

From the squares to the ballot boxes: understanding the unfolding of Spain's political crisis.

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The significance of the Spanish cycle in 2015 has been accounted for within many journalistic outlets. A thorough consideration of the processes within this cycle has not yet been produced. This brief contribution aims to highlight some of the key aspects of the current political situation in Spain. As an early disclaimer, I would like to bring attention to the fact that the unfolding of events in Spain, particularly since 2011, has often followed uncharted paths and therefore the power of prediction is not just limited, but would represent a rather dangerous exercise. However, an attempt to analyse the situation is certainly needed. In this piece, I will consider the historical lineages of what is currently happening as well as the key challenges that the new institutional politics is bringing to the emergent radical left in Spain.

The current institutional turn within Spanish radical left politics has generally been traced back to the occupations of many squares in Spain's main cities after a demonstration on the 15th of May 2011, a week before the municipal elections. The popular outcry in the squares was met by an unprecedented landslide victory for the conservative *Partido Popular* at the municipal level (and in the case of Catalonia, by the Demo-Christian Liberal coalition of *Convergència i Unió*). This has often been perceived, by the more institutionally focused left actors, as a demonstration that popular protest should be limited when the Left is in power. However, and I would argue more importantly, the 15-M and the outcome of the 2011 municipal election, represented the exhaustion of the elite pact forged during the transition to democracy in Spain. The 15-M marked the inability of the current regime to recover from the political crisis which had been postponed since 1978.

The unfolding of the Spanish political crisis can be seen through the paths of three different moments and movements. I will turn to each of them now, in relation to how they have been able to accelerate the exhaustion of the political regime whilst simultaneously producing a *prefigurative* action which may point towards what the building of new democratic institutions (and practices!) could look like.

Firstly, there have been the appearance of non-political (yet, highly politicised!) grassroots movements with mass appeal, particularly the PAH (Platform of Those Affected by Mortgages) and more recently the APE (Alliance Against Fuel Poverty). These movements have channelled their actions towards the existing contradictions in the relationships between the political sphere, the banking system and the energy sector, which have characterised much of the post-1978 Spanish regime. These two movements have gone right to the heart of the political implications of the processes of Spanish capitalist accumulation, and, by so doing, have highlighted the way in which the systemic corruption of Spain's two main parties (PP and PSOE), has been not just allowed to flourish but rather

it was purposefully designed by the 1978 elite pact which paved the way for a very particular kind of democracy. In a sense, we could characterise the last 40 years of Spanish politics as a kind of "arrested democracy".

Secondly, there is a further challenge to the 1978 elite pact in Spain. A crucial aspect of the pact was the relationship between Catalonia and Spain. This had never been an easy relationship and after 40 years of cultural and language repression, it was clear that Spain required a way of securing consent from one of the most industrialised and productive regions. In addition and just as important was the concern of the Catalan bourgeoisie to placate the rising working-class organisations in workplaces and communities which were threatening the stability of capitalist accumulation. This led to the 1978 Spanish Constitution being written by some of the leaders of the Catalan bourgeois parties (*Convergència i Unió*), and in securing a good seat at the table, they also secured what they perceived was a good settlement for their interests in Catalonia. The current political crisis and the inability of successive Spanish governments to incorporate the disparate elements of the state, coupled with the pathological relationship between the Spanish political and judicial systems to maintain and update such a settlement, has led to the break up of a large part of the representatives of the Catalan bourgeoisie (*Convergència*) with their Spanish counterparts. The current mass demonstrations in Catalonia and acts of mass civil disobedience highlight the desire for the democratic right to self-determination.

Thirdly, the recent municipal elections in May 2015, when in some of the most important Spanish cities (including Barcelona and Madrid), newly created local citizens' candidatures have won the municipal governments in a rather unexpected turn for the established political parties. In Barcelona, perhaps the most charismatic and well-known of such candidatures, the new Mayor, Ada Colau, had been the spokesperson for the PAH until February 2014. This recent development is already showing the way in which these new movements engage with existing institutions in ways that not just reform them, but subvert them, thereby showing the inability of existing structures to allow for a deeper form of democratic politics. Therefore, the creation of new institutional forms is part of this process.

Taking all this into consideration, the multiplicity of movements shows that current counter-hegemonic struggles should neither be framed around a working-class banner nor around dichotomous simplifiers, or as Laclau and Mouffe would call them, *antagonistic empty signifiers*. All too often, women, oppressed nations and people of different origins have been forced to wait for their liberation so that the "more important" struggles take precedence. In fact, the banner is not as important as the method - as the reconfiguration of the political landscape in Spain is showing us. It is time to impregnate with meaning, not with empty signifiers, and meaning is configured by human creativity, experimentation, successes and errors. If anything, the current situation in Spain shows that different struggles are not antagonistic but complementary.