

A number of observers claim that Podemos's ideology, strategy and discourse have been [inspired by the works of Argentinian philosopher Ernesto Laclau](#). According to some, even Syriza and other populist parties have Laclau as their intellectual reference: indeed, some of these parties' features appear to roughly reflect his ideas. But can we actually say they have been influenced by him?

Populism as a container

The core of Laclau's theory of populism is contained in two works: [Hegemony and Socialist Strategy](#) (1985), written with Chantal Mouffe, and [On Populist Reason](#) (2005). In the former book Laclau and Mouffe analyze the history of [socialist political strategy](#) and reject the central role assigned to the working class and to class struggle. After criticising a number of socialist intellectuals—Kautsky and Lenin in particular—they present Antonio Gramsci's political theory as the most appropriate strategy to lead socialism to power. Considering that ruling élites not only own the means of production, but enjoy what [Gramsci](#) calls "hegemony" in terms of political culture and leading worldview, a violent revolution would not be the most sensible strategy to impose socialism. On the contrary, the forces of the left should constitute a "historic bloc", combining all non-establishment groups of society, in order to conduct a "war of position", so as to conquer hegemony. The struggle has thus to focus on persuasion and conviction.

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In [On Populist Reason](#) Laclau counters the dominant understanding of populism as a deviation from standard political practice, and thus as an inherently negative force. He believes, instead, that populism can provide an alternative to traditional left parties, as well as an appropriate strategy for "radical democracy" to establish roots. This is indeed a salient

element of the theory, namely their support for democracy, even though described as a product of conflict, rather than consensus.

More precisely, Laclau believes that the contemporary notion of populism is misleading and artificial. He argues instead that populism is like a container of various popular demands and feelings that arise out of uncertain circumstances. Its immediate effect is that of separating two different groups, through the creation of an “[internal antagonistic frontier](#)”: the people on one side and the elites on the other. The specific way that a “populist” movement will come to have significance will then depend on the circumstances: this is what Laclau means by “[container of empty signifiers](#)”; indeed, populism’s defining feature is the lack of a precise ideological content. But populism is, in its essence, the true nature of the political: it expresses the vagueness of the political and societal reality of the moment, while at the same time taking simplification to the extreme—and simplification is the quintessence of political discourse. The populist strategy should then aim at uniting various popular demands, each representing a different struggle, under a key concept, or claim, such as anti-austerity for instance. This is the reason why class struggle and the working class cannot be the central element of socialist claims: while by no means irrelevant, they represent just [one dimension of the struggle for “radical democracy”](#).

How Laclauian is Podemos?

Podemos’s political strategy reflects a number of Laclau’s ideas. Its composition, for one thing, may recall the concept of historic bloc, as it is the result of a merger of [three different currents](#): *Izquierda Anticapitalista*, a Trotskyist radical left party; the 15M, a grassroots movement organized around a popular anti-austerity protest and gathering different social groups; finally, a group of political science students and researchers from the Universidad Complutense of Madrid. As a “Laclauian” historic bloc, Podemos’s attempt is clearly partial, for a considerable portion of the Spanish left—notably the PSOE—has not yet joined it. And yet such a varied background can be viewed as the first step of an endeavour aimed at uniting the left and achieving hegemony.

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Podemos has, moreover, immediately exploited the trans-class nature of the anti-austerity protests, which transcended the traditional political dimensions of left and right. As Laclau (and Mouffe) had imagined, Podemos harnessed the emergence of an “[internal antagonistic frontier](#)” which eventually pits the “people” against the “caste”. Such an internal frontier, according to Laclau, is paramount to defining the nature of the popular movement itself. This, we can argue, has been the case with Podemos, which has constructed its very identity in open confrontation with a ruling élite unwilling to yield to their demands.

In addition, Podemos presents itself as an alternative to the traditional left, as a popular movement encompassing a wider portion of the population. This operation of gathering multiple popular demands is a typical feature of Laclau's populism which, as a container of empty signifiers, may capture more effectively than traditional political formations the variety of a given social context, as its inherent ideological vagueness can more easily accommodate [different social demands](#). This operation of uniting various popular demands is facilitated by the adoption of one key concept, or key claim, around which the whole movement is grounded: in Podemos's case, this is a cry to put an end to austerity. Indeed, the identification of the ruling political and economic élites with austerity policies, which ought to be overturned, are the bulk of Podemos's rhetoric.

Furthermore, In Laclau's view, radical democracy would transform standard political practice: political activities would not be carried out exclusively by the institutionalized, representative system, but through all sorts of channels that are provided by society. In this respect, too, Podemos has shown consistency with Laclau's thought, as its presence has been felt well outside traditional political boundaries: thanks to the experience of the 15M, Podemos started its existence as a grassroots movement, which was crucial for the mobilization of people in the squares. Podemos even brought the use of television to a different level for Spanish standards: not only has [political debate been carried out more effectively on TV than in parliament](#), but TV and media debates certified Pablo Iglesias's role as political pundit, and introduced his political views to the wider public. In addition, Podemos is present in the Spanish—and European—Parliament, which, albeit a more institutionalized means of representation, is still crucial for the political success of the party.

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Interestingly, the Greek coalition Syriza too displays most of these features: it has harnessed the “internal antagonistic frontier” between people and caste; it has elected “anti-austerity” as its key demand and unifying concept; it presents itself as an alternative to the traditional left; it is made up of a big coalition which, although leaving out some left-wing groups, is akin to Laclau’s idea of historic bloc. Importantly, however, unlike Syriza, Podemos’s link with Laclau is explicit, if only because Iñigo Errejón, Podemos’s chief theorist, explicitly mentions Laclau as his main intellectual reference, both in [his doctoral thesis](#), and in [various interviews](#).

The validity (or lack thereof) of Laclau’s theory

In sum, Laclau’s arguments capture the features of Podemos but also of other new political movements like Syriza. And yet only the former has been clearly influenced by him. This is because his theory, in its descriptive part, appropriately identifies a number of typical elements of populist movements, so that a majority of these may be viewed as reflecting his thought, insofar as they display those traits he singled out. Importantly, this may be the case even if a given party has not, actually, been influenced directly by Laclau.

Laclau’s theory owes much of its effectiveness to the intuition that a crucial aspect of populism is its lack of a precise ideological content, as the latter may change depending on circumstances. What defines populism, apart from the very lack of a precise content, are strategy and discourse: in other words, its external features, not theory. As a consequence, virtually any populist party can be viewed as “Laclauian”, not necessarily because they draw any inspiration from him, but merely because they act like he described.

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