RESEARCH ARTICLE

POPULISM AND POP CULTURES: PODEMOS, THE POLITICAL USE OF MUSIC AND THE PARTY AS A 'POP PRODUCT'

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ABSTRACT: The role of 'popular cultures' and symbolic aspects such as narratives, imaginaries, audio and visual products in the emergence, success, and development of populism is poorly explored in literature. This article aims at investigating the relationship between populism and popular cultures by analyzing the case of the Spanish party Podemos. From the beginning, for the founding nucleus of Podemos it was crucial to try to be hegemonic, to match common sense, popular attitudes and identities, and to go beyond the traditional boundaries inside which the alternative left was enclosed. The article focuses on the relationship between the political evolution of the party and its use of music as a political tool and a ground for cultural debate. The link emerges between these political uses of music and the trajectory of the party, where the latter influences the former. Moreover, by debating on the political role of music, Podemos leaders delved deeper into he wider issue of the relationship between political hegemony and popular cultures, and discussed it.

KEYWORDS: common sense; hegemony; Podemos; populism and music; popular cultures and politics

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1. Introduction

The role of popular cultures and symbolic aspects such as narratives, imaginaries, audio and visual products in the emergence and development of populism is poorly

explored in literature (Caiani and Padoan, this volume). The scarce presence of these elements in populist studies is quite paradoxical, given the acknowledged importance that emotions and symbolic constructions have in populist phenomena. Popular cultures and cultural objects that transmit, spread, and shape them may play an important role in defining populist discourses (Ostiguy 2018). Populisms and populist leaders aim at establishing emotional connections with their People and at representing their authenticity. They pursue these goals also by appropriating and mobilizing popular cultures linked to forms of *folklore*, tastes, aesthetics, and cultural productions. From this point of view, between populism and "pop" (pop cultures and pop products) there is a sort of natural correlation. Moreover, emotions may produce cognitive effects that contribute to shaping symbolic constructions and the populist use of cultural products, which precisely aims to link emotions, symbolic constructs and narratives (Máiz 2011, Ben-Ze'ev 2000). Amongst cultural products, the function of music in these processes and its use by populist actors has been underestimated so far, although these actors often resort to music as a tool to create shared identities and shape the narratives sustaining them (Duncombe and Bleiker 2015).

This article aims at exploring the relationship between populism and popular cultures, by analysing the case of the Spanish party *Podemos*. The empirical focus is placed on the relationship between the political evolution of the party and its use of music as a political tool and a ground for cultural debate. As it will be displayed, by debating on the political role of music, Podemos leaders deepened the wider issue of the relationship between hegemony and popular cultures. Secondly, the link between this political use of music and the trajectory of the party, i.e. the ways in which the latter influences the former, will be observed by analysing the evolution of how Podemos has used music in campaign events and public meetings. Until 2016, this party usually referred to itself as a populist force (Lobera 2015, Gómez and Ramiro 2017), and its relationship with populism has always been an issue explicitly and publically discussed by its leaders (as well as an internal terrain of confrontation). As it will be observed, 2016 constituted a turning point in the evolution of the party also with respect to this issue. That turning point was reflected on the Podemos internal debate on music and popular culture.

The key issue that the article explores is precisely the constitutive link existing between the party's approach to populism and its internal debate on popular culture. By virtue of the foundational role that the debate on populism and popular culture had in the very origins of the party (and in the decision to found it), the constitutive elements and features of Podemos will be itemized and related to its internal debate on music, pop culture and hegemony.

The case study is therefore linked to the theoretical issue of how a populist party tries to use symbols and cultural products to convey identity and emotions. The investigation concerns the very construction of 'the popular' by a populist force aiming at reaching a mass consensus. When a party such as Podemos (similarly to all populist parties) tries to set aside the traditional communication codes of political action to reach large audiences - in its case abandoning the liturgies, the language and symbols of the traditional left -, what tries to replace them with? Is this replacement successful? To what extent can a party aiming at building 'the popular' from the left draw on forms of *folklore* and popular culture autonomously elaborated by 'the people'? To what extent, on the contrary, does the construction of the popular depend on mainstream products and the cultural industry, historically a counterpart for left-wing parties? The relationship between Podemos and musical products is from this point of view emblematic. As a matter of fact, music was one of the elected grounds on which the party tried to build its own innovative symbolism and to elaborate new forms of identification with its base. Right here it had to to suffer a setback in its action. Searching for a popular culture outiside the market, Podemos mostly found a vacuum. The party has not found its own "music" (and, more in general, its own 'popular culture'), and its leaders came to the conclusion that a political party (especially left-wing), in highly plural and complex societies, can neither have nor communicate only *one* culture. They finally argued the party can at best be a platform assembling heterogeneous products, styles and messages developed by other social actors, such as social movements, artists or the media. In its internal debates on these issues, Podemos split between the defense of alternative and militant cultures and the use of mainstream cultural products. The party did not succeed in finding sufficient cultural resources in the middle of these two polarities, which could serve as a bridge between an autonomous cultural elaboration and mass consensus. Over time, the choice was to go back to symbols and themes more specific of the traditional left, also following a sort of repentance by its leaders for a use of 'pop' products and means they finally considered excessively subject to the market.

The article is structured as follows. In the second section the foundational elements of Podemos that later influenced its debate on culture and music will be summarized. The third section outlines a brief history of the party's trajectory and discusses the evolution of the party's use of music in public meetings, the internal discussion about it and th use of musical metaphors as a means to face internal disputes.

Regarding the use of music in political events by Podemos, the full videos (thirty videos overall) of the main party rallies and electoral events in the 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2019 European and national elections were viewed. The selected events are the ones in which the main national leaders of the party participated, thus the first and the last event

of each campaign, and the ones organized in the major cities of the Country during the last week of campaign. As for the internal debate on the use of music and cultural products, the public conferences and seminars the party devoted to this theme were viewed, and the interventions in the newspapers by its leaders linked to this debate were consulted.

2. Populism, common sense and hegemony: the sources of Podemos

Scholars, observers, and the media have defined Podemos in different ways so far. A movement party emerging from the *Indignados* (Martín 2015, Subirtas 2015, della Porta et al. 2017); neo-Leninist party (Torreblanca 2015); a party whose success is due to an intensive and innovative use of social media; television-party, in which the leader's media notoriety is an element that globally structures it (Giménez 2014a). Despite this variety of definitions, Podemos has been almost unanimously considered a populist party, whose rhetoric is centered on the contrast between pure people and a corrupt elite, which Podemos articulates in dichotomies such as common people/privileged, producers/parasites, social majority/elites, virtue/corruption, democracy/oligarchy, above/below (Del Rio 2015, Font, Graziano and Tsakatika 2015, Gómez-Reino and Llamazares I. 2015). In the context of existing varieties of populisms, Podemos is usually considered a form of inclusionary populism (Caiani and Graziano 2019, Gómez and Ramiro 2017, Graziano 2018).

The decision to constitute Podemos by its founding nucleus was based on four essential elements: the academic context from which all the founders came from; their creation of a web-TV and their approach to mass media; their interpretation of *Indignados* movements as hegemonic movements reshaping political cultures; their use of political theory and, particularly, of Laclau's theory on populism. Since the beginning, all these four elements have established a crucial link between the foundation of the party and its founders' theoretical research on populism, common sense, hegemony, popular cultures and mass media. Moreover, these four elements strongly resurfaced in a decisive period of the party's trajectory, the phase of internal confrontation between its two main political areas, during which the debate on music took place within the party.

2.1. Popularizing intellectual work
The founding nucleus of Podemos consisted of professors and researchers from the Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology of the Complutense University of Madrid, who came from the radical left end of the spectrum (Torreblanca 2015, Gimenez 2014). This

nucleus came from two political groups: *Contrapoder* and *La Promotora*. The Student Association *Contrapoder* was founded in the Faculty in 2006, and it was involved in the mobilization process against education reforms between 2007 and 2010. In the same years and in the same faculty, Iglesias and other professors constituted *La Promotora de Pensamiento Crítico*, a political group formed by scholars who organized courses and debates, and published books and articles (Giménez 2014b). The dissatisfaction of these two groups with the usual forms of academic debate and with the limited boundaries within which the left was able to spread its proposals and analyses, was at the origin of stylistic and communicative innovations. In 2009, Iglesias promoted academic debates and seminars based on television formats. The objective was to be at the same time "majoritarian and disruptive," bringing a message of social transformation as far as possible beyond the traditional circuit of the militant left (Avinazada 2015, Bescansa 2015, Toret Medina 2015). It was a form of intellectual production intrinsically mediatized, externally oriented and popularized, although it remained faithful, linguistically and thematically, to the canons of the alternative left, at least initially. In 2009, Iglesias began to organize academic seminars at the Complutense in the format of a public TV talk show, *99 segundos*.

Thanks to these initiatives by *La Promotora*, a decisive turning point was determined. The *Promotora-Contrapoder* network got the opportunity to act directly on the media. Tele K, a neighborhood television in Madrid, proposed Iglesias to create the *tertulias televisivas* (talk shows) inspired by *99 segundos* on its channel. Iglesias's political-academic seminars then moved to television, and from 2010 he became the host of a small weekly political talk show, *La Tuerka*. The progressive technical improvement of the production favored a viewership increase of the talk show on what, since the beginning, had been thought as its true means of diffusion, Youtube (Giménez 2014a). The growing spreading of the show on social media made it possible to transfer *La Tuerka* to larger and more structured broadcasters, firstly to Canal 33 and finally, in 2013, to the web-TV of the national on-line newspaper *Público*, where it is still located. At the same time, the Iran-based broadcaster Hispan TV proposed Iglesias to conduct another weekly talk show, *Fort Apache*. Iglesias did not give up this job after the birth of Podemos, and he is still the presenter of the shows *Otra vuelta de Tuerka* and *Fort Apache*. Therefore, the general secretary of a political party conducts a television show twice a week, and this is a novelty.

This means that the founding nucleus of Podemos consists of a group of professional intellectuals and militants that primarily based its activities on the specific relationship that it established between theoretical reflection, militancy, and the search for communicative innovation in political endeavors. Going beyond traditional forms of

communication by left-wing forces and trying to match a wider audience was their main goal. To pursue it, they adopted "pop" formats such as TV ones.

2.2. Podemos and the party-television: media as the elected ground for ideological dispute

What is the value of *La Tuerka* in the history of Podemos? In the first place, *La Tuerka* was thought as a party from the beginning:

Since the beginning, we have considered La Tuerka "a party." People do not engage anymore politically through parties, we thought, but through the media. La Tuerka and our second program, Fort Apache, were the "parties" through which we would launch our political battle on the most fundamental terrain of ideological production: television (Iglesias 2015, p. 21).

Anyone who wants to do politics must have tools for ideological production. We do not care and it is not enough to have 'alternative media,' as the left has traditionally thought. We want to compete as equals, to be a tool for the ideological and political battle, which competes with the big ones in defining reality.[1]

Before the prospect of a new party arose, *La Tuerka* was conceived as an instrument to use on the terrain of ideological confrontation which, according to Iglesias, is essentially played in the field of media and, particularly, television (Iglesias 2014b). A left that does not want to condemn itself to marginality must be *popular*, and in order to be popular it must intervene effectively on television (Iglesias 2014a). The early Podemos produced a general re-evaluation of the role of mass culture, very discontinuous with the tradition of the critical and the alternative left:

Radical politics, which aspires to generate a new hegemony and a new power block, is not the one positioning itself against the forms of consensus of its age, in a melancholic margin of frontal opposition, but the one taking charge of the culture of its time (Errejón 2015).

This does not mean that the initial nucleus of Podemos did not strongly criticize mass media. Before Podemos, Iglesias was extremely critical towards the media, especially the private ones. What Podemos re-evaluated is the relationship between people and mass media, i.e. between what is popular and communication, arguing that the left should

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[1] Interview to Pablo Iglesias, "Galiza ano cero" (galizaanocero.tv), June 2013. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33j1QlP3pbY.

abandon its historical attitude to ignore or stigmatize this relationship, which is instead a fact from which any force who wants to hold a significant political role must begin its action (Iglesias 2015). It can therefore be argued that if it is true that Podemos is a party born form a web television, the nature and objectives of this web television were originally political, if not immediately electoral.

Through *La Tuerka*, future Podemos leaders searched for a connection with the way common sense and popular attitudes were concretely constituted in public opinion rather than aspiring to communicate with a common sense purified of its relationship with mass culture and the media representations of reality, like the traditional left, according to Iglesias, used to do.

Television—both *La Tuerka* and Iglesias's later presence from 2013 in prime time shows on progressive national channels such as *La Sexta* and *Quatro*—was the fundamental precondition for the creation of the party (Avinazada 2015, Bescansa 2015, Sampedro 2015, Toret Medina 2015). If Iglesias had not become notorious nationwide thanks to his participation in prime time talk shows, Podemos would not have been born.

2.3. Podemos as the Indignados's party? Social movements and common sense

There is a strong connection between Spanish social movements and the success of *La Tuerka*. The opportunity for Iglesias to reach the big media was mainly due to the emergence in Spain of large social movements with a strong consensus in public opinion. *La Tuerka* became a reference for these movements and began to be considered "the TV of the *Indignados*." National media could not avoid dealing with social demands pursued by large-scale mobilizations capable of reaching a majoritarian consensus, as 80% of Spaniards declared to agree with the demands of the 15-M movement (Pastor 2013). The fact that those movements already had a sort of media representation it was decisive for Iglesias to be invited as a commentator on national TV channels (Calvo and Álvarez 2015).

Podemos was thought as a political expression of social movements from the beginning (Iglesias 2015, Errejón 2015). On May 15, 2011, according to the founders of Podemos, a new political cycle began and its main feature was to be culturally and politically transversal, an element that shaped its ability to get a majoritarian consensus. Once again, in Podemos's initial discourse *common sense* was considered the central terrain of political disputes and of possible political changes (Franzé 2018). In the 15-M movement and the early Podemos there was no reference, as in Izquierda Unida's Marxist and anti-capitalist left, to class analysis and to the language characterizing it (Antentas 2015, Aslanidis 2015, Roberts 2016). The class cleavage—workers/entrepreneurs—did

not mark their symbolic elaboration (Calvo 2013, Pastor 2013). The 15-M was far away from the traditional left also due to its refusal to place itself along the right/left axis (Castañeda 2012). The largest part of the movement did not ascribe its self-definition to this dichotomy, but to the low/high and citizens/elites polarizations (Perugorría and Tejerina 2013, Hughes 2011, Cox and Fominaya 2013).

Podemos took all these elements from the 15-M movement. The founders of the new party considered the 15-M a politically, generationally and socially transversal movement, a plural reality impossible to force into traditional categories and able to obtain consensus and to change common sense by virtue of this transversal nature, signaling and expressing demands not by specific social actors, but by very broad "mayorías sociales" (Errejón 2015). Consequently, the early Podemos aimed to go beyond the symbols and identities of the traditional Left, by elaborating a new narration and addressing, like the 15-M, a heterogeneous majority, redefining the use of political symbols in a (Gramscian) national-popular sense (Iglesias 2015). These attitudes of the leadership group of Podemos decisively structured its political discourse until the 2016 general elections (Iglesias 2014a and 2014b, Errejón 2014a and 2014b, Del Río 2015), and they have been at the core of its internal debates on music and popular cultures.

2.4. Podemos and political theory: Laclau's hypothesis as a strategic base

Behind all these considerations, there was not only the 15-M movement, but also a precise theoretical background. A further constitutive element of Podemos is Laclau's theory on populism. It could be said that the party's strategy was largely organized around a single book, *The Populist Reason* (Laclau 2008).

According to Laclau, populism is a necessary element of every constitutive process of the Political: populism is politics. There are no social groups already established in the economic dimension independently of a process of political construction. The units of analysis are neither social groups nor social classes, but more limited elements that Laclau defined social demands. If social demands remain unaddressed, they can be articulated in an equivalence relation: the requests become complaints, and they give shape to a border that constitutes the equivalential chain of unmet demands. Populism is precisely, Laclau argued, the political process that transforms demands into complaints, building between them a chain of equivalences capable of erecting an antagonistic frontier between complaints and authority. Demands articulated according to mutual equivalences constitute a wider social subjectivity, popular identity. According to Laclau, populism is therefore a clearly performative phenomenon: 'the people' as an actor do not emerge from the discovery of an abstract characteristic underlying all the

demands that make up the chain of equivalences, but from the construction of this chain through a specific act, the act of naming the We, the Them, and the frontier separating them (Cano 2015, Raniolo and Tarditi 2019).

Given the performative nature of populism, discourse and communication—this was the interpretation of Laclau by Podemos's founders (Errejón 2015)—is the main terrain on which the construction of the people takes shape. An effective political discourse must therefore at the same time match and build common sense, through a double movement that simultaneously allows representing existing popular identities and building a new hegemony. By the early Podemos political struggle was mainly conceived as a struggle over words, the meanings and signifiers of political dispute, and it should be acted primarily on the ground of media. Discourse was considered a performative tool, capable of building collective subjects that are not mere and mechanic products of history, but that are constructed as social actors by an effective linguistic performance, which gives shape to a disorganized matter articulating it in a new collective will (Errejón 2014a).

This analytical framework had strong consequences on the way the party aimed to represent how the collective actor was articulated, and therefore on the general identity of the party. How were "We" and "Them," "the people" and their adversaries configured? If politics is the construction of a discourse in which a wide spectrum of requests can be recognized, and these requests must not be limited to the simple empirical claims of specific social sectors, the discourse must build the broadest "people" possible (Meyenberg 2017). To be broad, these people must not have an antagonistic nature. They must stand on the side of common sense, legitimacy and law, making their opponents symbolically slip into minority and illegitimacy. Therefore, the "We" must be generic, open and adaptable to the actors and the demands it manages to include. The "Them" must be circumscribed instead: "They" are the "tiny minority that has set itself above the law."

In the context of this theoretical and strategic background, a populist rhetoric—the division of society in the two antagonistic groups of the pure people and the corrupt elite and the initial declaration of extraneousness to the right/left dichotomy (Graziano 2018, Kriesi 2014 and 2015, Gómez-Reino and Llamazares I. 2015) —was used as a sort of «communicative technology» able to address wider segments of the population than those reached by the traditional radical left, and to build a hegemonic discourse by matching common sense and popular cultures.

3. The "popular", commons sense and pop cultures: music and culture in Podemos's trajectory

3.1. *The three phases of the party*

The ones discussed hitherto are the sources and the founding features of the early Podemos: they structured the party until the end of 2015, when Podemos faced its utmost tasks, namely, the general elections, the entrance in Parliament, and the negotiations with the socialist party (PSOE) for the formation of the government. Between March and April 2016, during the negotiations (later failed) for the formation of a new government with PSOE, Podemos went through an important internal crisis. Ten members of the party in the Madrid region resigned due to disagreement with their regional leader . All the outgoing people were very close to the political secretary of the party, Iñigo Errejón. The conflict was a sublimation of the rising divergence between Iglesias and Errejón at the national level. What were the objects of this divergence? They were three: a) divergences on the attitude to hold towards the PSOE; with Errejón open to dialogue and Iglesias on a confrontational position; b) differences on the form to give to the reorganization of the party and the internal weight of the respective components, with a hypothetical "assault" by Errejón on the internal balances to influence the direction of this reorganization, manifested by the resignation of the Madrilenian members closer to him; c) the dispute about preserving the politically and culturally transversal nature of the early Podemos (as the *Errejonstas* claimed) or more explicitly assuming a left-wing identity.

Thus the central issue of this conflict was the very identity of the party. Since 2016, Errejón insisted on the need to maintain the transversal profile—beyond left and right—that Podemos had from the beginning. He was also in favor of voting for a government formed by PSOE and Ciudadanos, without the presence of Podemos, while Iglesias excluded this option. Iglesias began working on an alliance with Izquierda Unida that could shift the ideological axis of the party more clearly to the left. In the beginning, Errejón's commitment was to declare himself against this alliance. Then, he tried to confine it to a dimension of pure "electoral instrumentality," denying it a general political value. Errejón consistently reiterated that the alliance should not affect Podemos's transversal self-representation (Franzé 2018). Therefore, in that phase the prospectively decisive conflict between the two components of the party (the "*Pablistas*" supporting Iglesias and the "*Errejonistas,*" as they used to define each other) emerged. It is possible to define this period, between the end of 2015 and the second national convention of the party in 2017, as the transition phase of the party.

This dispute remained contained until the repetition of the general elections in June 2016, and gradually exploded after that date. The conflict led to an explicit opposition between the two areas at the party convention in 2017 (which was won by Iglesias with the 56% of internal consent, while the Errejonist area achieved the 30%), and finally to the definitive exit from the party by the Errejonists in 2019. In 2019, Errejón participated in the regional elections in Madrid with his own political platform. Since September 2019, this platform has become a national autonomous party, competing in the general elections in November 2019.

After the national convention in 2017 during which the two internal areas confronted, the transition phase of the party ended and Podemos began assuming a more defined left-wing profile.[2] Populist rhetoric was significantly set aside. The party system—formerly called "the Caste" by Podemos—ended up being the main argumentative object of the party discourse, which moved from the terrain of anti-political establishment rhetoric to the centrality of social issues and to criticism towards the economic establishment. The party began defining itself "the left" and being significantly institutionalized. Due to these reasons, the post-2017 phase can be considered as the post-populist phase of Podemos.

The emerging conflict between "*Pablistas*" and "*Errejonistas*" in 2016 is the context within which the internal confrontation on (and *through*) music and popular cultures took place. It was indeed after the elections in June 2016, when the divergence between the two areas began to emerge, that the use of musical metaphors became an instrument of internal political controversy, and the political differences were translated in and staged as cultural differences. However, the other side of the internal debate on music, the one regarding the political use of music by the party, had begun previously.

3.2. Popular culture and hegemony: music as a political metaphor

Three forms of political use of music have been explored so far. Firstly, music with explicit political contents can be used as a form of protest by social movements and

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[2] It is also sensible to remind that Spanish citizens did never believe the tale of the transversal nature of Podemos. All surveys in 2015 and 2016 showed that citizens used to place Podemos on the extreme left, even more on the left than Izquierda Unida. Moreover, the share of Podemos votes coming from the right was derisory, while the party collected almost the totality of its votes from former voters of PSOE and Izquierda Unida, former abstaining voters, and new voters (Fernandez 2016). Therefore, the attempt to transmit a transversal profile was, in that period, effective to attract left-wing electors more than to collect a transversal consent.

contentious forms of collective action (Danaher 2019). Secondly, music can be employed to insert deviant or radical cultures into mainstream paradigms and de-marginalize them. Thirdly, political actors can appropriate non-political (and mainstream) songs adapting them to political functions as a form of "resistance to power" in authoritarian or traditional-mainstream regimes.

In this section, two further spheres of relationship between music (and popular culture) and politics will be explored. The first one involves the ways in which, within a party, music and culture become a disputed terrain in internal political dynamics and conflicts. How party leaders internally discuss their use of music and cultural products? In which ways the political use of cultural products may become an internal contentious and disputed issue? How the relationship between pop culture and politics is related with the populist nature of a party?

In 2016, after Podemos's second participation to general elections, music became a terrain—and an instrument—of internal debate. Internal political differences among 'Errejonistas' and 'Pablistas' were translated into musical (and, more broadly, cultural) terms. Pablo Iglesias launched this sort of translation in a public meeting of the party in Vigo, in September 2016, where he said:

> "Podemos must stick to a different language a language that allows to politicize pain. Causing fear in the powerful is a virtue. Podemos needs more Bruce Springsteen and less Coldplay."[3]

This metaphorical dichotomy was re-launched by El Nega, the front man of *Los Chickos del Maíz*, a militant hip-hop band that has been a musical landmark for Pablo Iglesias since several years. El Nega (Ricardo Romero) is a friend of Iglesias's and an activist in Podemos, were he supports Iglesias's stances.[4] *Los Chikos del Maíz* are very popular in Spain, particularly among young people, although they are excluded from mainstream media circuits and their songs contain radical political messages.

In September 2016, two months after the general elections in which Podemos did not succeed in getting more votes than the Socialist Party and guiding a left-wing cabinet, El Nega wrote a tweet launching the debate about music and populism:

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[3] Available at: https://www.eldiario.es/galicia/Pablo-Iglesias-Podemos-Bruce-Springsteen_0_560994872.html

[4] He also took part several times in the early shows on *La Tuerka*, in the context of the column "La Tuerka rap".

There are two Podemos (there have always been) one that wants to be kind as Coldplay and another that wants to be like Bruce Springteen. Let's be like the #Boss[5]

This metaphorical dichotomy became the umbrella under which the internal debate between two different cultural approaches (and approaches to culture) was then developed: Springsteen (rock, genuineness, authenticity, combativeness) vs. Coldplay (mainstream, pop music, conformism, moderation, and cultural industry).

This debate was related to more general and abstract topics, evoking some very long-lasting debates within the Left. These topics are: a) critical theory and mass alienation; b) the relationship between popular culture and cultural industry; c) the problem, for the left, to reach people through popular messages and, at the same time, distancing them from mainstream pop culture, thus being simultaneously inside and outside dominant codes; d) the relationship between cultural populism (to talk and act like common people do) and alternative cultures, and consequently, the relationship between political-electoral effectiveness and the transformation of society; e) reformism (Coldplay) vs. radicalism (Springsteen); f) the relationship between alternative cultures and social conflicts; g) the role of Gramscian "organic intellectuals"; h) the relationship between high culture and popular culture; i) the relationship between popular culture and hegemony; l) essentialism vs. constructivism; m) the ability in current times, by a left-wing party, to build and spread a systematic cultural discourse, able to expand a collective identity and a global vision of society. The whole debate was hence about broad and structural topics regarding the very role of the party in society.

In 2016, Podemos devoted a panel of its Summer University to discuss the dichotomy launched by Iglesias and Nega.[6] In that panel, Nega discussed with Germán Cano, a philosopher and an active member of Podemos who, since the beginning, had been close to the minority's leader Iñigo Errejón and to his strategic approach. In a few weeks, Nega became the most emblematic figure in this debate and Pablo Iglesias, to a certain extent, delegated him to argue the majority's stances. -. In such context he better specified the content of his polarizing tweet. He argued that by counterpoising Coldplay and Springsteen he meant to talk about two different possible natures of Podemos. While "The Boss" is an inter-generational artist, appreciated by people aged from 15 to 70, Coldplay are mainly supported by young people. Secondly, the metaphor also regards the dichotomy virtuality vs. reality: according to Nega, Coldplay have an enormous success in the digital dimension and on social media, while Springsteen "also lives in the real life of the

[5] Available at: https://twitter.com/nega_maiz/status/774171491269087232
[6] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8bOX3Hum5s

people." It is not just a matter of contents and messages, but also of the social usage people make of music, the context in which it is played and diffused, and the social practices it is linked to. Music, in this light, is also seen as a set of social relationships and activities, and the people's reception and use of it is as important as its contents and messages. Following this metaphor, Nega described two possible evolutions and natures of Podemos: the mainstream-young-virtual-moderate one (the Coldplay-Podemos) vs. the popular-intergenerational-social-radical one. These two Podemos closely resemble the "Errejonist" and the "Pablista" parties, in the kind of depiction the *Pablistas* gave of their two respective approaches.

Eventually, Nega stood for a farther musical model, which according to him would be even better than Springsteen: according to him, Podemos should be like *Rage against the machine*, a rap metal band that had great success in the Nineties. The discourse in this case moved on the terrain of the ways in which an alternative political force must search for hegemony and consent: by modifying the forms and content of its messages, or by remaining consistent with its original nature and goals? Nega's opinion was that *Rage against the machine* were the perfect example of the ability to reach and retain a great audience without reducing one's own radicalism. This band, in Nega's view, was the example of a sort of "hegemony *by virtue* of radicalism (that is by virtue of being different, original, and anti-conformist)" counter posed to searching for "hegemony *despite* radicalism," which, according to Nega, was Errejón's approach.

These stances were deepened and systematized in an article that Nega wrote on the national newspaper *El Español*[7], which was later quoted in an interview to Pablo Iglesias. It is worth to pinpoint the key arguments in this article, which is highly representative of the cultural approach through which Iglesias's area was facing this internal debate:

> "How far should we moderate the discourse in order to attract people without becoming blurred until we are unrecognizable? To adapt to reality or transform it?"

According to Nega, this was the key question, and for both him and Iglesias, Podemos had to remain critic towards mass culture products and cultural industries, working for alternative cultural values more than trying to use those products to transmit its messages. Music can be a tool in this work: "we must use the aesthetic and hedonistic dimension of music to transmit alternative values," Nega wrote.

Nega and Iglesias disapproved what they defined as cultural populism, i.e. a set of behaviors through which politicians try to look like common people and to share their tastes and their aesthetic and expressive forms. Moreover, popular culture is not a

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[7] https://www.elespanol.com/cultura/20161012/162613738_13.html

'paradise' which left wing politicians should simply adopt and reproduce. Within working class cultures, also racism, authoritarianism, and male chauvinism prosper. To suppose that 'the people' and popular classes are better than how they really are, according to Nega—who was born and grew up in a popular neighborhood in Valencia—is a true form of elitism. This kind of elitism is typical of those who talk in the name of the people without knowing and frequenting them, and who consequently suppose that no pedagogical work of politicization towards them is needed by political forces aiming to transform society. Thus, this form of cultural populism appears to Nega as a form of political moderation and an approval of society for what it currently is.

Finally—and this is a decisive point in the internal debate—Nega argued that no cultural work by the party can be disconnected from political and social conflicts. Social conflicts, the material emergence of contentious forms of expressing concrete social interests, are the only way through which alternative cultures and imaginaries can get the space to emerge.

Pablo Iglesias, in an interview he gave to the online newspaper *El Diario*,[8] stated:

Several times the debate within Podemos is a cultural debate, translated into musical references and even into dressing styles. The debate on Coldplay and Springsteen can be simplified as a debate between the hard and the soft ones. El Nega is pointing out the fundamental key: do we want to bet on an alternative culture or do we adopt a more or less progressive mass culture? This regards the dynamics of symbols, the relationships with other actors and with historical memory.

According to Iglesias, some parallelism can be drawn between Podemos and *Los Chikos del Maíz* (Nega's band). Both, in fact, were created and led to success by grassroot people involved in political activism. In saying this, Iglesias also defined "the others" in the internal debate:

"And where were you, *hipsters*? You just suffered this, because you did not succeed in being hegemonic in nothing. All the political sectors that at the end filled our rows had always seen us with fear, because we used to go much further on. This is true also in the case of *Chikos del Maíz*: they were considered politically incorrect, vanguardists, provoking. Change emerges in some way from there. Sure, making hip-hop and going on playing for young people are not the same thing."

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[8] "Es peligroso acostumbrarte a vivir en el parlamento," El Diario, 19-10-2016.
https://www.eldiario.es/politica/peligroso-acostumbrarte-vivir-Parlamento_0_571143917.html

It was a hard attack by Iglesias towards his *Errejonist* counterpart, and a contemptuous description of it. *The hipsters* is how he labels them: mainstream, conventional and often wealthy people playing the nonconformists, but scared of any real change and incapable of taking effective initiatives. *The hipsters* was (and currently is) a quite widespread label among the "Pablistas" to define the other area of the party. It almost indicates a sort of anthropological divide between the two areas that perceive each other also in terms of different social roots, anthropological diversity and even incompatibility.

In the same days Pablo Iglesias, spreading on Twitter the new video of the song "*They call it peace*" by the band *Riot Propaganda* (a rock-hip hop militant band that includes the members of *Chikos del Maíz*), whose music and lyrics resemble the style of *Rage against the machine*, wrote:

> They will insult them, they will accuse them, but here they are again, *Riot Propaganda*, saying what almost nobody dares to say.

In this way, Iglesias established a parallelism between *Riot Propaganda* and the kind of party he wanted: a party able to "say what almost nobody dares to say," i.e. "the truth," and above all the truth about power, as Iglesias has been stating several times in this and further periods (for example during the whole national electoral campaign in April 2019, that Podemos strongly centered on this topic). The opposition he established between rock and pop music in the musical field was the same he instituted between "the street" and "the Palace" in the political one. According to him, during its first year in Parliament, Podemos risked becoming too much identified with the institutions and their habits and privileges, while it should have gone back to "the street," closer to the concrete daily life and problems of common people. Musically, in Iglesias's and Nega's approach, rock and Springsteen stand for "the street," while pop and Coldplay for "the Palace."[9]

This is how the *Pablista* component approached these issues. Which was the approach of the *Errejonist* component? With regard to the metaphorical divide Coldplay/Springsteen, they: a) argued that this metaphor was not politically useful and effective; b) music and lyrics do not matter per se, but for the way in which they are (or they are not) 're-signified': every kind of music can theoretically have emancipatory effects; c) to associate Podemos with 'the hard against the soft' was not useful for the party and, on the contrary, it was counter-productive.

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[9] Ibidem

In an article that he wrote for the online newspaper "El Confidencial,"[10] Eduardo Maura, at that time a Podemos's officer very close to Errejón responsible for the party's cultural politics in Parliament, itemized the arguments of his area on this debate. The key point, according to Maura, was to criticize what he considered Iglesias' and Nega's central argument:

> Nega has responded with an approach—supposedly inspired by Adorno's critical theory—according to which there is a radical *outside* of alienation that we must think, protect and activate. Only from this outside of oppression - which very few know - would it be possible to raise awareness in the majority, through truths that translate critical postulates into action.

This *outside*, according to *errejonistas*, does not exist. Everyone—according to a Foucauldian approach, we could say—is involved in power and in its truth; power is visible and ubiquitous, hence there is no need of a 'prophetical' party revealing hidden truths. In such a cultural world in which everything and everyone is irremediably 'inside,' all cultural objects can be signified, re-signified or contested only from the inside. No message coming from a supposedly existing, non-alienated and pure *outside* can be politically effective. People can understand only the languages, codes and symbols in which they are involved daily, and the model of an 'external (revolutionary) consciousness' making people free of its alienation is definitively outmoded.

By virtue of these arguments, *errejonistas* such as Rita Maestre stated that their model was nor Coldplay neither the Boss, but Beyoncé who, despite being completely mainstream, was able to convey feminist messages to large audiences. This is an example of what the *errejonistas* mean by "re-signifying the mainstream": using pop culture as a vector for emancipatory messages and claims. Consistently, in his article Maura affirms that: 1) Springsteen and Coldplay, to stay in Iglesias's and Nega's metaphor, are less different than they seem; they are not non-communicating worlds, as many people are fan of both, and both support similar political positions; 2) the political effectiveness of a cultural product has nothing to do with the personal commitment of the artist. It is perfectly possible that the work of a committed artist is not transformative, and vice versa.

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[10] "¿Cuestión de gustos? Apuntes sobre el debate cultural entre radicales y moderados," 22-10-2016. https://blogs.elconfidencial.com/cultura/tribuna/2016-10-22/debate-cultural-radicales-moderados-podemos_1278248/

This second point is Maura's and the *errejonistas*' key argument. It is very consistent with their general cultural and political approach, as well as with the early Podemos's one. This argument regards the opposition between essentialism and constructivism:

All the voices of this conversation defend constructivist positions in politics, and therefore they assume that political, cultural, institutional and religious responses are not mere superstructural reflections, but parts of an open process not determined in advance by the economic position that people occupy in society. But from the same positions [Iglesias's and Nega's], culture tends to be conceived in the opposite way, in such a way that they end up defending the existence of essentially popular cultural manifestations—in the sense of "distinctive of the people," of "those below," etc.—and of expressions of the "popular classes" with a non-popular, inauthentic and non-typical origin. With this, what had been gained politically is lost on the side of culture. No cultural manifestation is essential and definitely transformative, popular, elitist or reactionary.

By virtue of this argument, *errejonistas* completely refused the dichotomies launched by *pablistas*, such as Beyoncé vs. Los Chikos del Maíz, trap vs. combative rap, Coldplay vs. Springsteen, and Nirvana vs. Ismael Serrano.[11] According to them, the political effects of a song or a single verse by Beyoncé or by a trap band can be much more significant than the ones by clearly connoted artists such as Serrano or *Los Chikos del Maíz*.

Moreover, Maura refused the very opposition hard vs. soft music (and politics). First, because in a constructivist perspective, what is 'hard' and what is 'soft' is never completely determined. On the contrary, hardness or softness of cultural and political styles and strategies depend on the context, the ways in which they are recognized, and the function they may play in certain situations. The same song or artist can be 'hard' in a specific context and 'soft' in a different one:

The most committed culture can play a conformist function and, vice versa, from the most unexpected places cultural articulations that can change things can arise. Whether an object or cultural process is one or the other depends on political factors of at least two types: 1) Inward, what do we do with it? There are advanced cultural products experienced in regressive conditions, and left-wing anthems that only generate conformity. 2) Outward, what kind and what level of conflict does it generate and are we able to generate with it?

Therefore, according to this area, the key factor for a left-wing party is not to establish permanent and unmovable cultural hierarchies, but to be able to move effectively in constantly blurry environments, forcing adversaries and potential allies to move

[11] Ismael Serrano (1974) is a songwriter and guitarist from Spain, popular in Spain and Latin America, known for lyrics that are often political

consequently. "The key for Podemos doesn't lie in sounding more or less hardcore, but in the fact that nothing and no one around it can stop moving," Maura affirmed.

3.3. A soundtrack for political change?

The second dimension in which the relationship between music and politics was discussed in Podemos is the one regarding the links between the party, i.e. its public activities and its identity, and music. The issue was articulated in this way in two public conferences organized by Podemos in 2016 on this topic: *May a soundtrack of political change exist?* Both conferences were previous to the internal conflict between Iglesias and Errejón and show that the topic of the relationship between Podemos and music has always troubled the party leaders. Both were titled "Podemos y la música. ¿Hay una banda sonora del cambio?". The first was held in February 2015 and the speakers were Diego Manrique (musical journalist), Sonia Cuevas (musical producer), Garikoitz Gamarra (musician and member of the club "Podemos cultura"), and Eduardo Maura.[12] The second one
was held in July 2015 and the speakers were the songwriter Nacho Vegas, El Nega, Victor Lenore (musical critic), and Lucia Lijtmaer (musical journalist).

In these two conferences, the topics of the relationship between Podemos and music and the possible soundtrack of political change were related to wider issues. In particular: a) the relationship between cultural change and political change; b) the possibility for a party, in current times, to have a uniform cultural identity and to be able to transmit that identity to militants and voters. A first, concrete field of discussion regarded the music that Podemos should feature in its public meetings and campaign events. This was considered a central issue regarding the kind of identity the party wanted to transmit to its members and to the external environment.

In its first year Podemos's events were closed with four songs: *People have the power* by Patti Smith, *Golpe Maestro* by Vetusta Morla (a 2014 song); *Como hacer crack* by Nacho Vegas (2011); and *L'Estaca* by Luis Jack (1968). The selected singers and songs well represent the internal approaches (and uncertainty) to the different ways in which music could communicate identity-forming symbols. As a matter of fact, they included an international star and a historically symbolic protest song (Patti Smith and *People have the power*); a current famous Spanish pop-band such as Vetusta Morla, and their song lacking explicit political messages; a politically committed Spanish songwriter such as Nacho Vegas (who supports Podemos); and a traditional militant Catalan song such as *L'Estaca*.

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[12] Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCS_ba3njfM.

Among these four songs, the most played in 2014 and early 2015 was the one by Vetusta Morla, a band that the *errejonistas* defined as "hipster." They admitted that this choice was a failure: people did not participate in singing it in public events and it did not communicate any specific identity. Anyway, the choice to use this song more than the other ones was due to the logic of searching for some musical source of identification that could sound 'transversal' more than traditionally militant. The speakers of the first conference joked mentioning that *L'Estaca* was included because, as nobody of the participants in Podemos meetings used to sing the other three songs (which were respectively in English and Castillan) and this created a bad effect, the fact that *L'Estaca* was in Catalan at least avoided any problem of this kind (almost nobody outside Catalunya could sing it).

In January 2015 Podemos organized the "March for change," a massive political demonstration that had a crucial importance for the party. During the demonstration, a playlist was selected by the (mainly *errejonistas*) organizers and transmitted in the streets. It was very discontinuous with the music accompanying traditional left-wing marches. It included: *Spanish bombs* by The Clash, *My generation* by The Who, *Déjame vivir con alegria* by Vainica Doble, *Rebel Rebel* by David Bowie, *Take a Walk on the Wild Side* by Lou Reed, Raffaella Carrà's *Hay que venir al Sur* and *Ghostbusters*. A very heterogeneous playlist, aiming at representing the transversal profile that the party intended to transmit also at the political level. However, at the end of the march and after the leaders' speeches, a band played on the stage the classic Mercedes Sousa's *Todo cambia*, a song with clear political traditions and implications. This heterogeneity demonstrates the high uncertainty troubling the party with respect to its identification with music and to the political use that you can make of it. The playlist and the live show chosen for the demonstration— like the songs chosen to end public events in its first year—contained everything: classic rock, punk, pop-rock, pop and commercial songs, and political songs.

Despite this heterogeneity, in the first phase of the party trajectory (2014-2015) the attempt to be not identified with the "old left" prevailed and, consequently, pop, pop-rock and mainstream songs prevailed in public events. It is important to notice that the cultural sector of the party's activities (and thus also musical choices) was in that period leaded by the *errejonist* area. In the first national elections in which Podemos participated, in December 2015, campaign events were opened with the theme song of the movie *Ghostbusters*, and closed with the new party anthem especially composed for the campaign. The lyrics of the song, which is still the party anthem, consist of just one sentence: "*Sì se puede*" ("It is possible"), inspired by one of the most popular slogans by the *Indignados* movements that became Podemos's main catchphrase. Its sound is pop,

simple and emotional.[13] At the time of that campaign, also very commercial songs were played during events, like one by the Latin pop star Enrique Iglesias.[14]

In the following years, there was a clear evolution in the political use of music by Podemos. The prevalence of mainstream pop music was replaced, from 2016 and even more from 2017, by the prevalence of songs belonging to two political traditions: the left-wing tradition (such as Inti-Illimani's *El Pueblo unido jamás será vencido*), and the republican and anti-Francoist Spanish tradition. From the general elections in 2016 (after the alliance with *Izquierda Unida*), campaign events were often closed with *El Pueblo Unido…* and *A galopar*. The latter is a 1969 song by Paco Ibañez, and its lyrics are drawn from Rafael Alberti's poem *Galope* written during the Spanish Civil War and dedicated to anti-Francoist militants and soldiers. Therefore, from 2016 on, Podemos overcame the idea to be not identified with leftist traditions, and this became visible in its musical choices.

This final choice was, anyway, a proof of the truthfulness of previous concerns and doubts among party leaders about the political use of music. What emerges most from the public debates that Podemos organized on this topic in 2015 and 2016, is their complaint for the absence of contemporary Spanish bands and songs that could symbolically represent the stance of both Podemos and the political change, and thus the lacking of musical sources that could create forms of collective identification especially in new generations.

In the first conference devoted to the topic "May a soundtrack of political change exist?", Eduardo Maura stressed that during the first campaign for European elections in 2014 and the following months, the discussion about the songs with which to conclude public events was very intense in the party. The result was the medley of tradition and innovation, militant and pop songs, old and new tunes, international and national music that we have observed. According to all the speakers in the two conferences, it was not possible to identify *one* music of change: "Our generation has not its music," the speakers affirmed. For this reason, the quest for an identity-forming music finally brought the party, after 2016, to search the past (*El pueblo unido..., A galopar, Todo cambia*).

The answer to the question "is there a soundtrack of political change?" was unanimously "no." The conclusion that came out from these discussions was that, in current times, it is not possible to impose "a music of the party" to people. This conclusion was linked to the empirical observation that identy-forming music, songs or bands had not emerged even after a period of mass social mobilization (the *Indignados*). This empirical

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[13] Here it is possible to observe how *Gosthbusters* was being played at the beginning and the anthem at the end of the last campaign event in 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAd0v0ZFYZ0
[14] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kIOb_7dDYac.

observation was connected to a wider assumption, mainly defended by *errejonistas*: in postmodern societies, there is no way to impose or spread uniform cultural messages, styles or tastes, because postmodern societies are too various, heterogeneous and fragmented. The party cannot produce or diffuse *one* culture. It can only represent the variety and heterogeneity spontaneously emerging from society, of course selecting within it what can be useful to the party's political and cultural scopes. The soundtrack of change can therefore only be plural and composite, and it can only be composed by "the people," not by the party. As it has been already disclosed, this argument was mainly defended by the *errejonist* area, which dominated the cultural sector of the party activities until 2016. It was also due to their internal weakening and their subsequent exit from the party that from 2016 on Podemos started politicizing more (and making more traditional) its "soundtrack": in today's Podemos it would not be possible to hear Raffaella Carrà in a public meeting. The 'music of the party' followed the party trajectory: from populism and search for a transversal consent, to a more left-wing and antagonist profile where leftist traditions were rediscovered.

4. Conclusion

The origins of Podemos can be connected to four fundamental elements. The academic origin of the founders and their attempt to popularize the academic and political debate. The foundation of a web TV and the consequential acquisition of a national notoriety by Pablo Iglesias. The capacity of the *Indignados* movements to reshape political identities and achieve a majoritarian consent. Laclau's theory on populism. Issues such as common sense, populism, hegemony, the relationship between politics and popular cultures, communication and consent, were at the core of all these four elements. Podemos was 'pop' since its beginning. To try to be hegemonic, to match common sense, popular attitudes and identities and to go beyond the traditional boundaries in which the alternative left was enclosed—in one word, to cease being marginal and try to become majoritarian—was crucial since the activities of *La Promotora* and *Contrapoder*, in the experience of *La Tuerka*, as well as in the founders' interpretation of the *Indignados* movements and of Laclau's theory on populism. In a way, Podemos itself was launched as a "pop product," a 'political commodity' that had to break into mainstream politics and be able to compete with the 'majors' of the sector, going beyond niche markets. Thus, its relationship with pop cultures is constitutive and primary.

We observed the centrality of all these elements in the internal debates on music and politics. First, in the discussions the leaders had about the ways in which music had to

be used in public events. On this terrain, we observed the internal tension to represent social heterogeneity, to use music that could communicate with wide audiences, and to transmit through music that the party shared the masses' tastes and did not talk from an 'outside' of popular attitudes. At the same time, we have seen that this attempt significantly failed. The "music of the party" was contradictory, it included extremely diversified musical tendencies, styles, traditions and contents, and it did not succeed (as the same leaders who were responsible for these choices admitted) in communicating and sharing a clear identity. The 'old left' and 'pop culture' constantly overlapped within the "soundtrack of change," signaling the same uncertainty and ambiguity that lay in the party on the political side. At the end, the political evolution of the party determined a choice between these two musical constellations. When the party moved away from its initial and self-defined populism, to a certain extent the attempt to be popular and 'mainstream' left space to the shared identities and traditions that political history made available.

What emerges from the internal debate on this issue is the disorientation of party leaders because of the absence of generationally and socially shared musical tastes and landmarks, even within the social groups that were involved in the *Indignados* protest cycle. This absence made the work of the party on this field even more complicated and signaled wider problems regarding the relationship with mainstream cultures and popular identities as a whole, as well as the difficulties in creating new identities and cultures. Even more, in the conferences organized on this issue, the main conclusion by party leaders (and by the experts discussing with them) was that, in our current complex society, it is impossible for a political party to carry out such a work.

Those problems were also at the core of the internal (political) debate based on musical metaphors. In that context, political divisions were translated into cultural and musical oppositions, and into the two traditional sides: 'apocalyptic' and 'integrated'. The resurgence of this sharp and paradigmatic dichotomy signals that within a party based on a populist theory such debates may assume a particularly high relevance and overheated discussions, but they concern very long lasting - and even initial - dilemmas in the history of left-wing parties. These dilemmas pivot on the question if and how it is possible to transform society acting in a largely hostile environment, if and how it is possible to combine radicalism and effectiveness, consistency and consent, and to pursue social change avoiding marginality.

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