09 2016

The struggle for social change reaches the institutions

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"Do not get used to barbarism," Ada Colau

The electoral cycle that is currently coming to an end in Spain began some two and a half years ago, in the spring of 2014. The first to break the ice were the folks from *Podemos*, who, shortly before, had created a powerful electoral machine. Their success in the European elections raised the need to "storm the institutions"; the effect was a change in scenario whose clearly uncertain outcome made it no less imperative. Thus began the municipal projects: *Guanyem Barcelona*, later *Barcelona en comú*, and the diverse *Ganemos* platforms, which sprang up across the entire Spanish territory. Their wager focused on gaining momentum in the movements in order to create a lever that would allow them to reach the city governments. The success obtained in the municipal elections of 2014 demonstrates the merit of this wager.

These initiatives stem directly from the social struggles of the last years, in particular from the Platform for People Affected by

Mortgages (PAH)[1], as is the case in Barcelona. In other cities they grew in the milieu of occupied social centers and the 15M movement and involve persons active in the *mareas* and different protest movements. They take shape as socio-political movements and not as a political party in the conventional sense.

It is important to recall that before the European elections of 2014, a debate had developed about whether it would be better to run for these European elections or for the municipal and autonomous elections that would take place in the following year. Diverse arguments were considered. Against running for the European elections stood the little importance of placing a few limited representatives amongst the 705 members of the European Parliament; their capacity for action appeared miniscule. In favor spoke the fact that because the whole state territory would be one electoral constituency, it would make it easier to obtain the necessary votes, bypassing the gimmicks of the highly unjust Spanish electoral law which unduly rewards rural zones and harshly penalizes minorities. *Izquierda Unida* has lost election after election for this reason. The proponents of *Podemos* settled the discussion by running for the elections with a newly constituted party and scarcely any organization. Their success was unexpected by everyone, including themselves.

The many *Ganemos* followed a distinct process. They all began with a campaign to collect signatures that could endorse the project. Both *Guanyem Barcelona* and *Ganemos Madrid* set this initial threshold at 30,000 signatures. If this threshold would not be reached, it would not appear opportune to move forward with the project. Fortunately the threshold was met and from there they began organizational debates and discussions about a code of ethics; the new political options were born of a broad process of confluence that avoided becoming a jumble and which from the

beginning set new criteria for action. In Barcelona Ada Colau, a well known PAH activist, served as a figure of reference. In Madrid Manuela Carmena was later placed at the front of the candidacy. In A Coruña it was Xulio Ferreiro; in Cádiz José María González Santos, "Kichi"; in Zaragoza Pedro Santiestaban.

The consequential difference between the process of constituting the municipal candidatures and that of a political Party such as *Podemos* lies in the social movement component that is incorporated in the "new politics": this consists, precisely, in making as thin as possible the distance between the "professionals" of politics and all the other people, such that politics can develop into another activity in the life of whomever. Only in this way, when all of the inhabitants of a territory are able to gather, communicate, debate and mutually make decisions that affect them, will politics cease to be the business of the few.

On the contrary, if parties are considered to be the only relevant agents in the sphere of institutional politics, their ideological identity and the logic of competition between them get reinforced. At the same time, citizens tend to lose interest in a competition which they do not feel affects them, but which impedes them from taking the reins of their own collective life in hand. In the long run political disaffection increases, which in cases of emergency, such as occurred during the crisis, leaves the affected totally helpless, when neither laws nor politics can protect us from the aggressions of finances out of control.

The strength of these initiatives comes from the power to act recuperated by so many people in the struggles against the crisis, as well as from the difficulty people face in making their rights respected; it arises from the need to convert rights won into law, to place limits on the voracity of economic forces and to protect

common life; it stems from the will to retake the political as just management of collective problems. As Ada Colau would point out, “empowerment and solidarity make us unstoppable.”[2]

For these reasons, the municipal lists cannot define themselves as mere political parties; they place the classic concept of party in crisis and overhaul the ideological polemic: it ceases to be about the ideas adequate for managing society and comes to center on the minimal requirements for a government whose duty it is to ensure a dignified life for all persons. In this sense the code of ethics becomes fundamental.

However, an unresolved problem lies in the dissymmetry of the components: persons belonging to political parties and others participating in more diffuse forms such as associations or social collectives. The dissymmetry becomes particularly visible in decision-making processes. In general, political parties, including *Podemos*, demonstrate a vertical structure that transmits decisions from the top down. Amongst the parties of the left, the Leninist tradition, structured around the famous “democratic centralism,” privileged the figure of the “professional revolutionary” at the expense of the worker who can dedicate only a fraction of his life-time to political action. This is not to mention the case of women, whose multiple occupations collide with the exigencies of an exclusive militancy that proves burdensome. Even if the new formations have abandoned the figure of the “professional revolutionary,” they continue to rely on professionals fully dedicated to political action, institutional or not, who stand loyal by definition to the leadership of their respective formations, the authority of which is not questioned.

Distinct from this, the type of activism that has been present in the social movements since the sixties introduced a more porous

figure, one that is more concerned with horizontal decision-making processes, less inclined to concentrate power in the leadership, less attached to the language of warfare and more attentive to promoting egalitarian forms of intervention. The feminist movements have played an important role in this change of organizational forms.

As a result, it proves difficult to combine such distinct forms of conceiving political action in the framework of platforms of confluence where persons coming from the different traditions join together, especially when signs of party identity become weaker in the new formation. Here, their distinct components become reconfigured and lose part of their original identity. This is the strength of the new formation, which, however, can represent a point of no return for those formations that integrate into it.

The confluence, in turn, does not constitute itself as a new party that gobbles up everything prior, but rather is born like a common shelter in which the old party discipline cannot impose itself. The protocols of organization and decision-making have to be much more democratic, but the process is not immune to tensions, as we have seen throughout the whole process, and as was confirmed by the relative defeat of *Unidos Podemos* in the recent state elections, which did not respect these forms in constructing its own process.

The "Ganemos" method

The municipalist lists were born as an ensemble of networked dispositives, organized around working groups and plenaries, with open session coordinating committees composed of delegates from different working groups. The power of decision moves around in a much more horizontal mode and does not concentrate in a

leadership whose decisions are binding. This does not mean there is chaos: decisions are made together and respected, but priority is given to caring for diversity, the active search for consensus and the identification of dissents so that they can be worked through and resolved. Thus, a continual dynamic of progress is introduced that files down differences and reinforces work in common, always supported by participative and inclusive methodologies.

The "Ganemos method" is therefore much more democratic than any *dirigiste* method and no less effective, as is demonstrated by the vast amount of work that has been performed in these few months. Its merit is its immense social rooting and its great capillarity, which amplifies itself with the intelligent use of social networks whose capacity to exponentially increase the amplitude of communication and the velocity at which messages circulate is simply extraordinary. The networks are inhabited daily by thousands of citizens who we rarely see in the assemblies, but who as constituents are no less active for this reason. The link to *Podemos*, which allowed for the definitive configuration of the lists, provided the undeniable know-how of these comrades regarding the management of communication tools and their implementation in media. The feedback between the three spaces – the territorial assembly, the mediatic and the virtual – is one of the keys to our way of doing things.

The mediatic dimension deserves special attention; it would be naïve to think that media simply reproduce reality; on the contrary: constant labor creates and recreates televised personalities we have never seen *in natura*, transmits messages reduced as if they were vitalizing capsules, simplifies, codes, standardizes and construes stories, figures and contents. Spectators tend to pay distracted attention to all of this, but it makes up the prime material of their thoughts, conversations and, ultimately, their voting preferences.

They contrast what they hear in the great magic box with their own experiences and they get enthused, enraged and ultimately they vote. The vote is a very weak social bond, but it is the only one that is within the reach of a large part of the population, which, given the little interest of the Institutions to make themselves permeable, has no access to them.

The “Ganemos method” does not discount these people; it is respectful of all those who do not want or who cannot allow politics to absorb an important part of their time, but it strives to offer to each and every person a greater scope for participation in public affairs. We understand that as human beings we live in community, such that common affairs concern everyone; deep down we are much more interdependent and vulnerable than lone wolves. To participate in public affairs is not only something that is ethically dignified, rather, it is a growing necessity, as that which is decided in political Institutions are questions that affect our lives every day: from taxes to welfare benefits, from the regulations of our rights to governmental compulsions, from things as basic as education and health to things no less important such as the livability of our cities, the right to clean air and water or well-being in matters of public safety.

The ethical code

All of the municipalist initiatives give foremost priority to the ethical code. This also changes habitual notions in the field of ethics.

An established tradition tends to separate ethics and politics, viewing ethics as a set of norms that should be valid for the conduct of all persons and politics as the art of governing others,

and as a result of an old tradition of domination, politics appears to be located at the margins of or above ethics. A poor understanding of Machiavelli contributes to this, making politics a kind of derogation from ethically appropriate conduct.

Placing of the question of the ethical code at the forefront of the new political initiatives reverts this situation. It aims to end the privileging of politics inherited from authoritarian traditions. The said code obligates political representatives to commit to an average salary (€2,200/month), which falls beneath the sizable salaries paid to senior officials of certain enterprises. It also commits them to not having bonuses, declaring assets, not defrauding public finances, not accepting gifts, not collaborating with companies active in the field in which the representative has worked for at least five years after leaving office, and so on.

It might be argued that these conditions prevent people who otherwise receive high salaries as technical specialists or executives of important companies to from dedicating themselves to public affairs, because they would not be sufficiently compensated, and that a situation would therefore arise in which experienced persons remain at the margins of institutional politics. This argument can be opposed by pointing out that if such persons are not disposed to renounce their privileges for a period, their interest in common matters may be minimal in any case. With the high technological competencies that society currently demands and the high levels of education in the population in general, it makes no sense to think that nobody has the necessary knowledge and experience beyond a narrow layer of high-end professionals and technical specialists. Rather, recent developments appear to indicate the contrary: a multitude of experienced, precarized people who are not getting good career opportunities despite their high level of training. To take advantage of this politically could be a great idea.

Of course, technical knowledge will always be important, but breaking the link that currently ties institutional politics to the interests of the dominant capitalism seems to be a good bet. This link is personalized in the clientelistic networks that surround the institutions of representative democracy and which are capable of neutralizing many council members. The economic transparency measures of the ethical code should serve to avoid the creation of such networks, putting an end to the long history of corruption that accompanies the recent history of democratic Spain. The ethical code insists on transparency, control and accountability as well as a battery of measures against corruption and an excessive professionalization of politics that fences in the privileges of politicians and places them in a space protected from civic demands.

Another no less important aspect of the ethical code has to do with the rejection of financing by the big banks and the demand that funds come from crowdfunding, small donations and microcredits invested by thousands of persons. This stipulation aims to revert the practice of the banking system that transforms the financing of party expenses, especially of electoral campaigns, into an element of lobbying political decisions that could be disadvantageous to them. For the political leaders of some indebted Parties it is difficult, if not impossible, to stand up to the demands of their patrons, who have ultimately ended up editing legislative proposals directly; more than a few have even boasted about this. Thus, publicly exposing lobby work is a requisite of the new politics.

Ultimately the point is that the demands imposed on political representatives in their dealings with the economic powers safeguard their independence, so that they can attend to being valuable for large layers of the population who are, in the end, the ones who elected them. Rather than behaving like real oligarchies,

this should help representative democracies move towards greater democracy.

But despite its importance, the ethical code is embedded in the rules of representative democracy. It aims to change these rules, making them more transparent in a manner that guarantees the control of the political representatives, but it does not exceed the logic of representation. There remain ambiguities about who will exercise this control, how to demand accountability from public managers, who decides about the smooth functioning of the municipal group, what will happen if representatives do not abide by what was agreed... In the new elected bodies we are beginning to understand that these measures, despite their importance, are not bearing all of their fruit, that we lack resorts with which to obligate those who are already in power to respect the agreements. The structure of the public institutions is so vertical and concentrates so much power at its peak that it is very difficult from the lower echelons to obligate someone occupying a higher position to comply with their obligations. It would appear as if *Realpolitik* would see to it that, at a dizzying speed, officials forget about the agreed commitments.

Redefining democracy

Fundamentally, the new politics aims to redefine democracy, implementing mechanisms that overflow representative democracy in the direction of a participative democracy, including the introduction of certain forms of direct democracy. Its nature as socio-political movement is expressed in this tendency.

This requires emphasizing those initiatives that are centered on direct intervention in municipal issues, be it from the city districts,

in creating specific institutions such as neighborhood councils, be it sectorally, in empowering forums and gatherings in working areas such as education, health, etc. The decentralization of power and the experiences of neighborhood democracy can act as effective counter-powers that limit and control institutional power. Being conscious of the necessity of this counter-power implies transferring resources and competencies from central institutions to these focal points of political innovation, which are capable of engendering a new institutionality. It is a matter of recognizing the troublesome points of the exercise of authority from the outset and departing from the conflict inherent in an unequal society in order to find those points of equilibrium that allow transformation to be advanced. To this end it is necessary to accommodate initiatives that, from the social, are already changing the existing system.

A first blockade in this effort comes from the established political parties. Abusing the representative frame, they think that only parties are legitimate political agents and that, as a result, any intent to expand the forums of discussion and especially to transfer political decisions to non-representative spaces of direct participation implies an attack against their legitimacy.

This rejection is very strong with respect to participative budgets and the new forums of district-level participation. In the first case, the parties object to part of the budget being decided directly by the citizenry; they think that this process is “less democratic” because it gives an unmediated power of decision to segments of the population who hold no legitimacy. As far as they are concerned it is of little significance that in the majority of cases, depending on abstention, the winning party of an election represents no more than 30% of the population and nonetheless claims to govern “on behalf of all.” In no case do they accept that

these decisions could be made by non-elected citizens, be they in local or virtual meetings.

The same happens with the forums of neighborhood participation. It is absolutely refused that these forums might be granted any decision-making capacity because they would enter into conflict with the representative chambers. This means that the relation between representation and participation which, at first view, does not appear to be contradictory, supposes a point of conflict that, in my mode of seeing, illuminates the restrictive and oligopolistic character of political representation, revealing the illusion in which it sustains itself. Nevertheless, it is proving very difficult to marry these two forms of understanding politics, given the unquestioned privilege enjoyed by the logic of representation and the doubts that are brought about by a participation that is not massive in any case, at least up to now.

A new story is also needed, not an ideology in the traditional sense of the term but a re-interpretation of the reality that allows us to understand how and why we have arrived at this point, where the basic conditions for a dignified life in the context of abundant societies are conceived in individualized terms. The notion of "common good" takes on new meaning here, emphasizing how privatizations are forms of subordinating this common good to interests of increasing profits that do not return to the society that bears the cost. It is not only corruption that seizes for private use the economic resources that come from the taxes paid by all citizens, but the use of public institutions and offices of government to pander to private firms that monopolize the services that administrations are supposed to provide. With this formula the public administrations redirect the affected users to private businesses, giving them a service that is in the majority of cases of poor quality and also worsening the conditions for the workers of

those centers, even if an improved appearance is achieved in return. Privatizations and indebtedness have been the magic formulas for turning the public administrations into buying entities of private services. If persons holding public office (or their close associates) are in the businesses offering services, then the circle closes with infinite prospects of continued profit, which, on the other hand, means continued indebtedness of the public coffers and tax increases.

Turning this situation around implies taking seriously the remunicipalization of services and the promotion of cooperative and solidary forms of production that are capable of generating another urban fabric. It also implies changing the productive fabric of the city, attaching more importance to education, tasks of care and environmental rehabilitation and requalification of civic infrastructures (rehabilitation of old buildings, modification of water supply systems, waste management, technological updates, etc.).

After a year in the new city hall, the balance is not as positive as we would wish. Problems arise everywhere, as much with respect to remunicipalizing services that had been privatized as to imposing more effective forms of management. And this is not to mention introducing participative practices that are unknown to a large part of the population and directly boycotted by the parties of the opposition. The mass media do not help us either. But we continue to believe that the wager is worthwhile: hopefully it will extend throughout all of Europe and a deeper and more mass democracy will manage to short-circuit the excessive power of the European elites who, with their politics of fear, are breaking the Union. Any transformation in Europe needs these new experiences, and we, the municipal governments of a new kind in Southern Europe, need this transformation desperately. Without it we will

not be able to avoid the clash with our deeply indebted States and European Institutions that despise us.

[1] http://afectadosporlahipoteca.com/

[2] Colau, Ada y Alemany, Adrià, *Sí se puede,* Barcelona, Destino, 2013, P. 8.