

# **The transversality of populism and the contingent nature of the left-right distinction**

**A conference by Iago Moreno**

The intellectuals and political analysts of the Spanish political left have tended to assume the left-right distinction as a supposedly objective or self-evident political axis. Such assumption implied conceiving the left-right distinction as encompassing or synthesizing the major sources of political conflicts in our contemporary world, while having a universal and transhistorical meaning or “substance”.

However, “left” and “right” have never been “universal categories” organizing the central axes of antagonism in every political landscape around the world. On the contrary, a sincere consideration of this question in depth evidences how the centrality of the discursive left-right distinction is merely pertinent to a short interval of western history, and how its usefulness is only *marginally* relevant to understand the fundamental antagonisms splitting societies across the globe.

While the euro-centric bias of their perspective disallowed them to appreciate the latter question (always at the expense of ignoring other social and political realities), I believe the contemporary rise of nationalisms and populisms opens a window of opportunity to put into question their misguided “reification” of the left-right axis. To begin with, a fundamental characteristic of their discourses has been their persistent rejection of the left-right distinction, but also because of their political subsistence (and their abrupt emergence) has not depended on subordinating themselves to it. But more interestingly, because the way in which the “organic intellectuals” of the left (and crucial segments of the right-wing intelligentsia) responded to their “heresy” vindicating a sort of sacrality or sanctity in this distinction revealed how misguided is the general approach to our conception of it. I have to say I am a vehement critic in this sense: as a laclausian, I merely regard them as discursive categories.

In this sense, I will start my presentation offering a brief explanation of the major features of the “objectivist” understanding of the left-right distinction as a “self-evident” axis. And in contrast, I will stress what I believe that this approach is missing or unable to see. Then, vis-à-vis a closer examination of how “right-wing” and “left-wing” nationalistd populism in Spain articulate the political beyond this distinction, and making sense of what their explicit rejection of such axis, I will develop my alternative explanation further seeking to exemplify my claims.

As many of you might have foreseen, the cases of reference in the second stage of my presentation will focus on the specific cases of PODEMOS and VOX. I believe this is pertinent to the extent that they both represent splendid cases of how nationalist populisms tend reject this axis; even when the contours of their base of supporters are sharply restricted to the fronteers of those who still define as the “left” and the “right”.<sup>1</sup>

Hopefully, the juxtaposition of these analogous cases will allow me to make my point without losing myself in the intricacies of any of these cases. I believe that this will make the explanation more congruent with the international discussion we are having today and, in addition, will make it easier for me to put at the center the theoretical critique I am seeking to put forward.

## **2. The fetishism for the left-right axis, the organic crisis of neoliberalism and the theoretical quarrels of the Spanish left**

Let’s start by outlining the controversial “reification” of the left-right axis that I have introduced before.

As I explained, before and after the eruption of PODEMOS and VOX, and throughout the whole “journey through the desert of neoliberalism” (“travesía por el desierto neoliberal”), the Spanish left wing intelligentsia helded to an essentialist conception of the left-right axis.

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<sup>1</sup> However, in order to enrich the conversation, if I have the time to do so, I will punctually refer to the case of the Catalan Secessionist movement and the analogous populisms in the name of “national self-determination” that have grown across Spain throughout the last decade.

In this sense, apart from considering themselves as depositories of “true left” they invested enormous efforts in trying to decipher if foreign leaders of the third world were “actually left-wing or not” or insisted in the necessity of intervening in the indignados movement to “explain them” (from a superior position) that their vindications where in fact “left-wing demands”. As if the discourse of these middle class mobilizations needed a leninist vanguard to “de-alienate” them and “shepherd them” towards the appropriate field, but more importantly, as if the meaning of this distinction could be established “objectively”, as if it was not a “discourse”.

Following this rationale, these intellectuals stand associated neoliberal post-politics (i.e. the illusion of politics “beyond right and left”) and the *third-way* social democracy to the death of the left *tout court*.

While I agree on the underlying idea that the “third way” implied the death of the left as an antagonist force, I disagree with the ultimate implication of this approach. And I disagree because of a distinct conceptual strategy to understand what “the left(S)” or “the right(S)” are in specific junctures.

Above all, I reject this approach for two reasons. First, because is a political approach tightly attached to the naïve believe in the potential “awakening” of a dormant left: as if its “political substance” was not the product of political articulations and legacies that can be transformed (and historically defeated) but an ideological content “circulating” through the veins of a dormant social body.

But more importantly, I reject it because they depart from a notion of the left (and the right) as a sort of transcendental signifieds, as signifieds with a closed meaning, essential and transhistorical.

Probably I am too vehement here because of my interest on latin american populisms, which did not need to rely on these categories (as in the case of Peronismo). But do think it is essential, in world where movements “beyond right and left” (this is, “transversal” movements) are on the rise since more than a decade from the plateaus of the Andes to the citadels of post-colonial imperialism. And therefore, I regard this debate as an opportunity to put the emphasis on how the old left-wing imaginaries are re-articulated (or dis-articulated) in distinct directions. I think this is the crucial (or pendant) mission to understand the contemporary crisis of the left-right distinction at a

political level, but also to advance in the conceptual debate on how to conceive it.

In this sense, my political interpretation goes as follows:

1. Left and right have always been contingent categories whose social and political meaning can only be “read” within the contexts or junctures in which they are inscribed.
2. The contextual significance of those categories or “signifiers” derives from the long-run sedimentations of conflicts from the past in the social imaginary.
3. However, the weight of this “past” is not an eternal burden, as profound transformations of the political landscape can always pull up the “roots” of their meaning.
4. Within the cycle of October, the right-left distinction, borrowing its categories from the French Revolution, and basing its spatial metaphors on the dynamics of institutional parliamentary politics, became a synonym for the opposition of greatly diverging political projects.
5. Until the fall of the Berlin wall and the ship-wrecking of soviet socialism, this distinction was especially strong within the west, where it came to be expressed as the clash of negative versus positive liberties or the market versus the welfare state institutions. However, it was not a “global” distinction. In countries such as Argentina, for example, “the left” and “the right” remained as partial categories without ever totalizing themselves, and in other parts of the world, the centrality of religious, ethnic or distinct social cleavages put other “schisms” at the center of politics.
6. The death of the cycle of October and the rise of neoliberalism as a sort of *pensée Unique* did transform that distinction into a less politically substantial distinction. It is true: the Left and right ceased to differentiate two radically alternative conceptions of how society should work; but these did not disappear only because they changed their meaning. On the contrary, they remained categories to define different coalitions of

alignments within society that still had diverging social compositions, political concerns and voting preferences.

7. The reason why their meaning changed without disappearing, is the same one that explains its non-universality across the globe: left-right are discursive constructions.
8. Such discursive character can be evidenced in the rise of reactionary nationalist populisms (i.e. the so called “right-wing populism”), progressive antagonist forces (i.e. the so-called “populist left”) and transversal populist secessionists (i.e. from Scotland to Catalonia).
  - a. Effectively, these forces implied a “return of the political” (in the mouffian sense of the term) or a “return of the repressed” ( in terms of Wolfgang Streek). They brought back into the political arena the opposition of “real” alternatives.
  - b. However, within most of these eruptions of antagonism and re-politicising turmoil, far from restoring the “*foundational*” meaning of such distinction, they challenged this distinction, they rallied against it, or they put forward other articulations of the political.
9. I believe this u-turn in the meaning of the right-left distinction is a window of opportunity to understanding the volatility and contingency of populism, specially vis-a-vis the “transversality” of nationalist populisms and their discourse.

In order to unravel the kind of controversial claim that I am making, I think it is worth taking into account a pair of examples.

### **PODEMOS**

I defend that the way in which PODEMOS broke with the left-right distinction can serve us to understand the previous question further. Primarily, because as the 5 Star Movement in Italy, PODEMOS has had one of the most insistently “transversal” discourses “beyond left and right” that I can think about. At least within the west and speaking about antagonist forces.

Let's observe this question:

1. While the political project of the Spanish Communist Party and its electoral front was to forge a "United Left" (*Izquierda Unida*), the strategy of PODEMOS was founded upon the idea that "the left-right axis configures a [political] *geography* that is not useful for social change [anymore]".
2. For this reason, since its birth at the 2014 European Elections, PODEMOS articulated its political discourse around the vertical opposition of "the ordinary people" (*la gente*) against "the regime parties" (*los partidos del régimen*) or, more insistently, against "the (political) caste" (*la casta [política]*).
3. This discourse was constructed outside the imaginary of the left and the right, and the semantics of its political messages, as the major characters outlined in their narration of politics, greatly differed from those of the traditional left. But more crucially, it was a discourse departing from the explicit rejection of the "left-right dichotomy" as the central split of the Spanish political camp.
4. In this sense, defining themselves as "*something different to another option in the electoral supermarket*" ([Errejon, 2014](#)), far from subordinating their discourse, to the "horizontal" logic of the left-right distinction, PODEMOS repeatedly confronted the left-right dichotomy as "*a choice between Pepsi and Coca-Cola*" ([Iglesias, 2014](#)).
  - a. In other words: instead of confronting the "grand coalition" as a form of politics "beyond left and right" they confronted "the left-right distinction" as we know it as a challengeable distinction deeply integrated in the neoliberal rationale.

What did the defenders of the sacrality of the left-right axis think about this strategy? They regarded it as a dangerous "game"; as a frivolous way of playing with the "*contradictions*" of a political juncture that supposedly had to be "unveiled" (sooner or later) as directly meaningful for the right-left axis. And this was not merely criticised as a mere act of demagoguery, but as a hazardous approach to the nebulous discourses of fascism.

What was actually happening here? PODEMOS was able to identify that the left-right distinction was internalised within the logic of neoliberalism. It understood that it came to define the contours of a “political geography” firmly attached to questions that were not of their interest: past historic figures, icons, sub-cultural affinities, non-majoritarian demands, past claudications, etc. And consequently, they understood that other distinctions could act “transversally” to construct a wider base of supporters than the dispute of these categories (now anchored at the domain of neoliberal ideology).

They understood that the alternative of “unveiling” the “true meaning” of the “real left” was based on an idealist conception of this axis, and it was destined to remain in a corner as an ornamental decoration, serving as a crutch for the neoliberal “third way”.

### **VOXISM AND THE DEATH OF LEFT AND RIGHT**

I can foresee that I am not going to have enough time to develop an explanation of the case of VOX as long as in PODEMO’s case, but I will try to briefly summarize this question.

Despite the antithetical character of their political projects, the motivations of PODEMOS and VOX to break with the left-right distinction were actually analogous (And so are the lessons we should extract from it)

VOX did not break with the left-right distinction by vindicating the power of “the people ” against “the caste”. They did so by discursively presenting themselves as the unique alternative against the “woke dictatorship” or, alternatively, as the “living Spain” that fought against a plural set of “enemies of the fatherland” but it always renounced to use “the right” as a figure of reference. For instance, against their definition as a “extreme right party”, VOX always insists on defining themselves as a “extremely necessary party, and its subject of appeal is always “the spaniards” (“los españoles”)

VOX understood that against “the left” and in defence of “the right-wing”, their strategies of electoral mobilization were destined to fall in an internal competition with the Partido Popular for the representation of an already established identity.

Alternatively, they decided to assume the right-left distinction as a distinction “absorbed” by what they called the “progressive consensus” and “globalism”.

And they did not do it guided by a nationalist irrational fury, but on the basis of an intelligent analysis of how this distinction had internalized specific post-political consensus. Including those of what Nancy Fraser has named as “progressive neoliberalism” and the extreme right refers to as “globalism”.

### **Nationalism, Populism and the return of the repressed: who cares about the right and the left?**

In both examples we can appreciate how their vindication of transversality (“politics beyond right and left”), far from defending a rebranded form of neoliberal post-politics (nowadays easily comforted in the right-left axis), it has become the battle war-cry of those who approached politics as an explicit antagonism.

We need to take into consideration that after the age of “non-partisan” politics, politics did not come as a *zombie uprising* of the left-right axis, but as a political antagonism against the left-right distinction.

What does this tell us about the left-right distinction as such?

This should lead us to acknowledge that Left and Right have a volatile and contingent meaning and are far from being endowed of a globally universal or temporally eternal significance in politics.

If VOX and PODEMOS are able to exploit the denunciation of the left-right distinction as an “*outdated division*” or a “*thimblereg game*” in their own favour, it is precisely because of this question.

The triumph of transversal movements as populism or nationalism, the triumph of politics beyond the right-left distinction, is not the product of a distortion of an objective axis, but a consequence of the autonomy of the political and the discursive character of these categories.