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Political activists' frames in times of post-politics: evidence from Kirchnerism in Argentina and Podemos in Spain

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This article studies the transformation of the frames of political activists who come from autonomous social movements in Argentina and Spain. The cases of Kirchnerism in Argentina and Podemos and the local electoral coalitions in Spain, despite all their contextual and historical differences, follow the same pattern of politicisation. They took place within a general social tendency towards post-politics, understood as the reduction of politics to technical management, without questioning the existing capitalist order. In both cases, the model of politicisation starts within an exceptional political event: the social protests of 2001 in Argentina and the mobilisations of the 15M or *indignados* in Spain in 2011. Drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the article examines how social actors re-adjust their frames by managing the contradictions between their previous autonomous logic of action and their new institutional roles, according to the changing economic and political context. It concludes that there has been a clear process of politicisation, materialised in the rise of new generations of political activists, but to some extent the post-political situation remains both in the exceptional political moment and in the electoral coalitions, as the core of the economic system remains unquestioned.

Keywords: Kirchnerism; Podemos; social movements; frame analysis; post-politics; political parties

Introduction

In March 2015 the Kirchnerist government organised the International Forum 'Emancipation and Equality' at the Cervantes Theatre of Buenos Aires. Dozens of leftists and progressive intellectuals, social scientists and politicians from Latin America and Europe were invited to speak at the event. One of the most anticipated invited speakers was Íñigo Errejón, Secretary of Policy of Podemos (We Can), who explained that his political party was an attempt to create an electoral expression of the demands of the Spanish *indignados* (outraged) or 15M. Another speaker was Alex Kicillof, who was then the Ministry of Economy and Public Finances of Argentina. He gave a personal account of his own evolution, from having an autonomist perspective – during his participation in the student movement and in the protests during the 2001 economic crisis – to joining the Kirchnerist party. Kicillof portrayed autonomist practices as an expression of neo-liberal hegemony:

> This [neoliberal] idea, that the State is useless, came to be assumed by us. We thought it was an enemy, an enemy of mobilisation (…) And we, who were part of these autonomist ideas, Zapatistas, Chiapas, understood that they were forms of resistance. They were not so much about direct and clear advancement as about resistance. But we understood after 2003 that the State can also be, must be, an instrument for emancipation.[1]

The similarities between the narratives of Errejón and Kicillof were not accidental. Their organisations – Frente para la Victoria (Front for Victory, directed by Kirchner's couple) and Podemos – are political coalitions which seek to channel the demands of spontaneous protest movements which, paradoxically, are characterised by strong hostility towards political parties, professional politics, and even any kind of institutionalised political organisation.

Despite the historical and contextual differences, there is a strong link between Spain and Argentina's recent historical political processes. In a frame of neoliberal economic political hegemony, financial crisis have led to a crisis of political representation. In both cases, the first anti-neoliberal response came from strong autonomist and anti-institutional protest. However, in both cases, in a short period, trust in political and state institutions was recomposed through the creation of new political parties or coalitions, which, to some extent, raised some of the anti-neoliberal critics and demands of the previous protests. These elements connect not only these two countries but the processes in many Latin-American countries in the first decade of the twenty-first century and European peripheral countries affected by 2008 financial crisis, as some others have discerned (e.g. Levey, Ozarow, & Wylde, 2016). In any case, Spain and Argentina share some further elements which make them especially interesting for illustrating these processes, mainly the implementation of what has been interpreted as a populist strategy which would overcome previous post-political situation created by neoliberal hegemony (Errejón, 2015; Errejón & Mouffe, 2015; Laclau, 2005).

The recent political history of Argentina and Spain can be characterised by reference to the shift from the typical post-political situation (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015) towards the strong politicisation of society at different levels. In both countries, this development was mediated by the crash of their respective national economies and the wide discrediting of the political elite. Our perspective here is that the Argentinean and Spanish cases, despite all their contextual and historical differences, follow the same pattern of politicisation. This process is structured through two moments: first, an exceptional political moment (an historical moment or event which opens the possibility for a partial re-foundation of the basis of society), and second, a subsequent moment in which some features of this extraordinary political moment are extended to everyday politics (Echeverría, 1998). To what extent are both political moments part of the same political movement? How can we explain the contradictions between the activists' political practices in both moments? To what extent does this movement entail a real politicisation of society or even the overcoming of the post-political situation? The hypothesis of the article is that the post-political characteristics remaining in 2001 and 2011 protests forced a radical turn in the anti-neoliberal activists towards more pragmatic relationships with state institutions and more concrete goals. That is (partially) the result of a change in political activist's frames, understanding them as the activist's interpretation of the conditions of possibility for political action and social change in a particular context. The lack of political expectations of change in the scale of nation-state drove to the logic of anti-neoliberal autonomous social movements, focused in the realisation of local micro-utopias, which remain in the first years after the exceptional political moment (2001 and 2011). However, a new scenario is open by the economic crisis and subsequent crisis of political representation, leading to a new frame of anti-neoliberal activist's interpretation of the political possibilities and subsequently to the logic of participation in state institutions.

Ultimately, the transformation of political and economic context leads towards the transformation of activist's frames, and subsequently, towards the transformation of the shape of political struggle against neoliberalism. The article studies to what extent this shift from different logics and different frames of interpretation of the conditions of possibility of political change leads to overcome the neoliberal post-political situation. For this purpose, it pays attention to how social actors re-adjust their frames and manage the contradictions they experience in shifting political and economic context.

This article is divided into four sections. First, it frames its hypothesis in the theoretical discussion of 'the political' and post-politics. Second, it explains the methodology followed by the researchers. Third, it contextualises the analysis through a discussion of the national and state crises experienced by Argentina and Spain, describing the rise of social movements and new electoral coalitions related to the demands of the protest movements. Fourth, it focuses on the changing political frames of the political activists. It concludes that there has been a certain process of politicisation, materialised in the rise of new generations of political activists, but at a certain level the post-political situation remains both in the exceptional political moment and in the electoral coalitions, as the core of the economic system remains unquestioned.

State fetish, post-politics and re-politicisation

Echeverría (1998) defines the political as the capacity to influence, found or transform human sociability, which, in capitalist society, tends to be monopolised by politics. This reduction of the political to pragmatic political management in the area of institutions, to professional politics, Echeverria calls the fetish of the State. The fetish of the State hides other levels of the political, which tend to emerge anyway as an impure and peripheral exercise. Besides, Echeverria speaks about two different moments of the political. Firstly, an extraordinary moment of foundation or re-foundation of society: war, civil war or/and revolution, the political par excellence. Secondly, the political in everyday social life, prolonging the extraordinary moment, which completes the transformative action and consists of the apolitical work that serves the events of the extraordinary moment. In Žižek's (2011) words, the gap between the political act and the administration of really existing social relations is that the first 'changes the very frame which determines how things work' (p. 216).

The fetish of the State, a substantial tendency in capitalism for Echeverría (1998), leads to a kind of post-political situation. Thus, the context of neoliberal success raises the contemporary debate concerning post-politics. This has been defined as a situation in which the political is reduced to politics, to technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economy and cosmopolitan liberalism (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015, p. 6).

The expansion of neoliberal capitalism from the seventies onwards, until it achieved a virtual post-political situation in the nineties, has been challenged through different political projects: from projects tied to the radical and pluralistic democracy of new social movements (NSM) to the more recent projects tied to Laclau's populist hypothesis. First, one of the political manifestations of the political shift in the seventies was the emergence of the so-called NSM. The actions of these NSMs favoured the rise of a New Left, which included in its discourse ideas related to ecology, sexual rights, gender equality, displacing issues related with trade unionism and social classes (Melucci, 1999). This also coincides with the rise of political autonomism (as a model of internal organising principles based on horizontal structures), from German squatters movements to the Zapatista movement in México. Secondly, in the context of the emergence of NSM, Laclau and Mouffe (2004) developed a critique of the

supposed Marxist essentialism and the primordial role assigned to the class struggle. They proposed a redefinition of the socialist project in terms of a radicalisation of democracy. Democracy should work in this project by articulating the irreducible multiplicity of struggles against different forms of subordination. So the new task of the left was not to fight the liberal democratic ideology but the opposite, to deepen and to expand it in the direction of a radicalised and plural democracy. Thirdly, also in the context of the NSM emergence, Kitschelt (1989) proposed the concept 'party-movement' to refer to those new political parties that were promoted by left-libertarian and ecologist groups in Western Europe during the 1980s. In contrast to the traditional communist parties, these parties were defined by their attempt to preserve some of the characteristics of social movements (horizontal organisational structure and so on) (Kitschelt, 2006). The political cycle opened by the economic crisis of 2008 have driven some authors to rescue the concept of 'party-movement' in order to explain the rise of new political formations born or invigorated by NSM, such as Syriza in Greece, Podemos in Spain, Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and Bloco de Esquerda in Portugal (Martín, 2015; Subirats, 2015).

Later on, Laclau (2005) moved from radical democracy to his particular definition of populism. For Laclau, populism is not a specific political movement, but the political at its purest, a neutral matrix of an open struggle whose content and stakes are themselves defined by the contingent struggle for hegemony. What characterises populism is the emergence of the people as a political subject, and all different particular struggles and antagonism appear as part of the struggle between the people and the Other (this content of us and them is not prescribed, but what is at stake is the struggle for hegemony). In a context where hegemonic power cannot incorporate a series of popular demands, an antagonistic force would struggle for some empty signifiers (democracy, justice, decency), which can incorporate the multiple particular and unsatisfied demands of the people. This thesis has been highly influential on Podemos and was partially based on the analysis of the Argentina's political tradition.

Diverse criticisms have been raised against the project of multiple identities and radical politics, as well as against Laclau's populist proposal. To begin with, for Žižek (2011, pp. 226–228) as well as for Dean (2015), the postmodern identity politics, related to particular life styles, fits very well with the idea of a de-politicised society. The recent proliferation of cultural groups and life styles is only possible and thinkable in the context of capitalist globalisation. The only link that connects all these multiple identities is the capitalist market, always eager to satisfy its clients. Moreover, Žižek (2008, p. 95) criticises Laclau and Mouffe's defence of the 'democratic invention' since in the very definition of political democracy there is a tendency to exclude the non-political, the (liberal) sphere of politics as separated from private life and the economy (the fetish of the State, in Echeverria's words). On the other hand, Swyngedouw (2015, p. 177) blames particularistic and local protests for representing a colonisation of the political by the social, rather than politicising the outer flanks of the political dimension, substituting the political by a proliferation of identity-based and fragmented communities.

The other key topic is the abandonment of criticism of capitalism. Postmodernism has politicised aspects previously considered apolitical o private, but it has contributed to the de-politicisation of the economy and the naturalisation of capitalism. For Žižek (2008, p. 178) and Dean (2016, p. 54), the escape from Marxist essentialism drove Laclau and Mouffe to the acceptance of capitalism and the renunciation of any real attempt to overcome the existing social order. In a similar way, due to the necessary externalisation of the enemy into an intruder or obstacle, from a populist perspective the cause of one's troubles is ultimately never the system as such, but the intruder who corrupted it (financial manipulators and not capitalists as such). In addition, Žižek dismisses the current polarisation between the post-political administration and the populist

politicisation. Both can coexist even in the same political force, replacing tolerance for multiculturalism as an ideological supplement with post-political administration (Žižek, 2006). Thus, for Žižek and Dean, politicisation in the current neoliberal context seems to unavoidably entail the politicisation of the economy.

Methods

The cases of Argentina and Spain have been selected for illustrating what we propose as a possible model of politicisation, understood as an overcoming of the post-political (neoliberal) situation. This process is analysed in political activists, active mainly in two concrete political organisations, as a change in their political frames and strategies, according to changes in the wider political and economic context. Qualitative methods are especially suitable for the study of political frames. This article is based on participant observation and 15 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2015 and the first quarter of 2016 and with political activists belonging to Podemos and local electoral coalitions in Spain as well as to *Nuevo Encuentro* (New Encounter-NE), which is part of the Kirchnerist coalition *Frente para la Victoria*, in Argentina. In order to select the informants the researchers have attempted to cover different levels of personal engagement in social protest and/or electoral struggle; so different viewpoints on political action could be reflected. The interviews were conducted in Buenos Aires, Seville and Cádiz.

The participant observation took place in assemblies, demonstrations and meetings of committees of local branches of these parties and coalitions. These observations were complemented by an analysis of documents pertaining to these political groups. The sample has followed the criterion of theoretical saturation. The researchers have stopped collecting data as new research did not provide additional information on the research questions.

The interviews and document analysis focused on the changing frames of the activists in relation to: the identification of enemies or those responsible for social problems, the existence of general strategies and the changing perception about the plausibility and desirability of the relationship with state institutions, alliances with different actors and goals, concrete measures and proposed alternatives.

These research techniques will be used in order to study the transformations of the frames of the political activists, which experienced the transition from participating in spontaneous and/or autonomous protests to being actively involved with political parties. The seminal work of Snow, Burke Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) introduced the concept of frame alignment to the study of social movements. Frame alignment takes place when the individuals reinterpret their biographies and life experiences according to the discursive contexts of the movement – producing new identities and becoming persons who can be mobilised and whose self-interest coincides with the goals of the movement. In this article, we will use the concept of 'frame transformation' (Snow et al., 1986, p. 473) in order to explain the shift of social protest and opposition to neoliberalism. Frame transformation is a type of frame alignment that takes place when the proposed frames, or logics of action, of the activists appear contradictory to the frames, rituals, practices and routines of the population and the institutions in which they are participating. In order to maintain and acquire social support and members, and to manage their new institutions and organisations, activists must propose new discourses, meanings and values. It must be added, however, that framing processes do not take place in a socio-economic and political vacuum; they are powerfully conditioned by political opportunities and the socio-economic context (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996, pp. 2–6).

Context: from post-politics to the political?

Social crisis and 'populism' in Argentina

From the last military dictatorship, Argentina has been one of the many laboratories of neoliberal politics. In the nineties, the democratic government of Menem was responsible for a high financiarisation of the economy, privatisation of public companies and high rates of public indebtedness (Lozano, 2001). The key policy of this period was the convertibility (a fixed exchange relation between the Argentinian peso and American dollar), which generated an effect of perceived enrichment in the population which contributed to the consensus on neoliberal model (Levey et al., 2016). Starting in 1998, Argentina suffered from a recession, the unemployment rate rose to 20%, and in the end the whole national financial system collapsed in 2001. As a result, the government blocked the bank deposits to prevent the flight of capital.

The period prior to the 2001 protests is usually characterised as one of low political unrest, low participation in protests and the fragmentation of demands. However, the outbreak of unrest in December 2001 involved street protests, shop looting and violent riots for weeks, mainly in Buenos Aires. The declaration of a state of emergency and around 39 people being killed in confrontations with police did not stop the protests. The popular claim *Que se vayan todos* (All of them must go!), directed against the political parties and policy professionals, gathered strength. Four presidents resigned in one week and there was a long period of political instability all through 2002. Argentina's 2001 protests are quite famous because of the innovation witnessed in its repertories of action and the influence of autonomist tendencies. The *piqueteros'* (picketers') movement, fragmented in a multitude of Trotskyist and autonomist organisations, introduced the 'cut the road and assembly' formula of protest, consisting in the blockade of the main roads of access to the city. These actions were organised by unemployed lower-class protesters using direct democracy and involved some kind of 'deinstitutionalisation' (Carrera & Cotarelo, 2002). On the other hand, the Popular Assemblies emerged in 2001 as an urban and middle-class form of horizontal organisation for protesting. This form of organisation is opposed to hierarchic and vertical structures typical of the State and traditional political parties. Besides, multiple initiatives of barter networks without official money were developed in the context of economic collapse. Finally, around 250 ruined companies were taken over by the workers and run through cooperatives. So, horizontal organisations and new political subjects were mobilised in this context (Almeyra Casares, 2005).

After a long period of political unrest, the left-wing Peronist Nestor Kirchner won the presidential election in 2003. Kirchner's popularity was the result of several factors (Boron, 2004), including the earlier low profile of the new president, being unconnected to prior governments, his personalist political style (populist to his detractors), his confrontation with the IMF, the World Bank and the US, his policy of purging agents involved in the military dictatorship and the reparations to victims of the dictatorship. For Muñoz and Retamozo (2008), Kirchner's government managed to spread the idea of taking back politics and the state for the people.

On the other hand, in relation to the economy, although there was not a radical change, following Wylde (2012, 2014), there was a notable shift from the previous neoliberal political economy. Néstor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández (the Kirchner governments) have managed an interventionist political economy in industry and social welfare. These governments developed a coherent political economy from 2003 to 2015, in the opinion of Vilas (2016), articulating with more or less success the particular interest of different social classes and factions with a nationalist discourse. Kirchnerism tried (successfully for a period) to combine the maintaining of the privileges of national elite with the assistance and the improving of living conditions of the working and lower classes.

Kirchnerism was widely supported by popular classes and brought practices and discourses from the radical left (e.g. promoting working coops). However, the Argentina's left-wing parties and many academics blame Kirchner governments for neutralising social movements and normalising capitalism and bourgeois state after the strong crisis of 2001 (Dinerstein, 2014; Katz, 2013 or Vega, 2015). During this period, popular assemblies were gradually broken up (with exceptions) and the public relevance of the *piqueteros* declined dramatically as result of the economic growth and the reduction in unemployment. In addition, there were significant processes of co-optation performed by the Kirchner governments, getting close to radical unions (such as the Central de Trabajadores de la Argentina, Argentine Workers' Central Union) as well as to *piqueteros* organisations. In general terms, the bulk of the *piqueteros* organisations became dependent on state subsidies (Almeyra Casares, 2005).

From financial crisis to political renewal in Spain

Spain had a period of enormous economic growth from the second half of the eighties, with an economy progressively deregulated, based on the tourist sector and on highly speculative real-estate and financial bubbles (Diaz-Parra & Solanas, 2015). The outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 had a great impact on the Spanish economy. The first symptoms could be seen in the labour market indicators, particularly the unemployment rate. The income per capita of the country declined, unemployment and poverty started to grow, rising to alarming rates among the youth population and home evictions became widespread. The way the crisis was managed after 2011, with severe cutbacks in public services and investments being imposed and the labour market being deregulated, in response to the demands of the 'Troika' (European Commission, International Monetary Fund and European Central Bank), worsened the situation. As a result of these policies, some public services, including education and health, experienced significant drops in budget resources. There were also significant cuts in pensions, unemployment benefits and social services.

The political management of the crisis, together with the numerous corruption scandals, turned the economic crisis into a crisis of representation. It was in this context of the political sphere having been discredited that the protests of the *indignados* or 15M movement in 2011 emerged, which became the most prominent social movement in contemporary Spanish history. Public square occupations, protest camps, networks, assemblies, work commissions and protests were extended throughout the country, building a new movement characterised by horizontalism and the use of new information and communication technologies (Castells, 2013). In the next years, there were two general strikes and they were raised strong and influential movements of housing and against cutback in public services. However, by the middle of 2013 the movement showed clear signs of withering away, mostly due to the difficulties it was having in generating an effective and stable organisational structure and in achieving any of its goals (Roca & Diaz-Parra, 2016).

The closeness of the political institutions to the social movement's demands and the frustration of many activists led a group of militants of the anti-capitalist left, a small Trotskyist-oriented party and several university lecturers to create a new political party in order to give institutional expression to the demands of the social forces unleashed by the 15M (Iglesias, 2015). They founded the party, which they named Podemos – inspired by Obama's campaign – in 2014 and participated in the elections for the European parliament in May of that year. The skilful communication strategy of the party and its leader, Pablo Iglesias, succeeded in attracting the attention of the mass media, and Podemos gained five seats in the European Parliament and 1.2 million votes (Errejón, 2015). After that, there was a transfer of militancy from the 15M and other social movements and political groups to Podemos. The new party set up its organisational structure to a great extent following the model of the networks formed by the 15M assemblies

(Romanos & Sádaba, 2015); however, institutional participation demanded a greater level of centralisation.

With the municipal elections on 24 May 2015 on the horizon, activists launched hundreds of municipal candidatures throughout the Spanish territory, most of them supported by Podemos and, in some cases, by other leftist political forces. These candidatures, which included in their programs many of the demands of the 15M and other social movements, seized power in the two most important cities, Madrid and Barcelona, but also in many other relevant cities such as A Coruña, Cádiz or Zaragoza. In other cities they gained hundreds of seats on city councils. Notoriously, some of the first measures adopted by the new governments of these cities were related to demands of the housing movement.

As time went by the media campaign against Podemos intensified, eroding the public image of its leaders and its social support. Nevertheless, in the general elections of December 2015 and June 2016, the coalition of Podemos with other leftist forces (En Comú Podem, Compromis and En Marea) received the third most votes. Anyway, electoral results in Argentina and Spain have made evident the differences from a social and territorial perspective. While Kirchnerism has wide support in the poorest regions and in the poorest areas of the big cities (provinces in the north of Argentina and Province of Buenos Aires), Podemos has got its support from the richest regions in the north of Spain (Catalonia and Basque Country) and its biggest support comes from young people with higher education. The old social-democrat party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español [PSOE]) keep being hegemonic in the poorest regions of the country (Andalusia and Extremadura) and among non-educated people ('Elecciones Congreso', 2015; 'Resultados electorales del balotaje', 2015).

Analysis of the frames of political activists

In this epigraph we check critically the proposition of a change from a post-political frame towards a populist-politicised frame through the analysis of fieldwork empirical material (Figure 1).

Post-political frame

In Argentina, prior to 2003, the enemy for left-wing activists as well as for a good part of the population were (professional) politicians, who were seen as being corrupt burglars. Politicians were blamed for the enormous problems of unemployment and poverty, which led to the political instability of 2001–2002. Today this is admitted but criticised by NE militants, some of whom

	Post-political frame	*Populist frame*
Enemies and allies	Professional politicians Activism as a marginal phenomenon	National economic elite and foreign institutions. Class alliance (nationalist populism)
Relationship with state institutions	Absence of relations with state institutions. Professional politics separated from society	Focus on institutional and party politics.
Proposed alternatives for political and social change	Cultural and social focus. Prefigurative politics. Local micro-utopias	Change through state institutions.

Figure 1. Changing frames.

were already left-wing activists but also by many others who were not (despite the age difference, the discourse of the militants about this period is quite homogeneous). The 'All of them must go!' slogan is interpreted by NE activists as a sign of impotence. All NE informants suggested that the time prior to 2001 was characterised by left activism being isolated, reduced to 'ghettoes' and separated from 'real people', with young Argentineans being completely de-politicised. They explain this fact by the abundance of consumer goods, thanks to the dollarisation of the Argentinean economy. One of the activists spoke about trade unions as an important political reference in these times, but, according to his point of view, their scope was very limited due to the left's lack of involvement in 'real' politics. Two of the interviewees told the researchers that in the 1990s politicians were not people they looked up to. In those times, political and/or youth rebelliousness was supposed to be sublimated in music icons and rock counter-culture. The autonomous rise of 2001 seems to have reversed this tendency only partially:

> […] before the rebellion was in rock music, in culture. I identified myself with *Los Redondos* (an Argentinean rock band). Young people followed these type of referents. Today this has changed. Young people identify themselves with politicians rather than with rock stars, because the rebellion they saw in musicians can be found nowadays in politicians. And politicians are no more these persons separated from society without any relation with you. You can humanize them. (Basteiro, interviewed in Buenos Aires, February 2016)

For NE activists, there was an emergence of left-wing activism, characterised by the relative absence of relations with state institutions and focused on prefigurative politics. NE activists show some disdain for prefigurative politics. Distance from state institutions is perceived as distance from the political itself.

In Argentina, an intensive autonomist and far left-wing activism, with multitude of small anti-capitals projects, has characterised the post-2001 period. Nowadays, it is easy to find popular markets, cooperatives and autonomous assemblies, which, paradoxically, are usually linked to some kind of state sponsorship, at least prior to the 2015 elections.

Political activism in Spain in the eighties and nineties was to a large extent focused on prefigurative politics (with small counter-cultural groups acting in the ambits such as squatting and anti-militarism). The strong movements at the end of the 1970s began to decline as the labour organisations came to be institutionalised and the left-wing parties were included in the governmental institutions. In this context the tendencies and campaigns characteristic of the European NSMs were introduced in Spain: feminism, environmentalism, squatters and so on. Within these, the criticism of the institutionalisation of the parties and trade unions was a central issue.

The 15M slogan *No nos representan* (They do not represent us) reflected the initial disaffection of the protesters (and a significant part of the population) towards political elites and the management of the economic crisis. It also illustrates the ambiguity of the discourse of the movement, which favoured the identification of people from very different backgrounds. Veteran activists from the radical left, trade unions and civil society organisations mobilised together with young people, leading to some internal conflicts. According to some interviewees, the new generations of activists liked long assemblies where they could speak freely and express their feelings, while veteran activists attempted to introduce more dynamism into the decision-making.

Another widespread slogan – 'It's not the left against the right, it's the bottom against the top' – manifested that the discontent was directed towards both the conservative Partido Popular and the socialist PSOE, which implemented austerity measures and were involved in corruption scandals. María, today a member of an electoral coalition, illustrated this tendency when she explained that before 2014 she did not vote. Her interest in politics came out of participating in the anti-austerity movement:

> I voted when I was 18 years old for the United Left. After that I never voted. Not because I was not interested in politics, in fact I was very interested in it, but because I didn't feel represented by anyone.

The 15M assemblies were critical moments of political learning and awareness for a young generation: 'the people who were there and who were very politicised, used to think one thing one week and a different thing the following week, because the discourses enriched us and we were learning'.

The autonomist organisation and initiatives raised by the economic and political crisis have a continuity with previous trends in extreme left-wing political organisation (Diaz-Parra & Candon, 2014; Dinerstein, 2014). These leads to interpret that the frame of political possibilities previous to the political representation crisis remained in the first years after 2001 and 2011, in contradiction with the new context leading to further changes in militants frames.

A new populist-politicised frame?

In comparison with the pre-Kirchnerist period, NE militants say that Argentinean people today speak in the streets about politics. People discuss and fight about politics and the political economy in the shops and in their own houses. From Laclau's sympathetic perspective, Kirchner's government succeed in displacing the empty signifier 'people', previously used in the opposition towards the state as a whole and professional politicians, towards the traditional antagonism in Peronist politics – 'the national-popular' against the oligarchy and foreign interests, under the guise of 'neoliberalism', as has been pointed out by Muñoz y Retamozo (2008).

Sometimes, NE members speak about capitalists as the enemy, but they usually spare national or nationalist capitalists, little entrepreneurs and so on. The class alliance is part of the discourse of the militants. This is one of the main criticisms from the left towards Kirchnerism, which they relate to the resignation of the capitalist frame as unavoidable.

For one NE militant the enemy is 'the enemy of the people', for another 'the ones who don't want to be the people'. Defining people, however, is not an easy task. NE militants, as well as Peronists in general, are strongly nationalist, Argentinean nationalist and (for those more left wing) Latin-American nationalist, what they understand as opposed to USA imperialism. The main references of NE militants are Argentinean nationalist leaders, from Kirchner to Peron and Evita and many others, but also Latin-Americans: Che Guevara, Chávez, Fidel Castro and the *Movimento dos Sem Terra* of Brazil. On the other hand, every NE militant identifies the political with the intervention of state institutional politics. The state is no longer the enemy of the people by nature, it depends on who is in control of the state and its bureaucracy. Even if they accept other means of political participation (through religious congregations, NGOs and others) these are not seen as completely political.

The interviewee's impression (supported by the ethnographic fieldwork of the researchers) is that NE militants are young middle-class city dwellers, which, in the previous frame, would be identified with an anti-political perspective. This contrasts with their militancy in a party that they define as a 'cadres in formation' party, which is organised according to principles of democratic centralism, and with an evident hierarchy of leadership that is highly accepted by the disciplined militants. This is a classical Marxist-Leninist organisation, but with a nationalist discourse and a neutral citizenship aesthetic. Centralised leadership runs through Peronism, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and its past leaders (Evita and Perón). The current leadership of Cristina Fernández is a typical charismatic strong leadership. One of the interviewees spoke about Nestor and Cristina as her parents. Even if all the militants have the 2001 demonstrations as their reference point and identify with this event, most of them began to change course after

Nestor Kirchner's death. They refer Nestor's funeral as the main event that nudged them to take an active part in national politics.

Beyond the national meaning, the term 'people' has an evident class component. The people are also the lower-class (the working class) as main reference of Kirchnerism. Redistributive politics, social aids to the poorest, the creation of a national social security system and the promotion of the national industry have been some of the main banners of Kirchnerism. In contrast with Peronism, which it is undoubtedly a floating signifier, Kirchnerism is a newly created identity ascribed to the left-wing, even if there are strong criticism and opposition from left-wing positions.

Podemos clearly has tried to give a populist electoral expression to the frame created in the 15M (Errejón, 2015) – using the dichotomy of us (those from below) against them (those from the top), and connecting individual narratives and fragmented social problems into a common discourse. It has also developed a strong charismatic leadership. It made possible a turn in the frames of many activists. For example, in relation to the state, one interviewee stated, representing the point of view of many of them, that:

> I think now that the state can be a tool for defending the popular classes. I now have a different point of view on this. […] It is one of the few cushions that the working class has in the context of neoliberalism, in which multinational companies and non-democratic institutions rule.

Thus, the state is seen as a counter to neoliberal politics and a means for social democratisation. Moreover, there has been a concession to other apparatuses of the state, such as the army or the police. For example, they have included an Army officer as candidate for the elections, something that has provoked strong criticism from left-wing positions.

In Argentina, in some sense the pre-Kirchnerist frame was as post-political as the subsequent one. Right-wing anti-Kirchnerist discourse has been against the political and politicisation. Kirchnerism has been blamed for politicising society, polarising it as result. It is a common place in Argentina to speak about the creation of a political gap or breach between those who are Kirchnerist and those who are anti-Kirchnerist. In contrast, the right-wing coalition, winner of the 2015 national elections, used a paradigmatic post-political discourse. An interview with the current president Mauricio Macri in *El Pais* (Cué, 2016), soon after winning the election, is a good example of this, as he speaks about a 'return to normality', after a period of internal and external confrontation, and where he says that the 'right-left' political axis is something of the past. A good example of the quick destruction of political symbols by the new government are the new bills. Whereas in the Kirchnerist government the bills were marked with the face of Evita Peron or the Mothers of the May Square (a group symbol of the resistance against military dictatorship), the new bills show pictures of animals and natural landscapes.

On the other hand, the reaction of Kirchnerism to the defeat in 2015 has been to adopt, in some way, a post-political strategy. A militant said that the message of Cristina Fernández is 'to do politics from non-political spaces' as 'citizens'. The NE militants have a consensus in the analysis of the defeat. They think they worked too much for the popular classes and not enough for the growing middle classes. 'We haven't grown with the middle class'. So the new orientation is to abandon the gap, the polarisation.

The Spanish political formations are at a different stage. They have just entered into several public bodies (at European, state, regional and local levels) and are governing in some important cities. However, the aggressive reaction of the mass media and some old professional politicians from different parties has a point in common with the social polarisation around the Kirchnerist government. The participation in state institutions, and particularly the experience of municipal governments, has raised important expectations in many activists. They aimed at 'breaking the

dynamics which have prevailed up until now'. The first change, says Iliana, is an aesthetic one: 'We are governed by ordinary people, with a closer language. We are achieving many things.'

Nonetheless, the electoral success has also generated critical challenges. As Ernesto pointed out in relation to the local government,

> I miss that the representatives reiterate certain messages strongly. They should insist more publicly in four or five issues that we [the coalition] understand as essential. Not being carried along by the bureaucracy. I miss certain moments of insubordination from within.

To many Spanish political activists and leaders, the priority at the short term is to win the general elections. However, other activists highlight the limits of institutional politics and defend a combination of mobilisation and electoral dispute. The problem, according to Ernesto, is that today, 'Only a few people are giving more importance to the street [mobilisation].'

The internal debates (and conflicts) within Podemos during 2015 confronted a view of the party as a movement, to some extent with strong fidelity to 15M practice and discourses, and a more pragmatic view oriented strategically to wining the general elections, focusing on the short term. The victory of the second perspective has driven political activism to focus on the electoral arena, abandoning street protest. Thus, the discourses about radical economic and political change have been supplanted to some extent by the focus on the critique of political corruption.

Conclusion

The frame of activists in a post-political situation is characterised by low expectations of big scale political changes and, especially, mistrust with political parties, formal politics and participation in state institutions. Political activism becomes a marginal phenomenon and takes on the form of union struggles, prefigurative politics and counter-culture.

In contrast to the post-political situation, the exceptional political moment and the posterior everyday political management can be understood as forms of politicisation. The events of 2001 and 2011, as well as the continued work of some electoral coalitions have raised problems that question the neoliberal post-political discourse, raising economic topics on class antagonism, financial deregulation abuse and/or elite's privilege. Thus, negation of the existing order and positive action to change it through old or new political mechanisms can be seen as two necessary moments for the political transformation of the society. The exceptional moment means the introduction of a street revolt and the crowd comes to represent an expression of opposition to the status quo (Dean, 2016). Everyday political management means the politicisation of institutional (and post-politicised) politics, and represents a possibility of practically challenging neoliberalism. In this regard, the cases have shown how neoliberalism is not about dismantling the state but about de-politicising it (something that party-movements attempt at least partially to counter).

The Kirchnerist populism is not so far from the politicisation of the economy in Žižek's terms. It has risen as a new frame in which class issues, resistance against neoliberalism and alternative economic policies (redistributive policies) are central to its militants. It permeates their political identity and the state project. In Argentina, as well as in Spain, political activists are aware of the strong limitations of prefigurative politics and the impotence of anti-political street protests. They have been driven to embrace the seemingly opposite frame, based on the acceptance of a centralised organisation and political pragmatism (although with certain reluctance or even fierce opposition among some left-wing activists and organisations).

This frame transformation brings us to the post-political elements that are present in both political moments. In the exceptional political events of 2001 and 2011, post-politics was reflected in the central slogans *Que se vayan todos* and *No nos representan*, and in the lack of a strategy with

respect to the political economy and state power. The autonomous rebellions, and further local utopian projects, seem to be post-political as far as they exclude a basic dimension of the political in the current context: the state, inverting the Echeverria's fetish of the State. In the following moment, the politicisation of economy seems more evident in the Argentinian case than in the Spanish one, where it is still too soon to draw any conclusions. However, both Kirchnerism and Podemos have post-political elements: the consensus about the capitalist development inside the country and the apparent state fetishism in the interpretation of the political by the militants. Some of the results of the electoral coalitions could be interpreted even as a contribution to the naturalisation of capitalism and liberal democracy. Consequently, who reflects a greater post-political character, the radical movements which refuse to participate in political institutions or the political parties which translate political disagreement to policy?

The recent evolution of Podemos and Kirchnerism seems to draw them gradually closer to post-political discourses, focusing on short-term strategy and pragmatism. This post-political component is much more notorious in the Spanish case and this can be a consequence of the extreme contextual differences between both cases. The immersion of Spain in a central region and an economic power bloc such as the European Union made the economic crisis much less radical; so the failure of neoliberalism has been less evident. In addition, in Argentina there has been a prolonged experience of Kirchnerist government. As a partial result, in Argentina's case at least there has been a clear politicisation of the economy through micro utopian projects as well as through reformist state politics.

Nonetheless, the post-political discourse is more evident among the right-wing rivals of both political coalitions since the post-political situation begins with the acceptance of the neoliberal economic consensus. Post-political elements are likely to be present in any political movement that aspires to create a great consensus on its proposed social order, or even a new understanding of what is regarded as common sense. Ultimately, the post-political situation emerges from the success of a particular ideology – that of neoliberalism.

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Note

1. The full speech can be seen in Spanish at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7zY3J0EGP0.

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