Nationalism and populism on the left: The case of Podemos

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Abstract

This article provides an empirical exploration of the relation between nationalism and populism on the left of the politi- cal spectrum. The Spanish party Podemos is a key case study for such an analysis, as it is a left-populist actor that has made extensive use of nationalist rhetoric in its discourse. Through a discourse analysis on a corpus that includes speeches by Podemos leadership and primary data such as interviews and original unpublished material, this article studies the nationalist dimension of Podemos and its relation with the party's much-discussed populism. The analysis shows that the Podemos leadership deliberately embeds nationalism in its populist strategy: Nationalism is a central element of the party's populist project and serves to advance an alternative form of national identification that challenges that of the right wing. Through a resignification of national pride and belonging, Podemos constructs an image of Spain that refers to an inclusive welfare state, to people's mobilization, and to a moral community that is not delimited by lingual or ethnic particularisms.

KE YW OR DS

left-wing nationalism, left-wing politics, nationalism, Podemos, populism

1 | INTRODUCTION

'Patria,[1] order, law, institutions'—with these words, Pablo Iglesias, the leader of the leftist party Podemos, addressed the crowd during the closing rally of the 2016 Spanish election campaign. In front of him, people in the rally held giant letters that together formed the phrase 'the patria is the people'. All this did not come out of the blue: Since the foundation of Podemos in 2014, Iglesias and the party's other leaders have frequently labelled their politics as patriotic. They have repeatedly claimed to be proud of Spain and of them being Spaniards, while labelling political adversaries (from tax-evading businessmen to corrupt politicians) as 'enemies of the fatherland' and 'anti-patriots', unworthy to even pronounce the name of the country.

What kind of nationalism does Podemos express in this discourse? The question becomes more puzzling if we bear in mind that Podemos has been studied in academia as an archetype of left-wing populism but never as a nationalist actor. The populist character of its discourse has been addressed extensively in the literature (e.g., Damiani, 2020; García Agustín & Briziarelli, 2018; Kioupkiolis, 2016; Ramiro & Gomez, 2017), and it has also been recognized by the party leaders themselves (Errejón & Mouffe, 2016; Iglesias, 2015b). In contrast, the nationalist discourse of Podemos remains scarcely explored: It is commonly acknowledged in scholarly works, but it is relegated to the margins of broader analyses, and lacks targeted empirical analyses (see, for instance, Basile & Mazzoleni, 2019, p. 7; García Agustín & Briziarelli, 2018, p. 18; Gerbaudo, 2017, pp. 122–123; Gómez-Reino & Llamazares, 2015, pp. 2–3). The objective of this paper is thus twofold: It aims to study the nationalist character of Podemos' discourse empirically and to see how nationalism relates to the party's much-discussed populism.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section presents the operative definition of nationalism that guides the analysis, based on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community (Anderson, 2006 [1991]). This makes it possible to untie the concept of nationalism from its frequent association with the radical Right, turning it into an analytical category that refers to a specific form of politics. The second section lays out the conceptualization of populism in strategic terms. It contends that approaching populism as a political strategy is the best basis for studying goal-oriented populist actors. The third section deals with the interaction between populism and nationalism, narrowing

down the discussion to left-wing politics. The fourth section presents the data collected and the methodology used for the analysis. This article employs a form of qualitative discourse analysis named discourse-theoretical analysis. The corpus includes a selection of politicians' discourses and primary data, such as interviews I conducted throughout 2019. Moreover, I was granted access to one unpublished report of a private meeting of Podemos' future party leaders held in 2013, at which they discussed the creation of Podemos and the strategy to adopt according to the result of a secret survey they had conducted. As I show in the analysis, this unpublished document provides fundamental and unexplored insights in understanding Podemos' approach to populism and nationalism. The fifth section discusses the empirical analysis. It points out how Podemos deliberately embeds nationalism in its populist strategy. The nationalist dimension of its discourse is not simply a trace of banal nationalism, but it is a central element of a calculated populist strategy. This serves to put forward a 'counter-hegemonic' identification with the nation that refers to (a) welfare policies and solidarity, (b) history from below and people's mobilization and (c) cultural and national pluralism. The concluding section summarizes the empirical findings and reflects on the broader relevance of this article by relating its findings to the existing literature on the relation between populism and nationalism.

2 | NATIONALISM

In the 1980s, the famous historian Eric Hobsbawm assumed that the increased scholarly attention on nationalism was a sign that the phenomenon was past its peak: '[t]he owl of Minerva which brings wisdom, said Hegel, flies out at dusk. It is a good sign that it is now circling around nations and nationalism' (Hobsbawm, 1992, p. 192). Despite Hobsbawm's optimism, nationalism does not seem to have faded away: In European politics, we are currently experiencing a re-emergence of national identity as an important source of political identity, mainly triggered by

right-wing forces (Bieber, 2018; Conversi, 2017; Crouch, 2016; Eger & Valdez, 2015) or by secessionist and substate nationalist actors (Lecours, 2012; Olivieri, 2015). These actors often turn to nationalism as a strategy to legitimize themselves, exploiting the emotion-charged symbolism of the nation (Finlayson, 1998). Certainly, the power of the nation-state appears to be shrinking, besieged by a globalized economy and transnational actors (Habermas, 1999), but this should not be confused with the decay of national identities. On the contrary, the decline of the nation-state often signals a revival of nationalism (Nimni, 1991, p. 2). Globalization, migration flows, terrorism and the neoliberal dismantlement of the welfare state seem to have provided the occasion for a revival of the political dimension of the nation, together with the general decline of other identities such as religion or class (Crouch, 2017; Nairn & James, 2005). While neoliberal globalization has uprooted many traditional identities and fostered the loss of community values, the national community has returned to be a source of political identification for many people, bringing back nationalist politics to European democracies (Crouch, 2018; Judis, 2018).

Although nationalism has been shaping world politics for the past two centuries (Anderson, 1996; Smith, 1991), it remains a concept that is difficult to define in substantialist terms, due to its ambiguous and contextual aspects (Brubaker, 2004, pp. 114–116; Canetti, 1984 [1960], p. 197). This is because nations are not unitary phenomena—they cannot be defined by concrete traits equally observable in all cases. Rather than a concrete entity, a nation can be more readily understood as a type of 'imagined political community', as Anderson famously claimed (Anderson, 2006 [1991]). Nations are *imagined* because their members 'never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson, 2006 [1991], p. 22). A national community can be imagined according to different elements and values—'different styles', in Anderson's words. The political process that performs its imagination is what we name nationalism (Anderson, 2006 [1991], p. 11).

In present-day Europe, most of the nations are long-established imagined political communities that have proven to be highly resilient and represent a primary source of identification for a vast number of people (Finlayson, 2012). Therefore, nationalist politics in contemporary Europe exploits a national identity that is already there, usually as a form of 'banal nationalism' (Billig, 1995)—as a matrix of social practices that have become sedimented and thus appear as if they were natural (Kølvraa, 2018, pp. 99–100). Nationalism thus plays a major role in naturalizing and reproducing the ideological conceptions and the sets of values that have been ascribed to the imagined nation—the 'sedimented' meanings of it. However, nationalism can do more than that. In fact, in its attempt to politicize national identity, not only does it reproduce sedimented ideological conceptions, but it can also modify them (Finlayson, 1998). This is because such ideological conceptions are neither immutable nor universal. The meanings of terms and symbols around which the nation is imagined (such as nationhood, hymns, flags, national pride and so on) are the result of conjunctural articulations—they only make sense within specific discursive regimes (Laclau, 2003, p. 26). There is not a 'true' colour of nationalism: The meanings ascribed to nationality change across time and space, and different meanings can also coexist within the same juncture, with rival hegemonic attempts to define the nation according to different sets of values (Finlayson, 1998, p. 111). Rather than a proper ideology, nationalism is a *sustainer* of the actor's actual ideologies (Freeden, 1998).

In sum, nationalist politics do not simply reproduce the sedimented ideological conceptions ascribed to national identity but can also attempt to subvert them through new hegemonic articulations based on different political values—nationalism may modify the ways in which we imagine our nation. Accordingly, in the analysis of Podemos' discourse, nationalism is treated as the politics of imagining the nation—it can attempt to reproduce previous imaginations and/or put forward new ones.

3 | POPULISM

There is broad scholarly consensus that Podemos is a populist actor (e.g., Damiani, 2020; Kioupkiolis, 2016; Ramiro & Gomez, 2017); less so about what it means to be populist (see Moffitt, 2016, p. 11; Panizza, 2005, p. 1). Among

different accounts of populism that exist in academia, such as those based on sociocultural (e.g., Ostiguy, 2017), ideological (e.g., Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017) or discursive (e.g., Laclau, 2005) definitions, there is one that characterizes populism in strategic terms—as a specific way of doing politics. It considers populism as the strategy of building and/or maintaining political power based on the mobilization of supporters (Barr, 2018; Weyland, 2017). It is a heterogeneous approach that includes scholars with divergent views on the defining attributes of the populist strategy, as well as with differences of opinion on the relation between populism and democracy. However, a shared focus on the means and ends of building power based on mobilization—and thus on agency and political action—brings them together (Barr, 2018, p. 44). As Barr explains, when populism is understood as an ideology, the risk is 'to hinder the full accounting for outcomes that are dependent in part on agency and action' (Barr, 2018, p. 53). On the contrary, defining populism as a political strategy allows one to centre the analysis on agency, political intentionality and goal-oriented leadership (Weyland, 2017). It implies that the struggle for political consensus is at the core of what populism is (Barr, 2018, pp. 53–54).

It is not a strictly formalized approach, and it can intertwine with other approaches such as the discursive one that emerges from Ernesto Laclau's theory (e.g., Laclau & Howarth, 2015). For instance, when Chantal Mouffe talks about populism as a 'political strategy' for the Left, she draws from Laclau's discursive approach to populism (Mouffe, 2018). For Mouffe, populism is the intentional political strategy of constructing a political frontier dividing society into two camps and calling for the mobilization of the people against the elite (Mouffe, 2018). As De Cleen explains, moving away from ideational approaches towards how populists discursively construct and claim to represent the people, 'allows taking into account more thoroughly the crucial strategic dimensions of populism […]. Parties and movements can turn to populism as a strategy to acquire power, even when they were originally not populist, and they do not necessarily remain populist once they are in power' (De Cleen, 2017, p. 346).

Following this account, I contend that the best way to grasp the populist character of a political actor is indeed by approaching populism in strategic terms. In the analysis carried out in this article, populism is thus treated as the actor's intentional strategy to maximize consensus by framing its political discourse around a moral division between the people and the elite. Moreover, this is an understanding of populism for which Podemos is an ideal typical example, considering that its leadership openly declared to draw from Laclau's theory of populism in building the party strategy (Errejón & Mouffe, 2016; Iglesias, 2015b). The populist discourse of Podemos is in fact commonly described in academia as a strategy or a tactic, especially among Spanish scholars: It has been defined as a tactic to break through the Spanish political system (Franzé, 2017, p. 240), a strategy to interpret the political moment after the economic crisis (García Agustín & Briziarelli, 2018, p. 18) and a discursive strategy from which its electoral success was largely derived (Rendueles & Sola, 2019, p. 18).

4 | NATIONALISM AND POPULISM ON THE LEFT

Recently, a new academic debate has flourished around the conceptual distinction between nationalism and populism, mainly in response to the ways the two terms are often conflated in scholarship on the radical Right (Anastasiou, 2019; Bonikowski, Halikiopoulou, Kaufmann, & Rooduijn, 2019; Brubaker, 2019; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017, 2020; Katsambekis & Stavrakakis, 2017). The issue at the centre of the discussion is the relationship between populism and nationalism: are they synonymous, are they distinct phenomena or can they coexist according to variable configurations of meaning?

Some authors—most notably De Cleen and Stavrakakis—argue that, while nationalism and populism often appear together in concrete politics, they need to be treated as analytically distinct and conceptualized as substantially different phenomena. Although both populism and nationalism refer to 'the people', the former only operates on a vertical up-down axis ('people as underdog'), while the latter is characterized by a distinct horizontal in-out axis ('people as nation') (De Cleen, Moffitt, Panayotu, & Stavrakakis, 2019). Within this framework, Stavrakakis, Katsambekis, Nikisianis, Kioupkiolis, and Siomos (2017) argue that, although the two axes may coexist in the same

discourse, there is always one which prevails, relegating the other to the periphery of the actor's discourse. Along this line, they claim that right-wing populist actors are better categorized as primarily nationalist, insofar as they use populism as a rhetorical means to put forward their nationalist political project.

For others authors—most notably Brubaker—nationalism and populism are two intersecting and mutually implicated phenomena that are not analytically independent. Brubaker agrees with De Cleen and Stavrakakis on the need to challenge the reified association between populism and exclusionary nationalism, yet he is reluctant to endorse a purified and one-dimensional definition of populism. In his view, populism cannot be defined exclusively by vertical claims making along an up-down axis, since the invocation of 'the people', typical of populism, occurs through lines of exclusions that are both vertical and horizontal (Brubaker, 2019).

However rich and inspiring, this theoretical debate on the differences and the interaction between populism and nationalism remains limited by its empirical focus on right-wing politics. How do populism and nationalism interact in left-wing politics? Although nationalism is far from being a common trait of the European radical Left (Chiocchetti, 2017; March & Keith, 2016), there is a scholarly agreement that the left-populist variant of the European radical Left is keener to draw from nationalism in its discourse (Custodi, 2017; Eklundh, 2018; García Agustín, 2020, pp. 65–80; Katsambekis & Kioupkiolis, 2019, pp. 103–105; Mudde, 2017). Despite the legacy of the global justice movement—which avoided a national symbolic repertoire and saw the global and/or local arena as the central battleground—still influencing the contemporary European radical Left, left-wing populism emerges as a national-popular project deeply rooted in the nation-state, and thus more prone to see the nation as its prime political battleground and even as a source of identity (García Agustín, 2020, pp. 65–80; Gerbaudo, 2017, pp. 113–34). Yet this conclusion still lacks in-depth empirical analysis of how exactly left-populists articulate nationalism and what relation it has with their populist strategies. In order to contribute to filling this academic gap, this article centres its analysis on the discourse of Podemos, a particularly useful case study for it being 'an (almost) ideal typical example of a European Populist Radical Left Party' (Damiani, 2020, p. 11).

5 | DATA AND METHOD

As outlined in the introduction, the research purpose of this article is to study the nationalist dimension of Podemos and to see how it relates with the party's populist strategy. In order to do so empirically, I rely on a set of primary data collected during field research in Spain in 2019, and on a selection of Podemos leaders' discourses. While conducting field research, I was granted access to one unpublished detailed report of a private meeting held in mid-2013 by the future leaders of Podemos, at which they discussed the creation of the party and the strategy to adopt. As the report reveals, between February and March of 2013, they conducted a professional national survey that was coordinated by Carolina Bescansa, a professor at the Complutense University of Madrid, with the objective of using the survey's findings for elaborating the narrative of what would later be Podemos. The report presents the survey's results and the internal debate that followed, and it is thus a valuable document that gives fundamental insights in understanding Podemos' approach to populism and nationalism. Together with the report, in the empirical analysis, I also rely on six semi-structured interviews that I conducted in Madrid in 2019, three with current and former leading politicians of Podemos (elite interviews), and the other three with scholars that have been studying the development of Podemos closely (expert interviews). Finally, I integrate my primary data with a set of 40 selected speeches, articles and texts by Podemos Secretary-General Pablo Iglesias and other party leaders that provide useful information for the analysis of populism and nationalism in Podemos, from its foundation until the end of 2019.[2] In this selection, I prioritized all the speeches that Iglesias gave at party events and at opening and closing rallies of the general elections campaigns (2014–2019).

All the data have been subjected to discourse-theoretical analysis (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007; De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017). This is a type of qualitative discourse analysis mostly used for empirical research in communication and populism studies (see, for instance, Carpentier, De Cleen, & Van Brussel, 2019; De Cleen

et al., 2019; Miró, 2020), although its applicability is not restricted to specific research areas (Howarth & Torfing, 2005, p. 25). It is *theoretical* because it draws its conceptual toolbox from Discourse Theory (Kølvraa, 2018), a political theory that originated out of an anti-essentialist and post-structuralist critique of Marxism (e.g., Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) and was later operationalized by scholars of the so-called Essex School of discourse analysis (e.g., Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Howarth & Torfing, 2005). Compared with other types of discourse analysis, discourse-theoretical analysis is characterized by a more macro-approach to the study of discourse; it is especially suited for identifying the construction of political identities and the discursive strategies of the actors (De Cleen et al., 2019, p. 10). It enquires into the 'architectonics' of discourses—that is, how words and concepts are articulated together to produce particular structures of meaning (Stavrakakis, 2017, p. 6). Articulation is defined as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 105). The central insight of Discourse Theory is that meaning comes about through processes of articulation; and discourse-theoretical analyses thus focus on how discourses bring together different elements to produce particular structures of meaning.

Accordingly, for studying the nationalist dimension of Podemos and its relation with populism, I first looked at how the two emerge together in the architectonics of the discourse and at the vocabulary and arguments deployed. Relying on the operative definitions of populism and nationalism provided in the respective sections, I identified populism with the division between the people and the elite and nationalism with the use of terms and symbols around which the nation is imagined (patria, Spain, patriotism, national pride, Spanishness and alike). This led me to see how populism emerges as the calculated macro-strategy that guides the discursive pattern and how nationalism is intentionally employed for articulating such a populist strategy. Then I moved to a more interpretive analysis of the processes of signification. In this second phase of the analysis, I centred my empirical attention on nationalism, trying to identify the relational elements of the articulation and consequent meanings the national community assumes. I thus mapped out three semantic fields within which nationalism is discursively signified—that is, specific fields that share a set of meanings and where the process of signification takes place (Cosenza, 2018, p. 14–15). They are (a) welfare policies and solidarity, (b) history from below and people's mobilization and (c) cultural and national pluralism.

The analysis was carried out relying on a qualitative coding procedure (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software. I gradually moved from descriptive open coding, which stays close to the texts and simply identifies nationalism and populism, towards more selective and theoretically-inspired coding that focuses on the processes of signification of nationality and its relation with populism.

6 | PODEMOS' NATIONALISM: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The analysis proceeds in two main steps. First, I expose how nationalism is embedded in the populist strategy put forward by the leadership of Podemos. Second, I discuss in more detail Podemos' nationalist discourse, the national imagination it envisages and the political values attached to it.

6.1 | The secret survey and the populist strategy on nationality

In 2013, many of the people who would go on to create Podemos the following year, worked together to 'identify the narrative structure of what would later become Podemos' (I1P). With this aim in mind, between February and March of 2013, they conducted a national survey, with no intention to publish it (R1S). The survey was coordinated by Carolina Bescansa, a professor at the Complutense University of Madrid (I1P). They conducted 2000 phone interviews asking questions related to eight different themes: (1) democracy, (2) economic crisis, (3) constitution, (4) autonomous communities and state centralism, (5) form of state (monarchy vs. republic), (6) national identity,

(7) class perception and (8) vote preferences (R1S). As Bescansa recalls, the aim of the survey was 'to find the central elements around which a political force capable of subverting the party system could be constructed' (I1P). The goal was to indicate the themes that could potentially be articulated in a populist strategy—how to discursively construct a distinction between the people and the elite (R1S). It suggested what had to be named (and what not) in order to be an electoral success; it indicated the problems most commonly perceived by Spaniards and gave feedback on how to frame them in order to give a leftist reply that could resonate in a transversal electorate. In sum, the data of this survey were 'the root the Podemos project was built on' (I3P). On theme 6 (national identity), the survey's results showed that local and regional belonging remained a few points above the national one, but that the national one was nonetheless very important for most of the respondents (R1S). In the survey, Spanishness emerged as a significant identity for the respondents. However, most respondents did not provide a clear answer when asked what they loved about Spain—they referred to general traits, such as 'Spaniards' happiness', 'the sun' and 'the people'. On the question regarding the historical events that made them proud of being Spanish, a common answer was the victory of the Spanish football team in the World Cup of 2010 (R1S).

Although there is broad agreement that the Spanish Right has been politically dominant in defining Spanishness—framing it in terms of centralization and monoculturalism (Coller, Cordero, & Echavarren, 2018, p. 189; Herrera & Miley, 2018, p. 203; Ruiz Jiménez, Navarro Ardoy, & Ferri Fuentevilla, 2017, pp. 430–431)—the survey indicated that such right-wing construction of national identity was not particularly prevalent in the respondents' replies. It suggested, rather, that there was a space for a political articulation of nationality that would differ from that of the right wing (R1S). Therefore, in the private discussion that followed the results of the survey, Podemos' future leadership began to form the view that the political hegemony of the Right over nationality could be undermined and that national identity was an important theme around which a populist discourse had to be articulated (R1S, I1P, I2P and I3P). As Bescansa recalls:

> It was precisely the awareness that the Spanish national identity remained an unresolved issue within the progressive camp after the Francoist regime that made us think it was essential to create a resignification of the value of being Spanish. In many ways it had already become normalized among the Spanish social majorities and yet it had not been normalized in the discourse of the political actors. (I1P)

They decided that, for a populist project to be successful, it had to include 'the aim of refounding a new Spanish national identity' (I1P). They thus began to draft a narrative that drew from the emotionally powerful sense of belonging that the imagined nation engenders in many people and at the same time tried to modify the ways the nation was imagined (I2P). In doing so, they entangled the creation of the political frontiers typical of populism [*us, the people* vs. *them, the elite*] with the in-out relation typical of nationalism [*patriot* vs. *antipatriot*]. This has been clear since the first party conference in 2014, when Iglesias exemplified this entanglement by saying that 'it is not the political elite that makes the country work, nor does it make the trains run on time, or the hospitals and the schools work. It is the people. This is our patria: the people' (Iglesias, 2014a). Working people and the poor thus began to be labelled as 'patriots' (Iglesias, 2016a), while tax-evading billionaires and corrupt politicians became 'an elite that uses the Spanish flag to hide its corruption' (Iglesias, 2017). They are 'enemies of Spain' (Iglesias, 2015c) and 'traitors of the patria' (Iglesias, 2019b), 'unworthy to even pronounce the word Spain or the world patria' (Iglesias, 2016a). It is not the elite, but the 'humble people' to whom the patria belongs (Errejón, 2017a).

As Íñigo Errejón, a founding member of Podemos, explained, this resignification of Spanish identity aimed at denying reactionary political forces 'the opportunity to put forward, uncontested, their own view of what the country stands for' (Errejón & Mouffe, 2016, p. 68). Progressive forces must hegemonize the terrain of national identification, Errejón warned, or the reactionary forces will do so instead (Errejón, 2018a, 2018b).

This was a completely new stance for the Spanish radical Left, which had refused any political articulation of Spanish identity since the time of late-Francoism (Navarro Ardoy, 2015; Rendueles & Sola, 2019, p. 42; I3E), due in

part to its ideological closeness to peripheral substate nationalisms (Ruiz Jiménez et al., 2017, p. 425)—so much so that at times the Spanish radical Left even shunned the name of the country itself ('Spanish State' rather than 'Spain') (I1E and I2E). This had been the case for Iglesias too, who in early 2013 still claimed that Spanish identity had been irremediably lost to the Right since the end of the Spanish Civil War, and thus was of no use to the Left, and that he personally could not even pronounce the word 'Spain' (Iglesias, 2013). However, by 2014, the year Podemos was founded, he had reconsidered his position, arguing that it is not possible to win your country over to your political project without laying claim to the idea of patria (Iglesias, 2014b). Patria—he now claimed—is 'the community that allows us to dream a better world, but to seriously believe in our dreams' (Iglesias, 2015a). He admitted that this would not come easily for them, because

> Our political group [the leftists] lost a war [the Spanish Civil War], and when they lost a war they lost a country, and the country began to be associated with the Right, and when they take this away from you, when they take away from you a flag that can be used to name us all, they have taken much away from you. (Iglesias, 2014b)

This notwithstanding, he was now convinced that this was a necessary and important part of the populist project that Podemos' leadership aimed to put forward. In order for Podemos to perform a politics centred on the idea of 'the people', national identity had to be wrested from the grasp of the Right and reframed with different values (Errejón, 2017a; Iglesias, 2014b), in line with the idea of 'Spain as a country of the People against the antipatriotic elites' (Errejón, 2017b).

6.2 | Counter-hegemonic nationalism

I contend that a good way to label this nationalist dimension of Podemos is by defining it as *counter-hegemonic*, borrowing the Gramscian idea of hegemony (Cox, 1983) and the reflexion on counter-hegemony developed in social movement and globalization studies (e.g., De Sousa Santos, 2003; Evans, 2008, 2012). Although Gramsci never used the term 'counter-hegemony', this is generally used among neo-Gramscian scholars to describe attempts to challenge a hegemonic construct by opposing an alternative hegemony on its own ground (e.g., Pratt, 2004). Exemplary of this idea is the concept of counter-hegemonic globalization, which identifies a stance different from anti-globalization, because it does not oppose globalization per se, but instead aims to reverse all aspects of the dominant [neoliberal] globalization, putting forward another form of globalization that challenges the dominant one on its own terrain (Evans, 2012). Along similar lines, Podemos' nationalism is counter-hegemonic because it deliberately attempts to put forward an idea of nationality that challenges the dominant [right-wing] one on its own terrain.

It is not surprising that such a counter-hegemonic approach emerges in Podemos as part of a populist strategy: Populist actors often exploit folklore, popular culture and traditional identities for political purposes, but within different configurations of meanings than those that are dominant (Caiani & Padoan, 2020). Counter-hegemonic nationalism is a constant element in the narrative of Podemos, and it emerges especially during the inflammatory parts of Iglesias' speeches, in which he starts making abundant references to patriotism, Spain, the patria and his being a Spaniard. The emotion of pride plays a central role here: It is constantly used to articulate another idea of nationality. In fact, the analysis of the architectonics of the discourse indicates the existence of a constant pattern in how Iglesias attempts to reimage Spain: He first declares his pride in Spain/patria/Spanishness and soon moves to his own definition of what Spain/patria/Spanishness really means. For instance, he is 'proud of being a Spaniard' because in his patria 'the best healthcare is public and looks after everyone' (Iglesias, 2015c). This is the common pattern of articulation through which nationality is resignified with left-wing values by Podemos.

In triggering the emotional dimension of nationality, the party leadership has not merely drawn on the idea of 'constitutional patriotism'[3]; it has, rather, opted for an idea of the national community perceived as something moral

and capable of fuelling an emotional collective identity in the public sphere, in a similar vein to the Left of the Latin American Pink Tide (Burbano de Lara, 2015, pp. 22–23). As Iglesias has provocatively argued, 'being constitutional patriots is not so sexy after all' (Iglesias, 2016b). Rather than defining their patriotism in simply constitutional terms, they did so in emotional and moral terms, thus associating it with the moral aspect of their populist strategy: The decent people are the nation, while the corrupt elite are not really Spaniards (Errejón, 2018b). However, this is an aspect where the analysis also indicates a certain degree of change over the years. Although I found scarce reference to the Spanish constitution in the discourse of Podemos during the years 2014–2018, this changed in 2019. During the electoral campaign for the 2019 election, there was a novel attempt to include the constitution in their counter-hegemonic nationalism. In the same way that they claimed to be proud of Spain and of being Spaniards, they also added pride in the Spanish constitution, seemingly taking a position of constitutional patriotism; but they did so without breaking from the emotional and moral dimensions of populism. In fact, the constitution was always framed as something that belongs to real patriots and to working people, while the Spanish Right and the corrupt elite were labelled not only as anti-patriots, but also as enemies of the constitution (Iglesias, 2019a, 2019c, 2019d). This is one of the very few aspects where I encountered changes in the nationalism of Podemos. Apart from this, the elements around which Podemos imagines the national community remained the same throughout the years analysed (2014–2019).

As outlined in the method section, the coding procedure indicated that there are three main semantic fields within which Podemos develops its counter-hegemonic signification of nationality. Remarkably, the European dimension is not one of them. In all the texts analysed, Podemos' criticisms of the European Union are never framed in a nationalist narrative. This finding is also confirmed in the elite interviews I conducted (I1P, I2P and I3P). In fact, Podemos' leadership always uses a patriotic rhetoric within the arena of national politics, in opposition to internal and not external adversaries. When they talk about European affairs and criticize EU-led austerity policies, their patriotic rhetoric fades away and references to national identity become virtually non-existent. This indicates that the supposed link between left-wing Euroscepticism and nationalism, as argued by Halikiopoulou, Nanou, and Vasilopoulou (2012), does not hold true in the case of Podemos. Rather than international politics, the three semantic fields around which the counter-hegemonic nationalism of Podemos emerges and acquires meanings are (a) welfare policies and solidarity, (b) history from below and people's mobilization and (c) cultural and national pluralism. I will now proceed to discuss each of them in turn.

6.2.1 | Welfare policies and solidarity

The attempt to establish a link between national pride and welfare policies is central to Podemos' definition of national identity. The welfare state is 'the central axis' of their patriotism (I1P and I3E). In this resignification, hospitals, schools, welfare policies and the social protection provided by the State become the material expression of the patria (Iglesias, 2016a). As Luis Alegre (the former Podemos Head of Communications) explains, the welfare state has been an important part of the construction of Podemos' patriotism since the beginning (I2P): Patriots are 'those who are willing to take care of each other and to generate a community in which we are not apathetic to each other and we commit ourselves to take care of each other. This goes through the maintenance and expansion of public services such as the health and education systems' (I2P). Accordingly, in his speech at the first party congress in 2014, Iglesias recalls that Podemos was criticized for using the word patria, but he defends this choice, insisting that speaking about patria is 'speaking about the dignity of the people […]. It is speaking about the need for schools where people could bring their children. It is speaking about the need for hospitals, the need for the best health professionals. It is being proud of your country, proud of having the best public schools, proud of having the best hospitals'. Along a similar line, he frames the patria in social terms during his speech at the 2015 party demonstration *Marcha del Cambio.* There, he defines the patria as the community which ensures that patients are treated in the best hospitals with the best medicines, and adds in outraged tones that 'his patria' has been 'humiliated' by 'this scam that

they call austerity' (Iglesias, 2015a). Similarly, in the closing rally of the 2015 electoral campaign, he states that he wants to be the president of a country where any of its citizens, when she/he travels to the United States and sees how someone there can die for lack of health insurance, can feel proud of being a Spaniard, proud of being from a country where the best healthcare is public and looks after everyone (Iglesias, 2015c). Commenting on right-wing activists who were screaming 'long live Spain' in the attempt to interrupt a Podemos meeting, he says: 'of course, long live Spain! But defending Spain is defending public services. Defending Spain is to defend public companies, defending Spain is to defend public health, it is to defend the public pension system, it is to defend the dignity of workers. This is what defending Spain means, and no jingoist *de charanga y pandereta*[4] with the ideas of Margaret Thatcher, running dog of rich people, is going to give us lessons on what being a Spaniard means' (Iglesias, 2019b). Such a dichotomization between true and false patriotism is recurrent in Podemos' counter-hegemonic nationalism, and it is often made around welfare claims: *Real* patriotism is the one of 'workers' rights' (Iglesias, 2018a) and 'making ends meet' (Iglesias, 2018b); *false* patriotism is the one 'of those who have the biggest flag' (Iglesias, 2018b) and 'have bank accounts in tax havens' (Iglesias, 2016a). As Pablo Echenique (the former Podemos Head of Organization) summarizes, the party fights for 'the patria of the fridge', against 'the patria of the bracelet' (Echenique, 2018), trying with this metaphor to symbolize the differences between a concrete and social patriotism, and a flaunted and hypocritical one.

6.2.2 | History from below and people's mobilization

History from below is a type of historical narrative which accounts for historical events from the perspective of the ordinary people, the oppressed, the poor or those who take part in social struggles. It is a type of narrative that Podemos uses frequently to present its idea of Spain. For example, when Iglesias delivers speeches to large audiences, references to heroic moments in the people's history of Spain often acquire a central position in the resignification of national identity (Iglesias, 2015a, 2015c, 2016a). Popular events of Spanish history are thus explicitly connected to pride in and love for Spain. For instance, in 2016, as sources of national pride, he lists the popular uprising against Napoleon's occupation in 1808, the Spanish working class that defended social rights and suffrage, the Spanish women involved in the feminist struggles of the past, the fighters against fascism during the civil war, the contribution of Spaniards in liberating Paris during the Second World War, the resistance during the Francoist dictatorship and, lastly, the 15-M movement (Iglesias, 2016a). The same pattern is traceable in his speech at the party demonstration *Marcha del Cambio* in 2015, in which he recalls with pride the popular uprising against Napoleon in 1808, the Second Spanish Republic, the resistance against Franco and the 15-M and explicitly links these historical moments to the greatness of Spain. This allows him to state that 'we love our country, which has its roots in a history of struggle for dignity', against those 'false patriots' who consider Spain as a 'brand' and 'believe that everything can be bought and sold' (Iglesias, 2015a). This pattern is repeated at the closing rally of the 2015 electoral campaign, where once again he connects his 'pride in being a Spaniard' to the same list of historical events (Iglesias, 2015c).

Furthermore, the link between national pride and the celebration of popular mobilization is not only limited to historical and past events but also refers to contemporary social movements. For instance, Podemos' leadership claims that the contemporary feminist movement is not only a bulwark against right-wing nationalists, but it is also an expression of the real Spain (Errejón, 2018a) and it performs a republican and social patriotism (Iglesias, 2018c). Along similar lines, people active in various social movements, from student movements to animal right movements, are defined as 'heroes who build the patria' (Iglesias, 2015c). In 2019, while attacking the hypocritical patriotism of the Spanish Right, Iglesias claims that the true patriots are the women who demonstrate on International Women's Day, the young people who fight against climate change and the pensioners and the workers who are mobilizing to defend their rights (Iglesias, 2019a, 2019d).

6.2.3 | Cultural and national pluralism

In specular opposition to Spanish right-wing nationalism, Podemos' counter-hegemonic nationalism aims at untying Spanishness from any link to monoculturalism. The real patria, Iglesias claims, is 'the community that ensures that all citizens are protected and that national diversity is respected' (Iglesias, 2015a). The unity of the nation is not undermined by the existence of different national groups inside its territory, but by 'Spanish businessmen who own bank accounts in Switzerland and Andorra' and 'have no other patria than their bank account' (Iglesias, 2014a). According to Podemos, Spain is a 'plurinational country' (I1P)—'a patria made out of different languages, cultures and feelings' (Iglesias, 2016c), 'a country of countries where citizens have different national attachments' (Iglesias, 2016d). Accordingly, the political program of *Unidos Podemos* (the alliance between Podemos and United Left in the election of 2016) is defined by Iglesias as 'social-democratic, patriotic and plurinational' and also includes the right of Catalonia to hold an independence referendum (Iglesias, 2016d). Whereas terms such as *patria*, *Spain* and *country* are central in the architectonics of Podemos' nationalist discourse, the term *nation* is never used, due to the party's recognition of the plurinationality of Spain. Podemos' frequent use of the term 'plurinational' resembles the debate over plurinationalism in Bolivia, which eventually led the Bolivian president, Evo Morales, to change the name of the country to the 'Plurinational State of Bolivia' in 2009. It is not surprising that Errejón was very familiar with the use of this term in Bolivian politics, since his Ph.D. thesis was about the struggle for hegemony in the first Morales government (Errejón, 2012).

However, linguistic and cultural differences are not only acknowledged as defining features of Spain, but they are also presented by the Podemos leadership as sources of national pride (I1P, I2P and I3P). Iglesias claims to be 'proud of a diverse and plurinational Spain' (Iglesias, 2016c): 'I am proud to be Spanish and I like Spain. I like how Spain sounds in Basque, how it sounds in Spanish, how it sounds in Galician, how it sounds in Catalan. I like my country because it is diverse' (Iglesias, 2019d).

At times, this plurinationalist vein of Podemos' counter-hegemonic nationalism also goes beyond the recognition of different Iberian nationalities within Spain and includes people who are not native to the Iberian Peninsula. According to Iglesias, patria is the community that protects all its citizens, regardless of the colour of their skin (Iglesias, 2015c), and that looks after discriminated-against minorities, such as Roma children, through 'inclusive patriotic policies' (Iglesias, 2016a). A Spaniard is 'everyone who lives and works in Spain, regardless of his origin, regardless of the color of his skin, regardless of his mother tongue, regardless of the national identity he identifies with' (Iglesias, 2018d). In endorsing this pluralist and inclusive conceptualization of Spanish identity, Iglesias asserts that what really torments fascists is to see Senegalese and Bangladeshis proudly wrapped in the Spanish flag, and that fascists must not be permitted to have the privilege to lecture anyone on what it means to be a Spaniard (Iglesias, 2018d). Similarly, the fact that Spain did not experience any substantial xenophobic backlash during the migrant crisis is framed as a source of national pride: 'we must be very proud of being Spaniards', Iglesias claims in mid-2018, 'because in Spain there has not been a xenophobic response to refugees and migration flows such as in other countries' (Iglesias, 2018e).

7 | CONCLUSION

Providing an empirical study of Podemos' discourse, this article has argued that nationalism is embedded in the party's populist strategy. As the analysis has shown, Podemos' leaders use a dichotomic division between the people and the elite as a calculated discursive strategy, and, in order to strengthen this populist strategy, they make full use of nationalism. Thus, the nationalist elements of Podemos' discourse are not traces of banal nationalism, but they are intentionally used by the party's goal-oriented political leadership as a means to reinforce their populist project and their political legitimization. This finding is consistent with Finlayson's claim that nationalism can be a key part of an actor's political legitimation strategy, because it provides fixity and legitimacy to specific values, linking them to the

apparently 'natural' nation (Finlayson, 1998, p. 103). However, Podemos is not simply referring to the naturalness of the nation for legitimizing itself, but it is actively attempting to modify its meanings. As outlined in the theoretical section, nationalist politics can also challenge previous images of the national community and put forward new ones. This is exactly what Podemos does: It challenges the association of nationhood with right-wing values typical of Spanish politics, and it proposes another identification with the nation along left-wing lines. It is a type of nationalism that can be readily defined as counter-hegemonic, because it is openly conceived to shape an alternative form of national identification that challenges the dominant one on its own terrain. In fact, the national community imagined by Podemos differs radically from the one typical of the Spanish Right. Through a resignification of national pride and belonging, Podemos' leadership constructs an image of Spain that refers to an inclusive welfare state, to people's mobilization and to a moral community that is not delimited by lingual or ethnic particularisms.

As regards to the academic debate on the conceptual distinction between nationalism and populism, the analysis supports De Cleen et al.'s (2019) insight that treating the two concepts as analytically distinct permits to better study their empirical interaction. However, it also casts doubt on their conceptual distinction based on different axes of exclusion. If Brubaker (2017, 2019) argues that populism simultaneously works on both the vertical (up-down) and horizontal (in-out) axes of exclusion, this article suggests that the same applies for nationalism. As the empirical analysis indicates, in Podemos' nationalism, the *up-down* and the *in-out* axes of exclusion are deeply intertwined—this is exemplified by Podemos' framing of the humble people as patriots and the corrupt elite as the enemy of the fatherland. This is consistent with the idea that nations are always imagined communities whose identification can potentially be constructed in different ways and through different axes of exclusion (Laclau, 2003).

Finally, if Stavrakakis and others argue that right-wing actors strategically refer to the people as underdog to put forward a fundamentally nativist, exclusionary and ethno-cultural image of the nation (e.g., Stavrakakis et al., 2017), this article shows that the very opposite is possible too: Podemos refers to the nation to put forward an inclusionary understanding of the people and to strengthen the distinction between the people and the elite. It uses nationalism for its populist project.

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LIST OF MATERIALS ANALYSED

(R1S) An unpublished report of a private meeting held in 2013 by the future leaders of Podemos, at which they presented the results of a national survey they conducted, and discussed the creation of the party and the strategy to be adopted.

LIST OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED

(I1P) Carolina Bescansa Hernández. Founding member of Podemos, Secretary for Political and Social Analysis of Podemos (2014–2017), member of parliament for Podemos (2016–2019).

(I2P) Luis Alegre Zahonero. Founding member of Podemos, Head of communications of Podemos (2014), Secretary of Internal Participation of Podemos (2014–2015), Secretary-General of Podemos-Community of Madrid (2015–2016).

(I3P) Sarah Bienzobas. Founding member of Podemos. Member of Juventud Sin Futuro (2011–2014), Head of the graphic team of Podemos (2014).

(I1E) Javier Franzé. Professor at the Department of Political Sciences and Sociology, Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

(I2E) César Renduelles. Professor at the Department of Political Sciences and Sociology, Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

(I3E) Jorge Sola. Professor at the Department of Political Sciences and Sociology, Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

ENDNOTES

[1] I have decided to leave the Spanish word 'patria' untranslated, since it is understandable for English-speaking readers. The English term with the closest meaning would be 'fatherland' or 'homeland'.

[2] Given that all the interviews conducted and the texts analysed are in Spanish, any phrases reported within inverted commas were first translated into English by myself.

[3] I refer here to the concept developed by Jürgen Habermas that places emphasis on collective identification to the norms, values and procedures that constitutes a liberal-democratic political community (Müller & Scheppele, 2007).

[4] A charanga is a small amateur musical band with wind and percussion, while a pandereta is a tambourine. De charanga y pandereta is an idiomatic Spanish expression that evokes an idea of Spain as folkloric, festive and frivolous.

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