Discourse versus practice: inclusion, professionalization and exclusion in three European radical left parties

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ABSTRACT
Based on a series of interviews with activists from Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece and La France insoumise, this article looks at the mechanisms of inclusion implemented in the radical left parties emerging in Europe from the mid-2010s onwards. With the aim of doing politic differently, these parties aim to integrate various segments of the population that have hitherto been poorly represented. The testimonies presented suggest a gap between the discourse of these parties and the reality of the forms of political engagement they propose. Despite the effort made to select their public figures on the basis of representativeness, the selection dynamic at work tends to progressively exclude a proportion of activists.

Keywords: inclusion ; activism ; radical left

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the repercussions of the financial crisis of 2008 have led to a series of major political developments in Europe. Austerity measures were challenged in a variety of ways. A number of new social movements emerged, calling for greater social justice and democracy. In Spain, the May 15 2011 movement (15-M, also known as the "movimiento de los indignados") mobilized urban youth. It inspired many other mobilizations elsewhere in Europe, such as the occupation of Syntagma Square in Athens. In France, an important reform of the labor code decided by François Hollande's Socialist government was challenged in 2016 by a vast movement, which first appeared on social networks through the hashtag "We're worth more than this" (#OnVautMieuxQueCa), outside any classical trade-union framework.

Such movements, which enjoyed favorable media coverage and broad public support, were interpreted by various political outsiders as a window of opportunity. Their strategy was to build a new type of party, capable of offering an electoral outlet to demands voiced during protests that were struggling to establish itself in the long term (GOMEZ, RAMIRO, 2019). Limited financial and human resources available to these radical left players prompted them to set up structures seeking maximum electoral efficiency. To this end, they provided themselves with charismatic leaders who promoted a program of radical change, and offered easy membership of the party. Their aim was to remobilize sectors of the population that felt unrepresented by traditional parties (MUDDE, ROVIRA KALTWASSER, 2013).

The launch of Podemos in January 2014 and its subsequent electoral success seemed to validate this strategy, with important consequences in Europe. This project broke with the organizational model of traditional left-wing parties. The party's founders (including its charismatic leader, Pablo Iglesias) proposed a synthesis of the contributions of the 15-M, ranging from the mobilization of cross-cutting themes, served by professional communication, to innovative internal democratic mechanisms, supposed to allow the free expression of the greatest number of registered members during internal consultations. These optimized recent means of communication, particularly social networks (Facebook, Twitter, and messaging applications Telegram and Whatsapp), while guaranteeing organizational transparency (CASERO-RIPOLLES, SINTES-OLIVELLA, FRANCH, 2017).

The electoral successes of Spain's new radical left were accompanied by a breakthrough for the Greek coalition Syriza. Transformed into a party in 2012, led by its young leader Aléxis Tsípras, it acceded to the government in January 2015 (MARKOU, 2017). At the same time, in France, the Front de Gauche disappeared in favor of La France insoumise (LFI), launched in February 2016 to support Jean-Luc Mélenchon's candidacy in the 2017 presidential election. LFI

largely renewed the forms of engagement and communication in politics, drawing inspiration from the Spanish model (BIRNBAUM, 2017 ; CHAZEL, LAGO, 2017).

Podemos, Syriza, LFI: these three contemporary parties were and are participating in the renewal of forms of structuring and political commitment on the radical left. At first, they present themselves as based on the aspirations of new social movements, youth, women and gender minorities. Their discourse of rupture, sometimes assimilated to a form of populism (BLOCK, NEGRINE, 2017), insists on the horizontality of practices, and values the mechanisms of direct democracy. It praises citizen participation, the debate of ideas, and the representation of the diversity of the working class. However, based on a series of three field surveys conducted in Spain, Greece and France between 2016 and 2017, among activists from these three parties, various limitations emerge. The activists' testimonies contradict in practice the public discourse of these structures, highlighting some of their fragilities. In particular, those qualitative, semi-directive interviews deal with the way in which the party's public communication is received and interpreted by the targeted members.

Based on these testimonies, this article presents the limits faced by Podemos, Syriza and LFI in their attempts to integrate marginalized segments of the population, particularly working-class women. A presentation of the tools of inclusion, both in public communication and in internal practices, reveals a relentless sieve mechanism that selects activists and pushes certain profiles to leave.

REPRESENTING THE PEOPLE, AS IT REALLY IS

The initial success of these parties reflects a phenomenon that goes beyond the simple promotion of a new brand by political entrepreneurs trying to carve out a place for themselves in the establishment. It presupposes that large segments of the population embrace not only the contestation of institutions, ruling elites and the policies they produce, but also the alternative proposed political offering, centered on civic engagement. A great deal of attention is therefore paid to the inclusion of all publics who may be marginalized in contemporary European societies. This is particularly striking in Greece, in a rather conservative society, where the radical left offers a space of expression and demand to LGBT:

> I was motivated to join even Aristeri Enotita, even Synaspismos, I was motivated to join them because I found a party or a group that was for women's rights, for the rights of LGBTQI communities, so that was my precise motivation. But

> apart from that, I felt socially useful. [...] With the refugees, with all the actions we carried out to help them and so on, that was pretty much it. We were very active on those issues. We took part in Pride, but with some criticism. – D., 27, woman, lawyer, Syriza activist.
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> There were also a lot of sub-groups, in the Syriza youth. For example, there was the gender group, the LGBTQI group, the anti-racist group, the anti-sexist group, and so on. If you were interested in something more specific than the general political direction, you could join these groups, and you met a lot more people. It was interesting, because it was more like a special group that worked in the field you were particularly interested in. – S., 26, woman, employee, Syriza activist.

The fact that these issues have been taken on board by appropriate structures within the three parties (first, inside Syriza) has gone hand in hand with the development of different profiles among their public figures. While the leaders still are men with a political background on the traditional left, deputies and local officials are intended to represent the diversity of the people. Even in the looks, as Podemos is working on:

> For the first time, we were in the Spanish government, in Spanish political life. When, at the congress, you see people with Rasta hairstyles, you think, these are the people you might meet in the street. They're taking their place in the political arena. It's perfect. It's a sign of the times. We need young people to get involved. – D., 46, man, teacher, Podemos activist.
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> I like the old political posters... They can shock the bourgeoisie a bit, you know, they're made for it, and at the same time they speak volumes. But Podemos' communication, for people who want to be convinced to vote for them, is much more skilful, more modern, and it doesn't attack them, it invites them, it's welcoming... – L., 28, man, waiter, LFI activist.

The promotion of female figures is particularly important for the Spanish party. Such is the case of the former mayor of Barcelona, elected as part of a coalition in which Podemos participates. Ada Colau's character is the subject of different projections by local activists and elected representatives. For some, the mayor of Barcelona embodies the culmination of their hopes, symbolizing the accession to power of a woman from a working-class background who has long been an activist among them. Catalan MP Jessica Albiach thus expresses a sentiment shared by some of the activists best integrated into the party structure and institutions:

> I think Podemos is super proud to have a mayor like Ada, especially because she takes care of things perfectly. She's an average person doing extraordinary things. It's already important that Barcelona has a woman mayor. It's never happened before, and what's more, she comes from social movements that have been involved in the social struggle in the PAH, against evictions, leading the fight in an impressive way. And the social policies they are implementing in terms of the social shield, public transport, canteen grants for children... It's marvellous. And it's a pity that the traditional parties are so irascible and that their aim is to destroy us. I believe that Ada is the mayor of all the people of Barcelona. - Jessica Albiach, 37, Podemos deputy in the Catalan parliament

The discourse highlighting a woman of the people, an "average person", corresponds to the desire to broaden the target audience by going beyond the borders of the left, while presenting an example of individual empowerment supposed to echo the experiences of people who have experienced a more conservative Spain, as one activist testifies:

> My friends came from different parts of the university, we were asking for a more open society, equality between men and women, lot of things that were terrible under Franco especially because of the weight of the Catholic religion. So it was impossible. So, during that period, we were born, we had a particular role and that was it. Be a good girl, behave well, find one man and one man only, marry him, have children, and that was it. You were what you were supposed to be. – J., 50, woman, retired worker, Podemos activist.

This work of representation is coupled with internal tools designed to modernize the relationship with politics, to renew forms of commitment and encourage the participation of all types of people in the process.

TOOLS OF INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

In this way, the break with traditional forms of engagement is matched by a communicational improvement, involving the recycling of practices existing in recent social movements, and the appropriation of new tools. In the daily practice of Podemos circles, one of the immediately striking elements is the omnipresence of the smartphone, at a time when it is only just becoming popular in Europe. Considered a political tool of the first order, the smartphone has become indispensable in its many uses. It serves as a sounding board for any party action, immediately filmed and photographed, then shared on social networks. Even during meetings, activists can consult the latest news published on regional and national daily press websites at any time, to comment on content or follow party news on the various social networks. Finally, its main use remains interpersonal communication, not only bilateral, but now collective as well.

Access to collective discussion groups in Podemos circles was made possible by the massive spread of smartphones in Spain, which at the time held the European record for the ratio of smartphones per inhabitant. The party has thus capitalized on a fundamental societal trend. Nevertheless, we must not underestimate the dynamics of exclusion engendered by such a technological imperative: by their very absence, it is extremely difficult to assess the number of people who may have been put off by such "connected" activism, particularly in the older age groups.

What's more, for those who have overcome the technological barrier and identify with the issues at stake in the discussions, the codes governing the exchanges still have to be internalized, mixing references to current events and the history of the party or its internal divisions, with generational elements drawn from the history of the left and social movements. For the veterans, these codes tend to produce a comfortable, self-sustaining inwardness, discouraging the integration of potential recruits on the one hand, and reinforcing the unity of the group around a shared sociability on the other.

A similar observation can be made for La France insoumise, where support groups tend to organize themselves on digital platforms to gain in responsiveness and manage the modalities of the daily life of their structure - formal decision-making remaining the "regal domain" of weekly or bi-weekly physical meetings. As for Syriza, the available data, though patchy, tends to indicate that socialization within this party takes place in more traditional ways: participation in events, meetings, occupations and mobilizations, but also in informal and festive events such as the party's youth festivals or the parties of the student union linked to Syriza.

In all three cases, the open discussion space provided by meetings represents only a fraction of the information exchanged between activists. These meeting spaces act as a physical counterpart to the continuous exchange enabled by recourse to the various chats hosted by Telegram, Facebook or Whatsapp. The two facets of political activity - face-to-face and digital - maintain a complex dialectical link at the heart of activists' political socialization. Even more than at meetings, the virtual discussions studied are peppered with jokes, emoticons, links to news articles or videos enriching the debate. While a minority of a structure's members are very active, the discussion thread also serves as a synthetic press review for many other activists, who are content to passively follow the exchanges to access the information sorted upstream by their comrades.

Discussion applications are also used by activists to follow the activities of national leaders and benefit from their analyses, thus building up a body of argument within easy reach during public discussions, a role previously occupied by the newspapers of the various organizations. This external use is supported by other open social networks, such as YouTube and Facebook, helping to build a political communication employed by the grassroots. The Instagram application, on the other hand, was still very little used by political activists at the time.

Within each of the parties studied, each social network is seen not only as a tool, but also as a political battleground, governed by its own rules. This strategy paid off: the accounts of the party, its local branches and its leading figures met with unprecedented success on the various social networks. The in-depth reflection that has gone into the production of partisan communications has enabled us to measure how far we've come from the intuitive relationship of first-time activists discovering commitment through the screen of their phone or computer.

While the discourse elaborated by top leadership claims to convey the voice of the excluded, without resorting to double talk, it is nonetheless transmitted in a perfectly controlled, even framed manner. This upstream, top-down strategy is an important factor in understanding how the generation that lived through Franco's Spain and the Greek dictatorship was able to seize some of the tools on offer: far from being left to its own devices and overtaken by a younger generation monopolizing party communication, it is constantly being trained and draws on shared party experience, particularly in the form of internal presentations.

However, the party's activist base mainly relays the productions of communications specialists supporting the party, as well as local initiatives, the word of the leadership, or comments on current events: this activity is far less demanding in terms of know-how than would be the elaboration of a graphic charter or the production of polished video clips. The same applies to the other two parties studied. Despite all the mechanisms put in place to maintain an ongoing dialogue between bottom and top, communication remains mainly top-down.

Podemos circles, Syriza committees and LFI support groups produce documents intended for debate and to keep the party's local structures alive; but when it comes to social networks, mainly the trio of Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, activists use them above all to keep abreast of the latest news from leading bodies and officials. Podemos appears here to be the initiator of such practices, later shared by fellow European radical left structures:

> Podemos thus banked on a complementarity between television and social networks, whereas the FI dodged its candidate's problems with conventional media through the intensive use of social networks, notably YouTube. This difference suggests that left-wing populist discourse is compatible with the prioritization of several communication tools, depending on the specific context of each party (CASTAÑO, 2018, p.179).

The collective use of social networks within the base of contesting parties is therefore mainly internal. As for communication strategies based on the use of Twitter and the video format, competing political parties, such as Emmanuel Macron's French liberal structure, La République En Marche, have been just as successful in capitalizing on the tools derived from new information and communication technologies (LEFEBVRE, 2018). What's more, the "old parties" have also embarked on a process of rationalizing and professionalizing their communications techniques, imitating the strengths of the parties studied in this field, and standardizing strategies that rely on the use of social networks, which are no longer the special feature of contentious radical left parties today. In turn, the imperatives of electoral competition have led them to personalize their communications:

> I don't really like posters with Mélenchon on them. I prefer slogans or I prefer the population, or representing someone, Marianne or whatever. His head, no, not really. I don't really like it. Whether it's in the media or in the party, it's not stuff I like. Less so anyway. – A., 25, saleswoman, LFI activist.

In all three cases, new forms of communication are no longer a determining factor in party identity. This phenomenon, coupled with the over-representation of a generation better trained in grassroots activism, has resulted in a notable disaffection on the part of some members with party communication, in favor of that of the grassroots group whose members they know. In this way, internal means of communication are invested in a horizontal perspective, as tools of socialization, a consequence of the weakening of the weight of the base on the orientation of the leadership in decision-making bodies.

SELECTION MECHANISMS AT WORK

Olivier Fillieule's early work on the biographical trajectories of activists - particularly gay activists in France, placed in the context of the first specific manifestations of this cause (FILLIEULE, BROQUA, 2001) - has helped shape a French-language sociology of militant commitment. His work addresses the question of the resources required for militancy, particularly in terms of capital and time available. It is by grasping these different dimensions (available individual and collective resources at hand, the role of pre-existing structures, training enabling or not enabling the development of a specific strategy) that it is possible to understand the mechanisms constraining the commitment of people who are nevertheless targeted by the communication of the parties they join. For the strength of these parties' internal mechanisms, in which the central leadership plays a major and indisputable role, tends in turn to render commitment outside election periods almost meaningless.

These selection mechanisms, which lead to a professionalization of activity (undesirable, admittedly, but described as necessary) and to a concentration of responsibilities, themselves explain two concomitant phenomena. On the one hand, the emergence of an intermediate class of executives, who are not necessarily publicly exposed when they stand back from the electoral game. They form the backbone of the parties mentioned, and are overwhelmingly male graduates of various ages, with the resources to invest themselves intensively in the party. On the other hand, the fluidity of commitment does not seem to favor the integration of people from working-class backgrounds: the demands of militancy in terms of time and resources instead select people who are better endowed socially. Certain exceptional cases - such as Ada Colau's career - are counter-examples due to promotional strategies, without invalidating the overall dynamic.

For the strategy of these parties requires the promotion of media figures capable of physically embodying the message conveyed by their partisan structure: this is a vital factor in overcoming the dominance of cadres and activists whose backgrounds are much more deeply rooted in the traditional political arena, or who come from marginal leftist currents. Such a strategy is not exclusive to these parties: in the political field of Western parliamentary democracies, outsiders of all stripes tend to value profiles likely to embody youth and a break with the establishment. The particularity of the structures we're talking about here lies in perfecting such communication methods. They highlight the paradoxical dimension of these parties, whose internal selection mechanisms tend at the same time to exclude from their cadres and their very base the socio-professional categories that they are supposed to lead and represent.

The moment of entry into the institutional arena (through the election of mayors or parliament members, for example) can, from this point of view, be described as a moment of truth. The replacement, and later marginalization and departure of Syriza's old guard, in favor of new leaders, most notably Aléxis Tsípras, remains a striking example. Executives and leaders no longer come from this base, but from the leaders' professional environment or transfers from other government formations. The party's discourse is reorienting itself around sovereignist themes and new political cleavages. This major evolution of Syriza enabled the triumphant breakthrough of 2015, while at the same time emptying the party organization of its substance, leading to a partial disintegration of its structure from that point onwards. The cost of victory is therefore extremely high, marking the beginning of Syriza's decline as a radical force, able to represent Greek outsiders.

It is significant to note similar dynamics at work in the Spanish radical left. The disaffection of grassroots activists, whose profile would logically constitute Podemos' core target, and the gradual loss of influence of local and thematic circles, coupled with the deepening and generalization of selection mechanisms, are the result of strategic choices that themselves stem from competing projects promoted by different players in party building. The prevailing option is that of professionalizing political activity in response to the need to build an electoral war machine. This has been to the detriment of a section of activists whose profiles and expectations no longer correspond to the reality of parties that have moved a long way away from their movement origins, thus encouraging their demobilization. This phenomenon is accompanied by apparent contradictions between the values promoted and the reality of practices:

> There are more men... We tried, the person in charge of it wasn't there at the last meeting so we don't know the results, but at the previous meeting we wanted to see in fact if the speaking time was more or less parity, even if from the moment there are fewer women, inevitably, there's a bias. We also wanted to see if there was a bias towards certain people, certain genders. Clearly, men talk more, there are speech cuts, women are cut off - but not only women, men are

> cut off too. Anyway, these are observations that are commonplace. – E., 28, woman, pharmacist, LFI activist.
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> It was more of an alternative youth style culture, young anti-conformists, listening to post-rock and electro, and also a bit of rap because it's cool, and also we smoke weed, we want to get high, it was like... You know, we have a cool party, why don't we come and talk about the left, because it's cool to do that? And you talk about anti-sexism, and how not to be a sexist, even if you don't care if you're not, it's just cool to talk about that. [...] In my organization in Patras, we were supposed to believe in the same thing, but in our day-to-day practice, we weren't really consistent with what we believed in. For example, there were cases of sexism, or racism. Or discrimination against homosexuals in my political party. I'm not proud that we didn't manage to transform ourselves into what we wanted to be. And I'm not proud either of what more or less happened with authority, and authority relationships with friends and groups, and we didn't really try to improve that earlier. And in fact we theorized, we justified ourselves, but we were blind to the turn Syriza was taking. – A., 25, woman, student, Syriza activist.

FROM DISAFFECTION TO DEPARTURE

The setting up of electoral war machines, where maximum efficiency is sought, weakens or eliminates the mechanisms of internal democracy to the benefit of a strong verticality in decision-making. Profiles considered competent, coming from the world of the media, academia or traditional politics, are therefore most valued and experience rapid upward trajectories, while others, less endowed, stagnate or distance themselves from the party after the first few months of involvement.

A dynamic of sifting and sorting activists is at work in the ranks of Syriza, Podemos and LFI (the latter showing greater resilience despite high turnover, thanks to its good electoral scores at presidential elections). But this dynamic is correlated with the process of institutionalization of these parties. It appears right from the start - at the very genesis of the French and Spanish parties and, in the case of their Greek counterparts, when the latter set about transforming themselves on the road to power. This dynamic is not simply a consequence of institutionalization. It stems from the need to select and professionalize cadres, corresponding to the imperatives of exercising power in a parliamentary system made up of a jungle of institutions.

The "meritocratic" selection half-heartedly promoted by the staff of these political parties effectively contradicts the principles of elective selection they promote. This emphasis on personal merit is reminiscent of more aristocratic approaches to activism. The fact that these protest parties are rooted in a radical historical tradition as well as in contemporary social movements, and that their composition favors academic profiles, might lead one to believe that these systemic

discriminations based on social class, gender or origin are fully integrated and deconstructed by activists. Yet they are very much present. The over-representation of people with higher education qualifications is particularly marked among the young activists interviewed. As they are more in demand than their elders to occupy positions of responsibility involving representing the party, the young cadres of these protest parties concentrate a significant amount of cultural capital. The prominence given to people from working-class backgrounds, immigrants and women in the foreground ultimately corresponds more to a selection mechanism aimed at rejuvenating the party's image than to a proportionate representation of the composition of its activist personnel.

The upward trajectories of some individuals are therefore more the exception than the rule. Most of the women interviewed, as well as those from working-class backgrounds, particularly manual workers, were in a stagnant trajectory or in a process of disengagement at the time of the interviews conducted, and expressed their unease with the values constantly reaffirmed by their party. The under-representation of women is also spontaneously mentioned by some activists :

> As a girl, I find there's sexism, even if it's not done deliberately, it's done in humor, or we get the real out of the fake. I'm going to say that I've found sexism even in La France insoumise, where there shouldn't be any. Let's say, unlike others, for example on the right or in the FN, I would have been an even greater victim of sexism, even worse, but I was a victim nonetheless. So personally, that's the negative point I'd say. To still have it. I can't carry a bucket, that's an example actually, a bucket of glue is too heavy. Or I can't carry the posters, they're too heavy. [...] But that's the way society is. So I wouldn't necessarily blame the movement. – A., 25, saleswoman, LFI activist.

As voluntarism is strongly promoted, militants climbing up in the party ranks explain their assumption of responsibility by fatalistic reasons: someone had to take on their tasks, often presented as drudgery. This is no false modesty. These positions of responsibility are in fact very demanding in a phase of the party's development where the membership of first-time activists implies a permanent re-learning of collective activity, as it has been observed. These first responsibilities are a real test, leading to frequent burnout due to political overload. For the partisan structure, it's a question of empirically establishing the ability of aspiring executives to occupy positions of responsibility, initially without any reward, in exhausting circumstances:

> First, running a legislative campaign when you've never done it before, without any training, it's not easy. When you're working on the side and taking competitive exams at the same time, it's not easy. But yes, I took on those responsibilities. […] So personally, I'd started to learn a bit about that, and that's why I managed not to explode too much during the campaign. Others, on the other hand, found themselves with a whole load of work at once, when they'd had very little practice before, and some of them exploded, which is normal. – C., 26, man, working student, LFI activist.

His testimony correlates with a low level of task rotation observed by activists in all three

parties, which runs counter to the promoted objective of horizontality - an extremely demanding objective, since it requires excellent training of activists, capable of replacing at a moment's notice officials and leaders who have no vocation for professionalism. This failure is expressed by Podemos activists, illustrating a trend that can be found in other local organizations as well as in other parties:

> The problem is that there aren't many of us and the rotation stops. But not for lack of will, but for lack of people. And when they say they've finished their six months and someone has to take over, it's annoying. [...] We're taking it into account, like the parity issue, we're trying, it's also one of the points on which we have problems because by bad luck and in general there are more men than women, in politics it's even stronger. – J.A., 46, man, employee, Podemos activist.

Profiles from working-class backgrounds, particularly women and LGBT, thus express difficulties in finding their place in parties that no longer offer the mechanisms of formation and progression of traditional left-wing organizations. The rapid ascent of certain individuals, in line with the objectives of public representativeness, is therefore to the detriment of the majority, whose departure is invisibilized.

CONCLUSION. A MERCILESS SIEVE

Maurice Duverger said that "(Political) parties today are far less defined by their programme or the class their supporters come from than by the way they are organized" (1951, p. 20). One could add: "and by the way they communicate". Each in their own way, Podemos, Syriza and LFI have at some point in their history succeeded in competing effectively with the traditional social-democratic parties of their respective countries (albeit briefly in the case of Podemos). Rather than wiping them out by inventing a new way of doing politics, integrating the diversity of the contemporary working classe in an innovative form of direct democracy, these parties will have gradually slipped into the role of their predecessors: the rules and stakes of electoral competition led them to adopt a high degree of professionalization, both in their external communication and in their internal organization. While they may occasionally succeed in rallying the votes of a section of the working classes, women and LGBT, these are ephemeral electoral mobilizations, that do not translate into a renewal of the forms of political commitment.

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