

Politics in a Time of Crisis: Podemos and the Future of Democracy in Europe by Pablo Iglesias, Verso October 2015, 256 pages, £10.99, Paperback, ISBN: 9781784783358.

Review By Danny Rye, Lecturer in Politics, Department of History and Politics, Liverpool Hope University, Hope Park, Liverpool L16 9JD.

ryed@hope.ac.uk

In just two years Podemos, from a loose collection of *Indignados*, have become a significant electoral force. In the December 2015 election, they trailed the centre-left Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE) by less than 1.5%. By the time you read this, they may well have overtaken them. This dramatic shift in the political landscape underlines how the post-Franco two-party political hegemony appears to be teetering, providing an opportunity to change the rules of the game. But can Podemos deliver a knockout blow to the old regime? And even if it does, is it enough to bring about significant change?

Despite the title, Iglesias' main concern in this book is Spain. Its political history – especially the legacy of the Civil War – weighs heavily on it. However, as this book argues, international elites are at least as much to blame for Spanish woes as domestic ones. Indeed, the author – and the leader of Podemos – observes, power belongs largely to 'the caste', a global network unfettered by loyalty to nation states. The key institutional supports for global neoliberalism – including the IMF, the World Bank and the so-called 'troika' – has drained power away from states, reinforcing the power of financial elites for whom the 2008 crash and the ensuing debt crisis was a pretext for 'a great counter revolution'.

The broader European dimension of the financial crisis and its impact, means the questions he addresses are pertinent beyond Spain. In particular, how can the power of these elites be challenged and countered? Iglesias answers this with analogy: politics can be like a game of chess in which cunning and skill are necessary to outmanoeuvre opponents. However, even if the powerful can be beaten on the chessboard, they are only likely to give way 'when they are knocked out in the boxing ring' (19). Thus, his broadly Marxist outlook contains Weberian and Machiavellian dimensions which recognises that politics concerns the struggle for power and power, ultimately, is the capacity to realise one's will. However, as he also recognises, agenda-setting, the capacity to define the terms of debate, to shape 'perceptions, cognitions and preferences' (as Lukes has put it) are means by which elites *sustain* their power. Thus, aside from direct conflict, the struggle for power has at least three additional dimensions: culture, rules and organisation.

In the first of these, 'the critique of culture and of dominant ideologies [is] ... the most fundamental task' (34). The cultural dimension of the struggle seeks to contest the 'lexical terrain', challenging 'common-sense' (for instance, the terminology of 'austerity', the household budget as a metaphor for state finances) and turning it back on elites in their own (media) spaces. If successful, this 'undermines the ruling ideology' and opens up space for criticism. Essential to this dimension of the struggle and Podemos' breakthrough has been television. In the contemporary western world, television 'shapes our aesthetic sensibility and political opinion'(36) and is a fundamental battleground of hegemonic struggle. Alongside fellow academics and activists, 'the guy with the pony tail' saw potential for breaking out of the academy and opening up new political space post-2008 by shaping alternative responses to the economic crisis and giving voice to the emerging political movement of the *Indignados*. It

made me realise how much people with a critical awareness ... were in need of cogent arguments, explanation, ideas that could help them understand the world

they live in, ideas to reaffirm their indignation, to answer back with, to make them feel part of a community that wants to change things (8).

This underlines the central role political movements play in giving voice to those otherwise excluded from the political process, in providing coherence to political positions that had not been articulated because neither the language existed to express them nor the channels to convey them.

Iglesias' Machiavellian recognition that politics is, above all, the art of power – including how to get it and keep it – is an important theme. Radical politics concerns action and *results*, not doctrine or exalted language. Politics, in short, is *strategic*: concerned less with the substance of issues and more with who controls the scope of conflict, the definition of alternatives, the rules of the game. Schattschneider (1960) conveyed this kind of power as the 'mobilisation of bias' which Iglesias recognises with the phrase 'he who sets the rules of the game is highly tipped to win' (103), which indicates why this second dimension of struggle over rules is so important. Because it wasn't the democrats who set the rules during the transition to democracy in the 1970s, he suggests, Spain has been subject to a consensus unchallenged until the emergence of the *Indignados* movement (104-5). His is a clear eyed view of politics and power, then, in which Reason of State trumps law, ideology is window-dressing for geostrategic interests and winners set the rules. Politics is thus not about 'goodies and baddies' but about power. In politics 'you deal with whoever has the strength to deal with you' (32), which means for change to happen, political strength and control of institutions that shape the political terrain are vital.

This means being organised. Robert Michels long ago observed a paradox at the heart of emancipatory and revolutionary political movements: organisation, whilst vital to the attainment of radical goals, is at the same time the means by which those goals become subordinated to the pursuit of the power to realise them. This third dimension of struggle, then, is strewn with potential pitfalls. A distinguishing characteristic of Podemos has been its somewhat unconventional modes of organisation as a political movement, including its relative openness and commitment to democratic decision-making. But Podemos also seeks electoral success and becoming more like an organised political party 'with leading bodies, internal systems of control, political and tactical guidelines and a clear goal of organisational efficiency' (192) is inevitable and necessary (and, thus far, successful). But there are dangers here too, as Iglesias seems to recognise. The left, he warns, must break out of 'traditional' forms of (hierarchical) political organisation and work in new ways that counter the 'internal demands' of organised activist life – 'congresses, assemblies, meetings, schemes, lists, pacts, backstairs chats and endless phone calls' which 'segregate the militants from society and suck them into routines that have little to do with fighting the enemy' (15).

Iglesias' solution is openness. Podemos' should link 'the most advanced sectors of civil society into a broader project of political change', involving wider society in decision-making through 'open voting' (192). These are fine ambitions, if a little vague, but when openness and democracy gets in the way of strategy, which is the first to go? How such issues are resolved is a question that Iglesias does not address directly, although there will come a point when he must. This points to a key shortcoming of this book. The focus is very much on how to win power and lacks a firm programme or strategy of what to *do* with it. This, given the party's position, is something that urgently needs addressing. At present, Podemos is something of a 'floating signifier' around which a series of fragmented demands have coalesced. It is a movement that has therefore become united in terms of what it is against (which Iglesias articulates in this book), but what positively is it *for*?

Furthermore, the emphasis on strategy so crucial to Podemos' success, could also contribute to its downfall. The danger is less electoral failure than losing sight of its purpose. Politics *is*, after all,

about ideology as well as strategy, principle as well as power. History is littered with examples of parties, particularly of the left, that have forgotten this and there is no guarantee that Podemos is immune to such a lapse.

Finally, given the book's focus on power, I should comment on its underlying conceptualisation. Although he acknowledges power's strategic and cultural dimensions, Iglesias sometimes overlooks the ways in which the modern democratic state places *some* limits on political power which, however unsatisfactory, constrains the capacity of the powerful to act as they will, and requires concessions and obligations to its citizens. This may not amount to 'democracy' in the sense of a truly equitable distribution of power, but it does mean that mechanisms exist by which *some* power can be exerted over those who govern us (although they may be co-opted by the elites they seek to constrain). Secondly, the underlying theorisation of power here is 'negative' in that it is understood as an instrument of domination and the imposition of will. Although (as noted above) politics is sometimes like chess, he argues that political conflict is finally resolved 'by measuring, or confronting, the power of each actor' (29) and thus in raw form is more like boxing. Even if the powerful can be beaten on the chessboard, they are not likely to surrender all their advantages immediately. In the end 'we must never forget that *power is power*' (24), which is to say that ultimately it is about will and about strength. All of which suggests that in the end, metaphorically speaking at least, all the cunning in the world cannot substitute for a good right hook.

But 'power', as many analysts now recognise, is also a positive term, that concerns the articulation and realisation of the human capacity for emancipation, something which Iglesias surely seeks. The book therefore doesn't successfully get beyond addressing who dominates, to identify ways of distributing, growing and nurturing a positive power of our own. This criticism may seem unfair, given that this is more of a polemic than political theory, but it remains that a clearer understanding of power in all its facets is going to be helpful to the success of any political strategy, particularly an emancipatory one. Iglesias is right, then, to suggest that successful radicals must learn how to box, but they must also learn how to build.

References

Schattschneider, E.E. (1960) 'The Semi-Sovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America', New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.