

The Hijacking of Feminism by Spanish Populism: The *Unidas Podemos* Case¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between feminism and populism. With this purpose, this paper focusses on the case of the political coalition *Unidas Podemos*, which is currently participating in the Spanish Government. Its political action particularly reflects the main argument of this paper: populism has *hijacked* the feminist movement in Spain. This result can be observed in three turns that populism and feminism implement together: punitivism, identitarian politics, and the emphasis on the emotional side of the political discourse. The conclusion will be that if (and only if) feminism maintains its independence from populism, can it retain the credibility of its claims that are rationally plausible in the democratic agenda.

Keywords: populism, feminism, Unidas Podemos, punitivism, postmarxism, recognition paradigm.

1. Is this feminism?

On 8 March 2020, feminist demonstrations (“manifestaciones del 8-M”) took place throughout Spain with the support of the Government (PSOE-Unidas Podemos), despite the fact that the European Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (ECDC) had previously warned about the need to “avoid unnecessary mass events” (Güell 2020), due to the rapid spread of the coronavirus across Europe. Notwithstanding this, the Spanish Government postponed the lockdown to 14 March so as to ensure the celebration of the 8-M demonstrations, where unfortunately many women were infected. According to a report assessing the impact of total lockdown measures on the containment of infections in Spain (Orea and Álvarez 2020), the lockdown delay caused 79,093 infections.² Still, some members

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²They elaborated two counterfactual scenarios that take as a reference the number of infections counted up to 4 April: 126,859 cases. The first scenario reflects what would have happened by 4 April in the absence of any lockdown. Orea and Álvarez state that the number of cases would have risen to 617,743. This means that the

of the Government did not accept this and put forward “alternative facts”.³ Somehow the Spanish Government followed a typical post-truth strategy (see MacIntyre 2018).

Now let us assume that those demonstrations were fully organized in favor of women. Then why were some female demonstrating members of the liberal party, *Ciudadanos*, booed, shaken and forced to leave at the cry of “¡*Florerros fuera!*”⁴ (i.e. “No trophy wives!”)? How is it that women themselves were expelled from demonstrations, allegedly organized in defense of their own rights?⁵ State feminism seems to assume this kind of inconsistency as a sort of trade-off with populism: populism provides feminism with access to power and feminism provides populism with a new legitimacy. In doing so, feminism has certainly become the leading social movement of left-wing populism in Spain, but this strategy may backfire in the near future and undermine some legitimate feminist claims.

In this paper, I would like to explore the relationship between feminism and populism and argue that if, and only if, feminism maintains its independence from populism, can it retain

restrictive measures of 14 March prevented: 490,884 cases, 46,619 deaths, 220,531 hospitalizations and 25,757 patients in Intensive Care Units. The second counterfactual scenario reflects what would have happened if lockdown had been brought forward by one week (7 March, i.e.: one week before the actual lockdown and one day before the feminist demonstrations in Spain). In such a scenario, the number of cases of 4 April would have been 47,766; that is, 62.3% lower than the 126,859 cases actually reported.

³ For instance, Feminist former Vice President, Ms Carmen Calvo (PSOE), insisted in encouraging women to participate at the 8-M demonstration on 2020, by arguing that “their life as citizens was at stake” (Nobile 2020). This sounded like an ironic premonition, since many women (including Ms. Calvo herself) would get infected during those demonstrations. Fortunately, last year, in 2021, Ms. Calvo has changed her mind and has stated that “life comes first” (Redacción de *El Huffington Post* 2021). After a whole year mourning thousands of deaths caused by the coronavirus in Spain, this might seem to be a step forward. However, the angry response of other populist and feminist members of the Spanish Government such as Ms. Irene Montero (Unidas Podemos) to the non-authorization of the 8-M demonstrations in Madrid on 2021 is revealing of the primacy that populists and feminists impassively attribute to *the political* (à la *Schmitt*). She argued that the non-authorization for public health reasons by the Delegate of her own Government (!) in Madrid was a “criminalization” of the feminist movement (Cruz 2021).

⁴ See García/Mata 2020. It was not the first time. Women of *Ciudadanos* had also been rebuked and harassed at the gay pride day demonstration a few months earlier (see Barroso 2019).

⁵ A perhaps not very reasonable way out would be to identify liberal or conservative women with that 1% of neoliberal-progressive feminism à la Hillary Clinton that the feminism of the 99% deplores. Then, “there is no one left out here” should be interpreted as there is no one left out here from the “99%, not one less” (Forenza 2019, p. 165).

the credibility of its claims that are rationally plausible in the democratic agenda. In order to examine this relationship between feminism and populism, I am going to deal with the case of the *Unidas Podemos* party, which is particularly revealing of the way populism has *hijacked* the feminist movement in Spain.

2. From *Unidos Podemos* to *Unidas Podemos*

A month before the Spanish General Elections of 16 June 2016, a new electoral coalition was registered at the Central Electoral Board on 13 May 2016, under the name of "*Unidos Podemos*" (United We Can). In doing so, Unidos Podemos brought together a wide set of left parties: Podemos, Unidad Popular, Equo, Construyendo la Izquierda-Alternativa Socialista, Democracia Participativa and Izquierda Unida (including the ancient Spanish Communist Party, PCE). Three years later, on 15 March 2019, the coalition changed its name and was re-registered with the new name "*Unidas Podemos*" for the 2019 elections ("unidas" is feminine). What did *Podemos* leaders mean by replacing "Unidos Podemos" (i.e. United we can) by "*Unidas Podemos*"—i.e. United we (just women)—can?

Unidas Podemos' success is due to multiple causes, but now I would like to focus on this change of brand, for it reflects the sign of the times in a post-socialist and populist context. As we shall see, the transformation of *Unidos Podemos* into *Unidas Podemos* clearly expresses the replacement of a non-hierarchical set of *democratic claims* by a constellation of social claims spinning around one of them, namely the feminist claim. The popular claim is no longer the result of several equal class discussion ("meta-classism"), but the result of a debate lead by one ruling class (women), representing the rest of them ("hyper-classism") (see Aránguez 2019). Let us now examine this transformation of populism, by focusing on this brand change.

2.1 Podemos

The *Podemos* ("We can") brand is quite a find in itself. Byung-Chul Han (2018, p. 26) has argued that deontic verbs such as "must", "have to" or "ought to" are particularly important under "disciplinary societies". But now we do not live in disciplinary societies, but "performance societies", where verbs such as "can" or "be able to" succeed. Let us recall Obama's "Yes, we can!". Of course, this "can" is not normative, deontic, disciplinary. It does not mean: Yes, we are allowed! Rather it means: Yes, we are capable! And indeed, what is important in our *turbo-capitalist* societies is no longer what *everyone is or is not allowed to*

do, but what the current *homo consumericus* can or cannot achieve or afford (Lipovetsky 2007, pp. 90 ff.). So, my frustration caused by someone else's *prohibitions* (that I am not allowed) is totally different from the discomfort, caused by *my own incapacity* (not being able) to achieve something. When I am not *allowed* to do something, I can rebel against someone else. When I am not *able* to achieve something, I can just blame myself, I just can resign myself. But that is something that I probably cannot stand in a performance society. Be that as it may, the very idea of revolution cannot be the same in such different scenarios.

This also explains (see Han 2018, p. 28) why neurosis was the typical psychological problem of disciplinary societies, while depression is the main problem of performance societies at present. In disciplinary societies, prohibitions usually create an atmosphere of *negativity*, due to the repressive insistence on what people are not allowed to do. On the contrary, performance societies, such as ours provide us with a very wide range of constitutional rights, which allow us to do many things; although we cannot (we are *not able* to) achieve everything we want, as is natural. And of course, since nobody prevents us from doing what we want, we are the only ones to blame for our own failure. All of us are well aware of our great potential, but the absence of prohibitions insistently reminds us of *what we are not capable of doing*. As a result, this situation causes an atmosphere of extreme *positivity*, but depression too. No wonder that manic-depressive disorder has become "the true structure of Western man" (Bruckner 1995, p. 76). Ours are "the first societies that make people unhappy, because they are not happy" (Bruckner 2000, p. 86), for citizens seem to feel incapable of living up to a self-imposed effort to fulfil their consumerist ideals. Despite the improvement of most humans' wellbeing, in our performance societies *the ubiquitous dilemma is either full performance or surrender*; success or frustration; and excuses are no longer available, since society is permissive by dint of moral scepticism and atheism. It is not easy for individuals to accept that, and a certain melancholy pervades the whole community. But there is a way out: no matter how well off we might be in our performance society, everybody is entitled to become a victim of an invisible force, such as "Heteropatriarchy", "Capitalism", "The System", etc. In doing so, individual impotence may be collectively re-structured, resignified, by means of the identity-based argument of "glass ceilings". In other words, despite the fact that nobody prevents me from getting what I want, I am not able to get that, because I belong to a certain group lacking *recognition*. Certainly, I have basic individual legal rights, but I am always a victim entitled to *additional* recognition.

Obviously, this identitarian turn has altered the very condition of victim, which is not an economic status any more. The status of victim is no longer about money, but neither is it about quantity or seriousness of suffering. Our society obscenely confuses adversity with unhappiness, the unpleasant with the painful. In this atmosphere of “*douleurisme*” (“painfulness”), “our small miseries are obscenely equated with great atrocities” (Bruckner 2000, pp. 223 ff.) and the whole of humankind becomes responsible for our slightest setback. Accordingly, victims turn out to be a *totem*, although the punitive response of power on the allegedly guilty is not merely symbolic at all (e.g. criminal law measures).

So we are all victims, who shout altogether: “Yes, we can!”. But what is that that *we can*? At first glance, we can do everything and nothing, and this may seem disappointing, but not for populists. Populism operates with “empty signifiers”, as Ernesto Laclau (2004, *passim*) stresses. From the populist logic, a doctrine weakens itself as soon as it becomes too explicit and loses the necessary *souplesse* to bring together the conflicting interests underlying the multiple “democratic claims”. Therefore, the vagueness of the populist message is both *intentional* (desired) and *intensional* (for it does not clearly specify the properties of its concepts) so as to be *extensional* and to encompass the greatest number of groups and claims (García Figueroa 2021b, pp. 21 f.). At the end of the day, this lack of definition boosts the emotive and rhetorical force of the populist message.

What if some people do not grasp this invisible force (“Heteropatriarchy”, “Capitalism”, “The System”, etc.) behind the immanent injustice that turns them into victims? Who can fill in the empty signifiers of populism? In this context, only a leader can allegedly awaken individuals from their blind spontaneity and guide the people towards the *real* common good. Such good is presumed unique and undivided under a striking “nostalgia for unanimity” (Zanatta 2019), which ignores in a totalitarian and perfectionist way the plurality of worldviews and individual preferences. For populism, individuals are not conscious, since they are always busy with unimportant short-term issues, such as getting a raise in salary or enjoying more vacation days. Therefore, conscience can only be grasped and interpreted by a leader, who heals people’s myopia as well as their clumsy spontaneity.

The spontaneity/conscience dichotomy arises with the transition from the *Narodniki* to the Bolsheviks in revolutionary Russia. As is well known, Lenin realizes that the proletariat rarely intends to subvert the regime and rather prefers to thrive within it. Hence populism peremptorily needs custodians of true *conscience*, capable of pushing the development of

history beyond proletarian inertia (Delsol 2015, pp. 48 ff.). For instance, at the Podemos congress of October 2014, its leader, Pablo Iglesias, argued (with old-fashioned rhetoric) that "Heaven is not taken by consensus, but by assault". And similarly Ayatollah Khomeini stated that "you do not make a revolution to lower the price of melon" (see Warraq 2013, p. 13). Therefore, the victory of the true conscience requires a revolution. The leader manages the ideals inspiring the true general will of the blind people. Deprived of their leader's consciousness, the people would be left to the spontaneity of getting cheaper melons.

The justification of undermining our liberal democracy is given by the need of "direct representation" in the oxymoron coined by Nadia Urbinati (2020, chapter IV). Where the people are "the absent fullness" (Laclau 2004, p. 113), charismatic leaders are the oracles capable of making it present (of re-presenting it) by awakening the people's conscience. From this point of view, the irrationality of populism would be apparent, for it represents the apparently irrational means used by the Hegelian "cunning of reason" (*List der Vernunft*) to make manifest the "reason of history". Therefore, moral, constitutional and legal limits should not apply to the leader, who is sovereign, *legibus solutus*. Accordingly, populist charismatic leadership matches not only a poor vision of politics ("show-business for ugly people", in Roger Stone's words), but also a childish vision of the electorate, who accepts that. After all, children are not fully responsible for their acts. Their absolute innocence and lack of responsibility have turned the child of every household into a kind of Rousseuvian icon, a "good savage at home" (Bruckner 1995, p. 89).

Perhaps a key of Podemos' message consists, finally, in the fact that it appeals to a left that is no longer *oppressed* by a disciplinary power, but *depressed by* power within a performance society. In this transition, left-thinking might be expected to develop at least three strategies: First, a return to the well-known 1968 motto, "*Il est interdit d'interdire!*" Secondly, a revival of programmes of economic redistribution. And thirdly, that such measures should be anchored in rationality and be embodied in enlightened and cosmopolitan projects. However, none of these three expectations are priorities in the left-wing populist projects. Faced with the "*Il est interdit d'interdire!*", today's populism in power fosters a "discriminatory legalism" (Müller, 2016, pp. 46 ff.) which, on the basis of a society divided between friends and foes, does not hesitate to promote the expansion of criminal law against "the enemies of the people". Faced with the economic redistributive policies of the welfare state, populism tends to assume identity-based policies. And finally, left-wing thinking has left rational, enlightened and cosmopolitan ideals so as to adopt postmodernism, tribal identitarianism, and

exclusionary nationalism. To sum up, the bankruptcy of these three expectations corresponds respectively to three populist turns in current politics: a punitive turn, an identitarian turn, and an affective turn.

2.1.1 The punitive turn: United we (women) can punish

Instead of “*Il est interdit d’interdire!*” and, specifically, instead of criminal abolitionism, the ruling post-socialist thought has promoted a new legal culture based on the expansion of criminal law. “Punitive populism” is reflected in four aspects of current criminal law, namely: the advancement of punishability (punishment before trial), the adoption of a prospective perspective (e.g. *inquisitio generalis*), the increase in penalties, and the suppression of certain procedural guarantees (Demetrio 2020, p. 17). Accordingly, it has also led to a special case of punitive populism, namely “punitive feminism”. Tamar Pitch (2018, p. 44) defines punitive feminism as “mobilizations that, claiming to be feminist and in defence of women, lead demands for criminalization (introduction of new crimes in legal systems and/or increased penalties for existing crimes)”⁶.

How is it possible that leftist thinking shifted from criminal abolitionism to the expansion of criminal law? Eduardo Demetrio (2020, pp. 30 f.) has convincingly argued that the reason that explains the (otherwise inexplicable) shift from abolitionism to punitivism is the leading role of victims in both doctrines, but in opposite ways. Abolitionism has often replaced punishment by some sort of bargaining allowing victims to replace punishment by a legal compensation in dialogue with the offender. Similarly, punitive populism and punitive feminism also involve the participation of victims, but it does so, in order to increase punishments. Specifically, the victims’ feelings of revenge and the empathetic identification of “the people” with those feelings allegedly justify populist and feminist punitivism.

For instance, in Spain multiple demonstrations were celebrated intending to coerce judges with accusations of representing a “patriarchal justice” (see e.g. Rodríguez Palop 2019, p. 67) in a so-called “manada” case. A group of young men (*manada*) had allegedly committed gang rape against one woman, but her lack of consent was not evident beyond a reasonable

⁶The criticism raised by the report issued by the *Consejo General del Poder Judicial* (the supreme body of the Judiciary in Spain) regarding the Draft Bill of the Organic Law of Integral Guarantee of Sexual Freedom is perhaps an expression of the excesses of punitive feminism that today promotes Spanish State feminism (see Poder Judicial de España 2021).

doubt (see e.g. García Amado 2020; Lloria& al.; 2019, Lascuráin 2019). By undermining judges' and parliament's legitimacy, streets demonstrators somehow tried to undermine representative democracy by turning it into a sort of "street democracy" (Nieto 2018). Moreover, since referendum-like events take place on social networks on a daily basis, democracies are turning into "digital democracies" too (Vallespín/Bascuñán 2017, p. 144). As a result, street and digital democracy fosters the "*disintermediation*" between the people and their leader in order to achieve a sort of oxymoron: "direct representation" (Urbinati 2020).

Now a genuine "victim-centered criminal Law theory" ("*victidogmática*") takes over our legal culture by satisfying the revenge instincts of victims against their offenders-enemies in a premodern way. Thus, on behalf of a whole collective (enemies of the people) the offender will be responsible for a complete but shapeless record of present and past social injustices suffered by all the victims as a whole ("victim", an empty signifier). With this return to the pre-modern perpetrator-based criminal law, crime turns out to be a sin again. Furthermore, it is a sin without possible redemption, because it is intrinsically and irrevocably linked to an identity, to a role. Interestingly, in our *liquid* society, where nothing is permanent, only identities really are permanent (see Bauman 2007, p. 71). Long gone are those days, when the delinquent was also considered by left-wing thinkers as a victim of a criminogenic society, who could be rehabilitated. Today, the ruling thinking maintains the simplifying and contrary thesis of the "immutability or incorrigibility of the dangerous subject, which is expected to reoffend" (Andrés-Pueyo 2013, p. 491, *apud* Demetrio 2020, p. 179). In this irreversible distribution of roles (victim/offender; friend/foe; men/women), also "sexual orientation has the same status as race, it rules out any kind of mixing" (Bruckner 1995, p. 159). As a result, punitive feminism proves to be a special case of punitive populism, probably because nowadays feminism has become somehow a special case of populism (see García Figueroa 2021b).

But why has the victim-centered criminal law paradigm resulted in punitivism instead of abolitionism? Punitivism is a reaction against the worldwide feeling of insecurity displayed after 9/11. Nowadays our performance societies are *risk societies* too. Indeed, the depression in Western societies described by Han is breaking out in communities, whose individuals have never been more protected in terms of rights, guarantees and dignity; but at the same time they have never felt more threatened than they do now, probably because they believe that they have never had more to lose. Indeed, the full assumption of the culture of human

rights has given rise to an expansive discourse of rights, but also to a less reasonable exercise thereof, inasmuch as their holders are increasingly narcissistic, but also insecure. Furthermore, citizens have never had a greater sense of insecurity in the face of global and invisible risks (e.g. radioactivity, viruses, social networks or the terrorist threat). To sum up, most of citizens feel like *real or potential* victims, who demand maximum security and this has redefined the role of the state: from the welfare state, we have moved to a "preventive state" (Denninger, *apud* Demetrio 2020, p. 97) and from this to a punitive state (Bauman, 2007, p. 74).

Our view on solidarity has changed accordingly: from welfare state solidarity we have moved on to a "solidarity of fear" typical of risk societies (Bernuz 2008, p. 320) and the fear-based social bond is stronger than the welfare-based one. This explains the devaluation of transgression and dissidence in the risk society. Transgression has lost much of its *glamour* because in our performance societies the forbidden ("*l'interdit*") had previously lost its *glamour* too. *Accursed* attitudes (recall the so-called "*artistes maudits*" and other outcasts) make sense under disciplinary societies, but our performance society would condemn those attitudes, precisely because they are not heroic at all. In fact, they clearly are inefficient, once freedom is taken for granted. Of course, there is still violence on streets, but in general terms collective actions tend to be less violent. For example, in an action around 2008, Arthur Lecaro, spokesman for the *Aristopunks*, stated that they wished to "show that it is possible to occupy a public space in a radical and entertaining way without actually breaking the law" (see Žižek 2011, p. 363).

No wonder that even rational dissenting tends to be socially disapproved, because adherence, obedience, no longer appeal to our rationality, but to our need for security. Populism has always longed for absolute moral *unanimity* (see Zanatta 2019), but allegedly now we *can* only *survive*, if we keep totally *united*, "unidos". Just *unidos podemos*. Therefore, dissidents are no longer heroes, who challenge the establishment. On the contrary, they rather represent a threat to our security. As a result, criticism is often interpreted as "offensive" and critics are stigmatized, regardless of their reasons, as they are automatically considered unsupportive, fascist, communist, extreme-right, sexist, unpatriotic, enemies of the state, anti-system, naysayers, haters or whatever.

This entails the reconversion of the *agora*. The public space ceases to be the place where we discuss reasons (pros and also cons). Rather, in our new physical and digital *agoras*

participants assume allegedly unquestionable unanimities confirmed by means of empty slogans and lack of criticism. The demonstrators no longer wear flowers in their hair, nor do they benevolently encourage us to practise free love. They may not be particularly violent, but they cast strident meaningless guttural sounds, insult or slander an entire category of people, or undress with a scarcely transgressive result. In fact, such street *performances* are designed to circumvent the linguistic level and reach the more irrational levels of their audiences. In these circumstances, as I have already pointed out, street and digital democracy tries to elude rational and institutional channels to settle disputes by avoiding dialogue, deliberation and especially *consensus*. Let us recall that populists believe that struggle, antagonism, is the very essence of politics and, consequently, consensus is the taboo *par excellence* for populism. In this context, sadly familiar to any European, rationality is the first casualty, because its essential ground (i.e. rational deliberation, the very exercise of arguing) is devastated. In the end, the diagnosis that Bertrand Russell formulated around 1935 for the interwar period is still valid: "the revolt against reason began as a revolt against reasoning" (Russell 2005, p. 54).

2.2.2 The identity turn: United we (women) can be someone

Apparently, today money is no longer our main problem and certainly "the tension between freedom and security has eclipsed the previous one between equality and inequality" (Bernuz 2008, p. 319). But that is not all. The bitter declarations of a Polish politician, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, against the pure *economy-based* policy of Brussels are quite telling: "When we talk to you about justice, you talk to us about European funds" (see Delsol 2019, p. 34).

Conservatives and progressives share this rejection of economy-based arguments. On the right, the illiberal democracies from Central Europe pose a "clash of mentalities", namely a clash between a multicultural, bureaucratic, and economicist Western Europe and an identitarian, heroic, and recognition-hungry Eastern Europe. On the left, post-socialism rejects economy-based arguments of the original Marxist materialism, by stressing the importance of immaterial goods such as *recognition* and identity. For all these reasons, even when states foster redistributive measures, they are often more symbolic than real, more cultural than material, and more emotional than effective.

In Spain, feminist politician, María Eugenia Rodríguez Palop, states that "the identity element (...) is not located in a different channel from our social needs and demands" (Rodríguez Palop 2019, p. 18) and adds in an interview with Pablo Iglesias, that "social rights serve (...)

for us to claim *what we are* and what we want to be, not to resign ourselves in *exchange for 'welfare'*" (Rodríguez Palop 2019, p. 120; emphasis added). Before an even more receptive audience in Catalonia, she clearly states: "it is completely false to say that you cannot be left-wing and be nationalist" (Rodríguez Palop 2019, p. 136). Clearly, identity comes first.

Here it is worth recalling Antonio Gramsci's decisive intellectual legacy and, more recently, the influential role of Honneth's paradigm of recognition on current post-socialism and populist strategies. As is well known, Gramsci realizes that Marxist materialism and "*economism*" would have been reductionist and would have undermined the credibility of the socialist message in increasingly fragmented societies where, additionally, the division between rich and poor, between capitalists and proletariat, can be obscured (and their antagonism mitigated) by growing social segmentation. Thus, the way to save social movements has consisted in changing the very essence of class struggle and taking it beyond the narrow confines of economic redistribution, by means of which the *welfare state* would have appeased social demands. It is a question, finally, of launching a cultural and *not merely* economic offensive. Naturally, such a cultural struggle presupposes a profound transformation of the traditional Marxist discourse into a populist discourse, and this is what Ernesto Laclau proposes in his famous book *On Populist Reason* (Laclau 2004).

The starting point of populist theorists consists in adopting a Schmittian concept of "the political". From this perspective, the very essence of *the political* is the division of the *demos* between friends and enemies, us and them, the people and the oligarchy, the ordinary people and the *élite*, "gente" and "casta". This implies characterizing each of the fronts in such a way as to keep their antagonism alive. *Ad extra*, frontiers must serve to clearly identify an *enemy*, whose aversion unites the *true* people. *Ad intra*, frontiers must be reinforced by means of "equivalent chains", that is, arguments which guarantee the friend's union, no matter how plural and diverse their democratic demands might be. So wealthy potentates and poor workers, Jewish women and misogynist Islamists, black immigrants and Basque racist terrorists, could well agree and develop a single "popular demand", despite the fact that they have nothing else in common, but an alleged common enemy.

This explains why some prominent populists committed to feminism (e.g. Rodríguez Palop 2019, 89 ff.) claim for consensus ("commonality") within the borders of "the people", but reject consensus outside, in the public arena. Interestingly, during an interview, Chantall Mouffe stated: "Although I sympathize with the "*indignados*" movement in Spain, I am really

concerned, when I hear them clamoring for a participatory democracy without leaders or parties and that the goal of such forms of direct participation should be to reach an inclusive consensus” (in Martin, 2013, p. 235). But the rejection of consensus may be a tricky argument. Consensus was the main instrument to reconcile Spaniards in the transition to democracy in 1978 and consensus is the ideal pursued by Habermas’and Rawls’ political theories. It is quite telling that consensus is the *bête noire* of populism.

To sum up, first, social movements based on Marxist materialism or *economism* opposed capitalists to proletariat. Then Lenin stressed the organizational need for strong leadership. Later on, Gramscian critique of economism led to a postsocialist strategy that emphasized the need to culturally unite classes that are extremely different in economic terms (e.g. Tarrow 2012, pp. 47 ff.). And finally, this led to the implementation of the paradigm of recognition (e.g. Honneth 2019), by arguing that injustice really means lack of recognition. This would explain why welfare state economic redistribution can never succeed. According to the paradigm of recognition, no matter how hard the State develops redistribution policies, a glass ceiling for certain groups would still remain. The recognition paradigm consequently defends the need for state *recognition* policies and not merely *economic* redistribution policies (see e.g. Butler/Fraser 2016).

Collective action thus becomes not only more cultural than economic, but also increasingly hermeneutic and more positive. The increasingly hermeneutic (interpretive and therefore ideological) nature of recognition policy is reinforced, since its implementation can no longer be based on *objective* and *material* parameters, such as income or salary, but necessarily involves *values* when assessing the causes of the groups’ lack of recognition. Again, this reinforces the importance of leaders, who are the interpreters to make explicit that "conscience" underlying the poor "spontaneity" of the people.

But in addition, the culture-based class struggle converts identity struggles into something *positive*. In the past, the class struggle was economy-based (rich vs. poor). Therefore the welfare state solution was somehow negative, for it aimed to “get rid of the poor” (as Olof Palme famously was said to reply to Otelo Saraiva de Carvalho, who had previously stated that “In Portugal we want to get rid of the rich”). In other words, poor people should simply *disappear* by leaving their identity (poverty) behind. On the contrary, now differences are not primarily economic, but cultural and they should not be removed, but *positively* stressed, by means of recognition policies. In a nutshell, it makes sense to eliminate poverty, but not

blackness. It makes sense to eliminate marginalization, but not to dissolve the marginalized *ethnic* groups. The injustice of recognition is not solved economically, nor by homogenizing classes; but through *positive* policies of *recognition*. This would require as a priority to support marginalized groups, by influencing media, culture, education and even "common sense" itself, as if a new religion were created. This is something that Gramsci already suggested when he stated that "in the masses philosophy cannot be lived, but as a faith" (Gramsci 2017, p. 295).

Naturally, this strategy is very compromising from a classical liberal perspective, and not only because it usually restricts autonomy. Sometimes it is hard to define which social identity does *not deserve* to be preserved. Let's consider a well-known case: Gauvin was the son conceived by artificial insemination by a lesbian couple, Candy McCullough and Sharon Duchesneau. So far, so good. However, the couple had selected the sperm donor to ensure that the child would be born as deaf as both women. When Gauvin was born deaf, McCullough and Duchesneau argued that deafness was an identity deserving of the utmost protection. This famous case (see Sandel 2007, pp. 1 ff.) raises serious ethics issues: to what extent can identity be more important than individuals and their fundamental rights? Is it not true that Gauvin was somehow a collateral victim of the paradigm of recognition?

Indeed, there are precedents for this biased reconversion of certain disadvantages for ideological purposes that are not always very edifying. To what extent is it a good idea to exalt "poverty of spirit" as Christianity does (Mt 5:3-12)? And is it not paradoxical to exalt "radical vulnerability" as a source of moral knowledge proper to women, as some feminists do (e.g. Rodriguez Palop 2019, p. 89)? Could it somehow be risky to try to preserve aspects of the identity of individuals that are nothing but disadvantages that we should actually eliminate? Furthermore the point is that when identity prevails over economicism, it may be tempting for many politicians to forget about effective redistribution policies and keep the merely rhetoric measures and win elections.

Once collective action becomes cultural, then it tends to attribute leadership to one class (*hyperclassism, merecracy*) and nowadays women have apparently benefited from this development. From this point of view, the evolution of social movements has gone through three stages: the classic Marxist economic class struggle (rich v. poor), Laclau's *metaclassism* (different but equal classes united by means of "equivalence chains") and thirdly *hyperclassism*, that is defined by the *merecratic* attribution to one *mere* class (women) and to

one democratic claim (feminism) the main role in the populist discourse (Aránguez 2019). From this perspective, the transition from *Unidos Podemos* to *Unidas Podemos* is nothing but the transparent manifestation of the populist transition from the metaclassist strategy to the hyperclassist strategy.

This last point naturally leads us to the third frustrated expectation of the left: rationality has given way to emotions. Where people used to assert their reasons, they now require a mysterious empathy, as if it were an emotional updating of the old Kantian categorical imperative. Instead of promoting cosmopolitanism and internationalism, they stand for exclusionary nationalism. Instead of promoting redistribution, they strive to preserve identities, no matter how unfair this might be for individuals.

2.1.3 The affective turn: United we (women) can feel

Finally,⁷ together with the modal verb "can", the prevailing verb of the populist discourse is "feel". Let us recall that the circle of the Podemos logo was transformed into a heart when the coalition of parties was registered in 2019 as *Unidas podemos*. As stated, beyond the neurosis (caused by excessive negativity, the *forbidden*) and the depression (caused by excessive positivity which reveals what I am *incapable* of), we have now moved on to a narcissistic, arbitrary, permanently unsatisfied rage, which seeks at all costs to command our feelings. We are immersed in a "politics of affects" and feminists usually celebrate it (e.g. Rodríguez Palop 2019, p. 43). This genuine "affective turn" in politics (Cossarini 2019, p. 83) is not new. Let us consider the overwhelming success of Stéphane Hessel's pamphlet entitled *Indignez-vous!* (Hessel 2011). That (not particularly sophisticated) manifesto did something as extravagant as *commanding us, prescribing us*, a feeling; but feelings cannot be governed by our will. This obsession with *ruling* which is impossible to rule (except by controlling in a totalitarian way our brain activity, privacy, education, culture and even *common sense*) also reflects the betrayal of that epochal "*Il est interdit d'interdire!*" that stood against a disciplinary society on May 68. The ethical modal verb of the society of discipline (*must, ought*) has survived in the performance society with an unexpected affective turn. It is now a matter of *duty to feel*.

Again, it is not surprising that today people ask for empathy, where they used to require (justifying) reasons in the past, as if reason had turned out to be a sort of exotic and petty

⁷In this section I follow the arguments previously outlined in García Figueroa 2020, pp. 488 ff.

anachronism. Thus, with the backing of a simplistic version of ethical intuitionism, "empathy" serves for everything and is relentlessly *imposed* on any discourse: legislative, judicial, political, journalistic, educational, medical, sporting, and so on and so forth. Finally, empathy *must* put us *especially* in victims' shoes, even in their raptures of revenge against their victimizers; without further deliberation, as I pointed out above. After all, "there is no need to *think*, because the meaning of evil is presumed to be self-evident" (Bernstein 2006, p. 163). Two disturbing features thus come together in the recourse to empathy: its prescriptive character (empathy is owed) and its arbitrariness (it is owed to whoever *emotionally* deserves it).

Martha Nussbaum, an author little suspected of denigrating emotions in moral discourse, reminds us, however, that empathy is above all an exercise of the imagination (*I imagine myself in someone else's shoes*). Therefore, empathy entails a form of "double attention" that allows me to imagine myself in someone else's position, but without losing the conscience of myself (otherwise I would not be empathetic any more). Nothing less, but also nothing more. Hence, in her opinion, empathy is "limited, fallible and of neutral value" (Nussbaum 2008, pp. 371, 373). Few characters have been more empathetic (and at the same time more frightening) than Dr. Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, in Nussbaum's own example (2008, p. 374).

For all these reasons, Nussbaum (2008, pp. 345 ff.) pays more attention to another less fashionable feeling: compassion. Compassion for those who suffer is associated with three *cognitive* requirements: the seriousness of the suffering of the other, the undeserved quality of such suffering and the similar probability of experiencing such suffering. To these three judgments (*magnitude, deservedness and probability*) is added the integration of this reasoning in an *eudemonistic judgment* that considers the case as a relevant part of one's life plans. From this perspective, our society is increasingly pleased to be empathetic (because it is imaginative), despite being much less compassionate (because it is less reflective). Let us have a look at a couple of examples.

In relation to criminal law and politics, it is striking that citizens (who usually consider themselves potential victims) can hardly conceive of the possibility of being victimizers as well. Accordingly, in the populist discourse (no matter it is leftist or right wing), *empathy becomes selective*. It concentrates *exclusively* on the victim (the friend, in Schmittian terms), but avoids the victimizer (the enemy), in whose shoes no citizens can ever put themselves.

This is surely due to the generalization of the status of victim (Bernuz 2003, p. 333). The fact that everyone is allegedly a potential victim leads to a total lack of empathy for those who really need it most and, above all, this leads to a total lack of compassion for *certain* offenders against the rules. To sum up, empathy becomes selective, for it applies exclusively in some cases, but not in others, and the criteria for managing such an “exercise of imagination” becomes ideologically biased.

A second scenario that appeals to the need for more reflection and rationality in the face of this "politics of the affective" is provided by the ongoing worldwide coronavirus crisis (to which I referred at the very beginning of this paper). In fact, this pandemic has continually appealed to our compassion for those who may be its victims. The risk to the sick and elderly is very high if we do not cooperate (magnitude); the sick and elderly have done nothing wrong to be the most likely victims of the virus (deservedness); and any of us or our loved ones can easily be caught up in the tragedy of a death (probability). Under these circumstances, empathy does not look enough. The frivolity of some citizens who, shielded by their youth, irresponsibly did not pay attention to safety measures, seems to respond to a hasty judgment of probability which is not very edifying and which could be expressed as follows: "I am not going to die if I fall ill. So I don't care!". However, there is also, above all, a lack of reflection that does not meet the test of magnitude, nor, above all, that of deservedness; when it is precisely such *reflection* that helps us to understand compassionately that the fate of all these people at risk matters to us as part of our own existence in community (eudemonistic judgment). But how can we now ask young people for a more *thoughtful* compassion in such a serious and real matter when we have limited ourselves to asking for their empathy, an exercise of *mere imagination*?

Of course, a spurious use of empathy does not deprive it of all value, but such a possibility should at least put us on our guard and lead us to ask ourselves about its concept, its scope and its limitations. The analysis of the magnitude, deservedness and probability involved in compassion entails more elaborate judgments that appeal to our reflection, and it is such rationality that populist rhetoric seeks to undermine through a full sentimentalization of the political discourse.

3. By way of conclusion: the risk that feminism becomes a hostage of populism

We have shifted from a neurotic and disciplinary society that expresses itself by means of deontic, normative language to a *depressive performance society*, which expresses itself by means of modal possibilistic language (“Podemos”). The transition of populism from meta-classism (“Unidos”) to its current hyper-classist phase (“Unidas”), in which feminism has taken over the leadership of various social movements, has led to an overrepresentation of feminist discourse in current populist politics. However, this apparent advantage could well backfire in the long run. The cooperation of feminism with populism in the three turns indicated (the punitive, the identitarian and the affective) has entailed the sacrifice of important principles of feminism, a sacrifice that the feminist tradition itself could have tried to avoid, by preserving fully legitimate claims within our constitutional framework. In this sense, punitive feminism does not fit in with an ethics of care, nor with the emphasis on empathy or, as the case may be, compassion. As for the identitarian turn, the usual indulgence and approval shown by populists and feminists towards nationalist and ethnic movements (e.g., Catalan independence movements) may suggest that certain groups that are victims of nationalism (e.g., Spanish-speaking Catalans who normally are more in need of effective protection) are being used for the benefit of causes that are not worthy. And the affective turn can, finally, lead us to irrationalism, the same that has always supported the discrimination of women. All in all, the most worrying aspect of the link between feminism and populism today is the devaluation of the freedom of individuals.

It has often been said that feminism has many mothers, but only one father, John Stuart Mill. The fact that the father of modern liberalism was the first feminist was no accident. So when feminists neglect the value of the autonomy of individuals particularly in a populist context, they are not only jeopardizing very important achievements of our legal political culture. I firmly believe that they are betraying themselves.

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