

Southern European populisms as counter-hegemonic discourses? Podemos and M5S in comparative perspective

Introduction

The prolonged economic turmoil affecting Europe over the last decade has unsettled a number of certainties among its citizenry by casting a shadow over many long taken-for-granted assumptions on the functioning of the economy and, more at large, of society. The question cannot be reduced to a generic dissatisfaction with economic performances and a resentment against the incumbents for their mismanagement or incompetence. If that were the case, the theory of economic voting, which suggests an electoral switch towards opposition forces when the economy goes bad (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2007) would have found a strong empirical support. The reality has been more complex, proving the limitations of such an approach (Kriesi, 2014; Bedock and Vasilopoulos, 2015), while providing evidence of a much more profound social malaise, whose appearance is linked, but cannot be conflated to the worsening of many key economic indicators and the relative impact on people's living standards.

A much broader and all-encompassing sense of crisis has permeated Europe, one which puts a strain on its liberal democracies and severely questions the consensus that these enshrine. The convergence between centre-left and centre-right forces on socio-economic matters, with special emphasis on the supposed inevitability of austerity policies despite their apparent failures, has raised the question of the 'strange non-death of neo-liberalism' (Crouch 2011), which has remained unchallenged, if not reinforced by traditional political actors in the wake of the financial crisis (Blyth 2013; Schmidt and Thatcher 2013). Talk of post-politics and post-democracy has thus intensified in order to make sense of the increasing insulation of the political establishment from social demands, and the general irresponsiveness of its institutions both at national and continental level to the growing discontent, which has resulted in a rising disaffection towards mainstream political actors (Crouch, 2004; Mouffe, 2005).

As a reaction to the impasse, a number of new political agents have surged and embarrassed the traditional working of various national political systems. Their emergence is favoured precisely by the decay of mainstream politics, which leaves the door open for a disarticulation and re-articulation of social forces towards the establishment of a new equilibrium. In this context, populism has become an easy label to pin on any force questioning the *status quo* and advancing a critique of the technocratic consensus centring on market policies and European Union's sway. In common parlance, populism has been employed as a disparaging remark towards political opponents, much to the detriment of a better comprehension of what is really at stake.

Yet, speaking of populism is not a useless exercise provided that we conceive it as a meta-theoretical device and acknowledge the existence of variants. Scholarly debates can be of help here, as they are growingly converging towards a minimal, 'thin' definition of the term that separates a certain political modality from the specific contents through which it can manifest itself (Stanley, 2008: 99-100, 107). This structural attempt to define populism isolates a number of abstract characteristics regarding the form of politics, from the various ideological substances that characterise its multifarious instantiations. In other words, populism can have different ideational guises, with their

common element lying in the dichotomising appeal to the people in opposition to an enemy, typically embodied by the elites.

Among the 'thin' theories of populism, the one propounded by Ernesto Laclau stands out. His contribution has exerted a profound influence on the analysis of populist phenomena thanks to its rigorous and coherent formalism and the consequent 'employability' to make sense of the most disparate cases. In other words, Laclau treats populism as a political logic constantly at play in the making and reshaping of political identities (Laclau, 2005). However, another factor makes Laclau's theorisation particularly appealing. The status of populism in his theoretical edifice is not simply analytical, as it also serves a strategic purpose. For Laclau, 'constructing a people' is the main task of contemporary radical politics, as provocatively put by the title of one of his writings (Laclau, 2006): in other words, an emancipatory course that transcends class reductionism and attempts to coalesce heterogeneous demands with the purpose of installing a new order, while ultimately rejecting the possibility of a fully reconciled society (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 177). It is not by chance that Laclau has tied his discussion of populism to the question of hegemony, another category that characterised the originality of his enterprise. Questions remain however as to how exactly populism should and can be played out in practice - the density and abstraction of Laclau's writings make the translation of theory into practice not exactly immediate - , and whether the strict correlation that Laclau draws between populism and hegemony is in effect warranted.

Coming back to the European context and in the attempt to distinguish among different populist variants, it is possible to claim that two broad types of populism have emerged. On one side, Western and Central Europe (France, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Austria, Germany and Hungary) have witnessed a surge of reactionary populist actors that display xenophobic traits; on the other, populist actors firmly located to the left (Spain and Greece) or uneasy to pin down across the classical political spectrum (Italy) have made their appearance in Southern Europe. Since our interest is, along with Laclau, directed at emancipatory rather than reactionary populism, it is with respect to the experiences of Podemos in Spain and the 5 Stars Movement in Italy (M5S from its Italian acronym) that we intend to deal with here.

Drawing on Laclau, this paper firstly intends to shed comparative light on how and to what extent Podemos and M5S have embodied the populist logic. What different features and perceptions of the crisis have favoured their emergence? What has been the role of the leader and of the affective dimension? Which demands have they articulated and which one has enjoyed privilege over the others? What has this meant in terms of normative orientation? As a second objective, the paper sets out to critically inquire the different prospective capacities of the two political subjects towards the unhinging of the current socio-economic order. It will be argued that, despite the M5S is electorally stronger and better placed to gain political power, Podemos is instead the only one of the two to display a counter-hegemonic potential. This in turn requires a normative critique and a critical discussion of the proximity between the notions of populism and hegemony in Laclau. Both exercises will be conducted by reference to some Gramscian insights.

Finally, why Podemos and M5S? Three reasons militate towards this choice: firstly, in the Southern European area they have in common the fact of still being opposition parties, unlike Syriza in Greece that has become a governing force and, following the decision to accept a new memorandum in July 2015, abandoned much of its early populist edge (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014; Katsambekis 2016; Aslanidis and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2016). Secondly, while Podemos is to be considered normatively oriented towards the left, it has, much like the M5S, initially attempted to get rid of the left-right dichotomy in order to define its political personality. Thirdly, Podemos and M5S do not emerge from previously existing political formations, but do represent genuinely new forces whose creation is not to be traced back to the joining of established political traditions. Fourthly, Podemos represents a reflexive application of populism (Kioupkiolis, 2016: 110), as it has admittedly drawn inspiration from Laclau (see Iglesias, 2015; Errejón, 2014). It is precisely the reflexive character of Podemos' populism - in contrast to another more 'spontaneous' type of populism, that of M5S - which permits to revise some of the coordinates of Laclau's thought: in the light of incoming information about how the very practice plays out on the ground and the object of study is altered in unanticipated ways, we are in a position to reform some aspects of his political theory (Giddens, 1991: 36-45).

The paper firstly introduces the Laclauian notions of populism, hegemony and dislocation. Secondly, it employs these theoretical tools in order to make sense in comparative fashion of the experiences of Podemos and M5S. Finally, it examines to what extent these two forces can be considered counter-hegemonic.

Laclau's theory of populism

Laclau's latest conception of populism¹ (Laclau, 2005; Laclau, 2005b) represents the apex of the distinctive theoretical framework he developed - known as Essex school of discourse theory - in which a novel fusion of Marxist, post-structuralist, post-analytical and psychoanalytical theory insights is carried out (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000: 1). Laclau defines populism as a mode of construction of the political itself, rather than as a category describing 'positive' characteristics and orientations (Laclau, 2005: 117). He thus shuns any type of definition that attributes ideological, sociological or even psychological traits to populism and its followers. Rather, a minimalist description is put forward, one which treats populism as a way through which a political practice acquires a particular meaning. In this way, populist practices can display ideological and social connotations entirely at odds with each other. It is not enough to speak of populism to infer its emancipatory or reactionary character.

¹ Laclau already dealt with populism in his early *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* in which he advanced a version of the notion informed by Althusserian Marxism (Laclau, 1977). Although not entirely at odds with the latter, his latest conception clearly displays the signs of Laclau's engagement with some strands of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. It is to this version that the paper will refer. The same should be said of the concept of hegemony. Howarth individuates three model of hegemony in Laclau's corpus (Howarth, 2004: 268). It is to the one developed from *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (Laclau, 1990) onwards that we shall be concerned here.

Populism thus reveals the form of a political practice. From this perspective, populism consists in the expansion of what Laclau calls the equivalential logic at the expense of the differential one (Laclau, 2005: 78). Borrowing from the linguistic repertoire of Ferdinand de Saussure, Laclau sees their interplay as delineating the modes of construction of political signification (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 130). Let us briefly recapitulate what the logics of equivalence and difference amount to. The latter is equated to the paradigmatic pole of language, whereby 'two or more elements can be substituted for each other with reference to a common negation or threat' (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 144), making for the construction of antagonistic relations in an 'us-them' fashion, with the consequent simplification of the signifying space (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 130). Oppositely, the logic of difference expands the syntagmatic pole of language, thereby highlighting the contiguity between the elements and resulting in the tendency to maintain them distinct and autonomous (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 144). The logic of difference is then responsible for a complexification of the political space (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 130). It should be kept in mind, however, that each political practice is always permeated by both dimensions and that the two logics are never to be found uncontaminated (Laclau, 2005b: 46; Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 144)

To put it in layman's term, populism is about the attempt to articulate a number of elements - which Laclau identifies in those social demands that are not satisfied by the existing institutional channels (Laclau, 2005: 73) - on the basis of their shared opposition to an enemy. Demands *per se* say nothing of their ideological orientation, as that is dependent on 'the way in which they will be differentially or equivalentially articulated' (Laclau, 2005b: 40). Laclau treats demands as floating signifiers, since their meaning cannot be *a priori* and once and for all fixated, but receive the pressure of rival projects that attempt to hegemonise them (Laclau, 2005: 131). However, as they are equivalentially articulated, demands become moments of a discourse, such that their proximity becomes an analogy, thereby producing the people as a universal political subject (Laclau, 2005: 109). In this way, an equivalence is drawn between them, whereby their common denominator does not lie in positive features, but rather in their common opposition to the same adversary. In stark contrast to populism, 'an institutionalist discourse is one that attempts to make the limits of the discursive formation coincide with the limits of the community' (Laclau 2005: 81). In other words, populism and institutionalism form two ideal poles in the middle of which the field of politics takes place: while the latter provides a dichotomous scheme whereby heterogeneous aspirations are drawn together with the aim of constructing an universal subject that claims for itself the role of the legitimate *demos* against the usurpation of the elites, institutionalism tries to neutralise existing demands in such a way so as to maintain the *status quo* and avoid the emergence of antagonism (Laclau, 2005b: 45).

The elements assembled by a populist practice form what Laclau calls a chain of equivalences. Among such elements however, one of them is endowed with a particular force which makes the enchainment possible. This is the empty signifier: empty precisely because it manages to perform the operation of structuring the popular camp by detaching itself from its original signified, while taking onboard a vast array of different demands. The empty signifier thus comes to allude to the whole camp; it is an evocative singularity which brings homogeneity to an essentially heterogeneous formation (Laclau 2005: 100). According to Laclau, we have an extreme but plausible situation when

such a function is played by the name of the leader (Laclau, 2005b: 40). The empty signifier - and in particular when this is occupied by the (name of the) leader - eases the identification with the popular camp, by presenting itself as an enigma that harbours reconciliation and promises meaning, thereby becoming the site on which a plurality of aspirations struggle to inscribe themselves (Glynos, 2000: 99; Panizza 2005: 19).

Further to this, since any political discourse is nothing but a contingent assemblage of elements that cannot be conceptually apprehended, the attribution of a name - both to the 'people' and its adversary - is performative. Put otherwise, naming constitutes the unity of the emerging subject and of its opponent: precisely because the unity of the people is not grounded in an undisputable infrastructure, but is the product of a discursive operation, the process of naming is constitutive, providing a moment of unity to the popular subject, but signalling at the same time the precariousness of the dichotomic frontier (Laclau, 2005: 118). It is here where the significance of the notion of hegemony comes into play. Laclau defends a post-foundational stance, which rejects the existence of an ultimate ground and of an universal subject that fixes meaning, while at the same time welcoming the necessity of partial and relative fixations (Laclau, 1990: 90-91). In other words, universalism is not entirely swept away as 'people need *an* order' (Laclau, 1996: 44), but the attention is addressed to its contingent foundations and constitutive processes (Laclau, 1994: 2). Since what is at stake in the creation of a people out of heterogeneous elements that bear no relation of necessity with each other is the 'naming [of] something which is essentially unnameable', Laclau has equated this operation to the trope of catachresis (Laclau, 2005: 71). In rhetoric, the catachresis is the attribution of a figurative term when a literal one is lacking. A hegemonic relation thus consists in the 'operation of taking up, by a particularity, of an incommensurable universal signification' (Laclau, 2005: 70). In a nutshell then, hegemony conveys the capacity of a particular content to become the signifier of an absent communitarian fullness (Laclau, 1996: 43).

For this to be possible, Laclau introduces a further element: affect. Affect is considered here as non-dissociable from the realm of signification. In particular, the theme of affect enters the scene through the recognition that the paradigmatic relation which makes the establishment of an analogy between different demands possible is governed by the unconscious (Laclau 2005: 111). Predicated on the constitutive lack of the subject, this libidinal bond explains, in psychoanalytical terms, how a particular political object is sublimated and raised to the Thing (Laclau, 2005: 119-120), i.e. it becomes, so to speak, the target of a radical affective investment of a subject in search of partial objects that generate identification.

Having said this, it is paramount to signal another condition for the onset of populism. As put by Laclau: 'the need to constitute a 'people'... arises only when that fullness is not achieved, and partial objects (aims, figures, symbols) are so cathected that they become the name of its absence' (Laclau, 2005: 116-117). Laclau makes sense of this phase through the category of dislocation. Dislocatory experiences are those traumatic events that indicate the limit of every objectivity and make it possible to reconfigure the social space through a reactivation of antagonisms. Dislocation, which appears through the very manifestation of demands that the institutions are incapable of managing,

is thus conceptualised by Laclau as possibility and as freedom, insofar as new avenues become feasible and the absence of a final determination comes powerfully to the fore (Laclau, 1990: 42-43).

The populism of Podemos and M5S

Both Podemos and M5S have been classified as populist enterprises. The few studies focused on highlighting the similarities and differences between the two have largely addressed their attention to the historical origins, normative orientation, communication strategy, organisational structure and electoral base (see de Prat, 2015; Hartleb, 2015; Semenzin, 2015). While these comparisons and contrasts are useful, we are interested in going beyond the descriptive, by trying to critically explain the emergence and evolution of the two subjects, as well as advance some tentative remarks on their perspectives regarding their quest for socio-political change. Put alternatively, we attempt to express a reflective judgement by trying to apply the populist logic furnished by Laclau to these two political processes, while maintaining an openness that leads us to contest some of its underlying theoretical aspects (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 184).

To start with, it is paramount to bear in mind the particular contexts of crisis from which the two experiences emerge. Despite many commonalities, the extents and contours of the dislocation are slightly different. The economic crisis has hit both countries quite harshly from 2008 onwards, but it is Spain to have paid the highest toll. In fact, Spain has not only witnessed a greater deterioration of many economic parameters than Italy - with the unemployment figures literally skyrocketing from 2008 to 2013 as opposed to a robust but more contained rise in Italy (Eurostat-ESSPROS database, 2017) -, but has also displayed more violent and scenic manifestations (with the infamous case of the evictions, which in Italy have instead been infrequent). Moreover, the degree of the austerity policies implemented in Spain has been more severe (Pavolini et al, 2015).

Along with the economic crisis, the deterioration of trust towards public institutions in both countries has been one of the distinctive hallmarks of the crisis. Corruption scandals, bribes and clientelism have been an ever-present feature making it to the headlines on a daily basis. In parallel, the privileges enjoyed by the political class (such as high salaries, MPs' immunity, life annuities, *lottizzazione*) have become a matter of fierce contestation amid the deterioration of the living standards for the bulk of the population. In Italy, the incapacity of traditional actors to enact a number of reforms that the public opinion saw as vital (new electoral law, abolition of provinces, cut of politics' costs) as well as the scandals involving two parties that had been at the forefront of the battle against corruption (Italia dei Valori and Lega Nord) further reinforced the feeling of frustration within the electorate towards the political class (Mosca, 2014: 45). We should not forget that the so called 'moral question' has never lost political salience in Italy since the *Tangentopoli* era in the early 1990s, gradually transforming itself into a sort of mythical horizon capable of reordering political loyalties.² In Spain, scandals involving the royal family and the territorial question - with the Catalan

² In this regard, it is worth noting that the moral question has been called upon most forcefully by actors as diverse as the then-Secretary General of the Italian Communist Party Enrico Berlinguer in the 1970s and

sovereignty process gaining traction from 2012 onwards - have been two crucial questions further defining the political traits of the crisis. Corruption and territorial claims in Spain are not new issues, but their scale has made them gain much centrality in recent years.

As Laclau suggests, dislocatory experiences translate into the flourishing of demands that the institutions are incapable of meeting. Crises are never objective though: they are nourished by material factors, but their very emergence and unfolding depend on how the materiality interplays with the subjective. In other words, they are always already mediated by representation, which functions as the primary terrain of emergence of the *volonté générale* (Laclau, 2001: 6). As for the specificities, we can say in principle that the economic aspect has been stronger in Spain than in Italy, and that the political one has had more prevalence than the economic in Italy. But the latter is already the product of an overdetermination: it is not simply that the economic crisis was not as harsh as in Spain - although, that could have had a weight -, but also the result of a number of factors that impeded to politicise the economic crisis as much as it was possible to do with the political scandals. The social protests that emerged in Spain and Italy have made this particularly visible.

The 15-M movement that developed in Spain in 2011 indicted the 'regime of the 78' as the main responsible of the crisis. What this expression conveyed was not just the cartel-like political arrangements between the Socialist and the Popular Party (PSOE and PP), but 'a set of political, economic and cultural consensuses that came into existence with the democratic transition in Spain and that for three decades permitted the economic and political elites to manage relatively successfully the labour, territorial and cultural conflicts' (Rendueles and Sola, 2015: 32). Through slogans such as '*no nos representan*' (they do not represent us) and '*no es una crisis, es el sistema*' (it is not a crisis, it is the system), the movement questioned the *status quo* as a whole through a political jargon that cut across the left-right divide and in so doing managed to reorder the system of political loyalties (Errejón, 2011: 132). Crucially, despite its internal heterogeneity, it was the same actor that channelled both the economic and political frustration, ushering the success of other subsequent like-minded experiments (such as the *mareas* movements against the cuts in education and health care, the *Plataforma de Afectados por las Hipotecas* against evictions and the *Marchas de la Dignidad* in defence of public pensions), that connected the indignation towards moral decadence and collusion in the political realm with a questioning of the bitter economic medicines and realities (austerity policies, discontent among the youth towards precarious employments and unemployment, EU's control over much of the process of economic policy-making). One of the summoning mottos of the 15-M '*No somos mercancía en manos de políticos y banqueros*' (We are not merchandise in the hands of politicians and bankers) is a vivid proof of the link drawn between political and economic crisis. In this sense, corruption stopped being seen as a phenomenon involving some 'bad apples'; rather, corruption was growingly understood as the result of an economic model based on real estate speculation (Franzé, 2015: 3)

1980s, and the two journalists of the historically liberal newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Gian Antonio Stella and Sergio Rizzo, authors of the popular book 'La Casta' (The Caste) (2007).

The Italian case has been different. The attempt to give birth to an Italian 15-M following the transnational day of action called by the Spanish Indignados failed amid the violent clashes between a group of demonstrators and the police that took place on the 15 October 2011 in Rome. A series of misunderstandings, tensions and internal struggles in the period leading up to the demonstration can account for this fiasco (Della Porta and Zamponi, 2013). More in general, it can be argued that the structure of civil society and contentious politics display different traits in the two countries. While Italy may have a stronger civil society, the Spanish one seems to be more autonomous and less tied to trade unions and parties (Riley and Fernandez, 2014: 453-459). In an article inquiring into the protest patterns of the precarious generation in Italy and Spain, Andretta and Della Porta come to the following conclusion:

It seems that the more structured, and party-dominated, civil society in Italy is being preventing the precarious generation to find the space to build a new collective identity and new forms of organizations. There, young people need to adapt to the pre-existing “bins” of the old collective identity in which they identify less and less (Andretta and Della Porta, 2015: 61).

In Italy, the critique of the economic system has thus been somewhat ruined by the predominance of pre-existing leftist actors, both of moderate and more radical inclination, facing problems of credibility beyond a steadily declining circle. This explains why much of the discontent in Italy has been channelled somewhat atypically by the precursor of M5S: the very figure of Beppe Grillo, along with his blog and the meet-ups. The slant of his political activity has been different from that of the 15-M. In particular, the critique levelled during the two V-days (V standing for *Vaffanculo*, f**k off in Italian) he organised in 2007-2008 was exclusively aimed at political questions: the presence of convicted people in Parliament, the electoral law impeding voters to express personal preferences, the lack of limit to parliamentary terms for politicians, the need of State permission for press publications and the public subsidies for newspaper and periodicals (Turner, 2013: 181). Reference to the dire straits of the economy was notably absent.

Let us now inquiry into the different types of populism staged by Podemos and M5S. In the first place, a clarification is needed. While M5S was the direct political translation of the opinion movement generated by Beppe Grillo himself, which in turn fed itself of a pre-existing popular feeling, Podemos was not the organic transformation of the *Indignados* into a political party, even though a number of those who took part to the social protests then joined the party led by Pablo Iglesias (Martín, 2015: 108-109). Rather, as clarified by the then number 2 of Podemos Íñigo Errejón: 'the cultural climate and modification of the common sense inspired by 15-M have been fundamental to imagine a counter-hegemonic intervention' (Errejón, 2015: 233).³ Nevertheless, both forces have put forward a dichotomising narrative that pits the people against the elites. Behind the label 'caste' as a way to define the enemy that both employed however, there is a different understanding of the term. In line with the different politicisations of the crisis, while the caste alludes in Italy only to the political class made up by the traditional political parties, in Spain the

³ In this sense, it is to be noted, although only in passing, that some tensions emerged within the 15-M movement before the 'hegemonic hypothesis' of Podemos. Many leftist sectors that composed the Indignados did not see the party option and the institutional road favourably (Cano Cuenca, 2015: 58-59).

term took up a further twist, thereby also encompassing the economic elites, with special reference to the role of bankers and the intertwinement between high politics and high economics, epitomised by the revolving door phenomenon.

Similar rhetorical exercises have been employed by the two parties to equate their political adversaries: while Podemos has used the formula '*PPSOE*' (contraction of PP and PSOE to indicate their similarity), M5S has employed the slogan '*PD meno elle*' (PD minus L, to highlight the proximity between the Democratic Party - PD - and the now extinct centre-right party The People of Freedom - PDL -). As for the naming of the popular subject, the M5S has tended to refer to it as *gente* (people, intended in the uncountable form, not as a national-cultural subgroup), *cittadini* (citizens) or *onesti* (the honest ones). Equally, Podemos has made reference to *gente* (same meaning as in Italian) and *ciudadanía* (citizenry, citizens being the name of another political party). *Popolo* and *pueblo* (people in the countable form) instead have used less frequent, in the case of Podemos admittedly because of the sinister resonances that this signifier may have generated (Cano Cuenca, 2015: 67), and possibly for the same reason in case of M5S.

However, the political frontier erected with respect to the rest of the political system has been somewhat blunted over time in the case of Podemos. As well analysed by Franzé, a change occurred from January 2015 onwards: while Podemos continued to stage an us vs them representation, the latter has been exclusively embodied by the political conduct of the caste, and not any more by the institutional structure of the 'regime of the 78'. The confirmation of this is the dropping of the demand for a constituent process, which was advanced in the early months of Podemos, and the recognition that the problem does not lie so much in the institutions *per se*, but rather in their wrong employment. The appeal to the need to construct a 'modern country', one of the central signifiers of the democratic transition, is possibly the most revealing aspect of the legitimacy granted by Podemos to the current Spanish political order (Franzé, 2015: 13-15).

Other two related trends account for this. On one side, Podemos has made alliances at a local level with PSOE in order to dislodge PP from power. Moreover, it has opened a debate on whether forming a coalition with PSOE or not at a national level, although this possibility did not materialise in the end. The reason for doing so is that, despite attempting to reject the classification as a radical left force, Podemos has been normatively anchored to the left, an element well reflected in the ideological provenience of its voters (Teruel et al., 2016: 16-17). The widespread urgency to defeat PP among these voters has induced Podemos to alter its initial uncompromising stance towards the Socialists and their historical role, with a reappraisal of social democracy ('voting socialist today is voting Podemos' being the utmost expression of this trend).⁴ A similar line of reasoning may be

⁴ The matter has been one of the main controversies between the two main figures of the party towards the last Congress in February 2017. Errejón defended the necessity to maintain a more cautious approach, recognising the pervasiveness of the Socialist political culture among the popular sectors: for him, attracting those voters entails the necessity to respect their biographies through the adoption of a tactical approach. On the contrary, Iglesias manifested the necessity of reaffirming the diversity of Podemos with respect to the Socialists in the name of a rupturist position. While not putting under discussion the collaboration at a local

applied to difficulties inherent to multi-level electoral competition in a country characterised by the presence of strong centrifugal forces. Podemos has backtracked from the original attempt to challenge regional parties, forging local alliances towards all kinds of election with the consequent concessions towards devolution and identitarian demands. However, even though this move has been electorally beneficial, in the long-run this may 'become a source of party contradictions, conflicts, and even electoral heterogeneity' (Teruel et al., 2016: 2).

On the other side, Podemos has become progressively closer to Izquierda Unida (United Left), to the point of forming a political coalition towards the last general elections in June 2016. Although Izquierda Unida was not precisely the enemy that Podemos took issues with, it is still possible to claim that it was part of the 'constitutive outside' on which the very creation of Podemos was predicated. More in general, the leader of Podemos Pablo Iglesias has recently retrieved much of the leftist symbolic heritage that Podemos had previously repudiated. While presented as a way to defend the alterity of his party with the rest of the system and avoid institutional cooptation, the capacity of such a move to redraw the existing political allegiances is doubtful. It should be remembered that populism is first and foremost about creating a new bloc out of heterogeneous elements. It is not only the us/them differentiation to define it, but importantly also its articulatory potential.

Oppositely, M5S has been recalcitrant to strike any political deal with other political forces, both at local and national level. Its electoral base is much more ideologically variegated than that of Podemos. As analysed by Biorcio and Natale, M5S has four groups of supporters. The 'militants', with a variable past voting history and very loyal to Grillo, account for 25% of the total; the 'leftists', who come from a history of voting left-wing parties and are less enthusiastic about Grillo, amount to 20%; the 'rationals', the 30% of the total, lend a more utilitarian type of support to the movement; and finally 'the least worse', who have a more conservative leaning, are around the 25% of the supporters (Biorcio and Natale, 2013). Because of such an ideological indeterminacy, M5S is not compelled to avoid the victory of another political actor that is perceived as a greater threat than the other: all other actors are thus treated as equally harmful for the interests of the country from its perspective. Since populism is not a taxonomical category in Laclau, but rather one of the two extremes of a *continuum*, it is fair to say that M5S has displayed a more populist politics, as it has maintained a much neater dividing line between the people and its enemy, while managing to articulate a huger array of political identities.

A closer look at the type of demands that the two movements have articulated can shed further light on their diversity. Let us start with M5S. The five stars enshrined in the symbol and the name indicate five of its key issues: water, connectivity, development, energy and environment. In actual fact, M5S has tapped a much larger number of themes, often adopting what seemed to be the most widespread position among the electorate on each of them. Among these, resentment against politicians' privileges, request for more investment in renewable resources as well as in public

level, the victory of the latter at the Congress may imply a more vigorous attitude towards the Socialists (see the congressional party documents: Errejón et al., 2017; Iglesias et al., 2017).

education and health care, and opposition to large public works stand out. On issues such as the immigration and the economy, the position of M5S has been rather ambivalent. On the former, Grillo had often made polemic remarks, not without xenophobic accents. However, the question is far from central and has proven to be deeply divisive internally, with the grassroots of the party and several MPs often demonstrating to hold a different view (Corriere della Sera, 2014). As for the economy, M5S has shown 'a very eclectic radicalism, which is dominated by ideas that have been the domain of the far left... as well as introducing ideas that are either extraneous or in opposition to the far left' (Tuner, 2013: 201). More in general, the policy proposals on a variety of issues have been rather vague and lacking an overall political coherence. Against the latter charge, M5S has proclaimed to be post-ideological and beyond left and right, in the name of an ill-defined technique that discriminates unequivocally good from bad decisions (see Borriello and Mazzolini, forthcoming). While such a benign stance on technique (with emphasis on digital technology) is itself ideational as it embodies a position on the matter that is all but neutral, the various attempts to define the political collocation of M5S are self-defeating. The reality is that its policy proposals point in different directions and that its populism is, from a normative point of view, intrinsically ambiguous.

On the contrary, Podemos has been a clear expression of a normatively left-wing type of populism. After all, its early disavowal of leftist liturgies and symbolism has not meant a distancing from the historical equality/hierarchy divide (Franzé, 2015: 12). The chain of equivalence engendered by Podemos has been chiefly made up of demands emerging from the crisis, such as 'the right to employment, housing, social protection, health, education, the cancellation of unjust debt, the end of austerity policies, the restoration of popular sovereignty' (Kioupiolis, 2016: 103), as well more political demands aimed at fighting corruption and giving more power to its autonomous communities. The policy solutions that have been furnished are linked to the leftist repertoire. However, typical struggles of the left that lacked a majoritarian consensus, such as those pertaining to the monarchy/republic, confessionism/laicism and proletariat/bourgeoisie cleavages, have been largely neglected (Franzé, 2015: 10). In a sense, it could be argued that the discourse of M5S is a static snapshot of the Italian common sense insofar as it reproduces its inherent ambiguities, while Podemos has drawn from a variety of its elements, in order to tie them to an overall left-wing proposal.

Of all the elements articulated, which one is it that has occupied the nodal point in the two cases? As highlighted above, Laclau attributes particular emphasis to the role of the empty signifier, which in many cases is represented by the very leader. Undoubtedly, the function of the leader has been of primary importance in both instances. Several authors have claimed that Podemos and M5S would not have been such without Iglesias and Grillo. Their capacity to unhinge the political inertias in both countries has been a decisive factor. A detailed phenomenological account of their leaderships cannot be pursued here. Their figures have been key in injecting passion into their political discourse, which can account for the capacity to reconfigure political loyalties and mobilise sectors that were showing themselves increasingly apathetic towards politics. Grillo, a former comedian, employs a satirical style that, by mocking any type of opponent in an irreverent way, has made it possible for contents that are traditionally unutterable to get to the political arena and connect with

a widespread feeling of frustration (Biorcio and Natale, 2013: 13-14; Turner, 2013: 193). Equally, Iglesias, whose public image was constructed through his participation to, and direction of, political talk-shows prior to the emergence of Podemos, is known for his direct, empathic and simple messages (Rendueles and Sola, 2015: 258), which avoided him to turn into one of those contracted and radical figures that media tend to stereotype (Cano Cuenca, 2015: 69).

However, some strong differences exist between the two types of leadership. While Grillo has systematically shunned debate with political adversaries, thereby limiting his interventions to unilateral addresses, Iglesias' communication form has been intrinsically dialogical. This attitude is well reflected in the internal working of the two political forces. M5S can be described as a top-down experience, where the participation of all members has been subordinated to their blind obedience to the leadership (chiefly composed by Grillo and, until his death, Gianroberto Casaleggio, the internet guru who helped the former to set up the movement, and now replaced by his son). Internal dissent has been trumped through the expulsion of those who dared to polemicise with the upper echelons of M5S. The political directives are issued by the top leadership without any internal programmatic discussion. Participatory digital devices are set in motion to consult the affiliates only through *ad hoc* consultations that leave little room for surprises. This in spite of the fact that Grillo has never ran as a candidate, and at times has even reduced his public visibility. Grillo, despite the famous slogan *uno vale uno* (one is worth one), is thus very far from embodying the role of a *primus inter pares* that Laclau envisaged for populist leaders (Laclau, 2005: 59). The case of Podemos is different. A lively debate has existed within Podemos since its inception and has intensified in the wake of the last Congress. A clear challenge to the arguments defended by Iglesias was mounted by the former number 2 of the party, Íñigo Errejón, without this implying a threat of expulsion for him and his followers. No doubt the role played by Iglesias and the top leadership has eroded much of the early horizontal rhetoric and the importance of the grassroots (represented by *los círculos* - the circles), but this has not thwarted internal discussion.⁵ Importantly, Podemos' democratic centralism still gives the possibility to the affiliates to renew their leadership. As a whole then, it can be claimed that the type of populism embodied by Podemos has been more deliberative and democratic in comparison to that of M5S.

Nevertheless, it is not just a question of leaders. No matters how essential a leader may be in the formation and performance of a political project, it is the capacity to intercept and embody the most central demands to make a difference. This differentiation belies a certain ambiguity in Laclau, for whom the empty signifier could be represented by a demand or a leader. However, if the empty signifier is embodied by the leader alive and kicking, this cannot be prior to the structuring of the popular camp; oppositely, if the empty signifier is a prominent demand in society that acquires a mythical and salvific value, this does not pertain necessarily to a specific political agent, as different

⁵ Kioupkiolis has rightly emphasised the plebiscitarian drift of Podemos, which became especially evident in the pre-drafted lists of candidates and programmes towards both internal congresses, the minimal involvement of the rank and file, and the manipulative use of digital technologies for decision-making (Kioupkiolis, 2015: 111-112). While sharing this preoccupation, we would not go as far as equating these phenomena with the personalist leadership of Hugo Chávez as the author does.

projects 'can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling function' (Laclau, 1996: 44). We think that the two forms are not mutually exclusive and, even more crucially, that more than one singularity can play an articulating function. In other words, the existence of a strong leader does not impede a specific battle to empty itself of its own specific contents and allude to a variety of struggles; and, equally, this does not impede that that it will be more demands to occupy that centrality in the articulatory process.

In the case of Podemos, we propose that two signifiers have played that role: democracy and *patria* (fatherland). Since the emergence of the *Indignados*, democracy has possibly been the most visible signifier, with reference to the growing detachment of political elites from the citizenry, as well as to the rigging of the democratic process at the hands of powerful interests that subvert popular will. Talk of democracy permits to foreground the related signifier *demos*, which in the case of Podemos conjures up the performative construction of a new subject with hegemonic vocation: the people (Franzé, 2015: 11). As for *patria*, Podemos interestingly incorporated a signifier that has been traditionally alien to the left. This appropriation has been conducted by way of a resignification of the term. In fact, the discourse of Podemos deploys it not in chauvinist or nationalist terms, but rather by claiming that love for the fatherland can only be genuine if the welfare of its people is guaranteed through the defence of state hospitals and schools against austerity cuts, which is at odds with the practices of the right and its members that privatize public spaces, dodge taxes and treasure their fortunes in tax havens (Franzé, 2015: 11). In the case of M5S instead, the 'moral question', that is transparency of the *res publica* intended as fight against corruption and public officials' accountability have been at the forefront of its discourse. It is fair to argue that the empty signifier of M5S is relatively emptier vis-à-vis those of Podemos in the sense that its moral as opposed to political character had made it possible to accommodate a greater number of demands and political identities. This has facilitated a greater expansion of the appeal of M5S and this can partially explain its relatively higher electoral performance. But should we take its slightly more populist edge and its capacity to attract a vaster array of voters as more conducive to hegemony?

Populism is not hegemony: problematising Laclau

By putting together a number of demands and signifiers traditionally pertaining to opposite political discourses, the operation of M5S is reminiscent of Juan Domingo Perón's attempt to appeal to very diverse and heterogeneous groups, as described by Laclau (2005: 214-221). This has made for a hypertrophic development of the equivalential chain that finds its origin in the utter emptiness of its anchorage point. As put by Laclau:

the tendentially empty signifier becomes entirely empty, in which case the links in the equivalential chain do not need to cohere with each other at all: the most contradictory contents can be assembled, as long as the subordination of them all to the empty signifier remains. To go back to Freud: this would be the extreme situation in which love for the father is the only link between the brothers (Laclau, 2005: 217)

While the father in the example of Laclau is represented by Perón, here we deem that it is not so much Grillo, who is not particularly liked by various segments of his voters (Turner, 2013: 202), to play that role. Rather, the father is the moral question itself. The problem, however, lies in the overstretching of the chain that, according to Laclau, is likely to make the unity of the people very weak (Laclau, 2005: 217). In this sense, we share the scepticism of Corbetta and Vignati, who claim that, if the M5S were to take power, any decision taken would elicit the discontent of a chunk of its supporters, making the movement much more fragile than what it currently appears to be (2013: 58-59).

By the same token, can a movement like M5S that lacks a unifying ideology nurture any counter-hegemonic pretension? We are convinced that M5S cannot be considered as a counter-hegemonic force in Italy, while Podemos, though not without difficulties and contradictions, does play a counter-hegemonic role in Spain. In order to substantiate these claims, we advance a normative critique of the political discourse of M5S and a theoretical discussion on the notion of populism and hegemony in Laclau, with an application to the two contexts.

As for the normative critique, Briziarelli and Martínez Guillem argue, in the wake of Gramsci's concept of Americanismo, that the discourse of M5S is to be conceptualised as a sort of neo-Americanismo. Accordingly, by placing emphasis on the rising importance of information and communication technology and digital modernisation, while upholding values such as radical individualism, libertarianism and anti-state ideology, M5S' discourse is resonant with the so-called Californian ideology (2016: 90-92). In a further move, they claim that

neo-Americanismo could be interpreted through the frame of a passive revolution because it encompasses the tendency of capitalist countries to sufficiently involve the forces of production in political economic re-structurations without necessarily improving their conditions or integrating them in the political process (2016: 94).

The adherence to a liberal utopia that leaves intact the market mechanisms that lie at the heart of the malfunction of the neoliberal project shows the complicity of M5S with many of the coordinates of the current order and evidences their limitations insofar as their counter-hegemonic potential is concerned. Even though M5S has grown increasingly critical of banks' and corporations' behaviour, the failure to articulate such elements in a coherent systemic framework of analysis and critique throws doubts on its capacity to replace the current order with a new one.

Our pessimism towards the counter-hegemonic and emancipatory potential of M5S is further reinforced by looking at some of its internal features. In assessing the historical weakness of Italian political parties, Gramsci had observed a disequilibrium in favour of agitation and propaganda, to the detriment of the development of theoretical activity, which in turn entailed the impossibility of engendering proper leaders (Gramsci, 1971: 227-228). 'Hence, squalor of cultural life and wretched inadequacy of high culture. Instead of political history, bloodless erudition; instead of religion, superstition; instead of books and great reviews, daily papers and broadsheets ; instead of serious politics, ephemeral quarrels and personal clashes' (Gramsci, 1971: 228). Despite the different

historical background that the Sardinian thinker was analysing, the incapacity to engage intellectuals, the overheated and contumelious oratory of Grillo, and the allergy displayed towards informed discussion make M5S fit perfectly into the type of party analysed by Gramsci. Instead, the balance between propaganda and analysis has been carefully cultivated by Podemos. The direct involvement of a whole new generation of young intellectuals (the very top leadership is composed by several academics) as well as the quality of the internal debate casts light on its inclination to reconcile high culture and propaganda requirements.

Even more tellingly, M5S does not replicate the characteristics of modern mass parties, whereby 'a close link is formed between great mass, party and leading group', such that they can move together as a 'collective-man' through a feedback system that Gramsci calls 'living philology' (Gramsci, 1971: 429). Rather, M5S is entrapped in a model by which the connection with popular feelings does not happen through a critical engagement, but is rather the product of hunches on the parts of the leaders, 'backed up by the identification of statistical laws, which leaders then translate into ideas and watchwords'⁶ (Gramsci, 1971: 429). It is precisely the search for a passive and indirect type of consent as opposed to a direct, active and participatory involvement of single individuals (Gramsci, 1975: 1771) to distinguish M5S from Podemos. In this sense, the horizontalist rhetoric of M5S is belied by a hierarchical and despotic structure, which in turn reinforces the gap between rulers and ruled and leaves no possibility as to glimpse a future in which this opposition may be transcended (Gramsci, 1971: 144). Oppositely, Podemos has managed, despite the limitations highlighted above, to uphold a pedagogical approach, which does not imply an *ex cathedra* contact, but rather a reciprocal relationship, 'so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil a teacher' (Gramsci, 1971: 350). Moreover, the 'policing' traits of its democratic centralism still maintain a deliberative aspect, as opposed to the purely executory character of the bureaucratic centralism of M5S (Gramsci, 1971: 155).

As anticipated, there is a further reason for thinking that the two populisms at stake differ insofar as their counter-hegemonic potential is concerned. As we have seen, M5S is tendentially more populist than Podemos. This gradational question anticipates nothing on their counter-hegemonic prospects, even though we contend that a by and large dichotomous narrative is needed for a political agent to effectively challenge a given order. However, the theory of Laclau postulates an unwarranted closeness between populism and hegemony, to the point of almost conflating the two. As put by Arditì:

[t]he specific difference that populism introduces vis-à-vis hegemony is the division of society into two camps to produce a relation of equivalence among demands and construct a frontier or antagonistic relation between them. This is why populism can be said to be a species of the genus hegemony, the species that calls into question the existing order with the purpose of constructing another. This genus has at least one other species, institutionalist discourse, whose essence is to maintain the status quo (Arditi, 2010: 492-493).

⁶ In the original translation, watchwords is rendered as 'words-as-force'. The term in Italian is *parole-forza* (Gramsci, 1975: 1430).

Laclau's take oscillates as to whether populism should be intended as already hegemonic *per se* or as a road to hegemony. Be it as it might, we should warn against this excessive proximity between the two notions. In this sense, while we deem that the analogy between language and society enshrined in the psychoanalytical and linguistic tools that Laclau employs has an important explanatory value, we are less prone to accept that symbolic representations have the all-encompassing 'society effects' that he attributes them (Howarth, 2004: 269). The contestation of an extant political formation and the concomitant articulation of the existing demands and signifiers under a new political project, does not automatically lead to the formation of a new hegemony. In other words, even when a populist project that professes its alterity to the existing socio-economic system manages to put together a number of frustrated aspirations and win the elections, this does not mean that a new order is being put in place. In order to separate populism from hegemony, we propose a different understanding of the notions of time and space. Since this is not the place to advance a fully-fledged critique of how Laclau treats them throughout his corpus (see Mazzolini, 2017), we advance only a very succinct reformulation.

As for time, each present is, according to Gramsci, pierced by two temporal forms: one plural, and the other singular. The plural temporality is characterised by the confrontation between different political projects, whose outcome varies continuously. It is, in other words, the sphere of the occasional as it allows for rapid twists: the victory of one project can be undone a moment after by another project. On the contrary, the singular temporality (also called hegemonic) consists of much longer and relatively more permanent structures that set the ground and establish the contours within which the plural struggle among different projects can take place. We may think of it as the spirit of an époque: far-reaching socio-political processes that show a certain degree of stability and draw the perimeter within which the game of the plural temporality can occur. The conjunction between the two forms of temporality happens when a project emerging in the sphere of plural temporality is capable of transcending that camp and impose itself by setting a new singular temporality (Filippini, 2016: 105-121). We thus deem that populist practices do not necessarily rise to the hegemonic temporality, because even when they conquer power, most often than not they leave unaltered many coordinates of the social formation that they allegedly attempt to outdo.

In order to better understand this, we propose in parallel a plural conception of space, in the sense that the social cannot but be thought as composed by different sites. Despite maintaining a very close relationship and being reciprocally influenced, such sites cannot be conflated as they can even display different and contradictory dynamics. Here, Stuart Hall helps us to understand that hegemony is obtained only when the struggle is successful in a variety of fronts. Indeed, hegemony is for him:

the struggle to contest and dis-organize an existing political formation; the taking of the 'leading position'... over a number of different spheres of society at once - economy, civil society, intellectual and moral life, culture; the conduct of a wide and differentiated type of struggle; the winning of a strategic measure of popular consent; and, thus, the securing of a social authority sufficiently deep to conform society into a new historic project (Hall, 1988: 7).

As we can see, spatiality here is not metaphorical, but real: to each of these social sites (culture, economy, leisure, religion, etc.), there correspond concrete places in civil society that Gramsci calls fortresses and earthworks (Gramsci, 1971: 238), even though the relationship is not clear-cut and unequivocal, but rather loose and amendable. The pervasiveness of hegemony is ultimately given by the capacity to adjust the civilization and morality of the masses to a given project, by which a pressure is exerted on subjects without the need of sanctions, making certain habits and customs as the natural way of behaving (Gramsci, 1975: 1566). The electoral victory of a populist experiment thus does not take place on a smooth plane, whereby the victory entails an immediate redrawing of the whole social formation: rather, in line with the Gramscian conception of the organic State, the road to hegemony is made up by a combination of a slow war of position in civil society and a war of manoeuvre aimed at State institutions.

In this sense, we think that Podemos has manifested a distinguished bent for the electoral. It is not by chance that Errejón declared that Podemos had to turn into an 'electoral machine war' (Público, 2014). Here, we share the preoccupation of Figueroa and Thielemann on the fleetingness of elections, which, in spite of good results, do not necessarily produce the necessary social alliances and politicization for a structural change (2015: 54-56). Nevertheless, the blitzkrieg electoral strategy was not entirely devoid of sense for Podemos: the sweeping and initially unexpected electoral consensus that it has received made it possible for a political force defending certain theses to come out of the marginality to which the radical left had been confined. The change of pace proposed by Errejón following the last general elections of June 2016 seems to confirm the Gramscian intuition on the need to combine war of position and war of manoeuvre. By envisaging a work of 'cultural and institutional craftsmanship' that entails a slow process of penetration into the different sites of social in the attempt to reconfigure social relations, Errejón recognises that the first phase of assault to the institutions is over, and that now what is needed is a work of rooting (Errejón, 2016).

As for M5S, we think that its populist discourse says nothing about its counter-hegemonic potential. Grillo's movement is structurally unequipped to play such a role, as it has been incapable to build a party leadership worth the name, and to provide sound and coherent explanations and alternatives for the order that they nominally take issues with, beyond the proposal of a number of 'best practices' solutions. Its populism can only be played out within the contours of the plural temporality, as it does not put under discussion the main coordinates of the current socio-economic system, namely neoliberal capitalism. Finally, its strict focus on the electoral moment further reinforces our suspicion of its inherent difficulty to make inroads into other sites of the social formation.

Conclusion

The present text has carried out a comparative analysis between Podemos and M5S by deploying the theoretical tools of Ernesto Laclau. Both political projects have found fertile terrain in the proliferation of social demands arising from the mixture of economic crisis and political discredit of mainstream traditional actors. However, the phase of protest that preceded their advent shaped the

public understanding of the crisis: while in Spain the 15-M movement drew a close connection between corruption and the economic system, in the Italian landscape the discontent took the shape of a mere questioning of the old political class.

Both Podemos and M5S have deployed a populist discourse, as they have tried to articulate different social demands on the basis of their common rejection of an adversary. However, even though captured by the same term - the caste -, Podemos has indicted both political and economic actors through its deployment, while M5S has tended to restrict its scope to existing political actors. Over time, the political frontier of Podemos has been blurred, by way of some concessions to alliances with PSOE and regional actors at local, and Izquierda Unida at national level, and the abdication to give birth to a constituent process. Instead, M5S has maintained a complete alterity with the rest of the political system. Normatively, even though both actors presented themselves as beyond the left/right cleavage, Podemos and M5S have also differed: the former has been a distinctively left-wing type of populism; whereas the former has maintained an ambiguous and contradictory ideological orientation. In both cases the role of the leader has played a fundamental role; however, we identify in democracy and fatherland for Podemos, and in the moral question for M5S the empty signifiers around which the two actors have conducted their articulatory processes.

Even though we conclude that M5S is in principle more populist than Podemos as it has managed to articulate a larger array of identities and demands and maintained a sharp political frontier, we think that only Podemos can, though not without contradictions, play a counter-hegemonic role. In order to substantiate our claim, we have shown that the hypertrophic development of M5S' equivalential chain runs the risk of bringing its inherent ambiguities to the fore once it reaches power, precisely because of the lack of ideological coherence. Moreover, M5S fails to question some key aspects of the current order, is uninterested in the formation of an intellectually prepared leadership, lacks any sophisticated analysis of the socio-economic situation and replicates a number of hierarchical relations in its internal functioning. While the latter are not entirely absent in Podemos, we think that it is much better equipped at nurturing the seeds of a different society.

Finally, we question the proximity between the notions of populism and hegemony in Laclau. The fact that M5S is relatively more populist than Podemos and has so far done better electorally, does not mean that it is more hegemonic. Rather, we think that the construction of a people and electoral victory may not have the far-reaching effect of ushering a new order. In this sense, we propose a short reformulation of the notions of time and space. In particular, thinking of space in plural terms makes it clear that the electoral moment is key but not sufficient, as hegemony can only be constructed through a war or position in a number of different sites. The ultimate yardstick is given by the capacity to instil new habits and consensuses among the population. Both M5S and Podemos have so far focused on the electoral, but while the former has entirely neglected any possibility of transcending the political sphere, the latter has shown the intention of shifting its focus to other sites.

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