



# The Alchemists: On the Rise of Podemos

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Podemos rally, Madrid,  
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Reuters/Sergio Perez

## I THE TRAGEDY OF THE COMMON

Defining the common (or the ‘commons’), as it has been robustly theorized in recent years, as on one hand what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call ‘the bounty of nature’<sup>1</sup> and on the other the value produced by labour that draws on ‘human faculties, competences, and knowledges’ (i.e., ‘socially produced value’),<sup>2</sup> it seems fair to say that over the course of the past decade and a half, which is to say both throughout the so-called *años felices*, or ‘happy years,’ between 1998 and 2008, and since the economic crisis in which they ended, the Spanish common has been in equal parts pillaged and plundered.

Environmentally, the past fifteen years have been catastrophic. Spain’s coastline, its most economically lucrative natural resource, has been developed into virtual oblivion. Between 1987 and 2005, the equivalent of eight football fields of coastline were destroyed daily. At the beginning of 2006, there were plans in place for the construction of a million-and-a-half new coastal residences, and then 2007 — just a year before the real estate bubble burst — began with plans in place for the construction of 3 million new coastal residences. This accelerating rate of coastal development, generated in part by the rolling back of existing legislation protecting the 500 metres of land bordering the water to first 100 metres and more recently only 20 metres, has ‘literally swallowed up the Spanish coastline,’ according Greenpeace’s Pilar Marcos.<sup>3</sup> Outside of Asturias and parts of Galicia and Cantabria, where an often-chilly summer climate and the relative inaccessibility of many beaches have provided both infrastructural and economic barriers to overdevelopment, the Spanish coastline is a jumble of high-rise hotels and apartment buildings in towns that are overpopulated for two months of the year and ghostly the rest. Contamination and overfishing have similarly wrecked the underwater ecosystems: to a casual observer the water along the coast appears populated by nothing but jellyfish and plastic bags that can be easy to confuse with jellyfish. Every summer, meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of hectares of forest are destroyed by fire — in many cases fires that have been set deliberately in order to strip land of its inherent environmental value in order to clear it for development. While Spain’s neighbours to the north, in particular, have moved to meet new European emissions standards ahead of schedule, Spain — in whose cities air pollution is not just an inconvenience but a costly public health hazard — has fought hard for exemptions from the same; and after many regional and local governments passed legislation banning hydraulic fracking, in 2013 the central government passed its own legislation to override such bans, inaugurating a new era of underwater drilling in already vulnerable areas.

As for the depletion of the other part of the common — the value produced by labour in its increasingly immaterial and biopolitical forms: In 2010, in a too-little-too-late bid to stem the rising tide of unemployment, outgoing president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, leader of the historically left-of-center Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), initiated a restructuring of the Spanish labour market that, while maintaining some established protections, nonetheless made it significantly easier, and more importantly significantly cheaper, for employers to lay off employees or reduce their hours. The major changes

1 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 139.

2 Hardt and Negri *Commonwealth*, 132.

3 In ‘Greenpeace warns Spain about building on coast’, AFP, 8 August 2013.

implemented by Zapatero's government included reducing penalties for what were considered *despidos improcedentes* (unfair or unjustified dismissals), establishing six consecutive months of financial losses as automatic grounds for the more affordable *despidos procedentes* (fair or justified dismissals), and allowing employers and employees to renegotiate salary and other terms of employment irrespective of the collectively bargained agreements governing the given sector in which they work. Predictably, incoming president Mariano Rajoy, leader of the traditionally conservative Partido Popular (PP), quickly doubled down on Zapatero's labour 'reforms', using his absolute parliamentary majority to reclassify as justifiable the firing of workers not only by companies actively suffering losses but also those foreseeing future losses, or even just in the interest of 'competitiveness'. The cumulative impact of this labour market redesign has been to allow employers to expropriate a greater share of the surplus value generated by labour for themselves and their stockholders and investors virtually at whim, whether directly — by lowering salaries or reducing hours (but not productivity) — or indirectly, by firing workers and so adjusting the supply and demand dynamics within the labour market.

Cornered by a worsening economic crisis and the anti-debt policies of the European Union, Zapatero reluctantly initiated Spain's austerity program, as well. In 2010, he violated his own campaign pledge never to cut social spending with a package of deep cuts that included a salary reduction for public employees, pension cuts, a suspension of the *Ley de Dependencia*, which governs disability assistance, and dramatic reductions in infrastructure spending. His program was taken up with gusto by Rajoy who, repeatedly declaring that Spain had been living 'in excess of its possibilities', in the first year of his mandate implemented what was described in the newspaper *El País* as the most brutal 'economic adjustment' in Spain's post-dictatorship history<sup>4</sup>, and followed it with a sustained regimen of new cuts to social spending that impacted in particular public health and education. A quick scan of the headlines from 2012 forward provides a snapshot of the accelerating diminution of the share of wealth appropriate by the state in order to provide for the common good under Rajoy: '175 Million Cut From Madrid's Public Universities,' 'Sit-in at the Ramón y Cajal Hospital to Protest Cuts,' 'Five Billion Cut From Disability Benefits Over the Next Two Years,' 'Three Hundred Health Clinics to Close This Summer,' 'Municipal Employees to Work More and Earn Less,' '2700 HIV-Positive Immigrants to Go Without Medical Care,' 'Another Heavy Blow for Universities,' 'Woman with a Broken Leg Has Been Waiting Fourteen Days to See a Surgeon,' 'Fewer Teachers, More Cuts,' and on and on and on.

Hand-in-hand with austerity — and often in the name of reducing costs — Spain has seen the steady privatization of public services and public resources over the past decade and a half. Plans to privatize hospitals and clinics have unsurprisingly been met by powerful resistance, but piecemeal privatization by outsourcing and subcontracting services has provided an effective substitute even where efforts to privatize institutions wholesale have been successfully frustrated. In Galicia, especially plagued by the annual spate of summertime forest fires, the firefighting force has been privatized, and in Madrid, public recreation centres have been

4 Jesús Sérvulo González, 'El ajuste más duro de la democracia,' *El País*, 11 July 2012.



Playa Levante Beach, Benidorm.  
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Photo

handed over to private vendors given broad margin to partition out the day into higher-priced and lower-priced hours corresponding with demand. Perhaps most controversially, in 2008, longtime leader of the PP in Madrid Esperanza Aguirre, at the time president of the Comunidad de Madrid and until recently mayor of the city, set in motion plans for the eventual privatization of the community's highly profitable public water utility, the Canal Isabel II, re-classifying it as a publicly held corporation with a view of eventually selling a 49 percent share of it on the stock market. While the fate of the Canal Isabel II remains up in the air

thanks to a well-organized campaign of opposition, the privatization in the coming years of Spain's rail travel system, which boasts a vast network of high speed tracks built with public money, appears inevitable.

Finally, the mortgage crisis that precipitated the broader economic crisis of 2008 unleashed, particularly in the major urban areas in which Spain's population is heavily concentrated, an epidemic of home evictions. According to data collected by the activist organization Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (Platform of People Affected by Mortgages), between the beginning of the crisis in 2008 and the end of 2012, some 171,110 evictions were carried out; in 2012, upwards of another 100,000 evictions were carried out, by the summer reaching an average of 159 per day, according to the online leftist daily *Público*. In 2013, according to *Público*, that number of daily evictions climbed to 216. In March of 2015, *El País* reported that the number of evictions had risen by another 7.4 percent in 2014, even as the government boasted of recovery.<sup>5</sup> Because Spanish law leaves former homeowners responsible for their mortgages even after their properties have been repossessed, many victims of eviction are left in a semi-permanent state of residential limbo, dependent on relatives or increasingly scarce public assistance for shelter. This, too, bears on the question of the common. 'Through their daily activities and struggles,' writes David Harvey, 'individuals and social groups create the social world of the city and, in so doing, create something common as a framework within which we all can dwell.'<sup>6</sup> If this is true, then the internal dispossession that characterizes Spain's eviction epidemic can be understood as a kind of exclusion from the common wealth of (or as) the city of individuals who have contributed — and, even when dispossessed, inevitably continue to contribute — to its constitution as such.

5 Because no official numbers are kept on evictions, these figures may be disputed. The general scope of the evictions epidemic, however, is not under dispute.

6 David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (London, 2012), 74.

The occupation, beginning on 15 May 2011, of the central plazas of Spain's major cities by self-described *indignados* (the 'indignant'), can be accordingly understood as a well-earned public repudiation of the authority of extant state power over a common — represented, in this case, by the paradigmatic communal space of the city — it had failed to safeguard and ceased to administer equitably or ethically.

Importantly, the object of protesters' ire was neither the PSOE, which at the time still held the presidency, nor the PP, whose return to power was by then all but inevitable: rather, as frequent references to the 'PPSOE' during the protests that marked the beginning of what came to be known as the 15-M movement suggested, and the organized abstention by the *indignados* in the following November's general elections affirmed, it was the regime within which, since the ratification of the current Spanish constitution in 1978, power at the national level had oscillated between those two parties, united in spite of their ostensible differences by a shared commitment to strengthening the alliance between capital and the state within a neoliberal framework.

Their electoral disengagement made it easy for the political class initially to dismiss the *indignados*. On 16 May 2011, for example, the aforementioned Aguirre, at the time still President of the Comunidad de Madrid, took questions from readers in a previously scheduled digital session conducted with *El País*. At 1:26, a reader identified by the username Jacinto33 asked Aguirre what she thought about the previous day's actions, and whether she was ashamed to be one of the leaders responsible for the critical situation in which Spain found itself at the time? 'It seems to me that those who oppose the current system [*los antisistema*] should run for office,' she replied.<sup>7</sup>

The unprecedented rise of Podemos, which burst onto the Spanish political scene three years later in advance of the 2014 European elections and within weeks of those elections was polling neck-and-neck with the PP, has left many wondering whether she wishes she could retract that recommendation.

## II

### A BRIEF HISTORY

There is a very short history of how Spain arrived at the 'critical situation' to which Jacinto33 referred in his question to Aguirre, and it is that the global financial crisis happened, and Spain suffered. A slightly longer version is that the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, which set in place the basic principles for the creation of the European Union, was deeply flawed. Among other reasons, this was because it did not include a unification of labour markets, condemning its member states to 'a race to the bottom' to attract multinational employers, because it included no means or mechanisms for addressing already existing economic imbalances and inequalities, and because its fiscal policies, 'fixated on applying austerity measures to pay down public debt, neglecting the option of budget consolidation via growth', according to Klaus Busch.<sup>8</sup> And then there is a still longer version (which is not simply another version of the same story that can be told about most of the other so-called PIIGS<sup>9</sup>) that could begin in 1975, with the death of Francisco Franco and the beginning of the end of four decades of military dictatorship, or with the subsequent transition to democracy that many now contend was not quite as ideal as it has been made out to be, or even much earlier than that, with the economic and political crises of 1930 that gave rise to the tensions that eventually erupted in the Spanish Civil War. Perhaps the most pertinent point of departure for that still longer version, however, is 1998, when the ruling PP government led

7 'Entrevista digital con Esperanza Aguirre', *El País*, 16 May 2011.

8 Klaus Busch, 'Is the Euro Failing?', published by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in April 2012. Busch, a Professor Emeritus of European Studies at the University of Osnabrück, has criticized the Maastricht Treaty almost since its inception for attaching economic unity almost exclusively to debt and deficit provisions and failing to address already existing economic imbalances between EU member states.

9 Use of the acronym to designate the Portuguese, Italian, Irish, Greek, and Spanish economies has unsurprisingly fallen out of favour, but the imbalances that led to its invention in the first place persist.