The Generative Politics of Presentism in Post-15M Spain

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> Having little regard for the present is the foundation of a "Western" understanding of democracy, according to which the creative and self-government of the indeterminate and heterogeneous demos must be warded off.
> —Isabell Lorey, "Presentist Democracy: Reconceptualizing the Present"

> The future is a time of disasters, and ones we have, moreover, brought upon ourselves.
> —François Hartog, *Regimes of Historicity*

In November 2013, David Fernández, member of the Catalan Parliament for the political party CUP (Candidatura d'Unitat Popular), took off his sandal in the middle of a plenary session (Figure 1). "Nos vemos en el infierno. Su infierno es nuestra esperanza. . . . Hasta pronto gángster. Fuera la mafia" (I'll see you in hell. Your hell is our hope. . . . See you soon gangster. Get the mafia out of here), he said. His threat was directed at Rodrigo Rato—a former director of the IMF, two-term minister of econ-

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Figure 1. David Fernández, CUP's representative of Catalonia's lower house of Parliament, lifting his sandal at then president of Bankia Rodrigo Rato, who is currently serving a four-year sentence for misappropriation of public funds. © Copyright e-noticies.com. http://politica.e-noticies.es/la-cup-enseno-la-sandalia-a-rato-por-la-guerra-de-irak-88905.html.

omy and finance under Prime Minister José María Aznar, and president of Bankia—whom he was questioning during a hearing for allegations of corruption.[1]

Fernández's most immediate reference with this gesture was to the

1. Rodrigo Rato was not only sentenced to prison for four and a half years, found guilty of misappropriation of funds (he entered prison in 2018) for the "tarjetas black" (black money credit cards), he was also the crucial figure that negotiated Bankia bank's nationalization of its private debt. On May 7, 2012, the same date that the Spanish central government announced a state bailout, Rato resigned, which resulted in EUR 23.465 million paid with taxpayer funds from the national treasury. It was clear that the Spanish population would have to pay for the private debt of banks and that this would be felt through the implementation and normalization of austerity politics. Seen retrospectively, the idea of interrupting accumulation of capital (e.g., through strikes aimed at generating a financial cost for corporations) was threatened by the real possibility of that cost being absorbed by the national treasury, once again making people pay for "bankrupt" corporations. It is not like this had not happened before; there were certainly other instances of private corporations being nationalized in the past. But considering that in 2015 the estimate for the total cost of nationalization of banks amounted to EUR 60.718 million (Segovia 2017), we can firmly say we were facing a problem of unprecedented magnitude for the Iberian country.

Iraq War, which he himself made clear in his statement to the press.[2] In many Arab countries, showing your shoe is a very offensive action and, in 2008, then US President George W. Bush was humiliated during a press conference when Muntader al-Zaidi, a journalist for Al-Baghdadia TV, shouted "This is a gift from the Iraqis; this is the farewell kiss, you dog!" before throwing both of his shoes at him (Myers and Rubin 2008). But Fernández's reference hit much closer to home. His gesture underscored Rato's long history of political dishonesty, dating back to his political career as finance minister. Rato was among those who greenlit Spain's participation in the Iraqi invasion in 2003 while serving as first deputy prime minister to José María Aznar of the conservative Partido Popular (PP). Fernández's gesture, in sum, was an exercise in what George Lakoff calls sophisticated political framing, where references are layered on top of one another and values and symbols, as opposed to political programs, take center stage.[3]

But a shoe is not just any political symbol with its own particular referents. Shoes have their own history in the struggle of Europe's working classes. The image of Fernández holding his sandal invites us to rethink its meaning in light of a long tradition of working-class imagery, where worn-out shoes have been a prominent symbol.[4] Fernández's gesture on the floor of the Catalan Parliament evoked the image of the clog, *sabot* in French. *Sabots* were popular shoes worn by factory workers in the nineteenth century to protect themselves from machinery and tools, to which the derivative term *saboteur* owes its origin. The meaning of *sabotage* morphed during the industrialization of the early 1800s to refer to workers working clumsily or being rowdy by banging their wooden clogs on the ground as a form of

2. Fernández explains that the use of his sandal was meant to remember the Iraq War (e-Notícies 2014). In the Arab world at large, shoes are associated with the most impure part of the body. Therefore, it is a symbol of humiliation to throw a shoe at someone. Apparently, in the Arab world, it is a sign of extreme disrespect to even show the sole of a shoe to someone, a reason why all Muslims must take off their shoes before entering a mosque.

3. In *Don't Think of an Elephant*, George Lakoff provides strategies for left-wing politicians to frame their discourses according to values, as conservatives have been doing for decades, instead of appealing to political programs. His main argument is that audiences are much more attuned to values as paths for interpellation than they are to political programs alone (Lakoff 2004).

4. Van Gogh's painting *A Pair of Shoes* (1886), to which Heidegger devotes his essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" (2002), is part of a similar imaginary of struggle, work, and poverty.

showing their frustration with working conditions (Pouget 1913: 37). Using the noise they made with their shoes, workers managed to protest wage cuts, unfair norms, and, more generally, the exploitative working conditions of industrialization. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, *sabotage* generally named a variety of forms of revolt against exploitation, a reaction to a "suffered wrong," disassociated from clogs (40).

More than two centuries later since the term started to circulate, what can sabotage illuminate about Fernández's gesture? What sort of displacement can sabotage produce that might help us unravel which notion of politics has gained significance with the political mobilizations against Spain's austerity politics? Historically, sabotage is a practice that concerns time, the ongoing temporality of production. In factories, workers sabotaged capitalists by literally breaking down the means of production, damaging the production itself or slowing it down altogether to negatively impact anticipated returns in the future. Briefly, saboteurs interrupted the increasingly accelerated temporality of production to force capitalists into improving their working conditions. In so doing, they attempted to dismantle the relationship that production imposed upon past, present, and future. Therefore, sabotage unfolded in what I suggest is a "temporal structure of interruption,"[5] an attempt to redefine the very relationship between the different orders of time (i.e., past, present, and future).

However, sabotaging methods practiced within the labor movement, such as machine-smashing, have often been disparaged by Marxist thought. Mao Tse-tung, in his text "On Practice," explains that machine-smashing emerges from a "perceptual stage of cognition and spontaneous struggle," a lower stage of knowledge developing before the proletariat's realization of "its own historical task." When "the proletariat . . . reached . . . the period of conscious and organized economic and political struggles, the proletariat was able to comprehend the essence of capitalist society" and, as a result, grasp the inner contradictions of capitalism (2014: 1:301). Sabotage is thus seen as the product of incomplete knowledge, with the workers lacking the proper tools for the revolution.

Following the proletariat's awareness of its own historical task, the temporal dimension intrinsic to its revolutionary path became evident. Schematically, the future was featured as the horizon of the temporal structure of

5. By "temporal structure," I mean the mediation through which a social formation articulates the relationship between past, present, and future.

the revolution, achieved by a ceaseless struggle.[6] But such a valorization of the future cannot be decoupled from the bourgeois faith in the future as the ideological horizon that propelled production, as Franco Berardi has pointed out (2011: 18). Such a temporal structure has been referred to by François Hartog as *futurism* (2015: xvii).[7] Retaining time in the present, I argue that the practice of sabotage is structurally opposed to the revolution's temporality. Saboteurs force changes here and now by intervening as an interruptive force and, as a result, breaking the continuity of the course of history, from a classical Marxist perspective. Sabotage, therefore, is not only cumbersome for not originating out of a complex understanding of the dynamics of capitalism; it also troubles the historical linearity required by futurism.

Rather than designing a strategy to accomplish partial wins throughout many stages of a projected revolutionary future, saboteurs refuse to negotiate. Emancipation is not seen as a condition of existence to be achieved through phases. Instead, saboteurs are concerned with provoking change in their immediate horizon, the present, which renders them presentists. In this light, saboteurs' idea of the future might be best imagined as an uncalculated sum of the very gains achieved in each present struggle. One might argue that they live by a sort of accelerationist position, which, in a saboteur framework, is equipped to counter capitalist acceleration.[8] Through sabotage, interruption is practiced as a form of fragmenting, of breaking down, the present state of affairs, thus causing transformation as a consequence.

In the crisis that began in 1989 and was identified by the so-called end of history thesis, presentism becomes the "regime of historicity"—defined by Hartog as "a category (without content), which can elucidate our experiences of time" (2015: xvii)—present in neoliberalism. A diluted regime of the experience of time that subsumes the past and the future, presentism entraps one in a permanent present to foreclose revolutionary change. Put differently, if capitalism is a system that dehistoricizes itself to appear natural and self-created, it only follows that its temporal structure eternalizes

6. In a revolutionary framework, the present became a time of action insofar as it could instigate future change.

7. Similarly, Berardi has discussed Italian and Russian avant-garde futurisms as the movements that inaugurate the ideological landscape of the twentieth century, "the century that trusted in the future" (2011: 17).

8. Capitalist acceleration should not be thought of as a linear and homogeneous acceleration but rather as a result of the articulation of different tempos (of production, circulation, distribution, etc.), combined differently, according to each case.

itself in the form of a permanent present, an ahistorical illusion of historical time. Often referred to as "a time of uprisings," our current historical moment, some argue, lacks an ability to imagine the total overcoming of capitalism, only worsened by a futureless horizon. Opposed to the revolutionary temporality, which is bound by a developmentalist paradigm, the term *uprising* highlights the ephemerality of these mobilizations, their powerlessness to make change endure, as well as their scatteredness.

Urged by a myopic (and unbearable) present, so to speak, mobilizations such as Occupy, Nuit Debout, and Spain's 15M movement (*indignados*, "the outraged") are perceived, among skeptics, as bursts that are fundamentally incapable of challenging the totality of global capital, which, ultimately, would make them presentists. These movements have been considered by a sector of the Left intelligentsia as naive, when not reactionary, for not realizing that they are unfolding within the limits of capitalism. The presentist attack needs to be considered from two different perspectives: on the one hand, it criticized the movements' refusal to put forward a project for a future society; on the other, it framed such refusal in terms of these movements' inability to understand their own historical task. Viewing them through a presentist lens categorizes these struggles as stuck in a perceptual stage of cognition, proper to neoliberalism. According to these criticisms, they are presentists for operating in the very coordinates made possible by neoliberalism. They fail to articulate a project outside of the neoliberal fragmented experience of time. But driven by an urgency to challenge austerity politics, a fundamental feature of neoliberal capitalism, it seems more accurate to view these mobilizations as reacting right where they could: in the precariousness of their here and now. They upheld that something should be done when nothing could be done.

What if these movements are proof that in this historical moment the conditions for struggle are indistinguishable from the entrapping conditions we find ourselves in? What if the temporal structure we currently inhabit, namely presentism, is the standpoint from which we can produce change? My claim is that the period unleashed upon Spain's financial crisis, which witnessed movements such as Juventud Sin Futuro (Youth without a Future), the 15M movement, or the rise of a radical Left national party in Catalonia, CUP, demonstrates a generative use of presentism in radical politics. What is more, Spain's 2011 mobilizations inaugurate a cycle wherein presentism becomes an ideological experience of historical time compatible with being cognizant of the inner contradictions of capitalism, redefining the very contours of the meaning of politics.

Specifically in Spain, the presentist criticism directed toward the 15M movement was twofold: some considered the protesters to be presentists because they resisted conforming to legible regimes of political representation; they instead favored dwelling in the indetermination of the 15M event. Others considered them so because of the protesters' refusal to articulate a political program that could be subsumed under the bureaucratized channels of Spain's democracy. These criticisms were valid. As Isabell Lorey has argued, "For the precarious, the connection with the past has been broken off in manifold ways, and the future cannot be planned" (2011: 4). On the one hand, the 15M movement was against the increasing precarization of life—and for its dignity. On the other, most of its participants were socialized under neoliberalism and, therefore, accustomed to the imperative of an accelerated present. Under these conditions, would it not be logical to assume that most of the participants were, in some way, presentists? What I contend is that presentism was one of the few political weapons they had at hand to act politically. By giving presentism the weight of everyday life, participants in the 15M movement were able, through presentism, to change the forms in which we today imagine and experience the present. In other words, it was through working with the only experience of time possible under neoliberalism (presentism) that they were able to transform such an alienating present into a generative, politicized account of everyday life. In a moment when corrupt politicians in Spain on both the center-left and the right were plundering the country's public finances, the present became the time in which political efforts had to be oriented toward reconstructing and caring for the institutional sphere—reclaiming these spheres as the site of the common.

Such moments entailed rethinking the tension between politics and teleological understandings of change. Vis-à-vis the "regime of historicity" offered by neoliberalism, politics might be articulated and practiced, rather than operate at a remove from or outside of neoliberalism. To analyze this tension, this essay will proceed in three parts. I first look at David Fernández's emblematic intervention in the lower house of the Catalan Parliament to argue that he was practicing and performing what I call a temporality of interruption and, thus, a fragmentation of teleological time. Next, I consider a 2016 speech by Iñigo Errejón, a founding member, political secretary, and speaker in the lower house of Parliament for the political party Podemos until 2017. The speech, which was delivered moments after the 2016 national election, makes what I see as a paradigmatic discursive use of the present. Both syntactically and figuratively, the speech articulates an

occupation of the present that is not merely a rhetorical flourish. Rather, it invokes the occupation of the squares during the 15M movement as sites for the social reproduction of everyday life. Errejón's emphasis on the importance of doing politics in a way that brings out the continuity between daily life—at one's home, in one's neighborhood, in one's relationships—and the squares of the 15M movement, I argue, is a way of privileging a particular understanding of the present. Finally, I examine how "neomunicipalisms" intended to institutionalize this understanding of everyday life. Neomunicipalists argued that doing so guaranteed real democracy. In so doing, they took the "particular" and universalized it to make political life accessible and familiar, and everyday life political and engaged.

The Time of Sabotage

Unlike Catalan textile factory saboteurs circa 1800 who, for the most part, struggled clandestinely, Fernández fought his battle from within the chambers of Parliament. Many critics in Spain and Catalonia saw the CUP's 2011 decision to partake in parliamentary politics on a regional level as a move that, on the one hand, many thought they were not ready for, and, on the other, many thought could endanger their political legitimacy, which had been acquired through municipal politics during the decade leading up to the 15M movement. As Fernàndez himself asserted, "la bona premsa de la CUP als seus municipis" (the CUP has good press in the municipalities where the party has presence) (Jòdar 2012: 79). Municipal institutional politics made sense under the dual-power framework championed by the CUP. They defended having "un peu al carrer i un altre a la institució" (one foot in the streets and the other one in the institution) (82).[9] But, at the same time, it was unclear whether less attention to locally based institutional politics would threaten their reputation.

9. To be sure, the 2013–17 cycle has reshaped Catalan politics drastically, making Fernández's famous and incisive contribution in Parliament acquire a different tone, especially after the December 21, 2017, elections, where the CUP suffered deep losses, decreasing their number of parliamentary seats from ten in 2015 to four in 2015. The first days after the elections, they had to face the irony of being forced to join a parliamentary group with the PP, since, according to Catalan Parliament rules, five seats are required to form an independent group. However, CUP representatives did not have to see themselves in such an uncomfortable position, thanks to Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), as they decided to release one of their elected members of Parliament to the CUP to ensure they would be able to form their own group.

Fernández's loud protest in Parliament, a synecdoche for the noise of wooden clogs, became a touchstone for Spain's new institutional politics on the left. The irruption of radical movements in the streets had finally had an effect on the country's political institutions. In fact, Fernàndez's speech could be seen, following Santiago López Petit's account of the 15M movement, as "un crit de fàstic contra aquest món, i a la vegada, un crit ple de vida que tapa la boca a tots els polítics, que els interromp el monòleg, que els enfonsa com a farsants" (a cry of disgust against this world, and at the same time, a cry full of life that silences all politicians, that interrupts their monologue, that sinks them for being deceitful) (Oliveres et al. 2011: 6). With the old paradigm of representative politics in crisis, the moment seemed to break open a time of conjunction where both a cry of disgust and a cry of life were simultaneously possible. This duality fueled transformation. Built on the idea of "common people" (i.e., not part of the status quo) co-opting institutions in order to return them to the majority of society, the speech reclaimed the public nature of governmental institutions by way of appealing to a new common sense that was taking shape at the time.

Pablo Iglesias, secretary general of Podemos,[10] announced the party's arrival to congress as an assault on Spain's corrupted institutions. During a speech in 2014, he said, quoting Marx, "el cielo no se toma por consenso, sino por asalto" (heaven is not won by consensus, but by assault).[11] Establishing an imaginary of struggle, antagonism, and co-optation outside of traditional Left and Right political poles was thought to be essential to channel indignation toward building a social majority. Assault, therefore, became a signifier that expressed the urgency of recovering a temporality of life, regardless of political affiliation. The embedded reference to Marx was mostly addressed to those on the left who remained suspicious of Iglesias's populist rhetoric.

Today, however, following Podemos's defeat in the 2019 national elections, its decreased support in the municipal elections in the same year, and the rise of the right-wing parties Ciutadans and Vox, parties that have used populism to gather support, it seems, have found that popu-

10. It is worth noting that Pablo Iglesias, in an interview with Anna Gabriel, the CUP's speaker between 2015–17, stated that many activists in Madrid involved in forming Podemos turned to the CUP to model their new ways of doing politics within Spain's institutional sphere (*La Tuerka* 2017).

11. Iglesias is here citing Marx's famous letter to Ludwig Kugelmann on April 12, 1871, when commenting on his enthusiasm about the Paris Commune: "compare these Parisians, storming the heavens" (1975: 131).

lism's "empty signifier," à la Ernesto Laclau (2005), has proven easily co-optable. As a response to "the incomplete and lazy character of the theoretical maneuver of populism," Veronica Gago and Diego Sztulwark suggest placing our focus on "the complex and variegated materiality of the contemporary popular" (2016: 607) as a much more fruitful pursuit. The political parties I examine here, such as Podemos, have, over time, become increasingly disconnected from popular society. To cite just one example, one of Podemos's most radical mechanisms for popular participation were "círculos" (circles). These democratically organized groups were meant to have significant influence over the party's political proposals. But today they are hardly active. That is why the argument I make in this essay is, in many ways, historical. I consider the speeches and other texts analyzed in the context of the moment in which they took place, that is, when they were still firmly rooted in the popular.

The language of co-optation and assault, within a democratic framework, worked to condense the kind of temporal structure made available through the experience of the 15M movement. That time, so to speak, precipitated the urgency of the now, the "now-time" of struggle, the *Jetztzeit*, as Walter Benjamin put it (2007: 261). If the 15M movement was a presentist movement, as I argue, it was because it cracked time open and thus resignified the present conditions and meanings of existence. This resignification followed initiatives such as Ahora Madrid's (Madrid Now) use of the deictic force of *ahora* (now) and attempted to rearticulate the present into a programmatic political project. As a result, the idea of the future did not seem as urgent as the battle over the present. If this battle were won, the future would follow, undermining the orthodox Marxist perspective that requires the future to be the horizon for emancipation. In short, the belief that forms of emancipation and dignity were achievable in the present—even if they did not inaugurate a radical shift in material conditions—were valuable struggles against the totalizing horizon of capitalism.

At the center of this attempt at a paradigmatic shift we see two different temporalities operating. They appear initially to be at odds, but, as I will argue, they nonetheless work together. In Errejón's view, "el 15M, en la seva ubicació ambivalent entre el sentit comú d'època i la seva resignació en un sentit rupturista, de qüestionament de l'ordre existent, es troba sotjat per dos abismes paral·lels" (the 15M movement, in its ambivalent position amidst an epochal common sense and its rupturist resignation, questioning the existing order, finds itself stalked by two parallel abysses) (Viñas 2011: 23). What Errejón, speaking in June 2011, just a few weeks after the

first squares were occupied, identified as an ambivalence might be better explained as a conjunction between, on the one hand, a temporality of sabotage or interruption—like Fernàndez's sandal—and, on the other, a temporality of community.

These two temporalities, however, were not ambivalent to one another. On the contrary, they unfolded with determination, simultaneously. They shared the belief that, in the present, both temporalities could cohabitate, rendering the temporality of the community necessary in the present. The time of the community is the time of everyday life, in Henri Lefebvre's terms, and takes the present as the moment for producing social bonds and practices. The temporality of the community would eventually be developed during the process of institutionalization that took place through neomunicipalist platforms that claimed power in 2015.

But how could temporalities of interruption and community be synchronic? If the former brings about discontinuity—rupture—and the latter offers an ideological experience of time as continuous and sustainable, how can these seemingly antithetical temporalities share anything in common? Put differently, what allows the interlacing of two heterogeneous temporalities to function at the same time? What holds them together while they exist separately is their shared attention to the present. However ephemeral, Fernàndez's gesture channeled the energy of the 15M movement into a confrontation with Spain's political class over austerity and its continued complicity with neoliberalism. The political class was defending austerity as an approach that would ensure the overcoming of Spain's national debt. But Fernàndez identified the capitalist logic of debt behind this political status quo, which mortgaged the idea of a future and thus, as Isabell Lorey has argued, captured the future as a form of delaying a good life in the present (Lorey 2019). In this sense, we can see how future-oriented temporalities are inscribed in a logic of sacrifice that paralyzes our potential to make change in the here and now.

The neomunicipalist platforms of Ada Colau and Manuela Carmena challenged the capitalist logic of debt. Before her election, in 2015, as mayor of Barcelona, Colau had been deeply involved in organizing around Spain's most rampant form of debt that exploded as a result of the housing crisis in the late 2000s. Carmena, the mayor of Madrid from 2015–19, left city hall with 65 percent less public debt than it had in 2012 (González 2019). The Platform of Mortgage Victims (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca—PAH), of which Colau was part since its beginnings in 2009, provided support and legal advice to those who had signed exploitative

mortgage contracts and could not make their payments—due to, for example, unemployment or the dramatic increase in interest rates because of the recession—and managed to stop evictions on the spot. The height of evictions during the crisis peaked in 2013 when 187 evictions were being carried out per day, only beaten in 2018 when evictions peaked at 191 per day (García 2018). The future, for those who had to pay their debts, could only be imagined as the time when the debt was finally paid. For many, that moment would not come for another twenty, thirty, or even forty years. Both Carmena's and Colau's projects showed how the privatization of public debt did not have to govern city politics. Life in the city could be improved as a result of a commitment to govern in the interest of the common good.

Well before these institutional experiences provided a new conception of the present and future as ones without debt, the student movement Juventud Sin Futuro managed to gather ten thousand protestors in Madrid on April 7, 2011, only a few weeks before the 15M event. These protests have been read as a prologue to the 15M event (Ubasart-González 2015: 202). Their motto was "Sin casa, sin curro, sin pensión. Juventud sin miedo. Recuperando nuestro futuro. Esto es solo el principio" (Without a home, without a job, without pension. Fearless youth. Recovering our future. This is only the beginning). The question of temporality was crucial to the movement, as their name indicates. The future was not something they could picture, as those critical of presentism contend, because the future was something that had been taken away from them; it had been mortgaged. This fearlessness toward the future, resembles what Slavoj Žižek calls "the courage of hopelessness" (2017), a courage one acquires when all hope for a better future has crumbled. That is the moment when true change can be brought about.

Presentism vs. "Those Who Are Absent"

Iñigo Errejón's speech in June 2016, barely a few minutes after Podemos admitted it had failed to accomplish the so-called *sorpasso* (surpass),[12] is an emblematic example of how presentism was used in post-15M politics. As a strategy to assert cultural hegemony, his use of presentism, I argue, functions both temporally and corporeally. In Errejón's speech, the use of the present tense becomes a temporal way of asserting

12. The 2016 election was the second attempt to precipitate the formation of a government since negotiations failed in the December 2015 national election.

that Podemos *is* the present. At the same time, it underscores the presence of Podemos in Spain's political landscape and, thus, affords political meaning to the structural duality inherent to presentism: present (time) and presence (body).

"A los que faltan . . . a los que todavía no han llegado" (to those who are absent, to those who are yet to arrive) was much more than just a formula. Errejón, who was the campaign manager for Podemos, used the statement to uplift the party's militancy, which was justifiably discouraged after the negative results. His line "Somos la fuerza que culturalmente marca el destino de España" (We are the force that culturally marks Spain's destiny) framed the results in "moral terms" following the populist strategy of turning political questions into moral ones, as opposed to statistical terms. These moves pointed toward the new direction of Spain's political makeup and, therefore, reassured Podemos supporters of the party's leading role at the same time that it opened up other ways of imagining political representation through direct democracy—a view increasingly prevalent since the 15M movement. Self-described as a party that was "not a party," Podemos claimed to be a "popular movement" that grew out of the experience of the squares. Its popular origin, they believed, equipped Podemos to better resonate with the Spanish electorate from below. Consequentially, "a los que faltan" (to those who are absent) replaced the schema which had been persistently pushed by mainstream media, according to which Podemos was far from becoming a new political force of any significance, with one that figured it as Spain's inevitable present.

Podemos, which emerged from a protest movement led by groups such as Democracia Real Ya (Real Democracy Now), had condensed the battle over the meaning of true democracy. As seen in the name of the group, the slogan's *ya* (now) expressed an urgency that undid the commitment to a future-oriented teleology of emancipation. To recapture the idea of democracy from the auspices of neoliberal Europe, the future was seen as too distant a horizon for change, whether materially or epistemically. "Nosotros ya conducimos la España que ya viene" (We already drive the Spain that is already coming) inflects *ya* in two ways: to connote the future in tandem with a "nowness." In other words, the future is, for the activist group, a present that collapses the different temporalities into one extended present. "Nosotros somos el futuro de España" (We are Spain's future) is a great example of a presentist claim, only expanded by the future's ability to literally come to the present, "la España que ya viene" (the Spain that is coming). The future is dissolved as a site toward which we orient our-

selves, society, politics, and so on, in favor of a future oriented toward us, the present.

Errejón's rhetorical construction of Podemos's inevitable presence simultaneously occupies a "nowness"—leading the *ya* of Democracia Real Ya to acquire an actualized status—and the temporal present. Its anchor was the construction of an absence through the figure of "los que faltan" (those who are absent), a rhetorical strategy that confirmed Podemos's legitimacy in institutional politics. What is more, the strategy claimed that there was a modality of politics in which, as citizens, we could be present, in opposition to the fundamental absence pivotal in representational politics—for representation entails speaking for those who are not present or cannot represent themselves. The irony was that the very critique Podemos was making of representative democracy would come to be the one that led to their own political troubles. Over time, participation in the *círculos* decreased and was eventually relegated to a virtual experience, the click of one's computer, erasing the bodily aspect that had been so essential to the movement.

Recapturing the cultural present from its neoliberal usurpers—embodied, in the rhetoric of Podemos, by corrupt politicians—meant reproducing the same energy that had driven people to take over Spain's squares at a moment when the privatization of public spaces was on the rise. The line "No hay ninguna formación política que tenga las plazas llenas siempre" (There is no political party that sees its squares always filled with people) evoked the square as a symbol that legitimized Podemos as a legatee of the 15M movement. But more importantly, it identified the square with a form of democracy grounded on presence—that is to say, based on bodies being present, occupying what has been enclosed and privatized in order to communalize it.

Occupation made sense as an emblem for a generation that felt displaced and removed from the political scene. It resonated with Spain's anarchist squat movement known as the Okupa movement. It also changed their status from "unoccupied,"[13] that is, unemployed, and even "pre-parados," a play on words that translates both as "prepared" and "pre-unemployed." These terms underscored the precarity and job scarcity of millions of young people as well as the labor market's failure to address the situation. The

13. The largest generation of Spaniards trained in higher education was also the least employed in the work force. In 2015, 49.5 percent of Spaniards between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four were unemployed (García Campos 2015).

idea of the protest movement was never to "possess" unoccupied public spaces, to begin anew a project of settler colonialism, as it were, but rather to inhabit those squares to turn them again into public spaces. The idea was to live in those squares until they inhabited the people's everyday lives, as well as their imaginary of the public. Such an occupation, with its tents, its kitchen run on donations, its bathrooms, became a site for everyday life. Not only for those who camped in Puerta del Sol in Madrid or Plaça de Catalunya in Barcelona, but for all kinds of people, ranging from those who would stop by from time to time to check out what was happening to those who were active participants in committees and the general assembly every evening. That summer, I would go alone every day during my lunch break to Plaça de Catalunya—a square I had always tried to avoid up until the 15M movement, though I lived five minutes away. I often went just to hang out, joining any conversation that sparked among a random small group, oftentimes formed by seniors, since they were the ones with lots of time during the day on any given weekday. In the evenings, I would attend the general assembly with friends and the feminist collective I was part of. For that short period of time, the square became a place where I went constantly, and, like many other Barcelonans, it became a symbol for a particular understanding of politics as life.

Through the transformation of the square into a site where people met, debated, planned actions, and so on, the idea of politics as something that happens in everyday life gained significance. Plazas were far from the typical image of revolutionary action, which has been historically fixated on sites of struggle, such as the barricade. Long after feminisms had begun their struggle to tear apart the dividing line between the public and the private, also realms that "liberalism seeks to separate," as Kathi Weeks has reminded us (2018: 71), the plazas symbolized, on the one hand, the recovery of popular political life and, on the other, the domestic sphere through its preeminence in everyday life. The dynamics unfolding in the squares only made sense so long as they could be portable and continued at home.[14]

14. Squares became a great symbol for the gathering and articulation of an amorphous iteration of a once cohesively imagined people. These movements were well aware that precarization had changed the rules of the game with respect to mobilization. Domestic space and quotidian time became central targets for mobilization since precariarized working conditions did not leave much room for traditional political mobilization. While symbols were effective insofar as they provided a romantic narrative, and they helped make mobilization visible, the bigger goal was to find strategies to allow people to be

As a result, no political movement could proceed without taking stock of the inequalities that governed our personal relationships and their correspondent distribution of reproductive labor. A focus on the present meant a shift toward caring about how life was made and reproduced day by day, an awareness emphasized by the 15M movement's slogan "La revolución será feminista o no será" (The revolution will be feminist or it will not be).

Neomunicipalisms and the Institutionalization of Everyday Life

The shift toward neomunicipalisms, which had already been so central to parties such as the CUP during the decade leading up to the 15M movement, became prevalent in cities across Spain: Guanyem Barcelona (which later became Barcelona en Comú [Bcomú]), Ganemos Madrid (later named Ahora Madrid), Zaragoza en Común, Compromís in Valencia, Marea Atlántica in Coruña, just to name a few. Having become paradigmatic during the 15M movement, the care for the present was much more than a tactical question. In fact, mayors Ada Colau and Manuela Carmena, whose popularity nationwide made them attractive candidates for regional and even national campaigns, have refused, so far, to partake in elections beyond the city. Thus, it would be a mistake to think that their agendas were made with the idea of scaling up administrative levels until reaching the level of the state. On the contrary, such a turn to municipal politics revealed a conviction about, on the one hand, the importance of scale in participatory politics and, on the other, a view of the city being already inscribed in a global network. Able to function without the interference of higher administrative levels, the city could build solidarity with other cities across the globe, thereby, to some degree, ignoring state politics. The international conference Fear-

involved through everyday practices. Potentiating solidarity in everyday life became paramount, and it took a variety of forms: making households more feminist, encouraging responsible consumption, participating in neighborhood associations, among others. However, I think that changes at a domestic level could not have become significant in the way that they did without some more grandiose symbols as catalyzers of those shifts. So although the square was meant to foster everyday life, it also nourished an imaginary of struggle, the symbols of which operated on a romantic level as well. In other words, against a risk to moralize about the importance of everyday life as the true and authentic politics, I think the squares were essential as symbols that fostered identity and a Promethean ethos, encapsulated in Podemos's "sí se puede" (yes we can).

less Cities, whose first edition was launched by Barcelona's city hall in 2017, is but one example of the efforts dedicated to fostering global networks.

The view of the city as a manageable scale for participatory politics has also helped reconceptualize the quotidian sphere as a deeply political one. At the center of this practice is the idea that knowledge emanates from "the practice of everyday life," as Lefebvre once suggested. As Davina Cooper has put it, "in local government, the micro-materiality of life: from food, housing, and streets, to refuse, drains and sewage comes constantly to the fore. Routinely dismissed as boring and insignificant against the flashier concerns of nation-states the politicization of these issues . . . elucidates their social importance and interest, as disputes about pavement curbs, traffic, housing and pollution became politically sutured to inequalities of gender, race, class" (2017: 345). Cooper suggests that there exists a rich knowledge embedded not only in the micromaterial but also in ourselves, as living vectors of all kinds of ideological meanings we often reproduce without interrogating.[15]

When knowledge is cognizant of its mediated nature and yet is based on experience, it becomes a self-produced practice crucial to neomunicipalisms. In the spirit of the 15M movement, this iteration of local politics rejects expertise and advocates for the production of knowledge that is grounded on practice. But the very grounds of that practice are anything but pure, immediate, and transparent. In confrontation with established forms of knowledge, practice in this sense can be thought of in presentist terms: it is through the experiences, relationships, encounters, and challenges one faces in local politics daily by virtue of being present that one produces an embodied knowledge of the unspoken, unjust dynamics of our time. In Lefebvre's account, the experience of the present is a "*mediation* among mediations" (1996: 101). He goes on to defend the idea that the city, a medi-

15. As a counterpoint to a romaticization of this sort of knowledge, I think of one of the CUP's advisors to the parliamentary group, who, when asked about the role of the general assembly in CUP, replied "que el coneixement col·lectiu porta poc . . . per generar aquests espais de debat, de col·lectius, o està molt ben travat la cosa . . . o el que genera és una ratificació de llocs comuns i que a més esdevé poc democratic, una cosa que hem de qüestionar és l'assemblea com espai de democràcia absoluta, és l'espai més antidemocràtic que hi ha" (that the collective knowledge has a short trajectory . . . in order to generate these spaces for debate, for collectives, or things are very well organized . . . or a ratification of the common places is produced and what is more, it becomes barely democratic, a thing we must interrogate is whether the general assembly as an absolute democratic, is not the most undemocratic space of them all) (Azagra 2015: 411).

ated entity, is an ideological grid that holds in its logic all sorts of ungraspable meanings that cannot be experienced transparently.[16] For Lefebvre, grasping such meanings requires disentangling the many extant forms of inequality and hierarchy. Put simply, for Lefebvre, the experience of the city, no matter how familiar it may be felt, is ideological.

Lefebvre points to the limits of the neomunicipalism on offer in Spain today. Although the micromateriality of life seems easier to grasp on a local level, critiques such as *La apuesta municipalista: la democracia empieza por lo cercano* (Observatorio Metropolitano 2014) have called attention to the limits and perils of neomunicipalism. Neomunicipalism's critics have taken issue, for instance, with the supremacy of the particular that one finds in municipalism and the idea that the particular ought to be the domain of immediacy. Such critiques have also pointed to the risk in the municipalist hypothesis of slipping into a triumphalism or moralism as the only true and authentic form of politics. Further, in a time of global capitalism, scale is not exactly a tangential issue. When capitalism's ongoing task to eclipse all horizons does not stop, turning to the local can appear naive. This naivete can be glimpsed in the unrealistic enthusiasm in a speech Ada Colau gave during the 2019 municipal campaign: "que Barcelona sigui una ciutat que envïi un missatge al món que se senti a cada racó, a cada Ciutat, que sí que es pot, sí que es pot, que ho estem demostrant i ho heu fet vosaltres" (that Barcelona ought to be a city that sends a message to the rest of the world that should resonate in every corner, in every city, that we can, yes we can, and we are demonstrating it, and you are the ones who have done the work). In her speech, the scale of the city is meant to resonate across the globe. The speech emphasizes that it is "vosaltres" (you all) who have made this city what it is today, thereby stressing the collective quality made possible in neomunicipalisms, thanks to the newfound proximity between life and politics. The scale of municipalism becomes a problem very quickly when one begins to think about questions such as food. Public vegeta-

16. This language of immediacy should not be confused with a claim about the immediacy of experience versus the mediation of abstract knowledge. Much has happened since the critiques of the metaphysics of presence, mostly led by *deconstruction*, following Heidegger's *Being and Time*, established a paradigm about the importance of absence (1962). Put succinctly, such critiques argued that the experience of the present could never take place as an immediate and transparent experience, and, therefore, absence was always at stake. Here, on the contrary, immediacy brings about the question of proximity, as opposed to a lack of mediation.

ble gardens, while productive and useful at the scale of the neighborhood, cannot solve the problem of food access, climate change (e.g., flooding, drought, etc.), and many other issues that are scaled on a global level.

Municipalism is necessarily bounded by questions of scale. Nonetheless, the neomunicipal focus on the "particular" (Observatorio Metropolitano 2014: 150) can become a useful ground from which to assert an immanence of the present that takes into account the ideological stratified layers in the particular, that seeks to reclaim a dignified life in the here and now. Neomunicipalism is a way of institutionalizing everyday life such that the duality of the "present," temporality and bodily presence, becomes a strategy from which to start building a horizon of change in the immediacy of our own daily world. At the same time, the strategy functions as a pedagogical terrain on which citizen participation in daily politics renders life itself political.

As Vicente Rubio-Pueyo has pointed out (2019), through the practice of what Bertie Russell has called "proximity politics," proximity—the vertebrae of neomunicipalisms—"has the potential to deautomize, or denaturalize, scale." In this sense, municipalisms can bring to the fore the multilayeredness of the city, especially as cities become neoliberal laboratories. "From a material standpoint . . . policies stemming from other administrative levels can profoundly and concretely impact the city . . . the effects of global economy are always felt . . . at the local level. . . . Therefore, the local level, even in its immediacy and concreteness, is continuously traversed by other more 'abstract' dimensions," Rubio-Pueyo warns us about claiming cities as sites of radical autonomy. In fact, it is precisely the stratified, multilayered composition of the city that enables the circulation of global capital, foreign investments, tourism, and so on, on a macroscale. It is this collapsing of a variety of levels that makes cities privileged sites from which to understand the many forms of exploitation and alienation suffered by citizens.

The neomunicipalist idea was meant to avoid what Mark Purcell has called the "local trap," the trap of equating "local autonomy with greater democracy or justice" (2006: 1931). Instead, it took the city, in all its neoliberal dimensions (i.e., as generators of condensed wealth), as a tactic for putting its extensible network to work for radically democratic purposes. Russell's observation that "cities are places [where] these movements are, initially, finding ways to manifest their constituent power, experimenting with how to establish radically democratic processes" (2019: 996), while partly true—for small towns have also engaged even smaller-scaled initiatives—neither interrogates the causes behind such a move nor considers how, in

the case of Spain, the neomunicipal hypothesis works in conjunction with regional and national parties. The case of Podemos is emblematic of this cooperation. Yet, cities remain crucial. Here Rubio-Pueyo's list of issues that make cities essential analytical categories is helpful: urban population growth due to migrations; tensions between the urban, suburban, and rural; and the metropolis becoming key in the circulation of capital (2019). Rubio-Pueyo argues that proximity politics is possible at the level of the city and allows citizens to simultaneously acquire a sense of belonging and identity while, at the same time, turning the city into a platform for a collective political experience. The importance of an embodied experience, as we can see, proves essential to this rehearsal of a different form of politics. Flying in the face of the widespread idea that contemporary protest movements rely heavily on social media and online participation, physical presence proves to be vital for change. Neomunicipalism's turn to micropolitics, that is, its turn toward the present, is a form of paradoxically expanding the horizon while narrowing the focus. Essential to this paradigm, the importance of bodily presence shows how deeply rooted presentism operates ideologically as a generative force.

Presentism is the historical modality that configures our ahistorical experience of historical time. After the so-called end of history thesis, presentism has become the very soil social movements and their corresponding processes of institutionalization have cultivated in order to produce radical politics and change. The duality of time and space inherent in presentism affords a generative platform for rethinking the present as a site of struggle. It has done this all the while attending to the corporeal dimension of politics, and not merely to political representation. Taking the present as a political tool, the strategies I have analyzed here show that, contrary to the claim by the Invisible Committee that "sous quelque angle qu'on le prenne, le present est sans issue" (no matter from which angle we look at it, the present has no way out) (Invisible 2007: 7), the present does have an exit. That exit does not lead to an outside. Instead, it leads further into the present, into its historicization, to recover a space for political intervention in the face of a naturalized and, therefore, eternalized present. It leads us to grapple with the potentialities of the present to reconceptualize its meaning and generate emancipatory politics with what we have in the here and now.

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