

Towards a Spanish Green Hegemony

Article by Pepe Escrig

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For years Spain has been facing a series of deep and overlapping crises that have made instability and uncertainty the new political norm. Spanish political ecology has been trying to resist, not without pain, the onslaught of this lasting upheaval. Ahead of the general election in November, journalist Pepe Escrig analyses the changes that have taken place in Spanish society in recent years to show not just how tortuous the path has been for political ecology but also the opportunities that are now open to it.

The economic crisis

The 2008 economic crisis hit Spain with particular severity. This was partly due to the deterioration of its productive and industrial system, its lack of control over financial speculation, the banking crisis, and a political gamble for the unbridled growth of its housing bubble. The crisis brought unemployment to 25.8 per cent and, although Spain had by then become the country with the world's highest rate of empty homes, over 600 000 families were evicted.

At the time, the green political movement in Spain was struggling to merge into a single political force and was therefore in no position to propose a solid political analysis of the economic situation, let alone solutions to it. Whereas in other European countries, May 1968 had fostered the growth of environmental movements, the mobilisations that took place in Franco's Spain were mostly democratic in character. This hindered the emergence of an environmental identity that could have served as a social and electoral foundation capable of sustaining even a minimally stable Spanish Green party in the ensuing decades.

As in other nations with social democratic governments, the handling by the Socialist Party (PSOE) of the first stage of the 2008 economic crisis was based on neo-liberal positions. This resulted, for instance, in the first cuts to public spending on renewable energy sources, adopted by the very government that had so actively promoted them in the previous years. In a bipartisan system like the one prevailing in Spain at the time of the crisis, these measures gave rise to serious public disaffection and to the illusion of a neo-liberal consensus in which ideological differences were reduced to mere "technical" options for the management of the economic and budgetary policies imposed from Brussels.

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However, this post-political parenthesis of sorts was to be short lived. In 2011, as a result of the perception that the bipartisan consensus didn't offer any alternatives, the anti-austerity *Indignados* movement (also known as the 15-M movement) unexpectedly sprung up, signalling the gap between voters and elected representatives. Traditional

political identities were fading while the political system showed itself unfit to assimilate popular discontent.

The social crisis

The social crisis in Spain was a direct consequence of the economic crisis, further exacerbated by the arrival in power of the conservative People's Party (PP) following the general election of November 2011. Ordinary citizens were hit hardest by the PP's austerity policies and cuts to social benefits. Inequality grew and the neo-liberal promise of social ascent – whether through hard work or the easy accumulation of wealth that had been touted until then by a culture based on credit and quick profit – was shattered. In parallel, the new government instituted a harsh environmental counter-reform, cutting investments in clean energy and decidedly promoting fossil fuels in the form of fracking, gas and coal. Spain had abandoned the race for energy transition in Europe.

As the social crisis deepened, the 15-M protests evolved into the largest wave of social mobilisations experienced since the end of the dictatorship. With the arrival of social networks and the loosening up of traditional class identities, citizens began to organise outside traditional channels such as unions. Movements such as citizen “tides” (*mareas*) emerged, autonomously organised around specific goals. One of these movements, the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (PAH), succeeded in reflecting in its aims and narrative a widespread feeling of discontent against the system. PAH's motto, “Yes we can”, was quickly adopted as a symbol by all kinds of social movements.

Against this backdrop, the green political movement in Spain managed to unite under the EQUO political party (except in Catalonia, where the Initiative for Catalonia Greens, ICV, already existed). EQUO chose to join the protests and condemn the cuts in environmental policies while at the same time supporting social demands. However, the main green demands, those related to the environment, were only of secondary concern to a population plunged into severe social crisis. Neither was EQUO able to put forward a message that incorporated around its green positions the wide diversity of social demands, thus providing a viable alternative to the overwhelming social gloom. This was to be achieved in 2014 by Podemos, after it adopted the social and democratic demands together with the language of citizens' mobilisations. Podemos' motto: “Yes we can.”

The political crisis

Since its foundation, Podemos promoted and led the political channeling of social protests. With the concomitant rise of the liberal Citizens party (Ciudadanos) in 2015, the Spanish political landscape was unrecognisable. EQUO was having difficulties establishing itself as a relevant environmental party and, in the face of the political upheaval, looked for shelter under the umbrella of other political forces. EQUO and ICV entered into alliance strategies with other parties and, as a result, in 2015 political ecology won seats in several municipalities and even entered the governing coalitions in cities as important as Madrid, Barcelona and Valencia. Its policies on sustainable mobility, such as the “Madrid Central” project, have helped in shaping the mainstream understanding in ways that today enable a stronger projection and social support for green policies. In parallel, changes in the composition of regional governments also helped bring environmental policies to a turning point by making them increasingly relevant and less sectoral. These political changes together with the Paris Agreement have now slowly but surely placed climate change on the Spanish political agenda.

In 2016, as a result of its alliances with other forces, EQUO reached the highest level of institutional representation ever achieved in Spain by political ecology: three MPs (in the House of Deputies), one MEP, five seats in regional parliaments and over 100 municipal councillors across the country. However, the lack of a clear strategy to capitalise on its institutional presence gave rise to serious internal conflicts, as EQUO's visibility and autonomy were compromised due to its integration into larger projects. Also, while the PP managed to remain in government that year thanks to the PSOE's abstention, the parliamentary dynamics had shifted significantly. This was

evidenced, for instance, in the parliamentary debate on the European Commission's "Winter Package" on clean energy, where the PP government was shown to lag clearly behind a new parliamentary majority that favoured a much faster decarbonisation of the economy.

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Subsequently, the declaration of independence adopted by the Catalan Parliament in 2017 led to a climax in the territorial crisis that, added to the instability of the new multiple party system, triggered a serious governance crisis and generated a dynamic of blocs and reciprocal vetoes. Faced with this complex and unstable political reality, all Spanish political parties underwent internal processes of verticalisation, standardisation, exclusion of differences, increased essentialism, and the affirmation of highly masculinised hyperleaderships. This political degradation, however, was countered by the return of social mobilisation, this time by the feminist movement, with the women's strikes of 2018 and 2019 being significant milestones. While feminism influenced the political agenda and progressive parties adopted feminist language and demands, EQUO showed signs of weakness and an inability to represent a powerful and differentiated ecofeminist approach.

In 2018, the PP was convicted on corruption charges, which saw the PSOE successfully promote a motion of no confidence against the government of Mariano Rajoy. The change in government provoked a political earthquake and signalled a turning point in all government policies. With the creation of a Ministry for Ecological Transition, a new, much more transversal and ambitious ecological approach was now adopted by the central government, making possible a 180-degree turn in Spain's role in the EU's climate and energy agenda. However, political instability has so far prevented these good intentions from materialising in the form of major reforms and increased spending.

The change in government, the eruption of the feminist movement, the inflated territorial debate, and political instability all served as the breeding ground for a national-conservative reaction. In 2019, for the first time since the end of the dictatorship, a far-right party entered Spanish institutions and both PP and Ciudadanos have opted to make deals with them while radicalising their own ideological positions. For its part, the so-called "space of change", so far led by Podemos, has shown signs of increasing fatigue and fragmentation. As a result, the alliance strategy that had allowed EQUO to ride the wave of political change in 2015 is now becoming an obstacle to its internal cohesion, as it exposes the party to strong and contradictory external tensions. These circumstances ended up preventing EQUO from even running in the last European Elections, and EQUO has arrived at this electoral cycle with just one MP, no MEPs, five seats in regional parliaments and some 20 municipal councillors throughout the country.

What about the ecological crisis?

Each year in Spain air pollution causes 10 000 deaths. On top of this, Spain produces 14 million tonnes of waste, spends almost 40 000 million euros on importing fossil fuels, and fires destroy around 100 000 hectares of forest in the country every year. Desertification already affects 20 per cent of Spanish territory and threatens 75 per cent thereof.

From an essentialist environmentalist point of view, these data would reveal the undeniable existence of an ecological crisis in Spain, whose logical solution would require a political ecology approach. However, also from that standpoint, scarce environmental education and concealment of data by the media are depriving political ecology of the sort of electoral support fitting for the objective gravity of the situation. What is certain, however, is

that regardless of the extent of its dissemination, data alone can never elevate itself to the category of crisis, nor can it embody a specific political meaning. In order to be expressed politically, the ecological crisis must first have been constructed politically. With this in mind, it's time to stop shifting the blame elsewhere; it is the very weakness of Spanish political ecology that explains why the political expression of this phenomenon is taking longer to develop in Spain than in other EU countries, despite the even wider availability of scientific evidence.

However, this battle is already being fought in Spain and the expansion of a new green hegemony has gained momentum in the last year since progressive forces recovered the political initiative. It is equally being favoured by the resonance of the international media agenda, marked as it has been in the last year by climate change, Greta Thunberg's Fridays for Future movement or the Green New Deal, revamped by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. As a result, more and more political actors in Spain are focusing on the political construction of the ecological crisis in order to best position themselves as the ones leading the way out of it.

Spanish political ecology must take up the challenge to move from essentialism to constructivism, from niche to transversality, from protest to proposal, and from catastrophism to hope.

Those most clearly fighting for the leadership of green hegemony at the national level include PSOE and Podemos. The PSOE leadership has adhered to a new narrative in favour of ecological transition which is part of a process of ideological overhaul within social democracy intended to recapture the initiative in an increasingly post-industrial society. Podemos, for its part, has equally adopted a narrative that could become increasingly structural as internal voices insist that Podemos' project can no longer be based on opposition to a political system of which they are now a part, nor on the mere condemnation of the social consequences of such a system. Yet, the current governance crisis is making it difficult for this debate to move from the rhetorical stage into one of concrete policies.

Although Spanish political ecology was unable to take the lead in these matters at the national level, important sectors and actors in this evolving "space of change" have been coming ever closer to its positions from an eco-social approach and seeing the need to use ecological transition as a powerful vector of social transformation. Some of these actors were already organised in relevant regional forces of which EQUO was a part, such as Más Madrid (More Madrid), Coalició Compromís (Commitment) in Valencia, or MES (More for Majorca), and are now taking steps towards greater cooperation which are leading to the creation of a new green political force in Spain. In fact, ahead of the general election which will be repeated in November 2019 after the failure of PSOE and Podemos to form a government, some of these parties together with EQUO have already merged into the coalition Más País. In its [joint declaration](#), they set out "ecology in the center of its political action as defended by the European Green Party" and they aim to harness the potential of "the ecological just transition and the Green New Deal to become the main vector of social and political transformation in the years to come". Spanish political ecology now has a clear opportunity to open up to new sectors and expand its base in an increasingly favourable climate for the implementation of transversal green policies: from health to employment, through security, industry or equal opportunities.

It's uncertain what the future holds for Spanish political ecology, but we do know that the upcoming implementation of ambitious policies in the field of ecological transition in Spain will directly depend upon which political actor ultimately secures the leadership of the new green hegemony, on the consolidation of a favourable European and international context, and on the qualitative and quantitative influence that political ecology can yield in this new setting. To achieve such influence, Spanish political ecology must take up the challenge to move from

essentialism to constructivism, from niche to transversality, from protest to proposal, and from catastrophism to hope. In other words, it must seize the opportunity to stop being the ecological resistance in order to take the lead in a new green hegemony.



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