

Recibido: 16-03-15
Aceptado: 27-03-2015

Open peer review:
<http://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/TEKN/pages/view/opr-267>

***Podemos* as event or not:
what it looks like from Manchester**

***Podemos como un acontecimiento o no:
lo que vemos desde Manchester***

Ian Parker

University of Leicester
discourseunit@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper explores *Podemos* by way of the notion of ‘event’ as theorised by Alain Badiou, and addresses two questions that bear on the nature of *Podemos* as an ‘anti-political’ phenomenon. The first, the relation between academic discourse and political events, makes the point that both Badiou and the *Complutense group* around Iglesias intervened in the real world, and successfully so, from within the university, from within an academic frame. The second question, which concerns how we relate to events that have not happened, makes the point that the fate of *Podemos* today is intimately bound up with the outcome of the election of *Syriza* in Greece. The paper describes the positive impact of *Podemos* on Left Unity in Manchester, and argues for a non-academic engagement with these two formations, *Podemos* and *Syriza* as possible events whose character is yet to be determined and that have implications for Europe and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Event, *Podemos*, Badiou, *Syriza*, Left Unity, Manchester.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se analiza a Podemos desde la noción de “acontecimiento” teorizada por Alain Badiou y sobre la base de dos cuestiones que se relacionan con Podemos como fenómeno anti-político. En primer lugar, en lo relativo a la relación entre discurso académico y acontecimientos políticos, llegando a la conclusión de que tanto Badiou como el grupo de la Complutense que rodea a Iglesias intervinieron con éxito sobre el mundo real, desde la Universidad, desde un marco académico. La segunda cuestión tiene que ver con el modo en que nos relacionamos con acontecimientos que aun no han ocurrido. Parker concluye que el futuro de Podemos está íntimamente ligado a lo que pueda ocurrir en Grecia tras la victoria de *Syriza*. En este artículo se describe el impacto positivo que ha tenido Podemos para el “Left Unity” en Manchester y se aboga por un compromiso con ambas formaciones más allá de lo puramente académico. Podemos y *Syriza* son posibles acontecimientos cuyo carácter está aún por determinar, y cuyas implicaciones traspasan incluso las fronteras de Europa.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Acontecimiento, *Podemos*, Badiou, *Syriza*, *Left Unity*, Manchester.

When we name them significant political events we draw them into political discourse,¹ and in that way we give them a life which extends beyond the one moment when they occurred. The keyword ‘event’, marked out as a particular term attached to politics, and popularised among academicians by the philosopher Alain Badiou,² raises at least two questions about how we speak about *Podemos*. What is happening in Spain has implications for radical political organisation elsewhere, including, already, for us in Manchester. The first of the questions *Podemos* raises is a question about the relation between academic discourse and political events, and the second is a question about how we relate to events which have not yet occurred.

The first question, then, concerns a theoretical discourse about ‘being’ and ‘event’³ which we borrow from Badiou, but which is always already posed for us as beings situated inside academic institutions. The problem which this question about the status of academic discourse poses is that we are positioned in this discourse as beings who interpret politics outside the university, interpret it in much the way that a bad psychoanalyst would interpret the speech of their analysand, spelling out the meaning of their actions to them. That bad psychoanalyst is invariably modelled on the psychologist who wishes to ‘psychologise’ reality outside the university so that their interpretations are felt by their subjects to be true, and this psychologising of reality itself relies upon what has been called ‘academicisation’.⁴

Configuring the world in a way that the academic will understand it not only comforts the academic, but academicisation also fuels the fantasy that somewhere outside self-evidently deadening and self-enclosed academic discourse there is a real world which might rebel against it and give it life. It is in that sense that the fantasy of an ‘event’ outside the university functions as a consolation; there is, in some forms of ‘community psychology’ for example, a search for such events that might challenge, mobilise and thereby provide a reason for the

¹ <<http://fiimg.com/2015/02/22/discourse-of-transformation-and-freedom/>>

² <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/alain-badiou/biography/>>

³ <<https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/alain-badiou-event/>>

⁴ <https://www.academia.edu/4093105/The_Academy_of_Everyday_Life_Psychology_hauntology_and_psychanalysis>

existence of the radical academic gazing earnestly and romantically at it through their office window.

We need to notice straightaway that Badiou himself, who graduated from the Union des communistes de France marxiste-léniniste to the École Normale Supérieure, is an unusual academic, involved for some years as an activist in L'Organisation Politique for example, but is an academic nonetheless. The involvement with politics which is that of 'being' an academic writing about 'events' is one that still entails, therefore, an involvement that reaches out through the window and tries to embrace what is going on outside. The 'problematic' of this theoretical discourse – that is, the constellation of issues that this discourse organises itself around – is precisely how to connect our 'being' with an 'event'. Furthermore, perhaps, how thus to change our privileged academic 'being' (and that is something that includes within it more than a little shame and guilt if we are revolutionaries) through our inclusion in the 'event' we identify (and want to identify with). This theoretical discourse wants to interpret the world and by changing it (which seems Marxist enough), but (and this 'but' introduces an element of uncertainty into its Marxist ambition) to change the world through the frame of a theoretical discourse.

This is also the problematic of *Podemos*, but with a difference. It is the problematic of *Podemos* because that project was precisely that of academics in political science around Pablo Iglesias Turrión from inside the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. They reached out the window to connect with the Indignados and, despite Pablo Iglesias' own political history as former member of the Unión de Juventudes Comunistas de España (the youth wing of the Spanish Communist Party), with that movement understood by them, and by many of the participants themselves, to be a form of 'anti-politics'.⁵ Iglesias' own academic work⁶ includes research and writing in the fields of political and social theory and in psychoanalysis, and there is clearly an engagement with theoretical debate that led the Complutense group to organise their own theoretical discourse as one which sought to intervene at the level of discourse itself; that is, to draw upon 'post-Marxist' discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in order to reconfigure the Indignados movement as what Laclau and Mouffe would recognise as a form of 'radical populism'.⁷

⁵ <<http://left-flank.org/2014/11/05/explaining-podemos-1-15-m-counter-politics/>>

⁶ <<https://ucm.academia.edu/PabloIglesiasTurrión>>

⁷ <<http://left-flank.org/2014/11/14/understanding-podemos-23-radical-populism/>>

This political-theoretical strategy entailed sidelining the post-Trotskyist Izquierda Anticapitalista who had played a key role in building *Podemos* while insisting upon the properly political aspects of the Indignados movement, and *Izquierda Anticapitalista* were themselves so keen to remain involved in *Podemos* as a party that now prohibits dual-membership that they have recently dissolved their own organisation so that they can continue participating as an ‘Anticapitalistas’⁸ movement with the Iglesias group in command. While changing the world through the frame of a theoretical discourse is the same problematic as that of the search for and celebration of an ‘event’ that might also change the ‘being’ of Badiou and his academic followers who aim find it outside the university, the difference is that *Podemos* has so far succeeded in implanting its discourse in the wider political field, succeeded in making its ‘anti-political’ discourse resonate with an ‘anti-political’ suspicion of the anti-austerity movement. That very success may be its undoing, and the attempt to maintain its position in lead poll-position up to the elections in Spain that may take place any time up to December this year has led *Podemos* to propose policies that take what may be a fatal step from ‘populism’ to ‘commonsense’.⁹

For Badiou, an ‘event’ calls for a repeated evocation of it and of what has changed, including what has changed for those subject to it, which is termed ‘fidelity’ to the event. The scope of this theoretical discourse can be seen in the way that Badiou describes such ‘events’ as occurring not only in the field of politics, but also in the fields of science, art and love (where Badiou’s own fidelity to Lacanian psychoanalytic discourse is adapted and modified). There is discussion among Badiou’s followers as to whether the Russian October 1917 Revolution or the Paris May 1968 protests or the Greek January 2015 election of *Syriza* counts as an event. But more important than that is the frame of the discussion, so that what is described is always already interpreted within its own theoretical discourse, even where, in the case of the election of *Syriza* for example, we know that there are performative¹⁰ consequences of the description for what might happen next.

The danger then is two-fold, for along with the theoretical framing of politics which hopes for an event to occur there is the emergence of something in politics that is not an event as such but something that appears in the place of the event which then all too easily seduces and reassures the academics. Might we see the rapid growth of *Podemos* in this light, and the shift

⁸ <<http://www.anticapitalistas.org/>>

⁹ <<http://left-flank.org/2015/01/02/understanding-podemos-33-commonsense-policies/>>

¹⁰ <<http://fiimg.com/2015/01/26/performativity-what-next-for-greece-and-us/>>

of position of its architect in a movement that is now, against the hopes of its members turning itself into a political party, into a ‘Secretary-General’ with a representative function in the European Parliament? And from that position, from the position of someone who was an academic and is now a ‘politician’, the world looks a little different, looks perhaps less like a world where events might take place and more like a world that is waiting for policies to be promised in a general election.

This is the first of the questions the emergence of *Podemos* raises, the question about the relation between academic discourse and political events, but there is closely connected to this question still the second question, which is about how we relate to events which have not yet occurred. If the status of the election in Greece of *Syriza* as an event or not¹¹ is still uncertain, what is clear that it is already playing a role as precursor to the possible victory of *Podemos* in Spain. This transnational dimension of *Podemos* is what gives it a significance beyond Spain and, by the same token, it is the transnational dimension of the victory of *Syriza* that gives it a significance as something that may at least stand in for an event for now so that something that really counts as an event might happen in the future. The philosopher Immanuel Kant once remarked that the French Revolution (which he celebrated) was of moment not so much for those who actually participated in it but for the enthusiasm it produced among its supporters across Europe.

Something of that is true in the case of *Syriza* which already has a double-function for *Podemos*, and which begins to address the question as to how we relate to events that have not happened yet. As could be seen in the massive *Podemos* demonstrations against austerity and in solidarity with *Syriza* that took place in Madrid immediately after the Greek election, whatever deal the finance minister Yanis Varoufakis¹² (who has never actually been a member of *Syriza*) strikes with the Trioka, the election of *Syriza* is the promise of the election of *Podemos* in Spain. And, at the same time, *Syriza* is desperately buying time, waiting for the election of *Podemos*, waiting for something to happen elsewhere in Europe that will finally, retroactively, make it possible to say that that the election of one, and then so of both, was an event. As the deadly space between the two elections opens up, a space which may be almost a year if it lasts from January in Greece to December in Spain, the space for either election to operate as event is closing down.

¹¹ <<http://www.analyzegreece.gr/notes/item/111-peter-bratsis-syriza-from-hope-to-event>>

¹² <<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2015/feb/18/yanis-varoufakis-how-i-became-an-erratic-marxist>>

While we in Manchester attempt to interpret these past and future events, and build solidarity with both, we are also in the lead-up to our own general election in the United Kingdom in May, which by no stretch of the imagination would count as an ‘event’ in Badiou’s theory. A Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government has carried out brutal cuts in welfare services while privatising the National Health Service, and it promises to cut and privatise even more if it wins the election. The Labour Party, which itself introduced many of the neoliberal measures now being pursued by the government, also promises to ‘balance the books’, and so poses no radical alternative. One pro-austerity party will be replaced by another, or there will be a combination of pro-austerity parties who will ensure that gap between rich and poor, a gap which increased under the previous Labour government and has increased even more under this government during the economic crisis, will get even bigger. Small right-wing parties will feed off the despair of the poor and turn their anger against immigrants, including against tens of thousands fleeing austerity from other parts of Europe, including from Spain and Greece. And even smaller left-wing parties, such as Left Unity¹³ which was founded after a call from Ken Loach to defend the National Health Service following the release of his radical documentary account of its birth ‘The Spirit of ‘45’,¹⁴ stand no chance of getting MPs into parliament.

Left Unity Manchester branch has struggled to maintain itself as a group that includes revolutionaries as well as reformists, but we are not involved as academics, and many of us are not academics at all. We have had many people come to meetings and then drift away because they did not like to be associated with the old revolutionary left, and we have had attempts by some revolutionary left groups to expose the reformists. One debate we had in the Manchester branch was whether we should even refer to ‘revolutionaries’ and ‘reformists’ in our ranks or whether we should avoid such a discourse in favour of a different discourse, and that second option was, predictably, seen by some revolutionaries as itself being a reformist discourse. Some of us who have attempted to build Left Unity as a broad organisation which tries, as it claims, ‘to do politics differently’ have looked to the experience of Izquierda Anticapitalista (which for those of us in the Fourth International are also our comrades in our sister organisation), and equally predictably, that has meant that we have been accused as being on the ‘right’ of Left Unity.

¹³ <<http://leftunity.org/>>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_c86Gwsb5LY>

After a series of internal crises, something of a little event occurred for us, the appearance of *Círculo Podemos* in Manchester bringing together Spanish émigré members and supporters, and it was, as Badiou might have said, love at first sight. At least it inspired us to put on a quite large public meeting co-organised by Left Unity and *Podemos* in Manchester, and then another larger event with reports from the election in Greece, again with speakers from *Podemos* and then a meeting with a speaker from Left Unity, *Podemos* and *Syriza* on the same platform. *Círculo Podemos* has re-energised Left Unity not only in Manchester, but nationally, and a 'Podemos Platform' has been formed inside Left Unity.

That move, of taking 'Podemos' as one of the names for different politics inside Left Unity, has then been condemned by some who define themselves as 'communist' as being a 'fad'. Maybe that is exactly the alternative term that can be given to an event that has not happened as it should have done (the election of *Syriza*, for example) or an event that has not happened yet (the election of *Podemos*, as we hope), but that scornful use of the alternative term 'fad' – a passing fancy, fashion, short-lived trend that will soon disappear and be forgotten – names too quickly as a failure something that has not even failed. It has not succeeded, that is for sure, for the event it promises has not occurred, but another response while we are waiting in the deadly space between the elections in Greece and Spain would be to keep working to keep the space open.

And so, here in the alternative to an event that has not yet happened and as an alternative to the academic fantasy of an event outside its own theoretical discourse, there is a task of solidarity by those of us who Badiou and his followers gaze upon hopefully waiting for something to happen that they can then interpret. Our task of solidarity is a political task, not 'anti-political' as defined by the political scientists, and it is eventful, composed of a series of activities that link us with Greece and Spain, and which also turn enthusiasm for radical change that is flowing backwards and forwards across Europe into a broader international response to the global crisis of capitalism. For just as Greek revolutionaries need their Spanish comrades, and vice versa, and just as we in Manchester look to Greece and Spain, so what might be called an event by the academics will also bang down the walls that divide them from the outside world, and might also break open Fortress Europe.¹⁵

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_c86Gwsb5LY>