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## CHAPTER 9

# Anti-Communism and the Mainstream Online Press in Spain: Criticism of Podemos as a Strategy of a Two-Party System in Crisis

Aurora Labio-Bernal

### 9.1 Introduction

The year 2016 will be remembered in Spain for a prolonged electoral crisis marked by the elections of December 2015, the repeat elections in June of the following year and the looming threat of a third call to the ballot box, which ultimately did not materialise. The inability to form a government after the first vote was due to the absence of a majority for either of the two traditional major parties as a result of the rise of other political forces, such as the Ciudadanos and Podemos parties. Both these groups emerged as alternatives to the two dominant parties, seizing a place of their own on the traditional ideological spectrum: Ciudadanos drawing votes on the right; and Podemos turning into the voice of many voters on the left. It is important to bear in mind that

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Podemos was born in the context of the 15-M protest movement and the public discontent with the austerity policies of recent years. Established as a party in January 2014, just three months later it took five seats in the European elections and won 69 in the national elections of 2015. In the repeat elections in June 2016, Podemos formed a coalition with Izquierda Unida, winning 71 seats.

The rise of Podemos, along with the fragmentation of the Spanish political spectrum into different ideological forces, has precipitated a crisis for the ‘governmental monopoly’<sup>1</sup> maintained by the two major parties, the *Partido Popular* (People’s Party, or PP) and the *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (Socialist Party, or PSOE). These special circumstances in the political life of the country have led mainstream newspapers to adopt positions in defence of the establishment, while taking a critical line with Podemos based on its classification as a radical leftist and/or ideologically communist political party. In light of this situation, I believe it particularly interesting to apply the concept of the fifth filter in Herman and Chomsky’s<sup>2</sup> propaganda model to the case of the online editions of the main Spanish newspapers. Despite the view that ‘anti-communism’ could be deemed a somewhat outdated notion<sup>3</sup> since the fall of the Berlin Wall, this idea has taken on a certain relevance to the media agenda today and demonstrates the contemporary validity of the propaganda model.<sup>4</sup> Although Herman himself has acknowledged<sup>5</sup> that they added free market ideology to the fifth filter in the 2002 edition, he also asserted that the concept of anti-communism as a value of the establishment continued intact. On the other hand, some authors speak of the ‘prevailing ideology’<sup>6</sup> to expand the framework to include super-structural aspects that represent a dissident voice in media messages. Although I agree with this view, I argue and will demonstrate in this paper that anti-communism has seen a powerful re-emergence in Western countries due to the crisis of traditional parties and the threat to the status quo.

Thus, in Spain the association of Podemos with the regimes of Venezuela, Bolivia, or Cuba has been a common strategy in the speeches of different political leaders as a way of attacking the new force, but also in the news stories and editorial opinions of Spain’s major newspapers. The vocabulary which, explicitly or implicitly, revives communism as the enemy of the Western democratic order has flooded the pages of the newspapers. The origin of this behaviour in news publications is rooted in the relationship with the other filters listed by Herman and Chomsky, as the two-party system currently in crisis bears a close relationship with the ownership interests of the media corporations and their connections to the political and business elite.

## 9.2 Anti-communism Revived in the Neoliberal Era

When considering how Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model may be revised and/or updated, it is always more interesting to try to avoid repeating previous studies and offer a perspective that takes recent events into account as

much as possible. Although it is obvious that we cannot compartmentalise the filters identified by the two authors to describe the propaganda strategies of the establishment, I have decided here to focus on one of them in particular, anti-communism, applying it to the current political reality in Spain and the rise of a new party, Podemos, a leftist movement that has burst onto the political landscape as an alternative to the traditional parties.

As a premise for this study, I argue that Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model continues to be perfectly valid for analysing the ideology of the media, broadening the scope of application to contexts outside of the United States. I concur with other authors<sup>7</sup> who argue that with the increasing complexity of the media industry and the intensification of capitalist ideals in the new neoliberal era, the Propaganda Model reveals the mutual support the different filters provide one another as the means whereby the establishment continues to control society through the manufacturing of consent.<sup>8</sup>

According to this line of argument, it follows that the dominant ideology operating as a superstructure of the system would repress or even silence any dissenting voice. But to understand how discourses are created, it is essential to analyse the communicative structure at global and national levels. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the context of corporate oligopoly, despite the crises that the big media groups have been suffering in recent years,<sup>9</sup> continues to be one of the basic features of the media industry. Ownership of the media thus remains in the hands of the same elite that share connections with the political and financial powers. As suggested in a recent study by various authors in the anthology *Global Media Giants*:

By ascribing to a relational definition of power, we argued that economic, political, and cultural power are all woven into the fabric of media power precisely because media corporations are situated within these spheres, but they also have the ability to influence these spheres in different ways.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to remember that for Herman and Chomsky the ideology of anti-communism was the fifth filter of the Propaganda Model of the Western system. It is obvious that this issue was much more palpable during the existence of the Soviet Union and the first years after the Cuban Revolution; however, anti-communism has regained relevance on the media agenda today due to the new use that the political classes themselves have been making of it. During the US elections, Donald Trump described Bernie Sanders, one of the Democratic candidates for the White House, as a 'communist'.<sup>11</sup> The shadow of the radical left was also invoked by Tony Blair when he referred to Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of Britain's Labour Party, as a 'populist politician' of the left, and a 'dangerous experiment' that represented 'a big challenge for the [political] centre'.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, in the French elections of 2017, the conservative newspaper *Le Figaro* described the leftist candidate Jean-Luc Mélechon as the French Hugo Chávez.<sup>13</sup> For several days

the campaign headlines continued to depict the French politician as the defender of the 'Bolivarian regime'<sup>14</sup> or as the 'apostle of the revolutionary dictators.'<sup>15</sup>

These examples make it clear that any effort to push the boundaries of socialism is quickly identified by the establishment as communism, an approach which, according to Herman and Chomsky, constitutes the creation of an enemy to the order, as will be demonstrated in the analysis of the sample chosen for this paper. But first, it would be timely here to offer a description of the genesis of Podemos as an alternative party emerging in the context of a profound economic, political and social crisis in Spain.

### 9.3 Birth of Podemos in the Two-Party Context

In February 2017, the journalist Pablo Pombo published an article in the digital newspaper *El Confidencial* with the headline 'Podemos becomes the Communist Party 2.0.'<sup>16</sup> It was not the first time that this term was used to describe the movement that arose out of the 15-M protests; a few months earlier, José Carlos Díez in *El País* published an article with the title 'Populism: Communism 2.0.'<sup>17</sup> In both cases, the reporters dismissed Podemos as the political heirs to the Communist Party of Spain and promulgators of old and outdated policies. Such references were nothing new in the media's treatment of Podemos and its leaders, despite the fact that Pablo Iglesias himself has denied any political identification with communism on repeated occasions.

The insistence of the Spanish media on linking Podemos to communism has from the outset taken a biased view of the party as being against the established order. In this respect, the idea of the 'communist peril' represented by Podemos has been accompanied by another term: populism. Indeed, this word was chosen as the word of the year in Spain by the Fundación del Español Urgente (Foundation of Emerging Spanish), whose coordinator, Javier Lascuráin, described it as applying to 'politicians of all ideologies but with the same trait of making an emotional appeal to the public and offering simple solutions to complex problems.'<sup>18</sup> Podemos would thus be depicted in the media as a movement that is both communist and populist, definitions that conveyed a markedly negative image to society.

To understand this portrayal of Podemos by the mainstream media, we need to examine what the birth of the party has represented, and what its platform and ideology have been. Emmanuel Rodríguez López<sup>19</sup> has studied the civic-political trajectory from the protest movements of the '*indignados*' in May 2011, also known as 15-M, to the creation of Podemos, in January 2014. It seems undeniable that the birth of the party led by Pablo Iglesias was the necessary culmination of the public discontent in the period of economic crisis, welfare cutbacks and sharply rising unemployment.<sup>20</sup> The ultimate idea of not trusting the institutions of the State or the traditional parties to turn the situation around was summed up perfectly in the declaration '*no nos representan*' ('they don't represent us') chanted by the crowds at all the demonstrations. As Rodríguez López suggests:

15-M and the wave of movements that followed it seemed to have been based on a political critique that went further than the traditional (leftist) criticism of the 'regime'. Unlike such criticism, which viewed the inadequacies of Spanish democracy as the result of the continued presence of certain underlying elements of Francoism (from the political class and the judiciary to state terrorism and the 'governing style'), the new criticism viewed the parties of the left as major players in the political regime.<sup>21</sup>

Out of these demonstrations, 15-M would develop its own network organization through meetings, the so-called citizens' circles or discussion groups, online mobilization and horizontal decision-making. Citizens became activists, but without adopting specific symbols or ideologies, other than their outrage over the problems related to issues such as public housing, healthcare and education or the lack of jobs for young people. This empowerment of the citizenry needed to be channelled, and in this respect organizations like *Democracia Real Ya* played an important role; however, it was necessary to establish a political party to move from civil protest to political struggle. This would be the task taken up by Podemos as of January 2014.

The creation of a new political force to run in the European elections of May 2014 was proposed only a few days earlier with the presentation of the *Manifiesto Mover Ficha. Convertir la indignación en cambio político* ('Make a Move: Turning Outrage into Political Change'). As Rodríguez López explains, the project was led by Pablo Iglesias, who in only two days obtained the 50,000 signatures needed to endorse the initiative. José Ignacio Torreblanca<sup>22</sup> has studied the profile of Podemos voters to draw some rather interesting conclusions. Torreblanca suggests that Podemos has captured the votes of abstainers and generally apathetic citizens all over Spain. He also supports the view that they are votes of discontent, from the moment the party obtained higher percentages in poorer neighbourhoods and regions hardest hit by the crisis. With respect to age, it appears that Podemos has won support from every generation, although it has been more successful with voters under thirty. In relation to academic level, Podemos voters tend to be among the most highly educated. In ideological terms, Pablo Iglesias' party has seized votes from the parties on the left: Izquierda Unida and the Socialist Party (PSOE), although it has also captured the attention of voters in the center. Geographically, Podemos has been more successful in cities than in small towns, and, although it has voters all over Spanish territory, its biggest support is located in Madrid, Asturias, Aragón, and the Balearic and Canary Islands.

#### 9.4 Analysis of the Sample

For this study, I have developed a content analysis that I will apply using a series of categories for the period running from the birth of Podemos in January 2014 to the Spanish general elections in June 2016. The categories will be applied to the

online versions of two major newspapers in Spain: *El País* and *ABC*, two papers representative of the two-party political system. Furthermore, these two periodicals are owned by two large media corporations, Prisa and Vocento respectively, both connected to the national and international corporate and financial apparatus. In the case of the owner of *El País*, the company Prisa, its stakeholders include the British investment fund Amber Capital, as well as Caixa Bank, Telefónica and Banco Santander. A block of shares is also in the hands of the Polanco family, which in turn is associated with organizations such as the Trilateral Commission, where we find another prominent family in the media world, the Ybarra family. The Ybarras are related to the owner of the other newspaper under study, *ABC*, in the hands of Vocento. One of its members, Emilio Ybarra, along with his brother Santiago, controls Vocento and is a member of the Trilateral Commission, which also includes figures such as Ana Patricia Botín, Chairwoman of Banco Santander Central Hispano. Meanwhile, another family with a presence in Vocento, the Bergareches, have an influence that extends to the oil giant Cepsa and the infrastructure and services operator Ferrovial, as Santiago Bergareche has held or currently holds various executive posts in all these companies.

The above information is provided to place the media outlets under study here in their political and corporate context, in order to understand that their message is directly related to the interests of the group to which they belong and the system of which they form a part. The analysis of news stories published in *El País* and *ABC* about Podemos is thus connected to the corporate structure of Prisa and Vocento as companies present in the framework of the market economy. Anti-communism therefore operates as a variable to convey a negative image of Podemos to the public. The corpus of the sample is made up of 150 news articles (70 from *ABC* and 80 from *El País*) from the period indicated above retrieved by means of key word searches in the digital archives of both newspapers. These key words constitute the references for the following categories of my content analysis:

- Podemos and Venezuela. As will be shown, both newspapers have repeatedly linked the party to the government of Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro to raise doubts about the democratic nature of Podemos and its leaders. The variables in this category include repeated references to alleged illegal financing of Podemos by the Venezuelan government (the legal proceedings for which have been dismissed by the Spanish courts as many as seven times)<sup>23</sup>, as well as the identification of Pablo Iglesias or Juan Carlos Monedero with a regime described as a dictatorship and a violator of human rights.
- Podemos and its relationship with countries with governments of the so-called 'radical left'. Principally, a connection would be made with Cuba, and in so doing, with communism. But this would also extend to other nations and leaders like Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Alexis Tsipras in Greece.
- Podemos and countries considered to form part of the 'axis of evil'. The term was of course coined by George W. Bush in 2002 to refer to enemy states of

the West. Specifically, it referred to Iraq, Iran and North Korea. For the case that concerns us here, the main link made is with Iran.

- Podemos, explicit communism and populism. In this category, I will analyse the terminology used to identify Podemos directly with the communist party, or with Marxism or any of its derivatives, including anti-establishment characteristics. Directly associated with this and as a means of attempting to discredit the new political movement, there are constant references to Podemos being a 'populist' party. In this respect, I adopt the approach of Vicenç Navarro, who considers that the 'term "populism" has no scientific value and is used as an insult by the Spanish and European establishments to define any movement they deem a threat or that does not have their approval.'<sup>24</sup> The negative references to Podemos and its supposedly populist character are frequent in the newspapers studied.

Having defined the categories and variables, I will next offer a qualitative analysis with certain quantitative data. Firstly, it is important to note that most of the news articles that link Podemos to communism are based on the party's relationship with the government of Venezuela. In the case of *ABC*, 60% of the samples studied contained news on this topic, while in the case of *El País* it was a little higher, at 62.5%. The main content of these articles is related to the idea that Venezuela is a communist-style dictatorship and that its leaders, both Hugo Chávez previously and Nicolás Maduro today, are tyrants who wield power on their own. This relationship is made by the media sources studied either through the repetition of statements by other political leaders or through the disclosure of documents that allegedly demonstrate financial ties between the Venezuelan government and Podemos. Some examples of this strategy can even be found in the headlines, such as one in *ABC* on 23 June 2016: 'Rajoy responds to Iglesias: 'Spain is not Venezuela.' The PP leader assesses the statements of the Podemos leader on the security of the voting process.'<sup>25</sup> Another of the fundamental issues associated with the long shadow cast by the Venezuelan government over Podemos has to do with the financial backing which it allegedly received in the Chávez era. The misinformation began with the publication of headlines like the one appearing in *ABC* on 25 February 2015: 'Venezuelan Government and CEPS accused of illegal financing of Podemos.'<sup>26</sup> The theory of the newspaper has always been that Podemos was financed by consultancy services provided by the Centre for Political and Social Studies (CEPS, for its initials in Spanish) prior to the existence of Podemos, but in which some of its future leaders participated, including Pablo Iglesias himself, Iñigo Errejón, and Juan Carlo Monedero. It is not a case of false information, but of information taken out of context and a lack of evidence. There were payments for these services that met all legal requirements, and it was never demonstrated that they were used to finance the party. In fact, *ABC* itself recognised that it was Venezuela's main opposition party that had made the accusation of 'alleged illegal financing' of Podemos.



*El País* took a similar line, repeating the story of the payment of Podemos leaders by the Venezuelan government. Although it did not directly claim that this was a case of illegal financing, it did adopt the same theory as *ABC*. Some of the news articles published in *El País*, such as an article on 17 June 2014, ran with headlines like ‘Foundation related to Podemos charged Chávez 3.7 million euros over 10 years,’<sup>27</sup> or attempted to establish a direct connection with one of the founders of Podemos, such as the story on March 1, 2015, stating that ‘*El Nacional* links Monedero to payments of 3.2 million euros. The Venezuelan newspaper claims that the co-founder of Podemos took payments from a *Chavista* think tank of which he was a director.’<sup>28</sup> Days prior to the elections of June 2016, *El País* brought up the topic once again with a news story with the headline: ‘Venezuelan Assembly investigates financing of Podemos by *Chavismo*.’<sup>29</sup>

The negative impact of the media allegations of the financing of Podemos by Venezuela was intensified with the alleged involvement of another country: Iran. As mentioned above, this country is one of the nations classified as enemies of the West within the ‘axis of evil’. The validity of the anti-communist filter, adapted to the current era through the ‘us versus them’ binary,<sup>30</sup> is reinforced with the inclusion of Iran as one of the supporters and financiers of Podemos. Both *ABC* and *El País* would corroborate this link in their news stories and opinion pieces to characterise Podemos’ leaders as heretics against the system. The difference between the two media sources in relation to the Podemos-Iran connection lies in the focus of attention in each case. In the case of *ABC*, the focus is placed on the money received by Pablo Iglesias from Tehran for his work as a presenter on the program *Fort Apache* for the Madrid-based Iranian network HispanTV.<sup>31</sup> According to *ABC*, this network was sponsored by ‘the Iranian government in the final years of the presidency of the Islamist conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to influence Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries.’ The article also claims that this alleged financing is being investigated by the Economic and Fiscal Crime Unit of the National Police. This story from January 2016 would continue to be cited in the months that followed, with *ABC* directly asserting that the birth of Podemos had been ‘sponsored’<sup>32</sup> by Venezuela and Iran, with captions like ‘Chavistas and Ayatollahs have contributed more than 6 million euros to the growth of the party.’

In the case of *El País*, the presence of Iran takes more of a political focus in an effort to demonstrate that its link to Podemos is an attempt to undermine the foundations of democracy in Spain. In this case, the newspaper uses opinion columns to promulgate this theory, like the article penned by Ángel Mas in February 2016, in which he warns of Iran’s interest ‘in destabilizing a Western democracy in the heart of Europe.’<sup>33</sup> He goes on to argue that:

[...] the party that has benefited from the support of a regime like that does not even feel the need to conceal it from voters, who in any mature democracy would run screaming from the possibility of being associated with such a brutal theocracy.

Equally critical of Pablo Iglesias is Ignacio Martín Blanco, for whom:

[...] it is abominable to listen to someone who aspires to be your nation's prime minister, or at least deputy prime minister, acknowledging unashamedly that he has collaborated with a theocratic regime that stones women and homosexuals, with the sole objective of destabilizing our country from within.<sup>34</sup>

Martín Blanco takes an even stronger tone when he asserts that:

[...] instead of accepting the rules of the democratic game, Iglesias expresses his determination to take drastic measures, with no consideration whatsoever for political pluralism, and to join forces with Iran and Venezuela against their common adversary, which is none other than constitutional Spain regardless of whether it is governed by the PP or the PSOE.

Beyond the question of financing, the idea that Podemos is a force working against the democratic order due to its proximity to radical ideologies also appears in relation to other countries of Latin America and other European leaders who have offered alternatives to the prevailing two-party system. Specifically, it is also common to read of connections between Pablo Iglesias or other members of Podemos and leaders like Evo Morales, as asserted in October 2014, when *ABC* published a news story that cites the Bolivian president as suggesting that 'Spain should be the door for Bolivia to enter Europe,' which can be achieved 'with brothers like Pablo Iglesias.' It should be highlighted that, although apparently a news article reporting the statements of Evo Morales, the interest lies in the fact that the Bolivian president himself is a dissident force according to the power structures and the media establishment. The researcher Manuel Rodríguez Illana has published a study on this, based on his doctoral dissertation, in which he concludes that *ABC* is the Spanish newspaper that is most hostile in its treatment of news on Evo Morales, to such an extent that he could be classified as a 'devil of the media'.<sup>35</sup> This theory seems to be supported by an analysis of an interview published by this newspaper with the Bolivian colonel Germán Cardona, with the headline 'Germán Cardona: The Bolivian and Venezuelan military exports cocaine on official planes'.<sup>36</sup> The interview, which attempts to uncover a cocaine trafficking network, contains two moments that reflect the negative treatment of the Bolivian president and the contaminating effect of this bias on Podemos. When Cardona is asked whether Evo Morales is involved in cocaine trafficking, the colonel replies: 'I cannot accuse him directly, but Evo is the maximum leader of the coca growers and everything that happens in the Chapare, in the crop regions and cocaine production goes through him.' The second and more disturbing moment in the interview occurs when Cardona is asked about the possible entry of cocaine by drug cartels using political influences. Cardona answers:

The cartel wants the Podemos party to take over the Government of Spain so that they can open a door for direct entry of cocaine into Europe. My sources tell me, 'Colonel, the MAS (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*, Evo Morales' party) is going to have its president in Spain; we have a party now; Evo is financing brother Pablo (Iglesias), he has been to the Chapare, our brother president brought him here.' I asked whether money was given to Pablo Iglesias and they told me no, that it is given 'to an organization in Spain'. My informant assures me that Evo Morales says that with the 'MAS' party (Podemos), we are going to get our products directly into Spain, that 'brother Pablo has said so' (Evo Morales had received Pablo Iglesias in Santa Cruz the previous September). I asked whether they were going to take advantage of this legal trade to get cocaine in and he told me 'possibly'.

This serious accusation by the newspaper *ABC* has its political parallel in the praise which, according to other writers for the newspaper, the leaders of Podemos heap on countries like Cuba. Thus we have the words of Mayte Alcarazen in June 2014, discussing Juan Carlos Monedero, one of the founders of Podemos:

Knowing that Mr Monedero considers that the repression, the execution of dissidents and the lack of the most basic elements of democracy in Cuba are, as he revealed yesterday, 'situations that need to improve', I have reached a conclusion. Cuba is the model.<sup>37</sup>

Also following this line of argument is Isabel San Sebastián, who in April 2016, only a few weeks before the elections, asserted:

Podemos is not a typical democratic force, comparable to the PSOE or even to Izquierda Unida. It does not defend ideological positions compatible with pluralism. It does not even take the trouble to conceal its true nature by raising its voice to condemn the unrelenting persecution suffered by the opposition in Venezuela or Cuba.<sup>38</sup>

Also included in this Bolivarian axis of evil is Ecuador. Thus, as if it were a criminal act, in December 2015 *ABC* featured the headline: 'One of Iglesias' deputies worked for eight years for Correa.' In the body of the article we find references to the similarities between the Ecuadorean president and Pablo Iglesias, after which the newspaper chose to insert the following:

The political leader Diego Ordóñez (center-right) commented to *ABC* that 'Podemos' alliance with the Bolivarian regimes is parasitic and the impact is felt by Venezuelan and Ecuadorean citizens, who suffer the loss of their civil liberties and impoverishment due to the populist recipes that have already proven to be pernicious in the handling of the Greek crisis.'

This manifestly hostile attitude toward Podemos and its leaders by linking it to socialist Latin American countries appears to be somewhat more moderate in the case of *El País*, although the association of the party with communist principles is still present. One example of this is a column written by Enrique Collado Pérez entitled: ‘Castro and Iglesias: Starting Over’, with the subheading: ‘Podemos isn’t proposing anything new. 60 years later it offers a clear parallel with the postulates of Castro’s Cuba.’<sup>39</sup> It is true that the identification of Podemos with the Cuban regime is made mostly by its columnists, as also demonstrated by a piece penned in May 2015 by Ernesto Ekaizer in response to the departure of Juan Carlos Monedero from the party, in which he suggests: ‘Monedero’s letter oozes nostalgia. It gives the impression that Monedero identifies with Ernesto Che Guevara when he left Fidel Castro’s Cuba.’<sup>40</sup> The suggestion of alignment with Cuba and other countries within the socialist orbit even leads some reporters, such as Paulina Gamus, to speculate on what would happen if a party like Podemos, which she describes as a ‘Tyrannosaurus’, were to come to power:

The essential ingredient for the victory of a Tyrannosaurus is resentment. Those seeking to achieve it must foment rage, envy and a desire for revenge against the politicians, who are responsible for the fact that you, them and I have a hard life. When the Tyrannosaurus comes to power, it doesn’t empower anybody except itself and its clique. In its speeches it had already announced, without many noticing, that a break with democracy was needed. It thus proceeds to destroy the institutions that guarantee civil rights and freedoms, and applies the same economic recipes that sank Cuba, that have sunk Argentina time and again, and that are now sinking Venezuela in the deepest pit of the most shameful misery.<sup>41</sup>

The apocalyptic tone taken with Podemos goes to its furthest extreme in discussions of the danger it poses to the established order when it is also linked to two other issues: populism and radical leftism, or directly to communism. Clear examples of this linkage can be found in both newspapers. Thus, in an article announcing the publication of the book *El engaño populista (The Populist Deception)* by Gloria Álvarez and Axel Kaiser, in May 2016 *ABC* published the headline: ‘A Podemos government would be catastrophic.’<sup>42</sup> A few days earlier, the newspaper had already begun promoting the book and criticizing Podemos when it published an article under the headline ‘The five pillars of communist populism’, which includes quotes from the aforementioned authors like this one:

The Bolivarian movement sweeping through Latin America does not belong to the leftist tradition, say Kaiser and Álvarez; it is pure populism. The leader of Podemos, like the presidents whom he has taken as his model, ‘has deliberately fostered a great deception, which is the promise of wellbeing for all with ideas and political projects whose only outcome would be the destruction of any chance of progress and freedom for the people.’<sup>43</sup>

According to *ABC*, in addition to Latin American populism, there is another European model, embodied in the figure of Alexis Tsipras in Greece and of Beppe Grillo in Italy. These are examples of leftist populists, but the break with the two-party system also appears, according to *ABC*, on the right in Marine Le Pen in France, and Nigel Farage in the United Kingdom. On this same spectrum of so-called populism, *ABC* decides to include all these leaders, thereby engaging in an ideological simplification typical of the commercial logic of the mainstream media. This is reinforced with the help of certain opinion pieces in the paper, such as one written by Ramón Pérez Maura, who talks directly of the ‘communists’ of Podemos in the following way:

The tension we have seen this week between the Iglesias and Errejón factions in Podemos brings to mind the old days of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party, which in the early twentieth century faced up against Lenin’s Bolsheviks and Yuli Martov’s Mensheviks.<sup>44</sup>

On other occasions, however, it is the paper’s news stories themselves that speak boldly of communism in their references to the new party. A few days prior to the elections of 2016, *ABC* ran the headline: ‘This is how Podemos is camouflaging its communist plan.’<sup>45</sup> And in the body of the article, the conservative journalist identified this as ‘taking power, putting communism into practice and establishing a new “constitutional process” that will topple the current constitutional system.’

*El País* also uses its columnists to make the same comparison and association between populism, Marxism and post-Marxism, as can be seen in a column by Héctor E. Schamis, who argues: ‘The so-called “populism” of this century in the end is profoundly authoritarian, resulting in a kind of Stalinist restoration.’<sup>46</sup> Other authors, like Antonio Elorza, decide that it is better to link the ‘populism’ of Podemos with the idea of ‘anti-systems’ intended to ‘dismantle a fragile democratic State.’<sup>47</sup> But without doubt the most explicit example in *El País* in this sense is the previously mentioned article titled ‘Populism: Communism 2.0’, by José Carlos Díez, who asserts that:

In Europe, populism is unfeasible within the democratic and legal framework of the EU. Syriza tried it and ended up rescuing the banks and applying tough cutbacks like Rajoy’s in 2012. In Spain, Podemos and its partners will not even be able to attempt it, holding only around 80 out of 350 seats. Their municipal leaders are already paying the debt they promised not to pay, the austerity continues, the youth are still angry and the same poverty is still there.<sup>48</sup>

All of the above constitutes a few examples of the constant criticism that the two biggest newspapers in Spain make of Podemos in the context of the rise of this new party. This study aims to offer an exploration of the biased and decon-

textualised treatment of news stories related to Podemos and its leaders at a moment of clear crisis in the two-party system. This criticism has been based on the use of the fifth filter in Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model, in what I consider to be an updated version of that model. While perhaps during the 1990s, the fall of the Berlin Wall made it hard to see any signs that anti-communism would continue to form part of the apparatus of the establishment, the economic and financial crisis of the last few years, which has provoked a public reaction and mobilization in various regions of the world (including Spain) has given rise to new parties like Podemos, and this emergence of new ideological forces that have broken up the usual alternation of power between progressives and conservatives has represented a disruption of the established order. In this situation, traditional politicians and mainstream media, integrated in the power structures, have revived the anti-communism filter as a propaganda method. In the next section, I will set out the main conclusions of this study, which will need to be expanded on in future years as the Spanish political context evolves.

## 9.5 Conclusion

The rise of Podemos as a new political force in the context of two-party dominance has constituted an unprecedented development in the recent history of Spanish democracy. The traditional power structures, heirs to Francoism albeit updated in the context of globalization, have thus felt threatened (at least in the early days of Podemos' existence) by this new party. As a result, the other political parties and the mainstream media (both their paper and digital editions) have identified it as a new 'enemy' which they have been quick to label as radical leftist, thus making new use of the 'anti-communism' filter as a means of averting the dangers posed to the established order. Although it is true that 'anti-communism' does not operate like it did in the past,<sup>49</sup> it is nevertheless clear that the binary of good guys and bad guys, of us versus them, continues to work effectively. Moreover, in the case that concerns us here, I have demonstrated that the identification of 'them', the 'enemy', or the 'bad guy' is closely associated with the resurgence of a possible communist threat.

To make this negative impact clear, two of Spain's biggest newspapers, *El País* and *ABC*, have published news stories and opinion pieces that associate Podemos with other 'devils of the media', to quote Ramón Reig.<sup>50</sup> The study presented here shows that there has been a clear media manipulation in an effort to demonise Pablo Iglesias' party, to which end various techniques have been used. One of these has involved the prioritization of content, as demonstrated by the ongoing importance given to the alleged financing of Podemos by Venezuela. In this case, furthermore, certain important pieces of information have been purposefully omitted, resulting in the decontextualization of the facts. Despite the fact that no court has been able to confirm such financing and

that every legal action filed has been dismissed due to a lack of evidence, the two newspapers have repeated the story, in many cases using sources from the Venezuelan opposition and casting doubt on the words of Podemos' leaders. The contamination of the information has been further supported by opinions published in both media sources that have given columnists free reign to classify the members of Podemos as populists and radicals. The negative bias is also evident in the choice of sources, with priority given to actors who are manifestly against the new political party. Furthermore, the anti-Podemos slant has also been demonstrated by the choice of preconceived ideas in the collective imagination associated with the axis of evil (Iran or the Bolivarian states of Latin America) to develop this superstructural identification.

As noted above, this analysis is only a first approach to the treatment of Podemos by the Spanish, mainstream, online media. The fundamental purpose of this study has been to confirm what seemed to me to be a scientific intuition that Podemos was not being accepted by the media system because it is viewed as a threat to the latter's survival, as was communism during the Cold War. It is clear that the new Left apparently represented by Podemos has been turned into an enemy to attack for the power structures in which the media, politicians and corporations all appear to share the same interests.

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