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The symbolic representation of the ‘People’ and the ‘Homeland’ in Spanish left populism: an opportunity for feminist politics?

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the symbolic construction of the ‘people’ and the ‘homeland’ in Spain’s left populist party Podemos by exploring the gender and class meanings that Podemos leaders evoke in their representation of these two key elements of populist rhetoric. Distinguishing between the official symbolic presentation of the constituency, that purposely selects certain symbols to evoke particular meanings about the people and the homeland, and the subtext of gendered norms that symbols evoke, allows us understanding the possibilities of the Spanish left populist party to contribute to feminist politics. Podemos has a role in the process of meaning-making that envisions gender and class-aware societal projects through the symbolic representation of ‘the people’ and ‘the homeland’. Yet, ambivalence in the egalitarian discourse and a symbolic subtext of unequal informal gendered norms in the party culture undermine the feminist commitments of the leadership adopted in the official presentation of the constituency. By capturing the gap between the official purposeful symbolic representation, that conveys a message of inclusive and feminist people-homeland, and the symbolic subtext of the party’s discourse and performance, that reproduces exclusionary gendered norms, the article contributes to reflect on the inclusionary potential and contradictions of left populism.

KEYWORDS

Left populism; symbolic representation; gender; class; feminist politics; Spain

Introduction

In the last decade, numerous populist actors have demanded democratic regeneration to recover national sovereignty, claiming to offer an unmediated representation of the ‘people’ and to protect the homeland against different sorts of elites and outsiders. A growing scholarship addresses the gender dimension of populism, with an emphasis on the anti-pluralistic and masculinist style of far-right politics (Dietze and Roth 2020; Köttig, Bitzan, and Petö 2017; Norocel 2013). However, few studies document the gender and class-based constructions of the political subject in left populist discourses (Castaño 2020), and the implications for a productive dialogue with feminist politics (Caravantes 2021). This article analyses the symbolic construction of the ‘people’ and the ‘homeland’ in Spain’s left populist party Podemos by exploring the gender – intersecting with class – meanings that Podemos leaders evoke in their representation of these two key elements of populist rhetoric and how they relate to feminist imageries and agendas.

We address the two following research questions: What is Podemos’ official symbolic representation of the constituency, i.e. the people and the homeland- with respect to a feminist politics? What are the symbolic subtexts of gendered norms underlying Podemos’ official discourse and performances?

Distinguishing between the official symbolic presentation of the constituency – that purposely selects certain symbols to evoke particular meanings about the people and the homeland – and the subtext of gendered norms – often intersected with class – that symbols evoke, allows us understanding the possibilities of the Spanish left populist party to contribute to feminist politics.

We argue that Podemos has a role in the process of meaning-making that envisions more gender and class-aware societal projects through the symbolic representation of ‘the people to become’ (Palonen 2021). Through a gender analysis of Podemos’ symbolic discursive construction and leaders’ presence and performance in institutional settings, we identify a leftist socio-economic construction of the ‘people’ and a multiplicity of gender meanings in the party’s formulation of popular sovereignty. Some of these constructions reflect feminist commitments, such as the notion of a ‘feminist country’, a gender analysis of the impact of the 2008 crisis on working classes, and the promotion of equal childcare responsibility. However, ambivalence in the egalitarian discourse and a symbolic subtext of unequal informal gendered norms in the party culture undermine the feminist discursive commitments adopted in the official presentation of the constituency. The next section presents our theoretical framework, followed by a contextualization of the case, methodology, empirical analysis and conclusions about our contributions to gender and populism studies.

Symbolic representation of the ‘People’ and the Homeland in left populist discourses

For the analytical purposes of this article, we base our conceptualization of populism on different approaches to benefit from a variety of theoretical perspectives. Mudde and Rovira’s (2013, 151) ideational definition addresses the opposition between the ‘common people’ and ‘the elite’ in the key binary in which ‘popular sovereignty’ is proclaimed ‘as the only legitimate source of political power’. Exploring the symbolic representation of a populist party requires drawing on analyses of populism as a political style (Moffitt 2016), whereby populism is a performative and relational phenomenon in which leaders perform in front of the people-audience on the media-stage, as well as discursive approaches that focus on populist actors’ construction of political subjectivities (De Cleen et al. 2020; Palonen 2021). While the ideational framework points at the centrality of the ‘people’ in antagonism to the elite (socio-economic in left populism) and the envisioned sovereignty (popular rather than national in left populism), performative and discursive approaches convey the complexity of populist construction of such political categories.

In the analysis of discursive symbols and performances, we rely on literature that invites exploring the meanings and emotions populist leaders wish to convey to the people, and the ways in which populist leaders and the people ‘co-constitute each other’ in populist discourses and performances (Dean and Maignushca 2020, 20). Of further interest in our analysis of the symbolic representation of the people are theories that see populism as constructing meanings about ‘becoming the people’, through resignifying subjectivities in political debates (Palonen 2021, 95). Palonen’s (2021) understanding of the people in populist politics as a temporary rather than a fixed demographic category, is based on Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) ideas of politics as constituting collective subjects through the articulation of political demands.

We adopt, then, a discourse-theoretical approach to explore how populist actors ‘construct the categories they claim to represent’ (De Cleen et al. 2020, 149). Discursive approaches aim here at grasping meanings constructed in conceptual disputes, both purposefully framed to achieve particular goals and as expressing subtexts of gender norms present in discourses (Kantola and Lombardo 2017). This conceptualization allows understanding the extent to which the symbolic construction of the people and the homeland as an inclusive social project in Podemos envisions a feminist politics. Feminist politics is defined as a political project that aims at transforming unequal gender and intersectional power hierarchies, through an ‘analysis of injustice’, ‘a vision of an alternative’, and actions to redress injustice (Dean and Maignushca 2018, 386). To assess the extent of the ‘feministization’ of a political space, Dean and Maignushca (2018, 388) consider worldview/self-understanding, policy, organization to promote feminism, embodied performance and affect/

emotions favourable to feminist politics. In this article, the envisioned feminist alternative involves worldview and policy to support an inclusive and caring society that disrupts gendered – intersected with class – hierarchies; organizational action that entails the centrality of women in political transformation and shared leadership with men, embodied performance that reflects inclusionary equality; and collaborative and gentle affective atmospheres.

We understand the symbolic representation of the people, drawing on Lombardo and Meier (2019) and originally on Pitkin (1967), as the representation of a constituency – in our case the people and the homeland – through a symbol – the symbolic acts performed by Podemos through discourses, images, or leaders' personal lives – that presents this constituency in a particular way and thus constructs meanings about it. The symbol 'standing for' the constituency, according to Pitkin (1967), suggests or evokes emotions and beliefs about – in our case – the people and the homeland. Through a variety of symbolic practices, such as the use of the national flag in institutional buildings and ceremonies, people are familiarised with a symbol – the flag in this example – so that they learn to associate it with feelings of attachment to the nation. Whilst Pitkin sees the represented as constituted prior to the moment of representation, Palonen's (2021) account of the Laclau-inspired concept of populism we draw on emphasises the representational moment as crucially constitutive of the people. Through the representation of their political demands, subjects become the people.

Through the creation of new meanings about the constituency, symbolic representation can therefore have an important legitimating function of formerly excluded subjects and their claims, as the introduction of new gender-sensitive parliamentary practices shows (Verge 2021). Symbolic representation interacts with descriptive (MPs' presence or standing for the constituency through their socio-demographic features) and substantive (MPs' acting for the constituency through substantive policies) representation in a variety of ways. This article focuses on symbolic representation but also considers one aspect of the descriptive-symbolic representation interaction that is related to what Podemos MPs physically standing for the people symbolically represents in terms of gender and class, as well as the role model they embody through their personal lives.

Following the discursive turn in representation studies (Saward 2010), symbols can construct the meanings of a constituency in more traditional or progressive, exclusive or inclusive ways, presenting the people and the homeland with particular features or ideas about them (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 235). In constructing meanings about the constituency, symbolic representation sets boundaries to what is the homeland and its values, who is included in the people – only some or all citizens from different gender, sexuality, race and ethnic origin, class, age, or ability – and with what roles. Symbolic representation has thus an important function in the inclusive construction of the people and the egalitarian envisioned projects of society, contributing (or not) to feminist politics.

To explore Podemos' acts of representation, we build upon a conceptual definition of political representation that highlights the relation between a purposeful symbolic presentation of the constituency by the symbol-makers and the implicit 'symbolic subtexts' that such presentation evokes (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 2017, 485–486). Symbolic representation on the one hand reflects intentional selection and construction of symbols chosen by claim-makers (Saward 2010) for evoking substantive meanings about women, men and equality to an audience. On the other hand, symbolic representation also evokes 'symbolic subtexts' (Lombardo and Meier 2019, 239) about women, men, the people, the homeland, that reflect underlying social and cultural norms informed by patterns of gender, class and race domination (Lombardo and Meier 2017, 485). The meanings attributed to symbolic subtexts depend on the spectator's perspective, thus leading to multiple interpretations of the symbol (Lombardo and Meier 2019).

In the case of Podemos, the gender and class-based analysis of symbolic representation allows us to explore both the purposeful representation of the people and the homeland through discourses, performances and personal examples of party leaders, that we call *official* symbolic representation of

the constituency, and the *subtext* of informal gendered meanings and norms that party's acts evoke. This allows us understanding the possibilities of the party's symbolic representation of the people and homeland for feminist politics.

We build on Mudde and Rovira's (2013) distinction between Latin-America's inclusionary left-wing populism and Europe's exclusionary right-wing populism, and the resemblance between Latin-American processes and the emergence of left-populist actors in South Europe. Scholarship often explores the distinctive characteristics of left populism in contrast to right populism, where left populism constructs a class-based people and a civic/inclusive homeland and right-wing populism constructs a land-based and nativist people and an ethnically exclusive homeland (De Cleen 2017).

The 'common people' in left populism is characterized by emphasizing the socio-economic over the sociocultural dimension of right-wing populist ethnic politics: the people represented as low income (the plebs) and, in Latin-America, as suffering cultural discrimination (Mudde and Rovira 2013). This represents a return to class politics due to a certain symbiosis between 'people' and 'class' (March 2017), although left populism pays greater attention to particularistic constituencies and the plurality of interests within the people than traditional class politics (García 2020). It also tends to picture everyday citizens as heroes, brought together by the economic and political injustices done to them (Fanoulis and Guerra 2021). The moral and economic framing of the people as honest citizens and 'underdogs' also determine the moral and economic characterization of the anti-elitism, which signals the corruption of the political establishment and its connections to economic powers (Mudde and Rovira 2013; Gerbaudo and Screti 2017).

Extant studies on gender and left populism (Castaño 2020; Rousseau 2010; Caravantes 2021; Kantola and Lombardo 2019) say little about the gender-class construction of the 'people'. When they do, they tend to explore how the conceptualization of the people obscures the diversity and asymmetries within the people, disregarding gender and racial dimensions and making some actors more 'popular' than others (Caravantes 2021; Roth and Shea-Baird 2017; Vega 2015). Aware of these limitations, left populist actors commit to the empowerment and inclusion of politically excluded and silenced voices, including an agenda favouring women's interests (Castaño 2020). However, left populists also tend to essentialize women and indigenous cultures (Vega 2014) and present the improvement of women's descriptive representation as a privilege granted by male leaders (Espina and Rakowski 2010).

Regarding the 'homeland', literature addresses left populist actors' efforts to distance themselves from exclusionary land-based and nativist constructions and their attempts to resignify national sentiments of pride and belonging in more inclusive ways (Mudde and Rovira 2013). Through forms of 'constitutional patriotism' (Habermas 1998) and social democracy, left populists tend to recognize internal diversity and promote decentralisation, with an emphasis on the welfare state in Southern European countries (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017). Some left populist actors, such as Podemos, explicitly antagonise right-wing articulations of nationalism as anti-patriotic (Custodi 2021). This counter-hegemonic logic reflects the understanding of populism as meaning-making representation, inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's work, that seeks to articulate political demands through the temporary unity around the homeland (Palonen 2021). While the nation is the privileged site of articulation, left populist actors invoke popular, rather than national, sovereignty, as the right to self-government in reaction to the unresponsive State (Gerbaudo and Screti 2017; Mouffe 2018). This narrative is important in Southern European responses to the 2008 economic crisis, when left populists invoked the role of the state as provider of egalitarian conditions for the population against austerity politics.

In the case of Podemos, it is particularly interesting to reflect on the feminist construction of the homeland as a political project, given the reference to a 'feminist country' in the official party discourse. The strong connections of nationalism with hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (Nagel 1998) and the instrumental role of women in national discourse (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989) make the relationship of feminism and nationalism profoundly tense. Nationalist discourses often invoke women in limited roles, as 'biological' and 'social reproducers' and relegated to

'symbolic markers' of a nation in which women and non-whites are rarely constructed as protagonists of the nation's political project (Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). However, some of these assessments reflect a Western-centric hegemonic perspective that conceals the potential positive relationship of feminist and nationalist projects in emancipatory processes of self-determination (Rodó-Zárate 2020), as invoked by Podemos.

The Spanish left populism of Podemos

Podemos is one of the few parties that mobilises left-populist discourses and imageries in a European context dominated by the expansion of radical right populist forces. Inspired by the *Indignados* movement, the party emerged in 2014 in response to a climate of political dissatisfaction and economic precariousness. The discovery of systemic corruption in the country's mainstream parties and royal family, as well as the profound impact of several economic crises in the living conditions of the population, triggered a transformation in the Spanish party system initiated by Podemos.

Created by a small group of academics and leftist activists, Podemos participated in the elections for the European Parliament of May 2014 unexpectedly winning 7.98% of the national vote. Within two years of its existence, the party disrupted the Spanish political landscape, becoming the third largest national party, and forcing new political alignments. Podemos leaders introduced a left populist style and contributed to a renewed centrality of class-based demands in Spain's post-austerity context, mobilising a pronounced dichotomy between the common people they committed to represent and the political elite (the caste), accused of misbehaviour and mismanagement during the economic crisis.

After the initial emphasis on a class-based diagnosis that disregarded gender dynamics, feminism became increasingly central to Podemos discourses of transformation (Podemos 2018; Montero 2017). Through formulas such as the 'feminization' or 'depatriarchalization' of politics, party leaders promoted a gender transformation to the dominant 'old' style of politics, which the party defines as 'masculinized' and 'patriarchal' and characterises as hierarchical, adversarial and exclusionary (Caravantes 2021). In addition to traditional feminist goals – such as increasing the number of women representatives (a zipper system that increased Podemos women MPs' representation to 49.2% in 2016 and 51.4% in 2019¹) and the attention to issues that disproportionately affect women-, party leaders committed to an inclusive politics of horizontal participation, collaborative leadership and dialogue with a plurality of actors.

The centrality of feminism in Podemos' agenda benefits from and contributes to a feminist momentum in Spanish politics, which peaked with a widely supported Women's Strike on March 8 of 2018 that mobilized 6 million women across the Spanish state and situated feminism at the core of the political debate (Jones 2018a). Whilst an ethos of hegemonic masculinity is present in Podemos (Kantola and Lombardo 2019), the feminist discourses of party leaders reflect an unusual complexity for mainstream parties, including lively intra-party debates on terminology and political strategies, and the relationship to institutional and extra-institutional politics (Caravantes 2021). In this context, Podemos provides an informative case to explore the gender dimension of populism as a left populist party that elaborates a feminist-informed discursive construction of the people and the homeland.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative methodological approach based on a comparative analysis of discourses, images and practices to explore symbolic representation in Podemos, with an emphasis on the leaders' populist discourses and charismatic performances, as well as the party culture. The secondary sources include written discourses and images, collected in official party declarations,

parliamentary interventions, electoral material, party banners, Podemos' official tweets, party events, party leaders' opinion pieces, interviews and other media coverage, between the foundation of the party in January of 2014 and its entry in a left coalition government in January 2020.²

We employed purposive sampling, which is aimed at capturing the interpretative dimensions of the object of study, rather than at determining incidence and prevalence (Luborsky and Rubinstein 1995). This qualitative sampling allowed us to intentionally select discourses and visual images about the construction of the people and the homeland in Podemos within the selected timeframe, to deepen our understanding of the meanings of our object of study. A selection of 76 symbols was gathered responding to three relevant analytical categories: people, homeland and party self-representation. To operationalise a populist construction of the 'people', we searched for keywords or images conveying notions of the people ('gente' or 'pueblo'), ordinary people, caste (as the marker of the antagonised elite in Podemos' discourse) and nonprofessional politicians (as the marker for the descriptive-role model representation of Podemos leaders). To operationalise the construction of the homeland in left-populist rhetoric, we searched keywords or images conveying notions like 'patria', patriotism and State or welfare state (informed by the literature on Southern European left populism after the 2008 financial crisis). To identify gendered subtexts implicit in leaders' performances that might differ from the party's official discourse, we also searched for discourses and visual images about Podemos' self-representation within the selected timeframe. We searched for discourses and visual images of significant moments in the party's trajectory that affected its public image, including electoral material, celebration of symbolic days such as International Women's Day, and key events in the party's internal organisation, such as party agreements and assemblies.

Then, we conducted a thematic analysis of the material to select the symbols that evoke gender meanings of the 'people', the 'homeland' and the party self-representation. Building upon the importance of socio-economic construction of constituencies in left populism (De Cleen et al. 2020), we also searched for intersecting class-based meanings in these gendered symbols. A total of 22 symbols compose our final sample of gender and gender-intersected-with-class meanings. We applied content analysis to all the materials of our final sample. The empirical analysis presents our data in the two following sections: the first concerns the official symbolic representation of the people and the homeland that Podemos aims to convey, and the second highlights symbolic subtexts that reveal underlying gendered norms embedded in leaders' performances and the party culture.

Podemos' official symbolic representation of the people and the homeland

Podemos leaders claim to symbolically represent the Spanish 'common people' in two main ways. Firstly, they construct the Spanish 'people' and the 'homeland' as the object of their representative claims. Secondly, they claim to embody the 'people' by means of their own presence in political institutions, their alternative performances to traditional politics, and their personal experiences/lives. The people and the homeland often overlap through a narrative that presents the 'honest' people as the class-based subjects of a homeland whose rights the welfare state should protect. A feminist construction of alternative performances relies on transforming priorities and gendered behaviours: putting care and the common good at the centre while promoting horizontal participation, collaboration and inclusion. In line with left populism, Podemos depicts an inclusionary and diverse people, with the particularity of increasingly presenting women and feminist ideals at the core of the country's political project.

The Spanish 'People': honest working-class heroes and resilient women

Reading the national context through the lens of populist dichotomies, Podemos defines the Spanish 'people' in opposition to a self-interested political and economic elite that is detached from the concerns of ordinary citizens (Sola and Rendueles 2017). Podemos discourse resembles left populist rhetoric in the inclusionary socio-economic construction of the 'people', unlike nativist,

land-based formulations of right populism. ‘La gente’ (the people) is an aggregation of subordinated and marginalised collectivities: unemployed and retired people with minimal pensions or without benefits, families suffering energy poverty and evictions, women and young people working in precarious conditions and/or forced to emigrate (La Sexta, 20 February 2019; Podemos 2015; Riveiro 2018b, 2018c).

‘Honesty’ in relation to public services and funds distinguishes the ‘people’ from the political ‘caste’ in Podemos’ discourse (Guillén 2015). Party leaders repeatedly expose the multiple corruption scandals affecting the two mainstream national parties, especially the PP (El Mundo, 13 June 2017). This narrative reinstates the antagonism between the honest living of lower classes, everyday heroes who rely on public services (Fanoulis and Guerra 2021) and the privileged elites that implemented austerity politics after the 2008 economic recession (El Diario, 6 April 2018). Valuing people’s honesty supports a feminist politics of reordering political priorities to place the common good at the centre and dedicate public funds to welfare demands (Montero 2017).

In the first stages of the party, class-based meanings articulated Podemos’ discourse more than gender, due to the centrality of the antagonism with the elite and the symbolic construction of the ‘people’. Progressively, with the expansion of Spanish feminist movements in 2017, women gained visibility in Podemos’ rhetoric (Gimeno 2017), particularly as the main group facing the economic crisis through ‘informally’ and ‘precariously’ assuming the ‘care labour that the State does not provide’ (Montero 2017). During Podemos’ no-confidence vote against the PP’s government in 2017, Irene Montero (2017), former Podemos parliamentary spokeswoman, constructed women as paradigmatic bearers of the economic crisis, resilient working-class subjects devising strategies to cope with the privatisation of public services caused by austerity politics and the political corruption of mainstream parties.

Podemos leaders: ‘Ordinary people doing politics’

Building on their definition of the Spanish people as underprivileged groups disregarded by the political class, Podemos leaders present themselves as their truthful representatives: ‘ordinary people doing politics’ (Navarra Televisión, 23 April 2019).

Podemos participated in 2015 elections integrating a leftist coalition that gained 21 percent of the national vote and brought 69 newly elected officials that contrasted the usual profile of MPs: an average of seven years below the average age of the Spanish MPs, the highest proportion of first-time representatives, gender parity and an unprecedented diversity, including social movement activists, a labour agriculture unionist and the first black congresswoman (Coller 2016). Through informal clothing and non-normative gender hairstyles, Podemos leaders also claim popular origins and status as non-professional politicians (Calderón 2014). While this type of messages mobilises gender and class stereotypes around the figure of the leftist militants, the descriptive representation of Podemos leaders expands the symbolic representation of Spanish diversity in terms of age, gender, class, race and socio-political background.

Podemos leaders also present themselves as the truthful representatives of the diverse ‘people’ because of the ‘commonality’ of their performance and personal lives. Claiming ‘to make what happens in the street visible in the institutions so that the parliament looks more like our country’ (Manetto 2016), the party uses the descriptive representation of MPs as role models, offering exemplary messages from their personal lives, and symbolically personifying the people’s concerns, everyday life and interests.

The first months of Podemos elected officials in parliament left multiple of these symbolic acts. One of Podemos’ most influential female MPs at the time, Carolina Bescansa, brought her newborn baby to parliament in 2016 explaining her decision based on her right/need to breastfeed and willingness to politicise the issue of parenting (Manetto 2016). Bescansa’s baby had profound gendered symbolic implications, provoking a debate on the role of women as careers, the public–private divide and work–life balance (Martínez-Bascuñán 2016). Another symbolic act involved the

kiss between two men, Podemos Secretary-general, Pablo Iglesias, and the Catalan leader of the left coalition, in parliament. Iglesias reacted to the media controversy declaring: ‘The politics of machos and gentlemen offended when seeing two men kissing is over [...] I hope there will be less insults and more kisses in this House [...] We [Podemos] are a factory of love’ (Cuatro, 2 March 2016).

In 2018, Iglesias defended a ‘feminist’ legislation in parliament that ‘affected him personally’ to establish gender-equal parental leaves (Podemos Congreso 2018a). In a heteropatriarchal society that does not reward men taking long parental leaves and equally sharing childcare, the fact that it was the father, Iglesias, defending this legislation evokes a moral stance and the renounce of his personal gender privileges. When Iglesias returned to public life after finishing his paternal leave, he framed childcare, a task usually associated with women without social and professional recognition, as a preparation for public service: ‘I think this [childcare] also prepares me to govern in a different way. After spending three months wiping butts and changing diapers, I am better prepared to be a good president’ (La Sexta, 24 March 2019).

The performances and personal lives of Podemos leaders appear not only as *representative* of the ‘everyday’ of Spanish ‘common people’ but also as a source of political and professional legitimation. Podemos performances epitomise social values the party promotes, such as inclusion, diversity and balance of personal and professional life. These messages construct the meanings of ‘the people to become’ (Palonen 2021). Through claiming that ‘childcare prepares to govern’ and presenting the party as a ‘factory of love’ in an aggressive party system, Podemos leaders build the image of a gender egalitarian, diverse and ‘honest’ party that puts the common good at the centre.

The homeland as inclusive welfare and a caring entity

The homeland (‘patria’) is a prolongation of Podemos’ class-based and gender discourse on the Spanish ‘people’, and a vehicle to construct an explicitly inclusive socio-political project of the country that distinguishes left populist rhetoric from a conservative populist defence of traditional values. Explicitly invoking class politics, Podemos leaders advocate for a ‘patriotism of making ends meet’ to fulfil basic and daily needs (Podemos Congreso 2018b). This discourse reorganises political priorities, including a gender implicit meaning on the management of domestic economies – ‘people ask themselves whether they will be able to turn the heating on’ – over national-identity claims – ‘rather than “What is Galicia”, referring to the 2014 elections in that region (Reinero 2014).

In response to nativist and land-based patriotism and evoking feminist discourses, Podemos emphasizes the centrality of an inclusive welfare to construct the homeland as a caring entity. The homeland, in Podemos discourse, is an entity that ensures public services and rights, such as universal health, education and housing (Sola and Rendueles 2017), which are the ‘true’ source of national pride (El Diario, 6 April 2018; Gerbaudo and Screti 2017). A video portraying a grandmother cooking and attending to the food preferences of all the family members (a metaphoric representation of the country taking care of everyone in their diversity³), an electoral slogan stating ‘A country with you’, or an electoral symbol of a multi-coloured heart (Mármol 2016) are symbols that convey Podemos’ emotional ‘recipe’ of inclusion and care for the country. While such representations reproduce gendered and age meanings of women’s caring roles in family settings, including the responsibility of uniting families, they alter traditional sources of pride of the homeland and invoke joy and love instead of the anger and fear in other exclusionary constructions of nationhood.

Feminism became increasingly central to Podemos’ official discourse on the homeland. In the 2017 no-confidence motion, Podemos spokesperson presented the party’s political project as ‘feminism against the resignation and despair’ and invoked the transforming potential of women’s political struggle against a ‘male chauvinistic model of country’ that relies on political corruption and generates social inequality (Montero 2017). Thereafter, Podemos has used feminist movements as

sources of political legitimation, invoking the idea of a 'feminist country'⁴ and associating the republic (which, in a constitutional monarchy as Spain, left actors often connect with democracy) with the image of a woman's face in purple (Riveiro 2018a).

The symbolic subtexts of leaders' performances and party culture

Beyond the intentional, official symbolic meanings that leaders construct, the performances and discourses of a political party evoke a subtext of implicit meanings about gender. In Podemos, certain leaders' performances and the gendered ethos derived from the party culture question the inclusive and feminist representation of the people and the homeland. An analysis of the symbolic subtexts in the party's discourses and performances reflects (a) the primacy of male leaders over feminist messages; (b) the unintended gender and class meanings of personalization; and (c) the masculine ethos and exclusionary affective atmosphere in the party culture.

Whereas the role of feminism and women's movements increasingly became central to Podemos' official discourse, the primacy of male leaders led to several symbolic acts in which feminist messages were either appropriated by male leaders or relegated to the background. The first year that Podemos faced an institutional celebration of Women's International Day, on 8 March 2016, the party released a series of controversial posters including the faces of male leaders and the motto 'A country with us[in the Spanish feminine form]. Not one[woman] less' (El Español, 8 March 2016). The contrast between a motto calling for the inclusion and centrality of women as political subjects and male leaders in the foreground proved the dependency on certain charismatic leaders, none of which included women at that time, and the prioritization of 'real politics' over feminist commitments.⁵

Similarly, in April 2018, Podemos presented a top-down pact for the primaries in Madrid among three male leaders – the national Secretary-General, the regional candidate and the Secretary – General in Madrid – to conclude a series of factional disputes in the organisation. The presentation took place in the central headquarters of the party with Podemos' motto at that time in the background, '*Nosotras*' (feminine form of 'we' in Spanish), a statement of the party's feminist commitment to centre women as political subjects (Díaz 2018). This episode, qualified by a party's grassroots feminist group as a 'pact among patriarchs',⁶ showed the continuation of Podemos' masculine dynamics of leadership despite the discursive emphasis on women as the 'agents of change' (Montero 2017). The negotiation of the pact among three male leaders without consulting the party bases also called into question some of the defining elements of the feminization or depatriarchalization of politics that Podemos commits to, including bottom-up and horizontal participatory structures, and the culture of collaboration and inclusionary dialogue with a plurality of actors (Caravantes 2021).

An analysis of the descriptive-symbolic representation of Podemos leaders as role models allows identifying another element of friction with Podemos' public script: the unintended gender and class meanings of personalization. In 2018, a personal decision of the two main party leaders at the time, Pablo Iglesias and Irene Montero, became a matter of external and intra-party debate after their purchase of a luxury house (Jones 2018b). Such a purchase was perceived as a contradiction to the party's commitment to live like the common people rather than privileged 'elites' (La Vanguardia, 18 May 2018). Iglesias and Montero subjected their positions to an internal vote as an exercise of accountability and internal democracy that provided grassroots members with the decision on the party's future. However, Iglesias and Montero held the two highest positions of representation within the party, the vote happened one year after a difficult moment of internal disputes, and a year before European, local and regional elections. Asking the party membership to evaluate personal decisions rather than political ones translated this vote into a form of personal endorsement to Iglesias and Montero, legitimising their positions in the party while reinforcing a 'plebiscite culture' that treats party members as voters rather than militants (Público, 2 February 2017).

In March 2019, the party repeated a similar personalistic logic announcing the return of Iglesias after his paternity leave with a sign of the leader raising his right fist and the message *Vuelve* ('returns'). The graphic layout emphasised the letters 'el' inside 'VuELve' in a different colour, which in Spanish translates as the masculine personal pronoun 'he', conveying a heroic tone and the prominence of Podemos male leader (Última Hora, 6 March 2019). In this instance, as well as after the episode with the sign 'Nosotras' in the background, Podemos leaders recognized the contradiction to the party's feminist commitments and apologized (República, 23 April 2018). However, a symbolic analysis uncovers the unintended gender and class meanings of personalization, which (a) tends to highlight the figure of male leaders over feminist messages -in this case, a message about joint childcare responsibility to counteract sexist family structures and women's job discrimination; (b) negates the party's official discourse on the leaders' political value based on their ordinary experiences -the heroic tone of returning to politics (read as 'real' labour) is striking in the case of Iglesias after his own representation as an ordinary father with popular origins whose experience changing diapers (socially unrecognised and gendered labour) makes him a better leader; and (c) contradicts the party's leftist and feminist narrative of citizen empowerment, participatory democracy and collaborative leadership, by isolating leaders as exceptional figures and asking party members to simply endorse their personal and political decisions.

A final symbolic subtext underlies Podemos public performance during its first five years of existence: the gendered meanings of the political culture of its organisation (Caravantes 2021). The different political sensibilities that coexisted in the formation of Podemos in 2014 progressively fragmented into the formation of factions, in a process determined by personal relations, informal dynamics and conflicts within the leadership. The resulting competitive ethos generated an adversarial atmosphere between two main factions that was publicly displayed (Carvajal 2017) and promoted a logic of 'cockfights' and 'excess of testosterone' (20 Minutos, 12 May 2016; Gutiérrez 2016). The dominant masculine management of this conflict generated a subtext that directly contradicted the party's official feminist discourse praising inclusion, collaboration and politics of care.

The subtext of conflictual intra-party dynamics interacted with the Podemos' official discourse in two other main ways. First, the centrality of factionalism during the party's initial years evoked the self-referential and self-perpetuating dynamics of 'professional' politicians and elites that Podemos claimed to contest, as if party leaders were more worried about their own positions within the intra-party structure and their own political futures than about 'serving' and representing the 'common people' and promoting a feminist and caring project of the homeland. Second, the top-down dimension of Podemos' factionalism symbolically undermined the populist connection between leaders and the people through the separation of the party's leadership from the membership. Party members were relegated to a legitimising role within a rhetoric of direct democracy inspired by the assemblies of the *Indignados* movement rather than as protagonists of the political change (Caravantes 2021). From a feminist perspective, the conflictual and self-referential leadership-centered dynamics disrupt the party's feminist discourse over collaborative and collective leadership and participatory and inclusionary politics.

Conclusion

This article contributes to theories on populism through an analysis of the understudied symbolic representation of the people and the homeland in a left populist party to assess the latter's contribution to feminist politics. The gender – intersecting with class – analysis of the symbolic representation of the people and the homeland advances our understanding of the inclusionary dimension of left populism. It allows capturing the gap between the official purposeful symbolic representation of Podemos, that conveys a message of inclusive and feminist people-homeland, and the symbolic subtext of the Spanish left populist party's discourse and performance that reproduces unequal informal gendered-classed norms. This inconsistency weakens the legitimacy of the feminist-informed representation of the 'people' and the 'homeland' of Podemos' representatives.

The analysis of the symbolic representation of the people and the homeland in Podemos shows an ambivalent relationship to feminist politics. While the party's official discourse emphasizes key feminist and working-class concerns, the subtexts of other party's images and discourses undermine leaders' feminist discursive commitments. On the one hand, Podemos' symbolic construction of the 'people' and the 'homeland' recognizes a diversity of gender and class-based subjectivities and feminist ideas that resignify the people as embodying gender and working-class subjects and the homeland as the place of inclusive welfare state. Constructing the meanings of 'the people to become' in more inclusive ways (Palonen 2021) and challenging gender-class inequalities contribute to building feminist societal projects. Part of this symbolic production relies on a descriptive-symbolic representation of Podemos leaders as the 'common people', which reflects the centrality of personalization and role model messages in populist rhetoric and leadership.

On the other hand, other party's symbology suggests a subtext of meanings that reveals ingrained unequal informal gendered-classed norms and poses specific problems to feminist politics. A series of Podemos images and practices, related to significant moments in the party life, conveys the prominence of male leadership over professed feminist ideals. Unintended gender and class meanings of personalization undermine the connection leaders-people and misinterpret feminist mottos. Conflictual and self-referential intra-party dynamics disrupt feminist commitments over collective leadership and the construction of an inclusive, caring, political project. This ambivalence reflects core elements of populism that complicate the relationship to feminism, including the primacy of personalization and male charismatic figures, that contradicts feminist ideas of shared power, and the masculine confrontational atmosphere that characterizes leaders' performances (Caravantes 2021, 2019).

Of special importance for populist studies are the double-edged implications of Podemos leaders' personalization. The symbolic-descriptive representation of Podemos leaders as role models in the official discourse allows them personalising the representation of the people. The party uses those symbols to promote an inclusive political project, calling attention, for instance, to a gendered shared care responsibility and a feminist reorganization of political priorities that disrupts the public-private divide. However, the unintended meanings involved in this personalization of populist leaders question their descriptive representation as 'common' people and the suggested alternative gender meanings. In the case of Podemos, this personalization builds upon a markedly gendered narrative of heroism around the figure of the party's Secretary General, directly contradicting both the feminist centrality of women as protagonists of political transformation and the party's rhetoric of citizen's empowerment. The emphasis on personalization reveals a misunderstanding of the feminist motto 'the personal is political' that enhances individual experiences and characteristics of leadership positions rather than calling attention to the structural dimension of private and personal spheres.

Gendered processes are typical of all political parties, not just populist ones (Kantola and Lombardo 2019). They are typical of left movements (Montesinos-Coleman and Bassi 2011) and left political parties (Dean and Maignashca 2018). Yet, gendered dynamics concerning the construction of 'the people' and the 'homeland' are particularly connected to populism, given the centrality of the people-elite binary and 'popular sovereignty' for populist discourse and representation. While scholarship has addressed the genderedness of left politics (Dean and Maignashca 2018; Montesinos-Coleman and Bassi 2011), our findings suggest future studies need to assess the extent to which and how particular gendered processes are specific to left populism as opposed to left politics in general.

The analysis of the constituency – the people and the homeland – constructed through symbols, from a gender-class approach, allows understanding how a left populist party purposefully builds the meaning of these crucial rhetorical elements in inclusive and feminist ways that challenge the privileged elites in terms of class and gender. Yet, it also reveals how the informal gendered norms of the party culture question the acts of representation that depict the party as a promoter of feminist politics. The most obvious gendered elements include the predominance of male leaders, the

relegation of women and feminism to the background, and the exclusionary effects of the leaders' personalization. The competitive ethos, the factional dynamics transmitted top-down and the hierarchization that separates the party's leadership from the membership are particularly detrimental to the invoked feminist agenda and to party grassroots members, who, ultimately, are the 'people' that populist leaders claim to represent.

Notes

1. See <https://www.congreso.es/busqueda-de-diputados>.
2. This time frame aims at understanding the performance of Podemos as a challenger party, before accessing a governmental position that shifted its discourse.
3. Podemos, Twitter post, 31 January 2017, 3:27pm. <https://twitter.com/PODEMOS>.
4. The motto appeared in the Twitter bio of Podemos' account for a long time. <https://twitter.com/PODEMOS>.
5. In subsequent years, the party amended its relation to the celebration of March 8 by collaborating and supporting the organisation of women's strikes (El Diario, 15 February 2018).
6. PodFeminismosMadrid, Twitter post, 20 April 2018, 4:12 p.m., <https://twitter.com/PFeminismosMad>.

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