Ambivalences of populism: the case of Catalan independentism

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Abstract

Most of the Spanish media Catalan independentism has been linked to nationalism and populism. This article argues that this political and social mobilization does not fit into the usual definitions of populism as anti-elitist, anti-liberal and anti-pluralistic movement. Catalan independentism is here interpreted by stressing its democratic features, namely as a form of democratic populism: horizontally organized, and critical of procedural safeguards and counter-majoritarian powers. The popular organization of the referendum on 1 October 2017 and the vigorous democratic experience by almost half of the population of Catalonia allow for a characterization of this populism as a hybrid phenomenon that includes bottom-up and top-down dynamics, thereby contrasting with the usual leader-centred understanding of populism.

Keywords

Populism, nationalism, independentism, referendum, Catalonia, secession

Résumé

Most of the Spanish media L'indépendantisme catalan a été lié au nationalisme et au populisme. Cet article soutient l'idée que cette mobilisation sociale et politique ne s'inscrit pas dans les définitions usuelles du populisme comme mouvement antiélitiste, anti-libéral et anti-pluraliste. Il s'agit ici de souligner les aspects démocratiques de l'indépendantisme, à l'instar d'une forme de populisme démocratique : organisé horizontalement, critique envers les garanties procédurales et les pouvoirs contre-majoritaires. L'organisation populaire du référendum du 1er Octobre 2017 et l'énergique expérience démocratique vécue par près de la moitié de la population de Catalogne permet de caractériser ce populisme comme un phénomène hybride qui inclut des dynamiques ascendantes et descendantes, contrastant par conséquent avec l'interprétation usuelle du populisme comme mouvement centré sur un chef de file.

Mots-clés

populisme, nationalisme, indépendantisme, référendum Catalogne, sécession

Introduction

One of the worst effects of the political mobilization for the independence of Catalonia is the polarization of public opinion. Newspapers, radio stations and state media have treated the events that were initiated in the autumn of 2017 in a partisan way. For the most part, Spanish public opinion sees the Catalan independence movement as treasonous to the Spanish nation, as an act of constitutional disloyalty by the government of Catalonia, as the sheer folly of a mesmerized mass, and even as more dangerous than ETA's (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, the recently disbanded armed movement for Basque independence) terrorism. On the other side, independentists have strongly contested the legality and legitimacy of the imprisonment of politicians and the infringement of basic freedoms, as well as the brutal police repression of the referendum on 1 October 2017. There is not much room for self-criticism on either side, as if a cloud of clear-cut antagonism has suddenly covered the Spanish democracy. 'Equidistant' political positions are considered intolerable cowardice in a moment of compulsory partisanship.

Proper deliberation has vanished from the public sphere because of an over-politicization of everyday experience. This enfeebled democracy (Ferrara 2018: 471) may have been somewhat pacified with the no-confidence vote in May 2018 that brought the Socialist Party into power with promises of a more political and not only juridical and repressive approach to Catalan independentism. Nevertheless, there doesn't seem to be an impending solution to the Catalan crisis.

In this confrontational atmosphere, it seems adequate to attempt a description of the recent events in Catalonia with the help of political concepts such as democracy and populism. Multiple causes explain the political situation in Catalonia: the legal framework, the alignment of political forces, the economic crisis, but also neoliberal globalization, European politics, and the increasing relevance of social networks in political mobilizations, to name a few. In the following pages, though, I will concentrate on the ambivalent populistic and democratic elements of independentism as it has manifested itself in Catalonia.

Territorial articulation of Spain: the problem

Some months ago, the Spanish journal *El País* published an interview with Jürgen Habermas. In it, when asked about his opinion on the situation in Catalonia, he said: 'But really, why would a cultivated and advanced people like Catalonia desire to be alone in Europe? I do not understand it. I have the feeling that it all amounts to an economic problem. I do not know what will happen. What do you think?' (Habermas, 2018a).

Habermas asks the interviewer because he does not know the situation well enough. He expresses his surprise about the Catalan secessionist movement. Why are Catalans striving for independence in an increasingly interdependent world? Why are they threatening the European project? Like so many analysts and academics in Europe, Habermas does not try to answer these questions, partly because, I think, he feels he does not know the context well enough to understand what has happened. He might not think that this political crisis can be understood by pointing to international circumstances or to a condemnation of nationalism as such, nor by saying that these kinds of secessionist movements are old-fashioned sovereignty claims in a post-national constellation.

Habermas's and many other intellectuals' surprised reaction and suspension of judgement on the Catalan situation is analogous to the reaction of the international community and the EU: it is an internal affair that should be solved internally.

We can, of course, point also to the uneasiness of national communities with globalization; to the difficulty of articulating regional or national demands in a European system based on methodological nationalism;[1] and to the boom of right-wing populism and movements of national closure in Europe and the USA. Of course, the territorial crisis has also served as a smokescreen for the political parties involved to hide their domestic problems of economic and political corruption. But the explicit motivations for independentism are internal. They refer to the recent history of Spanish territorial articulation and its corresponding state model.

The legal framework for the inner articulation of the recent democratic history of Spain is Article 2 of the Constitution, whose intricate formulation bears testimony to the compromises reached during the transition to democracy after Franco's death in order to achieve a political and social consensus:

> The Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, the common and indivisible country of all Spaniards; it recognizes and guarantees the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed, and the solidarity amongst them all.

There is, on the one hand, the unity of the Spanish nation as the base of the Constitution and, on the other, the recognition of autonomy for certain national minorities (nationalities) and regions. Hence, the Constitution distinguishes between two kinds of regions in Spain, which can justifiably lay claim to an asymmetric articulation of the Spanish autonomous communities: the historical nationalities (Basques, Catalans and Galicians) and the mere regions.

As, Jordi Solé Tura, one of the framers of the Constitution, wrote, this article is 'a true synthesis of all the contradictions of the constituent period' (Solé Tura, 1985: 100). Francisco Rubio Llorente, highly respected jurist, former vice-president of the Constitutional Court and President of the Council of State, defined the territorial issue more poignantly as the Gordian knot of the Spanish constitution, the unsolved issue that has spread its shadow over the system's development to the present day (Rubio Llorente, 2014). These different interpretations of the Spanish nation and the political consequences of the acknowledgment of Catalonia as the territorial locus of a historically constituted national minority lie at the heart of the Catalan political ordeal.

This problem can be traced back to the short second republic in the 1930s. During the republican constituent period, there was a lively debate about the optimal model of territorial articulation for Spain. There were several options available: the autonomous, the constitutional and the federal. The constitutional option was the one defended by Manuel Azaña during the debates in 1931 on the Catalan Statute of Autonomy. The federal option was then seen as an impossible alternative, and even if today there are some political parties pushing for it the broad consensus required for its realization is lacking. In short: one part cannot start a federation unilaterally; it needs the full support of all the regions and presupposes their identity as detached from the whole they are a part of,

namely Spain. This is precisely the option that Ortega y Gasset considered inadequate: according to him, the Spanish nation is pre-political, pre-constitutional (Ortega y Gasset, 2005b: 834). This means that any solution that doesn't presuppose the Spanish nation as the fundament of the legal order is, so to speak, ontologically impossible, a denial of reality. For this reason, Ortega y Gasset sees autonomous articulation as the only viable option for Spain.

Already in his book *España invertebrada* of 1921, Ortega y Gasset understands the history of the Spanish nation as a system of *incorporation* of different pre-existent social units that give birth to a big nation (Ortega y Gasset, 2012: 46). To keep the nation united the strength of the central force must be constantly under pressure from the centrifugal forces of the peripheral regions, Catalonia and the Basque country. Without this centrifugal tension, the uniting forces of the centre of Spain lose the stimulus to keep the country united. Stability thus is the result of the unsolvable tension between the centre and the periphery. But this balance is achieved not only with force but also by convincing, persuading; by proposing a suggestive project of life in common (Ortega y Gasset, 2012: 51).

This autonomist articulation doesn't amount to a solution to the so-called Catalan problem, he states: the problem is unsolvable, and this is a good thing, because the demands for secession keep the Spanish nation alive (Ortega y Gasset, 2005a). Ortega follows here the Machiavellian concept of the state, according to which tension is the optimal condition for its stability, where stability is understood as an agonistic balance between the elements of a wider system. There are of course two problems here: how much tension the Spanish nation can endure without losing its internal stability, and how much force and persuasion is needed to counter the secessionist energies of the peripheral regions in a beneficial way.

Ortega y Gasset's idea of Spain is still alive among the Spanish political elites that participated in the consensus of the democratic transition. Moreover, this conception of the Spanish nation is the *forma mentis* of the right-wing elite that commanded the institutional reaction to independentism.(2) Under the leadership of Mariano Rajoy, the government decided to respond to the secessionist movement by recalling the fundamental role of the unity of Spain in the constitutional architecture. Hence, they treated the problem from a legal perspective, deemed the independence referendum illegal and left the solution in the punitive hands of the judiciary.

In the transition to democracy, the model of territorial articulation chosen was the autonomous one. This model was perceived as a success from the 1980s to the 1990s: Spain became a member of the European Union, the whole country was modernized, and the Autonomous Communities enjoyed a broad operational margin and had many political competencies. But the severe economic crisis and the changes in the correlation of political forces fuelled a discussion about the need for a new transition. *Podemos*, a party that in the first years of its foundation adhered explicitly to populism (Mouffe & Errejón, 2017), has built part of its electoral success by denouncing the fragility of the constitutional consensus, and has defended the need for a second transition that breaks with the regime of toleration that didn't allow for a proper *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*

of the Spanish people. In this context the Catalan secessionist movement has also mounted a strong opposition to the constitutional consensus.

A first approach to populism

Many Spanish journalistic and academic critics of independentism have linked it to populism (Coll et al., 2018). In the polarized academic literature on the Catalan independence movement, the so-called unionist academics have analysed it as an example of 'the re-emergence of ethnic (rather than civic) forms of nationalism' depicting thereby 'the Catalan movement as reactionary' (Torbisco, 2017: 198). In what follows, I will first attempt a characterization of populism as a political phenomenon, then I will test whether this designation fits Catalan independentism, and finally I will present two versions of populism that can help us analyse the independence movement.

Many political analysts contest the possibility of defining populism due to its being an essentially contested concept or even a catch-all word. This is the reason why Taggart defines it as 'an episodic, anti-political, empty-hearted, chameleonic celebration of the heartland in the face of crisis' (Taggart, 2000: 5). But since Trump's election, the Brexit referendum, and the growth of extreme right-wing populist parties in Europe, academics are intensively writing on populism as the key element to understanding the specific crisis of the democratic system in many western countries. The unit of analysis is no more the Latin-American context, as it was not only in the times of Perón but also more recently when the so-called Bolivarian revolution started in Venezuela and neighbouring countries. The rise of xenophobic parties in Europe (represented by Orbán in Hungary, Duda in Poland and Salvini in Italy, among others) has triggered the discussion on populism as an inescapable horizon for contemporary western politics.

Today, an apocalyptic attitude towards the future of social rights and democracy in Europe is rationally justifiable. The enlightened, optimistic narrative of political, social, and moral progress as the inescapable teleology of humanity is countered by the increasing consciousness that Europe might be regressing to its darkest times. Populism, according to the way scholars are trying to define it, is responsible for the rise of right-wing parties. These parties have built their electoral victories by presenting themselves as the true representatives of the people. Ironically, by granting them the label 'populism', analysts are acknowledging that traditional parties are not in contact with the people and represent an elitist and anti-popular conception of democracy, leaving populist parties as the true mouthpieces of the popular will (Mastropaolo, 2005: 62).

There is a broad consensus on the belief that right-wing populism arises as a response to some deficits of representative democracy. Marco Revelli, for instance, states that this form of populism is a senile disease of democracy, the sign of an unhealthy democracy (Revelli, 2017). Jürgen Habermas speaks also of right-wing populism as an illness that must be distinguished from the anti-migrant prejudice and the fears of modernization rampant in the middle class 'that are only symptoms […] not the illness' (Habermas, 2018b), which he attributes to the lack of an effective political will in the EU. Others, like Jan-Werner Müller, argue that it is a reaction to a specific undemocratic element of representative democracies, namely that they cannot fulfil the ideal of collective

autonomy (Müller, 2017). In this version, populist movements stress the deficit of representative democracy and offer a solution: a non-mediated politics. The absence of mediation would allow, following the populists' discourse, for a manifestation of sovereignty (Brubaker, 2017: 369). The people should become sovereign, and this is only possible if institutions offer proper channels for the expression of the collective will, something that representative democracies cannot do, not only because there is an inherent democratic shortfall in representative democracy as such, but also and mainly because it has deficits caused by the economic and social circumstances of contemporary democracy, namely neoliberalism and the subjugation of politics to the financial system (Guiso et al., 2018). Critics of populism conclude that populism is not the right solution to the problems and deficits of representative democracy. The democratic surplus of populist solutions may create more severe problems than the democratic deficits of representative democracy.

Populism, as it has been used in the public political fora in Spain to demonize Catalan independentism, can be summed up as having the following features: it is linked with anti-elitist discourses; it tends to be anti-pluralistic; it is a thin-centred ideology (it can be also a strategy or a style of communication); it thinks of society as divided between two homogenous and opposed entities (the people and the corrupt elite); and it considers that politics should follow the general will of the people (and not the negotiation between elites). In the next section we will see whether and how these features operate in Catalan independentism.

Is Catalan independentism a form of populism?

The Catalan struggle for independence has evolved in recent years. Due to the Spanish government's reluctance to work towards a negotiated solution or to authorize a secessionist referendum, independentism has tried to 'bolster its legitimacy in order to gain international recognition. This need for external legitimation brought independentism to the motto of the 'right to decide', which places democracy at the centre of public discourse and avoids the ethnic implications of the term 'nationalism'.(3) Already twenty years ago, Rubert de Ventós (1999) offered an account of a non-nationalist independentism.

As a stateless nation, a non-fully sovereign nation, Catalonia needs to satisfy more demanding legitimation standards for its policies than full-fledged states. To gain international recognition, the independence movement needs to erase any nationalistic motivations from its discourses of justification. It must present itself as a civic nationalism, namely, neither xenophobic nor closed, but pro-European and open. Of course, this justification by appeal to accepted principles is not enough to achieve international recognition as a new state. This depends on legal frameworks and geopolitical motivations unaffected by sound ethical reasons (Vergés Gifra, 2014).

This emphasis on democratic legitimation brings us to some questions about sovereignty. The hope of Catalan independentism that other EU member states and global governance institutions would recognize the right of the Catalan people to self-determination was disappointed. Police repression and the alleged curtailing of fundamental rights by the

Spanish state were not perceived as sufficient reasons to allow for a change of course of the diplomatic relations between sovereign states. The main reason for considering the Catalan conflict an internal affair that didn't justify the international recognition of a new state was the fear that Catalan independentism would trigger other secessionist movements in Europe. A fear motivated more by concerns over regional stability than by reasons of principle.(4) Spain had not lost its state sovereignty, that is, the international community didn't take the Catalan crisis as a sufficient reason to change the status quo.

The democratic justification for independentism can be also traced in the course of action adopted by the popular mobilizations since 2010. Every 11 September, the national day of Catalonia, voluntary members of the two major social organizations mobilizing for independence, *Òmnium Cultural* and *Assemblea Nacional de Catalunya* (ANC), which have benefitted from the support of the regional government in Catalonia, organized huge demonstrations in a celebratory, peaceful and civic style. At the beginning of the executive phase of the independence process, the movement still described itself as 'the revolution of smiles', underlining thereby the civic attitude of the participants in the demonstrations.

The emphasis on democracy, understood as the alleged right of the people to decide their collective future via an independence referendum, is thus already present in the civic pathos of the movement. Democracy might also be seen as the key concept that explains how independentism grew from the 15% support it enjoyed in Catalonia in 2008 to 44% in 2016.(5) Was it a populist strategy? Yes, I would argue, but a democratic populism, that is, a populism that stresses democracy as the solution to political problems, with democracy here understood as the expression of the popular will that might, if necessary, override constitutional constrains and procedures.

This democratic populism was partially triggered by the Spanish Constitutional Court decision that modified the Catalan Statute of Autonomy. This counter-majoritarian decision, after the voting in of the Statute by the citizens of Catalonia and after having passed through the legislatures in the Catalan and the central governments, is the perfect example of an elitist decision that opposes the democratic will of the sovereign people. Was this decision the cause of the popular mobilization that kept growing since 2010 until the present? Or was it just a pretext? Its content is probably not known by the demonstrators, so what in fact prompted the protest and fuelled independentism was the fact that the people didn't feel represented by this decision, that they felt that democracy was being bypassed by Spanish elites interfering in an illegitimate way in democratic decisions by the citizens of Catalonia and their representatives. The usual populist contra-position between the people and the elites operates as a relevant factor in the Catalan political uproar.

After the decision in 2010, the huge mobilizations started to grow rapidly. The emphasis on popular will goes hand in hand with the rejection of checks and balances and of the self-justification of a political system that must protect the people from counter-majoritarian powers. This feature, shared with the increasing right-wing European populism, allows for a characterization of it as 'majoritarian post liberalism. […] What this means concretely is that the judicial branch, and especially the constitutional court,

as supreme interpreter of what the constitution says, should be responsive to the orientation and ways of thinking of the majority of the electorate' (Ferrara, 2018: 468).

Democratic populism stands for a simplified version of democracy according to which the legal system must respect some basic mandates from the people. The decision by the *Tribunal Constitucional* helped fortify belief in the Catalan opinion that the judicial counter-majoritarian power is politicized and that judicial review in Spain is not so much a mechanism to protect the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution as a tool in the hands of Spanish political majorities (for a detailed analysis see Ferraiuolo, 2018). If the checks and balances serve mainly as a political weapon to eliminate independentism from the political scene, as might reasonably be inferred from the imprisonment of politicians and civil society representatives, the state apparatus becomes the adversary without which populism cannot propose an alternative.

So, we have two key elements of the independentist mobilization: its civic modus operandi and its opposition to counter-majoritarian powers. Both features may be well understood as democratic: the commitment to horizontal organization and a people-centred ethos. Do they provide sufficient motivation to explain the growth and deepness of independentism? Don't we need another factor, namely nationalism, to account for it?

The 'right to decide' is the normative lever used to overcome the objections of nationalism or ethnicity. It is obvious, though, that the democratic populism of the independence movement builds upon a concept of nation or culture. Is this concept flexible, soft and liberal enough to keep up with European standards (as they were before the wave of right-wing populism in Europe these days)? Is independentism a form of ethno-populism?

According to Guy Hermet, the nation or the community can be a 'basic resort of ethno-populism'. This form of populism 'tries to exalt the particularism of a population to convince them that what they have is of irreducible value' (Hermet, 2001: 118). Ethno-populists make an appeal 'in the name of a tradition that greatly transcends the reference to democracy' (Hermet, 2001: 118). Can we trace this form of populism in the Catalan context?

I am not sure that in the Catalan case one can make this distinction as sharply, and this is one of the reasons why this case resists both clear-cut analysis and simplistic demonization. The democratic and the ethnic forms of populism coexist, as if both were needed, but at the same time none of them is sufficient to fuel the popular mobilization: the so-called '*procés*' is the fruit of the collaboration of state institutions and civil society; it combines parochial closure with the cosmopolitanism of Barcelona; it can be interpreted as a breach of loyalty or even a coup d'état by the Catalan parliament and as a legitimate and powerful democratic experience by the people. The only way to know if Catalonia has an ethnically motivated constituency that would impose an anti-pluralistic and authoritarian democracy by the Catalans *de souche* against 'colonizers' and the institutional underpinnings of Spanish culture would be to see what kind of policies a Catalan state would implement. How oppressive could this society become were independence to be achieved? If we could answer this question, then we would know which populism is hegemonic, the democratic or the ethnic. The transversal social power of independentism gives us a hint towards the democratic openness of the movement. On

the other hand, the complaints of *Ciudadanos* (a recently emerged political party in Spain) voters are directed to showing that independentism is democratically oppressive because it is based on a historical concept of Catalonia that doesn't fit the real sociological tissue of the country today.

Nationalism, as populism, is a highly ambivalent concept. In the political arena it is historically linked to the post-war consensus on the evils of ethnic nationalism. This doesn't mean though that there is not a banal nationalism operating in all European nation-states, and also a methodological nationalism that is one of the main obstacles confronting the European project. In any case, all nation states in Europe act in nationalist terms when they defend their culture and the interests of their citizens. In this sense, nationalism is banal, it is as transparent as the air, and it only becomes visible when newcomers bring to light the indirect discriminations and the biases of the policies and legislation of nation states. But, in the end, this flexible nationalism is the cultural frame that foreigners must accept and honour if they want to become citizens.

For stateless nations such as Catalonia, this banal nationalism is much more contested because of the lack of full sovereignty. Stateless nations carry a heavier burden of justification of their public policies because their decisions pend on the power of the state. The cultural policies of the Autonomous Communities may come into constant friction with the unifying role of the central government. That is why the Catalan school system, competency of the autonomous government, has been targeted in the recent political confrontation. The Catalan school, as the central tool for the (re)construction of the Catalan nation, is constantly confronted with the alleged right of all Spaniards to an education in Spanish. (6)

To be sure, even if we think of nationalism as a strong motor of independentism, we cannot overlook the sincerity (and, of course, naiveté) of its democratic articulation by civil society.

Ernesto Laclau's populism applied to Catalan independentism

To overcome these higher legitimation standards and the allegations of ethnic and exclusive nationalism, independentism stressed its democratic features. To use Ernesto Laclau's terminology, in the first steps of the growth of independentism the *floating signifier* that allowed for the canalization of popular demand was 'Madrid robs us', referring to the alleged economic plundering of the Catalan region by Spanish fiscal policy. It all amounted to a question of national dignity.

It took a few years after the counter-majoritarian decision for independentism to arrive at the floating signifier that allowed for an articulation of the popular demands: 'the right to decide'. This formulation expressed the discomfort of the people with the institutions of representative democracy and enlarged the movement's popular support base. The question is about who should take decisions, who is the sovereign. This enlargement of the popular base with the help of the floating signifier of 'the right to decide' is shown by the fact that independentism includes not only full-fledged Catalans (citizens with several Catalan surnames) but also those who are uneasy with representative democracy. This can make us think of Catalan independentism not as a populism in the wake of European

right-wing populisms, but as including also the democratic energies form the *indignados* movement: state sovereignty is not in the hands of the people and should be re-conquered to re-establish the broken bond of representation. In this case the people is not defined in national terms, but as those not represented.

Ernesto Laclau doesn't use the prism of liberal democracy to give an account of populism. Populism is in his case neither a sickness, nor a symptom, but 'the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such' (Laclau, 2005: 68). The people is constituted when the social demands that oppose oligarchy unite in a common identity. This people instituted by social demands confronts the status quo. Politically, this implies a subversion of hierarchies and institutions.

There are many open ends in Laclau's theory that deserve a deeper consideration. I want to stress here the influence it has had on the *Podemos* movement since its intellectual foundation in some circles of lecturers of political philosophy in Madrid. Pablo Iglesias and, much more clearly, Íñigo Errejón, have used Laclau's concept of populism to construct their electoral success. Populism, in this sense, is a response to the lack of accountability inherent to oligarchic systems. It is radically democratic in that it tries to keep alive the etymological sense of democracy through popular mobilizations. No wonder that there exists an obvious link between the *indignados* movement (called '15-M' in Spain) and *Podemos*.

Laclau wrote *On populist reason* precisely during the years of the populist flourishing in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Through the Latin-American lens, European left-wing populism, such as that of *Syriza* and *Podemos*, manifests a democratic energy and is the sign of empowerment by what he calls 'the plebs' in their struggle to become the people. This 'de-institutionalization that unsettles the old order' is more prone to appear in critical conjunctures, which 'are windows of opportunity for developing a relation of equivalence among unsatisfied demands and thus for populism' (Arditi, 2010: 494). One of the leaders of *Podemos*, Pablo Iglesias, shares the view according to which 'the 'Latinamericanization' of Southern Europe', the impoverishment of the middle classes since the economic and social crisis of 2008, is one such window of opportunity (Iglesias, 2015: 14).

Populism that builds its binding force on emancipatory values, in contrast to the closure characteristic of right-wing populism, can help us understand the new social movements and the democratic experiences that are not only symptomatic of the shortcomings of representative democracy but that can also be seen as revitalizing remedies.(7) Working with such an understanding of populism, Joaquín Valdivielso critiques Laclau's concept of populism and how it applies to *Podemos*.

According to him, populism is pulsing more vigorously in the new social movements, whose political significance fits neither the features of right-wing populism nor Laclau's concept of populism. Valdivielso writes that the restriction of the 'descriptive capacity of the theory of populism' is due to its focus 'on leadership rather than on leaderless collective agency' (Valdivielso, 2017: 307).

To obtain a full picture of Catalan independentism it is necessary to combine the decisive intervention of the Catalan political institutions (top-down) with the grassroots organization by the people (bottom-up). (8)

Lived democracy: the populism of civil society

Finally, on 1 October the illegal referendum took place.(9) Police forces tried to seize the ballot boxes and enacted the power of the state and the law that the Catalan government had bypassed. They were met by organized groups of citizens, who used their bodies to protect the polling stations. People from all social classes, and with different political orientations, resisted peacefully and prevented the police from seizing many ballot boxes.

The most noticeable factor, for me as a participating observer, was to see many people on the streets and in the schools that served as designated voting stations prepared for a night of being together, doing social and cultural activities to justify their presence in the schools before the Catalan police officers. Definitely people that weren't going out for the usual night of restaurants and parties, that for once were not buying or selling anything, but rather gathered politically. People shared information through social media, advising of the possibility of police confrontation and counselling about the rights of political activists in case of being addressed by the police. They still thought that the Spanish police were ready to talk, but the order to commandeer the ballot boxes was to be executed with the use of force. The pacifist attitude of the voters and demonstrators contrasted strongly with the use of force needed by the police to comply with their commands. The symbolic effect of the images and the videos reinforced the democratic, agonistic and antagonistic, experience of hundreds of thousands of people. In this sense, one could even say that the police violence was also symbolic: the state showed its force and at noon it did stop because of the reactions abroad to the images of peaceful voters of all ages and classes being pushed and beaten by highly armoured police forces that fought to take away the ballot boxes and the ballots.

Many people participated actively in the organization of the referendum and the protection of the polling stations, and many others saw the images on TV and felt solidarity with them. There were of course many other citizens – namely, the other half of the population of Catalonia – that remained at home and felt somehow protected by the firm reaction of the Spanish legal and political system against the illegal actions of the Catalan government. These were citizens that felt excluded by the referendum and that didn't want to legitimate it by voting, even if it was against independence.

Those Catalans in favour of the right to decide, those who think that the best solution is to let democracy decide, 'to hear the people', didn't just vote, didn't just participate in a regular election or (an illegal) referendum. They did make a democratic experience. Democracy on that day became a lived democracy, a performative democracy. People made democracy by resisting. Politics and democracy achieved thereby a heroic character, through the peaceful bodily resistance of thousands of citizens in many cities of Catalonia. 'Democracy in its limit, in its radicalism, in its singularity, did happen' (Sáez Tajafuerce Armengol Sans, 2017: 216). (10)

As we have seen, populism builds upon a confrontation in society. In the Latin-American case, it is the people against the bourgeoisie. Independentism cuts across classes, so the division it helped create is an inner division, in which the counterpart is no longer an elite but those citizens that deplore the independentist cause and feel threatened by its potential to reify a national culture based on an anachronistic projection of historical facts into the present, which has the effect of misrepresenting the real demographic nature of Catalan society today. Such a division is also a crucial element in the electoral message of *Ciudadanos*, a party that stresses social disunion as an effect of the pro-independence agenda and of the referendum, and harvests votes by presenting this division as a result of the cultural policy of the Catalan government over the last few decades: the full immersion of Catalan in the public school system and creation of a nation that had lost its powers of self-determination the almost forty years of Franco's dictatorship. This social division manifested in the proliferation of independentist and Spanish flags on the balconies of many Catalan cities in recent years; and also through a division in parliament, as was the case especially during the voting the on 5 and 6 September 2017.

The populisms of Trump, Chávez, Cinque Stelle or Lega build upon a well-identified enemy whose power poses a threat to the 'people': bureaucrats in Washington, the Venezuelan bourgeoisie, the Italian political caste, or immigrants. The enemy of independentism is not Spain as such, nor the Spanish political system, but maybe – and this is its biggest problem – half of the population in Catalonia. If this is the situation, if independentist populism has not been able to achieve a broader popular base than a bit less than half of the population, then we're justified to assert that it has failed as a political or electoral strategy. It hasn't been populistic enough because it wasn't pointed to a common feature of the people, a feature that unites, as is the strategy of *Podemos* or right-wing parties. Instead, independentism builds upon a question that divides society. The nature of the referendum and its divisive potential is also a way for unionist parties to stress this division, attributing its authorship and responsibility to the organizers and supporters of the referendum.

The referendum, seen as a tool to 'transform the will of the people into an 'immediate assertive power'' (Wolkenstein, 2015: 121), is presented by supporters of independentism as a simple solution to a complex problem, by conveying three ideas: the referendum is the quintessence of democracy, it is a good tool for taking binding collective decisions, and it is the best way to legitimate the creation of a new sovereign state.

The populist rhetoric of the referendum as the best way to bring back sovereignty to the people, and as the tool best-suited to exercise this collective right to decide, has substantial problems that have been underestimated by the political agents involved (Clark, 1998; Morel, 2018). First, the referendum is a shortcut in the democratic process that may endanger the procedural safeguards of the political system. Second, by posing a question the referendum has a divisive potential that jeopardizes precisely the democratic strengths that its defenders want to promote: the sovereign people is divided across society by the mere question they must answer. And third, referendums might be 'plebiscites in disguise', manipulative and lacking good quality deliberation (Landemore, 2018).

The populism of independentism, seen as a social movement, revolves around the popular experience of 1 October.(11) But the experience of the referendum, the lived democracy of at least two million Catalans, bears testimony to the real power of populism. By enacting democracy through a referendum, which in the eyes of the democratic populist rhetoric is the quintessence of democracy, independentism has achieved one of its goals: an experience of popular sovereignty. People felt they had the power to change things, to counter the power of the state and resist peacefully.

Of course, this enacted or lived democracy does not live up to the ideals of deliberative democracy. The intensity of this democratic experience is the result of the confrontation between the people and the police. This antagonism is another populist aspect of this whole affair. Populism, as opposed to liberal-democratic politics, fuels conflict. This agonistic model of democracy is now operating in Catalonia. The problem is that the political struggle is not a conflict about the policies that should be favoured or about the substitution of a corrupt political elite by the true representatives or spokespersons of the people. In this case, the struggle is about the limits of the sovereign state, about the creation of a new legality and the subversion of the constitutional order. What this democratic populism tries to achieve is thus something that representative democracy doesn't allow, because it aims at the destruction of the legal order and the creation of a new one. This rupture cannot be done with the tools of normal democracy but needs instead a democratic intensity that has two sides and makes manifest the ambivalence of populist social movements and politics: an enlivening power that is at the same time a danger for the future of the political community.

Notes

1 See the use of the term by Beck (2007).

2 The evening of the referendum, Mariano Rajoy, then state president, gave a televised speech about the events of the day. He started by saying that Spain is 'a great nation, one of the oldest in Europe'. Two days later, on 3 October, Felipe VI, Felipe VI, presently the titular king of Spain, stressed his commitment 'to the unity and permanence of Spain'. In contrast with this pre-political unity of the nation as the basis of the Spanish Constitution, the king stated that 'Catalonia's self-government [is] based on the Constitution and their own Statute of Autonomy'.

3 It is worth mentioning a paradox of the right to decide: in a referendum for independence the question of who has the right to decide is decided by the exercise of the right to decide. This right is not only controversial (with regard to who guarantees the right, who recognizes it, and whether it is a positive or a natural right), but it also has a recursive logic, as have all constituent moments.

4 On 13 October 2017, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, argued: 'if Catalonia is to become independent, other people will do the same. I don't like that. I don't like

to have a euro in 15 years that will be 100 different states. It is difficult enough with 17 states. With many more states it will be impossible.' Quoted in *The Guardian*, 13 October 2017 (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/13/eu-intervention-in-catalonia-would-cause-chaos-juncker-says)

5 According to the *Baròmetre d'opinió política* of the *Centre d'Estudis d'Opinió*.

6 In 2012, the former Minister of Education, Culture and Sports, José Ignacio Wert stated in the Spanish parliament: 'Nuestro interés es españolizar a los alumnos catalanes' (Our interest is to 'Spanishize' Catalan school students).

7 According to Rovira Kaltwasser, populism can be seen as a corrective for democracy 'in societies where there are significant problems in the dimension of inclusiveness' (Kaltwasser, 2012: 198), that is, in cases of deep social and economic inequalities, as is the case with classic Peronist populism. This is not the case with Catalan independentism. The people, in the Catalan case, does not designate an 'excluded mass' but rather those members of a region that feel politically oppressed and detached from their alleged right to self-determination.

8 For an account of populism from this double perspective see Aslanidis (2017) and Stavrakakis (2014). American scholars reacting to the Trump administration have also stressed the need for a populism from below (Arato & Cohen, 2017).

9 It is noteworthy that the Spanish government negated the existence of the referendum, describing it as 'a show' that was hiding 'a conscious and premeditated attack' with the use of 'the worst kind of populist practices', such as 'indoctrination of children […] harassment of judges and intimidation of journalists', as Prime Minister Rajoy said in his 1 October evening speech.

10 These authors refer to the referendum (Citizen Participation Process on the Political Future of Catalonia) of the 9 November 2014.

11 Several cities in Catalonia have changed the name of their squares, from King Juan Carlos or Constitution Square, to 1 October Square.

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