

## Twenty-one

# **Catalonia: from the fight against poverty to the fight against poor people**

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This chapter contends that there has been a significant shift in emphasis in how the problem of poverty is conceived and addressed in Catalonia. At the current time, a growing demonisation of people experiencing poverty is evident, which sits alongside a general mood in favour of nationalism. Support for both comes from neoliberal responses to financial pressures exacted on the state. Although far from intertwined or an inevitable coupling of interests, these dominant moods reflect the contemporary reality of Catalonia. It is particularly noteworthy for Scotland, where welfare debates have largely been seen as central to the independence debate, as it shows that political self-determination is not intrinsically socially progressive.

After the end of the regime of dictator Francisco Franco, Catalan society pursued a progressive goal of ending poverty. Dozens of campaigns against poverty and in favour of labour, social services and affordable housing established the socio-economic framework for a Catalan welfare state.<sup>1</sup> However, in the decade following 1996, Catalonia took a neoliberal turn and, instead, pursued the enrichment of the few at the expense of the majority. Although GDP rose by three points during the decade, the *Gini* co-efficient rose in a similar proportion.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, this situation has worsened as the pursuit of neoliberal goals that were initially merely unfavourable to people experiencing poverty has been succeeded by social policies that are explicitly hostile towards them. Fiscal pressure is used as an argument for the necessity of scaling back on social protection expenditure, although, as it will be argued here, the underlying motivations may be more ideological in nature. For example, the ruling conservative party, the CiU (Convergència i Unió), has stripped back the support that was available through the RMI programme to those receiving less than €400 a month;<sup>3</sup> indeed, Catalan Minister of Enterprise and Employment (Conseller d'Empresa i Ocupació) Francesc

Xavier Mena cancelled the RMI programme in 2012. Citing unproven concerns over fraud in the administration of the scheme, this decision adversely affected more than 7,000 of the very poorest Catalan families.<sup>4</sup>

More generally, conditions for the poorest people in Catalonia have worsened markedly in recent years. Although fiscal pressures may partly account for the difficulties faced, responsibility also rests with the Catalan government, which has primary responsibility for public security (health, housing, labour market and education). Since 2008, the population living with poverty has increased dramatically.<sup>5</sup> The Catalan *Sindic de Greuges* (regional ombudsman) denounced the increase of child malnutrition in Parliament.<sup>6</sup> More than one-quarter of children live in poverty (there was a child poverty risk rate of 26.4 per cent in 2011) – an increase of nearly nine percentage points in just three years (from 17.6 per cent in 2008). In response, the governing CiU said that the ombudsman was ‘alarmist’ and prevented its health and education spokespeople from responding in Parliament.

Thus, the debate concerning the independence of Catalonia from the Kingdom of Spain and the debate concerning the financial crisis have been prominent on recent institutional political agendas in Spain, but have not automatically been connected. Officially, from Catalonia, the process towards statehood has begun, following several meetings between the current government of Catalonia (*Generalitat de Catalunya*), the President of Catalonia (Artur Mas) and the President of Spain (Mariano Rajoy). Since the beginning of these meetings in February 2012, Rajoy refused to take part in any negotiation because the Catalan government demanded exclusive competences to collect taxes. Such arrangements have been made elsewhere in Spain – for example, the special fiscal pact of Euskadi and the Chartered Community of Navarre with Spain. Faced with this impasse (no further negotiations with Rajoy), Mas and his government declared they are now pursuing independence.<sup>7</sup>

The political and economic context in which these events are occurring is revealing. The ‘financial crisis’ has been used to justify the privatisation of large areas of the already diminished Iberian welfare state. So while wealthy Catalans and Spanish continue to increase their profits through privatisation (and, it might be argued, also from abuses of the tax system), the Catalan government has become the first of the autonomous communities to make cuts in public spending. Paradoxically, this disinvestment, which began in autumn 2011, came amid scandals of a very different nature, especially the *Palau de la Música* case and other incidents of white collar crime. A recent study stated that the intended savings from

cuts in education and public health in Catalonia in 2011 were not sufficient to counterbalance one-sixth of the fraud committed by those in power: public disinvestment of €2.7 billion against the embezzlement of €16 billion by the state administration.<sup>8</sup> While for the Catalan government tax evasion of great fortunes is considered elusive, the cuts in social spending are considered necessary, desirable and achievable.

The independence cause could have adopted (and could yet adopt) a socially progressive response to the challenges faced. However, instead, it has positioned itself – with almost universal public acceptance – as the champion of new strategies for the *punitive management of poverty*, at the heart of which is the demonisation of people experiencing poverty. These strategies have been implemented in the US, have some support in the UK, but are less common in continental Europe. Such punitive policy against the poor, however, is camouflaged by a caring and patriotic veneer that functions to allow a systematic assault against vulnerable sections of the population.

It might be argued that the punitive management of poverty has been necessary in order for the powerful to divert attention away from the socially regressive policies that are disadvantaging people experiencing poverty (such as tax exemptions for heritage assets, the reduction in taxes for the upper classes, inheritance and tax amnesties, as well as the flagrant cuts in health, education and subsidies<sup>9</sup>). Uniting against a common cause (the errant and undeserving poor) is a repressive mechanism of control through which rapid increases in social insecurity and public disorder can be managed. In this context, justificatory rhetoric from afar has been imported into Europe – referred to by the sociologist Wacquant as ‘American penal judiciousness’.<sup>10</sup> This provides an ideological and policy framework that justifies the persecution and imprisonment of the poor. It dismisses the social democratic concept of ‘rehabilitation’ as naive.

Solutions to the ‘problem of poverty’ are redefined within this framework. The concern is not to improve the potential of the welfare state to be socially progressive. Increasingly divisive groups among those experiencing poverty blame their situation on others who experience poverty (rather than the socio-economic structures that work in the favour of the most advantaged). For example, the problem of petty crime is addressed by imposing strict regulations on street activities. Such restrictions have increased exponentially and, as a result, virtually any informal work or leisure practice on the street is problematised (including those through which the poor may legitimately pursue income to ameliorate the intensity of the poverty they experience). Increasingly, the problems associated with poverty are left in the hands of charitable organisations.

At the same time, a consensus is emerging regarding the delegitimation – by law – of several kinds of inhabitants. This smacks of primordial nationalism. In this sense, ‘immigrants’ are labelled by definition and the varied assortment of people and practices as ‘uncivic’, and remain excluded from the concept of the ‘ideal community citizen’.<sup>11</sup> This conspires to maintain people in a permanent state of segregation in which a full range of punitive measures can be systematically implemented. In response to the demonisation of immigrants and concerns that are expressed about their entitlement, social protection for all (immigrant and non-immigrant alike) is threatened.

The management of poverty and criminality – through charitable surveillance and the penal system – has become increasingly the domain of powerful industries.<sup>12</sup> The Spanish Catholic organisation Cáritas Diocesana has an annual budget of €250 million and this continues to increase.<sup>13</sup> Although a planned privatisation of prisons is now uncertain because of the ‘financial crisis’, the Interior Department of the Spanish government is nevertheless trying to ‘improve the external control of penitential institutions with private security’. Evictions continue while bank bailouts are arranged, unemployment continues to rise, and insecurity and decreasing wages are a daily reality for hundreds of thousands of Catalans.<sup>14</sup> This coincides with the penalisation of all disorderly conduct, increased punishment, substitution of administrative faults for penalties, and building new penal facilities or CIEs (immigration detention centres).<sup>15</sup> The persecution of those involved in prostitution, pickpockets, street vendors, drink vendors, buskers and other ‘undesirables’ (all considered in equal terms) is considered a necessary part of the neoliberal management of poverty. The undesirable elements in society may face the option of accepting any employment under any conditions, ‘here or in Lapland’,<sup>16</sup> and refusal to do so could result in a prison sentence.

Politically, the neoliberal solution is for the majority of a population who are suffering the cuts to unite around a primordial nationalism, which reproduces and complements the soothing effect of charitable rhetoric and practices. The ‘true poor’ – as defined by our institutions – can count on Christian ‘handouts’ and citizens’ charity: if they behave ‘correctly’ and subscribe to the project of the ‘new state of Europe’. It will not be necessary for them to go to prison; they will be able to live – certainly with some difficulties – on the charity of ‘good citizens’.

In 2012, the first year of the financial cuts, the Medal of Honour of the Catalan Parliament (the highest honorary distinction of the Catalan Parliament awarded to personalities and institutions who are creditors of

exceptional recognition) was jointly awarded to the two 'souls of the country', Omnium Cultural and Càritas Diocesana. The former is a cultural association focused on the protection of 'language, culture and country', long associated with sustaining Catalan national identity in the Franco years. The latter is an agency of the Catholic church, dedicated to the coordination of beneficence. That these 'two souls' of Catalonia are claimed to 'symbolise that national and social aspirations are inseparable'<sup>17</sup> is a chilling triumph of neoliberal rhetoric and the defeat of solidarity in the quest to tackle poverty in contemporary Catalonia.

## Notes

- 1 O Salido and L Moreno, 'Welfare and Family Policies in Spain', *Política y Sociedad*, 44(2), 2007, pp101–14
- 2 See *Statistical Distribution of Personal Income and Risk of Poverty in Catalonia 2005*, <http://www.idescat.cat/cat/idescat/publicacions/cataleg/pdfdocs/edr1p05.pdf> and *Pobresa, Desigualtats i Exclusió Social a Catalunya*, [http://www20.gencat.cat/docs/economia/Documents/Arxius/doc\\_16846585\\_1.pdf](http://www20.gencat.cat/docs/economia/Documents/Arxius/doc_16846585_1.pdf)
- 3 *Renda mínima d'inserció (RMI)*, literally 'minimum insertion income'.
- 4 See 'Més de 7.000 famílies esperant el PIRMI', <http://www.eldebat.cat/cat/viewer.php?IDN=100888>
- 5 In 2011, 42.7 per cent of the population were under the poverty line before social transfers. In 2004, 36.9 per cent of the population were in this condition.
- 6 See *Report on Child Malnutrition in Catalonia August 2013*, <http://www.sindic.cat/site/unitFiles/3505/Informe%20malnutricio%20infantil%20castella.pdf>
- 7 ABC.es 'Rajoy y Mas, dos encuentros oficiales y dos reuniones secretas', ABC, 4 January 2012
- 8 The main source of data is provided by the Technical Union of the Ministry of Finance (GESTHA). The analysis was published in an article by the current deputy of the Catalan Parliament d'Unitat Popular-Alternative d'Esquerres (CUP-AE). See D Fernández, 'Silenci, aquí es defrauda: 16,000 millones d'euros anuales', *La Directa*, 8 November 2011
- 9 All these measures have been taken in both Catalunya and in the rest of the Spanish state, whether these governments were conservative or progressive. In fact, the first act of privatisation of public health was initiated by the first socialist president after the Civil War, Felipe González in 1986.
- 10 L Wacquant, 'La represión penal promovida como nuevo valor "de izquierda"', *Las Cárcel es de la Miseria*, Alianza, 2000, pp132–45
- 11 M Domínguez Sánchez, 'Crítica del Ciudadanismo', in *IX Congreso Español de Sociología*, Barcelona, Grupo de Trabajo de Sociología Política, Ponencia mimeografiada, 2007, pp1–9

12 Only the Spanish Catholic organisation Cáritas Diocesana has an annual budget of €250 million increasing every year. See L Daniele, 'Los donativos privados a Cáritas aumentan un 3.5%; los públicos caen un 2.9%', ABC, 23 October 2012. The privatisation of prisons is now uncertain because of the 'financial crisis', but note that 'the Interior Department of the Spanish government tries to improve the external control of penitential institutions with private security' – see 'Interior contrata a 95 exescortas para vigilar 21 cárceles', *El País*, 15 August 2013

13 See note 12

14 Data from January 2012 – 19.8% of the Catalan population live below the poverty line, according to the indicator AROPE (At risk of poverty or social exclusion) of the European Union. In this sense, child poverty reached 24 per cent and there are over 50,000 malnourished children according to the latest report from the *Sindic de Greuges* (Catalan ombudsman).

15 The crisis scenario changes this logic in an unknown way until today. The call for higher criminal penalties is accompanied by an economic need to reduce the unsustainable size of the prison population, 'groping' the possibility of an amendment to the criminal law in a clear efficiency-based sense. See I Rivera Beiras, 'Algunas notas sobre el debate epistemológico de la cuestión punitiva,' *Revista Española de Sociología*, 15, 2011, pp103-7 and Forero and Jimenez, 'La Cárcel Española en (la) Crisis. Mano dura y escasez. ¿Hacia la esquizofrenia punitiva?', *Indret Revista para el Análisis del Derecho*, awaiting publication. On the other hand, note that the last prison built was Puig de les Basses in 2011, but has not yet opened. Catalonia has exclusive jurisdiction in this matter. In the case of the CIE the Spanish state has jurisdiction in Catalonia. The Catalan government announced that the inauguration of Puig de les Basses prison would be in 2014, as soon as the government budget of this year has been approved. But after this public statement, the Catalan government has said there is not enough budget for building the prison in 2014. An editorial of the most influential newspaper of the Spanish Kingdom, *El País*, says that this is a strategy employed by Mas in order to blame Rajoy and to convert the delayed budgets in 'sovereignist fuel'. See Editorial, 'Propaganda. Artur Mas convierte la prórroga de los Presupuestos de 2012 en combustible soberanista', *El País*, 8 August 2013

16 The leader of the employer's representative, the Spanish Confederation of Business Organisations (CEO), José Luis Feito, proposed that the unemployed should stop collecting unemployment benefits as soon as the first offer of employment is refused. Feito said that 'an unemployed person should take any job even if it was in Lapland; if you do not agree you do not receive unemployment benefits.' 'CEOE afirma que "hay que aceptar trabajos aunque sean en Laponia"', *Europa Press*, 20 February 2012

17 S Hinojosa, 'Un país amb dues ànimes', *La Vanguardia*, 11 September 2012