

Ángel Rivero\*

Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1308-3709>

## The new Catalan nationalism

### Introduction

Catalan nationalism was born at the beginning of the 20th century, when industrialization and protectionism turned Barcelona from a provincial town into an affluent city (Smith, 2014). Since then, the regional political elites demanded cultural and political self-government for the region. Self-government was finally established several times, granted and regulated through different devolution laws and institutions: 1914, 1932, 1979 and 2006. Unfortunately, the Catalan issue did not reach a permanent solution in either case (Güell Ampuero, 2004: 24-41).

However, since 1979, in a steady way, the regional government had enjoyed almost full control on all the main political issues of the region: security, education, health, transportation and many others (Flores Juverías, 2013). Nevertheless, this unprecedented political power of the region was not accompanied with a diminution on complains and demands. On the contrary, each concession was followed by a new demand to be recognized: without independence, it was said, Catalonia is not free; and there is no democracy in Spain if self-determination to Catalonia is not recognized. This was the Catalan nationalism way of behaving and the Spaniards get used to it. This political behaviour was encapsulated in an axiom of Spanish politics: Catalans wanted independence provided they were not allowed to get it. The claim of independence was instrumental in getting new concessions and money from the federal government, but it was not aimed, really, at independence.

Why they did not want independence? Because once you get independence, there is nothing more to get and there is a high price to pay. Even nationalists recognize at that time that independence was irrational and anti-democratic. It was irrational because it was costly and impossible in a democracy; it was anti-democratic because the majority of the Catalan population is against it. However, the crisis of 2008 changed all that, and the rhetoric of independence was turned into a political programme: independence was proclaimed during the *coup d'état* of October 2017, self-government was even briefly

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\* Correspondence address: Department of Politics and International Relations, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Ciudad Universitaria de Cantoblanco, 28049 Madrid, Spain, e-mail: [angel.rivero@uam.es](mailto:angel.rivero@uam.es).

suspended, and Catalonia was rendered divided and in decline. This dramatic change in the political discourse of Catalan nationalism was analyzed by Ivan Serrano: “This shift departs traditional demands for more self-government characterized by a bilateral and negotiated agreement to reach an acceptable accommodation within the state, to a unilateral exercise of self-determination to define the institutional status of Catalonia” (Serrano, 2014: 5).

### **Fake independence**

On October 10, 2017, the then president of the regional government of Catalonia declared independence from Spain. This independence lasted just a few seconds because it was immediately postponed in order to open negotiations with the Spanish government (Minder, Kingsley, 2017). This bizarre move was presented by the main actors of this play as a way of making independence feasible: they dreamed or played with the idea of having an international conference on Catalan self-determination that will be carried between two sovereign states. In their dreams, this was a win-win move because the two possible outcomes of what they considered a smart decision were good for them: the target of independence was the highest good, and vocally was what they wanted. Nevertheless, the second option, to get recognized the right of self-determination for Catalonia by the Spanish government was, in reality, the best option, the good one: no costs at all for Catalonia and a formidable tool to blackmail the Spanish government forever. As we will see, at the end of the day, neither of the two dreams of Catalan nationalism came true. A full account of this independence process is available at Real Instituto Elcano (Real Instituto Elcano, 2019: 21-26).

Although this is not the first time that such dramatization takes place in Spanish contemporary history, as almost the same farce happened in 1934 but with cannons and bullets, there is indeed something new in these events. For the first time since the restoration of democracy in Spain (1975-1978), Catalan nationalism abandoned the lip service rhetoric of independence and embarked in a course of action that, neglecting the Spanish democratic constitution, broke the law in the name of the people’s will. Until then, the Catalan nationalism was pragmatic and legal, but wrapped in a rhetoric of victimization and survival. However, after the window opportunity opened by the 2008 crisis, Catalan nationalism began to threaten the democratic institutions and the law in the name of ‘a real democracy of the people’.

This populist shift of Catalan nationalism was studied by Astrid Barrio, Oscar Barberà and Juan Rodríguez-Teruel. They have shown how

secessionist parties and groups have innovated their mobilization repertoires in order to fit with this [European] populist-oriented discourse, employing mass mobilization, referenda simulations, and a populist political style in the institutions. Overall, Catalan secessionism presents a peculiar case where mainstream ruling parties adopt populist rhetoric and new mobilization practices to maintain power in adverse times. (Barrio, Barberà, Rodríguez-Teruel, 2018: 1).

## A populist understanding of democracy

Given that the main feature of today's Catalan nationalism is a defence of "real democracy" against constitutional democracy in the "name of the people", it converted to a populist movement. As they say, they are fighting "for democracy" against an "authoritarian state". This point is discussed by Jose Javier Olivas and sustained by Ignasi Bernat and David Whyte, that define Spain as a "post-fascist State" (Olivas, 2017; Bernat, Whyte, 2019). Nonetheless, given that there is striking discursive change from the demand of independence to the demand of a real democracy, I find appropriate to name this nationalism the new Catalan nationalism. This denomination is useful in pinpointing a new ideological programme in contrast with what Catalan nationalism demanded in the past.

To define more precisely this shift, it is also valuable to get familiar with the concept *populisme de separation*, as was defined by Dominique Reynié. In his view, Europe is contemplating a wave of populism at national level in many countries but also of sub-national populism in many others. Instances of the later are the independence movements of Flanders, Veneto, Scotland, Basque County and Catalonia. According to him:

Separatist populism follows a very simple logic: a rich region considers excessive her contribution to the national wealth and asses as unjust the redistribution of it done by the State in the name of equality. (...) It is in Catalonia were these separatists movements are stronger (Reynié, 2013: 227).



**Picture 1.** Matteo Salvini supporting the secession of Catalonia in 2015 when the Lega was still a secessionist movement, *Lega Nord*

Source: Tweet by Matteo Salvini, September 2015, 9:13 p.m. @matteosalvini: COME ON CATALONIA! To those that, in the name of freedom, resist and work against Brussels and the centralist states who want to wipe peoples, languages, cultures, identities and jobs. THANK YOU.

Emmanuel Dalle Mulle's speaks of "a Nationalism of the Rich", instead of populism, when he studies the discourses and strategies of separatist parties in Catalonia, Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland (Dalle Mulle, 2018). However, as mentioned, this new insistence on real democracy and the people's democracy is something that should be stressed.



**Picture 2.** Artur Mas' electoral campaign of 2012: "The Will of a People" (on the left) and Marine Le Pen's slogan for the 2017 presidential election in France: "In the Name of the People" (on the right)<sup>1</sup>

Source: Left: CiU electoral propaganda, November 25, 2012 Catalan regional elections. Right: *The Guardian*, Saturday 7, January 2017.

The electoral slogan of the then main nationalist party in Catalonia was, in the 2012 regional elections, "The Will of a People". Its leader Artur Mas presented himself as a new Moses, conducting his people free from the domination of the Spanish Pharaoh to the promised land of milk and honey. In fact, the Catalan nationalists love to talk of the voyage to Ithaca, but without specifying if they mean Homer or Kavafis. Artur Mas presented himself as the incarnation of a Catalan people with a single will in the same line as Marine Le Pen pretends to be France (see Picture 2).

And, in the name of the Catalan people, the New Catalan nationalism succeeded in taking control of the regional government (with less than 50% of the vote) in 2012 and enforced a policy of independence against the Spanish Constitution: the will of the people is sovereign and it is above the laws. This understanding of democracy is very different from what we understand by constitutional or representative democracy (see Table 1).

According to the new Catalan nationalism Catalonia is a single people with a single will; those who are against independence are not Catalans or are traitors; the will of the people is above the constitutional law; the public media of Catalonia (television, radio and press) are instrumental in developing the national project of Catalonia, and should not be neutral on this issue; political action is a *procés* aimed at an already pre-

<sup>1</sup> Both of them understand democracy as the expression of a collective being with a single will, the people. Given that this collective entity needs an interpreter both see themselves as the voice of the people. Artur Mas' poster also says: "Make It Possible" [the triumph of the will].

**Table 1.** A comparison between constitutional democracy and populist democracy

Constitutional democracy	Populist democracy
<b>Main assumption:</b> Social and political pluralism. The people is understood as the totality of citizens.	<b>Main assumption:</b> The people is a single being with collective identity and will. There is an antagonistic division in society between the real people and the enemies of the people.
<b>Institutions:</b> Separation of powers, checks and balances, limited government.	<b>Institutions:</b> Strong executive power with weak legislative and judicial powers. Given that the executive incarnates the will of the people, its powers should not be controlled nor limited.
<b>Media:</b> Free and independent media.	<b>Media:</b> Control of the media by the executive. Limitation and harassment of independent media.
<b>Elections:</b> Competitive and regular.	<b>Elections:</b> Permanent and plebiscitarian.
<b>Direct democracy:</b> Rare and exceptional (referenda, plebiscite).	<b>Direct democracy:</b> Plebiscitarian democracy as a norm.
<b>Political parties:</b> Pluralism recognized and valued.	<b>Political parties:</b> Manichean división – us versus them. Adversarial politics.
<b>Political action:</b> Politics understood as a negotiation in search of agreement.	<b>Political action:</b> Imposition of a hegemonic project: pre-ordained political goals.
<b>Leadership:</b> Limited power and strong accountability.	<b>Leadership:</b> Strong identification leader/people, limited accountability. Charismatic leadership.

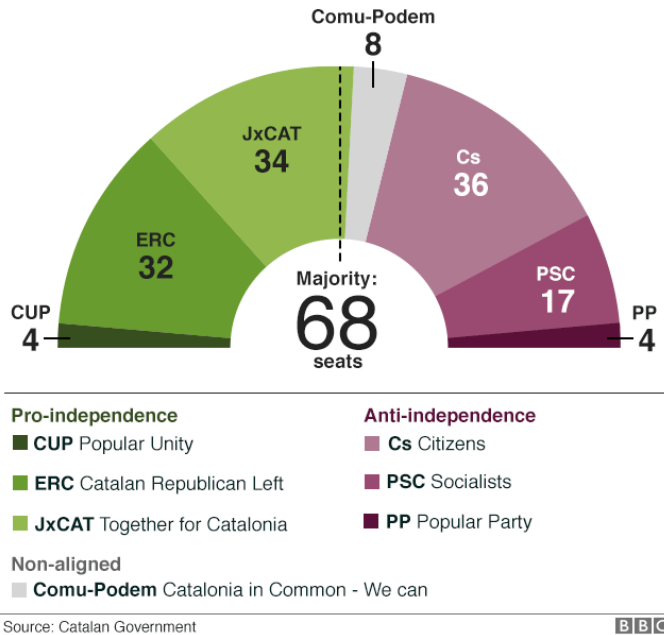
Source: Gratius and Rivero (2018: 42).

ordained goal, the independence of Catalonia; finally, the leaders of the independence movement of Catalonia speak always in the name of Catalonia (and not as part or party of the plural Catalan society).

### **A coup d'état in the name of the people**

The high tide of this populist wave ended in a *de facto coup d'état* when the Spanish Constitution, the Parliament of Catalonia and the Supreme Court were ignored by the government of Catalonia in October 2017 (*Spanish prosecutor says Catalan leaders attempted 'coup' in independence case*, 2019). As they said, they were obeying a higher voice, the voice of the people, the real sovereign, which commanded them to declare independence. All pro-independence parties of Catalonia combined (from the Marxists-Leninists Communists of the CUP to the xenophobic conservatives of CiU never reached 50% of the vote in the region), but nonetheless, they say, “there was a mandate of the people to carry on independence” (The Guardian, Tuesday 10 October 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/10/catalan-government-suspends-declaration-of-independence>). Daniel Gascón has brilliantly explained how this coup d'état was connected with this authoritarian, “illiberal”, understanding of democracy (Gascon, 2018). Adriaan Kuhn and Guillermo Graiño have shown the democratic confusion of the secession discourse in Catalonia (Kuhn, Graiño, 2019). I will tackle this issue latter.

## The split in the Catalan parliament



**Figure 1.** The Catalan Parliament of Catalonia after the elections on December 21, 2017 elections

Source: BBC, *Catalonia Crisis in 300 Words* (14 October 2019).

Although this coup failed, the new Catalan nationalism is still in control of the regional government of Catalonia and persist in defying Spanish democracy, but now in a vocal but legal way. In order to understand how a populist, authoritarian, and anti-democratic movement can emerge in a western affluent region (25,000 € GDP per capita), it is necessary to note that there are some domestic causes in need of explanation, but also that the new Catalan nationalism makes part of the wider movement of Europe's populist wave.

I mean by populism

those movements or political parties that understand politics as an unsurmountable conflict, a zero-sum struggle, between the people and their enemies. In the populist vision, the people is always morally right; and the oligarchy is always mean and, for this very reason, does not deserve recognition and nothing can be done with them. Politics as a mediation is abolished in favour of and understanding of politics as conflict: adversarial politics (Rivero, 2019: 282).

In the ideology of populism, the people is a collective actor with a single voice: the voice of the populist leader. This understanding of the people is contrary to the democratic understanding of the people. In a democracy, the people are the plurality of cit-

izens, not a collective being with a single voice. In this line, the new Catalan nationalism has a limited understanding of the Catalan people: for them, the Catalans are only those living in Catalonia, or not, that defend independence, the others are not Catalans at all; they are, in a derogatory way, Spaniards or, worst, traitors, *botiflers* (on the historical complexities of defining who is and who is not Catalan see Clua i Fainé, 2011). As in all populist movements, the new Catalan nationalism needs an enemy to blame of the predicaments of the present. In their view, the enemy of the *real* Catalan people is the Spanish Oligarchy that dominates Catalonia by sucking its wealth.

This paranoid vision of politics leads the new Catalan nationalism to neglect the very existence of democracy in Spain: given that they define themselves as victims of exploitation, Spain cannot be a democracy. However, reality says something different: Catalans have the same rights as all Spanish citizens; they pay the same taxes; they are more affluent than the vast majority of them; and, surprisingly, Spain is one of the most democratic countries in the world.

### **Is Spain a democracy?**

According to the respected Democracy Index of the *The Economist Intelligence Unit* there are only 22 “full democracies” in the world. Well, contrary to what the new Catalan nationalism believes Spain is number 16 in the world championship of democracies. Since the Index was created in 2006, Spain was always a full democracy and always scored among the twenty most democratic countries in the world (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020).

How can be explained this blindness or incapability of the new Catalan nationalism to perceive the reality of Spanish democracy? The answer is quite simple: they do not share the liberal definition of democracy employed by *The Economist*. Populist democracy can be seen as a radical critique of constitutional or liberal democracy in the name of a real democracy of the people, and this is the case with the new Catalan nationalism. As we have already seen, the Catalan issue “is not about independence, it’s about democracy”. Moreover, populism is, above all, a movement aimed at destroying democracy in the name of democracy (Rivero, Zarzalejos, del Palacio, 2018; Gratius, Rivero, 2018).

### **Is Catalonia a nation?**

Given that the main goal of the new Catalan nationalism is to realize a populist democracy, a real democracy for the people of Catalonia, it seems important to know what Catalonia as a people is. First, it should be noted that the new Catalan nationalism always impersonates Catalonia as a being with life and will of its own. This is quite bizarre because Catalonia was traditionally seen as a territory, properly defined in terms of space and material conditions. When Don Quixote arrived in Catalonia he said: “Bright sea,

smiling earth, clear air. We are in Barcelona!” (Cervantes, 1990: 986) . Not for the Catalan nationalists, for them Catalonia is a suffering, prostrated being, and their mantras are “Catalonia is humiliated”; “Catalonia is enslaved”; “Catalonia is oppressed” (Castro, 2013); “Freedom for Catalonia” (Heargreaves, 2000) and many others. Of course, nobody in Catalonia speaks that way save the nationalists.

Secondly, the Catalans were traditionally the Spaniards living in Catalonia, in the same way that all those living in Spain were Spaniards. There was no contradiction in being Catalan and Spanish in the same way as there is no contradiction in being a Londoner and English.

Spain was then understood as a territory that occupied the whole Iberian Peninsula and Catalonia was a region or part of it. In fact, what it is today called the Iberian Peninsula was until recently called Spain, even in Portuguese, and all its dwellers were the Spaniards, putting aside the kingdom they belong to as vassals: Castilians, Portuguese, Catalans and so on.

However, at the beginning of the 20th century, the Catalan identity was redefined in an ethnic way. This was the work of Enric Prat de la Riba in his book written in 1906, *The Catalan Nationality*. For the first time, Catalonia was presented as an organic totality of culture, race, will and spirit (Prat de la Riba, 1930, Chapter VIII). Although Prat de la Riba defines Catalonia as a nationality, he uses this word as a synonym of nation. Greatly influenced by the German doctrine of nations and nationalism, especially Friedrich Meinecke, he narrates in a poetic way how the winter of the Catalan nation is coming to an end with the blossom of a national spring. This blossom is nationalism, the movement that converts a sleeping nation in a sovereign state.

The nationalism of Prat de la Riba was fully German in the understanding of nationalism as a progress in human history. Moreover, in this sense it was completely alien to the Spanish/Catalan understanding of the political community. Accordingly, he maintained that in his time, Catalonia has completely developed as a full nation, and in order to achieve the completion of progress, a state of her own was needed. As in Meinecke, economic progress is associated with national development. In addition, national development has a cultural dimension and finally a political one. Given that Catalonia was affluent at the beginning of 20th century, it qualifies as an independent state. Nationalism is an ideology of congruence: if there is a nation, then it should be a state. On Prat de la Riba, like in the German dream of Meinecke, longed for a Catalan imperial nationalism (Krauel, 2013).

As pointed by Elie Kedourie, nationalism is an ideology that

pretends to supply a criterion for the determination of the unit of population proper to enjoy a government exclusively its own, for the legitimate exercise of power in the state, and for the right organization of a society of states. Briefly, the doctrine holds that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nations are known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and the only legitimate type of government is national self-government (Kedourie, 1994: 1).



Nationalism was fashionable at the beginning of the 20th century in all Europe, and Catalonia was not aside. According to the Prat de la Riba's nationalism, Catalonia was a nation and in order to achieve progress a Catalan state was in need. The problem was that nationalism, as stated by Kedourie "pretends to supply a criterion" for the determination of what is a nation, but reality is much more complex (Kedourie, 1994: 1). As already mentioned, traditionally Catalan and Spanish were complementary collective identities. Thus, the political project of Catalan nationalism was to disentangle both identities.

In order to create that difference between Spanish and Catalan identity, they concentrate themselves on creating identity by differentiation. They needed to define both: what is to be Catalan and what is to be Spanish. As expected, the result was a Manichean antagonism. Catalan was synonymous of modern, tolerant, civilized, progressive. In addition, Spanish or Castilian was equated with reactionary, obscurantist, underdeveloped, authoritarian. Being Catalan was cool, being Spanish awful.

They also created a new grammar and orthography of the Catalan language, until then a peasants dialect, and this was done by Pompeu Fabra in 1918; they wrote a national history, where the Catalan people was presented as the main character (Elliott, 2018). A few years before that, at the end of the 19th century the main attributes of the Catalan nation were already invented: the national flag in 1880, the national anthem in 1882, the national day in 1886, the national dance in 1892, the national saint patron in 1885, the national virgin in 1881, the national games and so on (Ucelanda Cal, 2018).

In the time of the high tide of nationalism (after the Prussian-French war of 1870), Catalan nationalism planted the seeds of the Catalan identity. To sum up, they created all the trappings of a nation, but at that time, the presumed nation ignores them (Prat de la Riba, 1930).

### **Nationalism as a project of identity creation**

During a century, this nationalism was aimed at self-government and secession from Spain was not demanded. Of course, it was, as all nationalisms of the beginning of 20th century, racist, xenophobic, chauvinist, jingoist, but it was instrumental in the very development of Catalonia as an affluent society. However, with the restoration of democracy in Spain (1975-1979) and with the reestablishment of Catalan self-rule in 1979, this ideology of national identity creation was turned into the official ideology of Catalonia, and this makes a difference. Moreover, this marks an important change.

There is a paradox in that many Catalan nationalists define Catalonia as a nation without state, but this needs qualification. Catalan government, for instance, has full control of education and this has important consequences e.g., Spanish is the mother tongue of the vast majority of Catalans, but education is compulsory only in Catalan. This means that the Catalan government has the capacity to educate or, if you wish, indoctrinate, the Catalan pupils in all those attributes of the Catalan nation that were cre-

ated at the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century. In addition, since the restoration of democracy, Catalonia was always governed by the nationalists. Thus, Catalonia is not a nation without a state.

First, because Catalonia is a region, a territory, and not an ethnic group; and Catalonia is also not the plurality of citizens of a state. It is not a nation in both senses of the word. Second, because the government of Catalonia has the capacities proper of a state (legislative control, coordination of society, policy design and implementation) so, in a sense, it is almost a state. Catalonia has no external sovereignty, but do have a certain internal sovereignty. Catalonia does not qualify as a nation and Catalonia has some of the attributes of a state. This is important to understand the Catalan imbroglio.

This program of catalanization of the Catalan society by the regional state was accepted by the majority of the Catalan society as a compensation after the Franco's dictatorship, were this programme was termed secessionist and was not implemented by the state. Nonetheless, it survived in civil society and was supported by the Catalan church. When Catalan nationalists state that the Catalan language was forbidden in Catalonia what they meant is that the programme of catalanization of society was abandoned by Franco's dictatorship. For instance, between 1952 and 1974, according to the official records, there were 5,878 books in Catalan published in Spain.

Thus, during almost three decades the Catalan identity created by the Catalan nationalism was implemented as a cultural programme of identity creation in Catalonia. Of course, there were protest on the part of those that suffered cultural imposition, but Catalan society reached a *modus vivendi* where official nationalism was combined with a tolerant pluralist society. This peaceful setting was called the Catalan oasis. However, this happy Arcadia was finally lost for a variety of reasons: First, when left nationalists displaced right nationalist in the government of Catalonia (2003-2006/2006-2010). At that point, a race began between the two on being more nationalist. The result was the disastrous devolution law of 2006. Second, when left nationalists denounced the deep corruption of the long years of national conservative government in Catalonia. The main result was the dismantling of the hegemonic nationalist party of Catalonia (CiU) under a wave of corruption scandals. Then the race turned into a war between nationalists. Finally, the crisis of 2008 arrived in a society where the political crisis was deep.

### **Conclusions: populism as a remedy to infight destruction**

As in many other European societies, populism was seen in Catalonia as the easy way to political, social and economic predicament. When governing was associated with cutting social expenses, a very unpopular policy in Spain, the idea of mobilizing the national fervour as a way of gaining political support was too tempting. The problem with this bright idea is that the cost can be very expensive. Until the crisis, Catalonia was seen as an instance of cultural plurality accommodation in a democracy. But this populist turn

destroyed the reputation of Catalonia in and out of Spain. After eight years of the new Catalan nationalism implementation, the institutions of self-government are discredited, the political leaders are third rate, the society is divided and tired (Boadella, 2007; Espada, 2017). Lying in politics has become acceptable in Catalonia and the credibility of the Catalan politicians is none, because fake news seems to be compulsory to them (Borrell, Llorach, 2015). The new Catalan nationalism promised a better democracy, a democracy of the people, but produced a divided society with downgraded political institutions (Zarzalejos, 2014), in a nutshell, a populist democracy.

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**Abstract:** In this article, I have shown how Catalan nationalism mutated in the last years. Since 1979 Catalonia enjoyed unprecedented political self-government, however, its political autonomy was not enough for the independence movement. With the economic crisis of 2008, they declared that the time of independence has finally arrived, and in 2017 a bizarre independence that lasted a few seconds was proclaimed. Catalan nationalism was traditionally pragmatic, but since then, this is no longer the case. It converted to a new nationalism that in the name of a democracy of the people divided Catalonia by antagonism. As I have shown, the new Catalan nationalism is today a populism of secession.

**Keywords:** nationalism, Catalonia, populism, antagonism, real democracy, secession, constitution

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