

# Podemos and the Spanish left risk alienating their own support base if they ally with independence movements in Catalonia

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*The Government of Catalonia has announced its intention to hold a referendum in November on whether to declare independence from Spain. [Enric Martínez-Herrera](#) and [Thomas Jeffrey Miley](#) write on the role of the financial crisis in the Catalan independence movement, and how parties on the Spanish left such as Podemos have positioned themselves in the debate. They argue that while it might be tempting to support anti-system groups pushing for Catalan independence, the real focus for the Spanish left should be on opposing austerity policies supported by both the Spanish Government in Madrid and the Catalan Government in Barcelona.*



The ghost of Karl Polanyi is haunting Europe. In his classic book, [The Great Transformation](#), Polanyi famously sketched the devastating social and political consequences wrought by the single-minded pursuit of a pure market society by European powers over the course of the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century. Polanyi argues persuasively that such utopian fantasies effectively engendered a negative, dynamic and dialectical process – a “double-movement” – that led to unprecedented levels of death and destruction, culminating in the rise of fascism and total war.



After over half a century of class compromise and relative social peace, Europe again finds itself in the clutches of a plutocracy dedicated to the realisation of utopian fantasies – incarnated in the neoliberal regime of austerity, imposed at the behest of the Troika on behalf of the financial sector. Thus far, the current austerity regime has had predictably dismal consequences in terms of the material conditions, employment prospect and life opportunities of the vast majority of European citizens, especially of those in the southern European countries who have found themselves at the eye of the financial storm.

A [crisis of democracy](#) has ensued. With the dramatic decline in system “efficacy” has come the onset of a serious crisis of legitimacy for representative institutions across the South of Europe. Indeed, there are clear indications that we are currently witnessing the commencement of what [Gramsci](#) termed an “organic crisis.” According to the still-unsurpassed theorist of hegemony, such crises take place when large segments of the population (in Gramsci’s view, social classes) “become detached from their traditional parties” – more specifically, when they become detached from the “particular organisational form, with the particular men who constitute, represent, and lead them”. In these situations, the representatives of the main established parties are no longer recognised by core constituencies as genuine “expressions” of the group. This is exactly what seems to be taking place in Spain, where [public opinion polls](#) show that, spiking alongside levels of unemployment, rates of citizen disaffection with their political representatives and with their representative institutions, as measured across multiple indicators, are higher now than ever before.

The bleakness of the current conjuncture from the perspective of democracy is perhaps best captured by the collusion in August of 2011 of the socialist Rodríguez-Zapatero government with Mariano Rajoy’s conservative party, then in opposition, in agreeing to amend the Spanish Constitution so as to prohibit budgetary deficits – a move that explicitly imitates a 2009 German reform and basically rules out by constitutional fiat recourse to counter-cyclical stimulus packages. This was achieved without consulting the demos via a referendum, with the cited rationale being to maintain credibility in the eyes of the financial markets.

This proved particularly unpalatable and therefore damaging to the reputation of the main parties, not only because of what it suggested about their ability to resist the demands of international finance, but also because both main parties (especially the conservative *Partido Popular*) had spent a good part of the previous decade responding to Basque and Catalan nationalist demands for constitutional reform with a variety of arguments centred around [the theme](#) of the need to be cautious before “opening up the Constitutional melon” and fiddling with the great but delicate historic achievement of the exceptionally broad constitutional consensus forged by the “Fathers” of the Constitution and ratified via referendum back in 1978.

## The financial crisis and Catalan independence

The current impasse between Spain’s central government and the Catalan regional authorities only makes sense as being simultaneously a symptom and exacerbating cause of this still-unfolding organic crisis. The on-going cycle of nationalist mobilisation in the region has been characterised by unprecedented open challenges to constitutional legality by the Catalan authorities, who have announced a plan to hold a unilateral referendum on independence in November, despite repeated cautious but clear warnings from the central government that it will enforce the law to ensure that such a vote will not come to pass on its watch.

The regional government’s recent turn to “contentious politics” and the tactic of top-down street mobilisation, alongside “populist” challenges to constitutional legality, have been principally propelled forward by a persistent [campaign](#) by the regional-government’s own television station, TV3. It is far from a coincidence that such a tactical shift should come at a time of acute economic troubles rocking the South of Europe.

Of late, the president of Catalonia’s regional government, Artur Mas, together with his ministers and coalition partners in *Convergència i Unió* and *Esquerra Republicana* have taken to invoking the distinction between “legality” and “legitimacy,” and even to posing the question, “Who’s afraid of democracy?” Yet this is emanating from a regional government equally committed to the pursuit of austerity as its conservative counterpart in Madrid. Indeed, Mas is always careful, particularly when addressing international audiences, to signal the loyalty of his regional government to the demands of the Troika, above and beyond any beef it may have with the Spanish central government, much less constitutional law. Mas and his government may have donned the outfit of populist rebels, but their brand of rebellion is of a decidedly neoliberal slant.

How to interpret the Catalan nationalists’ recent recourse to a more “contentious” brand of politics? The nationalist movement in Catalonia is best conceptualised as a ‘middle-class’ movement, one that has long been hegemonic in the heavily-subsidised Catalan ‘civil society’. Its core constituency of support is comprised of native Catalan-speaking middle classes, [disproportionately hailing](#) from the semi-rural hinterland outside of the Metropolitan Barcelona Area. Moreover, its hegemony in civil society is reflected and perpetuated by the fact that it is very well-represented across the spectrum in regional party politics, and is [overwhelmingly dominant](#) among the ranks of regional bureaucrats, intellectuals, and school teachers.

The business class has been somewhat more divided. The Catalan economy fared extremely well in the Franco period, witnessing an impressive cycle of industrial expansion from the mid-1950s through the outbreak of the OPEC crisis in the agony of the regime. With the transition to democracy and the devolution of powers to a regional



Artur Mas, Credit: Presidencia Gobcan (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

government, the business class smoothly shifted into supporting Jordi Pujol's center-right coalition, *Convergència i Unió*. Pujol was a charismatic leader who proved capable of forging a conservative power-bloc dominated by the Catalan business class with popular support provided by the nationalist native middle strata.

Nevertheless, the nationalist movement's appeal among the lower strata of Catalan society has always remained fairly limited. This is in large part because of its failure to take root among the internal-migrant, the Castilian-speaking bulk of what remains of the traditional industrial proletariat in the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, as well as [the fact that](#) it has only fared moderately better among these internal migrants' post-industrial, underemployed offspring. Not to mention its general lack of appeal among the latest wave of *international* migrants from North Africa, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.

Indeed, the linguistic and national diversity of the Catalan population has long constituted the demographic thorn in the side of any aspirations to build a democratic majority in favour of an independent Catalan nation-state. Put bluntly, Catalonia is a multi-national society. The long history of internal migration and even longer history of integration in the Spanish state (one of the oldest states in the world) for generations has hindered the mass appeal of the Catalan nationalist movement, especially among unskilled and semi-skilled workers, thereby rendering aspirations for independence little more than a utopian dream. In fact, it is [somewhat paradoxical](#) that the idea of independence grows as Catalonia becomes more multicultural through new waves of immigration that fuel xenophobia, which at the same time make this project increasingly difficult in democratic terms.

Still, the Catalan nationalist movement has wielded state power at the level of the regional government for over three decades now, and it has employed its state power to promote a [Herderian](#) nation-building agenda. Language policy and control over the education system, as well as of the regional mass media, have been the crucial components of this romantic peoplehood project. The Catalan nationalists have used their political dominance and parcels of state power at the regional level to wage a "war of position" over national imaginaries and political loyalties, beliefs and expectations. They have spent decades [institutionalising](#) their hegemonic project of nationhood in myriad ways, rendering it, in the words of [Rogers Brubaker](#), a relatively "pervasive system of social classification, an organising 'principle of vision and division' of the social world".

Only now, against the backdrop of the "organic crisis" currently unfolding in Spain, has the Catalan nationalist movement switched tactics to wage a "war of manoeuvre". It is effectively attempting a quick strike, hoping to take advantage of the opportunity provided by this crisis to render the utopian dream of an independent Catalan nation-state a consummated reality. In this process of mobilisation, and in a conscious effort to appeal beyond its traditional core constituency of support, the nationalist movement has increasingly supplemented its romantic repertoire with a materialist discourse of economic grievance according to which the Spanish central government is guilty of "fiscally plundering," even "robbing" the region as a whole – a classic anti-redistributionist populist trope that is clearly showing some signs of success in the doubly propitious climate of extremely high unemployment combined with severe regressions in social rights. Indeed, an impressive, albeit overestimated, surge in separatist sentiment swept the region between the end of 2010 and the end of 2012, though [support for independence](#) seems to have since stalled somewhere around 45 per cent, at the very most.

However, the Catalan nationalist movement is not operating in a vacuum. Over the past two years the confrontation between Artur Mas' neoliberal government in Barcelona and Rajoy's neoliberal government in Madrid has set the political agenda throughout Spain – practically dominating the headlines, only rivalled by the series of serious corruption scandals currently engulfing the ruling parties in both Barcelona and Madrid. So far the confrontation has proved convenient for both ruling blocs, though it has functioned somewhat better in partisan terms for Rajoy than it has for Mas. Quite shockingly for those on the left, over a year after the Bárcenas party finance scandal first broke, all the while pursuing painful and unpopular austerity policies, the PP nevertheless remains (according to most polls) poised to win a majority in the general election next year.

Mas has not been so fortunate. In Catalonia, the dynamic of secessionist mobilisation has thus far favoured most the partisan fate of [Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya](#) (ERC). The ERC is the current governing-coalition partner of

Artur Mas' *Convergència i Unió*. It is "left" in name only, having proven to be a loyal partner in supporting and implementing the current austerity regime, while commanding legitimacy in Catalan nationalist ranks as issue-owner on the subject of secession. The recent confession of massive tax evasion and money laundering via secret Swiss and Andorran bank accounts by ex-President Jordi Pujol will undoubtedly damage the electoral fate of CiU much further. A *sorpasso* within the Catalan nationalist bloc appears underway, but thus far the hegemony of the bloc itself, remains equally secured.

There is a convenient symmetry – if not outright collusion – of political tactics being employed by the Spanish central and Catalan regional governments, not to mention the plutocratic interests whose austerity agenda both sides equally represent. Both sides in conflict are determined to keep the agenda set around the axis of ethno-national identities and of polarising nationalist loyalties. A most effective smokescreen, capable of channelling some citizens' indignation, while simultaneously dividing and conquering them, pitting middle-class and some working-class segments against each other, imagined as "national" enemies, while reproducing and exacerbating the alienation of most working-class Spaniards from the terms and horizon of contestation in public debate, thereby fending off the fundamental threat of fissure of society throughout the country along class lines.

But every organic crisis brings with it a variety of new opportunities for those on the left. The very same stress on the social fabric caused by the simultaneous nefarious developments of sharp rises in levels of inequality, increasingly scarce employment opportunities, and severe cuts in welfare services is also creating material conditions that are ever more propitious for a re-awakening of class consciousness. In this respect, the collapse of support for the socialist party throughout the country, and especially in Catalonia, is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the emergent terrain of competitive party politics. The socialist party's long record as an establishment party, especially the legacy of its direct implication in the systemic corruption of the pre-crisis period, when combined with the Zapatero government's acceptance of austerity seems to have undermined any residual credibility of its claim to represent Spanish workers.

### **Podemos and Catalan independence**

So far, the most direct beneficiary of this development in partisan terms has been the ruling party in Madrid. The post-communist *Izquierda Unida* (United Left) has benefitted somewhat as well, though much less than its cadres had hoped. By far the most important development on the left, however, has been the eruption onto the scene of *Podemos*, which derives its legitimation from the Indignado movement and openly flirts with Assembly-style direct democracy. The young political scientists from the Complutense University in Madrid currently at the helm of this new party-movement have thus far demonstrated a significant amount of tactical agility in spreading their counter-hegemonic, anti-neoliberal discourse in the mass media. Moreover, they have openly called for a "constitutive moment," which could potentially re-channel the calls for a referendum over the issue of secession alone within a broader, Spanish-wide "rupture" with the governing regime.

The odds are against Podemos, of course. But their prospects for success depend largely on whether they can effectively set the agenda squarely around class conflict rather than the identity-driven politics which remain at the centre of the Spanish political debate. If Podemos can achieve this, it may just manage to spark the reawakening of class consciousness that is the precondition for forging any credible counter-hegemonic bloc. Their success in this herculean task will depend in no small part on their tactics in confronting the call to civil disobedience which will inevitably materialise within the Catalan nationalist movement when the November referendum is predictably and effectively prohibited by the Spanish government.

Some intellectuals on the left throughout Spain, indeed some with close ties to the inner circle of the leaders of Podemos at the Complutense, are committed to a tactic of alliance with radicalised anti-system secessionist parties in the hopes of forcing a rupture believed capable of facilitating an emergent revolutionary dynamic throughout Spain. Those who embrace such a tactic are guilty of wishful thinking. Still others on the left, especially in the Basque Country and Catalonia, believe as a matter of strategy (or principle) that every "nation" has the right to its



own state.

Pablo Iglesias Turrión, spokesperson of Podemos, Credit:



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These views clash with a more complex reality. As a matter of fact, Catalonia is a [multinational society](#) itself, and most of its inhabitants feel attached to both Spain and Catalonia, even if a vociferous minority identifies exclusively with the latter. Especially given the deeply diverse ethno-national topography, and the overlap of ethno-national and class cleavages in Catalan society, the pursuit of an alliance with a radicalised faction of the Catalan nationalist movement, even a faction that wields an anti-capitalist discourse (such as the [CUP](#)) is an extremely dangerous tactic for Podemos.

Such an alliance with the left fringe of the Catalan nationalist movement would alienate broad swathes of the disproportionately [Spanish-speaking working class](#) in the region, the segment of Catalan society that has already proven itself to be the core social base of support for Podemos in the recent European elections. Moreover, in electoral terms, this tactic is also dangerous insofar as most Catalan nationalists are very likely to see Podemos as a mere branch of a Spanish party, when they already have a wide array of electoral options “independent from Madrid.” But most importantly,

this tactic would alienate potential supporters in the rest of Spain, especially among those who fear that the secession of Catalonia would further damage the social and economic fabric of their country.

It is understandable that intellectuals and activists may nevertheless be tempted by the siren songs of those who mobilise on the bases of “nationality” and “language,” simply because of their demonstrated ability to mobilise segments of society in impressive numbers. The impressive mobilisation capacity of the secessionist middle-class elements of Catalan society stands in [stark contrast](#) to the apathy of the fragmented, alienated and still-slumbering working classes.

However, as the late great Marxist historian and scholar of nationalism, [Eric Hobsbawm](#), reminds us: “The call of ethnicity or language provides no guidance to the future at all, even when new states are formed on the basis of these criteria. It is merely a protest against the status quo or, more precisely, against ‘the others’ who threaten the ethnically defined group. For, unlike fundamentalism which, however narrow and sectarian in its actual appeal, draws its strength from the claim to universal truth, theoretically applicable to all, nationalism by definition excludes from its purview all who don’t belong to its own ‘nation’, i.e. the vast majority of the human race. Moreover, while fundamentalism can, at least to some extent, appeal to what remains of genuine custom and tradition or past practice as embodied in religious practice, as we have seen nationalism in itself is either hostile to the real ways of the past, or arises on its ruins.”

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Feature image credit: [Podem Ciutat de Valencia](#) (CC-BY-SA-3.0)*

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