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Andrew Dowling (Cardiff University)

## Principal frames for interpretation of the Catalan independence challenge to Spain

The ongoing Catalan crisis is one manifestation of the global crisis centred on identity, citizenship, state and society. Mobilisation in the defence of institutions, culture and identity are part of the contemporary zeitgeist. This article will note a series of frames that have been paramount in the emergence of the pro-independence movement. Whilst the issues that marked conflict in modern Spain, such as traditional class and religious cultures have declined and fragmented, conflicts over national identity remain unresolved. The current Spanish state order is subject to profound challenge by Catalan secessionists. The ambiguities of the constitutional and territorial settlement of the late 1970s no longer seem fit for purpose. The Spanish model, one we can call semi-federalism, began to be first questioned by the centre, in particular the second Aznar administration of 2000 to 2004. The Catalan project followed shortly after the Ibarretxe Plan, the Basque project of confederal association with Spain. With the semi-federal state model first questioned by Madrid, federalist and confederalist trends began to emerge in the Basque Country and Catalonia as mechanisms to protect and consolidate competencies.

Catalonia embraced secession as the potential solution to an accumulation of grievances. An exceptionally high degree of social mobilisation has sought to channel these grievances through a mass movement for independence. Catalonia has experienced the largest series of sustained popular mobilisations ever seen in modern Europe. They have been fuelled by resentment and frustration at the limitations of autonomy, by the wounds of historical memory and anger engendered by the economic crisis. In contemporary Catalonia we see expressed both discourse around identity given public expression by a sophisticated civic movement.

## The media

The attempted referendum held in Catalonia on 1 October 2017 became a global media spectacle. It became the biggest political event in recent memory in Spain, arguably with even greater salience than the attempted coup of February 1981, due to the rapidity of media communications. The sight of unarmed civilians being repeatedly hit by police produced a major wave of global sympathy for the Catalan cause. The unexpected violence of Spanish police action at closing down the vote meant a mass and global audience was reached through the media coverage of their action. Yet the referendum outcome for Catalan independence can be termed a media victory though a political defeat. The global media coverage catapulted the Catalan question as an important issue. The series of events between September and December 2017 offered drama, conflict, and ready-made visual media opportunities. The dramatic moment of 1 October gave great power to television coverage's visual messaging and presentation. Exceptional events also open up space for competing narratives. The calling, organising and holding of the referendum was a disruptive action that mobilised sectors of Catalan society and put intense pressure on the Spanish government. The Catalan revolt of autumn 2017 however was not only street based as the clash between Madrid and Barcelona can also be framed in terms of institutional conflict.

Political movements depend on the media on which they develop their action strategies, but also use them to test strategies. The Catalan government claimed a referendum would be held whilst the Spanish government affirmed it would not take place. Global media commentary seemed in-comprehending at the strategy of the Rajoy administration. Whilst Catalan language media engaged in emphasising the referendum as an expression of

democracy. Both Catalan and Spanish media landscapes were highly partisan. The Spanish media frequently labelled the events of autumn 2017 “a coup”. The Spanish media developed a specific taxonomy for reporting the crisis that greatly diverged from that of the Catalan government. For much of the official Spanish response to independence, the Catalans were portrayed as being undemocratic by breaking the law, refusing to recognise the Spanish Constitution. This found institutional expression at the highest level with the broadcast from the Spanish king, Felipe VI on 4 October 2017. There was also the attempt to portray the Catalans as embodying the worst features of a retrograde ideology: nationalism. The attempted referendum was portrayed as the cause of societal division, because the issue of independence was highly conflictive.

Social and political activists develop “frames” as a means of developing political agency and strategic unity. The pro-independence claims made around democracy, voting and self-determination sought to influence global public opinion as unanswerable and reasonable demands. These frames included the identity frame, where for Catalan media emphasis was placed on distinctiveness. Whilst Spanish media framing focussed more on the apparent shared historical experience that Catalans shared with other Spaniards. The Catalan struggle of the autumn of 2017 was one where social media played a key role in the visibility of the movement and its capacity to mobilise. With its trend towards self-selection, social media provides opportunities to consolidate support networks and reach beyond the limitations of traditional media forms. Social media then has functioned as a successful avenue of political communication to facilitate the visibility of the independence movement. In this, the Catalan movement embraced this new technology, and in particular the Spanish authorities seemed unable to craft a successful counter-narrative. Divergence in media consumption does not

determine political positioning but rather political values are likely to be highly relevant in terms of the choices made around traditional and new media.

A distinctive feature of the Catalan mobilisation has been its strong support amongst opinion formers in newspapers, radio and television. This places cultural and intellectual elites at the heart of the movement. Intellectuals in Catalonia are disproportionately representative of the Catalan-speaking middle classes. As with other middle-class professionals, wider economic trends have impacted on their industry since the late 1990s. Journalists have been direct victims of the economic crisis and seen their own societal status, stability and income decline. Changes in the media landscape, with vast decline in print consumption, have contributed to the journalists experience of precarity. Those who construct public political narratives have seen their personal economic capacity diminishing and have been able to communicate an articulate narrative as a response. These elites have played a crucial communicative and framing role between the political elites and the civil associations.

### Democracy and the People

The Catalan sovereignty movement crafted an iconography, political brand and unique form of display. As with most movements that act around the axis of national identity, the ANC pursued the strategy to present itself as the voice of the Catalan people. This framing of the Catalan people was that of a single entity mobilised for a single purpose. The Catalan people are unique and separate from the Spanish; hence, they must be independent. It is claimed they represent an unbroken lineage of a thousand years of history and are different to Spaniards in terms of language, values and cultural practices. Thus, 'the people' represents a new way of

imagining political association. With a negotiated settlement with Madrid ruled out, independentism has sought a variety of mechanisms to achieve legitimacy. These include vast social mobilisation, diplomatic activity, elections framed as a plebiscite and self-organised referendums. This was mobilised by the pro-independence sectors of Catalan society, including its intellectuals, which increasingly delegitimised the autonomy obtained in the 1970s and called for the restoration of the 'true' sovereignty lost in 1714. Thus the evocation of a historical defeat 300 years ago could contribute towards a contemporary political victory. Support for Catalan independence rapidly expanded and as it did so, its narratives and framing evolved. Expansion of social support brought a new element into the narrative: as the movement appeared to be approaching a social majority of the population, it began to speak increasingly in terms of democratic rights and the need for respect to be given to the democratic will. Thus as the movement evolved, it crafted a moral project around freedom and justice (rights). These doctrines of popular sovereignty conceive 'the people' as a historically constructed territorial community.

The consultation of 9 November 2014 and even more so the attempted referendum of 1 October 2017 presented what we can term the democratic achievement frame. This saw the referendum as a major achievement of the people, due to the high involvement of citizens in its organisation, the relatively high turnout at the polls and the civility with which the referendum was carried out. Catalonia presented itself as fighting for freedom and democracy. Yet, in spite of promises to the contrary, the failure to implement the result of 1-O gave to the referendum a patina of democratic performance rather than an expression of the democratic will. Even so, Catalan independence ascribed to itself the moral legitimacy of democracy to contrast with what it termed the 'anti-democratic' methods of Madrid. This framing argues that dictatorship and judicial repression of sovereignty comes from Spain whilst the Catalans seek

only for the will of the democratic majority to be expressed. The effect of these strategies has been to embody the moral high ground, and a claim that a superior society is held in abeyance by a corrupt and anti-democratic Spain. For many in the sovereignty movement, Spain is undemocratic; it is semi-Francoist or authoritarian. The Catalan parliament and institutions have held high social legitimacy: they are not simply an extra tier of administration but are also seen as a manifestation of the national and popular will.

Catalan independence is increasingly framed as the embodiment of European values of democracy. For many Catalans, the struggle is between democracy and undemocratic practices, hence the prominence of slogans such as ‘We want to vote’. Many of the principal public expressions and campaigns of Catalan independence have therefore been focussed on the democratic rights of the Catalan people. The right to decide has been used as a political mechanism to express Catalan self-determination. The self-determination frame presented the referendum as a choice on whether Catalonia should make political decisions separately from the rest of Spain. Catalan independence made the question of sovereignty as the core reason for leaving Spain. However, the usage of the term “self-determination” was a comparatively late arrival in terms of the political communication of the movement. For most of the time after 2012 and until 2017, often *sui generis* tropes and even euphemism were more common: voting, consultation, right to decide. This use of terminology was unusual in secession seeking movements.

### The wealth of Catalonia

Discourse about sovereignty, the state, territory, as well as the rights and privileges of citizenship, national identity, also find expression in dispute around what is termed to be

national wealth. For most of the 1970s and 1980s, culture, language and identity were the central themes of Catalan revival and reconstruction. From the early 1990s, economic grievances became an increasingly important part of the Catalan political narrative. ‘Espoli fiscal’: the financial plundering of Catalonia by Spain came to have great political traction post-2008. For most of the period of the economic crisis, it has been the Catalan national movement focussed on secession that has provided an optimistic political narrative. Independence successfully conveyed the idea of a better future through its master narrative.

Political responses to economic distress depend on how economic troubles are framed and interpreted. The construction *Espanya ens Roba* (Spain is Robbing from Us) had first been used by the populist leader of *Esquerra Republicana*, Àngel Colom, in the early 1990s. This slogan was revived during the economic crisis and came to express the explanation for the closed businesses, loss of employment, as well as opportunities and certainties. Economic injustice has been framed only in a territorial sense: that of the Catalan economic deficit with Spain. During the crisis, a strong sense emerged that only a Catalan sovereign state can repair the damage to the Catalan national community. Spain was portrayed as extractive state and Catalonia as productive territory. The movement projected a claim that the frustrations of Catalan society can be overcome. Independence could not only achieve what other political solutions had been unable to achieve, it could complete the national journey.

### The role of emotions

The vector of national identity is a form of social identity that can find powerful expression in a social movement or struggle. The turn to independence can be interpreted as a societal response to perceived injustice, unfairness and the failure of recognition. A strong



sense of injustice has been a motivator in the Catalan movement. The movement for independence has come to claim virtue, honesty, nobility and integrity in contrast with a state that has demonstrated it is unwilling to provide appropriate recognition. Collective dignity and respect, or the experience of shame and humiliation, or a feeling of resentment can contribute towards social mobilisation. One powerful aspect of nationalism is its role in the preservation of dignity and in the Catalan case, the emotionally charged "patriotic" cause. What can be termed resistance mobilisation is often preceded by emotions such as injustice, anger, indignation or fear. Whilst initially we see negative emotions as catalysts for organisation and action, we also see the emergence of more positive emotions such as collective pride. This transformation from negative grievance to positive affirmation has been particularly visible in the case of Catalonia. The participation in these movements channelled enthusiasm and faith in the capacity to achieve change. The Catalan movement has sought to dignify collective identity. This response to social hurt and channelling into mobilisation has been a key expression of social psychological impulses that the nation can express. Post-October 2017, and with the trials of the imprisoned civic and political leadership, emotional rupture towards Spanish (in)justice became ever more pronounced.

### Publicity generation

The movement for independence has been highly effective in terms of spectacle, publicity generation and attention seeking activity. The movement has been highly organised in the creation of the biggest series of peaceful protests Europe has ever seen. It has produced vast political demonstrations year after year since 2012. These were mass phenomenon and also were participatory, though little was demanded of the participants beyond attendance. The independence movement lacked iconic figures as most of the national heroes of the past, from

Companys to Prat de la Riba, Almirall to Cambó, were political figures who actively worked to achieve change for Catalonia and Spain. Between 2011 and 2012, the Catalan independence flag, the estelada, became the unitary symbol of the movement. It was notable that the flag adopted was an explicit rejection of the radical left pro-independence flag of yellow and red, which had been the only visible symbol of independence since the late 1960s. Thus shifts in collective political ideas determined a shift in chosen symbols. New supporters of the movement found a symbol with which they could identify. This is to note the emotional potency of the usage of symbols in the national realm. The form adopted by the Catalan movement became that of the popular performance of mass mobilisation, with the incorporation of music and folkloric festivals. Performance through visual display and the choreography of vast crowds became the form of political communication. Organisations, meetings, rallies and actions incorporate people into an emotionally gratifying culture of meaning that is seen to represent the heart and soul of Catalonia. Pro-independence culture, rooted geographically, culturally and socially, determined the terrain for the political and ideological clash between Catalonia and the rest of the state. Symbolic struggles occurred in a different terrain following the imprisonment of the civic and political leadership with public space subject to appropriation and contestation.

### The ethnic and the civic

Theories of nationalism have traditionally distinguished between two traditions, those of ethnic and civic manifestations. New paradigms increasingly suggest there is no simple binary division and that there is more overlap between these two positions than was originally postulated. The ethnic/civic polarisation should be thought of as more of a continuum than of two distinct positions, though at the ends of each position are two distinctive approaches.

Whilst Catalan nationalism has been generally portrayed as part of a civic tradition, with the Basque movement firmly within the ethnicist category, both movements were more nuanced than these traditional simplifications. A strong turn to civic expressions has been evident in Basque nationalism since the 1960s, whilst ethno-cultural expression has never been fully absent in the case of Catalonia. Equally, independence narratives are not singular whilst the movement's ideological tendencies are not absolutes. The political defeat of October 2017 has led to a reconfiguration of independence narratives. Citizenship and identity strands increasingly compete. ERC presents itself as inheritors of a civic republican tradition, part of a discourse that the party has crafted as the expression of progressive independence. This civic strand seeks to build an inclusive narrative, positing a flexible identity. Civic minded expression is increasingly harnessed around evocation of the Catalan Republic, through a voluntaristic crafting of citizenship. The support of Spanish speakers is actively sought within this expression.

Within the ethno-cultural identity strand of the independence movement, primacy is given to the Catalan language and its promotion/protection. Perhaps this was best encapsulated in the Koine manifesto of March 2016. This sector of independence also expresses attachment to strong cultural icons of identity. It exhibits a cultural reading of the need for independence and a narrative of the superiority of Catalan cultural expression to that of Spain. This language-cultural strand draws on historical narratives and collective memory. The ethno-cultural category struggles with the multiple identities that are prevalent across Catalan society and posits monocultural models such as Israel or Portugal. Membership of the political nation is here linked to identification with the national culture. Thus an attempt is made to construct a cultural unity around a diverse and fragmented society and seeks to affirm the imagined or invented Catalan nation. In positing these ethnic-cultural and civic categories we can note that

these strands, in moderate tension after 2012, have become more pronounced since October 2017. As we have seen, the Catalan independence movement successfully crafted a distinctive ideological vocabulary, building on its sloganeering and communicating a simple message. However, this simplicity led to major underestimation of its adversary and overestimation of its own ability to break with Spain. The implications of the drama between September and December 2017 continue to reverberate in Catalan and Spanish society and political culture. The oft commented on political division within Catalan independence since October 2017 means that master narratives will continue to be subject to renewal as the movement prepares for future challenges to Spanish state authority.