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The vanishing exception: republican and reactionary specters of populism in rural Spain

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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the dominant European tendency, the 2008 economic crisis and the ensuing austerity in Spain led to the emergence of left populist movements that have kept authoritarian populism at bay. However, those progressive movements have made few inroads in the countryside, potentially ceding this ground to reactionary politics. But if the specter of reaction haunts the countryside, I also suggest that this specter coexists with emancipatory possibilities. To examine these, I discuss a rural protest movement against extractive practices that developed in the early 2000s. This movement, I argue, provides valuable insight into how feelings of abandonment can be given a class-conscious, popular democratic expression.

KEYWORDS

Authoritarian populism; left-wing populism; Catalonia; Podemos; slow dispossession

Whether one calls them fascist, authoritarian populist or counterrevolutionary, there is no doubt that angry movements contemptuous of liberal democratic ideals and practices and espousing the use of force to resolve deep-seated social conflicts are on the rise globally. (Bello 2018, 21)

As Walden Bello argues, far-right populism has been gaining momentum across the world in recent years. In Europe, although by no means new, it seems to have found fertile ground in the context of economic crisis and austerity policies. And yet, as a recent *Foreign Affairs* article, revealingly titled 'The Spanish Exception', argues: 'One country seems immune to it all: Spain' (Encarnación 2017). How are we to explain Spain's alleged immunity to this authoritarian wave? In this article I defend a straightforward answer to this puzzle: authoritarian populism has been kept at bay by a series of popular democratic (or as I prefer to call them: 'republican') populist movements that have offered a potentially emancipatory response to the disenfranchisement and dispossession experienced by large sectors of the Spanish population. Nonetheless, I also argue that this situation should not be taken for granted: the risk that authoritarian populist movements develop and crystallize is high in the current political conjuncture, which is particularly open and unstable.

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Editorial Note: This paper is part of the 'JPS Forum on Authoritarian Populism and the Rural World', framed and introduced by Ian Scoones and colleagues in their joint paper, 'Emancipatory Rural Politics: Confronting Authoritarian Populism', published in *JPS* in January 2018. The contributions to this forum will be published separately and in clusters in 2018 and 2019. This forum is one of the initial outcomes of the activities of the Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI, www.iss.nl/erpi).

In this respect, it should be noted that these republican movements have had a poor penetration in the Spanish countryside. I shall suggest that this circumstance, which reflects a growing divide between city and country and the political isolation of the latter, makes rural Spain particularly vulnerable to the spread of right-wing populism. This hypothesis gains strength once we observe the growing impoverishment and marginalization experienced by large sectors of the Spanish rural population. Thus, I entertain that the specter of reaction haunts the countryside, but I also argue that this specter coexists with republican possibilities.

This paper is divided into four parts. In the first one, I examine the current Spanish political conjuncture, and argue for the need to read it through a relational perspective attentive to the *longue durée* of Spanish politics in order to assess the popular democratic movements that have emerged in recent years. In the second one, I explore the effects of crisis and austerity in the Spanish countryside, arguing that it has exacerbated an already ongoing process of slow dispossession with objective (impoverishment, land concentration) and subjective (feelings of abandonment, erosion of self-esteem) dimensions.

In the third part I take on the issue of emancipatory rural politics. To do so I move to Southern Catalonia, a region where I have been conducting ethnographic fieldwork¹ since 2010 (Franquesa 2018). I examine how in that region a broad movement – popularly known as the ‘Southern revolt’ – against land (and water and green) grabbing was able to reveal, and combat, the uneven ecological foundations of an unfair, territorially and class-inflected structure of accumulation and political domination. Although the Southern revolt peaked in the first years of this century, its echoes are still noticeable today in a region that has politically moved to the left since the turn of the century. Southern Catalonia and the Southern revolt thus offer a telling example of how feelings of abandonment in the countryside can be given a popular democratic expression.

Finally, I conclude this paper by dwelling on the thin but all-important line that separates republican (or ‘left wing’ or ‘popular democratic’) from reactionary (or ‘right wing’ or ‘authoritarian’) populism. I do so by examining the role that the morally charged idiom of dignity has played in recent years in the formation of political subjectivities in Spain. Thus, whereas this idiom offers an opportunity to bridge the existing political divide between country and city, connecting urban and rural experience and consciousness, recent developments make clear that it can also become a mobilizing rhetoric for authoritarian populism. Both republican and reactionary specters can hide behind, and eventually thrive through, the demand for dignity.

The Spanish exception

Narratives about Spain’s exceptionality within Europe are not new (see, for instance, Swynedouw 2015). During the better part of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these

¹The bulk of this fieldwork was carried out between 2010 and 2014, totaling 11 months. Research was aimed at building an ethnographically situated history of how Southern Catalans have related with energy facilities from the 1960s to the present. Fieldwork included interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis in local archives. I interviewed local mayors and administration officials, activists, peasant leaders, wind farm developers, environmentalist leaders, wine producers, nuclear workers and landowners affected by energy infrastructure. Among other activities, participant observation involved attending marches, demonstrations and activist meetings, visiting electricity-producing facilities, wine cellars and farming cooperatives, and accompanying farmers in their daily routines, as well as participating in the rich festive calendar of the region.

narratives – epitomized in famous mantras such as ‘Spain is different’ and ‘Europe ends at the Pyrenees’ – pointed towards some essential deficiency: Spain’s marginal position within Europe, the country’s archaic and oppressive political structure (which Franco’s dictatorship epitomized), its incapacity to modernize its productive base, and so on. Nonetheless, with the death of the dictator (1975) and entry into the European Union (1986) the situation changed quite radically: Spain became a ‘normal’ European country, a liberal democracy firmly inserted within the Western European landscape. And yet, it was precisely in that historical moment that the specter of the far right made a comeback to the heart of Europe (Stolcke 1995), now under the guise of what Stuart Hall called ‘authoritarian populism’ (Hall 1985). Since then, authoritarian populism has continued to grow, especially since 2008, being, in Don Kalb’s words, ‘the traumatic expression of material and cultural experiences of dispossession and disenfranchisement’ (2011, 1). In sum, over the course of half a century, Spain’s alleged exceptionality has undergone a complete reversal: the country is now identified for its imperviousness to far-right temptations and, presumably, the health of its democratic values and institutions.

Yet the ‘Spanish difference’ should be neither overstated nor taken for granted. We should first disentangle the two different rationales that political scientists bring forward to justify Spain’s exceptionality. The first one underscores the electoral weakness, and consequent parliamentary irrelevance, of far-right parties since the 1980s (see, for instance, Arzheimer 2009). True and important as it is, this parliamentary irrelevance needs to be qualified with two major, interrelated caveats. First, the recent memory of the Francoist regime has historically acted as an obstacle for the emergence of openly authoritarian parties and movements. But, second, far-right factions and ideologies have found easy refuge in the Partido Popular, a party founded by Francoist cadres that has ruled the country for the better part of the last two decades (1996–2004 and 2011–2018) (Casals 2011).

A second strand of literature approaches Spain’s alleged exceptionalism in a way that is more relevant to the subject of this paper. The title of a recent scholarly report neatly captures the thrust of this argument: ‘The Spanish exception: the failure of right-wing populist groups *despite* unemployment, inequality and immigration’ (González Enríquez 2017, my emphasis). A comparable argument can be found in Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser, when they write that even if ‘in contemporary Spain there is a real demand for populist radical right parties ... the Great Recession has not improved the electoral odds of the populist radical right as such but rather facilitated the emergence of leftist populist forces’ (2015, 21). As these quotes suggest, the alleged absence of far-right populism in Spain is understood as an anomaly, which the authors explain away by pointing to a series of relevant institutional factors – such as the electoral system and the existence of regional party systems (Alonso and Rovira Kaltwasser 2015) – and more dubious cultural traits – such as the Spaniards’ weak attachment to their national identity and their supposed Europeanism (González Enríquez 2017, 10–13).

We may observe that the construction of this anomaly is premised on the juxtaposition of two one-sided assumptions. The first one is economic, assuming a mechanical relation between certain objective economic factors (economic crisis, unemployment, etc.) and the rise of populist movements (for a critique, see van der Linden 2018). The second, culturalist one, assumes that populist movements should by default be located on the right, that is to say, that far-right *ideas* such as anti-immigration, xenophobic and

anti-EU discourses will strike a chord among the disenfranchised masses even if they may go against their class interests.

Here, I will argue for the need to abandon this juxtaposition of one-sided approaches and instead adopt what Don Kalb calls a 'relational approach,' attentive to how shifting fields of class power 'generate a history of clashes, victories and defeats, including memories and amnesias, which then form the background for broad-based populist sensibilities' (Kalb 2009, 294). A relational approach thus invites us to dismiss notions of mechanical causation to explore in historical perspective the dialectical interplay between objective economic conditions and political subjectivities. As importantly, it invites us to move away from a cold sociological analysis in order to place politics center stage, insisting on the need to remain open to affects and to the creative capacity of political praxis. This praxis is the key to understanding Spain's exceptionality. Indeed, I will actually suggest that the emergence of 'left populism' is not a concomitant circumstance or a byproduct of an anomalous process, but rather its main explanation: authoritarian populism has not unfolded because the emergence of a popular democratic response to austerity has kept it at bay.

This response has taken two main expressions, both possessing a broad social base: Catalan *sobiranisme* – the movement demanding a Catalan independence vote² – and, more importantly, the anti-austerity movement that emerged after what is known as the *indignados* uprising – the peaceful, semi-spontaneous gathering of a mostly young, middle-class crowd in the main urban squares of the country on 15 May 2011. This event triggered a very notable cycle of protest, giving rise to, or strengthening, a series of anti-austerity organizations (such as the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* [the Platform for Mortgage Victims]) and political parties, most notably Podemos.

Both movements can rightly be considered populist, especially if we define populism not so much through its contents but as a kind of strategic practice: 'The deliberate political act of aggregating disparate and even competing and contradictory class and group interests and demands into a relatively homogenized voice, i.e. "us, the people", against an "adversarial them" for tactical or strategic political purposes' (Borras, forthcoming, 4). Borras pointedly adds that if we adopt this perspective, populism must be viewed 'not [as] an "either/or" question ... [but as] a matter of degree' (Borras, forthcoming, 5). Indeed, this populist premise is central to Podemos' political strategy, based on the construction of a discursive apparatus aimed at 'building a people' in opposition to the corrupt 'elites' who defrauded them (Errejón and Mouffe 2015). Although trying to distance itself from the populist label and its negative connotations, Catalan *sobiranisme* has followed a similar strategy, premised on structuring a subject ('the Catalan people') whose demand to peacefully and democratically decide its own fate is denied by the Spanish state, therefore posited as an adversarial, undemocratic and illegitimate 'them'.

Nonetheless, whereas it is relatively simple to see why these movements may be deemed populist, explaining why they are forms of *left* populism is a more cumbersome

²*Sobiranisme* includes, but cannot be reduced to nor should it be confused with *independentisme* (the political movement aiming to achieve the secession of Catalonia from Spain). *Sobiranisme* is larger, broader and more plural than *independentisme*, both in its position towards the political status of Catalonia and in the range of issues in its agenda. On the one hand, not all *sobiranistes* are *independentistes*, that is to say, not all those political actors and forces that claim that Catalans have the right to hold an independence vote are in favor of Catalan independence. On the other hand, whereas *independentisme* tends to restrict political debate to discussing the path towards Catalan independence, *sobiranisme* insists that this discussion needs to be placed within a broader emancipatory project putting social and economic demands center stage.

task, especially considering how common the parallelisms and connections between right- and left-wing populisms are.³ To shed light on this issue, it may be useful to follow Bello's (2018) suggestion to situate political movements within the historical unfolding of the dialectic between revolution and counterrevolution. For this, Bello (2018) argues, we need to adopt a broad definition of revolution that includes historical processes of radical, democratic reform able to empower broad sectors of the popular classes. Let's thus have a necessarily quick look at the *longue durée* of Spanish politics.

Longue durée: the dialectic between revolution and counterrevolution

A look at Spain's political history during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveals a cyclical regularity. Periods of decentralization, economic reform and extension of democratic rights intersperse amid a general panorama of elite dirigisme, clientelism and authoritarianism. If the first represent moments of political openness and class fluidity, the latter represent political closure and class consolidation. For the sake of brevity, I will call the former, democratizing periods 'republican' and the latter, reactionary periods 'authoritarian'. Although admittedly reductionist, this bipartite scheme will allow us to visualize the dialectic between revolution and counterrevolution that articulates Spain's political trajectory.

The republican interludes, glorified by the Spanish Left, are brief: the *Sexenio democrático* (or 'six democratic years', 1868–1874), the Second Republic (1931–1939) and the *Transición* (the period, roughly 1973–1982, covering the latter years of the dictatorship up until the consolidation of a democratic regime). Authoritarian periods, such as the *Restauración* (1874–1923) and Franco's dictatorship (1938–1975), usually extend for three to five decades.⁴

All republican periods have been politically turbulent and unstable, features that sometimes extend to the preceding years (for example, 1919–1931). The turbulence and instability that characterize these periods express both the political and class fluidity that made them possible and the reactionary tendencies that strove to annul the promise of democratization and change that republican periods portended. Indeed, in the origin of each authoritarian period we can find some counterrevolutionary foundational act or set of events justified in the need to eliminate the risk of social revolution and aimed at controlling the state apparatuses and restoring the *status quo ante* in order to reestablish class power, defend the economic interests of the elites and discipline the working classes. The result is a new authoritarian period, generally resistant to change and quite stable, which tends to get eroded over time as the accumulated changes in the country's political economy realign its class structure. As Bello (2018) suggests, the politically volatile middle classes tend to be the decisive social sector making both revolution (democratization) and counterrevolution (reaction) possible.

It is also important to underline that, within each category, the memory of the preceding period tends to have an important role in the following one. This is especially obvious

³For opposite views on the emancipatory, transformative potential of left-wing populism, see Fassín (2017) and Mouffe (2018).

⁴This dialectic can be extended back to the first two thirds of the nineteenth century, albeit with a quicker turnover: 'The history of Spain between 1808 and 1874 is a succession of attempts to advance through the democratic path ... which were ultimately frustrated by as many blowbacks ... with a balance of 15 years of democratizing attempts against 66 of counterrevolution' (Fontana 2007, 433).

with the republican periods. Each republican period remains in the memory of the left as an unfulfilled agenda and a repository of political possibilities – what Bloch (1991) would call an *uncompleted past* – that reemerges in the subsequent republican period (Izquierdo Martín and Sánchez León 2010). A last historical constant should be highlighted. The coming about of republican periods has been characterized by the convergence and (often uneasy) alliance between (radical and moderate) left progressive movements and federalizing demands emanating from some non-Castillian regions (such as Galicia, the Basque Country and, especially, Catalonia). This helps explain why in counterrevolutionary processes the curtailment of social rights tends to go hand in hand with administrative centralization and cultural uniformization efforts.⁵

In the light of the scheme that I just proposed, how should we characterize the contemporary constitutionalist, liberal democratic period, known as *Regime of 78* (in reference to the passing of the current constitution in 1978)? At least in part for the sake of clarity, I propose that we classify it as authoritarian. Such a perspective is contentious: not only is it problematic to class it together with a military dictatorship, but it should also be stressed that the Regime of 78 has created levels of political freedom, administrative decentralization and social protection that are quite unprecedented in Spanish history. However, two further considerations justify my interpretation. First, in the origin of the Regime of 78 revolution and restoration mixed in intricate ways, thus emerging as what Gramsci (1971, 106–120) called a *passive revolution*.⁶ Indeed, the *Transición* was secured from above: that is to say, the current regime emerged as a reaction against the political openness of the *Transición*, articulated through a series of *transactions* between elites (epitomized in the 1977 *Pactos de la Moncloa*) oriented towards fencing off popular democratic reforms and demands in order to preserve the economic *status quo* and bury the memory of the Civil War (Naredo 2001). Second, over time, the Regime of 78 has grown progressively less democratic and more authoritarian. Indeed, since the mid-1990s there has been a slowdown in the rhythm of democratic conquests, and in some cases a clear rollback, while economic inequality has increased in parallel to the creation of a financialized economy that allowed for the hardening of class hierarchies. A result of this process has been the consolidation of a political-cum-economic power nucleus operating through mechanisms of rent extraction supported by clientelist, and often corrupt, practices knitting together corporate capital and the political party system (Narotzky 2016).

Authoritarian tendencies within the Regime of 78 have accelerated in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis. While joblessness, precariousness and private indebtedness augmented at an unprecedented rhythm, the Spanish government and EU institutions implemented an austerity program that dismantled welfare provisions, eroded workers' rights and socialized corporate debt (especially beneficial for banks and electricity companies, the traditional stalwarts of political-cum-economic power). The crisis revealed that promises of social reproduction and middle-class aspirations could not be maintained anymore for wide segments of the population.

⁵Or, in Brais Fernández's formulation, 'why Galician, Basque and ... Catalan independentists are – together with the "Reds" – the enemies par excellence which the Spanish Right's project is built around' (Fernández 2018).

⁶'Whereby social struggles find sufficiently elastic frameworks to allow the bourgeoisie to gain power without dramatic upheavals ... [so that] the efforts of the traditional classes ... prevent the formation of collective will' (Gramsci 1971, 115). Thus, popular projects are sidelined and remain *incomplete*.

The popular democratic response (2011–2016)

It is in this context that the left populist response emerged. The *indignados* movement did not blame the duress that Spaniards were experiencing on migration, but on a corrupt structure of accumulation that only benefitted a few. As their slogans said: ‘They do not represent us’ and ‘This is not a crisis; it is fraud.’ The key characteristic of the 15-M was its capacity to ‘fram[e] the democratic struggle as a radical redistribution of power, which should necessarily lead to a distribution of wealth’ (Palomera 2018, 79). The afterlives of the *indignados* – most notably Podemos and the electoral coalitions currently ruling most Spanish major cities (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Coruña, Cádiz, etc.) – achieved a tremendous capacity for social mobilization and high levels of electoral support. Although the immediate geographical reach of Catalan *sobiranisme* is far more restricted, its impact over Spain’s political life and its capacity to call into question the existing institutional arrangement may have been greater. Indeed, in Catalonia, the pillars of the Regime of 78 (such as a stable, imperfectly bipartisan, party system; sacralization of the crown and the constitution; and the triumphalist narrative of the *Transición* as a foundational myth) have been shattered in less than a decade.

The uneasy relationship that both movements, which possess distinct historical trajectories, maintain with each other is clear evidence of their differences – a circumstance, I should note in passing, that also extends to the interior of two movements that contain a diversity of political sensibilities and projects. Yet despite their differences, the two are popular democratic, non-authoritarian movements that, in a context of growing authoritarianism and economic-cum-political crisis, promote a democratic extension of civic empowerment (Pastor 2016). The two are also characteristically ‘republican’: they seek to undermine (and in many cases overcome) the Regime of 78; they are anti-monarchical; and they seek historical precedent in earlier republican periods. Indeed, both movements re-enacted previous struggles, injecting into the country’s political life, as Ernesto Semán’s says in reference to Argentinian Peronism, ‘the plebeian surge, the heretical, collective demand for dignity and workers’ rights that seems to be perpetually ready to call into question certain social and cultural hierarchies’ (Semán 2018, 126).

Since 2011, these two movements have been the main popular forces in the streets of Spain, and their activities have largely determined the country’s political agenda during this period. In parallel, the imperfect bipartisan system upon which the Regime of 78 was constructed has been seriously undermined. But the stalwarts of this system have not remained passive. The growth of Podemos and what is often described as the ‘Catalan challenge’ provided the justification for the growth of the government’s authoritarianism, which took shape in a context in which the division of powers has eroded, almost all big media outlets have closed ranks with the regime, and the main economic powers have heralded a visceral opposition and disdain to the two movements. Antentas (2017a) labeled the government’s strategy *offensive resistentialism*. Resistentialist because it was aimed at avoiding the possibility that the context of political fluidity would give rise to a democratic, republican opening; ‘offensive’ because it was not merely reactive, but also reactionary: it did not seek to preserve the *status quo* but to roll back the extension of democratic freedoms. Indeed, to the dismantling of welfare provisions, we must add, among others, the increased protagonism in the political process of the judicial system, an emphasis on ‘law-and-order’ that has curtailed protest and freedom of

expression (epitomized in the *Ley Mordaza*), and the attempts to recentralize the administrative apparatus.

Moreover, the increasing authoritarianism of the Partido Popular's government took place alongside the quick rise of its parliamentary ally, Ciudadanos, a neoliberal party that presents itself as the nemesis of Podemos. Ciudadanos' electoral appeal seems to rest on an ambiguous, even nebulous, ideology that combines ultra-nationalist rhetoric, pro-market jargon, and a coded xenophobic discourse, together with the image of a young leader who allegedly embodies the apolitical, meritocratic modernization which Ciudadanos promises to bring forth. The fact that this ideological mix attracted large numbers of mostly young, urban, middle- and working-class Spaniards constituted the first evidence that a new form of 'authoritarian populism' oriented to fend off the republican surge was in the making (Alabao 2018).

The end of the exception?

The period between 2011 and 2016 can be defined as one of emergent republicanism or, at least, as one in which the possibility of a democratic opening gained strength. However, in 2016 and 2017 the republican opening stalled, giving rise to a complex situation.

On the one hand, in recent years and months the two republican movements have encountered serious obstacles: Podemos' inability to widen its electoral support became clear in 2016, and, in 2017, the Catalan roadmap to independence collapsed, revealing the movement's strategic shortcomings. The reasons behind this regression have to do both with developments in the international arena – such as Syriza's 'capitulation', unexpected electoral results (Brexit, Trump's victory, etc.) and the EU's glacial response to Catalan demands – as well as with internal contradictions within both movements – such as the important, but waning, role of conservative nationalism within *sobiranisme* and Podemos' abjuring of the left-right political axis (Charnock, Purcell, and Ribera-Fumaz 2012). These contradictions are not unrelated to the ambivalently demophobic, state-centric (Badiou 2016) attitudes of both movements: their bet to play the political game within the institutional sphere has translated into a certain distrust towards, and desire to control, the popular ferment on which their force is based (Antentas 2017b). In fact, the blowbacks have revealed the limitations of the populist premise that the two movements, and especially Podemos, heralded. The hypothesis that a powerful narrative and charismatic leadership would lead to the fast seizure of power through electoral means has not only proven to be incorrect, it has also led to a palpable fading of the popular enthusiasm that animated these movements and to their progressive moderation.

Recently, we have seen strong evidence that the political volatility that has shaken Spain since the outset of the economic crisis is far from over. In the spring of 2018, a parliamentary no-confidence vote – supported, among others, by all left-wing and Catalan parties – surprisingly ousted the conservative government, and led to the election of a new Prime Minister from the nominally social-democratic party, the PSOE. It is unlikely that the new government will be able to create a new (but continuist) stable framework, for this would require some sort of federalist reform and a new period of sustained economic growth. In any event, right-wing parties will likely try to avoid such a settlement by resorting to increasingly authoritarian discourses and populist strategies, as evidenced by the recent election of the young Pablo Casado to lead the Partido Popular. As Rodrigo

Amírola argues, Casado's strategy, partly inspired in the success of Ciudadanos, is clearly populist, aiming to assemble 'a new moral majority that goes beyond left and right ... by mobilizing strongly conservative sectors in order to foment political polarization' (Amírola 2018). In just a few weeks, Casado has made clear the platform through which he aims to achieve this goal: war against so-called peripheral nationalisms (Catalan, Basque and Galician), visceral disdain to feminism (rebranded as 'gender ideology'), and a revamped anti-immigration discourse, peppered with neoliberal proposals (lowering taxes, especially on the wealthy) and due reverence to the historical pillars of Spanish nationalist conservatism (church, army, fatherland, and king). This is eerily similar to the discourse of Vox, a neofascist political party that has experienced a sudden rise in popularity in recent months. These events likely 'mark the end of the so-called Spanish exception' (Fernández 2018).⁷

It is too early to say whether the years 2016–2018 signaled the closure of the republican opening and the triumph of reaction, or whether they should simply be seen as an impasse marked by the resistance of a sclerotic regime. The outcome will depend, in the first place, on the ability of the republican movements to rejuvenate, extend and strengthen their base, and, above all, to develop strategic alliances; in the second place, on the success that the forces of reaction will have in promoting the emergence of forms of authoritarian populism. This tension will also be played out in the Spanish countryside.

The countryside

If, as I suggested, the period 2011–2016 contained the germ of a new republican period, it would also be the case that it introduced an absolute historical novelty with respect to its republican predecessors: the countryside has been little more than a non-presence in the recent political cycle.⁸

The anti-austerity movement is overwhelmingly urban: its rhetoric and style, its symbols, its agenda, they all are quintessentially urban. Catalan *sobiranisme* is less univocal, and it certainly has strong support in the Catalan countryside, but rural issues play a minimal part in its agenda and the political battle seems to be focused on widening its social base in urban Catalonia. This invisibility is further nurtured by media descriptions of the effects of the crisis, which tend to focus on urban contexts: both crisis and austerity and the response to it are presented as having an urban face. It is not difficult to detect behind this urban bias the hardwired, implicit assumption that rural dwellers are conservative (with a small c) and poorly organized (the infamous 'sack of potatoes'), and that change, therefore, can only come from the metropolitan areas.

This political divide between country and city is very problematic. On the one hand, it imposes limits on the reach of emancipatory politics. On the other hand, it tends to conceal the worsening of life conditions in rural Spain and its potential political effects. This worsening of life conditions is especially evident in three processes that I will now examine: depopulation, land concentration and impoverishment.

⁷As I finish the revisions to this article, on 2 December 2018, Vox has obtained 11% of the vote in the Andalusian election, thus entering a (regional) parliament for the first time ever and therefore confirming beyond any doubt that the exception is over.

⁸The *Sindicato Andaluz de Trabajadores*, allied with the left sectors of both movements, is the one very notable exception to the countryside's post-crisis political invisibility.

Depopulation, land concentration and impoverishment

The Spanish countryside suffered an abrupt process of rural exodus between 1955 and 1975. This process of depopulation left a durable imprint in the consciousness of rural dwellers, generating widespread feelings of abandonment and hopelessness (Sevilla Guzmán 1979). Although depopulation has decelerated since the 1980s, rural Spain keeps losing population and getting older, especially in the northern half of the peninsula. A recent report (Recaño 2017) suggests that close to 2000 municipalities (about 20% of the Spanish total) are at risk of disappearing. Indeed, a new genre of TV program and monograph (e.g. del Molino 2017) has popularized the idea of rural Spain as a romanticized 'Empty Spain.' Emptiness qua irrelevance is replacing the old stigma of ignorance and backwardness, further distancing the urban dweller from the quotidian reality of the countryside.

In parallel, the Spanish countryside has experienced a remarkable process of land concentration. As Franco, Borrás, and van der Ploeg (2013) suggest, this process is generalized all over Europe, representing one of the faces that land grabbing has taken on the continent. According to Eurostat, between 1999 and 2009 the number of agricultural holdings in Spain decreased by 23%, whereas the agricultural area shrank by 9%. In the same period, large holdings (over 100 hectares) grew in number and became larger, whereas the amount of agricultural land in the hands of corporations increased by more than 20%, reaching 11% of the country's total. Whereas these transformations would seemingly confirm modernization theory-informed visions of agrarian differentiation, such an explanation tends to ignore the role that mechanisms of extra-economic coercion (state and EU policies, financialization, real estate pressure, etc.) have played in land concentration processes.

Moreover, changes in the agricultural sector only reveal a part of the challenges that Spanish rural territories have been facing.⁹ The data that I have just presented cover an interval (1999–2009) that largely coincides with what I have elsewhere (Franquesa 2017) called the *Second Miracle*: the bubble-led cycle of economic growth that Spain experienced between 1995 and 2007. The two most visible processes of this cycle were the massive construction of private housing and the public and private construction of infrastructure such as roads, high-speed trains, airports, cultural facilities and power stations (Aguilera and Naredo 2009). Inflation of real estate assets was the lifeblood of the Second Miracle, generating rents that were captured by a bundle of real estate, construction and financial interests (López and Rodríguez 2011). The reproduction of this accumulation pattern required an incessant extension of the frontier of ground rent valorization,¹⁰ fueled by cheap credit, public subsidies, rezoning mechanisms and corrupt deals that rarely benefitted the original owners of the land. Despite its geographical unevenness, it is hard to overemphasize the impact of this real estate and construction frenzy over the bulk of the Spanish countryside: land artificialization, the re-ordering of land uses, the privatization of public and communal lands and natural resources, speculation and

⁹For a synthesis of the transformations of Spanish agriculture and their effects on rural land and territories since the turn of the century, see Arnalte, Moreno, and Ortiz (2013) and Soler and Fernández (2015).

¹⁰On the concept of ground rent and rent capture, see the classic work of Smith (1990) and the recent contribution of Andreucci et al. (2017).

land-price increases.¹¹ Indeed, it seems fair to argue that the Second Miracle worked as a land grab, especially if we adopt a definition of land grabbing that loosens the emphasis on ownership to place it on the capture of *control* over resources and the re-ordering of land uses (Franco, Borrás, and van der Ploeg 2013). I will return to this point in my discussion on Southern Catalonia.

But if the Miracle eroded the control of rural dwellers and farmers over their environment – and consequently over their reproductive strategies – it is fair to say that the impact of the ensuing crisis over their livelihoods has been even deeper. Current urban-rural income differentials are large. Indeed, it is not rare for the income of rural dwellers to be less than half that of the inhabitants of the respective provincial capital (Sánchez 2017). This situation is in large part the result of the uneven effects of the Miracle and the ensuing crisis over rural and urban territories. Thus, for instance, according to Idescat (the Catalan statistical institute) whereas in the early 1990s the average individual income in Catalan rural agrarian counties was slightly above that of Barcelona’s postindustrial, working-class neighborhoods (the old urban ‘red belts’), nowadays it is clearly below (Franquesa 2018, 2015–16). The crisis has thus impoverished rural Spain both in relative and in absolute terms.

This impoverishment is especially troublesome for smallholders and, by extension, for the regions where family agriculture, often practiced on a part-time basis, is more prominent (Arnalte, Moreno, and Ortiz 2013). Economic crisis and austerity have led to the erosion of state provisioning and the loss of industrial and state jobs in rural areas, thus undermining the complementary sources of income that are critical for the reproduction of smallholding agriculture (Moragues-Faus 2014). Furthermore, the extension of precarity jeopardizes the complex bundle of relationships of trust between households through which land is cultivated, as well as the forms of subjectivity on which those relationships, and by extension the future of these areas, depend. Southern Catalans often refer to this form of subjectivity as ‘self-esteem.’ The term encompasses a broad range of ideas: believing in your product and investing in it; maintaining affective relations with your land, your neighbors and the broader territory; developing initiatives that create new revenue opportunities; transmitting to your children the desire to stay and make a living in the area; and so on.

Slow dispossession and angry people

Altogether, the transformations I have just described – depopulation, land concentration and farming deactivation, urban and infrastructural encroachment, impoverishment – can be seen as a general process of *slow* dispossession, nurturing feelings of abandonment and hopelessness – the further erosion of self-esteem. My use of the adjective ‘slow’ – borrowed from Nixon (2013) – indicates the unspectacular, gradual and mundane character of dispossession here, which also helps to explain the inattention that this process receives in the broader public debate. Yet it is fair to assume that the objective and subjective conditions that I have described for the Spanish countryside constitute a fertile hummus for the emergence of authoritarian populism in this part of the country. Indeed, although so far rural disenfranchisement has not turned into organized anger, it is worth noting that

¹¹Between 1995 and 2008, the average price of agricultural land more than doubled – from 5200 to 11,010 euros per hectare (Soler and Fernández 2015, 88–93).

an insightful analyst such as Fernando Fernández has recently spoken of the risk of Le Penization in the Spanish countryside:

A year and a half ago, an agrarian organizer told me that he was worried because his bases reacted to their problems in increasingly more conservative ways, and because he found it increasingly difficult to introduce broader issues and debates. ... Since then I have observed a worrying political trend among certain sectors of the rural world who, feeling belittled and attacked, react by closing towards their own principles and evolve towards positions that have nothing to do with the defense of the rural world. ... More and more frequently I hear loaded conversations in the bar, the market and the fiestas that suddenly move from defending hunting and the need to control the fauna to a ferocious attack against environmental organizations and a defense of Spain and its traditions. I am worried to see Francoist flags in demonstrations demanding irrigation ... Where has the effort of the last decades in favor of food sovereignty and a lively, open, fraternal rural world gone? (Fernández 2017, 27)

Fernández fears that we may be witnessing an authoritarian populist movement *in statu nascendi*. This movement, he observes, understands itself as reacting against abstract enemies, most notably 'environmentalists' and 'the urban society', posited as the antagonists of the rural dwellers and their interests. Fernández offers a double explanation for the emergence of this movement. First, he points at the Left's historical inability to engage with the plight of the rural world and its unwillingness to understand the agrarian economy and, especially, family farming. This would open the way for the emergence of a Le Pen-style populism that would find its social base among pensioners, rural workers, and small and middle farmers, rather than among large landowners and the agroindustry, more favorable to the *status quo* and supportive of so-called market liberalization.

Indeed, the second key explanation has to do with the activity of a series of right-wing rural organizations, loosely connected with the Partido Popular and, increasingly, to Vox (see Fernández and Jerez 2018). These organizations have recently undertaken an effort to organize rural discontent, creating a movement called 'In defense of the rural world and its traditions' that emphasizes identity questions and posits urban environmentalists as its nemesis. Fernández admits that whether this will give place to some sort of full-fledged form of authoritarian populism in rural Spain is uncertain, yet the activist warns us that rural Spain is politically up for grabs. This view is congenial with my argument that the poor penetration of contemporary republican movements in the countryside opens a real opportunity for the emergence of authoritarian populism. In this respect, the analogy with the French National Front is apposite. For although the emergence in Spain of an independent, agrarian-focused, rural form of authoritarian populism is highly unlikely, the FN provides a revealing example of how far-right discourses and ideologies can be successfully ruralized (Ivaldi and Gombin 2015). Indeed, it seems fair to assume that the Partido Popular's incipient authoritarian populist strategy will target the rural voter, especially in those parts of the country where the party is dominant (such as central and western Spain, and probably extending to the south). It may also be a telling fact that Casado is the only national leader *not* born and raised in a major metropolitan center.

Southern Catalonia: a permanent revolt against all sorts of grabs

In their panoramic discussion of the global rise of authoritarian populism, Scoones et al. (2018) argue that the countryside not only provides the breeding ground for regressive

political forces, but may also offer progressive alternatives in the form of emancipatory rural politics and struggles. In this section I briefly discuss one such struggle in Southern Catalonia; it came to be known as the Southern Revolt, and it unfolded in the first years of the century, opposing a series of hydraulic and energy projects and defending a model of endogenous economic development.

Following the classification suggested by Srijker, Voerman, and Terluin (2015; see also Woods 2008) we may describe it as a form of ‘spontaneous rural protest.’ ‘Spontaneous’, to be clear, does not signal lack of organization, but absence of political party or union direction. ‘Rural’, in contrast to ‘agrarian’, indicates that the range of actors and issues involved went beyond – though they certainly included – farmers and strictly agrarian problems, tackling a large variety of questions, from the defense of local livelihoods and landscapes to the critique of the country’s hydrological and energy policies – but also of those local actors who were complicit with them. In so doing, the Southern Revolt developed a practical, ecologically-informed understanding of the role that the country-city division plays in the social division of labor and value in Spain. The Southern Revolt gave a unified voice to the region, vindicating a local identity rooted in peasant practices and a shared experience of marginalization, blaming this marginalization on a ‘them’ composed by all those actors – from the government to construction and electricity companies, but also local caciques – that had historically benefitted from it. Thus, as I will argue in the conclusions, the Southern Revolt can be located within a larger tradition of progressive agrarian (or rural) populism, which, while involving multiclass alliances, is, as Borrás (forthcoming) argues, necessarily class-conscious.

A new productive function

In the 1960s–70s, while Spain was experiencing an accelerated, industrialization-led process of urbanization and economic modernization, Southern Catalonia’s agrarian economy collapsed. As Southern Catalonia was losing its population, and thus becoming a place ‘with no productive function’ (Smith 2011) in modern Spain, the region was targeted for a new economic specialization: providing water and energy to urban Spain. Government and private electricity companies eyed the region, first projecting a series of dams and hydroelectric stations, and later (in the 1970s and 1980s) as many as seven nuclear power plants. Southern Catalans resisted this process from the outset (García 1997). Thanks to this resistance they were able to force the withdrawal of several projects, including two dams and three nuclear plants. The peak of this struggle took place in the late 1970s, in the context of the *Transición*, largely becoming the face of the pro-democracy struggle in Southern Catalonia. Opposition to these projects was especially strong among those social sectors depending on agriculture and, to a lesser extent, fishing. The then-nascent progressive agrarian unions played a decisive role in this struggle.

Southern Catalan land (and water) became useful for capital and state’s interests at the same time that the region’s labor was deemed redundant. A series of actors, from agrarian organizations to the antinuclear movement, but also some sectors of the church, led the opposition to this process, framed as a defense of the local means of livelihood. It thus corresponded with what Martínez Alier’s (2003) calls ‘environmentalism of the poor’, a defense of the local environment understood as a means of livelihood. It also possessed a strong republican, democratizing component, opposing and aiming to supersede

unelected power structures, such as the electricity companies – dismissively labeled the ‘new masters’ – and vertical agrarian unions and Francoist mayors, together with their clientelist networks. These actors, accused of ‘serving the new masters’, were the main advocates of energy facilities, as well as their main beneficiaries, enjoying, for instance, privileged access to good jobs in the nuclear plants.

The country’s pantry and sink

Resistance against extraction in Southern Catalonia experienced a strong rebirth at the turn of the century as a result of the coincidence of a series of proposed infrastructure projects. On 4 February 2001, the streets of Móra, the small commercial capital of the three northern counties of Southern Catalonia – Priorat, Ribera, and Terra Alta – hosted the largest demonstration that has ever taken place in the region. In front of 25,000 peaceful demonstrators, a simple banner read: ‘Stop aggressions to the territory.’ It was signed ‘The Platforms,’ a term that, in Spain, identifies local civic organizations convened to oppose a specific localized development and operating through an assembly-based, nonhierarchical structure. The four self-identified ‘Southern Platforms’ that organized the Móra demonstration formed in the previous two years in response to three kinds of infrastructure projects. The Platforms of Terra Alta and Priorat opposed the proposal of the Catalan government that positioned the two counties at the center of wind farm development. The Platform of Ribera opposed several projected waste and energy facilities, most notably Enron’s plan to build a natural gas combined-cycle power plant in Móra. And the Southern Catalan section of the state-wide Platform in Defense of the Ebro (PDE) opposed the National Hydrological Plan (PHN, in its Spanish acronym), a governmental plan of hydraulic infrastructure that hinged on the transfer of water from the Ebro River to Barcelona and the Spanish Levant (Valencia and Murcia).

The Móra demonstration is widely seen as the inaugural event for an unprecedented cycle of mobilization, popularly known as the Southern Revolt. This revolt gathered a numerous and diverse social base, triggering a reconfiguration of the political balance of forces within the region, which has kept shifting to the left to this day. In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, agrarian organizations played a secondary role in the Southern Revolt, a circumstance that reflected the fact that agriculture had ceased to be the main source of revenue for a significant part of the local population. Whereas during the *Transición* the conflict was framed as one of traditional (farming, fishing) versus modern economy (power plants), this time around the conflict emerged between two diverging economic development models.

The platforms defended a model based on what they called ‘endogenous economic development,’ where the farming base of the area and of many household economies would be strengthened by adding distinction to local production (mostly, high-scale wine) and complementary activities (fundamentally, tourism). ‘Endogenous’, thus, did not mean autarkic or self-sufficient, i.e. delinked from market circuits. It rather referred to the possibility of drawing on local (or endogenous) resources – the people, landscapes and agrarian produce of the region – to achieve a more favorable engagement with those circuits. Beyond the generation of new economic opportunities, the goal was thus to build a development model that afforded a larger degree of control to the local population. As activists insisted, this project of endogenous economic development wanted to combat

hopelessness and relied on 'generating self-esteem.' In contrast, the second model defended that the region should deepen its specialization as an extractive hub. Once again, it had its main advocates among conservative mayors, who supported the government's view that the area was a 'lagging' region that could only develop by hosting ever-new energy projects, which would generate tax revenues, rents, and a few jobs to the local economy. This second model enjoyed limited support among the local population, as the declining support to pro-extraction mayors in successive electoral contests evidenced.

The platforms developed a fairly sophisticated understanding of the broader political economic dynamics that converted their region into a site of extraction. In an interview conducted during my fieldwork, in 2010, a leading activist of the PDE (the largest and most powerful of the Southern platforms) described what united the different platforms, and thence the spirit of the revolt, in the following terms: 'We are sister struggles, we all fight against a development model that makes us peripheral: a pantry for water and energy, and a waste dump for what the country does not want.' Furthermore, although the platforms emerged as a reaction to a series of projects, they were able to go beyond a merely defensive attitude. This is most obvious in their proposals for what they called a New Culture of Water and a New Culture of Energy. With these proposals, the platforms made clear that they were not NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) organizations.

The New Culture of Water presented itself as a new socioenvironmental paradigm for water management, calling for conservation and the democratization of water politics in front of the traditional top-down approach that saw water as a bulk resource to be managed through large-scale infrastructure (Arrojo 2006). Importantly, the activists of the PHN dispelled the idea that the conflicts around water were mere conflicts between regions or between the country and the city. This was not, they argued, a struggle for water between, say, Southern Catalan and Murcian peasants, or between rural Southern Catalans and Barcelona's working classes. Against the government's argument, which depicted Southern Catalans as selfish citizens depriving their fellow countrymen of water, the PDE took pains to emphasize that the water sent to Barcelona and the Spanish Levant would not serve urban dwellers and small farmers, but would instead benefit a select few in the thriving real estate and tourist sectors, as well as a non-sustainable agroindustry predicated upon cheap water and cheap migrant labor.

Similarly, the New Culture of Energy emphasized the need to decouple economic development from energy use, demanded the closure of nuclear plants, and proposed a distributed energy system where smaller power plants closer to the point of consumption would progressively substitute large power plants owned by the traditional utilities. In this sense, they criticized the way renewable energy was being developed (top-down planning and corporate ownership), suggesting that it worked as a form of what Fairhead, Leach, and Scoones (2012) call 'green grabbing'. This is illustrated with the recurrent complaint that Southern Catalan farmers, echoing a long trajectory of struggle, wage against wind farm developers: 'They have become the (new) masters.'

Against the Second Miracle and its ecological regime

The Southern Revolt had its maximum strength between 2000 and 2004, the peak years of the Second Miracle. Indeed, the Southern Revolt was one of the largest of a series of conflicts against infrastructure projects (airports, golf courses, waste dumps, seaside

resorts, etc.) that mushroomed in Spain, with a very strong presence in Catalonia. There, local activists, although their platforms tended to operate independently, identified their struggles as part and parcel of a countrywide ‘movement in defense of the territory’ (Alfama et al. 2007).

This may in fact be read, using Polanyian language (Polanyi 2001), as a countermovement, an unplanned social defense against a structure of accumulation based upon a frenetic use and abuse of space and nature. The housing bubble, the ecological degradation of the seaside, the dramatic underuse of new, large-scale infrastructure such as airports, power plants, and high-speed trains – as well as the corruption that accompanied these projects – are all part of the present-day consequences, a damning testament to the Second Miracle’s effects on Spain’s environment. So is the ongoing crisis and the austerity measures that the government and the EU imposed on the Spanish citizenry in order to facilitate debt repayment.

As the epicenter of this countermovement, the Southern Revolt made clear that the Second Miracle was a deeply ecological process. It constituted what Moore (2015) calls an ‘ecological regime’, a notion that refers to durable sets of relations (from patterns of governance to class structures, among others) organizing the metabolism – that is to say, the material exchanges between humans and the environment – of any given political-economic order. These relationships are not external but a central constitutive element of that order.

As mentioned earlier, the key element of the Second Miracle was the spatial expansion of the frontier of ground rent valorization, allowing for the inflation of real estate assets, the overgrowth of the construction sector, and fabulous financial profits for banking and related sectors – as well as an unprecedented escalation of private and corporate indebtedness. All the big winners of the Second Miracle – banks, electric utilities, construction companies, and the real estate sector – engaged in a construction binge, funded by cheap credit and focused on residential units and large-scale infrastructure. Whereas traditional core areas (big cities, the seaside) became central to this activity, the Second Miracle pushed the frontier into peri-urban areas and the entirety of the Mediterranean coast. The ‘rest’ of the country was *iterated* as a periphery. Thus, the expansion of the frontier of ground rent valorization, combined with the increasing metabolic demands of an economic system highly reliant on increasing flows of energy and water, put added pressure to peripheries such as Southern Catalonia. The Southern Revolt was a struggle against using the area as tap and sink for that wasteful metabolism, and in so doing it revealed the contradictions and socioenvironmental injustice on which it was based.

These contradictions lie at the heart of the debate between development models. For the construction of infrastructures required a certain kind of *value relation*. It needed territories beyond the frontier of ground rent valorization that could be further *cheapened*, a term that I use in the double sense proposed by Moore: ‘One is a price moment: to reduce the costs of working for capital, directly and indirectly. Another is ethico-political: to cheapen in the English language sense of the word, to treat as unworthy of dignity and respect.’ (Moore 2017, 600). Indeed, infrastructure development needed land with a low market value as much as people who felt and could be treated as unworthy, unable to claim a higher value for their land and their lives and willing to accept those facilities that other territories did not want. The model of endogenous development aimed to challenge this value relation, positing the local territory as a valuable (as opposed to ‘cheap’)

element, both in market terms – that is to say, as the potential base for the making of livelihoods – and a source of self-esteem.

Rural populism and emancipatory rural politics

As I have argued all throughout this paper, the poor penetration of anti-austerity movements in the countryside signals a weakness in these movements' capacity to expand their social base and geographical reach. Yet as importantly, it also undermines their capacity to analyze the Spanish reality and, by extension, to propose emancipatory projects. In this respect, the Southern Revolt teaches us two main lessons: the urgency to develop an ecologically informed understanding of the city-country division, and the need to couple the critique of austerity with an equally ruthless critique of the economic bonanza that preceded it, understanding its 'slow' dispossessing effects.

In the first place, by neglecting the countryside, left populist movements in Spain at best downplay and at worst ignore the city-country (and center-periphery) relationship that underpins the existing structures of accumulation and domination. This, in turn, becomes a burden for introducing ecological questions in the emancipatory agenda. Indeed, as a certain Marxist tradition – represented by authors such as Gramsci (1957), Williams (1973) and Lefebvre (1978) – has argued, and the practice of the Southern Revolt shows, any successful emancipatory project must not only understand, but aim to supersede, the division between country and city that has been, and continues to be, central to the reproduction of capital and state. The ecological dimension of the structures of accumulation and domination becomes especially visible in peripheral areas such as Southern Catalonia, for that peripherality expresses an economic and ecological extraction – based upon and sustaining political marginalization – that is inseparable from the practice, experience and identity of the region's inhabitants.

In the second place, the popular democratic movements that have tried to break with the *status quo* since 2011 have focused their critique on the crisis and austerity policies. They have denounced the undemocratic character of these policies, as well as their dispossessing effects upon the urban middle classes that form their backbone. Yet the emergence of the Southern Revolt and similar rural movements in the preceding decade make evident that dispossessing dynamics were central to the cycle of accumulation that preceded and provoked the crisis. Furthermore, the Southern Revolt also criticized and revealed the authoritarian tendencies that gave stability to the Regime of 78, especially evident in the hydrological projects put forward by PSOE and PP. Something similar can be said about *Nunca Mais*, the movement that emerged in Galicia after the Prestige's oil spill in 2003. A broad, successful, left populist movement must take into consideration such a broad range of dispossessing processes and the authoritarianism that underpinned them in order to understand the divergent subjectivities to which they have given place over time.

Dignity: on morality, relationality, and class

Borras (forthcoming) argues that the historical – and ongoing – debate among left scholars on agrarian populism can help analyze (and build) progressive populist movements.¹² This

¹²For recent installments on this debate, see Bernstein (2018), van der Ploeg (2018) and White (2018).

debate has tended to polarize between so-called Chayanovian or (neo-)populist and Marxist (or Leninist) positions: whereas the former celebrate the political imagination of populism and its capacity to mobilize disparate social groups, the latter tend to criticize it as a romantic movement that privileges moralizing understandings of ‘the people’ while ignoring class analysis. The key, Borrás argues, is to find common ground between these two positions, retaining the populist impulse while enriching it with the Marxists’ keen understanding of class dynamics, in order to advance to a *class-conscious left-wing populism*.

In this concluding section I contribute to this debate by exploring how moral discourses intervene in the construction of populist movements. I do so by focusing on the notion of dignity and its role both in the Southern Revolt and in the more recent popular democratic movements. Whereas the centrality achieved by this notion makes patent the ability of the latter movements to grasp and mobilize emergent affects and ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams 1973), it also signals the limitations of a strategy that has been largely discursive. In and of themselves, moralizing discourses are insufficient unless they are related to class experiences (Franquesa 2016). Otherwise they can easily be captured by right-wing populism.

Southern Catalan dignity

Dignity was central to the Southern Revolt’s discursive apparatus. This can be appreciated in a manifesto issued in 2007 by a group of organizations opposing a new series of energy projects (more wind farms, a nuclear waste storage facility, and a natural gas submarine deposit). The authors wrote:

Until recently, we put up with everything like submissive subjects. ... But since 2000, with the struggle against Enron and the PHN, we gained our dignity and learned to organize and make ourselves respected. Never again resignation ... We are not submissive subjects anymore, we are citizens who have learnt how to struggle and we will struggle for our future. (Plataformes de les Terres de l’Ebre 2007)

This quote underscores that the Southern Revolt created politically active subjects, and it does so by contrasting dignity and resignation. During the last decades, dignity has been the main idiom through which Southern Catalans have opposed their marginalization and the conversion of their land into tap and sink of the accumulation process. Indeed, dignity should be understood as the central element of a local ‘theoretical framework’ – to use Narotzky’s (2016) expression – aiming to explain but also to disrupt the value relations that both sustain and result from a particular political economic structure. This structure allows for the extraction of profits from the area, *cheapening* its inhabitants and their possessions, most notably land. Or, to put it in Gidwani’s (2012) terms, turning them into ‘waste’: what the law of value needs to devalue or cheapen (in the full sense of the term) in order to produce economic value.

This demand for dignity takes two different, although often overlapping, forms. First, it emerges as indignation, a fiery reaction against passively accepting the denial of one’s own dignity. Indignation draws on, reinforces and gives political character to self-esteem; it constitutes the opposite of resignation and deference and thus combats a fatalistic passivity. Indignation, then, emerges as an attempt to reproduce a resistant

subjectivity that has informed a long history of peasant struggle, thus recalling an *uncompleted past* (Bloch 1991) of making autonomous peasant livelihoods and of being citizens who fully participate in the political process. The second form emerges as an assertion of dignity, understood as worth. It claims the value of Southern Catalans and their possessions, especially of their land, and of the region as a whole. The demand of dignity is an attempt to preserve – but also to construct and perform – certain possessions, a struggle against dispossession: being able to make a living and stay in place, preserving the value of land, maintaining local networks of solidarity, preserving some control over the labor process and household reproduction.

The Southern Revolt was able to put the moral strength of the notion of dignity at the service of its populist strategy, using it to build an opposition between a ‘we’ (the Southern Catalan people) and a ‘them’ (all those who benefit from a political economic structure that peripheralizes the area and its inhabitants). But we should also note that in Southern Catalonia the notion of dignity has obvious class undertones. Beyond its explicit political uses, the term is rarely used in the region. But there is a glaring exception: Southern Catalans often emphasize the dignity of being a *pages*, a Catalan word – cousin of the French *paysan* – that means peasant or family farmer. Yet I should point out that in Southern Catalonia the term is applied to anyone who feels an attachment with the agrarian economy, anyone who wishes to make a living *in* (and not simply *off*) the land.¹³

The point that I am trying to make, therefore, is that the Southern Revolt’s demand for dignity underpinned a populist strategy that was class-conscious. For in the region the notion is crucially linked to the everyday struggle for survival, a struggle to be a *pagès* which we could describe, using van der Ploeg’s phrasing, as ‘a struggle for autonomy and improved income within a context that imposes dependency and deprivation’ (van der Ploeg 2013, 61). The demand for dignity, thus, connects disenfranchisement and dispossession with broader political economic structures, while anchoring the region’s plight and struggle within a deeper trajectory of political and quotidian struggle.

Dignity beyond Southern Catalonia: the limits and openness of dignity

More recently, the claim for dignity has been a powerful undercurrent of popular democratic struggles. Indeed, the anti-austerity movement emerged as indignation (the *indignados* movement), and ongoing initiatives such as the Dignity Marches followed, organized by a coalition of unions and left organizations to demand ‘bread, roof, and work’. In 2015, Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, argued in a political rally: ‘We are the only reasonable possibility to recover our dignity’ (Europa Press 2015). On 2 October 2017, in the aftermath of the police’s repression of the Catalan self-determination vote, the cover of the newspaper *Ara* had just two words: ‘Shame and Dignity’ (*Vergonya i Dignitat*). A few days later, Xavier Domènech, a leader of the Comuns (the main Catalan afterlife of the *indignados* movement) tweeted: ‘October 1st was the dignity of a plural and diverse people that affirmed itself in the face of repression.’ The examples are multitudinous.

¹³This semantic extension runs in parallel to the declining importance of agriculture in the area, and is commensurate with the Southern Revolt’s above-mentioned shift from strictly agrarian to rural concerns.

During the first decade of the century, the idiom of dignity was central to the political discourse of movements – such as the Southern Revolt, but also the Galician *Nunca Más*, with its ‘Manifesto da dignidade’ – that felt mistreated and abandoned, largely left out of the body politic. After 2011, the idiom traveled from the rural periphery to the city squares, a move that reflected that a growing section of the urban working- and middle-classes felt left behind. Crisis and austerity curtailed their middle-class aspirations and threatened to expulse them from the mechanisms of hegemony and to render them ‘people with no productive function.’

This sequence of events shows the strength of the notion of dignity, its capacity to assemble people with different life experiences. But we should not fool ourselves. The demand for dignity and the experience of indignation are not patrimony of the Left. As several authors have noted (e.g. Riley 2013), the force of the demand for dignity is its disruptive capacity, its ability to call into question the existing liberal order. Yet that disruptive capacity can be mobilized in a popular democratic direction or in an authoritarian populist one.

This latter possibility can be appreciated in a political rally that the movement ‘In defense of the rural world and its traditions’ (the movement that Fernando Fernández identified as containing the seed of a rural authoritarian populism) organized in September of 2017 in Córdoba. In this rally, attended by 40,000 people, the organizers gave a speech complaining about nature preservation laws and the animal rights movement, arguing that they were causing ‘unease and indignation’ in the rural world. And they continued by saying: ‘Today a new alliance is born, a new way of fighting for the rural world and its traditions. And, with it, the rural world inaugurates a new way of fighting for its dignity and its interests’ (Pedrosa 2017). Indeed, the ferment for an authoritarian populism with a rural base speaking in the language of dignity is in place. If the mostly urban-based, popular democratic movements that have set the political agenda in recent years do not increase their effort to reach the countryside, this ferment will grow.

It thus seems fair to say that in order to be hegemonic, any popular/populist movement must come to embody a fight for dignity. Yet dignity is a largely empty concept, which simply asserts the presence and value of a group that feels disenfranchised. Whether this morally loaded concept takes a republican or a reactionary direction largely depends upon the contents that it is given and the social groups that articulate it and are summoned by it. If republican movements are to make inroads in the countryside, they have to connect the feelings of indignation with a broader analysis – oriented to a more equal and fraternal future – of the political economic dynamics that are at the base of those affects. This is what makes dignity republican. Otherwise rural dwellers are likely to find their self-esteem through an exclusionary notion of dignity underpinning a reactionary program. Easier said than done, of course. Yet I would argue that this is what the Southern Revolt did. And yet the spirit of the Southern Revolt is growing weaker in Southern Catalonia. The crisis is making Southern Catalan livelihoods more and more fragile, and with that precarity, solidarity gets strained, self-esteem weakens, and the energy to reproduce a resistant subjectivity feels increasingly quixotic. And in the face of these tendencies, the specter of reaction grows stronger.

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