

## [Re: The Left and Nationalism Monthly Series: “The revival of regional homelands and the perils of competitive solidarities” by Maurizio Ferrera](#)

Discussion published by [Daniele Conversi](#) on Monday, January 22, 2018

### **The Catalan blowback.**

I read Maurizio Ferrera’s article largely as a response to, and interpretation of, the global ghosts and fears evoked by the Catalan crisis. Moreover, the author perceives similarities between Italy’s Northern leagues and the Catalan pro-independence parties; this vision seems to inform much of his interpretive framework.

The article is a further hint that Catalonia’s push towards independence has led in practice to a rehabilitation of political Jacobinism and a return to state centralisation. Or is it the other way around? Separatism causes centralism, or no, centralism causes separatism: the egg and chicken dilemma is back.

Most Europeans now seem to fear more a government run by ERC in Barcelona than a neo-conservative PP government in Madrid which, it should be recognised, has secured greater respect than either Brexit or Trump. The Spanish Prime Minister has so far been quite successful in enhancing this image. Nobody can deny that, while Catalan nationalism has acquired a bad press, the Spanish central government appears so far strengthened by the way it has managed the conflict, even though it has effectively imposed unprecedented draconian measures - which, in the end, may prove to be a mere short term gain. In parallel, the continued radicalisation of the Catalan conflict has generated deep fractures within Catalonia itself, which are easily exploited by the central government. This in turn is likely to lead to further fragmentation and divisions. But, sooner rather than later, some sort of negotiation will be necessary. We do not know what will happen tomorrow, we only know that negotiation should always be firmly on the table.

Despite ample evidence to the contrary, there is thus a widespread fear that secessionism harbours the seeds of fascism, xenophobia and racism. The very notion is worrisome: Can such labelling be transformed into a self-fulfilling prophecy? As always, the answer largely depends on the general will to negotiate, which has now become a *rara avis*, a scarcely available good in the age of Trumpism.

Of course, in scholarly analysis, the reduction of Catalan secession to fascism has never gained traction. By sweeping with a big brush all regionalist movements, one risks ignoring their often subtle differences, including where they stand along the left-right divide. ‘Catalan egoism’ is thus likened to the capricious complaints of a spoiled brat, ignoring the relatively liberal atmosphere in which independentism has grown by coalescing against a less internationally visible Spanish nation-statism. Catalan secessionism is thus considered a bigger threat than a revived Spanish nationalist government. Three cheers for Rajoy, the defender of liberal democracy, down with Puigdemont and the other bunch of parochial provincials prone to destroying world peace in the name of their unprincipled lack of solidarity.

In the [introductory article to this series](#), I asked whether there can be a nationalism of the Left. Maurizio Ferrera's answer to this question is largely negative. The main problem is that the answer itself lies buried in a sea of generalisations, as if all forms of substate nationalism were of a similar ilk, whether one is talking about Catalonia or Lombardy. Buried as it is, the answer to the initial question still seems to be that, despite all the efforts to create a Left-oriented, progressive form of nationalism, even the most valiant efforts in this direction are destined to crumble. We are only left with the nationalism of the Right. And, since nationalism is the dominant ideology of the modern age, we are forever destined to be ruled by the Right or the far Right, just as has happened in the USA.

But surely, one can read the news through less opaque lenses. The area of immigration and refugees provides a good testing ground. Under the influence of Québec (and rehearsing Catalonia's own history of assimilation), Catalan pro-immigration policies have been encapsulated under the notion of 'intercultural nationalism' (see '[Despite the crisis: The resilience of intercultural nationalism in Catalonia](#)', *International Migration*, Vol. 55, Issue 2, 2017, pp. 53-67). This has nothing to do with the extreme anti-immigration rhetoric and chauvinistic substance of Salvini's NL - and Le Pen's FN for that matter. These nuances are lost if one looks exclusively at the egotistical withdrawal from the responsibilities of welfare redistribution policies. Again, the key question posed in my introductory article remains the same: Can there be a nationalism of the Left?

Solipsism becomes the main problem here. Unfortunately, there is an undeniable truth in Ferrera's pessimistic claim that *Catalan and Flanders' separatists 'count on continued EU membership even after independence, without realizing the chain-like shock that such changes would generate for the institutional foundations of the EU'*. This blindness and misunderstanding of the broader European context is, however, accompanied by a much more all-pervasive generalised blindness about the even broader picture, namely the tragedy brought about by unfettered, unopposed globalisation. This has led to a brutalisation of the human psyche which has no historical precedent. A new radicalism has been spawned in response, at all levels of society.

This seems paradoxical, but neoliberalism is still imposing its poisonous recipes, resisting against all odds, even surviving its own economic crisis and changing climate. States have few resources left besides nationalist recentralisation, as is happening throughout Europe and far beyond. From Turkey to Burma and several Asian countries, forms of accommodation enshrining greater respect for human rights are increasingly dumped in the name of reinforcing central states, just as these have become debilitated after decades of relentless neoliberal globalisation. 'Compensation strategy' is a suitable term. As free market deregulation brought havoc throughout the ecumene, nationalism, often in the form of authoritarian and xenophobic populism, becomes the first to benefit from the chaos, not a tainted social-democratic left itself corroded by its previous embrace of US-led globalisation - what Luis Moreno has aptly rendered as 'Anglobalisation'.

One more lesson can be drawn here: far from creating more cohesive societies, the rise of nationalism ushers fractured societies. One can take heed from the most powerful state in world affairs, the most powerful country on earth - the USA - where, after a spate of unprecedented scandals and a government shutdown, the slogan 'make America great' has been turned topsy-turvy into the everyday practice of 'making America divided'. The USA is more fragmented, violent and desperate than it ever was: a possible failed state in charge of the destinies of the world.