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The new secessionist wave – Reflections on the crisis of the neo-liberal state

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As part of our current series on Scotland and secessionist movements, SEN Journal: Online Exclusives is excited to present this original piece by Professor Daniele Conversi, Research Professor at the University of the Basque Country and the Ikerbasque Foundation for Science, who has written about [the wider issue of secessionist politics and the state](#).



One can study the new secessionist wave in the West and elsewhere from a number of perspectives: by looking at how nationalist leaders mobilize their constituencies, at the form of the state, at the international dimension, and so on. However, I believe what is paramount is that we are witnessing a rather precipitous fall of political legitimacy of the neoliberal state. Beyond nationalism, this can be seen in the rapid rise of anti-system movements, like the M-15 or *indignados* (aka “outraged”) in Spain, Beppe Grillo’s direct democracy movement in Italy, the Occupy movement in the USA, UK and elsewhere, and the electoral gains of Syriza in Greece, each of them with its different organizational roots, but all deeply dedicated to change the current political system. At the same time, the spread of populism, often accompanied by anti-Europeanism, threatens to twist the European Union’s hard-won achievement of tolerance through a seemingly unstoppable wave of xenophobia, Islamophobia and racism – a trend amplified by the challenge of the extremists’ intense [online activism](#) (Conversi 2012a).

So, where do stateless nationalisms stand in this respect? Less concerned with central institutions and traditional party politics, stateless nations seem to offer a more agile, novel and untested context in which to experiment citizen engagement and democratic deepening. In particular, they seem to offer alternatives to the corrupted and inefficient legacy of the neo-liberal state – identified as early as 1995 as the ‘[global panopticon](#)’ (Gill 1995).

Walker Connor is one of the few scholars who have systematically connected nationalism with [political illegitimacy](#) (Connor 2004). He argues that the rise of nationalism indicates a problem with state legitimacy. This problem is not simply with the regime type and incumbent politicians. Rather, he proposes that sizable numbers of citizens do not recognize themselves in key political institutions. Additionally, neo-liberal globalization and the majoritarian ‘nation-state’ have a particular impact on political legitimacy. [Majoritarian](#)

[systems](#) typically do not offer a sufficient level of representation for ethnic minorities and stateless nations and are thus vulnerable to legitimacy crises (Conversi 2012b). Representativeness and legitimacy have been further reduced by neo-liberal policies of privatization, de-regulation and unaccountability. But throughout most of the twentieth century, the majoritarian ‘nation-state’ has provided the unquestioned norm. This link between democracy and national representativeness has historically triumphed with the spread of (Western) modernity, so that, I believe, the linkage between [modernity and nationalism](#) should be placed at the core of research (Conversi 2012c).

How do the ghosts of the past impinge on today’s sentiments?

Memories of past injustices, discrimination and suffering can also condition the level of trust required for coexistence and the building of representative institutions (Smith 1999; 2009). Until quite recently, militarization and war were systematically used to build powerful coercive apparatuses throughout the West (Conversi 2007; 2008; 2012d; 2012e). Most European countries, including Spain, launched themselves in a breathless emulation of the French and German assimilationist and centralist models (Conversi 2012c). At least until the death of Francisco Franco (1975), Spain has tried to imitate these efforts as well. The persisting legacy of cultural homogenization is perhaps more visible in countries like [Poland](#) (Fleming 2012) and [Turkey](#) (Üngör 2011), where a rich inheritance of cultural differences and ethnic variety has been forever wasted and destroyed.

Stateless nationalisms, such as in Catalonia, Wales, Corsica, the Basque Country, Flanders and Scotland, have seized the opportunity by tendering the alternative vision of a new ‘small-scale’ global order. At the same time, nationalist parties in control of regional institutions, and empowered by autonomy statutes, have supplied examples of transparent governance, sustainable economic growth, the maintenance of the crucial functions of the welfare state and relative political stability and continuity (as in the Basque Country and South Tyrol). In some cases, they have marred sustainability with long-term investment, such as in research and development (R&D). For instance, Wales has planned to introduce unique legal requirements, becoming “[the first country in the world](#) to make it legally binding for all public bodies, from health trusts to libraries and schools, to take account of the environment and social issues ” (Vidal 2012). The [Climate Change Strategy](#) adopted by the Welsh government has been hailed as one the most ambitious globally, moving Wales from local recycling to the [global negotiating table](#).

Therefore, invoking the [economic crisis in order to explain away secessionist movements](#) would be a very simplistic and easily refutable temptation (Dardanelli 2012). Indeed, secession can be a very costly affair and there is no guarantee that, once seceded from a EU member state, the new state will be automatically accepted back in –accession might be blocked by the most powerful states.

Today, the European Union (EU) provides the only realistic framework for addressing the issue of secession. The EU remains a needed bulwark set against the prevarication of populism, nationalism and instability. At the same time, while Europe is going in the direction of deepening autonomy, Russia has mutated into a centralized authoritarian state dominated by a ‘crony capitalist’ oligarchy (Obydenkova and Swenden 2013). If the EU is split into two economic zones, tensions will no doubt increase. But if the EU disintegrates the odds are that the nation-state will try to reassert itself at the expenses of both territorial minorities and immigrants. In such a



highly interdependent world, it would be foolish to expect that local problems can be resolved merely at the local level.

What is wrong with the Spanish state's current form?

Spain finds itself at the intersection point of two economic crises, one global, the other home-made, or, better, 'house-made'. The former derives from a generalized failure of neo-liberal globalization to address a whole set of burning existential problems, like the uncontrollability of financial flows and anthropogenic climate change. In Spain, corporate de-regulation policies have devastated the territory through over-construction, environmental degradation, demographic concentration and low-quality housing standards, particularly along the Mediterranean coast. Despite the two crises being deeply inter-linked, no incumbent politician seems able to address them, either jointly or separately.

Within this broad set of problems, the form of the state is being increasingly questioned. Is Spain a majoritarian or consensual democracy? The Constitution simultaneously stresses the unitary character of the state and grants autonomy to regions as 'autonomous communities'. But in practice, since at least 2002, several decisions indicate a majoritarian vocation clearly eluding minority representation and local democracy. Thus the decision of the Spanish High Court of Justice (*Tribunal Superior de Justicia*) to suspend portions of the 2006 Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia after it had been already approved by referendum (18th June 2006) can be seen as one of the key catalysts in the subsequent rise of the *soberanista* (pro-sovereignty) movement. Another factor was the approval of anti-terrorist legislation under José María Aznar's second term in government (2000-2004) and the consequent abuses of the US-led 'global war on terror', which had contributed to polarize public opinion in Catalonia possibly even more than in the Basque Country. In practice, the mechanisms of collective bargaining and brokerage set up during the transition to democracy (1975-1982) have been deeply eroded. This has in turn badly affected the degree of trust necessary for political coexistence.

Can Catalonia actually secede?

It will largely depend on Madrid's reactions. The current governing class is mostly sclerotized around neo-liberal postulates, unable to address the long-standing problems of the *crisis del ladrillo* (brick/construction crisis), where the euro-zone recession merges with Spain's lopsided pattern of [unsustainable urbanistic deregulation](#), which began in the 1960s under Franco. The problem of regime illegitimacy risks transforming itself into a problem of state illegitimacy, at least in Catalonia. But it is unlikely that Madrid's ruling élites will one day wake up and decide to abdicate their power in order to save Spain from disintegration.



How will the central state respond to Catalan demands?

In Spain, the debate is often vitiated by a vein of anti-Catalanism in the right-wing public media (moreover, large chunks of the private right-wing media are owned by the indicted Italian tycoon Silvio Berlusconi). A biased media can create a difficult environment for negotiation and an ideal context for the expansion of conflict. To a lesser extent, the idea of the ‘[ungrateful Scots](#)’ as part of a [British shift towards English identity](#) can be read as a reaction to the assertiveness of Scottish and other nationalisms and groups (Skey 2012). But we do not have yet a Castilian nationalism that may offer an alternative to the legacy of Spain’s ‘nation-statism’.

Finally, can Catalonia be compared with Scotland?

To a certain limited extent, yes. [Luis Moreno](#) has highlighted the common points between the two programmes (Moreno 2012). On the other hand, there are vast differences: for instance, Scotland has not suffered the repression of a regime like Francoism, while there are differences in culture, economy, institutions, etc. The comparison with Veneto, Quebec, Puerto Rico, Flanders, Wales and other regions should also be taken with caution.

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SEN Journal: Online Exclusives would like to thank Professor Conversi for his contribution. If you would like to respond to this piece, please email us at sen@lse.ac.uk.

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