



University of  
Massachusetts  
Amherst

## **Multiculturalism, Identities and National Uncertainties in Southwest Europe: The Rise of Xenophobia and Populism in Catalonia (Spain)**

Item Type	working paper
Authors	Clua i Fainé, Montserrat
Download date	2025-03-29 13:49:34
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7367">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/7367</a>

## **Multiculturalism, Identities and National Uncertainties in Southwest Europe: The Rise of Xenophobia and Populism in Catalonia (Spain)**

Montserrat Clua i Fainé, PhD (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

This paper proposes a critical reflexive approach to the multiculturalist debate. The starting point is to realize that, despite the years we have spent debating about multiculturalists and interculturalists policies, even the amount of writings we have about the issue (Rodríguez, 2010), it seems that all this work has not been effective for the disappearance of racism and its consequences.

As was stated in the proposal of the workshop, today many European countries (with or without a history of multicultural policies) have seen a reaction against the policies of multiculturalism and an increasing of the presence of racist and xenophobic attitudes. At this moment it can be stated that an Islamophobic, anti-immigration and populist climate is growing in Europe. This phenomenon is demonstrated by the electoral results in many European countries, in which the radical right parties' vote has been increasing, reaching nearly 20 percent. But it can also be seen in the use of xenophobic and populist arguments by some prominent political leaders belonging to mainstream political parties.

This situation forces us to reconsider the theme, to strengthen the theoretical foundations that we have already consolidated (that have emerged from the anthropological experience on the subject that has been developed over time), and to look for what issues remain outstanding. I follow the premise of Leith Mullings that anthropology is particularly well situated to analyze racism:

With its emphasis on underlying social relations and the informal workings of structures, networks, and interactions that produce and reproduce inequality, anthropology has a set of theoretical perspectives and a methodological tool kit that lends itself to interrogation of new forms of structural racism and to unmasking the hidden transcripts of the process through which difference is transformed into inequality (Mullings, 2005:685).

The aim of this paper, therefore, is to provide some points for theoretical reflection on the subject through the analysis of one example: the rise of populist discourse in Catalonia (Spain) and its expression in a radical-right populist party, PxC (*Plataforma per Catalunya*: platform for Catalonia). But it is necessary to say that the paper does not pretend to offer an in-depth analysis of PxC. This populist party has been extensively studied by other authors, who have analysed its history and social foundations (Rius, 2011; Casals, 2007; Hernández-Carr, 2011; Erra, M. & Serra, J. 2008). The aim here is to use the PxC case as “good to think;” as a pretext for thinking about the contemporary presence of populist and racist discourses and practices in Europe; to suggest background questions on the subject and to propose new ways of looking at it.

I'm acutely aware of the specific sociopolitical context of Catalonia that must be considered to understand the particular forms that the populist discourse takes in Catalan society. And I will try to expose them in the analysis. But it is my hypothesis that this case also reflects structural elements about the emergence and expansion of populism and xenophobia that are applicable to other cases in Europe, beyond the particular forms that the phenomenon takes in each specific context. In this sense the aim is to go beyond the specific Catalan and Spanish cases, to contribute to the understanding of the increasing presence of far-right and populist discourses in the public sphere and in the political scene in contemporary Europe (Hervik, 2004). It is assumed that a comparative knowledge of the different expressions of European "new racism" (this taking a biologist or a more culturalist form, as Stolcke showed in 1995), should improve the comprehension of the general phenomenon beyond local and specific manifestations.

### **The Catalan Case**

The first element that must be taken into account to understand the Catalan case is that Catalan society is characterized by a strong Catalan national identity, distinct and largely opposed to the Spanish national identity. This specific Catalan national identity has been reflected in an historical nationalism of the so-called nations-without-state, which began in the mid-nineteenth century and has remained fairly constant in the Spanish context until nowadays, when it is undergoing a considerable revival (Balcells 1996; Guibernau 2004; Llobera 2004). This nationalistic political identity is an important element to take into account in the analysis, because it introduces a particular trait in the perception and the definition of the "group" and membership to it; as well as being relevant in the construction of discourses of inclusion/exclusion that both nationalist and racist discourses share. In Catalan society the opposition between "us/them" and the xenophobia against the "other" do not simply combine the duality Catalan/non-Catalan; it includes a distinction within the category "non-Catalan" between Spanish and non-EU immigrants. Precisely this particular nationalistic factor converts the Catalan case into an interesting context to observe how the distinction between "us" and "them" is constructed, when a new immigrant population enters a host society which conceives of itself as the threatened minority in a State that doesn't recognise its "national" and cultural difference. And on behalf of this "threat" to their national identity, it is considered socially legitimated to express a certain level of rejection and xenophobia towards foreigners.

What makes the Catalan case more interesting for the analysis of racism and xenophobia is precisely that Catalan nationalism has usually been depicted as a type of "integrative" or "civic" nationalism, based on cultural and linguistic criteria (although there are particular researchers who have questioned whether Catalan society has been as "integrative" as it would desire, i.e. Aramburu 2002; Clua 2011).

This idea of an integrative nationalism is significant because Catalonia has been a territory which has received substantial flows of immigrant populations throughout its history. Indeed, this has occurred to such an extent that some demographers assert that immigration has been an integral part of the modern Catalan system of reproduction (Cabr  1999). Demographers calculate that in the last century the population of Catalonia has grown by more than 350 percent. At the end of the nineteenth century, Catalonia did not surpass two million inhabitants. Today the estimated population tallies about seven million people. This spectacular demographic growth, taking the low

fecundity rate of the country into account, is largely due to immigration. Thus, in Catalonia it can be estimated that, nowadays, two-thirds of the population are themselves, their parents, or their grandparents, of immigrant origin. It has to be underscored that Catalonia is one of the regions in the south of Europe that has experienced the Industrial Revolution for nearly two hundred years. This has converted it into a focus of attraction for labour forces coming from other zones. Therefore, this immigration was not just a fundamental part of the demographic evolution of Catalonia: it also constituted a central mechanism of economic development, providing a cheap labour force.

This immigration stream reached extreme peaks in two periods of Catalan history. The first was between 1961 and 1975 (during Franco's dictatorship), when Catalonia received an important influx of labourers, estimated at almost one million people, coming mainly from other Spanish regions, especially the rural areas (mostly Andalusia, Murcia and Extremadura). The second significant influx in a relatively few years has been between 2000 and 2010, when approximately another one million people arrived. These immigrants were generally from non-EU countries; principally from North Africa, especially the Maghreb, but also from sub-Saharan, South America and the Philippines. More recently, Catalonia has received a considerable flow of immigration from Eastern European countries. For the total population of Catalonia, this has implied a growth of more than 20 percent in ten years (from 6 to 7.2 million people).

It could be said that international immigration and new processes of interculturalism in Catalonia, like in Spain and other countries of Southern Europe, is a rather recent process. Spain can be considered a "new" country of immigration, in contrast with countries such as the United Kingdom, France or the USA. Moreover, during these demographic processes, there has been no apparent social conflict nor have we seen significant xenophobic discourse or practices developed against this population. Or so it seemed until the appearance of PxC.

### **Plataforma per Catalunya**

PxC is a minor far-right populist party that was created in 2002 in a mid-sized rural area town called Vic (35,000 inhabitants, at 80km north-west of Barcelona). This party obtained 10 percent of votes in the local elections in 2003. But in the past few years the party has increased its influence on the territory and the number of voters. In the regional elections for the Catalanian government on 28 November 2010, PxC obtained more than 75,000 votes. And in the last local elections (March 2011), with more than 65,000 votes, it achieves political representation with 67 councillors distributed in 28 City Councils. The political party has been consolidated in the municipalities where it was already present, and entered in other populations with high immigration rates.

Although recently it has increased its influence in the territory and the number of voters, it is considered by public opinion as a non-representative extremist minority, with no real weight in Catalan society and in the political arena. Hence the general surprise in Catalan society when it was known that this small, minority party was cited in the Breivik's Manifest (2083 – *A European Declaration of Independence*) as an example of a good political party by the Oslo terrorist.

This is the point I would like to stress in the analysis of this case: why is PxC considered by Catalan public opinion as non-representative and of no significant political tendency? Why doesn't Catalan society react with more force against these types of xenophobic ideologies and its arguments? The evidence shows that PxC is clearly a far-right xenophobic populist party, which expresses an anti-democratic and anti-Islamic discourse. The charismatic leader of PxC, Josep Anglada, has a biography linked to the fascist extreme-right parties of the Francoist Spain. Anglada himself, along with some of PxC's elected members, have been involved in acts of direct physical violence against immigrants or against members of left-wing movements. They use a provocative language against Islam and immigration, using and raising fear of a supposed Islamic invasion and religious conversion of Europe, as did Breivik. Anglada itself has led media campaigns against the construction of Mosques in some Catalan cities and against Islamic women who wear burka.

As an example, we can look at the comments that Anglada posts on Facebook, and the reactions that are usually generated in their followers. They use a discourse about the Catholic and National Spanish unity against the "Moorish" (*moros*), with references to the Cid Campeador and the history of Spanish's Reconquest. That is, it is a Spanish nationalist party that does not accept any kind of cultural, linguistic or religious diversity in Spain, either coming from inside the country (as it is Catalonia) or from immigration.

It is this Spanish nationalist character that perhaps may explain the indifference that a large part of Catalan society shows towards the actual threat to peaceful coexistence that PxC implies. Some Catalans, especially those who speak from a Catalan nationalist perspective, tend to diminish and play down the role of PxC, stating that is an outside expression of Spanish nationalism that has nothing to do with Catalan people. With this argument, Catalan society reproduces the idea of its historical integrative capacity, its democratic values and its belief that it is a non-racist society. It reduces the electoral rise of PxC to a Spanish nationalist support of the former Castilian immigrants who were not integrated into Catalan society. The idea is simple and it's not new: "We are not racist; the racists are the others." In this case, the others are the fascist Spanish nationalists.

But the ethnographic evidence shows that this is not as simple as it seems. There are some individuals that express a Catalan national identity (and even a Catalan nationalist ideology) who share the xenophobic discourse of PxC and support its polemic ideas against Muslim immigration. They resolve the apparent contradiction between the Catalan and the Spanish nationalisms involved in this situation, through two different strategies:

- a. On one side, there are persons who refuse to accept that PxC is a xenophobic and Spanish extreme right-wing party as it really is. They argue that there is no evidence that shows this radicalism, and they are sure that the criticisms against PxC are slanders and false rumors invented by the enemies to discredit the party. So we can find people who believe without questioning the stereotypes and prejudices about immigrants and Islam created and disseminated by PxC, who however are very reluctant to believe what they consider to be prejudices about this xenophobic party.

- b. On the other side, there are people who refuse to accept the xenophobic charge of the PxC discourse, arguing that self-defense against external aggression (as it is supposed that Islamic immigration implies) is not being racist. They reduce the accusation of being racist to the active violence against immigrants and their families. So they consider that their ideas are not politically correct but that they are “the truth that everyone thinks, but nobody dares to say in public.” In this sense, with its defense of the rights of the “nationals” in front of the “aggression” produced by immigration, the party of Anglada is the point of connection between Spanish and Catalan radical nationalists. That is, he has found the xenophobic basis of both exclusionary nationalisms.

In both cases, the responses of people show the two principal characteristics that we must to analyze to understand racism and xenophobia: first, the role of ambiguity in the discourse; and second, what Taguieff called “the force of the prejudice” (Taguieff, 1987). It is evident that PxC—and especially its leader Anglada—had based its success on a calculated ambiguity that allows Anglada to resist the contradictions between discourse and practice (but also the contradictions of his followers). And he does this without eroding the party’s image and force inside their electoral framework. This capacity of integrate different (and in some time contradictory) ideas and practices is closely related to the strength of prejudice and stereotypes, because these are able to contradict any empirical evidence, no matter how evident it are.

From my point of view, the PxC case exemplifies the necessity to return to the old tripartite division in the explanation of racism—between ideology, attitude and behavior—applied by different authors some time ago (Banton, 1967; Taguieff, 1987; San Román, 1996) and that I also apply in my interpretation of nationalism (Clua, 2008). I think that it is necessary to focus the anthropological analysis of racism and nationalism on this intermediate level of attitude, where the most important but also the more imperceptible of people’s racism is situated. This is the space of prejudices and stereotypes, where the images of belonging are constructed, the definition of “us” and the “others,” in a diluted manner, almost imperceptible for the actors. But where the implicit ideas and feelings that allow future racist actions and behaviors are constructed. In the case of nationalism, it is in this space where the banal nationalism described by Billig (1995) is sustained. Perhaps it could be a good idea to talk about a “banal” racism and/or xenophobia (taking Billig's concept).

Finally, what is the core of the question is that the rejection of Muslim immigration (and of all the elements linked at the imaginary about Islam in Western societies) is more present in people attitude than what is expressed through the explicitly racist political parties and movements. In fact, the xenophobic discourse has achieved increasing political representation in local, regional and national governments in different parts of Europe. It has been expressed frequently by leaders of the mainstream political scenario that cannot be accused of radicalism. The simple slogan of PxC, “Our people first” has been used in the political discourse of different conservatives parties in Catalonia in the past and in the present. And some of them have been prominent figures in Catalan nationalism, not being accused of being radicals or far-right politicians.

So, a better comprehension of this kind of populist discourses embodying Islamophobia and exclusion against immigration requires going beyond the external and overt expressions of racism to uncover its structural elements. As Dominelli (2005) argues, it is important to remember that racism is not just a personal or individual

problem, nor is it a question limited to performing racist actions or having explicit racist ideology. Such a restricted vision overlooks the underlying socio-economic and political structures that produce and reproduce racist interventions. Nor does it recognise the way in which implicit ideologies and prejudices create underground racist attitudes, which support and permit the public expressions of racism (Banton, 1998; Taguieff, 1987). This is a very important matter because sometimes, in applying this limited interpretation of racism, even the institutions that intend to combat prejudices, racism and inequality, fall into the trap of becoming a part of a system that recreates those structures that it has set out to combat (Dominelli, 2005; Taguieff, 1987).

To conclude, we need to continue trying to better know the “force of prejudice,” studying how it now functions in our societies, what mechanisms are constructed and reproduced socially in people’s attitudes, and why is so difficult to eradicate. Our discipline has dedicated a lot of time and efforts to analyse, to understanding and combatting racism and xenophobia. We better know its function in Western societies as a form of legitimating actual social inequalities in societies that are supposed to be egalitarian (Stolcke, 1995). But we don’t know enough about how to combat and reduce racist and xenophobic discourses and practices. And this is particularly relevant in the current climate, when the severe economic crisis is increasing social tensions in Spain and Catalonia, which are heightened against immigrants. And where the limitations of multicultural policies are being put into the centre of debate. I hope that this work can contribute to shedding some light upon such a fundamental issue.

## References

- Aramburu, M. (2002), *Los 'Otros' y 'nosotros'. Imágenes del 'inmigrante' en Ciutat Vella de Barcelona*, Madrid: Ministerio de Educación y Cultura.
- Balcells, A. (1996), *Catalan nationalism: past and present*, New York: Palgrave.
- Banton, M (1967), *Race Relations*, London: Tavistock-Basic Books.
- (1998) *Racial theories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Billig, M. (1995), *Banal Nationalism*, London: Sage Publications.
- Cabré, A. (1999), *El sistema català de reproducció: cent anys de singularitat demogràfica*, Barcelona: Proa.
- Casals, X. (2007), *Ultracatalunya. L'extrema dreta a Catalunya: de l'emergència del búnker al rebuig de les mesquites (1966-2006)*, Barcelona: L'esfera dels llibres.
- Clua Fainé, M. (2011), "Catalan, immigrants and charnegos: "race", "cultura" and "mixture" in catalan nationalist rhetoric, *Revista de Antropologia Social*, 20 (1):55-75.
- (2008), *Culture, Ethnicity and Nation: an approach to the study of nationalism from social anthropology* (PhD in Catalan), Bellaterra: Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. <http://www.tdx.cat/handle/10803/32154>
- Erra, M. & Serra, J. (2008), *Tota la veritat sobre Plataforma per Catalunya*, Badalona: Ara Llibres.
- Guibernau, M. (2004), *Catalan nationalism: francoism, transition and democracy*, London: Routledge.
- Hernández-Carr, A. (2011), "¿La hora del populismo? Elementos para comprender el «éxito» electoral de Plataforma per Catalunya", *Revista de Estudios Políticos*, 153
- Hervik, P. (2004), "Anthropological perspectives on the new racism in Europe", *Ethnos*, 69( 2):149-155.
- Llobera, J.R. (2004), *Foundations of national identity: from Catalonia to Europe*, New York: Berghahn Books.
- Mullings, L. (2005), "Interrogating Racism: Toward an Antiracist Anthropology", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 34:667-93.

Rius, X. (2011), *Xenofobia a Catalunya*, Barcelona: Edicions de 1984.

Rodríguez, D. (2010), “Beyond Assimilation and Multiculturalism: A Critical Review of the Debate on Managing Diversity”, *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 11(3):251-271.

San Román, T. (1996), *Los muros de la separación. Ensayo sobre alterofobia y filantropía*, Madrid-Bellaterra: Tecnos-Servei de Publicacions de la UAB.

Stolcke, V. (1995), “Talking Cultures: new boundaries, new rethorics of exlusion in Europe”, *Current Anthropology*, 36 (1).

Taguieff, P.A. (1987), *La force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles*, París: La Découverte.