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Political fictions in the construction of Spanish national identity in times of crisis

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Our most recent “Ringvorlesung” or lecture series\(^1\) in the winter term of 2017/2018 about Podemos and the part that social networks played in the party's success in the European elections of 2014, elections where, despite having only come into existence three months before, the party won five seats in the European Parliament\(^2\) and later became the third largest party in the Spanish general elections of 2015 and 2016, ended with a question from participants about my opinion on the future of Podemos.

I still remember my (vague) response to a possible integration of the then populist anti-establishment party into the democratic order and I even compared it to the evolution of the Green Party in Germany, as a model for Podemos to follow in the future. What I could not have predicted then was the rise of VOX as a new force on the Spanish political scene. Founded in 2013, VOX achieved 11% of the votes in elections for the Andalusian parliament at the end of 2018, winning 12 seats. The features of this new party reveal its right-wing populist profile, one that is anti-immigration, pro-Spain and anti-Catalan independence.

According to comment and analysis in the media\(^3\), the rise of VOX is related firstly to the use of an anti-immigration discourse as a means of creating political upheaval and secondly and thirdly, to the focus of its political discourse on maintaining the unity of Spain as a nation state, as well as harnessing unease in society about the handling of the Catalan crisis by the Popular Party (Partido Popular). According to a survey in the EL PAÍS newspaper, “41.6% of those voting for far-right parties did so because of

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immigration, while 33.7% voted in order to ‘defend the unity of Spain’ and 28% ‘to stop the separatists’”.

The question is how VOX managed to mobilise the electorate so quickly especially considering that although far-right parties and organisations had always existed in Spain, since the transition to democracy they had played a minor role on the Spanish political scene. One explanation is the ability of the conservative Popular Party and its predecessor the Popular Alliance (Alianza Popular) to provide a home for the more conservative and extreme sections of the party. Clearly this ability has disappeared as is shown by the success of VOX and the way VOX has managed to trigger discussions about concepts that it seems still exist in the Spanish political narrative. An example of current debates about concepts relating to Spain’s past is the publication on YouTube of a political campaign video where the leader of VOX, Santiago Abascal, appears on horseback accompanied by several riders in formation and which is titled: “The reconquest will begin on Andalusian soil”. The video is designed to evoke the Christian Reconquista of the Muslim kingdoms of Al Andalus and can be read in several ways: the fight against immigration and for the unity of Spain by a group of brave horsemen (xenophobia, nationalism and anti-gender equality politics).

This is not a new narrative. From the creation of Spain as a kingdom and later as a nation state and then a parliamentary monarchy, there has been a narrative of unity, a battle or argument against a project of diversity. This narrative of unity is a central pillar in understanding Spain as a country for a large part of the population, especially in Autonomous Communities like

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6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIE7Xn10YU0 (accessed 15.4.2019).
Castile and León, Castilla-La Mancha, Andalusia and so on, as opposed to Autonomous Communities like Catalonia or the Basque Country. In most cases the foundations for this narrative of unity were laid long ago in the artistic and cultural imagination with myths and legends, while in the present the narrative is debated in public opinion, aided by discussions about politics on social networks like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

In our analysis of the construction of a national identity in Spain we will use the term nation in the same way as author Benedict Anderson, who defines it as “imagined communities”, a construction Anderson explains with a quotation from Seton Watson, “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”.

The representation of these “imagined communities” manifests itself, according to Anderson, throughout history in a common and collective narrative that changes over time and with cultural systems (religious and dynastic community and modern perceptions of national identity). In his Spanish historiography Tomás Pérez Vejo defines this vision of the nation as a reality that cannot be understood as an objective entity, but rather as an “imaginary construction” of recent origin.

A second concept we would like to refer to before a more in-depth discussion of the construction of a national identity in Spain is propaganda. According to the definition of “Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung” (bpb): “Propaganda ist der Versuch der gezielten Beeinflussung des Denkens,

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8 Ibid., p. 6.
9 Ibid., p. 12.
10 Tomás Pérez Vejo, España imaginada. Historia de la invención de una nación, Barcelona 2015.
Handelns und Fühlens von Menschen. Wer Propaganda betreibt, verfolgt damit immer ein bestimmtes Interesse.”¹¹ For us, this definition is important because we use it to analyse the concepts of interpretation and perception of the truth in the context of the creation of “political fictions”, as used by Hannah Arendt, because we consider the basis for all propaganda to be political fiction. According to Arendt, all “political fiction” emerges in five stages: “Täuschung, Selbsttäuschung, Image-Pflege, Ideologisierung und Entwirklichung.”¹² The principle of all fiction is deception or manipulation, followed by self-deception, constructing the fiction in the imagination, idolising this fiction and then finally a distancing from reality or the idealisation and acceptance of the fiction as a part of the discourse that defines reality as something that cannot be questioned or put in doubt.

In the Spanish context we can talk of a series of “political fictions” that have pervaded Spanish history, and which are key references or discussions in the concept of the “imagined community” that exists in Spain.

The “political fiction” that has perhaps had most influence in the creation of the Spanish national identity is what we will define as “unity versus diversity” and which appears in times of economic or political crisis. In this class of our “Ringvorlesung” we will reference some key moments where the two narratives, that of unity and political fiction, meet and lead to a conflict of political interests at moments of tension and when there is a lack of dialogue.

### 6.1 Charlemagne’s vision

In the seventh century, Spain found itself in one of the most difficult moments of the Reconquista: the kingdoms of Castile and León were immersed in wars of succession; the war against Al Andalus was stalled in a

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“status quo”. Just at this moment an exceptional work appeared: the *Histo-
ria Caroli Magni* or the *Historia Karoli Magni et Rotholandi*, (History of the Life
of Charlemagne and Roland) also known as the Pseudo-Turpin: a series of
legends about Charlemagne's battle against the Muslims in Spain. This
work is also known as the fifth book of the *Codex Calixtinus* or *Liber Santi
Jakobi*13 (The Book of Saint James), attributed to the Bishop of Reims,
Turpin14, a contemporary of Charlemagne. Turpin's apparent authorship
gave the book the status of a Chronicle, that is to say, it gave it authentici-
ty. The theme of this compendium of legends is fundamental to under-
standing the need to demonstrate that its contents should be considered as
real: the victory of Charlemagne over the Muslims and how this began
with a dream Charlemagne had: “[…] he being weary through oppressive
labour, resolved that he would henceforth rest and not go to battle. And
then he saw a path of stars in the sky, beginning in the Frisian Sea and ex-
tending through Germany and Italy, Gaul and Aquitaine, passing directly
over Gascony, Vasconia, Navarre and Spain to Galicia, where the body of
Saint James lay buried and undiscovered. Looking upon this stellar path
several times every night, he began to meditate its meaning.”15

The dream continued with the appearance of Saint James the Apostle, sent
by God to ensure Charlemagne liberated the lands of the Apostle from the
Muslims and who instructed Charlemagne to construct the Saint James
Way as well as visiting the tomb of Saint James: “The path of stars that
you have contemplated in the sky is the sign indicating that you must take
a great army from here to Galicia to do battle with those perfidious pa-

13 Liber Sacti Jacobi Codex Calixtinus, trans. by A. Moralejo, C. Torres, J. Feo, Xunta

14 Ibid., p 403: (Turpin) 1. Archbishop of Reims (d.788 or 794), to whom the narrators
attributed it, to make it more prestigious.

15 Ibid., p. 408.
gans, to free my path and my lands and to visit my basilica and my tomb”.

In this case the intention is clear: the Reconquista searches for legitimacy in two figures: that of the Emperor Charlemagne and Saint James the Apostle, (later described in iconography and popular culture as *Santiago Matamoros*, Saint James the Moor-Slayer). Robert Plötz emphasises the vision’s propaganda content, where secular or dynastic power, (the Imperial Crown) and the religious power of the figure of Saint James unite in a common vision, creating a first “political fiction” of the narrative of unity, in the war against the Muslims: the battle is the desire of divine power and is legitimised in the figure of the emperor as a representative of Christianity. A representation of this dream can be found in the reliquary of Charlemagne (ca. 1215) at Aachen Cathedral in Germany.

Within the narrative about Saint James and the Saint James Way we find multiple discourses in the history of Spain which continue right up to the present: with time the figure of Saint James moves from the knight who fought against the Muslims, represented in the iconography as Saint James the Moor-Slayer, to the peaceful pilgrim with his habit and pumpkin, a symbol of openness, Europeanness, of an open spirituality in the European context.

The recreation of the figure of the knight, Santiago Abascal, in the video for the Andalusian election campaigns deliberately draws on the idea of Saint James and the narrative of the Reconquista to give it legitimacy, in

16 Ibid., p. 408.


19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIE7Xn10YU0 (accessed 15.4.2019).
the discourse of unity about national identity, and its dependence on religious belief (Christians against Muslims) at a moment of national crisis for Spain, and connects with an old medieval narrative about unity.

6.2 “Limpieza de sangre” and the Christian knight

Since the conquest of Granada in 1492 the construction of Spanish national identity has involved a narrative of unity that is not only manifested in the cultural imagination on the peninsula but also in specific actions that have attempted to eradicate a discourse of diversity. By this we mean the doctrine of “limpieza de sangre”.

Historian Heinz Schilling in his book *1517 Weltgeschichte des Jahres* considers the “Reinheitswahn” and the “Fremdephobie” as a phenomenon affecting 16th century Europe. However, it highlights the influence of the Reconquista and the ideal of Christian unity as central elements in the danger that Jews and Muslims represent for Christian purity on the Iberian peninsula: “Auf der Iberischen Halbinsel hatte die Reconquista gegen die muslimischen Araber eine die Gesellschaft tief prägende Ideologie hervorgebracht, die unter dem Schlagwort ‘limpieza de sangre’ sich gleichermaßen der Reinheit des Blutes wie des christlichen Glaubens verschrieb”.20 Schilling also adds that the doctrine of “limpieza de sangre” created a posture of rejection and destruction in spiritual terms, later legitimised by legislating against what was culturally or ethnically other.21

According to Juan Goytisolo, the doctrine of “limpieza de sangre” establishes the desire to concentrate the power of old Christians and was imposed on the other territories in the Iberian peninsula, as well as more peripheral regions like “Valencia, Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia, places which had never been made fully Castilian and which, after Spanish

21 Ibidem, p. 197.
decline in the 17th century and especially in periods of crisis, began to articulate their desire for independence”.22

The counter to a diverse biography with Jewish or Muslim influences, that is the Jewish or Muslim converso, the new Christian; is the Christian knight or old Christian, an archetype of Spanishness who can demonstrate their nobility or Christianity down several generations and does not come from a converso family. The Christian knight becomes a “political fiction” to imitate. According to Goytisolo, for such a figure it is better to die with honour than live without honour.23 And the characteristics that define this figure are asceticism, spirituality, austerity and a Christian spirit. Wealth and material goods are not important as an objective in life, absolute values are more important: “Die Großzügigkeit und Freigegebigkeit des Spaniers, die Leichtigkeit, mit der er sich aller Habe entledigt und darauf verzichtet, sich mit der Verwaltung oder Mehrung seiner eigenen Güter zu beschäftigen, stammt aus seinem Glauben an höchste, absolute, unbedingte Werte.”24

The counterpoint to the Spanish Christian knight, as presented by Goytisolo and its depiction in Spanish literature (Lazarillo de Tormes, Antonio de Guevera etc.) is the Christian knight of Erasmus der Rotterdam, or the “humanism of knights”, as Schilling calls it, personified by Ulrich von Hutten, a humanist knight, cultured, educated in Italy, open to science and intellectual debate.25 A figure that in the narrative about economic crisis in the work by Enric Juliana.26 Juliana describes a figure that represents modesty, peaceful discussion, hard work and austerity. His model is the Knight of the Green Cloak, a Cervantine figure inspired by the Christian knight Erasmus de Rotterdam, as a counter to the excesses of the crisis. Juliana

22 Juan Goytisolo, Spanien und die Spanier, Frankfurt 1986, p. 44.
23 Ibid., p. 49.
24 Ibid., p. 50–51.
attempts to link to a narrative of difference, restraint, an illuminating narrative that, according to him and to Goytisolo, has always existed in Spain, but never had the force required to create a real majority discourse. “Cervantes tries to negotiate the Counter Reformation and imagines the figure of the Knight of the Green Cloak to show a social and spiritual archetype upon which the foundations of Spanish character could have been laid.”

6.3 Heretics, Lutherans and Erasmians 1517

The definitive consolidation of a narrative of Christian unity as Spanish imperial identity takes place in 1517 with the Protestant Reformation. During this century groups of Lutherans also appear in Spain, in Sevilla and Valladolid. In 1478 the Inquisition was re-established to fight against false converts using its repressive machinery during the reign of Philip II to repress and censure all dissent with the result that at the end of the 16th century all ideas of reform with regards to the Church had disappeared from the Spanish context. The only possible response was to create an inner exile in literature, art or spirituality.

During the 17th and 18th centuries and at the beginning of the 19th century, Spain defined its national identity essentially within a narrative of an empire fighting against the attempts of other powers to achieve supremacy in Europe. These are years which, according to essayist Goytisolo, are characterised by a process of slow decline. The discovery of America and the resulting expansion of Spanish interests in the world brought chimeric wealth and splendour as well as a flow of capital that flashed through Spain on its way to European cities, where Spanish monarchs paid off the debts they had run up with their wars against England and France. The expul-

27 Ibid., p. 19.


29 Ibid., p. 122.
sion of the Jews and Muslims brought about, according to Goytisolo, huge cultural, scientific and economic losses that would be central to understanding Spain's slow but ongoing decline.\textsuperscript{30}

A symbol for many of the greatness of empire, for others a symbol of its decline is the Royal Site of San Lorenzo de El Escorial (Monasterio de San Lorenzo del Escorial), built by Philip II in 1563 as a residence, monastery and royal pantheon for the Hapsburg royal family.\textsuperscript{31} From the El Escorial a monk-king reigned in the name of a Catholic empire. Not far from El Escorial is the Valley of the Fallen (Valle de los Caídos), where until now Franco has been buried: a monument built by political prisoners and which also aims to cement the unity of the Spain “created” by Franco: Catholic and not diverse.

6.4 From the loss of Cuba in 1898 to 2018

1898 is a date that anyone who grew up in Spain will know. My generation associates it with history classes and the narrative of a nation that lost everything in 1898. Cuba, the last colony of the Spanish Empire. The end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries saw a real tragedy, a trauma that was consolidated in the intellectual discourse of the Generation of ‘98. The philosopher Miguel de Unamuno, one of the most well-known members of that generation, advises the humiliated nation to take solace in modesty and austerity. Modesty and austerity, two words that are taken up by the members of the Generation of ‘98, Azorín, Unamuno and Machado in the landscape of the Castilian plateau: “Sie inszenieren die Landschaft Kastiliens als magischen Spiegel, durch den hindurch sie jenseits der trivialen Erscheinungen den authentischen Kern der spanischen Identität sehen und erkennen können. Die kastilische Landschaft dient den Schriftstellern aber auch als Kanal dafür, das, was sie als spanischen Ur-

\textsuperscript{30} Juan Goytisolo, Spanien und die Spanier, Frankfurt 1986, p. 37, 84.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 118.
sprung ausgemacht haben, einem breiten Rezipientenkreis zu kommunizieren.”

The Castilian plateau, a huge, arid landscape, resistant to the harsh weather becomes the polar opposite towards the otherness of Europe, towards the exterior and represents an image of a return to the interior, to the centre of Spain as a strategy against the defeat and humiliation of the loss of the colonies. What starts as a proposal for intellectual regeneration leads to a political debate about the national problem in the dispute between Américo Castro and Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, where they debate two different concepts of history and the essence of what is “Spanish”. According to Castro, “Spanishness” is defined by the experience of La Convivencia (The Coexistence) between Christians, Jews and Muslims in the past and therefore reveals a character with different traditions, while Claudio Sánchez Albornoz opts for a uniquely Spanish tradition that begins before the pre-Roman period. In this historic debate we can once again glimpse two narratives, the first describing the possibility of choosing a path of diversity which accepts the Christian, Jewish and Muslim influence on our history; that is to say a narrative of diversity in the construction of “Spanishness” and an open door to the diversity of different cultural and linguistic traditions on the peninsula, and secondly, a narrative of unity which sees “Spanishness” and therefore the Spanish nation, as an entity that existed even before Roman expansion across the peninsula.

These two different ways of understanding “Spanishness” also represent, as Till Kössler explains, “a cultural battle between the representatives of a


modernising project (Catalanists, Socialists, Communists and Anarchists) and those fighting for a united, Catholic Spain (the Church, Nationalists, Francoists). Kössler adds that “this interpretation also involves discussion of the question of participative democracy, gender equality and a cosmopolitan and secular way of life.” This first pluralistic and diverse model is imposed as a political project in the Second Republic, ending with the Civil War in opposition to the second division of the Spanish political project: the Franco dictatorship.

During Franco's dictatorship the narrative of unity reached its critical point. The Catalan, Gallego and Basque languages were banned. All political dissent was punished with concentration camps, prison or exile and the Catholic Church supported this unity project that lasts until Franco's death in 1975.

In 1978 with the ratification of the Constitution in the same year political consensus was achieved with the *estado de autonomías*, Spain’s constitutional framework of autonomous regions, which attempted to bring together the two narratives, that of unity and diversity. It is a model which works in the first years of the democracy and during the consolidation of democracy and up to when Spain joins the European Union and the introduction of the Euro, but begins to show its first cracks with the economic crisis of 2008.

Raul Zelik writes in his book *Mit Podemos zur demokratischen Revolution? Krise und Aufbruch in Spanien* that “for a long time (the economic crisis) has not only been about unemployment and forced evictions. Inadvertently, the country has manoeuvred itself towards a huge constitutional crisis […] The

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35 Ibid.
crisis also has a historical, national dimension. The Spanish state suffers from a lack of democracy and unresolved conflicts with the other nations in the state: Catalonia, the Basque country and Galicia”.

After many years of abundance, the construction boom, rapid growth and the euphoria of European football and the World Cup at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s, the housing crisis and later the financial crash put an end to rapid growth.

In response, the government of the day focused on economic cuts, particularly to social projects, affecting the most vulnerable in society, and also on a policy of “cuts” to democratic freedoms as with the Ley Mordaza (Gag Law).

During these years of crisis a large number of corruption scandals came to light involving top politicians and members of the Royal Family. In society in general there was a growing sensation of paralysis, of inactivity. The result was also a “cultural pessimism” which is reflected in the literary works published in the first 13 years of the 21st century, which painted a “dark” and “depressing” vision of a nation, one which forced its brightest and best to emigrate in search of work, a nation whose towns were dying because of an ageing population and whose corrupt politicians only considered their own advancement and well-being. Writers like Antonio Muñoz Molina and Sergio del Molino wrote works with titles such as Todo lo que alguna vez fue sólido (Everything that was once solid), Un viaje por una tierra que nunca fue (A journey through a land that never was) and gave voice to a depression shared by many: Spanish growth in the 90s was just a bubble. A bubble that burst.

Also questioned is the agreed pact of pseudo-diversity in the estado de autonomías and in particular the founding myth of the Spanish transition to

democracy of 1978 is put into doubt by parties like Podemos or some of the representatives of Catalan separatism, and with it the constitution.

The cry for help from authors such as Enric Juliana, who calls for modesty, austerity, prudence and an Erasmian “knight of the green cloak” like the character from Cervantes Don Quixote, is little more than a brutal criticism of a “way of being Spanish” that continues to exist in Spain: intransigent, individualist and the enemy of dialogue. It is a call to create a new country in which modesty, manners, good governance, conflict resolution and solidarity prevail over corruption, individualism, consumerism and conflicts between the different autonomous regions.

In contrast to previous crisis, like the loss of Cuba, the last colony of the Spanish Empire in 1898 which gave rise to large group of thinkers and intellectuals in Spain (the Generation of ‘98) and whose influence centred exclusively on Spain, this new crisis had an international dimension. Although the social realities and political and economic problems in Greece, the USA (the Occupy movement) and North Africa (the Arab Spring) were different from Spain's issues, they provided important inspiration for the Spanish movement which became known as 15 M after its launch on 15 May 2011.

During 2012 and 2013 the effects of the crisis (high unemployment, cuts to education, health, culture etc.) created a climate of such generalised dis-satisfaction that a large part of the population began to support political projects like Podemos which tried to tackle the structural problems affecting Spain from a perspective of diversity, as a clear challenge to the Parliamentary monarchy model which came into being in 1978.

Despite the initial euphoria around Podemos and the springing up of many influential political groupings, so far there has not been real political change that deals with the challenges facing Spain (separatist aspirations in Catalunya, structural causes of the high level of unemployment and the focus of the Spanish economy on the tourism and construction industries.)
On the contrary, Catalan separatism has radicalised the discussion about the legitimacy of the *estado de autonomías* model.

Positions on the political model of Spanish identity has radicalised to such an extent that at the moment we find ourselves with three narratives: two extreme nationalist narratives of unity whose political projects are diametrically opposed and a third narrative of diversity which is the great loser and is hardly heard in current discussions of identity.