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Is Nationalism an Ideology? A critical exploration from the Asturian case

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Nationalism and Ideology in the social sciences and the humanities

The classification of nationalism as an ideology has always been “a matter of some confusion” in political studies, as political theorist Michael Freeden rightly indicates (“Is nationalism a distinct ideology?” 748). In fact, adds Finlayson (“Nationalism” 98), “until recently (nationalism) has been somewhat neglected by political theorists (...) and has more often been investigated by historians and sociologists”, who tend to treat it as a socio-political movement more than as a political ideology. Authors such as Ball and Dagger consider that nationalism “take(s) so many forms and (is) so entwined with so many different ideologies that (...) is better not to treat (it) as (a) distinct ideology” (Ball and Dagger 18). This openness of nationalism--it is described by Adams as the “simplest, the clearest and the least theoretically sophisticated” ideology (Adams 82),--together with the fact that it “always needs to be in connection with wider social philosophies” (“Nationalism”

112) and its “consisten(ce) with a broad variety of forms of government, both dictatorial and democratic” (Eatwell 8), generates doubts among many researchers, who end up by characterising nationalism as a kind of semi- or non-fully-fledged ideology. Nationalism, suggests Finlayson (“Ideology, Discourse, and Nationalism” 112), “is not an ideology, but rather ideological; an operation utilized by ideologies”, generating a “matrix of meanings that can be mobilized by specific ideologies”.

Freeden and Heywood’s positions show, in different ways, such ambivalence. On the one hand, Freeden admits nationalism to be a thin-centre ideology but denies it the access to the club of established ideologies such as liberalism or socialism. He considers that nationalism “fails to meet the criteria of a comprehensive ideology. Its conceptual structure is incapable of providing on its own a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources, and conflict-management which mainstream ideologies address” (“Is nationalism a distinct ideology?” 751). On the other hand, Heywood acknowledges categorically that “strictly speaking, nationalism is not an ideology at all” since it doesn’t comprise a “developed set of interrelated ideas and values” (Heywood 136). However, he includes one chapter on nationalism in his well-known textbook on political ideologies. This apparent contradiction is not rare at all, since despite the widespread reservations about the ideological character of nationalism, most textbooks over the last two decades have included chapters on the topic alongside others on socialism, liberalism or conservatism (see Macridis 1989; Adams 1993; Eatwell and Wright 1993; Garner 1996; Eccleshall et al. 2003).

In the literature on nationalism, some degree of ambivalence is also noticeable. Smith is reasonably clear when he defines nationalism as an “ideological movement for attaining and maintaining identity, unity and autonomy of a social group some of whose members deem it

to constitute an actual or potential nation” (Smith 18, emphasis in original). Yet, he places the emphasis on the term movement rather than on the term ideology, pointing toward a dynamic that is visible in many studies. Nationalism is very often defined as a “historical movement” (Smith 29), “political force” (Alter 1) or “collective action” (Hetcher 7) that, based on a relatively fixed ensemble of political ideas about the organisation of modern society, imagines (Anderson 1983), invents (Hobsbawn and Ranger 1983) or creates (Gellner 1983) a nation. The expressionist (essentialist) approaches of some authors – who saw it as “the inevitable expression of a pre-existing, objectively-delimited nation” – are widely rejected in the humanities and the social sciences, in favour of a constructionist view that considers nationalism as “the agent which, given favourable circumstances, shapes the nation by means of social mobilization and discourse” (Máiz 252, emphasis in original).

Thus, part of the current debate has moved from the social and ethnic preconditions to the role played by the discourses, doctrines, ideas, cognitive frames or fantasies informing and supporting the collective mobilisations, as a quick review of the articles published in any of the journals devoted to the study of nationalism and ethnicity during the last years reveals. However, only in a few number of cases such ensembles of political ideas are explicitly defined and analysed as political ideologies. This reluctance to describe nationalism as an ideology has to do with the convergence of two underlying dynamics. On the one hand, the perseverance in most studies of some essentialist traits (that is, the underlying belief that there is something behind, even if its significance depends on interpretation) and, on the other, the persistence of pejorative views of ideology, which still evoke “a whole array of negative notions from false consciousness to fanaticism, mental blockage to mystification” (Eagleton 1).

Whether nationalism is an ideology or not is thus an obscure question that requires some clarification. The aim of this paper is to bring some light to this issue, arguing not only in favour of the inclusion of nationalism in the family of ideologies but also that it is necessary to analyse nationalism as a political ideology. Indeed, as we will see later, this will help us to grasp nationalism's ultimate and fundamental aim: to cover over the unbearable emptiness of society. Drawing on the insights of Freedon's morphology, Laclau and Mouffe's post-Marxism and Žižek's psychoanalysis, we will explore this question empirically with reference to a particular case study: Asturian Nationalism [1] in Spain. Firstly, we will examine the plural array of elements articulated in the nationalist discourse. Secondly, we will explore the roles played by these elements in the nationalist articulation. Thirdly, we will look at the force that binds together these elements providing them with coherence and fixing their meaning in a coherent social, political and cultural discourse. This will help us to show why an ideological characterization is needed if we want to grasp the force behind nationalist mobilization and national identity.

The moments of Asturian nationalist discourse

According to Freedon (*Ideologies and Political Theory* 3), ideologies are systems of political thought, flexible or rigid, deliberate or not, through which the individuals and the groups construct a given understanding of the political world that they live in, and then act. This conception fits within the general tendency to consider ideologies as political belief systems that shape our social reality and provide us the legitimacy to orientate our political action in a certain direction (see Heywood 6). But Freedon's perspective does not focus on such functional dimension. His morphological research strategy "concentrates rather on examining the conceptual configurations that accord any specific instance of an ideology a

particular set of identifying meanings”, taking into account that “ideologies are configurations of political concepts (...) in which particular interpretations of each constituent concept have been selected out of an indeterminate range of meanings they may signify” (Is nationalism a distinct ideology? 749).

Political concepts (i.e. liberty, democracy, freedom) do not have an essentially fixed meaning but, on the contrary, are “essentially contested concepts” (Gallie 171). Thus, the “impossibility of an ultimate fixity of meaning implies that there have to be partial fixations – otherwise, the very flow of differences would be impossible. Even in order to differ (...) there has to be *a* meaning” (Laclau and Mouffe 112). The basic ideological operation consists then in turning the unavoidable variety of options into the monolithic certainty that characterizes every political decision (Is nationalism a distinct ideology? 76). Ideologies are complex combinations of political concepts, at different levels, whose possible meanings are decontested or fixed in a particular way, and which aim to generate a particular view about the organisation of society.

Along this lines, Žižek has argued that an ideological reading consists in showing that a particular ideology (discourse, performance, practice, etc.) is the result of a combination, of a montage, of several heterogeneous floating signifiers that acquire their particular meaning through the intervention of certain master signifiers, nodal points, or points de caption (The Sublime Object of Ideology 125 and Lacan 268). “Any discourse is constituted as an attempt to (...) arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre” (Laclau and Mouffe 112) and, consequently, the main research question is “what creates and sustains the identity of a given ideological field beyond all possible variations of its possible content?” (The Sublime Object of Ideology 87).

In the case of Asturian nationalism, according to this logic, an ideological reading has to focus on the exploration of the several moments inscribed in the nationalist discourse/s (democracy, liberty, sustainability, socialism, etc.), the localisation of the central element binding them together (the idea of the nation) and the analysis of the new meanings resulting from the combination of all these elements in a single and coherent discursive chain. Therefore, the first step in our analysis should be to check whether the discourse held by Asturian nationalists is the result of a combination of several heterogeneous ideas. We will start our brief inquiry by reading a number of texts (pamphlets, manifestos, internal documents, etc.) produced by some nationalist parties over the last three decades.

In one of its propaganda pamphlets, the Conceyu Nacionalista Astur (CNA), the first nationalist party in Asturias during the Spanish Transition to democracy in the 1970s, introduced itself as:

A political union (...) within which there are several tendencies (Marxists, Marxists-Leninists, Trotskyists, libertarians, ...) united in a basic ideology of revolutionary and popular nationalism that fights for (...) the self-determination of Asturias, in the context of a European confederation of peoples, with the aim of establishing a self-government that will make possible the participation of the masses and the creation of a socialist and self-managed society. (Pol Autogobiernu)

Explicitly, the text mentions different tendencies coexisting around a central ideological element in which all of them converge: nationalism. Nationalism is conjoined with adjectives such as socialist, revolutionary, libertarian, self-managed, co-federal and European; signifiers that, in most cases, point toward different leftist traditions, fashionable in that particular

historical context. Two decades later, the political party Izquierda Nacionaliega Asturiana (INA) acknowledged again the influence of elements from diverse schools of thought, confessing that it had been “created (...) as a union of different political traditions: socialists, communists, libertarians, independentists, green, pacifist, feminist...” (INA 1997).

But let's turn back to the CNA. Among the objectives mentioned in the pamphlet quoted above, we find ideas such as the strengthening of municipalities, the achievement of a self-managed economy and a direct democracy, the “respect of the natural world”, the political unification of Europe and “the development in Asturias of the Celtic spirit (...) that has been oppressed for the last two thousand years by the static, rigid, imperialist and militarist Latinism” (Pol Autogobiernu). In Asturias Dixebrá, CNA's bulletin, there were fixed sections devoted to the anti-nuclear campaigns then in vogue and to feminism, as well as articles on Asturian folklore and history directly inspired in the romantic Asturian regionalism of the late XIXth century. We can also find articles about national liberation struggles and colonialism: Asturias was “a country culturally colonised and economically exploited by the Spanish State, which makes possible for us to affirm that we, the Asturians, suffer from a double exploitation: the colonial one and class one” (Remanacer 1).

The CNA collapsed at the beginning of the 1980s, after a failed attempt to create a terrorist group sponsored (and later betrayed) by the Basque terrorist group ETA. New nationalist parties emerged then, but they continued developing the same radical and revolutionary nationalist discourse. In the 1990s, however, some discontented sectors manifested the need to re-articulate the nationalist left with alternative values, “based on leftist and green ideas, on social justice and direct democracy” (BIA). An alternative left,

able to develop a new model of society constructed around the defence of the idea of social justice and the progressive values of peace, direct democracy, individual and collective rights and ecology; an alternative that will base its program on social solidarity, both with the world's peoples and with the excluded sectors of our society; an alternative that aspires to remove the social and political obstacles that disturb a society of equal and free members. (BIA)

Political parties such as Izquierda Nacionaliega Asturiana (INA) and Izquierda Asturiana (IAS) re-articulated during the 1990s the traditional nationalist discourse, inscribing new elements in the chain of significance and giving more prominence to some moments that had been marginal in other nationalist discourses: anti-globalisation, international co-operation and development, human rights, gender issues, pacifism, ecology.

But not all nationalist discourses are situated within the Marxist and radical traditions. The Partíu Asturianista (PAS), which in fact has been until now the main nationalist party in electoral terms, defines its political project as “Asturianist, inter-class and progressive” (PAS 27). For instance, breaking with the anti-systemic readings of other parties, the PAS accepts the current Spanish political framework as a valid and legitimate context for the development of its political action. Instead of attempting to overcome the current capitalist and liberal democratic system, it proposes to “use the democratic means (of the) Spanish Constitution” in order to “govern from within the democratic institutions” (PAS 115). In addition to such acceptance of representative and liberal democracy, it also introduces in its discourse neo-liberal elements such as regional competitiveness, city marketing and other market oriented economic policies.

In this brief journey throughout the texts of some nationalist collectives, we have easily found several references to different discursive moments: from socialism to market competition, from anti-colonialism to green thought, from Celtism to representative democracy. Asturian nationalist discourse comprehends a plural array of ideas and elements, which are also inscribed in other discursive articulations and whose origins can be traced back to a plurality of traditions of thought, both prior and contemporary to the emergence of Asturian nationalism.

The roles of the Asturianist element

So far, our argument runs parallel to Yannis's Stavrakakis' analysis of Green ideology. Through his reading of several manifestos and locus classicus of Green thought, he effectively shows how several elements such as direct democracy, pacifism, decentralisation, social justice or post-patriarchal principles, are articulated together with "Green" ideas. Therefore, both Green thought and nationalism seem to be, from a structural point of view, "ideological par excellence" ("Green ideology" 269), since both discourses include a plurality of elements not limited to the nation or the natural world. This means, on the other hand, that contrary to those who consider Green politics as a project limited to the principles of ecology, the ecological element is only one among others in Green ideology, although, of course, it occupies a crucial position. Concern about environmental issues is, as the Green thinker Porrit states, "by no means the same as being Green" (Porrit, quoted "Green ideology" 269). As we have shown, being a nationalist in Asturias doesn't imply only to have a certain perspective about the contours of the nation, about who is a who is not a "proper" Asturian, but also to have a particular view about the market economy, social justice or the European Union.

Freeden's doubts about the ideological character of nationalism seem unjustified, according to this schema. For him, a full ideological morphology contains particular interpretations and configurations of all the important political concepts required for the specific imagination of a given society. In contrast, a weak ideological morphology has a frail and restricted centre, linked to a more limited range of concepts, so that it is structurally unable to offer a complex range of arguments. On that basis, he categorizes nationalism as a thin-centred ideology, since its "conceptual structure is incapable of providing on its own a solution to questions of social justice, distribution of resources, and conflict-management which mainstream ideologies address" ("Is nationalism a distinct ideology?" 751). The problem with this assertion is that it refers to an ideal concept of the nation rather than the complex articulation of elements that form every particular nationalist discourse. Just as there are no universal socialists, liberals or anarchists (without historical context), there are no universal nationalists but only particular nationalists, whose identities are shaped by a complex articulation of ideas regarding the limits of the nation as well as the distribution of resources or social justice and, therefore, providing a full representation of society. As we have seen, the militants of the CNA had, definitely, something to say about such crucial questions.

Hence, the question that arises in this respect is whether the nationalist element is simply one more among the several elements of the nationalist chain of signifiers. In other words, do all the elements comprised in a nationalist discourse count the same? Do they have the same structural importance? We will try to bring some light to these questions with reference to the two Asturian regionalist parties that competed in the first elections after Franco's death, in 1977, when the differences between regionalism and nationalism started to crystallize in Asturias.

The first of them, Democracia Socialista Asturiana (DSA), was a political association articulated around “three basic aims: democracy, socialism and regionalism”, which promoted as its main objective “the development of socialism, within a democratic framework, which requires the collective ownership of the means of production, in order to end with any form of capitalist exploitation” (DSA 1976). Of the three central ideas delineating its identity, socialism was thus explicitly elevated to the central position. It was, in other words, the element that defined DSA’s political identity more effectively than any other. Therefore, regionalism acquired a particular meaning depending on its secondary position in respect to the socialist moment. DSA’s regionalism was a “popular” regionalism, in opposition to other forms of conservative or liberal regionalism. Pedro de Silva, founder and leader of DSA, was very illustrative in this respect:

There is no possible identification (...) between the kind of “regionalism” supported by the local capitalist groups and a true popular regionalism. The aim of the former is simply to neutralize the power of national and multinational capitalism in an attempt to be hegemonic in a certain territory. But at the very same moment when the prevalence of capitalism is questioned (...), the “superior” (capitalist) interests will always prevail over the hegemonic disputes. (...) The region / nation, as an economic and historic universe, constitutes (...) the appropriate framework for analysing class struggle (...), which is different in each particular social context. (...) Thus, a true popular regionalism is, necessarily, antagonist to the dominant productive system, which has a national and multinational scale. (...) By promoting regionalism (...) the capitalist schema will be objectively subverted. (...) Multinational capitalism requires a multinational culture as its instrument for the creation of ways of life, habits and customs to absorb the inevitable irrationality of the capitalist system and, at the same time, to uproot the individuals and communities from their real environment, to force them to break with their cultural lineage, to alienate them and destroy their critical skills. (...) The defence of

particular ways of life is possibly the only remedy to preserve the critical consciousness of the peoples. (De Silva 26-7)

“Regionalism” was decontested not as an aim in itself but as one of the necessary strategies to subvert the capitalist system of exploitation, which was the genuine organising principle that gave coherence to DSA’s discourse. That made it possible for the DSA to merge with the Asturian federation of the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP) in June 1976. It was an alliance “based on the socialist principles that link(ed) both collectives” that put explicitly into the open the secondary role of elements such as regionalism (DSA and PSP 1976).

Let’s move now to the second regionalist party which participated in the 1977 elections: Unida Rexonalista (UR). In its first public manifesto, its Founding Committee presented its political project as follows:

The Asturian people face the perspective of an imminent general election, which opens the hope for better times but, at the very same time, generates uncertainty and doubt. Many people, in fact, ask themselves what they can do in order to break the current situation of stagnation of the region and to create a new regime in which the people’s wills will have appropriate sources of expression. (...) To overcome all the difficulties, to facilitate a true process of change in Asturias, as well as to devolve the freedom and sovereignty to the people, to allow the Asturians to elaborate a Statute of Autonomy, it is necessary for everybody to make a big effort. The Asturian people, in order to defend their interests, require the creation of a common candidature (...), a regionalist option [that] should be born and delineated in Asturias with no external intromission. (Comisión Gestora 7)

Hence, under the dominant context of ambivalence and uncertainty of that Transitional period, what the Founding Committee proposed was the creation of an Asturian candidature

able to elaborate a political alternative to solve the crisis Asturias was suffering. The interpellated subject is clear from the very beginning: the Asturian people. Therefore, the creation of the electoral candidature is conceived on the basis not of a particular conception of class struggle, as shown before, but only on the basis of the future of a certain community. That is to say, in strictly regional terms. In the words one of UR's leaders, what they were looking for was an "Asturian and Asturianist wide coalition" (Masip 10-1), since autonomy was conceived as "the only mean for strength and protect the social, economic, political and cultural interests of the Asturian people" (UR 1977). That is to say, the discourse of the UR was articulated around the attempt to solve the rampant crisis and to cover over the widespread uncertainty haunting the future of the Asturian region.

As has been shown, in the discourse of both UR and DSA a regionalist moment is easily identifiable. In the case of UR the particular decontestation of regionalism was the central signifier that bound together several elements (feminism, devolution, democracy, etc.), attracting the support of various collectives. However, in the case of DSA the socialist moment was the one fixing in a certain direction the meaning of the regionalist element. The regionalism of UR was a wide regionalism, an open regionalism in which all the rest of interests and concerns of the Asturian people might be inscribed, while DSA's regionalism was a popular regionalism that only acquired its meaning in relation to a partial fixation of the idea of class struggle. The different location of the regionalist moment within the morphological structure of both discourses is what makes it possible to talk, in one case, about a regionalist discourse and, in the other, more properly about a socialist one. Not all discourses comprising Asturianist elements in their chains of significance are regionalist or nationalist discourses, because not all the elements count the same.

The nation as an empty signifier

We have already shown that nationalist ideologies comprise a plurality of discursive elements and ideas; elements that are also inscribed in other discursive articulations and whose origins can be traced back to a plurality of traditions of thought. Analogously, nationalist and communitarian ideas are neither restricted to nationalist discourses nor valid enough to clearly identify them, as the analysis of UR and DSA's discourses demonstrates. Ideological discourses comprise a plural and variable number of elements whose significance is not predetermined. Now, the crucial question is what binds them together in a particular discourse and what invest them with a partially fixed and coherent meaning. In other words, what creates and sustains an ideology beyond all possible variations in its possible content.

In the cases of UR and DSA we have just seen how the signifiers regionalism and socialism are privileged and act as reference points. They don't count the same, but more than the rest of the elements. They are "the privileged signifiers or reference points (...) that bind together a particular system of meaning" (Howard and Stavrakakis 8). Laclau and Mouffe call these signifiers nodal points; master signifiers or points de capiton in a more Lacanian fashion (Laclau and Mouffe 12). The question is, of course, why and when do certain elements acquire such a privileged position so that they became able of fixing the meaning other ideas in a new discursive articulation?

For a new process of discursive articulation to take place the meanings associated to a number of elements and ideas in other prior articulations have to collapse. If the ideas about the communities in which we live – and, consequently, about who we/they are – were ultimately fixed, there would not be any room for new identity conflicts. But history has not

finished. The defining feature of an object of analysis, so many times taken for granted, as society is its ultimate impossibility, since its contours will never be definitely delineated. There is always a critical situation when it will not be possible to symbolise the circumstances according to the mainstream road maps that until then had shaped our world-views and defined our identities. In other words, there is always a moment when “the contingency of discursive structures is made visible” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 13). In these situations, as Stavrakakis points out the centrality of negativity for human experience, understood as “the horizon of impossibility and unrepresentability that punctuates the life of linguistic creatures”, is fully visible (“Re-Activating the Democratic Revolution” 56).

But negativity should not be simply considered as a destructive force. On the one hand, these critical events have obvious destructive consequences: they shatter “already existing identities and (induce) an identity crisis for the subject” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 13). However, as Laclau insists, they also have a constructive character, opening spaces for new discourses (New Reflections 39). The negativity that emerges to the surface at certain situations is “a creative-destructive force that engenders as well as ruins positive forms” (Coole 6). Therefore, it is the condition of possibility/impossibility of the constitution of partial and temporary identities.

The theory of dislocation introduced by Ernesto Laclau (New Reflections 39-45) emerges here as the crucial tool for the understanding of nationalist ideology and national identity. As San Martín points out (“A discursive reading...” 102), the concept of ‘dislocation (...) accounts for the moment of destabilization, failure and subversion of a given discourse, as a result of the emergence of some events that cannot be integrated in the system of representation sustaining that particular discourse”. This idea of dislocation “seems to be

designed to account for what, in Lacanian terms, we could describe as ‘encounters with the Real’” (Glyos and Stavrakakis 116). The Real is what remains impossible to symbolize, what escapes the field of representation. In other words, the Real would be an event, or a collection of events, that is/are impossible to integrate in the discourses that give meaning to our social world. Reality, on the contrary, is the discursively constructed world of subjects/objects we live in, the world of socially produced meanings that will be dislocated at a certain historical point by the emergence of the Real. Thus, the Real is what confront us dramatically not with what we are but with what we are not, that is, what confront us with what prevents us from being fully ourselves.

Then, to understand society is not to understand what it positively is but “what prevent it from being fully itself” (New Reflections 44). The moment of prevention, of dislocation of a certain social imaginary, is simultaneously the moment that generates new attempts to construct an ultimate world-view with which to suture the dislocated space. Therefore, to understand nationalist ideology and national identity, rather than to describe affirmatively their content, is to explore their emergence as new discursive articulations and to study the moment when a previous national reality faced the Real, generating the desire for a new reading of the world in communitarian terms.

In some of his writings, Laclau has positivized the negative character of the Real in what he calls empty signifiers (Glynos and Stavrakakis 117): signifiers that attempt to incarnate the absence of totality made visible by a certain dislocatory event in a given society. In Laclau’s words, “although the fullness and universality of society is unachievable, its need does not disappear: it will always show itself through the presence of its absence” (Emancipations 53). Thus, the ideological operation per excellence, according to this logic, will be precisely the

attempt to decontest and hegemonize the empty signifiers that symbolise the impossibility of society.

“Order” as such has no content, because it only exists in the various forms in which it is actually realized, but in a situation of radical disorder ‘order’ is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of that absence. In this sense, various political forces can compete in their efforts to present their particular objectives as those which carry out the filling of that lack. To hegemonize something is exactly to carry out this filling function. (Emancipations 44)

The concept of the nation may clearly act as an empty signifier. It only exists in the several forms in which / though which it is actually realized. In the context of the Iberian Peninsula there is no universal or objective nation but various ideological and practical realizations of the nation with different degrees of success. There are various fillings of the signifiers nation and community, which might be dislocated at certain critical situations. In other words, the sedimented plausibility of these ideas is eroded and its contingency resurfaces always at a certain point. Then, the nation is present through its absence. Through the need of a tool to map our world and delineate who we and they are. The articulation of the political discourses that provide us with these tools to read the reality “can only take place around an empty signifier that functions as a nodal point” (Howarth and Stavrakakis 8).

The study of ideology is therefore “the study of the mechanisms which makes this illusion [the illusion of an ultimate order, of a definitive and full nation, etc.] possible” (Norval 300). For this reason, analysing nationalism as a political ideology is necessary if we want to grasp its ultimate and fundamental aim: to cover over the unbearable emptiness of society. If we

want, in other words, to bring some light to the questions of why and when do nationalist discourses (and movements) emerge.

The nodal point of Asturian nationalism

San Martín has delineated elsewhere in some detail the contours of the logic of dislocation in the Spanish context, locating the emergence of Asturian and other peripheral nationalisms in relation to the radical emptiness opened up by the collapse of the Francoist imaginary at the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies (“A discursive reading...” and La Nación (im)posible). In 1964, the Francoist Regime celebrated the “25 years of peace” opened with its victory in the Spanish Civil War. According to the official propaganda, such a period of peace, stability and development was one of the main achievements of the Regime. In fact, as Fusi acknowledges, until the decade of 1960, there were not dangerous mobilisations in Spain that seriously threatened the social hegemony of the dictatorship (Fusi 161; see also Vilar). Spanish society was, as De Miguel points out, highly apolitical, not only because of the political restrictions but also because of the sustained economic growth and its positive impact in the material conditions of living (De Miguel 208). However, several factors coincided during the 1960s, generating a growing social discontent and showing that, despite the official propaganda, “something was going wrong” (De Esteban and López Guerra 137).

Firstly, the labour conflicts increased dramatically after the introduction of the Law of Collective Negotiations in 1958, which opened some space for the development of clandestine trade unions. The “natural consequence (of the new negotiation mechanisms) were the workers strikes”, especially in industrial regions such as Barcelona, Madrid, the

Basque Country and Asturias (Carr and Fusi 140). The sixties were also years of rising student mobilisations. All around the Spanish Universities the number of demonstrations, acts of protest, sit-ins, or mere student meetings to discuss political issues grew rapidly. In 1969, the Regime, unable to control the student movement, declared a State of Emergency and closed temporarily the University campuses, showing symbolically the increasing disconnection between the nascent elites and the rigid structure of the Dictatorship. As Gunther and Montero indicate, the perception of crisis was reinforced by the partial liberalisation of the mass media that took place in 1966 (Gunther and Montero 13-15). The aim of the new policies was only to allow for a limited contrast of opinions within the ideological frontiers of the Dictatorship. However, it ended up by facilitating the progressive introduction of many opposition demands in the pages of both the old and new publications.

In addition, the regional question resurfaced powerfully during the final Francoist years. The policies to promote a homogeneous Spanish culture and identity did not manage to eradicate the old enemies of the nation, mainly incarnated in Francoist imaginary by Catalan and Basque nationalist movements (see Conversi's work, for example). Catalanism, especially in its cultural manifestations, managed successfully to survive the repressive policies and play a significant role in everyday Catalan life since the 1950s. The situation of Basque nationalism was radically different. Until the 1960s, the exiled nationalist government was inoperative and in the Basque Provinces only survived a folklorist and conservative particularism, not very threatening for the hegemony of the Dictatorship. However, the main peripheral challenge to the Francoist Regime come from the Basque Country, where a group of young nationalists, deeply discontent with the passive nationalist strategy, created the terrorist group ETA in 1959. Nine years later, ETA killed for the first time.

The overlapping of several critical events during the 1960s – worker strikes, student mobilisations, liberalisation of the mass media, peripheral nationalisms, interfamily rivalry within Francoist elites, progressive separation between the Church and the State, etc. – affected crucially the foundations of the Francoist political system. Their significance surpassed the mere collection of partial crises that might be sorted out within the contours of the hegemonic order of things. What was under pressure, as De Esteban and López Guerra pointed out, was “the total organisation of the Spanish political life. And the name of that (...) is: the (Francoist) State” (De Esteban and López Guerra 13). The Francoist project was dramatically revealed, though a sequence of critical events, as an unfulfilled fantasy that was for no longer able to control and/or integrate the new social, cultural and political demands. The dislocation of the hegemonic discourses opened an undecidable space, a time of uncertainty, which generated the desire of a new communitarian fantasy. It was in this terrain that a new nationalist ideology emerged in Asturias as one of the possible re-articulations attempting to constitute “a new space of representation” (New Reflections 61).

Yet, why did a certain idea of Asturias become a virtual nodal point under such circumstances? How can we account for the elements, and particularly the nodal point, comprised in the new articulation? In other words, what are the limits of the new discourse/s? Is there any limit at all? As Laclau formulates, “what are those limits that are other than aprioristic?” (“Identity and Hegemony” 82). His answer is:

the ensemble of sedimented practices constituting the normative framework of a certain society. This framework can experience deep dislocations requiring drastic recompositions, but it never disappears to the point of requiring an act of total refoundation” (“Identity and Hegemony” 82).

To explain this logic, Laclau gives the example of Antonio Conselheiro, “a millenarian preacher (that) had wandered for decades in the Brazilian sertao, at the end of the nineteenth century, without recruiting too many followers” (“Identity and Hegemony” 83, emphasis in original). The situation changed radically with the transition from the empire to republic, which brought about abrupt economic, political and social alterations that dislocated the traditional way of life in the rural areas.

One day Conselheiro arrived in a village where people were rioting against the tax collectors, and pronounced the words which become the key equivalence of his prophetic discourse: “The Republic is the Antichrist”. From that point onwards his discourse provided a surface of inscription for all forms of rural discontent, and became the starting point of a mass rebellion which took several years for the government to defeat (“Identity and Hegemony” 83).

On the one hand, the incarnation of God and Evil in the signifiers Empire and Republic was not predetermined aprioristically. It was a contingent and radical decision, possible because it was the only discourse available addressing the discontent of the rural villagers at that particular moment, in that particular historical context. But, on the other hand, it was possible because it did not clash “with important unshakeable beliefs of the rural masses” (“Identity and Hegemony” 83). Therefore, as Laclau notes, “the subject who takes the decision is only partially a subject; he is also a background of sedimented practices organising a normative framework which operates as a limitation on the horizon of options” (“Identity and Hegemony” 83, emphasis in original). It is necessary, then, to introduce a contextualization in the analysis of the emergence of constitutive decisions. We should pay attention not only to the moment of crisis and its productive effects but also to the

normative framework and the discursive elements available for the new articulations. Let's turn then our attention to the mainstream Francoist discourses about the community available at the time.

Francoist nationalist ideology promoted the "hegemony of a Catholic and traditionalist version of Spanish nationalism (...), which centred its discourse around the essentialist affirmation of a Catholic Spain basically identified with Castile" (Núñez 720). The role given to Castilian/Spanish language was central in the imagination of an ethnically homogenous Spain. This implied, of course, the conscious repression of the regional languages. However, the strategy toward these languages was much more complex than that of an extermination policy, as San Martín has shown in relation to the Asturian language (La nación (im)posible 247-83) In fact, the position of the Francoist elites in Asturias regarding this problematic issue is crucial to understanding why a new idea of Asturias in national terms was elevated to the position of virtual nodal point.

Since the late 1940s a group of Francoist scholars from the University of Oviedo (the main Asturian city) started to develop, from within the very ideological framework of the Regime, a large corpus of academic materials on the regional particularities of Asturias. The regional language received a lot of attention and became rapidly a popular subject of study among the growing numbers of Asturian speaking students from rural areas, although conceived as an old-fashioned dialect of Spanish without essence in-itself. On the other hand, the literature written in Asturian that had survived during those years was characterised mainly by its limits. In a majority of cases, it was extremely poor and tediously reiterative in its topics: traditional/rural stories, bucolic landscapes, as well as festive and humoristic anecdotes of "rude and coarse style (...), whose meaning is not the criticism but the trivialisation of the

situations” (Sánchez Vicente 13). Rural environments devoid of passions – (almost extinct) joyful Arcadias – appeared as the sole geographical locations of these stories. The only exceptions were, in most cases – particularly in the popular genre of the (performed) monologs – occasional trips of rural characters to the city, where they faced a succession of comical situations that, in a last instance, were always aimed to ridicule the villager. In the plays, the rich and educated characters often employed Spanish language, while Asturian language was restricted to the poor and illiterate, stressing thus the relations of power between the two languages and their clear functional division. Thus, the literature in Asturian was restricted to a clearly defined type of literature, inscribed in the official culture of the Regime. It was a type of literature peripheral to the true literature made in Asturias – the one in Castilian – to which some authors looked in search of certain expressive effects from time to time. In other words, the range of possible meanings of the literature written in Asturian language was decontested in a certain direction, its meaning partially fixed as a vulgar and old-fashioned adjacent to the true literature written in Castilian language.

Nonetheless, during those years a total number of over two hundred academic studies on Asturian language and more than one hundred literary works written in Asturian were published (Brugos 37-9). Undoubtedly, in Asturias, as in the rest Spain, there was certain--- although very limited---permissiveness toward the regional language, consisting in killing it without letting it die definitely.

However, when Francoist dictatorship was collapsing or at least in crisis, in the late 1960s and 1970s, a group of young lecturers and students from the University of Oviedo started to openly question such policies, that is, to question the meaning attributed until then by the hegemonic ideology to the vernacular parole. Francoist communitarian fantasy was rapidly disintegrating at the beginning of the 1970s, as we have briefly shown. The idea of a

homogeneous Catholic Spain, whose unity was symbolised by Castilian language, was not appealing for any more to growing sectors of the younger generations, since it was inextricably attached to the whole rigid social system in crisis. However, the central role of languages in defining nations and communities was not problematized. It was accepted that languages (as the most symbolic and visible expression of cultures) were the defining element of nations and communities., What was problematized, on the contrary was the role of a particular language, Castilian, in delimiting the nation, the community, the frontiers of inclusion and exclusion.

In the words of Asturian writer Sánchez Vicente, “in 1974, start(ed) a new epoch for the Asturian literature” (Sánchez Vicente 9). The limitations (in topics, styles, forms, genres, locations, etc.) disappeared slowly, progressively but decisively. A new group of writers began to use Asturian language as a literary vehicle to approach any topic; as a vehicle valid for any genre or style. Asturian language slipped away from its peripheral and secondary position and was given “an absolute and non-subordinated” value, which meant “an absolute rupture with the characteristics of the antique” Francoist strategies (Sánchez Vicente 13). In the new literature that emerged in the 1970s there are thrillers, erotic poetry, political essays, journalistic articles, short stories for children, etc. And all these works are commonly referred as part of the same literary movement: the Surdimientu (renascence, in Asturian). Why? Which are the elements linking the practitioners of such different styles, genres and forms? Where is their common ground located so that we can talk about the same literary and, more generally, cultural movement? The answer is, of course: Asturian language. If it makes sense to talk about a novel literary movement is only because all the authors employ the Asturian language as their artistic vehicle. Therefore, language stopped being a moment

and become a central signifier that – without a particular and limited meaning – is able to partially fix the meaning of other topics, forms and styles as “Asturian”.

This shift in the literary role of the regional language clearly symbolises the ideological turn we are trying to illuminate in this article. The dislocation of Francoist nationalist discourses opened an unbearable space of uncertainty. The association between Castilian language and the signifier nation was broken, and thus “the nation” became an empty signifier. That is, an object of desire whose meaning needs to be partially fixed in a certain direction. Asturian language, an element available, since it had been kept alive under Francoism through the administration of a calculated permissiveness (as a subject of study, through a limited and poor literature, etc), acquired then a new prominence and became something absolute in itself. In other words, it became a virtual nodal point around which to articulate a new idea of cultural community in substitution of the old Francoist nation. The imagined Asturian nation, decontested mainly in linguistic terms, was a signifier able to bind together around it a plural array of elements, whose meaning was transformed by means of such articulatory practice.

Final remarks

At this point, the answer to the question posed at the beginning of this article should be hopefully clear. Nationalism (Asturian, in our case) can be considered an ideology since: firstly, it consists of a discursive articulation around a nodal communitarian point (an idea of Asturias); secondly, such nodal point emerges as a virtual fixation of the empty signifier of the nation, at a particular critical situation when its absence becomes dramatically present; thirdly, this nodal point binds together a plural array of discursive elements; and fourthly, the

meaning of these elements is partially fixed by means of the articulatory practice (that is, due to their inscription in the new nationalist chain of significance). Thus, the nationalist discourse provides citizens with a series of identitarian markers with which to identify and construct the political frontiers necessary to organise their reality and, therefore, cover over the unbearable uncertainty of being. It is this capacity of the signifier “Asturias” or “Asturian nation” for creating a new world-view about the organisation of society that justifies the inclusion of (Asturian, in this case) nationalism in the family of ideologies.

On the other hand, as we have seen, the strategy of ideological analysis that guided this paper has proved fruitful in illuminating one of the main questions about nationalism. It directly focuses on the reasons behind its emergence – namely the attempt to cover over the precarious character of society – and thus can bring some light to the obscure questions of why and when nationalist discourses emerge.

Notes

[1] Asturias is one of the current 17 Spanish autonomous communities. It is located in northwest Spain and has, approximately, one million inhabitants. According to recent surveys, half of the Asturian citizens speak a vernacular language called Asturian or Bable (see Llera and San Martín). Asturias is constitutionally defined as a ‘Historical Community’ and has a medium degree of autonomy within the Spanish (asymmetrical) and quasi-federal system. Although most academics would agree that “regional identity” and “regional attitudes” are very strong in Asturias, the Asturian nationalist movement is a very weak peripheral movement in comparison to others such as the Galician, Basque or Catalan. In electoral terms, for example, it remains marginal within the political system and is divided in

several political parties (Partíu Asturianista, Bloque de la Izquierda Asturiana, Andecha Astur, Izquierda Asturiana, etc.). However, the Asturian nationalist movement has gained social relevance during the last two decades, especially in its most “cultural” manifestations such as folk music and literature. It has also become the most active social movement in the region, developing relatively successful campaigns, mainly in defence of the Asturian language, and introducing many of its demands in the Asturian political agenda. On Asturian nationalism see San Martín (2006) and Bauske (1998). On Asturian language and regional identity see Llera and San Martín (2003).

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