Territorial conflicts of sovereignty: A perspective from social movement studies

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1.Territorial conflicts of sovreignty in the 21st century

Center-periphery cleavages have often re-emerged in different times. Although the waves of new states established after World War I, the de-colonisation period and the breakdown of the Soviet Union have declined in intensity, also in the 21st century non-state nations continue to assert demands for collective self-determination in vastly differing political contexts--from Scotland to Catalonia to Hong Kong and New Caledonia and Bougainville (della Porta, O'Connor and Portos 2019a and 2019b).

Disputes on territorial sovereignty tended however—and will continue--to assume very different forms—going from cultural claims raised by a small group of intellectuals to widespread popular movements calling for independence. As for large waves of protests, there can be peaceful mobilization or a violent one. Also the aim can vary significantly: from autonomy to sovereignty. They can be declined in cultural or political terms. And the very nature of the nationalist identity might vary a lot, from exclusive to inclusive forms. This is all the more relevant as we are embedded in multilevel systems of sovereignty, with competences distributed at local, regional, national and supranational level.   Conflicts on the attribution of these competences as well as territorial sovereignty more broadly are expected to continue to build upon a mix of motivations and intersect with other political cleavages. In fact, research in the social sciences points at the complex nature of the motivations of disputes on territorial sovereignty in which socio-economic, cultural and political grievances as well as a vast array of claims always interact (della Porta and Portos 2020).

At the macro-level, looking at regional characteristics, some research has noted that, in democracies at least, relative economic affluence has positive influence on secessionist vote, as it does higher population and geographical distance from the center. Regions with specific minority language, especially if the minority language is used in a contiguous country, and regions with recent history of independence are also more likely to have strong separatist parties. This is different in authoritarian countries—where, e.g., poorer regions tend to be more affected by separatism. Also, richer regions have been said to be more prone to calls for secessionism, poor regions to claims for autonomy.

At the micro-level, individual support for independentism has been linked to identity or instrumental concerns. Perceptions of discrimination, embeddedness in ethnic associations, territorial location, the speaking of the minority language are all elements that increase the probability that a citizen will vote for

an independentist parties. While national identity has been considered as an important variable in explaining support for secessionism, it has also been suggested that the increase in support for independence can be explained by broad cross-cut alliances across different sectors of the population, in terms of both class and cultural attributes. However, the relationships between class identity and national identity is complex, and they are not mere substitutes for one another in different historical periods (Keating 2009: 4).

In sum, nationalist tides of contention have a distinctive identity-essentialist component, but they tend to become one of the several vectors for mobilization that sometimes diverge but oftentimes intersect with other claims, often embracing economic and employment issues (Beissinger 2002: 75-6).

2. Territorial disputes and globalization

Globalization in its various versions (economic, political, cultural) can be expected to fuel territorial conflicts rather that making them obsolete as it creates, at the same time, an increase in economic inequalities, the cultural uprooting of various groups of the population and a political weakening of the nation state.

The topics of secessionism and "right to choose" is particularly relevant in times of economic and political crisis. The *Great Recession* that hit the world in 2008 was a critical juncture that triggered socioeconomic and political transformations. Some of the political developments during the crisis have challenged civil, political and social rights, fuelling what has been dubbed as a *Great Regression* with democratic backlash. Especially in the geographical areas that have been hardest hit by the financial crisis, particularly in the European periphery, waves of protest have challenged the austerity policies adopted by national governments under heavy pressure from international institutions including the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As the financial crisis created problems in terms of political legitimacy, testified by a declining trust in representative institutions, old political cleavages have re-emerged. This was especially visible in a revived attention to social justice within a sort of revival of politicization on a class cleavage, but also in a reactivation, in various forms, of a centre-periphery cleavage (della Porta 2015). This has in particular regained momentum as sub-state entities have been pushing for their secession within the European Union.

It is indeed in a situation of dramatic socio-economic crisis that the issue of social justice has come to the fore. Even in cases of relatively rich regions (such as Catalonia), the call for independence has been, for a large part, justified as a way to insure social protection within inclusively defined national communities. Especially, in these situations, the constituency of secessionist campaigns have reached beyond the traditional supporters, with the spread of left-wing narratives resonant with progressive and leftist movements' frames. Progressive social movement organizations have acted then as promoters of frames that bridge claims for independence and claims for social justice, becoming brokers between independentism and other social movements on the Left. Often, through the involvement of social

movements, a participatory democratic vision becomes widespread. The right to decide is advocated for in the name of the people living in these would-be states. Elites in the central state are so accused of depriving the peripheries of their democratic rights, relying on prevailing institutional power rather than any form of ongoing democratic legitimacy. Resonant with these visions, horizontal organizational forms and participatory public spheres are called for. In sum, the collective identities that emerge in this process tend to be inclusive and horizontal, as movements act as constituent powers.

As suggested by della Porta et al. (2017a: 39-68), the level of popular unrest around issues of sovereignty results to a large extent of a combination of three contextual causes, as three intertwined crises intertwine at socioeconomic, political, and territorial level.

At the economic level, the Great Recession (with austerity policies, reduction of labour right, rampant inequality, growth in unemployment, cuts in salaries, retrenching public spending and social benefits) added on long established narratives related to mid- and long-term socioeconomic grievances (see Portos 2017). In Europe, it also coincided with a reduction of regional economic autonomy, which in turn fed pro-secession narratives about economic challenges (Guibernau 2004), and the shifting priorities "from language to money" within regionalist movements (Toubeau and Massetti 2013). In several regional areas throughout Europe, public opinion moved away from supporting inter-regional transfers and re-distribution, leading to territorial status anxiety and generalized discontent.

At the same time, a political crisis unfolded across various countries— even more so in the European periphery (della Porta 2015). Delegitimation of political parties, including the social-democratic ones, and democratic malaise were further fuelled by corruption scandals.

Together with the socioeconomic and political impasses, a crisis of territorial settlements and of self-government agreement also comes into play, for instance in the Catalan and the Scottish cases (della Porta et al. 2017b: 66). As globalization fuelled conflicts between 'winners' and 'losers', mobilization dynamics have restructured around new fractures that involved a territorial dimension (Kriesi et al. 2008). In part as a response to the process of increasing convergence and the inability of international institutions to cope with the Great Recession and its consequences, discourses attached to national sovereignty resonated with the dissatisfaction with the status quo of a large portion of citizens.

Scholars of nationalism have in fact pointed at its revival face to globalization. As Michael Keating (2001: 27) noted:

> "Reactions to the effects of the global market are often territorial, as the disjuncture between the global rationality of the multinational corporation and the spatial rationality of the local community is felt. So what may be a rational market strategy of plant closure from the overall perspective of the firm is felt locally as a loss of jobs and income not only for the affected workers but for the entire community. Hence the prevalence of local struggles against plant closures, with class and sectoral conflicts assuming a territorial form. More generally, social

solidarity may be assuming a territorial form with the decline of class attachments and the institutions that sustained them".

In sum, the implementation of austerity policies along with a crisis of political legitimacy (and self-government) have facilitated the emergence of democratic-emancipatory and social justice frames for mobilisation that have been, given some conditions, bridged with calls for sovereignty.

3.How territorial conflicts evolve

Territorial conflicts on sovereignty are made by complex processes, which are strongly affected by different actors, in intense reciprocal interactions. Sub-state as well as state actors are often deeply divided internally, with different groups using different action repertoires in order to pursue not only different strategies but also different aims. What is more, as conflicts intensify, the internal dynamics become more and more fluid, with competition as well as reciprocal adaptation.

 Social movement studies have suggested that forms of protest tend to change during periods of intense contention. In general, protest events cluster in time and space; cycle, waves, campaigns and tides are concepts developed to in order to define "a punctuated history of heightened challenges and relative stability" (Beissinger 2001, 16). Including non-routinized, unconventional ways of affecting political, social, and cultural processes, protests can be more or less radical in nature, ranging from more conventional petitioning to more conflictual blockades, and potentially, episodes of violence. A protest cycle is characterized as "a phase of heightened conflict and contention across the social system that includes: a rapid diffusion of collective action from more mobilised to less mobilised sectors; a quickened pace of innovation in the forms of contention; new or transformed collective action frames; a combination of organized and unorganised participation; and sequences of intensified inter-actions between challengers and authorities which can end in reform, repression and sometimes revolution" (Tarrow 1994, 153). Cycles have been assumed to develop through some specific sequences in their rise, peak and decline as mobilization unfolds, with potential for institutionalization but also radicalization of ideas and forms of action.

Repression has an important role in the trajectories of the action repertoires as well as the framing of claims and identities. As a protest cycle unfolds, authorities often aim at dividing the movement, through a mix of co-optation and exclusion authorities; they tend to increase repression, but also to learn how to better target it against the emerging actors. In general, the authorities tend to channel the protest through the selective repression of some actors and some specific forms of protest, with the parallel acceptance of others. However, when repression is perceived as unjust it may generate public outrage, thus fuelling greater movement mobilization.

Radicalization has been considered as the most likely outcome of the closing down of political opportunities and the adoption of strong and indiscriminate repression (della Porta 2017). However, radicalization in

violent form is not an inevitable consequence of cyclical dynamics as the spread of violence during the cycles of protest varies in time and space. Cycles of protests during the formation of the nation-state led to a repertoire of centralized political activity and social movements organized at the national level (Tilly 2008). In particular, radicalization is influenced by both political opportunities as well as relational dynamics, rather than being determined by either structural constraints or fixed patterns of evolution (della Porta 2017).

Looking in particular at conflicts on sovereignty, as radicalization not always happens, we can learn positive lessons from cases in which self-determination has been recognized, consultations on it developed peacefully, and their results were implemented. The separation of former Czechoslovakia in the Czech Republic and Slovakia can be a case in point. There are also cases in which referendums for independence have failed, but concessions have been granted in terms of broader autonomy (e.g. in the Scottish case). Also, there have been cases in which states have collapsed, but with different degrees of violence involved: so, in the Baltic region, the movements for national sovereignty were successful with much less violence that in the Balkans, where the process was much more turbulent, involving civil wars. Historically, most federalist states emerged from recognitions of differences bringing about a distribution of sovereignty.

Referendums are often an important step in the development of peaceful solution disputes on territorial sovereignty, but there are many caveats as referendums, with their majority logics, can create fear and polarization (della Porta et al 2017c).

In general, social science research on the topic indicated that referendums (as other elections) are of very different democratic quality. The degree of participation in referendum campaigns varies a lot: elites can play a more or less dominant role, the debate can be more or less intense, and of higher or lower discursive quality. Especially, the definition of the constituency of interested people is itself a main issue of controversy (as it has been the case, for instance, in the debate about a referendum on independence for the Euskadi). Social science research also indicates that the questions on which the citizens are called to express their vote have to be clearly stated as this is a precondition for a well informed vote. As direct democracy is clearly polarizing around, usually, two opposite solutions. In order for this (often necessary) step to be taken, participatory and deliberative (discursive) democratic instruments have to be deployed.

Recent research has demonstrated that referendums are not simply an elite designed, technical procedure involving one single act of mass engagement on the day of the actual vote (della Porta et al 2017b). Rather, several referendums have been induced and/or appropriated by social movements in many heterogenous contexts, beyond states with constitutionally enshrined rights for citizen-initiated referendums. Referendums should not be viewed as merely a way to technically adjudicate on constitutional issues. Regardless of their legal standing, referendums in fact create political opportunities in and of themselves. They influence subsequent phases of the cycle of contention, re-positioning multi-level mobilisation and drawing in different cohorts of activists and social groups.

The concept of "referendums from below" has been coined to define cases in which participatory and grassroots processes foster— and conversely, are fostered by— years of civil society agitation that pre-date the actual vote (della Porta et al. 2017b). The involvement of civil society orgaizations is most important for the development of deliberative and participatory practices of democracy, but also for increasing the inclusiveness of the referendum campaign and reducing the risks of direct democracy. Research on referendums from below show in fact that social movements and civil society organizations can facilitate participation but also improve the quality of the debate by broadening the arguments and contributing to procedural legitimacy.

Irrespective of their legal status (institutionally endorsed, legally binding or symbolic), referendums have become epicentres of contestation in broader cycles of contention. Instead of mere devices that institutional actors use to retrospectively legitimize technocratic decisions, "referendums from below" build upon the participatory and grassroots processes that foster— and conversely, are fostered by— years of civil society mobilization that pre-date the actual vote. Of course, however, also civil society and social movement organizations can have themselves different democratic quality and this might affect their capacity in terms of development of a diplomacy from below.

Notwithstanding some risks of direct democracy conflicting with deliberative conceptions defended by progressive social movements, referendums from below are particularly conducive to broadening participation and enhancing political engagement. In particular, citizen-initiated referendums or those with wide-scale appropriation of institutionally-promoted ones might in fact improve the quality of direct democracy (della Porta et al. 2017b). Referendums from below are so characterised by number of normative commitments, including encouraging mass participation and an emphasis on prefigurative practices and deliberation. The involvement of social movements increases participation, as movements create new public arenas and utilize subaltern public spheres. They increase the discursive quality of referendum campaigns by introducing new arguments and multiplying the points of view which are expressed. Valuing horizontal communication, social movements can therefore counterbalance the potential domination of referendum campaigns by political elites, and by bringing specific knowledge and viewpoints absent in macro-level institutional politics.

Even when (as it is often the case) referendums do not succeed in obtaining a majority for secession, the promoters of referendums on issues of independence often achieve public attention, open new arenas for debate, increasing the salience of and knowledge about their claims. This seems to be in particular the case with nationalist frames, as nationalist identities are shaped during intense moments, before then becoming more enduring and broadly accepted. As Mark Beissinger noted, "Not all historical eras are alike. There are times when change occurs so slowly that time seems almost frozen, though beneath the surface considerable turbulence and evolution may be silently at work. There are other times when change is so compressed, blaring, and fundamental that it is almost impossible to take its measure" (2002: 47). Collective identities sometimes crystallise suddenly rather than developing gradually, and are to be seen not only as

a cause of action, but also as the product of action' (Beissinger, 2002: 11).

Interactions during moments of intense mobilisation bring about an innovation in frames that emerge from the protest events as, "Thickened history had provided the context for a fundamental transformation of identities which, in "quieter" times, were once believed to be fixed and immutable" (ibid*.,* 2002: 148). While in quiet times political entrepreneurs indeed aim at building some structural advantages, these advantages are then put to work in noisy times, when 'the constraining parameters of politics undergo fundamental challenges, leading to rapidly shifting assumptions about the limits of the possible' (*ibid.,* 2002: 151). Referendums on independence can trigger this thickened moment, producing an acceleration of time (della Porta, 2018).

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In sum, territorial sovereignty disputes can vary a lot in forms and aims, being fueled, rather than tamed, by recent developments in terms of globalization, but also socio-economic crises and challenges to political legitimacy. This has an impact on the democratic solutions to address sovereignty conflicts.

As for other conflicts, the most negative consequences are to be expected when claims are ignored or, even worse, repressed. This is all the more the case when the conflicts are historically rooted, there are ethnic divisions linked to various forms of inequality, and experiences with authoritarian regimes. Research on civil wars provides much evidence on when disputes on territorial sovereignty escalate. Lack of trust, fragmented networks, weak public spheres are all conditions that fuel   bad practices. As mentioned above, participatory and deliberative forms of democracy—institutional but also at societal level.

A first common rule should be that no dispute has to be ignored or repressed. So, in a democracy, it is important to offer as many channels of discussion as possible. Democracies have first of all to fuel the development of highly deliberative and participated debates from which reciprocal understanding can emerge.

Also, in multiples public spheres different possible solutions can be elaborated and different possible futures imagined. As we live in conditions of multiple sovereignty, a polarization around two extreme positions would reduce the creative capacity to think about multiple alternatives. High level or participation are important as they increase not only the legitimacy of deliberation but also the potential of finding agreements, either procedural or substantial.

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