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The Ritual Making of Central Catalonia 1: National Identity and the Hanging of the Donkey

ALESSANDRO TESTA

Preliminary Note

'The Ritual Making of Central Catalonia' is a two-part essay, subdivided into two independent chapters, Chapter 2: 'National Identity and the Hanging of the Donkey', and Chapter 3: '*Comparses* and the Dynamics of Inclusive Nationalism'. They are very closely related. The division has been made for editorial reasons. I strongly recommend reading them both as one sole study.

INTRODUCTION: SOLSONA AND THE SOLSONÈS

The town of Solsona (population 9,000) lies at the core of its *comarca*,[1] Solsonès (population 13,000), which in turns lies at the geographical core of Catalunya. If, on the one hand, the *comarca* is located on the margin of the historical region of '*Catalunya Vella*' ('Old Catalonia'), on the other the general feeling in the area is that of being part of '*Catalunya Profunda*' ('Deep Catalonia'). For example, the village of Pinós, in Solsonès, some 25 kilometres (16 miles) from Solsona, is considered the geographical navel of Catalonia and

[1] A comarca is a county or province in the Spanish and Catalan administrative division.

is proudly thought of as that by many locals. Pinós is also, as is stated on its website, 'a remarkable geographical reference of the most profound and traditional Catalonia' ('*un referent geogràfic remarcable de la Catalunya més profunda i tradicional*': Turisme Solsonès 2019).

This geographical centrality and its rurality are widely translated by both the locals and the distant urban dwellers into symbolic centrality, its perceived cultural representativity associated with genuine rustic life. Catalonia is a country particularly proud of its economic and historical connection with '*la terra*' (the 'earth', 'land', 'soil')[2] and of its capacity to keep culinary and folkloric traditions alive. While Barcelona is usually described as populated by 'heterogeneous and hybrid identities' (Dowling 2018, 76), central Catalonia in general is widely associated by its own inhabitants and by other Catalans with tropes of authenticity, typicity, traditionality, and greater cultural homogeneity:[3] the veritable cradle of Catalan nation and identity (Llobera 1997).[4] Hence, it comes as no surprise that the *comarca* of Solsonès is commonly considered

2 The economy of the Solsonès is still driven by agricultural activities, as it has always been (Aldomà i Buixadé and Pujadas i Rúbies 1987), with industry and the tertiary sector having an ancillary role and being mostly concentrated in the main town, Solsona. 'Terra' is also a political metonymy for Catalonia, especially among leftist Catalanists, who often greet one another with the exclamation '*Visca la Terra!*' ('Long live the Land!'). An important evocation of *la terra* is also in the Catalan national anthem ('Els Segadors', 'The Reapers'), which celebrates both the proud character and the agricultural roots of the nation, and whose chorus goes, '*Bon cop de falç, defensors de la terra!*' ('Hit with your sickle, defenders of the land!').

3 According to Andrew Dowling, after Franco's death 'three broad spaces existed: an interior of countryside and small towns where the Catalan language retained overwhelming presence and dominance [this is the case of Solsona and the Solsonès]. […] In this sector of society, regional and local identification remained strongly rooted even during Francoism. A second zone is found in a wider industrial core from greater Barcelona to Tarragona where vast international migration of Spanish speakers occurred. In this area, the primary means of communication was Spanish. […] The final zone within Catalonia comprised around a third of the city of Barcelona, where mostly middle-class identification with the Catalan language remained' (2018, 25).

4 The symbolic geographies of Catalonia are discussed, from an anthropological perspective, in Collett 2012; Noyes 2006; Delgado et al this book. A convincing political history of the city of Solsona and its comarca is in A.a.V.v. 1994.

as one of the true bastions, together with the nearby towns of Cardona and Berga,[5] of *catalanisme* and *independentisme*.[6]

Solsona is a charming town characterised by a walled historical centre of medieval origins and structure, and a rank of smallish, outer districts encircling it. In spite of its central position, Solsona has been historically difficult to reach and poorly served by the regional transport networks (Llorens i Solé 1987, 399), as I have myself unpleasantly experienced many a time.[7] No wonder that the town can be considered as genuinely *provincial* in the common sense of the word as well as in the sense theorised by Dorothy Noyes (Noyes 2003, 9–12 and *passim*).[8] As such, it features in the typically Catalonian cultural, economic, and political interplay between the small settlements in the inner,

5 The towns of Solsona and Berga resemble each other in many respects (geographically, historically, socially, and economically), whence a certain rivalry between the two. Cardona is smaller, but it is also associated with a strong Catalanist identity, for its castle was the very last one to capitulate towards the end of the War of the Spanish Succession, hence becoming a symbol of the resistance for the (mostly Catalan) supporters of the Archduke Carles against the (mostly Spanish) defenders of Philip of Anjou. The territorial triangle between Berga, Solsona, and Cardona is considered the very heart of Catalonia.

6 *Catalanisme* ('Catalanism') is a form of strong attachment, appreciation, and sense of protection towards Catalan culture and all things Catalan, and can exist in purely attitudinal, poetical, or aesthetic variants as well as be shaped as a more or less structured and coherent form of regionalism or nationalism: 'Catalanism under the conditions of the Franco regime was a movement concerned with the protection and survival of a threatened cultural identity. […] Catalanism and nationalism are not interchangeable terms. Catalanism has been protean. Its extension has provided the key glue to Catalan political culture' (Dowling 2018, 60). Whereas *independentisme* ('independentism') is an eminently political movement (or political characterisation within different political movements and parties) that seeks secession from Spain and the transformation of Catalonia into an independent nation-state. The former can exist without the latter, but the latter cannot exist without the former.

7 I have been undertaking research on Catalonia in general and Solsona in particular since 2015; extensive and intensive ethnographic fieldwork in Solsona and in the immediately surrounding areas of central Catalonia was carried out over different stays, for a timespan of about 12 months in total, between September 2016 and February 2021. The first insights on my then ongoing research were published immediately after the momentous referendum of 2017 (Testa 2017a); more recent papers have focused on issues of heritage and religiosity in central Catalonia (Testa 2019, 2020b, 2021).

8 Caught between other bigger and better-known central Catalans (Berguedans, Manresans, Vigatans) and the imposing prominence of Barcelona, the Solsonians

rural areas (*pagès*), and the cities (quintessentially Barcelona). All regions and countries have centres, peripheries, towns, villages, and hamlets; but not all nations show such a hiatus between the central role that rurality plays in the historical and mythical past of the nation and the futuristic ambitions and industrial nature of the capital city. Nor do all regions exhibit such an imbalance between a huge metropolis (Barcelona is the fifth most populous urban area in the European Union) and the mostly depopulated hinterland at the core of a relatively small territory that makes this discrepancy even more striking.

EL CARNAVAL: BRIEF HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION

Solsona hosts a famous carnival celebration, one of the biggest and most popular in Catalonia. *El Carnaval* lasts for seven days and, until 2020 (in 2021 it was not celebrated due to the Covid-19 pandemic), it had been celebrated uninterruptedly since Franco's death (Vilaseca and Trilla 2011), becoming the veritable local cultural thermometer, one might say, of the process of transition from Francoism to a regime of liberal democracy first, and then from the latter to independentist ambitions.

Rooted in the carnival celebrations common in the distant past and scarcely documented before the Spanish Civil War (Bellmunt i Figueras 1994), the *Carnaval* was prohibited during the dictatorship of the Caudillo, during which, instead, the older *Festa Major* (Major Festival) flourished (Vilaseca and Trilla 2007). Just like in other Catalan centres, the general historical pattern at work at the time was the following: 'Traditional religious festivals were inflected with the heavy ceremonial of national-Catholicism […]. Carnival was banned outright or made unrecognizable' (Noyes 2011, 217).

From 1971 onwards, it was re-enacted and given a new life, gradually emerging as a transgressive reaction to the austerity of Franco's national-Catholicism, but especially as a veritable symbol of political and cultural liberation and a free expression of Catalan (and Catalanist) sentiments – much in the same vein as the more famous festival of the *Patum*, a Corpus Christi celebration, in the nearby city of Berga. This, again, follows the clear pan-Catalan pattern already discussed in the Introduction to this book. Not only did Catalan culture remain active, albeit mostly hidden, during the central period of Francoism, re-emerging slowly in the late years of dictatorship and blooming after the death of the Caudillo; it was actually strengthened by the repression (Dowling 2018, 6–29; Keown 2011a, 2011b; Llobera 2004, 58–110; Sánces-Biosca 2007). As a token of early recognition and as yet another proof

live in a condition of perennial rumination over their geographical centrality but socio-economic periphery.

of the failure of cultural repression during Francoism, in 1979 Solsona's carnival was declared by the Spanish government, despite its then emerging (and today solid) anti-Spanish stance, '*Fiesta de Interés Turístico Nacional*' ('Festival of National Touristic Interest'), an official denomination that was copied a few years later by the Catalan Parliament, the Generalitat.

Initially a rather loosely organised event, *el Carnaval* gained traction and structure between the end of the 1970s and the mid-1980s, which was the period during which both the Generalitat and civic sectors of Catalan society established a coherent set of cultural policies aimed at restoring and ref(o)unding Catalan language and culture throughout the *comunitat autònoma* (Bel 2013; Costa Solé and Folch Monclús 2014; Crameri 2008; Delgado et al this book; Kammerer 2014; Noyes 2003, 2011; Roigé 2016, Villarroy 2012, Wittlin 1994).[9] By the end of the 1980s, the festival had already claimed primacy among all other events in the comarca, hegemonising the public sphere during its taking place, and gaining prominent visibility in the media.

In the last three decades, the festival has grown exponentially, becoming a mass event participated in by most of the townsfolk and visitors from surrounding areas and *comarques*, but also from Barcelona, other Catalan cities, and even Andorra. Since the 2010s, with the growing independentist mobilisation, *el Carnaval* has, in concert with what has been happening in the rest of the region, assumed an even more explicit political verve, becoming, along with the *Patum* of Berga, one of the most Catalanist festivals in central Catalonia. Presently, it is not only the main public event of the entire *comarca*, but also one of its main identity ma(r)kers, a piece of local heritage, a tourist attraction and, therefore, also a considerable source of income for many.

EL CARNAVAL: FIRST ETHNOGRAPHIC INSIGHTS AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL ANALYSES

'Bon Carnaval!' ('Happy Carnival!'), said the lady with an enigmatic smile at the *Botiga del Carnaval*, while handing me the receipt for my purchase. At the time (end of February 2017), I had been living in Solsona for several months

9 Costa Solé and Folch Monclús 2014 demonstrates how these cultural policies and politics of culture influenced, and were in turn influenced by, the juridical framework. Particularly significant is the case of the Decret 413/1983, updated ten years later as Llei 2/1993 and 9/1993, two laws aimed at the promotion of 'popular and traditional culture and cultural associationism' ('*foment de la cultura popular i tradicional i de l'associacionisme cultural*', Costa Solé and Folch Monclús 2014, 59). These decrees and laws establish, between the 1980s and 1990s, the entire juridical and administrative architecture concerning what would later, from 2003 onwards, come to be known as Patrimoni Cultural Immaterial (ICH).

already, but I could not yet know that this cheerful, apparently innocent wish would mark my entry into one of the wildest sorts of pandemonium I have ever had the fortune to witness and participate in.

Lasting for seven days, *el Carnaval* takes place mostly, but not exclusively, in the historical centre, whose streets and squares are constantly and noisily packed with people throughout the week. The festival bears the greatest significance for the local community and is participated in on a massive scale, with extreme enthusiasm and even rapture, crossing transversally economic classes, political affiliations, genders, and ages. The youth, however, are particularly, vividly, and more loudly and visibly involved in the performances. The festival reaches a climax during the crucial '*cap de setmana*', from Friday to Shrove Sunday, and especially over the Friday and Saturday nights and the following early mornings, when to a casual observer it might indeed seem that the entire town collapses into a nightmarish gush of drunkenness, frenzy, dances, never-ending noise, fatigue, and sleep deprivation.

Nevertheless, in spite of the apparent chaos, the festival is actually centred on relatively few ritualised or ritualesque acts, which are well-circumscribed public performances within the ritual week. Some of the most important of these ritualoid acts (locally called '*actes*'), among others that could be mentioned, but which will not for reasons of brevity and salience, are: '*el Sermó*' ('the Sermon'), during which one of the carnival characters addresses the local and national politicians sarcastically and critically; '*el Nomenament del Mataruc d'Honor*' ('the Appointment of the Honourable Donkey-Slaughter'), the appointment of a figure chosen from among the most prominent Catalan (and possibly Catalanist) intellectuals and artists; '*la Pujada dels Gegants*' ('the Arrival of the Giants'), when the local giants, which are very popular and common figures in Catalan folklore (Grau i Martí 1996; Kammerer 2014; Noyes 2003),[10] parade through the medieval district; '*la Penjada i la Despenjada del Ruc*' ('the Hanging and the "Unhanging" of the Donkey [or rather a simulacrum of a jackass]'), the veritable climax of the entire Carnival, during which a mass of local people gather to sing the Carnival anthem; and finally, '*la Processó i la Cremada del Carnestoltes*' ('the Funeral Procession and the Burning of Carnival at the Stake'), the act that closes the festivity.

Other, less important *actes* involving giants and fireworks also deserve to be mentioned. The '*correfocs*' (an untranslatable word etymologically associated with fire and the act of running), for instance, are very popular: on the last day of Carnival, devilish figures and a fire-spitting giant – the '*Colla de Diables La Xera*' with their '*Fènix*' – turn the main square and the surrounding

[10] Home of two respected giant-makers famed for their craft throughout Catalonia, the culture of *Gegants* is very deep-rooted in Solsona, which prides itself on being 'the Catalan town with more giants per square meter' (Solsona Turisme 2018).

streets into a mayhem of fire. This *acte* strongly evokes the traditional '*fuets*', '*pleins*', and other '*coses de foc*' of Berga's *Patum*, a similarity verging on plagiarism – unspeakable in Solsona, of course, given the tacit and sometimes open rivalry between the two cities. But then again, the history of the astonishingly rich folklore in Catalonia demonstrates that 'economic and political rivalry between local communities has been an important spur to collective creativity' (Noyes 2006, 37).

Without a shadow of a doubt, *el Carnaval* is the single most important annual public event in Solsona and its entire *comarca*. A sizeable portion of its civic life and economic activities gravitates around it. Highlighted yearly by the local and regional press, but also by periodicals and grey literature, it is constantly boosted before, during, and after its occurrence by documentaries, films, songs, merchandise, preliminary events, school activities, promotional material, and much more.

El Carnaval is, truly, a 'total social fact', as Marcel Mauss famously called this type of event (Mauss 1923–1924). As such, it is also, in accordance with the generally accepted historical-anthropological wisdom on festivals and public rituals, a highly codified occurrence.[11] Along evident Maussian (but also Malinowskian) lines, Vittorio Lanternari wrote that 'the communal banquet, the waste of food, the binging […] and carnival: all of these form the context of social practices which have effects that are at the same time socialising and cathartic' (Lanternari 1981, 138). This seems to be the case especially with 'costly rituals', as cognitivists and behaviouralists would call them, i.e., those ritual events involving exaggerated/extreme behaviour and/or significant material waste – and Carnival in the history of Europe in general and in Solsona in particular falls into both categories.

Requiring not only both investment and waste, but also a noticeable collective effort of coordination and organisation, the festival mobilises different social forces and segments of the local civic society, just like many other public rituals, gatherings, and collective forms of engagement for which Catalonia is famous, like the human towers ('*els Castells*'), the colossal human chains stretching for hundreds of kilometres, or the massive street gatherings of millions for the famous *Diades* of 11 September (Johannes 2019; Kammerer 2014; Little 2019; Vaczi 2016). In this sense, *el Carnaval* is yet more robust proof of

[11] 'Festive events are characterised by ritual or highly formalised performances that are usually based on either a hierarchical organisation of the event or traditional features. The homeostatic calendar dimension of festivities is linked to the ritual one, and is assured by means of reiteration, tradition, and hierarchy. […] They are also characterised by exuberance, exteriorisation of sentiments, the expenditure or waste of goods or other anti-economic attitudes, amusement, grotesque or excessive acts, or the systematic inversion of social norms' (Testa 2014a, 45–46).

how deeply and mightily *incorporated* Catalan associational culture is in the social fabric of rural and urban groups alike.

The importance of Catalan *associacionisme* could never be stressed enough, especially as a force in the catalysation, dynamisation, and structuring of collective actions for folkloric and ritual purposes (Testa 2020b; Johannes 2019; Noyes 2003), recreational and sportive aims (Kammerer 2014; Vaczi 2016), as a modality of genuine political action (Dowling 2018; Clua i Fainé 2014; Vaczi 2016), and finally as a form of interplay and linking between these different spheres. Solsona and its festival are no exception to this pattern.

The historically determined Catalan penchant for *associacionisme* expresses itself in the festive dimension of the Carnival in two distinctive ways, one institutional, the other one (apparently) informal. These are: 1) the '*Associació* de *Festes del Carnaval de Solsona*', a juridical entity entitled to negotiate officially with the local bodies of government, and especially with the municipality (the '*Ajuntament*'), and endowed with the right and power, which are regularly exercised, to demand public subventions for its activities, and 2) the informal local groups of '*colles*' and '*comparses*', two types of network-based socialising groups that function within, during, and for the festival – and which in our case show both typically Catalan and characteristically Solsonian features. We shall return to these declensions of *associacionisme* in the second part of this study.

THE TOWN HYMN AND THE HANGING OF THE DONKEY

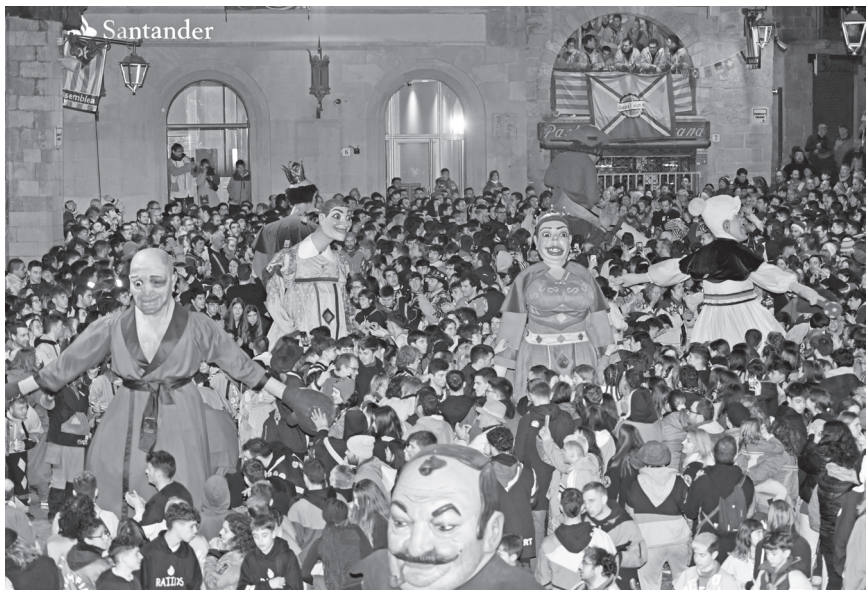
The Saturday of *el Carnaval* is by far the most important and heavily participated-in day of the week. A carefully planned and coordinated, but nevertheless apparently chaotic, ritualesque progression of *actes* unfolds during the afternoon and the evening, filling the streets of the historical centre: most of the crowds of thousands are separated into *colles* and *comparses* by their colourful uniforms ('*bates*'). Some of the oldest and most respected *colles* take charge of and animate the dangerously heavy giants. They are called '*colles gengateres*', and it is they who move the giants in procession, along with the playing '*banda*', from the Passeig de Sant Antoni Maria Claret down the Portal del Castell, then all the way through the long and narrow Carrer del Castell and down to the Plaça Major. This is '*la Pujada dels Gegants*' ('the Arrival of the Giants'), followed by the equally beloved and passionately participated in '*el Nomenament del Mata-ruc d'Honor*' ('the Appointment of the Honourable Donkey-Slaughter'). Immediately afterwards, another traditional *acte*, '*la Bramada*' ('the Bray'), is performed. Later on, for the joy of children, young people, and adults alike, the puppet of the Donkey is brought from the square to the belltower, where it is solemnly hanged amid the screams and chants of a thousand voices: it is '*la Penjada del Ruc*', the apex of the Carnival, during which the Carnival hymn (and the *de facto* town hymn) is sung:

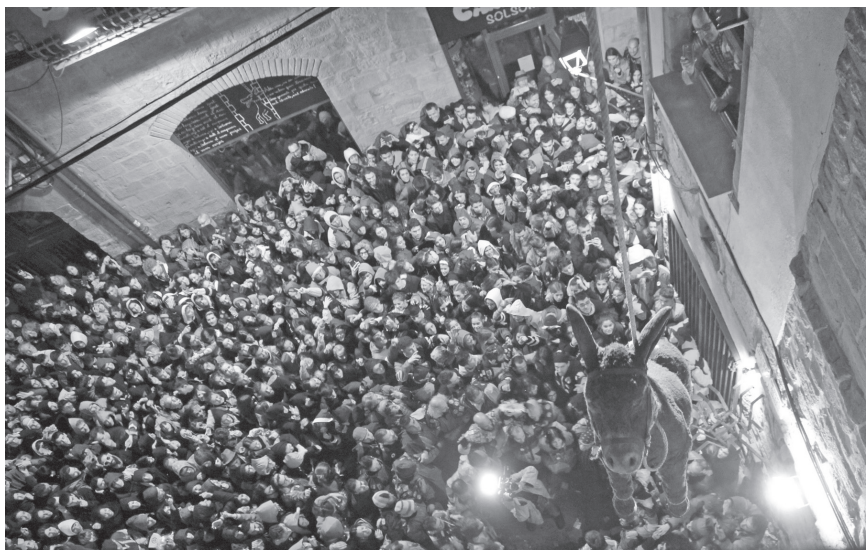
A Solsona bona gent,	*In Solsona there are good people,*
a Solsona, bona gent,	*In Solsona there are good people,*
si no haguessin mort el ruc,	*If they didn't kill the donkey,*
si no haguessin mort el ruc.	*If they didn't kill the donkey.*
Fa molts anys a dalt del campanar,	*A long time ago from the belltower,*
aquí a Solsona, aquí a Solsona	*Here in Solsona, here in Solsona,*
fa molts anys a dalt del campanar	*A long time ago from the belltower,*
aquí a Solsona el vam penjar, el vam penjar!	*Here in Solsona we hanged it!*
Adéu-siau, ens en anem	*Farewell, we part ways*
i no sabem quan tornarem.	*And we know not when we shall return.*
Som governats per quatre rucs mal educats, mal educats!	*We are governed by four ill-mannered donkeys, four ill-mannered donkeys!*

The song is an interesting folk anthem: a declaration of attachment to the city and its good people ('*a Solsona, bona gent*'), who, however, are far from being perfect, since they, just like anybody else, also have their sins to confess ('*si no haguessin mort el ruc*').

Being a relatively recent 'invented tradition', thus not deeply rooted in the past, the Carnival of Solsona does not sit on a strictly normative and ossifying conception of tradition. It does not, therefore, express the rather widespread popular idea of immutability and immanence of the traditional ritual facts (Testa 2020b), being by contrast rather creative and partly open to changes. In spite of this, continuity is emphasised in the song: '*fa molts anys* […] *aquì a Solsona*'. Even though the act itself was introduced in the year 1985, and the song even later, evoking the time depth of the tradition is paramount to condensing symbolic significance. After all, a tradition remains a tradition, no matter how young.

In European rural and provincial contexts, parochialism is as inevitable as, at times, the need to emigrate to find a better fortune elsewhere. But those who leave might sometimes get caught by the need or will to return, whether they actually do return or not. The will or need to return (albeit perhaps only briefly in order to participate in the carnival celebrations) makes it possible for the migrating *Solsonins* (the Catalan name for people from Solsona) to remain part of the social body of the town, ideally continuing to embody 'fidelity to the community and its traditions beyond any particular political or religious





3 and 4. Two crucial *acte*s of the Carnival: The Dance of the Giants and the Hanging of the Donkey. Source: Lluís Closa (image 3), Jordi Soldevila i Corominas (image 4).

loyalty and any cultural seduction of the outside world' (Noyes 2003, 175). Fidelity means that, although they do not know when, in the end, they shall return: '*Adéu-siau, ens en anem, i no sabem quan tornarem*'.

Just like the carnival Sermon and plenty of other *actes* and features of the Carnival, the underlying social and political critique is manifest in the hymn, too: '*Som governats per quatre rucs mal educats*'. This comes as no surprise, corruption and misrule being widely considered physiological evils of both the Catalan and Spanish polity. And, in fact, it has always been impossible to politically co-opt the Carnival: if *catalanisme* in Solsona is unquestionable, and *independentisme* strong,[12] all the remaining segments of the political and ideological spectrum are very much put into question during the festival.

The donkey, which is a sort of totemic animal of all of Catalonia (Brandes 2009, 785–786), and the animal of '*la terra*' par excellence, is not the only emblem of the Carnival: the Crazy Giant ('*el Gegant Boig*') plays a prominent symbolic role, too. The craziness of the giant, which also represents the praxiological and existential mode of the carnival week, along with the proverbially slow judgment of the jackass, represent respectively the negation of two of the most quintessential Catalan virtues: '*respecte*' ('respect', 'respectability', 'deference') and '*seny*' ('judiciousness', 'good sense', 'moderation', and 'pragmatism' – as Vaczi has written, a veritable 'Catalonian Volkgeist'; Vaczi 2016, 361). The temporary negation of *seny* is nothing but a ritual ruse to actually reaffirm it after the carnival period is closed. And even at the peak of the outmost carnival exaltation of lack of *respecte* and *seny*, the last words of the hymn sung while the donkey is being hanged, it is precisely *respecte* and *seny* that are exalted, through the condemnation of the ill-mannered asses that govern us – and, in a democracy, also represent/reflect us.

If *el Carnaval* is both the distorted representation and, to a certain extent, as we shall see, one of the matrices of Solsona's social body, then the climax of the collective action to which the entire community is summoned during those few days, the hymn, is the climax within the climax. The '*Penjada*' and the anthem are, to again use Noyes' terminology about the *Patum* for our own purposes, the 'orgasmic' moment of communion with/in the community, the 'oceaning' feeling of merging with the mass of fellow participants in the collective ritual, or else, in Victor Turner's terms, the instant wherein 'communitas' (Turner 1977) is created (and, inevitably, immediately dissolved). It is a

[12] The scholarly literature on Catalan independence has boomed since the 2010s and, as the number of scholars interested in the subject has been growing constantly in this time span, it has become practically impossible to digest it in its entirety. Among the latest studies, I have benefitted much from reading Andrew Dowling's *The Rise of Catalan Independence* (2018); but the issue is, of course, raised and discussed in many other studies hereby cited.

5. Carnival poster featuring *el Gegant Boig* as a veritable symbol of Catalan *independentisme*. Source: Author.

very special declension of 'carnivalesque communitas' (Testa 2020a, 150–167), like elsewhere in Europe. Even the ethnographic gaze and thick description are at odds with transmitting in words the electric atmosphere and the paroxysm, a veritable social telluric discharge one can witness and, if integrated in the local community, participate in, over those crucial minutes at the peak of the hanging ceremony.

THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC RITUALITY IN SOLSONA AS (CENTRAL) CATALONIA

The politics of Solsona's main public ritual is expressed through two closely intertwined, but also clearly distinguished, dimensions: critique and Catalanism.

As already hinted, most of the 'ritualesque' (Santino 2009) *actes* of the Carnaval express in a rather vivid manner political and social critique (this character of Solsona's Carnival is also stressed elsewhere: Vilaseca and Trilla

2011: *passim*). This comes as no surprise, for the entanglements and intersections between public rituality, collective identity, nationalism, and politics in Catalonia is a very well-known and researched fact. Likewise well-known is the astonishing richness of Catalan folklore and festive traditions and the equally astonishing level of popular involvement and participation in those, something that I have, in all honesty, hardly ever witnessed in any other European land.

For sure, Catalonia's political history during Francoism, then over the Transition, and up to nowadays is complex and tormented. Certain wounds are still open: the pain they caused and cause is still recalled in squares and bars and whispered in families. Bitterness and resentment slither through the veins of the social body in Solsona, just like in many other Catalan cities. *El Carnaval* is a means to recompose a social body otherwise disarticulated by conflicting social memories, diverging political views, migration patterns, unfulfilled promises of the Transition, and other messy stuff late modernity has brought about, in a region where Catalan independentism, or *independentisme*, is no less divisive than elsewhere, but in which the consensus on it is also much greater than elsewhere. The local critical mass of independentists and Catalanists as a whole determine that most of the socially visible and active people in the public arena are ostensibly Catalanist (both within and without the Carnival), with few exceptions. It is hard to say how much this is due to the more recent resurgence of activist forms of Catalanism and greater proclivity towards independentism, which had both been brewing since the 1990s and early 2000s, and erupted during the 2010s – as has been related in detail in the Introduction. Most of my informants would swear that they have been Catalanist and/or independentists '*tota la vida*'; and the polls of legitimate elections as well as illegal referenda in the past three decades seem to confirm this. And yet the explicit or implicit critique exercised through the festival also has a conciliatory power: one might be for or against *independència*, but the status quo, corruption, misrule, and Madrid's greed remain common enemies for everybody regardless of their political affiliation.

At times, local or even national politicians are scapegoated, especially during some of the most politically charged moments of the Carnival, such as the speech of the Honourable Donkey-Slaughter and the Sermon. Frequent rants *contra personam* have over the years been met with mixed feelings.[13] In an interview held in 2017, the *alcalde* (mayor) of Solsona, member of the

[13] The 'Sermons' are particularly vivid pieces of popular epic. They are rarely improvised and most commonly read aloud in the square in front of the crowd. Social and political critique always abounds in them – apart from attending two of them personally in 2017 and 2019, I have consulted several of the older ones, since those written and recited between 1971 and 1995 have been published: A.a.V.v. 1995.

Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (the Republican Left of Catalonia – a historically independentist party), confessed that indeed the Carnival was a 'difficult' period for the local politicians. He told me about an episode that taught him a lesson he would never forget: in 2007, when he was still *regidor* (a member of the municipal council) and not yet mayor, he went to attend *el Sermó*. Towards the end of the speech (which is normally read and also kept in the local archive), he himself was made the object of overt criticism and scorn. While this was being exercised *contra* him, hundreds of locals turned towards him and stared and snickered at him. He felt so excruciatingly humiliated he decided never to attend another Sermon again. Now (2017), he continued during the interview, he enjoys the Carnival as a private citizen with his children and friends: he even wears the '*bata*' ('uniform') of his *comparsa*; however, he keeps his public role out of the Carnival and never attends any *acte* in his capacity of mayor; and, above all, no more Sermons.

Following a well-established pattern in European festive culture, *el Carnaval* sanctions misrule and voices the popular discontent with the status quo, the powers that be, and anything else that deserves stigmatisation and/or derision. As I was told more than once, '*durant el Carnaval les coses surten*' ('during the Carnival things get to be known'). For this reason, too, the mayor admitted that over the years the council has sometimes delayed the undertaking of a certain initiative, or a vote on a certain resolution, for fear of running up against the carnivalesque sanction. Through the ritualised social critique and the convergence of collective concern-voicing, Solsona's Carnival has not only the power to affect the perception of certain social issues, but even to influence the decision-making processes of the institutional government. The politics of the public ritual are such not only in the anthropological meaning of the word 'politics', but also literally: it is the folklorisation of politics and the politicisation of folklore (Testa 2014b).

As for the Catalanist dimension of the festival, it is a well-perceived and partly contested (though also rather evident) feature that needs further analysis – here I distinguish the Catalanist (i.e., regionalist/nationalist) trait of *el Carnaval* from its 'Catalanness' (i.e., regional/national characterisation and representativity), which will be discussed in the following section.

When, during our interview in 2017, I asked the mayor about the evident Catalanist stance of the festival, he, an attentive observer of the Carnival for many years, remarked that the Carnival is not Catalanist: the context is. After all, he continued, the majority of the population of Solsona is strongly Catalanist and mostly independentist. Hence, the fact that Carnival assumes Catalanist traits is, in his words, '*inevitable*'. And inevitable it seems to have been in the wider context, too: in central Catalonia or Calunya profunda at large. In recent years, festivals in the region have been dotted with episodes of manifest and defiant public displays of *catalanisme*: in 2014, the iconic '*Aliga*',

the giant eagle of the *Patum* of Berga, wore the *Estelada*, the Catalan independentist flag. Subsequently, emulations occurred in many other localities, and the *gegants* began to be seen wrapped in *Esteladas* throughout the territory. The following year, Solsona's Carnival ended up in the pages of the entire Spanish press for staging and broadcasting the mockery of the Spanish army: that time, the common ridiculing of Spanish figures and symbols during the festival went farther than usual. The tribunal of Lleida opened a case and investigated. All these episodes, among the dozens that could be mentioned, also received media (and sometimes even judiciary) attention for their explicit independentist and/or anti-Spanish connotations.

As can be imagined, these already explicit connotations erupted even more vehemently during the Carnival of 2018, the first after *el Referèndum* and the failed attempt of Catalonia at becoming an independent state in October 2017. As my friend and informant Alba wrote to me in a WhatsApp message during those agitated days, '*realment hi haurà un abans i un després en la història de Catalunya. Res tornarà a ser igual*' ('there will truly be a "before" and an "after" in the history of Catalonia. Nothing will be the same as before'). Carnival in 2018 was indeed utterly hegemonised by references to the referendum, to Spanish political parties, politicians, judges, and other public figures, but also to Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which was activated shortly after the ephemeral declaration of independence and which abrogated the autonomy of Catalonia. Oftentimes, references were also made to the '*presos politics*', the political and public figures who were incarcerated and were then attending trial.

The escalation of the visual war (which has also been fought on the internet and through other media) of support for the referendum, considered as the final and inevitable step in the *procés independentista català*, was tangible and manifest everywhere, which also resulted, in Solsona, in the temporary silencing of opposing voices. This escalation had another visible side-effect in the public sphere: it also accelerated the already ongoing process of replacement of the historical national Catalan flag, *la Senyera*, considered more politically neutral, with the overtly Catalanist *Estelada* (Clua i Fainé 2014; Dowling 2018; Kammerer 2014) – as I have documented with photos, never before were there as many *Estelades* hanging from windows and balconies; entire palaces in Solsona's historical centre were covered with them.

In June 2018, I also participated in the *Patum* in Berga, and the same process was very visible there as well, but also in Girona. Days before the Carnival in Solsona in 2019, an emblematic episode of sabotage occurred that clearly showed the heightened level of polarisation in Catalan society in that period: for weeks the bridge that connects the town to the main provincial road and leads to the main portal had been covered with *llaçets grogs* ('yellow ribbons'), a popular sign of support for the political prisoners and, by metonymy, one of

6. Members of a *compars*a hold a banner referring to 'Law 155', which was activated after the 2017 referendum, abrogating Catalonia's autonomy for several months. The law is metaphorically 'hanged' from the belltower, whence the carnival donkey is also hanged. Catalonia is indeed a context in which 'symbolism is often as important as real political change' (Dowling 2018, 163). Source: Author.

the most recent icons of *independentisme*. Hundreds of them hung from the bridge fences. The night before the first day of Carnival, they were all cut off, and the morning after the news spread quickly, causing outrage throughout the town. While I walked across the bridge and witnessed the aftermath, I bumped into a group of friends belonging to my *comparsa*, who were promptly tying new ribbons to the fences, so that the bridge could be decorated again for the imminent start of the celebrations. The passion they put into the task was remarkable, just like the remarkable effort of, hours before, cutting them all off in the dead of the night and in the middle of a busy road.

The 'war of the ribbons' betrays a deeper, unresolved tension in a situation of disrupted and unachieved transformation, a state of 'pseudo-transition', which, embedded and ethnographically observable at the micro-level, actually reflects the current situation of Catalonia as a whole and shows clearly how 'today the public arena and the contested concept of *convivència* have become

7. Solsona's town hall in 2018. The regional flag, the *Senyera*, is hanging, whereas the Spanish flag is, as always, missing, and conspicuous by its absence – it is always being 'washed in the washing machine', as the office workers in the town hall often say, therefore unable to be hung. Conversely, a banner in support of the 'political prisoners' adorns the balcony, along with a yellow ribbon and the usual *Estelada.* Source: Author.

increasingly polarised around the issue of Catalan sovereignty and independence' (quoted from the abstract for SIEF 2019).

Cohesion and motivation characterise the work of people on both poles, but they are separated by more distance than a bridge can bridge. Johannes has written that 'one of the most visible results of the events of October 2017 has been the presence of yellow ribbons in public places' (Johannes 2019, 20), but in fact that word 'presence' does not do justice to the magnitude of the shift that occurred in the period 2018–2020, for which 'ubiquity' or 'omnipresence' are more accurate terms.

CATALANNESS, CATALANISM, AND THE FESTIVAL

The relationship between folklore or popular culture and national identity is as old as national identities themselves. Catalonia is no exception (Wittlin 1994). Folklore revival, a much more recent phenomenon than folklore itself, and also cultural heritage-making (Isnart and Testa 2020) have largely contributed, symbolically, politically, and also economically to the transitional process, as a now rich body of scholarship has abundantly and convincingly shown. This idea underlines several of the chapters in this volume, and was at the centre of

the conference panel from which it stems (I quote again from the SIEF 2019 abstract): 'Catalonia's participation in the Spanish transition to democracy in the 1970s found a potent resource in traditional festival: conceptual, gestural, and tactile'; it is therefore not surprising if 'since the Transition, public gatherings and rituals have proliferated in Catalonia'.[14]

The myriad of gestures, words, images, *actes*, and micro-acts that swarm and flow during and through the Carnival contribute to the emergence of a shared narrative about being in or from Solsona and about being in or from central Catalonia. The political landscape and discourses of the last few decades have partly succeeded in converging these sentiments in a common direction, in central Catalonia: *catalanisme* – albeit not without dissidences, inconsistencies, and ruptures. Far from being an inner essence of the festival, as some want it, its Catalanism is, as the mayor rightly suggested, a by-product of the historical, geographical, and social context wherein the festival occurs and for which it is functional.

In Solsona, the typical festive and 'seasonal nature of Catalanist sentiment and activism' (Johannes 2018, 63) along with the symbolic and historical geography of the socially constructed locality, create and provide 'a concrete model for Catalanism. Berga [here read: Solsona] – Pyrenean, medieval, Catalan-speaking – was easily identified with Catalonia as a whole, particularly by Barcelonans with little experience of the hinterland' (Noyes 2003, 204), thus fostering the idea of 'a kind of primordial Catalanism' (ibid). These considerations apply, *verbatim*, to Solsona as well. Hence, *el Carnaval* falls eminently within the solid pattern of other festivals from Catalonia *profunda* that have been considered as 'culminating moments for the expression of national identity' (Daniele Conversi quoted in Johannes 2019, 25; see also Kammerer 2014; del Mármol this book; Noyes 2003, 2011; Vaczi this book). In this sense, Solsona becomes a micro-model of central and 'deep' Catalan culture as a whole, a microcosm reflecting but also modelling the macrocosm of which it is part.

Indeed, the majority of the ethnological studies on Catalan festivals have inevitably focused on Catalanism, and that for the simple fact that there is hardly a festival in that context that is not Catalanist. The *conditio sine qua non*

[14] 'Performing transformation, claiming transition: Public gatherings and rituals in Catalonia from the 1970s to the present' can be read at the following link: https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/sief2019/p/7113 (accessed in October 2020). Reflections on the role of this or that cultural manifestation or specific cultural trends in the development of Catalanism and Catalan independentism are present in practically all the studies cited in this chapter, whereas more general overviews of the topic of cultural transformations and initiatives during the final years of Franco's regime and during the Transition are in Crameri 2008; Dowling 2018; Keown 2011b (and in Keown 2011a more generally); Llobera 2004.

for the establishment of an implicit (and sometimes, as we have seen, explicit) equation between popular festival and Catalanism is, however, the deeper idea of 'Catalanness' ('*Catalanitat*'), that is to say, the ensemble of socio-cultural elements that are considered as specifically, exclusively, or quintessentially Catalan, for a more or less structured and aware sense of Catalanness is at the basis of *catalanisme* – and therefore of *independentisme*.[15] Catalanness is not only an academic elucubration in the shape of an ugly word, but also a notion that has turned at least partly emic as well, of late (Kammerer 2014, 67–68), and that has been explicitly appropriated also by the institutions:

> *la Festa entesa com una de les principals manifestacions cíviques de la població [és] una manifestació que constitueix el marc idoni per expressar la catalanitat a l'espai públic. […] Avui, la festa popular és un dels pocs moviments de masses de caràcter inequívocament català del qual disposa la societat per manifestar la dimensió cívica dels seus membres*. (Ajuntament de Berga 2014)
>
> [the Festival conceived as one of the main civic manifestations of the population [is] a manifestation that constitutes the adequate element to express Catalanness in the public space. […] Today, the popular festival is one of the few mass movements whose character is unequivocally Catalan, and that is available to society in order to manifest the civic dimension of its members'.]

Or else: '*el Carnaval de Solsona és un dels més genuïns i populars de la Catalunya central i el conjunt del país*. (Ajuntament de Solsona 2018 – 'the Carnival of Solsona is one of the most genuine and popular of central Catalonia and of the country as a whole').

The essentialisation of general Catalanness through festive Catalanness as well as its collapse into Catalanism is manifest in such a discourse, which emerged in the 1980s and the 1990s, accelerated in the 2000s, and precipitated after 2010, the crucial year in which the reform of the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia was halted by the Spanish Constitutional Court – a veritable *terminus post quem* in the *procés de indipèndencia*.[16] Carnival becomes thus one of those '*fêtes qui « font pays », selon une formule lancée par les acteurs catalanistes depuis la transition démocratique, pour désigner toute action volontaire visant à la dynamisation, économique et identitaire, du territoire*' (Guiu 2013, 77–78). No wonder, then, that a glimpse of the cartography of Catalan traditional festivities confirms the arguments made in this section, which also evokes

15 For a definition of *catalanisme* and *independentisme*, see note n. 6 in this chapter.

16 This tentative periodisation could be integrated with a reference to the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact in Catalan festive culture (see Roigé et al this book). For sure, 2020–2021 will be remembered as another period of great change in Catalonia, which was harshly hit by the pandemic and the consequent health crisis.

those by other scholars who have worked on such festivities: 'une cartographie des fêtes labellisées en tant que « *fêtes d'intérêt national* » *par le gouvernement de la Catalogne montre des écarts importants: […] la majorité des fêtes reconnues comme ayant un intérêt patrimonial* « *national* » *sont situées dans la Catalogne dite* « *ancienne* », *en opposition avec la Catalogne dite* « *nouvelle* »' (Guiu 2013, 79–80).

Catalan festivals are territorialised in 'essence' but also emanate a territorialising power. This power is intercepted and used by another very specific Catalan organisational, associational, and in-group-shaping matrix, the *comparses*, to which the following, second part of this study ('The Ritual Making of Central Catalonia 2: *Comparses* and the Dynamics of Inclusive Nationalism') is devoted.