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The Ritual Making of Central Catalonia 2: *Comparses* and the Dynamics of Inclusive Nationalism

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The previous chapter, 'The Ritual Making of Central Catalonia 1: National Identity and the Hanging of the Donkey', demonstrates the social relevance of Solsona's main public ritual, *el Carnaval*, within the borders of the city, of its *comarca*, and of central Catalonia as a whole, describing and analysing the main characteristics of both municipality and festivity. Among these, little attention has been devoted to a feature that, however, bears a primary importance in the economy of the festival as well as in the entire local society: the *colles* and *comparses*.[1]

COLLES AND *COMPARSES*: DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

A *comparsa* is essentially a group of people (both *colla* and *comparsa* are roughly translatable as 'group', 'gang', or 'team'). What distinguishes at first sight a normal group of people from a *comparsa* is the fact that the members of the

[1] In much of central Catalonia, *colla* and *comparsa* are, when referring to festive or folkloric groups, closely related words, almost synonyms, although each retains a certain contextual specificity. In 2013, in an interview for the 30th anniversary since the foundation of their *comparsa*, some members affirmed the following: '*en el moment de creació els 50 membres van debatre en diverses ocasions sobre quin qualificatiu era millor: colla?, grup?, comparsa?, penya?, etc. Finalment, varem decidir anomenarnos comparsa*' (Nació Solsona 2013). For simplicity and brevity, though, from now on I will refer mostly to *comparsa* (which is also far more commonly used in Solsona), mentioning the other term only if a clarification is needed.

latter each wear the same '*bata*', which is a colourful uniform used mandatorily during the carnival and exclusively (or almost so) during festive occasions. The fact of appearing associated by a uniform is reflected in the etymology of the name, which comes from '*comparèixer*' ('to appear', cfr. Latin *comparere*, Italian *comparire*). Solsona's Carnival is the realm of some 60 *comparses* populated by some 10,000 people '*portant bata*' ('wearing a *bata*').[2] The *comparses* reign supreme and undisputed over every aspect of the festival, and probably represent one of the most striking post-Francoist developments in the history of the Carnival, and in fact in the recent history of the social configuration of Solsona altogether. Many informants have often insisted that the *comparses* are the '*essència*' ('essence') of Solsona's Carnival; the author Noemí Vilaseca, in her illustrated book about the Carnival of Solsona, calls them the '*ànima viva del Carnaval*', 'the living soul of the Carnival' (Vilaseca and Trilla 2011, 116). This folk ontology of Carnival is of paramount importance, as we shall see, whereby locals and strangers alike build that sense of typicity and authenticity that is then reflected on the local communities themselves, becoming symbolic material for the construction of social meaning and collective belonging.

The association organising the festival is called the Associació de Festes del Carnaval de Solsona, which in 2021 had some 900 '*socis*' ('members'). The Associació has a ruling body called '*la Junta*', which is itself a *comparsa*. Unlike in Berga, where its *colles* are (or at least were) 'overwhelmingly male' (Noyes 2003, 49), such separation does not exist in Solsona: there are *comparses* of many types containing people of many sorts, although such sorts tend to be patterned (*comparses* can be more feminine or more masculine, more youthful or more grown-up, more undisciplined or calmer, more or less dynamic, more or less open and inclusive, etc.).

Colles and *comparses* characterise most of the folkloric and performative traditions in Catalonia. Notable examples are those of the *Patum* in Berga and the '*colles castelleres*' performing the human towers. Being based on the spirit of free association and on the practice of 'getting together' ('*fer pinya*' in Catalan; see Vaczi this book), the *comparsa* also represents, *sui generis*, the ethos that Mariann Vaczi has aptly described as 'Catalonia's thriving associational culture or *associacionisme*, which empowers individuals and groups in their civic, leisure, educational, or political pursuits' (Vaczi this book).

A *comparsa* can be formed of just a handful of people (in certain very rare cases of two or three people or, exceptionally, even one person only) or, more often, tens or dozens. Apart from colouring, dynamising, and segmenting the collective landscapes of the festival, the *comparses* bear several practical functions: they organise the *actes*, the dances, the carts, and several other

[2] These figures come from the organisers and represent the rough numbers of *comparses* and their members in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

performances, prepare and apply the decorations in the streets and the squares, try to prevent utter disorder and violence (which still occur regularly), and take care of every aspect of the festival that needs a minimum of supervision and coordination. They do so joyfully, willingly, and apparently 'horizontally' through self-coordination (although hierarchies and competitions do exist among as well as within *comparses*, as is about to be discussed).

Some of the activities in which the *comparses* are involved require considerable effort, time, energy, and financial resources to be carried out. Many use their days off from work to engage in the necessary preparation for these activities; others offer a hand differently. Money is normally raised by the members taxing themselves through a membership fee. The *colles geganteres*, among the oldest *comparses* of the festival, function slightly differently. They take care of and govern, as already said, the very important *gegants,* the giants, the veritable, iconic, and idolatrised *numina* of the Carnival (Testa 2020b). In the case of the *gengaters*, a rather long, hard, even dangerous learning process is required to animate the giants. Being part of a *colla gegantera* is somewhat more prestigious than being part of a common *comparsa*, and it is therefore normally more difficult to be accepted into one, but the *colles* are ultimately also considered *comparses* themselves.[3]

The totality or vast majority of native Solsonins are part of a *comparsa* (with virtually no exception in the age range 10–40), but so too are many people from all over the *comarca*, from some of the surrounding *comarques*, also, and even from Andorra (in my own *comparsa* there are several Andorrans). Notable exceptions are: 1) a few natives – it is difficult to quantify what percentage, since there is no registry of the *comparses* and their members; 2) people with a recent background of immigration, for instance some of the more recently arrived South Americans or Europeans from EU countries or also non-EU countries, who tend not to be a part of a *comparsa* during the first few years of their stay. However, if they stay for longer than that (the level of successful integration of Europeans being very high), these individuals are usually invited into a *comparsa* – or form one themselves – after one or

3 '*A principis dels anys 8*0 *apareixen les comparses al Carnaval solsoní. Actualment sobrepassen de llarg la seixantena i ajuden, participen i organitzen actes, aportant una coloració molt especial a la Festa. Les comparses han donat un fort impuls a una indumentària popular per a fer costat al Carnaval. Les tradicionals bruses dels antics tractants de bestiar de primers del segle XX, que van aparèixer en els primers carnavals d'una manera lleugera i anàrquica van passar a ser, també, els uniformes multicolors de les comparses. Cada una d'aquestes té els seus colors i el seu nom; la brusa se la posen el primer dia de Carnaval i se la treuen la nit del dimecres de cendra quan es crema el Carnestoltes*' (https://carnavalsolsona.com/la-festa/comparses/, accessed October 2020).

two years; 3) many in the local minority community of Maghrebis (especially Moroccans), who have been migrating to Solsona since the 1980s and who today constitute about 8–9% of the total population (they formed less than 2% in the 1990s), out of the 14% of people of different nationalities living in Solsona (source: census IDESCAT 2019); in this case, an important exception is those who were born in Solsona in the last two decades, many of whom are now in a *comparsa* (although almost exclusively boys or young men). Until a few years ago, there were no more than a handful of young Moroccans in *comparses*, and, even today, according to several informants I have interviewed, and on the basis of my own observation, there are no more than a couple dozen members of *comparses* (predominantly boys between the age of 12 and 18), out of a total population of about 700–800, in a town of 9,000.[4] Even more strikingly, of the 899 members (as of 2021) of the Associació de Festes del Carnaval de Solsona, only one is Moroccan (according to the president of the Association).

In short, only '*pixapins*' and '*camacos*' (popular mocking hinterland nicknames for Barcelonans), tourists, and less well-integrated people living in Solsona, with very few exceptions, do not wear a *bata* and are not part of a *comparsa*. Worse, even, some '*forasters*' ('foreigners' or 'strangers') dare to wear masks and carnival costumes when visiting Solsona during the Carnival. This is regularly met with scorn and derision, and some unfortunates are occasionally ridiculed publicly for doing so. *El Carnaval* is the reign of the *bates*, and, such is the general feeling, the trivial carnival masks have no place in it. Thus, the *comparses* fulfil yet another important function with aggregative and internally cohesive powers: they signal empirically and immediately who is an insider and who is an outsider, for no Solsonin would ever dare to show up in public during the entire week of Carnival without his/her *bata* – let alone wearing a mask or a disguise.

Above all, however, the *comparses* are about having fun, eating, drinking, dancing, and jesting together. Commensality is as important for Catalonia as a whole as it is for these quintessentially Catalan groups. Commensality and its relevance will be discussed further on in this chapter.

4 An exact figure is difficult to gather today because of several factors. According to the official register, Moroccan citizens living in Solsona numbered around 1,000 between 2008 and 2010. This number has been declining in the past ten years, in spite of a higher birth rate among the community. This decline, I was told by the official at the immigration office of the Solsonès, is due only partly to emigration towards other Spanish areas or a return to Morocco, and it is actually mostly due to individuals from the first and second waves acquiring Spanish citizenship. This means that, while the number of Moroccans declines, the number of people of Moroccan origin is actually increasing.

The *comparses* are semi-formal groups, for although they do not exist as juridical entities, they do have their own rules, hierarchies, obligations, and rites of passage.[5] One normally gets into a *comparsa* by invitation from one or more of its senior members. Solicitations and candidacies are also a possibility. More structured *comparses* put new entries to a vote. One can leave a *comparsa* (which happens rather infrequently and usually because of *force majeure*) or even be chased away (which is very rare). An individual can belong to two *comparses*, although, given the rivalry between *comparses* for an array of available symbolic and even human capital, it is an unusual occurrence, often met with jealousy and disappointment by the other members and sometimes even with accusations of betrayal. Even though in the last couple of decades the *comparses* have both grown in number and in number of members, cases of disintegration or disappearance of a *comparsa* also exist.

The creation, reproduction, and maintenance of a *comparsa* help structure and give shape to a wide array of interpersonal and intergroup relationships, and although the *comparses* function eminently, though not exclusively, within, during, and for the Carnival, they also exist outside the carnival framework.

Hierarchy within each *comparsa* is established through a variety of complex micro-dynamics and is coded accordingly. Seniority is by far one of the most important criteria, and, as such, is exposed and made manifest though a system of 'grades' in the form of '*parxes*' ('patches') that are sewed to the *bata* to mark certain achievements and, especially, the number of years one has participated in the Carnival. Correspondence and constant contact are today maintained throughout the year by means of WhatsApp groups (every *comparsa* has its own).

As is commonly said and felt by Solsonians, 'la *comparsa* és com una família' ('a *comparsa* is like a family').[6] This strong sense of belonging among the members of *colles* and *comparses* is certified by all the ethnographers that

5 I partly disagree with Nina Kammerer when she writes that, in a *colla*, 'there are no official "members" or "partners" (*socis*) in any formal sense' (Kammerer 2014, 64). In Solsona at least, one cannot freely join a *colla* or *comparsa* and must go through certain steps in order to become a member. There are obligations to fulfil, among which are to always wear the uniform during the carnival week and to participate in the most important activities – and for most *comparses* to also pay the annual membership fee. A new affiliation can even be formalised through rites of passage, which vary from semi-serious oaths to nothing else than a prank or bad joke made in public at the expense of the poor newcomer. *Comparses* are neither completely formal nor informal, hence I prefer qualifying them as semi-formal.

6 The local writer and researcher Noemí Vilaseca (also a proud member of a *comparsa*) has written that '*entrar a formar part d'una comparsa és tot un ritu d'agregació i fa evident alló que el folklorista Joan Amades definia com a "esperit de confraternització" que regna aquests dies. Les comparses són una manifestació de la força de la communitas,*

have worked on the matter (Grau i Martí 1996; Kammerer 2014; Noyes 2003, 2011; Vaczi 2016), and is a rather well-established aspect. Since Catalans love *excursionisme*, nature, and the mountains, it is not uncommon to come across pictures of Solsonins by peaks and sight-seeing spots wearing their *bates* – and very often holding an *Estelada* as well. Sometimes they take and wear them when they go abroad for tourism, in order, of course, to take pictures and share them with the other fellow members. Couples belonging to the same *comparsa* may get married wearing their *bates* as wedding costumes, and their children will *ipso facto* and inevitably become new members. Children that are not born into a *comparsa* tend to be introduced into one early, for having been in a *comparsa* for a long time is a matter of great pride.

The association of the *comparsa* with a family, or even with *the* family, is not casual. Just like family bonds, those with a *comparsa* and loyalty to its members are considered strong and almost unbreakable. Since *comparses* are usually formed of individuals who already have established bonds (of family, love, friendship, work, etc.), they normally serve as a bond-catalyser. However, the admittance of new members from outside the pre-existing networks of established members is a very common phenomenon. Thus the *comparsa* can also be a bond-creator.

Being part of a *comparsa* 'as if' it were *família* and going through the years in the *comparsa/família* and transmitting this to offspring are dynamics that bear a particular historical and social significance in Catalonia. During the dictatorship, as is well-known, the Catalan language and traditions were prohibited, and 'it was in the family that Catalan lore, attitudes and customs were passed down' (Josep Llobera cited in Johannes 2019, 15). The '*casa pairal*' (the 'paternal house') was the place in which such continuity would be established, and where the self, the land, the past, and the destiny of the *família* merged together and embedded into one another (as has been said, '*pairalisme*, which could be called rural familism, conjures up a number of institutions, including the centrality of the ancestral house and of primogeniture': Llobera 1997, 300).[7] Aggregative, strong, and long-lasting like the *família* and its *casa*, the *comparsa* itself becomes a model for association and actually for more than association: a model for belonging, togetherness, and, as we shall see in the next section, also inclusion.[8]

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amb l'abolició de deferències entre els membres, que s'indentifiquen sota uns mateixos colors' (Vilaseca and Trilla 2011, 127).

7 Regarding this feature, see the still unmatched description and analysis in Noyes 2003, 159–164.

8 *Comparses* dynamise the Carnival dramatically, but they can also easily become sectarian – not only metaphorically, but also literally: a place of encounter and

8. Two members of the same *comparsa* being wed by the mayor in Solsona's town hall in 2019. The best man and the maid of honour also belong to the same *comparsa*.
Source: Author.

Within the mostly small communities of central Catalonia, Solsona is subdivided not only into the more traditional 'classes' or macro-categories of people bearing their own identities (political, familial, professional, vernacular, cantonal, etc.), or rather building and 'nesting' (Herb and Kaplan 1999) their own identities into one another; they also construct and express their sense of belonging through *colles* and *comparses*, these semi-formal 'small[er] groups' (Noyes 2011, 2016a), with their specific customs and costumes, micro-rituals, and in-group habits and regulations. A *matryoshka* that at times proves a real challenge for the ethnographer to un-nest and decipher, but which is evidently highly influential in matters of group perception, production, and reproduction.

The entering into and interacting with a *comparsa* embodies and mobilises the view and attitude (a 'grid' in Mary Douglas' words: Douglas 1970) of the individual about the functioning of the group and about his/her place in

socialisation open only to the veterans of Carnival, and located in a club in the second major square in the historical centre, is called '*la Secta*'.

9. A typically gigantic *sopar de comparses* (dinner of the *comparses*), where, in the spirit of the quintessential Catalan virtue, conviviality, hundreds of people from different *comparses* gather to wine and dine together, imbibing copiously. Note the different *bates* worn by the members of a same *compars*a, sitting close to one another, thus patterning the scene. Source: Vilaseca and Trilla 2011, 118–119.

it. These views and attitudes ultimately percolate outside the *comparsa* itself, having an impact on the wider social body: once Carnival is over, everybody takes back his or her place in ordinary life, but he or she 'here and now' also remains bound to who he or she is 'there and then'. During Carnival, however, the established behavioural norms (no matter how paradoxically transgressive such norms appear) of the *comparsa* are learned through time and with time deeply incorporated (Csordas 1990), in spite of them being, often literally, toxic for the body – alcoholic intoxication is one such norm. Wearing the carnival habit, the *bata*, means ultimately wearing the carnivalesque *habitus* (Bourdieu 1994). Just like one of the many unwritten norms of the Carnival stipulates that the week-worn *bata* is undressed and washed only at the end of Carnival, so the carnivalesque *habitus* is itself temporalised and ritually reworn the following year, thus ensuring the reproduction of both the ritual and the world within and without the ritual. This generative (or regenerative) modality vis-à-vis the social order is ultimately a form of interplay that makes possible individual agency through/against/with-in the wider social structures

(Sahlins 2000), whereby both the individual and the structure are impacted and mutually influenced by said interplay.

Public visibility, capacity of aggregation, success in the carnival competitions, manufacturing skills, bravery, drinking capacity, and many other features are all currencies of the social capital that each *comparsa* desires and tries to obtain in order to succeed and *appear* ('*comparèixer*' in Catalan) even more. This also requires a constant struggle to acquire new valid and active members, maintain inner coherence, and reproduce year after year.

In spite of those few, ephemeral 'oceaning' moments of communitas (Turner 1977), and *pace* Bakhtin (1984a, 1984b), the utopian horizontality of *el Carnaval* is (sometimes verbally invoked but) factually denied by those who should instead represent it. Ultimately, the *comparses* and their individual members' agencies structure by differentiation, dynamise thorough action, but also hierarchise through rivalry the festive arena. They compete for the 'carnivalesque capital' at stake in the social *champ* (Bourdieu 1994) that they themselves contribute to establish.

COMPARSES, CATALAN LANGUAGE, AND INCLUSIVE NATIONALISM

Just like the city Solsona is clearly bounded (walled, in fact), so bounded are most of its core-communities of autochthonous and long-term inhabitants. Likewise, networks like the *comparses* 'perform themselves as bounded groups to serve collective goals, including the stabilisation of their own fluid life; and this auto-telic work is increasingly the work of community in modernity' (Noyes 2006, 32).

Comparses bear inwards socially conservative power and potentially outwards transformative force, because the festival, being a time of hyper-socialisation, also allows for the integration of non-locals and non-Catalans into the locality, thus transforming it from within. At the same time, such a socio-cultural device has its downside in the (logical) exclusion of those who do not meet the expectation of participating in the Carnival from within (i.e., being a member of a *comparsa*); this can be the case of the 'inner outsider', such as a local refusing to take part in the Carnival as a member of a *comparsa*, or an external outsider unaware of the unwritten rules of the local public rituality, like a tourist (eminently, a *pixapí*, a Barcelonian). *Comparses* make work of differentiation between themselves, but as a whole they also constitute an aggregate, bordered ensemble that inevitably establishes a dichotomous 'us/them' logic ('us' intended as those who live in or are from Solsona and take part in the carnival, 'them' intended as the *forasters* ['strangers'] and those who live in or are from Solsona but do not take part in the Carnival).

There is, however, a case wherein these two logically complementary attitudes, one inclusive towards the within and the other exclusive towards the outside, remodulate and hybridise into one sole attitude that becomes inclusive towards the outside: this happens when a new member is welcomed into a *comparsa*. And here the best ethnographic example I can offer is my own.

After being invited to join a *comparsa* in December 2016 (I will not mention its name here, but every *comparsa* has its own name), which I accepted warmly and gratefully, and once the *bata* had been sewn by one of the local tailors, I was ready to be inducted into my new group – not before, though, being publicly shamed and mocked, on the morning of the first day of Carnival 2017, for having been spotted walking through one of the town streets without my new *bata*, as I did not yet know that this was a blatant transgression of Solsona Carnival's unwritten rules. That same evening, I went through the micro-rite of passage of the '*imposiciò de la bata*' (the 'bestowal and clothing of the *bata*'), which was also duly recorded on a video by one fellow member, and after being the object of a rather gross '*broma*' ('prank') a few hours later, I officially became a member.

I did whatever was expected or asked of me during the entire week – and that was at times quite trying. After the close of the festival, and for the following months and years and up to the present day, the attitude of the locals towards me has changed radically: I was no longer the nosy stranger who had moved to Solsona a few months before (September 2016) and learned Catalan surprisingly fast (and that probably because of my previous knowledge of Latin, Italian, French, and Spanish), which was a matter of great amazement and pride for the locals. I had been (warmly) socialised into the local community and become one of its members, albeit bearing a special status: I became a '*solsoní d'adopciò*' (a 'Solsonian by adoption'), as I was called by some, or alternatively a '*català d'adopciò*', as I was also called by others. An example of 'the incorporative power of sport, music, and festivals' (Noyes 2003, 208), and perhaps also an example of how the model of/for Catalan nationalism in general may work, as I am about to argue.

Becoming a *Solsoní d'adopciò* so quickly and by synecdoche a *Català d'adopciò* was due mostly to my becoming a member of a rather popular *comparsa*, and, of course, to my manifest curiosity and respect for their culture, as well as to a genuine will to integrate (although I was always, of course, upfront with everybody about the research motive behind my fixed-term stay in Solsona). It quickly became a matter of pride for myself and for those who had 'believed in me' from the beginning. After all, Solsonins like to perceive and qualify themselves as '*gent tancada*' ('closed people') – which could in fact perhaps also be a sort of meta-perception, that is, a perception, sometimes somewhat embarrassed, of what they think is the perception of others of them. In other words, a form of 'cultural intimacy' (Herzfeld 1997). Integrating so

fast was considered a rather exceptional achievement, to the extent that one or two of my friends congratulated me on managing to be accepted into such a tight community.[9]

However, becoming a member of a popular *comparsa* also had its conditions: I was invited to join not only because by then I had been socially active and visible for months in Solsona, but also because I had not confined myself to speaking Castilian (which is understandably the standard and expected linguistic behaviour for a foreigner), but had rather learnt Catalan, and in time participated in the first carnival after my arrival. As many pointed out in those months, I was the object of a certain curiosity and admiration, and one of the main arguments that I was often confronted with was that there were 'Spaniards' who had been living in Solsona for decades without learning Catalan, and look at this Italian who arrives and speaks it fluently after a handful of months.[10] (Note: obviously not all *comparses* are Catalanist, nor may all members of a *comparsa* be Catalanist; likewise, not all Catalan-speakers are Catalanist, obviously. Tensions, inconsistencies, and open disagreements concerning matters of identity and politics do exist in the microcosm of a *comparsa* just as in the wider social body of the local Catalan society; however, my own *comparsa* is one of those with a rather upfront Catalanist, and actually independentist, stance, which is by far the most common one.)

The Catalan language is widely considered, among Catalans as well as scholars, as *the* one true differential marker of the Catalan nation (Bel 2013; Clua i Fainé 2014; Dowling 2018; Johannes 2019; McRoberts 2001; Noyes 2003; Villarroya 2012; and many others). As Johannes (2019) recently remarked: 'Catalans will not consider another person to be truly Catalan unless they can speak the language, and are comfortable using it regularly'. Catalan politician and architect of modern Catalanism Jordi Pujol took the view that those who speak Catalan, and who live and work in Catalonia, are Catalan. Language has also been key to the claim of Catalonia as an open nationalism, willing to accept those who make the effort to learn the language and integrate'

9 One of my informants in Solsona told me – and several people in Berga confirmed – that in Berga *el Carnaval Solsoní* is considered '*tancat*' ('closed', 'inaccessible') and this especially because of the *comparses* and the difficulty for strangers to become part of one of them.

10 It should also be noted that 'the Catalan interior tends far more [than Barcelona and the coast] to monolingualism in Catalan' (Noyes 2003, 62). Catalan is the quotidian language and by far the most used idiom in Solsona and in Solsonès in general. Castilian is the language of the less integrated sectors in town. Among the large majority of the autochthons, it is confined to speaking with outsiders and little else.

(Johannes 2019, 23);[11] in other words: '*la lengua catalana ha tomado un carácter central, tanto para definir quién es catalán como para marcar el nivel de integración de los extranjeros*' (Clua i Fainé 2014, 80; same argument in Villarroya 2012, 37–38).[12] I can very much confirm this attitude, which, as I have just narrated, functioned in my case as well. (The history of my assimilation or naturalisation was surprisingly similar, methodologically, epistemologically, and perhaps above all psychologically and morally, to the integration of Dorothy Noyes in Berga as described in Noyes 2003, 31–36, 93–95.)

Strictly connected with the problem of language in the formation, maintenance, and transmission of Catalan national identity is that of its 'differential' nature, that it is in a constant dialectic of differentiation and confrontation with Spanish identity (Bel 2013; Clua i Fainé 2014; Dowling 2018; Johannes 2019; Llobera 1997, 2004; Noyes 2003, 2011; and many others).[13] Of course, the positional or relational or differential dimension is at the very basis of whatever form of social differentiation (national among others) and cannot but be grounded on an 'us ≠ them' logic (Delanty 1999): 'we' can only exist in so far as there is a 'you' or a 'they'. This logic, however, does acquire, in our Catalan case, a very specific connotation, especially given the size of the territory and the perpetual negotiation/confrontation with the 'other' *par excellence*, the Spaniards, much in the same vein as other examples of small and close nations and groups (Blok 1998; Noyes 2016; Smith 2013), which often engenders the proverbial phenomenon of the 'narcissism of minor differences', i.e.,

[11] This pattern has also been associated with the 'success' of Catalonia in modern times: 'the success story of Catalonia is that it has not only managed to preserve the identity of the original Catalans, but that it has largely managed to integrate the majority of immigrants into the Catalan imagined community' (Llobera 1997, 307).

[12] The question of the inclusive nature of Catalan nationalism is discussed in many works cited in this chapter, although differently. My own take on nationalism stems from years of reading the historical, philosophical, and anthropological literature tackling this thorny issue, although such a take is consciously limited to (mostly) European history and societies (past and present). I must admit, however, to have been especially influenced by Anthony Smith's approach as developed in Smith 2001 and then distilled and defended in Smith 2013, as well as by ethnosymbolism more in general (Leoussi and Grosby 2007).

[13] What complicates things is that there have been heated debates for years about the standardisation of Catalan and the adoption of this standardized version throughout the region. If the main binary opposition remains Catalan vs Castilian, the issue of linguistic regional variations in different areas of Catalonia, as well as within the macro-area of the Països Catalans, remains a *vexata quaestio* (see Strubell 2011; also Delgado et al this book).

'the idea that identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted, reinforced, and defended against what is closest and represents the greatest threat' (Blok 1998, 39).[14]

Affirming the importance of the Catalan language in the making of Catalan national identity might seem a tautology, but here I would like to stress especially the importance of *comparses*, which are no joke, either (especially if in connection with language, as in my case): they put into force and oil up the symbolic and ritual machinery on the basis of which a sense of local *as* national (and national *as* local) belonging emerges within the micro-society of Solsona. Together with numerous other factors, among which are education, state institutions, local cultural patterns, popular mythology, and political influences, this same machinery contributes to the telluric movement that makes the nation emerge, amalgamating ideas, claims, and dreams of unity and continuity into the imagination of a common past, future, and destiny. This is how the 'smaller identity' of Solsona, its being a community made of 'small groups' (Noyes 2016a), often in competition with each other, flows into the stream of a greater, 'imagined' community (Anderson 1983) of millions of individuals not knowing each other personally but nevertheless feeling associated by that collective sense of belonging, deeply rooted in the individual but aggregated in and expressed though the masses, that we call a nation. As Noyes wrote several years ago:

> all communities are imagined, but some are more imagined than others. […] Catalonia was a linguistic, cultural, social and economic unity with clear boundaries and reasonable internal homogeneity; it was a territorial

[14] If on the one hand social constructivism has taught us many a valuable lesson about how to de-essentialise social formations and representations, on the other it risks leaving us without interpretative tools: constructivism and its close kin, deconstructionism, are only the beginning of the analysis, not at all its end. It is, for instance, not sufficient to weaponise deconstructionism against cultural essentialisation and naturalisation, these universal and most human dynamics, nor should it be desirable to fall into the gravitational force at the opposite pole of reification: utter relativism and cultural denialism and cognitive nihilism. If all identities are socially constructed, as they indeed are, then the fact of an identity being constructed and emically naturalised is, *per se*, nothing particular or specific, and loses much of its explanatory power. What is at stake here (as it should be in any similar interpretative endeavour) is not to ascertain that these or those identities are constructed, for this is an unproblematic assumption – and a banal one at that – but rather to understand how and why certain identity configurations are produced and reproduced the way they are. And – *soit dit en passant* – the fact of national identity being, just like anything else, socially constructed, does not make it any less *real*.

> political unit sufficiently inscribed in various forms of memory and practice to suggest an identity among its empirical inhabitants. Performance provided a different basis for lived experience to lend reality to imaginings. (Noyes 2003, 204)[15]

The central-Catalan phenomenon of the Solsonian *comparsa* is, ultimately, a symbolic sublimation of Catalanism and a praxiological substantiation of both its intrinsic limits and its potentially inclusive force. Its strengths and weaknesses, or more neutrally speaking its mode of existence, shape the way it embodies, emanates, and enforces 'groupness' (Brubaker and Cooper 2000) or 'togetherness' (Scruton 2014), but also affinity and familiarity, rootedness, or any other term one prefers in order to conceptualise and define the experiential, emotional, and representational kernel a nation is made of.

BOTIFFARADES, BOOZE, AND BLASPHEMY: THE INNER AND OUTER LIMITS OF INCLUSIVE NATIONALISM

The inclusive and assimilating force of becoming part of a *comparsa* and of learning Catalan was in my case fully at work. After participating in the first carnival '*a tope*' ('to the fullest'), as the locals liked to say, I began to be offered support, in whatever issue, regularly. Suddenly, all doors were open to me. A few months before I had set off to study Catalan popular culture; in the process, I had myself become popular. As will become clear in this section, however, all that glitters is not gold, and I have not indulged in this exercise of ethnographic introspection to congratulate myself for my own success in the city of Solsona. Rather more simply, I dwelled upon this case because I cannot possibly know any other any better. But my case was far from being isolated. In fact, my observations and interpretations in this chapter are based on a synthesis of the patterns associating my case and similar ones I observed and studied (or was told about) during my stay. The conclusion is that all the better-integrated immigrants in Solsona were/are part of a *comparsa* (here again with a few exceptions, which confirm the rule). But as said, all that glitters is not gold.

[15] Even though Noyes does not endorse or reject (or mention) Anthony Smith's idea of ethnosymbolism (Smith 2001), i.e., the *longue durée* cultural complex that is one of the sources and engines of the idea (and the factual historical reality) of nation and nationalism, these words and the conclusions of her research seem to point in this direction. In any case, Catalonian national identity and nationalism fit quite naturally into Smith's interpretative framework and lend themselves to be considered, in my opinion, a rather paradigmatic case of ethnosymbolic nation(alism).

In the first pages of this chapter, I argued that the inclusive force of the *comparses* has its boundaries and limits, as do all dynamics established and stemming from networks and grouped forms of engagement. Once a person has been socially visible and shown a will to integrate, possibly learned Catalan, and subsequentially been invited to join a *comparsa*, all that it takes to stay there and build up a strong relationship with the local community is that certain behavioural and moral codes are respected, the spirit of associationism is embraced, and a sense of reciprocity and fairness is cultivated. (I hereby note fleetingly that it is not casual that some of these virtues are normally associated with what is considered yet one other quintessential Catalan virtue: '*pactisme*', i.e., 'pragmatism' and the 'art of compromise'.) The most visible exception to this otherwise well-established pattern is the case of the Islamic minority composed of, as said, mostly Moroccans. This chapter is no place to board the complex, thorny issue of migration to Catalonia from Maghreb countries and the integration of these migrants into Catalan societies. I will content myself with a few observations that can help highlight and calibrate the main arguments I have been developing so far.

The general feeling in Solsona concerning immigration and integration today is that whereas problems do not subsist with Europeans and other nationalities, things stand quite differently with the '*moros*' (the fairly derogatory term with which Muslim Maghrebis, who make up about 8–9% of the current residents, but also other Arabs of Islamic faith, are often referred to). Cohabitation is broadly considered possible but dysfunctional, and integration poor. As I have argued elsewhere (Testa 2020b, 28–29), this might be partly explained by the decision of Muslim Solsonians not to participate in the Carnival, although, of course, abstaining from the Carnival can be considered as both a cause and a consequence of poor integration.[16]

There seems to be a rather sharp generational divide, some of the youngest male descendants of the second wave of immigration from North Africa (from around the first decade of the 21st century), not more than a few dozen though, being more participative, although still with a very visible gender gap.

[16] This argument can rightly recall one of the concepts of (and long-lasting debate about) '*Leitkultur*', a concept theorised by political scientist Bassam Tibi, with which he intended to highlight the fact that the failures of multiculturalism in efforts of integration in Europe in the past few decades could be mitigated by establishing policies that would lead migrant communities to embrace a set of common values and views relevant – or even essential – to the receiving country. The sharing of this ensemble of relevant ideas and practices representing the 'core' of the receiving culture (the *Leitkultur*, precisely) would lead, so the theory goes, to a better integration of migrants, or at least a better coexistence between migrants and locals (Tibi 2001).

The refusal of the adults is, however, absolute and unanimous, and is motivated by four major representational, symbolic, and behavioural aspects: 1) the widespread immoderate consumption of alcohol and consequent intoxication; states of drunkenness and hangover characterising the existential landscape of Solsona during the entire carnival week; 2) the likewise ubiquitous cooking and consumption of pork meat in streets and public squares, especially in the form of one of the all-time symbols of Carnival: the *botifarres* ('sausages'); 3) the mockery of the clergy and of religious symbolism, sometimes verging into veritable forms of carnivalesque blasphemy; 4) transgressions and excesses of all sorts and the presence of lascivious representations.

These practices are carried out, today, by men and women alike, teenage boys and girls alike, and are extremely common throughout the festival, just like sexualised and often obscene *bromes* and *actes*. These elements of the ethos of the Carnival are not specific features of Solsona's festival, though: they are solidly established *longue durée* features in the history of carnival in Europe (Testa 2020a). In Solsona, they exist as they have existed in thousands of other European cities, towns, and villages for several centuries. They are not going to disappear any time soon. But they are deemed as outrageous and utterly unacceptable by the local Islamic minority (especially the grown-ups).

Every person acquainted with southern Europe and with Catalonia in particular knows the cultural prominence of eating and drinking in company and in public. This cultural trait can hardly ever be stressed enough. Unsurprisingly, it has been the object of systematic cultural analysis, for its being a specific modality of national identity construction and maintenance in Catalonia: years ago, Alexander Robertson described food as 'the essence of conviviality in Catalonia', stressing the 'binding power' of commensality (Robertson, 2010, 72); more recently, Venetia Johannes devoted a book to this aspect (2019); in her chapter in this book, she stresses that 'through consuming festive foods and shared dishes, yet also being aware of territorial variations, Catalans are involved in creating an imagined community through food'.[17]

Solsonins love to eat out. Just like most other Catalans, they indulge in commensality willingly, passionately, and very frequently. During my ethnographic fieldwork, I counted more than 40 snack bars, restaurants, and places to eat out in a town of 9,000, which is a rather impressive ratio. During the Carnival week, at least one main meal is consumed out every day, very often both main meals, if extreme hangover does not prevent that from happening – hangover or the typical state of prostrated stupor that hits many locals after the third or fourth day of binging and not sleeping enough.

[17] This importance has been emphasised to the extent of subsuming commensality and community into nationalism: 'gastronationalism', as it has been called (a concept by Michaela DeSoucey discussed by Johannes in 2019, 5–11).

Drinking alcoholic beverages in company and in public has a very important, actually an essential, social function in Solsona. Abstaining from alcohol consumption and from the social practices associated with it, particularly during Carnival, is usually met with puzzlement, disappointment, and sometimes even open reprobation and contempt, no matter the social, ethnic, or religious background of the abstinent. Abstinence is a practice that, if not directly impacting coexistence, can factually and seriously impair efforts of integration.

Such excesses are obviously condemned (but ultimately tacitly tolerated) by the Catholic clergy and the most fervent believers, with even some timid, occasional, and helpless forms of condemnation. Again, Carnival and the Church have not been at odds with one another in Solsona only over the last 50 years, for they have for centuries all over Europe (Testa 2020a). This is made all the more dissonant for Solsona, as it has been proud of its episcopate, in spite of being a very small city, for centuries. Popular devotion was very strong until not so long ago (A.a.V.v. 1994; Llorens i Solé 1987), with a particular emphasis, just like the rest of central Catalonia, on Marian cults. However, Christianity and traditional forms of devotion have been losing ground of late in Solsona, no less than in other parts of the Western industrialised world.

For decades, *el Carnaval de Solsona* has incorporated elements of parody of the local '*Festa Major*' (Vilaseca and Trilla 2007).[18] The four main carnival giants themselves are a parody of those of the *Festa Major*. If the latter is historical, religious, solemn, aristocratic, and associated with Franco's *Nacionalcatolicismo*, the former is recent, desecrating, joyful, popular, and associated with post-Francoism and *catalanisme*. The resulting mocking of Christian symbolism is ostensibly displayed during the week-long celebrations, not only in parodic but at times actually overtly blasphemous ways. In fact, the ridicule or even vilification of the Catholic Church in general overflows into an interesting kind of 'carnivalesque blasphemy'. Frequently, during past carnivals, the clerical hierarchies have been the object of scorn; in particular, Solsona being an old episcopate, it is the bishop who has often been made the object of mockery. Even the most important historical statue of the city, the Romanesque *Mare de Deu*, a revered Madonna hosted in the cathedral, which is present in the local prayers and folklore, has not escaped carnivalisation: for example, in a poster adorning one of the streets during the carnival of 2010, the baby Jesus in her arms was substituted with an image of the *Xut*, the giant

[18] 'During the year there are two very different festivals: Carnival, at the end of winter, with continuous partying, and the solemn Festa Major (town festival), from the 7th to the 11th of September' (Solsona Turisme 2018).

owl of the local folklore. Other episodes could be mentioned.[19] No wonder the Catholic hierarchies, interpreting a role that has been theirs for centuries, have been condemning the Carnival and its excesses.

Through an array of forms of syncretism, invention, reinvention, and symbolic manipulation, the locals reflect metaphorically, metonymically, or simply creatively and playfully, on their own relationship with the Catholic Church, and on the paradoxes of this long relationship. And this is what has also happened vis-à-vis the former political order: 'overwhelmingly reclaimed in the democratic period, Carnival now forces Catalans to question themselves instead of challenging the regime' (Noyes 2011, 218). As in all complicated relationships, extremes and roles are played alternatively, and, in fact, in an only apparently funny manner, the Solsonians interpret and display their being 'good Christians' during the pious and solemn *Festa Major*, and not quite so during the transgressive Carnival. There is no contradiction in this, but rather contrast and complementarity, just like there has never been a contradiction, but rather contrast and complementarity, between Carnival and Lent: Catholic Europe has been experiencing this for some 900 years now (Testa 2020a). Ultimately, however, Carnival lacking the sympathies of the most-fervent local Catholics is not the same as being unpopular among the local Muslim Moroccans, because the abstinence of the former is excused as an exception and an eccentricity (they are born and bred Catalans, after all, and it is older people anyway, the argument goes), whereas for the latter it is a painful sign or reminder of lack of mutual understanding and shared beliefs (or shared *Leitkultur*).

Alcohol consumption and intoxication, pork meat and *botifarrades* ('sausage-centred feasts'), youth and women's transgressive and licentious behaviour, blasphemy and desecration (no matter if done in jest and not seriously) are directly and starkly at odds with Islamic religious and behavioural prescriptions, and also at odds with the values and worldview upheld by most of the Muslims of Maghrebi provenance living in Solsona. They could even be considered veritable taboos.[20] This incompatibility becomes a factual impediment not only for further integration, but also for successful coexistence, sometimes fuelling on the contrary distrust and antipathy that are also rooted

[19] I am in possession of a secret video, absolutely not meant for circulation, in which a carnivalesque caricature of the Mass, adorned moreover with satanic symbols, is performed by a renowned *comparsa* in a local rural chapel. Other sacrilegious acts are very common during Carnival; e.g., in 2018, a gigantic 666 was painted in red by anonymous vandals on the portal of the Episcopal palace across from the cathedral, and washed away by the sacristan the day after.

[20] These aspects are discussed also in Testa 2020b; in the same study an analysis is offered about Solsona's Carnival and the religious sphere more generally.

in reciprocally established patterns of mutual otherisation and suspicion. Although things are visibly changing through the growing participation of the youth of North African descent, who are also locally schooled and able to speak Catalan (which is one of the driving factors of this change), this concerns almost exclusively the boys and young men, who are given more freedom by their families; for the participation of girls and young women is still extremely rare, and that of adults and older people practically non-existent.

The refusal to take part in the Carnival and comply with its norms of solicited intoxication, exaggerated commensality, segmented togetherness, transgression, and ritual negation of *respecte* and *seny* is one of the reasons why, in Solsona, only rarely are the adult Moroccans considered full members of the local community, *ergo* part of the Catalan nation as a whole, for, among other reasons, as has been intelligently written, 'festival is a labour and participation is obligatory' (Noyes 2011, 208). Many Solsonians lament this lack of interest and participation from the community of Muslims; others hardly notice, or at any rate ignore or are not interested in its causes; others, on the other hand, are aware of some of the implications of this refusal, and consider it as a proof of the impossibility of true co-existence. On the one hand, the inability of Carnival to change its *longue durée* and crystallised cultural features in order to try to include the recent migrants in the cultural dynamics of the local ritual life and its networks is an inner limit (old traditions and habits are not so easily changed). On the other hand, the unwillingness of the Islamic minority to change their beliefs and attitudes towards Carnival is an outer limit. Through a ritually activated cultural osmosis, the inner and outer boundaries of Carnival inclusiveness overlap and interpenetrate with the boundaries of Catalan inclusive nationalism.

CONCLUSIONS

Solsona's Carnival can be considered a '*fête de transition*': a 'festival of transition' is a category of festive events that were invented and/or recodified, acquiring most of their forms and meanings and their utmost social relevance, during a period of political rupture, radical transformations (both influenced by and influencing the festival), and consequential transition into a new social order.[21] More than 45 years after the beginning of that transition, another

[21] The case of the *Masopust* of Hlinsko in the Czech Republic, which was the object of my previous ethnographic research, is, in this sense, comparable to that of Solsona. Of course, the post-socialist transition was very different from the post-Francoist, given the major ideological and political differences between those different regimes (communist and atheist the former, conservative and Catholic the latter). Nevertheless, in both cases the festival offered a symbolic capital to be

eventful rupture, the 2017 referendum, shook Catalonia, disrupting decades of *pactisme* and more or less peaceful *convivència*, determining a situation of 'pseudo-transition', and precipitating the region into a new social and political crisis. Issues of nation (what is Catalonia?), Catalanness and national identity (who is Catalan?), nationality (how can one belong to the Catalan nation?), and nationalism and Catalanism (how and why does one adhere to the Catalan nation and strive for its assertion and recognition?) have become more urgent than ever.

Like other collective forms of action powered by, among other things, the traditional Catalan proclivity for associationism, *el Carnaval*, veined and animated by its *comparses* and *colles*, reveals itself as a cultural device that connects the lived experience of the empirical small group to the imagined community of the nation, through the mediation of the meso-level of 'central Catalanness', with Solsona being the centre of this imagined centre, in the (typically Catalan) 'nesting' interplay between local, regional, and national identity (Guiu 2013; Kammerer 2014; Noyes 2003; Testa 2019).

What is particularly interesting as a consideration in the political anthropology of this case study is that the assertion and expression of national identity – whether or not we agree on calling this 'nationalism' – that are made through such a device are framed, *pace* Anderson, against (or at least in open and strong criticism against) the state and its institutions. The state is not only in the background of the nation-binding ritual device and of its complex symbolic machinery: it actually becomes its main antagonist (if not the utopian Catalan state, certainly the very real Spanish state …).

For those living it as an explicitly Catalanist festival – and they are the vast majority – *el Carnaval* stands as a model or a miniature of 'deep Catalanism' itself, based as it is on a set of solid experiential or representational pillars: 1) its being born as a form of reaction to and in defiance of the moribund Francoism of the mid-1970 – which allows the locals to symbolically capitalise on the idea of resistance to Francoism; 2) associationism and the civic spirit, embodied in the *comparses*, of doing things outside of the institutional framework ('*los catalanes hacen cosas*', said former Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy in 2015 in an interview that immediately went viral through social media, probably thereby conveying more meaning than he himself intended); 3) the *comparses* being '*com una família*', thus naturalising membership in a rather artificial network of people into a type of family-like group to which one

mobilised, during the transition, in order to model a discourse of non-complicity or even open resistance vis-à-vis the regime. Other 'festivals of transition', according to my definition, are those analysed in Bertolotti 1990; Creed 2011; Noyes 2003; Testa 2017b, 2017c, just to name a few examples.

'belongs' – the simile of the family is a strong one, the importance of family being a 'charter myth' of central Catalan identity (Llobera 1997).

El Carnaval, in its complexity and articulations, tells much about Solsona. For some, it actually tells everything one needs to know about Solsona.[22] Its '*essència*', as the *comparses* have been qualified, make it possible for locals to weave the threads of the social fabric as well as to articulate and express their 'being Catalans' in central Catalonia.[23] And in fact, the preceding and complementary chapter focusses on the aspects of identity and national construction, social cohesion, and community-binding though investment of energy and time, material and financial waste, and the resulting creation of symbolic value. In this chapter, I have tried to highlight the dynamics through which these aims are achieved, and especially the role of the semi-formal network of the *comparses* in establishing and reproducing not only the behavioural and attitudinal patterns that characterise the ritual week, but actually a model of how Catalan inclusive nationalism can or could work.

We should beware, however, of a risk of reductionism and determinism. Since at least the age of Durkheim, stating that a public ritual in the form of a major popular festival is 'prosocial' is at best a tautology, at worst just a

[22] Solsona's Carnival has already for some time been perceived as one of its most important – if not its most important – piece of 'cultural heritage'. In this bipartite study I have not, however, tackled the issue of heritage-making and its cluster of related socio-cultural processes (such as marketisation, touristification, musealisation, and other '-ations'), as I have done elsewhere (Testa 2019, 2020b, 2021). There is now a rich body of scholarship about heritagisation in other areas of Catalonia or in the region as a whole, which has been growing after the ratification of the UNESCO ICH in 2003. The first ground-breaking study about the impact of the UNESCO policies and imaginers, which was devoted to Catalonia's first UNESCO's item, the *Patum*, is Noyes 2006 (which in many respects complements Noyes 2003). Afterwards, other scholars, especially but not exclusively Catalan, have shown a great curiosity and eagerness for the study of cultural heritage dynamics in Catalonia: an excellent introduction to this scholarship is Del Mármol Cartañà and Roigé Ventura 2014, but many other authors have been working on these topics, among whom, apart from those present in this book, at least Ferran Estrada Bonell, Claire Guiu, and Eliseu Carbonell Camós should be remembered.

[23] What I have attempted to do here had already been done, differently and about a different case study, by Dorothy Noyes in her *Fire in the Plaça* (Noyes 2003), although the situation of Catalonia has changed quite dramatically since she published her book, and even more since she did her fieldwork in Berga; see, for instance, the still exemplary analysis of the dynamics through which festivity, social memory, collective identity, community imagination, past construction, and nationalism interact and converge during the circumscribed time–space of the most important public event and ritual in Berga: Noyes 2003, 202–206.

banal statement. Prosociality should not overshadow other components that actually seem to contradict the general trend: as I explain in greater detail in another publication, 'it is important to stress this aspect here, in order not to fall into the trap of an implicit and uncritical neo-functionalism. Identity is not a monolithic social configuration, nor are its processual dynamics linear and predictive' (Testa 2019, 89).

The present chapter has tried to demonstrate, among other things, how inclusiveness and cohesion also come at a cost, and that even the architecture of the apparently 'consistent' carnivalesque infrastructure of the *comparse*s is far from being straightforward, homogeneous, or free of ruptures and tensions. And, again at odds with the traditional functionalistic interpretation of festivals, especially in rural or provincial areas, *el Carnaval* seems to represent one of the driving forces in the political polarisation that has followed the failed Catalan attempt to gain independence in 2017. Even more importantly, Solsona's main public ritual has the power to integrate and socialise individuals within its local community, within its microcosm of central and 'deep Catalanness', but also, alas, to prevent that, thus proving, by metonymy, that Catalan national(istic) inclusiveness also has its limitations, inner and outer. After all, ritually fostered cultural or civic nationalism is a form of, precisely, nationalism.[24] But then again nobody can be blamed for that, for utter inclusiveness cannot exist: it would be *ipso facto* a contradiction in terms.

[24] My conclusions are therefore in line, generally speaking, with the idea of contemporary Catalan nationalism being a form of 'civic' or 'cultural' nationalism (as claimed in the past by Llobera 2004; for definitions of civic and cultural nationalism, see Smith 2013 and Hutchinson 2013), although throughout the development of Catalan nationalism things have stood differently at different times (for a more recent assessment of the idea of Catalanism as a civic nationalism, see Dowling 2018, 34–36).

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