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Megaprojects in austerity times: Populism, politicisation, and the breaking of the neoliberal consensus

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Abstract

Drawing on the literature on neoliberalism and populism this paper examines the potential of contentious politics that target iconic megaprojects for promoting societal politicisation and effectively challenge the neoliberal consensus over the necessity of sustained growth and competitiveness, in a context of enduring austerity. Using the case of Valencia as an entry point, it looks at how, just as decision makers and global architects alike had mobilised iconic megaprojects and events to generate consent for the city's neoliberal urban policy, opposition movements, with less economic resources but in innovative ways, provided an alternative narrative to interpret the urban policy and its social consequences. Empirically, this paper draws upon 35 semi-structured research interviews and a press coverage analysis of national and regional newspapers. Interviews were conducted with urban environment professionals, members of business associations, members of political parties, elected politicians, journalists, community representatives and members of the social movements involved. From both theoretical and empirical perspectives, the case of Valencia raises important questions regarding the potential of populist strategies to foster politicisation and challenge the neoliberal post-political consensus.

Keywords

austerity, iconic megaprojects, neoliberalism, populism, post-politics

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摘要
根据关于新自由主义和民粹主义的文献， 本文考察了抗争政治的潜力， 这种抗争政治针对促进社会政治化的标志性大型项目， 并就持久经济紧缩的背景下持续发展和竞争的必然性对新自由主义共识有效地提出了质疑。 以西班牙的巴伦西亚市为切入点， 本文着眼于反对派运动如何以更少的经济资源、 却以创新的方式提供另外一种叙述方式来解释城市政策及其社会后果， 就像决策者和全球建筑师如何动用标志性大型项目和活动来为该市的新自由主义城市政策赢得同意一样。实证方面，本文采用了 35 次半结构化的研究访谈，并对全国性和地区性报纸的新闻报道进行了分析。访谈对象包括城市环境专业人员、商业协会成员、政党成员、民选政治家、记者、社区代表和相关社会运动成员。从理论和实证的角度，就民粹主义战略促进政治化和挑战新自由主义后政治共识的潜力，巴伦西亚这个案例提出了重要问题。

关键词
经济紧缩、标志性大型项目、新自由主义、民粹主义、后政治

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Introduction

Once coveted by city governments seeking to replicate the ‘Guggenheim effect’, applauded by the media, and revered by the general public, iconic megaprojects and mega events seem to have lost their allure. To many commentators’ surprise, plans to build a branch of the Guggenheim in Helsinki were rejected by the city’s councillors in 2016 (Siegal, 2016). Similarly, more and more cities have started to vote against hosting the Olympic Games. Thus, Oslo in 2014, Hamburg and Rome in 2016, Innsbruck in 2017 and Calgary in 2018 announced that they would not be bidding for the games since the expected economic benefits of hosting them did not justify the large investment they required. While megaprojects and events have always generated discontent in some groups given that, despite generating an appearance of growth, they tend to divert funds from the provision of health, education and other social services (Swyngedouw et al., 2002), rarely have they failed to gain the general public’s consent to such an extent.

After the 2008 financial downturn, however, the fiscally drained public sector in many western countries was less able, or less willing, to invest in iconic megaprojects while the bursting of the property bubble meant that the property sector was less able to generate returns for the private sector. Moreover, in times of austerity, the contrast between expenditure in megaprojects and declining budgets for social protection made official populist discourses presenting megaprojects as symbols of opportunity and generators of economic growth increasingly implausible. Instead, it was possible for some political groups and grassroots organisations to identify key megaprojects as signs of failure and mobilise their discourse against them.

Through the case study of Valencia, this paper looks at how different populist discourses have been deployed to create either consent or dissent around entrepreneurial policies based on the use of megaprojects and events. In doing so, it contributes to understanding the different natures of populist politics, and how they are mobilised at the local scale.

In an enduring austerity scenario in which the legitimacy of emblematic projects and

events has been seriously questioned, this paper also raises important questions about the potential of populist strategies to foster politicisation and challenge the neoliberal post-political consensus.

Methodological approach

This paper is based on an in-depth study of the urban political arena around which iconic megaprojects and mega events have been contested in Valencia. The case offers an illuminating example of the kinds of contradictions that appear in attempts at securing the social legitimacy of growth-oriented urban policies through the use of iconic megaprojects and a fractious urban political context that is opposing these projects.

Methodologically, this paper uses a mix of qualitative data, including 35 semi-structured interviews and a press coverage analysis of national newspapers. Interviewees were selected on the basis of their first-hand knowledge and involvement in Valencia's urban politics. Participants include urban environment professionals, members of business associations, members of political parties, elected politicians, journalists, community representatives and members of the social movements involved. In addition to being used for the corroboration of information and augmentation of the evidence from the interviews, the press coverage analysis has allowed to a chronology of events to be established and provided a measure of the changing ways in which Valencia's urban policy is represented in the press.

Megaprojects and the neoliberalism-populism nexus

Iconic megaprojects play a crucial discursive and ideological role in the creation of a neoliberal consensus since, in addition to being empirical manifestations of neoliberalism and conduits of neoliberal modes of governance, they are mobilised, often through the use of a populist discourse, as key symbolic elements within a politics based on competing with other localities for economic growth (Swyngedouw et al., 2002). Being at the centre of a populist discourse also means that iconic megaprojects can provide an entry point into the analysis of populism. In fact, despite its contradictions, which make neoliberalism prone to being challenged, neoliberal populist discourse has been highly successful in establishing its own interpretation of the world as common sense (Guardino, 2018). Populism, for its part, has also been analysed as a symptom of the post-political condition of contemporary democracies because it serves to conceal the negative social consequences of neoliberal policies (Azmanova, 2018). It hence becomes a technology of power that pre-empts civil society's possible opposition to neoliberal policies.

In addition to promoting neoliberal consensus, populism has a cause and effect link with neoliberalism in the sense that the exacerbation of inequality caused by neoliberal policies – particularly the subjective interpretation of that inequality – has brought about an upsurge of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Bettache and Chiu, 2019). Consequently, populism can be interpreted as a response to depoliticisation, a call for mattering politically, and a way of bringing collective experiences of inequality to the political table. From this perspective, iconic megaprojects provide clear empirical instances of the negative social and economic impacts of neoliberal policies that foster such politicising reactions. As a result, their symbolism can also be mobilised through a populist discourse against neoliberalism.

Populism and neoliberalism, as reflected in megaprojects, are, therefore, linked in different and somehow opposing ways, not least because populism can be both depoliticising (when used to promote the neoliberal

common-sense) and re-politicising (when it constitutes a way of reclaiming the right to politics). As a result, populism can contribute to both the making and the breaking of neoliberal consensus. There is, therefore, a need for a better understanding of the different features that characterise populism for, although it can signal a revival of politics, it can also be exclusionary and even totalitarian.

Populist discourse and identity formation

Scholars apply different theoretical perspectives to the study of populism. The main two are Mudde's ideational approach and Laclau's discursive approach (Dean, 2023).

The ideational approach emphasises the role of ideas, and, thus, defines populism as 'a set of ideas that not only depicts society as divided between "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," but also claims that politics is about respecting popular sovereignty at any cost' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018: 1669). Accordingly, the ideational approach considers populism as a 'thin' ideology that, although distinct, needs to be combined with other ideologies or ideological elements to be useful as a political ideology (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Stanley, 2008). This also means that populism can take many different forms and political hues.

The discursive approach sees populism as a discursive style with its own internal logic. Such style is independent of the ideological content of the discourse and the policies being put forward and therefore can be deployed by both the political left and right (Silver et al., 2020). Whatever the ideology, nevertheless, populist discourse articulates a series of collective demands in pursuit of a political project that challenges oppression by the elite (Dean, 2023).

In short, for both traditions populism has two key characteristics: it is people-centred – 'the people' are the source of legitimate power – and anti-elitist – there exists an antagonism between the people and the hegemonic power and ideas (Kioupkiolis, 2016; Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). Also for both approaches populism allows for different articulations, most often described as left-wing or right-wing, but which can also be classed along other lines, such as exclusionary/inclusionary, democratic/anti-democratic or top-down/bottom-up (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).

Capturing the key characteristics present in each of the approaches, Brubaker (2020) defines populism as 'a discursive and stylistic repertoire', which, in addition to positioning the elite as both 'outside' and 'on top' of the people, combines elements such as majoritarianism (prioritising the needs and interests of the majority), anti-institutionalism (direct rather than mediated), protectionism (protection of the people in terms of security, culture and economy) and antagonistic re-politicisation (Brubaker, 2020: 60).

The significance of understanding populism as a 'discursive repertoire', is that, since discourse is a semiotic device that allows for the understanding and the positioning of the individual within the political world, it provides a way into the analysis of identity formation, including the construction of a political identity. Thus, populist discourse is not only linked to identity formation (construction of the people). Such identity formation, in turn, can provide the basis for politicisation processes (construction of the people in opposition to 'the elite') (Popartan et al., 2020).

Moreover, the discursive approach usefully provides a set of operational criteria that need to be concurrently present to characterise a discourse as populist. That is, the reference to 'the people' needs to be central to the discourse, and the discourse needs to present society as divided into two antagonistic blocs (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).

Populism: Varieties and place

The key varieties of populism – left-wing populism and right-wing populism – present differences in terms of construction of the people, emotional dynamics, discourse and identity formation.

Right-wing populism's understanding of 'the people' has anti-democratic and authoritarian connotations (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014). 'The people' are the natives – those entitled to benefit from the rights derived from citizenship – while migrants, refugees and minorities are excluded. The 'corrupt elite' is the cultural elite (Bonikowski et al., 2019). Conversely, left-wing populism frames 'the people' in an inclusive and democratic fashion (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014) since its main focus is economic inequality and injustice. In this case, the 'pure people' are those who suffer from economic injustice and neoliberal policies, and the 'corrupt elite' is formed by those who economically exploit them, namely an economic elite often linked to neoliberal globalisation (Bonikowski et al., 2019).

In terms of emotional dynamics, for both left-wing and right-wing populisms the appeal to emotions is an important element of their discourse. Emotions are used to frame political issues and generate social cohesion and support for certain policies (for instance entrepreneurial policies that appeal to feelings of local pride in some instances of right-wing populism). However, as Salmela and von Scheve (2018) have argued, right- and left-wing differ in their targets of anger and the role of such anger. While right-wing populism represses shame and turns it into anger and hatred against 'the other', left-wing populism acknowledges shame and uses it to create bonds with others with similar grievances against neoliberal policies.

In terms of discourse, Brubaker (2020) has argued that in both right-wing and left-wing populist discourse the opposition between the elite and the people is both horizontal – in terms of outsiders and insiders – and vertical – those on the bottom against those on the top – in economic, social and cultural terms. For instance, economic elites, in addition to being privileged or 'above' in terms of wealth, are seen as globally mobile and detached from the values, interests and identities of the common people, and for that reason 'outside'. The main difference, however, is that the aim of left-wing discourse is to motivate aggrieved citizens to act politically as a collective with an emancipatory goal (Salmela and von Scheve, 2018).

The politicising potential of left-wing populism lies in the construction of emancipatory collective political identities and the effectiveness of the populist discourse to motivate political collective action. Yet, the politicising capacity of a specific populist discourse needs to be problematised. Drawing upon the literature on post-politics, which understands the political as the evidence of the nonexistence of a fundamental, unquestionable ground of society (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2015), I argue that a left-wing populist discourse can be more aptly characterised as politicising in scope when, in addition to contesting the negative effects of neoliberal policies, it aims to challenge neoliberalism ideologically by opening the possibility of establishing an alternative social order.

In any case, left-wing populism is linked to the construction of emancipatory collective political identities. It is inclusive and supportive of the precarious identities of the losers of neoliberalism. On the other hand, right-wing populism protects identities that are acquired by birth or through belonging to a community, such as nationality, ethnicity or religion (Salmela and von Scheve, 2018). Thus, right-wing populism is frequently linked to nationalism[1] since both have at their core the definition of a group

of people, the 'pure people' in the case of the former and the nation in the case of the latter (Bonikowski et al., 2019).

Moreover, both right-wing populism and nationalism are particularly suited for the task of mobilising the wider public in support of neoliberal growth strategies and/or political projects by equating success in economic terms to the interests of the people or the nation. In this way, through the use of soft power often in the form of a populist discourse, a common-sense that internalises the neoliberal mindset is created (Anderson, 2016; Guardino, 2018; Ramazzotti, 2020), ultimately negating the capacity to imagine systemic alternatives to neoliberal capitalism, and therefore contributing to societal depoliticisation. Such kind of populist discourse can be described as depoliticising. Although coercion is still crucial to achieving domination (McClanahan, 2019), it is the variable combination of soft and hard power – material violence and internalised logics – that make such domination, and with it the neoliberal project, so durable and difficult to challenge. Along these lines, entrepreneurial place-making through the use of megaprojects offers an example of what has been termed neoliberal nationalism, 'a new modality of urban geopolitics' in which urban space is mobilised to both reinforce (national) identities at the local sale, and to acquire relevance in the global stage (Véron, 2021: 11).

The question remains as to whether left-wing populism can mobilise place and identities linked to it with an emancipatory purpose, that is, to challenge neoliberal nationalist constructions of place, and ultimately neoliberalism. In any case, noting how populist narratives are increasingly concerned with place has prompted some commentators to call for the need to 'conceptualise populism as a spatial phenomenon' (Lizotte, 2019: 139). That includes considering the different scales at which populism operates. Although populism has usually been studied at the national scale (Silver et al., 2020) the analysis of populism at sub-national scales can offer important insights into its emotional dynamics. Iconic megaprojects, because they are global in scope but highly localised artefacts, offer a particularly useful look into the ways in which narratives about place can be used to leverage emotions and create collective identities.

Local leaders make populist discourse emotionally and politically relevant to the local audience by making reference to local culture, history and urban space. Such narratives mobilise emotions linked to attachment to place and national identity. However, since place allows for multiple interpretations, narratives about place are also contested. Similarly, they can be purely 'local' in scope or, as with neoliberal nationalism, also directed to the global scale (Lizotte, 2019; Popartan et al., 2020).

Crisis, populist discourse and breaking the neoliberal consensus

According to Rodrik (2017), the ways in which globalisation affects a certain society influences what variant of populism this society is more likely to develop. Territories that receive economic migrants and refugees usually see the emergence of right-wing or exclusionary variants of populism. Territories whose economies have been negatively affected by globalisation are more likely to see the emergence of more inclusive, emancipatory variants of populism. However, while the emergence of populism is linked to the socio-economic consequences of globalisation, there is scope for political agency since its political orientation depends on how such consequences are narrated and mobilised by populist figures (Rodrik, 2017).

The success of a specific discourse or interpretation of reality over competing ones depends not only on how plausible such discourse is, but on the capacity and resources available for its mobilisation (Sum and Jessop, 2013). This fact opens up questions regarding the possibility of the emergence of opposing orientations of populism in national and sub-national contexts. It also suggests that under certain circumstances right-wing variants of populism can be replaced with more inclusive, left-wing emancipatory forms of populism and political action (or vice versa).

In the aftermath of the 2008 economic downturn anti-austerity protests signalled a change in public attitudes not only towards neoliberal policies, such as those based on the use of megaprojects (Nagel and Satoh, 2019), and their social consequences, but also towards how these consequences were managed, and benefits and losses were distributed (Azmanova, 2018). Austerity certainly changed the playing field of urban politics not only socially, economically and politically but also symbolically and ideologically. Crisis, as discussed, can act as a catalyst for re-politicisation, often in the form of a left-wing populist mobilisation. From this perspective, della Porta's (2015) research on social movements and the contestation of austerity highlights the importance for contentious politics of ideational issues, such as identification and psychological perceptions of both self and political community, and the ideological implications of neoliberalisation.

As Stavrakakis et al. (2018) have argued, both the real and symbolic aspects of crisis, as well as the relationship between them, need to be taken into consideration. Crises are as much how we construct, interpret and narrate them as an objective reality. Thus, different groups put forward competing interpretations of crisis in regards to their causes, consequences and possible solutions, of which only a few will be retained (Sum and Jessop, 2013). Likewise, the perception of lived experience is open to reinterpretation and, therefore, offers the potential for alternative mobilisations by populist discourses of different political orientations. The narratives put forward by social movements – about the causes and consequences of economic crises and the relationship of neoliberal policies to these – are involved in the struggle to establish specific social and economic imaginaries as hegemonic (Sum and Jessop, 2013). Consequently, highlighting the importance of the spatialisation of populist grievances and discourse, providing an alternative interpretation of place to that put forward by neoliberal nationalist narratives also becomes a contestation strategy that allows the mobilisation of populations against neoliberal urban policies.

While many commentators, such as Laybourn-Langton and Jacobs (2018), Borriello and Mazzolini (2019) and Fine and Saad-Filho (2017), agree that no current systemic alternative is threatening neoliberalism, the possibilities for ideological change are not completely precluded. From a more optimistic perspective, other authors point to the importance of the micro-scale and of social practices as a breeding ground that makes it possible to imagine more systemic forms of change (McClanahan, 2019). Such practices can also constitute the foundation of emancipatory populist discourses in opposition to the neoliberal common sense.

Valencia's megaprojects, populist discourse and neoliberal consensus

Valencia, Spain's third largest city, with its long-term emphasis on an urban regeneration policy based on the use of megaprojects and mega events, offers an excellent entry point into the analysis of how populist strategies contribute to the creation and breaking of consensus around entrepreneurial

policies and their associated neoliberal nationalist construction of place. Between the 1980s and the late 2000s, successive local and regional governments made large public investments in prestige architectural projects and international events with the objective of making the city attractive for investment and tourism. Valencia's investments included, among others, the construction of the 350,000 m^2 complex of The City of Arts and Sciences, the hosting of the America's Cup sailing competition, and the hosting of the Formula 1 race.

Valencia's urban policy enjoyed wide consensus within the main political parties, influential local economic groups and general public for a very long time. The general consensus was that growth – in economic and physical terms – was a desirable objective, which could be achieved through the use of iconic megaprojects and mega events.

During the pre-2008-crisis period, opposition to the urban policy came from a limited number of very specific groups – intellectuals, ecologist groups, some neighbourhood associations and minority left-wing political parties such as the United Left party (EU) and the Green party – and did not generate a wide impact on the population. For anti-growth ecologist groups megaprojects caused huge environmental impacts and were a mere excuse for promoting excessive urban development. Other critics censored the short-sightedness of an urban policy which they called a policy of the spectacle. Several neighbourhood associations complained about the over-expenditure on megaprojects and events, which resulted in a lack of investment in public services, and got organised to demand more amenities for their neighbourhoods. In fact, the effort to situate Valencia globally contrasted with how day-to-day investment in the neighbourhoods was neglected. For instance, in 2009, in the Valencian Autonomous Community, 30,000 primary and secondary school students were being taught in temporary sheds due to a lack of proper schools (Caballer et al., 2009). In September 2013, the number of students in temporary sheds was still 18,000 (Silió and Játiva, 2013).

However, during the same period, the general public was satisfied with the urban policy, as reflected in the electoral results. The reasons for the wide popular consensus achieved by Valencia's urban policy were mainly of two kinds; economic and ideational. On the one hand, notions of 'growth for all' generated a consensus for the urban policy that rested on widespread expectations of economic gain. The idea that tourism would bring about the creation of wealth, reinforced by the impression of success given by the visible increase in the number of tourists, was widespread. Similarly, an economic model based on construction and urban development was widely accepted because – while the real estate bubble was growing – it seemed to generate jobs and 'easy' money for 'all'. Iconic architecture represented the physical reality that signified the image of economic growth and regeneration which was being presented to the public.

Moreover, the local and regional governments, both in conservative hands since 1995, mobilised the capacity of seduction of iconic projects and events through the use of a right-wing depoliticising populist discourse, which, along neoliberal nationalist lines, focused on local pride and self-esteem. According to the secretary-general of a regional federation of building contractors, Zaplana, the first conservative regional president:

> managed to rebuild the Valencian peoples' self-esteem. Suddenly we were no longer the people who crept shamefacedly into Madrid on tiptoe; no longer did we feel unimportant, incompetent, the people who only did things disastrously and late. This was suddenly a thing of the past; we did things well, on time, and to brilliant effect. (Interview with

> Secretary-General of FECOVAL, 18 December 2009)

Between 2003 and 2011, in addition to developing megaprojects, the local and regional governments, both in conservative hands, focused their strategy on the hosting of mega events such as Formula 1 and the America's Cup competition. The right-wing depoliticising populist discourse of both politicians exploited the Valencian people's inferiority complex by appealing to feelings of self-esteem. At the same time, the visibility of the megaprojects and mega events actually nurtured the citizens' self-esteem. Thus, the mayor's speeches and public interventions repeatedly referred to the city's golden age in the 15th century and compared it to the new Valencia that, she claimed, was again part of the European avant-garde (Sorribes, 2007). The regional president, for his part, referred to megaprojects and mega events as 'dreams that have come true' (Interview with Journalist of El País in Valencia's editorial office, 2 October 2009).

Such depoliticising populist discourse, which denied the existence of any kind of class conflict, and the possibility of implementing any alternative policies, fostered a consensual politics based on the general agreement that Valencia's entrepreneurial urban policy benefited the population at large. As several interviewees recall, the local and regional governments insisted that building megaprojects and hosting international events was in the best interests of the Valencian people as a whole, while those who dissented were called anti-Valencian.

Therefore, the right-wing depoliticising populist discourse of both regional and local governments was centred on 'the people', in this case defined in exclusionary terms as 'the Valencian people'. Additionally, it created an antagonism between two main blocs, Valencians and anti-Valencians, with the latter including the central government, also a representative of the establishment.

In fact, the socialist central government was the perfect external enemy of the Valencian people and their 'prosperity'. Every public appearance by representatives of the conservative regional or local governments was used as an excuse to accuse the central government of not pulling its weight, hindering strategic projects such as the celebration of the America's Cup. The regional minister of public administration (1985–1987) gives the following explanation:

> Everything changed when Rodríguez Zapatero came to power. Why? Because then that Cinderella conscience could be channelled through political ire. This was perfect, manna from heaven for local and regional governments of the conservative party. For it should be remembered here that a sense of being hard done by is hardwired into Valencia's psyche. (Interview with Regional minister of public administration (85–87), Councillor of the Valencia city council, 2 July 2009)

In short, a series of material and ideational factors mobilised by the right-wing depoliticising populist official discourse ensured that Valencia's urban policy enjoyed wide popular support. Meanwhile, the policy's disastrous social and economic outcomes for the population at large, such as underinvestment in public services, social inequality and net transfer of public money into private hands, were overlooked.

Valencia: Crisis, alternative populist discourses and consensus breaking

After the bursting of the property bubble in 2008, as the country entered economic recession, and despite the local and regional governments' attempts to continue galvanising support for the urban policy through their right-wing depoliticising populist discourse,

the critical voices started to become louder and more numerous. A local politician and former member of the city's social movements recalls:

> The visualisation that the emperor is naked, like in the children's tale, takes place from 2008 with the economic crisis. Some of us who said this much earlier on – at the end of the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s – were considered spoilsports … Naturally, when in 2008 the property bubble burst, many other things burst with it. (Interview with Podemos's Regional MP, 20 June 1017)

Likewise in the rest of Spain, when austerity measures intensified, new social movements such as the 15M Movement emerged and nurtured a process of incipient re-politicisation. An activist explains:

> The 15M came about and then there was an availability of people to occupy a bank, to try and stop an eviction … If, say, before you could gather ten activists and two interested people for a meeting, and there were 12 or 15 of us to go to a bank, from that moment on you could easily count on 50 or 60 people. And, if we planned to stop an eviction we spread it through the social media; it multiplied and the morning of the eviction you found 250 people at the door. That is the leap forward that the 15M facilitated. (Interview with a 15M activist, 13 July 2016)

In Valencia, megaprojects had much to do with such re-politicisation, since they became the physical representation not only of overspending and corruption but also, by comparison with the everyday city, of the patent inequality which sparked dissension. In fact, the deepening of the economic crisis had worsened and brought to light existing problems, most prominently a bankrupt regional government and further cuts in public services. This, in turn, prompted a change in the reaction of the population to the urban policy, which by 2011 had been put in the limelight by the political opposition, press and social movements as the visible cause of the region's economic problems (Gil, 2013; Zafra, 2014).

Squandering, bankruptcy and corruption made the headlines of the main local and national newspapers. For instance, in January 2013, *El País* included an article whose headline summarises perfectly well such a change in perception of Valencia's urban policy – 'The Valencian brand collapses: squandering and corruption deteriorate the region's exterior image' (Gil, 2013). By 2014 over 100 high-ranking public officials within the regional government were facing corruption charges (Ferrandis, 2014).

A handful of focal points of resistance to the urban policy and to the model of speculative urban development linked to it had always existed but, as the Second Deputy Mayor explains:

> What happens is that the existing citizen resistance movements start to have wider social impact. With the onset of the crisis people start to have very hard times economically and realize that all that overspending has only aggravated the social and economic situation. From then on it is like a spiral which grows and grows and in the end the policy of the mega events is called into question. (Interview with Second Deputy Mayor of Valencia, 21 July 2016)

Even 'citizens, who many other times were very proud of the City of Sciences or the Formula 1, suddenly started to rally' (Interview with former Regional MP (United Left), 12 July 2016). Thus, between 2011 and 2015, a series of massive anti-austerity protests rallying against cuts in public services, corruption and squandering took place.

The economic component was the first one to break the consensus. However, the ideational component of consensus continued to be very important. The social movements and political parties in the opposition

mobilised megaprojects to challenge the neoliberal nationalist construction of place promoted by the official right-wing depoliticising populist discourse that equated voting for the conservative party and their urban policy with the interests of the Valencian people as a whole. For the Secretary General of Podemos in the city of Valencia 'the adversary is clear, in the sense that it is precisely that identity project developed around the mega events' (Interview with Podemos Secretary General of Valencia, 20 July 2016). For him, what is at stake is a dispute over what it means to defend the interests of democracy and the interests of the Valencian people, the need to seek a 'different symbolism of what it means to be Valencian' (Interview with Podemos Secretary General of Valencia, 20 July 2016). Similarly, movements such as the 15M used the symbolism of being-in-common and of participatory decision-making, in contrast with the elitist decision-making process of megaprojects and the exclusionary construction of the people promoted by the right-wing populist discourse.

Other opposition initiatives, for example, 'The Route of Wastefulness', also tried to provide an alternative narrative about the megaprojects to the official neoliberal nationalist one promoted by the right-wing populist discourse. 'The Route of wastefulness' is a mix of 'citizen journalism' and alternative tourism. It started in 2012 and it was run successfully for three years. It consisted of organising coach trips around Valencia's ruinous megaprojects, including The City of Arts and Sciences, the America's Cup port and the F1 circuit, to show and explain to the citizens the results of an urban policy based on the use of iconic megaprojects and mega events. This was linked to a communication strategy which included the use of social media, and which, to bypass the ostracism of the local press, successfully targeted the international press. Press and audio-visual media from all over the world – such as Al Jazeera, the BBC and France-2 as well as Japanese, Belgian, Dutch and German audio-visual media – got interested in the route.

The use of local symbolism and the focus on social and environmental justice, which promoted a more inclusionary construction of place and 'the people', were also important elements of their strategy. As one of the promoters of the route explains:

> We've tried to give Valencia its value back. … For a start, to change the image, the conscience and the icons of the city … recover the value of the croplands at all the different levels – from a reflective viewpoint, of the ecological limits, of self-consumption. And then, also, the issue of the social role of urban planning. The need for the social and neighbourhood movements to reclaim the need for a people-centred urbanism. (Interview with the initiator of The Route of Wastefulness, 19 July 2016)

The City of Sciences, an obvious representative of overspending and lack of transparency as well as neoliberal nationalist place making, and its designer, star-architect Santiago Calatrava, were also targets of contestation. Neither the total cost of the complex nor the amount that Calatrava had received in fees was known to the public since the regional government withheld such information on the grounds that the terms of the legal agreement between the parties was confidential. However, the United Left party, a minority party in the opposition, after arduous research, managed to get hold of the construction contracts, and present them to the press. The disclosure of the documents had special symbolic importance because the City of Sciences was considered the regional government's flagship, and Calatrava was their house architect and guru. Blanco, a former United Left regional MP explains:

> I convened a press conference in situ, in the City of Sciences, seeking a bit the iconic image. All the televisions came over because, of course, the previous day I had said something so people would know that what I had was big, and to create expectation. There, I handed out the contracts and the tables with all the amounts that (Calatrava) had received. (Interview with a former Regional MP, 12 July 2016)

However, Blanco continues to explain, the real impact came when a website whose name loosely translates as 'Calatrava bleeds you dry', was created to make all the information accessible to the public. In his own words:

> When we launched (the website) we were a trending topic. TVs and radios started to call us and the foreign media started to take an interest. The New York Times came over a couple of times and placed the famous article on the front cover of September 2013 (which was what prompted Calatrava to sue us), the Times *magazine*, The Guardian … (Interview with a former Regional MP, 12 July 2016)

The Headline of *The New York Times* read 'A Star Architect Leaves Some Clients Fuming' (Daley, 2013). Again, the critique had more resonance locally once it made it to the international press.

From 2011 to 2015 the political opposition to the conservative local and regional governments and their urban policy was fierce. It culminated in the arrival, with a strong mandate to 'regenerate democracy', of the so-called 'governments of change' in 2015, putting an end to 24 years of rule by the conservative mayor Barberá, and 20 years of conservative regional governments. Long-term micro-resistances played an important role in this win, as a regional MP recognises:

> ultimately elections are not won by the political parties, but by a state of awareness generated by those who were able to resist. That is, the people of El Cabanyal, who have been fighting for 20 years, the people defending the croplands that have been fighting for 14 years, those who have defended alternative city models, the people who defended the seafront or those who raised up against the logics of the golf courses … I think that all of this is made evident in the few years prior to the economic crisis generating, above all, a social unrest that, together with corruption, helps to bring about a change of political cycle. (Interview with a Podemos Regional MP, 20 June 1017)

In Valencia, the right-wing populism linked to a neoliberal nationalist construction of place, and with the central government and 'anti-Valencians' as external enemies – which was ultimately depoliticising – gave way to an emancipatory populism. The latter, in line with the characteristics of left-wing populism, presented a more inclusive construction of 'the people' and had the 'corrupt elite' as the external enemy. Both populisms, however, mobilised megaprojects and events either in favour of or against Valencia's entrepreneurial urban policy.

Valencia: Populism, politicisation and the demise of neoliberal policies

The contestation of Valencia's urban policy was successful in changing the general public's perception of megaprojects and events. However, it was not successful in politicising the debate. In the case of Valencia, the elements of the left-wing populist discourse that focused on criticising how the policy had been implemented gained more traction than a discourse promoting a change away from a pro-growth competitive economic model. In that sense, the left-wing populist discourses that gained the minds and hearts of the general public after the 2008 economic crisis were

to some extent depoliticised since they focused mainly on practices such as corruption and squandering rather than on ideological issues to frame the debate around megaprojects.

As a result, the consensus against neoliberal urban policies and the associated neoliberal nationalist construction of place was fragile, and it was not based on deep ideological change. Soon, a general resurgence of interest on an economic model based on property development and an urban policy based on speculative growth could be observed even within the regional and local coalition governments, which had won the election on the back of their opposition to megaprojects and events. Thus, in April 2015, some members of the government showed interest in the proposal by a multinational from Singapore to build a tourist resort including a museum, a macro-casino and a six-star hotel in the America's Cup Marina (El País, 2015). In July 2016, the socialist first deputy mayor expressed his wish that Valencia would host the America's Cup again in the near future (EFE, 2016), and the mayor later confirmed that the council would welcome mega events if the investment was feasible (EFE, 2016). For activist groups such reliance on global investors and their proposals was a symptom of the council's lack of an alternative economic model.

The similar but somewhat contradictory discourses existent within the coalition government illustrate the fragility of the consensus against competitive urban policies. On the one hand, alternative imaginaries crystallised in 'a friendlier progressive discourse' (Interview with a journalist and activist, 15 July 2016), where some elements consistent with a neoliberal nationalist construction of place can be found. Such discourse was based on local pride too but advocated a focus on smaller scale projects with a strong sense of local identity as a competitive strategy. In the words of the spokesman for Compromís:

> As opposed to fake mega events that have nothing to do with our identity as a people, we aim to enhance what we already have … our own traditional festivals … our gastronomy. These are our mega events. If mega events intended to promote tourism then we promote tourism based on our self-esteem. (Interview with the Spokesman for Compromís at the Regional Parliament, 21 June 2017)

On the other hand, within the government it was also possible to find discourses that point to a left-wing inclusionary construction of the people. Thus, the new local council worked on the construction of a new symbolism based on citizen participation and empowerment. The second deputy mayor explains:

> We've gone from a focus on big projects to developing small projects in the neighbourhoods. For instance, we have articulated our participatory budgets, citizen consultations in the neighbourhoods around that. … It is there that we're going to test our ability to develop symbolic elements from small projects proposed by the residents, approved by the residents and implemented by the council because they have been proposed by the citizens. … When in four months time a resident says 'look, this is what I proposed or another resident proposed and I supported it', that is, another way of creating an alternative symbolism to that of the big projects and with more civic and empowerment connotations. (Interview with the Second Deputy Mayor of Valencia, 21 July 2016)

Despite the fact that a left-wing emancipatory populist discourse that advocated systemic change did not become hegemonic the baseline seemed to have changed. Representatives from the social movements agree that, albeit often with some scepticism, citizens became more open to listening to alternative discourses that challenge the necessity of neoliberal policies that promote sustained growth.

Conclusion

From both theoretical and empirical perspectives, the case of Valencia raises important questions regarding the potential of contentious politics and populist strategies for promoting societal politicisation and effectively challenging neoliberalism.

Firstly, it shows how the material and the ideational – symbolic representation and discourses – interlock in the creation but also in the breaking of neoliberal consensus. The economic element is important since it is the economic crisis and the austerity measures that first crack the narrative that represents megaprojects as generators of growth. However, consensus needs to be broken at a symbolic and discursive level too, not least because symbols and discourses serve as guides for the visualisation and interpretation of such a reality of economic crisis. In consequence, both the material and the ideational influence processes of societal politicisation and de-politicisation.

Secondly, it shows the importance of the capacity of populist strategies to mobilise such symbolism and narratives. In particular narratives about physical urban space and its link to local identities produce the emotional response that populism is seeking to leverage. In this sense – given that in megaprojects coalesce notions of entrepreneurialism, neoliberal nationalism, and populist construction of identity – the analysis of political responses to megaprojects is useful to advance the understanding of the different political orientations that populism can take and how these manifest at different scales (most prominently in the form of local populism).

Thirdly, it shows how moments of crisis provide the circumstances under which alternative populist discourses can become hegemonic. In Valencia the bursting of the property bubble in 2008 was the turning point that saw a left-wing emancipatory populism replace the existing right-wing depoliticising populism. Moreover, it highlights the importance of long-term micro-resistances for re-politicisation. Foci of resistance, however isolated and limited, are important seedbeds from which to build politicisation, not least because they are reservoirs of memory from which to generate alternative narratives to the established one. In Valencia we can certainly observe the importance of the work of social movements and minority political parties in building the ideational breeding ground from where alternative interpretations of megaprojects and their social consequences are preserved and are able to emerge. The Route of Wastefulness is a key example of how the personal experiences of affected citizens and an informed re-reading of local history are integrated into the left-wing emancipatory populist discourse and woven into a new frame for the interpretation of Valencia's urban policy.

Fourthly, the case of Valencia also shows how bringing together the literatures on populism and neoliberalism can enable a deeper understanding of left-wing populism's politicising potential and therefore its capacity to challenge neoliberalism ideologically. From that perspective, it demonstrates that the breaking of the consensus over a neoliberal policy does not necessarily entail a profound ideological change that challenges neoliberalism systemically. In Valencia, the consensus over growth (as represented by the neoliberal urban policy) was broken at a superficial level, as the critique remained within the system. Although the consensus around megaprojects and events was broken, a more systematic critique of the urban policy remained circumscribed to minority groups. The discourses that more successfully took root in people's minds were those that linked megaprojects with squandering and corruption, and therefore targeted how the urban policy had been implemented rather than challenging the underpinning logic of

promoting growth. Moreover, such discourses swiftly crystallised into a different type of populist consensus. The neoliberal consensus based on the pride of Valencia becoming an important city globally that saw megaprojects as a source of economic growth for all was quickly replaced by a consensus of a more localist sign, which was also based on local pride but which proposed competing for tourism by valorising the city's own local culture. Such rapid reformulation of Valencia's competitive strategy pre-empted a more systemic challenge of the neoliberal policy by providing a sense of closure, which was encapsulated in the coming to power of progressive local and regional governments.

Therefore populism and populist discourse can promote both politicisation – by sparking dissent in the first place – and depoliticisation – in this case by shifting consensus towards a different type of local pride. This also suggests new lines of inquiry regarding the characterisation of specific variants of populism as politicising. For instance, is left-wing populism always politicising? What further characteristics does left-wing populism need to have to successfully promote systemic change?

Finally, the case of Valencia calls for the conceptualisation of politicisation (and depoliticisation) as a permanent and necessarily incomplete process. This continuous process is punctuated by moments of crisis, when discourses and practices that have become naturalised – or depoliticised – are challenged, and thus politicised again.

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Note

1. Nationalism is understood here as 'an ideological movement for attaining and maintaining autonomy, unity and identity for a population which some of its members deem to constitute an actual or potential "nation"' (Smith, 2010: 9).

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