

**National myths and democratic history education: Secondary students' discursive  
construction of Catalan nationhood**

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**Bio**

Edda Sant is Senior Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University (UK). Her research focuses primarily on issues related to political and citizenship education and more generally in the areas of democratic education, history and social studies education. She has published in numerous journals including Review of Educational Research, Theory and Research in Social Education, the British Educational Research Journal and the Cambridge Journal of Education. Her most recent work includes the co-editorship of the The Palgrave Handbook of Global Citizenship and Education (2018, Palgrave) and the co-authorship of the book Global citizenship education: a critical introduction to key concepts and debates (2018, Bloomsbury). In 2016, she was awarded the Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association Best Publication Award (2015).

## **Abstract**

This study aims to refine our understanding of the potential perils and possibilities of national myths for democratic history education. Previous research studies in history education have often assumed that national myths are ideological constructs serving the interests of the privileged. This study examines national myths as empty signifiers responding to students' present demands. The focus is the case of Catalonia, where nationalism has recently grown. Based on interview (14) and questionnaire (340) data collected from Catalan secondary students, my analysis suggests that national myths can be open to existing contemporary demands against a powerful Other. As such, national myths can be considered an interface where history educators can intervene. National myths, and likely other myths and countermyths, might implicitly or explicitly exclude some students whilst providing others with a collective identity capable of political action.

## **Key Words**

History education; democratic education; Catalonia; Laclau; myths; nation

## Introduction

This paper contributes to discussions on the education of national identities. The focus is on the role that history education might play against/in the democratization of our societies. Specifically, I interrogate the ways secondary students (aged 13-15) in Catalonia (Spain) construct a historical myth of the Catalan nationhood using the conceptual tools developed by Ernesto Laclau. My aim is to re-examine the challenges and potential opportunities of national myths for more democratic arrangements.

The question of nationalism is particularly significant in our contemporary moment. Whilst at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century some anticipated the erosion of nationalism in post-industrial societies (Norris, 2005), recent events have shown that nationalist parties (such as *Lega Nord* in Italy) and demands (such as BREXIT in the UK) are very much alive. Political theory and research suggest that, in the Western world, in addition to the traditional left-right ideological divide, there is a cultural cleavage between cosmopolitanists and nationalists (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Kalb, 2009). Cosmopolitanists (often within a liberal framework of reference) prefer open borders, multicultural values and global institutions of governance. Nationalists favour national values and institutions (Norris, 2005). It is worth noting here that nationalists do not always privilege existing nation-states. Minority nationalisms, often ethnocultural minorities within a larger state, demand a new state of their own (Kymlicka & Straehle, 1999).

Catalonia is one of the settings where minority nationalism has grown. The region is often described as a nation without state that is entitled to self-government within Spain (Guibernau, 2014). Catalonia received worldwide media attention on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 when, in the context of the referendum for independence, existing tensions between Catalan independentists and the Spanish government resulted in police violence against voters (see Hincks, 2017). The question of nationalism is not new in Catalonia. Traditionally, most Catalan nationalists were explicitly

non-secessionist and they asserted the Catalan nationhood through the promotion of Catalan language and culture (Cramer, 2014). After 2006, Catalonia saw a rise of an independence movement co-constructed between civil and activist movements at the left of the traditional ideological spectrum and the Catalan government led by a coalition of Catalanist left/centre/right parties (Cramer, 2014). The independentist/secessionist movement demanded a fairer economic treatment by the Spanish government, a more participatory democracy, and, more importantly, a referendum for independence. Whilst the Catalan society was split on the question of independence, 80% of the people in Catalonia (regardless of their views on Catalan independence) supported a referendum (Colombi Ciacchi, 2017). But the Spanish government – led by the Spanish conservative party and likely representing the majoritarian view of Spaniards - refused to discuss the possibility of an agreed referendum arguing it was outside the limits of the law (Colombi Ciacchi, 2017). Catalan independentists (politicians and activists) decided to move forward the referendum, the Spanish authorities declared it illegal and sent police to stop the voters. As I am finishing these lines, nine Catalan nationalists have been sentenced to between nine and thirteen years of prison for breaking the law. Existing tensions have again become very visible on the streets of Barcelona and over Catalonia (Jones & Burgen, 2019).

In this article, I investigate how, in the context of growing nationalist mobilization (in 2014), Catalan secondary students discussed a national myth. In the academic literature, national myths are often conceptualized as ideological constructions serving the interests of the nation-state and the privileged (Jaskulowski & Surmiak, 2017; Shahzad, 2012). But national myths are unlikely to be static (Rutten, Mottart & Soetaert, 2010). Present-day demands play an essential role in guiding students' accounts of national pasts (Seixas, Peck & Poyntz, 2011; Wineburg et al., 2007). Thus, it is possible to interrogate myths as empty signifiers, or placeholders, responding to the contingent demands of the present (Laclau, 2014). My purpose

here is to examine if (and how) students articulate a national myth with their present demands and to explore whether these articulations might offer opportunities and/or additional challenges for a history education that aims to further democratize our societies.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I discuss national myths within history education and education scholarship more broadly. Second, I introduce the theoretical tools developed by Laclau that I use in this article (i.e. empty signifiers, antagonism and chain of equivalences). I then present the case of Catalonia (third) and the empirical study (fourth) in more detail. Fifth, I interrogate Catalan secondary students' accounts on a national myth using my theoretical tools. Finally, I summarize the main ideas of this study and discuss broader implications for history education theory and practice.

### **National myths, history and democratic education**

Schools are key settings where national myths circulate, explicitly or implicitly. National identity-building is an overtly stated purpose of schooling and, more particularly, history education (Christou, 2007; Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019; Wineburg et al., 2007). National myths are often part of the history syllabus (Christou, 2007; Sant et al., 2015) and teachers have some role to play in the production/challenge of these myths (Létourneau, 2006). But schools do not operate in the vacuum. Students might also bring national myths collected elsewhere (i.e. family, media) to schools as much as they might be modulated by hidden and explicit curricular practices (Létourneau, 2006; Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007). National myths are, intentionally or not, present in our schools, and teachers need to somehow respond (see, Sant & Hanley, 2018). For the purpose of this paper, the question is, how?

In the history education literature, national myths are often conceptualized through modernist conceptions of the nation (Mock, 2012). The work of Anderson (1996), Billig (1995), Gellner (2008) and Hobsbawm (2012) is often cited (Sant et al., 2015; Carretero, 2017; Christou, 2007;

Jaskulowski & Surmiak, 2017; Markovich, 2016; Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019; Shahzad, 2012) and the nation is described as both a social and ideological construct. Nations are understood to be social because they “are not naturally given; they are continuously imagined and reimagined through nationalist signifying practices” (Jaskulowski & Surmiak, 2017, p. 3; see, also Anderson, 1996). Nations are also ideological because they are conceived as vehicles to distribute hegemonic discourses (Hobsbawm, 2012; Shahzad, 2012). National myths operate as cultural tools, transforming “history into nature” and fostering people’s acceptance of the “myth as the natural truth without thinking critically” (Barthes, 1972, cited in Shahzad, 2012, p. 30; see also, Billig, 1995).

This modernist literature often constructs national myths (and more widely, all nationalist discourses) in opposition to the democratic principles of freedom, equality and plurality. Through the circulation of myths and rituals, the school perpetuates dominant worldviews and ideologies (Markovich, 2016) with the nationhood being naturalised and depoliticised (Jaskulowski & Surmiak, 2017). Simultaneously, national myths reinforce perceived divisions between the national We and the external Other. Such divisions downplay existing class and social inequalities (Jaskulowski & Surmiak, 2017) and foster stereotypical conceptions (Sant et al., 2015; Christou, 2007; Rutten, Mottart & Soetaert, 2010; Shahzad, 2012). Further, ethnic demands potentially accommodated within national myths are often problematic (Markovich, 2016). Students from ethnic minority groups tend not to feel included in the narratives associated with national myths (Sant et al., 2015; Christou, 2007; Peck, 2010).

To respond to these multiple democratic challenges, recommendations have been made for a more democratic history education. Among them, some authors have suggested a globally orientated history education (Sant et al., 2015; Osler, 2015; Shahzad, 2012). Others have recommended that history education should foster students’ critical reflection on the dominant structures of national collective memory (Christou, 2007; Jaskulowski & Surmiak, 2017).

These studies are very helpful in identifying the potential anti-democratic perils that might befall approaches to history education, but they are grounded in modernist conceptions of the nation that are not exempt from critique. Modernist accounts are at risk of “becoming a countermyth to nationalist primordialism” (Mock, 2012, p. 21). The nation, its structures, cultural tools and functioning are sometimes universalized without considering their local idiosyncrasies. Further, although modernists understand the nation as a social construct, they often downplay the role that the people, in general, or students, in particular, might play in the re-construction of national myths (Mock, 2012). National myths are not fixed (Rutten, Mottart & Soetaert, 2010). Students can negotiate their meaning (Seixas, Peck & Poyntz, 2011; Wineburg et al., 2007) and even “expand the boundaries of the dominant national culture” (Markovich, 2016, p. 13). Thus, modernist history educators are at risk of essentializing the nature of national myths and nationalism itself.

To overcome this risk, this article re-examines the question of national myths through alternative theoretical lens. By interrogating national myths as empty signifiers (Laclau, 2007), my aim is to denude these myths from earlier assumptions, so we can reassess some of the democratic challenges and (perhaps) possibilities of history education.

### **Empty signifiers, antagonism and chains of equivalences**

In this article, I understand social realities are constructed through discourses that I define as systems of signifiers and signifieds, meanings and values, including linguistic and non-linguistic elements (Laclau, 2007). I question whether national myths can operate as *empty signifiers*. Following Laclau (2007), I define empty signifiers as signifiers that mean nothing in themselves until they are socially constructed. For instance, research has shown how diverse concepts such as democratic education (Sant, 2019) or good teaching (Trent, 2011) function as empty signifiers whose meaning is entirely contested.

Empty signifiers are constructed as points of encounter of different (unsatisfied) social demands (Laclau, 2007). These demands are sorted and linked together through what Laclau and Mouffe (2001) define as a *chain of equivalences*. A chain of equivalences knots together different demands, privileging what they have in common more than what divides them. For example, under the umbrella of the empty signifier ‘equality’, feminist, class and ethnic demands can be articulated together in a chain of equivalences. The larger the number of particular demands, the larger the chain of equivalences. The larger the chain of equivalences, the larger the feeling that the empty signifier responds to the demands of the entire community, or what Laclau (2007, p. 162) names “the people”. In their condition of emptiness, empty signifiers are in constant process of re-construction. The meaning of the empty signifier depends on the chain of equivalences associated to it.

Each particular social demand is “always posed towards someone, or more precisely, to those already in power yet unwilling or unable to satisfy the claims” (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017, p. 7). The heterogeneous demands are quilted in a chain of equivalences under the umbrella of the empty signifier only insofar these demands are posed to the same antagonistic Other. For Laclau (1990), all identities are relational, and they require something outside them to “block” (p. 21) their unity. He explains, “the antagonizing force fulfils two crucial and contradictory roles at the same time. On the one hand, it ‘blocks’ the full constitution of the identity to which it is opposed and thus shows its contingency. But on the other hand, (...) [it] is also part of the conditions of existence of that identity” (p. 21). He later discusses, in reference to French revolutionary Saint-Just, “[w]hat constitutes the unity of the Republic is the total destruction of what is opposed to it” (Laclau, 1990, p. 21). The demands articulated in a chain of equivalences establish an *antagonistic frontier* that divides the social space between a We, constructed as a union of those making demands, and the Other, considered to be unresponsive to these demands. Thus, the Other is presented as preventing “society from coinciding with

itself, from reaching its fullness” (Laclau, 2000, p. 55). But for Laclau, antagonistic relations are not dialectical. The We and the Other do not constitute the social totality. There is always someone outside the We/Other that is excluded from this space of representation and blocks the space of representation itself. They are what Laclau defines as “social heterogeneity” (Laclau, 2007, p. 140).

Empty signifiers have the potential of galvanizing the masses into political action. Drawing upon Lacan, Laclau (1994) describes processes of identification with empty signifiers as the result of an “originary and insurmountable lack of identity” (Laclau, 1994, p.3) which needs to be filled. Gilbert (2014) explains, “subjectivity as such is defined by a certain constitutive gap, a radical incompleteness” of the subject (p. 123). Individuals feel obliged to identify with signifiers not because they provide the right answers, but because this process of identification allows them to articulate themselves into a social order “on which we rely for identity, meaning, and survival” (Mock, 2012, p. 81). This is particularly relevant in political terms. Through this articulation, individuals solidarize with others and constitute collectivities capable of significant political mobilization (see, e.g. Gilbert, 2014).

The concept of empty signifier, and Laclau’s work more broadly, has already encouraged important philosophical questions for democratic education theory and pedagogy (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017; Snir, 2017; Szkudlarek, 2011; Thiel, 2019). Could the schooled use of empty signifiers bring vitality to the democratic ethos and mobilization of young people? Thiel (2019) asks whether teachers and students could utilize empty signifiers to create collective identities and Snir (2017) recommends that teachers should invite “students of different identities to speak, learn and evolve together, without assuming the existence of a privileged discourse or an ultimate social identity” (p. 10). Or would the use of empty signifiers produce unwanted exclusionary practices? Mårdh and Tryggvason (2017) wonder whether opening signifiers such as the people could lead to educational articulations that frame “the European

people as standing against refugees and politicians supporting immigration” (p. 611). This paper investigates these questions in the empirical terrain of Catalan history education.

### **Catalonia, the present and the historical myth**

I examine the case of the national myth of the Eleventh September 1714, as discursively constructed by Catalan secondary students. A single case is justified because, following Jaskulowski & Surmiak (2017), a concrete and context-specific case can “broaden and deepen our knowledge on the links between history education and nationalism” (p. 38). This position is also consistent with Laclau’s theory, because the meaning of empty signifiers is always contingent and the study of signifiers requires contextual explanations (Pollock, Brock & Ellison, 2015).

I understand that the Catalan nation and the myth of the Eleventh September 1714 are *deviant* cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Deviant or singular cases often reveal additional information helping us to extend the range of possibilities contained within a particular phenomenon. As a minority nationalism (Kymlicka & Straehle, 1999) associated with anti-dictatorship struggles, Catalan nationalism can be considered a singular case. The present status of Catalonia as an autonomous region within Spain was re-gained in 1977 after almost forty years of Franco’s dictatorship in which Catalan cultural and political institutions were fiercely repressed (Guibernau, 2014). From then on, Catalan nationalists demanded increased autonomy and cultural and linguistic recognition (Cramer, 2014). Since 2006, two key factors have led to a growing support for independence (Guibernau, 2014). First, in 2006, after approval of the Catalan and Spanish parliaments, 73% of the Catalan people voted in favour of a new autonomy law designed to regulate the Catalan-Spanish relationships. Appealed by the *Partido Popular* (Spanish Conservative Party), the Spanish High Court of Justice sanctioned the new law, generating a sense of democratic outrage among Catalans and provoking massive protests in

Barcelona, which requested, among other demands, a more participatory democracy. Second, the 2008 financial crisis strongly impacted on Catalonia increasing the awareness of the high Catalan contribution in the Spanish finances (Guibernau, 2014). Cultural, economic and (participatory) democratic demands coexist in the present independence movement.

The myth of Eleventh September 1714, commemorated in the Catalan national day (*la diada*), is also deviant or singular as it represents a point of intersection for multiple demands. Eleventh September 1714 is considered to be the heart of the Catalan national narrative (Cramer, 2014) as it pinpoints the incorporation of Catalonia into a centralized Spain under Castilian rule when, in the context of the Spanish War of Succession (1700-1714), Barcelona surrendered to the Franco-Spanish army of Philip the 5th. Mock (2012) provides a historical account of the evolution of the myth in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and how cultural and democratic demands have historically coexisted within this myth:

Catalan cultural organization was effectively destroyed after the fall of Barcelona (...). The notion of restoring a sense of distinct Catalan political identity developed largely in reaction to Franco's repression (...). The first public celebration of the *Diada* in 1964 was also the first postwar Catalanist street demonstration. It thereafter became an annual occurrence, gradually incorporating participation from all social and political segments identified with Catalan national distinctiveness in reaction to the Francoist regime, culminating in the *Diada* of 1977, two years after Franco's death. A million people attended this gathering to demand a statute of autonomy for Catalonia (...) causing the annual commemoration of September 11 and the Catalanist movement in general to be inexorably intertwined in popular imagination with the struggle against dictatorship and the broader movement for democracy and decentralization (Mock, 2012, p. 41-42).

## **The empirical study: students re-constructing a Catalan national myth**

This research was conducted in 2014 when Catalan people celebrated the 300th Jubilee of Eleventh September 1714. TV documentaries, museum exhibitions, books, demonstrations, etc. commemorated the Jubilee. The event of Eleventh September 1714 was also present in most Catalan schools. The school curriculum in Catalonia is partially open and des-centralized (Engel, 2008): Spanish authorities define learning outcomes for all students in Spain, Catalan authorities add further learning outcomes for students in Catalonia and teachers are free to decide how these learning outcomes can be better achieved in their classes. In 2014, the Catalan curriculum for social sciences included different historical events (e.g. Franco dictatorship, the reign of the Catholic Kings) mythologised by Catalan or Spanish nationalisms (Sant et al., 2015; Muro & Quiroga, 2005). The event of the Eleventh September 1714 was implicitly mentioned in the syllabus, with fourteen year olds expected to learn about the “political and economic evolution of the Iberian Peninsula during Modern times”<sup>1</sup> [(Spanish) Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia, 2006, p. 53] and to “identify the key features of Hispanic monarchy and analyse a political and social conflict involving Catalonia” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2007, p. 19). The event was explicitly included in all social science textbooks for students aged 12-16 (Sant, 2017). I assumed that, at that moment on time, the myth would probably circulate (implicitly and/or explicitly) in schools.

The research had a theoretical and a practical purpose. Theoretically, I wanted to submerge myself in the complexity of the myth to refine our understanding of national myths circulating within schools. I intentionally designed open sampling, data collection and analysis strategies that could facilitate a diverse sample of students’ demands. The research also had a practical

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from Spanish/Catalan to English have been made by the author

purpose. I wanted to reconsider if (and how) educators could use myths as vehicles for a history education aimed to further democratize society.

I understand that, as in other forms of poststructuralist research, “the way in which we know is most assuredly tied up with both *what* we know and our *relationships with our research participants*” (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2013, p. 252). *What* I know is conditioned by my ethical commitments to the democratic principles of equality, freedom and plurality. It is also tied up with certain ontological grounds, which, in my case, have shifted. I collected data assuming, as modernists do (Hobsbawm, 2012), that equality, freedom, and plurality had predetermined meanings and that national myths and nationalism overall were opposed to those meanings. In a previous project, we have found that Catalan primary students’ historical accounts were articulated through an us-versus-them narrative and we have warned about the challenges of this narrative for a more pluralist society (Sant et al., 2015). I analysed data thinking, as poststructuralists do (Laclau, 2007b), that the meaning of democracy, democratic principles and nationalism is contested and cannot be defined in relation to any predetermined account. In my recent analysis of textbook and other teaching resources, I have concluded that multiple narratives of the nation coexisted in the texts (Sant, 2017). I assume that my analysis is unavoidably dependent on the multiple subjectivities (my own and that of the others) involved in the research project.

The research took place in three phases. First, via professional networks, I contacted six secondary schools that varied in terms type (semi-private/state school), location (rural/urban), economic status and expected support for independence (see Table I). Three hundred forty students (aged 13-15) within these schools responded to a questionnaire including the questions: 1) what groups do you identify yourself with? And (2) do you know what happened the Eleventh of September 1714 which is commemorated every year during the national day of Catalonia? And if so, could you provide an account of this? I tentatively (thematically)

analysed this data to map out the diversity of students' demands of the present (question 1) and delineate alternative approaches to interpreting the myth (table II). This initial analysis served to select participants and design the data collection strategy for the second stage.

Second, among the questionnaire participants, I selected two or three students per school for interview (total of fourteen). The interviewed students responded to a range of identifications (e.g. age, gender, nationality, ethnicity) and a range of approaches to the national myth (e.g. student identifies with the myth; student provides a factual account). Ethical consent was granted by these students and their parents. Following previous examples in history education research (Barton, 2015; Peck, 2010), I used a sorting-pictures task. With the purpose of opening "heterogeneity" (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2013, p. 252), I selected twenty-eight pictures (each portraying a single person) that, in my estimation, could best represent the groups that had emerged from the questionnaire data. The pictures also included a range of individuals who could represent different professional and socio-economic groups.

Sorting-picture tasks might lead to simplistic analysis if the complex subjectivities involved in both, selection and sorting, are not considered (see, e.g. Ivinson, 2018). The reader might need to be alerted that, when selecting the pictures, I expected students would construct a homogeneous Catalan nationhood opposed to an ethnic and culturally diverse Other. They might also need to be alerted that interviewed students described themselves as indicated in table I. However, it is also worth noting here that my purpose when selecting a sorting-pictures task was to stimulate discussion, "warm[ing]-up more abstract discussions", "surfacing taken-for-granted ideas" (Barton, 2015, p. 184, 197). My analysis is not based on participants' explicit classifications but on our conversations following these classifications.

During the interviews, I first invited the students to classify the individuals represented in the pictures in as many or as few groups as they liked and as many times as they wanted. We then

discuss these classifications. The aim of this task was to examine how students understood their present social reality. I then requested the participants to discuss the Eleventh September 1714 and the ways in which the groups they had created could or could not overlap with the people involved in the historical event. The aims of this second task were to investigate students' accounts of the national myth and the potential articulations between the myth and their understandings of their present social reality.

Third, I interrogated the questionnaires and the interview data using conceptual tools derived from Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) discursive theory. Firstly, I examined and codified students' accounts of the national myth considering the potential demands (articulation) and the people/institutions against who these demands were posed (antagonism). Secondly, I followed the same process to examine students' interpretations of their present social reality as encountered in the interview data. Thirdly, I explored how past and present demands were articulated in students' explanations. Fourthly, considering the theoretical framework of this study, I organized the data into three different categories: (1) past and present demands articulated in the national myth; (2) the antagonist Other within the national myth; and (3) the myth as provider of collective identity. At this point, I noticed that this latter category was extremely complex and that students could be classified in three distinct groups. Thus, I decided to divide this category into three: (3) the national myth provides collective identity; (4) the competing national myth and (5) the countermyth. The analysis that follows is organised according to these five categories.

### **Students re-constructing the national myth.**

#### ***The national myth as an empty signifier articulating cultural and political demands***

The national myth of Eleventh September 1714, as discursively constructed by the participants, appeared to function as an empty signifier open to present cultural and political demands within Catalan society. Three of the students explained,

[in 1774] he [the Spanish king] stole all of our [the Catalan people] freedoms, our language, our laws and our culture in general and he imposed their language [Castilian] (...) And now each 11th of September we claim to have our rights and freedoms back. (Lina, questionnaire)

[the law after 1714 was] very tough with Catalan language, culture and everything related to Catalonia. Because he [the Spanish king] was very dictatorial. (Gabriel, interview)

It was a revolt against those who governed and dictated orders. (Jan<sup>2</sup>, questionnaire)

In some of the students' accounts, the national myth was constructed through cultural demands of the Catalan nationhood. For example, Lina and Gabriel explained the myth in relation to Catalan "language" and "culture", both threatened by the Spanish King who "imposed his language". This discursive construction is likely to be associated with existing cultural demands within Catalan society (see, Cramer, 2014). Indeed, in the interviews, some students described their present reality in relation to Catalan and Spanish cultures and traditions. Biel, for instance, explained in the sorting-picture task,

here I would have the people who celebrate Catalan culture and traditions. (...) And here the people who celebrate Spanish traditions. (...) I do not follow Spanish culture; I do not share their traditions. (Biel, interview)

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<sup>2</sup> School 1

The pictures included a range of individuals explicitly selected to represent the groups emerged from the questionnaire data (i.e. age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, hobbies), but these students decided to sort the pictures in such a way that only Spanish and Catalan cultural groups were generated. The relation between Catalan and Spanish culture was here an antagonistic one. If, for Laclau (2007), a social group exists only if it is different from others, for these students, the Catalan culture was defined as *non-Spaniard*. The Spanish culture was constructed as preventing the cultural totality of the Catalan nationhood.

The national myth, nevertheless, was also constructed through political demands. For some students, as in the case of Lina and Gabriel, the myth simultaneously articulated cultural and political demands. The myth provided an answer to their demands for cultural and linguistic recognition and also an answer to their demands of claiming back Catalan people's "freedoms" and "laws". For other students, as in the case of the Jan, the myth was essentially a political one; that is, a "revolt against those who governed and dictated orders". In both cases, these political demands appeared to be related to present political demands. Students explained in the sorting-picture task:

The people who work as politicians are those who do not care about others. (...) I would not feel comfortable with them. (Sandra, interview)

We would have the population who is decided upon. And the politicians, those who have the power to decide. (Biel, interview)

They [the uppers] have more power, much power, and I have none. (Galiana, interview)

Ordinary<sup>3</sup> people have their lives modified by those who are important (David, interview)

For the participants who constructed the myth in relation to political demands, their present reality was divided between “the people” and what we could define as the “political elite”. “The people” were described as the “everyday” and “ordinary” people whose lives are decided by “the politicians”, “the uppers”, the “important”, “those who have much power” and “who do not care about others”. In other words, the political elite was presented through an antagonistic relation with the ordinary people and described as preventing the people from exercising their democratic sovereignty or, in Laclau’s terms, from “reaching its fullness” (2000, p. 55). My analysis suggests that, these accounts, that we could somehow describe as “populists” (Laclau, 2007), are likely connected with demands for a more participatory democracy existing within the Catalan society (Guibernau, 2014).

### ***The antagonistic Other***

The troops of Philip attacked Barcelona and, in that war (that unfortunately we lost), lots of people died (Martin<sup>4</sup>, questionnaire).

If the national myth functioned as empty signifier including two demands, the Spanish King operated as the antagonist of both. The King was explicitly or implicitly defined as “imposing his language”, “being dictatorial”, “governing and dictating orders” and, more generically, leading an attack that caused the death of “lots of people”. As Spanish and King, he represented the powerful Other, unresponsive to the cultural and political demands of Catalan nationhood.

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<sup>3</sup> In the original text in Catalan, the student literally mentioned “normal people”. I have decided to translate this as “ordinary people” as I believe “ordinary” better reflect what the student meant.

<sup>4</sup> School 2

My analysis of the interviews suggests that the 1714 King represented present-day Spanish authorities.

The antagonistic King fulfilled two distinctive functions as signifier. First, it neutralized potential antagonisms within the Catalan nationhood. Gabriel explained,

The Catalan leaders had less power [than the Spanish King] and therefore they were forced to be more democratic (Gabriel, interview)

As Gabriel, several students recognized the existence of political “leaders” within the Catalan community but, for these students, these leaders were “forced to be more democratic” because “they have less power”. Here, potential antagonisms within the Catalan nationhood were weakened by the mere existence of a more powerful Other. Second, the Spanish King united Catalan nationhood through different grievances. If, as Laclau describes, what constitutes unity is the destruction of what is opposed to it (Laclau, 1990), in the Catalan case, what constituted the unity of the chain of equivalences, including cultural and political demands, appeared to be an opposition to the King representing the Spanish authorities.

### ***The possibility of collective identity***

As empty signifier, the national myth appeared to provide order and collective identity to a range of students. As most would expect, the participants who demanded cultural and linguistic recognition felt that the myth offered an opportunity for the cohesion of the Catalan nationhood. Gabriel explained,

[Without the myth], this feeling would not be that intense. (...) Philip the 5th was very dictatorial. And if we would not have somebody to be angry against, this feeling would not be that intense. (Gabriel, interview)

But the articulation with demand for a more participatory democracy expanded the traditional boundaries of the myth. The myth did not only provide collective identity to those identifying themselves with the Catalan culture but also to those identifying themselves with the ordinary people living in Catalonia. In the interview, Sandra reported,

[I identify myself] with the people who arrives in a new place and who bring to this place new experiences (...) I would not feel comfortable with people who work as politicians because they do not care about others (...) [In the Eleventh September 1714 my family] was not here, they did not live here, so it has not been a problem for me, but it [*la diada*] is a very special day for Catalonia. And if it is for them, it is also for me because I live in this country. (Sandra, interview)

In cultural terms, Sandra defined herself as someone “who arrive to a new place” and reported having migrated from Bolivia. As such, she could be understood as not being part of the cultural (Catalan) We, nor the cultural (Spanish) Other. She could be understood as the “social heterogeneity”, those outside the space of representation itself (Laclau, 2007a, p. 140). But Sandra did identify herself with the political demands. The “people” expanded the chain of equivalences outside the cultural domain generating a wider community in which Sandra, as social heterogeneity, was included. This more inclusive variation of the myth allowed her to gain a collective identity that she would not otherwise have. As she explained, “And if it is for them, it is also for me”.

### ***The impossibility of total inclusion***

In my analysis, however, the potential of the national myth to provide collective identity was still limited. Despite studying in schools where teachers reported having taught the historical event, several students implicitly or explicitly manifested not remembering:

I am not Catalan and therefore not interested in this topic (Ricard<sup>5</sup>, questionnaire)

I don't remember what happened, but it must be important for the history of Catalonia (Anna<sup>6</sup>, questionnaire)

The myth did not offer these students the opportunity of a collective identity. One of these students, Maria, reported “not remembering very well what happened that day”. However, in the interview, when asked about a historical event important for her, Maria implicitly explained the marriage between the Catholic Kings - Isabel the 1<sup>st</sup> of Castile and Ferdinand the 2<sup>nd</sup> of Aragon (also Count of Barcelona). This event is often mythologized as the foundational myth of Spain (Muro & Quiroga, 2005). She reported,

When Spain and Catalonia were united. (...) When they made like a new society.

They joined the characteristics of one and the other. (Maria, interview)

For Maria, and perhaps for other students, whilst the Catalan myth of the Eleventh September 1714 did not fulfil their identity and meaning demands (Mock, 2012) and did not bring a possibility of order (Laclau, 1994), the Spanish national myth could, instead, fulfil this task. Maria just selected a competing national myth.

### ***The liberal-cosmopolitan countermyth of the invented tradition***

A few other students reported a very different account of the myth. As in Maria's case, the national myth did not provide these students with order and meaning. But the reasons for this were very different. When discussing the Eleventh September 1714, Artur explained,

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<sup>5</sup> School 6

<sup>6</sup> School 2

They were defeated, and they are proud of this. (...) But the Eleventh of September is only important in Catalonia since support for independence has grown. Before, nobody cared. And now, they are all preparing things for the day. I mean, the day has become important in the last years and only for the nationalists... The reality cannot be hidden. (Artur, interview)

In the line of modernist conceptions, Artur, and a few other students like him, defined the national myth as an ideological invention utilized by nationalists (Hobsbawm, 2012). In this conception, the national myth was denuded of its constructivist and mobilizing power as empty signifier. Against an invented national myth constructed by nationalists, Arthur demanded “reality”. However, it is worth noting here that Artur’s conception of reality was not necessarily coherent with historical accounts. As mentioned, in Catalonia, support for independence has grown since 2006 (Cramer, 2014), and as Mock (2012) explains, the first public celebration of *la Diada* was in 1964 and in 1977 a million people attended the celebration. In Artur’s case, the myth of the invented tradition functioned as a modernist “countermyth to nationalist primordialism” (Mock, 2012, p. 21) naturalizing and depoliticising its claims.

The countermyth of the invented tradition, nevertheless, also appeared to be discursively constructed through antagonistic relations. In the interview, Artur described that his society was divided between the nationalists (Catalan and Spaniards) and the liberals,

who have an open mind. For instance, who are not racist. Who respect all types of conditions. Who live in a world where we all respect each other. (Artur, interview)

Similarly to all the other students, Artur described his present reality in antagonistic terms. But this antagonism was different to the ones previously discussed (Catalan/Spanish; People/Authorities). Whilst my analysis suggests that all previous students’ accounts were embedded within a local space of representation, Artur’s account challenged this local space

and engaged, in contrast, with a global-local space of representation. Within this, the “liberals” (likely cosmopolitanists “who live in a world”) were constructed as being opposed to the “nationalists” who were implicitly defined as “racist”, not having “an open mind” and not being “respectful”. The antagonistic frontier here divided cosmopolitanists and nationalists (Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Kalb, 2009) providing Artur, and others like him, with some form of cosmopolitan identity.

## **Conclusions**

National myths might contain/be open to multiple demands. In the Catalan case, the myth of Catalan nationhood functions as an empty signifier articulating present demands of cultural recognition and participatory democracy addressed to a powerful Other, the Spanish authorities. As empty signifier, the national myth is capable of politically mobilizing students who identify with either of these demands. At the same time, the national myth excludes students who identify themselves with competing nationalist or cosmopolitan myths.

## ***Implications for theory and research***

This analysis questions some assumptions that often underpin research on nation-building (history) education. Researchers frequently design their studies to examine the intersectionalities between national identities and ethnic/cultural (Sant et al., 2015; Christou, 2007; Peck, 2010) or class identities (Jaskulowski & Surmiak, 2017). They assume the relevance of these long-lasting identities for national myths. By approaching national myths as empty signifiers, this study was intentionally denuded from modernist assumptions. The aim was to explore the myth in all its complexity, documenting and analysing diversity of demands. Sampling and data collection strategies were intentionally open to surface heterogeneous and taken-for-granted ideas. My analysis suggests that ethnic and cultural demands might coexist with other demands within national myths. Researching national myths as empty signifiers

might allow us to uncover some local nuances and present demands (such as participatory democracy here) that can be equally (or more) relevant in constructing the national myth and the national identity itself.

Of course, this approach and the study itself have their own limitations that need to be acknowledged. The use of empty signifiers as conceptual tools requires contextual analysis (Pollock et al., 2016). Catalonia and its national myth are singular cases. I can conclude that national myths are capable of comprising participatory democratic demands, but not whether my analysis is relevant to more exemplar state nationalisms and other national myths with less explicit connections with pro-democratic mobilizations. More research might be needed for this purpose. Similarly, the use of open questions and sorting-picture interviews as methods open the possibilities for multiple demands to emerge but also for multiple interpretations of these demands. I assume my analysis is conditioned by my ethical and ontological commitments and the way these commitments might have influenced my selection of pictures and my reading of students' accounts. However, I believe this premise to be coherent with the poststructuralist framework in which this project lies (Lincoln et al., 2013).

More theoretically, this approach contributes to open new questions, but it does not necessarily answer them. Laclau relies in a negative understanding of the social in which individuals are attracted to social demands as a result of a constitutive lack (Laclau, 1994). Why individuals prioritize certain demands and/or certain collective identities is not clearly answered (see, e.g. Gilbert, 2014). Research with empty signifiers does not allow us to identify potential individual, school-level or extra-discursive factors that might mediate processes of identification. Several questions (i.e. what make students choose between competing national myths? Why some students identify themselves with cosmopolitan myths? Why some students hold populist demands? And what is the particular role of schools in these processes?) are here not resolved. Longitudinal studies (e.g. Hochschild, 2018), biographical narratives (e.g. Kalb,

2009) or affective approaches (e.g. Mulcahy, 2019) might be more helpful to examine these questions.

### *Implications for practice*

This article was framed around students' accounts of a national myth, but the school history curriculum is wider. We know that national myths are often an explicit or implicit part of the official syllabus (Sant et al., 2015), teachers' accounts (Létourneau, 2006), schools' hidden curriculum (Christou, 2007) and the overall collective or vernacular memory (Létourneau, 2006). Each participant (e.g. policymakers, teachers, students, parents, school managers, etc.) on this curriculum will likely have their own demands that might (intentionally or not) define which national myths are included and how these are to be understood. It is, therefore, possible to conceptualise 'schooled' national myths as empty signifiers receiving pressure from rival ideological projects.

If we conceptualize schooled national myths as empty signifiers, we might need to consider additional challenges and possibilities for history education pedagogies. I do not overestimate here the influence of explicit (history) curricula on students' understandings. But as national (and other) myths and their multiple interpretations circulate in schools, educators need to respond in one way or another. My analysis suggests that national myths are open to democratic demands and thus, they offer a platform in which history educators who would like to further democratize our societies might wish to intervene (Szkudlarek, 2011). As Mouffe (2018) writes, we "cannot ignore the strong libidinal investment at work in national – or regional – forms of identification and it would be very risky to abandon this terrain to right-wing populism" (p. 71). In the line of what Apple (2015), following Stuart Hall, describes as the "politics of interruption" (p. 174), educators might want to foster the democratic ethos of the myth emphasising the democratic demands articulated within the myth and positioning

themselves against authoritarian and oppressive Others. If, for Laclau (2014), myths are “capable of galvanizing the masses’ imagination (...) into historical action” (p. 72), national myths, when schooled for democratic purposes, might offer opportunities to generate collective identities (beyond the traditional limits of the cultural nation) that can politically mobilize a wide range of young people (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017). In the line of what Snir (2017) describes as articulation, history educators might wish to utilize national myths to create spaces of discussion where students (and teachers) can raise their demands, solidarize with others and create new political projects.

History educators, nevertheless, need to be aware that, even if schooled for democratic purposes, national myths will generate exclusionary practices (Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017). Myths are constructed through antagonistic relations in which the Other is presented as preventing the society “from reaching its fullness” (Laclau, 2000, p. 55). There will always be an Other for each national (and no national) myth. Thus, the dilemma for democratic history education is not only whether national myths should be used in school settings, but what myths should or should not be used and, therefore, who might or might not be excluded (Callan, 2010).

This is also the case for cosmopolitan myths. The liberal cosmopolitan countermyth does not function in very different ways than the national one. As the national myth, it tends to depoliticize and naturalize globalization and other universalising demands. It assumes its realism and contributes to divide the society in two antagonistic groups: nationalists and cosmopolitanists. Through this division, the two groups are also stereotyped. A participant in this study, for instance, opposed nationalists to liberal cosmopolitanists, with only the latter being defined as non-racist, open-minded and respectful. He is not an exception (Kalb, 2009; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). History educators might need to be careful that, in their attempt to overcome the democratic perils of national education, their own recommendations (e.g. critical

and globally orientated history education) do not fail in this new myth. Essentializing nationalism, nationalists and their educational implications will likely result in the misrecognition and exclusion of people (for example, some Catalan nationalists) whose demands might be democratic.

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Table I. The participant schools and the interviewed students.

School	Type of school	Location	Support for independence <sup>7</sup>	GDHI per capita <sup>8</sup>	Interviewed students	Age	Languages spoken at home	Parents' place of birth	Answer to the question: what groups do you identify yourself with?
1	Semi-private - Catholic	Urban	Lower	€16,000	David	14	Romanian	Romania	Working people
					Mariona	13	Catalan	Catalonia	Young and sporty people, people who cares about environment and likes travelling
					Jana	13	Catalan	Catalonia	Catalan people
2	State school	Urban	Lower	€22,100	Gabriel	14	Spanish	Bolivia	Catalan, male, young, Barcelona supporters, sporty, cultivated, cinema fans, organized, independentists
					Sandra	14	Catalan	Catalonia	Catalan, independentists, young, mature, female, Barcelona supporters
					Gustau	14	Catalan	Catalonia	Catalan, independentists, young, skate and sport fan
3	Semi-private - Catholic	Rural	Higher	€16,200	Lina	13	Catalan and Arabic	Morocco	Young, sporty
					Galiana	15	Catalan and Spanish	Catalonia	Friends and class mates
4		Rural	Higher	€13,700	Boris	14	Catalan	Catalonia	Catalan, young, active

<sup>7</sup> Higher/lower support for independence is indicated in relation to the national average for the elections to the Catalan government in 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Gross disposable household income per capita (income that the residents of a territory possess for consumption or saving). By 2014, the Catalan average was €16,500.

	Semi-private Catholic				Biel	15	Spanish	Catalonia	Young and friendly
5	State school	Rural	Higher	€16,200	Artur	15	Catalan	Catalonia	No-independentist, artist, liberal
					Gisela	15	Spanish	Catalonia	Catalan, female, young, family, sports
6	State school	Urban	Lower	€16,100	Maria	15	Spanish	Spain	Young, class mates, sport fans, family
					Bruno	15	Spanish	Spain	Young people

Table II. Categories emerged from initial questionnaire analysis and examples of students' answers.

Question	Categories	Examples of students' answers
What groups do you identify yourself with?	Young people	Young People, Spanish people, skaters
	Catalan people	
	Sports (e.g. swimming club; Barcelona football club fan)	
	Female	Catalan teenager
	Locality	Chinese people from Barcelona
	People from 'other' national or/and ethnic groups	
	Spanish people	
	Music fans	
	Others	
Do you know what happened the Eleventh of September 1714 which is commemorated every year during the national day of Catalonia? And if so, could you provide an account of this?	Not known/ no answer	I don't know what happened
	<i>Factual account</i>	It was when Philip the 5th conquered Barcelona
	<i>Wrong factual account</i>	Eleventh September 1714 is when there was a terrorist attack in the USA. Flights crashed against the twin towers

	Myth critique	They lost a war and they celebrate it each eleventh September. They celebrate a defeat which, in my opinion, is pathetic
	Identification with the myth	In Catalonia, we were independent. And in the 1714, we lost everything