THE SOCIO-COGNITIVE DIMENSION OF WATER: THE CASE OF POLITICISATION OF WATER IN BARCELONA

Lucia Alexandra Popartan

Universitat de Girona

DOCTORAL THESIS

The socio-cognitive dimension of water: the case of politicisation of water in Barcelona

Lucia Alexandra Popartan

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Supervised by

Dr. Manuel Poch i Espallargas and Dr. María José Amores i Barrero

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MANUEL POCH I ESPALLARGAS

Professor del Departament d'Enginyeria Química, Agrària i Tecnologia Agroalimentària de la Universitat de Girona.

MARÍA JOSÉ AMORES I BARRERO

Project manager e Investigadora del Centre Tecnològic de l'Aigua CETAQUA

Certifiquem:

Que la llicenciada en Ciències Polítiques Lucia Alexandra Popartan ha dut a terme sota la nostra direcció el treball titulat *The socio-cognitive dimension of water: the case of politicisation of water in Barcelona* que es presenta en aquesta memòria, la qual constitueix la seva tesi doctoral per optar al grau de Doctor per la Universitat de Girona.

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Dr. Manuel Poch i Espallargas Dr. María José Amores i Barrero

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List of acronyms

AB	Aigües de Barcelona
ACA	Agencia Catalana de l'Aigua
AeV	Aigüa és Vida
AMB	Àrea Metropolitana de Barcelona
BeC	Barcelona en Comú
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CE	Circular Economy
CNT	Confederació Nacional del Treball
CUP	Candidatures d'Unitat Popular
DA	Discourse Analysis
ESF	Enginyers sense fronteres
EC	European Commission
FAVB	Federació d'Associacions de Veïns de Barcelona
HRWS	Human Right to Water and Sanitation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
PSC	Partit Socialista de Catalunya
RTC	Right to the City
SGAB	Sociedad General d'Aigües de Barcelona
TSJC	Tribunal Superior de Justicia de Catalunya

Publications, conferences, research visits

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"Populism as narrative, myth making, and the 'logic' of political emotions" (2020) Ungureanu C, Popartan L. *Journal of the British Academy* 8(s1): 37–43

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"Water management as discursive battlefield: the importance of narratives in the struggle for "remunicipalisation" of water in Barcelona", Athens, 29 August - 1 September 2017, *European Sociological Association Conference: (Un)Making Europe: Capitalism, Solidarities, Subjectivities*

Visiting scholarships

February - March 2018 - University of Manchester, Faculty of Humanities

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Summary

The thesis studies the discursive construction of cognitive frames in the water sector in order to understand dynamics of politicisation and depoliticisation in the water conflict in Barcelona between 2011 and 2019. The focus is placed on a particular type of politicisation at work in our case study: the *populist politicisation*. Using *Critical Discourse Analysis* as a method, the thesis will address the following research questions: (1) To what extent is the politicisation of water in Barcelona a populist one? (2) How do private actors react to the politicisation of water in the city and why does it matter? (3) Is Circular Economy a de-politicised area in the interaction between the actors in conflict? This thesis aims to make two kinds of contribution by building on the literature on populism, critical urban theory, and urban political ecology:

1) At the conceptual and **theoretical level**, the work articulates a novel conceptual framework which critically combines the literatures on populism, politicisation, and construction of discursive coalitions to analyse the water conflict in Barcelona. In this endeavour, the research draws critically on the theoretical instruments put forward by the philosopher Ernesto Laclau on rhetorical construction of society and populism. The research undertook here demonstrates that, despite the merits of Laclau's discursive-constructive approach, his ontologising perspective on populism as the "royal path to politics" (Laclau 2005) is questionable. The thesis distinguishes between the populist and anti-populist strategies of politicisation and points out the relevance of spatialisation and geographical imagination for different forms of populism.

2) On the **empirical level**, this reworked conceptual and theoretical framework is used to correct the one-sidedness of existing studies on politicisation of water or "remunicipalisation" which focus mainly on the public actors and disregard to a great extent the reaction of private or public-private actors. Therefore, this thesis is a first attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of the populist and anti-populist dialectic around water in the city of Barcelona. It also offers a theoretical toolbox for the analysis of water conflicts and politicisation in general. Moreover, this research looks beyond the

conflictive discourses in order to shed light on the other terrains of interaction between the public and private actors in the city arena: the relative agreement between the two contenders studied here around the concept and implementation of Circular Economy is presented as a potential for de-politicisation. Relying on an original data collection, the thesis focus on Barcelona en Comú, the municipal platform that has been governing the city since 2015 in close cooperation with grassroots movements such as Aigua és Vida. Then it examine the counter riposte of Aigües de Barcelona, the public-private company currently managing water in the city, where the majoritarian shareholder is Agbar (since 2010 controlled mainly by the French multinational SUEZ). Finally, data is provided on the discourses on Circular Economy of the two actors.

Summary in Catalan

La tesi doctoral estudia la construcció discursiva de marcs cognitius en el sector de l'aigua per tal de comprendre la dinàmica de politització i despolitització del conflicte de l'aigua a la ciutat de Barcelona entre el 2011 i el 2019. L'estudi de cas se centra en un tipus particular de politització: la *política populista*. Utilitzant el mètode denominat *anàlisi crítica del discurs*, la tesi aborda les següents preguntes d'investigació: (1) ¿En quina mesura la política de l'aigua a Barcelona és populista? (2) Com reaccionen els actors privats davant el canvi de política de l'aigua a la ciutat i quina importància té aquesta reacció? (3) És l'economia circular un àmbit despolititzat en la interacció entre els actors en conflicte? Aquesta tesi pretén assolir tant una contribució científica teòrica com empírica, a partir de la literatura sobre populisme, la teoria crítica i l'ecologia política urbana:

1) A **nivell conceptual i teòric**, la tesi articula un marc conceptual que combina des d'un punt de vista crític la literatura sobre populisme, politització i construcció de coalicions discursives per analitzar el conflicte de l'aigua a Barcelona. En aquest sentit, la investigació utilitza els instruments teòrics elaborats pel filòsof Ernesto Laclau sobre la construcció retòrica de la societat i el populisme. La recerca realitzada és una demostració que, malgrat els mèrits de l'enfocament discursiu-constructiu de Laclau, la seva perspectiva ontològica sobre el populisme, que es presenta com el "camí real a la polítización" (Laclau 2005), és qüestionable. La tesi distingeix entre les estratègies de política populista i anti-populista i senyala la rellevància de la 'imaginació geogràfica' per a les diferents formes de populisme.

2) A **nivell empíric**, aquest marc conceptual i teòric serveix per corregir la unilateralitat dels estudis existents sobre la política de l'aigua o la remunicipalització, centrats de manera preponderant en els actors públics, i que per tant no tenen en compte el discurs dels actors privats o publico-privats. Per tant, aquesta tesi introdueix una anàlisi en la profunditat de la dialèctica populista i anti-populista al voltant de l'aigua a la ciutat de Barcelona. El treball ofereix una sèrie d'eines per a l'anàlisi dels conflictes de l'aigua i la política en general. A més, aquesta investigació va més enllà dels discursos conflictius per fer palesa la existència d'altres àmbits d'interacció entre els actors públics i privats

en l'àmbit de la ciutat: presenta l'acord relatiu entre els dos camps estudiats en el tema de l'economia circular, un àmbit amb potencial per a la despolitització. Construïda sobre una recopilació de dades originals, la tesi se centra en el discurs de Barcelona en Comú, la plataforma municipal que governa la ciutat des del 2015, en estreta cooperació amb moviments socials com ara Aigua és Vida. Després s'examina la resposta d'Aigües de Barcelona, l'empresa publico-privada que actualment gestiona l'aigua a la ciutat, on l'accionista majoritari és la Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona (SGAB / Agbar), des de 2010 controlada principalment per la multinacional francesa SUEZ. Finalment, es proporcionen dades sobre els discursos sobre economia circular dels dos actors.

Summary in Spanish

La tesis doctoral estudia la construcción discursiva de marcos cognitivos en el sector del agua para comprender la dinámica de politización y despolitización del conflicto del agua en la ciudad de Barcelona entre 2011 y 2019. El estudio de caso se centra en un tipo particular de politización: la politización populista. Utilizando el método denominado *análisis crítico del discurso*, la tesis aborda las siguientes preguntas de investigación: (1) ¿En qué medida la politización del agua en Barcelona es populista? (2) ¿Cómo reaccionan los actores privados ante la politización del agua en la ciudad y por qué es importante esta reacción? (3) ¿Es la economía circular un área despolitizada en la interacción entre los actores en conflicto? Esta tesis pretende lograr tanto una contribución científica teórica como empírica, a partir de la literatura sobre populismo, la teoría urbana crítica y la ecología política urbana:

1) A **nivel conceptual y teórico**, el trabajo articula un marco conceptual novedoso que combina desde un punto de vista crítico la literatura sobre populismo, politización y construcción de coaliciones discursivas para analizar el conflicto del agua en Barcelona. En este sentido, la investigación utiliza los instrumentos teóricos elaborados por el filósofo Ernesto Laclau sobre la construcción retórica de la sociedad y el populismo. La investigación realizada demuestra que, a pesar de los méritos del enfoque discursivo-constructivo de Laclau, su perspectiva ontológica sobre el populismo, presentada como el "camino real a la política" (Laclau 2005), es cuestionable. La tesis distingue entre las estrategias de politización populista y anti-populista y señala la relevancia de la 'imaginación geográfica' para las diferentes formas de populismo.

2) A **nivel empírico**, este marco conceptual y teórico se utiliza para corregir la unilateralidad de los estudios existentes sobre la politización del agua o la remunicipalización, que se centran de manera preponderante en los actores públicos y no tienen en cuenta la reacción discursiva de los actores privados o público-privados. Por tanto, esta tesis es un primer intento de proporcionar un análisis en profundidad de la dialéctica populista y anti-populista alrededor del agua en la ciudad de Barcelona. También ofrece una serie de herramientas teóricas para el análisis de los conflictos del agua y la politización en general. Además, esta investigación va más allá de los discursos

conflictivos para reflejar los otros terrenos de interacción entre los actores públicos y privados en el ámbito de la ciudad: se presenta el acuerdo relativo entre los dos ámbitos estudiados en torno al concepto y la implementación de la economía circular, entendida como un potencial para la despolitización. Construida sobre una recopilación de datos originales, la tesis se centra en el discurso de Barcelona en Comú, la plataforma municipal que gobierna la ciudad desde 2015, en estrecha cooperación con movimientos sociales como Aigua és Vida. Luego se examina la respuesta de Aigües de Barcelona, la empresa público-privada que actualmente gestiona el agua en la ciudad, donde el accionista mayoritario es la Sociedad General de Aguas de Barcelona (SGAB / Agbar), desde 2010 controlada por la multinacional francesa SUEZ. Finalmente, se proporcionan datos sobre los discursos sobre economía circular de los dos actores.

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CHAPTER I - Introduction

Water is indeed not just H_2O; its meanings and practices meander like rivers, making unexpected turns and gathering or assembling all manner of connections and relations, transforming the social and physical landscapes as it passes from source to sea.

(Swyngedouw, 2015:3)

1.1. Beyond technology: the case for a discursive approach to water

"If water is the essential ingredient to life, then water supply is the essential ingredient of civilization"; with these words, David Sedlak commences his seminal book *Water 4.0* (Sedlak 2014) which analyses the successive paradigms of water management in the history of human societies. Indeed, water has been the key lubricant of social construction, urbanization and industrialization; at the same time, water policy and management have been a mirror of the technological and societal advances. Water and more generally environmental management are currently undergoing yet another paradigm shift resulting in a renewed struggle for legitimacy and power in signifying and managing water. Decision-making in the urban water management has aspired to find simple solutions to complex, unstructured problems; improved technologies play a necessary yet insufficient role in this process. Lately, the urban water problems have been on the basis of a new mental frameworks and narratives: along with the traditional criteria (i.e. water quality/quantity, cost efficiency), concepts such as democratic water, public water, resilience (Quitana et al 2020, Kumar et al 2020) or Circular Economy (Lazarevic and Valve 2016) have become key to renewed struggles for legitimation and power, and a core element of the decision-making process for meeting planning, design, and operational objectives in the water sector.

While the technical and economic aspects of this new paradigm shift have been extensively explored, its political and socio-cognitive aspects remain largely understudied (Korhonen 2018). Indeed, historically, water resources management focused on technical solutions to well-defined problems. However, experts studying the human-environment interactions have increasingly stressed the need to replace the prevailing mechanistic, technocratic-positivistic strategies that have proven to be inadequate for responding to recent challenges, and take more into consideration the complexity of the human dimension (Pahl Wostl 2015). According to Korhonen et al (2018), who review the research into the question of the Circular Economy, a paradigm benefits from two interrelated types of collective intellectual processes: the first one is

ideational/discursive and essentially ethical, while the second type is descriptive, positive. Surprisingly, the first category gets much less scholarly attention in current environmental studies than the second - the technical one - focused mainly on applications that answer generally narrow problems.

This predominant focus on technology and applications can be explained (Pahl Wostl 2015) by the fact that the bulk of water and environmental research departs from the assumption of the objective and rational character of the individual actors involved in the design and implementation water management and policies. This positivistic and narrow-rationalist assumption is problematic from at least three main perspective: first, the perfectly 'rational' character of decisions was challenged by advances in behavioural economics, neuro-cognitive science and psychology; in different ways, various experiments shows that the narrow view of a rational individual is a fiction that needs to be replaced with a more complex, bounded and situated view of rationality which takes into consideration collective narratives and mental frameworks (Lakoff, Engelmann, etc see also later later). Second, decision-making processes are often considered as if they existed occurred in a socio-historical and political vacuum; to the contrary, they are embedded in specific contexts, narratives of legitimation, and power relations and struggles between different groups in society. Third, the conflictive dimension of water - in terms of dominance over a scarce resource but also with regard to its symbolic and cultural meaning - is often left aside in the current water mainstream research. Let us examine these three critiques in more detail.

As mentioned, the technology-centred or *positivist approach* to decision-making (see also Chapter III) regards the water management as purely technical issues to be dealt with on account of neutral expertise, and independently of value frameworks. This perspective is rooted in the rich rationalist tradition in natural sciences and engineering, and has had a strong influence on social sciences as well, especially in economics and political science. Although its intellectual 'pedigree' goes back for centuries to the times of Greek philosophy up to the Enlightenment, this remains hugely influential despite criticism. Justin Fox (2015) connects the success of the rationalist tradition in more recent times to

the important role that statisticians and the statistics-based approach in mathematics, physics and economics played in the Allied victory in World War II. After the war, the logical and statistical approach would transform other fields such as decision analysis. In their simplest form, decisions would amount to (1) formulating a problem, (2) listing the possible courses of action, and (3) systematically assessing each option (Fox 2015). The mathematician John von Neumann helped advance research into decision-making with his notion of "expected utility." As outlined the landmark book *Theory of Games and Economic Behaviour* (Neumann and Morgenstern 1944), expected utility is what results from combining imagined events with probabilities. Subsequently, in economics, the development of the concept of "economic man" has had a paramount influence: human beings are supposed to be individual calculators, assessing probabilities in a consistent way and deciding according to utility measurements. For several decades, this assumption of the "rational individual" dominated the field of classic economics and influenced other disciplines, including decision-making in environmental studies and political science. This approach was sanctioned by the Nobel Prize granted to the influential economist Milton Friedman (see for instance Friedman and Savage 1948).

The positivist premises of the "economic man" and the prevalence of a specific model of human rationality in decision-making and economic thinking were strongly criticised (especially in terms of rationality narrowly understood as utility maximizing). It was the turn of another Nobel Prize, David Kahneman, who, together with Amos Tversky, started a series of experiments in order to examine how people make decisions in conditions of uncertainty. They found that there were consistent biases to the responses which could be traced to mental shortcuts, which they labelled as "heuristics." (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Drawing on aspects of both psychology and economics, they developed what later became known as *behavioural economics* and relied on the idea that cognitive biases often prevent people from making the best possible (or perfectly rational) decisions. Some

of these heuristics were relatively obvious[1] and were explained by psychological patterns such as risk-aversion, effort-aversion etc. (Fox 2015). The notion of *situated or bounded rationality* came across as a useful balance for the dominant and limiting concept of individual rationality: as humans, we take into consideration narrative frameworks, intersubjective relations, therefore we reason according to our concrete situation (Bendor 2001). In the words of the Nobel Prize in economics Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008), we are "humans" not "econs".

For cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff, political decisions from opposite political stances can be easily slanted as nonsensical; in reality they are simply informed by different moral frameworks and narratives, and that are constitutive to a practice of rationality irreducible to individual preferences. Lakoff applies these concepts to political analysis in his seminal book *Moral politics* (2016 [1996]). He departs from advances in neuroscience which show that 98% percent of our cognitive activity is in fact unconscious, driven by already formed mental frames which filter our reality and the way we constantly interpret it. These mental frames or visions of the world do not just float around but have a physical anchorage: neuronal circuits - "ideas-circuits" - which operate underneath the conscious level. The more we use these circuits, the more rigid they become. These circuits are activated much quicker than the consciousness itself, which explains why the sensorial information (what we perceive as 'reality') does not land on a neutral territory but on already formed ideas. Interestingly, Lakoff and other scientists show that our brain tends to adjust reality or even reject information from the outside if it does not fit the existing frames. This capacity of the brain to ignore facts would explain why pure data is not sufficient to convince people of a particular phenomenon (see for

[1] For instance, people tend to make inferences from their own experiences, so if they have ve recently seen a traffic accident they will overestimate the danger of dying in a car crash (Fox 2015).

instance the anti-climate change discourses); data matters but we make sense of it in relation to particular frames and values.

Coming from brain science, Richard Eagleman (2015) confirms that, as human beings, we are much more conditioned by pre-judgements and narratives than by a supposedly neutral access to reality and problems.[2] As Eagelman argues, the human brain is a producer of narratives or stories; in short the brain is "the storyteller" (Eagelman 2016: 73-74). Reflecting this feature in the policy realm, Fisher affirms: "Facts, in the natural as well as the social world, depend upon underlying assumptions and meanings" (Fischer 1998, 11). This does not mean that there are not aspects of reality, which are separate, independent from researchers, but rather that the "vocabularies and concepts used to know and represent them are socially constructed by human beings" (Fischer 1998:14).

The concept of frame is also taken up as a central analytical tool for social science discursive analysts, defined as cognitive schemata through which we make sense of and shape political reality (Benford and Snow 2000; Lindekilde 2014); they are embedded discursive constructions that can turn a phenomenon into a thematised social problem, offer foundations for collective solidarity and a call to action (della Porta and Diani 2006).

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[2] In this thesis, I will use interchangeably "narrative" and "mental frame" or "frameworks", and sometimes "discourses" to refer to these moral vocabularies that are constitutive to practical rationality. These narratives are not merely subjective; they emerge in the intersubjective interaction amongst the members of the community and in relation to the environment; moreover, as I have pointed out, they have an objective support in the neuronal activity of the brain as "storyteller" (see further and Engelmann 2016). Moreover, the narratives nourish (party) political ideologies and/or paradigms in policy-making and science. From my perspective, "ideology" and "policy paradigm" have a more restricted and specific understanding. Ideology refers to a set of ideas, arguments and policy-making that constitute the program, say, a political party; while the concept of policy paradigm is understood as a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the *very nature of the problems* that are meant to be addressed.

In the realm of social sciences, this school of thought gave rise to a multitude of approaches which all shared the importance of ideas, values and communication in understanding the social world (Section 3.3).

So far, I have looked at the criticism of the positivist / rationalist approach from an interdisciplinary and cognitive perspective. The second strand of criticism to this tradition is that it misses an important trait of complexity: not only the solutions but also the way problems are defined and framed depend on the type of society, socio-political frameworks, and the struggles of legitimacy of different actors. Compare for instance the distribution of water in a hierarchical-authoritarian society as Egypt and the distribution of water in a contemporary democracy like Spain: the technical problems are different not only because of the level of technological advancement, but also of the type of political community and power structures in place (Pahl Wostl 2015). Therefore, for sociologists and philosophers of science, any scientific explanation has to be seen in the context of specific social groupings that created them.

In the field of environmental studies, *political ecologists* claim that it is problematic to produce universal explanations of environmental problems across diverse scales, cultures or power structures (Robins 2012, see also Section 1.2). Therefore, they develop a *narrative approach* to environmental knowledge. An environmental narrative is well-known (and sometimes convenient) explanation of environmental processes that is widely accepted as "truth", but that may contain important simplifications and even errors[3] (Fortsyth 2011, see also Dryzek 2005). In this sense, instead of considering problems as neutral and solvable in a social-political vacuum manner, narratives indicate how environmental explanations may carry hidden normative values, which in turn reflect the

[3] The Cultural Theory work of Thompson, Warburton, and Hatley (1986) showed how different predictions of deforestation in the Himalayas varied by a factor of sixty-seven. Accordingly, they argued that organizations will select or represent data to support already existing worldviews (Forsyth 2011).

selective participation of different actors and solutions (Roe 1991 quoted). From this perspective of a situated understanding of rationality, Maarten Hajer (1995) referred to narratives as "storylines," in which diverse physical events and processes are ordered into opportune explanations that also include concepts of blame and urgency according to dominant social groups. Consequently "[e]nvironmental change will always be framed in different ways, and these different perspectives influence the gathering of data and the creation of explanations" (Forsyth 2011:35).[4]

In this complexity resides the third critique of a narrowly rationalist and supposedly neutral-positivist approach to water: the neglect of its inherent conflictive nature. Throughout the history of humankind, water has been involved in endless conflicts over its ownership, usage, management and distribution in particular after the agricultural revolution, and the creation of large cities and, subsequently, empires (Harari 2014). The exponential increase in population as well the climate change turn water into an ever-scarcer resource, and therefore in a key element of current and future struggles in human societies. The warning (or apprehension) that World War III would be fought over water gives a measure of how contested water is and is likely to become at the global level. The city is nowadays a key terrain for water struggles, with more than half of the world population dwelling in urban areas. With the increasing urbanization of the global population, the city has become a key site of both innovation and conflict concerning the management of water (Baraqué 2012). In recent times, in various part of the globe, previous consensuses (in themselves arrangements resulting from struggles between groups in society) have been increasingly challenged: long periods of agreement over the means and ends of this resource management and distribution are interrupted by periods

[4] To avoid misunderstanding, this perspective does *not* entail relativism, but pluralism and is compatible with the notion of moral and social progress in questions such as water management.

of conflict between relevant stakeholders, when the very foundations of the policy are questioned (Lobina 2012).

Against this background, this thesis advances a *critical discourse analysis* approach, which avoids the pitfalls of the positivist reductionism, and combines elements of the three critiques presented above. The aim is to offer a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary outlook of the water field. The perspective takes into consideration the shifting significance of water and how it has been constructed in the midst of conflicts for power and discursive legitimation amongst groups in society. As Erik Swyngedouw puts it "water is not H_2O" (Swyngedouw 2015:5); its metabolism "encompasses not just its physical and chemical properties but also an associated assemblage of symbolic and cultural meanings as it becomes incorporated into the political ecology of the modern city" (Gandy 2005).

Grasping the resorts of conflict and consensus in the urban water arrangements is key to understanding paradigm shifts. Therefore, this thesis aims to improve knowledge of the importance of mental frames and discourses at work in the water field by analysing narratives and discursive assumptions of stakeholders, experts and others in moments of conflict and politicisation. More concretely, the focus is placed on the discourses on "remunicipalisation" and circular economy in the city of Barcelona which illustrates the role of conflicting cognitive frames in shaping water policies in given historical moments.

The thesis departs from the premise that decisions in water management take place at three levels that are often interlinked: 1) technical 2) operational and 3) political, with the latter having a prominent role over the former two levels of decision (Poch et al 2012). The thesis explores this third level of decision-making - the political. It asserts that, like any policy field, urban water management is a political arena where different actors confront each other and aim to promote their priorities, based on their narratives. It is thus, a confrontation of mental frames or discourses which sometimes - if combined with other favourable socio-economic conditions – leads to a paradigm challenge or, sometimes, to a paradigm change.

This has become more evident in recent years, with the rise to power at urban level of new populist parties and platforms, which have put water policy at the centre of their political agenda and have promoted a new set of values regarding water management. More precisely, in the past years, the debate in many Spanish cities has focused on the public versus the private or mixed (public-private) management of water, with several administrations and social movements defending the "remunicipalisation"[5] of water services (Planas 2017). This thesis aims to make two kinds of contribution by building on the literature on populism, critical urban theory, and urban political ecology:

1) At the conceptual and **theoretical level**, this research articulates a novel conceptual framework which critically combines the literatures on populism, politicisation, and construction of discursive coalitions to analyse the latest water conflict in Barcelona. In this endeavour, the work draws critically on the current debate on populism, in particular on the theoretical instruments put forward by the philosopher Ernesto Laclau on the rhetorical construction of society and populism. The research undertook here demonstrates that, despite the merits of Laclau's discursive-constructive approach, his ontologising perspective on populism as the "royal path to politics" (Laclau 2005) is questionable for being over-generalizing and ahistorical.

As an alternative to existing approaches such as Laclau's, the thesis aims to clarify one of the most controversial concepts in social science, i.e. populism. The thesis argues for

[5] The concept of remunicipalisation is widely used in the specialised literature (critically) employed in this PhD but it is itself a matter of contestation: the discursive coalition in favor of public-private / private management in Barcelona argues that it is non-sensical to speak of a 'return' (expressed in the "re" prefix) to municipal control since in fact water is public and only managed in collaboration with private actors. In this thesis I use the concept in order to engage properly with the literature which discusses it but I use quotation marks for the case of Barcelona (except when it refers to discourses), to account for this contestation of the term.

a narrative approach to populism, and proposes a more differentiated concept of politicisation which goes beyond the one-sidedness of agonistic and consensualist approaches to it (Chapter II). To this end, I distinguish between the populist and anti-populist strategies of politicisation. In addition, this thesis argues for a more specific concept of populism and populist politicisation by considering the relevance of spatialisation and geographical imagination for different forms of populism (e.g. national or city populism).

2) On the **empirical level**, this reworked conceptual and theoretical framework is used to fill a *double gap* in the literature on water remunicipalisation processes. First, the thesis is a systematic study of Barcelona in Common (Barcelona en Comú, BEC) the municipal platform that has been governing the city since 2015 and its dealing with a question of water. Second, by focusing on the dialectic between the BeC and Aigües de Barcelona (AB), the thesis aims to correct the a general one-sidedness of existing studies on politicisation of water or "remunicipalisation" which focus mainly on the public actors and disregard to a great extent the reaction of private actors. Therefore, this thesis is a first attempt to provide an in-depth analysis of the populist and anti-populist dialectic around water in the city of Barcelona which thrive to install a new paradigm in the water management: a public one, inspired in the concepts of commons and direct democracy. It also offers a theoretical toolbox for the analysis of water conflicts and politicisation in general. Moreover, this research looks beyond the conflictive discourses in order to shed light on the other terrains of interaction between the two actors: the relative agreement between the two contenders around the concept and implementation of Circular Economy is presented as a potential for de-politicisation. Relying on an original data collection, the study focuses BeC in close cooperation with grassroots movements such as Water is Life (Aigua és Vida [AeV]). Then the counter riposte of AB is examined: this historical, public-private company, where the majoritarian shareholder is SGAB - Agbar (since 2010 controlled mainly by the French multinational SUEZ), has been managing, almost uninterruptedly, this resource in Barcelona for the past 150 years. Finally, data is provided on the discourses on Circular Economy of the two actors in an attempt to provide a

nuanced picture of the interaction between the contending actors, where politicised and conflictive discourses co-exist with areas of consenus

1.2. Overview of state of the art theoretical approaches

Change and continuity, conflict and consensus, these have been dynamics that have always concerned analysts in all scientific paths. Paradigm change (or attempts of) is a common expression in the water field and yet, as noted above, not enough research has been invested in illustrating the socio-cognitive, discursive and power-related resorts of these changes at the city level. More to the point, there is currently no attempt to look at how the current 'populist moment' affects the water sector and the policy options prevailing at urban level. In this section, I review the main conceptual tools employed to analyse the case of politicisation of water in Barcelona, which will be further discussed in Chapter II.

1.2.1. Water paradigms: public, private, commons

The literature on *policy paradigms* emerged in the late 1980s with a trend that sought to emphasize the influence of ideas, discourses and representations which had generally been neglected in policy analysis. Inspired by the seminal work of the philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn (1962), the concept of policy paradigm is understood as a framework of ideas and standards that specifies not only the goals of policy and kind of instruments that can be used to attain them, but also the *very nature of the problems* they are meant to be addressed (Hall 1993). Therefore, policy paradigm changes are regarded as the result of economic and institutional drivers but also, importantly, of a *constant struggle over meaning and dominant ways of understanding reality*. In the words of Ross Beveridge:

> "It could be said that competing policy proposals see the same things differently – that they see the same world but, drawing on different values and theories, come to different conclusions about how to reform it. More accurately, however, it

should be argued that, as a result of these moral values and theoretical tools, competing policy proposals see reality differently: a reality composed of different elements, working according to different logics and norms" (Beveridge 2012: 60)

In this thesis, paradigm changes are understood as the result of a shift in the dominant or hegemonic order of ideas, priorities and 'common sense' in a society at a given time (Hall, 2003). In many cases, the trigger is a historical event (for instance the *Indignados* movement in the recent history of Spain) which opens a window of opportunity (Tarrow 1994) for actors which had been prior marginal(ised) to emerge in the public sphere. This is when, usually via antagonistic dynamics with the hegemonic discourses and actors, the public sphere is politicised and new ways of looking at the world are proposed. If the socio-economic and political conditions are favourable, there is also an opportunity for paradigm change (Figure 1).

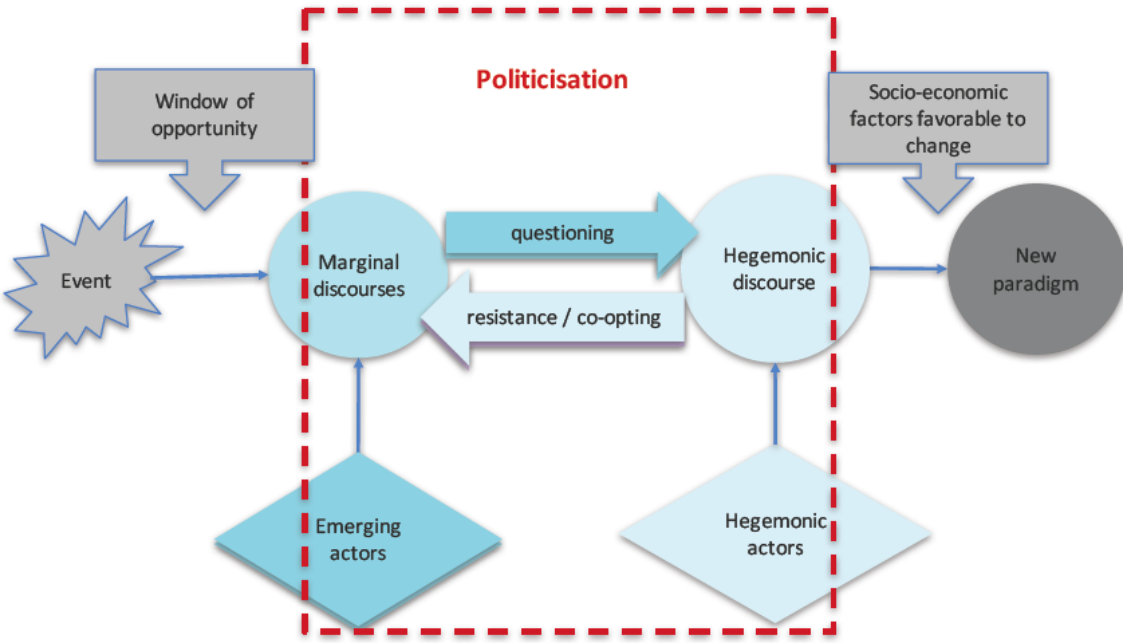

Figure 1. From transforming event to paradigm change

By hegemony we understand the process by which the dominance of ideas is established. Drawing on Antonio Gramsci, David Howarth (2010) emphasises two aspects of the

hegemony and counter-hegemony dynamics: first, hegemony is a type of political practice that captures the making and breaking of political coalitions. Secondly, hegemony can be seen as a form of rule in which a regime, practice or policy wins the consent of the subjects by securing their compliance.

Applying these ideas in the water sector, Hall et al (2013) envisages the urban water policy as a constant pendulum movement between public and private management paradigms. Thus, the 19th century, industrialization processes generated a growth of utility services, which was provided almost universally by the private sector, with small and large firms in charge of providing water, gas, transportation, waste management healthcare and electricity services. This tendency came to a halt in the late 19th century and the management paradigm turned to public, with local authorities taking ownership based on the belief that the private sector was illogical and wasteful, especially in the case of natural monopolies such as water. Thus, until the 1990s, the private management of water supply systems was rare, and it concentrated mainly in the cities, given the economies of scale of dense urban centres (Bakker 2013).

In turn, in the 1980s-90s, with the so-called 'Washington Consensus' (see Harvey 2008), describing a supposed agreement across political spectrum with regards to the market-based approach to structural policies[6], the emergence of neoliberalism as a new socio-economic paradigm, privatization was again rising as a preferred management option worldwide, including in the environmental policy and management areas (see March 2013). This turn was predicated upon the framing of water as an economic good—formulated in the 1992 Dublin Principles—and based on the assumption that private

[6] According to John Williamson, the economist who used this term for the first time, this 'consensus' encompassed policies of macroeconomic stabilization, economic liberalisation in terms of trade and investment, privatisations and the expansion of a market logic within the domestic economy. The name derives from the promoters of this approach, namely Washington-based institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Williamson 2004)

companies would enable large flows of private finance, improve efficiency by providing technical expertise that the public sector lacked, and therefore promote affordable rates for customers (Bakker 2010, 2013).

In the first decade of the 21st Century, the clash over private vs public water seemed to have finally reached an entente with the popularization of the private-public forms of management, under the egis of 'new public management' principles: a compromise between public control over a scarce resource and the quality provided by the competition and market criteria which would naturally enhance accumulation of know-how, innovation and technology. This was part of a larger trend of corporatization of public service agencies, which put market-based operating mechanisms at the heart of the organizational model, pushing managers to use market-oriented signals such as price and interest rates as primary factors in their decision making (McDonald 2016).

However, in 2013, Hall et al. advanced the proposition that, unless we accept claims of the 'end of history', shifts could be expected to occur again between a market and public sector paradigm. Signs of this transformation were already visible in vigorous anti-privatization protests early 1990s such as the famous *Guerra del Agua* in Cochabamba, Mexico. For the activists, water privatization entailed the appropriation for profit, by the private sector of both the natural environmental 'commons' and the public goods created and subsidized by the state (Bakker 2013). Frequently, environmental and social justice concerns were intertwined in these campaigns (e.g., through framing water as a common good or in terms of indigenous water rights). According to activists, water is different: "a partially non-substitutable resource, essential for life and public health, and imbued with both political and spiritual significance" (Bakker 2013: 256). Many of these claims have been adopted in the discourses promoting remunicipalisations in Europe starting from the 2000s on, with Berlin and Paris as emblematic cases (Lobina 2013, Beveridge 2012, Le Strat 2015).

The anti-privatization tendency in water and other public services (referred to as 'remunicipalisations' or 'renationalisations') has drawn considerable scholarly attention.

An important part of these studies performed quantitative analyses, looking for material causes and dynamics of these processes. Special attention was paid to the advantages and disadvantages of public vs. private management of goods (Bell 2010 2008, Albalate and Bel 2020), the impact of remunicipalisation (or attempts of) at political and economic level (Clifton et al 2020), or the political development of specific cases (Le Strat 2015, Lobina 2017, Pigeon 2016). However, many of these accounts *overlook the importance of power and the contested visions of the water* as key variables in water policy change.

Moving to the critical terrain, scholars of *political economy* wonder about the relation between processes of urbanisation and privatisation of water and how they relate to issues of class, power and domination (Bakker 2010; 2013; Hall et al 2013; Bagué 2017; Becker et al 2015, Cumbers and Becker 2018). Others offered *institutional and historical accounts* of urbanisation of water management and how different discourses on water have coexisted and struggled throughout the modernity to contemporary times (Masjuan et al 2008, Lopez Gunn 2009, March 2010). However, while this strand of literature is more sensitive to the importance of power and contestation, the picture they offer is rather static and there is little inquiry into the role of hegemonic dynamics and the antagonistic creation of political identities in these struggles.

The literature on *political ecology* with its urban branch, explores how is the privatization of water engages with larger questions of fundamental rights, values and democracy (Swyngedouw 2009, 2015, March 2015, Angel and Loftus 2017, Loftus 2012). From an UPE perspective, we would ask to what extent remunicipalisations reveal ontological disagreements on the condition of water - water-as-resource / water-as-lifeblood / water-as-commons - and what is the consequence of these differences on the way 'good' water management is understood by different social and cultural groups. Consequently, which visions are side-lined and which become hegemonic. Importantly for this thesis, the political ecologists study the tension between politicisation and de-politicisation of nature and water. There is, however, insufficient research on the concrete discursive strategies of movements which strive for politicisation; moreover, the existing studies deal almost exclusively with the 'insurgent' actors while paying scarce attention to the reaction and

the strategies of the economic actors whose legitimacy is being questioned (but see McDonald 2019).

1.2.2. Urban political ecology and populism

This thesis draws aims to bridge the existing gap in the literature on anti-privatisation and remunicipalisation conflicts, by building a conceptual framework which combines urban political ecology (UPE) and populism, overviewed in this section and more in depth in Chapter II. This novel framework allows for a nuanced and precise overview of the problematic at hand, by combining elements of power, discourse and antagonist creation of political subjectivities.

According to Erik Swyngedouw, (urban) political ecology departs from an understanding that *environmental and social processes co-determine each other* (2009:603). This conceptual approach was inspired by David Harvey's affirmation that there was 'nothing unnatural about New York City' meaning that combined social and ecological dynamics generate environmental assemblages or 'produced environments'. As Heynen et al (2006, see also Heynen et al 2014) assert, natural metabolisms are "discursively, politically and economically mobilized and socially appropriated to produce environments that embody and reflect positions of social power". Put otherwise, "…gravity or photosynthesis are not socially produced. However, their powers are socially mobilized in particular bio-chemical and physical metabolic arrangements to serve particular purposes; and the latter are invariably associated with strategies of achieving or maintaining particular positionalities and express shifting geometries and networks of social power" (Heynen et al. 2006:6)

A core concern of the urban political ecologists is to understand the emergence of the "political moment in political-ecological processes" (Swyngedouw 2009:604). Key authors inspiring the work of UPE school of thought, adopt an antagonist premise towards the 'political' - a concept developed more at length in Chapter II of this thesis - which refers to the "contested public terrain where different imaginings of possible socio-

ecological orders compete over the symbolic and material institutionalization of these visions" (Swyngedouw 2014:119). Likewise, Chantal Mouffe (2013:14) argues that 'the political' is to be understood as the dimension of antagonism which can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. Rancière (2019) shares a similar understanding of this concept, defining it in terms of dissent or rupture. For him, the political is the domain of disagreement, the rejection of the consensual visions of the pre-established "order of things" (Rancière 1999).

A notion directly related to the concept of political is depoliticisation, defined as the "foreclosure of the political in terms of (…) not recognizing the legitimacy of dissenting voices and positions" (Swyngedouw 2014:120). In line with Swyngedouw, Mouffe (2013:113) asserts that the neoliberal consensus "deprives democratic citizens of an agonistic debate where they can make their voices heard and choose between real alternatives". According to this scholarly tradition, both technocracy and consensus obstruct political engagement.

Applying these ideas to the water sector, Beveridge (2010) asserts that the 1990s privatisation processes were in line with the neoliberal paradigm and its political message, often presented and perceived as common-sense: that the market and a minimal state were the "only legitimate and viable future" Beveridge (2010:20). Thus, "[n]eoliberalism is defended not as normatively superior to the alternatives, but as the only option – there simply are no alternatives. It is the very condition of economic credibility and competence in an era of globalisation" (Hay 2007 quoted in Beveridge 2010:20). This depoliticised approach to environment and water management is "reduced to the administration and management of processes whose parameters are defined by consensual socio-scientific knowledges" (Swyngedouw 2009:602). As Swyngedouw (2007:18) points out, "[d]isagreement is allowed, but only with respect to the choice of technologies, the mix of organizational fixes, the details of the managerial adjustments, and the urgency of the timing and implementation".

The UPE is relevant for the Barcelona case study as it draws our attention to the foundational urban narratives, which can be primordial for a thorough comprehension of the mechanisms of depoliticisaton and re-politicisation of water. Thus, as the Barcelona case shows, consensus is never complete and leaves traces that allow the eventual resurfacing of conflict. Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory, argues that although all discourses try to take on a dominant (hegemonic) position, 'closure' (complete hegemony) is never fully possible. There is always a gap, through which marginal discourses can break in and take over a central position (Macgilchrist 2007).

Populism, another key concept for this thesis, is according to Ernesto Laclau, the main route to politicisation as it involves antagonistic rhetoric - construction of 'a People' and an Enemy - which is central to any political process (see Chapter II). However, the potential of populist theory to shed light on political ecology processes has only scarcely been explored. Thus, according to Andreucci (2018), despite an impressive collective effort of UPE to document socio-environmental outcomes of contemporary capitalism and the conflicts it generates – political ecology and its urban branch has dedicated comparatively little effort to reflecting on issues of counter-hegemonic political strategy[7]. For him, taking populism as a vantage point for the analysis means approaching cases of environmental mobilisation and conflict with a different set of questions in mind.

> "Rather than simply examine how and why certain groups mobilise, and what the outcomes of such mobilisations are, we could ask, for instance: How do these groups go about building solidarities with other 'subaltern' actors (and if not, why

[7] Importantly on the relation between the literature on hegemony and populism, Andreucci clarifies "So, why Laclau and not Gramsci? I'm aware that some political ecologists are strongly critical of Laclau's (and Chantal Mouffe's) 'post-Marxist' interpretation of hegemony, for displacing class from the centre of the analysis of political processes. I don't disagree with this critique, but I think it is possible to analyse populism without renouncing the centrality of class and of social relations of (re)production (Andreucci 2018)

not)? How do they articulate particular class or material demands with broader 'popular-democratic' struggles? How does a common identity emerge?" (Andreucci 2019).

Thus, this thesis combines elements of socio-cognitive analysis in order to explore the (populist) traits of the politicisation of water in Barcelona. The philosopher Slavoj Žižek noted the connection between the cognitive approach (i.e. of Lakoff) and the discourse theory of Laclau that I employ in this thesis: "The interest of [Lakoff's] project for us resides in the fact that it shares a series of superficial features with Laclau's edifice: the move from political struggle as a conflict of agents who follow rational calculations about their self-interests, to a more "open" vision of political struggle as a conflict of passions sustained by an irreducibly metaphorical rhetoric" (Žižek 2006).

1.3. The case study

The emergence of private companies in the Spanish water industry dates back to the end of the 19th century and the map of privatisation remained practically unchanged from the mid-1980s, when, under the Ley 7/1985 de Bases de Régimen Local (Local Government Regulatory Law), many municipalities chose to relinquish water services management to private companies (Ruiz-Villaverde et al., 2010). The Spanish water industry is oligopolistic in that it is strongly concentrated around two major business groups: Societat General d'Aigues de Barcelona (SGAB - Agbar), which operates under different names in different Spanish regions, and Aqualia, part of the Fomento de Construcciones y Contratas group. These two companies together have been responsible for providing urban water services to around 75% of the population resident in Spanish municipalities which have private companies involved in urban water services management.

This apparently stable landscape is nevertheless object of recurrent conflicts. Indeed, water has always been a constant object of political struggle and a key 'lubricant' for different political regimes and struggles (Swyngedouw 2015, Kaika 2005, Beveridge

2012, March 2015). David Harvey famously claimed that "(e)very political project is also environmental" (Harvey 2014). Indeed, the analogy works vice-versa too: all environmental and in particular water projects have a political background and as such, they are contested (see Table 1). In this sense, a transition from one paradigm to another was intrinsically related to conflicting discourses, for instance between water as a productive good versus as an environmental resource; between water as future material accumulation versus water as current capital accumulation; and between water as a source of identity and territoriality versus water instrumentals as a political rhetorical tool (Lopez-Gunn 2009).

In the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008, a proliferation of insurgent movements emerged in cities all around the world. In Spain, this wave took the shape of the *Indignados* or 15M movement (see Chapter V), filling the streets of major cities in the Spring of 2011 with the slogan "Democracia Real Ya" (Real Democracy Now). These insurgencies had a clear urban character (Harvey 2014) and staged, although in often contradictory and unarticulated ways, a profound discontent with the system as a whole, and tried to institute new forms of urban political acting (Dikeç and Swyngedow 2017, Garcia Lamarca 2017). The institutionalization of these urban movements was promised to contribute to a radical democratic transformation of the polis and also to institute a new common sense about the "urban being-in-common" (Swyngedouw, 2018). Subsequently, the implementation of *municipalist* projects as social movements 'get their hands dirty' with institutional politics (Mouffe and Errejón 2017), was built upon on concepts such as Right to the City (RTC), Urban Commons and participative democracy.

The RTC, according to Lefebvre, is a call for overcoming both capitalism and state socialism: it is "a critique of existing society in order to open up a path to another society, a possible world beyond capitalism, the State and consumer society" (Purcell, 2014: 144). According to him: "the realization of urban society claims for a way of planning oriented to social needs, the needs of urban society" (Lefebvre 1969: 166). RTC implies that private property and exchange value, which are the dominant ways of organizing urban

space, replaced by non-profit values. In the process of construction of the RTC, use value would substitute the exchange value of urban space.

Claiming the public control over water management became a banner for "new urban social movements" as denominated by Manuel Castells seminal work already in the 1980ies (Castells 1983). These movements reflect a growing concern for the materiality of the city, understood increasingly as a political space (Dikeç 2017) but also as an object of struggle against commodification of "the things that constitute the city" (Becker 2015:84). Water is again an important element of the new political programmes, framed as non-substitutable resource, essential for life and public health (Bakker 2013); according to these social movements, privatizing it amounted to "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2014). The discourse on remunicipalisation coincided with a revival of discussion around urban commons as unifying concept for alternative left movements (Planas 2017, Bakker 2010, Mustafa and Reed 2009).

The case of Barcelona reflects what Becker et al (2015) noted about anti-privatisation movements: they are increasingly overcoming the debate on ownership and become "spaces of contention where social movements can flourish and opportunities for new political subjectivities and forms of politics emerge in cities" (Becker et al 2015, p. 84). The use of RTC, as one of privileged framings of these movements, speaks to their goal of overcoming transformist stances and pursue a more radical, political transformation of urban society (Novy and Colomb 2013).

Table 1. Water paradigms in Spain XX - XXI Century

	XX CENTURY			EARLY 2000	LAST DECADE
PARADIGM	**Old hydraulic paradigm**	**Regionalist paradigm**	**New Water Culture**	**Financial, digital water**	**Contesting paradigm - water as commons**
LEADING ACTORS	Traditional hydraulic policy community (civil engineering)	Regional elites; farmers; new water users (e.g. urban, tourism, energy)	Environmental NGOs; EU Commission and Parliament, Nueva Cultura del Agua; regional parties; local activists	Multinational corporations Public-private companies	Public actors Social movements
CORE IDEAS	Hydrologic cycle **Supply management as a factor of production; agriculture as privileged user	Hydrologic cycle **Water and regional development intimately linked	Hydro-social cycle **Demand management; water as a social and environmental resource	Hydro-financial cycle **De-materialization Digital water Water services	Socio-ecological metabolism **Right to the City The city as a space for class struggle The commons

				Circular economy, Resilience	Recovering control over water
POLITICAL REGIME *(existing or proposed)*	Autocratic and technocratic regime	Representative democracy, multiscalar elections	Deliberative democracy	State + global governance, multiscalar networks of stakeholders	Direct democracy
WHO PAYS	Central state	Central state, and occasionally the regions	Water users (full cost recovery)	Water users (full cost recovery)	Water users but the "right to water" replaces full cost recovery as priority
DISCOURSE	Structural deficit; Water lost to the sea	Water 'wars'; regional 'solidarity'; water vs resources for exclusive internal regional use	River as life; ecological restoration of river basins; ecosystem based approach; efficiency in water use	Water as financial asset Circular Economy Digitalisation	Water is democracy Taking back control The 'citizen' replaces the 'client'

(Source - own elaboration based on Lopez-Gunn 2009 and Swyngedouw 2015)

1.4. Objectives

In this thesis, I start from the premise that the politicisation of water is part of a larger counter-hegemonic project of BeC which aims to bring about a paradigm shift in the water management. Within this framework, the politicisation of water promoted by the new municipalist parties and allied social movements attempts to contest the prevailing order, to bring to surface conflicts and debates around issues that had been considered as common-sense. Thus, the discourse on market efficiency, innovation, and technical optimization is radically challenged by discourses on common good, right to water.

There is a battle for legitimacy of the two imaginaries: the emerging paradigm of 'the commons' promoted by BeC versus the market paradigm represented by private companies. This clash of imaginaries is related to the *populist construction of new subjectivities*: the one hand, BeC constructs discursively the '*thirsty inhabitant'* who claims the right to access to water, and therefore rejects any mercantile approach to this vital flow; on the other hand, we have the "*engaged expert*" who is responsible to provide quality water, at good prices to the water customer. Finally, the analysis of the Circular Economy discourse of the two actors provides additional evidence that conflict and consensus are inherent processes, sometimes occurring at the same time and between the same actors.

The thesis will study the discursive construction of mental frames in order to understand dynamics of politicisation and depoliticisation in the water conflict in Barcelona between 2011 and 2019. The focus is placed on a particular type of politicisation at work in our case study: the *populist politicisation*. Using Critical Discourse Analysis as a method, the thesis will address the following research questions:

1) To what extent is the politicisation of water in Barcelona a populist one and to what degree it manages to institute a new paradigm of water management in the city?

2) How do private actors react to the politicisation of water in the city and why does it matter?

3) Is Circular Economy a de-politicised area in the interaction between the actors in conflict?

1.5. Methodological approach

For the data collection (see Chapter III), this research builds upon Hajer's step-by-step methodological approach to discourse analysis (Hajer 2005). Desk research was conducted on secondary literature to establish an initial chronology of events and place them in a wider historical context. Further information was collected by performing 30 interviews with company managers, key activists from the water movement, (some of whom become involved in the BeC city government after 2015), academic experts, as well as representatives of water regulators and associations of public and private operators. Further on, a second selection was performed to include those interviewees who had either been instrumental in designing the communication strategies of the two actors or had had consistent experience in the water management of the city. The data set was completed by the key manifestoes and declarations of AeV, official transcripts from the municipal council meetings, discourses of BeC, representative newspaper articles, documents produced by the company (both written and visual) and participant observation[8] at relevant events organised by the two contending parties. Finally, the data

[8] By participant observation I mean that my presence in these events was both as a researcher and as a participant, asking questions and making comments. I took notes which I afterwards analysed and coded. This method was integrated with the interviews and text analysis. The choice for these methods was motivated by the wish to maintain a certain distance from the 'material', given the politically loaded content of the data obtained. The interview offer a framework where people feel more comfortable and therefore the political tension can be more easily overcome than in a focus group.

was coded, including the notes from the events, texts and transcripts of interviews. The aim was first to trace the presence of the central populist frame – 'the People'/elite dichotomy – and its specific linguistic "proxies" (Caiani and Della Porta 2011). Next, this frame was connected to urban and environmental topoi. The coding noted the presence of similar expressions in the discourses of the two contending parties, identified as "floating signifiers" (Laclau 2005:86).

1.6. Structure of the thesis

Chapter II – Conceptual and theoretical framework: the return of the political and populism

This chapter clarifies the working concepts of the research and elaborates on the intellectual and scientific traditions that help us understand the case study. The goal is to present the scientific state of the art and then engage critically with it in order to show how this research contribute to move beyond it. The chapter starts by looking on politicisation as well as dynamics of policy change and stability. In this sense, it is relevant for this case study to document how these changes were explained by shifts in the established power discourses: periods of stability, where dominant ideas, values and ways of managing environment are followed by moments of conflict where discourses which were marginal start to question the established order and advocate for systemic changes. Next, a particular type of politicisation is presented: the populist one. It involves a specific kind of discursive articulation: antagonism, construction of the 'Elite' as the enemy and a 'good and pure People'. The chapter reviews the extensive current debates on populism, showing that there is no consensus on what populism is (an ideology, a discourse?) Is it democratic or anti-democratic, 'good or bad'? Further on, I analyse critically the work of one particular author, Ernesto Laclau, whom in my view is the most suitable for the case study analysis because he understands populism as discourse. The

choice for this author is justified and the limitations of his work are highlighted, as proven by the analysis of the empirical evidence of populist politicisation in Barcelona.

Chapter III – Materials and methods. Discourse analysis and interpretive methodologies

This chapter outlines the choice of tools for the empirical analysis. The first step is to provide details on the concrete methodological tradition employed. The research draws upon a combination of interpretive qualitative methods and specifically, Critical Discourse Analysis. The work builds on this field of study and makes use of the concept of *interpretative frame*, understood as a cognitive instrument that allows us to make sense of reality. The aim is to trace two necessary and sufficient conditions of populist framing: (1) the operation of the 'people' as a *nodal point* or empty signifier shaping a particular discursive ensemble; (2) the reliance on specific discursive infrastructures (the logic of equivalence and logic of difference), imposing a dichotomic representation of society along a Us/Them axis.

Chapter IV - Public vs. private waters in Barcelona. A brief historical account

This chapter IV gives an overview of the characteristics of water management in Barcelona and in Spain by looking at the relation between water and urbanization and tracing those moments where private management was contested. The story of water will focus especially on changing discourses on water and conflicts in order to introduce the reader to the actors and the historical, cultural and political references on which present discourses are built. The history ends with the explanation of the November 2019 Supreme Court ruling in favour of Aigües de Barcelona (AB).

Chapter V - Populist politicisation of water in Barcelona

This chapter outlines the stages of populist politicisation of discourse on water, analysing the structuration phase (discourses of Aigüa és Vida - AeV) and the institutionalization phase of it (discourses of BeC). The first subsection presents the main actors from the perspective of social movements and new municipalism literature: the social movement AeV, its antecedents and alliances; BeC, its rise to power, institutionalization and main programmatic goals. A subsection is devoted to the more recent mobilization of the water infrastructure and memory of the city in the battle for a new political identity. Metaphorically, the chapter unpacks the process through which a new substance is making its way into the urban water mix: the *remembered waters,* as they are captured in the contending re-signification of hydraulic ruins, public and private, and brought back into the 'domain of the sensible' (Rancière 2019).

Chapter VI - Anti-populist politicisation: Aigües de Barcelona claims its "Right to the City"

This chapter focuses on the reaction of the company whose legitimacy was questioned by the new municipal government. It looks at how the company gradually builds a communication campaign to counteract the one of BeC. This is presented as an anti-populist type of politicisation: by stepping into the public arena, in fact the company also undertakes a process of political identity formation in the context of a conflict. Its reaction goes beyond mere technical and managerial discourse and engages with wider political issues of democracy, legitimacy of public actors and representation. This chapter is devoted to 1) Barri a Barri campaign and 2) the analysis of the Memòries del Districte collection of books meant to re-signify the 150 years of existence of the company.

Chapter VII - General discussion. Conflict, consensus and the question of Circular Economy

This chapter departs from the initial assumption that politicisation and depoliticisation are inherent, inevitable processes and in fact 'two sides of the same coin': one cannot exist without the other. The two actors have had to work together in the same company during the whole conflict and even at discursive level, the reality shows processes of mutual borrowings or where they actually coincide in some diagnostics. One clear example is Circular Economy, a discourse which dominates both water and environmental policies and discourses of our times. This chapter is organized as follows: first Circular Economy precepts and its critiques are introduced; then the chapter moves on to present the *discursive synergies* between the two actors the company as well as cases of collaboration.

Chapter VIII - General Conclusions and future research

Chapter 8 draws the main conclusions of the thesis in the context of the theoretical underpinnings and the empirical findings. The emphasis is placed on the importance of the subjective dimension of politics and the key contribution of discourse analysis as a tool for understanding water policy and processes of change and stability in environmental paradigms. Also, the relevance of populist theory and interpretive methods to study moments of politicisation are highlighted. Further on, several ideas for developing future research are presented. For instance, the study could gain from a comparative perspective with other cases of remunicipalisation, using similar research tools. Another promising research path would be to explore more in depth the role of social movements in water and how the institutionalization affects (de-politicise) their initial goals. Also, a more thorough analysis of ideologies (neoliberalism vs. commons, etc) to understand their impact on concrete management options (centralization, decentralization for instance).

CHAPTER II - Conceptual and theoretical framework. The return of 'the political' and populism

"A political crisis is a moment for daring. It is when a revolutionary is capable of looking people in the eye and telling them, 'Look, those people are your enemies'." (Pablo Iglesias quoted in The Guardian:2015)

2.1. Politicisation between consensualism and antagonism

The current 'populist moment' (Mouffe 2016) and its politicizing and counter-politicizing effects form the basis for the conceptualization of the water conflict in Barcelona in this research. Before moving to the most controversial theoretical concept in the present work - populism – this chapter reviews the concepts of depoliticisation and politicisation. Depoliticisation can be generally understood as the denial/absence of political choice, the delegation of decision-making to technocratic experts and the growing public disengagement from politics (see Flinders and Wood, 2014). In turn, politicisation is the reverse of this tendency. Existing approaches of politicisation/depoliticisation differ on the way that they answer the fundamental question: what is the natural state of politics, conflict or consensus? The role of conflict and consensus in the political activity is one of the main controversies in these approaches. As Seymour Martin Lipset points out in classic book *The Political. The Social Bases of Democracy* (Lipset 1960: 24):

> "It was after the French Revolution that the problems of conflict versus consensus came into focus. The revolutionaries were naturally primarily concerned with furthering conflict, the conservatives with maintaining social stability. But for many years few men analysed the conditions under which conflict and consensus were or could be kept in balance" (Lipset 1960: 24).

Lipset's observation about the lack of balance in conceptualizing conflict and consensus remains relevant today. In effect, the political-theoretical field is dominated by the conflict between (i) the consensualist and (ii) the antagonist/agonist approach to politics.

However, these concepts can be understood in different ways, depending on the underlying political theory or sociological premises from which one departs [9].

In the following sections, I elaborate on these two schools of thought, paying attention to their understanding of realm of politics, the concept of democracy they embrace, their respective view on (de)politicisation and finally, the conceptual advantages and disadvantages of each of them.

2.1.1. The consensualist view

For consensualist approaches, modern democratic politics is based on a fundamental consensus amongst the members of the political community. The consensualist tradition has been nourished by different strands of thought (liberal, republican) and key philosophers from Hobbes, Locke and Kant to Habermas and Rawls. This approach is not homogenous, but two tendencies seem to dominate: the liberal and the deliberativist model.

In the liberal version, political authority needs to be understood as based on the consensus which results from the aggregation of the rational interests of the individuals. This determines a particular vision of democracy - *liberal democracy* - which for some

[9] Beveridge (2017), for instance, proposes a different categorisation of the literature on (de)politicisation according to the scholar's understanding of politics / the political. He differentiates between 3 lenses through which (de) politicisation is looked at in the specialised literature. A first lens understands politics as merely the realm of government and institutions. A more complex second lens embraces the definition of politics as 'the capacity for agency and deliberation in situations of genuine collective and social choice'. Politics is understood as the terrain of deliberation and contingency (the political) where action and change are possible (politicisation). This would correspond to my category of 'consensualist' thinkers. The third lens is held by post-foundationalist political theorists who draw a theoretical distinction between the 'political' as a radical and rarely occurring state of conflict, where democracy unfolds, and 'politics' as the institutionalised everyday practices of contemporary political systems (Beveridge 2017:6).

thinkers is currently the most influential framing of democracy in contemporary politics since it forms a convenient alliance with neoliberalism (Purcell 2008). According to Purcell, the concept of liberal democracy involves two traditions that are strange bedfellows: the liberal aspect stresses individual freedom, while the democratic aspect stresses the importance of democratic control of citizens choosing their collective fate (Sartori 1987 quoted in Purcell 2008: 40). For liberal democrats, the individual is the main political unit and the goal of the political action is to protect the individual from the 'tyranny of the majority', as famously asserted by liberal thinkers John Stuart Mill (1998[1859]) and Alexis de Tocqueville (2004). This is based on a 'social contract' between the individual and the community, with rights and obligations for each side.

The idea of liberty is central to the conceptualization of democracy. Negative liberty involves freedom from interference and impedes individuals to follow a course of action (involves for instance freedom of speech, to practice one's religion, etc.). In turn, positive liberty is the state where individuals are allowed to live according to their best abilities (Berlin 1969). In the latter case, freedom depends on the intervention of the community or the State for the basic provisions of rights (for instance education, health, etc.). Liberal democracy tends to embrace a negative conception of liberty, given its concern of liberal democracy to protect individuals from state tyranny (Purcell 2008). In this sense, the separation between the public and the private spheres is a key element: individuals should be allowed to pursue their self-interests and the political community and the common good are simply the aggregation of these self-interests, represented through elections as the main form of political participation (Riley 1988, Peterson 1981).

The contract-based view is echoed in another model of democracy embraced by consensualists: the *deliberative* democracy. The deliberative democracy was inspired by Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action. For Habermas and his adherents (Rawls 1993, Cohen 1997, Gutmann and Thompson 2004, Dryzek 2000, Parker 2003, Benhabib 1996), the goal is to eliminate violence from politics not only from a merely philosophical concern, but as a matter of extreme practical urgency (Purcell 2008). They oppose the liberal-democratic idea of an atomistic individual and assert that consensus

results not from already-given rational, self-interested preferences, but from the exercise of reason in the public sphere (Habermas 1996, Rawls 1993). They also reject the use of emotions and rhetorical artifices in this communicative action; in order to reach an agreement over what the common good is, the political community must ensure that individuals, sharing equal rights, can interact in a calm, reasoned and dispassionate manner. This exclusion of passion from political communication was criticised by another school of political thinkers, as we shall see in the next sub-section.

These philosophical precepts give way to a particular understanding of politics and the political which has been translated into the study of political activities and phenomena by a wide range of sociologists and political scientists (for an overview see Buller et al. 2019). Some of these scholars build on an understanding of politics as simply the realm of state and the governmental institutions and define politics as the pursuit of power (Burnham, 2014, Flinders and Wood 2014; Hay 2014). Consequently, depoliticisation is understood by default, and very generally, as the apparent absence of politics (Burnham 2014:1) or as a specific governing strategy for disguising the political 'true' nature of the policy process (Buller et al 2019). Other scholars overcome the simplification of these definitions. Colin Hay's (2007) work has been perhaps the most influential in this strand of the depoliticisation literature and is noteworthy in providing a – broad – definition of politics as "the capacity for agency and deliberation in situations of genuine collective and social choice" (Hay 2007: 77). Hay's definition has influenced the work of many social scientists (e.g Beveridge and Naumann 2014, Jenkins 2011, Kuzemko 2014). Hay also analyses the processes of depoliticisation and politicisation as issues that move between an arena of 'fate and necessity' (the non-political), where nothing can be done (depoliticisation), to one of deliberation and contingency (the political), where action and change are possible (politicisation). All in all, the above-mentioned authors criticize contemporary politics for the lack of transparency, the domination of technocratic and economist criteria in policy making and the political apathy of the public. The solution is opening the public sphere to increased deliberation and public participation.

The key shortcoming of the consensualist approach, in its different versions, is that it does not seriously acknowledge the importance of emotions and neither does it acknowledge the permanency and intractability of disagreement and conflict in all political communities. It seems that for consensualists conflict is simply an accidental state of affairs which is always, eventually overcome and the 'natural' state of consensus is re-installed via deliberation. However, the interests of the individuals are often radically different and even incompatible; moreover, more deliberation does not necessarily lead to consensus; research shows that it can lead to more disagreement. While the consensualist view of politicisation and politics emphasizes a growing agreement on some basic human rights (imperfectly institutionalized through the UN Charter, regional declarations of Human Rights, and constitutions) and on the importance of argument in the public sphere, the bottom line is that it is based on a fiction or a myth of the rational consensus of all citizens (Bottici 2010)

On the political analysis terrain, this conceptualisation of politics and (de)politicisation has allowed for conceptual clarity and has generated empirical traction. However, it largely disregards non-state actors and processes of politicisation. Moreover, it lacks a more precise take of the difference between politics and the political and how this influences our understanding of (de)politicisation (Beveridge 2017).

2.1.2. The antagonist/agonist view

The antagonist (or "agonist" for some authors - Mouffe 2014 - see below) view of the political is at the antipodes of the consensualist view, and speaks to some of the novel forms of democratic politics that have emerged in recent years, such as the Spanish *Indignados* or Occupy Wall Street (Swyngedouw 2018, Badiou 2012, Karaliotas 2017). In this sense, *this theoretical stance is better equipped to analyse instances of politicisation characterized by radical questioning of the political system* (Beveridge 2017) when 'all chips are down'. This view draws upon different sources, such as on Karl Marx's conflictive view of history and Carl Schmitt's (2007 [1932]) conception of *the political*, and it ranks some of the most influential radical democrats and left-wing

thinkers. As Lipset (1960) points out, for Marx a complex society could be characterized either by constant conflict (even if suppressed) or by consensus, but not by a combination of the two. Schmitt saw conflict and consensus as alternatives rather than as divergent tendencies that could be balanced.

The second source of this line of thinking is Schmitt and his distinction between *the political* and *politics*. In his 1932 *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt famously characterizes the 'political' as the relation of confrontation with the enemy, a real possibility that constitutes the essence or the fundamental of the political activity. In short, for Schmitt, political activity is fundamentally conflictive. In exchange, 'politics' refers to what is 'derivative' from 'the political', e.g. parliamentary debates, interest group politics, etc. This distinction has been reworked by influential thinkers like Rancière, Mouffe, Laclau or Žižek, and their followers. Notably, Chantal Mouffe, in her seminal book *The political* (2005) takes issue with the belief in the availability of a universal consensus based on reason displayed by liberal thinkers. For her, 'the political' is the dimension of antagonism which is constitutive of human societies while 'politics' is defined as the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created. Every order is political and based on some form of exclusion: there are always other possibilities that have been repressed and can be reactivated (Mouffe 2014:9).

For these authors, the concept of depoliticisation is key and is related to the triumph of the neoliberal logic. It means that broader contradictions in the system are reduced to policy problems that need to be managed. Elections are nothing more than mechanisms to reinforce the system with no effective choice between administrators, since they all embrace versions of the same neoliberal dogma (Buller et al 2019, Swyngedouw 2009). The logic of the market and commodification of every aspect of social life is thus, hegemonic.

> "In practice, non-partisan "experts" (often from the private sector) are increasingly drafted into implement a range of public functions because they are believed to provide more effective service. Indeed, all of us as human beings are

> gradually being remade as market actors. More and more we are preoccupied with enhancing our "portfolio value" in all domains of life: a concern which is realised through self-investment or the process of attracting other "investors"" (Buller et al 2019).

In this sense, the absence of 'the political' - depoliticisation - is associated with the absence of real contestation and the dominance of consensus which forecloses any real alternative to the status quo. This state of affairs has also been denominated post-politics (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2015) or post-democracy (Rancière 1999).

A 'return of the political' or politicisation is understood in general as a radical disruption of the system, but there are nuances in the definition among different scholars. For instance, for Rancière and his followers (see Dikeç and Swyngedow 2017, Velicu 2015), politicisation is the disruption of the "domain of sensible" (the dominant, what is acceptable to our senses) and the enunciation of the principle of equality by "those who have no part", those marginalised (Rancière 1999). For Žižek, politicisation equates with a revolutionary transformation of the society, where the inherent class struggle is made visible:

> "The political act (intervention) proper is not simply something that works well within the framework of existing relations, but something that *changes the very framework that determines how things work* …. [A]uthentic politics … is the art of the *impossible* – it changes the very parameters of what is considered 'possible' in the existing constellation (emphasis in original)" (Žižek 1999: 199).

Following the same antagonistic vision of politicisation, Mouffe associates politicisation with the radicalization of democracy which requires "the transformation of the existing power structures and the contraction of a new hegemony" (Mouffe 2005:53). For her, politicisation cannot exist without the production of a conflictual representation of the world, "with opposed camps with which people can identify thereby allowing for passions to be mobilized politically within the spectrum of democratic process" (Mouffe 2014:25

quoted in Buller et al 2019). Different from Žižek however, the ideal situation is when antagonism is overcome by a state of *agonism* - a society whose institutions allow for enough room for *dissensus* and conflict within its institutions, which would avoid the violent manifestation of conflict.

Given the importance assigned to contestation in politics, many antagonist thinkers embrace *radical and/or participatory models of democracy*, rooted in the republican and communitarian traditions (Hardt and Negri 2000, Swyngedouw 2018). These models share with deliberative democracy the critique to individualistic ideas of liberal democracy but differ fundamentally in their understanding of the common good: in order to reach that common good individuals do not only have to communicate but they also have to directly participate in the public affairs. The project of radicalisation of democracy essentially involves resistance to marketization and privatization of the society. The development of the society should be seen as a public and collective process, involving as many inhabitants as possible. Radical democratization is expected to be an ongoing struggle which "envisions a fundamentally more public, more collective, and more democratic world than either neoliberalization or the liberal-democratic state can provide" (Purcell 2008: 85).

The relation between the concept of radical democracy and the State is ambivalent: for some thinkers like Rancière, the idea of a democratic state is contradictory since the State inevitably means an order which marginalises 'the people'. "There is no such thing as a democratic state" he asserts, since "democracy cannot be identified with a form of the state; rather, it denotes a dynamic which is autonomous of place, time, and the state agenda" (O'Connor 2015). In turn, for Laclau and Mouffe (1985) the State is an arena worth conquering, if any change is to be effected by the 'demos'. This debate is relevant for the case study since BeC, inspired by ideals of radical democracy, is a political force which aspires and eventually manages to take power. Its project is therefore compelled to adapt to the requirements of 'State politics' and, even if it pushes an agenda of a participatory democracy, it is nonetheless constrained to move beyond the mere

contestation and eventually reach some form of agreements as I will discuss more in detail in Chapter VII.

This strand of literature is not without its criticism. The *difficulty of the antagonist/agonist view of politicisation and politics is that it dramatizes the relevance of conflict*. For some of these thinkers, there is an exaltation of conflict as necessary violence in order to overturn capitalism (Beveridge and Koch 2015). Also, because depoliticisation is understood as a systemic condition of the capitalist, neoliberal society, any counter-movement that falls short of revolution against the system as a whole is seen as ineffective (Buller et al 2019, Dean 2009; Darling 2014). This means that a multitude of contestations and protests cannot be captured within the grid of this theoretical stand. (Table 2).

This thesis attempts to bridge the above-mentioned conceptions: from the antagonist thinkers it takes the conceptual elements which help explain a situation of political conflict and the emergence of a 'populist moment' which threatens existing arrangements and paradigms. In this sense, the literature on populism and the antagonist creation of political identities is instrumental for the case study at hand. However, my research also employs analytical elements from the consensualist stance, in order to offer a broader outlook of the political situation under study, and thus accounts for instances of deliberation and agreement. Therefore*, in this thesis politicisation is understood as a process whereby new issues advocated by political forces emerge in the conflict for power and recognition in the public sphere.* In the specific case under study in this thesis, a new political force (BeC) has converted water into a public issue and has placed it at the centre of socio-political and economic controversies (Chapter V). Under the pressure of this movement of politicisation, economic agents such as AB have entered the public arena in order to defend their legitimacy (Chapter VI). The interaction becomes conflictive but does not exclude agreement on the question of water management but also on others, as the case of Circular Economy reflects (Chapter VII).

To summarise, I argue that 'politicisation' and 'politics' involve a dynamic relation between consensus and disagreement/conflict. Not only are the two conceptually

connected (there is no agreement without disagreement and vice versa), but – as Lipset (1960) points out – a democratic regime depends on the balance between the two; sometimes, like in the 'populist moment' of the Indignados and Occupy Wall street, the moment of contestation comes to the fore in order to challenge the establishment (Stavrakakis 2017); in other moments, e.g. the consensus- and compromise-building become more important, especially in the case of social movements which gain institutional power.

In order to understand instances of paradigmatic change (or at least moments when established paradigms are challenged) a *dynamic* balance between the two elements needs to be carefully accounted for. In the following chapters/sections, the study pushes forward a complex approach to *populist* politics/politicisation that avoids two conceptual pitfalls: the definition of populism either in terms of substance or form and the dominant view in the academic and the public sphere that regards populism as anti-democratic or anti-constitutional.

Table 2. Consensualist and antagonist strands of literature

	CONSENSUALIST VIEW	ANTAGONIST VIEW
Democratic tradition	Liberal democracy and Deliberative democracy	Radical, participatory democracy
Definition of 'the political'	Space of deliberation and contingency; Many authors do not distinguish between politics and political	Rare moments of disruption of hegemonic order; Conflict and confrontation
Depoliticisation	Lack of public participation, lack of transparency, political apathy	The normal state of the political activity is depoliticised since it is associated with consensus around the neoliberal order
Politicisation	Reform towards opening spaces for rational deliberation	Revolution; Making class struggle visible; Radical system questioning and protest
Advantages	Enables empirical study of the regular political activity and gradual reforms	Reflects the importance of protest and contestation for the quality of democratic processes
Problems	Too state-centred; Downplays the importance of radical changes	Narrow view of politics. Fetishizing conflict; Overlooks plurality and complexity of everyday political processes
Main authors	Hay (2007); Flinders (2013); Burnham (2014); Buller (2019)	Rancière (1999, 2019): Zizek (1999); Mouffe (2005); Laclau (2005); Swyngedouw (2018)

2.2. The populist controversy and politicisation

2.2.1. Introductory notes: populism as catch-all concept

Populism is an essentially controversial concept and can be understood in various ways and with different methodologies (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969; Canovan, 1981 and 1982; Panizza 2005; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2011 and 2018; Müller 2017; Fassin, 2018, Emerson 2011, Ellner 2005). There are many interpretations of populism, and its true meaning still seems to be elusive: *populism has been seen as an ideology, a soft ideology, a thin ideology, a discourse, a strategy, an organisational pattern or a style* (for a comprehensive presentation of different orientations on the topic, see Rovira Kaltwaser et al 2017, Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). Yet, most scholars seem to intuitively agree on is that populism mainly consists in the elaboration of an antagonistic political space dominated by the struggle between 'the Elite' and 'the People' (Demata et al 2020). This social, cultural, and political division is used by populists in order to justify their claims to power: they present themselves as the emanation of 'the People' as opposed to traditional politicians and the economic and institutional establishment, who represent 'the Elite' (Demata et al 2020).

This chapter highlights two approaches to current theory on populism due to their influence and representativeness: first, a *substantive approach* dominating both in the academic and the public sphere (politics; journalism): the interpretation of populism as a "thin" ideology (Freeden 1998; Mudde 2007 Stanley 2008) a syndrome (Wiles 1969) or as a strategy (Gidron and Bonikowski 2013). Secondly, I focus on the *formal approach* to populism. In particular, the poststructuralist interpretation of Ernesto Laclau (1977, 2005a, 2005b), who approaches populism from an ontological perspective. In my opinion, it is the most ambitious theoretical perspective from the philosophical point of view and, in addition, it has had an important influence on different political movements, especially in Latin America and Spain (Errejón and Serrano 2011; Errejón et al. 2016; Laclau 2005a; Iglesias 2015).

From my perspective, these approaches would be objectionable, since examining populism as an ideology (substantive approaches) or 'ontoligising' it (Laclau) are both too restrictive intellectual strategies. Instead, I adopt a working hypothesis that - complementing existing approaches - consider populism as a political narrative, focusing on the importance of imagination and political emotions, containing *both substantive and formal elements* (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020). Thus, populism can be analysed as a type of constituted political narrative by narrative patterns that are politicised and vary depending on the context.

2.2.2. Substantive approaches to populism: from thin ideology to anti-populism

The substantive approach that has recently gained more influence in studies of populism is best represented in the writings of Müller (2017) and Mudde (2007). Populism defined as a new 'thin' ideology, along the lines previously applied to the nationalism, feminism, or environmentalism (Freeden 1998; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2011; Stanley 2008). One of the characteristics of thin ideologies is the simplification of the arguments (also emphasized by Laclau) and the relevance of certain key concepts, which in the case of populism lead to the opposition between two antagonistic sides, 'the People' and 'the Elites'. According to Mudde (2004: 543), populism is "an ideology that considers society as divided, ultimately separated, into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the pure people versus the corrupt elite", and argues that politics should be an expression of 'the will of the people' (Mudde 2004, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2011 and 2018). According to this approach, populism is characterized by its emphasis on the common people, who are excluded from power.

Jan Werner Müller's conception of populism set forth in his widely quoted work *What is Populism?* is worth exploring more in detail here since it is symptomatic for the current dominant view on the topic (in academia, mainstream press, etc.): the so-called "anti-populist" perspective (Stavrakakis 2014, 2017). Müller opposes populism to democracy, therefore in order to understand his critique of populism, it is necessary to first analyse his conception of democracy. While Müller often writes of democracy, it is clear that he

has in mind *liberal democracy* (see Section 2.1.1) *understood as a representative democracy mediated by a liberal constitutional order*. Müller appropriates Claude Lefort's (1998) thesis that modern democracy is characterized by the existence of an empty place of power once occupied by God and King, and now occupied partially and temporally by competing political parties. 'The People' of modern democracy is represented through periodical elections, with the caveat that the democratic institutions, such as elections, do not express an already existing people, but constitutes it (Lefort 1998:18-19). He considers that the danger of totalitarianism arises with any claim that 'the People' is One, with no gap between the place of power and a particular representation of 'the People'.

For Müller, the key problem with populism is that it is anti-pluralist: "populists claim that they, and *only they*, represent 'the People'" (Müller 2017:20). Not only that, but "populists claim to transparently represent the will of 'the People', and that 'the People' is 'morally pure and fully unified'. This is why Müller concludes that "[t]he core claim of populism is … a moralized form of antipluralism" (Müller 2017:20). Populism is an exclusionary form of identity politics, and this is the case whether we are dealing with populists on the right or on the left, although Müller's examples are usually right-wing populists (Ungureanu and Serrano 2019).

When in power, populists use the state to propagate anti-pluralism: "populists create the homogeneous people in whose name they had been speaking all along: populism becomes something like a self-fulfilling prophecy" (Müller 2017:19). Therefore, populist regimes colonise, occupy and usurp the state, thus closing the gap between the 'place of power' and a particular image of 'the People' (Müller 2017: 71): "Populists will seek to perpetuate what they regard as the proper image of the morally pure people and then constitutionalize policies that supposedly conform to their image of 'the People' (Müller 2017: 63).

For Müller, conflict is part of democracy, even when it is conflict over who 'the People' are and what democracy is, but these conflicts must take place within the liberal

democratic order; that is, 'legitimately contained conflict'. Politicians and political parties put forward 'visions' of 'the People' and the electorate votes in elections on the basis of their identifications with these. The problem with populism is that, rather than having political conflicts – democratic competition – *within* the constitutional framework, they have political conflicts *over* the constitutional framework. For Müller partisanship is acceptable, as long as it is mediated by the liberal democratic constitution (Ungureanu and Serrano 2019).

The substantive approaches have the virtue of pointing to the importance of pluralism, and of the dangers of negating the role of institutions which indeed happens in the case of some populist leaders: for instance, the dominant form of populism of Trump, Le Pen or Orban undermines democracy, democratic procedures, and equal rights. However, Müller's view is conceptually and empirically problematic and his conceptual starting point is biased since he takes liberal democracy as the standard of judgment. Moreover, empirically, not all appeals to 'the People' are not necessarily anti-pluralist or anti-democratic. Ironically, Müller's approach centred on pluralism is anti-pluralist or not pluralist enough (Ungureanu and Popartan 2020, Stavrakakis 2017). For Müller, in democracies, any claim that 'We are 'the People'' must be false because it can only be a particular masquerading as the universal – a part masquerading as the whole people. However, as he also notes, "whether a particular claim is democratic or populist will not always be a clear-cut, obvious matter" and he gives the example of Tahrir Square (Müller 2017:73). There are, then, cases where the distinction between democratic and populist is blurred, where it is unclear if (in Müller's terms) the empirical people is not just a symbolic people.

The conception of Müller has been criticised precisely because it forecloses possible democratic manifestations of 'the People' outside the institutions (Stavrakakis 2014, Mouffe 2018). We thus need a more complex view of populist politicisation – both in conceptual and empirical terms. Moreover, substantive approaches do not take into consideration the formal elements of populism. In my view, the most philosophically sophisticated view focusing on formal elements pertains to Laclau (Popartan et al 2020,

Ungureanu and Popartan 2020). As the next section shows, the critical analysis of his formal ontology of populism, despite its problems, provides important theoretical and methodological elements for analysing the case of Barcelona. It is the combination of formal and substantive traits that gives the specificity to the complex and plural populist phenomenon.

2.2.3. Formal approaches: Laclau's ontology of populism

Laclau's work is important for the current work as it develops a framework where he relates populism to politicisation. He envisages populism as the "royal path" for understanding politicisation from an ontological perspective (Laclau 1977, 2005a, 2005b; Arditi 2017). His starting point is a formal ontological question: how are collective identities created? (Laclau 2005a: ix). As noted, Laclau's answer privileges the performative role of discourse for collective identity-formation in the context of struggles for hegemony. Starting from this assumption, Laclau argues that populism conveys the very logic of the formation of this identity, *independently of the content of the identity*. The populist dynamic emerges when fragmented social demands that are not met by existing institutions are gradually articulated, despite their heterogeneity, in what Laclau calls "chains of equivalence" (Laclau 2005a: 74-75). By means of discourse, a set of initially heterogeneous demands are brought together so as to constitute an identity - e.g. national, popular, or religious; this is a process whereby "a set of particular identities or interests tend to regroup themselves as equivalent differences around one of the poles of the dichotomy" (Laclau 2005a: 19-20). In his view, the collective identity is not constructed in abstract but in antagonist conflict with the existing hegemonic power, framed as the 'establishment' and the 'elite'.

Populism for Laclau (2005a) undergirds all processes of politicisation which, in turn, lead to the discursive construction of new identities. The populist politicisation and identity-construction are centred on the production of "empty signifiers" which can be key concepts such as democracy, people, or nation (Laclau 2005a: 96-96). The signifiers are empty to the extent that they can never refer to an ultimate, transparent reality. As

intimated in Chapter III, empty signifiers become, in the struggle for hegemony, "floating signifiers", that circulate between the contending parts and are given different meanings (see for instance the opposed understanding given to democracy by communist and capitalist regimes). In these struggles, political forces appeal to *particular* signifiers (e.g. a specific view of people, nation, or democracy) but assume the representation of a *totality* that unavoidably exceeds it and is always contested and under construction (see Chapter III for a more in-depth analysis of Laclau and Mouffe discourse analysis concepts).

Laclau and Mouffe in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) conceptualize universality - 'the People' - as the articulation of a chain of equivalence out of different elements. Differences that were once seen as natural are represented as equivalent, where 'equivalent' does not mean 'identical'. For instance, miners and LGBITQ+ people may unite in a struggle against a government that denies their sense of pride in their form of life. There is nothing natural in the unity of this discourse about 'pride', a discourse that constitutes the two groups as part of the same collective subject. The result may be that the two identities are articulated in new ways, but the differences between them do not disappear and may result in tensions at certain points in the struggle, for instance if another element such as 'family values' is added (Ungureanu and Serrano 2019).

The empty signifier may be a leader, an image or a slogan such as 'the 99%', and it comes to represent the chain or, to be precise, what the particular signifiers in the chain share. Otherwise heterogeneous struggles – against evictions, corruption and police brutality, for instance – are unified in a universal struggle of 'the 99%' against what is now the universal threat of 'the 1%'. Neither 'the 99%' nor 'the 1%' are sociological referents; the universality constructed through the articulation of equivalence and an empty signifier is precisely one that is hegemonically articulated.

Laclau's original approach has several merits, among them, that it is a significant contribution to the socio-political ontology, paying attention precisely to the constructive aspect of collective identities and to the role of conflict and discourse in their constitution; Furthermore, it provides useful conceptual tools (such as antagonism, hegemony, chains

of equivalence, empty signifiers) to analyse politicisation as a process and populist dynamics as a form of antagonism between collective political actors who may have different or even opposite ideas (for example, from the left, or right-wing, progressive or conservative, economically protectionist or liberal).

Therefore, while Laclau's critical discourse approach provides a compelling conceptual toolbox for studying processes of politicisation, his formal ontology runs into difficulties (Popartan et al 2020). As such, some theoretical adjustments are required to provide a more adequate framework for the empirical analysis of the antagonistic dialectic between BeC and the water company. In this context, this thesis raises three main objections to Laclau's view: in the first place, Laclau' formal-ontological approach is problematic as it turns populism into an ahistorical and catch-all concept. This approach glosses over the historicity of the emergence of the "populist imagination" as a source of legitimizing power. As such it is unable to grasp the specificities of different and even opposite forms of politicisation: not all politicisation is populist (Laclau 2005), but there is a plurality of forms of politicisation, some of which are anti-populist, as our case suggest.

Second, various approaches to populism – including Laclau's – *miss the relevance of spatialisation and the geographical imaginary* of the populist and non-populist processes of politicisation. Most studies on populism focus on the national level; in contrast, the few studies devoted to populist mayors such as Mockus in Bogotá (Gilbert 2015), Estrada in Manila (Garrido 2017), López-Obrador in Mexico City (Savarino 2006), or Ford in Toronto (Silver et al 2019), insist on the necessity to consider the metropolis as a productive space for populist articulations. Populist mayors may draw extensively on divisive themes from national politics including, for instance, immigration, crime rates or corruption (Silver et al 2019; Katz and Nowak 2017). Yet, anchoring populism in concrete spatial and historical contexts can capture specific cleavages between 'the People' and 'the Elite', for instance in accordance to urban references such as urban/rural, urban/suburban, centre/periphery etc. This approach is relevant when dealing with city populism in Barcelona, which – in contrast to national or supranational populism – is shaped by a specific topographic imaginary. Thinking about populism spatially entails an

emphasis on the "everyday spaces and political infrastructures that make populist politics possible" (Featherstone and Karaliotas 2019:35) and it requires a sensitiveness to the symbolic mobilisation of urban 'material flows' such as water. Likewise, the specific articulations of populist moments cannot be grasped without examining the histories of urban movements which shape urban counter-hegemonic repertoires.

Third, Laclau claims (2005b: 47) that the institutionalization of the counter-hegemonic movements leads to the disappearance of their transformative potential. This idea is taken up by other analysts who argue that, in the process of institutionalization, "the most genuinely emancipatory possibilities are likely to be frustrated" (Andreucci, 2018). Indeed, in Spain this has arguably been the case of the political party Podemos at national level, where the arenas of representation of social movements – The Circles - lost their prominence, and the party became more pyramidal and leader-centred (Rodriguez 2016). However, BeC follows a different pattern. Given that the municipal government maintained an active interest in preserving the "counter-power" of the social movements (P2P Foundation 2016), BeC consolidated the link with AeV and enhanced the radicality of their initial claims. In this sense, Laclau's approach can overlook the populist dynamics in which the power is dispersed rather than centralized and maintains its plural social basis even when it constitutes in the local government.

2.2.4. Main theoretical argument and contribution

As discussed in the previous sections, beyond the different approaches to populism, there is an agreement regarding the *centrality of the elite vs. the people antagonism* and the simplifying nature of populist discourse. However, in my opinion, populism seen as ontology or as an ideology are overly reductionist interpretations: they focus in a one-dimensional way on formal or substantial elements of the populist phenomenon. Furthermore, some of these approaches do not take into consideration the variety of populist phenomena. Also, in analysing the populist phenomenon today, these approaches do not pay sufficient attention to the centrality of narrative patterns or to the logic of populist emotions.

This thesis argues that urban references and the topographic imaginary are key to understanding specific forms of populist politicisation. These references imbue the discourse of both BeC and the water company. In this sense, the battle over the memory and the water heritage of the city are mobilising antagonising imaginaries of the development of the urban water system and are key in forming the populist politicisation encountered in Barcelona. This thesis contributes to existing scholarship, by broadening the scope of Laclau's theory on populism and politicisation through the addition of the factor geography. It also expands its explanatory scope to include cases - such as the antagonistic dialectic between BeC and the water company - in which not all forms of politicisation are populist. Moreover, contrary to the vision of Laclau, this thesis shows that the institutionalization of BeC does not lead to the disappearance of its transformative potential. On the contrary, BeC consolidated the link with AeV and the radicality of their initial claims.

Thus, this thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion on the definition of populism. As the case of Barcelona water conflict shows, populism can be characterized as a political narrative which combines both formal and substantive elements: 1) Formal - In the sense that populism codifies the political space in a Manichean way. 2) Substantive - In the sense that it contains substantive elements of the ideology of different groups, as illustrated by the particular take of BeC on specific issues.

The following chapter analyses the attempt of "remunicipalisation" in Barcelona with a focus on its evolution; from the discursive articulation of the struggle for public water involving social platforms (AeV) to its institutionalization (BeC). Then, I examine the anti-populist discourse of the water company, AB.

CHAPTER III - Materials and methods. Discourse analysis and interpretive methodologies

"There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings."

Yuval Noah Harari (2014)

3.1. Contending methods for social research

This chapter is dedicated to *discourse analysis understood both as a theory* comprising philosophical and epistemological premises, *and as a methodology,* providing tools and guidance for analysis of the social world (Howarth 2005). First, it is important to set this particular analytical approach against the wider background of scholarly debates around the legitimate ways to investigate social phenomena.

Mary Hawksworth begins her account of major schools of scientific methodology from the very basics: understanding what the term 'methodology' means. Summarizing the different possible nuances, the etymological roots of the word come from the conjunction of three Greek concepts: meta (quest in common), hodos (way) and logos (word, truth). When used as a prefix in archaic Greek, meta also typically implied 'sharing'. Therefore, a possible translation would be 'a shared quest for the way to truth' (Hawksworth 2015). The key word in this translation is 'shared', which leads us to think that methodologies are specific to communities of scholars and that the appropriate methodology for any inquiry is a matter of contestation, as scholars often disagree about the 'way to truth".

> "Strategies that are accredited as legitimate means to acquire truth gain their force from decisions of particular humans working within particular academic communities; thus there is a power element in the accreditation of knowledge (…) (…) Given the established power hierarchy within the discipline in the aftermath of the behavioral revolution, "the way" to knowledge has often been presented as if it were uncomplicated, value neutral, and uncontestable" (Hawksworth 2015: 28).

The study of social and political processes from different disciplinary perspectives has not been exempted from this disagreement on the acceptable way to produce knowledge. In the following, I provide a brief overview of these contending perspectives and then I

move on to unpack the choice for discourse analysis as this thesis's path in the 'quest for the truth'.

One of the most influential schools of thought in this terrain was *positivism*. As noted in Chapter I, the epistemological assumption that informs positivism is that scientific production of political knowledge can be immune from politics, values, and subjective bias. Positivism promises to provide analytic techniques that can generate 'laws of politics' and generalizations that would enable political scientists to explain the existing political world and predict future political developments (Hawksworth 2002). In this view, scientific investigations can grasp objective reality, because the subjectivity of individual observers can be controlled through rigid choice of neutral procedures in the context of systematic experiments, logical deductions, and statistical analysis of data. Empiricist assumptions have been central to the development of the discipline of political science and to the scientific study of politics in the 20th century (Popper 1959, King, Keohane, and Verba 1994; Tanenhaus and Somit 1967). However, the positivist stances have been substantially questioned in the past 50 years for their inability to predict major political events such as the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union or the globalization (for an exhaustive critique see Fisher 2003).

To counter positivist ideas, *social constructivism* brings forth a range of new theories about culture and society. Although it is difficult to give an overarching definition of this rich tradition, Jörgensen and Philips (2002:5) propose a list of four premises shared by all social constructivist approaches and that apply to discourse analysis, as follows.

First, constructivists assume a critical stance towards to taken-for-granted knowledge. For them, reality is only accessible to us through categories, therefore our knowledge and representations of the world are not reflections of the reality 'out there', but rather are products of our ways of categorising the world, or, in discursive - analytical terms, products of discourse. The second premise is related to the historical and cultural specificity of any research: we are fundamentally historical and cultural beings; our worldviews and our identities could have been different, and they can change over time.

This view *is anti-essentialist* implying that the social world is constructed socially and discursively and its character is not pre-given or determined by external conditions. Third, constructivists consider that there is a link between knowledge and social processes: our ways of understanding the world are created and maintained by social processes. Therefore, knowledge is created through social interaction in which we construct common truths and compete about what is true and false. Finally, knowledge and social action are deemed to be interlinked: within a particular worldview, some forms of action become natural, others unthinkable. Different social understandings of the world lead to different social actions, and therefore the social construction of knowledge and truth has social consequences (Jörgensen and Philips 2002:5).

Discourse analysis (DA) is just one among several social constructivist approaches but it is one of the most widely used. In the next section I look at the mediation between the *grande theorie* of social constructivism as applied to society at large and concrete instances of social interaction, which are the focus of analysis for DA.

3.2. How language matters: the metaphorical dimension of reality

As conveyed in the Introduction, discourse analysis needs to be understood as a 'package' that contains both philosophical (ontological and epistemological premises) about the role of language in the world, as well as methodological guidelines on how to do research. Importantly in DA, "theory and method are intertwined, and researchers must accept the basic philosophical premises in order to use discourse analysis as their method of empirical study" (Jörgensen and Philips 2002:4).

Apart from social constructivism, DA has its roots in the so called 'linguistic turn' in philosophy, a school of thought pioneered by Ludwig Wittgenstein and including major philosophers such as John Austin, Frankfurt School of thought with Jürgen Habermas as its most relevant representatives, Richard Rorty and Michel Foucault among others. It originates from a preoccupation with the importance of language not only as a tool for

merely describing reality but also as a creator of it: words are 'speech acts' therefore they have a performative function[10]. That does not mean that reality itself does not exist. Meanings and representations are real. Physical objects also exist, but they only *gain meaning* through discourse. Let us take for instance the case of an earthquake which kills people in a village. The event of earthquake is a material fact but as soon as people start to give meaning to it, it is no longer outside discourse. From a geological discourse perspective, it is a result of the movement of tectonic plates; a religious discourse would ascribe its meaning to the will of God; a political discourse in turn might look at possible mismanagement in the planning of insufficiently secure housing. Moreover, depending on the discourse used to refer to the event, there are importantly different courses of action which emerge from it.

The importance of discourse as both filter and producer of reality has been increasingly confirmed by advances in cognitive and neuro sciences. In this vein, Lakoff and Johnson, in the 1980ies, developed a theory regarding the role of conceptual metaphors in determining the way people perceive the world and communicate it. In their work, metaphors are seen as "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action" (1980:3). In their theory, *metaphors are not just figures as speech, as they are commonly understood, but 'figures of thought'* (see also Yanow 2000): our cognitive system relies on metaphors to express and understand categories and the relationships between them. According to the conceptual metaphor theory, we express more abstract

[10] "We are attuned in everyday conversation not primarily to the sentences we utter to one another, but to the speech acts that those utterances are used to perform: requests, warnings, invitations, promises, apologies, predictions, and the like. Such acts are staples of communicative life, but only became a topic of sustained investigation, at least in the English-speaking world, in the middle of the Twentieth Century. Since that time "speech act theory" has become influential not only within philosophy, but also in linguistics, psychology, legal theory, artificial intelligence, literary theory, and feminist thought among other scholarly disciplines" (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/speech-acts/).

concepts using domains of experience that are more concrete, which come from the experience of our bodies or the interaction with the physical world: for instance, gravity's effect on our bodies is a basic experience that structures the way we think of abstract phenomena as ordered vertically, e.g. that 'good is up' and 'bad is down' (Cienki 2013); the experience of hunger and thirst translates a full glass into a positive experience which in turn relates to the conceptual metaphor 'full is good' 'empty is bad' (for example a 'fulfilled life' vs. 'an empty life').

Language and meaning are thus embodied, in the sense that concepts and cognitive processes are related to bodily experiences in interacting with the environment. This goes against the idea of neat separation between physical and mental processes or between reason and imagination (Eagleman 2015).

> "Metaphorical reasoning, grounded in bodily experience, is something that unites reason and imagination: Reason, at the very least, involves categorization, entailment, and inference. Imagination, in one of its many aspects, involves seeing one kind of thing in terms of another kind of thing – what we have called metaphorical thought. Metaphor is thus imaginative rationality" (Stenvol quoted in Carver and Pikallo 2008:34).

3.3. Discourse in policy and environmental studies: from traditional to critical discourse analysis

Turning our gaze to social science research, we note that this discipline has also experienced its 'discursive turn' which found its origin in the 1970s in linguistic and cultural studies, before filtering through to other disciplines (sociology, social psychology, political science, geography, planning and urban studies). Narrowing down to policy studies, 'cognitive' or discursive approaches have been dominated by the social-constructivist understanding of policy issues as socially constructed (Hajer 1997; Garraud 2006; Surel 2006). It starts from the premise that public policies are devised in response

to a 'problem' of a perceived social, collective or public nature which justifies some form of intervention by legitimate political authorities. The way in which an issue is defined and framed will influence the way people think about it and about possible policy solutions: no issue is by essence a 'public problem' (Colomb 2008). An issue becomes a problem when it is politicised, and this is achieved via discourse, i.e. the employment of language and communication. The process of 'problematisation' and 'agenda setting' is analysed in relation to the cognitive processes through which the changing representations and perceptions of actors lead to the emergence and definition of a problem (Sheppard 2006: 352). The discursive approaches to the study of public policy emphasized the role of 'ideas', 'narratives' and 'discourses' in the process of emergence of a policy problem. These approaches are based on the assumption that "discursive power can determine the very fields of actions, including the tracks along which political action travels" (Fischer 2003: viii).

In this sense, 'traditional' DA analysts investigate the following questions: *what is a particular discourse doing? How is this discourse constructed to make this happen? What resources are available to perform this activity?* (Potter 2003: 609). Traditional DA tends to avoid making references to the 'ethnographic particulars' of the people performing discourse. DA analysts have consequently been criticised for the fact that "the emphasis on representational practices through discourses sidelines any notion of a pre-existing material reality that can constrain individual agency" (Bryman 2004: 377 quoted in Colomb 2008). This is why a number of authors have reformulated traditional DA approaches by *integrating a critical element, arguing that discourse should be examined in relation to the social structures and - importantly - power relationships* which make these discourses occur. The emphasis on discourse and the politics of meaning

> "…does not naively take the world to move just because of words. But, unlike the empiricist tradition, words and language, especially when combined with power, are recognized themselves to be a form of action, and thus important data for political and policy analysis" (Fischer 2003: viii).

According to Ruth Wodak (2004), a new paradigm evolved quite in opposition to what was, in the early 1990ies, a dominant preoccupation with language and grammar (famously championed by Noam Chomsky) but in isolation from the social context. The strand of DA that has sought to place discourse within its institutional and political background is the so-called 'Critical Discourse Analysis' (CDA) approach, especially for social sciences in works of Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak (Fairclough and Wodak 1997) or Van Dijk's (1993). CDA analytical approaches have been particularly influenced by Michel Foucault's ideas about truth and knowledge being something which is, at least to a large extent, created discursively and also influenced by power as a constructive element.

> "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. [Power] needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (Foucault 1980: 119 quoted in Jörgensen and Philips 2012).

In contrast with traditional DA, CDA focuses on the role of discourse "in the (re)production and challenge of social inequality and dominance" (Van Dijk 1993). Van Dijk argues that the "power and dominance of groups are measured by their control over (access to) discourse". In this sense, "not merely that discourse control is a form of social action control, but also, and primarily, that it implies the conditions of control over the minds of other people, that is, *the management of social representations* (1993: 257 my emphasis).

The objective of CDA thus becomes the analysis of which "structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events' play a role in the modes of reproduction of inequality and dominance" (Van Dijk 1993: 250). Critical discourse analysts therefore have a critical agenda, rooted in Critical Theory, as social

critics and activists. Critical discursive approach to urban interventions and policies can help unpack the moral and ideological underpinnings of policy agendas and conflicts.

One of the most influential works in CDA is the one of Laclau and Mouffe which is reviewed in the next section, focusing on the analytical concepts which will be employed in the analysis of the Barcelona case study.

3.4. Laclau and Mouffe: key analytical tools

The theory of discourse developed by Laclau and Mouffe in their classic work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*[11] (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) and later by Laclau on his own (the collection of essays *The rhetorical foundation of society*, published only a few weeks after the author's death, gives an overview of his main precepts) was a cornerstone for discourse analysts as it offers a system of innovative concepts for the study of socio-political phenomena. Their ideas set the basis for a new generation of political scholars known as the Essex School of Discourse Analysis (see for instance Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, Howarth 2010; Howarth et al 2016). It takes its lead from interpretive methods of social inquiry whose emphasis is placed on understanding and explaining the emergence and *logic of discourses and the socially constructed identities of social agents*. Laclau and Mouffe's embraced - critically - the ideas of poststructuralist Continental thinkers, especially Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, as well as the later Wittgenstein, who were concerned with language and psychoanalysis (Jörgensen and Philips 2002).

[11] Their political objective was to formulate a pluralistic 'radical and democratic' politics based upon the aspirations mainly of the New Social Movements in response to the 'crisis' of Marxism, prompted by the decline of class politics in the West and by the existence of totalitarian Marxist states in the East.

According to Laclau and Mouffe, a dominant or hegemonic discourse is established as a totality in which meaning of words is fixed by the exclusion of all other possible meanings. Discourses and identities are thus produced involving antagonism and power. Yet, because social systems have a fundamentally political character, they are always vulnerable to those forces and ideas that are initially excluded from the dominant field. "The discourse can never be so completely fixed that it cannot be undermined and changed by the multiplicity of meaning in the field of discursivity" (Jörgensen and Philips 2020: 28). When a competing discourse manages to question a particular hegemonic discourse, the process is called "dislocation" which introduces a "rupture in a normal - or rather 'normalised' - order of things" (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). This event threatens established identities, ideologies and discourses and on the other hand generate attempts to re-articulate these dislocated ideologies and discourses. An example of dislocatory event is the 2008 crisis which purported social movement to push forward new definitions of reality: 15M slogans such as "this is not a crisis it is a robbery" speaks to the importance of rhetorical redefinition of established terms in order to prompt new courses of political action.

Discourse is formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain nodal points (Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 112). A *nodal point* is a privileged word (or sign)[12] around which the

other signs are ordered; the other signs acquire their meaning from their relationship to

[12] Laclau and Mouffe were inspired here by the tradition of structuralist linguistics that followed Ferdinand de Saussure's pioneering ideas: "Saussure argued that signs consist of two sides, form (signifiant) and content (signifié), and that the relation between the two is arbitrary (Saussure 1960). The meaning we attach to words is not inherent in them but a result of social conventions whereby we connect certain meanings with certain sounds. The sound or the written image of the word 'dog', for example, has no natural connection to the image of a dog that appears in our head when we hear the word. Saussure's point is that the meaning of individual signs is determined by their relation to other signs: a sign gains its specific value from being different from other signs. The word 'dog' is different from the words 'cat' and 'mouse' and 'dig' and 'dot'" (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002:2)

the nodal point. In medical discourses, for example, 'the body' is a nodal point around which many other meanings are crystallised. Signs such as 'symptoms', 'tissue' and 'scalpel' acquire their meaning by being related to 'the body'. A nodal point in political discourses is 'democracy' and in national discourses a nodal point is 'the People' (Jörgensen and Phillips 2002).

When the nodal points are involved in a political combat, they become *floating signifiers*, a concept I have introduced in Chapter II (see Laclau 1990: 28, 1993b: 287). For purpose of discursive analysis, floating signifiers should be understood the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way. Laclau and Mouffe depart from the idea that the social field is criss-crossed by opposed political projects. The major *aim of hegemonic projects is to construct and stabilise the nodal points that form the basis of concrete social orders* by articulating as many available ideas (floating signifiers) as possible using what Laclau and Mouffe call *a logic of equivalence*. For instance, democracy, the 'Right to the City', 'right to water' are floating signifiers which, in a moment of antagonism, are articulated by certain actors as 'equivalent' into a discourse which gives a political meaning to water and thrives to become hegemonic.

However, as mentioned earlier, to note that no discourse can completely hegemonies a field of discursivity and therefore the possibility of a new articulation remains always open (Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000). The establishment of hegemonic *discourses as objectivity* and their dissolution in new political battlefields is an important aspect of the social processes that discourse analysis investigates.

In spite of the sophistication of their theoretical concepts for discourse analysis, Laclau and Mouffe did not develop to the same extent the methodological orientations for researchers to apply these concepts in empirical investigations. This does not diminish their usefulness; it simply requires the researcher to take further steps to operationalize these concepts. They assert for example that Laclau and Mouffe's idea that discourses are never completely stable and uncontested, can be turned into methodological guidelines concerning the position of the conflict in one's empirical material:

> "Using these concepts, it is possible to investigate the functioning of discourses in empirical material: how each discourse constitutes knowledge and reality, identities and social relations; where discourses function unobtrusively side by side, and where there are open antagonisms; and which hegemonic interventions are striving to override the conflicts – in which ways and with which consequences" (Jörgensen and Philips 2002: 51).

The methodological apparatus employed here draws on these reflections for this case study, but also on the recommendation to build an analytical toolbox that combines Laclau and Mouffe analytical concepts with other methodological traditions in discourse analysis. In this sense, the CDA approach of Marteen Hajer presented bellow offers several useful guidelines to approach text and empirical collection of material which will be employed in my case study.

3.5. Hajer's conceptual framework for a discursive approach to public policy

Maarten Hajer (1997, 2005) developed an influential discourse analytical framework to study environmental policies in the UK and the Netherlands. His work is also rooted in the social constructivist approaches to policy analysis referred to above, and builds upon the theoretical insights of Foucault as well as social psychologists. He provides very detailed methodological guidelines on how to do discourse analysis. He proposes a redefinition of the concept of discourse beyond 'discussion' or 'mode of talking':

> "Discourse is here defined as a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer 1997: 44).

The separation between discourse and material practices, also adopted by other CDA scholars (notably Fairclough 1995), helps to overcome the difficulties of Laclau and Mouffe's overly reliant on a purely language approach. It allows the investigation to look beyond 'text' and capture the interaction between discursive practices and other variables in the political realm such as for instance institutional or socio-economic ones. Hajer coincides with Laclau and Mouffe in that he understands politics in terms of struggle for discursive hegemony in which "actors try to secure support for their definition of reality" (Hajer 1997: 57). However, he introduces new analytical categories which can help disentangle the relation between discourses (narratives, storylines) and non-discursive elements: discourses "don't just float in the world" (Hajer 2005) but are supported by specific actors, power relations and institutions.

Hajer argues that *in the struggle for discursive hegemony, coalitions are formed among actors which, for various reasons, are attracted to a specific set of storylines.* He labels these '*discourse-coalitions'* (1997:65). These coalitions can include a wide diversity of actors such as scientists, politicians, activists, organizations, media, even celebrities. But what holds together such a heterogonous cluster of people? Hajer departs from the observation that policy problems are often complex and require input from many different discourses. For instance, in the case of acid rain analysed by Hajer, the problem might necessitate elements from the scientific discourse (What is acid rain?), the economic discourse (what are the cost to society?), the engineering (What can be done about it?) as well as political discourse (do we want to commit ourselves to a solution?) (Hajer 2005). It is very unlikely that one person can grasp the whole complexity of one issue and therefore it is indeed remarkable that people from such a wide array of backgrounds can eventually agree on a coherent storyline. For Hajer, what gives coherence to a coalition is a *discursive affinity*: the allegiance of this group to a basic moral argument (for instance that nature should be respected).

Hajer (2005) moves on to account the connection between discourse and power, namely the *changing influence of certain discourses in given historical moments*. Here he introduces two concepts: discourse structuration and discourse institutionalization. The

former reflects the moment when a discourse starts to do dominate the way a given social unit (a policy, a firm, a society) conceptualizes the world: central actors are persuaded or forced to accept the rhetorical power of a new discourse (1993:48). The latter refers to the phase when a certain discourse become 'solidified' in particular institutional arrangement, for instance a measuring system, a particular policy.

> "We thus have a simple two step procedure for measuring the influence of a discourse: if many people use if to conceptualize the world we may speak of discourse structuration. If it solidifies into institutions and organisational practices we may call this discourse structuration. If both criteria are fulfulled we may call this a dominant discourse" (Hajer 2005: 303).

Let us summarize the key theoretic and methodological concepts introduced so far: this thesis takes a social constructivist perspective on reality. To study the politicisation and de-politicisation of water in Barcelona this thesis relies on an analytical toolbox, which combines Laclau and Mouffe theory on the discursive articulation of populist identities with Hajer's concepts of discourse coalitions, discourse structuration and institutionalization. Moreover, drawing on cognitive linguistic approaches to socio-political phenomena, the concept of discursive frames is employed. These frames problematize issues in a particular way offer "foundations for collective solidarity" and action (della Porta and Diani 2006). As the case study suggests, frames are often produced by the leadership of social organizations and shared by discursive coalitions, which can also be described as a collection of actors who share and disseminate a similar framing of a given reality.

Table 3. Summary of discourse analysis concepts

Term	Definition	Author
Nodal point	A word (sign) around which the other signs are ordered and that acquire meaning from their relationship to the nodal point. Example: the body is a nodal point for 'tissue' or 'disease'.	Laclau and Mouffe (1985)

Empty signifier	Key concept such as democracy, people, or nation. The signifiers are 'empty' to the extent that they can never refer to an ultimate, transparent reality but can have different meanings in different discourses.	Laclau and Mouffe (1985)
Floating signifier	Empty signifiers which 'float' (change their meaning) in the context of a hegemonic discursive combat.	Laclau and Mouffe (1985)
Dislocation	An event which disrupts established meanings, identities and discourses and stimulates new discursive constructions, which attempt to suture again the dislocated structure.	Laclau and Mouffe (1985) Laclau (2005)
Chain of equivalences	Process by which empty signifiers such as 'democracy', or 'right to water', in a moment of antagonism, are articulated by certain actors as 'equivalent' into a discourse which gives a political meaning to water and thrives to become hegemonic.	Laclau (2005)
Discourse structuration	Reflects the moment when a discourse starts to dominate the way a given social unit (a policy, a firm, a society) conceptualizes the world: central actors are persuaded or forced to accept the rhetorical power of a new discourse	Hajer (1993)
Discourse institutionalisation	Refers to the phase when a certain discourse becomes 'solidified' in particular institutional arrangement, for instance a measuring system, a particular policy.	Hajer (1993)
Discourse coalition	In the struggle for discursive hegemony, coalitions are formed among actors which, for various reasons, are attracted to a specific set of narratives and storylines, sharing a 'discursive affinity'.	Hajer (1995)

Having introduced the analytical apparatus of the research methodology, the following section describes the case-study, the process of data collection and processing.

3.6. Materials and methods applied: discourse analysis in the case of Barcelona

In this thesis, CDA is used to examine three key dimensions of the water discourse in Barcelona between 2011 and 2019: 1) the strategic politicizing of water management under the resignification 'water-as-commons', employing a populist discourse, carried out by AeV and BeC and antagonizing AB, the private company water company currently managing water in Barcelona; 2) the counter-discourse of the company, *co-opting* of the language of participation, citizenship, and democracy used by BeC; 3) the non-conflictive, de-politicised areas of the discursive interaction between the two contenders represented by Circular Economy. To analyse the gradual populist politicisation of in Barcelona after the 2008 economic crisis, I distinguish between two phases: discourse structuration (2011 – 2015) and discourse institutionalization (2015 – 2019).

The research followed the dynamic of any DA investigation which, according to Wodak (2001) should be circular and constantly moves between theory and the empirical material to refine presuppositions and the data processing (see Figure 2)

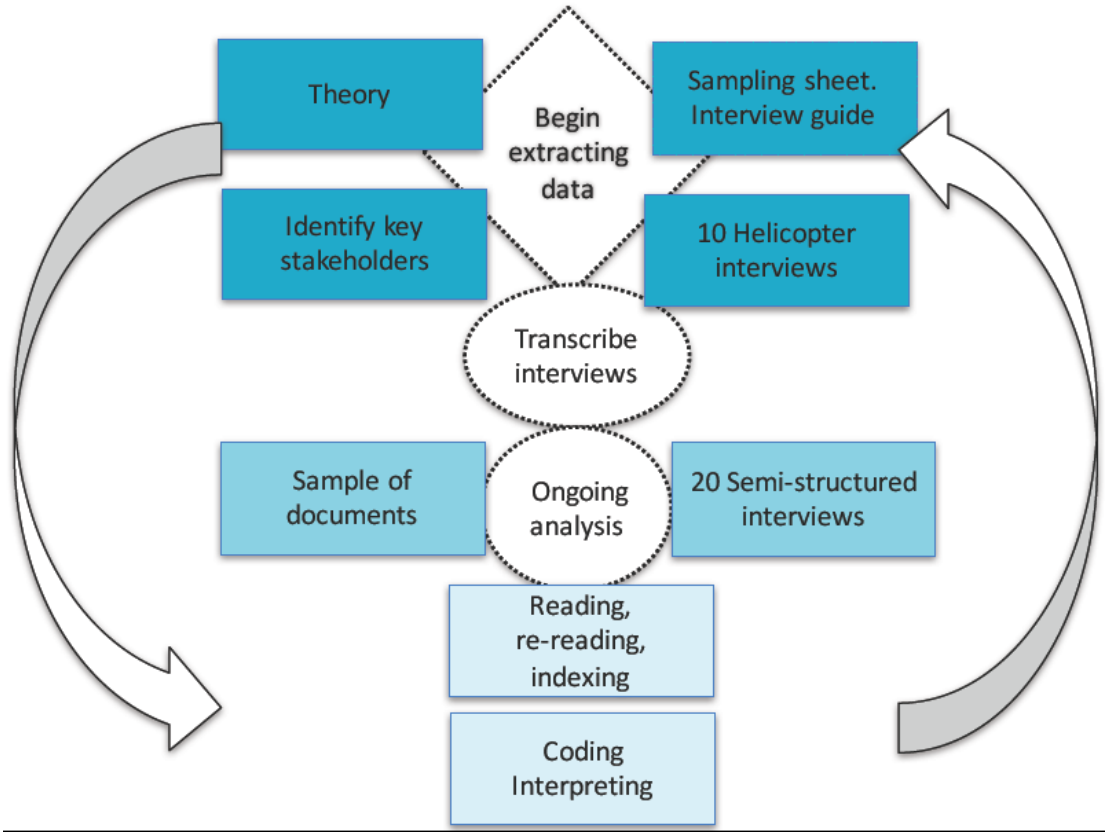

Figure 2. Discourse analysis and the empirical process

In this research, I built on Hajer's step-by-step approach to data collection for DA (Hajer 2005). I combined desk research on secondary literature to establish an initial chronology of events and place them in a wider historical context. The next step was a set of 'helicopter' interviews - open, exploratory conversations - performed between 2017 and 2018 with company managers from the Communication and Operations departments and had been in contact with the municipality officials. At the same time, I interviewed key activists from AeV and other related social movements, some of them involved in the metropolitan government after 2015. These interviews were meant to understand how water was framed in the context of the new municipalist government and how the discursive strategy was designed. The data set was completed by 1) the key manifestos and declarations of AeV, official transcripts from the municipal council meetings, representative newspaper articles and participant observation at relevant events organised

by the two contending parties and 2) notes from events (using participant observation method) organised by both sides.

Table 4. List of performed interviews.

Interview	Category	Expertise / Institution
#1	Expert	Water management / CONGIAC
#2	Public officer	Water management /AEOPAS
#3	Advisor	Housing / Barcelona municipality
#4	Advisor	Environment / Barcelona municipality
#5	Public officer	Ecology department / Metropolitan Area Barcelona
#6	Public officer	Public participation / Barcelona municipality
#7	Expert	Water management / University of Manchester
#8	Expert	Remuncipalisation / University of Glasgow
#9	Expert	Political ecology / University of Amsterdam
#10	Activist	"remunicipalisation" / Energy Poverty Observatory
#11	Activist	Water management / Aigua és Vida
#12	Activist	Water management / Aigua és Vida
#13	Activist	Water management / Aigua és Vida
#14	Activist	Water management / Enginyers sense fronteres
#15	Expert	Advertisement / IPSOS, market strategy company
#16	Activist	Neighbourhood association / FAVB
#17	Activist	Neighbourhood association / FAVB
#18	Manager	Operations / Aigües de Barcelona
#19	Manager	Operations / Aigües de Barcelona
#20	Manager	Business and innovation / Aigües de Barcelona
#21	Manager	Strategy and communication / Aigües de Barcelona
#22	Manager	Strategy and communication / Aigües de Barcelona
#23	Manager	Fundació Agbar
#24	Manager	Fundació Agbar
#25	Public officer	Circular Economy / Metropolitan Area Barcelona
#26	Public officer	Circular Economy / Metropolitan Area Barcelona

#27	Expert	Historian
#28	Expert	Historian
#29	Expert	Local operations / Aigües de Barcelona
#30	Expert	Circular Economy / Cetaqua

In a second phase, another set of interviews were performed with managers and activists between 2018 and 2019 to test the findings encountered thus far, update and refine the theoretical claims. I selected those interviewees who had been instrumental in designing the communication strategies of AeV and BeC and/or had a consistent experience in the water management of the city.

The third step was processing the materials. For the text data, I coded all the material using including notes from events, transcripts of interviews, using Nvivo, a software for qualitative data analysis. The aim was first of all to trace the presence of the central populist frame – the People/elite dichotomy – and its specific linguistic "proxies" (Caiani and Della Porta 2011). The presence of populist framing was reflected by two necessary and sufficient conditions: (1) the operation of the 'people' vs 'enemy' as nodal points shaping a particular discursive ensemble; (2) the reliance on discursive infrastructures (the logic of equivalence and logic of difference), imposing a dichotomy representation of society along a us/them axis (Stavrakakis 2017).

Further on, I look at the connection between the populist frame with geographical topoi either related to the urban (for example neighbour/ neighbourhood, street) or to environmental movement (water, life). Frames are understood as both deconstructive – critical with a status-quo - and constitutive, offering a new definitions and "foundations for collective solidarity to transform actors' identity in a way which favours action (della Porta and Diani, 2006, quoted in Caiani and della Porta, 2011). The coding paid attention to the presence of similar expressions in the discourses of the two contending parties, identified as floating signifiers. The frame analysis is based on a total number of 3950

statements (1950 for the pro "remunicipalisation" coalition and 2000 for the public-private coalition).

Regarding visual data, the analysis was restricted to the visual materials produced by AB, BeC, AeV and related social movements during the 2011-2019 period. Campaign videos and photos were considered as "framing device" (Noakes and Johnson, quoted in Lindekilde 2014). The research focused on how the different elements such as water, the neighbours, the urban environment, are depicted in the campaigns and other publications on both sides; the ways in which these sites are depicted and staged; the themes/messages associated with their depiction (in the text, in particular); the types of 'people' represented in the imagery of the visual campaigns, if any; the target audience(s); finally, the references to Barcelona history, if any. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which particular 'messages' about water were conveyed in the imagery and text of advertisements produced. Attention was paid for through linguistic and visual processes such as metaphors, connotations, analogies and synecdoches (when a part is used to stand for the whole or vice versa) (Smith 2005:403) which generate over-simplification (reduction to one trait), stereotyping (amplification of one or more traits) and labelling. Such processes have been the focus, since the 1970s, of studies aimed at 'decoding' the ways in which advertising functions (Colomb 2008).

CHAPTER IV - Public vs. private waters in Barcelona. A brief historical account

Who governs urban flows is not only relevant in terms of how the distribution of resources across the city occurs, but also in relation to the forms of urban organization that emerge associated to different visions of the ideal or the good city' (Castán Broto 2012:858)

4.1. From the Romans to the Industrial Revolution

To understand the current conflict over water in Barcelona, this chapter provides an overview of the historical evolution of this service, with a particular focus on intermittent conflicts. They are marked both by changes in the socio-economic and institutional conditions of the city but also importantly by cultural and discursive shifts. It is this latter take on the history that interests this thesis and it relies on the work of historians and scholars who look at the history of water through an (urban) political ecology glass, where the interplay between of urbanization, power and discourse is key to understanding the water system and its conflicts (Sywngedouw 2007, 2015, Masjuan et al 2008, March 2010, Lopez Gunn 2009, Castán Broto 2012). Indeed, from an urban political ecology viewpoint, natural elements are inextricably linked with social processes therefore it is impossible to understand water systems without referring to the shifting storylines that shaped them along the years.

In the case of Barcelona, the evolution of water supply and sanitation is one where the public and private waters were constantly intertwined, where long periods of collaboration or co-habitation are interrupted by moments of conflict and politicisation. A messy history but where there are several constants. Perhaps the most important is the endless search for water to sustain the growing urbanisation, fuelled by discourses of modernization and economic growth. In the second half of the 19th Century, another important element emerges in the water landscape, never to leave again until the present days: the presence of Societat General d'Aigües de Barcelona (SGAB) as main water supplier of the city. Related to this latter element, a third one is also to be noted: the regular challenges to this monopoly coming from both private and public spheres, doubled in some cases by the fierce defence of the incumbent. This chapter follows these (connected) threads to offer a sketch of the water history of Barcelona and how this matters for the current "remunicipalisation" attempt.

The water history of the city stretches back to the Roman city of Barcino, a remarkable system whose complexity was not matched up until practically the 19th Century. The decline of the empire was accompanied by a gradual degradation of the public water infrastructures, such as thermae and baths which were slowly replaced by wells which became the main water source during early Medieval times (Martín Pascual, 2017). In the 11th Century, the Rec Comptal, a private installation which was initially meant to bring water for irrigation and for the mills of the Count of Barcelona, became a key water supply for the city for centuries, along with the wells. It was not until the 14th Century that new water conducts were built to bring water from Collserola to the centre fountains which supplied hospitals and religious centres as well as a reduced number of privileged families. The densest areas of the city remained without supply. In 1701 an open conduct was bringing water from the old Rec Comptal to the centre city, an insalubrious solution (Voltes Bou 1967).

In 1778, the municipality promoted the construction of the Montcada Mine, close to the Besos River, which would remain the principal source of the municipal service in the next centuries. However, the municipality could only partially cover the water needs of the city, while the rest was supplied from a variety of private sources (March 2010). In 1824 the municipality planned a new extraction point, connecting the Montcada mine with the Besòs River, in order to increase the quantity of water supplied to the city. However, due to the complicated property regime, the project was difficult to implement, as it required agreements with the private owners of the water network. In 1852, the Municipality signed an agreement with the private owners, stipulating the cession of a fix quantity of water for public use, which could be extended in case of draught. The new mine was inaugurated in 1879 and it rose the public supply to 20.000 cubic meters a day. For more than a hundred years, this system of mixed public and private supply continued unchanged (Matés Branco, 1994).

The Industrial Revolution meant a surge of urban population and economic activities and therefore the demand of water increased concomitantly for both production and domestic uses. The modernization of water services was also related to the process of urbanization

beyond the medieval towns, the so called "Eixample" (Extension) of the city. The municipality tried to react to the new water demand and several projects were designed but never implemented. The lack of initiative of the municipality facilitated the emergence of multiple private initiatives to bring water to the Eixample neighbourhood. One of the most significant projets in this sense was initiated by the company Palau, García i Cia to extract water from the Dosrius watercourse. Because of lack of capital, the initial attempt was not successful and the company was bought by Companyia d'Aigües de Barcelona (CAB), a water company constituted in Liège in 1867. The project to bring water from Dosrius was approved for on December 12, 1868 and in 1871 the water could be commercialized (Gaya 2014).

In 1881 CAB was partially bought by Société Lyonnaise des Eaux et de l'Éclairage, constituting the Societat General d'Aigües de Barcelona. At this time, several companies were competing to supply water to Barcelona but they were gradually bought by SGAB (see Figure 3). It is the beginning of a new era in the history of water in Barcelona which will be dominated by this company for the following 150 years (Guardía 2012).

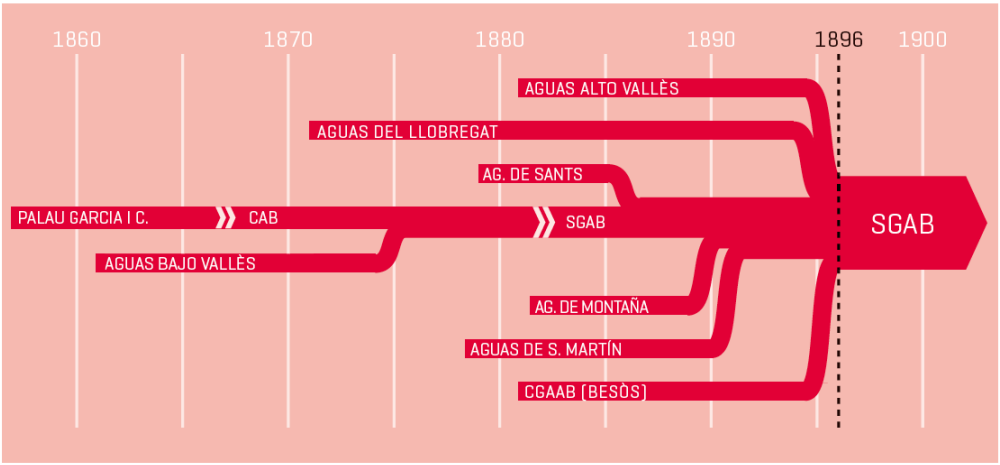

Figure 3. Companies absorbed by SGAB
(Source: Museu d'Historia de Barcelona 2011)

4.2. Early battles for a municipal service

In the first years of 20th Century, Barcelona had its first democratic government in its history, overcoming the times dominated by the influence of the landowners (the so called "caciquisme"). Conservative parties continued to have the power in the city but the influence of republican and regionalist forces was increasing (Martín Pascual, 2007). It was the beginning of "political *Catalanism*" which aimed to modernize Barcelona and promote a new vision of the city in terms of urbanism, housing, economy and culture. Achieving this goal entailed an increased water supply to cover the needs of a developing industry, especially textile, the expansion of the city and a growing population. In the context of the prominence of the *hygienist* discourses, the municipality aimed to stir the inhabitants' consumption of water by supplying more quantity and at lower prices. As a consequence, a public tender was opened in 1903 and in 1905 SGAB obtained the concession of 30.000 cubic metres per day of drinkable water from the wells of Cornellà de Llobregat and 80,000 cubic metres from the aquifer of the Llobregat River, both west of Barcelona (Matés Branco 1994).

At the same time, the municipality attempted to expand the capacity of its own water sources from the Montcada mine. However, the availability of this water sources was questioned by experts of the time, who pushed for alternative water sources, apart from those already controlled by SGAB. These attempts to diversify the water supply were resisted by industrialists and conservative politicians who owned wells and feared that a strengthening of the public regime would push them to pay for the resource (Masjuan et al 2009). For instance, manufactures such as Antoni Rosès thought that the increased municipal presence in the water supply business would entail a rise in industrial costs. Eventually an agreement between the municipality and these stakeholders was reached in 1910 and this consolidated the municipal service. This relied on two main sources: the underground water from the Montcada wells, the so called Aigües de Montcada (Figure 4) with 24.000 cubic meters and the Rec Comptal with 6000 cubic meters per day. SGAB, in turn, extracted water from Dos Rius, Vallés, two wells from Besòs and the surface

water of the Llobregat River. All in all, the municipality covered about 14% of the total water consumption while rest of 86% was covered by SGAB (Interview #28 - historian).

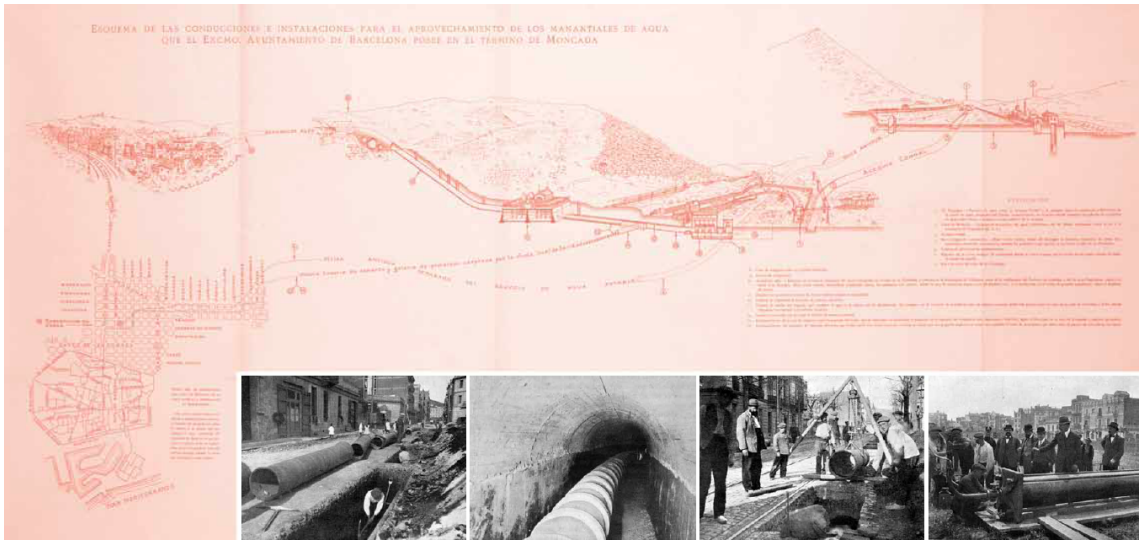

Figure 4. The general scheme of the extinct municipal water service, 1914-1920 "Aigües de Montcada" *(Source: Museu d'Historia de Barcelona)*

With the growing prominence of SGAB as the main water supplier of the city, came also the rise in the critical voices. This included for instance the well-known industrialist and art Maecenas, Eusebi Güell, who saw the opportunity to make considerable profit by helping the municipality to cover its needs for public water supply.

> "The municipality is being conditioned by a unique company, which has the monopoly and considers sufficient the current water flow. The city council needs water for its public fountains, watering and irrigation, etc. and has to pay an average of 0.17 *pesetas* per cubic metre. The total amount adds up to 300,000 pesetas yearly, a figure that would vanish if the city council bought water to other private owners' (Güell 1899, quoted in Masjuan et al 2009)."

At the same time, the increasing pressure for additional water sources compelled the municipality to open another tender in 1910. The corruption and favouritism scandal that enmeshed this tender determined the intervention of the State which created in 1913 the

Comissió Tècnica per a Tractar les Aigües (Technical Commission of Water Treatment). Presumably influenced by the intense debates around the municipalisation of urban utilities emerging across Europe and the United States, the Commission recommended the acquisition of SGAB by the city council. The company owners accepted to enter negotiations which advanced favourably up to the drafting of agreement between the parts (Martín Pascual 2010). Nevertheless, this attempt to municipalise the water service failed due to combined effect of several circumstances: 1) the opposition of the real estate owners union (Cambra de Propietaris), since a municipal supply at lower prices would have interfered with their profits from selling water to the renters; 2) the reluctance of other industrialists with interests in the water business who feared the expansion of the municipal service would limit the water market; 3) the typhoid epidemic in 1914 which affected predominantly the municipal wells and distribution points, dealing a hard blow to the legitimacy of the public water service; 4) finally, the beginning of the First World War changed the position of the SGAB board and convinced them to hold on to the company: Barcelona suddenly became the most important and safest asset of the French and Belgian owners, *Societé Lyonnaise* and *Crédit Général* (March 2015, Martín Pascual 2007, Interview #28).

This is a pivotal moment for the water history of the city. The failure to municipalize SGAB also marked the beginning of the decay of the municipal service. Despite the immediate modernization of Aigües de Montcada affected by the thyphus scandal, the technical reforms made by the municipality did not involve an extension of the water sources. This lack of capacity to supply more citizens was eventually favourable to the gradual expansion of SGAB (Figure 5). The company increased its number of clients from 57.000 in 1930 to 150.000 in 1950. The municipality was relegated to sanitary controls and overall monitoring of the service. The municipal service Aigües de Montcada became limited to the old town before eventually disappearing completely in 1989. All in all, the attempts to increase the municipal control over water failed due to a crisis of legitimacy which consolidated the monopoly of SGAB (Gaya 2014).

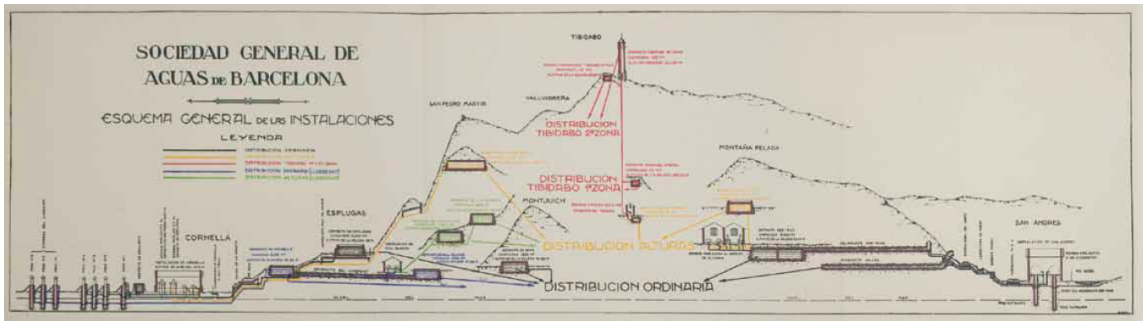

Figure 5. Scheme of the SGAB installations 1925
(Source: Museu d'Historia de Barcelona 2011)

Nevertheless, and in spite of the uninterrupted advance of SGAB as a main supplier, the company witnessed several other subsequent attempts of municipalisation. In 1920, motivated by a wave of elite patriotism and the hope of profits, SGAB was finally bought by a group of Spanish banks among which Banco de Barcelona, Banco de Bilbao, Banco Hispano Colonial, Sindicato de Banqueros and the Societat Anònima Arnús Garí, for 45 million pesetas, much less than the municipal offer in 1913 (Interview #28) They offered the municipality to buy a third of the company and in time, purchase the totality of the shares. The municipality had been part of the Board of Counsellors and would also have access to water supplied by the company at a reduced price and 20% of the company benefits. However, this project was also abandoned due to the financial crisis of 1920 which increased the barriers imposed by the State to the local government to contract the needed loan. This was coupled with increased interest of the bankers in benefiting from financial returns provided by the water business (Martín Pascual, 2017).

4.3. The "tumultuous Thirties"

The 1930ies were particularly intense for the city of Barcelona, in the context of major historical events: the economic crisis, the Second Republic, and the Civil War found their echo in the evolution of the water sector of the city. The consolidation of SGAB as the main water supplier of the city continued but at a slower pace than in the previous century. In spite of the difficulties, SGAB continued its effort to extend the company infrastructure but also in terms of promoting the company's image as a key factor in the modernization of the city (Interview #24 - Fundació Agbar, Voltes Bou 1967). In the first place, the company invested considerably in modernizing its infrastructures, for instance construction of new wells in the Cornellà de Llobregat plant, in the South of Barcelona, inaugurated in 1909, and installing new elevating stations in Cornella and Collblanc. In the Besòs River plants, the company extended its extraction capacity. SGAB was now supplying water to the Barcelona city as well as several other municipalities in the metropolitan area (March 2010).

Nevertheless, the company had to face a series of adverse circumstances. Thus, even if the population continued to rise thanks to the immigration trend, this was not matched by an increase in the water demand. In this sense, the economic crisis and the decrease in the industrial and construction activity also took their toll on the water sector. Moreover, even if an ambitious municipal law approved in the May 1930 established that each home in Barcelona should have running water, in reality this could not be implemented without major investments from the dwellers[13]. Importantly, the political environment, now dominated by the Left, was more favourable to the municipalisation of the water service. In this sense, Martín Pascual (2017: 77) notes that "during the 14th of January elections 1934, all political parties coincided in that there should be "intervention of the

[13] For instance many of the houses at that time did not have a bathroom and many poor neighbourhoods had no sewer system. This measure was thefeore applicable only to the well-off and middle class families but was ineffective for the popular clases, in the absence of major investments.

municipality in the companies monopolizing public services". Even if the threat of municipalisation did not eventually come to pass, SGAB remained an issue of public debate due to two circumstances which challenged the legitimacy of its supremacy: the momentary emergence of a rival company, Aigües Potables de Barcelona and the issue of salinization of the Llobregat River.

While SGAB managed to absorb the majority of these companies at the beginning of the XX Century and establish a *de facto* monopoly, this operation was not complete. Thus, an heir of one of this companies actually managed to challenge SGAB in 1935: Aigües Potables de Barcelona S.A offered the municipality the supply from its concession from the Mogent River tributary to the Besós River. The proposal was based on the traditional discourse of the need for an alternative to the monopoly of SGAB, appealing both to the owners of real estate by offering them better prices for the resource and to the political ambitions of municipalisation of the time. Regarding the latter, the company hoped to rally the support of the local government by offering the municipality the possibility to buy the company in 50 years, in exchange for fiscal and taxes exemptions. Eventually the project failed because of the reticence of the banking system to support the financial operation behind it but also due to the increasing hardships generated in the city by the Civil War (Interview #27 - historian).

At the same time, SGAB also had to face an important crisis triggered by the rise in the salinity of the Llobregat River, a sink for discharges of many industries in the area. This generated increased public criticism which prompted the company to react and initiate two campaigns to improve its image. This time, SGAB set up an alliance with the Spanish Olympic Committee to intervene with the Republican municipality in their favour and promote the installation of water pools in the neighbourhoods situated at a distance from the beach, supplying 100.000 m3 of water. In this sense, the company tried to take advantage of a general trend at that time which was favourable to hygiene habits and sportive activities, the latter championed by the Barcelona's candidacy to the Olympic games in 1936, eventually held in Berlin (Martín Pascual 2017, Interview #27 - historian).

Another remarkable initiative of the company to counteract the criticisms and improve its image was the project Popular Baths (Baños Populares - Figure 6). A member of SGAB board declared in April 1936 that "it is necessary to create around the Society an environment of public sympathy which is obviously missing right now and that we need to promote its activities" (Martín Pascual 2017:90). The project envisaged the set-up of a non-profit subsidiary Baños Populares to run the construction and management of three installations for public hygiene.

Figure 6. Baños Populares de la Travesera de Gracia, 1945
(Source: Museu d'Historia de Barcelona 2011)

Already in the previous decade, SGAB made itself visible the public space for instance with the support for the installation of the "Font Màgica" of Montjuic during the International Exhibition (Guardia 2011, interview #24 - Fundació Agbar) but also with important contributions to the urbanistic heritage of the city (for an overview see Martín Pascual 2017:59). However, these two campaigns described here are particularly relevant for our study, as they prove that the current legitimacy-defending strategies of the company, which rely on connecting with the popular classes are not new: they build on a long tradition of the company of interacting with the public sphere in adverse moments. In words of an interviewed manager, "This company was periodically forced to say 'I am

with the city, I am with the popular class', even if this meant building a ruinous business such as Baños Populares" (Interview #24).

With the outbreak of the Civil War, in July 1936, after the Franco coup d'état, SGAB was taken over by the anarchist union Confederació Nacional del Treball (CNT), which also came to control a number of other major private companies. The company was collectivized and a Revolutionary Committee of its own workers ensured the water supply during the whole duration of the hostilities. In 1939, the war finished with the victory of Franco and the company was returned to its former owners. For Gorrostiza et al, this episode is particularly relevant in the endless debate over the public vs. private management of water as it seems to be an "rather successful" example for a possible third way where the management was implemented not by public company but by a private company taken over by its workers (Gorrostiza et al 2012). This is important also in a larger debate between neoliberalism and the Left, where the discourse on efficiency and rationality have been taken over by the former while from the latter "rationality and efficiency are sometimes viewed suspiciously as something irrelevant or, worse still, as pennants of neoliberalism" (Gorrostiza et al 2012: 909).

4.4. The Franco regime: "*desarrollismo*" and the quest for endless water

After the Civil War, Spain found itself under the dictatorship of the general Francisco Franco. The dictatorship and the post-war repression needed no other justification but having won the war and the drive to re-establish the country "unity". However, in the following decades and especially after the beginning of the Cold War, Franco had to build alliances with the Western countries, and therefore it necessitated a new discourse to sustain his regime. Thus, they turned to modernization and development as new keywords of the government action (Interview #27). It is the beginning of the era of *desarrollismo*, when the country embarked in a major project of urbanization and construction of infrastructures, especially in the 1960ies. Water was one of the main focuses of the

dictator who had a predilection to the building of dams and implementation of water transfers (Swyngedouw 2015).

By this time, SGAB had been restored to its initial status and remained the main provider of water in Barcelona and surroundings. In the first decade after the civil war, its sources were the groundwater from Besòs and Llobregat and Dosrius and Vallès aqueducts. The number of citizens connected to the water network more than doubled in 10 years, from 75.597 customers in 1941 to 163.212 in 1952 (Voltes Bou 1967). The population grew further, also due to several waves of immigration from the rest of Spain, especially the poorer, Southern part[14]. The subsequent growth in water demand (also for the very dynamic industrial sector) prompted the search for new water resources. In 1955, SGAB obtained a concession of 457.920 cubic metres per day from the Spanish Ministry of Public Works to use the surface water from the Llobregat River (Voltes Bou 1967). The drinking water plant of Sant Joan Despí was built and it became an international reference for its capacity to treat a highly contaminated water. Again, SGAB managed to turn a difficulty to its advantage (Interview #27).

However, water was still considered insufficient and the search for new sources continued. The 1957 Water Plan introduced the Ter River transfer and in 1966 water from this river North of Barcelona arrived in the Catalan capital. The nine years which separated the approval of the transfer and its actual implementation were full of polemics nurtured by the opposition to the project of the riverane activists but also by pressure of SGAB which had alternative projects, which were not eventually pursued[15]. This moment was particularly delicate for SGAB: since the infrastructure of the Ter transfer was built by the State, the company's monopoly on water extraction was severely challenged. At the same time, the idea of municipalisation was revived, with the mayor declaring that

[14] Between 1960 and 1975, population in the metropolitan area grew from 2.5 to 4 million people (Masjuan et al 2009).

[15] The project of Ter-Gavaresa-Llobregat described by Martín Pascual 2017:135

the private management of water was one of the causes for the problem of water scarcity in Barcelona (Mayor Porcioles quoted in Martín Pascual, 2017). However, again the municipalisation was not carried out due to the astronomic financial costs and ambiguous position of the mayor himself (Interview #28). At the same time, the good relationship between the board of the company and the State was such that in the same year of the Ter transfer, 1966, SGAB receives the award for "Exemplary Company", as vote of confidence (Interview #28). The company acknowledged that the full competence of water planning resided in the municipality and eventually accepted the creation of an Advisory Committee, integrated by members of the local government and SGAB to oversee the water management of the city (Gaya 2014).[16]

Even with the transfer of the Ter River, the 'thirst' of the city could not be satiated: in 1969 a new document *El Agua. Recurso Natural Escaso (Water. A Scarce Natural Resource)* (Banco Urquijo 1969), which bluntly stated that Barcelona would run out of the water around 1985 if more transfers were not arranged. Thus, were it not for the protest of local population in Aragon, the Ebre River, 200 km from Barcelona, would have had the same fate as the Ter. In the summer of 1974, a massive campaign was organised in the region of Aragon, where most of the Ebro and its tributaries are located, to reject the transfer, framed in terms of "rich and predatory" Catalans "preying on the resources of others" (Saurí 2004, Sauri and Del Moral 2001). This opposition, together with the change of the regime and the economic crises, halted the transfer[17]. However, in the next decades, the Ebre continued to be a major source of political conflict. New attempts to transfer water towards Barcelona and Valencia were prompted by a sharpened public perception of scarcity nurtured by several episodes of draught. This gave birth to

[16] The desire of the municipality to secure its control over the water management was reflected in its proposal to constitute a public-private company, but due to the opposition of SGAB they eventually had to settle for the Advisory Committee

[17] The project was limited to a "micro-transfer" to the city of Taragona to nurture the rising chemical industry in the área

the "Nueva Cultura del Agua" (New Water Culture) movement, and made visible the stark differences between existing discourses around water: "the access to water as a fundamental right for both humans and non-humans; the local and regional identity forged historically around water (…) and the eco-social characteristics of water, not reducible to simple economics" (Masjuan et al 2009: 435).

4.5. The Transition and new attempts to municipalize SGAB

The death of Franco in 1975 opened the path of democratization in Spain, a period which for the next decades was known as the Transition. The transformation of the country was initially piloted by the Unión de Centro Democratico, which had its city representative in the mayor Josep Maria Socías, known as the "architect of the city Transition" (Martín Pascual 2017). The relationship of Socías and his government with SGAB was ambiguous: on the one hand he favoured the private management of water; yet he was also prone to respond to a growing demand for progressive measures and the multiplication of social movements organisations (Interview #27). The tension with SGAB was manifested for instance in the decision to freeze the water tariffs as strategy of approximation to the neighbourhood organisations. Concomitantly, the financial situation of the company worsened as a consequence of the halt of the construction of the Abrera plant. The situation was so serious that in 1978 the company was on the verge of bankruptcy: for the first time in its history, SGAB was unable to pay dividends to its shareholders. Once again the municipalisation was on the political agenda, especially with the local government now in the hands of the Socialist Party. The lack of consensus among the political forces, torn among different priorities in a very tense historical moment, the opposition of conservative forces and again, the costs of the operation, impeded the municipalisation (Interview #27, Gaya 2014).

However, this is perhaps the most similar attempt of municipalisation with respect to the contemporary one: the discourses of urban renovation and right to basic services are favoured by a circumstantial window of opportunity in which the company is in a fragile

situation. In the case of the BeC attempt, this circumstantial opportunity is given by the legal trial against the company which they did not initiate but which they capitaliseed discursively to push the "remunicipalisation" agenda.

In the next years, after overcoming this crisis, SGAB recovered and embarked in a project of exponential growth and diversification of its business both in terms of sectors and in terms of territorial scope. With the creation of Metropolitan Area of Barcelona in the late 1970ies, the water service and management also become 'metropolitan'. Following its tradition, the company expanded together with its emblematic city and got involved in all its major events, like the Olympic games 1992 (Interview #27). That same year, it formed the Agbar Group, which would become the second largest water company in Spain and the first in Catalonia (Aigües de Barcelona 2015). However, it is also during these years that a new voice gains more and more echo in water sector: the ecologist social movements.

In 1992, Barcelona was the site one a most peculiar and under-studied (but see Joaquin Sempere, 2004) water-related social protests: la Guerra de l'Aigua. For nearly 10 years, thousands of city dwellers, led by neighbourhood associations, with practically no support from major civil society organizations, stopped paying part of the water bill. They considered the public taxes included in the bill were illegitimate and decided to pay only the strict portion that covered the water management cost: the fee for AB service which amounted to about 43% of the total. The movement was restricted to affordability matters and only extended its focus beyond this to include ecologic concerns. In spite of the considerable duration of this peculiar resistance-to-pay movement, the private management model was never questioned, on the contrary, the target of conflict was precisely the public administration (Sempere, 2004). In this sense, the movement was not 'politicised' which, in spite of its length and public support, did not manage to advance any major change.

4.6. XXI Century: from unbridled domination of SGAB to the New Municipalist challenge

With the turn of the millennium, the presence of SGAB (from now on Agbar) in the city was so solid that for many citizens the company was synonymous with water management and the company was even thought to be a public one (Interview #1 - CONGIAC). In 2012 the mixed company Aigües de Barcelona (AB) was created to supply water to Barcelona and 22 other municipalities in the metropolitan area. The company was participated by the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (15 % of shares), Agbar (70%) and Criteria Caixa (15%).

After the end of the Guerra de l'Aigua, for almost another decade, urban water fell into relative oblivion. Nevertheless, for Edurne Bagué (2017), this is precisely the time when the first steps towards "remunicipalisation" were taken in Spain. The private management of water only timidly emerged as a topic of discussion in academic and activist spheres, inspired by the Latin American experiences with anti-privatization struggles and renationalization (Hall and Lobina, 2006). Mainly steered by environmental NGOs such as Ecologistes en Acció, Enginyers sense Fronteres and Nueva Cultura del Agua, the discourse around municipalisation had a marked technical character, given the predominant engineering and academic profile of the activists. Criticisms regarding the lack of transparency in water management, or the 'revolving doors' - that is the movement of staff between the private and public water bodies - were gradually complemented by wider concerns related the Human Right to Water and Sanitation (HRWS) and the idea of a more participative management (Delclòs 2008).

The municipalisation of water in Paris announced in 2008 was a turning point for these debates: like Barcelona, Paris had a long history of private management and the perspective of reproducing its model became a feasible possibility (Le Strat 2015). At Spanish level, in 2010 urban water made it back into the headlines following a decision by a local tribunal questioning the legal grounds upon which Agbar was managing the resources. The trial was later elevated to the Supreme Court of Catalonia which

sanctioned the initial decision, followed by the contestation of the company at the Spanish Supreme Court of Justice, resolved in 2019 in favour of the company.

With the economic crisis, the emergence of the 15M movement was an important boost for the "remunicipalisation" discourses. The diversity of actors now part of the movement was a catalyst for the politicisation of the water discourse, making it less technical and more permeable to the political messages of the 15M related to transparency, participation and accountability. RTC was one of privileged framings of these movements which, like Barcelona en Comú. As noticed, the term, famously put forward by Henry Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1968), who proposes a radical interpretation of the concept of political community, where membership is based on *inhabitance*: those who are entitled to decide over the city's destiny are those who gained this right through living in and creating the urban space (Purcell 2014). It is in this context that Barcelona en Comú wins the 2015 elections and embarks in the latest major challenge to the historical water company.

After the 2015 elections, project of "remunicipalisation" of water in Barcelona managed to successfully rally the support of the left-wing political spectrum. In this sense, it is telling that in 2016 BeC was backed by all the left-wing municipal counsellors to initiate the process of assuming direct management of water. Yet, this auspicious beginning proved to be fragile and in recent years the process suffered important setbacks. First of all, the initial left-wing consensus broke down, bitterly separated over a new populist cleavage: The Catalan independence. The intersection of these two apparently conflictive populist identities the - Catalan vs. the 'city people' - was problematic for the BeC project, which shattered its alliance with independentist parties such as CUP and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya. It is this other cleavage that blocked the 2018 referendum about the "remunicipalisation" of water promoted by AeV via a popular initiative signed up by approx. 26.000 citizens.

Another important setback for the "remunicipalisation" process was the historical ruling of the Spanish Supreme Court, issued on the 20 of November 2019, which legitimized the concession of the water service to the mixed company AB, revoking the previous

ruling of the Catalan Superior Court of Justice (TSJC). In its resolution, the Supreme Court dismissed the arguments of the companies Acciona, Aqualia and Aguas de Valencia, which challenged the creation of AB, among other things, because it was supposedly done without public competition. The TSJC had agreed with them in March 2016. However, the Supreme Court recognized the validity of the concession that SGAB has been holding since 1867, formalised in 1953 by the Ministry of Public Works. Another important acknowledgement is the one related to the ownership of SGAB over the water infrastructure of the city (Tribunal Supremo 2019). Even if AeV and BeC representatives declared their intention to "not give up" their "defence of this common good from private interests" they also acknowledged that the ruling was a "hard blow" to their cause (El Diario 2019).

CHAPTER V - Populist politicisation of water in Barcelona

"*The city is conflict. We are talking about a battle; we are talking about who owns the city" (Ada Colau 2016).*

5.1. Introduction

This chapter uses the theoretical framework presented in Chapter II to analyse the "remunicipalisation" discourse in Barcelona and answer the first research question, proving the extent to which type of politicisation encountered in the case study is indeed populist. By building on an original data collection, the research focuses on Barcelona en Comú (BeC), the municipalist platform governing the city since May 2015 in close cooperation with grassroots movements such as *Aigua és Vida* (AeV). The chapter traces the gradual discursive construction of BeC's left-wing populist identity, pitted against the neoliberal 'elites' or 'establishment'. Using populism, critical urban theory, and political ecology as key concepts, this analysis articulates a conceptual toolbox to explain the populist politicisation of water in Barcelona. As mentioned, the theoretical premises employ Ernesto Laclau's discursive-constructive approach, but criticize his perspective on populism as the "royal path to politics" (2005a: 67); in contrast, this research distinguishes between populist and anti-populist strategies of politicisation presented in this Chapter and in Chapter VI. Moreover, this study points out the relevance of spatialisation and geographical imagination for building different forms of populism (e.g. national or city populism).

Methodologically, Laclau's conceptualization of the discursive articulation of populist identities is combined with the literature on interpretive qualitative analysis. First of all, from Laclau I employ the concepts of *dislocation* and *empty/floating signifiers*.The aim is to trace the presence of the *central populist frame* – 'the People' vs. 'elite dichotomy' – and its linguistic "proxies" (Caiani and Della Porta 2011); then the analysis looks at how this frame is connected to urban and environmental and spatial topoi.

Another important Laclau-inspired element of this analysis is the construction of *chains of equivalences* (Chapter II). In short, the framing of remunicipalisation campaign is built on a discourse of 'recovering public control over water' and instituting a new management system inspired in the direct democracy ideas that are the core of the

municipalist philosophy of BeC. The construction of the 'people' is the result of a chain of social demands – accountability, public control, transparency, participation, universal access – which are aggregated in larger, politicized demands: equity, commons, democracy. These demands become 'equivalent' in the sense that they manage to constitute a discursively homogenous demand for 'democracy' and a notion of a unitary 'People', even if in practice the demands are heterogeneous (Fig. 5.1). As Panizza, summarises,

> "…the constitution of the political frontier between the 'underdogs' and the powerful requires that the particularities that make up the signifier 'the People' become elements in a chain of equivalences in which they only have in common the relation of antagonism itself" (Panizza 2005:6).

What occurs is a transformation of the political discourse which seeks to radically redefine political frontiers and articulate new social relations and new identities. Thus, the construction of a chain of equivalence between different demands can lead to the emergence of a populist identity "out of the dislocation of the specific identities of the holders of particularistic demands (neighbours, workers, peasants, the unemployed, women, ethnic groups, etc.) and their reconstitution in an imaginary unity (Panizza 2005:9).

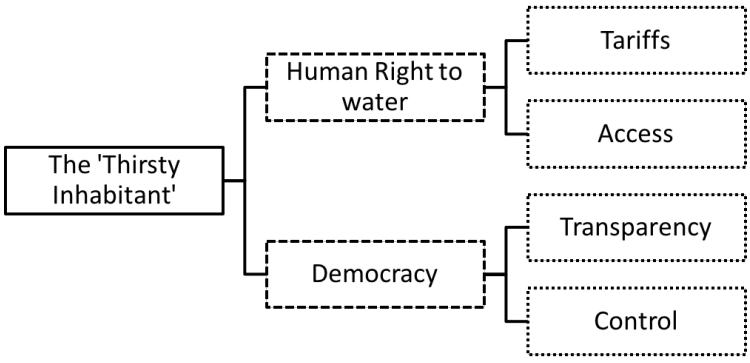

Figure 7. The equivalential chain of the remunicipalisation discourse

To trace the evolution of the discourse, Hajer's (2005) concepts for discourse analysis are instrumental: 1) **discourse structuration**, when a given discourse starts to dominate a social field and 2) **discourse institutionalization** refers to the point when that discourse solidifies into particular institutional arrangements. Hajer's approach is thus useful in tracking the gradual politicisation of water in Barcelona. In this case study, a first phase is identified between 2011 and 2015 when the question of public water becomes a matter of public debate (Section 5.3). Subsequently, between 2015-2019, the remunicipalisation discourse enters an institutionalized phase and shapes the municipal policy on water (Section 5.4).

5.2. From Indignados to Barcelona en Comú: a new political cycle in Spain

The 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent austerity measures imposed by the Troika were a hard blow for Spain: unprecedented levels of unemployment and mortgage foreclosures became a collective ordeal, with almost 320.000 evictions between 2008 and 2013 (Barbero 2015). In this period, social movements proliferated. The movement *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages) was founded in Barcelona in 2009, using direct action to target banks and provide support to neighbours who resisted police enforced evictions or squatted vacant properties (García-Lamarca 2017, Rubio Pueyo 2017, Islar and Irgil 2018). The PAH was also one of the seeds of *15M/Indignados* movement, which in May 2011 occupied urban centres across Spain. The mobilisation was triggered by austerity-induced social crisis but also by a long-built disenchantment with political corruption and the perceived submission of the political institutions to corporate and financial 'powers that be' (Fominaya 2015). For some analysts (see Subirats 2016, Rodriguez 2016), *Indignados* represented a game changer in the Spanish politics. *Indignados* did not immediately give rise to a coherent, organised social movement but it did have a profound influence on the parameters of the political discourse as well as the political configuration of the country in the next decade.

The phenomenon did not come out of nowhere: its predominantly urban character and the nature of some of its demands are tributary to previous urban social movements such as the feminist, the housing or the ecologist ones (Rodríguez 2015). During the few months that the protests occupied the streets, *Indignados* denounced the increasing inequality, the worsening life conditions, the loss of collective and individual goods, or the privatisation of public services among others. Importantly, the movement also demanded a radical democratisation of the political system, summarised in its core slogan "Real democracy now!" (Figure 8)

Figure 8. An Indignados protest in Madrid
(Source - El País 2012)

In this sense, Indignados uptake the *material* demands of the historical social movements such as the working class struggle of the beginning of modernity related to better life conditions and combined them with the *post-material* claims of the social movements from the 1960'ies which focus on more equalitarian and fair social relations. Yet, Indignados bring in an important element of novelty: the "rejection of the whole" (Gomà et al 2018:9) translated into "the amendment to the totality of the austerity policies and

of politics as a distant representation of the citizenry" (Ferré 2017). Indeed, this rejection is summarised in another emblematic slogan - "They don't represent us" - which stands as the epitome of the populist character of the movement's narrative.

These mobilisations, followed by others like the *Mareas* (Tidal waves) with more specific demands such as education or health, moved from material claims to demanding a profound transformation of the society. Some of these movements would disappear after a while, but others would transform into new political subjects, either parties (Podemos) or political 'confluences' or platforms (Barcelona en Comú and other municipalist homologues across Spain). The novelty of these political subjects reside both in their organisation and structure - i.e. assembly-style participatory processes of issuing programmes and electing representatives - and their discourses, inspired in the *Indignados* slogans.

The connection between these parties and platforms and the social movements can be found in their claims, their political culture and attitudes, and especially in their self-imposed requirement to maintain the 'street' as a space of political action (Gomà et al 2018). This was usually translated into cultivating a constant relation with the social movements and in many cases, with activists taking political roles, as is the case of Ada Colau. In the words of leftist leader Alberto Garzón (2017), "15M emphasised a classic lesson: that political parties cannot be the only form of political participation". As such, the political program put forward by this new political wave resonates with the precepts of radical and participatory model of democracy (see Chapter II).

The social mobilizations and public debates encouraged the further politicization of ecologist movements on water provided a reference for the reframing of the question of water (Interview #5 - AMB). The *Indignados* key demand of de-commodification of society - "We are not commodities in the hands of bankers and politicians" (see Fig. 5.1) - found its natural echo in the new water movement. Thus, Aigua és Vida (AeV) emerged in November 2011, only a few months after the *Indignados*, with many AeV activists having been involved in the May protests (Bagué and Varó 2018). The founding

organisations of AeV were Engineers without Frontiers (ESF), the main campaigner against water privatization before the creation of AeV, Ecologists in Action, New Water Culture, the Federation of Neighbours Associations in Barcelona (FAVB), as well as ATTAC – *Acordem*, a movement for global economic justice. Some of the activists also had experience in anti-privatisation struggles in Latin America Later. Other environmental organizations joined the platform, notably Naturalists of Catalonia and the Platforms for the Defence of the Rivers Ebre and Ter, the latter two with a protracted tradition of combating river transfers, a highly conflictive issue in Spain (Chapter IV). FAVB is deemed to be the most powerful organization in AeV in terms of members and access to public financing (March et al 2019).

However, AeV importantly relies on other emblematic non-environmental organisations, such as the PAH, whose founding member was the current mayor Ada Colau. The AeV has a loose network of 18 local groups, coordinated by a small fixed staff in Barcelona. The bulk of the AeV members are volunteers. The interviewed AeV members identify two main cohorts: the 'young' activists, politicized in the *Indignados* movement and the 'senior' ones, usually with more technical backgrounds and experience in environmental and water activism. Interestingly, some of these local groups allow for the participation of left-wing or green parties "but this is not the case of Barcelona, where there is enough critical mass of activists" (Interview #12 - AeV). Local groups focus on specific causes in their municipalities (such as for instance problems with water quality or access of remote urbanizations) and they coordinate with the central Barcelona group only for major campaigns and main political messages (interview #11 - AeV).

The change of political cycle inaugurated by the Indignados culminated in May 2015 with the victory of these new platforms and parties in the municipal elections in all major cities in Spain. Barcelona En Comú won the control of City Hall in the Catalan capital with a weak majority of 11 out of 41 municipal councillors. This thin victory pushed them into a fragile coalition with the traditional left party PSC (Catalan Socialist Party). In line with their adherence to participatory / radical democracy, Barcelona en Comú won the election on two main agendas (García 2017): first the defence of what they term 'social rights' –

the basic necessities of social reproduction (housing, food, water, energy) which they claim should be considered universal rights, rather than commodities; secondly, the transformation of the 'ways of doing politics', infusing an ethos of participatory democratic control over the urban process. This would be materialised through the expansion of networks of solidarity and commons-based initiatives and the creation of 'public–commons partnerships' (instead of the well-known 'public-private partnerships') that would allegedly allow for citizen involvement and control within the public sector (Barcelona en Comú 2015).

Drawing on many intellectual influences, from municipal socialism in the UK, the US and across Latin America (see Leopold and McDonald 2012) to the libertarian municipalism of Murray Bookchin (Bookchin 1999), New Municipalism starts from the premise that the scale of the city is uniquely equipped for creating more socially just and democratic forms of social organisation (Subirats 2016). The city is considered as a privileged scale for radical politics given the 'proximity' of municipal institutions to the people and everyday life (Russell 2019). This explains why new municipalist narrative puts so much emphasis on neighbourhood as we shall see in the next sections.

5.3. Making water visible: discourse structuration

Laclau (2005) argues that the condition leading to a "populist rupture" or dislocation is a situation in which a plurality of demands coexists with an inability of the institutional system to absorb them. In the case of Barcelona, this condition was favoured by the irruption of *Indignados* or *15M* insurgence in 2011 in all major Spanish cities, as explained in the previous section. In the words of Emmanuel Rodríguez:

> In just a few weeks, 15M managed to displace the political grammar from its traditional left vs right references and to fix it around something much more open like "the 99%" or [around the] topological metaphor of the conflict between "those below" and "the above" (Rodríguez 2015).

The call for more democracy and a radical transformation of the society at all its levels influenced the social movements in the water sector. The declared objective of AeV was to ensure that the water policy and the management of the integral water cycle in Catalonia are carried out by the public sector and have the "participation and control of civil society as a guarantee of quality of service and of democratic quality" (Aigüa és Vida 2011). The socio-economic reasons behind remunicipalisations around the world, and especially in Europe (Kishimoto et al 2017), also apply in the case of AeV. Their list of demands is no different from what David McDonald (2018) identified as the grounding for other 'social-democratic' model of remunicipalisations, including:

- Improvement of water service performance and reliability;
- Reduce costs to the state and end users;
- Expand democratic control;
- Improve equity;
- Improve environmental sustainability;
- Reduce the commodification of water;
- Recognize the non-market values of water

However, Kishimoto and Petitjean (2013) in a book favourable to remunicipalisations, claim that these processes are much more than a demand for mere change in ownership of service provision but have a deeply political character: "the aspirations of local communities for public and accountable water services are part of their struggle to obtain progressive social and political change". In this line, AeV fundamentally based the discourse on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation (HRWS) and portrayed the company as a barrier to its implementation:

> "Water supply cuts exceeded 120.000 people affected during the year 2014 and the type of management influences whether or not human rights are respected. The data for 2014 are clear: 74% of municipalities with private management made supply cuts and, in contrast, in to municipalities with public management, the amount decreases to 8%" (Aigua és Vida 2017).

From the beginning, the promoters of AeV argued that the debate around public water was absent at the time, and thought their mission was providing visibility to the demand of "public water, based on public control and participation" (AeV 2011). The AeV discourse appealed to previous water quality and environmental concerns, the HRWS, and denounced mounting tariffs and water cuts to poor families (a claim challenged by the company as we shall see in the next section). But these demands were now placed in wider political frame inspired by the core signifiers of the Indignados: 'real' democracy against the neoliberal elite, and the reclaiming public institutions for 'the people'.

Between 2011 and 2015, AeV articulated a narrative work based on a populist repertoire around the specific issue of the water sector. In this new discourse, water becomes the main floating signifier, reframed through a constellation of inverted metaphors (placing the more abstract term in the second position): "water is life", "water is democracy", "water is rights", "water is commons". The idea behind this discursive operation is dichotomic: water framed as common good cannot be commodified (Bakker 2007). AB became the main representative of these elites, framed as 'the enemy' which deprived citizens of their rights. Elements of this narrative are articulated in the most representative documents and manifestoes of AeV. It is worth analysing a few emblematic examples.

The foundational Manifesto of the AeV (Aigua es Vida 2011) was symbolically proclaimed in a press conference in front of the Agencia Catalana de l'Aigua (ACA - Catalan Water Agency). The site of this proclamation was chosen purposefully: in the same year, ACA had privatised one of the major water public company, Aigües Ter Llobregat, which generated considerable public uproar (March et al 2019). The Manifesto advances a simplified vision of politics as antagonism between two forces: the 'caste' represented by "Government of the Generalitat, with the support and complicity of the great Catalan economic powers", and the "citizenry of Catalonia" who is thought to be against "the private sector benefiting from basic services that we have paid with the effort of all". The representation of a social divide is reflected in expressions such as "They talk about money; we talk about rights" (Aigua es Vida 2011).

In the years following its foundation up to nowadays, AeV intensified its antagonism with AB in Barcelona but also with other private companies managing water in Catalonia. In February 2013, the entity presented a legal complaint at Anti-Corruption Public Prosecutor's Office against the constitution of the mixed company AB. The announcement of this action was symbolically staged in front of the municipality under a banner reading "The business of Agbar, the poverty of Catalonia" (Aigüa és Vida 2013) which would later become a recurrent presence in all the major public events of the entity (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Protest of Aigua és Vida in Barcelona
(Source: Aigua és Vida 2016)

That same year, in December, AeV in collaboration with other movements undertook another symbolic protest by surrounding the emblematic Agbar tower in Barcelona. The event manifest, issued by a Catalan independentist movement (*Procés Constituent*) and appropriated by AeV, was imbued with populist references to the people vs. elites divide inspired by the language of Indignados:

> "We are today at the feet of the AGBAR Tower, a symbol of economic power, a symbol of the oligarchy, the symbol of Catalonia of the 1%, to denounce those who do business with fundamental human rights and public goods and essential for the life of people (…). The Catalan Republic of the 99%, which we all want to build, must be based on the public and collective management of public services, on the public management of basic natural assets, transparent management with citizen participation and under social control" (Aigua és Vida 2013)

The claims regarding efficiency, water prices or the supply cuts, were gradually collapsed into the broader claim of democratizing the water management. "You write water, you read democracy" was a slogan imported from the Napoli municipalisation campaign, and it was distilled in the expression 'water democracy'. Access to water, became synonymous with public management which in turn is synonymous with democracy.

> "What we want is a democratic, public and participative water management…The type of management influences whether human rights are respected or not…The wave of public water management advances unstoppable. Because this is about democracy" (Aigua és Vida 2017)

In setting up this dichotomy, with political and economic establishment becoming an enemy, the movement is asserting the impossibility of taking a more moderate reformist position, arguing instead for the necessity of instituting a rupture with the current order if people's interests are to be met (Mudde 2015). Interviewing the intellectual leaders of the movement, one of them recognized that communication with the company had become difficult in times of confrontation:

> "Discourse works in dichotomy: socially, this issue [remunicipalisation] is more part of a negotiation strategy than a reflection on what to do collectively" (Interviewee #2 - AEOPAS).

From the very beginning, the strategy of AeV was to constantly enrich the network of alliances among grassroots movements and public actors and therefore expand the chain of equivalences which supported their framing of the water as commons. By 2015, when the municipal elections brought to power BeC, AeV had already become the central actor of the anti-privatization movement. As explained in the following section, the AeV slogan "public and democratic water" became a key signifier of the counter-hegemonic project of BeC.

5.3 The municipalist period: discourse institutionalization

In 2015, with the victory of the municipalist parties and platforms in all major Spanish cities – commonly known as the 'municipalities of change' - the discourse for public water enters the institutional phase (Bagué 2017). The movement for public water takes its claims from the squares to the City Hall, and several former activists take prominent positions in the city governments. To give just two emblematic examples: one former spokesman of AeV and member of ESF, Eloi Badia, was elected Councilor for Water and Energy in the Colau government and Moisès Subirana, another member of AeV, was named Badia's chief of staff at the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona. Secondly, "remunicipalisation" became one of the flagships measures of the new municipal government. The municipal government and the social movement became indistinguishable one from the other: not only the representatives of BeC and AeV were constantly present side by side at public event but more importantly, the framing of "remunicipalisation" practiced by AeV in previous years impregnate the debates of the municipal council meetings.

In this new phase, BeC government adopts the discourse on water previously elaborated by AeV and assimilates it to a wider, counter-hegemonic vision of the city under the aegis of "commons" and "Right to the City" as core signifiers. The narrative of BeC also constructs a populist, confrontational repertoire that combines formal and substantive elements. Thus, in a conversation with Saskia Sassen in 2016, Ada Colau, unequivocally

defended an antagonistic, totalizing discursive strategy for her group where separate claims gain force by being bound together under a narrative-ideological umbrella. She blames powerful interests who "tend to separate, to individualize conflicts" and therefore "the task from *inside and outside* the administration" is to "make visible that common line that exists between the different conflicts" (Barcelona Ajuntament 2016). Ada Colau also emphasises the need of make the conflict visible: "The city is a conflict and as it is not easy to talk about making effective the right to the city" (Barcelona Ajuntament 2016)

In this sense, it is important to know how BeC defines the oppositional actors. First of all, the discourse is usually uttered in the first-person plural, including the speaker in the totalizing category of 'the People'. In fact, the BeC slogan is "We are common people" ("Som gent comú"). The empty signifier of the people includes both generic definitions – "the common people", "the citizens, men and women"– but also related to specific urban spatial references - "the residents of Barcelona", "the people on the street", "the neighbours", "the neighbourhoods". Common adjectives associated to these framings are "courageous" and "fearless"**,** and allude to a clash with a powerful enemy. As we assert in Chapter VI, some of these terms become floating signifiers as they are appropriated in the narrative of AB. Such is the case of "neighbours" and the "man on the street".

Regarding 'the Elite', the BeC manifests and programmatic discourses display a wide array of populist proxies: the "elites" are "the political class", "the 200 Catalan families", "the big lobbies", "the privileged", "major economic powers", "private/powerful interests", "a handful of leaders", "oligopolies". They are associated with an overall negative frame by means of some of the most recurrent slogans: "We are losing Barcelona", "A city that sells urban heritage to the highest bidder", "a city highjacked by the elites", which "concentrates power in a few hands" and take decisions "behind closed doors".

This negative framing of the city "seized" by the elites leads to the formulation of an action frame, that instils a sense of emergency and points to a historical milestone: "The moment had arrived" to "win back the city", and "to change the rules of the game". The

goal is to "reclaim public institutions and put them at the service of the common good", taking "the change from the streets to the institutions", "bringing the policy closer to the people", "to put people back in the centre of the municipal policies", "transform our neighbourhoods to build the country we want". This should be done by privileging "the politics of proximity", "the participation of neighbours", "from below". "Proximity" is a core floating signifier of the BeC discourse, as an ideal place for politics that appears under different proxies; this signifier invokes the geographic dimension of the populist articulation: "start from below, from what we know best - our streets, our neighbourhoods".

Table 5. The most used BeC populist proxies.

Antagonistic frame	Proxies for 'The People'	Proxies for 'The Elite'
• Recover institutions • Bring institutions close to people • We are losing Barcelona • Prevent concentration of power in few hands • The abducted city • Take back the city • Brave city (implies enemy)	• The 99% • The common people • The neighbours • A popular government • Men and women of the city • Those from bellow • The people on the street	• The 1% • The elites • 200 Catalan families • Big economic powers • Lobbies • Powers that be • The privileged • The few

The same tropes infuse the narrative on water during this institutionalised discourse phase. The discursive coalition built by AeV in the previous phase enlarges to include BeC and an increasing number of social movements and political parties (most notably the extreme left Popular Unity Candidacy, CUP) which reproduce the AeV's frames and populist tropes[18]. On the 25th of November 2016, the plenary session of the municipal

[18] Other relevant actors are part of the public water discursive coalition: The Consortium for the Management of Catalan Waters; the Spanish Association of Public Operators of Supply and Sanitation as well as networks of heterogenous entities promoted by AeV: Commitment for Public and Democratic Water; Association of Municipalities and Town Halls for Public Water.

council approves the "study" the remunicipalisation of water with the favourable votes of BeC and the rest of the left-wing parties. In defending the bill, the speakers denounce the rising tariffs, the legal situation of the contract with AB, the Human Right to Water as common good, but they blend these claims in a dichotomic rhetoric where water is seen as "a source of multimillionaire business of a few" (Consell Municipal de Barcelona 2016). The same totalizing frame is also evident in the claim that "remunicipalisation" is a matter of general interest, overcoming political ideologies and creating a new, vertical divide (Errejón and Mouffe 2015).

> "It is *not about 'left' or 'right'*: to recover the control of the water service is something concerning us all […] What is important is to "keep away from *private hands* that which is important to support life" (Ortinez and Planas 2017: 26).

The text sets a dichotomy between the metaphor of "private hands" – and water, suggesting their core metaphorical opposition: unlawful appropriation is contrary to life itself. In this antagonistic discursive field, the pro-remunicipalisation discourse binds together different water-related demands and uses *democracy* as an overarching signifier for the whole chain. The "enemy" is built using the same logic: via a synecdoche, AB is singled out as a representative of a heterogeneous group of institutions and individuals representing the *Elite ("the 7")* as opposed to *the People ("the 7 million")*.

> …precisely because it is a struggle for the common interest, for the common good, the tendency to remunicipalise water is a strong wave, with the support of the citizen movements. […] we are the 7 million paying the bill while they 7 are earning millions" (Ortinez and Planas 2017: 28).

Moreover, 'the Elite' also includes the alliance between the companies and political representatives, already identified as enemy in the slogans of the Indignados and later in the discourse of Podemos, under the metaphor 'the Caste' (Iglesias, 2015). For instance, one of the ideologist of the "remunicipalisation" movement, summarised this accusation as follows:

> "All these gentlemen [water companies], their work depends on their good relationship with the political parties (...) Of course, if you are the owner of an automobile company, it is in your best interest to get along with the mayor and have some power over him. But your world, if you sell or not sell, does not depend on politics. So why do extensions [of water concessions] happen? Yes, it is due to deficiencies of the public sphere: there are many municipalities that do not know how to do the job and this is a deficiency. But the sector fundamentally has a logic of constantly extending contracts because their relationship is of absolute trust with the mayor" (Interview # 2).

'The caste' is graphically represented in a prominent anti-privatization video campaign as a rich man, standing in a bathtub in the middle of the desert, with a politician holding a sun umbrella over him. He serves water with a spoon to a cue of people, waiting to drink, wash their teeth or water the flowers. Towards the end of the clip, people realise the rich man is not entitled to distribute the water and symbolically threaten him with a plastic water pistol (Figure 10). In populist terms, *the anti-privatization discursive coalition articulates a new political identity - the 'thirsty people'* - as the result of a chain of equivalential social demands – accountability, public control, transparency, participation, universal access – which are aggregated in larger, politicized demands: democracy and Right to the City and its flows as 'essential for life'.

Figure 10. Sequence from the video "Movem'nos. Remunicipalitzem l'Aigua". *(Source: CUP Països Catalans 2016)*

After setting the frontier between the 'good people' and the 'bad elites', the final step in the construction of a populist narrative is, according to Iñigo Errejon, offering an alternative to the existing order: "you need one foot in the current order and another in the possibility of an alternative" (Mouffe and Errejon 2017). In the water discourse, this step is fulfilled as AeV insists that public management is to deliver "more transparency in management, more citizen participation, better service" (Aigua és Vida 2019a). This is for them justifiable in terms of the economic situation, where the public management is the sole guarantee against supposedly reckless private management:

> "I never thought that in the XXI century we would be still talking about a human right to water in Europe. They [the company] are saying that water is cheap but the crisis has shown the utter misery in which many families live. And the public function is to watch over precisely the general interest, so it is important that they regain power" (Interview #1 - CONGIAC).

The solution is to "recover the water for the citizens" (Aigua és Vida). The benefits presented as follows:

> "It is about regaining the political will to govern. This will be the greatest achievement of this process, that municipalities regained their own criteria. And there will be no turning back" (Interview #1).

5.4. The defensive phase: claiming the public memory of water

In 2017 AB had already issued the series of books titled *Memories of the District* where it claims its place in the social material of the city but also - interestingly - its support for the social struggles in the neighbourhoods (Chapter VI). It is thus the turn of the municipalist camp to respond. The campaign Water Memorial was launched in 2018 with

the aim to reclaim the infrastructures of the extinct municipal service of the city. The Water Memorial was structured in four main axes with the aim to account for the "historical reality of water in Barcelona where knowledge and experiences of alternative ways of managing Barcelona's water are recovered, such as: the Rec Comtal, the supply by water mines under collective management, the sewage network infrastructures like the high aqueduct of Montcada" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018).

In addition to discovering the city's historical water heritage, the Memorial also reflects on the importance of water as a common good through talks, meetings and seminars, with a focus on experiences of municipalizing water in other cities. The campaign proposed excursions to selected water heritage sites of the city such as the Casa de l'Aigua which belonged to the public company Aigües de Montcada (see Chapter IV). In a tweet of Eloi Badia, the municipal councillor of water, this infrastructure is related to the "renewal of the commitment of the Barcelona municipality with public water management" (Figure 11)

Figure 11. Images of the Casa de l'Aigua in the tweet of Eloi Badia
(Source: Official Twitter of Eloi Badia)

There is no doubt about the political agenda of the campaign. The curator of the exhibition, Joan Gaya, explains that the events are part of the attempt to "recover the will to govern the water service" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018). Moreover, in the videos presenting the campaign, Eloi Badia talks about the need to recover the public relationship with the water history of the city but with an underlying message: the current "remunicipalisation" attempt is not singular but comes in a historical line of similar struggles:

> "We recover the relationship between Barcelona and water, between citizenship and water because throughout history we witnessed moments of great significance and surely now we are living one of the most decisive: the citizens have decided to take a step forward and choose the relationship between the service provider, the city council, the citizens and the service provider" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018).

Setting a frontier also means separating, identifying the memory of certain infrastructures in order to fight the common perception that there is no alternative to private management. In the words of Romano and Raiford (2006): "Representations of the past can be mobilized to serve partisan purposes… shape a nation's sense of identity, build hegemony, or serve to shore up the political interests of the state; and they can certainly influence the ways in which people understand their world" (cited in Maurantonio 2017). The significance of sites such as museums, monuments, and memorials rests in their rhetorical power to act upon bodies and cultivate narratives that provide anchors for collective identity (Maurantonio 2017).

5.5. Final considerations

The project of "remunicipalising" water in Barcelona involved an abrupt change in the official rhetoric of the municipality with respect to the previous governments and the breaking of a long-standing alliance between public and the private entities managing

water in the city. By reworking Laclau's critical-discourse approach to populism, we have analysed first the populist framing of water in the struggle for remunicipalisation (AeV, BeC) emerging out of the movement of Indignados in Spain. In claiming that they are the true emanation of the civil society and the rightful reflection of democratic practices, BeC opens the possibility for an alternative definition of democracy as a democracy of commons, i.e. of the common people (*gent comu*). Echoing the *Indignados* call for 'real democracy', the re-signification of water as commons, antagonizing its previous understanding as commodity, is part of the municipality's strategy to build a new 'Inhabitant', claiming its 'Right to the City'. The radical democratization of the polis is not any more an abstract idea chanted in the squares but it is imbued with concrete content: the privileged sites of expert decision are supposed to be open the public access and 'the People', who could now have a say in the whole water management process, from tariffs to the configuration of a wastewater treatment plant. In this sense the dynamics it is both negative (de-constructing) and positive (constructing an alternative). This is well captured by Chantal Mouffe in a text worth quoting at length:

> "Radical politics cannot consist any more in a withdrawal from the existing institutions but in an engagement with them in order to disarticulate the existing discourses and practices through which the current hegemony is established and reproduced, with the aim of constructing a different one. Such a process I want to stress cannot merely consist in separating the different elements whose discursive articulation is at the origin of those practices and institutions. The second moment, the moment of re-articulation is crucial." (Mouffe 2005)

The chapter has shown the articulation of a populist narrative both in the case of AeV, during the phase of discourse structuration, and in the case of BeC, when the discourse becomes institutionalised. In this sense, the chapter is a contribution to the literature on populism which tends to focus more on parties, while there are rather scarce empirical analyses of populist social movements (see Aslanidis 2016, 2017).

This focus of the last subsection is placed on the changing meaning of the water infrastructure materiality or "water dowry" (Kaika and Swyngedow 2000) - water towers, pumping stations - as it is staged in the discourse of BeC. Both actors symbolically unearth the sunken infrastructure, the forgotten icons of water engineering and urban progress, which become once more enmeshed in a hegemonic combat for urban political imagination. During the battle for legitimacy between the public and the private actors a new substance is making its way into the urban water mix: the *remembered waters,* as they are captured in the contending re-signification of hydraulic ruins, public and private, and brought back into the "domain of the sensible" (Rancière 2019). Thus, the combat for the legitimate model of water management becomes a conflict about the materiality of water itself: 'water as life' or 'water as resource'.

CHAPTER VI - Anti-populist politicisation. Aigües de Barcelona claims its "right to the city":

Barcelona is a living city, constantly evolving, and its history is written every day by its citizens. We know this well at Aigües de Barcelona, a company committed to the people of Barcelona, which has been taking care of the water for 150 years and, like its people, we also build the city

(Ignacio Escudero, Memòries del Districte).

6.1. Introduction

This chapter provides the anwer to the second research question and illustrates the anti-populist politicisation of Aigües de Barcelona as a reponse to the challenge of its legitimacy. As shown in the previous chapter, the discursive framing of "remunicipalisation" campaign is constructed around the concept of recovering public control over water and instituting a new management system inspired in the concept of participatory democracy. It articulates a chain of equivalent social demands – accountability, public control, transparency, participation, universal access – which are aggregated in larger, politicised demands: democracy, commons, Right to the City (RTC). As the present chapter will show, in the course of the conflict, these concepts become 'floating signifiers': they can be used by all the parties involved in the discursive combat and their meaning can be altered to serve the rhetorical interests of both players. Indeed, the two communication campaigns of Aigües de Barcelona (AB) analysed here - Barri a Barri and Memòries del Districte prove the assertion of Gramsci (1971) that established actors are perfectly able to adapt, take on board messages of the adversary that they consider relevant and possibly, consolidate their position even more than before the conflict. In the words of Chantal Mouffe, this move would fit the definition of 'hegemony through neutralization' or 'passive revolution' to refer to a situation where demands which challenge the hegemonic order are recuperated by the existing system by satisfying them in a way that neutralizes their subversive potential (Mouffe, 2008).

Paradoxically, it was precisely the semantic field of AeV that offered the company the "opportunity to come out of its comfort zone" (Interview #21 - AB) and become a visible actor in the water governance. It overtly asserts its importance as a provider of vital services and it embraces its profile as a core element of the social fabric of the city.

6.2. The communication policy of the company: the intermittencies of silence

In an exhaustive literature review, David McDonald (2018) is surprised by the relative silence of the corporate world in the face of a growing tendency to question water privatisations. He wonders "where do private water companies and other privatization supporters stand on remunicipalisation" (McDonald 2018:54). The case of AB in Barcelona provides empirical illustration that companies can react vigorously and politicise their discourse to defend publicly their legitimacy. I distinguish and examine two discursive movements of AB: *1) the first phase (2015-2016)* refers to the mere rejection of the remunicipalisation discourse, dismissed as demagogic; 2*) in the second phase (2017-2019),* AB constructed a complex and robust counter-politicisation strategy, through which the company enters the struggle for legitimation in the public sphere. In this process, the discourse of the company captures some of the signifiers of the "remunicipalisation" campaign, and gives them a different meaning within an alternative framing of water management.

Let us begin by looking at the discourse of the company in the initial phase. AB's standpoint rallied a discursive coalition defending the private and the private-public management, which included other private water companies, representatives of Chambers of Commerce, political parties (Popular Party, *Ciutadans*, *Junts per Catalunya*)[19], an influential part of the mass media as well as academic voices[20] criticizing the "demagogy" of BeC (see, for instance, *El Pais* 2018; Gimeno-Feliu et al 2017; Tamames et al 2017).

[19] The Socialist Party of Catalunya (*Partit Socialista de Catalunya*) voted in favour of the remunicipalisation bill in 2016 but in general maintained an ambigous position regarding the issue. For a more detailed account see March et al 2019.

[20] For more complete image of this discursive coalition, it is worth noting that Economic Water Forum gathers every year the relevant supporters of the private / public-private management. Another forum is online newspaper of the water sector in Spain iagua (iagua.es).

When interviewed about how they perceived the "remunicipalisation" discourse, representative managers from AB depicted the company "the rational side" (Interviews #18, 19 - AB / Operations); in turn, they described BeC's discourse as "unintelligible" or "populist", i.e. as appealing strategically to people's emotions (Interviews #18 - AB). The polarization of the social field in two antagonistic camps was such that "the linguistic utterances are no longer understood outside the camp in which they are uttered" (Hajer 2005: 303). As stated by one manager:

> "I don't understand what "democratic water" means, it's like saying "squared water (…) There are two sides of this story: the rational and the emotional. We are rational, and they are ideological" (Interview #18).

The rejection of the "remunicipalisation" discourse was combined with attempts to provide explanations for its emergence. Most of the interviewed managers acknowledged that the anger generated by the effects of the crisis was comprehensible, but that AB was victim of a 'witch hunt' campaign. As one manager pointed out:

> "People were angry, they were right to be angry, but they found a scapegoat: the bigger and more successful the company, the more it generated envy and rejection" (Interview #20 AB / Business and Innovation)

Nevertheless, all interviewed managers agreed that the communication policy of the company has had to change in recent years as a result of the new political environment. Before 2015, the communication was very sober and were possible, inexistent. The metaphor used by one of the company employees was that of a girl who goes to a party in a "very discreet" outfit.

> "I go to the party…but I don't want to be seen. Why? Because this is a Catalan company, who makes business by managing a public service, I do it well but that's it. And that was the communication strategy." (Interview #24)

Managers mentioned this lack of communication as a problem and explained it because of the nature of the company, essentially a service provider and had no need to 'sell' its product or itself:

> "The company used to be invisible, the strategy was "if it works, if you open the tap and water comes out, then no problem". We didn't communicate at all because it was not necessary: we don't sell a product; we do not have to do a marketing like companies. Our message was *'everything works"*" (Interview #21 - AB / Communication).

Managers considered this traditional silence as an anachronism which left the company ill equipped to cope with the "remunicipalisation" campaign but also with the "changing times" in which communication was key: "If it's not Eloi Badia (BeC municipal water councillor), it will be another, these things are here to stay and you need to take off your tie" (Interview #23 - Fundació Agbar). "Taking of the tie" – a distinctive trait of the new politicians such as Pablo Iglesias, leader of Podemos - represents a call for an image change, which was unanimous among the interviewed managers. This concern eventually found its echo in the AB communication campaign launched in 2018.

6.3. Breaking the silence and taking the streets: the "Barri a Barri" campaign

Under the slogan "People of the neighbourhood (*la gent del barri*), the real protagonists", the information campaign *Barri a Barri* (Neighbourhood by Neighbourhood) inaugurated a second phase in the AB discourse.

An expert in advertisement interviewed for this thesis was asked to give her opinion about this campaign without having any background information about AB or the "remunicipalisation" conflict. She identified *Barri a Barri* as a: "standard testimonial campaign. It is usually less about communicating benefits but about stimulating an

emotional response" (Interviewee #15 - Ipsos). The campaign was multi-channel: in print (banners in the streets, leaflets, newspapers) and online. The company thus took a decisive step towards a counter-politicisation strategy, aiming to make itself visible and dislocate the frontier set by the opposing discursive coalition. In an effort to 'tell its story', it claimed its place in the social fabric of the city. As a representative manager stated:

> "In the last few years the entire water sector has had to take a step forward to become more present, explain the value they bring. To a great extent, it was the reaction to the "remunicipalisation" process; we wanted to explain certain truths because BeC is very demagogic." (Interview #21)

The campaign was designed to break the equivalence chain of the remunicipalisation discourse, by either counteracting or claiming to meet its core demands, and thus propose an alternative claim to democratic legitimacy in the public sphere. The main target was the accusation that AB was cutting water to people who could not pay for the service.[21] To counteract this image of AB being 'the Elite' going against the people's interest and thus of democracy, one of the managers explained that AB was "proud" to have taken the initiative to help families in need already in 2012, years before the Energy Poverty Law[22] was approved in Catalonia (Interview # 29 AB - Local operations).

The online campaign also included short videos of ordinary inhabitants of different neighbourhoods, with images of emblematic buildings in their part of the city projected against their body, suggesting a fusion between the place and its people. In short videos (20-30 seconds), the neighbours state their profession and convey one of the campaign messages. The voice of the company becomes, symbolically, the voice of the people. This identification between the company and the neighbourhood is further enhanced by the

[21] For instance, AeV accuses Agbar to have cut the water supply to 75.000 families: https://www.aiguaesvida.org/article-el-doble-joc-dagbar/

[22] Law on energy poverty (Lei de Pobresa Energetica), 24/2015

criteria for the selection of the participants, featuring average people: the baker, the pharmacist, the candy merchant or the retired grandmother become protagonists of AB's story (Figure 12).

By mimicking the appeal to the *gent comu* of the BeC, the campaign has a counter-subversive effect. Each video provides a few details about their life in the neighbourhood, apparently unrelated to the information campaign. However, these personal stories, in their diversity, reveal a common trait: all these people are linked to the neighbourhood for a long time, sometimes for more than one generation. According to one "witness", *"*we are the third generation working in the chocolate shop. We are proud to be part of one of the emblematic shops in Catalonia" (Aigües de Barcelona 2018). This suggestion of a long-standing relation with the city is therefore reflected upon the company: it is AB that has been part of the city for a long time, and has realized the interest of its people. The campaign leaves no doubt about this symbolic connection. For instance, Alicia is happy to "work in a 150 old company, just like Aigües de Barcelona" (Aigües de Barcelona 2018).

Figure 12. Barri a Barri street campaign photo 2018
(Source: photo by Alexandra Popartan)

In this antagonistic dialectic with the remunicipalisation discourse, the "neighbourhood" and the "neighbours" become floating signifiers; AB's communication strategy appropriates them from the opposing discourse and re-signifies them: by drawing on the same geographical imagination of city proximity (i.e. the neighbourhood), they associate these signifiers with references to the original ethos of the company as provider of technological solutions and innovation to water management at the city level. For instance, one of the key messages is the number of controls that are performed by the company in order to ensure a good quality of the water. The control is even more strict than what is required by law (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Barri a Barri online campaign photo 2018
(Source: Aigües de Barcelona)

The campaign thus promotes a new chain of equivalences inspired by and, at the same time, subverting the one advanced by the remunicipalisation discourse: the company takes up one of the core claims of the opposite campaign - universal access - and affirms they are the right providers of that access, given their long-term, historically-proven expertise in water treatment. By entering the dialectic game of BeC, the company politicises itself and creates a new identity: the *responsible expert* (Fig 6.3)

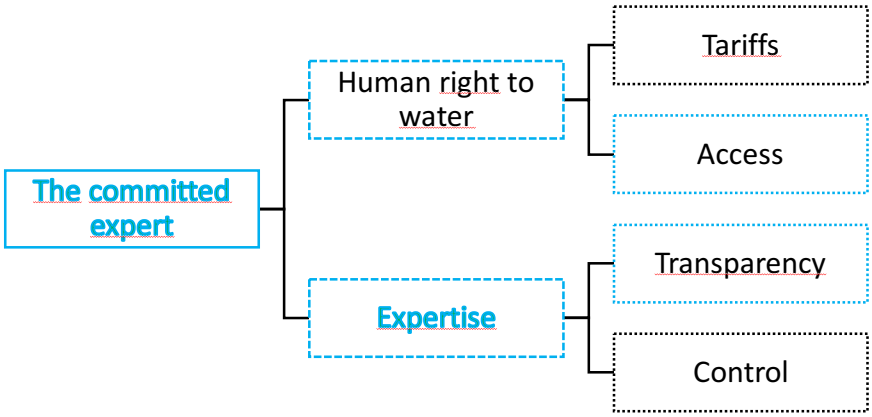

Figure 14. AB new equivalence chain: discursive co-option and subjectification

Therefore, the operation of "staging the people" (Rancière 2019) initiated by BeC and its "remunicipalisation" discursive coalition is converted by the company into an opportunity to enact an event of subjectification. According to one company manager:

> "Our new slogan was: 'the responsible management' (a provocation, saying that we are responsible, unlike you [BeC]). You cannot be a populist and then not deliver. We deliver, we have the know-how, but at the same time we are committed to the society and the environment. Our identity is 'the responsible expert'" (interviewee #22 - AB / Communication).

The defence of the questioned legitimacy goes beyond a mere confrontational rhetoric. In this choreography of enmity, AB also resignifies the 'Right to the City' and democracy focused not on the direct participation of the citizens, but on expertise. It presupposes that the 'people' not only want access to water but also appreciate the safety provided by the water expert, which is at the same time socially engaged and "close to the people".

> "People saw us as big company, far away from them. In making this campaign much more rooted in the territory, involving the people of the neighbourhood, we wanted to convey a feeling of *proximity*: we have always been in the neighbourhood, close to them, like them. Ada Colau did that very well, the

> proximity to the people, to the neighbourhood, to reality. We acknowledged that and found an opportunity to get out of our comfort zone" (Interview #21).

Another practice which AB seems to replicate is the multi-actor platform style of organisation: for instance, in 2019, the company inaugurates the Advisory Council on Participation, Transparency and Social Action, involving different actors of the civil society, labour union representatives, academics and neighbours. The reaction of AeV to the creation of this organism was virulent; the Council is slammed as "*false* democracy, legitimizing private interests" (*Aigua és Vida* 2019b).

This response opens a new phase in this confrontation, one in which the actor who enacted the division of the social field is forced to take defensive positions. It is therefore important to explore hegemonic logics by considering both populist and anti-populist discourses and "their mutual constitution on both the symbolic and the affective plane, within a negative ontological framework placing dislocatory limits on both of them and constantly redrawing their frontiers" (Stavrakakis 2017:18). The redefinition of floating signifiers is further operated by laying claim to the historical experience and memory of the city which the company has "helped build" in the 150 years of history (*Aigües de Barcelona* 2017). I analyse this discursive move in the next section.

6.4. "We are part of the landscape": mobilisation of urban myths in Memòries del Districte

Memòries del Districte is a collection of 14 short books edited by AB in 2017, one for each of the ten districts of Barcelona, plus other four covering as many 'cities' part of the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona. As the preamble announces, the story these books tell is different from the "official" history of these places: "the history of the cities is told by its people" (Aigües de Barcelona 2017). The books have a similar structure: a short corporate prologue, a historical introduction followed by the main part which represents the interviews with 10 personalities of the district. Each of these main accounts is

mirrored in several other short quotes of different neighbours speaking about the person in the main interview or the institution he/she represents. The prologue is signed by the Director General of AB and it combines a standard description of the collection and then focuses on one particular aspect of the history in each district, usually connected with the current or historical work of the company in the area. For instance, in the Sant Gervasi district, in the Northern part of the city, the prologue specifies that Aigües de Barcelona has been "historically connected" to Collserola as one of the main natural parks built on hills of this neighbourhood, "because of the sewers and other water infrastructure there" (Aigües de Barcelona 2017, Sant Gervasi: 2). Then we are reminded that this is the reason "why we are committed to its conservation".

In another district, "Aigües de Barcelona takes part in the Business Board of Sants-Montjuïc, together with other entities, companies and organizations from the district, to provide opinions and proposals […] which will be used to promote entrepreneurship, focused on the commercial fabric, but also the cooperative, social and collaborative economy" (Aigues de Barcelona 2017, Sants:7). In the district of Eixample, the largest of the city, the relation between the neighbourhood and the company is even more clearly expressed

> "The origin of Aigües de Barcelona is linked to the development of the Eixample. Since its foundation, 150 years ago, Aigües de Barcelona has been accompanying the city in its process of growth and modernization, supplying the new neighbourhood of the Eixample and guaranteeing the pressure and making water drinkable throughout the city" (Aigues de Barcelona, Eixample:4)

The video presenting the collection on its website tell us that the 1500 neighbours from these districts and cities have been summoned to tell their story and that of their neighbourhood. But who are these many neighbours and why have they been singled out to represent their neighbourhood? While 'random' persons are part of the story - people mentioned by their names and not by profession - a close look across the collection unveils the criteria of selection. Three main 'characters' stand out in the story: 1) the

activist (presidents of neighbours' associations, leaders of local social movements); 2) the owner of a local business (bars, restaurants, small commerce), and 3) the public servant (professors, artistic establishments, historians). All these people are "committed to their cities and…are the *living memory* of these cities" (Aigues de Barcelona, 2017, website Memories).

Again, like in the Barri a Barri campaign, we find a common trait of these personal stories, namely that most of them are linked to the neighbourhood for generations: "In the stationery Joan Lloberas, we have lifelong customers, who have passed from generation to generation" (MD, Sant Adrià de Besos, 2017). Elsewhere, a neighbour is proud to say that they "own the Puigdevall florist shop for more than 45 years. The relation with the clients is familiar, a lifelong relation". Indeed, this "lifelong" expression is frequently repeated across the books. Its Catalan original "de tota la vida" (literal "of all life") evokes not only a long time but also something which is familiar. *The message conveyed is that only that which has been around for generations – like the company itself – can be trusted.*

Moreover, this past is connected to the future, to *progress* and the possibility of improvement which is another key messages of the collection. Barcelona is a "city in constant evolution" and those who have built it can be relied upon to keep building it. Many neighbours speak about this connection between past, present and future against a background of appreciation of the progress the city has made: "The jewellery Orfi, belonged to my parents, it's a family business." says one of the neighbours of St. Adrià, "In recent years, I have seen the neighbourhood evolve very positively thanks to the reforms that have been made there over the years" (Aigües de Barcelona 2017, Sant Adrià).

Visually, the books are sober: black and white photos suggest the timelessness of these accounts. The accent is put on the neighbours whose portraits are up-close, smiling, conveying a feeling of *proximity* and simplicity. This patchwork of testimonies, evoking the famous '*trencadís*', the colourful mix of broken pieces created by Gaudí, the emblematic architect of Barcelona, is meant to put forward a "whole new look at the great

metropolis…living and constantly evolving" (Figure 15). Importantly, AB presents itself as a key piece of this mix which is invisibly held together by its waters. Through this vital flow, the company inextricably connects its own history and the one of the city because "for 150 years we have been taking care of the water" (Aigües de Barcelona 2017, website Memòries del Districte).

Figure 15. Example of mix of neighbours as represented in Memories del Districte
(Source: Aigües de Barcelona 2017)

At the same time, this history becomes symbolically a pass to the present and the future of the city to which they are still "committed to" and they "build", just like the neighbours. Water, as empty signifier acquires another meaning: that of carrier of incessant urban progress:

> "…at Aigües de Barcelona we know very well that the stories of the cities are written through the memories of their people [because] for many years we have been taking care of their water and, ultimately, we have been building the city like they do. Because water has flown through these cities […] and has been part of

> our past, our present and will continue to be part of our future." (Aigües de Barcelona 2017).

Note that "building the city" is an imperfect translation from the original Catalan expression "fem ciutat" (literally "make city") which has a complex meaning evoking at the same time the idea of building but also "being part" and "being committed" to a place. In the words of an interviewed manager "the aim was to incarnate the company in these persons" and thus make it visible:

> "…here and everywhere else, the water infrastructures are invisible to the citizen: they are outside the city, underground. A nuclear plant is inevitable in a town, see the example of the chemical complex in Tarragona: it's impossible not to generate an opinion, either good or bad. But water infrastructure is underground…this is an opportunity for visibility" (Interview #23).

One of the leitmotifs of the collection is represented by the struggles of the neighbours for rights. The books favour stories of resistance against the Francoist dictatorship and claiming social rights or the improvement of living conditions of the neighbours. This decision of the company to approach the leaders of social movements was perceived by one of the managers as a "new, unknown and risky terrain", but is positively assessed: "this risky transparency is good". Thus, we find representatives of well-known activist movements, civic centres and anarchist 'ateneums' such as Leialtat Santsenca, Can Battló, Ateneu de Nou Barris, some of them with a long histories of protest, civil disobedience or squatting. In the words of a company manager, the goal is the following:

> "It's a bit like borrowing the speech of the other: [BeC] uses this memory talk, these exhibitions of 'history and memory'. They use the topic 'neighbourhood' constantly. Well, now we also talk more about the neighbourhood than about city, we talk more about neighbours than about citizens (…) The goal is to say 'the word 'neighbour' is not yours, the word 'neighbourhood' is not yours': I take it, I redefine it and I steal it from you, it is no longer your property" (Interview # 23).

Indeed, many of the stories in the Memòries are about the struggle for public and collective infrastructures and after the 2008 crisis, against evictions (precisely the political turf of Ada Colau). Talking about Nou Barris, one of poorer districts of Barcelona, the president of a neighbour's associations recalls the building of her neighbourhood and how the organised struggle of the people was instrumental in forcing the public administration to invest in the needed infrastructures:

> "In that neighbourhood…there was neither light nor running water; the streets were not asphalted…Sewer system and any public service was simply non-existent: schools, health centres, transport ... In spite of everything…everyone helped out and the neighbours learned to join forces to claim the relevant services to the public administration" (Aigües de Barcelona 2018, Nou Barris 2017:35).

In the Sants neighbourhood, one of the interviewees talks about how the creation of the association is a result of a conjunction of events, including 15M, the Popular Municipalist Encounters (Trobades Populars Municipalistes), the Citizens' Parliament, all of which are important reference points for the BeC's own emergence. The Can Batllo staff is described as "neighbourhood movements, some of the *libertari* movements, unions. The common denominator is social consciousness". Elsewhere an activist confesses: "I have always fought for the working class and my struggle has always been peaceful" (Aigües de Barcelona, Sants:86)

Interestingly, the focus on these local struggles is not restricted to the section where representatives of social movements tell their story, but is also present in the corporative Introduction of each of the books. In Sants, the starting point is a square Bonet i Ruixi, described as "…revolutionary, traditional, anarchist … and most of all, popular" (Figure 16).

> "The Sants-Montjuïc district has the tradition of being the chosen place to start the great movements of the country. The integration in Barcelona did not impede the associative tradition the neighbourhood. In 1901 the Orfeó de Sants was

created, a working class institution with deep roots in the neighbourhood. Go to number 12 on Vallespir street. Now you will find a vacant lot, but in this location was the Rationalist Atheneum of Sants. On June 28, 1918, the bases were established here of Confederació Nacional del Treball [anarchist labour union] at the beginning of the century, with 160 delegates who represented about 70,000 CNT workers" (Aigües de Barcelona 2017, Sants:5).

Manifestació al barri de la Prosperitat per demanar un institut.
Any: 1976.

Figure 16. Protests of neighbours as represented in Memòries del Districte
(Source Aigües de Barcelona 2017 - Nou Barris)

All in all, the reference to the working class, anarchist movements, struggles for the rights of workers can be surprising for a history edited by a private company. However, in the context of an antagonistic environment, it is understandable as a movement to expand the discursive field into the terrain of the adversary.

The stories of the neighbours and their forbearers struggles are complemented with historical and contemporary pictures of the neighbourhood, with particular focus on the water-related infrastructures. Pictures like the one showing the children helping to build the sewer on a Sunday in the neighbourhood of Nou Barris (in Figure 17) is symbolic for the operation of 'unearthing' the water infrastructure and mobilizing it for its politics of memory. The inextricable connection between the people and its water and the city is the one repeated in every introduction: "like them, we build the city".

According to Kaika and Swyngedouw (2000), the effort to unpack the story of the cities according to their flows is not a new endeavour, yet it is "remarkably absent from much of contemporary urban research".

Instal·lant el clavegueram els diumenges al barri de Roquetes.
Any: 1964.

Figure 17. Children helping to build the sewer system in Roquetes block
(Source: Aigües de Barcelona 2017)

These authors defend the need to study the way water infrastructure its discursively mobilisation in different, conflictive accounts of urban history:

> "…urban networks in the contemporary city are largely hidden, opaque, invisible, disappearing underground, locked into pipes, conduits, tubes, passages and electronic waves. More importantly, the hidden flows and their technological framing render occult the social relations and power mechanisms that are scripted in and enacted through these flows" (Kaika and Swyngedouw 2000:120).

In a newspaper article, the AB's executive president, Angel Simón stressed that Aigües de Barcelona "is part of the landscape" of the Catalan capital and its metropolitan area, and he predicted that it will continue to do so over the years (La Vanguardia 2017) The metaphor used by the CEO is not random. Rather, it is part of a larger communication campaign of the company built around the idea that AB has played a key role in the construction and modernization of Barcelona. The best example of this discursive effort is the collection Memòries del Districte which have been analysed in this section. This collection has two main goals. First of all, there is an immediate, pragmatic aim to counter the negative image promoted by the "remunicipalisation" group who associated the 150 years of the company with long-standing collusion of AB with the "establishment". To contradict this assumption, just like the Barri a Barri campaign (section 6.2), the company makes an effort of re-signification: the 150 of years are now associated with continuous service and contribution to the progress and development of the city of Barcelona. To sustain this argument, this collection makes visible ruins, relics and memories of the water history of Barcelona. This is fully fledged operation of subjectification: the company is not just another actor of the "caste" but a "builder of the city".

The second goal is one of depoliticizing the discourse on water all together. If the politicisation is associated, as noted, with drawing a line that separates the social sphere in two antagonising camps - We The People vs. The Elite/ The Enemy - then to de-politicise means to distort this line of division. The metaphor used by the CEO represents precisely this blurring operation: the company does not want to stand out (as an enemy) but rather it gets integrated in the landscape. The same metaphor also achieves another subversive suggestion: AB cannot be easily uprooted since it is a 'part of the city'. Interestingly, as the MD analysis showed, the discourse does not only claim the role of

the company industrial and economic fabric of the city but in the sphere of social progress achieved via struggle and protest of the civil society. This way, AB takes a decisive step on the discourse game field of BeC, clouding the classic distinction between social movements and the economic actors.

6.5. Final considerations

In trying to install this new order and installing a new water paradigm, BeC is resisted. Every order, writes Chantal Mouffe (2005, p.18), is the temporary and precarious articulation of contingent practices. Common sense is the result of renegotiations between social agents and "[t]hings could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities". As Mouffe (through Gramsci) reminds us, hegemonies are active political projects to impose some particular understandings and practices on the world and exclude others" (Purcell 2008:173). In claiming that they are the true emanation of the civil society and the 'rightful' reflection of democratic practices, BeC opens the possibility for other definitions of democracy as a democracy of commons. In exchange, AB, contests this understanding, by recuperating and defending a notion of 'expert democracy' where the interest of the people are better 'represented' if they have an expert in charge of their water services.

The use of emotions, direct communication with the citizens, occupying the public space with campaign messages is using the weapons of the adversary and play along the populist articulation, not only discursively but also in a performative manner. According to one manager, this is in fact not such a new strategy in the history of the company:

> "If you look at the last 10 years, yes, [the current strategy] marks indeed a change, but if you look at the entire history, 150 years, the company has had to make similar efforts before, to defend its image" (…) Popular Baths" (Banys Populars, see Chapter VI), back in the 1930ies was deemed an "image campaign" to balance the effects of the Big Depression on the company staff" (Interview #24).

This may seem as a simple defence of the technocratic, depoliticised order but the way this is enacted by the company, speaks to larger debates around the continuously tense relation between neoliberalism and democracy (Purcell 2014). It consolidates a allegiance to an increasingly popular form of understanding of liberal democracy in the water sector: the connection between the private sphere and the so-called 'stakeholders' should be strengthened, bypassing the State.

Once the consensual, common-sense alliance between the State and the economic actors is broken, the public space is more plural and companies are forced to become part of the 'domain of the sensible' too. The staging of the People initiated by BeC and AeV is also an event of subjectification for the company: BeC forces AB to break a long silence and, metaphorically, 'come out of the sewers'. Now, in the light, this new subject learns that it can communicate, it addresses people and explains itself.

CHAPTER VII - General discussion. Conflict, consensus and the question of Circular Economy

Antagonism is central to politics, because it is through antagonism that political identities are constituted, and radical alternatives to the existing order can be imagined. As Laclau argues, without the traces of social division we have no politics but administration (Panizza 2005)

7.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on a third movement in the dialectic between AB and BeC: that of depoliticisation and synergy, thus answering the third reseach question of the thesis, showing that CE is an area of consensus between the two contending actors. In the previous chapters, evidence was provided to the gradual populist politicisation of the water sector after the 15M insurgence, culminating with the institutionalisation of the anti-privatisation discourse followed by the counter-politicising discourse of the company. This third chapter of analysis is in search for those elements of the two discourses where there is a coincidence, agreement or even possible room for understanding. To do this, Circular Economy (CE) is taken as an example: this currently dominant concept in environmental management and policy will illustrate how the two actors actually coincide in many aspects, even if each of them infuses the discourse with their "hallmark" rhetorical motifs. Second, a look at the data collected for the "remunicipalisation" debate is presented, where elements of overlapping between the discourses of BeC and AB are also identified.

7.2. Circular Economy: a de-politicised concept?

Circular Economy (CE) is currently a unique concept in terms of how rapidly it has received so much attention and has come to influence environmental policy across the globe. In particular, the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and the European Commission (EC) have promoted it intensively. Circular Economy, is indeed a highly influential discourse in contemporary environmental studies and policies but as such, it is also contested. Ellen MacArthur Foundation promotes a European-led CE based on the idea of "growth within" the region (2015). This is to be realized through a range of actions drawn from their headliner 'RESOLVE': REgenerate, Share, Optimize, Loop, Virtualize, Exchange (EMAF, 2013). Such actions focus on scientific and technological challenges of CE, e.g.

'Optimize' means improving efficiency, removing waste and 'leveraging big data' (EMAF 2015).

It has been suggested that CE could be a new paradigm of sustainable development in general (Geissdoerfer et al 2017), which will change industrial production and consumption in a fundamental manner. CE is an evolving concept with diverse meanings, definitions and intellectual origins. In a nutshell, CE emphasises the need to transition from a traditional linear 'take-make-dispose' model of production and consumption to a circular model which decouples economic growth from environmental degradation and natural resource consumption (Ness 2008). CE has strong roots in resource efficiency and closing material loops (Ayres 1999). For instance, Boulding (1966) envisaged the Earth as a closed circular system, which then led other scholars such as Stahel and Reday (2010) and Frosch and Gallopoulos (1989) to develop the frameworks for loop economics and integrated metabolism, respectively. More recently, CE has been associated with new concepts such as biomimicry (Benyus 2002) or 'cradle-to-cradle' (McDonough et al 2002).

In spite of its current dominance, the concept of CE is also contested by different ideologies and environmental discourses (see Dryzek 2005, Williams 2019). As mentioned, the idea of constant struggle over meaning is shared by various approaches to discourse analysis. As explained in Chapter I, if we consider that CE is a new paradigm in environmental management, it is important to think of it as the result of economic, institutional and strategic drivers but also, importantly, of a constant struggle over dominant ways of understanding the world. According to Korhonen et al (2018) the transition to a new paradigm benefits from two types of collective intellectual processes, as reflected in specialized literature: first one is paradigmatic, metaphoric and normative, while the second stage is descriptive, positive. The exhaustive literature on CE reviewed by Korhonen et al conclude that current academic work in this area addresses issues typical for the second stage in the paradigm change and that the basic assumptions concerning the values, societal structures, cultures, underlying world-views and the paradigmatic potential of CE remain largely unexplored. In other words, the engineering

and natural science disciplines constitute the biggest chunk of knowledge behind CE and therefore the concept has been developed in a certain isolation from "strategic, management and organizational studies or studies typical for social sciences" (Broman and Robert 2017; Ehrenfeld 2000, Korhonen et al. 2018). They argue that this knowledge gap has to be closed before CE can become a new paradigm in the sustainable development of the global society, and that more work using qualitative research methodologies and social science-type constructs is needed.

Nevertheless, while the specialized reviews correctly notice the literature gap in terms of norms, values and concepts, when translated into concrete proposals for research topics the authors limit their focus on strategic and organizational studies. It is therefore important to signal that even less literature has been devoted to critical approaches to circular economy in terms of its discursive fundaments of its public appeal and successful adoption as narration for policy legitimation (Lazarevic 2017). Across CE specialized literature four main narratives of future expectations can be distilled —the perfect circle of slow material flows, the shift from consumer to user, growth through de-coupling, and European renewal. However, they notice that these expectations "carved out a common future where *only winners exist*" (Lazarevic 2017:67). In this sense, dystopian futures (see Swyngedouw 2018) but also utopian ones are de-politicizing: concepts that become uncritically popular and thus hegemonic may easily become "black-boxed as myths that propose fixed reference points for public debate and deliberation" (Büsher 2017). Swyngedouw (2018) invites scepticism to such successful concepts, given that they reduce the space for critical reflection and action. Giampetro and Funtowicz (2020) are even more resolute in this sense, reflecting about the perils of a dominant scientific view / discipline over others:

> "A biophysical view of the sustainability predicament—the flows exchanged between the technosphere and the biosphere — is depicted to show that the idea of a full decoupling is simply due to ignorance of the knowledge generated in (inter)disciplinary scientific fields other than the dominant economic one. The success of economics as an 'elite folk science' is explained by the need of the

> establishment to ignore uncomfortable knowledge that would destabilize existing institutions. The success of the term circular economy can be seen as an example of socially constructed ignorance in which folk tales are used to depoliticize the sustainability debate and to colonize the future through the endorsement of implausible socio-technical imaginaries." (Giampetro and Funtowicz 2020:64)

The depoliticised nature of CE can also be related to what Igoe et al (2010) - following Antonio Gramsci and Lesley Sklair - name the "Sustainable Development Historic Bloc". For Gramsci (1971), a historic bloc is a moment in which diverse groups who share particular interests come together to form a class, and their ideas come to dominate the ways in which other people consent to see and are able to talk about the world. The Sustainable Development Historic Bloc, according to Sklair (2001), is a historical moment in which different stakeholders are working together to offer, easy, market-based solutions to complex socio-ecological problems (Büsher 2017).

To sum up, we can consider that CE has become a hegemonic discourse precisely because it falls in line with a market approach to environmental issues and, without disturbing the status-quo, it foreseeably favours all parties involved. Also, in comparison with other environmental discourses such as 'Sustainable Development' it relies on an easy-to-understand, visual metaphor of the perfect 'circle': like in nature, nothing is lost. Negative notions of 'garbage' or 'residue' are expected to gradually disappear or be transformed in valuable resources. Indeed, who could oppose such a scenario? Given this attractiveness, both public and private actors have rather uncritically taken up this discourse to define their environmental agenda as it is the case of our protagonists, AB and BeC.

Yet let us not forget that CE is also an empty signifier: AB has adopted the mainstream market-oriented CE narrative and placed it the core of its environmental action. In the case of BeC, an actor whose political identity was built on contesting 'the system', the adoption of a mainstream discourse such as CE is more puzzling yet it does so by trying to infuse the CE with topoi of its own ideology (commons, participation). In this sense,

we have a dynamics of consensus and conflict at play, both in th case of CE and remunicipalisation, as revealed in the following.

7.2. Between conflict and consensus in Barcelona

7.2.1. Circular Economy: discursive overlapping

CE has been adopted by the government of the city and the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona as an important guiding principle. This is in line with policy efforts at both national[23] and regional levels[24] which have placed CE in a privileged position to organise the environmental policies of the day. Analysing available discourses of the two actors, BeC and AB in this area, there are coincidences in their position and the way they adopt the mainstream CE discourse. However, the situation is complex depending on the different levels of government and actors involved.

In the case of AB, CE is a core discursive ingredient of the company corporate responsibility and communication strategy. The same goes for the 'mother' company, SUEZ, which designates CE as the opportunity to reconcile "growth and environment", and praises it as a "virtuous model that creates economic, social and environmental value, while conserving our natural resources. The goal is to stimulate innovation and entrepreneurship, to encourage collective intelligence and collaboration, to promote local experiments, to favour use rather than possession" (SUEZ 2017). In the same vein, when describing the SUEZ strategy in CE field, Angel Simón asserts:

[23] Importantly the Spanish Strategy for Circular Economy currently (under elaboration)

[24] See for instance the Estrategia d'Impuls a la Economia Verda i Circular of the Generalitat de Catalunya (http://mediambient.gencat.cat/ca/05_ambits_dactuacio/empresa_i_produccio_sostenible/economia_verda/impuls_economia_verda/

> "Circular economy is part of our DNA and permeates all our activity. We work every day so that this circular vision, beyond efficiency, is present in all our processes. We reuse water to give it a second life and deal with climate change, which threatens the available water resources" (SUEZ 2017)

Particularly interesting for this case are the projects developed in collaboration with the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (AMB). This layer of administration has revealed the scalar complexities of the conflict between the municipality and the company (March et al 2019). The party representation in the leadership of different departments is key to explaining the nuanced position of AMB with respect to this confrontation. Thus, the Presidency of the entity is held by the mayor of Barcelona, currently Ada Colau, and the departments ("Areas") are split between the coalition parties; importantly, the Ecology one is held by BeC and the Economy by the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC), the latter much more inclined to public-private participation.

Along with other regional institutions[25], the commitment of the AMB to CE has grown in recent years through several initiatives, in order to support the transition to CE of the compounding municipalities by offering tools, studies and information. Such examples of initiatives include the *Circular Economy Platform* that brings together agents, companies and projects on CE. The tool is aimed at city council technicians working on industrial symbiosis or circular economy projects, companies interested in implementing strategies in this field, experts and professionals in the sector, as well as the general public who want to expand knowledge on the subject.[26]

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[25] See for instance the Observatory of Circular Economy http://mediambient.gencat.cat/es/05_ambits_dactuacio/empresa_i_produccio_sostenible/economia_verda/catalunya_circular/

[26] More details here: http://www.amb.cat/web/desenvolupament-socioeconomic/actualitat/noticies/detall/-/noticia/plataforma-d-economia-circular/7101362/11708

Another initiative is the discussion forum titled Circular Economy Table, promoted by the Agency for Economic Development of the AMB. This is a perfect example of the AMB strategy of Economic Area in the CE terrain, relying on public-private collaboration. The forum regularly gathers experts, representatives from the administration and private companies, including AB and Cetaqua[27]. The aim of the Table is to collect the opinion and knowledge of different entities and city councils and reflect "the knowledge and the state of the current initiatives in the metropolitan territories so that they inspire others and guide the elaboration of the Metropolitan Program on Circular Economy in the AMB"[28]. In the terms of this thesis, this forum represents a discursive coalition which shares similar goals and a similar frame of reality.

The growing importance of CE in the policy of AMB and the good relationship between the Economy Area and the company is reflected for instance in two emblematic projects carried as collaborations between Cetaqua, AB and the city councils of Sant Feliu de Llobregat and Gavà, two municipalities part of the AMB. These projects identify potential synergies between territorial actors through the analysis of water, energy and waste flows. The project consists in the development and application of a CE model in the territory: promote the use of reclaimed water for non-potable uses in the municipality, the application of sustainability indicators and the promotion of a collaborative energy management model with the dissemination of good practices and business opportunities among the different industries (Aigües de Barcelona 2019).

If we look at the BeC discourse in the CE field, we can see that it is not in fact as different as the one of the company. One of the key documents of the City Hall concerning CE is the study issued in 2018 titled "Green and Circular Economy in the policies of the Barcelona municipality" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018). In a presentation given by the

[27] Research centre participated by SUEZ and public research institutions.

[28] The project is well described here: https://agenciaeconomica.amb.cat/ca/projectes/detall/-/projecteADE/7223545/7154508

vice mayor Gerardo Pisarello and the Environment municipal councillor, Janet Sanz, the stance of BeC in this area takes a moderate discursive line, talking for instance about the benefits of public-private cooperation.

> "Climate change is a productive system that wastes resources, natural reserves, and energy. We have to deal with it and we will do it with a model of *public-private* collaboration so that *companies and workers* can win".

The document itself, technical in nature, blends the mainstream win-win, market oriented rhetoric of CE with several discursive elements of the BeC political stance:

> "In 2015 the Social and Solidarity Economy represented 8% of the city's employment and 2.8% of companies, with 861 cooperatives, 1.200 joint-stock companies, 2.400 entities in the third social sector, and 260 community economics initiatives. Good part of these companies adopt the principles of circular economy by ideology and they are great drivers of collaborative work and the economy of the common good" (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2018).

The same discursive amalgamation is encountered in the Ada Colau's introduction of a CE project in the Besòs River area. The Mayor uses the idea of a Green New Deal put forward by the Democratic Party in the United States, a mild version of green social democracy. "I propose to start a Green New Deal in Barcelona, an agreement to walk together towards a true circular economy". At the same time, she defended circular economy as an economic activity serving "the needs of the city as opposed to the extractive economy that expels people…" (Barcelona en Comú 2019).

A systematic textual analysis of major strategies and discourses actors on both sides reveals interesting coincidences in the way the actors frame action and understand CE: topics that are common and then issues treated with predominance in separate discourses (Figure 18)

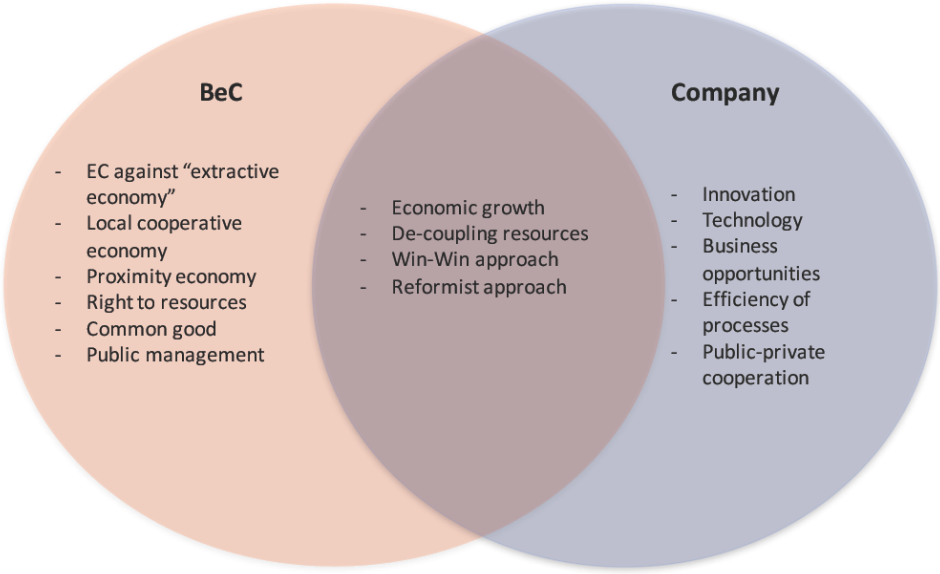

Figure 18. Differences and overlapping in the BeC and AB discourses on CE

In the theoretical context presented in this thesis, the analysis of the CE narratives speaks to the different conceptions of democracy embraced by the two actors. Indeed 'democracy' is a key concept in the current political realm. In the case of BeC, the type of democracy they adhere to is clearly a participatory one, which aim to radicalise (in the ethimological sense of getting back the roots) all spheres of political life. It favors participation above all aspects. In the case of AB, while the term democracy is not overtly used, interviews with managers have shown that they dismissed the label imposed by BeC as being anti-democratic. The discourse and actions both in the CE field and in others show that AB is more inclined to a deliberative type of democracy where the involvement of stakeholders and experts is important; however, it does not envisage participatory mechanisms as BeC. The scheme presented in Figure 8 is significant in this sense: while

both adopt the 'win-win' solutions of the CE discourse, the implementation reflects the difference between a radical and a deliberative model of democracy.

7.2.2. Beyond conflict in "remunicipalisation"

Interestingly, interviews of both managers and activists, reveal nuances from the "mainstream" position of their discursive coalition on "remunicipalisation". Thus, most of the interviewees on the municipalist camp seemed to favour the involvement of the private companies in the water sector, in spite of their declared anti-neoliberal political stance.

> "We contested the classic public control model too, accumulated power. We (BeC) are not better or worse people than any others. Making the company public is not a necessary condition. Corruption can also happen in a public model that does not guarantee transparency and participation. In the end, the key is to create mechanisms that, whomever is in charge, this works well" (Interview #5 - AMB).

Similar ideas are present in the discourse of the company, which defends that either public or private is not the problem, what matters is the quality of the service. This is well expressed in the statement of an AB manager with a long experience in dealing with public contracts:

> "I am not against public management, on the contrary, I like the Nordic countries where the public function has a lot of prestige and controls a lot. What is important is the service, the quality. Isabel II [public company managing water in Madrid] is an exemplary company. What works is political control over everything. It must be regulated like all things of first necessity that cannot be left exclusively on the market" (Interview # 18 - AB / Operations).

The position of the company defending the idea of 'rationality', blurring the difference between public and private management *per se* in the name of good management is a core discursive line of the coalition: for instance, Gonzalo Delacámara, the director of the

Water Economic Forum, one of the main platforms for the defence of the public-private management of water, dismissed the ideological interventions in the water sector as belonging in a "madhouse" (IAgua 2016). In the same line, the company's CEO, Angel Simón defends the idea of "placing technical knowledge at the centre of decision-making and thus avoiding ideological positions that hinder the development and implementation of effective solutions" (El Plural 2018, see also El Pais 2017). It is however not so common to have the "remunicipalisation" camp insist on the importance of quality and technology for the water management (which does not mean it is irrelevant for them, but there is less focus on the topic). A relevant voice in this discursive coalition summarised this as follows their idea of private involvement but highlights the rejection of the monopolistic model:

> "I am always going to need the private sector. I am going to issue tenders because I am not going to be in charge of neither the research nor the best technology for the water treatment plant; I am going to create competition mechanisms so that the best product wins at the lowest price. The activists are not going to tell you this but I am." (Interviewee #2 - AEOPAS).

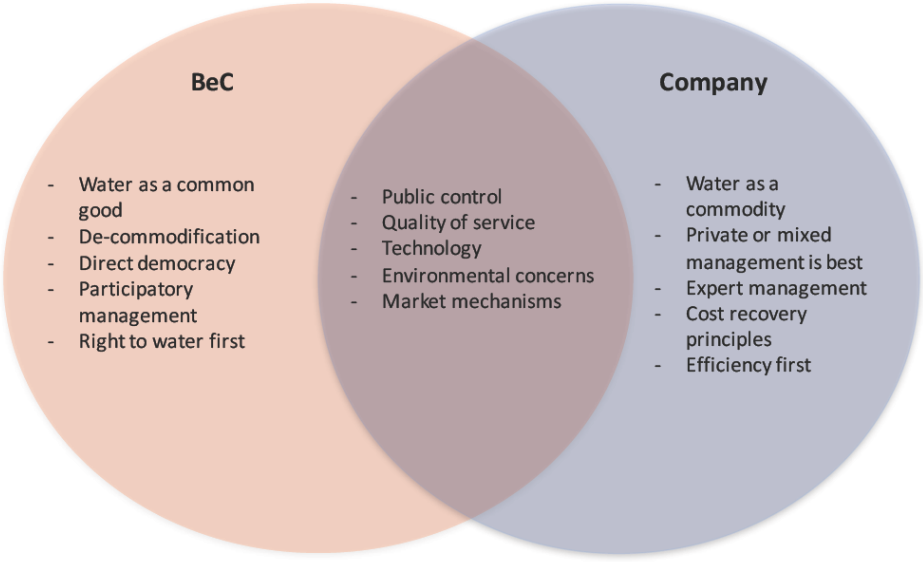

Figure 19. Difference and coincidence in the nodal points between the two discourses on "remunicipalisation"

Thus it can be noted that even in the context of a dire politicisation and conflict over hegemony, a closer look at the actors involved might find areas of consensus (see Figure 19). Beyond the possible coincidence and overlapping of ideas on public-private collaboration, there is also a coincidence in the need for more communication across camps. On the "remunicipalisation" side, some interviewees expressed the need of debate:

> "There is no serious debate: if you remunicipalise you are ideological, if you privatize you are rational. I even break the dichotomy, I just want to know why privatize, but I don't want them (the company) to make the calculations and the diagnosis! In the end, the problem is to widen the fields, I am willing to talk about everything, but if I bother you, you cannot say that I am "Indian", inferior (...) let's talk!" (interviewee #2).

The same idea of dialogue was expressed by many interviewed managers. In spite of the differences, it is precisely the concept of Circular Economy that actually provides relevant field of understanding, at least discursively, between the two actors.

7.3 Final considerations

It can be affirmed that political reality is indeed more complex than what consesualists or antagonist thinkers - presented at length in Chapter II - assert. In the light of the findings of this chapter, is impossible to affirm that the essential nature of political activity is either purely conflictive and consensus is temporary or vice-versa. In fact, the two dynamics are present all the time: even among actors who have declared open conflicts may in fact agree on fundamental issues and may be also forced to collaborate. Turning to Lakoff (2016) research on mental frames, these results confirm the assumption that cognitively, all human beings are in fact "bi-conceptual" and that a "pure" ideological stances exist only on discursive, performative terms but not in the substance of our cognition.

CHAPTER VIII - General conclusions and further research

"Public water", "water is life", "private water", "democratic water", "committed water": water is not just H_2O but an "empty container" in which history, culture, ideology and power configurations intersect in producing different meanings and ways of imagining and managing it. Its chemical formula is the only fixed trait; its political formula is changing, contingent and often conflictive. The climate emergency will be increasing the conflicts over natural sources such as the water: what does it mean to have a right to water? How should this crucial resource be distributed and managed? On the basis of which values and political-legal mechanisms?

Historical outlooks such as the seminal work of David Sedlak (2014) tell the story of a succession of paradigms dealing with these questions, connected to civilizational advances, changes in mental frameworks and narratives of legitimation, and also reflected in the search for technological innovations. Thus, long periods of concord over ways of doing are interrupted by technological breakthroughs and/or shifts in the way we imagine and enact the world. Change is not always incremental; sometimes an event sets in motion a mechanism whereby 'facts' are interpreted and re-interpreted through new lenses, values, and mental frameworks. This opens a window of opportunity for new projects; thereby the water suddenly becomes a combat field for narratives and socio-political forces which strive to impose new world views, new values and thus new priorities. As Chantal Mouffe (2005) reminds us "things can always be otherwise"; consensus usually obscures underlying conflicts and opposing visions. Take for instance the example of river dams: what for some is a praised masterpiece of engineering, for others is an atrocious invasion of natural habitats and ecologic equilibriums. The same applies to river transfers, a necessary 'correction' of nature for some, an inacceptable intrusion and theft for others. Different environmental discourses create different realities. As this thesis emphasised, the role of these often-intractable disagreements is now proved by advances in cognitive science and brain research: in human society and behaviour, decision-making cannot so easily separate facts from values, nor mental frameworks from data (see Chapter I).

In this thesis, I departed from the premise that a pure positivist-rationalist approach - which dominates the water sector and the research production in the field - is unable to explain these complexities and capture the moments when not only the solutions but also the problems (narratives, values, priorities) are in question (Chapter IV). The approach proposed in this research takes its lead from the social constructivist tradition and recent developments in sciences (in particular cognitive science, behavioural economics and brain research): from this post-positivist perspective, the socio-cognitive and discursive variables can account better for situations when 'all chips are down' or, otherwise, when clashes over legitimacy and power question the hegemonic doxa or what is the dominant "truth": these are recurrent moments when dominant paradigms are – successfully or not - challenged.

This thesis puts a magnifying glass on one particular historical moment and one city where a frontier between two conflictive paradigms confront each other: the water establishment of the city of Barcelona, after 150 years of uninterrupted private/public-private management, has been challenged by a new political project advanced by social movements and new political parties in the aftermath of the *Indignados*. Using a critical discourse analysis methodology, relying on original materials (interviews and representative texts), this thesis identifies the mechanisms through which water is taken out of the realm of consensus and transformed in a conflictive issue, i.e. it becomes *politicised.* In the period analysed here (2015-2020), urban water management has become a battlefield for legitimation of public and private actors in the public arena. This concurs to/with the idea that the parameters of decision-making do not reflect purely cost-benefit and efficiency criteria but are connected to power configurations and mental frameworks.

My analysis of the "remunicipalisation" project in Barcelona has relied on the theoretical framework provided by urban political ecologists. Following David Harvey widely quoted phrase - "all ecologic projects are political projects" (Harvey 2014) - this school

of thought has pursued to unmask the inherent relation between power, discourses and ecologic projects at city level. For political ecologists, when a particular environmental arrangement becomes dominant it is 'de-politicised', that is, it manages to impose a particular take on reality and presents it as the "truth", leading to the side-lining of dissident views. However, this is often a precarious state; marginalised discourses, when the opportunity arises, will challenge the dominant or hegemonic discourse. This dynamic of de-politicisation and re-politicisation is an inherent, a constant trait of the political world in general and the water domain in particular.

Nevertheless, the Barcelona case has been under-researched, and in particular Barcelona en Comú; while there is historical literature on the question of water in Spain (Swyngedouw 2015, March et al 2010) and on Indignados or Podemos (Rodriguez 2015, Gomà et al 2018) the question of water in relation to Barcelona and Comú only scarcely been researched (Bagué and Varó 2018) Moreover, the current research one-sidedly focuses on the so-called "insurgent actors" neglecting almost completely the reactions of the water companies (March et al 2019).

This thesis aims to fill this gap by contributing both empirical level by studying in depth the case of Barcelona but also theoretically. At the theoretical level, I take aim at the controversies concerning the definition of politicisation. In Chapter II, I distinguish between agonists and consensualist thinkers depending on whether they consider politics as a matter of conflict or agreement. These two strands of thinkers display very different positions with respect to what the realm of politics is (for some is just institutions, of others is the definition of an idea of 'a People') and prefer different models of democracy (whether liberal, deliberative, radical, participatory). The theoretical proposal advanced in this thesis aimed at bridging this gap: as the case study illustrates, conflict and consensus are two sides of the same coin and they co-exist even between actors who are declared enemies such as the ones analysed here.

Thus, I have argued that 'politicisation' and politics involve a dynamic relation between consensus and disagreement/conflict. Not only that the two are conceptually connected

(there is no agreement without disagreement and vice versa), but – as Lipset (1960) points out – a democratic regime depends on the balance between the two; sometimes, like in the 'populist moment' of the *Indignados* and Occupy Wall street, the moment of contestation comes to the fore in order to challenge the establishment (Stavrakakis 2017); in other moments, e.g. the consensus- and compromise building become more important, especially in the case of social movements which gain institutional power. Therefore, in this thesis politicisation is understood as a process whereby new issues advocated by political forces emerge in the conflict for power and recognition in the public sphere. In the specific case under study, a new political force (Barcelona en Comú - BeC) contributed through discourse and political action to the conversion of water into a public issue at the centre of socio-political and economic controversies (Chapter V). Conversely, under the pressure of this movement of politicisation, economic agents such as Aigües de Barcelona (AB) have entered the public arena in order to defend their legitimacy (Chapter VI). The interaction becomes conflictive but does not exclude agreement on the question of water management but also on others, as the case of Circular Economy reflects (Chapter VII).

Among all sorts of possible politicisation mechanisms, this thesis has argued that the populist politicisation clarifies best the discourse of the BeC. Relying critically on the work of the philosopher Ernesto Laclau and new development in science (e.g. in cognitive science), I have argued for a narrative approach to populism. In contrast to the ontological and ideological approaches to populism, I characterize it as an antagonising narrative which constructs a particular identity of 'a People' pitted against an 'Elite'. The People is an empty signifier (it can have a multitude of meanings) and it is the result of an aggregation of specific demands (transparency, ceasing water cuts, lowering water prices, etc.) into wider, politicised demands (commons, Right to the City, democracy). They form a chain of equivalent demands and eventually a People's identity. In the case of Barcelona, the identity constructed a "Thirsty Inhabitant" who is dispossessed by the 'evil' company of its right to water.

The theoretical contribution of the thesis to the literature on populism extracted from the analysis of case of Barcelona is the criticism of the Laclauian theory of populism which is overly ontological (he considers not only all politicisation but also all politics is more or less populist) and does not account for the differences between populist projects. Also, as the reaction of Aigües de Barcelona proves, an anti-populist discourse is politicising but not populist. The concept of populist narrative proposed here accounts better for these nuances.

The results of the analysis of Aigua és Vida (AeV) and BeC's populist narrative (Chapter V) capture two moments in the consolidation of the anti-privatisation discourse: the discourse structuration, when the issue gains prominence in the public sphere and discourse institutionalisation, when the discourse becomes municipal policy. Inspired by concept of radical democracy, the discourse on the commons and the Right to the City is taken up to justify the crackdown on water privatization. Combined with similar discourses in other sectors, the discourse on water remunicipalisation lends force to the counter-hegemonic project of BEC. It infuses it with the legitimation of everyday experience of the new urban commons, forging new urban identities, with the aim of breaking the connection between neoliberalism and democracy (Purcell, 2014). In this sense, the political program of BeC can be visualised as a 'Russian doll' discursive construction, whereby particular demands are aggregated in each sector and are reinforced by other sectoral demands – e.g. housing, energy, tourism. This creates a new chain of equivalence which eventually contributes to the emergence of a new public subjectivity.

In Chapter VI, I have traced the discursive response of the company, which displays both anti-populist traits but also adopts core signifiers from the remunicipalisation frame (e.g. citizenry, democracy, proximity, neighbourhood). The question then arises as to whether we are dealing with a typical case of co-opting. The literature on political ecology and social movements has analysed different cases of strategies of co-opting protest discourses; these strategies are commonly seen as dissolving political conflicts "in arrangements of impotent participation and consensual "good" techno-managerial

governance" (Swyngedouw 2011:371). To illustrate, consider the "capture" of the language of environmental movements into mainstream urban planning, leading to the deployment of a green ceremonial façade (Forbes and Jermier 2002) and gentrification (Anguelovski et al 2019), the cosmetic adoption of water-down discourse on diversity (Raco and Ketsen 2016) or participation (Nash 2012, Purcell 2008) so as to push for a marketization agenda.

In our case, while the company strategically borrows from the opposite discourse, we cannot speak of a case of full co-opting. Rather, Barcelona remains a case of open dialectic. The project of "remunicipalisation" of water is a constantly moving target on a terrain marked by fragmentation and fluidity. On the one hand, the politicization of water was successful in stirring the public debate about public/private management, forcing established actors to take position in a new battle for legitimacy. One could interpret the decision of the company to make visible its measures to halt the water cuts to poor families as a mere lip-service to the HRWS. However, the interviews with the managers seem to point into a different direction, namely to the perceived need to change not only the discourse but also the practice of the company in these aspects.

On the other hand, the new forces have not come to impose a new hegemony or in other words, they have not changed the paradigm in place. After the 2015 the populist politicization of water in Barcelona managed to successfully rally the support of the left-wing political spectrum. In this sense, it is telling that in 2016 BeC was backed by all the left-wing municipal counsellors to study the process of the "remunicipalisation" of water. Yet, this auspicious beginning proved to be fragile and in recent years the remunicipalisation process suffered important setbacks. First of all, the initial left-wing consensus has broken, bitterly divided over the national-populist cleavage of the Catalan independence. The intersection of these two apparently conflictive populist identities the - Catalan vs. the city people – has been problematic for the BeC project, given their inclination towards a mild non-independentist position, which shattered its alliance with independentist parties such as CUP and Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya. It is this other political cleavage external to the question of water management that blocked the

2018 referendum on water promoted by AeV via a popular initiative signed up by approx. 26.000 citizens. Another important setback for the process was the historical ruling of the Spanish Supreme Court, issued on the 20th of November 2019, which legitimized the concession of the water service to the mixed company AB, revoking the previous ruling of the Catalan Superior Court of Justice. Even if AeV and BeC representatives declared their intention "not to give up" their "defence of this common good from private interests", they also acknowledged that the ruling was a "hard blow" to their cause (*El Diario*, 2019). As a result, the relative fragility of the competing parts, the legal constraints and the intersection of different and persistent cleavages are likely to result into *the continuation of a dialectic between populism and anti-populism rather than into any stable hegemonic regime*.

Given the growing ecological crisis, the population growth and the need for an ever-scarcer resource (i.e. water), the future research into the water management will most likely need to adopt a (truly) interdisciplinary perspective, integrating engineering, economics, social sciences and philosophy. It should pay attention to the socio-political dimensions and narratives together which shape the interest for new technologies as well as the political and ethical dimension on innovation. Moreover, the growing importance of cities in the world due to the current trend of forming ever-larger cities will also result in the research focus on the evolution of processes of politicisation will need further scholarly the transforming possibilities of the "return of the political". More exhaustive and comparative research between cities or sectors could shed light on how different material conditions can influence the success or failure of municipalist political projects. These comparisons can be made between cities within Catalunya, Spain, or between cities pertaining to different countries and even civilizational areas. Another promising research path would be to explore more in depth the role of social movements in water and how the institutionalization affects (de-politicize) their initial goals. Also, a more thorough analysis of ideologies (neoliberalism vs. commons) to understand their impact on concrete management options (centralization, decentralization for instance).

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the politicisation of water in Barcelona

- The project of implementing direct, public management of water in Barcelona generated an abrupt change in the public discourse and the problematisation of a long-standing alliance between public and the private entities managing water. By reworking Laclau's critical-discourse approach to populism, this dissertation shed light on how particular grievances related to water become homogenous popular demands in the populist discourse of the anti-privatisation movement.
- Formulated in terms of the *thirsty people of the city* in opposition to the water company framed as the *enemy*, this dissertation has shown that the water politicisation in Barcelona is populist and the discoursive battle is imbued with geographical and material references overlooked in the existing literature on populism.

Regarding the anti-populist politicisation of the company

- This research traced the discursive response of the company, which displays both anti-populist traits but also adopts core signifiers from the remunicipalization frame (e.g. citizenry, democracy, proximity, neighbourhood).
- The question then arises as to whether we are dealing with a typical case of co-opting. The literature on political ecology and social movements has analysed different cases of strategies of co-opting protest discourses by the establishment these strategies are commonly seen as dissolving political conflicts "in arrangements of impotent participation and consensual "good" techno-managerial governance". In our case, while the company does undertake strategic borrowings from the opposite discourse, we cannot speak of a case of full co-opting but of an open dialectic.

Regarding Circular Economy as a depoliticised terrain

- The dynamic between politicisation and de-politicisation has been proven to apply even in cases of open conflicts as the one on water. The research proved that between two contesting parties there are still areas of potential understanding where the terms of conversation surround hegemonic, uncontested concepts.
- Using the discursive framework of this dissertation, Circular Economy is labelled as a hegemonic term and thus, it is uncritically adopted by both public and private actors. The existing critiques are not taken into consideration by relevant stakeholders and CE is considered as a positive policy objective. It is the case of BeC and Agbar which, although they display differences - infuse their specific discourses in the CE narrative - they agree on the core elements of the CE.

Regarding the relevance for the city of Barcelona

- On the one hand, the politicisation of water was successful in stirring the public debate about public/private management, forcing established actors to take position in a new battle for legitimacy. On the other hand, the new forces have not come to impose a new hegemony
- As a result, the relative fragility of the competing parts and the intersection of different cleavages are likely to result in the continuation of a dialectic between populism and anti-populism rather than in any stable hegemonic regime.

Regarding relevance for companies

- Since the PhD was developed in an industrial scheme, this dissertation has a strategic interest for companies - especially those working with the public sector and managing essential resources such as water. The lesson is to constantly look beyond the technical and managerial aspects of their functioning and remain sensitive to cultural, political and values-related dimension of the society. The case of Agbar should be an opportunity for the water sector and not only: a

company that stayed for 150 years in its comfort zone can be questioned by anew political configuration. It is also interesting to reflect on companies as social actors: the discourse in place for many years frame the private sector as exclusively interested in profit and their corporate responsibility policies have had little impact on this social perception.

Regarding further research

- In times of change and with humanity currently facing one its most testing challenge, a global pandemic of COVID19 - the debate around public vs. public management of essential services is powerfully back on the agenda. It is more important than ever to break the technocratic framing from within and more research and engagement will be necessary to answer important questions: can companies embrace a more open socio-political role? How does this engage with issues of democracy and political representation? What are the ethical considerations and discourses behind a new definition of (urban) resilience that will emerge as a result of the post-COVID world and where will companies stand?
- Other further research: the study could gain from a comparative perspective with other cases of remunicipalisation, using similar research tools. Another promising research path would be to explore more in depth the role of social movements in water and how the institutionalization affects (de-politicize) their initial goals. Also, a more thorough analysis of ideologies (neoliberalism vs. commons, etc) to understand their impact on concrete management options (centralization, decentralization for instance).
- The evolution of remunicipalisation processes will need further scholarly attention and research so as to understand the permanent tension between different forms of politicisation, as well as the transforming possibilities of the “return of the political”.

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