The Melodrama of “Mosque-War” in Catalonia: Villains, Victims and Gatekeepers

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INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades Spanish citizens have mobilized in opposition to mosques in 56 different Spanish municipalities, 30 of which are in Catalonia (Astor, 2011). According to a recent report by the Obervatorio Andalusí (2010), about one quarter of Spain’s Muslim population and just over 20% of the country’s mosques are located in Catalonia. Nevertheless, residents of Catalonia feel more negatively toward mosques than residents from other Spanish regions, as opposition to mosques has been significantly more frequent and intense in Catalonia, and particularly in the Barcelona metropolitan area, than elsewhere in Spain. By “opposition” I mean organized actions, including public demonstrations, by local communities and movements aiming to shut down mosques or to prevent the opening of new one in their districts (Astor, 2011:11). The phenomenon of mosque opposition does not only involve the opposing parties but also the Muslims whom the actions target and those Catalan residents who attempt to develop a “more inclusive sense of belonging” (ibid:179) and promote openness and respect for diversity. As a response to the anti-mosque demonstrations and actions several newly formed local anti-racist organizations protested against racism and discrimination. Also Muslims themselves responded in various ways to the attacks, sometimes with the above mentioned organizations, at other times separately.

A substantial literature has investigated controversies over mosque construction in European cities. These controversies are important because they reflect wider issues of integration, governance, security, and community cohesion that arise from the growing visible presence of Muslims in European urban centres. These studies have tended to focus on how public policies and attitudes regarding mosques, have been shaped by national philosophies of integration, entrenched models of religious governance, and established understandings of the place of religion in the public sphere (Cesari 2004; Ferrari 2005; Fetzer and Soper 2005; Koenig 2005; Scott 2007; Soper and Fetzer 2007; Sunier 2005).

Being attentive to the local narratives that residents utilize when articulating their motivations
for opposing mosques is central for comprehending the symbolic significance that people attribute to the presence of mosques in their neighbourhoods (on the importance of narratives see Richardson 1990; Sewell 1992; Somers 1992; 1995; White 1987). However, Berbrier and Pruett (2006:272) remarks that in recent decades, qualitative work has idealized the uniqueness of each local and situational variant, to the neglect of patterns and larger contexts. They claim that “while all discourse (like all politics) is inherently local, any discourse that is only local, (...), is sociologically uninteresting” (2006:272). Accordingly, I argue that it is essential to examine how the mosque conflicts are related to discourses beyond their local setting. By recognizing the simultaneously local and collective nature of these representations, we can begin to glimpse elements of the structuration of meaning (Berbrier and Pruett, 2006:278; cf. Giddens 1984). Knowles argues that in places such as these, claims to ‘the local’, to ‘the neighbourhood’ are increasingly being expressed and lived as a form of nationalism: ‘a nationalism of the neighbourhood’ (Knowles 2003: 183). Although most anti-mosque campaigns were mobilized around a practical defence of local public places the localist discourse of „defence of community” also tap into wider excusionary concerns. They are linked with discourses of the tidal wave of immigration in which ‘immigrants’ are making ‘indigenous’ communities strangers or second-class citizens in their own land (Cohen 1996).

Lately, no collective actions of mosque opposition has taken place in Catalonia, therefore, I have examined the available archives about the anti-mosque conflicts in Badalona in 2002, 2005, 2007, 2009, Mataro in 2001 and Reus in 2001-2004. The previous conflicts have left marks on the populations which are still characterised by intense ethnic tensions. Therefore, in addition I have conducted fieldwork in these cities between January, 2012 and March, 2013. Qualitative methods of data collection were chosen due to their appropriateness for understanding the dynamic and interactive dimensions of collective action. In-depth interviews and participant observation were used for gathering data on the emotional aspects of movement involvement addressed here. Participant observation allowed for an analysis of the discursive, emotional and performative dynamics of the conflict.

**Theoretical framework**

Benford and Hunt (2003) indicate that the “public problems marketplace is a terrain of contested claims” wherein protagonist claims regularly elicit and respond to antagonist claims. Urban environments are in a state of continuous struggle and discourse between groups with different cultural backgrounds. These groups try to either defend or change the symbolic representations that are present
in a specific locale. This activity is relational, dynamic and includes the individual and collaborative work of community activism (ibid). In order to grasp these dynamics I combine social movements literature, in particular that on mobilization - counter mobilization dynamics, framing, identity and emotions with performance theory and work written on the phenomenon of NIMBYism.

Movement-countermovement interplay is proven to be an important factor in shaping the ongoing development and ultimate impact of the movements and to have serious effects on the mobilization processes and action opportunities (Meyer and Staggenborg 1996). Until recently, only few analysts have specified, beyond the descriptive level, the interactive aspects of this process and the outcomes generated by these dynamics (Zald and Useem, 1987; Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Peleg, 1996). In my analysis, I approach the opposing sides as active, dynamic and interactive opponents of each other (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996; Marshall, 1995; Peleg, 1996; Andrews, 2001; Dixon, 2008).

As typically the Catalan mosque conflicts revolts around the importance of space I found current trends of literature on NIMBYism helpful for my analysis. Following Hubbard (2005) NIMBY protests can be conceived as ‘locally organised campaigns opposing a locally unwanted land use, whether industrial, human service facility or new housing’ (p. 52 see also Takahashi 1997; Wilton 1998). Accordingly, NIMBYism is increasingly regarded as a social and spatial process in which particular groups and individuals seek to ‘distance’ themselves from stigmatized Others. While I found NIMBYism literature useful for my analysis I argue that NIMBY discourses often downplay the complex drivers, associations, and interactions that frame resistance. As NIMBYism implies a singular identity and hides multiple (and often conflicting) interests and objectives of residents a straightforward labelling of resistance as NIMBYism also de-emphasises the scope and scale of resident action groups and how their interactions with other residents shape the formation of a suburban polity (Ellis, 2004; Wolsink, 2006).

A dramaturgical approach further facilitates an understanding of such dynamics. It does so by focusing on social acts, discourses and emergent meanings, recognizing that “... meaning is a continually problematic accomplishment of human interaction and is fraught with change, novelty, and ambiguity” (Brissett and Edgley 1990, p. 2). Alexander (2004), in particular, contended that collective action is both political and symbolic; performative actions, like actions in a theatre, symbolize particular meanings within the setting (both historical and physical) in which they are performed. The dialectic
between conflicting groups, the actions and reactions of protagonists and antagonists, are thus transformed into symbolic performances and counterperformances (Alexander 2004; Eyerman, 2006). Therefore, in order to analyze the Catalan mosque conflicts I borrow the theatrical concept of melodrama. The metaphor of drama in general is a useful resource to understand the dynamics of public controversies including MCM. First of all, it highlights how different emotional dynamics are enacted and strategically used. Second, it sheds light on the ‘processual, interactive [and] dynamic’ (Benford and Hunt 1995) nature of MCM actions. Third, it highlights the performative and collective dimension of emotions and allows us to treat emotions as ‘discursive performances that are acted out in particular social and political contexts’ (Zerilli, 2006, p. 77). Fourth, the notion of drama permits the bridging of action and narrative. That is it helps in understanding how emotional ‘experiences’ are politically articulated by social actors and possibly manipulated in order to support moral and judicial claims (Zerilli 2006, p. 77). Turner (1986) has observed the fondness of social movement activists for the use of melodrama. This choice is understandable if we consider that the melodrama restages the eternal battle between good and evil. It generates unambiguous distinctions between social actors, with the principal players being identified as victim, enemy, and savior, and infuses those distinctions with moral gravity (Nepstad, 2001 p.25; Anker, 2005; Brooks, 1995; Elsaesser, 1972; Gledhill, 1987; Singer, 2000; Williams, 1998). By adapting the concept of melodrama, I demonstrate how mosque-opponents, as well as supporters, narrate and perform their specific acts of the Catalan melodrama, i.e. emotional dynamics that present a particular interpretation of reality in order to mobilize people for specific aims as well as to demobilize antagonists.

**Islam in Spain**

Spain provides a particularly interesting context for studying mosque-opposition due to the strong historical presence of Islam in the country. Islamic Spain, or Al-Andalus, was a major center of Muslim civilization during the “Islamic Golden Age” (George 1998; Lombard 2004). Currently Spain’s Muslim population numbers almost a million and a half (Observatorio Andalusí, 2010). At the moment only France, Germany, and Great Britain have larger Muslim populations than Spain within the European Union. Given the long history of Islam in Spain, Moroccans have recurrently played the role of the “other” in the Spanish collective imaginary (Corrales, 2002). Social theorists have highlighted how the categories and ideational frameworks utilized to interpret novel phenomena are never constructed anew, but rather derive from shared histories and established understandings (Fine 2010; Sahlins 1981; Strauss 1978). The historical construction of North Africans and Muslims as Other in the Spanish collective imaginary has shaped current interpretations of, and reactions to, mosques and the
populations they serve.

**The Catalan Case**

Most conflicts over mosques in Europe include, either primarily or marginally, the question of the minaret, its height, or its very existence. The minaret appears to have become a symbol par excellence of the conflict surrounding Islam, or rather of its visibility in the public space\(^1\) (Allievi, 2009). As minarets can be perceived as “alien intrusions into national, cultural, or ‘secular’ space” (DeHanas and Pieri, 2011:800), the conflicts around the minarets became games of ‘political visibility’ which explains why disputes over minarets can also be interpreted as conflicts of power (ibid). Collective actions against mosques in Catalonia are different from the European ones, as they have focused first of all on the presence of small and non-distinctive prayer rooms (Astor, 2011). In contrast to purpose-built mosques, which are generally identifiable by their characteristic Islamic architecture, prayer rooms are almost invisible as they are normally located in converted apartments, garages, shops, and warehouses (Allievi, 2009). The spatial integration of Islam in Spanish society manifests a strong contrast between the great Islamic cultural centres, along with their architectural forms clearly identifiable, with their minarets on the one hand, and prayer rooms in garages that are opened on the initiative of small immigrant communities, without any symbols that might identify them as a religious centre in the public space, on the other. The paradox is that while these visible mosques are integral parts of the urban landscape of cities where they are located, it is the prayer-rooms that despite their invisibility receive social opposition in their location (Moreras, 2010:239).

As mentioned earlier, residents of Catalonia feel more negatively toward mosques than residents from other Spanish regions\(^2\). As José Casanova (2006:76) points out, investigating issues pertaining to the accommodation and incorporation of Muslims in Europe is complicated by the fact that the “immigrant, the religious, the racial, and the socio-economic disprivileged „other” all tend to coincide.”

\(^1\) It is not inappropriate to recall here that the minaret, like skyscrapers and the Tower of Babel, is something that rises into the sky, a symbol of power

\(^2\) In 2009 the Center for Sociological Investigations’ (CIS) survey on attitudes toward immigration suggest that respondents from Catalonia are significantly more accepting of opposition to mosques than respondents from Madrid. 54% of respondents from Catalonia viewed opposition to mosques as “very acceptable” or “pretty acceptable,” compared to just 28% of respondents from Madrid and 35% of respondents from the rest of Spain. Similarly, only 42% of respondents from Catalonia viewed mosque opposition as “not very acceptable” or “unacceptable,” compared to 61% of respondents from Madrid and 54% of respondents from the rest of Spain (cf Astor, 2011).
Some scholars claim that the strong regional identity present in Catalonia and its assimilationist approach to cultural diversity have generated an especially high degree of concern regarding the threat posed by foreign traditions to the region’s culture and values (Gil Araujo 2009). However, Astor (2012) rightly point out that several of the communities that have mobilized against mosques in Catalonia are composed of internal first and second generation Spanish migrants. Another interesting point is that anti-mosque sentiment in Catalonia, is not confined to a conservative segment of the region’s population, but rather cuts across the political spectrum suggesting that opposition to mosques is not rooted merely in ideological conservatism. A sudden rise in economic competition does not appear to explain either the high degree of opposition to mosques in the region. While certain segments of the Spanish population express feelings of resentment toward Muslims and other immigrants for taking jobs and public benefits, opposition to mosques has occurred for the most part during a period of major economic growth and primarily in a region with one of the highest per capita incomes and lowest unemployment rates in the country (Astor, 2012). Negative public reactions to mosque construction are frequently understood as manifestations of xenophobia, Islamophobia, or colonialist sensibilities (Maussen, 2009). However as Allevi (2009) and Astor (2011, 2012) have shown episodes of contention surrounding mosques are not centred exclusively on issues pertaining to religious difference and fear of Islamic extremism.

Rather, mosques have been connected to a range of social problems, which some scholars have referred to as "social and physical incivilities" (LaGrange et al. 1992) including crime, drugs, and the development of ethnic ghettos, that longstanding residents associate with the presence of immigrants, most notably Moroccans, in their communities. Mobilizations against mosques in Catalonia have been most rife in the peripheries of historically industrial cities in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Many

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3 In support of this finding, the results of the Center for Opinion Studies 2010 survey on perceptions of immigration in Catalonia suggest that residents of the region who think of themselves primarily as Catalan are slightly less hostile to mosques than those who think of themselves primarily as Spanish.

4 Astor (2011) shows that respondents who voted for conservative parties, particularly the PP (75%), were the most accepting of opposition to mosques, a majority of respondents who voted for the Socialists Party (58%) and the Republican Left (63%) also found opposition to mosques to be acceptable. Even 47% of respondents who voted for the Initiative for Catalonia Greens, the region’s most liberal and left-wing party, approved of mosque opposition.

5 In fact, between 1995 and 2007, when the vast majority of mosque opposition in Catalonia took place, the region’s per capita income nearly doubled from 14,000 to 27,500 Euros (Astor, 2011).
of these peripheral neighbourhoods that were originally constructed for internal Spanish migrants now have become home to relatively large immigrant, mostly Muslim, populations (Astor, 2012). The heavy concentration of Muslims in these specific neighbourhoods has generated the perception that immigrants have „colonized” these areas (ibid). The anxiety relating to the transformation of these neighbourhoods to “Muslim ghettos” is at the heart of collective mobilizations against mosques in Catalonia (Astor, 2011:191). There is a widely spread concern that racial or ethnic diversification will engender higher levels disorder, crime, and related problems. Thus, these conflicts are less about faith and more about space, identity, and power.

The Conflict
Contentious actions have succeeded on more than one occasion in correcting the starting points of political actors and making them respond to the demand made by the Muslim collective to open a place of worship (Moreras, 2010:257). In several cases, opponents have successfully pressured local officials and private building owners to not use their properties as service facilities. Pressure actions have prevented the opening of these premises, or have forced their relocation to another area. Typically opposition to the mosques from municipal officials and/or local residents has been expressed as "technical" concern over site location, size or parking; Muslims are often found worshipping in outdoor spaces provisionally granted by local authorities for that purpose or in the surroundings of existing prayer rooms that have reached (Amnesty International, 2012:85).

As the literature on mosque opposition suggests, industrial or deindustrialized areas with large working-class populations are the primary sites for contention over mosques (Buijs 1998; Jonker 2005; Kuppingder 2008; Manco and Kanmaz 2005; Saint-Blancat and Schmidt di Friedberg 2005). Similarly, mosque opposition in Catalonia most frequently takes place in peripheral neighbourhoods of industrial cities, often severely lacking in municipal services and are inhabited almost exclusively by the working class. Originally these peripheral neighborhoods were hastily constructed in the 60s to accommodate the wave of internal Spanish migrants (Costa et al. 2003; Villarroya i Font 1999). The difficult incorporation of internal Spanish migrants led to the emergence of stark divisions between well-accommodated central Catalan-speaking neighborhoods, on the one hand, and poorer Spanish-speaking peripheral neighborhoods, on the other (Astor, 2011:147). In recent years, intra-municipal divisions have become even more salient due to a large influx of working-class foreign immigrants to these poorer neighborhoods.
Those who expressed the most negative sentiments against the establishment or opening of praying rooms were obviously the working class Spanish (internal migrants) residents who lived on the premises. After the time of their migration, the internal Spanish migrants from Andalusia, Extremadura, Murcia, and other regions that were distant geographically, culturally, and linguistically were viewed as “foreign invaders” who threatened the established way of life in Catalonia. Upon arriving to Barcelona, Spanish migrants faced a significant degree of discrimination and spatial segregation (Candel 1965; Esteva Fabregat 1973). The base of their movements were neighbourhood and other ad-hoc organisations. In several cases local political parties, most often Plataforma per Catalunya and Partido Popular in Badalona have played leading roles in managing the contention and, needless to say, aggravating the conflict.

As a response to the fierce mosque oppositions in several of these cities a number of individuals and associations have joined into a counter-movement aiming to curb xenophobia and to create a more inclusive sense of local belonging. These movements, such as “Badalona Som Tots” (“We Are All Badalona”), relying mostly on a Catalan-speaking membership was formed mainly by articulate middle-class residents, including local journalists, artists, actors and some professional activists. In addition, several Muslim leaders in Catalonia have tried to counter anti-mosque campaigns by engaging in both discussions and activities aiming to calm residents’ anxieties about the presence of mosques in their neighbourhoods on the one hand and demanding their right for religious freedom on the other.

MOSQUE OPPOSITION FRAMES

Incivility and Insecurity
Due to lack of space, in this paper I will only highlight one segment of the Catalan mosque conflict, notably the major frames of the mosque-opposition and the roles opponents have cast for themselves and for their opponents.

In their diagnostic frames, those residents who opposed the presence or the establishment of mosques in their districts identified urban degradation (meaning incivility and insecurity) as a social problem and linked it to the phenomenon of Muslim immigration. The mosque was perceived not simply as a

6 It was formed in response to the opposition launched against the Pakistani community’s mosque in Artigas
marker of threatening immigrant presence, but also as a symbol which stood for deterioration of living conditions, deprivation of urban areas and a feeling of insecurity. Recent studies of NIMBYism have explored how campaigners seek to maintain the boundaries between Self and the Other. Western cultures characteristically equate whiteness with purity, order and cleanliness – and conversely, non-whiteness with disorder and incivility (Sibley 1995; Anderson 2000). My research participants claimed that mosques, by operating like magnets, would attract more Muslim immigrants to the area, which would result in the transformation of their districts into "a ghetto without solution" (a phrase coined by Alicia Sanchez Camacho, leader of the Catalan Partido Popular on the planned construction of a mosque in Badalona) where peaceful and civilized life would cease to end. Some research participants have stated:

*Of course I was against building the mosque! And I am still opposing it! Just imagine, they [Muslims] would come here all the time, not only to pray but also to live. It would just turn into a ghetto! Who wants to live in a ghetto? Would you? No, thank you. We are civilized, hardworking people who worked all our life. I want to live my life in dignity and want to feel at home in my own town.* (Miriam, 47 years old)

Apart from incivility insecurity was also often mentioned. They frequently recited the high rates of crime and the dangers they faced in their day to day lives in the public. Burchianti and Zapata-Barrero (2012:71) state that the linkage between immigration and insecurity is the most ancient and certainly the best documented framing in terms of intolerance toward migration in Spain (Ritaine, 2005, Santamaria, 2002). Political discourses stigmatise migrants, as being responsible of urban insecurity, delinquency and incivilities which disturb the peaceful coexistence of the inhabitants (Burchianti and Zapata-Barrero, 2012:71). By drawing on these meta-narratives, mosque opponents were engaged in what Spencer (2000) calls “appropriation”. Utilizing these meta-narratives, which portrayed immigrants as criminal and dangerous justified their concerns over higher crime rates and diminished quality of life within these working class neighbourhoods.

What is crucial here is that the construction/opening/planning of a mosque was perceived and thus constructed as an injustice within these frames. Framing research has been dominated by the study of “injustice frames” (Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson, Fireman, and Rytina 1982). But as Snow et al (1986) remarks the development and adoption of an injustice frame is not sufficient to account for the direction of action. That is Spanish residents may see the degradation of their barrios as an injustice,
but this claim’s relationship to action is partly dependent on whether blame or responsibility is internalized or externalized (Snow et al, 1986: 472). Residents were quick to find the target of their indignation: first and foremost the immigrants, second the local political actors.

**Vilification**

It is well documented in social movement literature that action is contingent on identification of the source(s) of causality, blame, and/or culpable agents (Benford and Snow, 2000:616). Vilifying opponents is a tactical weapon as it generates anger and moral outrage at the violator's actions, and what has, is, or could be happening (Blain, 1994:820). Negative stereotypes and enemy images are highly instrumental in upholding the borderlines that help collectives of people to establish their group identities (Sibley, 1995). Thus, scapegoats, like excluded groups in general, contribute to reinforcing the feeling of togetherness among majority populations. That is why, according to Girard, scapegoating constitutes "the very basis of both psychological and social order" (quoted in Aho, 1994: 116). Further, vilification also serves to “galvanize and focus sentiment” (Benford and Hunt, 1992:39).

The key dimensions of vilification of migrants, that is dangerousness and incivility –draw on an established language of abjection which serves to differentiate between ‘threatened Self’ and ‘threatening Other’. Postcolonial perspectives are productive for thinking about the imaginings of these ‘threatening’ figures. Hubbard’s (2004) work on local protest against a proposed asylum centre in rural England, states that contemporary portrayals of asylum seekers are the inheritors of colonial discourses of ‘the other’ seen through tropes of non-productivity, culpability, and dangerousness. In their accounts, mosque-opponents not only simply state that the invasion of immigrants altered the character of their neighbourhood but they also negatively depicted the culture, intentions and norms of the Muslims. They commonly portray immigrants as „backward,”“primitive,” and lacking in desire to learn basic civic norms. They felt that immigrant-presence brings “filth” and “deterioration” to their neighbourhood. The citation from a private conversation between a Badalona resident and me shed light on the processes of vilification.

*Listen, I’m not a racist but...just try to come and live here. Not as a fancy university researcher, no! Come seriously, live here for a while, I tell you, you will flee! Coz you will see how they really are. Muslims are not about the Alhambra and all this... You would see they are dirty, they are noisy, they occupy everything. They are also privileged here. They want a mosque they get a mosque. They have more rights here in the municipalities than us. It’s not all right! (Diego, 45 years old)*
Ideas of ‘dangerousness’ were not only racialised but also gendered. These tropes about dangerousness were embedded in an image of the racialised and sexualised male body as “potentially violent, implicitly young and morally deviant” (Judge, 2010:14). Several research participants lamented about the threatening presence of young immigrant males gathering on the plazas. Women, children and the elderly were absolutely absent in the narratives.

Although they blamed these problems, mostly, on the immigrants, they also vented their anger on the municipalities for “abandoning” their neighborhoods and failing to address the challenges generated by the large-scale arrival of immigrant populations. Residents created representations of authorities as discriminating against them by providing special and unfair treatment to undeserving "foreigners" (see Losecke, 1993). Support by public officials for immigrant services was presented as an abandonment of regulatory responsibilities, victimization of law-abiding citizens, an injustice, as well as a betrayal of the public trust. A research participant observed:

We felt that the local authorities have abandoned us. We could not believe that they [Muslims] have more rights here than us. The local authorities just did not care... they just wanted to put the mosque here so that it will be as far as possible from their own neighbourhoods. Where they live, of course. They don’t look after us, look at these benches... dirt everywhere, but they are encouraging them [Muslims]. (Javier, 42 years old)

Victimization
Complementing the vilification of the “Other”, dominant group members came to be seen as disempowered, disenfranchised, and victimized. Holstein and Miller (1990) argue that every social problem condition-category is inhabited by a victim, a person experiencing harm and judged as not responsible for creating the harm. Indeed, melodramatic representations of victimhood are central to several social movements; indeed as Benford and Hunt (1995, p. 87) claim ‘without victims there would be no social movement dramas’ (see also Benford and Snow, 2000; Reinarman & Levine, 1995; McCarthy, 1994; Loseke, 1989; Fine, 1995). The construction of victims is important as they are emotion-evoking representations of the social problem. Further, victimage rhetoric also functions to lift the burden of responsibility of the subjects. The essence of being a “victim” resides in a person’s perceived lack of control over the harm that he or she has experienced (Holstein and Miller, 1990:106).
Residents in the mosque war produced discourses that portrayed immigrants as a threat to the community which in turn emphasized the victimization of established residents. The building blocks of their victim identity were 1) the penetration of their neighbourhoods, 2) the consequent degradation, deterioration and loss of their home-spaces, 3) the feeling of stigmatization and 4) the feelings of abandonment by the authorities.

Residents articulated narratives of urban decline in which the previous supposedly tightly-knit community of the past was no more. They used a racialized lens and a “nostalgic haze” (Watt, 2007) to interpret the felt loss of community. Their victimage rhetoric was characterised by frequent reflections to the glorious past. The past is described as a time of greatness, happiness, ethnic homogeneity and a sense of community and solidarity. In these selectively constructed collective memories prior social cleavages and conflicts are downplayed and past episodes of ethnic conflicts between Catalans, Spanish and the Roma, along with previous problems with drugs and gangs are silenced (Astor, 2011; Carreras i García et al. 2006; Garriga 2003; Villarroya i Font 1999). Collective memories here are important features of the victimage rhetoric as they redraw group boundaries and create and maintain in-group solidarity. Explicitly, when emphasizing their shared Spanish identity and the civilized way of past life they distance themselves from the predominantly Muslim immigrants. A telling quote from a research participant:

_I think it was nicer way of life. It was tranquil and peaceful. You could walk around and felt safe. Not now. Everything has changed. Since they arrived life has changed. It’s not the same anymore, many people don’t find their place here anymore._ (Alonso, 39 years old)

By the internalization of such victimization frames, resentful residents engage in the act of “reverse racism”. Van Dijk (1993) refers to “reverse racism”, as the tactic by which dominant group members turn charges of racism around, and argue instead that it is they who are being victimized. These residents not only feel victimized by the “hordes of immigrants” “invading” their neighbourhoods, but at the same time also by local authorities, which they perceive as being soft and weak in responding to social issues. Feelings of neglect and exclusion among residents of these working class neighbourhood have contributed to the feelings of their own victimhood. Jorge, an internal Spanish migrant to Mataro told me:

_The Pakistani is more important than we are, that is the message they are sending. Building a mosque for them is more crucial then kindergardens and schools and the maintenance of the barrio. They_
invest in the Moro of course, that is their dream that all these people will learn Catalan and not Spanish. (...) the Moro is more valuable. (Jorge, 66 years)

Self-victimization is a crucial element in the mobilization processes and the construction and maintenance of social problems. The perception that public authorities fail to prioritize their needs has amplified Spanish residents' hostility toward the establishment of mosques in their neighborhoods. In other words, I argue that not only did the production of “victims” dramatize “problems,” but it also coalesced public sentiment regarding the “problem” (cf. Holstein and Miller 1990:117). Going further I argue that designating victims was central to the formulation of responses and remedies (ibid). The citations below suggest how the self-acclaimed victim-status was utilized in the mobilization procedures:

They (municipality) have abandoned us, again I have to add. They did not care that we were opposing the mosque, they just went on with the plannings. Don’t you think it is incredible that they don’t care about their own citizens? It was a great disappointed for all of us… we had to realise that we have to fight alone, that we are left to do everything alone. (José, 64 years)

Gatekeepers
The last quotation points to the other role the mosque opponents have cast for themselves during the conflict. At the same time as claiming a victim status mosque opponents also regarded themselves as the defenders of the barrios and the community. Literature indicates that NIMBYs often view themselves as the custodians or guardians of place. Practices of exclusivity toward Muslims and physical markers of their presence are linked to a general effort by longstanding residents to protect the quality and image of their neighborhoods in the face of perceived external threat. Drawing upon psychoanalytic ideas Sibley (1995) argues that people seek to defend their body, home and neighbourhood in response to the incursion of abject Others who appear to threaten the boundaries of individual and collective identity. The fact that they feel tied to the neighborhood, whether it be for economic or emotional reasons, has contributed to their strong desire to defend it against processes of decay and degradation associated with immigration. It is clear that disputes over places of worship go well beyond a mere clash about whether there is ‘room’ for them or not. Rather, space becomes a discursive contentious field that is linked up with the construction of identities (Sunier 2005:329). Indeed, literature on NIMBYism has been criticised lately that it plays down more subjective features; specifically the symbolic or emotional associations that local residents may have with the contested
place. Patrick Devine-Wright claims that places replete with memories, experiences, stories and myths are integral features of any locality. Specifically, it is due to the fact that the meanings associated with specific places can enable a person to feel a sense of continuity over time, a sense of positive distinctiveness, and a sense of self or collective efficacy (ibid:63-64). Therefore, he suggests that concepts such as place attachment and place identity are useful in order to capture subjective and contextual aspects of opposition (2006:63).

Devine-Wright's observations are very relevant in the case of Catalan mosque conflict. Astor (2011) states that the intense struggles for public recognition and resources that took place in these very neighbourhoods toward the end of Franco’s regime, as well as during Spain’s transition to democracy, were highly formative experiences for older residents. Narratives about the golden age where Spanish residents lived in peace and prosperity not only serves as an important building block of the victimage rhetoric, but also plays a crucial part in the “gatekeeper” discourses.

Few works have actually systematically explored the links between collective memory and collective action and so far we know little about how the memories of social groups might influence the ability of group members to engage in cooperative action (Harris, 2007:20). My research shows that as romanticized past is used to justify contemporary calls for the protection, collective memories may indeed support contentious mobilization in various ways. First, collective memories operated as a retrospective lens where insurgents could articulate grievances. Residents of the outskirts reconnected to the struggles they and their parents had to fight as internal migrants to establish and improve their new residence. These narratives of former struggles provided a historical framework for residents in their current struggle against the ghettoization of their neighbourhoods. Second, stories and narratives of hard labour and resistance provided residents with the necessary emotional energy essential for collective action. Collective memories assisted activists to recast prevailing emotional responses to victimization, for instance from private resentment to public anger, from frustration to indignation; from the feeling of powerlessness to readiness to act and in turn, these emotional transformations translated to demands for redress and action. A research participant stated:

*You know my parents came here from Andalucía without a penny. And they have carved a life for themselves and for their children. It was hard work, hard life. But they fought. We also fight for our neighbourhood. I grew up here, I am attached, I am not going to give up and leave (...) the previous generation was strong, and they raised strong children. They fought against the municipalities, they*
were discriminated, but they worked and worked for their rights. We are not sissies either. (Adriá, 28 years old)

CONCLUSION

In this small segment of the Catalan mosque conflict I have shown how mosque opponents define their neighborhoods through borders determined by their perceived self-interest, which is shaped by ethnic and gender constructions (see: Maney and Abraham, 2008:80). By drawing boundaries in reference to these visible markers they constructed sinister discourses whereby the presence of the immigrants in the neighborhoods jeopardizes the well-being of residents (ibid:68). Investigating local narratives can challenge simplistic accounts of public engagement, particularly the NIMBY concept, which ignores the way in which the responses of public actors are inevitably “embedded in real places and communities” (Walker et al, 2011:13). Using the melodramatic frame has highlighted how emotional ‘experiences’ are politically articulated by social actors and possibly manipulated in order to support moral and judicial claims. Further it helped generating unambiguous distinctions between social actors and infusing those distinctions with moral gravity.