

Thinking about the Political Situation in Catalonia

Montserrat Camps-Gaset, University of Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain

Abstract

Catalan Separatism is, above all, a peaceful movement for self-government, defending the capacity for taking decisions as a nation, as a State, in an inclusive way. It defends sovereignty in all aspects, including income generated in Catalonia, and the distribution of wealth. The Spanish transition after 1975 failed to encourage the construction of a pluralist State, and the autonomic framework has proved to be unsatisfactory. The reluctance of some parties in the government to give more autonomy to Catalonia, especially in the last ten years, and to recognise it as a nation, has led to a significant increase in Catalan independence supporters. Extreme right-wing movements have emerged recently, defending the unity of Spain and attacking democracy, not only in Catalonia, and their sometimes violent riots are tolerated more permissively by Spanish authorities than actions in favour of Catalan prisoners on remand. The conflict is a challenge to the idea of Spain as it is now and also an occasion to think about what kind of political framework Europe offers to its members. Europe should perhaps offer more flexibility to communities having different languages and cultures, and therefore, the Catalan crisis is an opportunity to imagine a new European order.

Keywords: Catalonia, Europe, Separatism, Spanish transition

A Trend Towards Self-Government

When talking about Catalans, nationalism is perhaps an unsuitable word. In this paper, the preferred words will be self-determination, independence or self-government, which, to our mind, describe the situation in a more exact way.

Catalan separatism, to use a common word in Europe, is not an ethnic movement. It is certainly a movement with a national basis, but Catalan identity means especially using Catalan (Bastardas, 2018), which is the autochthonous romance language, as a vehicular cohesive language, in a context where many other languages are used. These languages have arrived in Catalonia over time (Castilian, usually called “Spanish”) or in recent times through immigration (Chinese, Russian, Arabic, Tamazight, and up to 300 different languages (GELA, 2016; Junyent, 2015). Identity means also a cultural tradition that does not exclude other cultures or religions, because, historically, Catalonia has been a crossroads.

Catalan separatism is, above everything, a movement for self-government, defending the capacity for taking decisions as a nation, as a State, of deciding which laws are the best for all the people, in an inclusive way. It defends sovereignty in all aspects, including finance, that is, income generated in Catalonia, and the distribution of wealth. It certainly concerns the economic relationship with Spain, which up to now has been very unequal, but it is not only a question of money and taxes. Self-government means deciding about financial income, but also deciding about other laws, about education, immigration policies, refugees, health policies, transport, and so on. without any external interference or asking for central Spanish government permission. In the last ten years, Catalonia has suffered from the constant interference of the central Spanish government, which reported to the Constitutional Court any significant law issued by the Catalan Parliament and declared many to be against the Spanish Constitution and, therefore, unacceptable. A good example is the law about energy poverty: the Catalan Parliament enacted a law to give a minimum of electricity or gas on credit to very poor families in winter, in order to prevent them from freezing. Given that this law applied only in Catalonia and not throughout the whole of Spain it was considered by the Spanish Court to be unfair and a source of inequality (ACN, 2016). Another very spectacular example of interference in the Catalan capacity for ruling is the long-debated law against bullfighting, which at the time attracted the attention of half Europe. Among the 17 autonomous regions of Spain, the Canary Islands was the only one to enact a law in 1991 against any kind of animal misuse in public festivals, shows or performances. That included, of course, bullfighting, which had not been performed in the islands for some years. The law attracted no attention at all from any side. In 2010, the Catalan Parliament forbade bullfighting (a law to become effective only in 2012). The Spanish central Government reacted immediately.

The historical origins of the Catalan nation are explained in Michael Strubell's paper in this issue, so I will not go into them. The political transition after Franco's death (1975) did not allow Catalonia to be officially called “a nation”. In the United Kingdom, for instance, Scotland is officially given the name of a nation. This is not a minor issue: the debate on the name was a long one, and some politicians refused at the time to call Catalonia or the Basque Country nations precisely because both regions might demand their independence in the future. As if the name made the thing, they agreed on an intermediate term which is both ambiguous and unsatisfying, the Spanish term “nacionalidad”, which could be translated into “nationality”, and which is referred to in the second article of the Spanish Constitution.

As an example of how significant the word nation is, let us recall Prime Minister David Cameron's announcement of the results of the Scottish referendum. He said: "They've kept our country of four nations together". Spanish public TV translated, into Spanish, "quieren mantener nuestra nación unida", "they want our nation to stay united", that is, four nations were translated as a single one. This is more than being lost in translation! (Anonymous, 2014).

The Failure of the Spanish Transition of 1978

Language repression and the minimisation (or humiliation) of Catalan identity has a long history, and though the democratic regime, since 1978, has certainly improved the situation, it has not favoured mutual understanding among the different Spanish nations, nor promoted coexistence or living together in mutual recognition and acceptance.

In many ways, the Spanish transition failed. Perhaps at that time it was the only possible thing to do, because the situation was very complex, but it was a process expected to develop later. Instead, a regression took place after fifteen years (Minder, 2018). It is important to remember that Spain is the only European State where fascism won the war (1936–1939) and where the dictator died in his bed. Instead of an equivalent to the Nuremberg Trials, after 1975, there was a general amnesty in Spain, both for the republicans and communists banned during Franco's time, but also for politicians involved in serious dictatorial decisions or actions. Two months before Franco's death, five political prisoners were executed. One year before, in 1974, a Catalan anarchist had been executed, Salvador Puig Antich, after a very obscure trial and despite many international calls for mercy. These cases, like many other ones, were never revised. Today, a Francisco Franco Foundation still exists, and for years received public grants. Thousands of corpses of Republicans shot by Franco's troops or in Franco's time are still buried in unmarked roadside mass graves. There are no real effective initiatives to find them or to exhume them to give the remains back to the families for a proper burial. Only a few actions here and there and a law of historical memory that never came into real effect. In June 2018, the Dukedom of Franco (Ducado de Franco) passed from his deceased daughter to his granddaughter (Martínez, 2018). We can also remember that, a few years ago, the interior Minister (of the Popular party, PP) gave, on two occasions (in 2014 and 2015), a medal to the Virgin Mary (Kassam, 2014; Keely, 2015). All that might seem to be unrelated to Catalan separatism, but in fact, it is. Catalonia does not feel comfortable in such a Spanish State (Contiguglia, 2018; Encarnacion, 2018). It is true that all these facts are especially relevant when Spain is under the rule of right-wing parties such as the PP, but it is also true that left-wing parties, when in Government, have never tried to change the situation and have never voted against such privileges. Federalism, another fashionable world, has never been taken seriously by any party outside Catalonia. It was the dream of some centre-left parties and of many intellectuals, and became the magical word brought into use whenever time the Catalan people complained about Spanish centralism. No political party or lobby has ever attempted to build a truly federal Spanish state.

A Conscious Lack of Mutual Understanding

After 1978, and later, the diversity of the Spanish population was not especially encouraged. Democratic Spain was not built on the basis of a mosaic of languages and cultures, but on the basis of concessions made by Castilian centralism: Pablo Casado (PP) said: "Hay que volver a la Cataluña muy española" (Press Conference, 2017). Now and then (and that means quite

often) Catalanophobia (or phobias against Basque or even the Galician language or people) appeared, without any serious attempt to fight them, through education policies, for instance. There was no pedagogy of a plural state, no promotion of Iberian languages, no real appraisal of Spain's diversity. Official languages were, at their best, seen as a "problem", and sometimes, in the case of Catalan, there were (and still are) serious attempts at breaking the unity of the language and undermining the status of Catalan as a literate, standard modern language. The linguistic varieties of Valencia and later Majorca were claimed by some to be different languages unrelated to Catalan (Pradilla, 2011; Terrasa, 2013). Therefore, the existence of a standard level of the language with dialectal variation, like in all modern languages, was threatened. No linguist would ever support such a thing and many international voices were raised against the amount of nonsense generated by the discussion (Strubell, 1994). In Spain, language was not a question for linguists or specialists: it was a political question, decided by politicians (from the Central government) and resolved by law.

In Spanish autonomous regions where two languages are official (Galicia, Basque Country and Catalonia), public servants are not always obliged to know both of them. For instance, although citizens are entitled to address judges in Catalan or Spanish and have trials and enquiries in either language, judges are not obliged to know Catalan to apply for a position in Catalonia. That leads to situations of inequality where people are forced to forfeit their right to Catalan when in court. The co-official character of both languages is often only theoretical.

It is necessary to remember that there are quite a few European universities where Catalan is taught as a Romance language, but only a handful of Spanish universities teach it, and certainly, there is no tuition of Catalan, Basque or Galician in schools outside the regions where they are officially recognised. It would be politically logical to promote the study of the linguistic diversity of the State, or at least to offer an optional possibility in primary schools or in high schools. Such a choice has never existed. Catalan people, like the Basque people, have been tolerated in a largely patronizing way. They were (and are) sometimes objects of scorn and laughter, sometimes required to be thankful for having co-official languages and a Parliament. Anyway, there has always been an enormous lack of information about Catalonia within the other Spanish regions. This lack of information has been consciously fostered, and we should not forget misinformation: fake news about the supposed banishment of the Spanish language in Catalonia, about the way Spanish newcomers are treated, about the capacity of living together in peace ... Catalonia has never had or wanted two segregated linguistic communities, Spanish was never forbidden. Sociolinguists around the world have stressed the peaceful way this bilingual community lives together. Some years ago, the PP, a right-wing party in opposition at the time, started a deliberate attack against Catalan schools and the use of languages, claiming that the Spanish language was being marginalised. The truth is all youngsters brought up in Catalonia end their compulsory schooling speaking both Romance languages fluently (TV3, 2018).

The lack of mutual understanding is not recent; this is a recurrent feature of the democratic period, with highs and lows. There was no pedagogy about an autonomic State and no construction of a plural State, even if the official discourse claimed there was. Nothing has been done to educate Spaniards in this plurality. It is not the fault of Spaniards themselves, the blame goes to the politicians, the intellectual circles, the successive governments, both centre-right- or centre-left. What happens now has a long history behind it.

A Peaceful and Inclusive Project

Catalan people, like the rest of Spain, lived through the Basque conflict in anxiety and distress. Catalans never agreed with the violence of ETA. Catalonia also suffered terrorist attacks, and there were demonstrations against the murderers (the Hipercor attack in 1987, or the terrorist attack in Vic in 1991). Catalonia has never supported this way of acting; the Catalan model has always been one of dialogue and pacifism. When ETA attacked, it was usual to hear, from the Spanish Government, whichever party it was, the phrase “nothing can be reached by violence, with dialogue, instead, everything can be discussed”. It has been a great offence to Catalans when, in the months after October, some opinion leaders and politicians (even former socialist ministers) said “what happens in Catalonia is far worse than ETA, it is far worse than terrorism”. In 2018, Rafael Hernando (spokesperson of PP) said: “El adversario son los independentistas, como el enemigo fue la ETA” (Anonymous, 2018). In 2017, Jaime Mayor Oreja said something similar (EuropaPress, 2017). In 2017, Eduardo Inda (director of OKDiario) said: “El nivel de violencia en Cataluña no se ha vivido ni en el País Vasco de los años mas duros. Porque allá podían matar algún juez o algún fiscal, pero tampoco mataron muchos” (Anonymous, 2017).

In 2014, Ramon de Veciana (spokesperson of Unió progressiva y Democràcia a Catalunya) said: “Dos nacionalismos comparten hoy portada: el de Mas y el de los condenados de ETA. De como los nacionalismos tienen un denominador común.” (Veciana, 2014; *Estudis Catalans*, 2015).

Well, one should tell the victims. How many sons, daughters, brothers or sisters of the victims killed by ETA would not prefer a ballot box full of votes instead of the corpse of their parents or siblings? It was both an offence to Catalan people and to the victims of terrorism. The fact that now there are political prisoners, jailed without being tried, under the accusation of rebellion or even terrorism, when other convicts are free on the street, shows that what happens in Catalonia is indeed worse than anything else. The unity of Spain is perceived as sacred, more sacred, it seems, than dialogue and common sense. Manuel Fraga (Alianza Popular) said, in 1977: «Esa unidad es sagrada, y ahí sí que no admitiremos trágala de nadie», (Romero, 2013).

All together, and for the other reasons explained in this issue, things have come to a point where in Catalonia there is a great “disaffection”, that is, a great distance from the Spanish government and from the Spanish State. Many people think: “Enough is enough”, to put it in a colloquial way. There is probably a lot of what might be called a “secondary” separatism, or a separatism due to circumstances, that is, people who, rather than being truly separatists, do not want to belong to the Spanish State as it is now and do not see any other solution but Catalonia’s independence. Ten years ago, genuine independence supporters were a small minority. Since 2010, the number has risen to almost half of the voting population, and it includes people of all geographical origins, social classes and political affiliations. It is a really transversal movement and has sprung from the population, not the political classes. After 2008, when the economic crisis seriously affected Spanish society, separatism took on a certain air of hopeful utopia which helped to maintain courage (to a certain extent) among a part of the Catalan society. Thinking of a new state and how it could be put into practice gave a reason for collective hope. Nevertheless, it was not wishful thinking, but real work: people became active in cultural associations (Omnium Cultural and Asamblea Nacional), made proposals, met in local committees, and created a general atmosphere of constructing a new

society that surprised the political establishment in Catalonia and was not taken seriously in the rest of Spain.

Catalonia's independence is a project of a new State including the whole country and all people. Sovereignty is the crucial word. It is not and it has never been an ethnic project, a nationalism with racist features: everybody is welcome. Catalonia has experienced several waves of immigration, coming from other Spanish regions or, in recent times, coming from non-European countries, mainly African. The reception of newcomers has been made in different ways. The Catalan population is of different origins, but nobody stresses geographical origin as an important feature (Saeed, 2017). Quoting the words of a former Catalan politician, Carod-Rovira:

The debate in Catalonia is not about identity. We are not discussing identity, we are discussing sovereignty. We are not arguing about who each person is, but about who should rule, and those who work and live in Catalonia are the ones who should rule in Catalonia.

Being Catalan cannot be an inheritance nor an imposition. It's a decision, but one that does not force you to renounce other identities you may have brought with you, if you happen to have come from somewhere else (quoted by Vidal Aparicio, 2015).

In recent years, an association of pro-independence Spanish-speaking Catalans has appeared, called "Súmate" (www.sumate.cat), defining themselves as

Catalans of Castilian/Spanish language and culture, who, because of their family background and origins, have kept their cultural heritage, without abandoning their place in the Catalan national community.

The Appearance of Extreme-Right Movements

There is another important issue to take into account: the independence trend has exasperated a latent extreme right, which now acts openly on the streets. The extreme right movements against refugees, immigrants or other inclusive policies that have threatened Europe in recent years and have even reached some Parliaments were almost invisible in Spain, in part because of the lack of real opposition to the consequences of dictatorship in Spain, in part because some right-wing parties had included the heirs of Franco's friends. But when the Catalan independence movement reached its ignition point, several extreme right associations and groups rose in defence of the unity of Spain. The big problem is that, in many ways, the political reaction has been far more permissive with extreme right symbols or demonstrations (the pre-constitutional Spanish flag, swastikas, anti-immigration slogans, etc.), whether or not they included some kind of violence or rioted, than with separatist symbols or peaceful demonstrations. Two peaceful leaders of grassroots associations, (one with a baby) are in jail on remand since November 2017 without having caused any harm or incited any violent action (quite the opposite, they acted to avoid violence in a very crowded demonstration. It is extremely interesting to watch the documentary film about September 20 (Mediapro, 2018a) and about October 1 (Mediapro, 2018b). On the other hand, the assailants of a Catalan cultural centre, "Blanquerna", in Madrid in 2013, who caused many injuries, were convicted of violence and sentenced to prison were immediately let free, under the pretext that they

were fathers of young babies (Ferrer, 2017). As are Catalan prisoners, accused of terrorism and not yet brought to trial (Omnium Cultural, 2018). The extreme right has taken to the streets in defence of the unity of Spain, which does not mean, of course, that all unionists are extreme right-wing supporters. However, the extreme right is exclusively unionist; it fights against all kinds of national difference, languages or diversity, which includes, of course, immigrants or refugees (Streck, 2018).

What is really worrying is that many so-called unionists who would never embrace the ideas and aims of extreme-right groups, no longer hesitate to demonstrate alongside them, or to make political alliances with them. For some of them, the unity of Spain is more important than corruption, inequality, xenophobia, economic failure or human rights. When most of these groups speak of unity, they mean uniformity, that is, they attack the Catalan language or Catalan laws, and, as said before, they spread fake news about Catalonia across Spain to create a climate of Catalanophobia. It is sadly true that, in the rest of Spain, being openly against Catalonia wins many votes, since there has not been any real fostering of national diversity, as stated before. No political party wants to lose votes even if they have to discard the truth along the way.

Consequently, people who are not in favour of Catalan independence but who are democrats and see the gaps in Spanish politics have a very weak basis for feeling comfortable. It is true that there is some very faint support in the rest of Spain. It is also true that a new trend is gathering steam in Spain against the monarchy and in favour of a Spanish Republican State, (how Catalonia or the Basque Country would fit into that Spanish Republic, nobody knows). Many people who want social changes agree with the possibility of a legal referendum in Catalonia on its political future and, consequently, they would accept any result, but many others still deny the right of Catalan self-determination and claim the unity of Spain to be pre-eminent. The fact that many of these, however democratic, underestimate the force of extreme right movements is really worrying.

A European Challenge

For that reason, some people have been saying, since the beginning of the conflict, that the solution is not a purely Catalan one: it means a change in Spanish politics, not only of territory, but also of internal self-awareness (Ribó, 2017; Crónica Popular, 2019; Larsen, 2018). Indeed, we could go even further: the Catalan conflict raises questions about the meaning of Europe, of national states as they are, of regions and languages and certainly of population and immigration or refugee policies. Catalans have always said that they want to belong to Europe: Catalonia, a new European State. Nowadays, the European spirit is failing. To which Europe do Catalans want to belong? To a Europe that denies the right to learn and speak autochthonous languages, as happens in France, for instance? To a Europe that builds wire fences on borders and allows people to drown in the sea? Certainly not.

In the eighties, at the beginning of the European Union, there was a serious trend all over the continent towards a “Europe of Regions”, especially fostered in some Catalan circles. The different communities of France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, Belgium or other countries which spoke non-official languages and preserved long lasting traditions, became hopeful of being acknowledged beyond the inflexibility of the great national states. There seemed to be a different frame of understanding, where ordinary borders would vanish, as they do in the Schengen Area, in favour of a more open, flexible and locally based system of

decision-making and the recognition of difference. This discourse has long been lost somewhere among the good intentions of a few politicians. Europe has based its strength on the balance between some very powerful states and has made very few changes to the idea of statehood itself.

Nowadays, one of the reasons for denying the right to self-determination for Catalonia is the fear of a wave of referenda spreading throughout the European regions. In fact, there has been already a similar movement in Corsica, apart from the (older) case of Scotland. If the problem exists (if it has to be seen as a problem!), it means that there is something in the European identity which has not been resolved and remains latent or repressed. The response of France to the diversity of languages and traditions in its territory has been unsatisfactory since the French Revolution, which brought so many profitable changes to the modern world. Spain, which since the 18th century took France as a model both for territorial policies and for cultural ones, has not dealt satisfactorily with the national diversity of the State, even if the past two centuries have been far more turbulent than in France. Apparently, nobody cares for the lessons taught by history.

Therefore, Europe cannot conceal any more the fact that there exist many communities that do not feel comfortable with the political distribution of power as it is now. In Catalonia, some unionist political leaders used an intellectual argument against separatists, according to which the idea of nation belonged to the 19th century and not to modern times (Peces-Barba, 2010). In 1986, a member of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española said that speaking Catalan is a limitation (quoted by Vicent Partal, 2018). Catalan nationalists were thus old-fashioned emotional romantics, opposed to the bright reasoning of modern enlightened intellectuals. Apart from other possible arguments against this point of view, ironically, it applies exactly to states as they are perceived nowadays. Modern European states and the idea of indivisible nations which some of them (like France or Spain) claim as the only model possible, are in fact a result of the 19th century and of the first half of the 20th. If nowadays they do not provide a useful frame for the people (or at least a considerable part of the people) living in them it means that they are not the best political solution. Imagining a united and cooperative Europe means, perhaps, taking into account the plurality and diversity of languages and communities and providing a suitable way of putting into practice their sensible demands. Denial and repression do not lead to any kind of progress in the long term. Europe is a mosaic of cultures rather than a union of states, and, whatever the political solution to Catalan independence is, it affects Europe not only in terms of accepting a hypothetical new State, but also in terms of rethinking its political organisation. The ancient idea of a Europe of regions should therefore perhaps be reconsidered.

Conclusion

The Catalan conflict, with all its faults, has shaken the foundations of the establishment, both in Spain and in Europe. A conflict, when it is not violent, is not bad in itself. Ideas and renewal appear only after crisis and conflict. There are many questions raised by the Catalan situation, questions on the meaning of legality when half the voting population oppose it, on the meaning of politics, when instead of negotiation and political action the Central government reacts with police, judges, trials and jail; on the meaning of the very idea of nation and state and, especially, on the meaning of freedom and democracy in Europe. It is not an isolated case: it is perhaps the reason to think positively about the construction of a new European order.

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Corresponding author: Montserrat Camps-Gaset

Contact e-mail: mcamps@ub.edu