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# The Politics of Belonging: Complexities of Identity in the Catalan Borderlands

Jouni Häkli

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**Abstract:** The rise of the European nation-state system profoundly influenced the map of linguistic and cultural minorities. Catalonia in north-eastern Spain is no exception. The consolidation of the Spanish and French kingdoms during the 16th and 17th centuries left Catalan speakers without political and cultural sovereignty. Furthermore, in the Treaty of the Pyrenees of 1659 the Catalan homeland *els Països Catalans* was divided by the Franco-Spanish border.

Today, Catalan culture and politics enjoy increasing latitude in both Spain and France. This has encouraged various forms of cross-border co-operation in the Catalan borderlands. It also has led many Catalan nationalists to expect still greater political autonomy. Some activists have voiced claims for independence and even the re-incorporation of the Spanish (*el Principat*) and French Catalonias (*Catalunya Nord*). However, political tensions regarding the borderland's development exist between the local actors and the Spanish and the French national governments, as well as between Catalan nationalists and the population at large.

This article examines these tensions first by looking at cross-border co-operation efforts in Catalonia, and second by assessing the visible markers of identity that Catalan nationalists have placed in the border landscapes. These are contrasted with the results of a survey charting the opinions and attitudes of "ordinary" Catalans. The article argues that there are significant cleavages among Catalans, and that the era of the nation-states has left a legacy of complex loyalties at international frontiers.

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## INTRODUCTION

Much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could well be regarded as the age of the nation-state (Spruyt, 1994; Hirst, 1997). The first two decades of the century saw several new states emerging in the aftermath of the First World War. These "successor states" were the realisation of the new ruling idea of international law: the principle of national self-determination (Herb, 1997). The Second World War witnessed outbursts of nationalism on an unprecedented scale, and ended up reinforcing the existing divisions in Europe and around the globe. However, the devastation caused by two major wars also underlined the necessity for systems that help restrain and alleviate tensions between nation-states. European integration, in its various forms, can partly be understood as a contribution to these efforts with the ultimate goal of sustaining peace in Europe (Heffernan, 1998). Progressing integration, with the European Union as its apex, has also fostered an increasing number of economic, political and cultural relations and activities directed across existing state boundaries (Häkli, 1998c; Scott, 2000).

In consequence, many previously hostile or socially 'frozen' borderlands between European nation-states have turned into lively playgrounds for various local, regional, national, and international actors, representing a variety of interests (Donnan and Wilson, 1999; Perkman, 1999). This has led some commentators to argue for the gradual erosion, or even disappearance, of the state boundaries erected since the peace of Westphalia in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Ohmae, 1991; Pettman, 1996; Appadurai, 1996). Moreover, the "borderless world" discourse has gained strength from the growing orthodoxy concerning the contemporary world economy (Hirst, 1997; Newman & Paasi, 1998). Borders seem to mean less and less in an informational economy and

society, where knowledge, information and capital move around the globe with astounding ease and speed.

However, while in Europe and elsewhere some borderlands certainly are approaching the condition of being borderless, in other regions the development may not proceed with equal speed, or it may even take the reverse direction, as in the newly established states of the former Eastern Europe and the Baltics (Graham, 1998). Hence, to avoid unwarranted generalisation regarding the development of the European borderlands, it is crucial to take the borderland context into account (Häkli and Kaplan, 2002). In practice, this means paying attention to the historical development of the politics and culture of the borderland, as well as the contemporary social and economic conditions under which various forms of cross-border co-operation take place. The latter may include different perspectives on the border and its meanings: those who are institutionally involved in official cross-border co-operation tend to view the borderland differently from those who are committed to nationalist goals. The rather extreme views of the latter, again, may differ considerably from those of the "ordinary" borderland denizens, for whom the borderland merely represents an everyday environment marked by certain physical and social characteristics.

The relevance of actors' perspectives in understanding the evolving European borderlands is well illustrated by the case of Catalonia. This article first looks at the position of Catalonia as a borderland, and at the forms of cross-border co-operation in the region. The official cross-border relations are then contrasted with the discourse of Catalan nationalists, especially by assessing the visible markers of identity that Catalan activists have placed in the border landscapes. The tensions existing within civil society are then examined by comparing the nationalist symbolisms with the results of a survey charting the opinions and attitudes of "ordinary" Catalans. The article argues that there are significant cleavages among Catalans, and that Manuel Castells' thinking on the social bases of identity in the contemporary world may be useful in attempts to understand this variety. In conclusion it is acknowledged that the era of the nation-states has left a legacy of complex loyalties at international frontiers, and that people's sense of place is a social power that should not be underestimated in the analysis of European integration.

## **CATALANS: A BORDERLAND PEOPLE**

The Catalan borderland between Spain and France is an apt example of the significance of context in the development of borderland relations. In regard of distinctive language and culture Catalonia could well be an independent nation (e.g. Pi-Sunyer, 1980; Graham, 1998). However, the heyday of Catalan political independence lies far back in history, the age of prosperity under the kingdom of Aragon in the 16th century. Since then, Catalonia has been subjected to the currents of geopolitical rivalry between the Spanish and French ruling dynasties, and later, state governments (Sahlins, 1989; Brunn, 1992). For example, the treaty of the Pyrenees that ended the Thirty Year's War between Spain and France in 1659 meant the division of the traditional Catalan homeland, *els Països Catalans*. The major part of Catalonia remained within Spain but the northern part, *Catalunya nord*, was annexed to France (García-Ramon and Nogué-Font, 1994).

While the two states basically reached an agreement on the limits of their sovereignty when signing the Treaty of the Pyrenees, two centuries passed before the border actually materialised in the form of border stones. The delimitation of the border was reached in the Treaties of Bayonne (1856/1866) and only after that was the border strictly

controlled. Nevertheless, as Peter Sahlins (1998) aptly shows, many village communities in the Pyrenees insisted on their separate national identities and territories well before the boundary was defined. Hence, the sense of separate nationality was premised more on the emerging ideal of territorial sovereignty, and its local experience, than the national boundary itself. In fact, instead of merely separating people, the delimitation of the boundary paved the way for border crossings and co-operation between the Spanish and French Catalonias.

This is still the state of affairs in the Catalan borderlands today. Both Spain and France have a Catalan speaking minority, even though the political and economic position of the Spanish Catalonia, *el Principat*, far exceeds that of its northern counterpart (Mansvelt-Beck, 1993). In fact, the strength of the *Comunitat Autònoma de Catalunya* (Autonomous Community of Catalonia) among the Spanish regions does not really merit the label of minority for Catalans. In France, the state has pursued centralist policies much more successfully, and consequently the Catalan language and culture have had to make significant concessions to the standard French language, manners and systems of education (Mancebo, 1999).

Given the legacy of division of the Catalan territory, the deep roots of Catalan culture, and the region's current economic prosperity and political autonomy, one could estimate that cross-border co-operation will soon erase the boundary between Spain and France, or *Catalunya* and *Catalunya nord*. Adding to such expectations, both Spain and France are Schengen countries that no longer make border checks on people and goods coming from other member countries. Moreover, the European Union has for long encouraged and financed cross-border co-operation in various forms (e.g. the Interreg, Phare and Tacis programmes). Finally, Catalonia is one of the more active European regions with a marked interest in forging relations of co-operation with partners in other European countries (Guibernau, 1997). In consequence, Catalonia is currently part of such trans-national alliances as the "Euroregion Catalonia, Midi-Pyrenees, Languedoc Roussillon", "the Pyrenees' working group", "the Four Motors for Europe", "the Mediterranean arc", and others.

In all, the scene seems to be set for the gradual erosion of the boundary between Spanish and French Catalonia. Many of those involved in cross-border co-operation would surely testify to the prospect. Examples of successful projects are many, ranging from sister cities' exchange of experience and information to local cross-border co-operation in areas such as the annual vehicle inspection, water treatment, and the development of tourism (Roig, 1997). Larger scale projects range from a programme for exchange and mutual learning under the banner of Occitan culture, to lobbying for a high velocity train connection running through Barcelona and Toulouse (e.g. *Carta d'acció*, 1993). In all of these official cross-border co-operations the boundary is an irrelevant element that can and should be transcended.

This is also essentially the message of Catalan nationalist organisations, most of which would agree that Catalonia is "still legally occupied and colonised by the Spanish and French states" (Consell Nacional Català, 2001). However, while the unity of the *els Països Catalans* may be a shared goal, the means of achieving it, as well as the meaning attached to territorial unity, differ significantly. Whereas the Catalan nationalists are free to design provocative political programmes and proclamations, actors representing more official views are necessarily less radical and more inclined towards the accommodation of various policies and considerations, including those of the national governments. Therefore, while the latter usually talk about cross-border co-operation, or at best regionalisation (e.g. Serratosa, 1997; Vallvé, 1997), the nationalists' rhetoric often centres on no less than an independent Catalan state (e.g. Maulets, 2001).

## WRITING THE NATION IN THE BORDER LANDSCAPE

The political history of Catalonia, and especially the loss of autonomy during the dictatorship of General Franco 1939-1975, have provided a fertile ground for the emergence of numerous nationalist groups. Even the largest and most influential party in Catalonia, the Convergence and Union (CiU), could be labelled nationalist. However, the CiU is led by the long-standing President of the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, Jordi Pujol, who is known to be a moderate politician acting within the Catalan tradition of 'pactism' (Genieys, 1998). Therefore the term nationalist is here reserved for those activists who are less inclined to negotiation and formal representative politics.

Before the death of Franco all nationalist groups were forced to operate underground. This accounts for their manifold and frequently changing names and compositions. Still today there are numerous organisations with more or less nationalist agendas -- far more than can be listed here. Among the more prominent and visible organisations are *Consell Nacional Català* (CNC), *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), *Plataforma per la Unitat d'Acció* (PUA), and *Unitat Nacional Catalana* (UNC). Prominent youth organisations include *Coordinadora d'Estudiants dels Països Catalans* (CEPC), *Maulets*, and *Joventuts d'Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (JERC).

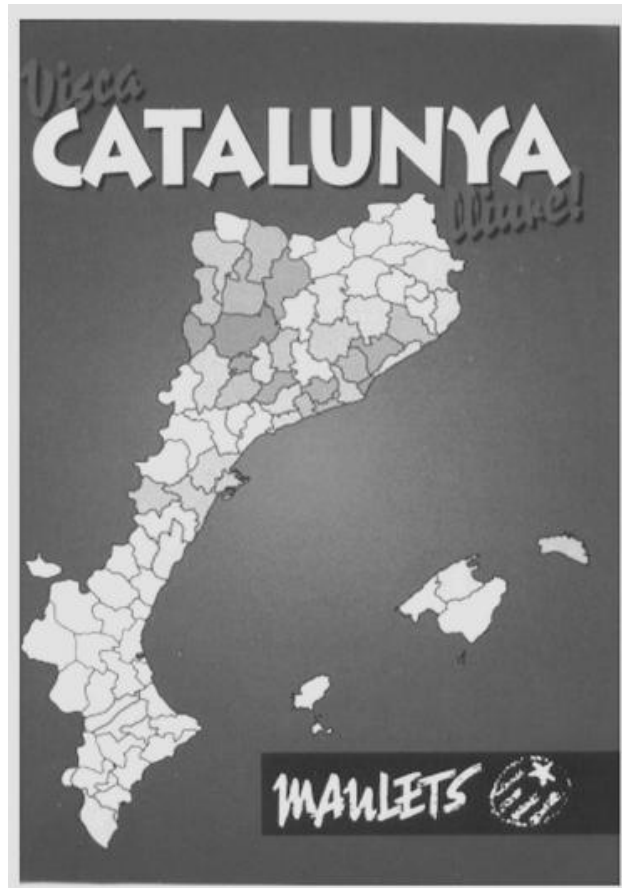
Most of these organisations seek to make their messages visible in territorial terms. Geographical research on nationalism has shown that territory is more important an element in the construction of national identities than studies have generally acknowledged (e.g. Nogué, 1991; Paasi, 1996; Hooson, 1994; Herb and Kaplan, 1999). Joan Nogué (1998) has distinguished at least seven dimensions through which territory may acquire significance in the construction of national identities. These include cartographic representation, education in geography, the definition of national boundaries, internal regional divisions, ideological landscapes, the idea of national character, and the protection of nature. I have elsewhere argued for the need to take both the textual and physical landscapes into account in the analysis of nationalism. The concept of *discursive landscape* points at the intersection of narratives describing national histories, images portraying the homeland of national communities, and the instalment of national symbolisms in physical space (Häkli, 1999).

The inscription of national symbolism into a landscape is a historically and geographically multifaceted process. Landscape is a socially constructed way of seeing, experiencing, and interpreting particular things and events. The relation between nationalism and cultural landscape can be addressed by focusing on these structured aspects of landscape, by looking at the ways in which things and events are systematically drawn to signify nationhood (on representative landscape, see also Duncan, 1990; Graham, 1998). The fact that there are certain textual or text-like materials through which this can be done -- the result of reading and writing national space -- justifies the term *discursive* in connection with landscape (Häkli, 1999).

However, the perception and interpretation that make up a landscape always take place in some material and cultural contexts. Therefore a more substantive understanding of space underlies the concept of discursive landscape. National landscape is not only read off from nature and culture, it is also written therein. The discursive landscape evolves dialectically when national symbols, which assume their meanings in and through the historical narratives of a nation, are concretely inserted into the very landscapes they describe (Kaplan, 2000).

A discursive landscape is also what the Catalan nationalists are constructing, more or less intentionally. *Els Països Catalans*, the Catalan linguistic and cultural area, is a

spatial concept that simultaneously points to the shared cultural history of Catalan speakers, and a definite geographical area (consisting of the Autonomous Community of Catalonia, the northern parts of Valencia, the eastern parts of Aragon, the Balearic Islands, the Principality of Andorra, the French Roussillon, and the Sardinian town of Alghero) (Guibernau, 1997). It is the cartographic image of this area that the nationalists frequently use to make the point of the unity of Catalans (Figure 1). Moreover, both the concept and the image of *els Països Catalans* underline the artificiality of the boundary between Spain and France.



**Figure 1.** Els Països Catalans as portrayed on a map (Source: the website of 'Maulets' 2001)

The message of unity across Catalan countries is literally written into the border landscapes of Catalonia. The landscape is physically very distinctive because the border mainly runs along the highest elevation of the Pyrenees. Moreover, the Catalans perceive themselves as a mountain people. This underlines the role of the Pyrenees as a cultural bridge rather than a physical divider between the Spanish and French Catalonias. The Pyrenees also occupy a central place in Catalan historiography. It was the mountains and monasteries that protected Catalan culture, first against the intrusions of Moorish conquest in the Iberian peninsula that lasted until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and later, against political oppression by Madrid seeking to convert Catalans to the dominant Castilian culture and language (Laitin *et al.*, 1994). Little wonder, then, that the Pyrenees accommodate many of the landmarks of Catalan identity, such as the monasteries of Ripoll and Montserrat, and the mountain peak of Canigou (Nogué, 1998). Even the traditional Catalan cuisine *Mar i Muntanya*, which combines game with seafood, recognises the existence of mountains as a central constituent of the Catalan identity.

Hence, the border-crossing points located in the mountain valleys of Cerdanya, Coll d'Ares, Coll del Portús, and Coll de Belitres make up a perfect location for the insertion of nationalist symbolism. Slogans like “neither France nor Spain”, “free Catalonia”, or signposts with Spanish and French names written over and replaced with Catalan names are typical elements in the Catalan border landscapes (Figures 2 and 3). Not even the sign of the French region of Languedoc-Roussillon is left untouched, as it is reminiscent of a provincial division originating in the French state, rather than the Catalan tradition. For Catalan nationalists the region is Catalunya Nord, or in French, Rossello.



**Figure 2.** Now defunct border crossing point on the Coll d'Ares (Photo by J. Häkli, 1999)

Certainly, the Catalan border-crossing points do not exhaust the geographical extension of the Franco-Spanish boundary. But symbolically they are among the most significant landscapes for Catalan nationalism. Border-crossing points are particular locations where nationalist discourses seek to erase the legitimacy of the state boundary. Yet, they are not the only instances for dispute centred on the border between France and Spain. The efforts by Catalan nationalists to deconstruct the border discursively may also take place through urban demonstrations, strategically placed banners, informal meetings, or the Internet, just as easily as they can find expression written upon the Catalan border landscapes.

The symbolic aspect of boundaries points at their thoroughly social and cultural nature: boundaries are not mere political lines marked in geographical space. Rather they are constructs that exist in various social practices – those of individual people as well as institutions (Sahlins, 1989; Paasi, 1996). Moreover, from the discursive nature of national boundaries their multivocality follows. Borders acquire different meanings for people involved in different social functions and practices (Häkli, 2002). Catalan nationalism is one very noticeable, and visible discourse with obvious implications regarding the border. However, there are other conceptions of the border in civil society. It is to these that we shall now turn.



## POPULAR VISIONS OF THE CATALAN BORDERLANDS

Identity was one of the most used and least theorised catchwords of the cultural studies literature of the 1990's (Paasi & Häkli, 2001). It is still frequently used in attempts to understand the multi-layered and sometimes overlapping feelings of community and belonging in various social and spatial groups. While identity is a useful concept for discussing spatial group formation, it should be kept in mind that the word in itself explains little. Rather, the concept of identity can be seen as a constituent part of the very discourses that form imagined communities. For example, the government of Catalonia frequently makes reference to the 'Catalan identity' in official texts and publications, and undoubtedly does so in an attempt to reinforce the sense of 'Catalanness' among the population (Guibernau, 1997).



**Figure 3.** A signpost written over at a border crossing point of la Guingueta d'Ix in Cerdanya valley (Photo by J. Häkli, 1999).

Yet, as the nationalist discourse on borderless Catalonia shows, there are alternatives to such governmental visions. There are also several indications of tensions existing between these two and the more popular visions of the Catalan borderlands. One interesting example is the result of an interview questionnaire made in the Catalan borderlands in 1999. Altogether 360 borderlanders were interviewed, 77 on the French and 283 on the Spanish side of the border. The interview charted people's border



crossing frequency and motives, and their opinions about cross-border co-operation and relaxed border control in Catalonia. It also elicited the respondents' future expectations regarding the disappearance of the border, as well as their understanding of the borderlands as a cultural and geographical unity.

The questionnaire interview was carried out in counties (*comarques*) adjacent to the border, and in all major cities. The results reveal that border crossing is a frequent activity for most of the people. Roughly one third of the respondents said that they cross the state border at least once a month, and some 40 per cent at least once a year. The remaining one third said that they never cross the state boundary. The most common motive for border crossing was either leisure or shopping.

Hence, it is not surprising that the Catalan borderlanders generally view the relaxed border control in positive terms. Roughly two out of three people on both sides of the border said that the increasing permeability of the state boundary is a favourable development. The respondents also think positively about co-operation across the border. Variation in the answers according to proximity to the border was only slight. However, in Cerdanya valley the share of positive attitudes was lower than anywhere else. This is likely to reflect the tense relations among the residents of the valley, which historically has frequently been a zone of conflict between villages and nationalities (Sahlins, 1989; Mancebo, 1999). Nonetheless, the answers to these two interview questions seem to support the governmental and nationalist idea of a borderless Catalonia emerging across the Franco-Spanish boundary.

However, some questions in the interview clearly revealed that the dividing function of the state border between Spanish and French Catalonias is still very much a reality for many people. For example, when asked what place names best describe the borderlands seen from where the interviewee lives, an integrative term was used by only 20 per cent of the interviewees on the Spanish side, and 22 per cent on the French side. The remaining respondents used a name that continues to recognise the border. Arguably, the discursive landscape of *Els Països Catalans*, capable of challenging the traditional national communities of Spanish and French Catalonia, is not yet in existence in the Catalan borderlands. It seems that the nationalist ideal of a 'Greater Catalonia' is not shared by most of the population living in the area.

Another discrepancy in the visions of the Catalan borderland was revealed when people were asked how much they actually knew about institutional cross-border co-operation. While more than half of Catalan borderlanders knew that some forms of cross-border co-operation exist, there were very few who could specify an example. Moreover, when asked if they knew about the practical functions of cross-border co-operation, and how to participate, the overwhelming majority answered negatively. Thus, there seems to be little in the official co-operation that "ordinary" Catalans can identify with. While border crossing is a commonplace activity for many, as part of people's everyday interaction, this can be done without any need to question the relevance of the border of the traditional identities connected to it.

## **CONCLUSION: IDENTIFICATIONS NEW AND OLD**

Several tensions and cleavages exist in the politics of belonging among the different groups of Catalan borderlanders. Mostly these arise from different aspirations and attitudes toward the Catalan borderland and territory connected to the actors' particular social practices and projects. While we can certainly understand and respect this variety, it is more difficult to see how all these different social and cultural dynamics could be seen as interlinked with, or arising from, the contemporary local and global conditions.

In this respect Manuel Castells' (1997) idea of three different types of identification may be useful in unravelling the complexities of belonging at the Catalan borderlands.

According to Castells (1997, pp. 66) *legitimising identities* derive mainly from states' institutional structures. They are the result of the era of the nation-states characterised by increasing powerful and interventionist state government that provides the population with citizenship rights, and rationalises its domination by producing and reproducing national identities. These identifications still seem to hold strong in contemporary Europe, despite the intensifying integration process. People have not been willing to surrender their traditional loyalties, at least as long as the state remains the primary provider of their citizenship rights (Dijkink, 1996; Hirst, 1997).

*Project identities* are typical for actors who are engaged in new kinds of social networks, activities and projects (Castells, 1997, pp. 8). Those who are actively participating in future oriented projects tend to identify with the realities they are constructing. They seek to redefine their position, and ultimately transform society by constructing new identities. Cross-border co-operation between institutional actors could well be seen to give rise to project identities. Such co-operation may produce visions of trans-national regions emerging in the borderlands through institutional networks (e.g. Scott, 2000). However, to the degree that this vision is shared by a restricted group only, project identity is also confined to a small circle of active participants in the projects of co-operation (Häkli, 1998a;b).

When yet another perspective is adopted – one that does not have to share the optimism of the managers of co-operation, nor the inclination to the status quo of the “ordinary people” – it is possible to distinguish the third form of identification. According to Castells (1997, pp. 66) *resistance identities* are formed in reaction to the dominant forces that seem to be marginalising actors and eroding significant local traditions. The fervent enthusiasm of the Catalan nationalists, and the emphasis they place on the traditional connection between people and homeland, may easily be interpreted in terms of resistance. Not only are they resisting the oppression by the Spanish and the French national governments, but also the official discourses of cross-border co-operation that merely introduce new layers of government into the Catalan borderlands, instead of striving for a more radical territorial reform.

The complexities of belonging in Catalonia and other European borderlands might easily be dismissed as a passing phase on our way toward an integrated Europe. However, it is unlikely that the politics of belonging will be over any time soon (Dijkink, 1996; Wilson and Donnan, 1998, Appadurai, 1996). The ethnic, cultural, and political map of Europe is so diverse, and crossed by so many boundaries, that while old borders are being crossed, new tensions are also likely to arise. Additional cleavages exist between the visions and intentions of the various social actors and groups that are active participants in the negotiation of the meanings of borderlands.

Social and cultural inertia embedded in people's connection with territory, the sense of place, is a much more powerful intervening force than the professionals of integration in Europe and elsewhere may have expected. As it is unlikely that ‘Europeanness’ will soon emerge as a singular cultural identity, it is safe to argue that the politics of belonging will persist in Europe. Instead of merely appreciating the fact, we should seek to analyse its roots and consequences, balancing carefully between ‘Castellsian’ generalisation and sensitivity to local contextuality.

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