

The symbolism in Spanish football illustrates that Catalan and Spanish identities are not necessarily incompatible

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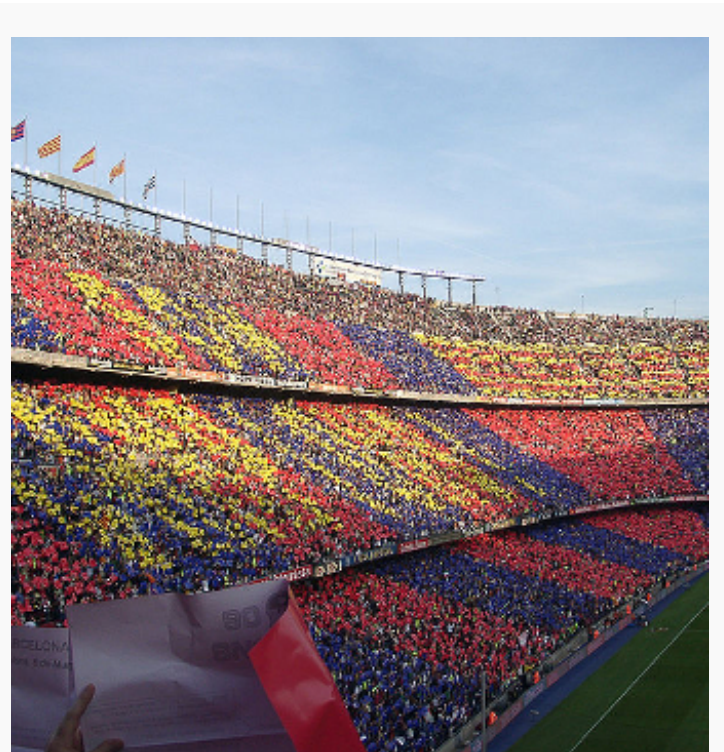
This weekend Spain's two most successful football clubs, Barcelona and Real Madrid, will play each other in Spain's national football league. As [Alejandro Quiroga](#) writes, the fixture between the two sides – commonly referred to as 'el clásico' – has increasingly become associated with the issue of Catalan independence. However he argues that support for the Spanish national team among citizens in Catalonia highlights that Spanish and Catalan identities are not necessarily incompatible.



On 26 October 2013 FC Barcelona will play Real Madrid in the Spanish league. The match will be preceded by its usual media hype and broadcast all over the world. Beyond legendary sporting rivalries, this year's *el clásico* is to retain its customary political connotations.

For decades a good number of Barça supporters have defended Catalan nationalist postulates. These fans have tended to see FC Barcelona as the representation of modernity, democracy and Catalan traditions, whereas Real Madrid have been associated with backwardness, authoritarianism and the Franco dictatorship. Real Madrid fans, on the contrary, have understood their club as quintessentially international and modern. With no apparent contradiction, they have also conceived Real Madrid as a Spanish national symbol and accused Barcelona of harbouring separatist feelings.

In fact, Barcelona and Real Madrid are more alike than they would like to acknowledge. They are both economic giants with international fan bases, competing for world-wide football markets. They have also hugely benefitted from the economic support of regional and city council administrations in Barcelona and Madrid and the generous funding of powerful construction companies and banks – the latter closely linked to the Spanish political elite.



Camp Nou, Credit: DJ Lucifer (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Besides, over the years, Barcelona and Real Madrid have received more than 50 per cent of the Spanish league's TV revenue, just between the two of them. In the last decade, this economic and political inequality has led to a sort of 'Scottishisation' of Spanish football, where the 'big two' seem to play in a league of their own. Unsurprisingly, no other team but Barça and Real Madrid has won the league since Valencia did in 2004.

In the field of national identities, however, stereotypes and feelings are much more important than economic inequalities. Traditionally, Catalan nationalists have used the Barcelona versus Real Madrid games as a showcase to foster their political demands internationally. Yet the rapid growth of the Catalan pro-independence movement in the last five years has led to an unprecedented political use of football at Camp Nou, Barcelona's stadium.

Barça's president, Sandro Rosell, may not be the ardent secessionist his predecessor Joan Laporta was, but he has

joined Catalanist demonstrations and lent the Camp Nou for pro-independence rallies. Additionally, Barça's board of directors have publicly advocated the creation of a Catalan national football team to compete in international tournaments.

These symbolic actions are pretty much in line with the discourse of Catalan political and media elites who have recently opted for the creation of a Catalan state within the European Union. Yet it is difficult to measure to what extent this new secessionist narrative is entrenched in Catalan society. Research has shown that there is a sharp contrast between the discourse of the Catalan establishment and the way Catalan citizens feel in the realm of identities.

By and large, Catalans are [more fluent](#) in their multiple identities (Catalan, Spanish and European), more generous when asked about solidarity with other Spanish autonomous communities, and more willing to keep the current constitutional system than is indicated by the discourse of most Catalan political parties and media. Nonetheless, it is also undeniable that, in recent times, support for an independent Catalan state has rapidly grown out of grassroots movements that have incorporated into their discourse the narrative of Catalanist political and media elites.

Catalans' multiple identities have been expressed during the celebrations of the recent victories of the Spanish national team. Spain's victory in the Euro 2012 final, for instance, reached a TV audience of 75 per cent in Catalonia, a share that demonstrates that the Spanish national team was hugely popular in the Principality. Street parties, a profuse display of Spanish emblems, patriotic chants and balconies adorned with Spanish and Catalan flags made it clear that many Catalans strongly identified with the Spanish *selección*.

The popularity of the Spanish national team has to be understood within this context of fluent, multiple identities in Catalonia. Some analysts have pointed out that the 'Catalanisation' of the *selección* was crucial for marketing the Spanish national team in Catalonia. Although there is some truth in the observation that the high number of Catalans in the team and the *selección*'s Barça-like style of play were important, the popular support showed in Catalonia for the Spanish national team should not be read as the exclusive by-product of the 'Catalanisation' of the team.

Clearly, the process of Catalanisation made the *selección* more acceptable to some Catalans with misgivings about what Spain still represented in Catalanist imagery. Yet the popularity of the squad in Catalonia has to be interpreted against the background of a symbolic universe and a national narrative that has promoted identification with Spain over the years. The Spanish media, Spanish governments and the *selección española* all contributed to create a mental frame of national identification with Spain at different levels.

Dual identities are possible because this Spanish frame of national identification is not perceived as incompatible with a complementary frame of national/regional identification with Catalonia. Hence, long-held dual identities facilitated the unproblematic identification of many Catalans with the Spanish squad in [2008](#), [2010](#) and [2012](#). Support for the *selección* fitted well into the predetermined mental frame of Catalans who felt attached to Spain.

Moreover, this support is not incompatible with cheering for FC Barcelona when playing Real Madrid. After all, the simplistic reading of *el clásico* as a Catalonia versus Spain game does not hold much water. Still, Catalan nationalists' identification with FC Barcelona should not be dismissed. For many supporters Barça is the national team of Catalonia and games against Real Madrid will, most probably, be increasingly politicised as the pro-independence movement grows.

A hypothetical secession poses a number of difficult questions in footballing terms. Would FC Barcelona play in the Spanish league? Would Barça have to compete in a Catalan league? Would FC Barcelona lose its Catalanist connotations should a Catalan national football *selecció* compete in international tournaments? Could Catalan players play for Spain should they wish to? One can only speculate about an independent Catalan state and its sporting repercussions, but it seems more than likely that football will remain a conduit to elaborate, transmit and recreate Catalan and Spanish identities in Catalonia.

A longer discussion of this subject can be found in the author's book, [Football and National Identities in Spain: The Strange Death of Don Quixote](#)

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