

Spanish and Catalan nationalism and their relevance for Flanders

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The present conflict between the Catalan government of Carles Puigdemont and the Spanish central government headed by Mariano Rajoy can be considered in a broader perspective as a clash between two kinds of nationalism. On the one hand, Spanish state nationalism. On the other hand, the nationalism of a sub-state, or as Montserrat Guibernau would describe it, the nationalism of a nation without state.³⁷ Each of these nationalisms strengthens itself and tries to overcome its internal divisions and contradictions by alterity discourses, representing the other as a ‘critical’ one, menacing directly the own identity and project.³⁸

The present Spanish-Catalan conflict and the nature of both nationalisms can only be fully understood if one takes into consideration the whole historical track and more specifically Spain’s 20th century history, the experience of civil war and four decades of Francoist dictatorship. No wonder that one of the main issues at stake is and will be in the nearby future the Spanish constitution of 1978, a product of the uncomfortable balance of power, once described by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán as a ‘balance of weakness’. According to the scrupulous observer of Spanish politics, the dictatorship was too weak to continue its enterprise facing an opposition too weak to impose a clear break. The outcome of this situation was not only the Amnesty Law of 1977 – the so-called ‘Pact of forgetting’ - and in the economic field the Pacts of Moncloa of 1977-1978, but also this constitution that formalized the violent destruction of the Second Republic and reintroduced a monarchy as the dictator foresaw and meticulously prepared. This long dictatorship and the transition to democracy give a special character to the present conflict and to both nationalisms as they are expressed today.

Españolismo

With the push of the Catalan nationalist parties for a separate state in the Spring of 2017, Spanish nationalism has been revived. This nationalism always existed in a very outspoken form of what Michael Billig called ‘banal nationalism’, ready to be cranked up each time it

³⁷ Montserrat Guibernau, ‘Nations Without States: Political Communities in the Global Age’, *Michigan Journal of International Law*, Vol. 25, 4, 2004, pp. 1251-1282. Montserrat Guibernau, ‘Catalonia: Nationalism and Intellectuals in Nations without States’, in: Montserrat Guibernau & John Rex (eds.), *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Migration*, Cambridge, Polity, 2010, pp. 138-155.

³⁸ For the concept of ‘critical other’, see: Anna Triandafyllidou, ‘National identity and the ‘other’’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 21, N° 4, 1988, 593-612. For the process of alterity discourses on the case of the Flemish and Walloon national movements, see: Vincent Scheltiens, *Met dank aan de overkant. Een politieke Geschiedenis van België*, Antwerpen, Polis, 2017.

seemed convenient to the ruling powers in Madrid.³⁹ A very peculiar and almost forgotten example of this move from ‘banal’ to ‘hot nationalism’ happened in July 2002 when Spanish Legion troops launched a military attempt to take over the tiny uninhabited Perejil Island, located at barely two hundred meters of the mainland coast of Morocco. This so called Romeo-Sierra Operation boosted a wave of Spanish nationalism and anti-Moroccan racism linked to the presence of Moroccan immigrants in the peninsula.

This Spanish nationalism - ‘españolismo’ - is a strong right-wing state nationalism that fundamentally does not accept the development of regional identities and languages that are treated with disregard. This disdainful attitude can be compared with the attitude of the Francophonie in the young Belgian nation state when for the first time an embryonic Flemish ‘movement’ formulated some linguistic demands.

Facing the Catalanist claim that their region is a nation, this Spanish nationalism states that there is only one nation, Spain. Its epicentre is Castile and its tendencies are centralism and unity. Both in the Spanish as in the Catalan nationalist narrative this viewpoint was imposed in 1714 with the end of the Succession War and the victory of the Bourbon monarchy. This monarchy – still ruling today with Felipe VI – replaced the House of Habsburg and banned the local traditionalist institutions, especially those in what today is Catalonia. It was the sour price Aragonese leaders had to pay for being on the losing side in the Succession War.

Basically, it prolongs Franco’s adage, ‘España, una, grande y libre’ and finds today its best political defenders in Ciudadanos and, of course, the Partido Popular, fighting each other today for hegemony in this right-wing, nationalist Spain. By the way, this does not mean that the latter should be categorized as Francoist, despite the fact that the PP managed to retain the support of the far right and to avoid – which is unusual in contemporary Europe – the creation of a significant autonomous far right political party, and despite a uninterrupted direct link from late Francoism over the Alianza Popular (AP). The AP was created in 1976 by seven people out of whom six had held cabinet-offices during the dictatorship and experience a second start in 1989 as the present-day PP, but still with ex-Francoist ministers among its leaders, such as Manuel Fraga Iribarne,.

Keystones of this Spanish nationalism are the monarchy, the army and the Roman Catholic Church. All three of these openly conservative institutions have to supervise Spain’s unity and the integrity of its territory. This explains their antipathy towards every proposal to discuss the constitution of 1978, whether it is coming from moderate nationalists or from the left opposition, which, in Spain, is overwhelmingly republican. Undoubtedly it plays a role in the categorical refusal of ‘Madrid’ to negotiate with a democratically elected and thus legitimate regional government that represents minimally fifty percent of the residents of Catalonia entitled to vote. It can also explain the harsh treatment of members of this regional government and leaders of social movements, including locking them up.

³⁹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism*. Michael Billig, *Banal nationalism*, London, Sage, 2010 [1995]. The taking of Perejil Island and its consequences in boosting nationalism could be compared with Margareth Thatcher’s assault on the Malvinas in 1982.

This treatment not only questions the degree of penetration of the concept of separation of powers. The degree of entanglement between king, army, church and political elites also questions the existence of the separation between church and state. During the Holy Week, Spain's government – through its Minister of Defence – ordered to fly the flags half-mast on every barrack in the country... to mark the death of Jesus Christ. During the same week members of the PP government, catholic leaders and high rank military sung together the unofficial anthem of the Spanish Legion called 'The Fiancé of Death', adapted for processions during the Francoist epoch.

Catalanism

In opposition to this nationalism, Catalan nationalism has a very popular and politically left-of-centre dimension with a strong mobilizing capacity and with outspoken republican convictions. Differently from Spanish nationalism it covers a political spectrum from centre-right to extreme-left, but counts no far-right segment.

In its identity construction victimhood during democratic setbacks in general and above all during the Francoist dictatorship plays a central role, although historically this victimhood cannot be considered a persistent, continuous positioning. At least it is counterbalanced by the idea of superiority towards Spain, which it regards as backward. Thus, Enric Prat de la Riba, leader of the first Catalanist party, the conservative Lliga Regionalista, introduced, in *La nacionalitat catalana* (1906), the notion of imperialism as a positive concept that distinguished the high culture of the natural nation that Catalonia was supposed to be from the lower culture of Spain.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, the 20th century shows a sequence of mostly violent abolishment of Catalan autonomy, with persecution of its leaders, each time democracy was replaced by authoritarian regimes in Spain. In 1914 the same Prat de la Riba became leader of the first type of self-government, the Mancomunitat, dissolved when in 1923 Alfonso XIII installed a 'dictatorship with a king' led by general Primo de Rivera. The second Spanish Republic reintroduced Catalan autonomy (1932) but when a year later the right wing won the elections this autonomy was abolished. Lluís Companys, leader of the autonomous Catalan government, had proclaimed independence – as a defensive reaction against the right-wing take-over – and would be later executed. After obtaining their autonomy again in 1936 when the left won the elections, they lost it dramatically by losing the Civil War. Then followed almost four decennia of uninterrupted repression, including the prohibition of speaking the Catalan language.

⁴⁰ Enric Prat de la Riba, *La nacionalitat catalana*, Barcelona, Biblioteca Popular, 1906. E. Ucelay-Da Cal, *El imperialismo catalán*. Prat de la Riba, Cambó, D'Ors y la conquista moral de España, Barcelona, 2003.

As in earlier episodes the actual Catalanist push towards independence was triggered from 2010 onwards when the central government of Madrid rewrote the Statute of autonomy of Catalonia from 2006, and rejected – among many other articles - the definition of Catalonia as a nation. In the Catalanist representation, this attitude joined up with the earlier repressive interventions.

Of course, Catalonia has its variant of ‘selfish nationalism’ characterised by the aiming of more prosperous sub-states at independence from the nation state in an attempt to put an end to the solidarity with poorer regions inside that nation state. In this discourse, solidarity is seen as unilateral, uneven, unfair and something that must be ‘limited’. It is the kind of nationalism that appeared in the 1980’s in Northern Italy with the Lega Nord and that also can be recognised in Flanders in the discourse of the New-Flemish Alliance (N-VA) and - in an extremist, distorted view – the Vlaams Belang (VB). In both discourses – the North-Italian and the Flemish one - the North has been systematically contrasted with the South as a healthy northern society facing a corrupted ‘southern’ state.⁴¹ In the Flemish variant, a discursive association is made between the South and poverty, prodigality, profiteering, Latin mentality, socialism. On the Catalan political level, it is clear that the discourse of the centre-right nationalists (PDeCAT, see below) contains elements of this so-called ‘selfish’ nationalism.

On the other hand, the ranks of Catalan nationalists have been reinforced by common people, victims of the harsh austerity policies adopted by the central governments – especially since the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and its fallout. The ‘specificity’ of Spanish austerity politics is that it goes along with a quasi endless string of corruption affairs in which high rank figures and administrations of the alternating leading parties (social-democratic PSOE and PP) are involved.

A jump into the abyss. Two fatal Catalanist miscalculations

On October 10th, presenting in the Catalan parliament the results of the independence referendum of October 1st, Carles Puigdemont declared “the independence of Catalonia in the form of a republic” and announced - exactly eight seconds later - the suspension of this unilateral declaration of independence (DUI).

In the afternoon of October 27th, Catalan parliament voted for independence with 70 votes in favour, ten against and two neither of these. Twenty-four minutes later the Spanish government announced the application of article 155 of the constitution, dissolving Catalan autonomy and taking over control of the entire Catalan administration, a radical measure confirmed almost immediately by the Spanish Senate.

With its unilateral declaration of independence (DUI), the government of Mr. Puigdemont, was forced into a path going much further than he and his colleagues – politically described

⁴¹ Michel Huyseune (ed.), *Contemporary Centrifugal Regionalism: Comparing Flanders and Northern Italy*, Brussels, KVAB, 2012. Michel Huyseune, *Modernity and Secession. The Social Sciences and the Political Discourse of the Lega Nord in Italy*, New York / Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2006.

as *pujolists* - ever wished. This current, embodied by Jordi Pujol who managed to lead the Catalan government during 23 years, never had a fully independentist project in mind. Instead it aimed at a federalization of Spain with as many competences and as much financial autonomy as possible for Catalonia. It built its dominant position in Catalan politics through a practice of bargaining with the successive central governments in post-Francoist Spain, regardless of their conservative or social-democrat composition. The strong and muddy entanglement between pujolism and Catalan business sectors (real estate development, tourism...) and capital flight ended in a judicial conviction of Mr. Pujol and some of his family members. This crisis of pujolism and the debate on the Statute of Autonomy drove this current into a disastrous flight forward.

By the standards of two fundamental criteria – and because of two errors on the part of the Catalanists - this political project can be said to have capsized.

First miscalculation: Europe

The accomplishment of the Catalan nationalist project was always considered as a uppermost ‘European’ undertaking. This is no exception. In many sub-nations, nationalist movements, for instance the Flemish one, represented their situation as being imprisoned by the ‘obsolete’ nation state, longing for the promising supra national entity Europe, where in a ‘Europe of the people’ freedom and prosperity would be reached. In that sense, one could consider Europe as what Pille Petersoo in her typology of ‘otherness’ called the ‘positive external other’.⁴²

In their discourse Catalan nationalists presented themselves as ‘more European’ than Spain, expressed in the metaphorical image of a nation sitting with its back towards Spain and with its face towards Europe. Implicitly, this discourse connects with the contemptuous phrase, falsely attributed to Alexandre Dumas, that ‘Africa begins at the Pyrenees’. This point of view was in the 20th century internalised by Spanish reactionaries who were opposed to the spread of liberal ideas from Europe and more specifically France (against the ‘afrancesados’), but also – in a sarcastic if not cynical way – by progressives criticizing the backwardness of Francoist Spain, comparing its economic and cultural situation with what were then called ‘underdeveloped countries’. The quite early industrialization of Catalonia and its corresponding share in Spain’s gross domestic product provided this Catalan self-image with a material foundation.

Unfortunately for the Puigdemont-cabinet (composed by his PDeCAT, the former CDC following the CiU created by Mr. Pujol, and the centre-left nationalist ERC) the European institutions as well as each of the member states refused even to consider any form of recognition of the would-be independent nation state. Scarcely one hour after the independence vote, on October 27th 2017, the president of the European Council, Donald

⁴² Pille Petersoo, ‘Reconsidering otherness: constructing Estonian identity’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 13, 1, 2007, pp. 117-133.

Tusk, stated on Twitter that *‘for the EU nothing changes. Spain remains our only interlocutor. I hope the Spanish government favours force of argument, not argument of force’*.

Like the reaction of the EU against the attempt by Alexis Tsipras’s government to renegotiate Greece’s debts and to obtain some oxygen for a more neo-Keynesian economic approach, also this time the reaction was unanimously negative. In this contemporary supra-national Europe not a single breach is permitted in the wall cemented by a neoliberalism with increasing authoritarian features, leaving no sovereignty in key questions.

Here, it looks like the leading actors of the Catalan ‘process’ underestimated the changes in the European context of the last two decades. With the disintegration of former Yugoslavia and the implosion of the USSR, the Europe of the beginning of the 1990’s was eager to welcome and recognize new states. It then symbolized the definite and total victory over a long standing enemy during a war, even if it was the Cold War. Europe’s weather forecast was in those days sunnier than today, after the financial crisis, its unilateral monetarist construction, its neoliberal austerity measures and – especially among large parts of the population of its member states in the South – its loss of credibility following the social and democratic deficit that these policies engendered. Nowadays this European construction is facing major problems affecting seriously the EU’s self-image as guarantor of peace and prosperity with its harsh approach to refugees, the threat of terrorism, the reintroduction of internal borders, the rise of far-right and racist political entities participating in and even controlling government in countries like Poland, Hungary, Austria...

In this inauspicious context, the approval of a nationalist project and its admission to the EU would trigger other nationalisms. It would destabilize the member states involved and indirectly the European project, since the latter is fundamentally based on and led by those member states.

Second miscalculation: economic anchorage

The second miscalculation of the leading actors of Catalonia’s roadmap to independence is indissolubly linked with the first one. Even before the independence vote in the Catalan parliament, hundreds of firms announced they would move their administrative headquarters to cities outside Catalonia or threatened the government with this intention. Of course, this does not lead immediately to a loss of employment and it is quite difficult to move vineyards or bank agencies, but symbolically the signal is crystal-clear. Large parts of the Catalan business world are not prepared to follow the independentists in their DUI, jeopardising trade and turnover positions as well with Spain as with the European Union, facing in a worst case scenario import duties and other avoidable barriers and obstacles. Few sectors of society are as internationalist as members of boards of directors and shareholders...

This intention or threat to move outside Catalonia shows in a clear way the absolute failure of an old idea in nationalist discourse: the necessity and possibility of ‘economic anchorage’.

In this way, the recent Catalan experience teaches other nationalist project very wise lessons about do's and don'ts.

Justicialization and two legalist logics

It was the deliberate choice of the Rajoy-cabinet and its allies, Ciudadanos and PSOE, to justicialize a political conflict. Indeed, Spain's legalistic logic tells us that the Catalan government violated the constitution with its DUI. This legitimized the implementation of the famous article 155 of that same constitution that allowed Spain to take over control of Catalonia and dismantle its elected institutions (parliament and government). Even the imprisonment of members of government can be legitimized on the base of this rectilinear logic.

But on the other hand, utilizing exactly the same legalistic logic, the Catalan government can legitimize its roadmap to independence. It obtained a majority in the 2015 regional elections (although not in votes, obtained an overwhelming majority in the independence referendum of October 1st 2017 (although not a participation of a majority of people entitled to vote) and, finally, it obtained a new electoral majority... precisely in elections held under the so-called '155-regime' and ordered by... 'Madrid'.

Following the legalistic logics in both camps, each accuses the other of having organized (or at least attempted to organize) a coup d'état.

Right to self-determination and secession

This brings me to the following problem: the right to self-determination. On the one hand this right is recognized by the United Nations: people have the right to choose their sovereign and international political status with no interference. After the First World War this right was advocated as being inalienable by politicians as different as the US president Woodrow Wilson (in his 14-points proposal) and the first Soviet-leader, Vladimir Lenin.

But practically, except for the recent case of Ethiopia, not one single constitution in the world authorises any form of secession, e.g. unilateral declaration of independence. Weaker forms as greater autonomy, federalisation, etc. depend mostly of majority rule, which means that in the Catalan case the whole of Spain should decide on independence for Catalonia, an idea that is not at all acceptable for the Catalan nationalists... precisely because it fails to respect the right of *self*-determination.

Between those two positions, Spain's absolute right of say and Catalonia's DUI, the left opposition (Podemos, En Comú Podem, the Mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau...) defends the proposal of a 'negotiated referendum'. However, this position is – also in the international media – largely neglected as a consequence of the harsh polarisation. And in the meantime, any move towards any kind of secession decided inside the sub-nation will be judged by the ruling state – and its legalistic logic – as an illegal act, if not a criminal one.

Belgium and Flemish nationalists

It is interesting to compare both nationalisms with other processes in Europe, such as Belgium-Flanders, and to unfold the many common features but also some important objective and subjective differences. Without aiming at completeness, it is interesting to stress some important differences.

First, Flemish people are no minority in Belgium, they are numerically a majority, living in a territory and an economic area that is more prosperous than the rest of Belgium. This is why the strategy of the main forces inside the Flemish movement advocated the seizing of power inside the Belgian state in order to satisfy their demands. This strategy ‘in three stages’ started in the 19th century when it was banking on a more positive demographic evolution. Rhythmed by the gradual democratisation (suffrage), it would guarantee Flemish political power inside Belgium and the fulfilling of Flemish demands. Today, the strongest party in Belgium’s federal government is the Flemish nationalist N-VA, leading among others the departments of the Interior (Home Affairs, the police forces), Defence (the armed forces), Finance. Can anyone imagine Mr. Puigdemont on behalf of the PDeCAT controlling Spanish armed forces or Mr. Junqueras on behalf of the ERC controlling the Guardia Civil or determining the penitentiary policy of the Spanish kingdom?

Secondly, historically Catalan and Flemish nationalism occupied completely opposite positions. During the Interbellum Catalanism went left and defended the Republic against its right and far-right enemies. Flemish nationalism embraced corporatism and far right ideology and practices. Concretely, on April 1st 1939, when Franco officially proclaimed himself as victor of the Civil War, tens of thousands of Catalans disappeared in exile or in Francoist prisons, while the Flemish nationalist press celebrated Franco’s triumph. While large parts of Flemish nationalism collaborated actively with the Nazi-German occupier, Mr. Companys was extradited by the French puppet regime of marshal Pétain and Nazi-Germany to the Franco-dictatorship. Many were the republican Catalan people fighting in the French resistance or trying to survive in the concentration camps.

Partly as a consequence of this essential mistake of Flemish nationalism, the Left ended up as Belgian patriotic. The improper episode during wartime strengthened an already existing identification of Flemish nationalism with right wing political positions and the rise of N-VA, for example, stimulated a kind of Belgian patriotic feeling, known as ‘Belgitude’, characterized by its emphasis on ethnic diversity, solidarity, optimism, peaceful celebration. Considered as ‘anti-nationalist’, this expression of soft-nationalism, is almost the opposite of the Spanish nationalism as described above.

Another consequence of these positions is that many actors of the Flemish Left – inside the social-democracy, the green party and the very pro-Belgian former Maoist party - read the Spanish-Catalan conflict through Flemish glasses. Especially, since it is clear that the Catalan politicians in exile are logistically supported by members of the N-VA, those left wingers tend to condemn the Catalan nationalist aspirations and to agree with the legalist

discourse and practice of the Rajoy-government. With this tunnel vision they lose from sight and – unintentionally? – approve a government that chooses the judicialization of a political problem, that favours intimidation and repression instead of dialogue, that tends to use the conflict to distract attention from the many corruption affairs, that tends to strengthen its position while its social-economic policy is the opposite of what every Left government should be doing.

Incompatibilities

In today's Belgium – with the N-VA giving priority to social-economic issues – metaphorically explained as the Flemish demands put away 'in the fridge' – there is no significant political force working in the direction of Flemish independence. Unlike Catalan nationalism, elections are not turned into a plebiscite for independence as there are no plans to organize a referendum on that matter. This can be explained as a pragmatic conclusion of the fact that not even a quarter of the Flemish population would be in favour of independence of the sub-state. To this pragmatic attitude we have to add today the 'Catalan lessons': the EU will not welcome a Flemish state and the Flemish entrepreneurs will not be eager to leave Belgium and to jump into the abyss.

By the way and in connection with the above-mentioned political pragmatism, it is noteworthy that the N-VA, as strongest party in the Belgian government and controlling the Flemish government, does not force the recognition of independent Catalonia. Instead of using its position of power and taking an exemplary stance in Europe, this solidarity with Catalanism remains logistical and mostly symbolic, but apparently effective enough to protect the party from existing internal and external critics.

Finally, not everything differs between Catalan and Flemish nationalism. The N-VA continues to stress the idea of Belgium as two conflicting, incompatible democracies, increasingly separated economically, culturally and politically... The same discourse was built up in Catalonia over the years (except that in Catalonia not everyone was prepared to represent Spain as a 'democracy'). One day, the commonsensualisation of this representation could be in Flanders the starting point for a leap forward... or backward.