

Secession in Spain: Catalan identity and nationalism

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Following the 2017 referendum, which the Spanish Government declared unconstitutional and a unilateral action on the part of the regional government of Catalonia, the Catalan regional government issued a declaration of independence. The Spanish Government responded by arresting prominent Catalan leaders, dissolving the regional government, and calling fresh elections. Although the immediate constitutional crisis has subsided, the underlying political issues remain unresolved. The Spanish Government continues to maintain that its territorial integrity is non-negotiable, while many Catalans continue to advocate greater autonomy or independence.

Robert Cooper's categorization of states into Post-modern, modern and failed states, with postmodern states which do not perceive security threats in the traditional sense and modern states as more anchored to *raison d'état* conception is useful when we see the rather muted reaction in Great Britain to the Scottish Referendum which though defeated came very close to success. In stark contrast was the Spanish reaction to the Catalanian attempts of secession and the rather traditional Spanish interpretation of sovereignty. This came as a shock to some commentators as did the muted stance of the European Union. The peculiarity of development of "nationalisms" in Spain is an interesting study. It is useful to briefly look at the various theories employed in the study of Nationalism and the unique history of Catalonia to develop an understanding of the events which unfolded post the October first referendum.

Nationalism is an essentially contested concept; the many theoretical standpoints which purport to explain this political phenomenon adopt diverging first principles which can lead more to confusion than conceptual clarity. This may be due to the fact that nationalism is not only a category of analysis but a category of practice as well. For simplification we utilize David Brown's categorization of the various theoretical standpoints on nationalism into three streams; Primordialist, Structuralist and Constructivist.

a) primordial standpoint, according to Brown, sees nationalism as a political assertion of the primordial community, the emphasis is on *instinct*. It sees it as arising from the "natural" in group preference (Pierre van Der Berghe, 1995). Political socialization into pre-existing ethnic and national groups (Walker Connor, 1994; David Horowitz, 1985) leads to formation of these bonds which are not amenable to rational explanation (Geertz, 1973). These include what Anthony Smith has termed as "perennialist explanations". Adrian Hastings too explains nationalism in primordialist terms and sees latter day nationalism as awakening what was already solidly there (Hastings, 1997). This approach indeed goes back to the romantic nationalism associated with Herder and Fichte.

Conflict is said to arise when existent political boundaries mismatch with the primordial ethnic community. Minority has the chance to assimilate and associate itself to claims of common inheritance a task which is promoted by the state in its state building exercises, but the weakening of the state apparatus in post cold war era has decreased the cohesive ability of the centre thus we have seen the assertion of the periphery.

b) structural standpoint, According to Brown the structuralist standpoint sees nationalism as a response to changing structure of the global economy, the emphasis is on *interest*. It relies on the liberal argument of individual pursuit of self-interest. For the realization of self-interest individuals resort to forming groups or functional aggregations (Don Ronen, 1979). Motives often arise from similarity of interests because common

culture leads to similar responses (‘beneficial and equal interactions with others are likely to lead individuals to identify with the interactive community’) but these are not as primordialists suggest unamenable to rational analysis but can be understood and are open to manipulation by elites. Unequal interactions between such groups united around common interests lead to manufacture of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy. The group affinity which appears to individuals as the most utilitarian is the one which is emphasized the most. Modern nations arose because they made good economic sense.

Gellner’s contention of congruent rise of industrialisation; which offers incentive for cultural standardization, and nationalism (Gellner,1983), Hobsbawm’s thesis of nation as a requirement of capitalist development (Hobsbawm,1992) and Benedict Anderson’s correlation of modern nationalism with the cultural homogeneity promoted by “print capitalism” which facilitated the rise of the ‘imagined community’ of the nation state rely on the structuralist explanation (Anderson,1991).

Spread of Industrialisation via colonialism and reaction to it led to spread of nationalism from its homeland in Europe. According to Hechter; unequal industrialisation within nation states and accompanying “cultural division of labour” lead to development of peripheral nationalisms; asserting themselves against the metropole’s exploitation of the periphery’s resources (Hechter,2000).

The contemporary surge of nationalism is thus a reaction to contemporary restructuring of the world economy and the growing obsolescence of established nation state as capable economic unit in the context of globalisation and emerging responses to it like the regionalization experiments like the European Union.

c) constructivist standpoint, nationalism as the new myth of certainty to counteract the insecurities and anxieties generated by modernity and globalisation, emphasis on *psychological ideology*.

It sees the function of nationalism as the provision of a stable identity to individuals in a world fraught with instability. It is a ready-made template which solves problems of individual’s isolation by allowing him membership to a defined and distinct community. It confers a readymade vision of the world, problems it faces and its solutions (Kedourie 1994).

Nationalism thus serves a psychological function for individuals. It may be harnessed by the elites for their benefit but the emotional response it engenders among ordinary people is an indication of the emotional function it fulfills, which is often manipulated by some to further their aims.

The fragility of the sense of self or ego is well served by the prescription of fixities nationalism provides i.e. it aids self-labelling and self-construction. (Frosh,1991)

The assertion of common ancestry and existence of national community, a kinship implicit in nationalism is a “regressive narcissism” the longing for the sense of security one feels in one’s dependence on ones parents in infancy, a security which the feeling of kinship with one’s nation creates in one. Common ancestry is family writ large and emphasizes oneness and is a convenient construction to solve the anxiety of loss of one’s parents and escape from complexities and ambiguities of the real. (Fromm, 1955)

Whenever nationalism promotes the myth of sameness and the myth of permanence more effectively than other forms of identity it becomes more salient politically and socially.

What Baumann (2003) has called the fluidity of modernity and its social disruptive nature has decreased the stability in life extensively; globalisation and the time-space warp it creates have indeed reduced the few fixities men clung to.

In political terms it provides a powerful formula for the elite dispossessed to regain political salience and masses a sense of community which they observe as decaying.

Among the above approaches in my view the current resurgence of Nationalism in Catalonia can be better understood in terms of identity. Globalisation has heralded an era of massive social and political reconfiguration chief among them being the unprecedented international economic integration, the weakening of the traditional nation state and shift of decision making further away from the masses to regional integration projects like the European Union and International Organisations. This has to a great extent led to uncertainty and instability which has seen re-emergence of ideologies which in essence serve as Schelling points for people to rally around. These may be seen as attempts to assume greater control of their futures in times when decision-making seems to be going further away from the people. The aim of assumption of greater control of their destiny and the more stable identity provided by these more local nationalisms is one of the reasons for these sub-national revolts.

Development of Catalan Nationalism a retrospective

Catalonia like many other regions of Spain has had a strong consciousness of difference. When did this orientation which was in general terms described as ‘the differential factor of Catalonia’ become politically significant? Of special importance in my view are the developments of the late nineteenth century which resulted in the politicization of the Catalan identity and the advent of Catalanism; a belief in Catalonia as a distinct entity from the rest of Spain.

Historian Alessandro Barbero (2004) traces the development of the “peculiar features that are today recognizable in Catalonia” that is its more European character than rest of Spain and its cultural similarities to South of France to the development of the Spanish Marches or *limes Hispanicus* by the Frankish Carolingian empire while the rest of Spain was under the rule of the Ummayyads of Al Andalus. These marches were the result of forays of Holy Roman Emperors into the Iberian Peninsula beginning with Charlemagne himself. By 810 the Emir of Cordoba had recognized the Frankish dominion up to the Ebro River and the resultant frontier province or March was administratively linked to Kingdom of Aquitaine.

Traditional historiography looks at the marriage between Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon and through this the personal and dynastic union of Crown of Aragon and Castile in 1469 as the beginning of the Kingdom of Spain. There was a gradual expansion of the Christian states and subsequent unification of the major part of the Iberian Peninsula under the authority of the Crown Castile and Aragon. The localized elites of various regions of Spain were accommodated through many devices which took the form of various local administrative arrangements, differential laws and charters called *fueros*. These special privileges included differential tax laws, military draft laws, laws governing nobility and some measure of local government.

The Spanish Empire in the New World can be seen as a collective enterprise of the Spanish Nation with *conquistadores* from all regions of Spain playing a major role in expansion of the domains of Spain at the expense of the indigenous peoples of the Americas. In fact many prominent Conquistadores like Francisco Pizzaro, Hernan Cortes, Pedro de Alvarado and many others belonged to what might be called the peripheral regions of Spain. It is interesting to note that the decline of Spain as a world power and an imperial power also marks the growth of discontent among the various “nationalities” of Spain.

The War of the Spanish Succession and accession of Felipe the fifth saw the promulgation of Nueva Planta decrees by which he cancelled the special privileges of the territories of the Crown of Aragon (which included

Catalonia) for supporting the claims of his rivals. It also marked the adoption of a more pronounced centralizing tendency by the Spanish crown which had been shorn of its territories in other parts of Europe. There was bitter resentment in the regions of the crown of Aragon over the loss of their ancient charters. Catalan nationalists often looked back at this incident as proof of domineering tendency of Castile trampling the unique institutions of Catalonia.

The nineteenth Century marks the start of politicization of the regional identities. The French Revolution and its ideals swept across Europe. Spain had a direct experience of tumult initiated by this event in the form of the Napoleonic invasion and occupation. The idea of a more centralized nation modeled on the post revolutionary France took hold of the Spanish liberals. The gradual disintegration of the Spanish empire had brought despair in the minds of the intelligentsia who saw the precepts of Liberalism as the silver bullet for their national woes. A centralized nation was seen as a step towards progress. This however was a cause of concern for many influential groups in Spain who preferred a more culturally plural Spain (Smith, 2014). On one hand were the federalist republicans who saw Spain as plural and heterogeneous and were averse to a monolithic Spain, on the other were the cultural elites of the peripheral regions who saw their special privileges and heritage being tampered with by the novel centralizing fervor of the Castilian state. The Catalan elites did see a stake in overarching narrative of Spain as a nation propagated by the Madrid elite but saw Catalan history and heritage as unique and equally important . The streak of differentialism got magnified in the coming years.

The three Carlist Wars fought in the nineteenth century over the form and substance of the monarchy in Spain involved a major element of regionalism. Nominally these wars were fought between forces which wanted the accession of Infante Carlos of Spain to the throne of Spain as an absolute monarch and Liberals who supported Isabella the Second's right to the throne. More substantively it was a contest between the Liberals who wanted a constitutional monarchy, reduced role of the Church, unified laws and jurisdiction all over Spain and Carlists who supported a more orthodox version of the monarchy and Church. The regionalists were interested in preserving their unique privileges which they had acquired over the centuries of development of Spain as a nation under the monarchy based in Castile. In the First Carlist War the Basques and Catalans were firmly on the side of the Carlists and their aim of the return of an absolute monarchy which they saw as protective of their special interests and regional individuality. The liberal victory led to the reduction of Basque home rule regulations. (Smith, 1966)

A short war the Second Carlist War was primarily confined to Catalonia and was a minor affair compared to the other two. The liberal victory in the Third Carlist War led to the establishment of a unified jurisdiction all over Spain ending the special tax laws and military draft laws and other privileges of several regions. This led to great consternation among the regionalists but a conception of national identity distinct from Spain had not yet crystallized among the Catalans.

Special attention should be given to some factors like; industrialisation of Catalonia at a faster rate than the rest of Spain which led to divergence of Catalanian interests and what was thought to be national interests by the government in Madrid and the Catalan language which provided the background for a separatist consciousness.

Industry: Incumbent industrialisation of an agricultural economy is often shaped by the form of agriculture practiced in that economy thus industrialisation took divergent forms in different regions of Spain. Catalonia's specialized agriculture especially vineyards were commercially linked to the market. The presence of such mercantile traditions and proto-capitalism helped faster industrialisation of Catalonia. A robust cotton and wine export industry soon developed in the region. Textile industry centered in urban areas; supplied by cheap labour from the hinterland; helped by protectionist policies flourished in the region. Industrialisation and attendant

social realignments played an important role in the development of Catalanism. Rest of Spain with the exception of the Basque country was industrialised at a slower pace due to unique features of the agricultural economy practiced there.

The centralizing Castilian state and its espousal of Free trade policies especially after the 1869 Budget (ironically the work of Laureano Figuerola a Catalan) was a cause of concern for the protectionist industrial bloc in Catalonia. Catalan industrialists were protectionists and were averse to this dogmatic free trade being peddled by the Castilian state. Several protests and deputations over this issue led to furthering of the differential identity of Catalonia not only among Catalans but also among rest of Spain which saw this egoistic pestering as rather selfish.

Language: Catalan regionalism was and is deeply connected to the Catalan language. Nation building process often carries with it a notion of a national language which the centre promotes often, but not always, at the expense of the languages at the periphery. These languages are often relegated to the status of dialect are excluded from school curricula, loss of official patronage often leads to decrease in literary activity in the language as well. The Catalan *Renaixença* or renaissance was a movement of increased literary activity in Catalan which led to greater cultural consciousness among the people of their Catalan identity. It was similar to the *Felibrige* movement in Occitan, closest relative of Catalan which had suffered neglect in France due to prioritization of Standard French by the French State as Catalan had been marginalized by growing importance of Castilian Spanish. There was a deep concern to elevate Catalan from a mere spoken language to a language of literary accomplishment. There were political undertones in the literature of the period; there was a glorification of the unique medieval institutions of Catalonia which were seen to have been destroyed by domineering Castile. Ode to the Fatherland (1833) by Bonaventura Aribau captures this motif of a desire of giving Catalan and Catalonia their rightful place. The Floral Games or the annual poetic competitions which were long standing tradition were formalized. The “Dante of Catalonia” Verdaguer reinvented the literary tradition in Catalan by using the modern idiom and style in his creations as opposed to the archaic forms used by the poets of floral games. There was popularization of Catalan literature among the masses. There was also proliferation of a vernacular theatre movement and working-class choirs, thus the language movement had reached a wider audience. From the elite circles of few intellectuals and litterateurs linguistic revivalism gained credence among the masses. A language is repository of symbols and a potent source of identity. The linguistic revival movement was initially, not intrinsically political but it led to a clearer conceptualization of the Catalan identity for the Catalan people. Language politics remained a controversial issue to date and an area of constant contestation.

Ideologies and Politicians: Catalanism initially tended towards moderate regionalism quite similar to many other provinces of Spain, its turn towards pronounced nationalism and separatism began with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was and has been a broad church with both leftist and rightist politicians sympathetic to differentialist aspirations. The ‘Liberal’ centre; the heir to the centralizing Bourbons was seen as an aloof, modernizing force destroying unique political institutions of Catalonia this fueled a considerable rightist response which centered around the Church particularly the see of Vic, and clergymen like Morgades and Torres i Bages. On the left were the Federalists like Pi y Margall, who supported Catalanian aspirations but were wary of the emotional content of Catalanism. Pi’s disciple Almirall modernized Catalan nationalism and gave it its characteristic anti-Castilian flavor, he favored a catch all Catalanism which will not get bogged down in ideological differences. Almirall’s thesis can be found in his 1885 *Memorial to Alfonso XII*. Castile represented by the decadent politicians of Madrid; was an aloof law-maker sapping the vitality of an energetic Catalonia. Almirall asserted the existence of a distinct identity and personality of Catalonia which was prior to

the union with Spain and had persisted ever since. Catalonia was ‘positivist, analytical and rooted in liberty’ while Castile was dominated by a penchant for abstract thought. Castile in its zeal for centralization was responsible for the decline of Spain. Thus it was still a moderate thesis which eschewed strict separatism. We see the coming of nationalism in the *Cathecism* of Prat de la Riba who as a conservative saw Catalonia as demanding the greatest claim of loyalty from Catalans as it was their fatherland or *patria*. He envisioned federative arrangements for an autonomous Catalonia within the structure of the Spanish Monarchy and not a revolutionary separation from Spain but his thesis was definitely an espousal of Nationalism and not mere regionalism. This program of home rule within Spanish state formed the core of Catalanism till the Second Republic.

The crystallisation of regionalism and politics of difference in Catalonia, Basque country and to some extent Galicia followed a similar pattern of deepening resentment at centralizing policies of the Madrid elites and its responses from the periphery. The role played by the regional elites, industrial interest and instability caused by various developments, wars and industrialisation in the crystallisation of these regional identities and politics associated with it by the early twentieth century does give credence to David Brown’s emphasis on the constructivist explanation of nationalism as psychological ideological constructions which provide security in a changing world for the masses and a means for disrupted regional elites to remobilise support.

The distinctive and differentialist identity of Catalonia had taken a political turn at the end of the century.

Political Developments of the 20th century: The two periods of authoritarian rule in Spain (under Primo de Rivera and under Franco) which shared monolithic imaginings of Spain as a nation were characterized by considerable hostility towards sub-nationalist aspirations while democratic periods saw political assertion of sub-nationalism which was acquiesced to by the centre.

Primo de Rivera’s politics of ‘anti-politics’ was marked by a deep distrust towards professional politicians who in his opinion had ruined Spain while he positioned himself as someone dedicated to his ‘country, religion, monarchy’ who had assumed the reins of Spain to protect her from squabbling politicians who positioned their interests above their country. He viewed regionalists as professional politicians propping up separatist movements for their own interests, unconcerned by the fact that they were causing great damage to the unified vision of Spain.

Republican Spain’s grant of autonomy to Catalonia post-Rivera was mostly due to political considerations. This overt separatism was deeply resented by nationalists who in the Spanish Civil War and later saw regionalists of all shades as enemies. Catalonia remained in republican control for the longest period. Again we see regionalists were on the side which was more receptive to their aspirations of greater autonomy as has been the case in the Carlist wars of the nineteenth century. Nationalist saw all the wellsprings of regional identity with suspicion. As a consequence regional languages were heavily suppressed in the following decades. Even the relatively higher level of industrialisation of these areas was seen as a cause of separatist tendencies in these regions. This anti industrialism can be seen in the strange request by the Nationalist General Emilio Mola to the Luftwaffe commander Sperrle to annihilate Basque industries so that a clean ‘agrarian Spain’ could be built. Industry was seen as the source of ideologies of communism, trade-unionism and even separatism which were against the Nationalist imaginings of Spain (Preston, 2004). The Southern feudal background of most Nationalist Generals contributed to this feeling. The quicker industrialisation of Catalonia and Basque country were to a great extent responsible for what Hechter calls unequal interactions between these regions and rest of Spain which led to the development of sub-nationalisms in these parts.

The Nationalist victory in Spain and the resultant Franco regime was an era of repression for regionalists. The memory of the Civil War era was not only kept alive by the Regime but it also informed its policies. For the Nationalist victors it was a lesson which had exposed the enemies of Spain. In this almost Manichean view of things protestors of various kind making demands on the regime were enemies and part of a conspiracy against Spain. Liberals and professional politicians were responsible for the decline and division of Spain. Regionalists were not only tainted by their association with the Republican Spain they were downright traitorous in the essence of their demands which meant division of the nation.

Francoism too blamed liberalism and ‘inorganic’ party politics as responsible for troubles of Spain, like Rivera regionalists were seen as petty politicians who for their own interests had divided Spain. Francoist Spain’s official history remembered the Civil war as a ‘crusade’ for the unity of the fatherland (Graham, H. 2005). Alternative history of resistance were delegitimized and often suppressed by the state but for many, the memories and trauma of the bombing raids of the Condor legion and the general savagery of the war became major reasons for the separation they felt from what was promoted as ‘One, Great and Free’ Spain by the Francoist government. These memories and subsequent repression of language and autonomy fueled the undercurrents of Catalan identity and aspirations for separation from Spain.

Contemporary Nationalism: a question of identity

The contemporary resurgence of Nationalism in Catalonia in my view can be understood in the context of globalisation and decay of the traditional ‘nation’ state and a need for a more secure identity rooted in a more local context in an era of cosmopolitanism. The time and space compression (Harvey, 1992) occasioned by globalisation has led to a reaction on the part of some people to turn to a more localized and secure identity which may be focused on any of the Schelling points available to people be it religion nation or region. In many cases it is region which provides a richer identity than the established nation state whose civic nationalism may not be enough to secure people in their quest for stability in a cosmopolitan world marked by fluidity.

The weakening of the nation state especially in Europe was also marked by the process of regionalization and integration which culminated in the most advanced experiment in shared sovereignty and multilevel governance known as the European Union. The multilevel governance model was marked by a flow of sovereignty upwards towards Brussels and downwards to local governments. The local governments saw greater delegation of power from the centre under the auspices of the European Union. This ultimately led to greater expectation on the part of regionalist aspirations which were in many cases tasting power which was denied to them in a national context. Thus we see these sub-national revolts have often tried to dissociate themselves from the current nation state but tend to see the European Union with hope. However the European Union has not been as enthusiastic about them especially in the case of Catalonia. European Union for the sub-nationalists solves the pragmatic concerns which may thwart their plans of severing ties from the parent nation. This is especially true of economic costs which might result from secession which were a prohibitive factor for such movements earlier. European Union is viewed as the stabilizer which will ease the birth pangs of a new nation if it were to emerge. But the instability which today stalks the European project itself has led to European Union’s lukewarm response to these sub-nationalisms, as is evident from delayed and equivocal response of Brussels to alleged police heavy-handedness during the October first referendum.

Spain scores a 3 on the 1-5 scale of Arend Lijphart’s Index of Federalism (Lijphart, 1999), so there is considerable scope of deepening of federalism, which can provide greater autonomy to Catalonia within a federal structure. If we view growing federalism as redistribution of sovereignty and decision making at multiple levels we see this process as having already begun on large scale in the European Union experiment.

Deepening federalism by facilitating greater devolution of power downwards and greater recognition of local governance institutions may lead to softer stances on the part of the regionalists. Will this reordering satisfy the concerns of identity? Greater control over decision making may lead to greater sense of control of their destiny among people of Catalonia, which may to some extent address this part of the question.

The manner in which the Catalan question continues to evolve will have reverberations across will have reverberations across Europe as there are many such sub-nationalist movements like the Basque country in Spain, Lombardy and Veneto in Italy, Corsica in France and Flanders in Belgium which are bound to be affected by this crisis. It will also affect the larger debate on secession, separatism and nationalism across the world.

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