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Catalanism: a place in Europe?

If there is one thing that cultural and political Catalanism cannot be accused of, it is that it has been short on Europeanism. It might be said that, cast in terms of a certain innocence, a little too much has been made of this European passion that has been a continually active and present factor in the history of thought and attitudes that, in our country, might be labelled as nationalist.

When all is said and done, our “nationalism” has always been somewhat peculiar: we haven’t believed too much that we are an exceptional country or people, called by destiny, by history or by Providence to play exemplary leading roles, to spread light and reason throughout the universe, to bear the Christian faith across the seas or to build empires. Ours is the nationalism of a fairly modest country and we do not even feel deeply and metaphysically that we are victims of some universal injustice, like the Serbs and the Poles. As for imperialisms of differing magnitudes, it is now even quite amusing to read Prat de la Riba who, inflamed by the ideas doing the rounds at the beginning of the 20th century, preached a curious “imperial destiny” for Catalonia: a destiny, and this is why it is even more diverting

when seen with hindsight, that was necessarily linked with intervention in Spanish affairs and the slightly fantastic image of “Greater Catalonia”. The fact is that a nation of relatively modest dimensions only very seldom seeks for itself —or has the chance to aspire to— active and positive centre-stage roles and to spread a model of its own, so as to influence in any decisive way the course of world events. There are a few cases, but very few. There are also negative starring roles of course —because of some exemplariness in misfortune— but they do not tend to be the result of aspiration or of any project but rather of some fatal error.

In any case, this has not been our history: our history, since a time we might call immemorial, from the different Ramon Berenguers if one likes, has been in its

most positive sense an attempt to find a comfortable position, a place of its own within a broader framework. In the most negative sense, this has brought a tendency to submission and dissolution within this framework. For many centuries Catalonia has been “inside” some or other political structure—whether it be the Crown of Aragon or the Spanish monarchy—many centuries of adjusting to others (are we an “adjusting people” by nature?) comfortably or uncomfortably, and this marks the political behaviour, ideologies and even feelings of identity, which are in good measure tied to our perception of the place we occupy in the world. Perhaps this history is not alien to the *European* and Europeanist vocation of contemporary Catalan nationalism: finding a place *for oneself* in Europe was—and is—simply finding a niche within a comfortable space. It is being, comfortably and without any risk, something other than Catalans. It is as if being *only* Catalans (in the same way that a Russian is only a Russian, a Pole a Pole, a German a German) was not or has not historically been a sufficient and secure enough and complete enough definition *vis-à-vis* the rest of the peoples of the world.

There is another explanation, though, and this is complementary and necessary: frequently the fact or desire to *be Europeans* is something we have seen as our way, or the only way of *not being Spanish*, of not being defined as Spanish or of not recognising ourselves, wholly or partially, within the Spanish identity. Each nationalism unfailingly concocts its own “national ideology”, a set of interpretations, judgements, prejudices and attitudes. And part of our “ideology” assumes and holds—with more or less

objective grounding, which is another question—that the Spanish are not as European as the “real” Europeans and, whatever the case, they are not as European as “we” are. Maybe it is that the Spanish people themselves have sought another perception (there is also a Spanish national ideology, needless to say, and a particularly potent one), by dint of insisting on their specificity and their difference. There is a Spain of El Cid, of the *conquistadores*, of bull-fighters, and of militant Spanish-Andalusian-ism, which is very difficult to fit with what we generally perceive as standard “Europeanism”. *Spain is different* was an official slogan and we could all see in *what ways* it was different and from whom. In ideological terms, it appears in the pride in Unamuno’s words, “Let them (the foreigners) invent!”: let them invent the different kinds of “wireless devices”, let them bother themselves—Europeans and Americans—with material well-being, industry and commerce, because our speciality, the Spanish one, is mysticism and great spiritual endeavours. It is not surprising that the more contemplative form of Catalanism, from the 19th century movement of the “Renaixença” [rebirth, revival] through to this Year of the Lord of 2007, should have largely consisted of permanent reaction against this “Spanish model” (grotesque, maybe, but effective and real) of *such a different* identity: so different from Europe, above all. It is not surprising that asserting the “normal” Europeaness of Catalans should have been a forceful way of simultaneously asserting the Catalan specificity *vis-à-vis* the Spanish one. From this standpoint, Spain was “different” from Europe and Catalonia was not: the conclusion is very clear.



Bartók, Jaume Plensa (2007)
Mixed media and collage on paper, 34 x 25 cm

Our Europeanism, therefore, and even a certain “European fascination” is neither wholly disinterested nor wholly idealist: it is also a way of taking a distance from a domain of identity and belonging that has little appeal for us, that is uncomfortable and maybe not very “prestigious”, to seek a foothold in another sphere that we feel is more “ours” and more endowed with positive connotations. How many times have we not been attracted by —if I remember the words (of Espriu) correctly— that “north / where they say the people are clean / and noble, refined, rich, alert, / and happy and free”? How many times have we not felt distant from “that south” where the people were more likely to be dirty, neither free nor alert and only happy when they were going to a bullfight or singing flamenco? Each people needs to feel some kind of superiority over another and if Spanish superiority was based on its imperial glories, *hispanidad* and Quixote, ours consisted in being more European than them. It continues to be most pleasurable to think that Barcelona is more “European” than other great cities we know of, and obviously more so than Madrid; or that Catalonia is “the most European zone of Spain”, which even the Spanish —as is well known— grudgingly recognise. Or used to recognise. In any case, these classical comparisons, which are so partial and so fruitful in terms of self-satisfaction, most likely had some objective basis a hundred, or fifty, or thirty years ago. Today, if they are still tepidly ventured, they have much less foundation, which notably devalues their effectiveness. Here, I should like to indulge in an incidental reflection: part of Valencian anti-Catalanism has sprung from deeply anti-modern and anti-European

ideological sources, combined with an all-too-typical inferiority “complex” *vis-à-vis* a Catalonia blurrily perceived, though not accepted, as “more important” and more potent in being more modern and less typically Spanish.

Forgive the slightly ironic tone of these observations: I believe they were necessary. Europe —the fact of wanting to be normal, run-of-the-mill Europeans— has also become our way of wanting to run away from Spain, and even wanting to flee it *ab initio temporis*: is it not true that “we” are children of Charlemagne —like the French, Germans and northern Italians— and “they” are not? Isn’t it true that, because of Spain-Castile, we have spent centuries —at least since Philip II onwards— culturally, politically and economically outside our space of origin, and that it is now time for us to return there in our own right? I could go on asking such questions, swinging between irony and rhetoric, but they would add little to the central idea I wish to highlight: that Europeanism is part of the Catalan national ideology, as a defining element —“we have always been Europeans”— but also as a result of reaction and distancing.

We are more European than the Spanish. Another, more doubtful, factor is whether this perception or attitude has some demonstrated effectiveness, because “Europe”, not the imagined ideal Europe as a space in which the Catalans belong, but the real institutional and political Europe, bears very little relation with our fantasies.

First of all, needless to say, this Europe, or more precisely the European Union, has been constructed and is still being constructed as a supranational state, a space made up of nations and not one that annuls nations. “L’Europe des

patrics” (Europe of nations) —as de Gaulle said and as everyone thinks— the Europe of traders and the Europe of Brussels institutions is unlikely to become the “Europe of peoples” if we understand “peoples” as realities that are independent of already-constituted states. Europeanism is a value and a project that has to be worked through to its democratic consequences; it is a project that rises above the old closed-off states in conflict; it is the foundation of a desirable common European identity (which will take a long time to come, if it ever does, since it is the equivalent of a single national-style space of identity), but institutionally and ideologically, doctrinally and functionally, it does not propose recognising and embracing, as such, peoples without a state: Basques, Scots, Flemish, Bretons, Catalans, et cetera, are still “internal affairs” of their respective states and not a European affair. And it is completely illusory to think that “Europe of the Regions” is the substitute or equivalent of such recognition.

Hence, and as a first application or conclusion, we might say that the Europeanist intensity of the European Union’s peoples without a state —and here the case of the Catalans would be paradigmatic— should not make them imagine that “Europe”, as a “superior” organisation, is the solution to their old conflicts with their respective states. For the cultural and political nationalisms of these “countries without a state”, it would be a mistake for them to become part of and to be confused with more or less institutionalised “regional” structures and not to present themselves precisely as defenders of nations with the corresponding rights (not recognised, but rights). Organic or political relationships,

for example, between Catalonia and Piedmont or Baden-Württemberg could be useful or interesting in some regards, but not institutionally, and hence —visibly, conceptually and nationally— they are different from those that Extremadura might have: they are accepted only as region-to-region initiatives. And Catalonia, as is evident, agrees to participate in them only as a Spanish region. There should perhaps exist a joint pressure “association” —serious, at the highest possible level and maximum visibility— of European Union nations without a state (something not easy to achieve, especially because of the political heterogeneity of the different “nationalisms” to be found therein: some, like the best-known and shrillest in Flanders, quite unrepresentable), but such an “association” does not exist, nobody expects to have one and the result is that, right now, these nations are as good as invisible in European terms. The “nationalities question” should be raised *within* the European Union but the “nationalisms” —Catalan included— only raise it within the respective states. In this situation, making one’s own “place in Europe” visible is rigorously impossible, at least in political and institutional terms.

There is, however, a second matter. In the process of the institutional construction of the European Union and the ceding or delegation of sovereignty of the member states, the classical independence and sovereignty (real and symbolic) of the selfsame states is founded ever less in the traditional attributes of states, for example political-policing borders, customs, currency and finances, absolutely autonomous foreign relations and national armies. Nonetheless, there is a set of characteristics and fields of

political action that are maintained as specific of states and in first place among these are the fields of culture, education and language, the mass media and its spaces and the specific symbolic complex (from sports to known public “personalities”, from “national festivals” to the “moral community” and interests). These traits and fields of ideological-political action will possibly have an increasing relative importance: it is in particular in the domains of culture, education and communication that each EU member state will seek to preserve and project its national specificity and in which the usual historic state nationalism will be fully functioning. States can or will be able to renounce many things, but they will never renounce —and, on the contrary, will preserve, reinforce and project— their cultural and, if such is the case, linguistic specificity. This is precisely because they know that it is right here where the reality, perception, and projection of one’s own distinctive identity are at stake. To repeat the famous words, “It’s *not* the economy, stupid!”

Hence, the second conclusion or application: it is also in these domains where peoples without a state (their social, cultural and political movements, their institutions of self-government, their civic entities, their intellectuals and their “opinion leaders”, their mass media, etc.) need to carry out a more intense and, if possible, more effective ideological action of promotion and self-defence (with due assignation of sufficient resources, for example, in the knowledge that the most substantial part of the existence and recognition of a nation is at stake here). Embracing as its own the cultural, educational and linguistic framework of the state is —for the

nation without a state— accepting its own non-existence, or partial, subaltern and subordinated existence which, at the end of the day, is heading for extinction. Language, culture, communication, symbolic definition in one’s own terms are the fields in which the continuity (which amounts to saying conscious visibility, within and without) of the national space itself is played out. The whole effort in this terrain has to be at least as determined and clear and “complex-free” as that of the states. If Catalonia has to be, or can be, or wants to be “a nation of Europe”, it must present itself as such a nation, as a whole, not as a part, because if political independence right now is not, or does not seem probable, cultural and symbolic independence is absolutely essential. “Being” is “being perceived” and being perceived in Europe as a nation has to be the result of being presented and projected as such: as a nation-whole, not as part of the Spanish nation. The plain truth is that the Catalan institutions that should be doing this are not doing so (except for the odd and partial instance like a book fair). They are not doing it seriously and methodically, neither before, nor now, nor in immediate plans for the future. It is clear that if they do not do it with their own country in mind —beyond the field of rhetoric— they will hardly be able to do it *vis-à-vis* Europe. In Europe, then, Catalonia is just another region of Spain (a peculiar region, perhaps, for the better informed, but not much more than that) and there seems to be no serious, consistent and efficient project for changing this image and this definition and this place on the map. If there is, I have not seen it yet II

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