

## **Commentary: The Roots of Catalan Identity and Ethno-Nationalism**

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For decades, ample attention has been devoted by international social scientists and humanists to documenting and analyzing Catalan ethno-nationalism. Yet relatively few of these scholarly sources have delved into the long history of Catalonia. Indeed, an appreciation of the complex history of Catalonia is vital in understanding how deep-rooted have been the Catalan search for identity, the uniqueness of Catalan language and culture, and the development of Catalan politicization. One particularly useful, recently re-published and updated source is *The History of Catalonia*, written by F. Xavier Hernandez, Professor of Didactic Social Sciences at the University of Barcelona. The first edition in English was initially published in 2007, with a second edition published in 2014, available (in English as well as other languages) from the Museu d'Historia de Catalunya in Barcelona.

There are seven (unnumbered) chapters in this concise yet detailed book. The first chapter, titled 'Prehistory and Old World', takes us a very long way back into the history of the region which eventually became Catalonia – in fact, an astonishing 450,000 years into the first evidence of pre-Neanderthal remains and Palaeolithic tools. Accompanying maps indicate the locations of

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Palaeolithic (800,000-10,000 BP), Epipalaeolithic (8,000-6,000 BP), and Neolithic (6,000-2,000 BP) settlements, as well as rock art locations, graves and menhir monuments during the Megalithic Age (3,500-1,200 BC), and settlements and mining sites during the Calcolithic and Bronze Ages (2,000-800 BC). The chapter goes on to describe the arrival of Greeks and Phoenicians, then the development of Iberian settlements, followed by extensive Roman development along the coast. Eventually, Romans introduced Christianity, which spread during the third and fourth centuries.

The second chapter, on Proto-Catalonia, essentially covers the long period of Arab/Berber influence within the Emirate of Cordoba, beginning with the disintegration of Visigothic kingdoms, countered by the Hispanic March within the Frankish Carolingian Empire, which consisted of eight Catalan counties by the tenth century, yet Tarragona and Lleida remained under Islamic control through the early twelfth century.

The first explicit reference to the designation ‘Catalonia’ appeared in a chronicle dating 1114-15. The third chapter describes Catalonia during the feudal era, at which time much of the region became consolidated into the extended territory under the Count of Barcelona, with the addition of what was known as ‘New Catalonia’ during the eleventh to twelfth centuries. Longstanding French influence continued with the Occitanian expansion toward the end of the twelfth century; yet this was followed, in turn, by the eastward expansion of Aragon into Catalonia, Valencia, and the Balearic Islands during the thirteenth century, and farther to Sardinia by 1327 (where the port of Alghero retains a Catalan identity to the present day). This was a time of urban development, together with economic and demographic growth, particularly centred on Barcelona. Most of the increasingly cosmopolitan Catalan cities and larger towns included settlements of hitherto marginalized Aljama Moors and Jews. Science, thought and culture flourished, however a widespread plague in 1348, followed by repeated earthquakes, took their toll. A ten-year civil war in 1462-72 led to French intervention and the occupation, then annexation of Catalunya Nord in 1462-64.

The fourth chapter, titled ‘On the Edge of the Empire’, describes the increasing ‘assimilation’ of the Catalan nobility into the Spanish nobility through an explicit policy of intermarriage. Catalan society fell under ‘the severe control of a restrictive establishment’ (65), while suffering from frequent violence, banditry and on the coast Turkish and Berber piracy. In 1610, over four thousand Moriscos (Spanish Muslims baptized – often forcibly – as Christians)

were expelled from Catalonia, while an intransigent Catholic counter-reformation dominated the church. Catalan politics were becoming characteristically complicated. Again, French interference was evident in what was called la Guerra dels Segadors (the Reapers' War) in 1640-59, resulting in a Spanish counteroffensive, followed by Bourbon occupation during the Succession War (1705-14).

Professor Hernandez reveals his particular interest in economic history in first describing, in this chapter, agriculture, manufacturing and trade during the eighteenth century, then continuing in the next chapter with his description of steam industrialization and the textile industry during the mid-nineteenth century, and building of the railway network, population growth and urbanization during the late nineteenth century: 'From 1840, Catalonia was involved in an irreversible process which was to forge a totally industrialized and modern society' (98); however, this time was also increasingly characterized by a struggle between the industrial bourgeoisie and proletariat. 'The nineteenth century was a period of wars, revolutions and revolts which were an expression of the contradictions of a society undergoing wholesale transformation' (85). Yet again, France (at war with Spain in 1793-95), having annexed Roussillon (Catalunya Nord), occupied Cerdagne (Cerdanya), Val d'Aran, and much of Catalonia in 1808-13 during the Peninsular War. This turmoil was followed by the Carlist Wars in 1833-40. A distinct Catalan cultural movement, the *Renaixença*, was born, evidenced not only in a resurgence of Catalan culture and language but also the unique Modernist art and architecture of Gaudi; indeed, the resurgence and politicization of Catalan language and culture have continued to the present day.<sup>1</sup> 'During the nineteenth century Catalonia established itself as an industrial country. This set Catalonia further apart from the other regions of Spain, as it was now economically, socially, and culturally different. A growing contrast existed between industrialized Catalonia and Spain, which was still basically agricultural' (103). The first Catalanist Congress was organized in 1880, and the Centre Catalana founded two years later, during a wave of terrorism. The basis of Catalan nationalism was the Unio Catalanista (1891-1904).

The author's preoccupation with economic development and technological change continues into the next chapter, titled 'The Electric Years'; yet this chapter covers a time of more than just electricity and industrial diversification – it was a time of growing Catalan nationalism and indeed an 'electric' political atmosphere. Apart from continuing to describe economic and cultural development, attention is directed to the increasingly complicated 'political Catalanism'

represented in the formation of the Lliga Regionalista in 1901, the Solidaritat Catalana nationalist coalition in 1906 (victorious in the regional election the next year), and the Mancomunitat de Catalunya in 1914 (a prelude to recognition of Catalan autonomy by the Spanish central government). In 1905 soldiers had attacked the offices of Catalan journalists and newspapers, including *La Veu de Catalunya* (The Voice of Catalonia). Following the entry of the Lliga into the Spanish government and organization of a revolutionary general strike in 1917, a campaign was organized for self-government for Catalonia.

The seventh and final chapter covers – in particular – the political turmoil from the 1930s Franco era through to recent years. In 1931 a Catalan Republic was unilaterally proclaimed, and a Statute of Self-government (Estatut d'Autonomia) voted on by the Catalan electorate and passed the next year. Lluís Companys, the President of the Generalitat (the Catalan parliament), declared a Catalan state, but within the Spanish Federal Republic. This resulted in the imprisonment of the Catalan government and 'indefinite' suspension of the Statute in 1938, only to have Catalan nationalists re-establish self-government and the Generalitat the following year. The Spanish Civil War hit Catalonia hard; with intense fighting on the Aragon front, Franco again abolished self-government in 1938 and Companys was executed in 1940. Catalan resistance grew; a new Catalan government in exile came into being at the end of the war. Later, during the 1960s, a campaign commenced for Catalanization of the Catholic hierarchy, and the Coordinating Committee of Political Forces in Catalonia was founded. The following decade, the Assembly of Catalonia was founded in 1971; with the death of Franco in 1975, the Spanish monarchy was restored; the Catalan Socialist Party was founded; over a million Catalans took part in a mass demonstration (the first of many to come) in September 1977. Following the 'provisional' re-establishment of the Generalitat, most significantly, in 1978 Catalonia was recognized as an Autonomous Community with the status of a Historical Region within Spain, according to the Statute of Autonomy, giving the Generalitat the powers enabling it to carry out the functions of self-government. But Catalonia was just one of seventeen autonomous regions (together comprising virtually all of Spain). Catalan autonomists – together with Basques and Galicians – have long argued that their regions, having distinct languages and cultures, should have far more rights than other regions.<sup>2</sup> In 1980 the first elections to the restored Catalan parliament took place, and nationalist Jordi Pujol was elected President.<sup>3</sup> A revised Statute was approved in 2006, however an attempt to change the Spanish Constitution failed in 2010; this resulted again in a mass demonstration under the slogan: 'We are

a nation – We decide’ (i.e. not the central Spanish government). In 2011 a referendum held in Barcelona called for the complete independence of Catalonia from Spain, and the following year another mass demonstration of more than a million flooded the streets with the slogan ‘Catalonia – a new European state’. Then a social movement, La Via Catalana (the Catalan Way) linked an estimated 1.7 million people in a huge human chain stretching over 400 km across Catalonia, calling for independence.

To bring us up to date, some very important developments in Catalan nationalism and separatism have occurred during the past three years since the publication of this book in October 2014. The 2015 election was significant: out of 135 seats in the Catalan parliament, 68 would be needed for a clear majority – however no one political party was able to gain a majority. There are many political parties and shifting alliances in Catalonia, ranging from left to right in their political philosophy; more importantly, some parties have advocated complete independence of Catalonia from Spain, others continuing status-quo union with Spain, while between these polarities still others have supported increased autonomy for Catalonia but short of complete independence. Of two leading separatist parties, *Junta pel si* (Together for yes) won 62 seats and the newly-formed CUP – *Candidatura d’Unitat Popular* (Popular Unity Candidacy) won 10 – thus separatists together now held 72 seats, sufficient to form government – if they could only agree. Among the unionist parties, the *Partit de la Ciutadania* (Party of the Citizenship) won 25 seats, the *Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya* (Socialist Party of Catalonia) 16, and the *Partit Popular Catala* (Catalan People’s Party) 11 – so unionists now held 52 seats. The remaining 11 seats were won by nationalists favouring self-determination but not necessarily independence: *Catalunya si que es pot* (Catalonia yes we can), a new coalition with *Podemos*, and *Unio Democratica de Catalunya* (Democratic Union of Catalonia). A strategic alliance between the two leading pro-independence parties was established January 9, 2016, giving them the needed majority to form the government – which could be further strengthened with the added support of lesser independence parties such as *Solidaritat Catalana per la Independencia* (Catalan Solidarity for Independence).

So the drive for independence soon came to a head. On September 6, 2017 the Catalan government called for a referendum on independence to be held October 1. Immediately the central government of Spain stressed that such a vote would be illegal and unconstitutional, so would be blocked. Yet 700 mayors vowed to open polling stations, and two mass pro-independence demonstrations were held in Barcelona. Despite efforts of the *Guardia Civil* to forcefully disrupt

the voting (more than 800 were injured), arrest compliant mayors, and neutralize the regional police (Los Mosses d'Esquadia), 73% of voting stations remained open or were re-opened. Out of a registered electorate numbering 5.3 million, just 2.3 million voted, and of these a claimed 90% voted for independence (the referendum was widely boycotted by anti-independence protesters, in addition to people who feared going out to vote). The Catalonia President Carles Puigdemont claimed that the referendum was a clear indication of support for independence. Within days, the fallout was inevitable: the Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy declared the referendum illegal; the Spanish King Felipe VI condemned the Catalan leaders; and the Spanish constitutional court ordered suspension of the Catalonia parliament. Mass demonstrations by independence supporters were countered by an equally mass demonstration by unionists. Finally, after pleading unsuccessfully for dialogue, Puigdemont signed a declaration of independence on October 10, whereupon Rajoy gave the Catalan government an eight-day ultimatum (later extended three days) before Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution would be invoked to dissolve the Catalan government and cancel autonomy. Then on October 19 the Spanish government imposed direct rule on Catalonia, taking over the government, police, education, health services, and Catalan-language media. Within days, independence supporters staged more mass demonstrations protesting the arrest of separatist parties' leaders, while the now-deposed pro-independence Catalan politicians encouraged officials to defy takeover attempts. When Puigdemont made it clear that another election would not be held, the Spanish government responded by announcing an election on December 21. Catalonia formally declared its independence on October 27, resulting within a couple of days in a mass demonstration again by supporters of maintaining Catalonia within Spain. Meanwhile, given all this instability, many larger national banks and businesses moved their offices out of Barcelona. The chief prosecutor charged separatists in the Catalonia government with 'rebellion, sedition and embezzlement'; Catalan leaders, including the parliamentary speaker (later granted bail on condition of relinquishing support for independence), were arrested and brought to Madrid for trial. However, Puigdemont escaped first to Gerona, then (November 3) with four ministers to Belgium, where they appealed to a Belgian court for protection from an international arrest warrant.

*As The History of Catalonia* reveals, Catalonia has had an extremely long history – indeed, the people of Catalonia can trace their origins back many thousands of years, although Catalonia was not defined by that name until the twelfth century. Catalanian ethno-nationalism is deep-

rooted; the pro-independence events today echo, rather precisely, those which occurred almost a century ago. Yet among important points which complicate the question of independence for Catalonia – apart from obvious economic ramifications - the following may be considered:

European governments rightly fear that if successful, the Catalan independence movement could favourably influence the many separatist and regional autonomy movements of ethnic minorities across Europe;<sup>4</sup>; thus, the EU was quick to re-emphasize the need for unity rather than separatism. In fact, nationalist, separatist, and populist politicians soon arrived from across Europe and from Quebec to observe how all this would play out.

Moreover, another ‘complication’ is that the Catalan people are not coterminous with the autonomous region of Catalonia; the historic existence of Catalan-speakers beyond Catalonia and even beyond Spain presents an interesting potential political dilemma. Current counts and estimates of the numbers and distribution of Catalan-speakers tend to vary somewhat. In all of Spain, there are approximately 7 million Catalan-speakers; 4.1 million are native speakers, increasing to 5.2 million if Catalan is claimed as a second language. The total population of Catalonia – defined as the Catalonia autonomous region – aged over two years is now 6.2 million, of whom 4.6 million (about 73-75%) speak Catalan, as many as 95% claim to understand Catalan, however less than half actually speak Catalan at home as their primary language. Within Spain, the Catalan-speaking areas extend far southward down the coast into Valencia and even a small part of Murcia. Valencian dialects are regarded by linguists as closely related to Catalan.<sup>5</sup> Approximately 2.5 million speak these Valencian dialects: in Valencia 31.6% as their home language (but more than half within traditional Valencian-speaking areas), whereas slightly less than half speak Valencian ‘perfectly to quite well’ – yet only about half of them can write in this language. To the east, in the Balearic Islands (Illes Balears), between 777 and 800 thousand Catalan-speakers predominate: 75% of the population speak Catalan while 93% can understand it. Westward, into La Franja, a Catalan-speaking fringe of Aragon, as many as 42 thousand (90%) are conversant in Catalan. And beyond Spain, Catalan is the official national language of Andorra, spoken by 61 thousand of the 77 thousand population, however just 38.8% consider Catalan to be their ‘mother-tongue’, compared to 35.4% who consider Spanish. Catalan is also spoken widely in Catalunya Nord in France: an estimated 142 to 200 thousand may be familiar with Catalan; more specifically, out of a total population of 462 thousand, Catalan is now spoken by about a third and understood by almost half.<sup>6</sup> Even in the port of Alghero in Sardinia, Italy, 88% of the 44

thousand residents understand at least some Catalan, but today just under a quarter still regard Catalan as their home language.

In his history, Hernandez pays limited attention to these other Catalan-speaking areas. Yet, as we have noted, not all people within the Catalonia autonomous region choose to speak Catalan – a very high proportion claim some familiarity with the language, but less than half actually speak it as their primary language at home. To the west of Andorra, the situation became even more complicated: the Val d’Aran is an autonomous part of Catalonia where the traditional language is a dialect of the Gascon form of Occitan; thus this area is essentially trilingual in the Aranese dialect (the local language), Catalan (the regional language), and Spanish (the national language).

What proportion of people within Catalonia actually support independence is much debated – judging from elections, perhaps little more than half; yet whether Catalan nationalists who have favoured autonomy, short of complete independence, may now be persuaded to take a more radical political stance – especially in response to what they may regard as unnecessarily heavy-handed oppression by the central government of Spain (strikingly reminiscent of the Franco era) – remains to be seen. Whether this represents a sufficient proportion to proclaim independence is a moot point. Nonetheless, clearly Catalonia has one of the strongest and most politicized separatist movements of any region in Europe, in the context of deep-rooted ethno-nationalism and longstanding pride in Catalan language, culture and identity.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Wittlin (1993, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Past sources comparing language minorities within Spain have included, for example: Medhurst (1977); Tudjman (1981); Bell (1983); Barton (1993).

<sup>3</sup> Guibernau (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Sources comparing Catalan ethnonationalism with other ethnic minority movements in Europe have, over time, included: Petrella (1978); Conferencia Internacional de Barcelona sobre el plurilinguisme a Europa (1991); Calvert (1993); Shafir (1995); Rioux (2000).

<sup>5</sup> Detailed in a special issue on sociolinguistics, *Catalan Review* (1995).

<sup>6</sup> An interesting report on the teaching of Catalan in North Catalanian primary schools during the 1980s was: Verdaguer (1988).