

Spanish identity: the Catalan case of personal identification

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Abstract: The academic essay presents the results of the analyses of the Spanish identity. The research is focus on the Catalan case of personal identification.

Keywords: identity, Spanish identity, personal identity mobility.

Introduction

Spain is one of the European countries which has some extraordinary territorial divisions. There are plenty of researches on the topic of Spanish nationalism, and even more on the topic of the regional realms and their uniqueness – Basque country, Catalan community and Galicia. The focus of this paper will be concentrated on the matter that concerns the Catalan community and the case of the identification within the Catalan space. The origin and formation of the zone will be a starting point to get to the core of the Catalan cultures, language and appurtenance.

Catalonia is one of Spain's autonomous communities in the northeast of the country, whose history is partially distinct from the Spanish history. When large parts of Spain were ruled by the Crown of Castile (officially speaking medieval Spanish), Catalonia was part of the Crown of Aragon (officially speaking Old Catalan). These houses later united through marriage in the late 15th century - which also marked a decline in the use of Old Catalan. Later in the War of the Spanish Succession at the turn of the 17th century, the Catalan nobility sided with the losing House of Habsburg, which led to the abolition of Catalan institutions and to the diminution of the political influence of the city of Barcelona in Spain. Catalonia has ever since been under control of Spain.

As we can see the Catalan representation was defined to be of less importance rather than the political power in the central part of Spain.

Spanish identity, Catalan case and personal identification

Through the flow of time there were more political and historical facts that led to patent neglect of Spanish nationalism and evolved to encapsulation of people's identity vision to regional identities. As the thesis of the famous historian and author José Álvarez - Junco in the book "Spanish identity in the Age of nations" shows, under the Franco dictatorship of 1939 – 1975 all regional identities, including the Basque and Catalan ones, were repressed in favour of the regime's centralized, Catholic-conservative version of Spanish identity [1]. "The protest of the Basque and Catalan nationalists at the centralizing prerogatives of the dictatorship merged into the wider anti – Francoist opposition to the extent that ETA, the Basque terrorist group, was applauded as an anti-fascist hero, as shown by the widespread support for it during the Burgos trial of 1970 and for its audacious assassination of Franco's right hand man, Admiral Carrero Blanco, in 1973. During the transition to democracy of 1975 – 1978, there was a redoubtable backlash not only against the centralized political and administrative structure of the dictatorship, but also against any form of Spanish nationalism, whether or not it coincided with the particular Francoist version. Accordingly, Spanish identity rapidly became synonymous with Francoism,

especially in its militaristic and fascistic dimensions. Even today, any manifestation of Spanish nationalism is regarded in many regional and certain progressive circles as inherently reactionary and untrustworthy.” [2]

The result of these historical events according to the same author is that the distribution of studies on the regional nationalistic attitudes of Spain is an impulse in large sense by an explicit or implicit hostility to Spanish identity. This was the key element by which not mentioning your belonging to Spain is denying the existence of the nation that was recently associated with the Franco’s regime. The recollection of the Spanish polity entails that this is an artificial structure and even oppressive one.

The studies for the Spanish state as a whole and its identity are comparably more different than the ones considering the Basque country, Catalonia and Galicia. The latter subject suggests an approach that can be distinguished as observing the communities’ formation as an odd phenomenon. The formation of states within another state with own sovereignty is the peculiar case, although the origin of these closed communities is a historical legacy.

I consider the existence of the encapsulated communities is due to the reaction of the people’s perception due to the historical events. The process of formation of a nation without state has begun in the late 15th century and was absolutely sophisticated with the transition to democracy after the regime introduced by general Franco.

Another important aspect that would contribute to the understanding of the Catalan identity is the steps to forming the national character (or in our case the local character). The French philosopher Montesquieu presents in his book *De l'Esprit des lois* a section on the “general spirit of nations” where he claims eagerly that human beings are ruled by a variety of factors: climate, laws, maxims of government, precedents, morals and customs. By the combination of all of them is constructed the general spirit of the nation. According to Montesquieu’s belief governments shall comply with nature, which means that they have to be in harmony with the nation. It is worth mentioning here the established term “The Volkgeist” tradition originated in Germany with Hegel, Herder and Savigny, which mean national spirit. Noting that nineteenth century Catalanism was not only an open discourse on the Catalan Volkgeist, but that it also involved an often implicit discourse on the Castilian Volkgeist. I will enclose a quote from Josep R. Llobera to feel the importance of this phrase “Volkgeist” for the Catalan spirit in comparison to the Castilian one.

”Furthermore, I hope to establish that the function of these two discourses in the overall Catalanist ideology was different: the aim of the former was to assert the existence of a Catalan nation, while the latter was directed at showing the ineptitude of the Castilians as modernisers. This said, it is clear that Catalan ideologists equated Castile with Spain or, to be more precise, they saw the Spanish state as a purely Castilian creation, and that an important part of their strategy was to make sure that whatever was predicated on the (degenerated) Spanish character did not apply to Catalonia.” [3].

From this quote the essential message is that according to the nineteenth century Catalan ideologists the Spanish state is a product made by the Castilian part of the country. The Catalan citizens - and even the ones that represent the elite of the community consider themselves as diverse part of the state – they not only think that they don’t belong to the Castilian stereotype, they reckon they are thoroughly unparalleled with the Castilian zone of Spain.

In the second half of the eighteenth century Spain appeared to foreign critics as a decadent nation as a whole that is with limited abilities and not able to vitalize its past glory. The poor economic performance of Spain was palpable as well - some authors

as Adam Smith or Montesquieu described the Spanish temperament as of excessive pride and dignity, while others had seen it as of a choleric type. According to Josep R. Llobera [4] the Spanish people is generally a fanatic, particularly in religious matters. Spanish saints tend to be idealistic, of the mystic type.

Next aspect that I find very defining for the Catalan identity and uniqueness is the Catalan language. When a tourist goes to Barcelona there is no way to omit the signs, the posters in front of the cinema and the billboards all written in Catalan language.

The lexical roots of Catalan mainly origin from the Latin language. Among the most commonly Romance spoken languages, Italian and French are the closest to Catalan, from both a lexical and phonetic point of view. In this sense the Catalan fluent people would be able hypothetically to understand French and Italian with ease.

Following the history of the Catalan language we can focus on the fact that after the Spanish war (1936 – 1939) and during the regime of Franco (1939 – 1975), the Catalan language and culture were fiercely persecuted and discriminated against. The main reason was that the Franco regime shared another visions of one coherent functioning state. In addition to the persecution against the use of the Catalan language, it was totally prohibited the educational usage of the Catalan language. Nevertheless, the Catalan society succeeded in keeping a significant cultural activity, often clandestine.

In the middle of the nineteenth seventeens several newspapers were published in Catalan, and from 1978 Catalan was allowed as education language.

In 1976 R dio 4, a Spanish regional public radio station began broadcasting exclusively in Catalan.

Later on it was established in the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia that the own language of Catalonia is Catalan. Catalan is the language usually used in public administration, public media of Catalonia and teaching in schools. Although Catalan was proclaimed as official language in the zone of Catalonia, both Spanish and Catalan are considered as official languages. The citizens of Catalonia have the right and duty to know both languages.

In Catalonia, from the late 1960s onwards, approximately 80 schools, created by parents or teachers, were the first to restore the usage of Catalan in education. These schools were inspired by the pedagogical tradition existing before the Spanish Civil War (1936) and followed Maria Montessori's method.

With the recovery of the democracy, following the dictator's death in 1975, the 1978 Spanish Constitution recognised the linguistic plurality of the state. The 1979 Statute of Catalonia and the 1983 Statute of the Balearic Islands recognised Catalan as their own and official language, as well as Spanish.

At that time, after years of exclusion from education, Catalan was in a clearly disadvantaged state in comparison to Spanish. In order to address this situation, the various autonomous governments adopted different strategies.

In Catalonia, for instance, the strategy was adopted in 1983 was the so-called language immersion, which was inspired by a programme carried out in Quebec (Canada) to deal with issues of language contact similar to those faced in the Catalan-speaking regions of Spain. The model was based on the idea that children should not be segregated according to their native language, because this would create two different school models: one for Catalan – Speaking children and another one for Spanish- speaking children. Using the language immersion strategy, children are schooled totally in Catalan, independently of the language they speak at home, and learn to read and write in this language. When children begin to master this language, Spanish is gradually introduced into the curriculum. In this way, when compulsory

education finishes, students have an equivalent mastery of both Catalan and Spanish, and are bilingual and biliterate, as several research studies indicate.

The Catalan language has an international importance as well. It is one of the so-called minority languages and it has been recognized as such by the Council of Europe in the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages, which “aims to protect and promote the historical regional or minority languages of Europe”. The importance of these languages is attested by the fact that they are spoken in total by more than forty million citizens in the EU.

As a minority language, Catalan was represented in the European Bureau for Less Used Languages, which was set up in 1982 on the initiative of the European Parliament. The aim of this pan-European non-governmental organization has been to encourage respect towards less protected languages within the EU, and to promote linguistic diversity.

“Has a nationality anything dearer than the speech of its fathers? In its speech resides its whole thought domain, its tradition, history, religion and basis of life, all its heart and soul. To deprive a people of its speech is to deprive it of its one eternal good. With language is created the heart of a people. “This quote from J. Hender in Essay on the origin of Language points out the theory that the language is the light that creates the people’s consciousness.” [5].

The Catalan language belongs to the cultural variety of the Catalan community. Culturally examined, Catalonia has established customs and visions through the ages, some of them preserved some of them celebrated nowadays only in the Catalan region. We can give as an example the Catalan human tower called originally “castell” - which means castle. These “castells” are a cultural phenomenon particular to Catalonia consists of erecting human towers. On November 16, 2010, castells were declared by UNESCO to be amongst the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The tradition of building castells originated in the Ball dels Valencians in Valls, near the city of Tarragona, first documented in 1712. Until the end of 18th century, they spread to other towns and cities in the area, though it wasn’t until the last 50 years that the practice of building castells began to spread to the rest of Catalonia.

Another very old Catalan tradition is the “correfocs”. The correfocs are people dressed as devils, who attach fireworks to themselves and they play with fire in front of the onlookers. The idea of the devils is not considered as an incarnation of evil. They are festive and energetic characters. They dance to the sound of the drums and the traditional gralla Catalan instrument, while they set off their fireworks.

Other distinguished example of the Catalan traditions is the day of Sant Jordi during the spring festival day 23th of April. In this day men give women roses, and women give book to men as a present. That day is also known as “Día del libre” (Book day), coinciding with the anniversaries of the deaths of William Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes and Josep Pla. The street are full of people gathering around book and flower stands.

When we speak for Catalan spirit, however, we have to underline the importance of the football emotions spread in the consciousness of every Catalan citizen. At this matter we can argue if a big culprit of the Catalan - Spanish polarization is football.

Actually because of the repression suffered throughout the 20th century, FC Barcelona became the symbol for Catalonia because it was one of the few Catalan signs that could fight the Spanish regime. Thus, on top of the already high emotions of football, political emotions are added and the result is that the rivalry becomes hatred.

This obvious tension between the two Spanish teams Real Madrid and FC Barcelona has given more interest and polarization when people from Catalonia and people from Madrid sit in the stadium to watch “El Clásico”. This contemporary wrangle is the clear manifestation of the Spanish division and differences.

Considering the football conflict as the surface of the iceberg, we can indicate that the nature of the strong Catalan separatism is not a sudden outburst of nationalism, but a conflict escalation of the negotiations between the Spanish central state and the Catalan autonomous community.

According to the article by Marc Chehab [6] on the topic “Why do so many Catalans want to leave Spain?”, the reason why so many people support separatism consists in two structural features. “The first one is about Spain. If you add up the support people gave to the two main Spanish parties - the conservative-liberal PP and the social-democratic PSOE – in the 2011 national elections, you realise that these parties absolutely dominate pretty much all of Spain, except two regions: The Basque country and Catalonia, where they aren’t even voted by half the population. Basque and Catalan politics are dominated by regional parties, which means their regional party systems have considerable autonomy from national politics, but also that they are likely to feel underrepresented in Madrid.

The second structural feature is in Catalan politics, which is structured mainly along two axes: the left-right axis, and the axis of nationalism. But in this landscape there exists an ideological gap. There is a Catalan-nationalist centre-right party (CiU), like there is a Spanish nationalist centre-right (PP); there is a Catalan-nationalist centre-left party (ERC), but there is no independent Spanish-nationalist left-wing party, because already in 1978 Catalan socialists and Spanish socialists formed together Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC-PSOE), which defended CiU’s nation-building programs and usually argues for federalism.” - writes the author.

Bearing in mind the political situation in the country, I consider the main problem that the Catalan community has been facing is the lack of considering their opinion and view in the decision-making process. For the Catalan population the representatives of their community are the most trustworthy, which is why people want to become part of a state that is separately organized on the base of their own traditions and customs that had last through centuries.

Conclusion

The root of the separatism of the Catalan autonomous community is a mixture of all the components already included: the historical part of the formation of the Catalan people, the prohibiting all the expression of Catalan identity through the years served as an engine for the Catalan preservation - and therefore for their division from the central part of Spain, the traditions and the customs of the Catalan region united the primary relationship between the people.

Catalonia as an autonomous community within the Spanish state has its own uniqueness compounded of the long authentic history of the region. This territorial part of Spain has preserved all the traditions, language and customs, typical for the Catalanian self-consciousness, which entirely means that culture and origin of one person, or one community is encrypted in the core of the society and cannot be eradicated or tamed by another culture or mind vision.

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