

What have been the main motives behind modern regional nationalism in Spain? Discuss with reference to either or both of Catalonia and the Basque Country

(Danny Concha)

Since the democratic transition of the late 1970s, regional nationalism in both Catalonia and the Basque Country has experienced dramatic periods of intensification and growth. This manifests itself as a feeling of unique ‘Catalanism’ and ‘Basqueness’ that has existed in a state of constant tension with the Spanish state throughout the democratic period; the self-identification of both regions as ‘Other’, and the consequent push for this ‘Otherness’ to be recognised and indeed reflected through either significant increases in regional autonomy or full-blown independence. In order to assess the main motives behind Catalan and Basque nationalism, I will systematically outline both the deep-rooted ideological platforms as well as the steps and processes which have ensured the persistence and rise of both movements in its modern form.

Mansvelt-Beck defines regional nationalism as being both an ‘ideology and a form of behaviour’¹. This is useful when assessing what motivates Basque and Catalan nationalism as it enables us to conceptualise this phenomenon as a combination of both a pre-existing collective history, culture and unique language (ideology) and also a series of reactions to a rapidly changing political climate, with collective nationalist mobilisation responding to processes ranging from dictatorship to democratisation and decentralisation, modernisation and globalisation (behaviour). When considered alongside each other, both aspects have contributed to the formation and expression of intense nationalist feeling in the regions in question.

Any account of modern regional nationalism would be incomplete without considering the deep-rooted historical motives and unifying features which still inform Catalan and Basque nationalism today. In the build-up to the 2014 referendum, Salvador Cardús expressed that ‘everything that is happening in Catalonia is not coming from an unexpected burst of political madness... but rather is the product of the maturation of historic aspirations’², which reinforces this point. The fact that Catalonia’s National Holiday – the *Diada l’Onze de Setembre* – to this day recalls the loss

¹ Jan Mansvelt-Beck, *Territory and Terror: Conflicting Nationalisms in the Basque Country* (London, 2005), pp.9-10

² Salvador Cardús, “What has happened to us Catalans?” in Castro, Liz (ed.), *What’s Up With Catalonia?* (Ashfield, MASS, 2013), pp.97

of Catalan independence to the Kingdom of Spain on the 11 September, 1714 speaks volumes about how much the region identifies with its past independence and sovereignty to the extent that it still forms an integral part of modern nationalist discourse; in 2013, rhetoric such as – ‘we are in reach of a dream that so many Catalans share: that we can recover the freedom that we lost almost 300 years ago’³– was pervasive.

According to Whitfield, modern Basque nationalism is similarly motivated by historical and pre-modern values. She argues that this modern phenomenon is largely an ‘invention of the late nineteenth century’, as Basque nationalist sensibility continues to interpret and emphasise two fundamental historical pillars. Firstly, Whitfield stresses that much of Basques’ perception of themselves as a people and nation is ‘rooted in... their long history of political autonomy’, dating back to the medieval *fueros* system of legal privilege and fiscal autonomy in its relationship with Spain, a system which ‘recognised all Basques to be of inherently ‘noble’ status’⁴. Secondly, Whitfield references the contribution of Sabino Arana, founder of the first Basque nationalist party in 1895 – the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV) – as inculcating a lasting sense of Basque exceptionalism by inventing the myth of a Basque ‘fatherland’ (*Euskal Herria*). In this way, both modern Catalan and Basque nationalism is greatly informed the long-standing narratives of the past.

However, history is not the only motive behind modern regional nationalism; language (and its preservation) is also key. Both Balfour and Shih consider language to be the fundamental marker of Catalan and Basque identity respectively, with Balfour suggesting that throughout modern Spanish history, ‘language has been key in national self-determination’⁵. He argues that over the last 30 years, the Catalan language has served as ‘the main expression of Catalonia’s national character’. This is reflected in the policy of Jordi Pujol, who emphatically sought to ‘Catalanise’ the region’s educational, judicial and public sphere – passing legislation 1983 and 1998 – in a bid to restore nationalist sentiment in Catalonia following Franco’s dictatorship⁶.

Shih similarly claims that ‘the distinctiveness of Basque cultural identity is essentially based on *Euskara*’⁷. However, in recent history, both Euskara and Catalan have undergone intense periods of state oppression and marginalisation (under the Primo de Rivera and Franco dictatorships),

³ Carmen Forcadell Lluís. ‘Catalonia, a new state in Europe’, *WUWC*, pp.16-17

⁴ Teresa Whitfield, *Endgame for ETA: Elusive Peace in the Basque Country* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 34

⁵ Sebastian Balfour, ‘Houses of many Nations: Identities in Catalonia and the Basque Country’ in *The Reinvention of Spain* (Oxford, 2007), pp.12

⁶ *ibid*, pp.13

⁷ Cheng-Feng Shih, *The Emergence of Basque Nationalism in Spain: Struggle for Peace in a Multi-ethnic State* (Canadian Mennonite University, 1998), pp.43

which has consequently politicised language as a key tool for nationalist expression in the modern period. The threat of linguistic normalisation under these regimes, combined with the threat of linguistic dilution due to the mass influx of immigrants to both regions – which are amongst Spain’s most industrialised regions – has created a very tangible problem for Basque and Catalan nationalists in the form of language loss/extinction. This threat has been particularly pronounced in the Basque Country, as Shih claimed that the combination of Spanish immigrants and the difficulty of learning Euskara meant that in 1998, only 20% of Basques were able to speak the language, with a mere 12% able to read or write it⁸. This is compared to 84.7% of Catalans who claimed to speak the vernacular fluently in 2005⁹.

Perhaps it is for this very reason that modern Basque nationalism has been dominated by periods of radical expression and violence, most notably from the organisation Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA). Sabanadze argues that ‘the fear of cultural extinction – heightened by the effects of industrialisation and modernisation of the Basque Country – ... all contributed to the successful rise of radical nationalism in the 1960s and 70s’¹⁰. ETA explicitly demonstrate the way in which ideological beliefs have motivated modern expressions of nationalism, as their campaign of violence, which killed 800 people between 1975 and 1998¹¹ was and remains, fundamentally rooted in myths surrounding the Basque ‘fatherland’; this is evident in the way that the group has aligned itself with the so-called *ezker abertzalea* movement, which translates loosely as “Left wing” and “friends of the fatherland”. Likewise, their call for independence is motivated by the notion of a unified *Euskal Herria* of seven provinces (hence the slogan *zazpiak bat*, meaning ‘the seven are one’). Over time, such ideology has become imbued with a general anti-establishment sentiment which is primarily based on a glorification of Basque history and myth.

However, ideology alone cannot account for the mass mobilisation that has come to define more moderate forms of regional nationalism, especially in the case of Catalonia. Collective nationalist uprising must be considered as a somewhat inevitable reaction to the shortcomings of political and social developments that have occurred since the democratic transition. This begins with the ambiguities and contradictions of the 1978 Constitution, which to this day remains in place and continues to frustrate both Catalan and Basque nationalists. This is firstly due to Article 2, which sought to solve the issue of regional nationalism by defining the so-called ‘historical regions’ – predominantly Catalonia and the Basque Country - as ‘nationalities’ within the indivisible Spanish nation-state. However, according to Sabanadze, this solution was inherently flawed as ‘the term

⁸ Shih, pp.43

⁹ Balfour, pp12

¹⁰ Natalie Sabanadze, *Globalisation and Nationalism: The Cases of Georgia and the Basque Country* (Central European University Press, 2010), pp.25

¹¹ *ibid*, pp.57

nación is used only once and only in reference to Spain' whilst 'the term *nacionalidades* is also used only once... and nowhere is it properly defined'¹². For Perales-García, this 'incomplete' Constitution has, for the last 30 years, contributed to the ongoing 'problem of definition', in which neither Catalan nor Basque nationalist identities are properly recognised¹³.

Furthermore, the Constitution committed Spain to an uncontrollable process of devolution by re-organising the country as a decentralised state of seventeen *comunidades autónomas*. Conversi considers this as a crucial motive behind modern regional nationalism because it blatantly revealed the Spanish state's 'surreptitious aim [of] curtailing the powers of the two main autonomous communities...by standardising the political power and representation of each region'¹⁴. The fact that many of the so-called 'communities' were, and indeed remain 'entirely invented' (such as the 'communities' of Cantabria and La Rioja)¹⁵ has proven pivotal in fostering a strong sense of injustice in the 'historical regions', who feel that their historic rights and political ambitions have been 'watered down by the autonomic model'¹⁶, to borrow Cardús' phrase.

The autonomic model has also played a hand in creating economic injustices which continue to fuel modern regional nationalism today, particularly in the Catalan case. Paluzie argues that 'the fiscal decentralization model is asymmetric', as it is divided into two systems; the *common* and the *foral* regimes. Whilst the Basque Country is guaranteed 'power to collect and manage its entire tax system' under the *foral* regime, Catalonia is subject to the low-sovereignty model of the *common* regime. With a perception that any change would create grievances amongst the other fifteen communities that are also subject to the *common* regime, Catalonia has been excluded from the fiscal privileges enjoyed by the Basque Country¹⁷. Given this situation, Balfour argues that another key motive behind modern Catalan nationalism is founded on 'the insistence that their region should enjoy the same competencies as the Basque country'¹⁸, an injustice that was greatly aggravated by the financial crisis from 2008 onwards.

More recently, the passing of an updated Catalan Statute in 2006 and its subsequent reform by the Constitutional Court in 2010 has been pivotal in not only further fuelling Catalan nationalism but also in transforming it. Despite approving and adhering to a new Statute (which clarified Catalonia's status as a nation), the Spanish government eventually declared 14 of the 277 articles

¹² Sabanadze, pp.29

¹³ Cristina Perales-García, "How did we get here?" in *WUWC*, pp.110

¹⁴ Daniele Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans, and Spain: Alternative Routes to Nationalist Mobilisation* (London, 1997), pp.146

¹⁵ *ibid*, pp.144

¹⁶ Cardús, pp.97

¹⁷ Elisenda Paluzie, "Premeditated asphyxia" in *WUWC*, pp. 24

¹⁸ Balfour, pp.39

to be 'unconstitutional' and restrictively amended it 4 years later, provoking outrage in the region. For this reason, Carlos Puigdemont – current President of the Generalitat of Catalonia – considers 2010 to be 'the starting point of Catalan independence', which is reflected in census polls which reveal how only 16% of Catalans sought independence in 2006, compared to an estimated 60% in 2016¹⁹. Catalonia's dramatic turn towards secessionist nationalism reveals how the built-up of political injustices and disillusion with the Spanish state have rapidly led the country to the point of crisis, with mass protests and rallies taking place in 2011, 2012 and 2013.

In the case of Basque nationalism, we are yet to witness collective mobilisation of this scale. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that the Basque Country is still coming to terms with the bloodshed of its recent past and with an embryonic form of nationalism that has not quite managed to bridge the gap between the radicalism of ETA and the moderate conservatism of PNV. This is the answer implied in Conversi's conclusion that 'Basque nationalism has suffered from ideological incoherence since its invention'²⁰. Conversely, we might take Spain's economic situation into account, as the Basque Country still boast a preferable economic agreement and have not suffered the same levels of unemployment as Catalonia.

All in all, both modern Catalan and Basque nationalism can be shown to be motivated by a combination of ideological, social and political factors which have gradually build up since the democratic transition to the point that Spain now has a genuine secessionist crisis on its hands, with the case of Catalonia. With Puigdemont promising to hold another referendum in 2017, the prospects of modern regional nationalism in Spain remain very much open.

¹⁹<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/talktojazeera/2017/04/puigdemont-scotland-catalonia-170401095538077.html>

²⁰ Mansvelt-Beck, pp.127

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