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Scottish Energy and Catalan Hope

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EDGAR ILLAS, JUL 3 2012

The possible independence of Scotland may solve one important conundrum for the separatist movement in Catalonia; the dilemma of what to do with the political status of new states in the European Union.^[i] The question is, how should the EU proceed if an European region decides to secede from its current state and become a new state? Should the new state be automatically part of the EU through a process of internal expansion, or should this state have to apply for admission, or rather “re-admission”? This is an unprecedented situation and, as Paul Cairney explained a few weeks ago on e-IR, there is currently no legislation that determines how to proceed in these cases. Thus, if Scotland finally became independent, it would set a precedent that could influence the fate and force of Catalan separatism, even if all possible outcomes would still remain open: that is, both new countries could be expelled from the EU, or both could be re-admitted, or Scotland could continue being part of the EU but not Catalonia, or vice versa.

Here we encounter a classic discord between constituted sovereignties and constituent movements. On the one hand, it seems likely that European states will threaten Scotland and Catalonia with expulsion from the EU if they pursue independence. Not only do most European states fear that the emancipation of these nations will intensify the unresolved regional tensions that exist within their boundaries, but, more importantly, constituted states are on principle opposed to the dismembering of other states, as territorial partitions always make visible their own artificial nature. On the other hand however, if Scotland or Catalonia decided to secede from the UK and Spain, it is unquestionable that they would continue being part of the EU.

Can anyone imagine the EU suddenly denying citizenship to the millions of inhabitants of these regions, as if they were, say, “pieds-noirs” in 1962 Algeria? Or, on what basis would they be denied re-admission if they have complied with all the rules of membership of the EU? The illogicality, in other words, is that constituted nation-states hardly ever support a process of secession; and yet once this process has taken place, the non-recognition of the new state tends to be more problematic and even ineffective than its acceptance. These dialectics should be especially acute if the involved members belong to a supranational entity such as the EU.^[ii]

An interesting difference between Scotland and Catalonia puts them in a strangely similar position. Catalan separatists often marvel at London’s willingness to support the organization of a referendum on independence by the Scottish National Party. Catalans see this receptiveness as a clear sign of Britain’s democratic maturity, and they lament that Madrid would never give support to such a procedure. Indeed, in Spain this type of referendum would be declared unconstitutional, which is indicative of the feeble democratic spirit of a state that never fully broke away from the political and ideological structures of Franco’s dictatorship.

British Prime Minister David Cameron’s promise to cooperate with Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond can be read as a democratic gesture but also as a tactic to show that Scottish separatism has no substantial popular base and is therefore not legitimate. Thus, in a contradictory and yet complementary way, the intransigence of the Spanish state may be able suppress the separatist aspirations of the Catalans, but it can also have the opposite effect and convince those undecided or unionist Catalans that Spain does not want them and that seceding is their only available option.

Given that governments continuously work to control the emergence of new constituent forces, one suspects that

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London and Madrid will not stop being opposed to Scottish and Catalan separatism. At the same time, however, their position and reaction will ultimately be inconsequential, as the transformative power of separatism, if it exists, is internal and self-sustaining. The simile that Catalan separatists often invoke to make this point is clichéd but illustrative. They say that the decision to divorce does not depend on an agreement between the two partners; on the contrary, you only need one unhappy partner to justify a divorce. In fact, it is precisely when there is only one unhappy partner that the reason to divorce is stronger!

The potential divorce of Scotland from the UK can help Catalan separatists put forward another important point related to state violence. The establishment of modern states has of course involved wars of independence and all sorts of colonial, imperial, religious, and terrorist conflicts. What makes Scottish and Catalan separatism rather unique is that their confrontation with the state has been, and will likely remain, bloodless. In Catalonia, a violent faction named “Terra Lliure” ‘Free Land’ was founded in 1978, but it was almost as weak and inoffensive as the Scottish National Liberation Army or so-called “Tartan terrorists” that appeared around the same time. Lack of popular support and harsh police repression during Barcelona’s 1992 Olympic Games compelled “Terra Lliure” to dissolve in 1995.[iii] Since then, Catalan separatism has unfolded as a peaceful and civic movement.

But violence could possibly emanate from the Spanish state if Catalonia decided to secede. The 1978 Spanish Constitution, whose Article 2 states that it ‘is founded on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, common and indivisible motherland of all Spaniards,’ contains a further article, Article 8, which determines that the Army must ‘guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain, and defend its territorial integrity and constitutional order.’ In other words, the Constitution establishes that any attempt to secede from Spain must be repressed through a military response.[iv]

From the abolition of its political autonomy in 1714 by the first Bourbon King, Philip V, until Franco’s dictatorship, Catalonia has suffered a long history of military oppression. As state general Baldomero Espartero put it in 1842, in order to keep Catalonia under control “Barcelona must be bombarded at least once every fifty years.”[v] Even though state repression targeted class struggle rather than political separatism, the conflicts between the state and the Catalans have always had a cultural and nationalist subtext. This was confirmed by one of the fathers of the 1978 Constitution, Gregorio Peces Barba, who in October of 2011 commented on the growth of Catalan separatism and proclaimed: “But I am optimistic; this time we will not have to bombard Barcelona.”[vi]

But today military repression has become an unfeasible course of action. Not only a large part of the population in Catalonia has close relatives in the rest of Spain, but the application of Article 8 would also put the EU in an unmanageable position: how could the EU justify that a European territory has attacked another European territory? And yet the long history of state violence still dwells in the memory of many Catalans. For this reason, Scotland’s peaceful process of independence would probably have a reassuring effect for those Catalans who still fear repression if they become openly pro-independence.

The necessity to control one’s economic, political and cultural space in the global market seems to indicate that the separatist sentiment among the Scottish and the Catalans will continue to grow. But the future of these peoples is obviously inscrutable. What seems certain is that their parallel situations will foster the keen complicity that already exists between them. The new Scottish Parliament designed in 2004 by Catalan architect Enric Miralles and his partner Benedetta Tagliabue—a masterwork of contemporary architecture—is indeed the best emblem of this connection full of energy and hope.

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[i] For a comparative study of Scotland and Catalonia, see Keating and Solano. For the history of modern Catalan nationalism, see McRoberts.

[ii] See López Bofill for a compelling treatise on the juridical bases of an independent Catalonia within or outside the EU.

[iii] For a history of “Terra Lliure,” see Vilaregut.

[iv] For the complete text of the Spanish Constitution: http://es.wikisource.org/wiki/Constituci%C3%B3n_espa%C3%B1ola_de_1978

[v] For a study of the regency of Espartero, see Carr pp. 218-55. For a contextual analysis of Espartero’s infamous sentence, see: <http://blogs.sapiens.cat/historiadorvital/2010/02/20/barcelona-ha-de-ser-bombardeada-cada-cincuenta-anos/>

[vi] http://www.ara.cat/societat/Peces_Barba-portuguesos-catalans-advocats-Cadis_0_580142131.html

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