

The October 18 strike on Via Laietana in Barcelona. EPA



STATE POWER AND CATALANOPHOBIA

TRIBUNE

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Complex phenomena are more straightforward in their infancy, and social institutions are better understood through examples from the past. For instance, how is elite rule enforced? Thucydides, the Athenian historian, gave an example about the Spartans' serfs, the helots. In 425 BC Sparta suffered a humiliating defeat against the Athenians in its own territory. In the aftermath, the ephors' council announced they would reward the helots who had mostly supported the Spartans during the campaign: so, they crowned the awarded helots with laurel, paraded them up the temple hill... and had them secretly slaughtered – for the Lacedaemonians con-

sidered that those with the most initiative to help their masters were also most likely to rebel.

Institutions are redistribution machines. When resources are scarce and elites weaken, pressure for change grows. Against this, ruling elites often resort to two time-tested strategies: chop off the heads that stand out and/or find scapegoats (ideally the same) to divert popular discontent.

With the unprecedented wealth industrialisation, modern nation-states became more willing to buy acquiescence through redistribution. Cohesive nation-states tend therefore to be led from their most prosperous regions, as they have the resources to buy other communities' loyalty. For example, in 19th and 20th-century France regionalist movements (e.g. Le Félibrige in Provence) abhorred secession and displayed strong French-nationalist sentiment. Spain followed the same strategy successfully e.g. with Navarre regionalism.

The conflict ignites when some minorities' economic potential, if unchecked, threatens to upset the power balance: then ruling elites deliberately foster marginalisation and wield the State's power against the perceived threat. The Jewish case inevitably comes to mind, but many other discriminated entrepreneurial minorities exist: Middle Eastern Christians, East African Indians, South-East Asian Chinese...

This brings us to the Catalan (and Basque) conflicts. Not by coincidence are Spain's two independence-seeking regions also the most industrialised – Catalonia being larger and therefore potentially more threatening. Thus Catalans, long regarded as the Jews of Spain, fit both roles of uncomfortably successful minority and convenient scapegoat. Catalanophobia displays indeed the standard traits of xenophobia: widespread media and online bullying, consistently discriminatory economic government policies and lopsided application of the law (e.g. against independentists). Anti-Catalanism is such an old, pervasive trick in Spanish politics it even has a standard name: Lerrouxism – in reference to a famous politician who made it his personal trademark. Revealingly, although Catalan and Valencian traditional cultures are virtually identical, their popular and media stereotypes in Spain have nothing in common – Catalonia's being the most negative.

Machiavelli understood the problem long ago: to subdue a country with another culture whose citizens have a tradition of liberty one must, he advised, either move the capital there, or raze them, or dilute them with colonists, or allow them to rule themselves. In Spain the first solution is unthinkable, and so is thankfully (despite Spanish far-right's exhortations) the second. The third was pursued and partially succeeded (most of the Catalans opposing independence today have strong 20th-century Spanish immigration roots, often being immigrants themselves), but Catalan society's attractiveness led to the newcomers' gradual assimilation instead of the opposite – a rare case among stateless nations. The obvious solution is therefore self-rule; yet, as long as Catalonia is politically subordinate, it is just too tempting for Spain's establishment to clip its wings whenever it becomes uncomfortably successful. Independence may therefore seem far off, but it is realistically the only solution to what in Spain is all-too-often known as the "Catalan Problem".