

THE CATALAN BONSAI

TRIBUNE

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A common trait among hierarchical societies is the purposeful infantilisation of servants. Slaves, housemaids and wives are treated as mentally deficient, denied any education beyond the most basic and subjected to persistent bullying to discourage independent thinking – even when this impairs their usefulness in their roles. Wasteful as it is, there is nothing irrational in this behaviour. Since brute force alone cannot hold together any community more complex than a pack of baboons, the master's privileges must rely on the perception that their contribution is irreplaceable – and there is no better way of achieving this than making it real by denying to slaves the tools to make their masters redundant.

So it is with states. States use their monopoly of violence to collect and redistribute resources. Just like every other institution, they charge for their services – except that their coercive power allows them to impose them on their “customers”. Hence the most basic state, in ancient history as much as in modern slums, is the protection racket. Modern states often disguise their basic nature, but all-too-often the veil drops – as it did when, on October 1, 2017, a spotlessly peaceful, democratic referendum on Catalan independence was met with charges by riot police.

As modern states in rich countries are so strong, they rarely need to keep their subjects helpless at the expense of their productivity. Yet, sometimes a community may have so much potential to alter the

power balance that it may, as General Espartero said in 1842 about Barcelona, need to be bombarded every 50 years. This used to be the case of colonial empires, often larger than the metropolis, where the best jobs were reserved for expatriates, a large fiscal deficit was systematically siphoned off and trade with countries other than the metropolis was outright forbidden.

This has for a very long time been Catalonia's situation under Spain's rule. As its more egalitarian, less oligarchic social structure proved more adept than that of most of Spain to take advantage of the opportunities offered by industrialisation, the “Catalan problem” increasingly dominated Spanish politics. An option was, to

be sure, to “make Spain more like Catalonia”, and indeed the idea was repeatedly put forward from Francisco Nipho in 1770 down to Esperanza Aguirre as recently as 2013 – but it could never work because the more egalitarian model that made Catalan society successful would all-too-uncomfortably challenge the position of the elites. Instead, the Spanish state consistently intervened to weaken the Catalan economy. In 1985, economist Ramon Trias Fargas described it as “a premeditated asphyxiation” and not much later other authors started to refer to Catalonia as a “bonsai economy”. Thus, for example, despite every exhortation from Europe and Catalonia itself, Spain keeps starving the

Catalan economy of resources and investment (eg the Mediterranean Corridor recommended by the UE) while it builds useless infrastructure elsewhere (eg loss-making high-speed trains). Yet integration in the European (and global) economy changed the rules of the game. Barcelona, and Catalonia as its hinterland, is an extraordinarily attractive location for global investors that, left to its own devices, could readily become Europe's California. No wonder the conflict has become more acute than ever: if purposeful infantilisation does not work as well as before, direct coercion is leveraged instead – hence the spectacular (and purposefully visible) escalation of repression against Catalan independentists. Deprived by globalisation of other tools of economic control, such as tariffs and monetary policy, the state asserts its power using (and overusing) the ones that it has left. Yet this is where some hope may lie – for in the long run brute force alone cannot hold together any community more complex than a pack of baboons.



A bonsai tree. AP