

Aspirational vacuum

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«...these genuine features of the [Spanish] state, its former monarch escaping justice, the latest one threatening and taking sides in favour of institutional violence..., would shame any truly democratic Western parliament»

Not a few foreigners wonder, what's up with those Catalans? Claiming independence in today's Western democracies seems nothing short of caprice; bar Scotland, which benefits from some lenience, maybe because they play rugby against the English, sometimes successfully, or perhaps because of whisky. Never mind that legend says Irish monks were the first to distil the "water of life", or that the smaller island produces an equal or better sort of whiskey, spelt with an "e". Obviously, this column does not deal with distilling... it's about trying to elucidate "why Catalonia?", beyond the simple response "why not?"

The question can be seen from many levels, one being the "aspirational", according to this author. Let's take Italy and France; both centralised states with a lingua franca that somehow goes undiscussed, permeating north to south, east to west. Yet this evolution was neither painless, nor completely accidental in nature.

In continental France, "regional" languages (i.e. all those spoken, bar the langue d'oïl, which became today's French), such as Breton, Basque, Occitan, Corsican, Flemish, or Catalan, have been largely marginalised during a large chunk of the republican years. Yet French was also "aspirational": it allowed everyone, whatever their origin or social class, to benefit from the status of "citoyen", a member of a republic that voted (including the king) for the "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen" way back in 1789. Never mind the spiral of terror that followed, chopping off heads with a very French revolutionary fervour, or Napoleon's messianic dreams to "civilise" Europe.

Italy had its own path to a shared ethos. Tuscan was just one of the lingua vulgaris that appeared after Latin, the Roman empire's own lingua franca. To an extent due to the Duchy of Firenze's clout, in trade and industry, already in the Middle Ages, as well as in culture (Dante, Petrarca), Fiorentino, or Tuscan, "turned" into today's Italian. The Risorgimento had an aspirational tone, too, of revolt against foreign rulers, while restoring the old primacy of Roma (even if Firenze was initially taken as the unified Italy's capital between 1865 and 1870). Again, Italy's path has had its ups and downs: a southern half in which the different mafia clans retain relevant power, or the political caricatures of the likes of Mussolini and Berlusconi, and possibly Meloni today. Nevertheless, there is robust identification with the "tricolore", and "i valori repubblicani", throughout the peninsula.

The reader might wonder what Madrid's positive ideals should be, beyond sun, cerveza, and beaches (which are not in the capital). Spain was supposed to be a model of democratic transition; no matter the near thousands of deaths during it, or that it still has the dubious label as being second only to Cambodia in mass graves.

Its reaction to the peaceful Catalan independence movement (not a bit of litter on the ground, is one of the mottos of Catalonia's mass rallies of late) was a wake-up call to many: mass beatings by the police merely for voting, extortion of significant figures in the movement, prison and confiscatory fines issued to many (they have not abated), cases of

torture and threats to detainees, etc. These genuine features of the state, its former monarch escaping justice, the latest one threatening and taking sides in favour of institutional violence, would shame any truly democratic Western parliament. This all sets Spain's aspirations at a very low bar, unfortunately, and sets the will of most Catalans to follow a very different path.

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