The Scottish path of Catalonia’s Independence

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Scotland and Catalonia share a somewhat similar social configuration as sub-state nations with analogous perceptions, interpretations and aspirations for home rule within their respective British and Spanish frameworks. However, Scotland and Catalonia have not always followed parallel processes over the last decades, as far as the achievement of institutional forms of self-government is concerned.

Considering both similarities and differences, it is worth underlining the erroneous prescriptions put forward by influential modern schools of thought --notably those functionalist and Marxist-- regarding Scotland and Catalonia. Those approaches insisted that both territories were failed national communities which were bound to disappear. Such assertions have been repeatedly falsified in contemporary times. Far from being homogenised and dissolved within the British and Spanish polities, nationalisms in Scotland and Catalonia have forcefully renewed their claim of political independence for both stateless nations.

In its political manifesto to contest the 2011 Scotland’s parliamentary election, the Scottish National Party (SNP) reiterated its commitment to hold a referendum on independence. The party obtained an overall majority of seats (69 out of 129), which reinforced electorally its claim for independence. Subsequently, bothScottish Executive and the British Government engaged in constitutional negotiations so that a binding popular consultation could take place. Eventually the Edinburgh Agreement was signed on October 15, 2012, stating that a clear question was to be put to the eligible voters according to the following wording: ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’ The referendum on Scotland’s independence took place on September 18, 2014. A majority of 55 per cent of the voters responded “no” to the question on independence. As many as 84 per cent of those entitled

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to participate cast their votes in one of the highest electoral turnouts in British politics.

Despite that no agreement equivalent to the one reached between the Scottish Executive and the British Government was achieved, the Generalitat Government and other Catalan institutions (parliament, local councils, civil society associations) promoted the celebration of a referendum on independence on November 9, 2014, along the lines of the one celebrated earlier on in Scotland. They claimed that the Catalan citizenship had the democratic right to decide according to the following wording and sequence of questions: “(a) Do you want Catalonia to become a State? (Yes/No); If the answer is in the affirmative: (b) Do you want this State to be independent? (Yes/No). You can only answer the question under Letter (b) in the event of having answered “Yes” to the question under Letter (a)”.

The referendum promoted unilaterally by the Catalan authorities was declared illegal by the Spanish Constitutional Court, which ruled that it did not comply with the provisions of the democratic 1978 Constitution and related legislation. Nevertheless, the Catalan Government went ahead with the idea of holding a public consult. This finally took place although with no legally binding effects. A majority of 80 per cent of those who participated in the consult voted for secession (‘Yes’ to both submitted questions). Turnout was around 37 per cent of the registered voters.

Rational Scotland

During the referendum campaign, debates in Scotland unfolded in unruffled terms. In the period closer to the referendum day, transfers of votes between the two camps were important and, a few weeks before September 18, the final result was unclear. As had happened with the case of the Quebec Referendum in 1995, early surveys had advanced a neat refusal against secession. In the Canadian province nearly two thirds of Quebeckers had expressed their opposition to sovereignty at the beginning of the referendum campaign. However, the outcome resulted in a mere difference of 77,000 votes in favour of the union in an electoral census of around 5 million voters. In Scotland, a poll carried out on September 6th indicated that, excluding the undecided, those in favour and against were 51 per cent and 49 per cent, respectively.

Dispassionate reasoning has arguably been considered to be a characterial feature in political discussions in the homeland of Adam Smith, David Hume, the
Democratic Intellec{t} and the School of Common Sense. On scrutinizing the contrasting viewpoints on independence, an ‘argumentative rationality’ was said to stand out with the use of abundant data and sources of evidence. An example in point was the challenge by the Conservative/Liberal-Democrat British Government of David Cameron to the Nationalist Scottish Executive of Alex Salmond to spell out clearly whether an eventual independent Scotland would adopt the Sterling Pound or the Euro as legal currency of the new country. Such a direct interpelatia{t} put into question the viability of a sovereign monetary policy in a future independent Scotland. It is worth reminding that, since the unleash of the 2007 financial crisis, the British Treasury injected into the Scottish economy the amount of £300 billion as bank rescue capitals and guarantees (an equivalent sum to the total sovereign debt of Greece, which reached 157 per cent of its GDP in 2012).

To such allegations, the Scottish Executive put forward the counter-argument that an independent Scotland would not be prepared to assume the public debt if the Bank of England (i.e. UK’s central bank and responsible for the Sterling Pound) refused to share the currency with Scotland. It would be unreasonable, supporters of the ‘Yes’ campaign claimed, that all financial assets and reserves contributed by Scotland in the past were to be kept by the Bank of England and the debt were not to be shared equitably. There was also a constant reminder by the nationalists on the huge amount of revenue gained by the British Treasury with the extraction of Scotland’s North Sea Oil (calculated in a sum no inferior to the same previously mentioned figure of £300 billion). Despite the reiterated petitions by the SNP in the past, a Scottish Fund with revenues obtained with the exploitation of the North Sea resources was never established. The Scottish nationalists made implicit reference to the once-called ‘Norwegian Dream’, as was labelled in the case of neighbouring Norway --a wealthy country with similar socio-demographic characteristics and natural resources as Scotland--, as a plausible case which validated the independence option not only emotionally but rationally (Moreno, 2013).

According to the pledge (‘vow’) signed by the main British parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal-Democrats), the UK central institutions should provide the Scottish Parliament with more powers following the idea of devo-max, by which practically all administrative competencies and political powers would fall within the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament with the exception of foreign affairs and defence matters. According to a post-referendum survey, two thirds of Scots were in favour of devo-max, with the support of 71 per cent of men, 62 per cent and women, and cross-cutting social classes and age groups. This option for a maximum of devolution was preferred by voters of all representative political parties in Scot-
land (59 per cent of Liberal Democrats, 60 per cent of Conservatives, 62 per cent of Labour, 71 per cent Greens, and 79 per cent of Nationalists) (Herald Scotland, 5th October 2014).

Indeed, Scotland’s independence referendum has brought to fore of the political discussions in Europe the re-scaling and interdependence of political decision-making. In the case of Scotland it is to underline the fact that the autonomous Scottish Government followed a Scandinavian universalistic criterion in the provision of public policies (e.g. free elderly care, free provision of medicines prescribed by NHS, or exemption of university tuition fees for Scottish and EU students). In recent decades, the SNP has put forward a social-democratic discourse which has gained support from the traditional Labour strongholds. As shown in post-referendum analyses of voting patterns, in those areas where unemployment was higher, support for independence was also higher, and vice-versa. A majority of voters in Glasgow, for instance, and what once was known as the Red Clyde, opted for the ‘Yes’ vote in the referendum (Moreno, 2014b).

It remains to be seen how the recommendations put forward on November 20, 2014 by the post-referendum Smith Commission for further devolution of powers materialize. The report by this commission proposed an amount of extra devolution required to meet the expectations raised by the famous ‘vow’ from the three British party leaders (Conservative, Labour, and Liberal/Democrat) in the last week of the referendum campaign. However, such proposals were not regarded to be, by any definition, devo-max nor what the former Labour UK Prime Minister described as being close to federalism (Keating, 2014). Such recommendations were to be debated in the UK Parliament in order to produce legislative proposals in 2015. A bill was expected to be accomplished after the next British general election, around May 2015. Among the various powers and competencies envisaged by the Smith Commission there was no further devolution of taxes other than income tax.

Emotional Catalonia

Up until now, the debate on independence in Catalonia has mainly revolved around identity politics. Nationalist elites have insisted that Catalonia is not Spain and does not want to belong to it. The fact that Catalans have expressed a high degree of duality in self-identification (Catalan and Spanish) is somewhat over-seen in such claims. In the last 30 years, Catalans have reiterated a lesser degree of being ‘exclusive’ (‘I am only Catalan, not Spanish’) than the Scots. In 1986, a
survey was carried out in Scotland addressing for the first time what later has been coined as ‘The Moreno Question’. In such occasion, 39 per cent of the surveyed people considered themselves to be ‘Only Scottish’ without any identity sharing with Britain (Moreno, 1988). After all these years, the percentage of ‘exclusivity’ in Scotland has remained rather stable. The assumption behind the formulation of ‘The Moreno Question’ was that when citizens in stateless nations such as Catalonia or Scotland identify themselves in an exclusive manner (‘Only Catalan’; ‘Only Scottish’), the institutional outcome of this form of singular identification would also be exclusive. Demands for self-government would therefore evolve towards claims of a right for independence and secession (Moreno, 2006).

In the midst of the economic crisis, the ruling on the reformed Catalonia’s Statute of Autonomy (constitutional law) by the Spanish Constitutional Court in 2010 was interpreted as a setback for Catalonia’s aspirations for further home rule. Soon after the sentence of the Spain’s highest tribunal, the percentage of those considering themselves as ‘Only Catalan’ rose significantly. According to the survey carried out in November 2013 by Generalitat’s Centre of Opinion Studies, 31 per cent of Catalans felt “Only Catalan”, more than three times the percentage recorded in the mid-1980s (see table). It can be easily deduced from these figures that the increase in Catalans’ exclusive self-identification has been mainly reactive and contingent upon the ‘situational logic’ of recent years. Likewise, it has grown rapidly in recent times. Greater numbers of Catalans have interpreted the refusal of the Spanish central elites and, in particular, the rejection by the central Conservative Rajoy Government in 2012 to decentralise further fiscal powers as requested by the Catalan Generalitat, as a political humiliation against Catalonia.

Responses in Catalonia to the question:
“In which of these five categories do you include yourself?” (1985 and 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>1985 (per cent)</th>
<th>2013 (per cent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself only Catalan</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself more Catalan than Spanish</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself as much Spanish as Catalan</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself more Spanish than Catalan</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consider myself only Spanish</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Figures have been rounded to nearest full percentage. In 2013 there were 2 per cent
of don’t know/refused responses. Figures from the two surveys are provided together for illustrative purposes only.

Sources: Moreno, Luis (1988), and Centre d’Estudis d’Opinio (November 2013).

As it could not be otherwise, the result of Scotland’s referendum has had an impact on expectations for Catalan voters to achieve independence. There have also been other intervening factors and developments which have affected the public debate and which have somehow cooled down the climate of euphoria induced by those groups in favour of secession. The public confession made by Jordi Pujol, President of the Generalitat during 1980-2003 and father figure of contemporary Catalan nationalism, that he had been hiding abroad money and assets away from the control of Spain’s tax authorities caused no little criticism. The concurrence between the two main parties advocating independence --and which have diverse political colouring and electoral expectations (CiU, center-right, and ERC, center-left)-- has also created some tensions in sectors within the nationalist camp. Finally, the federalist option advocated by some socialists, communists and greens has gained some support in those sections of the electorate unhappy with both independentist and unionist stances. Not surprisingly, and for the first time in the recent years, a survey poll carried out at the end of 2014 indicated that a slim majority of voters were against independence (Centre d’Estudis d’Opinio, 2014).

Territorial subsidiarity in the EU

Developments around the turn of the millennium, and particularly since the 2007 financial crisis, have dramatically exposed the limitations of the nation-state as a ‘sovereign’ actor in global economics. Models of British ‘command-and-control’ majoritarian democracy, as well as of Jacobin vertical diffusionism of power, seem to be in terminal retreat. The ongoing re-scaling of nation-state structures and political organization is in line with Europe’s principle of territorial subsidiarity. Processes concerning the ‘unbundling of territoriality’ are having a direct impact on citizens’ living standards. This crucial tenet of Europeanization establishes that policy decision-making should be located at the level closest to the citizen. In other words, the purpose of subsidiarity is to limit the power of central authorities by assuming the criteria of ‘proximity’ and ‘proportionality’. Subsidiarity aims to provide a protective measure against over-expansion of European control in matters resting upon the jurisdiction and prerogatives of each layer of government in a
multi-tiered Europe. It also encourages co-ordination to manage growing inter-depencies.

Territorial subsidiarity goes hand in hand with the second guiding principle of Europeanization: democratic accountability. There cannot be any further development of politics in Europe if decisions are taken behind-closed-doors, as happens in our often opaque state-centred polities. Democratic participation and citizens’ involvement in public life is quintessential to the very preservation of the European social model, if this manages to survive vis-à-vis the concurrence of alternative systems such as re-commodified individualization or neo-slavery practices for economic growth.

The aspirations in Scotland and Catalonia to achieve national sovereignty contrast with the institutional process of Europeanization. Convergence and political interdependence within the EU is not an incentive for internal boundary-building and the establishment of self-centred compartments of governance, as happened with the old Westphalia nation-states. Europeanization reaches out citizens in the Old Continent as a whole (NB. Already over half of the legislation in people’s daily life has a European matrix). Fight against fiscal evasion, to mention a pressing policy to overcome the financial crisis, is just inefficient if all European countries and territories are not involved in a common stance. It is nonsense to impede or curtail self-government in stateless nations such as Scotland and Catalonia in a political union like the EU, which proclaims territorial subsidiarity as the guiding principle for policy decision-making and implementation. Notwithstanding, the impact that the secession of Scotland and Catalonia would have brought in 2014 for the whole multi-level governance in the EU should not be trivialized either.

Other stateless nations could follow similar processes of state formation to request political status as ‘full sovereign’ member states. In such an eventuality, who could deny similar independentist aspirations to, say, the Basque Country, Corsica, Flanders or Wales? How many sovereign states could the EU coordinate in their administrative and political processes? These issues are often left out in media discussions but they need to be pondered from a European perspective. They certainly put into evidence the growing incapacities of the single nation-states so eager to maintain their power bases. All these considerations would be redundant if both Scottish and Catalan nationalists were not interested in Europeanization, but they have repeatedly made explicit their European vocation and their active defence of the European social model. These aspects are democratically acknowledged by most parties involved in the on-going debates on independence.
Concluding remarks

Nationalist political discourse in Catalonia has tended to reinforce the aversion towards the central elites in Madrid, insisting in the cliché, ‘Espanya ens roba’ (Spain robs us). Catalan advocates of secession have indeed deployed an effective strategy of mobilization by which the in-group (Catalonia) is kept highly motivated in its dispute with the out-group (Spain). All is aimed at maintaining the self-affirmative popular compulsion of ‘Yes, we can’ for the achievement of independence. This psycho-social attitude is in line with the ‘demonstration effect’ theorized by Thorstein Veblen as the means to overcome unsuccessful attempts in the past.

All things considered, the main lesson to be learnt by Catalan supporters of independence from Scotland’s referendum experience is that an agreement with Spain’s central institutions is necessary if a popular referendum is to take place in the foreseeable future. This course of action can be regarded as the “Scottish path for Catalonia’s independence”. In parallel, a new process of political negotiations in order to achieve a new constitutional order in Spain should incorporate both elements of unity and diversity within the EU framework. Once again, territorial subsidiarity appears as the paramount challenge to advance in the process of Europeanization.

Scotland’s referendum of independence has contributed in an effective manner to stimulate discussions on territorial politics within the EU, particularly in those countries with a plural internal composition as the United Kingdom and Spain. Given the context of in(ter)dependence in the Old Continent, higher capabilities for self-government should correspond with an increase in citizens’ participation so that political disaffection and social anomie may be overcome. The EU could further legitimize itself with the promotion of a socio-economic model which permeates internally all its territories and tiers of government. The preservation of its welfare systems --a European invention after all-- implies the promotion of citizenship in all civil, economic, political and social realms (Moreno, 2014b). On confronting the Faustus’s temptation of selling their free, fraternal and egalitarian souls in pursuit of particular interests, Scots and Catalans, as well as Brits and Spaniards face the challenge of building European institutions of multi-level governance. By articulating the materialization of such aspirations, an ever closer union could be achieved as envisaged by the founding fathers of contemporary European integration.
References


