

Piedmont and Catalonia: the unification of Italy and Spain. Some comparative remarks*

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During the 19th century, the process of political unification in Italy attracted serious attention throughout the Continent and beyond. Foreign observers interpreted the events from the perspectives of both their native countries and their political leanings. Liberals saw a new and critical flourishing of freedom; conservatives feared the rise of a new power in what was then called the concert of nations; Catholics worried about the possible loss of autonomy of their Church, whose state-like sovereignty they deemed essential; progressives believed it offered the possibility of reform and even revolution; nationalists longing for the independence of their countries viewed the new Italy as a mirror of their own future. But all those who loved and admired Italy were overjoyed by the final turn of events.

The time has arrived for Europeans to take level-headed stock of these events and to look at their consequences for all of us, and not only for the Italian people. This is why the conference *L'Unità Italiana: uno sguardo dall'Europa*, launched under the auspices of the Turin Academy, is so timely and necessary. The most forward-looking, cosmopolitan, European and advanced region of Italy, Piedmont, was the core of the movement that built the Italian state and, dare I say, the modern Italian nation. We must therefore welcome a meeting such as this, endowed as it is with a strictly European perspective.

It seems to me that one of the most fruitful ways to look at the nature and consequences of Italian unification is to engage in a systematic comparison of similar territories and societies in Europe during the same period and undergoing relatively comparable economic and social processes. The Italian and the Iberian peninsulas offer such an opportunity, by considering Catalonia and Piedmont (Fig. 1). In spite of their divergent des-

tinies, within their respective states they share historical, cultural, economic, linguistic, and industrial characteristics that seem to warrant comparison. Historical and contemporary comparisons of the advanced, industrial areas of Spain and Italy are certainly, a very promising undertaking; yet, unfortunately, it is one that thus far has not been systematically attempted. One finds, at best, passing remarks about their similarities and disparities. Some of them, often reflecting the pressure of political developments in either region, are not even minimally accurate. In the worst of cases, several historians and social scientists have exhibited almost complete ignorance regarding the coexistence of what are, quite simply, the two most important cases of capitalist development, industrial revolution, and cultural modernization in Mediterranean Europe.

The history of Piedmont (and, to a large extent, that of Lombardy and Liguria as well) and that of Catalonia present a number of striking similarities. Linguistically, both societies are intimately related to the Occitan and Provençal lands of Southern France that separate them geographically. The Catalan and Piedmontese languages have for centuries been an essential part of the identity of their respective country. Linguistically distinct in different but significant degrees from the major political unit into which each was to integrate itself, both regions, were in addition, and historically always had been, frontiers. Both straddle important mountain chains, whilst the capitals, Turin and Barcelona, have long been thriving cities on the lowlands. However, in these frontier countries, for very long periods of their respective histories, the political center represented by these cities was not well-consolidated and, at times, became marginalized. However, there were also periods in which these

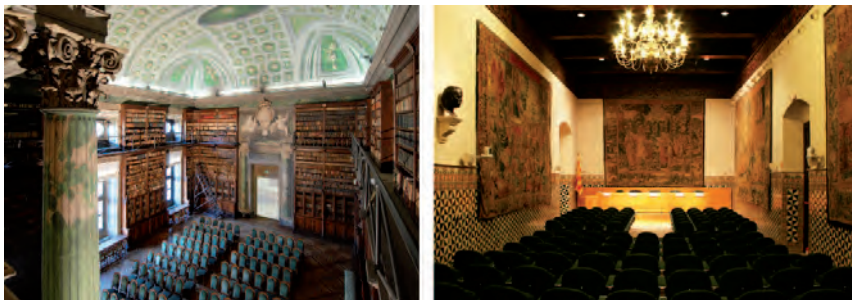


Fig. 1. Left, *Sala dei Mappamondi* at the Academy of Sciences of Turin. Right, *Sala Prat de la Riba* at the Institute for Catalan Studies, the Catalan Academy of Sciences and Humanities.

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cities managed to carve out for themselves a substantial political unit which evolved to become their core such that ultimately both were eventually established as political capitals. Yet, large parts of the old kingdom of Savoy are today in France; and part of Catalonia is under French administration. In addition, Valencia, a Catalan-speaking region to the south, has a separate administrative and political status in Spain. But within the relatively 'backward' Hispanic and Italian social, cultural, and political universes of the 19th century, Catalan, Piedmontese, and Lombard societies strike us as regions that were capable, as to the manner born, to enter and even shape the modern world (Fig. 1).

As a matter of fact, endogenous capitalist and industrial revolutions took place within Catalonia and Northern Italy. Historically, the process of modernization in Europe, and therefore in the world, began in Southern Europe: the modern mentality as well as the basic institutions of modernity find their remote historical roots in those lands, from late Medieval times and continuing into the early Renaissance. Trade and mercantile international law, banking, protodemocratic parliaments, competitive individualism, and primitive capitalism found natural homes in Northern Italy and Catalonia from the start. Later on, these societies shared in the development—again, seemingly from within—of the ideologies that became characteristic of modern times: liberalism, socialism, and anarchism, with Northern Italy and Catalonia embracing constitutionalism and rationalism in true unison with the rest of Western Europe. Apart from the liberal bourgeois culture that developed in Turin and Barcelona over the 19th and the 20th centuries, linked to the urban and industrial development of these cities, revolutionary radicalism also found in each society a specific and original form of expression, which became more socialist and communist in Turin during its revolutionary period (one that we associate with the Antonio Gramsci and the *consigli operaí*) than in Catalonia, whose working class veered towards anarcho-syndicalism. Yet, Catalan syndicalism was substantially different from the much more utopian libertarianism of the period. It strongly emphasized disciplined cooperativism and workers' control of the various enterprises. But no less than the revolutionary movement in Piedmont, its Catalan counterpart left its mark on the history of European industrial and left-wing radicalism.

For all these reasons, both societies were, for a long time, peripheral to the core of the states to which they now belong; by the same token, they were also central and vitally important to their respective states, in that they were and have remained powerful industrial and advanced regions. Indeed, the wider economies of Italy and Spain largely depended on their prosperity during the modernization of these countries and continue to do so today.

Obvious differences between Piedmont and Catalonia, important though they are, do not entirely blur the picture. On the contrary, some of them happen to be extremely enlightening, and some are perhaps only a matter of degree: Catalonia is not just a region, it is a nation, so defined in the democratic Spanish Constitution of 1978 and considered as such by most Catalans. Piedmont, on the other hand, despite its strong linguistic and cultural identity within Italy, is readily defined as a region

mostly by its own people. The Catalan language is a distinct Romance language, just as French, Italian, Provençal or Romanian. Its vitality is considerable and its official recognition by the world of universities, science and the humanities is assured and quite effective. Catalan capitalism and industrialism and indeed the modernity of the social structure of Catalonia may be older or more precocious historically even than that of Piedmont; yet, for a series of significant reasons, Piedmontese capitalism and industrialism successfully reached advanced stages of internationalization and modernization which were only defectively arrived at by the Catalans and their enterprising bourgeoisie. While both are important industrial regions today, Catalan development seems to lag behind that of Piedmont and Lombardy, and quite substantially in some areas.

Perhaps the greatest contrast between the two societies is to be found in their respective relationships with the states to which they belong. Thus, historically, the peripheral Piedmontese, shifted their political ambitions from a transalpine world onto the Italian peninsula: they then became the chief architects of a united Italian nation. Turin was briefly the first capital of Italy, in the earliest stage of the state-building and nation-building years. The contrast could not be greater with Catalonia. The Catalans, entrenched in their small principality, jealously kept their relative independence within the Spanish crown and empire, from which they were excluded. They sometimes had to fight for sheer and heroic survival against invasions by the Spanish and French monarchies. The cost for them was immense and need not be recounted here. By the 19th century, and unlike the Piedmontese, they had no larger nation to unify: the massive reality of the Spanish monarchy—clumsy, archaic, centralistic, as already seen by many at the end of 17th century—was there as a most stubborn and alien political reality. While the Piedmontese conquered and built the Italian state, the Catalans had to accommodate themselves within the Spanish one, and survive as a national community.

In this respect, it is most revealing that the expressions *catalanismo* and *piemontesismo* mean exactly the opposite in Spain and Italy. The former is, of course, Catalan nationalism, occasionally even meaning separatism or independence. The latter, on the other hand, was a term widely employed in the years after the formation of the kingdom of Italy, after 1861, to indicate the tendency to build the new state according to the criteria of the Sardinian State. The expression also reflected the resentment of Lombards, Tuscans and, especially, Southerners against early Piedmontese control and penetration of the state administration and the army. Penetration of that kind by the Catalans has never occurred within the Spanish state. If anything, there was serious under-representation, at least until the arrival of democracy late last century. It has always been the norm, and is a source of complaints in Catalonia about the lack a rightful place within the Spanish state.

Perhaps the contrasting situations of each region vis-à-vis Rome and Madrid, not to speak of their distinctiveness in terms of culture and language, together with the respective feelings of nationhood explain how, today, Catalans abhor being coupled or linked to certain Northern Italian regionalist or semi-independence movements, such as the Lega Nord, which they

see as vastly unrelated to their history, identity and claims. All parties and movements in Catalonia are vehemently committed to a just distribution of resources between all peoples of the Iberian Peninsula. Opportunistic regionalism finds no friends in Catalonia. This is not to be confused with very strong feelings—backed by a constant flow of economic analyses—that resource distribution, state investments and financial arrangements within the Spanish state represent an unfair burden upon the Catalan economy. This is reflected in Catalonia's political party system, which is substantially different from that of the rest of Spain. (It must be added, for a multiple nation state such as Spain, that the same goes for the Basque Country, which enjoys a much fairer fiscal system but, owing to its ethnic identity, also possesses its own political party structure.)

The end of the 20th century saw these two peripheral yet crucial areas of Italy and Spain converge in their roles regarding their respective peninsulas as well as within Europe as a whole. (To some observers they are the southernmost Northern European societies.) The implementation of regionalism in Italy and the recognition by the Spanish constitution of 1978 of the nationality status of Catalonia and the restoration of the *Generali-*

tat, the ancient Catalan Government, has begun to create a more adequate framework for the prosperity and democratic stability of their respective states. Given the strong linguistic, cultural, and industrial links of both Catalonia and Piedmont with the rest of Europe, their frontier position may have been seen, in the past, as sources of ambivalence and national disloyalty by poorer regions or diffident central governments. However, they are now sources of strength: two vital, vibrant and forward-looking societies within Italy and Spain.

Both Piedmont and Catalonia can act as strategic links between their respective wider states and their peoples on the one hand, and the larger unit of Western Europe, on the other. Granted the amount of initiative that they deserve, Piedmont and Catalonia will fulfill a creative, dynamic and highly innovative role in the consolidation of a united and prosperous Europe. This task will only be successful if European citizens rethink the meaning of their states and look for political units of the right scale and scope. It is only then that democracy can be strengthened and the ancient traditions of civility, industry, democracy and progress—such as the Piedmontese and the Catalans have always cherished—continue to flourish.