

The Mancomunitat de Catalunya (1914): Centennial of the First Step towards Self-Governance. Symposium

The centennial of the establishment of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya, a federation of the four provincial councils in the former Principality of Catalonia, was commemorated with symposium of historians at the Institut d'Estudis Catalans from the 22nd to 24th of October 2014, under the sponsorship of the Diputació de Barcelona (Barcelona Provincial Council).

The Mancomunitat de Catalunya was established on the 6th of April 1914, and it was the first step towards self-governance. This occurred precisely 200 years after the 1714 defeat and the loss of Catalonia's autonomous political institutions by the force of Spanish-French Bourbon weapons. The Mancomunitat was the forerunner of the Generalitat de Catalunya of 1931 and its later rebirth in 1977. The Generalitat is the current autonomous government of Catalonia, even though the institution dates from the 14th century.

The Mancomunitat was the product of collaboration among the political parties and civil society of Catalonia in a project of national construction. During its ten years of existence, it built up the country in the spheres of communications, professional education, culture and health-care with very few resources, while it also laid the groundwork for linguistic normalisation by making Catalan its official language. Catalonia today is the heir to the efforts begun by the Mancomunitat.

Twelve speakers shared their current knowledge of different facets of the Mancomunitat for three entire afternoons with a colloquium with participants in a symposium with more than 100 people registered. In the morning of the 25th, there was a guided tour of the exhibition "Prat de la Riba i la Mancomunitat de Catalunya" at the headquarters of the Diputació de Barcelona. The speakers at the opening event of the symposium included the President of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (IEC), Joan Domènec Ros; the President of the History-Archaeology Section of the IEC, Josep Massot i Muntaner; the President of the Barcelona Provincial Council, Salvador Esteve; and the Regional Minister of the Presidency of the Generalitat de Catalunya, Francesc Homs. They noted the Institut d'Estudis Catalans' historical ties with the Mancomunitat, they stressed the exemplary efforts of the Mancomunitat seen from the present, and they recognised the opportunity offered by the symposium.

The first talk was by **Albert Balcells** (Institut d'Estudis Catalans, symposium coordinator), who spoke about "Enric Prat de la Riba i Josep Puig i Cadafalch, primer i segon presidents" (Enric Prat de la Riba and Josep Puig i Cadafalch, First and Second Presidents). He explained that Enric Prat de la Riba and Josep Puig i Cadafalch belonged to the same generation and the same political party: the Lliga Regionalista de Catalunya, founded in 1901. The author of the leading breviary on pro-autonomy nationalism, *La nacionalitat catalana* (1906), Prat de la Riba was the founding president of the Mancomunitat, the federation of the four provincial councils of Catalonia, although he never stepped down from the presidency of the Diputació de Barcelona, which he had held since 1907. When he died prematurely in 1917, the architect and art historian Josep Puig i Cadafalch, who had been Prat's right-hand man in cultural policy, was chosen to succeed him. Puig occupied the presidency until 1923, although he did not serve simultaneously as the president of the Diputació de Barcelona. Under his mandate, the four provincial councils transferred all services and resources to the Mancomunitat in 1920, so this was the period when the Mancomunitat had the most substance, despite the limitations imposed by not having achieved a statute of autonomy in 1919. The importance of the efforts made during Puig's seven-year presidency should not be eclipsed by his error of having believed in the apparent regionalism of General Primo de Rivera, who seized power in 1923 without any effective opposition and liquidated the Mancomunitat in 1925.

The historian **Santiago Izquierdo** (Universitat Pompeu Fabra and Universitat Oberta de Catalunya) spoke about the "Antecedents i campanya pro Mancomunitat" (Background and Campaign in Favour of the Mancomunitat). He analysed the lead-up to the Mancomunitat de Catalunya and the long and complex campaign that resulted in the establishment of the institution in April 1914. He examined issues like Antoni Maura's draft law on local administration in 1907, and especially how it affected the provincial commonwealths. Discussing this draft law shed light on how the differences on this issue separated the politicians of the Restoration, the representatives of the more centralist Spanish nationalism and



FIGURE 1. Opening event at the symposium “La Mancomunitat de Catalunya 1914. Centennial of the First Step towards Self-Governance”. Left to right: Josep Massot, president of the History-Archaeology Section of the IEC; Francesc Homs, Minister of the Presidency of the Generalitat de Catalunya; Joandomenec Ros, President of the IEC; Salvador Esteve, president of the Diputació de Barcelona; and Albert Balcells, scientific coordinator of the symposium.

Catalan politicians. After the failed attempt in 1907, in 1911 the process demanding the Mancomunitat was once again launched, spearheaded by the Diputació de Barcelona, which suggested to the other Catalan provincial councils that they form a single government for all of Catalonia by combining the provincial corporations. Once the foundations for the Mancomunitat were approved by all four provincial councils, it began to be discussed in the Courts on the 17th of October 1911, where the draft law became stuck owing to the lack of understanding and hostility of much of the chamber. This draft law on provincial commonwealths was not submitted to the Congress until May 1912, although it only contained part of what the Catalan provincial councils had proposed. In June, the draft law began to be discussed in the Congress, and in October it was ratified by 171 votes in favour and 42 against. After being approved by the Congress of the Deputies, it had to be voted on by the Senate. Faced with obstructionism and delays in approving the draft law in the upper chamber, the Catalan parties expressed their dismay and asked that the government approve the draft law on provincial commonwealths by decree, if needed. In the meantime, Catalan civil society mobilised en masse to demand that it be approved. Finally, the president of

the Spanish government, Eduardo Dato, decided to close the issue which had been dragging on for too long and was threatening to endanger the already fragile political stability of the Restoration regime, and he used his authority to issue decrees to approve the draft law. On the 18th of December 1913, the government approved the commonwealth of provinces. It was the only reform of the local administration effected during the Restoration, and even though it was a general decree and not only for Catalonia, no other region managed to seize upon the opportunity it afforded.

The historian **Enric Pujol** (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona) spoke about “La relació de la Mancomunitat amb l’Administració local i el projecte d’estatut d’autonomia de 1919” (The Mancomunitat’s Relationship with the Local Administration and the Draft Statute of Autonomy of 1919). He stressed that Catalan town halls played a key role in shaping and developing the regional corporation. At first, the very idea of creating a commonwealth of provincial councils was linked to a reform of the Spanish local administration. Even though this was not what made this new body possible, once the Mancomunitat had been established, the town halls were

crucial in its functioning, given that they were one of its main sources of financing. Even though the Mancomunitat was funded by the provinces, a major part of its income came from direct and indirect taxes which were collected by the municipalities and paid by the town halls to the provincial councils until 1920, and after that directly to the Mancomunitat. For this reason, when the campaign in favour of political autonomy for the Principality of Catalonia was being planned in 1918, the municipalities were the impetus behind the movement. Catalan autonomy was associated with municipal autonomy, and the town halls demanded that they be relieved from having to finance the provincial councils and the Mancomunitat, insisting instead that these bodies should have their own funding through a transfer of competences from the Spanish government. This campaign in favour of political autonomy spearheaded by the town halls led to widespread social mobilisation and the coalescence of a united front among the Catalan parties, which unfortunately were unable to attain their goal. However, it did serve to develop of draft statute of autonomy in 1919 that had the support of 1,072 Catalan town halls, which accounted for 99% of the population of the Principality in a municipal referendum promoted by the Mancomunitat. This text is worth analysing in some detail to ascertain the aspirations at that time based on *realpolitik*, since it was drafted with the goal of finding a compromise solution with the government of Spain. This negotiated solution ended up being impossible because of the intransigence of the Spanish monarchic parties in the Congress of the Deputies and the simultaneous outbreak of serious social conflict in Catalonia.

In his talk on “Les finances de la Mancomunitat” (The Finances of the Mancomunitat), the economist **Josep Muntaner i Pasqual** (Institut d’Estudis Catalans) explained that the job of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya entailed the need for public debt in order to attain more resources than the four unified provincial councils strictly had. This was allowed by the third article of the Royal Decree issued on the 26th of March 1914, on the Statute of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya. In all of Spain, only Catalonia seized upon the opportunity offered by the 1913 Royal Decree on Commonwealths because of its regenerative force, and only the Diputació de Barcelona had the economic wherewithal to do so. A holistic approach like Catalonia’s, modern, rational and self-sufficient, had never before been tackled in any state in Europe or in any European region, much less in Spain after the 1898 colonial defeat. Infrastructures had been built in the European regions which had been the most developed based on increasing industrialisation, but only according to the peremptory rise of factories. However, nowhere had this occurred with such coherence and breadth of territorial organisation as what was undertaken by Prat de la Riba’s Mancomunitat. Catalonia was the only place in Europe where there was a politician with such a sweeping vision

as Prat de la Riba’s, and he planned and executed a comprehensive, coherent territorial project. However, the financing was not sufficient, and the issuance of public debt did not raise enough funds. Some testimonies indicate that the reason was the paltry contributions by the banks, but this can only be a supposition without any clear proof. This divorce with the banks may lead us to believe that the Mancomunitat might have become unviable if the institution had lasted longer. While the distancing of the banks from the Mancomunitat may be a stain in the history of the first effective step in Catalonia’s national resurgence, the impetus and the accomplishments of the Mancomunitat should always be remembered.

In his talk, the physician **Ferran Sabaté** (Universitat de Barcelona) discussed “La política sanitària” (Health Policy). The Mancomunitat, which had neither the ability to enact laws nor sufficient wherewithal, radically transformed the social structures and mindset in the field of health, and its influence extended beyond its lifetime. In the field of charitable medicine, it transformed the services for poor demented citizens and the former orphanage system into modern systems to care for pregnant women and the mentally ill. A Healthcare Regionalisation Plan was developed to coordinate all the resources – both public and private – scattered around Catalonia. Health information and educational campaigns for the people were launched, as was continuous training for healthcare staff. Mobile rapid intervention teams were created. Waterworks and sanitation engineering projects were carried out, and in the realm of public health, efforts were made to combat malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid fever, child mortality and the endemic goitre, among other scourges. The Mancomunitat’s efforts in health were the first modern, public, programmed effort to intervene to improve the people’s health conditions before the advent of social security.

The historian **Andreu Mayayo** (Universitat de Barcelona) focused his lecture entitled “La política agrària” (Agricultural Policy) on the policies implemented by the Mancomunitat in this field. He explained that even though Catalonia had become the “factory of Spain” over the course of the 19th century, active farmers were still in the majority in the early 20th century, and the agricultural question still polarised social and political life until the 1930s. It is worth bearing in mind that the county maps initiated by the Mancomunitat and established by the Generalitat were based on weekly farmers’ markets. The agrarian crisis which spanned the late 19th and early 20th century placed the issue of agriculture on the political agenda and unleashed a bitter social conflict. The Mancomunitat, spurred by conservative Catalanism, opted for the modernisation of agriculture and livestock, along with inter-class, non-egalitarian cooperatives (the decision-making ability was linked to the economic capacity

of each member) to overcome the conflict within the context of social reformism. In this sense, the Mancomunitat's priorities were to consolidate and expand the role of the Escola Superior d'Agricultura created by the Diputació de Barcelona in 1912, and to create the Serveis Tècnics Agraris, which would spread the new developments aimed at improving productivity and product manufacturing around the communities. Finally, we should spotlight the efforts of different individuals who also played a major political role, such as Carles Pi i Suñer, Pere Màrtir Rossell i Vilar, Josep M. Rendé i Ventosa, Josep M. Valls and Manuel Raventós.

In his talk entitled "Els serveis i ensenyaments tècnics, carreteres i telèfons" (Technical Services and Education, Motorways and Telephones), the historian and engineer **Santiago Riera** (Universitat de Barcelona and Institut d'Estudis Catalans) discussed how the Mancomunitat de Catalunya was the outcome of active Catalanism, which was likewise the product of an effort to modernise the country. And modernising the country meant improving education, healthcare, education (primary, secondary and higher) and communications. All of this meant creating schools, hospitals and healthcare networks; encouraging the study and cultivation of the sciences; promoting the techniques that other countries were already using; and creating the communications infrastructures needed. In Catalonia, technical schools were created hand in hand with new pedagogies; hospitals and medical care centres were created; a telephone network that had been practically non-existent was created; roads were laid down; and it became possible to build a (secondary) railway network to complement the Spanish system. Regarding science, given the obsolescence of a centralist university that was passive in the face of Catalanisation and virtually impossible to change, the Mancomunitat created the Institut d'Estudis Catalans as the "Academy of Academies" charged with bringing Catalan and European science together. And thus Prat de la Riba's wish was fulfilled: "All the villages of Catalonia with a school, a library, a telephone and a road to reach them!" The network of centres at the Universitat Industrial and the Laboratori General d'Assaig i Condicionament analysed and assured the quality of raw materials and manufactured goods, and the Cursos Monogràfics d'Alts Estudis i d'Intercanvi promoted contact with scientific progress from abroad through courses taught by foreign personalities (such as Einstein). These efforts were matched by the Mancomunitat's developments in telephones and roads, even though the proposed secondary railway system was never actually built.

Josep Massot i Muntaner (Institut d'Estudis Catalans) delivered the talk on "Cap a la normalització lingüística" (Towards Linguistic Normalisation). He stressed how the Mancomunitat continued the efforts that Enric Prat de la Riba had made in the Provincial Council of Barcelona af-

ter he became its president, the most important manifestation being the creation of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans in 1907. The IEC started with the History-Archaeology Section and expanded in 1911 with the creation of the Philology Section (or the Institut de la Llengua Catalana) and the Sciences Section. Prat de la Riba showed a keen interest in the efforts to provide uniform rules for the Catalan language, to standardise it with other cultured languages and to project it internationally. For this reason, not only did he encourage research, publications and educational dissemination in the most diverse ways, but he also had a special interest in getting the members of the IEC to develop spelling norms that could be presented to Catalan society as an alternative to the orthographic anarchy that reigned at that time, and that they be completed with the rules of what was then called the "literary language". These desires, which were not bereft of difficulties and oppositions, found their expression in the *Normes ortogràfiques* adopted by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans in 1913, which Prat de la Riba painted in *La Veu de Catalunya* as a necessary instrument for Catalan language and culture. Some of their points were revised in 1917 when the Institute published its *Diccionari ortogràfic*, written under the supervision of Pompeu Fabra, and the next year the *Gramàtica catalana* by Pompeu Fabra himself, who became the most influential force in the efforts to streamline and modernise the language. This caused him a great deal of resentment, such as from Antoni M. Alcover, the first president of the Philological Section, who clamorously broke off with the Institute once his protector Prat de la Riba died; the leaders of the Acadèmia de la Llengua Catalana, including Jaume Collell; and especially a large group of members of the Acadèmia de Bones Lletres, who did not accept his reforms and advocated a different orthographic system. Under both Prat de la Riba and Puig i Cadafalch, the Mancomunitat strove to promote Catalan as the language of culture, education and public administration. These efforts bore fruit especially during the Second Republic, at the beginning of which both the Acadèmia de Bones Lletres and the organisers of the Jocs Florals accepted the linguistic authority of the Institut d'Estudis Catalans. However, after the 1936 Civil War, there was a huge shift, and it took many years for the lost positions to recover wholly or even slightly.

Assumpció Estivill (Universitat de Barcelona) spoke about "Les biblioteques i les bibliotecàries" (Libraries and Female Librarians). She surveyed the launch of the project to create a public library system in Catalonia which depended on the Mancomunitat, as envisioned by Eugeni d'Ors, and its subsequent evolution. She primarily explained how libraries gradually penetrated the towns around Catalonia based on figures on the number of readers and what they read, and how the collections evolved to more closely reflect the readers' interests. She also spotlighted female librarians' competences, how they exercised these competences and their influence on the



FIGURE 2. Cover of the symposium programme.

maturation of the project. The Escola de Bibliotecàries, the only one in Spain, was founded in 1915 to prepare an exclusively female staff to serve in the 11 public libraries created by the Mancomunitat in towns outside of Barcelona, with the Biblioteca de Catalunya, which was opened in 1914, as their headquarters. The period studied reached the Civil War, when the initial project can be regarded as consolidated and the network of libraries began to reach a certain breadth.

Professor **Josep González-Agàpito** (Universitat de Barcelona and Institut d'Estudis Catalans) delivered the talk entitled “L’obra pedagògica de la Mancomunitat” (Educational Efforts of the Mancomunitat), which he stressed was one of the cornerstones of the national reconstruction policy that this institution undertook. The foundation was a new kind of education for all levels which was meant to be an efficient tool for regenerating society and serving as a solid foundation for the developed, educated and European Catalonia preached by Noucentisme. The talk examined the ties between educational modernisation and the objectives of the government efforts under Prat de la Riba and Puig i Cadafalch. He also analysed the different actions in the fields of primary education, vocational training and higher educa-

tion, as well as in the sphere of informal and non-formal education, which were regarded as the keys to social regeneration. The teachers’ schools continued to depend on Spain, so the Mancomunitat created its *Escoles d’Estiu* (Summer Schools) to update and fine-tune the teachers’ practice, along with the Montessori courses which were very popular among Catalan educators, the three courses at the *Estudis Normals* to round out the knowledge acquired at the state normal schools, the free journal for educators, *Quaderns d’Estudi* and the *Butlletí dels Mestres*, which offered educational resources.

The historian **Josep Maria Roig i Rosich** (Universitat Rovira i Virgili) focused his talk entitled “La irradiació de la Mancomunitat fora de la província de Barcelona” (The Spread of the Mancomunitat outside the Province of Barcelona) on the decentralising modernisation efforts by this institution, which was close to both the region and its citizens, in the different geographic regions and social sectors. The provincial and municipal worlds were always a key part of the Mancomunitat’s efforts. To organise and balance Catalonia, action outside of Barcelona was needed; it was a major capital, but because of its size and industrialisation it had somewhat turned its back on the rural world. The Mancomunitat tried to offset this not

only in theory or approach but also through the projects it planned and carried out. The speaker analysed this thesis in three fields: first, in politics or the representation of the provinces in the governing bodies; secondly, in the ideological or theoretical sphere in relation to the planning of the rural world of small and medium-sized towns, with possible connections between their social and cultural associations; and thirdly, in the sphere of cultural projects and infrastructures outside of Barcelona. The Mancomunitat was located in Barcelona, but it was not centralist; it was interventionist to some extent, but always bearing in mind the needs of the working and middle classes, and it thought and acted on behalf of the country by favouring the inland areas as well. Finally, given the brief life of the Mancomunitat, we should analyse it more as a project than as a consolidated, finished effort. However, the less-developed regions and the three provinces with the fewest resources, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona, received proportionally more investment than Barcelona, as proven in the distribution of the assets and liabilities among the four provincial councils in 1925, after the Mancomunitat was liquidated.

In his talk entitled “La Mancomunitat, la intel·lectualitat i el Noucentisme” (The Mancomunitat, Intellectuality and Noucentisme), the historian **Jordi Casassas** (Universitat de Barcelona and Institut d’Estudis Catalans) outlined the role played by intellectuality in the government actions undertaken by the Mancomunitat de Catalunya. He also analysed the composition of this social sector, seeking the origins of its genesis and its burgeoning collective awareness of the need for intervention in public affairs. He started with the premise that this intellectual interventionism was linked to the hegemony of Noucentisme and, more generically, to the political consolidation of Catalanism. Casassas offered a few remarks on the possible convergences between Catalonia and other areas within the north-western Mediterranean. Finally, based on the general evolution of the country in the context of the Great War and the post-war years, he analysed the political leanings of the intellectual sector and consequently the reasons behind the 1920 “*cas Ors*”.

The Institut d’Estudis Catalans has published the lectures from this symposium in a book.