

Book Reviews

The Basques, the Catalans and Spain

D. CONVERSI, 1997

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Catalonia and the Basque Country, or Euskadi, are often mentioned in discussions on devolution in the UK. They are perceived as regions, or stateless nations, which have achieved a considerable degree of autonomy during the last two decades. This autonomy is all the more remarkable given the context of repression by a highly centralised state which characterised the regime of General Franco and which ended only after his death in 1975. The period when the repression of both cultural and nationalist symbols and of individuals who defended them now seems far more distant than a mere 20 or so years. If the Basque Country and Catalonia have achieved so much in so short a time, so the argument goes, then why can't we?

Things are much more complex than this, of course. Outsiders tend to lump Catalonia and the Basque Country together, as part of the same nationalist or devolutionist phenomenon. In many ways they are, but this approach masks some very important differences between them which condition their development as stateless nations. Daniele Conversi examines such issues in a book which provides a wealth of factual material and places its subject within the wider context of modern nationalism.

The author highlights what Catalonia and Euskadi have in common, but more importantly analyses their deep-rooted historical differences. He points to five basic similarities between the two nationalist movements: they both (1) operated within the same state structure, Spain; (2) arose broadly at the same time, the end of the 19th century; (3) are among the most popular nationalist movements in Western Europe; (4) belong to regions that have been at the vanguard of the Spanish economy; and (5) have received a vast number of immigrants and thus had to face the challenge of integrating them (p. 257).

The differences, according to Conversi, reflect the greater strength of Catalan culture and language as a unifying social force over the last century, an element whose absence in the Basque Country led eventually to the use of violence as the cohesive force which united native Basques and immigrants. The Catalans' self-confidence in the survival of their language and culture—sometimes mistaken for arrogance in other areas of Spain—even through the dark years of dictatorship, has been lacking for much of the period in the Euskadi. Since its revival as a literary language in the mid-19th century, Catalan has been an instrument of both cultural and commercial communication in Catalonia in a way that the Basque language never has been. Immigrants, too, have expressed a desire to learn Catalan, although their motivation may often have been pragmatic since Catalan is perceived as the language of the ruling classes and therefore as an essential ingredient of social advancement (p. 213). Conversi demonstrates how

these and other issues have led to Catalan nationalism remaining 'moderate and broadly united around a cultural platform,' while 'Basque nationalism kept its radical separatist posture and its internal fragmentation' (p. 158).

Violence itself, argues Conversi, becomes a unifying force within the Basque Country. He charts the ways in which the theory of action-state repression-action was put into practice and helped ETA gain widespread support both among native Basques and immigrants as Francoist repression intensified in Euskadi from the late 1960s onwards. The role played by language and culture as a unifying force in the moderate nationalism of Catalonia belongs to violence in the much more fragmented Basque society. The opposition to the central Spanish state has, according to Conversi, been much more obviously confrontational in Euskadi than in Catalonia: 'if the main concern in Catalonia has been its self-definition and socio-cultural composition, in Euskadi the problem was "Spain"' (p. 188). According to Conversi, the more ETA confronted the Spanish state the more kudos they gained, especially among the young and the immigrant population, while the failure of the United States to support opposition to Francoist repression meant that the ever more radicalised opposition turned to Marxist theory for their inspiration.

The structure of Conversi's book intelligently and unobtrusively allows him to lead from a historical analysis of the two nationalisms to a more theoretical investigation of their differences. Following the first chapter, which is an introduction, chapters 2 and 3 trace the historical development of Catalan and Basque nationalism, respectively, from their beginnings in the 19th century to the Spanish Civil War. In a neat piece of symmetry, chapters 4 and 5 consider the Franco years, this time beginning with Euskadi and then moving to Catalonia. The two nationalisms are combined in chapter 6, which is dedicated to the transition from dictatorship to democracy and cover 1975 to 1986, the year of Spain's accession to the European Community. Chapters 7-9 centre on the three principal features of nationalism which concern Conversi, namely language, immigration and violence. They are entitled 'Language and Other Values', 'Nationalism and Immigration in Catalonia and the Basque Country' and 'The Roots of Violence' respectively. Chapter 10 is the Conclusion.

The Basques, the Catalans and Spain contains expert analysis and is highly readable. The facts—which are both plentiful and pertinent—never get in the way of the analysis, which is thorough and clear. The book contains five uncomplicated maps which indicate the various provinces of Euskadi and Catalonia and the relationship between these and other areas of Spain. There is a glossary of Spanish, Catalan and Basque words (the latter constitute the majority), and an exhaustive bibliography consisting of historical, cultural and sociological items. The breadth of the bibliography, the author's grasp of it and his ability to integrate it into his own analysis are most impressive. The book contains a number of errors, most of them relatively minor (for instance, the theatre historian Enric Gallén appears as Enric Galien). However, something seems to have gone wrong with the chapter numbering in the Introduction, where chapter 2 has become 1, 3 has become 2, and so on. I can only think that the author forgot that the Introduction was numbered as chapter 1. However, this unfortunate confusion does not distract from what is a splendidly written and organised study of Basque and Catalan nationalism which will become an obligatory part of any reading-list on the subject.