

Protectionism and the Birth of Catalanism

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Critics of Catalanism often reduce the movement to a reaction based on economic and fiscal selfishness. Jeanne Moisand shows how Catalanism originally identified itself with the defence of protectionism and the Spanish empire. It was only after the latter had been lost that the Catalan economic identity became opposed to the Spanish nation.

Critics of Catalanism often reduce it to a reaction based on economic and fiscal selfishness. They claim it is particular to the inhabitants of a wealthy industrial region who are little inclined to show solidarity with poorer Spanish regions. Faced with this jaded interpretation, Catalanists tend, conversely, to highlight the movement's cultural and political roots. This firm separation between the cultural and economic domains, which often guides people's explanations of Catalanism, nonetheless appears largely artificial. The importance of debates on protectionism and free trade in the movement's crystallisation during the 20th century shows the degree to which economic issues relate to aspects of culture and identity. Like other contemporary European ideologies on foreign trade,¹ the strength of the Catalan protectionist trend is actually based as much on widespread ideas and beliefs as it is on economic interests. Conversely, the construction of people's regional and national ideas of Catalonia is also conditioned by social and economic factors and, within those, by the dominance of discourse defending a protected labour market. Today, re-examining the issue of 20th-century Catalan protectionism by analysing it from its socio-economic, political and cultural dimensions enables us to set out the different stages involved in interpreting the birth of Catalanism.

¹ TODD D., "Le protectionnisme, un libéralisme internationaliste. Naissance et diffusion, 1789-1914", <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Le-protectionnisme-un-liberalisme.html>, posted online on 20/10/2009 ; and *L'Identité économique de la France, Libre-échange et protectionnisme (1814-1851)*, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 2008.

Protectionism and Political Freedoms

As elsewhere in Europe, Spanish liberals in the early 19th century associated political freedom with economic freedom, recognising the benefits of a lack of restrictions on trade. While certain colonial monopolies remained in place, such as that of tobacco in the Philippines, the mercantilist system was dismantled globally, influenced by American independence and the liberal reforms that trade underwent in the colonies. However, in Catalonia, economists in the early 19th century believed that the collapse of Spanish foreign trade, a side effect of American independence, made a fully open customs arrangement unenforceable in Spain. Eudald Jaumandreu (1774-1840), professor of economics for the Barcelona department of trade, defended – before the German Friedrich List (1789-1846), who was considered the main protectionist thinker – a system of foreign trade that was open to a greater or lesser degree according to the level of development in each country. Over the decades that followed, the leaders of the Catalan protectionist movement, such as the great trader and industrialist Joan Güell I Ferrer (1800-1872) continued in the same vein. They succeeded in distributing their writing and mobilising the population with petitions that were closely followed at local level.²

Before all of this, however, the 1840s saw the beginning of a separation between political and economic freedom right across Spain³, which followed a similar timeline to that of France. Driven by a movement of popular governments, opposed to the establishment of the liberal reign of Isabella II (1833-1868) by the regent Maria Cristina, the progressive General Espartero became regent in 1840. However, he quickly failed to live up to the expectations of his progressive and radical partners by adopting unpopular tax measures and secretly preparing to sign a free trade agreement with the United Kingdom. In Barcelona, opposition to Espartero, who was said to have sold out to the English, became particularly intense. It led to violent street demonstrations known as the ‘turmoils’ (*Bullangues*) from 1842 to 1843, during which the regent ordered the bombardment of the city. We can therefore see that Catalan protectionism was driven from the beginning by radical urban groups of artisans and workers as well as by the richest industrialists.

² LLUCH MARTÍN E., *El Pensament econòmic a Catalunya (1760-1840), Els orígens ideològics del proteccionisme i la presa de consciència de la burgesia catalana*, ed.62, Barcelona, 1973.

³ SÁNCHEZ LEÓN P., *Libertad económica versus pluralismo político: la movilización a favor del libre comercio en Inglaterra y en España, 1840-49*, Madrid, Instituto Universitario Ortega y Gasset, 2000.

As in France during the July Monarchy, the fight for political freedoms therefore became compatible with the struggle against open customs. Recent historiography of Catalanism underlines precisely this special attachment that Catalan society felt for those political freedoms, which could explain the particular intensity of protectionist mobilisation in Catalonia. According to the historian Borja de Riquer, the affirmation of Catalan individuality was brought about by the early emergence of a ‘civil society’ in Catalonia in comparison with the rest of Spain. It was based on the development of a dense network of associations, which enabled Catalans to be considerably active in the public sphere, despite their belonging to a state that was archaic, militarised and lacking in educational services.⁴ Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, however, discourse on protectionism and free trade shifted position, clouding the protectionists’ affiliation with the struggle for political freedoms.

Victory for a Form of Protectionism that Destroyed Freedom?

After Espartero’s withdrawal in 1843, the moderate liberals governed unchallenged during Isabella II’s reign and maintained a protectionist customs regime – indeed prohibitionist for some products – thereby fuelling contraband activity and the police efforts required to repress it. It was in this climate of restrictions on political and economic freedoms that an international campaign to promote free trade was launched from the United Kingdom; this was well received in Madrid and the trading cities of Cadiz and Jerez. Debates over foreign trade intensified after 1856, while the progressives were politically marginalised once again and the Spanish economy entered a period of growth. An association for the reform of customs tariffs was established in Madrid in 1859 by progressive and democratic economists, and was reminiscent of English and French associations of the same kind. Its founders were also involved in setting up the association for the abolition of slavery (1865).⁵

In 1868, a liberal revolution dethroned Isabella II and gave a group of economists from Madrid the chance to temporarily hold power. New, more liberal customs tariffs were immediately adopted (1869) as well as a new constitution that was more respectful of political freedoms (1869), while the abolition of slavery was declared in Puerto Rico (1873). In order to fight against the new customs tariffs, the first protectionist associations were then founded in Catalonia; these were also inspired by foreign models. The Six-Year Democracy (1868-

⁴ RIQUER I PERMANYER B. de, *Identitats contemporànies: Catalunya i Espanya*, Barcelona, Eumo Editorial, 2000, p. 215 onwards.

⁵ SCHMIDT-NOWARA C., *Empire and Antislavery, Spain, Cuba and Puerto Rico, 1833-1874*, Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999, chap. 3, p. 57.

1874), however, did not last long enough to make the new legislation permanent. During the Restoration (1875-1923), while political freedoms were under threat, the 1869 tariff was adjusted in favour of protectionism. This shift marked the success of the activity of the new protectionist Catalan associations, which, in 1889, merged with the association that promoted national labour (*Fomento del Trabajo Nacional*). Led by the main Catalan textile bosses and their associates, the FTN nevertheless recruited from among the extensive pool of small-scale Catalan employers.⁶

Although protectionist activity identified less with the struggle for individual political freedoms after 1850, its ties with the fight for Catalan freedom, on the other hand, became increasingly well established. The protectionist campaign became active on a major scale in 1869 when thousands of people came out in protest against the new tariff. During the 1880s, frequent meetings once again gave rise to petitions and demonstrations. The protectionist cause was taken up by the first Catalanist programme, published in 1885: the ‘Memorial in defence of the moral and material interests of Catalonia’, known as the *Memorial de Greuges* (‘Grievances Memorial’). The third part (of four) of this famous text put forward a demand for a ‘protectionist state’. It strongly criticised discourse that advocated free trade, both for its anti-Catalanism and its denial of the protectionist aspirations of all Spaniards. The absence of a ‘defence of national interests’ in the rest of Spain was presented as a consequence of the “weakness in which its people live,”⁷ in terms of both economic and political organisation. According to the Catalanists of 1885, the intensity of local protectionist activity was primarily a result of the particular politicisation of Catalan society, especially its network of associations. A far cry from the ‘civil society’ that is presented today, supposedly more peaceful and anti-military than the rest of Spanish society, these Catalan associations, on the other hand, strongly supported the army’s involvement in the colonial struggle, which fuelled its power within the liberal Spanish regimes.

The Economic Identity of an Imperial Nation, and the 1898 Crisis

The effort to reorganise the Spanish empire after the fragmentation caused by American independence movements was particularly supported in Catalonia, and was instrumental in

⁶ The FTN listed 15,000 registered in 1914, at a time when the Catalan industry was still loosely concentrated and mostly made up of small- and medium-scale industries. REY REGUILLO F. del, *Propietarios y patronos. La política de las organizaciones económicas en la España de la Restauración (1914-1923)*, Madrid, Ministerio de Trabajo y Seguridad Social, 1992, p. 161.

⁷ *Memoria en defensa de los intereses morales y materiales de Cataluña*, Barcelona, Imp. Barcelonesa, 1885, p. 114-115.

fuelling Catalan protectionist discourse. The joint defence of national production and colonial trade was in fact one of its most concrete aspects. Unlike French protectionists, who were anti-slavery and fought against the sugar cane producers in the colonies in order to defend sugar beet producers back in France, their Catalan counterparts believed it was necessary to show ‘solidarity’ between the peninsula and the colonies, and to support the integration of their markets.

The liberal Spanish revolution of 1868, soon overtaken by the first independent uprising of Cuban nationalists, granted the Antillean Creoles (descended from Spaniards) equal political representation in the *Cortes*. This strengthening of political integration between the colonies and the peninsula, which from then on made up the imperial Spanish nation in equal measure, enabled the protectionists to demand economic compensation. The 1882 ‘law on trade relations’, and the 1891 protectionist customs tariff, strengthened Cuba’s role as a captive market for the consumption of Catalan textiles and wheat from the peninsula – produce whose sales capacity had been seriously compromised by the economic crisis. These measures, considered as the mark of national economic solidarity, sparked opposition from Cuban exporters (who preferred to trade with the United States) and consumers. In 1891, Cuban economic corporations started an economic opposition movement against the customs reforms. In 1895, Cuban nationalists rose up once more against Spain, and soon received support from the United States. They were joined in their struggle for independence by Puerto Rico and the Philippines, and won their fight.

Right up to the last moment, Catalan protectionists refused to contemplate the loss of the colonies or the fracturing of the national-imperial economic system. The FTN defended the war unequivocally, opposing any form of negotiation with Cuban nationalists. Faced with the news of their lost markets, the FTN demanded, for the first time, that a tax negotiation regime, similar to that of the Basque country, be established (‘economic alliance’). In 1899, producers’ demands were taken up by Barcelona traders, who started a major tax strike supported by the mayor. Their aim was clear: faced with a state that no longer protected the national-imperial economic identity, Catalan producers adopted the attitude of their Cuban counterparts. Their economic and political opposition to the central state was accompanied by a demand for fiscal and administrative autonomy. This organisation of a nationalist economy of a strictly Catalan nature – post-1898 and later co-existing with the Catalan defence of

Spanish protectionism – could base itself on another type of protectionist discourse, which had already been in place since the 1880s.

The Economic and Cultural Defence of Catalan Labour

Since the 1880s, intellectual professionals, for their part, took action in defence of the Catalan labour market. Members of the liberal professions and free intellectual groups (journalists, writers, theatre producers) took action together while playing an active part in constructing a Catalanist vision. By setting out the sociology of Catalanist cultural associations that developed over the 1880s and 1890s, the historian Joan Lluís Marfany has succeeded in highlighting the overwhelming presence of doctors and lawyers among their members.⁸ This can by no means be explained exclusively in terms of their love for the local culture; instead, this professional investment was also based on the compatibility between Catalanism's cultural programme and a defence of the identity of these professions, as shown by the case of jurists.

From the 1860s onwards, the number of law graduates in Barcelona grew more rapidly than the legal services market, and the gap widened during the economic crisis at the end of the century. Affected by administrative and university centralisation, and faced with a number of important Catalan families of lawyers monopolising major civil matters, a group of legal professionals, from more modest social backgrounds than their European counterparts, endeavoured to end the situation but came up against the Spanish state's inability to organise the profession. Demands for the decentralised management of a free market legal service and public judicial services, in which the Catalan language would feature, grew stronger in professional associations. These became vital intermediaries for the Catalanist programme, organising their claims during the bitter debates over the adoption of the Spanish Civil Code (1889). Jurists then carried out their (successful) defence of Catalan civil law, coupling their corporatist discourse with the construction of a judicial vision of regional traditions and customs.⁹

Pressures to protect the Catalan intellectual labour market could also be felt in other areas of cultural production, whose impact on the public was a great deal stronger. Theatre

⁸ MARFANY J. LI., *La Cultura del catalanisme*, Barcelona, Empúries, 2nd ed, 1996.

⁹ JACOBSON S. H., *Professionalism, Corporatism and Catalanism: The legal profession in Nineteenth-Century Barcelona*, PhD Tufts University, 1998.

attendance and production, which was not limited – as were the printing industries – by widespread illiteracy, experienced a rapid boom. During the process of professionalisation during the 1870s, Barcelona theatre producers nevertheless came up against restrictions on the spread of entertainment in Catalan, which competed with commercial repertoires from Madrid. Local writers and actors were soon forced to accept positions as amateurs of the community theatre or ‘modernist’ artists with no commercial outlet. Writers’ associations called on local and public authorities to defend Catalan theatre on the grounds of its cultural quality and benefits to society. At the beginning of the century, municipal and provincial institutions in Barcelona, governed by republicans and Catalanists, supported their cause and adopted their discourse: Catalan culture, educational and patriotic, should be protected against the invasion of third-rate culture from Madrid.

The efforts to establish the economic and cultural borders of Catalan work, as initiated by the intellectual professions, soon carried over into other professional categories. After the crisis at the end of the century, the separation between Catalan and non-Catalan workers, for example, became increasingly clear. Rivalry over access to employment was accompanied by new discourse on cultural and political differences between Spanish and Catalan workers. Protectionist discourse, which had originally defended Spanish labour, thus gradually took up the defence of Catalan labour.

Conclusion

In accounts of the Spanish exception, the protectionists’ success was traditionally interpreted as an explanation for the ‘backwardness’ of the country’s economic development. The scope of the debates between proponents of protectionism and those of free trade from the 1840s onwards, and the final triumph of the protectionists during the 1890s, were by no means limited to Spain. On the other hand, the economic identity shaped by those debates seemed more complex there than in other countries. Catalan protectionists succeeded in mobilising public opinion on a much larger scale than elsewhere, to the point where protectionism in Spain was eventually associated with the Catalan identity. This capacity for mobilisation exceeded that of some major industrialists, known for imposing their class interests. The successful spread of protectionist ideology was based more on the effectiveness of the link between the discourse of professional and economic corporations and that of numerous educational, political or local workers’ associations. It was also based on an attractive ideological content: this discourse, first associated with preserving individual

political freedoms, was then applied to Catalan freedoms while defending the cause of a Spanish nationalism of imperial magnitude. The 1898 ‘Disaster’, when Spain lost its colonies, at last placed the Catalan dimension of this vigorous economic nationalism in a stronger position than the Spanish dimension, which continued into the 20th century. Fuelled by differing conceptions of the national economic identity and the institutional means to defend it, even today conflicts over economic and fiscal policy still feed disputes between the Catalan and Spanish authorities over the 2006 *Estatut*.

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