He first time I arrived in Barcelona was almost a decade ago on May Day 1978. On that day, the first legal international workers' holiday since the defeat of the Republic nearly forty years earlier brought almost a million people into the streets. Political posters covered almost every visible surface, sometimes brashly occupying billboards; in the spaces between the various calls to mobilization you could glimpse remnants of automobile or toothpaste ads. Barcelona's broad boulevards were invisible beneath the miles of demonstrators; trade unions, political parties, women's rights groups, neighborhood associations, and even a new gay group carried banners bearing the narrow red and gold Catalan stripes. Slogans were in Catalan, Catalonia's national language had been banned by Franco at the end of the Civil War and even in the years preceding his death in 1975 it was tolerated in only the most limited of circumstances. Demands for national self-determination and social progress were thus poignantly intertwined that day in a manner that underscored all that had been suppressed by the fascists. But for me, they could not help but resonate with another situation that was far more familiar: the national movement in Québec. Of course, this May Day demonstration was larger than anything I had ever seen in Montreal where demonstrations were already gargantuan compared to the rest of Canada. But looking at its composition and enthusiasm, listening to the participants articulate concerns around self-determination, language rights, and almost palpably feeling their sense of national community, it would have been difficult not to have been reminded of the outstanding issues of the day back home. It would be outrageous to compare the historical relations between Canada and Québec to the impact on Spain and Catalonia of the Franco regime, not to mention the horrific war that led to his victory. But there can be no denying that the respective conjunctures initiated by Franco's death on the one hand and the electoral victory of the Parti Québécois on the other forced the central states in question to confront anew and with unmistakable urgency the character of the relationships they wished to maintain with their most formidable national minorities. (In Spain, it should be immediately noted, Catalonia shares this status with Baixada, the Basque country). Each conjuncture was born with immense possibilities.

In the intervening years, I have returned to Catalonia only to be struck again by the same feelings of kinship between the situation there and in Québec. But now, the comparisons suggested by visits in the late 70s and early 80s have been reinforced by recent scholarly interest in the dynamics that characterize national communities within developed states. The very possibility for such interest has depended on the emergence of unstable situations in several western countries previously regarded as fully formed "nation-states." While Québec now appears to be a prime example of this phenomenon, modern nationalism emerged there in the 1960s before many comparable situations were viable. At that time, the discourse appropriated by many Québécois intellectuals to explain the character of national oppression and formulate their own role in ending it was drawn largely from the decolonization struggles in Africa and the anti-imperialist campaigns of Cuba and Vietnam. But with the gradual abandonment of this paradigm generated in the Third World, comparative models that see Québec sharing a problematic with other minority nations of the developed world are receiving more attention. What is so intriguing about looking comparatively at Québec and Catalonia — and so suggestive for understanding the motor forces of national consciousness — is that today's national concerns are similar despite radically divergent economic and political histories.
Modern Nationalism in Quebec and Catalonia

Robert Schwartzwald

By the time Samuel de Champlain established his Habitation at Quebec in 1608, Catalonia had already known several centuries of highly sophisticated constitutional government, one which many historians consider to have been the most advanced in medieval Europe. The strong bonds that joined the Kingdom of Catalonia’s four provinces did not disappear when it entered a confederation with the Kingdoms of Aragon and Castile in 1478-79 produce such a result. On the contrary, feelings of distinctiveness tended to strengthen as Catalans found themselves forced to bail out what they perceived as an impossibly mishandled central state in the period following the colonial conquests in the Americas. An indigenous capitalist class had long made Catalonia among the wealthiest regions of the Iberian peninsula, most often the wealthiest, and in periods of deep crisis the region emerged as the "saviour of Spain." The high level of industrialization, especially in textiles, and the thriving principal port, Barcelona, consistently attracted immigrant work forces from the rest of Spain as well as from underdeveloped southern France. The various urban, rural, commercial, and industrial interests found expression in a representative assembly, the Generalitat. This continuing measure of self-government was the price Catalonia had successfully exacted from the Spanish crown in recognition of its economic importance. It was suppressed, however, after the Catalans were abandoned by their British commercial allies in the Spanish War of Succession. When Britain signed the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713-14, it also spelled the end to formal constitutional identity for Catalonia. This would not be recovered until the 1930s, when the Spanish Republic accepted an autonomy statute presented to it by a revived Generalitat and massively approved by the Catalan people. General Franco, of course, suppressed the statute along with all Catalan institutions following his final victory in the Civil War. Since his death in 1975, however, the Generalitat has been legalized, an Autonomy Statute negotiated, and the Catalan language been granted "co-officiality" in Catalonia along with Spanish. But while this sounds like a happy ending, the current status of these gains is highly problematic. To see how it is that long-cherished aspirations may turn sour just as they seem to be within reach, a telling example may be invoked from the unlikely sphere of urban planning.

One way the new sense of possibility after Franco's death manifested itself in Catalonia was through an energetic program for renewing many of the urban spaces of this highly industrialized region. The level of municipal services has traditionally been higher in Catalonia than in most other parts of Spain due to indigenous wealth and a sense of communal solidarity. Yet, industry has been allowed to develop under the Franco regime in a way that flouted these standards. Horrible air and water pollution and a lack of urban green space were some of the more obvious results. But since the restoration of democracy, the Catalan Architects' Association, whose building sports a Picasso mural, has led a discussion about urban space through publications, colloquia, and exhibitions. This has already led to some great urban projects, including the extension of Barcelona’s famed Ramblas into an esplanade that will rehabilitate the city’s old port. Many of the houses and buildings in the turn-of-the-century modernista style identified by most non-Catalans with the architect Antonio Gaudi have undergone cleaning and restoration, while other new urban projects celebrate Catalan artists that have won international recognition. There is a breathtaking new monument to Picasso designed by the modernist artist Antoni Tàpies. A giant glass cube, continuously obscured by flowing water, sits provocatively on a broad boulevard adjacent to the beaux-arts pavilion of the 1888 Universal
Exposition. Inside the cube, various mementos of the prosperous but smug era when the youthful Picasso lived in Barcelona are thrown together; turn-of-the-century furniture, a piano and other sundry objects are shrouded by banners bearing iconoclastic slogans taken from the artist's cubist and surrealist writings. The monument brilliantly amplifies Picasso's own challenge to the incipient provincialism of the city. At the same time, it is clearly an expression of Catalan pride. The project defiantly proclaims its participation in current aesthetic debates without sacrificing its specific cultural referentiality. Not only must the universal be brought to bear critically on the particular, it seems to say, but this is possible in Barcelona because the city and its culture have always been intimately involved with these universal issues.

Across town near a bull-ring, an equally exuberant if somewhat provocative monument may be found: a sprawling new park of palm trees, concrete, and covered walkways surmounts a ceramic phallic tower by Joan Miro that is topped off with a characteristic crescent moon.

For years, Barcelona's seedy port life, with its transvestites, prostitutes, and sailors on the make, had most graphically set itself against the cautious ambience of Madrid.

And yet it was only three years ago, as I stood with a friend in the refurbished basement speakeasy El Real, that he sighed as he said in Castilian, "Barcelona no es lo que era," or, "Barcelona is what it used to be.

For years, Barcelona's seedy port life, with its transvestites, prostitutes and sailors on the make, had most graphically set itself against the cautious ambience of Madrid. Located deep in the interior of the liberal periphery and under the vigilant eye of the reactionary central government, Madrid was "protected" from such unsavory influences. But with the changes that have taken place in Spanish political life, Barcelona and Catalonia as whole have lost the self-assurance of being the one part of Spain in touch with outside developments. In truth, Madrid has lost not a little of Barcelona's thunder. It has come into its own as a cultural and intellectual metropolis; and from outside has been lionized as the capital city of a country that has successfully made the peaceful transition to democracy. Word had it at the time that Madrid had come so far that its left-wing mayor had even declared "una semana del erotismo!" All the differences between the seedy old times and the technocratic new ones could be grasped as once in this proclamation.

The fact is that the democratic governments in place since the death of Franco continue the centralist practices that privilege the "national" capital, but now in the name of modernity instead of tradition. The Cortes -- the Spanish parliament -- still has final control over the funds available to the Generalitat, a poignantly reminder that the two capitals are hardly on equal footing. And, recently, the central government has shown its determination to assume a leading role among the Spanish, i.e. Castilian-speaking nations of the world. The combined impact of these policies is to encourage the feeling that Barcelona is somehow less international, more provincial than in the past, and that Catalonia as a whole is a recalcitrant society grasping at narrow ethnic interests. To those familiar with the thrust of "official" pan-Canadian nationalism as elaborated in the Trudeau years, this syndrome will not seem strange. The liberal government effectively prevented a meeting of the world's francophone nations for years because it was determined that Quebec should have no independent international presence at such a meeting. At the same time, it adopted a relentlessly demeaning attitude toward all expressions of Quebecois national aspirations. This attitude reflected a state-centric position that viewed Quebec nationalism as a fundamental disruption to its own project. In this way, it had a logic of its own and was not merely reactive. Whether or not minority nations actively pursue their national goals, they are never "let alone;" the status of their relation to the central state is always vectorial, never stable. In this context, the question of winning or losing the initiative becomes all the more crucial.

What seemed to be happening in Catalonia in 1984 reminded me of the frustration many felt in Quebec, particularly in Montreal, where the Parti Quebecois government was accused of over-organizing the cultural sphere. Like in Quebec, the Catalan government's increasing preoccupation with the symbolic seemed to be a defensive response to setbacks in the field of constitutional change. For although national independence was never the issue in Catalonia, the original formulation of the autonomy demand was much stronger than what was eventually secured. Like in Quebec, populist mobilizations were taken in hand by government agencies and transformed into an abundance of neighborhood, municipal, and regional "popular festivals." Expressions of "authenticity" that often spilled over into the sentimental and folkloric were common. New public art erected in village squares paid homage to various aspects of popular and traditional culture -- Catalan national dances, for example. Flanking these populist gestures were official government reports on the future of Catalan cultural and educational institutions such as museums, theatres, and universities. And in an uncertain way, even the economic importance of the Catalan caixons, or credit unions, and their immense intervention into cultural life brought to mind that of their Quebecois counterparts, the caisses populaires. Both institutions pride themselves on their expressed concern for the welfare of the popular layers of society and are geared in turn with trust and familiarity.

Under other circumstances, especially if the autonomy process had proceeded well, this mixture of populist and high cultural concerns might have been lived unself-consciously and regarded as "normal." Unfortunately, ten years of unsatisfactory negotiations and compromises with Madrid had produced considerable demoralization. Although Catalans have historically seen themselves as embracing the new, one could sense for the first time a nagging doubt about the possibility of articulating modernity and nationhood now that the official nationalism of the central state claimed to be the legitimate barrier of that mantle.
Catalonia's historical disputes with Madrid over an acceptable level of autonomy produced a situation diametrically opposed to that in Canada, where Quebecois have always compensated for economic marginalization through an exaggerated presence in functional positions. A facet of this proclivity was Pierre Trudeau's own call for so-called "French Power" in Ottawa, a programme which independentist intellectuals viewed as a cynical and diversionary attempt to extend this tendency to the federal level. In Spain, the geographic concentration of the Catalan bourgeoisie and its historical failure to make alliances with other Iberian capitals left it relatively isolated against the hostility of the centralist government in Madrid. And so, by early in this century, according to political economist Luis Ponsenach i Montaner, "the region with the most distinct characteristics from the other Iberias; the one whose language is spoken in a quarter or fifth of Spain; which is to the same proportion contributes to the costs of the state; the most advanced, richest, and best related to other civilized countries is scarcely represented in the government of the state." Even toward the end of the Franco regime, none of Spain's senior judges came from Barcelona and only 4% of the divisional chiefs within Spanish ministerial departments came from the city, as opposed to 21% from Madrid.

Indeed, the Catalan situation demonstrates that national aspirations cannot be explained away as a compensatory response to economic underdevelopment. In fact, modern nationalism in Catalonia emerged despite the closeness of the Catalan bourgeoisie and in response to its continuing failure to secure the kinds of political arrangements with Madrid that would adequately meet demands for self-determination. Instead, it has been the intelligentsia, especially the literary and artistic community, that has forged alliances with popular layers to prove the mainstay of Catalan national aspirations. Its commitment to this cause has historically differed from the tactical nationalism of the Catalan haute-bourgeoisie who have more than once relied upon the repressive apparatus of the state to quell labour unrest within their factories. Well into this century, the central state has excluded the intelligentsia from its institutions and regarded their linguistic and cultural heritage with enmity. This accounts for the particularly meager attention of the intellectuals to Catalan national demands. There is good reason for this, as Regis Debray points out in his book dedicated to the "scribe," particularly those involved in writing, teaching or publishing in the national language:

"The labour of universalization which is that of the intellectual is always tied to a concrete situation in which the stakes are the very possibilities to express and communicate. To conceptualize the intellectual, it is necessary to conceptualize the history of which he is a product. There is no intellectual in and of himself, just as there is neither a State in general or a universal subject."

Following the abrogation of the liberal Carlists constitution of 1812, the nationalism of Catalan intellectuals channeled itself in the romantic doctrines of the enduring relationships of land, people, and language. Students of traditional Quebec nationalism will note that "faith" is not among these relationships. In nineteenth century Catalonia, the Church was not a key guardian of national institutions as in Quebec, although elements of it were later to distinguish themselves by resisting the Franco regime and supporting secular demands for autonomy. In fact, the outlawed Generalitat met under the shelter of the Benedictines of Montserrat, the famous abbey and pilgrimage centre overlooking Barcelona.

In Quebec, hostile observers have always pointed to the preponderant role played by clerics in articulating nationalist sentiment. It is not uncommon for these same critics to contend that only the outward garb has changed between the messianism of yesterday's nationalists and the secular discourse heard in the modern independence movement. After the defeat of the May 1980 referendum, Pierre Trudeau gleefully boasted that these unrepentant demagogues had ultimately failed in their attempt to manipulate the population. It was as if the intervening twenty years of profound social and cultural changes, characterized in Quebec by often intense alliances between teachers, writers, and the general public, had never taken place. In a multi-signature letter to the Montreal daily Le Devoir in December 1980, Quebec's nationalist artists and intellectuals took issue with Trudeau's argument and gave Debray's general observation a more immediately compelling interpretation. They argued that "whether one calls Quebec a national, a people, or a society, [Quebec français] remains the site from which Quebec's intellectuals and artists begin to create. Quebec français is both the subject and interlocutor of their creation. The erosion of this territory directly compromises their existence and creativity."

Today, the first genuinely broad demonstration of political passion in Quebec since the defeat of the referendum concerns protecting the integrity of the Charter of the French Language: "On pleure sur la Loi 101" proclaims the banners hanging from many of Montreal's ubiquitous balconies. Once again the question of language rights has come to the foreground in underscoring the continuing presence of the "national question." Likewise in Catalonia, where the Socialists swept to victory in the first Catalan elections based on a programme that convincingly combined socialist and nationalist demands, linguistic issues figured prominently among the latter. As Catalan sociologist Francesc Vallençà explains in The Linguistic Conflict in Catalonia, "Language is the most visible sign of a national community: in addition to carrying through its socially integrating function as a medium of communication, it is the expression of a culture, not understood as a static and homogeneous product, but as a heterogeneous, multiform, and dynamic project. While taking tradition as its point of departure, it embodies the cultural concerns and aspirations of men and women of today."
In both Québec and Catalonia, the current situation suggests little reprieve for those who feel that there are specific national communities worth defending.

In Canada, the excellent terminological work done by the OLF is generally unrecognized, and so notorious was its Commission de surveillance (the PQ government) that most Canadians likely think that the OLF itself was created by the independence movement to police Bill 101. In reality, the OLF is a product of Jean Lesage’s Liberal government of the early 1960s. By taking a longer view, it is clear that the real emphasis has been placed on improving the quality of the language used in public, from government through to advertisers. The difference, of course, is that in the early days the strategy of the OLF was to morally exhort the Québécois to speak “better” French. These highly normative campaigns have never really been abandoned, but under the PQ, the OLF became the state’s major interventionary arm in creating conditions that legally enforce and socially valorize the use of French. In the process, the French language has been made to appear more “necessary” to immigrants group, although many still need to be convinced.

In the case of Catalonia, the two major occupations confronting the DGPL and the Oficce de la langue française in Québec are striking. In fact, the DGPL’s White Paper makes prominent mention of the contacts between its representatives and those of the OLF. In September 1982, meetings were held which were described as having been “extremely valuable for the orientation of the activities of the Service.” “The General Director,” says the report, “maintains intense contact with the directors of all organisms in Quebec which undertake tasks related to linguistic policy and scientific work on language: members of the autonomous [i.e., government, depairs, directors of the Office de la langue française, of the Conseil de la langue française, the Commission de surveillance which oversees the current application of Bill 101... the Toponymic commission, the Commission de la signification at Université Laval, and the Centre for Linguistic Studies at Radio-Canada.”

In the light of these general guidelines, the Catalan authorities concluded that a universal policy regarding Catalan was both unrealistic and unproductive. Integration of immigrants takes place fairly easily in major cities like Barcelona and other towns present a far greater challenge. Thus different policies, objectives, campaigns, and time-frames were set for different parts of Catalonia.

As for the Spanish government’s interpretation of linguistic “co-officiality,” the stress is predictably not on the development or the presence of Catalan, but rather the rights of non-Catalan speakers to continue using campaign all public situations. The policy of the central government is seen by many as doing little more than uplifting the linguistic status quo rather than cooperating in the process of reestablishing Catalan. The criticisms levelled against “co-officiality” recall those made in Quebec about official Canadian bilingualism. The reversals that have occurred since the signing of Bill 101 — largely through the provisions of the new Canadian Constitution and its reinforcement by the Supreme Court — show to what extent the language issue is a significant concern for the central state’s willingness to redefine its relationship to minority national communities. Here, the attitudes of the former liberal federal government — which bequeathed the Constitution — and the social-democratic regime in post-Francisco Spain are indeed similar.

In fact, Madrid consistently tends to give legislative power to the provinces from Catalonia the most restrictive interpretations possible under the Autonomy Statutes. Catalans first expressed their dissatisfaction with this state of affairs by blaming their own Socialist parliamentarians who had urged “trust” when dealing with Madrid. While the Statute was ratified by the nation in 1982, the significant rate of abstention confirmed that these politicians were seen as compromised; the government’s failure to push through a new constitution was viewed as being designed to whittle away Catalonia’s bargaining position. In the 1980 elections to the General Assembly and its reinforcement in 1982, negotiations with the newly elected Socialist government of Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez became acrimonious on practically every point. Since then the Socialists in Madrid have been charged with banning any way very notion of autonomy and accepting the policies of the left-wing Socialists who acceded to the cabinet in 1982, they had formed the governments of Spain through their political party, the Socialists, the other party. In particular, their policy designated fourteen autonomous “communities,”
including Madrid itself! In this way, it evacuated the specificity of the demand for autonomy as it flown historically from distinct national communities such as the Catalans and the Basques. After the failed coup attempt in 1981, the central government bowed to the right wing by stating that the autonomy process had moved too quickly. In consultation with the Socialists, the central government then proposed a “Law for the Organic Framework of Provinces of Autonomous” (LOAPA), which would prohibit one autonomous community from obtaining a right of primacy which is not shared by the others. This formal equality can have disastrous consequences for minority regions. As Louis-Solo-Molins has explained in _Le Monde Diplomatique_, “it is not obvious that the Madridian autonomous community will want to legislate on the teaching and use of Castilian in its territory with a law comparable to that which the Catalans and the Basques want in order to safeguard the use of their languages in their territories... In the name of the LOAPA, the central government would intervene to force Bilbao and Barcelona to adapt to Madrid.” While recent decisions of the Constitutional Tribunal have cured some of Madrid’s worst excesses, they have also made it clear that attempts to assert the primacy of “regional” languages will not be tolerated.

It is true that the Canadian Constitution accords the provinces rights that far exceed those that presently exist for autonomous regions of Spain. Nevertheless, the extent to which other provinces and the central government itself will be allowed to allow any practical consequences to flow from that admission that Québec constitutes a “distinct society” within Confederation— the current wording of Québec’s negotiating position for “signing on” to the new Constitution—is a wide open question. Many provincial leaders have already declared, à l’estropiapol, that they consider their own territories to be: “distinct societies” too, so they don’t see a problem in conceding the wording to Québec. But it is difficult to see how concrete respect for Québec’s national rights fits into a scenario of “commonality of differences.” Will the other provinces, for example, be willing to amend a Constitution that defines the language rights of non-francophones in a way that once again could make bilingualism among francophones the _de facto_ norm for public jobs in Québec?

In both Québec and Catalonia, the current situation suggests that little respite is in store for those who feel that there are specific national communities worth defending. Those Québécois who expected that economic progress would obviate the basis for national demands should look at the history of Catalonia, whose development demonstrates that such a pattern can never be taken for granted. In fact, despite unequal and even diverse patterns of development, the specific national concerns experienced in Québec and Catalonia today are fundamentally similar. To the extent that those concerns are born out of resistance to operations of delimitation and marginalization on the part of larger central states, their respective responses will have much to learn from each other. At first Catalans may be tempted to look toward Canada for glimpses of a more generous federal system and Québecois toward Spain for a peek at the successes of a minority national bourgeoisie. But in the long run I would suspect they would do better looking at each other, learning from their respective collective interrelations with their central states. Thus they may plan the political and cultural forms of intervention that will make their collective futures viable.

Reading List

I am indebted to Oriol Pi-Sunyer and Susan M. DiGiacomo of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, whose recent articles have proven invaluable in contemporary developments in Catalonia. I would be happy to provide a bibliography on request. The following monographs are recommended as further reading:

- Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture. _Questions de culture #10: L’État et la Culture_. Quebec: 1986.

Some important dates in modern Catalan History:

- 1931 - Draft proposal of Statute of Autonomy approved by referendum in Catalonia.
- 1932 - Statute of Autonomy proclaimed in Madrid by the Cortes of the Second Spanish Republic. Reestablishment of Generalitat for first time since 1714.
- 1939 - Defeat of the Republic.
- 1975 - Death of Franco. Juan Carlos becomes King of Spain.
- 1977 - Spanish parliamentary elections. Socialists win a clear majority in Catalonia. Among their demands, “català, idioma oficial” (Catalan, the official language). In Spain as a whole, the Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD) wins the most seats.
- 1978 - Adoption of new Spanish constitution.
- 1979 - Referendum on Statute of Autonomy. 88.1% of voting Catalans approve it, but abstention rate is 40.4%.
- 1980 - Elections to Catalan parliament. Socialists lose to nationalist parties. 37.9% of voters abstain.
- 1985 - As of today the Socialists continue to govern in Madrid.

Robert Schwartzwald is an Assistant Professor in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He is also Director of the Canadian Studies Program of the Five College Consortium of Amherst. Having spent time in New Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges and the University of Massachusetts, and having lived in New England, he lives in Montreal where he continues his research on the relations between questions of literary (post)modernism and national identity in contemporary Québécois literature. He is a corresponding member of the Centre de Recherche en Littérature québécoise at Université Laval and the Vice-President of the American Council for Québec Studies.