



Michael A. Vargas, *Constructing Catalan Identity: Memory, Imagination, and the Medieval* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 197 pp. ISBN: 9783319767437

Imagine that you throw a party in which you invite Hegel, Nietzsche, Wilfred the Hairy, Prat de la Riba and some late-twentieth century social constructivists. That is pretty much what Michael A. Vargas's new book feels like, but without the explicit presence of the two Germans. Part of their Spirit is there, though. *Constructing Catalan Identity: Memory, Imagination, and the Medieval* is a genealogy of how Catalans have construed their sense of collective belonging drawing from their medieval past. But it is also a dialectic about how the past is used to shape the present and how the present shapes the past. The synthesis of this to and fro is, for Vargas, one of the ways whereby one can understand what it means to be Catalan today. With a strong and diligent analysis of Catalonia's medieval past, this book persuasively shows how the constant (re)uses of this past have ended up defining much of the current Catalan cultural, political and architectural landscape.

The book is divided into two main sections which echo the structure with which the author conceives the process of identity construction. The first is a repository of raw materials from the past, called 'inventory'. Following *la longue durée*, Vargas, a medieval historian, offers a well-researched historical account of the events, people and places that have been used to shape the Catalan collective memory since the times of Wilfred the Hairy. These include a wide array of items that span from the marriage between Petronilla of Aragon and Ramon Berenguer IV, the myth of Otger Cataló and the *Guerra dels Segadors*, to the War of Succession, the *Jocs Florals* and the *Parc Güell*, amongst many others. Of praise here is the meticulous work the author does to contextualise the political

powers of the count-kings of the House of Barcelona in relation to the Kingdom of Aragon. For Vargas, the origin of a Catalan collective sense of belonging is not to be located around the birth of nationalism as an ideology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but in the pre-modern era. Here, Vargas transits between the two main sides of the scholarly debate on nation building: from the purely *modernist* (the nation as an exclusively modern construct), to the *perennialist* (the modern nation as stemming from pre-modern roots). Hence, despite the author claiming inspiration from Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's 'invention of tradition' –together with Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*, or Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities'– his arguments are also informed by Anthony D. Smith's ethnosymbolism, or more perennialist views on 'the nation'.

The second part, called 'making meaning', sees Vargas deploy his modernist take on nation building, and shows how Catalans have put all the previous inventory to work. The section starts with how different narratives of 'decadence' were instrumental to later allow for a *renaixença* of the Catalan language, culture and specific conceptions of power legitimation and societal organisation. For the author, this decadence seems to have the *Compromís de Casp* as its original sin. However, far from static, Vargas shows how this narrative has shifted from Catalans initially blaming themselves for abandoning their language in favour of Castilian (as an attempt to integrate themselves in the nascent Spanish state in the early modern period) to criticising a Castilian-moulded Spanish state for its recurrent insensitivity vis-à-vis the *fet català*. Following a section on examples of how the Medieval has shaped the modern (maybe with an excessive focus on the main touristic attractions from Barcelona such as the *Parc Güell*, the Cathedral and *Santa Maria del Mar*) the book ends by making a strong case against pro-Spanish-unity discourses that dismiss Catalan as a dialect of Spanish or as an ethnic retrograde hurdle towards harmonious cohabitation within the state.

All in all, this book will be of interest for the non-initiated in Catalan language, culture, history and politics, and will make a good addition for English speakers who wish to make a first entry, from the perspective of an outsider, into some of the historical arguments underlying Catalonia's recent push for self-determination. A deeper reflection

on what it means to be Catalan today beyond the main tenets of traditional Catalanism (to put it bluntly, how someone who does not wear a *barretina*, does not dance *sardanes*, and does not venerate Wilfred as founder of the *pàtria*, can feel Catalan) would have been a solid way to give a rounder shape to this book. Together with this, a clarification of how, if at all, Catalanism as an ideology is not a form of nationalism (something that the author seems to implicitly maintain), would have also been welcome. This notwithstanding, in a period in which the words ‘manipulation’ and ‘indoctrination’ have become the mantelpiece of yet another wave of Catalanophobic, repressive and discriminatory narrative across Spain, Vargas’s book is a fresh reminder of how using the past to mould the present is, as Gramsci would have it, just a process of legitimation. Whether such a process is lived as natural or as fake is only a matter of hegemony and power relations.

Sergi Auladell i Fauchs
University of Saint Andrews