



Bambery, Chris and George Kerevan, *Catalonia Reborn: How Catalonia Took on the Corrupt Spanish State and the Legacy of Franco* (Luath Press, 2018), 260pp. ISBN: 9781912147380.

During the last three decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, the quantity of political information available to the average citizen in most Western societies expanded exponentially, thus endangering the traditional ability of social elites to generate and popularize discourses of social reality that confirmed their ‘natural’ role at the top of the social hierarchy. It was not long, however, before these same elites developed an effective, and better yet, progressive-sounding solution to this challenge to their canon-making prerogatives. It was the idea that those entrusted with commenting on pressing social issues should strive, not to provide the public with the most accurate rendering of truth as they understood it, but rather something known variously as a ‘neutral’, ‘unbiased’ or ‘impartial’ vision of reality.

Who could be against that highest of scientific-sounding goals, objectivity? And for the most part, the rank and file of the humanities sector in the academy, the mainstream press and publishing industries bought into (and continue to buy into) the idea that this is the surest path to enhance rigor and knowledge.

Generally overlooked in this rush to professionalize humanistic inquiry along these pseudo-scientific lines was the enormous role that institutions – more often than not possessing strong links to state power – have in generating available stocks of information on any given social or

political question. Put another way, if institutions allied with state power can effectively flood the cultural field with semiotic materials that reify their key interests, then most analyses rooted in an ethos of impartiality, which is to say, finding a happy medium between the totality of competing claims, will naturally favor their postures.

Why? Because, despite their frequently spirited and self-satisfied statements to the contrary, most professional arbiters of taste, be they journalists or academics, have little stomach for going against what appears to be majority opinion in their immediate environs, and will, in time, generally bend their critical outlook to, if not wholly conform to the infosphere's putatively majoritarian postures, at least feel a need to pay intellectual homage to them.

There will, of course, always be a minority that will resist this initial temptation to comply with such prevailing norms. Invariably awaiting them is an endless onslaught of demands from the taste-makers who have ceded to the cultural field's majoritarian logic to refute one-by-one the claims generated by the state-allied social institutions, an exercise whose purpose is generally not, as the cross-examiners tend to claim, to further clarify truth, but rather to exhaust and distract the person holding minoritarian views and, in this way, effectively mute his or her ability to articulate their point of view in a clear and coherent way in the public square.

If transcending this dynamic and telling the story of a new or insurgent social or political phenomenon in its own terms is a difficult task for those with a native understanding of the contours of a particular cultural system, it is even more so for those seeking to do so from a foreign point of departure. And yet, this is precisely what the Scottish writers Chris Bambery and George Kerevan have done strikingly well in *Catalonia Reborn*, their very readable, well documented and surprisingly complete account of the Catalan *procés* and its historical antecedents. In a world where English-language readers interested in international affairs are forced to rely ever more heavily upon 'journalist-pundits' generally lacking adequate linguistic and cultural training for an understanding of the world outside their borders, this book is wonderful and encouraging antidote.

Unlike, for example, *The New York Times*' Spain correspondent Rafael Minder, who made clear in a 2017 interview that reading pro-independence newspapers was a strictly optional part of

his attempts to better understand the Catalan independence movement, and unlike the esteemed British scholar John Elliott (*Scots and Catalans. Union and Disunion*, 2018), whose mandarin fixation on social stability and disdain for popular democracy blinds him to the possible benefits of the drive for Catalan independence, Bambery and Kerevan simply seek to explain, from the inside as it were, why so many Catalans believe it is probably time to separate from the rest of Spain. Is it an impartial book? No. But then again neither are the establishment-affirming texts produced by the likes of Rafael Minder (*The Struggle for Catalonia. Rebel Politics in Spain*, 2017) and Elliott. Where it undoubtedly outstrips these two titles and others similarly treating the independence movement with knowing establishment condescension (e.g. Lola García's *El Naufragio*, 2018) is in the realm of intellectual honesty.

In this text, the authors neither glorify nor pathologize the movement. Rather they start from the simple and respectful premise that if upwards of 48% of a society are prepared to vote for radical alteration of its form of governance (as opposed to a the 39–40% plurality that is seemingly inalterably opposed to such a change), then there is probably something real and important going on with a very coherent and apprehensible autochthonous logic behind it. They then seek to piece together that logic in the light of Catalonia's recent history. At no point do they suggest this discourse is, or should be, universally accepted, nor paternalistically warn the reader about the dangers lurking behind other interpretations of the Catalan past and present. No, as odd as it may seem in this time when so many are seemingly begging to be preemptively protected from points of view that clash with their existing world view (frequently under the guise of combatting that dreaded thing called bias), they actually seem to trust the reader to do his or her own cross-checking and contrastive analysis regarding their claims.

The book is divided into thirteen chapters. It also includes a very informative historical timeline and a list of Catalan and Spanish acronyms abbreviations at its very outset. The first of these chapters establishes the basic parameters of the present conflict and introduces the reader unfamiliar with Spain and Catalonia to its key players. The second explores what might be called the anonymity problem suffered by those belonging to a nation without a state, while also deftly

comparing Catalonia's medieval and early modern histories with those of Castile. Taken as a whole, Chapters 3–7 constitute one of the more intelligent and economical non-academic summaries of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Catalan history that I know of in English, and maybe even in Catalan itself. Chapter 8 is a superb primer on the Basque struggle for independence that highlights frequent brutality of ETA as well as the equal, if not greater brutality employed – along with frequent abrogation of basic legal and political rights – by the Spanish state to bring it to heel. Chapters 9–12 provide a highly detailed and readable history of recent Catalanism from the battles over the 2006 Statute of Autonomy right up to the 27 October 2017 Declaration of Independence. In this summary, it is gratifying to see the authors explain a phenomenon that often vexes and/or is simply ignored by many foreign observers on the left: that neither *Podemos* nor its Colauist-affiliate in Barcelona are particularly robust supporters of the Catalan struggle for sovereignty. The book ends with a chapter that locates the Catalan conflict in the context of the overlapping crises of Spanish and European democracy, as well as that faced by the European and international left before movements, like the one in Catalonia, that call into question the essential 'naturalness' and solidity of present-day nation-states.

If you have a friend who asks how they might to get up to speed on the recent events in Catalonia, recommending this book is a great place to start. Used in combination with other texts, it will also be of great use to university instructors seeking to introduce their students to one key vector of the 'nationalities problem' in Spain.

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