

REVIEW: PARTIES AND NATIONALIST STRATEGIES IN CATALONIA, SCOTLAND AND FLANDERS

Francesc Morata

Cesáreo R. Aguilera de Prat, **Partidos y estrategias nacionalistas en Cataluña, Escocia y Flandes**, València: Tirant Lo Blanc, 2002, 335pp, pb, €24.90, ISBN 8484426971.

In Europe, there is an increasing amount of literature on comparative studies dealing with regional governments, regionalism, territorial politics and multilevel governance. The literature has mainly focused on the role of subnational institutions and local and regional policy-making within the national or the EU contexts, paying little attention to the role of subnational parties which are already soundly established in several EU member states. In some cases, these play also a strategic role at the regional and, sometimes, national level – like in Spain, Germany or Belgium. Cesáreo R. Aguilera's book on 'parties and nationalist strategies in Catalonia, Scotland and Flanders' makes a substantial contribution to improve the state of the art on the role of subnational parties and nationalist elites in general and especially in these three significant 'regions'.

As he points out in the introduction of the book, the lack of specific research on nationalist sub-state parties is probably due to the influence of different factors: the traditional central-statist focus of political scientists, the scarce relevance given to regional elections, and the pre-modern ideology which seems to pervade nationalist movements. According to Aguilera, the concept of nationalist sub-state parties can be based on three main characteristics: (1) they are all organised within a given territory; (2) they intend to genuinely

Francesc Morata is Professor of Political Science and Administration, Department of Political Science and Public Law, Autonomous University, Barcelona.

represent a population which is supposed to (or should) share a single common identity; (3) they tend to develop a strategy aiming to reach the highest level of self-government. These three factors are crucial to understand the extent to which nationalist sub-state parties bring with them a new dimension of political competition, overlapping the traditional left-right one. Based on empirical data, the research is a cross-comparison aimed to analyse the political strategies of four nationalist sub-state parties – *Convergència i Unió* (CiU)¹, the Scottish National Party (SNP), *Vlaams Blok* (VB) and *Volksunie* (VU) – during the 1990s. Such a selection is particularly interesting as it combines three relevant European regions and a wide range of nationalist sub-state parties categories: antisystem (VB), pressure (SNP), government oriented (CiU, VU), asymmetric autonomist (CiU), and independentist or secessionist (SNP, VU and VB) parties.

The study is divided into three chapters. The first one addresses the issue of the impact of nationalist parties on national governance. The second one is devoted to nation-building strategies. The last one is an attempt to test the ability of the classic party typology dimension to explain the four cases.

Each one of the Nationalist sub-state parties under scrutiny plays a different role within the national context, depending on centre-periphery relations, party system configuration and their own electoral weight. Until 1999, CiU was trying to take advantage both of its dominant position in Catalonia – even with a relative majority in the Catalan parliament – and the lack of an absolute majority at the central level to support the state's governability without assuming governmental responsibilities. However, after the Popular Party's absolute majority at the 2000 Spanish elections, CiU has lost any bargaining power in Madrid while being obliged to rely on the PP in Catalonia. The SNP, historically captured by the British bipartisan system trap, presented itself as the 'only real opposition'. However, the new electoral rules set up for the Scottish Parliament in 1999 have opened a window of opportunity to become a party of government, at least in coalition, provided that the other partners would accept the symbolic principle of self-determination and a special fiscal arrangement for Scotland within the UK state. The VB is an example of an anti-system party acting as a free-rider in Belgian politics. While Flemish independence is still an essential issue in its

¹ *CiU is a two-party coalition: Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, created and led by Jordi Pujol since the 1970s, and Unió Democràtica de Catalunya, the old Catalan Christian-Democratic party.*

Scottish Affairs

programme, xenophobia and anti-establishment slogans seem to be more appealing for its voters.

Regarding the nation-building strategy, Aguilera makes a clear distinction between the various political discourses. CiU considers the insertion of Catalonia into Spain as an never ending process and a problem. The constitutional state of the autonomous communities makes a clear distinction between the 'regions' and the 'nationalities' which should have led to an asymmetrical model of state instead of an increasing uniformity. However, traditional federalism is not the alternative as, again, it means uniformity, avoiding bilateral relations between the central state and the nationalities. The solution should be based on an open model of asymmetrical autonomy based on territorial differentiation. Aguilera shows the links between this strategy, CiU's eclectic approach to national identity – a combination of the ethnic and the civic, culture and politics – and the dominant perception of sharing plural identities which characterises Catalan society. This does not prevent CiU stressing the importance of strengthening national identity as its main governmental priority.

The SNP seeks a peculiar concept of independence for Scotland which is not synonymous with separatism, but a kind of semi-sovereignty. A (confederal?) Council of the Isles would be responsible for managing relations among England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Such a 'pragmatic' approach is consistent with the acceptance of Scottish multiculturalism and a strong emphasis on openness and rejection of any kind of xenophobic or racist attitudes towards the English and foreign immigrants.

The absence of national parties is one of the main peculiarities of the Belgian state, a fact which creates an odd situation in which the electors can only express political preferences on the basis of ethno-territorial cleavages. Ironically, the federal state is the bargaining product of territorial elites which, according to public surveys, does not seem to fit with the rather popular feeling of *belgitude*. The asymmetrical Belgian federalism is thus a complex solution that allows the sharing of a single, but weak state. One important outcome is the lack of institutional instruments for conflict resolution of territorial tensions at the central level. Nationalist parties have succeeded in imposing an ethnic approach to the state's restructuring. However, while the VU supported civic and democratic pluralism as the main sources of Flemish identity, the VB draws on closure, exclusivity and

Review: Nationalist Parties in Catalonia, Scotland and Flanders

xenophobia, embracing cultural and political discrimination along the lines of the French Front National and other European extreme-right parties.

Regarding typology, both CiU and the VU can be characterised as hinge-parties, whereas the SNP and VB are, for different reasons, opposition parties. During the federalisation process, the VU was actively involved at the central level. However, CiU is a special case as it is not a third state-wide party, but a territorial one capable of influencing Spanish politics according to its electoral weight and its hegemonic position in Catalonia since 1980. In any case, populism – more or less exacerbated according to historical circumstances and political culture – is a common feature of all nationalist sub-state parties. According to historical circumstances and political culture, populism adopts different connotations: catch-all party (CiU), increasing social expenditure (SNP), opportunism (VU), anti-establishment and single-party issue (VB). Ideological non-definition can be a political resource but also an electoral handicap in the right-left dimension (CiU). Obviously, nation-building is the hobby-horse of all nationalist sub-state parties. But again differences prevail: rhetorical claims for sovereignty merged with pragmatic incrementalism (CiU), gradual and limited independentism, confederalism leading to independentism (VU), radical separatism (VB). Aguilera stresses also the relevance of organisational aspects. CiU is the most relevant example of strong leadership. Jordi Pujol's overwhelming charisma has hugely influenced the hierarchical configuration of CiU, as a party of government strongly rooted in the rural areas and in the middle-sized towns of Catalonia. At the same time, it has prevented the rise of alternative leaders. Thus the coalition seems to be ill-equipped to face both Pujol's retirement in 2003 and the likely future role of an opposition party. Leadership and continuous internal conflicts have been the two main characteristics of the VU until its dissolution in 2001, while the VB remains a highly centralised and elitist party. As regards the SNP, the need to cope with *structural* fractionalism (i.e. fundamentalists and gradualists) is associated with internal decentralisation, participation and a rather influential leadership.

To sum up, Aguilera's book is a useful and stimulating tool for scholars working on comparative politics, especially at the sub-national level. It allows us to better understand the emergence and the strategic role of nationalist sub-state parties in the EU. A translation of the book into English would certainly be welcome.

March 2003