

**The Nationalism of the Rich: Discourses and
Strategies of Separatist Parties in Catalonia,
Flanders, Northern Italy and Scotland**



Emmanuel Dalle Mulle PhD

Université de Genève

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Summary

In recent years, nationalist parties in Catalonia, Flanders and Scotland have gathered considerable electoral support and led one of the most formidable challenges to state integrity in the history of Western Europe since the end of the Second World War. Contrary to the nationalist propaganda developed during the 19th and early 20th century, concerns over the economy and welfare have played an unprecedented role in their rhetoric, consistently overshadowing cultural and linguistic considerations. Although this novelty has already been mentioned in the literature on ethnicity and nationalism, the economic and welfare dimensions of the discourse of contemporary Western European substate nationalist parties remains an under-researched topic.

This book aims at filling such a gap by means of an in-depth examination of the ‘nationalism of the rich’, which I defines as a type of nationalist discourse that aims to put an end to the economic ‘exploitation’ suffered by a group of people represented as a wealthy nation and supposedly carried out by the populations of poorer regions and/or by inefficient state administrations. The core elements of this rhetoric are: a claim of economic victimisation according to which a backward core area holds back a more advanced periphery; and a denunciation of political marginalisation that takes different forms in each of the case studies analysed in the book, but that can generally be described as a subtler and more subjective form of victimisation than deliberate oppression or discrimination.

It is based on an in-depth study of the propaganda of five separatist parties voicing the claims of economic victimisation and political marginalisation mentioned above in four affluent Western European regions from the time when they began to formulate the nationalism of the rich until 2015. These are: the Catalan *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC, Republican Left of Catalonia); the Northern Italian *Lega Nord* (LN, Northern League); the Flemish *Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie* (N-VA, New Flemish Alliance) and *Vlaams Belang* (VB, Flemish Interest); and the Scottish National Party (SNP).

The book is a work of comparative history and politics that aims to make a contribution to the literature on ethnicity and nationalism and, more specifically, to the study of substate nationalism in Western Europe. It builds upon and complements previous examinations of the subject, notably: exploratory analyses of the resurgence of minority nationalism in Europe and North America;¹ more detailed and nuanced comparative

¹ See for instance: Gourewitch, P. A. (1979) ‘The Reemergence of “Peripheral Nationalisms”’: Some Comparative Speculations on the Spatial Distribution of Political Leadership and Economic Growth’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 21(3), pp. 303–322; Tiryakian, E. and R. Rogowski (eds.) (1985) *New Nationalisms of the Developed West. Toward Explanation* (London: Allen&Unwin); Harvie, C. (1994) *The Rise of Regional Europe* (London: Routledge).

inquires on regionalism and minority nationalism in the same area;² and comparative research on regionalist parties using a party politics approach.³

Methodological premises

In this book nationalism is approached as both a form of consciousness and a principle of political legitimacy, and as a form of politics and a language of political legitimation. Instead of focusing on rather elusive 'national aggregates', the study takes specific nationalist parties as units of analysis and dissects the representations of the nation that they have constructed and the political programmes arising therefrom. By interpreting such parties as 'archaeologists', which put together past and present cultural elements into a coherent narrative that they use to make sense of reality and mobilise people, the book suggests using their arguments as hints of the social problems that have triggered the parties' reaction to structural changes in the societies where they have operated. It then aims at identifying the factors that created a window of opportunity for such actors to arise (or re-orient their discourse) and provide frames to define pressing social issues, single out their causes, and propose specific solutions. The book therefore adopts a constructivist approach focusing on nationalist discourse as both interpretative and constitutive of social reality and a research strategy combining both abduction and retroduction. It examines in depth the language of the actors studied and, after having identified the main frames used by them, relates these frames to existing theoretical frameworks and identifies commonalities and differences across the case studies.

The book has three main goals:

1. to show that the nationalism of the rich represents a novelty in the history of nationalism, peculiar to societies that have set in place complex systems of national redistribution and have adopted economic growth as the main principle of government legitimacy;
2. to write a comparative history of the evolution of the nationalism of the rich as formulated by the parties analysed in the case studies;
3. to identify explanatory factors for its appearance and evolution.

The Nationalism of the Rich: A New Phenomenon

The formation of nation-states in Western Europe mainly followed a process of territorial expansion whereby dynastic military-administrative centres imposed their rule over wider areas. In most of them, such a process followed a path of 'capitalised coercion' according to which economic and political centrality tended to coincide. This was largely the case in France, Great Britain, Portugal and, although much later on, Italy. When this did not happen because of the presence of multiple centres, such as for

² Keating, M. (1996) *Nations Against the State: The New Politics of Nationalism in Quebec, Catalonia and Scotland* (Basingstoke: Macmillan); Keating, M. (1998) *The New Regionalism in Western Europe. Territorial Restructuring and Political Change* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar); Guibernau, M. (1999) *Nations without States: Political Communities in a Global Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press).

³ De Winter, L. and H. Türsan (1998) *Regionalist Parties in Western Europe* (London/New York: Routledge); Elias, A. and F. Tronconi (eds.) (2011) *From Protest to Power: Autonomist Parties and the Challenges of Representation* (Hungary: Wilhelm Braumuller); Hepburn, E. (ed.) (2010) *New Challenges for Stateless Nationalist and Regionalist Parties* (London: Routledge); Alonso, S. (2012) *Challenging the State: Devolution and the Battle for Partisan Credibility. A Comparison of Belgium, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

instance in Switzerland and, to a lower extent, Germany, federal structures ensured the adequate representation of the new state's different economic and political centres. Minority nationalism, on the contrary, mostly arose in economic and political peripheries—a type of national mobilisation that largely accounted for the formation of new states in Eastern Europe, but also in the Western part of continent, as the case of Ireland bears witness. Hence, the nationalism of the rich, synthetically defined as the national mobilisation of a periphery economically more advanced than the core, represents a novelty in the history of nationalism. However, there are two exceptions that to some extent can be considered as forerunners of the nationalism of the rich. These are represented by nationalist movements in the Basque Country and Catalonia between the end of the 19th and the early 20th century. There, as a consequence of the formidable industrialisation of these two areas during that period, we see a reversal of the relative economic positions of the centre and the periphery going along with nationalist demands that includes some economic claims. Yet, economic arguments remained marginal and were mostly linked to tariff protection rather than to fiscal redistribution and national solidarity.

Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC)

Current calls for Catalonia's independence largely revolve around arguments of economic victimisation whereby the region would be 'fiscally plundered' by the Spanish state. Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, ERC took the lead in the construction of this narrative of the *expoli fiscal* (fiscal plundering). Building on old discursive frames within Catalan nationalism, the party formulated a cultural-determinist explanation of the Catalan socio-economic development based on the perception of the Catalans as hard-workers that, albeit not accompanied by disparaging comments against the populations of Spain's poorer regions, has contributed to legitimise the rejection of solidarity with the rest of the country on the basis of considerations of responsibility, reciprocity and fairness.

Substantial fiscal transfers from Catalonia to the rest of Spain exist and have often been accompanied by overcompensation effects and a lack of investment in infrastructures. However, other autonomous communities have registered similar imbalances, without experiencing a framing of the fiscal protest in nationalist terms. Identity and political factors, notably the existence of a fully-fledged Catalan national identity and the clash between opposing views, in Spain at large, concerning the place of Catalonia within the state, account for that. Furthermore, the historical relationship between Catalonia and Spain is dotted with events that can be interpreted as evidence of Catalonia's oppression. While some, such as the persecution of Catalan culture and language under Franco, are incontrovertible facts, others, such as the exclusion of Catalan merchants from the colonial trade lie on shakier grounds, without being for this reason less effective. The main source of conflict in any case lies in opposing views of Spain's mononational or plurinational character and of the recognition of its constituent units. Until recently, a frontal confrontation had been avoided thanks to a 'constructive ambiguity' that had lain at the core of the model of the 1978 State of Autonomies and that was shattered by the 2010 ruling of Spain's Constitutional Tribunal.

The Vlaams Belang (VB) and the Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA)

These two parties are treated together on account of the common social, economic and political context in which they have operated. The arguments of economic victimisation voiced by the VB and the N-VA have centred around the theme of the *geldstroom*—i.e. the flow of money going from Flanders to Wallonia, while those of political marginalisation consist in the idea that the Flemish demographic and political majority would be made powerless by the constitutional guarantees granted to the Francophone minority.

After having been the poorest area of the country for more than a century, in the mid-1960s, Flanders overtook Wallonia in terms of income per capita. This reversal in the economic fortunes of Flanders not only set the ground for the establishment of a substantial funding stream going from the north to the south of Belgium, but also contributed to the formation of a narrative rejecting solidarity with the rest of the country on the basis of considerations of responsibility, reciprocity and fairness. Flanders' socio-economic success was portrayed as the result of the extraordinary work ethic of its population. The Walloons, on the contrary, were described as welfare profiteers who had to follow the Flemish example and work harder to improve their socio-economic condition, rather than taking advantage of the Flemings' hard-won prosperity. The existence of an alternative national identity has been a necessary requirement for such a rejection of solidarity, because it provided a frame to interpret distributional problems in nationalist terms. Some peculiarities of the Belgian federal system—notably its bipolarity, duality and asymmetry—have further nourished centrifugal forces and tended to tilt the institutional architecture of the country towards confederalism.

The Lega Nord (LN)

The LN is a fascinating case because it built an entirely new identity for Northern Italy out of the 'vague', although certainly well-entrenched, perception of a cultural difference between the North and the South of Italy. Between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, regionalist leagues arose across the north and began questioning the unity and homogeneity of the Italian nation. Although regional fragmentation had always characterised Italy, apart from the French- and German-speaking minority areas of Aosta Valley and South Tyrol, such fragmentation had never led to political mobilisation. These regionalist leagues later merged into the LN. In the League's discourse, despite being the economic engine of the country, the North would be marginalised politically by the domination of Southern Italians within state institutions. Such political marginalisation would then explain the North's economic victimisation.

Considerable transfers between some northern regions and the rest of the country do exist and some of the League's claims about the misuse of public funds are confirmed by evidence. Yet, much of the LN's arguments and calculations are also exaggerations and over-simplifications of reality. More importantly in a comparative perspective, while Northern Italy was richer than the South since unification, the LN in fact arose in those non-metropolitan areas of the North (the so-called Third Italy) that, after the Second World War, registered a process of late industrialisation bringing them from enjoying an income per head slightly below the national average to ranking among the richest provinces in the country. The League explained the economic development of the Third Italy through a 'cultural-determinist' argument attributing its occurrence to the remarkable work ethic of the Northern population, thus enabling the party to reject

solidarity with the South on considerations of responsibility, fairness and reciprocity. Similarly to the VB and the N-VA, the LN also used stigmatising and stereotypical language against the population of Southern Italy, portraying them as lazy welfare profiteers.

The Scottish National Party

The Scottish National Party is a deviant case in the sense that Scotland's fiscal position within the United Kingdom has been much more ambiguous than that of the other regions examined in this study. In addition, Scotland's (potential) economic superiority has largely hinged on the revenues coming from the exploitation of a natural resource (oil), rather than from its industrial basis, with consequences for the type of arguments that the SNP has been able to make. Yet, from the 1970s on, and increasingly so from the 1990s, the SNP has argued that Scotland is more advanced than the rest of the UK, that it pays more than what it receives from London and that it would be richer if independent.

Correctly assessing the truth of these claims is difficult and such indeterminacy has allowed the debate to drag on without a definite answer. What is key, however, is that, since the 1970s, the discovery of oil opened up the possibility of an attractive constitutional scenario alternative to the Union that was not available before. In this respect, Scotland's situation resembles the reversal in the relative economic capabilities of Flanders and Wallonia occurred in Belgium in the mid-1960s, although the continued economic centrality of London and the South-East made it more problematic for the SNP to portray the political centre as a cost for Scotland. However, the narrative of the 'democratic deficit' arisen during the 'Thatcher years' did contribute to spread a perception of Scotland as suffering the detrimental policies imposed by successive Tory governments that had no legitimacy in the region because they received most of their support in the South-East of the country. This powerfully fed the claim that the Union was limiting Scotland's potential and that the region would be better off if independent.

Comparing the Nationalisms of the Rich

In the rhetoric of the parties studied in this book, the rejection of solidarity with the rest of the parent state has been warranted not so much on account of considerations of identity alone—although this is always present in the background of the parties' discourse—, but rather more openly on consideration of control, reciprocity and attitude (I refer here to Van Oorschot's list of welfare deservingness criteria)⁴ and the principles of trust, fairness and reciprocity that undergird welfare state arrangements. They have therefore formulated a conditional conception of solidarity that, elaborating on Abts and Kochuyt,⁵ I propose to call 'welfare producerism' and, more specifically, a 'culturalised' form of welfare producerism, in which the nation is discursively identified with the entire community of 'welfare producers'. Within such a framework, solidarity with the rest of the parent state can be rejected without questioning the welfare state altogether, while austerity measures can be considered as compatible with redistribution since austerity is deemed to rebalance the distribution of benefits and

⁴ Van Oorschot, W. (2000) 'Who should get what, and why?' *Policy and Politics*, 28 (1), pp. 33-49.

⁵ Abts, K. and T. Kochuyt (2013) 'De vreemde bedreiging van de verzorgingsstaat', *Tijdschrift voor Sociologie*, 34(3-4), pp. 227-249.

burdens between the recipients (to be found outside the in-group) and the contributors (made up of the members of the in-group). The case-study parties have thus used the transfers—oil revenues in the case of Scotland—as a ‘trump card’ to project the appealing and credible image of a more prosperous society combining competitiveness and welfare protection in a context of high international competition. Hence, elaborating on Michael Keating, the nationalism of the rich can be seen as a rhetorical tool ‘for reconciling economic competitiveness and social solidarity in the face of the international market’.

It further suggests that the nationalism of the rich also contains the promise of a ‘free-riderless’ society, in which the members of the national community refrain from abusing collective solidarity. It therefore echoes liberal communitarian arguments whereby a strong national identity is a prerequisite for efficient solidarity, since solidarity would need commitment and consensus on the basic norms and values shared by the society in which it is discharged, otherwise it would lead to inefficiencies, profiteering, higher costs and lower quality. In this framework, changing the boundaries of the political community is seen as the only realistic solution, because cultural change is deemed to be well nigh impossible.

Accounting for the Rise of the Nationalism of the Rich: Domestic Factors

Considerable and sustained transfers between the regions analysed and the rest of the parent state do exist and have often been accompanied by some overcompensation effects, inefficiencies, lack of convergence, public policy failures, and corruption scandals that certainly contributed to undermining the legitimacy of the systems of national solidarity of the parent states—although the case-study parties have largely over-emphasised these shortcomings. Yet, by themselves the transfers are not a sufficient condition for the rise of the nationalism of the rich. In most of Europe, imbalances similar to those seen in this study are mainly realised between capital regions and the rest of the country, thus lending credibility to the hypothesis that the perceived mismatch between the economic capability of the region and its political power is a major factor in explaining the appearance of the nationalism of the rich. In this connection, Bavaria is an interesting counter-factual case. Despite being the closest fit to the contexts examined in the case studies—notably on account of its cultural differentiation, economic primacy and a recent reversal of its economic position relatively to the rest of the parent state—, this region has not seen the development of nationalist parties calling for self-determination on account of arguments of economic victimisation to the same extent as the cases in this book. The institutional architecture of the German federation along with its better fiscal and economic performance in the last quarter of the 20th century largely account for such lower intensity.

In a longer historical perspective, the establishment of the welfare state in most of Western Europe in the post-Second World War period can be considered as a crucial turning point. The creation of such extensive forms of automatic redistribution to a scale unprecedented before followed, from the 1970s, by situations of public policy failure in coincidence with national/cultural cleavages roughly squaring with sharp income differentials among territorial areas is probably the most important combination of factors explaining the formation of the nationalism of the rich. At the same time, differences in governments’ performance in managing the economy and welfare, along

with different institutional structures, go a long way to explaining variation in the force of the nationalism of the rich across European regions.

Accounting for the Rise of the Nationalism of the Rich: External Factors

Although the overall conclusion of this study is that the nationalism of the rich primarily builds on endogenous factors, globalisation and European integration have certainly contributed to exacerbate some of these internal factors and to create a more conducive environment to self-determination demands. Globalisation—mainly defined as increased economic interdependence—has had a three-fold impact on the nationalism of the rich. First, by intensifying international competition and providing more leverage to highly mobile capital as compared to less mobile labour, globalisation is deemed to have contributed to reducing the fiscal and monetary leverage of governments, as well as to have put under stress welfare expenses. This however should not be uncritically taken as a reason for the ‘crisis of welfare’ that began in the 1970s, nor should one conclude that governments have been left with no leverage whatsoever. On the contrary, the factors accounting for the fiscal crisis of the state have largely been domestic in nature—mainly linked to the transition from industrial to service-based economies and to the aging of the population—, while in the face of increased competition governments’ performance in fine-tuning the economy has grown more important than ever. Second, trade liberalisation is believed to have reduced the ‘optimal’ size of countries thus creating a more enabling environment for secession. Third, coinciding with the transformation from Fordism to post-Fordism and contributing to increasing interregional disparity, globalisation has promoted the development of regional economies. With regard to European integration, the EU cohesion policy has certainly had a direct impact on regional mobilisation by stimulating regional authorities’ participation in political and administrative processes at the European level. This has given to some of them a ‘taste’ of what independence could be, in the form of an informal ‘regional foreign policy’, and has pushed nationalist parties to call for more representation powers vis-à-vis the EU.

Beyond Discourse: Strategies, Voters and the Political Opportunity Structure

The factors accounting for the formulation and consolidation of the nationalism of the rich do not necessarily explain, or not fully, the evolution of the parties’ electoral performance. When looking at trends in electoral support for the case-study parties and trends in support for independence, one immediately sees that these do not necessarily coincide. Hence, these parties have been able to attract voters beyond the pool of hard-core separatists. To do that, most of them have followed at least some of the following four strategies: instrumentalism, gradualism, diversification and institutionalisation. Instrumentalism refers to the adoption of a conception of independence as a means to improve governance and welfare, rather than as an end in itself. Gradualism is an understanding of independence as a process that can be achieved in stages of further devolution of powers, rather than only as an event. Diversification means that these parties have broadened their ideological and policy portfolio, developing well-rounded profiles and competing with other parties beyond the centre-periphery cleavage. Finally institutionalisation relates to their decision to participate in government, especially at the regional level, to counter the accusation of political impotency. Two other elements that are further discussed in the book are the political opportunity structure and the configuration of power among relevant actors given to each party at different times in their history. With regard to these two last points the double-edged role played by

regional parliaments is probably the most important in explaining the recent electoral success of these parties. While regional parliaments have certainly contributed to strengthen state legitimacy by accommodating regional demands and recognising difference, they have also offered to these parties a platform to promote their separatist agenda through gradualist strategies and have created new political arenas that have shaped political debates differently from those at the centre.

Conclusion

The nationalism of the rich is a major novelty in the history of nationalism. The main premise for its appearance in the last quarter of the 20th century lies in the structural and normative change brought about by the triumph of Keynesian economics in the post-Second World War period leading to the establishment of extensive forms of automatic redistribution unprecedented before and to making government performance in ensuring economic growth and welfare the main principle of political legitimacy. The onset of the age of permanent austerity from the mid-1970s, set the ground for the rise of fiscal protest and welfare producerist arguments about redistribution. It also contributed to spreading the perception of a dilemma between solidarity and efficiency in most advanced economies. In the regions analysed in this study, this general trend has coincided with uneven territorial development squaring with national and/or cultural differences that have enabled ethnic entrepreneurs to frame distributive issues in nationalist terms. The specific cultural-determinist explanation of regional socio-economic development provided by such parties has allowed them to reject solidarity with the rest of the country on the basis of considerations of fairness and reciprocity, rather than on the simple basis of identity. It has also allowed them to reject solidarity with the parent state without rejecting the welfare state altogether. On the contrary, independence has been portrayed as a means to reconcile solidarity and efficiency in a context of heightened international competition. Although such arguments have remained central to the propaganda of these parties, their electoral success has also relied on other factors, with the strategies of gradualism and diversification arguably playing a major role. Yet, while for most of their history—and with the exception of the recent radicalisation in Catalonia—, the case-study parties have been able to increase their electoral prospects in the absence of major changes in grassroots support for independence, their electoral success does suggest that their secessionist agenda is no longer felt as a major threat to the welfare of the local population.