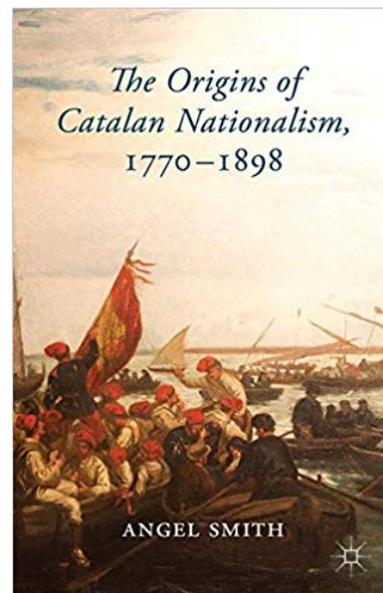
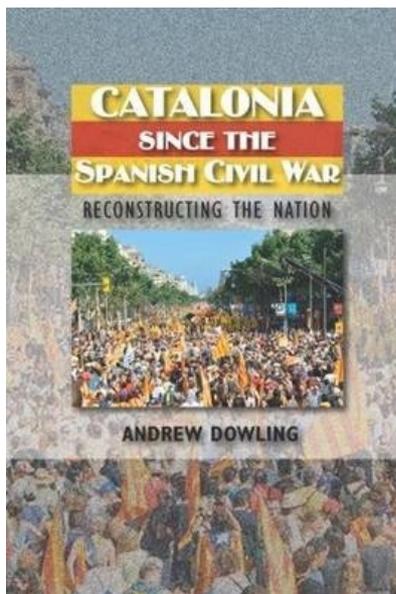


**CATALAN NATION-BUILDING OR NATIONAL
RECONSTRUCTION?**

Andrew Dowling, *Catalonia since the Spanish Civil War. Reconstructing the Nation* (Sussex Academic Press, 2013), 213 p. ISBN: 9781845195304

Angel Smith, *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism, 1770-1898* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2014), 304 p. ISBN: 978-1137354488



Any foreign observer today, in 2018, looking at Catalan and Spanish reality, can come to the conclusion that the political-identification disputes between Barcelona and Madrid are easily deciphered. On the one hand, a more or less modern state, with a powerful center, much like any other large European country, intends to homogenize its population. On the other, a smallish territory, with a certain economic capacity, tries to defend its linguistic and cultural idiosyncrasies.

Any outside observer, in fact, regarding any conflict distant from their normal range of knowledge, tends to simplify the positions held by opposing actors in a confrontation. All the local details are a blur, not as significant as an overall picture of the situation. This pattern of simplified perception (found all over the world) lends a special interest to two of the latest contributions written in English on the history of Catalan nationalism. The so-called ‘Catalan Question’ is like other recurring conflicts in Europe that have attracted attention and interpretation over the last century: the Croatian-Serb conflict in the interwar years and again in 1992–1995; Northern Ireland in 1912–1914 and in 1968–1998; or the rivalries of first German and then Russian minorities in Baltic countries after Czarist control and once more after Communist domination. In other words, seen by outsiders, nationalisms in conflict suffer periodicity: now urgent, then forgotten, then a new and often abrupt rediscovery.

Seen from the inside, Catalan history would seem to be reasonably clear in its long, broad strokes, and rich with shadows and brightness in the finer detail. In any case, what is shown by these two studies, and other recent work, is that foreign authors are far more willing to perceive and conceive of Catalan history as a subject in itself, while necessarily embedded in Spanish history. Sadly, such a perception is largely not shared by the bulk of Spanish academic historiography. The contrast marks the simple fact that British and American authors are willing and able to read bibliography in Catalan as a matter of course, while most Spanish historians prefer to ignore such writing.

But let us discuss the works reviewed here and the greater questions they pose. Construction or reconstruction of a nation or national cause? With what cultural, political and social axioms did the national movement begin? These are the major points raised by both books, which we shall address sequentially. In fact, Angel Smith’s *The Origins of Catalan Nationalism, 1770-1898* (2014) was

published after Andrew Dowling's *Catalonia since the Spanish Civil War. Reconstructing the Nation* (2013, with a slightly different Catalan version put out the same year). Put in chronological order based on their substance, both works indeed do hook up and cover a long period, from the eighteenth century right up to the present day, i.e. 2013. Although both works have very different objectives, use diverse methods of analysis, and are distinct in style, they put the same coin on the table, spinning its two faces: What were the premises that brought forth today's Catalan national identity? And even more important: Was the dynamic set off by a single closed process, without alternative options and possibilities?

These questions provoke dissimilar replies from Smith and Dowling. Smith is more open to speculation about the multiple 'national destinies' for Catalonia that floated in the conceptual environment of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In contrast, Dowling offers a narrower perspective: a seemingly dominant political pathway for Catalan nationalism from 1898 onwards. Without presenting a single, unifocal understanding of Catalan history, Dowling speaks of national reconstruction before 1939, and even in the nineteenth century; this, in his narrative, seems to be a basis on which to rebuild what had been lost before. He therefore supposes that there exists an eternal *Renaixença* which functions as a kind of temporal loop in which nationalists believe they can have what never was, because each new recovery is in fact a new beginning. The implication would be that all nationalisms look to the past by idealizing it. But what causes the loop effect?

Smith tries to answer this by studying the undeniable pattern of digging for historical sources or legitimization that characterize all regionalisms or nationalisms undergoing radicalization. But such ideological archeology cannot be the only explanation. This is not to deny the importance that the appeal to a glorious past now gone has for all such movements. The Catalan medieval

empire could just as well be, say, the Serb idealization of Stefan Dušan. But the simple existence of the long gone power or institutions of such a group now in such a territory cannot presuppose the eventual existence of a strong nationalist movement centuries later. If Catalonia revived because of a former glory, why did Valencia, the Balearic Islands or especially Aragon not rise to this same call? There is a long list of examples throughout Europe, where collective identities with their own language and culture that clearly differed from those of a dominant majority did not give birth – or rather rebirth – to a modern and persistent nationalism like the Catalan case. The trend is often to remain integrated and absorbed by the nation-states in which such peoples found themselves inserted. Smith is more restrained than Dowling in his interpretation of the origins of Catalan nationalism precisely because he is, in principle, researching the first steps of a national movement, while Dowling takes off from an *éternel retour* that may not have even taken place.

But what are the varied circumstances in which a nationalism consolidates itself as a *something*, located in a place and in motion over time? In this sense, the monograph by Smith is far more daring than the one by Dowling. Smith is attempting to stake out new claims, a new hypothesis. Specifically, he stresses that the transit in ambition, the move that makes a regionalism turn into a nationalism, is by no means inevitable. Starting with the premise of his doubt, Smith deploys a well-argued critique of characteristic teleologies that abound in most nationalist movements – including both Catalan and Spanish. Disappearance as a distinct collective was not out of the question, a threat that is always present, no matter how consolidated a society thinks itself; globalization itself, for instance, poses the possibility in our day and age. In fact, such a prospect is not clearly dealt with by Dowling in the pages he devotes to the immigration waves that hit Catalonia from 1915–1930, 1945–1970, and 2000–2007.

Smith pays no heed to Catalan sources – nor any others – which look to medieval roots of the Catalan past, the Carolingian ‘Spanish Mark’, or the centuries of Catalan sea power on the Mediterranean. All national birthing he moves to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so that Catalan history – as nationalist theorist Enric Prat de la Riba argued in a lively metaphor –, is like the reappearance of a subterranean river. By way of contrast, Dowling does discuss this coming together and falling apart of Catalan nationhood, almost to the point of making this rhythm into an immortal collective trait. However, he does not point to a basic ideological source, the period from the late nineteenth century onwards, and then up to the 1930s, from Victor Balaguer to Antoni Rovira i Virgili, when the myth of Catalan ‘democracy’ would be constructed in the twentieth century or of that the *Corts* as a ‘mother of parliaments’. Instead, he stresses Catalan pro-European sympathies as opposed to an alleged Castilian isolationism.

Over and over again, Dowling stresses to the English-language reader that ‘Catalanism’, however nationalist, remains a prudent autonomist movement, and resists making the jump to a naked call for independence. This is perhaps one of the most interesting traits of Catalan nationalism when viewed in a European context. Most such nationalisms reach for the dream of statehood and national freedom. The Catalan movement, as Enric Ucelay-Da Cal has shown, has persisted in trying to ‘conquer’ Spain, and make her over in a Catalan image: the will to exist turns towards hegemony. Other nationalist movements tend towards a pattern of evolution, which however much it moves from an autonomist phase to a pro-independence stance, does not attempt to take over the alleged oppressor state. Can anyone imagine the Irish nationalists around 1920 being ready to relieve England as center and motor of the British Empire? Or Lionel Groulx, with his messianic and Catholic dream for French Canada, taking over from Anglophone Canadians? Seen in this way, the present – the years from 2010 up to today – represents the death of the idea

of ‘Catalanism’, a generic term which has never had a clear definition or meant any concrete form of political organization. To trace a direct line from autonomy to current pro-independence politics renders the understanding of both Catalan and Spanish political forms incomprehensible.

There would seem to be a certain consensus between Dowling and Smith to situate elites in principle next to the popular masses, but – in the heart of the analysis – above them. The elites would be the key factor through which was made possible the existence, the creation or the survival of a Catalan identity, differentiated from Spanish and French, and even, earlier on, from Gascon and Navarrese. Smith, unlike Dowling, argues that Catalan nationalism was the result of the desire of cultural, political and social elites to best try to pull together a sense of Catalan identity, different depending on exactly who was doing the pulling, within a larger framework of Spanishness. Nevertheless, Smith wisely avoids the unending debate about the origins of Catalanism as a culture and as a movement. In broad terms, Smith pulls back the thesis of a double Catalan-Spanish patriotism put forward by Josep Maria Fradera: if Fradera situated the change in the period 1830–1860, Smith finds this trend in the second half of the eighteenth century. Smith roundly affirms that in the late seventeen-hundreds, Catalan elites could feel themselves to be an integrated part of a Spanish nation without having to excise from their minds a sense of belonging, and of sharing a repertoire of feelings regarding past ‘glories’, the common use of the Catalan language, the rules of civil law and the habits of particular family structures. From this viewpoint, one could, as younger historians like Jordi Roca have done, begin to speak of an early, ‘first’ regionalism which could be voiced by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such a current of feeling and thought could become linked to what would become the affirmation of ‘provincialism’ (Catalonia as a ‘province of the crown’) and include hints of what would soon become federalism. In sum, the key question that would be expressed over time by successive leading social

figures, visible in writing, business and politics. If, between 1770 and 1840, these social leaders had remained happy to pose vague ideas of regional spirit and insinuations of greater decentralization, their heirs a generation or two later would begin to doubt the solidity of the Spanish nation-state still under construction. These same heirs would mark their distance from federal republicans and moderate cultural Catalanists. Their point: that ‘the problem of Spain’ was not simply in the hands of courtiers in Madrid and ‘politicos’ in parliament, but in an effective Castilian hegemony in the whole of Spanish life. This critical change also meant that such dissidents felt themselves to be part of a distinct nation and even members of an ethnic group different from the other people of Spain. The point is that the doubt regarding Spain became evident. Why did this feeling take off from the 1860s, and become so radical a regional sentiment that it mutated into a nationalist movement in the 1880s?

The visions of past origins that were forged from the 1860s to the 1930s situate us in a triple frame of reference for Catalan nationalism: rebuild Spain from Catalonia; set-up an independent Catalonia; or perhaps establish the solid foundation of a Catalonia within Spain, but with a political will of its own, not subject to the comparison with over a dozen other regional autonomies. The fourth option also exists: national disappearance. From this starting line-up of choices, Dowling, in the last part of his book, presents a clear portrait of the political project led by Jordi Pujol from 1980 to 2003, but which was carried on until 2012. Pujol’s coalition, *Convergència i Unió*, posited a Catalan state within the Spanish state. This was the end of the plan to influence Spain, and implied a strategic withdrawal to Catalonia proper. Dowling presents a variety of forces dominating Catalan nationalism during the twentieth century. But, after the defeat and the submission even of conservatives to a centralist, hyper-Spanish discourse under the Franco régime, the post-civil war period, and especially during the death of Franco and his dictatorship, nationalism found a certain consensus between left and right. Here the changing positions of communists

and anarchists are relevant, as is the role of the Catholic Church. These are subjects central to Dowling's book. But the projection of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya in the Spanish politic system during the years of the Second Republic (1931–1939) through the regional, autonomous state is not dealt with as clearly. Nor is Dowling's handling of the sensibilities and reactions of Catalan nationalism to the 'State of Autonomies' created by the Constitution of 1978 sufficient to clarify the underlying tensions. What about the need for Catalan nationalism to distinguish itself from all the new regions and regionalisms? The result was either a superiority complex or an uncomfortable co-existence with a state system which did not quite fit.

Therefore, let us return to Smith's key question: Why the evolution from bland regionalism to a more robust nationalism? Dowling picks up the implicit challenge and takes the matter up to the twentieth century, to reverse its sense. In so doing, the question becomes: Is the next evolutive step of Catalan nationalism the jump to an openly pro-independence stance? Is this a long term change? Does such a shift form part of the rise of new nationalisms forged in the image of Scotland and its 2014 referendum? This leads to another question: Does a broader perspective from the outside help understand the politics of nationalist demands in the twenty-first century beyond the infinite ramifications of regional disputes? Given this insight, might we not detect a necessary political criticism of Dowling: What evaluation might he have made of failures and successes? Perhaps this is not fair, given the author's purpose.

Despite the broad perspective from outside, Dowling focuses on Catalonia in what might be termed 'Catalan detail', and pays comparatively scant attention to the Spanish dynamics that condition Catalan reality. In reading, one can barely spot the intersections between identities and identitarian attitudes which arise in Madrid, understood as a synthesis of all of the rest of Spain. Due attention is paid to the criticism from Spanish politics

around such polemics as language use in education, especially since 1983. This touchy matter is quite competently attended to insofar as this is an extremely controversial doubt and debate, at the heart of Catalan politics. But there should be more Spanish input into this very Catalan discussion, just as there should be more Catalan content in the treatment of the ongoing lives of Spanish politics.

On this point, this reviewer makes a suggestion, as the self-criticism of a native Catalan historian. In his book, Smith rejects the common position regarding cause-and-effect in the relations of weak Spanish national construction and the response that would develop as Catalan nationalism. Although Smith does not use this reply as a central aspect of his overall argument, he stresses that, quite the opposite, Catalan proto-nationalism arose out of the reaction of local élites to the pressures of Spanish nation-building. For Smith, this response was not an effort to fill an ideological emptiness produced by the weakness of the Spanish process, as has been affirmed by historians like Borja de Riquer. Rather, when these élites participated in the collective effort to 'build Spain', they encountered disagreements in the construction of a unified narrative. Put simply, they found the contribution of their past left out, ignored. In broad strokes, with regards to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the discussion would gravitate around the Catalan role in the failed edification of Spanish nation-state but also in a Catalan proto-state. A double failure which has left a situation without closure in any way, a failing which can be easily perceived from the outside.

Aside from observations previously made in this review, other additional critiques can be posed of both works. Why so little comparison with Basque nationalism, the alternative 'peripheral' nationalist movement equivalent to Catalan protest? A regular allusion when positing phases of Catalan nationalist development or at specific crisis moments would have been useful. Was there any convergence at a given time, or not? Similarly, both volumes pose the

centrality of greater Barcelona as a major aspect of their explanation. Admittedly, Dowling offers constant references to the failure of any pan-nationalist initiative regarding Catalan-speaking areas in Spain – Valencia and the Balearic Islands – or even in French Catalonia. Unsurprisingly, he does not include Andorra, which despite its tiny size, is a logical reference as an independent and recognized entity which has Catalan as its official language. But Dowling does not evade the standard dichotomy – remarked but not explored – between urban Barcelona and its rural hinterland, dealt with rather homogeneously. Despite the danger of excessive localism, it might have been profitable to touch upon smaller urban realities, such as Reus-Tarragona or Girona, both for their specificities and the resulting electoral behavior. The same can be said, with a more distant time frame, for Smith.

Major debates are directly confronted by both authors. To begin with, there is the question of why Catalan identity survived during all of Spanish nation-building. No explanation, however, is offered for why absolute Castilianization failed, especially in the twentieth century. There is still no convincing reasoning regarding the Franco dictatorship's failure to consummate a cultural genocide, to hispanicize Catalonia once and for all, and Dowling does not proffer any innovation on this matter. Perhaps the régime's need to show laxity after the Allied victory in 1945, as well as the appearance of a certain level of cultural 'Catalanism' under Franco's tutelage, with the 'thaw' of the 1960s and 1970s, will disconcert the international reader. Nevertheless, both Smith and Dowling do a most credible job on the successive changes in internal hegemony with the Catalan nationalist movement.

Dowling is particularly clear on the utilitarian role of business leaders regarding Catalan nationalism, and how their shift towards socially more moderate or conservative attitudes served as a brake on similarly pro-Catalan left-wing currents: this tendency recurred in the 1970s, during the Transition to

democracy, and was especially visible in the 1980 elections to the first Catalan Parliament since the 1930s. Later evolution from 2003, and the fall of Pujol, to the visible irruption of mass ‘independentism’ are a very current topic, without a clear future. Doubtless, this is an inconvenience for any work that is too close to an ever-changing present. Each day that passes distances the end of Dowling’s book, and possibly could serve to contradict its sense. Nevertheless, Dowling rightly avoids prophecy - even in his epilogue; prophecy is never a good road for a historian.

The rapid evaporation of native popular culture in the face of globalizing pressures and technological change is another aspect not detailed by Dowling. In dealing with the effect of immigration on the concepts that sustain Catalan nationalism in the twentieth century, he does not describe adequately either the ways society itself has been altered or the nationalist theorization regarding the possible planned death of a Catalan identity based on the general use of the Catalan language. We are not given useful comparisons with the situation of Basque in Euzkadi, nor of the Irish language in Éire, nor other analogous cases, nor does he situate the power of Catalan language and literature as a means of survival – even using translation – in a broader European frame adaptable and open to what might be termed ‘indie’ influences.

To sum up: we have two complementary works. They have diverse starting points and differing final objectives, but they can be read together by a foreign reader with ease, without any previous familiarity with Catalan events and viewpoints. Angel Smith’s book attempts to present novel hypotheses: to explain how and why societies hunt for and recover myths, symbols, and alleged traditions, so as to reinterpret and reformulate all such lore according to interests and needs of a new time. Dowling’s work is clearly directed at endowing English-language bibliography with a solid descriptive synthesis that can depict and interpret the trajectory of Catalan nationalism during the twentieth century.

His aim is less to offer surprises than to provide readers with an understanding of Catalan specificity in a broad European scene. Up to now, Catalonia has been too strong to be dissolved by Spain, even to dissolve itself, but it has also been too weak to become a recognized state (but who can foresee the future?). The style of the country has remained pragmatic, utilitarian, even calculating – perhaps to a fault – in the effort to survive as some kind of whole. Both works are useful contributions, which try to situate Catalan history on a European map as a clear presence rather than as a mere Spanish curiosity. Both books help widen a corpus of study on Catalonia which is growing daily.

Arnau Gonzàlez i Vilalta

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona