

On Catalonia, Spain, and the European Union

Wolfgang Streeck

Europe is looking at Spain these days. Will the country, will the Spanish state break apart? Few people feel competent to form a view on who is right and who is wrong, and what would be a solution if there could be one at all. From an outside perspective, one is tempted to point out that hardly any modern nation-state, in Europe and elsewhere, is ethnically or linguistically homogeneous, and none was put together without, often violent, conflict. One of the reasons why the West European state system has been comparatively stable since the end of the Second World War is that its governments had learned, from bitter experience, what one can call the art of federalism: of decentralization of power and devolution of governance, making it unnecessary for the borders of states and nations to be coterminous.

Federalism is, however, not easy. It makes high demands on the integrity of the national government and the wisdom of those with power over the national constitution. The center must be trustworthy, which among other things means that it cannot be seen as doing the bidding of one particular ethnic community. From a socialist perspective, there also must be sufficient space for local experimentation with locally adapted and responsive institutions capable of enhancing democracy and containing capitalism. At least as important is a country's fiscal constitution: how much solidarity is owed by stronger regions to weaker ones and the country as a whole. Most people are willing to share – but they must have confidence that their contribution is not squandered or soaked up by corruption.

A few examples may be useful. Switzerland has probably the most extensive experience with federalism: with regional and local autonomy on the one hand and central government

restraint – as well as integrity and professionalism – on the other. Italy has after the war negotiated a treaty with Austria on a special status of autonomy for South-Tirol that to many is a model for both domestic and international peace-making. But since it gives the Alto Adige prerogatives withheld from other regions, it causes a lot of political discontent, especially since the area is doing better economically than many other parts of the country. In fact, regional separatism is strong in Italy today, one reason being the drain on national resources from the Mezzogiorno and its dismal and apparently never-changing economic condition. Belgium, for its part, is already two countries *de facto*, having overcome potentially disruptive ethnic conflict by very deep decentralization to three regions in decades of continuous institutional reform. As to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, “devolution” has been on the agenda since the 1970s but always got stuck. One of the questions that turned out to be intractable was whether England, as the main and dominant part of the country, should have its own “regional assembly”, like Scotland and Wales. This raised the thorny issue of what would then be the role of the “Parliament of Westminster” and the Monarchy.

In the Spanish case, it is sometimes suggested that the EU should mediate between Catalonia and Madrid. But the EU is a contraption of its member states and firmly controlled by them (they being the “Masters of the Treaties”). If on anything, they agree that this must remain so. This means that the EU will be one hundred percent on the side of the Spanish nation-state, if only because anything that looks like a victory for Catalanian separatism would immediately trigger similar demands on other countries, not just in Italy but also, importantly, in France.

Regional autonomists, not just in Catalonia but also for example in Scotland, sometimes believe that having gained sovereignty they should and could become EU member states. This

shows only that they fundamentally misunderstand what the EU is. Not only do they fail to appreciate its nature as a cartel of its member nation-states, who will never admit to their club a region-turned-state against the will of the state from which it has broken away. They also see the EU as an empire of freedom, an international regime providing for peaceful cooperation, bottom-up, between associated countries – or as a very soft federation of *de facto* independent sovereignties. Actually the EU is, as one should and could know, a centralized super-state in waiting, devoted to imposing free markets, global competition, a hard currency and neoliberal “structural reforms” on its member countries. Fighting the difficult fight for national sovereignty and then, having won it, handing it over to Brussels simply makes no sense, even less so if, like the Scottish “nationalists”, one would adopt the euro on top of it. The EU from which Europe’s regional autonomists expect support and which they hope to join as sovereign nation-states is not the real EU but a dreamland, not just one that doesn’t exist yet but one that will never exist at all, certainly not as long as illusions about its true nature are not radically dispelled.