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Review of Michael Vargas, *Constructing Catalan Identity: Memory, Imagination, and the Medieval*

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2012), Elliott tells us that theory gets in the way of his pragmatism. That is a smoke screen, since careful readers can intuit not only that he holds theoretical predilections but that they are ill-fitted to his task. One is that governance and the decisions of contending elites are of greater consequence, of a higher order, than sloppy change from below. While Great Britain and Spain need no explaining (no matter that the loss of Empire and the Brexit fiasco throw shade on Great Britain's exceptional ego, and no matter that many who know the history of Spain consider it a repeat-offender failed state), Scotland and Catalonia remain "lesser polities" of questionable relevance. Second, he is dismissive of manifestations of culture, of the construction of identity, of the productive capacity of myth and memory, and of the possibility that a state can inflict long-lasting trauma on its own people. A third guiding position, one that subsumes the first two, has it that time is the most powerful agent of change. This is tricky. Elliott can be adept at describing the seriousness of momentary conflicts even while relentlessly piling evidence upon evidence to the end that change always seems to brush the past under its rug. Leaders and those who struggle against them may try to steer the world this way or that, but they inevitably get set adrift, rocked to and fro by exigencies that they cannot anticipate and that they never fully comprehend. The problem here is that fatalism cannot answer the question Elliott asks. Some successionist movements have very deep roots. In seeking to learn why it is that their emotional batteries get recharged time and again, the answer has to go beyond identifying dynastic foibles or fleeting successes or failures in diplomacy. It has to take account of the psychology, sociology, and anthropology of humanity's use of the past to change the present.

Near the end of the book, Elliott asserts "Spain after 1978 was an infinitely more benign country than the Spain of General Franco" (270). Such relativism is undoubtedly true for those who ignore the damage done by the past to the present. It also forgets that events in the present can reawaken ancestral spirits and reopen old wounds.

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Vargas, Michael A. *Constructing Catalan Identity: Memory, Imagination, and the Medieval*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. Pp. xii, 197.

While a nation is a social construction, no nation can be simply constructed, as the failed example of Padania vividly testifies. To be built socially, a nation must contain the raw materials for its building, and a sense of a shared history is an essential component to such a project. Furthermore, there needs to be a degree of societal consensus around its constituent parts. We should not see these parts as

fixed and unchanging. Rather contemporary needs will determine what should be promoted and emphasised. Linda Colley noted some years ago the centrality of Protestantism in the making of British identity in the eighteenth century, yet this religious component is barely relevant today. The past that arrives in the present is there through a process of selection. Michael Vargas's study carefully examines how features of a medieval past are celebrated in contemporary Catalan society.

The case of Catalonia is a fruitful one for the examination of the relationship between historical recall as well as the impact of myth-history in the national story. As we are shown in this lucid study, the presence of the medieval is visible in the physical architecture of cities such as Girona and Barcelona; in the naming of streets, squares and even metro stations; in the evocation of a millenarian culture; in the selection of national heroes; and in a sense of collective historical consciousness. This is what Vargas terms an "imagined medieval inheritance" (8). This is not to delegitimise Catalan nationhood as this imaginary inheritance is probably a universal component of national stories, from Joan of Arc, Saint Patrick and the shamrock to the Battle of Kosovo. As Hans Kohn once noted, in nationalism, what is true is *not what is*, but what people think is true.

Golden ages and glorious pasts are often the building blocks of nationalism. Catalonia, like Poland-Lithuania and Bulgaria, achieved its greatest territorial extent in the Middle Ages, which subsequently produced the cultural-political narratives of decline, decadence and, most importantly rebirth. Vargas examines closely the notions of decadence and renaissance in the Catalan tradition, seeing them as moral frameworks. One cannot exist without the other. Decadence can best be seen as offering the possibility of rebirth. This rebirth, or revival, permits a form of national reinvention, as a mythologised past comes to serve more contemporary political aims. Often moving effortlessly around a wide range of cultural expressions, Vargas encourages the reader to see anew the Catalan Renaixença in the nineteenth century. The author argues persuasively that a political purpose to Catalan cultural revival can be located earlier than has hitherto been argued. Here what are termed the medievalising and modernising interact producing invented traditions (*jocs florals*), an evoked landscape represented in the epic form, and what Vargas calls an official popular medievalism.

This medievalising can connect with both the present and provide a narrative for the future, and here we can be reminded of Nairn's positing of nationalism as akin to Janus. This was evident in the shift from elites adopting Castilian to participate in Spanish nationhood to an embrace of Catalan as tool for modernity. The internal status of the Catalan language was transformed as economic modernisation created social divergence from the halting modernisation in other areas of the state. This transformation over the course of the nineteenth century created a distinctive fusion in Catalan identity around the question of culture-language. Yet this did not mean the abandonment or rejection of Spain, as

contemporary pro-secessionist ferment should not lead to a misreading of the Catalan past. The modernisation of Spain, led by Catalonia, remained central to the narrative.

A line can be drawn from the present-day attachment of Catalans to their institutions to the representation of the medieval in the present. The resonance of the Generalitat and its president, as being an almost unbroken line from the Middle Ages, is evoked as evidence of the deep national roots to Catalonia. Saints, religious icons and holy landscapes also play a role in the construction of contemporary identity. Montserrat, Poblet, Girona, Vic are sites of nationalist commemoration, where we encounter a fusion of the national and the religious. These elements feed into what Vargas terms streams of collective consciousness, where Catalan expression is constantly evoked and remade. Paradox also abounds. The rejection of Spanish Catholicism means the evocation of a deep Catalan religiosity, for a secular religion: nationalism. In this sense, what is deemed to be Spanish requires de-legitimisation.

This can be seen in the rupture with the Spanish monarchy. While present day Catalan nationalism invokes a republican narrative, this vision is combined with a hagiographical relationship to Catalan monarchs, perhaps none more so than Jaume I, the conqueror. The evocation of monarchical glory is present in many contemporary national narratives, from England to Poland. Jaume I brought glory to the medieval Catalan empire, but he did so at a terrible price, particularly in the conquest of Mallorca, which resulted in the enslavement or forced departure of much of the native Muslim population. Catalan children are taught uncritical narratives of medieval warrior nights, the Almogavars, who were ruthless mercenaries. Memory and historical memory are, as we have noted, selective, but it would be like ignoring the brutal depredations of the Black Prince in France and instead invoking him as embodying some national essence.

On occasion, some of the interventions rehash uncritically many of the standard tropes of Catalan nationalism, for example claiming that the mass internal migration of Spaniards from the south to Catalonia in the 1950s was a Francoist state policy to dilute Catalan identity. Historiography has demonstrated that state authorities tried to prevent this movement and frequently sent new arrivals back to the south. It is unfortunate that the final chapter is so hazy. Seemingly written as part emotional reaction to the attempted referendum of 1 October 2017, hyperbole seems to take over when we are told that the Guardia Civil “beat *and shot* Catalans,” while “*millions* stayed home for fear of attacks upon them by their own government (my emphasis)” (167). (Emphasis added by the reviewer.) This is disappointing when the full body of the book has been a model of considered analysis.

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