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# Rising Tensions in Catalonia and Scotland: A Comparative Exploration

When discussing secession and states striving for independence, two of the most prescient examples in the Global North are Scotland and Catalonia. As two countries that have both had independence referenda in the last ten years, Scotland and Catalonia share a lot of similarities in their secession movements. They both have longstanding and storied histories as autonomous nations within their respective countries and a longstanding history of being pushed around by those overarching countries. They both have political, economic, social, and historical grievances associated with their autonomy. Finally, they have strong secessionist movements that are pushing forward right now. This paper will explore these similarities by describing the economic, political, and social grievances surrounding these rising tensions, and then explore the similarities and differences between these two case studies.

One main reason for these divides can be seen in the economic disenfranchisement of the populations of Catalonia and Scotland, respectively. In a state that is supposedly autonomous, there are common qualms about economic autonomy on top of political autonomy. This is present in Scotland in several ways. Ultimately, Scotland has very little economic control. When explaining the four matters reserved to Westminster (the UK government), Keating explains that the second is a series of economic provisions designed to protect trade in the UK, which “include reservations on company law, copyright and intellectual property, competition policy, and industrial relations” (Keating 34). Scottish people are looking for the autonomy to prioritize and

incentivize their businesses, foster further national identity, and maintain pride in Scottish-owned businesses. This lack of fiscal autonomy has radicalized the voters of Scotland and led them down the path of secession.

Catalonia's relationship with the larger Spanish country is rather different. Instead of seeking economic power to bolster their economy and make them an economic powerhouse, Catalonia is already one of the economic powerhouses of Spain, with a distinctly high GDP. However, despite their autonomous status, they have several grievances with Spain. First, there is a lack of fiscal autonomy, even as compared to other autonomous communities in Spain. For example, the Basque Country has its own economic accord, wherein they are allowed to collect their taxes. Considering Catalonia's status as the biggest economic powerhouse in Spain, this lack of an economic accord has led the people to question their payment of taxes to Spain (Crameri 42). This becomes an exceptional point of contention when looking at Catalonia's share of taxes in the overall Spanish system. There is a widespread annoyance that Catalonia hands over more in taxes than the amount it receives back in services and investment. This has been perceived to be directly responsible for major shortcomings in any form of infrastructure that requires Spanish investment, especially transport.

The next important feature in describing the rise of nationalism in these two states is the political grievances that each state faces. In Scotland, there has historically been a distinctive political tradition. We first see unionism, which was not assimilationist and celebrated national diversity, hoping for no crossing of the wires of statehood and nationality. Next, we saw the transition towards devolution when the UK turned into a family of self-governing nations combining local parliaments with an overarching one at Westminster. Independence only became a serious option in the 1970s (Keating 7). Concerning Scotland, there is a distinct left-leaning

tendency from Scottish voters that is not shared by the rest of UK voters. They tend to specifically be on the left on social equality and redistribution issues (Keating 6). Furthermore, while national status has rarely ever been contested (Keating 5), Scotland is not treated as such in the UK, with their own party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), never gaining any traction in Parliament because of the two-party system that is prevalent in the UK. Furthermore, the Conservatives (Tories) have consistently been in power for the majority of the last 50 years (33 out of 51 years, to be exact). This domination of the party that does not closely line up with Scottish values is bound to create discontent (Lecture 04/18).

Catalonia also has a distinctive political tradition. Until the mid-eighteenth century, Catalonia enjoyed significant political autonomy, with the union with Aragon recognizing separate political identities. However, with the Spanish War of Succession, Catalonia was opposed to the Bourbon king Philip V. When Catalonia surrendered, there was a dissolution of Catalan political institutions, and the Catalan language was forbidden, with Castilian Spanish becoming the official language despite very few speaking or understanding it. Catalonian autonomy was consistently given and taken away throughout the early twentieth century (Guibernau 157). As such, there has been a constant push and pull for Catalonians looking for national autonomy and independence. Finally, it was granted to them after the Franco regime fell in 1975. This played a significant role in Catalonia's unrest and secessionist movement; the Franco regime heavily discriminated against them, and they claim that the current Spanish constitution disenfranchises them, as it was written ambiguously with strong influence from Francoists (Lecture 04/30). One of the last straws for Catalonia was when the Spanish High Court of Justice diminished and modified the 2006 Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia. 51.5% of this statute was challenged and removed several important symbolic and tangible political rights.

With a long, storied history of unstable autonomy in Catalonia, all culminating in an autonomy statute being edited this drastically, it is no surprise that secessionist sentiment is growing in the nation.

As of this point, Catalonia has extremely limited autonomy. The points removed from their statute of autonomy include:

1) The term “nation” only applies in an ideological, historical, or cultural context,
2) ‘National Symbols’ are not being interpreted as national symbols, but as ‘symbols of nationality’,
3) It is unconstitutional to give preferential status to the Catalan language,
4) The duty to know Catalan is not as important as knowing Castilian Spanish,
5) A rejection of the attempt to protect matters already devolved from constant legislation of the Spanish state,
6) Removal of a statute that would eliminate the Catalan economic deficit generated from the imbalance, as mentioned earlier, between Catalan contributions and Spanish state funding,
7) Not allowed to set up its taxes,
8) Limiting GDP-based state investment rules, and
9) No allowance for a Catalan Council of Justice.

This ties together many of the social, historical, and political grievances that Catalonians face. From a political position, we see the distinct rejection of an attempt to protect matters already devolved from the constant legislation of the Spanish state. There has been harmonization consistently coming from the Spanish government for years now, trying to bring together the power of all of the Spanish Autonomous Communities under a more unitary, less

decentralized rule. Catalonia feels a strong need to move towards independence and subsequently has increasing nationalist rhetoric because they are losing political ground, losing power over governing its state, and even losing claim to their own judiciary.

From a social position, there are several extremely limiting mandates in this dilution of their autonomy statute. Items 1, 2, 3, and 4 were particularly limiting on a social level. The removal of a national symbol, preference towards a non-regional language, and the removal of the very meaning of the term ‘nation’ is an extreme way of taking away national identity. This is not just a perceived attack on the Catalonian autonomy, but also on their cultural identity and historical status as an independent nation. The statute on language, in particular, lines up with Stepan et. al.'s assertion that “had political leaders…attempted to impose one language and culture on their countries…would not have been served in any of these four longstanding democratic states. This was so because more than one territorially based linguistic-cultural cleavage had already been activated in either of these four countries” (Stepan 5). This quote, in context, explains that there is a difference between the way France democratized into a unitary state with a distinctive French identity and the way that other states have to democratize. Spain’s previous sociolinguistic and cultural cleavages make the type of unification that Spain is attempting a very risky tactic, which has understandably fostered extreme resentment and secessionist attitudes.

There are strong social resentments in Scotland as well, for their rising nationalistic sentiment and secessionist attitudes. In the 1960s, Scottish Conservatives began to follow an image that simply did not line up with Scottish values, presenting the image of a “remote or anglicized elite that seemed out of touch with current Scottish problems” (Devine 148). The conservatives further alienated Scotland with Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal crusade on social

policy and eventually formed a nation that was staunchly pro-Labour and very much against the Conservatives, including conservative social values and social policy (Devine 174). This alienation, as stated above, does not effectively line up with the wishes of the rest of England, which has consistently been in the Conservatives' hands. Thatcher was staunchly anti-socialist in any way and was truly hated. Even Scottish historians described that "'Thatcher seemed to be hated so intensely north of the border because she personified every quality we have always disliked in the English: snobbery, bossiness, selfishness, and, by our lights, stupidity"' (Devine 174). It is no wonder that, in a government that has been consistently heavily influenced by Thatcherism and her neoliberal crusade over the last 40 years, people in Scotland have reached record levels of discontentment with the current system.

When comparing the two, several things become apparent. Along the lines of similarities, we see a lineup of the actual types of grievances. People want to set their own taxes. Scotland wants to set their agenda when it comes to supporting local businesses and the economic strength of their nation. They have a distinct, recognized, and respected national identity, and want to set their social policy and maintain their own rules. However, some of the causes behind these wishes do not line up. For example, while Catalonia has a remarkably stronger economy than much of Spain, the same does not apply to Scotland. While currently bolstered by its oil reserves, Scotland is predicted to lose its oil reserves' economic viability in the next 20 years (Oil and Gas Sector and Infrastructure). While Catalonia is a sustainable economic powerhouse, Scotland's power is from a diminishing resource, which makes its case somewhat different. It puts the long-term viability of economic and political independence more in question, which undoubtedly has influenced the independence referenda and the attitudes surrounding secession. Another difference comes from the longstanding history of losing and gaining autonomy. While Scotland

has dealt with ebbs and flows in their national power, Catalonia has had a much more volatile history, having as recently as 50 years ago dealt with a legitimate, discriminatory, and deadly dictatorship. Furthermore, the constitution came out of a government that still had much anti-Catalonian sentiment present, which stacked the cards against them.

In conclusion, Catalonia and Scotland are two heavily secessionist countries with a lot on the minds of their citizens and voters. Their grievances are characterized by economic interests, such as Catalonia's relative economic power and Scotland's non-compete agreements and field-leveling with the UK. They are seen in their distinctive lack of political power, such as Scotland's left-leaning tendencies on the issues that were most directly impacted by the Thatcher regime's main policy objectives, which have carried forward throughout the Conservatives' policy goals to this day. They are further shown in their social grievances, with Scotland relating to their perception of the English and the people governing them in particular, and with Catalonia surrounding the removal of so much national symbolism and national identity, even removing the prioritization of their native language.

While these two cases have many similarities and differences, one thing remains certain: secession and independence are not things that can be discarded lightly. There is heavy discontentment in both nations, which will not be easily discarded by the governments of their respective countries. Further research surrounding these problems could explore the role that economic viability plays in the people who are not pro-secession, the attachment of this dissatisfaction to specific political figures who represent the discontentment, and the overall discussion about the viability of these nations as independent states.

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