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The Spectres Haunting Europe: Reading Contemporary Catalan Nationalism through *The Break-Up of Britain*

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This article reads contemporary Catalan nationalist discourse through the lens of Tom Nairn's polemical classic *The Break-Up of Britain*. First published in 1977, that text presents key issues for understanding contemporary Catalonia. The first is the emergence of a national sentiment that is separate from that of anti-colonialism because it is characterized by a higher level of economic development than the place it is seeking to break from, but is the repository of a legitimate claim to self-determination. That is how Nairn sees the Northern Ireland–Éire relationship, and that is a good analogy for Spain–Catalonia. The second is the tension between what he sees as 'indifferent', that is to say strictly civic-political nationalism and a more linguistically or culturally-driven nationalism. This is also a key tension in Catalonia, where immigration has transformed the national movement towards an inter-culturalist ideology and a *de facto* bilingualism (with Catalan and Spanish) remains a key but strategically unacknowledged element of that movement. The third aspect of *Break-Up*, and the synthesis of the comparison, is the importance of federalism, which is key for Nairn in seeing a way forward for the constituent countries of the UK and long a crucial, if not *the* crucial, political element of *catalanisme*.

It was once widely believed that solutions to 'national questions' were a precondition of socialist or civil progress. There may be some truth in this; but we know now that the 'solution' will rarely be final, a relegation of mere nationhood to the historical files. These are facts more likely than not to recur, in new and more potent forms. Socialists in search of self-government are more, not less, likely to diagnose and resent great-nation chauvinism, overbearingness and egotism. To those who have learned anything from recent history, then, the only possible safeguard must be to make an Alternative Strategy fully and freely federative in principle. (Tom Nairn, 'A 1981 Postscript' to *The Break-up of Britain*[1])

Thus Catalan nationalism – which has never been separatist and which has always intensely desired to unify the Iberian nationalities in a brotherly, federative organisation – is the aspiration proclaimed by a people who, conscious of their rights and

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> their strength, stride confidently down the path of the great progressive ideals of humanity. (Enric Prat de la Riba, *La nacionalitat catalana*[2])

Introduction

Tom Nairn's *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism*,[1] first published in 1977 (and subsequently reissued in 1981, 2003 and 2015) has justifiably earned a place as a classic of scholarly polemic. And with recent developments, such as the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, rumblings about a Brexit-led reunification of Northern Ireland, and of course Brexit itself, it might seem that its moment has really arrived. I will make that case in this article, but not for the reasons that a reader might intuit. This is because, in terms of the political situation of what Nairn has jokingly called 'Ukania', the results are rather mixed. As we will see, Nairn certainly saw Northern Ireland as being part of the crisis of the United Kingdom's state, but he most definitely did not see the eventual outcome there as a push for unification with the Republic of Ireland, an option that Brexit brought into the public discourse in a way that we have not seen since partition itself. This is not some quirk of Nairn's thought, and the reasons for his scepticism about an all-Ireland Éire are central to the present-day importance of his formulations. Furthermore, while he seems to be downright prophetic in terms of the secular and territorial quality of modern Scottish nationalism, Nairn seems to have overestimated the popular appetite for actual separation, as the 2014 rejection of that option by a 55–45% split amply demonstrates. And while his chapter 'Culture and Politics in Wales' does deal with the intersection of culture and language, it does so in a somewhat grudging tone, clearly indicating that this is something of a dead end that the movement will need to move past.

But the small nation that *The Break-up of Britain* tells us the most about is not British at all; it is Catalonia. The recent crisis over Catalan separatism, ostensibly sparked by the referendum of 1 October 2017 and arguably begun by the 2010 Constitutional Tribunal's interpretation of the 2006 Statute of Autonomy,[3] can be fruitfully read through the schemas of *The Break-Up of Britain*. This is most true of Nairn's analyses of the place of Northern Ireland and Scotland in the United Kingdom as a whole. He posits that Northern Ireland (which he habitually calls 'Ulster')[4] has long existed as a kind of industrial heartland in terms of the island of Ireland as a whole, and as such could never be integrated into a southern State that he presents as a backward quasi-theocracy. That, of course, strongly echoes the Catalonia–Spain relationship that has been suggested by many observers, not least among them Nairn himself. He is altogether more sympathetic to Scottish nationalism, which *The Break-up of Britain* presents as more modern and non-sectarian than its atavistic English equivalent, again strongly reflecting the self-image of much of contemporary Catalan nationalism, which has come to be defined by a kind of 'interculturalitat català'. What synthesizes all of this is the common thread of federalism. That is to say, both Spain and the United Kingdom are in denial about their *de facto* federal qualities, and the recent threats of their 'break-up' may have the common salutary effect of making

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that kind of denial impossible to sustain, thus leading to massive constitutional reform in both cases, break-up or not.

Ulster's No and Catalonia's Sí

Much of *The Break-up of Britain* was originally published in *New Left Review*, a journal to which Nairn contributed over the course of 45 years (from 1962 to 2007); his centrality in the British left would likely lead a casual reader to guess wrong about his position on Northern Ireland. For decades (arguably since partition) the basic position of that political community has been to see the Unionist majority as some sort of artificially maintained leftover of imperialism who would eventually have to give up any false consciousness about their identity as a people distinct from the whole of the island of Ireland. Nairn, though, dismisses this as part of 'The Myth of Anti-Imperialism', in the words of a section head early in *The Break-up of Britain*'s chapter on Northern Ireland. Rather, he posits the place as a region whose economic vibrancy and cultural heterogeneity would never fit into the southern State. He writes of northern Protestants that 'The reasons why they were not "Irish" in the sense that Catholic-based agrarian nationalism had established, are clear enough. But they were not really 'British' either … What distinguishes the Protestant North-East in such company is its massive industrial development' (Ref. 1, pp. 196–197).

Obviously many political and economic details are different, but nobody versed in the tensions between Spanish and Catalan nationalisms can fail to find this formulation strikingly familiar. Catalonia is well-known as one of Spain's most prosperous regions; a common joke about the movement is that in terms of oppressed minorities, Catalans make unlikely victims. More precise formulations of this dynamic generally invoke the well-known fact that, in the opening words of the OECD's backgrounder on the country, 'With more than 7.5 million inhabitants, the Autonomous Region of Catalonia is the second most populous region in Spain, representing 16% of its total population. Catalonia is the main contributor to the Spanish economy with nearly 19% of Spain's GDP. The GDP per capita is higher than the European Union average.'[5,6] Small wonder that it is very uncommon to come across analogies with other national liberation movements, either historical (such as Algeria) or contemporary (such as Corsica). Part of the infrequency of comparison there clearly has to do with Catalonia's lack of an armed or violent paramilitary presence; part of this, though, is also clearly to do with the relatively prosperous quality of the national territory to be liberated.

The nineteenth-century roots of *catalanisme* are in the Catholic conservative discourse that predominated in other 'small nations' of Europe, such as Flanders or Hungary. The second quote that opens this article is from Enric Prat de la Riba, one of the key early figures of Catalan nationalism, himself basically a figure of the Catholic conservative bloc. It is in that bloc that we find the roots of the centre-right Catalan nationalism that consolidated a majority in the post-Franco era via the ideology of Pujolism. I refer there to Jordi Pujol, the founder of the party Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, which was the leader of the electoral coalition

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known as Convergència i Unió, (CiU) and which subsequently re-formed in 2016 as the present-day PDeCAT. Pujol's Convergència didn't start out as explicitly separatist, but CiU/PDeCAT has long been synonymous with a mainstream, majority-friendly form of *catalanisme*. Albert Balcells' *Breve historia del nacionalismo catalán* arguably allows us to trace the consolidation of a centre-right, bourgeois quality of the movement to the early 1980s, once the new Spanish constitution had fully taken hold and the wave of post-Franco unity began to recede.[7] Balcells recalls how

> Starting in 1978, the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) abandoned the principle of self-determination – just as Jordi Pujol's party [then called Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya] and the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC) had – but as of 1983 they began to give nationalism a negative connation, one that was attributed to CiU; this formulation didn't hurt their [CiU's] monopolisation of Catalan nationalism. (Ref. 7 p. 256)

Seen from the outside, Catalan nationalism would seem to share some of the same basic political ground with Unionism in Northern Ireland. That is also, of course, what we have historically seen in Northern Ireland. That is to say, it is a political movement that, although containing some liberal or centre-left elements, is basically on the right, drawing its support from the bourgeois and relatively well-off working class in a prosperous, industrialized area that abuts a region defined by economic underdevelopment ('the south' in both cases). This, of course, reached a new high in the wake of the 2017 UK elections, when the Democratic Unionist Party, the dominant voice of Unionism in Northern Ireland for the last decade or so, entered into a 'Confidence and Supply' agreement with the British Conservatives (whose official name is 'The Conservative and Unionist Party').

With this in mind, Nairn was calling for a new kind of category of country, one that is not defined by an imperial dynamic as such but is nevertheless the repository of legitimate aspirations towards self-determination. At the end of his chapter on Northern Ireland, he has this to say:

> The dominant progressive myth of anti-imperialism is focussed overwhelmingly upon nationalism as a justified struggle of the repressed poor against the wealthy oppressors. […] However, it has never been the case that this main current exhausts the meaning of nationalism. There have also been a number of what could be called 'counter currents' – examples of societies which have claimed national self-determination from a different, more advanced point in the development spectrum. […] Not surprisingly, this category is mainly one of small nationalities and territories in 'sensitive' geopolitical points. The more advanced and industrialised Belgians developed a successful nationalist movement against the (then) backward and agrarian Netherlands monarchy between 1815 and 1830. In the late 19th and early 20th century the more advanced regions of the Basques and the Catalans developed separatist tendencies against backward central and southern Spain. For a quarter of a century 'western' Israel has fought for independence against the less developed Arab lands on all sides of it. Among the new-nationalists movements in Europe, Scotland is (at least potentially) a new addition to this camp. […]

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> The Ulster Protestant territories clearly belong to this group. And one must put the same question about them as to other members of this rather marginal and select 'rich men's club.' Does it follow that they have no right to self-determination because they are (relatively) economically developed? (Ref. 1, pp. 209–210)

That is precisely the question with which Catalonia finds itself faced today. Nairn laments that a longstanding resistance to English liberalism, which many in Northern Ireland saw as complicit with a Republican desire for Protestant assimilation, was defined by a hostility that meant that 'this resistance was never conducted as the real or straightforward expression *of* that community. That is, as the assertion of its own distinct identity and rights, its own capacity for national self-determination in a separatist sense' (Ref. 1, p. 198). A similar hostility to modern Spanish socialism, which has been generally unionist, is a defining part of the modern Catalan nationalist movement, on both the left and right. For Nairn, this legacy has unfortunately meant that self-determination in Northern Ireland 'was fought over a desperate battle for the frontier: for imperialism, "British Ireland" in the old sense. Protestant Ascendency over the natives, and so on' (Ref. 1, p. 198). But the dynamic in Catalonia is very different. The hostility to a metropolitan progressivism that would ignore national specificity has instead moved Catalan separatism towards a 'big tent' movement and away from something that is easily synonymous with a left-wing programme of anti-imperialism (which may have been the case until the civil war but has been a minority part of *catalanisme* since the 1970s).

What this Northern Ireland section shows us is that *The Break-Up of Britain*'s greatest contemporary value lies in the conceptual framework that it provides, and part of this is the description of a sub-state formation that, while clearly not following the traditional contours of a decolonizing possession, is nevertheless the home of a national distinctiveness and thus the bearer of some form of rights around self-determination. As Nairn himself says, *The Break-up of Britain*'s 'predictive side' is in many ways mistaken, and writing now in the twenty-first century we can see that this is as true for Northern Ireland as for the rest of the United Kingdom. But in terms of a framework for the understanding of 'small nations' of a variety of historical pedigrees, it is quite durable, as the experience of contemporary Catalonia makes clear.

Scotland, Wales, Indifference and Modernity

In many ways Nairn is more convincing overall on the matter of Scotland. Despite the recent turning-back of Scottish independence in the failed referendum of 2014, *The Break-Up of Britain*'s analyses of the broad-strokes ideological tensions in Scottish nationalism have proven durable. And they are just as illuminating of the situation in Catalonia as the conceptualization of Northern Ireland. The crucial matter has to do with immigration and the gradual rise of a non-ethnic nationalism; Nairn could see this emerging in Scotland as early as the 1970s, and that has become a characteristic element of the separatist movements in both Scotland and Catalonia (as it has in Quebec). Scotland forms a kind of conceptual centrepiece for a political project that seeks a nationalism that reconciles the left's historical commitment to

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collective action and collective belonging with a liberal-leaning vision of modernity that seeks to protect not the sovereign individual of classical liberalism but rather its conceptual cousin, the diversity that naturally flows from that seminal experience of modernity: global migration.

Nairn's analysis of Scottish nationalism, much more than what he says about Northern Ireland (or for that matter Wales or England), lays out the emergence of a long-term tendency of small nationalist movements: that of civic over ethnic approaches to belonging. In his long opening chapter, 'The Twilight of the British State', he invokes implicitly an emerging Catalan self-awareness as he argues that the rise in peripheral nationalism has nothing to do with 'the Celtic bloodstream':

> This is not to deny the significance of ethnic and linguistic factors—the things usually evoked in accusations of 'narrow nationalism'—above all in the Welsh example. However, in the Scottish case these are relatively unimportant: this is overwhelmingly a politically-oriented separatism, rather exaggeratedly concerned with problems of state and power, and frequently indifferent to themes of race and cultural ancestry. Yet it incontestably leads the way, and currently dominates the devolutionary attacks on the British system. Before long (and depending partly on the fate of the declining Spanish state) it may figure as the most prominent and successful new-nationalist movement in Western Europe. (Ref. 1, p. 53)

Part of this 'devolutionary attack' is meant to bring that system into something resembling modernity, an issue that is key in many analyses of the United Kingdom's unusual governance frameworks. Distinguishing it from a unitary state such as France, John Loughlin has written, for instance, that 'the United Kingdom is more accurately described as a union (or multinational) state, thus keeping the "pre-modern" state structures while becoming a society with a modern public administration.'[8] Nairn argues that the modernized, technocratic latter can hardly make up for the backwardly pre-modern former. The degree to which Nairn specifically identifies 'the declining Spanish state' as being an issue is, of course, also a key concern for this essay.

Even the most zealous language advocate must address, however reluctantly, Nairn's sense of the Welsh movement's shortcomings, his desire 'to push the national movement leftwards – in this case, away from the cultural-linguistic nationalism focused on North and West Wales, and towards the socialism rooted in industrial South Wales' (Ref. 1, p. 341). One need not agree on the inevitability of socialist politics as such to see the basic point to be made here: a devastated-but-recovering language (the 2011 census puts the number of Welsh people able to understand the language at 19% of the total population of Wales)[9] will only carry a movement so far before it hits the solid brick wall of bilingualism with a dominant tongue. An open, territorial movement may retain and genuinely profit from the idealism around language that should accrue given language's elective, learnable quality, but the reality of governance will entail bringing into the fold those who, for whatever reason, simply haven't acquired it. Evidence that this is happening in Catalonia would be difficult to acquire absent polling data that takes into account language ability. There is such work on a parallel consideration, which is ethnic identification and voting

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behaviour; Ivan Serrano and Albert Bonillo's 2017 article closely examines the 2010 and 2012 Catalan elections with an eye to tracing ethnic affiliation (especially that connected to the internal migration from other parts of Spain, such as Andalucía) and voter behaviour, and conclude overall that 'in contexts of growing political polarization, a primary conception of ethnicity such as birth [inside or outside of Catalonia] can regain importance in explaining electoral behaviour.'[10] That is fairly intuitive, although it would be incorrect, I think, to conclude from this something like 'Spanish speaker = Spaniard = Unionist' or 'Catalan speaker = Catalan = separatist'. One way I have seen the complexity of this embodied, however fleetingly, was in Barcelona at demonstrations around the general strike for 3 October 2017, in the wake of the police brutality that marred the 1 October 2017 referendum on independence. Among those demonstrations, there were *a lot* of placards written in Spanish, especially in the student-led demonstrations at Plaça Universitat around the University of Barcelona, such as the punning, hard to translate 'Respecto a los Catalanes, voy a ser muy Franco – Rajoy' or 'Rajoy says: As far as the Catalans go, I'm going to be very frank/going to be very Franco'. To elaborate on the analogy with Quebec (very common in discussions of Catalonia), it is near-impossible to imagine seeing sarcastic, anti-Jean-Chrétien placards written in English at demonstrations in the wake of the 1995 referendum on independence. This kind of bilingualism is more present in Catalan identity, even the nationalist variety, than is widely acknowledged.

This bilingual reality has been a sticky matter in the legalities of devolution and the political aftermath of that devolution. The 2006 *Estatut d'autonomia de Catalunya*'s Article 6.1 begins with 'La llengua pròpia de Catalunya és el català', but its Article 6.2 reads

> Catalan is the official language of Catalonia. So is Spanish, which is the official language of the Spanish state. All people have the right to use the two official languages and the citizens of Catalonia have the right and the duty to know them.

To an outside viewer this would seem to be a model of bilingual practice. Indeed, it seems strongly influenced by the Irish model. Article 8.1 of the *Constitution of Ireland* (1937/2013) reads 'The Irish language as the national language is the first official language.' As in the Catalan case (although much more so) this is still aspirational rather than a reflection of the sociolinguistic facts on the ground,[11] and so Article 8.2 reads 'The English language is recognised as a second official language' and Article 8.3 reads 'Provision may, however, be made by law for the exclusive use of either of the said languages for any one or more official purposes, either throughout the State or in any part thereof.' Nevertheless, a sense of bilingualism that assumed 'el dret i el deure de conèixer-*les*' or 'the right and the duty to know *them*', that is to say *both* Catalan and Spanish, was one of the aspects of the 2006 statute that wound up undone by the 2010 ruling of the Tribunal Constitucional. This is somewhat ironic given the way the statute explicitly imitates the language of the Spanish constitution's Article 3, which reads 'El castellano es la lengua española oficial del Estado. Todos los españoles tienen el deber de conocerla y el derecho a usarla' or 'Castillian Spanish

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is the official Spanish language of the state. All Spaniards have the duty to know it and the right to use it'. The Tribunal, however, found that

> Regardless of the subsequent independent analysis, we advance the position that one cannot give an aspect as essential as Catalonia's own language [la lengua propia de Cataluña] a treatment that is so frivolous as to only result in an incomplete and decontextualized reading of this issue.[12]

The report of the Catalan government's Grup d'experts per encàrrec MHP replied to this ruling in equally acidic terms, more or less making the case that bilingualism was already in the spirit of the 2006 *Estatut d'autonomia de Catalunya*, and that this can only be undone by a radically centralizing Hispanophilia that is not at all part of the post-transition tradition of Spanish politics.[13]

It may also seem that the 2006 Estatut was trying to translate Quebec's *Charte de la langue française / Loi 101* (1977) into Catalan, but that is not really the case. Indeed, it is worth offering some caution here regarding the preponderance of analogies between Catalan and Quebec in the discourse around both nationalist movements. No doubt in Quebec bilingualism is widespread, especially in Montreal, but monolingual French-speakers are in fact a near-majority in the province,[14] and Quebec is legally a *monolingual*, French-speaking jurisdiction (the only constitutionally bilingual province in Canada is New Brunswick). These Quebec analogies tend to obscure the reality of Catalan bilingualism; in terms of the language–nation nexus, Catalonia is nearly as close to Wales as it is to Quebec.

The important place that the Spanish language has in Catalan identity is by no means uncontroversial. Pau Vidal's 2015 book *El bilingüisme mata*, for instance, made the case that Spanish was displacing Catalan to the point in which it had become a kind of dialect, which he calls *catanyol*: 'a kind of written and oral Catalan that, because of the excessive presence of Spanish-isms [castellanismes], provokes a certain comic effect […] or, more seriously, an inability to speak or express oneself genuinely.'[15] This was a controversial book and its thesis that an independent Catalan republic should be officially monolingual was by no means a consensus position, but the fact that the official language of a state should be in question does speak to the widespread quality of bilingualism. It was, in some ways, a more pessimistic version of Francesc Vallverdu's seminal 1970 book, *Dues llengües: Dues funcions?*, which made the case that Catalan and Spanish coexisted in an uneasy dance between bilingualism and diglossia, and that this constituted something fundamental about the Catalan society that, in that late Franco period, was beginning to emerge.[16] That book painted a portrait of the Catalan language that could be seen as objectively a bit grim. Such assessments included the memorable recollection, so well-known to minority language speakers everywhere, of the experience of 'meetings of neighbourhood associations, student groups, or lawyers, all of whom speak or at least understand Catalan, at the moment that they need to make formal presentations, adopt Spanish as the only language' (Ref. 16, p. 74).

Crucially, this shift away from ethnicity and towards territory, at the expense of language where necessary, has not only made these nationalist movements seem more

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virtuously modern, but has strengthened many aspects of their specifically separatist claims. Ricard Zapata-Barrero has been clear about this, writing in his essay 'Building a public philosophy of immigration in Catalonia: the terms of debate' that

> A definition of citizenship linked to residency creates difficulties for the monopoly that the Spanish state holds over the definition of citizenship, which it links in a nearly sacred way to nationality. This argument is not 'a new Catalan idiosyncrasy,' but rather constitutes a European language that Catalonia is adopting for strategic political action.[17]

That action has to do with understanding legally defined territories as the repository of citizenship, and making it more difficult to define someone's nationality in a way that is separate from the territory where they live.[18] We can see in some reaches of *catalanisme*, then, a vision of national identity that is, to return to Nairn's sense of Scottish nationalism, 'indifferent to themes of race and cultural ancestry'.

Such a vision has also taken hold in Scotland, of course, most explicitly manifested by the insistence on the part of the Scottish National Party that only those resident in Scotland could vote in the 2014 referendum on independence; being a 'Scot' who lived in England or Canada or Kenya did not allow you to decide on the fate of the nation, that is to say the fate of the *territory*. But it is still not easy to imagine a Scottish scholar asking, as Gracia Dorel-Ferré did in 2011 in the venerable Quebec nationalist journal *L'Action nationale*,

> what's the big deal that no small number of Catalans are of African or South American origin? They are part of the Catalan puzzle. They behave as Catalans, whether you want them to or not, because they are established in a country that is characterised by openness and migration [un pays d'ouverture et de passages]. This is the new *catalanisme.*[19]

Lest anyone think this is just making nice for a foreign audience where interculturalism is undeniably important to the nationalist movement, Zapata-Barrero has, writing in Catalan, made the dynamic even clearer. His 2005 research report on interculturalism in Quebec, Flanders and Catalonia partially concludes by saying that

> [t]he premise that must be followed is recognition that Catalonia is a society of immigration. This fact means that it's been built by immigration, that you cannot separate its history from the arrival of immigrants. Furthermore, these new arrivals are not somehow separate, nor are they a historical exception, but rather form part of the basic historical tradition.[20]

The migrations that Zapata-Barrero is referring to are not only those of the recent immigration from the post-colonial world, but also 'internal' migrations, especially the large number of Andalusians who migrated to a more prosperous north, not only to Barcelona and environs but all over Catalonia as well as Valencia and the Balearic Islands, in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these migrants 'became Catalan' in the manner of nineteenth-century Irish migrants to Quebec; that was certainly true of the children of these migrants, who, as children of the post-Franco era, would have been schooled in Catalan and thus socialized naturally into a revitalized Catalan culture.

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I may at this point seem to be far from anything proposed in *The Break-Up of Britain*, but I do not think that to be the case. Indeed, it is by turning towards the Marxism of Nairn that we can see the degree to which his evaluation of the United Kingdom synthesizes a political analysis that is, essentially, that of contemporary Catalonia. I made the case in the previous section that the Northern Ireland Nairn presents is in fact an excellent analogy for contemporary Catalonia. Something similar can be said for the synthesis of the antithetical nationalisms found in Wales (cultural/linguistic) and Scotland (political/state-power); these find a kind of synthesis in the experience of Catalan nationalism. They incorporate details of each, but an analysis of the material realities reveals that problems in the constituent parts (bilingualism, a fully open national identity with a strong base in immigration) have been fully taken on board and transformed into something new. Earlier in this paper I tried to downplay the specifically socialist politics that Nairn is agitating for throughout *The Break-Up of Britain*. I did this not because I reject that kind of politics but because I wanted to claim the overall analysis for a country whose nationalist movement has, since the 1970s, had a clear centre-right majority (much in the manner of Unionism in Northern Ireland). We can make up for that partial erasure of a specific political project, I hope, by returning to the ideological fundamentals, that is to say, Marxist-inflected dialectics, to see the degree to which Nairn's sense of *both* Wales and Scotland can clarify as much about contemporary Catalonia as his sense of Northern Ireland can.

The Spectre of Federalism

I will invoke that broad ideological pattern one more time by way of offering an overall synthesis, and suggest that a spectre is indeed haunting Europe – the spectre of federalism. As the quote that opens this paper illustrates, Nairn's analysis is thoroughly federalist in spirit, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly. Indeed, one of the ways that *The Break-Up of Britain* most closely anticipates the current state of Catalan nationalism is in its relative EU-philia. Although Brexit is now widely associated in the popular press with the political right, most of the British left would have opposed the United Kingdom's 1973 entry into what was then the EEC on grounds that closely resemble what is now known (and is too little discussed in that popular press) as Lexit. On the matter of that original entry, Nairn writes:

> Metropolitans have often accused those who (like myself) both supported entry into the European Community and self-government for smaller nations. There is no contradiction in this. None, that is, unless one thinks that the Community and the old British state are equivalently healthy and acceptable 'larger units'—so that it must be illogical to accept one and reject the other. In fact, there is no common measure between them. […] [W]hatever the shortcomings and contradictions of the new Europe, it is still a modern, voluntary, genuinely multi-national organisation, capable of great farther progress and of playing a positive role in a new world order. (Ref. 1, p. 60)

It is precisely this multi-national reality that has made the European Union popular in nations where the 'big unit' (Spain, the UK) is able to sometimes ignore the sovereign

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existence of 'smaller units' (Catalonia, Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland). That practice of studied ignorance is literally impossible in an entity such as the European Union (no less than it was in the days of the EEC), and so it is not hard to see what makes that, at least conceptually, attractive for small nations. But in fact it has been fairly easy for the European Union to ignore 'small units' when they come in the form of sub-state nations, and that ability to ignore was on vivid display in the days following the 2017 Catalan referendum on independence. Supporters of independence issued call after call for the European Union to intervene and lead efforts towards Catalonia–Spain dialogue, only to find that the EU was not interested in undercutting one of its member states. This was true of both the European Council president Donald Tusk, who Daniel Boffey, writing for the *Guardian*, quoted speaking directly to the Catalan president 'as a member of an ethnic minority and a regionalist, as a man who knows what it feels like to be hit by a police baton,'[21] but who did so by way of urging him not to declare independence, as well as the European Commission, which issued a statement on the day after the referendum on independence that opened by saying

> Under the Spanish Constitution, yesterday's vote in Catalonia was not legal. For the European Commission, as President Juncker has reiterated repeatedly, this is an internal matter for Spain that has to be dealt with in line with the constitutional order of Spain.[22]

In terms of advancing the actual outcome of an independent Catalan state, faith in the European Union may seem to have been misplaced.

At a larger conceptual level, though, the model of the European Union remains important in a way that brings us back to the realm of Nairn and the politics of which *The Break-up of Britain* was part. I am referring there to federalism, broadly conceived. To return to the quote that opens this paper, Nairn believed that 'To those who have learned anything from recent history, then, the only possible safeguard must be to make an Alternative Strategy fully and freely federative in principle' (Ref. 1, p. 346). That federalist principle not only animated Nairn but a lot of the British and Irish Left in the 1970s. On the Irish side, Desmond Fennell would be the best-known of these voices; his 1995 article 'Solutions to the northern problem: a federal Ireland and other approaches' was basically a précis of work that he had been publishing in a variety of venues over the previous two decades.[23] Fennell, a columnist for the now-defunct *Irish Press* and a regular contributor to the *Irish Times*, had also been an informal advisor to both the centre-right Fianna Fáil (for whom the *Irish Press* was something of a house organ) and the ostensibly socialist Sinn Féin. It was the latter political party that adopted some of his federal proposals, in the form of a platform published in 1974 under the title, *Peace with Justice: Proposals for Peace in a New Federal Ireland*. Fennell's two-part article in the *Irish Times* ran under the titles 'A new look at federation'[24] and 'The Federation of Man',[25] a reference to the Isle of Man, where Fennell argued that the capital of a federated British Isles should be located. He published a second two-part article on 'A Federal Ireland' in the *Irish Times* in February 1978. Federalism was an animating force behind much of the innovative thinking around Irish nationalism

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and the rights of northern unionists in the 1970s, and much of that thinking had a distinct, if likely unwitting, Catalan flavour to it. Alain-G. Gagnon has written of

> another period that is characterised by the contributions of Francisco Pi y Margall to the spreading of federalist ideas: indeed, we see in this Catalan's writings a deep knowledge of the federal constitutions of the USA, Switzerland and Germany, and the marked influence of Proudhon.[26]

Gagnon is referring to a key figure of the late nineteenth century, and the spirit of federalism also had roots in the regionalist debates in Spanish overseas colonies of that period, especially Cuba (as Lluís Costa has discussed).[27] This line of thinking represented some of the earliest flourishing of what we would now recognize as modern Catalan nationalism. Antoni Rovira i Virgili would become *catalanisme*'s most important political thinker of the first half of the twentieth century, and in his 1917 book *Nacionalisme i Federalisme* he has an essay entitled 'Institucions autònomes', wherein he argues that

> a strong nationality, fully impregnated with its own ideals, has nothing to fear as far as the limitation of its autonomy in the realm of governance and political liberties. Such limitation is neither obligatory nor essential in federalist doctrine; very much to the contrary.[28]

That sense of the possibility of federalism, the doors that it can open not just for countries stuck in centralized kingdoms (such as the UK and Spain) but also the way that it can accommodate very robust forms of national difference and the political difference such robustness often demands, defines much of the argument of *The Break-up of Britain*.

This sense of the possibilities of federalism has been remarkably long-lived in Catalonia as well. Ferran Requejo Coll, for instance, has vigorously defended the idea of federalism in works in Catalan (especially his 2009 anthology *Liberalisme polític i democràcies plurinacionals*),[29] French (in a 2011 article for a special issue of the aforementioned Quebec journal *L'Action nationale* devoted to Catalonia)[30] and English (in a 2015 article for the *Oxford University Politics* Blog).[31] His argument throughout is that the reason for the rising separatist feelings is, more or less, that there has not been enough federalism on the part of Madrid. This is a common analysis across the Spanish left as well, and the PSOE (the Spanish socialist party) has called for the Spanish state to 'Include the principle of loyalty between the State and the Autonomous Communities.'[32]

A *de facto* federalism has long been the political reality of the Kingdom of Spain, but, as in the UK, it has not been its constitutional reality. It was perhaps an act of provocation, then, for Luis Moreno and César Colino to include a chapter on Spain, written by them, as part of the volume of the series, *A Global Dialogue on Federalism*, which they edited together.[33] There they note that

> This extension of home rule to all Spanish ACs [Autonomous Communities] implied the genesis of a de facto federal state in all but name. Although already recognised by many Spanish and foreign academics as such, there is still much controversy among

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> Spanish scholars on whether Spain can be considered a full-fledged federal state. (Ref. 33, p. 292)

Part of the problem here, and the crucial point of difference between the United Kingdom and Spain, is the number of such communities. In Spain there are 17 in all, including Madrid. This has had the effect of undercutting the claim that the 'historical nationalities', which is to say the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, can make to distinct status, since they are autonomous in some of the same ways that Andalusia, Murcia or Navarre are. Luis Moreno had outlined a version of this argument in his 2001 book *The Federalization of Spain*, where he described in greater detail a state deeply split between the centralizing tendencies of Spanish nationalism and the multinational reality of the country.[34] That sort of discourse, really, is the inheritor of Tom Nairn's work on the United Kingdom, itself the product of a 1970s discourse around federalism and regionalism in the British Isles and elsewhere.[35] *The Break-up of Britain*, Nairn's most famous and long-lived work, may seem dated inasmuch as the Good Friday Agreement or the fate of the present-day Scottish independence movement mean that 'Ukania' didn't turn out quite as he expected. But it is dated in a positive way too. That is to say, it brings us back to a period whose debates around national belonging, self-determination and the spirit of federalism explain a great deal about the contemporary situation, of Catalonia especially, but of places further afield as well.

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References and Notes

1. T. Nairn ([1977] 2015) *The Break-up of Britain: Crisis and Neo-nationalism* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing), p. 346. Throughout this paper I am using the 2015 edition issued by Common Ground Publishing; it reproduces the 1981 edition more or less wholesale, including typos. That 1981 reissue itself added very little to the original 1977 version, except for this postscript. For an early version of some of the key arguments, see T. Nairn (1968) The three dreams of Scottish nationalism. *New Left Review* (first series), **49** (May–June), pp. 3–18.
2. E. Prat de la Riba ([1906] 1998) *La nacionalidad catalana / La nacionalitat catalana*, edited by J. Tusell (Madrid: Biblioteca nueva), This is taken from Biblioteca Nueva's 1998 bilingual Spanish/Catalan edition, whose Catalan version is simply a facsimile of F. Giró's 1910 reprint of Prat de la Riba's 1906 original. That reprint was produced by subscription.
3. In 2006, a new Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia (Estatut d'Autonomia de Catalunya) was approved by a popular referendum and by both the Catalan and Spanish parliaments. It was almost immediately referred to the Tribunal Constitucional, who took four years to rule on its constitutionality. The interpretation that finally emerged changed significant aspects, especially those that pertained to Catalonia's status as a 'nation' and to the powers over language and cultural legislation that would logically follow from such a status. Relevant documents, including the full text of the Statute as well as the Tribunal

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Constitucional's ruling, can be found at http://web.gencat.cat/ca/generalitat/estatut/index.html or goo.gl/pkNZ2E.

4. The term 'Ulster' tends to carry polemical weight in these discussions; its use to describe the part of the island of Ireland that remains part of the UK generally indicates that one is on the Unionist side of the debate (that is to say, the side that believes that the United Kingdom should continue to be defined by the union of Northern Ireland with the rest of Great Britain). Use of the terms 'the North of Ireland' or 'the Six Counties' tends to indicate that one is on the Republican or Nationalist side (that is to say, the side that favours Northern Ireland uniting with Éire to form an all-island Republic of Ireland). 'Northern Ireland' is generally taken to be the politically neutral term, if for no other reason than this is the official name of the territory. Use of 'Ulster' in this context is also, geographically speaking, simply inaccurate. Ulster is one of the four provinces of the island of Ireland; it is made up of nine counties in total. Of these, three are in the Republic of Ireland: Donegal, Cavan and Monaghan. The fact that 'Ulster' continues to be used by major media outlets, including the BBC, as a synonym for 'Northern Ireland', has promoted widespread confusion on this matter.
5. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2008) *Higher Education in Regional and City Development: Catalonia, Spain* (Paris: OECD Publishing), p. 2.
6. An OECD report on the region published two years later, in 2010, also stated that 'Catalonia is larger than many OECD countries in terms of population, surface and economy. With 7.5 million inhabitants, its population is similar to that of Switzerland. Catalonia covers an area of over 32,000 km^2 and has a surface area similar to Belgium. With a GDP of approximately EUR 200 billion, its economy is as large as Norway' (Ref. 36, p. 40).
7. A. Balcells (2004) *Breve historia del nacionalismo catalán* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial).
8. J. Loughlin (2011) British and French nationalisms facing the challenges of European integration and globalization. In: A.-G. Gagnon, A. Lecours and G. Nootens (Ed.), *Contemporary Majority Nationalism* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), p. 132.
9. The complete breakdown is at https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Welsh-Language/WelshSpeakers-by-LocalAuthority-Gender-DetailedAgeGroups-2011Census or goo.gl/jWE6i1.
10. I. Serrano and A. Bonillo (2016) Boundary shifts and vote alignment in Catalonia. *Ethnicities*, **17**(3), p. 385.
11. For all intents and purposes, all Catalan speakers are bilingual with Spanish; the 2013 census states that 99.7% of Catalans report being able to speak Spanish; for Catalan the figure is 80.4%. The complete breakdown can be found at www.idescat.cat/pub/?id=aec&n=1013 or goo.gl/1bj7Pm. Most linguists agree that all Irish speakers of at least school age are bilingual, as indicated by the fact that the Irish census has no means to indicate that someone is a monolingual Irish speaker.
12. Tribunal Constitucional (2010) *Interpuesto por noventa y nueve Diputados del Grupo Parlamentario Popular del Congreso en relación con diversos preceptos de la Ley Orgánica 6/2006, de 19 de julio, de reforma del Estatuto de Autonomía de Cataluña*. Sentencia 31/2010, 28 June, p. 11.
13. Grup d'experts per encàrrec MHP (2010) *Informe sobre la sentència del Tribunal Constitucional sobre l'EAC* (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya).

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14. The 2016 Canadian census reports that 49.9% of the population of Quebec reports ‘French only’ for command of official languages. The complete breakdown is at www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/hlt-fst/lang/Table.cfm?Lang=E&T=21&Geo=00 or goo.gl/rDMZgP.
15. P. Vidal (2015) *El bilingüisme mata: del canvi climàtic al canvi idiomàtic* (Barcelona: Portic), p. 166.
16. F. Vallverdu (1970) *Dues llengües, dues funcions?* (Barcelona: Edicions 62).
17. R. Zapata-Barrero (2009) Building a public philosophy of immigration in Catalonia: the terms of debate. In: R. Zapata-Barrero (Ed.), *Immigration and Self-government of Minority Nations* (Brussels: Peter Lang), p. 129.
18. The term ‘nationality’ is a loaded one in Catalonia. The Spanish constitution of 1978 affirms the unity of the Spanish state in Section 2, but also clarifies that that it ‘recognises and guarantees the right to self-government of the nationalities and regions of which it is composed and the solidarity among them all.’ This tension between ‘nation’ and ‘nationality’ was also at the heart of the 2010 Tribunal ruling on the 2006 Statue of Autonomy, which stated that ‘From the perspective of the Constitution, Catalonia is not a nation in the sense that Spain is, but rather a nationality with a right to autonomy’ (Ref. 12, p. 23). Carles Viver Pi-Sunyer and Mireia Grau Creus have remarked that the Generalitat continues this fight, though: ‘Despite the fact that the Spanish Constitution uses the word “nation” to refer to Spain itself, and only admits to the possible existence of “nationalities,” the Parliament of Catalonia has proclaimed openly and freely that Catalonia is a nation, and has used the adjective “national” in numerous statutes concerning a wide range of realities’ (Ref. 37, p. 27).
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32. Partido Socialista Obrero Español (2017) *Un nuevo pacto territorial para una sociedad plural*. Available at www.psoe.es/propuestas/reforma-constitucional/nuevo-pacto-territorial/ or goo.gl/NZs8qR.
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35. See, for instance, Pierre Fougeyrollas, whose 1968 *Pour une France fédérale. Vers l'unité européenne par la révolution régionale* are close to Desmond Fennell's proposals for a federal Ireland: see P. Fougeyrollas (1968) *Pour une France fédérale. Vers l'unité européenne par la révolution régionale* (Paris: Éditions Denoël). The more direct influence on Fennell's proposals was Yann Fouéré's 1968 book *L'Europe aux cent drapeaux* (Paris: Presses de l'Europe), published in 1980 as *Towards a Federal Europe: Nations or States?* (Swansea: Christopher Davies). Fennell mentions Fouéré (a Breton nationalist who went into exile in Ireland after being accused of collaboration during the Second World War) many times in his writing, especially in his (1985) book *Beyond Nationalism: The Struggle Against Provinciality in the Modern World* (Dublin: Ward River). Fouéré's schema, though, is more explicitly ethnic in basis; one section of his chapter 'L'Europe des régions' is titled 'Vers des régions-Etats monoethniques'.
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