

Where Next for Spain's Regions?

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When the coronavirus pandemic hit, Spain was still reckoning with an ongoing political crisis epitomised by the 2017 Catalan independence referendum. Regional tensions are not new to Spain, but recent years have seen peripheral nationalisms gain ground in many of its autonomous communities. Ibai de Juan Ayuso delves into the country's history to ask where its regions find themselves today and what challenges they face. Going forward, addressing regional inequalities could go hand in hand with an effective ecological transition that creates space for multiple identities to thrive.

In his 2016 book *Collapse*, the Spanish political scientist Carlos Taibo wrote about the possible causes of a social reconfiguration in the not-too-distant future: "We should not lose sight of the fact that every corner on the planet could be affected by disease [...] against a backdrop of inadequate medical responses, and with critical economic and social implications." The Covid-19 pandemic indeed appears to be a crisis that gradually breaks down our modes of production and consumption, as well as our social life, as we know them. What might this crisis mean for the regions of Spain and the identities forged within them?

Looking closely at Spain's autonomous communities reveals that the fluctuating tension between them and the Spanish state is exacerbated by the effects of neoliberalism and the commodification of spaces and identities. The Covid-19 crisis is sure to be an influential factor in regional dynamics as it decelerates the territorial model and increases inequalities. In the context of the current health and climate crises, Spain's regions require a joint search for solutions with a view to integrating a variety of identities within a plurinational state.

The cultural region: the heartbeat of Spanish identity

Since the end of the 19th century, Spain has been living a paradox. While regions such as Catalonia, the Basque Country, Navarra, and Galicia have a strong cultural identity, Spain's national identity is pieced together from the worst remnants of its history. Spanish identity is not propped up by an abundance of glorifying myths, as tends to be the case with France and the United Kingdom, which have historically relied on a well-versed group of intellectuals to favourably interpret events to preserve an appealing identity in the collective imagination. The legacy of the French revolution lives on, while the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic military disasters that fast-tracked a return to monarchy years later remain blurry in the collective memory. Similarly, a 2014 [survey](#) found that 59 per cent of the UK's population thinks the British Empire is something of which to be proud. The idea of the well-intentioned empire, a purveyor of progress to distant lands, endures, despite the exploitation of resources and communities that made it all possible. Meanwhile in Spain, imperialism, military disasters and dictatorships, to name a few, generally form the basis of identity expression, making it a less than flattering label.

It was therefore inevitable that, towards the end of the 19th century, peripheral nationalisms would take root in various regions. Unlike the Spanish state, they had intellectuals capable of looking to other European nations like Germany not to self-flagellate – like the generation of 1898[1] – but to create a new cultural identity separate from

a straggling Spain. It could be argued that the existence of a Spanish identity was an indirect cause of the birth of these nationalisms. Much as today English nationalism in the form of Brexit contributes to alternative national projects in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

That said, there were some events and figures that influenced Spanish identity for the better in the 20th century. Nowadays, few students in Spain learn about the educational revolution brought about by the Free Institution of Education,[2] the diplomatic bridges re-established between Spain and America by Rafael Altamira, or the progressive social legislation brought in during the Second Republic (including the right to abortion in 1937) – all for some reason absent from the core history curriculum.

Aware of the reality of the times, the fathers of the 1978 Spanish Constitution sought a watertight way forward before the expectant gaze of the West. Against the backdrop of the 1970s, the end of a dictatorship endorsed by both the church and the West might have prompted a shift towards Eurocommunism in the Mediterranean giant.[3] The key to avoiding this was to maintain national unity through the very institution that would end up inheriting Francoism: the monarchy. King Juan Carlos I took up an intermediary position between Spain's Francoist past and its democratic future, establishing a constitutional monarchy as a kind of lowest-common-denominator solution while fulfilling Francisco Franco's last personal mandate: "the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation." [4]

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At the regional level, this meant the establishment of the State of Autonomies, popularly known as "coffee for all" in reference to how the settlement would be same across all regions. Spain was arranged into 17 autonomous communities and two autonomous cities located in North Africa (Ceuta and Melilla) – a territorial division that acknowledged the plurality of cultures and identities within each region of a decentralised Spain. This intermediate position between a federal and unitary state meant that national unity could be maintained without much discord. However, a conflict was already emerging between the Spanish state and the militant Basque separatist organisation, ETA. This conflict had begun in the late 1950s during the dictatorship and was to continue until May 2018 when ETA was dissolved. Basque nationalism is still present in society, but it now operates through political action.

In Spain's model of autonomy, the uneven distribution of powers (particularly financial) exposed inequalities. Some 40 years later, this would lead the generation born during democracy to interrogate the values of the Spanish constituent settlement. The last 20 years have seen conflict brewing between the Spanish state and Catalonia, reaching a climax on 1 October 2017 with Catalonia's self-determination referendum. The debate over Catalan independence is ongoing, seemingly on pause during the pandemic, but we cannot rule out the possibility that, once the health crisis subsides, the conflict will escalate again, compounded by another financial crisis.

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The economic region: the commodification of identity

The emergence of economic liberalisation and reindustrialisation in the 1980s sped up a transition that had been taking place in the Spanish economy since the 1960s. The services sector rose to prominence and tourism became

the country's main economic engine, sharpening the differences between coastal and inland regions both financially and demographically. Employment opportunities encouraged a population shift towards service-growth areas and large cities, while spatial planning was determined by market needs (today, 50 per cent of Spain's population resides in Madrid, Barcelona, Bilbao or Seville, which together represent just 2 per cent of national territory). As a result, regions – and particularly cities – reliant on tourism became commercialised, resulting in the distortion of cultural identity and a weakening of the social fabric due to processes such as gentrification. As the late Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman pointed out, globalisation's effacement of boundaries and the spread of individualism has created a marketplace of identities whereby individuals live with a constant feeling of cultural indeterminacy. The consequences are twofold.

First, a greater awareness of inequality in cities forces the population to address this by catering to the needs of “minority identities”. This is a case of tackling urban injustices by drawing attention to how some groups (including women – though they are actually the majority – environmentalists, LGBTIQ+ communities, and ethnic groups) are unfairly represented in a space that only reflects the dynamics of the dominant market. The city brings together all the necessary ingredients for an identity explosion looking to counteract a stream of normative attacks and the commodifying characteristics of post-modernity.

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Second, other historical regions have managed to protect their identities against complete commodification and maintain a distinct historical narrative, something which has made them attractive to many citizens opting to relocate from urban hubs to these areas. Sometimes, and especially in rural areas, identities are reinforced in opposition to the city. Catalan nationalism finds deep roots in the rural towns of Girona and Lleida, while the heartland of Basque nationalism is found in the rural areas of Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, northern Navarra and the French Basque Country. If these regionalisms can resist identity commodification, they will continue to experience an upswing in response to globalisation. This situation may give rise to confrontations between regions and state, going as far as further calls for independence.

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The political region: the end of majorities

In Spain, legislative powers are divided into three levels: state, regional and local. From the arrival of democracy until 2015, the balance of power at the state level was largely shared between the centre-right People's Party (PP) and the centre-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), with the eventual support of *partidos bisagra*, or “kingmaker parties” (nationalist parties that stand in their respective regions and secure representation in congress). The 2008 financial crisis saw the emergence of a new wave of parties that shook up the political landscape and made it difficult to form majorities, resulting in a succession of general elections in 2015, 2016, and April and November 2019.

Strikingly, some progressive movements that bring together various interests have been able to form majorities in cities like Madrid (Ahora Madrid between 2015 and 2019) and Barcelona (Barcelona en Comú from 2015 to present) but have not yet managed to take root at the regional level. It would not be a stretch to consider these movements a political offshoot of the minority identities inhabiting large, commercialised cities.

In the Congress of Deputies, traditional regional forces like the Republican Left of Catalonia and the Basque Nationalist Party are represented, but also new forces like the Galician Nationalist Bloc, the Regionalist Party of Cantabria, and Teruel Existe, among others. Regionalist, nationalist and pro-independence identities are increasingly entrenched.

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The most notable among these new parties has been the rise of far-right VOX (obtaining 56 seats out of 350 in the November 2019 elections), which is opposed to the nationalist and pro-independence parties. Their presence in congress as a third power is further proof of social polarisation and the fragmentation of identity which draws a dividing line between peripheral nationalisms and a centralised Spain with no autonomous regions, more reminiscent of a regime that has no place in the democratic make-up of the country.

The results of regional elections held in the Basque Country and Galicia in July 2020 are enlightening. In both territories there has been an increase in nationalist forces (the Basque Nationalist Party and Euskal Herria Bildu in the former and the Galician Nationalist Bloc in the latter), taking first and second place in their respective parliaments. In turn, the Catalan elections scheduled for 14 February 2021 do not look set to alter the parliamentary majority of the pro-independence forces on the Left and Right.

The electoral results of the last five years are only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface lie social dynamics that have evolved over time, introducing a new phase of tension between the Spanish state and the regions. Only time will tell whether this conflict will involve one region or several in opposition to the state.

Post-pandemic horizons

With coronavirus, the world is witnessing an historic phenomenon. The economic wellbeing of the Spanish regions has taken a severe hit, particularly in those heavily reliant on tourism such as Catalonia, Valencia, and the Balearic Islands, where GDP fell more than 20 per cent in 2020. The current deceleration of the territorial model is proof of an imbalance among economic sectors dependent on the services industry. In the medium- to long-term, it would not be surprising to see inequality increase due to the impending economic crisis, and regionalist identities flourish among the working classes. A gradual rise in tension between the Spanish state and peripheral nationalisms is therefore likely, though the outcome is hard to predict.

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Spain found itself caught up in the pandemic before it was able to resolve its territorial issues. Coordination between the administrations is clearly lacking. As a result, the country is facing a triple crisis: health, financial, and political. The Spanish state and the autonomous communities now face the task of deciding which of these to prioritise. Given the current market dynamics, administrative and social support networks have become the only answer to maintaining, or at least easing the deterioration of, social cohesion. These networks are an example of the political offshoots of multi-scalar identities (European, national, regional, urban, and even suburban), a social driving force for cooperation between individuals without the need for an economic relationship. These identities,

together with the commitment of democratically elected governments, will provide the tools to help society confront the challenges that are sure to arise in the coming years. Markets will continue to play an important, but not leading, role in both the post-pandemic recovery and in the urgent environmental transition.

Recovery should not be approached as a return to pre-pandemic standards, but rather as a step towards new horizons of sustainability. At the same time, the groundwork for reaching a consensus must be laid. If, for example, Spain gave less importance to the values of individualism, it might start to tread the path of cooperation between societies and cultures. Peripheral nationalisms may threaten national unity, but they also engender a strong sense of social cohesion within their territories. Whether this plurality of identities creates a schism or a source of cohesion in the face of regional inequalities depends on the willingness of the state and regions to cooperate. A future solution might be reorganising Spain into a set of federal states once the nationalisms gain enough strength to lobby in this direction, an alternative which might help avoid the identity conflicts so recurrent in Spain.

Meanwhile, it is important to remember that climate change has the potential to increase territorial inequalities and further erode relations between regions and the Spanish state. Prolonged droughts in the centre and south of the peninsula, recurrent flooding in the east and megafires, among other things, paint a picture of environmental, social, economic and political decline in the decades ahead. Any future environmental policies must therefore work to alleviate (or at best eradicate) potential conflicts between region and state.

Such measures should be accompanied by a socially just environmental transition. A good starting point is reorganising the territorial model to create space for the primary sector. In economic terms, regions with a strong agricultural output have not been as badly affected by the Covid-19 crisis. The resurgence of organic farming throughout inland Spain will allow for a rebalancing of the productive sectors and inland-coastal differences.

Another important step will be supporting the four green industries (energy efficiency, solar power, wind power, and electric transportation) while striving for ecological coherence. In the long term, this means understanding development as something separate from growth and within planetary limits. Spain has the world's second-longest high-speed rail network, but it is underutilised. Making travel by train cheaper could encourage demand and make the investment pay off in the long term. Moreover, it will be important to simplify the logistics of production and consumption, taking a zero-kilometre approach to activities and favouring local businesses. This will both reduce environmental impact and help restore social fabric.

All these measures on production, transport, and consumption must be oriented towards reversing inland-coastal inequalities and transforming regions into spaces that are sustainable, interconnected, and fair. For Spain, the road to sustainability relies on a society that understands that overcoming the health and environmental crises will involve a re-humanisation of regions and the peaceful coexistence of rightful identities.

Footnotes

[1] In 1898, Spain lost its last colonies (Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines), an event which marked an inflection point in national history and resulted in the birth of an intellectual current which looked to the past to search for the intrinsic roots of Spain's problems.

[2] The Free Institution of Education (in Spanish, *La Institución Libre de Enseñanza*) was a project developed between 1876 and 1939 based on Krausist philosophy that advocated secular primary, secondary and university education.

[3] Eurocommunism was a revisionist trend among various Western European communist parties in the 1970s and 1980s which rejected the model of the Soviet Union and claimed to have developed a theory and practice of social transformation more relevant for Western Europe.

[4] As set out in article 2 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution.



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