

The Occitanists and the EU: A minority's turn around

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The concept of French identity has always been linked with French language. Regional movements, such as the occitans, fighting for the survival of their culture and their language, have historically posed a challenge to the very concept of France as an identity which, in its most accepted form, denies the existence of other languages, cultures and identities within its borders.

Occitania is the name given to the ensemble of regions where Occitan, a Romance language, is spoken. It comprises the whole, or part of, 32 *départements* in France (around 2/5 of France), the Val d'Aran in Spain and several alpine valleys in Italy. Out of the 12 million residents in the region, it is estimated that around 7 million understand Occitan and 4 million speak it.

Occitan was, by the XIIIth century, the dominant vernacular language in Europe. The Troubadours had developed a poetic genre which was to influence all western European literatures. Furthermore Occitan was the only language used for legal and administrative purposes outside Latin. Town Charters (*Establissemmentz*) written in Occitan can be found outside Occitania (CIERBIDE).

France, even as a Nation in the making, has always been hostile to its non-French speaking indigenous groups. The first translation of this concept into legislation was the Edict of Villiers-Cotterêts which, in 1539, imposed French as the exclusive language of the kingdom. At the time of the appearance of what could be considered the first expressions of nationalism in several countries, the theory of the superiority of French over all other languages was developed by Henri Estienne in his book "*De la précellence du langage français*" (Of the pre-eminence of the French language) published in 1579. Cutting the elites from their sociocultural roots in the newly conquered provinces and unifying them to better serve the King was part of the strategy to centralise the State: social superiority and linguistic superiority became inseparable elements and the French Academy established by Cardinal Richelieu in 1635 was an integral part of his policy of political centralization.

The French Revolution continued this policy after the political victory of the centralist *Montagnards* over the federalists *Girondins*. The revolutionary leaders claimed that French was the only language capable of disseminating the revolutionary ideas and that all 'foreign' languages could only be the carriers of reactionary and counter-revolutionary ideologies. Abbé Grégoire wrote and proposed to the Convention his "Report on the necessity and the means to annihilate dialects and universalize the use of French." (CERTEAU)

The Jacobins' arguments regarding the importance of French were framed between 1790 and 1794 in a number of reports to the various assemblies by prominent members such as Talleyrand, Condorcet, Lakanal, Le Pelletier, and Sieyès (PARIAS). The projects developed at that time on the making of good citizens through a general education system were the basis for the education laws of the 1880's which saw the imposition of French as the only language to be used in the new compulsory education system. The systematic punishment of pupils using regional languages in the school further instilled the shame of one's language in generations of Occitans.

Occitan has nonetheless maintained a status as an instituted language (SAUZET) and this is largely due to the activism of the occitanist movement which found its origins in the XIXth century European-wide Romantic movement.

The Occitan literature was at the very heart of the European Romanticism, as Mme de Staël states: "The word 'Romantic' has recently been introduced in Germany, to indicate the poetry originating from the troubadours" (STAËL, 61).

The Romantics deplored the gulf separating classical French literature from the people in whom they were to find their primary inspiration. Occitan writers such as Jasmin and Mistral, who reflected the aspirations and the cultures of the people were acclaimed. The success of Occitan literature, both medieval and contemporary, had a strong impact on the young occitan patriots of the next generation and was further reinforced by the romantic historians. Augustin Thierry, Guizot or Fauriel demonstrated the superiority of the democratic civilization of the South of France and denounced the injustices and the violences committed against it (JEANJEAN, MRS. 1997).

This convergence of historicity and literature meant that no other nationalist Renaissance appearing anywhere in Europe around 1848 had as much legitimacy as the Occitan one. This led to the establishment in 1854 of the *Félibrige* by a group of Occitan poets who saw the need for the Occitans to be given back the consciousness of their own identity (LAFONT, 1971). For Frédéric Mistral, the most brilliant poet in this group the liberation of the Occitan people may well have come from a reform of the French State and from a European federalism, but these sentiments could not be voiced publicly after the 1871 French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war and nobody dared contest the policy of administrative and cultural centralisation. The *Félibrige* witnessed the economic destruction of their region without denouncing it and locked themselves in a resistance based on living in the past. In 1870-1871, Mistral, under pressure from his social and intellectual milieu, turned even more to the right at the very same time that Occitan opinion veered to the left, as evidenced by the Communes of Narbonne and Marseille which so frightened him.

Mistral's refusal, when asked, to lend any support to the wine-growers during their 1907 revolt epitomised an unwillingness to deal with any real political or economic issue affecting the very people whose values this movement claimed to represent. By the 1930's, the relationship with the working and peasant classes had so deteriorated that Charles Maurras, a prominent member of the *Félibrige*, was also the leader of the extreme-right nationalist and royalist movement *Action Française*, and participated actively in the Vichy regime.

The 1944 liberation was marked by a feeling of triumphant French nationalism and the occitanists who had sided with the Resistance, Gaullists and communists alike, fell "into the trap of French Nationalism" (BALZAGUES). The Institute for Occitan Studies (IEO) they created was essentially a cultural organisation but in the 50s and 60s it was divided, as was the whole country, by the great decolonisation debate fueled by the Algerian war. François Fontan, a member of the Institute, perceived the colonial nature of the Occitan situation and founded the Occitan Nationalist Party (PNO). The leadership of the IEO comprised only intellectuals, mainly academics, who, because of the close ties they had with the French left, could not accept in its midst these separatist political activities judged as a crime against French unity.

The PNO actively supported the Algerian liberation movement and the French deserters for two reasons:

- firstly, it felt compelled to fight alongside other liberation movements;
- secondly, it believed that the psychological shock created in Occitania by the Algerian independence would help raise the consciousness of the Occitan people and therefore help eradicate French patriotism in the region.

As the gulf separating the economic development of the North and South of France in the early sixties was widening rapidly, the analysis of the PNO equating the economy of Occitania to a colonised economic seemed justified.

During the winter of 1961-62 which saw the entire population of the Decazeville region behind the coal miners following the announcement of the closure of the mines, some members of the IEO led by Robert Lafont, created the Occitan Committee of Studies and Action (COEA). It condemned what it called "interior colonization", stressing the Occitan character of the political and socio-economic struggles taking place in Occitania. It never questioned the French structure itself, and tried to modify, from the inside, the policies of the French left.

A new generation joined in following the May 68 events, and each step of this ideological development increased the divisions within the Occitan movement, stressing the various contradictions within its ranks. Nonetheless, among those who accepted the fact that the fight for the retention of their language and culture could not be separated from the socio-economic context, and therefore could not be achieved without a political struggle, some common analysis seemed to prevail on two fronts closely linked: Regionalisation and Europe.

The Occitan movement rejected the regionalisation proposals put by either the right or the left. Both de Gaulle's proposals of 1969 and the Defferre Law of 1982 were perceived as a purely superficial and symbolic decentralisation, never to reach the levels of regionalisation existing in other countries such as Germany, Italy or Spain. The regionalisation was an institutional problem solely organised and manipulated by Paris. The first regional elections held in 1986 only reinforced this view: they were held the same day as the national legislative elections, ensuring that the regional question would not be debated at all. The lists of candidates for the different regional councils were drawn in Paris, showing further the contempt the national political organisations had for that new administrative strata. The occitanists wanted the Region to be a natural organic unit based on historical, cultural, as well as economic realities and to erase the artificiality of the jacobins' administrative division of France (JEANJEAN, 1992).

The colonisation factor being at the very centre of their analysis, the decolonisation of Occitania was at the heart of their political project. This could be achieved only with the collective regional property: the inhabitants would own collectively natural resources such as the natural gas of Lacq or the bauxite in Provence, and all companies working, or exploiting resources, in Occitania would have to transfer their head offices and pay their taxes locally. But if the responsibility of the centralised State was highlighted, that of the local middle classes was also stressed. The local bourgeoisie, having espoused Jacobinism since the Revolution, lacked an occitan national consciousness, and was in fact betraying the rest of the population.

The European question was approached from the same anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist ideological perspective which can be best summed up by a text written by François Fontan in 1965 on the myths and realities of the European integration: the objective, geographica, human and cultural Europe does not exist and it serves only as a pretext to well defined economic, ideological and political interests (FONTAN).

European political integration was seen only as a necessity within the framework of a liberal capitalist society requiring bigger markets, unimpinged by customs and regulations. European unification, a condition *sine qua non* of the Marshall Plan, was only a step towards a greater concentration of capital as European companies, not being able to compete, would be taken over by the anglo-American trusts.

The concentration of capital and of industry would lead, in the name of efficiency and rationalisation, to a greater concentration around some economic centers such as the triangle Genoa-Turin-Milan, or the Rhine valley while the excentric regions such as Brittany or Occitania, already under-developed, would see their economic situation worsen even more.

In 1965 Fontan was predicting the crumbling of both the Eastern and Western blocs along nationalist lines. He claimed that the idea that the world was heading towards uniformisation and integration was a mere illusion put forward by the American right and the Soviet left. The disintegration of the blocs would lead to national independences and would help develop an international trade no longer held up by the political alignment of those countries in a manicheist world.

An editorial in an Occitan magazine (AICI E ARA, 4) analysed the result of the European elections of the 10 June 1979 in similar terms, viewing the Assembly as, in majority, pro-American, the States' policies of colonisation as reinforced and one of the aims behind the European integration as a better coordination of the repression of nationalist movements. The collaboration between the Spanish and French police forces was then conducted openly.

The States were organising a judiciary Europe destined to combat nationalist movements, a Europe in which political asylum would be denied to all those considered as "terrorists" by centralist states incapable of dealing with the demands of economic independence since they were dominated by insatiable multinational companies.

The 1976 crisis in the wine-growing region of Languedoc had given ample evidence to the Occitan movement that the Common Market was dominated by the wholesalers and was aiming at the eradication of the wine industry of that region. The European regulations were seen as a premeditated plan put in place to institutionalise the ruin of the South of France through the unchecked and fraudulent importation of Italian wines and others transiting through Italy (LE BRIS).

The 1976 riots encouraged the anti-European sentiments felt by the Occitanists as they forged links with the wine-growers' leadership.

The opposition to the entry of Spain and Portugal in 1986, following the opposition to the entry of Greece in 1981, dominated the agenda as both those countries had agriculturally-based economies in direct competition with the Occitan regions, further eroding the economies of the latter.

In 1976, the Occitan movement in the Languedoc felt obliged to support unconditionally, and without a thorough analysis, the demands of the local wine industry. Occitanists wanted desperately to believe that the wine-growers' demonstrations, with Occitan flags and Occitan songs, were the expression of a new Occitan consciousness, and they wanted to believe in a unified and monolithic Occitania, re-creating a centralism of their own. Occitania never had a monolithic and uniform identity. For the Occitan wine-growers of the Bordeaux region, the occitanists were those people who, in order to defend a cheap and nasty plonk, opposed the expansion of the Common Market, therefore preventing them from accessing those new markets, in which they had found buyers for their high quality wines. Europe was becoming an essential element in the growing divisions of the Occitan movement which even split the IEO in 1980/1981 (JEANJEAN, 1995).

The editorial in the Winter 97-98 edition of *Lo Lugarn*, the magazine published by the PNO, announced the changes in strategy and policies of that political organisation and summarised its evolution on the European question: for nearly thirty years it had opposed, in principle, the construction of Europe, but in 1994 it favoured a federalist Europe based on regionalism - in France, the other side of the same equation.

The Occitan movement was as hostile to the Regionalisation proposals as it was to Europe. It is true, as claimed by most occitanists, that Regionalism was first decided, organised and manipulated by Paris and did not take into account the linguistic, cultural and historical identities of the Regions. Nonetheless, the 1982-1984 laws of decentralisation gave a leading role to the Regions, enabling them to formulate a regional plan. The inter-regional cooperation was encouraged and extended to encompass an international dimension as the Regional Council was empowered to organise regular contacts with the foreign decentralised Regions with which they had a border. This legislative framework led to several meetings between the Presidents of several Occitan Regions and Jordi Pujol, President of the Generalitat de Catalunya. As a consequence, a Euroregion comprising Languedoc-Roussillon, Midi-Pyrénées and Catalunya was created in 1991.

Occitania was not only disenclosed on an economic level, but was also culturally less isolated.

Jordi Pujol, whose name came to symbolise Catalan cultural identity after his trial and imprisonment in 1960, has been president of the Generalitat since 1980. He kept linguistic politics in his own portfolio and today, bilingualism is in place in all levels of education. Catalan is the preferred language of local administration and has become an official working language in the European Union institutions (MORENA,162). This reconquest of their language and of their culture had a direct impact north of the border. In French Catalonia, economic pressure and the cultural and political importance of Barcelona are causing changes in the attitudes of the French Catalans: the language of the people is becoming the language of commerce and power, as it recovers and rediscovers its lost prestige (ARRELS, 106). This influence is also being felt in Occitania which had close linguistic and historical links with Catalunya (JEANJEAN, 1998). Along with the new economic ties, such as the creation of the Euro-region mentioned earlier, cultural agreements are put in place as evidenced by the founding of the CAOC, a cultural organisation established by the present government of the Generalitat and working at bringing Occitania and Catalonia closer.

The cultural dimension of the Euro-Region was decided in February 1989 and some occitanists saw the new possibilities this new entity offered. The very same year the Tarn departmental section of the Institute of Occitan Studies organised the first presence of products from that *département* at the international fair of Girona, and contacts between Occitans and Catalans who had similar or complementary economic interests. The easy intercomprehension between the two languages led to rapid growth in economic exchanges. Following this first successful experience, the IEO-Tarn embarked on exploring the synergy between cultural identity and economic dynamism (IEO-TARN).

The IEO, as a cultural organisation, demonstrated that the new economic and political particulars could be used successfully by the occitanist movement, provided they entered into an association with various strata of government, local, departmental and regional, and with economic partners. In spite of some local successes such as this one, occitanists have only had a very limited political influence but what influence they have had has been greatly enhanced by the various actions in favour of minorities carried out by European Union organisations.

The collapse of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the civil war in Yugoslavia ensured that the question of minorities was given a high priority on the European agenda. It was one of the main issues at the Copenhagen Conference on the Human Dimension of June 1990 and agreement was reached on a list of rights to be conferred to minorities. The OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Union now coordinate their efforts with a view to developing a coherent system for the protection of minority rights in spite of the disagreements encountered on defining the nature and even the very concept of a "national minority" (BENOIT-ROHMER).

These actions on the legislative level, the establishment of support structures such as the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages and the financial help given to projects promoting minority languages have ensured that the very small minority of occitanists who could see the European potential in the late 1980's has become the vast majority in the 1990's. The intransigence of French governments, whatever their political colour, when dealing with the minority question in both the international and national arenas, has hastened this shift.

The ideology of the Nation-State adopted since the French Revolution proclaims that France is a homogeneous whole (one state, one nation, one language, one culture) in which all citizens are equals, regardless of their race, religion, origins... Although equality may appear to be a very desirable aim, this legal equality rules out the recognition of differences within the society and denies the very existence of minority groups. On that principle, France refused to ratify Article 30 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of Children which stated that children belonging to minorities had the right to be educated in their own language.

For the same reasons, France refused to sign the 1992 European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages aiming at preserving the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe. Furthermore, successive French governments, have started or accepted a series of measures to counter these developments.

The 1994 Loi Toubon on the protection of French, was widely presented as a weapon aimed at countering the growing place taken by English in French public life, particularly in audiovisual communications. The law, apparently innocuous, strengthened the colonialist linguistic policy pursued since the XVIIth century. It did not mention regional languages but the circular of the 20 March 1996, explaining the details of the law, specified that the use of French is compulsory for all audiovisual communications, publicity, business, public meetings.... It does not differentiate between regional languages and foreign languages.

Whenever challenged, the Loi Toubon has been interpreted by the various authorities in light of the 1992 modification of Article 2 of the French Constitution. This amendment, endorsed by all political parties inscribed that "French is the language of the Republic" in the Constitution. This strengthened the body of the law against minority languages which, previously tolerated, now became officially illegal (LA SETMANA, 47).

In this context it is not surprising if the French government is concerned about the long term consequences of the closer ties between Occitania and Catalunya. It is so sensitive about this strengthening bond that the most trivial of events seems to provoke a paranoid reaction, demonstrated in bizarre behaviour on the part of its representatives, whether in Barcelona or Occitania (JEANJEAN, 1998).

The French authorities therefore clearly recognise a danger for the centralist structure of the state in such cooperation. The Nation-State fights to ensure that the purity of its language and culture is preserved, building a linguistic Maginot line around its borders.

French governments over the last 20 years have relinquished some of their powers to both regional and European assemblies, mainly due to economic pressures. They did so willingly, at first, believing they were in total control. But, after a slow start, the regional and European assemblies have been asserting their independence, setting up their own agendas at a rapidly increasing pace. These internal and external opposing forces are slowly chipping at the centralist government and this can only increase. Occitanists may be still weary of the dominance of the economic agenda in the European Union, but Europe is no longer perceived as obstructing the emancipation of nations without states but, on the contrary, as favouring them against the wishes of oppressing centralist states (LO LUGARN, 62).

Europe represents a good opportunity for the Occitan regions to intensify their cooperation with neighbouring societies. All these efforts should, in the new millenium, lead French centralism into an even more untenable position when the legal new possibilities are considered.

The European Court of Justice is building a new supranational judicial order, based on a jurisprudence which links individuals and the countries signing the Treaties and "although the Court denies it, this work, at the edge of the signed agreements that set it up, makes a legislative melting-pot of this judiciary institution" (PALESTEL). As the European Union norm takes precedence on national norms, judges from member states can base their rulings upon the Court's decisions or on those made by the European Commission or by the Council of Europe. In any jurisdiction judges can (or must) refer matters to this Court which allows them to go beyond the letter of national laws.

In 1989, the Conseil d'Etat, as the highest court judging conflicts between individuals and the administration, had to formally accept the precedence of international treaties over internal laws (QUATREMER).

Since then Europe has progressed and it was always evident that the legislative and executive powers of the European Union would increase to the detriment of the Nation-States. The meeting of the Council of Europe held on 16-17 June 1997 reinforced the power of the European Parliament. "France and Germany were not on the same wavelength, Paris preferring to privilege the prerogatives of the national parliaments, Bonn adopting the opposite strategy. Amsterdam settled the dispute and decided in Germany's favour." (DNA)

The Occitan movement, along with other minority groups in France, aware of the possibilities offered by the new structures, is on a new learning curve, establishing a whole network of alliances with other minorities in France as well as in Europe, new political or economic strategic cooperations at the local, regional, national and international levels. The French concept of identity based on a common language, which was untenable historically, is becoming more and more untenable with the development of the EU and cannot withstand serious scrutiny: France is a far more complex and interesting reality, an amalgamation of competing identities, each complementing the others. In the next decades, this new realisation should lead to a more assertive attitude from France's minority groups and it is very likely that their growing awareness of the legal avenues opened by the European Union will lead them to win the legal battles which may put an end to several centuries of centralism in France.

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