



## Scots and Catalans: union and disunion

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Jaime Gerardo Lluch

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**Scots and Catalans: union and disunion**, by J. H. Elliott, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2018, xiv, 339 pp., \$30.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 300 23495 4

John H. Elliott has given us a magnificent account with many virtues: the book opens up wide vistas on the historical trajectory of Catalonia and Scotland since the early Middle Ages to 2018. Even for specialists in the social sciences on multinational democracies, there is a veritable cornucopia of historical wisdom here, especially concerning the pre-eighteenth-century history of these societies, and the development of their respective states. The book is also daring and ambitious because, in its first five chapters, it sketches the contours of the long period between the medieval and modern epochs, and addresses the most recent decades in Chapter Six, tracing both implicit and explicit linkages between very recent political developments and their historical precursors.

In comparative politics or historical sociology, we would see Elliott as a comparativist. As originally put forth by John Stuart Mill in *A System of Logic* (1843), and known today as the “most similar systems design,” one traditional research design strategy, for inference-oriented, controlled comparison in qualitative, small-N studies, is to choose two cases that are very similar in many respects. Hence, where one would expect similar political outcomes, if s/he finds one important outcome in which the two cases differ, then the explanation must lie in the one aspect in which they actually differ substantially. Implicitly, this is the logic being used by Elliott in his book, and it is also one of the book’s many strengths. There are plenty of social science books or articles that use a similar logic to explain contemporary political outcomes in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Québec, Puerto Rico, or Flanders, but none that attempts to do so over nine centuries of history and then ends in a meditation on the relevance of this past to a number of highly consequential recent political events in both Catalonia and Scotland.

Elliott, therefore, in his first five chapters unveils a number of striking similarities between Catalonia and Scotland.<sup>1</sup> In its geography, the most notable features of Scotland, as in Catalonia, have been its “mountains and the sea, and its history and character were shaped, as with Catalonia, by the dialogue between them” (11). In Chapter One, the parallel stories of dynastic union, and the founding of composite monarchies, is told: James VI/I became “King of Great Britain, France and Ireland” in 1604, and the union of Castilla and Aragón (and with it the principality of Catalonia) in 1479 upon the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella yielded vast territories that were eventually inherited by the Habsburg Emperor Charles V. In Chapter Two, we also learn how, after dynastic union, the tension between center and periphery prompted parallel outbursts of rebellion, such as the rebellion led by Pau Claris in 1640–1641 in Catalonia, and the succession of conflicts in Scotland that ended in the defeat by Cromwell’s army at the battle of Dunbar in September 1650 (52). In Chapter Three, we are presented with Elliott’s illuminating account of the aftermath of two parallel incorporating unions: the Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 and the Nueva Planta of 1707–1716: these incorporated Scotland and the Crown of Aragón, respectively, into wider political bodies: “Great Britain” and “Spain” (89). The reordering of the islands of Britain after 1707 and the reconstitution of “Spain” after 1707–1716 confirmed that Scots and Catalans were now firmly ensconced in emerging state structures that many considered alien impositions (121).

In spite of these and many other parallel developments and similarities between Catalonia and Scotland spanning the centuries, throughout the book there is one recurrent and notable difference: in different epochs and critical junctures both Scots and Catalans have reacted with

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<sup>1</sup>The first similarity, of course, is that both are sub-state national societies. Regarding nations and nationalism, it seems that Elliott subscribes to the primordialist view of the origins and the nature of nationalism (268, 253, 267). In the social sciences, this view is minoritarian and somewhat passé. Most social scientists are modernists and subscribe to some version of constructivism. Contrary to what I would call the “primordialist origins fallacy,” the legitimacy of a people’s claim to be a nation does not depend on the historical “origins” of the putative nation, which can often be murky. The modernist consensus is that a contemporary “nation” exists where there is widespread national consciousness, a strong sense of group solidarity, and an actually-existing or historical territory.

indignation to the unaccommodating or strong-arm policies employed by their respective central states. Nevertheless, Scotland has clearly been more successful in securing recognition, accommodation, tolerance, reciprocity, and pluralism from the British state (controlled by its *Staatsvolk*, the English), whereas Catalonia in that sense has been considerably less fortunate vis-à-vis the Spanish state (controlled by its *Staatsvolk*, the Castillians).

Thus, “in Scotland, as in Catalonia, the effect of the aggressive behavior of a more powerful neighbor was simply to strengthen a collective sense of the *patria*” (29). Rebellions in both societies in the early seventeenth century were prompted by a sense of frustration because “the prince had defaulted on his obligations under the terms of the contractual relationship that bound him to his people” (53). The difference between both is clear in the assessment of the political effects of Anglo-Scottish Union of 1707 and the Nueva Planta of 1707–1716. In Catalonia, the Bourbons imposed a political system that replaced the “horizontal” Spain of the “House of Austria with the top-down government of a ‘vertical’ Spain,” and one that was arbitrary and authoritarian, depending on military power to ensure obedience and loyalty (98). The Scots, on the other hand, were able to retain “some control over their fate through parliamentary representation in Westminster” (99), and their new status “was less immediately disruptive” (100). There was an absence in Westminster of “purposefully pursued integrating policies of the kind that Madrid sought to implement in its bid to transform Spain into a more unitary state” (146). The British polity gave the peripheral nations of the UK “room for political manoeuvre that did not exist for the peripheral peoples of Spain . . .” (144).

In the nineteenth century, Madrid pursued an interventionist policy in Catalonia, which was not matched by Westminster in Scotland. Westminster kept Scotland on a loose rein, and tensions “were far fewer than those to be found in the Barcelona-Madrid relationship” (163). Coercive power could be applied in Scotland by the central state, but “there was not the generalized brutality of repression that scarred Catalan public life” (162). Rapid industrial growth was occurring in both societies, but the Scots “fitted more comfortably than contemporary Catalans into the larger political association of which they formed a part” (177).

In sum, Chapters One through Five stress a key difference between Catalonia and Scotland: the latter has been more successful because it has dealt with a more pluralistic, accommodating central state for centuries. Chapter Six, however, seems to change course from history to the realm of politics and political ideology, tracing the story of the divergent paths of Scots and Catalans over the past 10 years. The Scottish National Party (SNP) won an absolute majority in 2011, and Prime Minister David Cameron, stressing that he was a democrat who had to respect democracy in Scotland, negotiated the holding of a legally binding referendum with Alex Salmond of the SNP. A civic and educational campaign ensued, and the referendum was peacefully held in 2014. Devolution Max was the actual winner, and, following the Smith Commission recommendations, the Scottish people, in the Scotland Act of 2016, were granted maximized autonomy. Moreover, in the public debate in the UK, Scotland is generally recognized as “a nation,” unlike Catalonia vis-à-vis Spain. By contrast, in Catalonia, despite huge majorities in favor of “the right to decide,” as well as Catalan governments asking for the right to hold a self-determination referendum, the central state has always insisted this would not be constitutionally viable. The results were the election of pro-independence Catalan governments (with about 47.7% of the vote), the holding of a referendum and the central state’s attempt to block it by any means necessary on 1 October 2017, a half-hearted declaration of independence, the application of the recentralizing Article 155, the arrest and imposition of (up to) 20-year sentences upon some members of the Catalan parliament, the exile of many others, the declaration of new elections in December 2017 (again won by the sovereigntists), and a violent exacerbation of tensions. In fact, the most recent poll available indicates that 51% of Catalans now favor independence.<sup>2</sup>

What explains this divergent pattern in Chapter Six? It should come as no surprise that the Catalans have been dancing a conflictive duet with Madrid since 2010, given the long history of non-accommodation that Elliott narrated in the first five chapters, but he does not make the specific linkage between that long historical trajectory and the important *differences* between Scottish and Catalan political behavior since 2010. Scotland has been more fortunate in its dealings with the British state, but the Catalans have not benefitted from accommodation, reciprocity, pluralism, and tolerance from the Spanish state. The implicit message in Elliott's book that explains the differentiated paths followed by Scots and Catalans since 2010 concurs with recent empirical research showing that "substate nationalists have expectations about what is fair treatment by the central state and notions about what obligations emerge due to common membership in the same state. Substate nationalists thus inhabit a 'moral polity' in which human reciprocities are expected and notions of collective dignity, the commonweal, and mutual accommodation are essential."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, in Chapter Six,<sup>4</sup> and in many others, the book would have benefitted from cross-pollination with the rich social science literature on substate and state nationalisms, including Miroslav Hroch on the national movements of stateless peoples, Charles Tilly, Richard Bonney, and Otto Hintze on the formation of states, Michael Keating, Alain-G. Gagnon, and Ferran Requejo on plurinational democracies, Brendan O'Leary on federalism and multinationalism, Juan Linz on nationalism in state-nations, Will Kymlicka on liberal nationalism, and my own work on the political roots of contemporary substate nationalists' radicalization.

Jaime Gerardo Lluch  
*University of Puerto Rico*

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<sup>2</sup>“ERC afianza su ventaja sobre JxCAT, que se asegura la segunda plaza pese al ascenso del PSC,” *La Vanguardia*, 6 September 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Jaime Lluch, *Visions of Sovereignty: Nationalism and Accommodation in Multinational Democracies* (Philadelphia, PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 27.

<sup>4</sup>There are several inaccuracies in Chapter Six. Regarding the legality of the Catalans' referendum, this is as much a political question as a constitutional one. In Scotland, nothing in British constitutionalism gave the Scots a right to hold a referendum: what was required was the political will in Westminster to negotiate such a referendum with Holyrood and to find a legal way to make it possible. In Spain, if there were the political will in Madrid to let the Catalans express themselves, a way could be found to hold at least a non-binding consultation on their self-determination preferences. See Jaime Lluch (editor), *Constitutionalism and the Politics of Accommodation in Multinational Democracies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Jaime Lluch, “Constitutional Moments and the Paradox of Constitutionalism in Multinational Democracies (Spain, 2006–2019),” in Rogers M. Smith and Richard R. Beeman (eds.), *Modern Constitutions* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 237–260. See also Institut d'Estudis Autònoms, Generalitat de Catalunya, 2020. *La Sentència del Tribunal Suprem sobre el referèndum d'autodeterminació de Catalunya de l'1 d'octubre de 2017*. Furthermore, it is inaccurate to say that on 1 October 2017, only a few people were really hurt by police brutality and that some of the images of repression and abuse were invented or distorted (255). At least 1066 people, who were simply trying to vote, were injured that day and directly by police repression.