

Immigration in Multinational States. The Case of Catalonia

by Francesco Pasetti



“There is nothing in the world of brute facts that requires us to draw a sharp distinction between our concern for the interests of our fellow-citizens and those of strangers – there are no “natural” frontiers, moral or otherwise – although once we have drawn such a distinction, we have no difficulty in finding features of the world which legitimate our actions.” (Brown, 2000:190).

In Catalonia distinction and features to which Chris Brown refers do not regard only the dual relationship between citizens and strangers, but a more complex one, involving: a nation-state and its citizens (Spain and Spaniards), a minority nation and its community (Catalonia and Catalans) and immigrants. Each of these actors is characterized by specific and different “cultural demands”. This broad and oversimplified concept in the case of Spanish nation-state and in that of Catalan national minority refers to a proper nation-building project, while as to immigrants it refers to the heterogeneous set of cultural claims pertaining to immigrant population conceived as a whole.

This article is a brief reflection addressing the complex relationship among such actors. In particular the focus of the attention is on immigration management, and on the way through which it challenges the

equilibrium between the Spanish nation-state and the Catalan national minority. From this perspective the three-fold relationship identifies, by its own nature, an asymmetric hierarchy of power where the Spanish nation-state dwell at the top, Catalan minority nation rests in the middle, and immigrants lie at the bottom.

But let's take stock of the situation.

Setting the stage

Immigration is a structural dimension of Spanish and Catalan societies, but represents a relatively recent phenomenon for both of them. In the lapse of time that goes from 2000 to 2012, foreign population has grown more than five times in Spain and more than six times in Catalonia. At the beginning of last year, 2012, foreigners were about 5.700.000 in Spain and about 1.200.000 in Catalonia, respectively the 12% and 15,5% of their populations.

The institutional framework deployed to deal with immigration has always given the impression of not being able to match up with such phenomenon. Constitutional and institutional arrangements established during Spanish transition to democracy did not take into account immigration; simply because it was not an "issue" at that time. With the affirmation of the democratic regime and the subsequent economic upturn, Spain's net migration rate grew steadily. Yet, a structured institutional framework to deal with immigration, in a context of multinationalism, is still missing.

In the current scenario three main areas of immigration management (access, citizenship and integration) are shared between the central government and the regional one. The main role is played by the former, which manages entry inflows (i), regulates naturalization procedures (ii), and set the guidelines for integration policymaking (iii). Then, integration is essentially delegated to regional governments, which develop autonomous plans and implement concrete measures in their territories.

Matters at stake

Such institutional framework accentuates the asymmetry characterizing the power-relations between the Spanish nation-state, the Catalan national minority and immigrants. To put it in another way,

immigration management in the context of a multination state calls into question the power relations between minority nations and the dominant nation-state.

On the one hand the Spanish nation-state aims at controlling the entrance to its territory and at regulating the boundaries of its national community; and this is for fulfilling the necessary conditions underlying its sovereignty: the control of its territorial borders and the definition of its citizenry. On the other, the Catalan minority nation wants to “safeguard” its national community from the risk to become a minority within its own territory. This is based on the premise that immigrants tend to be integrated into the dominant Spanish culture.

The conflict of these competing interests is especially noticeable as regard the issue of language. The Catalan language is a central element of identity. The Regional government of Catalonia implements measures and actions to stimulate the learning of Catalan among immigrants. This clashes with national language policies which, on the contrary, aims at spreading the knowledge of Spanish (*Castellano*) among foreigner residents (based on the claim of offering them a mean of integration into the broad Spanish society). The dispute about language does not regard just language policies *stricto sensu*, but cuts across others areas of policymaking: work placement and vocational training, education, and residential integration.

More in general, the Catalan government questions the existing division of competencies in immigration management, claiming for more autonomy in integration matters, as well as for more authority concerning inflow management and naturalization procedures.

And what’s up with immigrants?

With no doubts they represent the weakest actor in this situation since they have to experience integration measures arranged by the host society. In the eyes of them, integration into the host society represents a double challenge in so far their identity and their cultural singularity are questioned by competing nation-building processes, the Spanish one and the Catalan one.

So what?

Concluding remarks

Last 12th of December Artur Mas, president of Catalonia, fixed the date for the referendum: the 9 November of the coming year Catalans will be called to express their opinion about the foundation of a Catalan state and about its independence from Spain. The constituency will be made up of Catalan residents older than 16. According to last predictions this means Spanish residents and immigrants who have been living in the region for more than 2 years.

This means that, at least in hypothetical terms, the future Catalan citizenry would include people regardless of their origin, both Spanish and not (assuming the basic conditions that people who take part in the founding constituency will be acknowledged as Catalan citizens). A new actor, the Catalan citizen, is theoretically postulated and introduced in the debate; and it cuts across both the traditional categories of citizens and strangers, to which Brown refers.

Despite its mere speculative character, such perspective could be useful to re-address the current relationship between Spain, Catalonia and immigration, contributing to assess the crucial matters characterising the current institutional framework. The ultimate matter at stake concerns how to maintain unity required for assuring stability and cohesion at the level of nation-state, while preserving cultural diversity of minority nations and immigrant population. That is to find a balance among competing interests and cultural demands along the multiple lines of the relationship between nation-state, minority-nations and immigrants. This means, in institutional terms, to find a framework that is able to accommodate and maintain centripetal pressure of Central government and centrifugal one coming from Catalan one.

BROWN, C. (2000) "On the Borders of (International) Political Theory." In *Political Theory in Transition*, edited by N. O'Sullivan. London: Routledge.