

BOOKS

Basques, Catalans and the Spanish divide

“Catalonia Today” spoke with Italian scholar Daniele Conversi, whose definitive work which compares the nationalist movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country was recently translated into Catalan

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aniele Conversi’s book *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain: Alternative Routes to Nationalist Mobilisation* is on the syllabus of any course that deals with the issues of European minority nationalist movements. But until now, the book was not available in Catalan and, as shown by its virtual absence from local public libraries, it was hard to get a hold of in Catalonia. With its recent translation into Catalan, Conversi’s ground-breaking work will now face the test of a new readership; one that may be a bit more partial in its reading of the book. *Catalonia Today* spoke with the scholar during his recent visit to present the new edition of his book, (*Els bascos, els catalans i Espanya. Entre la modernitat i la violència*, Editorial Pages).

Conversi’s quest to understand Catalanism in particular began with a university dissertation, “which had to be done in a different language”. So he chose Catalan which, he says, is not so different from his native Italian.

He was struck by the historic regional conflicts in Spain. “The struggle for collective rights in Catalonia and the Basque Country is much more advanced than in any other European area,” says Conversi, who has written an authoritative work on the breakup of Yugoslavia, also translated into Catalan (*La desintegració de Yugoslavia*).

How are the Basque and Catalan movements more advanced? “They’re better organised, with a much more popular consensus and there is an *haute* cultural and political elite who are very active in putting forward cultural platforms,” Conversi explains.

Culture and politics are the keys to Conversi’s notion of the mobilisation of small nations within Spain. When asked how much he believes the movements are driven by economic demands, such as more local control over taxation, Conversi insists that culture is a prevailing factor. “A lot of people join in for pure economic reasons,” he says, “but for me this is not important. What is important is the cultural core.”

More specifically, he adds, in the case of Catalonia “There is a legitimacy about the issue of language and most people agree with that. The people who really reject Catalan as the normal language are a small minority here. Even the right has accepted it.”



Thousands protest in Bilbao in favour of Basque rights in February; Catalan government observes September 11 national day

Historically, such a consensus has been much harder to reach in Euskadi, the Basque name for the country in northern Spain.

In his book, Conversi gives two reasons for the prevalence of violence in the Basque movement, particularly by the hand of the military wing Eta, as opposed to a more pacific approach in Catalanism: “a lack of shared core values and the repressive action by the part of the state’s military forces.” The end of violence should be the priority for the Basque movement, says Conversi.

However, violence is not endemic to the Basque society, he writes. In the 16th and 18th centuries, Barcelona was a most unruly place. Engels once described it as “the city whose history records more struggle on the barricades than that of any other city in the world.”

Much has happened in Spain and the world over since Conversi completed his dissertation in 1994 at the London School of Economics. The author is keen to express his opinions on the impact of recent events. Conversi sees Aznar’s government, particularly during his second term, as vital to a recent radicalisation of separatist attitudes in Spain. “When Bush made his speech on September 12, the day after the 9-11 attacks, Aznar identified immediately with the idea of Good vs Evil. Aznar adopted a policy of no negotiation, and went further in trying to criminalise the entire Basque nationalist movement.” The separatist political party Batasuna was banned, Basque language newspapers shut down, members of Eta incarcerated. Aznar had declared his own war on terror. The feeling of being the target of the Aznar ad-

ministration spilled over into Catalonia as well. “Pasqual Maragall accused the government of overplaying the Basque-terrorist card,” says Conversi. “The government in return accused Maragall of *antipatriotismo*.”

“When Aznar talks about “*patriotismo constitucional*” [constitutional patriotism] it is very conspicuous because he didn’t even participate in the approval of the Spanish constitution.”

Conversi speaks highly of Spain’s 1979 document, though he supports efforts toward reforming the statutes of autonomy. In terms of the Euskadi, he says: “I’m not optimistic about having an immediate solution by changing the constitution. “Both the Catalans and Basques should debate more clearly how the EU treaty will affect them rather than thinking about the Spanish constitution.”

BIOGRAPHY

Daniele Conversi is Senior Lecturer at the University of Lincoln and Academic Visitor at the London School of Economics, where he received his PhD in sociology. His post-doctoral dissertation, “Language, Immigration and Nationalism: Comparing the Basque Country and Catalonia”, is the basis for his book, now available in Catalan “Els bascos, els catalans i Espanya. Entre la modernitat i la violència” (Editorial Pages, January 2005). Previously, he taught at the Government and History departments at Cornell and Syracuse Universities, as well as at the Central European University, Budapest. In 2000, he published another book in Catalan “La desintegració de Iugoslàvia” (Editorial Afers-El Contemporani), on the breakup of Yugoslavia.