

CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

An International Narrative for the Mancomunitat?

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In the early spring of 1921, Josep Puig i Cadafalch placed the Mancomunitat de Catalunya (Commonwealth of Catalonia, comprising the four provincial councils), of which he was president, at the disposal of the delegates who had come to Barcelona to take part in the International Conference on Communications and Transit, the first intergovernmental conference organised by the League of Nations, formed just over a year earlier. Over a period of one and a half months, from 10 March to 20 April, a large part of this Conference's sessions were held at the Palau de la Mancomunitat, the former Palau de la Generalitat (seat of the Catalan Government before 1714).

Considering the many agreements reached concerning treaties, international instruments and regulations on transit, train lines, ports, navigable waterways or the right of landlocked states to have maritime flags, there is no doubt that the Conference was a success. Eugeni Xammar, at that time Press Officer at the League of Nations, played a key role in the choice of Barcelona for holding the Conference [1]. Given this, it is only logical to think that the journalist was acting in coordination with the president of the Mancomunitat. However, it is unclear what ultimately motivated him to offer Barcelona to the international body that emerged from the Treaty of Versailles.

Was there a paradiplomacy —official diplomacy was the exclusive preserve of the government of the Spanish State— undertaken by the institution that grouped the four provincial councils of Catalonia? In such a case, did it have a specific goal in mind and had certain people been given the mission of carrying it out? If this was so, what did it consist of and what resources did it intend to use? Were Barcelona and Catalonia being promoted with the intention of gaining some sort of international impact as a state, para-state or lobby to achieve a form of self-government that the Spanish Council of Ministers refused to consider time and time again?

This article cannot answer these questions, nor does it intend to. This would require in-depth research without any presuppositions and with the required breadth. What this paper can and will do is to propose five aspects for the debate that this in-depth research should address.

A matter of character?

There is a general perception that the Mancomunitat was more engaged with international forums —or the forums with Catalonia— during the presidency of Josep Puig i Cadafalch (1917-1924) than during that of Enric Prat de la Riba (1914-1917), not only because the former lasted for almost twice as long as the latter but also —and this is a hypothesis that would have to be confirmed— due to a question of the two men’s character.

The policy of the Lliga Regionalista —the majority party among the members of the Mancomunitat’s permanent council— regarding the rest of Spain was set by Francesc Cambó with his political action in Madrid (outside Catalonia) and by Prat de la Riba as the party’s highest representative in Barcelona (inside Catalonia). Prat de la Riba was widely read, with a wealth of theoretical knowledge acquired in the library but with little direct experience of the world outside of Catalonia. His travels were confined to a sanatorium in Auvergne to treat tuberculosis —which later turned out to be Graves’ disease— and a few weeks in Madrid to complete his doctoral studies in Law, from which he fled, almost literally, after confirming the prejudices with which he had arrived [2].

In this distribution of tasks, almost by natural inclination, Puig i Cadafalch emerges as the third pillar, with an international agenda and a huge list of contacts. His profession as architect and art historian endowed him with the curiosity to travel outside of Catalonia and gain first-hand knowledge of Europe, and also the Americas. The Mataró-born politician had a natural inclination to see things for himself, and not just read about them, as his predecessor had done [3].

Is it plausible that Cambó, Prat de la Riba and Puig i Cadafalch would distribute different spheres of influence and interest by natural inclination

Therefore, is it plausible that the three Lliga Regionalista politicians would distribute their respective spheres of influence and interest (Spain, Catalonia & abroad) on the basis of their respective characters? And if this was so, how deep did this compartmentalisation go in political terms? In other words, did Puig i Cadafalch have the deliberate intention to internationalise Catalanism and the Mancomunitat when Prat de la Riba was its president? And what role did Cambó play in all this?

Paradiplomacy as government, party or individual?

If the international contacts made from Catalonia followed a preset plan or had a defined purpose, the question to consider is to what extent they were made on the initiative of the Mancomunitat, the Lliga Regionalista or individuals affiliated with the latter party. Two key figures emerge in the task of internationalising Catalanism: Alfons Maseras and Joan Estelrich.

The former —writer, journalist, dilettante— had made the transition from the left to finally come to rest under the umbrella of the Lliga Regionalista, through the offices of Eugeni d'Ors, in the mid-1910s. After living for a time in Paris, where he made contacts with propagandists of other nationalities, in January 1915 he published *Pancatalanisme. Tesi per a servir de fonament a una doctrina*. The pamphlet developed previous ideas originally from his philosopher mentor, and also from Cambó, about linguistic unity and the reformulation of Spain as an Iberian and imperial entity.

But above all, in *Pancatalanisme* Maseras proposed a number of arguments for internationalising Catalonia, which could be seen as the beginnings of a paradiplomacy. The proposal consisted of contacting leading figures from other nationalities in Europe, particularly those that shared affinities with the Catalan nationality; fostering participation in international congresses or assemblies of national minorities in which the voice of Catalonia would be heard; promoting the study of Catalan among foreign academics and the translation of works in Catalan into other languages; and opening Catalan centres affiliated with universities to advance Catalan culture in all its breadth and diversity [4].

In 1919, Estelrich founded *Expansió Catalana*, with offices in Paris, in partnership with Maseras, with the purpose of internationalising Catalonia in the sense of creating awareness of its distinctive character and, in some way, centralising and organising all of this propaganda activity. The Majorcan journalist had only joined the Lliga Regionalista a couple of years earlier, also under the patronage of Cambó and d'Ors. In March 1920, he gave a lecture that was later published, *Per la valoració internacional de Catalunya*.

In this lecture, he also proposed a number of themes for advancing in this internationalisation, clearly influenced by Maseras. Catalans should attend all manner of international congresses, assemblies and seminars; there should be Catalan contributions to foreign literary journals; propaganda sharing with national minorities similar to Catalonia should be increased; and affinity should be sought with important personalities and communities. What was not so clear was the ultimate political aim that all of this would

pursue [5].

Starting in the second half of the 1910s and especially during the 1920s, Maseras and Estelrich became the promoters of this internationalisation in Paris, with at least Cambó's nod of approval, who financed part of the activities. However, we cannot yet say to what extent this was a party and government strategy and, if so, with what goals.

The Union des Nationalités, an attempt at paradiplomacy?

While these two propagandists were doing their job and disseminating their ideas, the Occitanian journalist Jean Péliissier and the Lithuanian nationalist Jean Gabrys had created the Union des Nationalités in Paris in 1912. Cambó, Prat de la Riba and Carme Karr were honorific members of the Catalan committee, with participation on a more practical level by Antoni Rovira i Virgili, affiliated with the Mancomunitat, Maseras himself and also Puig i Cadafalch [6].

The entity organised half a dozen congresses until it was dissolved in 1919, as well as the review *Les Annales des Nationalités*, with specific issues for different nationalities, as was the case of Catalonia. Its declared intent was to enable nations without State, through initial mutual recognition—that is, acceptance of their existence beyond their own borders—to help each other gain some kind of recognition in their respective regimes: self-government or independence.

The Catalans, most of them affiliated with the Lliga Regionalista, but not just them—the republican Pere Coromines did as well, for example—acted in good faith. Gabrys' faith, however, was not so unwavering. The Lithuanian showed great ambivalence in seeking the support both of the Central European Empires (Germany and Austria-Hungary) and the Allies (Great Britain, France and Russia) during the First World War to help Lithuania free itself from the yoke of the Russian Empire.

Within the framework of this transnational collaboration, a pro-Lithuania Committee was organised in Barcelona which raised funds for the victims of the Great War, through contacts in the Lliga Regionalista, but also among republicans and through Catholic connections. The Catalanists, who, at that time, were one of the few European nationalities with an institution capable of achieving autonomy, found that reverse solidarity did not work [7].

What purpose would a Mancomunitat paradiplomacy seek to achieve? As an act for its own sake or as a key issue to pressure the Spanish Government to grant real self-government?

The Lithuanian campaign owed more to Maseras' personal interest—Maseras was in

contact with Gabrys and one of his associates, Yvonne Pouvreau, with whom it seemed he interacted socially— than to a party decision. On the other hand, in the case of the participation in the Union des Nationalités, the presence of Cambó, Prat de la Riba and Puig i Cadafalch in this forum could indicate that the party had concluded that it was an important step for the internationalisation of Catalanism. However, it remains to be seen to what extent this was part of a broader strategy that encompassed the Mancomunitat.

The Catalan volunteers, a case of divided support

If one could infer from the previous example a clear wish to use the Union des Nationalités for the international projection of Catalonia, the propaganda campaign to promote the participation of Catalan volunteers in the First World War was quite the opposite. In 1916, the physician Joan Solé i Pla launched the campaign so that the presence of Catalans in the ranks of the French Foreign Legion could be used as leverage, once the War had ended, to ask for France's support in pressuring Spain to grant real self-government or even independence.

Solé i Pla did not take into account the geometries of *realpolitik* and his proposition fell flat on its face after 1919. However, during those three years, he strove to build a “sacred union” of Catalans through the Brotherhood Committee with the Catalan Volunteers, including representatives from all the pro-Allied political currents. This was done through individual commitments which were presented as representing parties [8]. However, while the left wing —pro-Allies on the whole— were favourable to it, the Lliga Regionalista was not so comfortable, as the party included people among its members who were in favour of both sides and the party itself maintained a neutral stance.

Faced with this difficulty in finding a united position, during the presidency of Prat de la Riba —who felt a certain affinity for the Germanic culture— the Mancomunitat viewed the Committee with a certain amount of suspicion and distrust. It was not until the Armistice had been signed, in the midst of the campaign for a Statute of Autonomy, after the winter of 1918, that Puig i Cadafalch embraced unreservedly the legacy of the Catalan volunteers. At that time, he proposed the reconstruction of Belloy-en-Santerre, a village where one of the most charismatic, albeit short-lived, combatants had disappeared, Camil Campanyà, one of the very few Catalans who really believed in what he was fighting for. However, the Mancomunitat was not able to put the patronage of the French village into effect due to diplomatic interference from the Spanish and French governments [9].

Puig i Cadafalch also invited field marshal Joseph Joffre to chair the *Jocs Florals* (a Catalan poetry competition) to bathe the event in his heroic aura, acquired in the Battle of the Marne, because he was a Catalan, born in Roussillon. This use by the Mancomunitat and, consequently, by the Lliga Regionalista, of a campaign that it had originally viewed with suspicion did not continue beyond 1921, by which time Spanish domestic politics had become extremely complicated. Thus, paradiplomatic action was not particularly solid and it was based more on a belief in gains to be had than on the certainty about how to materialise them.

Diplomacy is the preserve of the central government

The lack of serious research focused on the aspects we have mentioned here limits our ability to give a definitive answer to the question about the existence of a planned decision to internationalise Catalanism beyond the intention of a few individuals or groups.

In the background, however, there hovers another question that is perhaps the most important question of all: what purpose would a Mancomunitat paradiplomacy seek to achieve? As an act for its own sake or as something to pressure the Spanish Government to grant real self-government? The question is very pertinent and the answer is more complex than may be initially thought. On 29 November 1918, Puig i Cadafalch, the council of the Mancomunitat and the Catalan parliamentarians in Madrid presented a proposal of “Bases for the Autonomy of Catalonia” to the central government headed by Manuel García Prieto. This text delimited what should be the powers of the State and assumed that everything not explicitly included in it would be devolved to a Catalan government. In section B of the 2nd base, it said that “international relations and diplomatic and consular representation” would remain as powers held by the Government of Spain [10]. In other words, the representatives in the Mancomunitat were of the opinion that the regional Catalan administration to which they aspired would have no need to be active in this area.

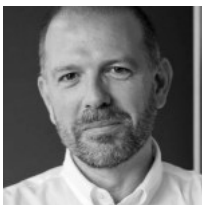
In March 1919, after the Spanish Government’s refusal to debate the issue, the strike at La Canadencia stopped the autonomy campaign in its tracks in Spain. Maseras and Estelrich pulled strings in Paris while Puig i Cadafalch explored Francophile contacts. Barely two years later, on 26 January 1922, the president of the Mancomunitat, on behalf of its Permanent Council, congratulated Arthur Griffith, as head of the provisional government of the Irish Free State, on having achieved independence after signature of the Anglo-Irish Treaty [11]. He did this at the request of the republican parliamentarian Albert de Quintana. The latter also asked Puig i Cadafalch to convey to the president of the Spanish Council of Ministers Catalonia’s wish to be governed “by itself within the limits of a full political, administrative and economic autonomy”, by means of the fundamental bases of the Statute approved in late January 1919 and which the State had not wished to consider either. While the Permanent Council empowered the president to give effect to the first proposal, it limited itself to asking him to carry out the second proposal “at the time and with the effectiveness that we would all wish”. Puig i Cadafalch deferred fulfilment of the second point to “the discretion of the presidency” [12].

Only a comprehensive examination of this accumulation of apparent contradictions will answer the questions with which we began our paper.

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