

Cultural nationalism as a transnational communicative process: The case of Celticism

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A recurring problem in studying European national movements is that of “internalism” or “methodological nationalism”: the tendency to explain phenomena in a given country primarily from causes within that same country. We explain German nationalism from German social and political circumstances, Finnish nationalism from Finnish social and political circumstances, Irish nationalism from Irish social and political circumstances.

As these examples indicate, this internalism also implies a tendency towards socio-economic determinism: historical phenomena tend to be explained by relating them to socio-political causes. In its extreme form, this amounts to what Bruno Latour has denounced as “explaining the social from the social”: phenomena in society are explained in terms of society as determining infrastructure. The tendency is all the more obvious when we deal with cultural phenomena such as intellectual reflection, the production of discourse, literature and art: these are a priori seen as *explicanda* and the socio-political “infrastructure” is a priori seen as the location of their explanation. In this manner, culture is always the result of a process (or the passive, inert ambience in which that process takes place) whereas the agency of the process is always the sphere of social action. This blinds us to the possibility that culture itself *is a praxis*, a form of social action, a communicative activity with potential agency and the potential to *cause changes*— rather than being merely the expression of changes caused elsewhere.

My starting point is that in order to get a more comprehensive grasp of historical developments, in particular in the rise of national movements in Europe, we need to combat the partiality and tunnel-vision of internalism and infrastructural determinism. This involves two related things:

[a] we need to factor in the possibility that cross-national transfers can be at least as important as society-internal causation in triggering events and movements;

[b] we need to allow for the possibility that culture is an agency and that it can exercise a causal influence on social developments.

The result of this dual starting point has been an attempt to chart the *cultural transfers* involved in the spread and diffusion of national movements across Europe. We can study nationalism and national consciousness-raising as a diffusion process communicated from one country/society to another. This explains, for instance, why national movements arise at roughly the same time in countries or regions that have vastly different social, economic or

political regimes and where the modernization process is at very uneven stages of development: Iceland, Estonia and Bulgaria developed national movements no sooner or later than the Basque lands, Scotland, or Flanders.

CASE ONE: THE TRANSMISSION OF MOBILIZING FORMULAS SUCH AS POETIC HISTORICISM

An example of such a diffusion can be found in the spread of the so-called “floral games” between the Provence and Galicia in the mid-19th century.

The process begins when in 1813 the Geneva-born historian Simonde de Sismondi, in his *Histoire des littératures du Midi de l'Europe*, drew attention to the Académie des Jeux Floraux of Toulouse, in Occitan France (Sismondi 1813 1:226-230). Founded in 1323, this had been an association of poets dedicated to the pursuit of literary elegance and the refined expression of courtly love – what was called *le gai savoir*, something we may approximately translate as ‘the elegant craft’. The Académie, founded (as Sismondi saw it) to give an urban continuance to the receding aristocratic tradition of courtly-love poetry, subsisted across the centuries, as part of Toulouse’s city culture, and maintained its prestige by bestowing its honours periodically on famous literati from further afield: we encounter names like Ronsard, Voltaire, Chateaubriand, Alfred de Vigny, Victor Hugo, down to Maréchal Pétain. These honours traditionally took the form of a flower wrought in precious metal: a rose, or eglantine; hence the literary festivals were known as the Jeux Floraux or ‘Floral Games’. The Académie could also bestow on an especially accomplished author the title of ‘Master of the elegant craft’, *Maître en gai savoir* – or *Maître ès jeux*, ‘Master of the Games’.

Victor Hugo’s literary career was more or less launched by the fact that, as an aspiring adolescent in 1819-22, his poems won him prizes and the title of *Maître ès jeux* at successive Floral Games. It marks the beginning enmeshment between the Floral Games and Romanticism. At that time, when Sismondi drew attention to the institution, it was a harmless literary vanity, briefly suppressed during the revolution, now catching the tide of the Restoration (cf. the dedication in Poitevin-Peitavi 1815). In the climate of the day, it achieved fresh interest for being such an unusual survival of the medieval cult of courtly love. Following Sismondi, the poetry of the Troubadours was being rediscovered by scholars like François Raynouard (*Choix de poésies originales des troubadours*, 6 vols., 1816-26), Grimm’s pupil Friedrich Diez (*Die Poesie der Troubadours*, 1829) and Claude Fauriel (*Histoire de la Gaule méridionale sous la domination des conquérants germains*, 4 vols., 1836) as the country’s first flourish of vernacular literature. Myths proliferated about the amorous origins and refined literary flirtations at the Academy’s roots, the Floral Games were received with a more Romantic-regionalist agenda and after 1839 Occitan was readmitted as a language. Later in the century, a special prize was created for poetry written in the langue d’oc.

To be sure, this did not become an Occitan *Risorgimento*. The Toulouse Floral Games remained a regionalist variant within an overwhelmingly French embeddedness. When a revival of the Occitan language was undertaken, the centre of that movement was, as we

shall see, in the Provence, around Frédéric Mistral – in Arles, not in Toulouse. Even so, Toulouse made Mistral *Maître ès jeux* in 1895, nine years before he won the Nobel Prize for literature.

Across the Pyrenees, in Barcelona, the Toulouse revival reminded intellectuals that in the 14th century there had briefly been Floral Games in Aragon. Troubadour fever was in the air: in 1836 Antonio García Gutiérrez, an adept of French Romanticism, wrote a popular history play called *El trovador*; it became lastingly famous because it was used as the libretto for Verdi's opera *Il trovatore*; and that opera was first performed in Barcelona in 1854. Meanwhile, in 1841, Antonio Rubio wrote a cycle of verse in troubadour style and in Catalan under the pseudonym *Lo gaiter de Llobregat*, 'The Piper from the Llobregat River'. In 1858, another Barcelonese poet and historian, Antoni de Bofarull, published a collection of new verse in Catalan under the title 'The Modern Troubadours' (*Los trovadors nous*).

Bofarull had in these years been contemplating an imitation of the newly burgeoning Jeux Floraux in Toulouse, arguing in repeated press articles that in the Middle Ages Barcelona and the Crown of Aragon had also had their Floral Games, and that Barcelona owed it to itself to reactivate this dormant tradition. In 1859 the scheme was launched and the first revived *Jocs Florals* were held in Barcelona. All the National-Romantic writers competed and saw their various works crowned with various precious-metal flowers, and the most prominent saw themselves elevated to the status of *Mestre en Gai Saber*. Barcelona went modern and medieval in one and the same gesture. The *Jocs Florals* became the most important cultural event of the metropolis and a galvanizing point for Catalan cultural nationalism well before the rise of political autonomism; indeed, although the authors involved were fully bilingual, their decision to make the *Jocs Florals* a Catalan-only affair was all the more pregnant with meaning, creating a prestigious and public-official social ambience for the language.

From Barcelona, the formula proliferated further: in 1868, a newly-founded literary journal, called *Lo Gai Saber*, proposed to seed the Barcelona event in other parts of the Catalan lands so as to spread the message of Catalanist activism and mobilize new poets into what was now becoming known as a *Renaixença*. In fact, Floral Games had been held in 1859 in Valencia, and would re-emerge in the 1880s, but that city half-drifted back into the ambit of the Barcelona event afterwards.

Galicia followed soon after: in 1861, *xogos froraes* were held in La Coruña, marking the beginning of the Galego cultural revival. In San Sebastián, the journal *Euskal-Erria* organized successful Floral Games in 1879, giving the event the Basque name of *Itz-jostaldiak* and involving literary, musical and sporting competitions modelled both on the Toulouse and the Barcelona examples; these Basque events were consolidated into a standing organisation in 1882 (the 'Consistory of Basque Floral Games of San Sebastián'), which, as its statutes put it, aimed 'to ensure by all the means within its reach the preservation and propagation of the Basque language and to stimulate the cultivation of its special literature [and], as far as its resources permit, to preserve and propagate our popular music'.

There was even a backwash north of the Pyrenees – not to Toulouse itself, but to the Provence, where the revivalists around Frédéric Mistral were flourishing. Mistral had published his great masterpiece, *Mirèio*, in 1859; that same year, in Barcelona, Bofarull's opening address to the first Floral Games held up *Mirèio* as an example to the Catalans. But in the event, it was Barcelona that provided the role model: the *Jocs Florals* themselves were taken up by the group around Mistral, who began holding their own *Jeux Floraux* in Apt in 1862, and in other cities in the years after.

This case illustrates two or even three things:

[1a] movements of what I call the “cultivation of culture” often spread by way of the imitation of successful examples from elsewhere;

[1b] this applies even to the self-appellation of cultural nationalism and the deep historicist assumptions that such appellations testify to: *renaixença*, *rexurdimento*, Irish Literary Revival, Czech *obrozeni*, *vazrazhdane* (Bulgarian national revival), *rilindja* (Albanian re-birth/renaissance), etc., etc.;

[2] in some cases (Catalonia, the Basque Country) a given cultural gesture can be the initial stage of a full-fledged separatist movement, while in other cases (Toulouse) it remains merely regionalist; in the case of Galicia and Valencia, these took up an intermediary position. This raises the question of why and how regional movements can radicalize into national movements.

CASE TWO: THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL IDENTITIES

It is well known that the establishment of the new philologies and the comparative paradigm in linguistic studies realigned the sense of ethnolinguistic identity for speakers of Basque, Lithuanian, or Romanian, and the relations between various dialects and languages in the Germanic family (German, Danish, Dutch, Flemish, Icelandic, Faroese, Norwegian). In addition, the speakers of Celtic languages such as Welsh, Breton, and Irish received a powerful new frame in which to conceive their national specificity. In Ireland, the Gaelic language too over from the Catholic religion as the country's foremost marker of non-Englishness.

In the course of the century we see a remarkable transmission of a pre-modern Gaelic identity-myth to a new, urban, English-speaking constituency. The “Milesian” origin-story had been current in Gaelic Ireland until the seventeenth century and had then dwindled from the status of a serious explanation of historical origins to that of a myth. The change is marked by the work of the seventeenth-century Gaelic historian Geoffrey Keating. In the course of the nineteenth century, the Milesian myth became a point of identification for the Irish nationalists who identified themselves as “Celtic”; Keating was revived in an urban, English-speaking, modern-national context and the language became a key point of

reference in the new academic discipline of Celtic philology and Celtic mythology. Thus a Celtic sense of ethnic identity migrated from tribal Gaelic Ireland to national urban Ireland.

We can indeed trace the transmigration one stage further: from the nineteenth-century codification (e.g., by the Paris-based Celtologist d'Arbois de Jubainville) the Milesian myth reached Manuel Murguía, who adopted it into his *History of Galicia* in the 1880s, and celebrated Galicia as the dwellingplace of the Milesian Celts before they crossed from La Coruña to Ireland. Along with the rainy climate and the use of bagpipe music, this Milesian ancestry myth has become an important trope in the Celtic self-image of Galicia.

The case raises further questions. Why were contemporaries who at the same time were doing parallel forms of ancestral rediscovery and myth-construction doing so in apparent ignorance of each others' work (e.g. Murguía and Yeats)? Why do certain forms of cultural transfer take place in national tunnel-vision while others are embedded in a Europe-wide exchange network (e.g., Humboldt on the Basque language)? Does this correlate with the difference between myth and the academically institutionalized cultivation of culture?