

# Culture, Connectedness, and Social Cohesion in Spain

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*Abstract:* “Culture and social cohesion” is not (yet) an important policy or media issue in Spain. This article analyzes the reasons for this, emphasizing the importance of the full sociohistorical context (such as the late development of the “welfare” state, the importance of families in producing cohesion, and the territorial aspects of cultural diversity). New social developments, including the rise of economic globalization, the growth of individualism, and the increase of immigrants from poor countries, all converge around the question of “culture and social cohesion.” A broader vision is needed of the possible actors, activities, and systems to help manage these issues, together with a greater emphasis on the role of local partnerships in the production of social capital and in building a more active general cultural participation.

*Résumé:* « Culture et cohésion sociale » ne sont pas (encore) des questions politiques ou médiatiques importantes en Espagne. Cette étude analyse les raisons de cette situation, mettant l’accent sur l’importance du contexte socio-historique complet (tel que le développement tardif de l’État providence, l’importance des familles pour la cohésion, et les aspects territoriaux de la diversité culturelle). Des développements sociaux, y compris la montée de la mondialisation économique, de l’individualisme, et de l’émigration de pays pauvres, convergent autour de la question de « culture et cohésion sociale ». Il devient nécessaire d’acquérir une vision plus large des acteurs, activités et systèmes pouvant aider à gérer ces questions. Il devient nécessaire aussi d’insister plus fort sur le rôle d’associations locales dans la production de capital social et sur une participation générale plus active dans la culture.

## Introduction

“Culture and social cohesion” may be a topic that is seldom discussed in Spain at the state level, but it is an idea whose time has come—especially at the regional and local levels of Spanish society. Spain must face the same pressures of modern life that afflict the rest of the world, and acknowledge its troubled status as a “triple-post” country—since the three posts (post-industrialism, post-materialism, post-modernism) are often cited as forces that are fragmenting the relationships among people (CIRCLE/CCRN, 2000).

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However, several aspects of the problem of “culture and social cohesion” in Spain are the direct result of a particular history and tradition. These Spanish-specific issues may be traced to four historical factors:

- Late development of the welfare state
- Federal structure of the state
- Family-based cohesion
- Traditional culture

#### **Late development of the welfare state**

The Spanish welfare state developed relatively late in comparison to other western European countries. The social safety net in Spain initially favoured the institution of a public health care system and the dispensation of old age pensions (under the dictatorship of Franco, during the 1960s and 1970s), before devoting its attention to public education and other similar infrastructures (in the 1980s). Housing, social affairs, and culture have never been the first priorities of the Spanish state.

The most recent figures on social expenditure as a percentage of the GDP show that Spain is still well below the average recorded for any other European Union country (see Table 1). Yet despite its rather low record of social expenditure, Spain is the one country in the European Union with the fewest differences between rich and poor. The latest United Nations Human Development Report (1999) suggests that the “top” fifth of the Spanish population is only 4.4 times richer than the “bottom” fifth (see Table 2).

But the distances between rich and poor are surely growing in Spain, due to the election of a right-wing government in 1996. The recent decrease in taxes has especially benefitted the higher income fraction of the population, which encourages the growing ranks of the “new rich” to embrace their own right to “individualism” at the expense of the increasing numbers of the poor arriving from other countries. This political reality may explain why a policy for social cohesion still remains low on the Spanish agenda.

Inside of Spain, civil society organizations are crucial to the framing of any public understanding of the terms “culture and social cohesion.” Due to Franco’s extremely long and damaging dictatorship from 1936 to 1975, a new democratic Constitution was not ratified until 1978. Public unions and associations were similarly late to the Spanish scene, not registering a significant social presence until the mid-1970s. Nevertheless, some territories within Spain, such as the Basque country and Catalonia, managed to preserve a public spirit of association in spite of the fascist climate: both territories suffered repressions from the central government as a consequence of their national (cultural) identities.

Another larger geo-historical dynamic must be taken into account. For Spain together with Italy represents an example of the Latin model of civil society. According to Gregorio Rodríguez Cabero (1999), the Latin model is characterized by three traits: “(1) it has a high dependency on state resources, (2) it is fragmented and it is under pressures of particularism and clientelism, and (3) it designs a system of ‘suspicion’ or ‘distrust’ towards the State, in what Sebastià

**Table 1: Social Expenditure\* as a Percentage of the Gross Domestic Product**

|                       | 1990 | 1995 |
|-----------------------|------|------|
| Finland               | 25.5 | 32.8 |
| France                | 27.7 | 30.6 |
| Germany               | 26.4 | 31.3 |
| Spain                 | 20.5 | 22.7 |
| United Kingdom        | 23.0 | 27.7 |
| European Union (mean) | 24.8 | 28.4 |

\*Social expenditure includes: health care, education, culture, social affairs, and housing.

Source: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales (1999).

**Table 2: Human Development\* and Richness**

|                    | Human Development Index | GDP per capita | Relation between the GDP of the richest 20% and the poorest 20% of the population |
|--------------------|-------------------------|----------------|---|
| 1. Canada          | 0.932                   | 22.480         | 7.1   |
| 2. Norway          | 0.927                   | 24.450         | 5.9   |
| 3. United States   | 0.927                   | 29.010         | 8.9   |
| 4. Japan           | 0.924                   | 24.070         | 4.3   |
| 5. Belgium         | 0.923                   | 22.750         | 4.6   |
| 6. Sweden          | 0.923                   | 19.790         | 4.6   |
| 7. Australia       | 0.922                   | 20.210         | 9.6   |
| 8. The Netherlands | 0.921                   | 21.110         | 4.5   |
| 9. Ireland         | 0.919                   | 22.497         | -   |
| 10. United Kingdom | 0.918                   | 20.730         | 9.6   |
| 11. France         | 0.918                   | 22.030         | 7.5   |
| 14. Germany        | 0.906                   | 21.260         | 5.8   |
| 15. Denmark        | 0.905                   | 23.690         | 7.1   |
| 21. Spain          | 0.894                   | 15.930         | 4.4   |

\*The Human Development Index, produced annually since 1990 by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), generally represents the "welfare" or "development" of a territory. The index is obtained by weighting a set of indicators related to economy, education, and health.

Source: United Nations Development Programme (1999).

Sarasa has labelled a distant accommodation. It is a model of intense financial co-operation but low institutional co-operation" (p. 11, author's translation). Certainly, these characteristics "prevent walking towards a more articulated model of relations and complementarity between public and private non-lucrative organisations" (p. 11).

Another socio-anthropological dimension of Spanish civil society can be traced to another institution critical to social cohesion: the family. As Salvador Giner (1998) observes,

in societies like Catalan with a very reduced geographic mobility . . . where the relations with the family and old friends (the “chaps”) are intense, the needs . . . for new friends joining in a society, club or association (devoted to culture, leisure, etc.) are minor. This can explain (together with our political history) why the [public] association rates in Catalonia are inferior to those of other European countries. (p. 32, author’s translation)

The institution of the family also plays an important role in individuals’ production of wealth, not only in Catalonia but across Spain, which doubly reinforces its importance in Spanish society (this is explored further in a later section).

### **Federal structure of the state**

According to Lluís Bonet,

the political changes from 1975 onwards led to the definitive establishment of a democratic regime that recognizes the pluri-national dimension of the state. A new Constitution was approved in 1978 clearly stating ‘the right to the autonomous government of the historic nationalities and the regions of Spain’ as well as the sovereignty of the indivisible Spanish nation . . . this contradiction allowed for both political consensus and co-existence during the transition. (1999, p. 62, author’s translation)

Seventeen autonomous communities were thus formally constituted, with a degree of political autonomy very similar to the federal state, but “without the formal federal structure.” The Constitution was designed to preserve the identities of historical nationalities (such as Catalonia, the Basque country, and Galicia) which had struggled to survive against the repressive Franco regime. At the same time, the Constitution enabled decentralization of both administrative and political authority across the rest of Spain.

These recent changes in state structure affect the development of policies related to social cohesion and culture among Spain’s seventeen autonomous communities. The official re-organization of these smaller “states” within the larger one also reflects differences in economic structure and labour market policies in combatting unemployment during the 1980s and 1990s (by far the highest in the European Union at that time). For example, Asturias’ deindustrialization and Andalusia’s rural unemployment were combatted with “passive” labour market policies (that is, mostly subsidies), whereas the Basque country strategy against industrial crisis relied on more “pro-active” policies (training, entrepreneurial spirit, participation of civil society). It must be said, though, that neither the active nor the passive approach considered culture as a viable means of tackling the problem of social exclusion.

Low immigration rates from poor countries into Spain is another important factor. Spain has always been a country of emigration; thus, the “social cohesion” challenges of immigration have never been an issue in Spain (although Catalonia

and the Basque countries have historically experienced tension with immigrants from the rural parts of Spain; see Sánchez, 1998). Spain's immigration policy is presently dictated by annual quotas and ad-hoc agreements (with Morocco, Ecuador, Colombia, and other countries according to geographic or cultural proximity). Catalonia, Madrid, and the Mediterranean provinces are the areas with the highest immigration rates, but "foreign" content even here does not exceed 5%. The lack of general exposure to immigrants has triggered riots of xenophobia in places like El Ejido (Almeria, Andalusia) in February 2000. At the same time, however, a few fledgling examples of "good practices" are emerging in response to these same pressures, such as the education policy in Catalonia<sup>1</sup> and non-governmental organizations like SOS Racism.<sup>2</sup>

### Family-based cohesion

Another factor that can help explain the Spanish situation is the family, perhaps the most pre-eminent social institution in the country. The cycles of economic crisis between 1973-1979, 1981-1985, and 1993-1996 might have inflicted more lasting damage if the family had not consistently absorbed and deflected the fallout from rampant unemployment across most of Spain. One measure of the importance of family ties in the larger promotion of social cohesion can be seen in the numbers of youth still dependent on their parents. In 1999, 90% of the age group 20-24 in Spain still live with their parents (far above the European Union mean of 66%) (see Table 3). The gap widens with an increase in age: 62% of Spaniards aged 25-29 still live with their parents (compared to the Union mean of 32%).

**Table 3: Percentage of Youth Living with their Parents**

|                       | 20-24 years old |      | 25-29 years old |      |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------|-----------------|------|
|                       | 1987            | 1996 | 1987            | 1996 |
| Finland               |                 | 24   |                 | 8    |
| France                | 47              | 52   | 14              | 18   |
| Germany               | 57              | 53   | 20              | 20   |
| Spain                 | 84              | 90   | 49              | 62   |
| United Kingdom        | 45              | 57   | 15              | 17   |
| European Union (mean) |                 | 66   |                 | 32   |

Source: Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales (1999).

The long intergenerational co-habitation in the same household that these figures involve would have not taken place if the institution "family" had not evolved from a hierarchical model towards a more democratic arrangement of dialogue and support. Spanish families only began to recover from the Franco legacy after the generations born during the 1940s (and to a lesser extent the 1950s) grew to maturity and brought democracy to the bedrooms and boardrooms of the nation, throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Marriage and fertility are two other factors in the Spanish social equation. During the 1990s, Spain was the only state in Europe besides Italy with the highest “mean age to first marriage” and lowest “total fertility rate” (TFR). The TFR is used by demographers to measure the reproduction level of societies (assuming an absence of migration), with 2.1 as the standard figure for “guaranteed” replacement. In the case of Spain, the TFR was 1.15 (compared to the European Union mean of 1.44 for the same period). Once again, the low number can be interpreted as a pre-emptive response to economic pressures.

More measures of the links between families and social cohesion in Spain include the number of persons living in family households (95% in 1991 versus 88% in France, 81% in Germany, and 86% in the U.K.); the mean of persons in each household (3.3 in 1991 versus the European Union mean of 2.6); and the divorce rate (0.8 per thousand in 1996 versus the European Union mean of 1.8).<sup>3</sup>

The family thus pulls certain forces together, while pulling others further apart:

The family can contribute to the dampening of individual needs for a larger social life . . . and yet it is the space where civil values and religious and political ideals are inculcated, ideals which crucially contribute to the maintenance of our society . . . . Civil society is essentially communitarian, recognizing the importance of individual needs to maintain social relations, encourage friendship, and promote self-respect in a desired identity. (Giner, 1998, p. 32, author’s translation)

### **Traditional culture**

The participation of citizens in cultural activities is another indicator of social cohesion. According to Fisher & Fox (2000), “the more people are engaged in cultural activity at a practical level, as opposed to consuming the arts as audiences, the more likely they are to participate in the democratic process” (p. 26). However, they note, even if social cohesion appears enhanced as a result of such active participation, the relationship remains fraught with ambiguities.

In Spain, cultural participation is deeply rooted in the day-to-day lives of citizens. Even though the numbers of public unions or associations are still few, the forms of cultural participation available to the public are many. The conservative Falles associations in València, the religious assemblies in Seville, the acid Carnival-clubs in Cadis and Tenerife, and the nation-building “human towers” in Catalonia<sup>4</sup> are all typical groups celebrating local festivities by bringing communities together throughout the year. This is a bottom-up process that unites culture with social cohesion. Concepts such as “active” versus “passive” cultural participation (or “users” versus “consumers” of culture) blur when a citizen (or a close relative or neighbour) is a member of cultural associations: social capital appears.

The importance of traditional and popular culture in Spain is linked to the pride of “place” established from 1982 to 1996, which followed the transference of powers from the central state to the autonomous communities. Local cultures and traditions from the streets and squares became formally validated, together with more hybrid forms springing up to incorporate the old elements with the new.

In some cases, traditions were “re-invented” (when they were not invented altogether!)— partly to adapt the traditions to recent times, partly to attract internal tourism (for more on the “invention of traditions,” see Hobsbawn, 1983).

This recent cultural flowering can also be seen as a “natural” reaction to the authoritarian Franco regime. However, this “patriotic spirit” is being co-opted by the current José Maria Aznar government, which is intent on promoting Spanish as the world’s second language and culture for the Internet era. Unfortunately, this policy neglects all nuances of internal cultural differences in favour of “competition” and “efficiency.” Its basic interest seems to be monolithic: “delivering Spain to the world market.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Culture and social cohesion: The case/example of Barcelona**

The preceding pages have addressed the question of “culture and social cohesion” in Spain *per se*. However, in some areas and towns, the terms of the debate are becoming similar to those of other territories in Europe. Let us now narrow our focus to a single Catalan city, the better to understand its strategy of response as part of the larger European picture.

The “Accent on Culture” plan proposed by the ICUB—Institut de Cultura (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 1999) outlined the following objectives:

1. To strengthen Barcelona as a producer of cultural content
2. To make culture a key element of social cohesion
3. To incorporate Barcelona into the wave of digital culture
4. To re-animate the heritage of Barcelona
5. To unite the various parts of Barcelona into a single metropolitan cultural space
6. To put Barcelona on the international map

The second objective—“to make culture a key element of social cohesion”—is elucidated further:

Today the main cause of inequalities is not the accessibility of information, but the capacity of converting an overabundance of information into useful knowledge for social practice. Cultural services and facilities, along with initiatives and educational strategies for the fostering of cultural practices, all serve as instruments for the redistribution of knowledge, and are therefore indispensable to the maintenance of social cohesion. (author’s translation)

To this end, the “Accent on Culture” plan in Barcelona advocated two courses of action: (a) to increase the number and services of public libraries (since these were identified as the primary portal to knowledge for all citizens); and (b) to increase the connections between the traditional festivities of Barcelona with those of non-European immigrants (both in terms of cultural production and participation).<sup>6</sup>

Other instructive examples of social cohesion-through-culture in Barcelona can be found in the Municipal Agency for the Associations of Barcelona (AMSA)

and the Council of Associations. Both were promoted by the City Council in the mid-1990s with the aim of strengthening links between local cultural organizations and local authorities. The AMSA is a veritable hub for capacity building, local networking, ad-hoc advising, and the provision of services.

### **Hunting dinosaurs with slingshots?**

In 1997, Pedro Maestre won the Nadal Prize (one of the most prestigious literature awards in Spain) for his novel *Hunting Dinosaurs with Slingshots*. The sense of the title can be applied to real-life situations too, since we often see our elected representatives or technical officers mustering few public resources (slingshots) against huge social problems (dinosaurs). And the challenge of “social cohesion and culture” represents a case in point: will we be able to overcome this Goliath like David, with only a tentative slingshot in hand? For in our increasingly “post”-littered society (postindustrial, postmaterial, postmodern), our sources of symbolic “meaning” or “experience” (thus “culture” understood in its broader sense) are no longer manufactured only by arts and culture groups or organizations (both public and private) such as museums and festivals. Now we are all at the mercy of an increasingly sophisticated “content industry” that includes urban planning, tourism, the media, and pop(ular) culture, none of which bear any particular allegiances to old-fashioned values such as social cohesion. In fact, those values are often actively undermined or displaced by a far more fragmented and individualistic agenda. Two small slingshots against this onslaught can be discerned in two organized public responses: urban planning, and awareness of unthinking consumption.

### **Urban planning**

Many urban planners consider public streets and squares as schools or training grounds for our collective perceptions of “civilization” and democracy. According to Jane Jacobs, the vitality of any American urban core depends on the cultivation of an easy and ongoing sense of trust:

The trust of a city street is formed over time from many, many little public sidewalk contacts. It grows out of people stopping by at the bar for a beer, getting advice from the grocer and giving advice to the newsstand man, comparing opinions with other customers at the bakery and nodding hello to the two boys drinking pop on the stoop, eyeing the girls while waiting to be called for dinner, admonishing the children, hearing about a job from the hardware man and borrowing a dollar from the druggist, admiring the new babies and sympathizing over the way a coat faded. . . . Most of it is ostensibly utterly trivial, but the sum is not trivial at all. The sum of such casual, public contact at a local level—most of it fortuitous, most of it associated with errands, all of it metered by the person concerned and not thrust upon him by anyone—is a feeling for the public identity of people, a web of public respect and trust, and a resource in time of personal or neighbourhood need. The absence of this trust is a disaster to a city street. Its cultivation cannot be institutionalized. And above all, *it implies no private commitments*. (1963, p. 56, italics in the original)



Certainly, the search for a climate of respect and confidence cannot be institutionalized in big towns. Furthermore, the conceptual basis of the “urban sprawl” involved a fight against all “public spaces,” including streets and squares, and any “social cohesion” linked to territory: suburban housing was sold as an idealized back to nature lifestyle (luckily deconstructed by Sam Mendes in *American Beauty*). Jeopardization of the territory (shopping malls, multiscreen cinemas, a space of flows with motorways and huge parking spaces) and raw individualism (*live without neighbours!*) have alienated individuals from every imaginable space of shared commitment, be it personal, social, or territorial. The result is a comfortable fall into “urbanalization” (Muñoz, 1999, p. 34): a loss of visual and social “complexity” in urban areas, as well as a loss of security, respect, and care for public spaces. Catalonia, Spain, and many other areas of Europe have copied this “urban sprawl” model during the last few decades. This has had an inestimable impact on the sense of social cohesion in these areas.

#### **What contents are found in culture and the media?**

The most “developed cultural industries” in the world today are eminently exportable: cinema factories in Hollywood and multimedia design studios in London and Tokyo have extended themselves everywhere. They embody a culture of fluidity, fast consumption, vanity fashion, and dirty competition. Physical and emotional violence have become “normal” in the media: cinema, television, multimedia games, and so forth. At the same time, it is becoming more and more difficult to find examples of personal reflection, intergenerational exchanges, group negotiation, and personal effort linked to positive social externalities. This is a particularly insidious example of how passively available “entertainments” destroy all hope of active social cohesion between individuals, from within. We cannot play “social cohesion” from 9.00 to 17.00, if we have “social exclusion” from 19.00 to 23.00 at prime time.

#### **Conclusion**

Culture and the arts have, by all means, an important role in bringing our communities together, fostering local development, and connecting people in real and participative projects; briefly, in creating meaning in our lives (that’s what culture is about, after all!). In this article, the importance of taking into account the full socio-historical context of a society when attempting to understand the linkages between culture and social cohesion has been emphasized. Factors such as the reduced services provided by the “welfare” state, the importance of families in producing cohesion, and territorial cultural diversity have been analyzed. Some examples in Spain (and specially in Catalonia) have been given, with a special reference to traditional culture, which has always played a major role in shaping the identities of individuals and groups. The cases analyzed also reinforce the need to look broadly at the various organizational actors and factors in society—such as family structure or the cultural diversity of territories—to understand the ways in which cultural activity intersects with social cohesion. These actors and factors are key in influencing future public policies and programs.

Spain is becoming a “richer” country. Recent social changes (growth of individualism, new immigration from poor countries) shape a “post” society that will have to address issues of social cohesion in a way that it had never done before. (Spain has always been a country of emigration and it is now facing immigration for the first time in its history.) It will be crucial to address these issues from: (1) a perspective that includes a clear understanding of the relevant socio-historical forces, where traditional culture managed by grassroots third sector associations has always played a major role in creating meaning and in permeablizing culture to the economic and social spheres of citizens’ lives; (2) a broad vision of the possible actors, activities, and systems that may play roles in helping to manage these issues currently; these elements include cultural organizations, events, activities, and opportunities for grassroots expression and genuine participative processes, but also the structure of families; and (3) an emphasis on the role of local partnerships, where third system associations, public authorities, and small- and medium-sized enterprises work together in re-generating social capital that creates meaning in our lives.

Nevertheless, we cannot expect to hunt dinosaurs with slingshots. Trends in urban planning and the audiovisual violence of the media, to take two obvious examples, have a deep impact in society, often deleting the bounds that “culture and social cohesion” policies and programs try to nurture and re-generate.

#### **Notes**

1. One of the key elements of the education policy in Catalonia is an explicit acknowledgment of “students with learning difficulties” (read: children whose parents are recent immigrants) in both primary and secondary schools. As most schools (public and private) belong to the same planning network and both benefit from public subsidies (although in different amounts), the public authorities intend to balance the number of “students with learning difficulties” in all schools belonging to the same district.
2. SOS Racism is a non-governmental organization which first brought the need for an immigration policy sensitive to labour conditions, education, and culture to the public’s attention.
3. All figures cited here are from Ministerio de Asuntos Sociales (Spanish Ministry of Social Affairs) (1999).
4. “Human towers” are part of a distinctive tradition still very much alive in Catalonia (although partially re-invented over the years). Specific associations meet on the occasion of town festivities to build eight-, nine-, or ten-storey human castles where the upper “floors” are occupied by children. These human castles have grown in visibility in the last 20 years, a period of marked “nation-building” for Catalonia—winning both media attention and government grants for their continuation.
5. The policy of the Cervantes Institute (the official institution promoting Spanish culture to foreign countries) completely ignores Catalan, Basque, and Galician languages and culture.
6. The “Kings’ Parade” each January 5th (although “catholic” in origin) is moving towards a celebration of multiculturalism since each one of the three kings of the Epiphany (Melchior, Gaspar, Baltasar) is depicted as a native from a different land, or an immigrant to Barcelona.

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