Regionalism after regionalisation: Spain, France and the United Kingdom
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1 Introduction

In the final stages of the 1997 British election campaign, three days before the polls, the Conservative candidate and prime minister John Major made a whistle-stop tour visiting different parts of the country in one day to warn voters that there were only 72 hours left to save the Union. The situation was clearly pressing. What was at stake was not, apparently, just who would be in government for the following four years, but what John Major had earlier referred to as ‘1,000 years of British history’. It was the plan for regional autonomy, as proposed by his political opponent, that was on the brink of jeopardising British unity and history. According to Major, the danger was not so much the proposed regionalisation scheme itself. Once introduced, however, there would be no turning back, and the Union would find itself on a slippery slope towards separatism and fragmentation. Paradoxically enough, it was exactly the threat of separatism and regionalism that his opponent, Tony Blair, aimed to stop by introducing regional autonomy. Both had the same goal in mind, namely the preservation of national unity and the prevention of fragmentation, but they held diametrically opposed views on the outcomes of one particular policy, regionalisation of political power.

During the past few decades, a lot of countries have decentralised administrative and political powers to regional authorities. Especially in Europe, and often on the basis of European integration incentives, most states have created or empowered regions as levels of administration and government. A large number of reasons have been given in favour of implementing regionalisation, ranging from resolving the ‘overloading’ of the centralised state, and improving democracy, to the influence of the European Union’s regional funds and globalisation. In many instances, introducing regional autonomy as a way of dealing with demands or potential demands of regionalist movements has been one of the reasons behind regionalisation. Whatever the explanation or argumentation, whenever a regionalisation scheme is in any way connected to a conflict between regionalism and national unity, that tends to be the issue that dominates the public and political debate. In such instances, promises that regional autonomy will bring an end to regionalism and separatism are matched by warnings or hopes that such autonomy will only create or enforce regional differences and undermine national unity.

As described above this was the case in the United Kingdom in 1997. The Labour Party’s manifesto proclaimed that thanks to regionalisation “The Union will be strengthened and the threat of separatism removed” (Labour Party, 1997). In total contrast, the Conservative Party manifesto of the same year warned that “the development of new assemblies in Scotland and Wales would create strains which could well pull apart the Union” (Con-
servative Party, 1997b). These discussions and wordings must have sounded very familiar to French and Spanish followers of the 1997 regionalisation debate. More than a decade earlier, regionalisation had been introduced in those countries, after very similar sounding clashes between opponents and supporters of regional autonomy. In the French regionalisation debate of 1981, député Michel Debré warned that the proposals for regionalisation “ne permettra pas d’éviter les conflits et menacera l’unité de l’État, de la nation” (cited in Le Monde, 1981). Minister of the Interior Gaston Deferre defended regionalisation by claiming the opposite: “La régionalisation préservera cette unité [nationale]. ... Si nous donnons à toutes les régions françaises le statut que le Parti socialiste propose, la plupart des revendications régionales seront satisfaits. Cela détendra la situation dans les régions concernées” (cited in Huguenin & Martinat, 1998, p.22). In Spain, similar debates, warnings and hopeful predictions had been made when the introduction of regional autonomies was discussed in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In all cases, these arguments were defended and attacked with more passion than had been the case for any of those put forward in favour of policy efficiency, democratisation and the streamlining with the rest of Europe that regionalisation would or would not bring.

This topic is not the preserve of the political agendas of West European states. Regional autonomy, or federalisation, as a means to accommodate regionalist demands and pacify ethnoterritorial conflicts, is applied or is under discussion around the world. In Nigeria, federalism was introduced to pacify internal ethnic conflicts that have occurred since the 1950s (see Suberu, 2001), and the same approach is being proposed for Iraq in 2005. However, in those cases too, regional autonomy is being opposed out of fear that it might lead to fragmentation and eventually the break-up of the state. A fear, expressed by Iraqi Sunni leader Adnan al-Dulaimi as follows: “On federalism, we reject it because it will lead to tearing up the country. We call on all Iraqis for unity, solidarity, closing of ranks to confront those who want to undermine the unity of Iraq. No to sectarianism, no to federalism”. These different claims of either disastrous or pacifying effects of regional autonomy figure in dealings with ethnoterritorial conflicts in very different places and different stages of conflict escalation around the world.

These repetitions of similar political quarrels in different contexts reveal differences in opinion as regards the importance and fragility of national unity and regional interests. It also reveals an uncertainty or at least a lack of clarity with regard to the effects of the introduction of regional autonomy.

1 ‘will not make the avoidance of conflicts possible and will threaten the unity of the State, of the nation’ (translation FS).
2 ‘The regionalisation will maintain that [national] unity. ... If we give all the French regions the statute that the Parti Socialiste proposes, the majority of the regional demands will be satisfied. That will calm down the situation on the regions concerned’ (translation FS).
autonomy as a policy to accommodate regionalist demands. This present lack of clarity is not reserved to political debates and what might be exaggerated claims put forward by politicians.

1.1 Regionalism after regionalisation as a research subject

When we talk of regionalism, we mean striving for regional autonomy and emphasising regional distinctiveness, which leads to conflicts on the spatial distribution of political power, a concept that overlaps nationalism and separatism. Regionalisation designates the division of an area, in this case a state, into regions, and the transfer of administrative and political responsibilities to those regions, a term which shares conceptual family ties with decentralisation, secession, and regional autonomy. If the relations between both concepts are studied, a crossroads of many different bodies of literature can be created. Because the particular focus of this study is on the development of regionalism after regionalisation, the key studies are those that take a view on the explanation of the ebb and flow of regionalist politics, and those that suggest various policy approaches to regionalist conflicts.

The advance of regionalisation and the supposedly surprising reappearance of regionalism over the past decades has resulted in large numbers of studies being devoted to those topics. Such research takes many forms, from the emergence of East Germans as a regional minority in the united Germany (Den Hertog, 2003), to the disintegration of Yugoslavia after a series of bloody wars (Denitch, 1996), and from an analysis of a regionalist conflict within the Swiss canton of Bern (Ganguillet, 1998) to an analysis of ethnic conflicts worldwide (Gurr, 1993), and from the usage of Frisian language business names (Van Langevelde & Pellenbarg, 2001), to Eritrean separatism and secession from Ethiopia after a long and violent war (Dorman, 2005). Some comparative studies try to cover all areas and provide us with general and apparently universally valid conclusions, based on empirical analyses of incredibly different cases, and connected by the application of a term like regionalism, nationalism, or ethnic conflict. This study concentrates on three cases in Western Europe, Spain, France and the United Kingdom, thereby limiting the universal value of its conclusions. However, all three states introduced political regions relatively recently and allow for a meaningful comparison. Details on the selection of those cases are presented in chapter 3.

Apart from a large number of case studies on regionalism, some of which have been researched in details, for example those on Scotland, Quebec and the Basque Country, a range of more theoretical publications have also been issued which provide explanations of the occurrence and dynamics of regionalist conflicts. Those often generate a number of key variables which are used to explain where and how regionalism appears, by what means the conflict is fought, and how to achieve a sustainable solution. This
study has a more modest ambition and concentrates on the effects of one particular event, namely the introduction of regional autonomy. However, an overview of theoretical literature on regionalism, and regionalisation, is presented in the following chapter.

Part of the theoretical literature deals, directly or indirectly, with regional autonomy as a response to regionalist demands, among a number of other possible responses. Others address the effects of the introduction of regional institutions on the formation of regional identities and the strength of political actors such as regionalist movements in states with regional autonomies. Together these constitute a body of literature which explicitly or implicitly formulates assumptions and predictions about the development of regionalism after regionalisation. However, like the politicians who defend or oppose the introduction of regional autonomy, the literature does not provide us with one single point of view, but contrasting ones instead. Some studies predict the weakening of regionalist politics after regionalisation, and the general satisfaction of the population of the regions concerned, while others highlight the ways in which regionalist movements can take advantage of the regional institutional infrastructure to make more efficient demands and generate more popular support. Thus, as in the political arena, a debate is taking place in the academic arena on the effects of regional autonomy for regionalist conflicts which begs clarification. Despite the fierce and much publicised political discussions, and the plethora of studies on regionalism, very little empirical work has been conducted on the development of regionalism after regionalisation. To my knowledge, no comparative empirical studies exist addressing this question.

1.2 Research objectives

The main objective of this study is to provide a better understanding of the effects of political regionalisation on regionalism, taking as empirical cases the development of regionalism after Spanish, French and British regionalisation. It aims to answer the research question to which degree and in which ways political regionalisation influences the development of regionalism within the regions concerned. In this way, the main goal of this research is limited to the analysis of the dynamics of political regionalism, its political project, the strategies of realising it, and the support among the regional population. It can, therefore, be regarded as making a contribution to the literature on ethnic conflict resolution, with the introduction of regional autonomy as an option to accommodate regionalism and by providing empirical evidence of its effects on the development of regionalism.

This research does not offer an assessment of the value and applicability of regionalisation as a policy instrument to accommodate regionalism, because it does not include a comparison with situations in which other instruments were applied. Nor does it consider the situation of regionalisation
not being implemented. This research does not examine the other outcomes of regionalisation either, and its effects on for instance policy efficiency, democratisation, or the connecting with European integration. Those can be important motivations for regionalisation, but are not within the scope of this book. Also, this research does assume regionalism, as studied here in its democratic form, or state fragmentation or centralisation, as neither positive nor negative forces per se.

Regionalisation comes in many varieties, with varying outcomes and choices for particular forms of regional administrative and political structures being related to political state traditions, as argued in chapter 2 and further elaborated on in chapter 3. The inclusion of Spain, France and the United Kingdom means examples from three major state traditions can be incorporated. This makes it possible to analyse the effects of different types of regionalisation, and analyse its effects on regionalism in different contexts of state traditions of governance.

A second contribution of this research lies in the attention it pays to regional institutions as causes, not just outcomes, of regionalism. In this way it provides a small contribution to the literature which provides explanations of the occurrence and trends of regionalist and ethnoterritorial conflicts. The introduction of regional autonomy as an outcome of a regionalist conflict, and thus of regionalism as a causal factor of political regionalisation, has been well documented. However, through the provision of a regional political infrastructure, regionalisation should be considered a causal factor of the development or emergence of regionalism in certain regions as well, a topic that has received less attention.

Finally, this research adds to the knowledge on the role of territorial institutions in the building and maintenance of territorial identities and the territorialisation of politics. The regional distinctiveness seen by regionalist movements as a basis for claims for regional autonomy, and its recognition by others, may be related to the presence of certain regional institutions. A certain loyalty or attachment to a territorial community, conditions for supporting territorialised political projects, or even the consciousness of the existence of such a community, is related to the reproduction of this distinctiveness through institutions associated with that territory.

1.3 Structure of the book

In this first chapter I introduce the book’s theme, its objectives and contributions, and the reason for this study. The next chapter defines the central concepts used and these are then discussed in more detail. At the same time, an overview of the literature on regionalisation and regionalism is given, working up to an analytical framework to study the development of regionalism after regionalisation. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and research design of the research based on the theoretical grounding of the preceding
Chapter 3 also elaborates on the spatial and temporal scope of the study, and discusses the selection of empirical case studies. In the first place a comparison is made of the choice for the regionalisations in the three states in which the development of regionalism is subsequently compared, namely Spain, France and the United Kingdom. Secondly, the book deals with the selection of three regions Galicia, Brittany and Wales which are to be analysed in more detail as case studies within those three states. Those three regions will provide the main empirical evidence for this research.

The middle part of the book presents the case studies, alternately per state and per region. Chapter 4 introduces regionalisation and regionalism in Spain, and provides quantitative data on the development of regionalism since the moment of regionalisation. It shows the spread of political regionalism to many regions where it had not been present before, and provides evidence of its growing impact. Chapter 5 analyses the effects of Spanish regionalisation in more detail, focusing specifically on Galicia. It discusses the progressive institutionalisation of the region and the development of a separate Galician political arena. It also looks into the relationship between the presence of regional autonomy and the growing election results of Galician regionalist, and the adoption of regionalist discourses by other politicians in the region. Chapter 6 presents the backgrounds of François Mitterrand’s regionalisation of France, and the subsequent development of regional identities and political regionalism in France’s 22 regions. Chapter 7 analyses the effects of the introduction of directly elected regional governments on regionalism in one of those regions, namely Brittany. Chapter 8 describes the transfer of autonomy by Tony Blair’s government in the United Kingdom to Scotland and Wales, and the asymmetrical situation that resulted. Chapter 9 assesses the effects of ‘devolution’ for regionalist politics in Wales, the last case study.

Chapter 10 offers a comparison of the preceding case studies, comparing findings between the three states and between the three regional case studies. In doing so it concentrates on the influence of the different state traditions and different forms of regionalisation in those three countries. The last chapter sums up the research findings and the lessons learned from them, projecting them against the theoretical background offered in chapter 2, and offers some conclusions on the effects of regionalisation on regionalism.