

CENTRALISM, REGIONALISM AND DEMOCRACY

Resistance to centralisation in Modern Europe in politics, in economics and in culture.

(Resumé of talk by Mr. Camilo Nogueira)

1986

1.- The modern way of resistance to centralism

In Europe, we are taking part in a double process of the displacement of the political powers. Both pose a question mark to political and administrative structures built up over the past few decades in the various European states. On the one hand, supra-state institutions were formed or strengthened and assumed those powers (above all in economic affairs) previously belonging to centralised States.

On the other hand, countries, regions and nations now claim political powers refused to them before. This is the modern way of Europe's resistance to centralism.

It is true that the State-nation has always tried to increase its power, but / the present historical tendency (under very different political and administrative formulae) is now centred on the recovery of political, economical, social and cultural life for those political non-state communities. From the Italian and French regions to the German landers or the Swiss states, as well as the different Spanish nationalities and regions, the countries making up Great Britain or the Belgian communities, amongst others, the initiatives and realities are varied and different, tending to shape a new political form in Europe.

2.- Democracy and Nationalism: Two motivations of political autonomy

The European tendency to politically de-centralise, has two basic and complementary motivations: on the one hand the anxiety and the need to strengthen democracy; on the other, the intention of non-State nations to obtain or recover self-government.

The revindication of political de-centralisation is closely tied to the strengthening of democracy. If political centralisation which found its origin in the 7 French Revolution, was at that time motivated by progress and modernisation, today the centralist States distort democracy and constitute an obstacle to / free development of the economic and cultural capacity of the various countries and regions in Europe. This is especially true in States, for example / Spain, incorporating the centralist character of the French Administration, / without attaining real efficiency in benefit to its peoples. What is more, political de-centralisation is not only necessary to strengthen democracy with consequent economic, social and cultural efficiency. There is equally, (and this in Spain constitutes the main force behind de-centralisation) a tendency to self-government by non-State nations. These nationalities, present in all European States, see in their democratic anxieties, a revindication for autonomy giving them linguistic, cultural and political freedom, thereby respecting their national character and allowing for a presence internationally-speaking.

Obviously, these nationalist desires fall within the process of the political construction of Europe and are contemplated with distrust by present-day prerogatives and by the present power of States.

3.- The Spanish question

The question of resistance to centralisation in the case of Spain has, after that accomplished in the 1978 Constitution, the following fundamental risks:

a) The political battle against the despotic régime in Spain between 1939 and 1975 made nationalist aims coincide with respect to Catalonia, the Basque country and Galicia, being opposed by the democratic forces. The self-government demands made by the Catalonians, Basques and Gallegos were always unquestionably tied to democratic values, based both on the recovery of their political and cultural identity and on the strengthening of democracy and the search for greater efficiency and economic and social justice. In this way, those demands gave way to a sort of state organisation, known today as the "Estado de las Autonomías" (Autonomous State), benefitting the entirety of countries and regions making up Spain. Apart from the Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, there are another fourteen Autonomous Communities enjoying today political and administrative autonomy.

b) The "Estatutos de Autonomía" (Statutes of Self-Government) obtained by the Autonomous Communities through the 1978 Constitution, in which Galicia, Catalonia and the Basque Country are called "Historic Nationalities", entail a commitment between the national political forces and the political powers of the State. This commitment was not, however, precisely delimited: the Constitution and the Statutes allow for a margin of movement which can be used restrictively or not with regard to the autonomous governments.

c) The Statutes of Autonomy establish a government and a parliament or assembly in each Community, having political, economic, social and cultural powers. Competences in the question of Law are severely restricted.

Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia and Andalusia have more competency for self-government than the other Autonomous Communities, their Statutes being approved by referendum. Each Autonomous Community has a different Statute.

d) Once the Statutes had been openly declared, a two-fold process started up:

- 1.- In a relatively short time, self-government competences were transferred, surprising for such a bureaucratic State like Spain.

- 2.- On the other hand, the Central Government by-and-large kept up its peripheric Administration, thereby doubling unnecessarily many services, at the same time putting into action restrictive measures against the Autonomous Governments in political, economic / and cultural sectors.

e) Politically-speaking, the State parties with majority in 1981 (UCD and/ PSOE) drew up a Law (Ley Organica de Armonización del Proceso Autonomico, LOAPA) which substantially drained the content of the Statutes / leaving in the hands of the State powers the final word regarding the true capacity of self-government competences. The LOAPA was appealed / against by the nationalist and left-wing parties before the Tribunal Constitucional (Constitutional Court); this declared that the LOAPA was anti-constitutional.

Furthermore, the Central Government (with the PSOE now in power), counting on the practical support of Alianza Popular, continues to restrict and to limit the autonomies via sectorial legislation (local administration, financing, Judicial powers, university, etc.) and by executive decisions (transfer of services, etc.).

f) With strict regard to the economic sector, at the present time the definite financing system of the autonomies is under discussion in Spain. / While the nationalists are claiming real economic autonomy, participating/ in major taxes (personal, profit and VAT), the Central Government is / intending to restrict that autonomy, with proposals which, in a certain / sense, would convert the Autonomous Communities into simple centres for decentralisation of expenditure, without true autonomy.

g) On the cultural front, we must take into account and remember that / four languages are spoken in Spain:

1. Castilian Spanish, which is the official language of the State.
2. Catalan, the spoken and official language of the Autonomous Community of Catalonia, Valencia and the Balearic Islands.
3. Basque, the official language in the Basque Country and also spoken in Navarra.
4. Gallego, the official language in Galicia and spoken by 80% of the population; Gallego forms a part of the linguistic family of Portuguese and Brazilian, being spoken in Europe, America and Africa.

The Constitution and the Statutes of Autonomy recognise as official these various languages, but the Central Government took the autonomous Laws/ passed for the normalisation of these, to the Constitutional Court. In the/ case of Gallego, the Central Government appealed against the obligation / to know this language (included in the Law passed by the Galician Parliament); it is obligatory to know Spanish under the Constitution.

- h) The entry of Spain into the Common Market can be taken advantage / of by the Spanish State in order to limit autonomous competences, under / the pretext of the transfers of competences undertaken by Brussels.
- i) In the near future, the dialectics between the democratic and nationa- / list aims of Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia, as well as other / countries within the State, and the Central Government will condition the / degree of self-government to be attained in accordance with the 1978 / Constitution.