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Catalan civil society and the High Middle Ages

by Marie Kapretz

Current developments show that Catalan civil society is extremely well-organised. *Associacionisme* plays a very important role in the life of Catalans of any age: Children join sports associations or go hiking with scout groups on weekends. Commercial and business associations can be found in cities and towns around the country. Villagers and citizens are active in organisations that arrange public feasts, carnivals, Corpus Christi or other traditional festivities. Civil society is also very active and well-organised when it comes to raising its voice. From 2012-2017, major political demonstrations with over one million participants took place. These events highlight the involvement of hundreds of volunteers and their capacity for self-organisation. But where does the strength of Catalan civil society actors come from? Can we say that civil society movements in Catalonia are a mere contemporary phenomenon and nothing more than a result of today's influence of mass media and social media platforms? On the contrary, historical examples of civil movements in Catalonia can be tracked back as far as the High Middle Ages. The following examples will shed some light on the long tradition of civic movements that have helped to shape the Catalan citizen movement of today.

As we will see, the Parliament of Catalonia as an institution has its roots in the 11th century and is the result of such a movement. The work of the townspeople of Vic in contesting the Church's excessive power in the 12th century, although ultimately unsuccessful, is also relevant in this context. More modern examples such as the *Ateneus* as a form of educational institutions organised by the workers during the Industrial Revolution in the second half of the 19th century or the role of the *Congrés de Cultura Catalana* in the second half of the 20th century, which had an impact on the Catalan political landscape on the eve of democracy, are also relevant but need to be discussed elsewhere.

Analysing the first two examples will provide an insight into the origins of civil society movements in the frequently under-represented Mediterranean region.

1. The origins of the today's Parliament of Catalonia

What was the role of civil society in the 11th century? As previously mentioned, civil society in Catalonia has helped to create modern institutions and a law-making system.

The Roman and Visigoth law codes which had guaranteed peasant properties, lost their influence in the 10th century. Consequently, villagers were vulnerable to the looting and violence perpetrated by the inhabitants of

newly built castles. This not only happened in Catalonia but also in other parts of Europe. At that time, the new feudal class imposed its influence through acts of destructive violence in what is known as the Feudal Revolution.

Historians have observed that during the 11th century, civil society started to resist and attempted to re-establish normality with a minimum standard of social norms. However, members of the brutal aristocracy would not heed the people's requests for peace. Therefore, the people formed an alliance with the Church as an authority that could at least threaten and carry out excommunications. Thus, the Church, especially the well-educated and well-connected Abbot Oliba in Vic, played an essential role in supporting the peasants' claims. Consequently, a *Pau i Treva de Déu* (literally: peace and truce of God) was imposed: From Saturday to Monday, no violent acts could be committed; people on their way to a market or place of worship were not allowed to be prosecuted; a 30-foot radius was proclaimed around any church in the country, known as the *Sagrera*, a sacred ground on which no violence was allowed at any time. Although this process might seem similar to what was happening in France at the time, the French *Trêve de Dieu* is commonly seen as an initiative of the Church promoted by important cloisters such as Cluny, whereas historians consider the *Pau i Treva de Déu* in Catalonia to be an achievement that was clearly initiated by the peasant population and, therefore, as an early act of civil society movement, which the Church quickly joined to protect itself against the rampant violence of the feudal lords. The findings of historians such as Pierre Bonnassie and Thomas Bisson are particularly relevant in this regard.

Within the context of this article, two outcomes from this process are of considerable importance:

First, the creation of *Usatges*, the first genuine Catalan legal code. It was reformed in 1589 and later in 1704 but abolished under the *Decreto de Nueva Planta* in 1716, after the Bourbon dynasty had won the War of the

Spanish Succession and imposed strict centralistic rule in line with Spanish laws. Until then, the *Usatges* system of laws had been in power for more than 500 years.

Second, the creation of an early form of parliamentary representation. The representatives of three social classes formed the *Corts Catalanes*: The ecclesiastical, headed by the Archbishop of Tarragona; the military or noble, led by the Duke of Cardona; and the royal or of the towns, presided over by the Chief Councillor of Barcelona. From the 11th century onwards, no law could be passed by the count-king without the approval of the *Corts Catalanes*. The modern Catalan parliament still refers to this as its foundational moment, as it was an agent of accountability, checks and balances, and the most direct representation of the population possible.

2. The consular movement – A failed civic society movement in the city of Vic in the 12th century?

On our journey of understanding the civil society movements in Catalonia throughout history, we need to consider the relevance of the 11th century initiative of the townspeople of Vic, who claimed more power by organising security and making their voice heard. If we look at the movement strictly as a self-government initiative it might appear as a failure, as no relevant rights were granted on paper. However, civil society actors gained significant influence in decision-making thanks to this initiative. Moreover, they were considered negotiating partners to the bishop and count-king at one point.

In the aftermath of the declining influence of the Roman and Visigoth law codes on the Iberian Peninsula in general and in Catalonia in particular, the reorganisation of the coexistence of different social classes and groups had become paramount, as seen in the previous example.

Catalonia in the 12th century had already overcome the violence and struggles of the 11th century's Feudal Revolution. It was now

organised in a system of counties under a count-king based on the newly created code of laws called *Usatges*, which continued to coexist for some time with older Visigoth laws. The Church, through its dioceses, played a significant role as a peacekeeper and, therefore, had power over nobles and peasants.

Vic, located 60 kilometres from Barcelona in the heart of the county of Osona, was and is still today the bishop's seat, which was highly important in the 11th century. However, due to the ongoing expansion of the county to other regions (Besalú, Cerdanya and Provence), the viscounts of Ausonia (Osona), descendants of the Montcada family, started to give less importance to the town, leaving the power almost entirely to the bishop and the Church. Consequently, the bishops possessed an unusual degree of secular authority, resulting in citizens' discontent. The first sign of it was the rejection of the bishop's request to pay a *firmançiae* – a tax to guarantee the compliance with the orders of the episcopal court. A robust civil movement backed the refusal, which was then accused of conspiracy and rebellion against the bishop.

Historical documents of the accusations raised by Pere, bishop of Vic, against the town's citizens reveal a heated debate and court process. Even though no significant reforms were carried out as a consequence, the movement appears to have been strong enough to improve citizens' rights: Count Ramon Berenguer IV renounced oppressive taxes on Vic in return for a one-time payment of 400 gold *morabetins* paid by the citizens. This decision is significant: it was the first time that inhabitants were viewed as separate subjects from their lords. A second result was that leading persons amongst the townspeople were treated as consuls by their equals, later named *boni homines* or *probi homines*, who would temporarily mediate conflicts and act as spokespeople for the urban community when dealing with the bishop or the king. In academic literature, the creation of the consuls is considered important in the long-term evolution of the

municipal organisation in Catalonia. They are a historical example of Catalan civil society's self-empowerment.

As we can observe from these two examples, the significant achievements of citizens' movements throughout Catalonia's history helped shape the region's social identity and way of life today. One can not only appreciate the tradition of civil society movements but also the Catalans' strong identification with their democratic institutions, especially with their Parliament. To this day, civil society is concerned with shaping social coexistence whenever necessary and considers itself a key agent. The High Middle Ages in Catalonia were a time of social upheaval due to the corrosion of former law systems, namely the Roman and Visigoth law codes. In addition, peasants had lost part of their rights due to a highly violent feudal class. Hence, society underwent sweeping changes that gave birth to new forms of accountability and public control of power: it is thanks to the Catalan citizens of this time that an early type of parliamentary assembly representing three social classes was established, a peace-keeping regime was installed, the new system of laws, the *Usatges*, was passed, and that even a timid sort of citizen self-rule was allowed in the town of Vic.

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