



# Escaping provincialism

JOAN MANUEL TRESSERRAS

In his essay *The Curtain*, Milan Kundera characterised two sorts of provincialism, that of so-called big and that of so-called small national cultures. In fact, Kundera was taking up an old discussion started by Goethe, when the author of *Faust* coined the concept of *Weltliteratur*, that is, world literature. In the turn from the 18th to the 19th century, Goethe already considered the notion of national literatures outdated, conceiving an idea of literature we would call transnational today, made of the best contributions written in each language of the world. Kundera in his turn recovered this approach to reflect on the need of creating a European literature, that is, an area of critical creation, discussion and thought embracing the whole continent and hence of transnational, supralinguistic nature by which the concept of national literature would be overcome, falling into obsolescence.



However, Kundera quickly noticed that like Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, his idea hit a double obstacle of provincialism of «the big» and «the small». (It should perhaps be pointed out that when talking of small nations we do not necessarily refer to those with little population: an example is the case of Poland, a big nation in numeric terms but having been on the verge of disappearing several times in history.

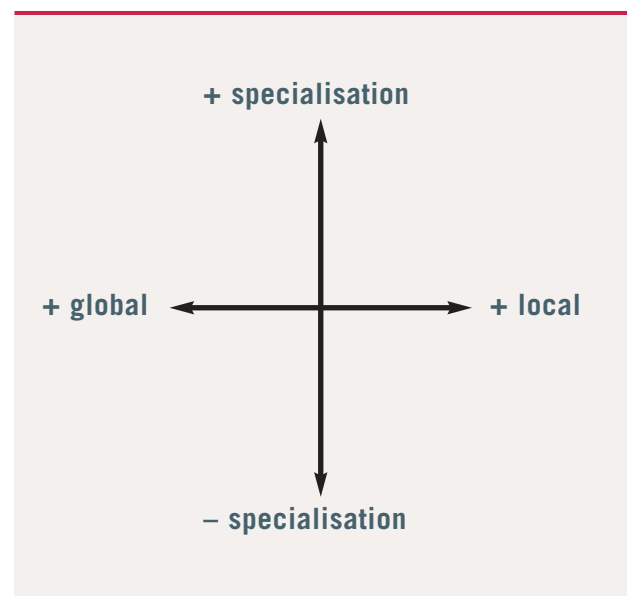
Hence a small nation is one that for any reason does not play a relevant role in the world stage and has not enough political or economic power.) To summarise, provincialism of small nations consists of an inferiority complex by which they have nothing really valuable to contribute to the world stage; as opposed to it, that of big nations consists of a sort of arrogance releasing them from the duty of giving any consideration to ideas appeared beyond their domain.

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In his essay Kundera referred to national literatures, but the same thought is appropriate to tackle the behaviour of collective identities in a global world and the possible economic effects of this matter.

Regarding culture, the debate on identity and economy needs to be tackled from at least two perspectives: creation and cultural industries. As to the former, it is crucial to foster and deploy policies aiming at stimulating local and seizing foreign talent. Regarding the latter, the key is to provide the conditions for Catalan-based cultural industries to be able to offer production of universal interest and work as foreign talent centres without surrendering their Catalan way. If we showed these principles on a coordinate axis where the x-axis represents a value defined

between + local and + global (local being the wish to access a local market and global the wish of creating products for global markets) and the y-axis another value going from + specialisation to - specialisation (specialisation being the degree of creativity and added value coming with the product), the resulting chart would be:



**The top left quadrant (+ specialisation, + global) is the one defining the optimal area where we need to be, especially when talking of culture and communication industries, in order to project Catalan cultural identity to the world and doing business there.**

Hence the upper right quadrant (+ specialisation, + local) represents the most notable local cultural expressions in terms of projection, relevance, dissemination, typicality and/or reputation, emerged from either popular or so-called high culture. In a way, we are talking of the most outstanding of a national culture, those milestones defining it and with which all individuals belonging to a given national community create a tie of identification. These

are especially valuable items as they are rooted in the real national folk tradition while containing a clear elective component allowing them to be shared with other items stemming from other traditions, which makes them especially appropriate for globalisation in progress.

However, this does not mean that the lower right quadrant (- specialisation, + local) refers exactly to failed local cultural production but rather those products we could consider minor in any creative area, not in a derogatory sense but in the Anglo-Saxon way, that is, those works or creators not being at the top of their cultural system but at its base, yet being necessary as they provide solidity and strengthen the foundations upon which excellence can be built; from an industry perspective, they provide the offer allowing to keep or enlarge the audience. In any case, the lower left quadrant (- specialisation, + global) does define a less desirable domain, namely that of banal cultural production or that with little possibility of creating an interest beyond mere mimicking of big yet hardly demanding, low-pitch trends.

In the way the global space is that of mass culture, the opportunity of introducing own contents with a true personality and original branding depends directly on the degree of specialisation of the proposition. It makes no sense to think of conquering a space holding the *Weltkultur*, to put it in Goethean terms, i.e. the global culture, without making any contribution with a truly distinctive specific value.

So we are interested in the top left quadrant (+ specialisation, + global), which is the one defining the optimal area where we need to be, especially when talking of culture and communication industries, in order to project Catalan cultural identity to the world and doing business there. It is the manoeuvring zone the small have to overcome their provincialism (that inferiority complex we referred to before) and take their own capacity to make relevant contributions within the global context. However, we need to raise a question before-

hand: are Catalonia and its cultural identity really part of the small ones? Is this actually the league where we are to play?

**We have been unable to visualise to the rest of the world other personalities, landscapes or chapters in history we could reasonably think that any other national culture not being tied by the sort of problems and shortcomings the Catalan is suffering from would have used much more efficiently, for instance Montserrat abbey or the imprisonment and execution of president Companys.**

There are plenty of reasons to answer yes to this question. For instance, it is true that the Catalan cultural system often lacked the resources or even the motivation needed to confer global value to own, easily exportable landmarks. It is true that there were many classical personalities, famous universal Catalans in the 20th century, spearheaded by Gaudí, Miró, Dalí and Casals, who have been positively associated with Catalonia and in some case (very especially Gaudí) provided a major economic benefit.

However, it is equally true that we have been unable to visualise to the rest of the world other personalities, landscapes or chapters in history we could reasonably think that any other national culture not being tied by the sort of problems and shortcomings the Catalan is suffering from would have used much more efficiently.

Just allow me to mention some examples:

Montserrat abbey with its impressive landscape and being a mythical place, half-way between history, legend and religion; or the imprisonment and execution of president Companys, an unparalleled case in the history of Western democracies, the potential of which has nevertheless not been managed to be developed as a symbol of a whole set of values. Nor has Catalonia's struggle against the Franco regime become symbolic within the history of 20th century



urban struggle; and even the Civil War is known to the world as **Spanish Civil War**; etc. All in all, Catalonia's possible identity and community have fully legitimate starting points but they remain mostly to be projected, recreated and defined.

Along the same lines goes the fact that the most representative personalities of Catalan cultural identity never manage to enter the global stage. This means two things: first, there is an identity for own consumption that is useful and valid within the own system (but tends to stay away from the global stage), and second, this system is comfortable enough to allow creators and industries to accommodate and surrender the chance of going global.

However, the Catalan community has an asset clearly challenging its belonging to the small, which is Barcelona and its role as the capital of the country and Catalan culture itself. Barcelona has experienced a strong process that turned its name into an international successful and reputable brand.

A product made in Barcelona or bearing any relation with it is an added value, as shows the fact that some garment brands (**Custo**, Mango) have decided to place the name of Barcelona on their labels. Related to the power of the Barcelona brand, a statement of the president of **Mango**, **Isak Andic**, shall be recalled: «Although we are in more than ninety countries, identifying our brand with the name of Barcelona is a way of not forgetting where we started and projecting the city's potential throughout all continents.» It is just one example, but we could find many more.

The rise of Barcelona as a city able to draw the world's interest came about with the 1992 Olympic Games and radical, effervescent transformation this event brought to the city, to the point of becoming a model many other places have tried to implement. The reputation and attraction of Barcelona have increased ever since, and a look at the boom experienced by its tourist industry in the last years is enough to state this.

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Now, the information society we are part of as a civilisation with its multiple attached phenomena (like deterritorialisation of some landmarks or progressive hybridisation of cultures) originates decisive changes in the form of social organisation and affects processes of identity building, allocation and reproduction. For instance, Barcelona's international projection occurred aside from Catalan cultural identity, which again has been unwilling or unable for years to have access to an excellent platform to disseminate across the world. However, the potential is there, and so is the possibility of using it. Based on what premises?

The approach of Robert A. Davidson, a professor at the **University of Toronto** specialising in Catalan and Hispanic Studies, is very interesting. He has made a detailed study of Barcelona's international footprint. According to Davidson, the specific difference of Barcelona (and in a certain manner, its latent or inherent brand) lies in its modernity having been under heavy influence of the siege experience: historical and literal siege, of course, but also metaphoric siege that may currently mean massive or badly managed tourism for the cultural identity of the city.

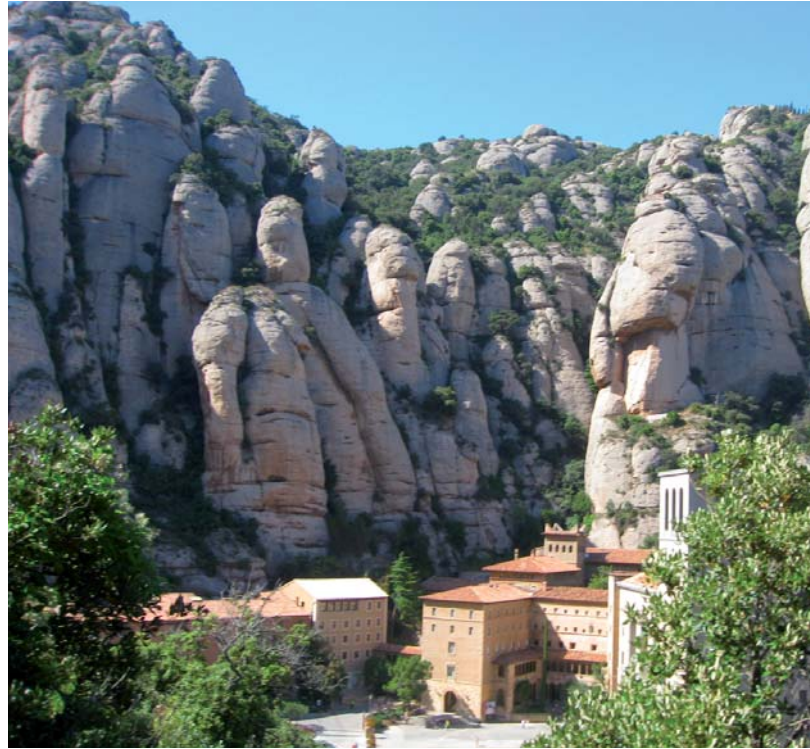
From this perspective, as Davidson claims, if the Barcelona brand has become so powerful it is because it bears the tensions of centuries of struggle for cultural survival inherent in its aesthetic setting. Barcelona has been repeatedly on the brink of not existing in modern history, that is, to face the possibility of disappearing we set out as a characteristic of «small» nations in the beginning. Yet this tendency of not existing that has placed such a big burden on the memory of the Catalan national community, provides the Barcelona brand with some reminiscences and a deep meaning turning out to be attractive and

seducing to people from all over the world. Hence a historically negative connotation has become positive to be the non-explicit yet perceptible content of a brand able to raise the interest of millions of consumers across the world.

There should not be any reason for wasting the enormous potential created by associating Barcelona with Catalan cultural identity. While the Barcelona brand always provides added value, the Catalonia brand does not take any off as it is almost unused, neutral. Hence the axiological side provided by the siege experience includes values like resistance, perseverance, strength, courage and intelligence, that is, values commonly perceived as being positive that should be easily transferred from the Barcelona to the Catalonia brand.

To give a not at all trivial example, we have had one first experience in associating both brands in the international image of **FC Barcelona** in the last seasons, and the approach of presenting it as a Catalan team did not find any noteworthy resistance beyond Spain, as by the way was expected. Expansion and generalisation of the possibility of perceiving items of other identities different from the own or even embracing complete identity propositions with progress of deterritorialisation is to be understood as an opportunity. Coming back to the case we were mentioning before, this explains that certain fragments of identity become especially relevant when appearing together with successful personalities in culture, show business, arts or – of course – sports.

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▲ Catalonia needs to learn to visualise to the rest of the world the value of its main chapters in history or landscapes such as Montserrat.

In this referred association between the Barcelona and Catalonia *brands*, Catalan cultural identity obtains notorious benefits in terms of visibility and projection, but Barcelona also takes a very important asset from it, namely its settling in the European and global context as a capital, that is, recognition that Barcelona is not only an extraordinary city for many reasons but also the capital of a country and a national community with an own cultural system.

Barcelona thus strengthens its positioning as the capital of the Western Mediterranean Arc and one of the most relevant European cities from a globalisation perspective. To summarise, it is in the best position to activate its options within the top right quadrant (+ specialisation, + global) of our coordinate axis.

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Doing what? There are many and very diverse possibilities, but as usual, the most important is to set priorities and focus efforts so they are as fertile as possible. However, there is an apparently clear opportunity: the big number of

migrants arrived in Catalonia in recent years makes this country a great place to become a multilingual centre of production, distribution and export of information, communication and cultural contents all over the world. To have this come true, policies fostering multilingualism need to be implemented, so the children of migrants grow up not only using Catalan as their vehicular language but also preserving their mother tongue.

So for obvious reasons, the Catalan culture and communication space plays perhaps a role as decisive as ever, which however still needs to overcome internal fragmentation into administrative units to appear as it actually is: a market with a size and potential perfectly comparable to that of any other European communication and cultural market, which our cultural industries



▲ The Triplets, an example of global visibility of Catalan culture.

need to urgently exploit. To summarise, the Catalan culture will have opportunities for success in the globalisation age as long as it is able to acknowledge and cohere internally its identity. It may seem a paradox but it is not: it is simply about getting rid of any form of provincialism.

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