

Catalan Culture

Sir, – I have only just been able to read John Weightman's review of Claude Hagège's *Le Français et les siècles* (April 1-7), in which he states: "Sad though the thought is, dialects and small minority languages can no more withstand the fluidity of modern life than plants and animals can survive the destruction of their habitats." He goes on to suggest that the world will be left with a few "major standard languages" to be shared with the "international idiom of Anglo-American". Wherever bilingual speakers are found amid a monolingual majority, the bilinguals will gradually move over to the monolingual majority languages, we are told. The plight of the French stateless languages (Catalan, Basque, Breton and Provençal) is cited as an example of this.

How is it that, even in a paper like the *TLS*, it is still possible for the most strikingly obvious example of the *opposite case* to be ignored? I refer, of course, to the area where I live, Catalonia, where the stateless language, Catalan, has been spreading, rather than diminishing, over the past ten years. In Catalonia, it is spoken by 66 per cent of the population and 91 per cent understand it perfectly (as opposed to 80 per cent six years ago). In Majorca the figures are 75 per cent and 96 per cent respectively. Among young people – under twenty-five – 87 per cent speak it and 98.4 per cent understand it (figures are from the last Spanish Government census – 1986 – in all cases). Book sales in Catalan have gone up from 300,000 in 1978 to 4 million in 1987 (Catalan Bookseller Association's figures). People from monolingual homes tend to begin speaking and using Catalan normally around the age of sixteen or seventeen (evidence from my personal experience). In the last year, two new weekly magazines and one new daily international newspaper have appeared, printed integrally in Catalan (the newspaper, the *Diari de Barcelona*, has an anti-Catalan nationalist line, incidentally).

Quite apart from all this, Catalan language culture has been enjoying an extraordinary revival in the past few years, noticed so far only in France and on some American campuses, where books by new writers like Quim Monzó and Sergi Pàmies are circulating in translation. Anyone who has read more than half a dozen of the great Catalan works of fiction produced in this century alone will vouch for the fact that it is one of the most underrated Western European cultures, if not *the* most underrated. And, contrary to "internationalist" prejudice, this revival – or, better expressed, this continual process of cultural self-affirmation – has not made the Catalans culturally closed or narrow-minded: Catalonia has for years been the most cosmopolitan area of Spain, and among the bestsellers in Catalan at the moment are, for example, Jay McInerney, Tom Sharpe, Marguerite Yourcenar and Milan Kundera. Nor has Catalan become the exclusive property of the nationalists, who are few and far between

(the independentist party won only six out of 138 seats at the last autonomous elections), nor of a particular class: it is a normal language – misinformation campaigns emanating from Madrid notwithstanding – functioning independently of class or political interest. (Its most famous poet, twice nominated for the Nobel Prize – Miquel Martí i Pol – is a former textile-factory worker.)

What upsets the "experts" on Spain about Catalan is, essentially, its statelessness. It has survived thanks to the personal preference of the people who speak it as a native language and also to the natural support given by an important international centre, Barcelona. But it has survived *despite* a certain amount of opposition from the Spanish State, and in defiance of a monolingual, monocultural concept of Spain, beloved – rather patronizingly – of so many northern European observers.

Even if Catalan was not in the advantageous position it finds itself in today, I still don't see what argument can be made for predicting a future of "important" languages, which sounds to me about as interesting as a gigantic airport lounge. Speakers of "small" (read "stateless") languages have all the right in the world to communicate with each other – via television, poster, computer, press, radio and book, as well as by word of mouth – in their native tongue. This is a fundamental human right. Rather than lament the supposedly inevitable disappearance of these languages in France, Mr Weightman would do better to point out the appalling philistinism shown by the French State towards them. In French Catalonia, for example, children are denied even two hours a week in Catalan during the normal curriculum, and have to study it outside school hours. In Spanish Catalonia, it is Castilian that is taught a few hours a week, all other classes being given solely in Catalan. The result is that Catalan children grow up actively participating in a major Mediterranean culture that is an undeniable part of their heritage, whereas their French counterparts are denied this access, and inevitably find themselves in the role of provincials keeping an envious eye on distant Paris.

As anyone reading this letter will have already noticed, it is not only a commentary on John Weightman's review, but also a thinly disguised plea for the near-total ignorance of Catalan culture in Britain and other parts of Europe to be ended, once and for all. It would be a pity for the world to focus its attention on Barcelona in 1992 (year of the Olympics) without having a clue as to what is really going on down here.

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