

A country seen from below: Catalonia's contribution to the world



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Description:

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Countries are recognizable for many things. Catalonia has stood out for its landscapes, its artists, its sportsmen and football clubs, its capital...and, in recent times, also for its cooks. But what really makes this small piece of Europe opening to the Mediterranean unique is the power and authenticity of its civil society.

A small country that, up until now, does not have the structures of a State, but does have a powerful and cohesive civil society with some very authentic traits that make it both interesting and unique.

On the one hand, thousands of grassroots cultural organizations with a strong link into the territory that have reinvented folk culture turning into something festive and, above all, open to participation. *Grallers*, choirs, the typical *sardana* dance, giants... and the cherry on the cake, the human towers or *castells*, towering to the skies up to ten stories high thanks to the disciplined and altruistic collaboration of hundreds of participants. A country that has no need to hire artists to party on the streets, it just needs its associations. A country that is full of *Athenaeums* and *Casals* (people's cultural centres) where people come together to collaborate, offer help and strengthen affinities under the umbrella of projects and associations of all sorts.

A country that has fought to defend its cultural and linguistic identity under 40 years of Franco's dictatorship, where

its people have managed to keep their language from becoming a minority language, as so often happened in similar cases. A people that is proud of its language that has found a space for it on the Internet in time, being recognized as an example of revitalization. One example of this will to modernize its language is the fact that the second global version of Wikipedia, after English, was in Catalan!

Catalonia is also a country that is at the forefront in educating its children and youths through leisure, with hundreds of scouting associations dotted around and leisure centres that have become a model of education in leisure. Some countries look in awe –and certain envy– at the thousands of volunteers who, every weekend, dedicate many hours to methodically and thoroughly educate their young through leisure.

A country that, historically lacking any structures for a welfare State, has woven a great social fabric to protect its citizens through associations and funds in charge of catering to those in need. Nowadays, with the collaboration from public institutions, there is a powerful social non-profit sector that meets the new needs of its society.

A small country that, with its metropolis of Barcelona taking the lead, has organized the largest rallies in Europe for peace in the world, calling against the war in Iraq (2003) and also, in Spring this year, in favour of welcoming refugees. A country that despite being the target of a terrorist attack just a few days ago, has sent a strong and clear message in favour of peace in the world and against racism, something it has become renown internationally for.

Ultimately, Catalonia is a country that has grown by joining forces in the common struggles of its people and through citizen collaboration to improve its environment. In fact, the most prominent trait of Catalonia as a country is that, everything it's institutions have done and promoted, has been because it had previously been promoted or started by its citizens from the grassroots.

The country I'm talking of, with just over 7 million inhabitants, will hold a referendum to decide its future on the 1st of October this year, and in all likelihood, will offer its letter of presentation as a new State in Europe. Catalonia faces many challenges, and has much to learn from other countries, but it can also contribute a great deal. Especially sharing its way of conceiving its associative movement, the strength of its citizens, the nerve of its civil society...and also the notion that projects and initiatives that are successful are always those that are outlined and launched from below.

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