



Episode 1,052: Catalonia, Spain, and Secession: What's the Libertarian Answer?

Guest: Marco Bassani

WOODS: It's been a really, really long time since I've seen you, and it's too bad, but of course you're in Milan and I'm in the U.S. and I don't travel there much and you don't travel here much. But the miracle of Skype makes possible this wonderful conversation, and to find out that you know about Catalonia when I've been desperate over here for somebody to come on and talk about it was just the icing on the cake. So let's start, before we get into the history or the reasons for why Catalanian secession, can you just tell us where things stand as of — we're recording this on December 1st, 2017. Where do things stand with the whole thing right now?

BASSANI: All right, well, it's a standstill, supposedly. A lot of people think it's over. It's not over at all. There will be elections. On the 21st of December, there will be the elections for the new Generalitat. That's the local parliament in Catalonia. And actually, what's going on, it's a repression of thought. The thought police is there. They've arrested a lot of people, as you know. There are certain things that you wouldn't expect to happen in Western Europe nowadays, but they're going on with the tacit or implicit agreement of all the big nations, from the U.S., France, Germany, Italy, and all the others. Nobody's saying anything at all that people are being arrested because they wanted to have a referendum, which they did and they actually won. So that is where things are. They're going to elect a new Generalitat — that is, the new legislature for the Catalan people — and I doubt it's going to be a unionist one.

WOODS: What can you tell us about Catalonia itself, its history and its particular interests here that it feels like are not being served by Madrid?

BASSANI: Well, actually, a lot of people think that this started six or seven years ago, right? One of my mentors, a great Italian political scientist, Lombard political scientist, Gianfranco Miglio, used to say political scientists believe that history begins in 1945 with the dropping of the bomb in Hiroshima, right? So that was the beginning of history. But it goes back a long time. Same thing is true of Catalonia. There was — well, first there was this big movement for federalism and that started with Pi i Margall, who's a pretty well-known guy also in politics.

And then the whole thing — there was the birth right after the First World War of the idea of the Catalan independent state. It was called the Estat Català. Now, you have to remember that the Catalans had their own language. And of course you could — it's not a dialect. It's not a dialect of Spanish and it's not a dialect of French. It's as far as it is from Spanish as it is from French, so it's really a language with everything,

literature. It just needs an army to be a language, right? So the difference between a language and a dialect is that a language is a dialect with an army and a passport. So this is pretty much what they wanted.

But it started with the Fourteen Points of Wilson in 1917-18, you know, the founding of the SDN. So they started to think, We're not Spanish; we're Catalans and we want to be part of this big movement, democratic movement. So it started about 100 years ago, actually; almost exactly 100 years ago. But then it accelerated a lot after the end of Franco's regime. A lot of people may not know this. This was in the 1970s, and it was perfectly staged by Franco, who decided to hand over power to Juan Carlos, the king, and make it a monarchy again for Spain.

And then everything started in 2005-06, when they started to discuss their new statute of autonomy. They included the word "nation." They said that Catalonia was in fact a nation. Well, this was something that could not stand in the eyes of Madrid. And that started with the supreme court or constitutional court, actually, in Madrid, that there was a long fight against this word, nation. They just said there's only one nation. It's the Spanish nation. And clearly that is not true.

WOODS: So today, then, fast-forwarding to today, a lot of people will say Catalonia enjoys more autonomy than almost any region in Europe or in the West, certainly more than an American state enjoys vis-a-vis the federal government.

BASSANI: No.

WOODS: So what could they be complaining about? That's what we read in the papers.

BASSANI: Oh, that's what you read in the papers. Actually no, there's just no comparison. Actually, there's been a discussion going on on what's been going on fiscally in the region. And they're deprived – well, the complaint is that about 8% of the GDP of Catalonia goes into other regions and Madrid. Madrid said it's only 4%. So they say you still know it's 8%, and they say it's only 4%. Nothing of that sort happens in any state of the United States. There's no state of the U.S. that is paying that much – the price of union is not that costly. Of course, the only price of union that's comparable is the one that Lombardy and Veneto pay. Lombardy pays 18% of the GDP for being part of Italy. That is, it gives the GDP, 54 billion euros, every year to other regions, so just amazing redistribution, territorial redistribution.

The other thing is no, they do not have autonomy. The constitutional court since 2006 started to crush every single thing and every call for more autonomy. And Madrid, they never wanted of course to have a referendum on independence, but they never even tried to give them more autonomy. So there's no comparison with an American state, with Rhode Island or any state, Idaho.

Actually, the whole sort of like federal regional system of Spain, it's a mess because Spain is a multicultural and multinational empire like the ones that were destroyed by the fall of the Soviet Union. So that is probably what boosted the whole Catalan movement for independence. It's not by chance that the first vote on referendum was on November 9th, 2014 – that is, 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This was

considered by a lot of Catalans a very peculiar date, because the Catalan movement for independence will be the end of the Berlin Wall for Western Europe. When there was the fall of the Berlin Wall, of course the communist regimes collapsed, but nothing really happened in the West. There was no discussion of borders and so on, in Scotland, Catalonia, Veneto, the Basque Country, and so on. All the other areas, nothing really happened. And now a lot of people think it's really high time to move to some sort of — not self-determination. That would be used for post-colonial societies — but something that is called the right to decide.

WOODS: So there's no possibility that even a small portion of the Catalan independence movement is thinking, if we have the referendum and we get ready to go through with it, this is our last-ditch chance to show Madrid we are genuinely serious and maybe we will get what we want? Or are they just absolutely "independence or bust"?

BASSANI: Well, Madrid never, never tried to negotiate to do anything. It was just like going against a wall. What do you do? It was like two trains just going on the same track, and finally there's just clashing. There were never talks. The only thing that Rajoy wanted to know is: *did you declare independence? Because if you did, it's over. I'll put you in jail.* And nothing else.

Very different attitude was the one that the UK had vis-a-vis the Scotland referendum three or four years ago. That was clearly negotiated, and it's clear that Scotland will be an independence nation in a few years, because all the old people voted in favor of the union but like the overwhelming majority of the people under 45 voted in favor of leave, leave the UK for Scotland. So there will be clearly another vote that will be very important in the near future. Everybody knows that.

But the things in continental Europe, there's not anything like — and especially in Spain that is going back to the worst days of the 1900s, and Franquistas actually are everywhere and what they want. They don't even recognize that these people are in jail because of their ideas. They wanted a vote on a referendum, and they wanted to preach and go on talking about their own independence, and they were put simply in jail.

WOODS: Now, on the other hand, I've heard that, in addition to the claim that we're paying a huge amount in taxes and not getting much back, that there's another economic argument: that since the financial crisis and since there were terrible economic numbers in Spain and a lot of Western Europe, they had so-called austerity and supposedly Catalonia was unhappy with this and they feel like if they could set their own economic policy they would do a lot better. How much of that is part of this?

BASSANI: Well, that was very important, because the whole movement started in the year 2008, 2009, and we all remember that 10 years ago there was a big, big crash of the world economy or the Western economies. They lost 5, 6, 7, 8% of the GDP in one year. So that clearly boosted the whole movement, the whole movement for independence. There's one thing that never happened in a democratic country. There was never a secession that was successful. And why is that? Well, first of all, those

status quos got a lot for itself. A lot of people would be conservative no matter what. They don't want big changes.

But then at a certain point, when you realize that you're going to lose everything with the union with Madrid and the union is going to cost you all your prosperity, because Catalonia has become really the much richer than average region compared to the average of Spain, Extremadura and all the other regions of a multinational empire called Spain, are clearly poorer. So at a certain point, you do realize that the union has got a price, and the price tag was put in the year 2008, 2009, and it was so clear that the union with Madrid was going to cause a disaster. So it was like, we are giving up our future staying with Madrid.

At that point, actually what happened was a very bizarre thing. In two, three little towns, they just voted for secession, for independence. And they gathered like 90, 95% of the votes in favor of independence. The whole movement started. Until the crisis of 2008, 2009, generally the independence movements didn't get more than 15, 20%. At that point, the clear majority started being in favor of independence. Even right now, there is discussion that they do have a majority but they wouldn't let them vote, so it shows that Madrid has already decided that they might win.

WOODS: More with Marco Bassani after we thank our sponsor.

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Now, here's the big question that is in people's minds. The ideology that motivates these folks — I mean, a lot of it is nationalism, no doubt, and cultural and economic issues. But there is some concern that the driving force behind this movement is leftist, and so the argument has been made by some libertarians that, in the abstract, it's nice to talk about secession and self-determination, but there are actual people in this place, some of whom will be more oppressed possibly in an independent Catalonia than they were in Spain. And so is there any room in our analysis as libertarians for those people?

BASSANI: Yeah, I mean, I think it's a very weak argument. The general ideology of the movement for Catalan independence is leftist, but no more leftist than the average leftists who are living anywhere in the United States, California left and right would be more leftist than any Catalonian movement right now. So the idea that they're going to set up the communist country of Catalonia makes me laugh. Clearly, Catalan separatism was not strongly influenced by anything that's classical liberalism or libertarianism, but that's beside the point. That's the will of the people to pay for their own socialism. If they want to pay for that, well, they are financing Spanish socialism at this point, so they might want to at least see the cost.

Now, the whole thing is probably that in a federation, you start seeing things as they are more, much more closely than you would in a centralist state. So even the very timid federalism that came out after Franco's regime in the 1970s and '80s in Spain clearly made a lot of people in Catalonia aware of how things were going. But I don't see any point in just going against — or just saying you cannot go on with your independent state because you're not libertarian enough. I know there are a lot of

libertarians that do love repression. I just call them fascists, usually. They just hate people that go to the ballots and vote.

The only thing they wanted to do was to vote and show the rest of the nation they don't want to be part of Spain. So the Guardia Civil was there just kicking their butts because they wanted to vote. And they only thing they were shouting was, "We have voted," right? *We have voted, we have decided we are a nation. We want to be independent.*

So I don't see what — how can you be independent for the wrong reasons? This is really pretty bizarre on the libertarian side. But I know libertarians are very much impressed by free markets or they only talk about free markets most of the time, and I don't think there's any more problem with an independent Catalonia for free markets than there is with a large, multinational state called Spain.

WOODS: Well, let me then, just for the sake of argument, leave aside the Catalonia and Spain question, and let's just think more in the abstract. Or you know what? We don't even have to think in the abstract. I'll give you a specific example. Suppose you thought that the reason Kosovo wanted to secede was specifically so that it could cleanse its territory of Serbs and of Orthodox monasteries and things of that nature. And you knew that was what they wanted to do, but they couldn't do it under the current arrangement so they needed to secede, and you knew for a fact that was what they wanted to do. Could a libertarian really cheer that and say this is going to be great, we're going to have liberty in our time?

BASSANI: Not really, no. Actually, there are two or three things that should be met, requirements. You shouldn't want to secede in order to oppress the new minority you're going to create. That's certainly one point that is very important. In the Baltic states, that was something very clear that happened for a few years in the 1990s. There were large minorities of previous oppressors — that is, ethnic Russians who had the power before 1991 — and they were like 30 or sometimes 35, 40% in those three Baltic states. And in the end, they were given all the rights, but in the beginning there were some problems.

There usually are, but not in Catalonia. In Catalonia, we're talking about 3 million and a half of the people that are Catalans, 2 million and a half that are Spanish, and 1 million foreigners. So nobody ever said the Catalans were only the people who speak Catalan from morning until they go to bed at night. Actually, what they said is the Catalans are the people that live in Catalonia. They never identified with an ethnic group or anything of that sort, even linguistically. So they didn't even use the language to define the Catalans. They said the Catalans are the people that live in Catalonia. So they're not going for secession — or their bid for independence is clearly not to oppress a minority of 40% of people who are actually Spaniards. Actually, I know a lot of people over there that are moving or shifting towards independence and they have both parents that speak Spanish at home, so it's a very different thing.

Actually, although you do remember that NATO in 1999 started to help Kosovo and started to bomb, and they didn't ask anything about what the intentions of Kosovo were. They just decided that they had the right to be independent, and they backed it. So sometimes they back it; sometimes they do not.

But the thing is Mariano Rajoy, the Spanish leader from Madrid, he hardly has a majority in Madrid, and out of like 700 majors in the Catalan region, there's only one who comes from his party. So it sounds like Abraham Lincoln saying we're going to free the majority in the Southern states that are oppressed by a secessionist minority, right? It's like a spectacular lie.

WOODS: Well, let me give an example from the U.S. There's been some talk about California seceding. I don't think they would ever actually go through with it, but there's been talk about it. If I lived in California, I'm quite certain that my life would be worse in an independent California. Even though I favor the right of secession and I don't like the federal government, I feel certain that those people would do a worse job than what's happening now. I would be taxed more, there would be single-payer health care – whatever. It would be terrible and I would hate it. And so I would – no, it's true they're not seceding for the purpose of killing me, but they are seceding for the purpose in part of making me work harder for the regime, and I would still consider myself a victim. So how could I therefore still justify the secession?

The answer would be in part – well, obviously because I don't favor the use of military force against those people. But also because I think in the long run the cause of liberty is served when it's easier to exit, and it's easier to exit when there are more political options, there are more political units in the world. So there's that. And I think also, as you were indicating, the costs of the kinds of policies these people want would now be more directly borne by them, and so this could conceivably, not guaranteed, but conceivably be a form of political education for these people, to see the real, close-up results of what they favor.

BASSANI: You put it perfectly. I would have put it in a very short way. If you are an independentist in any country, that does not mean you are a libertarian; but if you are a libertarian, you have to be an independentist all of the time, because the other option – or independentists let the people vote. If you're in California and you don't want to be taxed even more, of course you can vote no, but the right of the people, of any portion of the people to just express and actually decide about things that are of real importance – not our leaders, not our rulers, not our masters, not in a big election like deciding between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, but the real things that do concern ourselves, like how we want to be home-rule, we want to just be our own bosses at home, we just want self-government and all of these things, then you should be in favor of deciding. Then you might decide to stay with the union and not – if you're in California. You might decide to break with the union if they're in New Hampshire or somewhere else.

But the whole prospect of just building up states, building continental states like the European Union, 500 million people that are totally incapable of regulating anything but they go on regulating everything. Or the same thing in the United States. You know, big government cursed by bigness. Thomas Jefferson in the beginning thought that liberty was the real important thing of the American experiment for self-government, not the union. This idea that the breakup of the union is a moral catastrophe came from Abraham Lincoln. That's clearly not one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, so the second part of the United States, the non-republican part.

WOODS: You mentioned earlier the international response to what's been going on in Spain, and it's overwhelmingly been not in favor of the independence movement but rather in favor of the central government in Spain. I wonder if that is just a matter of the rulers of all of these major, particularly Western countries consider themselves to part of a big club, and they sure wouldn't want to see a part of their own country break off, so they're going to have the back of some country that is experiencing a turmoil like this because they're all club members. They're all buddies and they're all part of the ruling class, and so they're not going to be sympathetic. Do you think it really boils down to something as crude as that?

BASSANI: Yes, exactly. That is the point. That is exactly the point. But I think Mariano Rajoy and the government in Madrid is really walking on thin ice, because there are certain things that might happen. One morning, Donald Trump wakes up and says, no, sorry, we were wrong about Catalonia. Catalonia should be a free and independent state. And so that's the end of it, exactly what happened almost 30 years ago with the unification of Germany, 28 years ago, with George Bush the father who said, all right, you can go ahead and get united. So when one of the big states starts recognizing Catalonia, then I guess the fight is pretty much over.

But it's a club. In Italy, there are at least two regions — one is clearly Veneto — that if they had a referendum — if we referendumbed in Veneto, 60% of the people would vote for independence, and all the polls show that. And Scotland will do that. But other regions from around Europe — we're talking easily could be 40, 45 new states coming up in Europe if that happens. And so this standstill shows that the zeitgeist is clearly not for big, unifying clubs like the European Union. And even in the United States, I'm sad that Jefferson Davis is not living right now. The bid for Southern secession right now would be much easier than it was in those days, because in those days, 1860-61, it was the big unification movement, Italy, Germany later on, and so on. So the real zeitgeist, the spirit of the time was to unify. But at this point, it is so clear that it is rather the breakup and not the unification.

WOODS: You are the author of a book called *Liberty, State, and Union: The Political Theory of Thomas Jefferson*, which of course is very decentralist in its arguments because that's what Jefferson was all about, and I'm a big fan of that book. But if I may jump away from Europe for a minute, I'm curious to know about the project you're working on now, which sounds like it's going to be very interesting, and I'm curious to know when it's going to be ready. So first tell people what it is you're working on.

BASSANI: I'm working on states' rights in the United States from the Revolution to the Civil War. And it's of course a quite big book, as you can imagine. It's going to be long monograph with some chapters. And the end of it, I would consider sort of the end of the American experiment of self-government the Union — the end of the Union as moral catastrophe brought about by the political theory of Abraham Lincoln. And so I will start with states' rights in the beginning and the Constitution, the Anti-Federalist, Federalist, and then I will discuss a little bit Thomas Jefferson, and of course the most important political thinker of the 1800s in America, who's John C. Calhoun, and the most clear proponent of the states' rights doctrine and the idea of a concurring majority. So it's going to be ready, the whole thing, in about six or seven months. And so you'll read it.

WOODS: Do you mean the manuscript will be finished or it'll be published?

BASSANI: It will be published later on.

WOODS: Oh, okay. So look, if you write a book like that, how can you not come to the United States and talk about it a little bit? You've got to.

BASSANI: I will be in —

WOODS: All right, good. Maybe I'll see you then [laughing].

BASSANI: I will be in South Carolina at the end of February, so yeah.

WOODS: Oh, okay.

BASSANI: They have a little institute with —

WOODS: Oh, okay.

BASSANI: — the people who I'm very much in touch with.

WOODS: Yeah, those are great guys. Well, I appreciate your comments on this stuff. I know that our friend Carlo Lottieri has been writing about it, but I think he's been writing in Italian.

BASSANI: Yeah, he's been very vocal about Catalan independence and so on. We are, we both are, and we've been talking about it in several news and journals and newspapers and so on, but we do what we can.

WOODS: Well, I'm going to link to some of your stuff at — let's see, what is today's episode? — TomWoods.com/1052, because I've got a talk you gave on natural rights, I've got your Mises.org archive. We'll put all that stuff up. And of course, when your book on states' rights come out, needless to say, I am conscripting you back into the service of this podcast.

BASSANI: Definitely. I love that.

WOODS: Okay, all right, well, thanks so much, Marco. I appreciate the time today.

BASSANI: Thank you, Tom.