

## **Josep Ramon Llobera. Intellectual precursor of contemporary nationalism.**

Oonagh O'Brien

*Institute of Global Health and Development,  
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh*

Josep Ramon Llobera was known by some of us, his students, as *El Mestre*. This term seemed to encapsulate the role he played for us which went much further than being a teacher, but someone who was a mentor and true renaissance figure drawing on his broad education in economics, history, social science and knowledge of different European languages and disciplinary traditions to inspire and support us. Of course he also became a great friend who expressed true delight in the company of those whose ideas he had shaped.

It is a particular irony to me that Josep is not around at this particular conjecture in history, when identity and nationalism is dominating political discourse and the fissures and fusions arising from it are disrupting conventional political allegiances. Much of his writing and critical thought anticipated some of the current complexities of these alliances.

I met Josep as a first year undergraduate student at the Dept of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Hull in 1976. I had been living in Scotland since my Irish parents had moved there around 10 years earlier, having been born in Wales and lived for a time in England. Josep and I immediately had shared interests of identity and nationalism. Franco was not long dead. Catalonia was in ferment and Spain was constructing a new nation. The 1979 Scottish independence referendum happened while I was an undergraduate and was in fact the first time I was eligible to vote. (My son's first vote at the age of 16 was ironically the 2014 Scottish referendum).

At that time the social sciences were treating both religion and national identities as being of diminishing importance in political life. Josep was adamant that this was not the case, and drawing on his beloved Catalonia, he carefully constructed the argument that national identity was still a force to be reckoned with. Marxism was the dominant theory in the department and when he invited me to a reading group based around the reading of Marx's *Capital* I felt I had really 'made it'!

He had an amazing ability to bring in a breadth of ideas, from many different periods of history to inform his teaching as well as the intense chats that we had with him in the student's union after class. Explaining what was going on in Spain and the influence of Franco was an eye-opener for many of us who had not really paid much attention to this southern European country after the end of the civil war. Josep was an enthusiastic and very inclusive teacher, treating all of us as if we were his contemporaries and not naive young undergrads. He encouraged us to consider further study and made many of us believe that we were capable of doing it.

This conversation that we had over the years of my undergraduate degree resulted in my doctoral fieldwork being carried out on Catalan identity and language in France, in St Llorenç de Cerdans a village in *Catalunya Nord* and later teaching social anthropology for a year at the Autònoma University in Barcelona. He worked to establish a group of researchers carrying out fieldwork in different parts of Catalonia, in France, Majorca, Minorca, Andorra and El Principat. Although this did happen, it sadly did not result in a body of research for a variety of reasons.

Josep left Hull to return to teaching in London and his world in Bloomsbury, a place he rarely left except to go back to Catalonia. He lived happily in a small space which declined rapidly as it was gradually taken over by books, two deep in floor to ceiling shelves. Acquiring the next door flat helped with the space problem. This decision was no doubt encouraged by his wife Ann MacLarnon, who also played an important role in introducing Josep to the world of physical anthropology which resulted in some great narratives about transporting deceased primates around the country for research purposes.

Josep's early work was focused clearly on an analysis of Marxism and he maintained that a depth of understanding of the history of key economic and sociological thinkers was essential for all anthropologists. His interest and knowledge of the Scottish enlightenment is still passed on to my students, and he told me in great detail which graveyards I should visit in my home town of Edinburgh to find the graves of the key enlightenment figures. Indeed he was quite shocked that I did not already know where they were.

In particular his work on Durkheim played an important part in restoring his importance at a time when associations with functionalism were perceived as anything but positive by the activist student audience. But his biggest enthusiasm was for anthropology itself, as a discipline and a science. Together with Talal Asad, another teacher we were lucky to have at Hull, they both showed us how anthropology could be a critical subject appropriate for questioning the times we were living in, and not to complacently accept its colonial legacy. Josep's writings and teachings constantly highlighted the importance of the history of theoretical ideas which lead to contemporary anthropological research and teaching. And yet, he was not afraid of the sacred cows. Fieldwork was not essential to anthropology he argued, indeed he never did fieldwork until his trip to the Bahamas in the 1990s and didn't seem to return a particular convert. His insistence on the importance of historical and theoretical thought over pure ethnography was also at odds at the time. As Joan Bestard Camps and João de Pina-Cabral have pointed out, his passion for anthropology has had a lasting impact in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking world through his edited Anagrama volumes of translated key texts. These editions were central to my teaching at the Autònoma in 1983 when there were very few anthropological texts available in the aftermath of the dictatorship when critical

social science had not been encouraged. He also played a role in embedding European anthropologists and social scientists into his teaching in the UK through teaching and the volume *An Invitation to Anthropology* (2003) he produced for undergraduates.

Josep's major contribution though lies in his huge range of writings on nationalism and in trying to develop a theoretical understanding of its resilience in the face of the modern nation state. His extensive historical knowledge and understanding are key to his ideas on this. He argued and demonstrated that ethnic and nationalist sentiments can be traced to early historical times, well before the French Revolution when many writers identify the growth of a national consciousness. These early ethnic sentiments are therefore precursors of the nation state, not a result of that structure. His writings summarised in careful detail the different theoretical approaches to the understanding of nationalism. The volume *God of Modernity* (1994) argued persuasively that rather than nationalism being a waning force in the modern world, the situation is more complex. As the nation state is weakened in the face of supra identities such as the European Union and global economic interests, nationalism has replaced religion and other identities in an increasingly secular and unfamiliar world. Nationalism has an extraordinary power and mobilising force and therefore he argued, could not be dismissed. Throughout his writings, the concept of the growth of ethnonations within nation states was perceived as important, and as nation states lose absolute power, ethnonations see increasingly little use for the structure. He persisted in arguing that European nationalism was highly specific due to the long history of European nation states and therefore arguments about nationalism in Europe could not be extrapolated to other parts of the world.

Josep was never afraid of controversy and polemic. Indeed he enjoyed a robust discussion and invited them! But perhaps a sense of personal discomfort hung over his own identity as a Catalan and the strong anthropological concept of the "other". He wanted to study and write about Catalonia and wanted to do that as an anthropologist. However, the othering of the subject created a dichotomous tension. The paradigm of southern European anthropology's ethnographic writings was not for him. His later writings on Catalonia as part of a wider European landscape of identities are widely recognized as a hugely important and convincing portrait of an ethnation with detailed understanding around the central roles of language and culture. It could be said that as anthropologists have moved away from the study of isolated rural monographs, Josep led the way in evolving the method of researching one's own culture.

My great regret is that Josep was not around for the Scottish referendum. Now firmly resident back in Scotland lecturing at a local university, I found the experience of the build up to the referendum and the actual vote a life changing moment. The explosion of discussion, ideas and information has changed Scotland forever and he would have loved it. At work and in my family people were divided as to their opinions, but that only served to stimulate discussion. What is a nation? What kind of Scotland do we want? How should land ownership be reformed? What will happen if we vote "Yes"? Who are we anyway? Is this about nationhood or about governance? Who is Scottish? What kind of political system do we want? Josep and his writings and ideas were very much to the forefront of my mind during this time. On the day of the vote, people were in contact with each other still making up their minds. The narrow no vote was a disappointment to many, a relief for others, but was generally accepted. The referendum was certainly not the end of the growth of interest in the future of Scotland but for many almost a beginning.

What a contrast with the referendum that followed in Catalonia 3 years later. The vote was not legally sanctioned, and the tension between the national state and Catalonia grew palpably in the build up. The night before the referendum brought many people together no matter what their opinion about the result, as they defended the right to vote but Scotland and other parts of the world watched the violence the next day in horror and shock. This event was the result of complexity and fissions in Catalan political parties, partly building on the long standing in migration Catalonia has experienced, and as with Scotland, growing tensions with the central state. How I wonder what Josep would have thought and what he would have written about this difficult time. His argument that nationalism is complex and resilient within the nation state is certainly born out by the state of European politics in the early part of twenty-first century in ways that few of us foresaw. I would just love to be sitting in a cozy corner of Bloomsbury discussing it all with him, with his standard animation and humour. He is greatly missed.

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