

# The Irony of Right-wing Secessionist Fantasies

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In the wake of Obama's victory, citizens in several states submitted petitions to secede from the United States. It is something of an irony that the very states seeking secession from "big government"—like Louisiana and Alabama—have been among the top beneficiaries of that selfsame government. Put bluntly, the government would be far smaller without them, and they would seriously struggle far more without it. Indeed, were they to become independent, most would be failed states in need of a bailout. Only this time their benefactor would be not the federal government but the International Monetary Fund, of which the United States is the principal donor. Louisiana and Alabama would go the way of Greece and Spain.

Far from rejecting the "European model," these would-be campaigners for "independence" are actually embracing it, in their secessionist impulses and in their economic fate. Across the European continent, regions aspiring to be nations are attempting to break away from their mother countries. In November, Catalan separatists won a huge victory in regional parliamentary elections, handing almost two-thirds of the local parliament to four different parties that all want a referendum on secession. In October, British Prime Minister David Cameron agreed with the Scottish National Party—the single largest party in the Scottish Assembly—to hold a referendum on independence in 2014. Following elections in October, the separatist New Flemish Alliance, which wants to pry Dutch-speaking Flanders from French-speaking Wallonia, won the Belgian election.

It is the apparent paradox of neoliberal globalization that even as capital flows freely, people travel more and consumption becomes standardized—particularly within the West, at least—regional, national and ethnic identities have hardened and taken on an increasingly militant electoral expression. In terms of consumption (Nike, McDonald's, iTunes) and communication (Facebook, Twitter, Skype), we have more in common and feel more connected. But politically, we seem to be becoming more insular and remote.

Nowhere is this clearer than within the European Union, where borders between full member states have become almost meaningless and currency among most of them is shared, but nationalism of various hues is on the rise. "It seems clear that, despite the over-rationalized expectations favored by the internationalist perspectives of the left, nationalism is not only not a spent force," argues acclaimed British academic Stuart Hall. "It isn't necessarily either a reactionary or a progressive force, politically."

In Italy, France, Austria, the Netherlands and Denmark, sizable far-right parties with anti-immigrant and Islamophobic agendas have taken root. Elsewhere, in Catalonia, the Basque region, Scotland and—to a far lesser extent—Belgium, the parties are at least mainstream or even progressive. The former willfully miscast neoliberal globalization as cosmopolitanism and then try to reassert the primacy of the nation-state against its onslaught, scapegoating minorities to foment and exploit moral panic over the loss of "culture." The latter seek to embrace the opportunities provided by globalization and the supranational structures that have emerged to govern it. Both are inadequate responses to the lack of autonomy and democracy that is the hallmark of this current period. The former represents little more than old white wine in a new bottle. The latter is more complex.

In Europe, it is partly history's revenge on rhetoric. The emergence of the nation-state as the single most effective economic and political unit over the past two centuries necessitated a confected patriotism that sought either to iron out or ignore regional differences. This meant reimagining countries not as the product of regional alliances, wars or necessity but as an incarnation of innate genius born from essential characteristics. "We have made Italy," said Massimo d'Azeglio at the first meeting of the newly united Italy's infant parliament. "Now we must make Italians." But while those differences were eclipsed, they were rarely eliminated.

This is best illustrated through language. In Spain, for example, the official language is Castilian, but around a quarter of Spaniards also speak Catalan, Basque or Galician. But it is most potently expressed through economics. Flanders is wealthier than Wallonia. Catalonia believes it contributes too much tax to the federal government. Scotland, while less wealthy than the UK as a whole, has oil. Whether they would be better off as independent nations—given the economic burdens that come with self-government—is a moot point. Independence is primarily a question of liberty, not wealth.

Ultimately, all but the most reactionary nationalist movements wish to stay within the European Union, seeking a far more protected and diluted version of independence than we would reasonably describe as sovereignty. An independent Flanders or Catalonia, as currently envisioned by those pushing secession, would retain the euro, have no meaningful borders, and pool its resources with a far less democratic European superstate.

In its most recent tantrum, the American right displayed the worst of both worlds: the bigotry of the reactionaries and the opportunism of the secessionists. It's a predicament with which Derek Belcher, who started Alabama's secessionist petition, sympathizes. Belcher became incensed at the government for shutting down his topless car wash business on grounds of obscenity. "I don't want to live in Russia. I don't believe in socialism," he said. "America is supposed to be free.... I don't think any one state can stand alone. But if we've got twenty of them, then that starts to be something." And if you've got fifty of them, who knows? Maybe you could really get something started!

Calvin Trillin offers "A Short Message to Those Who Have Signed Petitions Asking to Secede From the Union."

**Gary Younge**

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**P.S.**

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\* Gary Younge, the Alfred Knobler Journalism Fellow at The Nation Institute, is the New York correspondent for the Guardian and the author of *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the Deep South (Mississippi)* and *Stranger in a Strange Land: Travels in the Disunited States* (New Press). He is also a contributor to The Nation.