

Corsican nationalist movements have fought for

the recognition of Corsican cultural and political sovereignty since the mid 1970s. Last year the French government decided to offer Corsica limited devolution within fiscal, economic and linguistic areas. These proposals are popularly known as the Matignon Process.

This process can be interpreted as an attempt to counter nationalist demands without jeopardising the sovereignty and unity of the French nation in the hope that an increased Corsican cultural and political self-determination will dam up the ongoing unruliness on the island, long perceived as a major problem in France's backyard. It also aligns with the European Union's recognition of regional identity.

Matignon has provoked a considerable discussion both in Corsica and in the rest of France. Much debate focuses on the role of culture as a legitimate criterion of nationhood. Many Corsicans have reacted against the decisions as political rights based upon ethnic criteria assuming a Corsican cultural and political homogeneity which leaves them deprived of democratic rights. In view of this Corsican politicians have bypassed 'culture' in their recent claims to political legitimacy. They now demand legislative rights. In the rest of France the Matignon Process has instigated debate about the Republic's political legitimacy. The proposals are perceived to admit French cultural and political heterogeneity, and challenge fundamental public and political beliefs in cultural homogeneity.

A look at the role of culture in public debate about Corsica over the years suggests that 'culture' is not a stable, objective

foundation of nationhood, but is closely connected to historic political practices, always in the process of endorsement, contestation and transformation.

During the 1980s and 1990s 'culture' has become a key semantic terrain of political discourse in Europe. Wars have been interpreted and explained in ethnic terms – as questions of conflict over culture – giving 'culture' a prominence as a politically legitimate means of debate. The public image of minority groups, in particular linguistic ones, has changed over the last two decades. From being national sub-groups, linguistic minorities are today perceived as distinct cultural groups by the European Union. In EU terminology, linguistic minorities constitute the cultural heritage of Europe and form an important basis of the 'new Europe' as a mosaic of different cultures; a 'unity in diversity'.

Cultural arguments have more credibility today than ideologically political arguments. This has been sustained by the media where 'culture' is often perceived to be the 'real' underlying reason for social and political conflicts. On Corsica, the FLNC (Front de Libération Nationale de la Corse) and diverse autonomist movements themselves shifted from a politico-economic discourse of underdevelopment and anti-colonialism to an ethnic and cultural projection of their image during the 1980s and 1990s. Concepts like 'the Corsican people' were promoted, followed by presentation of Corsica as a 'community by destiny', and the establishment of a specific Corsican cultural identity which underscored Corsica as a culturally homogeneous and sovereign nation as politically legitimate as France itself.

France has never been able to accept a notion of 'a Corsican people'. The French Constitution has aimed at cultural and political unity, a sustained effort to eradicate linguistic and cultural pluralism within the national borders. But in recent years the Republic has, however reluctantly, come to accept a version of the idea put forward by nationalists that Corsica is culturally different from the rest of France. The change in French political perceptions was part of increased interest in national heritage during the 1980s. Corsican customs and language had been presented somewhat pejoratively in the Deixonne-law of 1951 as a 'folklore' – opposed to civic culture. In 1982 such conceptions were upgraded as the particular 'culture' of Corsicans, which it was 'of utmost importance to safeguard for a national culture which recognised its original diversity' (*circulaire n° 82-261 du 21 juin 1982*).

Recognition of cultural differences has led to changes in contemporary minority political rights throughout Europe. Nationalist movements have formed their own liaisons within the EU which coordinate minority demands and lobby for the strengthening of their languages, culture and rights. The most important concessions towards Corsicans have involved the gradual recognition of a specific Corsican language and the recent Matignon Process. Such concessions are not, however, conceived of as minority rights by France. Because the French nation is primarily defined by cultural unity, the Republic does not admit to having minorities – only regions.

Proponents of the cultural view present a world made up of separate peoples, each with their specific and coherent way of life. This general confidence in culture's overriding importance, however, shows its limits as it becomes clear that 'culture' lends itself to various political purposes – one of them being to present or to represent populations as if they were bounded entities.

Eighteenth century travel writers either romanticised or condemned the Corsican vendetta in a society which overtly expressed its attachments to the Republic, but where French institutional forms were used to strengthen the existing local elites of family-alliances. Such early accounts contributed to an institutionalisation of 'vendetta' to a degree that it did not deserve. The image of Corsicans as violent seems nonetheless to have left a lasting imprint upon the island. Over the years, French newspapers have engaged in defining Corsica as a 'traditional' backward society of endemic violence, and Corsicans as thus unfit to take their place as 'modern' French citizens. This view of Corsica was also represented by Corsican journalists until the mid 1970s, when the rise of nationalism and a generally increased focus on human rights made it politically incorrect.

Journalists and the general French public still think of Corsicans as morally and ethically different from mainland French. The meanings of this difference vary, however, according to circumstances. In periods of increased violence on the island – such as was the case when nationalist factions almost systematically eliminated each other's members in 1995 and 1996 – 'Corsican culture' seems to be regarded as a problem. In other contexts 'Corsican culture' has been projected in a highly positive way. In the 1990s world-wide debates about globalisation, and how globalisation was perceived to lead to a loss of local character, identity and values, Corsica was often positively praised for

safeguarding family-values, traditions and a sense of collective identity.

Categorisation of Corsicans seems to have altered their social world and their experience of living in it. Many people on the island still live under a perceived social stigma of not having had access to proper French social competences. Concepts of Corsica and what it means to be Corsican today are therefore, in part, a consequence of what France has made it mean over the years.

Corsican nationalism in many ways succeeded in transforming French cultural stereotypes of Corsicans into a positive sense of identity. Since the mid 1970s vendetta, family-alliances and also the Corsican language have been explained as part of a separate Corsican culture. The analyses of what it meant to be Corsican were inspired by 1970-social anthropology's depiction of Mediterranean societies as egalitarian, based on codes of honour and a segmentary family-and-friendship organisation. These representations of Corsica as a holistic community were meant to point up a fundamental difference between Corsica and the perceived individualism and hierarchies of continental life.

The poignant nationalist promotion of a distinct Corsican identity and a steady production of anthropological and ethnological texts describing Corsican culture contributed to help Corsicans become their own sociologists. In public social interaction on Corsica during the 1980s and the early 1990s it was not uncommon to hear people explain and justify their actions and social behaviour in the context of the particularities of Corsican culture and identity.

Meanings change, however. While the focus on culture has provided Corsica with a political authority in the Republic, cultural explanations of Corsicans have also proved problematic – installing a new political hegemony and defining new areas of power and influence in the society. In particular, focusing on Corsican culture as if it was a concept shared by the whole island population has prevented other ways of thinking from being heard.

The cultural theory has never been universally embraced by Corsicans. As long ago as the 1970s some Corsican intellectuals pointed out that the cultural image of Corsica as an egalitarian society had led politicians and decisionmakers to underestimate the island's social and economic problems and to put the island beyond the reach of modern development. Although nobody denies the importance of family networks or the attachment to a certain family ethic, the image of Corsica as egalitarian is to some a serious distortion of

historical reality. Until the Second World War, part of the population lived and worked under almost feudal conditions. To their eyes the images of an egalitarian society have seemed impudent.

My own impression is that people on the island are now contesting the meaning of key terms and concepts of their society. Family-based political organisation seems to be increasingly questioned. The local elections of March 2001 broke long-lasting dominances in Corsican politics, with the old certainties about who got elected fading away. Reliance on notions of culture and identity as the basis of social organisation has left a range of social problems unacknowledged. Poverty, drugs and AIDS, for instance, are very concrete social and political matters on Corsica as well as on the Continent.

Political understanding of Corsicans in purely cultural terms proves problematic because it denies basic democratic rights. Anyone may – at least in principle – argue according to his or her convictions. This is not so when the background of the conflict is understood to be cultural and ethnic. Cultural explanations exaggerate Corsican unanimity and downplay change and local diversity. Not many Corsicans are prepared to accept this in today's world.

The Matignon Process is itself an excellent example of the new mood. Most Corsicans consider themselves both French and Corsican. A number of opinion polls suggest that the majority of Corsicans wish to vote democratically for or against the Matignon decisions. The process is not, however, based on democratic criteria as such, but on assumptions of cultural and ethnic rights. A possible result of Matignon, then, is a process of separation from France – even though this may not be what the majority of the population wants.

Matignon seems to have reversed the culture debate. Corsican politicians have shifted focus and conducted their campaigns on a strictly political and economic basis, using no cultural arguments. Thus, the notion of 'the Corsican people' has disappeared in favour of the symbolics of 'legislative power' (*Le Monde* 13 July 2000; 6/7 August 2000).

In the rest of France, the Corsica question has provoked an identity-crisis. The Matignon Process seems to throw the French 'ethnic' nation in relief. The island's likely new status has stirred a brand-new discussion about nation and nationhood. The debates in continental newspapers concern French national homogeneity, what the national identity is and ought to be, and not least the legitimacy

of a Europe of the Regions. Corsica and Corsicans are not discussed *per se* in recent newspaper debates. Corsica has become, rather, a metaphor for the actual constituency of the French nation.

Long-forgotten political antipathies such as 'Jacobins' and 'Girondins' have been revived to define the future nation. Many feel that France's cultural identity in Europe is threatened. In their eyes the French nation rests to a large extent upon linguistic homogeneity, and the qualities of the language are perceived to guarantee a French civilisation. Linguistic concessions towards Corsica would thus make France 'an extended Belgium' or 'a smaller Russia' (*Le Monde* 6-7 August 2000). In other words, not a 'real' nation, because not linguistically coherent.

Some have even argued that nations such as France are in fact 'the design of God', and that this cannot be said about 'regional identities', such as the Corsican, which 'have been reconstituted via historical anachronisms and plastic explosives' (*Le Monde* 28 August 2000). The irony is that neither France nor any other European nation are 'natural' cultural communities. Most European national borders have been externally constituted through wars and internally through varying degrees of assimilation. Other European nations, however, no longer insist upon cultural homogeneity. The Nordic countries, for example, define nationhood in political terms. And in political terms, minorities are not a threat to national integrity - if that is what one is aiming for.

A Corsican friend once said to me that, 'the French should not complain so much about our way of interpreting law and justice, of obstructing the judicial system. For in fact it might just as well be because of us that the French judicial system is able to develop and renew its concepts and procedures. Because we are an enigma to French constitution; because we are innovative in our way of going about law and justice, we constantly force the French judicial system to develop'. This was not said in a Matignon context, but it may contain some truth in the current situation. Both as a metaphor, and in a very real sense, the Corsica question challenges concepts of nation, culture and regionalism in France today.

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