

The Geographical Review

VOLUME 93

October 2003

NUMBER 4

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND THE SCRIPTORIAL LANDSCAPE IN QUÉBEC AND CATALONIA*

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ABSTRACT. Two small cities, Victoriaville, Québec, and Olot, Catalonia, are discussed in their national contexts to understand the twentieth-century evolution of that aspect of the visible landscape that is scriptorial in character: the signs, banners, graffiti, and inscriptions in public view. In Victoriaville, signs have gone from bilingual French and English to French. In Olot, they changed within a decade from Castilian to Catalan. Especially in Olot, with its recent history of repression, the monolingual landscape script represents an act of resistance. Both transformations reflect a strong sense of cultural solidarity and the adoption of legislation designed to protect and promote the main basis of the identity of distinctive regions. A territorial minority seeking cultural affirmation is sensitive to how the visuality of language separates it from the surrounding majority that speaks a different vernacular. As such, the language on signs or inscriptions carries symbolic meaning, involves subtleties, and contains contradictions. The scriptorial landscape, one element of the cultural landscape, contributes to the communication of national identity in a bounded territory in the past and the present.

Keywords: Catalonia, identity, landscape, language, Québec, signs.

How a cultural identity is communicated in a given territorial space raises a central issue of the linkage between the bases of that identity and its concrete manifestation. Nation-states with long histories of political independence are characteristically self-assured and matter of fact about how they communicate their national identity. At the opposite extreme are minorities who do not have the autonomy to set cultural policy or even to bound their space. In the continuum between those poles are territories still in the process of consolidating a cultural hold on their space. For them the path toward asserting identity is self-conscious and often facilitated by legal codification. Language is now often considered the most important factor in defining who this group is. If language rights now underpin demands for autonomy, that linkage has not always been assumed. Until the late eighteenth century, language was viewed as being a natural object of divine origin, not a phenomenon controlled by human will (Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity

* Three geographers shared with me astute cultural perspectives about their own societies: Marcel Bélanger (1927–2001), Université Laval; Francesc Nadal i Piqué, Universitat de Barcelona; and Maria Dolors Garcia Ramon, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. A fourth geographer, Mary Scott Killgore Gade, read the manuscript.

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