

The World seen from the corner, the galician globalisation

Description

*Galiza bounds to the North with the hake of the Irish Box.
To the East with the European paths to emigration.
To the South with Cape Town.
To the West with the Americas*•.
(www.osdiplomaticos.com)

Introduction

Galiza or Galicia⁽¹⁾. This tiny country somewhere in Europe has shaped the European identity throughout history and presents a very peculiar way of seeing its surroundings. It is a good example of how the so-called globalisation has to be accomplished in an egalitarian form – otherwise it is a farce – a good demonstration that one does not need to be big to become influential. General information and useful links about the place may be found in sites such as Elandnet (<http://www.elandnet.org/links/en/Europe/Galicia/>), or in <http://galicia97.vieiros.com/english/parliament.html>. But here my only intention is to write about a peculiar and interesting vision of the World from the academic perspective of Cultural Geography.

Galician geographical tradition has almost never approached in a direct manner the geography of the imagination or those imagined geographies referred to the construction of personal worlds. In fact Galician geography in general still did not approach new methods of analysing new cultural evidences from what we could call new cultural geography; Galician geography has yet to solidly enter the geographical turn. Crossed references all throughout the Galician culture or along other domains of knowledge are plentiful, perhaps this is the time to systematise it in our science. Only the great Professor Otero Pedrayo attempted to do that, but obviously not in a straight way or at least in the way we understand it now.

What we learn and what is around us (images, symbols, words, etc.) construct our mental images and perceptions. “The images we construct are at the same time inherently social” (Cloke, Crang, Goodwin [eds.] 1999: 209). This is one of the basis for the construction of a culture, but these elements are not fixed in time, but rather they can change and the idea of the indigenous culture remains. Therefore it is easy to understand that the self-perception of the Galician people and the external perception of Galiza and its peoples evolved with time.

Conforming the references

From when population settled down in what is presently Galiza it is difficult to argue when these peoples acquired any degree of community self-consciousness beyond being local tribes. The most obvious is to admit that this happened after the Roman invasion (2nd century BC), because it is under Roman rule when the first people coming from this area identified themselves as Galicians. But it is also evident that a cultural-ethnic unity existed from a long time before that; in addition, it was an illiterate community. Later historical developments helped to constitute a clear well-defined group of population and territory, politically defined as an independent kingdom (410 AD). The early Middle Ages were prosperous times, with Galiza finding its place and personality and also a very dominant position in the Iberian Peninsula. These very same historical processes forced the progressive withdrawal of the Galician influence from 1230, and drastically after 1486 (López Carreira et al. 1997). In addition, some eastern territories were incorporated into other kingdoms; so that the so-called ‘Irredentist Galiza’ is now administratively separated from Galiza’s core, but these territories still preserve a more or less strong Galician identity, this being a focus of occasional political debates (as seen in <http://www.angelfire.com/folk/gzunida/>; López Mira 1998).

These changing situations encouraged some of the external and internal perceptions of the Galician-ness still existing.

The most common cliché applied to the Galician character is that of uncultivated people, unable to succeed, with a voluble character, even sad or depressive. This is obviously an easy generalisation, a wrong idea adopted as true by a misinformed outsider (Caramés Martínez 1993; Rivas 1994; Paredes 1999). It first originated from the independence of Portugal, the succession wars and the popular revolts in Medieval Iberia, which had very different ends in Galiza and in Castille(2); very negative and very positive results respectively (Caramés Martínez 1993; Paredes 1999). Later Spanish occupation reinforced what was called “Galician self-hate”, the shame because of the origin and identity, a very common feature in relation to colonial processes. In any case, the Galician society to Galicians themselves continued to be a dynamic society, far from being “sad” (as seen in Rivas 1994). The negative conceptions are changing very rapidly now, being substituted by others of moderate “pride” and a desire to open channels for international expression, as if Galician society was trying to recover some lost or wasted time.

Nonetheless it is admitted that historical misfortunes granted some doses of scepticism in the daily behaviour, huge doses of ‘retranca’(3). This deep-rooted view of life had to mix up with the enormous migrational processes happening since the early 19th century(4) and the development of the Galician fishing fleet, a traditional activity that became of the first order in 20th century(5). These two last mentioned aspects give us some of the keys in the elaboration of the Galician imaginary.

This imaginary to which I am referring is a territorial imaginary, part of the folklore and the broadest imaginary, not ‘The Imaginary’ of the Galician culture, impossible to embrace now. This last should include, however, all those ancient folkloric traces that still persist at present. These obviously shaped the Galician communities abroad and the external perception of the Galicians. This is when outsiders’s clichés appear, where Galicians are seen as “mysterious and reserved people”, “honest and good working people”, “deeply attached to their ancient customs”, and so on.

Galiza itself is seen as a “mysterious” place, a strange or magical territory, with some degree of inherent dignity. O’Flanagan (1996: 17): “... sensation of everything one sees is antique, venerable and unchangeable ... everything seems to be covered in a warm and tired air”. Apart from this, a number of very negative conceptions are derived from the former condition of poverty, and/or personal manias (Caramés Martínez 1993; Rivas 1994).

But in the Galician territorial imaginary something is missing, that is the North and the South, in detail the Celtic World and Portugal.

With the independence of the county of Portucale in 1121 (nowadays North Portugal) the old ethnic unity and the political union of the Kingdom of Galiza splits in two. It was just a fight for dynastic power, with personal envies included. Since that moment Galician poetry, literature, music – cultivated arts and some popular expressions in general – cried for the departure of the “prodigal son”, hoping to find him again, or precisely, waiting for him to come back to the “mother”. Curiously, the negative aspects of this issue always came from outside Galiza (Banhos Campo et al. 1997; Paredes 1999; and many others).

And the North... The idea of the “North” as some kind of positive mythological reference is not so strange in many cultures around the Globe. In Galiza this idea was reinforced by the 19th century romantics, who were generally based in the exaltation of the Celtic links (Rivas 1994), links lost in time but with a real form in modern folklore and society (Paredes 1999, 2000; and many others). The ideal of the “North” can be constructed, the cultural bonds embellished – and this certainly happened – but for the Galician case these links and influences do exist in fact, something that complicates the panorama. Hence, we find the same expressions that we found for Portugal in relation with the other “capex of the World” or “ends of the World” (Paredes 2000), the so-called Celtic countries, Ireland and Brittany in particular.

Even if we just pay attention to the fishermen’s world we realise the tremendous importance of Ireland and its seas for this sub-culture. Ireland is an emotional reference for many Galician sailors, when many of them visited Castletownbere (or Dingle or Valentia) as their first harbour abroad ever. They even have altered many of the place-names to the Galician pronunciation, in fact, worldwide references are assimilated in the Galician culture as illustrated below (figure 1).

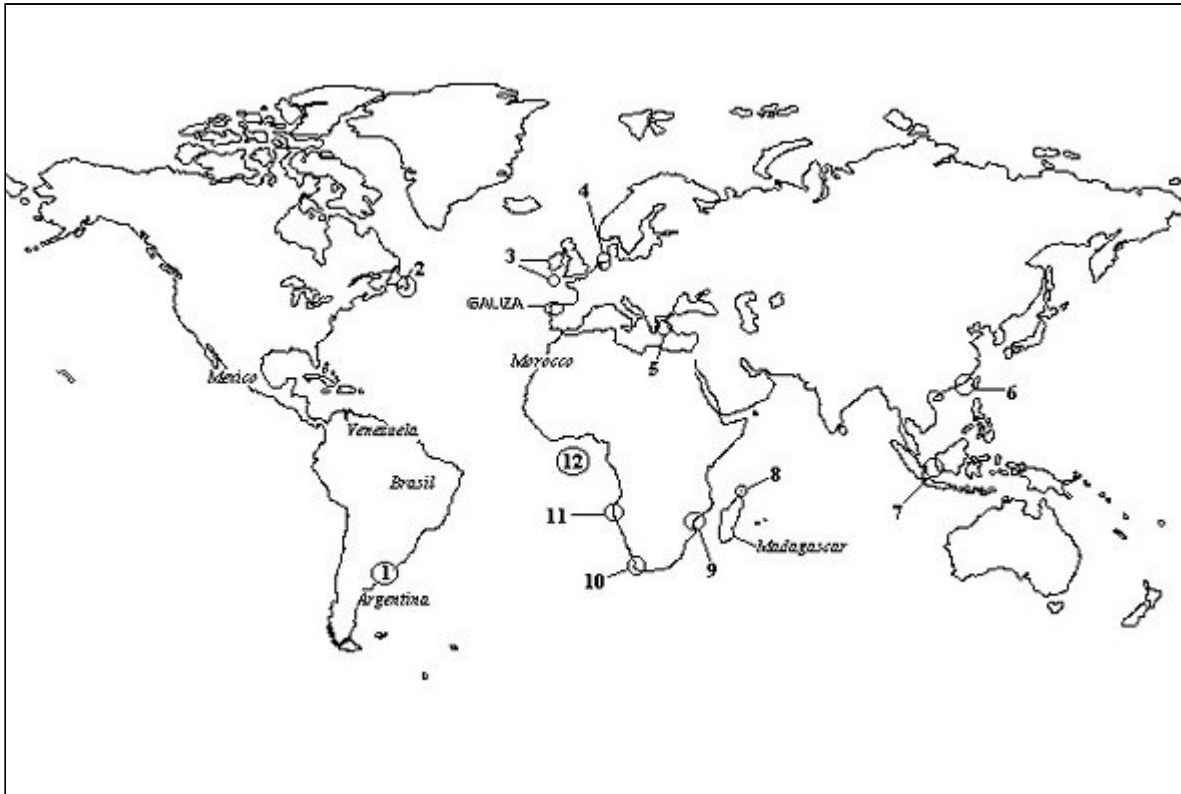


Figure 1. The Galician referential Sea-World.

(1) Buenos Aires. (2) Saint Pierre (Newfoundland). (3) Casteltón (Castletownbere), and the “Gran Solâ€™ (â€œThe Irish Boxâ€•). (4) Antuerpe (Antwerp). (5) Pireo (Piraeus). (6) Hong Kong. (7) Singapur (Singapore). (8) “A Galegaâ€™ (â€œThe Galicianâ€•, a tiny island just above Madagascar). (9) Mozambique. (10) Capetón (Cape Town). (11) Valisvai (Walvis Bay). (12) Gulf of Guinea.

Source: Os Diplomáticos de Montealto (<http://www.osdiplomaticos.com/>); author.

It is when we analyse the role of the sailors/fishermen and the emigrants that we realise the tremendous spread of the Galician culture and the socio-cultural feedback generated by this. A Galician may not know anything about the closest village but he/she may know all the details about the Hong Kong harbour or where to go out on a Saturday night in Buenos Aires instead. The globalisation understood as a common ground of peoples and knowledge is something old – it just sped up recently – and for the Galician culture the daily village life in direct relation with what was happening in the other end of the World is something quite common. Galiza, with its impressive fishing fleet, its impressive number of sailors embarked in foreign ships(6) and its (sadly) outstanding migrational process took its own vision of the land away and mixed it with new contributions found throughout its global experience.

Country	Galician population at present	Number of galician centres
Galiza	2.742.622	(non applicable)
Spanish State	525.000	68
Argentina	330.000	53

Venezuela	100.000	12 (1)
Brazil	95.000	7 (11)
Germany	90.000	11 (1)
Switzerland	55.000	19
France	50.000	2
Uruguay	36.000	12 (1)
Great Britain	32.000	1 (1)
Mexico	17.000	2
The Netherlands	12.000	5
USA	10.000	4 (1)
Panama	9.000	0 (2)
Portugal	5.500	1
Belgium	4.000	3
Cuba	3.000	14
Chile	2.800	1
Australia	2.000	1
Puerto Rico	1.300	1
Andorra	< 1.000	1
Canada	< 1.000	1 (1)

Colombia	< 1.000	1
Denmark	< 1.000	1
Dominican Republic	< 1.000	1
Kenya	< 1.000	1
Peru	< 1.000	1
Russia	< 1.000	0 (1)

Figure 2. Distribution of Galician population.

In this table: Without brackets the centres presented only as “Galician”. In brackets the number of Galician centres presented in association with Spanish centres or Spanish centres where the Galician component is predominant and/or of high importance. These are centres established by emigrants and only later recognised as “official”, not academic centres (for example those in Universities).

Checking the figure for Argentina it is easy to understand why all the Spanish there are called Galician in a generic way. South America, and very especially Argentina, is basic for the understanding of the Galician referential world. Argentina is sometimes even considered a “second Galiza”, and the city of Buenos Aires the “fifth province”. The Galician population in Ireland is small, there is however an Irish Centre for Galician Studies in UCC.

Source: Galicia Universal (<http://galiciauniversal.xunta.es/>); IGE (<http://www.xunta.es/auto/ige/index.htm>); López Carreira et al. (1997); author.

These factors also constructed the modern vision of the Galicians as “people who are everywhere”. It has been sarcastically asked if there is any country left without Galician presence (see figure 2). This was rapidly incorporated to modern folklore, i.e. as shown in humoristic songs as: “We have contacts, we have powers/in the Universe there are other beings/they are Galician as ourselves/The Martians have arrived/and they are Galician as well/they are as Celtic as you are”(Z); or even to jokes, i.e.: “it is said that when Christopher Columbus approached America’s shore for the first time, he heard from the coast: ‘throw me a rope’ [in perfect Galician]”.

The emigrants also helped to construct (or consecrate) the vision of Galiza as the “beloved motherland”. “Nation’ is in itself an imagined community” (Mitchell 2000: 269), “national identities are co-ordinated ... by ‘legends and landscapes’ ” (Daniels 1993: 5). Thus it is usually admitted that this construction of the country as the “motherland who embraces all her sons” was a romantic construction of the first Galician 19th century nationalism – also found in other nationalist processes – but we cannot forget the strong sentiment of identity and the special relationship with the possessed land in the rural (and not so rural) society. This marriage between Man and Land could even be traced back to ancient times according to some customs and cultural facts (Pena Graña 1994). In fact, that obsessive love for the “land one walks over” is a well-known characteristic of the Galician psychology, explained in part for being the traditional Galician society a poor rural society where a productive land meant the familiar survival. The 19th century nationalists had, therefore, an easy task upgrading the consideration of the “beloved piece of land that feeds you” to the whole country, using cultural references recognisable and well known by everybody. In a way, the conception of the “Galician motherland” (definitely “Galiza is a woman”) was a constructed but logical next step in the definition of modern Galician identity according to the existing patterns in each period of time. The evidence is that this concept had such an enormous popular acceptance that today even non-nationalists firmly assure that Galiza is “our mother of the two seas”.

Final considerations

So far we realise many different things: first of all about the many diverse different external contributions received by the Galician culture; secondly, the capacity of the Galician culture – in spite of all the pressures – to adapt and assimilate these influences; thirdly, the mix with the Global references in a traditional way; and finally, a subconscious sentiment of “globality” from a (not always exposed) participative action. A “cosmopolitan vision, precisely because it comes from the end of the World” (in <http://www.fonomusic.com/osdiplomaticos.html>).

Part of what the concept of globalisation involves is the understanding of the Globe as an intercommunicated place, the “global village”, but the risk precisely resides into not really knowing anything in depth because – for obvious reasons (enormous amount of information, time limitations, accessibility restrictions, etc.) – we cannot access all the information we could hypothetically reach. This also implies that now one can access things never imagined, without even having the suitable methods of selection in order to filter that information. Hence the importance of paying attention and try to understand from the original source minorised cultures as the expression of one of the most genuine human features: diversity.

The traditional Galician culture, until today able to deal with the “pre-computers Globalisation”, is now in a delicate situation for – briefly – two main reasons: a) The influence of the Spanish language and aggressive interference of Spanish culture (specially strong and devastating since the apparition of the mass media); b) The lack of means and equipment, related to the traditional situation of economic backwardness (i.e. poor ownership of computers, poor connexion to the internet, poor accessibility and/or diffusion of own methods of expression, etc.).

Globalisation must be egalitarian, that is to say, the possession of the methods of production (whatever form they can adopt in modern days) and access to the channels of diffusion in equal terms. Otherwise, globalisation would further fragment into sealed containers that “diversity”. Otherwise, we will see the consecration of the production-capital model and the established powers in a greater and more repressive (and better controlled) scale, without even noticing (“we are in Europe now, what else do you want?”). In short, the final consecration of capital, its representatives, and their ways of escape and future safe reproduction.

Because of that I would like to finish with what Castelao stated expressing the importance of the singularity reflected in a territorial example (in his ‘Sempre en Galiza’): “Galiza, cell of Universality”.

Notes:

- (1) I use here the native name “Galiza”, even though “Galicia” is often used as well.
- (2) Emerging Iberian kingdom in 1230. It constituted the core of modern Spain.
- (3) Galician word explaining a determinate behaviour, behavioural code or attitude only associated with the Galician people. It has to do with a mix of scepticism, ambiguity and black humour, sometimes very acidic. Also, if using it, one has to look “cool” and very serious all time. In fact it is a “defensive” behaviour.
- (4) Defined (altogether with the Irish one) as the greatest Diaspora in times of peace (that is, not originated by a war). Galiza suffered a total loss of over 1 million people in 19th century and over 830.000 during 20th century. It came to represent over 40% of the total of the Spanish migration. Galiza comprised almost 14% of the Spanish population in 1752, now it is no more than 7% (2.7 million). [IGE (<http://www.xunta.es/auto/ige/index.htm>); INE (<http://www.ine.es/>); Villares 1986; López Carreira et al. 1997; Paredes 1999].
- (5) Galiza contributes with over 40% of the Spanish State fleet (<http://www.xunta.es/>). Remembering that the Spanish State fleet is one of the largest in the World, we realise how this small nation (Galiza) represents an impressive number by itself.
- (6) There is a long tradition of joining foreign ships, just because the Galician fleet cannot employ them all.
- (7) Song “Xa están aquí”, from “Os resentidos” (“Made in Galicia 1982-1994”, ‘greatest hits’ album).

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