



THE FIVE PARTS OF THE WORLD JOINING HANDS (1936) BY JOSEP M. SERT.  
DECORATION OF THE COUNCIL HALL OF THE SOCIETY OF NATIONS, GENEVA.

# IMMIGRATION IN CATALONIA



SERT, MURAL IN TOWN HALL OF BARCELONA (DETAIL).

THERE IS A REAL DANGER THAT MEN AND WOMEN WHO WITH A LITTLE HELP WOULD BE ABLE TO GET ON MIGHT OTHERWISE BECOME HOPELESS OUTCASTS. THE FINAL RESULT OF THIS, AS WELL AS THE HUMAN WASTE, WOULD BE AN ENORMOUS ECONOMIC AND MORAL WASTE. THAT IS WHY SO MANY INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANISATIONS IN CATALONIA ARE WORKING TO AVOID THIS DANGER.

ÀLEX MASLLORENS HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF MIGRATION OF CÀRITAS DE BARCELONA

**B**etween 1939 (the year the Spanish Civil War ended) and 1975 (the year General Franco died) the population of Catalonia grew from 2.9 to 5.3 million inhabitants. Most of this spectacular increase was due to the arrival of thousands of workers from far more depressed areas of Spain.

In fact, for many years Catalonia was the driving force behind Spanish industrialization, and because of this many people in rural areas where there was practically no chance of employment saw emigration to Catalonia as the only

decent way out of the poverty in which they lived. Obviously, the Franco regime never carried out the agricultural reform that was needed.

During this period, the Catalan population went from 11.2% of the Spanish total in 1940 to 15.6% in 1975, with 16.2% of the working population of the country as a whole.

At the end of the fifties, especially, there began to be a need in Barcelona and the surrounding area and in other industrialized parts of Catalonia for a large, cheap workforce prepared to take

on the worst and lowest-paid jobs on offer. This work was done mainly by people from Andalusia, Extremadura, Galicia, Aragon, Murcia, etc. who came in search of better living conditions.

This human avalanche could have had far more conflictive results than it did and could even have had a damaging effect on Catalan society itself. Catalonia had lost all her national rights at the end of the Civil War and her citizens had had to renounce their culture and also the use of their own language in public. Just by chance, the arrival of



SERT. CATHEDRAL OF VIC (DETAIL).

waves of immigrants coincided with the first semi-public attempts at cultural initiatives of a “Catalanist” nature and the publication of a certain number of books in Catalan. For the workers arriving from outside Catalonia there was a real danger that they would identify the Catalan language and culture with the “exploiters” they worked for and that this would lead them automatically to reject everything they felt was “too Catalan”. The fact is, though, that the part played in favour of respect and plurality by certain social groups, such as the illegal parties and trade unions or even movements within the Church, has proved over the years to have been extremely important in contributing to harmony and understanding.

Today, in spite of the considerable hardships that most of the immigrants had to undergo –slums, crudely constructed shanty towns, satellite estates devoid of any form of town-planning or basic facilities– their integration is exemplary and relations between the original Catalans and the newcomers and their descendants are so natural that there is hardly any difference between them. In fact, the nationalist parties all get a substantial part of their support from second or third-generation Catalans. Catalan today is understood, if not spoken, by the majority of the Catalan population, without much difference between the “life-long Catalans” and those that

have arrived in the last thirty-five years. Now, though, parroting, perhaps, what is happening in other parts of Europe, people have begun to worry about what could happen with the new immigrants, those from the Third World countries. For this reason, and to avoid regrettable mistakes, it has to be said quite clearly that, first of all, there is no “avalanche” or “invasion”, as some panic-mongers would have us believe. The latest reliable studies indicate that the presence of foreigners in Catalonia (including people from the Common Market and the rest of the “first world”) represents no more than two per cent of the population. In this respect we should bear in mind that there are European countries where problems such as racism, rejection, discrimination, violence, etc. are beginning to be taken seriously and where the percentage of immigrants in some cities exceeds 35 % of the total population.

Secondly (and contrary to what all those people think who have only just heard of the existence of Moroccans or Gambians), there have already been Third World immigrants in Catalonia for some years now, in some places in proportions not far short of those today. It is worth noting here the arrival during the seventies of relatively large numbers of Latin-Americans escaping from the dictatorships in their countries. Of these, the most numerous fugitives came from Chile (1973) and Ar-

gentina (1976), but these were not the only American countries from which immigrants arrived. And before that, at the end of the sixties and beginning of the seventies, there began to be a constant and increasingly noticeable presence of black Africans in certain rural and/or tourist areas, mainly engaged in agricultural work or traditional crafts. Also during that period tens of thousands of Moroccans arrived in Barcelona’s industrial belt. They came into the country illegally and didn’t in fact have many problems, because it was a time of growth, and a cheaper workforce was needed than was available here, one that could withstand even greater exploitation and that would contribute to the materialization of the great development plans based mainly on investment in infrastructures and services.

At first, this workforce didn’t settle definitively, but came and went, and would often escape over the border to France as soon as the occasion arose. Many of the Moroccans worked in terrible conditions on the construction of the first Spanish motorways.

With the consolidation of the economic situation, around 1975, a large part of the immigrant population from the Third World went from mobility to stability. As Teresa Losada says in her work “La immigració marroquina en els últims vint anys”, included in *Els treballadors africans a Catalunya. Aspectes socials i culturals*, published by the Fun-



SERT. MURAL IN TOWN HALL OF BARCELONA (DETAIL).

dació Jaume Bofill in Barcelona, “during the last ten or fifteen years, profound economic, political and cultural changes have altered the shape of immigration and led to the double paradox of foreign workers existing alongside unemployment and the divorce of immigration and production demands. From the point of view of demography what happened was that a specific class of manual workers grew into a foreign population added to by each new generation, and manual jobs were undertaken by the foreign population which had a higher birth rate. Most Moroccans are today forced to undertake agricultural work, jobs of a sort no-one else wants to do, in an industrialized landscape that has not managed to overcome the after-effects of the crisis. Immigration (...) is no longer seen as a passing phenomenon of secondary importance, but as a reality affecting all aspects of our society: culture, politics, the economy and religion.”

The Spanish state has lost a golden opportunity to effectively put into practice what it calls a “foreign workers regularization process” (halfway between an amnesty and a census), but this regularization was one more in a series of “national bungles”. It was done badly, trampling on the most elementary rights of the immigrants, papers have been lost, there have been countless cases of unequal treatment of people in practically the same situation, and so

on. The final result has been that there are still tens of thousands of immigrants whose situation is illegal, foreigners are “expelled”, left without identity papers and with an expulsion order in their pocket which no-one ever carries out (and which officially bars them from ever getting a job or renting accommodation), the prisons are full of foreigners with no hope of rehabilitation, etc. And life is hardly a bed of roses for those who are “legal” either: the administration stubbornly turns down applications for family regrouping, preventing immigrants who have been working here for years from bringing their families over and starting to look ahead with a minimum of stability and hope.

There is a real danger that men and women who with a little help would be able to manage might otherwise become hopeless outcasts. The final result of this, as well as the human waste, would be an enormous economic and moral waste. That is why so many individuals and organisations in Catalonia are working to avoid this danger.

But it would also be extremely unfair to overlook the fact that there are large parts of the country that have passed the test with flying colours and where, in spite of a considerable presence of immigrant workers, their integration and their acceptance by the local population are now irreversible realities.

Between them, the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) and non-profit-

making organisations dealing directly with immigrant workers living in Catalonia cover an important range of activities of all kinds. As well as social attention to families, which must be our priority if we want to avoid (as far as is possible) the systematic marginalisation of immigrants, there are also other initiatives on a long-term basis—for example, monitoring of children’s education; legal support, especially in the defence of the recognized rights of immigrants and of Spanish citizens in general, and also in obtaining residence and work permits. It is also important to ensure that immigrants obtain the pensions they are entitled to by law, or even, in some cases, Spanish nationality.

These organisations also provide literacy courses for adolescents and adults as well as general training for women and technical training for both sexes. It is also their aim that all children should attend school, since the state schools in Catalonia at present accept all boys and girls, whether legally resident or not. Very often financial aid is necessary to pay for pupils’ school books or meals or to cover the cost of accommodation or even maintenance.

Finally, we must not forget the all-important work of informing and denouncing. The public must be made aware of the way immigrants in our country live and the problems they are up against and, especially, how these can be solved on a day-to-day basis. ●