An Uncertain Icon: The Changing Significance of the Croix Occitane in the Post-War Midi

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The Occitan cross adorns many crimson flags in the Languedoc, communicating a proud attachment to both the region's identity and its long and turbulent history.¹ Regional identity has at times seemed like and pretended towards a national status, based upon the pre-modern unit of 'Occitanie'. Occitanie is the region in which Occitan is principally spoken, encompassing much of the southern half of France (the Midi, described as Méridional), but concentrated most strongly around the regions of Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrénées. It has been recognized as a vibrant identity since the Middle Ages, but has skirted political validation, except as the territories of the Count of Toulouse, both prior to and following its conquest by the French nation in the 13th century. The predominance of winegrowing in the economy of these regions has engendered convergences between wine and regional identity throughout the twentieth century; this has ensured that the Occitan cross has frequently been deployed as part of the vocabulary of viticultural protest whenever the Languedoc viticole faced economic difficulties.

Yet exactly which aspects of Occitan history or identity are called to mind vary with the specific deployment of the cross. It has been borne at the head of demonstrations, spray painted on walls as a sign of protest and today flies atop the offices of the regional administration. How then can we reconcile a symbol which is at once dissenting, combative and yet, legitimately institutionalized? This chapter will elucidate how the cross was used to ground different inflections of Occitanisme, and will analyze different conceptions of distinctive Occitan patrimony as those relate to issues of class, regionalism, internal colonization, and modernization.
Tracing the varying deployment of this symbol, from the head of protest marches in the 1960s to the top of government buildings after the decentralization drive of the 1980s, allows for an illuminating analysis of both Occitan and regional identity. The fluctuating significance of the Croix Occitane is emblematic of a struggle for control of regional patrimony that first arose in the late 1960s. The height of both Oc and Vine as resistant notes in the south coincides with a period in which supporters of both articulated and manipulated the significance of this patrimony: from its aggressive usage in the 1970s, when regionalist protestors deployed it against the French state, to the 1980s, when the sweeping election of the left redefined the experience of these regionalist fringes and brought patrimony into the collective vocabulary of French nationhood (Lebovics, 2004, p.6). This history shows how local symbols and protests have helped demarcate the lines between precarious communities rooted in their locality, and external pressures often embodied by national government.

[A] Decazeville: Patois and the Pit

The miners of Decazeville went on strike between 1961-1962, spending nearly a month occupying cold, damp underground mines isolated from their families and sleeping on piles of straw to protest a round of lay-offs (Reid, 1985, p.204). That the intensification of action involved 20 miners hunger-striking was intended to instruct the French public of the extent to which Parisian technocrats were wreaking havoc on the peripheries of the state; it presented broken, starving labourers as evidence of a barren and damaging industrial policy. Particularly relevant in this strike, however, was the extent to which it solidified Occitanisme as the new language of resistance to the centralised state, rehabilitating a concept which, it was commonly thought, had previously been the reserve of perceived intellectual dandies like the literary movement of the Félibrige. Many regionalist commentators highlight Decazeville as a turning point for the Occitan movement; for Michel Le Bris, despite being 'originally
cultural, the Occitan movement after 1962 became political' (Le Bris, 1975, p.31). The miners conveyed in the language of the region that damage wrought on the culture of their community and their economy was in fact representative of damage being done by the French state to the regions more broadly.

So too was the icon of the Occitan cross a useful tool in communicating the distinct character of this industrial dispute, with the red flag synonymous with pit strikes and also communicative of regional difference. Reid depicts the fragile Occitan movement at the time of the strike as having largely restricted itself to 'literati and intellectuals in Montpellier and Toulouse' (Reid, 1985, p.209). Yet the langue d’oc of strikers’ slogans brought an air of freshness and humanity to the Occitan movement, a decisive move away from the poetic and literary incarnation of Occitanie and towards 'an interpretation of Occitanisme as the cultural expression of all those dispossessed by the central state' (Reid, 1985, p.210). Strikes broke out across the Languedoc in support of the Decazeville miners, with rugby games cancelled in Toulouse and Perpignan as a matter of solidarity (De Sède, 1982, p.267). These measures of support began to symbolize a meshing of movements as the political maturity of the Occitanistes allowed them to address problems of class and speak coherently to the region's economic interests.

The miners’ strike showed Occitanistes that the formation of another society didn't rest merely on reactions to 'cultural alienation' but had to involve direct political action. Those convinced of the need to speak simultaneously of Socialism, class struggle and the culture of the region’s masses converged to form the Comité Occitan d'Études et d'Action (COEA) in 1962 (Lafont, 1971, p.219). This organisation was designed to channel the political relevancy of the older scholarly societies into more direct action to foster Occitan identity. The COEA, as the hub of Occitan intellectuals, began to speak of 'internal
colonialism' which contributed to a new conception of regional disparity. The Occitan movement had to deal not only with traditional identity and language, but also de-industrialisation, unemployment and the exodus of youth and agricultural labour (Alliès, 1972, pp.10-12).

Decazeville reenergised intellectual engagement with Occitanisme and other intellectuals emerged to champion the cause of regionalism in the 1960s. Robert Lafont, a long time member of the COEA was emblematic of this shift, moving from linguistic analysis to political theory, as southern intellectuals took on a new role as social activists. Lafont published *La Révolution Régionaliste* in 1967, which advocated federalism as a solution to the increasingly alienating and 'autarchical' character of the French Republic (Lafont, 1967, p.14). In recognizing the challenges of European integration and regional economic disparity, Lafont sought to construct a federalism that liberated through the representation of regional interests at a European level.

[A] Les années 68 and Occitanie

While the riots of Paris were not mirrored in the Midi, the social pressures triggering such a widespread movement across Europe did come into play there, as did the ramifications of so direct a challenge to central government. If 1968 did not create the forces which encouraged expressions of Occitan identity and spurred viticultural radicalism, then the années 68 can be said to have provided a shot in the arm to an existing process in the Midi. Yet, it is striking how little memorial legacy '68 has left in the region. Most interviewees showed little appreciation of 1968's direct impact on the Languedoc viticole, denigrating its importance as 'an urban movement, not a rural one' (Interview with Bonafé, 2010). In claiming that 'Occitania is essentially agricultural' (COEA, 1971, p.81), the COEA sought to distinguish the Midi as not only culturally but also economically distinct from the North.
Southern regionalists took strength from ‘les années 68’ and the reservoirs of support filled by the actions of those in the COEA would fuel an increasingly active Occitan movement. Despite its poor local traction, 1968’s legacy has been widely acknowledged to have created an increased national appetite for discussion of the role of the regions in the centralized state. Robert Lafont’s reflection on the consolidation of the French nation throughout its history was released in this same year. His very first line warns that the book ‘could shock the French reader’ (Lafont, 1968, p.25), and Lafont proceeds to tell the story of France’s triumph over the regions throughout the 17th and 18th centuries until the modern period, characterizing internal and external colonialism as merely different facets of ‘official French chauvinism’ (Lafont, 1968, p.221).

Culturally too, the 1960s had an impact on Occitanisme. Formed in July 1968 by Claude Alranq, the Occitan theatre group Lo Téatre de la Carriera (Theatre of the Street) toured a series of Occitan language plays about the struggles of winegrowers. The group, which bore the Croix Occitane as its logo, became a resonant link between the people of the Corbières, wine and the Occitan movement. In particular, their play La Mort et Resurrection de M. Occitania (The Death and Resurrection of Mr Occitania), linked the economic and cultural health of the Languedoc with the titular embodiment of the region (Hébert and Noël, 1980, pp.145-161). After resurrection, he is reminded that ‘a people that has lost recognition of itself is the easiest to destroy’ (Nouvel Observateur, 1971). This awakening was demonstrated by the formation of a group called Lutte Occitan (Occitan Struggle), charged with pushing a specifically Socialist vision of Occitan independence in 1970. They drew together the many Comités d'Action Occitans which had formed in the wake of 1968 to form a socialist political federation and push for national liberation (Rawlinson, 1996, p.6). Significantly, it was Lutte Occitan that championed the slogan of the Occitaniste movement,
'Volem viure al païs' (We want to live in our country). They tried to connect the popular engagement with Occitanisme and Catharism in the context of political struggle. For example, their meeting in Montségur in 1973 drew some 10,000 attendees, ostensibly to commemorate the Cathars, but also to listen to political rhetoric as the Occitan cross flew against the resonant backdrop of the Cathar citadel.

The rally finished with a performance from Claude Marti, the Occitan singer whose popularity across France had also served to raise interest in the Occitan cause. Moreover, Roland Pécout, in a book on Claude Marti, wrote of this period that 'it was an era in which the affirmation of Occitania had taken on the colours of the Third World; the passage from this stage marked the end of a certain romanticism and the beginning of a more lucid analysis' (Pécout, 1974, pp.50-59). The popularization of the Occitan movement, bearing the Croix Occitane as its emblem, and the radicalization of vocabulary encouraged further recourse to the challenging debate about the Third World' and the future role of regions like the Languedoc in a ‘post-imperial' world.

Although these developments during the 1960s had proved useful in drumming up increased support for the Occitan movement, it was the conflict at Larzac which entrenched this support. When the French government (and specifically then Minister of Defence Michel Debré) sought to extend a military base which had been in place since 1899 from 30km$^2$ to 170km$^2$, infringing on agricultural land on the Larzac plateau, locals began a long-standing struggle to prevent the annexation of regional land in service of the military. Tractors and sheep-farmers inundated the proposed expansion area, setting up protest camps within which circulated a new regional radicalism. The multi-cultural protest camp threw up odd combinations of freedom-fighters: suddenly Kanak militants protesting the extension of army bases in New Caledonia appeared alongside Languedocien activists to express the solidarity
of minorities sidelined by the extension of a Parisian imaginaire. By broadening their national and international appeal, the defenders of Larzac cultivated a potent authenticity which validated their non-violent actions and held them up as a legitimately oppressed group. They successfully manipulated the outrage at Paris’ seemingly unfeeling dismissal of their grievances to create a new local space for protest.

Indeed, there were demonstrable interactions between the Occitan movement and nationalist militants elsewhere in Europe. In particular, Occitan extremists sought to form connections with the IRA in an effort to show solidarity and draw a comparison between the Occitan nation under French control and Ireland under British rule. The 'Long Kesh Ramblers' - an Irish republican band formed as a fundraising group for the families of interned political prisoners - were welcomed at a series of concerts in the South of France and happily posed for photos during 'the exchange of the Occitan flag and the IRA flag.' The group's political engagement was well appreciated in the Midi where, following a concert, debate raged about violent struggle and the road to 'national' liberation (Lutte Occitan, 1973).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Figure 1: Occitan Activists and the Long Kesh Ramblers exchange the Croix Occitane with the Starry Plough, a symbol of Irish nationalism with a particularly Socialist overtone. (Lutte Occitan, 1973)

Common ground was found in mutual hatred of occupying soldiers - also stationed at Larzac - who had massacred 'our brothers, the workers of Ireland.' Likewise, the two groups professed 'the solidarity of impoverished people on the periphery of capitalist Europe' (Lutte Occitan, 1973). The 'internal colonialism' loathed by both the Occitan movement and the IRA
allowed common ground to be found despite many disparities in their actual situation. Suddenly, the dormant Occitan nation was granted a similar cachet to those resisting oppression all over the globe. Yet the most enduring link remained between the Occitanistes and the militant winegrowers of the Languedoc; their shared heritage strengthened both movements.

[A] Tangled lines between Oc & Vine

When winegrowers occupied Montpellier Cathedral early in 1971, police diagnosed a new vivacity and different tone in their protest movement. According to several RG reports 'the occupation certainly referenced "folklore" and at times took on the look of a "kermesse" (regional festival)' (RG Report, 1971). The notion of an Occitan revival had become bound to the concept of regional resistance in the eyes of the forces of order. The significance of the highly visible and symbolic acts of the winegrowers was in creating new touchstones of regional identity. These demonstrations, bearing the Occitan cross at their head, served as a new form of cultural fête, in which the symbols of Occitanie and the region's occupational identity could be communicated in a modern setting using well-worn vocabulary.

The deployment of the cross in festive contexts, and the celebratory atmosphere amidst a climate of contestation, underlined the importance of patrimony in communicating modern attachment to distant values. The RG description of this protest symbolized the commingling of culture, identity and politics; the appearance of the Occitan cross at demonstrations was an especially striking facet of the Midi's political development, projecting the tried and tested combative values of the Languedoc into a modern setting. Indeed, it became a potent and communicative symbol, a tradition which had been reclaimed or reinvented to serve modern needs. Hobsbawm states that 'invented tradition' is utilized to serve three main aims: establishing or symbolizing social cohesion; legitimizing authority;
and socializing and inculcating beliefs (Hobsbawm, 1983, p.9). This theory does not suggest there is only one conscious font for tradition, but rather that communities can subtly and at times unconsciously shape their own traditions to be reflective of their aspirations and preoccupations. In this sense, the alignment of Occitan and viticultural groups is understandable during a period of social and political radicalism, as they were mutually validating.

Abandoning the modern phrase 'agriculturalist' in favour of the rather outdated label of 'peasant' was another of the principal unifying concepts which drew the sheep-farmers of Larzac, the miners of Decazeville and the winegrowers of the Midi under the aegis of one broad movement. This peasant label allowed all three movements to connect themselves to the past and fostered an understanding of patrimony which emerged in opposition to the central modernising project of the Parisian powers-that-be. By uniting as 'peasants' fighting for regional patrimony under threat from a predatory colonizer, they won the conceptual battle for legitimacy. These sweeping terms allowed the co-option of swathes of history which might reinforce their resistant claim.

The formation of Mouvement d'Intervention des Viticulteurs Occitans (MIVOC) in 1975 by a winegrower long involved with viticultural political activism, Jean Huillet, forged a tangible example of the cooperation between winegrowers and the regionalist movement. Huillet, in his trademark cowboy boots, blue jeans, earring and handlebar moustache became involved with Occitanisme in the early 1970s through Lutte Occitan and carried their message into his participation in viticultural activism (Martin, 2005, p.138). In 1975, MIVOC denounced the enemies of Languedocien viticulture, whom they named as: 'Merchants... Political power... and large landowners'. These enemies were characterized as external, Parisian, centralizing and of the political right (Martin, 2005, p.142). Moreover,
Huillet published an article in the Paysan du Midi on 13 February 1975 which specifically utilized the rallying cry of the Occitan movement in defence of winegrowers: 'Volem viure al päis!' Huillet associated regional identity strongly with regional viticulture as the predominant economic activity of a Méridional working class. His attachment to the Occitan movement, his viticultural activism and also his Socialism demonstrate a strong conceptual bond between class, region and identity, which was borne out by his political engagement. For Huillet, 'the economy' was viticulture, 'the region' was the Languedoc viticole and the 'päis' was Occitanie (Paysan du Midi, 1975). The interaction of these local identifiers was seen as intuitive and their inter-dependency was reiterated as a political certainty, in direct contrast to the political and geographical exterior.

This direct association marked a tangible interaction of the 'civilization of the vine' as both groups took an active stance in claiming the authenticity of their own regional patrimony. After 1971, the various movements of the South became drawn together under the flexible banner of the Occitan cross, symbolizing a hazily defined political radicalism which supported regional, working class activity and cultural production against perceived external threats.

[A] The Fight back

A useful indication of the significance surrounding symbols like the Occitan cross and the history and identity it invoked was the long shadow it cast across the French government. This notion of patrimony was not officially welcomed into the purview of the French state until 1978, when Giscard's administration created an office of Cultural Patrimony within the Culture Ministry (Lebovics, 2004, p.84). 'Emergency ethnography' was suddenly pursued by the French state as a way to drain potent regionalist groups of their primary weapon – historical authenticity. This was set up in direct opposition to what had been termed 'guerilla
ethnology' emanating from regional actors – a concept analogous to Hobsbawm's ‘invented tradition’. Lebovics describes this over-wrought term as one which 'devalues an activity by regionalist political actors which the 'real' scientists find both occupationally and politically unacceptable' (Lebovics, 2004, p.84). Defining the Midi's traditions and celebrating their heritage was to remain a distinctly Parisian-led affair, allowing undesirable elements of local culture to be sanitized by the study of professional ethnologists who eschewed the fiery fervour of regionalists or protesting winegrowers and offered a decidedly 'neutral' stance on historical issues of place and locality.

The creation of this office within the Culture Ministry was backed by an inquiry ordered by the government and led by Isaac Chiva, a Social Anthropologist from the Collège de France. Chiva, along with Claude Levi-Strauss, sought to bring about an administrative decentralization in the control of patrimony backed by a coordinating central body (Lebovics, 2004, p.95). This initiative was not targeted solely at the Midi but reflected the pressure from regional groups during this period: the popularity of the Larzac protestors, the visibility of militant winegrowers, the vigor of Occitanistes and Bretons and also the violence of the struggle in Corsica. The government's reorganization was not merely a move to strike out at regionalist groups, but rather to protect itself and start fighting back against those seeking to carve it up.

Thus have centrally led campaigns sought to deploy the Occitan cross as an image of regional distinction. The Occitan cross has been repeatedly pinned to the image of the Cathar knight, horse bound and symbolic of a sanitized regional heritage. Stripped of radical context and widely used as a tool for marketing the Midi to tourists, Cathar heritage replaced the unsuccessful 1963 ‘Mission Racine’ which had seen the French government attempt to paint the Midi as a cheap alternative to the beach holiday destinations of Morocco and Tunisia
This campaign infuriated regional groups, and its concurrence with the Decazeville strike, viticultural protests and then the occupation of Larzac heightened the sense of a region under attack. Such mass marketing had been a contentious issue, as it was seen as an attempt to erode the functional identity of the region, relegating the cherished rebellious heritage to a historical curio to be found atop biscuit tins. Winemakers’ leader André Cases repeatedly claimed that 'mass tourism brings nothing, it is destructive' (Le Bris, 1976, p.207). Indeed, this attempt to cast the Midi as a beach destination, threatening political, cultural and economic marginalization, was satirized in cartoons in the radical journals Lutte Occitan and L’Echo des Corbières. Both presented a proud homme d’oc (Occitan man) hemmed in by restrictions and facing ever more pressure from newcomers and profiteers, with their existence only guaranteed as some sort of living museum exhibit.

Figure 2: 'Since Larzac, the ongoing liquidation of our country will become unavoidable if we do not take heed of our "Occitan fatherland"' (Echo des Corbières, 1972).

The resurgence in Occitan nationalism which had been championed by the COEA bolstered public awareness of the Languedoc's Cathar heritage. The Cathars were a heretical Christian sect which was the target of the Albigensian crusades of the Thirteenth Century, when the French nation wrested power in the Languedoc from the Counts of Toulouse. The Cathars remained significant as an obvious symbol of difference from a time where Occitan was widely spoken in a Midi which was politically distinct. They were also popularized at the time by a documentary television series, La caméra explore le temps, which had dedicated its final 2 episodes to the Cathars. Les Cathares: La Croisade and Les Cathares: L’Inquisition, directed by Stellio Lorenzi and broadcast on 22 and 29 March 1966, showcased the antiquity and size of the region at over 16 départements in the Twelfth Century. Isabelle Veyrat-
Masson stated that 'the overwhelmingly successful documentary was a way to embody and reconcile a reconstructed identity' (Veyrat-Masson, 2001, p.106). This series was significant and well received, constituting an important reminder of Catharism's importance to the Languedoc.

In contrast to the unpopularity of the 'Mission Racine', the later ‘Pays Cathare’ (Cathar Country) program was locally directed and sympathetically incorporated cultural festivals and historical commemorations into a regional celebration of Cathar identity (McCaffrey, 2001, p.130). This culturally attuned integration of region and state has served as a means of pacification. Invented tradition had been reconditioned by the state to be commemorated as a profoundly historical event. 1980 was declared a year dedicated to the celebration of heritage, and Giscard d'Estaing's government appointed acceptable interpreters of folklore, history and art in each region of France. Television and radio airtime was dedicated to broadcasting on patrimony, stamps and postcards were released and the government went as far as having sixty million commemorative matchboxes issued by the State tobacco company (Lebovics, 2004, p.112). The studies, articles and exhibitions which took place during 1980's year of patrimony helped define a genuine cultural heritage within France. Rather than serving as lairs for regionalist malcontents, local spaces of cultural pluralism could now be incorporated into the positive, collective field of national identity.

The end of that year marked a poignant moment in France's approach to heritage, with the cancellation of the Larzac plan in 1981 by the new Socialist government. Much of the fire which had driven regionalist protest had been extinguished as the government addressed the most immediate, inflammatory crises. The declining relevancy of the Occitan movement sidelined it from involvement in viticultural struggles. The shared potency which had brought
about this fragile regional alliance was dampened by a government more determined to open itself to the regions for the sake of preserving the national whole.

The city of Toulouse re-adopted the Croix Occitane as its emblem in 1983 as part of celebrations which commemorated the historical legacy of the medieval Counts of Toulouse. The reclamation of patrimony by regional councils and local authorities after the decentralization program of 1982 could take place in an atmosphere of sustainable development which actively courted the communication of regional interests. Further to this, institutional usage of the Croix expanded, with the Conseil régional de Midi-Pyrénées beginning to use the Croix Occitane as its logo in 1986 (De La Farge, 2010). In its deployment of the Occitan cross alongside the Cathar logo of a rising sun, the Audois 'Pays cathare' (adopted in 1989) program was emblematic of a shifting regional dialectic. Suddenly the patrimony which had motivated protest and provided the cultural cachet for regional dissidents was reclaimed by the state and reused liberally. Surveys into the possibility of marketing the Aude on its own patrimony were undertaken by the Conseil Général in 1987 and brought private interests closer to the local administration while allowing for popular consultation to guide policy (European Commission, 2002). The diverse and fluctuating significance of the Occitan cross was redeployed in the wake of national political change as a means of developing and refining progressive and positive regional identity, rather than communicating grievances against the central state.

Yet the institutionalisation of the Occitan Cross has not rendered it uncontroversial, nor removed it from the psyche of the Midi. In 2004, the incoming Président de la Région George Frêche proposed a change to the region's name: gone would be the Languedoc-Roussillon in favour of a title recalling the Roman presence in the area, Septimania. Protests against the idea conveyed a popular rejection, as 5,000 people gathered in Perpignan to
protest against the plan (Nouvel Observateur, 2005). Following this reaction, Frêche admitted defeat: '95% of people have expressed their love for the (name) Languedoc-Roussillon, and 5% defended Septimanie. It was a proposition and the people didn't want it, I am abandoning it, I'm backing off. I've touched a raw nerve and I won't stand against popular will' (AFP, 2005). Yet this climb-down did not signify an end to his attempts to rebrand the region, as he changed the flag from the traditional Occitan cross to a figurative rendering of the seven suns referred to by Septimania, representing the seven principal cities of the region. This flag change still met with criticism and there remain groups on social networks like Facebook campaigning for the reinstitution of the Occitan Cross as a symbol of Languedociens. As ever, traditional images of regional patrimony like the Cross proved a powerful tool in communicating modern grievances in an historic vernacular.

This adapted patrimony was the potent force which brought the broader regionalist movement together, uniting Occitanistes, winegrowers and strikers with a heady mix of emotive ethno-politicking and enthusiastic class entreaties. The symbol fluctuated historically between an articulation of regional difference and a claim towards Occitan political separatism. Tradition and inherited memory were updated by modern institutions which recycled and repositioned the relevancy of local patrimony. The deployment of the Occitan cross has represented a narrative of this negotiation, with its usage depicting a changing message bound to the enduring authenticity of regional patrimony and the changing political reality of the local space.

Works Consulted:


AFP, 23 September 2005.

Interview with Pierre Bonafé at Domaine de Larzac, Pezenas, Herault, 17 August 2010.


RG reports, 03/02/1971. Archives Départementales de l'Hérault, 676W179.


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1 The Occitan Cross (Croix Occitane) is the distinctive twelve pointed yellow cross set against a red background which constituted the heraldry of the Counts of Toulouse and represents an early token of Occitan nationhood.

2 For further discussion of the key group, the CRAV and viticultural violence in the Languedoc, see A. W. M. Smith 'Molotovs in the Minervois: Were the Comité Régional d'Action Viticole terrorists, revolutionaries or just cantankerous winegrowers?', Nationalisms, ed. B. Sudlow (New Jersey, Transaction, 2011).