



photographer Lluís Brunet

Xavier Sala i Martin 

Professor of Economics at Columbia University

What Catalans Want

Next new state in europe

Toni Strubell

For many, Xavier Sala-i-Martin (Cabrera de Mar, 1963) is “*the man in the eccentric-coloured jackets*”. At least, that is the image that most Catalans have of him. Many do not even know that this flamboyant TV personality is in fact a leading economics professor at Columbia University in New York. Forced to place him on a professional map, many would probably situate him closer to the world of professional football than that of academics and the economy. Indeed, his green, pink and yellow tailor-made suits and jackets have for years earned him the unofficial title of Catalonia’s most lively-clothed man at FC Barcelona matches (he was the club’s Statutory Economic Commission president (2006-2010) under Joan Laporta’s presidency) and on TV celebrity shows. His choice of jackets wavers little for the highbrow international economics venues he regularly attends. The press loves them and generally places him at the geometrical centre of most group shots he’s involved in. On a “Malaria No More” solidarity campaign held at the New York Stock Exchange on August 5th 2008, he and FC President Joan Laporta opened the session that day by jointly pressing the ‘Opening Bell’. Sala-i-Martin’s orange jacket was the star at the day’s event, of which –jacket or no jacket– the professor is particularly proud!

Sala-i-Martin, needless to say, is a keen football fan. To be more accurate, he is a Barça fan. The distinction is called for because being the latter doesn’t necessarily preclude the former. Many Barça fans see the club as a substitute for a national side and may not really care too much about football itself. Whatever the case, the professor is one of a select group of Catalan intellectuals that make no secret of their expansive devotion for FC Barcelona which they see as “*more than a club*”, which is the team’s motto. While other staunch FCB-supporting academics open their web home pages with scholarly quotes and notes about meeting times, Sala-i-Martin’s launches out with a portrait of himself in a turquoise jacket holding up the UEFA Champion’s League cup. And that’s not all. It goes on to show the masterly video that Barça coach Pep Guardiola showed to his players five minutes before playing the vital final against Arsenal in Rome in May 2009. From there he jumps, almost reluctantly one might think, to “Academic Stuff” and a graph on the evolution of the world distribution of income. Indeed, this is a favourite subject of his and one in which he has even countered conventional thought on the matter. Despite this penchant for sport and Barça, it would therefore be a mistake to think we are faced with a banal clothes eccentric. Far from it. Professor Xavier Sala-i-Martin is consistently ranked among the most widely-quoted economists in the world. In 2004 he won the King Juan Carlos I Prize of Economics which is awarded to the person the Bank of Spain considers to be the best economist in Spain and Latin America.¹ In 2006

¹ He gave the entire \$95,000 prize to the Umbele foundation which promotes education and development in Africa.

he also won the Lenfest Prize 2006 awarded to the best teacher at Columbia University. His study area includes economic growth, development in Africa, monetary economics, social security, health and economic issues. He is a champion of liberal thinking on which subject he wrote the book "Liberal economics for non-economists and non-liberals". Another of his best known books is "Economic growth" written with Robert Barro. Xavier Sala-i-Martin writes for *La Vanguardia*, often expressing views which are as critical of the policies of the Spanish government as they are favourable to Catalan independence.

