

XOSÉ M. NÚÑEZ SEIXAS

CATALAN NATIONALISM AND THE QUEST
FOR INDEPENDENCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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CATALAN NATIONALISM AND THE QUEST FOR INDEPENDENCE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Catalan quest for independence has undoubtedly become the key issue of contemporary Spanish politics since the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Alongside the Scottish referendum of independence in 2014 and the rise of Scottish demands for a second referendum to be held after Britain's exit from the European Union (EU), the mobilisation of Catalan nationalists in favour of independence has also contributed to posit the issue of the so-called 'inner-enlargement' of the EU borders, as well as the convenience and legitimacy of the claim for self-determination in Western European democracies.¹ Most surprisingly, what seemed to be the foci of ethnonational unrest, linked to enduring ethnic conflict, in Western Europe from the 1970s through to the 1990s, Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and (to a lesser extent) Corsica, have been replaced by peaceful mass mobilisation in favour of self-determination, coming from stateless nations that, until quite recently, appeared as a paradigm of pragmatic accommodation within their respective nation-states: Scotland and Catalonia.

Certainly, the contemporary Catalan conundrum cannot be considered a conflict between 'Catalonia', as a community or as a nation, and 'Spain' as a nation, as if they were two irreconcilable entities by definition. Nor is it, in my view, a mere internal 'coup d'État' by a part of Catalan political elites backed by some thousands of agitators against a constitutional and democratic regime defined by the 1978 Constitution. It is rather a political and cultural conflict of legitimacy, which takes place on the one hand between state-led nationalism (Spanish nationalism), led by the principle of state reason (*raison d'État*), and the fear of suffering an amputation of its national body, and the Catalan national movement aiming at achieving full-fledged sovereignty, on the other. To be more precise, what has been happening in Catalonia since at least 2010 is a radicalization of a cultural and political dichotomy which goes back to the final years of the nineteenth century, and which represents a further case in Europe of conflict of legitimacy between the nation-state on the one hand, and the socially existing nations within its territory on the other.

I.

The last president-in-exile of the Catalan government until his return home in 1977, Josep Tarradellas, summarised this conflict in a sentence: "the problem is that Catalonia is a nation without a state, while Spain is the nation-state". Spain is a state that, as a united (though not homogeneous) political community under the form of a composite monarchy with an imperial bias, has existed since the last decade of the fifteenth century. This political community went on to perceive itself as a single nation, though it also accepted some greater or lesser degree of inner cultural and political plurality. However, all variants of Spanish modern nationalism since the early nineteenth century coincide in their pointing out that Spain – the whole territory of Spain – constitutes the sole subject of sovereignty, and therefore that only Spain as a whole is entitled to decide as a collective entity.

Some authors – and the mainstream Catalanist narrative, including some pseudo-historians close to the so called *Institut Nova Història*, partly financed by the Catalan government² – trace the origins of the 'Catalan Question' back to the early Modern period. They tend to see it as an unavoidable result of the discomfort of the Catalans as a community with the Spanish monarchy and the latter's tendency to centralise power and impose similar duties and taxes upon all its peninsular territories.³ Nevertheless, the conflict between 'Spain' and 'Catalonia' did not begin in 1640, when the Catalan revolt against the king Phillip IV failed, while the Portuguese succeeded in restoring a kingdom of their own. This did not start either in 1714, after the end of the War of Spanish Succession and the defeat of the supporters of the Habsburg dynasty by the victorious Bourbons. The supporters of the Habsburgs were particularly present in the territories of Catalonia and Valencia, and a consequence was that the new king (Philip V) abolished the territorial privileges of those territories within the traditional composite monarchy, while the Basque *fueros* were respected.⁴

Although a certain nostalgia for the lost Catalan liberties remained throughout the eighteenth century, and several writers voiced that opinion,⁵ the fact was that Catalan elites also enjoyed in their majority the new economic opportunities opened up by their participation in the increasing commerce with the American colonies.⁶ Catalonia also became an early industrial region, whose textile products were sold in the territories of the Spanish empire. Most Catalans sided with the Spanish

‘patriotic’ side in the Peninsular (anti-Napoleonic) War of 1808–14, which became the foundational moment for modern and liberal Spanish nationalism. The inclusion of the Catalan middle-class and elites in the Spanish nation-building project carried out by liberal elites during the period 1833–1868 was not particularly problematic. The vast majority of Catalan liberals, democrats and republicans engaged themselves in the task of making a new Spanish state, although some trends emphasised decentralisation as a desirable model for structuring the post-imperial Spanish polity. They also maintained a strong sense of regional identity. However, this aim was not specifically upheld by Catalans, as it was also shared by many Republicans and democrats all over Spain.⁷

Only at the end of the nineteenth century did the situation substantially change. In tandem with the cultural renaissance (*Renaixença*) of the Catalan language that developed since the mid 1830s, some political and cultural groupings, similarly to what was happening in several European peripheries, steadily politicised ethnic and cultural claims. They also increasingly asserted that Catalonia was not only a historic and cultural region, but a nationality in the past and/or in the present, or, *tout court*, a stateless nation that deserved full-fledged sovereignty. This was already expressed by the first Catalanist Assembly in Manresa, a conference held by several Catalanist organisations, which outlined the so-called Manresa programme (*Bases de Manresa*) in March 1892. This was a draft of a ‘regional constitution’ that claimed a semi-federal restructuring of the Spanish state, based on the revitalisation of the ancient laws of Catalonia dating back to the late Middle Ages, with strong emphasis on corporativism and traditionalist tenets.⁸ At the close of the nineteenth century, the lawyer and intellectual Enric Prat de la Riba expressed this tenet (*Compendi de la doctrina catalanista*, 1895): Catalonia was the nation; Spain was just the state to which Catalonia belonged. This ideological shift, confirmed eleven years later by the publication of Prat de la Riba’s book *La nacionalitat Catalana* (The Catalan nationality, 1906),⁹ overlapped with the moment in which some of the structural weaknesses of the Spanish nation-building project became apparent. This meant the unfulfilled transformation of a post-imperial and composite political community into a modern “French style” nation-state.¹⁰

After Spain’s defeat in the short war with the United States (1898) and the loss of the last overseas colonies, from 1901 onwards, sub-state nationalisms also developed and gained traction in metropolitan Spain. Firstly, the Catalan movement; shortly afterwards, the Basque national movement – since the foundation of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) in 1895 –, and only from 1916–18, the Galician national movement. Up to the outbreak of

the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), the Catalan movement not only gained social and political strength, but also became internally more diversified. From an initially conservative and fiercely Catholic hegemonic trend, a Republican fraction also emerged from 1906. Several years later, Catalanist left-wing and even pro-independence parties were born, contributing to broaden the political spectrum encompassed by Catalanism.¹¹ On the eve of World War I, the Catalan movement had undoubtedly reached the stage of 'mass movement', to use Miroslav Hroch's terms.¹² There were right-wing Catalanists, left-wing Catalanists (and since the late 1920s, also Catalanist-oriented Communists) and Republican Catalanists. Even some Fascist-oriented groupings and individuals existed throughout the 1920s and 1930s.¹³ They all shared a number of common symbols and 'invented traditions' crafted between the 1880s and the first decade of the twentieth century. Among them, it is worth mentioning the commemoration of September, 11th as the Catalan national holiday (in remembrance of the surrender of Barcelona to the Bourbons in 1714), as well as the adoption of the local dance from the Empordà region sardana as a 'national dance', the appropriation of the popular song *The reapers* (*Els segadors*, 1899) as the national anthem that remembers the Catalan reapers' revolt of 1640, the consecration of Saint George (*Sant Jordi*) as the 'patron saint' of the nation, as well as of the monastery of Montserrat as its holy place or sanctuary, and the increasing diffusion of the Catalan flag (four stripes over a yellow field) in civil society. To this flag, some pro-independence groups added after 1900 a five-pointed star in a triangle at the hoist, as a provoking homage to the Cuban flag.¹⁴

Until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, Catalan nationalism comprised three peculiarities, at least in relation to the Iberian and European context, as well as to other Western European national movements:

- 1) The enduring strength of Catalan culture and language: for this reason, political Catalanism has always had a more inclusive rather than exclusive character. Language has been the main core-value for the Catalan movement since its early beginning,¹⁵ while the emphasis on history, *Volksgeist* and 'race' – though also existent as ideological elements in early Catalanist thinking – played a much more secondary role in mainstream Catalan nationalist ideology.

- 2) The term 'Catalanism' was not always equated with 'Catalan nationalism'. In fact, the former label (*catalanisme*) was polyvalent and highly ambiguous. The term embraced those who merely upheld the

development and modernisation of Catalan culture, Catalan federalists who considered Catalonia to be a part of a Spanish federal republic, regionalists who were in favour of mild administrative decentralisation, and even separatists or proto-separatists. Almost everyone was entitled to become Catalan, if he or she accepted and learned the Catalan language, as well as those spiritual values which were considered to be characteristic for good Catalans (such as a strong work ethic, love for Catalonia's history and proper traditions, etc.).¹⁶

3) The interventionist vocation of the Catalan movement in Spanish state politics. To many supporters and leaders of the national movement, Catalonia had to play within Spain a similar role to that played by Piedmont in relation to Italy. But this did not mean cultural integration within Castilian culture. This shaped a paradoxical contradiction that characterised the mainstream Catalan movement during the twentieth century: Should Catalan leaders be the Otto von Bismarck of Spain, acting as Prussians who modernised the whole of the Spanish polity, or should they be like Simón Bolívar for Catalonia, liberating it from Spanish/Castilian rule? The proclaimed objective of conservative Catalanism was to modernise Spain, but also to transform the Spanish political community into a plural and heterogeneous empire, in a similar way to the *Ausgleich* model offered by Hungarians within Austria-Hungary since 1867. On the contrary, the aim of the Catalanist left was to make Spain become a federal or confederal Republic, where Catalonia (alongside the Basque Country and perhaps Galicia) should be given an outstanding, specific role. Otherwise expressed, its project was that of an asymmetric federalism, where Catalonia would become the stronghold of civic and Republican values.¹⁷

During the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and the upcoming post-war years, a great part of right-wing and Catholic Catalan nationalists supported, *malgré eux*, the cause of the rebels against the Spanish Republic, as they considered the insurgent generals and their centralism less dangerous than the 'red' revolution, anarchy and the subsequent destruction of religion and property. After 1939, conservative regionalists and many moderate Catalanists continued to passively uphold the Francoist regime. Instead, left-wing Catalanists, from moderate Republicans to Liberal Reformists, Socialists and Communists, sided with the Spanish Republic.¹⁸ Left-wing and liberal Catalanists endured imprisonment, repression, and exile. Clandestine political organisations attempted to keep alive the legacy of Republican catalanism in the 1940s and early 1950s, although their success was limited.¹⁹



Montserrat Monastery.
Photographer/Author: Edgardo W. Olivera.

II.

The Francoist dictatorship (1939-1975) represented, amongst many other things, a failed attempt at a Spanish authoritarian 'nation building' from above.²⁰ Its policy of imposition of a Catholic, authoritarian and centralist state-led nationalism – though with increasing 'regionalised' nuances, especially from 1945 – had two paradoxical effects. On the one hand, there was a de-legitimisation in the long term of the symbols and expressions of Spanish national identity, even those identified with democracy and liberal values. On the other hand, the Francoist policies of cultural homogenisation had a high level of success: internal migrations, broadcasting and TV in Spanish since 1956, as well as mass sport and popular culture spread throughout the territory common cultural references, which cemented a certain sense of Spanish banal nationalism. Some vernaculars (Basque, Galician, Catalan in Valencia and the Balearic Islands) were highly affected by this cultural homogenisation, whilst the Catalan language resisted, owing to its preservation by the urban middle-class. However, the figures of monolingual Castilian speakers increased in all bilingual regions, including Catalonia, between the 1950s and the 1970s. Some urban and sub-urban regions in Catalonia, particularly Barcelona and its metropolitan region, became overwhelmingly Spanish-speaking areas. The risk of linguistic assimilation meant a challenge for Catalan nationalism, which managed to preserve the social use of the Catalan language in the lap of civil society, from hiking clubs to leisure associations.²¹

During the clandestine period (1939-75) that followed the defeat in the civil war, Catalan nationalism experienced an internal reformulation, as well as diverse ideological transformations, which can be summarised as follows.²²

1) An ideological re-orientation towards the Catholic centre-right, with social-Christian and reformist components, which attempted to be catch-all. This current led to the later foundation and consolidation of *Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya* (Democratic Convergence of Catalonia, CDC) in 1974. This party was greatly influenced by the nationalist thinking of its charismatic leader Jordi Pujol, who later shaped an enduring coalition with the Christian-democratic fraction, *Unió Democràtica de Catalunya* (Catalan Democratic Union, UDC), whose origin dated back to 1931. Pragmatism was the prevailing label of this relatively heterogeneous trend. According to Pujol, Catalonia as a whole had lost the civil war against an external other, Castile/Spain. Therefore, the most important

priority was now re-building the Catalan nation, reconstructing its social and cultural unity: 'making Catalonia', *fer país*.²³ This entailed the guaranteeing of the survival of Catalan collective identity, first and foremost its language and culture, independently on the concrete political objectives that were established at a given moment. Therefore, CDC accepted in 1978-80 the home-rule statute afforded by the Spanish state during the transition to democracy, although the party never gave up its intention to achieve more ambitious goals.

2) The Catalanist and working-class left, and especially the communist and socialist factions, gained great social influence, replacing anarchism, which had been overwhelmingly dominant among the Catalan working class until 1939. From the theoretical point of view, the Catalanist left proclaimed its solidarity with the entire Spanish working class and opted for a federal state as a form of government for the future. Moreover, both Catalan Socialists and Communists enthusiastically embraced the defence of Catalan language and culture as a crucial point of their political agenda.²⁴

3) A minority trend, mostly identified with left-wing extremist parties founded in the 1960s, advocated fully-fledged independence in the short term, now reframed as a project for the whole of the Catalan-speaking lands (Catalonia, Roussillon or French Catalonia, the Balearic Islands and Valencia).²⁵

Notwithstanding the decades of repression, the Catalan language and culture, and the Catalan sentiment of collective identity endured the long Francoist dictatorship and became one of the most important foci of democratic opposition. Alongside the city of Madrid, the Basque Country and some industrial areas, Catalonia was the part of Spain where democratic civic society was at best articulated through a network of associations and groups that raised the banner of democracy, Catalan identity and decentralisation. All these tenets were deeply intertwined. Its clearest expression was the Assembly of Catalonia (*Assemblea de Catalunya*, 1971), an overarching body supported by dozens of groups and associations, which aimed at achieving democracy, political amnesty and the restoration of the Catalan Autonomy Statute of 1932.²⁶

III.

The first democratic elections that were held after the death of General Franco (1977 and 1979) revealed the social strength of conservative Catalanism, but also the wider implantation of the Socialist and Communist left in Catalonia. At this point, one thing was clear for most Spanish anti-Francoists and post-Francoist reformists: the upcoming Spanish democracy would be forced to adopt a decentralised structure. In theory, sub-state nationalists were in favour of the implementation of a multinational state; the post-Francoist conservatives, as well as the centre and liberals, were only eager to accept limited administrative decentralisation. The left-wing parties expressed their preference for a federal system. In the end, the right to achieve autonomy was extended to all regions, while at the same time different routes towards and levels of home-rule were established, the highest being accorded to the 'his-



Jordi Pujol and Adolfo Suárez. Moncloa Palace, Madrid, 16.06.1980.
Fons fotogràfic Arxiu Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, CDC.

torical nationalities' (those which had approved an Autonomy Statute by referendum prior to July 1936). Sovereignty was held by the Spanish state, which in turn transferred broad powers to the autonomous communities and strengthened them with legislative and executive powers in many areas (i.e. agriculture and fishing activities, transport, culture and education, public health, tourism, commerce). At the same time the central state maintained legislative pre-eminence in other areas as well as the monopoly on taxes (with the exception of the exemption enjoyed by the Basque Provinces and Navarre, the 'Economic Agreements' dating back to 1878).²⁷

Unlike the Basque nationalists, the main Catalan and Catalanist parties actively participated in the elaboration of the democratic Constitution of 1978, and it was due to them that the text of the Constitution recognised the existence in Spain of 'regions and nationalities', always within the 'sole and indissoluble Spanish nation'. The concrete nationalities were also not mentioned nor enumerated in the text, nor was it established what was the difference between a region and a nationality. In the end, the right to autonomy was extended to all Spanish regions: it was the so-called solution of "coffee for everyone". However, the mention of the existence of 'nationalities' introduced a certain element of asymmetry. The Basque Country, Catalonia and Galicia, those territories that had approved by referendum a home-rule statute prior to the outbreak of the civil war, were afforded a 'fast track' for achieving autonomy (that defined by article 151), whereas the rest of the regions followed a 'slow track' defined by article 143. This was presented as a cornerstone for the recognition of the different 'quality' of the so-called 'historical nationalities' within what came to be labelled 'state of the autonomous communities'. Federalists hoped to transform the State of the Autonomies into a federal state in the near future; sub-state nationalists aimed at obtaining in the mid-term a more explicit recognition of the multinational nature of the Spanish polity. Finally, some radical groupings, particularly the Basque 'patriotic left', radical Galician nationalists and some Catalan factions, continued to demand the short-term recognition of the right of self-determination.²⁸

Certainly, the institutional framework of the State of the Autonomous Communities contained several ambiguities. The autonomy system did not establish any detailed delimitation of spheres of competence among the central government, regional governments and municipalities. The financing system was left unaddressed, even by Catalan nationalists (who at that time opted for not assuming the responsibility of collecting taxes),

and no efficient mechanism was established to ensure equalization transfers between richer and poorer regions. Finally, there was no provision for a forum that would allow co-participation in the government's tasks by the regions. These deficits made the evolution of the system heavily dependent on short-term political negotiations between the central government and the sub-state nationalist parties.

From the first regional elections held in Catalonia in 1980 to 2003, the CiU coalition (*Convergència i Unió*, shaped by CDC and UDC in 1978) led by Jordi Pujol maintained its majority in the Catalan parliament.²⁹ This was the so-called 'Pujol age', largely influenced by the doctrine and self-government practice implemented from the *Generalitat* (regional government) by CiU, which kept control of regional institutions and most municipalities of Catalonia, with the exception of major cities and the Barcelona metropolitan area.³⁰ The so-called 'Pujolist' doctrine (*pujolisme*) could be summarised, as mentioned above, in the slogan *fer país*. For him and his followers, regional autonomy had to be considered as a first step towards an imprecise political horizon, yet home-rule offered enough devices and power to (re)build Catalan national identity, and primarily the extension and 'normalisation' of the social use of the Catalan language. To this end, the exclusive control of some crucial instruments of nation-building, such as public TV in Catalan, mass-media, primary and secondary education, cultural and symbolic policies and the implementation of a welfare system was regarded as sufficient to reinforce an exclusive sense of Catalan identity amongst a majority of the Catalan population, independent of its origin. The Catalan language should become the dominant language in the mid-term, and linguistic policies should actively encourage Castilian-speaking immigrants to adopt and transmit Catalan in the near future. The ultimate definition of Catalonia's political status (independence, shared sovereignty, etc.) could be postponed to a later stage, depending on the future of the European Union.³¹

Therefore, all doors and all possible options were kept open: independence (although indefinitely postponed) within the European Union? A Hispanic/Iberian confederation? A flexible combination of federalism and decentralisation, such as that offered by Yugoslavia between 1974 and 1988? (In fact, Jordi Pujol declared himself to be a firm admirer of the Yugoslav solution in the mid-1980s). Shared sovereignty with the Spanish state? Or Catalonia aiming at being one of the 'motors' of Europe, as a strong cultural and historical region within a decentralised and regionalised Europe, where the power of nation-states would be progressively undermined in favour of Brussels and the sub-state territories?³²



Jordi Pujol's inauguration as President of the
Catalan Government. Barcelona, 08.05.1980.
Fons fotogràfic Arxiu Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, CDC.

The Catalan and Catalanist left-wing parties, which maintained a special link with the Spanish state-wide parties (PSC-PSOE and PSUC/PCE, from 1987 onwards *Iniciativa per Catalunya/Izquierda Unida*), regarded federalism as a desirable model for a future Spanish polity. They proposed to strengthen Catalan self-government through a generous interpretation and implementation of the possibilities offered by the Spanish Constitution and the State of the autonomous communities. In the 1990s, and particularly between 2003 and 2007, the Socialist mayor of Barcelona and later president of the *Generalitat* between 2003 and 2006, Pasqual Maragall, enthusiastically embraced that idea, and proposed it as a third way between autonomy and independence. He upheld the idea of the transformation of Spain into an 'asymmetric federation', where Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia should enjoy a special status, different from the rest of the regions. However, this view was not shared by most Spanish socialists and communists, who opted for a different solution: that of symmetric federalism, based on the steady conversion of all autonomous communities into single states of the federation, with a more or less similar level of power competencies and symbolic recognition. This 'federalism from above' would consist of a step-by-step federalisation of the autonomy system and would not necessarily require a constitutional reform.

During the 'Pujol era', the independence movement remained a minority current, though quite active and always present at the level of civic platforms (such as the *Crida a la Solidaritat*, Appeal to Solidarity, during the 1980s). The youth organisation of CDC, which was formally independent from the party, also expressed pro-independence tenets since the mid-1980s: in fact, many of the later leaders of mass secessionism came from its ranks.³³ From 1992 onwards, the pro-independence supporters that came from *Crida* or from other far-left Catalanist parties took control of the old-fashioned social-democratic and Republican Party *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC, Republican Left of Catalonia), which dated back to 1931 and had been the main Catalan party until the civil war. From then on, they began to have a more visible presence in the municipal institutions and throughout Catalonia, as well as in a more modest way in the Spanish parliament. However, the supporters of full-fledged independence did not represent more than 15–17 percent of valid suffrages at any election.³⁴

IV.

The Great Economic Depression started on a global scale in 2007, which made its effects felt in Spain in a particularly notable way starting in 2008/09, also had profound socio-political effects, shaking the foundations of the political-institutional system designed by the Constitution of 1978, and setting in motion some of the structural defects in the functioning of Spanish democracy, which were purportedly inherited from the transition period. Amongst these effects have been the emergence of a social and generational fracture, the sharp decline in the legitimacy of several state institutions, primarily the Monarchy, and the increasing lack of trust placed by citizens in the political elites, in the wake of a series of corruption scandals that affected the main state institutions, but also regional institutions, beginning with the Catalan *Generalitat*.

However, the Great Depression has also been accompanied by the sharpening of the territorial fracture. It became clear that the solution designed in 1978, a strongly decentralised state with some touches of asymmetry, may have come to an end; or that, at least, it would require a severe readjustment, which should also entail a discussion upon the subject of sovereignty, and therefore the very conception of the nature of the Spanish state, which should be conceived as a multinational polity.

Until the beginning of the new century, the autonomy system has shown itself flexible enough to provide an adequate framework for resolving the territorial tensions of Spanish democracy. Nevertheless, it was far from being entirely consolidated. Sub-state nationalists continued to demand a further reform of the territorial structure of the state, which should recognise its multinational character. However, survey data until the first decade of the twenty-first century suggested that the choice of open secession in the short term did not have overwhelmingly majority support in Catalonia, nor in the Basque Country. Moreover, the consolidation and social acceptance of the State of the Autonomous Communities, either in its present shape or in a more 'federalised' version, enjoyed the support of a large majority of citizens in all autonomous communities.

Between 1978 and 2011, the politico-institutional accommodation of the demands of the Basque Nationalists (split between a pragmatic fraction and a pro-independence fraction, which in part also supported armed violence) had been one of the great pending issues of Spanish democracy, and the violence of ETA had stained forty years of its history with

blood. At the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the focus of territorial tensions shifted to Catalonia. For many observers, this has been a considerable surprise. Certainly, from the mid-1990s, the Catalan independence movement had emerged from political marginality and, owing to the moderate rise of the party ERC, consolidated itself as a significant actor in the Catalan political system. The transversal character of Catalanist tenets also made it possible for the supporters of full sovereignty to find some echo in parties that were not manifestly pro-independence, from the PSC to UDC. Nevertheless, opinion surveys until 2010-11 continued to display the clear predominance of the sentiment of double identity (Catalan and Spanish, to a greater or lesser extent, though rooted in a strong attachment to Catalan identity) amongst the citizens of Catalonia, and the minority (although not irrelevant) nature of the pro-independence position.

Opinion polls equally displayed increasing signs of disaffection in Catalonia towards the whole of Spain. They also confirmed the existence of a growing frustration towards the functioning and institutional evolution of the State of the Autonomous Communities. If for the Catalanists, as for the Basque or Galician nationalists, the tendency towards the homogenisation of power competencies of all the autonomous communities seemed a threat to the difference established by the Constitution between 'nationalities' and 'regions', the reform of the autonomy statutes of Aragon, the Canary Islands and Valencia in the 1990s, which included their definition as 'nationalities', tended to erase that thin patina of symbolic asymmetry. The dissatisfaction with the mechanisms of redistribution of financial resources and inter-territorial solidarity, apart from the Basque and Navarre economic agreements, was a frequent complaint of political Catalanism, which increasingly found a larger echo among significant sectors of Catalan society.³⁵

To this was added the growing dynamics of political and administrative recentralisation implemented by the Madrid cabinets led by the Spanish conservatives of the Popular Party (PP), driven by the enactment of 'Laws of Bases' (overall legislations) and other mechanisms that enabled the invasion of regional competences. This was due to a parallel tendency, installed in the mass media and opinion makers close to the conservative party, from the end of the period of the cabinet led by José-María Aznar (1996-2004). According to that narrative, the autonomy state would be expensive, inefficient and threaten to feed excessive centrifugal tendencies, due to the lack of enduring loyalty to the Constitution displayed by most sub-state nationalists. The economic crisis thus offered a good

excuse to cut costs and recentralise competences, without having to alter the letter of the Constitution or the Statutes. The purported 'adventures' of the socialist cabinet presided over by Rodríguez Zapatero (2004-11), who had given green light to the process of reform and broadening of the Catalan autonomy statute and had also put forward the idea of Spain as a 'plural polity', would only have contributed to 'denationalising' Spain.

All this demonstrated that Spanish nationalism and Spanish national identity, which seemed to be vanished from the public sphere between 1975 and 1995, was instead very alive and furthermore received a further political impulse, partially through regionalised expressions.³⁶ This was the case with several regionalist groups and parties in Valencia, but also in Navarre and other regions, which rejected the purported separatist objectives of sub-state nationalisms coming from neighbouring territories (Catalonia and the Basque Country).

V.

The contrary tendency among several sectors of Catalan society was the growing disaffection towards Spain as a national project, especially the rejection of the Spanish State and its core institutions and symbols, from the Spanish flag to sport teams. Between 2009 and 2011, several independence organizations, with the support of CiU and ERC, organised symbolic referenda in a total of 550 Catalan municipalities (58 percent of the total), including Barcelona, to vote for independence. Half a million Catalans participated in these plebiscites, with an overwhelming majority in favour of secession (93 percent). Participation was high in the small and intermediate towns, and much lower in Barcelona. However, the plebiscites were a symptom that something was moving in the underground of Catalan society. This heralded what was to become a 'perfect storm', which broke out in 2010/11, as a number of social and political frustrations were cumulatively shared by increasing sectors of the Catalan population, both overlapping and reinforcing each other.³⁷

The bottom line of the pro-independence consultations became more visible when the decision of the Constitutional Court was heard at the end of June 2010. It ruled on several points of the appeals that had been presented by the Popular Party (as well as by the Aragon regional government) against the *Nou Estatut*, the New Statute of Autonomy that had been approved four years before (2006) by referendum by the Catalan citizenry, although the turnout barely reached half the electoral census. It was the culmination of a tortuous process initiated in 2004, which had gone through the development of a first draft of the statute of autonomy approved by the Catalan parliament, its submission to the Spanish *Cortes* and its substantial reduction and 'reframing' by the constitutional commission of the parliament. Its president, the veteran PSOE leader Alfonso Guerra, described in April 2006 the task of that commission as "combing and brushing like a carpenter" the draft that had arrived from Barcelona.³⁸

This had given rise to increasing political tensions and dialectic diatribes in the media. The Spanish right fiercely attacked the Catalan new statute for potentially being a prelude to secession and blamed the Spanish Socialists for being accomplices of Spain's destruction. Conversely, radical and pro-independence Catalan nationalists accused mainstream moderate Catalanists of having made too many concessions to the requirements put forward by the Spanish government. The verdict of the Spanish Constitutional Court declared up to fourteen articles of the

2006 Statute unconstitutional in whole or in part, and proposed a restrictive reinterpretation of 27 other articles, so that they would not incur in unconstitutionality crime; it also considered that the references in the preamble to the Statute to "Catalonia as a nation" and to the "national reality of Catalonia" lacked "legal effectiveness". The opinion included five individual votes by Court members, who were against the decision.

Certainly, less than 20 percent of the 223 articles of the new autonomy statute had been fully or partially declared unconstitutional. But the key question was a symbolic one: the abolition of the term 'nation' in the preamble. As a consequence, an unexpected wave of outrage in Catalan public opinion appealed to voters from different parties, regardless of their degree of nationalism, and generated a sense of frustration in many people who until then had remained alien to the issue of the new statute. To that was added that the Constitutional Court suffered serious legitimacy prob-



Artur Mas addressing the 13th Congress of Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya's (CDC). L'Hospitalet, 09.06.2004.
Fons fotogràfic Arxiu Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya, CDC.

lems, since two thirds of its magistrates had fulfilled their mandate, and the political manoeuvres of the PP in the Congress and the Senate blocked the election of new members so as not to alter the relationship between conservatives and progressives. Tens of thousands of people attended the massive demonstration held in the streets of Barcelona on July 10, 2010, under the slogan *Som una nació. Nosaltres decidim* (We are a Nation: We shall decide). Opinion polls revealed an important leap in the independence option before and after the Constitutional Court's decision, which went from 28 to 40 percent of respondents. More than two thirds of the Catalan population believed that the level of self-government enjoyed by Catalonia was unsatisfactory for the new challenges faced by Catalonia in the twenty-first century. They also remarked that the precarious regional financing was an important reason for their discontent.³⁹

The political situation in Catalonia appeared to revert to its previous state in the following months. In November 2010, the new regional elections brought the CiU back to power after seven years of left-wing government coalition (ERC, PSC and *Iniciativa*), now under the presidency of Artur Mas, Pujol's designated successor, who placed the obtaining of new financing as an irrevocable objective of his cabinet. On the whole, in the regional elections, the CiU had been strengthened to the detriment of the ERC, but the pro-independence vote had dropped by almost 50 percent, and the parties that were champions of Spanish nationalism (PP and *Ciutadans*) increased their suffrages. The PSC experienced a haemorrhaging of votes that foreshadowed its subsequent collapse. There seemed to be a period of dead calm.

However, the independence social movement continued to grow and to diversify into several branches and sectorial groups. This was strongly rooted in civic platforms, most of which held in April 2011 the National Convention for a Catalan State, which set up the embryo of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC, *Assemblea Nacional Catalana*) founded a year later. The initiative was led by several figures, mostly from the world of culture, the arts and audio-visual media, but also from trade-union leaders and politicians from different parties and some veteran activists of social movements. Most of these leaders were still mostly familiar faces of the radical Catalanist scene. However, another relevant step was taken when, in March 2012, the CDC ordinary party convention adopted for the first time a pro-independence discourse, imposed from below by its rank-and-file members. It proposed "to build our own state that guarantees our survival as a nation and our viability as a society, now threatened", relying on the support from a broad social majority.⁴⁰

VI.

The victory of the conservative Popular Party (PP) with absolute majority in the Spanish parliament after the elections of November 2011, alongside the brutal budget cuts imposed by the new Government in Madrid, at the behest of Brussels, the International Monetary Fund and the European Central Bank; the wave of corruption scandals that affected the heart of the Spanish political and institutional system; and the crisis of legitimacy of the monarchy, patent since April 2012, seemed to prelude the perfect storm that was brewing in Catalonia. The civic pro-independence movement knew how to read the moment. Its leaders accurately interpreted that this was a golden opportunity to launch a political offensive for mobilising its supporters: the counterpart, the Spanish state, was at least weakened, and some of its central institutions deeply delegitimised, from the monarchy to the political elites.

However, nobody had predicted the magnitude of the silent earthquake. The social consolidation of the option for independence was visible in the gigantic demonstration – 1.5 million people – that filled the streets of Barcelona during the *Diada* (Catalan National Holiday) of September 11, 2012. The ‘perfect storm’ had become a genuine tsunami, which deeply shook Catalan and Spanish politics. This also meant that a number of organisations rooted in civil society, from ANC to Òmnium Cultural, took the lead in agitating for independence, promoting a multi-level social agitation of peaceful character, which seeks to keep a visible part of Catalan society in permanent semi-mobilisation. This was demonstrated in the exhibition of pro-independence flags at the balconies and windows, as well as in the successful merchandising of symbols and objects related to the independence movement, from scarfs to t-shirts, bags and key-rings.⁴¹

What were the main causes behind this silent earthquake? There were some general factors that related to the impact of the great economic crisis of 2007–08 on the Spanish political system. Among them, the sudden loss of popularity and prestige of the monarchy has to be pointed out: king Juan Carlos I, and one of his sons-in-law, were involved in several corruption scandals from April 2012. King Juan Carlos I abdicated in June 2014, yet his successor Philip VI, who was untouched by the scandals but lacks any personal charisma, has been so far unable to recover the level of acceptance that the monarchy enjoyed between 1977 and 2005.⁴² Some more corruption scandals have come to public light since 2013, several of them affecting the main ruling parties, and even former cabinet

members, such as the former vice-president of the Spanish government, Rodrigo Rato, who was finally convicted and jailed.⁴³

As a consequence, a public discussion emerged concerning the existence of a crisis of legitimacy of the political system defined by the 1978 Constitution (or, as some put it, the '1978 regime'). Many political leaders and opinion makers suggested that time had come to revise the agreements of the democratic transition in the late 1970s. This meant opening a new constituent process and the re-making of the whole political system, including the option of holding referendums for self-determination by the 'nationalities' (Catalonia, the Basque Country and, eventually, Galicia). The dissatisfaction felt by broad sectors of Spanish society with the political regime, in particular the lack of response by political elites to the new challenges posed by the economic crisis, as well as the rejection of the austerity politics dictated by the European Union, expressed itself since 2014 in the emergence of a new left-wing populist party, *Podemos* (We Can). As a parallel reaction, the liberal and fiercely anti-Catalanist party Citizens (*Ciutadans/Ciudadanos*) also extended in the rest of Spain, enjoying some sympathy by conservative voters who looked for a new option, free from the shadow of corruption that affected the PP.⁴⁴ Both parties managed to shake the Spanish party system in general elections held since 2015.

Moreover, at least three distinctive factors can be highlighted in the Catalan case, which go back to the beginning of the twenty-first century.⁴⁵

Firstly, a generational change had taken place within political Catalanism, and within Catalan society as a whole.⁴⁶ This was accompanied by a growing radicalization of the elites and intermediate cadres of the Catalanist parties, who increasingly advocated, starting with the CDC, for a new framing of Catalan self-government. They entered into an internal dynamic of cumulative radicalisation, strongly fostered by party competition (ERC, CDC and UDC, but also to some extent *Iniciativa* and PSC).⁴⁷ The cognitive frameworks of the new population cohorts that grew in autonomous Catalonia governed by CiU are a product, in part, of the task of nation-building carried out by the Generalitat during the 'Pujol age', although their voting patterns and preferences are far more volatile. They are also citizens who, having emerged from the democratic period in Spain, feel free from the ties of previous years. Thus, they began to uphold that the legacy of the Transition period could now be "sent into retirement", as the former ERC leader during the 1990s, Josep-Lluís Carod-Rovira, had already written in 1998. The European context, Carod-Rovira affirmed,



Diada Nacional – Catalan National day. Barcelona, 11.09.2012.
Photographer/Author: Marc Puig Pérez.

would favour the achievement of Catalan statehood through peaceful mass mobilisation. Spain, an EU member state, would be now an established democracy, in which the army no longer played a relevant role.⁴⁸ Faced with a clear secessionist agenda, backed by a qualified majority of the Catalan population and respectful of democratic values and procedures in accordance with the standard requirements of the EU, the Brussels' elites would feel sooner or later forced to endorse a process of political dialogue between Madrid and Barcelona. In the end, the EU would welcome Catalonia — a modern and pro-European country, according to the self-image shared by most of its inhabitants— into its fold.⁴⁹

Independence would be an even more desirable option after the failure of the utopia of the Europe of the regions since the first decade of the twenty-first century. This had been a card actively played by Jordi Pujol and Pasqual Maragall, with different nuances, two decades before. Even Artur Mas affirmed at the beginning of this century that self-determination was an outdated principle, while the future of Europe would be based in the deepening of its multi-level federal structure, as an Europe of Regions.⁵⁰ But now they had to realise that the prevailing model of governance in the EU was based on a consociationalist design between nation-states. To be 'someone' in Europe, therefore, Catalonia should have its own State. The enlargement to the East executed by the EU in 2004 seemed to reinforce this perception: if Malta, Cyprus or Estonia were entitled to be fully fledged member states of the EU, with populations that were quantitatively inferior not only to Catalonia, but to those of Galicia, Wales or Scotland, and if languages such as Maltese and Estonian obtained official recognition in Brussels, why not Catalonia and the Catalan language, which is spoken by many more people?⁵¹ The return of the nation-state in the twenty-first century, after decades advocating its disappearance before the push of the regions and European supra-national power, can be regarded in several examples in Europe today, from Hungary to Scotland, although with very different inflections and diverging political interpretations. They all have in common the belief that statehood can be a barrier of defence against the uncertainties of globalization, growing immigration (at least in some cases), and increasing threats to the survival of the Welfare State.

The Catalanist dissatisfaction with the Spanish state of the autonomous communities, what several authors have labelled as the 'impossible integration',⁵² was also rooted in a paradox. Several authors have interpreted the rise of mass secessionism in Catalonia as the success of the nation-building policies implemented by the *Generalitat* since 1980: the

linguistic Catalanisation of public schooling and administration, the partial control of the contents taught in primary and secondary schools, the expansion of autonomous public TV, the extension of Catalan political power, including its own police.⁵³ Everything suggested that in two generations, Catalan citizens would be full national Catalans: Catalonia was a garden that only had to be watered properly. Thus, the present-day roots of the pro-independence sentiment had to be sought in the conscious efforts of the Pujol years' efforts of nation-building: a successful Catalan nationalisation. Younger cohorts of Catalan citizens would now claim for a different recognition of their cultural and political identity, as they now became mature.⁵⁴

However, there is also an alternative interpretation. Precisely the fact that the mass nationalization mechanisms of the nineteenth century no longer operate with the same efficiency since the late twentieth century, many Catalanists have been frustrated by the enduring constraints for increasingly nationalising the population through education or the public media: as expressed by a high-ranking member of CDC in the 1990s, the "patriotic bigamy" of average Catalan citizens seemed difficult to eradicate, as was also reflected in most opinion surveys.⁵⁵ This was also evident in the paradoxical effects of language policies, which have increased the percentage of knowledge of Catalan (a language that today is known by almost 90 percent of the Catalan population), its public and symbolic use, as well as its visibility. However, they have not had a significant increase in the number of everyday speakers, nor have they been able to prevent Spanish from maintaining its strength and continue to be the most spoken language in Catalonia in the daily intercourse, particularly in Barcelona and its metropolitan region.⁵⁶

One result of this frustration has been the push forward: only by overcoming the limitations of the Spanish legal and political framework, and attaining full sovereignty, could Catalonia finally recover its full identity. In other terms, the total number of Catalanists may not have necessarily increased, but the existing ones have been strongly radicalised, in the hope that a Catalan State could curb what for many signifies irrepressible disappearance of the country's identity within a global world and an increasingly plural Catalan society, where immigrants continued to arrive. This has generated an extremely agonic awareness among many Catalanist activists. According to their perception, Catalonia as a distinctive, recognisable entity would now be fighting not for its hegemony, but rather for not vanishing within Spanish identity and culture. Only a state of its own would reverse this mid-term tendency.



Via Catalana. Diada Nacional – Catalan National Day. Barcelona, 11.09.2013.
Photographer/Author: Marc Puig Pérez.

Secondly, a relevant reorientation of the political discourse and discursive frames of the Catalan pro-independence movement, or at least of a relevant part of it. This was patent since the late 1990s, even with very different hues and tones related to the weight of the historical myths and grievances, and the anguish concerning the survival of the Catalan language. The new pro-independence narrative underlined that the Catalan nation was a civic and inclusive project, based on democratic values, with less focus on cultural or romantic postulates. This also entailed the acceptance of internal cultural plurality, Castilian-Catalan bilingualism and the co-existence of multiple identities among Catalan citizens. Catalonia's independence has also been put forward by some ERC leaders and other intellectuals as a 'chance' for definitively reforming Spanish democracy, by freeing itself from the political deficits inherited from Francoism and a deficient Transition. Intra-Iberian close cooperation and good neighbourhood between a Catalan and a Spanish republic was envisaged as a prospect for a better future.⁵⁷

In fact, Catalanism has faced similar dilemmas to other sub-state nationalist movements since the final decades of the twentieth century, from Quebec to Scotland.⁵⁸ In order to gather support for the sovereignty project, the visibility of historicist and cultural claims had to be reduced in favour of the interests, fears and expectations of the citizenry, independently on their language, culture and ethnic origins. It was necessary to build a civic, republican project (in the classic sense of social and civic republicanism), that was inclusive and useful to everyone, which promised its adherents greater welfare, greater social justice, ecological sustainability and innovation, and a way to overcome the structural flaws of Spanish democracy. It was time to forget about 'reforming' Spain, whose state structures and prevailing political culture were characterised by the democratic deficits inherited from the Transition period. The performative argument would be that of the comparative grievances in tax and economic matters: the industrious Catalans would pay more taxes to the 'parasitic' and inefficient Spanish State than they would receive in return. This would be manifested in the deficits of infrastructure investments regarding highways, railroads and airports on the part of the former.⁵⁹ In short, and as some would affirm simplistically, "Spain robs us".⁶⁰

Although it has a credible base and is a perception, a grievance shared by many Catalan citizens, it is undoubtedly an instrumental discourse. In fact, some of its leading champions have been before cultural nationalists who sought to increase complicity and win supporters. Moreover, corruption was also a feature of the Catalan political system, and substantially

affected the ruling party in the Pujol era, CDC: some of its leaders, and not least Pujol himself, were convicted for being involved in notorious corruption cases. The figures concerning revenues and financial transfers, taxes and state investments, are open to debate and interpretation. However, the emotional impact of those arguments was assured by their relative verisimilitude: one simply needs to take a crowded commuter train in Barcelona every morning. It also draws on enduring stereotypes present in mainstream Catalanist narratives since the beginning of the twentieth century, as the tale *L'auca del senyor Esteve* (Santiago Rusiñol, 1907) already showed: the purported opposition between an industrious, civic and honest middle-class Catalonia, and a Castile purportedly full of corrupt officials and subsidised layabouts, now personified in the southern regions of Extremadura and Andalusia. This kind of arguments insisting on economic grievance may be socially effective, yet they lack the emotional appeal of culture and history. As in many other contemporary examples of national claims, the discourse on Catalan independence combines both types of arguments, economic and cultural, civic and ethnic.⁶¹

Thirdly, in a situation of economic crisis, increased unemployment rates, decreased welfare, generational fracture and uncertainty about the future, and, similarly, given the lack of alternatives and freedom of action that most political forces would offer, the fact is that the pro-independence movement benefits from upholding a sort of last 'useful utopia'. This entails the hope that statehood could provide a multi-purpose refuge of security protected by a strong community feeling, for the battered horizons of expectations of many citizens, from young people without a future to veteran cultural nationalists, especially the low middle-class, which has been affected in its quality of life and its expectations by the impact of the Great Depression of 2007. As dreamt by the radical Catalanists of the 1920s, now as the time to encourage a kind of quiet middle-class revolution.⁶² According to pro-independence propaganda and many authors committed to the cause of Catalan statehood, a Catalan republic would mean that more resources would be available for sustaining and improving a public health service, the education system, the pension system and all those facets of the welfare state that are now under threat.⁶³

Both Catalanist parties and the Catalan regional government, presided over in 2012 by Artur Mas, were confronted with the requirement of keeping pace with the pressure from below exerted by civic organisations. Therefore, party elites were also forced to rise the threshold of their political claims. This was also useful for the CiU government for deviating public attention from its dramatic restriction in public expenditures, also

fuelled by the neo-liberal convictions of some of its leaders. However, political polarisation from below combined with competition between party elites and contributed to accelerate the increasing fragmentation of the Catalan party system. While a great part of the former 'pragmatic' nationalists ended up joining a new liberal pro-independence party, the Partit Democràtic Europeu Català (Catalan European Democratic Party, PDeCat), most former Christian-Democrats remained opposed to short-term independence. Some pro-nationalist factions of the Catalan Socialist Party (PSC) and the Catalan post-communists also left their former allegiances and opted for joining parties and platforms that openly promoted independence. In fact, the Catalanist left, traditionally inclined towards federalism, was now subject to increasing pressure from both extremes of its electorate. Moreover, a new actor gained traction, the anti-system and anti-capitalist party *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (Popular Union Candidacy, CUP), which declared itself in favour of a Catalan People's Republic, partly following some Latin-American revolutionary models, but also as a Catalan reaction to the legitimacy system of the Spanish '1978 regime', invested with Republican and populist tones. That Republic should also entail all Catalan-speaking regions, including Valencia, the Balearic islands and French Catalonia.⁶⁴ According to several opinion surveys, while the percentage of Catalans who would eventually vote for secession amounts to 40-45 percent (while a slightly greater percentage would oppose independence), more than two-thirds of Catalonia's electorate is eager to hold some kind of referendum where just the Catalan people would decide over its collective future.

The lack of response by the Spanish government to the new demands emerging from Catalonia since 2012, as well as the parallel re-strengthening within the conservative right, and of some sectors on the left, of a reactive and hyper-centralist Spanish nationalist agenda, has paved the way for a clash of political legitimacies and national identities. In fact, contemporary Spanish nationalism is far from having found an ideal formula for facing the challenges of the second decade of the twenty-first century.⁶⁵ Anchored in old, inherited dilemmas from the transition to democracy, it has shown itself little capable of offering imaginative theoretical solutions. If anything seems to prevail in the main variants of current patriotic Spanish discourse, it is the quest for a future in the past. For some, this future is found in the status quo guaranteed by the Constitution of 1978 and a limit to the decentralisation or evolution of the State of Autonomies that reinforces the competencies of the central State and corrects its purported excesses. In this narrative, inherited slogans from the early twentieth century such as that of *Hispanidad* (Spanishness or Hispanity),

the universal nature of Castilian Spanish, or the necessity to forget the recent past to avoid reviving fratricidal divisions pre-empt the new, modernising contents and tenets that would make Spanish identity more attractive for those who reject it. Others look for this future in an imprecise federalism trapped between the dilemmas of symmetry and asymmetry, republic and monarchy, or whether federalism should be implemented from the top-down or the ground up, through a constituent process.

Some statements made by PSOE leader and Spanish premier since June 2018, Pedro Sánchez, have insisted on returning to the formula of a 'nation of nations', the coexistence of a political nation (Spain) with several cultural nations (Catalonia, Galicia, the Basque Country), which was coined in the 1970s and adopted by Felipe González in the ensuing decade. However, this insistence seems not to take into account that the concept of 'nation of nations' does not satisfy present-day political claims for recognition emerging from Catalonia and other territories. Former supporters of asymmetric federalism as a solution for the accommodation of ethnonational demands within the Spanish polity have insisted on the existence of a 'federal deficit' in the domain of recognition of collective demands from minority nations, which prevents the State of the Autonomous Communities from evolving into a real (con)federation.⁶⁶ Moreover, right-wing patriotic discourse in Spain increasingly questions decentralisation and claims for a return to a more centralised State structure.

For its part, the incipient discourse of the new left-wing and populist party *Podemos*, founded in 2014, identifies "just the people" as the authentic container of the virtues of a nation that takes pride in its liberal, republican and anti-fascist tradition. The idea of Spain as a 'country of countries' (*país de países*) emphasises linguistic diversity and the idea that fundamental belonging to the Spanish nation should be chosen by the individual rather than being imposed. However, *Podemos'* discourse also attempts to play with territorial ambiguity in Catalonia, Galicia and Valencia. As of November 2019, it is still uncertain where this new cocktail will take the new populist left. The proposals of the new left face a manifest lack of definition regarding the form of State in the future, although proposals for political dialogue have been advanced in order to hold referendums on self-determination negotiated and agreed upon where there is a social majority that demands it. The long-term preferences of *Podemos'* leadership are directed towards the transformation of Spain into a multinational and federal Republic, where social rights and republican values would shape a new emotional bond among its citizens.⁶⁷



Via Catalana. Diada Nacional – Catalan National Day. Barcelona 11.09.2013.
Photographer/Author: Marc Puig Pérez.

VII.

The path of the political events underwent a sudden acceleration since 2015. In September that year new regional elections were held. They were presented in practice as an informal plebiscite: if the parties in favour of independence (on the one hand, the alliance *Together for Yes*, *Junts pel Si*, composed of the main pro-independence parties, CDC and ERC, as well as by independent candidates belonging to civic organisations, or who had previously joined other parties, and on the other hand, the anti-capitalist CUP) achieved the absolute majority of valid suffrages, the way would be paved for the short-term proclamation of a Catalan republic. This would be made possible through the passing of a specific legislation by the Catalan parliament that intended to build a new legal framework, parallel to the Spanish one. This should create the conditions for Catalonia's 'disconnection' with Spain within one year and a half, as well as for drafting a specific Catalan constitution.

However, the fact was that the addition of the suffrages obtained by *Together for Yes* and the CUP amounted to 47.8 percent of valid votes. Owing to the electoral law (that overrepresents rural districts), both parties gained the majority of seats at the regional parliament. They were clear winners of the regional elections, but not of the informal plebiscite for independence. After several months of hard negotiations, in January 2016, the CUP achieved the resignation of Artur Mas, who was accused of being corrupt and too conservative, in exchange of its support in the Catalan parliament to a new candidate. Mas was replaced as new president of the Catalan government by the former mayor of the city of Girona and CDC member Carles Puigdemont. A convinced supporter of independence since his youth, the new president promised to move on with the process of independence, and did not hesitate to push forward towards an unilateral independence referendum in case the Madrid government continued to refuse to agree on a bilaterally negotiated solution, based on the exercise of self-determination by the Catalan people. A parallel campaign of external proto-diplomacy was launched by the Catalan government, with meagre results. The lack of relevant political interest for what was happening in Catalonia by the EU and the most important state diplomacies in the world also was a real limitation for the chances of success of Catalan independence.⁶⁸ Notwithstanding this, the Catalan government pushed for implementing the agenda of 'disconnection' and unilateral rupture.

The course of the events is well known. A new independence referendum was held without the agreement of the Spanish government on October 1st, 2017. However, only pro-independence voters felt that they had to go to the polling stations, while those who rejected separation from Spain did not simply accept the legitimacy of the vote. The intervention of the Spanish police at some polling stations in Barcelona and other towns, trying to prevent the referendum from taking place, caused some clashes and incidents. Official results published by the Catalan government were confusing, and no effective control of the legitimacy of the results could be granted. Turnout was in any case lesser than 50 percent.

Moreover, article 155 of the Spanish Constitution was implemented, and Catalan home-rule was suspended by the Madrid government for some months. While Carles Puigdemont and some members of his cabinet left Catalonia for Belgium, where they have avoided so far being extradited to Spain and developed an agitation campaign on the international level, some other members of his government, as well as political and social leaders of the movement for independence, were arrested and imprisoned.⁶⁹ After one year and a half in provisional detention, in February 2019 they were brought to trial in Madrid, accused of sedition, misuse of public funds and disobedience. In October 2019, a guilty verdict was made public by the Supreme Court of Spain. Nine of the twelve accused were sentenced to prison terms ranging from 9 to 13 years after being found guilty of sedition, and some of them also with misuse of public funds.

Protests were heard among international organisations. Amnesty International denounced the extremely "vague" and "overly broad" interpretation of the term "sedition" by the Spanish Court, yet did not consider the trial to be unfair according to international standards. However, for the supporters of independence, as well as for many Catalans, the verdict came as a collective humiliation. The convicted leaders were regarded as political prisoners. As soon as the verdict was made public, street riots and protests took place in Barcelona and multiple towns across Catalonia, joined by large crowds of protesters. There also were peaceful mass demonstrations, and several marches demanding freedom for the "Catalan political prisoners", headed by prominent political leaders.

However, the main pro-independence parties (ERC, PDeCAT and CUP) continued to participate at the regional and state-wide elections between 2017 and 2019, and ERC even gave passive support to the formation of a left-wing coalition cabinet in Madrid in January 2020. A more pragmatic line of negotiation with the state, favouring the access of left-wing par-



Street riots following the Supreme Court's verdict against the Catalan pro-independence leaders. 15.10.2019.
Photographer/Author: Marc Puig Pérez.

ties to government and envisaging a medium-term agreement with the Spanish socialists and post communists, seems to be making way among some Catalanist parties and activists, particularly amongst the ERC leadership. The internal competition between the two main pro-independence parties (ERC and PDeCAT), on the one hand, and the existence of a Catalan government in Barcelona, presided over by Quim Torra (PDeCAT), and a sort of 'Government-in-exile' led by Carles Puigdemont from his residence in Waterloo (Flanders), contributes to further complicate the picture of Catalan politics in early 2020.

VIII.

In the present day, after several years of intense events, accelerated since the 'hot autumn' of 2017, there is no vision of a medium-term solution to the conflict between Catalanism and the Spanish State, entrenched in a direct confrontation which, at least until now, has been bloodless, although not exempt from some moments of great tension and police charges. After the regional elections of December 2017, the preferences of the Catalan citizenry appear divided into two more or less symmetrical halves. On the one hand, slightly less than half of Catalans favour independence (45–48 percent), are highly mobilised and apparently share a common objective in appearance, although it is doubtful that the project of the Catalan Republic of the left-wing and anti-capitalist party CUP is identical to that of the liberal and centre-oriented PDeCAT, and to that of the social-democratic oriented ERC. On the other hand, just over half of Catalans favour either the maintenance of the status quo, or a federal or decentralised state (with protected power competencies for Catalonia): this would seem like a kind of political draw.

Moreover, the mass mobilisations of the detractors of independence in the autumn of 2017 suggested that this half of the population has also been able to articulate itself and express its voice, as a reaction to the pro-independence movement. Similarly, the electoral results obtained by pro-independence parties (ERC, CUP and PDeCAT-*Junts per Catalunya*) in the general and local elections of the Spring 2019 displayed that independence claims continue to be alive, and that the 'pro-independence' community retains cohesion, partly thanks to the daily mobilisation in favour of the release of the 'Catalan [political] prisoners'.⁷⁰

There are so far no clear signs of political solution to the Catalan conundrum. Certainly, the Spanish coalition cabinet presided by Pedro Sánchez since January 2020 has made some steps forward, partly thanks to the support given by ERC to its formation in the Spanish parliament. A bilateral dialogue between the Catalan and the Spanish government is due to start in the summer of 2020. Both sides have different expectations: the Spanish side will offer a deepening of the financial and political autonomy of Catalonia within the limits established by the 1978 Constitution, while the Catalan counterpart will first put on the table the right of self-determination. Yet, this may be a first step towards a political solution based on mutual recognition of the legitimacy of both sides. Opinion surveys continue to remind that the Catalan citizenry is divided into two

camps. Yet, pro-independence activists must sooner or later admit that their chances of pushing towards a unilateral declaration of independence are over. The Spanish main parties must also concede that the indefinite judicialization of the Catalan question is not a valid solution for a political conflict.⁷¹

Beyond the circumstantial fluctuations in Catalan and Spanish politics that may occur in the near future, some questions remain open.

In the first place, it may be supposed that the pro-independence project must define in a more precise manner what idea of nation it advocates. So far, there is a permanent, but not always visible, tension between emancipatory tenets – the republican utopia of a more just, less corrupt society that distributes welfare – and economic ones, based upon financial grievance, the argument that a richer territory deserves to collect its own taxes and not to transfer resources to poorer regions. It is difficult, however, to be Giuseppe Garibaldi and Umberto Bossi at the same time. Those who seek an independent state motivated by a strong cultural and communitarian sense of Catalan identity, whatever the cost and even if it entails economic setbacks, must convince those who are motivated by a calculation of costs and benefits, the rejection of the Spanish right or the dissatisfaction with the Spanish political system.

Until now, the claim for independence has managed to attract under a common label adhesions and motivational factors from variegated fields. This was reinforced by the victimising dynamics generated by the disproportionate judicial response of the Spanish State, which is frequently presented abroad by Catalanist leaders as a pseudo-authoritarian machinery that follows the path opened by Erdogan's Turkey and Orbán's Hungary.⁷² Carles Puigdemont has recently declared that "we [the Catalans] represent a challenge to the obsolete concept of the nation-state" sustained by "populist nationalisms" in East-Central Europe, which "are trying to preserve, a concept rooted in the idea of one language, one culture, one people and one identity. It is precisely these ideas that we are calling into question". As expressed in his 2018 book *The Catalan Crisis. One Opportunity for Europe*, where he advocates for international mediation for solving the Catalan conundrum, Catalonia's quest for independence should become a test case for the maturity of European democracy.⁷³

However, it also remains to be seen whether, within the discourse of independence, historicist and cultural identity components have been completely relegated to civic and inclusive positions. The discomfort

voiced by many Catalanist intellectuals about the bilingual character (Catalan and Spanish) of the outlined Catalan Republic by most pro-independence mass organisations may be a symptom as expressed by the *Association National Language* in October 2012, and by the group *Koiné* in March 2016.⁷⁴ Although the majority of supporters of independence are in favour of Castilian-Catalan official bilingualism in a hypothetical Catalan republic, this position being upheld by most leaders of the movement,⁷⁵ there also are some of them who desire that a future Catalan state should aspire to the cultural homogenisation of its citizens in the long term.

Secondly, until now there has not been a rational and argued debate in the Catalan (and Spanish) public arena about the costs and benefits of independence, similar to those that took place in Quebec or Scotland. This implies embarking on a really deliberative process, in which national and 'ethnic' passions were kept in the background and with guaranteed plurality in all public media. So far, however, that discussion has been conspicuous by its absence. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the stubborn refusal to open a political dialogue with the Catalan independence movement by the Spanish conservative government until 2018, and the Spanish right in general, taking refuge in its totemic defence of the 1978 Constitution and in the application of the law without discussing legitimacy, identifying the *rule of law* with the *rule by law*. Secondly, the process of unilateral acceleration, and not always respectful with the anti-independence parliamentary opposition (as seen on 6–7 September 2017, when the Catalan parliament passed the 'laws of rupture'), which was undertaken by the Catalanist parties since the summer of 2017, with a basis of questionable legitimacy. Therefore, the unity of Spain "like it or not", turning a political problem into a judicial and public order question, seemed to oppose independence the hard way.

In terms of political culture, it is evident that the 'Spaniards' (or the Spanish government) have been neither British nor Canadian; but the pro-independence elites have not always been Scottish or Quebecois. On the contrary, tactical interests, rivalries between parties, as well as the strategic malleability of political arguments, have prevailed. On the one hand, political evidence is denied, such as the evident discomfort with the status quo of almost half the Catalan population, and the fact that more than two thirds of Catalan citizens are favourable to a referendum, although not all of them are in favour of secession. On the other, pro-independence elites have deliberately played opportunistically with the required thresholds of democratic legitimacy that would justify secession. Between 2012 and 2014, several Catalanist leaders considered that at least

60 percent of the votes had to be obtained. Afterwards, the majority of the seats obtained in 2015 were appealed, and later the setting of a minimum participation threshold for the vote of October 1, 2017, as a prerequisite for legitimising the result, was avoided.

Thirdly, within this debate, the question of the requirements necessary to regard the results of a plebiscite of self-determination as democratically binding should be discussed. Half plus one of the valid suffrages, without setting a required minimum participation? The simple majority, with a minimum percentage of voters over the census over half? A qualified majority and more than 55–60 percent of valid votes? There are no indisputable and consensual formulas in International Law, and in each case (as demonstrated in Montenegro in 2006, as well as in Scotland in 2014) the participation thresholds have been agreed bilaterally.⁷⁶ In this respect, arguments are put forward for all tastes. Against the option of the qualified majority, it is argued that this means granting the status quo votes a higher value than the votes favourable to secession, with which the democratic principle that all suffrages must have the same relevance would be compromised. In favour of qualified majorities, it could be argued that such a substantial and irreversible modification of the political status of a territory should enjoy an undoubtedly hegemonic social endorsement in order to avoid social fractures, in the same way that any change in a Constitution in all truly democratic political systems requires a qualified majority of parliamentary support. No less important than the percentages should be the clarity of the question, or questions to be answered in a hypothetical referendum: should citizens choose between one option, or between several? A clear question in the Canadian or Scottish style? Or rather the possibility of multiple answers, Puerto Rican style?⁷⁷

Fourthly, if anything has been evident in the autumn of 2017 and again in October 2019, it has been that the international context, both European and global, is plagued by uncertainties. After the failure of the Scottish nationalists in the 2014 referendum, Catalan nationalists have remained practically alone in Europe for several years in their defence of the right of self-determination. In fact, beyond rhetorical statements of solidarity voiced by other sub-state nationalist parties, ranging from the Basque Country and Wales to Galicia and Flanders, it seems that very few of them would be eager to embark on a joint action with the Catalan movement seeking for the international recognition of self-determination.⁷⁸

Perhaps the re-enactment of the Scottish campaign for a independence referendum after Brexit in 2020 – following a completely different strat-



Diada Nacional – Catalan National Day 11.09.2018
Photographer/Author: Marc Puig Pérez.

egy, aimed at agreeing with the British government on holding a new plebiscite after developing an intense campaign backed by civil society and the Scottish government – may introduce some substantial changes in the international environment. Nevertheless, it seems evident that the EU Member States have no interest in establishing a precedent of internal secession, which is equated (often a priori) to a threat of fragmentation and weakness of the European project. Moreover, a Catalan Republic not recognised by other States could find itself in the position of a new state outside the EU, a matter that is susceptible to legal debate but politically plausible. International uncertainty hinders the chances of success of any unilateral secession in Europe.⁷⁹

Paradoxically, what might have been possible in Africa, in the Caucasus or in the Balkans in the past, is no longer viable within the EU, just as the European context also makes it possible to avoid a state of emergency being declared in Catalonia by the Spanish state. What at first seemed to operate as a precondition favourable to the peaceful and democratic conquest of independence – the fact that Spain’s membership of the EU would prevent the State from using brute force, decreeing martial law or resorting to the army, and would force the Spanish government to open a dialogue on an equal footing with the Catalan Government – could become a factor of external constraint. Thus, what was feasible for Kosovo (the path of unilateral independence proclaimed by an elected parliament, then recognised by several states diplomacies) is not possible for Catalonia.⁸⁰ The EU is not an idealist club of democratic states that protects oppressed peoples, or at least purportedly oppressed peoples. However: did the Catalan pro-independence leaders not know this beforehand?

It should be concluded that not only the Catalan movement but also the majority of sub-state nationalist movements have not yet finished defining their models of multicultural coexistence for the long twenty-first century. Neither have State-led nationalisms, beginning with Spanish nationalism. Perhaps this is because the mould of classical nationalism is no longer sufficient to accommodate societies characterised by the co-existence of multiple, hybrid and changing identities. Until now, all attempts to reinvent nationalism and national identity, or to subject the totem of national sovereignty to real debate, have ended in failure or indifference. The national state seems to have returned to the forefront of the European political landscape. Hence, today, a post-national Spain, Great Britain or Belgium is still to be invented. However, my impression is that the same still applies for a post-national Catalonia, Scotland or

Flanders. The post-pandemic world may make things different, but it is plausible that existing national states will come out of the present crisis substantially strengthened.

ENDNOTES

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