Catalonia & Spanish State: The dilemma of Catalunya en Comú

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This article, dated 11 September, discusses the position of one of the major parties in Catalonia faced with the decision of the Catalonian government to call the referendum outlawed by the central Spanish state government. It does not deal with the most recent repression against the Catalonian institututions by the Madrid government.

1/ On 9 September 2017 Catalunya en Comú adopted its definitive position on the 1 October referendum on Catalan self-determination on (henceforth "1-O"), while awaiting ratification by its rank and file through an internal consultation. [1] The position adopted completes and ratifies the hesitant trajectory the party has adopted since the Catalan government formally laid out its roadmap to the referendum in September 2016, with the commitment to hold it before the end of 2017. Nonetheless, we believe that it is important that the rank and file respond positively because if not Catalunya en Comú will simply be outside of what is at stake on October 1, left at the fringes of Catalan politics. The formal position of the organisation, on the other hand, raises various problems.

The first is the refusal to give in advance any binding character to the referendum, by characterising it as a simple "mobilisation" given the absence of guarantees and a consensus on the convening of the referendum. This ignores the fact that the lack of a normalised institutional framework for 1 October is entirely attributable to the refusal of the PP (the ruling Partido Popular), with the support of all the state structures, to accept the holding of a referendum and, more generally, to the refusal of the bulk of organizations opposed to independence to consider any debate on the latter to be legitimate. It is also forgotten that the "absolute guarantees" demanded for the vote have never been met by any other electoral consultation, as correctly recalled by the fourth deputy to the mayor of Barcelona, Jaume Asens, and were not met for example in the referendum on the Constitution in 1978. [2] Also, as indicated by Albert Noguera, the guarantees "are not neutral and technical instruments, they are also ideological instruments which are disputed and operate at the heart of the social and democratic contradictions." [3] This is not to deny the importance of the guarantees for 1 October, but simply to avoid thinking of them in a fatalist and predefined form. They form part of the political struggle itself to implement the referendum, whose final nature can only be evaluated after the fact. Also, this overinvestment in the guarantees contrasts with the reality of the great social - political struggles of history, which had little to do with prior legal certifications. The "movement" background of a good part of the leadership of Catalunya en Comú, and its reference to 15M as a founding narrative, does not sit very well with this formalist passivity.["15 M" refers to the *Indignad@s* movement which is dated as from 15 May 2011.]]

The second problem concerns the disconnection made between what will happen on 1-O and the political conditions which will exist on 2 October. This reduces the vote on 1-O to a mere "mobilization" and, incomprehensibly, does not take into account the fact that the result will weigh on the possibilities of then attaining the declared objective of Catalunya en Comú, a referendum negotiated with the state and including guarantees. This is the expression of a self-contradictory position arbitrarily diluting the meaning of 1-O and endangering Catalunya en Comu's declared goal

for 2 October. In reality, any attempt to hold a binding referendum negotiated with the state after 1-O should consider that the latter will only be possible if 1-O expresses its full power and if the Spanish state government emerges much weakened by this test of strength. The evidence is that if 1-O is only a "mobilization", without significance, in which moreover we participate against our wishes and which does not involve too great a challenge to Rajoy's government, the necessary conditions for holding a "real" referendum will not then be met. [4]

The third problem, and the most serious in practical terms, is the absence of a call to participate actively in 1-O. The question proposed to party activists only concerns whether Catalunya en Comú should participate or not – in the mode of a low intensity presence – in the event, as the National Coordination meeting of September 9 rejected the organization campaigning for 1-O. [5] This has undoubtedly put the organisation in a position of passivity to the referendum, with a clear attempt to reject the exploration of any attempt to articulate its own road map to an independence process., which would not mean being subordinate to this process.

This passive, tepid and demobilizing position having been adopted, there was, among the main leaders aligned with the official position, only the deputy mayor of Barcelona, Gerardo Pisarello, who put an acceptable position in relation to 1-O, in an article published on 5 September, 2017. Alongside several debatable assertions and with a generally very institutionalist tone, he wrote that "a defeat for 1-O would be more than a defeat for the roadmap of a government. It would be a decisive blow to the possibility of advancing in the full exercise of the right to decide. It would be a blow, also, to the democratic and republican initiatives of opposition to the Regime of 1978". He also indicated that "a yes vote would mark a divergence with the governmental roadmap. First, as a form of rebellion against centralism and authoritarianism. Second, because it would also be a means of advancing towards a basic majority proposal among the *comunes*, rooted in a tradition stretching from Pi y Margall to Joaquin Maurin and Lluís Companys: a multinational agreement, respectful and between equals, which questions the oligarchical and elitist project of "cohabitation" imposed in recent years and opens the way to a new republican cohabitation between the different peoples and inhabitants of the peninsula". [6] This way of seeing things is undoubtedly interesting but has no practical consequence and barely goes beyond putting a thin varnish of rupture on the hesitant position of Catalunya en Comú which Pisarello ultimately backs.

2. The project of Catalunya en Comú, whose predecessor was the electoral coalition En Comú Podem, which won the general elections of December 20, 2015 and June 26, 2016 in Catalonia, was created with the dual objective of exporting the model of Barcelona en Comú to Catalonia as a whole and overcoming the limits that Podem had shown as a Catalan political project, as demonstrated by its precarious existence in 2014 and 2015, culminating in its subaltern involvement in the failed electoral coalition Catalunya Sí que es Pot, together with Iniciativa per Catalunya (ICV) and Esquerra Unida y Alternativa (EUiA). [7]

Podem Catalunya was created as the mechanical effect of the general expansion of Podemos in the European election campaign and those which followed. But this took place without any reflection on how to approach Catalonia, on how to relate to the pro-independence process which opened in 2012 and the Catalan national question in general. The clash between the Spanish national-popular project that the state-wide leadership of Podemos wanted to build and Catalan realities weakened the potential of Podem in Catalonia. To some extent, what propelled Podemos to the "centre of the chessboard" at the state-wide level consigned it to the margins in Catalonia. [8] In terms of a conception of the national question, Podem was located a step behind the old, failed PSOE model of the "Catalan federation", that is, behind the position of a subaltern Catalan branch of a state-wide party.

The underlying challenge in the emergence of Catalunya en Comú was then to overcome these

limitations and advance in the building of a Catalan national party. However, things happened otherwise and the inter-party negotiation between its creators substituted for any deep strategic debate on the Catalan national question. At its founding congress, a series of generalities were approved which revealed no deep reflection at all on the national question, nor any strategic evaluation of the independence process. The distance taken from the latter led to a consistent passive tactic seeking to preserve a low profile for as long as possible, in the hope that *independentismo* would collapse and/or be defeated. This was a renunciation of an y active policy seeking to strengthen the constituent potential of the independence movement and articulate the aspirations which were the legacy of 15M.

3. The internal debate in Catalunya en Comú on 1-O cannot be detached from the overall future of its political project or the general profile of the party. Its policy concerning 1-O has a certain autonomy with respect to its positions on, for example, economic policy or its conception of the role of the "street" and the institutions in a strategy of change. But this autonomy is relative. What is also at stake in relation to 1-O, perhaps fundamentally, is the question of the nation and shape of the overall project of Catalunya en Comú.

This stems from a timorous and calculated tactic in relation to 1-O but also a Catalunya en Comú with a low "Catalanista" profile, little inclined to disobedience and rupture. The ambiguities on 1-O express in the first instance ambivalences on the national question, but also on the constituent dynamic of the party. This is the decisive fact. The hesitations of the "Comunes" (the name by which the party is commonly known in Catalonia) before the challenge of the independence movement indicate an organization more inserted in conventional governability and institutional normalization than anything else. They give an image of a political force more favourable to an exit from the institutional crisis from above, in the form of a positive, but limited, transformation of the traditional party system, in favour of a new system where the post-neoliberal left has a greater weight than in the previous phase. It is difficult not to see in the episode of 1-O a significant moment in the process of transformation of the Comunes into "Eurocomunes". [9]

It should, in this sense, be stressed that Catalunya en Comú, through its relations with Unidos Podemos, En Marea and Compromís, is involved in a trajectory at the political level of the Spanish state to form a governmental majority with the PSOE of Pedro Sánchez. A path which is certainly better than indefinitely supporting the PP government, but has little to do with a constituent perspective of rupture. On the contrary, it signifies the definitive institutional normalization of the forces of the "bloc of change". But beyond the general limits of a government formed by the PSOE and Unidos Podemos (and Catalunya en Comú, En Marea y Compromís), it is impossible to think that such a government could accept a referendum on Catalan independence. [10] In reality, an executive formed by Sánchez and Iglesias will not take the path of the referendum with guarantees that the *Communes* defend, but the road of constitutional reform that would rule out any constituent hypothesis.

4. For its part, Podem Catalunya, against the expectations of many, has taken a more proactive approach to 1-O. After an early period in post marked by hostility to the independence process, general secretary Albano Dante Fachín has, in a real but partial fashion, adopted a more constructive position towards the dynamic opened in 2012, a perspective which for a long time was only coherently defended by the activists of Anticapitalistes inside the party. Podem's position can be summarized thus: a call for "massive participation" in the referendum as a way to form a broad front against the regime of 1978, but considering the referendum as a non-binding mobilization and defending "No" as a voting position. The decisive question in Podem's view is the call for "participation", as this will be the key variable to evaluate 1-O, and this puts Podem in the camp of the defenders of the referendum.

Even if Podem's position is globally positive, it also has strong inconsistencies. Its efforts in relation to 1-O have been broadly and rightly appreciated, but it remains regrettable that the organization has taken a middle of the road position, well behind that which the situation demands. The first weakness is to call for a massive participation on 1-O while at the same time not considering it binding, an objectively contradictory position. If 1-O has a high participation, how would it be possible to argue that it has no validity? Why should the vote of Catalans have no real consequences? How can one argue that following a possible "yes" victory in a consultation with high participation the Catalan Parliament has no legitimacy in in proclaiming the independent Catalan republic? The argument is untenable.

The second weakness resides in the defence made of the call for a "No" vote. It is frankly difficult to see how a "no" victory could open a breach in the regime of 1978. Very much to the contrary, it would halt any such dynamic. Podem has defended the idea that after 1-0 a constituent process should begin in Catalonia. It is difficult here also to see how this could be done with a "no" victory. The fact that the weak point of 1-O is participation, that the victory of "yes" is seen as an won in advance by the pro-independence forces and that it is necessary that "no" supporters turn out to vote, means that the voting call is not an object of true debate and that the whole controversy turns on the legitimacy of the referendum. But that does not mean that we should not point out the weakness of Podemos' argument in favour of "No". Anybody who thinks about the strategic mode of an institutional rupture can easily see that "yes" has an extremely broad potential whereas that of the "no" is practically zero. Does this mean that Podem should defend independence as a perspective? That would not have too much meaning, given the opinion of its social base and the nature of its specific political project. In reality the strategic challenge for Podem, which its leadership has not faced, was to defend "yes" as a strategic option of rupture and as a road towards the multinational state model that the party defends, assuming the classic idea of rupture which is prior to any proposal of free voluntary federation. In short, it would be possible, starting from the limited strategic approach of Podem, to defend a "yes" vote on 1-0.

5. The social mobilizations in general have contradictory consequences and the lessons the masses learn from them are not unequivocal. The potential of the pro-independence movement as a process generating a consciousness of struggle and collective organization is ambivalent owing to its peculiar combination of impulsion from below and above as both a social and institutional movement. Social and institutional disobedience to the Spanish state favours a culture of struggle, but can easily lead to the applause directed at the Mossos de Esquadra (the Catalan autonomous police). Resistance to the Spanish authorities can lead to an over-legitimation of the Catalan political class which – unlike its European equivalents up to their necks in unending austerity and limitless mediocrity – has a narrative and a project. Social mobilization, as we know, is in general episodic, and it is probable that the great majority of those who have participated in the pro-independencee demonstrations will demobilize strongly in the event of a victory and return to their everyday private lives. It is also clear that the social bloc that is invested in the process started in 2012 is strongly based among the middle classes and the young.

But despite all these limits and ambiguities, the impact of a victory or a defeat will be undeniably very different in the Catalan society of the future. If the lesson drawn from the pro-independence process is "yes we can", participation, involvement and social mobilization will be be given heightened value and will have more weight in the political culture of the country. If the "independentista" adventure ends with a "No we can't" it is apathy and scepticism that will prosper. Whatever one thinks of the independence project, these different experiences will contribute to marking the relationship of Catalan society with collective action. It is truly paradoxical that considerations of this kind are clearly absent in a formation like Catalunya en Comú that defends in its texts the importance of social movements for any strategy of change, and which includes a broad

spectrum of leaders who had previously had a strong activist culture and involvement.

6. We cannot avoid comparing the current vacillations of Catalunya en Comú with what happened in 2014 with one of its founding partners, Iniciativa per Catalunya (ICV), which then practiced a policy of passivity and non-definition very similar to that of the *Comunes* now. In that case, however, the hesitations do not concern whether or not to support the planned referendum (which was the fruit of a broad consensus agreed in Parliament) but primarily around which way to vote in the referendum, something ICV only decided at the last minute, and second, on how to react to the "participative process" that Mas proposed as an alternative to the consultation prohibited by the Constitutional Court, from which the ICV initially firmly distanced itself but which it finally supported, although adopting a low profile. While expressed in a different form, the dilemmas of ICV then and Catalunya en Comú now reflect the same embarrassment before the pro-independence movement and an inability to think strategically about how to link up with the agenda derived from 15M and the *Mareas* against austerity. The comparison of the role of the two organizations in 2014 and today recalls what Marx said in the *18th Brumaire*: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce." However, considering, first, that ICV was then a minority force in electoral decline whereas Catalunya en Comú is one of the most important Catalan parties, and that second, that the Mas government had retreated whereas that of Puigdemont is obliged to go as far as possible, we might argue that the course of events has reversed Marx's formulation. Thus, if the attitude of ICV in 2014 was the farce, that of Catalunya en Comú now is the tragedy.

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* http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5153

Footnotes

[1] The position of the party leadership was approved by almost 60% in the consultation of 12-14 September.

[2] Asens, J. (2017). "Si hi ha urnes, jo aniré a votar al referèndum de l'1-O" (interview), *El Crític*, July 10, 2017. The 1978 Constitution is that which culminated the "transition" from the Francoist dictatorship to the current constitutional parliamentary democracy.

[3] Noguera, A. "Sobre las garantías del referéndum catalán", *El diario.es*, September 5, 2017.

[4] This point is discussed further in point 8 and 9 of the following article: Antentas, Josep Maria (2017). "1 de octubre: terciando en el debate Llonch-Garzón", 18 de julio. The English translation of this article is included in a dossier reproduced by ESSF (article 42040), Debate – The Catalan national struggle and the left in the Spanish state—a dossier.

[5] The question put to members was: Should Catalunya en Comú participate in the 1 October

mobilization?

[6] Pisarello, G. (2017). “1-0: raons per mobilitzar-nos i votar”, *El critic*, September 5, 2017. The English translation of this article is included in a dossier reproduced by ESSF (article 42040), Debate – The Catalan national struggle and the left in the Spanish state—a dossier.

[7] For more on the creation of Catalunya en Comú see Antentas, June 2017, ESSF (article 41429), Catalunya en Comú’s challenges: On the possibility of losing by winning.

[8] See Antentas, April 2015, ESSF (article 34631), Spain: Podemos and the Catalan independence process.

[9] Antentas, Josep Maria (2017). “¿Comunes o eurocomunes”, 4 de Mayo, Viento Sur.

[10] The only plausible hypothesis, in an exercise of political fiction, where a government of this type could accept a referendum on independence would be a situation in which this was the result of an order from the European Union as a way of resolving the “Catalan” problem. However, if this problem becomes unmanageable following a victory for “yes” on 1-O, the capacity of this government to maintain a prolonged disobedience in the face of state repression is doubtful. In this fictional scenario, it is probable that a referendum on independence would however be accompanied by a process of constitutional reform and improvement of Catalan self-government to reduce support for the option of independence. But this is not the current situation and the policy of demobilization of Catalunya en Comú and Podemos precisely goes in the opposite direction. .