Catalan's Decision – On the eve of October 1 referendum on independence

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How tomorrow's Catalan independence vote came about — and why it should have the Left's support.

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On October 1, Catalonia will hold a referendum on its independence. This vote, convened by the Catalan government but banned by the Spanish Constitutional Court, is the culmination of an unprecedented five-year confrontation between Catalan and Spanish institutions.

Since the independence process began with a mass demonstration on September 11, 2012, the Catalonian national holiday, the movement has grown into a sustained political and social force capable of organizing mass protests every year since. These developments clearly worry the right-wing government in Madrid, which is now trying every repressive tactic possible to prevent the vote from taking place.

Tomorrow is a key moment for Catalonia, and a good occasion to recall the political trajectory of the Catalan independence movement, with all its potential and limitations.

The Mainstream Movement

The movement that erupted in 2012 was the result of three connected dynamics. First, many Catalan citizens disliked the aggressive centralism of the second Aznar government (2000-4), which made Spanish nationalism the core of its political-cultural project.

Second, the new Catalan Statute of Autonomy, which the Catalan parliament passed in 2005, faced challenges when it went to Madrid for approval. The conservative People's Party (PP), then in the opposition, claimed the law was unconstitutional, and the constitutional court declared fourteen articles illegal. This failed process to increase their nation's sovereignty convinced many Catalans that they could not reform Spain from within.

Finally, the economic crisis and turn to harsh austerity policy further alienated Catalonia from the Spanish state, increasing the perception that Spain had politically and economically failed. Tensions between the central government and regional administrations increased as Madrid sought to take

advantage of the crisis in order to impose a recentralization plan that would, among other things, cut regional governments' public spending.

In Catalonia, discomfort with austerity policies and the collusion between financial and political elites was expressed first in the 15M movement. But, although it was not directed against austerity, the independence movement was also able to benefit from this discontent with the economic situation and offered a concrete proposal — independence from Spain — as a way out of the current situation.

In 2012, the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) organized a democratic movement exclusively around the call for independence. The ANC quickly grew into a mass organization with branches all over Catalonia, becoming the undisputed leading organization of the movement. As a result of its singular focus on independence, the ANC has neither critiqued austerity policies nor proposed economic change. Instead, the mainstream independence movement centers itself around shared identity — "We Catalans must unite because we have common interests" — and the desire to have a state of its own — "Without a state nothing can be done."

Left-wing supporters rounded out this focus on nation and state with a stagist perspective that calls for independence first and reformed economic and social policies later. But this approach ignores the fact that whoever controls the transition process determines what comes later. Today's concessions and demobilizations cannot be recovered tomorrow.

This insight is especially important in the Spanish case because the discourse of "first independence and then the rest" closely resembles the rhetoric of "first democracy and then social rights" that the Left accepted in the post-Franco transition. This doctrine justified compromises that left-wing forces never recovered from. It's a reminder that any movement based around a shared demand must take advantage of the opportune moment, but what it cannot win today, it cannot guarantee. The independence movement's elevation of the nation and the state as well as its stagist approach has produced serious strategic problems. That said, independence would directly confront the institutional framework established in 1978. For those fighting neoliberal capitalism, this assessment of the movement must become the starting point of any strategic analysis.

The Movement's Social Base

The independence movement cuts across class and generational lines, but the middle classes and young people dominate it. The high bourgeoisie has opposed the independence process from the beginning and consistently attempted from behind the scenes to derail it. The traditional working class — historically, immigrants who came to Catalonia from southern Spain in the sixties — has been less involved.

We can explain the traditional working class's absence by two different but related phenomena: the lack of this class's identification with the Catalan national question, and the decomposition of the labor movement. Workers in Catalonia remain divided on independence, and a significant part of them do not view an independent state as a future horizon.

A paradox of the independence movement is that the dominant political force since it began has been the Catalan nationalist right, Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC), historically the party that represents big capital despite the latter's opposition to independence, although it has by no means completely controlled the movement. The CDC came to power in 1980 under the leadership of Jordi Pujol, initiating a long phase of conservative nationalist hegemony and closing the previous period when Catalanism was mainly dominated by its progressive currents.

In the sixties and seventies, the struggles for Catalan national demands and labor rights worked together, as they were fighting a common enemy, Franco's dictatorship. Indeed, the workers' movement — in particular its main illegal organization, the communist Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC) — based its strategy on this conjunction, fighting to unite the Catalan working class around a national identity and successfully convincing Spanish-origin workers to embrace national demands.

During the post-Franco transition, Pujol brought together the middle classes, combining a moderately nationalist and democratic project with his faultless anti-Franco credentials. As a result, he could present himself as the guarantor of quiet political change, overcoming the Left and winning a political hegemony that would last for more than two decades. His pragmatic relationship to the Spanish government, quest to increase Catalan influence in Spanish politics, and cultural nationalism united his middle-class social base. In the nineties and the first decade of the new millennium, this gradualism hardened as the CDC sought to enhance Catalan self-government in hopes of improving the nation's position within the global economy. When the independence movement broke out, President Artur Mas (Pujol's successor) had no choice but to lead it.

Since then, the financial and business powers have largely distanced politically from CDC, which nevertheless continues to represent their class interests. In the five years they have been in government, the right-wing nationalists have experienced a serious decline in favor of the pro-independence center left around Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC). This forced them to relaunch CDC as a new party in 2016 under the name of Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català (PDECAT).

From Referendum to Disconnection and Back

Since the beginning, the independence movement has fought for a referendum, but the Spanish government has systematically denied this request. Indeed, the central government rejects the legitimacy of the debate altogether.

This reflects the nature of the centralized Spanish state and the political regime that emerged from the 1978 constitution. The national question — and, within it, the Catalan question — became one of the transition's hottest issues, especially for the dictatorship's inheritors and the army, who oversaw the creation of the new constitution.

In this period, the Catalanist parties' demanded the restoration of an autonomous government within the framework of Spain's democratic transformation. While the new constitution introduced the ambiguous term "nationalities" to describe the particular characteristics of Catalonia, Basque Country, Galicia, and Andalucía, it did not recognize the multinational nature of the state or its constituent nations' right to self-determination. Indeed, article two established the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation, the common and indivisible homeland of all Spaniards."

In practice, this meant considerable political and administrative decentralization constrained by a strict legal framework, which the constitutional court has increasingly interpreted in a restrictive manner. In 2012, the Catalan government announced that it would hold an independence referendum and on December 2013 its date was set for November 9, 2014. When the Spanish constitutional court banned the vote, the Catalan government rebranded the plebiscite as a semi-official popular consultation, legally defined as a "participatory process." This strategy avoided both surrender to and direct confrontation with the central state. The Spanish government couldn't prevent a massive democratic event in favor of independence, but the independence movement couldn't promote the vote as a binding act.

The 2014 referendum had an ambiguous result. First, its hybrid nature made it an important event without binding political consequences. The vote showed that the independence movement had gained hegemony but still lacked an overwhelming electoral majority. Independence won handily (1,861,753 out of a total 2,305,290 votes), but this victory looks less impressive when we consider that almost three times that many people — 6.2 million — had the right to vote (the Catalan electorate comprises 5.2 million but for this occasion people over the age of 16 and 900,000 foreign residents were allowed to vote). November 9 allowed Catalonia to have a referendum without doing so — and not to do it while still claiming it had. Thus, though it represented an unquestionable political and social success, it became a serious strategic error because it pushed the independence movement to follow a flawed road map.

Following the vote, the pro-independence forces decided to convert the 2015 regional elections into a plebiscite on independence. Then, after the new government formed, they initiated an eighteen-month disconnection process that would make Catalonia independent from the Spanish state. This plan had an insurmountable internal contradiction: the same movement that did not dare disobey the legal ban on the 2014 referendum was now trying to accomplish something that required greater mobilization and demanded a direct confrontation with the state from which it had just backed down.

Finally, after an unproductive two-year detour, the government and the independence movement returned to the starting point: the need for a referendum on independence as a catalyzing moment of a democratic confrontation — that is, October 1's moment of truth.

The Catalan Left

Catalunya en Comú, the Catalan party led by Barcelona's Mayor Ada Colau, has maintained its distance from the October 1 vote, though it does call on the centralized state to accept to hold a legal referendum. Colau's party has unequivocally denounced state repression but remains stuck in a passive position.

The party decided to participate in the October 1 event but considers it more of a mobilization than a referendum. Consequently, Catalunya en Comú calls for a new referendum with binding effects, agreed upon by both the Spanish and Catalan governments.

This position has serious problems: first, we should blame the lack of guarantees — not to mention the legal and procedural uncertainties — on the Spanish government's repressive efforts, which have forced the Catalan government to act unconventionally.

Second, Catalunya en Comú seems to disconnect the results of the vote from the political conditions that will exist the next day: planning a binding referendum will only become possible if the Spanish government loses or pays a high political price. Finally, though the party decided to participate, it did not openly call for mass participation nor encourage people to vote, thereby maintaining its low profile. Podem, the Catalan branch of Podemos — which is not part of Catalunya en Comú, although some kind of electoral agreement between both will probably be made — was created during the national party's expansion following the 2014 European elections, but its founders failed to consider how the party could insert itself in Catalonia, especially with regard to the independence process and the national question.

The central party's Spanish leadership worked since the party's inception to consolidate a Spanish national project, which clashes with the political situation in Catalonia and the Catalan national question, weakening the party's potential there. In a way, what propelled Podemos to the center of

the political map throughout Spain pushed it partially to the margins in Catalonia.

However, Podem has finally agreed to defend participation in the October 1 referendum, a commitment that goes far beyond what Pablo Iglesias would have desired. In fact, Podemos's leader is closer to Catalunya en Comú than to his own party branch in Catalonia. Podem does not consider the October 1 referendum binding and takes an anti-independence position, but it has decisively sided with those trying to hold the referendum against the Spanish government's will.

Meanwhile, an anti-capitalist wing has formed within the independence movement, centered on the Candidatures d'Unitat Popular (CUP).

Radical independentism grew among young people and the non-parliamentary left during the eighties before consolidating in the nineties. It played an important role in social activism, but remained politically marginal until the 2000s, when radical left pro-independence candidates began to win seats on local councils. The CUP entered the Catalan parliament for first time in 2012 with 3.4 percent of the vote and three MPs. Three years later, their share rose to 8.2 percent and 10 seats.

Over the past five years, CUP has combined its commitment to the independence process with an anti-capitalist program. However, it has largely operated from within the independence movement's framework, failing to connect its anti-capitalist position with a strategic claim that would have let it reach with new social layers and help redefine some of the mainstream movement's goals. In this period CUP made two important and interrelated mistakes.

First, it did not try to build an alliance with the left-wing groups — like Podem and Catalunya en Comú — that reject independence but support the right to self-determination. Doing so would have redrawn the map of the Catalan left. Second, it endorsed both the semi-official and non-binding November 9 vote and the subsequent decision to turn the 2015 elections into a plebiscite and initiate a subsequent independence process.

CUP navigated its internal difficulties — the product of its mistaken political line — as best it could, but it did so with a genuine display of rank-and-file democracy that contrasts sharply with Podemos's authoritarian plebiscites. And in 2016, it played a decisive and positive role in redirecting the movement toward a new referendum.

Unity Not Bifurcation

The debate over independence has handicapped the Catalan left, and, for this reason, a deep schism has developed within it. Surprisingly, almost no one tried to formulate a strategic agreement between these two sides, independence supporters and those in favor of the right to self-determination. Such an alliance could have agreed to the foundation of a Catalan Republic and a constituent process without necessarily agreeing on the new state's final destination (independence or a type of federal alliance with the rest of the Spanish State).

Meanwhile, the independence movement has largely failed to join forces with the offshoots of the 15M movement. The fact that neither Catalunya en Comú nor CUP have thought seriously about this issue amounts to shooting themselves in the foot, and the shortcomings produced by this bifurcation threaten to harden into permanent incapacities. As a result, the radical left in Catalonia is divided, giving more power to the center-left ERC and to the Catalan right wing.

This mistake repeats across the entirety of Spain as well. The Spanish left has never successfully

understood the Catalan national question nor has it articulated the movement strategically within its own project to transform Spain. This failure has been obvious at several critical moments in Spanish history, including the establishment of the Spanish Second Republic on April 14, 1931.

The Catalan question was one of this process's main controversies, and the procedure to approve the Catalan Statute of Autonomy — which the Spanish Parliament voted to approve on September 9, 1932 — was turbulent. The Second Republic's constitution, which called for an "integral Republic" that remained "compatible with the autonomy of Villages and Regions," clashed with Catalan demands.

As Joaquim Maurin, the main theorist of the heterodox Worker's Party of Marxist Unification (POUM), wrote "the Republic was not federal but integral, a euphemism of unitary." He meant that the new state not only failed to satisfy the Catalanist demands, but it also weakened its own capacity to break with the old monarchic centralist state that could have been smashed if the Republic had been federal.

The issue of Catalan self-governance arose again in the post-Franco transition. Then, the left-wing parties, including the PSOE, formally defended the right to self-determination. But this was merely rhetorical, and the Left, including the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), accepted a constitution that flatly denied it. Since then, the PCE and the electoral coalition it launched in 1986, Izquierda Unida (IU), have defended the right to self-determination abstractly, as a mechanism to convert Spain into a federal state. They do not seem to recognize that the right to self-determination implies the right to separation. In their 2015 platforms, both IU and Podemos called for a binding independence referendum in Catalonia as part of their struggle to consolidate a new left-wing political majority across Spain. However, they have been reluctant to endorse the Catalan government's attempts to hold a unilateral referendum until a pro-referendum political majority exists in the Spanish parliament.

IU is not in favor of the October 1 referendum, and Podemos holds the same position as its allies in Catalunya en Comú: it supports the vote but doesn't recognize it as a real referendum. However, the fight between the Catalan government and the Spanish state — not to mention the escalating repression — have forced both IU and Podemos to denounce the government's authoritarian behavior. The Spanish left should consider how the advance of the Catalan independence movement affects Spanish political life and society. Does it weaken the political regime born in 1978? Or does it help reinforce the Right's reactionary values and hegemony outside Catalonia?

We cannot definitively answer this crucial question, but we can say that the Left must fight for the first scenario, which means rejecting the Spanish nationalist project and its reactionary rhetoric. The more left-wing forces give in to this line of argument and the more they tiptoe around the thorny issues, the more they allow the PP and its minions to use Catalan independence as a scapegoat for its own failing legitimacy.

Spanish (and Catalan) Federalist left currents and the independence movements in Catalonia, Basque Country, and Galicia must articulate a joint strategy that resists the 1978 regime and the economic powers-that-be. This requires a complex center-periphery dialectic that neither views matters from the Spanish political arena nor locks itself into a perspective of fighting only from by the periphery. This crucial strategic issue unfortunately does not appear to interest either Podemos (outside of its Anticapitalistas left-wing current) and IU, or the CUP and mainstream independent movement.

The Coming Challenge

It is impossible to remain neutral in the clash between the Spanish state and the Catalan government. On the one hand, the reactionary and antidemocratic central government denies the right to self-determination and the basic democratic claim to hold a referendum. On the other, a democratic demand is expressing a long-sustained discomfort regarding the structure of the Spanish state. The government's repressive attempts to paralyze the referendum are unprecedented in their magnitude and political significance. On September 6, the constitutional court outlawed the Referendum Act and initiated a battle between Spanish and Catalan rule of law — a situation we could define as one of dual institutional legitimacy.

After the decision, all activities related to the referendum became illegal. The civil guard searched several printers for campaign material and ballot papers and raided media headquarters.

The Spanish general attorney served a subpoena to the 712 Catalan mayors — out of 947 — who had officially expressed their willingness to organize the vote. On September 20, the Spanish police raided the Catalan government's headquarters and arrested fourteen people (who were provisionally released after appearing before the judge few days later). The central government also blocked the Catalan government's bank accounts. And, finally, on September 23 the Spanish government announced it was taking the control of the Catalan police.

Outside Catalonia, actions in support the referendum have faced repression. For example, a judge prohibited a gathering that was supposed to take place in a building owned by the Madrid City Council. (The rally was finally held successfully in a private theater.)

October 1 is no longer just about the Catalan people voicing their opinions. It will set the stage for a wider democratic battle over the future of the institutional framework created in 1978, which could strengthen or weaken depending on who wins this battle. The Spanish left must show solidarity with the Catalan people and their right to hold the referendum, but the Catalan left has a specific and complex challenge. First, it must fight to overcome state repression and hold the referendum as planned. Second, it must mobilize the highest possible turnout.

The bulk of the opposition does not recognize the referendum's legitimacy and is calling for a boycott. Podem is the main exception: its general secretary defends the vote but is campaigning against independence. Catalunya en Comú's leaders have declared that they will vote but have yet to reveal how. However, to defend a "yes" vote is the best strategic choice, even for those who want a voluntary federal coexistence between the Catalan and Spanish peoples. Those in favor of this federal horizon should acknowledge that it can only be built on the basis of Catalan sovereignty. The outcome is far from guaranteed, but this strategic "yes" could deal a major blow to the 1978 regime and unleash Catalonia's democratic potential to create a better political and social framework. That is precisely the strategic challenge for the future.

Josep Maria Antentas

P.S.

* Jacobin. 09.30.2017:

https://jacobinmag.com/2017/09/catalonia-independence-referendum-spain-podemos

* Josep Maria Antentas is a professor of sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.