

Social transformation - Catalonia's fight is driven by a passion for neighbourhood, not nationhood

Tuesday 17 October 2017, by [BERNAT Ignasi](#), [WHYTE David](#) (Date first published: 17 October 2017).

The referendum wasn't a spontaneous happening, it was the result of a neighbourhood solidarity that will outlast any constitutional settlement.

It looks like we are in for a lengthy impasse on independence in Catalonia. But as this political stalemate unfolds, a much more fundamental process of self-determination is well under way. The international community still fails to recognise that the region has witnessed an unprecedented revolution in participative democracy that started long before the referendum, and will almost certainly outlast any constitutional settlement. This is not a struggle for "nation" or flag, it is part of something much more fundamental to the future of both the Catalanian and the Spanish people.

When the polling station at L'arenal de Llevant opened just after 8.30am on 1 October, the international observers waiting outside were astonished when they saw who had been sleeping overnight inside the school to prevent it being closed by Spanish prime minister Mariano Rajoy's shock troops. The group that emerged were pupils between the ages of 12 and 17, their parents and their teachers. Pupils, teachers and parents had worked together through the night, barricading themselves in, prepared to physically defend the school against riot police.

Some commentators saw this as a spontaneous happening, a result of the tense politics surrounding the referendum. But those kids and teachers did not just decide on a whim that they would join together. The committees to defend the referendum that took to the barricades in more than 2,000 polling stations came from neighbourhoods that have been developing new strategies of political and economic solidarity for years.

In other words, participatory democracy is not a result of the referendum, but is the result of a long-term project for social transformation that seeks, in the words of one woman we met in a polling station in Poble Sec, "to sweep away capitalism and patriarchy".

Anyone who knows about local politics in Catalonia will know this is not mere sloganising. Perhaps the best-known of the left's alternative strategies in local government is in the Catalanian capital, where Barcelona en Comú and the mayor Ada Colau have been in power for two years. Across the region the CUP (Popular Unity Candidacy party), Barcelona en Comú's coalition partner on the left in some councils, controls around 20 municipal councils - representing more than half a million people - and has 10 seats in the Catalanian parliament.

The social and solidarity economy has been developed by local movements for at least 20 years, but the economic crisis and the relatively recent political project of municipal socialism have boosted its momentum. One of the most outstanding projects has been Som Energia, a co-op of consumers that uses only energy from sustainable sources. Guiamets, a small town governed by the CUP, has

contracted all the energy to this co-op. It is not unusual for architects, psychologists, or lawyers to group together on co-op principles, and waste recyclers, carpenters, wine and olive producers, graphic designers and even local banking and insurance services are no different. The Network of Social Economy (XES) connects more than 150 co-ops and organisations.

Support for the “solidarity economy” as an alternative to capitalism is supported by new grassroots political structures. “Constitutive, or constituent, assemblies” in the neighbourhoods involve hundreds of people discussing and then mandating the course of action their councillors and MPs take.

It is the same organising principle that came into play in the committees in defence of the referendum. The idea is to provide a model of participative democracy that outlives the referendum and gives people a chance to build new institutions and new forms of organising. Their power and reach across Catalonia should not be underestimated. It was those networks that built the mass participation in the general strike. One internal document leaked from the Spanish army indicates its own weakness in the face of those committees: “We are not sure that the Catalan government can control these structures at the moment ... the street belongs to the radicals.”

Indeed, those neighbourhood assemblies played a decisive role in the political impetus for this referendum. The CUP forced an agreement with the Catalanian government to ratify the budget in exchange for the 1 October referendum. That deal was discussed and debated vociferously in the assemblies.

It is not mere rhetoric when the parliamentary leader of the CUP, Anna Gabriels, says: “We know that to avoid continual economic and social crises, we need to build new economic and social relationships. We are anti-capitalist, socialist and feminist and we want to build a new republic on that basis: one that is sustainable and nurtures solidarity and equality.” And this is the point that the left across Europe hasn’t yet grasped: this aim has always been part of the self-determination movement.

The wide range of different political groups in those communities have displayed an incredibly mature approach that is committed to the neighbourhood, rather than the nation, as the focal point for action. It is this commitment that ensured high level of involvement from women’s collectives, migrant solidarity groups, independent trade unions, autonomists, anarchists and the social centres.

As the international media sees an oversimplified battle between Catalanian and Spanish nationalisms, the political elites in both states are looking over their shoulder at a movement that threatens to shake the foundations of both.

Ignasi Bernat and David Whyte

P.S.

* The Guardian. Sunday 15 October 2017 16.13 BST Last modified on Monday 16 October 2017 12.01 BST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/15/catalonia-independence-neighbourhood-nationhood-referendum#img-1>

* • Ignasi Bernat is an academic sociologist and social movement activist based in Barcelona. David

Whyte is professor of socio-legal studies at the University of Liverpool; his most recent books are *How Corrupt is Britain?* and *The Corporate Criminal* (with Steve Tombs)