

Catalonia and the national question: 'If I were Catalan, I would have no choice but to vote yes to independence'

Thursday 20 July 2017, by [CASULLERAS NUALART Josep](#), [FIDLER Richard](#), [PASTOR Jaime](#) (Date first published: 13 July 2017).

Jaime Pastor, interviewed by Josep Casulleras Nualart.

Introduction

On October 1, by decision of the Catalan government, the region's voters will be asked in a referendum "Do you want Catalonia to become an independent state in the form of a republic?"

The referendum, which is the culmination of years of mass mobilizations by Catalans in favour of independence, has come under sharp attack by the Spanish government headed by Mariano Rajoy, which in recent years has used the Constitution, the central parliament and the courts to deny the Catalan people the right to determine independently the constitutional status of their nation. This is a case of longstanding oppression. Under the regime of General Francisco Franco, which emerged triumphant in the Spanish Civil War, Catalans were even denied the right to use their own majority language, Catalan.

A recent article published in the web-based daily *Público* entitled "Legitimacy and legality. With the right to vote on October 1" attracted considerable controversy. The author, Jaime Pastor, an influential Marxist activist and intellectual, criticized leaders of Spain's new left party Podemos who have aligned themselves with the dominant Spanish nationalism in attacking the October 1 referendum in Catalonia. Pastor is the author of, inter alia, a book on the national question, the Spanish state and the left that in my opinion contains one of the best explanations anywhere of the historical development of the Marxist approach to the national question. [\[1\]](#)

Pastor's article focused in particular on the prevalent misreading in Spain of the international jurisprudence on the exercise of self-determination by minority nations within existing states. In the following interview he defends the Catalan referendum and addresses some of the major political implications of the October 1 vote.

Jaime Pastor is a political science professor at the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia [National University of Distance Education] in Madrid and editor of *Viento Sur*, a journal of ideas and analysis. The interview was first published in Catalan. I have translated the Spanish text, which was published in *Viento Sur*.

Of particular interest to Canadian socialists attempting to understand the Quebec national question is the fact that Pastor speaks as a leftist in the dominant nation, Spain, who advocates a vote for independence in the dominated Catalonia. The reasons he gives — above all, the inability to remedy Catalonia's inequality under the existing Spanish constitutional and political regime — could apply, *mutatis mutandis*, in Canada, where outside of Quebec (and now the indigenous communities) there

is an historic unwillingness to even discuss, let alone accommodate, the demands of Québécois and indigenous peoples for autonomous status as distinct nations within or without the Canadian social formation.

Most recently, the modest request by Quebec premier Philippe Couillard, a staunch federalist, for a dialogue with Canadians aimed at eventually re-opening constitutional talks in the hope of finally getting Quebec's approval of the 1982 Constitution was met with a prompt No by Prime Minister Trudeau, who had not even read Couillard's 200-page book. [2]

Following Pastor's argument, which I find compelling, I would argue that the historical record proves that the Canadian left, and indeed consistent democrats, must go beyond the defense of the right of self-determination and support the demand of most progressives in Quebec (including in the left party Québec solidaire) for independence, even if only to provoke a public rethinking of the undemocratic nature of Canadian state structures and how they might be reconceived and reconfigured, with or without Quebec, to facilitate the pursuit of a progressive social agenda and solidarity among the constituent peoples within the existing state.

This is timely reading during the official celebrations of what the dominant authorities term the 150th anniversary of "Canada" — in fact, the granting by the British monarchy in 1867 of home rule to four of its overseas colonies in North America, with the definitive denial of nationhood to the Francophone and indigenous peoples.[3]

Richard Fidler

Interview with Jaime Pastor

Josep Casulleras Nualart - You said "If I were Catalan, I would go to vote." What would be your vote?

Jaime Pastor - I am not an independentist, but I recognize that the attempt to federalize the Spanish state has proved impossible. And I recognize that there is no desire for a federal agreement among the majority of the Spanish parties. In that context, I would have no choice but to vote yes. It would be desirable if the yes to independence were to lead to some kind of confederal arrangement or a free state associated with the various peoples in the Spanish state, although not with the Spanish state as such. That is, it would be a question of forcing, on the basis of the vote in Catalonia, an opening in the "nut" at the core of the constitutional debate, and the opening of constituent processes. And in that context, arriving at a confederal arrangement. I defend the option of separation in order to allow negotiations between equals.

Where you surprised by [Podemos leader] Pablo Iglesias' criticism of the October 1 referendum?

Yes, because I think that this time he acted hastily, given the position of Podem Catalunya [the Catalanian Podemos], and the fact that the debate on the referendum was still going on in the communes.

What do you attribute this to, Iglesias' misgivings about the referendum?

There are two factors. On the one hand, there is a basic problem which is that although Podemos has been talking about plurinationality, it still holds to a vision in which the idea of the Spanish nation prevails over others. And I think that there is an underestimation of the evolution of a major part of the Podemos electorate. Perhaps they overestimate the weight that is still exercised by a Spanish nationalism that pays little attention to the fact that recognizing the plurinational reality also means recognizing the right to decide. Perhaps there is the weight of electoralist considerations in opposition to the consistent defence of the right to decide. Perhaps they were thinking that outside of Catalonia defending participation in this referendum would not be understood. But there are recent articles and studies indicating that among the Podemos voters there is a growing openness toward being consistent, that is, that there are indeed several nations, and that the Partido Popular [PP] government is blocking the exercise of a referendum, and given that the path to an agreement is closed the only type of referendum that is possible is this one.

Is Podemos also a prisoner of the complex of not being sufficiently Spanish?

That's a factor. There is a certain fear of being accused of having placed themselves on the side of those who want to break up the unity of Spain. That is the discourse of Pablo Iglesias, that they are in favour of a referendum but that they would defend remaining in Spain. There is a fear of appearing to oppose the idea of the unity of Spain. On the other hand, we see that the entity that does the most to challenge that unity is the PP itself. Of even greater weight is the fear of being consistent with the defense of plurinationality, and not only in cultural terms as the [Social Democratic] PSOE says but in political terms. That is, recognizing Catalonia as something differentiated from the rest of Spain.

You were also surprised by [United Left leader] Alberto Garzón's attack on October 1. He says it means legitimizing the Catalan right wing.

Unfortunately, a culture that has been dominant in the Communist Party of Spain still weighs heavily on Izquierda Unida [United Left], which defends the right of self-determination but still only in the federal framework. It has not stopped defending the right of self-determination as the right to separation. But on the other hand in this case the part is taken for the whole. One can be critical of the PDeCAT [Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català, a nationalist Catalan government party] but I think this is an excuse. We cannot say that we defend the referendum only if it is a radical and consistent Left that hegemonizes this demand. It seems to me an idea of the Left that basically obscures the weight of a culture that still thinks there is one nation above all of the others.

Are they unaware of the Catalan reality?

There is a certain lack of understanding, yes. We see that EUiA [United and Alternative Left, the Catalan counterpart of the United Left in Spain] is prepared to participate in a mobilization. The United Left in Spain is unaware of the enormous plurality and diversity that exists in the whole of this majority of Catalan society that is demanding a referendum; whether or not it is possible through an agreement, it can be done within the given possibilities. There are sectors that want to go beyond an independence that does not alter the social situation in Catalonia and there are those who want to go further like the CUP [Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, a leftist Catalan party]. Yes, there is some misunderstanding, and the old culture that has not stopped taking its distance from the idea of a nation of nations.

The Catalanian communes also have a mistrust of the referendum. They talk of guarantees.

They are waiting for the government to clarify what the list of registered voters will be, how the election will be audited, what international observers there will be, etc. I think it is legitimate to

demand more guarantees, whatever can be done to ensure that the referendum is given international recognition. In the meantime, it must be supported; I would be a partisan of the minority position within this convergence, which is to support critical participation in the referendum and to ask that the questions that are not sufficiently clear be clarified. It seems to me legitimate that there are doubts, but this does not appear to me to be enough to bar support for this referendum and a call to participate in it.

You say the referendum is legitimate and legal.

Of course. That is certainly true if we understand that international jurisprudence prevails in those constitutions that explicitly undertake to accept those international agreements. Take, for example, the ruling of the International Court of Justice in Serbia's appeal in the case of Kosovo. There is an evident recognition that in some particular situations the referendum can have all the legal guarantees if it is conducted peacefully, if the attempts [by the minority nation] to reach an agreement with the state have been exhausted, and if the decision to separate has been taken by a majority of the affected society. Now, the big challenge of Catalan society is to demonstrate that in this referendum a majority of the population participates.

What consequences will the referendum have in the Spanish state?

If the referendum is held and there is substantial participation, it will be an important blow to the '78 regime. [3] That's why I say to the various peoples of Spain who are critical of the Spanish state that we have an interest in supporting the referendum. Furthermore, let us not forget that the question to be asked proposes the formula of a Catalan republic. Accordingly, it would be the opening of a definitive breach in the regime, and not only in the self-governing state but also in the monarchy as the cornerstone of this regime. And we ought to see how Spanish society would react.

How would it react?

Keep in mind that Spanish society is concerned not with the independence of Catalonia but with the cutbacks in social spending, health, education, etc. It would help even more if, along with the referendum, there were a determination to overcome the cutbacks that Catalonia, too, has suffered. We have already seen the guaranteed income and the annulment of the Francoist sentences approved by the [Catalan] parliament. If Catalonia shows that it not only wants to vote in the referendum but also that they are challenging the policies of austerity, solidarity with the democratic demand outside of Catalonia would increase further.

Could there be a situation of regression?

If the referendum were blocked through repressive measures, that would imply a democratic regression in the Spanish state as a whole. We see how free speech is being criminalized as in the harsh use of the criminal code with the gag law, the contempt for the anti-Francoist legacy, and the process of recentralizing the police; this would also be to the detriment of the Basque country and Galicia.

Better that we get it right...

Yes, yes. What is at stake is the road toward a break with the '78 regime and toward a radical democratization of Spanish society. Or, on the contrary, toward a more authoritarian course.

What will the PSOE do?

The PSOE has tried to take its distance from the possible use of the repressive article 155 of the

Constitution. [4] It cannot close ranks with the PP in opposition to the demand for a referendum but neither can it appear to be questioning the unity of Spain. And the PSOE's problem is that it lacks the credibility to be able to demonstrate that the sort of proposals it makes is viable. It will be important to see how Catalan society evolves and how the [Catalan social democratic] PSC comes to see that it must allow some type of recognition of the referendum. Now, within the PSOE there are positions like those of Pérez Tapias or Odón Elorza, who have defended a clarity law like the one in Canada. They still have time to present an emergency measure in the Congress, as they did when they imposed neoliberal austerity. Now there is sufficient urgency to come up with a possible organic law on the referendum.

And after October 1, won't the PSOE close ranks with the PP to preserve the unity of Spain?

The PSOE will reject the result of the referendum if it does not have massive participation. This could create a profound crisis in the PSOE, and we will then have to see what position the PSC takes. If the PSOE lines up with the PP it will become a subaltern force of the PP, which is what [PSOE leader] Pedro Sánchez has sought to avoid. It would be the old tradition of [former PSOE leader] Felipe González that would emerge triumphant.

13/07/2017

P.S.

* Life on the Left. Thursday, July 20, 2017:

<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.fr/2017/07/if-i-were-catalan-i-would-have-no.html>

Footnotes

[1] Jaime Pastor, Los nacionalismos, el Estado español y la izquierda (2012: Viento Sur, Madrid), now in its second printing. Online:

<http://vientosur.info/spip.php?article3614>

See in particular the first chapter, "Una perspectiva histórico y teórico."

[2] In its English translation, Quebecers: Our Way of Being Canadian.:

<http://www.saic.gouv.qc.ca/documents/relations-canadiennes/politique-affirmation-en.pdf>

[3] The Constitution adopted in 1978 adopted by the PP and PSOE after Franco's death. It fails to recognize the right of self-determination of Spain's constituent peoples or nations.

[4] This article allows the Senate, where the PP has a majority, to suspend a regional government if it fails to comply with the Constitution or "seriously jeopardizes the general interest of Spain."