

Spain on Trial - On the trials of Catalanian political prisoners

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This week the trials began: the trials of Catalanian political prisoners in Spain, on trial for crimes of 'rebellion' and 'sedition'. Let's just pause to reflect on this. We have a leading European state putting 12 people on trial for peaceful political activities. All 12 were either elected or legitimately recognised political leaders representing the majority in Catalonia. And they have already been in jail for 17 months or so. Although the offences are 'rebellion' and 'sedition', they are on trial for organising a plebiscite that was also supported by the majority of the people. They are on trial for organising a vote against the wishes of the sovereign. You have to pinch yourself. This is in Europe. In the 21st century.

Human Rights Watch has condemned the violence of the Spanish Police (though it has not yet been accused of hate crimes) and Amnesty International has officially asked to be an observer at the trials. This comes a matter of months after the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Basque political prisoner Arnaldo Otegi was not given a fair trial.

So where is the mass mobilisation in Europe to stop this trial that makes a mockery of basic human rights standards? Where are the solidarity demonstrations? Why is this not being scandalised in the European press? One reason is that it has been very easy to dismiss the Catalan crisis as a backlash against "Catalan nationalism." It is less easy to face the reality: that a particularly ugly form of Spanish nationalism has risen to the surface of politics. This is a form of nationalism that has empowered the extreme right, like the VOX movement in Andalusia. Recall that VOX's most prominent demand was to further rescind the autonomy of the Catalan parliament.

Three weeks ago, the left-wing mayors of two Catalan towns of Verges and Celrà were arrested in a dawn raid along with, a journalist from the magazine La Directa and 13 other activists. They were arrested for organising peaceful protests demanding the release of political prisoners. In the past few months, politicians, teachers and fire fighters alike, have been charged by the authorities with "hate crimes" and "discrimination" against "the Spanish nation and the corps of the Guardia Civil." Numerous ordinary people who have dared to condemn police violence - or even talk about it in public - have been hauled in front of the judiciary, facing prison for "hate crimes" against the Spanish state.

The Catalan crisis has become a key battleground preserving the dominance of the Spanish government and the financial oligarchy. Of course, not everyone on the left supports self-determination for Catalonia. But the origins of the current struggle are in the anti-austerity movement and Spain's attempts to quash it. This struggle is exemplified by the modification of the Spanish constitution in August 2011. This modification - introduced as a consensus between the ruling PSOE and the PP in opposition - came in the form of Article 135 which amended the constitution to guarantee the repayment of the public debt above any other social spending. This economic 'stability' measure was key to ensuring the primacy of the interests of the Spanish banks and foreign capital investors as a matter of social priority. The right to profit was effectively secured even when so many of the beneficiaries of this measure were widely known to have been routinely engaged in fraud in the run up to the crisis.

Since 2006 more than 40 laws passed by the Catalanian Parliament have been blocked by the Constitutional Court using the argument that the Parliament has no competency to legislate on such issues. In reality, the Court has been crudely and deliberately narrowing the boundaries of the Catalanian Parliament's competencies. Most of the blocked laws were concerned with securing social rights and protecting people against impact of austerity. The most striking of these blocked laws was one that banned the eviction of people before they were offered social housing and included a measure to protect the vulnerable against their water and electricity supplies being cut off. This law had cross-party support in the Catalan Parliament. Other interventions included outlawing measures on gender equality and climate change.

The movement for Catalan independence at the same time contains the seeds of a real, economic and social, self-determination. As we noted in an earlier piece for The Guardian, the 'solidarity' economy has been developed by locally-based social movements in Catalonia for at least twenty years, but the economic crisis and the relatively recent political project of municipal socialism has boosted its momentum with an explosion of initiatives and projects.

So this is not a simple struggle. Spain's extremism can be partly explained by the economic and social threat to the political establishment and the oligarchy. Certainly, this is not explained – as most of the mainstream media would have us believe – as a struggle between 'Catalan nationalism' and 'Spanish constitutionalism.'

At the same time, it is much more difficult to explain why the rest of Europe has tolerated this. It is much more difficult to explain why there are political prisoners on trial. In Europe, in the 21st century.

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P.S.

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