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Catalonia

Catalonia's paradox

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October 1 shook Catalonia and the Spanish state. What happens now?

[October 1](#) has passed, closing a period of the shared history between Catalonia and the Spanish state and beginning an uncertain future. It was a day when all the tension building over the five-year independence process came to a head.

The numbers speak volumes. 2,262,424 votes cast. With an electoral roll of approximately 5.3 million people, that represents 42.5 percent turnout. We would have to include the votes seized by the police and from citizens who could not vote to calculate a final number. Of those votes counted, 2,020,144 (90 percent) were in favor of independence, 176,566 (7.8 percent) against, and 45,586 (2 percent) left their ballots blank.

Next to these tallies, we must list another figure: the 890 officially registered injuries. The images say even more than the numbers — unprecedented [police violence](#) met historic popular mobilization.

The independence movement has emerged victorious, and, while the vote doesn't mean that pro-independence forces will reach their goals immediately, they did gain momentum by demonstrating their determination and capacity for mobilization despite state repression and their opponent's decision to boycott. The [post-Franco](#) Spanish state is more discredited than ever in Catalonia.

The immediate consequences are clear. The Law of Transiency, which Catalonia's parliament passed on September 8, stipulates that, if the referendum results in a "yes" victory, the Catalan government would move to proclaim an independent republic.

However, it is not clear how the government will proceed. Its decisions will determine the fate of the independence movement as well as the broader democratic bloc that supported the vote. How to keep that democratic bloc — which goes beyond the pro-independence forces — united is a decisive strategic question in this context. Catalonia's independence hangs in the balance, and in the short term, the institutional and political struggle between the Catalan and Spanish states will only intensify the current crisis. Though the official independentist narrative claims that the main work for achieving independence is already done, October 1 marked the start of the most critical phase.

We should therefore see the October 3 general strike as October 1's second act. Initially driven by small unions, the planned work stoppage eventually won partial support from the Comisiones Obreras (CCOO) and Unión General de Trabajadores (UGT), Catalonia's two major unions. These organizations did not call for a full strike but for partial work stoppages, to which both workers and employers agreed. Eventually the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) and Òmnium Cultural — the mainstream independence movement's leading organs — as well as the Catalan government threw their support behind the protest, though the ANC did so only reluctantly.

This "official" bloc rebranded the event as a cross-class "nation stoppage" that mixed a traditional strike with mass demonstrations and the voluntary closure of enterprises and public administration. Overall, the day turned into another impressive collective action in the midst of an exceptional political situation.

What will happen now in Catalonia depends not only on local actions but also on the impact that the independence movement, referendum, and mass protests have on Spanish politics in general. The situation's complexity makes it dangerous to draw any hasty conclusions.

On the one hand, the People's Party (PP), which rules Spain, will continue to use Catalan independence to mobilize its conservative base. On the other hand, a section of the Spanish public, including Podemos and its base, has rejected the state's repression and now favors a legal referendum.

Further, in those parts of Spain that, like Catalonia, have longstanding national or regional conflicts, the independence process may polarize pro-Spanish centralists and the respective nationalist movements.

All these factors create a complicated scenario for the Left, which will lose more ground in the long term if it gives up the defense of democracy in the short term. Behind these rapidly unfolding events sits an important paradox: Catalan independence poses the greatest threat to the continuity of the political and institutional scaffolding created in 1978, but it may also temporarily strengthen some of the state's pillars, producing a framework that pushes Spanish politics to the right.

Madrid's Strategy

The PP, working hand in hand with the state apparatus and most of the media, has taken an inflexible stance toward independence since the movement began in 2012. It will continue this approach because it believes that opposing Catalan sovereignty benefits the party in a number of ways: it boosts support in key regions of the Spanish state, unites its base, recovers ground from Ciudadanos, puts [Pedro Sánchez's](#) "new" Socialist Party (PSOE) under pressure, and moves political debate away from the issues that help Podemos, such as state corruption and the ongoing economic crisis.

But for the umpteenth time since political turmoil began in 2011 with the rise of 15M, narrow partisan logic has prevailed over long-term thinking. The PP's failures show the Spanish elite's strategic limitations when confronted with the crisis of the 1978 regime. Resist and endure before all challengers from Catalan independentists to 15M and its electoral offshoots. This has become the ruling class's mantra.

The PP's scorched earth policy has an important precedent, one that coincides with the rise of pro-independence forces in Catalonia: the aggressive Spanish nationalism of José María Aznar's second government (2000-4). While Aznar's centralism was useful for the Right at the time, it actually triggered the current crisis, producing irreversible disaffection among the Catalan people.

The government in Madrid likely calculates that it should intensify its confrontation with the independentists until it can defeat their hopes for a quick independence process. Having used the stick, it will later try the carrot, offering some room to more moderate forces.

But the more the Spanish state's policy entrenches the conflict, the more difficult it will be to change direction. When legitimacy fails, only force remains, but the use of the latter only further erodes the former. Today, the crisis of legitimacy of the Spanish state in Catalonia has reached its peak.

September 20 to October 1

Before the state [intensified](#) its repressive policies on September 20, the independence movement, led by the ANC and Òmnium, lacked self-organization from below. Only the [Candidatura d'Unitat Popular \(CUP\)](#) represented an

anticapitalist and unofficial pro-independence current, but it did so at the cost of serious internal contradictions and enormous external pressures.

But the state's repressive barrage and the imminence of the vote spurred popular self-organization, and neighborhood and municipal Committees of Defense of the Referendum (CDRs) joined the Escoles Obertes (Open Schools) in organizing volunteers to protect polling stations on October 1.

Neither the ANC nor Òmnium were overtaken by the push from below, but they may force these organizations' militants to engage in more consistent civil disobedience. Up to this point, their approach remained quite timid, concentrating on setting up polling stations, and they had not planned any real system of defense to confront police harassment.

Large-scale self-organization emerged late. Without a doubt, if Catalonia en Comú had actively engaged more around the referendum, the process could have gone much further (though we should recognize that many of its militants played an active role beyond what the party officially did). What was achieved on Sunday was spectacular, but the absence of a unitary movement was felt in the months leading up to the referendum. The ANC did not want to promote a broader alliance, and the forces outside the mainstream could not initiate their own dynamic to align with the ANC. Only the events of the last few days changed the situation, launching a process of organization from below that had not existed before.

Phase Two

In the coming confrontation, the movement has four fundamental challenges.

First, it must expand its social base. It is difficult to evaluate the results of October 1 in detail thanks to the repressive conditions under which voting took place. No doubt, over two million "yes" votes constitutes an important social bloc. While not strictly a numerical majority, no organized or active counter-bloc has emerged to oppose it.

The independence movement exploded between 2012 and 2014 but has remained more or less stagnant, albeit at high levels of support, since then.

Some got tired of the eternal process that seemed to go nowhere, but, in recent days, new support developed, mainly because of the Spanish state's repression. Some "yes" votes may have been cast in favor of democracy rather than independence. Further, we cannot know how many people who would have voted "yes" could not do so because of all the complications of the day.

In terms of its social composition, the independence movement's base pivots around the middle class and young people, though older voters were very visible in the polling lines on Sunday. The mainstream movement never captured an important part of the left-wing social base and, in fact, it did not try to do so: it simply expected they would eventually become convinced.

Catalunya en Comú's hesitant policy reflects not only its leadership's views, but the social reality of its political and electoral base. This is worth noting explicitly, as it's a key factor. Having a specific policy towards left-wing political and social organizations and their social base is necessary, which undoubtedly clashes with the project of the neoliberal right in power, the Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català (PDeCAT), whose weakness should be exploited to impose a left turn. We should roughly sketch the path to radicalizing the mainstream independentist movement:

implementing urgent political and social measures as an anti-crisis package, prioritizing the start of a constituent process, and creating a framework that can include those who do not necessarily want independence but support some sort of constitutional rupture with the state.

Indeed, the absence of any alliance between independentists and those who support Catalonia's right to decide has been one of the process's biggest strategic weakness. This has one immediate implication: the Catalan Parliament must carry through the referendum's popular mandate in a way that ensures the pro-democracy-but-anti-independence sectors who participated in the organization on October 1 feel included. That is, it must avoid fracturing the democratic-disobedient front that contributed to the vote's success and thereby reducing its supporters to an alliance of independentist forces only, without distorting the meaning of what was approved on Sunday.

Second, the independence movement must maintain the strength shown after September 20, in the days leading up to October 1, and on the day itself. Democratic grassroots efforts such as CDRs should continue in one form or another. Beyond the ANC and Òmnium, the people should build broad committees that are not subordinate to those two organizations while still having a policy of unity toward them.

Until September 20, pro-independence action was limited to the impressive September 11 annual mobilization, but it had little capacity to respond in important moments or to go beyond the ANC or Òmnium when they opted to react to events passively. The answer is not to return to normal but to sustain the dynamics of self-organization that began on the eve of October 1.

Third, pro-independence forces must develop a more complex perspective regarding the struggle, confrontation, and victory. The movement regularly uses the term "[disconnection](#)" to describe independence, a word that, while conveying a seductive image of quiet change, greatly simplifies what breaking with the state actually entails.

The official discourse has insisted that independence represents a transition from one legality to another, ignoring the fact that, if the former does not accept that change, what begins is a struggle in which brute force is decisive (recall Marx's [remark in Capital](#): "between equal rights, force decides"). Force nevertheless is conditioned by the context and legitimacy of the one who wields it. Keeping all this in mind is important for the looming sustained conflict.

Fourth, pro-independence forces must look for and weave alliances across the entire Spanish state. The movement has welcomed the solidarity it received from outside Catalonia in response to the intensified repression, but it based its strategy on unilateral action, never seeking out support in other parts of Spain beyond the nationalism of the Basques or Galicians. In reality, unilateralism and the search for allies are compatible.

That support is more necessary than ever now. As long as the PP believes that the iron fist benefits it the most in the short term, it will maintain its policy of repression. Independentism must articulate its struggle, without dissolving it, within the context of the broader battle against the 1978 regime.

Democracy, both by standing against repression and by being able to decide the future, should be the starting point. The recognition of a common adversary will be the second step.

The Internal Frontline

The independence movement confronts the Spanish state, but the movement has also faced an internal struggle.

The most visible disagreement is between the two government parties, the right-wing, neoliberal PDeCAT and the center-left Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC). But, beyond their competition, the most decisive battle will take place over whether the radical forces within the movement can surpass the bloc formed by the Catalan government, ANC, and Òmnium Cultural.

Events since September 20, especially the self-organization from below and the movement's radicalization, may favor more left-wing forces, both politically (primarily the CUP) and socially. Finally, the role that Catalonia en Comú plays in this struggle will be decisive in determining whether this situation shifts left.

Until September 20, Ada Colau's party remained passive. When the government called the referendum last year, Catalonia en Comú expected the plans to collapse, hoping that every step toward the vote would be the last and that the government would push a unilateral referendum into the indefinite future. The party only explained its position when pushed, and then it opted to defend the referendum process as a mobilization without committing to its success or calling for a massive turnout.

After the state's repressive turn, however, Catalonia en Comú modified its position and joined the mobilization, but it did not fundamentally transform its strategic orientation. Ada Colau's blank vote — neither "yes" nor "no" — summed up the party's discomfort with the independence debate.

Now Catalonia en Comú must choose: either it watches the fight from a distance, or it joins the confrontation with the state and supports a constituent process. It can take this active role with twin objectives: overcoming the centralized state and breaking the Right and center-left's hegemony over the independence movement.

To do so would not necessarily mean supporting full independence. Instead, it might prove that a rupture with the state has become the necessary condition for a federal solution. That is, without betraying its own programmatic positions, Catalonia en Comú can support the proclamation of the Catalan Republic and the opening of a constituent process.

If it stays on the margins, this could push it to the periphery of Catalan politics or, if independence is defeated, it may enjoy a rebound effect that gives them it a new medium-term success. But either way, if the party resumes the passive orientation it held prior to October 1 in the new stage that opens, it will severely affect the nature of its political project. It is not only Catalonia en Comú's position on the independence debate that is at stake, but its own constituent and rupturist drive. The discomfort of the independence movement with the Comu's position is understandable, but this should not make the party forget the need to have a unitary policy towards them, particularly on democratic and constituent issues.

Podem has had a more proactive and committed position toward the referendum. It denied the vote's binding nature and even called on its base to vote "no," but these positions contradict the party's proposal to open a constituent process.

Now Podem must decide if it will stay outside the next phase of confrontation with the state, or if it will have an active policy towards the sovereigntist bloc and help to try to overcome that bloc's right wing.

Thus, the Left must complete three interrelated tasks: maintain the independence movement's unified action against the Spanish state, articulate a democratic and anti-repressive bloc that moves beyond independence, and fight to re-balance Catalonia's political forces to favor the Left.

This last point gets at a more fundamental question: what does the term independence mean, and how does it relate to the concept of sovereignty? The mainstream movement has presented independence as the solution to all of Catalonia's problems while leaving the concept empty of concrete content. In fact, official independentism, both in its neoliberal and center-left forms, could produce independence without real sovereignty in a state that is formally independent but remains subaltern to the European Union, favorable to international trade agreements like the TTIP and to policies that serve multinationals.

The Catalan left must insist on sovereignty with all its national, social, economic, and health dimensions, not to mention its relationship to notions of democracy and solidarity against reactionary nationalism. Put another way, the Left must figure out how to link a proposal for political change with a proposal for another social, economic, and institutional model, to go beyond the change without change that mainstream independence embodies.

Contradictions

Those on the Left, both in Catalonia and the Spanish state, who have [remained](#) opposed to or outside the independence movement have often pointed out, with more or less authority, the process's innumerable contradictions. The most notorious of all, of course, remains the presence of a neoliberal party at the head of the Catalan government, a defender of a strict policy of social cuts that never used to support independence. I have already pointed out [some limits of the Catalan political process](#) in terms of the social base and the contending forces.

But the constant insistence on the process's contradictions reflects an excessively scholastic attitude toward social reality itself and unfortunately often appears in many Left analyses of phenomena that fall outside their authors' predetermined schemas.

All social processes produce contradictions to a greater or lesser extent. This comes from the very complexity of human societies and how they express conflict. A movement not only contains contradictions and limitations, but its evolution will always produce contradictory and limited results. This observation brings us back to what [social theorists](#) call the unintended consequences of social action.

Any anticapitalist strategy needs to learn how to work in the context of contradictions and limits to try and resolve the former in an emancipatory direction while widening the confines of the latter. The purest strategy is precisely the one that knows how to handle itself in an impure, contradictory, and complex world.

"Whoever expects a 'pure' social revolution will never live to see it. Such a person pays lip-service to revolution without understanding what revolution is," [wrote Lenin wrote](#) in 1916 about the Easter Rising. Today, we are not facing a revolution, but his words nevertheless apply to the Catalan reality.

Faced with the imperfections of the Catalan independence movement, the Left has two options: opt for a passive policy that will involuntarily exacerbate the movement's deficiencies, or follow an active policy that intervenes in reality and pushes the process in a more progressive direction. The first option leads, depending on the case, toward abstract radicalism, propagandism, or institutionalist routinism. None of these outcomes have anything to do with a serious attempt to change the world.

The contradictions and limits of the five-year independence process have prompted the abrupt emergence of striking paradoxes, a term that can take on both comic and tragic valences. Certainly, the days leading up to October 1 were

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days of paradox. Disobedient parties called for order and calm, while leftists turned to the Catalan police. Right-wing forces appealed for institutional disobedience, disguised as complying with the new Catalan legality, while activists and anarchists lined up to vote. A reactionary government accused its citizens who wanted to organize a referendum of plotting a coup.

When social processes accelerate, as they have in Spain, all strategic thinking that does not want to be fossilized must plunge headfirst into these paradoxes, where things are not what they seem and where the consequences of actions may not always be clear.

The paradox of strategy is that it can often be overcome by the paradoxes of reality itself. And the paradox of the paradoxes of real politics is that they can, at times, stimulate a strategic thinking that overcomes the paradoxes that previously undermined it.

Barcelona, 3 October 2017

PS:

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