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Spanish state

Catalonia - Exit stage Left?

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The independence movement in Catalonia is gaining steam. Incorporating anti-austerity and democratic demands is the next step. Since September 11, 2012 – the National Day of Catalonia – the Catalan independence movement has burst onto the scene. The independence movement has steadily displayed its strength, from that year’s gigantic 11S demonstration, to the [historic human chain](#) known as VÃ-a Catalana (or Catalan Way), which spanned the country on September 11, 2013, and finally the [mass protest](#) in the form of a “V” (as in victory and vote) last September.

In the past two and half years the independence process has jumped from stage to stage. The 2012 demonstration marked its abrupt emergence and the confirmation that independence had become a central demand of Catalan society, one that would influence the political agenda in its immediate future. Throughout 2013 parties in favor of the sovereignty process, under the aegis of the [Catalan National Assembly \(ANC\)](#), the movement that has driven the entire process, began talks to set the conditions for holding the referendum.

The 2013 demonstration exerted decisive pressure compelling the parties to reach an agreement, which was announced on December 12, 2013. Accordingly, a referendum or “civic consultation” was set for November 9, 2014. It asked a [double question](#): “Are you in favor of Catalonia becoming a State? If so, do you wish it to be independent?”

The giant 11S “V” rally of 2014 represented the final phase of the pre-9N (November 9) mobilization and was designed as an act of mass mobilization to defy the referendum’s prohibition announced in advance by the Spanish government of Mariano Rajoy, and to pressure the Catalan government into disregarding this prohibition. Following 9N and after long and tortuous debates on whether or not to present a unitary slate including all pro-independence parties for Catalonia’s parliamentary elections, a new phase will culminate on [September 27](#), the date of the elections.

A review of the process begun in 2012 exposes Catalan politics as a prolonged figure skating contest in slow motion: the actors move very slowly, dramatize their gestures to infinity, and are keen to offer their best smile along with their best pirouettes.

First came the date and the question; then the long preparation for the referendum; next, the signing of the 9N Convocation Decree; after that, the agonizing debate over the elections announcement; and on and on – milestone after milestone, deferring the final outcome and unspeakably extending the film’s plot, risking the loss of bored viewers and secondary actors in the middle of the show, of letting the climax and contained excitement evaporate.

But behind this permanent political slow-motion show stands a background of unprecedented instability – a slippery ice rink in which crashing and skidding toward the unforeseeable is a constant possibility. It isn’t hard to imagine the president, the head of the opposition, and the whole of “organized civil society” stumbling uncontrollably to the floor.

In reality, the Catalan political system has imploded under the double impact of [15M](#) and the rise of the independence movement. These have caused an unprecedented crisis in the parties that have politically managed the post-Franco regime over the past four decades: Convergencia i Uni3 (CiU, an electoral coalition among liberal Convergencia and Christian-democratic Uni3, in power since 2012 under the leadership of Artur Mas, and which governed continuously from 1980 to 2003 under the historical direction of Jordi Pujol), the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC, social democrats opposed to the independence process), and the Popular Party (PP, the party of the Right heading the Spanish state though a minor power in Catalonia).

A particular political architecture is disappearing, while another is in the process of consolidation. This year promises to be a moment of truth, decisive in the resolution of the prolonged political crisis affecting the Spanish state and for the Catalan independence process. Successive elections (Andalusia on March 22, municipal and autonomous on May 24, Catalonia on September 27, and general elections by the end of the year or at the very latest January 2016) will be a test.

At the Spanish level, they will measure the capacity of the PP and PSOE (the center-left Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) to withstand [Podemos's](#) influence. In Catalonia, they will determine the relative strength of Mas and ERC (a center-left independence party and the other Catalan political force which has experienced a steady rise in voter preference in polls since 2012) in their fight for domestic hegemony in the independence process, as well as the strength or weakness of the latter, following the 9N referendum.

Within the long electoral cycle this year, September 27 and the upcoming general elections will condense popular expectations. For some, everything rides on a pro-independence majority voting on the first plebiscitary date. For others, a Podemos victory on the second date opens the door to the future.

A fork in the road to possible futures is clearly drawn. Not an absolute fork, perhaps, but a real one pointing to preferences, identities, projects, and different expectations. Looking ahead from below, not everyone sees and yearns for the same thing, nor does everyone envision common paths for arriving at the same destination.

Fixing our gaze over the limits of our imagination and glimpsing a better future that puts an end to an eternal, unending present constitutes the premise necessary for making possible that which does not yet exist.

Therein lays the strength of the present moment in which fissures of light pierce a formerly bleak and opaque future. But a bifurcated future that delineates apparently contradictory prospects casts a shadow of uncertainty and fear.

Like two magnetic fields that neutralize each other, could the independence process and Podemos weaken one another in Catalonia at the risk of both losing their decisive punch? Are both present ways out incompatible? Do they trace hopelessly divergent lines like two canoes carried by opposing undercurrents? Are they merely two parallel paths? Or is it possible to articulate them in convergent ways?

Today, this is the strategic, yet surprisingly nonexistent debate, that needs to be addressed from any perspective that aims to constitute a popular majority for change in Catalonia and to bring about democratic scenarios and rupture within the totality of the Spanish state.

The Post-9N Map

The November "civic consultation" ended the phase opened in September 2012 with the eruption of the independence movement. Holding a referendum or "consultation" became the main strategic objective of the independence movement and its central demand before the Spanish government, which remained opposed throughout.

The Spanish Constitutional Court's September 29, 2014 [ruling](#) against the Consultations Law adopted by the Catalan Parliament appeared to leave open two possible solutions: either capitulation by the Catalan government, canceling the referendum and rushing into early elections, or open confrontation, seeking to organize the referendum through institutional disobedience.

In the end, after an agonizing and convoluted process, where the thin red line separating comedy from tragedy was not always clear, the Catalan president used a last-minute ploy and, taking advantage of a legal loophole, chose to carry out a so-called “participatory process” instead of the referendum, deploying an organizational and institutional device that ensured the possibility of voting on November 9 (albeit with fewer poll sites than normal).

The 9N results, 2,305,290 votes (out of a total of 6,200,000 – the Catalan electorate usually comprises 5.2 million people, but this time all over the age of 16 and 900,000 foreign residents were allowed to vote), showed the strength of the sovereignty movement’s civic and democratic thrust.

Participation was undoubtedly a success, considering institutional obstacles and the referendum’s lack of formal recognition. 1,861,753 votes also demonstrated the solidity of the “Yes-Yes” block (recall that the referendum asked a double question: “Are you in favor of Catalonia becoming a State? If so, do you wish it to be independent?”).

9N revealed a rather obvious reality: the independence movement has become hegemonic, yet lacks an overwhelming absolute electoral majority. Two minorities coexist alongside the majority and mobilized pro-independence block. One minority (generally passive and demobilized and only activated when voting for pro-Spain parties like the PP and Cs, an emerging anti-Catalan force) opposes the independence movement, while another relevant minority is rather indifferent to the independence movement but might favor the right to self-determination without making it a political priority.

The latter, however, is suspicious of the process opened after 2012, which it feels is headed by a neoliberal government that seeks to exploit the independence movement for its own benefit.

In reality President [Artur Mas](#) was forced to ride a pro-independence wave that threatened to smother him in September 2012 and to abandon the traditional pragmatic gradualism practiced by CiU. His ability to exploit the movement is not clear-cut. Without it, he would likely be finished, devoured by unpopular austerity politics.

The Independence explosion has allowed him to appear before the Catalan people as a statesman of historic stature (rather than a vulgar neoliberal manager at the service of finance) and organize an endless fight forward.

Despite this, he has suffered a continual decline in support over the past two years, leading to parity with ERC, which appeared more credible in its pro-independence conviction and less responsible for austerity policies (although as the opposition it has sustained Mas, approving his budgets and economic measures, arguing they are a necessary evil that will end as soon as independence is obtained).

Nonetheless, 9N success gave the Catalan president an unexpected boost, lifting him in the polls and portraying him once again as an indispensable independence leader.

This may be enough to ensure victory for Mas in the elections called for September 27, yet with a tight margin that underscores the main problems facing the Catalan right: the historical exhaustion of CiU as a political instrument capable of articulating a solid political and social majority, and its urgent need to re-found itself and elaborate a new political tool.

Halfway between an officially sanctioned referendum and a frontal act of institutional and civil disobedience which a formally held rebel referendum would have entailed, 9N amounted to a “disobedient detour” that avoided both surrendering to state impositions and direct institutional confrontation.

The Spanish government could not prevent a mass democratic event, but neither was there an act of explicit legal and institutional rupture coming from Catalonia that decisively precipitated developments. It was a last-minute farce that snuck through and handily maneuvered the challenge of holding a referendum that was more than rhetorical, yet fell short of pushing through unambiguous future scenarios.

In the end, 9N was a political and democratic success in that it opened a new stage; at the same time it failed to project an unimpeachable political message or draw an unquestionable roadmap, thus leading to a strange impasse. Somehow the 9N “participatory process” was the perfect formula for holding a referendum without doing so, and of not holding one by doing so.

Paradoxically, then, after 9N the independence process entered an impasse, marked by disagreements between the two main parties, *Convergència* and ERC, on how to deal with the call for early elections. The Catalan National Assembly (ANC), the social movement that has driven the independence process since 2012, raised the need to convene early elections at the latest by March 2015, giving them a plebiscitary character, with a unitary independence slate led by Mas.

This proposal generated opposition between *Convergència* and ERC. Both forces were almost tied in polls, with a trend towards a slight advantage by ERC before 9N and a rebound for *Convergència* after 9N due to Mas’s ability to capitalize on the referendum.

Convergència emerged as the champion of the single slate, pointing out that without an agreement, it made no sense to hold elections. It thus exerted strong pressure on ERC, which opposed a unitary slate, viewing it as a *Convergència* bear hug that blocked its future prospects. From 2012 to 9N in 2014 *Convergència* declined in polls, against the rise of ERC, who appeared more credible in its commitment to independence and less tarnished by austerity policies.

Despite *Convergència*’s recovery, ERC acceptance of a single list meant not only blocking the possibility of future growth but also its final subordination to the machinery of *Convergència*, a stronger, more structured party with solid organic links to business, financial, and media power.

ERC, for its part, advocated separate independence lists arguing that this facilitated reaching a broader spectrum of voters with a common programmatic point (the proclamation of independence), and appeared as the strongest supporter of independence calling for elections as soon as possible in order to initiate rupture with the Spanish state.

In pressuring ERC, *Convergència* aimed either to force it to accept the unitary slate against its will, or simply to make it look like a sectarian party, thus placing its partisan interests above the current sovereign process. Mas’s wager on a unitary slate had two main motives: the first, of a conjunctural nature, was that the unity list guaranteed his continuity at the head of the government and dispelled the possibility of defeat.

The second, more structural, is the aforementioned need of the Catalan right to re-found its political space in light of *Convergència*’s historical decline (its cyclical post-9N upturn notwithstanding).

His strategic goal was to put together a “president’s list” that went beyond the party structures, enjoying the influence of relevant independentists and other actors, to become the embryo of a new centrist Catalan party (actually right-wing, of course). The aim was to reestablish a conservative political instrument riding the wave of the independence process, allowing *Convergència* to escape the blowback from austerity policies and corruption policies (in particular those of Jordi Pujol, the party’s founder and president from 1980 to 2003) by reinventing itself in the new pro-independence stage.

The advantage of the pro-independence “single slate” was that, while in fact a deeply partisan strategy aimed at saving the Catalan right, it could be presented as a magnanimous strategy (“go beyond parties,” “leave behind our differences and focus on what unites us”) and drew from the genuine pro-unity sentiments among supporters of independence.

The tug of war begun after 9N between Convergencia and ERC ended in a draw.

ERC resisted pressures for the unity slate, but had to accede to delaying elections until September 27. Convergencia and Mas had to accept the impossibility of a single list, but in exchange achieved electoral costs for ERC (which always seemed to be on the defensive and to eschew the entire debate) along with delayed elections, thus buying itself more time, its historic specialty.

Throughout this debate, the ANC remained blocked and paralyzed. It shared Mas’s advocacy of a single list, but it also agreed with ERC’s proposal for immediate elections. It eventually accepted Mas’s proposed calendar and the postponement of elections until September.

This whole debate reflected a clear dynamic: the gradual loss of the capacity by the ANC to take the initiative, which since 2012 had partially defined the political agenda, forcing the parties and the Catalan government to adapt to social movement pressures.

Institutional preparations for 9N and the subsequent handling of its success reinforced the president’s position; he controlled the pace of the decisive moment, while the ANC made the tactical blunder of not supporting ERC’s request for immediate elections with mobilizing pressure.

The entire post-9N discussion and resulting call to defer elections until September 27 generated a sense of impasse in the independence process, producing dead time of almost a year between the 9N and the next 27S, with no strategic justification. The spectacle around the unity list and its denouement has only exposed the strategic limits of the independence movement, trapped by the “national unity” approach.

Above all, it revealed the glaring absence of any strategic debate over what was really essential: how to broaden the social base of the movement, reaching in particular those sectors of the Catalan population who don’t strongly identify with the independence demand and correspond sociologically to the bulk of working-class layers on the periphery of the Barcelona metropolitan area.

They are Spanish immigrants (or children or grandchildren of immigrants), whose first language is more often Spanish than Catalan, and whose media references (particularly radio and TV) are in Spanish and not Catalan.

This social sector overlaps in large measure with supporters of the Socialist Party of Catalonia, of the Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds-Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (a coalition of Greens and the Communist Party that has thirteen deputies in parliament after winning 9.89% of the vote in 2012) and with Podemos, the new rising star.

Thinking about how to broaden the independence movement’s social base on this front would have undermined the main strategic bias of the process led by the ANC, and raised the need to accompany the independence claim with an emergency economic program against the effects of the crisis.

Podemos and Podem

Podemos's unexpected rise in Spain, and in turn Catalonia, has further complicated Catalan political life as well as the strategic alignments of left currents and their relationship to the independence process. Podemos was launched in January 2014 to field candidates for the May 25 European elections by a team of activists based primarily in Madrid.

Its initial project lacked a clear idea of what to do in Catalonia. European elections are based on a single Spanish district, requiring a particular electoral strategy for Catalonia (which represents a substantial 16 percent of the total Spanish population).

Rather than seeking to create and establish Podemos directly in Catalonia, its promoters' initial plan was to seek dialogue and join forces with existing Catalan political or sociopolitical forces.

Podemos founders were aware that Catalonia has a party system partially separated from the Spanish one and that the independence process had deeply shaken Catalan politics since 2012. However, the absence of any organized Catalan partner willing to team up with it forced a rushed creation of Podemos in Catalonia (called Podem).

Compared to other Spanish regions, it came about in a relatively weak state, with a relatively small capacity for militancy and the lowest electoral result of all [Autonomous Communities](#) (the administrative regions into which the Spanish state is divided): 4.6% compared to the 7.9% countrywide average.

The reasons for this weakness are related to the particular complexity of the Catalan political map and of the Left, in particular, which already comprises several Catalan projects and organizations, reducing the electoral, political, and militant space for Podemos.

Initially, the emergence of Podem was regarded as an anomaly by all Catalan political forces, believing that the new project would not fit into the complex Catalan context. Little by little, however, Podemos established itself in Catalonia, enjoying an electoral pull, a current of popular sympathy, and a very important militant influx. It emerged as a new and undeniable reality of Catalan politics that had come to stay, an unexpected shock to the already shaky Catalan political map.

When Podemos was launched in Madrid, it championed a novel democratic position in the Catalan independence debate, which is unfortunately absent from a political system dominated by the authoritarian behavior of the PP and the PSOE, diehard opponents of the right to self-determination and to the realization of the negotiated independence referendum.

[Pablo Iglesias](#), the leader of Podemos, adopted a democratic position that stood out in this context. He declared support for holding the Catalan referendum and announced he would abide by its outcome in case of a "yes" win, although he noted a preference for Catalonia remaining in the Spanish state.

Following the May 25 European elections, and in the context of a spectacular rise of Podemos in the polls, Iglesias's statements have become more ambiguous with respect to the Catalan debate, due to Podemos's electoral interests and his goal of winning the general Spanish elections scheduled for the end of 2015. Defending Catalonia's right to self-determination is not popular in various parts of the Spanish state and can be easily used by the PP, the PSOE, and the media against Podemos.

Podemos leaders have adjusted their initial stance “unequivocal defense of Catalonia’s right to decide” while at the same time preserving an overall democratic (though ambiguous) position. It needs to uphold this democratic position, which is light years ahead of the PP and PSOE, if it cares about its electoral prospects in Catalonia.

In Catalonia, Podemos supporters, members, and voters have different opinions regarding the independence process. In general terms the bulk of its social base favors the democratic right to self-determination, without being pro-independence or making it a top political priority. Podemos’s Catalan leadership developed a discourse in favor of the right to self-determination, without defining its own position on the vote in the event of a legal referendum negotiated with the state.

During the 9N referendum, it maintained support for holding the referendum and opposed the prohibitions of [Mariano Rajoy's](#) Spanish government, while refraining from calling for a vote either way.

All this places Podem in a difficult position in the independence process debate. Podemos is strong and credible and gains support around its criticism of corruption, traditional parties, and austerity policies. The independence process is a hot potato that places Podemos on the defensive when facing the gamut of pro-independence parties and Catalan media pressure. Podemos thus finds itself in an uncomfortable position that in the medium term can generate tensions and contradictions for its growth in Catalonia.

The emergence of Podemos has politically awakened a section of the Catalan people that is largely outside of (which does not mean opposed to) the political and social vision of the independence process and its representation of Catalonia as more homogenous in terms of national identities than it really is.

This Catalonia, in fact, had been losing its leading role since the workers’ movement fell apart as a central political and social actor, ceding ground to other social movements with greater weight in the middle classes in the full meaning of the term. Suddenly, a more diverse Catalonia, which in some ways had already burst abruptly into the public squares during the M15 anti-austerity mobilizations, made its presence felt, providing a more complex image of the country and its political system, and of the political alignments of its popular layers.

It is a Catalonia that has not been represented up to now (or which was represented by forces in decline), led by an alternative and rising political instrument. Indirectly it has complicated even further the political strategy to be followed by the popular forces, which face a complex interlacing of the social and national questions, and must weave together a complicated political architecture in terms of its identities.

A homogeneous people does not exist, nor does a linear “popular unity.” This is a diverse and heterogeneous people, whose collective identity is under construction and which, as far as its national identity and its relation with the independence process are concerned, has diverse inclinations and feelings.

This “people” includes those who enthusiastically attended the rally with Iglesias in the Vall d’Hebron in Barcelona last December 21, as well as those who participated the massive actions with Teresa Forcades and Arcado Oliveres, promoters of the Procés Constituent socio-political movement (Forcades is a Benedictine nun known inter alia for her activism against pharmaceutical multinationals; Oliveres is an economist and a historical reference point for social movements). The same “people” who identify with David Fernandez (parliamentarian and spokesman for Candidates for Popular Unity, the anticapitalist and pro-independence political force unit with three seats in the Catalan Parliament, or 3 percent of votes).

Undoubtedly, it is a people who cannot be reduced to monolithic representations of “popular unity.” An image of an overly homogenous “people” might, at this decisive moment, lead to representing and pulling together only a minority,

of taking the part for the whole. It might fail to generate a pole of attraction powerful enough to serve as the connecting point of a broad majoritarian bloc, one plural yet coherent in its (self-) representations.

How can we synthesize politically the popular bloc that today faces divergent possible futures and that remains partially divided with respect to the independence project? This synthesis, as complex as it is essential, as difficult as it is full of potential, is the winning formula in Catalonia. It is the equation that can defeat Mas and, at the same time, maintain the pro-sovereignty challenge in order to deal a well-aimed and perhaps decisive blow to the regime that Rajoy and PSOE leader Pedro Sánchez hope to keep afloat.

What is to be avoided is a fracture of the Catalan popular layers at the base of the sovereigntist process that results in, on the one hand, a minority alternative left (CUP, the sectors more to the left of ERC, etc.) within a pro-sovereignty bloc (with a political and electoral majority precariously united in everything else), led by CDC and the ERC leadership; and on the other hand, a democratic and anti-austerity pole, represented by Podemos, outside of the sovereignty process and, despite its electoral relevance, incapable of attaining a political and electoral majority in Catalonia.

An alternate “synthesis” perspective involves defending a post-September 27 act of effective sovereignty, both formal and substantive, by the parliament of Catalonia, that breaks with the legality of the 1978, post-Franco political framework without determining the final model of relations between Catalonia and the Spanish state. That is, it supports the opening of a Catalan constituent process that lays the basis for a new institutional framework and a new Catalan Republic, whose relationship to the Spanish state is to be discussed at the end of that process.

Those within the popular and working classes who have a pro-independence outlook, and those who do not, can now come together around the need for a unilateral act of sovereignty and the proclamation of their own republic, an action that would have two consequences.

First, it would open the door to discussing what model of country we want in Catalonia, and therefore to “decide on everything” — precisely what Mas does not want. Second, it would pose an unprecedented institutional challenge to the legal framework of 1978 and the Rajoy government, and take a substantive step forward along the path expressed on November 9.

The corollary of this approach must be to insert the opening of a Catalan constituent process into a state-wide perspective aiming to initiate autonomous, national and sovereign constituent processes with feedback mechanisms, in order to put an end to the Regime of 1978.

A Catalan constituent process is neither subsidiary to nor dependent on a Spanish one, nor should it ignore what is happening in the state as a whole. On the contrary, a strategic articulation of the various sovereignties can help smash the pillars of the battered post-Franco political and institutional framework.

Podemos and the independence process thus pose a challenge to each other.

First, Podemos must build a national-popular project in the state as a whole, compatible with a pluri-national conception of the current Spanish state, with the right to self-determination for its component nations, and without any hierarchical relationship, be it political or symbolic, among them.

This implies a clear defense of the right of the Catalan people to decide, the guarantee of a binding referendum, and above all the acceptance of the right (which does not necessarily imply agreeing with how it is exercised) of the

people of Catalonia to decide unilaterally their future given the present impossibility of doing so through a legal, mutually agreed upon referendum process.

Secondly, Podemos has to construct its own project in Catalonia. It must root itself in Catalanismo and relate (in order to attract them) to a sector of the pro-independence social bases, beginning with those of an ERC that is finding it increasingly difficult to justify to a portion of its electorate its permanent subordination to Mas.

Between backing the independence process and moving only outside of its confines, there is space for a relevant force in Catalonia – but not for one that aspires to prop up a winning majority.

Podemos and Podem put forth to the independence process, including its principal political and social protagonists, beginning with the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), the need to dialogue with an emerging political movement that crystallizes a discontent distinct from independence demands.

Podem galvanizes a social sector that is (at least partially) outside the independence process (though it does not identify with the Spain of Rajoy and Sánchez) and, at the same time, speaks to sectors within that process that might swing away from it given the new possibilities of change offered by Podemos.

The new Catalan and Spanish political context forces the pro-independence movement to reconsider objectives and strategies.

The first and most important step is to widen its popular social base, which is impossible without inserting an explicit social dimension into the movement. The second is to be able to articulate a dialectical vision between an accumulation of forces peculiar to Catalonia and a rupture at the state level with the institutional framework of the Regime of 1978, seeking synergies and mutual support through the defense of sovereign constituent processes.

Unfortunately, the importance of both tasks has been highlighted by their absence in the debate of recent months, which has been ridiculously centered on the advisability of a single independence list on September 27, starkly illustrating the strategic limits of the approach of the ANC and the pro-independence mainstream. Very big challenges on the one hand, but strategic small-mindedness on the other. A bad combination, for sure.

[[[Strategic Limits, Strategic Mistakes

The current impasse in the independence process is the result of its own strategic limits and of the weaknesses of its foundational framework, which delinks the independence claim from any substantive social content and concrete measures for working-class social improvements. The ANC's opening strategic mistake was the construction of a broad, majoritarian movement of "national unity" devoid of a clear social dimension, since the mere demand of independence was enough to pull together a majority.

The limits to this approach had been pointed out for some time by political sectors like the Procés Constituent and the Candidates for Popular Unity.

The focus on "national unity," on "first independence, then we will see," puts the abstract nation above the concrete one, Catalonia above Catalans. It fails to see that providing the independence process with a citizens' rescue plan, a social emergency package, does not divide or fragment it. On the contrary, it strengthens it. Catalan society is deeply divided – torn apart, in fact – by four years of austerity policies and more than three decades of neoliberalism.

Unity is not possible if the causes of the fissure are evaded, especially if those heading the unity are perceived by many citizens as responsible for the social meltdown and as the pillars of a political system that only generates growing discontent.

Ignoring immediate social needs and uncritically accepting Mas's leadership is what divides and pits the social against the national, creating a playing field that breathes air into the Catalan right (even while forcing it to step on the accelerator and push its cardiovascular capacity to the max). It facilitates disappointment and apathy around the sovereignty process for those segments of Catalonians who, politically and culturally, identify less with Catalanismo.

Any unity that artificially attempts to eliminate the multiple contradictions cutting across Catalan society ends up harming itself, kicking an unfortunate (and unnecessary) goal into one's own net in the game's first minute. The combination of, on the one hand, a national claim bereft of an explicit social dimension and, on the other, Mas as political head of the independence process (despite not controlling it and just barely surfing its wave), has been lethal for efforts to broaden its social base from below beyond its initial impetus.

The paradox of the situation is that while independence activists explicitly separate national demands from social ones during large demonstrations, the latter are present in a latent form. Those calling for independence do so mostly because they think it will mean more democracy and equality. Taken as a whole the sovereignty movement has great democratic potential. Behind the independence claim is the strong democratic aspiration, common to all current struggles, to be able to decide and control one's destiny in a moment that appears gloomy and dark.

Absent other alternatives, independence appears a concrete solution to the current crisis, a credible and tangible proposal pointing to a possible future that is not diluted by a present of endless crisis. The bulk of middle and popular classes advocating independence do so because they think they it will improve their lives, is the starting point for building a more just and solidaristic country, and is a chance to wipe the slate clean.

But paradoxically, independence per se, as defined by the main actors behind the sovereignty process, does not guarantee any of this. Little will change in an independent Catalonia in the hands of CiU and ERC, in which the influence of the families and firms that dominate the country remained intact.

The construction of a Catalan Republic opens possibilities but does not guarantee their realization. This will require pushing the democratic envelope of the sovereignty drive, extending the right to decide to all spheres. All this, of course, is antithetical to Mas's project.

Bifurcated Futures

How different might things have been if the September 2012 independence call had included a basic social emergency program? What if the 11S, 2013 V demand for independence had also clamored for an anti-crisis package addressing the humanitarian emergency?

What would have happened if alongside the "President, open the polls!" demand by ANC President Carme Forcadell there had been a "President, enact a social emergency program!"? Where would we be if the November 9 Referendum Convocation Decree signed on September 27, 2014 had been accompanied by a battery of basic citizen rescue measures?

The answer is clear: Mas would have done far worse on the political stage; the center-left and left forces involved in

the independence process would have performed in a more favorable arena; and the political and social organizations disconnected from the independence process, from the leading unions to alternative social movements and their social bases, would have tilted towards it.

Social support for the process would have broadened on the popular and working-class front. Naturally, the behind-the-scenes wheeling-and-dealing by Catalonia's financial oligarchy to halt the sovereignty process would also have been even more intense, as would have been the contradictions within Mas's party, Convergencia. The party would have had a difficult time distancing itself from the process and, had it done so, would have self-destructed.

Any discussion of a broadening of the sovereignty process might have (wrongly) seemed abstract in its initial stage, from 2012 until 2014. But with the current impasse, and with the consolidation of Podemos and Podem, it is now very tangible. It is now unavoidable, whether by conviction or for instrumental purposes.

Those who exclusively defend independence (or at least those for whom it determines everything else) and do not sympathize with 15M and its legacy nor with the anti-austerity spirit of popular mobilizations, are forced to confront an unambiguous reality: the urgent strategic need to give the sovereignty process a popular dimension in order to widen its social base.

This is what that the ANC must address if it wants to strengthen the process and make sure it does not run out of gas – the need for the independence push to contain a seed that will build a more egalitarian country.

And, in parallel fashion, those of us who situate ourselves in the camp of popular emancipation from below, in the overlapping social and national struggles and in the fight against all forms of oppression and inequality, face the unprecedented challenge of having to merge the bifurcated futures of Catalan popular layers that are not irremediably moving away from one another. It is a challenge that simultaneously points to unprecedented opportunities and exciting risks.

With elections called for September 27, the challenge is to put together a successful popular bloc that breaks with the Mas-ERC coalition – one that puts another alternative on the table and points to new possibilities. This means breaking from the political and discursive framework fixed by Mas (and the other central actors of Catalan politics), no longer pretending to stand alongside him, but rather to reformulate the debate on independence and sovereignty: carrying those concepts to the end, drawing on the democratic thread, extending them to cover all spheres and thus proposing a democratic and participatory Catalan constituent horizon as a framework for shared convergence of all the processes of change.

Right to decide? Of course, but on all subjects, beginning with economic policy. Independence and sovereignty? Yes of course, but then let's talk about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Plebiscitary elections? Why not. But on all issues, not only on independence. On Mas himself, on the cutbacks, on austerity, on corruption.

With that focus, the possible futures, now bifurcated, can begin converge. From that point on, there is no reason to limit the scope of our dreams or our confidence in our options.

Translated by René Rojas.