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Catalonia

Class, hegemony and independence

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This text is intended as a contribution to in a strategic debate opened on the left around the Catalan referendum of 1 October 2017, but which we think goes further. We will not go into the history of the formation of the Catalan independence process. We will limit the discussion to proposing a characterization of what is called ‘the process’ and try to provide arguments as to why leftists who are not pro-independence should actively promote 1-O as a moment of rupture.

One of the typical “common sense” arguments of the traditional left for not supporting the Catalan referendum of October 1 is that the process is led by the bourgeoisie. This is blatantly false and can only be based on two misunderstandings, one malicious and another that is either the product of ignorance or a displacement of categories so absurd that it is invalidated. The falsity of this argument is empirically verifiable. The Catalan big bourgeoisie has repeatedly protested against ‘the process’ as irresponsible and generating instability for business, as anyone can see if they google the statements of the Catalan employers Foment del Treball. Ignorance comes in defining what the bourgeoisie is, as a concept that the Spanish left has only used in the last 40 years to refer to Catalonia or, in the case of the PCE, to justify its policy of alliances with the progressive and national bourgeoisie (sic) represented by Suárez in 1978.

“Bourgeoisie” is a concept of classical economics taken over by Marxism, which defines the ruling class in relation to ownership of the means of production. As we have already remarked, the elites of this social sector are against the process: Foro Puente Aéreo, Foment del Treball, the elitist Circulo Ecuestre, the Circulo de Economía or the international Comisión Trilateral have repeatedly expressed their opposition to independence, as well as José Manuel Lara (Planeta), Isidre Fainé (CaixaBank), Josep Lluís Bonet (Freixenet) and Josep Oliu (Banco Sabadell), although some sectors of Foment del Treball did, given the facts, support the process with the hope of improving its position and privileges in relation to the bourgeoisie of the rest of the Spanish state and internationally. Also, given the dynamics of popular mobilization, the process has been endorsed by most of the small and medium-sized enterprises, organized in entities such as PIMEC, Cecot or the Chamber of Commerce.

But in no case have these actors driven the process - faithful to their proverbial pragmatism they have been repositioning their interests as the process has moved on. As Artur Mas himself acknowledged with Lampedusian melancholy in front of the Colegi d'Economistes de Catalunya before 9N: “The elites of the country should not try to change the course of history, but they must channel this basic movement. It is not about braking or halting, but making it go well.”

To make things not “go well” for these sectors of the ruling class, to influence their contradictions, and to try to ensure there is not a “channelling” of the crisis of the regime, ending with a new pact and redistribution of the pie among elites, is the first task for any organization or space that aspires to political and social change.

Watching from the sidelines, waiting for the biggest mass movement in Europe at the moment to crash, with the excuse that sectors of the Catalan bourgeoisie intend to “channel” it to their own interests, is not an option. To the contrary, it is precisely for this reason that the movement must be supported, and its political leadership challenged by activating and bringing together its most popular sectors. In the context of the “de facto 155” in Catalonia and democratic regression throughout the state, failure to understand that if the sovereignty process crashes we all crash has its hermeneutic merit: not letting reality spoil a good story.

So, who leads? Or, rather, who surfs on the Catalan sovereignty movement? It is clear that a sector of the Catalan

political class (undoubtedly full of undesirable elements and little inclined towards a radical transformation of society) has ceased to represent the political interests of the Catalan bourgeoisie (although they continue to defend their economic programme) and maintains its aspiration of playing a leading role through its control over a part of the state apparatus and its ability to adapt to a process of independence.

Here again, it is a question of not letting the social mobilization process that is taking place serve as a heroic account to justify its social and economic project of austerity. The challenge here is not who is capable of describing more vehemently a leading sector of the process, but how we are able to articulate a common ground between the Catalan pro-independence and pro-sovereignty left and the rest of the state that allows a new hegemony: a Catalan republic and constituent processes is a perspective that 1 October could activate if there was sufficient political will.

Faced with the tendency to see the Catalan independence process as something homogeneous, it is interesting to explore its internal contradictions and see it as a field of struggles and an undetermined end. In a national-popular process, homogeneity is a fiction prior to the real struggle or conquered through a monopoly of the state: that is, the "national" tends to overcome all the class contradictions that exist in the "popular". However, when this national-popular process is set in motion and conflicts with the apparatuses of state domination, the first cracks appear, forms of struggle that go beyond those of the ruling elites of the national-popular process.

This leads us to the question of trying to define the social basis of the process. We suppose that nobody will claim that there are more than two million bourgeois or politicians in Catalonia. It is true that the dominant matrix is the so-called "middle classes" (a concept which, in its own definition, emphasizes the heterogeneity of its components and its relation to certain class expectations rather than a strictly Marxist definition, i.e., relationship to ownership of the means of production) and that the "working class" in a classical sense is absent. That is to say, we are dealing with a multi-class movement, in which there are workers, small owners, government employees, politicians, professionals, small and medium company owners, and so on but whose relationship with the independence movement is not determined by the economic relationship they occupy, rather by national-popular adhesion to the project of an independent Catalonia.

This implies a programme full of contradictions: a sector of the process seems to have as a model of independent Catalonia a kind of southern Switzerland. For most of the popular base the example is a Mediterranean Sweden, where the market is controlled by an efficient and sensible state (a dream shared, by the way, with most of the social base of Spanish progressivism). A minority but significant sector (more significant at least than in the rest of Spain and elsewhere than in Europe) is committed to a clearly anti-capitalist outcome to the process. Therefore, the glue of the perspective of an independent Catalonia hides different projects. Is that so strange? Have the mass political and social movements that have emerged since the defeat of the labour movement by neoliberalism had no similar weaknesses? Is it not the absence of a "formed" working class with a hegemonic transformative project the main absence that marks the limits of our time? Undoubtedly, these obvious limitations prevent us from speaking of the independence movement as a socially revolutionary movement because it does not question the material foundations of capitalism: the subordination of collective interest to private property, and relations of production and reproduction.

But did 15M do this? Were the working class and its interests the central protagonists, occupying the workplaces and radiating from the heart of capital a project of an alternative society? It is true that 15M carried a socially more advanced programme, but that only appeared later for that sector of the left that today looks with suspicion to Catalonia and that also at the time looked with suspicion at the 15M movement, for not self-defining as being of the left and because of the absence of the "working class". This conception of the role of the working class is reminiscent of Laclau's correct criticism of Kautsky and of the Second International in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*:

"His supposedly radical position, based on the rejection of any compromise or alliance, was the centrepiece of a fundamentally conservative strategy. Since his radicalism relied on a process which did not require political initiatives,

it could only lead to quietism and waiting. Propaganda and organization were the two basic - indeed the only - tasks of the party. Propaganda was geared to the creation of a broader "popular will", through the winning of new sectors to the socialist cause, but above all to the reinforcing of working-class identity. As to organization, its expansion did not involve greater political participation in a number of fronts, but the construction of a ghetto where the working class led a self-focused and segregated existence. This progressive institutionalization of the movement was well suited to a perspective in which the final crisis of the capitalist system would come from the bourgeoisie's own labours, while the working class merely prepared for its intervention at the appropriate moment. Since 1881 Kautsky had stated: "Our task is not to organize the revolution but to organize ourselves for the revolution; not to make the revolution but to take advantage of it." [1]

It is true that the absence of a working class as the central vector in the independence process is an obvious limit. To deny it would be to apologize for the populist multi-classism that today is the fundamental thing holding the process together. But if we want to bring the debate to a strategic level, rather than postulate "socialism out of time" and empty slogans, we must shift the discussion and start thinking that politics is constituted not only by structural factors, but also by political agents.

The attitude of an important part of the left to the independence movement is, so to speak, pre-hegemonic in two senses. On the one hand, the majority of the Catalan left, or at least its most significant part with leadership functions, the group of Ada Colau and the Comunes, see the movement as something static, incapable of different and open developments, mutations through internal conflict. The left in Catalonia that remains at this critical time outside the sovereignty movement (despite being part of it) assumes a passive position that neither fights for the leadership of the movement itself nor incorporates new social sectors generating a class delimitation within the process itself. It maintains an ambiguous attitude, of waiting, hoping that the independence option loses its strength and its thrust, with a strategy based on collecting the remains as a lever for a more than possible neo-constitutional negotiation with the elites that govern the Spanish state.

Certainly, to the passivity of the "Comunes" left in Catalonia must be added the limitations of the CUP, which, despite their honest radicalism, have not endeavoured to play a liaison role between the left and the independence movement, preferring, in key sites such as Barcelona City Council, to adopt a sectarian attitude that would secure the entrenchment of its space in a risky alliance policy that would drag the Comunes into a joint fight against the convergent-republican leadership of the sovereignty process.

On the part of the Spanish left, there is a tendency to regard the sovereignty movement as a "farce", as if it were not something serious, but a simple game between elites, which reveals a complete misunderstanding of that old much-quoted idea of Lenin (which in reality is present in any "politics of conflict") that division with the ruling classes is a precondition for any social transformation. A "precondition" means that it is not enough in itself, but that it is a necessary contingency, which opens a rift by which emancipatory policies, partisan subjectivities and class interests can break through. It is true that the sovereignty movement could end in a Lampedusian farce, but so could everything else. Nothing is born true, it becomes true in active struggle and conflict. It is passivity that creates the lies, the false and eternal verdict of accomplished facts: those on top will always win. Although, confronted with this, an active position does not guarantee the truth, it is again the precondition for any emancipatory politics.

Those from below always move into historically concrete social and political conflicts, where the cards are always marked by those above and where degrees of consciousness are diverse and contradictory. Anyone looking for a pure social struggle, clear of political, cultural or national contradictions, looks for a field of struggle that is not of this world, which only exists in the iconic imagination of the worst nightmares of socialist realism. The longed-for and absent working class will only be formed in political struggle, in and beyond the workplace, in contact with other classes, defining its interests in real processes of political struggle and postulating from there the hegemony of its interests as the best overall solution to a society in crisis. Because the working class as a political subject does not exist as such, it is formed: what exists is a multiform mass which we call labour power, and which is present

throughout society, even though it is not conscious of itself as a force for emancipatory politics.

It is true that the attitude of certain sectors of IU, such as Garzón, and of Podemos is different: it must be recognized that Podemos has defended a referendum in its discourse while IU has not been able to propose anything other than an abstract “Federal State”. However, the Catalan settlement proposed by Podemos rests on an as yet unfulfilled premise: that Podemos wins the elections with an absolute majority, since co-government with the PSOE, being realistic, would be totally linked to denying that referendum.

It is not impossible that this would happen at some point, but it is difficult to believe that this scenario will occur in the short term. Because this is the great tragedy of “gradualist” strategies: to think of political time in a linear and monotonous way, without disagreements, as if the Catalan process and 1 October were annoying parentheses within a passive strategy of accumulation of electoral forces, instead of articulating the different temporalities that structure the political field of the state, and thinking of 1 October as the catalyst that could precipitate the fall of the PP government and open up an acceleration of political time that would propitiate a leap forward of constituent processes throughout the territory of the Spanish state that will finally bury the regime established in 1978 under the ruins of the valley of the fallen.

Every crisis is conjunctural: the regime crisis provoked by the Catalan situation will not last for ever and the independence movement, if it does not go all the way at this time of maximum opportunity, may not have another chance in a while. It seems unlikely that with the current leadership of the process it will be carried through to the end: a rebellious disobedience implies a degree of cohesion and determination that the Catalan political class seems unable to assume, while the Catalan and Spanish left are unwilling to take advantage of the process from the point of view of constituent democracy.

Perhaps the tragedy is that the hypothetical “failure” of the sovereignty process is potentially functional both for the left represented by Ada Colau in Catalonia and to that which is represented in Spain. In the words of Josep MarÃ-a Antentas, the Catalan sovereignty post-process scenario does not augur a situation of democratic radicalization, because passivity *“before the challenge of the independence movement indicate[s] an organization more inserted in conventional governability and institutional normalization than anything else. They[It] give[s] an image of a political force more favourable to an exit from the institutional crisis from above, in the form of a positive, but limited, transformation of the traditional party system, in favour of a new system where the post-neoliberal left has a greater weight than in the previous phase.”* [\[2\]](#)

There are still some decisive moments where things can happen. Perhaps the repression of the PP and post-Francoist state apparatuses will awake the majority from their passivity. Because opportunities happen and then the only thing left is the self-fulfilling prophecy of “no we can’t”.

In recent weeks there has been a qualitative leap in the level of conflict with the state and in the massive and spontaneous response of the population, with elements of self-organization and methods of struggle that go beyond what is usual for institutionalized civil society in the process: the entry of the labour movement with the call for a general and social strike for 3 October, the decision of the dockers to refuse assistance to the military forces’ ships docked in the port, the student movement blocking traffic and occupying university buildings, different platforms promoting acts of solidarity throughout the state and a charter of social rights in Catalonia culminating in an assembly of Catalan social movements, signs of solidarity and demonstrations throughout the Spanish state.

To the extent that this happens, to the extent that defence of the right to decide of the Catalan people is placed in the world of labour and the social movements, the social agenda of these movements and broad sectors of the population hitherto absent will begin to have “constituent” force. This is fundamental to begin to construct and visualize a new balance of forces, a new political camp of strategic alliances, that challenges the neoliberal

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“constituent” agenda of Junts Pel SÃ- on the one hand and forces the state-wide left to back the energies unleashed by the independence process as a destabilizer of the 1978 regime. The problem of Spain and the Catalan question will only be unlocked if the working and popular classes offer solutions and are the protagonists of what Gramsci called “grand politics”, that is, those facts that affect the “configuration of states”, the themes historically unresolved by the ruling classes.

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[1] Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* [page 22](#).

[2] See Josep Maria Antentas [The dilemma of Catalunya en ComÃ](#)⁰.