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Catalonia

September 11 and November 9 – the moment of truth

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There is no doubt. The moment of truth approaches. But which? The coming months will be worth years. For better or worse they can lead to an acceleration and a point of irreversible movement towards the breaking of the institutional framework created in 1978, or can represent the epic collapse of the process initiated in 2012, leaving behind a legacy of cynicism and frustration without comparison.

The first measures of the script of the coming weeks seem clear. After the mobilization of 11-S the Mas government [of the Generalitat of Catalonia] will approve the Law of Consultations [concerning the independence vote] and then, sign the decree for calling of the consultation, which will probably be suspended by the Constitutional Court.

From there two routes are possible. To maintain until the end a democratic disobedient impulse that would accelerate the process of sovereignty and would wear down the State, or to go into reverse gear. And in this second option there are also several possibilities, from the search for other short term routes to allow the democratic exercise of the right to decide, to attempts to postpone the process sine die.

To respect the decision of the Constitutional Court, as everything indicates Mas will do, despite his grandiloquent gestures, would be a strategic error of the first order. A very bad symptom. To defend the consultation at all costs must be the first step in this game. To disobey a ban which is unjustifiable and inexplicable outside the context of the Spanish State, but also before a considerable part of Spanish public opinion, is the main challenge of the Catalan democratic forces. The Asamblea Nacional Catalana (ANC) and those who lead the pro independence movement should clearly take this route and not accept the policy of plan Bs of uncertain content. Faced with the evidence that this will not happen, the left forces must become the main defenders of the consultation. At the moment of truth there should be not doubt on who favours going to the limit in favour of the right to decide.

Unity? What unity?

In this situation it will be key in the next months to maintain the broadest possible unitary block between those in favour of the consultation. A unity which cannot, however, be tied behind the Mas government, but that must maintain a strong pressure on the latter and seek to go beyond it. No room should be left for a retreat or the indefinite postponement of this key moment. Unity in defence of the consultation should not be confused with the mantra of patriotic unity that reduces all social contradictions to the national question and serves to deactivate the resistance to austerity policies. The Pujol scandal should serve as definitive warning for all those that still defend this policy with good intentions. The problems are at home, not only on the other side of the Ebro.

The justification for a pro-independence strategy disconnected from social demands is based on the argument by which it is first necessary to advance all together to independence, not to divide and to weaken ourselves, and later discuss what type of Catalonia we want. There are several weak points in this argument. First, unity in favour of the exercise of the right to decide is not incompatible with everyone defending their model of how the country should be. Second, independence without social content is incapable of connecting an important part of the Catalan society of popular and working class origin with Catalan nationalism. Third, today, here and now there is already a national model and those who lead are defining it day to day, with cuts, layoffs and evictions.

One Catalonia already exists, that of financial power, that of Mas. So why postpone the defence of our Catalonia? So

we who want a Catalonia without cuts, layoffs and evictions must postpone our proposals? Might we not request the same of those who cut, lay off and evict? There is no doubt: to cut, lay off and evict divides Catalan society. But it benefits some, and this is what in the end counts. And, in fourth and last place, it should never be forgotten that in a transition process who controls it determines what comes later, and that through the latter, the relationship of forces between social actors is never equal. The concessions and demobilizations of today are never recovered later.

The subordination of social demands and social and economic transformations to political demands has a long tradition of failure in the trajectory of popular movements of all types. History is full of revolutions by stages in which after the democratic stage the social one never arrived and was lost in the space-time of broken illusions. It is not necessary to go very far back either: paradoxically the discourse of “first independence and then the rest” resembles amazingly the argument of “first democracy and then social rights” of the Transition, which served to justify resignations and concessions that never would be recovered. In politics promises for the future do not exist, they are both illusory and fleeting. To take advantage of the opportune moment, the suitable conjuncture is the base for any movement which makes demands. What cannot be obtained today cannot be guaranteed for further ahead.

National unity, in addition, far from being a conjunctural policy, ends up becoming a permanent strategy in which there is no end in sight. If now the argument of “first independence then the rest” is accepted, soon we will be called on to accept, in the hypothesis of an independent Catalonia, the austerity imposed by the European Union. “Stay calm, it is necessary to make sacrifices so that the Troika recognizes us, but later we will recover the lost rights”, would be then the argument. Always there is a good excuse to postpone redistributive policies and the extension of rights.

The paradox of the situation is that, although during the great mobilizations of 11-S of 2012, 2013 and this year, the national demand was explicitly separated from the social ones, the latter were present in latent form. Those who favour independence do so in their majority because they think it will be synonymous with more democracy and more equality.

There is, in the independence process, a double inter-crossed conflict. First, on the surface, the institutional clash between the state apparatus and the Catalan government. A second, deeper, opposition between the politics of the street, participation and real democracy, and politics from above. This latter opposes the Catalan popular movement against Rajoy, but also opposes those who want to manage, in the best of cases, the right to decide from above and place this process within controlled channels, against a constituent and democratizing logic. We have to oppose a dual reason of state, that of the actually existing Spanish state and that of the nonexistent Catalan State. Both have anaesthetizing potential. To fight requires openly confronting the first, without being used by the second.

Under the combined impact of austerity policies and the independence process, the traditional Catalan party system has self-destructed. Its two great pillars, CiU and the PSC, have entered into crisis. The second, without credibility on either the social or national planes, faces the destiny of PASOK. The first, although in a better position, undergoes unstoppable erosion, because the austerity fractures it and its credibility with respect to the independence process is relative.

Unlike the party system of the Spanish State, where the PP and PSOE are in decline, but have not yet been overtaken by any emergent force, the crisis of CiU and the PSC is deeper and they have lost the political-electoral leadership. But, due to the centrality of the debate on the national question, what benefits from the political crisis is a force, ERC, that incarnates a project of rupture at the national level but continuity at the economic level, and not an anti-austerity force such as Syriza in Greece or Podemos in the Spanish State. This is the great paradox of the Catalan political crisis.

In this context it is essential to articulate a broad pro-sovereignty political alternative opposed to austerity. The

proposal defended by the Procés Constituent of Arcadi Oliveres and Teresa Forcadès from April of 2012 is, right now, more necessary than never.

Faced with the decline of CiU and the PSC and the ascent of ERC, a new actor is needed which can become a point of support of Catalan politics and which incarnates the critique of austerity policies and traditional politics that exploded on 15-M of 2011. Neither ICV-EUiA, nor Podemos, nor the CUP nor even Procés Constituent, in themselves, have the strength to become an alternative that can destabilize Catalan politics from the left. It is then time to consider formulas of convergence and joint work. But a new actor of this type could not be only a sum of abbreviations; it requires simultaneously convergences of non-organized people and existing organizations. And, still more important, it will only have sense if it represents a clear break with the traditional politics and the institutional culture that has done so much damage to the left from the Transition until now.

Only such a new political instrument will make the crisis of the traditional Catalan political system complete and open the way to a new system of parties. It would be a disaster if the CiU and PSC cannot be challenged by a force with social, electoral and institutional weight with a national project that does not advocate obedience to the financial world and the Troika, and that the new hegemony of ERC was facilitated and uncontested by a left fragmented into multiple options. For the first time in decades, those who want not only political change, but also a change of economic and social model, have the possibility of playing a significant role in Catalan politics. Something that does not happen often. Something unimaginable three years ago. Something that is still hard to believe. To let this type of opportunity pass has in the long run a much higher price than the apparent sacrifices and short term difficulties in forging convergences.

Inside and outside

The consultation of 9-N 2014 is more than a simply Catalan affair. Contrary to which the majority common sense of the Catalan independence movement believes, what happens outside Catalonia is determinant. Without external allies, the exercise of the right to decide is much more complex and the pressure towards unity with the patriots whose money is invested in Andorra is much stronger. And contrary to what a good part of the Spanish left thinks, the Catalan independence process, far from being a fringe obsession, is a fabulous opportunity to strike an accurate blow to the battered ship of the Transition.

It should be repeated time and time again: those who wish to prevent the Catalan people's right to vote on 9-N are those who have not let to the Spanish people choose between monarchy and republic, have cut health and education, protected banks before families, and covered up cases of corruption for each other. Although it is lamentably not explicitly formulated and understood, there are many points of common interest between a good part of those who demand the independence of Catalonia and those against the bipartisanship of the PP-PSOE and their policies. If Rajoy (and the PSOE of Pedro Sanchez) lose the Catalan standoff, their authority across the State will be debilitated. The feeling of shipwreck will be generalized.

It is precisely from this double strategic understanding, in Catalonia and outside Catalonia, that the germ of a will for free coexistence and neighbourliness and alliance between sovereign peoples faced with domestic and international financial power must be born. The national question should not be approached from a basis of identity politics or emotion, but from a democratic and strategic viewpoint. There lies the key to not losing the way, or confusing friends with adversaries, choose mistaken priorities and thus play the game of those who want nothing to change or to those who want everything to change so that everything remains the same.

Nobody knows what would happen if there were a head-on collision between the institutions of the Spanish State and

the Catalans. Nobody glimpses with clarity the result of a frontal collision. But such a clash can do nothing good for the battered present regime, and many possibilities can open up for the democratic and anti-austerity forces across the state, on condition that they know to read the moment and do not leave the initiative to those who fight to maintain a crumbling political and institutional framework.