

In Catalonia, a new political subject: self-organization

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“A new actor is emerging as a promoter of mobilizations supporting independence movements, but leading more direct actions, such as the occupations of public spaces and blockades of communications. So the Catalan press analysed the mobilizations of thousands of “citizens” after they mounted successful the road blockades during the “national strike” of November 8, at the initiative of the Committees for Defence of the Republic (CDR). The CDRs initially appeared to ensure that the referendum of October 1 could be held, and were then called Referendum Defence Committees.

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Effectiveness demonstrated on October 1st

Prohibited by the Spanish state, this referendum could not have taken place without a citizen mobilization. Polling stations, usually schools, were then occupied and defended for two or three days by the neighbourhoods concerned. A first experience of joint action, from below, of discussions, of organization of voting, of non-violent resistance to the attacks of the Guardia Civil sent by Madrid, of repression undergone in common, of celebrations after the results - impressive if we take into account the brutal repression - were announced. Self-organization from below had demonstrated its effectiveness, thousands of Catalans were having their first experience not during a day of protest, but by acting together against the de facto state of emergency imposed by the right wing Popular Party government, for several days.

The initiative for this citizens' mobilization did not come from the Catalan government, but from below, from activists of the left parties, in particular the CUP (Candidatura de Unitat Popular), and social movements like the National Assembly Catalan (ANC) and Òmnium cultural (ÓC).

Pau Llonch, an activist in the pro-independence far-left electoral coalition Crida, which won the 2015 municipal elections in Sabadell (a city of 200,000 inhabitants in the province of Barcelona) and a member of the city's CDR, explained that the initiative was born “from the need to be organized in a scenario that has been imposed on us. CUP has emphasized the need to organize these committees without wanting to make it its patrimony”. On October 1st families in Sabadell kept 23 electoral centres open. With the constitution of the CDR, what was at stake was creating an area of popular

sovereignty and from the outset the trade unions, the youth groups, the students and some political parties got down to this construction.

“Nobody intended to create a homogeneous movement,” said Llonch, “it was about building a space to cope with what could happen in the following weeks, but also in the case of a possible constituent process”. As a result, the CDR does not take a position itself on the results of the referendum - the victory of a yes to independence - but rather asserts the right to take decisions in a sovereign way. On the future of Catalonia -independent republic, federation or confederation of Iberian republics - the CDR has no definite collective position. [1]

“In our founding statutes, we have positioned ourselves in favour of the right to self-determination,” says David Garcia (pseudonym), a CDR activist in Salt, a town of 30,000 inhabitants in the province of Girona. “The rapid evolution of the situation has made us work against the clock, not only here, but throughout Catalonia. First, we had to organize the voting day and then the general strike. Now we continue the activities, lunches, workshops, days of reflection”, he adds. [2]

Following the success of the referendum, the citizen assemblies of these RDCs continued, even though the number of participants had decreased. Thus, in Vilanova - a city of 70,000 inhabitants in the province of Barcelona - out of the 835 enrolled, on Saturday, October 7 there were around 200 taking part in the debates on the upcoming actions, according to anti-capitalist activists Cesar and Raquel. “The meeting was “popular”, families had come with children, but to measure the level of mobilization we must remember that on October 1 around 2,000 of us occupied the twenty schools of the city and that at the general strike of October 3, more than 8,000 demonstrated in our city,” they say. [3]

The CDR mobilized for the demonstrations against the repression and for the release of the political prisoners, the road and rail blockades on October 3 and on November 8, discussed how to prevent the stranglehold of the Rajoy government on Catalonia.

The leaders of the great historical social movements, ANC and ÒC, are now conscious of the significance of the emergence of the CDR:

“We complement each other, each plays his part” explained an ANC leader after the November 8 roadblocks, pointing out that the Rajoy government “thought that with the imprisonment of the two Jordis [Jordi Sanchez, President of the ANC, and Jordi Cuixart, president of Òmnium Cultural] we would be disorganized, and it has been shown that this is not the case. And where we don’t succeed, others come to do the work. There is a great capacity for self-organization on the territory”. [4]

For the moment, the CDRs are the local nuclei of this self-organization. More than constituent structures from below, or “councils/soviets” representing the working population, they are action committees like those in France after May 1968.

National coordination

Until now there have been four national meetings of the CDRs - while some had advocated the articulation of a political leadership, because of their “heterogeneity” it was decided to settle for a “technical” coordination: thus, on November 8 this coordination worked via WhatsApp and Twitter (@CDRCatOficial). At first, these CDRs were eclipsed in the media by the ANC, Òmnium, the Catalan government or the pro-independence parties. On November 8 they hit the front-page headlines and experienced a new development. New CDRs have multiplied.

The first national meeting was convened “in secret” (by word of mouth, in principle nothing on the networks or by telephone) on October 14 at the initiative of the CDR in Sabadell, where CUP activators are the principal animators. Cesar, who represented the CDR of Vilanova, said: “The participation exceeded the expectations of the initiators, almost 100 committees or groups from all over Catalonia, even if the majority came from the province of Barcelona, and around 250 people present. There was a great variety of structures and “sensibilities”: “referendum defence committees”, “... the Republic”, unnamed structures, delegates representing democratic assemblies and those of smaller committees. A bit of everything on the political level. Most significantly, there were a significant number of committees, perhaps a quarter, mainly from the “red belt” of Barcelona, which clearly positioned themselves on the defence of the right to decide and resistance to attack from the Rajoy government and not on independence or the Catalan Republic, explaining that there were some of their members who were not separatists. These positions were accepted without any problem. Proposals to define the type of “constituent process”, so not to be limited to actions but to make proposals of the type of society – economy, education, health ... - that we want have been made, but it is the ways of resisting from day to day that dominated the discussion.” [5]

The final, very succinct, press release reflects the level of agreement of the meeting: “to defend the right to self-determination of our people despite the repression of the state, we propose to advance in our network construction at the supra-municipal level”. And it ends: “in the face of the imminent application of article 155 or if arrests occur, while we continue the effort of popular organization from below, we will impel and take up mobilizations in the street to defend the popular will against the repression and for the withdrawal of the occupying forces from our house”.

In the following days, the multiplicity of initiatives and platforms at the central level – a “United Platform Against Repression and for Freedoms”, a “Table for Democracy” and a third, older, but revived for the occasion, “Stand for Peace”, emerged as a result of the hesitations of the Catalan government, divided on how to resist the Madrid aggression which heightened the confusion in the movement.

The second national meeting of the RDCs, which brought together about as many committees and representatives in Igualda on October 21, ended without any step forward, either in the field of structuring or in the field of priority initiatives to support. It was the same at the third national meeting of the CDR in Argentona on October 28.

The CDR continued mobilizations – saucepan concerts, daily gatherings at 7 pm in front of the town halls or the central squares, road blockades, street demonstrations - around the idea of support of “our president” exiled in Brussels and for the release of those imprisoned in Madrid. In anticipation of the strike on November 8, in street demonstrations cries of “vaga” (strike) were increasingly massively taken up. In the social movements, the disarray that followed the announcement of Carles Puigdemont’s exile began to make way for criticisms.

This is evidenced by the ANC of Sants-Montjuïc: “It is clear that from now on we must review our strategy. Perhaps it will be necessary to stop waiting to know what the leaders say and instead to decide more at the base, in spite of the dangers that this represents.” [6]

The effect of such an evolution has been immediate within the RDCs, which include the most active part of the population fighting for the right to self-determination.

The fourth plenary meeting of the RDCs, meeting in Manlleu on November 4, brought together a much larger number of committees. Its statement testifies: “We consider our organizational and operational structure established, following a process of consolidation that we wanted to be fast but effective. Through this network, which involves more than 172 RDCs across our country, we are in

contact with organizations that fight for our national sovereignty and participate in committed trade unionism... We are prepared to defend the Republic in a peaceful but radical way. That is why we are calling on the public to participate actively in the defence committees of the Republic of their municipality... Faced with the coup d'état we are experiencing, today more than ever, we must break with the false normality it imposes: let's bring the country to a halt, imminently... Let's start from Wednesday [November 8] a step forward so that the European Union hears us; block the economy, even if the Spanish state tries to prevent us from exercising our right to strike."

The structure adopted by this national meeting is transversal, bringing together the full range of ideologies, members of social movements and political parties. The independence of local and district assemblies is absolute, and they do not have to accept proposals of national or territorial scope. But local assemblies are coordinated, through their democratically elected representatives, at the territorial level who, in turn, choose spokespersons to go to national assemblies. This coordination makes national initiatives and actions possible.

November 8, a step forward

November 8 demonstrated the effectiveness of the new structure. While the strike was not as big as that of October 3, because few unions ultimately called for a strike, the country was paralyzed by widespread blockades of transport, highways, roads and railways. railways, organized by the CDRs. And the Rajoy government proved unable to impose its "order" in Catalonia. Raging, the Spanish interior minister spoke of "radicalized pickets", calling the blockades "sabotage" and announcing arrests.

And the development of the CDR continues: on November 10 the spokesperson of the CDR Sabadell, Helena Vazquez, announced the existence of 280 committees, one hundred more than at the fourth national meeting that had taken place a week before.

Such a development could be used for the construction of a "constituent process from below" - an idea put forward until now by a minority of the radical left - moving towards a "Catalan Social Assembly", which could draw inspiration from the "Charter of Social Rights" elaborated by the activists in the various "marches" and "platforms". And even if the Catalan elections imposed by the Rajoy government on December 21 play a role of political division - which cannot be without effect on the CDR - the level of self-organization attained and its "transversal" nature constitute a good basis for progressing in the accumulation of more forces within such basic unitary organizations in order to involve in the constituent debates everybody interested in the definition of a new social model. Because the CDR have until now managed to bring together both pro-independence activists and those who, without wanting Catalan independence, aspire to a true democracy, the end of the Spanish monarchical regime of 1978 and the realization of the social needs of the greater number. They are a new political subject.

Jan Malewski

P.S.

* Translation IVP: <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5266>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.publico.es/public/comite...> .

[2] Ibid.

[3] Information provided by telephone by Fabrice Thomas. The author thanks Fabrice Thomas and Yorgos Mitralias for their help in compiling this article.

[4] See note 1.

[5] Information provided by telephone by Fabrice Thomas.

[6] <http://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?...> .