

# Catalonia: The post-election political landscape (excerpts)

Sunday 14 January 2018, by [ANTENTAS Josep Maria](#) (Date first published: 31 December 2017).

**A critical analysis of the outcome of Catalonia's December 21 election was published earlier on this site [1]. The author, Marti Caussa, is an editor of the Spanish print and web-based journal of the "alternative left," *Viento Sur*. Here below are excerpts from a later assessment by another contributor to *Viento Sur*, Josep Maria Antentas [2], who offers some further critical advice to the Catalan left on how to confront the challenges of the coming months. The excerpted paragraphs (which I have chosen in order to minimize repetition with other articles on the subject already available in English) follow the numbering of the original text; I have added a few footnotes, signed "Tr," to those supplied by Antentas. My translation from the Castellano.**

**Richard Fidler**

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7. Independentism won the election, but without a clear road map nor even the appearance of one. A victory without a plan, then. Managing the December 21 (21D) verdict will be complex, now that the hypothesis (the official public narrative) of an easy independence and disconnection by agreement has been refuted. The movement that emerged in 2012 is unprecedented in its massive and ongoing nature. It has obtained the greatest support in its history after having suffered a serious (and arguably self-inflicted) political defeat on October 27 (27-O) [3] and having badly mismanaged the referendum vote of October 1 (1-O).

But its foundational strategy is exhausted. The policy of first independence, later the rest, the policy of delinking the national and social questions, is a worn-out paradigm, responsible for the collateral damages inflicted on the movement, the effects undesired by its promoters. It will not help to create a broader social majority or to shape a project that guarantees economic and social change. And it has boosted the identitarian polarization promoted by Ciudadanos in the working-class neighborhoods.

But it does so on the basis of the social devastation caused by a neoliberalism that has relied to a large degree for its implementation on the complicity of the left and the workers movement. Added to the obliviousness toward independentism in the popular neighborhoods is a long tradition of insouciance that started in the institutionalization of the workers movement after the Transition and its turn to social-liberalism, conservative Pujolist nationalism [4] centred on the middle class and the less urban parts of Catalonia, and the social-liberal Catalanismo of Maragall [5] that sought to attract support from the former Convergencia middle sectors but on the basis of excluding the working-class peripheries. The new left that arose after 15M [the May 15 occupation movement that began in 2011], Podemos and the Communes, owed much of its success to the recovery of support in the popular neighborhoods, but it did not go beyond doing this with a superficial electoral-media

model that was not deeply rooted and is therefore very limited in its ability to reverse the historical tendencies of social, cultural and political destructuring, and vulnerable to changes in the overall context.

**8.** Newly minted in 1968 by Josep Benet, the slogan *un sol poble* [a single people] has been a constituent part of the political imagination of Catalanism, a recurring presence in diverse but decisive junctures, among them October 2017. In its original meaning it had a dual aspect, both social and national, that at the time expressed the will for national integration under a project of social integration of the Spanish immigration from the rest of Spain that had come to Catalonia. [6]

But by the end of the Transition, the articulation between national and social had been disassembled by a dual and combined process: on the one hand, the rise of Pujolism with its identitarian vision of the nation, suitable to economic neoliberalism, seesawing around the middle classes and relegating to a subaltern role the working class that had been the sustenance of opposition to Franco-ism; on the other hand, the decomposition of the workers movement as a result of the impact of neoliberal restructuring and its particular process of institutionalization and bureaucratization. Hollowed out from below, with a dismembered social base, and integrated into the state from above, the historical workers movement ceased to embody a project either of social transformation or of dynamic articulation between class and national identity. And with this, a structural part of the Catalan working class was relegated to a peripheral position both socially and in the national narrative, one of the most visible, albeit superficial, manifestations of its significant disaffection with respect to Catalan institutionality being its well-known differential abstention in the autonomous territory's elections.

**9.** Contemporary independentism has likewise taken up the idea of *un sol poble* but with a meaning distinct from the original, shorn of its class dimension. This has been noted by the historian Marc Andreu, [7] a great authority on the anti-Francoist workers movement and the historical evolution of the working-class neighborhoods, although he overlooks the responsibility of the left and the effects of its bureaucratization and social-liberalization in the desynchronization between the social and national. The contemporary delinking between the national project and the social question splits in half the idea of a single people, smooths the way for its fracturing along identitarian lines and boosts *Ciudadanos*. If there is to be a single people in the sense of a minimal social consensus around some socio-cultural references and a collective identity, there must also be a single people in terms of equality and social justice.

Herein lies the Achilles Heel of the foundational strategy of independentism. In 1845 the British Conservative politician Benjamin Disraeli published his novel *Sybil, or The Two Nations*, on the squalid situation of the English working class. The idea of two nations is a recurrent one in history, referring to the social fracture. It is useful to resort to it in the current debate in Catalonia as it points to the close link between the social and national questions that is requisite for strategic thinking about what is meant by *un sol poble* if that idea is to have an emancipatory content. And the very idea of *un sol poble* needs to be updated in the context of the social transformations in Catalonia, the social fragmentation, the cultural changes, the process of individualization, and in particular the impact of the new immigration from outside the Spanish state. *¿Un sólo pueblo plural? ¿Un pueblo de pueblos?* Whatever the case, it expresses the desire to find a basis of shared references within a framework of pluralism and cultural diversity. To work in that direction presupposes going beyond the strategic limits of independentism and the passive politics of those within the ranks of the left who have stuck closely to emphasizing those limits without having a plan to intervene in the real processes.

**10.** The immediate road ahead for independentism is bifurcated. Either it clings to an exhausted strategic paradigm that spectacularly collides with the state, or it is refounded to keep alive the

flame of the rupture. In other words, the choice is between a strategic stagnation — flavoured with a paradoxical combination of the unreal foundational illusionism and a new self-image as the victim following the October 27 defeat — or a general refoundation-reformulation. Strategic quietism will mean entering into a political death-agony, albeit dissimulated in the short term by a defensive anti-repression logic in which independentism can end up evolving into a movement with a project for a break with the state disconnected from any road map and short term objective. That is, dissociating its formal objective from its more prosaic day-to-day practice and converting itself into the protagonist of a structural conflict of Catalan and Spanish politics but without any presumption that it will be resolved.

On December 21 the winner was an “independentism without independence” as conservative commentator Enric Juliana put it, [8] an independentism that could not realize independence but still with a formal project to proceed to independence albeit without a convincing plan even from the propagandistic standpoint (strategically, its limits were always apparent). The question is whether it will be forced to proceed toward a stage not only of independentism without independence but of independentism without an independence project, and whether it will locate itself traumatically in a climate of defeat and demoralization mixed with an exclusively defensive anti-repression dynamic, or whether it will be able to do this in the context of a strategy for struggle holding out for a new phase.

This could occur simply through the solidification of an independentist bloc too weak to win but too strong to be definitively defeated, generating a continuation of the conflict in the context of a normalized instability and used by the leadership of both contending blocs to keep its social base intact and mobilized. But it could also remake itself through a global reorientation of the perspective and objectives of independentism in a sense that helps to overcome its basic weaknesses and its more contradictory aspects.

**11.** The road toward a strategic reformulation involves, as we have emphasized in many previous articles, [9] tying the independentist agenda to anti-austerity policies and defending a constituent process compatible with an independentist and confederal future. This dual turn is decisive to the urgent two-fold job facing independentism: to expand its social base while articulating an alliance in Catalonia with the federalist partisans of the right to decide and who are opposed to the 1978 Regime, and to break the persisting isolation throughout the Spanish state that has smoothed the way for the repressive route taken by Rajoy.

This fits very poorly with Puigdemont’s leadership within the independence movement and with an ANC [Catalan National Assembly, a mass nationalist organization] that since October embodies better than anyone the strategic crisis of independentism, on the one hand permanently locked into the foundational paradigm of first independence, later the rest, and on the other hand having subordinated itself completely to the Catalan government and its president. In reality, if the ANC wants independence for Catalonia the first conclusion it would have to reach would be the need to free itself from its initial paradigm and from the Catalan government itself. In other words, the independentist strategy requires strategic independence from its own limits and from the Catalan executive.

However, it is certainly not easy to implement a strategy of disconnection with its foundational hypotheses and with the excessive institutionalization-governmentalization of the *procés* (in particular post-2015). And there is no signal that things are evolving in that direction. But faced with the paralysis of the major political and social organizations of independentism, posing this necessary reorientation must be the central task of the independentist left grouped around the CUP (which involves questioning its own strategy as well) and the non-independentist left represented by Catalunya en Comú-Podem (which presupposes abandoning passivity as a permanent orientation).

[...]

**14.** From the standpoint of those who favour emancipatory social change, the two most negative results of 21D are the poor showing of the CUP and Catalunya en Comú-Podem, two forces whose mutual exclusion in their respective alliances is already an initial signal of strategic gridlock. Contrary to the conventional journalistic commentaries, electoral results cannot be the sole way in which to assess the success or failure of the project and orientation of a political force. These must be considered in relation to the general political influence of a party, its capacity to define the political agenda and condition the public debate, and whether or not it acts as a general political-cultural reference for broad social sectors with their own possibilities to organize and mobilize around their political initiatives. Analytical electoralism, in this sense, is as superficial as strategic electoralism.

The relation between electoral success and the correctness of a party's political orientation is complex, too. There can be situations in which a party has poor results that are the consequence not of a mistaken political line but of the fact that it defended what is correct in a complex situation. Going against the stream may on many occasions be the only commendable and, in retrospect, courageous course. But it can prove costly in the short run. On the other hand, the contrary is also true: adapting to the pressures of the context may in certain situations save the situation but at the price of laying the basis for a later political defeat of greater scope. Reformist parliamentarism is a true master at this.

The complexity of the relation between political orientation, project and electoral results, however, cannot be used to fall into a minority mentality that makes a fetish of resistance and self-justification when things go badly. Aspiring to build a party with majority support must be a constant objective and, precisely, understanding the non-linear nature of this link is a necessary condition to avoid slippages, a tendency to self-complacent resistance, or an obsession with results that lack content. And in both cases that concern us, CUP and Catalunya en Comú-Podem, the disappointments of 21D should encourage a self-evaluation both of the political line that was followed and of the project itself.

**15.** The drop in the CUP vote was clear: from 336,375 votes (8.2%) and 10 deputies in 2015 to 193,352 votes (4.45%) and 4 deputies now. It lost primarily in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Many of the lost votes were "loaned" to the ERC by voters who did not want to vote for Junts pel Sí, but it appears as well that the CUP lost votes to Junts per Catalunya in the Catalan interior. For many voters a "useful vote" for oficialista (outgoing government) candidates, in particular the ERC, outweighed a critical assessment of how the Catalan government had managed the October 1 vote.

The CUP's poor results, largely in the major urban areas, reveal the CUP's limits as a political and organizational force. Beyond the question of its orientation, the 21D vote is suggestive of problems of a more structural nature in its project which, despite everything, is an exceptionally strong one in comparison with the other European anticapitalist parties. Overcoming those problems means considering popular unity as a broad strategic project that transcends what is popularly referred to as Unitat Popular, and requires alliances and interface with other realities of the political and social left which, moreover, is not necessarily wedded to independentism. This in turn means engaging with the procés from both within and without and not working exclusively inside it in a context where it is essential to redefine its foundational premises.

**16.** The result of Catalunya en Comú-Podem, 326,360 (7.45%), was also disappointing: less than the total vote obtained by its predecessor, the unsuccessful coalition between Podem, ICV and EUiA, and Catalunya Sí que es Pot (CSQP), 367,613 votes (8.94%). [10] Caught in the electoral polarization, it proved unable to create a space for itself, and may well have lost votes to both left and right, to ERC

(and CUP) and to PSC (and Ciutadans). The basic question is not so much the orientation it adopted in this election campaign but the entire political line adhered to since its irruption in Catalan politics from December 20, 2015 on, in which its tactic was one of strategic passivity, hoping that independentism would soon collapse, instead of trying to be an active influence in the particular context by developing a constituent and anti-austerity proposal for Catalonia that could lead to a convergence between the impulse generated respectively by 15M and the pro-independence movement. [11]

But besides its orientation in the independentist debate, the future of the Commons project as a whole is at stake. Having lost the initial boost of the two victories in the general elections (20-D 2015 and 26-J 2016), and without the militant impact of the launch of Barcelona en Comú in the summer of 2014, Catalunya en Comú, founded in April 2017, has failed to take off organizationally or politically since then, becoming embroiled in a poorly managed row with Podem, which it remained entrapped in until October 1. In the few months it has existed, it has taken shape as an electoralist, institutionalized party without lively internal debate and lacking in territorial and social influence or, worse still, without a project to obtain it. [12]

In this new stage, its leading team will have to decide whether it is permanently located in the historical-strategic continuity running from the Moncloa Pacts (1977) to the tripartite government (2003-2010) or whether it is located in the slipstream of the constituent challenge of 15M. A crystal-clear dilemma, to speak openly, which allows many tactical nuances but tolerates no strategic ambiguity.

**Josep Maria Antentas**, December 31, 2017

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**P.S.**

\* Sunday, January 14, 2018:

<http://lifeonleft.blogspot.fr/2018/01/catalonia-post-election-political.html>

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## Footnotes

[1] On ESSF see (article 42754), [Catalonia & the December 21 elections: The independence movement resists, but without clarifying its strategy](#).

[2] <http://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article13365>

[3] On October 27, Catalan President Carles Puigdemont, having received no answer from Madrid to his request for negotiations following the October 1 vote for independence, declared Catalan an independent Republic. Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy immediately followed this declaration by implementing emergency powers under article 155 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, dissolving the Catalan Parliament and calling a general election in Catalonia on December 21. - Tr.

[4] Jordi Pujol, President of the Generalitat of Catalonia 1980-2003, promoted the creation of a federalized Spain, but not an independent Catalan Republic. - Tr.

[5] Pasqual Maragall, President of the Generalitat of Catalonia, 2003-2006. – Tr.

[6] For the origin and context of the slogan, see the recent biography of Benet published by Jordi Amat, *Com una pàtria. Vida de Josep Benet* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2017).

[7] Andreu, M., “Un sol poble?,” *El Critic*, 15/09/17. Available at <http://www.elcritic.cat/blogs/sentitcritic/2017/10/15/un-sol-poble/>.

[8] Juliana, E., “Un teorema defectuoso,” *La Vanguardia*, 24/12/17. Available at <http://www.lavanguardia.com/politica/20171223/433826863380/elecciones-catalanas-teorema-defectuoso.html>.

[9] See, for example, Antentas, Josep Maria. “21D: zozobras pre y (post)electorales” Público.es 15/12/2017. Available at ESSF (article 42701), [Catalan elections of December 21: pre \(and post\) electoral anxiety](#).

[10] Podem=The Catalan counterpart of Podemos; ICV=Initiative for Catalonia Greens; EUiA=United and Alternative left; CSQP=the coalition of the preceding parties, formed in 2015 to contest that year’s Catalan election. – Tr.

[11] I discuss in more detail the politics of the Commons prior to 1-O in: Antentas, Josep Maria, “Los comunes y sus dilemas,” *Viento Sur* 11/09/17. Available in English at ESSF (article 42066), [[art42066](#)].

[12] For a more detailed analysis of the major aspects of the project of Catalunya en Comú, this series of three articles published after its founding congress may be consulted: “The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner,” *Jacobin*, 28/06/17, available at ESSF (article 41429), [Catalunya en Comú’s challenges: On the possibility of losing by winning](#): <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/the-loneliness-of-the-long-distance-runner>; “¿De comunes a eurocomunes?,” *Viento Sur*, 04/05/2017: <http://vientosur.info/spip.php?article12544>; and “Los comunes y el programa,” *Viento Sur*, 07/09/2017: <http://vientosur.info/spip.php?article12978>.