

# **Catalonia's independence movement - A strategic assessment (self-determination, class and nation)**

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## **Translators' introduction**

After more than two million people in Catalonia voted to declare independence from the Spanish state in October 2017, the state struck back. The Spanish central government, under the conservative President Mariano Rajoy, dissolved the Catalán government and charged its leaders with crimes of rebellion against the state. Rajoy called new elections in Catalonia for December 2017. In the results of those elections, the pro-independence parties took the small majority of a sharply polarized electorate. The independence movement, the Catalán government, and the Spanish state are currently locked in an impasse.

Josep Maria Antentas, a professor of sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and a member of the editorial board of *Viento Sur*, a socialist magazine published in Madrid, analyzes the development and current state of the Catalán independence movement. He roots the crisis over Catalonia in the general crisis of the Spanish state stemming from the negotiated end to the fascist Franco dictatorship, as codified in the Constitution of 1978 (arrangements that Antentas calls "the regime of 1978"). To him, the movement for Catalán independence and the movement of the Indignados—protests for democracy and against austerity that began on May 15, 2011 (often referred to by the abbreviation 15M)—are the two biggest current challenges to the regime of 1978. For this reason, the article begins with background on the "transition" from the Franco regime to the parliamentary democracy that has governed the state and its "autonomous communities" (regional governments rooted among the distinct nations that make up the Spanish state) since then.

**Eva Maria and Lance Selfa**

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## **Catalonia's independence movement**

The Catalán October of 2017 was the culminating event of a movement towards independence that opened in September of 2012. The independence movement has been one of the central aspects of the ongoing crisis of the Spanish regime after the upsurge of the 15M movement in May 2011. It has gathered force since the turn to the harsh politics of austerity led by the social-liberal government of the Socialist President José Rodríguez Zapatero in 2010. The explosion of Catalán independentismo (i.e., the movement for independence) is a consequence of a series of linked factors: the effects of the harsh españolista (i.e., Spanish nationalist) turn during the second term (2000-2004) of conservative President José Maria Aznar's administration; the failed attempt at reforming the "Estatut of Catalonia" (the law that determines self-government of Catalonia) initiated in 2003; and the impact of the economic crisis and harsh austerity implemented by Zapatero's government in 2010. It shows the failure of the Spanish state, born in 1978, on the terrain of its national identity and territorial definition in the midst of an economic crisis and a crisis of legitimacy in its institutions.

## **The regime of 1978**

The current Spanish state was consolidated during the period of "transition" initiated after the death of Franco in 1975. The most decisive moments of this time were the Pacts of Moncloa in 1977, which codified the negotiated transition to democracy, and the ratification of the Constitution of 1978.

The post-Franco transition has been presented as a happy story of an immaculate process that reflected the ability of a group of statesmen (including the king, post-Franco politicians, and anti-Franco leaders) to work together in a commendable spirit of "consensus." A true "immaculate Transition," as one political commentator once ironically described it. [1] The majority of the Left, including the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) and the two major trade unions, the Workers' Commissions (CCOO) and the General Union of Workers (UGT), together with the conservative Catalán and Basque nationalists, agreed to the new institutional framework, born in 1978, and its legitimating narrative.

Only the extra-parliamentarian revolutionary Left, some layers of social activists, and the left-wing Catalán, Basque, and Galician nationalist currents stayed outside of the official transition "consensus," whose "canonization" was a strategy to permanently validate the new regime's institutional framework and the distribution of power between the social groups that created it.

The official narrative around the transition skips entirely the role of the class struggle and all the conflicts during the whole process, and it hides the fact that the process was an "asymmetrical transaction" towards a European-style parliamentary democracy that didn't change the dominant ruling block. The idealization of the transition took root in a historical amnesia that never questioned the legitimacy of the fascist regime born from its victory in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39).

At the center of this mythical narrative about the transition was the constitution, which became an untouchable juridical/institutional fetish. Since then, constitutional reform has been one of the biggest taboos in Spanish politics. This was only challenged in August 2011 when the two main parties, the Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the conservative Popular Party (PP), made an agreement to push through an "express" reform of Article 135 to establish as government goals budgetary stability and the reduction of the deficit. In effect, this "reform" made the neoliberal economic agenda part of the constitution. Mythologizing the transition and the constitution was an attempt to create an analog in the Spanish state that "antifascism" plays in other countries like

France and Italy. Yet this myth has never gained a comparable power or legitimacy. [2]

The sainted figure of the king, viewed as a guarantor of the whole process, was one of the main props to the myth of the transition. Until the current crisis of the regime, the crown was protected by a code of silence that impeded any financial accountability while keeping its scandals out of the press. Named by Franco as the inheritor to the king's title in 1969, King Juan Carlos I only gained his public stature after a failed coup by a rogue military officer in 1981. The official story of the defeated coup presented the monarch as the decisive defender of democracy, even though the real story is a lot murkier. The image of the king and the royal family was virtually untouchable until 2010, when, in the midst of the economic crisis, a corruption scandal engulfed the king's son-in-law Iñaki Urdangarín. [3] The king's health declined. In the face of an unprecedented plunge in his popularity, the king abdicated and handed off the throne to his son Felipe VI in June 2014. Replacing the king was the state's attempt to slow the erosion of the crown's credibility, yet it carried no implication of any effort to more thoroughly reform the crisis-ridden state from above or to embark on a "second transition."

The national question in general—and the "question of Catalonia" in particular—was one of the most crucial issues in the post-Franco transition. Decades of dictatorship based on a Spanish nationalism that was hostile toward expressions of national, linguistic, and cultural self-determination in the Spanish state, gave way to the paradoxical coexistence of a loose idea of Spain as a nation alongside the Spanish Left's adoption of a superficial concept of "plurinationality." Despite its public support for this plurinational idea, the Spanish Left never took too seriously the right of self-determination. Nevertheless, there were small but notable exceptions on the revolutionary Left, like the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR, a Trotskyist organization), that supported the right of self-determination. [4]

At this time, the central demand from the main Catalán nationalist parties was for the restoration of an autonomous Catalán government within the framework of the democratic transformation of the Spanish state. [5] Still, the demand for independence held marginal support in Catalán politics. The post-Franco reformist Spanish state government of Adolfo Suárez managed to contain the debate on the national/territorial question by restoring to the Basque Country government the right to collect taxes directly, as it had in the nineteenth century. In Catalonia, the Spanish state used "Operation Tarradellas." In September 1977, it restored "from above" the Generalitat de Catalunya—the government abolished following the Civil War—along with its president in exile, Josep Tarradellas, a progressive but also an anticommunist and authoritarian. While, paradoxically, these moves recognized pre-Franco republican legality, installing Tarradellas at the head of the Generalitat by fiat was a maneuver to neutralize the Left and to channel the anti-Franco struggle away from a "rupture" with the system and onto the path of reform.

The national question was a particularly sensitive point to post-Franco sectors of society and to the armed forces, both of which directly influenced the passages in the constitution that governed them. The constitution approved in 1978 established in its Article 2 the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation, the common and indivisible fatherland of all Spaniards, and recognizes and guarantees the right to autonomy of nationalities and regions that compose it and solidarity among all of them." The text introduced the ambiguous term "nationality" to refer to the particular regions of Catalonia, the Basque Country, Galicia, and Andalucía, without recognizing the plurinational nature of Spain. At the same time, it reserved the term "nation" to refer only to Spain, denying the right of self-determination to these regions.

## **Self-determination in Catalonia**

The first democratic elections to the Generalitat of Catalonia resulted in the victory of the moderate-conservative nationalist, Jordi Pujol, the most prominent figure of the anti-Franco nationalist bourgeoisie. With the active support of the world of business and the media, Pujol won a fear-mongering campaign against the possible victory of the Socialist Unified Party of Catalonia (PSUC, the old Communist Party of 1932), or of its participation in coalition with a government of the social democratic Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC). During the transition, Pujol was able to become the political representative of the Catalán middle classes, supporting a moderate nationalist project while having impeccable anti-Franco and democratic credentials.

He became the guarantor of peaceful and slow political change. This was attractive to a moderate sector of the Catalán society whose opposition to Franco had been mostly passive and expectant, and which had never embraced radical ideas. [6]

Pujol's rise in popularity was the start of a long phase of conservative hegemony in Catalán nationalism, which put an end to the period of the 1960s and 1970s, when the workers' movement was at its peak. During his long time in power (1980-2003), Pujol combined a gradualist and pragmatic politics of demanding transfers of powers from the Spanish government with a conservative, romantic, nationalist discourse.

Under his government, a program of "Catalánization" of society was put in place. Its main achievement was the system of linguistic immersion in the schools, guaranteeing that all students learned both Catalán and Spanish, and the creation of Catalán media such as television and radio.

During the 1980s and 1990s, in practice, the "state of the autonomous communities," as the 1978 regime came to be known, allowed considerable political-administrative decentralization, but subordinated it within a strict constitutional framework that the Spanish government continuously tried to interpret in the most restrictive and centralist manner possible. [7] Following the failed coup of 1981, the Spanish Congress approved in June 1982 the Ley Orgánica de Armonización del Proceso Autonómico (LOAPA) that governed the relationship between the autonomous communities and the central state. Although the Constitutional Court subsequently invalidated a substantial part of the law, it still provided a framework for the devolution of powers from the central government. The 1980s-1990s implementation of the "state of the autonomous communities" with its progressive shift of governmental powers to the regional governments, developed under pressure from the conservative nationalist Catalán and Basque governments. This created a permanent back-and-forth with the Spanish government that was at once the site of ritualistic low-intensity conflict that shaped Catalán and Spanish politics, while serving to bolster Pujol's government.

The right-wing Prime Minister José María Aznar's second term (2000-2004) marked a turning point. Starting then, the Spanish Right has promoted a "hard" Spanish nationalism as a central feature of its strategic project. This was based on a rigid and anti-plural vision of Spain that clashed directly with Basque and Catalán nationalisms, and was connected to a plan for administrative recentralization of the state. This represented a change from the PSOE governments (in power from 1982 to 1996) whose national project and concept of Spain combined a defense of a "plural Spain" with a core commitment to a strong Spanish nationalism. The PSOE did not obsess on Catalán and Basque nationalism. In light of a past it judged as failed, the Socialists' national project emphasized a future of modernization and Europeanization. [8] The aggressive Spanish nationalism that Aznar embraced in 2000 became the cornerstone for Spanish "neocons" to organize and mobilize their social base. While cloaking itself in the constitution and the myth of the transition, the Spanish Right promoted a particularly centralist and homogenized interpretation of the law. Useful in the short run

to win votes outside of Catalonia and to shape the political agenda, Aznar's policies represented a "scorched earth" campaign that created increasing disaffection among important sectors of Catalán society.

In response to Aznar, but also as a way to offer an alternative to Pujol, the Catalán Socialist Party (PSC), under the leadership of ex-Barcelona mayor Pasqual Maragall, called for reforming the *Estatut de Autonomia de Catalunya* (the Catalán Autonomy Law) in 2001. In the 2003 elections, an alliance of the PSC, the Catalán Republican Left (ERC, pro-independence social democrats) and the Catalán Green Initiative (ICV, Greens of Eurocommunist origin), put an end to Pujol's long reign.

Reform of the *Estatut de Autonomia* attempted to increase self-government, to protect governmental powers assumed over the previous two decades and, symbolically, to promote the recognition of Catalonia as a nation. These goals were always moderate and compatible with the existing constitutional framework, but they unleashed an extremely intense campaign of agitation from the Spanish Right. In Catalonia, the process was very contradictory: on the one hand, it helped to mobilize (and later to disillusion) the most nationalist sections of Catalán society, while, on the other hand, it counted on indifference from a large section of the working class with direct or indirect origins in the rest of Spain, as well as a small Spanish nationalist minority. On September 30, 2005, the Catalán parliament approved a new *Estatut*. The Spanish Congress severely weakened it in March 2006. But Cataláns, with 49 percent of the electorate turning out, ratified it in a June 2006 referendum with 73.9 percent for, 20.8 percent against, and 5.3 percent casting blank ballots.

Four years later, on June 28, 2010, the Spanish Constitutional Court declared fourteen provisions of the law unconstitutional, effectively gutting it. A few days later, on June 10, an immense demonstration under the slogan "*Som una Nació. Nosaltres decidim.*" ("We are a nation. We decide.") filled the streets of Barcelona. Without being openly pro-independence, the mobilization expressed a massive and unprecedented disaffection with the Spanish state. The failed *Estatut* reform created a perception in Catalán society that greater self-government within the Spanish state wasn't possible and that "Spain" itself was unreformable. All of this happened three months after the Spanish Socialist government of Zapatero made a sharp turn to austerity. Together, these two events would provoke a double crisis of legitimacy for the state, bringing together a political, social, and national crisis. The political earthquakes of 15M in 2011, with the emergence of the Indignados, and of 11S (September 11) of 2011, the date of the first massive demonstration explicitly calling for Catalán independence, were soon to be felt.

## **Independence, pure and simple**

Following the brilliant September 11, 2011 public demonstration of pro-independence sentiment, the Catalán National Assembly (ANC), formed in March 2012, took the lead in organizing a single-issue movement for Catalán independence. The demand for an independent state was not connected to any other concrete program for change to the political economy, nor was it connected to any anti-austerity demands. A simple proposition lay behind the demand: uniting all people, no matter what they thought about other political questions, around the goal of an independent state. In other words, to take away what divided people, and rally around the common goal. The common sense of mainstream independentismo is based on the primacy of the national question as, first, a framework for shared identity ("Catalonians have to unite because we have common interests") and second, a justification for using the independent state to decide the type of country Catalonia would be ("without a state, we can't do anything"). This double primacy—national identity and a state—dovetails with much of the pro-independence left's stagist view: "first independence, then we'll fight about everything else." This shaped a movement that was based on



serious strategic misconceptions, but nevertheless proposed a democratic project that collided frontally with the regime of 1978.

Thus, “pure and simple” independentismo was born with a misguided strategic focus to a key question: What social alliances and social base would guide the movement? The independence movement’s main strategic obsession was how to push the conservative nationalists to support independence. But it didn’t grapple with more decisive strategic problems: how to attract the Left, from a pro-Catalonian but not pro-independence tradition, and sectors of the working class that were outside of the nationalist movement, and how to connect these to the *Indignados* movement. The strategic design was conceived so as not to alienate the Right, and to get it to jump on the independence bandwagon. So the movement disconnected the demand for independence from any kind of concrete challenge to the politics of austerity. Outside of the generic promise that an independent state would make things better, the independence movement did not concretely tie its project to a way out of the economic crisis that could attract those who had suffered the most from it.

The movement’s political goal was, from the start, sponsoring a referendum for independence, and basing all of its strategy on a “unilateral” move, i.e., accumulating forces in Catalonia against the Spanish state. Although this was a logical jumping-off point and the base of its strength, at the same time, the movement didn’t try to relate the goal of independence to the broader crisis of the Spanish state. Nor did it look to alliances with parties and movements outside of Catalonia, like Podemos, that were also mobilizing against the state. In other words, it did not place the movement for independence for Catalonia within the broader context of a break with the regime of 1978.

The Catalán nationalist Right, organized first under the Catalán Democratic Convergence (CDC) and then under the European-Catalán Democratic Party (PDeCAT), led first by Mas (2012–2015) and now by Puigdemont (since 2015), would gain hegemony in the independence movement, in the sense that it was always to subordinate the movement to its partisan interests. But this has been an unstable hegemony, as the PDeCAT has seen a strong electoral decline, losing support to the center-left ERC. At the same time, big capital has also deserted the Catalán nationalist Right. Traditionally a supporter of conservative nationalism, Catalán big business opposes a pro-independence agenda. And that is despite the fact that the Catalán nationalist Right continues to defend the interests of Catalán business.

Thus, the independence movement was born as a cross-class alliance that mainly revolves around a middle-class (both old and new) milieu slammed by the crisis, public-sector workers, and workers in mid-sized cities in the Catalanian interior. From the start, big business and traditional power centers opposed the movement. It also suffered from a weak implantation in the working-class neighborhoods in the Barcelona region (and other industrial and post-industrial areas of the country), where descendants of the population that migrated to Catalonia from the rest of Spain during the 1950s and 1960s is concentrated.

## **Class and nation**

The history of Catalonia has been characterized by a complex relationship between the social question and the national question, or between class and nation. This has generated important challenges for the Left that have not always been easily resolved. Thus, during the 1930s under the Second Republic, there were frequent ruptures and misunderstandings, as well as episodic alliances, between the revolutionary and majority anarchist workers’ movement in the National Confederation of Labor (CNT) which was generally hostile to nationalism, and the left-wing nationalist and populist

republicans, politically represented by the ERC's base in the petit-bourgeoisie, artisans, and some small sectors of the working class. [9]

It was only during the anti-Franco movement in the 1960s and 1970s that class and nation became concepts that could be more clearly articulated to confront a dictatorship that was the enemy of both Catalán self-determination and of the working class. From the 1950s, immigrants originally from other places in Spain have formed the majority of the industrial working class in Catalonia. Despite this, and in the context of the struggle against a common adversary, the working-class movement was able to combine the social struggle and the national struggle. It not only was able to adopt class demands, but also to embrace national demands supported by the nationalist movement linked to the middle classes and the bourgeoisie. It was thus possible to overcome a potential fracture in the working class based on national origin, and to keep the anti-Franco camp united. The slogan "*un sol poble*" (only one people), coined by the activist and historian of Catholic origin Josep Benet in 1968, summarized the movement's approach to the questions of class and nation. [10]

But once the transition was accomplished, two forces combined to undermine this understanding between the social and the national. First, the rise of Pujolism with its identitarian vision of the nation, alongside economic neoliberalism, tilted heavily toward the middle classes while relegating the working class—which had been the core of the resistance to Franco—to a subaltern position. Second, the social weight of the working class declined due to the impact of neoliberal restructuring and the institutionalization and bureaucratization of working-class organizations. Sapped from below, with its social base weakened and integrated into the state from above, the historical working-class movement stopped embodying both a project of social transformation and a dynamic articulation between class and nation. With that, an important part of the Catalán working class, in particular that of direct or indirect origin in Spanish migration, was relegated to a peripheral position in both the social and national narrative.

In no case can we speak of the existence of two closed national communities: a self-contained Catalán one, and one of Spanish immigrant origin. On the contrary, since the 1960s processes of cultural and social hybridization, in the framework of a social model of shared cultural and national traits, have been very important. The success of linguistic immersion, which guaranteed education in Catalán, was the cornerstone of this. It promoted the creation of a bilingual society where everyone speaks and understands both Catalán and Spanish (*castellano*), no matter which is one's first language. Still, there are distinct gradations in Catalán or Spanish identity, in media consumption in Catalán or in Spanish, and in the affective-symbolic ties to Catalán and Spanish political institutions.

In this setting, the rise of an independentismo disconnected from a social project generated a social and political polarization (galvanized by the state institutions and the Spanish media) whose most prominent reflection was the result of the Catalán elections of December 21, 2017. In the elections, the right-wing Citizens Party (Ciudadanos, often referred to as "Cs") was able to gain support in many working-class neighborhoods with an appeal to Spanish unity that, without disregarding Catalán identity, subordinated it to a national Spanish identity. The division between the social and the national during these years made the Cs' rise possible. It undermined the idea of "only one people" as a social consensus around shared sociocultural and national interests. For this to become a reality again, it is imperative that "only one people" be defined in terms of equality and social justice. This understanding was completely lost in the current economic crisis, and the independence movement has never really confronted it. Thus, despite the fact that this slogan has been raised at various times, it expresses a different meaning than it did during the anti-Franco resistance. It has lost its class dimension. It has become an empty rhetorical demand, independentismo's attempt to present itself as the embodiment of "all" the people, but without articulating an effective strategy to do so. In short, it's more of a rhetorical slogan than a strategic one. [11]

## The Left at a crossroads

The Left, regardless of whether it supported or opposed independence, didn't know how to articulate the national and social questions in a way that would transcend the limits of mainstream independence politics. During the post-2011 tsunami that destabilized the traditional party system, two main left alternatives established themselves in Catalonia: the Popular Unity Representatives (CUP), and Podem (Podemos in Catalonia). For opposite reasons, neither was able to put forward an effective strategy to confront the main political challenges facing the Left following the 15M upsurge in 2011 and the rise of the independence movement in 2012: how to bring together the aspirations from both movements that pointed in different directions. The social base of the movements has been different, even if sometimes overlapping. The mainstream independence movement was never committed to reaching the traditional social base of the non-independence left, nor the M15-inspired Left (including Podemos and Catalunya en Comú, or Catalonia in Common). The Left was incapable of overcoming the situation.

The left-wing pro-independence parties like CUP tended to minimize or ignore the problem. Left groups that criticized the move to independence, like Catalonia in Common, cited the shortcomings of the mainstream independence movement to stand outside of it. As a result, the pro-independence and non-independence left had little common political ground, weakening their capacity to influence Catalán politics. This impeded the forging of an alliance against the regime of 1978 in defense of the right to self-determination.

The CUP, which started at the city level and won representation in the parliament of Catalonia after 2012 (3.48 percent of the vote and three deputies in 2012, 8.2 percent and ten deputies in 2015, and 4.45 percent and four deputies in 2017) is an openly anticapitalist and pro-independence formation. It's very combative, has a strong democratic base, and practices unconventional politics. It decided to operate entirely within the pro-independence camp, thus distancing itself from the existing Left and its social base. While not uniting with the Left, however, the CUP had to make common cause—albeit with conflicts and tensions—with the center-right/center-left government. As a result, it gave cover at times to an illusory “road map” and to a social-liberal government, while also playing a crucial role in the decision of the Catalán executive to call the October referendum. Even though it always defended its own anticapitalist program, it also remained to a great extent stuck in its role of insuring that the government wouldn't back down in its fight for independence.

Catalunya en Comú-Podem is an electoral alliance that groups together the party of Barcelona's mayor Ada Colau (Barcelona en Comú), the Catalán branch of Podemos (Podem), the Greens (ICV), and the Catalán left-wing federation United Left (Izquierda Unida or EuiA, a small coalition dominated by the Communist Party). After its victory in the municipal elections in Barcelona in May 2015, the party of the Comunes (as they are popularly known) was able to claim victory in the Spanish general elections in Catalonia in December 20, 2015 and June 26, 2016. However, it remained peripheral in the September 27, 2017 elections to parliament (7.45 percent and eight deputies), victim of the strong polarization between those who supported the call for independence and those who didn't.

The party remained locked in a passive position, and from the time the Catalán government oriented itself on the September 2016 referendum, it stood aside, assuming that government plans would collapse and that the independence movement would flame out. It had to quickly catch up around the October 1, 2017 referendum. But it always lagged behind events. It opted for a lukewarm position: it defended the independence referendum as a legitimate mobilization. But it did not commit to its success or to calling for a mass vote from its base. After the Spanish state's turn to repression on September 20, it partially modified its position, participating in the mobilization



against repression, but without transforming its core strategic orientation. The blank ballot that Ada Colau cast—neither “yes” nor “no”—illustrated well their election tactics, and the unease the Comunes felt before October 1.

The Comunes correctly criticized many of the problems with the mainstream independence movement, such as calling for national independence without criticizing austerity, its focus on Catalán identity, or the conservative nationalists’ control of the movement. But their own passivity prevented them from challenging the real problems in the movement. It made them a bystander to events. That is lethal for any political force. Their indecision before the unilateral October 1 referendum expressed not only their ambivalence toward independence, but also a certain unease with the dynamic of institutional confrontation and the radicalization of the political situation. This can’t be separated from its increasing integration into the state’s institutions and its evolution towards a “Eurocommunist” political culture. [\[12\]](#)

## **Toward the October crisis**

After the September 27, 2015 elections, the new Catalanian government of Carles Puigdemont took power. The governing coalition Junts pel Sí (Together for “Yes”) represented an alliance of pro-independence forces from the right to the center-left. The pro-independence and anticapitalist CUP supported the government, but didn’t join the ruling coalition. The government embarked on a quixotic journey that promised Catalonia’s independence in eighteen months, following a process of legal “disconnection,” based on setting up “state structures” (such as a Catalán tax-collecting authority) whose culmination would be a law of transition codifying independence.

Through the term “disconnection,” the process of building an independent Catalán state was presented as an amicable transition from one type of law, the Spanish one, to another law, the Catalán one. In this way, any notion of “rupture” or confrontation was avoided, and replaced by a new legalistic vision, a kind of legal-institutional fetishism. But the aim of an independent state could only be understood as a political process that reflected the underlying balance of forces. In reality, it is not possible to “disconnect” from a state. It is only possible to break from it after a confrontation. There is no such thing as an amicable disconnection from a state against its will. Outside of cases of war, it’s conceivable that a rupture with/from a state can take place as a consequence of an intense struggle and decisive mass sociopolitical confrontations that, coinciding with a favorable geopolitical environment, might force a state to agree to a democratic separation, even against its own interests. But that has nothing to do with the “disconnection” of one type of law from another. [\[13\]](#)

Facing up to the illusory nature of its eighteen-month “road map” of legal disconnection, in September 2016 the Catalán government, mostly responding to pressure from the CUP, reoriented itself around preparations for a referendum on independence (that the Spanish state would never accept) to take place in late 2017. The referendum provided a focus for a countdown to a confrontation over democratic rights.

Scheduled for October 1, 2017, the referendum became the central axis of Catalán politics and the epicenter of a permanent confrontation with the Spanish state. But the Catalán government never really had a solid plan on how to accomplish it. It continued to advance toward the date without much real preparation. Despite the fact that President Puigdemont and his government had publicly vowed that the referendum would take place, in private, they were convinced that the Spanish state would act to stop it. In reality, Puigdemont’s plan was to continue the process until legal entanglements and state repression would deem it impossible to move forward. The Catalán government, however, couldn’t go back to square one. It had to go as far as it could to keep its social

base mobilized. "We have tried, but it's impossible," was the message they wanted to send. Competition between the two government parties, PDeCAT and ERC, set the whole dynamic in the executive. Neither of those two parties wanted to be the first to backtrack. ERC always thought that, sooner or later, PDeCAT would back down and ERC would capitalize on its retreat. PDeCAT trusted that ERC, led by Vice President Oriol Junqueras, who was directly responsible for organizing the referendum, would fold. The Catalán media repeatedly called this inter-party competition a "game of chicken." It consisted of holding out for as long as possible. In the end, the Catalán government went much further than it ever imagined or prepared for.

During the month of September, the institutional tension between the Catalán government and the Spanish state intensified. On September 6-8 the parliament of Catalonia approved the Law of the Referendum and the Law of Transition (which established the legal and political steps to take in case of a "Yes" victory in the referendum). With the legal and repressive state apparatus in motion, the political dynamic changed on September 20 (20S), after the Spanish states' National Guard stormed the Generalitat's economic and foreign affairs offices, arrested several politicians, and seized information related to the organization of the referendum.

Until the events of 20S, the dynamic of self-organization from below was practically nil in the independence movement, led by the National Catalán Assembly (ANC) and Omnium (a Catalán cultural association that is one of the most prominent supporters of independence). Only the CUP represented an alternative strategy for independence, but that created strong internal contradictions as it faced pressure to fall in line with the mainstream independence forces. It didn't have political weight to shift the "official" agenda. But the repression on 20S and the imminence of October 1 stirred, for the first time, a dynamic of popular self-organization whose best expression was the Committees of Defense of the Referendum created in many neighborhoods and towns, together with the movement for "Escoles Obertes" (Open Schools) led by teachers and professors, that organized volunteers to rally around and to occupy the voting stations in the early morning of October 1.

Strictly speaking, we can't say that the ANC and Omnium were "sidelined." They maintained their authority and political and moral legitimacy. But we certainly can speak of the capacity of the self-organized movement to pull ANC and Omnium activists into taking a more aggressive stance, and to engage in civil disobedience. The movement took on a more pointed, vital, and electrifying dynamic that broke the confines of mainstream independentismo. As a consequence, it attracted an important layer of social and union activists who weren't necessary for independence, but who were against the repression of the Spanish state. A de facto sociopolitical coalition, going far beyond the independence movement and including part of the social base of the non-independence Left, was forged. Nevertheless, this coalition was weighed down by the absence of a political agreement between the independence movement and Catalunya en Comu-Podem. Large-scale self-organization, however, emerged late, in an explosion from below that made the independence movement more like the explosion of the M15 movement of the Indignados.

The collision between the Spanish state and Catalán institutions, in conjunction with the popular mobilization, created a situation of dual legitimacy (and legality) that could, by its nature, only be temporary until one side definitively won out. Some analysts identified the situation as one of "dual power" or "dual institutional power" (the power of the Spanish state institutions and the Catalán ones supported by popular mobilization). To talk about "dual power," however, would be incorrect because it doesn't recognize the enormous inequality of power between the two sides. It is more precise to describe that moment as one of "dual legitimacy" that expressed very asymmetrical, unstable, and unequal institutional powers. Beyond the unequal distribution of power between the two sides, two decisive limitations were apparent. First, the Catalán government and civic organizations showed no will to push confrontation to the end. Second, self-organization from below

emerged late, and was held back by the active participation of only part of the non-independentista left. “Between equal rights, force decides,” wrote Marx in the first volume of *Capital*. [14] This could be a good summary of the outcome of the Catalán October.

Navigating this tense situation that had gone far beyond what they expected, and in the midst of a growing popular pressure that partially escaped the government’s control, Puigdemont, the ANC, and Omnium focused on preventing the National Guard from seizing ballot boxes and ballots, ensuring these were distributed to polling stations, and keeping the electoral computer systems running. They expected to project media images of long and peaceful lines of citizens waiting to vote at polls closed down by the Spanish police. But in the midst of virulent, but ineffective, police repression, and popular self-organization, the referendum succeeded against all odds.

On the morning of October 1, the Catalán executive came very close to calling off the voting due to the police repression. But internal division in the government forestalled that decision, and the voting continued. Popular outrage at the Spanish state’s repression propelled a day of mobilization on October 3, 2017. Initiated by smaller unions as a call for a general strike against the Spanish government’s repression (although legally it had to be framed around labor issues), by the end of the day, it had become a “national stoppage.” This involved the two major unions, CCOO and UGT, the two leading organizations of the independence movement (the ANC and Omnium), and in a more or less explicit manner, the Catalán government itself. It ended up being a cross-class mobilization that involved traditional strikes and protests, and the voluntary closure of government offices and some small- and medium-sized businesses. The bosses of small and medium-sized business didn’t officially sign on in support of the mobilization.

### **The danger of “responsibility”**

The absence of any plan after October 1 was clear. In reality, the dilemma of the moment was complex and required two things that were very difficult to balance: first, to be faithful to the promise that the referendum of October 1 would be binding and, therefore, to make some kind of proclamation of the sovereignty of Catalonia; second, to try to ensure that the *de facto* coalition formed in September and October between *independentistas* and the non-independence sector around opposition to the repression and the regime of 1978 wouldn’t be broken.

Because the Catalán government’s leaders lacked strategic vision and courage, a period of hesitation and zigzags led to several unprecedented, misunderstood, and disorienting actions: the “suspension” of the declaration of independence on October 10 (a confusing suspension of a declaration not actually proclaimed); a failed attempt on October 26 to call elections based on a secret agreement with the Spanish government to stop the imminent suspension of the Catalán autonomous government; and, finally, the vote on the declaration of independence on October 27, which, beyond the parliamentary pomp, had no effect, either concrete or symbolic (for example, the removal of the Spanish flag from the palace of the Generalitat, the seat of government). Despite these maneuvers, on October 30 the Spanish state arrested or forced into exile the Catalán government.

It has since become clear that when the Catalán government decided to put the declaration of independence to the vote in its parliament, it was already viewed as a symbolic act. The government planned to renounce any attempt to make it minimally effective or to use it as part of the confrontation with the Spanish state. This undoubtedly deceived its social base. The history of people’s movements is replete with similar situations in which moderate political and social leaderships are unable to manage the movement they led in a coherent manner, and temporizing at decisive moments, end up demoralizing their own base. In the end, this provides a boost to reaction,

all in the name of prudence. In the name of “responsibility,” the most irresponsible acts are committed. This opens the door to a counterattack by the reactionary forces. In this context, it’s worth recalling the well-known expression of the French revolutionary Saint-Just in 1794: “Those who make a revolution halfway only dig their own graves.” No doubt about it.

The weaknesses shown by the Catalán government in the moment of truth must be found in its nature, class composition, and political culture. The PDeCAT is a neoliberal party that was pushed along the path to independence because it had no alternative when the movement broke out in 2012. It chose to ride it, assuming that it wouldn’t find itself in a situation from which it couldn’t escape. In the ensuing five years many of its cadres have become independentistas and others, like Puigdemont, have always been so. But it is a party of order with a conservative social base, resistant to ruptures and sudden changes, pragmatic and gradualist by nature, linked to the economic world (although its links with big capital have been broken by its drift towards independence), and distrustful of popular mobilization. For its part, ERC perfectly embodies the synthesis between a genuine conviction for independence and a political culture that is not very much in sync with the struggle. It is gradualist and built on a progressive middle-class social base that, except in some sectors linked to education, has been largely absent from the great social mobilizations against austerity of the recent past.

These decisive weeks highlighted all of the strategic, conceptual, and social limits of the forces that control the Catalán government and that sustain the independence process (with the exception of the CUP, which embodies a minority sensibility within it). This particularly affects the ANC, whose strategic incapacity was exposed in three ways at the critical juncture: first, it showed an extreme subservience to the Catalán government and the majority independence parties and an inability to assume a leadership role independently of them; second, it continued to cling to a top-down and one-off conception of mobilization, without understanding the importance of the CDRs, of organization from below, or a strategy of sustained struggle; and third, it continued with its usual failure to develop a policy towards democratic sectors that support the right to decide but are not pro-independence.

In short, an insurmountable contradiction in the independence movement was exposed: on the one hand, it is the bearer of a demand—the creation of its own Catalán state—that the Spanish state can’t concede because it raises the specter of its breakup; on the other hand, it has been an extraordinarily moderate movement, in its forms of action and in its conception of political change. The radical nature of its demand (to break the state) and the moderation of its actions put it in a difficult strategic position. Without claiming to draw any historical parallels, it is worth recalling a well-known passage from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* in which Marx sums up well this kind of political and strategic impotence:

*“But the revolutionary threats of the petty bourgeois and their democratic representatives are mere attempts to intimidate the antagonist. And when they have run into a blind alley, when they have sufficiently compromised themselves to make it necessary to activate their threats, then this is done in an ambiguous fashion that avoids nothing so much as the means to the end and tries to find excuses for succumbing. The blaring overture that announced the contest dies away in a pusillanimous snarl as soon as the struggle has to begin; the actors cease to take themselves au sérieux [i.e., seriously] and the action collapses completely, like a pricked bubble.”* [15]

## **The regime strikes back**

On October 27, 2017, Rajoy’s government—with the support of the PSOE and Ciudadanos, and by

extension, that of the entire state apparatus, the crown, and the media—announced a series of actions, including dissolving the Catalán government and calling for new elections on December 21, 2017. Rajoy justified these actions by invoking the Constitution's Article 155 empowering the central government to intervene in an autonomous government in cases of failure to fulfill "constitutional obligations." Rajoy's actions amounted to the de facto dissolution of self-government in Catalonia, which, in and of itself, had dubious constitutional justification. In reality, this was a coup d'état carried out by the central state itself, sundering its own norms by resorting to force and creating an exceptional situation. [16] Similarly, the judiciary, ruling more on political than on legal grounds, charged the central leadership of the Catalán government with "rebellion" (Article 472 of penal code), a crime that specifically targets "violent" uprisings to "overthrow, suspend or modify in whole or in part, the Constitution." This action, of dubious legality, was obviously inapplicable to the October events.

Carl Schmitt's famous assertion that "the sovereign is who declares the state of emergency" [17] helps us to understand what happened. Although formally a state of emergency—in the sense of an explicit break with the constitutional order—wasn't officially declared, the central government created a climate that allowed it to take actions that undermined the existing legal structure, with the goal of maneuvering to change the political and social situation. In short, a state of emergency was declared under the guise of defending the constitution. This arbitrary exercise of power and authoritarian trashing of its own norms in a moment of political crisis is a valuable lesson on the nature of the state in general, and a lesson on the nature of the "democratic deficit" of the state created in 1978, in particular. These events should knock from its pedestal all the silly and fetishistic reverence for the law and its institutions that we're used to hearing in "normal" times.

Rajoy's snap ordering of new elections in Catalonia, after having dissolved the Catalán government, made the real correlation of forces plain for all to see. Rajoy regained the initiative, and showed that the Spanish state and judiciary still held the ultimate power. The Spanish state put the Catalán independence forces on the defensive. The results of the December 2017 elections showed a victory for the pro-independence forces, but also underscored deep social and political polarization: 47.5 percent (and 70 deputies) for the pro-independence coalition, 43.5 percent (57 deputies) for the supporters of the Spanish state, and 7.5 percent (eight deputies) for the "third camp"—against both independence and the Spanish state—represented by Catalunya en Comú-Podem. [18]

The polarization throughout the Spanish state over the September-October 2017 acceleration of the drive to independence has, in the short term, boosted the Right and brought about a closing of ranks among all pro-regime forces, under the leadership of the most conservative. Paradoxically, the independence movement has functioned as both the main challenge to the regime of 1978 (along with the Indignados), while at the same time, serving as a scapegoat that allows the state's repressive forces temporarily to assert themselves in an authoritarian and aggressive way. The plan for conservative restoration is a type of "defensive offensive." It is "defensive" because it is unable to address the demands of those who today have been left out of the political framework of 1978 (the social base of Podemos and Catalán independence). It would have to change the distribution of political and institutional power to bring about the economic and social integration of the majority of the middle classes and skilled workers and precariously employed youth. It is an "offensive" because it is very aggressive and authoritarian and embraces the idea of taking advantage of the Catalán crisis to recentralize the whole structure of the Spanish state while isolating Podemos at the same time. But, in the medium term, the very logic of this "defensive offensive" exacerbates the crisis of the regime of 1978.

Beyond reacting to the political climate and orchestrating a counteroffensive, the ruling power bloc has shown itself incapable of articulating a "passive revolution" in the Gramscian sense: a "reform from above" co-opting part of the Catalán independence movement and the social base of Podemos



into a new social, political, and state project. Co-opting a section of the independence movement would require a reform of the state that clashes with the hard core, or “the source code” of the 1978 Constitution and the identity of Spain. Integrating Podemos’ social base would require a new cycle of economic expansion and consumption that would create a credible future (half real, half imaginary) for the middle classes and youth.

The political scenario following 21D is complex and imprecise. The pro-independence forces won the elections, but they suffered a political defeat vis-a-vis the Spanish state. They were left without a clear path forward. The state was able to block the pro-independence offensive but it wasn’t able to eliminate a movement that will remain central to Catalán politics in the next period and can have decisive influence over Catalán political and social life. For the Left, it’s a complex picture. Generally speaking, we have witnessed a collapse of the main strategies for change that the *Indignados* of 2011 and the Catalán independence movement of 2012 put on the table. The mainstream independence movement promised a quick and painless independence that the October events disproved. CUP presented itself as committed to fighting for independence all the way to the end. But after the October defeat, this position appears to be essentially voluntarist. Catalunya en Comú-Podem had a perspective of a rapid political change in the whole Spanish state, but that was blocked in the 2015 and 2016 general elections.

All of these perspectives, representing contradictory projects of change, had the merit of galvanizing the imagination of very important sections of Catalán society. But this came at a price of simplifying reality and selling quick and easy solutions. The current challenge is to rethink these main strategies originating in 15M and in the independence movement, and to relaunch a new and credible radical project, emphasizing self-organization and not just electoral-institutional work, and to try to forge (an impossible?) synthesis of the social with the national.

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**P.S.**

\* ISR Issue #109: Features, Summer 2018

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<https://isreview.org/issue/109/catalonias-independence-movement>

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## Footnotes

[1] José Vidal-Beneyto, *Memoria democrática* (Madrid: Foca, 2007).

[2] Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga, *The Reinvention of Spain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[3] In 2011 and 2012, Urdangarín was accused of money laundering and diverting public funds to non-profits he controlled. In 2017, he was sentenced to more than six years in jail.

[4] See a history of this organization and its politics during the Transition in: M Causa and R Martínez (eds). *Historia de la Liga Comunista Revolucionaria (1970-1991)* (Madrid: La Oveja Roja, 2014). The Liga is the historic predecessor of today’s Anticapitalistas.

- [5] Pere Ysàs Solanes and Carme Molinero, *La cuestión Catalána* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2014).
- [6] Jordi Amat, *El llarg procés* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2015).
- [7] Jaime Pastor, *Los nacionalismos, el Estado español y la izquierda* (Madrid: La Oveja Roja, 2012).
- [8] Balfour and Quiroga, *The Reinvention of Spain*.
- [9] José Luís Oyón and Juanjo Romero (eds.), *Clase antes que Nación. Trabajadores, movimiento obrero y cuestión nacional en la Barcelona metropolitana (1840-2017)*, (Barcelona: El Viejo Topo, 2017).
- [10] The historical context for this slogan is explained in detail in the recent biography of Benet by Jordi Amat, *Com una pàtria. Vida de Josep Benet* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2017).
- [11] I provide a more detailed discussion of the slogan of “only one people” and the relationship between class and nation in Josep Maria Antentas, ESSF (article 43012), “[art43012],”: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article43012>
- [12] For a more detailed analysis of the politics of Catalunya en Comú in the lead-up to October 1, 2017, see Josep Maria Antentas, ESSF (article 42066), [Catalonia & Spanish State: The dilemma of Catalunya en Comú](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42066): <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42066>
- [13] I analyze the limitations of this concept of “disconnection” in Josep Maria Antentas, ESSF (article 42087), [Spanish State and Catalan Referendum : Decisive days in Catalonia](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42087): <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42087>
- [14] Karl Marx, *Capital* (1867), chapter 10, section 1: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch10.htm>
- [15] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte* (1853), part III: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch03.htm>
- [16] For an analysis written as these events unfolded, see: Josep Maria Antentas, ESSF (article 42341), [A coup by the state – Tribulation of Catalan October](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42341): <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article42341>
- [17] Carl Schmitt, *Teología política* (Madrid: Trotta, 2009).
- [18] For more detail on the election results, see Josep Maria Antentas, op. cit. “[Catalonia: The post-election political landscape \(full version\)](#),”