

Some historical background: Catalonia vs. the Spanish State, or the failure of the federalist alternative

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As a powerful pro-sovereignty movement that advocates withdrawal from the Spanish state has consolidated itself within Catalonia, the majority of Spanish analysts and political leaders, even those on the left, have been habitually belligerent to that aspiration. Generally, they tend to focus their explanation of the rise of the independence movement on the interests and behaviour of the Catalan political and cultural elites, emphasizing their greater or lesser capacity of manipulation of the middle classes of this country against the “common enemy”, i.e. Spain or the Spanish state.

In contrast to these biased interpretations, it seems to me more appropriate to concentrate on the response of the Spanish elites, not only the traditional wing, but also that wing which seemed to be willing to recognize the Catalan “difference” at certain key historical moments. Thus I will refer to some relevant figures that were more open, before access to the government or parliament of the Spanish state very quickly led to disappointment of the expectations generated. In this way, with this brief journey into the past, perhaps we can better understand why there has been growing frustration in Catalonia with the permanent blockage encountered by a federalizing reformism and why new social sectors now want to go beyond this: in summary, support for a specific constituent process, not subordinated to that which could be opened in the future in the framework of the Spanish state, and why independence appears as the consequence of the fact that the other road has been closed.

From Azaña y Jiménez de Asúa to the “transition”

Starting with the Second Republic, it should be remembered that prior to its advent a significant part of the opposition to the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera had favoured recognizing the specificity of Catalonia. This was true of Manuel Azaña, who on his visit to Barcelona on March 27, 1930, stated: “And I have to say also that if some day in Catalonia another will dominates and you resolve to sail alone, it would be fair and our duty would be to leave you in peace, with the least damage to all, and wish you good luck, until, with the wound healed, we could at least establish relations as good neighbours”. Later, on July 17, 1931, he repeated this willingness: “Our motto, friends and colleagues, cannot be more than freedom for all Hispanics, and if anybody does not want to be in the common homestead, so be it” [\[1\]](#).

A position that Luis Araquistain, leader of the PSOE, shared in 1930: “It is not a question of

Catalonia and the rest of Spain having the same will to government, but rather the harmonious coexistence of two or more different wills. It would be absurd for non-Catalan Spain to be governed according to the will of Catalonia, but it is no less absurd than the wishes that Catalonia, even if independent, which it is not, would be subject to the will of the Kingdom of Spain" [2]. Even so, the Pact of San Sebastian, which brought together the majority of republican forces, was not to realize a federal option and Catalan nationalists had to be content with the promise that a draft statute of autonomy would be negotiated in a future Cortes.

The subsequent history is already more or less well-known: the municipal elections of April 12, 1931 saw the triumph of a new political force created just a few months previously, the Esquerra Republicana, and two days later, after Lluís Companys was proclaimed mayor of Barcelona, came the proclamation of the Catalan State under the regime of a Catalan Republic "that freely and cordially longs for and requests from the other peoples of Spain their collaboration in the creation of a confederation of Iberian peoples and is willing to do what is necessary to free them from the Bourbon monarchy" [3].

This federalist advance very soon collided with the reticence of the new republican government, parliament and Azaña himself not only in relation to the new Statute, but also the attempts to give the Second Republic a federal nature, as Joaquín Maurín recalls. In the Constitution the formula of the "integral state" proposed by the socialist Luis Jiménez de Asúa, a follower of Hugo Preuss, was adopted and thus temporarily restrained nationalist pressure. However, in October 1934 and July 1936 new pressures on the constitutional framework came from Catalonia: the first ended up being punished being forcibly repressed by the new right wing government in Madrid, while the second opened a process in which a social revolution instituted a new popular sovereignty, eventually also defeated with the suspension of autonomy after the events of May 1937.

In relation to the experience during this entire period the reflections that Jiménez de Asúa made later from exile are of interest. Arguing with Basque and Catalan and still claiming that the "integral state" was the most suitable solution, the illustrious constitutionalist recalled in 1946 that in a lecture he had given a few years before on the path to the Third Republic he argued that "if the Basques, the Gallegos or Catalans wished to secede from Spain and accredited this resolve in a serious and majoritarian plebiscite, we should not prevent it, as liberals, witnessing with pain but with dignity such mutilations of the Spanish state. To move one soldier or guard to oppose, by means of force, the willingness of these countries would be stupidity and injustice". Then he added: "I think we need to abandon silence and say once and for all how the organization of the Spanish State should be addressed and whether the Third Republic should be federal or not. Nor should we silence the hypothesis that one or more of these regions, which it would be more just to call "countries", should separate from the Spanish core and become independent nations" [4].

It is not difficult to observe in these new proposals a recognition that the Second Republic did not resolve the issues concerning these "countries" and, therefore, that a future Third Republic would have to go beyond the formula of "integral State" for these peoples, even accepting their right to independence. A reflection which unfortunately would not be addressed within the PSOE and the Spanish left in general.

Afterwards and for several decades, the Francoist dictatorship exacerbated the repression of any form of expression of the national identities of these peoples and that is why the majority of the left-wing forces assumed in their programs the defence of the right to self-determination of the peoples and the federal option, although in the case of the PSOE and the PCE accompanied by a growing ambiguity while approaching the "asymmetric transaction" with the reformers of the Franco regime.

In the “transition” we soon witnessed a “consensus” on article 2 and Title VIII of the Constitution (turning a deaf ear to proposals such as those of Francisco Letamendia or Lluís Xirinachs) that allowed for the development of a state based on autonomous regions- with asymmetries but with the federal option explicitly prohibited in article 145 - intended to neutralize new “peripheral” nationalist pressures, especially in Catalonia and the Basque country. Both “Operation Tarradellas” and the Basque economic arrangement allowed a pact with the Catalan and, although with higher tensions (compounded by the persistence of ETA), Basque elites providing some degree of political stability to the new regime, as verified in the periods of PSOE or PP government without an absolute majority. However, at the same time the process of construction of new political subjects advanced in these autonomous communities that would clash with the recentralizing trends from 2010 onwards, in the context of a systemic crisis and the crisis of the EU, strengthened under the PP government in recent times, as we have seen with the recent reform of the Constitutional Court.

In the Catalan case, the lived experience from 2003, with the start of the process of drafting the “Nou Estatut” and the promise of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero to respect what was agreed upon from the Generalitat, would end up failing, after the trimmings of the Spanish parliament and the recourse by the PP and several Autonomous Communities, with a ruling of the Constitutional Court in 2010 that would confirm to a broad sector of Catalan society the impossibility of taking a federalizing track in the framework of the current regime. Artur Mas – and the political elite he represents, even at the expense of losing support in significant sectors of the Catalan bourgeoisie, only interested in a “fiscal pact” – had to respond to this note of having reached a dead end, rather than the opposite, as claimed by many critics [5].

The lessons of history and the constituent challenge

Therefore, there seems to be a wide consensus that this judgment of July 2010 was the turning point for the opening of a new cycle within Catalonia in which the thesis that the only way to establish a relationship of equals between the Catalan and Spanish *demos* passes by the prior recognition of the former as a political subject able to decide if it wants to be independent and to develop its own constitution has become hegemonic “common sense”.

In response to this aspiration we have seen the leadership of the PSOE resurrect a federal proposal. This, however, by ignoring the use of terms such as “nation” to refer to Catalonia (as we have seen again with the rapid rectification by Felipe Gonzalez) or “pluri-nationality”, is not only tardy but confirms the criticism made by the late Miquel Caminal of this type of federalism: its “submission to the nationalism of the state”, because it is still based on the primacy of a national identity over the others existing within that state. Compared to that type of federalism and together with Caminal, we proposed, in the 1990s, inside the United Left, another type of federalism, multinational and freely agreed between the different *demos* –and at the same time willing to recuperate the best of the Spanish and Catalan republican, municipal and libertarian tradition – that would be a way out of the current blockage; but this option would require the prior recognition of the right to decide – including separation – something that continues to be rejected by the vast majority of the PSOE. Only the candidate for Izquierda Socialista in the recent party primaries, Jose Antonio Perez Tapias, has dared to propose this alternative, without any support from within its ranks.

In the case of the leadership of Podemos we are seeing an evolution with positive aspects (recognition of pluri-nationality and the right to decide of the Catalan *demos*), but also a questioning of this exercise, and the possibility of a constitutional process itself, subordinated to waiting for an electoral victory of this formation in the general elections that could open a constituent process at the state level. However, it seems logical that such a promise, even if we grant such a hypothesis –

today unlikely – meets with a reasonable distrust from the Catalan pro-sovereignty and pro-independence movement because of the lessons learned from the three historical moments already mentioned as well as the ambiguities of the discourse of Podemos leaders in this respect, opposing the social to the national question instead of searching for the best possible link between the two both inside and outside of Catalonia. However, the debate on the programme of this formation – and the “confluence” that eventually occurs, such as those already being forged not only in Catalonia but also in places like Galicia, the Valencian Country or the Balearics – means that the next presidential election could be a good occasion to define a clear position before a question which is at the centre of the political agenda at the state level and, therefore, cannot be forgotten within a project of “change” and the double rupture that has to be made with the regime and with austerity.

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P.S.

* Translation IVP. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>

Footnotes

[1] *Sobre la autonomía política de Cataluña*, Madrid, Tecnos, 2005, pp. 88 and 39 respectively

[2] Cited by Daniel Guerra, *Socialismo español y federalismo (1873-1976)*, Oviedo, F. José Barreiro-KRK Ediciones, 2013, p. 123

[3] For a reconstruction of that time and its relation to the current struggle for a constituent process: X. Domènech Sampere, “Hay un balcón esperando. La ruptura catalana”, in *Hegemonías*, Madrid, Akal, 2014, pp. 301-312

[4] *La Constitución de la democracia española*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1946, pp. 100 and 102

[5] I have developed these themes in *Los nacionalismos, el Estado español y la izquierda*, Madrid, La oveja roja-Viento Sur, 2012 and 2014, and *Cataluña quiere decidir*, Barcelona, Icaria, 2014