

# Spanish State and Catalan Referendum : Decisive days in Catalonia

Friday 29 September 2017, by [ANTENTAS Josep Maria](#) (Date first published: 19 September 2017).

As state repression and popular mobilization in Catalonia grows, Barcelona-based author and activist Josep Maria Antentas explains the potential for the October 1 independence referendum to detonate an institutional crisis across Spain. As this article was being prepared for publications, demonstrations in support of Catalonia's right to self-determination were growing across Spain, and no one knows if conservative Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy will risk bloodshed to prohibit the vote; if the Catalan government will blink and postpone the referendum; or if the vote will proceed and trigger a political crisis for the both the Spanish state and the Europe-wide forces pushing austerity.

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**1.** After five years of eternal process in which the grandiloquence of the key actors was proportional to the extraordinary sluggishness of events and the parties' consistent desire to avoid a decisive clash with the Spanish state, we have finally arrived at the moment of truth. It's not the final scene of the film, but it is a critical passage in determining the ending.

"The process ends, now the Mambo begins," as the far-left, pro-independence Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) succinctly summarized the changing situation. A mambo, don't forget, might have started back in in 2014 if the Catalan government of Artur Mas of the ruling Democratic Convergence of Catalonia [now known as the Catalan European Democratic Party, PDeCAT] had not retreated in November of that year when it abandoned the attempt to conduct an independence referendum (a "consultation" in the language of the time) after it was prohibited by the Spanish Constitutional Court. A mistake that, surprisingly enough, met with hardly any resistance on the part of the other actors in the process (with the initial exception of the Republican Left of Catalonia, ERC), none of whom drew up a public balance sheet nor explained the reasons behind the ongoing rodeo over the last three years. [1]

**2.** The Catalan parliament's September 6 approval of the Referendum Act marked a point of no return. Since then, officially speaking, Catalonia has entered into a situation of double legitimacy—a duality of legitimacies (and legalities) on a collision course that, naturally, can only exist temporarily until it is settled in favor of one or the other. The scenario presents an asymmetric, unstable and unequal institutional double power (that is, the power of Spanish state institutions and those of the Catalan state, which have placed themselves outside of their own legality).

It's important to keep in mind just how "asymmetric, unstable, and unequal" this relation is to accurately understand the conjuncture and to avoid the mistake of seeing this as a confrontation between equivalent or similar powers. There is, in fact, a tremendous inequality between the two. "Between equal rights force decides," as Marx wrote in chapter VIII of the first volume of *Capital* when talking about the fight over the length of the workday between workers and employers.

Forgetting this factor can lead to naïve or illusory visions about the nature of the State—not about

the Spanish state specifically, but also about the modern capitalist state in general. At the same time, we must remember that “force” cannot be separated from the legitimacy of the power that uses it, nor from the political context in which it operates. Legitimacy and context determine the degree to which said power can deploy force. And neither of these are fixed variable, rather they change along with events. Brute force and political force, therefore, in the broadest sense of the terms, permanently intermingle.

3. Any movement must be able to assess the world and changing situations in terms that are favorable to its interests while communicating confidence in its capacity to win as well as the belief that its objectives are attainable. In the independence movement’s narrative, the term “disconnection” has been used regularly in order to visualize the unilateral materialization of independence. The concept carries a pleasantly agreeable tone, free from stridency and tensions, softening any feeling of conflict or insecurity. In this sense, it has definitely played an important role in making the independence movement’s strategic horizon appear credible. But it has come at the cost of enormously simplifying the complexity of the project’s analysis and of how confronting the state is understood.

The idea of disconnection brings to mind the painless turning off of an electric circuit. There is a well-known scene in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: a *Space Odyssey* that clearly illustrates how to *disconnect* (oneself) from a superior power. This takes place in the part of the film “Mission to Jupiter,” when the Discovery approaches the great gaseous planet. After checking for anomalies in the HAL 9000, the supercomputer in control of the ship, astronauts Dave Bowman and Frank Poole plan to disconnect from it. After Poole dies as a result of HAL’s action, Bowman gains access to the room where HAL’s central circuits are locked up, gradually deactivating the computer, leading it to gradually lose consciousness. The machine regresses to infancy and ends up, before shutting down, singing a children’s song “Daisy Bell.” The great Leviathan who controlled the ship, a humanized super-computer, dies. [2]

Contrary to this image, in reality, it is not possible to disconnect from a state. Neither is it possible to break with a state without a confrontation. Thus, paradoxically, the idea of disconnection, although very different, recalls Antonio Negri’s theory of the exodus that has been in vogue over the two previous decades. In this case, not advocating an exodus in the sense of creating liberated non-state spaces, but rather in the sense of creating another state.

However, no such agreeable disconnection from a state exists against its will. Leaving cases involving a military clash aside, there are examples of ruptures with states that come as a result of intense tug-of-wars and mass political-social confrontations that, intermingled with international geopolitics, may force a state to accept a democratic denouement of a contest contrary to its interests. But all this has very little to do with the strategic imaginary with which the independence movement has been played out up until now.

Hence, the capital importance of what happens in the coming days. The most important thing is for the Catalan government and its allies to continue forward until the last breath. And, crucially, popular mobilizations must push their way onto the scene, nourished by a torrent of ordinary people.

4. The movement for independence has been defined by its imposing mass size and staying power. Since 2012, under the direction of the Catalan National Assembly (ANC), each September 11—Catalonia’s traditional nationalist day—has expressed this support through methodically planned demonstrations, even if these are typically followed by very little movement street presence until that date on the following year. Behind every S11, there is real organization from below, in each town and neighborhood, although absolutely dependent on the political leadership of the ANC itself (and to a lesser extent the Òmnium, a Barcelona-based Catalan cultural association).

Over the last five years, the movement has demonstrated very little spontaneous capacity from below or the ability to overflow its own leading organizations, negatively impacting the movement at various junctures. The absence of any pressure beyond that officially directed by the ANC in the weeks prior to the N9 consultation in 2014—either to prevent the Spanish state’s actions or the Catalan government’s retreat — is the clearest example.

The events of September 20, when ordinary people flooded into the streets to in the face of the sudden intensification of Spanish state repression [3]

Obsessively preoccupied with not alienating the Catalan right, independence movement organizers did not pay enough attention to the strategic necessity of ensuring participation by forces on the political and social movement left that were not already in favor of independence. This criticism notwithstanding, rather than using the limits of the dynamics opened in 2012 as a justification for a passive policy, it was more strategically sound to engage with these limits as a stimulus to actively interact with it while working to reduce the right’s influence within the movement.

Furthermore, such a passive wait-and-see policy neglected another decisive question: the moment of intensification of the confrontation between the State and independence forces, such as the one we are living through today. This clash represents a key conjuncture in which we must try to shift the correlation of forces to the left, we must fight in such a way that the most combative sectors become protagonists in a scenario in where the forces of order within the independence movement lose out to those that favor a rupture, with the anti-capitalist Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) at the head.

7. Two things are at stake on O-1: the exercise of the legitimate right to self-determination of the Catalan people and the future of the 1978 post-Franco regime. We face two battles in one, which interact and feed off their own autonomy. They cannot simply be dissolved into each other or merged, but neither can they be completely separated in strategic terms.

This is where the interests of the independence movement and political forces throughout the Spanish state (and their Catalan allies) that favor a constitutional rupture with the regime of 1978 can partially converge. Since 2012, Catalan independence has not given sufficient importance to the search for allies across the whole Spanish state, but increasing repression has acted to change this attitude, even if it has been too-long delayed.

Genuine instances of solidarity from outside Catalonia are highly regarded and appreciated, although their strategic potential has been acknowledged too late and is still not well-integrated into the movement’s overall policy. On the other hand, state-wide initiatives such as the ones Unidos Podemos and Catalunya en Comú are promoting—such as the meeting of public officials last Sunday, September 23 in Zaragoza—have the merit of clearly denouncing repression and the de facto Spanish state coup d’état playing out in Catalonia.

Such initiatives’ insistence on coming to an agreement with the state on how to hold a referendum serves to defend the legitimacy of the right to self-determination. But the proposal, unfortunately, is devoid of all strategic potential because it is disconnected from active support for 1-O. Thus, it fails to address the present crisis in the name of an uncertain proposal for the future while projecting an ambiguous and hesitant message at a critical moment, as if what happens today will have no repercussions for tomorrow.

The escalating repression has accentuated the connection between the Catalan independence process and the crisis of the Spanish. The democratic question, if the State continues in its authoritarian logic, may be the lever to transform public opinion Spanish. This would facilitate political solidarity with Catalonia by political and social forces across the Spanish state and pose the

potential for a strategic understanding of Catalan events' potential for provoking a constituent rupture(s) with the framework of 1978. But the democratic question, if it is to unfold in all its depth, implies that political and social forces in the Spanish state must correctly comprehend the Catalan national question.

**8.** The intensification of repressive measures and growing political tensions once again shows the weakness of the position adopted by Podemos and Catalunya en Comú with respect to O-1. They each support it as a legitimate mobilization but do not recognize it as a referendum because it lacks the necessary formal guarantees. Yet it makes no sense to embark on an a priori debate about whether O-1 lacks such guarantees or not. In fact, this will only be determined on October 1 when we see if the referendum is carried out, or if it is suppressed or withdrawn.

The decisive question is to understand, as unfortunately neither Podemos nor Catalunya en Comú do, the need to go all out to try. We must do so whether one believes it will be possible to hold the referendum against the will of the state, or if one believes that—under these conditions—all that is possible is a protest mobilization. The Catalan government and its political and social allies' commitment to try to carry out O-1 is what is important, it is that commitment that has triggered the current political crisis. And it O-1 supporters' determination which is intensifying it.

To declare in advance that the O-1 is a mere mobilization (as both Podemos and Catalunya en Comú have done), to refuse to go all-in, only deactivates the movement's potential as a precipitating element in what might become a decisive political and institutional crisis. Such timidity with respect to O-1 not only exposes doubts about the independence project, but also a diminishing of Unidos Podemos and Catalunya en Comú's profiles as constituent forces pushing for a rupture with the status quo. [4]

So we face decisive days ahead. These September days have shaken Catalan and Spanish society and will, no doubt, be followed by still more intense ones come October.

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**P.S.**

\* SocialistWorker. September 29, 2017:  
<https://socialistworker.org/2017/09/29/decisive-days-in-catalonia>

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<http://www.vientosur.info/spip.php?article13036>

\* Translated by Todd Chretien.

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**Footnotes**

[1] More detailed analysis of the Independence process' trajectory and the origins of the referéndum available at: Josep Maria Antentas, [Spanish state: The catalan referendum and its previous lives](#), June 19, 2017.

[2] This scene is available at YouTube.

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/20/spain-guardia-civil-raid-catalan-government-hq-referendum-row> (Socialist Worker)], mark a drastic change of pace and logic. The movement has taken on a relatively sharper, vital, and electrifying dynamic, more focused on sustained mobilization. A new phase has begun in sync with an intelligent, strategic emphasis on nonviolence that has characterized it from the beginning.

The ANC and Òmnium are playing a leading role in what has taken place over the last week, but their style is more conducive to a contained mobilization rather than popular actions from below spilling over from below and this approach may continue to impact the movement at critical instants. The great challenge over the next days is as follows: exactly how to combine the leadership of these two organizations—which no one questions—with the need for the explosive spontaneity characteristic of the M15 movement.

We cannot yet assess the scope of the response that started on September 20. Clearly, it has changed the tone of the political environment. But it still may tend toward stabilization, or be the initiator of general outbreak prior to October 1, or on the day of the referendum itself, if the Spanish State pursues further repressive actions.

5. At this key juncture, the basic limits of the whole independence process are clearly emerging; that is, the delinking of the proposal for a Catalan state from a concrete plan for social mobilization and democratic regeneration. In other words, the disassociation with the legacy, the meaning and the agenda of the anti-austerity Indignados movement that erupted on May 15, 2011 (M15) when millions occupied city and town squares across the territory of the Spanish state.

Both movements have galvanized and represent distinct parts of the Catalan *people*. The *people of the squares* in 2011 are not the same as the *people of the independence process*, even if there are important crossovers that we must not forget. To do so would be to read reality too mechanically. In Catalonia, part of the middle classes and the precarious youth gravitated towards M15 and toward the political options that were born from it (Podem, the Catalan expression of the Podemos party and the radical Catalunya en Comú party, neither of which have consistently *advocated* independence, even if they *supported* Catalonia's right to self-determination). Another part moved more sharply toward the independence movement (in its diverse variants). And there are, no doubt, others that are swinging between both poles, providing a weak connection between the bifurcated futures enshrined in the independence movement and the legacy of M15.

However, M15, beyond both the precarious student/youth component and the critical role of the middle classes buffeted by the economic crisis, also contained a *mass, neighborhood component*, featuring popular and working-class participation during an epoch when the trade union movement as such was decomposing. These last features are, critically, absent in the independence movement and represent its Achilles' heel.

Thus, the movement suffers from the lack of an anchoring social sector both quantitatively and qualitatively, both numerically and strategically. And, it goes without saying, it has been the main source of controversies and headaches for each member of the Catalan left, whether or not they define themselves in such terms, and whether or not they are participating in the independence process or stand outside it. We must not minimize this problem nor pretend that it does not exist, as the left wing of the independence forces have tended to do. Nor should it be used as a pretext to remain outside this new movement that emerged in 2012 and thereby end up making the its weaknesses worse, as Catalunya en Comú and those it influences have done.

In this sense, various initiatives carried out by sectors of the trade union movement, in conjunction with social justice activists, are particularly important, including: the Barcelona dockworkers' decision to refuse to service ships carrying Guardia Civil deployed from other parts

of the Spanish state and the announcement of a call for an October 3 general strike (however propagandistic it may be) by several smaller unions.

**6.** Born formally in March 2012, the Catalan National Assembly (ANC) provided a strategic road map toward independence based on the construction of a transversal and plural movement articulated exclusively around the goal of independence. This pure and simple independence had an undeniable attractive power, although it was in itself a key strategic limit for the new movement, both from the point of view of its stated objective (independence) and from the point of view of opening doors to social and democratic change (an objective formally shared by many of the movement's members).

Retrospectively, without falling into the nostalgia of what could have been but was not to be, it is enough to ask ourselves how things might have turned out if the movement had paired the slogan of independence in 2012 with a program of social mobilization and basic democratic regeneration. The answer is clear: the Catalan right and Artur Mas' government would have felt even more uncomfortable with the independence tsunami, yet they still could not have detached themselves from it while independence process advocates would have expanded their base by attracting popular and working class supporters. If this path had been taken, traditional leftist political organizations (as well as new ones that arose after 2014) and the unions would have faced difficulties remaining indifferent. [[For more on the arguments, see: Josep Maria Antentas, "Tribulaciones y atolladeros del proceso independentista," *Público*, March 2, 2017.

[4] For more on Catalunya en Comú, see: Josep Maria Antentas, [Catalonia & Spanish State: The dilemma of Catalunya en Comú](#), September 11, 2017.