

Catalonia, an emancipatory process

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Many European Union states are small. Catalonia belongs to the group of medium-sized nations. It has its own history, language, culture, art, customs and traditions. As the historian Pierre Vilar said, “the Pyrenees are a refuge and a corridor”. This is why Catalonia has always been a plural community with a great capacity for integration. Its social and political project, with deep roots in its own millennial history, has always been a project for a better future for all, a future of integration, well-being, culture, justice and freedom.

The so-called “Catalan process” is a collective experience of awareness, self-affirmation and democratic participation for the whole population. After the military defeat in 1714 over the issue of succession to the throne, expressions of Catalanness were persecuted but could not be suppressed, so that in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a cultural and linguistic renaissance in Catalonia, which was followed by the resurgence of political Catalanism, which bore fruit with the creation of the Second Spanish Republic and the approval of a Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia.

The terrible War of Spain gave way to a bloody post-war period. For almost forty years Franco installed a firm and repressive central Spanish structure. After the dictator’s death in 1975, the so-called “transition”, which has gone nowhere but perpetuated itself, has shown some inevitable turns towards the democratization of certain structures, although not all of them. The constitutional creation of the Autonomies in Spain has partly softened the harshest and most irritating aspects of the relationship with the central State. Some of those Autonomies have few difficulties with it, because they are like an elongation of its presence. The creation of seventeen autonomies was almost a surprise for fourteen of them, for which a simple transfer of administrative management would have been enough. The Constitution created them (“nationalities and regions”) to erase the only three national entities coming from the Republic (1931-1939): Catalonia, Euskalherria and Galicia. It was the so-called “coffee for all”, in which Andalusia immediately wanted to have a place alongside the historical nationalities.

After a very brief initial period with certain guarantees, the 1981 coup d’état meant a clear return to centralization. There are countless transfers of powers provided for

in the first Statutes of Autonomy which, after so many years, have still not been carried out. There are countless restrictive interpretations for Catalonia that the Spanish Constitutional Court has been promoting in conflicting cases. It is truly unheard of that at the end of October 2017 the application of article 155 of the Constitution, of doubtful constitutionality, was accepted for Catalonia, since it was never thought of by the original legislators in the terms now applied. Thus, the Generalitat of Catalonia lost its powers, which were later recovered, but only in part, since the extreme vigilance to which the finances and the daily work of its government, as well as the daily work of its Parliament, are subject, make the Generalitat a clearly subordinate body.

The fact that, in the face of the terrible and globalising corona-virus, the Spanish Government has declared the “State of Alarm” and has interpreted it in an absolutely centralist way, emptying the Autonomous Communities of any decision-making capacity, and turning it into the application of article 155 to the whole of Spain, already indicates the degree of constitutional importance that it attaches to the Autonomous Communities. Because it could have exercised its power by coordinating the existing constitutional powers, not by supplanting them.

It is important to bear in mind that, in spite of everything, in spite of the iron central Spanish structure, firmly installed with Franco and in no case dismantled after Franco, the Catalans have increased, step by step, their desire for self-management, their self-awareness as a nation, their self-affirmation in freedom. What Catalonia lacks is precisely self-sufficiency. Maintaining this situation of insufficiency and, if possible, increasing it, is the aim of Spanish centralism, which proclaims with satisfaction that Catalonia is its own land of great interest but that it is falling -paradoxically or exemplarily- into an inappropriate relationship with Catalonia, because while it needs it, it treats it more or less indifferently, as if it were a semi-abroad, as if such treatment could be a stimulus to the rapprochement and acceptance of the Catalans.

When the referendum on independence called by the Catalan government was held on October 1, 2017, there was an outburst of emancipatory collective action: it was not only an act of the government, nor of Parliament alone, but also of entities, groups, sectors and individual citizens who proclaimed their willingness to express their opinion and their democratic decision beyond any restriction or legal limitation. The “process” was initially frustrated by the harshness and brutality of a Spanish State that affirms, expressly and literally, through its governments, its judges, its forces of order, its bankers and big business, that the unity of Spain is

more important, more fundamental and basic, than the coexistence and the desire for democracy of its own citizens, that is, that the political, ideological and circumstantial idea of unity is more important than the will of the citizens to exercise democracy in freedom. Because it is a question of citizens being able to decide on this unity, without it being imposed on them, even less so by force.

It is clear, then, that the effective powers of the State are against the Catalan will. Nor do we know how many percent of Catalans are in favour of independence, although in the elections since 2012 the pro-independence forces have always won in Parliament by an absolute majority. This seems to indicate a lot, if not more. But everything would be more transparent, even more in line with conventional norms, if we could count through the votes how many of us are in one position or another, to democratically accept the result. In this sense, a referendum was called, not to directly proclaim independence but to know whether Catalonia was ready to put herself in conditions to carry out, to make independence a reality. Something that seems absolutely democratic and reasonable.

I agree with my friends when, despite the brutal intervention of the Spanish police, we can rightly refer to the positive result obtained in the 2017 referendum. But I disagree with them when they say that independence was ‘proclaimed’ that day, without making the distinction that seems to me extremely important between ‘declaring’ and ‘proclaiming’. What we did that day, and hence its importance, is that we declared independence, that is to say, we declared our political will, our democratic resolve, to carry it out. Since we did it by peaceful and democratic ways, and not after a warlike struggle, that declared resolution needed some time to be implemented, it needed preparation, assumption of competences, popular and institutional empowerment. After perhaps months or a couple of years, the declaration becomes a proclamation, which consists of making visible that the country is now independent, recognized and confirmed internationally. In a solemn act, the declaration is recalled and the proclamation is celebrated.

In the Catalan process we have seen once again, as was seen earlier in Latin America and in all the former Spanish colonies, that the State will do everything possible, even the undesirable, to ensure that this declaration has no effect. If we look at it from a historical perspective, we can see that Catalonia will have more difficulties in its endeavours – despite the many that have been experienced and suffered by others – because it is a territory that is not far from the metropolis but is, geophysically, a territory and an “internal” market. This is why Catalonia can be controlled more easily: with politicians, judges, police and other powers akin to the

State, who do not have to adopt occasional and extraordinary measures, since they already manage the situation from the ground. The State only has to settle down well, strengthen well and adequately compensate its own and related powers, already installed in Catalonia.

It cannot be expected from these centralist and absorptionist powers of the State, after more than five hundred years, that they will easily accept that one of their territories can have its own voice and want to make decisions for itself. Even less so when they still hold pilgrim ideas -absolutely contrary to serious historiography- such as the idea that Spain was already unified with the Catholic Kings or when they continue to defend -more or less loudly- that “the discovery” was a peaceful undertaking with beneficial cultural and religious effects for America. Little can be expected, then, in terms of flexibility and democratic understanding, from powers of state that have behaved like the first of October and continue to behave with stubborn blindness. I think, however, that particularly from the height of October 1, 2017, something could be expected -even if not much- from other actors who should have reacted by defending the popular will and democratic values: I am referring to the intellectuals and defenders of the left in Spain, and to the European Union.

Of course, the deafening silence of many Spanish intellectuals, artists, journalists (not all of them, but almost) who on other occasions have protested strongly against more or less fascist positions, on the right or the left, and who have now remained on the sidelines, as if the Catalan protest were not with them. Their position until recently was good. With their silence it seems that either they have deafened the noise of the batons and sabres, or they have decided to maintain positions and small privileges. Because the struggle is hard, implacable, and whoever moves does not appear in the photo, whoever goes off script, does not renew his contract. I see with satisfaction, and I will not deny it, that many of them continue to demonstrate for some noble cause. To understand that the Catalan cause does not deserve to be among them, I say to myself that they surely accept that the unity of Spain is the noblest of all causes, that it can be defended by all means and against all values, even if it is against the values of democracy and freedom.

It seems to me that some passive people, who seem to be able to but do not want to, have not yet noticed that the Catalan process has been moving from a process of self-determination to a process of global rupture, thus becoming a process of the Spanish regime of 1978, a regime that was born from the dictatorship and has tried

to save as much as possible from it. After a dictatorship, the only democratic solution was the rupture that was not undertaken. When organizing a reform (“Law for the Political Reform”) it was already indicated that it was simply wanted to reform, that is to say, to give another form to the previous regime, without collapsing it, without really breaking it. It is clear that this was the case. Otherwise, how do you explain that the Head of State proposed by Franco was not submitted to a referendum, as was done, for example, in Greece? How do you explain that the legislative power and the police were not transformed from top to bottom, and that the old model could be continued, even if in some cases its name was changed (for example, the “Court of Public Order” became the “National Court”, with the same tasks of legal exceptionality).

It is essential to understand this: the Catalan process is the first attempt to put in check a transition that has not been transitory but permanent and a regime that has ended up being put in place with international approval. Because the current process calls into question the very notion of democracy and freedoms that exist in Spain. Of course, Spain is nominally a democracy, simply because it uses the same dictionary words that are used in other countries of the world. But the same words can be used to describe very different realities. Franco also defended the “rule of law”, the rule of his law, of the law that he imposed. And he spoke of “25 years of peace” on the 25th anniversary of his cruel dictatorship. And now they want, for example, to homologate the Spanish judiciary to the German one because in both States there is a “Constitutional Court”: both courts share the same name of course but have fundamental differences in the election of their members, in their attributions, and independence. The crime of “sedition”, for which critical politicians, leaders and activists have been convicted, is an old Spanish one that does not exist in European judicial systems.

This is why a badly made and unfinished transition must be brought to an end, because it is high time that it was brought to an end forty-five years after the death of the dictator. The Catalan process does not, therefore, simply seek to reform the State or make a copy of it. It aims to change it at its roots, which is why it seeks the independence of a Republic, because it simply wants another State. Despite not having achieved this so far, the effort that has been made to get this far has been enormous. A few years ago, many thought that the task was only for the Catalanists or the bourgeoisie, or the coalition between them. It is clear that the process has demanded great political, social, moral and pedagogical force, that is, a great force of public concurrence and agreement, but this also requires a great mental change

among the citizens. Hundreds of thousands of citizens who until a few years ago lived apart from the process or even against it, have conspired to carry it out.

The negligence and foolishness of many Spanish leaders who saw in the process a timid movement of peaceful Catalans who would not go far and would eventually surrender, has given way to a major democratic tsunami, which embraces, across the board, young and old, natives and newcomers, speakers of many different languages. Some twenty years ago, the official slogan was “We are 6 million”. The current one is “We are 7.5 million”. This means that in just twenty years Catalonia has increased its population by a quarter, thanks to people coming from many parts of the world, particularly from the East, from Africa, from Latin America. The very fact of having been able to carry out this demographic change with fewer difficulties than could have been expected and also with far fewer resources than would be demanded of the State and than would be real if Catalonia had its own State, this same fact is an extraordinarily important argument not only in favour of the democratic break-up but also speaks in favour of the country’s capacity to carry it out.

If the silence of the majority of Spanish intellectuals, academics and artists in the face of the events in Catalonia and in the process unleashed against its leaders has been resounding up to now, it must be acknowledged that the silence of the European Union is also resounding. Much more was expected of it, particularly after the referendum of October 1st, but surely that was one of the basic errors of that movement. It was an error of naivety on the Catalan side. That on the day of the referendum the Spanish police and civil guard reacted as brutally as they did against Catalan citizens who were going to vote, it is true that it frightened European leaders terribly, since those images were collected and shown on televisions and in the media all over the world. Some of the European leaders expressed their surprise and displeasure. It seems that it was precisely some European intermediation, worried and frightened, that helped to curb, from midday that Sunday, the uncontrolled brutality of the police. A behavior typical of the previous dictatorship (42 years before, at that time!) was horrible and unacceptable, but in the media it lasted a few hours. The king’s speech after two days, on October 3rd, did not disturb Europe as it would have done, no doubt in Belgium, Holland or Sweden, where a king saying what Philip VI said would no longer have been king the next day. It is therefore impossible for them to be said in those countries. Certainly, the existence of the Spanish monarchy, which has the double stain of having been named by Franco and of being as it is, does not bother

the Europeans who, in the end, do not want problems in southern Europe and believe that a strong state – even if it is problematically strong – will resolve the independence-seeking desires of the Catalans and Basques in particular, which do bother them a lot.

There is still one question that I have asked myself repeatedly during the five years that I have had the honour of representing Catalan interests in the European Parliament: why has the European Union not come out in defence of the democratic values that it defends in Article 2 of its Charter of Fundamental Rights?

In the European Union, particularly in its Parliament, suspicions and accusations are constantly being voiced against Hungary, Poland, Romania or Slovakia, to name the four most striking examples. I think I know why still few MEPs and few political leaders have doubts about Spain, even if some have them privately. The reasons are various: firstly, Spain is considered to be one of the big players.

Demographically, it is – after Brexit – the fourth largest European state in terms of population, after Germany, France and Italy. It is also considered great – although some of us may find it to be an outdated nostalgia – because of its undeniable imperial past. Secondly, this is because Spain is – although it seems hard to believe – a great unknown in Europe. In fact, the whole of southern Europe is largely unknown in central and northern Europe, as is still the case in Latin America and Africa, despite the fortunately perished European colonial dominions. From this ignorance come the clichés, the suspicions, but also the omissions, which can lead to looking the other way or to unjustly concentrating on a single and very small issue.

However, the case of Spain certainly has a singularity: the northern states believed that with the death of the dog, with the death of rabies, everything would be fine and that the corroded structures of the State would be transformed almost by decree. And European ignorance still stands. They do not know, or they do not want to know – when they are told, they seem stunned – that in Spain there is a “Francisco Franco Foundation” – unimaginable a thing comparable in Berlin or Rome – that there is a “Valley of the Fallen” in a fascist version, or that the Spanish high courts have been denounced on many occasions by the Council of Europe, among others. Often, Europeans do not look and, if they do not look, they do not see. And if they do not see, they do not have to say or do anything. It seems to me that European ignorance about Spain – real and feigned – is magnificently demonstrated by a very old German expression: when we Catalans want to say that we do not understand something or some behaviour, we say “That sounds like Chinese to

me”; Germans say That sounds like Spanish to me (Das kommt mir Spanisch vor)”.

Spain must therefore be protected, for demographic, historical and economic (passive) reasons and out of ignorance of its reality, which even protects Spanish tourism, which for the Nordic people is a delight and a blessing. It seems that the time has not yet come for frank, frontal criticism of Spain. I don't think it will be long now, if things progress as they have been up to now.

And this attitude towards the confrontation between Catalonia and Spain is fully understandable if we take into account what is the basic, fundamental reality of the Union, which must be clearly expressed: the European Union simply does not exist, despite its 27 current members after Brexit -I trust that it will soon have two or three more members- and its almost 450 million population. I do not know if anyone is thinking of taking effective steps to refound the Union, but at present a Club of States which maintains its essential competences: fiscal, labour, external relations (with one voice only authorised for each occasion), cultural, public order, following a European Central Bank which has no democratic control over Parliament. Nor is the currency, the euro, shared by all its members. Furthermore, what does a common currency mean when there is no common tax policy, when the Member States can compete with each other and offer various tax advantages to large companies?

But the “process” has not been liquidated, because people's will remains, since it comes from far away and is based on history and collective conviction. Among other things, we must bear in mind that the process has not only been a clear expression of democratic will but also a moment of collective empowerment. Citizenship education is not achieved through more or less ideological or patriotic theories or statements, but through convincing experiences. Here we can be helped by Max Weber's magnificent distinction between “authority” and “power”. Authority is that which is possessed by capacity and dignity in conduct. Authority is recognized by others, without pressure of any kind, as is the case with authority recognized by students with respect to the worthy teacher or by children with respect to responsible and loving parents. Power is something else: those who hold power need to defend it, often with coercive, legal, penal mechanisms or, if necessary, with direct force. The people, in Catalonia, have realised that democracy gives them moral and even legal authority, far superior to any coercive power their adversaries may have. Certainly, democratic and popular values are superior to the mechanisms of power that safeguard different interests and objectives.

In this sense, the process has obviously been a highly educational political process

on a large scale. And the citizens have understood the practical, concrete force of democratic exercise and resistance, exercised from pacifism and civil dignity. The process is not over. It is under way. A political process depends on many factors, but it always has guarantees of success when it is in the hands of citizens who are aware and willing to exercise their civic responsibility peacefully.

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