Chronicle of a deceit – foretold?

former members of the SEPC (Catalan Students' Union) and in different pro-independence organizations

> "Potser et maten o potser
> se'n riguen, potser et delaten;
> tot això són banalitats.
> Allò que val és la consciència
> de no ser res si no s'és poble.
> I tu, greument, has escollit.
> Després del teu silenci estricte,
> camines decididament." [1]
>
> **Vicent Andrés Estellés**

How did we go from being two university students, to being a part of one of the most important events in the history of Catalonia? What can we say about everything we saw? Every once in a while, we look back and remember everything we have experienced together, especially the time when we first met. We were two young women aged 19 and 23, and both studying at the University of Girona. We met at the Catalan Countries Student Union during days that would be key in the history and memory of this country. We experienced the event shoulder to shoulder and that is what has led us to express our thoughts on the independence process which has been ongoing since the *First of October* to the present day. For us, it was not only the beginning of our political life, but also our friendship.

We initially thought we were just members of the Catalan Student Movement, but we soon realised that were going to be part of something much bigger than that. University students were key players in the mass demonstrations in favour of the Catalan Republic, not only because we appealed to the whole university community, but also because of the pressure the student body exerts on institutions and drives them to support the national demands of our people. We called student strikes, protecting people's right to demonstrate and enabling both students and staff to

take to the streets. In our actions, we were always clear about when we needed to empty classrooms and fill the streets.

To contextualize the situation: the Sindicat d'Estudiants dels Països Catalans (SEPC) [Student Union of the Catalan Countries] is the leading student union body in the Catalan Countries [2], and this is where we made our presence felt. The Student's Union was formed in 2006 and is part of the left-wing Esquerra Independentista [3] political movement. The SEPC's main objective is to build an educational framework for the Catalan Countries from a left-wing perspective [4]. The struggle is specifically aimed at building a public, populist, feminist, quality Catalan education system. The Student's Union is structured horizontally, and operates through assemblies. It is coordinated through a national framework which structures and unifies the actions of the entire Union. This same national structure is reproduced in the smaller Unions in each area, which can be found in municipalities, institutes, or university campus, depending on the size of the student body.

Thanks to the endeavour of the many activists and students who took to the streets en masse, we were able to halt government projects which were attacking the public education system, such as 3+2 or the EU2015 [5]. Ever since the government, headed by Artur Mas, increased university tuition fees, our struggle has focused on demanding they be reduced. On 7 April, 2016, the Parliament of Catalonia approved a bill to reduce fees by 30%, but the bill was never introduced, and this is why the SEPC continues to push for a reduction, and have collected over 70,000 signatures for ILP Universities [6] in a push to have fees reduced.

This was the protest space that welcomed us, where we experienced the Catalan independence process, and where we fought for a Catalan Republic. Today we are going back in time to three years ago to reassess everything that experience and the whole student movement meant to us. We will attempt to provide a critical analysis of the political moment in Catalonia, and describe the role the students and young people played, ever ready to struggle, for the future of our people.

We want to vote

In September 2017, the academic year began marked by the Catalan political agenda. The Parliament of Catalonia had already announced a date for the Self-Determination Referendum, and had approved the law of transitoriness [7]. Students welcomed Joan Fuster's resolute determination more than ever: "Every policy that we do not make ourselves will be made against us" [8].

We felt that the referendum marked the beginning of a true process of independence for Catalonia. For the first time, the government appeared to be genuinely willing to take a gamble for the nation, and in all of this, the role of the people was clear: to defend their sovereignty by going out on the streets. Therefore, the student movement, and the SEPC in particular, put all their efforts into mobilizing the student community in favour of Independence for Catalonia. As students, we had to make it clear that we wanted independence, and that we were willing to put our studies, and our lives, on hold if that was what it was going to take.

But the SEPC was not the only agent mobilizing the university community in favour of the Republic at the time. Since May 2017, it had been managing the *Universitats per la República* platform, which centred on launching a massive campaign to collect signatures petitioning for the National Pact for the Referendum [9]. After this, it became a tool to unify and mobilize all students, lectures and administrative staff in Catalan universities. The main goal was to mobilize students in favour of independence. This cross-cutting platform, without any political leanings other than saying YES to the Referendum, gave us much greater mobilizing power and enabled us to reach a great deal more people.

The platform was highly successful in convening one of the largest student demonstrations in the history of Catalonia. On 28 September, 2017, over 80,000 students gathered in the streets of Barcelona. After spending weeks handing out ballots, informing people about their voting station, and helping to organise the long-awaited day in any way we could, we had managed to create the perfect climate for the referendum.

1 October, 2017 will be etched in our memories forever. We were one people standing together with a common goal. Organizations, agents, and political parties faded into the background, making way for popular power. With no hesitation whatsoever, the people defended the schools in their towns or cities against the police with their own bodies.

We will most probably remember 2 October as well. Again, the students took to the streets at 12.00 midday in front of the University of Girona’s Rectorate Building, their hands raised in the air in silent protest. We had voted and we had won, but we had also been beaten, and we felt we had to show a response which matched the moment.

The entire University of Girona community began preparing for a nationwide shutdown the following day, 3 October. Our struggle began to be decentralized as we left the university to go into the city centre as one student body, and the student movement coordinated with the Gironès Youth Assembly (AJGI) [10] to form one large youth bloc that was going to be needed for future demonstrations.

It was the largest demonstration ever held in the city of Girona. The days were filled with excitement and hope, and it felt like the beginning of a real revolution. We felt that we were finally on our way to independence, and that the Catalan people were more united than ever. We felt strong and thought that everything was going in our favour, and that if we continued with the same energy and drive, we would get our Republic. However, it was not a path that we could take alone. We needed our government and our institutions to take the final step, and to make the mandate of 1 October effective by proclaiming the Catalan Republic.

We have voted, we have won.

On the evening of 16 October, the repression of the Spanish state fell on Jordi Sánchez and Jordi Cuixart. It was a first warning from the state, making it clear that we could all finish up in prison if we continued along on the same path. We joined the wave of pot banging protests organized in front of national police stations. We were mostly young people and students, and we took to the streets with a sense of outrage, keen for things to begin to change.

The SEPC and Universities for the Republic called for another strike on 26 October, 2017. We felt that the movement was starting to stagnate, and that the strike was asking for a real change. The demonstration was huge and intense, and although our actions were only symbolic, they were powerful. This fuelled us with the idea we were not the only ones who were starting to feel deceived. We began to feel that the carnations we held in our raised hands were not forceful enough, but as we had been asked to stay peaceful, we masked our feelings, with the exception of a small number of youths. We wanted not only wanted justice for our people and our political prisoners, but we also wanted our government to act.

The following day, President Puigdemont appeared before the world’s press holding the hope and enthusiasm of a nation in his hands, and on 27 October, he declared the Independent Republic of Catalonia. It was the most political moment of our lives. People cried with joy, emotionally proclaiming “we’ve done it!”, amidst kisses and hugs and tears. But the euphoria lasted only eight seconds. Only eight seconds

passed before our President “suspended” the DUI [11].

We went from being the happiest people in the world to the most confused, asking ourselves what this declaration meant. We now know that in there were no state structures in place to enable independence. no matter what they say to the contrary. We, the people, had done our job by taking to the streets peacefully and letting ourselves be beaten, while the Government had not done its part. We went from “we want to vote” to “we voted and we won,” and from there to “the people rule, the government obeys.”

We now had a government that had backtracked, when the people wanted to move forward. Mariano Rajoy invoked Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, imposing direct rule, and ordering fresh elections in the Catalan Parliament for 21 December. There was no trace of the Catalan Republic we had been promised, and everything we had gone through, the sleepless nights, the eternal strikes, the skipped classes, everything we had sacrificed, had been to no avail. Now we were worse off than before, and even our autonomy had been suspended.

The people rule, the government fails to obey

The Catalan people had to endure Spanish injustice, and on top of that, their Government had not done the work the people had expected. We had the feeling that the people’s mandate had grown too powerful for a government that was selling us the Republic as something achievable if we just followed in its footsteps. The pressure to make the independence real put the ruling party in Catalonia, Junts per Catalunya, in an awkward position. This was visible in the 21-D [21 December] election campaign, where the focus shifted from gaining independence to releasing political prisoners. The issue was no longer breaking away from the Spanish State, but returning to normality, and this change of focus was evident within the political space that had promised us a Republic.

Nevertheless, we still had some hope for the elections on 21 December, 2017. On one hand, we thought that if independence could win by a majority again, there would still be a chance to continue with the mandate of 1 October. On the other hand, we believed that the CUP [12] was really the only party willing to give it all in order to proclaim the Catalan Republic. They had proven to be the only party to unfailingly and openly support both the DUI and institutional disobedience.

Although the CUP had gained independence, it suffered a setback in the elections.

Junts per Catalunya [Together for Catalonia], headed by Puigdemont, won the majority of pro-Catalan independence seats, and gained many CUP voters. That day, we watched any hope we had left for the process towards independence vanish, as our dream shattered before our eyes so suddenly that we were barely even aware of it. We remember that December night as being sad and confusing, like a defeat.

He who sows misery reaps rage

The political landscape changed radically with the new academic semester. Street demonstrations were almost non-existent, but we were on fire in conversations taking place in the bars. We needed a great deal of time to assimilate everything we had experienced. Even now, we wonder how we were able to endure the constant mobilization that went on for months: the eternal meetings preparing strikes, writing endless manifestos to read out in squares and the streets, surviving on little sleep, eating food wherever we could, working all hours, and our mobile phone constantly connected. We kept on asking ourselves “What?” now?” “What good has all this done?”.

In the face of political inaction and the implementation of 155, from within the SEPC, we refocused our efforts on education, calling a strike to lower tuition fees on 26 April. We felt discouraged and depleted from all the previous demonstrations, and this made it very difficult to do our work. In October we had called strikes from one day to the next and received a huge response, but now we had to work three times harder to get an acceptable strike following.

1 October, 2018 was the ill-fated first anniversary of 1 October. For us, the name and the playful-festive celebration of the day were insulting. How could we celebrate a day that was an open wound for us? A year later, the 1 October mandate was still far from over. For us, the struggle continued and this is what led us, with the SEPC, to call a student strike.

At the time, it seemed that a fracture was opening up and dividing the independence movement. The young people had tired of raising their hands in the air and holding lilies, and were beginning to look for confrontation. We really wanted to upset the balance of the Spanish state. On the other side of the fracture, part of the movement criminalized the young people who covered up and confronted the police, and thought that fighting a revolution was a bed of roses.

This fracture became evident on 21 December, 2018. A year after the imposed elections, the Spanish state held a Council of Ministers in Barcelona, which was considered a provocation. A mass demonstration was called in the Catalan capital aimed at preventing the council from being held. The young people wanted a combative demonstration and we took to the streets to fight.

The idea spread through the movement that police, hooded and dressed as protesters, were amongst the demonstrators, looking for confrontation with the police. But there could not have been undercover police because we all knew each other. We were the same young people who had sat down together peacefully and endured police beatings. Our future was at stake and we intended to defend it as it should be defended. This was when we began to realize that the Spanish state was persecuting us and we had to be careful. Protecting ourselves meant covering up and shielding our heads and faces with hoods. In January we had all the more reason to do so, 21 reasons to be exact. One for each of those subsequently arrested.

Solidarity is our best weapon

Our lives had gone back to a certain normality. But one Wednesday, which seemed no different to any other, we woke up to frenzied activity on our mobile phones. It was Wednesday January 16, 2019, and plain-clothed, unidentified national police officers had arrested 13 people that morning. By the end of the day, the arrests had reached 16. Most of the detainees were our companions, not only companions in our struggle and on demonstrations, but our friends in life. We spent the morning in front of Girona National Police Station watching those who had just been arrested go in, and then and waited for them to come out again. In total, 21 people [13] were detained and accused of blocking the TAV [14] on 1 October, 2018.

Yet, again, we tried to resist. One of our companions was at the university when the police went to her home to arrest her. Right away, we did everything in our power to prevent her arrest and she took sanctuary in the University of Girona. After gaining permission from the university, many students and young people locked themselves inside the university building with her, willing to stay there as long as necessary. The ten-day sit-in was called *La Caputxinada UdG*, and for these ten days, we were at the very centre of the independence movement. Many other movements and groups showed solidarity and held demonstrations, including political parties and the most important political figures at the time.

Many of the young defendants were militants or ex-militants of the SEPC UdG and La Forja-Gironès [15], that is to say, people with whom we had experienced everything that is described above. The arrests were completely arbitrary, so we thought that if it happened to them, the same thing could happen to us. The repressive police raid demonstrated that wearing a hood was a necessary measure to protect ourselves against repression, and ensure the continuity of our struggle. By attacking young people, the state showed that it had a very clear goal: to spread fear amongst us and prevent us from continuing our fight. But it backfired, because it only increased our anger and our desire to face a state that threatened us with repression.

Our sentence: independence

Two years later, another academic year was beginning. There was no sign of the Republic, which now seemed a long way off, and we celebrated another 1 October. This time, not even the SEPC called a strike, and demonstrations were even less combative than they had been the previous year.

However, there was some movement during the summer. A new activist platform, called Democratic Tsunami [16], was set up in response to the harsh sentences handed down in the trial, and aimed to change the state of affairs. When it went public on October 14, we were back there again. As expected, the verdict was unfair for the politicians implicated in the struggle for independence: they had been sentenced to between 9 and 13 years in prison. It was time to flood the streets.

This was the beginning of weeks of constant protest. Each day, together with the Sentence Response Committee, we organized a unitary movement made up of several Girona youth organizations. This proved to be was an essential mobilizing agent, as the people were clamouring to take to the streets, unable to wait for the Tsunami to call on us as they had not planned any actions in Girona.

However, the streets were not burning because the Tsunami Democratic had told anyone to set them alight, nor had any other organization. They were burning because of the accumulated rage, powerlessness and frustration of youths who did not want another 2017. Night after night, Barcelona’s Plaça Urquinaona burned with rage, out of control and with no political leadership. We had a very powerful self-organised street movement that wore down the police. We had never before seen anything like it.

Why were the political organizations not taking the lead, nor at the forefront of the struggle on the streets? Given the large number of arrests that were taking place, we believed that the Spanish state could go even further, and those of us in organisations were just cannon fodder for outlawing. Catalans understood that we had to take care of ourselves, and that anyone organizing these demonstrations could end up in prison just like the Jordis [17]. Everyone was frightened. The Democratic Tsunami, however, had already thought of this, and could not be pursued because there was no visible entity or person behind it. However, it is clear to us that it did not take the lead that people demanded of it during the spontaneous events on Urquinaona Street.

Have you ever seen anyone pointing the barrel of a gun at you directly? Have you ever heard the sound of rubber bullets being fired, and how different the sound of a foam gun is? Just how frightening this is leaves no doubt whatsoever, but we held steady in the front line of fire, and protected ourselves in whatever way we could. We learned that the street furniture could protect us. Our eyes saw the city full of possible shields we could pick up, or barriers and rubbish bins we could hide behind. Clashes with police finished up with completely disproportionate police charges that made one thing clear: the riots only began when the police arrived.

Many things changed during the time of the street protests following the sentence. We were again asking ourselves “What now?”, “What has changed?” The riots channelled young Catalans’ anger, but it also spotlighted the simmering lack of connection between political institutions and the people. Understandably, the government responded to the protests with more police and more rubber bullets, and this did not please the demonstrators at all. However, public opinion gradually changed. The shift was small at first, but then forceful [18], moving from being critical of the situation to understanding the full magnitude of what was happening at the demonstrations, what young people were demanding, and why we w former members of the SEPC (Catalan Students’ Union) and in different pro-independence organizations ere taking this action.

But the flames in the streets slowly extinguished, and with them, all hope of independence. We would need a whole other article to explain the complex motives that put out the flame, and the political, discursive, and emotional consequences. For now, we are left with the memories and the small trophies we took home from the streets: coloured rubber balls for our dogs play with, the foam bullets that put our eyes out, and canisters from the tear gas that made us splutter and cry.

Will we do it again?

This raises many questions. For now, the Catalan independence process seems to have halted. Since the post-sentence protests, we have neither returned to the streets en masse, nor achieved any institutional commitment that would bring us, in effect, any closer to achieving a Republic. We can see how the movement has taken a turn towards focusing on anti-repression campaigns, with no aspirations other than returning to normality. However, the Spanish state repression has not ceased at any time, in spite of everything, and never, ever will.

In the middle of this uncertainty, who would want to do it again? Who would put themselves back into the fray? Who would go back after being repressed with all the force of a state that has been questioned over its actions? Who would return after being criminalized from both inside and outside the movement for breaking away from the general trend to be pacifist, and acting fearlessly to oppose oppression? Who would go back after having to endure the general feeling that young people are neither interested nor involved in politics, and then when we do get involved, we are excluded with pedantic paternalism?

The young people, the students, and workers who have been on the front line whenever the political moment has asked us to. We have not forgotten the Republic. We continue to yearn for it, and continue to build it in whatever spaces we can. We continue to defend the Catalan language and culture, and are working to strengthen our sense of belonging, developing it everywhere we can, because we know that it is only with conviction and effort that will we achieve our goal. Yes, we will do it again. But we will be more aware than we were before, and will have more tools to detect and unmask deceit. As we wait for a new opportunity, we will try to analyse, understand, and learn from the opportunities we have had. Students are key to political change, and if we are presented with another opportunity, we will be there.

We will halt our studies, our jobs and our lives as many times as we need to. We will raise our hands in the air again, put our bodies in front of police batons, light barricades, and fight and push everything that oppresses us as a people up against the ropes. We hope that no one will ever underestimate our strength, because if the children of 1 October were able to crush the Spanish state, imagine what the children of the week after the sentence could do. With courage, camaraderie, and with no fear, we will do it again.

Notes

[1] Excerpt from the poem *Assumiràs la veu d'un poble*[*You Will Assume the Voice of a People*] by Vicent Andrés Estellés. English translation: "Maybe they will kill you or they will mock you, maybe they will betray you; these are all banalities. What is worthy is the awareness of being nothing unless you are a people. And you have chosen earnestly. After your dead silence, you walk decisively."

[2] Els Països Catalans [Catalan Countries] refers to the countries which form part of the geographical, historical, cultural and linguistic unit where the Catalan language predominates.

[3] L'Esquerra Independentista (EI) [The Independent Left (IL)] is a political movement advocating the construction of an independent, socialist and feminist Catalonia.

[4] For more information: https://www.sepc.cat/

[5] EU2015, for more information: https://issuu.com/sepc_nacional/docs/llibret_e2015_1_

[6] Iniciativa Legislativa Popular [Popular Legislative Initiative] demanding a reduction in university tuition fees.

[7] LLEI 20/2017, del 8 de setembre, de transitorietat jurídica i fundacional de la República [Law of judicial transition and foundation of the Republic of Catalonia]. This is the name of the law aimed at guaranteeing a new legal framework, and the orderly succession of administrations and continuity of public services during the transition process of Catalonia to an independent state in 2017.

[8] Citation from *Diccionari per ociosos,*1970, Joan Fuster.

[9] The National Pact for the Referendum is a campaign to collect the signatures of institutions, organisations, elected representatives and private individuals, from both inside and outside Catalonia, in support of holding a referendum on the political future of Catalonia. For more information: https://pactepelreferendum.cat/ .

[10] This would later become the youth independence organization La Forja – Jovent

Revolucionari.

[11] Declaració Unilateral d'Independència [Unilateral Declaration of Independence].

[12] Candidatura d'Unitat Popular [The Popular Unity Candidacy].

[13] After the events, the group 21 Raons [21 Reasons] was created. 21 people are pending trial in the midst of an anti-repression campaign. For more information: https://21raons.cat/ .

[14] Tren d'Alta Velocitat [High-Speed Rail].

[15] La Forja – Jovent Revolucionari is a political youth organization in the Catalan Countries which fights throughout the country for a Socialist, Feminist and Ecological Republic. For more information: https://www.laforja.cat/ .

[16] A movement set up months beforehand, at the beginning of the trial, with the objective of calling the public to a mass demonstration once the verdict was announced. https://tsdem.gitlab.io/ .

[17] Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart, the leaders of National Catalan Assembly (ANC) and Òmnium, the main civic groups behind Catalonia's pro-independence street mobilizations.

[18] Speech by Clara Ponsatí at the event in Perpignan on 29 February, 2020. https://www.eltemps.cat/article/9549/discurs-clara-ponsati-perpinya