

CATALONIA AND THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-DETERMINATION, 13.9.17

**Quim Arrufat, International Coordinator for the Popular Unity Candidacy,
Luke Stobart, journalist**



RIC-Scotland organised demonstration at Spanish Consulate on Sunday, 1st October

Speakers Quim Arrufat, International Coordinator for the Popular Unity Candidacy
Luke Stobart, London journalist who has lived in Barcelona for 13 years

Facilitator - Pat Smith

Quim's up-to-the minute report from Barcelona and his answers to members of the audience can be seen at:-

<http://independencelive.net/event/1118>

Luke prepared the following talk, which was amended because of material already covered by Quim.

Elephant in room in coverage of terror attacks

Look at the world media's attention on Barcelona. There was a bigger elephant in room than the undead one in *Game of Thrones*. It is possible that was not a coincidence that attacks only took place in Catalan territory, just 6 weeks before a referendum in Catalonia and that a previous linked terror atrocity took place just before general elections and was seen to influence it, It was a Catalan government and Catalan police force that rapidly managed to end the crisis (shooting dead terrorist suspects with no attempt to take them alive – even where this was possible). This revealed what one Spanish writer described as the existence of

an efficient Catalan state that was already de facto independent (actually we could agree with this conclusion from a more critical perspective – by which the demonstration of authoritarian violence proves the existence of a de facto state. Perhaps that is too confusing a comment for so early in the talk...! Let's move on)

However, the wider response to the crisis was relatively civic and peaceful – suggesting something else was underhand. I gave some examples in *The Guardian* but the best example was the large anti-terror demonstration a week after the killings, which was inundated by anti-Islamophobia and pro-peace placards. It featured mass whistling and jeering of the King and President Rajoy – denounced for their economic and military support for Gulf States identified as funding ISIS.

I don't want to idealise Catalan society. Not everyone reacted to the attacks calling for unity and criticising the establishment – there were some attacks on mosques (as there were in rest of Spain). But overall there was a much better reaction. Why? There is the Memory of 2004 train bombings in Madrid, which the Aznar conservative government immediately blamed on the Basque ETA.

An additional factor is to the left-wing atmosphere in Barcelona and Catalonia – particularly – and also Spain. *One* of the reasons for that – among several (the others we can return to) – is that there is a mass *generally progressive* struggle for independence that is politicising, because it is subject to legal threats, prohibitions, harassment and dirty war. According to surveys, 72% of independistas described themselves as left wing (significantly more than Catalan average – fairly left-wing) Let's look at the movement in more detail.

The national movement

Catalonia has a long proud history of attempting to modernise society and political institutions against backwards and violent central authorities that goes back to the MiddleAges.

From the late 19th Century Catalanism developed as a response to the lack of modernisation and decline of a Spain, It was initially dominated by industrialists and other bourgeois political forces (and with a strongly protectionist bent).

This was later radicalised– in a period of mass workers' and national agitation – around a more middle-class republican politics the Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC). Autonomy (devolution. and republic. In 1934 under ERC President Companys briefly announced the creation of a Catalan state. Again, it is important to avoid idealising the movement – like most nationalist movements at the time leading advocates developed a racial worldview based on innate difference with non-Catalans (similar to nationalist movement in the Basque Country).

If the national movement had contradictions, which surfaced in the Civil War when ERC took sides with the Communists and Spanish Republicans against the revolutionaries – the CNT and POUM attempting far reaching social change - it was still one that upset the most reactionary sectors of Spanish society. Franco's coup in 1936 was as much a response to the fear of national fragmentation of Spain, as it was rising levels of self-activity by workers and peasants. And both movements (like the current pro-Catalan movement) were anti-monarchy. The right's hatred of minority nationalists – even those that did little to oppose (such as in the

Basque country) was such that it embraced the 1920s slogan ‘better a red Spain than a broken Spain’.

After 1939 and the crushing of the Spanish Republic the minority nations were stripped of autonomy, language and traditions repressed. For decades only a single (Spanish) national culture was imposed through a regime of fascist terror. A new movement developed led by barrister Jordi Pujol. While this movement was socially far more limited than the workers and neighbourhood movements that eventually undermined the possibility of Franco’s regime continuing after his death, it allied with the broader left (for example in monastery occupations and in formal CP-instigated pro-democracy platforms). Gone was much of the essentialism of the early 20th Century. Pujol defended a Catalonia that was for all who lived there was (even if he would also make clear that he thought southerners were *culturally* inferior). Like Scottish nationalism, this was a clear civic nationalism, something that has allowed (and continued to permit) the movement to integrate large numbers of non-Catalans.

So how could we summarise the movement? Perhaps by having a somewhat complex, long but broken history. Arguably it should be seen more as a failure of the Spanish national project than a millenarian project. Some nationalists – including pro-Catalan radicals – may not like me saying that. But the question exists as to why – if historic Catalonia includes part of the French as well as Spanish territory is there only a serious movement on the Spanish side. (And a comparable unevenness can also be identified in the French and Spanish Basque Country). Quite simply France created a successful nation state. At least since the 19th century Spain only achieved national unity through force.

The current struggle

The current tensions did not start with what is described as the ‘sovereignty process’ in 2012. Rather they began in the early 2000s with the hostility by the Aznar government towards the historic nationalisms (particularly the radical Basque independence movement, which suffered widespread repression). In 2003 a Catalan left-alliance led by a Socialist, attempted to reform the Catalan statute to gain greater powers – fiscal, immigration policy, cultural. This was approved in a referendum in the mid 2000s but then truncated first by the Socialist government, then congress. The conservative opposition appealed to the Constitutional Court and fourteen articles were deemed unconstitutional. It denied Catalonia having the legal status of a nation. 1.5 million demonstrated in protest in Barcelona under the slogan “We are a nation. We decide”

Between 2009-11 local pro-independence activists held local symbolic referenda. The key thing was a grassroots movement. At this point the main impulse of those protesting was the denial of their national status and the way that their language culture continued to be treated as a threat and “problem”, e.g. in the Spanish comedy film *Siete Apellidos Vascos* (*Eight Basque Surnames* or *Spanish Affair*.) Sometimes this showed a nastier prejudice. e.g. against Barcelona taxi drivers.

With the onset of the crisis another argument was added: the economic case for independence. A strong wing of the pro-Catalan politics – that represented by Pujol’s and later Mas’ *Convergència* – always mainly sought greater economic advantage for Catalonian territory, institutions and businesses (defending the interest of the Catalan bourgeoisie). The fundamental argument is there is a fiscal transfer from and discrimination by Madrid

- "Madrid ens roba" (Madrid robs us). Now economic liberals argued that independence would put a stop to such transfers and every Catalan would be 8% better off – an argument defended after 2012 by economic liberal pro-Catalan president Mas. A new “pragmatic” layer of converts greatly widened support for independence.

Worth pausing here because the economic arguments are in my view one key to understanding some of the misunderstandings over Catalanisme. The economic case is not totally spurious. The state has invested less in transport infrastructure, and non-toll motorways. There is a relative transfer of revenue to the Spanish state's coffers from richer territories, which are almost all in Catalan speaking territories and the Basque Country. The Spanish government has preferred to sell energy utilities to foreign companies, rather than to Catalan banks – to avoid concentrating too much economic influence in Catalonia. (My take on this is that there is interest in rebalancing the economic power away from the areas that industrialised first and developed strong local national identities: Basque Country and Catalonia). Of course, there are limits to this as economic development is not only or mainly shaped by government policy.

But, and here there has to be a giant *but*, the main reason Catalonia makes a large net transfer to the central state is that it is a relatively rich part of state. It's transfers – like those from other parts of the state – help investments – including in welfare state provision – that aid more disadvantaged areas such as in the South. Political hostility towards Catalan demands in Andalusia is not just a product of Spanish nationalist propaganda. This area – with over 40% unemployment – would likely see its tax burden increase and restrictions on revenue.

Not all independentistas argue the economic case for independence – CUP tends not to – and the expression “Espanya ens roba” is pretty discredited in Catalonia. But the pro-independence movement has done little to argue *against* this argument, which is more reactionary than progressive and divisive. The idea that Catalans are selfish is behind the willingness to accept the anti-independence narrative that the independence movement is being naively manipulated by the Catalan bourgeoisie.

Contradiction at the heart of the pro-sovereignty movement. According to surveys economic reasons are the biggest motivations for supporting independence amongst pragmatic converts): but only the main one for 30% of pro-independence supporters, followed by 26% having a feeling of not being understood/will to self-govern, 24% wanting to make a better country and only 20% seeing as a question of identity.

Another reason why the pro-independence struggle exploded in 2012 was the wider social struggle. The Indignados movement – a Spain-wide movement that began in Madrid – was not clearly linked with the national movement. In Pl. Catalunya in Barcelona a vote on support for self-determination was nearly lost! Mainstream pro-Catalan politicians criticised the amount of Spanish being spoken in the squares. But the movement – opposing austerity but also (more fundamentally) the poverty and corruption of the political system – put the whole political establishment on the defensive – particularly the pro-Catalan Convergència i U, which as the governing party in Catalonia had been one of the strongest agents and advocates of austerity.

Some (including myself) were surprised when CiU turned to supporting independence in the autumn of 2012. The mass pro-independence protest of that year was key but perhaps also were the occupations, which left CiU needing to cling on to its Catalan nationalism in order

to survive electorally. Developing out of the Indignados movement (as well as other inspiring social movements such as la PAH (Defending the Right to Housing) there emerged the view that the post-Franco political and institutional structure (or “post-78 regime”) was at fault and needed a radical overhaul.

Activists in Catalonia responded creating a “constituent process” campaign to build the new Catalan political framework in the interests of the 99% (unfortunately this interesting initiative has floundered since.

El Procès

There are 3 pro-Catalan forces (CiU – centre right, ERC -centre left – but increasingly centre, CUP - anticapitalist)

The last five years have followed a different logic. Politics has stayed on the street – spectacular yearly protests on the Diada (national day of Catalonia) – but the engine of the Process has increasingly been in the institutions and even politicians from the parties seen by the new movements as least “representing us”.

Since 2012 there have been:-

- An attempt under CiU leader, Mas to hold referendum on 9th Nov 2014: banned. CiU wished to cancel. CUP pushed for (effectively symbolic) referendum, Mas joined call. In response the Spanish state has issued threats and attempts at repression and The 3 main politician ‘organisers’ have been fined 5 million euros (not a small punishment!)
- Plebiscitary elections were held on September 2015. CiU and ERC Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes). CUP resisted pressure to join, aiming to widen pro-independence constituency by defending social change – something more important now ERC subordinating its political strategy to right. Junts pel Sí and CUP stood on platform of defending unilateral declaration of independence if majority of votes were pro-independence. They won largest vote, but not the majority. This inconsistency was because of Podemos’ -Eurocommunist coalition which takes no position).
- * Junts pel Sí did not have parliamentary majority. In order to continue the Process it needed to ally with CUP. There was a vitriolic campaign against CUP by whole of Junts pel Sí, much of movement, pro-independence media (including sexist trolling against Anna Gabriel, the CUP's parliamentary spokesperson). Mas – the austerity knife wielder was removed from Assembly tie! Buck. The fate of the country was in hands of 1 anti-capitalist. Furious humiliated Mas agreed to abandon presidency but not without getting CUP negotiations to sign an apology and to agree to hold up Junts pel Sí government under new president Puigdemont. This was later agreed – in exchange for binding unilateral referendum. The budget was not an austerity budget but it was not a decisive break with neoliberalism either.
- Were the CUP right? My feeling was it was right to insist on the need to eliminate Mas, but that other agreements are more problematic. In the short term it must be acknowledged that this agreement won the holding of the coming referendum. This was important as active and support for independence has been sliding after years of a slow Process.

But in the long term this may have been an own goal. From the Scottish referendum to Corbyn and the early Podemos in Spain we have seen that when serious social change is

offered the social majority reacts positively. The strong vote for Spanish centralism in the industrial belt is not just about the more varied national origins of population. Surveys show that support for independence is centred on middle classes and is weaker among migrant workers. It is also a class response to a project that is still steered by bourgeois presidents.

Referendum

The referendum was always going to be contentious and lead to conflict. Spain's governing party is a particularly conservative electoral party with roots in Franco's dictatorship. Its attitude to minority nations – they don't exist (as decided at its 2008 party congress – “Spain is every Spaniard's only historical and political reality Constitutional Spain ... is a single nation whose sovereignty corresponds only and exclusively to the Spanish people”). Aznar's reaction to the Madrid bombings was a case in point. I would make the following comment on George Kerevan's piece in *The National*. We should not think that Spain is simply an exception when it comes to state backing for repression or threats: we should not forget Bloody Sunday and some of the economic threats against Scots in the Indyref.

Catalonia punches above its weight. It is a major component of the Spanish economy – as well as symbolically (Barcelona is perhaps better known and respected internationally than Madrid). The failure of the Spanish national project means there are nationalist movements from Galicia in the North East to the Canaries off the African coast. The Basque Country, particularly, watching Catalonia with interest. Furthermore there is no historic union between nations. Catalonia's statehood can only be understood as a loss of a large part of the Spanish state.

70-80% of Catalans want a referendum. This should make mass turnout possible, but the Spanish state has mobilised through all of its political, media and other resources to question the validity of the referendum – which those people radically against independence will boycott any way.

A disappointment has been the decision by Podemos and los Comunes' Catalan coalition not to recognise the referendum as binding, despite not presenting any realistic alternative. Their argument is that only pro-independence forces have called it (!) Barcelona mayor Ada Colau – the recognised leader of the PAH housing movement – has said she will not endanger public servants by instructing them to break the law. This means accepting the 1978 regime can decide upon legality; as well as being disappointing for a mayor who gained fame doing illegal blockades to prevent evictions.

This could also damage the chances of a high turnout. None of the forces that are against independence are recognising the referendum for what it is - a flawed referendum but the only one possible. That will weaken the participation the 30% of Catalans that want a referendum but who are not in favour of independence. At the moment surveys showing that 50% turnout and around 70% 'yes' vote suggest that the conflict over the referendum could intensify after.

This could change because of a wave of authoritarian responses to the referendum:

- Spanish police raiding printers and newspapers to seize ballot papers
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- S Suspension by highest Spanish court – the Constitutional Court – of referendum and law preparing transition to new state structures
- - Spanish paramilitary and national police detachments have been brought into the Catalan territory
 - Public prosecutor calling for criminal charges against all cabinet members
 - The head of the Catalan police has been instructed to tell his officers to prevent the voting (which he seems to have agreed to do)
 - Perhaps most crazily, legal prohibition of a rally in Madrid in support of Catalans’ ‘right to decide’ (organised by the Trotskyist Anticapitalistes)

And we can add to this dirty war in which Interior Minister was recorded instructing a campaign by fraud office, police and media to find dirt (imagined or real) against Catalan politicians.

Add to this usual staple of propaganda against movement. Menacingly Rajoy has said this a coup similar to that attempted by pro-Franco supporters. He has also said that he only needs 5 days to scrap Catalan autonomy and bring in a state of exception. This could be preparing the ground for a heavy and even violent police response.

Consensus among pro-independence seems to be that this is to scare people away from voting but it may galvanise people to vote. It should not be assumed that those that don’t support independence will not do so, if they see society evolving towards a police state.

What is the reaction in Spain outside Catalonia?

Unions from across the State have met to show solidarity and examine the possibility of solidarity actions in the face of repression (although these unions were mainly so-called ‘nationalist’ unions specific to territories with minority identities)

Podemos leaders have joined many of the Spanish leftists in denouncing flagrant democratic violations. (The party mixes a populist patriotism with recognition of the multi-national nature of the Spanish state – a small but significant break with political tradition)

There is strong support for the right to decide in the abstract But there is also a lack of understanding of minority questions – something compounded by the dominant left politics. The New-Labour type socialists are hardly indistinguishable from the conservatives. Podemos has sometimes bravely defended Catalan self-determination against the other Spanish parties and media, but faced with the messy real exercise of such seems to have run scared – like its allies in Barcelona Town Hall.

Many Catalans believe things will shift. Colau has said she will vote, and in 2014 voted ‘leave’.

One last difficulty: Europe?

Merkel has said she only recognised Spanish laws and the constitution. The EU will be a further obstacle. As CUP’s Ferndández says, anyone who thinks the EU will help Catalonia

gain independence should remember that years after a mass struggle Catalan is still not a recognised language of the EU

The CUP could play an important role here: highly critical of EU and in favour of break with euro.

With all these difficulties should the movement give up?

One of the most pleasant surprises has been Catalan Podemos leader, Albano Dante-Fachín in Catalonia. He has taken a highly principled position on the referendum. While insisting he will vote no, he has said the referendum day should be turned into a new Indignados type protest for democracy and we should stay on the street. This has gone down very badly with the Podemos leadership, but it exactly the kind of action that could take break the impasse and bring new social forces into the struggle.

Catalan friends say a lot could change before the referendum – even the attitude of the non-independentista left – but it will take linking the size of the national protests with the radicalness of the Squares to break the impasse.

The questions and Luke's answers can be seen at:-

<http://independencelive.net/event/1118>

It was agreed that RIC-Edinburgh should approach Catalans active in Edinburgh and Scotland to organise a protest at the Spanish Consulate in Edinburgh.

RIC-Edinburgh organised the protest outside the Spanish Consulate in North Castle Street on Monday, 25th September. About 150 people attended.

RIC-Scotland organised the protest outside the Spanish Consulate on Sunday 1st October to coincide with the referendum. About a 1000 people attended. See report at:-

http://www.thenational.scot/news/15569236.More_than_1000_Scots_gather_to_show_support_for_Catalonia/