

# Catalonia: Towards Independence?

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On Catalan National Day 11 September 2012, a claimed one and half million people, around 20% of Catalonia's population, demonstrated in Barcelona in favour of independence. Such annual demonstrations had barely mobilised a few thousand or so people for many years. For the first time since the late seventies, the Constitutional settlement of 1978 is on the verge of collapse. How this dramatic sea change has come about is as much to do with the radicalisation of Catalan nationalism as with the impact of the economic crisis. Nor was this the first time this movement has swung from right to left.



Catalan Independence Protester

## From Fascism to Democracy

Like all nationalist movements, Catalan nationalism looks to a distant past in which defeat on 11 September 1714, when the fall of Barcelona to the Spanish (and French troops) led to the end of Catalonia's semi-independent status, is a pivotal event in the liturgy of national identity. However, like other modern

nationalist currents in Europe Catalan nationalism emerged as a political movement in the late nineteenth century, coinciding with the development of capitalism.

Despite the events of 1714, Catalonia remained an important mercantile centre and the development of a local textile industry saw industrial capitalism develop before elsewhere in Spain. By the early twentieth century the disparity between Catalan economic development and the rest of the state was substantial. One result of this was the emergence of a militant mass workers' movement. The other was the turn by sections of the bourgeoisie to nationalism. Parallel to this, a cultural and linguistic revival further reinforced national identity.

Bourgeois nationalism, in the form of the Lliga Regionalista, limited itself to defending the regional rights that would allow Catalan industry to develop unhindered by Spanish "backwardness". But the Catalan bourgeoisie, faced with an increasingly rebellious working class, would both in the early twenties and again in 1936 back its Spanish counterparts to crush revolution. Under the military dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923-1930) the mantle of Catalan nationalism passed to an increasingly radicalised petty bourgeoisie.

During the Second Republic (1931-1936) the separatist Catalan Republican Left (ERC) became the dominant force in Catalan politics with a mass base among the peasantry, white collar workers and the lower middle classes in urban areas. As part of what, in the last resort, would prove a forlorn attempt to establish a modern liberal democracy, Catalonia was granted its first Statute of Autonomy in 1932 with the ERC heading the new Generalitat government. Like other left republican parties in the Spanish state at the time, the ERC vacillated between the workers' left and the right depending on local circumstances.

During the first year of the Civil War

(1936-1939) the national question was swept aside by social revolution. Control by the workers' movement of the economy and initially, armed resistance to fascism, put the nationalists on the defensive. Middle class republicanism was eclipsed by Stalinism as the defender of order and the bourgeois state. In Catalonia this role fell to the recently formed United Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSUC), the first 'regional' communist party to be recognised as an independent section of the Comintern.

Catalonia had never enjoyed so much independence as during the first months of the war but this was thanks to the workers' revolution and not the left nationalists, let alone the Catalan Stalinists. One of the great ironies of history would be that with the final defeat of the revolution in the summer of 1937 the Catalan government, in the hands of the ERC and PSUC, found its authority undermined by the Spanish Republican government, which now took direct control of Catalonia until its catastrophic fall to fascism in January 1939.

More than at any previous time in the country's history the Franco regime (1939-1977) tried to impose uniformity on Spain that would eliminate any national diversity. Catalan was prohibited in the public sphere and local customs and culture undermined or, at best, transformed into 'Spanish regional' folkloric curiosities. Yet despite the regime's intentions, forty years of Francoist reactionary centralism had exactly the opposite effect than it had set out to achieve. National and regional identities flourished, albeit in the private sphere. Identifying with Catalonia, even speaking Catalan became an act of defiance. Cultural events or football became some of the most visible expressions of Catalan identity. Political activists that fell into the hands of the police however, could expect swift brutality if they dared to speak in the "language of dogs" (as Franco once referred to it) in front of their oppressors.

During the sixties and early seventies Catalonia, like many other areas of the Spanish state, was transformed both socially and eco-

nomically. Opened up to foreign investment and tourism, the Spanish economy underwent a spectacular boom. Nowhere was this more the case than in Catalonia where its industrial base expanded massively attracting hundreds of thousands immigrants, mainly from the south. Eventually this massive concentration of a new working class would lead to growing conflict in the workplaces. What were struggles primarily over conditions at work soon developed into political opposition to fascism. By 1970, Spain had one of the highest strike rates per capita in the world in a country where democratic trade union organisation and strikes were strictly illegal.

Catalan nationalist organisations played a relatively minor role in such mass resistance. Although present in the growing civic and cultural movements, they were clearly eclipsed by the workers' movement at this stage. As elsewhere, with the notable exception of the Basque Country, the Communists were the most influential force. While the historic organisation of the Catalan working class, the CNT, had never recovered from the defeat of 1939 the PSUC was able to convert itself into the dominant force on the left. The party's credentials as a 'Catalan' party combined with its aura as the party of anti-fascism had made it attractive to both the new generation of working class militants and the sections of the Catalan middle classes radicalised by Francoism. 'National' demands in defence of the Catalan language and culture and demands for self-government had never disappeared and the PSUC's emergent euro-communism made it even more suitable to appear the champions of democratic reform.

Many newly arrived workers sympathised with the plight of the Catalans and national demands were present along with calls for democratic rights, particularly the demand for self-government and defence of the Catalan language. This was especially the case with Spanish-speaking workers organised through the new unions, the Workers Commissions, which were led mostly by the PSUC. In contrast the radical independentist left was a marginal influence, even compared to the

Marxist revolutionary left and the anarchists.

Within the context of these mass workers' struggles, by the late seventies there were increasing initiatives promoting Catalan national identity. Nowhere was this clearer than over the question of the language and in education. Movements of teachers, parents and students (often led by the far left) resulted in vibrant grassroots campaigns for secularisation and democracy in Catalan public education. Buildings were occupied by teachers and parents in working class areas and run on a democratic basis, the teachers often receiving no pay until the authorities were forced to recognise the schools. Notably such initiatives were actively supported in Spanish-speaking working class communities, a clear illustration that at this stage many workers saw the need for their children to learn Catalan as their first language. With the disintegration of the regime after Franco's death in November 1975 mobilisation for workers' rights and democracy in general increased at all levels. On 11 September 1977 over a million demonstrated on the streets of Barcelona for a Statute of Autonomy. Over the coming months a new constitution would be negotiated in Madrid between the main political parties, left and right, and the remnants of Francoism. It established the basis of a modern bourgeois democracy but also the untouchable nature of the 'Unity of Spain', which the army was entrusted to defend despite recognising the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Galicia as "nationalities".

Demands for national rights would be channelled through a process of regional autonomy across Spain regardless of local circumstances. The Catalan Autonomy Statute was approved in a referendum in October 1979<sup>1</sup> with jurisdiction over areas such as culture, the environment, communications, transport and the setting up of a Catalan police force. Budgets for health and justice

were to be administrated locally but overall policy decided in Madrid. This was also the case for the thorny question of education, albeit later allowing linguistic immersion whereby students would be taught primarily in Catalan. The first Catalan elections in March 1980 demonstrated the growing hegemony of the bourgeois nationalist *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), which now formed the first autonomous government since 1936.<sup>2</sup> For the next 23 years, the CiU would dominate Catalan politics seeing its role as negotiating the best deal with the Spanish state for Catalonia. Independence was not on the agenda. Thus, CiU MPs in the Spanish parliament would offer their support to both Socialist Party (PSOE) and conservative (Popular Party) governments in return for concessions. All this would begin to unravel in the 2000s.

Consolidation of Catalan autonomy would mark the end of the left-wing hegemony over the national question. With the establishment of basic democratic rights politics shifted to the electoral arena. This led to a sharp decline in the influence of the Communist Party, both in Catalonia and the rest of the state. This was not just due to the unexpected rise of the social democrats (PSOE), which had played hardly any role in the mass opposition to Francoism, but also to the Communists' role in accepting the new status quo from wage restraint through to the monarchy. By dropping its defence of self-determination the PCE further weakened the credibility of the PSUC.

In Catalonia, demobilisation combined with the establishment of the *Generalitat* and the subsequent promotion of the Catalan language and culture weakened the connection between mass struggles for social and economic justice and the national question. Losing both influence and membership, the PSUC suffered a damaging split in 1982.<sup>3</sup> Relatively marginalised, the majority of the

<sup>1</sup>On a 60% turn out, the Yes vote was 88.15%, No 7.76%.

<sup>2</sup>CiU: 28% of the vote and 43 seats; PSC: 22%, 33 seats; PSUC 19%, 25 seats; ERC 9% and 14 seats. Radical left independentist lists received 39,000 votes, 2.38%, and a united far left slate 33,000 votes, 1.22%.

<sup>3</sup>The pro-Soviet PCC.

PSUC would later transform itself into an eco-socialist party, Iniciativa per Catalunya-Verds (ICV), but with a far narrower base than the PSUC had had in the seventies.

## From Autonomy to Independence

Rejection that Catalonia is a ‘nation’ in its own right and thus little more than a ‘region’ of Spain is still widespread in the rest of the State. Such attitudes have, in turn, reinforced both a sense of grievance and national identity in Catalonia itself. The right wing Popular Party in particular has encouraged the idea that the “rich” Catalans were taking advantage of their autonomous status to deny funds to poorer parts of Spain. Electoral opportunism and its own centralist ideology have meant that the PSOE has failed to combat what Catalan nationalists have identified as ‘*Catalanofobia*’. Even the Communist Party-led United Left (Izquierda Unida), although paying lip service to ‘self determination’, has done little to combat such prejudices. In fact its leader Cayo Lara, after causing outrage among IU’s Catalan counterparts (EUiA) by stating that all of Spain should vote on whether Catalonia should be independent, subsequently accepted the right of Catalans to decide their future but insisted that his party would oppose separation.

Over thirty years of the Generalitat promoting Catalan and other symbols of patriotic pride has undoubtedly consolidated the sense of national identity. Over the years opinion polls have regularly shown over 50% of the population as feeling either ‘more Catalan than Spanish’ or ‘just Catalan’.<sup>4</sup> What

has changed is that while in the 90s around 30% of the population had supported independence, this had risen to 43% by June 2011 and to 59% by October 2013.

With the failure of attempts to widen Catalonia’s autonomy and the impact of the crisis, both on Catalan business and in the form of mass protest against austerity, mainstream nationalism has embraced the demand for independence. Long before 2012 CiU was under pressure from its base and from the left. Despite all its claims to be defenders of national rights, collaboration with the rabidly Spanish nationalist PP, both in Madrid and in Barcelona, had undermined CiU’s credibility among sectors of its support. Already in 2003 it had been forced out of office and replaced by the *Tripartit* ‘left’ government based on the social democrat PSC, ERC and ICV-EUiA<sup>5</sup>, which governed until 2010.

Under pressure from the left, the CiU tried to regain lost ground by supporting an attempt to reform the Catalan Autonomy Statute (originally introduced in 1979) backed by the parties of the *Tripartit*. After long negotiations, during which the Spanish government (PSOE) watered down much of the original content, the statute was approved in the Spanish parliament in April 2006. The reformed Statute broadened the Generalitat’s areas of responsibility, increased its ability to receive more finance and, in a highly symbolic move, recognised Catalonia as a “nation”.<sup>6</sup>

Even prior to its state wide electoral victory in November 2011, the PP had launched a counter-offensive in the Senate and the Constitutional Court against the new Statute, among other things removing preferential treatment of Catalan in education, reducing responsibilities in justice and eliminating the

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<sup>4</sup>‘Only Catalans’ 27.1%; ‘more Catalan than Spanish’ 24.7%; ‘as Catalan as Spanish’ 37.3%; ‘more Spanish than Catalan’ 4.9%; ‘only Spanish’ 4.2%; *La Vanguardia* 14.10.12. There seems to be a correlation with Catalan identity and use of the Catalan language: in 2007 93.8% of Catalonia’s seven million inhabitants understand Catalan, 78.3% know how to speak it and 49.3% use it as their first language on a daily basis.

<sup>5</sup>Esquerra Unida i Alternativa (EUiA) is the Catalan equivalent of IU; since 2003 it has formed an electoral alliance with ICV.

<sup>6</sup>In the subsequent referendum, organised by the Generalitat, 73% voted in favour and 21% against, albeit with only 49% participation. The radical left called for a ‘No’ vote given the extremely limited nature of the text.

term ‘nation’ from the text. In response, in what till then was the biggest demonstration in defence of Catalan rights since September 1977, a million people demonstrated in Barcelona in defence of the Statute in June 2010. This was followed between September 2011 and April 2012 by local ‘referendums’ organised by the left nationalists in 555 Catalan municipalities; 900,000 people, the vast majority of participants, voted in favour of independence.

With the economic crisis raging CiU returned to government in November 2010 with the aim of pushing through massive cuts in public spending while strengthening its hand in relation to Madrid. Instead of the new “Fiscal Pact” that the CiU hoped to negotiate with Madrid, the PP, faced with the stringent conditions accompanying the EU’s bailout package, set out to control the deficit and spending of the Autonomous Communities (regional governments). As a result, nine Communities including Catalonia, were forced to be bailed out in turn by the Spanish government to the tune of 12,600 million Euros (5,433 million going to Catalonia), thus reducing severely their room to manoeuvre. In this context, sectors of the Catalan bourgeoisie, especially in the medium and smaller businesses, began to see independence from the “Spanish economic swamp” as a way to get out of the crisis, especially as Catalan exports were no longer dependent on the Spanish market as they had been in the past. By the 1990s a majority of Catalan exports were destined abroad, particularly to countries of the EU.<sup>7</sup> Parallel to this is the long standing grievance that Catalonia provides more money to the Spanish state than it receives in financing and services. It is not difficult to see in this context how the CiU (and the ERC) can blame Catalonia’s deficit, and thus its austerity policies, on the unequal relationship with Spain. So once the possibility of more autonomy and fiscal control was blocked, the

idea of some form of independence has become increasingly attractive to sectors of Catalan business and, in turn, their political representatives.

The left of course cannot accept such arguments are a reason for separation. An independent Catalonia would not somehow escape from the ravages of the crisis and the hardship this means for the majority of the population. But neither should the left accept, as unfortunately sections of the Spanish left do, that any move towards more autonomy, let alone independence, means that Catalonia is not showing ‘solidarity’ with the ‘rest of Spain’. The supposed redistribution of wealth from the richest Autonomous Communities to the poorest has not happened in practice. Social inequality in the poorest regions has in fact increased between 1991 and 2001.

Most of those business sectors backing CiU would be happy with the special economic status the Basque Country enjoys<sup>8</sup>, but the whole thrust of the PP’s economic policies points in the opposite direction. Business sectors flirting with independence are clear that they would want a framework where austerity continued and labour relations would be to their advantage.<sup>9</sup> Against this background, CiU’s Congress in March 2012 came out in favour of a turn towards ‘sovereignty’ whereby Catalonia should have some form of “state structure”. This latter formulation is the crux of their position rather than independence as such: a “structure”, which would protect Catalan business from the worst consequences of the crisis and allow control of finances, hence alleviating some of the more extreme effects of austerity. Such a new “state” would be “within Europe” that is, part of the EU.

Meanwhile hundreds of cultural associations, local collectives and prominent individuals from all branches of Catalan nationalism established the Catalan National Assembly

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<sup>7</sup>See Joel Sans, “Grietas en el Estado español: crisis y cuestión nacional catalana” *La Hiedra* no5, January-April 2013. <http://www.enlucha.org/site/?q=node/18312>

<sup>8</sup>For historical reasons, the Basque Country has its own fiscal administration.

<sup>9</sup> See Sans, “Grietas en el Estado...”

(ANC) with the aim of promoting independence. It was the ANC that was behind the massive mobilisation of 11 September 2012. CiU hoped it could use the demonstration success as a springboard to strengthen its position in the Catalan parliament and called snap elections in November 2012, with the promise of organising a referendum on independence in 2014 to coincide with the three hundredth anniversary of the defeat of 1714. But instead of the expected absolute majority, CiU lost 12 seats and 90,000 votes (see table), forcing it to depend on support from the left nationalist ERC to form a government.

## Cul-de-Sac?

ERC support for the CiU government states a referendum will be held in 2014 but within the current “legal framework”. Given the opposition of the Madrid government, as well as most of the Spanish parliament, this makes the holding of such a vote highly unlikely. This is a calculated ambiguity by the CiU so they can escape from the logic of separation and shows that, despite all the bluster, their real aim is to still pressurise Madrid into some form of a fiscal agreement. Faced with the absence of legality, CiU has begun to talk of a “plebiscite” through elections whereby those favouring independence would stand a joint list and upon winning at the polls would declare independence through the Catalan parliament.

Even this formula still begs the question however, of what happens when Madrid rejects such a declaration as ‘unconstitutional’ and proceeds to take legal action against the Catalan government. Likewise the pact with ERC insists that Catalonia would develop its ‘own state structures’ inside the framework of the EU. As the nationalists’ opponents have been quick to point out, the EU will not accept the separation of part of a member state that opposes such separation. The idea of an independent Catalonia outside the EU terrifies the Catalan bourgeoisie.

On the face of it the demand for independence has reached an impasse. Given both the economic situation, the strength of the Spanish nationalist lobby and subsequent fear of losing votes, the PP rejects a negotiated settlement. Examples of centralist intransigence are widespread. The recent education reform, apart from its sweeping privatisation and imposition of a conservative curriculum, specifically attacks teaching in Catalan. Meanwhile, the State Prosecutor’s Office has taken out charges against 187 Catalan municipalities that have declared themselves as ‘sovereign and free Catalan territories’. The Association of Spanish Army Officers has backed up this offensive by calling for military intervention to defend the unity of the homeland as indeed the Constitution allows.

Faced with a situation where there is no existing legal framework that allows the Generalitat to call a binding referendum of this sort it is extremely unlikely that the Catalan government will now launch a mass campaign of civil disobedience, let alone a rebellion, to achieve independence. Moreover, the Christian Democrat faction of CiU are increasingly outspoken against separation.<sup>10</sup> As seen, CiU would be content with some form of “state structure” which would allow more benefits for Catalan business. But there are not just formal legal impediments. Any form of major concession by Madrid would not only damage Spain economically but inevitably provoke a process whereby other areas would at least demand more autonomy if not, as in the case of the Basque Country, independence.

The problem for the nationalist right is that support for independence is not abating. On 11 September this year an estimated 1.4 million people formed a human chain from the French border to the south of Catalonia demanding the right to decide on the country’s future confirming, if need be, that the massive mobilisation twelve months earlier was hardly a passing phenomena. By failing to organise the much heralded referendum in 2014 CiU would open the doors to the historic defend-

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<sup>10</sup> CiU is a coalition between the nationalist *Convergència Democràtica* and the Christian democrat *Unió Democràtica*.

ers of independence, the left nationalist ERC, which is already ahead in the polls. By backing the CiU's austerity policies in exchange for a guarantee of a referendum the ERC is also under pressure from its left, principally from the Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP).

Formed by various radical left independentist factions during the 80s, the CUP has built itself up at a local level on the basis of grassroots organisation with an anti-capitalist programme. With over 100 local town councillors and hundreds of activists, its politics are an eclectic mix. Influences range from a Stalinised version of Marxism through to movementism. By deciding to move beyond its localised and 'municipalist' origins to contest the Catalan elections in 2012, winning 126,219 votes and 3 MPs, the CUP has begun to transform itself into a serious alternative to both the nationalist and non-nationalist reformist left. In standing as CUP-Left Alternative it deliberately courted the non-independentist anti-capitalist left, including candidates from En lluita and other revolutionary marxists in its lists.

Since being elected, the CUP's MPs have agitated around an array of issues both inside and outside parliament, in particular against the austerity policies of the Catalan government, the repressive role of the Catalan police and an unwavering defence of the right to self-determination.

Apart from the CUP, further opposition to the moderate left nationalists has emerged from the newly founded *Proces Constituent* (Constituent Process) promoted by a series of well-known activists. Its manifesto has already attracted 45,000 signatories and reflects the core ideas of the *Indignados*: opposition to austerity, restitution of cuts, nationalisation of banks under democratic control, radical democratic reform, taxation of the rich and Catalan independence. By building a broad socio-political movement based on lo-

cal assemblies, the *Proces* aims to introduce widespread reform through 're-founding' the political system of 1978.

Support for the CUP and the *Proces Constituent* shows that mass support for independence cannot be seen as just the result of the frustration with Spanish centralism, but overlaps with the fight against neo-liberalism. Having responsibility for administering public spending, the Generalitat has introduced a wave of cuts that have had devastating effect on education, health and public services. Opposition has come from public sector workers in the form of strikes, demonstrations and occupations. More or less parallel to, and increasingly interrelated with this, was the emergence of the *Indignados* (the 15M movement) in May 2011.<sup>11</sup>

While the independence movement, which includes CiU voters<sup>12</sup>, and the resistance to austerity, which includes people with little sympathy for separation, are not symmetrical the two clearly overlap. This can be seen in various ways. Among those who declare themselves in favour of independence, 71% describe themselves as left wing. Support for independence is strongest among the Catalan speaking working and lower middle classes. Protests organised by the ANC have not only included slogans against the cuts but also, in the case of the human chain of 11 September 2013, the encircling of hospitals and schools. Also independence flags are a common enough sight on protests against cuts. Finally both the CUP and the newly created *Proces Constituent* have received widespread support among activists of the 15M. Attempts by the CiU to divert attention to its cutbacks by blaming them on Madrid have, by and large, failed.

Any elections at present would probably leave Catalonia 'ungovernable' as the left-right unionist-separatist divisions make the creation of a stable government unlikely, ac-

<sup>11</sup> See Andy Durgan and Joel Sans, ' "No one represents us": the 15 May movement in the Spanish state.' *International Socialism Journal*, 132, 2011, pp23-34. <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=757> <http://muhalefet.org/haber-istrypanyada-15-m-hareketi-0-7953.aspx>

<sup>12</sup>52% of CiU voters believe Catalonia should be an independent state, and 70% would vote Yes in any referendum, Sans, "Grietas..."

ording to all the latest polls (see table). While the PSC, for a long time the second party in Catalonia, like the PSOE, is in freefall, the PP will lose out to the unionist-populist party Ciutadans. On the left, ICV-EUiA is winning support but far less than the ERC and the CUP. It remains to be seen whether the *Proces Constituent* can achieve its aim for an agreement between itself and the CUP and ICV-EUiA. Opposition by both the *Proces* and CUP to ‘professional politicians’ and the recent experience of the *Tripartit* government, where ICV-EUiA participated in an administration carrying out neoliberal policies, make unity problematic.

Although a defence of self determination remains a central principle, revolutionary socialists in Catalonia are forced to take a clear

position in favour of independence. Some form of federal solution, favoured by social democrats, much of IU and even parts of the far left, is an abstraction when there is no such demand emerging in the rest of the State. Any vote will pose a stark choice, and a ‘no’ means the continuance of the status quo. Of course defence of independence does not mean revolutionaries abandoning their distinct politics. That there is no common interest between the nationalist bourgeoisie and the working class is clear, as the mass struggles against austerity in the last two years have shown. As the CUP rightly argues there can be no independence inside the EU or the Euro. National independence on its own is no panacea but can only be posed as part of the wider fight for social justice and democracy.

	2006: % of vote	No. of seats	2010: %of vote	No. of seats	2012: % of vote	No. of seats	Poll: 27/10/13 Predicted seats
CiU <i>Bourgeois Nationalists</i>	32.2	48	38.5	62	30.7	50	31-32
ERC <i>Left Nationalists</i>	16.6	21	7	10	13.7	21	36-38
PSE (PSOE) <i>Social Democrats</i>	27.4	37	18.3	28	14.4	20	14-16
PP <i>Spanish Conservatives</i>	10.9	14	12.3	18	13	19	13-14
Ciutadans <i>Unionists</i>	3.1	3	3.4	3	7.6	9	16-18
ICV-EUiA <i>Eco-socialist - United Left</i>	9.7	12	7.4	10	9.9	13	14-16
CUP <i>Radical Left Independenists</i>	-	-	-	-	3.5	3	5-6

Table 1: Catalan election results 2006-2012