

LEARNING THE LESSONS OF THE CATALAN REBELLION AS AN 'EVENT'

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What happened in Catalonia on October 1 and 3¹¹⁸ can be described as what the philosopher Alain Badiou calls *the event*, what the Marxist Walter Benjamin refers to as *messianic time*, and what indigenous Quechua people in Latin America call *Pachakuti*. These concepts all put a name to the eruption of something unexpected in a situation that interrupts the continuity, or the logic of reproduction in the structure of domination.

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The structure of domination has a logic of monotonous-continuous reproduction until a social movement that nobody expects abruptly bursts into it, like, for example, a popular uprising or a mass popular reaction. These events are ephemeral, they are never lasting. To endure, they must have a political response that produces a genuinely innovative political discourse; one that can account for the new “subjectivity” and “truth” produced by the event. To this end the entire political discourse must be renewed; it must be updated in accordance with the new subjectivity that *the event* produced for people.

The question to ask yourself about Catalonia is: What is the political response to October 1 and October 3? Opening a

118. October 3 refers to the general strike that saw more than two million people on the streets.

debate about this is of utmost importance. There, in Catalonia something happened that had not been foreseen: a people emerged who were willing to defend their sovereignty, their right to decide, and their right to self-determination with their very bodies. On October 1, the people defending the ballot boxes did not ask their neighbours: “what are you voting for”? It was not important what people were voting for, the important thing was to defend the nation of Catalonia’s right to decide its own fate. Thousands of people who were not pro-independence defended the right to vote with their own bodies.

Having sovereignty is not the same as being independent: sovereignty is people’s right to decide their fate, which can include a multiplicity of options: federalism, confederalism, independence, and so on. In short, status models abound. In this sense, I think creating a popular united front that integrates both pro-independence and federal sovereigntists has enormous potential.

Let us take a look at the case of Corsica. Right now there is a coalition there between pro-independence sovereigntists and pro-autonomy sovereigntists that quietly won the elections. (“Autonomist” does not mean the same thing in France as it does in Spain –it relates to what the United Nations recognises as an “autonomous republic” or “associated republic” with full sovereignty). The Corsican sovereignty movement (for independence *and* autonomy) has a platform from which to fight for its own demands and is in negotiations with the French state. If something like this were created in Catalonia it would certainly have power because the sovereignty (as opposed to

the independence) movement would easily account for two thirds of the votes. When you consider that the independence movement already has almost 50% of votes, and another 15% or 20% of supporters of federal sovereignty is added, it becomes clear that such a platform would have enormous power in terms of its appeal for the nation of Catalonia and international institutions. This would mean a something powerful in terms of legitimacy.

If Catalonia is in this position, imagine what this might mean for places like Galicia and Andalusia where the pro-*independence* movement has neither the numbers nor the strength to call on large majorities. We have to return to the concept of sovereignty; we have to expand it to demands for sovereignty by people in Galicia, the Basque country and Andalusia who could easily participate in a process of this sort.

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However, we have not yet seen this sort of gesture being made. I have spoken with individuals from the Catalan left who are in the thick of it and who are in favour of this, but I myself have not yet seen any organisation make this sort of gesture. Albano Dante Fachín¹¹⁹ tried to make coalitions in this direction. He said, “the only guarantee we have of a sovereign constitutional process is in voting for independence”. This statement recognises that an *event* took place and that the only way to be faithful to it is by renewing political discourse in keeping with the new subjectivity and truth that it gave birth to.

119. Albano Dante Fachín was a member of the Catalonian Parliament for Podem/Podemos. He resigned from the party over its failure to offer a challenge to Spain's repression.

I believe that there is a debate to be held in all the stateless nations about what popular sovereignty means after October 1 and the implementation of article 155. Any sovereignty strategy must incorporate an inclusive struggle with horizontal relations between stateless nations at its heart. For a leftist project, it is no longer enough to speak of an “anti-capitalist republic”. If it is to be a republic, then from a left perspective it has to be anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, anti-racist, and against environmental pollution. We have to decolonise the concept of the republic without delay and that means beginning to speak of an anti-systemic republic.

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this *event*, and the process of seeking sovereignty. The first lesson is how we reframe what we understand as sovereignty. The organisation of a strong popular movement requires a concept of sovereignty that goes beyond the independence movement otherwise the sovereignty movement against the Spanish imperial-colonial state gets divided between pro-independence sovereigntists and sovereigntists who are not pro-independence. And this division works in favour of Spanish unionism. A concept of sovereignty must ensure that we move beyond exclusively culturalist discourses. There has to be a discourse that encompasses a people’s problems: sovereignty can mean eating better, it cannot just be about celebrating language and identity, it has to go further.

For a movement of popular sovereignty to take place, sovereignty must be linked to control over a nation’s resources, be they energy, primary resources and food, as well as being related to control over political authority, taxes and so on. It

has to be based on a series of issues which show people that having more sovereignty implies improvements to their quality of life. A sovereignty discourse that does nothing more than focus on language, culture, and identity will not reach many people, because there are plenty of people who do not see the point in celebrating those things, but who do see the point in improving their material conditions. That is why it is so important to create a discourse on popular sovereignty with social elements that go beyond identity. I am not saying that defending identities is unimportant or that this should be set aside, I am saying that social demands must be made too.

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Second, as we have seen in Catalonia, the Catalans cannot do it alone. If these types of struggles are going to be developed, stateless nations must be coordinated so they can erupt at the same time or at least to better implement organised solidarity. Although demonstrations outside Catalonia were held in support, the Catalans were, by and large, alone. The typical hackneyed exercise of bringing a Galician, a Basque, an Andalusian and a Catalan to talk about what is happening in their country and show solidarity to each other is not enough; when such meetings end, everyone leaves and, until the next of these discussions, there is no communication. Organisational ties must be forged in the work of political solidarity: remaining scattered is not an option because it will not work. This became clear in Catalonia, where, even though there was a powerful mass movement, they could not do it alone.

A third lesson relates to the need for different types of alliances with the Spanish unionist left. Izquierda Unida and Podemos behaved disgracefully during the Catalan process

of self-determination. This revealed the bankruptcy of their projects. We cannot continue to hope that the Spanish unionist left will show solidarity with the liberation struggles of stateless nations. Like the French left in Algeria, the Spanish unionist left sides with the imperial-colonial state when it comes to its oppressed nations and colonies.

Podemos's recent attempt to explain the rise of the right and their loss of followers in the wake of the Catalan process of self-determination is certainly worth discussing: astonishingly the Catalans are blamed for Podemos's misfortunes. Pablo Iglesias explains it thus: Podemos's discourse is rational, while the Catalan pro-independence movement has an irrational discourse because it is demanding the impossible and the PP has an authoritarian, irrational discourse which exacerbates Spanish nationalism by not acknowledging a legal referendum as a possibility. For Iglesias, both the PP and the Catalans touch on the "irrational" emotions of nationalism. He argues that his is the most rational discourse, which is the one that involves holding a legal referendum. But what is going on? Why do very few people support this? According to him his discourse is the most rational, but there isn't much support for it because it does not reach, move, or have an emotional pull for anyone. As both Catalan nationalists and the PP have their own emotive symbols, a rational discourse like Podemos's (which was clearly the best option) failed because it did not move people.

So, why did Podemos end up where it did in this process? Why did the right end up taking up all the space? Why did the Catalans punish Podemos in the elections for the Generalitat

(Catalan Government) in Catalonia? Because they positioned themselves alongside the right-wing stances adopted by the unionist state against the popular movement for the referendum in Catalonia. They sided with Rajoy in saying that the referendum was illegal, that people should neither participate nor recognise it, and they called for people to boycott it. During the referendum Iglesias said again and again: "I would not vote in this referendum if I were Catalan". Well, if you are not Catalan, shut your mouth and let the Catalans decide what they want. Not pro-independence? You do not have to be pro-independence to respect an act of civil disobedience, an act which was, in fact, the first truly large-scale act that challenged the regime of '78 on the basis of Catalan people's right to self-determination. Instead of connecting itself with the referendum, as international observers documenting the repression of the state, Podemos took sides with the Spanish state. Podemos spoke out against a referendum organised using civil disobedience and proposed a legal referendum, but without saying what powers would be used to make this agreement in Congress and on what constitutional terms it could be carried out, as, under the Spanish constitution a referendum of self-determination would not be possible unless everyone in Spain could vote. This would be like the English being allowed to vote in the Scottish referendum.

The strategy adopted by Podemos has had a huge political cost, from the point of view of the Basque Country and Galicia, as well as Catalonia. On seeing this, citizens must have thought: those politicians who went on and on about ending the regime of '78 certainly looked like a regime party

when they finally got an opportunity to do something about it. They showed once and for all that they are a regime party.

Ultimately this discourse of the 'left' is seamlessly absorbed into the discourse of the right. Spanish unionism –of the left and the right– is a discourse that is blind to its own nationalism. It is a unionism that hides under the mantle of being neutral and universal but has everything to do with the position of privilege. The privileged do not have to defend their identities. Why would they when they are already dominant?

And this brings us to the fourth lesson: that sovereignty must be forged in an entirely different way. Forging a new sovereignty means going beyond the nation-state project. The nation-state concept is highly problematic because with it you visit on others the oppression visited on you as an oppressed nation, and against which you were fighting. We must more clearly reject the unionist state's categorization of the Catalan Republic because it represents an attempt to impose Catalan and Catalanism on everyone who lives there. The danger is that this can merely replicate the dynamics of 'nationhood' in Spain, but over a smaller area.

We need a forward-facing project for a sovereign republic that envisions, for example, linguistic diversity, where communities that want to have more classes in Spanish can have them, and so too can those communities who want more classes in Urdu (there are Pakistani communities in Barcelona) or in Romani (there are Roma people in different regions of Catalonia). This does not mean that Catalan should not be taught in schools and no subjects should be in Catalan. It just means there is no point in duplicating the nation-state's model

for political authority which promotes the fiction that there ought to be a correspondence between one identity, nation, language, and population that is directly linked to the identity of the state.

This is one of western modernity's fictions, it does not ring true anywhere in the world and has generated more problems than solutions. What this model does is to standardize, annihilating all cultural differences and the diversity of peoples that coexist within a territory. If you are going to do that you had better pack your bags and leave; you would be doing to other people the same thing Spain did to you. Hence the importance of using a form of political authority that is more plurinational (in the sense used by indigenous peoples in Latin America) or a sovereign confederation of peoples like the Kurds. You have to have another model of political authority that is distinct from the notion of nation-state. I am not arguing against the state but against the modern-colonial form it takes in the nation-state.