

AN UNPRECEDENTED SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROCESS

by Salvador Cardús *

The social and political process that a significant part of Catalan society is engaged in is so dense, complex and fast-paced that it is difficult to clearly appreciate the factors that explain its origins some ten years ago and its current state of development. According to opinion polls conducted at the end of 2013, 60 percent of the population held a desire to have an independent state (double the number than at the beginning of the process), a phenomenon which is still on the rise. Nevertheless, a huge number of political uncertainties remain. At present no one can reasonably predict the probable future evolution and eventual outcome of this impressive democratic challenge to twenty-first century Europe. Not until the process comes to an end will it be possible to fully, precisely and rigorously examine all the factors involved in this phenomenon, which is as politically exciting as it is unprecedented.

I say this because I think it is worth noting that the following analysis should be seen as tentative. We are awaiting more data and in-depth research to help us understand a process of political demands of a kind which has never previously been seen in contemporary Europe. Although it is a process which should be seen from the perspective of a long Catalan tradition of economic, political and cultural resistance, it was not originally intended to follow this radical, yet purely democratic path, lying outside the framework of the Spanish Constitution. In addition, the speed of events, combined with the consistency of developments in public opinion accompanying the mobilisation of civil society, mean that any attempt to

understand the situation is all the more complex.

One condition and two triggers

From my point of view, the first thing of note are the conditions which made possible the emergence of the current process. No one believed at the time of the recovery of democratic institutions in Catalonia (in 1977 following the restoration of the provisional *Generalitat* or in 1980 with the creation of the first Parliament of Catalonia after the Franco dictatorship) a majority expression of a desire for independence would have been viable. Not because of the lack of a solid conceptual independence movement with a long political tradition, but because it was in the minor-



ity and political conditions during the transition to democracy, with no real break with the previous regime, meant the time was not right. In fact, the only Catalan political party with a republican tradition, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, was not made legal until after the Communist Party and following Spain's first democratic elections. Nevertheless, after more than thirty years of self-government, the situation has changed. The existence of a regional government and the policy of 'national reconstruction' it has developed have made possible a strong sense of belonging and a degree of cohesion within the Catalan political community. While in 1980 four out of ten Catalans declared themselves to be 'solely' or 'mostly'

Spanish, in 2014 this figure is not even one in ten. Conversely, while two and a half people out of ten felt themselves to be 'solely or mostly' Catalan in 1980, now the figure stands at six out of ten. The remaining three out of ten stand outside of this dichotomy.

The failure of Catalonia's latest attempt to politically accommodate itself within Spain (with the reform of Catalonia's Statute, begun in 2004 and prematurely ended in 2006) was met with a response which was largely unexpected. The fact that a proposal which had the backing of 90 percent of the representatives of the Parliament of Catalonia was critically reduced by Spain's judiciary (which according to experts left Catalan political autonomy in a

La Serra del Montsant,
Montsant, southern
Catalonia.

worse position than under the previous statute of 1979), may well have reduced the public to a state of collective depression. Instead, distancing itself from its political representatives, civil society set to work and turned the page on the old autonomous model, in a display of a progressive ability to respond to circumstances. There were certain precedents in demonstrations between 2004 and 2006, but it is chiefly following 2007, with the failure of the new Statute, that an impressive, grassroots mobilization of society became apparent: all manner of separatist organizations emerged in large numbers; mass demonstrations of public support heralded a new era of political sovereignty; hundreds of books supporting sovereignty were published; informal referenda were held at the local level in 550 municipalities, including the capital, Barcelona, with the participation of over twenty percent of the population; around 4,000 promotional activities were organised in just eighteen months. And so on. There is an almost endless list covering this mobilization. To some extent it cannot be catalogued, since much of it has taken place online, and as such is hard to quantify, though it has an extraordinary scope. One can find few examples in post-WWII Europe of a process of constant and increasing mobilization of this magnitude, with the ability to rally two million people (of a population of seven and a half million) in a human chain 400 kilometres long.

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However, to explain this response to failure we need to add a factor that has not yet been studied thoroughly, which is

the response to humiliation. The failure of the reform of the Statute could have resulted in a parliamentary political crisis, without causing the social reaction I have outlined. However, it appears as if the Spanish political elite wanted to profit from political failure in order to accelerate the process of dismantling the very concept of autonomous states. This process is advocated by the FAES Foundation, closely linked to former Spanish President José María Aznar, and is also in keeping with the desire of certain sectors of the PSOE, the Spanish socialist party. Arrogant expressions of such an ideology, humiliating the Catalans for their political failure, began in 2006, coinciding with the continued erosion of the political autonomy which had been won only after much effort. The state broke its agreements, publicly flaunting the notorious fiscal suffocation (with Catalonia making a net contribution exceeding 8 percent of its GDP, according to the Spanish government itself), Catalano-phobic campaigns were organized by the Spanish *Partido Popular* and, what is more, the Spanish press added to a resurgence of Spanish nationalism of a most unitary and homogenizing variety. In other words, they once more dismissed and attacked Catalan language and culture, keys to a feeling of national belonging. The appeal against the new Statute in the Constitutional Court (in spite of it having been approved by the Catalans in a referendum in the summer of 2006) and the painful sentence which followed, removing its very essence, gave way to the grassroots reaction. In July 2010 a million Catalans took to the streets of Barcelona under the slogan 'We are a nation. We decide', in a protest organized by *Òmnium Cultural*. On the 11th September 2012, one and a half million Catalans once more took to the streets with the slogan 'Catalonia, a new European state' this time organized by a body behind the popular consultations of 2009 and 2010, the Catalan

National Assembly (ANC). On the 11th September 2013, two million Catalan participated in the 400 kilometre-long *Via Catalana*, once more organized by the ANC. It was a show of strength, intelligence and organizational ability that surprised even the Catalans themselves.

Political *aggiornamento* (renewal)

The social reaction to the political failure of the reform of the Statute and Spain's subsequent attempt at humiliation was so overwhelming it forced the political parties to adopt a position in response to the public's demands. Likewise, the pro-independence social movement has appreciated that it needs to be headed by the parties which are supporting the process. It has therefore adopted a strong position in order to ensure a steady pace, without resorting to any form of populism that would have detracted from the formal legitimacy of any developments.

The Catalan nationalist, centre-right coalition, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), which governed from 1980 to 2003 and again since 2010, has adopted the sovereignty thesis, most notably from 2012 to now. The traditionally pro-independence party on the left, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya* (ERC), has experienced a period of unprecedented growth and is vying with CiU for first place. *Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds* (ICV), the former-communist party, remains in favour of Catalonia deciding its own future but has yet to declare whether it supports independence. In the space occupied by left-wing parties we find assembly-based *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP), which is also pro-independence. The *Partit Socialista de Catalunya* (PSC) has been plunged into an unprecedented crisis due to its lack of clarity, which it tries to disguise with appeals to federalism. As a result it is in danger of becoming a minority party. Meanwhile, Spanish nationalism which not only



The Santa Maria d'Escaladei Monastery, Priorat region.

opposes Catalan independence but also the Catalans' right to decide, is divided between the right of the Spanish right-wing *Partido Popular* (PP) and an ideologically undefined party *Ciudadanos* (C's), which is gaining ground on the PP. In total, two thirds of the Parliament of Catalonia has declared itself in favour of a referendum on the 'right to decide' (CiU, ERC, ICV and CUP), fifty-five percent are explicitly in favour of Catalonia becoming an independent state and only twenty percent are strictly Spanish unionists. Forecasts suggest that these figures will rise significantly in favour of pro-independence positions in the next election.

Whatever happens, it is clear that the independence process is creating strong tensions within virtually all of the political organizations, which are



Siurana, Priorat region.

busy trying to catch up with the social demands of a climate of informal political participation of unprecedented dimensions. Voter turnout in 2012 was the highest since 1980 and the Catalan population has a taste for political debate, in stark contrast with the general climate of distrust towards parties that exists throughout Europe.

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Spain's failure to understand

A relatively surprising phenomenon is Spain's apparent failure to under-

stand the magnitude of the Catalan secessionist process. It may well be a reaction to events which even caught Catalan political analysts unawares, as mentioned earlier, and for the fact that it fails to follow the pattern established over the previous thirty-five years. Nevertheless, the fact is that Spanish political elites, party leaders, major media organizations, certain business sectors and senior government officials have refused to initiate any form of dialogue to find some kind of middle-ground. Obsessed by the unconstitutional nature of Catalonia's separatist aspirations, they refuse to accept any kind of negotiation, even to the extent of criticising the few sectors of Catalan society which are trying to find a third, non-disruptive, alternative.

Initially Spain alleged that it is a process triggered by the economic crisis and that once it has passed every-

thing will go back to normal. Then it insisted that the process would eventually run out of steam. Thirdly it warned of an impending breakdown of social cohesion between native Catalans and the descendants of the massive waves of migration of fifty years ago. Finally, Spain tried to make people believe it was all the result of President Artur Mas' megalomania and the manipulation of the public via publicly-owned media. However, the fact is that the move towards pro-independence can be traced back to around three years before the start of the recession. In fact, signs of improvements in the economy (noticeably more visible in Catalonia than the rest of Spain) may well bolster support for secession. Moreover, not only has support failed to run out of steam, according to opinion polls, the opposite has occurred. In relation to possible fractures in cohesion, it seems that those who utter such threats have not understood that Catalan society has established a peaceful multicultural model, with very low levels of racism. Instead, organizations which are successors of the waves of immigrations have come out in favour of independence and proudly state their radical Catalan nature. As for President Artur Mas and publicly-owned media, one need only remember that his policies are a reaction to public pressure (as late as autumn 2012 he was still trying to reach a settlement through a new fiscal pact), and that Catalan public television accounts for only between 15 to 20 percent of the

audience share, while the rest is in the hands of Spanish channels.

The strategy of threats and scare-mongering employed by Spanish leaders has proved itself worthless. On the contrary, the Spanish state's total inability to create a climate of trust and empathy reinforces the belief that there is no possible means of reconciliation. Aside from these threats, often exposing a barely democratic political culture, the Catalan process, indifferent to such tactics, continues to unfold in an impeccably democratic, peaceful, good-naturedly friendly, manner.

The outcome

Ultimately we will only be able to judge the success or failure of the current analysis with the final outcome of the process. If the independence movement were to lose momentum, if fear took hold of Catalan society, if political leadership took a step backwards and, finally, if the desire for self-determination were to fail to achieve an electoral majority, one would need to thoroughly review the information we have so far taken as decisive. For now, however, this scenario seems unlikely. It appears highly unlikely that the steps taken so far would be undone. It is difficult to imagine who could politically lead a failure of this nature. Nonetheless, if the outcome lives up to the aspirations of this great popular movement and the political dynamics it has generated, we will have to spend many hours studying the idiosyncrasies of such an unexpected and unprecedented process.

*SALVADOR CARDÚS

(TERRASSA, 1954). PHD IN ECONOMICS AT THE *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* (UAB). VISITING RESEARCHER AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE, CORNELL UNIVERSITY (USA) AND QUEEN MARY COLLEGE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON. CURRENTLY HE IS PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY AT THE UAB AND THE FORMER DEAN OF THE FACULTY OF POLITICAL SCIENCES AND SOCIOLOGY. HE HAS CONDUCTED RESEARCH INTO THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION AND CULTURE, MEDIA, NATIONALISM AND IDENTITY. HIS PUBLISHED WORKS INCLUDE, *Plegar de viure* (GIVING UP ON LIFE) WITH JOAN ESTRUCH, *Saber el temps* (UNDERSTANDING THE TIME), *El desconcert de l'educació* (THE EDUCATION PUZZLE), *Ben educats* (WELL EDUCATED) AND *El camí de la independència* (THE ROAD TO INDEPENDENCE). IN THE FIELD OF JOURNALISM HE WAS THE EDITOR OF THE *Crònica d'Ensenyament* MAGAZINE (1987-1988) AND WAS DEPUTY EDITOR OF THE *AVUI* NEWSPAPER (1989-1991). HE CONTRIBUTES TO *ARA*, *La Vanguardia*, *Diari de Terrassa* AND *Deia* NEWSPAPERS. HE IS MEMBER OF THE *Institut d'Estudis Catalans*.

