

What has happened to us Catalans?

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The interpretation of the past

It's not at all easy to explain to a reader who is unaware of the social, cultural, and political reality of Catalonia how Catalonia has gradually turned in favor of independence over the past few years. To someone who's new to the issue and not familiar with the historic or political background and who's intrigued about the immediate causes of a wish to break up a state, the shift would probably seem capricious, if not opportunist. Indeed, the lack of knowledge and perspective on the internal and peculiar situation makes the external and more general aspects, the more obvious ones, the more stereotypical, seem "natural". And when this "naturalness" doesn't live up to snuff, it's normal that instead of doubting if that stereotypical image was fictitious or forced, we demand explanations from those who revealed our ignorance.

The Catalans, right now, find ourselves in this predicament: to have to explain and justify that which is a profound reality of our country, and to defend it against stereotypes and misconceptions. Well, let's get to it! You first have to remember that throughout the 20th century the Francoist dictatorship assimilated us into an indivisible Spanish archetype all the while repressing any expression of cultural, linguistic, political, or economic difference. After the dictatorship, with the delicate Transition toward democracy, Catalonia's national ambitions were again masked. Everyone pretended that they were resolved by a political model called the "Spain of the Autonomies", the exaltation of which was necessary for consolidating the whole new democratic structure. So, we had 40 years of Spanishness forced on us by the dictatorship followed by 30 more with the promise that the democratic consolidation of Spain—if carried out peacefully— would allow Catalonia to evolve toward more developed forms of self-government and respect for our national reality. In total, for more than 70 years, they have hidden from the outside world the fact that we are a "different" society.

Yes, Catalonia is as much or more different than Scotland or Québec, but the political circumstances have hidden that fact. The old historic nation, the cultural and linguistic reality that is so different from Spain's, the will to recover the political liberties that were lost in the War of Succession of 1714—the true First World War—were all politically constrained by a wide regionalist nationalism and by a minority secessionism from an internal point of view, which internationally, only the culturally enlightened minorities were aware of.

Therefore, the first thing that we need to make clear is that everything that is happening in Catalonia is not coming from an unexpected burst of political madness, from ethnic xenophobia, or selfish parsimony exacerbated by the current financial crisis, but rather is the product of the maturation of historic aspirations. A process that has been, certainly, expressed in many different ways over the years, and that in this latest phase, for reasons I will attempt to expose, has the majority leaning toward a wish for having state structures—and if possible, staying within Europe—achieved peacefully and through a process of democratic self-determination. This expression of majority rule has not only surprised international public opinion, it also snuck up even on Spain, which has always belittled and underestimated Catalans' national aspirations. And so it was that Spain concluded that the autonomic model established by the Constitution of 1978 did not only resolve the historic aspirations of the Basques and Catalans, but trusted that these would be dissolved in a process of simple administrative decentralization.

The failure of the autonomic model

Nevertheless, that autonomic model that watered down the political ambitions of two historic nations into 17 administrative regions has failed on various fronts. On the one hand, because it has satisfied neither the aspirations of the Basques nor those of the Catalans—to different degrees and for reasons that would take too long to explain here. And on the other because Spanish nationalism, which is profoundly centralist and homogenizing, felt threatened by its own invention. The administrative decentralization introduced many economic and political inefficiencies into the system, and with good reason, the State felt weakened.

The resistance toward the autonomic process by the Spanish themselves could be felt from the very start—this was the principal motivation behind the coup d'état of 1981. In addition, in practice, legislation was passed with the express objective of invading the autonomies' areas of jurisdiction so that the central government could take them back. But it's true that the evolution from theory to practice of this anti-autonomism becomes most prevalent from 2000 on thanks to the conservative party, *Partit Popular*, and its president, José María Aznar. From that point forward, the failure of the autonomic model is not speculation from the vantage point of so-called Catalan victimization, but the pretext of a well-articulated program to take back established autonomic powers from several different statutes of autonomy.

From the Catalan side, the ample awareness of the failure of the autonomous model came a few years later. In 2004, when the Parliament of Catalonia began to reform the Statute of 1979 in which lay the foundations of political autonomy, there was little general awareness of the model's weakness in satisfying national expectations. At that point, the political parties were more aware of the weaknesses of the autonomies than the people were. When the reform was initiated, led by Pasqual Maragall, the objective was to manage to properly fit Catalonia into Spain by means of a federal system. For the CiU nationalists, the objective was the recognition of the Catalan national reality with special emphasis on equal treatment of the Catalan and Spanish languages—as official languages with the same rights and obligations—and on the modification of the model of regional financing. In the end, the ERC independentists supported the reform of the Statute trusting that it would mean the beginning of a new transition that would lead toward their own clearly secessionist goals.

But the Spanish Congress, on which the ratification of the Statutory reform depended, eliminated most of the significant improvements that were proposed for self-government in 2006. What is worse, the Constitutional Court ended up restrictively amending the new law, even though its whittled-down version had already been passed by referendum and received a rather resigned affirmative vote. Awareness of the complete failure of the project, which began to be clear in 2006, was widespread by 2010. The Catalan people leapfrogged the political class by demanding a new sovereignist political framework. The final denouement arrived with the demonstration on September 11, 2012, the day that Catalonia celebrates its National Day.

At any rate, the part that is hardest to document in a brief and clear fashion is that which here I can only sustain as a hypothesis. And that is the fact that the triggering of secessionist feeling, which according to most rigorous polls has reached between 55 and 60 percent of the voting population, has to do with an unrelenting process of humiliation since 2006. I say that it's not easy to quickly demonstrate it because it has to do with a process of changing the emotional structure, fed especially by political provocations that often have more symbolic than legal force. Of course, it's undeniable that the financial crisis has also more clearly revealed the unfair fiscal treatment—the *plundering*, in political combat terms—and the mistreatment in public investments, a fact that has accompanied and reinforced this very notable political transformation.

Perspectives for the future

It's not hard to imagine, from a Catalan vantage point, the political collapse that this mainstream independentism has provoked in Spain. The reaction from the Spanish has been of the lowest democratic quality, unimaginable in any of the neighboring countries. The most common reactions have been threats and insults, and there has been no lack of dirty tricks. I won't enter into details here either, because it's not unlikely that this viscerality will become even more stark as the time for making a final decision gets closer. On the other hand, for the Catalans, what may be most surprising is the rather undramatic fashion in which the expectation of national emancipation is being experienced by most of the population. That is, the vote against the recognition of the right to self-determination of the Catalans held on to only 20 percent of the votes in the last elections (on November 25, 2012), and only 14 percent of the registered voters. One might even consider that this de-dramatization of the process' repercussions might reveal a certain unawareness of the seriousness of the proposal. But the truth is that the majority of independentists believe that they are simply availing themselves of a democratic right that does not deserve—given their peaceful character—the irritation with which it has been received. And suffice it to say that this lack of drama is most obvious among the youngest generations, who did not live through the Francoist past of the country, nor the transition to democracy, and therefore haven't developed any feelings of loyalty to a Spanish Constitution that they consider disloyal to Catalonia.

The whole situation is helped, of course, by the fact that the globalization process, though it may seem paradoxical, makes the advantages of a large state and wide borders increasingly irrelevant. It's clear that since the world is better and better connected, and more interdependent, independence poses no risk of isolation, especially in Europe where even physical borders are not an issue. It's for that reason that, in this context, Catalans take for granted that their independence makes total sense within the European Union, and not just in its current form, but also if it should end up becoming the United States of Europe, with a similar structure to the United States. In fact, it's little known that an independent Catalonia, would be ranked 13th by population among the 50 current states of the United States, and would occupy the 7th position of the 27 states of the European Union, or the 9th when ranked by GDP (according to the IMF, 2011).

The future of Catalonia is uncertain, and the fight is between the defense of the right of the state by the Spanish and the strength of the expression of the democratic will that many Catalans believe should be above and beyond any previous legality. We'll find out what's going to happen before two years are through.