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Catalonia

# **“The founding hypotheses of the Comunes and independence are no longer operational”**

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**Josep Maria Antentas teaches sociology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona. Xavier Puig spoke with him following the publication of his latest book, “Spectros de Octubre” (Sylone).**

**In your book you locate the Catalan crisis as part of a general crisis of the Spanish state. Why?**

Everything that has to do with Catalan independence is one of the great aspects of the regime’s crisis. The other crisis is everything related to 15M, the waves of protests against the cuts, the erosion due to economic crisis and corruption. At the same time, the current crisis also refers us to the historical limits of the state model that was created in 1978. In the end, it reflects the non-resolution of the national question in Spain, although the regional model bought time, but without solving the underlying historical problems.

Precisely, one of the problems of the independence movement, as defined by the Procés, is that it has raised a battle that is not very connected to the general crisis of the regime. It has not articulated its proposal for the future with the need to give a concrete response to the problems generated by the economic crisis and, rather than seeking to articulate itself with the struggles against austerity, it has sought subordinate this to the fight for an independent state. It is one of the limitations that have existed. Independence is, paradoxically, one of the central factors of the regime crisis, but at the same time it has also been used to try to recompose it in authoritarian form.

**In your opinion, there are two movements (15M and independence) that challenge the regime, and this has not been well understood?**

For me, this is the big problem of the Catalan crisis. 15M was a moment of rejection and discomfort, which opened a political crisis and formulated proposals for the future. This is what favoured, although it was not an automatic effect, the emergence of projects such as Comunes or Podemos. This type of process marks a path, a hypothesis. Then, independence indicates another type of future, the Catalan Republic. They are two proposals that coexist in the face of people’s unrest in a scenario of bifurcation of futures. I think the two, mostly, have seen each other as competitors. There have been people with one foot in each place, but there has not been enough dialogue between the two roads. Competition has been imposed above any attempt at articulation.

This is one of the weaknesses of the whole cycle and, in particular, of all the forces of the left, pro-independence or not. It has made the social base of the independence movement smaller than it could be and, above all, has meant that its project was less challenging than it could have been, there has not been any dialogue with the legacy of 15M or any critical proposal regarding austerity policies. And, conversely, for everyone who ended up crystallizing in Comunes and Podemos, the fact of not having had any active policy regarding independence for many years, of limiting themselves to a wait and see position, meant that during 1 October they remained paralysed, without knowing what to do. In the end, they were engulfed by polarization. The lack of dialogue between the two worlds was a strategic weakness before and during 1 October and is a problem for their future projects.

It is clear that there are people on both sides who cannot maintain any type of dialogue because their projects are antagonistic. It is clear that the world of Convergència has always tried to use independence to cover its support for the cuts and that it instrumentalized the 2012 wave to mitigate its fall in legitimacy and to have a narrative and an apparent project, replacing the ultra-neoliberal rhetoric of the failed “government of the best” with which Artur Mas won in 2010. But in general, there could have been more discussion between sections of the independence movement and Comunes and Podemos. It seems to me that it is one of the limitations that we have to verify when

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taking stock of everything that has happened, in a scenario like the current one in which the two movements are bogged down.

The hypotheses of both are blocked. Despite being different, both were able to convey the idea that there could be a quick and easy change. No doubt it is important to motivate people and convince them that victory is possible, that you are an active subject with the ability to change things. But what has been shown is that reality is more complicated and that it had been oversimplified. There has been no lightning electoral victory for Pablo Iglesias, nor has the independence movement achieved its objectives. When hypotheses are dismantled you have the challenge of rephrasing them and rethinking the relationship between the short and long term, without giving up your goals.

This failed dialogue between the two worlds also explains their difficulties in rethinking the future, and this is a necessary task in any serious strategic rethinking. Note that the debates on Podemos or Comunes and about independence are usually separate, many of the people who reflect do so completely from within one of these areas, without much concern to develop an overall view of the political crisis opened from 2011 and 2012. And now that this cycle has been exhausted and we are in another phase, although imprecise, it is important to have a global perspective in a complex time of strategic difficulties for everyone.

### **Who is responsible for these sectors not having a dialogue?**

Basically, it has been easier this way for both. For the independence movement, it has been very easy to believe that it just had to grow and that those who didn't favour independence would adapt or be out of the game. For the Comunes bloc, the most comfortable thing was to practice a wait and see policy, trusting that the independence movement would crash into the wall. In the short term, this was easier, because it avoided considering complex things, but in the long run it has ended up being very damaging. The apparent comfort of the present was mortgaging the feasibility of the future. This has been a very short term policy.

### **Do both movements now face these realities?**

Yes. They come up against the fact that they have stronger adversaries. On the one hand, the 15M impulse is exhausted. Iglesias's initial path, based on a quick electoral victory, has long since evaporated. In Catalonia, the hypothesis of the Comunes of transferring the initial success in Barcelona to the Catalan sphere and stabilizing the strength of the victories in the general elections of 2015-2016 has proved unsuccessful and is no longer credible. On the other hand, the independence movement has seen the fallacious hypothesis of the law of legal transiency, and the disconnection without difficulties from the state, blocked. The founding hypotheses of Comunes and Podemos and of the independence movement have ceased to be operative, even in the field of propaganda.

### **They are retreating even in respect of more conservative or reformist proposals, don't they?**

Sure. Paradoxically, 1 October 2017 was the most important crisis the state has suffered since the 1970s. But at the same time, it was used by the most conservative sectors to reinforce themselves, using the strategic weaknesses of the independence movement. Despite not having a proposal to stabilize the regime in the long term, 1-O has been used to try to close the crisis of the regime in an authoritative way, but this does not solve any of its problems. In the short term, there may be the fiction, by the government, that it has enough strength to close the processes above, but the underlying causes that triggered the political and social crisis are still extant. Given this situation, the independence movement has no proposal. There is much talk about the division of independence, but less about the fact that none of the majority orientations existing within it have coherence. In reality, there is no serious rethinking of the strategy.

On the other hand, in the world of Comunes, given the difficulties, there have been internal divisions, and the temptation to abandon objectives. In the end, it is a space that is increasingly conceived as a complement to the PSOE than as an alternative in itself. When a movement is blocked, it has risks and challenges. One of the dangers is to remain immobilized in your foundational ideas, not knowing how to adapt them and not going beyond. The other risk is to start reviewing your hypotheses and end up abandoning your goals, often making it appear that you do not do so, that you are actually faithful to your usual approach, but that you are simply adjusting it to the conjuncture. People tend to mould expectations unconsciously according to real possibilities and this logic also works in political combat. The issue is how to keep your foundational goals by rethinking your strategic hypotheses to go beyond the initial limits. Precisely, I think this is what neither the majority of the independence movement nor Comunes and Podemos are doing.

**You say in the book that identity needs to be renegotiated...**

Yes, making a strategic balance sheet of your existence and seeing what it takes to take another step. I don't see this happening much in the independence movement. There is a part of the old *Convergència* that wants to back down, although it has little objective basis to do so due to the immobility of the state; the world of Carles Puigdemont offers a republican rhetoric, but an autonomist practice, a lot of symbolism and little content, and seeks to play for time; the ANC and the proposals of sectors such as Jordi Graupera's are to maintain a hard independence, but reaffirm and accentuate all the limits that the movement has had. In the case of ERC, they identify the problems of the movement very well, but the solution they give may seem to many, perhaps not as a surrender, but a real abandonment of any scenario of rupture.

The CUP think that it has remained a coherent force that does not recede, but without publicly raising the limitations that the *Procés* has had. It has always been clear about them but has failed to question the movement with strategic proposals, beyond disobeying, that will modify the parameters of the *Procés*. Since October 1, it has remained too much in a voluntarist discourse, without addressing the major fundamental issues, and that is why I find it very interesting that it has opened a strategic debate in recent months, the result of which will be very important for the entire alternative world in Catalonia. The foundational problem of the *Procés* has been to disconnect the demand for independence from a critique of austerity and a broader perspective of the regime's decline throughout the state. And it seems to me that today it is the ANC itself which addresses the least the limits of the dynamic unleashed from 2012.

**How is this to be solved?**

The idea that the demand for independence is disconnected from criticism of the problems of austerity is doomed to failure. Catalonia is a society where there are very different visions of things, but with many people destroyed by the crisis. You cannot drive a very broad movement without addressing the great social problems that are hurting this society as a result of the cuts, which were very severe at the beginning of *Procés*. From the beginning it would have been necessary for the movement to have adopted a program of social emergency measures to deal with the crisis.

Now, if the movement had done so, it would have strained the social base of *Convergència* much more. The Artur Mas government embodied values contrary to this. Many people made the calculation that it was essential not to lose to the Catalan right. In doing so, I think that other questions were not raised that were more important. For example, how to make a large part of the Catalan federalist left feel linked to the project. Also, how to attract a part of the more popular social base that is not so Catalan in its identity. It seems to me that this has been the great problem of the movement, which has not had a solid debate about which social bloc it should articulate.

After 9N, after two years of growth between 2012 and 2014, the movement had difficulties in going further. It is often said that the base must be widened. It doesn't seem like a correct term to me. For me you have to see the limits and

reformulate it. The movement, in my opinion, would have to assume, for example, a decalogue of basic measures against austerity and relate the Catalan Republic to a project of general regime decline. I think these should be the strategic proposals that should be put on the table by the left, not so much because it is realistic right now to think that they could be taken on by the main actors, but to offer a perspective of where to go in a moment of bewilderment.

### **Explain ...**

There has been the hypothesis, and the practice, that since the movement wants to leave the state, it simply has to build up forces in Catalonia and what happens outside doesn't matter. There has been a unilateral project that is legitimate. The logical thing is to start by organizing yourself, but then you have to see what alliances you make if you don't want to confine yourself to a strategically very limited perspective. On the other hand, there has been the hypothesis of the Comunes, which is that we have to stop any unilateralism in Catalonia until there is a majority of change in the whole state. Neither the centralist conception of change, nor the peripheral rupture alone are strategically satisfactory, nor do they address all the complexity of Catalan and Spanish politics and society.

The problem is that there has not been a synthesis of the two points of view. In the end they are complementary, although their articulation is complex and contradictory. What the independence movement has not been able to develop is the idea that the Catalan Republic must be perceived as something that would be aided by having a Spanish Republic alongside, the relationship with which it would be necessary to specify. That is, inserting it as part of a broader movement that would bring down the regime of 1978. Failure to do so has facilitated the criminalization of the movement in the rest of the state, has encouraged apathy or hostility on the part of Spanish society and has allowed the people of the rest of the state who have shown solidarity with the movement to be quite isolated.

In October 2017, there was a spatial-temporal lack of synchronization between the Catalan crisis and the regime crisis throughout the state and between the two challenging axes of the cycle opened in 2011 and 2012. There are no perfect proposals, but when thinking about strategic reformulations and how to better articulate the Catalan rupture, the global rupture of the regime and the change of social model, I find it interesting to revise points of view such as those raised, with differences, by figures such as Joaquín Maurín or Andreu Nin in the thirties, not to extrapolate them anachronistically to the present, but to try to reflect today with more perspective.

### **Could it be too late now?**

It has been seven years since 2012 and five since 9N. If things had been done differently, we would be in another situation. Now, assuming we are where we are, what is the next step? For some it is to stay at the heroic level and move forward without doing any analysis of the correlation of forces, for others it is to play for time or, at best, to seek a horizon of lukewarm progressive-democratic reform. Actually, if you think from the point of view of independence, the most necessary thing would be to reinvent yourself to get rid of the initial defects of the movement. If you think from the point of view of Comunes or Podemos, maintaining the challenging nature of these projects would mean reversing – which is objectively impossible – the dynamics already started with Vistalegre in the case of the Iglesias formation and the failed birth of Catalunya en Comú. All these fundamental questions, of course, are mixed in with the situation and with the immediate need to articulate a unitary and challenging response to the judgment of the trial...

### **In the book you talk about the concept of Eurocomunes ...**

Yes, employing a little the simile with the Eurocommunism of the 1970s, using the term that was used to explain the policy that the Italian, Spanish and French Communist Party had when they evolved towards a social democratization

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of their programme and towards a more electoralist orientation, while maintaining a rigid internal bureaucratic structure. Quite quickly, the world of Comunes has assumed this more electoral, more institutional, more normalized existence, hence we can talk about a tendency to become Eurocomunism.

I also believe that its behaviour on October 1 cannot be separated from this. The fact that when a political crisis arrives, a large political force that theoretically is pro-rupture plays such a lukewarm role instead of trying to deepen the crisis in a constituent sense more favourable to its programme, also has to do with the increasing institutionalization of its vision of things. This does not mean that they are a party fully comparable to the conventional ones, but it does show that the path they have taken has been exhausting their emancipatory potential and will continue to do so progressively.

### **Does this trajectory of Comunes make the creation of an alliance with the pro-independence forces more difficult?**

It seems to me that there is little prospect of dialogue between the independence movement and Comunes. In addition, in the current stage of bewilderment and defeat, it sometimes appears as a caricatural thing, as a dialogue between two spaces that are losing their ground-breaking drive. In contrast, in the previous period, before October 2017, their collaboration could have been offensive. All the debate about the support for the government of Pedro Sánchez that has taken place in the last year and a half is a caricature of this alliance between Comunes and the independence movement. There is a difference between synergies of rupture and collaboration to adapt to the logic of the lesser evil against the PP.

### **It also speaks of the lack of relationship between the world of the CUP and Comunes...**

It seems important to me. And even more when almost nobody talks about it. They are two political spaces that, despite their differences, have shared a critical vision of austerity policies and the majority parties, many of their activists have shared spaces of social militancy. Obviously, when competing at the electoral level, it is normal that there are tensions, but that the two spaces have had such a differentiated policy and have not been able to have a dialogue is problematic. It involves a fracture of the social sectors most critical of neoliberalism. This is, however, a debate, we might say, of the previous phase, which serves as a balance sheet of the years behind us. Although it is still a pending subject, we are now at another stage...

### **No one has believed in popular unity?**

Each has interpreted it in their own way, either using one concept or another, and has basically understood it as a unity around their own space and their own programme. It is legitimate, and partly logical. The thing is how, while doing this, you can go further at the same time. It seems to me that it is one of the issues that explains many limitations of these years. It could have led to more bridges of dialogue and discussion. Because deep down we see that all alternative political sectors, referenced in the struggles of the recent past, have difficulties and a shared need to reorient themselves. It is not very clear where to go, and nobody has an impeccable proposal, we must restart from a certain collective humility in this regard.

What seems pertinent to me today is to think about how a new confluent space can be built in Catalonia that brings together all those who are outside the most institutionalist logic and want to do politics in a pro-rupture way, keeping alive the ground-breaking drive of the dual cycle –15M and the Procés– that is over, and be part of the new radicalism and emergent movements. And if we think about the scenario of a possible new economic crisis, it will be decisive whether we have been able to take this step or not...

**What do you mean when you say that the pro-independence movement has had a fetish for the state?**

It is the idea that, given the problems, a state is the solution. It is a very debatable proposal in itself. A state in itself is no guarantee of anything: it depends on the correlation of forces, on the policies that are applied. The idea that everything that cannot be done now can be done with one's own state has been sold. Actually, it's not like that. A state is not necessary to stop an eviction, and having it is not a guarantee per se that it is not done. On the other hand, a state within the euro, which signs the TTIP and has economic policies dictated by the European Central Bank or the German government has a very limited sovereignty. There has been a lot of conceptual fetishism that considered that the state was the guarantor of everything, without considering too much what a state is and what role it plays at the present time, nor what relationship exists between states, international organizations and financial power.

The independence movement, except for that part linked to the CUP, has not discussed what sovereignty is in the monetary or economic field, for example, when it has spoken a lot about the will to be sovereign. If you think about it, it is contradictory. This is also one of the limitations of its project, which has had a very simplistic view of what is sovereignty, democracy and the relationship between both. Sovereignty has been understood exclusively from the national point of view, but not in the popular aspect, and democracy has been understood very much in terms of representative system and very little in the sense of social self-organization or the ability to decide on all areas of social life, after decades in which neoliberalism has drastically reduced the issues that fall within the scope of conventional political decision.

**Is this desire to take state power as a priority also one of the problems of Podemos?**

It is not that there is no need to take state power. The question is why you take it and seeing that the government is only part of the power of the state, and that getting there makes sense if it serves to initiate a process of social transformation that, inevitably, will be neither linear nor simple and will meet the resistance of economic power and the state structures themselves. To get into government to end up adapting as Alexis Tsipras did in Greece ... do you have a project of breaking with the economic powers or you end up adapting.

Podemos plays with the idea that there could be something intermediate between rupture and complete adaptation, but its evolution has been very clear. In the end, you win an election and you get into the government of the state, and if you are not willing to have a policy of confrontation with the economic powers, what do you do? And given the difficulties in obtaining the desired lightning victory, we have seen how Podemos has been modifying its *raison d'Être* in a double sense, first abandoning the most disruptive aspects of its program and, second, ceasing to have the objective of being an alternative to PP and the PSOE so as to run as a minor partner of Pedro Sánchez.

The argument is that being part of a government with the PSOE would guarantee politics of change, but the reality is that the policies that could be made by Podemos would be derisory and, at the same time, Podemos would have to swallow all the contradictions of the PSOE, that collide directly against the very nature of Podemos and the public perception of Podemos. For various reasons, the independence movement and Podemos have proposed strategic proposals that were limited. The independence movement for not wanting to talk about an economic and social model and Podemos for having designed a very electoralist conception of change and for formulating very superficial alternatives.

**Another thing you question is how internationalism has been understood within the independence movement ...**

In general, it has not given much weight to internationalism and has only looked out in a diplomatic sense, seeking

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institutional international support. This lack of perspective is closely related to the fact of having nothing to say about the crisis of the European Union. The independence movement has not placed its project much within the framework of the current EU crisis and the political crises that have shaken many of its member states. Within the independence movement there is a minority internationalist vision, that of the CUP, but basically understood as solidarity between the emancipation movements of the stateless nations and not so much as an international alliance of the subaltern classes.

In any case, having an internationalist perspective, regardless of how this concept is specifically understood and which variant is embraced, is the basis of an emancipatory project, especially in today's world. We need to move towards a new internationalism of the 99%, which somehow tries to give a coordinated response to all the subaltern movements. The rise of the new feminism and the movement for climate justice are today outstanding examples.

However, most emancipatory groups and organizations are still very focused on politics within the borders of their state, partly due to the very depth of the political crises that have shaken many countries since 2011, but it is necessary to strengthen mobilizations and international initiatives. For me that does not mean disregarding local and concrete politics or the national issue. Often a fallacious contrast is made between internationalism and the national question when in fact, the defence of the right of peoples to self-determination, and in particular by the movements that are part of nations and states that deny this right to others, is an inescapable condition for genuine solidarity.

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