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## Is Catalan Separatism a Progressive Cause?

Edgar Illas

*Indiana University - Bloomington*, [eillas@indiana.edu](mailto:eillas@indiana.edu)

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## Is Catalan Separatism a Progressive Cause?

### Abstract / Resumen

This paper argues that the Left has not developed a theory for singular events such as Catalan separatism. Instead of conceiving it as a mere nationalist construct and rejecting it on behalf of federalism or universalism, I propose to focus on the transformative energies of this political and cultural movement. After tracing the historical links between separatism and radical leftist politics, my paper aims to extract three lessons from the project to build a new Catalan state: first, the possibility of formulating a right to vote based on residence and not on citizenship; second, the project to devise a non-culturalist articulation of nation and state; and third, the deactivation of the violence of the Spanish state through the assertion of a transnational European demos.

### Keywords / Palabras clave

Catalonia, separatism, Left, singularity

### Cover Page Footnote / Si quiere que su cubierta contenga una nota al pie de página...

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Two main preconceptions about the transformation of states are still widespread among the Left. First, when nationalist movements question the established form of a given state, we have learned to be suspicious of the interests behind their politics. Unless there is a clear situation of oppression and colonialism, national struggle is often seen as a reactionary mode of politics founded on false consciousness. A long tradition of Marxist thought on the national question, from Lenin and Stalin to Régis Debray and Michael Löwy, has articulated different ways of entangling the problematic of capitalism and the conflict over the association of peoples.<sup>1</sup> And yet leftist thought has generally remained reticent to embrace national causes that have a local and regional magnitude rather than a universal dimension. It is assumed that local political projects tainted with patriotism are bourgeois constructs devised to fragment the universal class of the proletariat. Patriotism is an ideological strategy to devalue labor power by making workers perceive other workers not as companions but as national adversaries. Hence, revolutionary politics can only go the other direction and strive to build international solidarity among workers and multitudes.

We must admit that this first preconception is actually quite true. The most important theorists of nationalism (Eric Hobsbawm, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson) have shown that nationalist mobilization is consistently linked to bourgeois interests. Also, it is undeniable that all attempts to change capitalism must incorporate a universal dimension that accounts for its systemic nature; otherwise, local action and change only result in the displacement of problems elsewhere.

This universal dimension or internationalism, however, encounters one dialectical complication when we take into account that local and national contexts constitute a necessary mediation for the access to the universality of the system. Perhaps we can distinguish two sequential phases here. First, a moment of “true” universality can be recognized and affirmed when social unrest or the protests of multitudes emerge. At this stage, struggles against an established state of affairs epitomize instances of the global malfunctioning of the system. As Žižek has explained many times since the financial crisis that erupted in 2008, it is important to understand that today’s global protests express a common discontent with the system. With reference to the massive demonstrations in Greece and in Turkey’s Taksim Square, Žižek writes, “[t]he true path would be to co-ordinate the two struggles, to reject ‘patriotic’ temptations, to leave behind the two countries’ historical enmity and to seek grounds for solidarity” (12).

Yet, while protest and resistance may be coordinated at the transnational level, the construction of a new order beyond the phase of struggle must take place at the local, regional and national levels. Any new political order entails a limited spatialization, and in this second phase the revolutionary agents must begin to deal with the gloomy dilemmas of hegemony and power: What are the priorities in the building of the new state? Who should direct the political transformation? And the inevitable Schmittian question: Who is the enemy against which this new association of people must be defined in order to constitute itself?

Defining an enemy is highly compromising for the struggle. If one determines that the enemy is internal, for example the members of the old order, this decision can have two possible consequences. Either it will lead to the exclusion of the members of the previous regime, and thus the struggle will no longer be representing everyone, or, if the members of the old regime are included in the new order, this will engender the general feeling that the new is a mere transmutation of the old and that the Lampedusian maxim has been fulfilled again. On the other hand, if one decides that the enemy is external, for example

another country, then the scope and the fruits of the struggle will not be universal either. Consequently, in this situation we will have to face the charge that the struggle has ended up producing new exclusions and mere external rearrangements rather than radical transformation.

A common answer to these dilemmas, and this is the second widespread preconception among the Left, is that the model of federalism and the coalitions of states constitute the most useful frame to articulate the irreconcilable needs of universal struggle and particular national politics. Federal state forms seem to provide a satisfactory way to create larger unions while respecting local differences. In turn, cosmopolitan coalitions of states represent an operative midpoint between conflictive national interests and the goal of universal equality. For this reason, union, federation, or coalition almost always are seen as more desirable directives than separation, independence, or regionalism.

Badiou, for instance, has openly admitted his distrust of separatist movements in relation to Quebec:

In the last twenty or thirty years, we have witnessed the break-up of national entities, sometimes their fragmentation: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Somalia, Congo ... You have to be very vigilant as to the real meaning of state disintegrations. They are negative phenomena of contemporary history, often responsible for tragic human situations. (87-8)

While Badiou admits that the situation in Quebec is peaceful and qualitatively different, he affirms that “it is possible to negotiate consistent federalisms, and that this is a better formula” (88).

Žižek has expressed similar views in reference to the independence of his own country. Despite his involvement in the democratization of Slovenia (he even ran as candidate for president in 1990), he did not seem too enthusiastic about his country’s separation from the old USSR. In an article he wrote a week before the proclamation of independence, he adapted an old Marx Brothers joke: “You want to be independent? Be independent. You’ll have more problems, but at least you’ll be independent” (In Mead 46).

For these radical thinkers, separatism is not a positive creation of new entities or the occasion to build new state forms. Instead, separatism primarily entails the negative disintegration of established powers and is the cause of “more problems” and tragic situations. Indeed, the Left has little interest in exploring the possible links between separatism and revolutionary politics, especially when it comes to European and First World secessionisms, which are often still perceived as Engels’ “*geschichtlosen Völker*” or “non-historical peoples.”

Not even Régis Debray acknowledges these links in the famous 1977 interview in which he defends national mobilization vis-à-vis the internationalism of Marxism. Debray considers the nation a historical “invariant” that composes collectivities by delimiting “between what is *inside* and what is *outside*” (28). He then proposes to articulate the internationalist theories of revolution within the national context, which “remains the practical determinant, the starting-point for action” (38). But at the interview’s close, Debray is asked what he thinks about the French Left that claims to be internationalist and at the same time supports the cultural rights of the Bretons or the Corsicans. He answers that French internationalists should not only focus on the revolutionary energies of Cuban, Algerian, Chinese or Vietnamese national struggles, but

also retrieve the revolutionary patriotic elements of their own nation, such as the Paris Commune, the *Marsellaise*, or the Resistance.

So, what about the Bretons and the Corsicans? Debray does not say anything about this part of the question, and it remains unclear whether their struggles are also part of what he considers France's "repressed elements" and "relics of past suppression" or whether they are not potential revolutionary elements. In any case, the fact that Debray refers to anti-colonial national struggles and to the revolutionary history of France, but not to the unspecified, or in-between, position of the Bretons and the Corsicans, is symptomatic of the lack of engagement with the question of internal separatism. Debray's omission ultimately reinforces his thesis, as it demonstrates the importance of one's own national imaginary, in this case French, and the difficulty to question it in a real and open way.<sup>2</sup>

Another idea further reinforces a predilection for federalism. It is the idea that bigger states can guarantee more equality because they reach a larger number of people whereas smaller states, in contrast, easily become agents of inequality, as they seek difference and distinction, if not outright privilege. Intuitively, this preconception seems to be accurate: if more citizens share the same state jurisdiction, it is more likely that equality will be implemented among that population, as everyone should be nominally equal in the eyes of the law. However, we must also remember that the reason why modern states worked to encompass large territorial jurisdictions was not so much to implement equality but rather to reduce the overall costs of self-defense, since the cost per capita of an army is lower in bigger countries than in smaller ones. Thus, the size of nations turns out to be a dialectical measure. For the same reason that bigger states can potentially lead to more intra-state equality, they can also lead to more inter-state inequality and conflict. The bigger states are, the more cost-effective wars become for them. Bigger states, in short, are more likely to engage in wars. Thus, when we link the wish for equality with state law we run the risk of endorsing its obverse and contributing to the increase in disputes between different countries and their laws.

Globalization, however, is rapidly changing these dialectical valences. The transformation of inter-state wars into what Carlo Galli has termed global war has dissolved the bond between war and state. As Galli argues, global war is limitless and sets up no division between the internal spaces of the friend and the external spaces of the enemy. The state is no longer the central commander of war power or, in other words, it has lost the monopoly on violence. As a result of "*the global socialization of violence*," war is today the boundless counterpart of globalization itself (174).

In this context, another important tendency has emerged, the tendency to reduce the size of nation-states. As Alberto Alesina and Enrico Spolaore explain in *The Size of Nations*, while "[i]nternational conflict provides an important incentive to form larger jurisdictions," in the global world, in contrast, "[d]emocratization and a reduction in the use of force in international transactions are interrelated forces both leading to a reduction in country size" (100). Even though we must remark again that what has diminished is not so much the use of force but rather the state's monopoly on violence, it is true that, as Alesina and Spolaore argue, there is no longer a clear incentive to form large jurisdictions that protect peoples in a more successful and cost-effective way. In fact, scholars such as anthropologist John H. Bodley have demonstrated that small nations are by and large more egalitarian and socially balanced than big countries, which favor the formation of ruling elites. For Bodley, community solidarity and closer

relationships between people and government in small nations “can be the foundation of a revitalized global system” (1).<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, perhaps it is time to revise the premise that federalism and bigger states are preferable frameworks for the implementation of progressive politics. Globalization has destabilized the political categories that we have inherited from modernity, and we need to be ready to question all of our *idées reçues* in search of alternative vocabularies and premises.

The Catalan case provides a good occasion to undertake this task, even if, or precisely because, the Left has overlooked the rise of separatism in the last five years as an inconsequential event or as non-event. To my knowledge, since Trotsky defended Catalonia’s right to self-determination in 1931, no radical thinker has ever referred to the Catalan problem as a possible site of transformation, as part of global protest, or as a symptom of progressive discontent.<sup>4</sup>

Three reasons may explain this lack of interest. First, Catalan separatism is almost always identified with nationalism, and, as we have seen, the Left tends to consider nationalism a mere bourgeois construct with more repressive effects than emancipatory goals. Second, Catalonia is one of the richest regions of Spain, so the Catalans’ desire to secede can be easily interpreted as a selfish move to avoid redistributing wealth through the central state. Finally, the Catalans’ well-known pride in their language and culture can be indicative of a culturalist mindset. In this sense, separatism may simply constitute the political expression of the fantasy that an independent country will shelter the Catalans from the disturbances of the global world.

This picture could make sense if it were not for a small piece that does not fit. In reality, Catalan separatism emerged as a radical movement and, until very recently, it was mainly supported by the working and middle classes and was linked to anticapitalist claims and socialist ideals. Let us take a brief look at the history of this movement.

While separatism has been a subtext of Catalan nationalism since its political emergence at the end of the nineteenth century, the bourgeois hegemony over the nationalist project tended to incorporate it, and eventually neutralize it, as a potentiality without actuality. Barcelona’s bourgeoisie invested in the building of the Catalan nation and the creation of a modernized cultural space differentiated from that of agrarian and backward Castile. Yet, given that Spain remained the primary market for Catalan industries, the bourgeoisie simultaneously attempted to extend the process of modernization, often conceived as “imperialism,” throughout the Peninsula.<sup>5</sup> The political goal of this process was the federalization of the Spanish state.

Eventually, the irrepressible centralism of the state and, perhaps more importantly, the complicity between the Catalan bourgeoisie and the state in the military repression of class struggle in industrial Catalonia, made federalization an always uncertain process. The separatist sentiment grew stronger especially among the working and middle classes and it led to the founding of a political party in 1922, when a former military colonel, Francesc Macià, inspired by the Irish who had achieved independence the year before, founded Estat Català (EC). The party had a civic and military character and was defined by its leader as the “*exèrcit alliberador de Catalunya*” ‘liberating army of Catalonia.’ But when Primo de Rivera came into power in 1923 and established a fascist regime, he illegalized the party. Macià and other militants fled to France, but continued to conspire against the dictatorship. None of their actions were successful, but they included a range of heroic and vibrant acts. Macià worked to found a League of Oppressed Nations in Paris that included countries from all over the world, from the Basque Country to India.

In 1925, he went to Moscow to seek Stalin's support (through the mediation of Catalan high-level official of the Profintern, Andreu Nin). In 1927, he organized an invasion of Catalonia through the Pyrenees, for which he was judged in a trial in Paris that gave him international fame as the "Catalan Quixote." And in 1928 he fled to Latin America, where with the help of various collectives of Catalan exiles drafted the first constitution for a Catalan state, known as the Havana Constitution.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of this vigorous engagement, Macià gained many admirers in Catalonia and, when the Second Republic was constituted in 1931, he was elected the first president of the Generalitat de Catalunya. Macià's first action was nothing less than to declare the independence of Catalonia on April 14. Even if his intention was to insert Catalonia in a confederate state of Iberian peoples, the central government disavowed his radical act and, four days later, established that Catalonia would remain an autonomous region within a unified state.

Macià's EC had also been integrated into a new party, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), which governed Catalonia until the end of the Republic in 1939. But two main differences existed between EC and ERC. First, while ERC was also decisively nationalist, the party did not share Macià's initial insurrectional strategy and rejected direct action in favor of parliamentarism and governance. Second, ERC emphasized its leftist stance and was more willing to create stronger alliances with communist and anarchist parties that gave priority to the emancipation of the proletariat over the independence of Catalonia. In this respect, when Macià suddenly died on Christmas Day 1933, Lluís Companys, a labor lawyer and high-ranking official of Barcelona's City Council and the Catalan Parliament, was elected president and ERC's strategy prevailed within the coalition.

During the Civil War, the separatist impulse was predictably entangled in the contradictory directions of the Republican side. The clash between the anarchist militias, which collectivized Catalonia's economy during the first year of the war, and the communists supported by Stalin, destabilized Catalan society as much as the advance of Francoist troops. The division between those who wanted to embark on a total revolution and those who wanted to focus on the fight against Franco, and between those who fought for a Republican Spain and those who fought for a Republican Catalonia, created innumerable conflicts among the Republicans. President Companys had little control over the situation.

After Franco's victory in 1939, separatism, and Catalan nationalism in general, virtually disappeared. The Gestapo captured president Companys in France and handed him over to Franco, who, after an unwarranted court-martial, executed him in Barcelona on October 15, 1940. During the postwar, an immense amount of heroic efforts kept alive the spirit of Catalanism through publications, meetings, associations, economic solidarity, the resistance organization Front Nacional, and the preservation of the Generalitat in exile under president Josep Irla. Yet separatism became a utopian longing among the exiled scattered all over Europe and America

It was not until the 1960s that a new generation of anti-Franco activists initiated the political re-articulation of Catalanism and separatism. Specifically, the Partit Socialista d'Alliberament Nacional dels Països Catalans (PSAN), founded in 1968, represented the largest movement that combined the separatist impulse and Marxist revolutionary directives. In this context, the new anti-colonial struggles in the Third World constituted a model for the various versions of Catalan separatism. Three main features characterize the movement in this conjuncture. First, separatism now involved Catalonia and also the

Catalan countries (Valencia, the Balearic Islands, and Roussillon). Second, the fragile unity of the movement during Francoism vanished in the transitional period, when multiple factions appeared, each claiming to be the most radical and revolutionary unit. Given this atomization, it was not surprising that separatism did not gain political representation in the institutions of the new electoral system.

Third, and closely related to this second aspect, the endorsement of violent tactics by a small faction led to the founding of Terra Lliure in 1978. The organization focused on causing “symbolic” damage and defined their fight in terms of national and class liberation. As its 1981 Declaration of Principles asserts, Terra Lliure “lluita per la defensa de la terra, de la llengua, de la sobirania nacional, dels interessos com a treballadors i contra l’espanyolització de la societat catalana” ‘fights to defend the land, the language, national sovereignty, the interests of workers and against the Spanishization of Catalan society’ (qtd. in Vilaregut 47). The organization, however, had little popular support and its social influence cannot be compared to that of ETA in the Basque Country.<sup>7</sup>

But the most important political event of this period was the channeling of the various separatist impulses through one party: the restored ERC, now under the leadership of Heribert Barrera. The new ERC abandoned the revolutionary ideals of the other branches of separatism, but it also refused to endorse the new parliamentary monarchy orchestrated by the state without any previous referendum. As Barrera put it, it was “inacceptable que se’ns hagi posat davant del fet consumat, que la Monarquia hagi estat introduïda d’estranguis, sense consultar popular prèvia” ‘unacceptable that they put us in front of a fait accompli, that they slipped in the monarchy, without first consulting the people’ (qtd. in Culla 165).

After Barrera, the next leader of ERC, Àngel Colom, was a key figure for the integration into the parliamentary route of the different branches of separatism, including Terra Lliure, which officially dissolved in 1995. This integration gave a formalized political structure to separatism, but it also turned ERC into a single-issue party, with a program fully focused on the achievement of independence. For this reason, the next leader, Josep-Lluís Carod-Rovira, worked to expand the social bases of the party and to create a program with a more varied agenda. ERC finally came to power in 2003 in coalition with the other two main progressive parties, the Partit dels Socialistes de Catalunya (PSC) and Iniciativa per Catalunya (IC), and they governed the Generalitat until 2010 under presidents Pasqual Maragall and José Montilla.

The coalition under president Maragall drew up a new statute of autonomy to enhance the self-government of Catalonia. But in 2010 Spain’s Tribunal Constitucional rejected many articles of the document, including the clause that declared Catalonia a nation. After this amputation, secessionism began to boost at an unprecedented speed. Massive rallies in 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2014 staged the transformation of separatism into a hegemonic movement that traversed class and linguistic divisions.

This new hegemonic position entails two important consequences. First, the nationalist frame has been abandoned. While Catalanism had always emphasized the building of the Catalan nation as a culturally differentiated entity within Spain, the new separatism has downplayed the role of culture and stressed instead the economic and political aspects of the new state. Separatism is no longer explicitly tied to the central identity mark of the language. The movement is composed of Catalan-speaking and Spanish-speaking militants, and has the support of multiple collectives of non-European immigrants with no historical links to the Catalan structures of feeling. Dialectics are indispensable to understand this change. While contemporary separatism may be



interpreted as the culmination of modern nationalism, it also involves the overcoming and even the negation of the previous nation-building project. The project to build a new state is not the ultimate expression of Catalan culture; rather, national culture is subsumed under this project in the same way that Catalan cultural products in Spanish or in any of the other languages of the territory become potential constituents of the project as well.

The second aspect is the dissociation between separatism and the Left. While ERC still linked separatism to progressive politics, the major party in Catalunya, *Convergència i Unió*, whose leader, Artur Mas, became president of the Generalitat in 2010, has embraced separatism while remaining a conservative formation. The incorporation of non-leftist parties into separatism, exemplified by CiU's shift, is indicative of a structural change that has taken place at the economic level. In the new global economy the pact between the state and the Catalan bourgeoisie is no longer operative. The state cannot offer protectionism and Catalonia is no longer the "motor" of Spain but simply another site of production and consumption competing with other global sites. Also, as a result of the close tie between state power and corporate capital and the key role of the state in the production of what David Harvey termed "places with special qualities" (295) to attract highly mobile capital, Madrid has become the financial and economic center of the Peninsula. In this respect, Catalan separatism must be understood as the effort to obtain the state power that Barcelona needs to remain competitive in the global market. This economic determination can ultimately explain why separatism has penetrated all layers of Catalan society, except for those ruling elites whose wealth still depends on the ties with the central state. Separatism, in other words, is the political expression of a new generation of entrepreneurs ready to compete on a global scale and without the costly and often hostile intermediation of Madrid.

This recent transmutation of separatism can be read as an abandonment of its progressive content and revolutionary ideals. But before accepting this predictable conclusion, we must ask the speculative question: What if, in fact, the true success of transformational movements is not the achievement of their alleged goals but rather the concrete reform of a given situation? In the academic world but also in Hollywood's political movies, we often encounter the idealization of failed revolutions, an idealization that involves the *jouissance* of seeing pure ideals get crushed by some form of oppressive power. A more dialectical approach can help us overcome this melancholic position. Thus, an alternative premise is that revolutions succeed, not when they fully realize their ideals, which is a rather utopian prospect, but when they intervene in a situation and reform it in an effective way.

Rosa Luxemburg's dichotomy between revolution and reform should consequently be revised. This distinction made sense when Marxism consisted of a proletarian road to socialism. In this context, the dialectical move between (inexorable) structural development and (voluntaristic) class struggle articulated the Marxist problematic and imposed the necessity to insert proletarian militancy into the further comprehension and final implosion of the system. As Luxemburg stated, "[s]ocialism will be the consequence only of the ever growing contradictions of capitalist economy and the comprehension by the working class of the unavoidability of the suppression of these contradictions through a social transformation" (142). In this stage, reformism merely attenuated the effects of the contradictions of capitalism and disabled the prospect of substantial change.

But in our stage of global capitalism, in which the working class is no longer an identifiable subject, in which production has become fully socialized in the so-called "real subsumption of labor under capital," and in which the contradictions of the system

are internal folds of a globalized mode of production, then a different dialectical base constitutes the conditions of possibility for political struggle. Instead of relying on the two pillars of the development of the system and the collective struggle of the proletariat, the new dialectics come from the tension between the emergence of singularities and their immanent effects on given situations.

Singularities are not unequivocally antisystemic or reformist, as their content cannot be programmed or anticipated. Their content gets articulated while they unfold as immanent events. Thus, one can only discern these contents retrospectively, or rather through a temporality of the always-already, by observing the effects of political impulses on a situation. If we could establish a clear-cut difference between revolutionary and reformist events, then all singularity would be lost and events would merely constitute applications of predetermined directives.

Yet we do not need to worry about falling into the opposing trap, which is the ideology of unknowability and nominalism--things are always singular mysteries, history is a succession of unfathomable events, all one can do is contemplate them, etc. In reality, within globalization no singularity emerges without a theory, so to speak. Given the profusion of media technology, the performative function of language in the financial and political spheres, and the dominance of immaterial commodities and labor, events are always already overexposed and overinterpreted. Images, words, documentaries, blogs, pictures and books are tied in with the very appearance of events, so that everything taking place in the globe is immediately recorded, broadcasted, and theorized. In this respect, nothing occurs outside of the techno-ontologico-economic structure or *Gestell*, to use Heidegger's term, of global capitalism.

Our task is not to expect that a series of revolutionary events will lead to the historical overcoming of this structure. Rather, our task is to extract the transformational effects of singular events as they are always already taking place, or as they have always already taken place. Emancipation should not be conceived as the coming of a future realm of freedom, but as the unconcealment of what is already free, laying bare in front of all of us, like Poe's purloined letter. Perhaps freedom is not a transcendental realm, a utopian regulative idea, or a messianic star of redemption; instead, it lives in the immanent singularities interwoven in the very structure of capitalist control.

Before examining the possible transformational contents of Catalan separatism, we must make a clarifying remark. The contemporary rise of this movement has gradually forced everyone to take sides for or against secession; or, at least, everyone must choose whether the potential secession of Catalonia should be decided by the Catalans or by all Spaniards. One is tempted to say that not even the position of looking at the decision as an aporia is available. For instance, one of the most renowned cultural critics in Catalonia, Josep Ramoneda, has interpreted this dilemma in these terms: "[P]er als espanyols, Catalunya forma part d'Espanya, i per tant estem en una situació aporètica, perquè els espanyols entenen, en funció del seu dret a l'autodeterminació, que tenen a [*sic*] dret a dir si volen o no els catalans a dins, i els catalans entenen, també amb raó, que ho volen decidir ells tots sols" '[f]or the Spaniards, Catalonia is part of Spain, so we are in an aporetical situation, because the Spaniards understand, following their right to self-determination, that they have the right to decide whether they want the Catalans or not; and the Catalans also reasonably understand that they have to decide it themselves' (Muñoz 21).

But here we encounter a perfect example of the potentially crippling effects of aporetic thinking. If we present the dilemma between the Catalan demos and the Spanish

demos as an unsurpassable impasse, then the consequence is that things remain the same. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it becomes evident that the expression of undecidability already implies a decision, in this case that the current allocation of sovereign power does not change. If instead we conceive this dilemma not as an impasse but as an occasion to decide and act, then the possibility of transformation emerges. Or, to put it in less positive terms, the true aporia does not lie in the exceptional moment in which the content of the sovereign power must be decided, but in the fact that, when one makes a decision, the decision is no longer available, as the content of sovereign power has already been established. At the same time, when one wants to dwell in the aporia and maintain a critical distance so as to do justice to all the possibilities, then one is inevitably opting to leave things the same. In this respect, I probably do not need to clarify that my exploration of the transformational contents of Catalan separatism presupposes the decision that this movement is an actual form of constituent power and historical change.

So perhaps we can detect three main transformational instances in contemporary Catalan separatism: first, democratic practices not based on citizenship but on residence; second, an imagined community based on militancy rather than culture; and third, the deactivation of state violence by means of asserting a transnational European demos.

Multiple popular polls have been organized throughout Catalonia since 2010 to vote on the question of independence.<sup>8</sup> These polls were constitutionally invalid, and, since the organizers could not have access to the electoral registers of legal citizens, they used the municipal census of inhabitants. Therefore, electoral polls included both legal citizens and illegal immigrants, as immigrants can register as residents of a town even if they do not have a legal status or a work permit. To be a resident, one only needs to show a passport and provide an address, and the register gives you full access to public health care.

The goal to open the polls to everybody above sixteen was that pro-independence votes from immigrants could also be counted. And yet, is this experiment not a valuable case of grassroots democracy? The separation of the fixed link between legal status and right to vote and the prevalence of residence over citizenship in the definition of this right, are useful directives to re-energize democracy in our context of permanent mobility and global flows of labor.

In close relation to this first point, a second aspect is that the new separatism is a movement composed of all types of foreign and diasporic subjects. While Catalan nationalism, like all modern nationalisms since the nineteenth century, understood culture as the hegemonic construction of the imagined community, the new separatism has downplayed the role of national culture and has laid the emphasis on the common project of building a new state. It is true that Catalan nationalism was already a quite receptive ideology. In the 1960s, when many Andalusians moved to Catalonia, Jordi Pujol coined a definition of Catalanness that became emblematic: “Català és tot home que viu i que treballa a Catalunya i que en vol ser” ‘Everyone who lives and works in Catalonia, and is willing to become Catalan, is Catalan’ (20). Naturally, the way in which one would express their will to become Catalan was by speaking the language and identifying with the culture. But this appendix was quickly dropped and the most repeated definition was simply that “everyone who lives and works in Catalonia is Catalan.” So, even if one could argue that the process of acculturation was implied (and Pujol’s linguistic policies to revitalize the Catalan language certainly corroborated this), the limits of the Catalan imagined community remained quite flexible and inclusive.

But for separatism, Catalanness is primarily a political positioning, not a cultural one. To play with Pujol's definition, we could say that the emphasis now is not on living and working in Catalonia, since a good amount of committed separatists live and work abroad (as became visible with the Catalan chains organized all over the globe the days before September 11, 2013), but on the will to become Catalan, a will that has more to do with political practice than with cultural identity.

One could argue that the previous nation-building work constituted the cultural base or *Bildung* that engendered the politics of separatism. And yet separatism has incorporated multiple collectives of non-native Catalans: to mention a few, the collective of Spanish-speaking Catalans *Súmate*; the Fundació Nous Catalans; or the Unió de Centres Culturals Islàmics de Catalunya, whose president, Nouredinne Ziani, was suddenly accused of espionage by the Centro Nacional de Inteligencia in May of 2013 and extradited to Morocco after fourteen years of living in Catalonia.<sup>9</sup> This incorporation is indicative of the predominantly post-nationalist stance of separatism and of the transmutation of Catalanism from culture to politics, or from culture-as-politics to politics-as-culture. Can this shift produce a model for a non-culturalist articulation of nation and state? Even if the possible achievement of a Catalan state will logically cancel out separatist militancy, perhaps the non-nationalist character of this militancy can generate a state model beyond modern nationalism but also beyond postmodern multiculturalism.

Finally, a third aspect has to do with the fate of Spanish sovereignty vis-à-vis Catalonia and the European Union. The Spanish state faces an impasse. On the one hand, the Constitution of 1978 stipulates in article 2 that “[l]as Fuerzas Armadas ... tienen como misión garantizar la soberanía e independencia de España, defender su integridad territorial y el ordenamiento constitucional” ‘the mission of the Army ... is to guarantee the sovereignty and independence of Spain, defend its territorial integrity and its constitutional order’ (“Constitución”). Thus, the law dictates that, if the Catalans decide to secede, the state must send troops to abort the process of independence. Or, at least, as article 155 establishes, if an Autonomous Community does not conform to the constitutional order, the state “podrá adoptar las medidas necesarias para obligar a aquélla [la Comunidad Autónoma] al cumplimiento forzoso de dichas obligaciones” ‘can adopt the necessary measures to force that [Autonomous Community] to comply with the said obligations.’ On the other hand, however, if the state suppresses the secession movement in some violent form, it runs the risk of creating a conflict within the EU and infringing one of its foundational premises, namely that the federation is the guarantor of peace in the continent since World War II. So, if the state cannot attack Catalonia, then it will have to acknowledge the lack of sovereign control over its own territory.

This sovereign impasse relates to the question of the status that an independent Catalonia, or an independent Scotland or Flanders, would have within the EU. Currently, no legal clause stipulates whether these territories would be automatically accepted into the federation or whether they would have to request re-admission. And yet it is unlikely that the EU decides to withdraw the passports of millions of citizens and banish from the free trade zone cities like Barcelona, Edinburgh, or Bruges.

An important component of the symbolic and legal nature of Europe will be decided with the possible independence of these territories. Now an ambiguity exists about whether the EU is a confederation of different nation-states and peoples, or whether it also represents such a thing as a European people. If the EU expels the new states that may result from the secessionist movements and forces them to request re-admission, the

assumption will be that the Union is a federation with a secondary role vis-à-vis the jurisdictions of member states. In contrast, if the EU automatically accepts the new states, then it will be established that a European people exists above the particular states that house the various national communities. In other words, by deciding that the European status of the Catalans, the Scottish or the Flemish is autonomous and not contingent on their Spanish, British or Belgian citizenship, then a transnational European demos will be asserted.

Is this limitation of state sovereignty, and especially to the extent that it deactivates the state violence inscribed in the Spanish constitution, not a precious example of the pacifying effects that the EU can produce? These effects may be read as instances of cosmopolitanism, this utopian premise constrained by the limits of state law and yet always pointing at the surpassing of these limits.

These various transformative effects (the right to vote based on residence and not on citizenship; a non-culturalist articulation of nation and state; and the deactivation of state violence through the assertion of a transnational demos) may present forms of new sovereignty which neither reproduce the repressive structures of traditional states, nor are lines of flight beyond sovereign power and therefore beyond the muddy field of politics. Catalan constituent power is an energizing space to continue observing the actual unfolding of these potentialities.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Löwy's *Fatherland or Mother Earth?* remains a central and comprehensive study of the link between Marxism and nationalism.

<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s, Robert Lafont was one of the main theorists of the regionalist resurgence in France inspired by the anti-colonial liberation struggles; see his *La révolution régionaliste*.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, Bodley presents Spain as a model of a wealth-equitable nation as it resulted from the decentralization process after Francoism (51). But he later speaks of the Basque Country and the Mondragón Cooperatives as an example of a successful unit within an existing nation (114-6). Given that the Basque Country is the only region with a special fiscal system, it is unclear whether this level of decentralization could be implemented in all regions of Spain.

<sup>4</sup> See Trotsky's "The National Question in Catalonia." But a sign that things are changing is the manifesto in favor of letting Catalans vote on their national future. The manifesto was published in November of 2014 and signed by progressive figures such as Saskia Sassen, Noam Chomsky, Richard Sennett, Tariq Ali, Dario Fo or Ken Loach, among others. See [www.letcatalansvote.org](http://www.letcatalansvote.org)

<sup>5</sup> See Ucelay-Da Cal's *Imperialismo catalán*.

<sup>6</sup> For studies of separatism and revolutionary politics in the 1920s, see Ucelay-Da Cal, *Strategies of Separation*, and *The Shadow of a Doubt*. For a history of Catalan separatism, see Rubiralta.

<sup>7</sup> The dismantling of Terra Lliure came after the infamous *Operación Garzón* in 1992, a preventive manhunt ordered by the State's Supreme Court Judge Baltasar Garzón. The operation involved indiscriminate arrests and extensive tortures and brought back the ghost of Francoist repression in Catalan society. For an account of the operation, see Bassa. Also, for a history of separatism during the transitional period, see Renyer Alimbau.

<sup>8</sup> Between 2010 and 2013, 553 polls were realized throughout Catalonia; see Trépier.

<sup>9</sup> See [www.sumate.cat](http://www.sumate.cat); [www.nouscatalans.cat](http://www.nouscatalans.cat); [www.ucidecatalunya.blogspot.com](http://www.ucidecatalunya.blogspot.com).

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