

Observations of Catalan Independence: A Foreigner's Perspective

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11 September 2014, the National Day of Catalonia, was quite a unique experience for me. I had only been in the country about six weeks. A friend told me a few days earlier that there would be a large 'manifestación', or demonstration, on the day. For some reason I had it in my head that this meant there would be a parade, and I thought it was an annual event commemorating the public holiday. So you can imagine my surprise when I learned what the manifestación really meant: approximately 1.8 million Catalans taking to the streets in support of independence from Spain. All day the city was awash in a sea of red and yellow t-shirts with the slogan 'Ara És L'Hora': Now is the time. Excitement and jubilation were in the air. I went for a bike ride and detoured at the Arc de Triomf, where I wandered through several dozen stalls representing various Catalan community, sport, cultural and nationalist organisations. There were men dressed in the uniforms of 1714, commemorating 300 years since that fateful 11 September when Catalonia lost its autonomy at the end of the War of Spanish Succession. I watched as the men fired old muskets.

Later in the day I attended the manifestación (wearing my only red t-shirt), acting as a participant-observer. It was remarkable to see so many people peacefully gathering along Gran Via de les Cortes Catalanes, one of Barcelona's main thoroughfares. It was actually the only time that I was afraid to speak Castillian Spanish! (Friends have since assured me that Catalan nationalists have no problem with Spanish speakers.) I snapped photos for a few groups; I watched as people sat in chairs or simply enjoyed being with each other. I was waiting for a march to happen; it was only when I returned home and turned on the news that I saw the aerial views: people lined up in long stripes of red and yellow for several kilometres on Gran Via and Avinguda Diagonal, forming a large V. The message of the day was clear: these people want to vote for independence on 9 November.

11 September has been significant for me ever since I watched the Pentagon burn from my Washington DC rooftop in 2001. Being a historian, I also recognise that the day holds a special place for Chileans, as that is the day in 1973 that Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected government of President Salvador Allende. I must confess that before I came to Barcelona I did not realise that the day held such meaning here. I knew that it was the National Day of Catalonia, but I did not know the history

behind that day. I still find it odd (or perhaps ironic?) that Catalonia celebrates its 'national' holiday on the day that the region *lost* its autonomy. A Catalan friend of mine told me that normally 11 September is a sombre day when politicians lay wreaths at statues of the heroes of Catalonian independence. There was nothing sombre about 11 September 2014, as the Catalan independence movement formally launched its yes campaign for the upcoming 'consulta', or plebiscite, scheduled for 9 November.

Witnessing the manifestación was the most visible demonstration yet of what I had heard in the news, streets, cafes, bars and corridors of Universitat de Barcelona since commencing my visiting fellowship: there is a sizeable percentage of the Catalonian population who want independence from Spain. Observing this movement and the arguments as a 'guiri', or foreigner, has been fascinating. It is impossible to escape the independence movement in Barcelona. In my four months here so far, Catalan independence was the main news story across Spain every day until a nurse in Madrid caught Ebola (the independence debate moved to the second story); after she beat the virus, independence returned to its place as the number one news story. On the one hand, perhaps it is inappropriate for someone like me who does not live in Barcelona full-time to comment. I do not have to live with the education, health, welfare or tax system that Catalans – and more widely all Spaniards – have to cope with on a daily basis. I come from a position of privilege being able to travel here from Australia and to work flexible hours. I draw an Australian salary, have not lived through the economic crisis still gripping Spain, and ultimately I do not need to live with the consequences of independence. But as an outsider I also have a perspective different from both Catalans and Spaniards. I am not bound by the passions engulfing both sides and, theoretically, may be more 'objective' in my assessment of the situation on the ground. So with that disclaimer, I invite the reader to take or leave my observations of the Catalan independence movement.

First, I see two interrelated but separate issues: whether or not Catalonia should be allowed to hold an independence plebiscite (which, as distinct from a referendum, is non-binding), and whether Catalonians should vote affirmative or negative. To me the first question is a no-brainer: a plebiscite is a peaceful exercise in self-determination and in a democracy it should be permitted. I take this view both as a staunch democrat and as a historian of Indigenous peoples, who for centuries have been denied rights to self-determination. In the post-Cold War era we have witnessed independence referenda leading to new (or revived) nations including East Timor (1999) and South Sudan (2011). We have also seen similar regional independence movements in the developed world go to plebiscites or referenda in Quebec (1980 and 1995) and Scotland (2014). In these cases the no vote won by narrow margins, a point to which I will return. On 29 September, though, Spain's Tribunal Constitucional (Constitutional Court) made the unsurprising decision to suspend (not cancel) Catalonia's state-sponsored consulta pending a challenge from the federal government. Independence supporters believe the decision to suspend the consulta was politically motivated. It is hard to argue there were no political considerations in the decision, but we also need to recognise that this is standard fare within a system of judicial review. We will have to wait to see how the Tribunal Constitucional challenge to the consulta proceeds.

Meanwhile, the government scheduled an 'alternative consulta', which did not appear much different to the original one except for a minor change to the wording of the

questions, the manner in which voters would 'enrol' and the lack of official state sanction. Only about one-third of eligible voters participated in the alternative consulta, which some critics have called a glorified opinion poll. Not surprisingly, given the majority of anti-independence supporters chose not to participate in the non-binding poll, 81% voted in favour of independence. This entire drama has unfolded as a colleague at the Universitat de Barcelona predicted: the President of the Catalanian Generalitat (parliament), Artur Mas, passed a law to schedule a consulta, the intervention of the Tribunal Constitucional halted the vote scheduled for 9 November, and Mas is using the Court's decision and the outcome of the alternative consulta to his political advantage. He is even possibly preparing for early elections to gain more seats and end his minority government's reliance on smaller parties.

It is a shame that the government of Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy has been so determined to oppose the Catalanian consulta. As the Opposition Socialist Party leader Pedro Sanchez effectively points out, Rajoy's government has merely thrown petrol to fuel the independence movement: in 2010, while still in opposition, challenging a statute in the Tribunal Constitucional that had granted more power to the Catalanian Generalitat; mandating that schools must teach in Castillian Spanish instead of Catalan if even only one parent requests it; and of course refusing to allow the consulta. All of these actions signalled hostility to Catalanian autonomy. Clearly Rajoy does see Catalonia as an integral part of Spain and wants to keep the nation united. He also clearly worries that allowing a state-sanctioned plebiscite to proceed could set a precedent that other autonomous regions would pursue. The Basque Country is the obvious candidate, but potentially Galicia or Anadalucia also have independence movements that could garner steam. Yet if Rajoy were to look to the Quebec and Scotland examples, he would see that permitting the consulta could have been the best way to defuse the independence movement. There may have been up to 1.8 million people on the streets on 11 September 2014 and similar numbers at manifestaciones in 2012 and 2013. But, as some of my friends and political commentators have argued, that was all of the independentistas. Of the other 6 million residents of Catalonia, the majority may well not support independence. When citizens of Quebec and Scotland finally had to consider the consequences in their own states, they voted no. In 1995 Quebec's no vote was by the slimmest of margins: 50.5% to 49.5%. Sixteen years later, the Bloc Québécois Party – the political wing of the independence movement – lost forty-five parliamentary seats in the Canadian election and now holds only four. The 1995 referendum essentially answered the question of Quebec independence once and for all.

Why Quebec and Scotland voted no ultimately came down to serious considerations of the consequences of independence. In the build-up to the Quebec referendum, several Canadian businesses and financial institutions were relocating their headquarters from Montreal to Toronto. A new nation would mean new laws, new tax rules, new regulations; moreover, if they wanted to remain Canadian corporations, they needed to be sure they were headquartered in a city that was part of Canada. These moves seriously hurt the Quebec economy. In Scotland several financial institutions made similar promises (or threats depending on your perspective) to relocate to London in the event of Scotland voting to separate from the United Kingdom. Consequences meant also considering questions about currency, European Union membership (or in

Quebec's case, NAFTA and relations with the United States), visas, resource rights and sovereign debt.

This very question of consequences is the main reason I find the Catalan nationalist movement so difficult to digest. I have seen little reference in the media, or even on independence movement websites, to Catalonia's plans for what an independent state will look like. They are likely to want to remain part of the European Union. However, the EU Commission has indicated that new states would have to go through the same membership process as all other states, which could take years. Membership in the European Union also requires the unanimous consent of all member states. Why would Spain support Catalonia joining the EU? Being outside the EU would mean less access to the Spanish (and European) economic market, meaning the need for trade negotiations. Catalonia would need to negotiate its energy supply with Spain and Europe. Another caveat to an indefinite period of non-membership is that Catalonia would need to develop its own currency independent of the Euro. Given the Euro currency crisis, this is not necessarily a bad development because having its own currency would give Catalonia the ability to devalue it in hard economic times. But producing its own currency would require designing and producing it, which would be costly. It would also need its own central bank with its own reserves to support the currency. Other infrastructure of a new nation-state costs money. Independent Catalonia would need to set up its own visa system and border security. It would need its own defence force. All of these are of course feasible tasks, and they are problems new nation-states around the world confront with varying degrees of success. Unlike new developing nations such as East Timor, though, I cannot foresee Catalonia being a recipient of foreign aid from the developed world.

It is unclear how newfound independence would impact the tourist industry, which is vital to Barcelona and Catalonia's economy. Given the popularity of Barcelona it is probably fair to say that in the long term there would be minimal disruption to tourism. But in the short term, tourists may be wary of coming to newly-independent Catalonia, particularly when they can still travel to Spain with no difficulties. Will newly-independent Catalonia set up visa waiver programs such as those which currently operate for Spain? On the flipside, Catalonia would need to negotiate similar waivers from countries such as the United States, United Kingdom and Australia for its own citizens, or else they will need to apply even for short-term tourist visas. How long would it take for Catalonia to become part of the Schengen agreement? Until they are part of the Schengen agreement, the thousands of passengers arriving into Barcelona each day from across Spain and the rest of Europe would need to go through immigration/border control, which again would require new infrastructure which would cost money. Moreover, Catalans would lose the rights of free movement and work across the European Union, potentially needing to apply for visas even to travel to Spain.

As I wander through the streets of Barcelona I see pro-independence signs such as 'I want a country without hospital waiting lists' and 'I want a country where my children will have jobs'. What plan is there for cutting hospital waiting lists given that the same number of people requiring medical attention would still be residing in Catalonia (or perhaps the plan is to stimulate an exodus, but that could also mean an exodus of doctors)? What are the economic development and job creation plans? Not being part of

Spain or the European Union means that if the economic crisis does continue, or if there were another slowdown, young people would not have the same mobility to search for new job opportunities elsewhere in Spain or Europe. How will Spain and Catalonia divide the sovereign debt? Presumably Catalonia would not be starting in a debt-free clean slate. If national debt were divided according to GDP, then Catalonia's gross national debt would be 121% of GDP. Mind you that Greece currently has a debt to GDP of 175% and is essentially insolvent (again). And what plan is there to attract foreign investment into a new nation, particularly one which would be burdened with such a sovereign debt? Foreign investors like stability; on the one hand perhaps they would see the independence question done and dusted and a new stability in the region, but on the other they may pose the same questions as those businesses that left Quebec about new regulations and laws. These are just some of the problems I foresee with an independent Catalonia. They are not insurmountable, but I have yet to see an actual *plan* for a viable independent Catalonia.

As an observer, the passions in favour of independence seem to boil down to a combination of disdain for Rajoy and the Partido Popular, as well as an economic and a cultural argument. Being an unashamed liberal, I am no fan of Rajoy myself. But governments change, and there will come a time when Rajoy is no longer prime minister and the left is back in power. That is how democracy works, rather than seceding when unhappy about the central government (ask the United States how that went down in 1861). The economic argument is that Catalonia brings in about 20% of Spain's revenue but is not getting its fair share back. Catalonia is tired of subsidising the rest of Spain and wants to control its own revenue. Indeed, this is the very issue which Rajoy challenged in the Tribunal Constitucional in 2010, catalysing what was otherwise a relatively quiet independence movement. But for every economist who argues that Catalonia is propping up Spain, I see other economists who argue that Catalonia is receiving excessive concessions to appease the independence movement. Moreover, there are those who point out that without free access to Spanish (and European) markets, Catalonia's revenue would plummet. It is hard to know which economist is right when I hear mixed messages coming from all sides. One thing I do believe, though: independence is a distraction from the genuine, combined economic woes of Catalonia and the rest of Spain.

Then there is the cultural nationalism grounded in the notion of a separate Catalan culture and identity. Language and culture are intricately entwined, so clearly in that sense Catalans are indeed different from the rest of Spain. As an outsider, though, I am a bit stuck as to where the differences are beyond that. One reason that there has been so much mixing of Spanish and Catalan cultures is because from the 1940s-60s, there was an influx of migrants from other parts of Spain to Catalonia. Many of these people and their descendants learned the Catalan language, while at the same time enriching Catalonia by bringing their customs, food and cultural practices. In restaurants across Catalonia – and not just the ones catering to tourists – I see similar cuisine offered that I see across Spain: gazpacho, paella, tortillas (Spanish omelettes), patatas bravas, flan. Some say that tortillas and pan tomate (bread with tomato) come from Catalonia. But I can get tortillas and pan tomate across Spain. This is not to deny them as part of Catalan cuisine or culture; rather, it is to return to the important anthropological concepts of cultural fluidity and cultures changing over time. Much of the rest of Spain has actually

adopted part of Catalan culture and vice versa, making the cultural nationalism argument harder to distinguish as an outsider.

I also find it hard to see how Catalan culture is under attack, notwithstanding the actions of Rajoy's government regarding school bilingualism. I still see Catalan written everywhere and hear it spoken on the streets. Indeed, even going into a *national* phone company like Movistar, I was not able to get a brochure I could understand because they only carried Catalan brochures. There are Catalan television and radio stations, newspapers and bookstores. In a restaurant when I asked for a Spanish menu, the owner insisted that the menu he gave me was Spanish with a bit of Catalan mixed in (I can assure you that the entire menu was in Catalan). I even had to go through a convoluted process to get the computer I typed this article on changed from Catalan to Castilian Spanish; the policy of the Universitat de Barcelona is to install them in Catalan until a 'formal request' is made to change it. I recognise that Catalan was forbidden during the Franco years. Perhaps at that time I could see a pretty good case for Catalanian independence. But since the transition to democracy, Spaniards have enjoyed the rights and freedoms that Western democracies privilege. Among those rights are the right to practice their culture and to freedom of speech and expression. To give the independence movement credit, it has been peaceful and civil. But I look at places like Palestine and see people do not have rights under a dominant occupying power. I find it much easier to support independent statehood as the only solution to their grievances.

At the end of the day my passion for self-determination leads me to support having a formal independence vote, as well as supporting whatever outcome the people vote for. That said, I think the people really need to think of the consequences of voting yes, as independence may not be the panacea for their woes. Rajoy claims that a plebiscite or referendum is unconstitutional because Catalan independence affects not only Catalonia, but all of Spain. The constitutional question aside (which I am completely unqualified to answer), Rajoy does have a point: if Catalonia were to leave Spain, it would impact on the rest of the country socially, politically and economically. Maybe the real solution, then, is that a plebiscite on Catalan independence should go to a national referendum. Some close friends of mine in Madrid believe that the majority of Spaniards would gladly vote yes to Catalan independence in a national referendum. Across Spain, many citizens are sick of the Catalan nationalist movement and would be happy to see the Catalans leave. Who is to say if my friends are right or not? But perhaps the independence movement should consider this as a new strategy.

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