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The Price of Democracy in Barcelona

By Josh Hollis
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Eric Hobsbawm wrote a decade ago, “More nonsense and meaningless blather is talked in western public discourse today about democracy, and specifically about the miraculous qualities assigned to governments elected by arithmetical majorities of voters choosing between rival parties, than about almost any other word or political concept... the word has lost all contact

with reality.”[1] Surrounding the situation today in Barcelona there is a great amount of faith based thinking on secular matters.

As I write this helicopters are buzzing overhead, as they have been solidly all day and intermittently for the better part of a week now. Today, Tuesday was a general strike. From up above they can see what I can hear, thousands of people in the street protesting despicable state violence against the local population. It seems surprising to me that the events of the last few days have come as a shock. As the next steps unfold this is concerning. Ultimately there isn't likely to be any magic, only realism, and someone here should say that clearly I think. It is a failure of the leadership if they don't.

It is perfectly obvious that the government in Madrid cannot accept the peaceful succession of Cataluña. This would be the start of a process, with at least the Basque country following. The Basque experience fighting for independence should really be instructive; I am not sure why Cataluña expects to find it any easier. ETA was more committed and worked for far longer and eventually gave up the fight, this would seem to be the logical point of reference for what needs to be invested to break away. Democracy cast no spells there. Max Weber noted a defining characteristic of the modern nation state was that the state holds, “a monopoly on legitimate violence.” The reality, I think, is that it doesn't really make a difference in Madrid if you do it with bombs or ballots, attempts to break the state will be taken as a challenge to the monopoly on violence.

Whether it happened before or after the vote, Madrid was going to crack down. Imagine 42% of those eligible had voted peacefully, with 38% of eligible voters forming the largest group and calling for independence, what then? Madrid would have said no and at some point would have enforced its own edicts with force. That was inevitable. The craven mess that is Mariano Rajoy could not even let the results come in, because he is terrified of ceding democratic legitimacy, but that in itself is evidence of the depth of democratic sentiment in the ruling class here. A corrupt, dim witted, and fascistically inclined sham. They don't care for democracy any more than the rulers anywhere else. If the local leadership know this then they must also see that they weaponised local democracy against the legitimacy of the central government. That may well have been the intention, but there is a very real sense here that events have escalated in a way now that was not intended. Left wing Catalan daily *El Periodico* yesterday ran an editorial calling the manner of the vote “a grave error” by Puigdemont and that he was “the president of only part of the Catalans.”

The king spoke on TV an hour ago and criticised the independence movement. He pointedly made no reference to the police violence. My phone buzzed with a whatsapp from a friend, Catalan, against the police violence, of course, but against independence, she said, “oh no, this is the worst thing he can say to the independistas!!!” It seems amazing that there was an expectation the king would mend bridges. The Robocop looking hired goons were bashing skulls and throwing women down flights of stairs for king and country and no other way about it. He was never going to attack his own. It appears that the next move is to try and split the Catalan people instead.

The leader of Ciudadanos, the right wing political party, Albert Rivera Monday called for invoking article 155 of the constitution to annul the Catalan regional government for a day and use that to call new local elections. Presumably this would create a forum in which the powers that be would be willing to argue the case against independence. There are many compelling practical reasons. I haven't yet seen anyone discuss what will be the currency outside the Euro, trade relations outside the EU, or the general economic effects of succession. None of these suggest the practical realities of life will be easy for at least a decade. The economic crisis of 2008 here really only ended, as much as it has, a year ago. You can't eat the democratic will of the people. By following this path of local debates within a constitutional form that creates a buffer too independence itself, it seems logical that the next step is to call on the roughly 50% of the population who oppose independence to make their voices heard. "The noisy minority" is a phrase often heard in Barcelona when talking to people who aren't pro independence. Trying to exploit this and make the debate a Catalan one, with passions high, has the potential for a sadly divisive situation to develop here.

None of this is to say that the independence movement is doomed to failure. It certainly doesn't endorse the government in Madrid in any way. However, it seems inescapable that somewhere a great price will be paid for independence. That this isn't discussed feels bizarre. I saw a friend, well drunk by this point, walking home from counting ballots at his local college on Sunday. He said 6000 had voted here with 5300 voting *Si*. We discussed the horrible violence of the police and I asked him what he hoped to gain from all this, "independence" he said. I asked again, but what does that do for you really? He looked vacantly at me, "independence." That is enough for maybe half of Cataluña and certainly less than half of the population here in Barcelona. If it doesn't move you emotionally though, lots of people here find the whole thing rather weird.

Two month before this election *Si* was polling at under 40%, having lost 8% support as the reality of the election drew nearer. (This referendum had a 42% turnout, the previous one 37%.) It may be that 38% is a fairly accurate reflection of the support for independence in reality. Supporters are claiming that police violence deterred people from voting and that ballots were stolen. I have spoken to several people who are convinced that *Si* supporters stuffed ballot boxes. A friend who lives in a rural area has told me he knows someone who boasted he voted at five different polling stations. The editorial noted above from *El Periodico* was critical of the lack of basic democratic procedures to the voting. (The whole referendum was organised by pro independence parties.) Give and take and in relation to the polls the result is probably about what was expected. It seems objectively impossible to see the referendum as a thumping mandate for independence.

A lot of English language coverage seems to be focussing on themes of left and right, fascists and democrats. Independence here is not a left right issue at all, it doesn't cut that way. The referendum was called long before Rajoy displayed his fascistic side, that being fully out in the open was an effect not a cause. The press here, local Catalan also, seems much more depressed at the situation today. It seems as if no one expected or planned for what should have been obvious. Sad and deplorable, but expected. Independence won't come because of some secular enlightenment liberalist theories. Not any more than having god on our side will make it happen.

The question then becomes what is the price and are people willing to pay it. Hopefully a frank discussion of that is the next step. After the general strike today the local government must decide what comes next, it will be sad if this escalates further without people fully understanding what they are getting in to. The reality is that anyone living here here in Barcelona today is about as free as you could imagine. The government are a shitbag racket of thieves in most places, but as it goes the Spanish are no more ghastly than any others really. (Catalan politicians have their own corruption scandals also.) If you fight the state it will fight back though. The sense seems to be that however nice the ideals are, this may not be worth fighting over, at least not in the way this is heading. Whether either side of the political dick-swinging contest – that ended with the people Billy clubbed – are responsive to that remains to be seen.

Notes.

[1] Hobsbawm, Eric, *Globalisation, Democracy, and Terrorism*, (London, Abacus, 2007)