

A letter from Catalonia

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A look at some of the history of the current situation

In the international media, the current situation in Catalonia is often explained with reference to the Franco era and the suppression of Catalan language and culture during that time.¹ Commentators also refer to the fact that during the Spanish Civil War the majority of Catalans fought on the side of the Republican government, which meant that after Franco won the war, oppression in Catalonia was especially brutal: large numbers of Catalans were imprisoned, disappeared and killed by the Franco regime.

These comparisons with the Franco era are also increasingly widespread in the Spanish media, which is perhaps unsurprising given the immobility and oppressive response of the Spanish national government, led by prime minister Mariano Rajoy of the Partido Popular (PP) - a conservative party with Francoist origins. Indeed such comparisons are also made by the politicians who are opposed to Catalan independence. Thus, for example, Pablo Casado, PP's national vice-secretary, warned that Carles Puigdemont (the president of Catalonia) was likely to end up the same way as Lluís Companys - who was President of the Catalan government during the civil war, and was tortured and executed by Franco in 1940. This prediction sent shock waves through the Catalan public but Casado then clarified by saying he had only been referring to Companys's unsuccessful declaration of a Catalan state (within a 'Spanish Federal Republic') in 1934, as a result of which he was sentenced to imprisonment under the then right-wing Republican government.

These references to the Spanish Civil War and Franco have some validity, but they do not on their own explain the present situation. After all, before 2010,

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political parties and movements in favour of independence represented only between 4 and - at its height - 17 per cent of the Catalan population. It is events in more recent history that have been nurturing the desire for independence over the last few years, namely the PP-inspired frustration of much of 2006's statute for greater autonomy for Catalonia.

All Spanish regions have an 'autonomy statute' (Estatuto de Autonomía). But this statute is not the same for all regions. For instance, the Basque country can collect its own taxes - based on the argument that this is a revival of historical rights - but the Catalan government cannot do so, though they have made similar arguments in favour of such a right on grounds of historical precedent.

In 2003 negotiations for a new statute of autonomy began between the Catalans and the Spanish central government, which at the time was led by José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero of the Spanish Socialists (PSOE, Partido Socialista Obrero Español). Many Catalan politicians and citizens believed that more of the wealth produced in their region was being taken away by the central government than was being given back in the form of investments in infrastructure, education, the health system and social security. They wanted more control over their economy. But they also wanted control over their own culture and education, especially with regard to the status of the Catalan language. After a long process of negotiation among the different Catalan parties, a proposal for a new statute was passed by the Catalanian parliament in 2005 and sent to the central Spanish government; and - after very substantial changes that led to withdrawal of support for the statute by one of the Catalan parties, Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC, Republican Catalan Left) - this was approved by the central Spanish parliament, and the Spanish senate. In a subsequent official referendum in Catalonia this watered-down statute of autonomy was approved by 73.9 per cent of those voting (the abstention rate was 50.6 per cent). According to people I have discussed this with, most Catalans, including those who had always been in favour of independence, were happy with the new statute. Esquerra Republicana conceded that it had misjudged the will of the Catalan people and accepted the new statute.

But the PP under the leadership of Mariano Rajoy then decided to launch an appeal against the statute to the Constitutional Court, on the grounds that it was unconstitutional. In 2010, after four years of deliberation, the court declared that many of the paragraphs in the statute were unconstitutional - even though

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equivalent paragraphs already existed in statutes of autonomy for other parts of the country. This sparked one of the first mass demonstrations for independence in Barcelona since the end of Franco rule - comprising around one million people according to the police at the time.

This is the story that many people cite as marking their turning point from 'autonomista' to 'independentista'. But it was also the moment when many other people began to embrace the idea of 'the right to decide', that is, the right to hold a referendum about secession from Spain - including people like my neighbours, who are against independence but in favour of a referendum. It is this lack of the right to decide that has enraged people, and made them lose their trust in the central government, no matter who is in power. So, in discussions about potential negotiations, the most frequently heard argument these days is that negotiation makes no sense - 'they hate us, we will never get what we need and want from the Spanish government' (a sentiment, accompanied by hollow laughter, that was echoed on a recent occasion when, in response to the promise by the government and PSOE to discuss a change of the constitution, I expressed a measure of hope). Such sentiments are usually followed by a list of things that the government does not do in Catalonia, starting with its failure to deliver promised infrastructure: for example there is no fast train along the coast connecting important Catalan and non-Catalan cities, from Barcelona to Cadiz, though there is a fast train from Barcelona to Madrid, which passes through empty landscapes. The list of complaints also includes central government's lack of adequate investment in education, in helping small business, in the social services, and in the health service.

Some have argued that the movement for independence is simply a case of rich people not wanting to share their wealth with the poor in the rest of Spain.² And there is certainly an element of truth in this. But there are many different arguments for independence, and they vary across social classes, genders, and generations. For instance, progressive groups have been angry about the Spanish government blocking Catalan legislation - as has happened with the Catalan law to make evictions illegal if people cannot pay their bills due to unemployment, or the law exempting retirees from paying fees on their medication. Even a law forbidding bull fights was deemed 'unconstitutional' because, it was argued, bull fights represent 'Spanish culture'. (This is by no means to argue that the Catalan government under the CIU [for details on this coalition see below] has a particularly progressive record:

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this is a region that has a very harsh record on austerity measures and the eviction of indignados.)

There are also many cultural-political complaints, including criticism of the lack of respect shown by the Spanish government, and the ridiculing of Catalan language and culture. At the same time, these complaints about being seen as inferior are often connected with Catalan feelings of superiority in relation to the rest of Spain, which tends to be regarded as consisting of 'landlords and bureaucrats' living off the wealth that is created in Catalonia. Catalonia is seen by many as a country of creative, industrious people, with a level of industry that does not exist anywhere else in Spain except in the Basque Country (the fact that the creation of its wealth would not have been and is not now possible without all the Andalusian immigrants is not part of this story). It is true, however, that Catalonia produces 20 per cent of Spanish GDP - a good reason for the Spanish government not to tolerate its secession.

In everyday life one does come across hard-line independentistas criticising people for not speaking Catalan, or marginalising people from other Spanish regions that are against independence. However, this kind of attitude is not propagated in any of the official statements of groups and organisations in favour of independence.

The build-up to the referendum

The story of the build-up to the referendum of 1 October is a complicated one. In 2011, following the debacle with the new statute of autonomy, a civil society organisation was created, the *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (ANC, National Assembly of Catalonia), and this has since then campaigned incessantly for independence, and organised huge demonstrations on every 11 September, the national day of Catalonia. (This is known as the 'Diada', and commemorates the fall of Barcelona in 1714, to Bourbon troops supporting Philip V's bid for the Spanish throne.) These demonstrations have attracted between one and two million people over the past four years.³ And the movement has also revitalised an older organisation, *Omnium Cultural*, which was founded in 1961 to defend the Catalan language and Catalan cultural institutions against Franco's oppression.

The results of the 2015 regional elections reflected the increased support for independence, though not decisively. Two parties of the centre right - the

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Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (CDC) and Democrats of Catalonia (DC) - formed an alliance with the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya and jointly contested the elections under the name Junts pel Si (JxSi - Together for Yes), whose main programme point was to achieve independence. (DC was a pro-independence breakaway from the Democratic Union of Catalonia (UDC), which had formerly been in partnership with the CDC in the alliance *Convergència i Unió* (CIU), which had governed Catalonia for most of the post-Franco era.) A fourth party, *Candidatura d'Unitat Popular* (CUP - Candidacy of Popular Unity), a staunchly pro-independent left party, though it did not join this alliance, promised to support JxSi policies, as long as these included setting in motion the process for independence. (CUP calls itself radical, but I would not call them that, because being radical means going to the root of things, and dependence/independence is not the root question for the social conflicts in either Catalonia or the rest of Spain.) In the event, JxSi and the CUP together did not win the majority of the votes (they achieved 47.7 per cent, of which 39.54 were for JxSi and 8.2 per cent for the CUP). But as a result of the process through which votes are translated into parliamentary seats, they achieved an absolute majority in the parliament. This is how they have been able to launch the process for independence.

Those opposing the process in the Catalan Parliament include *Ciudadanos* (Citizens, Cs), who are originally a Catalan party, although they now operate as a national party. (Cs won 13 per cent of the vote in the 2016 general election and support the Rajoy government now.) Though they construct themselves as modestly liberal, and were founded primarily to combat independence, *Ciudadanos* are regarded by most people as being of the centre right, and pro-neoliberal. The Cs won approximately 17.9 per cent of the vote in the regional Catalan elections. The Catalan section of the PP, with 8.5 per cent, is of course also against independence, as is the Catalan Socialist Party (12.74 per cent). The majority within Catalunya Si que es Pot (CSQP - Catalonia, Yes We Can), with 8.9 per cent of the vote, was also opposed to the form in which the referendum was launched, although they are in favour of the right to decide and support a change of the constitution and a legal referendum. CSQP is a left alliance that is broadly modelled on Barcelona's *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona Together) and is closely connected to *Podemos*. These are all groups that have their roots in the anti-austerity *indignados* movements that emerged in Spain after 2011 and campaigned to protect people from evictions, and for the improvement of the health, education, and social security systems.⁴

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Podemos and other local organisations deriving from the 15-M movements have different perspectives in different localities, since they originate from specific local movements. Within different regions their coalition partners have varied: sometimes these have been with the local socialist party, sometimes with other regional or local parties.⁵ Until now they have managed to maintain a common perspective on the independence movement and on national politics in general.

Their position - shared by all their regional sister/cousin organisations, including CSQP - is that there must be a right for the Catalan people (and any other citizens) to decide whether or not they want to remain in Spain or become independent. According to surveys, this is a right that is supported by between 70 and 80 per cent of the Catalan population, and about 60 per cent of the Spanish population as a whole (this right is supported by many who are against independence). However, Podemos also argues that this decision has to be taken through an agreed, valid referendum, not through one organised unilaterally by the Catalan government. For this to happen, the Spanish constitution needs to be changed, because it includes a paragraph stating that the unity of Spain is undividable.

The difficulty for CSQP and Barcelona en Comú is that their membership includes people both for and against independence. Moreover the mayor of Barcelona, Barcelona en Comú's Ada Colau, does not have a majority in the municipal parliament and thus needs to be in constant dialogue with the Socialist Party (who finally became part of her government in 2016), as well as the ERC and the CUP (which is the party that resists her most among the left). In addition, she has the PP and Cs against her.⁶

These conflicts are reflected within the Catalan population. While a large majority is in favour of the right to decide, only around half of the population - according to all sorts of surveys and according to the regional election results in 2015 - are in favour of independence. This explains why the actions of the independentistas (shorthand for the three Catalan pro-independence parliamentary parties), in forcing the 'process' through parliament with their absolute majority, created anger among the other political parties, including CSQP and Barcelona en Comú (and now, Catalunya en Comú, the new regional party founded since the regional elections by Barcelona en Comú, Catalan sections of Podemos and other small left and green parties).

These critics argued that it made no sense to launch a referendum that was not

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agreed in negotiations with the Spanish parliament and through a change of the constitution. And they also criticised the nature of the law for the referendum on a number of legal and procedural grounds, including the lack of a minimum level of participation below which the referendum would not be valid. This absence is for fairly evident reasons. The independentistas knew that those who were against independence would not vote because they considered the referendum illegal. Participation would thus be predominantly by pro-independence citizens, ensuring that a simple majority of voters would vote yes and give legitimacy to a unilateral declaration of independence. As Ada Colau argued, the way in which the independence process was launched had left behind half the Catalan population.

In the event, it seems that the repressive measures adopted by the central government before the referendum on 1 October (confiscating voting material, detaining eleven members of the Govern [Catalan government] for a few days, shutting down the website of the Catalan government, etc) motivated large numbers of people to vote who otherwise would not have done so, simply to defy the central government. The participation rate (as much as one can trust the figures, given that the electronic system checking who had voted, and where, was shut down by the central government and it took some time for the Govern to set up a new one) was 42 per cent - 2.2 million people. Of these 90 per cent were in favour of independence - which is 38 per cent of all citizens with the right to vote. This result is made all the more complex - as the Podemos factions and others with sympathy for the independentistas think - by both the limitations of the referendum and the police repression, which made voting difficult. The result cannot be regarded as a solid basis for secession. The CUP argues that they have a mandate from 'the people' to declare unilateral independence, but this simply shows their disdain for the majority of 'the people', who did not vote for independence or did not vote at all - for whatever reason.

After the referendum

As the international media has reported, the process and its results, including the police violence, have created major controversies within Catalan and Spanish civil society. One very negative result has been the surge of far right groups (the ultras as they are called here), who have suddenly come out in public as defenders of 'the

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unity of the Spanish nation' (of course, not everybody wanting to defend that unity is a fascist). These include the political party España 2000 (which has only competed once in a general election, in 2011, when its total number of national votes was only 9256), the FE/La Falange and Fuerza Nueva. Both before the referendum and since, they have been threatening individuals known to be independentistas in their homes, and they have also tried to obstruct gatherings in Valencia and parts of Catalonia. Up to now these groups have been all but invisible: there is no far right political party in Spain to speak of. Some argue that this is because the far right is already in government, but - even given the attempts at repression of the referendum - I think this is an exaggeration. The PP today is no further to the right than the CSU in Germany or the Brexit Tories in the UK.

Another civil society phenomenon has been the number of demonstrations taking place not only in Catalonia but also in the rest of Spain. On 3 October there was a demonstration in Barcelona of about 700,000 citizens protesting against the violence of the national police force, which will have included people both for and against independence. The same can be said of the 'white demonstrations' of 8 October, the theme of which was dialogue. These were organised by a new Spanish-wide civil society movement that has apparently appeared out of the blue, announcing itself with a big banner unfurled on top of a building in central Madrid, asking the question 'Parlem?' (Catalan for 'shall we talk?'). As an answer a similar banner was raised on a building in Barcelona saying: 'Hablemos' (Spanish for 'Let's talk'). These 8 October demonstrations were supported by Podemos and its affiliated local parties. Ada Colau and Pablo Iglesias took part in Barcelona.

On 9 October there was a huge demonstration for the 'unity of the Spanish nation' in Barcelona (and in other parts of Spain), supported by PSOE, Ciudadanos and PP. On 18 October, following the jailing of Jordi Sanchez and Jordi Cuixart - the leaders, respectively, of the Asamblea Nacional de Catalunya and Omnium - on the grounds of sedition, 200,000 took to the streets to protest. On 18 October, after the government announced it would suspend Catalan autonomy (using article 155 of the Spanish constitution), half a million people participated in demonstrations demanding freedom for the 'two Jordis' and for Catalonia.

As I write this account, on 19 October, the possibility of dialogue seems to have vanished - if it ever existed. The PP and Ciudadanos have never considered any dialogue, except one on the - unacceptable for them - terms that the Catalan

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government returns to 'legality' and re-establishes the 'social order' (this would mean that the Govern had to give up any demand for independence or even a referendum). This condition has always been part of the central government's standpoint, and is the reason why real negotiations have never taken place.

The argument that the referendum was illegal is based on the constitution's clause about the unity of Spain, while the actions of the government are justified on the grounds that it has to guarantee the rule of law and the social order: nobody is above the law, they argue. (This was their defence for the jailing of Sanchez and Cuixart, but it should be noted that this same tribunal has found the PP to be in violation of the constitution on a number of occasions, for example in its 2012 taxation amnesty, without that having had any consequences.) Those who defend the 'right to decide' argue that the constitution has been changed several times over the past forty years.

The stand-off between Rajoy and Puigdemont can in some ways be seen as a showdown between two stubborn men, neither of whom is able to give in an inch for fear of 'losing face'. But that is only part of the story. The independence process, as flawed as it has been, did not come into being because a few nationalistic politicians thrust it upon the population. The politicians have been, and are still being, pressured into this process by substantial social movements. Before it collapsed in 2015 Puigdemont had been part of CIU, which, though nationalist, had never favoured independence. Their goal had always been a better negotiated statute of autonomy. But because of the growing pressure of civil society movements (and also in an effort to distract public attention from its own corruption scandals) its members were more or less forced into the independence process.

One might wonder that the independentistas would embark on such an adventure, given the risks of being forced to leave the EU and the Euro (they are staunchly pro-EU and pro-Euro), and with companies fleeing their country due to the instable situation. But the people I speak to in my everyday encounters, as well as leading politicians, really believed that the EU would protect them from any violence on the part of the central government, because, according to EU law, member countries must respect the right of expression of their citizens. They were convinced they could remain in the EU because Catalonia is such an important economic force in the EU; and they were convinced that capital would remain in the country because of the continuing possibilities of making profits (due to the

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inhabitants' industrious attitude). Even, now, when more than seven hundred companies have moved their head offices to other parts of Spain, many see this as little more than an attempt to pressure the Govern to refrain from independence, and believe that the companies will come back once they realise the process will work out fine. Others, like the CUP, realise they may suffer for a while, but think the price is worth paying: in the end they will be able to decide their own fate - and get rid of capitalism altogether.

The role of PSOE

Since the general election of 2015, PSOE has played a considerable role in creating the stalemate and uncertain future that we are facing today. Podemos - participating for the first time - almost overtook PSOE in this contest, receiving 20.6 per cent of the vote as compared to PSOE's 22.01. (PP, who were the incumbent ruling party, remained the strongest party, with 28.7 per cent of the vote, but this was down from 44.63 in 2011.) At this point the numbers meant that, although the PP had the most elected members, Podemos and PSOE, together with the smaller left-wing regional parties represented in the parliament, could have formed a coalition government. However, PSOE, under the leadership of Pedro Sanchez, was strongly opposed to a change in the constitution leading to the 'right to decide', while all the other left parties favoured it - among them the ERC, which under no circumstances could or would consider going back on their election promises.

PSOE members and voters were (and are) divided on this issue. But it would have been possible for Sanchez to at least promise a process in which a change of the constitution would have been negotiated (this is what he has promised now, together with Rajoy). However, as he was worried about losing the support of members opposed to such a process, he instead started negotiations to form a government with Ciudadanos. Only after these two parties had made an agreement and signed it did they then invite Podemos to join them (they needed their participation if they were to be able to put together a majority in Parliament). But their refusal to include in the joint programme the 'right to decide' and a number of other social demands, which would have effaced completely what Podemos and its allies stood for, proved an insuperable stumbling block. After six months of fruitless negotiations, Sanchez was still unable to garner enough votes to become prime minister, because Podemos

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abstained from supporting him. Rajoy was also unable to form a government and so, according to the rules of Spain's constitution, new elections were declared in 2016. The result was more or less the same as before, except that Podemos lost about 1 million votes and PSOE gained some. Rajoy tried again to win enough support to become prime minister, but could not garner enough votes, because Sanchez insisted PSOE should vote against him, as they promised during the election campaign. However, the party's federal committee, which had an old guard majority, then ousted Sanchez as leader. After this, Socialist members of parliament abstained when Rajoy again put himself forward as prime minister, and thus allowed him to be voted in. In the subsequent PSOE leadership election, Sanchez (who now occupies a position on the left of the party, though this has not always been the case) stood again as candidate and, in what was a surprise for many, once again won, against the more right-wing Susana Díaz from Andalusia. Since then he has been talking about Spain being a 'plurinational' country, a term he had avoided before - but without ever specifying what 'plurinational' means.

In the debate about 1 October and its aftermath, the PSOE, and Sanchez in particular, have failed to take a stand in favour of continued dialogue with the independentistas. Instead, Sanchez has spent all his time negotiating with Rajoy, with a result that he proudly presented as a success on 11 October, namely that (a) Catalonia would have to return to the state of law (that is, disregard the referendum); and (b) this would then lead to a process of six months in which experts would suggest a change of the constitution to allow the 'right to decide'. These changes would then be presented in parliament, giving Podemos and other groups the chance to argue for their position of an agreed referendum - which the PSOE would oppose. Of course, in Catalonia nobody took that 'offer' seriously - including Ciudadanos and other groups against independence, who were eager to reassure their supporters that they would not allow any change of the constitution.

The ultimatum - or rather the two ultimata - that came with this 'promise' of a process to change the constitution have been widely reported in the international media. Given the process of the referendum, the risk people took to vote, and the number of people who voted in favour of independence (even taking into account the reservations discussed above), it would have been totally impossible for the Govern to simply give in to either of these ultimata. Instead, Puigdemont, under quite a degree of fire from independentistas within and outside his own party, tried

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to create some kind of dialogue. To this offer the central government, Ciudadanos and - sadly - PSOE all argued that it was not possible to enter in dialogue with a government or its representatives that had broken the law. From their point of view this argument is correct and consistent. However, the problem - as Marx once said of capitalists - lies precisely in their point of view. To consistently deny the possibility of deciding about their national status to a large majority of people (given that a majority of those opting against independence still want to vote) may be legally correct, but it is democratically illegitimate.

The right to decide

The Catalan independence movement includes progressive elements: it demands social rights, public education, multiculturalism (around 200,000 independentistas - visible through their flags and banners - and others have filled the streets of Barcelona with the demand to let more refugees in) and equality. This is, however, completely irrelevant to the argument. A movement with much less virtuous demands, even one that should be opposed, deserves the right to express itself and democratically decide its fate. Sadly, however, in Europe it is mainly the right that supports the 'right to decide', while the centre and left fear any kind of 'secession' (the former) or 'nationalism' (the latter). But the European left should be supporting Podemos and other left groups demanding the right to decide. This would not imply support for independence or any kind of nationalism - whether or not in progressive form - but would simply mean support for a broad democratic process. Whatever one might think of the independentistas, they do not deserve to be lumped in with right-wing, anti-European movements, eager to keep their precious money for themselves alone.

The coming days, weeks and months will show that oppression does not silence such demands. The jailing of the 'two Jordis' has united parties and individuals for and against independence in the demand to free them. Even the Catalan Socialist Party, and the Catalan branches of the national trade unions, UGT and CCOO, took part in the demonstration the night after their incarceration. Unfortunately, I believe that the way in which the Catalan government has handled the process for independence will play into the hands of the anti-independence right - in spite of the oppressive measures by the central government. People are fed up with

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uncertainty and untransparent declarations for a process of independence. They want their normal everyday life back. And Catalunya en Comú, with its sober positions against unilateral independence and against the measures of the central government, will be the losers, since they infuriate hardcore independentistas as well as hardcore defenders of Spanish unity.

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Notes

1. See for example Natalie Nougayrède, 'As Germany and Spain prove, history - with all its wounds - is not over', *Guardian*, 7.10.17: www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/07/germany-spain-catalonia-protest-history-20th-century-traumas; Cees Nooteboom, 'Die ungewisse Abspaltung', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 10.10.17: www.fr.de/politik/katalonien-die-ungewisse-bspaltung-a-1365393).
2. See Charlie Hebdo: www.corsematin.com/article/culture-et-loisirs/les-catalans-plus-cons-que-les-corses-a-la-une-de-charlie-hebdo; and Counterpunch: www.counterpunch.org/2017/10/11/catalonia-the-revolt-of-the-rich/.
3. For an example of the largest one, forming a V for Vote in the colours of the Catalan flag, see: www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXYmfAornEo.
4. For a more detailed analysis see Sirio Canos Donnay, 'The people versus the elite', in European alternatives discussion in *Soundings* 60, summer 2015; and 'We the people' in popular fronts discussion in *Soundings* 65. There is a short documentary about the movement in Barcelona and Madrid at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=80UdS9WuQXA.
5. Pablo Iglesias, the leader of Podemos, though not loved by everybody has managed to keep the party united and on a more left-wing path against his main opponent Iñigo Errejón, who, drawing on the concepts and strategies

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of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, wanted a more open politics towards the Socialists and Cs. Iglesias won the battle at the last national conference narrowly (41.47 against 39.12 for Errejón). For more on this see Íñigo Errejón and Chantal Mouffe, 'Constructing a new politics', *Soundings* 62, spring 2016.

6. Despite these difficulties Colau has managed to realise many changes in Barcelona, including a restriction on the number of hotels and apartments for tourists, new infrastructure projects, and the confiscation of empty houses belonging to banks in order to house evicted people, to name a few.