

Catalunya: A Week of Escalation

Could the Riots Open a Horizon Beyond National Sovereignty?

CrimethInc.

October 18, 2019

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Starting Monday, in response to draconian sentences imposed on politicians who promote Catalan independence, tens of thousands of people across Catalunya have engaged in sustained rioting and disruption. Although the majority of the movement remains pacifistic, a few thousand participants have rejected the leadership of political parties and organizations, opting for open confrontation with police. The various mobilizations are still taking place in confluence, however, making it very difficult for the police to control. Protesters have reportedly used caltrops, Molotov cocktails, and paint balloons to disable police riot vans, while keeping individual officers at a distance with lasers and slingshots and driving away helicopters with fireworks. In the following report, we review the events of the past week and explore what is at stake in this struggle.

As anarchists, we have a more robust conception of self-determination than mere national sovereignty. All governments are based on the asymmetry of power between ruler and ruled; nationalism is just one of several means by which rulers seek to turn us against each other so we don't unite against them. We consider it instructive that the Catalan police have worked closely with Spanish national police throughout the last several years of repression; even if Catalunya gains independence, we are certain that independent Catalan police and courts will continue to repress those who fight against capitalism and seek true self-determination. At the same time, there is a longstanding tradition of anarchist and anti-state activity in Catalunya, and we are inspired to see some of this coming to the fore in resistance to the violence of the Spanish state. It is possible that the latest escalation of conflict in the streets of Catalunya will be a step towards the radicalization of the entire movement and the delegitimizing of state solutions.

Let's look closer to see.

Monday, October 14

In retribution for the 2017 referendum and subsequent declaration of independence, Spain's Supreme Court sentenced former Catalan vice president Oriol Junqueras to 13 years in prison; former ministers Jordi Turull, Raül Romeva, Dolors Bassa, Joaquim Forn, and Josep Rull were sentenced to between 10 and 12 years apiece. Former parliament speaker, Carme Forcadell, received 11 and a half years for sedition. Activists Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart were sentenced to 9 years each, also for sedition.

Several independence groups called for demonstrations and blockaded major roads in Barcelona. Early Monday afternoon, the Tsunami Democràtic group called for demonstrators to blockade the Barcelona airport. There were also blockades on train lines and many highways.

Showing the integrated functioning of all the different subsections of the state, the Catalan and Spanish police—the *Mossos d'Esquadra* and *Policia Nacional*—worked together to repress the demonstrators. They brutally attacked a large number of people. While the majority of demonstrators remained “nonviolent” in response, as they had in 2017, some built burning barricades and pelted police with bricks, fire extinguishers, and luggage carts from the rooftops. It took the police hours of violent attacks to evict the airport. One clash in a parking deck started around 9 pm and continued until nearly midnight. Afterwards, thousands of people continued to resist; some erected burning barricades on the interstate.

Tuesday, October 15

On Tuesday, the blockades organized by “Tsunami Democràtic” continued on a largely “non-violent” basis, slowing and in some cases paralyzing rail, car, and air transit. More protests broke out that night. Goaded by police violence, more and more people began to fight back, throwing heavier objects and setting fires in the streets.

The *Assemblea Nacional Catalana* (“Catalan National Assembly,” ANC) and various political parties had convened columns to march from across Catalunya starting Wednesday, taking the highways and thus blocking them, in order to arrive in Barcelona on Friday for a general strike and protest. The plan was for this action to be totally pacifist. This was basically a repetition of their 2017 strategy, in which they organized demonstrations on October 3, two days after the massive police beatings that occurred during the referendum on October 1, waiting an extra day before holding the protest in response to government repression so that people wouldn’t be reacting immediately to the violence without a chance to calm down.

Yet they also gave their approval to Tsunami Democràtic, which had planned all along to organize flash-mob-style protests immediately following the verdict. These protests, too, were intended to be completely nonviolent, but to take a more effective approach—targeting infrastructure rather than merely symbolic points. Either the organizers underestimated how many people would show up and stay into the night, or they overestimated their ability to impose pacifism after the 2017 experience.

Starting Tuesday night, events were clearly out of their hands. In Catalunya, the extent to which people employ combative and destructive tactics is generally a useful indicator of the autonomy of a particular demonstration, even though in and of itself utilizing more confrontational tactics doesn’t necessarily imply a radical agenda. The parties have always insisted that everything must be peaceful, just as they have watered down the meaning of “independence,” using nationalistic discourse to and suppressing the anti-capitalist objectives that used to characterize the movement.

It’s not easy to summarize the political ideas of people fighting in the streets on the basis of their conduct, but it seems that the pacifists remain under the ideological dominance of the parties and “civil society” organizations like ANC and Omnium, whereas those putting up barricades appear to be open to a much wider vision of what the enemy is and the objectives of the actions could be. The former tend to be middle-class (or aspiring middle-class) and exclusively Catalan speakers; the latter group is much more diverse, including Spanish speakers (though still mostly Catalan speakers), immigrants, and others. When the more confrontational demonstrators express themselves, they tend to express opposition to the police, “the fascist Spanish state,” and to mention more economic issues.

We should always challenge the assumption that a movement is about one thing. A movement is only about one thing where there is an effective leadership controlling it. Left to themselves, people don’t tend to reduce their concerns to single issues. Reality is intersectional.

Hats off to the anarchists and other anti-authoritarian activists who have spent the last two years spreading non-statist, non-nationalist perspectives and analysis relating to this issue and creating the autonomous, horizontal spaces that have cropped up in this movement since 2017, outside the dominance of the political parties and the Marxist-Leninists who dominated the *indepe* movement before 2013. The emergence of this autonomous space is the key difference

that distinguishes what is happening today from what happened in 2017—and we’re seeing its fruits in what is taking place in the streets.

Another major factor in the way that people in Catalunya have behaved ungovernably this week is that the Spanish state was stupid enough to imprison the pacifist politicians and “civil society” activists who had effectively pacified the movement in 2017. The ones who had already effectively killed this movement, it seemed, until now.

Never underestimate states. Also, never underestimate statist stupidity.

Wednesday, October 16

On Wednesday, high school and university students declared a strike, which continued through Friday. ANC marches and highway blockades set out from many major cities. In the evening, people engaged in very serious rioting in Barcelona; substantial rioting took place in all three other provincial capitals, not to mention smaller cities like Manresa. Many of the clashes occurred outside the Delegations of the (Spanish) government or Guardia Civil barracks. There had already been significant rioting in Lleida and Tarragona on Tuesday night.

Catalan president Quim Torra and ex-president Carles Puigdemont declared that the rioters were “infiltrators,” but only the immediate followers of those politicians were stupid enough to believe this. The usual absurd conspiracy theories spread across social networks about masked protesters getting paid in envelopes of cash.

In Madrid, a fairly large anti-fascist, pro-Catalan demonstration took place at the same time as a fascist march against independence. The two demonstrations clashed and police separated them.

Thursday, October 17

ANC marches continued. Rioting took place again that night in Barcelona and other three provincial capitals. Fascists marched in favor of Spanish unity in Barcelona, attacking some protesters in favor of independence.

Friday, October 18

Today, the general strike is taking place in Catalunya. A Spanish judge has ordered that web-pages linked to Tsunami Democràtic must be shut down—something similar to China forcing Apple to shut down an app used by demonstrators in Hong Kong.

The conservative People’s Party (PP) is calling for the application of the National Security Law—essentially, martial law. Meanwhile, it appears that a new political consensus may be forming. For a couple years Spain hasn’t been able to form an effective majority government; elections took place earlier in the year, but will have to take place again in November, because disagreements prevented the Socialists from forming a coalition government with Podemos. The fighting in Catalunya is driving a wedge between Podemos (which takes a soft approach based in dialogue, potentially open to a “legitimate” referendum) and Socialists (who take a hard approach rejecting any possibility of dialogue or self-determination). This creates the possibility of a coalition government involving the Socialists and the PP—assuming the PP, Citizens, and Vox parties

don't get enough votes to comprise the majority on their own, which they very well might not, as Spain remains majority left.

The riot cops are exhausted, probably only running on cocaine at this point. There are videos circulating of riot vans carousing down the streets with the cops using their sound cannons to shout "Som gent de pau." This means "we are people of peace"—it is the slogan of the independence parties, but the cops mean it in a mocking, provocative tone. There are cases of the *Mossos* discipline breaking, of individual officers being isolated and beaten up, which never happened during the strikes of 2010 to 2012 or even the week of the eviction of the anarchist social center Can Vies. Several times, police were forced to retreat by combatants hurling rocks and even some Molotov cocktails. Even at the high point of the resistance defending Can Vies, it was rare to see police retreat; they just had to work really hard to advance, at which point rioters simply went elsewhere.

A mainstream newspaper reported today that fully half of the police riot vans have been decommissioned by damages, primarily to tires. It's unclear how quickly they can repair them. If they lose their vans, they will be powerless; there are too many people in the street, using too much force. The state would have to send in the *Guardia Civil* or the military proper to maintain what they call "order."

The real question is what will happen on Saturday. Today could serve as a catharsis, ending the unrest; it could be effectively repressed, if police bring in new resources and tactics; or it could be the day that the state recognizes that it has lost control and has to escalate repression. During the riots defending Can Vies, it was after the fourth day that the state recognized it had lost; on the fifth day, everyone was exhausted so the march was just a victory lap. But now, with perhaps double the number of police but several times as many participants, spread throughout Catalunya, the movement won't tire as quickly. Though the pacifists condemn the rioting, they're still marching and blocking highways, thereby adding to the difficulty for the state.

The Backstory, the Future

The Iberian peninsula has seen conflict between monarchists, capitalists, fascists, and proponents of state democracy, on one side, and anarchists and other proponents of liberation since long before the Spanish Civil War. It's important to remember that the independence movement only took center stage in Catalunya after countrywide anti-capitalist struggle reached an impasse, undermined by many participants' erroneous belief that democracy—direct or otherwise—could bring about the changes they desired.

In 2011, the 15M movement, a forerunner of Occupy, broke out in Spain, occupying plazas and clashing with police. That was just one chapter in a phase of struggle arguably peaked on March 29, 2012 with massive riots during a nationwide general strike. All around the world, this was a high point of grassroots struggle against the inequalities of capitalism and the violence of the state.

Yet rather than continuing to invest energy in grassroots direct action as a means of enacting change, many who had promoted direct democracy in the plaza occupations shifted to trying to rehabilitate state democracy via new parties like Podemos. Ultimately, as we chronicled here, the results were disappointing, serving to pacify the social movements without achieving their original goals.

In the ensuing vacuum, the independentista movement gained momentum, proposing a referendum as a way to make Catalunya independent—promising a state solution to the problems that had originally inspired people to mobilize against capitalism and government oppression. When Spain cracked down violently on the referendum, this left anarchists in an awkward position, wanting to oppose police violence but not to endorse national independence as the solution to the problems engendered by capitalism and the state. Of course, it wasn't just Spanish police participating in the crackdown—it was also Catalan police. All the institutions that would supposedly serve the people after independence were already being used against them, as they surely will continue to be if Catalunya does at some point become an independent state.

All this shows the problems with nationalism and democracy. We support people in Catalunya defending themselves from police, courts, and other institutions of power; this is why the events of this week have been inspiring. But ultimately self-determination means abolishing these institutions, not reforming or reinventing them. The question remains whether the current struggle in Catalunya will radicalize more of the participants towards anarchist solutions or simply towards more violent means of pursuing national sovereignty. But those at the forefront of events will surely have disproportionate influence on the answer to that question.

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Retrieved on 17th June 2021 from crimethinc.com

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