Democracy, Red in Tooth and Claw

On the Catalan Referendum: The Old State, a New State, or No State at All?

CrimethInc.

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On October 1, during a referendum on Catalan independence, Spanish police attacked crowds of voters, smashed out the windows of schools hosting polling stations, and beat senior citizens at random. In response, a massive general strike took place in Barcelona on October 3. By setting up this opposition between the violence of the Spanish police and the self-organization of Catalan voters, proponents of independence have created the impression that nationalism and democracy offer a solution to state oppression and police violence. In the process, they've invested Catalan police and politicians with renewed legitimacy. Yet what if democracy, nationalism, and police violence are not opposing phenomena, but three aspects of the same thing? Here, we argue that the way to achieve self-determination is not to create a new state, but to abolish the state as a model for human relations.

Don't take our word for it, though. Let's back up and see if there's any coherent way to resolve this conflict over state sovereignty besides the anarchist approach.

Which Side Is Democratic?

Both sides claim to be fighting for democracy. The Spanish police present themselves as the defenders of law and order, while the proponents of Catalan independence say they seek self-determination through elections. These are two different visions of what democracy entails.

Or are they? Let's look closer.

If democracy simply means being assaulted by police in the name of constitutions ratified before you were born, there isn't much to distinguish it from dictatorship. The fact that the salaries of the officers who beat you are paid with tax money they extort from you just adds insult to injury. The Spanish state needs to legitimize those laws, police, and taxes with democratic elections or else it will be obvious to everyone that their rule rests on force alone. This explains some of the innuendo about how the majority of Catalan people don't actually want independence.

But the partisans of Catalan independence face a version of this same paradox. What weight will their referendum carry if the result is not implemented via laws, police, and taxes? In calling for an independent Catalan state, they are calling to replicate everything they currently object to in Spanish rule. Catalunya already has its own police and tax collectors who treat those who resist them just as violently as the Spanish police treated aspiring voters on Sunday.

So it's not a question of which side is democratic. They both are. The question, rather, is which elections, laws, and police should hold sway—the Spanish ones or the Catalan ones? To answer that question, we have to confront a deeper problem, the question of sovereignty.

What Makes Elections Legitimate?

Was the referendum on October 1 legitimate? The Catalan government asserts that it was. Meanwhile, Spanish President Rajoy maintains that "a self-determination referendum in Catalonia didn't happen," in the longstanding tradition of politicians like Donald Trump who proclaim reality by fiat.

What does it take to make a referendum legitimate? Is it a question of what proportion of the population participates? Or is the important thing whether the vote adheres to an established protocol?

According to the Catalan government, 90 percent of the ballots cast on Sunday were for independence. On the other hand, only 42 percent of registered voters participated in the referendum—2.2 million people out of 5.3 million registered voters. That still seems like a pretty good turnout, considering that 12,000 Spanish police were violently attacking voters all over Catalunya, inflicting nearly 900 documented injuries and surely a great deal more that went unreported. But it still accounts for less than half of the registered voters and considerably less than half the population.

Opponents of Catalan independence boycotted the election. Even if they hadn't boycotted it, most of them probably wouldn't have risked being beaten by Spanish police in order to vote for those police to continue to wield authority. It's entirely possible that the majority of the residents of Catalunya don't want independence, regardless of the results of the referendum.

For reference, no Presidential election in US history has ever included more than 43% of the total population. Countless people have boycotted US elections, but this has never discouraged those who rule from Washington, DC from assuming that they hold rightful authority. If we decide the Catalan referendum wasn't representative enough, we should probably reject the legitimacy of every US Presidential election as well.

Others argue that what makes an election legitimate is not what proportion of the population participates, but whether it takes place according to proper protocol. This argument is most popular with the *extreme center,* the sort of people who are sticklers for the rules regardless of what the rules are or who wrote them. Before we buy into this argument, let's recall that it was protocol that kept women and people of color from participating in elections for the first century and a half of US democracy, just as the current rules still serve to prevent many people of color from voting today. Adherence to protocol does not guarantee inclusion or egalitarianism.

But the real problem with relying on protocol is that it returns us to the problem of sovereignty. If two different governments establish two different sets of rules, how do we determine which is legitimate? Every existing government came to power by rejecting the authority of its predecessor. We can't simply do whatever the authorities tell us; we have to make our own decisions about what is right.

The Problem of Sovereignty—Democracy, Nationalism, and War

What should determine which polity people belong to? Nations generally make this determination according to place of birth or parentage. The former approach perpetuates the feudal system; the latter makes nationality a kind of caste system. Neither of these models is "democratic" in the sense of guaranteeing everyone equal rights and participation in society. They also don't offer any guidance as to what we should do when competing polities demand our fealty, as will occur in Catalunya if this conflict intensifies.

Should the answer to this question be determined by majority rule? There are many problems with this approach. For example, it doesn't address the question of scale. Partisans of independence may comprise the majority of the population of Barcelona—does that mean they should be able to force their agenda on the minority that opposes it? Catalans comprise a minority within the Spanish state—does that mean Spain should be able to force them to remain Spanish subjects? Spain comprises a minority within the European Union, which itself is a minority within

the United Nations. Should world politics simply be a matter of ever bigger majorities forcing decisions on minorities?

Nationalism has developed as a response to this quandary. Understanding the question of sovereignty as a competition to amass majorities at all costs, people form blocs on the basis of superficial similarities such as ethnicity, language, religion, and citizenship. These blocs contend for control within each state and in conflicts between states. This struggle takes place nonviolently as democracy and violently as war—wherever you find democracy, war is never far away.

There are two grievous problems with this approach. First, it exacerbates internal hierarchies; second, it imposes conformity and the struggle to dominate others as the dual basis of all relations. In practice, nationalism means being oppressed and exploited by people of your own ethnicity, language, religion, or citizenship. To defend ourselves against those who aim to rule us, we have to join forces across the boundaries of identity, forming common cause on the basis of shared aspirations for freedom and peaceful coexistence. Nationalists promise to deliver self-determination on the basis of shared identities, but true self-determination demands symbiotic relationships that transcend identity.

The principle of majority rule itself is the problem. On the one hand, the theory of majority rule suggests that we are obligated to accept whatever the majority desires, prescribing a complete abdication of ethical responsibility. On the other hand, the practice of majority rule tacitly implements the principle that *might makes right,* reducing all relations to cutthroat competition.

Because majority rule is the foundation of democracy, we should not be surprised when democracy serves to legitimize and mobilize the violence of the state, provoking rival states to do the same thing in response. This is the dual risk posed by the independence movement in Catalunya: it could establish a new state just as oppressive as the previous one, but more difficult to question on account of appearing more representative—and it could trigger open hostilities between entrenched state actors who become incapable of imagining each other as anything other than enemies. The latter scenario appears very unlikely for now, but we are not the only ones to speculate that as economic and ecological crises intensify, the Syrian civil war will become a more common template for the politics of the future than the social democracies of the 20th century.

Anarchist Alternatives

Anarchists have long sought a way out of the traps of nationalism and democracy.

In place of citizenship, a holdover of feudalism and the caste system, we propose voluntary associations that do not claim exclusive control of populations or regions. In place of nationalism, we propose mutual aid across all lines of identity. In place of the state, we propose true self-determination on a decentralized basis. In place of democracy, the principle of majority rule, we propose the principles of horizontality and autonomy. In place of the wars that nationalism and democracy always foment, we propose solidarity and transformative justice.

What could this mean in Catalunya today, where partisans of Spanish sovereignty clash with partisans of Catalan independence? Our answer is utopian, but it offers a point of departure to imagine what we could aim to accomplish in our social movements besides setting up new state structures.

Let Spain be a voluntary association comprised of everyone in every land who identifies with it, and let Catalunya be another such voluntary association among a thousand more. Let all of

these associations coexist on the condition that none seeks to rule the others or deprive them of resources. Let each association set out to create commons rather than to amass private wealth, and let all join forces to defend themselves whenever anything threatens these commons or the liberty of the participants.

In this vision, each person could participate in as many different associations as she saw fit. Each association would function as an experiment in collective creativity, shaped alternately by consensus-based decision-making and by the spontaneous interplay of the participants' self-directed activities. In place of the cutthroat competition of capitalism and statecraft, each of these associations would strive to offer the most fulfilling model for cooperative human relations. A process of natural selection would reward the most generous and nourishing projects rather than the most selfish and brutal, without reducing them to a lowest common denominator or imposing competition as a winner-take-all zero-sum game.

This vision predates the anarchist movement; it has antecedents in a variety of indigenous societies and federations. It is already the model by which anarchists in Barcelona and elsewhere around the world organize themselves in networks of assemblies, social centers, organizations, and affinity groups. Even if we can't implement this vision on the scale of a region or a continent yet, we can act according to its logic, building networks of mutual aid and standing up to tyranny wherever we encounter it.

From this vantage point, we can see that when police attack people attempting to utilize voting booths, anarchists should intercede—not to defend the voting booths, but to protect people from police. We should make it clear that winning referendums will not bring us closer to the world of our dreams—the important thing is to become capable of creating the relations we desire on an immediate basis, in a way that can spread rhizomatically throughout society.

At the same time, we have to make clear everything that the Catalan police have in common with the Spanish police and other police the whole world over. We've seen the Catalan police attack demonstrations over and over just as the Spanish police did on Sunday. If they provoke less outrage when they attack migrants, workers, and anarchists than when they attack voters, that only shows us how far we have to go.

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