

**OVERCOMING MUTUAL
REJECTIONS**

**THE PROBLEMS OF CIVIC
CONVERSATION, AND THE EXAMPLE
OF CATALONIA**

Víctor Pérez-Díaz

ASP Research Paper 121(b)/2021

Research Papers



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Introduction

In an earlier essay, I suggested that we should consider political problems as if they were games of chess, being played as multiple simultaneous matches (Pérez-Díaz, 2020). Victories, defeats and rankings would follow one another, over and over again, and each match would have its own prize, but the final victory would remain to be seen - it could come... right at the end, or at any time. I now propose a game that, in a sense, goes hand-in-hand with all the others: that of the control of feelings of mutual rejection. I examine this by focusing on a personal experience while emphasising the socio-cultural breadth of the underlying problem - which is far more than just an incidental tactical one.

The underlying challenge is that of winning or losing the game of how to hold together a political community (Europe or Spain, for example) and overcoming or (at least provisionally) circumventing the possibility, or the probability, of spiralling feelings of reciprocal mistrust. Such feelings could overshadow the whole, threatening to cause chaos and darkness. They prevent the formation of a solid foundation for civic friendship, which is indispensable for producing and reproducing a plausible political community. A community, that is, that will be able to last - and even to last for a very long time - just as any European nation-state or a Roman *civitas* might dream about lasting for a millennium.

In this case, we could attempt to reinforce the European political community, for example. However, it should be done by taking account of not only (and not so much) the ideas and interests argued over in the debates, and the continuous manoeuvring, but the feelings (and the moral dispositions) of the people. And it should also be done in a certain way: indirectly, by focusing attention on how one of the European nation-states (Spain) and one of its territories or regions (Catalonia) fit together. This would be justified for two reasons. Firstly, because what we ascertain at the nation-state level may be useful to us, by analogy, at the European level. Secondly, because, in order for the project of an integrated Europe to come to fruition, it is essential that its constituent parts, its nation-states, have the internal coherence and stability necessary in order to avoid any one of them becoming a source of contagion. To the contrary, this would aggravate an already chaotic situation and foster the creation of a kind of black hole into which a large part of our energies (of Europeans, of Spaniards and of Catalans) would be sucked, for far too long. And the ultimate consequence of that would be a Europe that is “eternally in the making” - a variant of what Voegelin called “that famous Europe which does not exist” (1989).

I focus on a “Catalan problem” which, in reality, includes a number of problems of adjustment between Spain as a nation-state in existence for the last five centuries, and Catalonia, as one of its key territorial, cultural and institutional components throughout that time. Over the last decade, half of the latter’s electorate has demonstrated its desire for independence from Spain and the other half, to remain part of it. I examine the feelings of trust between the two halves. I do not attempt to offer a description and far less a complete explanation of the ongoing process, but merely an exploratory essay and, in some way, an invitation to a conversation.

As regards method, I introduce a variety of material into this essay: statistics, news, philosophical and literary references, and personal testimonies. I include the latter in order to be able to better understand the perspective from which I view the problem, and I invite the reader to do the same. In this way, we can become involved in a conversation parallel to, and connected with, the civic conversation or public debate that is taking place at this time. This means engaging in a process of shared reasoning, making use of what John Newman (1979

[1870]) called an “illative sense”, that is, one with which we uncover the truth and forge our consent to it in multiple ways, by means of conversation, in search of a relative, and elusive, consensus which will, in its turn, be put to the test as we continue to move forward.

I develop my argument in two clearly differentiated parts: the first is of a very general nature whereas the second is centred on the subject of Catalonia. I propose to consider the present moment as a drama open to various possibilities, and to approach it from the perspective of a (let us say, Pascalian) bid to understand the disorder and bring it to an end, thanks largely to the presence of a political community that is self-aware and responsible for itself. However, the alternative option also exists: the continuance of a culture of noise, with the corresponding disorder, with which it is thought we can “continue to live”.

I note the sense of insecurity with which we regard this disorder. Accustomed as we are (in Europe and in Spain) to a centuries-old history of certain collective subjects - some “ourselves” - in the form of nation-states (or their equivalents), it is logical that we feel bewildered at the present time. There would be no point in denying it. It is inevitable. We must begin from this point, and with good reason. Because, while some casual observers deplore feelings of national identity as “emotionalism”, in reality, although these feelings may be confused they are not false and they are important to bear in mind. Perhaps they are some of those confused perceptions (as Leibniz would say) with which human beings are accustomed to living, in the belief that *they have to live with them* in the absence of any others.

I go on to outline a straightforward analysis of the conditions of resilience and weakness inevitable to every civic conversation that is associated with the sense of relative fragility of every political community.¹ I do so citing our condition as agents or, in other words, as “transient survivors” who, as such, bear an existential insecurity which is made even more difficult to handle in times like the present, moving at a fast pace, with a lot of noise, and only half-shared collective stories and rituals.

In the second part, I develop my argument by moving on to the relationship between Spain and Catalonia. I suggest that creating *a foundation of civic friendship* would substantially reduce that existential insecurity. I analyse a case, just one small incident, that calls into question the friendship, and I have chosen the case to indicate how a denial of friendship, according to how we handle it, can, paradoxically, contribute to the formation of a friendly space. I base this on my own personal experience and, given that I am resolved to examine how to turn an obstacle into an advantage (“the consideration of contrariness” proposed by Gracian in Discourse VIII in his *Agudeza y Arte de Ingenio* [Wit and the Art of Inventiveness]), I explore the subject of how we can put “feelings of rejection” and “unfair criticism” to good use; insofar as such criticism highlights a kind of resistance to reality in the arguments of all sides, including our own, and tests our capacity for empathy and, by extension, for learning.

Lastly, I refer to two factors that could either facilitate or impede that learning. It is likely that the use and abuse of distortion in the public space will impede it. Leaving aside analysis of the systemic background of such distortion (that is, the bias and degree of “falsity” that generally accompanies the normal operation of economic and political systems), I refer to certain sources/foci of distortion and, more specifically, to the role of different kinds of prevaricators. This role is the reverse of that of the “enlightened benevolent” or, as Leibniz described them, “enlightened persons of good intention”. The latter would try to apply justice with wisdom, understood as a *caritas sapientis* (Riley, 1996; Leibniz, 2011 [1692]); and they (and Leibniz, as a

¹ Expanding on the subject of the fragility of political forms to which I refer in Pérez-Díaz (2017).

philosopher, diplomat, jurist, politician and driving force of Enlightenment society) would contribute in this way to a better world of peace and of balance, of love and knowledge; in sharp contrast to the chaotic world of continual and forceful distortion.

I finish with praise for “the unusual”: a reference to the (possibly utopian) ideal of the political community as a space for friendship. The aim is for more than simple (though laudable) tolerance (understood as a “painful coexistence” by Ortega in his discourse on the Catalan problem of 13th May, 1932) and even for more than mere benevolence and enlightenment. The aim is to discern a pathway from “self-interested friendship” to “true friendship”. What would be “unusual” would be an emotional and moral impulse similar to respect and admiration for what is different, to the culture of praise, and to magnanimity: all virtues that may seem, in the so advanced and so supposedly realistic times in which we live, a little anachronistic. (Rather like those of Don Quixote?)

I know that my allusion to the ideal of political friendship, a key part of the argument, needs to be developed further, and I hope to do so more extensively elsewhere. In addition, my occasional references to thinkers of the seventeenth century - that extraordinary century of chiaroscuro - such as Leibniz, Gracian and Pascal, to their graded observations, their appeal to ingenuity, their awareness of contradictions and their sense of commitment, are a way of reaffirming how the human sciences of today are rooted in an earlier tradition of philosophy and the humanities. They are also a way of invoking an ideal, that of the political community as a space for friendship and, at the same time, of emphasising the need for the most realistic analysis possible of the complexity of the agents and of the variety of circumstances.

I believe that this is more urgent than ever in these times of huge turbulence. And if these times are turbulent, those to come will be even more so as we suffer the consequences of the pandemic, geopolitical tensions and economic crises. We can console ourselves with the knowledge that European civil wars are a thing of the past, from whose incivility we still have so many lessons to learn.

1. The bid for a political community

1.1. In a confusing time

Spain is obviously not the only European country that is subject to a worsening of internal tensions today. In fact, it shares a labile situation and an uncertain future with many others, to which we might apply the words that a political scientist and economist friend, Michele Salvati uses to describe Italy: “*tutto è ancora in mente Dei*” [“all is now in the mind of God” or “all is still in the lap of the gods”] (2020). Which means, among other things, that we are facing an open drama in which just a few years seems an inordinately long time in which “anything could happen”. There could be one, two or five years of a provisional *modus vivendi* - or eight years, as suggested by another politician and academic, Andreu Mas-Colell (2019) ², who is a close observer of events in Catalonia. Or perhaps even thirty?

On the other hand, this provisional situation offers an *opportunity* to enlarge and complicate the political playing field. The usual games are, and will continue to be, of fundamental importance: those concerning declarations, summit meetings, elections, economic measures, human rights, historic narratives, diplomacy, media propaganda; without forgetting the basic

² Salvati’s political stance is one of a left-leaning liberal; that of Mas-Colell, one of a Catalan sovereignist who focuses on self-determination; my own is one of a Europeanist who focuses on civic friendship.

issue of maintaining law and order, which would exclude recourse to physical violence. What I propose here, however, is that, without disregarding those games, we should concentrate on playing and winning a *different game*: that of controlling feelings of rejection among adversaries, which is crucial for a grand strategy in the medium to long-term with a view to European construction.

This particular game must be placed in context, bearing in mind that the context is partly constant and partly changeable, and may be very changeable. Right now, we are living in a time of intense localised upheaval, in which each moment seems to have a strange urgency which may get worse or simply become a kind of melodramatic routine. For example, just in *the last week of February, 2020*, as I began to write this piece,³ the populist, socialist government of Spain initiated activities which were called, ambiguously, negotiations and conversations, with a Catalan regional government of nationalist-separatists which laid down as a condition of the negotiation/conversation the recognition of a relationship of equals between itself and the Spanish state (thereby challenging the sovereignty of the Spanish people who, it is assumed, were/are the cornerstone of the current constitutional system), as well as what it considers to be the right of Catalonia to self-determination (which the Constitution does not recognise) and an amnesty for the political leaders responsible/irresponsible for an illegal referendum on that same self-determination. That scenario would be the culmination of a cycle of political unrest that has been growing for a decade, during the course of which the number of Catalans in favour of independence has grown from about 30% to approximately 45%.⁴

Meanwhile, as the economy continues on an erratic course and the general dissatisfaction in society with politicians increases, the debate about the Catalan problem in the public space becomes increasingly strident, complicated and unpredictable. At the same time, the language employed by both sides is continually misleading: depending on whom one listens to, self-determination is or is not a consultation, the constitutional order is or is not legal certainty, performances at the polls and in parliament are or are not political actions, and could be somewhat analogous to a dream, and the amnesty could be a loosely interpreted as parole, etc.

It seems as if the whole country has settled into a “culture of noise” or fuzziness. It is not that words no longer have complex meanings but that they are ambiguous, true news is confused with fake news, and invective is becoming increasingly frequent. However, depending on the context, all this can be taken more or less seriously, and everyone’s assumptions begin to sound increasingly uncertain. At times it seems that everything gets shaken up but almost nothing happens, budgets are extended and the style of governance slides towards what we could call “the permanently provisional Belgian model” of government⁵. It is hoped that the tension among the public will be offset with the dramatic effects of headline news about the

³ The first version was written between February and March and the final one, in the middle of the summer.

⁴ On the evolution of opinion of the Catalan electorate in these years, see Rodríguez (2017), and Oller, Satorra and Tobeña (2019).

⁵ In Belgium, between 10th June, 2007, and 26th May, 2019 (some twelve years), there were 1,163 days with a caretaker government; in Spain, between 20th November, 2011, and 7th January, 2020 (some eight years) there were 405 days of a caretaker government.

coronavirus, dust-laden winds from the Sahara, an Asian Tsunami, impeachment proceedings, the American presidential campaign or some war or other, not to mention the reverberations of globalisation and future disasters.

And yet, only a month goes by and as *I make a first revision* of this text in the *first week of April, 2020*, the world has been transformed out of all recognition. The coronavirus pandemic has created pandemonium: literally the imaginary capital of an infernal world. The subject that now absorbs almost all public attention is no longer independence but survival. And yet... the Catalan problem still simmers away, and will continue to do so, connected now with new problems of health, the economy and public debate. It is activating feelings of community, hostility, anarchy, confidence, impotence. Not to mention that *over the summer* there is talk of a “constitutional or constituent” crisis, “with or without” a challenge to the monarchy: yet another incident in a series of upsets.

A (Pascalian) bet on “bringing some order”

Against this complex and ever-changing backdrop, the observer is asked to take on the role of participant-observer who has the possibility of “doing something” to understand and, therefore, to bring some order to the Catalan problem. And at this point, we could make a bet on whether this “muddled provisional” situation will continue for some years; or whether it will be cleared up within a very short space of time, one way or another. As for me, on writing this essay, I would bet on an interpretation of the signs that suggests that the muddle will go on for some years.

I make this bet in, we could say, the Pascalian sense (Pascal, 1950 [1658]: fragment 233). If I lose the bet and the problem is resolved fairly soon, and to the satisfaction of the large majority (as occurred with the democratic transition in Spain, for example) then I shall be delighted to have lost (and I shall rectify my prognosis with pleasure). However, this does seem to me to be unlikely, given the nature of the political adversaries, the biases of the élites and the bewilderment of the public; and given that what was a key socio-cultural factor of the transition, namely the “consensus between the two Spains”, seems to be conspicuous by its absence.

If, however, I were to win my bet because “some order” were brought, for a time, then there is hope that, between us all, we could take advantage of this interim period to do things considerably better, one way or another. A range of at least four possibilities come to mind.

First, to carry on doing things in a mediocre but acceptable sort of way. Because, for example, politicians and their followers are accustomed to getting along with each other, having to find compromises and generally keeping the disorder under control. Nevertheless, they gradually discover two things: that they are not so powerful that the world cannot carry on without them, and that they can overcome their resulting sense of impotence by pretending that they do control it.

Second, to carry on in an equally mediocre but rather more eventful way. Politicians are overly tempted to indulge in back-stabbing, and (almost without realising it) they lapse into the old bellicose routines of the left, the centre and the right, all the highs and lows, of the last two centuries. Echoes of accommodating Francoisms may return, those always ready to hold on to the levers and minutiae of power beneath their high-flown declarations of national unity. And echoes may also return of the distortions of *caciquismo* [the corrupt influence of local bosses] and clientelism, and the wheeling and dealing of the many variants of conservative liberalism

and populist radicalism, amid (over-acted) scenes of indignation and calls to persecute unfortunate scapegoats. All of which goes hand-in-hand with the consequent degradation of civic conversation.

Third is the possibility of what we might call a more powerful option: one that could, on the one hand, be fatal (as in the case of Icarus, whose wings melted in the heat of the sun) if it happened on the imaginary stage of a great theatre of the world on which an aggressive strategy of conquests and heroic projects and delusions of grandeur were unleashed. On the other hand, it is an option which could be positive (as in the case of Daedalus, in contrast to Icarus: Pérez-Díaz, 2019), if it happened in a peaceful, energetic and sensible way.

In which case, the fourth and last option emerges: that of committing to bear witness to, and make a statement inspired by, the possibility of, and the normative impulse towards, a political community understood as *a space for civic friendship*. Why not make the attempt, or at least a declaration? In the end, as Salvati reminds us, to be the *vox clamantis in deserto* [the voice crying out in the desert] requires only stubbornness, courage and patience. Although a touch of ingenuity would not come amiss, in the sense, suggested by Baltasar Gracián, of a “consideration of contrariness” (1993 [1642]) that allows us to perceive an obstacle as a potential asset.

If, however, we look for support in the obstacle itself, it is largely because we cannot find a solid enough source of support within ourselves. This brings me to a brief digression on the general subject of what could be called our basic existential insecurity.

1.2. A condition of transitory survivors, anxious to endure

In the modern era we are overwhelmed by news but we do not yet know how to control the onslaught. For Hegel, “reading newspapers” had come to be the “modern man’s morning prayers”, which informed him of his place in the world at every moment during its continuous process of change. Perhaps we should, however, reconsider his interpretation (and the exposure to other media) as “the modern man’s daily *hallucination* (morning, noon and night)”. He no longer knows whom to pray to or understands what is happening to him; and finds that any appeal to reason in history or the laws of dialectics is of little use. Because, as Santayana pointed out (1998 [1911]), Hegelian dialectic can be seen as the substitute for a tragicomic history of human experience, which does not provide us with a comprehensible reading of reason in history but only a continuing enigma, full of surprises. Inevitable surprises. Events that were neither predicted nor expected.

But Hegel’s error was not only that of attributing a rational structure to the progression of events but that of extending it to the meaning of the very experience of reading the newspaper. This, to make something clear, is a mixture of his reason and his unreason. The unreason of imagining that the reception of a combination of, on the one hand, “events” adjusted to fit the interpretative frameworks (which are often banal and manipulative) of the press at any given time and, on the other, of the “exhortations” of leaders and intellectuals, preaching from their pulpits, adorned in their secular vestments - exhortations that can be considered simulacra of prayers - make for a step forwards of reason in history.

In search of an “us”

However, as we have known, and as we have practised since time immemorial, true prayer demands a *relaxed field* (Bellah, 2011): a space in which to develop, with a certain calm and reflection and a moral impulse *sui generis*, an internal dialogue and a dialogue with one’s

surroundings and with some form of the ultimate realities. All of which, in their turn, require silence, an ability to listen, and distance from the noise and pressures of public debate and current media outlets.

It is in the experience of that reading/prayer/dialogue where we may try to apply, as best we can, a more or less reasonable interpretative framework to the human history, contingent and surprising, that is brought to us by the news. We apply it by combining reflection and observation with the detail of innumerable fragments of proven, or yet to be proven (scientific or commonsensical) truths. We do all of this (in a more or less conscious way) within the context of some mythico-poetic narrative related to the historical account and the lived experience of ultimate realities, whose religious roots, still clearly visible, have been subject, in recent centuries, to a not entirely successful process of simplification and secularisation.

Today, we probably make this attempt because we are determined to situate ourselves in a process of “totalisation”⁶ of which we would be, or we would want to feel ourselves to be, a part. We attempt it by being, or by imagining ourselves as being, part of an “us”, a community that seems to be “us” to a sufficient, congenial, accessible and comprehensible degree. Communities of believers or unbelievers; modern or of their time; of the left, the right or the centre; of one tribe or another.

But, over the centuries, in various parts of the world, we have got entangled in the “us” of political communities, or nation-states. We have done so because we are determined to seek and find in them an “us” of which to become a part and with which to be connected, which provides us with names, both our own and those of things, as well as a means of managing time, and glimpsing an origin and a future. It is also a way of experiencing the landscape, as permanent, and ourselves, as more than merely passing through, mere transient survivors.

It is as if, with these simple heuristics (a world ordered by “nations”) but loaded with connotations as profound as they are confused, apparently easy to understand and taken for granted, the whole (and our place in that whole) is made intelligible and accessible to us (To our understanding? To our influence?). As if, in this way, we acquire a presence and, above all, a potential for agency: personal and collective agency. As if we are capable of taking our own decisions; capable of making ourselves be respected; capable of doing things: as if, in short, we are given a meaning and a direction. It is this meaning to which the *symbolisms* of nation, country, fatherland or motherland - the Russian mother-earth - or simply home and land are continually, inevitably, alluding.

And so it is that, in the midst of the daily, overpowering, hustle and bustle of the public space, with its incessant repetition of news-events, a moment of silence sometimes occurs that enables us to discover that sense of “us”. It is true that this discovery can be disparaged by supposedly rationalist intellectuals of the age as an expression of “emotionalism”. It can also be perceived, however, as a moment of intense emotion and as a kind of miracle by many ordinary people and by not a few of the “enlightened benevolent”; who see it from a more positive attitude of gratitude and inquiry .

Gratitude precisely because, perhaps, that moment, that singular silence, places people in the

⁶ Using, out of context, Lukacs’ terms (1960 [1923]), with which he wanted to emphasise the meaning (and the direction) of the revolutionary process for its protagonists as both observers and participants in it.

context of relationships which, even if at first sight may seem a little strange, can help them to build or rebuild the narrative that they need. I am referring to three types of relationships: with the powerful; with “our own”; and with (confused perceptions of) transcendent subjects, which may be, often, quite elusive.

Firstly, it places them at a certain distance from power, from powerful people with whom they find it increasingly difficult to identify. The élites find self-affirmation in modernity; they live in “another world” and attempt to ensure their control over things, but their assertiveness has its downside. Nowadays, at any rate, however charismatic they try to be, and however much they try to guide and care for their citizens, by playing the leadership role, sooner or later they will be obliged to answer to them. Absolute kings (Louis XIV, Frederick II and/or their successors, and many others) have to learn to play *the double game* of “I am the State” and “I am the first servant of the state”. When they are replaced by parliamentarians, those servants chosen by the electorate (and their party and clientilistic machines), however remote they try to remain, they soon learn to play the (same) double game, and end up being held to account in the same way.

Secondly, that same “political” moment makes it possible for people to renew their connection with “many” whom they recognise as fellow travellers along a path of frequently confusing experiences: as a people, a society, the masses, classes, human beings... They will identify as “the people in arms”, or “the sacred union” or “together in times of crisis” - a war, a recession, a pandemic - or “a country capable of great achievements”, or possibly “a country that has suffered much and overcome its misfortunes”. Either they will have some such sense of plenitude ... or they will have a sense of “being nothing at all”.

Thirdly, it places us, essentially, in a strange relationship, as characters in search of an author. In search of a story, with its corresponding mythico-poetic language, which does not tend to be the one proposed by the modern story of secularisation, but one that is more complex.

Going a step further (which I feel is necessary in order to do justice to the profundity and importance of a subject which is not merely a question of “pragmatic pacts and compromises, and laws and declarations”) I would say, tentatively, that this is about a language and a story with which to refer to feelings of *involvement in, and belonging to, and in relation with* extraordinary, preternatural or supernatural beings or entities. They look mysterious but inevitable, and central to all, or almost all, social and political experience of which we have ever had evidence. Relationships with entities that seem like dwellers in time and beyond time; in a setting near and far: near-at-hand, and in a distant memory, and in an indefinite future. Entities which we can call political communities, historical projects, homelands or nations or countries, or civilisation, the West, a global village or humanity. They always have religious or crypto-religious connotations.

We should remember that, in spite of those nomenclatures, people continue - we continue - to be unable to identify such entities with any clarity, as if they can only be glimpsed, mentioned, evoked, discerned, questioned. Them, and us. As if they were inconceivable without us, and us, without them. As if they were outside present time: in the past, in the future, in enigmatic symbolisms. We, the individuals of the here and now, bearing the weight of being transitory survivors and thus burdened by the nostalgia of *remaining*: remaining bound to reality, through which we move. With the nostalgia of listening and looking, and of being listened to and looked at, always. From our being-there, remaining-there.

That is why we need (and, at heart, are grateful for) that silence, that parenthesis from the

continuous noise, to listen and to look at what there is: which is what is-already-there because it has already been done, and done by others. Not something to be invented, but to be found. This includes the extraordinary, the divine, the gods. They are to be found, in fact, through testimonies, rather than invented: found in an Egyptian or Roman polytheistic, or Old Testament, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim way. In a dialogue that is half internal dialogue, half a dialogue of many voices or polyphony. Whereby everything is-there, and everything is close by and connected. Gods and men, the heavens and the earth (the *Geviert*, Heidegger's classic fourfold; 1975 [1951]). Being-there in, and through, our encounters with seas and mountains, farmland and woodland; and with other human beings, both similar and different; and with their symbols. And, precisely because of that, encounters with fatherlands, the landscapes of fathers, and with motherlands, the landscapes of mothers, and with nations, the landscapes of those born and those yet to be born, of the coming generations, the guardians / keepers of our memory. And with the protective gods and in their company, silent and absent. Who are present, or present in their absence: because they are missed, they are conjured up, they are reproached, they are feared, they are questioned, their silence is heeded. The reproaches and questions are not a matter of interests or ideas, of data or calculations but a matter of experiences and perceptions, and thoughts combined with sudden emotions and longstanding feelings. Feelings that *with them* we remain, and *without them* we lack, and that each "us" lacks, validity.

It is in that being-there where we, the transient survivors, encounter situations, and complex webs of relationships between beings and things, which seem to come and go, and seem to remain, or could endure; among which the noises and the whispers, and the tactician cunning of politics are no more than epiphenomena. Echoes of things; disturbing experiences of the resistance /reality of things on the part of people who are trying to endure, and remain. Anchored in their necessity to cling to, and to express themselves through, an enduring political community. In search of a political community that will soothe, or seem to soothe, that anxiety: an "us" in the midst of (local, European and/or global) disorder.

An increase in insecurity in times of crisis

Now I suggest we return to the here and now, and specific historical situations such as the complex and shifting current state of affairs in Europe and the chaos in Spain caused by the Catalan problem. This can be viewed from afar as almost anecdotal but, observed from close-up, it is a crucial existential matter (ignoring, for a moment, the contribution of the pandemic, and other current scourges, to the ongoing chaos).

In such circumstances, do the symbolisms of the political community provide us with little more than a confused perception, or do they may provide us with a more clear glimpse of a meaning? Perhaps, and above all, it is the former: a confused perception. We can present a number of (very up-to-date) scenarios of the loss of meaning that occurs when, for example, we have a previous history that is little understood; when we are heading towards a future which, though it intrigues us, is unknown; when the mishandling of an economy is never sorted out; or when the politics that is almost reassuring as it muddles along can become disastrous when it increases in intensity (and strives to assert its teleocratic nature: its being put at the service of a project: Oakeshott, 2000 [1975]). And, more generally, when, in all those fields of human activity, we find a public space in which the upper ranks of a society speak out while the voices of the masses, although often eminently reasonable, are rarely to be heard above a whisper. In such circumstances, no civic conversation can be anything but fragile, and this fragility is virtually inherent in our condition.

I believe that some variant of basic anthropological *humility*, rooted in awareness of the fragility of our public debates, can help us to face this historical moment of uncertainty. It can help us to test the waters of politics and public policies without being too dogmatic, and avoid us becoming so mystified as to be unable to see, for example, what is happening, not with their “reason in history” but for other more modest reasons.

The modest reasons of a Europe, for instance, that has been seventy years in the making, and with no end in sight. And now we have a post-Brexit Europe that makes believe it is free at last to move faster and to be on the brink of catching that train about to leave to the next station, but suspects that the rails have not yet been laid. It cannot decide whether to contemplate its future in good spirits or in a state of constant grumbling. Perhaps because it is missing a past that it has left forgotten somewhere.

Or, going one step further, the dubious reasons of parts of the West, mindful of those of an *America First* (leitmotiv of ex-President Trump), which puts itself forward as a beacon of light to the world, inciting everyone to fight and succeed “so that everyone is first” - a thought-provoking enigma. Because, according to him, one must be first today, but more importantly, tomorrow, and forever more. Even if it means losing one’s direction and decorum along the way. Which brings us back to a debate on how to choose between greater and lesser evils.

Looking closer to home, we have Spain after forty years of transition, consolidation and democratic life. It has been “put to the test” several times with uncertain results (Pérez-Díaz, 1996). Now there is even the hint of returning to a variant of those violent years of the 1930s, over which the dark shadow of the familiar but always distorted “two Spains” would appear to be hanging. And before that, there were the upheavals of several centuries, with invasion by an (enlightened) foreign power and the (melancholy) loss of her own empire and, before that, the forging of the nation in *La Conquista* [of the Americas] and *La Reconquista* [of Spain from the Moors] at a very slow pace. All of these had their counterpoint in so many luminous experiences, even if only such a faint memory remains of them.

Now there are new populisms protesting on every street corner; the oligarchies are active and busy but without losing their way; and the middle and working classes are living from day to day. Brilliant, restless spirits are constantly innovating, learning to learn what they will soon have to forget in order to learn something else. And a large part of the culture industry (as it tends to be called) is anticipating the eternal moment, triumphal and terrible, of the final deletion of the contents of the most recent computer text,⁷ such as the scenes of those who fell from the Twin Towers in New York, plummeting down one after another, unconnected to each other, and to whom will be offered the strange yet moving tribute of a deeper hole and a higher skyscraper. As if, apparently, the idea were to leave mankind without the traditional consolation of a resurrection as Soloviev (1900: 140) might have reminded us.

However, it is time to return to *our here and now* in more detail, and to fine tune our bet by focusing on the current Catalan problem, and offering a more personal testimony.

2. A realistic search for a space for friendship, and the example of Catalonia

In these times of coronavirus, maximum risk and complete ignorance, the pandemic has combined with an extreme economic situation. While the virus and the crisis are threatening

⁷ The equivalent of a final deletion of the text in the file.

our survival, the crude, bad-tempered, political debate is generating increased mistrust, and its effects on social and emotional life are causing confusion. Everything has contributed to increasing a sense of bewilderment, of being confined in a labyrinth and watching, immobile, a shadow dance swirling around us, in an atmosphere of haste, incredulity and shock.

On the other hand, being almost immobile within a labyrinth may have its positive side. Seneca stated that “those who run in a labyrinth are confused by their very speed” (*Letter XXXVII to Lucilius*). Ergo, we can take a gamble: we can take advantage of being confined and confused in order to reason and not to run while obeying the commands broadcast on the news and the slogans repeated *ad nauseam*. We must avoid the trap of believing that this world of uncertainties will disappear once the current political enemy has been blamed. Let us make use of our circumstances for reasoning through conversation, narrowing down the subject matter, focusing attention, turning difficulty into opportunity and bringing our own experience to bear. And a perfect example of the kind of problems about which we should be reasoning together, right now, is that of Catalonia.

2.1. An experience of nostalgia, misunderstandings and learnings

A half-century of nostalgias

I am a respectful admirer of the many virtues of the Catalan people, and of a Catalonia that inspires great confidence and which can provide an imperfect (but who could ask for more?) guide to those who are confused. A Catalonia that is a point of reference for its business acumen and negotiating skills, its enjoyment of everyday life, and its long-term vision, pragmatism and sentiment; its *belle époque* detail and great design. It travels afar but remains attached to the land. A Catalonia which is, to a large extent, almost the prototype of a “civil” (as opposed to “uncivil”) civil society, at least in the restricted sense of markets and associative fabric.

Catalonia, tested to its limits during its thousand-year history. Frequently successful. So adept at playing the card of standing aloof as well as that of making a deal. So much to learn from everyone, and everyone from her: especially Spain, which needs the very best of Catalonia, devoted to the freedom and greatness of them both and, if possible, in the best sense of the term, to greatness without conceit.

I remember my first encounter with Catalonia in the 1950s and 1960s. The discovery of Barcelona, taking a stroll down *Las Ramblas*, the sun, the sea and the hospitality. People minding their own business, independent, capable, trustworthy. I remember reading *Els altres catalans* by Francesc Candel (1964) while I was studying the migration from countryside to city, seen as key to the transformation of the Spanish Bonapartist-Francoist, bureaucratic-authoritarian system by means of a metamorphosis of farm labourers. Learning that these people were not just the “sacks of potatoes” that Marx claimed that they were (without justification) in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, but groups of individuals (whom I was getting to know through my field work: the Castilians, Leonese, Navarrese, Extremadurans, Andalusians) with a far greater capacity for agency. People who could be settled or nomadic. With their own sense of honour; opening up new horizons through their own efforts, without more ado. Those who were becoming, to a substantial degree, a working class of promise.

In the sixties and later, although the horizon is somewhat uncertain, there is a fairly clear logic to the situation that is to lead to Europe (democracy, the market, and a plural associative fabric) from which Spain, at that point, cannot, would not know how to, does not want to, and

cannot even imagine deviating from. As for me, in the first half of the 1970s, I am in the United States - a different world - and, on my return, I become immersed in the transition, the theory and experience of civil society, bound up with the emergence of that democratic Spain. It is at this point when, more than ever, Catalonia appears to be crucial.

Crucial not for itself, but for everyone. It is what corresponds to a “Tarradellas moment” which some of us believe could have merged with a “Roca moment” (in around 1984: after Miquel Roca, one of the so-called “Fathers of the Constitution”, of 1978). It is a time when the Catalan segment that is always eager to “conquer Spain” (like Jaime I, known as “*El Conquistador*”) shows signs of making a move to become leaders (at a distance but in a very credible way) of a *Partido Reformista* [Reformist Party] on a national scale. It seems an auspicious moment for a gathering of the “enlightened benevolent” who are sufficiently realistic to go along with and try to persuade ordinary people, full of good sense, towards a promised land of something better than mere tolerance. Towards a noble task and a noble conquest, bound up with a complex, ambitious, enlightened and benevolent project of modernisation.

But just at that moment, at the last moment, the opposite occurs. What has appeared to be an existential decision to lead Spain jointly, in an as yet unspecified direction, turns into a decision to withdraw, to back away. (Which causes understandable consternation among a business community accustomed to the continual growth of its influence in Spain, considered both natural and desirable since time immemorial, and almost always with the tacit or explicit support of nationalist politicians.)

Then, suddenly, three or four decades later, at the turn of a new century, there is a change of direction, an about-turn, a groundswell. What has changed? Is everything to be called into question? Radically? Is no more than a combination of party political tacticisms enough to show that all that had gone before had been a pipe dream?

Recent misunderstandings

Truth is unconcealed reality (*aletheia*) which emerges when the veil that normally hides it is torn away. Sometimes that veil can be torn away by agreement but, at others, by misunderstanding.

To cut a long story short, I was in Barcelona in July, 2012, after several years of economic crisis and statutory debate, against the background of a political class with little moral authority and an excess of anxiety. I was speaking before a Catalan public who could not have been more enlightened or benevolent. In circumstances that were more than conducive to dialogue between conflicting positions, with cautious respect for established custom in its various forms, keeping differences within certain limits, using rhetoric that varied from somewhat transgressive to fairly moderate. The good manners of people with a keen sense of opportunity, clearly defined interests and including, in the end, the clarity of disagreement because things are the way they are. An open-door occasion?

On my part, I believed that I was on familiar ground. I had a record of academic visits, continuous professional contact, genuine friendships, frequent trips, and positive conversations.

I presented a text that I felt was full of verifiable data, reasoned conclusions and open interpretation, as part of a tradition of academic research over several years. The text emphasised the complexity, and even the ambiguity, of Spanish and Catalan society on the

issue of the accommodation of Catalonia within Spain, and underlined a potential for moderation and compromise as regards the dispositions and feelings of ordinary citizens. Complex identities (which many politicians simplify), nuanced arguments about the substance of economic and social policies (which many politicians misrepresent) and (very) favourable attitudes to debating in a civil manner (which many politicians ignore).

All of this would, I imagined, prepare us for a dialogue between opposing points of view that would define contradictions, enable compromises, and overflow with mutual understanding. It was to be enlightenment and benevolence in the style of those men of letters from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, absorbed in the dawning of the best of worlds, perhaps in the knowledge that if things were not as they should be, they soon would be. How ingenuous. Although - if I may say so, thank God! - I received an impromptu lesson in realism.

Because there I was, up against criticism which caught me unawares and which sounded to me like resounding, radical rejections of dialogue and, in a sense, communication.

Briefly, I had three commentators criticise my presentation. The summary of what they said, or what I understood them to say, is as follows. The first claimed that the survey data I had presented were not correct in the light of other data that contradicted them. The second, that even if the survey data were correct, they were of minor interest because what was important to politics was not in the answers to surveys but in demonstrations on the streets. The third, that even if the data were correct and my analysis fair, they were both ultimately irrelevant because they were inopportune: the time for dialogue was over.

Hence my presentation was irrelevant, ergo, one might think that my presence was also irrelevant, and that the invitation extended to me had been a misunderstanding or perhaps, on my part, a delusion.

I must admit that I felt quite uncomfortable. Perhaps I had expected better from what I understood, in a timeless, almost Homeric, way, to be the Mediterranean rules of hospitality. Just the little things one remembers from childhood - "*ah, cuando yo era niño soñaba con los héroes de la Iliada!*" [ah, when I was a child I would dream of the heroes of the Iliad!] as Antonio Machado said (in *Proverbios y Cantares*, XVIII). Dreaming of heroes who were rivals but brothers-in-arms. Childhood memories that set the imagination on fire and opened up an array of possibilities (Gopnik, 2009), and dreams. The little things with a hint of innocence, and a hint of the wisdom of the poets.

I have to say, however, that, over time and on mature reflection, my attitude has changed appreciably. I certainly do not reject the emphasis on dialogue and complexity. Even less do I renounce childhood or the poetry; but I fear that they are not enough. I have to recognise that those three criticisms were, in fact, highly instructive. I am very grateful for them as they taught me things that I would not have learned without them.

The criticisms seemed unjust at the time because they did not, in my opinion, take sufficient account of what I was saying, nor of what I meant - the intention of my words - nor their content. They did, however, broaden the context and the course of the discussion and hence they had a rational and emotional component from which to learn. It is "the advantage of unjust criticism" that it can be useful and, though unjust, its usefulness makes it less so.

Possible lessons

We can benefit from criticism to begin a learning process which, to give it a name, I would call one of the objects of analysis, the ambiguous rejections, the mutual misunderstandings and fluid realities, and the reasons for caution and hope.

The first lesson is that if we do not manage to become partners in dialogue with others, because we lack the empathy necessary to understand what they say and what they mean (Davidson's Principle of Charity), we can at least become aware of this failing. We can develop the talent to turn an impossible dialogue into an opportunity for understanding others as objects of analysis and, incidentally, self-analysis.

Once we have achieved a certain distance from ourselves, thanks in part to no longer expecting too much from the dialogue nor expecting it too soon (and yet without allowing our curiosity to flag) we are able to realise that those others draw attention to interesting topics; and, consequently, take advantage of their reasoning in order to enrich our own.

In my own case, this has led me to conclude that I should have anticipated, and understood, the outright rejection, from the start, of my "good advice". I should have imagined that what was, for me, to some extent, a theoretical and, basically, remote question was, seen at first hand, an existential matter that was far more dramatic and closer to home. It was as if their rejection were telling me: "This man has no idea of where he is or what we are like or how we feel about this matter. Well, he's going to find out." And something else: "He hasn't even realised how much things have changed in recent years, or how far our feelings of rejection to the indifference with which we believe we are seen from Madrid have come. Rejection of that chronic neglect of what, or of what we are convinced, is of supreme importance, going round and round in circles about a subject that affects us so much. And, that being the case, it should be enough for anyone who is paying attention." (In inverted commas, a scene imagined by the author).

From the above, a second lesson can be deduced. Namely, that the rejection (or reproach) may contain a positive and stimulating cognitive and emotional component. Also that it should be treated as an ambiguous phenomenon: as well as rejection, there is also an invitation to a struggle for recognition from which perhaps a greater mutual understanding may blossom. An understanding, for example, that part of what is happening is that we are facing people who demand more attention to their condition as active and responsible subjects.

A third lesson would be to understand that, in the heat of debate, we usually witness both sides losing sight of the other's vision or, in other words, of undervaluing each other's reality. As a result, mutual misunderstandings can cascade, each one reinforcing the next, and causing an atmosphere of growing confusion.

For example, those against independence may not realise how strong the feelings and symbolisms of the (two million) Catalans in favour of it are; neither do the latter, in turn, recognise the strength of the feelings and symbolisms of those who identify themselves as Spaniards and constitutionalists in Catalonia (also about two million, not to mention the rest of Spain). At the same time, many of those non-separatists may still feel, in some way, *els altres catalans* [the other Catalans], belonging to a society subordinated, to all intents and purposes, to the hegemonic society that controls the economy, social life and culture, which is made up of Catalans of Catalan ancestry and whose mother tongue is Catalan. On the other hand, it is obvious that this social hegemony is limited by the state institutions, and that those conflicting

feelings tend to change as the result of their combination with interests of all kinds.

In short, although both sides in the debate are realities who are resistant and jealous of their identities, they are also complex and fluid realities. And being fluid, somewhat messy: always defying clarification. All the more so because the two sides live, and co-exist, in a cross-dialogue with each other and among themselves. It is not easy to know what they identify with; and it seems to be proven that many have some form of dual identity (Spanish and Catalan, not to mention European).

At this point, it is time to take the next step, the fourth lesson, and introduce some caution and a reason for hope.

I shall begin with a reminder of the teachings of a millennial cultural tradition about experiences of good and evil, peace and war, love and hate. These tell us that, in the current political drama, ambivalent relationships are as likely to espouse enmity as friendship (without excluding the possibility of people opting for a prolonged state of bipolarity or schizophrenia). The result, one way or the other, depends heavily on whether people allow themselves to be guided by their common sense and their better moral feelings or whether they allow themselves to get carried away by a desire to exploit, dominate, humiliate and indoctrinate others. Essentially, it is that simple. In this regard, observers of society in the seventeenth century tended to be more pessimistic than those of the eighteenth. In view of our experiences in the twentieth century, perhaps we should consider that it remains an open question.

As regards caution, we should be understanding but not “overly understanding”. The most sensible thing would be to be “understanding, realistic and reasonable”: in the manner of those who proceed step by step, alert to the context and the positions of all those involved, and who understand that this game is for the long-term, and that the stages follow one another as part of a process. In the end, (although there is *no* definitive end), it is a question of understanding why people of any “here and now” are not more understanding, why they are so obstinate and confused, why they are distrustful and reject so much, so often, and so intensely. Also why, at some point, the mere repetition of “dialogue, dialogue” can be counterproductive and even come to sound false. And we must remain alert in order to distinguish between true friendships (actions speak louder than words) and false friendships (just empty words).

As regards hope, it is the very fact of having it that pushes people forwards. And with hope may come a new direction, and the impetus to follow a path away from the terrain of attacks and accusations (of “tyrants”, “victimisers”, “supremacists”, etc.) towards an intelligent dialogue that allows us to face up to the numerous substantive problems, including the crisis, the pandemic and others, of today. The more serious and urgent they are, the more they require sound judgement.

A forbearing and lucid dialogue of this nature, if it were to succeed, (if “the fates favour us”, as the ancients used to say - today we usually talk of “trends”) could become a habit. It could provide a space for mutual respect and cooperation which would, in its turn, bring us closer to a model of civic community. Whether it be called Europe, or Spain, or Catalonia or all three at the same time is immaterial. Without forgetting that true friendship is not the result of a pact or a project. We bring it into existence. And it comes freely when it wants to come, or never comes at all.

2.2. Alert to foci of distortion and, and in praise of the unusual

The creation of, and care for, a space for friendship requires continual effort, which includes handling unjust criticism and attacks of one kind or another, as well as cultivating a certain kind of idealism. Tame the tiger, and set your sights high. Converse, contain distortion, and dream of agreements.

Conversation is not generally an easy task. The conversation (frequently) implicit in the markets is not (Pérez-Díaz, 2009), and neither is one about religious differences. It is no easier in the sphere of politics where, only too often, debate obscures more than it illuminates, and divides more than it unites. All the more so when it is dominated by the presence not of the enlightened benevolent but of voluntarists with a propensity for misrepresentation and mental confusion, in various different ways such as those of magical hyperrealism, vague symbolisms, and a belief in the omnipotence of ideas.⁸

Broadly speaking, this problem tends to occur across a spectrum of politicians, economic and social élites and intellectuals and the media. The frequency of these practices has a good deal to do with the relative importance of agonistic tendencies within the institutional systems in which they operate: capitalism, multi-party democracy, the fabric of interest groups. To simplify, we could say that a section of the traditional bourgeoisie live their lives (with a measure of enlightened benevolence) while protecting their interests in the belief that, whatever happens, one way or another, nothing will happen to them and they will not really suffer. These privileged people follow politics in a way similar to that of past generations who might go to Paris to see *boulevard* theatre. This is politics disguised as theatre: out on stage for the general public but with far more going on behind the scenes for the initiated. In accordance with which, they are quite sincere, including when they are not being so entirely, and justification can be found for almost everything: with perhaps just the hint of a mixture of sceptical freethinkers and the clericalism of the pro forma confession and mild penitence.

And we should remember (without wishing to over-generalise) that we may find that their rebellious offspring are no more than the mimetic rivals of their parents. Opposed but alike. Just like the *soi-disant* post-modern revolutionaries, prone to moulding their discourse according to circumstance, trying to transmute their impotence into omnipotence, and deciding that things are, in fact, as they are written in the script or the plot of the latest farce or tragicomedy, with their propensity to assert themselves and without losing sight of their advantage.

This being so, quite a few politicians can get used to implying that they are the architects of the continuous creation of the world and that, with their assertions, they make things happen: unemployment goes down, the economy grows, solidarity is achieved, and external threats are magicked away. In contrast, with their opponents, everything goes wrong. They think that they are like the gods, whose every word created and recreated the world. If they were to remain silent, the sun would cease to rise. They tend to transform politics into a melodrama peppered with comic, triumphant or heart-rending arias, of varying quality, sometimes even followed by well-deserved applause.

In general, the role of politicians that usually prevails in one of these melodramas is as

⁸ On the application of magical hyperrealism to the Spanish social and political scene, and on blurred symbolisms, see Pérez-Díaz (1996; 2008).

warlords. In fact, since time immemorial, the language of politics has almost always tended to be one of domination and war by other means. Many politicians aspire to being recognised as “political animals” - little better than predators - better feared (up close) than loved (from afar). In contrast, we find abundance evidence from ordinary people, in their response to surveys, highlighting the fact that, although they do, in effect, see politicians as belligerent, they see themselves as far more pacific. A single detail: when asked in a survey in 2012, 72.1% of Catalans and 71.9% of Spaniards overall thought that, “in relation to the controversies over autonomies, nationalisms etc. in Spain... the majority of people would tend to reach agreements, but political leaders tend to promote conflict” (Pérez-Díaz, Mezo and Rodríguez, 2012).⁹

Lastly, we often find a circle of intellectuals and their adherents, crucial to the configuration, and distortion, of the public space, who are protagonists or participants in the media and academia. They tend to divide their time between searching for the truth and acting as worthy proponents for the political and socioeconomic élites, putting words (figures, exclamation marks and stories) into the mouths of one side or the other; sometimes but not always accurately – useful, because, quite often, it is the usefulness whose uselessness is confirmed by the fact of their being there, and they receive sufficient recompense to remain there. Even if they just have bit parts to play, they are restless spirits who seek, and usually find, their fifteen minutes of fame.

It is therefore true that, to the extent that certain patterns of distortion have prevailed, public debate over the last few years has become somewhat harsh; but not so much so that it makes us forget the rational component contained within this debate (and this nuance is very important). It is a debate that, in my own case, with the comparative harshness of the three rejections, tells me and tells us that a simple statement of the facts is not enough because we need an interpretative framework that makes sense of those facts - and continues to gather them, interspersed with words, *sine die*. It is very important to understand people as agents, and not merely as respondents to surveys nor (I should add) as voters who drop their papers in the ballot box.

The practicalities of preventing a dialogue from becoming a dialogue of the deaf is a difficult issue. It is not enough to invoke and repeat the mantra of “dialogue, dialogue” because real dialogue comes and goes like a bird on the wing, and to seize it requires determination. And because, even when managing the public space from a distance, it still remains to add the context of better understanding, deeper empathy, a pause to reflect on outside criticism, a search for common sentiments, a longer narrative, greater patience, a space for friendship, and a more comprehensive “us”. And, moreover, to understand that the phenomenon of distortion of the public space is the result of a combination of systemic distortion, projects and strategies: a systemic distortion bound up with different strategies of domination, exploitation and humiliation.

In praise of the unusual, and an unexpected but not impossible friendship

⁹ This is congruent with other data about (mixed) feelings of belonging and preferences for different (graded) variants of autonomy, which facilitate compromises; as well as about the nature of (serious) historical failure and the (high) risk of internal dissent which separation would bring about (which entails anticipating the high costs of the conflict); and, finally, about the probability of separation from Spain (not very likely, perhaps the effects of wishful thinking and/or the expectation of the victory of inertia and/or a kind of last-minute caution or restraint: it’s anyone’s guess).

However, to this must be added the possibility of a positive stimulus from the space for friendship; and one that is not so far-removed from one's own experience. In my case, for example, I should have remembered in time (and I failed to do so due to an error of judgement of which I was not fully conscious at the time) what had happened to me thirty years earlier. Back in the 1980s, at the height of what I have called "the Roca moment", I wrote an article for *Diario 16* (1984) developing the idea that Catalonia, free and capable, found itself facing a range of options, among which were self-absorption, separation or a primary role in Spain; and how possible and how desirable it was that it should choose to take a leading role in Spanish life and politics: all of which would be compatible with its differentiated identity, with its European identity, and with its global vocation. This article received a quite complimentary review from a writer, Ramón Barnils (1984), which (I understood) almost made an example of me to some of the *Catalanistas* [those supporting independence] because he had come to believe in the options open to Catalonia more than they seemed to believe in them themselves. As a result, being seen as pro-Catalan among wary Spaniards and even, to some extent, almost as more Catalanist than the *Catalanistas*, feeling unsure of themselves, I had become, in his eyes, someone unusual. Nevertheless, my reviewer chastised and criticised me for a lack of realism that, in his eyes, had led me to ignore the "minor details" of the pressure, which he believed to be overwhelming, from "*la Constitució als estatuts passant pel DNI, la Benemèrita, tres segles de submissió... i tota la panòpia estatal, administrativa i fàctica d'Espanya.*" [from the Constitution to the statutes, including the ID card, the Civil Guard, three centuries of submission... to the whole state panoply, administrative and factual, of Spain].

To which I now respond, with some delay I fear, that although I do accept his kind - or perhaps less-than-kind - irony, I would emphasise that I still consider myself, even if only for the sake of argument, as unusual or unaccustomed at least in one sense: that of breaking the habit of continuing to aspire to that famous tolerance (Ortega y Gasset, 1973 [1932]) that, stripped of its aura of early nostalgia, and now in the form of formal agreements and recurring noise, has become increasingly inadequate for what is at stake: the risk of rupture and the chaos that would ensue, leaving a spiral of mutual distrust in its wake.

On balance, there are a number of possible scenarios. To start with, it is absurd to try to conceal the risk of separation. Firstly, because the balance of power, which appears to suggest a stable equilibrium, is not in fact equal because there is no parity of sentiment or desire between the adversaries and, at present, one side seems more mobilised than the other.¹⁰ Secondly, because, if the level of mistrust is high, the continuous swings in feeling could cause ill-considered consequences: such as the spread of the problem to other autonomous regions, a unending stream of insults and reproaches, a series of law suits and disclosures in the public arena, and a search for culprits and scapegoats who will be, preferably, defenceless, and starting with those who are closest.

At the same time, however, there are reasons to cherish hopes based, ultimately, on that existential insecurity which I mentioned at the beginning, connected to the need for understanding and mutual assistance in difficult times. These are reasons based on our ability to understand and to learn and, in this sense, to overcome, for example, the short-sightedness of the political parties and their voters, in general, towards the problem of Catalonia over the

¹⁰ This is how it is perceived by those seeking independence who are in favour of immediate and resolute action, such as, for example, Quim Torra, who see themselves running "the last hundred metres" (Torra, 2016).

last fifty years. And likewise, in our ability to cultivate those good feelings of helping each other, starting with reciprocal listening and respect for the elements that differentiate us all as well as for the common features, thanks to which we have reached the point we are at with relative freedom, prosperity and civil peace. Otherwise, we would have completely lost our way some time ago - and not for want of trying. With common sense and a sense of what we have in common, and a somewhat broader vision, the possibility exists of building and rebuilding a space for friendship in Catalonia, in the whole of Spain and across the whole of Europe - and, in particular, a space for friendship *between* Catalonia and the rest of Spain. A space for reciprocal loyalty and commitment that could and should be the objective which marks the long-term direction of this historical experience of ours that has been underway for so many centuries

Lastly, and balancing aspiration with realism, it is worth noting that the likelihood of achieving this objective is about fifty-fifty. It is unlikely if there is a lack of substantial support from the influential social sectors that I referred to above. That being so, in order that they give that support, it is not only necessary that they should want to do so but, above all, that ordinary people understand this, that they mobilise and that they demand it. And further, it is necessary that these efforts, by everyone, come accompanied not by a string of exhortations to dialogue but by a narrative that explains the desirability of the ultimate objective as well as its *plausibility*. A narrative that deals with the resources, the obstacles, the alliances and the details of implementation; without losing sight of the other simultaneous games. A narrative that leaves the way open for a coming-and-going between a pragmatic friendship, “of vested interests”, that does not amount to much, and a “true” friendship that aims higher.

As far as I am concerned, I insist in my suggestion – and as I have included personal testimony of my own in my discussion, I must admit that this insistence may have something to do with the memory of my grandfather, who came from Calatayud, and the impression that perhaps the Aragonese have a role to play in these agreements and disagreements... I insist as much in spite of those rejections as because of them, on making a bid for this unusual objective. Unusual because it is unfamiliar and unexpected, though as unexpected not impossible. Just like friendship.

We seek friendship motivated by that basic insecurity of transitory survivors to which I referred at the beginning, modulated by the historical conditions of each case. Because our entry into this world and the way in which we live and survive in it is by co-existing, aware of being surrounded by basic care, and by giving and receiving. Together with this comes, from infancy, our innate curiosity for that *haecceity* of the mediaeval philosophers, that differentiated individuality; for the differential act, for what is different. This is what usually encourages us to relate to those who are not our equals, in the broadest sense, *precisely* because they are not; thus avoiding the boredom of repetition of what we already know about only too well. We travel, we emigrate, we read, we find each other, avoid each other, lose and miss each other. In an eternal search.

Friendship and curiosity are to be seen in all the chess games of political life. And all the more so when these are long-term games or win-win games that involve a reiteration of deals and treaties, and recurring alliances. But friendship requires time. The time for it to develop and be tested. And all the more so right now, in a time of pandemic: as a test of survival.

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