

The Fight in Catalunya: Independence or Self-Determination?

How the Lines Are Drawn—An Account from the Front Lines

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The following breathless account of last week's street fighting in Barcelona and the surrounding regions reaches us from anarchists in Catalunya, where the Spanish government's crack-down on the movement for national independence has provoked a wave of popular resistance that threatens to transform the demands and consciousness of the movement itself.

We've just experienced the heaviest rioting in Catalunya since the 1970s. Six nights straight, starting Monday, October 14. It's Sunday night now. Reports are coming in of a barricade on fire in Girona, so make that seven nights.

According to one journalist, 1044 dumpsters burnt, 358 city trash cans ripped out of place, and 6400 square meters of asphalt burnt. And that's just in Barcelona.

A fascist—or just a good citizen—ran over two people in a highway blockade near Mataró. Earlier in the week, cops ran over two protesters with their riot van in Tarragona, then got out and beat one of them. We've had a few hit by cars this week. There's a comrade in critical condition in the hospital right now; cops hit her in the head. A cop in critical condition, too, shot in the head with a slingshot Friday night; the steel ball broke his helmet. He had spent the week shooting and beating people who didn't have any protection. Fucker never thought the tables would turn.

In addition to the highway blockades, there are still big protests in Barcelona, roads blocked. It's mostly peaceful at this point. The media have been trying to sound the death knell of the uprising for days now, and more independent twitter accounts are getting shut down. It could start up again at any moment; it hasn't really ended. For now, the state hasn't instituted martial law, though the conservative government of the Madrid region wants to ban all pro-independence rallies there. There are supposed to be clear sides, remember? Spain vs. Catalunya. But those aren't the lines of this conflict.

What's It All About?

On Monday, the *Tribunal Supremo* gave seven politicians and two mainstream activist leaders prison sentences of 9–13 years apiece for organizing the independence referendum of October 1, 2017. Sedition. Several more people in exile would likely receive the same sentences. Fuck politicians and these politicians in particular: they were fine running a prison system while they were in charge, and in 2017 they preferred sabotaging the independence movement with the straitjacket of pacifism to losing control of it. My friends and I protected a polling station, starting at 5 in the morning. We hate voting, but we hate the cops even more.

Regardless, this one trial wasn't the sole focus of the upheaval. The unions said if organizing a referendum is sedition, any protest could be, so they called a strike for the end of the week. And a month ago, seven members of the CDR [Committees to Defend the Republic, grassroots pro-independence and sometimes anti-capitalist assemblies formed in 2017] were arrested and accused of terrorism. They're still locked up. We have our reservations, but we're on the side of people fighting against repression and for freedom, always. So the liberal idea of self-determination is contradictory nonsense? Definitely, but that's a long conversation and we're still in the middle of it. A barricade in the street? It's a good figure of speech. Metaphor, comparison? Spell? This is what *we* mean by self-determination.

By Wednesday, lots of people in the streets were calling for the resignation of the whole Catalan government [which has been pro-independence throughout the last several elections]. Pro-independence politicians have been insulted and ejected from demonstrations. Meanwhile, *el Cercle de l'Economia*, a think tank representing a large part of the Catalan bourgeoisie, is pointing out that the crisis has political roots, stemming from Madrid's attempts to reduce Catalan autonomy going back a decade, and they re-emphasize their proposals for more self-government and better financing... within the Spanish state. Their top priority is to put an end to the rioting, so if nationalism means an interclass alliance on the basis of putative ethno-linguistic sameness, this isn't exactly that. The bourgeoisie have been against the movement for a while now.

It's Sunday, and a new week is about to start. Whether they are rioters or unlucky bystanders, 28 people are sitting in prison with no option of paying bail, beginning the two-year wait until trial; 194 people have been arrested. Fully 590 people have been reported injured, but a lot of us don't go to the official medics, so the true number is surely two or three times higher.

There's a new blockade at *la Jonquera*, the principle highway connection between the French and Spanish parts of Catalunya. It's maintained by 500 people, way out in the Pyrenees mountains. Earlier in the week, they blocked the road for 30 hours, drilling rebar into the asphalt and putting plastic bottles on top to make them visible. A group of *gilet jaunes* came to blockade the other side of the border. When the former blockade got cleared away, a group of truckers decided to make a blockade. Truckers!

The *Audiencia Nacional* has started investigating *Tsunami Democràtic*, the nonviolent platform that organized the airport protests, for terrorism. They just don't learn. This whole uprising was sparked by repression.

Already on Monday, things started to get out of control with the blockades at the airport, the highways, and on train lines. There was too much chaos, spread out too widely, for the police and the political parties to control it all. Tuesday, the blockades continued, but that night rioting broke out in all four provincial capitals—Barcelona, Girona, Lleida, and Tarragona. Wednesday, the National Assembly of Catalunya (ANC)¹ continued with their plan for marches departing from five different cities in the farthest reaches of Catalunya to converge on Barcelona on Friday. The distance they would cross was 100 km in some cases. This plan was pacifist and pacifying, aimed at just tiring people out—but they didn't go home, they blocked all the highways, god bless 'em.

Wednesday night, there was even heavier rioting, even in some smaller cities. When the police charged hard and laid out left and right, people didn't like that. There were more burning barricades. Catalan politicians started saying it was the work of infiltrators, circulating bogus stories on social media about *encaputxats* [masked ones] getting envelopes full of cash. I'm still waiting for my envelope, Torra, you stingy Catalan prick! [Quim Torra is a member of the Parliament of Catalonia and the current president of the Government of Catalonia. This appears to be a play on the stereotype of Catalans being stingy.]

On Thursday, the rioting in Barcelona lasted till 6 in the morning. It also continued in the other capitals. Protests took place in solidarity with Catalunya in Madrid, Donostia, Granada, and València. Fascists marched for Spanish unity, too; there were clashes in Madrid and València.

¹ The National Assembly of Catalunya (ANC) is a large pro-independence civil society organization. Their former leader got up on a police van at a moment of maximum tension two years ago and convinced the crowds to quit the streets. He is now serving a 9-year prison sentence for sedition.

They caught an anti-fascist in Barcelona and beat him badly. Another Nazi tried to knife some protesters; he was disarmed, stomped, and left in a coma.

On Friday, 500,000 protesters converged in Barcelona. Shortly after they arrived, the ANC cancelled the march. I heard some people complaining, “The Assembly calls it off, and everyone goes home,” even as they dutifully headed for the metro. All across the city, street after street, the asphalt was fire-scarred. Where *haven't* the rioters been, this week? I picked my way through the crowd at *Jardinets* to meet up with the group with YPG flags, the Rojava solidarity demo. The Kurdish movement has long supported Catalan independence and Catalunya has been a hub of support for Rojava and democratic confederalism, though the latter is much easier to co-opt in Europe. For its part, Turkey hasn't been interested in co-opting, only annihilating.

The march managed to start off through the dense crowds, chanting and wrecking a couple BBVA's [a bank heavily invested in Turkey].

Then it was done. *Passeig de Gràcia* was packed all the way down to Plaça Catalunya. One block over, Pau Claris was full all the way to Plaça Urquinaona, at the top of Via Laietana, which was guarded by riot cops. Plenty of those people were trying to get down there. The sun hadn't even set and it was a war zone.

The cops were holding a corner, shooting rubber bullets, and people were responding with stones. People would run when the cops made a particularly strong assault, but then immediately poured back in, edging closer and closer. Barricades went up, increasing in complexity and effectiveness. Every couple minutes, the cops would shoot off a few rounds of tear gas. People would extinguish them in seconds. The cops had to be conservative with their ammunition; after the previous night, they knew they could run out—and that the crowd won't be merciful. Each gunner was easily shooting off 100–200 rubber bullets and 50–100 canisters of tear gas a night. Added up along an entire police line, that makes for a fierce barrage, but it barely slowed the crowd down.

Early on Friday night, things were a bit awkward. Behind the front line, there were huge crowds of young people hanging out, eager to be close to the action, but not entirely sure that a riot is a good thing. Consequently, the rioters stayed with their own, breaking up rocks at the front, directly in the line of fire. If you tried breaking up the paving stones 20 meters back, where it made sense to do it strategically, a circle of gawkers would form, many filming, asking, “what are you doing?”

Let's set the scene. There are all sorts of people here—mostly young, but some older. Many people have Catalan flags, plenty are speaking Spanish, some are tourists. Some are clad all in black, some have no masks at all. Of all the arrestees so far, only two have belonged to an independence organization or party, though of course the CDR has no formal membership. Some people question the necessity of the property destruction that is taking place; one has to explain, “rocks are needed up front.” No one questions the attacks on the police—they are the common enemy. Too many years of getting beaten, of peaceful protests and things staying the same. “Forces of occupation, out!” is one of the common chants, and it is hurled against *mossos* [Catalan police] and *nacionales* [Spanish police] with no distinction, although people chase after the vans of *nacionales* with a special fervor. Their presence in the streets here is hatefully symbolic: whereas the *mossos* live and work here year round, the Spanish cops were sent in just to repress the movement. They're the ones who beat up people's grandmothers for voting in 2017.

The Spanish flag is like a red banner, taunting the bull. it provokes a special reaction, but all cops are targets, and the *mossos* are getting their share. Their more quotidian presence is no

advantage: just the week before this all started, they were beating up people who were trying to stop evictions in the Raval and Poble-sec neighborhoods. Hundreds of people were there, thousands of neighbors saw it, everyone saw the videos.

In the hinterland, behind the escalating combat, people are calm, enjoying the liberated space, building ever more complex barricades, occasionally pulling another dumpster to the front to serve as fuel for the fire. I pass some of the biggest barricades I've ever seen. Several banks are trashed, while others are oddly untouched. I glimpse what becomes my favorite graffito of the night: "Violent fags seeking revenge." Another is also spot on: "in the riots, we aren't so alone." It's true: people take care of each other.

There's a lower street that angles back up to the police position at the bottom of the Plaça. If we take it, the crowd can flank the cops battling it out at close quarters at Urquinaona. A line of riot police holds the top of the street. The approach is 100 meters, under fire the whole way. People start picking their way up the sides, leapfrogging from doorway to doorway to get into throwing range, while one comrade keeps blinding the cops with a laser. The combat grows intense. Projectiles whizz by. People wince or fall when they're hit, go limping back. Some old guy in an anarchist militia hat, 1936-style, stands in the middle of the road, taunting the police, magically unscathed. When you run out of rocks, you have to scramble, doorway to doorway, back to the mouth of the street.

As the assault intensifies, the police counterattack. A column of riot vans charges down the street and people scatter, but as soon as the vans turn, people charge right back in. This happens over and over. Each time, the vans get to an intersection and they have to choose—they can only pursue one group. As soon as they turn or go straight, everyone who ran in the other two directions starts chasing the cops, pounding on the vans. At this point, all the vans are damaged.

It's too dangerous for the cops to get out of the vans like they used to do. There are too many people, too angry. They'd get stomped. We'd *love* for them to get out of the vans. What sorts of goodies might be found inside?

The cops have retaken the dumpsters that people pulled across the lower street, which afforded a protected vantage point within easy throwing distance. They pull the dumpsters out of the way. It's a naked approach again, all one hundred meters of it. People go back to trying.

Suddenly, a group in black is pulling their injured comrade back down the street, calling for medics. Something is wrong. We help them get to a clear spot. I know we shouldn't crowd them, but I want to slip in, just for one second, to see if they're all right. A cameraman is going in: I duck in to push him away, and while I'm close, I look. Hit in the face. Eyeball exploded. The medic's hands are already covered in blood. I turn to my buddy. We'll stay here, help keep the area clear—and if the cops charge again, we won't move. No retreat. After what feels like a long time, the ambulance comes. Some reports say four people have had their eyes shot out this week. Other reports place the number at seven.

Back at the Plaça, there's a burning barricade on the corner and people have sacked a restaurant terrace for the big cloth umbrellas, which they expertly place over a barricade just 10 meters from the police position. Now people can throw from a perfect distance, completely protected. The quarries for preparing projectiles have been set up where they should be, out of the way. People have fashioned tools to lift up the paving stones and the huge fire at the secondary barricade is burning off most of the tear gas. The cops are now pinned under a barrage of hundreds of stones a minute, not to mention the occasional discreet throw from a balcony. How many tons of stone will be thrown at them in the course of this night?

The collective intelligence of the crowd has increased exponentially. People have reconstructed the street so everyone is as safe as possible, so people can approach close to the cops and put them in constant danger. There's a constant supply of ammunition and the whole crowd is protected from van charges from the rear. What a difference from just one hour ago. The cops are starting to get traumatized as more of them are injured. We're no longer the victims. We're winning.

Street after street, the fires are growing bigger, reaching as high as the third floor. In Gràcia, this caused some problems with neighbors, who practically had flames scorching their balconies. But here around Urquinaona, right in the center, Airbnb has already destroyed the neighborhood; many of the buildings are empty. Who cares if tourists can't get to their cheap apartments? They stole those houses from the people who lived here.

It's not entirely empty, though. At the moment of maximum conflict, an older couple, faces drawn, walk with a tense step past the rioters, towards the police line, which doesn't stop shooting. I peek around the corner to watch. It looks like they make it to the door of their apartment without getting hit.

A little later, on the lower street, I take in a sight that stays with me. There are no more dumpsters providing cover in the middle of the street. Three young people have pulled a couple mopeds from their parking spots to fashion a makeshift barricade. They're crouching down, just 15 meters from the police position, farther forward than those of us taking cover in the doorways. Two of them are masked, but the third, a teenage girl, has nothing in the way of protective clothing. All the same, she keeps straightening up, exposed to police fire, to throw more objects. If only she'd cover her face! Some people make a mad dash from cover to leave the three another pile of stones. People take care of one another as best they can.

This fighting continues for more than four hours. It's not as long as Thursday night, but far more intense, with more people and better technique. Only after repeated van charges and heavy assaults have hammered away at the crowds on Urquinaona—and after many people have slipped away due to exhaustion, injuries, or just plain satisfaction—do the police bring out their celebrated new weapon, a water cannon mounted on a tank. They make a video showing the tank advancing and extinguishing some burning barricades, but in practice it's not as decisive as all that. They keep it in reserve until late in the night, only using it with massive police backup, and only after many people have already surrendered the plaza.

I can imagine the cops had a directive from the very top: use it, but under no circumstances let demonstrators destroy it. The crowds would have loved to tear that thing apart.

Friday is a high point, but it's not the end. The police deploy some innovations on Saturday. They have a cordon of good citizens forming between their lines and the demonstrators at Plaça Urquinaona that helps to keep things peaceful. How quickly the pacifists agree to serve the forces of repression when people stop obeying them! No one prevented them from doing their peaceful marches, but they're incapable of accepting any difference or multiplicity of opinion—much like the state itself.

And they don't accomplish anything. They killed the movement in 2017—and while it's true that this week of fighting won't break apart the Spanish state, in these very same days, we've seen how people fighting fiercely in the streets have defeated austerity measures in Ecuador, Chile, and Lebanon.

Saturday in Catalunya isn't a total bust, though. There are still riots in the Raval and Gràcia neighborhoods as well as in some other cities, much as the corporate media try to play that down.

Sunday is definitely calmer, but still people don't give up. In Girona, 1000 people surround the courthouse, trying to block the judges from sending the arrested to pretrial detention.

We don't know what will happen next. Society has been divided and the line does not trace any national or linguistic divide. It separates people on the basis of their chosen relation to social control: **those who support the police and those who oppose them**. Some people still talk about democracy, but they mean opposite things. They're willing to shoot down helicopters to attain it—or willing to run over protesters and beat up old folks to preserve it. Some of the former people will eventually have to acknowledge that what they actually want is anarchy; some of the latter may admit that what they really favor is fascism. But for the most part, things will remain muddled and equivocal—and we anarchists will do our best to develop and share clear visions of the enemy, clear lines of flight, lines of attack.

In any case, many, many thousands of people have experienced something they'll never forget. Most of them will not join us in our projects and conspiracies over the next few months, but some will, and we've got to learn how to grow and share with them as they share with us.

The rest, they'll still be there, and we'll meet in the streets once again. These are not calm times that lie ahead of us.

Monday Update

There are protests today outside jails and courthouses. Two of the detainees were sent to migrant detention. The cops have announced the arrest of a youth accused of shooting fireworks at the police helicopter on Wednesday. He has been charged with attempted murder, public disorder, and assaulting authority. This struggle will not end any time soon.

Meanwhile, in one small town outside Barcelona, masked individuals set fire to a couple police cars right outside the station. In a small village on the coast, some people pelted a cop with stones as he was driving away from the station in his private car. In both cases, the targets were *mossos*, the Catalan police.

Our overlords are also in the news. P. Sánchez, Socialist president of Spain, comes to Barcelona, but refuses to meet with the President of the *Generalitat* [the Catalan semi-autonomous government]. Dialogue is impossible. Not even the leaders of democracy are trying to fix the situation, if it means looking weak in front of their imagined voters.

The whole circus tent is falling down.

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