

The Machiavellian challenges of Article 155 ¹

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I say that one ascends to the principality either with the favour of the people or with the favour of the great (Machiavelli, The Prince, Ch. IX).

Puigdemont should have read Nicolò Machiavelli with more attention, so as to understand the meaning of his advice now, in the 21st century. Certainly he has enjoyed the fervour of a part of the people, but in a democracy you earn the favour of the people within the legality of the rules, rather than playing false, where the fervour ends up undermining democracy, and then ceases to be favour. It is also true that he has tried to win the favour of the great, but the great are no longer the Catalan nobles – now they are the members of the European Council, and they clearly have denied him any form of support. So, as many of us have been predicting since the beginning of the process, without the effective support of the people, or even the verbal support of the great, Puigdemont will not end up ascending to the principality of the so-called Catalan republic.

Although it does not seem that Rajoy has read it with due attention either, stopping at phrases like: "For injuries must be done all at once, so that, being tested less, they offend less; and benefits should be provided little by little, so they may be tasted better" (Ch. VIII). Or maybe he has read it very recently, and Article 155 is in fact the 'all at once' that finds its justification in: "[S]o let a prince win and preserve the State, that the means will always be honourable and praised by all" (Ch. XVIII), - a phrase that has often been mistakenly taken out of context to say that for Machiavelli "the end justifies the means," when he himself is emphatic in saying: "[T]he worst that a prince can expect from a hostile people is to be abandoned by it" (Ch. IX)....And I conclude that a prince should esteem the great, but not make himself hated by the people" (Ch. XIX).

This he said 500 years ago, when the challenge was to ascend to the principality, not to win elections or to defend democratic monarchy. Today one should only change the tone, but not the content, of his comment: "I say that each prince should desire to be held merciful and not cruel; nonetheless he should take care not to misuse this mercy" (Ch. XVII). This is the first Machiavellian challenge for the application of Article 155: to defend and preserve the State requires to restore the constitutional order and economic stability, and to open the doors and windows of the Palau de la Generalitat, currently closed to those who, in one way or another, do not support the independence cause; but any act of the central government - under the protection of Article 155 - will be presented as

¹ Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution allows the central government to temporarily take over the control of competences of an autonomous government, when the latter does not comply with its constitutional obligations. Most federal constitutions have similar articles.

an aggression against the rights of Catalonia, as further proof that the only solution is independence, generating more hostility.

One must know how to break this perverse dynamic, and the first thing is to avoid unnecessary cruelty - for example, freezing the accounts of research groups, or the administrative and management incompetence that centralization often involves. For example, the Generalitat's commitment to digitalization had a strong component of disloyalty towards the central administration by building 'alternative state institutions', but it was also a, by no means negligible, push to improve administrative efficiency. The second, to have empathy -which is not the same as mercy- with the vast majority of Catalans who want to live in peace and love, and both want and know how to improve their own affairs. Today these people are confused and deeply worried, since the independence mantra becomes more mantra than reality by the day, yet there is distrust that the situation will be fixed from Madrid. And, yes, there is the question of dignity, which often neither of them seems to respect, ones for their political and legal actions, the others for their promises that, it is now seen, were false. But empathy does not necessarily bring contentment: in the long list of grievances of the Catalans, real problems are mixed with lies or, simply, lack of solidarity or co-responsibility.

Which brings us to the second Machiavellian challenge. Machiavelli was Florentine, that is, from the landlocked interior of Tuscany, and perhaps because of this there is a recurrent theme in his writings that he never expressed as clearly as an ocean-going navigator would: "The best way to deal with immediate problems is to be clear about where you want to go". The application of Article 155 - held to be an exceptional and temporary measure to confront institutional bankruptcy - is no exception, for example two immediate challenges are: in Catalonia, the Central Administration is marginal -9% of employees - and their relationship with the majority of Catalans is sporadic, although significant, yet not necessarily welcome: comply with norms, pay taxes, etcetera; in addition, the rhetoric of the Generalitat - and the media that controls or supports it - has tended to claim its own successes but blame the central government for shortcomings, cuts or failures. It is not by chance that the process has been nourished by the discontent of the economic crisis, as if the real estate bubble, banking crisis, public debt and corruption had not listed Catalan surnames too. The temptation is to react by doing just the opposite, but to go where?

PP, PSOE and Citizens support the application of Article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, they agree that we must preserve the unity of the Spanish State, participate actively in the European Union and the Eurozone and, now also, that the existing model of financing the autonomous Spanish regions, as well as the Spanish Constitution, must be reformed. But this is not enough to face the social disruption that affects all Spaniards, or to answer the question that will be on the street in the next elections to the Catalan Parliament: what model of territorial decentralization is wanted for Spain?

It is logical that there are differences in the answer to this question and that the Catalans should vote on these and other matters, but to have a credible

alternative to separatism - and populism - will require a minimum agreement on what the self-government of Catalonia, and of the other autonomous regions, is to look like, after article 155. In my opinion, it can be neither to leave things as they were - secession excluded - or recentralization. A future agreement, open as well to those forces that today do not support article 155, would be the best guide for the implementation of Article 155, if it is to end up being "honourable and praised by all", or at least by a large majority of Spaniards and Catalans.