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In Barcelona, Austerity with an Iron Fist

Peter Gelderloos

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Criminalizing public meetings, expanding police powers and weaponry, and applying anti-terrorist measures to street protests: it sounds like Spain in the Franco years, but all of these measures have been proposed in Spain in just the last couple of weeks. Far from being a throwback to the years of dictatorship, these repressive developments go hand in hand with the current economic crisis. Considering the connection between the 15M plaza occupation movement and the subsequent Occupy movement that spread to several countries around the globe, between the March 29th general strike in Spain and the upcoming May 1st general strike called in the United States, between the brutal austerity measures implemented already a year or two ago by the government in Madrid and the increasing signs of shakiness from more stable EU countries such as France, Spain is, if anything, ahead of the curve.

The repressive trends of the crisis are especially visible in Catalunya, where social movements have been most active in resisting or blocking austerity measures. Hospitals that planners intended to shut down have been occupied and kept in

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function. In response to fare hikes, neighbors and users have forcibly opened metro stations so everyone can ride for free. Students have seized their universities to protest measures of privatization, and ordinary people have harassed and chased away politicians when they tried to make a public showing. In the month of March, every single family in Barcelona threatened with eviction for not being able to pay their rent or mortgage that sought broader support in order to resist successfully postponed or blocked their eviction.

When Spain was shut down by a general strike on March 29 which achieved an estimated 77 percent participation, in Barcelona the level of struggle far surpassed the plans of the major unions, the Confederation of Labor Unions (known by its Spanish acronym, CCOO) and the General Union of Workers (known by its Spanish acronym, UGT), which had already sold out their constituents and signed on to most of the major reforms. In the Catalan capital, most of the work to mobilize for the strike was carried out by neighborhood assemblies and anarcho-syndicalist unions like the National Confederation of Labor (CNT, by its Spanish initials) or the General Confederation of Labor (CGT, by its Spanish initials). The major unions were largely isolated the day of the strike, when tens of thousands of people took to the streets, burned banks and fought with police.

In the aftermath of the strike, Catalunya's notorious interior minister, Felip Puig, reacted with indignation and promised harsh new security measures. But honestly, what do ruling politicians and their banker friends expect? That they can take away people's health care, homes and livelihood while they live it up in exclusive neighborhoods, vote themselves pay raises, drive around in luxury cars, and go to private clinics and private schools? That there aren't any consequences for slashing retirement and unemployment benefits with the excuse that there isn't enough money to go around because they've spent it all on bailouts? Do they honestly expect that people are

going to be shocked by the smashing of banks when those same banks have kicked them out of their houses or swallowed up the money that used to go to health care and unemployment?

The new security measures and police powers the Catalan government in particular is granting itself are not a reaction to the rebelliousness of the March 29th general strike, Puig's hypocritical handwringing notwithstanding. In the early months of the crisis, before any popular outburst could provide the excuse, it had already become clear that one of the only growth sectors for employment in the foreseeable future would be police and private security. Puig made it clear where his priorities lay from the moment he stepped into office in December 2010: among his first acts were removing the article in the police protocol that prohibited torture and removing the cameras from Catalan police stations — cameras that had proven their usefulness in the previous administration by catching frequent beatings and acts of torture carried out by police. It was Puig who presided over the brutalizing of thousands of peaceful protesters involved in the occupation of Plaça Catalunya last May. Also under his tenure, private security in the metro and elsewhere have been given police powers. Violence and repression has always been this politician's preferred response to popular discontentment.

But every politician is an opportunist, and this one is hoping no one will notice the hypocrisy as he throws a fit in response to the riots. What are the new measures he is either demanding or already in the process of implementing?

One hundred new riot police (the total number of police in Catalunya alone has already gone up by about 2,000 in the last few years, while thousands of workers in education and health care have been sacked), and a new prosecutor to focus exclusively on "street violence." More surveillance cameras in public places, and a web site to encourage public snitching and crowdsourcing for the identification of rioters. Laws punishing public anonymity through masking or other means (which would

also prohibit the burka and niqab, and could affect the tradition of masks and disguises, as well as heavy fireworks, that mark most popular festivals here). Puig has proposed restrictions on the right to assembly, and he wants the power to detain the usual suspects (those with police antecedents) before “situations of risk” as a preventive measure.

And of course, Interior is pushing for harsher sentences for a variety of crimes. While Puig graciously admits that, “vandalism is not the same as terrorism,” he nonetheless proposes making the sentencing the same and allowing two years of pretrial imprisonment for public-disorder-related accusations, effectively giving the police the power to pass prison sentences of up to two years without trial.

It is noteworthy that Spain was one of the first countries to develop a domestic anti-terror politics, in its case, to allow the torture and long-term imprisonment of anyone involved in the Basque independence struggle. In the last decade, a huge proportion of Basque prisoners were youths arrested for *kale borroka*, the tradition of rowdy street protests against Spanish authority. In many cases, entire villages have been depopulated of their youth thanks to harsh anti-terror laws.

Now the politicians are toying with the idea of bringing these same anti-terror politics to Catalunya. After the March 29th general strike, Artur Mas, the president of Catalunya, affirmed that *kale borroka* had come to Barcelona. Puig demurred, preferring the more sober label, “urban guerrilla warfare.” The media backed up such exaggerations, using the figure of 80 wounded during the riots in Barcelona to make extreme measures seem necessary.

But the vast majority of injuries were caused by police. Every single one of the six people hospitalized in urgent condition (ruptured spleen, contusions to the lung, loss of an eye and cerebral damage, etcetera) were injured by riot police shooting rubber bullets at close range or aiming for the waist up, in clear violation of the law. Not surprisingly, it’s one law that

no one in power is talking about. They are much more worried about people potentially taking over the cities they inhabit than about the police potentially killing or crippling people.

The repression, ultimately, goes hand in hand with the crisis, and both are logical products of a system that has demonstrated time and time again its total lack of respect for human dignity and life on this planet, human and nonhuman. Today it’s Spain; tomorrow, it could be anywhere else. Those in power have made it clear that they will not stop until we stop them.