



José Ovejero, Jordi Puntí

### **Reflections on a peaceful dialogue**

(June 2023, translated by Marc Prior)

We met and got to know each other personally in January 2023 in Zaragoza, about half way between our homes. On 3 February, José sent the letter launching this dialogue in writing. Our initial task was to determine our respective backgrounds and the defining characteristics of our identities, whether by biographical imperative or of our own choice. Since we're both writers, it comes as little surprise that José began with a poem he had written many years previously expressing his anti-nationalist stance and his scepticism regarding collective identities (an aspect he later nuanced); Jordi responded with an excerpt from one of his novellas in which class consciousness comes into conflict with the tendency of many workers to support right-wing nationalist politicians.

Despite all our subtle differences, we soon realized that we shared a distinct mistrust of political dogmatism. We were united in rejecting essentialist nationalism, whether Spanish or Catalan, and in being concerned at the growth of the far right in a country – Spain – where at the end of the Franco dictatorship there were to be no guilty parties and no one was to be punished. We thus entered into dialogue on points on which we agreed and which defined a similar ideological framework for both of us: tolerant and progressive.

The further course of the dialogue would show where we diverged from each other.

We were also united in our critical perception of the Spanish justice system, which some years previously had imposed harsh sentences on the politicians responsible for the illegal referendum in Catalonia on 1 October 2017. The majority of these politicians were sentenced to long prison terms for sedition. We both regarded the Spanish judiciary as an ossified institution that had continued to nurture attitudes passed down over many decades, according to which the integrity of the national territory justified tendentious interpretations of the law; an institution still exhibiting a country's antiquated, conquistador image of itself. Politicization of the judiciary in Spain is an obstacle to any scenario of dialogue and understanding for the reality in Catalonia.

In his first letter, Jordi also pointed out that our exchange of opinions began asymmetrically, as he had to write in Castilian to facilitate communication with José. Although he grew up speaking Castilian as well as Catalan, it's clear that his way of thinking and his advocacy of

Catalonia's right to self-determination are inextricably linked to the linguistic and cultural richness of the Catalan language. For this reason, the Catalan desire for independence has historically always been nourished by the Spanish state's claim to dominance, not least with regard to markers of identity such as the language and the culture that Catalonia has produced. Inevitably, language and culture progressively became the main topic of our discussion.

Not the only topic, of course. But when raised, it's likely to gain particular prominence, and to be a source of annoyance to some. Language and culture are linked to deep-rooted attitudes that often serve as a collective identity – even though Catalonia's long history of being economically disadvantaged, for example, is equally relevant in the controversy.

From the outset, José emphasized his distrust of the Catalan political class, of a right-wing *Independentisme*, which he believes is founded on a potentially exclusionary nationalism. Barcelona's reputation as a particularly modern city and Catalonia's economic ties to the rest of Europe could be lost if Catalonia were to become independent; not only would the newly independent country find itself outside the EU, a risk would also exist of nationalist radicalization bringing reactionary forces to power in it. A trend towards exclusionary nationalism already exists in Catalonia, says José; it's merely keeping a low profile, because independence cannot be achieved without the support of non-nationalists.

Jordi considered the risk of a shift to the right in Catalonia to be low, but agreed that it was important to remain vigilant. Although we took different positions on this issue, we both viewed it as a remote, very unlikely possibility – and that it would be better to discuss more realistic scenarios.

In his third letter, Jordi made a suggestion that could serve as both a distant point of convergence and a basis for fruitful debate in the medium to longer term: Would a legal referendum on the status of Catalonia be conceivable for José? (In other words, something completely different from the illegal referendum held on 1 October 2017, which Jordi believes was not really serious, and which was accompanied by widespread police violence against voters.) "Referendum" is still a catchword in Catalonia, but the conditions under which it could be held, and even the question on the ballot, would have to be clarified. For example: Federalism or independence? The status quo or independence?

Jordi added that Spain should view such a referendum as an opportunity to modernize its political system, including, for example, the question of the monarchy (which continues to be a taboo subject), and to become as democratic again as it was in the Second Republic, before the civil war that led to Francisco Franco's dictatorship.

José chose not to answer the question regarding the referendum immediately. He preferred to wait until the end of the dialogue, in order first to weigh up the pros and cons carefully and analyse certain specific aspects of Spanish politics and the legal system, examine the origins of the historical conflict between Catalonia and Spain and, above all, discuss the current state of this conflict and possible paths for dialogue and resolution.

While writing to each other, we both read Eugenio Trías' *La Cataluña ciudad* (published in 1984) and Lola García's *El muro* (2022) to equip us better to judge the historical dimensions of the conflict. Trías' essay prompted us to talk about the rivalry between Barcelona and Madrid and how each city views the other. It was interesting to see how Trías views Barcelona as a model for an open, progressive, creative civil society, and Madrid by contrast as a classic example of a closed, traditional society, mired in the past and very concerned with its own ascendancy. This is doubtless a somewhat simplistic view. Yet José confessed that, as a young man from Madrid, he was envious of the freedom and creativity he believed he saw in urbane Catalonia; and that by comparison, he too found the Spanish capital oppressive and backward-looking at the time. This changed for the first time with the famous *movida madrileña*, the great pop culture-driven movement in Madrid in the 1980s. The institutions, however, remained largely unaffected by the change.

At the same time, Lola García's book sparked a conversation between us about the many political attempts that have already been made to reach new agreements between Catalonia and Spain. Time after time, solutions seemed possible but a conclusive agreement was never reached, due either to a lack of flexibility or to electoral tactics. The fact that negotiations between Spanish and Catalan politicians often took place in secret is reflective of the mistrust not only within the political class, but also between the Spanish and Catalan populations: the leaders of the two sides negotiating with each other at all is sometimes seen as a form of treason.

After we had each written half a dozen letters, José explained his position on the referendum: although he doesn't believe it will solve the conflict, he nevertheless considers it necessary. He fears it will reawaken the most rancid nationalism on both sides, with the Spanish side also being able to draw on the army and the state judiciary. However, he sees no alternative way forward to consulting the population: firstly because of the ongoing conflict between the societies in Spain and Catalonia, and secondly because the conflict also exists within Catalonia itself.

Jordi regards the referendum as an indispensable step, although he is anything but certain about the outcome.

We're both aware that much would have to change in the Spanish state for such a referendum to be possible or even seriously discussed: not merely because of the constitutional changes it would entail, but above all because of the change in mentality that it would require of both sides.

In the course of our dialogue we floated the possibility, half in jest, of convening a gathering of smart minds from different sectors of society: intellectuals, historians, economists, artists, activists. These individuals would each examine the causes of the conflict, its peculiarities, and possible solutions to it, including the referendum, from their own particular perspectives. In a fit of suspicion, Jordi suggested that politicians should be excluded from such a congress, or at least those who often actively exploit the conflict for short-term interests and throw their convictions to the wind for quick returns if they have to. It goes without saying that the congress, or rather a series of such congresses, should not have the purpose of imposing a solution formulated beforehand. This is also the reason for excluding politicians: to prevent the exercise from becoming a power game. Instead, it should be dedicated to analysis, understanding and communication. We therefore thought it beneficial for the voices of people from outside the country to be heard at these congresses, people who are thus likely to be less prejudiced than many Spaniards and Catalans. Such gatherings would extend this conversation, this attempt at dialogue, to include people of very different backgrounds, with very different experiences, from very different bubbles. (A recurring theme of our dialogue was also how we live in bubbles created by the media, language, our environment, and how these bubbles sometimes make us unreceptive to our counterpart's point of view.)

Spain's regional and local elections were held towards the end of our correspondence. They delivered a clear victory for the conservative PP together with gains by the far right, and consequently a series of alliances of these forces in regional governments and on city councils. This result felt to us as though reality had slapped us in the face. It made our endeavours all the more unrealistic. The recent shift in the political landscape makes dialogue even less likely, and threatens to extinguish any remaining flexibility. The parliamentary elections, called early by Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, will result in a changed electoral landscape and will reframe the Spanish-Catalan question, perhaps even radicalize it, for years to come. It's possible that the parties on the Spanish left will be able to remain in government, but once again only with the support of Basque and Catalan nationalists. *Déjà vu*, all over again. If, on the other hand, the right and the extreme right – both of which advocate a fanatical Spanish nationalism – gain an absolute majority in the parliament, Spanish-Catalan relations will become unpredictable.

By the time we meet in Westphalia, the results will be known. It's conceivable that the two Spanish nationalist parties will have to rely on the more right-wing forces from the Basque and Catalan nationalist spectrum to form a government. Such an alliance would have bizarre consequences. But let's not get ahead of events.

At any rate: Jordi, who, unlike José, entered the dialogue with a certain optimism, now finds the situation much more difficult.

Was our contribution to the "Westphalian Peace Talks" worth the effort in the end? Were we not courageous enough? Did we lack the necessary imagination, despite being novelists? Were we too attached to reality? Or is the conflict now so entrenched that it's already become a form of fiction? Whatever conclusion we draw, there's no question that the dialogue was worthwhile. On the one hand, it forced us, as writers who are used to creating and dwelling in parallel realities, to conceive of different scenarios, together; on the other, it was an exercise in seeing the world through each other's eyes, which is always an interesting endeavour.

The dialogue also brought home to us how many points we agree on, which was more than we had initially thought. Moreover, generally speaking, such an exercise is never without value, and we consider it beneficial to make it available to a public audience and, above all, extended it to include other voices. If we rule out the use of violence to resolve conflicts, as we do here, dialogue and negotiation are the only available means of finding a solution. We're well aware that conflicts can rarely be resolved completely. But just as in a relationship, a family or a circle of friends, living in society means constantly negotiating and finding ways of doing so that prevent conflicts from destroying our lives.

In summary, it's less about resolving the conflict than about eliminating its destructive power, and thus improving the lives of citizens, which should be the goal of any policy worthy of our respect. Whether the way forward is now a referendum, a negotiated solution or restructuring of the territorial model; whether it results in a federalist Spain, division into two separate states or some other solution currently beyond our imagination: what's crucial is that attitudes don't harden hopelessly and that confrontation isn't sought in order to impose a particular territorial model by force. Above all, escalation must be avoided, which usually results in human well-being being downgraded as a political priority. At the same time, nationalist diatribes of whatever shade must not be used as a smokescreen for corruption or political incompetence.

Therefore, irrespective of the outcome, and even though there are times when our confidence hits rock bottom, we'll continue to talk to each other – in the conviction that this is

the only possible way, in spite of everything. Let people call us naive or feeble: we believe that there is nothing more radical in these times than maintaining dialogue with each other and relying on human goodwill – or at least the goodwill of some; we're not that naive.