

Game Tape Analysis: Why Catalonia Represents All of Us

October 24, 2017



At the southern tip of Europe, stretching out its two hands of Ceuta and Melilla to reach Africa, Spain usually goes unnoticed. Our news hardly ever makes world headlines; it's simply not impactful enough. Over the past month, however, my adopted homeland has been enveloped in one of the most controversial events of the decade, and finally our dirty laundry is being hung out to dry on the international clothesline. The threat of Catalonia breaking away from Spain is juicy. It's the political equivalent of a marriage gone wrong, complete with steeped-finger scheming, mutual resentment, and fittingly, bouts of domestic violence. But it also serves to show how the choices and actions of politicians turn a prominent issue in need of discussion into a roiling turmoil. The question of Catalanian secession is the result of the thoughtless, petty political practice that is ubiquitous in governments around the world, but that should have no place in the future of governance.

I live in Seville, in southern Spain, the capital city of Andalusia, which has the resources to potentially be one of the richest regions of the country, but which is, unfortunately, one of the most mismanaged regions and thus suffers poverty and unemployment levels among the highest in the nation. Long before I had ever set foot in this land, or could even find my present-day home on a map, leaders of one of the actual richest regions of the country started to feel an inkling of doubt in their relationship with their peninsular brethren.

Catalonian elected officials had been inspired to seek more autonomy when they re-drafted their regional statute, specifically taking measures to express their discontent with the redistributive nature of the tax system. Maybe negotiating the tax system didn't seem too farfetched. The Basque Country, another autonomous region, does have their own internal revenue service. Perhaps the Catalans foresaw the economic crisis and wanted to safeguard against having to pay the welfare checks of other regions. Either way, I suspect that those Catalan leaders were thinking as most politicians do in modern times—not in what would make their constituents, their own people satisfied, or even happy with their lives while keeping the region afloat, but rather in 1) what do I personally believe, 2) what tactics can I use to get the people behind me, and 3) what move will keep me in this politics game the longest?

In 2004, the Catalan parliament began to rewrite their Statute of Autonomy, the collection of

regulations that guides the operations of all aspects of the region. However, the powers that were introduced some controversial articles that would have given Catalonia more judicial and economic independence, as well as implied a compulsory nature of the use of the Catalan language in the public sphere, and most concerning for the conservative *Partido Popular* (People's Party, or PP) representatives in the regional parliament, the use of the word "nation" to refer to Catalonia in the statute's articles. As the heirs to the Francoist ideal of a strong centralized Spain, if there's one thing the PP is good at, it's reading too much into what someone says, especially if it threatens the idea of One Spain.

Controversy rose to a fever pitch, with the PP, led by current president Mariano Rajoy, stoking the fires of patriotism to shed a villainous light on the Catalan government. Finally, a compromise was made between socialist president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero and Catalan political leader Artur Mas, a redrafted solution found. It was rejected by the PP and the Catalan separatist party for being both too radical and too lenient at the same time, but it passed nonetheless. So the citizens got to vote. However, low voter turnout was a huge issue at that point in time, and the new autonomous statute received an overall approval, but only by the votes of 49% of the population. This is where things started to go awry. The PP were emboldened, and both sides were looking for a fight.

Catalonia was unhappy with their situation. One contentious issue was the fact that as one of the wealthiest regions, taxes were levied on them by the central government and then fairly distributed amongst all the regions of the country, obviously having to contribute more to the poorest ones. The Catalans weren't getting back what they were putting in. In addition to the economic issue that sparked the inferno, I would mention that tension has existed between Castilians and Catalans since the Hapsburg-Bourbon contest for the throne in the 18th century. Furthermore, during the Spanish Civil War, a topic that, frankly, Spaniards avoid talking about at all costs, Francoist forces made sure to act on this old feud. During this severely damaging period of time, which in my opinion has never seen proper closure, the Catalan, Basque, and to a lesser extent, the Galician cultures were oppressed, with Franco favoring pure Castilian traditions. Their language, their mother tongue, their most natural and fluid way to express their humanity, was prohibited as well as their centuries-old tradition of self-governance.

When Spanish politicians are faced with the possibility of progress, a suggestion of change, they panic. The People's Party always falls back on words like *legal* and *tradition* to back up what they believe is right, and they combat their opponents like seventh grade tattletales, keeping track of every single misdeed, and going after physical appearance if all else fails. And in some way, I understand this nervousness. There's a tense undercurrent in Spain that is never mentioned. It's as if the nation's leaders feel that at any moment this fragile network of autonomous communities, so different one from another, and brought together forty years ago in an open-ended experiment in creating democracy, could come undone at any moment. I understand why they all look like they have stomach ulcers. Spain has been through a lot, and is still finding its identity as a modern nation.

Once the citizens of Catalonia underwhelmingly voted in support of the proposed statute, the PP presented various cases of unconstitutional articles to Spain's Supreme Court. From the filing of the lawsuit in 2006, the PP and the Catalonian leaders began to engage in a back and forth escalation of jabs. Both sides tried to get one another's magistrates removed from the judicial panel, and in the end, the PP succeeded in the strategy that the Catalans had originated, and in 2010 the court finally ruled that parts of the document did indeed violate the Constitution. The response to the ruling was to call for a referendum on whether Catalonia should take the step towards independence, and thus began the manipulation and mobilization of the people by the Catalan government.

The Catalonian separatist movement is not a grassroots movement. The whole idea of secession, a

legitimate threat of secession, came from the top, from leaders like Artur Mas and Oriol Junqueras, and the hastily-assembled idea of separating from Spain was spread by word of mouth and through Catalan media until people began to be convinced that it would be a good idea. I sympathize. The ham-fisted mannerisms of the conservative leaders are downright infuriating, and I have no doubt that many Catalans have a strong regional identity, pride in their culture, and disdain and resentment for past events that would propel them to distance themselves from the Spanish conservatives, who can't stand Catalonia, yet abhor even more the idea of a Spain with a piece missing.

As a leader, though, this is not the time to generate more controversy that will only lead to the edge of cliff, where we find ourselves today; it's the time to take a breath, gather up your fellow policy makers, and rack your brains to find the best diplomatic solution to the problem. Instead, strong rhetoric and appeal to patriotism and cultural nationalism was employed, and a message of reassurance, that Catalonia could easily break away and that life would basically continue on as usual, only better, was propagated. But did those who spread the message of independence take the consideration to also share the practical, logistical planning that would have to take place if they really wanted to become an independent state? Did they leave their ego at the door? Did they give the Catalan separatists the chance to understand what they're getting into?

The issue went into a tailspin. The conservatives began to lash out ungracefully in fear. Catalan officials began to take measures that served for nothing but to save face and protect their own fragile egos, calling for referendums that were obviously non-binding and unofficial, over and over. Neither side did what they were elected to do: to guide us into a future where everyone is better. Politicians are the people I want to see leading us, and instead of having brave women and men who think in terms of solutions and are at the forefront of societal progress, we have at the very top of our political chain mere placeholders who duck and cover at the appearance of an opportunity to make our lives better. I ask them: if you aren't here to eloquently solve our problems, who is? I look around the world and I see people who we refer to as "leaders" who are devoid of any shred of dignity and courage, whose practical skills are nil, and who are completely inept. But they're great campaigners.

They're of a dying breed. The result of the argumentative nature of political behavior in our times is illustrated in the issue of Catalonian secession, and it shows how imperative it is to change. There is no stopping the advances that we as humans are taking, and the world is getting more complicated. However, we are not living merely to survive anymore. Our leaders and ourselves now have the time and the means to think about doing good instead of just staying afloat, and the real problems we are facing—global warming, unequal distribution of wealth worldwide, a solution to the eventual end of fossil fuels—are going to require cooperation and the ability to look beyond the fears we've inherited from older generations. Great people who embody ethical politics and possess an ability to think beyond the constraints of party platforms and one's own self-interest in order to have an honest and evolving debate about issues, to act in good conscience on the behalf of those they represent, to lead, are the future of politics, but only if we take the conscious steps to make it reality.