

INTERVIEW

Interview with Paul Ríos, Tom Woodhouse, María Jimena Duncán and Mariano Aguirre

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ICIP

Four experts in the field of conflict resolution and peacebuilding and dialogue spaces provide us with their vision of the political and social conflict that is currently taking place in Catalonia.

From the analytical and practical perspective: Paul Ríos (Basque Country), María Jimena Duzán (Colombia), Tom Woodhouse (United Kingdom) and Mariano Aguirre (Spain-Argentina) help us identify the features of the Catalan conflict that can be found in other contexts and, at the same time, possible outcomes to the current impasse.

1. What is it that most surprises you about the Catalan conflict?

Paul Ríos, peace and human rights activist. Founder and former coordinator of Lokarri

I find it striking that, despite everything that has happened over recent years, things have not come to a severe degree of violence, because looking at events from the outside, the “normal” thing to expect would have been some kind of escalation towards a violent confrontation. It may be because Catalan society has in its DNA a certain rejection of the use of violence and a sort of conviction that this is not the way to resolve what is going on, seeing that there are better alternatives. There must be a cultural factor within Catalan society that holds back those tendencies that often lead to extreme acts of violence.

Tom Woodhouse, Emeritus Professor of Conflict Resolution, Bradford University

I suppose what strikes me most is how quickly events can polarise and divide people. I am a frequent visitor to Barcelona, a city I love, and I have close and valued friends in the city from all over the world. Barcelona and Catalonia have always seemed to me to be cosmopolitan and outward looking places in sentiment, values and behaviour. In recent years these qualities may be seen to be in retreat, as society has undoubtedly become more politically and socially polarised following the referendum on independence.

María Jimena Duzán, journalist and former consul of Colombia in Barcelona

What surprises me is that it is a cultural conflict. In the years that I lived here I could see that it was coming. The legacy of Pujol was the creation of a Catalan culture that was centred only on what was Catalan, and that affected me. I came from a country as complicated as Colombia and I thought it was surprising that this didn't generate a conflict, because it seemed to me that what they were doing was creating a new generation of young people who in their cultural cosmovision put everything Catalan above all else. There is a very powerful feeling that developed in that world and is now asking for independence.

Mariano Aguirre, Senior Advisor on Peacebuilding, Office of the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Colombia

During the Franco regime, Barcelona represented what is now called cosmopolitanism: an open, multicultural society, opposed to the strict conservatism of the regime in Madrid. That image of Barcelona might have concealed the conservative culture of the rural sector of Catalonia, as well as the closed patriotism of the elite and sectors of urban society. Nevertheless, during the transition and once democracy had become established, Catalonia fulfilled the role of an open society, a bridge between the rest of Spain and Europe, a recipient of immigrants from other parts of Spain (and later, from other continents), connected to the Mediterranean and North Africa. With these influences, it is surprising, although not inexplicable, that some of the politicians and a part of Catalan society adhered to a closed conception of nationalism.

2. Which aspects can be linked to global tendencies and which ones are specific to the Catalan case?

Paul Ríos

We live in a globalised world where there is a certain tendency towards uniformity and that leads to identity becoming a very important issue. People feel the need to try to recover or preserve their identity and sense of community, that something that identifies you as a member of a group, in order to face up to a certain disorientation that people suffer. They have sold us the idea that the important thing is to work for a universal culture, but this covers up a lie. This universal culture actually means accepting a single or predominant culture, which may be the one presented by the powerful states, and putting obstacles in the way of recognising that there are other ways of identifying with a community. This is happening internationally and I think what is happening in Catalonia may be partly a result of this, because there is an identity that is in danger. These conflicts take different forms in different places, in some cases they can be more violent, in others people find ways of isolating themselves from the world, of confronting the State or the dominant culture, etc.

Tom Woodhouse

It is clear that global trends are generating pressures which are threatening to fragment and destabilise communities. The Trump administration continues to challenge the fundamentals of a liberal world order which for all its faults and shortcomings, has secured a relatively peaceful world since 1945. In the national and domestic politics of many countries across Europe – and in the UK, where I live, especially linked with Brexit – , an unpleasant climate of demagogic emotive and irrational public discourse has emerged. So clearly there are global trends at play. But we must be careful not to fall into the trap of fatalism, assuming that these global trends inevitably degrade and damage the social and political fabric. Societies can be remarkably resilient with reservoirs of positive, tolerant and inclusive social cultural and political capital. Catalonia, despite its current problems, has this in abundance.

María Jimena Duzán

At a global level, polarisation is in fashion and it is based on stoking up the worst passions and above all hatred. Politics today is conducted as a show, and the social networks are a key tool. Polarisation is infecting all political spaces and Catalonia is no

exception. Nor is Spain, where there has been a revival of nationalism, with Spanish flags all over the place, something that surprised me. All nationalisms worry me, including Catalan nationalism, but the response has been an exacerbation of Spanish nationalism. One of the things that I had always admired in Spain is the fact that it permitted the creation of the autonomous communities, but that is changing in many ways with this deluge of flags that assault you everywhere. To me this seems to be very complicated and something specific to the Catalan and Spanish conflict, because here there was an agreement following the dictatorship. Some gentlemen sat down –because there were no ladies there– and they said: “We are going to establish autonomous communities” because each one has its cultural, political and social specificities. That is how each community was established with its own characteristics and that was the deal. The Spain of today is the product of that deal, which is very interesting for all the people that come from the outside, but suddenly that deal is no longer enough. There has to be another one.

Mariano Aguirre

Nationalism has been an essential component of the formation of the modern state.

Statements about the end of nationalism, both from the left and from liberalism, were wrong because they denied the historical and identity-based components, social ties and historical narratives (real or mythical) that generate links between individuals, families and social groups of different characteristics. These narratives have given rise to nations and states (two spaces that do not always coincide) and to the very concept of citizenship, strongly linked to the state and – closing the circle – to the nation.

Over the course of the last decades, nationalism has experienced two very relevant developments. On the one hand, the tendency to close in on itself, with a melancholic discourse on the past, faced with the complexity of the modern world (a complexity that includes, among other elements, more migrations, challenges to customs in areas such as family, the role of women, environmental management and demands for equality). On the other hand, the proposal to build a post-state and post-national world, in which the constitutional patriotism (open, cosmopolitan) of each state entity is instrumental in generating a cooperative and egalitarian world. Spanish nationalism (embodied by “Madrid”) has been identified with the conservative reactionary proposal. Offended,

radical Catalan nationalism has followed the same trend.

Catalonia is the battlefield of the debate between two different conceptions about “how to be (nationally) in the world.” Spanish nationalism and radical Catalan nationalism are on one side of this debate. The cosmopolitans (still) without a clear political representation are on the other. And there is the additional complexity that Catalonia is not an independent state, but an autonomous community within a state that, at the same time, is part of the European Union.

3. What factors could help overcome the conflict?

Paul Ríos

To tell the truth, and recognising my lack of knowledge, right now I can't see any window of opportunity for the conflict to be resolved. There might be one, but that requires a knowledge of the reality and the dynamics that you can only have from inside Catalonia. Given this, if it is true that there is no clear window of opportunity, the strategy should be to avoid escalation. If things are already complicated enough, what you have to do is not to add more difficulties. You have to look for strategies that will stop things coming to a level of internal social division that almost reaches the point of no return. You can come to a rupture in the visions of the future between people who think differently and a rupture of narratives that prevents people living together in a collaborative and constructive way. That is the risk that you can run, that you end up with two different societies living in the same territory. When that happens, it is very difficult to re-establish the links and spaces of collaboration.

Tom Woodhouse

One key insight which may have relevance for Catalonia is that that there are identifiable stages which societies in conflict experience. If the issues in contention in a conflict are not addressed and managed intelligently, the conflict in question can escalate at best to a frozen conflict, or in severe cases, and at worst, to enmity and violence. Of course there is no inevitability about this progression and all conflicts can be navigated non-violently.

One well known model about how people behave in conflicts at the political level is based on a four stage escalation sequence ? moving from discussion (stage 1) about differences; to polarisation (stage 2) where negative perceptions of the other begin to define the narrative; segregation (stage 3) where the parties move apart, communication breaks down, and attitudes harden. Conflicts which have moved to level 3 (segregation) are prone to escalate then to a frozen conflict where the interests of neither party are satisfied (let's say stage 3.5); or ultimately to the damaging levels of enmity and violence (stage 4).

It is clear to me as an outsider that the Catalan situation, if we are looking for analytic models to help to understand and respond to it, is at stages 1-2 of the escalation model briefly outlines above. While it is highly unlikely and certainly undesirable that the situation in Catalonia might degenerate to the destructive levels of stage 4 in the model, the question emerges, how to make the dynamics at play in stages 1-2 in the model (discussion and polarisation) lead to a constructive transformation.

Transforming the perception of the situation in Catalonia, from a fight to be won to a problem to be solved, places it into a problem-solving paradigm where integrative, nonviolent and peaceful outcomes can be defined. There are concrete ways in which this process can be part of the fashioning of a political resolution. Above all, Catalan politics and society has prospered historically from its commitment to the peaceful resolution of difference.

It would be both timely and productive for those involved in peace and conflict transformation centres and networks across Spain and in Catalonia to explore what it means to be peaceful, and to share knowledge about skills, tools, maps, and frameworks which might be helpful in the current situation. In recent years the peace and conflict research community has started to focus on the question, not so much why conflict? but what creates and sustains peace?.

María Jimena Duzán

When things do not work, you have to reconstruct them. The autonomous communities came as a ceiling on their political expression. If the Catalonia issue is sorted out, and we do not know how, do things end there? Are the other autonomous communities

going to be silent? What will happen to the foundations of the deal [of the transition]?

Mariano Aguirre

We would have to go back and review “the conflict.” For example, do the supporters of independence really want a Catalan state or a different situation within the Spanish state? Is it viable to seek independence when around 50% of the citizens of Catalonia oppose that option? A key issue (and one that is ignored) is people’s lives. In other words, apart from the grand visions (independence versus defense of the unity of the Spanish state), what aspirations do people have for themselves and for future generations? If, among other things, they want the freedom to legitimately exercise their Catalan, Spanish and European identity, have social protection and guarantees of their rights and freedoms, enjoy equal opportunities to reach an acceptable level of economic well-being, and enjoy freedom of movement in Spain and Europe, then where are the common areas of negotiation?

Except for extremist positions, nobody wants war or misery for Catalonia, nor the collapse of Spain. Seeing the experiences of coexistence of different identities in state frameworks such as in Switzerland, Quebec in Canada, and Scotland in the United Kingdom, and after the serious and now promising experience of the Basque Country, is it not possible for advanced and democratic societies such as those in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain to reach agreements negotiated with the aim of obtaining a good, cooperative and decent life for all?

Photography: From top to bottom and from left to right we find an image of Paul Ríos, Tom Woodhouse, María Jimena Duzán and Mariano Aguirre.

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