# Catalonia and the Carnation Revolution

Gabriel Magalhães

Soldiers hold back the crowd watching the siege of the Republican National Guard headquarters in Lisbon on 25 April 1974 as they wait for the car carrying General Spínola. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

Many Catalans that voted in the polemic referendum of 1 October 2017 waved a red carnation, the lyrical banner of the Portuguese revolution of 25 April 1974. The Portuguese media echoed this symbolic coincidence, pointing out that, in one polling station, the then president of the Government of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, had raised the revolutionary flower of a far-off April in Portugal. What did those Catalan carnations mean? And what meaning can those red Portuguese carnations hold for Catalonia today, fifty years on from the Carnation Revolution?

## The wish to be Portugal

Portugal is, for many Catalans, an enchanted mirror in which to contemplate the possibility of their own independence. The country of Camões and Pessoa serves as a kind of life insurance for Iberian diversity. Throughout history, Spanish reality has not been able to assimilate the rectangle that is Portugal, and this offers hope to the triangle, never equilateral, that is Catalan culture. In this respect, the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974 reflects, in that enchanted mirror, the most sympathetic aspect of the Portuguese reality: a face that is friendly and free, revolutionary and utopian, defined with red

carnations.

If we had to reduce that carnation to a single lexical petal, the word of choice would undoubtedly be *freedom*. In 1974 and in 2017, it was freedom, their most intense aroma, that radiated from those flowers. Freedom is an open word, a kind of terminological Aleph: all other sounds can be contained in it. In essence, it resembles a spiral travelling towards infinity, capable of encompassing all. It opens up a horizon that is all horizons. In short, we are contemplating an absolute mirage that, in 1974 and in 2017, bewitched the Portuguese reality and a section of the complex Catalan mosaic. The Catalans of 2017 wanted to be the Portuguese of 1974, with freedom, in the form of a flower, as their banner.

## The pain of being Portuguese

And yet, let us dig a little deeper into the images of the Portuguese revolution: those carnations were placed in the barrels of rifles and machine guns, carried by soldiers that sometimes patrolled the streets and plazas of Lisbon in tanks. The Catalans saw the flower and they picked it to put it in the vase of their own history. But they didn't seem to have seen the rest: the weapons and all the equipment of war that the flowers nuanced.

In fact, many of those lyrical soldiers of 25 April 1974 were condemned to fight in the Portuguese empire, during the colonial war that began in 1961. They were condemned to kill or to die. This tells us something fundamental: Portuguese independence is not by any means a fairytale. It is not a flower. Secularly speaking, it sits on the legacy of an empire laced with seams of criminality, in common with all imperial edifices. There was a tireless, bloody, global journey, conducted by the Portuguese, that was the price to pay for not being Spanish. A voyage that began in 1415, with the conquest of Ceuta, and would end shortly after that revolution of April 1974, with the independence of the last Portuguese colonies in 1975. All that remained was the enclave of Macao, handed over to China in 1999, and the problem of East Timor, which would be occupied by Indonesia after the Carnation Revolution, only achieving independence in 2002.

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Portuguese independence is not, in fact, a dream, but rather a crude reality, knitted together with enormous suffering. Writing about the empire, Portugal's vital fuel going back centuries, Fernando Pessoa asks himself, in a poem from *Mensagem*, "Was it worth the trouble?". The poet answers enigmatically: "All is worth the trouble if the spirit is not small". And, in that same 1934 book of poems, the poet affirms: "The Sea has fulfilled itself, and the Empire is undone. Lord, Portugal has yet to fulfil itself!" [1] In other words, the

country has achieved independence, but it has not fulfilled itself; it has not become what it should be. One might say that independence is not of itself a magic act that resolves the problems of a country.

Those soldiers of 25 April 1974 knew something else, too: Portuguese independence – the actual, complete autonomy of the nation – does not always correspond to the freedom of its people. According to the patriotic discourse of the nationalist Estado Novo, they were forced to risk their lives in Africa. In reality, eras of dictatorship – such as that of the Marquis of Pombal in the second half of the 18th century, or the decades of Salazar, during which Portugal bowed to no one – in fact corresponded to times of slavery for the Portuguese people. The paradox is that the freedom of my country may be my slavery. The independence of a nation, at times, drifts towards a sad, individual servitude, as is the case today in countries – North Korea, for example – that shut themselves off from others.

And one more thing that those soldiers knew: the Portuguese people are divided into first-, second- and third-class citizens. The country is not for all; many are obliged to emigrate. This is still happening today. In fact, a historian could tell you that, after the 1640 revolution, which led to the exit of Portugal from the Spanish monarchy, achieved 28 years later in 1668, at a high price in blood, a group of families declared themselves the owners of the country, as if that was the payment owed to them for the part they played in that particular exploit. [2] Independence can mean, not the fraternal equality of a whole people, but the creation of privileged social strata that rule over other strata of the population.

## A film in black and white

Of course, the freedom of a culture, of a country, is a fundamental and beautiful thing. But, in reality, freedom itself is no magic solution to all problems. Ultimately, freedom creates its own difficulties, which may be successfully resolved or not. The Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974 was, for the most part, a film in black and white; a black-and-white film that reflected the pain of the past and the present, with touches of colour provided by the red carnations and the people’s joy, their expectation that life could be something more. Yet the crowds were not celebrating national freedom; they were celebrating the possibility of personal freedom after all the weighty, bloody civic obligations that had been imposed on them. Few national flags are to be seen among the mythical crowds of that 25 April. What we see are faces unveiling themselves and arms rising up and asserting themselves.

A soldier of the RALI (Light Artillery Regiment) defends the Revolution during the Military coup attempt of General Spínola, March 11, 1975. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

## National conscience

Let us respect, nonetheless, the mimetic desire that Portugal awakens in a section of Catalan society; but let us also try to see past the mirages and determine the real-life lessons for Catalonia afforded by the Carnation Revolution of 25 April 1974. First lesson: the way in which the Portuguese people, with a few exceptions, operated as a cohesive bloc remains impressive today. Portuguese national consciousness is a fact, and, on that date, it shifted to the left, leaving behind its complicity with the Estado Novo. This consciousness is very old: it was born in the 14th century during the crisis of 1383–1385 and was nurtured by the blood of a fierce civil war, to which was added the intervention of Castilian troops.

In 1640, when Lisbon revolted against the Spanish monarchy, the entire Portuguese empire, once again as a bloc, backed the movement, from Asia, the Americas and Africa. The only exception was Ceuta. Some essayists, including Eduardo Lourenço, even write of a Portuguese hyper-identity when faced with similar phenomena. [3]It is true. Not even Portugal's endemic emigration has diluted this great, immovable pyramid of identity. On 25 April, and in the great demonstration of 1 May 1974, we witnessed the spectacle of that wholly unified crowd that is Portugal.

Catalonia is not like that. We know from Jaume Vicens Vives that it is a crossroads of territories, bringing together all kinds of populations. [4] The country lacks broad collective

consensus, something that the famous slogan *Som un sol poble* (We are one people) attempts to overcome. Perhaps one of the greatest mistakes of the *procés* in Catalonia has been the desire to stage a national unanimity, through large demonstrations and a referendum, when what was really happening was a country split in half. By acting in this way, the Catalan identity mirror has been broken, and each group regards itself in a shard of the national image..

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Building broad consensus is one of the great challenges for the Catalonia of the future. Some pro-independence supporters have already understood this. Others are slow to do so. A unified Catalonia does not have a clear-cut profile; rather, it resembles a choir of many voices. And this polyphony is probably much richer and more interesting than the monochord singing of pure nationalism. The challenge for Catalonia, more than independence, consists in the marvellous adventure of inventing its own unique way of being a nation. This, I believe, will be Catalonia's greatness.

## Countries change

Second real-life lesson: part of the magic of those red carnations is the way those soldiers – terrifying killing machines – are transformed into butterflies of freedom by a flower. What was once a dangerous praying mantis is turned into a luminous firefly. In fact, that day was the culmination of a journey to peace that the Portuguese began in the second half of the 19th century. On that "first whole, clean day", in the words of the poet Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen [5] we left behind the bloody legacy of empire that included, among many other savageries, the monstrous sin of the six million black slaves transported over the centuries from Africa to the Americas.

Portugal today is a peaceful nation. It is impressive to see how the country has reinvented itself so credibly that, in recent decades, several Portuguese have held and continue to hold high-ranking international positions. Essentially, the red carnations in the gun barrels sum up what Portugal has been seeking for more than a century without ever achieving. Today, peace is our empire, the most beautiful we have ever conquered. And that is also what makes the country so appealing for international tourism. A gentle, Buddhist convent-like tranquillity reigns in the nation, as if it were a European version of Shangri-La.

In the same way, Spain could also change and cease to be that rough, disagreeable, sackcloth-like thing that envelops Catalonia. And, at the same time, Catalonia does not have to live poking at that lustrous wound of an independence long sought and never achieved, when each new attempt inflicts new wounds and perpetual sacrifice, and each new defeat

ensures that it remembers its identity and its project. In fact, everything could be different, everything could be changed. Countries are not fatalities, nor immutable prisons that we languish in. There is another Spain, within today's Spain, that is in search of itself, and another Catalonia is being born in today's Catalonia. But what must we do to achieve them? Here, too, the Carnation Revolution shows us the way.

## The mummy of Francoism

The way in which the Portuguese Carnation Revolution broke with the past had little in common with the Spanish Transition. The Portuguese revolution disposed of an empire very quickly, like throwing an empty packet of cigarettes into the gutter. It was a profound metamorphosis that took place in a very short space of time. In Spain, because of the memory of the Civil War, still very much alive today, the situation had to be handled differently, with great care, though Adolfo Suárez managed occasional broad strokes of surgical genius. As a result of this restraint, Spain today is undoubtedly a democracy, but the mummy of Francoism remains within. We should add that this ghost of conservatism is not exclusively Hispanic: the same macabre spectre is currently rearing its head in many Western nations. But the cautious slowness with which the lugubrious phantom of Francoism is being exorcised is characteristic of Spain.


A combat vehicle of the Armed Forces Movement (MFA) drives through a Lisbon street on 26 April 1974. Photo: Alfredo Cunha (through the Mário Soares and Maria Barroso Foundation)

We have already seen why: priority was given to exorcising the Civil War, the monster of monsters, which is only fair and understandable. The spectre of the brutal conflict of 1936–1939 pushed the phantom of Francoism into the background. To start the ball rolling with a project of unity, a constitution was created, but this constitution was mistakenly treated as an almost immovable reality. And so the country has moved, is still moving, extremely slowly in freeing itself of the subliminal memory of a dictatorship that has yet to make an act of definitive contrition. Julián Marías was absolutely right in saying that this act of contrition is incumbent on both sides of the fratricidal conflict. [6] True. But if the war was ultimately the fault of both sides, the long years of the dictatorship are the specific fault of conservative Spain, for which the latter has not yet definitively confessed to any shame.

In the case of Portugal, the great bridge over the Tagus in Lisbon, previously named after the dictator Salazar, was rapidly renamed the 25 de Abril Bridge. After the revolution, the right-wing party was called the *Centro Democrático e Social* party, so that, in theory, the right-wing had no place in the Portuguese political panorama of the time. Everything shifted too far to the left, but future major revisions of the Constitution achieved a centrist regime with which all Portuguese citizens can identify.

In the case of Spain, it was decades before Franco would abandon his winter retreat in the Valley of the Fallen. Conservatism in the army was partly overcome; Spain is no longer that "sinister collaboration of generals and noblemen" described by the Portuguese writer Eça de Queiroz in the 19th century [7] Yet many obstacles and stumbling blocks remain. A constitution that only tends to change a comma here and a few words there is a good example of this ill-omened intransigence. A social majority is currently preparing to launch a second transition, but without the cooperation of the right, the holes will be mended with patch after patch, in a perpetual instability that could end by condemning the present regime to death.

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The right must decide whether it loves democracy more than it loves itself and its past. And Catalonia cannot avoid signing up for the great challenge that is completing, once and for all, the Sagrada Família that is the Spanish democratic system. I believe that this will allow it to see itself in its true aspect. A pro-independence Catalonia is one of the levers of the old Hispanic system. But a new Catalonia, fully autonomous and fully engaged in dialogue with the rest of Spain, would resonate with novelty, revolution and hope.

## Conclusion: utopian energy

Let us take that word *hope* and return to the images of the Portuguese Carnation Revolution. That hope, the immense joy of that hope, is perhaps the most enduring message of the revolution. Many of the leftist ideals of that revolution have been consigned to the scrap heap of history. The democracy that conquered in those days is now at stake and must be defended. But the great strength of that day was absolute hope, whose flag we must fly in our hearts.

This same utopian energy has been part of the Catalan world for many centuries. It is a trait that unites Portugal and Catalonia. And, in this respect, Catalonia can also be a source of inspiration for the Portuguese, for its traditional economic prosperity, a shining, everyday presence, proclaiming a wealth that we Portuguese have so often lacked, condemned to live in the shadow of our penury. And for Barcelona, too, that great contemporary metropolis, city of museums and monuments, of debates and bookshops, where one of the largest basilicas in the world is currently under construction.

Although the Carnation Revolution of 1974 in many ways can and should be an inspiration, Catalonia has its own path. It is a powerful culture, capable of producing its own carnations. The West, Europe and the Iberian Peninsula need what Catalonia can create, not what it can imitate. It would be truly extraordinary if the Catalan world could propose affirmative and original identity solutions for dialogue, cultural union and prosperity, so needed in today's world. A Catalonia with its own personality would be a homeland for all its citizens, and a benchmark for humanity.

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