

**Barcelona, the Left and the Independence Movement in Catalonia**, by Richard Gillespie, 2019, Abingdon, Oxon and New York, Routledge, 129 pp., £45 (hardback), £15 (ebook), ISBN (hardback) 9781857439625, ISBN (ebook) 9781351046879

The political aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis in Spain not only coincided with the growth of the independence movement in Catalonia, but also accelerated it. Indeed, it has been argued that ‘part of the emergence of Catalan independence can be accounted for as a protest against the traditional political order in a period of political and economic crisis’ (Dowling, 2017: 149).

The alternative left municipalist platform Barcelona en Comú (BComú, or ‘the Comuns’) was founded in this context in 2014 and went on to win control of the city council of Barcelona the following year. Its triumph in Catalonia’s capital at the height of the independence movement was highly significant given that it combines a radical social agenda with support for some degree of sovereignty for Catalonia, but is more ambivalent about full independence.

In *Barcelona, the Left and the Independence Movement in Catalonia*, Richard Gillespie, Emeritus Professor of Politics, ‘examines the extent to which the political project of the Comuns has brought radical change in Barcelona’, as well as ‘consider[ing] the prospects of the Comuns growing beyond the city’ (2). The book constitutes the first in-depth academic study of the Comuns’ emergence, strategy, achievements and shortcomings to date and is extremely thorough in its account, thanks to the author’s meticulous grasp of both the history of the left (in all its forms) across Spain and the nature of pro-sovereignty politics in Catalonia.

The book’s key strength lies in the extensive insights it provides into the ways in which the Comuns’ behaviour has both shaped, and been shaped by, the ‘multiple, simultaneously unfolding contests’ (1) taking place in Catalonia and beyond over both left-right policy options and the territorial distribution of power. Following the Introduction, Chapter 2 assesses the multi-level context in which BComú emerged while Chapter 3 explains how different alternative left parties and citizen platforms came together to form BComú via a ‘confluence process’, in a context of ‘great fluidity on the left’ (26). This all contributes to the assessment of ‘what is novel, and not so novel, in BComú political approach’ (2) – one of the book’s objectives. By comparing BComú with the behaviour of other left-wing actors, as well as addressing the internal debates over strategy among its constituent parts, Gillespie shows here, and in subsequent chapters, how the platform struck a balance between the goals and methods of traditional socialism and radical anti-capitalism, while also departing from both of these in certain respects.

Chapter 4 then assesses the challenges BComú faced to govern once it had won the Barcelona city council election in 2015 but with only 11 out of 41 seats (45). Focusing on party politics, it provides a precise account of the difficulties that mayor Ada Colau faced to secure piecemeal support from other parties on a case-by-case basis due to the Comuns’ inability to secure a cross-party majority coalition among left-wing forces (a short-lived coalition with the Socialists at one stage only held a minority). The growing dominance of the independence issue made it difficult for the Comuns to strike agreements with other parties, but also caused tensions within BComú itself, which brought together federalists, confederalists and even some *independentistas*. The Comuns ended up attracting criticism from both pro-independence and ‘constitutionalist’ forces for their attempt to straddle the divide.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Gillespie argues that the Comuns did achieve ‘some degree of success’ (116) in their first term. He provides a detailed appraisal of both their achievements and shortcomings in effecting change to political culture and across a range of policy areas at municipal level in Chapter 5, before showing why the Comuns have made significantly less progress at regional level (Chapter 6). These evaluations are used as a springboard to consider what hurdles they face going forward to remain relevant (Chapter 7).

While Gillespie is to be applauded for the impressive depth of detail achieved on the Comuns, it might have benefited the reader if he had occasionally stepped back from that to provide some broader context or comparisons as to what can be considered to constitute success or otherwise for such an alternative left formation. That said, the focus on the ways in which the specific Catalan context impacted the development of BComú does go hand in hand with due consideration of the opportunities and challenges that it has faced more generally as a new radical left platform, which has relevance for other contexts, even if the book does not aim to be systematically comparative. For example, in Chapter 6, Gillespie points to polarisation over the Catalan independence issue as being one of the primary reasons for the failure of the Comuns to take off at regional level, but also to the wider difficulties in achieving a confluence-style process on a larger scale, beyond the municipal level. While this book will inevitably be of interest to those interested in politics in Catalonia and wider Spain, it thus also provides an invaluable case study for those studying anti-austerity movements and alternative left politics more widely, and the challenges and opportunities they face in multi-level political and institutional settings.

## Reference

Dowling, Andrew (2017), *The Rise of Catalan Independence: Spain's Territorial Crisis*. Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge

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