

# Catalan manifesto for the social history of town and country

*Miquel Amorós and Joan Carles Gelabertó, december 2013*

*In 2015 Joan Carles Gelabertó published the book «[Història de la revolta a Catalunya. Lluites i revoltes antisenyorials i antiestatistes durant l'època medieval i moderna](#)».*

**Introduction by the editors of Argelaga:** *The “Catalan Manifesto for the Social History of Town and Country”, by Miquel Amorós and Joan Carles Gelabertó, is a vindication of history as a weapon of class struggle, which seems to be forgotten whenever the national question is discussed. The “Manifesto” exposes the fact that the historical manipulation of the pro-sovereignty forces eulogizes oligarchic institutions from the past, whose rehabilitation would only serve to reinforce economic oppression with a home-grown political apparatus that would most effectively ensure its continuation. A different reading, however, in a libertarian sense, will rediscover the social question in the past, a social question which, in a historically consistent manner, is expressed by way of a multitude of revolts against the oppressors, both in the cities as well as the countryside, and by way of their own forms of defense and self-organization. The text that follows is accompanied by a schematic outline of Catalan history since the fall of Rome.*

The defense of the territory as the location where the conflict between proletarianized society and the capitalist regime takes on its most glaring form has allowed us to glimpse the origins of Catalan society. This visit to the past uncovers an Estates democracy at the basis of medieval urban and rural society, one that is quite elaborate and more integrated into the territory and nature, in which one can identify the popular elements—serfs, *colons*,<sup>1</sup> the *poble menut*,<sup>2</sup> the *mà menor*<sup>3</sup>—and trace their historical trajectory throughout their struggle for self-government, their resistance against seigniorial oppression and their participation in social uprisings and wars.

Our point of view is not intended to contribute any kind of populist mystification of History, which, thanks to the manipulation of facts that evoke the establishment of some kind of Catalan Golden Age, for the purpose of justifying or reforming nationalism, is now being marketed by a regional bourgeois plutocracy. It is not by chance that for our contemporary “pro-sovereignty” elements that golden age of restricted freedoms coincided with an oligarchic regime that was perfectly articulated within an oppressive monarchy: its political conception was identical down to the smallest detail with that of the Patriciate allied with the nobility before the Decrees of Nueva Planta [1707-1716], which, far from fighting for the interests of the Catalan nation, merely defended its own corporative privileges. Nonetheless, the economic and institutional framework is no longer that of a city-state,

in which a local ruling class that sought to uphold the status quo of the Austrian Kings that ensured its privileges was resisting both the centralizing Monarchy as well as the popular groups. Today, with globalization, the Catalan ruling coalition is only a tiny piece subordinated to the forces that really make the decisions on the world market; it therefore has no specific interests of its own that could be defined as national interests. What the pro-nationalist elements really want is for the Generalitat to wield the political power that corresponds with the economic power of Barcelona, and that this should take the form of more economic transfers, mainly financial, on the part of the Spanish State. If, as would appear to be the case, the Spanish State does not agree, then the ruling class of Catalunya will open up communications with the real power centers, necessarily bypassing Madrid. They are demanding more freedom of movement for greater economic integration within global capitalism, that is, in other words, for a more profitable position of the Barcelona conurbation on the map of the globalized economy.

We, who believe, in agreement with the ancient peasant communes, that “it is madness that things that should be held in common are not common to all”; we, who wish to put an end to social injustice, capitalism and the State, even if they are Catalan, seek to draw the clear outlines of a historical dynamic that starts with de-urbanization, the scarcity of money and the disappearance of the Frankish imperial State, which produced a stateless rural society based on communes and non-monetary exchange. Custom replaced Roman law, promoting self-government. When the Justinian Code of civil law, the *ius commune*, was rediscovered, the neighborhood assemblies formed “*universitats*”,<sup>4</sup> that is, collective entities endowed with a juridical personality and the capacity to express their will by way of their elected forms of government (the *Consolat*, the *Consell General*, the *Paeria*). In addition, the process of feudalization led to the clash of different and unequal powers that were separating and developing. On the one side, the popular element, farmers and citizens, who waged a decentralized resistance; on the other side, the forces of the nobility, the monarchy, the clergy and the urban commercial patriciate, who sought to seize as much power and privilege as possible. The monopoly of power, liberties and exemptions or privileges and burdens was shattered; this was a historic crossroads. Therefore, a struggle of Estates, classes, petty feudatories, institutions, etc., took place, in which at first the citizen movements tended to establish the defense of liberty through grants of franchises and charters, and the peasant movements fought for equality through attempts to abolish servile obligations and to obtain control over communal property. In the end, the final result was the domestication of the *poble menut* and the enslavement of social space, obtained thanks to the establishment of the absolutist State and the advent of capitalism. This is the historic question to whose solution we hope that our work will contribute, in the good revolutionary sense.

Our starting point is therefore civil society and its autonomous manifestations—devoting particular attention to revolts—over the course of the “dark ages” and social crises. And our destination is that of its just and egalitarian ordering after the abolition of all kinds of separate power, whether corporative, political, economic or administrative. Therefore, the end of patriarchy, the autonomous market economy, classes, parties, borders and the State. As a methodological principle we shun the idea of progress, for that idea would consider the historical process as something rigidly determined, doomed to end with the rule of the bourgeoisie. Thus, capitalism would be viewed from that perspective as necessary and even positive, together with the liberal regime whose development it facilitated. And therefore, according to this view, the correct position of every socialist movement would be to help capitalism to realize its potential, and to separate economic action, conducted by the trade unions, from politics, exercised by the parties. From this perspective, the peasant

insurrections, the Luddite uprising and anarchist workers movements are considered to be primitive and reactionary phenomena that reflected either a peasantry manipulated by priests and religious monarchists, or a proletariat that was still underdeveloped, which must be led and guided by a vanguard leadership.

We think that capitalism and parliamentarism were only one way among others that might have been chosen, a way that was made possible by the victory of the bourgeoisie. The peasant and proletarian revolts were necessarily anti-capitalist at first, since they challenged the new bourgeois order because the latter made their living conditions worse, undermined their values and imperiled their collective ways of life. The fact that they were so often anti-constitutionalist proves that their consciousness, far from being underdeveloped, was actually highly developed, since they understood that their political interests had nothing in common with those of the industrial bourgeois and landowning classes. Their defensive struggles, by means of direct action, communal property, or working conditions established by centuries-old guild regulations, were not “feudal”, but instead comprised a response that originated in the existence of an egalitarian peasant or working class identity that did not want to disappear. It was a “class” defense that was not in favor of the *Ancien Régime*, but was also against a dissolution of the *Ancien Régime* that would redound to the benefit of the capitalist bourgeoisie. Its combatants did not hesitate to form alliances with the feudal aristocracy or the absolutist monarchy if this would help relieve some of the pressure on the oppressed dangerous classes, and even sometimes directed these alliances against their own wealthier factions. The bourgeoisie successfully inculcated the workers movement with the concept of progress and the workers movement would become its advocate, committing the mistake of considering itself the historic heir of progress.

## **SCHEMATIC HISTORICAL OUTLINE**

1. Revolts during the fall of the Roman Empire. The Bagaudae and Circumcellions.<sup>5</sup> Decline of the Carolingian State, the rise of the rural communes, feudalism and the first anti-seigniorial riots.
2. The formation of the Catalan municipalities. Resettlement and repopulation of deserted lands. *Consells*, *universitats* and communal property. Parishes, *sagrera*<sup>6</sup> and mass meetings of the Peace and Truce of God movement. Royal charters and free cities.
3. The cities are taken over by oligarchies. Conflicts between the “orders” (War of the Union, the Insurrection of Berenguer Oller, La Biga and La Busca,<sup>7</sup> the grievances of the *mà menor* and the *mà mitjana*<sup>8</sup> in Lleida, *Avalot del Peix*). *Cònsols*, *jurats* and *paers*.<sup>9</sup> *Batlles*, *veguers*<sup>10</sup> and councillors. Parliament of Estates: *Les Corts*. Pre-state institution for records: the Generalitat.
4. The rise of feudal relations and markets. The anti-seigniorial struggle in the countryside, a trans-European phenomenon. Millenarian traits. Revolt of the Serfs. The Insurrection of Forans in Mallorca. The restoration of Roman law and the development of the monarchic State.
5. Unification with Castille. Ferran the Catholic. Consolidation of the absolutist State: Revolt of the Brotherhoods. *Vegueries*.<sup>11</sup> Social stratification in the countryside. Rich farmers and tenant farmers. The persistence of feudalism. Intermixing of the patrician oligarchy and the urban nobility. The *Pacte* and the establishment of a balance of forces. The distinction, based on natural law, between king, crown and kingdom.

6. The peasant revolt, with an anti-institutional, anti-feudal and anti-urban reaction: War of the Reapers, the Angels of the Land, the uprisings of Valldigna, l'Avalot de les Faves, the Barretines, the Segona Brotherhood....

7. The War of the Spanish Succession. A new international balance of power established between monarchy, oligarchy and common people. The Maulets. Anti-Bourbon guerrilla war and agitation against the nobility. Offensive waged by the town guilds against the Bourbon town councils. Revolt of the Joseps. Bread riots.

8. Crisis of the *Ancien Régime*. The War with France. The reaction of the countryside against incipient liberalism and capitalism. Confiscation and sale of land. Confluence of the War of the *Agraviats* and the Crowning of the King. The realist revolt of l'Urgell, the Malcontents, the Carlist Revolt (the War of the Matiners), the *bullangues*, the Luddite raids, the Republican incidents.... Reaction against the above history.

9. Landowning bourgeoisie and *caciquisme*. End of the rural world and of peasant culture. Peasant criminality and Luddism. Birth of the proletariat, the new revolutionary subject. Mutualism, resistance societies, internationalism and social revolution.

10. Formation of the national market. Peripheral capitalism and centralist State. Collectivism and the resurgence of the agrarian question (parcelization and capitalization). The class struggle and anarchosyndicalism, the struggle of the Luddites, of the republican parties.... Reaction against the above history.

Miguel Amorós and Joan Carles Gelabertó

December 2013

All the footnotes in the above text were added by the Translator.

Translated in December 2013 from the original Catalan text obtained from the website of Argelaga: <https://argelaga.wordpress.com/2014/04/08/manifest-catala-per-la-historia-social-a-vila-i-camp/>.

First published in *Argelaga*, No. 4, April 2014.

- 1. Christian settlers granted lands in the disputed regions between Christian and Moslem jurisdiction during the period of the *Reconquista*, subject to the condition that they serve as soldiers for the Christian power in its wars against the Moslems.
- 2. Ordinary folk who were members of neither the military, ecclesiastical or noble orders, and who were thus excluded from representation in the supreme governing or consultative bodies of the developing monarchical regime of the later Middle Ages.
- 3. Literally, “lesser hand”, this term referred to the “order” to which the majority of the townspeople in the Catalan municipalities—impoverished day laborers, servants and so forth—belonged.

- [4.](#) In the Roman Empire, such legally-recognized groups were known as *collegia*, or colleges (etymology: Latin, “joined by law”), and appear to have been organized and founded exclusively under religious or patriotic auspices, often by wealthy sponsors.
- [5.](#) Heretical North African Christian sect of the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., which advocated the cancellation of debts and the freeing of slaves, among other extremist views.
- [6.](#) Areas around churches which were supposed to be endowed with rights of sanctuary and refuge from violence, analogous to the customary privileges of temple precincts in ancient Greece and Rome.
- [7.](#) Opposing bourgeois factions of the 15th century.
- [8.](#) The more prosperous artisans and merchants of the Catalan municipalities who, like the members of the *mà menor*, were also excluded from the enjoyment of municipal privileges in the developing monarchical system of the 12th and 13th centuries.
- [9.](#) “*Cònsols, jurats* and *paers*”: an English approximation for these terms would be “Aldermen”, lower level municipal representatives.
- [10.](#) “*Batlles, veguers*”: district or county representatives of the Aragon monarchy in Catalunya.
- [11.](#) A medieval administrative territorial jurisdiction of the Catalan region under the rule of the Aragon monarchy.