



Independent thinking: Sr Teresa Forcades

Frances Murphy

The result of the Scottish independence referendum this week will be awaited eagerly not just in the UK but around the world; and nowhere more so than in Catalonia, where the question of independence is also dominating political discussion. One of the most influential voices in the Catalan independence debate is, surprisingly, that of a Benedictine nun. Sr Teresa Forcades spoke to *Thinking Faith's* Editor about capitalism, community and the Catalan question.

Questions of sovereignty and independence are at the top of the UK political agenda in the final days before the Scottish independence referendum. Some 1200 miles south of the Scottish border, many of the questions and arguments that are currently dominating British political discourse are shaping another landscape. The movement from within Catalonia to annexe itself from the Spanish state is gaining momentum, and the Catalan President (Catalonia already has a certain degree of autonomy) intends to hold a vote later this year on the question of independence – although this has not been sanctioned by Spain. Spearheading the campaign for Catalan self-determination is a group by the name of [Procès Constituent](#), not a political party in themselves, but facilitators of conversations and cooperation between similarly-aligned parties seeking Catalan independence.

Procès Constituent is led by economist Arcadi Oliveres and Sr Teresa Forcades, a Benedictine sister and medical doctor who has made a name for herself in recent years by voicing publicly her views not just on Catalan independence but on abortion (she is pro-choice) and on swine flu (she took to [YouTube](#) to criticise the production and use of the vaccine). She traces her journeys down each of these paths back to a single starting point: a concern for social justice.

In the case of Procès Constituent, this concern is manifested particularly in its anti-capitalist agenda. Forcades's critique of capitalism centres on 'the fallacy of capitalist freedom' and the injustices committed in

Sr Teresa Forcades at Queen Mary University of London, May 2014



the name of chasing maximum profit. She is keen to point out that she is not against business, and not against private initiative or property, but she believes firmly that a profit-driven system in which a worker's well-being is considered to be a sacrifice worth making in the race for financial reward is the biggest obstacle to social justice. It gives rise, she says, to a competitive definition of freedom, one under which 'my freedom stops where yours

starts' – this is not the radical freedom of the gospel.

These ideas come straight out of Catholic Social Teaching, but the language is missing – there is no mention from Forcades of the common good, of the dignity of the worker, of subsidiarity (one of her central tenets is the importance of bottom-up reform: 'Changes in the direction of greater social justice have always come from the people'). This is not, however, a case of Forcades tailoring her delivery to make her ideas accessible to a wider audience; rather, her thinking has developed organically without the vocabulary.

'I have never used it, the language. I know it, I have studied the social teaching, but my own biography I think explains [why I don't use it]. I don't come from a Catholic, active family: I was 15 when I first read the gospels. I was taken aback by it, not in such a way that it was contradictory to what I had lived up until that moment, but in a way that I thought: everything that I have cared for, the social justice and everything else, it's here in an utmost manner. So there was this coming together of social engagement, without a

Catholic or religious basis, with the gospels, which has remained – in the sense that I have friends, and my own family, that don't use that language. For me it comes naturally [not to use the language].'

The lack of 'church speak' from a Spanish Benedictine nun is even more curious when you consider that it is increasingly infiltrating 'secular' discourse: at a conference on Inclusive Capitalism this year, [Christine Lagarde](#) cited Pope Francis in her speech and [Mark Carney](#) raised questions that would not have seemed out of place in an encyclical by Francis or Benedict XVI. Given that Forcades does not believe that an 'ethical capitalism' exists, does she find it encouraging when representatives of the system of which she disapproves utilise the language of Catholic teaching, or does their commandeering of this vocabulary give people a false sense of security that capitalism is redeemable?

'In principle, if even the representatives of neo-liberalism, like Lagarde, see fit to use the language to move towards a sense of social justice, it is a good thing. We have been moving away from this in recent years, and it is hard for me to hear people who are representing the political leadership of society talk about marginalised people as if they were nothing, as if they didn't exist, as if they were disposable... But let them talk about [church ideas], and then critical people will ask: "Ok but, don't you say that we should be going for the common good, so why do we do this and why do we do that?" I don't mind them doing that and then I think we can call them to accountability.'

So it is clearly a good thing when a pope places these issues so high on his agenda, as Pope Francis has done?

'Of course for me it is a joy when the pope talks this language. I am very happy about it and I have hopes that it is not going to be something that will fade away but something that will help us change in a very important way... But for me the most important thing is not to rely on a pope or on any type of top-down deliverance of social justice, because I just don't believe in it, in society or the Church. And that means nothing against the pope, or the president, or whoever; it's just the realism of looking at history and realising that either the strength, the impulse, comes from below or it does not happen... In the gospel, it starts with this little town and this incarnation that's

not powerful, and I believe in that – that's how the good things happen.'

This strong emphasis on change brought about from the grass roots has distinct echoes of Liberation Theology, and that is no surprise. The first book of theology that Forcades read, recommended to her by a Jesuit from whom she sought advice having just read the gospels for the first time, was Leonardo Boff's *Jesus Christ Liberator*. 'So for me, liberation theology is not a subset of theology, for me it *is* theology: I started with it.' But she is keen that too-close parallels are not drawn between what is happening in Catalonia – 'a growing social unrest coming from people that had never been organised politically before' – and recent Latin American history, which, she thinks, deserves to be better-known. 'I have been in Latin America,' she says, 'and I could not compare, because of the brutality, of the sheer oppression of the violence against the people, and the simplicity in the best possible way. The people I have met there I am very impressed by, especially in Guatemala. Thousands of people were being killed there in the 80s: I was alive, I was a teenager already and I was coming to the faith, and I didn't know about that! I knew about the [Jesuits in El Salvador](#) and of course that's very important, too. But it's not just about five Jesuits; it's about thousands of people and they are ignored, in the Church also. They should be on the front line, they should be our inspiration, they should be talked about constantly.'

For Forcades, it is the communal dimension of grass-roots activism that gives it its power – she may not talk about subsidiarity, but the word 'solidarity' features frequently in her discourse. She talks about the 'activation of political subjectivity' being one of Procès Constituent's prime goals – but this is not to be misunderstood as the activation of the 'subject', and the individualist thinking that might follow from that. 'Subjectivity is that notion that I am responsible – part-responsible, with others. And this, as far as I have seen, cannot happen alone.' Not only, she says, is there a better chance of achieving a desired outcome through group action, but the sense of communion is valuable in itself and, in fact, is the only way to bring about a truly just society.

There is a Trinitarian theology that underpins this. The three persons of the trinity existing in a dynamic equality present, for her, the strongest challenge to a

hierarchical society – and in fact to any attempts at a hierarchical theology: ‘All these models of power, hierarchical power applied to this notion of God the Trinity, they have been a tension in theology from the beginning. We have a God that’s Father, but also Son: in Godself, there is a giving pole and a receiving pole. That’s astonishing! If we take that seriously, we encounter a notion of God, in whose image we are made and created, which has a receiving “something”, which doesn’t know everything or doesn’t have everything or doesn’t control everything.’

It is this receptive dimension of God on which Forcades’s approach to politics, to civil society, to the very idea of community, is based. Why? Because it shapes her definition of freedom, a freedom that only finds its true form when it is utilised with and for others. ‘Freedom means there is a space for you to be different from God. And this difference that you have, God cannot appropriate unless you freely give it, and that’s key, that’s very important. To take that seriously is to say then: “what is my responsibility towards God?” I cannot just say, “Ok, God will do everything” – not because God is not powerful but because God is love, and by being love has to make room for you and wait for you. And so this responsibility, that’s what happens when you come with others and you realise that you have something to give, and others have things that you don’t have – and that’s a good, that’s not a bad thing – and that it’s not about each of us individually becoming perfect; it’s about joining and realising that this joining will demand a constant dialogue and a constant give and take. That’s a dynamic that’s fascinating for me, and I’m still learning, of course, in my community and in these groups of political activists. We are all learning and I think – I wish! – it remains like that.’

Community, then, is an end as much as a means. In recent years, that word has taken on a political life of its own through the now extremely popular community organising framework, first coined by Saul Alinsky and since adopted by Barack Obama and implemented globally. Does Procès Constituent feel any kinship with its ideas?

‘As far I know from the US, community organising does not have such a clear political goal as we do. It tries to influence the political constituency, of course, and to push for certain laws, but we have this sense of

going to elections. Not ourselves – [Procès Constituent] don’t want to do that because we don’t want to be a competitor in an already-fragmented left, it wouldn’t make any sense – but what we will try to do is to bring together, for the next Catalan election, some of these parties that are for social justice but are fighting separately.’

And what parallels does she see between the Catalan independence movement and the Scottish referendum?

‘[Scotland’s union with England] is not of yesterday, it’s built in and it seems that it is something that cannot be broken again, but in this case there is this will [for independence]. I don’t know what will happen but of course there is a similarity [with the Catalan situation] in trying to foster your own culture and tradition in an independent state, within Europe, and doing that in democratic ways. Because of course there have been examples of terrorism, and Scotland and Catalonia are not going this way. The difference is of course that Britain is allowing the referendum to take place and Spain is not, so that might have the unwanted effect of causing a growing political will for independence in Catalonia.’

Agree or disagree with Forcades, she is certainly a political figure – although, as she is adamant to point out, not a politician – of interest. Her passionate defences of the causes to which she has aligned herself seem to arise not from a need to court controversy, but from a desire to give a voice to the voiceless, very much in line with the liberation theologians whom she so admires. She has been painted by some commentators as a would-be leader of a revolution, but she rejects this: it is the careful, slower re-shaping of the landscape that she desires, rather than the earthquake of revolution. She is certainly many things that one would not expect of a Sister of St Benedict, but perhaps her religious vocation is most recognisable in her advocacy of a contemplative approach even to the most radical ideas: ‘You need a long time for certain things to mature. If we were able to turn the political tables in 24 hours, new people would come in and would do the same thing as the old people, so we need to prepare.’

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