

The discomfort of a small Europe

Conversations about the crisis of infrastructures and other real or imaginary crises of Catalans throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century

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When we were normal

We have converted that previous era into a myth, when we were normal, just before the Olympics, the *happy eighties*, when despite all kinds of problems Catalonia appeared to be at peace with its eternally dissatisfied soul. Catalonia was increasingly similar to the nations of northern Europe, *where they say that people are free, awake and happy*. Barcelona had reconciled itself with its Olympic and popular spirit of the Republic, Catalonia was nationalist, and Spain or the Spanish state, or however we want to call it, *The Spains*, Hispania, *Sepharat*, was changing at full speed. Alfonso Guerra said: *Its own mother would not recognize it!* Then, at the beginning of the nineties, we suffered from *normal* problems, unemployment and ETA terrorism. The first groups of the movement known as *Rock in Catalan* (*the Generalitat's groups*, as they were called in the rest of Spain), young people from Vic, Manresa, Girona, Costantí. Lluís Gavaldà, the singer of the *Pets*, the author of songs such as *Calla i balla* (Shut up and dance), stated in the film *Rock&Cat* that *at that time we were normal*, extremely normal! The Linguistic Normalization Act had been unanimously passed years earlier, and the teenagers of the *Club Super3* generation, educated according to the *linguistic immersion* model of schooling, watched the Catalan TV channel TV3 and danced *in Catalan* in the local festivities, depoliticized, carefree, as it is supposed that young people should be when they are partying. Jordi Pujol followed the programme of work that he had already foreseen years earlier, in 1956, in the book *Construir Catalunya* (Building Catalonia). A convinced pro-European, he was at the highest point of his capacity for influence in Madrid, and in Brussels, he chaired the Assembly of European Regions with complete *normality*, he promoted the group *Four motors for Europe* (with Baden-Württemberg, Lombardy, and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur). The Territorial Laws were passed, although not unanimously, because even then it was not easy to reach a consensus on

structural reforms. Xavier Subies drafted the Territorial Plan of Catalonia closed with two collaborators in an office in Carrer Aragó, inspired by the ideas of the Rubió i Tudurí brothers. Jordi Prat, now in ADIF where he looks after Renfe's suburban service, lived a quieter life drafting the Mountainous Region Plans. Luis Lago, a state civil servant transferred to the Generalitat, drafted the Road Plan of Catalonia taking as an inevitable reference the General Public Works Plan drafted by Victorià Muñoz Oms, in 1934. The economic crisis was diminishing, the arrival of foreign industrial investments was being negotiated (NISSAN, SONY, SAMSUNG...). We had a clear project: to be a *country of Europe!* Having recently joined the European Common Market, in 1986, we were converting the old *noucentista* and Republican dreams into reality, having been repressed during forty years of obscurantism and autarchy.

Catalonia was a *normal*, or *normalized*, country, in the sense that it had been reconciled with its eternally dissatisfied soul. The leaders of the eighties already had the work done. In an event organized by CDC on Montserrat, in 1995, Jordi Pujol told his supporters just this, that they had already done the work. Pasqual Maragall was in Rome, on a sabbatical year, on holiday. This generation of exceptional political leaders would have had to give way to a new generation of politicians younger and more *normal* than them (as happened in Madrid!), for Catalan civil society to recover the initiative, to aid the emergence of new collective projects. But they did not do it. And in the mid-nineties the world began to turn quicker, with the appearance of Windows'95, the mobile phone, the Internet, and the future began to be different for everyone. We no longer had such an obvious, and so shared a project.

The infrastructure crisis is a symptom, among others, of a discontent which began, to give it a date, on 2 December 1996, when the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona published its report on the metropolitan infrastructures of Barcelona, signed by Barcelona Regional, with the intention of alerting people to the reduction in public investments in infrastructures, and of supporting the investments that were necessary in the Llobregat delta and in Besòs Sud, for the 2004 Forum.

Jordi Pujol knew that things were not going well, that we were not keeping up with the times, when he had to defend himself from the first criticisms on the infrastructure deficits condemned in the first reports of the Chamber of Commerce of Barcelona, five

years later, one evening at the Association of Civil Engineers, on 7 May 2001. On that day we were given a list of all the public works under way, detailing the investments foreseen in the next five and ten years, one by one, almost stunning the auditorium with figures of hundreds of billions of pesetas. The message was that the infrastructures of Catalonia were not as bad as people were saying that, thanks to their agreement with the PP, there would be major state investments in Catalonia in the short and medium term, in addition to the many that the Generalitat itself was making. The Catalans' concern for this issue was therefore groundless. But many people were annoyed not just by the lack of investments in infrastructures, but also by not knowing the priorities, at what plan or vision of the transformation of Catalonia the list of all the investments presented was aimed, the lack of a project as easy to view as those that had previously existed.

At the time Pere Macias was Regional Minister of Territorial Policy, and in accordance with Mateu Turró, from the European Investment Bank, they decided to organize the so-called *Forum of Infrastructures of Catalonia* to carry out a strategic reflection on all these issues, the antecedent of the *Mesa de les Infraestructures* (Infrastructures Committee) which met just once, at the Cartographic Institute of Catalonia, shortly before the 2003 autonomous election. The controversy increased in intensity, encouraged by the media, which as some journalists, such as Jaume A. Aroca, from *La Vanguardia*, recognized, were so influential that they even succeeded in excessively conditioning the design of major infrastructures such as the L9, which was discussed hastily, looking out of the corner of their eye at the metro that the engineers of Rodríguez Gallardón were building in Madrid. Before the 2003 election, the left-wing parties had used the incapacity of the last governments of President Pujol to plan infrastructures and the territory because in many cases the infrastructures were at a standstill, or delayed, by popular platforms. The advertising posters of *Iniciativa per Catalunya* showed the map of Catalonia with points marking all the emerging territorial conflicts, a symbol of the mismanagement of the territory. At that time, a good part of the one and a half million people from around the world, the latest migratory wave, had already arrived, and all were living fully immersed in the *exuberant Catalonia*, that Anna Cabré foresaw at the end of the eighties in *Catalunya 2010*. All of a sudden ten, twenty years had caught up with us, and instead of 6 million we are now more than 7, thanks to the arrival of people from all over the world, the Ukrainians of Guissona, the Senegalese of Banyoles, the Moroccans who were working everywhere in the

construction, in Premià de Mar, the Chinese of the Rondes of Barcelona, the Ecuadorean women who left their children to come to look after us, the new General Manager of SEAT, who is Scottish and not German, like the previous one, my Russian neighbour on the same landing, an opera singer, who we see from time to time, the very punctual Peruvian nurse who looks after my father three times a day, the Indian friends of my children, Naren and Karan, my wife, who is Puerto Rican. This is the best that could have happened to us: while Catalonia continues to search for its place in the world, the world has found its place in Catalonia!

The economy was growing at a dizzy pace, with a joy which would have been completely carefree had it not been because the process of offshoring of the industries which arrived in the eighties began. The *Forum of the Cultures* was inaugurated and closed in *Besòs Sud* almost unnoticed.

And from the deficit of infrastructures we went to the successive crises of the infrastructures, beginning with the Bracons tunnel, the first crisis of the first tripartite government, when Pasqual Maragall replaced Jordi Pujol. Shortly afterwards there was the collapse of the manoeuvring tunnel in El Carmel, which we experienced in a disproportionate manner, because it was one thing after another. These continuous crises were the symptoms of a deeper discontent. The list of problems which successively affected the infrastructures is extremely long: from the crisis of Bracons and the Carmel tunnel to the AVE high-speed train tunnels through Barcelona and the protest by the Board of Trustees of the Sagrada Família, from the chaos caused by the strikes at the airport to the electric power cut, from the water supply problems during the drought – when the Department of Environment and Housing decreed that people could not water gardens and had to let their plants die – and then the suburban train network which was closed for days because of the high-speed works and they had to set up a service with hundreds of buses, to the abuses in telecommunications, and a lot more small or big problems besides, often magnified by the media in the face of the sensation of incompetence of the administrations, improvising solutions as they went along.

The *infrastructure* of Catalonia was in crisis, but the discontent was more general: also the *superstructure* of Catalonia, social, cultural, institutional, was in crisis. The social

use of Catalan began to decline. TV3 was just one more of the very many TV channels, and although the children and young people continued to go to school each day loaded down with very heavy books written in Catalan, they preferred to play with the iPod, or to consult GoogleEarth, and they increasingly speak in Spanish among themselves.

We have stopped being *normal*. And if there is one thing that we know it is that we will never again be able to be *normal*.

In a couple of decades, as Catalans we have gone from feeling big, and *proud*, after the 1992 Olympics, to exaggeratedly *dissatisfied*, during the economic crisis which lasted until almost 1996, and increasingly *annoyed*, according to the studies by the Generalitat's Public Opinion Centre, from then on, when the issue which *annoyed* us the most was the lack of state investments in infrastructures in Catalonia, in comparison with the investments in other regions or autonomous communities. Today, in the midst of an economic crisis, rather than annoyed we feel *downhearted*. I suppose that now we are reaching rock bottom, because the institutional propaganda of Barcelona City Council proclaims *Long Live Barcelona!* And the Generalitat feels obliged to encourage us with campaigns such as *Som-hi!* (Let's go!).

On the nature of discontent in Catalonia, Enric Juliana writes: *in psychoanalytical terms it could be said that in Catalonia a notable conflict has broken out between the Ego and the Superego, between reality and the idealization of the personality, between a reality which is clearly perceived as below expectations and a pride which has always flowed from an abundant source.*

A new motor for Catalonia

President Pujol closes his eyes, nods and shakes his head, thinking of what I have just asked him. We are in his office, in Passeig de Gràcia, a few books on the desk, the collections from his publishers, the book *El catalanisme motor del país*: the economic, social and cultural perspective of Catalan nationalism over the twentieth century. I asked him a couple of years ago: Isn't the *territorial* perspective missing? The landscape, the environment, urban development or the infrastructures, the administrative organization of the territory?

Without any theoretical digressions, President Pujol mentions the network of regional hospitals, and one by one lists each and every one of the regional hospitals that he had inaugurated, starting with Vielha, all located in accordance with the principle of territorial balance, he told me, and of proximity to the people, although the Ministry of Health only wanted to create a few big hospitals, and put this as a condition for autonomous financing!

He asks me: When did we last see each other?

Some time ago, I remind him, maybe more than two years ago. You were still preparing the congress and the book *El Catalanisme motor del país*, and I was beginning to write *La ciutat infinita*, a chronicle of the Barcelona and Catalonia of today, commissioned by Barcelona City Council. At the end of the interview you asked me not to publish anything that we had talked about.

President Pujol shuts his eyes again, remembering.

Now I am completing a book of conversations on Catalonia for the Centre d'Estudis de Temes Contemporanis, I continue to tell him, and I would like to include a conversation with you.

Alright, he smiles. You are a Civil Engineer, aren't you? Civil Engineers tend to be serious people. There are all kinds of economists, or journalists, some obviously know very well what they are talking about, but others improvise, you know?

I do not know whether everyone thinks that Civil Engineers are so serious, after the successive infrastructure crises from which we have suffered in the last ten or fifteen years in Catalonia.

You need to have a vision of the whole of Catalonia. Often the roads, and the railways, absorb all the public attention, because the railways fascinate and can even obsess us. But we should not forget that we have the big infrastructures well orientated, that a lot is invested in infrastructures, although people are impatient. Public works have their rhythms, as you know. Believe me when I tell you that we suffer from deficits at present which should worry us more than the physical infrastructures, which are being solved. Because look, we need an intercontinental airport, alright, we already know this and they are already building it, and now a group of Catalan entrepreneurs and of public institutions wants to buy Spanair, alright, all this is very good, I don't need to tell you that, very good, we have a lot of assets, but without an excellent university system, capable of attracting talent, researchers from around the world, we will not progress. The bases of economic growth of the past years have not been very solid: consumption, property construction, immigration, tourism. And the culture of leisure in which part of society has established itself is also the culture of decadence, there's no doubt about it. Nowadays the deficit in research and innovation is bigger than that in physical infrastructures. Training, technology, research and an enterprising spirit, this is what we need, more scientific and technical vocations, more engineers, as I told you. Economic infrastructures in general, such as the ICREA, to attract research talent, the Alba Synchrotron, the particle accelerator, the Mare Nostrum supercomputer. We need to strengthen the UOC, the Barcelona Biomedical Research Park, the Barcelona School of Economics. Mas Cullell did very good work, it's true, but in this field we are just beginning. The school system needs to be modernized, to be opened up, if we want to take off again.

To what extent is the situation of economic infrastructures in Catalonia today the responsibility of the Catalan public administrations, or of the state?

The management of the Generalitat can of course be improved, but it is a substantial fact that we have been subject to persistent bad treatment by the state, in relation to financing and to the investments in infrastructures, above all, and at the same time a hostile public opinion has been created in Spain toward Catalan demands. We have not managed to make ourselves respected, we have taken on battles such as the revision of the Statute, at the wrong time, using mistaken tactics. Think that even experts in public

finance, such as Antoni Zabalza, have demonstrated that the current system of autonomous financing leads to a surplus for the state and the autonomous deficits, in health or education, an obvious fact, which we have not succeeded in defending well.

President Maragall said on one occasion: we went to Madrid and we were received by a friendly government, we explained why the current financing system is unfair with Catalonia, and inefficient for Spain, they listened to us, and after understanding perfectly what we told them, they said no.

Yes, but President Maragall took too long to realize that they were saying no to him. In private, the presidents of many autonomous communities have admitted that the system discriminates against Catalonia. *Solidarity is exercised with the resources of others*, some say, ironically. Often the state's response to Catalan demands has been the same throughout history, from the famous *Memorial de Greuges* (Memorial of Grievances) of 1885, by Valentí Almirall and Eusebi Güell, or the message of the Presidents of the Chamber, of Foment, of the Ateneu, of the Economic Society of Friends of the Country, of the Industry Defence League, and of the Sant Ildefons Agricultural Institute, as a result of the Tancament de Caixes (Closure of Tills) of 1899, where they already demanded the same Economic Agreement as in Navarre or the Basque Country, until the discussions for the revision of the Statute. But, whether or not we agree, you cannot go to Madrid to make a fool of yourself. To be respected, first of all, we have to be serious, as I said earlier, serious in the commitment to the country and to our people, serious in our approaches, with coherence and a sense of responsibility, with a will to act and not just for people to see that we are acting. We need more serious politics!

In what sense?

The political parties need to be more serious, for a start. They are a necessary, essential, social institution, and we cannot fall in the trap in which the Italian parties have fallen time and time again, you know? Converted into a breed closed in on itself. Soundness, and not spectacularity. Just with strict seriousness, the country does not react. We also need enthusiasm, emotion. Passion. Catalonia thrills me and I want to say that and to

share it with all Catalans and those who have just arrived. Enthusiasm or good faith are not excuses for a job badly done. The job that the public administrations and companies have to do must be serious.

The other day I was talking with the Minister Tresserres about cultural infrastructures, what he calls cultural seduction. The public infrastructures which were created a few years ago to guarantee the transmission of Catalan culture: TV3 and the public media, schools with Catalan as the language of transmission, lose their capacity for influence in a globalized information and communication system. The public administrations cannot filter or control the contents any more, and soon not the text books or syllabuses either.

Yes, Minister Tresserres is right about this. But the states, Spain, France, continue to defend the official cultures, and to impose them, less than fifty years ago, it's true, but as much as they can. School in Catalan is fundamental. I saw Minister Tresserres at the burial of the children from Sant Boi, and I was thrilled that in the ceremony, in Catalan and in Spanish, the teachers and colleagues of the deceased children spoke to them in Catalan, even though almost none of their surnames were Catalan. We still have schools, with all the problems they have, as the social and cultural institution, the decisive infrastructure that must permit the continuation of Catalan culture, and also social integration.

How do you see schools today? Children are loaded down with books, but their world is the iPod, Facebook, Wikipedia, in class and in the playground the children speak the language they want, often Spanish.

The proposals of the Minister Maragall go in the right direction, I agree, More responsibility for the teachers, and also more autonomy for the schools, more order in the classrooms, more demanding and more assessment. Above all, we need to educate better, to give the teachers prestige and recognition. I am also concerned by the social institutions, weakened here and in half of Europe, starting with the family, and without

stable families, social stability and the future are threatened. The reform of schools faces enormous challenges, characteristic of this time.

Which, in your opinion?

The new technologies entail fast and deep changes, globalization covers from the economy to culture, and society, and we have the highest migration in Europe, almost as high as in Switzerland, while the influence of Catalonia in Spain is going down, also on a political level. And a very intense economic crisis has broken out which will lead to more protectionism, more nationalism of the states, less European integration. My generation did a lot of work, from the beginning of the eighties, and I must confess that in the middle of the nineties I was relatively satisfied with the progress. We had made great progress, on all levels. But the last ten years have been of concern, the changes have surpassed us. The balance cannot be good.

But you think we will get out of it.

Of course we will come out of it, but with seriousness. We will be capable of consolidating the values of coexistence and of progress, of self-respect, without which society disintegrates and the country is adrift. But today there are powerful forces which act against the cultural diversity of the world and take us to a level, uniform and banal, superficial world. Staying open to the flows of the world and to technological progress without letting yourself be dragged toward simplification and vulgarity requires an effort and an active commitment, in Catalonia and everywhere, because our world is the world and we cannot hide our head under our wing. We cannot stay sheltered in a harbour with calm waters, which can corrupt us. We must fly or navigate on the sea of Spain and Europe and the world. Globalization raises too big challenges for us to be able to face them from mediocrity, or routine. We will not save the language or the factories if we do not act seriously. We need to improve, first of all, productivity. We are now on 6, the **President** of Volkswagen, Herr Piëch, told me in Wolfsburg, while Slovakia is on 4. Very good, he told me, you have improved. But Germany is on 8, and

if we do not liven up we will end up being average, we will stagnate. NISSAN-Renault will go to Tangiers, Volkswagen to Bratislava.

It is not just a question of good economic infrastructures, then.

No, what concerns me more is what I call the *IVA*, the Ideas, the Values, the Attitudes that have to make us react as Catalans, currently in certain decadence. Because you will agree that the party is over, as the editorial of *The Economist*, so criticized, said. But I agree with this point: The party is over. We had fallen for the temptation of easy money, property speculation, mass migration of low salaries, and now we realize, finally, that Catalonia is losing initiative, modernity. We need rigour, effort, tenacity, virtues that go beyond the civilized, idle, and short-sighted hedonism. Helmut Schmidt told me that in German society there has been an *Entlastung der Zukunft*, that is a lack of concern about the future. Only if we concern ourselves for the future will we be capable of carrying out the profound reforms that we need. And in Catalonia we do not, of course, have as much margin of time as in Germany. Look, if the Fourth Ring Road of El Vallès has not been made, if two important companies which would give work to hundreds of people end up deciding not to set up in El Vallès, it is our fault, no one else's. In Catalonia we are facing serious challenges of identity, of cohesion, of progress, of respect.

But despite everything, you are still optimistic.

Because we are responsible for the future, our personal and collective future. I remember in 1982, in more critical circumstances than the current ones, with a scandalous unemployment and a very hostile government in Madrid, still with embryonic public institutions in Catalonia. We organized the exhibition "Catalunya endavant" (Catalonia ahead), and I remember that in the inauguration I said the same as I am telling you now. That we needed a reaction against sadness, against the idea of erosion, against the philosophy of defeat, at that time of extremely tough economic crisis, which could represent the interruption of centuries of progress for Catalonia, which could entail a crisis of identity. I remember that it was the 12 November 1982.

Then, the eighties and nineties, as everyone knows, were extraordinary years in the process of construction of the Catalonia that that Catalan nationalism had imagined since the beginning of the century. Catalonia always reacts, and takes flight again, however harsh the crises, that of 1714, of 1898, of 1939.

Some say that the Catalans dramatize excessively.

It is possible that we are weighed down by the myth of defeat, the *Finis Cataloniae*, and the fact is that people from my generation experienced it in person. When in 1939 Josep Benet sees the national troops coming along Carrer Gran de Sant Andreu, he promises himself to remain for ever faithful to his people. And that is what he does. We should not dramatize, it is true, but we should not conceal the truth either. As a country this is one of the most difficult moments that we have experienced in the last hundred years. One of the most difficult. We lack ambition, and willpower, what I call a *motor*. We need to react, and overcome these times of boastfulness, of verbal conceit, the presumptuous, imprudent style, the aestheticism, the concern to make a good impression and, if I may say so, also a lack of sincerity.

That is to say the verbalism that Josep Pla criticized.

Look, for me, this motor should be a renewed Catalan nationalism. But I am not the best person to talk about *post-nationalism* or *post-noucentisme*, naturally. The human communities will always need to have confidence in themselves, and the good confidence of self-esteem, of a shared identity. Think of Europe, of the European Community. Europe only considers *eisige Projekte*, as Dahrendorf called them, frozen, cold, projects, because you cannot advance with the construction of Europe without a conscience of identity, and today Europe does not have any other identity than the sum of the identities of the states. The nationalism of the communities which, having a national conscience, do not have their own state, is not a disease, or an attack of melancholy. Article 29 of the Declaration of Human Rights says this: *Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.* And nationalism Catalan style, Catalan nationalism, has three dimensions:

the German Romanticism of Herder, language, culture, the collective feeling, and the territory and the landscape, of course, but also the identity of coexistence, and of a project. Our nationalism is also that of Renan, when he says *the nation is a daily plebiscite*. The nationalism of Spain or of France does not need a daily plebiscite. But a nation, whether or not it has its own state, is, in addition to a shared history, a firm will to follow it, to continue it freely. And in Catalonia the spirit of the phoenix has always prevailed, the resurgence. We have always overcome the threat of the *Finis Cataloniae*, to which we referred earlier, in incomparably more adverse circumstances than the current ones. Now is the time to react. We have a lot of assets in Catalonia, including, the main one, the capacity to react. Catalonia always returns.

He accompanies me on leaving his office.

Where does your surname come from? He asks me.

My paternal grandfather was from a small village in Huesca.

From the Border?

He came to Catalonia as a boy, I explain, when Caminos de Hierro del Norte de España sent his father to work as switchman at Balenyà-Tona-Seva-Taradell station, in the municipality of Seva. There he married my grandmother, and years later they settled up the road, near Seva.

A couple of operators are completing the installation of a hydraulic lock on the main entrance door to President Pujol's office.

You'll see how good it will be, says the person in charge. First class.

Yes, smiles President Pujol. First class.

A first-class people

Afterwards I will explain an anecdote from my first days as mayor and it will amuse you, says Josep Palmarola, mayor of Seva since the first democratic elections of 1979, now thirty years ago. Now let's go and have breakfast together, I'll invite you.

We leave the town hall, an old building in the centre of the town, we go under the stone arch, which the mayor tells me was the former entrance for the cavalry into the town! Because Seva breathes history everywhere. It grew around a sanctuary, one of the best conserved of Osona, and was very important at the time of liberals and Carlists, as studied by the historian Antoni Pladevall, who for years was regent or curate of Santa Maria de Seva, a parish which was already mentioned in the chronicles of 1026. Positioned from east to west, almost a thousand years after being built, the church still conserves the nave and the belfry, more than twenty-six metres high. Today is Saturday, half past nine, and there are already families with children playing on the swings in the square. Seva is a healthy town, the doctors from Barcelona used to recommend it for people with all kinds of respiratory diseases. At the foot of Montseny, situated on the plain of Vic and surrounded by wood and vegetation, it has a dry climate with little fog, and each evening the sea breeze passes over the Collformic. In Seva you will find magnificent farmhouses and manor houses, such as the *Sobrevia*, designed by the noucentista architect Puig i Cadafalch, and blessed by the bishop Torres i Bages, in 1905, the perfect synthesis between the traditional and the noucentista Catalonia, which wanted to be more than modern.

But despite its beauty and its magnificent enclave, wrote Marius Carol thirty years ago in *El Correo Catalán*: *Seva is condemned not to grow*

Because the lords, many of them with noble titles, did not want to sell a square inch of land to prevent pipes or tubes from passing through their domains, hindering the construction of a complete sewerage or water transportation network.

It's a shame, the journalist said, *because Seva could become a first-class town for mountain tourism.*

Thirty years ago that was the case, the mayor tells me, but since then we have modernized a lot, but without losing our character. First with the water treatment plant, and the sewers, the reservoir and the water distribution, and starting from these infrastructures the town began to grow. We have opened wide and tree-lined roads, built good houses, created social, cultural and sports facilities, tennis, the swimming pool. Barça has stayed on the *El Muntanyà* estate since the eighties, the Equestrian competition of the 1992 Olympics was held here, and a golf course has been built, for which by the way a pipe still has to be laid from the water treatment plant to be able to water it with treated water.

We reach the restaurant, parking the car by the entrance.

I never lock the car, he tells me.

What do you want for breakfast? He asks me, bringing a couple of cooked sausages that he brought from home. I dry them in the larder, he tells me. But these two are not very dry inside, you see?

We order lamb chops, beans with lard, and wine, which would be an enormous breakfast on any day of the week, but today is Saturday, I got up early and spent some time cutting the grass.

They say that you will soon stop being mayor, I say.

Yes, I have already done everything, or almost everything, that I thought I had to do in the town. I just have one project pending: the ring road, which we will start this summer.

Will you leave it completely, afterwards?

Yes, so far I have been devoted to it exclusively, the work of the town council has been my main priority, from 1979 to now. I will continue collaborating, but I will stop giving orders.

They say you have always given orders a lot, that you ran the town council like a company.

Yes, like a public company. The town's petrol station is owned by the town council, for example, and the water company, and they guarantee atypical resources for a town council. Of course we are attentive to the subsidies of the Provincial Council or the Generalitat, or the state, and we do not let any go, but our atypical income is of about the same size. And we charge, although only a little, for the use of facilities, but at least we cover our costs.

You do well, I say. I pay seventy euros each year, as family membership of the Seva Tennis Club, a very reasonable price. The other day I went with a nephew and the woman who looks after the club told me: look, it doesn't matter, if the child plays a while with his cousins he doesn't have to pay anything, but if you play the whole hour he would have to pay me three euros. And if it gets dark, he will have to buy tokens for the lights.

It is obvious, residents must know that the public facilities have to be maintained, that they have a cost which in one way or another we all have to pay. Maybe the depreciation of the facilities should not always be charged in the prices of public services, but of course maintenance should. I also avoid unnecessary expenses, in particular electricity consumption, which last month amounted to three million seven hundred thousand pesetas, by the way, that is some 23,000 euros. We do not have a local police force and we do not want it. Why? We do not give subsidies for no particular reason to the town's entities either. When the football club, for example, needs money, I help them as much as I can but not out of the municipal budget. For example I seek financing by contacting private companies which may be interested in paying a certain amount in exchange for advertising. In any case, I warn the entities that in the coming years, if they need money again, they should carry out the negotiations themselves with the companies, or increase their fees.

The municipal engineer told me some months ago that the works sometimes cost half in Seva what they cost in other towns.

Because we control them a lot, but it isn't easy. An example: we had some land left over in a project and instead of getting rid of it I asked the contractor to make an embankment along the side of the Quatre Carreteres road, because I saw people walking along the verge, which was dangerous, from Tona. Then I commissioned a small project to compact the embankment and to put gravel, not a lot, but enough to make a path for pedestrians and cyclists, with a few trees along the side, and it also dignifies the entrance to the municipality.

But the road is owned by the Provincial Council.

Yes, that is the problem. The Local Roads Service of the Provincial Council sent me a letter. They asked: why have I done work on a road owned by them? On the basis of which project? I replied that if Seva town council had carried out this small action in advance it was for the reason that I explained to you before: there was a need, I do not want there to be accidents with pedestrians on the road, and we had the opportunity to carry out the works at a very low cost. For many small works it is clear that as public administrations we make life complicated for ourselves with unnecessarily complicated procedures which end up taking too much time and using too many resources, or they are simply not carried out.

It shouldn't be that difficult, I tell him, to come to an agreement on this matter with the Local Roads Service of the Provincial Council.

Maybe not, but the fact is that they didn't at all like the small embankment on the side of their road, but while we discuss who is more in control, the president of the Provincial Council or the Mayor of Seva, people can walk more safely to the station.

After thirty years of being mayor, everyone in the region knows you. It is said that you think too fast, that you've seen it all before.

I am a practical man, what I like is to solve problems, not to philosophize.

They also say that you have become rich with your businesses.

During these recent years I have invested in private companies, from an old people's home to a metallurgical company which was in crisis, and I have bought some land, in Seva and in other municipalities and some investments have gone well, others not so well.

They also say that you fight tooth and nail for Seva, that you would do whatever is necessary.

Yes, you know that. I love my town as much or more than anyone else can love their town, and I demand respect for it. Now we are the only town council of Osona which is still opposed to the MAT (high voltage line), and we are maintaining our appeals against the line, because it is badly planned and it ruins the landscape. We will see what they tell us in the courts, in the end.

How do you see the situation of Catalonia at the moment?

Bad, very bad. Don't you?

Why?

For a start due to lack of leadership. The other day I heard President Obama's speech to the US Congress. Obama said: we are in a bad situation and things will get worse, but we will do what it is necessary to do, however tough it is, and which is this and that, and in the end we will come out of this. I believed him, I think that he is a serious politician, that he really wants to do what he said, and that he will get where he has to defending his country, to solve the problems, as it should be. I miss that same spirit of leadership in Catalonia, and in Spain. Here a lot of people think that just by talking the problems will be solved. I am a practical man, not a philosopher. At first I suffered even to speak in public. I remember the first political function in the town, before the first election in 1979, I was so nervous that before speaking I had to have a glass of whisky. That was thirty years ago, I was very young and I hardly had any management experience, whether private or public, and even less political, but I learned by keeping my feet on the ground and working hard.

You've always been proud of your town.

Yes, no town has our prestige, and I have always had a special feeling of fondness for Seva. When I was small, when I went with my father to Sant Julià or to Viladrau, with majestic mansions, fountains, tree-lined avenues, or to Aiguafreda, a modern industrial town, on coming back I felt an immense sadness because I thought that these towns were more important than mine. But the children of Seva don't have that feeling of sadness any more now, quite the contrary. We even have Crivillé, the world champion in 500 cc.

The woman from the restaurant asks: What would you like for dessert?

I can't eat angel hair pasta, the mayor says, cutting a cake in half, which is not with angel hair pasta, I'm diabetic. Do you want the other half?

And a coffee, please, I ask the waitress.

I should be proud of Seva too, I think, because I feel at home here. My grandparents, and my great-grandparents were from here, but not from the town Seva, from Santa Maria de Seva, I mean, but from another town in the municipality of Seva, a few bends down the road, toward Tona. It is a town without any charm, with hardly any history, which instead of growing around a church or a sanctuary for a thousand years, was established a little more than a hundred years ago around a railway station which was called Balenyà-Tona-Seva-Taradell, in the middle of all these municipalities. My great-grandparents' town, which the people called Balenyà until quite recently, unlike the town of Seva has more fog, is not surrounded by woods but by fields and factories, on the other side of the railway line. My great-grandfather was the switchman at the station, and his house was one of the first to be built, in nineteen eighteen, when all there was around the station was some oil and grain stores, the chair factory and little more. Other houses were built next to the houses of the railwaymen, along the road from Taradell to Seva, and in 1956 the Housing Cooperative built hundreds of two-storey back-to-back houses in terraces. Toward the end of the sixties there were maybe a few hundred people living there, almost a thousand at the beginning of the nineties, the majority in the municipal area of Seva, but also in Malla, El Brull and Hostalets de

Balenyà. Then the town's Residents' Association, promoted by Josep Mauri, the cyclist's uncle, requested the creation of an independent municipality. That was a time of civic euphoria. A boy from the town, Melcior Mauri, even won the Vuelta a España!

But that whole process was led very badly, the mayor tells me.

You're right, I admit, because I was involved too. I recall that in a discussion with the Residents' Association the mayor made a proposal for the municipal delimitation of Balenyà, now Sant Miquel de Balenyà, which had an eccentric, or at least unusual shape.

It has the shape of a pipe, I say, because between the town centre and the cemetery, the municipality of Seva granted to the hypothetical new municipality of Sant Miquel de Balenyà only the publicly-owned land along the main road.

The mayor exclaims, laughing: So we will call it the pipe of peace!

The four mayors affected by the possible segregation, he explains to me now, had a meeting with the Minister of Governance, Mrs Cuenca, in which it was basically clear that the Territorial Delimitation Commission of the Generalitat would not solve the segregation dossier in favour of the Residents' Association.

This was, indeed, what happened. In 1993 the Territorial Delimitation Commission of Catalonia rejected the segregation. At that time the town was simply integrated into the municipality of Seva, and curiously it stopped being called like the train station to become *Sant Miquel*, like the church, although it cannot be said that there was any great religious fervour in the old town of railwaymen (the church was built in 1953, when in the middle of Francoism there could not be a town without a church).

Fortunately, the municipal controversy ended in 1997, when the town council of Seva adopted the name *Sant Miquel de Balenyà* for the town.

It is obvious that a town with such a short and profane history cannot be of much interest to the clergyman Pladevall, the parson of Santa María de Seva church and a

recognized regional historian. In his book on the history of Seva, a magnificent volume of 300 pages, he devotes a little less than five pages to Sant Miquel de Balenyà, almost all explaining the frustrated segregation process, although approximately half of the inhabitants of the municipality live there.

It is confusing that the train station is still today called Balenyà-Tona-Seva, I tell the mayor. How do you think the station should be called?

Sant Miquel de Balenyà, he tells me, of course!

Or maybe Sant Miquel de Seva, I say.

Sant Miquel de Seva? He laughs. Will you propose it to the residents?

Maybe it would be good, to put an end, for once and for all, to this story of misunderstandings. Because the rivalry between the municipality's two towns has always been considerable, especially as regards municipal investments. In Sant Miquel de Balenyà they feel ill-treated, there is the perception that very little is invested there, in comparison with what is invested here in Seva. The last issue of *El Gallaret*, the town's magazine which Jaume Mauri now promotes, details, for example, the investments that will be made in the municipality with the extraordinary anti-crisis subsidy approved by the Spanish government (the Spanish Plan to stimulate the economy and employment): of the €564,770 that Seva town council will obtain in relation to its number of inhabitants, only 29% will be invested in Sant Miquel de Balenyà. But, at the same time, the old priest of Sant Miquel was opposed, without the reason being known, to the town council arranging the façades of the church and of the annexes, when the town's church square was redone. There is no way to get the football clubs from the two towns to share the football pitch, or to have joint teams, so the town council had to make a football pitch for Sant Miquel above La Muntanyeta, although it is not yet grass, like in Seva.

I am not sure that a football pitch is the best facility to install above La Muntanyeta.

La Muntanyeta is a fantastic place, the mayor tells me, to play football and also to locate other facilities.

We reach the mayor's house, a big, simple and elegant house, almost the size of the town's nineteenth-century manor houses, but it is modern, with perfect facilities and finishes. He tells me that he took twenty-four years to finish it, and indeed it looks new, brand new. In the garage cables and tubes hang from the ceiling, a sign against the high voltage line ("NO A LA MAT"), big panels with electric switches on the wall, the boiler. In the larder, on the other hand, there are hams and sausages hanging to dry, and in the cellar there are hundreds of bottles of wine. He gives me a present of more cold meats, a *botifarra* and a *bull*, perfectly frozen, vacuum packed and labelled.

I have always enjoyed eating well, he tells me.

I ask him: What projects do you still have pending? The ring road, you told me earlier.

The ring road, yes, as a relief road to Sant Miquel, so that the majority of the traffic from Seva to Barcelona, even to Vic, is diverted, such as the lorries from Els Monells. The land has already been expropriated, and the project completed. I just need the agreement with Renfe to be able to make a bridge over the railway lines. It will be a municipally-owned road, not of the Provincial Council of Barcelona, or of the Generalitat of Catalonia!

Renfe plans to double up the lines to Vic, which could be an extraordinary occasion to redo the area around Sant Miquel station, more so taking into account that the road between the houses and the station should lose a lot of traffic, thanks to the diversion.

We already have an initial preliminary plan for the station, the mayor tells me.

We return to the town hall, where they give me a colour photocopy of *SEVA, excursions i passejades* (SEVA, excursions and walks).

And we say goodbye, as it is already half past twelve.

I owe you an anecdote, the mayor laughs.

It's true.

A few days after I was chosen to be mayor, he tells me, I was closing the town hall when I was visited by a couple.

We have come to pay the capital gains, the man told me.

Come in, then, I said, if it's to pay we're always open!

While I was writing the invoice on the typewriter, the man asked me: What party are you from?

Me? I'm from Seva, I told him.

The man smiled to his wife, with a gesture as if saying this mayor is a peasant from a village and doesn't even know what I'm asking him. It was the beginning of democracy, there had been municipal elections, but not yet for the Generalitat, and everyone was very politicized. So I wasn't surprised when the man insisted: What political party are you from? Republican Left? Convergence? Democratic Union?

I understood you first time, I replied. I already told you, I am from the municipality of Seva! And what I want to do is the wastewater treatment plant, the sewers, to bring water, to improve the electricity supply, to modernize the town, like Sant Julià, like Viladrau. I want this town to grow well. Before anything else, I am from Seva.

Yes, that is what many people say, there are socialists and people from Convergence, people from Barça or from Espanyol, and that you are from Seva.

He asks me: do you know who that couple was?

No, of course not, I tell him. Who?

They were your parents! He laughs. They came to pay the capital gains because your grandfather had granted his house to your father, the one you want to do up now.