



Matthew Tree

Catalonia

and how it got that way

El conflicte inevitable



THE
ANGLO-CATALAN
SOCIETY

Edited by the Anglo-Catalan Society's Occasional Publications
(ACSOP), February 2019

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ACSOP extends its thanks to Jaume Huch and L'Albí publishers for their
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**‘CATALONIA
AND HOW IT GOT THAT WAY’**

A personal chronicle

by

Matthew Tree

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1

WHY?

How Catalonia Got That Way

A shorter version of the following text was read out as part of a talk given at Cambridge University in May of 2018. Updated since then, it is an attempt to explain why – at the end of the 1970s – it was possible, even for a non-expert such as myself who barely spoke Catalan, to sense that, sooner or later, the current situation in Catalonia was not only foreseeable, but inevitable.

*

At the time of writing, I'm fifty-nine years old, which is an age when younger people don't yet get up to offer you a seat on the metro, but stare at you as if they're about to do so.

I've been in contact with Catalonia for forty years and have lived there - I mean here - for the last thirty-four of them. I discovered my written voice in Catalan before I did in English, and went on to publish eleven titles in Catalan (fiction – which garnered a couple of awards – non-fiction, autobiography, a couple of diatribes, a road book) before returning to my mother tongue, which – thanks to the discipline of writing in a second language – is now a lot friendlier for this user than it had been when I abandoned it for Catalan. I've made a proper fool of myself on infotainment programmes which I scripted and presented on Catalan public TV; I've been a guest on radio chat shows and still am a columnist for Catalonia's third best-selling newspaper; I've given talks on all kinds of things all over Catalonia, and done more live readings than I could shake a stick at, assuming I'd want to.



Matthew Tree: some titles in Catalan

All this distasteful own-trumpet-blowing is simply to stress that I'm not – indeed, cannot be — detached or neutral when it comes to talking about Catalonia. After all, Catalonia has taken up a larger chunk of my life than has my native London. Catalonia has, for various reasons, been a source of endless fascination. My children are Catalans. And Catalonia, for decades now, has been the only place where I really feel at home.

And as it's become increasingly difficult to talk about Catalonia without mentioning politics, in this longish, probably over-long piece there's going to be some politics but they are, I would like to stress, based purely on my personal experience and observations of Catalonia. (I don't belong to any political party and can only vote in municipal and European elections – for the time being).

But first of all, I'd like to kick off with a brief account of what happened on October 1st, 2017 (Referendum Day), written just twenty-four hours after those events. After which we'll go into the now distant past of the late nineteen-seventies and then look at the situation as it stands now, before taking a small peek at possible futures.

2

ONE DAY IN OCTOBER

‘On the evening of September 30th, I went on a stroll to my nearest polling station, the Fort Pienc primary school at the far eastern end of Barcelona’s Eixample district; the same school which my children had attended from the ages of three to twelve. So I knew quite a lot of the people there, who were putting up signs on the walls supporting democracy and the right to vote and were going to spend the night, organising activities that were non-referendum-related, as they knew they would get visits from the Catalan police, known as the Mossos d’Esquadra, who had instructions to close any premises in which ‘referendum-related activity’ was taking place. (Later on, the Mossos would turn up twice, take note of the number of people staying overnight and leave).

The atmosphere inside was bristling with the excitement of people who thought they’d never stand a chance of seeing any real change in Catalonia, and were now finding they were doing the changing themselves.

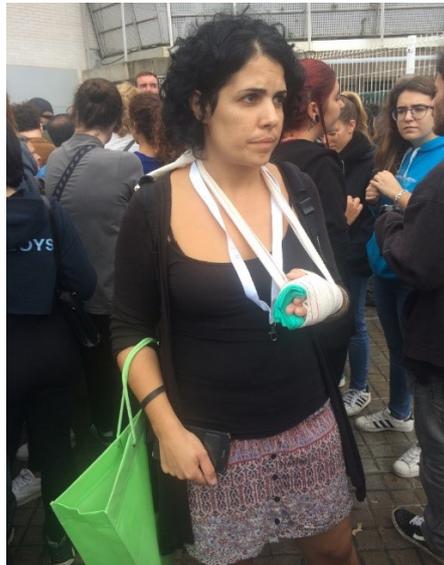
An app named ‘Call to Democracy’, downloaded by millions of people, advised everyone who wasn’t staying the night to be at the polling stations at 5am the following day: four hours before they opened at nine. This was to prevent any attempts by the Spanish police to break in and steal the ballot boxes. I got there at five to five, it was still dark, and already hundreds of people were waiting in a drizzle which took another quarter of an hour to turn into a downpour. Nobody left. We waited and chatted. At around six, I went back home to get an umbrella and some dry shoes and socks. On the way back I headed to the bar of the bus station opposite the polling station for a glass of water. The Catalan government spokesman was on the TV, announcing that, in order to allow citizens to vote at schools which had been evacuated and then sealed off by the police, a universal census had been activated, meaning that with suitable ID, anyone could vote at any available polling station. Not long after I got back to the crowd, the street-lamps clicked off just as natural light was starting to ease its way into the sky.

A little later, a helicopter belonging to the Spanish National Police began circling over us, spotlights on, for about an hour. There were no press helicopters, because Madrid had sealed off Catalan airspace for the weekend to avoid journalists taking pictures of the huge crowds waiting patiently at polling stations all over the country. Nine o’clock rolled around but the doors were still shut, because the Spanish authorities had blocked the servers to prevent voting. The school’s IT expert arrived, and fixed the problem, at least for the time being. The elderly were given priority, and soon a corridor in the crowd was made so that a thin line of men and women in wheelchairs or leaning on walking sticks or their grandchildren, could wend their way into the school. A little later, the first of them emerged to universal applause.

How Catalonia Got That Way

One (very) elderly man in a wheelchair raised his fist and yelled ‘Long Live Free Catalonia!’. These were, after all, people who had lived through the most oppressive years of the Franco dictatorship.

Anyhow — to cut a long story short — there was a lot of waiting to be got through, hours and hours of it, with the server still crashing every thirty minutes until finally the IT guy found a definitive solution, in the early afternoon. By this time we had heard news from the three other polling stations in our neighbourhood: some people from there had come over with videos of people being beaten, dragged and kicked by heavily armed Spanish National Police, who had broken into the premises by climbing fences or smashing windows or kicking doors open. All in order to get the ballot boxes. A Catalan public TV news app started to broadcast news of the number of people injured around Catalonia in similar operations: by midday there were well over two hundred.



Marta Torrecillas with fingers in splints

I asked a passing camera crew where they were from. France 4. Their cameraman had been swiped with a baton when filming at the nearby Ramon Llull polling station. I asked a woman whose arm was in a sling and her fingers in splints, what had happened to her. Her name is Marta Torrecillas, she’s 33 years old and works for the Catalan government as an Administration Department Head. She was at the nearby Pau Claris polling station when the police came in. No sooner did they see the accreditation around her neck identifying her as a Catalan government worker, than they ripped the plaque off her, and threw her down a stairway with her skirt up and blouse down. One policeman then twisted three of her fingers. She thought they’d been broken, but it turned out that one had been immobilised and the others left intact. (He has been

identified as agent 4U21, and - it goes without saying - is still at large). After having been thus abused, she had made her way to Fort Pienc, and voted. She had the stunned, dazzled look of someone who cannot yet fully believe what has happened to them.

Our polling station, thanks to the size of the crowd that never left its side, remained untouched by the Spanish police.

News from other places further afield started coming in. In Sant Cebrià de Vallalta, a tiny municipality off the Maresme coast, north-east of Barcelona, people had been dragged down stairways; in another tiny village, Aiguaviva, near Girona, pepper spray – classified as a chemical weapon by the Chemical Weapons Convention — had been used on people (after the ballot boxes had been removed, according to the later Human Rights Watch report).

The helicopter came back several times and buzzed above us before heading off again. And then images started flooding in on smartphones from all over Catalonia: people being shot at with rubber bullets while they tried to help an injured man into an ambulance; a middle-aged woman with her face covered in blood; young women being dragged along the floor by their hair; a wounded town councillor politician being whacked as friends tried to get him through a police cordon. All in all there was an average of eight injured people for every polling station that was attacked. 770,000 people of a total census of 5,400,000 had been prevented from voting, either because they couldn't make it to an untouched polling station or because the servers were down or because they were being attended to by paramedics.

Apart from at least partially revealing what Catalans wanted, the referendum also showed us what Madrid really thinks of us, when push comes to shove: that from its point of view, the only acceptable option is that we — literally — keep our heads down, shut up and pay our taxes (Catalonia has the highest fiscal deficit of any European region). Or we will be terrorised.

The latest news, just in today (02/10/2017), is that the thousands of violent men in uniform who showed such loathing towards us yesterday, are being told by the state to stay on in Catalonia for an indefinite period. And it's not so they can learn the language.'

*

And now we need to go back thirty-seven years.

3

THE FIRST VISIT

I would (probably) never have got to know Catalonia at all, had it not been for a funny little marriage in a London registry office (in 1978, when I was nineteen) presided over by a facetious, bearded man who didn't take our wedding seriously, assuming that we just wanted to get hitched up so that my Spanish girlfriend — as I then thought of her — could stay in the country. He was right. (Spain wasn't yet in the EU — or whatever it was called back then — and my girlfriend had recently had a personal visit from plainclothes immigration police telling her she had two weeks to pack her bags and decamp from the island).

It was a quick ceremony, as there were no guests apart from the witnesses. Our idea was to keep the whole business a secret, but marriage, like murder, will out: she told her sister. And a few months later I was stepping into a jet plane for the first time, astonished at how cramped the thing was, in order to meet my Catalan in-laws.

The only clue I had as to where I was going was George Orwell's 'Homage to Catalonia' (which it isn't) and a couple of things my girlfriend had let drop about her being Catalan, an adjective which meant nothing to me, but left me with an uncomfortable feeling of it being something exclusive, something which — unlike my girlfriend — I didn't belong to. So it made me feel a bit jealous.

I may or may not have known that Catalan was also a language: I simply can't remember. I am sure that I had no intention of learning it. All told and in general, the words Catalonia and Catalan gave rise to nothing but a slight mental itch which I couldn't be bothered to scratch.

*

The thought of meeting my girlfriend's family for the first time, on the other hand, terrified me. After all, in their eyes, I was — I supposed — an outrageously young man, far too youthful to have done as anything as serious as marry anyone, let alone their middle daughter. I caught a train from the sooty, fidgety city that Barcelona then was, staring at the unfamiliar trees and ochre farmhouses that passed blithely by, and alighted at the station nearest to her village, where her elder brother was waiting for me. He turned out to be an instantly likeable man, who, as we conversed awkwardly in broken school-French, drove us across a wide plain flanked by tall yellowish protuberances. I later found out that these were a characteristic geographical feature of the area, known in Catalan as 'turons testimoni' ('witness hills'). But back then I felt I was being driven deeper and deeper into a very strange land.

The family turned out to be unanimously friendly, showing me nothing but the most open, easy-going form of hospitality, which included offering me what appeared to be an unlimited supply of beer, thus soothing my then extremely nervous self enough to small talk. And

talking of talk, one thing quickly became clear: if I was to have any communication with anyone except my wife (in English) and what little chatter her brother and I could muster with our French, I was going to have to choose one of the two languages — one official, the other not yet so — that were spoken in that particular part of the world.

*

This was a time when Franco's Spain was still unravelling, but very slowly. The Catalan president in exile, Josep Tarradellas, had come back home and was putting the first post-war Statute of Autonomy together. Some of the local shopkeepers had changed their signs from the previously obligatory Spanish, to Catalan. Others had chosen to leave things as they were, believing as they did that any year now there could well be another military coup d'état and then they'd have to change any Catalan signs back into Spanish (with the cost that that entailed).

This linguistic precariousness under what was supposed to be a democracy had created a certain amount of confusion among Catalan speakers (who in this village of five thousand, made up around 90% of the population). To begin with, nobody knew how to spell in Catalan because they'd never been taught the language at school, but they all wrote in it anyway, their sentences packed with errors. Years of repression had made them pessimistic about its future, yet proud that it had survived as much as it had. So it was, that when they saw me teetering on the brink of deciding whether to learn Catalan or Spanish, they would tell me that they would love it if I learnt Catalan, but then immediately warned me that it would be a dead language by the end of the century.

(As far as the media were concerned, I soon found out that there was only one Catalan language newspaper, and as for television, Catalan language programmes were limited to a few hours in the middle of the day, consisting of hopelessly under-budgeted dramas; or news programmes in which local items were permitted to be explained in Catalan: for anything international the anchor-people had to switch to Spanish).

The only person who insisted that I learn Spanish and only Spanish was one of the local fascists, a young (Catalan) man who had the de rigueur brilliantined hair of his colleagues in the neo-Francoist organisation Fuerza Nueva (as well as a gun). And there was also a resident Dutchman married to one of my wife's cousins, an unendearing man who thought that all things Catalan were a waste of time because in the end this was Spain, wasn't it? He made no effort to hide his disdain for the Catalan language from his wife or his wife's family, who were nonetheless courteous enough to never fail to address him in Spanish.

Because I didn't care much for the blandishments of the fascist; and because I didn't want to be treated, as was the Dutchman, like a ranking foreign emissary; and a bit because Catalan was most definitely the underdog tongue; and above all because it became clear to me in a matter of days that Catalan was the default language of almost everybody I knew, I decided that I'd learn that language first.

My wife and I were due to go back to London, where I got hold of a copy of 'Teach Yourself Catalan', by professor Alan Yates of Sheffield University, which had appeared a couple of months earlier, almost miraculously, given that as far as I knew, I was the only person in Britain who wished to acquire this particular language. Not long afterwards, I returned to the village for a six month stay.

4

**AN APPARENTLY INEXPLICABLE
ANOMALY**

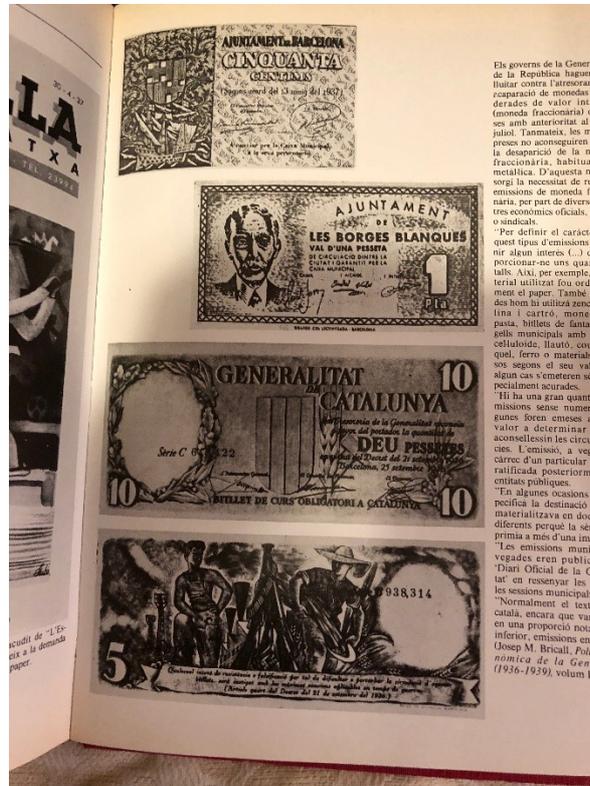
At first sight, it looked unusual, Catalan, with its tricky combinations of weak pronouns ('L'hi dono': 'I give it to him') and verbs which sometimes added 'eix' to the stem ('llegeixo': 'I read') and sometimes didn't ('llanço': 'I throw'); with its accents both acute and grave, its cedillas and umlauts; with its capricious past participles and its ever so easy past tense (you only have to add a word before the verb to kick it into history); it sounded odd too, with its swelling double Ls ('ocell', 'lluna', 'Lluís': 'bird', 'moon', 'Louie'); its host of monosyllables ('poc', 'foc', 'boc') and its shushing Xs ('xiuxiuejar', 'xandall', 'xalar'). It came over like a mixture of rolling waves and abrupt clucks; and like all languages everywhere, it was hell to learn, what with memorising pages of Professor Yates's book and then practising them with real people, each and every day; but as time went on, Catalan drilled itself into my head until I became all but bilingual, so intense was the learning curve and so total the immersion (there weren't any Catalan classes for adults, not back then).

And as I started talking to people — people whose youth had, inevitably, been spent under Franco —; and as I read my first Catalan fiction, some of it written by authors based in places where I never so much as suspected that Catalan was spoken, such as Majorca and Valencia; and as I pored over a history book about Republican Catalonia, in which there were photos of previous Catalan presidents and ministers and of money printed in Catalan, it dawned on me (gradually) that something inexplicably wrong had taken place in this corner of Europe: how could it be that all this history, all this writing, all these people milling about speaking this rolling-and-clucking tongue, had never been so much as mentioned in the country where I was born? How could it be possible that an entire culture could be hidden in plain sight of the generations of British and other foreign tourists who had flocked to Catalonia in the last three decades? A culture, I was discovering, which had already produced world-class artists such as Dalí and Miró, without anyone knowing that they had belonged to this same Catalan culture; a culture which, like most others, had soaked up foreign influences while retaining an intimate network of its own (Salvador Dalí, for instance, was told how to pose for photographs — with those goblin eyes of his — by the satirical writer and philosopher Francesc Pujols; Joan Miró, for example, was inspired by the surreal poetry of his friend J.V. Foix). How could it be that not a soul I knew had the first inkling of the existence of all this?

My brother-in-law dropped a few hints. He had been fourteen before he'd even seen the Catalan flag, so banned had it been; Catalan language books had been prohibited completely in the first years of the dictatorship, except for the odd Catholic tract. For many years, speaking Catalan outside of the home had been a high-risk pursuit, with people

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being thrown off trams for chit-chatting, or beaten for asking their turn in a bakery – to give two documented examples – so linguistically vigilant were Franco’s policemen, both when in and out of uniform.



Bank notes in Catalan from the II Republic

After the arrival of democracy — or ‘democracy’ — Catalan politicians were not allowed to travel officially and Catalan theatre groups — already making an international name for themselves — were, when touring abroad, banned from indicating on their posters that they were, indeed, Catalan. For example.

All I’m trying to say is that even to my callow, unworldly nineteen year old self, it was blindingly obvious that I’d stumbled across a colossal European anomaly. An anomaly, because it had been suppressed with a rigour so severe that it presupposed heavy doses of loathing — perhaps even hatred — on the part of the central authorities, and not just under Franco. And an anomaly because, if it had survived as well as it had, it was because of clandestine language classes, clandestine hangings of flags, clandestine printing presses, clandestine hoardings of books, clandestine talking; it had survived because large numbers of Catalans had, in effect, practised mass civil disobedience for many years.

And there was something else that made Catalonia anomalous...

*

In the late 'Sixties, so my brother-in-law explained — three coaches had turned up unannounced in my wife's village. They contained an entire Andalusian village, which then proceeded to settle in for life. Similar scenes took place all over Catalonia, and on Barcelona's outskirts once smallish towns swelled into urban sprawls thanks to an influx of around a million and a half people from southern Spain and Galicia. There was a distinct us-and-them attitude on the part of the native-born Catalans towards the newcomers, and vice-versa. Unused to hearing Andalusian accents, the locals often couldn't understand their neighbours from southern Spain; and the Andalusians, of course, didn't understand a word of Catalan and neither did they have much opportunity or need to do so, given that most of them were working in tiring factory or construction jobs, and that socially they tended to stick together (as did the Catalans born-and-bred); the suppression of Catalan until the mid-'Seventies didn't help much either.

Each 'side' developed an attitude of slight superiority towards the other. For the newcomers, Catalonia was Spain, and that meant that they had the right to always be addressed in Spanish and usually were. Once, when my wife's mother, who ran a patisserie, switched from a Catalan-speaking customer to a Spanish-speaking one, she accidentally gave the latter the price in Catalan ('trenta pessetes') instead of Castilian ('treinta pesetas'). Despite the minimal difference in sound, the Spanish speaker said she couldn't understand and asked for the price to be repeated in her language. This kind of linguistic tussle was fairly common at the time. (When I was in a Barcelona taxi with some friends of my brother-in-law, and the driver claimed he couldn't understand a Catalan street name which was quite similar to its Spanish version, a fight almost broke out). For their part, the Catalans often looked down their noses at the Andalusians, considering them under-cultured and difficult to integrate.

Happily, by the time I arrived, all this was starting to change for the better. Mixed marriages were helping, as was more and more social mixing. And, of course, the passing of the generations, with young people tending to be more inclusive than their elders. (When I was in my wife's village, my brother-in-law recommended I read a book called 'The Other Catalans' — 'Els altres catalans' — by a Spanish-speaking immigrant called Paco Candel: it was a reasoned yet impassioned argument for the full acceptance of people like him within Catalan society: to make sure he got his point across to the people it was aimed at, he insisted the book — originally written in Spanish — was published

first in Catalan; ‘Els altres catalans’ became a huge best-seller and marked the beginning of the thaw between ‘native’ Catalans and recent arrivals).

*

Over time, my wife and I had got to a stage — or *the* stage — where arguments had become more frequent than making-ups, and were soon to separate. I went back to London.

I returned to Catalonia, or rather its capital, on my own, four years later, in 1984.

I confess a need to explain why — despite the break-up of my marriage — I decided to go back to Catalonia with the intention of living the rest of my life there.

*

I was born into an English middle-class family; my father was from London and my mother, from Liverpool. Combining their own money (hard won, it should be said: they did not come from wealthy homes) and a scholarship that I myself managed to win, they were able to send me to a fee-paying school which, in turn, facilitated my entry into a ‘good’ university. This privileged education opened my eyes to the real function of such institutions, namely, to perpetuate unto perpetuity the stratifications implicit in the English class system, given that said institutions give you a clear advantage over the rest of your compatriots, not only because you’ve got certain qualifications that are nominally more valuable than those to be obtained at run-of-the-mill centres of education, but also because among the friends you make at elite universities, there’ll always be some with prestigious, well-positioned parents who’ll be able to give you a helping hand in the future; or perhaps your classmates themselves will start to clamber up the social ladder until they land jobs which are as coveted as they are prized, and from which vantage points they themselves will be able to help you to do a bit of upward clambering. And this holds true whether you long to be a banker, a stockbroker or a Harley Street dentist; or whether you’ve set your sights on being a TV producer, a publicity agent, or (my case) a writer.

In short, I was sure as sure could be that I did not want, under any circumstances, to stay in a country in which I had such metapersonal advantages, so to speak. Whatever I did, if I wanted to be a writer I would have to do it on my own without the social shots in the arm that I would have been administered — almost by default — in England.

Thus — along with several other reasons which aren't relevant here — I had to get away.

And abroad, there was just one door that was open to me; or better said, ajar.

5

RETURN

When I got back to Catalonia in 1984, there'd been quite a lot of changes. There was now one public TV station and one public radio broadcasting in Catalan. Catalan had become the vehicular language in schools. Catalonia had a government of its own. On the streets of Barcelona, far from fights breaking out over language preferences – as they sometimes had — a lot more people were using Catalan normally, as well as Spanish, and just about everyone seemed to understand it. In other words, the friction of the 'Seventies had gone and bilingualism (whether active or passive) was becoming the order of the day, as opposed to the diglossia of the previous decade.

*

From a foreign point of view, though, Catalonia still didn't exist. When tourists visited, they headed mainly for the coast, where a sort of ersatz, clichéd Spain had been prepared for them — often by Catalan entrepreneurs — in the form of bull-fighterish or flamenco-patterned souvenirs, mediocre tablaos, not to mention the universal promotion of sangria as the Spanish drink (Catalans themselves, however, didn't bother with it much). From time to time, these tourists would venture into Barcelona, whereupon people would point them out, partly because they were so rare and partly because they often wore bikinis and swimming trunks even when strolling through a city centre awash with fully-clothed locals.

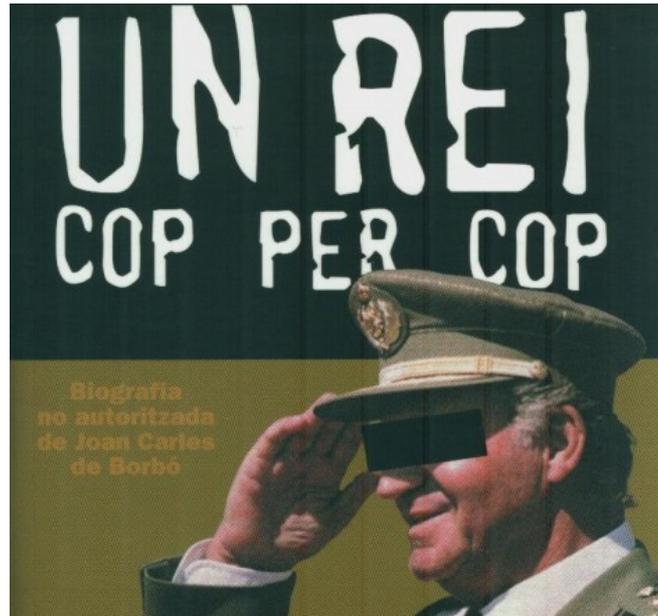
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The attitude of the central government towards Catalonia toggled between grudging tolerance and blatant restrictions. In 1989, for instance, Catalan public TV decided to create a second channel, with more cultural content. Madrid tried hard to block this as best it could (literally, by interfering with the signal) obliging Catalan TV to use an illegal transmitter until a negotiated agreement was reached. And there were other, less publicised controversies. Cars using C stickers to indicate the owners' Catalan nationality could be stopped by police and the drivers fined; attempt after attempt was made to reduce the use of Catalan in the schools, practically the only public space where its use was widespread, and which guaranteed that all schoolchildren would become bilingual in both Spanish and Catalan, came they from Olot or Cadiz or Nador or Dakar.

*

In 1981, while I was still in London, there was an attempted coup d'état in Madrid, from which Juan Carlos, the then King of Spain, emerged as the guarantor of Spanish democracy and an international hero. However, an investigation that formed part of a book on the King published in the Basque Country in 2001 (there was also a Catalan edition: 'El rei cop per cop', Patricia Severlo, ed. Kalegorria) followed by an essay by the Catalan historian Josep Termes in 2004, arrived at a different conclusion. According to them, the King — worried about increasingly itchy elements of the military who believed Spain was becoming too decentralised — had decided to dissolve the Spanish parliament and form a transitional government presided over by a military officer (with representatives from all the major Spain-wide formations, but not from those limited to the Basque Country and Catalonia). The presiding officer was to be the King's former secretary, Alfonso Armada. This unvoted-for government would then reframe the structure of the state by limiting the powers of the autonomous communities (meaning, in effect, those of the Basque Country and Catalonia, the only two that caused any concern) and then call for elections to be held. The actual seizure of the parliament building was to be done by six busloads of paramilitary police – the Civil Guard – led by lieutenant colonel Antonio Tejero. These men were not informed of the entire plan, having been told only that they had to seize the parliament without the use of violence (Tejero must have presumed that firing three shots into the ceiling when he entered was a gesture of peace). When Tejero was told that the coalition he was helping to usher in included the Communist Party, he balked and tried to convert the event into a common or garden military seizure of power, which, as we know, was eventually put down. (In 2012, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* published a 1981 report from the then German ambassador Lothar Lahn, who had been surprised that Juan Carlos had shown “great sympathy” for the coup plotters, saying they “only wanted what everyone wanted”, and adding that their sentences should be “as light as possible,” which indeed they were; in 2018, a former veteran Guardia Civil called Manuel Pastrana, and a contemporary of Tejero's, published a book in which he claimed the latter had assured him that Juan Carlos had ordered the coup; and in February of 2019, the news site *El Correo de Madrid* published a signed letter sent to the right-wing journalist Fernández-Villamea by Antonio Tejero, confirming that he, Tejero, had acted on orders from the king).

Armada was jailed for just seven years; Tejero was condemned to thirty of which he served fourteen. (The man in charge of the Spanish National Police and Civil Guards whose remit in Catalonia in 2017 was to sabotage the referendum on independence, is colonel Diego Pérez de los Cobos, who, back in 1981, personally volunteered to join the Civil Guards involved in the coup).



King Juan Carlos I, hero of democracy...

I found out about the coup a little earlier than most people as a friend who'd just started working for the BBC called immediately to tell me what was going on, suggesting that I should warn the people I knew there. I phoned my former brother-in-law, who told me that Spanish TV was broadcasting nothing but military music, but that he'd already suspected what was happening and was packing his bags in case he had to flee over the border into France, given that everyone in the village knew he was pro-independence. In the end neither he nor anyone else had to flee abroad. Not back then.

After the coup, in June of 1982, the two main parties in Spain came up with something called the Law of Harmonisation of the Autonomous Process, whose function, simply put, was to put a brake on the powers due to be transferred to the different autonomous communities in general, and Catalonia in particular. Catalonia's expectations of an incremental increase in home rule – implicit in its constitutionally approved Statute of Autonomy – were thus reduced to (almost) nought.

6

GAMES AND PASTIMES

Catalan was made the fourth official language of the 1992 Olympic Games — held in Barcelona and some other Catalan towns — despite the claims of senators belonging to the Popular Party that this was ‘anti-constitutional’. A Catalan grass roots organisation did what it could to display banners reading ‘Freedom for Catalonia’ in front of any foreign camera crew who cared to film them. Half-way through the Games, the Catalan government published ads in several widely read international newspapers and magazines, asserting that Barcelona was the capital of a country called Catalonia, something which outraged many Spaniards (which begs the question: why?). In short, these were the first timid attempts made by Catalans to cease being Europe’s best kept cultural secret.

*

They weren’t too successful. One out of many examples of the persistent incomprehension on the part of international media towards all things Catalan, was a British documentary made in 1992 by an English TV director who wanted to undercut what he regarded as the over-positive image of the Games that had been generated more or less everywhere in Catalonia. His working premise was that this was nothing but hype and that he could cut through it to reveal a less pleasant reality underneath. To do so, he wanted to interview street-sweepers, prostitutes, bar owners who had been forced to close because their establishments didn’t meet the new pre-Olympic standards of hygiene that had just come onto the statute books, and other people he assumed would have a negative take on the Games. As his fixer, I found him a street sweeper, a prostitute, a disgruntled bar owner and so on; but lo and behold, they all turned out to be pleased as punch and proud as peacocks that the Olympics were coming to Barcelona, and what’s more, were perfectly happy with the plethora of Catalan flags which were hanging everywhere from private homes. The documentary, needless to say, was stymied by its own false premise: incoherent and dull, it was shown just once, on Norwegian TV.

(The director chose to ignore the one event which did cast a shadow over the Games: the detention of twenty-five people accused of belonging to an armed pro-independence organisation — Terra Lliure — which had already announced its own dissolution. Seventeen of the detainees were tortured, something which the Spanish government did not acknowledge or investigate. Amidst all the Olympic fervour, little information was released about this episode).

*

Between the 1986 announcement that Barcelona had been selected for the 1992 Games and the Games themselves, Barcelona became fashionable. The Time Out guide to Barcelona became that publisher's third best-selling city guide after London and Paris. Gradually, at first, and then in swelling droves, a different kind of foreign visitor appeared in the city: urban weekend-trippers who were fascinated by the Gaudí buildings, the elegant, charming streets, and the Modernist façades which the City Council was relieving of decades of grime.

I ran into quite a lot of these visitors over the six years between the announcement and the Games. And, just like the Dutchman in my wife's village, every last mother's son and daughter of them shared an intense — and for me inexplicable — dislike of all things Catalan. For them Barcelona was a Spanish city, and anything that contradicted this *idée fixe* was either ignored or rebuffed (I heard an English woman ask a freshly-made friend at a party for her name, and upon hearing it was Jordina, a Catalan name, she said: 'No, no, give me the Spanish version'). Full of disdain for what they regarded as an unpleasant and condemnable nationalist deviation from Spanish normality, these European and American people, it seemed to me, had placed themselves in a kind of parallel universe. I still recall the exact words of a woman who had come to Barcelona as a tourist in the mid-Nineties and had then settled there for the next two years: 'I've got nothing against the Catalans, I just wish they'd let me live in Spain'.

This attitude was frustrating for most Catalans and anyone else who knew — as I did — that the negative side (or the 'nationalist' side in the most negative sense of the word) of a certain Catalanism present in the 1970s — the complaints about newcomers from southern Spain, etc. — was coming to an end. And that there were more and more pro-independence Catalans who tended, in the main, to be left-wing and anti-racist and anti-fascist. Most of the real racist and fascist organisations in Catalonia, on the other hand, were usually firm defenders of the unity of Spain.

7

LETTERS

That said, as time went on, I began to notice that I was no longer the only Catalan-speaking foreigner I knew. On the contrary, I was meeting more and more Catalan speakers from, for example, Holland, Germany, Cuba, Peru, Tanzania, Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Italy, Greece, Germany, India, America...and Britain. And this was just through social coincidence: friends of friends who would eventually become my friends too.

*

Meanwhile, I was still trying to turn myself into a writer but was finding out that the aforementioned elite educational institutions I'd attended had cramped the style I hadn't yet managed to find: my writing was too refined, too precious, too literary. I just couldn't get a written voice that was natural, unhindered and fluent. And when I tried to make my English more colloquial, that didn't work out either, because if you spend eight or nine years in the places of education I'd been to, you lose contact with the language spoken on the streets.

I never so much as suspected that in order to find this elusive written voice, I'd have to change my language as well as my country. One summer evening in 1989, in the bar in front of the block of flats where I lived at the time, the poet and publisher Antoni Clapés launched a new series of chapbooks of prose and poetry, in which there was an eclectic mix of known and (completely) unknown writers. After the presentation, I got to talking with him and he suggested that I write something in Catalan, given that he didn't publish in English. If he liked it, he said, he'd publish it; and if he didn't, he wouldn't.



“Foreigners” writing in Catalan

As soon as I began to write the first sentence of this text, I had the feeling that I could make the Catalan language do as I pleased: jump, wail, squeak, scream, laugh, grumble and shut up, if needs be. Everything, in short, that I hadn't been able to do with English. When the text — a mere half dozen pages — was published in 1990, I felt I was free at last from the limitations of my mother tongue.

If I mention all this, it's because as the years rolled on, I began to discover that not only was it becoming increasingly normal to bump into Catalan-speaking foreigners but that there was also a small group of foreigners who, like myself, were writing and publishing in Catalan: novelists and essayists from Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Argentina, Morocco...

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And this is as good a moment as any to slip in a parenthetical glance at modern Catalan prose fiction, of which by now I had read quite a lot. Before I was able to read in Catalan, I had imagined Catalan literature to consist of a relatively small selection of parochial, twee and rural novels too minor to transcend the borders of Catalonia itself. I was astonished to discover that many of the great Catalan classics of the first half of the 20th century, when Catalan society was still highly traditional, spoke freely about sex, violence, corruption, love, hatred and mental illness with a forthrightness that would've made many of their English contemporaries blush. To give some examples from titles that are available in English translation, 'Dark Vales' (1901) by Raimon Caselles, concerns a priest who suffers from what would now be diagnosed on the spot as bipolar disorder, who is taunted and ridiculed by a middle-aged prostitute who turns up one day in his parish. 'Private Life' (1932) by Josep Maria de Sagarra is a stunningly physical description of the decadence of the Catalan aristocracy and upper middle classes, and includes a graphic description of a sex show in the city's Old Town. Joan Sales's 'Uncertain Glory' (1956) is possibly the greatest novel ever about the Spanish Civil War, and is almost certainly the one which is closest to the bone when it comes to conveying the reality of that catastrophe to the reader. Mercè Rodoreda's 'Camellia Street' (1966) relates the life of an orphan who, after a series of unsuccessful or downright depressing and on occasion remunerated relationships with men, emerges as a mature, independent woman who finds she is far happier when free of the male sex.

As for more recent Catalan writing, it punches well above its weight. Quim Monzó's original, disturbing and often funny short stories, such as the ones in the collection 'A Thousand Morons' (2012) or his

extraordinary novel 'The Enormity of the Tragedy' (1989) can hold their own with the best European fiction of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. I could go on and on, this list doesn't even scratch the first scratches on the surface of Catalan literature, but suffice to say that over the years, I have been lucky enough to meet and befriend several of the best Catalan fiction writers working today, people like Màrius Serra, Jordi Puntí, Najat El Hachmi, Joan-Lluís Lluís, Jordi Cussà and others, and can vouch not only for their seriousness as writers but for their abiding interest in contemporary international fiction. Catalan writing, then, is anything but parochial and twee. Though it is, occasionally, rural. And now, unfortunately, we have to go back to reality.

8

RIGHTS, VOTES, MASSES

During the opening years of the new millennium, something started to shift in the Catalan political world. For years, the 1978 Second Catalan Statute of Autonomy (the first had been approved in 1932 and, of course, struck off the books by Franco) had become little more than a much-worried bone of contention between Madrid and Barcelona. Although the Statute allowed for the transfer of various powers to Catalonia over time, these transfers were forever being delayed or denied, something which resulted in constant legal wrangling between the two governments.

To stop this abundant leakage of public money into lawyers' pockets as well as to update the Statute for the 21st century, several Catalan parties of different political shades clubbed together and drew up a third Statute of Autonomy, which would have given Catalonia the same more or less federal status already enjoyed by the Basque Country for years. The protection of the Catalan language would have been shored up, the judiciary would have been decentralised, and self-taxation introduced. Back in 2005, when the Statute was approved by over 80% of MPs in the Catalan parliament, the vast majority of the Catalan population would have been happy with it. According to Spanish constitutional procedure, the Statute was then sent to the Spanish parliament and senate, which redacted or modified the clauses that accorded Catalonia national status and most of the self-taxation, among other things. This altered version was then put to the Catalans, who voted for it in a referendum (well, 49% of them voted, of whom 74% were in favour). But even after all this, the right-wing Popular Party took the text to the Constitutional Court on the grounds that up to two hundred of the Statute's clauses were 'unconstitutional'.

The Constitutional Court sat on the Statute for four years, until — although this court was incomplete (due to the deaths of some members) and incompetent (given that several judges had outstayed their mandate) — on the 9th of July, 2010, it saw fit to suppress or modify considerably no less than thirty-seven key clauses, including several which were considered legal in the Autonomy Statutes of other communities, such as Andalusia. (What was more, although the Catalan authorities had adhered to every relevant letter of the Spanish Constitution when ratifying the Statute, the Constitutional Court did not: according to article 152.2, a Statute of Autonomy that has been altered constitutionally can only be ratified by being re-put to the people in a second referendum. This was not done, leaving Catalonia's autonomy in what amounted to a legal vacuum).

Just one day after this bowdlerisation of the Statute was made public, 1.100.000 people protested in Barcelona (according to city police figures): the largest demonstration ever held so far in the Catalan capital. (The Catalan population at the time was just over seven million). It was

certainly the largest demo I'd ever laid eyes on, and it was chock full of Catalan flags – many of them now carrying the star that indicated their bearers were pro-independence.

The central government and its affiliated media ignored the demonstration completely, yet it was a spectacular show of public frustration with the said central government. Many if not most of us felt that the illegal expurgation of the new statute was a sign that Catalonia was trapped in a state whose attitude towards it was becoming more hostile. This was more than an educated guess: between 2006 and 2010, I gave quite a few talks around Catalonia, and again and again, during the Q&As, people in the audience – even when we weren't on the subject – would tell recent anecdotes of how they'd been insulted and slurred when travelling in Spain. Apparently, the Catalanophobia forever lurking under the surface of some sectors of Spanish society for at least two centuries had been prodded to the fore by the idea that the Catalans might get some kind of privileged deal with the new statute. (I only experienced one incident personally: a taxi driver in Tarragona who was opposed to the Statute also found it offensive that a foreigner should speak to him in Catalan, and shouted 'hijo de puta!' at me before driving off; and after I'd given him a tip, too).

Anyone wanting an audio-visual taste of anti-Catalan feeling amongst centralist Spanish media during the Constitutional Court's four year *drôle de décision*, could do worse than youtube a 2009 documentary called 'Spain's Secret Conflict', in which an English reporter interviews various Spanish politicians and journalists and the odd professor. Convinced that he is a relatively uninformed correspondent working for Channel 4, some of the interviewees drop all the pretence at circumspection they surely would have shown to a Catalan journalist. The gloves came off: one radio presenter describes Catalonia as a 'cancer' that has to be 'extirpated'; a TV presenter for TeleMadrid claims that the Catalans are crazy to promote their language, because their professional classes – such as their doctors, she says – can't work outside of Catalonia because they only speak Catalan (as she had promoted several books of hers — all in Spanish — in Barcelona, she knew full well that this was unadulterated cock and bull); outside the Valle de los Caídos – the objectively hideous mausoleum built by Republican slave labourers for the corpses of Franco (now slated for exhumation) and the fascist leader José Primo de Rivera – a young woman expresses her wish for Franco to come back to save Spain from breaking up. What the interviewees didn't know is that the English reporter was a long-term resident in Catalonia, and well-informed about Spanish and Catalan history and politics. And that the programme was going to be shown to Catalan as well as English-speaking audiences.

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After the massive 2010 demonstration, there was a kind of lull in 2011, but if you pricked up your ears you could make out the sound of millions of people mulling.

In 2012, when the Catalan National Day (September 11th) rolled around, as usual I met up with some friends for lunch and they, oddly, insisted I joined them on that day's demo, knowing full well that I didn't enjoy the September 11th demonstrations, as I thought of them as ineffectual and kind of dull. 'Not today,' they said, 'today is going to be different.'

The demonstration was due to start at the top of the Passeig de Gràcia, which was quite a way from where we were. We left the restaurant and headed in that general direction, but only got a few metres: we found that the demonstrators had already occupied the entire length of the Passeig de Gràcia and had now squeezed themselves leftwards and half way down the Via Laietana (that is, almost as far as our restaurant). People had come from the furthest corners of Catalonia; there were Catalan speakers and Spanish speakers (as well as speakers of several other languages, English included); there were elegantly dressed ladies and punkish girls, elderly people and children of all ages, people in wheelchairs and people on skates, bikers and Sikhs... I ran into people I hadn't met for years and who when I first met them wouldn't have wanted an independent Catalonia any more than they would've desired a kiss from a ditched boyfriend, but who were now full-on fans of a new republic. According to the city police, one and a half million people marched in Barcelona that day.

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The next five September 11ths saw more demonstrations in favour of independence, most of them as big and some of them bigger than the 2012 one, their game plans laid out by the grass roots, non-party organisation called the Catalan National Assembly. In 2013, 1,600,000 of us (according to Catalan government figures) held hands across the length and breadth of Catalonia. In 2014, 1,800,000 of us (according to city police) formed an enormous Barcelonan V in the red and yellow colours of the Catalan flag. In 2015, 1,400,000 of us (according to city police) packed the Meridiana, a 5.2 kilometre Barcelona thoroughfare. In 2016, a million of us (according to the respective local police forces) took part in decentralised demonstrations in Tarragona, Berga, Barcelona, Lleida and Salt (Salt is a town immediately adjacent to Girona, and has the highest percentage of immigrants in Catalonia; as I was demonstrating there, I heard people lamenting that it was a pity there

weren't more Moroccans and Africans on the streets: not the kind of thing you hear in 'nationalist' demos in other European countries). In 2017, a million of us (according to city police) formed a gigantic X in central Barcelona. (Other, smaller pro-independence demonstrations were held in Amsterdam, Bangkok, Canberra, London, New York, Paris...). And all of this we did without one single violent incident.

On top of this, in November of 2014 the Catalan government organised a non-binding consultation on the independence question. You could vote for the status quo, for a federal state, or for an independent republic; what's more, this survey was open to everyone registered as a resident in Catalonia, whether they had a Spanish passport or not. The Spanish parliament declared it unconstitutional, but the Catalan president at the time, Artur Mas, went ahead on the basis that it *was* legal, according to article 144 of the Catalan Statute of Autonomy. A spokesperson for the Spanish government brushed the future consultation off with a sneer, claiming that if it did take place, it would be little more than a 'backyard barbecue'.

Nearly 2,500,000 people voted, 81% of them in favour of independence. Pere Martí, a Madrid-based Catalan journalist who published a book about the consultation, said in a radio interview that the Spanish executive was left 'speechless', given that this massive straw poll had cast some doubt, to say the least, on Spanish prime minister Rajoy's constant assurances to foreign leaders who were concerned about the previous three mass September 11th demos, that 'the immense majority of Catalans want to stay in Spain'. Not only that, but those same millions of Catalans had knowingly disobeyed the government. Madrid later banned Mas, the Catalan vice-president, and the Catalan minister for education from office for between one and a half and two years (as it happened, by then they had already retired from their respective posts) and imposed fines on them ranging from 24,000€ to 36,000€. In September of 2017, the three were ordered, out of the blue, to post bail to the tune of 5.2 million euros within a fortnight or have their patrimonies embargoed.

In 2017, Catalonia's new president, Carles Puigdemont, had announced that the only political solution to the growing calls for independence was a binding referendum on the issue, and announced a date: October 1st. Time and again — eighteen times in all — he attempted to negotiate the referendum with Madrid. Madrid didn't so much as want to hear about it. Given that the majority in the Catalan parliament had been pro-independence since the 2015 elections, Puigdemont — a friendly, well-informed, sincere and highly intelligent man who I've known since his journalist days — firmly believed that his duty was to carry out the mandate handed to him by Catalan voters.

In the weeks leading up to October 1st, Madrid assured anyone who would listen, both at home and abroad, that the referendum would never take place, and that the Spanish government was prepared for any eventuality. Barcelona assured much the same broad audience that it would take place, and that it, too, was prepared for any eventuality.

Autonomous government referenda have been legal in Spain since 2005, but as Madrid didn't want this particular one to go ahead, they asked the Constitutional Court to block it. The court didn't immediately make it illegal – that might have looked a bit Russian – but did suspend it. In the Catalan parliament, a local referendum law was fast-tracked using a parliamentary procedure which is standard in the Spanish parliament, but which the Catalan parliament's unionist opposition claimed was illicit.

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In mid-August 2017, two Jihadist terror attacks took place in Catalonia. In Barcelona, a single driver drove a van down the middle of a crowded Rambla, killing fifteen people and injuring over a hundred. A second attack, in the coastal resort town of Cambrils, resulted in one death and several injured. For reasons that remain unclear, the responsibility of dealing with the situation was left almost exclusively to the Catalan police, the Mossos d'Esquadra (instead of the Spanish Civil Guard, who usually deal with terrorist threats). Within hours, led by their commander-in-chief, Josep-Lluís Trapero, the Mossos deployed mobile units across Catalonia, and wound up the entire terrorist operation in just four days, despite the Civil Guard not having given them vital information concerning the leader of the terrorist cell — who was later discovered to have acted in the past as an informer for Spanish intelligence — and despite not being allowed access to the Europol database. Trapero in particular and the Mossos in general became Catalan national heroes. This deeply troubled the central government, for reasons which weren't clear at the time.

Immediately, false rumours were spread that the Mossos had deliberately kept the Civil Guard out of the investigation. And documents purporting to be from the CIA (despite being in bad English and using non-CIA punctuation) began to appear in unionist newspapers that claimed the American agency had warned the Mossos of the attacks before they took place (although state intelligence agencies do not talk to regional police forces). Somebody, somewhere clearly wanted to undermine the Mossos' now excellent reputation.

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Josep Lluís Trapero

It soon became clear why: on September 19th, some six thousand Spanish National Police and Civil Guards were bussed into Catalonia. They were billeted in various seaside hotels and on three ships – one of them covered in Loony Tunes characters (which led to these intruding forces of law and order being dubbed ‘Tweety Pies’ by the Catalans). Discreetly at first, and then highly noticeably, they began raiding printing presses and the offices of local magazines looking for ballot boxes and voting slips (they eventually confiscated several million of the latter and found none of the former). These raids were met with spontaneous protests. On September 20th, without bothering with warrants or explanations, they raided several Catalan ministries, arrested fourteen second tier Catalan civil servants and took them, handcuffed, to the Civil Guard barracks in Barcelona. Meanwhile and on that same day, National Police armed with rubber bullet guns (outlawed in Catalonia) surrounded the headquarters of the most left-wing of the Catalan pro-independence parties, the Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP). As they didn’t have a warrant, they weren’t allowed in, and the CUP members on the premises formed a peaceful blockade to prevent them from doing so. The siege lasted for hours on end. A crowd began to form and was advised by CUP leader Anna Gabriel to stay calm and not rise to any baits cast by the police. Another, far larger crowd had formed outside the Catalan Ministry for the Economy, which is where some of the arrests of civil servants had taken place and where Civil Guards were still confiscating material and searching for no one knows quite what. The crowd grew to forty thousand strong, making it difficult for the Civil Guards to drive away. Later the crowd was joined by Jordi Sànchez, the leader of the ANC, as well as Jordi Cuixart, the leader of the other main civil society pro-independence movement, the cultural organisation Òmnium Cultural (both would later ask the crowds to disperse).

Yet another large crowd had formed outside the main courthouse of the Spanish judiciary in Catalonia, saying that it wouldn’t budge until

all the detainees were released. And released they all were, within 48 hours.



Looney Tunes billet for Spanish police

On September 29th, the Spanish government spokesperson, Méndez de Vigo, once again announced that there would be no referendum, but that if people wanted to organise a ‘picnic’, they were welcome to do so.

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On October 1st, the picnic took place. I described (some of) it at the start of this text.

9

LIES AND PUNISHMENT

The Spanish deputy prime minister, Soraya Sáenz de Santamaría, made an official appearance on Referendum Day, claiming that her police had behaved highly professionally. If she was lying so blatantly – and she knew damn well that she was – it could only be in order to construct a false narrative that would justify even greater acts of violence in the future. Her malodorous pork pies were compounded the following day by prime minister Rajoy, who stated that ‘no referendum had taken place’. (In fact, 2,286,217 people had voted, 90,18% of whom were in favour of independence).

But who took the mendacious biscuit was the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alfonso Dastis, who, in the days after the referendum, told stupefied interviewers from CNN, Sky News and the BBC that ‘no riot police, just normal police’ had been present, and that most of the images were ‘false’ and ‘fake news’ and that if there had been any police violence, it was because the police had been ‘provoked’. In fact — with the exception of a handful of older images that were posted by mistake on social media — all the videos showing police violence were genuine, as proven by the locations and situations shown in them. (At the end of October, the BBC launched a thorough investigation and confirmed that all the footage it had broadcast was authentic).

Two days after this outbreak of authorised bullying, mass demonstrations took place all over Catalonia, accompanied by a highly successful general stoppage.

On October 8th, a large unionist demonstration took place in Barcelona. According to city police, 320,000 people marched in favour of a united Spain, shouting demands that Puigdemont be jailed (or in some cases, shot). A few windows sporting independence flags were broken, and some small groups gave the fascist salute and screamed insults at the Mossos who were shepherding the demo. An as yet unknown number of the participants were bussed in from the rest of Spain. In general, however, it was a peaceful march by people who were simply opposed to independence.

On October 16th, the leaders of the ANC and Òmnium Cultural, Jordi Sànchez and Jordi Cuixart, were accused of sedition and violent rebellion and imprisoned in Madrid without bail. A third man was also accused of sedition: Josep Lluís Trapero — the head of the Mossos and Catalonia’s national hero — who wasn’t jailed in the end but had to surrender his passport and report to the Spanish police every week (he has since been fired from his position by Madrid, relegated to a minor desk job and accused of organising a ‘criminal conspiracy’).

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As the days slipped by, it became clearer and clearer that Madrid was gearing up to implement article 155 of the constitution, a law which allows central government to take direct control over an autonomous one if the latter behaves ‘unconstitutionally’. On October 26th, in a last ditch attempt to stave off 155, Puigdemont called autonomous elections. On finding out, however, that even this return to strict constitutional behaviour would not change Madrid’s mind, he called off the elections and handed the responsibility for implementing the mandate of the referendum to the Catalan parliament. On Friday, October 27th, a majority in the parliament declared Catalonia an independent republic. I lived in it for a couple of days. According to Marta Rovira, the general secretary of one of the most important pro-independence parties, information reached them from various sources, some of them official, that if the republic were implemented there would be ‘blood on the streets’.

The Catalan president and four of his ministers then moved to Brussels, in order to work for the republic ‘in freedom and in safety’, as Puigdemont put it in a press conference broadcast worldwide. Two days later, the other half of his democratically elected government (the vice-president and seven other ministers) voluntarily turned up in Madrid to answer a court summons accusing them of rebellion – that is to say, acts of violence against the state – sedition and misuse of public funds. The judge fiddled with her mobile while their lawyers pleaded against the charges. They were all then imprisoned without bail and accused of crimes that carry 30 year sentences. For several months, they were in preventive custody in Madrid, at 650 kilometres’ distance from their homes and, in many cases, their small children. In July of 2018 — after Rajoy’s government was ousted by a vote of no confidence and the Spanish Socialist party, led by Pedro Sánchez, took power — they were moved to Catalan jails. The following people are behind bars at the time of writing: Oriol Junqueras, the vice-president of the Catalan government; Joaquim Forn, the former Catalan minister of the Interior; Jordi Sànchez, the former president of the Catalan National Assembly and an elected MP in the Catalan parliament; Jordi Cuixart, the president of Òmnium Cultural, which, with 160,000 members, is now the largest cultural association in Europe; Raül Romeva, the former Catalan minister for foreign affairs; Josep Rull, the former minister for the environment; Jordi Turull, the former spokesperson for the Catalan government; Carme Forcadell, the former Speaker of the Catalan parliament; and Dolors Bassa, the former Catalan minister for Social Affairs. In exile in Brussels are Toni Comín, the former Catalan minister for Health, and Meritxell Serret, the former Catalan minister for Agriculture; in Scotland there is Clara Ponsatí, the former Catalan minister for Education; in Switzerland are Marta Rovira, an elected

Catalan MP, and Anna Gabriel, ditto. As well as the Majorcan rapper Valtonyc, accused of sedition and lese-majesté. And Adrià Carrasco, accused of terrorism for having helped block a motorway during a later protest.

To give an idea of what the jailings meant for the families of the imprisoned, one could do worse than listen to Txell Bonet, the wife of Jordi Cuixart: the civic leader, president of Òmnium Cultural, and declared pacifist. Together with Jordi Sànchez, Cuixart has spent the most time under lock and key (at the time of writing, just over a year). Before Cuixart and the other political prisoners were transferred to Catalan penitentiaries (something which should have been done, according to Spanish, European and international law, as soon as they were put in prison), Txell had to make a ten hour return journey to a Madrid prison every weekend with her and Cuixart's infant son. In Madrid, they got forty minutes talking time with Cuixart through a glass screen in a room shared with other visitors which had appalling acoustics. So that his son would recognise him as his father, Cuixart would begin by singing the boy's favourite song to him. That a child so young should recognise his father is important: the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child states that the forced separation of infants from parents can cause long-term trauma (the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has also condemned the imprisonment of Sànchez and Cuixart on the grounds that their rights to political opinion, a fair trial and participation public life have all been violated). Apart from the weekly forty minutes through a screen, Cuixart was also granted two face-to-face cell visits per month, the only times when he was able to embrace his son (who celebrated his first birthday during one such visit). Txell and her son had travelled over 45,000 kilometres before Cuixart was transferred to Catalonia. (He and the other prisoners are now back in Madrid prisons, for the duration of their trial).

On top of all this, 256 Catalan civil servants have been fired — often for simply having ‘the wrong attitude’ — and nearly a thousand town councillors, mayors, a professional clown, a car mechanic, and several school teachers have been charged with a variety of things the most common of which are ‘hate crimes’ against the Spanish police and, in the case of the teachers, pro-independence ‘indoctrination’ of school students.

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Around Catalonia, widespread feelings of anger, frustration, determination – together with a dash of fear — are now palpable.

10

CATALONIA

How Catalonia Got That Way

What has never been understood in Madrid — and even less so abroad, where Catalan history and culture is little-known, to put it mildly — is something that was already quite clear at the end of the ‘Seventies: the whole business has been and always was as predictable as a sell-by date.

Just as water ends up finding its own level, anomalies always end up being exposed to view, sooner or later. And a population a part of which, at least, has its own language and two official ones and a territory which has generated its own history and culture — and which lives within a state which has tried its level best to hide the very existence of all this — is nothing if not an anomaly.

After the referendum, Madrid convened Catalan elections on December 21st of 2017 (although according to the law, only the Catalan president can do this), and then imposed all kinds of unusual limitations on the pro-independence parties: yellow ribbons — the main symbol of support for the prisoners and exiles and their families — were banned from public buildings and the fountains of Montjuïc in Barcelona were forbidden from gushing in yellow. On top of which, the most important unionist party in Catalonia (Ciutadans) was able to pay for its exceptionally expensive electoral campaign with two million euros whose providence has yet to be accounted for. Despite all this, with a record participation of 80%, the pro-independence parties won an absolute majority, once again. A result which Madrid, although it had answered for the total legitimacy of this election, refused to recognise. And continues to do so.



Yellow ribbons banned from public spaces

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Madrid's inconsistent behaviour following the results of a Catalan election that Madrid itself called, is one more instance of the fact that, even now, it still has never really had a clue as to what to do about Catalonia and the Catalans. The dictatorships of Miguel Primo de Rivera and Francisco Franco, it goes without saying, opted for cultural, political and linguistic repression. By coincidence, on the day I'm writing this paragraph (04/04/2018) there's an interesting article in the Punt Avui newspaper by journalist Pere Bosch, in which he quotes Miguel Primo de Rivera: 'among the worst ills of the fatherland is separatist feeling, propaganda and action, carried out by intrepid minorities'. Bosch also quotes Franco who, in an interview with foreign journalists towards the end of the Civil War, said that Catalonia 'had been one of the fundamental reasons behind our uprising'.

Catalonia, then, has always been viewed by the powers that be as a foreign (and dangerous) body within the Spanish body politic. In a nutshell, for Madrid — and Catalan unionists — Catalonia is not and never has been, Spanish enough.

11

SPAIN

In 2013, I got an invitation from the American consulate in Barcelona. They were interviewing dozens of politicians, historians, trade unionists, artists, journalists, writers and others in an attempt to find out just how serious the pro-independence movement was. Among other things, he asked me if, at this stage in the game, anything could be done to weaken support for independence; and I said that all you have to do is get hold of the original version of the third Statute of Autonomy, before it was watered down by the Spanish parliament, and then Madrid would have to agree not to touch so much as a comma and guarantee its application for ever and a day and implement it at midnight on the dot; then, I said, the pro-independence movement might lose some followers. But, I added promptly, no state-wide political party would ever do such a thing because it would mean committing electoral suicide. And even if it did, the party that succeeded it at the next elections would hasten to abolish the Statute on the spot, using any and all means necessary.

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Given the Francoists' monocultural and monotonous vision of Spain, it might have been logical for them — once they had conquered Catalonia in 1939 — to take drastic actions against its inhabitants, such as large-scale ethnic cleansing through expulsion or even extermination (in fact, they did oblige an important part of the population to leave; and they ended up shooting 3,358 people; and I remember that as late as 1978, on Spanish public radio, a presumably Francoist army officer said that the only solution to the 'Catalan problem' was to put the Catalans into concentration camps).

But it didn't make sense to punish all the Catalans, given that Franco had Catalan collaborators who had fought for the Nationalist forces or who had backed the regime in secret during the war and — the wealthier ones especially — were now outspoken post-war supporters of the new regime, something they demonstrated, among other things, by ceasing to speak in Catalan to their children (or anyone else).

So the easiest, most practical and discreet way of dealing with the Catalans turned out to be to conceal them from the rest of the world, telling anyone who cared to listen that they were as Spanish as any other inhabitant of Spain, that their language was nothing but a dialect, that their history and culture were Spanish to a fault, that their literature was so third-rate and provincial that outside of Catalonia no one had so much as heard of it.

To do this under the two 20th century Spanish dictatorships was a piece of cake. To do it after the advent of democracy was harder, but successive governments since then have made considerable efforts to

keep Catalonia out of sight both within the Spanish borders and internationally, as we have seen.

Which is why Madrid felt the need to come up with a clearly fictitious explanation for what the English journalist Paul Mason called the ‘explosion of democratic civil disobedience’ which took place in Catalonia on October 1st, 2017, an event which — together with the earlier mass demonstrations — effectively internationalised both the political existence of Catalonia itself and its conflict with Spain. According to Madrid, the whole affair was the handiwork of a conspiracy of ‘radical and irresponsible’ pro-independence politicians, and that all it had to do to make everything go back to normal — or ‘normal’ — was take these politicians out of the picture.

Unable to accept that Spain is not the genuinely united nation it persistently presents itself as to the rest of the world, Madrid has refused to acknowledge that everything that has happened in recent years is the creation of a genuine popular movement, almost certainly the only one of its kind in Europe. A movement composed of citizens of every different social class, geographical origin and age imaginable. People like the Mayor of Esponellà, a village of 456 people not far from Girona. There, as everywhere else in Catalonia, people from Esponellà and local villages surrounded the polling station to prevent police from stopping the voting. The Civil Guard dispatched dozens of agents, who shoved their way through the crowd; as the ballot box had already been hidden, they smashed down the doors of the local first aid station, thinking it had been concealed there. They never found it. Looking back on that day, the Mayor mused to a local reporter: ‘Heavens, but there were so very many people here. More even than on our Annual Pumpkin Day’.

And the Spanish judiciary thinks it that all Catalonia needs is more heavy-handedness, to deal with unwanted ‘radicals’ like him.

EPILOGUE

Visit any nook or cranny of Catalonia nowadays and you will be reminded of the existence of political prisoners and exiles by yellow ribbons strapped to balconies, pinned to lapels, slung across village squares, dripping from bridges, fastened to lampposts, or displayed in shop windows. The outrage sparked by the continued imprisonment and exile of peaceful civic and political leaders has spread way beyond the pro-independence movement itself (something not appreciated by the organised gangs of far-right nuts and members of the right-wing but marginally saner Ciutadans party who spend their spare time tearing or cutting off yellow symbols wherever they find them). Outside the different Catalan penitentiaries, ‘yellow dinners’ — evening picnics — have been held regularly to show support and raise money for the political prisoners. On August 28th, 2018, I went to the one held every Tuesday next to the walls of Puig de les Basses prison, between Figueres and the French border, where Dolors Bassa, trade unionist and former Minister for Social Affairs in the Catalan government, is being held. The strangeness of the fact that this obviously innocent woman was behind bars, was set off by the equally strange sight of hundreds of people having supper ‘with’ her, at folding tables, eating a full meal, with wine and conversation, interrupted by sudden, spontaneous and unanimous shouts of ‘Llibertat!’. No foreign journalists have deigned to report on this extraordinary spectacle.



Picnics outside jails with political prisoners

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On the eleventh of September, 2018 – the Catalan National Day – over a million people (exactly a million, according to the city police, but they didn't look down the side streets) turned out, mostly along Barcelona's lengthy Diagonal thoroughfare. About 250,000 of them were wearing T-shirts saying 'Fem la República' ('Let's make the Republic a reality'). Yet again – it was the seventh time that over one in seven of the entire Catalan population had demonstrated on this day – the event was peaceful, festive (there was music, human tower building, papier-maché giants from various villages spinning amidst the crowd) and determined. There were Afro-Catalans, Latino-Catalans, Anglo-Catalans... You only had to take a cursory look at the people around you to see that these were not 'professional' demonstrators (meaning, the ones who always turn up to proclaim their support for any cause that dovetails with their political beliefs) nor – except in some cases – were they members of political parties (indeed, party political logos were all but absent). They were everyday citizens, people you might work with, or live next to, argue about your overdraft with, buy your groceries from, or they might be your children's schoolmates. Not only was there no violence, there wasn't even any stray rubbish: the waste bins were neatly piled high with beer cans and food wrappers (the cans that didn't fit were placed in rows directly underneath the bins).

A lone Japanese man bore a flag reading 'Japó amb Catalunya'.

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On September 18th, 2018, two British MPs from the All Party Parliamentary Group on Catalonia visited three of the Catalan prisoners in the prison called Lledoners. I was with them as an interpreter. The director ushered us into a meeting room (a handful of red chairs, grey walls). Jordi Cuixart — the first interviewee — was a little late as he had had to clean up after pottery class, finally bounced into the room and shook everyone's hands as cordially as if we'd dropped round at his flat for a drink and nibbles. Once we were all sitting more or less comfortably, a member of the delegation asked him how he was. From the answer, we learnt that he was happy to be in jail, because he had received so much support in the form of letters from thousands of ordinary citizens and from artists in all fields both in Catalonia and from abroad (he was especially pleased to get a letter of support from Ken Loach, of whose films he was an unconditional fan); that even when he was sad – which happened especially when he thought about his partner and their infant son – he was happy, because he knew it was impossible to be happy without the presence of some sadness; that he made the most

of the positive things that came his way, such as the one and a half hours he could spend with his son per week, or conversations such as the one he was having with us; that in Madrid, the wardens had tried to keep him away from the other inmates but he had insisted that he be among them and be treated like one of them, because human contact is both essential as well as interesting; that the Catalan independence movement wasn't ethnic, given that 70% of Catalans came from other parts of Spain, like his Murcian mother; that the association he presides over should bear in mind that Catalan culture and Catalan independence are two separate issues and should not be confused; that his partner, the cultural journalist and poet Txell Bonet, had done so much to internationalise the situation of those in jail and exile, and that by way of support when not visiting him in jail, she used a secret signal in her TV appearances to tell him that she loved him; that he found it strange to be in a prison where some of the warders were members of the cultural association of which he was president; and that he expected, when he finally went to trial, that he would be sentenced to decades of jail time because the judges were not basing their charges on any kind of reality, because all they wanted was to use him and the others as scapegoats with a view to intimidating the rest of the pro-independence population; and finally, that he wished the MPs would do what they could to let the world know about this.

After Cuixart left, Jordi Sànchez and Raül Romeva came in. When asked how on earth they could be charged with violent rebellion, Sànchez explained the Spanish legal concept of '*dolo eventual*'. In other words, of collateral violence. In law school, this concept is usually taught using the example of the man who places a bomb on a plane because he wants to kill one of the passengers; when the bomb goes off, of course, it kills all of the passengers, and the man is charged with murdering the lot, even though his intention was to liquidate just one. How, the visibly baffled MPs asked, did this apply to the Catalan political prisoners? Sànchez and Romeva said that according to the investigating judge, by organising a referendum, they must have known that the Spanish police and Civil Guards stationed in Catalonia would react violently. QED, they were guilty of violent rebellion. The MPs shook their heads, their bafflement replaced by absolute stupefaction.

When asked about the change of government, both prisoners saw it as reasonably positive, especially since the new president, Pedro Sànchez, had stated publicly that the Catalan conflict was political in nature: an incipient hint at the need for some kind of dialogue. But because of this, Romeva pointed out, when he and the others finally go to trial, the ultraconservative judges on the Supreme Court ('most of them to the right of the Popular Party') will hand down the heaviest sentences they can, precisely in order to nip any potential Madrid-Barcelona talks in the bud (given that no self-respecting Catalan

president would deal with a state that had just sent down former Catalan government members and civic leaders for ten or twenty or possibly even thirty years).

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What Madrid is now faced with (no matter which party is in power) — at least until it deigns to negotiate with Barcelona on equal terms — is the worst political pickle it's been in for many a decade. It is a situation, as I said, which was on the cards at least as early as the late 'Seventies, for anyone whose eyes were open enough to read the signs.

As for Catalonia, nobody knows what's going to happen, but one thing's for sure: if I now tell people abroad that I live in Catalonia, or that I speak Catalan, or even that I'm reading a book in Catalan, they no longer frown and ask me where Catalonia is, or what Catalan is, or how come I'm reading in a dialect. Because — and this has made things a lot easier for those of us who live here — Catalonia, for the first time since the Middle Ages, has once again become an internationally spoken household name.

What is more, everything now points to it also becoming an international *cause célèbre*, in a future near enough to be within sniffing distance.

And I'll stop here, because I have to stop somewhere in this river-like story which will nonetheless go on flowing, despite the opposition of all those who hanker, rather desperately — and in vain — for it to be staunched for good.

Banyoles/Barcelona, 2017-2019

ARTICLES

CATALONIA TODAY
SECTION 'LONG-TERM RESIDENT'

(2006-2019)

KICKING AGAINST THE PRICKS

12 April 2006

There he sat, in my flat, twenty-four years old, as well-informed a person as any to be found in Europe: he lived in a major capital (Amsterdam), had been through tertiary education, spoke four languages including his native Dutch, and regularly read the papers.

We met last year, not long before Sant Jordi's Day, which he'd heard of and wanted to know more about. Among other tidbits of information, I trotted out the fact that Catalan-language publishers sold over 30% of their books on that day alone.

He raised his eyebrows, frowned incredulously, leaned forward and finally said: 'Catalan is a written language?'

After having spoken Catalan for nearly a quarter of a century and having read a fair amount of Catalan literature dating from the 12th century through to the 21st, I take it so much for granted that I am living in a normal culture I sometimes forget that out in the wide world, the vast majority of people, even 'educated' Europeans, are so blissfully ignorant of things Catalan that, as far as they're concerned, all Catalan-speakers past and present (myself included) might as well have spent our lives stuffed away in cryogenic canisters.

It's no use explaining, for example, that Catalan is the seventh most-spoken language in the EU, the only one to be used in four different states and the nineteenth most-used language on the internet. None of this will convince uninformed foreigners that they should take Catalan culture as seriously as any other.

Many Catalans feel that this unilateral display of ignorance will only come to an end on the day when, upon being asked where they're from, they will be able to brandish a passport marked 'Catalunya' by way of an answer. Even my Dutch acquaintance would then realise that Catalan is, at least, a written language.

ALL THE WORLD'S A NATIONALIST

2 July 2006

Two weekends ago, the Raval-based group 'Ojos de Brujo' played at an avowedly multicultural festival organised by Izquierda Unida in a village near Madrid. At the start of the concert, they mentioned they were from Barcelona, and were immediately booed. To avoid further confrontation with the audience, they eliminated further references to Barcelona from their lyrics; hence 'las Ramblas' became 'la calle' and so on.

(There is a certain irony to this, given that 'Ojos de Brujo' have spent years telling us all that they are citizens of the world who belong to no nation, least of all Catalonia).

This event took place as the World Cup continued to rage in Germany. I know there are people who watch the matches out of pure love of football, but it seems to me blindingly obvious that under the surface of the World Cup lies little more than an unashamed celebration of the most blatant nationalism we are ever likely to see this side of a war. All those people desperately screaming out the names of the nation states they happen to have been born in, depresses the hell out of me.

Not least because so many of the same people – and I'm sure we could include much of the audience that booed 'Ojos de Brujo' - are capable of slagging off the Catalans on the grounds that the latter are 'nationalists'. This is nothing more, say I, than an unusually stupid form of hypocrisy.

Which is not to say that the Catalans, like everyone else, aren't prone to a little bit of soccer-inspired nationalism themselves, despite not being allowed to have their own squad: on June 27th, each time France scored a goal against Spain, countless celebratory rockets exploded in the Catalan sky.

BUNCH OF C'S

6 November 2006

A new coalition party (Ciutadans-Partido de la Ciudadania, usually abbreviated as 'C's') has won three seats in the Catalan parliament. Its members claim that they recognise no national community whatsoever – their avowed 'non-nationalism' can, logically, mean nothing else – which would make them practically unique among human beings, were it true. But their manifesto reveals that their main concern is with nothing other than an apparently excessive use of the Catalan language in Catalonia. Unfortunately, that isn't all.

My first indication of this came from a friend who helped found the party (name withheld, given that Ciutadans has a habit of publicly slandering anyone that falls foul of it). He left after six months, when he noticed that more than a few sympathisers were turning up at party rallies with Spanish-flag badges pinned to their lapels (a sure sign of far rightness). It is surely no coincidence, then, that of the two Ciutadans voters I know of, one finds the ultraconservative Partido Popular too moderate, and the other used to support the Falange. Neither can it be a coincidence that Ciutadans has received the blessing of Esteban Gómez-Rovira, the founder of a neo-fascist party called Juntas Españolas. However, it should be pointed out that Ciutadans also has some left-wing voters, who, astonishingly, don't mind being bedfellows with people who still have wet dreams about Franco. It would seem that a common antipathy towards a Catalanish Catalonia (as opposed to a wholly Hispanified one) has brought certain lefties and fascisti together, with the result that the voice of the extreme Spanish nationalist right has finally managed to sneak into the Catalan parliament though a back door opened by a 'non-nationalist' party. Citizens, my arse.

BULL FROM THE BEEB

15 January 2007

On the 4th of this month, one Marian Hens broadcast a programme about immigration in Catalonia on the BBC's Radio Four which – conditioned by the breathtakingly superficial research that tends to characterise English media reports on the area - presented the Catalans as 'fiercely nationalist' ethnocentric xenophobes hell-bent on forcing their 'local language' (sic) down the throats of helpless foreign residents.

I am not suggesting that English journalists have to assume – as died-in-the-wool zealots like myself do – that Catalonia is no more Spain than Scotland is England and that political independence would be a blessing for everyone both inside and outside Catalonia, but it would be nice not to have everything remotely pro-Catalan branded as selfish and racist, a priori. Ms Hens could easily have counterbalanced her one-sided portrait of this complicated corner of Europe by mentioning, say, the Linguistic Volunteer programmes for recently arrived adults, a pioneering and highly successful initiative that plenty of nations would surely copy, if only someone - a BBC reporter, for example - took the trouble to tell them about it. Had she bothered to visit any of the adult education centres around the country she would have found surprisingly large numbers of Catalonia's million or so newcomers taking a considerable personal interest in the 'local language', which many of them, like I myself, didn't know existed before they arrived. Perhaps because they have cottoned on to the fact that many (sadly not all) Catalans consider this language to be a kind of natural, easily accessible passport to their country, far more important than 'blood', a meaningless race-based concept which most European states nonetheless still use as a key factor when granting nationality. Britain included. Kindly remove that beam from your eye, Marian.

ALL THE TIME

9 November 2007

Last Sunday, me and Max, my best friend in London and the entire UK, for that matter, arranged to meet up at the Apple Store in Regent Street. When I got there, he ess-em-essed me to say he'd be a little late. Already a touch homesick after a couple of days in London, I decided to look at a Barcelona newspaper on one of the demonstration MacBooks.

Max showed up as I was browsing the sports section: 'Anything of interest?' I translated a headline: 'Schuster blames Madrid's defeat by Seville on the fact the referee was Catalan'. Max grimaced on the spot: 'Jesus, that's disgusting'. 'Oh,' I said, revelling in the blitheness 23 years of life in Catalonia has rubbed off on me, 'we get this shit all the time'.

Max had come across a little of it himself. His several Spanish friends in London were all great people, he said, but he only had to tell them he had a friend who lived in Catalonia, for them to instantly express facial disapproval and on occasion even urge Max to describe my home simply as Barcelona, thus avoiding the (for them) dreaded C-word.

Such prejudice aroused Max's interest to the extent that nowadays, whenever introduced to someone from Spain, he instantly mentions his English friend in Catalonia (taking care to stress the word). If the Spaniard in question winces or flinches, Max experimentally rubs it in by explaining that this friend of his also speaks Catalan. Should this elicit further negative reactions, Max goes the whole hog, adding that his friend (me) doesn't feel he's living in Spain, wants Catalan independence, writes in Catalan etc. etc. Having thus lit the touchpaper, Max stands calmly back and watches the fireworks, at once baffled and intrigued.

MORE CON THAN MIST

3 December 2008

I'd hoped that by this time Economistgate would be old, even dog-worried hat, but no, this sad controversy is still with us. The story so far: in its November 8th issue, *The Economist*, a self-described 'authoritative weekly newspaper' based in the UK, published a special report on Spain. Mixed in with some pertinent economic analysis was a blithe chunk of Catalan-bashing, in which the Catalan language was assumed to be a nationalist-imposed hindrance to the economy, and the Catalans themselves – or their elected representatives – little more than a selfish bunch of apple-cart upsetters who had foolishly brought down upon themselves the opprobrium of all sensible Spanish people.

The article caused a whale of a splash, being announced on the evening news, commented on for weeks on end in Catalan newspapers both great and small, and, above all, causing thousands of citizens, whether Catalan or foreign, to send emails of correction and complaint.

The *Economist* waited three whole weeks before allowing a word of any of this to appear on its letters page. By which time, it had apparently received two 'balancing' opinions to contrast the two pro-Catalan ones (which latter, carefully documented, were from the Catalan Government's UK delegation and a Catalan professor at Princeton). One of the 'balancing' letters was from one Helena Medina in New York who spun therein a tale of anti-Spanish persecution in Catalonia unhampered by a single shred of evidence. The second was signed with the spammish soubriquet of Adin Seskin, who limited himself to a brief xenophobic barf: 'Catalan politics is based on clumsy parochialism, dead-end linguistic nationalism and an astonishing amount of whining...'. The *Economist* should sign this gentleman up for their Madrid office on the double, as he obviously has just what it takes to be the Spanish correspondent for such an authoritative weekly: die-hard centralist prejudices combined with unadulterated ignorance of the porcine kind.

OLD GRAND-DAD

4 December 2015

Last month, Figueres – suitably enough for a town which is home to the Dalí Theatre Museum - hosted a festival called Ingràvid ('Weightless') aimed at promoting contemporary art that is both accessible and attractive to the general public. One of the pieces was a Fiat which had been carefully plastered with Francoist insignia by artist Núria Güell, and which was supposed to be driven slowly along the streets of Figueres to remind people that Francoism was still prevalent in Spain, forty years after Franco's death. I say 'supposed', because this particular moveable installation was banned by the Mayor on the grounds that Francoism is no longer prevalent and therefore parading its symbols around town would make no sense. The curator of the festival, Ester Pujol, was understandably furious. Even so, I found myself asking, was the Mayor being fabulously obtuse, or did he have a point? After all, just how prevalent is Francoism today? It's true that in Tortosa there's a hideous monument to those who fought on the Fascist side in the Civil War. And then there's the Francisco Franco Foundation in Madrid – dedicated to fostering a positive image of the dictator - which has received government subsidies from the Popular Party (currently in power in Spain). And the remnants of the Falange – Franco's equivalent of Mussolini's Blackshirts – are still a legalised political party. But that would seem to be about it. So it struck me that Ms Güell might have been overdoing it a bit with her embellished automobile. That night, however, Spanish public television (TVE) broadcast a prime time interview by Bertín Osborne (the Warren Beatty of Spanish show business) and Franco's granddaughter, Carmen Martínez-Bordiú. The interview took place in her living room, which was jam-packed with photographs of the dictator as well as some curious paintings of women's buttocks (whose praises Osborne lost no time in singing). The interview was clearly intended as light entertainment, with the interviewer fielding innocuous, featherweight questions ("Your grandfather was the most powerful man in Spain; how do you feel about that?"). Indeed, Osborne and Martínez-Bordiú chatted and laughed about the latter's grandfather as if he'd been just one more gracious old gentleman, with not the tiniest allusion to him being responsible for over 200,000 deaths – many of

them judicial murders (not least, that of the Catalan president Lluís Companys in 1940) – or his having ruined the lives of millions of citizens thanks to his insistence on running a relentlessly Fascist regime right to the bitter end. Ms Güell, perhaps you should get your satirical car out and start driving: you're needed urgently, and not just in Figueres.

THE TWIST

14 January 2016

Last month, in a wantonly hip comparison, the Financial Times used two popular political drama series – Denmark's 'Borgen' and America's (though originally Britain's) 'House of Cards' – to explain the Catalan independence process, described by Madrid correspondent Tobias Buck as 'an engrossing feast of political drama with cliffhangers, surprise turns and last-minute revelations so improbable they would make a television scriptwriter blush.' This is anything but exaggerated: the independence 'drama' began back in 2006, when the Catalan parliament approved a new Autonomy Statute which would have given Catalonia a similar status to the semi-federal Basque Country and perhaps solved the 'Catalan Question' for many years to come. However, although the Statute was ratified in the Spanish parliament (which wilfully hacked off a few bits), after a four year wait it was finally bowdlerised (disembowelled would be a better word) by the Spanish Constitutional Court, at the behest of the right-wing Partido Popular and Spain's (socialist) ombudsman. This resulted in a spontaneous one million strong demo in Barcelona. Madrid ignored it. Pressure built. Two years later, in 2012, the largest pro-indy demonstration ever held in Barcelona (about one and a half million people) prompted the then Catalan president, Artur Mas, to ask the Spanish premier, Mr. Rajoy, for some mild financial reforms. That failed. Mas then decided to go full tilt, and opted for an independence process which, after all, already had considerable popular backing. Later, in 2013 and 2014 up to 2 million people demonstrated in favour of independence, in Barcelona alone. Polls showed that over 80% of Catalans wanted a referendum on the issue. Madrid refused to negotiate one, so Mas proposed a non-binding consultation (not a referendum: that would come later). Madrid banned it. The Catalan government went ahead anyway –after weeks of wrangling between local political parties about the wording of the questions on the ballot papers– and nearly two and half million people finally voted on 9/11/14. Madrid ignored the results and indicted Mas and two other Catalan ministers for defying the Constitution. Given continuous popular pressure to move on, Catalan pro-indy politicians decided to make the upcoming Catalan parliamentary elections into a

kind of plebiscite, but then squabbled for months about how to go about it. At the last minute, Mas's party and the Catalan Republican Left, plus some non-party independents, formed a coalition called Together for Yes (Junts pel Sí), which competed with the far left Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) for the pro-indy vote. Junts pel Sí obtained 62 seats and the CUP, 10: together, they had an absolute majority. But then, they couldn't agree on how to work together, the stumbling block being – at least for the CUP – the presence of Mas, who they regarded as being beyond the anti-capitalist pale. When all seemed lost, Mas stepped down at the eleventh hour, a social democratic Mayor from his own party was proposed as president, the CUP accepted, and Catalonia now has a functioning, pro-independence, cross-party government. Whew! And this month...

CATCH AS CATCH CAN

8 October 2017

We could talk about the ins and outs of the legal status of the Catalan referendum - which will or will not have taken place at the start of this month – until we're blue in the face or the cows come home (whichever happens first) but the fact remains that the wish of 80% of Catalans to vote in a referendum on independence was ignored then scorned then rebuffed then made illegal by Madrid, with the result that by the time you have read this, the face of Spain as we knew it will have changed for good. The Catalan president has informed the world, via the Financial Times, that his executive disposes of 6000 ballot boxes, and a majority in the Catalan parliament have voted the referendum into law (the unionist parties chose to walk out of the chamber rather than vote no). For his part, the Spanish president has stated in no uncertain terms that the referendum 'will not take place' and as a first taste of what lies behind those words, members of the Civil Guard (the Spanish paramilitary police) recently rushed to a printing press near Tarragona and – as they didn't have a warrant to enter the building – began searching the vehicles of workers coming off their shifts (they didn't find anything). They have now extended their siege to two other printing presses and a small local paper. Ah, and Spanish intelligence operatives are attempting to locate the above-mentioned 6000 ballot boxes. And the state's official bulletin has published the names of around a thousand people who will be taken to court if they do anything to assist the referendum, ranging from the CEOs of Catalonia's public TV and radio stations, to the head of the Catalan police. And I've just heard that Madrid has ordered the Constitutional Tribunal to abolish the Catalan government altogether. All told, this is an extraordinary case of a democratic state blindsiding a sizeable chunk of its own citizens because they wish to vote on their political future, and blaming it on a 'handful of authoritarian politicians in Catalonia', perhaps forgetting that this 'handful' was given an absolute majority by millions of voters. In other words, whatever Madrid does – if it confiscates the ballot boxes, if it shuts down the Catalan government, if it sends in the army, or if it backs down and allows the referendum to take place - that strange, contradictory 'Transition' which took place after Franco's death, will

now be over and done with. Either it will harden into something not a million miles from the regime that came before it (in Catalonia, at least) or it will be transformed into an unflawed democracy voted in by those many Spaniards who would like to live under a flexible and transparent form of government, even if that means allowing the Catalans to decide for themselves. Oh, and Brussels, it would be so nice if you could get around to letting us know where you stand on all this. Really.

SPECIAL EXPORT

13 April 2018

Franco once famously said (in a meeting with foreign journalists towards the end of the Civil War) that ‘Catalonia has been one of the fundamental causes of our uprising’. A ‘cause’ he would deal with by turning its very existence into a state secret, through the execution of its most visible representative (1940); the banning of its national flag well into the post-war period; and by making the spoken - let alone written - use of Catalan inadvisable outside the home. In a nutshell, Catalonia qua Catalonia was rendered invisible, whereas Catalonia qua a-Spanish-region-like-any-other was successfully promoted. With the advent of democracy, the cover-up of Catalonia continued, it being made especially inconspicuous abroad (I still recall an ad from the 1980s, placed in English Sunday supplements by the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture to promote Spanish wines: on a map of Spain, each producing region is correctly named, Galicia, La Rioja, etc. but the dreaded C-word is nowhere to be found, the area that corresponds to Catalonia having been labelled: ‘North-East Spain’).

But the last seven years of massive peaceful pro-indy demonstrations, the October 1st referendum, the imprisonment of civic leaders and elected politicians and the exile of several others, have not just put Catalonia on the map, they’ve engraved it there: never since its medieval apogee has it been so easy to see. Yet as knowledge of Catalonia spreads, so does a considerable amount of international bafflement about one key question: given the seriousness of the conflict, why weren't there any ongoing negotiations between MAD and BCN? The world, of course, still knew nothing of yet another well-kept secret: the Catalanophobia that has been successfully fed to important (but by no means all) sectors of the Spanish population by various Spanish regimes and which now makes it political suicide for a state-wide party to sit at a table with a Catalan government on equal terms. A Catalanophobia which has, sadly, led to many hate-filled spin-offs, such as the tweets following the 2015 Germanwings tragedy, in which all 144 passengers lost their lives shortly after taking off from Barcelona (one of the mildest went: ‘So what? They weren’t people, they were

Catalans’). In short, anti-Catalan aversion, be it extreme or mainstream, has not been reported abroad.

Or at least not until last month, when German judges threw out the charges of violent rebellion against Carles Puigdemont, the Catalan president-in-exile, and released him from the Neumünster jail where he’d been placed in temporary custody thanks to a Madrid-issued European Arrest Warrant. The official Spanish response was not fully adult: a cross letter was sent to each and every Euro MP, the Foreign Minister grumbled that the decision was ‘unfortunate’, etc. Not only that, but in certain media outlets a visceral nastiness - comparable in its display of hatred to the Germanwings tweets - was also in evidence: on esRadio (audience: 400,000) a well-known Spanish journalist urged that the 200,000 German residents on Majorca be ‘held hostage’ and that bombs should be placed in Munich breweries. On top of which, the day after Puigdemont was released, the far-right (but fully legal) online news site Alerta Digital headed its report on the recent truck attack in Munster (3 dead, dozens injured) with the words: ‘Karma exists!’. For a brief instant, then, Germans have had a personal taste of what it means to be a pro-independence Catalan, in a state and a society (or rather, part of it) whose loathing seems to know no bounds.

YEAR OF THE KANGAROO

29 January 2019

This month will see the start of what must be some of the oddest judicial proceedings in what used to be called the free world. Nine political prisoners will be put on trial together, some of them for having helped organise an independence referendum (which was legal or not, depending on whether you defer to Spanish, Catalan or international law); two of them, for having made a speech in front of 40,000 demonstrators and then asking those same demonstrators to disperse; and one of them, Carme Forcadell, the former Speaker in the Catalan parliament, for having allowed a debate (on independence) in that self-same parliament, one of whose principle functions is to house debates. Most of these people have been in jail for several months or over a year, and are accused of violent rebellion, sedition, and misuse of public funds. A tricky business, that mention of violence, given that on October 1st, 2017, brute force was all but exclusively used by the Spanish police against voters. Which is why the nominally socialist Spanish foreign minister, Josep Borrell, recently resorted to the time-honoured tradition of his right-wing predecessors: lying through his teeth to the foreign press and the EU (specifically, he said that many images of the gratuitous police violence came from servers in Russia and Venezuela). This was counterbalanced by a detailed recent report compiled by the prestigious doctor and university professor Núria Pujol-Moix, which proved definitively that on Oct. 1st, the Spanish forces of law and order inflicted wounds on 1,066 people; 68 of those wounded were over 65, of whom 13 were over 79; 1,443 people were beaten with truncheons, punched, kicked, pushed, thrown to the ground or down stairways, dragged by the ears, hair or neck or shot at with rubber bullets (one man lost an eye); 34 people suffered traumatic brain injuries; only 20% of victims were hit on those parts of the body acceptable to police protocol; 80%, on body parts vulnerable to damage. What's more, the American data analyst Joe Brew has proven that in tweets made on and immediately after Referendum Day, only the pro-indy parties talked about violence (that inflicted by the police); the unionist parties didn't mention the word violence at all (they naturally wanted to keep mum about the police brutality; but if the voters had been violent, they would

have tweeted it from the rooftops). Despite which, it seems that Madrid's upside down version of events will be the one that foreign governments accept, if a recent incident in the Westminster parliament is anything to go by: last month, Ronnie Cowen MP asked the British minister for Foreign Affairs when he was going to protest about the continued imprisonment of Carme Forcadell. The minister retorted that the UK government would fully support the implementation of the rule of law in 'democratic' Spain. Clearly, the minister didn't realise - who does out there? - that for Madrid, the unity of the state trumps human rights, political rights and, yes, the rule of law itself. If a law can be seen to protect those defending Catalan independence, the Spanish judiciary will simply skip over it. A kangaroo court indeed.