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Balibrea, Mari Paz and London, J. (2019) Mediating the Catalan Independence Movement: an introduction to a dossier of studies. *Journal of Catalan Studies* 3 (21), pp. 282-288. ISSN 1139-0271.

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Mediating the Catalan Independence Movement: An Introduction to a Dossier of Studies

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There is no doubt that the Catalan independence movement is a major historical development in recent Spanish and Catalan history. What seemed unlikely and far-fetched fifteen years ago is now, not only a reality, but one that is here to stay for the long haul: the confrontation between supporters of a Catalan Republic and the different governments of the Spanish state; the substitution of Basque terrorism by Catalan separatism as the key enemy and alterity against which Spanish nationalism in democracy defines itself; conflicts amongst Catalans themselves; the acceptance of independence by unprecedented numbers of Catalans as a concrete objective (one that is attainable in their lifetime); and, on the other hand, the possibility that social, political and cultural achievements for Catalonia as a distinct and differentiated nation – themselves often the result of anti-Francoist social movements and grassroots struggles culminating in the Spanish transition to democracy – may be lost or reduced. The dynamics of what has come to be known as the *Procés* seem to have affected all aspects of life in Catalonia.

While there is continuous discussion about the situation, in Catalonia and the rest of Spain, and regular references to it beyond these directly affected areas, interest has tended to focus on its most immediate spheres of influence: its political, economic and social consequences and its international geopolitical impact. Political scientists, historians, constitutional lawyers, economists and journalists tend to be called upon to match the need for experts to speak cogently about these areas. Indeed, the university as an institution clearly has a role to play with a view to informing audiences outside Spain. Within the Anglophone world, for example, there have been enlightened days of debate at institutions such as Stanford (California) and UCL (London).¹

Yet at the same time that the Spanish constitution has been challenged and political parties in Catalonia have disagreed with regard to solutions to the crisis, the public manifestations of the *Procés* have, in themselves, developed a richness worthy of consideration. There are the marches, of course, and popular protests. Football, as always, is another forum where subtler audience behaviour shows a stance (not usually transmitted in recorded highlights). In matches, for instance Barça–Sevilla on 4 November 2017, a section of supporters have entered the Camp Nou ten minutes into the game to evoke the ten Catalan politicians in prison or exile. The sign “Llibertat presos polítics” (Freedom [for] political prisoners) is prominent in the stadium and throughout Catalonia. It has become a rival to the Catalan flag, painted on banners, and stencilled on churches, public buildings and private residences. Meanwhile, broadcast media have (sometimes self-consciously) represented the *Procés* according to the

¹ *Legitimation Crisis: Catalonia’s Independence Referendum and Spain’s Constitutional Strain*, Stanford University, 4 December 2017. For the full programme of speakers, see <https://events.stanford.edu/events/736/73627/> (checked 21-08-2019). A selection of the talks and discussions is available on Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olF_1LfiQHs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olF_1LfiQHs;); <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmUIwmvrJ-4&t=1481s>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xtFpQ6UbYBk> (checked 21-08-2019). *Revisiting Sovereignty in Europe? The Catalan Crisis in Context*, 17 April 2018, UCL European Institute, University College London. For details of the conference, see <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/european-institute/events/2017-18/conference-sovereignty-catalonia> (checked 21-08-2019).

potential of their form. Put another way, and seen from the perspective of alternative academic disciplines, there is a need to open up the subject to other specialists. That was what motivated the organization of a conference entitled *Mediating the Catalan Independence Movement*, in London (in September 2018).²

The aim was to open up less thoroughly analysed, yet vital areas of enquiry, by introducing contributions from cultural studies, visual studies, media studies, translation studies, sociolinguistics, literature and performance studies, to add through their different insights, new reflections on the independence movement. Several analyses produced at the same time as our project confirm the importance of such perspectives (Algaba-Bellido-Pérez, 2019; Álvarez Fuentes, 2019; Anderson, 2019; Dubois-Villeneuve-Siconnelly, 2019; Gagnon *et al*, 2019; Gray, 2019; San Cornelio-Gómez Cruz, 2019). These approaches underline the study of culture as the key arena for the construction of social discourses. Since these discourses encompass symbols, narratives, and rhetorical formulations, there is a good reason to claim that such elements require as much analysis as the ostensible political events themselves.

In this sense, our focus of attention is to reflect on the Catalan independence movement as a mediated one because it is settled (for the moment) by the very form (mediation) of its communication. To the extent that the ongoing conflict has captured the imagination of people in the Spanish state and global audiences alike, it has polarized opinion, eliciting passionate responses at home, and often puzzlement abroad. The saturating presence of those responses and reactions in the Catalan and Spanish media is matched by frequent references in news bulletins all over the world. We would therefore argue for the importance of rigorously interrogating the roles that different local, national, and state media (radio, TV, print and online press) have played in constructing ideas of the *Procés* for their audiences. And when these domestic issues are portrayed for international audiences they usually constitute a response to geopolitical interests worthy of study. As *The Daily Telegraph* headline ran on the day following the 1 October referendum on independence, “Catalonian Referendum Violence Plunges EU into Crisis as ‘90pc of Voters Back Independence’” (Strange-Badcock, 2017).

Moreover, while the roots of the movement and the nature of the dispute are longstanding, its current form undoubtedly belongs to the digital age. Even a well established historian such as J. H. Elliott is conscious of this new power for mobilization (2018, 272). Aware of the relentless exposure that social media and around-the-clock coverage allow, proponents as well as detractors, militant participants, political leaders as well as media professionals and the general public have routinely used platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to shape and expand the reach and influence of their ideas and actions. If this is so, how has the ubiquitous use of social media affected the power balance between grassroots movements, governments, and mainstream media? In the meantime, more traditional forms of cultural and artistic exposure – writing, performance, posters, flag waving, demonstrations – compete for public attention next to (and in alliance with) these new forms of mediation and, in so doing, continue to prove their currency and influence. So how have culture, art and the everyday intervened and been used to construct or deconstruct the meaning of the *Procés*? The independence movement has characterized itself by its enormous presence in the public space. Its sophistication in creating and resignifying collective symbols (yellow ribbons, Canigó flames, *castellers*) is employed to promote and advance the movement through mass performances (*diada* demonstrations) for which new social media provide massive horizontal boosters. On a more modest scale, the *Procés* has infiltrated the more established arenas of high culture. At the end of some theatrical productions, after the actors have taken their bow, one of them steps forward to protest against the

² A summary of all the papers and the discussion is available (Churchill, 2018).

imprisonment of Catalan politicians as another unfurls the “*Libertat presos polítics*” poster.³ Political protest can form part of an ostensibly unpolitical play.

This dossier is a modest contribution to the enormous field that the critical questions mentioned above only start to define and frame. While, from one standpoint, these three articles are limited in scope, they successfully approach areas of analysis and interpretation that will continue to be the focus of popular and scholarly attention for many years to come.

Three contributions to the debate

Stemming from the acknowledgment that grassroots organizations have been pivotal in the Catalan independence process, Mandie Iveson’s “*Tweeting the Nation: The Online Construction of Symbolic Boundaries in the Catalan Independence Process*” studies how these organizations have used social media intensively to raise national consciousness and mobilize the public. Drawing on theories of symbolic and moral boundaries (Lamont-Molnár, 2002), her article explores the discursive constructions of nationalism of two opposing grassroots groups – one pro-independence and one pro-union – and how these constructions are mediated on Twitter. Contrary to the public rhetoric of a modern Catalan nation, analysis suggests that discourses of deviance are present in each organization’s narratives and concludes that the boundary work and othering strategies used by both sides contribute to the creation and maintenance of the “us/them” dichotomy present in all nation building projects.

“*The Fight for the Front Page: the Procés in the Anglo-American Press and the Official Positions of the US/UK Governments in the Catalan Independence Story*” (by Cristina Perales, Carles Pont and Christopher Tulloch) focuses on the news coverage and op-ed articles about the Catalan independence process in the US and UK broadsheets between 2010 and 2017. The aim is to analyse the influence of international public opinion regarding the Catalonia-Spain conflict, based on the published opinion in the Anglo-American press, and compare the diplomatic positioning of the US and UK governments on the issue. The study, based largely on framing analysis, news stories and opinion columns published by *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, covers a period from June 2010 (when Spain’s Constitutional Court ruled to curtail the 2006 Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia), to 3 October 2017 (in the aftermath of the 1 October referendum, unauthorized by the Spanish state). This is complemented by an ethnographic study based on interviews with foreign correspondents in Spain and the official press releases of the US and UK administrations regarding the position of their respective governments in relation to the *Procés*.

Helena Buffery’s “*In Process: The Catalan Independence Movement in On-stage Translation*” focuses on aesthetic responses to the *Procés*, tracing the ways in which the evolution of nationalist politics in Catalonia over the past ten years has been represented on contemporary Catalan stages (including the Teatre Lliure, the Teatre Nacional de Catalunya, the Biblioteca de Catalunya and the Teatre Romea) through plays by Jordi Casanovas, Narcís Comadira and Marc Rosich, amongst others. After reflection on the limitations of dramatic forms for mediating the complexity of debates and positionings, alongside the ambivalent deployment and treatment of the theatrical in relation to the Catalan independence movement, Buffery goes on to analyse the use of on-stage translations – notably from other, international contexts – as well as original drama and ephemeral experiments with documentary theatre, in order to explore alternative ways of performing the relationship between the personal and the political. Placed in counterpoint with the overarching politics of framing and translation generated

³ This took place, for instance, at Teatre Nacional de Catalunya for the final performance of Lluïsa Cunillé’s *Islàndia*, on 5 November 2017.

in the build-up to 1 October 2017 and its aftermath, these stagings emerge as dynamic environments of memory for past and more recent cultural trauma narratives.

Representation versus reality

In the context of aesthetic responses to the *Procés* (within and well beyond what is the traditional theatrical realm), it is not by chance that Buffery cites Baudrillard. It was he, after all, who notoriously argued that significant reported conflicts had not taken place: hence, the Romanian revolution (of 1989–1990) proved that “the criteria of truth have been supplanted by the principle of credibility (which is also the principle of statistics and opinion polls), and this is the true guiding principle of the news” and, since television images are “virtual”, the “virtual” puts an end “to all reference to the real or to events” (Baudrillard, 1994, 54–55). Likewise, in arguing that the Gulf War (of 1990–1991) did not occur, he accused us all of preferring television, the “universal mirror” of the virtual, to “the catastrophe of the real” (Baudrillard, 1995, 28). We are certainly in that kind of realm, when (as Buffery describes), a Catalan woman claiming to have been tortured by the Spanish police ends up being an actress who has faked the episode on a Youtube video.

Over twenty years ago Quim Monzó wrote a short story in which a war breaks out. As if to outdo Baudrillard, not even the radio or television reports it: the former broadcasts music and the latter continues the cycle of Elvis Presley films, the usual series and unconnected news items. There are no demonstrations, no barricades in the street, and even the military does not react. Nobody is quite sure who is against whom. There is a “pacte de silenci” (Monzó, 2000, 182) between the two sides and there are no real casualties. Then the war ends as unexpectedly as it had begun and the media reveal nothing of the peace treaty. But Monzó has played a trick on Baudrillard: the war has taken place because he has written about it. And Monzó knows that his postmodern trickery does not create an impassable barrier with the world. Ideological stances reinforce the connection between the author of fiction and political reality: Monzó is a staunch advocate of independence. By 2015, he was one of seven hundred signatories to a Manifesto of Independentist Writers, including Jaume Cabré, Isabel-Clara Simó and Àlex Susanna (Vilaró, 2015). When, as Iveson documents, a song by Lluís Llach is used for the cause of independence, Llach’s support for independence and his activity in Catalan politics confirm the use of his aesthetics.

What is more, just because we are caught up in discourses perpetuated by the very form of the medium – be it Twitter, the press, government announcements or drama – that does not mean there is no room for checking facts or historical accuracy. Despite the occasional fakery or exaggeration, the Spanish police did harm many Catalan citizens when they tried to vote in the 1 October referendum. A researched estimate puts the figure at over one thousand injured (Redacció, 2019). There is a discourse to be challenged when inaccuracies outside Spain abound. How can an English-speaking readership understand the background to Catalan arguments for independence when an article in *The Times* states that Catalonia “has a long history of grievances towards Spain, which began during the dictatorship of General Franco” (Keeley, 2017)? With one sentence, hundreds of years of documented cultural and political prohibition (Marcet i Salom, 1987) just disappear (the legal insistence on Spanish in the fifth clause of the *Nueva Planta* (1716) is obviously just one of many highlights). This authoritative inaccuracy has been accompanied by accounts in which even the fate of Catalan under Franco has been questioned. Consider, for example: “People often claim that the Catalan language was banned under Franco. This isn’t strictly true” (Wheeler, 2017). There may, indeed, be a debate to have on the changing status of Catalan during Francoism (Dowling, 2018), but the documentation on book burnings, violent persecution and prohibition is easily available (Benet, 1995; Solé i Sabaté-Villarroya, 1993). That these comments by a leading Hispanist (underplaying the prohibition) should be published in

the *London Review of Books* – a journal generally considered on the left –, is clearly cause for concern.

Faced by such distortions, a study of the mediation of the *Procés* is as essential as the conversation about the issues within the *Procés* itself.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Institute for Modern Languages Research (School of Advanced Study, University of London) and its director Catherine Davies, for hosting the conference from which these papers derived, on 12–13 September 2018. The conference was supported by the Centre for Iberian and Latin American Visual Studies at Birkbeck, University of London and the Centre for Catalan Studies, Queen Mary University of London.

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