

LIFE ON THE RECEIVING END

By: Matthew Tree

Back in the Sixties – Franco's time, when use of the Catalan language was still largely illegal outside the privacy of home - there was an incident on the Spanish Cadena SER radio station that's still remembered in Catalonia today. The best-known voice of the period, a presenter called Bobby Deglané – who usually came on to his guests, according to author Quim Monzó, like a 'knight in shining syrup' - invited a Catalan comedienne, Mary Santpere, also well-known throughout Spain, onto his weekend show. Straight out, he came out with: 'Mary, is it true that you Catalans, rather than talk, simply bark, just like dogs?'. To which Santpere, after a moment of being taken aback, replied, 'I wouldn't say that, but in Catalonia, as it happens, Bobby is a very typical dog's name'.

Those of us who came to live in post-Franco Catalonia found and still find it inexplicable that in the rest of Spain anti-Catalan jibes of the bobbydeglanesque type, or worse, are a lot more common than anyone might reasonably expect after 30 years of democracy. The stories come trickling in year after democratic year from over the Catalan border, stories of Catalans going out into monolingual Spain, being identified as such, and then

being looked at askance, or short-changed, or insulted on the street, and so on and so forth. For example, one television cameraman I knew told me how in 2004 he and his crew had sat down in a restaurant in Burgos only to be told by the manager, and I quote: "Si quereis hablar en catalán, mejor que lo haceis en otro sitio". My favourite story of this type, however, is the one told on public radio a couple of years ago, by the Catalan-language writer Empar Moliner. No sooner was she speeding out of Madrid airport in a taxi to the city centre, than her mobile rang. A friend from Barcelona. She answered. Started chatting. In Catalan. Within seconds, the driver had turned to remonstrate: 'Here in Spain, we speak Spanish!'. Moliner leaned forward and lied: 'Hey, I'm speaking Italian, eh?, not Catalan'. The reply: 'Oh, that's OK then. No pasa nada.'

Personally, I find it incomprehensible that the Catalans who've had such experiences never seem to be especially affected by them. If someone were to tell me to stop speaking English to another English speaker, in any context whatsoever, I would get very cross.

It's true that all these anecdotes, plentiful though they may be, are just that: anecdotes, mere episodes, isolated cases of regional sparring of a kind in many places around the world. Perhaps, it did on occasion occur

to me, the Catalans were right, even, to treat such incidents as teacup-sized storms.

Then, in the year 2006 – when the Catalan parliament was putting together the third Statute of Catalan Autonomy - I came across two incidents which seemed to me to be indicative of a great deal more than mere inter-regional bitching. On both occasions I was on the breakfast show of the private Catalan-language radio station RAC 1; musician Miqui Puig and I had what must have been one of the easiest paid jobs in the western hemisphere: for half an hour all we had to do was talk about things we'd liked and disliked over the past week. Occasionally, if the pressure of this got too much for us, the presenter would open the lines and let the hoi-polloi mention a few likes and dislikes of their own. One Friday, we got a call from a Barcelona taxi driver; the previous weekend he had upgraded his taxi to a Mercedes, and decided to celebrate by going for a long spin to the capital of Aragon, Saragossa, where he could show off this brand new tool of his trade – freshly painted, of course, in the instantly recognisable black and yellow of all Barcelonan cabs - to some Aragonese friends of his.

No sooner had he stopped at the first set of Saragossan traffic lights than the drivers to right and left of him began to wind down their windows and treat him to a mixture of forthright verbal abuse and earnest

recommendations to leave town which were clearly provoked by the Catalan nature of his car. He made it to his friends' place, only for them to ask him please not to leave his taxi parked in the street, where they could not guarantee it remaining in one piece for long. So he drove it to a car park, on entering which he was accosted by a group of angry young men who threatened to do his windows in, no matter where he parked. At this point he gave up, and, abandoning Saragossa, headed post-haste for the safety of the Catalan border.

The following Friday, in the same radio studio, we got another similar call, this time from a town near Barcelona – Mataró, if I remember rightly - from the mother of a sixteen year old girl who had just been on a school trip to Madrid to see the Prado gallery. When this girl had been chatting to her school friends in Catalan on the Madrid metro, an elderly man sitting opposite had told her to speak in Spanish. She refused, saying she would speak Spanish to him but not to her friends. The old gent's reply was to the effect that if he were a younger man he would and I quote 'Smash her face in'. Upon which a younger man who happened to have followed all this stood up and offered to do just that. The mother of this girl went on to tell us how she and the mothers of all the other girls going on the trip had given their daughters highly specific instructions before leaving for Madrid:

they were not to wear any Catalan or Barcelona Football Club insignia, and if asked about what they thought about any political issue related to Catalonia, were to keep mum or change the subject or make themselves scarce. All these mothers considered these precautions absolutely necessary.

Now, it might look as if, once again, we're simply piling isolated anecdote upon isolated anecdote and trying to draw some overall conclusion from them. But in these cases, I think it's the small print that counts, so to speak, in the sense that what makes these two stories significant is that both the Aragonese friends of the Barcelona taxi driver and the mothers of the teenagers off to their school trip *took for granted* that there was – in Saragossa and Madrid respectively – a *general* (not an anecdotal or residual) antipathy towards Catalan people that might turn ugly, possibly with violent consequences. That struck me as being indicative of a more widespread phenomenon that was both unpleasant and – given certain circumstances – potentially explosive.

As it happened, when reading about anti-Catalan prejudice in Spain later on, I came across this observation by the Spanish historian José Antonio Maravall: 'to speak of something Catalan or to speak in Catalan, in a café in Madrid or any other major Spanish city, exposes one automatically to a hostile reaction'. He was writing not

about Spain in 2006, but about Spain in 1931. What was happening in 1931? The Catalans were negotiating their first Statute of Autonomy with central government. What were they doing in 2006, when the taxi-driver and the teenage girl's mother phone in their stories of Catalan-baiting? As mentioned, they were negotiating their third Statute of Autonomy. So, I thought, is this the key to it all? Is it just the Catalan Statutes of Autonomy that foment anti-Catalan prejudice in Spain at given moments in time? Or did it exist before? Is it manifested even when there is no Statute of Autonomy on the horizon?

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In Spain, any controversy of any type involving Catalonia – or the Basque Country, for that matter – is an open invitation to all kinds of media and political manipulation of the key terminology. You can barely touch the subject without setting off carefully placed semantic booby traps. So before moving on, we'd like to clarify the three key terms.

Firstly, **Catalonia**. 'Catalonia', in this talk, refers only to the Principality of Catalonia, capital Barcelona, and doesn't include the other Catalan-speaking areas with which it still maintains cultural connections, namely

Valencia, the Balearic Islands, part of southern Aragon, French Catalonia, the town of Alguer or Alguero in Sardinia, the state of Andorra and a toenail sized sliver of northern Murcia. We're not going to talk about any of these areas.

Secondly, **the Catalans**. 'The Catalans' refers here to all registered residents of Catalonia, irrespective of where they come from, where their parents come from, what colour their skin is and what language they prefer to speak.

Finally, **monolingual Spain**. 'Monolingual Spain' is used here to indicate those areas of Spanish territory in which Castilian aka Spanish is the *only* official language, and which are home to about 25 million people, out of a total Spanish population of just over 40 million. The remaining 15 million live in areas where Basque, Galician and Catalan are co-official languages together with Spanish..

Ok, now we've got all that cleared up, we can go on.

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Anyone living in Catalonia today can hardly fail to notice after a while either long or short, that the Catalans' worldview – that is to say, their perception of where they stand and how they came to stand there - is remarkably

different from that of the inhabitants of monolingual Spain. Whereas the latter's history books, for example, put Castile and Castilian hegemony at the centre of their story, those of the Catalans relate Catalonia's slow but consistent fall from historical grace.

Because this Catalan worldview tends to be little-known and because it's impossible to even begin to understand the existence of anti-Catalan prejudice in Spain without it, there follows a description, as brief as I can make it, of how most reasonably well-informed Catalans view their historical record.

For them, the famous reconquest of the peninsula from the Moors starting around the 10th century, was achieved not only by the Galaico-Portuguese fighting their way down the western edge and the Castilians doing the same down the centre swathe; but also by the Catalan counts and later the Catalan count-kings who gradually removed the north-eastern strip of the peninsula from Arab and Berber control until by 1245 they had claimed not only Tarragona and Lleida but also Valencia and the Balearic Islands for Christendom and themselves.

Successive Catalan count-kings used this mainly coastal territory as a springboard to create a fourteenth century commercial empire, with direct military control over Sardinia, Sicily, Naples, a chunk of Anatolia, much of Greece, including Athens: the Catalan Count-King Peter

III, thrilled to have the Parthenon in his power, ordered a dozen crossbowmen to protect it from thieves in 1380.

All this swashbuckling went hand in hand with the emergence of some of the most precocious protodemocratic legislation in Europe, always according to the Catalan view of things. The body of civil law known as the Usatges, which began to emerge in the 12th century, paved the way for the Corts Catalanes, a kind of precocious parliament in which nobles, clergy and even the artisan class, the proto-bourgeoisie, so to speak, were included. (Its historical successor, the English Magna Carta, did not appear on the European scene until a century later). This Catalan protodemocracy eventually led to one of the main points of discord between the Castilians and the Catalans: the king of the latter had to be approved by parliament before he could take the throne. The king of the Castilians, their royal tradition being absolutist, did not.

If our imaginary Catalan is a little better-informed than usual, he would at this point delight in quoting us the French historian Pierre Vilar's famous analysis of Catalonia at this point in her history: 'perhaps, between 1250 and 1350, the Catalan Principality is the one country in Europe about which it would be less inaccurate, less risky, to describe in apparently anachronistic terms as a nation-state.'

If, to drive the point home, the Catalans wanted to be a bit bolshie, they would casually point out now that at the time referred to by Pierre Vilar, the flag that represented Catalonia is the very same one that represents it still. Whereas the Spanish flag, they would enjoy adding, was invented by decree on May the 28th of 1785.

After this, even our cocky Catalans would have to admit, it's downhill all the way. To begin with, a dynastic alliance in 1469 between Isabel, Queen of Castile, and Ferdinand II of Aragon, Valencia and Barcelona did *not* unite Spain – as the old Spanish nationalistic myth has it – given that the Catalan-Aragonese Kingdom retained its legal system, tax system, parliamentary structure, currency, customs tariffs on the Castilian border, and so on. But there is no doubt that from this moment on, power begins slowly to shift from Barcelona to the centre of the peninsula. In 1518, Catalan merchants were forbidden to trade with the recently-discovered Americas. In 1652, after a decade-long popular uprising against Castilian interference in its affairs – similar to parliamentarian/absolutist conflicts happening all over Europe, not least in England - Catalonia still managed to conserve most of its legal independence, but lost an important chunk of territory – Perpignan included – to their erstwhile allies, the French.

This is as nothing, however, to what happened in 1714, the key date in modern Catalan history, when the country lost its war against the Bourbon dynasty and was incorporated by force of arms into a still fledgling Spanish state (remember, which didn't yet have its own flag). What it did have was one irritated absolutist monarch, Phillip V, who used his Right of Conquest to justify his subsequent elimination of Catalan financial independence, of most Catalan law – but NOT Catalan civil law, something worth bearing in mind for later - of Catalan currency, all Catalan institutions, its eight universities included, the long-cherished right of the Catalan parliament to approve its King, and the use of the Catalan language in certain contexts.

Not only this, but an entire neighbourhood of Barcelona was razed to the ground to make room for a huge barracks to be installed in what is now the Parc de la Ciutadella, partly to house some of the 30,000 Castilian troops billeted in Catalonia to keep the place in its place.

Even the English – at that time, on paper at least, military allies of the Catalans – were aware that an independent country was being juggernauted. In 1714, precisely, a little book appeared in London called 'The Case Of The Catalans Considered', whose author stated : 'It should be pointed out that the Principality of Catalonia, before being yoked to the Spanish crown,...has always

been governed by its own laws, independent from any other kingdom. Until now, those laws have remained intact and the slightest attempt to tamper with them has resulted in the people rising up in arms'.

Later, in the 19th century there was a resurgence of Catalan culture which in its turn, together with other circumstances, led to the appearance of political Catalanism which eventually led to the recovery – after its suppression 218 years earlier, of the main Catalan institution of government, the Generalitat – together with a Statute of Autonomy (1932) which restored a small amount of the home rule lost in 1714. Both Generalitat and Statute were suppressed yet again seven years later by the well-known fascist dictator, Francisco Franco Bahamonde, who ruled from 1939 to 1975.

Four years after Franco's demise, in 1979, a new Statute of Autonomy was negotiated under the watchful eyes of the military and then a third one, designed to improve on the circumstantial shortcomings of the second, was approved almost unanimously by the Catalan Parliament in 2006 but was impugned by the conservative Partido Popular and Spain's (socialist) ombudsman and so is currently being held on ice in the Spanish Constitutional Court.

There, in an outsize nutshell, we have the Catalan version of history. Whether people find it to their taste or

not, is not really here nor there. The fact is, as we said, that is how most reasonably well-informed Catalans see their collective past.

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From the Castilian point of view, the military seizure of the Principality of Catalonia in 1714, and the dozens of measures that were later taken to bring Catalonia into line with the laws and language of Castile, simply form part of what was then thought of as a typical nation-building process. It was and is, always from a Castilian point of view, absolutely normal, absolutely taken for granted.

What the Catalans of the time, 1714, regretted most was the loss of their legal system and institutions, now abolished at one stroke. From their point of view, this constituted a complete loss of political independence, was not legitimate and never would be legitimate. Graffiti that appeared on the streets of Barcelona soon after the 1714 defeat read: 'All Catalonia is now nothing but a jailhouse'. For many Catalans today, what they regard as their forced membership of the Castilian-Spanish national project is still not legitimate.

It is during this post-1714 period, and especially over the 19th century that modern anti-Catalan prejudice as we live it today begins to emerge.

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Take the language, for example. Although a preliminary report by a Castilian functionary called Patiño affirmed soon after 1714 that the Catalans, and I quote: 'spoke and wrote only in Catalan, without making much use of Spanish', the new laws imposed by the Castilian regime insisted that Spanish or Latin were to be used in the courts, instead of Catalan, as had been the custom up until then. At the same time guidelines were laid out for the prohibition of Catalan in school teaching, book-publishing and preaching, the latter being an extremely widespread activity back then, when most people believed in God. It should be said that these decrees proved extremely difficult to implement at first.

Which is probably why in the 1800s, measures designed to limit the use of Catalan multiplied, reaching a fever pitch towards the end of that century. In 1881, any legal or commercial document written in Catalan – from a testament to a tram ticket - was decreed null and void. The ban on Catalan in the courts was made stricter, often with disastrous consequences for monolingual plaintiffs: in the Spanish parliament in 1905, the MP for Tarragona Julià Nogués brought up the case of a Catalan who had been wrongfully jailed for 14 years for answering 'yes' instead of 'no' to a Castilian judge's question that he hadn't

understood correctly. In 1896, it was forbidden to speak in Catalan at any forms of public meeting, indoors or outdoors. In the same year, the use of Catalan was banned on the telephone and in telegrams. In 1900, it was banned in theatres. Later, under the dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera, which lasted seven years starting in 1923, inspectors were sent into Catalonia to sack any schoolteacher on the spot who was found speaking to his pupils in Catalan. All posters and signs in public buildings of any kind had to be in Spanish only. The night watchmen were obliged to call out the time in Spanish instead of Catalan. By this time, 1929, there were already some 150 laws designed to increase or enforce the use of Castilian in Catalonia. And we haven't even got within spitting distance of General Franco yet.

The Catalans' insistence on using their own language despite all of this – in 1924, the architect Antoni Gaudí once famously said to a policeman who, infuriated by being addressed in Catalan by this venerable old gentleman, asked him if could speak Spanish: 'Of course I can! I just don't feel like it!' he replied, before being taken in for questioning) – this insistence, as I say, gave rise in monolingual Spain to the idea – still widely prevalent – that the Catalans not only use their language as a sign of disrespect to Spanish-speakers and by extension to the Spanish nation as a whole, but also to eliminate the use of

Castilian inside Catalonia itself. As early as 1916, a Castilian deputy in the Spanish parliament, Eduardo Ortega y Gasset – brother of the better-known José - declared: 'It is not a question of persecuting Catalan in Catalonia, but of avoiding the persecution of Spanish there.' At the time, the immense majority of the Catalan population were either monolingual Catalan speakers or had a highly imperfect knowledge of Spanish.

Today, curiously enough, although now all Catalans can speak Spanish, from time to time, grouplets of Spanish politicians and intellectuals still insist on insisting that the Spanish language is being persecuted in Catalonia. A 'Manifiesto por la lengua común' drawn up as recently as June of this year, repeated the accusation. Although it claimed an almost sexually intimate knowledge of the linguistic status quo in Catalonia, only three of the seventeen signatories actually live there, the majority being based in monolingual Spain, with one other living in the Basque Country and yet another, in London.

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So, here we have one root cause of anti-Catalan prejudice: not the language in itself, but the insistence of large numbers of Catalans on using it as the default language in

Catalonia. Despite having been told for such a long time that they really should not do this.

In the London School of Economics the last thing I wanted to talk about was economics – a subject I understand even less than, say, bosonic string theory – but in order to understand the crucial second source of antipathy towards Catalonia in Spain, the delicate subject of money has to be broached. After all, the stereotypical Catalan – as seen by prejudiced monolingual Spaniards, not all, of course - not only barks like a dog, but is mean, tight-fisted, selfish, miserly, money-grabbing and even - and this accusation dates from a 1907 article in *El Mundo* newspaper by the novelist Pío Baroja – a Jew. ('Everything in Catalonia' – he wrote – 'has a markedly Semitic character'). This last summer, a hundred and one years later, a Catalan friend of mine resident in London overheard some Spanish people in the audience at a lecture in the local Cervantes Institute describing the Catalans as 'a bunch of Jews'.

The supposed stinginess of the Catalans has been reflected in a host of popular jokes, the more elaborate of which – as is also the case with Jewish humour – are told by the butts of the jokes themselves. The ones of monolingual Spanish origin tend to be both shorter and blunter. The shortest one I know, overheard personally,

goes: [joke about the dead Catalan, shown with thumb and finger].

As mentioned, Catalan civil law was allowed to remain in force for several decades after the military defeat of 1714. Catalan civil law both favoured and fomented the existing tendency in Catalonia towards smallholdings, commerce and the beginnings of capitalist investment. When, in 1778, the Catalans were finally allowed to trade with the Americas, they did so with a vengeance, dealing primarily in hard liquor – Catalan 'aiguardent' was a major local product – sugar, coffee and, last but by no means least, slaves. The wealth that returning Catalans injected into their economy paved the way for the first full-scale industrial revolution on the Mediterranean coastline. By the early 19th century, this was already causing friction between Catalonia, with its capitalist economy based mainly on textile products, and central and southern Spain, with a mainly agrarian economy, the profits of which accrued to a small number of landowners with considerable influence in Madrid, in both court and parliament. The Catalan business lobbies pressured the central government for protectionist laws on the British model, designed to create an internal Spanish market. The landowners, whose agricultural products already had what amounted to a protected market, were opposed to this protectionism, even though

it would have favoured manufacturers anywhere in Spain, not just in Catalonia.

This economic conflict – between the property-owning classes of Catalonia and monolingual Spain respectively – gave rise to a surprising twist of fact: the Catalans started to be blamed for living off the fat of Castile and Andalusia. Even though economic surveys made in the early 20th century showed clearly that Catalonia, with some 10% of the population, was contributing 25% of the overall Spanish budget while getting just 6% back in public investment.

Even now – with an average yearly deficit of 9% - Catalonia is one of the most highly taxed and under-funded regions in Europe.

Despite all this, the suspicion that the Catalans are not only rolling in it, but also withholding financial support from other regions started to become more and more widespread. In 1915, when the Catalans asked for money for local infrastructures, the then much-read Madrid newspaper, *El Imparcial*, described the Catalan authorities as 'financial parasites who feed themselves at the expenses of the state'. 86 years later, in 2001, when the Catalan government was pushing for a transfer of 15% of income tax to Catalan public funds, the then president of Extremadura, Juan Carlos Rodríguez Ibarra, made headlines with his comment: 'Just because the Catalans

speak two tongues, doesn't mean they need to eat twice as much as everyone else'. To this day, the myth persists that Catalonia is getting more money than it should from Madrid and that any attempt to actually get more money than it does is a sign of greed.

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So: sooner or later, this combination of legalised attacks against the Catalan language together with such heavy taxation, was going to get the Catalans' goat. Their first political reactions, however, were nothing if not moderate. Anyone today who ploughs his way through the foundational texts of Catalanism, most of which date from the late 19th century, might be surprised to find that none of them show any interest in independence. The republican theorist Valentí Almirall, for example, writing in 1886, opted for a federal status within a liberal Spain. The bishop Torras i Bages, in his monumentally mind-numbing and highly selective compendium of Catalan history and culture, 'La tradició catalana' – inflicted on readers in 1892 – defends a mustily conservative Catalan region smelling of old cassocks. On the other hand, Enric Prat de la Riba's more popular treatise 'La nacionalitat catalana' (1906) defended what Catalonia currently has: a

partially autonomous government overseen by the Spanish state.

And yet right from the word go, Spanish media and politicians treated all Catalanists as separatists. In 1901, the liberal deputy Luis de Armiñan brought up the question in parliament: 'Could Poland possibly be the Catalanists' role model?', the Poles being famous at the time for their struggle for independence. To this day, the main insult word for a Catalan is 'polaco' – Pole – and should anyone be in doubt, they can consult the first or second edition of the Collins Master Spanish-English dictionary, where the second definition of 'polaco' is given as 'Catalan' brackets 'perjorative'.

Nowhere in monolingual Spain did this perceived separatism ring alarm bells more violently than in the Spanish military whose paranoia about Catalonia meant that, as historian Jaume Vicens i Vives pointed out, 'martial law was imposed in Catalonia for 60 of the 86 years running from 1814 to 1900'. Far worse was yet to come. In 1909, a gang of rogue army officers launched arson attacks on the offices of two Catalan language publications in Barcelona, not long after an article in an army newspaper declared: 'Catalonia must be Castilianised...people there must talk Spanish, think in Spanish and behave like Spaniards, whether they wish to or not.'

Talk of the military brings us to Spain's two 20th century fascist dictatorships. We have already mentioned the linguistic bullying of Primo de Rivera's seven year regime, in which he also banned the Catalan flag and the sardana national dance. Franco, however – whose troops entered Barcelona in 1939 - turned out to be the absolute limit. Even the Catalans who went over to his side while the war was on had a rough time of it: a Catalan fascist was fined in 1938, for speaking in Catalan on a hotel phone in Seville.

Once Franco and his comrades had hacked their way into Catalonia they installed what might be called a regime of linguistic and cultural terror – as well as terror of the more usual kind – designed to eliminate every last trace of the Catalan cultural universe. All Catalan institutions were abolished – again - along the Bourbon dynasty's 1714 pattern. The democratically elected Catalan president, Lluís Companys, exiled in Paris, was handed over by the Nazi occupation forces to Franco in 1940, and shot. The home of the most famous Catalan philologist, Pompeu Fabra, was ransacked and his library bonfired in the street. Every single one of the thousands of civil organisations of all kinds that had flourished under the Republic, from neighbourhood basketball teams to the Catalan Blind People's Association, was obliged to Castilianise its name, its statutes, its membership cards

and its meetings. Catalan was forbidden in all publishing, all media and all public places. In 1955, the Spanish embassy in London even managed to convince the BBC, with strong support from the prestigious anti-Franco republican exile Salvador de Madariaga, to suppress its fortnightly short wave broadcasts in Catalan.

This was not, as has sometimes been claimed, a situation that lasted merely during the first, most violent half-decade of Franco's regime, but went on right up until he was gasping his last. In 1960, when a group of moderate Catholic Catalanists interrupted a concert by singing a patriotic song in Barcelona's Palau de la Música, the following documented comments were made to them by the police when they were beating them up in the station cells: 'what Hitler did to the Jews was nothing compared to what we'll do with the Catalans'; 'within a year you'll be our slaves, you'll be licking our boots'; 'you Catalans are lower than shit'. Hey, and these were moderate, Christian Catalanists they were slagging off. Detainees who insisted on speaking in Catalan before the judges, such as the philologist Jordi Carbonell, were placed in psychiatric institutions. Women belonging to the clandestine Catalan Republican Left party, whose members denied they were Spanish, were frequently raped in custody, as two of the victims once explained to a mutual friend.

From that whole period, however, nothing drove home to me personally just how savage the anti-Catalan climate under Franco was until I heard a true story told me by a man I was buying a table from, some ten years ago, in the Sant Antoni neighbourhood of Barcelona. In 1966, when he was eight years old and still living in his village, his parents sent him to the local Council offices to pick up a form they needed. When he stepped into the lobby he said, without thinking, 'bon dia' in Catalan instead of 'buenos días' in Spanish. The man behind the desk stood up, came out, and without a word of warning slapped this child so hard he fell on his arse. Anyone English who can imagine being slapped about by a public functionary for saying 'good morning' in, say, Bootle or Beccles, will have an idea of what it was like to be a Catalan speaker in Catalonia for a fair chunk of the late twentieth century.

With the advent of democracy, far from winning widespread sympathy from Spanish public opinion for having nearly had their culture surgically removed, a survey commissioned by the then Spanish president Adolfo Suárez in 1977, showed that Catalonia was the least liked region of Spain in Madrid, the two Castiles, Andalusia, Galicia, Extremadura, Asturias, Murcia, Aragon and the Canary Islands. Only in Valencia, the

Balearic Islands, Navarre and the Basque Country were the Catalans not pushed to the bottom of the list.

Since then, antipathy towards Catalonia has proven so deep-rooted in monolingual Spain that Catalan historian Josep Maria Solé i Sabaté was moved to say in a recent interview, and I quote his exact words: 'In the same way that in Austria, before the Second World War, you could not be fully Austrian without being a little bit anti-Semitic, so in Spain today, you cannot be one hundred Spanish unless you are at least a little bit anti-Catalan'.

We have seen at the beginning how anti-Catalan prejudice, fomented openly in certain Spanish media and by certain Spanish politicians, has resulted in harassment, verbal abuse, and so forth. On occasion, it takes a far more serious form, no better example of which can be given than extraordinary and mind-boggling case of Èric Bertran.

In 2004, Èric Bertran was a 14 year old schoolboy who lived in the Costa Brava resort town of Lloret de Mar. Èric, a Harry Potter fan, had a web page called 'L'Exèrcit del Fènix', - the 'Army of the Phoenix' - named after the J.K. Rowlings's Order of the Phoenix. On the 24th September, Èric sent an email to two supermarket chains and a dairy products manufacturer, requesting them to include Catalan on the labels of their products and suggesting that his Phoenix organisation would make things difficult for them in the future if they didn't. What

he meant by this, as he explained in a later email to an enquirer, was that he and the three other teenagers who made up the Exèrcit del Fènix would bombard the Customer Service addresses of these companies with repeated emails.

On September 30th, just before 11pm, twenty Civil Guards in full combat uniform, automatic weapons at the ready, broke into Èric's home, searched his room and removed his and his brother's computers. They identified themselves as members of the anti-terrorist unit who had been sent from Madrid that same day. It turned out that one of the supermarket chains Èric had emailed, had reported him to the police in the belief that the Army of the Phoenix was an organisation of urban guerrillas, a suspicion apparently shared by the Civil Guard's intelligence division. A fortnight later, during which time Èric went through several panic attacks and had to be put on medication, he was summoned to Madrid to declare before a public prosecutor. On December 15th, in an almost incredible scene, the public prosecutor – who let slip during the hearing that she hadn't read the original email that had caused all the trouble – declared Èric mentally unstable for having photographs of burning Spanish flags on his website (the next day he was obliged to see a court psychologist) and then, after arguing with him about his

national identity for some time, screamed at him: 'Say that you're Spanish or I'll lock you up!'.

One year later, in March of 2005, the supermarket chain dropped its accusations against Èric Bertran, after having had its server blocked for months by furious Catalan e-protestors.

The point of all this is that such an episode would have been inconceivable in any other part of Spain except Catalonia, with the very possible exception of the Basque Country. A 14 year old boy from Cantabria or the Canaries, for example, who sent a grousy email to a company to persuade it to label its products in Castilian would not, in all probability, have received a visit from an antiterrorist unit based in Madrid.

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So where do we stand now, we residents of Catalonia today? Well, a boycott on all Catalan products which began in 2006 - around the time of the Statute of Autonomy negotiations - is still being adhered to by an important minority in monolingual Spain (in Madrid, 21% of citizens recently confirmed they were still not buying Catalan). The public deficit of 20,000 million Euros a year, combined with the influx of one million two hundred thousand new citizens in the last ten years, on top of an

original population of 6 million, has put an increasingly noticeable pressure on hospitals and schools. Media campaigns generated from outside Catalonia calling the Catalans linguistic bullies and destroyers of the Spanish language in Catalonia continue to be shouted into our tired old ears, despite an official European Union investigation in September of this year, which ruled that not only was Castilian not persecuted in Catalonia, but recommended that the Catalan language immersion system used in its public – meaning state - schools be adopted by other bilingual communities in Europe.

Put bluntly, the Catalans are tiring of a tiring situation that has gone on for far, far too long. Of the six million odd citizens who have the vote, over two million now want outright independence, with a further two million remaining undecided. Even us foreigners, voteless though we are, have been canvassed. A majority of Latin Americans, it turns out, would prefer to stay in Spain, whereas the Eastern Europeans, for example, are largely in favour of secession. As is at least one long-term English resident. Especially since less than 40% of the Spanish population would favour an armed intervention should Catalonia and the Basque Country raise their hands to wave goodbye.

Before anyone can say, hey, what's it to you, with your British passport and your universal English language, why you should you care about this kerfuffle in a little coastal corner of the continent?, I would like to finish by saying that my own interest in the issue is more personal than political, given that one of the areas in which anti-Catalan prejudice is most virulent is in the world of writing. Take this book, for example. 'L'últim patriarca' by Najat El Hachmi. Najat El Hachmi came to live in Catalonia from her native Morocco at the age of eight. Twenty years later, with this novel, she won the most prestigious and also best-remunerated Catalan-language literary award, the Ramon Llull, in January of this year. Despite this unique achievement, when the Spanish translation was being prepared, Najat received tremendous pressure, even from her own agent, to eliminate the words 'traducido del catalán' from the title page, as this would seriously prejudice sales in monolingual Spain.

It is, indeed, an open secret in the literary world, that monolingual Spanish readers tend to shun the products of Catalan language writers. One of the most commercially successful of these, Ferran Torrent, from Valencia, was once offered a juicy contract for the Castilian version of one of his books, but the publisher put just one condition,

just one. That Ferran Torrent's forename should be changed to Fernando so that people would assume that he was a monolingual Spaniard.

I never realised just how much this was the case, until something similar happened to me. Here we have the Catalan original of a novel published in 2001, 'Privilegiat'. The biographical blurb is standard: Taught himself Catalan in 1979, published this, that and the other (Catalan titles given), contributed stories to these anthologies, bla bla bla, contributes to this and that newspaper and this and that radio station (their names given, identifying them as Catalan language media). OK. This is the Castilian version: born in London, writer, contributor to newspapers and radios. He has lived in Barcelona since 1984. Not a single mention of the fact that I had at the time published three books in Catalan, contributed stories to five others, and worked for the Catalan media. Nothing. No mention of the dreaded C-word.

And that is precisely where the problem lies at heart. Just to live in and form no matter how modest a part of the Catalan cultural universe, is in itself seen as indifferent or undesirable or politically incorrect or downright distasteful or even bloody horrible in monolingual Spain. Yet at the same time, in Catalonia we are bombarded with reminders, some of them laced with slights, that we form

part of Spain and should therefore behave in a more Spanish way than we do. I put it to you that this is an untenable situation, which sooner or later will have the kind of consequences that will make headlines around the world – at least for a day – given that they will involve a new place being laid at the table of the United Nations. What I'm sure everybody wants – and I include the vast majority of the inhabitants of monolingual Spain – is that in the photographs accompanying the banner print, there will be no violent scenes, no rumbling tanks, no cadavers on the streets of Barcelona.

Your turn.