

## ON “THE VALUE OF INDEPENDENCE”

*To the Editors*

In page 255 of his book on *Scots and Catalans*, Professor John Elliott, referring to the TV images of scuffles and confrontations between police and would-be voters in an illegal referendum in Barcelona on October 1, 2017, speaks of a “barrage of manipulated images and false information” that were shown on news programs around the world, including some “widely disseminates images of blood-stained voters [which in reality were] carry-overs from earlier incidents quite unrelated to the 2017 referendum”. In this context, Elliott adds, “truth counted for little. Foreign opinion-makers, many of them knowing little about the Catalan domestic situation or the background of the secessionist movement, were all too happy to accept the images and stories that were being put about by the *independentistas*”. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case of Professor Neal Ascherson, who reviewed Elliott’s book on these pages (see his “The Value of Independence”, *NYRB*, LXVI, no. 7, April 18-May 8, 2019, pp.33-36).

According to Ascherson, confronted with the challenge of the Catalan separatists’ projected referendum on independence, which was in violation of the Spanish constitution and declared illegal by the Constitutional Tribunal, “the right-wing premier Mariano Rajoy panicked and behaved as if he were an eighteenth-century king facing armed rebellion”. This is of course a patent exaggeration which shows to what extent Ascherson has adopted the opinions of the separatists, carrying him to state that, when writing about these matters, “Elliott’s impartiality deserts him” and that King Philip VI’s speech three days after the incidents, was, “for most of the outside world [...] a disastrous and uncompromising rant”, because he “offered no hint of apology or concession”. Ascherson seems to think that the king should have apologized and made concessions to the secessionist who created havoc in the streets of Barcelona (and many other cities and towns of Catalonia) while trying to carry out a referendum which was patently illegal, instead of making, as he did, a serene and dignified speech in defense of the Constitution and of the millions of Catalans who do not support separatism and are daily harassed by the Catalan government and its goons. Naturally, Ascherson makes no reference to the million plus Catalans who demonstrated in Barcelona in support of the king and against separatism one week after the monarch’s speech. Neither does he explain how the king could make concessions when, as a constitutional chief of state, he lacks executive power.

Ascherson displays a surprising ignorance of the complexities of Spanish and Catalan history. He makes some egregious errors, such as stating that Franco’s rebellion took place on September 1936. Well, Franco’s party was often called the “18<sup>th</sup> July Movement”, and as long as Franco lived July 18<sup>th</sup> was one of the most widely observed

holidays in Spain; and of course, on p. 315, Elliott correctly dates the rebellion in “July 1936”. Another remarkable fact is how much of Elliott’s book Ascherson seems to have overlooked. For instance, Elliott reminds the reader several times of how complex and divided Catalan society has always been (even more than Scottish society, in my opinion) ever since the Middle Ages, when Catalan civil wars ravaged the countryside. The Carlist wars pitched peasant against urban Catalonia during the nineteenth century, and a similar chasm subsists today, when the rural, less populated areas are separatist and the urban zones are unionist. Ascherson, however, shares the opinion of the separatists in pretending that Catalonia speaks with only one voice, and that this voice is theirs. Thus he refers to “the Catalans and their cause”, “constant victimhood”, the “Catalans’ struggle”, forgetting or ignoring the fact that in all these struggles, wars, and rebellions there were substantial numbers of Catalans on both sides. In Catalan local elections today, non-separatists regularly outnumber separatists (although by small margins); however, a skewed and outdated electoral law which favors sparsely populated rural areas gives the separatists thin majorities in the Catalan parliament. Another important fact overlooked by Ascherson and clearly stated by Elliott (p. 229): in Catalonia “90 per cent of those who cast their votes [in the Constitution’s referendum] showed themselves in favour, a figure above the national average.”

Other serious errors by Ascherson: 1) contrary to what he says, Barcelona was not, strictly speaking, “the last stronghold of the republic” in the civil war. Barcelona surrendered in January 1939, but Madrid, Valencia, and Alicante struggled on for two more months. 2) The “tragic week” in the summer of 1909 was not caused by “an attempt to introduce conscription in Catalonia”. Conscription was obligatory in all of Spain since early in the nineteenth century. What triggered the protests which led to the “tragic week” was the shipping of conscripts from Barcelona to Morocco to fight in an unpopular colonial war there. 3) Being Catalan was not an “underground identity” in Franco’s Spain. My father was Catalan and never made any effort to conceal it, and neither did his relatives and friends, who went around speaking in Catalan without any problem or stigma. Some small unpleasantness could occur especially when non-Catalan speakers felt excluded in conversation or some person in authority made some remonstrance. Elliot recounts (p. 219) that a policeman in 1955 admonished him to speak Castilian, probably surprised by the fluency in Catalan of an Englishman. But such incidents were extremely rare. Since the early 1950s the Franco dictatorship increasingly tolerated publication of books and journals in Catalan. There were strange contradictions in the dictator’s repressive regime. For instance, Jordi Pujol, the nationalist leader, was jailed in the 1960s for some public criticisms towards the Franco government, but while he was in jail he was authorized to establish a bank called Banca Catalana, which became a decisive stepping stone in his political career. No “underground identity” here. 4) Liberalism in nineteenth-century Spain did not hold “power for a few precarious intervals.” Liberals of one kind or another governed Spain almost uninterruptedly since the death of Ferdinand VII in 1833. The central decades were chaotic due to the Carlist wars and to the frequent military *pronunciamientos*, but even the victorious generals went back to more or less respecting the constitutional

parliamentary system. The Spanish army was, by and large, liberal too. 5) Probably the most outrageous of Ascherson misstatements is contained in his concluding remark, where he says, referring to the Spanish government, that “in Western Europe, a central authority that can only maintain itself by repression must change its ways or perish”. This is simply parroting one of the most outlandish of the separatists’ tenets, that there is no difference between present-day’s democracy in Spain and Franco’s dictatorship. One would expect a little more discrimination from a professor at a respected British University.

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