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Catalonian Complexities

Gabriel Tortella, reply by Neal Ascherson
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In response to:

The Value of Independence from the April 18, 2019 issue

To the Editors:

On page 255 of his book *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 disseminated images of blood-stained voters [which in reality were] carry-overs from earlier incidents quite unrelated to the 2017 referendum.” Elliott adds, “Truth counted for little. Foreign opinion-makers, many of them knowing little about the Catalan domestic situation or the background to 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 in these pages [*NYR*, April 18].

According to Ascherson, confronted with the challenge of the Catalan separatists’ 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 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 “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 secessionists who created havoc in the streets of Barcelona while trying to carry out a referendum that 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. 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 in September 1936. Franco's party was often called the "18th July Movement," and, of course, on p. 215, Elliott correctly dates the rebellion in "July 1936." Ascherson seems to have overlooked many important points in Elliott's book. For instance, Elliott reminds the reader of how complex and divided Catalan society has been since the Middle Ages. Today 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 "Catalans and their cause," "constant victimhood," the "Catalans' struggle," and ignores that in Catalan local elections today, nonseparatists regularly outnumber separatists, but a skewed electoral law 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."

More errors by Ascherson: (1) Contrary to what he says, Barcelona was not "the last stronghold of the republic" in the civil war. Madrid, Valencia, and Alicante struggled on for two more months after Barcelona's fall. (2) The "Tragic Week" in the summer of 1909 was not caused by "an attempt to introduce conscription in Catalonia." Conscription had been compulsory in all of Spain for almost a century. What triggered the "Tragic Week" was the shipping of conscripts to Morocco to fight an unpopular colonial war there. (3) Being Catalan was not an "underground identity" in Franco's Spain. My father, for instance, was Catalan and never concealed it; neither did his relatives and friends, who spoke Catalan without any problem or stigma. (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 from 1833 on. (5) Probably the most outrageous of Ascherson's misstatements is his concluding remark: 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 democracy in Spain and the Franco dictatorship.

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Neal Ascherson *replies*:

Professor Tortella's letter contributes to the campaign, still all too necessary, to clear up the appalling damage done to Spain's international reputation by the Rajoy government's mishandling of the Catalan crisis. As a journalist who reported from

Franco's Spain but also witnessed—in Madrid—the joyful renewal of democracy at the 1977 free elections, I hope that damage can be repaired. But Tortella's insistence that Madrid did nothing wrong throughout the crisis, while the Catalan nationalist leadership did nothing right, merely leaves the wreckage blocking the road.

He is correct to point out a careless mistake—it was July, not September, 1936 when Franco's rebellion began. It's also true that his forces entered Madrid, Valencia, and Alicante after—not before—Barcelona, although J.H. Elliott in *Scots and Catalans* remarks that the civil war “would end...when General Franco's troops entered Barcelona in triumph on 26 January 1939.” As for the causes of the 1909 “Tragic Week,” I followed Elliott again where he states that “Maura's government...made a disastrous miscalculation by calling up Catalan conscripts to fight in Spain's colonial war.”

Listening once more to the king's speech on October 3, 2017, I find it not so much a “rant” as an earnest message to another planet. In such a moment of crisis, only days after the shocked world had watched police beating up men and women attempting to vote, he offered no understanding of Catalan grievances and fears. Incidentally, Professor Tortella's figure of a “million-plus Catalans who demonstrated...in support of the king” is contradicted by both the Spanish and the Barcelona police, who separately estimated less than half that figure.

In conclusion, Professor Tortella absurdly accuses me of equating modern Spain with Franco's dictatorship. Having experienced both, I would never make such a comparison. But in moments of panic, bad old methods—sending in police to batter “rebels,” jailing political opponents or driving them into exile—can recur. Spain has the most imaginative system of regional autonomy in Europe; all the more painful, then, that the constitutional ban on secession is enforced so rigidly and repressively. It's not only the would-be seceder that suffers. Britain nearly destroyed itself attempting to resist Irish independence, but now the relationship is far richer and warmer than under the unpopular Union. The same will probably be true with Scotland. Why not Spain and Catalonia as European good neighbors?