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9. Someone Else's Crisis?

UK Press Coverage of the Failed 2017 Catalan Declaration of Independence

Fernando León Solís and Hugh O'Donnell

The Law on the Referendum on Self-determination of Catalonia was passed by the Catalan parliament on 6 September 2017. It stipulated that if a majority of those who took part in the upcoming referendum on 1 October voted in favour, independence would be declared within 48 hours, regardless of the size of the turnout. The opposition groups Ciutadans (Citizens), the Catalan Socialists and the Catalan branch of the conservative Partido Popular (Popular Party) walked out of the parliament with accusations against the governing pro-independence coalition of breaking parliamentary procedure and violating parliamentary rights. Even veteran members of the left-wing Catalunya Sí que es Pot (Catalonia Yes We Can) and the all-Spain party Podemos (We Can) were vociferous in their attack on the methods of the would-be secessionists.

The following day the Spanish Constitutional Tribunal suspended the new Law and public prosecutors in Catalonia filed charges of disobedience against the five members of the Catalan parliament's presiding body. The main opposition party in the Spanish parliament at the time, the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (Spanish Socialist Workers Party), led by Pedro Sánchez, closed ranks with the conservative Popular Party and its leader, Mariano Rajoy, and called the event "an attack on democracy"; other opposition politicians and media outlets regarded both the parliamentary methods used and the passing of the law as a *coup d'état*.

By the end of September, it was evident that the response of Central Government would be firm: ballot papers and ballot boxes were confiscated, the technology necessary for carrying out the referendum and the tallying of the votes was all but dismantled, and the judicial and police clampdown on the preparations for the referendum and against street protests commenced, with a number of key officials being arrested. This tense political situation reached its climax on the day of the referendum itself, 1 October, and, invoking the referendum law nine days later on 10 October, the First Minister of Catalonia, Carles Puigdemont, declared in Parliament: "I accept the

mandate of the people for Catalonia to become an independent state in the form of a republic” but immediately added: “[I] ask Parliament to suspend the effects of the declaration of independence so that in the coming weeks we can undertake a dialogue”. The wording of the declaration left everyone wondering whether independence had in fact been declared there and then, declared and immediately suspended, or postponed. The central Spanish government demanded that Puigdemont confirm whether he had declared independence or not, thereby giving him the possibility of back tracking and thus avoiding the application of article 155 of the Spanish Constitution, which provides for the suspension of regional governments. Given Puigdemont’s ambiguous response, on 27 October (the same day that the Catalan parliament eventually proclaimed the Catalan republic in a session boycotted by the opposition parties) Central Government invoked article 155 and called a regional election for 21 December.

Puigdemont and some members of his cabinet fled to Belgium shortly after in order to avoid the charges of rebellion, sedition and embezzlement filed against them. Other key political figures and civil activists appeared in court and were kept in custody. From then on, whether they were ‘political exiles’ or ‘runaway politicians’ and ‘political prisoners’ or ‘politicians in prison’ became central to the debate.

This chapter studies coverage of the Catalan crisis in the editorial columns of two of the most widely read British broadsheets, *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian/The Observer*, between September and December 2017. *The Observer*, which was acquired by the Guardian Media Group in 1993, occupies the same political space as *The Guardian* and is for all practical intents and purposes the latter’s Sunday edition under a different name, as a result of which we will consider these two titles as forming the same publication. The two publications chosen for analysis – *The Telegraph* on the one hand and *The Guardian/The Observer* on the other – were selected because

of their contrasting positions on the left and right of the political divide in British politics respectively, but also because of their overlapping stances on *Brexit* which, as will be seen, featured high on both their agendas. *The Telegraph* devoted four editorials to the Catalan crisis (all of them establishing explicit connections with *Brexit*, as will be seen), while *The Guardian* dedicated five and *The Observer* four: this compact purposive sample, chronologically tagged to the period of most intense media interest in the events in Catalonia, allowed us to foreground the institutional voices of the publications chosen rather than those of any individual journalists.

Narrative structures and strategies: conflict, personalisation, internationalisation and domestication

Our initial analysis of the material revealed consistent use of narrative structures as interpretative frames. The recourse to narrative structures as instruments of interpretation is present in all walks of human life. Its universal nature has been studied by for example Barthes (1987), Greimas (1987), Ricoeur (1991), Jameson (1984) and Abbot (2002), among other authors; and its pervasive use in the media has a solid research history – see D’Amato and Lucarelli (2019) or Hussain (2018) for two recent studies.

Unsurprisingly, the Catalan crisis was constructed in both publications selected primarily as a clash between two power blocs leading inevitably to political and social disaster, and both used their editorial authority to issue a series of undisguised warnings. For instance, in the run-up to the referendum *The Telegraph* warned on 21 September that Spain’s long-standing post-Franco “settlement now appears to be cracking, with an independence referendum planned by the regional government of Catalonia for October 1” (we return to who the addressee of these warnings – what Iser (1976) calls the “implied read” – might have been later). On the same day *The Guardian*

warned of the risk of “a horrible disaster both for Catalonia and Spain as a whole” (Step back from the brink, 2017), with the tone becoming increasingly bleak after the referendum, including even the possibility of death: “Is the independence of Catalonia a cause worth dying for?”, *The Observer* asked on 8 October 2017. *The Telegraph* depicted the deteriorating situation as a ‘catastrophe’ and as a ‘disaster’ (Brexit was the right choice, 2017) and *The Observer* warned that the application of article 155 and potential incarceration of political leaders would trigger a “descent into violence” (Independence for Catalonia, 2017).

In terms of characterisation of the main actors the two publications varied significantly. For *The Telegraph* the battle was between collective or even to some extent abstract entities – between Madrid and Barcelona or between the central and the Catalan governments, never mentioning politicians by their name. By contrast, one of the most salient features of the editorials of *The Guardian* and *The Observer* was the personalisation of the conflict in the two main leaders – Mariano Rajoy and Carles Puigdemont – at the expense of their parties, the network of other supporting groups or the institutions they represented. And yet despite these differing emphases, one of the main features of the stance adopted by all three newspapers was their even-handed approach, the attempt to keep a safe distance between the two opposing camps, the at times painstaking effort not to take sides.

This leads to the pertinent question of ‘internationalisation’, one of the main strategies of the pro-independence camp. Internationalisation should be understood in two ways: on the one hand, as the striving for global exposure of the conflict, which was an obvious success for the separatists; on the other, as the search for an alignment of international opinion with the independentist cause – which, as will be seen, was less apparent.

A final but also key trait of the editorial comments analysed here was the national contextualisation of the Catalan and all-Spanish political predicament in a process defined as ‘domestication of the news’ which Gurevich *et al* define as follows:

This is accomplished, first, by casting faraway events in frameworks that render these events comprehensible, appealing and ‘relevant’ to domestic audiences; and second, by constructing the meaning of these events in ways that are compatible with the culture and the ‘dominant ideology’ of the societies they serve (1991, p. 206).

This way, through editorialising on the Catalan crisis, Brexit, Scottish nationalism and the current and future role of the UK were discussed – at times by contrast, others by resemblance, and on occasions by proxy.

Illegality and illegitimacy of the referendum

It was not until late September 2017, when the street protests against the judicial and police clampdown on the preparations for the referendum commenced with both Spanish and international media focusing on the police response, that the two publications selected first editorialised on the situation in Catalonia. The position of *The Telegraph* (consistent with the stance of other pro-Brexit British media outlets) was that while referenda are *per se* legitimate political tools, the one held by the Catalan government could not be justified on legal grounds (The crisis in Catalonia can be ended, 2017). The Guardian Media Group papers, in keeping with their anti-Brexit position, held the opposite view: “Referendums are the blunt instrument of democracy, means that do not always [deliver] their expected end” (Catalan independence, 2017). Their different stance on this point notwithstanding, the Group’s newspapers’ views on the legality of

the Catalan plebiscite were almost identical to those of *The Telegraph*: “Ignoring the constitutional court means breaking the law”, and the organizers were cautioned on the legitimacy of a referendum that would be held “with ballots now confiscated, and uncertainty over voting lists” (Step back from the brink, 2017). *The Observer* echoed this stance providing more elaborate background information: in the Catalan regional elections of 2015, the paper explained, “The Yes campaigners sought to turn those elections into a crude plebiscite” (Catalan independence, 2017). In the event, the pro-independence parties during that election obtained an overall majority of seats in the Catalan parliament but not an overall majority of votes, a situation that *The Observer* mooted as “the Trump bonus of winning power without an overall majority of votes” (Catalan independence, 2107). This was the broader parliamentary context in which the 2017 Referendum Law was passed which, according to *The Observer*, called into question its legitimacy (Catalan independence, 2017).

The detailed description of the police clampdown on the day of the Referendum itself did not deter *The Guardian* from dwelling on the lack of legitimacy, legality and even morality of the vote, nor from casting doubts on the pro-independence leadership and the results: “Catalan officials told voters to print off ballot papers at home and said they could vote wherever they wanted. Whatever they may claim, the results are neither legally nor morally binding” (Catalonia’s referendum, 2017). It added another point that was pivotal to its stance on the matter – the relationship between numbers, political representation and democratic legitimacy: “whatever votes are tallied cannot truly represent Catalonia’s wishes”; and further: “Catalans who wanted to remain in Spain were unlikely to vote” (Catalonia’s referendum, 2017).

The narrative portrayal of the nationalist camp: reality versus fiction

The decision of the pro-independence nationalists to push ahead with the independence referendum despite constant reminders of their failure to gain an overall majority in the 2015 regional elections, and of the lack of legality of the referendum itself, was, according to *The Observer*, the product of vaulting ambition and excessive-zeal: “failure doesn’t dampen ardour like this” (Catalan independence, 2017). This characterisation of the Yes camp was shared by *The Telegraph* after the referendum in an editorial where, it was argued, initially rational economic arguments had become overtaken by dangerous irrational passions:

The motivation for secession appears more economic than cultural: Catalonia gets less out of the national tax system than it puts in. But passions are nevertheless running high – too high if the violence on the streets of Barcelona yesterday was anything to go by (Authoritarian EU, 2017).

‘Ardour’ and ‘passion’ turned the pro-nationalist camp into a zealous, headstrong, irrational, emotional bloc which trampled not only on legality but also on truth and reality. Their stance was closely scrutinised against their claims and expressed by means of dichotomies through which the duality ‘real’ versus ‘fake’ was a common thread.

Division versus Unity

Contrary to the claims of achieving political representation for the whole of Catalonia allegedly held by the pro-independence coalition, their political divisions were highlighted by *The Observer* in its first editorial on the issue, with a reference to ‘reality’ and (very importantly, as will be seen later on in relation to ‘domestication’) in opposition to the political coherence represented by the Scottish National Party:

If all these elements were fused into a single political force with the parliamentary domination of, say, the Scottish National party, there would be a persuasive case for holding an independence ballot [in Catalonia], whatever Madrid and Spanish law had to say. But that is not present reality. The agglomeration of very different parties, from bourgeois conservative to leftwing republicans to anti-Europe anti-capitalists (with a touch of anarchy thrown in) commands only a narrow majority in the Barcelona Generalitat. They have little in common but their espousal of this referendum. They are a rickety coalition (Catalan independence, 2017).

One week after the referendum, *The Observer* referred to the pro-independence camp as “Puigdemont and the ramshackle coalition of nationalists, republicans and leftists that supports him” (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017). These divisions, it was argued, went beyond the political arena and reflected a culturally, linguistically and demographically heterogeneous society : “This region, and would-be country”, *The Observer* had declared a little earlier, “is profoundly split: by language, by the origins of its population and, if you examine the results map from the last Generalitat elections in 2015, between country and city” (Catalan independence, 2017). The language divide, *The Observer* further noted, is reflected in the political stance of the population vis-à-vis independence:

As Josep Borrell, a Catalan, socialist and former president of the European parliament, explained recently: “Seventy-five per cent of the people whose mother tongue is Catalan support Yes and 75% of the people with other languages as their mother tongue are against independence (Catalan independence, 2017).

Just before the unilateral declaration of independence (UDI) in the Catalan parliament and the application of article 155, *The Guardian* warned that “Catalans are said to be increasingly uneasy that they could be set upon a path to full secession from Spain that many of them do not seek” (23

October 2017). And after the UDI, *The Guardian* again reminded its readers that “[i]ndependence is opposed by many Catalans – historically the majority of them” and that the region “is deeply divided on the issue of secession (almost half of all Catalan legislators walked out of Friday’s vote)” (Spain’s crisis, 2017). The lack of popular support for independence in Catalonia was repeated by *The Observer* in its 29 October editorial: “to become a reality, independence requires the clear majority in favour within Catalonia that it presently lacks” (Independence for Catalonia, 2017).

On other occasions the pro-independence assertions regarding representation were denounced as crude, one-dimensional catchphrases that did not stand to a reality check: “Simplistic slogans and radical stances cannot hide a crucial fact, which is that Catalans are highly divided on the question of independence. Recent polls show only 41% are in favour” (Step back from the brink, 2017). And as *The Observer* argued in the first editorial devoted to the crisis, contrary claims lacked substantiation (Catalan independence, 2017). *The Observer* further alerted its readers to the contrast between bogus claims and social media images and the reality of the level of support for independence, the former reduced to the level of “possibly seeming”: “And yet the pictures of chanting crowds we see on televisions from London to Brussels would seem to argue otherwise” (Catalan independence, 2017).

On the day of the referendum, in the midst of domestic and international denunciations of police heavy-handedness, *The Guardian* denounced this political blunder on the part of the Spanish government but reminded its readers that “[e]ven so, support for independence peaked in 2013, at an estimated 49%” (Catalonia’s referendum, 2017). The following week, *The Observer* declared that “When Carles Puigdemont, the Catalan president, called a post-referendum strike, workers in many Barcelona shops and private sector businesses ignored him”; and it further contrasted truth

with falseness when criticising the fact that Puigdemont and his allies “continue to ignore this majority, claiming to have finally made the case for independence when the exact opposite is true” (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017).

The War of Words: empty, bogus, provocative claims

This denunciation of uncorroborated statements went beyond the issue of number of supporters and was further reinforced by the frequent depiction of the pro-independence proposals as unrealistic. In its 24 September 2017 editorial *The Observer*, after denouncing the spurious claims, dangerous tactics and illegal actions of the Yes camp, demanded: “No dreams, please”. Their calls for independence were deemed “the drumbeats of separation” – an image that conjures up the concept of a phoney war designed primarily to intimidate. These appeals were also regarded as ‘wild words’, a lexical choice that evokes ideas not only of recklessness and lack of rationality, but also disorder, which together with the “Civil unrest” incited by sections of the pro-independence camp can “promise only disaster” (Catalan independence, 2017).

Along these lines, the ‘tactics’, ‘skills’ and alleged manoeuvrings of the Yes campaign were warned against: “No one should doubt the Yes campaign’s skill at campaigning, or using the clout of the regional government’s resources, including universities and schools, for PR advantage. But public relations can’t heal a divided region” (Catalan independence, 2017). The reference to public relations located the pro-independence strategies and claims within the realm of marketing and advertising rather than truth and reality.

The images of the police crackdown on 1 October 2017, which received international media coverage and was regarded variously as firm, robust or heavy-handed by different sources, did not persuade *The Guardian* to align its position with that of the pro-independence claims,

which were again interpreted in relation to their truthfulness: “if Catalan leader Carles Puigdemont was right to say that the Spanish state had ‘lost much more than what it had already lost’, his assertion that Catalonia had won is at best half true” (Catalonia’s referendum, 2017). The following week *The Observer* reiterated its allegations of the deceptive nature of the strategies of the Catalan leader, whose “repeated appeals for outside mediation suggest a man worried his bluff is about to be called” (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017). And at the end of October, when the situation was escalating rapidly, “Puigdemont and his leftwing allies’ were labelled “specialists in rash, provocative and inflammatory behavior” (Independence for Catalonia, 2017) – a serious indictment against the First Minister of a major Spanish and European region. In the same editorial *The Observer* further presented a damaging image of Puigdemont, whom it asked to “eschew the gesture politics and vainglorious posturing that have characterised his approach”. Independence, it added, cannot be achieved by “otiose declarations, specious parliamentary manoeuvres, media manipulation and spin, misuse of public funds and the intimidation of ordinary citizens”, an indictment that left Puigdemont being represented not as a ‘statesman’ but as an ‘agitator’.

Sheer will, arrogance, emptiness, fakery, illegality, subterfuge and incitement of fear were not the only accusations aimed at the Yes camp; according to *The Observer* it was also driven by conflict: “The call of ‘Catalonia for the Catalans’ has an inevitable divisive ring” (Catalan independence, 2017). Similarly, and contrary to the self-depiction of the pro-independence camp as a victim, *The Telegraph* denounced its divisive, vilifying tactics, or “The demonization by those who seek independence of those who resist” – a tactic that, according to this conservative daily, “bears unwelcome resemblance to the worst aspects of Scottish nationalism” (Authoritarian EU, 2017) – a comparison the importance of which will also be studied below.

The anti-independence camp: errors of judgement

The cautionary tone

If the focus of the representation of the nationalist camp was on its spurious claims and provocative actions, the characterisation of the anti-independence camp pivoted around its ultra-legalistic, ill-conceived, counterproductive political decisions – that is, as driven by errors of judgement. One of the most notable features in both publications was the cautionary tone and the constant warnings sent to Rajoy, Madrid or Spain of worse evils to come as a consequence of their ill-judged decisions.

Thus the first editorial of *The Guardian* on the issue warned that “Madrid appears deaf to the argument that its heavy-handed attempts to stop the vote will only ultimately strengthen support for secession” (Step back from the brink, 2017). One week before the referendum, and in the context of the arrests of politicians and the threat to suspend regional powers, *The Observer* warned that “at that PR level, it stokes the cynical claim that, even today, Franco equals Spain and Spain equals Franco. Any hint of oppression lite can be used to advantage” (Catalan independence, 2017). On the day of the referendum and in relation to the police actions *The Guardian* stated that: “The outcome is almost certain to be that some of the Catalans indifferent or opposed to secession – until now, at least, the majority – are pushed into the arms of the cause. Who wants to be ruled by a state like this, many are asking”. (Catalonia’s referendum, 2017).

One week after the Referendum, the central government’s response was represented like this by *The Observer*: “the ill-considered police action was the latest in a string of attempts by Rajoy’s weak, minority government to block the push for independence”. The same editorial concluded that “[i]t is plain that the Spanish government has mismanaged recent events. Matters should never have been allowed to reach this point” (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017). According to

both *The Guardian* and *The Observer* Rajoy's wrong decisions stemmed from his inability to listen, his political mistakes and mismanagement of the situation. His choices would certainly backfire, he was continuously warned. *The Guardian* declared that "the violence was viewed around the world via social media, turning international opinion against the government. Creating martyrs for the opposition is not the way to win a political argument" (Catalonia's referendum, 2017).

Several weeks later *The Guardian* still maintained its focus on Rajoy's personal mishandling of the situation and its potential consequences on the eve of the application of article 155, when it warned that: "Further false moves by Mr Rajoy are likely to provoke even moderate Catalans to opposition, as Madrid's earlier heavy-handedness and the police actions during the unilateral referendum did" (23 October 2017). The majority of Catalans do not support independence, *The Guardian* reminded its readers a few days later; however, "current events might change that" (Spain's crisis, 2017). Two days further on, *The Observer*, using a dramatic metaphor, persisted in its criticism of the futile, backfiring decision taken by Rajoy to apply article 155: "while his actions may calm the situation in the short term – and the tense days to come will determine whether that is the case – Rajoy has set a time bomb ticking that could ultimately explode in his face" (Independence for Catalonia, 2017). Likewise, the last key decision made by the Spanish Government in that autumn of discontent was interpreted as counterproductive: "The fresh regional elections Rajoy has scheduled for 21 December [...] will, in effect, become the referendum on Catalan independence that the Madrid government has fought so hard to prevent" (Independence for Catalonia, 2017).

In three of its editorials *The Telegraph* adopted the same standpoint, the difference being that for this conservative daily the blame was never personalised in the Spanish leader but in

‘Madrid’. In terms of errors of judgment, for *The Telegraph* “Madrid is correct to have judged the referendum unconstitutional. It has erred, however, by pursuing a heavy-handed response” (The crisis in Catalonia can be ended, 2017). Regarding the central government’s political inability to manage the situation, *The Telegraph* declared that: “Madrid has mishandled the Catalonians” (Brexit was the right choice, 2017). In the same admonitory tone employed by *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, all these counterproductive decisions were warned against on the grounds that they might end up justifying the pro-independence movement: “Madrid’s force backfired horribly, and if it thinks that will resolve this disaster then it is likely to be mistaken” (Brexit was the right choice, 2017). The day before, the paper had declared:

Madrid also insists that the referendum held on October 1 was invalid, attracted the support of fewer than half of the voters and thus cannot be said to count – that it would make more sense to hold legal elections. This argument might have won more sympathy were it not for Madrid’s overreaction to the plebiscite. Violent scenes of alleged police brutality, reminiscent of the bad old days of Franco, handed the separatists a moral authority they would otherwise not have had (Spain’s crisis, 2017).

That is, the ethical upper hand potentially gained by the pro-independence movement was not based on the validity and authority of their claims *per se*, but as a result of the ill-conceived, flawed decisions made by the ruling party and its leader, who lost the sympathy that they might have justifiably earned.

The half-way house, meandering position

The discussion so far points to a critical depiction of the opposing camps as on the one hand irrational and unrealistic (the pro-independence faction, the Catalan government, Puigdemont and

his allies) and on the other as mistaken and incompetent (the Central Government, the ruling party or Rajoy). In this setup, it is difficult to ascertain whether the broadsheets analysed here aligned themselves with any particular narrative. As will be seen in this section, their position in fact zigzagged, maintaining an even-handed, almost symmetrically balanced portrayal of both camps.

Refereeing the Blame Game: The Guardian/Observer

The Guardian and *The Observer* invested significant time and effort in covering the issue of blame in relation to the Catalan crisis. Their default position was that of a sympathetic understanding of the historical, cultural and economic causes of Catalan nationalism and demands for greater autonomy; but also of a recognition of the advances of the Spanish state in terms of territorial devolution (Step back from the brink, 2017). Likewise, *The Observer* depicted Catalonia as “a region where the actual presence of Madrid governance on the ground in country towns and villages is already vestigial” (Catalan independence, 2017). In this context, *The Guardian* celebrated the “already impressive levels of self-government”, a settlement under which Catalonia “has thrived [...] in many ways over the years” (Step back from the brink, 2017), fostering a “bustling economy” (Catalan independence, 2017).

Therefore, in spite of accusations against the Central Government for its heavy-handed police and judicial reaction to the organisation of the referendum, *The Observer* did not question the credentials of Spain’s democracy and explicitly rejected denunciations of oppression of Catalan nationalism as simplistic: “The independence referendum that the devolved Catalan government intends to hold on 1 October can be portrayed as a cry for freedom from the rule of Madrid by a suppressed nation caged within Spain. That is much, much too simple” (Catalan independence, 2017).

Unsurprisingly, the attacks on Rajoy and the Central Government intensified on the day of the Referendum, with signs that *The Guardian* was converging with the pro-independence narrative. Against Rajoy's assertion that the police acted with "firmness and serenity", *The Guardian* claimed that "[p]olice brutality has ignited the political crisis", a brutality that it regarded as an 'assault' (Catalonia's referendum, 2017).

This strong tone of condemnation notwithstanding, a safe distance was maintained. Vis-à-vis the claims of both sides regarding the number of people injured, *The Guardian* declared: "The immediate result of the violence was hundreds of casualties by mid-afternoon, *according to* Catalan authorities, and at least 11 wounded officers, *according to* the central government" (Catalonia's referendum, 2017, our italics). The lexico-syntactical repetition reinforces the cautious position adopted. In its attempt to maintain a non-partisan position *The Guardian* further stated: "[b]etween them, the two sides have produced both a vote that is hugely contentious and a result that is meaningless" (Catalonia's referendum, 2017).

The Observer showed the same restraint as *The Guardian* regarding claims relating to the number of casualties: "While separatist leaders say hundreds were injured, fortunately no one was killed" (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017).

The portrayal of the Spanish forces of law and order deserves special attention, these being depicted by the independentists as forces of occupation and oppression. *The Observer* gave voice to the perspective of those who defended the actions of the much-maligned Guardia Civil (Civil Guard) by reporting that:

Residents who have spoken to the *Observer* complained of intimidation and threats by pro-independence activists. Far from criticising members of the Guardia Civil, a group of women in one Barcelona

neighbourhood thanked them for stepping in on referendum day after local police allegedly failed to keep order (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017).

And along the same lines as its sister daily, *The Observer* apportioned an equal amount of blame to both factions, with the focus of its indictments on the decision-making and management skills of both leaders:

[The] behaviour [of the Catalan leaders], like Rajoy's, is irresponsible. Like Rajoy's minority government in the Cortes [Spanish Parliament], their political base is narrow: they have but a tenuous grip on the 135-seat Catalan assembly. Puigdemont, the man at the heart of the independence storm, was the unexpected replacement for [the previous Catalan First Minister Artur] Mas. He lacks his predecessor's experience and élan. Like Rajoy, he seems desperate to make his mark and fearful of appearing irresolute (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017).

Just before the UDI, *The Guardian* once again explicitly refused to assign blame by apportioning it evenly to both leaders – again on the grounds of deficient political wit and ill-intentioned political decisions:

There is no mileage in the blame game. Spain's weekend move towards the imposition of direct rule did not start this process, any more than Catalonia's declaration of independence did. Both actions were provocative, part of a ratcheting of defiance between two leaders, Mariano Rajoy in Madrid and Carles Puigdemont in Barcelona, who have each made mistakes while at the same time appearing keen to keep the dispute from getting out of hand (23 October 2017).

This toing-and-froing was clear again at the end of October when criticism of the actions taken against the Catalan government came close to the pro-independence narrative, with *The Guardian*

stating that there was no doubt that “Madrid turned a blind eye to legal and civil rights when it dismissed criticism of police brutality in the anti-referendum operations” (Spain’s crisis, 2017). It is worth pointing out, however, that the phrase “turning a blind eye”, that is, looking away rather than at, at least dilutes the Central Government’s agency, a move that should be understood in the context of the equal apportion of blame whereby, according to the same paper, the situation:

has accelerated thanks to the recklessness and intransigence of both sides as they have ploughed on, intent on forcing the other to step aside or back down. That may owe less to the real conviction that they could strongarm their opponents than to the pressures they faced from their own side to stand firm (Spain’s crisis, 2017).

At the end of October, the decision to implement article 155 was regarded as a Central Government ‘diktat’ in *The Observer* (Independence for Catalonia, 2017), with a comment on the doubts that pro-independence leaders “will quietly give themselves up to a Spanish justice system they understandably distrust”, thus expressing misgivings about the Spanish judiciary, a key tenet of the pro-independence campaign. Despite all this, Rajoy was represented as compelled by the circumstances, part of his responsibility once again removed from him: “Mariano Rajoy”, *The Observer* had stated earlier, “was reluctant to resort to direct rule from Madrid, but faced by the stubborn and, in his view, illegal defiance of the Catalan leadership, he clearly felt he had no choice” (The crisis in Europe, 2017); and again: “Mariano Rajoy [...] says that, in the end, he had no choice but to take the “nuclear option” of sacking Catalonia’s government and placing himself and his ministers in charge” (Independence for Catalonia, 2017).

The same can be said about Rajoy’s decision to call regional elections on 21 December 2017, which was read using the same interpretative frame: it was not only inoperable, ill thought-

out and counterproductive but they would be held in a context of punishment and of lack of freedom, fairness and reliability – thus reproducing, initially through a series of rhetorical questions, the view of the pro-independence camp:

How can Rajoy hope to mount a free, fair and credible election if his principal opponents are in jail or on the run? How can there be an open, democratic debate if television and radio stations and newspapers deemed to be biased in favour of independence are brought under state control? Who in Catalonia, or internationally, would credit the results of such a poll? If the Madrid authorities persist in their apparent determination to punish the secessionist leadership, an election that may represent their best chance of ending the crisis will be condemned as a travesty. It would certainly be boycotted by many Catalans. It will be doomed from the start (Independence for Catalonia, 2017).

It needs to be said that *The Observer's* fears of media control on the part of the state were unfounded as article 155 stipulates the suspension of regional government but does not provide for suspension of freedom of speech. This misunderstanding of the law gave further credibility to the pro-independence claim. However, a workable solution was regarded as achievable, precisely because of the democratic credentials of Spain, depicted in the following excerpt as the opposite of the authoritarian, oppressive state of the pro-independence narratives:

Catalonia is, by most measures, a prosperous and successful place. Its people do not suffer hunger, preventable diseases or military oppression. They are not murdered, raped or displaced (unlike millions in recently independent South Sudan). Catalans, on the whole, like Spaniards, on the whole, lead a fortunate, peaceful, privileged existence. Barcelona, like London, is a model international city, where divisions of nationality, race, colour and creed increasingly belong to the past. In such propitious circumstances, it is surely not beyond the wit of Catalans and Spaniards to work out a form

of amicable association that both can live with. To fight would be self-indulgent foolishness (Independence for Catalonia, 2017).

After the December Catalan regional elections, in which the pro-independence parties again obtained a majority of seats but less than fifty per cent of the vote, *The Guardian* declared: “There is no mandate for Catalan independence there. But there is no mandate for the status quo either”. In this stalemate *The Guardian* again called out the provocations of both sides and asked for changes in their stance in equal measure: article 155 should be revoked and an amnesty for “jailed and exiled Catalan leaders” should be ensured; but also, separatists “should accept that the 1 October independence vote is null and void” (Catalonia’s election, 2017). This balanced system of concessions would be the only way to reach a ‘compromise’, a half-way solution to move forward.

In its attempt to defend a centre-ground position, the success of the leader of the opposition in the Catalan parliament, Inés Arrimadas – her party, Ciutadans, received the largest number of votes but not enough form a government – was presented as a lesson to be learned (Catalonia’s election, 2017). To that end, she was portrayed as “centrist unionist”, despite her party’s radical (for some, visceral) opposition to Catalan independence. It can be argued that these ‘inaccuracies’ are the price to be paid for the sake of a narrative which advocated equidistance and an underlying distrust of independence. This was never more evident than in the 8 October 2017 editorial of *The Observer*, in which, despite the attempt to apportion blame evenly, the newspaper, in its final analysis, held the view that in a globalised world movements advocating identity politics are outdated, bold and dramatic rather than driven by any sense of rationality and reality. This applies to Catalan nationalism but also by extension to Scottish nationalism and also English nationalists, now re-formed as Brexiters, all of these in the thrall of outmoded fantasy-driven worldviews:

When all is said and done, there is something inescapably romantic about an independence struggle. It excites visceral feelings about identity and destiny. It conjures wild images of flags, clenched fists and *Braveheart* heroics. But reality rarely matches the dream. Economic viability is one critical consideration. Here is another: in a globalised, interconnected world, where national frontiers, especially in Europe, count for less and less, especially among the young, the 19th-century concept of the exclusive nation state is increasingly anachronistic. Amid all the emotion and calculation, a basic question remains unanswered by Catalonia's separatists, as it does in pre-Brexit England: at a time when old divisions are thankfully breaking down, why create more walls? (The crisis in Catalonia, 2017).

Shifting the Blame Game: The Telegraph

The Telegraph was much less taxed by questions of blame for the Catalan crisis than its left-leaning competitor. Before the referendum, its starting position was that Spain “is now a successful modern democracy” (The crisis in Catalonia can be ended, 2017) and the same caution as *The Guardian* and *The Observer* was echoed in relation to the pro-independence reports on referendum day, bracketing the claims of the levels of aggression dispensed by the forces of law and order: “[v]iolent scenes of *alleged* police brutality” (Spain's crisis, 2017, our italics). It also blamed both sides in equal parts, with an interesting twist: for it the behaviour of both camps was tainted with Francoism in equal measure, thereby locating them in an unreconstructed and unrecoverable dictatorial past:

This crisis can still be ended amiably, but to do so both sides must remember that trampling on the legitimate concerns of fellow citizens, declaring opponents traitors and giving way to the violence of faction against faction in pursuit of political ends – these are not signs of new and just representation, but methods of a dictatorship the country thought it had left behind (The crisis in Catalonia can be ended, 2017).

The Telegraph did go as far as to accusing Spain of ‘authoritarianism’ (Authoritarian EU, 2017; EU was supposed to end nationalism, 2017; Brexit was the right choice, 2017) and of being ‘anti-democratic’ (Authoritarian EU, 2017); however, on every single occasion, these traits were not presented as particular to Spain, but “found across much of the continent”, a tendency “that still lies at the heart of many European states – and which is reflected in the EU’s obsession with centralisation and its terror of popular democracy” (Authoritarian EU, 2017). This way, the accusations of despotism and tyranny launched against Spain by the pro-independence movement were echoed, but also watered down as a pan-European problem. This ‘dilution’ should be read as a sign of the process of ‘domestication’ of the Catalan issue, whereby Brexit and Scottish Nationalism were discussed by proxy, as will be seen in our concluding remarks.

Conclusion: the “domestication” of the Catalan issue

The situation in Catalonia was frequently discussed in the newspapers analysed in connection with the political context of the UK, particularly Brexit. The similarities in origin were highlighted in *The Observer*: “[y]ou can also, as with Brexit, feel the tumult of economic disaster 10 years ago still making waves” (Catalan independence, 2017). Accusations of irrational desires for clawing back power were launched against both the pro-Brexit and the Catalan pro-independence camps: “There is also a strand of emotion that, like Brexit, sees salvation in ‘taking control’” (Catalan independence, 2017). And the same accusations of unscrutinised, make-believe claims were launched: “like Brexit, the possibilities after secession have barely been mentioned, let alone examined. One word – Yes – seems enough. Welcome to a new land, flowing with milk and honey” (Catalan independence, 2017). The indictment against referenda themselves (a key point of “Remainers”) was launched, with a warning for the Catalans: “Britain, surveying the inchoate

aftermath of Brexit, is learning that the hard way. Catalonia may be about to learn it too” (Catalan independence, 2017).

As noted, *The Telegraph* interpreted the Catalan crisis as, at least partly, a pan-European issue, to the extent that no Spanish (including Catalan) politicians were mentioned by name in its editorials, whereas EU leaders (Tusk, Juncker, Merkel, Macron) did indeed feature personally. We would argue that the situation in Catalonia was not the real focus of attention of *The Telegraph*, it was rather being vicariously used to reinforce its pro-Brexit stance, with the aim of debunking some of the main ‘myths’ of the Remain camp: that is, the claim that the EU is more rational, well organised and free. In its 21 October 2017 editorial *The Telegraph* stated:

One of the biggest delusions among militant Remainers is that the EU is so enlightened, so morally superior to Britain that once the prospect of leaving it becomes more concrete, the British people will want to jump back in. Yet everything that has happened in Europe since the referendum has vindicated the vote for Brexit (Authoritarian EU, 2017).

And what had happened in Europe since the EU referendum? According to *The Telegraph*, Europe was suffering an “identity crisis” of which “Spain is at the epicenter”. The troubles in Catalonia were interpreted as part of a mixture which can be fairly regarded as highly incongruous:

Structurally the continent remains in crisis and its politics veers to extremes. The Czech Republic has elected an anti-corruption businessman who is under investigation for financial irregularities. Hungary and Poland are in revolt. Two Italian regions have voted for enlarged autonomy. Austria may well be governed by a coalition that includes nationalists. And Germany’s far-Right won 94 seats in the Bundestag (Brexit was the right choice, 2017).

What was the Catalan issue telling us of the reality of the European Union, according to *The Telegraph*? In an editorial entitled “The Catalonia crisis shows Brexit was the right choice” it was claimed that the EU is irrational, chaotic, unruly and unmanageable, therefore, leaving was the right decision (Brexit was the right choice, 2017).

Moreover, the Catalonia crisis proved that the EU was a failed project on at least two accounts.

First of all, for not having lived up to its own grand expectations:

Wasn't the whole point of the EU to prevent nationalism and authoritarianism? It was founded in the post-war years to create a more unified, democratic Europe, one that would be so rich and stable that extremism would wither away. And yet Catalonia's parliament has declared independence and Spain is on the brink of civil unrest (EU was supposed to end nationalism, 2017).

And, secondly, for its inability to deal with the current situation and future crises:

The EU looks on, impotent – knowing that Catalonia won't be the last region to make this leap into the unknown. The nationalist genie is out of the bottle and no amount of coercion, condescension or feigned ignorance will make it go away. Brexit is not Europe's biggest problem (Brexit was the right choice, 2017).

The reference to ‘coercion’ aligned the interpretation of *The Telegraph* with that of the pro-independence narrative and its depiction of Spain as a dictatorial country. However, *The Telegraph's* position was more nuanced than that. As the following excerpt shows, the British response to Scottish Nationalism (its handling of the situation) was contrasted to the Spanish

allegedly totalitarian mishandling of the Catalan pro-independence movement; however, the accusation was diluted by making it a European, rather than a strictly Spanish trait:

Catalonia's declaration of independence caps a violent history of regional nationalism that British politicians of Left and Right have tried and failed to explain in terms relevant to our own country. In fact, the stark contrast between how the UK is handling the Scottish nationalists and how Madrid has mishandled the Catalonians illustrates the wide gulf between Britain's tradition of small government versus the authoritarianism found across much of the continent. London prefers diplomacy and democracy (Brexiteers was the right choice, 2017).

The role of the UK in a fragmenting Europe – in which the Catalan secessionist bid was regarded as one of the focuses of its identity crisis – was also discussed in *The Observer*. Wistfully echoing Morris's view that, as far as the British Empire was concerned, "as the flare of the imperial idea faded, so its beauty faded too" (1978: 9), the editorialist none the less felt able to offer but a conclusion that both defended the fading *grandeur* of Britain and its continuing redeeming role within the EU; in the end the UK assumes the mantle of exemplar to follow: "Forgetful of its historical role as European exemplar, arbiter and guarantor, a diminished, inward-looking, self-obsessed Britain just does not get it. Europe is slipping ever deeper into an existential crisis all of its own. It is us who should be helping them" (The crisis in Europe, 2017).

In short, while we do not dispute that in some senses the UK journalists were indeed writing about Catalonia and Spain, it is also our content that their actual focus was always the UK itself. Many of the elements of our analysis confirm us in this view: the narrative strategies used, which made combining Spain/Catalonia and the UK (and occasionally Scotland) a relatively simple matter; the lexical choices such as references to 'lessons' requiring to be 'learned' and the even

more frequent references to ‘warnings’ and ‘admonitions’; the sustained use of deontic modality – the use of terms such as ‘should’, ‘ought to’, ‘must’ – reinforcing moral obligations with which the reader is assumed to agree. This reader is the ‘implied reader’, whom Iser defines as follows: “He embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect – predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself. Consequently, the implied reader as a concept has his roots firmly planted in the structure of the text” (1976, p. 34).

In other words, while admonitions and the like may appear on the surface to be addressed at the Spanish and Catalan governments and politicians, their implied (and no doubt in many if not most cases actual) addressee is the reader of the editorials themselves, whose assumed political background and leanings provide the semiotic key to the journalistic message intended.

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