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A History of Dread. The (Im)mediate Experience of the Push for Catalan Independence

Tomas Macsotay
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Texte intégral

1 In writing a history of events of present times, one deals with problems related to immediacy and mediation. The Catalan Push for independence began its march in 2012, culminating in a series of highly fraught events in 2017. As a resident of Barcelona during these years, I got increasingly concerned over the challenges that the *procés* was presenting to our communities, and years later I opened the internet archive IDAP (*Índice de documentación audiovisual sobre el procés*)[1], in which I attempt to reconstruct its environmental materiality and its human "atmosphere", if at best a reliable approximate term to denote a flux of eventfulness that needs to be shown and recovered as a sensorial archive in order for it to be successfully understood, re-told or historically captured.

2 I am particularly preoccupied by the ways in which a rift between mediation and lived experience becomes disavowed or unacknowledged when the events under consideration are multitudinous in nature: when the images and experiences under discussion are of mobilizations, of sudden and repeated interventions in public spaces and streets. Surely, this is no new story: one need only leaf through Restif de la Bretonne's *Les nuits révolutionnaires* or the diaries of Victor Klemperer to obtain a sense of the troubles of persons recording the process of their precarious navigation of

overwhelming historical forces[2]. However, it needs remarking that even the elaborate life-worlds that these examples offer to outline for a reader remain a tenuous voice that is often overridden by master narratives about the events in question.

3 One only needs to consider the responses generated by two sustained and epochal civic actions that dominated the USA during the pandemic—the June 2020 Marches protesting the killing of George Floyd and the January 6, 2021, march on the Capitol at Washington DC—to obtain a sense of this particular problem of first-hand encounter and first-response framing and narration[3]. In a personal engagement with these events, I examined the rise and subsequent mediatization of a simple yet ambivalent Black Lives Matter (BLM) gesture: the "Kap knee"[4]. I came out of this piece of writing with a sense of the moods (often fatigue and loneliness) that held together the networks of activists, and how deeply these differed from a media narrative that touted thunderous pro- and contra- statements, no matter whether these came from self-proclaimed mouthpieces or critics. In first-hand coverage, the distaste and derision, the irrational labels, the visceral or barbaric adjectives simply fly about—while from those involved in the events of BLM protests, I could recover an interest in the ritual "kneel to a halt" form, which for them held the possibility of creating a makeshift vessel for sentiments of grief, mourning and shame[5].

4 Can historians somehow redress this weak basis for accessing a recent event such as Catalonia in 2017, the US in 2020-21, or Brazil in January of 2023? I believe so, but never remaining innocent to the deep problems that attach to first-hand witnessing and distanced narrating. First, in a point which I will elaborate below, we need a more thoughtful and self-reflexive, less pretentiously symptomatic semiology of crowd events. To properly tackle this task, it becomes necessary to abandon the mythic "crowd-as-automaton" paradigm, and to keep track of an environmental factor that often gets lost in first responses: environments are capable of sustaining tenderness and mutual care as much as they can sustain intransigence or violent hate—an experience of auditive and spatial hate-transmission recently explored by Maite Pagazaurtundúa, a victim of ETA terrorism, in her online project "Cartografías del odio"[6]. Of course, the first challenge, of understanding crowd events, should by no means presume to be a new type of question: around a century ago crowds had been a concern deeply entrenched in the era's philosophical and scientific debate, imbuing classic postulates in sociology, anthropology and strands of psychology with ideas that have never really been out of circulation since.

5 The idea of crowds-as-automatons shaped itself around elite and sometimes conservative sentiments over social control. Thus, the founder of a "psychology of the crowds", Gustave Le Bon (1895), held hypnosis responsible for the unaccountable "contagion" taking place in the midst of the crowd[7]. Not long after, Durkheim coined the notion of "collective effervescence" to join other metaphors that had so far attempted to convey simultaneity in crowd behaviours, such as the electric current, hysteria, or the primitive myth and magic of "totemism". One may discard such metaphors as placeholders for more falsifiable and viable analytical jargon, yet it is clear their paranormal overtones were required to expose anthropological universals even in the flux of modern, urban, industrialized existence. In his *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse* (1921), Freud warmly embraced Le Bon in his directives for a differential idea of crowd life and multitudinous emotion, citing him throughout his book, and only quarrelling with his predecessor over the notion of hypnosis[8]. This Freud wished to see replaced by another contentious idea—that of the leader as figure of identification for the persons in crowd constellations.[9]

6 Emotional contagion may seem like a somewhat straightforward thing to document and interpret: when presenting his thesis about the "great fear" of 1789, French historian Georges Lefebvre pointed to circumstances that could suggest the production of a mobile chain of emotional transmission—from dearth of food, leading to mass vagabondage, to the power of swiftly spreading rumour[10]. However, there are many ways in which multitude phenomena could be typified (are members of the crowd paralyzed or hyperactive?) and made to interconnect into a system (are emotions

transferred through word or image, through living presence or symbol and abstraction?), making it far from clear what direction the chain of behaviour and causation is taking. This makes for the particular interest of a book from Helmut Plessner's early writing on philosophical anthropology: *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sociales Radikalismus*[11]. Published in 1924, during the fall-off from World War I, it tried to make predictions about the growth of radical politics (both communist and *Nationalistisch-völkisch*). Plessner saw these radical voices, the voices of *Gemeinschaft*, as pertaining to an adolescent sentimental idealism, a longing for a rejuvenation of social life-forms. Society (*Gesellschaft*) is a spectrum of social relations marked, according to Plessner, by the impositions of "necessities, thrives and aspirations", by the disappointment or emptying of values, by the creation of individualism in intellectual enterprises but also of distance, playfulness and lightness in cultural ones[12]. In the opposite end of things, the mood idolized in *Gemeinschaft* is one of earnestness, which is pursued to sacralise social values, and to coin commitment through a new emotional system of immediacy, marked by a cultural reunion of individuals in a new mass. This is why *Gemeinschaft* gains momentum in advanced capitalism, yet is radically "limited" in a sense that Plessner understands to reside in a large operation of unmasking that tries to uproot day-to-day practices of intersubjective emotion and experience.

7 Plessner's term for *Gemeinschaft* is that of "idol of the times": emotional resonance and openness is fetishized by it[13]. Plessner's purpose here is not just to second-guess abstract conceptions that commonly served to rally community (love of fatherland, love of mankind), but rather to show how the crisis of community is caused by the very conflicts created when these abstract conceptions become the node of attempts at rejuvenating social life as such. The life of *Gemeinschaft* is marked by the constant instability that appears when individuals try to renounce their many protective and distancing gadgets—lightness, grace and fun, and the myriad interpersonal forms where emotions and values appear as shells rather than essences, as instruments rather than goals in their own right. Since this cannot happen, *Gemeinschaft* sooner or later flips its own economy of immediacy into one of formalized intensity. Members learn to direct their "love" not immediately to fellow-travellers, but to an *überperson,* a person credited with founding action, endowed with heroic and charismatic clarity of vision. It will in this more stable form sustain the communal setting with regimenting structures that can postpone and displace the direct interface and protect private inner experience for the community´s members.

8 In Plessner's account, we see an important displacement from Durkheim's sense of the *foule* as a synchronic and hypnotic event interconnecting the mass, but also to Freud's sense of community as mere repetition of the "fraternal bond" held in conflicted anguish over fear and awe for the tyrannical father. In his account of crowd process, Plessner substitutes those metaphors of unexplained psychic power, of electricity and of sexual (mis)identification for one of blood. Somewhat awkwardly, he promotes the term "Blutgemeinschaften" to convey the process by which individuals find shelter in community: either as persons who are born into blood ties (tribe, dynasty, fatherland) or as ritual trappings where an initiation involves a "cleansing" of one's spirit. But blood is also metaphorically important in showing a specific sense of community that is premised on immediacy: in such Blutgemeinschaften, the ordinary individual has been exchanged for an interconnected system, a free intersubjective flow clouded in emotional union. Even if it only takes a thunderous event or unusual circumstances to confer on a *Gemeinschaft* a deep sense of emotional reunion, then still immediacy coins the basic archetype of that community's existence as a formal union.

9 More recently, the spell held by "totemistic" ideas in classic thinkers from Durkheim to Freud, and which made them put much stock in reifications and substitutions of inner life (abstract concepts, symbols and images) is being challenged by new inroads into the power of physical ambiences. A new wave of writings have recovered the concept of presence, atmosphere and environment for charting and framing the life of affect, to suggest how a hard-to-rationalize vibrancy can engender a setting, a mood, a

scenography in ways that will better explain the phenomenon we often know as emotional contagion[14].

10 The availability of certain emotions that came to govern experience of the Catalan *procés* has been one of the most striking insights that my residence in Barcelona afforded me. It showed a deeply troubling phenomenon of emotional disconnect, of misreading between those who were a part of the social continuum during the events—never more sharply than in the interface between the willing pro-independence community and the large demographic of reluctant Catalans. It also showed the disappointing poverty of reporting on atmosphere, affect or emotion governing the *procés* in state and foreign media, such that the deep dread that accompanied the entire mobilization will eventually fall entirely out of view with the consumer-friendly image of rightful grassroots emancipation offered by many news outlets.

11 A way forward with these findings is to tune in historical enquiry with two axes of work: first, the need to go beyond mere simplistic accounts of "emotional contagion" as mere lapses of individual reason and to embrace metaphorical forms of cultural transmission in the collective or crowd; and second, to become aware of the ease with which atmosphere can be deliberately designed or brought about to create highly volatile political and social environment. In that sense, this contribution invites for the *procés* and other recent crises to be considered afresh with a greater sense of the undeniable transformations undergone by our virtual and media systems not merely as (mis)information gateways, but as powerful conditioners of our environmental life-worlds.

Notes

1 Este artículo surge de dos proyectos colaborativo de investigación: *Prehistorias de la Instalación: del interior eclesiástico barroco al interior moderno*, código PGC2018-098348-A-100 (MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE); y *Improvisation and Emotional Contagion. History and Philosophy of Emotional Experiences*, código PID2019-108988GB-I00 (MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE)

IDAP: <https://paginadelforodeprofesores.wordpress.com/dossier-de-violencia-independentista-en-cataluna/>

2 Restif de la Bretonne, Nicolas-Edme (1989), *Les nuits révolutionnaires (1789-1793)*, «avant-propos» y prefacio de Charles Brabant & Marcel Dorigny, Paris, Éditions de Paris.

3 Macsotay, Tomas & Nausikaä El-Mecki (2024, eds.), *Toppling Things. The Visuality, Space and Affect of Monument Removal*, Series Thamyris-Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race, Leiden, Brill.

4 Macsotay, Tomas (in print.), "Shame and guilt matter. Revisiting the crowd-monument dilemma from the case of the Kap knee".

5 For example, Evans, Martin, "«A cheering mob danced on the statue»: How slave trade symbol became focus of Black Lives Matter protests in Bristol", *The Telegraph*, 07 June 2020. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/06/07/edward-colston-statue-toppled-thrown-dock-black-lives-matter/>

6 Cartografía del Odio. Renew Europe: https://cartografiadelodio.com/.

7 Le Bon, Gustave (1895), *Psychologie des Foules*, Paris, Félix Alcan, p. 35.

8 Freud, Sigmund (1921), *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*, Vienna, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag,.

9 Lefranc, Jean (2005), "«La foule et la horde». Freud lecteur de Le Bon", in Jean-Marie Paul (ed.), *La Foule: Mythes et Figures*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, pp. 25-42.

10 Lefebvre, Georges (1932), *La Grande Peur de 1789*, Paris, Armand Colin.

11 Plessner, Helmut (1924), *Grenzen der Gemeinschaft. Eine Kritik des sozialen Radikalismus*, Neuauflage Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2002. An English translation was only published in 1999 (Prometheus Books), and a Spanish one in 2012 (Siruela).

12 Plessner, 1924, pp. 25-27, 34-35.

13 Plessner, 1924, pp. 36, 45.

14 Massumi, Brian (2013), *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts (Technologies of Lived Abstraction)*, Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press.; Böhme, Gernot (2017), "Atmosphere, a Basic Concept of a New Aesthetic", in A.-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul (transl. and

ed.), *Atmospheric Architectures. The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces*, London, Bloomsbury, pp. 113-126; Schmitz, Hermann, Owen Müllan & Christian Slaby (2011), “Emotions outside the box—the new phenomenology of feeling and corporeality”, *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 10, pp. 241-259; Griffero, Tonino (2017), *Quasi-Things: The Paradigm of Atmospheres*, New York, State University of New York Press.

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Auteur

Tomas Macsotay
Universitat Pompeu Fabra

Droits d’auteur