



**17A:  
BARCELONA  
GOES OFF SCRIPT**

Blanca Garcés  
Mascareñas

Senior Research Fellow  
CIDOB

CIDOB REPORT  
# 02- 2018

A terrorist attack's goal is not the deaths in themselves, but the response they provoke. In his crucial book *Terrorism: how to respond* (2010), Richard English says the threat terrorism poses to democracy is not the danger of death and destruction – always limited compared to a war – but the risk of provoking ill-thought-out and counterproductive responses from states. According to Simon Jenkins (2016), the danger arises when the dead become politics. This is what Yuval Noah Harari (2017) calls the strategy of the fly: knowing that it is small and fragile, the fly enters the elephant's ear in order to provoke the effects it cannot bring about alone. Hence, with many terrorist attacks, we move from the dead to terror and from terror to the politics of fear.

From the terrorist's perspective the dead are the transmitter through which a certain message is broadcast and demands are made. For Al-Qaeda first and later the Islamic State, the deaths are necessary to defend themselves from the West and, as a result, act as a reminder that the world lives under constant threat. From the perspective of the countries and citizens affected, the attacks have tended to generate reactive discourses of polarisation. One of the most emblematic cases is that of the United States after 9/11. According to Kellner (2007), the Bush administration built up a complete Manichean rhetoric based on the distinction between good and bad, between those who "like us" are in favour of freedom and those "from the axis of evil" who want to destroy us. From there, "the politics of fear and lies" as well as the "spectacle of war" made hitherto unthinkable legislative changes possible, an unprecedented expansion of the arms industry and the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Europe similar arguments have been deployed after each attack. Some people have equated terrorism with Islam, immigration and refugees;

some have returned to casting doubt on the possibility of Muslim integration; some have, without nuance, distinguished a West of reason in favour of freedom from a barbaric and destructive Orient. These arguments have led many governments to declare themselves at war. This is where the narrative becomes fact. Declaring oneself to be at war does not necessarily mean a war starts. France, for example, had been part of a coalition fighting the Islamic State since 2014. Declaring yourself to be at war means verbally formalising the state of being at war, while launching a military operation on a specific place (Raqqa, in the case of the November 2015 Paris attack) has the aim not of winning the war but of symbolically punishing (invoking justice, although also implicitly revenge) those who supposedly attacked your people.

But in Europe, each jihadist attack is followed by a war being declared on a supposedly internal enemy. The best illustration of this war directed inwards is the declaration of the state of emergency, with the indefinite deployment of the army, the strengthening of online and offline surveillance measures, the introduction of preventive sentences and the paring back of fundamental rights and freedoms in exchange for greater security. These are emergency measures that can be deployed indefinitely (oxymoronic as an indefinite state of emergency may sound) and which, in some cases, end up becoming law. Here, again, the case of France is paradigmatic, with a new antiterrorist law (November 2017) which according to the government represents a “fair balance between freedom and security” and according to human rights organisations involves turning what were strictly exceptional measures into law.

Alongside the securitisation of the state, in many European cities there has also been a progressive criminalisation of immigration. Again, this has taken place at first at a discursive level, explaining terrorism through origin, religion or lack of integration. At a later date, the narrative became fact and therefore policy, with increasingly strict measures against irregular immigration, greater entry control (including of the refugees meant to be relocated from Greece and Italy) and more integration programmes, not only to support the processes of cultural and socioeconomic inclusion, but also to show (in an almost declaratory way) that the state is doing away with outsiders, rewarding those who integrate and penalising those who do not. Some measures seek declarative gestures more than results. This shows that policies do not always become facts, or if they do, they often remain at the levels of discourse or symbolism.

In this context, what happened in Barcelona after the attacks on August 17th 2017? To what extent have similar arguments been deployed or, by contrast, has Barcelona gone off script?

## The three noes

In the first days after the attacks on August 17th and 18th in Barcelona and Cambrils (17A), three noes were expressed. The first, like in other European cities, was the NO to terrorism. The messages condemning terrorism came unanimously from all institutions, political parties, social entities, governments and international institutions. To this point Barcelona stuck to the script.

Alongside the messages condemning terrorism, a second no was rolled out: the NO to racism and xenophobia. While the attacks in Madrid on March 11th 2004 (11M) were interpreted as the result of the Iraq war, and the discussion was therefore fundamentally political, after 17A demonstrations of hate against Islam grew significantly: from attacks on mosques in Montblanc, Granada, Seville, Logroño and Fuenlabrada, to small rallies by far-right groups. This time, social networks also amplified the xenophobic and hate-filled messages directed at Islam, for example making the hashtag #StopIslam a trending topic over the days following the attack. In this context, the response by most political and social actors was resounding: NO to xenophobia, to racism and Islamophobia, almost with the same force as the NO to terrorism.

Some days later, a third no began to take shape: the NO to fear, expressed in Catalan as *"No tinc por"*. This was, in fact, the slogan for the demonstration held on August 26th (26A) rejecting the attacks. It was not politicians behind the banner. It was the Barcelona City Council that decided that those who should lead the demonstration were the security services, the emergency and civil protection services, municipal cleaning staff, taxi drivers, the anonymous citizens who helped the victims; in summary, all those who had been on the front line during the attacks. The demonstration ended with a speech explaining what we are not afraid of and why we are not afraid (now expressed in the plural). Among other motives, it was affirmed that "we are not afraid" because "instead of dividing us we will find ourselves more united in the incorruptible defence of freedom and democracy through the diversity of our cultures and beliefs" and because "Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, expressions of racism and xenophobia have no place in our society".

Barcelona did go off script in this triple NO to terrorism, xenophobia and fear. These three noes were not contested or the subject of discussion. In this sense, they functioned more as slogans than as points of arrival following in-depth public and political debate. Nevertheless, slogans also have their power. Condemning xenophobia with almost the same intensity with which terrorism is condemned involves rightly remembering that the

issue is not one of some against others. In fact, the declaration of the 26A demonstration spoke of neither enemies nor terrorists. Saying “I am not afraid. We are not afraid” also means rejecting, even if only implicitly, the strategy of terror of some and the politics of fear of others.

### **Victims against terrorists**

17A happened in Barcelona but it happened in a strange way, different to similar attacks in other European cities. Barcelona empties in August, neighbourhood businesses shut, and the general feeling is that on the city's streets only the tourists remain. All the more so on the Ramblas and around the Sagrada Família, which seems to have been an intended target. It should be no surprise, then, that among the 16 dead, as well as Spaniards, there were citizens of Italy, Belgium, Canada, the United States, Australia and Portugal, and that the majority of the 155 injured were also tourists of 34 different nationalities. This attack was not made on a train filled with commuters on their way to work first thing in the morning, as in Madrid; or during a national holiday on a seafront promenade full of families from the city itself, like in Nice; or at a Christmas market on a normal afternoon, like in Berlin. More than with other attacks, in Barcelona the victims represented the whole world.

And who were the terrorists? On the one hand, we have Abdelbaki Es Satty, thought to have been the brains behind the terrorist cell. As Galdon points out (2017), his life story fits the typical portrait of the European jihadist: a young man (though not an adolescent), socialised in petty crime (smuggling hashish in his case), who had spent time in prison and had contacts with the Islamic State on some of his trips abroad. On the other hand, we have a group of young people aged between 17 and 24 of Moroccan origin who grew up in Ripoll, a small town in the Catalan Pre-Pyrenees. According to Galdon, such young terrorists had never previously been seen. They were all known in the town, had work, friends and apparently *normal* lives. As Raquel Rull, a social worker in Ripoll, recalled: “they were boys like all the others. Like my sons, they were Ripoll boys”.<sup>1</sup>

While the victims came from around the world, the terrorists were from here and, especially in Ripoll, they were considered (at least after the attacks) part of *us*. This explains why the biggest question for many was:

---

1. See: <http://www.elperiodico.com/es/sociedad/20170822/carta-educadora-social-ri-poll-6237368>

Why them? Beyond culturalising discourses that explain the processes of radicalisation through origin and religion, two parallel stories were deployed that were not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, the radicalisation of the young men from Ripoll was explained as the result of the manipulation of Abdelbaki Es Satty, who apparently convinced them from his position as imam of Ripoll. The mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, denounced the “the infinite cruelty of those who dehumanise adolescents and turn them into murderers”.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of their age, because they had barely had time to acquire the motives – or at least not sufficient ones – to prefer to die in the act of killing, the questions raised were: To what extent were they conscious of what they were doing? To what extent did they really want to die while killing?

On the other hand, the radicalisation of the young men from Ripoll also raised the question of what we are doing wrong as a society. As one of their sisters stated at an event in Ripoll, “for a young man who was born in Catalonia or arrived there at a young age to rebel against the country and the most valuable thing they have, their city, means we have a real problem that we must not hide”.<sup>3</sup> What went wrong for so many young people to prefer to die in the act of killing than to learn, fall in love and have fun? How do we explain how the imam of Ripoll was able to find a dozen young people, almost adolescents, in a town of 10,000 whose rage was greater than their desire to live? According to the mayor of Ripoll, “they enjoyed public schooling, work integration programmes, had girlfriends, played sport”.<sup>4</sup> In the words of Olivier Roy (2016): “they were neither the poorest, the most humiliated, nor the least integrated”.

These two narratives did not go without criticism. While some denounced the scant attention given to the victims (for example in the 26A demonstration), others criticised the closeness and condescension with which the terrorists and their families were treated. Referring to an event organised in Ripoll, Antonio Puigverd (2017) wrote in *La Vanguardia* “that it did not seem that the victims were those who died on La Rambla (mentioned only once), but the Maghrebis of Ripoll”. For Puigverd they were no longer “our young people” but “Maghrebis”. Voices like his requested a thicker line be drawn between victims and terrorists, between *us* and *them*. This same criticism reappeared

---

2. See: <http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/alcaldessa/es/blog/no-tenemos-miedo>

3. See: <http://www.europapress.es/catalunya/noticia-hermana-oukabir-protagoniza-acto-ripoll-contra-atentados-20170826221815.html>

4. See: [https://www.ara.cat/societat/Alcaldes\\_0\\_1859814075.html](https://www.ara.cat/societat/Alcaldes_0_1859814075.html)

weeks later following the proclamation with which the philosopher Marina Garcés opened the Mercè festival in Barcelona. Garcés alluded to the absence of both the victims and the “young men from Ripoll” and remembered that we will never know “if they really wanted to die in the act of killing, as they did”<sup>5</sup>. This simple question triggered condemnation from certain political parties and newspapers and, in their wake, an avalanche of accusations over social networks.

### ***Us against them***

Many saw the murder of film director Theo van Gogh at the hands of an Islamist extremist (Amsterdam, 2004) as irrefutable proof of the failure of multicultural policies. For many it was also the definitive confirmation that Islam is incompatible with Western democracies, that the values of some cannot peacefully coexist with those of others. In a similar way, France experiences “its attacks” as direct attacks made from within by those who reject the founding principles of the republic. In a recent article, Gilles Kepel (2017) speaks of the need to “integrate *outsiders* into the universe of *insiders*”. In both one case and the other, increasingly strong dividing lines have been drawn between an enlightened *us* defending liberal values and a barbaric *them*, obscurantist and fanatical, that is often associated with immigration and Islam.

This dichotomous thinking is relatively absent from the accounts that emerged after 17A in Barcelona. As well as condemning xenophobia, Islamophobia and racism, most of the institutional discourses coincided in insisting once again on the messages of integration and in defence of harmonious coexistence in diversity. There was, nevertheless, one great exception: Xavier García Albiol, leader of the Popular Party (PP) in Catalonia, requested more monitoring of mosques and prayer centres, and for all illegal religious centres to be closed. Although he admitted that the majority of Muslims do not “practise terrorism” and it is only a minority that do, he called Islam the only religion in the world that “kills in the name of God”. García Albiol also took advantage of the occasion to justify the rejection of immigrants in general using the well-worn and repetitive argument “ours first”. This led him to say that “there is no Islamophobia here, what we have are certain gentlemen who have come to take advantage of our system”<sup>6</sup>.

---

5. See: <http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/premsa/2017/09/21/prego-dobertura-de-la-merce-2017/>

6. See: <http://www.ccma.cat/tv3/alcanta/els-matins-destiu/els-matins-destiu-29082017/video/5685159/>

However, in contrast to other European cities, this exclusionary and dichotomous discourse was not the dominant story, nor even one that was jostling for dominance. It was made from isolated positions and in the case of García Albiol, isolated even within his own party. This does not mean that Catalan or Spanish society is more open and tolerant of diversity. In fact, opinion polls show that attitudes to immigration do not differ substantially from those of other European countries. What is different is the dominant political discourse. Words such as *convivencia* (peaceful coexistence), diversity and interculturality are on the lips of most political parties. Integration policies, now with shrunken budgets, are drawn up and justified using these same principles of coexistence and interculturality. This explains why the discourses, like the policies, do not change substantially when there are changes of government, as is the case with Barcelona City Council.

In an article published in *Ara*, the political scientist Jordi Muñoz (2017) explained the predominance of these more inclusive discourses through the absence of xenophobic parties. It is not that clearly anti-immigration options have not appeared, such as, for example, *Plataforma per Catalunya* or the PP itself on certain occasions, but that when they have, they have not succeeded. In the case of Catalonia, the effects of the *Pacto Nacional para la Inmigración* (2008) must not be forgotten. It agreed a shared vision between most of the political forces (except the PP), municipal organisations and the main economic and social agents. Though the predominance of those discourses avoided dichotomous distinctions in the style seen in other European cities, it also shut down important discussions.

The question “What are we doing wrong as a society?” is difficult to answer without at the same time questioning what lies beyond the discourse itself. What if the “young men from Ripoll” did not feel as part of *us* as our accounts want us and them to think? What if our model of social coexistence is different from the one we think we have?

## **NO to war**

According to Bourekba (2015), it is fundamental to “deIslamify” the focus on the jihadist phenomenon and consider it as a means, among others, of political violence. In other words, stop emphasising the religious narrative

**IN CONTRAST TO OTHER EUROPEAN CITIES, THE EXCLUSIONARY AND DICHOTOMOUS DISCOURSE WAS NOT THE DOMINANT STORY, NOR EVEN ONE THAT WAS JOSTLING FOR DOMINANCE. THIS DOES NOT MEAN THAT CATALAN OR SPANISH SOCIETY IS MORE OPEN AND TOLERANT OF DIVERSITY. WHAT IS DIFFERENT IS THE DOMINANT POLITICAL DISCOURSE**

of the protagonists, which strengthens the notion of incompatibility between Islam and democracy and, as a result, encourages the growing stigmatisation of Muslims in Europe. Speaking, by contrast, of “political violence” means understanding the motives behind their radicalisation in the wider context of the rebirth of the self-proclaimed caliphate on Muslim soil and the wars taking place there. If we analyse the responses in Europe to date, we may conclude that Islamifying and culturalising explanations have had the most weight, equating jihadist extremism with Islam, immigration and refugees. When seen in a political light, as we have seen, it has been to “declare war”. In this context, what happened in Barcelona after 17A?

Neither in Catalonia nor in the rest of Spain has any politician declared war. Certainly, the Iraq war, the 11M attacks and the mass citizen demonstrations at that time, which not only changed the government

**WHAT IF THE “YOUNG MEN FROM RIPOLL” DID NOT FEEL AS PART OF US AS OUR ACCOUNTS WANT US AND THEM TO THINK? WHAT IF OUR MODEL OF SOCIAL COEXISTENCE IS DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE WE THINK WE HAVE?**

but led to the immediate withdrawal of troops, are facts that are too recent to have been forgotten by any politician. But not only has war not been declared. In Barcelona, led by the social organisations, a section of society has condemned the Spanish state’s (direct and indirect) participation in the other wars often forgotten in the West. At the August 26th (26A) demonstration, they dressed in blue and reclaimed old slogans such as “No to war” and “Your wars, our dead”. According to Francesc Mateu (2017), director of Oxfam Intermón in Catalonia, they wanted to move beyond a model of manifesting grief and condemnation

to also point out responsibilities and demand different attitudes and policies.

What were the demands made by those in blue (#anemdeblau) at the 26A demonstration? The unitary manifesto made five major demands: it urged the condemnation of xenophobia and Islamophobia; demanded the response to the 17A attack not take the form of more repressive security; remembered the many other dead who “do not appear on the front pages of the newspapers”; and denounced the hypocrisy of the politicians, above all the Spanish government and the monarchy, “who promote wars and fuel armed conflicts through the sale of arms to countries such as Saudi Arabia<sup>7</sup>;

---

7. See: [http://www.lafede.cat/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/manifest26A\\_adhesions\\_cat1.pdf](http://www.lafede.cat/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/manifest26A_adhesions_cat1.pdf)

and finally, in clear continuity with the citizen's campaign "Casa Vostra Casa Nostra" (#volemacol·lir) and the large demonstration that took place in Barcelona in February 2017, they asked for open borders for refugees.

The 26A demonstration was partly coloured blue. Just as with the demonstrations that followed 11M in Madrid, sections of the public responded by claiming these other dead forgotten by the West for their own (with signs such as "Madrid=Baghdad" and "they are our dead too") and questioning the role of Western governments in the wars, which are understood as the ultimate causes of the attacks. "The enemy is war" was shouted from Madrid. "Your wars, our dead" was shouted again from Barcelona. With slogans like these the attacks were interpreted as "political violence" and the demand was not for "more war", but "NO to war", questioning the government's role in the violence hidden behind jihadist extremism at global level and thereby dissolving the dividing lines between friends/enemies, democrats/the violent, the West/barbarity.

### Conclusion

To what extent did Barcelona go off script? To return to Hariri's strategy of the fly (2017), unlike in other European cities, the elephant did not move in the expected way. Beyond the almost mimetic, ritualised reproduction of grief and condemnation, Barcelona has not declared itself at war either externally or against a supposedly internal enemy. In the accounts that followed the attack, what prevailed were NO to terrorism, NO to xenophobia, NO to fear and, finally, from social entities and sections of civil society, NO to war. From there, the dichotomous reasoning of friend/enemy, West/barbarity and insider/outsider that was

so characteristic of the accounts given in other European cities has not been constructed. From the NO to fear, there has also been no place for the "politics of fear" and neither have we seen a progressive securitisation of the state or a gradual criminalisation of immigration. Or not yet, or not in a dominant way. Neither was there in Madrid after 11M.

But that the elephant did not move as expected does not mean that it did not react. Sporadically, voices have called for a stronger line to be drawn between victims/terrorists and us/them. Most voices have been raised

**BARCELONA HAS NOT DECLARED ITSELF AT WAR EITHER EXTERNALLY OR AGAINST A SUPPOSEDLY INTERNAL ENEMY. IN THE ACCOUNTS THAT FOLLOWED THE ATTACK, WHAT PREVAILED WERE NO TO TERRORISM, NO TO XENOPHOBIA, NO TO FEAR AND, FINALLY, FROM SOCIAL ENTITIES AND SECTIONS OF CIVIL SOCIETY, NO TO WAR**

along the national axis, as part of the Catalonia/Spain confrontation. This is where the elephant moved furthest. Newspapers such as *El País*, *El Mundo*, *La Razón* and *ABC* decried how handling the attacks would be used to “campaign for the Catalan independence *procés*”, while at the same time asking that 17A serve as an alarm call to end “the democratic absurdities” attributed to Catalan independence supporters. One of the main targets in this battle of narratives was the Catalan police force, the Mossos d’Esquadra. 17A showed up the seriousness of the lack of coordination between some police bodies and others, as well as the implications of having security forces with terrorism competences but without access to the main international databases. The Mossos became the subject of criticism from those who demanded unified management of the crisis, while in Catalonia many politicians, media and part of civil society turned them into an almost heroic symbol of the antiterrorist fight and citizen protection. In this context, it is not surprising that, beyond those who “went in blue”, the 26A demonstration also became a space of confrontation between some and others.

But in this Madrid’s 11M was not too dissimilar. There the elephant did not move in the expected direction either. Instead of turning the dead into terror and the terror into the politics of fear, the Madrid attacks triggered an unprecedented confrontation between the government, who for the first few days continued to insist ETA was responsible, and the growing numbers of those who doubted that. As a result, the demonstration was not unified either. As Amador Fernández-Savater (2015) recalls, at the end of the demonstration, in a surprising and unpredictable manner, the politicians had to quickly leave the street to escape anonymous people shouting the question “Who was it?” While in Barcelona the confrontation was along the national axis, in Madrid it was more left-right. As Fernández-Savater also says, the civil confrontation between the “two Spains” then resurfaced: one that insisted on ETA’s responsibility and, as a result, appealed to the constitution, and one that not only asked who was responsible, but demanded an immediate end to the war.

The fact that in both Barcelona and Madrid the elephant ran in an unexpected direction only confirmed one fact: when we talk about immigration, as well as terrorism, we speak about nothing more than ourselves. The fly may provoke an angry reaction from the elephant, but the elephant will only move down the path it was already walking.

## References

- Bourekba, Moussa. "Después de Charlie Hebdo. El reto de la interpretación multidimensional del radicalismo". *Foreign Affairs Latinoamérica*, vol. 15, no. 2 (2015).
- English, Richard. *Terrorism: how to respond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Fernández-Savater, Amador "'El enemigo es la guerra': ¿por qué el 11-M de 2004 no se convirtió en otro 11-S?". *el diario.es* (20 November 2015) (online) [http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/enemigo-guerra-convirtio\\_6\\_454314595.html](http://www.eldiario.es/interferencias/enemigo-guerra-convirtio_6_454314595.html)
- Galdon, Gemma. "17A: entre ISIS y Columbine". *Contexto*, no. 131 (23 August 2017). (online) <http://ctxt.es/es/20170823/Politica/14629/Ctxt-atentado-barcelona-ISIS-Columbine-Gemma-Galdon.htm>
- Harari, Yuval Noah. «La stratégie de la mouche: pourquoi le terrorisme est-il efficace?». *BibliObs* (18 August 2017) (online) <https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20160331.OBS7480/la-strategie-de-la-mouche-pourquoi-le-terrorisme-est-il-efficace.html>
- Jenkins, Simon. "The scariest thing about Brussels is our reaction to it". *The Guardian* (24 March 2016) (online) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/24/scariest-brussels-reactoin-paranoid-politicians-isis-atrocity-belgium>
- Kellner, Douglas. "Bushspeak and the Politics of Lying: Presidential Rhetoric in the 'War on Terror'". *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, no. 37 (2007), p. 4.
- Kepel, Gilles. «Le procès Merah, une radiographie de la contre-société salafiste». *Le Figaro* (3 November 2017).
- Mateu, Francesc. "Més enllà del dol". *El Punt Diari* (30 August 2017).
- Muñoz, Jordi. «Els beneficis del bonisme». *Ara* (30 August 2017) (online) [https://www.ara.cat/opinio/jordi-munoz-beneficis-bonisme\\_0\\_1861013888.html](https://www.ara.cat/opinio/jordi-munoz-beneficis-bonisme_0_1861013888.html)
- Puigverd, Antonio. "Dedo en la llaga", *La Vanguardia* (28 August 2017) (online) <http://www.lavanguardia.com/opinion/20170828/43878740923/dedo-en-la-llaga.html>
- Roy, Olivier. *Le Djihad et la mort*. Paris: Seuil, 2016.

