



TEN DAYS IN AUGUST

Jordi Moreras

Associate Senior
Researcher, CIDOB;
Department of
Anthropology, Universitat
Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona)

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After the tears always come the hard questions. Or at least that is what we thought would happen after last August's attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils. But that is not what happened. The political class, the media and public opinion were all too absorbed in the controversy between Spain and Catalonia on how to tackle the questions so abruptly put on the table by the story of a group of young Moroccans resident in Ripoll who had been planning a series of attacks on Catalan soil for months. Never before has an event of this magnitude been so swiftly followed by a turning of the page with no conclusions drawn about what happened, or citizens being informed. The debate on the issue remains pending.

After these tragic events the same patterns were activated that have unfortunately become usual after a terrorist attack on European soil attributed to jihadism: mourning, solidarity with the victims and a lot of questions asked. We have developed a triple response when facing terror, which has a palliative effect on our collective consciousness: political determination (proclaiming the "unity of democrats against terrorism"); security action (through the deployment of police and preventive measures); and emotional solidarity (participating in collective mourning that serves to generate a sense of shared victimhood, in this case through the use of the hashtag *#notincpor*). These gestures are activated almost automatically in a post-traumatic setting in which the emotional response overlays the rationalisation of what happened (Badiou, 2016).¹ The media take charge

1. Alain Badiou's arguments after the Paris attacks on November 13th 2015, relating to the collateral risks of these actions on our societies could well be applied in this case. According to him, the exclusive dominance of trauma and emotion has four consequences: authorising the state to take measures that serve to erode public freedoms; reinforcing identity impulses; transforming the idea of justice

of placing us within contexts of meaning in which only what has happened is spoken of, and all other news is at a secondary level.

When political gestures, security measures and spontaneous expressions of contained emotion also dominate the news, two-thirds of the story which seek to establish how events unfolded before, during and after the attacks have already been closed. The third and final part of the narrative circle involves the activation of an expert discourse which normally combines inductive, deductive and prospective exercises analysing the causes, motivations, ramifications, connections, consequences and other evidence that suddenly appear with regard to the perpetrators of the attacks. This paper proposes to contribute to a reflection on what

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happened during those ten days in August, which, more than offering a chronological description of what happened, or offering an evaluation of what was done well or not so well, seeks to act as a reminder of how our societies mature and learn when they face adversity (Muro, 2017). We intend to provide a review of what happened from a perspective based on the social knowledge accumulated by a society that has had to face a growing series of uncertainties, and to which it has had to provide a more or less articulated response.

Three singularities

Three particular features stand out about these attacks: first, the fact that the police and security services were unable to detect any sign of the impending attacks' and how they were precipitated by the fortuitous explosion a few days earlier in Alcanar (Tarragona). This shows the extent to which the detection networks deployed in Catalonia were ineffective. Second, we have already referred implicitly to the extremely short mourning period of barely two weeks. The political circumstances experienced in Catalonia for some years may explain the brevity of this social grief when compared to other similar attacks. To use an expression that has become common in recent times it seemed that Catalan society "switched screens" to the sovereignty dispute playing out between Spain and Catalonia. The third unusual feature is the one we want to analyse in more detail, as we

with overtones of revenge; and granting victory to the terrorists by giving disproportionate impact to their actions.

consider it to be highly revealing of the way Catalan society conceived of itself as a society in progressive pluralisation. It relates to the fact that, as soon as it was known that the place where the perpetrators of the attacks grew up was Ripoll, and that nothing in their life histories seemed to predict that they would become terrorists, the first questions of what had gone wrong began to arise.

Looking more deeply into the responses given “in the heat of the moment” over those days, as well as some of the consequences that resulted months later, we can see the attempts to explain events that no one ever imagined would happen. This does not mean that Barcelona, like other global cities, was not a candidate for lengthening the list of capitals wounded by terrorism, but that the perpetrators in this case did not fit the common profile of the marginalised young person of immigrant origin.

In this respect, the array of questions and answers that followed the tragic events could have led in two contradictory directions: either to suggest introspective reflection to review the way Catalan society evaluates its own social model, or to shift all the questions towards the causal search for a series of external factors whose confluence could have provoked this fatal outcome. It appears that the first group of questions has been shelved and that we have launched into embracing the always comfortable claim that this is an element that is external to Catalan reality (and even to the reality of the Muslim communities in Catalonia themselves). Saying that the first and last reason for what happened was the increased presence of Muslim communities inspired by Salafism has enacted an exorcism which allows the evil that must be eradicated to be identified, and limiting it to a threat that can be named. By taking this second path, a desire has been shown to avoid the necessary self-criticism we must undergo concerning a model of social integration whose continued validity we should be questioning.

Never one of us

In his classic essay on the stranger, Alfred Schutz (1974) argued that for the society that receives them, as their footprint remains very recent, the stranger is an unknown person. They have neither formed part of nor shared the society’s history, and can only be judged by their current acts. The society into which they insert themselves demands a permanent commitment from them, both in terms of their individual integration and that of their family. Without their memory being recognised, and given the weight of present obligations, life histories become the only capital the stranger is granted to claim his singularity. Our society is resistant to accumulated sociological evidence: despite many children of parents who emigrated not

inheriting their parents' condition as migrants, we always end up reminding them – implicitly or explicitly – of their expatriate condition. The statistics tell the opposite story: 21.5% of Moroccans living in Catalonia on January 1st 2017 (211,384 according to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia) were born on Spanish soil, and 36.8% of them are under 25 years old. Despite this, a recent report, whose overall synthesis declares that “the consistent similarity of the results among members of the second generation and the children of Spaniards of the same age suggests the integration of the former into a single community”, suggests other much less hopeful results (Portes *et al.*, 2017). The report's preliminary study informs that:

“Although national origins are not significant grounds for any of the key integration indicators, once other variables are controlled for, young people of Moroccan origin and others of Islamic descent must be subject to greater attention from the authorities and society in general to prevent their religious identification generating reactive attitudes of opposition and receptiveness to radical ideologies. While, as a whole, the second generation advances towards positive inclusion in Spain, we know that a just a few exceptions to this process can have tragic results. It is here that the Spanish authorities, social agents and society in general must focus” (Portes *et al.*, 2017: 15-16).

The conclusions of this study were presented on November 27th 2017, so the possibility that its authors had the events of August in mind should not be discounted. As an exception that seems to confirm the rule, it highlights that the development of identities assembled around references as structured as the religious ones are an unsatisfying variable in a premise based on the idea of integration.

After the first moments of emotional reaction, another type of question was articulated that attempted to address how this could happen. Without doubt, the statement that raised greatest feeling during those days,² was the piece written by Raquel Rull, a social educator from Ripoll, aimed at one of the young people who took part in the attacks (“How could it be Younes?”), which went viral on social networks and was subsequently republished by several Catalan newspapers.³ This heartrending letter not only flowed with the desperation of someone who knew the life stories of these young people first hand, it also asked a question of great importance, which the author asked twice: what have we done (or stopped doing, or never

2. Along with the image of the father who lost his three-year-old son in the Barcelona attack hugging the city's disconsolate imam in Rubí on August 24th.

3. *La Vanguardia* and *El Periódico de Catalunya*, among others (August 22nd 2017).

thought that we had to do) for this to happen? This document contains a message that it would be difficult for any sociological study made in Ripoll from this moment on to convey, and which the summary of the court case in progress will be unable to capture. She is brave enough to wonder about the uncertain dimensions of the social reality, those which are implicit and which we fail to capture with our theoretical and methodological tools. In her own terms, Raquel Rull dares to recognise that, despite having the impression that many efforts were made to make these young men feel like any other young people, something supplanted all that effort. Her testimony, alongside those of others⁴, had the effect of displacing questions in another direction away from the reasons that led these young men to carry out these attacks. Both statements articulate a question that is not directed at anyone in particular, and does not seek political responsibility, but is aimed at Catalan society as a whole. This is a question that arises out of the day-to-day lives of people who know the difficulties inherent in everyday community life first-hand, and who, as on previous occasions, bear witness to what it costs to generate solid trust and how easy it is to lose it. No doubt both statements could perfectly well be accepted by other people aware of the fragile consistency of the social fabrics of other neighbourhoods in the rest of Catalonia.

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So why Ripoll? It was conceivable that this could happen in another setting, but not in a city in the interior of Catalonia with 11,000 inhabitants at the entrance to the Gironese Pyrenees. Few have realised that this case lays bare the errors of assessment that suggest that in the smallest communities the integration of immigrant populations is much more effective than in the large urban agglomerations. It has been said that this is due to the close relations between people, something that is valued in the lives of small localities and even in neighbourhoods with strong associative networks. But this must always be put in perspective and other factors must be attended to. What happened has also invalidated the idea that processes of violent

4. Like that made by Hafida Oukabir, one of the perpetrators' sisters, at an event in Ripoll on August 26th, that "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".

radicalisation occur in urban contexts with a strong presence of immigrant communities. The proof is that the radar of the security forces' had never focussed on Ripoll, at least not in the way they do on other municipalities in metropolitan Catalonia.

Old debates, new issues

As tends to occur in situations such as these, old questions are revived that had probably been left unresolved, or which had perhaps been shelved for a later date. The involvement of the imam of one of Ripoll's two mosques in the rapid radicalisation of these young people again raised the question of the situation of imams in Catalonia. Their contractual and educational precariousness, alongside a lack of connectivity with the social context in which they carry out their duties, remains one of their main limitations. In the early 2000s, in Catalonia a drift of public opinion was generated that demanded training for imams. And so from 2002 to 2012, Catalan language training was provided, to which were gradually added elements relating to history, law and the Catalan public institutions. But the questions raised after the attacks were not aimed at training, but at monitoring imams, given the evidence that the communities chose their imams in an inadequate manner.

At the start of this debate all eyes were on the director general of religious affairs in the Catalan government, Enric Vendrell, who, in statements to the radio station *RAC-1* (August 22nd) said that, under the principle that "each faith has the absolute autonomy to choose its religious figures", suggested that the only thing the Catalan government could do was, at most, a process of accompanying this selection process. This response fits with the legal framework in force in Catalonia, and was met by comments from some within the Muslim community requesting greater involvement from the Catalan government in regulating the figure of imams (Rodríguez and Ribas, 2017). Implicit in these demands was the issue of the representation of Islam in Catalonia, with the suspension of the institutional support given by the Catalan government to the *Consell Islàmic i Cultural de Catalunya* (Catalan Islamic and Cultural Council), with which it signed a collaboration agreement in 2002. The situation of de facto non-representation of Islam in Catalonia, despite the repeated complaints made by Muslim communities, did not seem to concern the Catalan institutions before the attacks. But afterwards, it was necessary to show who was who and stage the existence of these dialogues. The first test had to be passed in the hours following the attacks with the presence of Muslim representatives on television stations, and then at the reception given by the president of the Catalan government on August 21st. In both cases, voices were soon being raised from within these communities questioning the representativeness of certain people at

these events. This is not a new phenomenon. It has been going on for years in Catalonia and the Catalan political institutions are perfectly aware of it. Hence the degree of confusion produced by the absence of a minimally representative structure among Catalan Muslims.

The meeting held on December 21st in the headquarters of the Ministry of Governance of the government of Catalonia, presided over by the councillor herself and accompanied by the director of religious affairs aimed to relieve this absence. According to an article published by *El Punt Avui* (September 22), “the meeting was held at the request of the councillor, who wants to begin a process of working with the Islamic communities, and it was agreed to continue holding regular meetings with the aim of reaching agreements” (Roruera, 2017). The image showing the participants in this meeting, the first held after the attacks, again raised suspicions in various sectors of the Muslim community, who publicly expressed their doubts about the representativeness of some of the people invited to this meeting on social media. What is true is that some of them are part of sociocultural bodies that are long established in Catalonia, despite, nominally, not being able to be considered religious bodies or as representatives of Muslim communities.

Once again the difficulty of forming a minimally representative organisation of Islam in Catalonia has been made clear. But one of the collateral effects of the attacks has already begun to emerge in the form of the first reactions from within this network of associations, because a range of actors (specifically the large mosques that host significant numbers of worshippers) want to play a greater role, meaning that some of the previously existing balances may be changed.

An inherited exclusion

The most important questions that must be resolved after what happened are connected to the doubts about *why*. It will still be some time before more details can be accessed about the social contexts and family and personal circumstances that shaped the lives of the young people who participated in these attacks. But it is the moment to articulate some thoughts that might help understand what happened in Ripoll, which could happen again in any other town or neighbourhood in Catalonia. On *Critic.cat*, the sociologist Santi Eizaguirre (2017) published a very interesting article in which he explained the socioeconomic setting of Ripoll and the area in which it is located. I believe that some of his points are particularly important for defining the environment that hosted the processes that activated the fatal outcome. Eizaguirre says:

“Ripoll [...] is also a southern European city, ageing and impoverished. [...] The best educated young people do not find many opportunities – they leave for nearby cities and do not return to the area. [...] In the case of those involved in the attacks, it becomes clear that young people cannot be treated as a group in a broad, homogeneous sense” (Eizaguirre, 2017).

What the author suggests, as well as describing a context of prolonged structural crisis in a mountain region, is that, despite the fact that social inclusion dynamics may exist that join spaces and institutions to each other, a restricted range of opportunities remains that forces them to emigrate and seek other more favourable places to progress professionally. His final comment suggesting the existence of features that differentiate the group of young people and prevent them from being treated as a homogeneous whole I interpret as another new argument supporting the idea that the young men who carried out the attacks were at no point treated like the rest. They were never one of us, because their families weren't either. We never valued their socialising role, nor did we understand why they wanted their sons and daughters to follow in their footsteps. We did not value their cultural baggage, or their language, not to mention their beliefs. We resisted those beliefs entering the school, and we wanted them to base themselves on our identity without right of reply. They live among us, but we have never considered them to be just another member of our community. Our indifference towards their project of cultural transfer and continuity has led their two main social institutions, the family and the mosque, into crisis.

Alain Badiou (2016: 71) argued that the origin of the young people is fairly unimportant – their spiritual, religious origins and so on – what counts is the choice they made with regard to their frustration. And in this there are significant differences between parents and children, because some have lived in diametrically different socioeconomic circumstances. We still have not been able to assess the effect of the economic crisis on migrant groups, especially Moroccans. We know significant displacement of families has resulted to other European areas with better opportunities, but we do not know the impact of this loss of human capital. The crisis has temporarily coincided with the age many young people of Moroccan origin enter the labour market, whether they have finished their studies or not. This crisis was triggered among the parents, expelling them from productive sectors in which they had been for years, but we still do not know what impact it will have on young people starting their first jobs. And, following Eizaguirre (2017), here it does not help us to apply the estimates of youth unemployment as a whole without making specific reference to young people from Moroccan families.

It is clear that the sense of frustration these young people may experience when they see themselves displaced within the society in which they have been educated and raised is proportional to the fact that they have been socialised within it, and mastered many of its codes and rules, in contrast to their parents. In the Schutz (1974: 107) text already quoted, he dared to state that the stranger makes an effort to investigate the cultural pattern of the group they are joining, and when they manage to recognise and adopt these principles, it can be said that their integration process has been successful and “then the stranger is no stranger any more, and his specific problems have been solved”. Although it is very likely that he was not thinking about young people whose parents emigrated years before.

In Ripoll, as in other parts of Catalonia, there is a corner where the boys of Moroccan origin meet in the afternoon. There is another corner where adult Moroccan men meet, chatting in the open air in the early spring heat, waiting for prayer time. Both presences are well-established in our social environment, like the groups of regulars at one bar or another, or the retirees playing petanque. Their presence, like that of the small groups of women in hijabs walking towards the market on Monday, attracts nobody's attention. Nobody is bothered by them, as we've all seen each other, despite the fact that we have never exchanged a word. Nobody asks about anybody and discreetly all return to the intimacy that is important only to a few. A courteous indifference indicates an absence of conflicts to us, no worry fills us because we do not know what is happening. And in the meantime many identities continue to grow out in the open.

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