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Anti-anti-catalanism

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"Està prohibit fumar a les andanes del Metro" ("It's forbidden to smoke on the platforms of the Metro") was the only phrase that P. knew how to say in Catalan. I met him at the start of his stay in Barcelona and he repeated the entreaty with sarcasm, imitating the same, recorded voice that one hears in the tunnels of the underground. One might think initially, that he did so joking about what these words represented: the culture of the institution and the preservation of order. But by contagion his words also became a joke about Catalan itself which, more than as a cultural element, the artist probably perceived as a mechanism of the state apparatus.

Amongst the local artistic community, P. would have barely heard Catalan spoken, yet in contrast, this language was left impregnated with the same instructive and coercive messages as where he heard it used. As far as he perceived, it was as if Barcelona had a specialised language relating to the "monopoly of legitimate force" which Max Weber indicated as being definitive of the formation of state. And, if this is the case one would have to admit that the Catalan language, which the Catalan institutions devote themselves to preserving, has ended up being perceived as a language used specifically for the preservation of order.

Or at least this is how I explain to myself why this artist in question, as well as so many others, and probably an important part of the contemporary creative art sector in Barcelona, have become accustomed to disdaining the particularities of Catalan culture. An art scene that to start with would be dedicated to cultural analysis, fascinated by local peculiarities, minority cultures and the postcolonial discourse, so how can it be that it has tended to adopt positions that so often, artistically but also politically, seem closer to being *anti-Catalan*?

Nationalism of the oppressed

"There are 'Catalan nationalists' because there are 'Spanish nationalists", wrote Joan Fuster in 1980 (1). According to the essayist from Valencia, a key figure in Catalan nationalism in the second half of the 20th century, Catalan nationalism wouldn´t have arisen spontaneously nor have structured itself autonomously, so much as it did so in reaction to Spanish nationalism and the elimination of Catalan rights that were carried out in line with this ideology. Seen in this way, Catalan culture could be counted amongst the oppressed cultures that, according to Hal Foster, have awoken the interest of artists from all over, particularly from the 1990 onwards, with the irradiation of which what he calls the "paradigm of the artist as ethnographer" According to the North-American critic, in the context of globalization, artists have perceived oppressed cultures as places from where dominant cultures can be subverted, and have therefore proceeded to take an interest in "the oppressed, post-colonial, subaltern or subcultural other" (2).

But if we return to Fuster, we realise that when Catalan is referred to, it's not done so to talk of an oppressed *culture*, so much as an "oppressed nationalism". According to the writer, "state-nationalisms have had the historic mission of making war between each other", and for this reason, "one nationalism is as repugnant as another". Yet Fuster believes that "we ought to make a concession to the nationalism of the oppressed: the oppressed nationalities". And he considers, therefore, the case of Catalan nationalism as "a lesser evil" given that ultimately Spanish nationalism is the guilty party (3).

We resort however to Ernest Gellner, an anthropologist and theoretician of nationalism, to realise that, if we apply the prerogative of Fuster, in reality any nationalism would end up being considered "a lesser evil". According to Gellner, the ability of nationalism is to present the formation of a state as something natural and particular to a specific culture: "nationalism sustains that [state and nation] are made for each another". (4) Without the question of the state, nationalism doesn't make sense and we could therefore think that the difference that Fuster proposes between some "repugnant state-nationalisms" and some "oppressed nationalisms" has no raison d'être. Nationalist ideology in itself implicitly brings with it the existence of a state and any nationalism, without a state, can have no other vocation than that of wanting to achieve its own.

Fuster would probably also have considered Catalan nationalism as a "lesser evil" in that he sees it as "timidly vindicatory", (5) and probably a passing phase, that will dissipate once it achieves its goal. But, according to Gellner, this is highly improbable as the moment that it has a state at its disposal, the nationalist principle will continue its vigil, to ensure that its principles aren't violated, while maintaining the congruence of national and political unity. For a Catalan nationalist, therefore, the bad news is that in Gellner's eyes there is no exemption for the victim, and that Fuster's phrase "there are Catalan nationalists because there are Spanish nationalists" is, in effect, as true as the reverse: "there are Spanish nationalists because there are Catalan nationalists".

On the other hand, I'm not sure to what extent it will seem good news to a Catalan nationalist that in the eyes of P., Catalan culture has already become perfectly articulated as national, to the point of being confused as a state culture, one that in no sense is perceived as oppressed. Albeit that as compensation he found this culture fairly anodyne and of little interest. I don't believe that nationalism in itself or nationalist aspirations are what makes artist ethnographers or multiculturalists hang back when attending to the particularities of Catalan culture in their projects. It's about something that derives from it, the articulation of a culture as national that ends up presenting it as something totally self-sufficient, congruent, institutionally protected and as natural, to a specific community. Just as Zygmunt Bauman indicates: "to become national, culture would have to begin denying that it consisted of a project, it would have to disguise itself as natural". (6)

The emphasis that Catalan institutions place on interpreting culture in a national tone, alongside the relative –or, in any case, mixed- impact that Catalan has in many social ambits, can generate nothing more than a disaffection with the official side of the dichotomy. In any case, for a large number of us, who have incorporated as Catalans an important quantity of identifiable cultural patterns in our *formatting*, and who, at the same time are close to relativism and the multicultural discourse, nowadays it's disconcerting to work out where to situate ourselves in relation to this debate: between a *Catalanism* that has tended to disguise itself as the victim, and a "lesser evil", but which when all is said and done proceeds to the national articulation of cultural elements with the same "repugnance" that nation-states have made; and an exacerbated *anti-Catalanism* that, saving a few officious and official loudspeakers –or perhaps because of them-, continues to inundate daily life.

Without ambassadors nor ethnographers

"We live in a time when it is already possible to use the Ikurriña in the way Jasper Johns used the American flag, that is to say, with critical-ironic distance and a lack of sentimentalism". (7) Peio Aguirre published this declaration of Txomin Badiola from the year 2000, in an article that dealt with the environment of the "local factor" that in those times began to proliferate amongst artists of the Basque country. For "local factor", he considered the use of local iconography in artistic projects, a constant in the case of Badiola: "hooded men, Athletic Bilbao, historic Basque nationalist posters, Oteiza, images of the 'culture of violence', etc.", which the artist deals with indistinctly from "the appropriation of drag-queens to the camouflage aesthetics of New York". (8)

In an interview with Manel Clot from that time, Badiola emphasised the "political dimension" that invades everything in the Basque cultural landscape, which ends up being unavoidable, while at the same time appearing "post-modernized", with a growing schizophrenia between "what it defends and the way of life". (9) "Desire, irrationality and the fragmentation of the subject" are aspects that, according to Aguirre, define the work of Badiola, despite its "local factor". (10) Or, precisely, through it, due to the experience of a national culture that has become irredeemably heart-breaking and traumatic; due to the conflict of terrorist action, just as Aguirre indicates, but also for the pacts that the Basque culture has established with globalization precisely by calling the visual arts into play, with the Guggenheim in Bilbao as the flagship.

In any case, Badiola, according to Aguirre, along with Asier Pérez, Jon Mikel Euba, Ibon Aranberri, Iñaki Garmienda and Asier Mendizabal, have lead to an "anthropological and sociological gaze" on their context that approximates the artist "to the role of cultural or political ambassador". Likewise he considers that from this position, art is being used "as a means of making it possible to renegotiate the concept of identity and nationalism, without for this having to deal with the issue in an aggressive, exclusive or dogmatic manner". (11)

Hal Foster foresees that the artist as ethnographer when he resorts to the oppressed culture, with his expectations of subverting the dominant culture, doesn't end up overly identifying with the other culture, aligning it in accord with his own parameters and suppositions. For this reason he demands critical distance and a capacity to place the representation of alterity in relation to an analysis of his own point of view; that is, his own cultural narrative, in which the artist is equally immersed as when he enters into interaction with the other culture. "Framing the framer when this frames the other" is the well-known suggestion that Foster finally makes to the artist ethnographer when he adapts to the "contradictory status of alterity".

With the "critical-ironic distance and lack of sentimentalism" that Badiola predicates with regard to the Ikurriña, as well as with Aguirre's consideration that in the works of Basque artists it's hard to interpret a "state of pro or contra" regarding national culture, (12) these "ambassadors" and ethnographers of their own cultural environments would have to eradicate, if nothing else, the reductive over-identification that Foster speaks of. In relation to the local particularities, their projects can be considered in a large part as experiments, amongst which the question of a national culture, more than a self-sufficient monolith, would be explored as just one more space for the negotiation of difference.

We won't enter here into evaluating the corresponding projects in detail. In our case, pointing out the relation that these artists maintain with the "local factor" only aims to contrast it with the situation in Catalonia, where the very danger of over-identification that Foster indicates would probably have to be substituted for its contrary; a danger of dis-identification. An excess of distance with regard to the Catalan culture and, in particular, towards the elements and symbols that are identifiably nationalist, have made these questions practically disappear from the stories that artists realize with cultural practices and the construction of identity. This being the case in the work of indigenous artists as much as that of foreign, artist ethnographers.

Faced with a national culture that is established as a continuum, practically without fissures, presented as alien to discrepancy, or miscegenation, something to be preserved immaculate, one could think that the contemporary, fragmented subject and irony of Badiola would have it more difficult to find their place. On the other hand, amongst the few projects that make explicit reference to these aspects of national culture that spring to mind, those of a caricaturist nature occupy a special place, as is the case of "Tothom estima a Catalunya" (2008), by Ana García-Pineda or the contemporary auca (cartoon strip) by David Bestué and Marc Vives, "Moments rellevants de la Catalunya contemporània" (2005).

Despite the fact that humour –more than irony- is a key element amongst the artists of the generation that I am referring to, I believe that it is still somewhat symptomatic that Catalan national symbols don't appear in contemporary art unless by means of the very "excess of distance" from what, in these two cases, is the butt of their joke. Catalan culture is usually identified with a purified construction, devoid of conflict, stabilised, inoffensive, almost naïf. In current artistic production, more than as a space for cultural negotiation, hybridisation and the deployment of identities from a postmodern or postcolonial perspective, Catalan culture generally appears as a peculiarity that in reality seems to have become disjointed from daily life, something that is practically extemporary.

Anti + anti ≠ pro

"I don't believe that those of us who are opposed to increased legal restrictions on abortion are pro-abortion, in the sense that we think abortion is a wonderful thing and hold that the greater the abortion rate the greater the well-being of society; we are 'anti-anti-abortionists'". (13)

The demonstration that Clifford Geertz offers in the case of abortion, is I believe the clearest way to explain the position that the anthropologist proposed in the lecture he gave, in 1983, with the title "Anti-anti-relativism". This concept of "anti-anti-relativism", served Geertz to challenge at one and the same time both relativism and anti-relativism, while also suggesting the possibility of opening up a path through the dichotomy by testing out a third, alternative via, which was the fruit of the "double negative" itself. (14)

Of the first, relativism, Geertz questioned the issue of the supra-cultural and supra-historic observation that is usually attributed to the cultural analyst. However much his work is developed from an academy or linked to a laboratory it is a fantasy of the relativist to imagine himself beyond the margins that determine any cultural framework, presenting himself in the face of controversies as impartial and as "sceptic to emotions as his white coat". (15) But not for this, was Geertz disposed to succumb to the opposing siren call, that of anti-relativism, which in reality he considers even more inadmissible. In this case, due to the ethnocentricity of anti-relativism and the transposition that is made of some specific cultural peculiarities to universal values.

Having reached this point, the anthropologist considers that the attraction of the "double negative" lies in that it doesn't function according to the usual logic, in which *anti + anti = pro*. As the case of abortion easily demonstrates, the double negative in some cases also "enables us to reject something without committing ourselves to what the thing rejects". (16) That is to say, according to Geertz, an *anti + anti ≠ pro* is also possible. And, therefore, with the concept, "anti-anti-relativism", Geertz denies anti-relativism, without for this wanting to identify himself, once again, with its point of departure.

As far as he proposes, anti-anti-relativism ought to serve as a sort of corrector in relation to relativism: the ethnographer, while requiring relativism for an analysis of how the frames of reference of the other culture have an impact on the articulation of the criteria of objectivity, would also at the same time finally have to consider his own specific point of view, not as someone impartial, as a possibly a-cultural prism, so much as a construction that is equally culturally determined. Here, in order to establish a negotiation on equal terms, between the points of view of the native and the explorer, the latter would ultimately have to apply an anti-anti-relativist perspective, that would lead him to visualize how one's own system of beliefs also enters into play in the actual process of cultural interaction. In this sense, anti-anti-relativism is probably is not so distant from the "paral-lactic focus " that, years later Hal Foster popularised in relation to the artistic practices that we commented on before.

In any case, the dissatisfaction that we have proposed in our case between the pro and the *anti* position, in relation to Catalanism, is what leads me now to experiment with the possibility of applying the formula of Geertz to this question. My wish is to propose the possibility of an "anti-anti-Catalanism", an exercise that, in reality, requires turning on its head the directionality with which the anthropologist resolves his diatribe. Unlike anti-anti-relativism, on this occasion the challenge is to propose a local peculiarity as a point of view that, as in the case of relativism, has been projected as supra-cultural. (17) In this case, with the double negative, we refer inversely to the possibility of injecting new doses of relativism when approaching and interacting with the ethnographic peculiarities of Catalonia.

According to the formula of Geertz, we propose therefore, anti-anti-Catalanism as a position that openly confronts anti-Catalanism, but despite this doesn't return to the defence of Catalan culture in a nationalistic tone. As we've seen, while Catalanism is currently experienced as obsolete by an important part of the sector of artistic creation, an anti-Catalanist stance is also probably inadmissible for a large number of its agents.

Anti-anti-Catalanism proposes that the local peculiarities and Catalan symbols also form part of the circuitry that constitutes us, even though, more than their *naturalization* as a national culture, it proposes the invention of practical and interpretative solutions to place them in relation with the challenges of times past. Anti-anti-Catalanism is an invitation to go beyond the mere "being for or against", in this way rearticulating aspects of Catalan culture within the cultural production of today, as this substrate is something that also exists in our individual and collective constructions, as well as in other multiple dimensions, albeit in a hybrid and mixed form. Because, ultimately, the same circumstance that causes aspects identifiable as Catalan to be forgotten when we refer to the production of contemporary culture, in reality is as obnoxious as when Catalan culture is proposed as a self-sufficient and closed unity.

Trojan Horses

"We'll be the Trojan horse of the popular classes in the Parliament of Catalonia" was the most memorable declaration of the central meeting of the CUP, Candidatura d'Unitat Popular, in the last regional elections for the Generalitat of Catalonia, in November 2012. David Fernández (18), who headed the party's list of candidates, in this way invoked a passage from Greek mythology that also has a particular resonance in the artistic sector: the Trojan horse, the same one that Lucy R. Lippard proposed in her famous essay as "probably, the first activist work of art". (19)

Anti-anti-Catalanism wants to serve to experiment with the possibility of a cultural stance and policy, more than merely serving as an attribute with which to explain art projects or detect a trend. Even so I'd like to end mentioning one specific project, "El Gegant-Menhir" by Lola Lasurt, which I was involved with, as a curator at the Museu Joan Abelló in Mollet del Vallès in 2011. It dealt precisely with a Trojan horse that endeavoured to introduce urban planning and social problems into the public sphere of the city. On this occasion, however, more than a wooden horse, a large battery of "local factors", such as elements of the history of the place and symbols linked to the Catalan culture, were deployed to camouflage the artillery.

The project stemmed from the gigantic menhir that had been found in Mollet del Vallès a few years before. With the excuse of making a Gegant (giant), to pay homage to it, a collective process was initiated with entities and inhabitants from the city to concoct the legend that would relate it to the artefact, as is established by the tradition of giants in Catalonia. Yet Lasurt knew from the start that by calling for a story from the community, inevitably the rumours and criticism circulating at that time, around the conditions that had made the discovery of the menhir possible, would seep out: a case of urban speculation and the truculent story of the demolition of a community centre. The construction of the Gegant-Menhir thus became the possibility of inscribing these controversies in the epidermis of a menhir that had rapidly become a local symbol that would end up not just informing about Neolithic culture but would also do the same for the circumstances of the time.

The collective concoction of the giant, the design of the corresponding parade and the realization of an auca that narrated the legend, were the elements that enabled the filtering of new statements into the public sphere. While at the same time these very elements were submitted to a process of deconstruction and above all reactivation, towards directions that would initially have been considered inappropriate. From its fossilization within the national, candy-coated, folk culture, the project connected the symbol that is the giant, as well as the auca as a narrative form, with issues of the present; while at the same time, these elements provided new ways of dealing with them and calling them into debate.

According to Lippard, the activist artist who identifies with the Trojan horse acts at the same time both "inwards and outwards". That is to say, "through subversion, on the one hand and mobilization on the other, activist art acts as much on the inside as beyond the frontiers of this besieged fortress that is official culture or the 'art world'.". (20) In the case of "El Gegant Menhir", Catalan symbolism is what makes possible the infiltration of the artistic device and local controversy into the social fabric. So if we follow the pattern that Lippard exposes we observe that it also has an impact within the art system, in the pressure that this project inevitably exercised on the limits of the local museum where it was produced. Finally in relation to the anti-anti-Catalanist vocation of "El Gegant Menhir", it's also possible to evaluate a certain impact of the project in relation to its other institutional articulation, when the exercise of appropriation and denationalization of Catalan symbols was carried out with the collaboration of the Colla Gegantera and other pro-Catalan entities of the city.

Anti-anti-Catalanism is a stance with which to eradicate the ballast that nationalism has placed on certain aspects of Catalan culture, that if on the one hand naturalizes it as a culture of the state, on the other, makes it difficult to place them in correspondence with current challenges and articulate them within contemporary cultural production. But is it really possible to imagine local art production reconciled with Catalan culture? And correspondingly, can we imagine experimental processes,

such as those proposed by El Gegant-Menhir, also having an impact on reviving those cultural aspects that the institutions shelter?

In any case, I doubt that a project like this would be enough to convince even P. that Catalan culture has some plastic possibilities that go beyond the recorded voice that prohibits smoking on the metro. So, as far as the institutional anthem and Catalanist politics are concerned, while we are no doubt light years from the war cry of CUP being genuinely anti-anti-Catalanist and substituting the Trojan horse so as to more explicitly contextualise it while at the same time freeing it from the national corset. One possibility: “We’ll be a Gegant-Menhir of the popular classes in the Parliament of Catalonia”.

Notes:

1. FUSTER, Joan (1980): “Pròleg”, a: Xavier Arbós i Antoni Puigsec: Franco i l’espanyolisme. Curial, Barcelona. p. 12.
2. FOSTER, Hal (2001): The Return of the Real: The Avante-Garde at the End of the Century, MIT Press, 1996
3. FUSTER, Op. cit., p. 12.
4. GELLNER, Ernest (1988): Naciones y nacionalismo. Alianza Universidad, Madrid. P. 19.
5. FUSTER, Op. cit., p. 7.
6. BAUMAN, Zygmunt, Culture as praxis
7. AGUIRRE, Peio (2001): “Basque Report 2.0”, a: Lápiz. N. 178. P. 54. Published originally on artzin.net in December 2000. My thanks to Asier Mendizabal for having facilitated this reference as well as for the conversation we had surrounding the proposals that I’ve developed in this text.
8. AGUIRRE, Op. cit., p. 50
9. CLOT, Manel (2002): “Viure la seva vida”, a: Malas formas. Txomin Bodiola, 1990-2002. Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Barcelona. P. 161.
10. AGUIRRE, Op. cit., p. 50.
11. AGUIRRE, Op. cit., p. 57.
12. AGUIRRE, Op. cit., p. 57.
13. GEERTZ, Clifford : Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics
14. Clifford Geertz explains that it is during the Cold War that different intellectuals from the United States resorted to identifying themselves as “anti-anti-communists”, in their opposition to the witch-hunt initiated by Senator McCarthy. According to Frederic Jameson, on the other, the formula of “anti-anti” was formulated for the first time by Jean Paul Sartre, also in relation to his position regarding communism: “this ingenious political slogan that Sartre invented, to find his way between a flawed communism and an even more unacceptable anti-communism”. JAMESON, Fredric (2005): Archaeologies of the Future
15. GEERTZ, Clifford (2010): “El pensar en cuanto acto moral: las dimensiones éticas del trabajo de campo en los nuevos estados”, a: Los usos de la diversidad. Paidós, Barcelona/ Buenos Aires/ Mèxic P. 60.
16. GEERTZ, Op. cit., p. 96.
17. The question of relativism, as a peculiarity of Western culture, is developed by Richard Rortry, above all in his response to the same lecture by Clifford Geertz. RORTRY, Richard (1996): “Sobre el etnocentrismo: respuesta a Clifford Geertz”, a Objetividad, relativismo y verdad. Paidós, Barcelona/ Buenos Aires/ Mexico. Pp. 275 – 284.
18. David Fernández: ‘Serem un cavall de Troia de les classes populars al Parlament’”, in: Ara. 18-11-2012.
19. LIPPARD, Lucy R. (2001): “Caballos de Troya: arte activista y poder”, a: Brian Wallis (ed.), Arte después de la modernidad. Nuevos planteamientos en torno a la representación. Akal, Madrid. P. 343.
20. LIPPARD, Op. cit., pp. 343 i 344.