Civility, Empathy, Democracy and Memory
Exploring the ‘we’ in compromised times

M A R I A M. D E L G A D O

‘Democratic societies are civil and civic societies’, my father once told me. As a child, he had seen his native Spain torn apart by civil war. His father had been killed in the conflict, alongside uncles and cousins. Other family members had died in Franco prisons in the post-war years. Sent to the UK with his 6-year-old sister as a child refugee, he remained in England until his early seventies – separated from his mother and younger brother who stayed behind in the Basque Country. He had witnessed what a dictatorship does to human rights: families separated, dissidents tortured, individuals imprisoned without proper trials or appropriate legal representation. Democracies he believed were places where you could hold an alternative opinion and not risk public humiliation, imprisonment, torture or death for doing so. Dictatorships see the world in black and white: you are with us or against us; there are no grey areas. It is the responsibility of the processes established by a democracy to ensure that humanity is encouraged to look, listen and rationalize before pontificating, pronouncing or ruling. Dictatorships coerce; democracies converse. Dictatorships assume guilt; democracies assume innocence until proven otherwise. Democracies should function according to principles of respect and civility, and an understanding of the importance of ensuring that human rights are recognized and protected.

In the piece that follows, I offer a number of thoughts on civility and its relationship to democracy and empathy inspired by events (both political and cultural) in late 2017 and 2018. I understand civility not as decorum or deference but rather as what Keith J. Bybee terms ‘a threshold condition that precedes and permits the kinds of interaction required by the other codes of conduct’ (2016: 10). Civility is here viewed as the cornerstone of civitas or citizenship: a political body of citizens bound in to codes that shape – and indeed ideally help to better - the structures of society.

The observations I present are a way of reflecting on the temper of our times, a way of asking questions about how we engage with one another in ways that help to promote understanding and respect and the role that culture can play in facilitating this process. I comment on a film I saw in 2018 that deliberates on how ‘we’ may achieve change and how ‘we’ is constituted and operates. Finally, in turning to the current constitutional crisis in Spain, I consider two cultural events. The first is a production drawing on verbatim interviews with Civil War veterans that engages with issues around memory, community, civility and camaraderie and how these relate to the ways in which communities may seek to find points of convergence and understanding in troubled times. The second is a new spoof political movement formed by one of Catalonia’s most important writer-directors that has sought to question the bipolar rhetoric of the separatist movement and its diverting of attention from the serious corruption scandals that have beset Catalonia.

Civility and Empathy

Civility involves empathy. It is also fundamentally rooted in a need to listen, and listening is about recognizing that others may not think as you do. They may hold different opinions and principles. Diversity and equality are rooted in a recognition that all persons should be treated with respect whatever position they come from. For Emmanuel Levinas (2002 [1969]), the perspective of an Other can never be as knowable as our own; perspective is shaped by an individual’s experiences and desires, and comparisons are inevitably to self: to a belief system and a frame of reference that has been shaped by a series of factors. It is what so often erases difference and makes empathy so difficult. The co-founder of Cheek by Jowl, Declan Donnellan, on receiving the Golden Lion of
Venice Biennale for lifetime achievement in 2016 spoke about theatre as a means for one group of people to look at another group of people doing something (Donnellan 2016). For this practitioner, theatre’s importance lies in allowing those who are part of the encounter to develop their empathy and empathy lies in sharp contrast to sympathy, which is about reinforcing similarity: ‘I am the same as you. I feel the same as you.’ Empathy is the opposite. It is ultimately about ‘understanding we have no idea about what the other person is thinking’. Empathy recognizes difference. Sympathy does not. ‘We need to have an empathetic connection to understand,’ Donnellan states. ‘For just to see that another human being is different to me is the first act of any political discussion’ (2016). Donnellan’s words resonate for me because like him I feel we are drowning in sympathy – think like me, do like me – but failing to consider the need for empathy.

One of the reasons I so admired Robin Campillo’s 2017 film 120 BPM is because it negotiates the tricky terrain of empathy. Mapping the political structures of resistance, it focuses on a dozen ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) activists in 1980s Paris attempting to raise awareness of the policies of the pharmaceutical companies who were refusing to allow AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) patients access to drugs that were their only hope of staying alive. They don’t agree on the tactics needed to achieve their overarching aim. Nevertheless, they remain in the same room, working together to find a common way forward. Sean (Nahuel Pérez Biscayart) is dying but he continues to work with Thibault (Antoine Reinartz) and Sophie (Adèle Haenel) even though they don’t often agree about the best way of mobilizing the government into legislative change. They argue, and the discussions are rambling and messy, but the group recognize the need to work through the issues; they promote a model of civility based on a need to make visible lives that have been rendered invisible. Their civility is based in a commitment to citizenship: a collective belief that the need for change, the need to save lives is more important than anything else. And it is this acknowledgement of the importance of negotiating these differences that makes the film so memorable and inspiring.

In the current climate of neo-liberalism, it is the ‘I’ that prevails. I. Me. Not We. Not Us. 120 BPM is about the pain of the We. The problems of the We. The differences that exist within the We. We is not a single unit. It may not always be united, but it agrees on a shared purpose that recognizes things that should be different. Things should be better. They need to be better.

THE RHETORIC OF ANTAGONISM

We live in a moment in history where the leader of the Western world promotes a culture of belligerent sympathy where civility plays no part: or, in Donnellan’s words, ‘You’re my friend, you’re my friend, you are not my friend.’ All black and white. All absolute. No recognition of the validity of other views. Chantal Mouffe sees agonism as fundamental to ‘a project of radical and plural democracy’ which ‘requires the existence of multiplicity, of plurality and of conflict, and sees in them the raison d’etre of politics’ (2005: 18). Political discourse is currently dominated not by the ‘democratic matrix’ proposed by Mouffe where difference can be debated but by a culture of adversarial incivility which is based on exclusion and the closing down of discussion (see Mouffe 2005:9-22, 57; Gorka 2018). There is no listening – just slurring pronouncements thrown across the divide of a parliamentary space. Say it often enough and forcefully enough and it becomes truth. Harsh rhetoric and declining political civility have, in the words of Gerald F. Seib (2018),...
can be posted cheaply and swiftly, and you can run away from the consequences, you create the conditions for a culture of irresponsibility. It is too easy to say you disagree with Trump while employing his tactics to similar ends: to hurl abuse, to embarrass, to consolidate one set of opinions as (fake) truth. For lending her name to a letter calling for due process to be followed for cases of sexual misconduct (2018), Margaret Atwood was vilified in social media (Gorka 2018). She recognized the frustration of individuals who have not been able to get a fair hearing through institutions and corporate structures – this is wrong and must be addressed – but questioned whether the Internet is an appropriate tool for conducting such hearings, calling instead for systems to ensure the core protection of human rights for all. Writing about the grey area, the terrain of the equivocal and the ambiguous that demands human reasoning, evaluation and interpretation, she observed:

In times of extremes, extremists win. Their ideology becomes a religion, anyone who doesn’t puppet their views is seen as an apostate, a heretic or a traitor, and moderates in the middle are annihilated. Fiction writers are particularly suspect because they write about human beings, and people are morally ambiguous. The aim of ideology is to eliminate ambiguity. (Atwood 2018)

Atwood advocates for culture as a space for promoting understanding, respect and responsibility in Levinas’s definition of the term (1985: 97). The toxic aggression that has governed discussions of Brexit has seen Europe reduced to a market economy, a place for trade and commerce, without any due consideration of a European vision built on the need to avoid the conflicts that had resulted in the human carnage of two world wars. Both Scotland’s Edinburgh and France’s Avignon Festival were established in the aftermath of World War II as a way of thinking about how culture may provide a mechanism that would unite rather than separate Europe and promote an understanding of difference – linguistic, artistic or political. Culture as a space for asking difficult questions without the need to provide the closure of easy answers.

Europe is no longer perceived as a heterogeneous space for encounter across linguistic and cultural difference but the dangerous other that saps the British Isles of its financial resources. By blaming Europe and the maligned European Union for the folly of government policies, responsibility can be evaded. Throw blame at others and run away from the consequences.

But civility recognizes the importance of taking responsibility for one’s actions. It recognizes the position of someone who thinks differently, speaks differently and behaves differently. Is it any wonder that the UK voted for Brexit when its language learning – with the beneficial cultural understandings it offers for thinking through difference – languishes so far below that of other parts of Europe. In Luxembourg, 100 per cent of upper secondary school students learn two or more languages, with figures of 98.6 per cent and higher recorded in Finland, Romania, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and France. The United Kingdom has the lowest share of secondary school students learning a second language, less than 10 per cent – a figure shared with Portugal and Greece (Eurostat 2018; Paton 2011). In 2004, the Labour government halted compulsory language lessons for pupils aged 14 or over and the figures speak for themselves: only 47.6 per cent of 16-year-olds took a GCSE in a foreign language in 2015; in 1998, the figure was 85.5% (Griffin 1998). If systems for promoting an understanding of difference are being eroded, how can we hope to promote greater understanding and tolerance? And what does that mean for civility?

3 London’s Polish Embassy reported ten incidents of xenophobic violence in the North of England reported in the weeks following the murder of Arkadiusz Ioswik in Harlow. See Bilefsky (2016).
RECOGNIZING OTHERNESS

Multilingualism is a place where otherness – the strangeness of linguistic difference – is negotiated. In Catalonia, where bilingualism has been such a key part of the region’s identity, the move towards separatism and the questioning of the legitimacy of a second language has seen levels of xenophobia and supremacism that refuse to recognize the importance of empathy in political discourse. Quim Torra, who took office as Catalan President on 15 May 2018, has promoted a polarized discourse, denouncing those who oppose the Catalan language and traditions as bèsties (beasts). His promotion of a treatise denounced as ‘perillós, irresponsable i inacceptable’ (dangerous, irresponsible and unacceptable) by the anti-racist SOS Racisme Catalunya (2016) has further legitimized a rhetoric that dehumanizes as hyenas, vipers and unnatural those who speak Spanish in Catalonia (Torra 2012). SOS Racisme Catalunya have not traded in insults but rather sought to denormalize Torra’s rhetoric; to refer to a nation’s people as ‘filth’ cannot aid in promoting the empathy and understanding that conflict resolution needs.

Culture can offer a space for recognizing otherness. Ajax, the earliest of Sophocles’ tragedies, written at a time when democracy was itself being constituted, recognizes the need for respect for one’s enemies. Agamemnon and Menelaus permit Ajax a proper burial. In Sophocles’ Antigone, the title protagonist similarly argues for the need to bury her brother Polynices who has been left to rot while his brother Eteocles has been given a hero’s burial. Civility and respect are presented as cornerstones of a democracy. It is not difficult to see why, in a country with more than 100,000 corpses lying in mass graves from the Civil War and the Franco era, Antigone resonates (see Delgado 2017b). The Greeks made work that encouraged an empathetic position from an audience. These plays examined the terrain of doubt and dissent, the grey area of moral and political responsibility rather than the black and white of absoluteness. These plays continue to illustrate Bybee’s observation that ‘civility does not exist outside of politics as an independent force that restrains and pacifies our disputes. Instead, civility is itself a subject of political struggle and debate, a mode of behavior that is developed and professionally refashioned in the democracy of everyday life’ (2016:69).

Watching the structures of Spain’s young democracy tested during 2018 by the corruption scandals of the right-wing People’s Party government – most conspicuously the Gürtel case that oversaw the payment of bribes for public works contracts⁴ – brief moments of civility have opened a way forward. The toppling of Mariano Rajoy’s government on 1 June by a vote of no confidence called by the Socialist leader Pedro Sánchez was a recognition that a group of parties who did not have the largest vote in the Parliament could unite and create a new government with a commitment both to greater transparency in politics and to the opening of discussions with Catalonia’s separatist-led regional government.

HISTORY, MEMORY, RHETORIC: IN MEMORIAM: LA QUINTA DEL BIBERO

In 2016, my favourite theatre in Spain turned forty. Barcelona’s Teatre Lliure is a space built on the need to ask questions – of texts, of audiences, of theatre itself – as a society began envisaging how to forge a democratic infrastructure in the aftermath of Franco’s death.⁵ One of the works presented by its then artistic director Lluís Pasqual during the anniversary year revolves around issues of memory and testimony, about the histories we construct and the ways in which a nation-state thinks about its past. In Memoriam is a piece of theatre about how a nation remembers and what it remembers – a pertinent issue for Spain, which has grappled with the legacy of the Civil War and its aftermath through much of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In Memoriam constructs an oral history of the Battle of the Ebro, the longest and bloodiest battle of the war (July to November 1938), from the testimonies of the conflict’s youngest conscripted soldiers. Nicknamed ‘the baby bottle brigade’ because of their youth, approximately 30,000 teenagers, born in 1920, were recruited largely from Catalonia to form part of the campaign to fight on the Aragon front in the hope

⁴ For further details, see Pérez (2018). I have dealt with corruption in Spain elsewhere; see Delgado (2017a).
⁵ Founded as a cooperative by six artists in 1976 and originally based in an old workers’ cooperative in Gràcia, it now has its base in the remodelled Palau d’Agricultura building designed by Josep Maria Ribas and Manuel M. Mayol for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition. The Lliure – with a focus on artisanship rather than authorship – blends a repertoire of productions of classical plays with new writing, devised work and international visiting productions.
⁶ Federica Montseny, Minister of Health, on seeing the conscripts allegedly coined the term quinta del biberó (baby bottle brigade): ‘¿A dónde van? Si parece que acaban de arrancarles el biberón de la boca’ (Where are they off to? It looks as if they have just had their bottles taken out of their mouths) (cited in Colomer 2016).

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of defending Valencia. The production is both an elegy to lost youth – 90 per cent of the combatants lost their lives in the battle while survivors were imprisoned inhumanely in concentration or forced labour camps – and a mode of countering narratives that present binary histories of the Civil War – Republican good, Nationalist bad (or vice versa) – into which history has to be made to ‘fit’. In Memoriam is the oral history of a disappearing generation – of the twelve combatants interviewed by Pasqual in preparing the production, all but two have died since the production first opened at Girona’s Temporada Alta Festival in October 2016.

Six young actors take on unnamed characters whose stories move from conscription to death or life post-Ebro, whether in the Argelès-sur-Mer refugee camp or building the Valley of the Fallen. The actors step out of character to discuss the process of creating the roles – a process that illustrates how In Memoriam functions as a way of educating a new generation on the Civil War and its legacy. The production’s actors – aged from 21 to 28 – had little prior knowledge of the Civil War before they embarked on the project. Three did not know the dates of the war and none had heard of La Pasionaria (The Passionflower), Dolores Ibárruri, the Communist Party orator whose political slogans functioned as battle cries for the Republic: ‘Más vale morir de pie que vivir de rodillas. ¡No pasaran!’ (It’s better to die on your feet, than live on your knees. They shall not pass!) (Ortiz 2017). In Memoriam thus becomes a civic project – collecting the stories of those who fought in battle and couldn’t speak of their experiences during the difficult years of the Franco regime or during the pact of silence (also known as the pact of forgetting) that came into being as Spain negotiated its transition to democracy and the nation was encouraged to forget the past and think only of the future. There is a minute’s silence that one of the actors calls for as the production comes to its end and candles are lit to the memory of those who fell. This minute of silence functions as a moment of remembrance but also references the silence of the Franco dictatorship in relation to human rights violations and the pact of silence that followed (see also Balló 2016). These combatants didn’t discuss their experiences with their children; only with a different generation born during the democratic era – their grandchildren – were they able to begin to talk about the horrors they had experienced during the Civil War and the Franco era (Pasqual 2018). But it is not simply the experiences of the survivors that are documented. Letters from those who perished feature. Characters narrate their own death as a way of inscribing their presence into these narratives. The dead haunt the stage – revenants that remind the audience that the foundations of modern Spain are built on the unburied corpses of the Civil War (see Delgado 2015).

In Memoriam gives voice to the dead, but the voice is plural and heterogeneous: voices overlaid, a mix of accents and tones, overlapping Catalan and Castilian, prose and poetry, music and dialogue, projections and live action. Two violinists (Oriol Algueró and Ricart Renart), a cellist (Oriol Aymat), a harpsicord player (Dani Espasa) and a tenor (Robert González) perform Monteverdi’s Il combattimenti di Tancred e Clorinda (The Fight between Tancred and Clorinda) and fragments of Purcell’s King Arthur: remains, slivers and splinters, moments that converge and collide with the fragments of lives narrated and embodied by the actors.

In Memoriam has been criticized for not placing blame firmly and squarely on the insurgents that rose up against a democratically elected government in July 1936 (Navarro 2018). But this is not a work about the achievements of Spain’s Second Republic (1931–9) or the illegitimacy
of Franco’s coup d’état. In Memoriam is about the ways in which Spain may redress a culture of forgetting. Amnesia is a dangerous thing; it doesn’t acknowledge the mistakes of the past or help prepare for the future. It assumes that only the present matters. Amnesia, as my colleague Bryce Lease reminds me, is as much an activity as is remembering (2018). In juxtaposing the rhetoric deployed by Spain's then Prime Minister, Juan Negrín, in order to send Europe a powerful message that the Republic was worth backing, with the narrative testimonies of those who fought at the Front, rhetoric is weighed against actions. These adolescent conscripts were sent to the Ebro with the rhetoric of Negrín’s resistir es vencer (to resist is to win) ringing in their heads. Negrín’s irresponsible oratory sounds alongside Franco’s triumphalist discourse. Rhetoric is used to intoxicate, persuade, cajole, bully and intimidate. As in Irish dramatist Sean O’Casey’s The Plough and the Stars, early enthusiasm for the cause is soon overtaken by the realities of life on the frontline: inadequate weapons, poor leadership and scarce provisions. But the combatants create a community on the battle field. They may not all share the same motivation or belief in the cause but they recognize the importance of camaraderie and support in times of crisis. They listen, they engage and they ask for an acknowledgement of the errors that led to the carnage on the battlefront.

THEATRICALIZING THE SEPARATIST DEBATE: TABARNIA

Until mistakes of the past are recognized and addressed, they continue to haunt the present. And the present in Catalonia and within the wider nation-state of Spain has been dominated by a reckless rhetoric promoted both by Rajoy’s government and the separatist politicians of Junts per Catalunya and Esquerra Republicana. All have prioritized political point scoring over diplomacy and the possibility of a lasting peace. Albert Boadella, founder of performance company Els Joglars and a fierce anti-separatist who was also a founder of the Cuidadanos (Citizens) party in 2005, has created a spoof separatist campaign focused on Tabarnia – a coastal area between Barcelona and Tarragona – that wants independence from Catalonia. Boadella, as Tabarnia’s new president, utilizes the language of the Catalan separatists to articulate his separatist agenda (Tabarna 2018): Boadella’s investiture, undertaken from his ‘exile’ in Madrid, in January of this year echoed that of Carles Puigdemont, the ex-President of the Catalan Parliament who was at that time in Brussels as President in exile.

Boadella’s theatricalization of the separatist debate has involved orchestrating a range of performative events to provide an ongoing running performative commentary on the thorny issue of secession: two websites, television appearances, a social media campaign; an online shop selling branded merchandise; marches and a list of demands: no to speaking Catalan only, no to leaving the EU, no to companies leaving Catalonia, no to going back to 1714 – the year the Bourbon king defeated the Catalan army – no to politicians that divide. Tabarna’s protest is articulated not as playtext or as a contained rehearsed staging but as an ongoing improvisation, devising happening-like responses to the constitutional crisis.

In 1977, Albert Boadella faced imprisonment for his role in an Els Joglars’ production about a 1974 garotte killing undertaken by the military regime on the same day that the Catalan anarchist Salvador Puig Antich was assassinated. It was a production that led to a general strike and contributed to the abolition of censorship in Spain. Forty years on, Boadella continues to ask questions of how democracy functions, how theatre contributes to debate and discussion and

\[^7\] Els Joglars were formed in 1961, promoting a model of performance that used gestural language rather than Castilian (Spanish) that had been imposed as the official language of Catalonia by the Franco regime. Their performance language merged satire with classical mime and drew on modes of collective creation. They continue to make work in their geodesic dome space, la cúpula, close to the town of Pruit, 100 km north of Barcelona.

\[^8\] The movement has two websites. The first, Tabarna Today, announces itself as a platform for the internationalization of the Tabarinian Movement and has a series of materials in Catalan, English and Spanish, https://www.tabarna.today/about. The second is in Spanish and has up to date news and information, https://www.tabarna.org/web

\[\text{Photo Ros Ribas, courtesy of the Teatre Lliure}\]
how to perform an articulation of the implications of political decisions on Catalonia and its people. Salvador Garcia Ruiz, the chief executive of the pro-independence newspaper Ara, may have referred to Tabarnia as ‘something like Peter Pan’s “Neverland” for the unionists’ (cited in Minder 2018), but Tabarnia has highlighted issues of democracy and voting rights and of how to bring together societies where majorities are slight and the consequences of decisions made can be colossal. In the December 2017 elections, for example, separatist parties won 70 of the
135 seats. The city of Barcelona, however, did not support the independence process that Torra is pushing for: separatist parties winning 38 seats, pro-union parties 47. The Tabarnia flag has the following Latin motto on its coat of arms: *Acta est fabula* (play is over) but the performance of Tabarnia, like *In Memoriam*, shows that play is anything but over: rhetorical game play has been central to the escalation of the political crisis in Catalonia. Naïve posturing, empty promises and inflammatory rhetoric lead to disrespect and divisions. As the gaps get wider, the need for measured discussions becomes ever more acute.

**Towards a Culture of Civility**

Working with the opposition is the challenge that now faces Pedro Sánchez’s coalition government. The opposition in central government is led by right-wing hardliner, Pablo Casado – tellingly a former Vice Secretary-General of Communication for the party well versed in headline-grabbing one-liners. His confrontational oratory has demeaned what he terms the historical memory movement and any attempt to redress the crimes of the Franco era (Pérez Mendoza 2018); the Catalan Parliament is led by Quim Torra who similarly reflects a value system that prioritizes nationalism above the principles of democracy. Opening a space for civil dialogue with Catalonia that is equitable and ethical in the face of a hardline People’s Party determined to protect the supposed interests of a nation-state where there is no room for migrants, legalized abortion and a historical memory that positions itself against ‘official’ Francoist narratives will not be easy.

9 Casado has adopted the anti-immigrant rhetoric of many European party leaders in his early speeches as party leader; see Junquera and Abellán (2018).
at the time of writing, incarcerated for their role in the 1 October referendum. Amnesty International (2018) has called for Sánchez’s release, calling the Spanish judiciary’s actions in continuing to hold him in prison as excessive and disproportionate. In February 2018, the removal of Catalan artist Santiago Serra’s ‘Political Prisoners in Contemporary Spain’ from Madrid’s ARCO contemporary art fair at the request of the exhibition centre’s operator, prompted complaints that freedom of expression was under siege and censorship back in operation forty years after it was abolished in post-Franco Spain (see Jones 2018). The implications of curtailing debate in the name of nationalism have wide-reaching implications for democracy. As Paul Preston (2017) has observed in relation to the wider culture of anti-nationalist rhetoric promoted by the People’s Party: ‘It is as if Rajoy was unaware of a pattern in the past century of Spain’s history: Catalan separatism feeds off Madrid’s centralist intransigence.’

For Bybee, ‘civility forms the baseline of decent behavior and… its rules set out the terms of social belonging and identify the basic forms of consideration we owe each other in public life’ (2016:42). Rajoy’s lack of civility in recognizing and respecting the discontent in Catalonia has had devastating consequences: it has fuelled antagonism and anger and exploited the economic crisis for political gain.10 The need for a culture of civility that promotes greater inclusivity has never been greater. Civility, as Sánchez demonstrated when he allowed 650 migrants turned away by Italy and Malta to enter Spain and opened access to the public healthcare systems to all migrants on arrival into the country, is intertwined with compassion and empathy.11 It is a basic human right. The rhetoric of nationalism creates an alluring balm in times of crisis; it encourages tribalism; it creates distrust of difference; it looks the problematic, the challenging or the testing is erased or marginalized, culture can reaffirm its civic responsibility.

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