

COMMENTARY

ARRIGO LEVI's impressions of Barcelona, originally written in 1992

Fear and loathing in a grey, dismal city

I arrived in Barcelona in May 1942. We had fled Italy to escape from the government's new anti-Semitic laws and the nightmare scenario of a Nazi victory, which seemed more than likely at that time.

We reached Barcelona after a night train journey through the darkness of France and Europe. Spanish trains had wooden carriages jam-packed with poor peasants and jumping with fleas. We stayed four days in Barcelona, in a small hotel near the Rambla de los Capuchinos, after which we travelled to Bilbao, where we stayed for almost a month at the Pensión Anzoátegui on the Gran Vía, eating nothing but olives, cod, eggs and sweet red peppers. Finally, we boarded the Monte Amboto, a small cargo boat which was also transporting some seventy passengers. We bid farewell to Europe, before briefly stopping off at brightly-lit Lisbon, where they had white bread on sale and the shops were filled with everything one could wish for. It was like a mirage to us, as it was for all the Jews of Europe who were waiting to escape to a safe haven. In 1942 Barcelona was still sunk in the gloom of the civil war. But how can I compare it to the metropolis that I saw spread out before us a few nights ago, in an incredible fiesta of light, sound and stirring music? Montjuïc had already existed in 1942, but all it had then in the way of buildings was a solemn line of abandoned structures left over from the 1929 Universal Exhibition.

Meanwhile, the city stretched out beneath it - the ancient, evocative Barrio Gotico and the long stretch of the 19th-century Ramblas which led from the port to Paseo de Gràcia, where Gaudí's amazing mansions stood. But it was a grey, wretched city in those days, with women on the street corners selling combs,



matches, or perhaps three bananas, or some other worthless items. And of course, there were the daily lottery ticket sellers, crying out in lamenting tones: "Tickets for today!"

Both the men and women were small, ugly and dressed in black. Even for people like us who were only stopping off in Barcelona on the first stage of our journey to America and salvation, that grey, poverty-stricken Spain of the post-civil war period with its Guardia Civil in their ridiculous uniforms and those comical shiny, stiff black hats - seemed to us like a strange, remote, primitive civilisation. One

day we went to a bullfight; we found the spectacle barbarous and absurd, not to mention incomprehensible and totally boring. During my years in Argentina, the Barcelona of 1942 provided me with the perfect setting for my Spanish literature studies, as if Cervantes and Lope de Vega had almost been contemporaries.

My memory of those places and those days is enshrouded in a kind of all-pervading greyness. Lisbon was like a fleeting, luminous dream and Spain a kind of dark, motionless representation of that old Europe which was

provincial and starving, governed by dictators and tormented by conflicts, persecutions and absurd tragedies. Only fifty years have passed, yet anyone would think it had been fifty centuries. The Barcelona of 1942 and that of 1992 are like two different universes, inhabited by different people, different Europeans, different Spaniards, different men and women people who are tall, handsome, vigorous, healthy and fit and who have cheerfully embraced the dream of brotherhood and universal peace.

In the entire history of humanity, no generation has ever experienced before two his-

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torical periods which are so different in one single lifetime. It is true that mine was the last of the innumerable generations of human beings who came before the atomic bomb, a global society which did not quite succeed in destroying itself or in making the planet uninhabitable, no matter how hard we tried. Mine was also the first of another long series (let us hope) of generations who will live forever under the nightmarish threat of a nuclear holocaust; thus they are condemned to live (if they do not go mad first) eternally in a world where every year will be a year of Olympian peace.

PLATFORM

MIQUEL PAIROLÍ

Gales from the East, gales from the West

The worst thing about ideologies is that they tend to offer a perfect, sweetened and therefore false vision of life. They attempt to present

a simple and distorted view of a reality that is in fact complex, with an infinite number of layers and perspectives.

Ideological simplification

blinds one into thinking that things are one way when in fact they contain a variety of opposing forces. Nowadays, for example, there is currently an idea going around that eastern European countries have gone from the hell of communism to the paradise of the free world, from the control by the Soviet bloc to the embrace of a free, democratic and liberal Europe. The inhabitants of these countries, therefore, must be living in a state of permanent happiness after such a pleasant change.

But this is a simple and wrong-

headed idea, an idealistic and confusing hypothesis. Daily life has more shades of grey, and is a little murkier, with plenty of residue. Social reality is more complicated and bittersweet, the contradictions and grey areas become heavier and more evident.

What is really surprising and strange is the large amount of abstention in these countries during the European elections. But should we really be surprised?

If we examine the situation closely, with the benefit of experience, and make an effort to see it for

what it is, we would realise that that the forces which have cheated and deceived those countries over the past decades have brought about more disappointment and scepticism, giving people reason to feel indifferent. Joining Europe in the short term will not bring peace to their lives. On the contrary, it will be another jolt for people who have already had more than their share. We should not demand enthusiasm, therefore, from those who after enduring the gales from the East, are now receiving the gales from the West.

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