

God, we're not immigrants! A reflection on moving and staying

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The first time we went there the guy at the front told us that we had to come back the following day, at eight in the morning, to take a number. Like a patisserie. We weren't impressed with the idea, but to be honest we were happy to have understood him. Every successful piece of communication takes on greater significance here. Often you don't really care *what* has been communicated, only that it has been communicated successfully.

But when we returned to the *Policía Nacional* the next morning, we knew immediately something was wrong. We *sensed* it. We couldn't know exactly what had gone wrong, because there were plenty of weak links in the chain. Maybe the guy at the desk had misunderstood my faltering Spanish. Maybe I had misunderstood his disinterested reply. Maybe we had both understood each other, but the guy had told us the wrong thing. Yeah, that must have been it: he'd just told us the wrong thing. He probably doesn't work there. If you saw the place you'd understand how entirely plausible that is.

As far as I was ever able to find out, there never was a mistake. There was no fault in communication. This is how the system functions. You line up from maybe seven thirty in the morning, until they open at nine. At which time, they begin handing out numbers; a maximum of eighty per day.¹ The number tells you at what time you can return to see someone. In our case, all we wanted was to see someone to get a list of documents that we would need to bring to our next appointment, which we also hoped to organise, in order to obtain our official student-residency cards. I began to understand what Orwell was talking about when he said

¹ I don't know if the *Policía Nacional* is always this way. I'm assuming that it is a little busier at the moment owing to the regularisation of migrants *sin papeles* [without papers].

that if Fascism were to be installed in Spain, it would take on a comparatively benign form, if only due to the inefficiency of Spaniards (2001, 162). I mean, I get the feeling that this is the same system they would use to organise a Holocaust.²

How did we know, without asking a single question, without making eye contact with anyone who was there, that something was wrong? It wasn't just the number of people lined up. If we'd seen one hundred frustrated twenty year-olds with frosty breath and elegant clothes we'd have known we were in the right place. We'd have been annoyed, but we would have joined the queue. To be honest, the answer is simple: colour.

If I had to state from memory, I'd say the majority of the people there were probably from different parts of Latin America, probably a few from different parts of Northern Africa, but Pamplona doesn't seem to have the same level of migration from these parts as does the south of Spain, or even a bigger city like Barcelona. It was actually quite a diverse ethnic mix, but the problem was that they didn't look first world. They looked positively *Other*.

I expected feelings of unbelonging in Spain. I've used the term unbelonging here because other terms such as isolation or alienation suggest too much a state of being acted upon by one's environment. As if we are passive victims in the process. On this particular morning we definitely felt that we didn't belong there, but we had not been excluded by those in the queue. We had refused them. We refused to believe that we could possibly be a part of that group. As one of the girls in our group said: *god, we're not immigrants, we're Australians!*³

It's strange because I think this incident generated the most extreme and immediate feeling of unbelonging I've felt since arriving in Spain. That's not to say that there haven't been others. The first was probably on the streets of Barcelona. It was a specifically corporeal unbelonging. It was the unbelonging of a Sydney boy in a Spanish winter, which comes from realising that I really hadn't packed the right clothes. This unbelonging subsided quickly, with

² Orwell thought that most Spaniards lacked the 'damnable efficiency and consistency that a modern totalitarian state needs.'

³ Of course I see the inherent irony in this statement. I also saw the offensiveness in it.

a new vest and some better planning. Within a week or so my body had made some minor adjustments, and I wasn't feeling the cold so violently any more.

I also felt for a while that I didn't belong amongst the Erasmus students at my university. Between my usual standoffishness and a slight longing for certain people back in Sydney, I was on the verge of alienating myself from this group. But then, at the end of our organised excursion around Pamplona, a group of French students dragged me off to a bar. And there I was, a serving of *patatas bravas* [cooked potato chunks] and a *caña* [beer] in front of me, belonging, more or less.

I can think of only one other sense of feeling out of place here that can compete with that morning at the *Policía Municipal*: an earlier night at a *discoteca* called *Marengos*. At three in the morning, with bad trance from five years ago, bad pop from ten years ago, and a few hundred happy people dancing around me, I thought to myself: I do not belong here. But at least I had other people there with which to bitch about the music. Besides, I've felt that way a hundred times on nights out in Sydney as well. The sensation was in no way new or specific to Pamplona.

There was something more forceful, more brutal and arrogant, about my sense of unbelonging that morning at the *Policía Municipal*. We stood on the other side of the street, looking at the people in the queue. Each of them precariously positioned here, attempting to root themselves into the landscape. To *legitimise* themselves. They all looked bored, but not impatient, the boredom of people who have accepted the situation. Our boredom would have been impatient and indignant. Our boredom would have bitched and moaned. But the thing is, we never got bored, because we never crossed the road. We looked for about thirty seconds, exchanging worried glances, and then went to get a coffee to warm ourselves up. Maybe buy those textbooks so the day wouldn't be a *complete* waste of time.

There were so many cultural assumptions tied up in that turning of bodies back to the café. It gives away a lot about us. We'd been told to join the queue. It's not as if this is a culturally foreign concept for us. We know all about lining up in Australia. We're experts in the discourse of the justice of the queue. Or more importantly, of that morally repugnant act of *jumping the queue*. Had we been the good little Australians that my *compañera* [female companion] suggested, we should have been happy to line up. To wait our turn. The truth is

we never considered it. We expected the Spanish bureaucracy to create a new queue for us. They should have been able to differentiate between us, the Australian students, and them, the immigrant workers, the Others. Indeed that differentiation is not simply a racist construct of our Australian imaginaries. It's a recognised bureaucratic strategy. Straubhaar and Martin (2002, 72) speak of the need in a country like Romania of 'modernizing border management to facilitate the movement of *legitimate travellers* and goods while discouraging illegal migration' [emphasis mine]. And that's what interests me so much about this: the way travellers expect to be treated differently to migrants. And generally we are treated well. People tell us how great our Spanish is when our Spanish is not great. They say things like, you'll have to speak a bit slower, he's Australian. And then they smile an unpatronising smile and enunciate with charming clarity. They say, 'ooh, Australia, I *really* want to go to Australia', and smile at us as if just meeting us takes them closer to those beaches and those cute little animals.

In part, we travellers conceive of ourselves as engaging with space differently to migrants. And we expect to be treated accordingly. We're visitors, guests even. We're unthreatening because we come and we go. Like a refreshing breeze on a summer's day. *Enjoy your time here*, the woman at the desk said when a few days later we finally got to see someone (without lining up). The implication of that statement is that our time here is finite. There could almost be a subordinate clause: but make sure to leave.

If travellers are a cool breeze, or perhaps a gentle cycle of ripples, migrants come in waves.⁴ In Australia we like to talk about waves, or floods of immigrants. And after Boxing Day (December 26), 2004, we all know how destructive waves can be. A wave can flood a landscape and alter it permanently. Travellers pass through, whereas migrants *enter deeply* into the landscape, they take root, de/reforming the previous makeup. In the Maldivian Islands, after the 2004 tsunami in South East Asia, commentators spoke of the need to redraw the maps, because the tsunami had actually altered the form of the islands. The old maps wouldn't represent the current shape of the coastline ('Tsunami Alters Shape,' 2005). The same thing

⁴ Certainly there can also be waves of travellers. I'll see that when the Festival of San Fermín comes around. But we may assume that the wave of travellers will disperse and recede. After the running of the bulls, Pamplona will re-form itself into the quiet city of 200,000 people that I know at the moment.

happens with a census after periods of significant migration. A new image of the national body and landscape is required. Migrants are seen as affecting every aspect of a society and its landscape; economics, urban sprawls, unemployment, birth rates, and through these births, the *bodies* of a nation are altered. Because migrants remain, and so do their children, they have the capacity to alter the physical appearance of the Navarrese. In this way neo-fascist groups like to speak of migration as a form of genocide, with the white race being, in a sense, diluted. The negative idea of the wave that deforms the landscape is often spoken of by those who knew the old landscape. My grandparents grew up in Campsie, in Western Sydney, when it was white. Every now and then I hear them talk about how you wouldn't even *recognise* the place now.

It seems that this wave of migration from outside Spain is now cresting in Pamplona. A lot of people here seem to have that sort of ethnic ignorance that made my grandmother believe that my Sri Lankan-Australian friend would definitely know her Sri Lankan friend who also lives in Sydney. The other day I was instructed to go to *Los Chinos* to buy a phone card (which meant the *zapatería* [shoe shop] two doors down). The shop's name almost doesn't seem racist, just completely naïve about ethnic complexities.

I'd like to tell you how migrants feel here. How they are treated, if they feel that Spaniards perceive them as invading the landscape. It's possible that the Navarrese aren't too fussed. The Basque population has already seen waves of internal migration that have radically altered the social landscape of a city like Pamplona.⁵ Perhaps migrants enter differently into a heavily and openly contested landscape like that in Pamplona. But of course, I can't tell you any of that. I never found out.

Essentially this is a silent ethnography. Dumb and blind. We rendered everyone else speechless and invisible by going to get coffee that day. When we saw the queue we were expected to join, we looked away. I wanted to look at the differences between my experience and that of migrants here (especially the most precarious of these, those without papers). But I

⁵I fell into a trap the other night, when in a *discoteca* a guy asked me how I liked their country, the Basque Country. I said, yeah; I like it a lot here, but I haven't been to the Basque Country yet. He pointed out that Pamplona is the capital city of the Basque Country. Luckily I was able to charm him with my knowledge of football, the difference between Athletic Bilbao and Real Madrid. And later on when I mentioned the revolt in Asturias in October 1934, I thought he was going to faint.

walked away from them. Because it was cold and there was no way we were going to wait all morning in the cold like they had to.

Reference list

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