

The Boy in the Classroom

Finn Janning

It begins with a boy who was not born a nationalist and ends with a nationalist who was never a boy.

At least, that is a possible beginning and end. In the words of Aristotle, we now only lack the middle to have a complete story.

So now that we know it begins with a boy, let's move towards the middle, where we can place him geographically in Barcelona, Spain.

Spain is one of Europe's biggest countries. Located on the beautiful Iberian Peninsula in Southwestern Europe, it boasts a population of approximately forty-seven

million. More interestingly, for the purpose of this story, it has three distinct and official languages: Spanish, Basque, and Catalan. It's an assemblage of different languages, traditions, landscapes, and customs.

This is where the boy enters. For some, he is not placed in Spain but in Catalonia, the autonomous community of which Barcelona is the capital. More than seven million people live here in Catalonia, some of whom would like to detach themselves from Spain and become their own nation.

From a strictly mathematical position, the majority of voting Catalans don't want to leave Spain. Therefore, the independence

campaign has, for a long time, been representing the minority. The minority is typically regarded as good, as if the minority is in possession of the truth. Yet, democracy and numbers make up one side, while the other side represents the dominating ideas and means of communication. Here, the majority is Catalan. The schools teach in Catalan, although both Catalan and Spanish are official languages. In fact, speaking Spanish is, in some parts of Catalonia, looked at with skepticism and even dislike. Except if you are a tourist who doesn't know better. But even with tourists, the Catalans have reached their limit. Stickers saying "Tourist go home" are not uncommon around the city. They prefer their own company.

As a result of the struggle for independence, the Catalan language is no longer a means of communication; rather, it has become a political tool. Unfortunately, turning language into a political instrument hinders the main purpose of language, which is to communicate, that is, create relationships and beautiful poetry. Instead, it splits people. The Catalan independence campaign

echoes the former American president George Bush's famous campaign trail quip, "You're either with us or against us..."¹

You have to be cautious not to step on anyone's delicate nationalistic feet.

§

The tiny episode that I would like to share with you deals with a boy in Spain, in Catalonia, specifically, in Barcelona, where he is in a classroom. He is six years old. It's the first year where he is taught Spanish, which after English is the second foreign language being taught. The boy stands up and yells, "Down with Spain, up with Catalonia."

Of course, this episode could be shaken off with phrases like "boys are boys," or "it's just for fun." Yet, if we do not see how one nation (if we accept that Catalonia is a nation) being treated differently from another one is a problem, then there is indeed a problem. This is why nationalism is a forbidden word, unless you are living in a George Orwell world where war is peace.

¹ *'You are either with us or against us' -CNN, November 6, 2001*

Let us dwell on this episode with the boy in the classroom. What we learn about and expect to see in the world is determined by how we experience the world. In other words, how the boy perceives the world affects the world in which he lives. The boy, apparently, lives in a world where he hates Spain so much that he even hates the language. Thus, the language is no longer a way to enlarge life, but it has become something that defines borders.

Is the boy in the classroom a sign of an emerging sickness called discrimination?

The symptoms are there. For instance, the nation that awakens strong negativity could easily be replaced with women, black people, or homosexual people, who have and are still being discriminated against.

§

Since the financial crisis in 2008, the movement for Catalan independence has caught fire Catalonia is the richest region in Spain, mainly due to its tourism industry. The money that comes in is sent to Ma-

drid, where it is then distributed to the rest of Spain. The Catalan politicians have never negotiated a decent deal with the politicians in Madrid because the Catalan politicians were either incompetent, or too preoccupied with filling their own pockets. Instead of fighting for fairness by political means, the Catalan nationalists want to free themselves from Spain. It is not because they don't like sharing but rather because they can't be bothered to negotiate.

I wonder whether some Catalans disapprove of sharing because they, like many capitalists, tend to forget how they didn't get to where they are today alone.

Its geographical location, its reputation, security, welfare, infrastructure, level of education, healthcare, etc., didn't come for free. Some of it can be considered as lucky "born" privileges, and others as part of their European and Spanish privileges. Also, perhaps as an example of the Catalan sense of humor, they praise themselves for being the Germans of Spain: that is, they are industrious and rather fond of money. But this sounds more like the Germans in the 40s

than now; today, Germany is an artistic and humanistic center of Europe. The Germans know that “we”—all of us—are in it together when it comes to making this world better. Catalonia confirms what history has told us: that nationalism and capitalism go hand in hand.

The Catalans want to be independent so they can become richer. They define themselves as non-Spanish, which of course is a negative definition because it doesn't tell us what it actually means to be a Catalan. We are different, they say. And they are different, but so is everyone else. We are all different. That's the beauty of life.

§

I am aware this may sound aggressive, so let's take a look at me (although I am not really that interesting). This is a love letter. I love the Catalans; I live here, my kids were born here, they go to school here, my wife is Spanish and was born in Barcelona—she is from here. In short, every day I kiss a Catalan. But I despise nationalism, regardless of

the nation upholding it.

The Catalan independence campaign is not a heroic fight against a discriminating and oppressive religion or a political regime; it's mainly a fight for money. It's an antagonistic, protectionist project, which is not cosmopolitan at all. It is based on vanity, greed, and hate. Vanity because the nationalists believe that they are better; greed because they want more money; and hate because they blame everything bad on Spain. At times, the Spanish Civil War is treated like a football match between Real Madrid and Barcelona, but the civil war was a whole country in war with itself. The last city to fall against the fascist regime of Franco was Madrid.

Sometimes, it is nice to take a critical view of oneself. When I mention these topics to Catalans, they either agree but remain silent about these issues, or the nationalists say “you don't understand,” “it's too difficult to explain,” “during the civil war my grandmother was not allowed to speak Catalan,” and “it's too emotional.” I don't assume to understand much, but I know hate is un-

healthy. During the Second World War, the Germans imprisoned my grandfather, but I don't hate the Germans. The idea alone is absurd. Forgiveness is a prerequisite if you want to move forward. You need to free yourself to embrace life. Of course, we should learn from the past, but it does not do to get stuck there. In general, Spain has not been very good at dealing with the past. Yet, it's obvious that healing doesn't emerge from accusations.

The Catalan nationalists illustrate that it is easier to blame and not reconcile than to act accountable for one's past, while at the same time they try to create a sustainable future.

§

All this brings me to the beginning: the boy in the classroom. We already know he is six years old, but what we don't know is that his eyes are brown, his hair is dark, and he is very pretty. Today, he is attending his first Spanish lesson. He doesn't like Spanish. He hates *them*.

From where was this hate born in this innocent boy?

It is obvious that kids of his age don't hate; they get angry when they are interrupted while playing, but they don't hate. Hate, therefore, can only be a reflection of the parents' attitude, or worse, the school's attitude. Here, it came from the father. Yet, does it matter who started it? No, it happened. Of course, parents are the most important role models. It's not Cristiano Ronaldo or Leo Messi. Still, if the schools don't intervene, they are systematically promoting hate.

It doesn't require a lot of imagination to see similarities to the kids of parents who have passed on their hate for women, black people, or homosexuals. Kids are very perceptive. They look up to their parents, and they are too young to question their parents' judgment.

Thus, the moral is clear: nationalism is camouflaged as capitalism, but in truth, it is simply racism with a better marketing campaign. It all stems from the anger of not being sufficiently sovereign. Parents and schools have a huge responsibility in Catalo-

nia (and many other places in today's world), not only to *not* teach kids to hate, but also to stop hate.

Why teach hate, when you can teach your kids respect, care, and love? If kids are the future as the political clichés tell us, then what kind of future would we, as parents and adults, like to create?

§

As I promised earlier, it begins with a boy who was not born a nationalist and ends with a nationalist who was never a boy. Because the father of the boy was never really innocent. He was a nationalist promoting hate.

Of course, I can't end with the word "hate."

Therefore, let me just propose that the boy in the classroom is an example of how we all become what we experience. The little boy in the classroom was not experiencing a new language and the terrain that a language opens for him; no, he was experiencing repression. He perceived what he was

trained to expect. He experienced hate. Yet hate didn't arrive disguised as language but in the shape of an unquestionable figure.

I believe that the value of life depends on two things: what we leave behind—feelings, conviction, thoughts, and gestures—and what we keep for ourselves.

I guess growing up, becoming mature and wiser means that we learn what to pass on and what to keep for ourselves.

I am a father, I could have been this father, was I that father?

Nowadays, I tend to keep what I don't like for myself. This is why this is a love letter to the Catalans. Let your deeds, words, and action follow your heart, not your fist. Then, the future will be worth growing up in for the little boy, and all the other boys and girls.

Finn Janning grew up in Denmark. He has studied philosophy, literature and business administration at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), and at Duke University. He earned his PhD in practical philosophy from CBS. His work has been featured in Epiphany, Under the Gum Tree, South 85 Journal, among others. He lives in Barcelona, Spain with his wife and their three children.