

■ reviews

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Liz Castro, *What's up with Catalonia?: The causes which impel them to the separation* Catalonia Press, 2013. 228p.

Escrits de Xavier Serra, *A peu de foto*. Writings by Xavier Serra. At the foot of the picture. Photographies by Francesc Vera Ed. Afers, Catarroja, 2013. 140p.

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We are reviewing two books that seemingly have nothing to do with each other, and are not strictly philosophy. Or maybe they are.

We keep denying. The first book edited by Liz Castro is not a research paper. However, both its subject —historical conditions of the present— and the way this has been dealt with —crowdsourcing in social networks— has gained attention and had an immediate impact. The second book, by Xavier Serra and Francisco Vera, cannot be considered either as research from an academic point of view. The collaborative work between the writer and the photographer was published first in a blog whose content was eventually gathered into a book. Its impact has been also significant, and the readers have been spreading it into the web. We should wonder in both cases, why.

On January 15, 2013, American tech writer Liz Castro, who also defines herself as a “gourd crafter, would-be farmer, and Catalanista” posted on Twitter an open call to disseminate via crowdfunding a collection of articles she was editing in English on the situation of Catalonia after the massive rally for Catalan independence of September 11, 2012.



Crowdfunding can be broadly defined as a method to raise small amounts of money from a large group of people to support projects and initiatives by other people or organizations. Even if crowdfunding precedes the Internet, both the Web 2.0 and mobile technologies have fueled the emergence of online platforms that enable collective fundraising. Liz posted her project in Verkami, the pioneer crowdsourcing platform based in Mataró, and she got an amazing response: in less than two months, the initiative largely surpassed the goal of •7,500 and collected •12,372 from nearly 600 sponsors. Each sponsor received a copy of the book, plus an additional copy or two to be sent to the person the sponsor had previously selected.

What's up with Catalonia? leverages Web 2.0 in its full. As Liz Castro writes in her editor's note "it occurred to me that with the contribution of Catalan experts, the help of new technologies, the power of social networks, and some good translating, I might be able to edit a comprehensive collection of articles so that people outside of Catalonia could get a much clearer idea of just what's going on there". Indeed, a large crowd of Twitter users (including most of the book contributors) have played a major role both in spreading the word and publicizing the final outcome. In a similar vein, Josep Maria Ganyet recalls in "Keep calm and speak Catalan" how a spontaneous tweet he posted on his way to work grew into a full-fledged campaign: "Soon after I published the tweet, still on the train, I realized that the message "Keep Calm and Speak Catalan" had taken off. It was soon to follow the general path of all those messages that go viral: Twitter and social media, blogs, digital newspapers, radio, television, printed editions of newspapers, and then round again. The poster "Keep Calm and Speak Catalan" appears on websites in Japan and France, in protest movements in the United States, on websites in favor of Catalan culture and independence in

Catalonia, as the avatars of thousands of Facebook and Twitter users, and at its peak had reached almost one million Google results”.

The book, which includes a prologue by Catalan President Artur Mas, contains 35 essays and notes written in a concise, agile, and reader-friendly style by renowned academics, political representatives, community leaders, writers and journalists who present Catalonia's history, economics, politics, language, and culture to the rest of the world. While the essays are explicitly targeting an international audience, they also aim at raising awareness on the “causes which impel them [Catalans] to the separation”, to use the quote of the US Declaration of Independence that provides the subtitle of the book. In this regard, the book provides historical context for remote causes while exploring the most recent events that have triggered the growth of the independence movement (i.e. the rulings of the Spanish Constitutional Court against the Catalan Statute, the fiscal asphyxia, or the unrest provoked by the policy of the Spanish Ministry of Education towards Catalan language). Generally, nearly all contributions of the book distill a point of no return with regard to Catalan-Spanish relations. As Germà Bel puts it: “in the end we have to choose between changing states or changing countries. From what we're seeing, it seems like there are many more of us who would prefer to change states rather than bury our own country.”

Overall, the shared feeling is that the stakes remain very high in Catalonia at the moment, and adjectives defining our present time as crucial, momentous, or exhilarating are widespread. Nevertheless, the book also casts times of hope. As Muriel Casals writes: “The future is in our hands. We defend Catalonia as a new state in Europe out of Catalan patriotism and out of European patriotism. We hope to be able to add our Catalan cultural and linguistic contributions to



Francesc Vera: *Vàter públic, Torí*. 2010

increase the richness and diversity of the continent that we share with our European compatriots.”

We come back now to Xavier Serra and Francesc Vera. For several months in 2010 and 2011 the authors published thirty-six photographs and comments on a blog online. There are still traces of this collaboration which can be found on the web (<http://apeudefoto.wordpress.com>).

The outcome deserves attention. The photographs are not only minimalist, austere geometrically flawless: they reveal surprising details of our contemporary life through their composition and the moment they capture. Those are present and of-the-present images which, however, have the virtue of instigating, drawing from the collective memory that lives in us. This is a starting point: buildings, landscapes, fragments of cities—often European cities—, evoked by Francesc Vera’s trigger the viewer’s kaleidoscope of memory. Actually, by pressing the shutter of his camera, Francisco Vera also hit the brain that produces the image. And the miracle occurs, because without acknowledging very well how it may happen, a personal discourse, yet timeless, wide, made of memories and full of meaning, infiltrates as a stowaway into our consciousness. We reflect upon it when we find the intruder.

There is neither inside nor outside in universality. There is no localism. Maybe this is what happened to Xavier Serra also when writing his short comments. Writings convey a rare, very rare sense of freedom. The writer’s stories are not quite the photographer’s: it is not necessary at all. The stories evoked by the writer come from his Valencia family memories, from travels to Italy, and always from the background of philosophy in which he lives and where he works. For us there is no doubt. The reader is willing to watch the pictures again, and is willing to re-read the texts. This contemporary Book of Hours is a method book. We should study well its apparent ease, because basically it is a great little book of intellectual history. The intellectual history of all of us, what today we meant by *cosmopolitan*.

The web has the ability to capture what is of paramount interest to a disaggregated community of users which turns in the end into different types of collectivities. Personal memory is transmuted into a shared memory. Both Liz Castro’s volume on Catalonia and Vera and Sierra’s volume on the timelessness of the present time have this feature in common. Very different in style and composition, the web has made them all and for all.

English version by Marta Poblet