

LLUÍS LLACH

‘BELONGING TO A MINORITY IS VERY EDUCATIONAL: IF YOU ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO SURVIVE’

Interviewed by Eva Piquer*
 Photos by Carmen Esteve
 Juan Miquel Morales

In another country, in another historical context, perhaps Lluís Llach (1948) would simply have been a committed musician. However, he had the luck to have the misfortune to start singing at the end of the twentieth century, in the closing days of the Franco era. He joined the Setze Jutges (Seven Judges), a group of singers that fought for Catalan language and culture during the dictatorship. A victim of prohibitions and censorship, the young man from the Empordà region wrote songs that the public turned into hymns. A left-wing nationalist, Llach carried on fighting for his ideas following Franco's death, while continuing to grow artistically. In 1985 he played a memorable concert in front of 100,000 people in the FC Barcelona stadium. Llach abandoned the limelight in March 2007, having been a vital figurehead in the musical and intellectual worlds for three or four generations.

We are in the middle of a world economic crisis. Can you see a way out?

I guess there is one, but it won't be easy. It's a predictable, unfortunate crisis; it's the failure of the Chicago economic school that preached the most savage form of neoliberal capitalism. I've always been anti-capitalist, but of all forms of capitalism, they've chosen the worst. Some much more socially sensitive economic schools foresaw a disaster just like this one. We are witnessing both an economic failure and an ethical one.

So is it also a moral crisis?

Yes, of course, and it's been coming from a long way off. One of its starting points was that awful

triumvirate made up of Thatcher, Reagan and John Paul II. Each of them set about destroying social sensitivities from their own particular sphere of influence. Thatcher took on the unions, who had a long tradition in England and had power. The European Left's arrival in power didn't help the situation at all: those that should have been the alternative ended up leading Europe's major political scandals. Felipe González saw his ministers go to prison. Those that should have maintained democracy's ethical values left society without the tools it needed. The Left sunk its own values. Aznar, Berlusconi, Sarkozy et al are the sons of that failure. It was really difficult to imagine during the eighties that Europe would end up having characters like Berlusconi or Sarkozy (even though the French Republic is a different matter). If we are

able to do so now, it's because first there needed to be a dismantling of a whole system of economic, moral and social principles. If you speak about equality and fraternity nowadays, people burst out laughing.

There are still some idealists around...

But you don't hear them. In the sixties and seventies we could believe that the media was a tool for spreading information and even for consciousness-raising, but suddenly it simply became the means of transmission of the ideas of the powerful and the major lobbies. The people that stood up to the economic system and its values lost their microphones. We were led to believe there was no alternative to vicious capitalism that condemned human beings to animosity against other human beings. Any alternative has been wiped off the list of possibilities. So, see how we are now... The current economic turmoil has once more left the middle and lower classes in a situation of complete defencelessness. It's very difficult for someone to have the courage to admit that the more controlled capitalism is, the better. Zapatero, in spite of being so 'socially committed', is the first to say 'no' to nationalisation. Sarkozy is more protectionist than Zapatero.

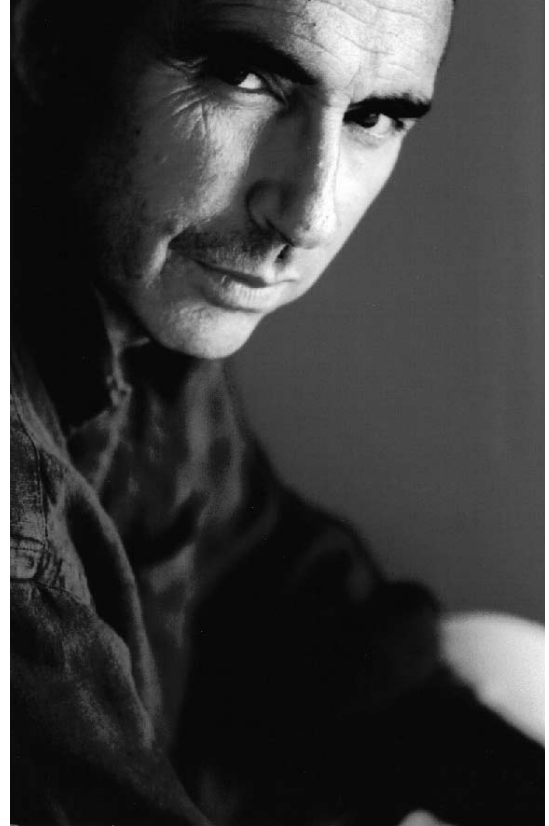
FROM MICRO-HISTORY IT'S CLEAR THAT TWENTY YEARS AGO WE WERE BETTER OFF. INEQUALITIES ARE ON THE RISE AND THE MARGINALIZED CONTINENTS ARE MORE SO THAN EVER

Do you think Obama will sort the world out?

Compared with Bush, Obama is a marvel... Nevertheless, what can this man do against the economic structures that are in place, the vested interests, the lobbies...? How can you undo all that?

Humanity makes progress, despite all the 'despites'?

In macro-history, yes. If we are capable of seeing macro-history as doing away with present-day



reality we can see that the world progresses more in some aspects than others. In micro-history it's clear that twenty years ago we were better off. Inequalities are on the rise and the marginalized continents are more so than ever. And in terms of the value system, we are suffering from an unheard of setback. How can Berlusconi call on China to respect human rights? A whole set of social values have been destroyed; they formed a network that had gradually conquered small spaces. They employ petulant, vicious language: anyone who opposes what we have is 'anti-system'.

Let's take a look at micro-history, yours to be specific. You stopped singing in 2007, when you were still in good shape. Why?

For various reasons. I've maintained a special dialogue with the public for forty years. This is the only thing that has kept me going. It's obvious with my ideological and cultural leanings, that without public support I'd have been wiped off the map. I didn't want this special relationship to end up being cheapened, as it got older. Another reason: I've had the privilege of being very sincere with myself. I've worked how I like and when I like specifically because the public has acted without obeying the laws of the market. But for fifteen years I was scared of losing the capacity to reinvent myself. I

went through an aesthetic renaissance thanks to knowing the poet Miquel Martí i Pol. But Miquel died, I grew old and chose to retire rather than ending up repeating myself like an automaton. A third reason for my retirement is that I felt I had lived in a very one-dimensional way and I wanted to find another way of living once more. In this respect the challenge is very open. I've always been very conscious of the privilege my work has been. But I can now publicly announce it was a fantastic job. As much as it might keep me busy, everything I had while I was singing in public is very difficult to replace.

For many years you refused to sing such a symbolic song as L'estaca (the Stake). Were you scared that the symbol would eclipse the musician, that the commitment would end up killing the artist?

In Catalunya there were times when what I did artistically, including my commitment, and the significance it had for the public, was out of all proportion. I was a boy who had been educated in the scholastic tradition and I arrived in Barcelona when I was sixteen. Thanks to a series of coincidences I fell in with a very active group and after a short time I started to become a reference point, not only for the anti-Franco movement, but the Catalan movement too. I had to live through all this during a period of transition in which we made up for what the country was lacking and it gave me an enormous amount of power. For years I was really frightened by the amount of power I held. It got to the point where I asked myself whether I should keep singing or not. But since I liked it a lot, I looked at things from another angle: if I could play this part (and I tried to do it well) and it was down to me thanks to a historical accident, then so be it. Once Francoism died out, in the eighties and nineties, people abandoned their socially and politically critical posture at an alarming rate. I believe this posture needs to be retained. And without realising it I go back for more. It's an addiction of mine. In fact, what has kept me going all these years on so many stages is the side of me that likes to protest.

When you lend your support to a cause you create a certain point of view among the public. It's an enormous responsibility...

This responsibility has blocked me many times. But I have also tried to use it to the extent that I have supported causes I haven't believed in, but which I thought were positive in terms of social discourse. Maybe I didn't fully believe in them, perhaps there was some kind of feeling, but I defended them passionately in order to spark a debate. If not, it would've been taken for granted that all the intellectuals were in agreement. Since I retired I have tried to keep my public appearances to a minimum. You see, it also gave me something: if at the end of a concert people come up to you to explain their struggle, then they're keeping you up to date as to leading social concerns. When you retire, you stay at home and your means of gathering information return to being the usual ones. It's more difficult for you to find out what's going on.

Have you always been clear as to what side to identify yourself with? For example, you've always been supportive of the Palestinian cause, but it's not so easy to take sides...

Taking sides means getting involved. Someone who works in the field of communication and culture, who is called an intellectual, I think they should get involved. The good thing about being 60 years old is that you have been able to watch history 'live' for 40 years. As a Catalan I defend the Palestinian cause. With all the sacrifices that a lot of people have made in order that we can have our own identity, I'd be really ashamed if we ended up thinking that the only way to exist was thanks to the massacre of others, whether collectives or individuals. That's why the situation in Palestine is so disturbing. I'm not saying there aren't many arguments on both sides. But what horrifies me the most is that a people that have experienced so many human catastrophes at first hand can end up inflicting those same catastrophes in the name of its own existence. I would even question whether it's worth existing under such circumstances.

Have you ever regretted supporting or opposing a particular cause?

Being innocent, I thought that instead of writing a song for Nelson Mandela, I could dedicate one to the woman who had been at his side, Winnie. A few months after recording it I was horrified



to find out that she had carried out many barbaric acts. Yes, I have regretted some of the things I have defended. But let me tell you something. When you are part of the media yourself, when they manipulate you, you shouldn't be offended, it's part of the job. People with very different ideas can use a song as a personal or collective tool. And it's wonderful that this happens. But there are limits. You need to know how to set some limits so that only a certain set of people can manipulate you.

You were born in a small country with a particular national reality. How has this affected you?

Belonging to a minority is very educational, if you are lucky enough to survive. And when I say 'survive', I mean to make something of yourself, however minimally. Being part of cultural, political and sexual minorities has made me question many things. Being born in this country has made me understand that the creation of states in the way that we know it has been done through the annihilation of entire identities and collectives. No state, not the Spanish, the French or the British can say that it

was built on a truly democratic basis. Assassinations and genocide have been the norm in the construction of the current states and powers. The years have gone by and now there are those that want democracy to be used to legitimise the situations of injustice that it originally created. Some people are surprised when marginalized or oppressed groups express their desire to exist. We Catalans understand why because we look at the situation from inside. Belonging to a small culture, in a world in which small cultures are destined to disappear, puts you in a state of awareness. Those on the outside see you as small, provincial and closed. In terms of my humanity, belonging to minority groups has made me live life a different way, including in my personal relationships. If I had been a man in the way society wanted me to be, I wouldn't have had to rethink thousands of things, or to face up to them.

You made me think of that poem by Maria-Mercè Marçal where she gives thanks to chance for having been born a woman, working class and from an oppressed nation.

I'm not a woman or from the working class (I come from the rural upper class), but I was born in the same oppressed nation. The meagre nature of suggestions by some well-known intellectuals never fails to surprise me. The people from AT-TAC [Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens], for example, well-prepared people like Ignacio Ramonet et al, talk about the Catalans as if we were cultural racists. The fact that people with so much information, with so much culture, with so much political sensitivity say such things..., but because they have seen the other side of the fence, they don't understand that if they turn the mirror round they'll see their own reflection. This doesn't make you feel more powerful, on the contrary, it makes you much more conscious of your own limitations and miseries, while at the same time it gives you a more interesting viewpoint.

Is being Catalan and singing in Catalan a handicap in terms of reaching an international audience?

Sure, sure, sure. Sorry, but the question makes me laugh. In a world where empires have used

language for their own ends... I was partial to using French, thanks to my liking for how it sounds. When I was little I used to listen to French singer-songwriters and I'd have loved to have sung in French. But when you are the means of transmission, you need to know what service you are offering. Modern music has been one of the most powerful machines of alienation for penetrating the values of adolescents and preparing them for being what the system wants them to be. When you're conscious of this fact and are aware of the record companies' policies, you realise that you form part of a world that has an unequalled degree of penetration. Nowadays, with video games, it may well be the first time that modern music is losing its role. Up till now, we musicians were almost exclusively responsible for the annihilation of childhood and adolescent thought.

Do you still believe in the Catalan Countries?

Yes, yes. I firmly believe in them as a future project. The economy will do the work that we haven't been able to do politically or culturally. The Catalan Countries are, to start with, an economic necessity. A section of the Valencian upper classes are beginning to realise this fact. Then there are the obvious cultural and historic realities. When I say the Catalan Countries I don't mean a single community, but rather a form of confederation of countries.

Does national freedom require having one's own state?

I am from an anarchist background and I find the idea of states difficult to swallow. I don't see the state as solving problems; I see it as a problem in itself. But after 60 years of observing how we live with Spain, I would say that independence is the only solution. As Xavier Rubert de Ventós says, we are mistaken when we think that if we educate them, one day they will understand us. They understood us some time ago, but its no use. I believe that the Spanish state, as a project with a promising future, where peoples can form part of a state from a position of liberty and tolerance, has its days numbered. The fact that it can still be said nowadays that Euskadi isn't a political problem makes me mad. The anti-terrorist policy is the Spanish state's

most glaring mistake in the last 50 years. It's outrageous that they still invent laws that bend or totally break human rights in order to stop ten percent of the population from voting. And let's not talk about Catalunya, where they kill projects that have been approved by 80 percent of the Catalan parliament. These are actions that are very difficult to explain to Europeans.

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Do you believe the Catalan language has a future?

Yes. I don't see the language as being endangered, it won't be in danger as long as we don't want it to be. We learnt how to maintain and defend our language in adverse conditions. It would be a blow to history if we don't take advantage of the fact now we are able to maintain and defend our cultural situation. Language defines us as a group, it allows us to identify ourselves, but it doesn't make us a nation. If one day a majority of our people decide that our language is no longer necessary, I wouldn't call that a loss of national identity. In any case, the problem doesn't come from the immigrants. In Catalunya, waves of immigration have been a constant, many centuries ago, almost 40% of the Occitanes came here. For you and me Spain is a point of reference. But in twenty years time, many children of current immigrants won't have the Spanish framework as their point of reference.

You have stood up for many causes, but you've never particularly represented homosexuality. Why is that?

I come from a world that didn't put homosexual freedom before sexual freedom. For the first few years of my artistic life I fought in favour of homosexuality via sexuality. Later, in the 80s, some famous people started to come out of the closet. More than anything this caused me indignation,



because I don't believe they did much good and they were people that I didn't like ideologically. I've always been in the front line of militancy in terms of showing solidarity with all movements in favour of gay rights. And I've never kept my sexuality a secret, if I've been asked the question directly. But I'm upset by ghetto-type attitudes. I understand homosexual freedom through sexual freedom a lot more, as it includes concepts that no one talks about, such as the sexual freedom of old people: they have more injustices committed against them than against homosexuals.

I COME FROM A WORLD THAT DIDN'T PUT HOMOSEXUAL FREEDOM BEFORE SEXUAL FREEDOM

You had cancer without the public finding out.

They told me I had a year and a half to live and I decided that I didn't want to create a national drama. But I think it's fine that people like Joan Manuel Serrat or Cristina Hoyos have declared that they were suffering from cancer, and I understand that their gesture has helped to give hope to a lot of sick people.

Your integrity throughout all these years is admirable.

If I have shown integrity it's because people have allowed me to have it. I have had a certain protection that has allowed me to be sincere with myself and to act in line with my beliefs.

Is it difficult to maintain ideological integrity when you have too much money to be left-wing?

This is a great incoherence that I treat with normality. I had the luck to become popular at a very young age, when my capacity to fight and my non-conformism was so great that I wouldn't sell out for any price. The system tries to buy you in successive phases: when you're an adolescent and they instil certain values in you, when you start to work, when you get married, when you have children, when you suffer from a mid-life crisis, when you get old and you realise you haven't been able to change almost anything... if you overcome all these phases without selling out, you can't be bought. The fact you belong to social and sentimental groups of a certain marginalisation also helps, because you are never afraid to be seen in a bad light. *Neofatxes globals* (Global Neofascists) is one of the worst songs I have ever written, but I hit the nail on the head. When I

wrote it they told me I was too old now for protest songs. I don't care; I need my people's support.

Have you always known how to find your people?

Well, you know I was about to lose them. A long time ago I had a lot of commercial success, with three or four number one records in the Spanish state. I carried on doing what I wanted to do with total freedom. But with success, without me realising it, there came a kind of absorption on behalf of the system: that personality to whom we apportion all the blame. One day I said to my manager: something's going on here, I want to sing for my people, and in the last thirty concerts I've done, my people have been nowhere to be seen. Success put me on a professional footing where my people weren't to be found. So I said 'enough', the stadiums are finished, let's go back to the original concerts, and let's go back to the villages, the theatres. I knew I was giving up who knows how many million every year, but you can't put a price on it. It's not so much admirable integrity as a need. It's also a question of self-interest. If I move away from my people, what do I talk about in my life? Of the advantages of being famous? I'd rather take Felipe González to court for having broken his electoral promise on NATO, even knowing I'd lose out on lots of concerts, but that my people would lend me their support.

What causes do you think are worth campaigning for in the twenty-first century?

There are a lot more that there were forty years ago. The current situation could end in a revival of para-fascism, this is an obvious danger. There are also the same old words as ever: hunger, inequality, injustice, the exploitation of the Third World... the Western world is annoyed by the fact that it gets bombed, but the fact is that there are more than three billion people who are angry, humiliated and

exploited. On the other hand, we have social questions here, with old people waiting for the 'dependency law' for which there are insufficient funds.

IT WOULD BE A BLOW TO HISTORY IF WE DIDN'T TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE FACT THAT WE ARE NOW ABLE TO MAINTAIN AND DEFEND OUR CULTURAL SITUATION

Have you done everything you wanted to do?

I've done a lot more than I wanted to do. I didn't even intend to have a career as a musician. I was a naive kid with no goals or aims and in a sense, I still feel that way. It's all been a complete surprise. When I finished the concert in the FC Barcelona stadium in 1985, in front of 100,000 people, while the people around me were celebrating (we won I don't know how many daft Guinness records), I had to go and watch how they took down the stage. I didn't leave until it was all taken down. It did me good. For someone in such a privileged position like mine it's sometimes difficult not to lose sight of things. They say that I behave with false modesty. Well, even if it's false, I always feel compelled to deny that I'm a great singer or whatever. For forty years I have had to force myself every day not to believe it ever, and not to believe it sincerely, in spite of public recognition. I don't deny that I've been capable of making a melody or composing some lyrics with sentiment, but from that to being what the people make you feel about yourself when they express their admiration... every time they turned on the lights in a theatre, I saw the public watching me with adoration... When the concert was over it was worth getting in the car and going home alone, sleepy, hungry, feeling alone, without any support to cling onto. It was a valuable lesson so I didn't believe I was some kind of a God.

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