

The “assault” on “sub-Saharan immigrants” in the media

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When, from the anti-racist camp, we voice our concern about the treatment that news concerning migration issues receives in the media, some people think that we are denouncing a sort of media plot by people who hold xenophobic views, who need to be unmasked. Well, it's not like that at all. Neither is it a matter of conspiracies nor, most importantly, are we talking about journalists with xenophobic opinions (although these do exist). The matter is simpler and, it would be fair to say, more serious. What we observe is that, in contrast with the media's great capacity to establish images about immigration in public opinion, the professionals working for these media neither have sufficient knowledge about the issue they are reporting and expressing opinions about, nor are they conscious of the concrete repercussions of their work, of the stereotypes they reinforce, of the ammunition, in effect, that they provide to those in the political arena who do push forth policies of exclusion and xenophobia. There are, of course, professionals who do an excellent job, but between the fact that there are few of them, and that media businesses, who are the ones who should take up this issue, are not willing to do so, the end result is that in spite of the use politically correct arguments, the image of immigration in public consciousness is in constant decline.

Let's look at this through a glance at the press treatment of what happened around Ceuta and Melilla in the second half of the year that just ended.

Construction of the news in the media

The attempts by a considerable number of immigrants to jump over the border fences of Ceuta and Melilla to enter Spain have been portrayed in the media by resorting to all kinds of metaphors, whose effect throws up an image that has very little relation with the truth, but which is strongly indicative of how certain migratory issues are tackled and of what understanding media companies have of these. On 27 August, which is when the recent cycle of events began, the headlines report the news in a reasonably aseptic and, by and large, balanced way: The Guardia Civil blocks the entry into Melilla of 250 immigrants using riot prevention materials (ABC), The Guardia Civil prevents the entry of 250 illegal immigrants in Melilla (El Mundo), The Guardia Civil blocks a mass entry of immigrants in Melilla (El País), Around 250 Africans attempt to jump the fence that surrounds Melilla (El Periódico de Catalunya).

The assault

However, in the body of the news articles, metaphors start to appear about “repeated waves”, “avalanches”, “assaults”, among which the account by *El País* from that day stands out, which reads: “it was an example of military strategy”, “they use military tactics”, “they use the call to prayer by the muezzin to send their comrades to the assault”, “when the horn sounded, an army of sub-Saharans came out of the vegetation; they simultaneously carried over 100 ladders... and the battle commenced. It was like a medieval assault”. And, on the following day, the same reporter insisted on this idea by resorting, in this instance, to the government envoy, “we do not rule out that among them there may be members of the militias from the many wars that Africa is suffering”.

This description is very significant. It is not just a literary means used by the author, but rather, it shows a perception that we will continue to find throughout the following weeks: the understanding of Spain (and, by extension, of the European Union) as a fortress under siege, that must be protected from the onslaught by massive waves of poor people (particularly Africans) resorting to well-defined means to do so, either material (more fences, higher and equipped with more control tools), human (more police, and even the army), or international cooperation (calling the EU to assist us, or Morocco and its army) in response to a situation that is described as an emergency and as one of the most serious problems faced

by Spain. This is the discourse and the views that are practically unanimous. The differences surface, on the one hand, due to the political game played by parties and, on the other, as a result of the degree of proximity that most journalists seek to achieve in relation to the authentic dramatic human circumstances that the protagonists of this story carry with them.

Already on the second day, the newspapers begin to carry their own ideologised view of events in their headlines, and thus they tell us of “avalanches”, “waves”, “injured Guardia Civil officers”, of the “assault of the fence”, “mass assault on the border” and, while we’re at it, on the 31st, *El País* carries the headline “assault on Melilla”. The difference between “jump” (saltar, in Spanish) and “assault” (asaltar, in Spanish) goes far beyond a simple vowel. The meaning changes entirely, and it is not a matter of bad use of language (those writing are professionals of the pen, and language is their tool). Jumping the fence, crossing it, entering illegally... have nothing to do with assaulting. There is no need to resort to the dictionary to understand that the connotations that the word assault implies are very different from what the immigrant people referred to are trying to do, that is, to get into the EU however they can to be able to work and thus earn means of subsistence for themselves and their families. And let’s not say that what they are assaulting is not a fence, but the city, Melilla, as such. It’s obvious that, with events portrayed in this way, the alarm bells start ringing.

Nor is it pointless to note that it is *El País*, precisely, that presents this view. There is no doubt that the author of these accounts, and it may even be fair to make a generalisation in this sense about the entire newspaper, acts from an anti-xenophobic and anti-racist subjective stance, as is evident from other news items. However, if even when working with this starting point it is possible to construct the images that we are discussing, this means that they are common currency in the media as a whole. That is, we have no need to resort to examples that are more explicitly xenophobic which, of course, have been distilled by the pens of other journalists from different newspapers whose stance in these matters is less defensible.

In the coverage of these days, as could be expected, there are also plenty of references to these people as “illegals”.

This climate that was created progressively fertilises the ground to legitimise the intervention by the army, and when it takes place on 29 September, the image according to which we are witnessing a bellic problem is definitively propped up, just as the headlines and photographs from these days reflect, as do various accounts like the one in *El Diario Vasco*, on 1 October, which begins with “the military operation on this side of the fence leaves one breathless”.

The figures

The use of figures, something that the media like very much, does not reflect the true quantitative dimension of the events at all. We are talking about a few thousand people who, apparently, would end up saturating our countries, when it turns out that every two or three days, through ports and airports, this same total number of people enters and ends up staying in spite of not having a residence permit. In these days, we also saw how the figures were inflated by the practice of identifying the number of attempts to jump over the fence with the number of immigrants, when the Guardia Civil itself, which is the source that was consulted, insisted that the same people attempt the jump several times. This is what *El Mundo* does on 29 September, when it details that “over 12,000 immigrants have tried to jump the fence”. From this perspective, that of figures, which journalistic references so often employ, the number of people who gain access to Melilla and Ceuta is absolutely marginal. In spite of this, the treatment of these events well beyond their scale can be seen in *El Mundo*, which, already on 31 August, in its editorial comment under the headline “Melilla, faced by waves of immigrants”, states that “the immigrants now launch massive attacks” and, a month later, on 30 September, will refer to them as “one of the greatest problems that Spain has”.

The excess of figures features grotesque¹ examples such as those from the *Diario Vasco* on 9 October, which features among its headings (in this case a sub-heading): “The Spanish frontiers of Africa are not in Ceuta and Melilla, but rather in the desert, where there are swarms of Islamist groups, and millions of sub-Saharan arrive to jump into Europe”. If we are talking of millions who come to jump into Europe and who, moreover, have some connection with Islamists, of course, we’ll end up shouting the classic: “Legion, come to me!” However, why should we call on the media for rigour, when a veritable intellectual of the standing of Sartori is capable of clamly stating, in *El País Semanal* on 25 December 2005 that “The African problem is very serious: it has been calculated that between 200 and 300 million people would be ready to go to Europe by any means, even if this is by jumping fences, as has happened in Melilla, or in dyngnies”.

Responsibilities

Insofar as the immediate response on the border is concerned, the accounts of the first few days stress the impeccable behaviour of the Guardia Civil. If, in spite of everything, some people are injured, this is apparently due to the ladders having fallen, after which, of course, they were immediately taken care of by the Guardia Civil, which thus honoured its name, the ‘benemérita’². Even if, on the first day (29 August), one immigrant is found dead at the foot of the fence, no responsibility can be laid at its door, as only the official versions are reported. It was left to various associations (Medicos sin fronteras, Prodein, SOS Racismo, APDHA) to take the step of directly contacting the people on the receiving end of the intervention and to disclose the data and evidence that end up emphatically contradicting the credibility of official sources and illustrating the damage caused by the use of rubber bullets, truncheons and other repressive equipment by the Guardia Civil. Even so, when a third immigrant died on 15 September in the hospital in Melilla with a destroyed trachea³, the “very peculiar” official version according to which this person had been found in that condition by an immigrant in a Moroccan village and had been able to walk to the frontier in Melilla in such conditions, where the fence was opened to let him through and he was picked up and taken to hospital, was initially not even questioned by the press, even taking into account that the immigrant in question was taken to hospital after a charge during which rubber bullets were used. Once again, it was left to these associations to question the official version. It is also true that throughout these months, the press has also gathered some accounts that indicate that there were interventions by the Guardia Civil that contravene current legislation and the rights of the people trying to jump the fence, but from an overall glance at this period a clear trend can be noticed, whereby such actions are presented as specific episodes, which is also as far as the official version ever goes, when it has to face up to unquestionable facts such as, for example, the repeated aggression by a Guardia Civil officer against an immigrant who was on the floor and was not putting up any sort of resistance, which was broadcasted by Tele 5.

Concertinas or barbed wire?

The “spin” operation reaches grotesque⁴ levels when, to refer to the barbed wire that crowns the fence, we repeatedly hear people talking of “concertinas”⁵. It is obviously not an effort to improve the population’s musical education, but rather of sweetening a reality that causes terrible damage to those who try to jump over the fence. When they have been spending several years selling us the argument for a very strong investment of euros in a panoply of technological means (acoustic sensors, infra-red optical systems, video-cameras...) that,

¹ “Esperpéntico” in the original, a term used to refer to grossly exaggerated portrayals which deform reality, a 19th century literary trend started by the Spanish author Ramón María del Valle-Inclán.

² A term used to refer to something or someone who is distinguished, worthy or admirable.

³ In lay terms, “windpipe”

⁴ See footnote 1.

⁵ In reference to the extendable leather lateral part of this instrument similar to that of an acordeon.

supposedly, will painlessly prevent the entry of unwanted immigrants, it now turns out that it all looks more like the barbed wire fences that surrounded the concentration camps of the Second World War, which are sadly remembered in European memory.

As for the underlying responsibility, what is emphasized above everything else is the version (also maintained by large part of the political class) that points to Morocco, which is considered responsible for what is taking place, and is required to “solve” the problem. Only a marginal space is afforded to the systematic violation of fundamental rights by Morocco, by its judicial and penitentiary system, and its police and military forces, alike. What stands out is a unanimous outcry requiring Morocco (in spite of the fact that it claims to have detained 23,000 immigrants so far this year and argues that it is a problem that does not depend on its actions) to act, and to do so with more forcefulness than it has up to now. The newspapers make this demand by a large part of the political class their own, bringing it to editorial prominence without it being made subject to Morocco respecting Human Rights or the right to asylum. This pressure will have an effect, and Morocco will go so far as to resort to the army, killing five immigrants with their bullets in Ceuta on 2 October and six more in Melilla, four days later (as well as many people suffering gunshot wounds and various other injuries). Amid the clamour for “cleaning up” [the border] anything is allowed, and we thus see how dozens of immigrants are rescued by the Polisario⁶ from the desert where they had been abandoned and sentenced to death by the Moroccan police forces.

Packaging agendas

The ability of the media to set and change the agendas of the political class can be seen in this example of what occurred in Ceuta and Melilla.

Its newsworthiness in the media was replaced by the revolts in the French suburbs, which also had a sell-by date. The bulk of what happened in September and October in Ceuta and Melilla has not changed. There continue to be attempts to jump over the fence (albeit in smaller numbers), as happened previously; hundreds of immigrants, men, women and children are languishing in military camps like the ones of Taouima in Morocco and the one of Adrar in Algeria; hundreds continue to wander in the hills that are found near to the border... but it is not the moment for this. Its coverage in media has changed radically. And therefore, they are not the focus of concern in the political agenda.

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<http://www.icariaeditorial.com/libros.php?k=2&o=2&id=748&pg=1>

This “annual report on racism in the Spanish state” contains an excellent collection of in-depth articles, one for each of its sections, which cover immigration law, police abuses, the situation on the southern border, media, minors, the regularisation process, the Roma people, social racism and the far right, and also contains information from the SOS Racismo offices for the reporting of racist incidents and cases of discrimination, press report summaries about relevant events, and statistics from official sources.

Mugak runs a media observatory, publishes a quarterly media review publication and sends out a daily newsletter featuring links to immigration-related articles from a selection of newspapers, as well as publishing Mugak magazine, which deals with immigration issues:
<http://revista.mugak.eu/>

⁶ Frente Polisario, the Western Saharan independence movement of Saharawis, present in refugee camps in the region.