

NEWS

# Catalonia's steady slide into violence

*Are recent stabbings in Berga and Hospitalet isolated incidents or indicative of a deeper malaise in Catalan society?*

**NEIL STOKES**

A "passion for the superfluous" was the mentality behind the recent spate of violent episodes that have shocked Catalan society, says Montserrat Tura. While the stabbing incidents in Berga and L'Hospitalet have provoked universal alarm, the Home Office minister's theory of gratuitous violence is only one of many put forward to rationalise Catalonia's seeming slide into everyday brutality. Some blame a relativism which has overthrown morality, some blame the police, others point to racial tensions, while others find fault with a society that has marginalised its young and disadvantaged. It appears that Catalonia is losing its innocence as it develops into a more sophisticated, complicated modern society.

The events in Berga, which saw 22-year-old Josep Maria Isanta knifed during a local festival, have been at the forefront of the media. Yet Berga has also been in the spotlight for the local population's reaction to the killing. A mob baying for the heads of suspects rounded up within minutes of the stabbing became a protest against local police. Residents criticise the Mossos d'Esquadra for their policing style, an accusation which the authorities reject and who blame

"small groups of radicals" for taking advantage of the anger in Berga to further political ends.

Parallels can be made between the Berga saga and events in Sabadell over the last few months, where alternative youth movements and skinhead groups were locked into a cycle of confrontation with the local authorities. However, the Isanta killing is also reflected in the knife fight that took place in and around a L'Hospitalet school last week. Like in the Isanta case, one of the victims tried to break up a fight, only to receive a blade in the throat. Altogether, three 15 to 16-year-old youngsters were injured and three others were arrested. Since then, police have had to contain the situation by preventing friends of the victims from entering the school in search of revenge on Latino pupils connected to the stabbings.

The question is whether these are isolated incidents or indicative of a malaise threatening Catalan society with more widespread problems of violence witnessed in other European countries. For the last two weeks, the southern French city of Perpignan in Catalunya Nord has been torn apart by a war between the Gypsy and North African communities. Pitched street battles, shootings and rioting



Fights between gypsies and North Africans in Perpignan in Catalunya Nord have been reported in depth by the Catalan media / EFE

have been the order of the day, with the Maghrebis blaming favouritism toward the Gypsy community from the mayor. So far, two North Africans have been shot dead, while many Gypsy families have sought refuge with relatives in Figueres and Lleida. Despite the cultural links with Cat-

alunya Nord, the Catalan media has given acres of space to what is intrinsically a French issue. Perhaps the interest originates from a sense that these conflicts are what lie in store for Catalonia. A country blessed with relative prosperity and good services, it is also a society that has seen the ero-

sion of the family, a decline in the birthrate and a sudden influx of immigrants, while all along the questions of national identity and autonomy have never been satisfactorily resolved. To deal with these issues while keeping society safe and sound may require every last ounce of *seny*.

## Barcelona city council gets on its bike to promote green transport

**CATALONIA TODAY**

The Barcelona council never rests in its search for an answer to the city's chronic transport problems. The Catalan capital may be a far cry from Amsterdam or Cambridge but, undeterred, the Ajuntament is in the middle of the latest ruse to convince residents to dump four wheels in favour of two: *La Setmana de la Bicicleta*. Until Sunday, the local authorities are once again promoting the use of bicycles by hiring them out for free. At the heart of the campaign to encourage cycling, the municipal authorities are loaning out between 50 and 200 bicycles every day from 10am until 8 in the evening. The special week will come to a close on Sunday when the fourth *Bicicletada de Barcelona* takes place. A multitude of cyclists will start out from the junction of Aragó/Balmes and will cross the finish line on the avinguda de Maria Cristina, in an event to celebrate cycling in the city.

More than 30,000 people habitually use the bicycle to get around Barcelona, which has more than 120 kilometres of cycle lanes. Nevertheless, the city's cycling resources are still far from perfect. During the presentation of the cycling



Barcelona council promotes cycling / L.C.

week, for example, deputy mayor Jordi Portabella admitted that "There are bicycle lanes that are good and those that could be better." His words echoed recent criticism of Barcelona's cycle lane system by Ecologistes en Acció, who have produced a study which shows that more than half of the city's lanes are in need of urgent re-

pair or modification.

Barcelona also suffers from bicycle theft on a huge scale. Although there are known to be at least 210,000 bicycles in the city, there are fewer than 4,000 parking spaces, and only 290 of these are indoors. Plans for an official register of bikes to thwart thieves still has not been developed. According to Portabella, the Comissió Cívica de la Bicicleta has, to date, spent more than a year working on the issue without coming to any conclusions. However, many stolen or abandoned bicycles in the possession of the authorities will be put back into circulation, said the deputy mayor.

Another problematic topic connected with bicycles is the co-existence with pedestrians. A 1998 law established norms requiring a pavement to be more than five metres wide to be used by cyclists, a regulation often ignored. Portabella, however, assured his audience that "the bicycle is the vehicle that is involved in the fewest accidents in Barcelona". The deputy mayor also said that since 2002, when building new cycle lanes, space had been taken away from car drivers, "not from pedestrians".

## Save your blushes for BCN Bridal Week

**MARTAWENDLINGER**

Don't be mistaken, it's not time for Barcelona Fashion Week, but it is for the newest edition of BCN Bridal Week. Events, exclusively for professionals, will include the Pasarela Gaudí Novias catwalk show and the NOVIA España Trade Fair at the Fira de Barcelona Convention Centre from June 15 to 19. Spain is currently the second largest exporter of bridal gowns, renowned for the quality of the fabrics, constant innovation, and impeccable design. Barcelona, for centuries a centre for textiles, and currently one of the most fashionable cities in Europe, will host the various events. The week begins with the Pasarela Gaudí Novias, from the 15-17 June, featuring collections from over 25 of the most important national and international designers including Jesus del Pozo, Devota & Lomba, Joaquim Verdu, Hannibal Laguna (a review of his show and interview will appear in next week's edition), Cymbeline, and Pronovias presenting their best ideas for dressing the bride and groom and their friends and relatives. A cast of international models will be on hand to strut these imaginative, and always captivating, designs. The Gaudí catwalk will be



A Hannibal Laguna wedding dress

followed by the NOVIA España Trade Fair, from the 17-19, which has become the meeting point for firms in the bridal, ceremonial, and communion industry. Last year, over 370 journalists attended from all over the world, with 40 per cent of visitors coming from abroad as did 30 per cent of the exhibitors, representing a total of 50 countries. [www.moda-barcelona.com](http://www.moda-barcelona.com)