

Josep Valtònyc: “What’s happening to me could happen to anyone.”

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26 July 2018

The WWSW interviewed the rapper Josep Valtònyc, who has been sentenced to three and a half years in prison (see: Pursuit of rapper Valtònyc reveals widespread censorship in Spain).

Alejandro López: When did it all start?

Josep Valtònyc: It all started in 2012; I was 18 years old. I left my house and the police arrested me. They took me to the police station and told me that I had been arrested for the lyrics to my songs and that there was an alleged crime of glorifying terrorism and slandering the Crown. Well, it was a rather symbolic arrest. That is to say, I was in custody for a few hours, they got my info, booked me and told me that the judge would call on me to enter a plea. I was also informed that this case would probably be handled by the National High Court, and that’s the way it turned out. The public prosecutor called for a prison term of three years and eight months. We all thought it was a bit of a stretch, and that the judge would reduce the sentence. But I went to trial and got three and a half years. We appealed to the Supreme Court, and they upheld the sentence of the National High Court. Then we went to the Constitutional Court, which rejected my appeal.

AL: What exactly were the lyrics they sentenced you for? Was it a song, a particular lyric?

JV: It was an entire album called “Residusd’unpoeta” [Residues of a Poet]. It was on YouTube. It’s not just any particular lyrics, it’s the whole album. The sentence is three hundred pages of quotations from my songs on this album.

AL: What are the charges you’ve been convicted of?

JV: Slander of the Crown, glorification of terrorism and death threats. The threats are supposedly against politicians.

AL: The European extradition order that has been issued for you is for terrorism. What do you think of this?

JV: They put me on trial for humiliating the victims of terrorism, and I consider that to be a real humiliation of the victims of terrorism. To trivialise terrorism in this way, to accuse someone who sings a few songs of terrorism... seems absurd to me. In other countries what has happened to me simply does not take place.

When they issued the European Arrest Warrant there was no box they could tick that said “making songs”, so they classified it as “terrorism”.

AL: How do you relate your case to others in Spain? You’re not the only one. Another rapper, Pablo Hasél, has also been sentenced to two years and a day in prison and a fine of 24,300 euros for crimes of glorification of terrorism with the aggravating circumstance by recidivism, libel and slander against the Crown and state institutions.

JV: Mine is not an isolated case. It is a wave of repression due to the mobilizations and the organization of the people in the Spanish state. Power has to react in some way, and what it does is instill fear. We are experiencing a throwback in terms of freedoms in every sense. This shows that what is happening to me can happen to anyone. It’s not an attack on me. It’s an attack on freedom of speech.

AL: How do you think your case has impacted or will impact other

artists in the Spanish state? That is, do you think artists will self-censor themselves out of fear of the penal consequences?

JV: What I think is that the worst censorship is when it’s self-inflicted. That’s what’s going on. There will be many songs and lyrics that will not be released and will not be sung out of fear. It’s like we’ve gone back a century. We can’t put limits on art, but that’s what’s happening.

AL: Have you been able to talk to Pablo Hasél? Have you discussed the similarities of your cases?

JV: We’re being put on trial for exactly the same thing.

AL: Slander of the king.... seems like a medieval law. What do you think of this?

JV: The Crown slanders itself all on its own. Many scandals about them have been coming to light in recent days [Valtònyc is referring to recent revelations in which Corinna zu Sayn-Wittgenstein, a Monaco-based consultant close to Juan Carlos I, says in recordings that the King emeritus used her as a figurehead to hide assets and properties abroad, and that he had accounts in Switzerland in his cousin’s name.]

AL: One of your songs you’ve been convicted of is called “The Bourbons Are Thieves”.

JV: They put me on trial for telling true, objective facts, and that is because what is happening is scary. People are not going to be able to say what they think about those who are stealing public money from us, money taken out of our wages every month. We have the right to speak out, to criticize, to get angry. It seems unbelievable that I am being tried for calling him a thief and that nothing happens to him for actually being a thief.

AL: It is no coincidence that those who are being condemned are not singers and groups that sing anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic songs, but Hasel, you and others who consider themselves leftists.

JV: Music is music. You can play a character like in a novel. There are people like Jiménez Losantos [far-right radio talk show host] who call for the bombing of Barcelona and incite xenophobia, and nothing happens to them. The media do incite hatred, xenophobia and machismo and nothing happens to them. I believe that these people should be censored, but not by the state, but means of social censorship, by taking people out of our spaces.

AL: How have the mainstream media treated your case?

JV: Very badly, in the sense that they have bought into the “apologia for terrorism” story. I do not support ETA [Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom]. And the media have treated me as if I did. I find it insulting that they are using the fight against terrorism to justify the deterioration of fundamental rights and freedoms. I believe that those who have directly suffered terrorism would not support this. They do not want the fight against terrorism to be used to justify censorship. The media has really played into this by taking sentences out of context, cutting them short. It’s like watching a Tarantino movie and only seeing a scene where a character has his head cut off. I’d be scared too. But if you watch the whole movie, you might understand it.

AL: At the same time, you have received a lot of support and solidarity, especially from young people. Your fellow artists came together to sing and record the song “The Bourbons Are Thieves”, in defense of freedom of speech. In a matter of hours, the video clip reached almost a million views. It was Trending Topic both in Spain and the rest of the world. The #FreeValtonychashtag on Twitter has over 350,000 tweets, most of them in your support. What’s it been like to see this solidarity with your cause?

JV: I have seen that people support me, that they love me, but above all, people have understood that this also affects them. That this is an attack on a fundamental right and that, if they do not fight, it will be taken away from them. Because rights are not given to us: rights must be won. We must fight for them.

The song surprised me very much. The way it was done, and how artists came from all over the Spanish state. I think the people have mobilized. We have created an important movement, and if my case had to be the trigger, then I’m happy.

AL: Even relatives of ETA victims have approached you to show their support. Explain this to us.

JV: ETA victims came to a demonstration and they told me that they are with me. They don’t think it’s right for this to be done in their name.

AL: Along the same lines, in the article we published today we point out that since ETA declared an end to the armed struggle in 2011, the accusations of “glorification of terrorism” have multiplied fourfold. According to statistics, from 2004 to 2011 there were 33 sentences. From 2011 to 2017, there were 121 indictments.

JV: This shows that the National High Court is really the former Court of Public Order [a court under Franco whose mission was the repression of “political crimes”] and that its function is to repress, and that the repressive apparatus of the state is very well oiled. This shows that they need to repress people. And today, the only resistance is not armed, but rather intellectual in nature. And this is what they’re going after. The National High Court is a clearly political court. Its mission is to persecute dissidence, and given that there is no armed resistance anymore...

AL: The years 2011 to the present are also years of austerity measures, increased poverty and inequality, multiple workers’ struggles and strikes, and mass protests. We are living in a time of intensification and sharpening of the class struggle. How do you relate this to attacks on freedom of speech?

JV: The regime is going through a crisis of legitimacy, in the sense that there is an organization, there is resistance, there is satire towards the regime. It is a crisis of legitimacy in every sense. It is both political, because out of 1400 corrupt politicians only 70 have been imprisoned, and people know this. People are fed up.

And it is a crisis of judicial legitimacy, in the sense of the impact of court rulings. Just look at the case of “the Herd” [the case of a group of five men who raped an eighteen-year-old girl—they were sentenced for lesser charges of sexual abuse, not rape], Alsasua [the case of seven young people sentenced to between 9 and 13 years in prison for a fight with two civil guards and their partners in October 2016], and the case of the prevarication of judge [Pablo] Llarena [investigating judge in the case against the Catalan independence movement]. A judge can’t have a political strategy. A judge has to abide by the law and justice. He cannot have an ideological tendency.

And a crisis of legitimacy of the monarchy, people are clear that the monarchy is useless, that they want a republic and that there has to be a referendum on monarchy or republic.

And then the whole organisation of 1 October [referendum organised in Catalonia on independence, which was severely repressed by the Spanish state] and the credibility that the Spanish state lost by responding in this way, proving that Spain is a police state.

Everything that is happening is related to this, with instilling fear so that people will not organize, demobilize the streets, so that people will stay

home and not be free to demonstrate. This is why the “gag law” was passed [a law that limits freedom of expression, bans mass gatherings and imposes fines for protesting and commenting on social networks]. Now, apart from demonstrating, people have no right to comment on Twitter or make songs. They have no right to freedom of speech.

AL: Last April, when he was leader of the opposition, the current prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, said: “A rapper going to prison is a very bad sign of the state of our democracy.” Pablo Iglesias, Podemos’ general secretary, told Congress that “It seems that criminal law is applied to persecute dissidents and yet the corrupt get away with it. It’s a disgrace!” I would like to know if, since the so-called “Government of Change” was formed by the PSOE and Podemos, has your situation changed? Do you think it’s going to change?

JV: Well, I don’t think the government should influence judicial decisions. There has to be a separation of powers. I don’t think it’s right for Pedro Sánchez to influence a judicial decision such as mine, or for the Ministry of the Interior or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to influence the European arrest warrant. Justice is justice and politics is politics. What the PSOE has to do is to remove from the penal code “glorification of terrorism” and “slander of the Crown”.

I think it is absurd that Pedro Sánchez should make this comment when it’s his party that approved these anti-terrorist laws that are now putting us in jail. The movement for freedom of speech is clearly gaining strength, and there they saw an opportunity to win votes and sympathizers.

AL: Do you think they’re going to abolish the articles on glorifying terrorism and slandering the Crown or the gag law?

JV: No, in fact, the first thing the government has done is to harden the crime of Rebellion [currently, the political prisoners of Catalan independence are accused of rebellion, sedition and embezzlement. Rebellion is punishable by up to 30 years imprisonment]. Let’s not kid ourselves. The PSOE is the same old shit.

AL: What is your current situation?

JV: I’m fine. I’ve been looking for a flat and now I’m working. I think things are going to be okay. The precautionary measures [of the Belgian courts] are minor, and that’s a good sign. They see no danger in me.

AL: Are you going to keep on singing?

JV: Yeah, yeah, I’m still doing my stuff and when I’m able, I’m going to start working on a new record.

AL: So you’re not afraid of more accusations and more convictions?

JV: I don’t care and I’ve never cared. I escaped from the Spanish state and want to be able to continue singing. If I wanted to stay quiet and hide, I would have gone to jail.

AL: What events have influenced you in singing leftist and anti-capitalist songs?

JV: Books in general. One in particular is *The Open Veins of Latin America* by the writer Eduardo Galeano. It helped me understand that music has to be a tool for social transformation, and that music and art is a hammer to transform reality. I wanted to make use of it in that way too.

AL: How can WSWs readers and supporters help your cause?

JV: There’s a resistance fund called freevaltonyc. You can make donations there and that’s what helps me pay for lawyers.



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