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The Basque Country: the heart of Spain, a part of Spain, or Somewhere Else Altogether

Abstract

The Basque Country exhibits contradictory symptoms of good health and chronic internal rupture. A flexible and robust economy and a vibrant cultural life are undermined by opposed senses of identity, which make almost any statement about the region deeply contentious. The verifiability—or otherwise—of Basque nationalist and Spanish nationalist readings of Basque history and culture matter less today than the fact that they are held with genuine conviction by big sectors of Basque society. Both traditions have their own legitimacy, but neither has been capable of fully acknowledging or including the other. Paradoxically, Francoism reinforced Basque nationalist identity, and anxieties about the survival of the Basque language stimulated radical Basque nationalism, with enduring consequences. An accommodation might be found in acceptance by both sides that Basque identities are multiple, and through recognition that there are several ways of being Basque, none of which need negate any of the others. The recent Irish settlement offers some pointers, though no rigid templates. Bernardo Atxaga's declaration that Euskera is not *the* Basque language, but a Basque language, is an indication that this process of respecting multiple identities is already underway, though the obstacles to a resolution remain formidable.

Keywords

Basque Country, Euskera, identity, Spain, Francoism, nationalist identity, multiple identities

The Basque Country: the heart of Spain, a part of Spain, or Somewhere Else Altogether

Paddy Woodworth

“Nafarroa Euskadi da. Lo siento en mi sangre” ‘Navarre is the Basque Country. I feel it in my blood’ (A supporter of the *izquierda abertzale*, author interview)

“Euskadi no es sólo una parte de España, es el corazón de España” ‘The Basque Country is not just part of Spain, it is the heart of Spain’ (Jaime Mayor Oreja, author interview)

“Euskera is not the Basque language. It is a Basque language. We are rich in the Basque Country, we have three languages, Euskera, Spanish and French. And now, with globalization and *rock’n’roll*, we have a fourth language, English” (Bernardo Atxaga, author interview)

The long-running crisis of identity in—and about—the Basque Country is a more chronic condition than a nervous breakdown. The symptoms of hysteria, paranoia, depression, stress, delusion and exhaustion are all certainly present in the patient. But we must make a more severe diagnosis here. The Basque Country is suffering from a crippling internal rupture. And, to adapt a phrase made notorious by Xabier Arzalluz, an acerbic leader of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), this disorder creates ulcers in the Basque and Spanish bodies politic that have bled copiously for many years, and often result in fatalities. The psychic wounds produced by the Basque conflict are equally dramatic, equally disabling.¹

And yet the patient, whether Basque, Spanish, or both at the same time, often exhibits the appearance of robust good health. The Basque government enjoys powers as broad as any region in

Europe, and has made the Comunidad Autónoma Vasca (CAV) into an economic and—in many respects—cultural success story. Post-Guggenheim Bilbao is a beacon of sophistication to the elite international traveler, and can seem not only at ease, but at one with itself. Down the coast from Bilbao, the San Antolines fiesta in Lekeitio has all the appearance of an exuberant outburst of civic pride, community participation, energy and joy. The small Basque region is home to half a dozen prestigious and cosmopolitan cultural festivals, from dance in Biarritz to jazz in Vitoria. Then there is the quintessentially Spanish-Basque fusion fiesta of *Sanfermines* in Pamplona. As for eating out, you sometimes feel that Michelin stars are scattered across the region like confetti at a wedding. On the French side of the border, there are Basque *ikurriñas* the ‘Basque national flag’ fluttering gaily alongside French tricolors, and entire streets where Basque identity is transmuted into innocent and profitable kitsch in the form of souvenirs.

If the region is suffering from a chronic illness, a casual observer might remark, we should all be as sick as this. Yet the consequences of a chronic crisis of identity shadow every aspect of Basque life I have just referenced. An *ertzaina* ‘policeman in the service of the Basque Autonomous Community’ was shot dead by ETA right under Jeff Koons’s *Puppy*, that durable emblem of the playful post-modern spirit of the Guggenheim-Bilbao project, on the eve of the museum’s inauguration. Talk for even a few moments to many of the revelers in Lekeitio’s fiesta, to find out that they are seething with anger at their disenfranchisement as Batasuna voters and at a judicial offensive which is sweeping many radical activists indiscriminately into jail. Many of the other revelers, who may not talk so freely, live in well-founded fear of Batasuna’s associates in ETA and the *kale borroka* ‘street struggle,’ and feel compelled to hide any expression of Spanish identity.² The gastronomic temple where you have just had the best meal of your life may be laundering money for terrorists. Those innocent French Basque streets were the setting for state terrorist attacks sponsored by Madrid’s PSOE administration in the 1980s.³ And so on.

Where, then, to begin the diagnosis of so grim yet so elusive an illness, or rather illnesses, because nothing in the Basque Country is singular? Perhaps we should start with geography, to find some pur-

chase for our thoughts, some orientation for our ideas. Immediately, though, we run into difficulties, because the Basque landscape is driven with territorial claims and counter-claims, and any orientation will be interpreted as an ideological position by one group or another. Hesitation comes naturally to any halfway sensitive writer on the Basques, because one very soon learns that the simplest sentence about the place and its people will always be construed as partisan by someone. No assumptions here can be politically innocent. An anecdote to illustrate this difficulty: a Spanish cultural administrator I had met in my native Ireland wrote me a charming email some years back. He told me he had accepted a position with the Foral Government of Navarre, and kindly offered me any assistance I might ever require in writing about this ancient kingdom. Shortly afterwards, I was commissioned by Signal Books and Oxford University Press to write a book on the Basque Country for their series "Landscapes of the Imagination." In due course, I wrote to my new friend, asking for his help with the project, insofar as it related to Navarre. Of course, he never replied. From the point of view of the government he was now serving, Navarre is simply not part of the Basque Country, so he could offer me nothing.

This rigid exclusion of Navarre from the Basque Country, however, was not always the position of the Spanish establishment. The censors of Franco's dictatorship, for example, raised no objection whatsoever when Pío Baroja wrote a guide book to the Basque Country in the 1950s which not only included Navarre but made it the centre-piece of his account of the region. Baroja had always been harshly critical of Basque nationalism. But his physical and spiritual home was the valley in which the Bidasoa river unites Navarre, the French Basque Country, and the region which is today known as the CAV. He had no hesitation in ascribing Basque identity in equal measure to all three places. The rift between Navarre and the other Basque provinces is a relatively recent one, a response by Spanish nationalists (of both the left and right) to the claims of Basque nationalism.

Spanish nationalists and conservatives have no monopoly on exclusion. The member of the *izquierda abertzale* 'left' quoted at the start of this article refuses to recognize any Spanish identity in Navarre. More moderate Basque nationalists all too often exclude

Baroja himself from the canon of Basque literature, partly because he wrote in Castilian, and partly because of his hostility to their ideology. Miguel de Unamuno, Blas de Otero, Gabriel Celaya and other distinguished writers of Basque origin are also dismissed as “Spanish” on similar grounds. It should not be forgotten, of course, that Irish nationalists generally offered a similarly cold shoulder to James Joyce for many years. It was only after independent Ireland gained grown-up self-confidence in the 1960s that *Ulysses* was unbanned, and that the cosmopolitan Joyce has become as much—and more—an icon of the Irish nation as narrow-minded “patriotic” writers like Paraic Pearse, the leader of the 1916 Easter Rising which sparked the Irish War of Independence. Things change, and then they change again.

So, for the purposes of this article, I propose to consider the Basque Country as seven provinces, including the CAV, Navarre and the three provinces currently under French administration. This is not to endorse the Basque nationalist slogan *Zazpiak Bat* ‘the Seven are One.’ It may be just as appropriate, or more, to say *Zazpiak Zazpi* ‘the Seven are Seven.’ It is certainly not to pre-judge the political status of any part of the region. It is simply to recognize a long and deep cultural association and identity between all seven provinces. Conversely, we should also recognize that all the provinces have their own individual identities, as well as long and deep cultural associations with the adjoining regions, and with the nation-states of France and Spain. If that is the geographical territory we are going to consider, perhaps we should now move straight to the political questions which makes the issue of Basque identity such a contentious and painful one, at least on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees.⁴ These questions are: to what extent should we recognize as legitimate the fracture which Basque nationalists perceive as dividing their country from Spain? A question which must always be paired with its twin: to what extent should we recognize as legitimate the common ground which many other Basques perceive as uniting their region with the Spanish national project?

Let us take the Basque nationalist position—or rather positions, because nothing is straightforward here—first. Sabino Arana, the founding father of Basque nationalist ideology, like many European nationalists of the late nineteenth century, based his case for a dis-

tinct national identity partly on racial grounds. His successors in the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) 'Basque Nationalist Party' have shifted the argument to (somewhat) more politically correct ethno-cultural and historical differentiations. ETA and the *izquierda abertzale* have in turn stressed language and even class (the concept of the PTV, the *Pueblo Trabajador Vasco*, the 'Basque Working People') as key signifiers of membership of the Basque *polis*.

We could spend a great deal of time and space here deconstructing Basque nationalist historical, cultural and ideological *canards*. But however historically skewed or ideologically twisted some Basque nationalist claims may be, the Basques do have at their disposal many, if not all, of the primary materials with which peoples construct legitimate national identities, and we will return to these materials later. In any case, focusing on the bogus nature of some Basque nationalist claims may not assist us very much in understanding the Basque Country today. Many studies on nationalism suggest that while exposing the fallacious or partial nature of nationalist readings of history, and highlighting the flaws in nationalist ideologies, is a necessary and salutary exercise, it misses a very important point, indeed the central one. This point was made a long time ago by the French historian Ernest Renan: "Amnesia, and I would even say historical error, are an essential part of the formation of a nation" (Hobsbawm 12). Renan himself thought that more accurate historical research would undermine nationalist positions. But despite the best efforts of many historians, like Eric Hobsbawm a century later, this does not appear to have been the case. As Hugh Seton-Watson wrote in 1977: "A nation exists when a significant number of people in a community consider themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they formed one. It is not necessary that the whole of a population should so feel, or so behave, and it is not possible to lay down dogmatically a minimum percentage of a population which must be so affected" (5).

The legitimacy of the Basque claim to nationhood, according to this view, rests not so much on the veracity of its historical, cultural or ideological underpinnings, but on the degree to which it is accepted as a norm by Basque citizens today. The same, of course, applies to Spanish claims to nationhood, inside and outside the Basque Country. Two valuable recent studies, *The Reinvention of*

Spain by Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga, and *Imagining Spain* by Henry Kamen, remind us that Spanish nationalists have been no slouches in transforming dubious historical theses into political holy writ. Basque nationalism may be just as creative in relation to its origins, and just as real in its ideological force, as is Spanish nationalism, or any other nationalism. But can we say that a “significant number” of contemporary Basques have demonstrated a desire for a national identity distinct from that of Spain? The vote on the referendum on the 1978 Spanish constitution in the CAV suggests that they have.

Basque nationalists campaigned either for abstention or a “No” vote on the Constitution, essentially because that document did not include a Basque right to self-determination.⁵ The PNV had not been included directly in the parliamentary commission which drew up the Constitution. They felt betrayed by the PSOE and the Communist Party (PCE), which had both supported Basque self-determination in the late Franco period but quietly dumped this position during the constitutional discussions (Francisco Bustelo 50). These parties made this shift for two reasons: they knew the principle of self-determination was unacceptable to the *poderes fácticos* ‘de facto powers’—military, financial and ecclesiastical—who conditioned the supposedly exemplary constitutional negotiations to a very considerable extent; and they knew that many of their own supporters were Spanish nationalists and deeply hostile to Basque “separatism.” Curiously, many PSOE leaders display total amnesia when reminded of this *volte face* ‘about-face’ today.

The Basque nationalist campaign against the Constitution was remarkably successful. Only 31% of the electorate in the CAV voted in favour of the constitution, as against 59% in Spain as a whole—and, indeed, as against 61% of the electorate in that other Iberian fiefdom of “peripheral nationalism,” Catalonia. And 10% of the Basque electorate voted “No,” double the number across the whole state. It is important to add, at once, that of those Basques who did vote, 75% voted in favor of the new arrangements (against 88% in Spain overall). The Basque “No” vote represented 25% of participants, three times the Spanish (and Catalan) average. Predictably, these figures are read by Basque and Spanish nationalists in diametrically opposed ways. For Basque nationalists, the Basque people—the whole

electorate—has never given its majority assent to the Constitution. For Spanish nationalists, a ringingly clear majority—three quarters—of Basque voters approved the foundational text of modern democratic Spain. They argue that abstention figures are notoriously open to any interpretation one cares to give them. Furthermore, Spanish nationalists add, a majority of the Basque electorate (53%) did support the Basque Statute of Autonomy in a referendum only two years later. And that statute is firmly set within the limits of the 1978 constitution, and had the support of the PNV. The statute was even endorsed by the political-military wing of ETA, whose political surrogates in Euskadiko Ezkerra called for a “Yes” vote in the second referendum, having advocated a “No” vote in 1978.⁶ This broad vote for the statute shows, Spanish nationalists say, that the Basque people supported the Constitution retrospectively, at the very least.

The Basque nationalists have their counter-arguments. They point out that subsequent elections have constantly yielded an overall majority to parties which proposed either abstention or rejection of the Constitution. This tends to support their interpretation of the very high level of abstention in 1978. As for accepting the Statute of Autonomy, most Basque nationalists contend that they agreed its terms as a pragmatic holding operation, not as a principled expression of their core position on Basque identity. It would have been suicide for the PNV not to seize the opportunities offered by the very significant powers Madrid was conceding to Vitoria (the Basque administrative capital), but such acceptance should never have been taken to imply a final settlement. In recent years the PNV has repeatedly insisted that these powers, though they are extensive, are not commensurate with Basque status (in their eyes) as a sovereign nation. With 20 years elapsed, they say, and in a Spain where democracy has been consolidated and the *poderes fácticos* firmly subjected (one hopes) to the rule of law, it is not unreasonable to renegotiate a constitution that was reached under the duress of military tutelage, and to which a majority of Basques never subscribed in the first place.

I have focused here on the arguments around the constitutional referendum outcome not because I think they clinch the issue of Basque nationhood either way, but because they reveal a significant fissure between many Basques and the constitution’s model of *con-*

vivencia or ‘co-existence.’ Madrid ignored, and ignores, this fissure at its peril (Basque nationalists unfortunately also tend to ignore the fact that this fissure divides Basque from Basque on their home territory as deeply as it divides Basque nationalists and Spanish nationalists in the context of the whole state). To paper over this fissure, or to argue that it should not exist, will not stop Basque people falling into it as the conflict in the region grinds on relentlessly, decade after decade.

You may say, with some justice, that the last time the fissure was last mapped in electoral detail was 30 years ago, and that it is probably less wide and deep today. That is a rational speculation, which opinion polls tend to support.⁷ Ironically, however, a real opportunity to test support for Basque sovereignty today, at a deeper level than poll samples, was lost when the Spanish parliament, government and judiciary rejected the proposal of the *Lehendakari* ‘Basque first minister,’ Juan José Ibarretxe, to hold a *consulta* on this issue in 2008.⁸ In any case, Ibarretxe’s dogged, not to say obstinate, persistence in pursuing this ‘consultation’ indicates that the fracture still conditions political and cultural life in the region. It might be useful at this point to ascertain what forces have kept this wound open while a boldly restructured Basque economy has boomed, Bilbao has famously reinvented itself, and cultural production in Euskera has blossomed, so that a casual visitor to the region is likely to carry away the impression of vibrant prosperity indicated in the opening paragraphs of this article. To comprehend these forces, we must first understand something about the factors which make the Basques a distinctive people. The main factor, which has given many Basques a sense of separate national identity is their language, Euskera. True, people do not need their own language to form a nation—just think of the Swiss, or the Americans—and nor do the speakers of minority languages always seek national status. But Euskera’s unique linguistic status, its lack of any clear structural relationship to any other language in the world, and certainly none to its immediate neighbours, gives it a powerful *cachet* as the main badge of Basque identity.

And while Basque nationalists have certainly “got their history wrong” on many occasions, the history of the region does have features that distinguish it from its neighbours. The Basque were much

less exposed than their southern neighbours to the great Roman, Muslim, Jewish and Visigothic cultures that dominated or influenced most parts of the peninsula—though there was a lot more interpenetration with these cultures than Basque nationalist historiography likes to admit. Nor did this relative isolation forge any sense of a unified political identity in the early Middle Ages. Almost always divided among themselves on lines broadly corresponding to the current provinces, Basque lords formed shifting alliances with their peers, and just as easily with elements of the emerging Spanish and French kingdoms to the south and north. They became absorbed, sometimes peacefully and sometimes by military conquest, into these kingdoms by the late Middle Ages. Even where one can attribute the absorption of a Basque province to conquest, one can always find Basques who were willingly fighting on the side of the conquering monarch. The Basques' internal feuding, known as "the wars of the bands," remained notorious even after formal absorption. Ironically, the remarkable grant by Castile of a *fuero* 'special right' of "universal nobility" to the peoples of Guipúzcoa and Vizcaya was probably motivated more by a desire to undermine the authority of the fractious local aristocracy than by any recognition of special qualities in the Basques, though of course Basque nationalists like to read it that way.⁹

Whatever the intentions of Castile, however, the relationship of the Spanish Basques to this and other *fueros* differs from the typical experience with such special local privileges in the rest of the emerging Spanish nation. There is little doubt that the economic privileges extended to the Basque provinces were exceptional, and none at all that these privileges lasted much longer into the contemporary period than elsewhere. Among other things, the customs frontier with Spain remained on the river Ebro, rather than on the French border, until the middle of the nineteenth century. So while other regions of Iberia also enjoyed special rights, it is certainly arguable that the Spanish Basques had more extensive *fueros*, and held on to them longer than anybody else. The loss of these rights after the nineteenth-century Carlist Wars, coupled with the hectic late-nineteenth-century industrialisation of Basque cities, especially Bilbao, and even of the countryside, created a sense of estrangement and resentment against Spain in many Basques. As usual, it is dan-

gerous to oversimplify: in the same period other Basques, especially the financial-industrial oligarchy, were drawn towards closer identification with Madrid. The influx of Spanish-speaking workers to fill the new factories, many of them in small towns, certainly created new social tensions, which generated nationalist sentiment. A lot of these workers brought with them Marxist and anarchist ideologies, regarded as anathema by many in this conservative Catholic region.

It is one of the ironies of modern Basque history that ETA, expressing the most radical form of Basque nationalism today, should have attempted to fuse it with Marxism-Leninism. This was not how Arana had envisaged his movement ending up. Arana invented a flag, a separatist ideology, and even a new name, Euzkadi (now Euzkadi), for the Basque homeland. He preached total independence from Spain, first for Vizcaya, and then for all seven provinces. However, during an illness in prison, shortly before his death, he shifted his ground and argued for Basque autonomy within a Spanish state. The PNV continues to this day to oscillate between aspiring to independence, or at least “sovereignty,” and settling for autonomy, a dynamic aptly described by Santiago de Pablo, Ludger Mees and José Antonio Rodríguez Ranz as “the patriotic pendulum.” The ambiguity of the party’s rhetoric as the pendulum swings has been useful at certain elections and moments of internal crisis. But it infuriates and baffles its critics, both in the *izquierda abertzale* and in Spanish nationalist parties. The Statute of Autonomy stimulated autonomist thinking in the PNV during the 1980s and much of the 1990s, but pro-sovereignty voices have dominated again since the PNV’s Lizarra-Garazi pact with the *izquierda abertzale* in 1998.¹⁰ This ambiguity understandably frustrates the PNV’s opponents, who often compare it unfavourably with the clear-cut pro-independence program of the Scottish Nationalist Party.

The forms Francoism took in the Basque Country played, ironically enough, a significant role in forging contemporary Basque identities which the dictator would have found repugnant. By treating Vizcaya and Guipúzcoa as occupied “traitor provinces,” and subjecting Basque culture to harsh repression, the Caudillo gave bitter substance to some of Arana’s claims. It was in this suffocating atmosphere of occupation that ETA was born in 1959 as a clan-

destine student study group, dedicated to the Basque language and to symbolic acts of defiance like putting Basque flags on mountain tops. But its members grew impatient with the passivity of the PNV, representing a defeated generation, and shifted towards armed resistance to the dictatorship.

Why did the Basques, and only the Basques, develop a significant armed opposition to Franco, demanding their own state? And why does this armed movement remain a powerful, if diminished, destabilising factor in Spain today? Repression was bloodier in Badajoz than it was in Bilbao, but you do not find the *Extremeños* looking for independence because of what Franco did to them. The difference is, surely, that the repression had a national dimension in the Basque Country that it did not have in the Leftist heartlands of Spain. It involved the repression of a much-loved language, and the imposition of a set of symbols with which most Basques could not identify. But, one may well ask, was not that also the situation in Catalonia? And yet the Catalans never gave much support to the short-lived group, *Terra Lliure* 'free homeland', which claimed to represent them in arms against the state. Here we enter very difficult terrain. It has been well mapped, however, by the anthropologist Joseba Zulaika. He argues that there are elements inherent in Basque culture which make many Basques identify negotiation and compromise, essential elements in a democracy, with betrayal. Zulaika traces this resistance to compromise through many aspects of Basque culture, from hunting through card-playing to the oral poetry of the *bertsolaris*.¹¹ He also stresses the religious formation of many ETA members of the period, and of the metamorphosis of religious vocation into existentialist and Marxist ideologies of commitment and action. For an insider's version of the world which gave birth to ETA, there are few, if any, richer sources.

Using a more conventional set of sociological tools, the Italian writer Daniele Conversi explicitly contrasts the "alternative routes to nationalist mobilisation" taken by the Basques and Catalans. His most fertile idea is that it was the "weakness," not the strength, of Basque culture and identity that led to the emergence of a violent nationalist movement. The Catalan language had a literary tradition comparable with the richest in Europe, and was still a means of daily communication for millions in the 1950s. This was a source

of great national self-confidence for the Catalans. This vibrant cultural world gave them a stage on which to experience and play out their sense of national identity even under the dictatorship. The simple fact that Catalan is also relatively easy to learn by osmosis, because of its similarities to Castilian, meant that immigrants were much more easily assimilated into this Catalan universe. In short, the Catalan nationalists under the dictatorship experienced their culture as oppressed, but by no means thought of it as threatened with extinction.

In contrast, the Basque literary tradition, at least in terms of the written word, is decidedly thin until the last century. However, the all-too-common impression that Euskera has no literary tradition, that it has never been more than a “primitive” and “rural” language with a purely oral culture, and that it is kept on life support today by subsidies from the autonomous government, is false.¹² Bernart Dechepare’s *Linguae Vasconum Primitiae*, ‘The first book published in Euskera’ in fact came respectably early by comparison with other vernacular printed literatures, in 1545. But Dechepere’s collection of religious, secular and erotic poetry contains a verse in *Kontra-pas* which, while appropriate enough for such a novel venture at the time, was still sadly relevant to publishing in Basque four centuries later:

Euskara,
jalgi hadi plazara.
Bertze jendek uste zuten
ezin eskriba zaiteien;
orai dute forogatu
enganatu zirela.

Euskara,
get out into the street!
Many people thought
writing in Basque was impossible.
Now they recognise
They were deceiving themselves. (116)

Most of the sparse crop of books which followed were translations of religious works, including a fine Calvinist New Testament.

The masterpiece of early Basque literature, *Gero* 'Later' (published in 1643), is a work of lively originality, though it has a religious theme, the vice of procrastination. Atxaga describes its author, Pedro Axular, as the Basque Cervantes.¹³ Atxaga acts as a (somewhat reluctant) international spokesperson for Basque literature because his works have been more widely translated than any other Basque author.¹⁴ He recognises that the Basque canon has been very uneven, indeed that it has almost disappeared at times, and that the literary language had to be virtually reinvented by the poet Gabriel Aresti in the Franco period. But Atxaga argues that this may not be a critical deprivation for contemporary writers in Euskera because "el lenguaje literario es único, que sólo hay uno y es universal" 'there is only one literary language, and that language is universal' (*Henry Bengoa* 73). That is, writers are free to mine classics from many other cultures, something he has done triumphantly himself in his best-known work to date, *Obabakoak* 'People of [the village of] Obaba.' This loosely linked series of stories are unmistakably Basque in their setting, but are almost all adaptations of stories from the European and Middle Eastern traditions.

There is a strong element of making a virtue out of a necessity in this argument, however. While all writers can draw on literature in languages foreign to them, the best case for writing in their own language is surely that they can say things in it that can be fully expressed in no other way. So a limited tradition in one's own tongue has to be an impoverishment. Atxaga, who is not afraid of contradicting himself, comes very close to saying this elsewhere: "Creo que la relación con el euskara ... es lo más característico de nuestro comportamiento y de nuestro modo de vivir, algo que no podemos perder sin perdernos, al menos un poco, a nosotros mismos" 'I believe that the relationship with Euskera ... is the most characteristic thing about our behaviour and our way of life, something which we cannot lose without losing, at least a little, our own selves' (*Henry Bengoa* 57). And Euskera, as we have seen, cannot be learned by osmosis, but only by a long period of study and immersion, far beyond the cultural and financial means of most immigrants. As a result, Basque nationalists had long felt that their culture was not just under siege but in danger of complete disappearance. During the Franco period, there was a widespread sense of despair,

a *sentimento agónico*, of living on the threshold of extinction as a people. As Conversi puts it, the first generations of ETA believed that “only drastic measures such as mass insurrection could save them from their doom,” and this feeling found a broad echo in the Basque population. Conversi concludes that the Basque experience is one where “violent conflicts have been revived by weak identities, and weak identities have been rejuvenated through violent conflict” (268). Atxaga echoes this anxiety many Basques feel about losing their language, and therefore their identity. He is keenly aware that, as he puts it, “la falta de reconocimiento mata” ‘lack of recognition kills’ (*Henry Bengoa* 58), that without a community of writers and readers in Euskera, some kind of extinction would indeed occur.

Today, such an extinction seems less likely than at any time in the last 150 years. A quarter of the people in the CAV now speak Euskera as their first language, compared to fifteen percent when Franco died.¹⁵ From the outside, because of his success in translation, it sometimes seems as if Atxaga is the only contemporary Basque producing a significant literary output; but several other distinctive writers, like Ramón Saizarbitoria, Joseba Sarrionandia and Arantxa Urretavizcaya are widely considered to be first-class. Widely, that is among the very small public which actually reads their books in Euskera, and the rather larger ones, inside and outside the Basque Country, which read them in Spanish. Nevertheless, Euskera is still clearly vulnerable on both the vernacular and cultural fronts, though the threats today are more likely to come from the globalisation of culture, coupled with the indifference of many Basques, than from any ill intent from Spanish nationalism.

Atxaga has rejected ETA's ideology since the transition to democracy, and is increasingly inclined to blame apathy and inertia at home rather than any exterior agency for the fact that Euskera as a literary and spoken language is still relatively weak. Nor does he share any radical vision of a monocultural Basque Country. His position is unusually pluralistic, in that he wants to celebrate all Basque identities, despite coming from an *Euskaldun* (Basque-speaking) milieu. “Euskera [he told me] is not the Basque language. It is a Basque language. We are rich in the Basque Country, we have three languages, Euskera, Spanish and French. And now, with globalisation, the movies and rock'n'roll, we have a fourth language,

English.”¹⁶

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Atxaga was a member of *Pott* (‘failure’ in Euskera), a literary group which produced an eponymous and very influential magazine. Mari José Olaziregi describes these writers thus in *Waking the Hedgehog*: “the group manifested their literary preferences clearly by concentrating on literatures from central Europe (Kafka, Werfell, Celan, and so on) and the English-speaking world (detective novels, film noir, adventure novels), as Borges had recommended in his essays. But, above all, the members of *Pott* defended the autonomous nature of literature” (21). This meant rescuing Basque culture from the narrow vision of Basque nationalism, though not all the members of the group have been as consistent as Atxaga in escaping dogmatic political categories. Sarrionandia was imprisoned on charges of ETA membership in 1980, and made a dramatic escape five years later, concealed in an amplifier used by a band visiting his jail. The sophisticated fiction he has continued to produce while underground is praised by many who find his politics repellent. In sharp contrast to Sarrionandia’s trajectory, fellow *Pott* alumnus Jon Juaristi (who had been a member of ETA in the early 1970s), went so far in rejecting his old loyalties that he became an articulate and passionate advocate for the Spanish nationalism of the *Partido Popular* in the Aznar period.¹⁷

The very diversity of paths chosen by these members of *Pott* illustrates the often neglected fact that Basque identity is not narrowly particular but remarkably heterogeneous. Ordinary families can display the same uncomfortable plurality in politics: you may find that a father is in the PP, a daughter in Batasuna, and a cousin is a councillor for the PSOE. Bilbao, as its wiser citizens will often remind you with pride, not only gave birth to Arana, father of Basque nationalism, but to Dolores Ibárruri, *la pasionaria*, icon of the international communist movement, and to several of the seminal figures in the foundation of the Spanish Socialist Party. And do not forget, they will add, that in the mansions of the Bilbao suburb of Neguri one could always find some of the staunchest defenders of conservative Spanish nationalism.

Socialists and conservatives whose primary identity is Spanish collectively represent close to half of the Basque electorate. They do not live in ghettos and in many respects live very similar lives

to Basque nationalists, celebrating the same fiestas and supporting the same football teams. In particular, those conservatives who come from a Carlist background share many traditions with their Basque nationalist neighbours, from pelota to Catholicism to use of the Basque language.¹⁸ Their reading of the region's history is drawn from many of the same materials as those which furnish Basque nationalism's narratives, but they construct a completely different national edifice. As Marianne Heiberg pointed out long ago in an excellent but often overlooked book on the region, *The Making of the Basque Nation*, each narrative is "partially valid" in its own way (ix). In the year 2000 I asked Oreja, a senior member of the PP at Spanish and Basque level, whether a "Downing Street Declaration" from Madrid would break the logjam in the region (*World* 25).¹⁹ He answered with a resounding "No" on two counts. The first was based on frank self-interest. It is an open secret, he said, that Spain "does" have self strategic and economic interests in the Basque Country, and very big ones at that. The second, quoted at the outset of this article, was based on his Spanish nationalist reading of history, which puts the region not on the periphery, but at "the heart of Spain." Oreja declared, with patent sincerity, that the Basques had been the initiators of the *reconquista* and had thus been part of the lifeblood of the Spanish nationalist project from its inception. One can challenge the details of his historical account, just as one can question Basque nationalist orthodoxy, but, forgive me for repeating, this is to miss the point. The point is that many Basques, and many Spaniards outside the Basque Country, choose to believe that the region is an integral part of what makes Spain Spanish.²⁰ As long as they do—and it is likely to be for a very long time—their stories are also part of the meta-narrative of the Basques.

Recent research suggests that more Basques identify themselves as being both Basque and Spanish than as subscribing solely to one or other of these identities (Balfour and Quiroga 4). One of the few beauties of the Belfast Agreement which ended the Irish conflict was the recognition, by both sides, of the legitimacy of the identity of their opponents.²¹ Unionists recognize the right of Irish nationalists and republicans to Irish symbols and traditions, and Republicans and nationalists recognize the right of unionists to celebrate the British monarchy and the Union flag on Irish soil. All Basque

factions have, so far, taken from the Irish experience only what is advantageous to their own cause in the short term. The concept of respect for multiple identities could well be to the advantage of all of them. In any case, as outsiders, we cannot understand the Basque Country through the mutually exclusive prisms of Basque and Spanish nationalism. We can only see the whole rich, vibrant and tragic picture through the binocular visions, often contradictory, of writers like Atxaga, Baroja and Unamuno, and indeed of filmmakers like Julio Medem. The Basque poet Gabriel Aresti, whose reclamation of Basque identity and the Basque language in the dark days of the dictatorship inspired so many young Basques, concludes his best-known poem, *Nire Aitaren Etxea* 'The House of My Father,' with these lines:

Ni hilen naiz,
 nire arima galduko da,
 nire askazia galduko da,
 baina nire aitaren etxea
 iraunen du
 zutik

I shall die,
 My soul will be lost,
 My descendants will be lost,
 But the house of my father
 Will remain
 Standing. (260-61)

Whatever form the Basque house takes in the future, it must surely be strong enough, and broad enough, to accommodate all the identities of all its children.²²

Notes

1 The phrase "Basque conflict" is itself a controversial one. Apologists for ETA often use it to imply that acts of violence in the Basque Country are the inevitable consequence of the conflict, rather than the responsibility of those who carry them out. Yet those who argue that no political conflict exists—that is,

that the problem is one of criminality, pure and simple, by the terrorists—are blanking out the context in which these acts take place.

2 Batasuna is a pro-independence party close to the thinking of ETA, banned since 2002 under Spain's *Ley de Partidos* 'Parties' Law, because it refuses to condemn ETA attacks. The judicial offensive is based on a blurring of the line between radical activism and terrorism. But this line is often blurred in reality: the *kale borroka* 'street struggle' is a form of low-intensity terrorism or political vandalism and bullying by teenage radicals close to ETA.

3 A minister and deputy minister from Felipe González's center-left PSOE government has been found guilty of organizing a kidnapping associated with the Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación (GAL), which killed 26 people in the French Basque Country between 1983 and 1986 (Woodworth, *Dirty War* 426).

4 Basque nationalism is weakest (but probably growing) in the French Basque Country (*Iparralde* in Euskera), with about ten percent of the vote going to *abertzale* parties. I do not discuss it here in any detail because it is inappropriate to the frame of this edition of the journal, which directs us towards "the case of Spain." But it is important to remember that, for Basque nationalists of all stripes, *Iparralde* is an integral part of their region. For a discussion of related issues, see Woodworth's *The Basque Country* (245-69).

5 Article 2 of the 1978 Constitution references, in the same sentence, the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation" and guarantees "the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions that are integral to it." This "feat of semantic engineering" (Balfour and Quiroga 46) does not even specify which parts of Spain are regions, and which nationalities, nor does it clarify the relationship between "nation" and "nationality." For an excellent discussion see Balfour and Quiroga (45-54).

6 ETA-Militar, the only ETA operating since the early 1980s, and the *izquierda abertzale* have never supported the Statute of Autonomy.

7 A survey cited by Balfour and Quiroga indicated that 25% of Basques felt solely Basque, and a further 19% more Basque than Spanish, with 34% equally Basque and Spanish and 8% more Spanish than Basque or only Spanish (Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, Boletín 31, 2003: 3-4). Most surveys suggest that little more than 50% of Basques consider themselves Basque nationalists, and by no means all of these would fall into the "solely Basque" category and support full Basque independence.

8 The tendency of much of the Spanish judiciary to act as a chorus for the government of the day, rather than as an independent and separate power of the state, is of considerable assistance to Basque nationalist propagandists when they seek to discredit Spanish democracy. The same goes, only more so, for the

judicial offensive against Basque radicals, which has attracted sober criticism from human rights bodies.

9 The granting of aristocratic status to an entire population had the paradoxical outcome of creating an egalitarian democracy, at least in theory, as Juan Aranzadi has pointed out (51).

10 This pact, explicitly modeled on selective aspects of the Irish peace process, formed a Basque “pan-nationalist front” ranging from ETA to the PNV, in support of Basque national sovereignty. It foundered when ETA ended the cease-fire on which it had been based, alleging that the PNV had not taken agreed steps to set up sovereign Basque institutions across the seven provinces.

11 *Bertsolaris* are spontaneous versifiers, capable of composing long pieces in public, alternating verses with a competitor following a common theme and rhyme scheme.

12 There is, indeed, a very lively culture of oral poetry in Euskera to this day. At most Basque fiestas, and at many informal social gatherings, two or more *bertsolariak* ‘versifiers’ will compose and exchange stanzas spontaneously over long periods, following a set subject and rhyme scheme.

13 The pen-name of Pedro Daquerre Azpilicueta, parish priest of the French-Basque village of Sara.

14 The London *Observer* included him in its 1999 list of the “21 top writers for the 21st century.”

15 The contemporary figures for the French Basque Country and Navarre are 22% and 11% respectively. See <http://www.eustat.es/elem/ele0004600/tbl0004653_i.html>.

16 The quotation is from an interview with the author in Reno, February 2008.

17 Juaristi’s ideological inversion is not unusual among former leftist members of ETA. Many individuals, it seems, can only abandon one dogmatism by clutching on to another. And while Juaristi has abandoned the identity of his own tribe, and written beautifully about the personal cost this departure exacts in *El Bucle Melancólico* ‘The Melancholy Loop’ (268), he has gone further than most of his former comrades in embracing an entirely new identity, that of Judaism and the defence of Zionism, a move which must have tested the latent anti-Semitism of some of his new bedfellows in Madrid.

18 Antonio Basagoiti, a leader of the Basque PP, makes a case for the Basque identity of PP voters in the region (Woodworth, *Basque Country* 110-11).

19 The Downing Street Declaration (1993) was a joint Irish-British statement in which Britain confirmed that it had “no selfish strategic or economic interest

in Northern Ireland.” It was a key moment in the Irish peace process, convincing the IRA and Sinn Féin that Britain would not stand in the way of a united Ireland if a majority in Northern Ireland voted to leave the UK.

20 A comparison with Northern Ireland is instructive here. It is a long time since any British conservative has believed Northern Ireland was remotely close to the heart of the United Kingdom.

21 For a discussion of the relationship between the Irish and Basque peace processes, see Woodworth’s “The Spanish-Basque Peace Process.”

22 New waves of immigration are changing these identities all the time. It is fascinating to watch young Asian children, adopted by Basque parents, participating in Basque fiestas. Or sub-Saharan Africans working on fishing boats where the dominant language is Euskera. Who knows what they may contribute to the increasingly always rich and complex identity of the land of the Basques?

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