

The Creation of the Basque Identity through Cultural Symbols in Modern Times

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0. Introduction

Hidden amongst mountains a people inhabits both sides of the Western Pyrenees, a people that has preserved its ancient language over long centuries, and to a great extent its old regime and customs as well, a people which has managed to keep itself apart from the view of the spectator and the conqueror's sword: the Basque people.

(W. von Humboldt, *Los vascos*, 1801)

Just two centuries ago, following his visits to the Basque Country in 1799-1801, the German linguist Wilhelm Freicher von Humboldt wrote this description of the people living on either side of the border between Spain and France. Even today this purely romantic description is still a widely-held view of Basques.

Probably things are changing: at the time of writing this paper, the Basque Government has just published a survey about the vision that European people hold about the Basques. More than 54% of them identify the Basque people as favouring independence, 32% of the Europeans think the Basques are patriots, and a quite significant percentage, 26% to be precise, think that the Basques are violent. No doubt, the activity of the terrorist group ETA, which has killed more than 800 people in the last thirty years, has something to do with that vision. It was not until 1998 that ETA declared a ceasefire and instructed its political wing Herri Batasuna (HB), later called Euskal Herritarrok (EH), to negotiate with the Spanish Government.

During the last two hundred years, Basque identity has grown stronger and stronger. Undoubtedly it existed centuries ago, although in a form that was probably more or less unconscious, but it was not until the creation of the modern forms of the nation, in its different conceptions (especially the French and German ones¹), that the so called *Basque differential fact* arose and was taken into account in politics². This paper will try to explain how certain internal and external factors have helped the formation of Basque (national) identity in modern times, especially from a cultural point of view. Language, a particular vision of history and the old laws, and finally the birth and defence of violence as a political resource and justification are examined here. All of them in their symbolic role of 'invented traditions', in the sense that Eric Hobsbawm gave to this concept in his well-known book: really invented traditions, of a 'symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past, different from "customs", and, although they usually referred to a historic past, they are "largely fictitious"³. This seems to fit the Basque case quite well, given that history and traditions are often presented (especially, but not only, by nationalists) as compulsory references for the definition of identity. It is equally true that culture has at least two levels, one that appears on the surface and another, more complex level, 'formed and moulded by a lengthy historical process'.⁴ To determine briefly what is the link between the two levels in modern Basque culture is one of the main aims of this paper.

It is clear that, as Emile Durkheim said, 'a society is formed not only by a mass of individuals, by the territory they occupy, the things they use and the acts they realise, but, above all, by the idea which that society has of itself'. The invention of the nation is an expression of modern collective identity, and its nature is symbolic⁵. It replaces the former conception of the ethnic group, but the ethnic origin of nations (as Anthony D. Smith explained in his book) is sometimes strong. 'In general', according to Jon Juaristi, 'there is a tendency to consider that Nation-states belong to the order of the artificial, whilst the prestige of the natural is accorded to ethnic identities'⁶. Perhaps its importance is simply that ethnicity is once again presented with a symbolic value. Similarly, modern nations and

¹ Of course, we are trying to use some "pure" categories, not to generalise. It is absolutely true that also the Jacobean nationalism, which has a rationalist root, took some irrational and romantic elements. When we use the term *German nationalism* we are referring to a "traditional nationalism, linked to the defence of a semi-feudal society against the attack of the bourgeois revolution (...) which opposed to the universal optimism of liberal Jacobean nationalism the romantic and sentimental cult of tradition, a closed conception of State, an organic view of history and a cult of the supposed values of the race" (G. Jáuregui, *Ideología y estrategia política de ETA*, Madrid, 1985, p. 15).

² As Gurutz Jáuregui explained, "myth was deeply rooted in Basque people's mind, and nationalism just used that myth, developing traditional myth into "action myth", in the sense George Sorel used". G. Jáuregui, *Ideología y estrategia política de ETA*, Madrid, 1985, p. 12.

³ E. Hobsbawm, 'Introduction: Inventing traditions', in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds.), *The invention of tradition*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, pp. 1-2.

⁴ M. Heiberg, *The making of the Basque nation*, Cambridge, 1989, p. 238.

⁵ J. Beriain, 'La construcción de la identidad colectiva en las sociedades modernas', *Identidades culturales*, Bilbao, 1996, p. 23.

nationalisms replace religion, but they can use religion as a symbol and, in any case, they present themselves not as political movements, but as political religions⁷.

To ethnic nationalism, it is unimportant if its invention of tradition and the nation is unmasked, nor does it matter how detailed and precise this unmasking is. The only important thing is loyalty to collective symbols, cultural production and the construction of its own imaginary (in short, the reproduction of a whole world), 'because nationalisms are mass ideologies and, thus, immune to critics'⁸.

The things on which Basque nationalism bases its arguments do exist: the Basque language exists, the old laws existed. But they are presented not as facts, but as symbols. They are re-presented, so it is clearly a representation of the world, a cultural artifact in the sense defined by historians such as Roger Chartier.

That the Basque Country belongs to the concept of Southern Europe is very clear, and the presence of nationalism and its relative strength is one of the proofs. As Marianne Heiberg explains, the emergence of deep (and, in the Basque case, quite rapid) structural changes, 'the economic part of which is industrialisation, the political one, state centralisation'⁹ are sufficient to explain the importance of nationalism.

Basque nationalism has been, and is, an ethnocentric model, which, as Daniele Conversi says, 'tries also to emulate the state's stress on a unified culture'¹⁰, although it does not have a unified culture or a state itself. But, as some Basque scholars have remarked, in the end the general question about what Basque identity is must be reposed, since there is more than one identity. Moreno Bergareche and Antxustegi Igartua distinguish between ethno-linguistic identity and historico-political identity¹¹. To a great extent, in our opinion, both of them are closely interrelated in the ideological doctrine of Basque nationalism, even though, in fact, the reality is a very different matter.

⁶ J. Juaristi, 'La invención de la nación. Pequeña historia de un género', *Claves*, 73, Madrid, p.3.

⁷ See A. Elorza, *La religión política. El nacionalismo sabiniano y otros ensayos sobre nacionalismo e integrismo*, San Sebastián, 1995.

⁸ J. Juaristi, 'La invención...', op. cit., p. 4.

⁹ M. Heiberg, op. cit., p. 231.

¹⁰ D. Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans & Spain. Alternative Routes to Nationalist Mobilisation*, London, Hurst, 1997, p. 164.

¹¹ A. Moreno Bergareche, E. Antxustegi Igartua, 'Sobre la identidad vasca desde la perspectiva de la tradición foral', in *Landazuri*, n. 7, July 1998, p. 9.

1. The external point of view: foreign visitors to the Basque Country

The Romantic vision appears in the story of every traveller who visited the Basque Country at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Wilhelm von Humboldt was the first to draw a picture of the Basque people as the surviving remnant of an ancient civilisation, culture, institutions and language. Some British travellers did the same. For example, in 1848 the Earl of Carnarvon published his impressions of a journey through Spain in 1827-1835, when the first Carlist War began. In his introduction to the work, Carnarvon describes the Basques as a 'heroic' people that 'resisted for years the combined efforts of three great monarchies (...) became the scene of chivalrous loyalty, the refuge, as formerly the cradle, of Spanish liberty, and the centre and focus of universal interest'¹².

Some other English travellers followed Carnarvon. For example, Edward Bell Stephens: 'The triumph of Don Carlos would therefore be not merely the defeat of Queen Isabella, it would be the defeat of the combined power of her allies', Great Britain amongst them'. Bell was in favour of Basques (carlist Basques) 'whose enthusiasm in the cause of their persecuted sovereign, as to shut out the remotest prospect of the war in Spain being brought to any other termination than the complete triumph of their beloved Carlos Quinto'¹³. Not a word about liberal Basques, some of them claiming for old laws (or their spirit as a way to self political and administrative organisation, arranged to the new times).

Quite a few Basques joined the foreigner travellers in explaining things in that way. Joseph-Augustin Chaho, a typical romantic figure (writer, journalist, traveller, political radical, poet, amateur student of the occult sciences and exotic languages) was one the first to mention the Basque Country as a nation oppressed by Spain fighting for its independence¹⁴. Curiously, and significantly, Chaho never mentioned the other Basque Country, where he was born and lived, which seemed not to be oppressed by France.

Literary fabrications were also made in the nineteenth century. This was not an isolated phenomenon. James Macpherson produced his Ossian poems which, after some time, were revealed as fake. The Basques, probably following that example, produced an apocryphal 'medieval' poem, *Altabizkarko kantua* ('The song of Roncesvalles'), which is still proudly sung today by a famous Basque singer, a poem which describes the supposed victory of Basque guerrillas over Charlemagne's army. In fact, the poem was written in French in 1833 in Paris, by a Frenchman of Basque origin who

¹² H. J. G. Carnarvon, *Portugal and Galicia, with a review of the social and political state of the Basque provinces*, London, John Murray, 1848, p. iv.

¹³ E. Bell Stephens, *The Basques provinces: their political state, scenery, and inhabitants; with adventures among the Carlists and Christians*, 1837, pp. v, vi.

didn't speak the Basque language, François Garay de Monglave, and was then translated into Basque by a student from Bayonne who was also resident there. Such occurrences were usual and useful from a Romantic point of view.

In all this romantic literature, whether fictional or not, Basques were usually presented as 'freemen of spirit (...), drinking in their Mothers' milk a love of justice and a reverence for the law (...), models of ancient manners (...), faithful pieces, generous hosts (...) following with passion, but without intolerance, their Fathers' faith (...), the flower of Europe', and, moreover, 'a people indomitable in war'¹⁵.

2. Language as a sign of national and racial identity

In his very first paper about the Basque language, Humboldt linked it to a national conception: *Ankündigung einer Schrift über die Vaskische Sprache und Nation, nebst Angabe des Gesichtspunktes und Inhalts derselben* was the title of that document of 1812. Later he linked the Basque language to the first inhabitants of Spain, following a widespread myth that made the Basque people proceed from the most ancient times¹⁶. Cultural identity (identity of language) and nation were synonyms for Humboldt¹⁷.

In a general sense, Humboldt considered that languages and nations were absolutely and intimately connected. That theory, based on a racial conception of nation (the nation as the *Volkgeist* or the spirit of a people) was expounded in his work *Über der influß der verschiedenen Charakters der Sprachen auf Literatur und Geistesbildung* (1821) and, more widely, in *Über den Nationalcharakter der Sprachen* (1822). 'We can generally accept that the different languages are the organs of the peculiar ways of thinking and feeling of nations (...). Language sets up a link between all generations, in which all of them have a representation (...). Language is, in fact, the nation itself'.

In the modern period the first mention of the Basque people is made in connection with their language. Humboldt said that 'the Basques are characterised by their language, organisation, customs, physiognomy, and all that surrounds them, including the aspect of their country, as a separate and pure breed'. As long as their language was not related to any other in the world, and it does not form

¹⁴ J.-A. Chaho, *Voyage en Navarre pendant l'insurrection des Basques (1830-1835)*,

¹⁵ H. J. G. Carnarvon, op. cit., pp. 325-327.

¹⁶ *Prüfung der Untersuchungen über die Urbewohner Hispaniens vermittelt der Vaskischen Sprache* was the title of that 1820-1821 text.

¹⁷ J. Agirreazkuenaga, 'El descubrimiento de la nación política vasca por W. Von Humboldt en 1801', *W. Von Humboldt, un puente entre dos pueblos, Oñati 1995*, San Sebastián, 1996, p. 466.

part of the branch of Indo-European tongues, it was clear for Humboldt that the Basques were a distinctive people in Europe, and that they deserved a different treatment from the Spanish and French nations. This seemed possible in Spain, but not in the case of the Northern Basque Country, 'because the Basque districts have only a limited importance to the French Republic'. It is Humboldt, even before the Basques themselves, who gives a political view of the problem, a people with a national peculiarity, broken into two parts between Spain and France, a people that remains 'without mingling with its neighbours, in a primitive simplicity, in spite of every progress of luxury surrounding them'. Just like the Bretons in France, the Welsh, the Gaels in Scotland, the Wends in Germany, the Estonians, and quite a few other peoples in Europe.

It was necessary then to preserve the language, in order to preserve the race and its singularity, the national character¹⁸. The integration of different peoples inside the same state began to become a real problem in the nineteenth century, not before. It is significant that in our century the translator of Humboldt's text on his trip to the Basque Country in 1801, Telesforo de Aranzadi, underlined the fact that there was no word to name all the Basques and their country in either of the surrounding languages: the French called them *biscayens* when referring to Spanish Basques, and *basques* when referring to French Basques; the Spanish called them *vascongados*, which in fact means 'Basque speakers', and the country was called 'Provincias Vascongadas', or 'Basque speaking provinces', even though Basque was not spoken by all Basques, nor in the whole Basque Country. *Vasco* was in origin a word used in Spanish to name only French Basques. Even in the Basque language there is not a word to name all of us: *euskaldun* or *eskualdun* refers to Basque speakers (literally meaning 'one having or owning the Basque language'). The country is called *Euskal Herria* or *Eskual Herria*, in fact a concept coined before the creation of modern nations and related to language: 'Basque speaking people' should be the literal translation of the term; this is thus not a territorial but a linguistic or, if you prefer, a cultural concept (more than 'Basque country' it should be 'Basque people'). As the creator of the standard version of the Basque language recalled, 'since some time ago, from at least the last century onwards to judge by Sabino Arana's writings, there have been some members of our community to whom it seems to be almost an insult to say *vascuence* and *vascongado* (...). The attempt has been made to compensate for that loss by artificial means.' It was then that Arana invented the words *Euzkadi* (later *Euskadi*) and *euzkotarra* ('of Basque race'), to substitute the older terms *Euskal Herria*, *euskalduna*, related to language¹⁹. In Arana's national-racial

¹⁸ The word 'nation' is, as we are reminded by the Basque translator of the story of the trips to the Basque Country in 1801, Telesforo de Aranzadi, the specific one chosen by Humboldt.

¹⁹ Concerning this subject the opinion of the creator of the standard variety of Basque language and of Basque philology studies in the University, Koldo Mitxelena, is probably the most significant: Mitxelena, Koldo, 'Los vascos y su nombre', *Revista Internacional de los Estudios Vascos*, XXIX, 1984, pp. 11-29.

conception, language is important because 'it is the only instrument remaining to us for research on that long prehistoric period of the race'²⁰.

Religion was, to some extent, also important in developing the cultural basis of nationalism. The role played by the Basque priesthood in the institutionalisation of language and in linking it to certain ideological conceptions was prior to nationalism. Probably the first explicit and successful attempt to do this took place in the first years of the nineteenth century, only some years after the French Revolution of 1789. A priest called Juan Antonio Moguel wrote a book entitled *Peru Abarca*, hand-written copies of which circulated profusely in the Spanish Basque Country²¹. In that book Moguel presented a model of a 'pure' Basque, a man living in a hamlet in the mountains, 'a farmer (...), a peasant who has never been to school; a solitary man who has never left the forests of the Basque language, who knows not a word in any other language, but who can speak fluently and purely about so many subjects without any discomfort at the supposed lack of terms for public or domestic instruments, and does not need foreign concepts'²². Mitxelena, Juaristi and others mention the relation that links Moguel's *Peru Abarca* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *bon sauvage*. An inverted and bizarre relation, anyway, because in fact Rousseau's paradigm fits a liberal conception of society, whilst Moguel's tries to recover the spirit of a lost (and most probably unreal) paradise. We have to see Moguel's vision of the world as a reaction against the damage done by the French Revolution to religion. So long as priests were the keepers of the language and of the ideology related to it (and, to a great extent, the creators of that ideology as well), they determined the paths along which ideas expressed in the Basque language had to travel²³.

Moguel and others are a good example of how a social class, the priests (some of them at least) came to hold the power to build up cultural conceptions around the Basque language and, to a great extent, they decided what Basque culture was to be. This is what a prestigious socio-linguist, Joshua Fishman, has called *custodios linguae*. As they were the only holders of the secrets of the cultured Basque language, models for every Basque speaker, they were in practice the only ones that managed such an important means for the transmission of knowledge. They were scrupulously careful to remain the only authors of Basque literature in the sense of a classical *authority (auctoritas)*, so that Basque culture, even before the emergence of Sabino Arana's nationalism, was artificially related to

²⁰ S. Arana, *Obras completas*, Ekin, Buenos Aires, p. 1340.

²¹ The complete title is *El doctor Peru Abarca, catedrático de lengua bascongada de la Universidad de Basarte*, Durango, 1881. The book was printed after the author's death.

²² Moguel, J.A. de: *El doctor Peru Abarca, catedrático de lengua bascongada de la Universidad de Basarte*. Durango, 1881, pp. 6-7.

²³ Those ideas have got a remarkable duration in time. In 1989, one of the most famous *bertsolariak* (verse improvisers) and old journalist Inazio Eizmendi said that 'here three atmospheres have been special, and they have saved Basque language. Basque-speaking environment, farm ambience and religious atmosphere (...). The University of Basque language have been the farm and the hamlet'. *Diario Vasco*, 5th July, 1989.

the values of an ancient world. The marginal, not central but important, role of defending the language (its symbolic value) was given to priests:

Whilst the nationalist bourgeoisie was unable to assume the role of promoting a language that was not in fact theirs, that work was taken up by the more traditional and less intellectually prepared group within nationalism, the farmers and the priests, the bastions of the language, marginal groups that obviously could not understand that the most urgent task regarding the situation of the country was to lay the foundations for Basque to become a normalised cultural language²⁴.

Language was thus given a secondary status, very important as a political symbol, but not very reliable as a modern language. Some Basque writers and journalists, supporters of the Basque language, offered this curious vision of its development:

In our opinion, the weakness of the Basque language is the Basque language itself. We have created it. The Basque Country itself has considered its own language as something of scarce importance. This is a tremendous wrong. Most of the priests, the notables with beards and walking sticks speak Spanish amongst themselves. The farmers know that, and just as grass cannot grow through the stones of the streets, the Basque language is unable to live amongst the people of the town²⁵.

The first president of the Academy of the Basque Language (*Euskaltzaindia*) wrote these words in 1901. The fact that Basque was spoken in the highly urban nuclei of the Basque Country, such as the capital of Guipuzcoa, San Sebastián, or in one of the most industrial and commercial Basque towns, Eibar, was irrelevant. The situation is the same a couple of decades later: 'Wealth is presumed to be in the mountain (...). The Basque language lives in the mountain, it is mountainous', said some other priests in 1922²⁶. As a result, Spanish (or French in the northern part of the country) is the language of the dominant classes, the prestige tongue. On the one hand, the Spanish language spreads because of the 'broad relations that now link young people, who speak Spanish at school, in the army, at work, in the cities where they go to serve; while contributing to the spread of Spanish, this constitutes a tendency towards generalising the use of this language'²⁷. On the other hand, priests and nationalists never really tried to place the Basque language in those ambiances, since they preferred to keep it 'pure' in idyllic reservations.

This is, as in so many other questions, the great drama of ethnic nationalisms, which cannot conceive of a stateless language. One language, one culture, one nation, one state, that is the identification made. In this equation, 'language has acquired a previously unknown political dimension' as 'symbols (...) central to national mobilisation' in which 'language plays an

²⁴ I. Sarasola, *Historia social de la literatura vasca*, Akal, Madrid, 1982.

²⁵ *Ibaizabal*, 25th January 1901, p. 4.

²⁶ *Argia*, 2nd April 1922.

²⁷ J. M. Barandiaran, *La religiosidad del pueblo*, Anuario de la Sociedad de Eusko Folklore, San Sebastián, 1924.

indispensable role since it is the most elaborated symbolic system available to man²⁸. Even though only 20-23% of the Basques are today fluent in Basque, and most of the nationalists, whilst claiming to defend the language, don't speak Basque at all. In the end, it is clear that for Basque nationalism, as for some other ethnic nationalism, language is important but is secondary, because it only plays the role of being a distinctive sign which demonstrates the purity of race and a defence against strangers.

3. History and old laws as a cultural symbol

As we have mentioned, Basques were seen as devoted supporters of their ancient laws, called *fueros*. Some other parts of Spain (or, if you prefer, the Spanish Kingdom) also had their own laws: Catalonia, Valencia, the Balearic Islands, Aragon. Felipe V, the first Bourbon Spanish monarch, abolished all of them in the seventeenth century; this was not only because he wanted to rationalise the administration, but also because the inhabitants of these regions had supported the wrong candidate, a Habsburg. All were abolished except the Basque laws, which remained in effect until the nineteenth century. During the preparatory work for the first Spanish Constitution, in 1812, the liberals saw the necessity of using a common administration and law for all the Spanish lands, so the *fueros* were seen as an obstacle to that aim. Nevertheless, Fernando VII once again reinstated the *Ancien Régime* and the Basque laws remained in force. After his death, his daughter Isabel became queen and she was obliged to take some steps towards liberalism and the modernisation of the state; but Fernando VII's brother Carlos María Isidro, the queen's uncle, preferred not to see a woman on the throne and favoured a reestablishment of the old situation. War broke out. A considerable part of the Basques, who saw their old laws in peril, joined the Carlist army. As a result of two long wars, and, finally, out of the necessity of constructing a modern state, the *fueros* were abolished.

Following the abolition of the *fueros* in 1876, the ideology of *fuerosismo* emerged. According to Antonio Elorza, 'with *fuerosismo* two ideological currents, created in the central years of the century, and apparently with no political content, were put together. One of which was the ruralism that from different sources like Antonio de Trueba or Fermín Caballero finally fixed a very useful stereotype at the service of a national conscience that had arisen out of rejection of the industrial process.'²⁹ Historical essentialism was born.

"The existence of the *fueros* was the main evidence produced by Basque nationalists that the Basques were once a sovereign people, although the *fueros* of each province were distinct and the

²⁸ Conversi, op. cit., p. 165.

²⁹ A. Elorza, *Ideologías del Nacionalismo vasco*, Haranburu Altuna, San Sebastián, 1978, p. 17.

Spanish Crown had never treated the Basque Country as a single political unit", underlines John Sullivan³⁰. But were the old laws of the Basques an expression of their independence? The question is much discussed, even today. Probably it is a question of anachronism: independence and self-determination are modern concepts, just as the nation is also a very recent idea. It is true that Basque people probably had a 'deep experience of self-governance', but it is equally true that this couldn't have been based, 'as some nationalist historiography claims, on ideologies of sovereignty, but on the grounds of the ideology and practice of agreements used by the governing lineages of the country', and it meant 'a politically differentiated form of being Spaniards'³¹. So we definitely cannot say, even if it were possible to determine with certainty what the Basques laws were (some of them were not written down according to our continental tradition, where law was and is mainly statutory), that the *fueros* were a kind of Basque 'constitution'. Some researchers, for example María Cruz Mina, who studied the Navarrese case, think that the *fueros* were related to a Middle Age society, where limits to the kings' power were explained in terms of a feudal division of political power, and it is in this light that the so called 'pacts' between, for example, the Basque people and the Spanish crown must be seen. We cannot then apply, 'making a historical abstraction, concepts that emerged after the liberal bourgeois revolution to feudal social formations' and see in those Middle Age institutions a precedent of modern constitutional systems³².

Those systems entered into crisis during the eighteenth century, when the medieval world and the modern, bourgeois world definitively collided. It was only then that some clues to Basque political identity began to appear. Until that point, Basques did not use to regard themselves as a unit. As professor Joseba Agirreazkuenaga has demonstrated, there were some provincial institutions, the *Diputaciones*, and some supra-provincial conferences that, at least from 1793 onwards, 'signified the recovery of a framework of reference and opinion superior to the political formations structured around the provincial *Juntas Generales*', but it is equally true that until 1830-1833 'there was still no clear movement in favour of the creation of a common Basque administration'. 'In 1833', according to professor Agirreazkuenaga, 'all the protagonists accepted in their diagnoses the crisis of the *foral* system and the need to define new alternatives'. In 1834 the first Carlist war began, and then 'the first voices were raised in favour of the conjunction of a type of *foral* system and the liberal constitutional regime'³³.

³⁰ J. Sullivan, *ETA and Basque Nationalism. The Fight for Euskadi 1890-1986*, London and New York, 1988, p. 3.

³¹ A. Moreno Bergaretxe and E. Antxustegi Igartua, op. cit., p. 9.

³² M. C. Mina, *Fueros y revolución liberal en Navarra*, Alianza, Madrid, 1981, p. 224.

³³ J. Agirreazkuenaga, 'The making of the 'Basque' political institutions: the federal association of the representative assemblies during the Liberal Revolution (1793-1833)', *Parliaments, Estates & Representation*, 17, 1997, pp. 125-128.

Much of the difference had an economic basis in privileges, and this was also recognised by the romantic travellers who offered that idealistic vision of the Basques. Carnarvon, for example, said that there existed 'external symptoms of the real difference which prevails between the internal arrangements of the privilege provinces and those which have no special rights; taxation for some purposes is really applied in the privilege states to the objects for which it is nominally raised'. We may say that while Catalanian nationalism tried to obtain certain equal rights within a modern and increasingly industrialised Spain, Basque nationalism on the other hand demanded the maintainance of privileges that would ensure a situation of wealth.

The weakness of Spain as a nation can help to explain the emergence of the equally modern conception of the Basque Country as a nation. But the Basque, ethnic, romantic and historicist conception of nation is no stronger than the Spanish conception; the explanation for the weakness of the Spanish nation-state should not be sought in the fact that it is based on a French, citizen-made conception of the state, while Basque nationalism focuses on supposedly historical and racial bases of the German type. This tension is very common in Southern Europe, as explained by Marianne Heiberg, who also underlines the contradiction of nationalism, because it is a movement that has produced relatively few nations³⁴.

The central point, in our opinion, is that defence of the *fueros* was not, and is not a real desire to recover those old laws, but their use as a symbol of historical prestige and pedigree. That is the reason why most of the Basque nationalist historians begin their arguments on independence and the claim for 'historical rights' with the Carlists wars, which are not seen as a fight to put the brother of the last absolutist king on the Spanish throne, which in fact was the main reason for war, but as an effort to recover the 'lost independence' of the Basques. It was not, in any case, a war between Basques and Spaniards. There were a lot of liberal Basques fighting against Carlism. As an illustrative detail, we can recall that the first articles published in the Basque language in a newspaper appeared in a liberal paper, not in a Carlist one. The reason was that the liberals needed a modern means of expression, whilst the Carlists controlled a very old but effective instrument of propaganda: the pulpit. As a Basque historian, José Ramón Urquijo, has explained recently, nationalist historians feel no need to set forth history as it happened, because history is not a science but an essential element in their 'restoration as a people'. 'Basque nationalism', says Urquijo, 'has not proceeded beyond the period of romantic proposals to reach a history that is at least positivist'³⁵. The liberal vision, although existing as a small and marginal part of nationalism, has rarely emerged, which, in Urquijo's opinion, 'is a

³⁴ M. Heiberg, op. cit., p. 231.

³⁵ J. R. Urquijo, 'La Primera Guerra Carlista desde la ideología nacionalista vasca', in *Vasconia*, 26, 1998, p. 69.

clear reflection of the lack of agreements with political forces of the Spanish state that is practised in nationalist politics³⁶.

4. The myth of Arcadia

So Basque-language culture rested on three supports: Language (Basque, of course), Agriculture and Religion³⁷. That means that the other languages used by Basques (French and Spanish), mainly by the leading elite, the increasing importance of industry and the town, and finally a secular conception of the world (the one that was contributed by the French Revolution) were automatically replaced by a very conservative Arcadian vision: the pure Basque was a farmer, a Basque-speaker and a good Christian (catholic). Even though now and then, and of course throughout history, there were some Basques who were non-Catholic, non-religious, republican or liberal and non-conservative. A myth, which Basque nationalism was later to profit from, was born. Even some very famous non-nationalists, such as the philosopher and professor Miguel de Unamuno (who was himself Basque and spoke the Basque language in his youth), reveal, in spite of their efforts to be 'modern', that they believed in that myth: 'In the concrete case of the Basque language', said Unamuno in 1901, 'I am absolutely convinced that it will be lost, without remedy and very quickly, and the reason is Basque itself, because it is a language unsuited for modern culture'. And he concluded: 'It is a rural language'³⁸.

The myth of the Basque Country as a political unity - which it never was - and a model of harmonious society, 'the moral and religious essences of which were supported by the rural world and found their political expression in the Fueros'³⁹, was reiterated by historians - or pseudo-historians. As Manuel Montero and others have underlined, Basque historiography has an intellectual attitude that gives too much importance to the past in determining the present and the future, a 'conflictive historiography' and thus, 'a political weapon'. The first modern historical monograph written by a Basque about the Basque Country and people, José Antonio de Zamácola's *Historia de las Naciones Bascas* (History of the Basque Nations, 1801) is, in Montero's opinion, a 'suggestive title and (the

³⁶ J. R. Urquijo, op. cit., p. 109.

³⁷ Since we are dealing in this brief paper only with modern history, we will not refer to some other historical myths used by Basque nationalism: the mythic origin of the Basque Country, founded by a legendary lord (Jaun Zuria or White Lord) come from the North, the battle of Arrigorriaga in the first Middle Ages, the myth of Cantabria (the lands that were not touched by romanisation, in which the Basque provinces of Guipuzcoa and Biscay were supposedly included) and the myth of the primitive monotheism and gospel's early predication, "which gave to Basque's catholic faith an almost apostolic origin". All of these characteristics are mentioned in G. Jáuregui, *Ideología y estrategia política de ETA*, Madrid, 1985, p. 10.

³⁸ M. de Unamuno, 'El bizkaitarrismo y el vascuence', *Los Lunes del Imparcial*, Madrid, 30th September 1901.

³⁹ A. Elorza, 'El nacionalismo vasco: la invención de la tradición', *Manuscripts*, 12, 1994, p. 185.

work) aims to study the Basque Country as a whole (...) but, concerning its historical interpretation, it is nothing but a lot of lies, doubtless of traditional origin, but inventions after all⁴⁰. Throughout the nineteenth century, some Basque historians presented their history as a sacred history looking for exemplarity⁴¹, especially Sabino Arana, who was not a historian. Basque history and traditions, which are so inmemorial that need no demonstration, are presented against Spanish history.

The bases are pretty much the same, the forms may be different. It is very significant, in our opinion, that in the French Basque Country, where no particular nationalist force was able to create any party, priests were the ones who determined the ideology of Basque-speaking people on the bases of religion, language and the peasantry, mainly through the *Eskualduna* weekly following a long tradition⁴². On both sides of the border, the background of that right-wing and reactionary ideology was the same. In the South, one of the areas where Spain's industrialisation process was most developed, it crystallised in nationalism, a movement which demanded recovery of a Basque rural and pure mountainous world, a presumed lost Arcadia, where all inhabitants were gentlemen (but farmers), Basque speakers and lovers of their old traditions and laws. But this formulation was made from one of the most modern cities of Spain, Bilbao, and it was done in Spanish. In the North, where industry was weak, that ideology was expressed against republicanism and laicism and firmly supported the *Ancien Régime*. In 1936-1939, whilst in the South Basque nationalism, after a period of doubt, decided to align itself with the left-wing political forces of the Spanish Republic in their fight against Franco; it then managed the first statute of autonomy and created the first Basque government. In France, the priests around the *Eskualduna* weekly (which was owned by the bishopric of Bayonne and supported the Basque candidate, and later minister of the Vichy government, Jean Ybarnegaray) supported Franco – a supposed defender of religion – and, after that, during the occupation of France by the nazis, translated and published Hitler's speeches.

In the South, the Basque and Spanish cultures collided. In Bilbao industrialisation was very rapid between 1876 (when the old laws were abolished) and 1900, swifter than in the rest of Southern Europe (with the exception of Catalonia, whose development was different). If at the end of the nineteenth century it was already possible to be *vasquista* (a friend of Basque culture), which is a concept that depends only on the culture of each person, at the beginning of the twentieth century it was necessary to be nationalist, which is a reaction again someone else's culture. 'To justify this resentment the urban nationalists resorted to a mythical ideology based on rural symbols', explains

⁴⁰ M. Montero, 'La invención del pasado en la tradición historiográfica vasca', *Historia Contemporánea*, 7, 1993, p. 287.

⁴¹ A. Elorza, 'La invención...', op. cit., p. 187.

⁴² The French-basque historian Jean Goyhenetche remembers that 'le Pays Basque de la Soule, de la Basse Navarre et du Labourd n'a pas constitué un lieu social de production historiographique (...). La seule institution qui remplit la fonction de lieu de production sociale fut l'Eglise'. M. Goyhenetche, *Les Basques et leur histoire. Myths et réalités*, Bayonne, 1993, pp. 246-247.

Heiberg, although 'in terms of factual information, the nationalist arguments concerning the nature of pre-industrial Basque society are demonstrably incorrect'⁴³. The mirage proceeded from the early 1830s. Lord Carnarvon, for example, said that 'before the outbreak of the present revolution [he refers to the Carlist war] the Basques were happy'⁴⁴.

As Anthony D. Smith has demonstrated, it is 'a dichotomous view of history (...); a "traditional" (complex, agrarian and religious) era or type of society contrasted with a "modern" (industrial, capitalist and secular) type, in which the "nation" and the "masses" become defining and necessary features of modernity, part of an inevitable and universal account of social development towards ever larger units of territory, technology and population.'⁴⁵

Nationalism seemed the only way forward for some Basques. The other course possible, which from the nineteenth century has been used in some parts of Southern Europe, was patron-client relations. But that had the disadvantage of the myth of universal knighthood. All Basque people were supposed to be of pure blood, not mixed with Jews or Moors, because of their birth to Basque parents. All of them were knights, even though the land was not very rich and the legal structure gave all the inheritance to the first son (*primogenitura*) so that the family exploitation was not divided. But this conception of universal Basque knighthood is also modern, 'little more than a myth'⁴⁶ dating back to the fourteenth century but very widespread until the beginning of the nineteenth century; it was granted by the Spanish kings precisely in times of great centralisation, 'in order to protect the northern borders which the new centralisation trends had made vulnerable to French incursions'⁴⁷. The political ideas of the nationalism of the PNV (the Basque Nationalist Party), somewhere between an *Ancien Régime* style egalitarianism and the more modern ideas of Christian Democracy, crystallised in the 1960s in the co-operative movement of Mondragon, where, without questioning the capitalist system, employers and workers were to some extent (but not to the same extent) owners of the enterprise.

But this entire situation, this myth of the lost Arcadia, disappeared suddenly when, in the fifties, under Franco's regime and after a cruel Civil War, massive industrialisation and waves of immigration changed the landscape of the Spanish Basque Country. Then ETA was born. In a context of new Basques of foreign-origin, race could no longer be the basis of Basque nationalism. Symbols became stronger, whilst arguments became weaker, and some other justifications were found in the new anti-colonialism and in left radical ideas, such as Maoism or Trotskyism. But, in the end, things changed very little, and Arana's ideas (an ethnic closed nationalism, exclusive and jealous to avoid the

⁴³ M. Heiberg, op. cit. P. 240.

⁴⁴ H. J. G. Carnarvon, op. cit., p. 326.

⁴⁵ A. D. Smith, *The ethnic origin of nations*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 172.

⁴⁶ A. de Otazu, *El igualitarismo vasco: mito y realidad*, San Sebastián, 1973.

mingling of two supposedly separate communities: the 'pure' Basques, whose 'purity' was no longer given by race but by political faith, and Spaniard 'invaders') remained unaltered⁴⁸.

5. Violence and politics in the Basque Country

More than a century and a half later, the romantic idea presented by Humboldt was acquiring form. The myth of an invasion of the Basque Country came true with the Spanish Civil War. Actually, it was not true that Franco's army was only directed against Basque people, and it is certain that Basque nationalists were no more punished than other political forces such as the socialists, communists or anarchists. It is also true, of course, that the Basque language was practically forbidden, and the attempt was made to delete Basque culture by means of force and to replace it with Spanish culture. The presence of violence in everyday life explains the fact that some Basque intellectuals should endeavour to explain the workings of ethnic nationalism's invention of identity. It also explains why nationalist politicians, whether conservative or radical, hate those intellectuals who are considered to be 'Spanish nationalists' or, if they are of Basque origin and pedigree, 'traitors' to the Basque cause and people.

The Basque Government in exile, in a booklet published in London in 1938⁴⁹, explained the situation after all of the Basque Country had come under the control of Franco's military regime in these terms: 'The Basques, a strongly independent people (...) owing to the geographical position of their country, when they were not actually passed by, they were successful in defending their independence against these early invaders'. The link was again made with race and language: 'The Basque race differs from any other, untouched as it is by the many civilisations and cultures which have swept across the Iberian Peninsula. Science has been unable to classify the origin of the Basques; and their centuries-old language, 'Euzkera', is unique⁵⁰. This uniqueness is connected with the necessity of a nation: 'Though being a closely-knit race in customs, ideals, language, and other general characteristics, the Basques have not developed the idea of political nationalism (...). This has proved to be one of the greatest mistakes in the history of Euzkadi⁵¹. When the Spanish Civil War

⁴⁷ D. Conversi, op. cit., p. 179.

⁴⁸ At the time of writing this text, Herri Batasuna, the political wing of the so-called Movement of Basque National Liberation, in which ETA is included, proposed to the other nationalist parties PNV and Eusko Alkartasuna a joint celebration of the 'Aberri Eguna' or 'Day of the Basque Homeland'.

⁴⁹ Autonomous Government of Euzkadi [The Basque Country], *The Basque Country and European peace. An analysis of German Domination in Euzkadi*, Autonomous Government of Euzkadi, London, 1938, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Autonomous Government of Euzkadi, op. cit., p. 3.

began, according to this official Basque version, the Basque people (in other words, Basque nationalists) decided to join with the Republican forces 'to defend themselves against a swiftly-advancing and ruthless aggressor.' It was not considered as an aggression directed against the whole of the Republican legal and constitutional system and forces (in fact, against anyone not thinking like Franco's rebels) but only against Basque nationalists⁵².

The counter-propaganda of the new Spanish government did not deny the specificity of the Basques, and for that reason the repression there was especially cruel: 'We must recognise that the problem in this region has distinct characteristics (...) due to the presence of what the Basques call "Nationalism", and which should be plainly and simply called "Separatism", one of the most monstrous aberrations of the human spirit, which has made it possible for people born in Spanish territory to hate Spain⁵³. Spanish nationalism fighting against Basque nationalism.

"ETA is the result of the composition and interaction of two factors: Sabino Arana's nationalist ideology and franquism", explains accurately Gurutz Jáuregui in his book about ETA⁵⁴. When ETA appeared as a reaction against the new situation, although it was supposedly based on new ideologies, much of Arana's traditional doctrine continued to be existant. First of all, they continue being ethnocentric, exclusive and centripetal. As the PNV did during the 30s, under the Spanish Second Republic, ETA and its collateral organisations, headed by the political party Herri Batasuna (in 1998 renamed as Euskal Herritarrok), tried to spread to every social sector, and to launch itself 'not merely as a political party but as communitary movement trying to give answers to the whole Basque society, and considering itself as the only legitimate representative of the Basque community⁵⁵. They project themselves over their own community, which is a closed community, and consider it as the only expression of the 'Basque people', again a pre-national absolute concept. In that strategy of confrontation against the 'enemy', ETA had to decide between two nationalistic models: on the one hand, the European ethnic minorities (except Northern Ireland), which were and are trying to rebuild their identities facing the European Union; and the nationalist models of the Third World (Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba). They decided then, in the sixties, that 'negotiation and the political path are not useful (...) every process of national independence has always followed the path of violence and armed struggle⁵⁶. And they did: after more than 800 deaths, they have joined the other Basque nationalist (moderate) parties, offered a ceasefire and demanded a negotiation. Two hooded people

⁵² 'It has to be remembered that the rebels' intention in attacking Euzkadi was not to exterminate the "Reds" but to exterminate the Basque National spirit'. Autonomous Government of Euzkadi, op. cit., p. 7.

⁵³ Universidad de Valladolid, *Informe sobre la situación de las Provincias Vascongadas bajo el dominio rojo-separatista*, Universidad de Valladolid, Valladolid, 1938, p. 41.

⁵⁴ G. Jáuregui, *Ideología y estrategia política de ETA*, Madrd, 1985, p. 460.

⁵⁵ G. Jáuregui, 'ETA: Antifranquista o antiespanyola?', in *L'Avenç*, n. 191, April 1995, p. 8.

⁵⁶ In G. Jáuregui, op. cit., p. 12.

appeared in October 1998 in a BBC report on television: they did not feel themselves obliged to ask their victims for forgiveness. The use of violence had been a necessary decision to 'protect' the Basque homeland. 'But when a choice is made for homeland and comrades, a choice is made against society and citizens', says Aurelio Arteta⁵⁷.

Research into the ideology within radical Basque nationalism has demonstrated that in the so called Basque Movement for National Liberation (of which ETA and HB are the main organisations) a Basque is one who accepts the characteristics of his/her culture (the language), who wants to be Basque and who fights for the Basque Country. 'Those who assume these three characteristics are the spirit of the Basque Country and, thus, the true Basques, the true nationalists'⁵⁸. Non-nationalists are radically excluded from being Basques. Paradoxically, not all the inhabitants of the Basque Country are Basques for the radical nationalists. They are, in fact, enemies of the Basque Country.

This sharp distinction between Basques and Spaniards, or, if you prefer, between Basque nationalists and Spanish nationalists, has grown dramatically in recent decades. When, for example, Marianne Heiberg went back to the Basque Country in the 1980's, she realised that 'certainly the progressive economic decline of the area is starkly visible. Moreover, although the unyielding cleavage between *españolistas* and *abertzales* remains, the boundary is maintained with less tension'⁵⁹. But in 1998, now that ETA has declared a ceasefire and the nationalist parties have signed the so called 'Lizarraga agreement', a break between Spanish and Basque nationalists appears very clearly on the horizon. Just at a time when nationalism seemed to be so unfashionable. But, as the former right-wing Spanish politician Miguel Herrero de Miñón believes, nationalism is still attractive, because it replaces the old fight between left and right wings. His diagnosis is that:

Personally I think that, for good or bad, the twenty-first century will be, because of globalisation, the century of nationalism, more so than the present century. Because nationalism is a product, desired or not but unavoidable, of social and political modernisation (...). The really important thing in nationalism is not its party formulation, but the nation it generates (...). The Spanish political future will, as a consequence, have to be designed attending to the existence of those irreducible peripheral nations (...). In my opinion, nationalism will still be an unbeatable force due to the sclerosis of the classical political forces. A nationalism, not even one making demands but a satisfied one, may offer the appeal of a political project to give cohesion to society and integrate a collective identity, capable of attracting both conservatives and progressives (...) because most of the issues used to differentiate left and right wings are dissolved to a great extent by the market⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ A. Arteta, 'La sinrazón del vigilante', *El País*, Madrid 23rd November 1998, N° 934.

⁵⁸ J. M. Mata, *El nacionalismo vasco radical. Discurso, organización y expresiones*, Bilbao, 1993, p. 341.

⁵⁹ M. Heiberg, op. cit., p. 227.

⁶⁰ M. Herrero de Miñón, 'El espejismo nacionalista', *El País*, 14th November 1998, n. 925.

There are some other diagnoses. For example, a teacher of Ethics and Philosophy in the University of the Basque Country, Aurelio Arteta, only some days after Herrero's article, wrote in the pages of the same newspaper that:

the Basque Country and the Basque society name very different things and are linked between them as an ideal and sacred being: the former is an absolute and pre-political cultural matter, while the latter is real, profane, sociologically observable, relative and democratic. The first is a meeting of believers who need interpreters for their faith, the second, a sum of citizens that speak for themselves. One reduces all its members by abstraction to a single identity, to which they belong for life, while the other encompasses all its members in their changeable diversity of chosen identities. ETA, it is obvious, as any other nationalism, choose the People. The only thing that is worthwhile is "our survival as a people". The people that form the Basque country. Of course, it is a symbol, a fictitious being to which they give personal and social characteristics: there are some "rights of the Basque Country" and a "right for the Basque Country to speak", we are facing "a new choice that we all offer to the Basque Country". Just as God is a product of religious alienation, the Basque Country is a product of nationalist estrangement⁶¹.

I would finally like to reproduce one of my colleagues' words, which I agree:

Some nationalist politicians are trying to construct the future of the Basque Country betraying their own history, putting in practice Orwell's assertion: 'Who controls the past controls the future, and who controls the present controls the past'. As historians, we have the obligation of demonstrating manipulation. And, as citizens, we can hope that this time history will not be repeated as a tragedy, but merely as a farce.

After all, we can only survey the past, not the future. As Herrero says, 'it is better not to invent time: it is enough to let it pass'.

⁶¹ A. Arteta, op. cit.