The historical dynamics of ethnic conflicts: confrontational nationalisms, democracy and the Basques in contemporary Spain*

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ABSTRACT. All the historical moments in which the Basque debate reached political protagonism in contemporary Spain coincided with political contexts of institutional democratisation. The debate on patriotism in the Basque Country is connected with a uniform narrative regarding the Basques and their moral distance from the Spanish nation: the ‘Basque problem’. This narrative has fostered a confrontational discourse between Spanish and Basque nationalism. It has also promoted recourse to specific stereotypical images of the Basques, which bind ethnicity to collective identity. Such representations reveal that the invention of the Basque country as a uniform ethnic collective had much more to do with the internal contradictions of Spanish national identity – and later of Basque identity – than with the existence of a secular conflict between Basques and Spaniards. The Basque case shows that every ‘ethnic conflict’ requires adequate contextualisation in order to avoid simplifying its origins and past pathways to make it conform to present uses.

KEYWORDS: Basque Country, ethnic conflict, ethnicity, nationalism, nation-building, Spain.

Nationalism is a key political feature of modernity, as has been demonstrated by various scholars, including Benedict Anderson and Liah Greenfeld. If we follow Anderson’s understanding rather than Greenfeld’s, we can assume that conscious belonging to a national collective tends to be a cultural issue more than an ideological one. National identities are constructed rhetorically by individuals as narrative metaphors that give emotional reality to an abstract political concept: the nation (Anderson 1991; James 1996). Many such narratives are dedicated to identifying and telling of the conflict with the

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stranger to the nation, a symbolic body in which one’s own identity is recognised (Cohen 1996: 806).

The narrative of the nation, in its attempts to integrate territory and political imagination, draws thicker or thinner moral lines between what is familiar and what is strange, between the ‘here’ of the nation and the ‘out there’ that is not the nation (Bauman 1999: xxiii). What is ‘ours’ is that which belongs to our compatriots: a territory, its landscape, group values and goals, a memory of a collective past, myths, symbols and rituals that unite ‘us’. All this is constructed in greater or lesser express opposition to ‘them’. These ‘others’ may be located outside or inside the borders of the nation (Bauman 1999: xxx–xxxi; Grodzins 1956: 21–2; Cohen 1994: 199).

If the identity of the nation is to be established for the political collective it represents, it should be perceived as secure, which only occurs when it can prevail over external or internal hostile elements. In times of war, political revolution or ethnic conflict, the strength of this identity may be questioned, generating a national crisis of legitimacy. In these situations, narratives of opposition to an internal or external enemy can permeate the national identity discourse and eventually define an oppositional or confrontational nationalism.1

This variant of nationalist discourse appeals to intense mobilisation of the nation in opposition to a ‘natural enemy’. The appeal is controlled by the creators of the national narrative, which may include intellectuals, politicians, journalists, civil servants, political activists, etc. They draw a clear, negative silhouette of the enemy in order to emphasise the ‘threat’ to the nation and the weaknesses in the national identity. If the enemy is within the national borders, the nationalist narrative will tend to highlight certain cultural singularities that suggest moral deviation from the values and ideals of the legitimate nation. Such cultural singularities are generally ethnic and include historical, religious, racial and other features (Schlesinger 1991: 174).

In the light of these narratives, this article examines the ethnic conflict affecting the Basque Country in contemporary Spain and proposes that the ‘Basque problem’ is an oppositional identity narrative that has fomented a conflictive historical image of the relationship between Basque and Spanish identities; though both have been shown in the past by Basque historians to be complementary and interdependent (see Castells and Cajal 2009; Molina 2005). The narrative of the ‘Basque problem’ was invented in the last third of the nineteenth century within the framework of Spanish patriotic discourse and disputes between liberals and traditionalists regarding the nation. It was later incorporated into the emerging Basque nationalist discourse.

An analysis of how this narrative was built will provide a picture of the complex historical relationship between Basque and Spanish identities. I will then focus on three historical contexts of public debate on Basque identity which are central in the historical development of the ‘Basque problem’ as a case study in ethnic conflicts. These historical contexts are the democratic revolution of 1868 and the civil war of 1872–76; the Second Spanish Republic (1931–36); and, finally, the transition to democracy (1975–78). All of them
incorporate a political process of State democratisation, along with political violence and a uniform public narrative of otherness regarding Basques. This narrative, founded in a politicization of the concepts of Basque culture and ethnicity, was strongly influenced by confrontational nationalisms – either Spanish or Basque. I will finally contend that the historical complexity of these various contexts has been unfairly reduced by current public opinion and even academic analysis to the parameters of political violence and ethno-nationalist conflict, the only parameters operative in defining today’s ‘Basque problem’.

The rural problem

Nation-building in modern Spain implied – and may have been very dependent on – region and ethnicity building. Nineteenth-century Spanish nationalisation processes promoted multiple and often intersecting conceptions of fatherland, country and region (Archilés and Martí2001; Núñez2001b, 2006). ‘Much like the British nation consisted of the English, Scots, and Welsh, the Spanish nation consisted of Basques, Catalans, Aragonese, Valencians, Castilians, Andalusians, and others’ (Jacobson2006: 211–12).

Liberalism imagined Spain as a nation of citizens plagued by history and religion, which nonetheless were the necessary ethnic preconditions for the emergence of the Spanish body politic. When the first liberal Constitution was launched in 1812, liberals resurrected a popular medieval heritage defining the national community by a common history and culture. Regional ‘political traditions’ justified national sovereignty and the fall of the absolutist regime. The medieval parliaments of Aragon and Castile, including the Basque institutions that permitted home rule within Castile, were invoked as historical examples of the ancient origin of Spanish (i.e. national) liberalism (Forcadell and Romeo2006). Furthermore, the 1808–14 struggle against the French became the ‘War of Independence’, the national myth-making cornerstone. The ‘Spanish people’ came to be a political, literary and academic actor in works that underlined the historical continuity of the Spanish liberal Volkgeist (Inman Fox1997: 35–54; Álvarez Junco2001: 119–279).

Traditionalists were also attracted to the regional variety and peculiar nature of the Spanish nation. However, they defined the Spanish nation as ethnic, organic and intrinsically Catholic; liberal ideas were ‘anti-traditional’ and ‘anti-Spanish’. They advocated a decentralised Spain where regions would maintain their medieval privileges and common Catholic heritage, which they emphasised as the Volkgeist of the nation (Álvarez Junco2001: 357–81).

Spanish national identity was formed and framed by the debate between liberal and traditionalist canons of patriotism. This ideological dichotomy influenced political discourse and intellectual debates, segregating the interpretations of the ‘historia patria’ (Boyd1997: 71–89, 99–119) and affecting the parallel construction of regional identities. In the Basque Country, historians, philologists, archaeologists, politicians and journalists praised the poetic
virtues of the Basques and sought their timeless essence as the last remnant of the ancient and ‘liberal’ Spanish race. In this harmonious picture, Basques were puritan Catholics, hard-working farmers in a romantic landscape, respectful of social hierarchy and order (Molina 2005: 83–110).

Following the European rural idealisation of the time, both liberal and traditional regionalist intelligentsia maintained that pure ethnicity could only be found in the peasantry, removed from industrial society (Thiesse 1999: 159–60). Consequently, the Basques were cast as virtuous peasants, the most ancient community in Europe, living in a ‘primitive liberal democracy’ reflected in their *fueros* (ancient local laws), which they considered the prototype for liberal Spanish constitutions (Castells 2007).

In 1868, the democratic ‘Glorious Revolution’, supported by progressive urban middle-class elites and implemented by army officers, produced a constitutional monarchy. The 1869 Constitution was based on popular sovereignty, universal suffrage, individual rights, and the separation of Church and State. This last issue was particularly difficult for traditionalists (commonly called ‘Carlists’), who remained strong in the agrarian, ultra-Catholic Basque Country. A nation-state could now be built with nationalism as a civic religion, like Germany’s Second Reich or the Italian Risorgimento. However, the highly unstable political system and the crisis of the constitutional monarchy opened the door for the Republicans. Although Republicans had no more popular support than constitutional monarchists and were divided between unitarists and federalists, they managed to present their program as the last alternative to traditionalism (Castro in Álvarez Junco and Schubert 2000: 79–90).

Republican politicians and intellectuals defined ‘nation’ as a free and voluntary union of citizens with common interests and memory. They held that the Spanish nation included multiple linguistic and ethnic groups and was fundamentally civic, though linked to an idealised medieval Spanish memory that imagined ancient Spain as a ‘proto-civic’ place where Jews, Muslims and Christians co-existed (Álvarez Junco 2001: 433–45). While advocating a federal state, Republicans claimed they were also preserving the ‘traditional’ political structure of the nation.

From 1868 to 1876, the search to define the Spanish nation was linked to citizenship. State emphasis on political rights and citizenship revealed a growing civic nationalism in all of public life and politics. Overwhelming mobilisation of the public sphere brought about patriotic commemorations, academic debates and literary sagas, making the nation (symbolic of new citizen rights) the center of political debate (Molina 2006). For Carlists, the de-centralist features of the Republic were overshadowed by its secularity; the new regime was a frontal attack on religious principles and National-Catholic identity (Canal 2000: 158–60; Rubio 2000: 75–8). Diverging liberal and traditionalist visions of the Spanish nation eventually led to the battlefield. The Basque rebellion in 1873, immediately after the proclamation of the Republic, began the Second Carlist War.

The new war was not distinctively Basque; the peasant uprising also affected many rural areas in Catalonia, Valencia, Aragon, Castile and, above
all, the old Kingdom of Navarre. Yet it rapidly acquired a Basque flavor in liberal propaganda, for three objective reasons that help explain why traditionalism was stronger in the Basque Provinces and Navarre than elsewhere in Spain. First, the *fueros* gave institutional strength to the peasant revolt, allowing the creation of a veritable ‘rebel State’ able to provide its own fiscal, military and postal resources and structure. Second, economic and social crisis in rural Basque society encouraged more extensive peasant mobilisation than in other areas. In spite of utopian ethnic stereotypes, Basque peasants felt alienated from a changing society. Fear of the Republican State and its social, fiscal and religious decrees fueled their support for the traditionalist rebellion (Sesmero 2003: 201–3). Third, the Catholic Church interpreted the secular nation-state as a direct attack on Basque traditions.2

The Carlist insurrection was a tragic struggle between Basque urban liberals and traditionalist peasants. But this internal dimension was diminished by the external symbolic dimension in the Spanish public sphere. While Basque liberals held the cities, traditionalists gained power throughout the rugged countryside, which was ideally suited to their guerrilla tactics. The democratic regime faced in the Basque Country a peasant insurrection legitimated by local traditionalist intelligentsia who appealed to regionalist *fueros* mythology. Traditionalists absorbed Basque ethno-regionalist imagery, which was reinforced by their strong connection to local peasant communities and the isolation of Basque liberalism in the besieged cities.

Ongoing clashes in these provinces and Navarre even after the traditionalist defeat in all other Spanish territories in 1874 favored a link between Spanish traditionalism and Basque ethnicity in the liberal media and propaganda. Parallel to this, wartime patriotic debates drew an ethnic border between Basque and Spanish identities. A new negative Basque stereotype was invented in press articles by war correspondents, pamphleteers, and academic intellectuals. Peaceful, hardworking, Catholic peasants became fanatic Catholic barbarians bent on destroying the Nation, symbol of civilisation and progress. In liberal public opinion, the *fueros* became the root of institutional absolutism, and Catholic fundamentalism something inherently Basque. Spanish liberals cast traditionalists as alien, which became synonymous with Basque.

The Barcelona journal *El Cañón Krupp* claimed in 1874 that traditionalists were not at war, but simply ‘Basques [who] have executed wounded men and prisoners, have plundered the villages, have raped women, have stolen everything possible’. Liberal public opinion agreed that a singular identity was behind the Carlist rebellion in the Basque Country. A war correspondent of *La Correspondencia de España* – the journal with greatest circulation – stated that in other regions Carlism ‘is in no sense the same threat as in the inaccessible mountains of [the Basque provinces of] the North, since in other places it does not have ... the plentiful [human] elements ... hybrid institutions, a nature that resists any sort of progress, and fanaticism that reaches the extreme of exultation’. The war was described as a conflict between ‘the nation’ and ‘the village’, between urban ‘educated citizens’ and

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‘un-educated highlanders’ whose imagination was limited to ‘the confines of their land’. In the words of a democratic Parliamentary Deputy before the Spanish Parliament in July 1876, the civil war was ‘a national struggle’ against ‘rebel inhabitants of provinces that were enemies of the Nation’ (Molina 2005: 138–9, 163, 177, 230).

The clash between urban, civic, national identity and Basque, local, ethnic identity was a struggle against peasant culture itself, as brilliantly described by Weber (1976). At that time, literature and the press were becoming their own public spheres, influenced by a reading public demanding patriotic themes. The ‘exotic Basques’ satisfied the new middle- and lower-class stereotype craving. The stagnant war in those lands radicalised public opinion, encouraging romantic journalists and politicians to make the Basque provinces ‘another country, different . . . in its customs and traditions, ideas and thoughts . . . a sui generis Sparta that would always be against whatever the rest of Spain agreed upon’, in the words of a war correspondent covering the visit of King Alfonso XII to the recently pacified Basque provinces in March 1876 (Molina 2005: 182–3).

After this royal visit, Parliament decided to punish these ‘rebel provinces’ by canceling their historical privileges on 21 July 1876. This ‘rebel’ label was first used in Government war communiqués a year before, and became prolific in Parliamentary debates on the Basques and their responsibilities in the civil war. The law ending historic Basque self-government echoed widespread public and political opinion in favor of punishing ‘the Basques’ for their supposed support of the Carlist insurrection.

The rigid, confrontational nationalism of the first democratic period provided an ‘ethnic understanding’ of the struggle with traditionalism, using romantic ideas about a country at war with itself. The ‘Basque question’ (‘la cuestión vascongada’) was coined in 1873 by Antonio Cánovas, future president of the Government when the fueros were abolished. It referred to the historic self-government of the Basque provinces and their problematic relationship with the nation-state. The civil war had elevated this ‘question’ to a fantastic political conflict between Spain and the Basque Country.

However, not all the provinces had been equally traditionalist, and most urban Basque citizens were enthusiastic liberals (and Spanish patriots). Frustration spread throughout the Basque Country, a shared discontent with the new, unitary State; and regionalism remained as the common culture of all Basque political currents (Castells in Castells and Cajal 2009). The ‘ethnic revival’ after 1876 idealised lost self-government, peasant culture and singular ethnic components (religiosity, language). Though regionalism was also present in Catalonia and Galicia (Núñez 2006), the Catholic, ultra-conservative ethno-nationalism that arose among the traditionalist groups that had been defeated during the war was uniquely Basque. It was precisely those groups who had most suffered from the patriotic discourse that sought to separate Spanish ‘citizens’ from Basque ‘peasants’ in the trenches.

When Basque nationalism emerged in the 1890s – under the charismatic leadership of Sabino Arana, son of a Carlist family and founder of the Basque
Nationalist Party (PNV) – it benefited from the rural, anti-liberal discontent, strengthening the general demand for devolution. It celebrated the uniqueness of the Basque language, history and race, and demanded the restoration of the old laws, threatening to secede from Spain (Corcuera 2007). It also recovered the widespread confrontational wartime discourse of a ‘fantastical’ conflict between Basques and Spaniards (de la Granja 2003: 43–76).

Like thirty years before, once again a nationalism used an old, rigid confrontational discourse to convert the multiple social, economic and political problems of the Basques into an external conflict with ‘Spain’. It did not matter that most Basques considered themselves Spanish. The same had happened during the civil war, and converting Basque ethnicity into an identity border had worked then. Basque nationalism gradually took over the rural areas, which were the least incorporated into the nation-state, and the urban electorate controlled by Catholic traditionalism.

The religious problem

In the early twentieth century, a context of mass politics and socio-economic modernisation redefined Basque identity. The Biscay province was at the pinnacle of Spanish industrial development, on a par with Catalonia. New political parties and movements arose (socialism, Basque nationalism) and existing ones flourished, including liberal republicanism and Catholic traditionalism. In the three provinces, local public opinion and political leadership manifested a common regionalist culture based on the memory of rights lost in 1876, which had been replaced by the fiscal autonomy regime granted to each province by the State in 1878. This new local autonomy (established as a pact or ‘concierto’) ended virtually all political demands. Regionalist concerns in 1905, 1907 and 1924 were mainly influenced by the Catalan question, but none of them created serious popular support for self-government. Only Basque nationalist sympathisers sought anything beyond provincial autonomy. In fact, there was no agreed-upon name for this potential political community that would bind the provinces together. Basque nationalists used the new term ‘Euzkadi’; the remaining political forces (identified with the Spanish nation) used such terms as the Basque Country, Basque Provinces or Vasconia.

All this changed in 1923 when the Parliamentary Monarchy delegated state power to a military dictatorship – headed by General Primo de Rivera – that imposed a Catholic, centralist and authoritarian nationalisation policy. Basque nationalism became a clandestine movement, and the Spanish left-wing political ideal shifted clearly towards federalism or regionalism (Quiroga 2007: 110–28). When the Monarchy collapsed in 1931, the Republican ideal, following the example of Catalan demands for autonomy, became associated with a vague notion of greater Basque self-government.

At the beginning of the Second Republic, in April 1931, Basque political forces were divided by distinct and frequently antagonistic visions of their
The nationalists believed in an historic Basque fatherland composed of four Spanish and three French territories; the Catholic traditionalists, Socialists and Republicans neither defined the Basque territory as culturally uniform nor accepted the concept of a Basque nation. At the same time, the idea of a Catholic Spanish nation, which had been the guiding principle of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, had entered a period of crisis. The new Republic inspired a civic, lay ideal of the nation: unitary but tolerant of regional self-government (Radcliff 1997: 305–25).

A ‘new’ Spanish nationalism drove the Republic, defining the Spanish people as a democratic and secular political community united by a common body of law, with room for a certain cultural determinism in the civic idea of a Spanish fatherland. Democracy, progressive politics and regional autonomy were the core of the national project; while culture and history remained as part of the nation-building strategy (Muro and Quiroga 2005: 18). These cultural values were as urban as in the 1868 regime, and manifest in the national project of ‘pedagogical missions’ to rural areas. In 1937, the Minister of Public Instruction, Fernando de los Ríos stated of this national program: ‘We were trying to revive in the mind of the peasant the cultural values created by his ancestors. We were attempting to make him conscious of his history, awakening a feeling for true ‘Spanishness’.’ These educational programs sought to ‘raise cultural and civic levels’, to promote the Castilian culture and ‘racial virtues’ representative of an ‘exemplary citizenry’ (Holguín 2002: 48, 56).

The Republicans were tolerant of regional autonomy plans and offered home rule statutes as a way of accommodating areas with nationalist sentiments within the State structure. The 1931 Constitution proposed an alternative ‘integral state’ framework with the Spanish people as sole national sovereign, but allowing statutes of regional autonomy. The Republic gave nationalist forces, strengthened by repression in the final years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, the opportunity to develop autonomy projects. However, the Basque autonomy project drafted in the summer of 1931 was more concerned with the new religious question than with Basque political claims.

The first Republican measure reformed the Catholic Church, transforming Spain into a modern, secular political community. Divorce and civil marriage were legalised, religious symbols were removed from public buildings, ecclesiastical orders were barred from teaching and State subsidies for the clergy ended, forcing disclosure of church property and other taxable possessions (Graham 1996: 135–36). In much of northern Spain – especially in the Basque provinces – priests and clergy were significantly present among the rural population, sharing a common worldview with peasants and factory workers. Basque nationalists and traditionalists sided with Catholic and rural culture against republicans, socialists, and anarcho-syndicalists; all enthusiastic supporters of the Republic who generally lived in industrial towns, river cities and coastal capitals. The ‘cultural war’ between Catholics and laicists swept through the Basque territories in 1931 (Christian 1996: 13–14, 19; Molina 2007: 182–4).
Basque Catholic opinion imagined the Republic as the first step down a slippery slope into ‘bolshevism’, ‘anarchy’ and ‘atheism’ (Blinkhorn 1975: 41). This apocalyptic threat materialised on 11–13 May 1931, when anti-clerical vandals set fire to dozens of religious buildings in Madrid and Andalusia. Basque Catholics perceived the Government’s disinterest in defending Church property and Catholicism in headlines and photographs of gutted buildings and headless religious icons.

In the summer of 1931, some children reported having seen the Virgin Mary in the Guipuzcoan village of Ezkioga. The event immediately attracted thousands, and other visions by children and adults created a stir. The Virgin sightings led to speeches in defense of Catholicism, and seemed to offer a solution to the crisis of Basque farm families, who felt besieged by the Republic’s educational programs, industrial development and social modernisation. So, the Catholic response to these challenges involved a claim for home rule. Some seers actually linked their visions to a demand for regional autonomy, with allegories of justice and vengeance against the Republican ‘foreign regime’ (Christian 1996: 29–40). The regionalist campaign, sponsored by the entire political right, was officially conducted by the leaders of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV).3 The 1931 Statute of Autonomy project was the first political document to treat the Basque Country as a political unit composed of the three traditional provinces (Biscay, Guipuzcoa, Alava), and the old Kingdom of Navarre (Zabaltza 2005: 31).

The intensely ethnic and religious terms used to express regional autonomy outweighed any unifying elements within the State. The Statute project specified powers reserved for the Spanish government (foreign affairs, armed forces, communications, commercial and penal law) and left almost everything else to the Basque one. It also granted regional competency in Church–State relations and religious matters, with power to negotiate directly with the Vatican (Blinkhorn 1975: 49). The scarcely democratic Statute rejected proportional representation – favouring rural areas and the Catholic right – and increased the years of residence required to exercise political rights (thus disfavouring the immigrant-supported left). The draft statute idealised rural ethnicity as the symbol of Basque identity (de la Granja 2008: 167–70; Fusi 1984: 190–4).

The major attraction of Basque autonomy was the possibility of isolating Spain’s most Catholic region from the ‘anti-clerical plague’ emanating from Madrid. This was the key to its political success in territories such as Navarre or Alava, where Basque regionalist consciousness was minimal. From the outset, the Basque autonomy debate in the Spanish Parliament clearly focused more on religion than political autonomy. When the Spanish Parliament declared the religious dimension of Basque autonomy unconstitutional, the statute was withdrawn (Molina in Castells and Cajal 2009).

This new turn in the ‘Basque problem’ implied emphasising religion over ethno-regionalist claims while gauging the reaction of Spanish liberal opinion. Spanish Republicans saw the Basque autonomy project through stereotypical
lenses, accepting the false claim that Basque regionalist representatives in Parliament were the true representatives of the Basque Country. The Basque left wing fell short in its attempts to ‘publicly emphasize the existence of a liberal and left-wing tradition that would be as representative of the will of the (Basque) people as nationalism and Carlism were’ (Fusi 1979: 80–1). Consequently, in the Republican Parliament the nationalist-traditionalist coalition became known as the ‘Basque minority’, as it had been baptised by the Republicans in 1931.

In fact, the entire Spanish left wing committed the political error highlighted by historian J. P. Fusi; Republican politicians assumed a pre-modern foundation to Basque identity. The Basque Country was again placed among those ‘isolated rural areas’ separated from the ‘urban culture’ of the nation ‘in both the moral and material order’ (Holguín 2002: 55). However, unlike the 1873 scenario, there was already a (Basque) nationalism that could replace Spanish nationalism, offering alternative representation as a project for separating from Spain.

Republicans were disgusted at Basque regionalist insistence on religion and ethnic distinctiveness (language, 

fueros, race). The patriotic debate updated the traditional ethnic image of Basque identity, adding liberal imagery of Basque nationalism as a far-right and xenophobic movement, which transferred to the claim for autonomy (Fusi 1984: 189; Heiberg 1989: 82). Apparently, it justified fears that regionalist control might lead to a conservative, theocratic and traditionalist Basque ‘reservation’ that would limit Spain’s civic project. This potential ‘Vaticanist Gibraltar’, a label quickly trivialised and mocked in the Republican press, revisited two classic stereotypes in the patriotic debate: Basques as reactionaries and as separatists.4

The deep moral ‘border’ between Basques and Spaniards was again heavily influenced by a civil war atmosphere. The Catholic press denounced religious persecution of the Basque people by the secularising government in Madrid, calling for armed insurrection and a new ‘Reconquering’ of Spain. Violent public disturbances and gunfighting between left- and right-wing militants caused numerous deaths in Basque cities (de la Granja 2008: 263–9).

Republican intellectuals and politicians vented their irritation with this political violence and disorder in the press and by constant heckling during the Parliamentary sessions on Basque autonomy. Voices in the Madrid Parliament warned of a land ‘where whole villages are won over by superstition and fanaticism, the traditional enemies . . . of the Republic’ (de la Granja 2008: 263). Basque regionalist representatives were imagined as the descendants of the ‘renegades who covered Basque soil in blood during the Carlist wars’. They were described with exactly the same images and clichés used sixty years before: ‘foreigners’, ‘clericals’, ‘cave men’ and ‘cave-dwellers’, supporters of a ‘clerical and reactionary’ regional autonomy. Basque identity was again placed outside the nation, in a world of rustic savagery.5

After the first regional Statute was defeated in Parliament, the nationalist-traditionalist alliance lost its raison d’être. In the following years, the Basque
Nationalist Party – who in spite of their militant Catholicism was more inclined to Christian-Democratic policies – sided with their ancient enemies, the Republicans, in the hope of winning some measure of autonomy; while Basque traditionalists (and most of the Spanish right wing) gradually began to favor a military uprising against the Republic. Finally, the Spanish leftist Popular Front coalition saw autonomy for the Basque provinces as perhaps the only democratic way to integrate Basque nationalism within the constitutional framework. The first Statute of Autonomy was approved by the Spanish Parliament in October 1936, ensuring the loyalty of the Basque nationalists two months after the beginning of the Civil War. Since historic self-government had been only provincial, the first regional Basque autonomy experience was very brief and affected only Biscay. It ended with the rebel conquest of Bilbao in June 1937.

Foundations of the current ‘problem’

During the Franco dictatorship (1939–75), nationalism dominated Spain in the shape of National Catholicism, a cultural blend of fascist, traditionalist, and military principles: Catholicism was the essence of the ‘nation’ and Castile was its ‘ethnic core’. Francoism was a classic case of oppositional nationalism that regarded the Spanish nation as organic and culturally homogeneous. The existence of ‘Basques’ or ‘Catalans’ was therefore problematic because cultural distinctiveness challenged Franco’s unitary ideal of a Catholic nation. Political autonomy was regarded as a path to secession rather than a positive accommodation strategy. Left-wing and liberal forces – called rojos (‘reds’) – were demonised along with ‘separatists’ – Basque and Catalan nationalists who had supported the Republic. Both were considered the ‘anti-Spain’, a disease that must be cut out ‘at the root’; they were excluded from Spanish identity and outlawed. This fueled violent physical repression during the Civil War and early post-war period (Richards 1998: 26–66; Sevillano 2007; Rodrigo 2008). The pro-Republican Basque provinces of Biscay and Guipuzcoa were accused by the dictatorship of being ‘traitors’ to the homeland, and lost their fiscal and administrative autonomy. Alava and Navarre were allowed to keep their autonomy in reward for their wartime support of Franco.

Basque regional identity was conflated with Basque nationalism, and eradication of the latter became the necessary solution to what the new nationalist regime saw as a ‘political and historical problem’ (Preston 1994: 224). Franco’s victory forced thousands of Basques to join the Basque autonomous government in exile. Political purges and enforced cultural assimilation policies continued in all Basque provinces: Spanish was declared the only official language and expressions of regional identity were banned.

The Civil War and subsequent dictatorship altered the Basque nationalist culture. The ideological and cultural fragmentation of the pre-war Basque Country was ignored, the ‘fratricidal’ dimension of the war was erased and the
conflict was remembered as another act of Spanish aggression against the Basque homeland. Basque nationalists encouraged the younger generation to remember the Civil War in mythical terms, as symbolised in the bombing of Guernica (Aguilar 1999: 15–16). This ‘ancestral seat’ of Basque liberties became a searing metaphor of the martyred Basque people (Lécours 2007: 70–1). A ‘culture of defeat’ arose among Basque nationalists, extending to all Basques identified with the fight against the dictatorship.

The Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) – which led the Basque autonomous Government in the exile – came to represent almost exclusively this culture of defeat and the collective sacrifice of those who fought the ‘Spanish enemy’. It spread quietly through family circles, church associations, sports clubs or peer groups (Pérez Agote 2006: 74–98). However, the public posture of the PNV did not align with this ‘underground’ identity narrative. Unlike the Communist Party, it never favored guerrilla warfare against the regime and some of its clandestine militants were prosperous entrepreneurs inside the ‘autarky’ economy of the dictatorship. In the absence of political liberties, a radicalised and disenchanted youth, whose war experience resided in family memories, identified their combative heritage as a defining characteristic of the Basque nation. These young nationalists criticised the PNV for its pacifism, its cooperation with the Republic in exile (which to them was essentially ‘Spanish’), and its commitment to autonomy rather than independence. The dictatorship had transformed the nationalist fantasy of the ‘occupied and subjugated’ Basque Country into a grim reality. In this step from fantasy to reality, the PNV was cast as a traitor to the Basque nation by ETA. This new separatist organisation formed around a new, mystical patriotism of armed resistance to the dictatorship and advocated violence as an instrument for re-establishing a Basque national identity (De Pablo, Pablo, Mees and Jose 2001: 61–5, 261–4; Jauregui 1981: 208–9).

ETA became the new tool of radical nationalists to ‘regenerate’ the nation and forged a new Basque identity discourse, using a cocktail of ethnic nationalism and Marxist rhetoric, with elements borrowed from Third World liberation movements (Jauregui 1981: 151–263). By adopting the name of Basque soldiers who fought in the Civil War (gudaris), and the memory of nineteenth-century traditionalist guerrillas, ETA members projected their struggle onto the epic stage of historical opposition to the Spanish state drawn by the narrative of the ‘Basque problem’ (Muro 2008b).

In 1968 an ETA activist killed a civil guard policeman, and was in turn soon murdered; beginning the action–repression–action guerrilla dynamic that its members had embraced in theory and practice. ETA supporters (along with the Spanish democratic opposition to the dictatorship) saw the killings not only as retribution for dictatorial repression, but also as an identity message: the ‘rebellious Basques’ were still there, the ‘Basque problem’ still existed. They understood their nationalism and violence as cohesion factors, confirming the classic, negative stereotypes Spanish liberal nationalists had applied to them in the past.
In the turbulent later years of Francoism, mass repression radicalised much of Basque society. Between 1956 and 1975, ten of the eleven ‘states of emergency’ declared by the dictatorship affected the Basque provinces, reinforcing the idea that the Basque Country was occupied by enemy forces. People suffered the humiliation of endless checkpoints and searches by security forces who were almost entirely from outside the region, and who were encouraged by their commanders and the Francoist propaganda to harbor suspicion and downright hostility towards the Basques. Many Basques with no political involvement were subject to abuse, arbitrary arrest, ill-treatment and systematic torture (Woodworth 2001: 38; Conversi 1997: 225–6). Fierce state repression served to unify Basque nationalists and non-nationalists, and even Spanish leftists and democrats.

In early 1969, the military regime put sixteen jailed ETA leaders on trial in a military court, hoping to make an example of them with harsh jail sentences and even death penalties. The December 1970 trial in Burgos launched the new Basque national identity into international media and politics. The Spanish opposition and widespread international public opinion viewed ETA as a symbol of ‘Basque resistance’ to the dictatorship (Muro 2008a: 106; Woodworth 2001: 39). From then on, ETA was publicly perceived as representing an ‘ancient problem’, and ETA’s militants were labeled ‘Basque activists’ or simply ‘Basques’. The Burgos trial became the ‘stage for the Basque cause’ and francoist Basque politicians voiced alarm at how public opinion was associating the ‘terrorists’ and ‘separatists’ with the ‘Basque people’.

The national problem

By the time Franco died in November 1975, ETA had become a persistent product of the Spanish authoritarian State. It enjoyed popular sympathy, even legitimacy, especially from left-wing militants all over Spain, enabling its pursuit of violent activities during the transition to democracy (Lécours 2007: 80, 82). The violence of ETA was not directed specifically against the Franco dictatorship, but against the nation it represented. Whether the State (Spain) was a dictatorship or a democracy was of no real consequence, it was considered the ‘oppressor’ of the Basque people (Jauregui 1981: 212–13; Garmendia 1995: 41). An anonymous ETA spokesman had informed a French journal in 1970: ‘we are not against Franco, we are against the Spaniards, we are against colonisation by Spain, whatever its form of government’.

Prior to 1974, ETA had killed twenty-nine people. From 1977 to 1981, in what public opinion labeled the ‘lead years’ of the democratic transition, 240 deaths and hundreds of wounded were attributed to ETA (Domínguez in Elorza 2006: 290–1). This rash of killings helped to transform Basque nationalism into something vigorous, popular, and multidimensional. The violence of ETA, stimulated by the changing institutional and cultural context, gave Basque nationalist demands exceptional weight in the democratic political
debate. Basque nationalists and non-nationalists managed to unite and campaign for amnesty for Basque political prisoners, autonomy and legalisation of the nationalist local flag and language. Frequent bloodshed accompanied general strikes, barricades and demonstrations in Basque cities, while ETA intensified attacks on police, alleged police informants, former francoists and Basque businessmen. Few political groups dared criticise these assassinations; those who did couched their criticism in stiff warnings to the government that violence would continue until the ‘legitimate aspirations’ of ‘the Basque people’ were satisfied (Heiberg 1989: 109–10). From this point on, ETA had become for public opinion a material manifestation of the ‘Basque problem’.

Ironically, the Spanish transition to democracy ran parallel to an extreme polarisation of the Basque public sphere. Political parties, artistic productions, amnesty organisations, social research, businesses, schools, newspapers, public projects, folk festivals and publishing houses were all forced into mutually exclusive categories: ‘abertzale’/‘españolista’ (pro-Basque)/(pro-Spanish), Basque/anti-Basque (Heiberg 1989: 103–29). These were the same oppositional categories victorious Spanish (Catholic) nationalists used in 1939 to divide the ‘real Spain’ from the ‘false Spain, ‘good Spaniards’ from ‘bad Spaniards’.

During the transition to democracy, arguments for cultural plurality in Basque society entirely disappeared from the Spanish political debate. The new identitarian cleavage between ‘Basques’ and ‘anti-Basques’ forced a politically diverse people into a single political community called ‘Euskadi’. It had been redefined by the oppositional culture of Basque nationalism, especially of its radical front, led by ETA and the political party Herri Batasuna (Azurmendi 1998: 61–110). The Basque nationalist culture became the framework for the new Basque identity narrative in the public sphere. The new narrative underscored the opposition between the Basque Country and Spain, making the political problem external – between ‘the Basques’ and Spain. Thus the ‘Basque problem’ gradually became the ‘Basque conflict’ in the public narratives of Basque identity.

Spanish public opinion adopted this ‘external’ identity narrative easily. It fit the multi-ethnic atmosphere of the transition period and the classical stereotype of the Basques. Furthermore, the long authoritarian regime had thoroughly discredited and de-legitimised Spanish nationalism as a political discourse (Núñez 2001a: 722–4). New democratic politicians rejected its confrontational narratives (conservatives and Catholics versus liberals and secularists), along with the project of a centralist State. Centralism gave way to a region-building process that included redefining regional borders, shaping new cultural entities and a ‘territorial grievance’ political discourse against the State (Núñez 2005). The quest for ethnic distinctiveness generated new mythical images of the ‘peoples’ of Spain as ‘secular nations’ (Balfour and Quiroga 2007). According to the decentralised State established in the 1978 Constitution, the Basque right to self-rule was not criticised as it had been in 1931 but was welcomed by most of the Spanish Parliament.
The early democratic context favored the ‘conflict’ narrative. The new Basque nationalism, divided between a moderate (and democratic) wing – PNV – and a radical one – Herri Batasuna and Euskadiko Ezkerra – was seen as the outcome of 150 years of civil wars and symbolic violence. Journalists and intellectuals described the political violence in Basque provinces as a ‘northern war’; and Spanish politicians tended towards traditional banalities about Basque identity. The Assistant Director General of Security (one of Spain’s foremost police experts on ETA) had pointed out in 1974 that ETA was basically an ‘unsolved (historical) problem’ (Portell 1974: 282–3). Six years later it was the Home Secretary (Ministro del Interior), Juan José Rosón, who insisted upon this argument: ‘in reality the terrorist phenomenon is not clear, given that in 1873 events took place in the Basque Country and Navarre which have taken place in an identical manner again in 1980, and even the terminology used then is still the same today’ (McClancy 2000: 236).

Not surprisingly, the 1978 Constitution annulled the fueros. The Spanish Parliament clearly wanted to solve the ‘historical problem’ symbolically and assumed that the Basque identity resided in the nationalist community and its hegemonic collective memory. Accordingly, Basque Nationalist Party representatives were again baptised as the ‘Basque minority’ in Parliament. Diario 16, a leading Spanish journal, devoted its first issue to the new government’s removal of Franco’s ‘traitor provinces’ label for Biscay and Guipuzcoa. Its headline read: ‘The King will cancel Franco’s punishment of the Basques’. The historical banality of associating this label with ‘the Basques’ strengthened their ‘rebellious people’ cliché, ignoring the fact that many Basques had strongly supported the rebellion against the Republic.

Political and historical studies on the Spanish ‘transition’ consider the Basque Country as completely atypical of the political culture of that time, since extreme and violent positions had generally been avoided everywhere else. The Basque community is said to be a stranger to the ‘politics of consensus’, which was rooted in identity narratives of democracy, political reconciliation, oblivion and peace (Desfor Edles 1998: 41). The ‘Basque conflict’ narrative could be an example of the ‘exception’ of Basque politics in democratic Spain, so far as it succeeded in focusing on (selective) warlike memory, collective violence and an identity grievance against the State (Aguilar 1999: 21–2; Desfor Edles 1998: 130–1).

However, as long as the media and Spanish politicians used the same ethnic banalities and preconceptions as those of Basque politics, the new identity narrative of the ‘Basque conflict’ would have a clear place within Spanish democracy. It fit well with its new ethno-romantic, pluralist and de-centralist political culture. The changing narrative of the ‘Basque problem’ has encouraged Spain and the Basque Country as (often contradictory) nations. The historical weakness of both were overshadowed by oppositional narratives such as the one analysed here. This political functionality also explains its ongoing attractiveness in the political debate.
Conclusions

The Basque Country has been central to the ‘personalisation’ of the Spanish nation (Cohen 1996: 801–2). Contemporary historiography shows that every historical moment of political prominence of the Basque debate coincided with periods of democratic change in the liberal State, as they have been outlined, for example, by Álvarez Junco and Schubert (2000) or Vincent (2007). The first was the democratic six-year period that evolved into the monarchic Restoration, which fostered a gentle democratising reform that continued until the Dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera in 1923 (Burdiel 1998). Evidence of continuity can be seen in the evolution of the debate on the first Basque question, focused on the Carlist war, which ended with the Restoration Constitution.

The next period was the Second Republic (1931–36), which brought more intense social and political democratisation (Vincent 2007: 117–37). One phase of the political debate focussed on the demand for Basque autonomy in the context of a ‘culture war’ between secularists and Catholics. It was initially settled with an autonomy regime (1936–37), but was soon interrupted by the military rebellion that ended in the Franco dictatorship. Upon Franco’s death in November 1975, the third period began with the transition process towards democracy, and with the Basque country as the main territorial issue. ETA terrorist violence gave Basque nationalist and autonomist demands particular significance, to the point of actually encouraging the attempted coup d’état in February 1981 (Vincent 2007: 218; Domínguez in Elorza 2006: 298–9).

These periods are politically connected by a common democratising process and a uniform narrative regarding Basques and their moral distance from the Spanish nation. This identity narrative has fed the ongoing nationalist confrontational discourses regarding the ‘Basque question’. In 1868 and 1931 the goal of Spanish patriotic discourse was to make the Basques a ‘powerful’ enemy within national boundaries and thereby ignore the contradictions of the liberal national project, especially the weakness of the State and of its secularist democratic project. In 1978 the goal of Basque nationalism (supported by Spanish public opinion) was to ignore the contradictions of its hegemonic culture and power, such as the fact that part of its social backing came from an anti-democratic political religion – Basque radical nationalism.

An explanation of why successive patriotic debates regarding the Basque Country have appeared in periods of democratisation of the Spanish state must take into account two interdependent causes. First, that the internal singularities of this small peripheral territory contain many of the key historical elements of the Spanish democratisation process: political and national conflict between secular liberalism and traditionalist Catholicism, and between urban and rural cultures; as well as the dismemberment of the national identity, owing to the existence of a State identity alongside Basque, Galician and Catalan identities since the end of the nineteenth century.

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Second, each moment of democratic opening in Spain generated greater reactions in Basque lands than in other regions. These reactions were characterised by a ‘sacralisation’ of radical politics that was incompatible with democratic culture. This occurred in a traditionalist-Catholic sense in 1868 and 1931, and in an ethno-nationalist sense in 1975. These reactions instrumentalised Basque ethnicity, appropriating it as their cultural and political patrimony, and enforced a confrontational rhetoric of nation.

Thus, all the historical periods of the Basque debate are linked by a single context of political democratisation and recourse to oppositional images of the Basques that bind ethnicity with collective identity. These representations show how the invention of the Basques as a uniform ethnic group had more to do with the internal contradictions of Spanish national identity – and later of the Basque identity – than with any uniform ancient conflict between Basques and Spaniards.

Beyond these historical links and in spite of what is generally stated in politics, academia and public opinion, the current ‘Basque conflict’ has little or nothing to do with prior formulations of the question. The difficulties in nationalising the peripheral peasantry, the dispute between liberalism and traditionalism, the cultural war between a secular state and the Church, all disappear in the current problem. Just one common factor carries over from before the Second Republic: the lack of internal consensus between Basques regarding their common identity. Aside from that, the axis of the current conflict lies in the Franco era and revolves around the ‘weak’ democratic culture of this peripheral territory due to the effect of a radical nationalism, directed by ETA; a powerful political religion which sees violence as sacred collective sacrifice to an all-powerful god: the Basque nation (Zulaika 1988; Mees 2004: 328; Casquete 2006: 137–69; Mata 2005).

To apply elements of the ‘ethnic conflict’ theory to the narrative of the ‘Basque problem’ will always require a temporal specification, since this ‘conflict’ varied from one historical period to another and was completely autonomous in each. To paraphrase Gellner (1988: 15): why should we assume that a question has the same answer everywhere and in every period? To say that history has phases, so that the first phases are preconditions of the latter ones, does not mean that the first need the latter.

A long-term historical approach may be helpful for contextualising the varied and diverse effects of social constructs such as nation or ethnicity upon ‘ethnic conflicts’, according to the political and cultural factors present in each temporal period. Thus, we may assume with Rupesinghe and Tishkov (1996) that ‘in reality, the nature of [ethnic] conflict is as complex as the global varieties of social life itself; a fact which should, but does not always, lead scholars to reject the temptation to make categorical classifications and avoid oversimplifications’. Those who analyse the ‘Basque conflict’ should certainly avoid this temptation. It would help to recognise that the internal conflicts of past societies were as complex as the present ones, and do not always require the latter to be correctly understood.
Notes

1 Hazareesingh (1994) makes use of this definition of nationalism, with the single objective of isolating the conservative, authoritarian and Catholic nationalism that was born in France due to the ‘Affaire Dreyffus’ and which has continued until now through the current ultra-right wing Front National.

2 The consideration of this war, and the prior one of 1833–39, as Basque pre-nationalist wars – as the historiography of the 1970s and 1980s suggested – has been rejected by the new historiography of Carlism (Canal 2000: 402–36).

3 During these republican years, the Basque nationalist community was politically divided between the majority, right-wing Basque Nationalist Party, and the small, left-wing pre-republican Basque Nationalist Action (Acción Nacionalista Vasca) party, which was a frustrated attempt at modernising the ideology and politics of Basque nationalism (de la Granja 2008).

4 This political label was coined by the Socialist journalist Indalecio Prieto (1883–1962), the most relevant leader of Basque Republicanism who became minister of the Spanish Government in the 1930s. Its meaning combined the appeal to the Vatican (which was considered by Republicans an external enemy of the Nation) with Gibraltar, the British colony on Spanish soil since 1714, which became a classic irredenta for Spanish nationalism.

5 Quotations taken from El Liberal, 15 July 1931 and Spanish Congress, sessions of 29–30 July 1931.

6 I adopt here the interesting thesis developed by Schivelbusch (2003).


8 Le Monde, 16 December 1970.

9 Diario 16, 18 October 1976.

10 An ‘exception’ which is especially clear in the culture of the radical Basque nationalist community, as shown by MacClancy (2007: 40–1).

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