

## THE NATIONALIST CANON Argumentation of the Basque “conflict”

**José M<sup>a</sup> Ruiz Soroa**

Lawyer, Doctor in Law. Lecturer at the University of the Basque Country

### Summary

The purpose of this paper is twofold: 1) to set forth what could be referred to as the “canonical version of the Basque conflict”, which has been the version offered by the Basque nationalists for many years now. Although the basic points are the same in all cases, details of this version may vary depending on whether it is heard from the peaceful and democratic side of Basque nationalism (that is, the Basque Government and the Basque Nationalist Party, PNV) or from the radical and violent side of Basque nationalism (represented by ETA and the socio-political organizations around it – mainly BATASUNA); and 2) to contrast this nationalist canon with the historical, social and political reality of the Basque Country, in order to make evident the false statements on which it is based and, most importantly, to reveal its total inability to explain the Basque reality.

## Structure and content of the canon

The nationalists' explanation of the political situation in the Basque Country takes the form of a fiction story or a tale. Thus, according to this explanation, Basque politics are muddled by an essential, unresolved conflict ("the heart of the plot"). An imaginative story has been built around this main theme, which, as any proper tale, is comprised of a main character (the "Basque people"), a story (the original independence of the Basque Country and the crushing of such independence in modern times), a key point ("terrorism"), an unsatisfactory evolution (the current situation) and a "happy end" (the exercise by the Basque people of their "right to decide").

As all stories and tales, the nationalist canon is highly attractive for its simplicity. However, as will be evidenced throughout this paper, it is a biased representation of reality, arbitrarily made up from a selective and Manichean point of view, which, in short, fails to explain the socio-political reality of the Basque Country.

## The main character (the Basque people) and their history

The existence of a "Basque people", culturally distinct from the rest of Spain, is the basic starting point of the nationalist canon. According to this theory, the Basque people have been culturally different since ancient times, having certain unique cultural features (language, customs, racial origin, secular nobility) which would make them a distinct "ethnic group", separate from the Spanish people (according to the most impassioned versions of this theory, the "Basque population" would have existed for about 7,000 years, that is, since the emergence of sedentary agriculture). This people, or ethnic group, would moreover have had a national self-consciousness dating back to ancient times, evidenced by their continuous desire for self-government.

In this respect, according to the nationalist canon, history proves that the people inhabiting the four Basque territories (Biscay, Alava, Guipuzcoa and Navarre) have had self-government institutions since the end of the Middle Ages (although most of the data is found after the 16<sup>th</sup> Century), which put them in a special, privileged situation within the Spanish monarchy. These institutions were the so-called "*fueros*", which established a system of virtual semi-independence: although the Basque people in theory accepted the king of Spain as their sovereign, they reserved the right to run their own government and to reject the royal orders which they considered opposed to the law of their own institutions (the *fueros*).

This system started to be challenged by the centralism of the Spanish government during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of the implementation of a radically centralized

State. These challenges (which are most clearly reflected in the laws passed between 1838 and 1876) negatively affected both the political rights of the Basque as a distinct people and their cultural peculiarities as an ethnic group. With regard to their political rights, the powers of the so-called *fueros* were gradually reduced, until they finally disappeared. As for their cultural peculiarities, the Basque language was excluded from the education system and disregarded by the public administration.

These attacks against the Basque people as such reached their peak during Francisco Franco's dictatorship, from 1937 to 1976, a period of time in which any expression of cultural diversity was violently repressed.

### The heart of the conflict

According to this view, the Basque conflict would be but a typical situation of political domination of one people by another, combined with an additional situation of repression of any distinct cultural identity ("cultural genocide"). After 1964, still under Franco's dictatorship, this conflict caused a violent popular reaction (ETA) which unfortunately evolved into indiscriminate terrorism, which still exists today. Although there is no agreement among nationalists as to the use of violence (which is supported by some and condemned by others, although all of them "understand" its reasons), all nationalists basically consider that it is an expression or a consequence of the background political conflict. Therefore, it would be absurd to try to solve the problem of violence without previously or simultaneously solving the conflict itself.

### The unsatisfactory evolution

According to the nationalist canon, the limited democracy existing in Spain since 1978 has somewhat improved the earlier climate of oppression, but has not been sufficient to efficiently contribute to the resolution of the conflict. Thus, although the Spanish Constitution of 1978 and the Statute of Autonomy of the Basque Country of 1979 have given the Basque people a certain degree of decentralising autonomy, the level of self-government existing in the historical past has never again been achieved. Basque nationalist parties have repeatedly demanded recognition of the Basque people's right to freely decide about their political status, within or outside Spain, whether as an associated, confederated or independent state. The refusal of the successive State governments to even consider this possibility (and, in this respect, both socialist and conservative governments have reacted the same) is keeping the conflict frozen, without any significant change in the initial positions of the parties involved.

On the other hand, even though certain administrative powers have been devolved to the regional Basque government by the central State government, the regional government lacks the financial, administrative and human resources needed to guarantee the effective self-government of the Basque Country and to protect their distinct cultural identity.

## The happy end

Any serious attempt at solving the Basque conflict necessarily requires that the Basque population is effectively granted the right to independently decide on their own future (it is the equivalent to the right to self-determination enshrined in several international texts of the United Nations, although here it is referred to as a “right to decide”). Exercise of this right may lead to a free association with Spain or to total independence within the European Union.

For many years, Basque nationalist parties have pointed out that the only possible way to unblock the situation is to engage an honest and open dialogue on the issue, but their proposals have repeatedly been rejected by the central government in Madrid. A few years ago, in 2005, a proposal for a new Statute of Autonomy recognizing this right to self-determination was rejected, as well as the more recent proposal for a new bilateral agreement, which also guaranteed the “right to decide” (2008).

The above described nationalist canon is extremely inappropriate to understand the actual situation of the Basque Country, because it distorts the main data, ignores or conceals other important information and, in short, provides a biased, partial and incomplete view of the Basque reality within Spain. This is, in short, a version of “how things should be” according to a nationalist *weltanschauung* rather than an objective account of “how things really are”.

Below is an account of objective data evidencing the deficiencies of the nationalist canon.

## The Basque society

Modern sociology prefers to use the notion of “civil society” when referring to a given group of people, and avoids using concepts such as “nation”, “ethnic group”, “*volk*” or “community” which are in themselves loaded with ideological connotations and emotional values. It can be categorically stated that the Basque society is, and has been throughout its history, an essentially plural society, both from a cultural and a political point of view. Therefore, any reference to “cultural

monism” in the description of this society is extremely inappropriate. For the majority of Basque society, there is not a single cultural and national sentiment, but, rather, a natural overlapping of the Spanish and Basque national identities.

Shown below are a number of recent sociometric data for the period 1981-2007, taken from the EUSKOBARÓMETRO (Basque barometer) survey prepared by the Department of Political Science and Sociology of the University of the Basque Country:

- Perceived national identity (sentiment of belonging): the percentage of those who consider themselves “only Basque” varies between 23% and 40%, depending on the year. The percentage of those who feel “Spanish and Basque” ranges from 52% to 63%.

- Political sympathies or affinities: those who consider themselves “nationalists” are in all cases below 50%; those who consider themselves “non-nationalists” are always above 50% (annual data for a 25-year period).

- Last general elections in March 2008: 57% of the electoral roll voted for “non-nationalist parties”, while only 34% voted for nationalist parties (an additional 8% could be added to this figure, representing a hidden vote for BATASUNA).

According to the above data, most people in the Basque Country have a sense of “double national identity” and are capable of expressing “shared loyalties” regarding politics. The monist conception of Basque society as “a single people” is a distorting and simplistic view of the Basque reality.

## History

Regional systems of shared government between the local elites and the king of the country were quite common in the history of Spanish and other European monarchies after the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and existed not only in the Basque Country but also in many other Spanish regions. This government system had the particular characteristics of the Ancien Régime and was gradually abolished by all European countries during the constitutional period following the French Revolution of 1789.

The historical situation of the Basque Country is not an exception in European and Spanish history, if compared to that of other regions, kingdoms or cities. The only particular feature of the Basque Country’s historical evolution is the extended duration of the above described pre-modern system. However, trying to find situations of “sovereignty” or “independence” in a medieval or pre-modern context is nothing but a “presentist” distortion of old ideas. To still invoke these alleged “historical rights” of the Basque people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century only evidences

a historicist conception of politics, typically found in all conservatism. The only thing which can be positively proven by history is that the Basque Provinces have been conveniently and peacefully integrated in the Spanish monarchy (and later, in the modern Spanish State) without any specific cultural or political problems.

It is true that the development of the modern capitalist society, and consequently of the liberal-constitutional state, entailed a process of political and cultural homogenization of the population throughout Spain (as happened, in fact, in all European countries). This was an almost inevitable phenomenon, which was probably positive on the whole. Spain, however, is the European country where regional and local cultures have been best maintained, as is evidenced by the number of native speakers of languages other than Spanish, who currently amount to more than 20% of the total population.

### The use of violence

Terrorism is not the expression of a cultural and political conflict inherent to the relation between Spaniards and Basques, but rather an isolated and context-determined manifestation of certain characteristic movements of the 1960's: anti-Francoism, revolutionary leftism, anti-colonialism, etc.

ETA has existed longer than has been normal in other European cases due to the fact that some nationalist political sectors have addressed the issue indulgently and permissively and, in some cases, have even taken a political advantage of ETA's existence, using it as an argument to negotiate with, and justify their demands to the Spanish government. Basque nationalists have in general had an accommodating attitude towards terrorism because it suited them.

Furthermore, we cannot overlook the fact that terrorism has been an effective means of "persuading" the Basque population to internalize or assimilate the nationalist doctrine, under the threat of suffering negative consequences. In spite of that, an overwhelming majority of society is opposed to terrorism and tired of its persistence.

### Current socio-political situation

What the Spanish Constitution of 1978 refers to as a "State of Autonomous Regions" is, in fact, a "Federal State". This is made evident in the following quote, taken from RONALD L. WATTS, *Comparing Federal Systems*, Kingston, 1999, who is one of the most reputed specialists in this field: "Spain is federal in all but name... Spain is currently one of the most decentralized countries in Europe..."

Spain is an interesting example of an effort to accommodate regional pressures for autonomy of varying intensity.” (page 130).

In the particular case of the Basque Country, the regional government is vested with financial and administrative powers which extend beyond those normally granted to a federated state, and establish a real federal asymmetry to the region's benefit. The Basque government collects all taxes within the region, manages these taxes as it sees fit and pays to the central government a small contribution for military defence and diplomatic services. There is no other example in Europe of such a level of regional self-financing.

The Basque regional government regulates the study of the local language and culture with full autonomy. This has favoured an amazing process of recovery of the local language. According to the most recent laws passed by the regional government, the only language of instruction in pre-primary and primary education is Basque, a decision which has raised a great number of complaints by parents who wish that teaching also be done in their own mother-tongue, that is, Spanish.

The Spanish and Basque federal system is subject to a permanent process of adaptation and consolidation within a general plan of inter-regional cooperation. But, the nationalists' demands for self-determination or secession destabilize the system.

### **There is no happy end, but a need to adapt to pluralism**

In a situation of such extraordinary national and cultural pluralism as is to be found in the Basque Country, there cannot be a “happy end”, because of the nature of the situation itself. For the different national sentiments to harmoniously coexist, the solution must necessarily be based on any of the federal solutions widely undertaken throughout the world.

Effective self-determination of the Basque Country is seen as a traumatic and negative experience by most of the population, because it could involve a rupture or a split between communities. An overwhelming majority of the population would rather consolidate the current federal system, making all such changes as may be required in day-to-day practice.

What happens, in short, is that modern Basque society does not feel that there is a basic and essential conflict with their current political constitution, but is, on the contrary, rather happy with the current federal situation (70% according to the EUSKOBARÓMETRO survey). The only change almost unanimously demanded is ETA's dismantling (98%).

Under these circumstances, the nationalist canon, or tale, on the existence of an alleged “essential conflict” is utterly inappropriate. In fact, the conflict actually lies in the nationalists’ insistence in keeping such a biased and limited view of a reality which is much richer, much more nuanced and much more plural. There is not a “canon of the conflict”, but rather a “conflict caused by the canon”.