Between votes and bullets. Conflicting ethnic identities in the Basque Country

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Abstract

With settlement of the Northern Irish conflict, the Basque Country hosts the most threatening nationalist conflict in the European Union. After the breakdown of the ceasefire late in 1999, a return of intensive and indiscriminate ETA violence has provoked a political and social crisis for Basque (and Spanish) society, and, according to all recent opinion polls, the issue of terrorism now ranks first among citizens’ worries. This article focuses on the historical origins of the Basque conflict, its evolution during the Francoist dictatorship (1939–75), and the reasons for its continuity in the new political context of democracy. Special attention is paid to the attempt of kick-starting a peace process in 1998, comparison with the Northern Irish experience, and factors which contributed to the collapse of that attempt of peaceful accommodation. Finally, in the light of the most outstanding theoretical approaches towards the explanation of political violence in the Basque Country, several proposals for the necessary rethinking of this problem are presented.

Keywords: Nationalism; political violence; terrorism; peace process; Spanish and Basque history; ethnic conflict.

‘News dies faster than ever before’ (Gowing 1995, p. 271)

1. Introduction

Time passes quickly for any social scientist analysing the problems of identities, violence and peace in the Basque Country. When I accepted, months ago, the invitation to contribute an article to this special issue of ERS, my idea was to write about the Basque peace process, reasons for its beginnings, and achievements and problems on its way ahead. At that
time, the Basque academic community, as well as Basque society in general, lived in an optimistic atmosphere of hope and expectation. For the first time since political violence emerged in the Basque Country, most of us thought that we were witnessing the first serious attempt to bring the violent conflict to a peaceful and democratic settlement. The basis of our hope was the unilateral and indefinite cease-fire declared by the terrorist organization Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in September 1998. More than a year had passed without fatalities; secret contacts between the government and the paramilitaries had taken place; the political wing of radical nationalism was using a more institutional and democratic, and less militarized, discourse.

Now, when writing these lines, the cease-fire has broken down; ETA has returned to the stage, doing the only thing it really knows: killing innocent people. No week-end passes without threats or arson attacks against conservative or socialist politicians. The Basque political system is more polarized than ever before; the Spanish government, strengthened by its overall majority in the March 2000 general elections, is not willing or able to take any further steps to de-escalate the situation. In short, no such thing as a peace process now exists.

Yet, and despite the current pessimism, this article does focus on that embryonic peace process, doing this mainly for two reasons. First, the fourteen-month ceasefire and the process leading to it constituted more than a trivial anecdote within the long history of the conflict. Even if, as we know today, during that period violence continued in Basque cities in the form of arson attacks or letters sent by ETA to Basque businessmen demanding the payment of the ‘revolutionary tax’, the previously unknown experience of more than one year without casualties helped to push Basque society out of its mood of lethargy. For the first time in about thirty years, a real opportunity of democratic accommodation seemed to take shape. The ceasefire served as a reminder, probably against the intention of its announcers, that violence was not an ontological, inherent feature of the Basque society, but rather an unnatural, collateral by-product.

A second argument that makes it worth spending some time on the analysis of the process that triggered the ceasefire refers to the structural character of that process. It was not just a quickly dying news story for the media. Instead, it was a sequence of successes and decisions embedded in a general framework of policy-making as a response to problems raised by any violent ethnic conflict: how is a peace process kickstarted after long periods of violence? As far as political and constitutional demands are concerned, should there be negotiations with terrorists? How can paramilitaries be pushed to the negotiating-table without pushing, at the same time, their victims out? Which kind of political settlement can obtain a minimum of consent from each of the political communities and cultural identities involved in the conflict?
How can the problem of prisoners be dealt with? These and other questions are at stake in the Basque Country and elsewhere. A comparison between the Basque peace process and the Northern Irish one focuses on a comparative relationship between different peace processes internationally. Actors in one process try to learn from the experiences made by others and borrow elements of their strategy. This ‘borrowing’ may be helpful, but it is also risky if the specific circumstances of a particular society are not sufficiently taken into account and certain errors committed. This is one of the points made in the last section dealing with the problems of the post-ceasefire period. No analysis of the problems of violence and peace in the Basque Country, however, should be done without first discussing the historical dimension of the conflict, which started long before ETA was founded.

2. Basque, Spanish or both? One century of conflicting identities

The historical roots of the Basque conflict go back to the fifteenth century and the beginning of Spanish state-building. In 1496, the marriage of the Catholic Kings Isabela and Fernando prepared the unification of Aragon and Castile, the two most powerful kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. This unification was formalized in 1516, but even before then the monarchs had made important steps towards the creation of a stronger homogeneity among their subjects (De Pablo/Mees/Rodríguez Ranz 1999, pp. 5–20; Mees 2000). The policy of territorial, religious and cultural unification enacted by Isabela and Fernando was based on such powerful instruments as the Reconquista, the radical repression of the important Jewish and Muslim sectors of the population, and the Inquisition, which was under direct control of the monarchs. In the European context, this policy has been described as a successful example of the ‘genesis of a modern administrative state’ (Schulze 1994, pp. 54–7). Milestones in the process of Spanish state-building were: the Treaty of the Pyrenees (1659), by which the border with France was fixed; in 1668, when Portugal was definitively separated from the Spanish monarchy; and, as a consequence of the Peace of Utrecht, Spain was ‘peninsularized’ (Jover Zamora 1992, p. 100), losing its territories in Italy and the Netherlands. Finally, after his victory in the War of Succession, Felipe V abolished the remaining traditional rights of self-government, the Fueros of Aragon, Valencia, Cataluña and Mallorca, organizing the political and administrative life in these territories of the Crown according to Castilian legislation. In the opinion of historians like Domínguez Ortiz, Morales Moya and Fusi, all these measures gave birth to Spain as a nation (Domínguez Ortiz 1955, pp. 40–1; Morales Moya 1996, pp. 57–61; Fusi 2000).

Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century, which in Europe was the century of the nation-state, the evolution of Spanish history differed
from that of most European states (Mees 2000). Spanish liberalism was too weak to complete the process of state-building by that of nation-building. Whereas in Europe modern nation-states were created and consolidated, the Spanish state began a long period of decay. Developed within a context of imperial conquest, Spain subsequently lost its last colonies in 1898. The Spanish monarchy, once the most important colonial power in the world, was degraded to a third-class member status in the European concert of nations. The Spanish liberal nation-state was a weak state that, after the independence of most of the American colonies at the beginning of the nineteenth century and, due to continuous warfare on Spanish territory during the following decades, fell into chronic financial crisis, a serious handicap for later liberal governments. With a bourgeoisie located in the Catalan and Basque periphery and political power in the hands of traditional aristocratic elites, who controlled life in the provinces by a broad net of clientelism, the central state lacked the legitimacy necessary for the integration of all Spanish territories and their peoples within the framework of a single state. Thus, Spanish nationalism in the nineteenth century remained weak and never became a movement (Núñez Seixas 1993, pp. 138–50).

Besides the late creation of Spanish national symbols (flag, anthem, historical myths), two other vehicles fundamental for integration within other European states in nineteenth-century Spain did not function at all. One was public education, which in the bankrupt Spanish state, was not much more than an aspiration. The reality was that of an educational sector dominated by the Catholic Church, which was not the most appropriate instrument for the promotion of liberal principles and loyalty to the state. The same thing can be said about military service. The creation of a national army, guided by the principle of the soldier being an armed citizen and since the French Revolution a sacred ideal of European liberalism, in Spain was only valid for members of the lower classes unable to pay the sum necessary to free oneself from military service. It was not until the presidency of Canalejas in 1912 that the government started to take steps to abolish this discriminatory practice (Mees 1992).

In this context, the longevity of local and regional particularisms and their successful resistance against the complete absorption by the state is understandable. Despite all attempts to apply the policy of homogenization also in the north, the Basque provinces succeeded in maintaining, up to the second half of the nineteenth century, their traditional Fueros, that is, an extensive system of political and financial self-government (Rubio 1996). The Fueros guaranteed the political influence of traditional agrarian Basque elites, whereas representatives of the emergent commercial and industrial bourgeoisie protested against their under-representation in the regional parliaments and the duty-free import of European products with customs located on the frontier with Castile and not on the coast. Consequently, Basque liberals demanded
a reform of the old *Fueros* to adapt them to the circumstances of a modernizing and industrializing Basque society. After liberal victories in the Carlist-Wars,\(^1\) however, the new conservative government of Cánovas del Castillo abolished the *Fueros* completely. This radical abolition was answered by the creation of a broad popular movement, *Fuerismo*, protesting against this political deprivation and demanding restoration of the *Fueros*.

Following the scheme of Miroslav Hroch (Hroch 1985), this movement can be considered as something in-between the phases A and B of the ‘national awakening’ in the Basque Country, since the movement was more than a creation of a few intellectuals interested in the history and culture of their nation, which would correspond with Hroch’s phase A. Instead, *Fuerismo* was both a political movement with a concrete programme and an occasional participation in several elections (phase B), as well as a cultural ‘renaissance’. The receptors of its message were not only urban intellectuals, but also broad sectors of the illiterate rural population, which through the ‘oral literature’ of the popular poets, the *Bertsolariak*, was confronted with the themes of *Fuerismo*, as the *Bertsolariak* deplored the loss of the *Fueros*, decay of the Basque language, *euskera*, and interference of non-Basque, foreign customs and behaviours (Extramiana 1979; Coverdale 1984; V. Garmendia 1984; Canal 2000).

This proto-nationalist movement, its ideas shared by the militarily defeated Carlists, created a political and social atmosphere hostile to the central government and within which Basque nationalism would emerge. *Fuerismo* fuelled the process of Basque national conscience-raising, even if its discourse did not yet question the unity of the Spanish monarchy. When, from the 1880s onwards, the coastal province of Bizkaia\(^2\) and its society were turned upside-down by the rapid and radical industrialization and high levels of social unrest, the public space for relatively moderate ideologies like those of *Fuerismo* or even Carlism was narrowing, which opened the doors to radical doctrines and movements like Basque nationalism and socialism. Sabino Arana Goiri, the founder of the Basque Nationalist Party, did little more than draw radical conclusions from the fuerist and Carlist programmes, interpreting Basque history not in terms of autonomy, but as requiring absolute independence from the Spanish State. In his discourse, he mixed well known elements from the Carlist tradition, such as doctrinaire Catholicism, agrarian romanticism and a moralizing rejection of all ‘exotic’ and ‘anti-Basque’ ingredients of the new, modern world like industry, capitalism and secularization, together with other ideas borrowed from traditional social Catholicism, like harmony of classes and anti-socialism with – in the case of Arana- racist implications against the immigrant workers. Arana even shared some concerns with socialist and republican politicians, such as the call for a crusade against clientelist anti-democratic
power-structures, which Joaquín Costa, one of the most brilliant ideologists of liberal Spanish **regenerationism**, also denounced as **caciquismo**, a traditional type of power-brokering channelled through a network of hierarchic clientelistic relations (Costa 1902). The solution of all problems for the Basques, in the eyes of Sabino Arana, was through the reaffirmation of their own history, culture and race, the consequent expulsion of everything considered external to that tradition and the recuperation of the old independence by restoration of the **Fueros**. This attractive millenaristic message was embedded in the daily work of creating a nationalist history with deep mythological implications, as well as nationalist symbols like the flag, anthem and national festivities, all together with a purification of the Basque language by means of the elimination of Roman influence and the invention of neologisms supposed to be Basque in their origins, like the word **Euzkadi** for the Basque territory (Payne 1974; Larronde 1977; Corcuera 1979; Solozábal 1975; De Pablo/Mees/Rodríguez Ranz 1999, pp. 21–57; Flynn 1999, pp. 97–173).

The first members of and voters for the Basque Nationalist Party, created in the mid-1890s as a semi-illegal group acting in public when possible and underground when repressed, belonged to the urban petty-bourgeoisie of Bilbao, the provincial capital of Bizkaia. This middle-class nationalism was a radical answer to the radical transformation of daily life caused by the socio-economic process of modernization and its consequences like massive immigration, rising criminality, industrial strikes and other riots. Nevertheless, already in the lifetime of Sabino Arana, other sectors from Basque society joined the nationalist movement. For native industrialists and managers opposed to the few families of the high bourgeoisie that controlled the biggest part of Basque industry and the banking system, as well as the political life of leaders of the notable monarchist parties, the nationalist movement became an important instrument or pressure-group both in Basque and Spanish political and economic life. Peasants and fishermen used it to express their protest against **Caciquismo**, on the one hand, and the social costs of modernization to the fishing industry on the other. To at least some industrial workers, nationalism was helpful in constructing a new identity for themselves (Mees 1991, 1998).

However, it was not always and probably not even mainly rational interest in the first place that motivated Basque people to become nationalists. As important as rational choice, or even more important, was the attractive image of Basque nationalism as a movement and a community reliant on the total integration of individuals and not only their vote in elections as did the traditional political parties. In the Restoration Monarchy’s Spain, and despite the universal male franchise introduced by the liberal government as early as 1890, electoral politics were discredited due to the high extent of corruption and vote-purchase
by candidates. Sabino Arana and his followers succeeded in building up a modern democratic popular party, which was just the core of a broad político-cultural network of organizations, associations and initiatives of all kinds directed to different groups of the population like youth and women. These groups offered a rich variety of activities, like courses on traditional Basque dances, music, Basque language, mountaineering, football, and pelota.4 In order to stress even more the difference between the Basque Nationalist Party and the other traditional political parties, from 1913 onwards, in the official denomination of the PNV the word ‘party’ was eliminated and substituted by that of ‘Community’ (‘Comunidad Nacionalista Vasca’, CNV) (Camino/Guezala 1991; Mees 1992; Ugalde 1993).

Basque nationalism, as a cross-class social movement, soon became one of the most powerful political and social forces in the province of Bizkaia, with significant influence also in Gipuzkoa, whereas the two rural Basque provinces of Alava and Navarra continued to be dominated by traditional elites (Mees/De Pablo 1994). Following the model of Hroch, the definitive step from ‘Phase B’ of political agitation to ‘Phase C’ of a mass-movement was taken during the years of World War I, when in 1917 Basque nationalists obtained, for the first time, a majority in the provincial elections of Bizkaia and thus the possibility of forming the first provincial nationalist government. Success continued some months later when in Bizkaia all elected deputies to the national Spanish parliament, except one, belonged to the Nationalist Party, which outside Bizkaia obtained another two deputies, one in Gipuzkoa and the other in Navarra (Mees 1999). The Dictatorship of General Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923–1930), who rose – among other reasons – in order to maintain the unity of the Spanish nation, was a mere parenthesis in the successful development of Basque nationalism.

In 1931 the Second Republic re-established democracy and the two parties of Basque mainstream nationalism – split in 1921 – reunified. The PNV obtained in 1933 another important electoral victory, increasing even more its electoral strength of 1918. This victory took place only a few weeks after the referendum on the Statute of Basque Autonomy, backed by about 84 per cent of the voters in the provinces of Alava, Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia. Due to the confrontation between Basque nationalists and the new rightist Spanish government, implementation of autonomy was not reached until October 1936, after the right was voted out of power and when the Civil War had already begun with parts of the Basque Country occupied by Francoist troops. José Antonio Aguirre, the first nationalist Basque President or Lehendakari and his multi-party government were forced into exile, when in June 1937 the Basque Country was conquered with German and Italian assistance.

Franco immediately abolished Basque autonomy and enacted a policy of repression against, not only Basque nationalism, but all expressions
of Basque cultural particularism. A second wave of industrialization and immigration since the end of the 1950s, which now also affected the two provinces of the interior, Alava and Navarra, was the catalyst of a deep crisis for Basque society. This crisis has been described with the Durkheimian category of *anomie* (Waldmann 1990, pp. 71–5) and was triggered by several overlapping factors (industrialization; immigration; crisis of traditional values and channels of socialization; repression; and an inoperative policy of exile nationalism). Within this new context, Basque nationalism split again to give birth to the underground organization ETA which, after an initial period of radical, traditional mainstream-nationalism, at the end of the 1960s was transformed into a Marxist-Leninist paramilitary group organized according to the model of different third-world guerrilla groups. Since its first lethal attack in 1968, ETA has killed more than 800 people. Ever since, Basque nationalism has been divided between a majority, peaceful and democratic wing and a minority one with violent implications, which since 1978 is politically represented by the coalition Herri Batasuna (HB).  

Further below, I come back to the theoretical debate on political violence in the Basque Country with the purpose of checking some of the principal hypotheses raised in that debate in the light of the experience accumulated in the aftermath of the ceasefire’s breakdown. Nevertheless, this necessarily brief historical overview indicates that the division between the PNV and ETA is much later than the split produced within the Basque society at the end of the nineteenth century, that between Basque nationalists and those citizens who did not share this identity or even considered themselves Spanish nationalists. The shape of modern Basque society was not a product of Francoism, but of the late nineteenth-century monarchy. As discussed above, only fifteen years after the death of its charismatic founder, Basque nationalism had become a powerful mass-movement in the two coastal provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa, and less so in the more agrarian and conservative Alava and Navarra. Being nationalist was not only a political option. It was a way-of-life and an identity, symbolized and reproduced by a flag, an anthem, special nationalist festivities, the language, the socialization in one or more of the multiple cultural groups and initiatives attached to nationalism (language; dance and folklore; mountaineering; youth; women; labour union; etc.) and the share of the basic ideas which made up the political philosophy of early Basque nationalism as mentioned above. Traditional Basque particularism, political deprivation and a radical socio-economic modernization, including massive immigration of unskilled labour as one of its consequences, had shaped modern Basque society as a complex amalgam of cultures and identities, none of which were hegemonic.
Of course, the culture of modern capitalism and socio-economic progress was the Spanish one. Basque big business elites spoke Spanish, considered the Basque Country a centrepiece of the monarchy, sold their products on the national market and defended the ‘Spanishness’ of the Basque territories by leading the monarchist parties. The socialist labour movement, despite its artificially internationalist discourse, shared most of these Spanish nationalist, or anti-Basque sentiments, and mainly for three reasons. First, the openly anti-socialist, clerical and frequently even racist programme of the Basque nationalists made any kind of sympathy with the ideas of Sabino Arana and his followers nearly impossible; second, trust in Marx’s theory of nationalism as an invention of the bourgeoisie, condemned to disappear as capitalism developed, was another argument against political philosophies for the conservation of what socialists considered obsolete and anti-historic small nations and premodern languages; and third, the socialist labour movement was, in its beginnings and especially in Bizkaia, a movement of Spanish immigrants with non-Basque cultural and social backgrounds. They could hardly share the claims of Basque nationalists, who considered precisely the immigrants as the most effective instruments of the Spanish crusade against the Basque Country and blamed them for the decay of their traditions, customs and language (Mees 1992, 1998).

On the opposite side, Basque nationalists questioned directly the existence of a Spanish nation which included Basque citizens. Contrary to what occurred with proto-nationalist Fuerismo, for Sabino Arana and his followers the Basque nation was incompatible with the Spanish centralist nation-state. Arana forged a primordialist or essentialist concept of nation, defined by race, territory and religion rather than by language and voluntary, civic attachment. Reinterpreting or even inventing history, creating the national symbols (flag, anthem), cleansing the Basque language of any Spanish influence and divulging the neologism Euzkadi as the new denomination of the Basque nation and its homeland, Arana did the same work done by other nationalist leaders in other places necessary to build an imagined political community (Anderson 1991). Members of the Basque community aspired to a restoration of the golden age of Basque freedom and self-government granted by the Fueros before their abolition in 1876. How this policy of devolution should be implemented, however, remained an unanswered question in Arana’s political programme. Yet, this ambiguity carried with it an important advantage: it allowed both separatists and autonomists to have a place within the nationalist movement.

The history of Basque nationalism following Arana’s death in 1903 has been summarized as a sequence of pendulum movements between separatist radicalism and autonomist moderation, between opposition to and accommodation with the Spanish state (De Pablo/Mees/
Rodríguez Ranz 1999 and 2001). Even though the demand of partial self-government within the Spanish state through regional autonomy was the guideline of the PNV’s political practice until, in 1936, the first Statute of Autonomy was granted, separatist radicalism never disappeared in the discourse of Basque nationalism. Indeed, the PNV never defined clearly, in any programme, the political and administrative links the Basque Country should have with Spain if the nationalist programme was put into effect. In order to prevent the nationalist movement from splitting, the claim for regional autonomy within the state was frequently characterized as the first link of a long chain leading towards Basque national emancipation. This policy, built around the claim for regional autonomy, was not only a guarantee for the cohesion of nationalism. It also kept open the doors for an understanding and a cooperation with other Basques, who would not give up their Spanish identity but, at the same time, were not opposed to some degree of Basque self-government. For example, the Statute of 1936 was the result of an agreement between Basque nationalism and Basque (and Spanish) socialism (De la Granja 1986, 1990).

However, there was not sufficient time to see if this tool of limited self-government would be able to create a new political framework, within which the clash of conflicting identities in the Basque Country would be cushioned by democratic and institutional means. As already mentioned, autonomy was abolished by Franco, the Basque government fled into exile and the radical wing of nationalism broke away from the PNV to found ETA, which, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, became the core of what would be known as the Basque National Liberation Movement, that is, a broad network of political, social and cultural organizations, associations and initiatives with the common aims of independence and socialism (Mata 1993). This popular entourage of the armed struggle was what made ETA different from other terrorist groups in Germany, France or Italy. It also complicated the engineering of any strategy of conflict resolution, which required something more than mere measures of policing.

3. Democracy, nationalism and violence

After Franco’s death in 1975, the door to the restoration of democracy in Spain was opened by the political transition, the result of negotiation between the more reformist sectors of the regime and the democratic opposition. King Juan Carlos as commander-in-chief of the army was an important protector of this political hara-kiri committed by Francoist institutions. Together with the Constitution, the Basque demand for self-government and, in general, the problem of power-sharing between the central state and the different regions and nations within it was at the top of the agenda of post-Francoist policy-makers. There was no doubt
that it would be very unlikely to recover and consolidate democracy unless this problem was solved. On the other hand, it was also evident that, for the most reactionary sectors of the regime, too radical a decentralization could easily be considered a challenge to the unity of the Spanish nation, which since the 1936 putsch had been guarded and enforced by the army.

The new Constitution, which fixed formally the ‘unity of the Spanish nation’, asserting at the same time that this nation was ‘made up of nationalities and regions’ with a right of political and administrative autonomy, was openly rejected by the Basque nationalist left and criticized by moderate nationalists, who campaigned for abstention regarding the referendum on the Constitution held in 1978. As a consequence, in the Basque provinces, due to the high rates of abstention and ‘no’ votes, there was no majority for the constitutional framework, upon which the new democracy was to be built. However, the Constitution opened the door to the re-establishment of Basque autonomy, abolished by Franco in 1937. It was this partial devolution of the historic rights of Basque self-government by means of the Basque Autonomy Statute in 1979 that at least facilitated a de facto integration of moderate nationalism into the constitutional consensus. The nationalist left, represented by HB and backed by the terrorist offensive of ETA, which during the years of the transition carried out its bloodiest campaigns with a total of 240 people killed in 1978, 1979 and 1980, opposed autonomy because it was based on an ‘anti-Basque’ Constitution, perpetuated the territorial separation of the different Basque regions (excluding Navarra and the French Basque Country) and fixed dependence of the Basque Country on the Spanish state. Finally, more than 90 per cent of the Basque voters in the provinces of Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia and Alava supported the Statute of Autonomy, with the participation of about 60 per cent of the total electorate.7

Ever since, the gradual implementation of autonomy permitted the establishment of a remarkable level of self-government within the Spanish state, including its own institutions (Parliament, Government), police (Ertzaintza), tax-autonomy and other far-reaching powers in different sectors like education, culture, media, industrial policy and justice. Never in the contemporary history of the Basque Country had nationalism been as influential and powerful as during the 1980s and 1990: all presidents of the regional government have been nationalists, voted in by nationalist majorities for the regional Parliament; moderate nationalists control the public media (TV and radio); and nationalism is the dominant ideology within the Basque Catholic Church, and also influential among large sectors of the business community, education and the working class. In addition, on the symbolic level, important goals were achieved: the flag and the anthem invented by Sabino Arana, the founder of the PNV, became the official symbols of autonomous Euskadi.
None of these steps in the process of Basque nation-building has been recognized by radical nationalists, which, due to the reasons mentioned above, have a very different interpretation of autonomy, not as a tool of nation-building on the way towards higher levels of self-government, but as an obstacle to self-determination and territorial unification. In the discourse of HB and other organizations of the Liberation Movement, violence has been promoted as a legitimate instrument of self-defence for a small nation in a crude struggle for survival. A primordialist interpretation of their nation blinded ETA paramilitaries and leaders of their political arm so as to make them unable or unwilling to comprehend the complex reality of a heterogeneous Basque society and its conflicting identities. Moreover, even within the nationalist community, violence separated democratic nationalists from those backing the armed struggle. However, the common rejection of the use of violence for the achievement of whatever political aims, manifested by all political parties except HB, had a dual consequence: it contributed to consolidate democracy and autonomy in the Basque Country, but without formulating and testing any reasonable strategy of conflict de-escalation and accommodation. In other words, even in a democracy ETA continued killing, HB – scoring generally about 15 per cent of the valid votes in the elections\(^8\) – kept on supporting these activities more or less openly, the democratic parties persisted in issuing communiqués after each new assassination, but nothing changed.

Yet, this situation of stalemate started to evolve during the 1990s, leading to the first unilateral and indefinite ceasefire in the history of ETA since its foundation in 1959. My argument is that the ceasefire, and thus the first serious, later frustrated, attempt to break the stalemate and find a resolution to the conflict, became possible because, during the 90s, the shape of a new structure for political opportunities took place. Among the different, mostly endogenous, factors which shaped and sustained this process, the influence of the Northern Irish example was of extraordinary importance.

4. The Basque peace process and the Irish mirror

Sydney Tarrow, one of the major experts in the history and sociology of social movements, has pointed out that one of the most significant features of modern social movements is their tendency to acquire a transnational character. This is in the sense of learning and drawing conclusions from the experience of other movements in other places and historical situations. Tarrow calls this the ‘cumulative power’ of movements, which ‘not only repeat many of the themes of their predecessors (…), but build on the practices and institutions of the past’ (Tarrow 1994, p. 191). The transnational fluid communication between different movements in different places can even produce a mobilizing domino
effect, like the revolutionary movements in the states of the former Soviet bloc and cascading defection of republics from the USSR in 1990/91.

This thesis seems to be valid also in the field of nationalist movements and peace processes. Particularly in the Basque case, I would argue that the unilateral and indefinite ceasefire declared by the radical nationalist ETA paramilitaries is hardly imaginable without the strong influence of the peace process in Northern Ireland, which had started years before and whose experiences were thus available for nationalists in the Basque Country. And this is true despite the profound differences between both cases. Arnaldo Otegi, the new spokesman of HB, the radical nationalist party close to ETA, and one of the principal protagonists in current Basque politics, confessed in an interview given to *The Irish Times* that ‘Ireland was a mirror for us, and so was the republican movement. Negotiation was always regarded here in the Basque Country as something suspect. But Sinn Féin [SF] and the republican movement showed us that negotiation did not have to lead to political treachery. If it could happen in Ireland, why not in the Basque Country?’

This recent Irish-Basque connection, however, was not new. Its long tradition starts nearly with the emergence of Basque nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century (Núñez Seixas 1992, 1998; Ugalde Zubiri 1996). Scholars like Edward Moxon-Browne or, more recently, Cynthia Irvin have published comparative analysis on the nationalist movements in the Basque Country and in Northern Ireland (Moxon-Browne 1989; Irvin 1999). At the end of the 1990s, a new intensive eruption of this historical relationship became one of the foundations which, at least according to its promoters, the Basque peace process should be built upon. The core idea developed by the Basques, after analysing the Northern Irish experience, was that of a coalition of pro-nationalist partners as a first step towards peace. An example was the secret negotiations between John Hume and Gerry Adams since April 1993, which only needed Tony Blair’s electoral victory in May 1997 after eighteen years of conservative government, to push the Northern Irish peace process definitively out of a period of paralysis.

The application of this idea in the Basque case was not at all an easy task, since – as already mentioned above – during the 1980s and 90s the gap between moderate and radical nationalism had widened. On the one hand, ETA paramilitaries and their political wing had drifted more and more away from the reality of Basque society, radically escalating the conflict by bombing, shooting and the new concept of the ‘socialization of pain’ put into practice by the burning and destruction committed by teenage street-guerrilla gangs. Terror was no longer selective and everybody outside the self-denominated Basque National Liberation Movement could become a target, even moderate nationalists. In 1988, the ‘Agreement for the Pacification and Normalization of Euskadi’
signed by all Basque parties, except the radical nationalists of Herri Batasuna, formalized the common rejection of political violence. The text offered, at the same time, a ‘dialogued solution’ to the problem, on condition that the will to put an end to violence must be a clear objective for the strategy and ideology of ETA affiliated radical nationalists. This agreement was both a consequence and catalyst of a new cleavage within Basque society: it separated those backing the use of violence for political purposes from those who rejected this tactic, a cleavage overlapping and cutting across the historical division between Basque and Spanish identities.

In this situation of acute and frequently lethal confrontation, how could the idea of a pro-nationalist rapprochement become operative? The confluence of several factors created a new structure of opportunity, in which political shifts, that only months before had been unthinkable, suddenly became a reality. In this brief article I can only outline the bases of what I consider the main arguments, which – somewhat artificially – I separate here only for analytical purposes, since the following factors in reality are closely interrelated (Mees 2000a):

- **Devolution as a means of conflict de-escalation**

Thinking about ways to settle ethnopolitical conflicts, Ted Gurr has argued that ‘limited autonomy agreements tend to undermine the political cohesion of the communal groups and reduce its fighting capacity’ (Gurr 1993, p. 303). As we have seen above, this is exactly what happened in post-Francoist Spain after democracy and Basque autonomy had been restored. During the last twenty years, and despite problems with the Spanish government and the Constitutional Court, autonomy – until today controlled by moderate nationalists – has become a collective power base for Basque nation-building. The implementation of autonomy was carried out against the will of about 15 per cent of the voters, who remained outside the Constitutional consensus. For the rest of Basque society, however, the radical nationalist discourse about the Spanish (and French) ‘genocide’ against the Basque nation, used to legitimate ETA violence in part, incrementally lost plausibility.

- **Military and political weakness of ETA and radical nationalism**

This was a direct consequence of the first point. The increasing military dominance within radical nationalism and the abandonment of any political strategy not directly linked to the necessities of armed struggle pushed the movement into an increasingly marginal position, thereby truncating the growing electoral support for HB, which instead has lost support since the European elections of 1987. Moreover, several important police blows at the military and financial heart of ETA contributed
to a remarkable weakening of the organization. When in December 1997 the judges of the Spanish Supreme Court pronounced a seven-year sentence for each of the twenty-three members of HB’s collective leadership, this verdict did not produce any major alteration in the political and social life in the Basque Country. Thus radical nationalists’ isolation became evident to everyone.

- **Mobilization of grass-roots protest against violence**

Another important factor contributing to this isolation and the process of conscience-raising against political violence was the mobilization of the Basque peace movement since the end of the 1980s (Tejerina/Fernández Sobrado/Aierdi 1995; Funes 1998). This movement, which was not only a reaction to the perpetuation of violence but also the incapability of the political system to progress towards a peaceful resolution of the conflict, was very successful especially among Basque youth traditionally sympathetic to radical nationalism. Opinion surveys show that the mobilization for peace impacted even on the rank- and-file of Herri Batasuna. The peak of this mobilization was reached in the summer of 1997, when 532 days after a kidnapping, the police freed a hostage held by ETA and condemned to die by starvation because the government refused to meet an ETA demand for the transfer of Basque prisoners to prisons in the Basque Country. One week later, about 8 million Basques and Spaniards protested in public against the execution of a young Basque town councillor of the governing Conservative Party after a 48-hour ultimatum also regarding the transfer of all prisoners.

- **Break-up of traditional political alignments**

Rapprochement of the different nationalist parties was possible not only because of a political and strategic shift within radical nationalism. It also needed a transformation among moderate nationalists who, since the 1988 agreement, were part of the so-called ‘Democratic Bloc’ together with non-nationalist parties and, as such, strongly opposed radical nationalism and ETA. This traditional political alignment was questioned, however, when the moderate nationalists were convinced that socialists and conservatives were not willing to explore the possibilities of a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the conflict as mentioned in the final clauses of the agreement. In the opinion of moderate nationalists, this document had not been conceived as a mere anti-terrorism pact. The agreement was finally buried when, in March 1997, both socialists and conservatives rejected the peace proposal presented by the President of the Basque Regional Government, because they considered it an abandonment of democracy and a concession to terrorists. Thus, moderate nationalists formed the impression that neither socialists nor conservatives, while the principal
victims of ETA violence but also in electoral terms the main beneficiaries of the situation, were reliable partners if a peace process was to be kick-started.

A simultaneous evolution of Herri Batasuna towards a less military and more political strategy smoothed the way for a new political constellation in which lessons from the Irish example of the nationalist coalition of interests could be applied. In the eyes of ETA and its political wing, this constellation permitted, for the first time since the transition to democracy, the shape of a ‘new majority’ backing Basque self-determination and achieving this aim by democratic means. The Agreement of Lizarra, signed in September 1998 by all nationalist parties, the two nationalist unions and other organizations, set out these principles in a text preceded by a lengthy analysis of the Northern Irish peace process. This agreement was the result of long, and initially secret, negotiations among parties and the debates between the same organizations within the framework of the so-called Irish Forum. This was established by radical nationalists in order to analyse and draw conclusions from the process that had led to the Stormont Agreement. Only a few days after the signing of this pro-nationalist Lizarra Agreement, the paramilitaries of ETA announced a ceasefire (Domínguez Iribarren 1998a; Orella 1998).

- **Political negotiations with ETA**

Only after the ceasefire had collapsed and through documents leaked to the press both by the Spanish Minister of the Interior and ETA itself, it became known that months before the Lizarra Agreement was signed, the moderate nationalists of the PNV and Eusko Alkartasuna [EA] had carried out secret parallel negotiations with ETA. Still today, while writing these lines, there is a violent polemic between moderate nationalists and the conservatives or socialists about whether these negotiations ended with a secret agreement or not. However, there is one document with the stamp of ETA, PNV and EA in which the three organizations announce the beginning of a ‘new phase in the conflict with Spain’ and their agreement on four basic goals:

1. The creation of a new institution including representatives of all seven (Spanish and French) Basque provinces as a step towards the dissolution of current institutions, as well as towards Basque unification;
2. Cooperation among all organizations ‘favourable to the construction of Euskal Herria’;
3. An end of cooperation and agreements with forces intent on ‘the destruction of Euskal Herria and the construction of Spain (PP and PSOE)’; and
4. An ETA announcement supporting this process by a truce, which in public will be called ‘indefinite’. In reality, however, it would be
revised after four months in order to ascertain if each of the signing organizations had or had not kept its word.

The PNV and EA signed and sent the document back to ETA with a note on the front page which indicated that the ‘development of this agreement’ could be found on the other side of the sheet. In that attachment, the parties try to ameliorate the significance of point three, stating that the demand for an exclusion of non-nationalist parties should be understood, in the long run, and that, if ‘the defence of the Basque nation’ requires this solution, agreements with other parties could be taken into account to ensure the stability of institutions under nationalist control. ETA, in a response delivered to the PNV and EA, stated that it was not willing to accept the ‘specifications’ concerning the development of the agreement. However, the paramilitaries considered the Lizarra Agreement, which had already been signed, and the ceasefire announced when their letter to PNV and EA was written as a promising and valid statement of nationalist cooperation regarding a new political framework for the Basque Country.\textsuperscript{11}

5. The end of a dream

On 28 November 1999, fourteen months after the ceasefire was called, ETA announced, in a communiqué and an interview published by the daily \textit{Gara}, the end of the truce. It blamed surprisingly the moderate nationalists for this decision, which, according to ETA, was the consequence of the unwillingness of the PNV and EA to implement the agreement of summer 1998. In January, ETA assassinated an officer of the armed forces in Madrid. During the following months, other fatalities (politicians, policemen, journalists) followed. One of the basic principles of the Lizarra Agreement, according to which ‘the resolution of the Basque conflict must be necessarily political’, and that this had to be carried out ‘within a context of permanent absence of all types of violence’, had been broken, and with it the nationalist entente itself. Moderate nationalism was pushed into one of the deepest crises in its history and received severe criticism not only from ETA and HB, but also from the so-called constitutional socialist and conservative parties. Especially President Aznar, backed by his overall majority in the Spanish Parliament and most of the media, confirmed the impression of political observers that, in his party’s political reasoning, nationalism is the seed of terrorism and that, if the latter is to be eliminated, the first has to be weakened, if not eradicated, as well.\textsuperscript{12}

While Basque politics and institutions are submerged in day-by-day confrontation with a high level of violent rhetoric, the active violence of ETA and urban street-gangs continues menacing and punishing those who disagree with radical nationalism. Concepts like ‘fascism’ or ‘totalitarianism’ have recovered a prominent place in the discourse of
policy-makers and journalists. Even references to Daniel Goldhagen’s bestseller *Hitler’s Willing Executioners* (Goldhagen 1996) can be found in press comments against the PNV, its betrayal of democracy and its willingness to execute the totalitarian proposals of the terrorists. After fourteen months of hopeful expectation, no possibility of engineering an agreement which might lay the groundwork of a broader political consensus in favour of a Basque peaceful and multi-identity society is in sight.

What are the reasons for this débâcle? Why has the strategy, considered by important sectors of Basque society a possible path towards settlement of the conflict, ended up in increased confrontation? Of course, the immediacy of the successes and the logical lack of insights into the process of decision-making especially within ETA and the Spanish government, render any answer to this question hypothetical. Yet, comparison with the Northern Irish peace process might provide some arguments for the debate. I focus here on the following three points.

1. Contribution of the veto-holders

No peace process is possible without the (active or passive) consent of those who have the capacity to terminate the process. These veto-holders are normally the paramilitaries and the government. Contrary to what happened in Northern Ireland, in the Basque Country neither ETA nor the conservative government seem to have been willing or able to embark upon a peace process. Joaquin Navarro, a judge of the High Court in Madrid, in one of the very few analyses about the breakdown of the ceasefire, makes the point that President Aznar ‘lost the best opportunity which had ever been to achieve a definitive peace’ (Navarro 2000, p. 150). Instead of pushing the process, he blocked it, leaking the name of the mediator in the government’s contacts with ETA, capturing and imprisoning one of the two ETA interlocutors in the government’s only secret meeting with the terrorists (19.5.1999 in Zurich), not developing any remarkable measure of confidence-building (for instance in the prison policy; Von Tangen Page 1998) and basing his strategy towards ETA on the unrealistic assumption that ETA would lay down arms without any real prospect of political change.

On the other hand, in communiqués and interviews published before and after the collapse of the ceasefire, the spokesmen of the Basque terrorists made it very clear that they would continue monitoring the process, which in their opinion was not a peace process, but a ‘democratic’ process towards Basque sovereignty; peace would be considered as nothing else than the complete implementation of the ETA programme. Any deviation from this programme was reason for a return to armed struggle, and this is exactly what happened when the moderate nationalists rejected as ‘eccentric’ the ETA proposal to hold elections in all (French and Spanish) Basque provinces so as to put an end to the
institutions based on the Basque Statute of Autonomy and instead create a new ‘national’ parliament in which Basques on both sides of the border would be represented.

2. The error of moderate nationalism

Consenting to direct political negotiations on constitutional issues with ETA, moderate nationalists accepted the paramilitaries’ pretension to monitor the process, thereby granting them a legitimacy they actually don’t have. One of the most outstanding differences in the peace processes in Northern Ireland and in the Basque Country is in the role played by the radical nationalist party as the political wing of the armed group. Whereas in Northern Ireland Gerry Adams and Sinn Féin started secret contacts with John Hume and the Social Democrat and Labour Party [SDLP] to pilot the IRA step-by-step towards politics, during secret negotiations between moderate nationalists and ETA, HB was not even present. Although there is not much inside information about the relationship between the political and the armed wings of the Basque Movement for National Liberation, it seems that a strict top-down hierarchy from the military centre to political executor is still in place. On the contrary, in Northern Ireland Sinn Féin has apparently gained more political autonomy from and ascendancy over the military wing. In a democratic political system, a successful peace process is hardly imaginable without the transfer of the political mandate from paramilitaries to the only agencies with legitimacy to speak on behalf of the people, the political parties.

3. Nationalist entente and multi-party negotiations

In Northern Ireland, the nationalist entente was a tool that silenced IRA arms and, as a consequence, smoothed the way for the Stormont negotiations. The core idea was the strengthening of the Republican movement as a necessary strategy prior to negotiation with Unionists and the British government. Neither the SDLP, nor the SF, and probably not even the IRA, imagined any settlement of the Troubles without an agreement with Unionism. In the Basque Country, however, something different happened. ETA urged the moderate nationalists to break all political and institutional cooperation with the constitutional parties, dissolve the autonomous institutions and design a political path towards Basque self-determination. When the moderate nationalists, who during Francoism had fought for autonomy and are still governing through the autonomous institutions, became aware that, instead of leading and controlling the peace process, they were following guidelines given by ETA and radical nationalists, and that this image was losing them votes and power, they started slowing their cooperation with HB. This political shift, however, came too late: ETA returned to arms, arguing that the PNV and EA had broken their word; the constitutional parties and their Basque followers joined together in a defensive anti-nationalist front against what they
perceived as an attempt to sideline Basques who did not share an explicitly nationalist identity.

Thus, and due to these errors, obstacles and sabotage, the fourteen-month dream of a peaceful Basque society, in which the conflict of identities could be carried out by democratic means, became an illusion. However, while writing these lines, there is still a glimmer of light, and this is probably what the Basque Lehendakari Juan José Ibarretxe meant when, in a comment on the collapse of the ceasefire, he stated that after those fourteen months Basque society would no longer be the same as before. Opinion polls, frequent and massive demonstrations, and public debates seem to prove that a rejection of violence and a demand for dialogue as being the only ways out of conflict within Basque society, and even broad sectors of the so-called Liberation Movement, are felt and manifested with more intensity than ever before. In fact, in the elections to the regional Basque Parliament of May 2001, pro-ETA radical nationalist EH suffered a real debacle, losing half of its seats (1998: 14; 2001: 7).

Only the future can reveal if ETA, after more than a year’s ceasefire to be broken by arguments not understood even by many of its political followers, has involuntarily triggered a peace process in the only region of the European Union in which the struggle of conflicting ethnic identities is still manifested through arson, bombs and bullets. This continuity of violence raises a series of theoretical problems.

6. Epilogue: Basque violence and the misery of theory

No theory can be constructed based on the empirical evidence offered by a single case. In fact, as stated above, after the collapse of the ceasefire, ETA terrorism is about to become the only case of violent ethnic nationalism in Western Europe, if the peace process in Northern Ireland continues surmounting all the obstacles in its way. In her recent study on militant nationalism in Ireland and the Basque Country, – which is one of the most interesting books written on Basque violence in recent years – Cynthia Irvin highlights the discrepancy between the large number of studies focusing on the causes of political violence and the scarce number of studies dealing with the question ‘under what circumstances armed insurgent organizations adopt alternative, non-violent strategies’ (Irvin 1999, p. 7). Irvin’s book was written before the Lizarra Agreement, the ceasefire and its breakdown and that is why, after this frustrating experience, we can add another statement: if we know something about the rise of political violence in ethnic conflicts and less about the possible ways to accommodation, our information about why peace processes fail and violence continues, is still even poorer. Definitively, none of the theoretical approaches towards ETA violence – predominantly elaborated by Anglo-Saxon writers – offers a satisfying
explanation of what is going on today in the Basque Country. This, in my opinion, is due to the somewhat static character of the theories, which in most of the cases focus only on a certain period of nationalist violence or, if generalizing their hypothesis, do not take sufficiently into account the profound transformation of the historical framework within which ETA activity evolves. However, it seems to me that nothing has to be completely invented and that it is possible to find some hints in the published literature which might complete the theoretical approaches and facilitate a better understanding of current Basque violence. The following considerations are nothing else than some modest proposals for a necessary theoretical debate.

The first and basic condition that any theory on political violence in the Basque Country should meet is the clear differentiation between Francoist dictatorship and democracy. Most of the authors concerned with Basque violence agree on the thesis that Francoism created the context in which ETA could rise: Franco was ETA’s father. Within this general consensus, however, the arguments differ when explaining why in the Basque region a historical conflict about ethnic identity and political power became violent, whereas in other regions like Catalonia it remained a purely political conflict. Clark (1984, 1990), Jáuregui (1985) or Moxon-Browne (1987; 1989; 1989a) put an accent on the high degree of political repression and the ‘reaction to the stagnation and sense of futility experienced by younger nationalists within an established party’ (Moxon-Browne 1989a, p. 52); Conversi (1997) blames the lack of a shared ‘core value’ like language in the Catalan case for the fact that in the Basque Country violence could perform this attractive function within the Basque nationalist movement; the ‘structural conductiveness model’ presented by Díez Medrano (1995) is based on the empirically not very correct assumption that the weakness of the bourgeoisie within the nationalist movement and absence of organizational alternatives outside the PNV opened the door for radical and violent schisms within mainstream nationalism; Zirakzadeh (1991) criticizes the ‘modernization interpretation of Basque politics’, stating that political violence was the result of a confluence of various factors, especially the existence of economic problems, influence of local political and social struggles and informing role of formal ideologies (Marxism; anti-colonialism).

The most sophisticated theoretical approach towards Basque violence and, at the same time, the only one with an explicit focus on the more recent (pre-ceasefire) situation is that done by Irvin. She tries to combine structural elements (‘instrumental approach’: rational choice) and other factors stressed by the ‘behavioral models’ of social mobilization, placing them into a new framework inspired by the political-process theory, and attempting to demonstrate that ‘a militant nationalist movement’s choice of strategy and structures can best be understood as the outcome of a process of debate and coalition-building among three distinct subgroups
of activists: ideologues, radicals, and politicos. The relative size and influence of each group within the organization are held to be affected by external conditions and strategic situations in the political environment. Which strategy dominates, is determined by the relative strength and interactions of different subcoalitions of activists’ (Irvin, p. 19).

The application of all these different approaches, including Irvin’s, to the post-Franco era or, more concretely, to the post-ceasefire experience in the Basque Country generates a series of methodological problems. Notwithstanding the imperfection of Spanish democracy (and of all democracies), no serious political analysis will be able to find evidence for the thesis that, since Franco’s death, nothing has changed in the repression of the Basque nation and that, as a consequence, political violence has still to be considered as the result of an unresolved political conflict. Since 1977, when the first general elections were held, the Basques are asked every couple of years to express their political opinion by voting for one of the parties, reaching the political spectrum from parties favouring independence and the armed struggle to Spanish-nationalist right-wing parties. If these elections would have produced a broad majority supporting independence – and not the usual 50–50 balance between Basque nationalists and not nationalists – in the long run no government and no Constitution would be able to impede this step. In the meantime, the autonomous Basque institutions exercise a remarkable level of self-government, which in the field of public finances is comparable to that of any European state.

In the same sense it could be argued that, due to institutional support, the Basque language is now in a much better situation than ever before and its promotion has become a real ‘core value’ not only for nationalists. Even if one might disagree with other assertions made by Van Amersfoort and Mansvelt Beck on the current situation of the Basque language, especially their insinuation of a nationalist ‘language discrimination against the Spanish in the job market,’ they are right in stating that ‘the role of language in education is no longer a source of contention’ and instead the problem is the ‘ politicization of language’ (Van Amersfoort/Mansvelt Beck 2000, pp. 458, 461).

Is relative deprivation, caused by economic problems, a factor fuelling the current political violence? The fact that Basque industry is, despite terrorism, one of the most prosperous industries in Spain enjoying a high percentage of economic growth, and there is no visible correlation between Basque areas with relatively high rates of unemployment and the intensity of political street violence seems to contradict this hypothesis (Mees 2000a). Another similar argument has been tabled by Mansvelt Beck. Looking for a specific environment that forms a particular ‘biotope’ for radical nationalism, this geographer’s ecological analysis of HB’s electoral implantation does not show any correlation between the radical nationalist vote and unemployment (Mansvelt Beck 1999).
Furthermore, if Zirakzadeh is right in asserting, like nearly all of the other authors mentioned above, the ‘instrumental dimension’ of political violence, ‘tied to the workings of the broader political system’ (Zirakzadeh 1991, p. 12), the Lizarra Agreement should have been the grave-digger of terrorism, since the political and social forces who signed built a powerful coalition with real possibilities to forge political majorities for the achievement of radical nationalist goals. Such a favourable opportunity structure had never existed before in the history of radical Basque nationalism.

Why then the persistence of political violence in the Basque Country? Why have the ideologues and radicals once again silenced the politicos, – to use Irvin’s terms? As indicated above, I do not see how the years after the implementation of Basque autonomy could be described as a period ‘characterized by high levels of state repression’, during which ‘revolutionary nationalist organizations are most likely to attract ideologues and radicals, who will prefer a strategy focused primarily on an armed confrontation with the state’ (Irvin 1999, p. 179). Social scientists should be careful evaluating both information on ‘state repression’ facilitated by militants and statistical data on detentions or ‘increasingly more coercive’ (Irvin 1999, p. 196) anti-terrorist policy. Those figures should at least be ‘objectified’ by placing them in the historical context of a political system of growing Basque self-government, more and more indiscriminate ETA violence and increasing rejection of that violence both by Spanish and Basque society. In Irvin’s analysis, however, Basque autonomy does not deserve more attention than one or two nearly casual mentions in a narrative focused on the repressive dimension of ‘regime responsiveness’.

More convincing are other arguments put forward by the same author and linked to the ‘behavioural’ side of political violence. Apparently, in the Executive Committee of ETA, there had been only a very small majority in favour of the ceasefire. Afterwards, violence returned as an expression of an intra-organizational conflict as promoted by hard-liners, who were keen to ‘restrict internal communications, inhibit participation in political debates, and perhaps restore group cohesion and solidarity’ (Irvin 1999, p. 42). In a similar sense, Heywood suggests that a greater emphasis to be placed on political negotiation might provoke ‘the adoption of more radical stances by hardline activists’. The result would be that violence becomes a ‘self-generating phenomenon, a vicious circle which is virtually impossible to stop’ (Heywood 1995, p. 39). In fact, the breakdown of the ceasefire aborted any attempt to articulate an autonomous political discourse of HB-EH and even those leaders, who had generally been considered ‘politicos’, returned to a discourse which was (is) determined by military logic and reasoning.

A second argument concerning the longevity of political violence in the Basque Country was already formulated by the anthropologist
Joseba Zulaika in 1988. Zulaika, anticipating a thesis which was later taken up by Irvin, maintained that in the Basque case political violence could not exclusively be understood in terms of rational and purposive behaviour, being instead its ‘magic’ and ‘ritual’ ingredients essential factors for the durability of violence. This Basque anthropologist recognizes a direct relationship between the ‘desacralization’ of religious symbols and rites on the one hand, and the ‘resacralization’ of society. According to this thesis, this sacramental engagement in the political area would be symbolized by the sacrifices offered by ETA activists and their disposition to ‘offer’ their own life as a supreme act of worshipping dedicated to their new God, in this case the Basque nation (Zulaika 1988).

This approach could be completed by another one with a long tradition in sociology. Since the early writings of Max Weber about the process of secularization, we know that secularization does not necessarily bring about the disappearance of religion from civil society. Instead, forms of religious thinking and behaviour can be transferred into political life. In extreme cases, this transfer has produced ‘political religions’ (Sironneau 1982; Wuthnow 1988; Hanf 1999; Lehmann 2000). It should be checked if this conceptual ‘Idealtype’ of ‘political religion’, which originally has been applied to ideologies and movements like Fascism and Stalinism, might be of any analytical value in the study of enduring political violence. Zulaika’s case study is located in a small village and, according to the analysis of Mansvelt Beck (1999, p. 118), the highest vote-sharing of HB can be found in the small towns and villages of the Basque-speaking areas in Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia: ‘The stronger HB is represented, the smaller the municipality’. This finding would fit into the political-religion-thesis, since, in small-scale localities, a high level of social control can be established by small social and cultural networks and the political discrimination of outsiders and dissidents. Thus, the reproduction of sectarian thinking and collective behaviour (political religions) can be enacted more easily than in a big city.

A third argument is related to the comparative analysis of the life-cycle of violent underground groups. Martha Crenshaw has underlined the tendency of terrorist groups to endure even if ‘objective’ circumstances change. The specific microcosm in which terrorists live is based on extreme security measures and a very high in-group solidarity. This lifestyle separates the activists from their environment, making them unable to perceive any feature of reality not corresponding to their own one-dimensional perception. This would be the last step of a ‘gradual growth of commitment and opposition’, at the end of which the violent struggle becomes a self-generating phenomenon. Armed activity would be aiming almost exclusively at the reproduction of the own group structures and producing a constant reminder of the state’s inability to exercise the monopoly in the use of coercive force. For group outsiders,
however, it becomes more and more impossible to recognize any rationality and concrete purposiveness beyond these actions. Furthermore, Crenshaw points out another characteristic feature in the recruitment of new militants for terrorist underground groups by ‘initiation rites that involve violation of taboos, or “bridge-burning acts” that create guilt and prevent the convert’s return to society’ (Crenshaw 1993, p. 394). This thesis fits into the Basque situation, where the street guerrilla gangs with their arson attacks and threats fulfil this function of socializing teenagers with the use of violence before joining ETA.

A final argument in this theoretical debate about the reasons for the durability of ETA violence has been introduced by a well-known nationalist PNV politician, who years ago was Councillor for Culture and spokesman of the regional Basque Government, but now is one of the most outstanding and intellectually prepared dissidents in his party. Joseba Arregi makes the leaders of his own party partially responsible for the persistence of terrorism, mentioning four reasons: 1) for simplifying the analysis of ETA as a mere consequence of an unresolved political problem, without recognizing the totalitarian character of the organization; 2) for sharing the political aims of the violent radicals (self-determination; independence); 3) for requesting and offering as the only possible way of solution a ‘dialogue without limits’, forgetting that within a democratic system any dialogue between democrats and totalitarian activists has to be carried out within the limits and rules established by democratic norms and institutions; and 4) for discrediting and undermining the Statute of Autonomy backed in the 1979 referendum by a broad majority of the Basque voters, including those of the PNV (Arregi 2000).

These are some of the ideas which might help both to formulate a new theory on political violence within democratic societies and to offer guidelines to policy-makers for the management of peace processes. In any case, in the Basque Country, where a total of 3,000 (!) bodyguards have to care daily for the safety of Basque citizens threatened by ETA, the experience of the Lizarra Agreement shows that no peace process is supposed to be successful unless ETA is really willing to embark upon such a process. Or, as Mansvelt Beck puts it in an implicit allusion to the political-religion premise, ‘Peace can only be obtained if the community of believers can be convinced of the virtues of compromise and peaceful coexistence with non-believers’ (Mansvelt Beck 1999 p. 120).

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Notes

1. The three Carlist Wars took place between 1833 and 1839/40, 1846 and 1849, and between 1872 and 1876. Carlism was the social, political and military representation of the Ancien Régime opposed to liberalism.

2. As a consequence of the political conflict, in the Basque Country even the spelling of the provinces’ names is highly contentious. I use the Basque names of Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia, since these are the official names of both provinces, even if they are not yet recognized by the Spanish Language Academy. In Alava and Navarra I use the Spanish spelling instead of the Basque one (Araba; Nafarroa). Here both spellings are official, but only the Spanish one is recognized by the Academy.

3. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the small wooden sailing ships were substituted by bigger steam trawlers which needed less labour. Most fishermen working on the trawlers were no longer owners and became simple workers, frequently without fixed wages, who depended on the amount gleaned from the sale of the fish (Delgado 1998).

4. This is a traditional Basque ball-game, in which a leather ball is smashed against a front (or side) – wall either with the hand or a racket, and has to be returned by the opposite player or team before it touches the ground for the second time.

5. During the ceasefire of 1998/99, HB created a new electoral platform called ‘Euskar Herritarrok’ [EH]. This formally new organization was created in order to display a new political image of radical nationalism as a political movement no longer dependent on ETA and with the aim of recovering voters who in years before had abandoned HB because of disagreement with the party and its political strategy.

6. The weaker and more autochthonous socialist labour movement in the province of Gipuzkoa was an interesting hybrid of Basque cultural identity, strong socialist conviction and opposition to Basque nationalism. See the memoirs of one of the historic leaders of socialism in Gipuzkoa, Toribio Echevarria (1968).


8. This is an average percentage. Normally, the HB-EH vote-scoring is higher in elections to the Basque Parliament, whereas in those to the Spanish Cortes it decreases.


11. The text of the three documents can be found in El Diario Vasco, 4.5.2000.

12. ‘The PNV and its leaders are a fundamental and grave part of the Basque problem’. See President Aznar’s interview in the Catalan daily paper La Vanguardia, 11.6.2000. In other press conferences or official statements, Aznar has mentioned a set of preconditions for the re-establishment of any kind of contacts with the PNV, including the substitution of the party’s political leadership and complete shift in its political strategy.

13. As an example, see the article of the political scientist Antonio Elorza with the significant title ‘El lehendakari y la muerte’ (The Basque President and Death), in El Diario Vasco, 5.6.2000. Elorza urges the Basque President and member of the PNV to break all contacts with HB and ‘to join the democrats’, because otherwise the party would be considered ‘one of those “willing executioners”’ detected by Goldhagen in Nazi-Germany.


15. The invitation to former ETA-militants now in exile to return to Spain, was ‘sold’ by the government as such a measure, but in reality it was not much more than a political marketing campaign, since it only affected former terrorists without any penal charge, who could return to Spain anyway, if they wished to. In the same sense it should
be remembered that the prisoners released during the truce were all released according to the law, because they suffered from an incurable sickness or had served three quarters of their penalty. At the same time, the transfer of prisoners from the Canary Islands to the peninsula or, in some cases, to prisons near the Basque provinces, was never conceived as a first step towards a new prison-policy and an abandonment of the principle of ‘dispersion’, that is, the imprisonment of the ETA-members in prisons far from their homeland.

16. ‘Nothing will be like in the past. A society that has known what it means to live in peace will never get used again to a scenario of violence’. See El Diario Vasco, 29.11.1999.

17. It should be remembered that the bulk of the current laws regulating the language policy on the public job market is not the result of nationalist imposition, but of a broad parliamentarian consensus reached by previous government-coalitions of moderate nationalists and socialists. Furthermore, language has not only become a ‘political weapon’ for ETA-affiliated nationalism, but also for the Spanish and Basques conservatives of the PP – and to some extent also the socialists of the PSOE/PSE – who are engaged in a real crusade against this policy in order to carry out a general roll back, which by the nationalist community is considered a direct aggression against Basque culture and identity.


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