

## **REVIEW: IDENTITIES IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY**

*John MacInnes*

Ludger Mees, **Nationalism, Violence, and Democracy: The Basque Clash of Identities**, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 248 pp, hb, £50, ISBN 1-4039 0265-8.

Anyone wishing to understand the ‘tragedy’ of Basque politics will find this book indispensable, if only because it demonstrates that tragedy, insofar as it implies suffering that is unintended or avoidable, is the wrong adjective. Hardly anyone emerges with much credit from this disaster (850 murdered by terrorists, innocent citizens killed by state sponsored ‘anti-terrorist’ squads, routine street violence, arson and intimidation, over a thousand journalists, academics, politicians, business people and others protected by bodyguards from terrorist death threats, widespread extortion or ‘revolutionary taxation’). Faced with the choice between immediate electoral advantage and strategic peace making politicians of every party, within and beyond the Basque country, have consistently opted for the former. The French government has, until recently, done far less than it could to combat terrorism directed at its neighbour. Finally sociological and political analysis has, with a few honourable exceptions, been superficial or simply ideologically driven. All this in a region enjoying the greatest decentralisation of power within an existing European state.

Mees gives a short but incisive account of the emergence of Basque nationalism and its historical antecedents such as Carlism (extremely traditionalist Catholic opposition to the Bourbon monarchy), the history of

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the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), the civil war and Franco dictatorship, the founding of ETA, the evolution of its political and military line and the numerous splits produced by ideological and tactical dissent over how to react to the democratisation of Spain and overwhelming popular support for the Statute of Guernica which founded the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country within the Spanish state. His analysis suggests that beneath the patina of revolutionary rhetoric, ETA has more in common with Carlism than Karl Marx. Most of the book focuses on the abortive attempt at a Peace Process in the Basque Country following the Pact of Lizarra between the PNV and ETA in 1998 and, by way of detailed comparison with the Northern Irish and other processes, lays bare the chain of errors, false optimism, party electoralism and bad faith that derailed the process almost before it started. Crucially, Mees demonstrates that its failure was more fundamental than a simple question of lack of interest on the part of the conservative Partido Popular (PP) government in Madrid – that failure worsened an already tense and fragile political situation – and that the PNV's strategy of allying with non-democratic nationalism (the 'Liberation Movement' surrounding ETA) not only weakened democracy but gave more than a grain of truth to the PP's charge that democratic and terrorist nationalism shared not only ends but also means.

Alasdair MacIntyre has commented on the historical importance of what Machiavelli called 'fortuna' or chance. Thus the three years since Mees wrote his study have changed the panorama substantially. First, much improved French cooperation in the new era of a 'war against terror' after September 11 has severely weakened ETA. Second, the PP decided to ratchet up its rhetoric of a 'united Spain' versus domestic and international terrorism, portraying its political opponents, including the socialist party, as accomplices of terror, either wittingly or 'objectively'. In the general election campaign of March 2004 this was given a further twist by the curious decision to meet with ETA by Carod Rovira, leader of the nationalist Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), and Conseller in Cap (First Minister) of the new 'Tripartite' regional government in Catalonia formed by ERC, the socialists and greens. ETA has never guarded the secrecy of its meetings with Spanish politicians, and Carod could hardly have expected to remain a member of the Catalan government once the talks became public. ETA then declared a cease-fire in Catalonia, allowing the PP to portray the socialists as appeasers of terrorism if they maintained their coalition with ERC there. The fact that this demonisation boosted support for ERC at the

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expense of the PP's former ally *Convergència i Unió* was much less important than the electoral support it promised the PP elsewhere in Spain.

The PP appeared set for victory when ten bombs exploded in packed Madrid commuter trains killing almost 200 and injuring 1500 three days before the election. It was immediately assumed that ETA had committed its bloodiest ever outrage, and secured certain victory for the PP. Within hours of the blast Batasuna (the banned political party controlled by ETA) denied any 'operation', condemned what it described as a 'massacre', expressed solidarity with the victims and blamed 'the Arab resistance'. Within hours the police investigations centred on Islamic terrorism, but the PP government and the television and radio it controlled insisted that ETA was almost certainly responsible. This apparent manipulation of information about the bombing for electoral purposes aroused great anger. The massive solidarity demonstrations, called by a PP government to endorse its defence of the constitutional status quo against ETA terrorism and its 'allies', rebounded against it by rekindling memories of the massive anti-war mobilisations the previous year. Government ministers were jostled and booed both on the demonstrations and when they voted. The call to turn out to vote as a democratic reply to terrorism helped the socialists to a comfortable victory, given that its supporters are traditionally more likely to abstain.

This unexpected victory deprived ETA of the aid given to it by the PP's policy of political polarisation. Whatever the content might prove to be of socialist president Zapatero's commitment to a 'plural' Spain, constitutional renewal, consensus and dialogue, he is less easy to caricature as a dogmatic Spanish nationalist. Second, mass popular revulsion at the outrage irrevocably changed the context for ETA operations. Can Batasuna condemn Islamic terrorism while justifying its own? Precisely what ends legitimate murder and if 200 murders are a 'massacre', what lesser number might be reasonable? The Madrid bombing destroyed ETA's ability to equate the state's monopoly of violence in the Basque country with its military actions. It is too early to hope that ETA's military campaign has at last ended, but their last murder was in May 2003, most of its latest attempts have been bungled affairs by young inexperienced cadres, and rumours circulate about a cease fire and of ETA dropping its 'claim' to the French Basque country (**El Mundo** 25 May 2004).

Basque politics is now dominated by the 'Plan Ibarretxe', named for its author, current PNV president of the Basque Autonomous Community. It

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would replace the Statute of Guernica, approved in a 1979 referendum, with one of 'free association' with Spain. There would be dual Basque and Spanish citizenship, but those of Basque descent living elsewhere would be eligible for the former. Any powers still exercised in 'collaboration' with Spain would be subject to Basque ratification, while there would be 'direct' representation in all foreign affairs. A Basque constitutional court would have final jurisdiction on all matters. A referendum on autonomy held only in the Basque country would be binding. In return there would be no unilateral declaration of independence.

The plan's supporters argue that it forms the basis for negotiation with Spain. Its opponents see it as capitulation to ETA, which managed to drag itself back into political relevancy when its political arm, Batasuna, surprised everyone by securing an unexpected majority for the plan in the last Basque parliamentary session of 2004. In February the Spanish Cortes, as expected, rejected it, whereupon Ibarretxe called new Basque elections. As always in Basque politics little is straightforward. A plan full of demands no sovereign state could ever concede, and greeted by blanket opposition from the non-nationalist population in the Basque country, hardly comprises a basis for negotiation. It is an excellent basis, however, for capturing votes from the illegalised Batasuna. Those who oppose it, conversely, have been slow to propose any alternative to the status quo, as if to admit any discussion implied capitulation to nationalism. It seems likely that the PNV's strategy will bring them electoral success and outright majority. 2006 will therefore be an interesting year, as Socialist president Zapatero's promise to respect the multinational character of Spain and embrace constitutional reform will be tested to the limit.

Mees says relatively little about what is perhaps the most interesting issue in Basque nationalism. The late Gwyn Williams once asked 'When was Wales'. One might also ask whenever was the Basque Country? ETA defines the Basque Country as the three provinces that currently form the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country, the Autonomous Community of Navarra and the three 'Basque' French areas of Lower Navarre, Labourd and Soule in the département of Pyrénées-Atlantiques. Support for Basque nationalism in France is, always has been, and always will be, miniscule. It is not a lot greater in Navarre where the bulk of the population want nothing to do with a potential Basque state. Within the Basque Autonomous Community nationalist support is geographically concentrated in different areas, and

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support for radical nationalism concentrated in the smallest rural communities. According to the latest CIS survey from 2001, only three out of ten of its inhabitants think of themselves as uniquely Basque, and just over four out of ten think of the Basque Country as a nation. However, a great merit of the book is the way that it shows that this clash of 'identities' is a thoroughly political rather than a cultural process. Identities are what the Plan Ibarretxe and its counterparts create, rather than reflect.

Writers critical of ETA get death threats. It has planted bombs in the University of the Basque Country, where Mees works. His cycling partner was murdered by ETA as he was working on the book. Thus, as well as the impressive scholarship, the tremendous personal courage behind this book also deserves great praise.

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