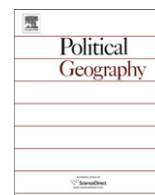




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### Review Essay

#### **Building bridges on the road to peace. Centralism, resistance and the Basque revival**

**Basque Nationalism and the Spanish State, André Lecours. University of Nevada Press, Reno (2007).**

**Territory and Terror: Conflicting Nationalisms in the Basque Country, Jan Mansvelt Beck. Routledge, London (2005).**

One of the most astounding visual features of the Basque Country's space is the variety and innovativeness of its recently built bridges, from Santiago Calatrava's pedestrian *Zubizuri* (white bridge) in Bilbao's Campo Volantin to its counterpart in Plentzia, built after the 1983 flood; from the colorful refurbishment of Puente Príncipes de España in front of the Guggenheim Museum to the *pasarela* (footbridge) Pedro Arrupe, connecting the latter with Deusto University. In a supposedly divided society, these bridges stand as a testimonial to the strenuous effort to overcome ideological and political barriers through visually engaging and deep-reaching symbolism – just as the blowing up of the 16th century *Stari Most* in Mostar (the city itself named after the 'Old Bridge') symbolized the ultra-nationalist determination to break up communities and provoke mutual hatred (Sells, 1996).

With some flights of fancy, this 'tradition' can be said to reach back to the early days of industrialization (1893), when the world's oldest transporter bridge, the *Puente Colgante de Vizcaya* (or *Bizkaiko Zubia*) was built by a student of Gustave Eiffel, thirty years after the also impressive viaduct of Ormaiztegui in Guipúzcoa (1863).

This bridge-building heritage contrasts with the past record of burned or bombed bridges, like the San Francisco bridge (later Puente de la Merced) burnt by withdrawing French armies in 1813, or the most ancient of Bilbao's bridges, the Puente de San Antón, destroyed both during the Carlist wars and the Spanish Civil War. But not all new bridges brought peace: the much uglier Miraflores highway bridge is still boycotted by neighborhood associations because of the unsustainable amount of acoustic and atmospheric pollution.

Whether one looks at bridges as symbolic sources of peace or conflicts depends on one's overall approach. Since Basque nationalism has been associated with the last remaining traces of violent ethno-national conflict in continental Europe, most recent books on the topic unsurprisingly focus on the persistence of violence.

The Dutch political geographer Jan Mansvelt Beck happened to be in the Basque Country in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period of particular tensions, when several professors had been threatened or harassed by extremists in a bitter political – ideological struggle, leading some to prefer exile rather than live under threat. Since this initial perception gives tenor to various portions of the book, one can expect that the description would tilt toward an

emphasis on the divisive nature of Basque politics. In fact, several chapters focus precisely on Basque internal 'fragmentation' and divisions.

Technically, Mansvelt's book is well constructed with a complex and superb introduction synthesizing the main approaches in the field. The first two chapters are dedicated to comparing cultural homogenization trajectories in both the French and the Spanish sections of a geo-cultural unit for which Mansvelt Beck adopts the widely used term *Euskal Herria* (literally, the Basque language Country/people), that is, the four Basque provinces within Spain and the three within France. Accordingly, the first of the two chapters deals with the northern portion of Euskal Herria (*Iparralde*, under French jurisdiction), while the second deals with the southern portion (*Hegoalde*, under Spanish jurisdiction). While the former chapter presents several interesting notes on France's trajectory to cultural homogenization, the second is marred by a partial adoption of the run-of-the-mill interpretation of the *débil nacionalización española* (weak state-building), a concept imported into Spain by Linz (1973). This vision has been recently critiqued by a younger generation of scholars (Castells et al., 2007; Molina Aparicio, 2005). However, in a subsequent chapter, he applies a similar notion to the Basque Country, which is interestingly conceptualized as a weak 'proto-state' due to political fragmentation. He convincingly criticizes those authors who speak of 'nations without a state' (p. 225), while stressing simultaneously the power of institutions, the limits to their power, and internal divisions. This is however problematic, since it fails to consider that such a 'fragmentation' is far from being beyond amendment and, hence, it is not necessarily negative. In fact, within a broader European framework, it can be even turned into an advantage and stimulate creative answers (Kriesberg, 1998). Moderate nationalism, led by the Basque Nationalist Party (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, PNV), maintains a notable stability, remaining constantly ahead of other parties with around 40% of the votes. Since 1980, the nationalist parties' hegemony has been constant, producing considerable electoral stability with little transfer of votes between two main blocks (nationalists and non-nationalists). If it were not for the long shadow of political violence, Basque politics could be seen as relatively stable and Basque civil society as one of the most mobilized and articulated in Europe – certainly so in comparison to countries like Italy, where censorship rules and political opposition has been frozen for over a decade. By most European standards, Basque society, politics and culture remain so far highly pluralistic and lively. Moreover, violence has steadily declined over the preceding twenty years, since at least the approval of the Statute of Autonomy (1980). As time heals many wounds, the author might have chosen to speak of 'overlapping identities' rather than incommensurable barriers. In fact, the uneasy coexistence of diverse 'cultural representations' is exercised through core images of nationhood enconcing their own cultural fabrics (Watson, 2007).

Even more problematic are attempts at using concepts such as 'weak' vs. 'strong' state; Although a 'strong' state is supposed to restrain or prevent ethnic conflict, its strength can also be measured by its unwillingness to embark upon self-defeating assimilationist projects. In a multi-polar, pluralist Europe, a strong state must by definition be committed to the practice of full-spectrum multiculturalism. To choose not to do so is a probable sign of surreptitious ethnonationalism and incipient isolationism, which in turn is likely to engender greater and broader conflicts.

The book then follows with interesting sections on *Iparralde*, which has been the subject of much subsequent scholarly attention, some of which incorporates Mansvelt Beck's findings (Ahedo Gurrutxaga, 2005, 2008; Harguindéguy, 2007; Itcaina, 2007). Various other chapters describe the area's historical background with great attention to some pioneering works on Basque nationalism. Chapter 7 on the spatial dimension of violence adds a good amount of geographical data, while Chapter 8 advances some scenarios of conflict resolution. Mansvelt Beck only briefly mentions the negative repercussion derived by introducing US-inspired legalization as part of a global 'war on terror' (pp. 219–220). This, he implicitly agrees, contributed to a hardening of stances between 2002 and 2004. But the overly pessimistic tone does not help to see a way out of the pre-2004 impasse.

Despite an oft-exaggerated emphasis on the continuation of violence and the persistence of conflict, the book charts new territory in Basque conflict studies. Of the two books reviewed, by bringing territoriality into the debate, this is the one most obviously addressed to political geographers (p. 225). Despite its interpretive limits, Beck's contribution is an excellent piece of scholarship.

The historical role played by the Spanish state in shaping Basque nationalism is approached from a different angle by André Lecours. His book adopts a more nuanced form of the weak-state building hypothesis, focusing rather on the state's subtle, and less subtle, ways of engendering national identity and, in the process, fomenting the very counter-identity which it originally planned to 'extirpate'. That identities are mutually constructed is being recognized by the new literature on Basque nationalism: On the one hand, Spanish centralists and liberals promoted an image of the Basques as a rebel people that needed to be assimilated and 'converted to modernity' by state centralism (Molina Aparicio, 2005). On the other hand, Basque nationalism turned to its own advantage those very negative elements blazed abroad by centralist propaganda, and local historians began to mobilize their contrastive identity even before the birth of Basque nationalism (Gracia Cárcamo, 2007).

Lecours' book is well devised, with chapters following the evolution of the Spanish state vis-à-vis its peripheries from early state-building through centralization and authoritarianism to democracy, with one chapter dedicated to Basque paradiplomacy and another one to conflict management, particularly analyzing the *Ibarretxe Plan* for Basque 'co-sovereignty' or 'free association' with Spain. In a final comparative chapter, Lecours convincingly argues that, despite violence, Basque nationalism is substantially like most other Western sub-state nationalisms (Catalonia, Flanders, and Québec).

Lecours' driving theoretical and methodological approach lies with *historical institutionalism* and focuses on institutions, particularly the state, as the most suitable way to understand the development of sub-state nationalisms. There are good reasons for this: since institutions are normatively and cognitively 'internalized', "human agency is embedded in the institutional context" (p. 13). Although institutions cannot provide the sole explanatory factor, through their 'identity-generating potential', they can "launch and sustain a process of identity construction quite independently of agency". For instance, Cantabria was officially 'invented' during

the transition to democracy when Castile's province of Santander (La Montaña) was given a separate status among Spain's 17 autonomous communities (Conversi, 2002). Endowed with a set of symbols, landmarks and myths including a colorful flag, a powerful geographical context (the *Cordillera Cantábrica* or Cantabrian Mountains) and even an associated ethnonym (the tribal *Cantabri* confederacy mentioned first by Strabo, and then by Julius Caesar in his *De Bello Gallico*), Cantabria's autonomy statute (1981) pushed local intellectuals on the path of developing a regional identity. This led to more disputable claims, such as that Cantabrian was a distinct language. In short, a new regional identity has been developed after autonomous Cantabrian institutions had been set up. Lecours explains this and other cases as circumstantially bounded: "The development of an identity may soon follow the creation of the regional unit, even if politicians do not actively promote it, because the establishment of a new center of representative and democratic government typically lays the foundations for the emergence of a political community" (p. 16).

But, if such 'institutional' identities can, even indirectly, generate separate myths of origin their effect would be to create ethnic identities, thus leading to *ethnogenesis*. A similar hypothesis has been applied to the case of 'subversive' institution-making in the former Communist bloc (Bunce, 1999). In a healthy way, this approach counters much of the recent literature on the impossibility of artificially creating distinctive ethnic identities, a view most famously expressed by Anthony D. Smith and his ethno-symbolist approach, which Lecours briefly considers (Smith, 2009). However, historical institutionalism also stresses the notion of *unintended consequences*: "Institutions may be created with a specific purpose in mind but lead to a wide range of unforeseen or, at least, unintended outcomes" (p. 16). In the specific Basque case, patterns of elite relationships generated during the transition helped the expansion of nationalist politics. But every period in Spanish history has contributed to set up a distinctive relationship between center and periphery, thus impacting on Basque identity formation.

The most recent critical phase occurred between 2002 and 2004, when, due to Spain's incorporation into the US-led 'war on terror', "the political climate in the Basque country was the most volatile and tense it had been since the end of the dictatorship" (p. 2). As with many other countries victimized by the Bush era's remapping of the world order into 'good' vs. 'evil', Spain as a whole risked halting decades of progress and reverting to the dark days of authoritarianism. The outlook was so bleak that, with the return of the Socialists in power (March 2004), it has been possible to speak of a "second transition" (Encarnación, 2008: 150–164). This in turn created the conditions for a 'permanent ceasefire' in March 2006.

Certainly, Lecours seems more aware of these developments than Mansvelt Beck, whose book was written earlier and possibly published too late to incorporate many crucial changes. But Lecours is considerably more balanced and objective than Mansvelt Beck, who persists in seeing Basque nationalism as ultimately responsible for violence, a thesis that is increasingly difficult to hold. Both are books of impressive scholarship and deserve to be available in paperback.

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Daniele Conversi  
 Ikerbasque Foundation,  
 Facultad de Ciencias Sociales y de la Comunicación,  
 University of the Basque Country, Euskal Herriko  
 Unibertsitatea (EHU/UPV), Campus de Leioa,  
 Barrio Sarriena s/n, 48940 Leioa (Bizkaia), Spain  
 E-mail address: [daniele\\_conversi@ehu.es](mailto:daniele_conversi@ehu.es),  
<http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/conversi/cv.html>