

## Book Review

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Ludger Mees, *The Basque Contention. Ethnicity, Politics, Violence*. London: Routledge [Europa Country Perspectives Series], 2020, 288 pp, 18 illustrations. ISBN 9781857439632

In his book, *The Basque Contention*, Ludger Mees pens a history of the Basque nationalism and ETA from its genesis to demise. He has at heart to demonstrate that ETA was nothing more than a mortal deviation from the ideology of Basque nationalism; as such, the abandonment of terrorism brought this nationalism back on track to fight for its primary objective, that is, according to the author, democracy for the Basque people. The book lines up a map of the territory referred to as 'Euskal Herria' (the Basque Country) by Basque nationalists, eight graphs (models of language teaching in the Basque Autonomous Community, the number of ETA victims, the results of the union elections, the share of nationalist votes during the Basque elections, and a poll of the political preferences of the citizens of the Basque Autonomous Community), but also eleven charts – six of them dealing with election results – and an index of proper nouns.

Ludger Mees is highly knowledgeable about Basque nationalism. He has written a number of books and articles on this topic and has collaborated with reputed specialists in the field. He held a professorship in contemporary history at the University of the Basque Country where he became a vice-chancellor. The introduction to this book gives us an indication on the origin of his interest in this topic – which led to a first



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book in 2003 – as Mees explains that he was traumatized by the assassination of his friend José María Korta, a Basque nationalist, by ETA (p.4). ‘If truth be told’, Mees states ‘I have myself been traumatized by ETA’s cruelty and by the cynicism of some its defenders, and I have grown admirative of the force of a number of its opponents – some of which have become my friends.’

Mees’ thesis is that the Basque contention goes beyond the sole period of ETA’s violence and contends that the current assimilation between the Basque conflict and terrorist violence is a ‘rather reductionist perspective’ (p. 3). Besides, he concludes by saying that ‘ETA had (...) radically transformed the nature of the Basque contention, which was no longer only a struggle for democracy and self-governance’ (p. 109).

Four hypotheses are established from the first pages of the book (p. 7-8):

1. ‘The Basque contention was not the result of ETA’s foundation in 1959.’
2. ‘Basque nationalism as one of the central actors in the Basque contention was not a creation ex nihilo (...). It was preceded by a long period of ethnic particularism that had already surfaced during the 17<sup>th</sup> century.’
3. ‘Nationalism (...) as a social movement (...) evolved over various stages with different levels of mobilization that oscillated between the extremes of institutional routine and extra-parliamentary contention.’
4. ‘(...) ETA and its political wings was but one of [different internal factions of Basque nationalism], and not even the majority one.’

The book is built around eight chapters and an epilogue. After a long introduction, the second chapter, titled ‘The context’, presents the

contention as growing out of a combined weak state structure and of feeble Spanish nationalism. According to the author, one needs to separate the history of the Spanish state and its agents from the history of the Spanish society and its culture as Basque nationalism lies in the second. He analyses the ongoing academic debates on the weakness of nation-building in Spain in six points and concludes on the 'precarious and fragile national identity' in Spain (p. 24). Chapter three covers the seventeenth up to the nineteenth century, the so-called ethnogenesis, with the apparition of a 'marker of similarity and difference' (p. 36) based on a local political system. He subsequently analyses the emergence of a sentiment, of a movement, and ultimately of specific institutions, especially in the context of the Carlist movement, and stresses the singularity of the French political context. The fourth chapter, 'The claim for sovereignty', describes the emergence of the nationalist movement between 1895 and 1939 and focuses on Sabino Arana (founder of the Basque Nationalist Party, PNV), the racist roots of the movement, the foundation of the PNV (Partido Nacionalista Vasco/Basque Nationalist Party), and the emergence of the political contention ('from contentious politics to war', p.70). We can note his description of the PNV as stamped by a 'patriotic pendulum', oscillating between 'radical identity and ideology and moderate accommodation (*realpolitik*).' The fifth chapter covers the Francoist period - 'between resistance and accommodation' - while detailing the activity of José Antonio Aguirre as president of the Basque Country, the exile, and how marginal the Spanish question was perceived in the midst of the Cold War. At that point, ETA emerged. In the sixth chapter, Mees discusses the transition toward democracy (the 'Transition'): Basque actors had to decide between autonomy and independence, and he notes the tactical divergences inside the PNV on the participation in the Transition. He highlights as well the role of Xavier Arzalluz (leader of the PNV from 1979 until 2004), the 'virulent interference of the Basque contention in the process of democratization' (p. 118), and the violations of human

rights at that time – both by ETA members and by the Spanish security forces. The seventh chapter focuses on the problem of political violence between 1980 and 1995 and stresses the PNV's point of view on the evolution of the Spanish democracy, on the bilingual linguistic model that was adopted, and on the political agreements with the Socialist Party (PSOE) and with the political branch of ETA. The changes caused by the end of the Cold War are made evident in this section. Chapter eighth describes what he calls the 'radical decade' (1995-2005) as the extreme cruelty of ETA and the ordeal of its victims provoked a U-turn in Spanish public opinion. The author focuses on the radicalization of the political branch of ETA, on the organization of street fighting, the distribution of suffering, but also on their strategic discussions with the so-called 'moderate' nationalists on their common objective of self-determination. He lays out the final rapprochement between ETA and the PNV, with the profound change it provoked in the Basque society, as the conflict evolved from one pitting democrats against terrorists (the Ajuria Enea Pact of 1988) to one opposing Basque nationalists and non-nationalists. Chapter nine examines the demise of ETA between 2006 and 2011, the negotiations in Norway, and the organization of the international conference that publicly staged the cessation of ETA.

Hence, this book amounts to a fresco resituating the history shared by both the PNV and ETA, one covering 59 out of the 125 years of the Basque nationalist movement. This highly documented work sheds an interesting light on the very last years of ETA even though, as the author himself recognizes, many episodes of this period remain undisclosed and have yet to be deciphered.

By all accounts, this is unquestionably the work of an expert. And yet, I doubt that Ludger Mees's approach is 'renewed' (p. 7). It seems to me that some of the elements he postulates are not novel hypotheses but mostly an interpretation of a series of well-established facts that have been covered by the existing scholarship. Since Javier Corcuera's

dissertation in 1979 (updated in 2001), a number of historians and political specialists of the Basque Country – Ludger Mees among them, as he had access to the archives of the PNV – have delved into the roots of Basque nationalism and wrote its history. *The Basque Contention* generally synthesizes a history that has already been known, save for the final part that insists on the role of ETA.

Moreover, I believe that it is scientifically problematic to offer nowadays a linear account of a situation that is politically highly subjective. When the author concludes that Spain should ‘articulate a liberal, pragmatic and flexible response to the territorial claims of the periphery, admit the pluri-national reality and come, akin to Jürgen Habermas, to the conclusion that “the frightened retreat behind national borders cannot be the correct response” (p. 264), he adopts a position that is both politically charged and that goes beyond the simple description of a complex reality. There is a very open debate in Spain today about the fundamentally geopolitical role being played by these accounts of ETA’s history. To venture a true hypothesis on the impact of ETA on the history of Basque nationalism, wouldn’t it be necessary to start by establishing the number of Basque citizens that had to go into exile during the 1980s and 1990s to avoid death – or life between two bodyguards – and that are still missing from the electoral rolls today (the associations representing the victims put that number at 300,000, but it remains to be calculated)? In his positive review of Ludger Mees’s book *El péndulo patriótico*, Javier Corcuera noted in 2006 already that ‘the image of the pendulum threatens to occult a reality that is more complex. As can be seen when reading the book written by De Pablo and Mees, the double element of fundamentalism and moderation (...) gives [the PNV] its current strength: the radicals need the moderates and vice-versa.’<sup>1</sup>

For the last 30 years, many Basque authors have described the Basque nationalist ideology as comparable to Spanish and French nationalisms,

making the coexistence of two such nations incompatible on the same territory. Now, Ludger Mees reminds us that the peripheral nationalisms are demanding the recognition of the pluri-nationality of the Spanish territory (the Spanish Constitution currently distinguishes between the Spanish nation and the peripheral nationalities). But these same peripheral nationalities do not admit that the territories they govern – the independence of which they are demanding – are themselves multinational, both Basque and Spanish. The Basque Country, Catalonia, the Balears, Valencia, Galicia are all territories in which some citizens admit a local nation, some admit a Spanish nation, and others recognize both at the same time.

The rich bibliography commanded by Ludger Mees suggests that the contemporary debates on nationalism in Spain in the twenty-first century are not that important, or at least not necessary for his research. The books that bring a contradictory perspective on his implicit thesis, that the nationalist ideology is in essence democratic, are not mentioned. Not the books by Juan Aranzadi, nor the books by Juan Pablo Fusi, Antonio Rivera, or Jon Juaristi, a former member of the ETA and now an erudite writer that has completed a considerable number of books focusing on the foundations of the sacred dimension of the nation and how it paves the way for sectarianism. Likewise, research published by the anthropologist Mikel Azurmendi, another former member of ETA, is missing. So is the work of Joseba Arregi, a member of the Basque nationalist government during the 1980s and 1990s who has examined the philosophical stalemate faced by ethnic nationalisms trying to create homogeneous states. There isn't any reference to Patxo Unzueta, a member of the anti-Franco ETA, to Kepa Aulestia, former leader of Euskadiko Ezkerra (EE) political party, or to Fernando Savater, a Basque philosopher who has campaigned against an 'imposed nationalism'. The bibliography lacks work on the representations of the history of the nation, or of the Spanish language that have been written in the region.<sup>2</sup> In the chapter on the Civil War of 1936, two pages delve into the Guernica

bombing, but there isn't a line on the secret separate peace signed by Basque nationalists with Italian fascists, even though it is a major event that raises the question of the nationalist loyalties and of their political priorities.

Delivering a historical account of the Basque Country that limits itself to the internal contradictions of Basque nationalism in its legitimate march towards ensuring the rights of the people in question seems problematic. In this book, Ludger Mees only presents Spain as a set of state actors and not as a subject of real sentiments. Opposite to that, the PNV is described as the emanation of a society and of a culture, even though it is now obvious that the party is creating a state dotted with its own agents and is in the process of writing a history at this very moment.

Certainly, the history of political movements offers a conundrum to any academic researcher, as every word is charged. Ludger Mees openly admits that ETA's narrative has been constructed (p. 240), but I have found numerous examples, all through the book, of expressions that are – I truly believe – employed to subliminally set nationalism as a natural evidence that simply emerges from this territory, and not the product of a very efficient politics. For example: 'the Basque citizen' (in lieu of Basque nationalist), the Basque and 'their compatriots in France' (p. 38), 'when the Basques were free and self independent', 'the claim for sovereignty', 'the recovery of historical independence' (p. 54), 'the Basque country, including Navarre', a 'moderate terrorist' (p. 233).

As I understand it, contemporary Basque nationalism in Spain is the result of a winning strategy, employed to this day, that aims at transforming a part of the population into a minority. The process is akin to the political systems of Central European countries. The states born during the 1920s, out of the recently deceased Austro-Hungarian Empire, were not more homogeneous than their predecessor. As such,

they differentiated the citizenship from the nationality (the Hungarians in Slovakia are Slovakian citizens and can revendicate a Hungarian nationality). Similarly, the PNV proposes to make out a Basque nationality different from the Spanish citizenship. Furthermore, when Ludger Mees comments that polls show a 'deeply divided' Basque society (p. 255), he qualifies the independentists and Spanish nationalists as minorities ('Even an updated and perhaps strengthened self-government would leave a *significant minority sector* of the citizens outside this consensus (about autonomy) because they demand independence or a stronger nexus with the Spanish state', [my emphasis] p. 255). Thus, Basque nationalists pose a complex question to Spanish or French citizens, populations that have never been accustomed to the concept of interior minorities. These nationalists hope to influence the concepts of nationhood and sovereignty in Europe.

Ludger Mees explicitly situates 'this case study in the scholarly debate about highly complex issues such as the relationship between state and nation building in Europe' (p. 5). I certainly believe that we need to clarify these complex questions through proper academic research and debates, all directed at the larger public including, notably, publics outside of Spain. In this book, some questions remain untreated. For example, how many Basque inhabitants left their country because of ETA? Who paid for the Aiete conference or for the Oslo negotiations? What is the PNV doing to elucidate the hundreds of murders left untried? What memory policies are being developed in the Basque country? How is the history of the Basque Country and Spain taught in schools? What is the influence of the academic networks linked to the nationalists and to the academic para-diplomacy (i.e. the role of the 'lehendakari Aguirre chair'<sup>3</sup>)?

Ludger Mees' book offers nonetheless an interpretation of the PNV's policy towards political violence in general and ETA in particular, with a large historical perspective. It adds to the existent bibliography about



Basque nationalism a synthesis about the end of ETA, from 2006 to 2018 and the previous 'radical decade' of Lehendakari Ibarretxe. It precisely describes the secret talks between nationalists and with the Socialist Party (PSOE and Socialist Party of Euskadi, PSE) using academic, institutional and media sources. It explains how important ETA's withdrawal was for the patriotic left. He describes the peace conference of Aiete and the political success of Basque nationalism after the end of ETA, until the election to the European Parliament in 2019.

*Barbara Loyer*  
*Université Paris-8*

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Javier Corcuera Atienza, « Radicalidad y moderación en el nacionalismo vasco », <https://www.revistadelibros.com/articulos/el-pendolo-patriotico-historia-del-partido-nacionalista-vasco>

<sup>2</sup> For example: Juan Pablo Fusi, *Identidades proscritas. El no nacionalismo en las sociedades nacionalistas*, Taurus, 2010, p.387

<sup>3</sup> <https://agirrecenter.eus/en?set language=en>