

Imaging the Basques: anthropological perspectives

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Zer esan lezake britainiar antropologo batek Euskal Herria bisitatu zuten bidaia-idazle anglofonoei buruz? Zenbait idazleren ikuspegian, Euskal Herria, funtsean, Espainia da, baina euskaldunak ezberdinak direlakoan daude. Batzuek inguruari, psikologiari edo tradizionalismoari egotzi izan diete ezberdintasuna. Beste batzuek "araza" kontzeptua erabili edo p aisaia goraipatu dute. la guztiek denboraz kanpo ikusi dituzte euskaldunak.

Giltza-Hitzak: Euskaldunak. Bidaia-idazleak.

¿Qué puede decir un antropólogo británico sobre los escritores anglófonos de viajes que visitaron al País Vasco? Algunos escritores ven el País Vasco como esencialmente castellano; mas vieron a los vascos como muy distintos. Algunos explicaron esta diferencia en términos del entorno, la psicología, o el tradicionalismo. Otros catalogaron a los vascos en términos de la anatomía, la lengua, o un primitivismo. Otros, utilizaron el concepto de 'raza' o elogiaron el paisaje. Casi todos presentaron a los vascos como viviendo afuera del tiempo.

Palabras Clave: Los vascos. Escritores de viajes.

Que peut dire un anthropologue britannique sur les écrivains anglophones de voyage qui ont visité le Pays Basque ? D'aucuns voient le Pays Basque comme essentiellement espagnol, mais bien d'autres voient les Basques comme très différents. Certains expliquent que cette différence est due à l'environnement, la psychologie ou le traditionalisme. D'autres cataloguent les Basques en termes d'anatomie, de langue, voire de primitivisme. D'autres encore utilisent le concept de «race» ou font l'éloge du paysage. Et pratiquement tous présentent les Basques comme vivant hors du temps.

Mots-clés : Les Basques. Écrivains de voyage.

1. AN INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT: ANTHROPOLOGY

British anthropologists love to study society, and to compare societies across the world. For many, this used to be considered an unproblematic enterprise. Societies, after all, were easy to identify, had clear boundaries, and were sharply defined. They were seen as single, coherent entities, complete unto themselves, capable of independent existence, and almost bounced off one another when they encountered. This I call the "billiard-ball" view of society.

Thanks to the Basques (among others) academics slowly came to realize how blinkered this view was. For it was their nationalist struggle against Franco, and more generally the rise of ethnic regionalist movements throughout postwar Europe, that woke anthropologists up to the fact identity could not be taken for granted. What militant Basques and other discontents of the time dramatically demonstrated was that identity was multiple, problematic, and contested.

One of the first anthropologists to take some of these lessons on board was the Norwegian Frederick Barth. He argued that identity was forged at cultural boundaries, that it was processual and relational. A group was defined through its relationship with others, which was highlighted at the boundaries. These boundaries were themselves social products; their importance varied and could change over time. On his reading, ethnic boundaries were not necessarily territorial, but primarily social (Barth, 1969).

If ethnicity was to be seen as a consequence of contact, then it became important to remember that contact could lead to stereotyping. This sort of labelling might fulfil several functions. It might act as a way to create order; to justify certain privileges and differences in access to the resources of a society; as a crucial support in defining one's own boundaries; as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Of course, it could also be morally ambiguous and strongly challenged by interested parties.

The next point was most forcibly made by James Boon. He propounded that cultural contact did not lead to a portrayal of each others' cultures but to an exaggeration of them, where the observing members of one group overstated the differences of the observed. On this logic, others were not just seen as different but as very different, with most commonalities strictly underplayed (Boon, 1983). And since classification always brings hierarchy in its train, that expression of difference was always at the same time a ranking, albeit very often a complex, multifarious ranking (Herzfeld, 1987).

Anthony Cohen rounded out the debate somewhat, by arguing that ethnic classification, whether of self or others, had to be viewed as a form of strategy, and it had to be studied as such. He also demonstrated that as the structural importance of a regionally distinctive economics dies, its symbolic importance rises. In other words, even though the commercial worth of distinctive economic practices might decline, they remain locally significant, only this time as symbolically central to people's definition of themselves (Cohen, 1985). A corollary of Cohen's point is that, as distinctive economic practices become ever less common, peoples may

well define themselves more and more in predominantly cultural terms (MacClancy, 1997).

In sum, societies and their cultures are not billiard balls. They are far more malleable, diffuse and difficult to perceive. Instead of trying to define them, modern anthropologists have usually to step back and ask, who is doing the defining, how, why, to what end, to what effect?

Of course anthropologists are not innocent bystanders, observing the action but remaining apart from it. In fact they can play a modest but still noteworthy role in directing the perpetuation of the very processes they are meant to be merely analysing. José Miguel de Barandiarán and Telesforo de Aranzadi are the earliest Basque exemplars here: dedicated anthropologists who were also committed to assisting the appropriate appreciation of their people (MacClancy, 1993). I do not enter the debate on whom their inheritors are, for the point is still clear: authoritative anthropologists are not merely sharp-eyed overlookers of social life; they are integral members of it as well. To put that another way, we are not flies on the wall; we are, in our own small way, part of the buzz.

Many anthropologists like to see themselves as superior to all but the very best of travel-writers. In contrast, travel-writers are characterized as having to move around the place, constantly on the look-out for good copy. They have not time to shift the superficial from the valid. Self-preening ethnographers like to say they have the great advantage of staying put, in one field site, where they can seek to put the patently exotic in context with the apparently mundane. After all, the idea of doing lengthy fieldwork is to gain such a profound understanding of one particular place that the ethnographer can justifiably strive to comprehend the whole of the local scene in a holistic manner. Oh, vain pretension!

The mistake here is to confuse length of residency with depth of insight, as though staying in one place almost inevitably means that the anthropologist gets it right. Sometimes that does happen, but not necessarily. In recent years the previously well-regarded work of long-term ethnographers has been radically questioned. For instance, the early, great foreign anthropologists of Iberia (above all Julian Pitt-Rivers, who worked in Andalusia in the late 1940s and early '50s) have been damned as fulfilling, in a more insidious because apparently more authoritative manner, exactly the same exoticizing evils that have long been laid at the feet of travel-writers. According to this argument, we might not be travel-writers, but we can still be fellow-travellers.

To sum up this introduction: we anthropologists are not special, but we like to think that we are good at what we do. And sometimes we seem to be right, justifiably so. The notions of identity we deal with are not static but dynamic, processual, strategic, shifting, contested, negotiable, exaggerated, where the social encompasses the economic, and the tension between the social and the individual remains forever creatively unresolved.

I want now to apply these insights to Anglophone writings on the Basques, to see what senses of culture these authors are deploying. Since I recognize the past

sins of my predecessors, I pride myself on striving for humility: it is not for arrogant academics to crab travel-writers just because their concept of culture or society is one anthropologists gave up decades ago. Our job here is not to castigate others for their approach, but to map their conceptual terrain.

One last trio of qualifiers: first, this is an exploratory paper, a provisional initial report of a broader study that I am making into British travel-writers to the Basque Country. Thus, I wish to suggest rather than declaim. Second, this study will deliberately focus on lesser-known texts, for too many commentators about British writers to the Peninsula have spent their time going over, yet again, the canonical volumes of Richard Ford and George Borrow (e.g. Burns, 2000). Yet, if we are to gain some idea of popular views, it is precisely what is stated in otherwise forgotten books which needs to be analysed. And these texts, like any other in anthropology, need to be situated in their appropriate contexts, which in this case includes the home market for travel-writers. Third, I have no wish to offend anyone. If some of the material I quote is unflattering towards the Basques, the response has to be: better to know the critiques others are making of you than to turn one's back and pretend it is not there.

2. A GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT: TRAVEL-WRITERS IN SPAIN

Since many of these writers did not focus on the Basques but spoke about whole regions of Spain, if not the whole country, I have to place their remarks in their broader geographical context. In other words, to understand their comments about the Basques, I have first to summarize their attitudes to Spain in general.

To many British travel-writers, the traditional image of Spain was one of baroque religiosity, bloody bullfights and lovers impelled by their passions. This was an image built to a great extent on ignorance, for Spain was not included in the Grand Tour of Europe: young British gentlemen, concerned with their self-education, did not visit its cities; its spas were not fashionable; it was not part of any modern religious pilgrimage. Indeed, Spain

(...) remained unsanctioned by habit and convention, and most Victorians and Edwardians found (it) vaguely intimidating and even suspect from (its) association with the excesses of Romantic sensibility [...] Spain, until quite late in the nineteenth century, still seemed as remote as it had seemed in the eighteenth. "No country is less known to the rest of Europe", said Dr Johnson in 1761. "There is no country in Europe so little known and yet so well worth visiting", wrote Dr Madden in 1864 (Pemble, 1987: 48. Also Hare, 1878: xiii; Saglia, 2000).

Unlike Italy, Spain was not "a wreck of paradise". English visitors educated in the classics did not experience the same "light of recognition" that they felt on viewing Italian sites. Through ignorance, Spain became a land of mystery, a peninsular home for the exotic, culturally separated by the Pyrenees from the continental land-mass. Kirkpatrick, commenting on the work of Richard Ford and Borrow, says they make the reader feel that "Spain is a detached fragment of the orient", a country of brutal contrast, whether geographical, economical, emotional, or cultural (Kirkpatrick. 1916: 251). In 1954 V. S. Pritchett was still able to say:

Spain is the old and necessary enemy of the West. There we learn our history upside down and see life exposed to the skin. Neither in France nor in Italy can one be so frankly frightened. All the hungers of life are blankly stated there. We see the primitive hungers we live by and yet, by a curious feat of stoicism, fatalism, and lethargy, the passions are sceptically contained (Pritchett, 1954: 7).

Spain is a way for Britons to reveal, by contrast, the Anglo-Saxon norm. Like the image of the Eastern city discussed by Gilsenan, Spain can represent Britain “both as its opposite [...] and as its concealed, secret dispositions, secret, longed-for, feared, enticing, and shameful all at once” (Gilsenan, 1986: 13). In the Mediterranean Puritan Victorians saw pleasures and freedoms not available to them in Britain, and yet they simultaneously condemned and repudiated ‘the Latin way of life’ with startling violence. Taking their high morality with them, they were both fascinated and appalled by the seeming excesses of Spanish Catholicism and bullfighting.

Spain was a land of strong contrasts where the dichotomies underlying any notion of civilization were more vividly expressed than elsewhere in the Mediterranean. In Spain life was seen to be more exposed, its roots more visible. British travellers to Spain could exploit these Hispanic contrasts to underline the difference between Spain and Britain. Thus reading a book on Spain indirectly reminded the reader what constituted Britain, what made it distinct. These attitudes, especially towards bullfighting, have persisted into recent decades, stimulated greatly, in the case of bullfighting, by Hemingway’s almost mystical interpretation of the practice (see e.g. Tynan, 1955; Welles, 1968).

3. PARADES OF THE PICTURESQUE: THE BASQUE COUNTRY AS SPAIN, AND AS NOT-SPAIN

My first point has to be that most British travel-writers to Spain saw its centre and south as the essence of the country and went straight there. If they do make comment on the Basque Country, it is literally only in passing, as they cross the Pyrenees and head impatiently towards Castile. Thus there are relatively few British travel-writers who bother with the Basques, and most of them only dealt with the topic in a cursory manner. But, cursory or not, what was their vision of the Basques?

Some of them saw the Basques as quintessentially Castilian, as but variants of some general Castilian mould. Walter Starkie is the clearest example of this first position. In *Spanish Raggle-Taggle*, an account of his minstreling in Spain one summer during the Republic, he first quotes the painter Zuloaga’s words to him,

For you should remember that though I am born a Basque from Eibar yet I refuse to sacrifice my universal heritage for any regionalism. It was Castile made Spain and every one of us whether we are Basques, Galicians or Andalusians must go forth from our narrow regions and become Castilian, for it was Castile that made the Spanish world (Starkie, 1934: 97).

Starkie seems to have swallowed his host’s words whole, for ninety pages later he stages an imaginary conversation between Unamuno, Pio Baroja and Ramiro

de Maeztu, “three Basque writers. Each of them was Basque by race, but Castilian by tradition, for Castile is universal Spain – the Spain that exists not only in the Iberian peninsula but over the sea in the New World” (ibid: 186).

Richardson echoes this Ibero-centric view of the Basque Country when he states,

At Hendaye, the frontier, [...] the grand view across the Bidasoa to the mellow walls of Fuenterrabia is as Spanish as anything in Spain (Richardson, 1928: 53).

Dornford Yates, a highly successful interwar author, adopts a similar perspective in her *Jonah and Co.* Its main characters spend the whole of their Iberian journey (sixty-three pages) touring Navarre and Guipuzcoa in their car, but fail to make a single reference to the Basque dimension of the area. On returning to France, they take “our last look at Spain” (Yates, 1922: 229, my italics). To these Bright Young Things, San Sebastian is just another smart resort, like Biarritz, but one which (if they knew it) happens to be in an area known as the Basque Country.

The opposite attitude is to view the Basques as very different, and the Basque Country as not-Spain, as a separate zone to visit after leaving France and before entering Spain. This attitude seems the more common among our authors (e.g. Pritchett, 1984: 37), and for good reasons of travel-writing logic: the more different or colourful the better, and so all the more easy to entertain one’s readers. On this argument Iberia becomes a landmass occupied by a variety of different peoples, each discernibly distinctive in easily describable ways. The danger for travel-writers here, especially for those over-eager to please their public, is that their accounts tend to turn into what I call *parades of the picturesque*, where different peoples each have their own dress, dance, customs, and psychology. Trouble is, in some of these accounts, that it is easy to gain the impression that it almost does not matter what particular dress, dance, and customs the locals exhibit, so long as they serve to differentiate them from the other peninsular peoples identified by these authors. A further trouble, and a direct consequence of this logic, is that, within these accounts, characters are often portrayed as more Basque than most Basques. Indeed they are not allowed by their creators to act as anything but representative Basques forever performing in archetypically Basque ways. It is as though they are never allowed to be off-duty Basques or simply themselves. The parade of the picturesque turns into its own parody.

Jan Morris is all too exemplary of this style, for she seems unable to mention a Basque without an accompanying stereotypical adjective. On the first page of the first chapter of her “Spain”, she is already speaking of “the savage Basques”, who “hurling themselves upon Charlemagne’s rearguard, slaughtered half his men-at-arms” (Morris, 1986: 21-22). By Chapter Two she is informing us that

the Basques are the queerest and staunchest of the Spanish minorities [...] Their Catholicism is so dour and stolid as to be almost Calvinist in flavour. Their architecture is all blacks and whites and patterned walls. Their churches look like airship hangars, they invented the art of whaling, and their national game, *pelota*, is the fastest of all ball games (ibid: 39).

Visiting the oak in Guernica, she calls a Basque gardener “stocky [...] keeping an eye on you” while the womenfolk “gossip in incomprehensible polysyllables behind your back” (ibid: 40). For her, if the archetypal Castilian is gaunt and meditative (“he looks as though pursued by some mighty preoccupation”), then “this grave model is coarsened by the Catalans, dullened by the Galicians, and solidified by the Basques” (ibid: 43). It is a slick generalization, and as cheap as any of its ilk.

Dorothy Clanfield is also guilty of this compulsively stereotyping style in many pages of her “Basque people” (1931). Here the characters seem forever condemned to behave as the epitome of Basqueness, and nothing but. It is as though, if her characters cannot act as Basques, then they should not find space in her chapters. When, in her stories, a Basque has to act, he or she is made to do so in an archetypically Basque way.

The Basque narrator speaks, “There seemed to be nothing to do but wait. But the Basques are not a cool, self-possessed people who take to waiting with patience. The exasperated young lover put it to me many times with passion, that the right would surely be on their side if they simply...” (Clanfield, 1931: 163-164).

Like all Basques I am *impulsive*, given to acting violently when I feel violently... I couldn't sleep for rage, for pity, for indignation... That night again I did not sleep, but before morning I had thought of two ways out... (ibid: 193-194).

4. EXPLANATORY APPROACHES TO THE BASQUE COUNTRY

Some authors, rather than thicken the stereotype or heighten its contrastive colours, try to *explain* the distinctiveness of the Basques. Some of these writers seek to do so in geographic and climatological terms. They are the environmental determinists, who claim to believe that a certain combination of mountains, sea, and humidity directly produce the Basque character. This appears to be a hang-over from the eighteenth century when it was common to explain cultural diversity in environmental terms (Azurmendi, 2000: 401).

One trouble with this approach is that it is too often formulated back to front, i.e. the chosen “character” is first isolated and then local environmental causes are selected for their fit. For a particularly telling example of this approach, listen to the words of Fr James Brodrick, a biographer of Ignatius Loyola:

Men and their habitat are bound together by a thousand subtle influences, visible in so far as they control nature but only to be guessed at in so far as nature controls them. The skies over their heads, the hills that limit their horizons, the prevailing winds, their food and drink, must all, over long ages, affect them physically and mentally. And then there is the powerful cohesive force of language and common traditions. All in all, the influences in Euskalherria have produced a magnificent kind of human being, full of dignity and self-respect, with an equal respect for the dignity of others, hard working, frugal, nobly independent, brave to the point of rashness, profoundly conservative, and at the time gay and venturesome... etc., etc. (cited in Burns, 1994: 86).

Bogue Luffman thought the Basques south of the mountains

have no sense of beauty. They are not to be blamed. Away from the Pyrenees there are no refining influences in the north of Spain. The scenery and the surroundings are harsh and brutal, and the people's spirit is governed by them (Luffman, 1893: 41).

Sixty years later, Salter treads the same logical path:

Probably because of the climate, they were much bigger eaters and drinkers than the Spanish and, also probably because of the climate, they, like the British, worshipped all forms of violent exercise. As a result we might witness log-chopping, stone-piercing, beer-drinking, and steak-eating competitions, not to mention the national Basque game of "jai-alai", the fastest and most exhausting ball game in the world (Salter, 1983: 215).

Rodney Gallop, much more learned than most travel-writers to the area, eschews this facile environmentalist approach for the sake of a psychological determinism. For him, the problem is not to explain Basque character. Instead, he accepts it as pre-existing. To him, it is the ground, not the end of his argument, for he contends that it is the nature of Basque character which has ensured that Basque society and culture have survived through the centuries (Gallop, 1970). As the distinguished American anthropologist of the Basques Bill Douglass gently puts it in his introduction to a reprint of Gallop's book,

any reader having more than a passing acquaintance with the Basques is likely to find Gallop's statements both thought-provoking and controversial (Douglass, 1970: xiv).

Others turn this style of argument on its head by producing a traditionalist determinism, i.e. the Basques are the way they are seen to be because of their traditions: it's their customs what made them. This is the "dead hand of tradition" with a vengeance. Clanfield (again) is a clear exemplar of this mode:

You must not forget that the Basques are descendants of a race whose oldest tradition is that it is not only possible but natural for human hearts to give each other joy rather than pain and who recognize this as the natural and attainable end of human existence (Clanfield, 1931: 38).

V.S. Pritchett sings the same tune:

The (Basques) have little religious superstition and little regard – perhaps because they are poor in imagination and poetry – for the image-loving and decorative forms of Catholicism. Their religion is plain, their faith is immovable... and is married to the sense of tradition that rules them. In this they have the integration of primitive societies (Pritchett, 1984: 31).

What is striking, given the evidence of the other chapters in this book, is how rarely these travel-writers refer to Basque history in a determinist mode in anything other than a slighting reference.

5. CATALOGUING THE BASQUES: BODY, TONGUE, ENDURANCE, NATIVES

Some shun these determinisms altogether and choose instead to highlight Basque distinctiveness in terms of an iterated and interlocking set of criteria: anatomy, language, cultural longevity, length of residence, primitive simplicity. Anatomy first:

[A Basque policeman] wielded a short truncheon with as great a dexterity as I have no doubt his ancestors did the jawbones of mammoths... Both his eyebrows and his mustachios were of the cave-dweller variety. He was, in fact, undiluted Basque, the real Pyrenean cave-man. To encounter him for the first time was to know the thrill of discovery (Coles, 1945: 173).

In the mountains,

People look different up there, they all look the same. Here the notion of a short, stocky, muscular race of men all with dark hair and blue eyes, all of them remarkably hirsute and yet somehow fine featured, confronts you every time you look at somebody (Elms, 1992: 228).¹

Euskera is predictably prominent in several of these accounts. This “obscure language, isolated from both Spain and from the rest of the world” (Jacobs, 1994: 292) is perfect food for their imagination. To one it is “utterly weird and apparently impenetrable”; to another, it “sounds half way between a smoker’s cough and a stutter” (Elms, 1992: 219; Richardson, 1998: 125). Richardson (ibid: 128), who made a valiant attempt to become conversant in Euskera, first summarizes its grammar and lexicon, then cries in desperation, “Who on earth dreamed this language up, and what was their problem?”

The age of Euskera dovetails neatly with the apparent length of Basque residence in the area. For V.S. Pritchett, “the Basques are the oldest settled race in Europe. They are locked in their language” which is like “the code of a secret society” (1984: 30). One of Clanfield’s characters discovers prehistoric cave paintings on her kin’s land; another claims that a *pelota* player would make more money in one year in Argentina than would the whole of his hillside village “since the days of living in caves!”; a third, when asked how long Basques have worn espadrilles, replies, “What a question! Since Neolithic days of course” (Clanfield, 1931: 129-130, 143, 192). One author, on a train, lists the names of the stations: “Zuazo, Yzarra, and Yñoso, with their suggestion of prehistoric reptiles” (Marriott, 1908: 308). Another, also on a train, listens to the three Basques in his compartment: “It was an easy thing to visualize from the strange noises issuing from their lips the striking of prehistoric encampments” (Coles, 1945: 174).

Other writers, keen to underline the age of the Basques, take a slightly different tack. Elms claims “the ancient, the aboriginal” is to be found in their sports (Elms, 1992: 227) while Richardson, easily blending age and nature in a traditionalist mix, states “Wood-chopping is an ancestral sport that chimes in nicely with Basque tree-loving tendencies” (Richardson, 1998: 135). Jacobs, like many of his

1 On supposedly craniological characteristics of the Basques, see also Jacobs 1994: 293.

predecessors, stresses the “distant and mysterious” origin of the Basques and then lists Basque myths about their ancestors: refugees from the lost island of Atlantis; one of the earliest families of humankind, who came to Europe from the Orient in search of the sun; a grandson of Noah, who left the Ark when it ran aground in what is now the Basque Country (Jacobs, 1994: 293).

What seems to be occurring here is more or less the following: British writers to Spain, when faced with a social or cultural aspect which they cannot immediately explain in historical terms, resort to the oriental: it's the Moors who made the Spaniards so. However, in the Basque Country, visitors do not look to the East for explanation; instead they excavate locally and claim the continuing contribution of prehistory. For these writers, “prehistory” and “the Orient” are made to play the same role of deepening a sense of difference between the reader and the read-about. It is just that each term is applied to a different population: “prehistory” to the Basques, and “the Orient” to non-Basque Spaniards. The only exception to this that I have found to is Richardson's suggestive comment on Fuenterrabia: its streets he thought “quite theatrical”, but “the most striking” of all was the town's inhabitants: “swarthy were they, short, and quite African in countenance” (Richardson, 1928: 120).

The claimed age and rootedness of the Basques is made to go hand in hand with the supposedly rude level of their technology. Cayley, noted that Basque cart-wheels were of strikingly simple construction (Cayley 1909: 389). Richardson, passing through north Navarre, noted how “primitive” the ploughs seemed, while pastoral scenes on the outskirts of Pamplona held “something primitive and fundamental” (Newbiggin, 1926: 192-193, 196). Luffman thought the Navarran village of Caparroso, “at once striking and peculiar, in its rude primitiveness and effective position” (Luffman, 1895: 32). He also pondered over domestic detail:

The kitchen utensils in this part of the world are very simple. The saucepan is unknown. Everything is cooked in tiny jars of clay and iron. [...]. The clay pitchers and jars resemble those shown in the Roman rooms of the British Museum (ibid: 20).

Though this ancienry of the Basques is usually vaunted, it can also be made a source of criticism; primitivism, after all, has always had a dark side. On leaving San Sebastian, Luffman thought “The country suddenly became very wild, and all the people I met equally so” (ibid: 12). Over a century later, one writer reports the angry reaction of a local to the burning of a French car during the fiestas of a Basque seaside town: “We're going back to prehistory, I tell you seriously” (Richardson, 1998: 148).

6. “RACE”

Several authors merge these different dimensions of distinctiveness into one summative concept: “race”. This should come as no surprise, as it has long been a common (though always contested) principle of social classification throughout Western Europe and America. What is unexpected is how innocent its users appear, even after the Holocaust. Pritchett, writing in the mid-1950s, is surprisingly

at ease with the term: for him, the “Navarrese and the Basques are a tough, sporting race” whilst the Basque religion is “racial” because it is culturally central and immovable (Pritchett, 1984: 31, 151). The most developed proponent of this attitude is Clanfield, who though writing in the early 1930s seems blithely unaware of what was already occurring in Germany:

The conversation turned, naturally enough, on the Basques – the strangeness of their racial isolation, not only unrelated to the European Aryans all around them, but to any other of the races of mankind; their legendary vitality which has outlasted the Romans, the Goths, the Moors, feudalism, monarchy, industrialism: their passionate clinging to incomprehensible old folk-ways; the oddness of the fact that unlike all other peoples they never seem to have roamed and migrated to and fro, but (since they are probably descendants of Pyrenean cave-dwellers) are the only human beings in the history of our race who took root where they were planted (Clanfield, 1931: 12-13).

Further comparisons of Basques and Aryans abound in her stories, always to the benefit of the non-Aryans (e.g. *ibid*: 26, 39, 43, 141, 144-145, 147, 214). As one of her sedentary character declaims, “If there is one thing I detest more than a motor car it’s a Basque who’s gone Aryan” (*ibid*: 188).

Naively, I had expected to find in the latest travel-writing about the Basques what modern commentators call “racism without race”, “cultural fundamentalism”, or “ethnic absolutism”, where “ethnicity” or “culture” today play the same explanatory role that “race” once did (e.g. Harrison, 2002). Not so. In this particular geographical case, racially-couched explanations are still very much alive and very active. For example, John Hooper, for many years the Guardian correspondent in Spain and author of a bestselling “portrait of the new Spain”, opens his chapter on the Basques by citing snippets of the haematological, physical anthropological, archaeological, and linguistic evidence in order to argue that

The Basques are the last surviving representatives of Europe’s aboriginal population. Secure in a homeland of steep-sided hills and valleys much of which was covered in dense forest, they seem to have had only the most limited contact with the peoples who entered Europe two millennia before Christ and who brought with their Indo-Europeans languages and their distinctive blood group distribution, characterized by a high proportion of B and Rh+. Thereafter, isolated from those around them by language as well as geography, the Basques began to inculcate that resistance to outside influence – and especially outside rule – which is the hallmark of their history (Hooper, 1986: 214).

One might have expected more of an educated journalist than such a concatenation of clichés. There is a similar assimilation of outdated data in Elms (1992: 219).²

² Jacobs (1994: 293) touches on the same material but is much more circumspect in drawing any conclusions.

7. OF MIND AND MORALITY: THE PSYCHE, THE ODD, AND THE JUDGMENTAL

More cautious writers shy away from awkward determinisms and any talk of race. Instead many of them choose to indulge in a superficial psychologism. Pritchett saw the Basques as reserved, only showing their feelings in pelota (1984: 30); to Ussher they were “gregarious and athletic” (Ussher, 1959: 213). To the aristocratic George Cayley, they were “proud, honest, and independent”; those in the mountain district appeared “honest, hearty, industrious folk” (Cayley, 1909: 386, 389). To prove his point about their pride, he relates the following: he and his companion, near the end of their long ride from southern Spain to the north, arrive at their first Basque village, at night.

We presented ourselves before the posada. The door was closed, and we called knocked lustily. At length a maiden appeared at a wicket.

Caramba! Is this a way to keep gentlemen waiting in the dark? Send the *mozo de la cuadra* to take our beasts, *carajo!*” But the young lady, not liking our salutation, which certainly savoured more of impatience than politeness, and observing by the flaring lamp in her hand that we looked more like bandits than gentlemen, told us demurely to go about our business, and would listen to no appeal, but shut the wicket in our faces...

Harry calmly suggested that, had our language been civilier, our reception might have been more cordial, and that we must polish up our free-and-easy Andalusian manners to suit the *Provincias Vascongadas* (Cayley, 1909: 386).

The most blatant Anglocentric interpretation in a psychologistic mode that I found comes from Salter, who condescended to approve of the Basques as quasi-Brits down south. For him, it is just a pity about the religion they profess:

(Their) slightly undergraduate attitude towards life, combined with their really remarkable capacity for ‘carrying’ hard liquor, and the fact that they are superb rough-sea sailors, so endears them to the average Anglo-Saxon that he can almost forgive them for being devout Catholics. We like to feel that our foreigners are simpler than we are, and we are always a little bit uneasy about supposed Latin subtlety; but the Basque, well, he was a sportsman and knew how to hold his liquor – definitely a “pukka sahib”, as Continentals go! (Salter, 1953: 216).

For the Anglo-Saxon, too, the punctual, hard-working, reliable Basque is far less difficult to understand than the more reserved, formal and complicated Spaniard, and that greater understanding, consciously or not, usually makes for a happier holiday (ibid: 226).

Salter liked the Basques, because he thought he could comprehend them. Luffman had much the same opinion about Basque women, who

impressed me favourably. They looked good. There was no artfulness or hypocrisy about them; nor were there meaningless smiles (Luffman, 1895: 22-23).

In general, British writers might claim to comprehend the Basques and to approve of their vaunted independence, but only one goes so far as to refer to a Basque sense of superiority. Only Clanfield acknowledges that Basques may feel themselves above others, even above those who deign to approve of them (Clanfield, 1931: 143).

At times, some authors dispense with any of the above sophistications. Instead they fix on the odd, the unusual and the unexpected, and so succeed in making the supposedly already odd Basques seem even odder. These literary excursions are patent exercises in a crude exoticism, cynically targeted in a mercenary manner at home audiences. One author notices that the Basque “cultivation of the land is peculiar” because they use short-handled hoes (*layas*), and that they shoe their oxen by hoisting them with a belly band, then lashing their legs (Cayley, 1909: 389). Another says that participants in an *irrintxi* contest

produced a sound unlike anything I had ever heard before [...] a high-pitched warbling scream held for as long as the lungs will allow, and finished off with a three-note cockadoodle (Richardson, 1998: 136).

A third laughs at the sight of a “queer team” of various draft animals pulling a dray loaded with wine barrels, then lovingly details the picturesque garb of a kindly old shepherd who befriends him (Luffman, 1895: 23, 35-36). As late as the late 1950s, foreign authors could still write of Basque witchcraft as a lived reality, Starkie devoting seven pages to one local’s account of a contemporary brush with a broom-riding hag (Starkie, 1957: 167-173).

The great majority of these authors are polite. They are, after all, gentlemen and women: civilized, educated persons who, in the years before mass tourism, had the means to travel. They wished usually to underline the attractions as much as the apparent oddness of the Basque Country. The only author I have found who consistently disparages local ways in a manner akin to modern travel-writers like Paul Theroux is Luffman. He is ready to rubbish the Basques for their food, architecture, hygiene and care of buildings. Bread, whether brown or white, is “villainously hard and heavy stuff” (Luffman, 1895: 19); Pamplona, he calls “one of the dullest ‘capitals’ I ever visited”, and Tafalla “an ugly, insignificant town” (ibid: 27, 31). He seems to relish dwelling on filth, and strives to give weight to his words by stressing his broad experience of vile spots around the world:

The ground floor of every house is the barn where cows, pigs, poultry and other animals herd together. The odour is simply intolerable (ibid: 7).

Of all the disgusting odours that ever arose from a square of this earth none could beat those emitted by that horrible house in Renteria (p. 8).

I could not cope with the bugs and fleas of Renteria (p. 9).

The best he can say of an inn is that it “was very clean *for a Basque house*” (ibid: 22, my italics). Luffman also likes to focus on the curious contrasts he claims can be seen at every turn:

coats of arms and crests above doors leading to pigs’ hovels, and the former abodes of nobles turned into the grimy haunts of vagabonds and beggars (ibid: 42).

This kind of contrast is, of course, all one way. He makes no mention of former brothels or thieves’ kitchens turned into palaces of the nobility. The implication seems clear: the Basques may have a history, but that of its upper classes is not what it was. The place is in picturesque decline.

The only other author who makes similarly disparaging comments on the Basques is Yates and she confines her remarks to two spots in north Navarre. Her car-borne characters first sweep

through a village that might have been plucked out of Macedonia, so rude and stricken it looked. There was no glass at the windows: filth littered the naked street: pigs and poultry rushed for the crazy doorways at our approach.

Two pages later a leaking radiator forces them to stop at “a hovel, half barn, half cottage, where a sturdy mother came lugging a great caldron” (Yates, 1922: 171, 173). Luffman liked to condemn, as though it was his ticket to literary distinctiveness. Yates, a far more successful author, was much more balanced; as we shall see, her eye for dirt did not blind her to the presence of beauty.

8. THE GLAMOUR OF LANDSCAPE

Perhaps the environmental determinism practised by some writers is not so surprising, given the strong impression made by the countryside itself on many of them. For these are writers bedazzled by the glamour of landscape. In the words of one, the Basque country is “the high and separate land of these dark and different people” (Elms, 1992: 218). Another, passing through Roncesvalles, thinks the inspiring beauty of the area justifies the Song of Roland’s occasional inexactitude:

So runs the well-known legend, and if it is not historically accurate in every point let us blame the romantic setting of the scene, the mountains, streams, and forests, all of which stimulate the imagination and encourage flights of fancy (Newbigin, 1926: 198).

A third, walking south from Pamplona, proclaimed that never had he “beheld a vaster extent of cloudland or a more lovely collection of forms and colours” (Luffman, 1895: 30. See also p. 21). A fourth, tramping the same area, eulogised it so:

Scents from damp trees, from rain-soaked grass, were delicious; the banks were greener, the mountain slopes seemed nearer, the birds sang joyfully, shaking crystal drops to the ground from overhanging branches. It was fine to be walking after the storm upon these aromatic uplands, to be striding in the strength of manhood over the antediluvian earth, to be swinging along this shining Spanish road, to be roaming through a storied land free of care or responsibility. This was life! (Coles 1945: 163).

Earlier, climbing into the loft of his Roncesvalles *fonda*, he pleased in the sight:

Great beams slanted to a floor piled with hay, drying fruits, farming and forestry implements. A delicious scent of mellow herbage and timber was everywhere (Coles, 1945: 160).

Perhaps the most extreme form of this writing comes from the work of the highly popular interwar author Dornford Yates. Her characters are driving southward over the Pyrenean pass of Valcarlos:

I gave the car its head, and we went at a wicked hill as a bull at a gate.

Almost immediately the scenery became superb.

With every yard the walls of the gorge were drawing further apart, slowly revealing themselves in all their glory. Forests and waterfalls, precipices and greenswards, grey-lichened crags and sun-bathed terraces, up, above all, an exquisite vesture of snow, flawless and dazzling – these stood for beauty. All the wonder of height, the towering proportions of the place, the bewildering pitch of the sky – these stood for grandeur. An infinite serenity, an imperturbable peace, a silence which the faint gush of springs served to enrich – these stood for majesty. Nature has throne-rooms about the world, and this was one of them (Yates, 1922: 167. See also pp. 171, 229).

This ecstatic tone might seem excessive to many today but one reason professional writers wrote in this way was because it was commercially viable. For what the Basque Country gave authors such as Luffman, Coles, and Yates was a chance to indulge their Anglophone readers with a vision of rurality increasingly denied in an ever industrializing England.

The danger of these attractive visions is the way they blind their seers to the historical reality of the area. For what they perceive is their own particular versions of timelessness, as though the country were isolated from modern, frequently ugly developments. Not for them luxurious moments spent contemplating the aesthetics of Biscayan factories. Starkie, strolling through the streets of Puente La Reina, confesses, “I felt as if I had suddenly been spirited back to the Middle Ages” (Starkie, 1957: 175). When Coles arrived at Roncesvalles for the night, he found

the fonda was feudal, six hundred years old, and had been a mediaeval pilgrims’ hostel”, while the woman in charge “spoke as if the Middle Ages lived but yesterday (Coles, 1945: 158).

Luffman, passing through Tolosa, judged it “an old-fashioned little place, doing no trade with the rest of the world”: as though its paper-mills were of no importance, unworthy of note (Luffman, 1895: 14). Alice Newbigin, driving down to Pamplona, observed “leisurely country scenes [...] which made us feel remote from speed and modern life”; Pamplona itself “seems, somehow, remote from the world” while the sight of market-women jogging home on their donkeys and bullock-wagons lumbering past on muddy roads appeared “something Biblical” (Newbigin, 1926: 192, 194, 196).

9. OUT OF TIME

But there is a double aspect of this timelessness. Many readers will have already noted that within many paragraphs of this chapter I have been able to mix examples from very different times: the late nineteenth century, the mid-twentieth century, today. Indeed at times the only clue to the date of a quotation is the year of publication in the reference. To this extent, we can say that the English literary image of the Basques has been essentially static for the last 150 years: there might have been some changes (no more references to the ubiquity of filth) but none we can register as especially significant. Most likely because of the un-

changing economic logic which underpins the market for travel-writing, the image of the Basques has remained much the same and continues, even today, to fulfil the same exoticizing function. Oddness sells.

So, if I am right in this, my final question has to be: if the aim of the market remains the same, why should we think the image *need* change?

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