Against the Ethnicisation of Regional Territorial Minorities

Contribution from the Basque Experience in France

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Since the last decade of the last century and after more than thirty years of Basque-related demands (euskaltzale and/or abertzale),¹ the issue of institutionalization of the French Basque Country has reached some legitimacy in daily public debate among the local political class. In 2013, the majority of mayors supported the creation of a “territorial community” which would imply the official recognition of a new “Basque Country” local authority. Indeed, today the French Basque Country benefits from no official recognition. With Béarn, it makes up the Pyrénées-Atlantiques department within the Aquitaine region.²

As to the Basque language (euskara), the claim that it should be made official, seen as the means to give it a protective legal framework, appears today to be less outlandish than yesterday, and this applies to the opinion of many local elected representatives as well as that of a growing, even of a majority, share of the population.³ At least, this shift of attitudes towards the possible institutionalization of the French Basque Country points to a change of paradigm for individual and collective links with the local language and culture.

It’s in the light of this relative upheaval that we must consider the coming into being of clubs and societies which are violently opposed to Basque language entering the public domain. This phenomenon seems indeed to be the real sign of a significant tightening of the symbolic balance of power in favour

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¹ The term euskatzale means, in Basque language, “bascophile.” It is currently used to name the Basque cultural movement. The term abertzale means “patriot.” It is used for the naming and self-naming of all the Basque nationalist movements. Today, the term “Basque nationalist” is challenged by the majority of abertzale who prefer to call themselves and to be called patriots. To refer to the French Basque Country, I shall use both the following names: “North Basque Country” and “Iparralde” which literally means “North side.” This expression is used by reference to the Spanish Basque Country or “Hegoalde,” the “South side.”

² Christine Bessonart, “Biltzar and the community,” in Le Journal du Pays Basque-Euskal Herriko Kazeta, 18 April 2013.

³ Internet site of Office Public de la Langue Basque (OPLB). Complete reference in the bibliography.

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of Basque-related circles, whatever their nature (*abertzale* and/or *euskaltzale*), although they are still a minority in the polls. It is a fact that, within the debate as to the legitimacy of the Basque language entering the public domain, ideological differences are fiercely clear-cut. Opponents systematically put forward the argument that applying institutional bilingualism would necessarily undermine one of the founding principles of the French Republic, the principle whereby citizens’ equality before the law implies official francophone unilingualism.

On the other hand, Basque-related circles claim that official use of *euskara* as the institutional framework would right a democratic deficit and a social injustice. They are not demanding a return to an exclusively bascophone Basque country. They are campaigning for the official recognition of the bilingual character of basco-french society. In this way they are sharing the opposition to global ideologies which lead to a leveling of language and culture and which don’t care about the future of territorial minority languages.

We must specify that this conflict is happening within a sociolinguistic context marked by increased marginalization of the Basque language. Indeed, between 1991 and 2006, the number of Basque speakers dropped from 34 per cent to 22.5 per cent of the population. However, some data allow Basque language militants to remain optimistic and mobilized in response to the seriousness of this *euskara*-unfavourable disglossia situation: among the young 16–24 year-old generation, the number of Basque speakers grew between 1996 and 2006 from 11.6 to 16% (Mintzaira Internet site).

Despite everything, the Basque language in France has an uncertain future and these data are traumatic in the Basque Country to the extent that language is traditionally considered to be the country’s raison d’être: *Euskal Herria*, the

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4 Made public in 2006, a sociolinguistic survey carried out under the responsibility of the Sub-Ministry for linguistic policy of the Autonomous Euskadi Basque Government, in partnership with the Office Public de la Langue Basque (*OPLB*), in fact shows that in the French Basque Country, 22.5% of inhabitants are bilingual Basque speakers, 8.6% are receptive bilinguals and 68.9% non-Basque speakers. The *OPLB* is a recent public organization created at the end of 2004: its creation witnesses in particular the State’s attempt to answer identity and cultural aspirations. It has GIP status (Groupement d’Intérêt Public). Its aim is to conceive, define and carry out a concerted linguistic policy in favour of the Basque language. The Office raises the necessary financial means to carry through actions chosen within the framework of its partnership with the State (Préfecture, Rectorat, Drac), the Aquitaine Region, the Département of Pyrénées-Atlantiques, The Syndicat Intercommunal de Soutien à la Culture Basque et le Conseil des Elus du Pays Basque (Mintzaira Internet site).

5 *Euskal Herria* includes the seven Basque provinces. In Spain, three of them (Guipuzcoa, Biscaya and Alava) make up the Autonomous Community of Euskadi within which Basque is
whole of the Basque Country, literally means “Country of the Basque Language.” In the same way, belonging to the group must traditionally happen through language. According to the self-name Euskalduna, translated by the French word Basque, identity and language merge. Euskalduna is the contraction of euskara-du-n-a, “he or she who speaks Basque.”

By showing the social part played by the central feature of identity and its contemporary political practice, we propose to state the Basque militant experience’s new contribution to thinking about modern societies’ cultural future in the context of increased globalisation/plurilisation of cultural values and language use. How do the Basque movements proceed in their venture of rehabilitating the symbolic character of the local linguistic referent? To what extent does this rehabilitation provide an answer to new society issues emerging from increased individual and collective spatial mobility? How does Basque militantism propose to make the linguistic fact both a cultural (in accordance with tradition) and political feature (in accordance with citizenship)? What sort of argument is put forward to make Basque culture and, within it, euskara, as much an element of social cohesion and mobility as a vector from which to answer both the monolithism of global ideologies and the contemporary need to be faithful to tradition?

**Euskara’s Officialisation: the Basque Minority’s Narrow Communitarian Plan?**

In the 2000s, opposition to Basque institutional claims is made up by two societies, the Citoyens-en-Adour-Pyrénées Vivre-Ensemble Association and the

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6 Euskara is considered by linguists to be a language island to the extent that it has no relationship with the neighboring Latin languages surrounding it. The question of its origin and possible parentage has not yet been answered scientifically. A number of hypotheses are put forward so as to link the Basque language and population with a linguistic family or to a population identified elsewhere; linguists, anthropologists and geneticists are trying to explain in what conditions they came to occupy the aquitano-pyrenean lands. The fact is that euskara has been the language of the people or peoples who have been living on either side of the western Pyrenees from prehistory until our time. At the current state of analyses, scientists agree about one fact: euskara existed before the arrival of the Indo-Europeans.
Lissagaray Circle, to which must be added local elected representatives of traditional national parties such as the Socialist Party or the U.M.P.\textsuperscript{7}

This grouping makes up a speech forum for challenging the whole of euskaltzale and abertzale aspirations. These different actors have in common that they base their discourse on common and widespread representations of Basque activism by instrumentalising the theme of a supposedly intrinsic link between Basque minority, euskara, nationalism and ethnicist views of society.

What’s more, this opposition declares that they challenge the Basque language, the Gascon language or any other so-called “regional” language being made official on a par with the French language. Besides, they recall that they do not at all object to regional languages’ transmission and learning. But according to them, this is already possible within the current French legal framework. In issue number 7 of Cap Vivre-Ensemble journal, we can read that the associations’ aim is to declare itself clearly in favour of teaching and transmission of regional languages “based on families’ wishes and in the respect of all regional cultures”:

“There should be no specific rights granted to a group of speakers within a territory according to the Conseil Constitutionnel’s remarks in its reasons for its decision on the European chart of regional languages. Especially if this territory is already defined.”\textsuperscript{8}

Far from leading to a debate, euskara’s claim to officialisation only makes opponents want to make their militant discourse public, incompatible with necessary conditions for debate because of being against in principle. For

\textsuperscript{7} Since September 1999, the cap Vivre-Ensemble association, following the Communist Party and Front National’s example, has been the only organization categorically and publicly to object to the institutional reforms supported by Basque-related groups. This association includes very few activists. These claim to belong to the left or to the “republican” right. They say that they are defending, “republican spirit,” the unity and territorial integrity of France. In October 2003, the Lissagaray circle was created by Jean Espilondo, then socialist deputy and general councilor of Anglet-North, Christian Aguerre, formerly editor of the weekly La Semaine du Pays Basque, Jean-Claude Paul-Dejean, former history teacher and Pierre Bidart, academic and responsible for Izpegi editions. This association stems from thinking within the local Socialist Party. Within this thinking group come together at the same time a majority of socialists but also non card-carrying people claiming to be “of the left.” The Circle includes many teachers. Half of the members are in work, the other half not working. Some members are Basque speakers (Interview, on July 20th 2004, with Christian Aguerre). According to Christian Aguerre, the Circle has no links with the cap Vivre-Ensemble association. Be it as it may, one of its founders Jean-Claude Paul-Dejean also belongs to the association.

\textsuperscript{8} “Langues régionales et unité de la République,” in Journal de cap Vivre-Ensemble, n°7, 2nd trimestre 2001, 3.
example, many opponents consider officialisation of the Basque language to be inappropriate to the sociocultural characteristics of the Basque country’s population: “Beware, it’s a matter of co-officialisation, that means putting French and Basque on the same level. That seems dangerous to us and non-representative of the cultural diversity of the geographical area concerned” (Interview with a member of the CAP Vivre-Ensemble association in January 2000).

Analysis of this statement shows us how discourses against officialisation are both full of strong ideology, but also ideologically very poor. Taking the above quotation by its opposite, we could, for example, ask the following question: wouldn’t it be just as legitimate to consider non-recognition of the Basque language to be non-representative of the cultural diversity of the Basque Country? On evidence, yes. But, dialectically speaking, this question cannot be asked within spheres which are favorable to the institutional status quo because their reasoning is built on deep belief in the existence of the Basque minority or, in other words, of the Basque ethnic group. This opposition sticks to the idea of a Basque world, which by nature is intrinsically essentialist, fixed, tightly closed, and atemporal. That is why, whether it be about linguistic, political, cultural or identity issues, associations which are against Basque nationalism lean on this representation. This allows them to maintain that the officialisation claim is an authoritarist and ethnicist idea wished for by a minority, the activist Basque minority. According to Christian Aguerre, formerly editor of the weekly La Semaine du Pays Basque and, in July 2004, a member of the Lissagaray Circle:

One thing is certain, that is that people cannot be forced to speak Basque except within a totalitarian structure. If Basques have to go through the obligation of learning and using this language to hold down a job as is the case in the Basque Autonomous Community [...] I say no, and secular laymen say no because it’s the antimony of liberty. If the day comes when people will have to learn Basque to be employed by Bidart Town Hall, quite a few will bugger off. And the Basques will remain among themselves. Co-officialisation of Basque leads to a situation where in order to get a job, you have to be bilingual, and I don’t want that. I don’t want my children and grandchildren to have to learn something they don’t want in order to earn the right to an economic living.

Interview with Christian Aguerre in July 2004

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9 Here I mean by the expression Basque world the representation space which refers to all that is felt, thought and/or perceived as being Basque.
According to him, the fact of the French language being the language of the Republic doesn’t exclude other languages. But he thinks that parity among languages is incompatible with the principle of equal treatment for each citizen: “So what are we going to do? Civil servants who only speak Basque will be needed, well at least who use it. Others will say: ‘what about us gascons...Can you imagine the set-up, it’s just madness!’” (ibid).

In the last statement, a slip of the tongue followed by immediate awareness of this slip are witness to the passionate discourse which characterizes many opponents to the institutionalisation of Basque language. How can this language be made a publicly recognized means of exchange when that which is thought to come within the Basque world is perceived only in terms of exclusiveness: “who only speak Basque?” A potential Basque-speaking future civil servant is thought of as only speaking Basque because...he speaks Basque. This statement is witness to a fanciful view of the contemporary Basque-speaker’s condition, all the more so because in the Basque Country, cases of monolingual Basque speakers are very rare. Ignoring this fact, Christian Aguerre sees claims to systematic bilingual education in state schools as “the antinomy of liberty.” In this case, the idea of liberty relates to “freedom of conscience” which he links to “secularism.” He considers that the outlook of having to learn Basque in order to be a civil servant in the Basque Country is “violent coercion” (Ibid.). For it to be compulsory to teach and use the French language within the public domain is not a “freedom of conscience” problem for Christian Aguerre since the French language has a national, civic, and universal vocation, it’s the language of the Republic and, what’s more...it’s his language. Here it must be stressed that beyond denouncing the link between Basque language and Basque nationalism, refusing to accept the institutionalisation of euskara is based on a postulate: the Basque language is the language of the Basques and not of the Basque Country, it is the language of a minority, the Basque ethnic group, and not that of a territory, the Northern Basque Country, which doesn’t exist in the eyes of the law. It is clear to see here that stigmatization of territorial cultural minorities finds justification in the idea that so-called “ethnic” groups are intrinsically unable to make mobilizing categories for progressist...
social processes out of their linguistic claims, processes which go beyond the issues of identity rights (Appadurai, 2006). In the French case, this stigmatization happens under the pretext of defending republican universalism, an ideal which is said to be challenged by regionalist localism (Pierre, 2010). Now Walter Benn Michaels shows that globalization also leads to another phenomenon: a tendency shared in all corners of the earth to valuing linguistic diversity (Michaels, 2006). Recourse to languages as mobilizing categories lets us state a social situation problem in terms of linguistic minorities/majorities and no longer exclusively in terms of ethnic minorities/majorities.

Systemized Bilingual Teaching: Cultural Egalitarianism?

In this context, Richard Irazusta, a member of *Abertzaleen Batasuna*, stated in October 2004 that the officialisation concept means that the Basque language will benefit from the setting up of a systemized bilingual education aimed at all the school-age population in the Basque Country. (Interview with Richard Irazusta). So behind this concept the idea emerges that the Basque language must ideally become the language of all the country’s inhabitants, and not of those who come from Basque-speaking circles and/or of those who were born in the Basque Country. It must become the language of “Basque Country Territory,” promoted by the “Basque Country 2010” territorial prospect Development Scheme started by the State, and not the language of an ethnic minority or of an officially recognized political attitude. That is why, from a symbolic point of view, the plan for systematic teaching of *euskara* in state schools is considered to be an answer to the recurrent accusation of ethnicism. This accusation takes its inspiration from a vulgarized history of Basque

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11 *Abertzaleen Batasuna* [Union of patriots] is the most important left-wing abertzale party by the number of activists and of elected representatives in the French Basque Country. It regularly gets between 10 and 15% of the polls. It demands the recognition of the whole of the Basque Country within Europe based on a federation of peoples and not of nation-states. More specifically, it works towards getting a first institutional recognition of Iparralde by demanding, in particular, the creation of a Basque Country *département*.

12 As from July 1992, an official invitation from Bayonne’s *sous-préfet* was addressed to political elected representatives, to representatives from educational, cultural, social and economic circles, as well as from different public services, to undertake a prospective and participative thinking process about the French Basque Country’s future towards 2010. A vast enterprise of territorial prospecting and of canvassing civil society was then launched. Two comittees were created : the *Conseil des Elus du Pays Basque* and the *Conseil de Développement du Pays Basque* (Ahedo, 2003 ; Chaussier, 1996 ; Jacob, 1994 ; Ségas, 2004).
ethnogenesis where the amalgam between Basque identity and essentialism dominates; a mixture which stems from the myth of Basque singularity.\textsuperscript{13}

The systemized teaching of Basque, i.e. an idea of the Basque language as a potential common and public idiom, allows it to become somehow disethnicised. According to Basque-related circles, normalized teaching would automatically depoliticize the Basque language because the fact of learning it would no longer depend on parental choice but on the language’s public status and therefore only on living and going to school in the Basque Country. This model is seen as the means of going beyond the idea whereby, to learn Basque, be it from a very early age or as an adult, you must come from Basque-speaking circles, have Basque origins and/or come from an \textit{abertzale} family.\textsuperscript{14} Therefore the officialisation idea is in no way linked to the idea of \textit{minority}, neither from a legal point of view, nor from a representation point of view.

This sort of reasoning is relatively recent among the \textit{abertzale} world. Indeed, the claim to a right to equality is not at all the same as the classic claim to a right to difference. The right to difference discourse enters into the game of the system it challenges: by implicitly accepting the legitimacy of a \textit{norm} – that is by agreeing to the regionalized and ethnicised version of the Basque fact –, it gives itself a narrow communitarian dimension. In some way, claiming the right to difference amounts to reading the world through the viewpoint of the birth of the French State: a hierarchy was established between mobile citizens’ national temporal culture and tightly closed ethnic atemporal regional culture. To make the notion of “difference” a right amounts to agreeing to the opposition between the so-called “political” sphere and the so-called “ethnic” sphere, as well to all its derivatives – nation/region, society with State/society without State, society with writing/society without writing, society with history/society without history, civilized/barbarian, public sphere/private sphere...In the Basque case, the pervasiveness of these antagonisms – making a world view – is all the stronger because its central justification is a common belief in the a-temporality of the \textit{Basque world}, a belief in the existence of the \textit{Basque ethnic

\textsuperscript{13} Here I understand the concept of myth to be the meaning given by Roland Barthes, namely that myth is “a system of communication, it’s a message” (Barthes, 1957). Also, by the myth of Basque singularity, I mean the historically built narrative according to which the \textit{Basque world} is an enclosed world or, in, other words, an ethnic group.

\textsuperscript{14} A survey by the \textit{Institut Culturel Basque}, carried out between 2004–2005 over the whole of the Basque country and entitled \textit{Pratiques culturelles et identités collectives en Pays Basque}, showed that amongst the Iparralde population this representation of basque identity was the most widespread: <http://www.eke.org/fr/eke/gure_ekintzak/batek_mila/batek_mila_ekintzak/inkesta>.
group, an anthropological category born in the XIXth century. So the claim to a right to difference is necessarily stamped with classical representations which a “regional culture” should fit into. On the contrary, in the case of the claim to a right to equality, the norm, in this case the institutional status quo, is challenged. The implementation of the right to equality would imply a fair treatment of both the Basque Country’s historical languages that is to say a co-official status of French and Basque in the public domain.

Conclusion

Basque-related movements are trying to apply to euskara the idea of “territorial identity”: its officialisation would imply that in the French Basque Country everyone would learn and be able potentially to use French and Basque. By this territorial logic, nationalist formations and, more generally, the cultural movement, are trying to place themselves within a logic which is far removed from any essentialism by claiming an extra right which relates to citizenship and not to ethnicity. Semantically, this position is based on the fact that euskara is an objective datum giving rise to subjectivity, it comes outside the idea of atemporality even if it is the origin of its development conditions. In fact, on the one hand it allows contemporary basque militantism to remain part of local cosmologic tradition and on the other hand to create a parallel structure towards the dynamics of freeing basque culture from the water-tight myth of basque ethnicicity. Basque criticism of culturalo-linguistic uniformisation movement born from the globalization phenomenon therefore involves an attempt to rehabilitate the ancestral link between language and group membership. To answer sociolinguistic issues about increased individual and collective spatial mobility, the militant basque experience appeals today to the modernity of traditional data. By claiming that euskara should enter the public domain, basque militantism is putting forward an update of the symbolic character of language as much as making local culture open to all.

So the opponents to officialisation of the Basque language are, paradoxically, those who place themselves (all the while challenging it) within an ethnic and essentialist logic: by claiming that the only people to learn Basque will be those who wish to, they are thus marking out the community of Basques, the community of Basque speakers within the Basque Country itself. To make the basque language a public implement and a shared value within a territory makes no sense for these associations to the extent that they consider basque culture to be intrinsically “regional” and the basque group to be, by nature, narrowly communitarian, “ethnic,” and therefore tightly closed.
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