

The Basque Contention: Ethnicity, Politics, Violence, by Ludger Mees

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The book *The Basque Contention: Ethnicity, Politics, Violence* (2020), by Ludger Mees, is a very complete account of the political history of the Basque Country, ranging from the Late Middle Ages until 2019. Considering the vast literature on the matter, the author offers a distinctive look at Basque nationalism and its rich, complex history. With several books and articles published on Basque political history, the well-known German author is a Basque-speaking academic expert who has the advantage of having a closer, intimate view of the topic. Mees has lived and taught in the Basque Country for decades.

In his book, the author uses a contentious politics approach, taking into account the unique Basque ethnic features. The Basque conflict is presented in three different dimensions: a political dimension rooted in the Basque right to self-determination and independence; a social dimension, related to a framework of competitive identities and ideologies; and an ethical dimension, regarding the debate over the legitimacy of the use of violence to achieve political goals.

In the initial chapters, Mees presents the historical context of the Spanish state as a framework where Basque ethnic particularism and later, political nationalism, are inserted. Although the author rejects Spanish exceptionalism, he accepts the particularities of the Spanish nation-building process, which was impacted by several factors that interacted with the development of a modern, liberal nationalism in the Basque Country.

Following Anthony D. Smith's ethno-symbolism approach, Mees guides the reader through a Basque pre-modern ethnogenesis panorama, between the 17th and 19th centuries, before the creation of Basque nationalism. The author examines the Basque cultural revival and the creation of *fuero* – a plural political movement that didn't seek independence but rather the preservation of earlier institutions of self-government.

Mees describes how capitalist modernity impacted Basque cultural particularism through the industrialization of the Basque economy, which resulted in massive immigration of Spaniards from other regions. In this context, moderate *fuero* was replaced by nationalism and socialism with the formation of modern political parties and organizations like the PNV (Basque Nationalist Party), led by Sabino Arana, the founding father of the Basque nationalist movement. The author describes a context of socio-economic instability and foreign proletariat street riots, where Arana's rhetoric of ethnic appeal, social Catholicism, agrarian romanticism, xenophobia and racism flourished. At this historical moment came the creation of the modern concept of the Basque nation and all its key elements (like the *Ikurriña* flag or even the very name of Euskadi).

Mees explores the shift to a more moderate PNV after Arana's death. In the first two decades of the 20th century, and after internal divisions between pro-independence radicals and moderate upper-middle-class party members, the PNV presented a political programme that was pragmatic and ambiguous enough to bring together the heterogenic universe of Basques nationalists.

Afterwards, the author analyses the charismatic leadership of the PNV under José Antonio Aguirre, before and during the Spanish Civil War. In this period the PNV moved from right-wing to the centre, since left-wing Republicans supported the implementation of the Basque Country Statute of Autonomy. This political stance positioned Basque nationalism alongside the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, while putting a target on the Basque Country's back. The consequence was a terror campaign made by Francoist troops and their allies, who destroyed Guernica, subjugated the region, and almost annihilated the Basque nationalist project.

During the time of Franco's dictatorship, Mees explores Basque contention in two branches: the Basque government in exile, which lobbied against Francoism from abroad without much success, provided that Franco's regime was

understood as an ally against communism in the context of the Cold War; and the foundation of ETA considering an absent PNV in the local context, an oppressive regime, and a second industrial revolution that included more social, economic and cultural disruptions.

Although the author stresses the importance of Basque political processes and an analysis of social movements beyond the political violence linked with ETA, he recognises that the outbreak of political violence mediatized local political dynamics. ETA's new nationalism included elements of anti-colonialism, anti-elitism and socialism, supported by an armed struggle as necessary means. The 1960s and 1970s are characterized by several internal tensions and organizational transformations, namely the important split between ETA political-military and ETA-military. As Mees points out, ETA was the centre of attention in Basque politics through its violent operations, and it was considered the face of independentism, while the PNV was quietly planning a return to action inside Spanish borders.

After the description of the political transition in Spain, where King Juan Carlos managed to conduct peaceful negotiations between opposing political parties, Mees gives a clear picture of the great division inside the Basque nationalist movement with unstable outcomes: the failed negotiations of a national front in 1977; and the Chiberta Meetings, which exacerbated the internal conflict between the two branches of ETA. A key political party, with close ties with ETA, was born in this time: HB (Herri Batasuna). Aside from the political parties, Mees depicts a thriving ETA that, similarly to the early Arana's PNV, was able to create a supportive socio-political network ranging from unions, rock bands, youth groups, ecologists, and other civic organizations.

In the early years of Spanish democracy and in the 1980s, Mees examines the PNV's rise to power and dominance in Basque politics through several electoral moments like the constitutional referendum, the referendum on the Basque Statute of Autonomy and the following regional elections. The PNV regional autonomy agenda achieved better political results than the HB unbending self-determination demands. Furthermore, the PNV gained political capital with both the new Spanish political establishment and a substantial number of Basque citizens, by consolidating democracy in the region and delegitimizing political violence. Under the leadership of Carlos Garaikoetxea and, subsequently, José Antonio Ardanza, the hegemonic PNV

had the political power to carry out autonomous institutionalization in several dimensions, such as creating a Basque police force or public television and the promotion of the Basque language.

Mees continues his Basque nationalism journey through the 1990s, with the clash over anti-terrorist strategy between the Spanish government under the leadership of José María Aznar and the Basque government led by José Antonio Ibarretxe. The author describes a polarization of politics inflamed by the right-wing media, which tried to position the PNV also as a guilty element in the broader field of violent nationalism, where ETA and HB were present.

In the 1990s, Mees also portrays the continuous ETA terror campaign that led to massive popular outcry (the so-called “Spirit of Ermua”), while a less-moderate PNV tried unsuccessfully to lead a pan-nationalist alliance supported by the nationalist left.

Mees begins his analysis of the 21st century by recalling the restored hopes based on the openness of José Luis Zapatero’s government to negotiation. In this framework, the author explains the first step of a major political shift in which the Basque National Liberation Movement would be led by the politics of Batasuna instead of ETA violence –the formal agreement between the Basque Socialist party and Batasuna headed by Arnaldo Otegi. The same political and civic Basque National Liberation Movement that once supported or tolerated ETA was rejecting political violence.

Besides the juridical and police pressure against ETA, also international high-profile figures and organizations made important lobbying efforts for the end of violence. The outcome was the 2011 ETA announcement of a definitive cessation of its armed activity, followed by its historic dissolution in 2018.

The author analyses the political context in the aftermath of ETA’s end, unfolding the same balance of power plus some new features: the new left-wing party Podemos overtaking the PP and the Socialists; a return of the moderate PNV, focused on social and economic issues; and a more institutional and pragmatic *abertzale* (patriotic) left led by Bildu.

Mees ends his book with thoughts on post-ETA Basque political tendencies, surrounded by an unstable present, where catharsis hasn’t made its way yet, considering the timid recognition and lack of apologies to the conflict

victims; and a dangerous future, regarding the renaissance of identitarian and nationalist politics in Spain, namely with tensions between the Catalan independence movement and right-wing Spanish parties.

Overall, Ludger Mees makes a thorough examination of Basque nationalism, guiding the reader through its major events, dynamic political processes and key actors. Mees makes a comprehensive analysis of the PNV's leading role in the growth and consolidation of Basque nationalism. This matter is one of the strongest accomplishments of his work, but the author overlooks the consequences of the PNV's hegemonic presence in Basque politics. The PNV is in fact the most successful political party in the Basque Country's history, but the author misses the key debate on the absence of political alternatives with access to governmental power which has an impact on the quality of Basque democratic debate and, therefore, on the economy, society and identity of a nation that today uses —not by chance— the flag and the national anthem created by the PNV.