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FROM ETHNIC TO ETHIC: APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

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A running baton

Let me start with an image that is telling, I think, of the complex and dynamic nature of the links between collective identity and linguistic awareness.

This is Bilbao, my hometown, exactly one year ago. Two runners cross the line that marks the arrival of the Korrika, an exhibition race held bi-annually in the Basque Country since 1980 to celebrate, support and spread the Basque language. The race is not a competitive one. Rather, it technically consists in passing a wooden carved baton from hand to hand, until it arrives at the finish line after 11 days of running. People run or march non stop in relays, day and night, under sun (rarely) and rain (quite more likely), from tiny villages in the countryside to the sprawling crowded big cities and industrial areas, all around the Basque Country. Last year it went on from Urepel, in France, to Bilbao on the Spanish side of the border, covering around 2300 kilometers.

The baton is adorned with the Basque flag, and contains a message which is read at the end of the festival. It has always been considered an honor to hold the baton, which is why all kinds of organizations and entities, both public and private, "buy" kilometers to have their representatives carrying it for a 1 kilometer relay. The baton itself has become a symbol of the Basque language, and is replicated in parallel events organized around the five continents, including those taking place in London, Mexico City, New York, San Francisco, Berlin, Buenos Aires, Geneva, Madrid, Barcelona, Dublin, Edinburgh, Liverpool and even Soweto and Shanghai.

There is nothing particularly original behind the idea of the Korrika. Similar initiatives take place to promote other languages, including the Rith that runs through Ireland. What is surprising is that the growing number of its participants, that reached an estimated 750.000 people last year, has traditionally been higher than the actual number of Basque speakers. As a matter of fact, it just seems reasonable to wonder why any human group would invest their effort to recuperate a language that, after all, most of its members do not speak (let alone use in their daily lives), as it is still the case for nearly two thirds of the Basque population. Especially considering that practically all Basque speakers are bilingual and can fluently communicate in Spanish -or French in the Northern part of the country.

Collective identity and modernity

This obvious question makes us face up to the link between attempts at reversing language shift and the building of a national identity. In this respect, the Basque case highlights the complex and multifarious nature of constructing, performing and negotiating collective identities, both at the societal and individual levels.

In this sense, I will look at the concept of collective identity as both sociological and historical. Moreover, I will follow a postmodern perspective, stressing out that the core of identity is located in the individual's relation and interaction with others. Such vision appears to be particularly useful to understand the changing nature of collective identities as historical constructs that are not static. The definitions that social actors make of their collective identity usually differ from one historical era to another, and may even vary according to time and place. However, such change has historically been slow, alternating between fairly stable moments (marked by the extension of a certain definition of group identity) and other times when such ideas have been subject to change and redefinition.

That is probably why we do not have a consensus on what being Basque really means or on what grounds people can define themselves as Basque or "something else", in the sense that individuals identify themselves with a group that differentiates between "us" and "them". Here we must refer to the well known debate between primordialism and constructivism:

- As you know, primordialists tend to argue that each group establishes its identity thanks to building "stones" that all together constitute a wall, which is society. These "stones" are constitutive features (cultures, traditions, histories, physical traits, language repertoires, religion, etc.) that do not change, and tend to be fairly evenly distributed within the group.
- Conversely, constructivists view the persisting features in the formation and continuity of national identities against a backdrop of myths, memories, values, traditions and symbols, which can be invoked in new ways for new purposes at different points in time. Therefore, these identities, according to constructivist theorists, may not only fade away as modernization and growing cultural integration develop, but they may even be subject to constant redefinition.

This latter approach helps us to understand the changing role of Euskara (or Basque language) as the definitions of Basque identity evolved, and went from emphasizing ethnic or biological elements to framing Basque difference in socio-cultural terms: in other words, switching from considering it to be a distinctive sign of a certain race, to viewing it as the cultural value of a community, as a shared asset embodying political significance.

Euskara becomes political

Attempts to promote and to defend our national language have a long history in the Basque Country. Prior to the eighteenth century, there were numerous examples of a linguistic consciousness and of more or less successful attempts to stimulate Euskara's development and extension. It was not until the nineteenth century, however, that this linguistic awareness acquired a new dimension as it blended with nationalist currents of thought sweeping across Europe at the time. The evolution of Basque identity is not an isolated phenomenon: similar processes have taken place elsewhere, and undergone several stages:

- A first stage corresponds to a kind of romantic rediscovery of national identity through the folklore, culture and language, but with no political aim.
- Phase B is characterized by the agitation of a group of intellectuals, who, inspired by the awareness raised in phase A, claim a national idea and formulate it in terms of political emancipation against the backdrop of modernity. In other words, it's not the nation that makes nationalism, it is the other way around.
- In phase C, this political and cultural agitation gets further nurtured in political parties that end up gaining massive support. In our case, this phase started when the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) became a relevant political actor after the provincial elections in 1917.

From the very beginning of this political articulation, language was identified as a major factor in the Basque collective consciousness. The decline of the language was denounced, and all the factors leading to this situation were carefully analyzed: the disdain for Euskara among the ruling classes, its absence from the educational system, the improvement of communications that made population movements easier, the poor adaptation of the language to modern life, the lack of a unified standard, or how little the lower classes valued their own use of the Basque language.

However, early attempts to define Basque identity in national terms tended to lean on racial, rather than cultural terms. Basque nationality rested on five elements, namely: race, language, government and laws, character and customs, and historic personality, with race being the fundamental, indisputable element. From the point of view of ethnic characteristics, they claimed, the Basque people constitute a race different from the rest, with both their history and their language demonstrating the dynamic and creative nature of the Basque national character.

From this perspective, language was just one of the features that proved the continued existence of a group of racially distinct individuals, who through time had occupied the same territory and had used the same communicative code: Euskara. In this context, teaching Basque speakers to read and write in Basque was not a priority, let alone promoting the

language among sectors of the public who did not speak it. The value of the language, more than its intrinsic worth as a means of communication or as an agent to transmit scientific knowledge, rested on its capacity to shape a collective mentality. Language represented a unifying link, a nucleus, a soul, and a central value in the collective consciousness of the Basque ethnic group.

Democracy and struggle for cultural identity

Franco's dictatorship introduced a systematic repression of Basque national symbols. Public spaces were particularly singled out for repression. The prohibition to use the language in schools or on the streets meant Euskara had to withdraw to the more personal confines of private life and the family. At the same time, the arrival of a very high number of Spanish-speaking immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s accelerated the decline in the use of Basque language, both in terms of geographical space and social environment.

However, while repression was taking place, and as a response to it, the task of recovering Basque and Basque literature took place silently. Years later, this would encourage a socially significant cultural recovery, a cultural renaissance that laid the foundations for Euskara's unification, modernization, and normalization. From about 1960 onwards, the creation of Basque schools helped reclaiming the Basque language as a vehicle for communication and breaking the secular isolation between Euskara and the education system. Finally, the will to adapt the Basque language to the needs of a modern industrial and urban society allowed Euskara to enter into both the literary and scientific fields that had until then remained almost completely out of its realm.

Here is the key: The fact that this process of linguistic and cultural recovery became a natural part of the struggle for Human Rights and against dictatorship brought about a major change in the political articulation of the Basque national consciousness. This process ultimately led to a redefinition that discarded other elements on which identifying Basque difference had once rested. It gradually came to be seen that nationality, or the differential nature of the Basque people, could not fall back on biological ethnic arguments. As a result, language acquired a preeminent position as *the* basic component, above all others, of Basque collective identity. Most tellingly, as the promotion and knowledge of the language grew, so did a collective sense of Basque national identity. And the connection between the Basque language and the Basque national feeling continues strengthening up to our days.

However, the changing process of Basque national identity shaping is far from being finished. And the role that language awareness is bound to play in it will depend on the ways Basque society responds to a number of questions that are being debated right now. To finish up this presentation, I should like to outline two of them:

- Firstly, when a community defines itself in terms of being a national political community, language usually ends up acquiring a political value. It is surely no coincidence, then, that social groups identify themselves as speakers of a certain language. Indeed, in Euskara, the same word expresses being Basque and speaking the language: *euskaldun*. However, when the symbolic value of a language becomes more relevant than its communicative dimension, the affective relationship to that symbol takes precedence over the actual use of the language, and becomes one of the main standards against which one's participation in the collectivity is measured. This is how an element that is not shared—or rather, a communicative code that is not dominated—by all the members of a given society can still become a defining element for that whole community. There is no doubt that Euskara enjoys a very high level of symbolic acceptance within Basque society. However, is that enough to keep it alive? While the efforts for recuperating the language keep failing to promote its use in everyday life, chances are that the situation of Euskara will tend towards a model characterized by widespread knowledge, but minimal use.
- Secondly, Basque national feeling is complex because it incorporates apparently contradictory aspects: primordialism and constructionism, objective characteristics like Euskara and subjective ones based on cultural and civic (not ethnicist) values. And we cannot forget that its constant redefinition takes place against the backdrop of the globalization/anti-globalization debate and its challenges. Fishman's ideas apply here, when he states: "The global and the specific are now more commonly found together, as partial (rather than exclusive) identities, because they each contribute to different social, emotional and cognitive needs that are co-present in the same individuals and societies...". Now, I find these words challenging as they keep us reframing the role of the Basque language in relation to the shaping of our national identity. And all the more so, considering that ours is not a bilingual setting any more: over 40 languages are spoken in Euskadi nowadays. Should this multilingualism lead us to rethink the linking of national identity with the language spoken in the territory?

Behind such a classical political claim as the right of Basque citizenship to decide about its future as a nation, there coexist demands for individual and collective empowerment, brought forward by all sorts of social movements that share a commitment to express the community's political will in Basque. This multifaceted nature of that political will is well illustrated by the multiple colors that the Korrika runners introduced into their baton, as shown in the video, as a symbol of the message to be carried around the country. My hope is that we will be able to incorporate all those colors, together with all the civic values brought forward for the promotion of the Basque language into the ever changing nature of our national identity. As the T-shirt of one of the baton holders of the last Korrika read: "Euskara is our only free territory".