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Reclaiming Basque: Language, Nation and Cultural Activism

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From the Introduction:

Introduction

In 1963, a group of idealistic youth who had recently formed the revolutionary group "Basqueland and Freedom", declared in their magazine Zutik! [Arise]: "The day that Basque ceases to be a spoken language, the Basque nation will have died and, in a few years, the descendants of today's Basques will be simply Spanish or French" (Jáuregui 1981:160). After the death of the dictator Francisco Franco almost twenty years later, Spain was reconfigured into a quasi-federal political system of autonomous communities. Soon after achieving its autonomy, the newly-created regional Basque government, representing a much more moderate sector of the political spectrum than Basqueland and Freedom, nevertheless expressed a similar sense of compelling urgency about Basque language revival in its first political program: "The Basque community has become aware in a gradually more intense and, given the circumstances, more desperate fashion, of the capital importance of Basque, understood simultaneously as a national language, as a fundamental sign of our community, and as a genuine instrument of thought and creativity. . . . Today we are completely convinced that Euzkadi will never be fully realized, in the full sense of the word, if the Basque language dies" (Eusko Jauriaritza 1980:72-73). Yet another twenty years later, on the cusp of the new millennium, this commitment was renewed once again as thousands of citizens in a coordinated simulcast event filled four soccer stadiums in capital cities across the Basque territory to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Basque language campaign Bai Euskari!, [Yes to the Basque Language!]

In this corner of the Western Pyrenees known as the Basque Country people have disagreed about many things. They have disagreed about the kind of society they want to build, its proper name, its geographic boundaries, about whether it should be socialist or capitalist, whether they want to have independence and what that might mean. They have argued bitterly over the legitimacy of political violence and also suffered deeply its consequences. But one issue about which there has been a remarkably strong degree of consensus over the years is that the Basque language, Euskara, is a valuable heritage that should be protected and reclaimed.

This book explores the pursuit of that conviction, examining some of the changing methods, modes of representation and discourse of the Basque language revitalization movement as it was first expressed at the end of the nineteenth century and again when it reemerged as a social movement in the waning years of the Franco regime. Drawing on the analysis of historical documents, political treatises, and my own direct observations and interviews conducted through ethnographic fieldwork over the course of more than twenty years, I explore in the chapters ahead why people have thought it important to save Basque and how they have gone about it. As the opening quotations make clear, these efforts at language revival have been unfolding alongside and sometimes at the very center stage of the simultaneous Basque nationalist struggle for autonomy. For some language advocates the two struggles are inseparable. For others, they are issues that should be kept clearly distinct. We will look at these and many other debates language advocates have about what affects the social life of Basque and what it means to speak a modern language. The principal protagonists behind these actions call themselves euskaltzaleak, Basque language advocates. Though many are of

Basque ethnic heritage, others are not. And while many language advocates speak Basque natively, some learned Basque as a second language, and yet others may not know Basque well at all. Euskalzaleak are best thought of not as an ethnic group or as a linguistic community in the usual sense of the term, but as a political affinity group. Coming from various class and social locations, intellectuals, artists, musicians, linguists, educators, parents and young people of varying walks of life, euskalzaleak make up a polymorphous social movement. Some of them have gone on to become a part of official language planning efforts working in town halls, provincial or regional governments, while others work in a wide array of civic organizations that are collectively referred to as euskalgintza. A compound word composed of the root euskal [Basque] and the suffix gintza [production, construction], the term euskalgintza conveys an understanding of language revival as an active and ongoing process of collective making and remaking Basque. Euskalgintza is the main focus of this book and by all accounts, the results of this movement have been nothing short of impressive.