

## 1.2. When underground becomes (alter) mainstream: the commercial as transgression

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### Abstract

In the Basque Country, the combination of a Basque ethnic culture together with subcultural expressions, and the joint mobilisation of them in the different conflicts -particularly the national one- by the social and political movements, has favoured processes of cultural and identity reconstruction. This has also favoured processes of (counter) institutionalisation, in the political realm and in material infrastructures, which have granted them particular power and a lasting nature, to the point of disputing the cultural hegemony of cultural products on the market. It crystallized an aesthetic mode of counterculture and a soundtrack. In that sense, the 'Basque Radical Rock' becomes in a kind of Basque (counter) mainstream, mainstream for some sectors and geographies, in dispute with the commercial or 'Spanish' ones. With Basque rock consolidated as counter-hegemonic, the role of rhythms such as commercial music or reggaeton becomes reversed and they acquire, in countercultural environments, a certain transgressive possibility. This is what some feminist and queer groups have explored. This reflection criticises the aesthetic closure, but also the sexism of Basque rock, moral taboos about sex, or a certain ethnocentric moral superiority with regard to some rhythms, supporting dance and even a right to moments of frivolity. Transgressive praxis involved a provocative and disconcerting insertion of commercial songs, or even traditional Spanish music, at venues playing Basque rock, and passionate reggaeton dancing between young women.

**Keywords:** Basque Country, music, transgression, counterculture, gender, mainstream.

### Music, protest politics and identity in the Basque country

In the last 50 years, the Basque Country has witnessed major counterculture phenomena. These have not only openly disputed cultural hegemony, but actually managed to achieve it. From the 1960s, traces of traditional Basque language and culture acted as powerful magnets, since they were able to carry out countercultural symbolic apertures, and blend with new cultural phenomena, giving rise to interesting mutations (Amezaga, 1995; Larrinaga, 2014). This is clear particularly in the field of Basque pop music, as a privileged terrain of symbolic action, given that it is the new cultural phenomenon of the period, able to mobilise feelings and emotions (Gabilondo, 2009; Larrinaga, 2014; Urla, 2001).

In a context of crisis, unemployment and continuing repression, the decade of the 1980s in the Basque Country saw the emergence of a youth resistance movement, organised around punk and "Basque Radical Rock". This movement undertook a spatial redefinition ("the street", certain bars, festive spaces, a wave of squatting to create *gaztetxes* - occupied youth centres) and was manifested in a constellation of small record labels and expressive communication channels (fanzines, magazines, free radio stations, music, concerts, style...). In a cultural sense, this movement involved the development of a "Basque radical culture", a social, political and cultural phenomenon that disrupts the categories of political subjectivity established by the framework of political-institutional narratives that make up the social space.

This radical culture maintained a special interaction with a Basque-speaking culture which, because of its subordinate character with regard to the dominant (Spanish-speaking) one, is also structured as a popular culture. This relationship was reflected in the growing role of the Basque language in the music, or in the -contentious- attempts to frame the movement in the (contra) hegemonic mobilising narratives of the Basque nationalist left.

In the context of the dispute for hegemony between the Basque national and Spanish national narratives, this frame alignment provided a very fertile context for cultural creativity, and for the (re)construction of the Basque identity and the conception of Basque culture itself. It crystallized an aesthetic mode of subculture and a soundtrack.

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In that sense, the punk and the 'Basque Radical Rock' becomes in a kind of Basque (counter) mainstream, mainstream for some sectors and geographies, in dispute with the commercial or 'Spanish' ones.

### **Euskal Kantagintza Berria: countercultural ethnogenesis**

In the decade of the 1960s, the Basque music-cultural group Ez Dok Amairu -with figures such as Mikel Laboa, Xabier Lete, Lourdes Iriondo and Benito Lertxundi- was the main focus of a wide-ranging musical movement known as *Euskal Kantagintza Berria* ('New Basque Music') and which included other pioneering figures such as Michel Labeguerie, Imanol... It was very much open to the influence of international music currents, represented by figures such as George Brassens and other new *chanson* singers in France; Peter Seeger, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Woody Guthrie in the United States; Violeta Parra, Atahualpa Yupanqui, Daniel Viglietti and Víctor Jara in Latin America; and the *Nova Cançó* in Catalonia of Lluís Llach, Raimon, Francesc Pi de la Serra, Maria del Mar Bonet... (Amezaga, 1995; Larrinaga, 2014).

One of its main figures, Xabier Lete, distinguishes at least three expressions in this movement. Firstly, that of those who understood it as a cultural recovery of the Basque language. Secondly, those for whom it was, above all, a national recovery in the political sense. Finally, that of those who considered music as an important part of a Basque aesthetic renewal project, including the sculptor Jorge Oteiza. All of these expressions appear at the same time and also mingled in the context of *Euskal Kantagintza Berria*, from the aesthetic renewal project led by Oteiza to the cultural front approaches of the armed organisation ETA (Amezaga, 1995; Lete, 1977).

The cultural front granted a central importance to the language and its recovery. Opposing the racial and genealogical version of traditional nationalism, ETA's alternative proposal considered the language to be a key element in the definition of the Basque identity and nation (Amezaga, 1995; Larrinaga, 2007).

Together with the cultural recovery movements, from 1962 strong conflicts were registered in the field of labour. The debates would be reflected within ETA, which, at its second assembly, declared itself openly socialist, introducing a heterogeneity into the national narrative by which class and nation were identified as two aspects of the same event (Sáenz de Viguera, 2007). Although at times contradictory, this facilitated an absorption of nationalism by a working class mainly made up of Spanish immigrants (Herreros and López, 2013). Factory struggles also moved into the urban space in the form of neighbourhood movements, demanding improvements in living conditions (Estebaranz, 2006; Herreros and López, 2013; Larrinaga, 2014). A new national/ethnic redefinition would take place: Basques are those who live or work in the Basque Country.

The creation of a new Basque community nationalism took place particularly in the three years from August 1968 to mid-1971, being defined especially in anti-repressive terms, above all after the Burgos court case and the wave of solidarity that occurred around Europe (Larrinaga, 2014; Letamendia, 1994). Although clandestine, this new nationalism became hegemonic; its identity is fundamentally transgressive and anti-repressive.

Spheres that belong to the State, such as education and cultural promotion, start to be expressed alternatively and from a Basque national viewpoint. Thus many actions that took place in the field of culture were private, but with a desire to make them public; belonging to the market, but with a national-activist intention (Larrinaga, 2014; Letamendia, 1994).

The Basque language, group consumption and reproduction of elements of Basque culture -whether traditional or in its new manifestations- and the Basque flag, the *Ikurriña*, banned since 1939, became symbols of this new identity (Larrinaga, 2014; Letamendia, 1994). This identity had a particularly emotional expression in music, and so music festivals turned into a kind of collective catharsis.

Songs, in effect, became a medium for launching new messages of hope, justice, peace and freedom, of reconstruction and dissemination of a renewed culture in the Basque language and a new identity, denouncing injustice, expressing the need to create a people's conscience, transmitting hope and bringing literature to the people. The songs themselves wrote the narrative, and festivals achieved vital importance; they became places where the link with the social movements was tightened, constituting a pretext for people to meet together. The major music festivals were a common mobilising resource in anti-nuclear campaigns and those in favour of the Basque language or political amnesty. This relationship would broaden the vision and repertoire of themes of the *Euskal Kantagintza Berria*, from cultural or national demands to a more political orientation (liberties) or in favour of general progressiveness or internationalism (Amezaga, 1995).

Roberto Moso, the lead singer of one of the first punk groups, and one of the few who sang in Basque, remembers what the exciting atmosphere of these festivals meant for young rock fans, and the feeling they offered of being close to danger:

There were gigs broken up violently by the Civil Guard because people had shown Ikurriñas (until they were legalised in '77) or for shouting "separatist" slogans. There were many more -most of them- when nothing happened, but still you could smell the adrenaline. There were rumours going round about patrols just about to arrive, or about the presence of infiltrators, and the singer-songwriters also liked to play at agitating the masses or, if appropriate, at being sedating orators when faced with, very justified, popular disturbances. We weren't mad about the music but those events were really exciting, kind of like a new type of mass, and there were lots of *kaikus* [traditional Basque jackets], beards and stickers (...). So the *jaialdis* [festivals] were boisterous, full of energy and girls that you would put your arm around to sing along and everyone would sway and sing night hymns and on top of that they were supposed to be dangerous, subversive and even "historical". (Moso, 2004: 47-48)

The folk style, unlike commercial pop -which was not a style favoured by those singing in Basque-, was consistent and emphasised the link with global counterculture, in turn linked to social movements (Eyeran and Jamison, 1998). So global counterculture and the new Basque ethnogenesis coincided, giving rise to a new cognitive framework that was young, modern and Basque-speaking. The success of this symbolic operation, which transformed the Basque language from something associated with the countryside into a symbol of modernity, was only possible in as much as it was countercultural, transgressive and ground-breaking (Larrinaga, 2014).

The town and city councils at this time, some more willingly than others, were handing over the powers to organise *fiestas* (a city, town or neighbourhood's yearly festivities) to people's committees, which had representatives from cultural and sports groups, as well as from the anti-repressive community. To raise money, makeshift bars, or *txoznas*, were set up in the streets, and these often offered their own cultural events, becoming ephemeral but influential spaces reflecting the new political and cultural hegemony. The music, live or recorded, defined a particular scene (Larrinaga, 2014).

By the end of the 1970s, despite political, social and organisational turmoil, it seemed that a cultural cycle had come to an end (Larrinaga, 2014). In 1981 only 11 albums of Basque music were released. It was the decline of a discographic cycle that had begun around 1967 with the creation of Basque record labels; this involved the release of a total of 50 LPs and 220 singles or EPs between 1967 and 1976 (López Aguirre, 2011).

### **Basque radical rock explosion**

Despite a celebratory Spanish consensus, in the Basque Country the agreements for reforming the Dictatorship were confronted by an explicit rejection or a critical acceptance. This political framework -and the repression that accompanied it- produced a sensation of exclusion and distance from Spanish cultural reference points; and also from *Euskal Kantagintza Berria*.

A second factor that fed this feeling of exclusion was socio-economic: the capitalist crisis and restructuring, with the dismantling of the major steel and shipbuilding companies, and a deficit of public services, incipient ecological problems and the formation of ghettos. In many districts this involved youth unemployment levels of up to 40% or even 50%, and worker resistance that in some cases resembled urban guerrilla warfare (Lahusen, 1993; Amezaga, 1995; Pascual, 2010; Herreros and López, 2013; Larrinaga, 2014).

In this context, heroin arrived in fertile territory. But there were also other cultural references different from the celebratory Madrid *movida*: the *No Future* of punk and its ability to communicate the present. The negation of that already established crystallised -especially in the most economically disfavoured areas- in an explosion of punk groups labelled, not uncontroversially, Basque Radical Rock (Rock Radical Vasco, RRV). Together with it, and no less important, was a redefinition or differentiated use of specific physical spaces by and for young people: "the street" full of people, certain bars, a wave of squatting of *gaztetxes* (social centres run by young people). And also a constellation of small music labels and independent and self-managed communication channels: fanzines, magazines, stickers, graffiti, comics, free radio stations, amateur music-making, record shops, the circulation of recorded cassettes, concerts and style, and even coarse, direct language that challenged moral taboos...

But this cultural and social creativity, which combined both negation and creation (Porrah, 2006), did not occur in a socio-political vacuum, but rather within the political and social magma of popular initiatives that had been proliferating since the last years of Francoism. It is this socio-political context, over and above the (breaking of the)

link with *Euskal Kantagintza Berria*, that permits discussion of a countercultural continuity, since “what we find is an effervescent antagonistic culture ready to be 'infected' by punk” (Herrerros and López, 2013: 72).

So, the initial rejection of *Euskal Kantagintza Berria* should be understood as an implicit negation of seriousness and solemnity as necessary registers of political rebellion. The *fiesta*, playfulness, celebration and irreverence would now be put forward as fully valid dimensions of the antagonistic culture (Herrerros and López, 2013; Pascual, 2010). Pleasure does not cancel out the political, but rather reaffirms a countercultural community and a transgressive praxis (Lahusen, 1993).

Rock, and especially punk, music appropriated the new geography that no other cultural agent had even approached: the street (Kasmir, 2000). From the nineteen-eighties, popular *fiestas* would become politicised: politics, instead of being amputated, was to be present at these *fiestas* as another part of its social nature. Festive practices and songs created other celebratory spaces or added a new narrative to those already existing, reinserting them in the radical space, in which rejection and pleasure constantly mingle (Sáenz de Viguera, 2007). Different movements and subcultures mixed in bars and *txoznas*: punks, independentists, skinheads, middle-class hippies, ecologists, artists, feminists...

In the Basque Country, punks took over from the singer-songwriters and they did so because, in accordance with their philosophy, they didn't wait until they knew how to play properly before getting up on stage, taking all their attitude and energy with them (Herrerros and López, 2013). This scope and dimension is not easy to understand without bearing in mind the rise, already mentioned, of new independent, or autonomous, media, which could be both symbolic or material; or without paying attention to the conjunction of the cultural and the political (Herrerros and López, 2013; Pascual, 2010). It meant, above all, a space for expressing both symbolic and physical antagonism and struggle, as well as social redefinition of the structural variables that had created it.

The youth movement came about in special relation to the working class areas where Spanish immigrants settled in the 1960s. Most groups sang not in Basque, but in Spanish. Some, like Roberto Moso (2004) of Zarama, have spoken of an excitement or fascination for the “repressed” language; singing in Basque felt like the most punk thing that could be done, even without knowing the language very well.

Yet among those who sang in Basque, there was a virulent criticism of current conceptions of all things Basque. This is the case with the famous song *Drogak AEK-an* by Hertzainak, which used irony to criticise official conceptions -whether traditional ones or from the point of view of the independentist left wing- and instead championed the culture and identity of street life (Atutxa, 2010). In the French Basque Country, punk was particularly irreverent, to the extent that relationships with Basque nationalism were not always good, and in some cases were decidedly poor (Bidegain, 2010).

Punk contributed to the innovation of a non-essentialist Basque identity. It contributed to a definitive change of old Basque identities -deriving their source from lineage and ethnicity or in Basque ethnic spaces- innovating modes and privileges, as well as features of Basqueness. Furthermore, punk occupied an alternative communal space where a new collective identity was created and expressed (Kasmir, 2000).

This would largely favour the integration of young people from Basque and Spanish-speaking areas within a common frame of reference. Jakue Pascual remembers:

We were urban, we loved rock, and we didn't live in anything like a farmhouse. Also, there were lots of maketos [Spanish-speaking immigrants] or children from mixed families of Basques and immigrants among us, and even so it was the only movement that managed to bring Basque-speaking culture and Basque down to street level, with groups like Hertzainak.. (Herrerros and López, 2013: 91)

Among musical groups, as well as participating in festivals linked to cultural demands, the presence of the Basque language was to become ever larger. Traditional elements or instruments (*triki*, *alboka*...) were included and they even participated in homages to some of the main figures of *Euskal Kantagintza Berria*, especially the one most ahead of his time, Mikel Laboa.

The evolved and militant syncretism of modernising elements -which came from international youth cultures, particularly punk- and indigenous popular Basque components, was what favoured this creative explosion (Amezaga, 1995; Porrah, 2006). This hybridisation was mediated by the mobilising role of the independentist left.

Furthermore, these groups of young people were not the only ones to feel excluded from the agreements made to reform the Dictatorship. The new nationalism that had arisen from the countercultural ethnogenesis of the previous period split in two: a political culture that wanted to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the

political reform, while others, with HB as their electoral framework, felt that there were still chances to carry out a revolutionary rupture. This division was experienced, to a large extent, along generational lines (Larrinaga, 2014).

In the optimistic atmosphere regarding the possibilities of revolutionary rupture, and given the continuing harsh political repression, the powerful military organisation ETA(m) decided to maintain its dynamic and pull towards it a large part of the social forces accumulated in the countercultural ethnogenesis. Local and communal groups, student movements, unemployed workers, ecologists, feminists and many more would be found holding these positions of rupture, sharing spaces and struggles (Larrinaga, 2014).

Repression would act as the glue that held them all, including the young punks, together. In fact, direct nationalist references were hardly made by RRV groups, who preferred negative circumlocutions expressed in anti-repressive terms: against those who acted against the country's construction (Porrah, 2006).

Jakue Pascual has described these constructions of identity that occurred in the heart of the movement and with regard to others, putting down roots as the latest symbolic and territorial extension of the Basque social proletariat, as well as tackling the national question:

The solution adopted by a large number of young Basque people in this context was the creation of their own identity as a group apart. The 'official us' was negated and questioned by an 'individual us'. (...) But there were not only two levels of identification (by and from the radical youth): an intermediate level was also present, that saw the *izquierda abertzale* ['nationalist left'] as a revolutionary force, partly as a force to question the current system, and which at certain times managed to mediate between the two identities mentioned above. (Pascual, 2010: 116)

The youth movement and the nationalist left would coincide, not only in terms of their anti-repressive dynamics, but in the new resignified spaces: *gaztetxes*, the old quarters of towns and cities, alternative bars... After an initial rejection, there was recognition by the independentist left of the mobilising and agitating power of the musical and youth movement.

In the 1990s, young people who had grown up within the punk counterculture appeared in the street, in schools, at concerts and in *gaztetxes*. They would not experience tensions between orthodox nationalists and punks; a new cultural identity was being consolidated (Larrinaga, 2014). This new wave of young people, unlike the last one, would, after the first few years, experience a decade of economic bonanza.

From 1991 record releases would turn what came before upside down, in linguistic terms: albums in Basque would outnumber those released in Spanish, even in punk (Amezaga, 1995). Kortatu's change to Basque in 1988 appeared as a watershed moment; it was not for nothing that the group had played a key political role as a bridge between the independentist left and the youth movement. Even veteran RRV bands that continued to be active, and had always sung in Spanish, started to include the occasional song in Basque on their albums or in group projects.

The decade of the 1990s was to be one of consolidation and building, in every sense, a Basque counterculture, one that was markedly in the Basque language, and its physical and symbolic spaces, still in unstable equilibrium: *gaztetxes*, *fiestas*, *txoznas*... This was also the case for aesthetic conventions, although in mixed form. Testosterone would continue to be present in the streets, particularly in public altercations (Larrinaga, 2014).

## Music, class, ethnicity, nation... and gender?

*Me gusta ser una zorra [I like to be a bitch]*  
(Las Vulpes, 1983)

The youth movement of the 1980s, characterised by punk, was conditioned by structural conditions and conflicts of class and ethnicity/nation, not in a determining fashion, but rather in a way that would dynamically rebuild their definitions. However, there is another factor absent from Radical Basque Rock music, marked by the masculine violence of the State and its radical replica, and that factor is participation in a debate about gender, love and sexual relationships.

In 1983, the all-girl punk band Las Vulpes jumped to stardom after appears on Spanish TV performing a version of The Stooges' "I Wanna Be Your Dog", causing a scandal. Despite of the impact of this band, and others like Doctor Deseo that explores multiples sexualities, heteronormative masculinity was initially installed in an un-problematised way into the Radical Basque Rock (Sáenz de Viguera, 2007). The US anthropologist Sharryn Kasmir

(2000) also underlines this character, which would later be strongly criticised, pointing out that, although the liberatory aesthetic and language of punk offered women quite a bit of room to manoeuvre, Basque punk presented a masculinist version of Basqueness that attributed cultural agency and innovation to men, affirming the masculinity of social spaces and key policies, and writing a masculinist narrative of the nation.

## The commercial as transgression

With Basque rock consolidated as counter-hegemonic, the role of rhythms such as commercial music, *reggaeton* or "*música cutre*" ("cheap music") becomes reversed and they acquire, in countercultural environments, a certain transgressive possibility. This is what some feminist and queer groups have explored.

The reflection criticises some questions about the Basque rock and the countercultural environments:

- a) The aesthetic closure and monotony into the Basque rock and countercultural environments, around HC/Metal and ska-punk.
- b) The sexism of Basque rock (Sáenz de Viguera, 2007; Kasmir, 2000), and its masculine performance, as well as dances like the "pogo". In general, this critique can be extended to the rock and pop, as riot grrrl movement or initiatives like Ladyfest revealed (Bilbao, 2015).
- c) Moral taboos about sex and hedonism, due to catholic influence, but also to the ascetic political activism, struggle and violences in the last years (Fernández 2013; Ziga, 2012). In this sense, the Basque rock have achieved the seriousness and solemnity that the punk movement criticised to the songwriters. If the first punks in London wrote, in a détournement of The Beatles, "You don't need love, all you need is dynamite", in the Basque Country, after 50 years with dynamite, perhaps we could say something like "You also need a bit of love".
- d) A certain ethnocentric moral superiority with regard to some rhythms like reggaeton or the Spanish ones (Fernández, 2013).

In contrast, they support dance and even a right to moments of frivolity, a re-appropriation of others musics. Transgressive praxis involves a provocative and disconcerting insertion of commercial songs, or even traditional Spanish music, at venues playing Basque rock, and passionate *reggaeton* dancing between young women, breaking the hegemonic link between music and politics.

Suddenly, exploration was to result in an explosion: *En masse*, the festive spaces of the *txoznas* incorporate commercial music, even *reggaeton*. The change is sudden and, in many cases, unreasoning, observes one of the transgressive girls (Miner, 2013). But it also points out another question, that the very social dimension of music is undergoing changes.

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