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Looking forward into the past: *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* and the immigrant question in the Basque Country

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**ABSTRACT**

This article examines the discursive and political response to immigrant-generated diversity by *Partido Nacionalista Vasco* (PNV) in the Basque Country of Spain. A much-ballyhooed fact about PNV is that its founder, Sabino Arana, articulated a racist nationalist doctrine in the late nineteenth century. Alarm bells were raised in the early 2000s when the Basque Country became a destination for foreign immigrants arriving in Spain from Latin America and North Africa: do foreign immigrants pose a threat to Basque national identity? The PNV’s answer to this question has been a clear ‘no’. Rather than distance itself from its past, however, party elites legitimate the inclusive and compassionate attitude towards foreign immigrants through selective discovery of the Basque national narrative. While sceptics of ideational variables are quick to suggest that nationalist elites manipulate the past to serve current purposes, this article suggests that such an interpretation does not do justice to the subtle ways in which symbols, myths, and images of the past have shaped the worldviews of PNV elites in the realm of immigration.

**KEYWORDS**

Spain; Basque Country; nationalism; ethnosymbolism; immigration

**Introduction**

Among the main cases of sub-state nationalism in the West, Basque nationalism has the dubious distinction of being associated with terrorism and racism (Conversi 1997). Its Scottish, Quebecois, and Catalan counterparts are often vaunted for defining their communities according to civic principles that allow ‘outsiders’ to quickly and easily become ‘insiders’ (Keating 2001). However, the recent attention given to immigrant reception policies in these cases reveals a persistent tension between inclusive and exclusive understandings of the nation among sub-state nationalist and regionalist parties (SNRPs) (Barker 2010; Hepburn 2011). There is a dearth of scholarly research analysing the Basque case, however, even though compelling evidence indicates that the Basque Government has been actively carving out its own approach within Spain to the social and political integration of migrants (Jeram 2013; Muriel and Gatti 2014).

It is striking that political debates regarding immigration in the Basque Country have remained positive and devoid of hostility towards migrants and the cultural diversity they bring with them. At the state level, as well as in various autonomous communities and municipalities in Spain, immigration has been ‘ politicized’, with politicians on the right and left invoking the ‘bogeyman of immigration’ as a scapegoat for rising unemployment, crime, and social disorder (*The Economist* 2010). While the total foreign population is low compared with other autonomous communities, the growth rate of the immigrant population in the Basque Country has been among the highest in Spain in recent years. This may be partly attributable to the Basque Country’s relative insularity from the economic crisis; many foreigners have migrated from other autonomous communities to
the Basque Country in search of job opportunities. The governing party until 2009, and again since 2012, Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) has carefully created a discourse in response to these changes that portrays immigrants as contributors to Basque society both economically and culturally.

This article explores why PNV has positioned itself as a champion of immigrants’ social rights and diversity. Considering the ‘legitimation paradox’ facing SNRPs—in theory, too much diversity may undermine the nation-building process and lead to existential suicide—it is puzzling that PNV has stayed the course even though some SNRPs in Quebec, Flanders, and Catalonia have adopted platforms in favour of limiting immigration and targeting the unfavourable cultural characteristics of certain ethnocultural groups. Another reason why one would expect an anti-immigrant turn by PNV is the matter of the Euskara (Basque language) revival. Especially since the transition to democracy, the importance of Euskara to the Basque nationalist movement has been consolidated; all major SNRPs and nationalist civil society organisations are committed to improving the status of the language in the Basque Country (Urla 2012). Immigration presents a threat to minority languages, such as Euskara, because foreigners tend to adopt the dominant language in the state (Kymlicka 2001). What is more, the threat to Euskara posed by immigrants is more acute than elsewhere given that the language is not widely spoken outside of the Basque Country nor is it easily learned as a second language due to its unique lexicon.

Recent analyses of how SNRPs react to immigration have focused on rationalist variables (Hepburn 2009). For example, pro-immigration discourses and policies can be rational responses to a low birthrate and labour shortages in the national territory. On the other hand, SNRPs may be hesitant to welcome immigrants to fill labour market vacancies because they may become ‘political agents’ of the central government and vote against SNRPs in local, regional, and state elections (Banting and Soroka 2012). Navigating between the different factors that may influence how an SNRP positions itself within potentially explosive debates over immigration and its effects on the economy and identity of a sub-state nation is fraught with difficulty. Both rational and ‘irrational’ concerns weigh in on actors within SNRPs as they attempt to craft a response to immigration that also serves a nation-building function.

It is well established that historical narratives are central to nations of both the state and sub-state varieties (Coakley 2004; Lecours 2012). Nationalist mobilisation has an important basis in images of the past, which tend to be embellished and altered in order to create a tendentious image of the nation’s history. PNV has packaged components of the ‘objective’ heritage of the Basques to propagate an image of the nation that is permeable to outsiders and committed to human rights based on personhood rather than nationality. This argument fits with an ethnosymbolist perspective of nations and nationalism; reinterpretation and reappropriation of history by elites is not necessarily outright ‘invention’ or ‘fabrication’. The assumption that elites manufacture history to substantiate present concerns ignores how the past continues to provide frames of reference for the interplay between elite proposals and mass responses (Hutchinson 1987; Smith 2009).

The primary empirical material for this article comes from five semi-structured interviews with PNV affiliates who were chosen for their involvement in the party’s immigration proposals and policies. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and respondents were asked pre-determined questions as to not bias their responses. The interviews were transcribed and analysed to gauge how PNV conceives of, and justifies, its official policy stances with regard to the management of the foreign population in the Basque Country. In addition, a wide range of secondary sources as well as primary sources including government documents and press articles were consulted to triangulate the data generated by the interviews. It is important to underscore that this article is not about the effectiveness or implementation of immigration-related policies, but, instead, about how PNV has discursively attempted to ensure a degree of common consciousness during a period of ‘crisis’ brought about by the recent wave of foreign immigration.
In the next section, the ethnosymbolist perspective is situated as a bridge between rationalist and primordial understandings of how SNRPs respond to the ‘legitimation paradox’ (see Jeram, van der Zwet, and Wisthaler 2015). Then, the paper moves on to lay out the relevant historical materials that current PNV elites have worked with to ensure a sense of continuity with the nation’s history. The following section constitutes the main empirical contribution, an analysis of PNV responses to the migration-membership dilemma through the lens of ethnosymbolism. The concluding discussion synthesises the findings and suggests avenues for future research.

The ethnosymbolist bridge: between fixity and rationality

The research tradition linking deeply rooted understandings of nationhood to immigration policy provides students of SNRPs with an obvious starting point for their research (Brubaker 1992). The assumption that sub-state nationalism is an inherently ‘anti-modern and illiberal’ ideology prompted the argument that SNRPs—the political representatives of sub-state nations—would unequivocally seek to exclude immigrants from membership in the nation.

Once the field moved beyond grand theorising to empirical research, it was noted that sub-state nations are often as progressive in their treatment of diversity, if not more so, than their respective states (Keating 2001). Subsequent case research revealed, however, that some SNRPs have not been resistant to the ‘civic integrationist’ turn, pushing for the tightening of membership requirements and presenting a more essentialist conception of the nation in their discourse and policies (Hepburn 2011; Jeram 2014). The dominant mode of explanation for this variance comes from theories of party competition, which contend that SNRPs will use immigration as a ‘strategic’ policy issue (Hepburn 2014). Accordingly, SNRPs will insert themselves into the immigration debate in opposition to state-wide parties in order to assert their nationalist credentials and win elections (Hepburn 2009). Reducing the policy and discursive outputs of SNRPs with respect to the ‘legitimation paradox’ to mere rationality, however, discounts the symbolic realm of nationalist politics.

At a general level, ethnosymbolists consider the ‘cultural elements of symbol, myth, memory, value, ritual, and tradition’ to be crucial to analyses of identity politics (Smith 2009, 25). There are various reasons to pay close attention to these elements with respect to how SNRPs confront the ‘legitimation paradox’. The nationalist masses are diverse; employing nationalism as a defining ideology requires that political parties hold together diverse strata of the population divided by class, geography, religiosity, and even race. Continuity with the past helps to sustain communal bonds and a sense of national identity. Of course, there is never a single version of the nation’s history, and elites, even those from the same political party, may espouse conflicting prescriptions for the nation based on different interpretations of the group narrative. Yet, visions for the national community that confront its members with fundamental notions about ‘who we are’ and ‘what purpose our existence serves’ must resonate with significant and diverse sectors of the population (Hutchinson 1987; Smith 2009, 35). This drives a dialectic process of reinterpretation in search of a new synthesis that is likely to resonate with the nation at large.

Rationalist and modernist critiques often describe the processes of rediscovery and reappropriation as mere fabrication for political ends. For example, in the specific case of immigration, SNRPs may seek the votes or economic contributions of new immigrants, and thus ‘manipulate’ their core supporters by invoking a version of the past that transmits an image of an inclusive nation since time immemorial. Ethnosymbolism cannot conclusively resolve the debate between ‘interests’ and ‘ideas’, but such a rigid emphasis on rationality conveniently disregards how the national past—prominent myths, symbols, traditions, and memories—provides frames of reference for the new challenges that SNRPs must face in order to maintain nationalism as its raison d’être. A focus on the symbolic world of SNRPs does not supersede alternative accounts, but provides a vital supplement to rationalist perspectives that are only able to interpret all action as strategic with a post hoc knowledge.
The ‘objective’ past: reactionary nationalism and emigration

The historical record cannot decisively tell us about the depth of social and political links between Basque territories since time immemorial. With much certainty, though, we know that the three provinces that compose the modern Basque Autonomous Community—Álava, Bizkaia, and Gipuzkoa—were self-governing before the creation of the modern Spanish state. The consolidation of the Spanish state was a fragmented and slow process; the Basque provinces preserved their political autonomy through agreements with the Crown known as the foral laws. The foral laws were jealously guarded by Basques because they empowered Basque provincial governments to veto royal edicts and exempted Basques from central taxes. Present-day Basque nationalists interpret the foral laws as akin to constitutions designed to protect the customs of the Basque people and their inviolable self-governing rights.

From the seventeenth century onwards, the process of centralisation sped up and spurred participation in a movement to brush back the encroaching Spanish state in the Basque provinces known as Carlism.2 When Carlism failed to achieve its aims and the foral laws were abolished in 1876, the yearning for a return to self-governance among Basques was converted into a modern nationalist ideology by Sabino Arana.

Arana is the figure most responsible for the permeation and shape of early Basque nationalism; he coined its symbols and values, including the Basque national flag and anthem. Arana founded PNV in 1895, the party that has been the main political voice of Basque nationalism during Spain’s Second Republic (1931–1936) and modern democratic period (1978–). Arana has been often accused of the ‘sin of racism’ because his texts and speeches defined a primordialist view of Basque nationhood (Douglass 2002). The vitriol found in his discourse targeted the wave of Spanish migrants that began arriving in the Basque Country in the late nineteenth century. Between 1900 and 1930, the population of the Basque provinces nearly doubled despite a declining birthrate (Fusi 1984, 15). According to Lecours (2007, 53), ‘migration contributed to the racializing of Basque nationalism since it exposed, in the eyes of Arana and like-minded Basque traditionalists, the fundamental difference between Basques and Spaniards’. Arana warned Basques not to mix with Spanish ‘outsiders’ while PNV limited its membership to those of Basque racial stock and vowed to expel foreigners from an independent Basque Country (Zabalo 2008).

Race was not all that demarcated the Basque membership community for Arana; the motto ‘god and the old laws’ was embraced in speeches and PNV communications to underscore the devout Catholicism of the Basque people. Arana painted the foreign Spaniard population as poisoned by the ideologies of secularism and liberalism, making them morally inferior to Basques who he considered to be the purest of Catholics. Religion was so important to Arana—a value adopted by PNV—that he likened Basque nationalism to divinity: ‘my nationalism is rooted in my love for God, and its aim to connect God to my blood relatives, to my great family, the Basque Country’ (Zirakzadeh 1991, 125).

Aside from playing the role of host society, Basques have had a long history of emigration from their ancestral lands. In the sixteenth century, Basque migration to the Americas occurred as part of Spanish expeditionary missions and the promise of more stimulants for the already thriving Basque economy. Relations between Basques and other Spaniards settled in the New World were tense and Basques remained ‘close-knit and ethnically united out of self-protection from anti-Basque sentiments’ (Totoricagüena 2003, 59). As the Spanish empire in Latin America began to crumble in the nineteenth century, Spanish authorities embarked on a centralising project at home much to the dismay of Basques who were accustomed to operating with political autonomy. The Cádiz constitution of 1812 emphasised the themes of sovereignty and a unified Spanish nation, and in 1876, the foral laws were abolished. The fight to retain the foral laws was a costly one for most areas of the Basque Country; military defeat left Basques saddled with debt and destroyed much of their agricultural and industrial infrastructure. This ushered in a new phase of Basque emigration driven by a desire to escape hardship and, in some cases, forced deportation for treason against Spain.
The Río de la Plata region of Argentina and Uruguay became the preferred destination for Basque emigrants. A positive connotation and social status was associated with being Basque in Argentina and Uruguay because of their contributions to independence movements in each country; Argentinean and Uruguayan governments used legislative and informal means to attract Basque immigrants (Totoricagüena 2003, 63–65). Latin American countries, especially from 1870 onwards, were engaged in their own nation-state-building processes, actively focusing on the national homogenisation of their populations. This process was not, however, incompatible with the maintenance of strong ethnic and cultural ties among diaspora Basques and other immigrant groups. In fact, Argentina and Uruguay modelled multi-ethnic states, which promoted ‘the creation of multiple and complementary identities around the idea of the nation as a civic identity’ (Molina and Oiarzabal 2009, 707). The majority of Basque migrants ended up in ‘ethnic’ neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires and Montevideo where Euskara was the language of the entrepreneurs and working class who experienced much economic success (Totoricagüena 2003, 64–66).

The negative consequences of the battles over the foral laws for living conditions in the Basque Country were nothing compared to the repercussions of Francisco Franco’s victory in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Any sympathy for Basque distinctiveness by central authorities quickly eroded and in its place came an aggressive centralising policy, which included the prohibition of Euskara and Basque cultural manifestations. Franco’s regime also tortured, intimidated, and even killed many Basque civilians to exact revenge against Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa—the two Basque provinces that sided with the Republicans in the war. The stamping out of Basque culture and fear of reprisals drove many Basques to seek refuge in welcoming diaspora communities abroad. For example, in 1939 alone, 1400 Basque refugees came to Argentina facilitated by presidential decrees altering the country’s stingy immigration laws specifically for Basque newcomers (Anasagasti 1988, 44). In addition, partnerships between the governments of host countries and Basque cultural organisations quickly formed and facilitated the passage of Basques to their new homes whilst providing forums for the maintenance of Euskara and Basque culture.

By the 1950s, Franco’s regime had eased its repression of Basque culture and liberalised its economic policies. The Basque economy grew spectacularly in the late 1950s and 1960s because open trade benefitted the port cities of Bilbao and San Sebastián and the region’s steel and shipbuilding sectors. A consequence of economic growth was another significant wave of migration from central and southern Spain, which put considerable strain on Basque society and its nationalist aspirations. In 1970, approximately 700,000 of the Basque Country’s 2.3 million residents were born elsewhere. By this point, PNV had lost some of its influence on the nationalist movement because its leaders were in exile and Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), which formed in 1959, challenged its authority. ETA’s vanguard vocalised a new conception of ‘Basqueness’ based on voluntary participation in the nationalist struggle and learning Euskara. ETA’s armed struggle against the Franco regime included many migrants, including Juan Paredes Manot, one of its most famous martyrs (Clark 1984, 147–149).

Apostles of Arana linked to PNV and in wider Basque society did not share this inclusive vision for the nation and feared the negative influence of migrants. Of course, not all PNV affiliates followed ‘Aranist’ principles; a PNV newsletter in 1971 synthesised an inclusive pro-immigrant alternative to a race-based membership boundary (Conversi 1997, 202).

Mobilising the past to define the present: PNV as ‘open to the world’

The first two decades of Spain’s current democratic regime—approximately from 1977 until 2000—was a period in which the Basque Country lost many more inhabitants than it gained. Between 1982 and 2000, the Basque Country registered a net migratory loss of 96,395, but since 2001, the trend has reversed greatly, with a net gain of 56,313 in the following five years (Blanco 2008, 189). This latest wave of immigration to the Basque Country is different than those before it because the source is no longer other regions of Spain, but foreign countries, particularly in
less-developed regions of the world. Foreign nationals in the Basque Country officially compose 7% of the total population, but this figure does not include unregistered migrants and those who recently obtained formal Spanish citizenship, and thus underestimates the actual degree of immigrant-generated diversity.

The main competencies related to immigration, such as entry and official citizenship attribution, are reserved for the Spanish state, but the Basque Government has used its autonomous institutions to develop immigration-related policies and programmes, primarily at the coterminous stages of immigrant settlement and integration. The first notable immigration-related document of the Basque Government was released in 2003 under the auspices of the new Immigration Directorate within the Ministry of Housing and Social Affairs. A tripartite ‘nationalist’ coalition government including PNV, Eusko Alkartasuna (EA), and Ezker Batua-Berdeak (EB) delivered the Plan Vasco de Inmigración (PVI), which first and foremost conceives of migration management as part of the Basque Government’s broader fight against social exclusion and poverty. PVI is critical of the current division of powers related to immigration and urges the Spanish state to rethink its conception of state-administered citizenship as the primary conduit for human rights. Instead, PVI proposes a more inclusive citizenship based on jus domicile—citizenship by residence—to extend equal civil, social, economic, and cultural rights to everyone regardless of their place of origin or official status under the central immigration law (Muriel and Gatti 2014).

PNV’s electoral programmes for the 2009 and 2012 autonomic elections devoted significant attention to the foreign immigrant collective in the Basque Country. The promise to build a Basque nation that is both ‘more unified and more open to the world’ is the slogan underscoring PNV’s conception of the membership community with respect to immigrants (PNV 2009, 64). Towards this end, PNV commits itself to offer the most complete level of social services for immigrants from the moment of inscription in a municipal register regardless of one’s status according to Spanish law. Moreover, the party pledges to ‘facilitate the regularisation of immigrants “without papers” who live in the Basque Country for three years’ (PNV 2009, 64). This constitutes a critique of the Spanish Foreigners’ Law, which (supposedly) unjustly promotes illegal modes of migration and leaves undocumented migrants in a vulnerable position without rights and potentially subject to detention and expulsion.

PNV lost control of the Basque Country regional executive from 2009 to 2012 to a Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE)–Partido Popular (PP) coalition government. Much of the party’s immigration-related discourse throughout this period and during the 2012 electoral campaign was critical of the coalition’s government handling of the immigration file. For example, PNV members expressed their displeasure that the coalition government dismantled Heldu, a service established in 2002 to provide immigrants with legal advice and assistance with labour market integration (El Mundo 2010). Another source of tension in the immigration sphere was the long delay before the renewal of PVI; it was renewed in late 2011 after the previous framework had expired in 2009. Even then, the party continued to level criticisms at the reconfigured PVI and the cuts enacted by the coalition government in parliamentary debates about immigration until its re-election in 2012.

PNV’s 2012 electoral programme is notable for the importance it gives to initiatives aimed at combatting racism against the immigrant collective and diversity mainstreaming of the health and education sectors. These plans include financial resources for awareness campaigns to combat stereotypes and special accommodations for immigrant patients (e.g. translation services) (PNV 2012, 166–167). In the education sector, PNV supports additions to the school curriculum to ‘promote activities directed at the entire student body about the countries of origin of immigrant pupils’ (PNV 2012, 165). The previous ‘non-nationalist’ coalition government carried out a more individualist approach to integration rather than offering programmes and services catering specifically to the immigrant collective (Jeram 2012, 148–151). Certainly, PNV has distanced itself from the centralist parties on the separate but related issues of immigrants’ social rights and active support for cultural diversity.
By waging a political battle with the centralist parties over immigration, PNV has exposed itself to counterclaims of hypocrisy given that the party still accents Sabino Arana as its founder. The proceeding interview material is categorised according to four themes that consistently arose during the discussions: Spanish state-building, humanism, emigration, and self-determination. Certainly, an argument could be made that the invocation of the past as a frame for the present situation is strictly instrumental; perhaps PNV elites have fabricated and misinterpreted history in order to reverse demographic decline, fill labour market needs, win votes, and present a ‘progressive’ image of the nation in the European and international political arenas (Keating 2004, 367). For this to be undoubtedly true, one must assume that the masses are delineated from elites by their inability to understand ‘rational’ concerns. Otherwise, why do SNRPs, such as PNV, filter their interests through leitmotifs connecting the past and present forms of the nation? By tracing connections from the ‘objective’ historical experience of the Basque nation to the current ideological package shaping PNV’s approach to immigration, we enter the ‘inner world’ of party elites and consider how the past weighs in on their ongoing attempts at national boundary making and legitimisation.

‘They were oppressors, not immigrants’: invasion and Spanish state-building

The interviews revealed a consistent narrative about the different waves of immigrants that have come to the Basque Country. The Spanish migrants who came before the Second Republic and during the Franco dictatorship are considered to be ‘agents’ of the central state sent to weaken Basque nationalism and help carry out the centralisation agenda. The exclusion of these ‘foreigners’ by Basque nationalists is conceptualised as self-preservation rather than xenophobia, and thus not relevant to the current phase of foreign immigration. PNV respondents likened migration in the 1900–1930 and 1950–1970 epochs as synonymous with the Spanish state-building process, even though many of these migrants were ‘pulled’ by the greater economic opportunities in the Basque Country and ‘pushed’ by deteriorating conditions in central and southern Spain:

PNV was created because people came from outside to impose on us other laws that were not ours; we weren’t opposed to the newcomers, but simply tried to prevent those who had centralist intentions from succeeding in their aims. Yes, PNV emerged in the context of mass migration from the rest of Spain, but it wasn’t a matter of xenophobia, it was a reaction to the laws which nullified our oral laws, we did not accept those coming from outside to impose their laws on us … this was the source of Sabino Arana’s statement: ‘Euskadi is the homeland of the Basques, this is our homeland’. Especially after the Civil War, migrants came with an attitude of victory; there was no interest among this population to co-exist with native Basques, it was only to invade and destroy our culture. So, our party’s posture was not a rejection of immigration, but a rejection of invasion. (PNV-1, interview, 2010)

When Arana founded PNV as a reactive project, our society had been through two wars during which our self-governing rights were voided and our language prohibited. So then, a reactionary party with some racist overtones emerged. (PNV-4, interview, 2010)

After the Civil War there was much opportunity to work here, but those who came weren’t immigrants to the Basque Country, they were victorious Spaniards who came to exact revenge against the ‘traitor’ [Basque] provinces, which meant that they had no interest in living together with us, but only to invade our lands and prohibit our language by punishing its speakers. The reaction wasn’t against immigration, but against an invading occupier. The new immigrants come not to invade or impose their cultures, but in search of a better life. (PNV-2, interview, 2010)

These quotes interpret the negative reaction to Spanish migrants by PNV as a result of the specific motivations of some migrants, that is, to carry out Spanish nation-state-building in the Basque Country. The passages suggest that many migrants from Spain held pejorative attitudes towards Basque culture and aspirations for self-government, which is a contested postulate (Zabalo, Mateos, and Iraola 2013). This permits the party to present its current posture towards immigrants not as a rupture with the past, but as part of its historical commitment to fighting for self-government for the Basque nation. New immigrants, from PNV’s viewpoint, do not seek to extinguish Basque culture and self-government, but arrive as new members of the national community.
During a speech in 2000, then PNV president Xabier Arzalluz made a similar claim to absolve Arana and the party of anti-immigrant sentiments, professing admiration for immigrants who come to work in the Basque Country, but also suggested that the Franco regime had used migration as a deliberate strategy to undermine Basque nationalism:

In our country there was tremendous immigration during forty years [under Franco]. It was good and well that some migrants came in search of work; they diluted the evil that Franco had done, because, if it had not been for immigration, we could have had a referendum [on independence] and won it easily. (El País 2000)

The nationalist mythology of PNV cannot be stretched too far as the historical record has preserved Arana’s writings and speeches that go much beyond chastising outsiders who came with a specific intent to undermine Basque nationhood. For example, he condemned marriage between Basques and non-Basques and proposed a Bilbao city ordinance to prevent Basque prisoners from mixing with Spanish inmates (Conversi 1997, 60–61). Yet, without Arana and the nationalist ‘work’ he did by creating a Basque flag, symbols, and political party, the nascent Basque identity may not have coalesced into modern nationalist movement.

Rather than apologise or sever the link between Arana’s racist dogma and the party, PNV officials carefully legitimise the practices of the party during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The specific claim that Spanish migrants brought with them the centralist motivations of the Spanish state serves to promote commiseration over unjust suffering and justify the way in which the boundaries of the nation were set by Arana. Membership in the Basque nation is open to those who wish to join and partake in the community, but closed to those wishing to invade and exterminate Basque national distinctiveness.

‘We have always been compassionate’: from Catholicism to humanism

Arana’s musings about the divinity of the Basque people left an imprint on the PNV ideology; the party remained confessional until the democratic transition. One of the main ideas he derived from Catholicism is a concern for the poor and needy (Zirakzadeh 1991, 127). Bilbao’s upper class was the most secular demographic and they benefitted from the centralisation of Spain, so they were unlikely to find Basque nationalism an appealing doctrine. Arana developed animosity towards them: ‘all of us know that today the poor are inhumanely exploited and treated like beasts by property owners, industrialists, mine-owners, and businessmen’ (Conversi 1997, 62). Tapping into a pre-existing religiosity in the Basque countryside proved effective and PNV became ‘one of the earliest Christian democratic parties in Europe’ (Clark 1979, 44).

PNV has become an officially secular party since the end of the dictatorship: the party defines itself as ‘Basque, democratic, participative, plural, non-confessional, and humanist’. The values of egalitarianism and concern for the poor at one time generated by confessionalism live on in the party’s ‘humanist’ approach to contemporary immigration:

Our Christian roots still define us as a party. We are an officially secular party now, but the humanist ideals still resonate with us. We inspired the creation of Christian democracy as an alternative ideology to liberal capitalism and communism, an ideology the Popular Party does not share. Perhaps for this reason, they [Popular Party] have taken a sharp turn to the right with regards to immigration and we have not ... I believe our compassion [for immigrants] is intimately linked to our notion of humanism, people of all origins have a right to a dignified life and if they cannot find it at home, they should be able to search it out in any corner of the world they choose. (PNV-2, interview, 2010)

Our philosophy since inception was Catholic confessional until 1977 when we dropped this official label. However, our Christian roots prevail and we are above all else humanist in our posture, valuing the human rights of all people from all religions ... we treat migrants as though we want them to come here. (PNV-3, interview, 2010)

Originally, Arana added religion to the list of core values defining the Basque nation to further distinguish Basques and Spaniards. Strict adherence to a Catholic doctrine is hardly feasible in a modern
urbanised society like the Basque Country, but PNV still draws upon its history of religiosity. The references to humanism as a mutation of confessionalism work to define the Basque nation as imbued with compassionate ideals in a manner that ties it to the national past.

‘We are a nation of immigrants’: emigration

PNV remains committed to strengthening the ties between Basques abroad and in the homeland. The party’s 2009 regional electoral platform highlights the action taken during its previous term to enrich the lives of Basques at home and abroad by assisting diaspora communities ‘to be better connected to the homeland and receive more attention than ever from Basque institutions’ (PNV 2009, 79). The ancillary initiatives, such as apportioning resources for the recovery of the ‘historical memory’ of emigration and training grants for companies that recruit abroad in Basque diaspora communities, suggest a potential preference for a more ethnically based membership community.

Parallel to its commitment to the diaspora, PNV has invoked the memory of emigration as justification for an inclusive nationalism and the ethical treatment of immigrants. In 2008, the PNV–EA–EB Basque Government formally expressed its rejection of the European Union’s (EU) ‘return directive’, which also received strong criticism from human rights associations for increasing the vulnerability of migrants to prolonged detention, expulsion, and re-entry bans from EU member states. Aside from pointing out the ways in which the directive contravenes international human rights norms, the written letter to the Spanish Minister of Labour and Immigration affirmed the importance of the Basque Country’s past situation as a sender of migrants to its current self-projection as a safe haven for vulnerable immigrants:

Euskadi has been a land of emigrants for both political and economic reasons and now we must remember our history and offer to whoever knocks on our door the same treatment that we were given when Basques needed to abandon their homeland. (El Correo 2008)

Under the PNV-led governments of 2001–2005 and 2005–2009, the Minister of Social and Housing Affairs—charged with responsibility for most immigration matters—belonged to EB rather than PNV. Therefore, it was a representative of EB, who had primary responsibility for the communiqué cited above. Two past directors of immigration claim that PNV has never been interested in immigration and was content to allow its coalition partners to handle the issue:

Immigration matters were in the hands of the junior partner of the previous PNV-led government. PNV actually exercised very little control and, in my opinion, the party has not had its own internal debate about this issue and was not very preoccupied with it during its time in government. (Former Basque director of immigration, interview, 2010)

The action of the tripartite government is shared, but the proposals and ideas that ended up in the immigration plans came from the party that held the relevant ministry, which wasn’t PNV. (Former Basque director of immigration, interview, 2010)

PNV representatives were more than willing, however, to underscore that the willingness of host societies to accept Basque migrants in the past obliges today’s Basque society to accommodate new immigrants in the same way:

This has always been a country of immigration, and because of this we did not and do not see immigrants negatively as a philosophy. There was much economic emigration in the nineteenth century and emigration for political reasons after the Civil War. Repression against everything Basque was fierce after Franco’s regime was installed. You could say there were two distinct phases of Basque emigration. A country such as ours, a nation of immigrants, cannot but have a philosophy of accepting immigrants as more than labour; instead, we think of newcomers as fellow human beings. (PNV-1, interview, 2010)

We have a tradition of migration for both economic and political reasons … there are large Basque communities in the United States, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and other countries. A large wave left during the dictatorship and
received opportunities to live full lives both culturally and economically. This happened because of these host countries, which welcomed us and offered us possibilities to work and thrive. (PNV-5, interview, 2010)

We cannot forget that when we had economic necessities, we immigrated and were welcomed in new countries with open arms. Basques took part in the development of new nations and were treated as equals without being asked to give up their heritage and culture. (PNV-3, interview, 2010)

The 2003 and 2007 immigration strategies of the Basque Government conceptualise immigrants as victims of injustice and the ‘unacceptable difference of wealth’ between countries in the global north and south (Basque Government 2003, 2007; Muriel and Gatti 2014). Even if PNV had marginal involvement with the details of PVI, the party has claimed credit for many of its innovations, especially the model of inclusive citizenship that affords full rights to education and healthcare for ‘illegal’ immigrants. One interviewee referred to the Basque Country as a ‘pioneer’ within Spain with respect to immigrants’ social rights, which is ‘obviously linked to our history of emigration’ (PNV-3, interview, 2010). The deployment of the Basque emigration narrative to illuminate PNV’s compassionate approach to immigrants reinforces a sense of pride in the achievements of the Basque diaspora. Basques abroad succeeded economically in their host nations and proceeded to establish cultural institutions to maintain a Basque identity among descendants that persists up to present day.

‘We need to manage immigration as a sovereign demos’: self-determination

A persistent tension has existed within PNV for decades over whether to pursue autonomy or independence (Pablo and Mees 2005). The desire for self-determination among PNV cadres and supporters is animated by nostalgia for the foral laws, which had been the centrepiece of Basque autonomy within the Spanish state, but abolished in 1876. According to Lecours (2007, 50), ‘Basque politics, from that moment on, features claims for the reestablishment of the foral laws in one way or another.’ Arana himself was influenced by a group of Basque writers known as ‘foralists’ who ‘yearned for a time when Basques lived in harmonious arcadia’ free from Spanish authority (Unzueta 1988, 43).

The governing powers articulated in the Basque Country’s autonomy statute partially re-created aspects of the foral laws, in particular the conciertos económicos enabling the Basque Government to collect and manage its own taxes. Since the agreement was made in 1979, however, the process of transferring competencies to the Basque Government has been plagued by acrimonious conflicts between PNV and the centralist parties, especially the right-leaning PP. Personnel connections between the Franco regime and PP, as well as the party’s uncompromising vision for the indivisibility of the Spanish state and nation have made it a constant target of Basque nationalist mobilisations. During the past four decades, periods of relative calm have been punctuated by rancorous conflict over the recognition of the right of self-determination for the Basque people between PNV and both PP and PSOE. PNV continues to demand from the Spanish administration the full spate of competencies it believes to be part of the 1979 autonomy statute in order for the Basque Government to provide for the welfare of all Basque citizens (PNV 2012).

A first step by the Basque Government towards involving itself in the management of the foreign population was the creation of the Basque Directorate of Immigration under the auspices of its Ministry of Housing and Social Affairs in 2001. The motion was supported by all parties in the Basque Parliament except PP, which had concerns about a potential clash with Spanish sovereignty according to a former Basque director of immigration:

The immigration directorate was created with the support of all parties except PP, which presented an appeal asking for its nullification in consideration of the fact that immigration is a state competency. Realistically, everything that would be handled by the directorate are matters that fall under the jurisdiction of the Basque Government such as health, social, education policy ... I think they [PP] thought any advance towards more autonomy would lead down the path to independence; so it’s like today an immigration directorate and tomorrow the regulation of borders and visas. (Former Basque director of immigration, interview, 2010)
The director of immigration and Minister of Housing and Social Affairs were the primary actors in the subsequent development of immigration action plans for the Basque Country. These actors, as previously mentioned, were not PNV affiliates but rather members of EB. The PVI depicts actions by the Basque Government as direct responses to the state-level Foreigners’ Law, which the preamble to PVI accuses of putting immigrants in a ‘vulnerable situation’ by restricting their basic rights and freedoms (Basque Government 2003, 2007). According to PVI, Basque institutions will work collectively to overcome the many obstacles to integration faced by immigrants, which are a direct result of state laws that restrict access to legal residence and permit violations of basic human rights such as unwarranted expulsion and the denial of family reunification. PNV respondents agree with the negative assessment of the Foreigners’ Law and consider state jurisdiction over the status of immigrants and distribution of rights between ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ immigrants a breach of Basque self-determination rights:

We aspire to have more self-governance precisely to deliver better services to our citizens. Everyone residing in the Basque Country, whether they are considered ‘legal’ by the Spanish state, is a Basque citizen. Because of our goal to provide for everyone equally, the resistance of the Spanish state to transfer competencies in immigration, especially in areas that the autonomy statute empowers the Basque Country, causes many problems for us. For example, labour market policy is a competence of the Basque Government and a primary vehicle for integrating immigrants, but still the Spanish state continues to interfere by setting regulations about which immigrants we can offer assistance to. Finally, after recent negotiations we will have more power in this realm, but there was a 30-year delay, a period during which we could have contributed to the integration and dignity of immigrants, but we couldn’t because a competence designated to us was not conceded by the state. (PNV-3, 2010, interview)

If we had competency in immigration, we would definitely try to institute a very different relationship with the source countries, one of cooperation that would put an end to the hierarchical relationship we have now in which immigrants are treated as sources of cheap labour rather than as human beings. We would prefer that migrants basically have the same rights as citizens before they even arrive, thus avoiding the precarious situation most start in and never escape. When we don’t have the competencies we deserve, the goals and values of our society become compromised. For example, the state’s treatment of unaccompanied minor immigrants is harsh and here we do our best to treat them as we would a minor born here without a guardian; we provide housing, education, and food … which is not done in the rest of the country. Yet, we can’t always protect them from detection by state security forces. (PNV-1, interview, 2010)

If we were an independent state, we would legislate differently in areas of nationality and borders … the policies shared by the EU and the Spanish state run counter to our vision. Their policies of closing the borders and cataloguing immigrants according to their capacities are too harsh, but the best we can do for now is offer services to offset the hardships of immigrants made acute by state and EU regulations. Lacking the ability to govern ourselves isn’t a new problem and isn’t likely to change. A few years back when we approved a new statute and presented it to the Spanish legislature, it was rejected and we were not permitted to discuss a compromise. (PNV-2, interview, 2010)

The theme of self-governance connects the ‘new’ issue of immigration to the ‘old’ tug-of-war between the centralizing Spanish state and Basque nationalism. SNRPs are in the business of promoting internal solidarity and condemning the state as an occupier or ‘enemy’ of the nation. Traditionally, PNV and other SNRPs have gone about this ‘business’ by referencing their respective nation’s distinct language and culture, but such appeals may not be effective as they once were because minority languages and cultures are thriving in Western sub-state nations (Béland and Lecours 2008). Immigration-related competencies have been added to the mix of identity markers that distinguish the Basque nation and embedded within the broader struggle for self-determination. The references to the past may not be as explicit when compared to the other themes, but the decision to situate compassion for immigrants within the long-standing fight for self-determination is supportive of the general argument.

A recent polemic debate in Spain regarding access to public healthcare by ‘illegal’ immigrants draws attention to the connection between the theme of self-determination and PNV’s benevolent disposition towards the rights of immigrants. On 1 September 2012, a new law entered into force that excludes undocumented migrants from Spain’s public healthcare system. The law, enacted by
means of decree by the PP-led central government, makes exceptions for pregnant women and minors, but all other undocumented migrants are only entitled to ‘emergency healthcare in cases of serious illness or accident’. Civil society and NGOs were quick to condemn the law as inhumane and likely to put the rest of society at risk of contracting illnesses. The Basque Government refused to apply the law, as did a few other autonomous communities in Spain. As the opposition party, PNV framed its response as part of its commitment to inclusive citizenship, defending the right of all persons living in the Basque Country to healthcare independent of their administrative situation. What is more, PNV member Iñigo Iturrate lambasted PP for making xenophobia part of its electoral repertoire and trying to pin the ‘economic crisis on the bogeyman of immigration’ (*El Correo* 2012).

The abdication of the foral laws and subsequent pursuit of self-determination has inspired PNV and its followers to continue the nationalist struggle despite many roadblocks put up by the Spanish state. PNV chooses to frame issues arising from immigration within the long-standing struggle for self-determination for many reasons, but the past appears to shape its policies and rhetoric.

**Conclusion**

The research presented here and elsewhere (Adam 2013; Barker 2010; Hepburn 2009) has put to rest the argument that SNRPs are inherently parochial and backwards, with automatic sympathies for a culturally closed vision of national membership. PNV in the Basque Country has presented a consistent pro-immigrant position substantiated by various policies and initiatives since 2001 that has, perhaps, surprised analysts who foretold that ‘racialism [would] remain a stronger force in Basque nationalism’ (Kymlicka 2001, 278). The pertinent question, however, remains: why do SNRPs like PNV adopt particular policies and discourses in the realm of immigration politics? This article has shifted attention away from the dominant approach of instrumentalism to underscore how the cultural past has weighed in on PNV’s immigration politics, an issue with clear relevance to the boundaries of the membership community.

The ethnosymbolist framework is liable to the critique that it ‘crystallises’ nations and assumes that the mere mention of national myths and memories is sufficient proof that they indeed matter. Taking the critique one step further, Umut Özkirimli (2003, 347) argues that what ‘matters is not the presence of premodern cultural materials, but the selection process, the ways in which these are used and abused, and this necessarily reflects present concerns’. This is quite simplistic since ethnosymbolism in general, and its treatment in this article, affords a role for elite agency, but adds the qualifier that the present concerns of elites are filtered through the lens of the national past. If you want to win an election or buoy support for independence, how do you know which stylised version of the national past will have the desired effect? Even if SNRPs ‘select’ from history, where do they get their criteria for selection? It is hard to reason that a consensus within an SNRP on what is both meaningful and inspirational for the nation can be derived from rational calculations alone.

The ethnosymbolist lens should not replace the rationalist perspective that has provided many useful insights about the intersecting and contradictory pressures facing SNRPs with respect to immigration politics. Where it may really have value is in trying to better understand the link between public opinion and SNRP positions. Recent studies have presented contradictory findings as to whether publics more supportive of self-determination for the sub-state nation are less open to immigrants (Escandell and Ceobanu 2010; Turgeon and Bilodeau 2014). A strategic reading of the feelings of the nationalist masses towards immigrants is not easy, and perhaps the past provides the signposts that allow SNRPs to navigate this murky terrain without them knowing it.

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Notes

1. Respondents were identified as ‘voices’ of the party in the immigration ambit by their presence in related parliamentary debates and media sources. I made the decision to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees.
2. Carlism was a broader struggle between liberalism and traditionalism in the whole of Spain, but support for Carlism was strongest in the Basque provinces because of a strong attachment to provincial autonomy.
3. The most significant source countries are Morocco, Romania, Bolivia, and Colombia.
4. To be counted in official estimates, immigrants must register with their municipality.
5. The same tripartite government made up of PNV, EA, and EB constructed a second Basque Immigration Plan in 2007, which retained the same principles and ideas as the first. In both instances, it was a representative of EB that controlled the relevant ministry.

References


