

# Voegelin, Ethnicity, and Basque Separatism

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What follows is a Voegelin-inspired meditation:

1. Ethnicity is "in" these days. This is likely a result of today's postmodernism and globalization, which naturally arouses a stress upon the particular and local in reaction to modernity's and globalizations's stress upon the general and ecumenic. That means it is in danger of becoming a "topos," one of those standard themes people just keep repeating in a doxic way, without really attending to whether such talk advances our understanding of the real issues confronting us. So we will need to be cautious as we proceed.
2. A theme might be "topical" simply in the sense that those using it are unaware of the ambiguities evoked by the term, confusing a very fluid linguistic designation for a rigorous, analytic concept. Max Weber warned of the term's unsuitability "for a really rigorous analysis" (Weber 1978: 1:394; Guibernaux and Rex 1997: 24). Fishman cautions that the term is more common in the English-speaking world, although globalization may render it more common. Historically "ethnic" in English reaches back to 1470, "ethnicity" to 1777, and meant "heathen, pagan, uncouth, neither Christian nor Jewish." This would relate to the Septuagint's use of "ethnos", which generally meant the "people," but in a negative, pejorative way. "Natio" was the Latin equivalent, originally. The survival of ethnic for "minorities" reveals the outsider, pejorative origins of the term. In any case, the pair "ethnicity/ethnic groups" are now "mainstream" in English-speaking scholarship. Perhaps the unacceptability of "race" as a term, along with the ambiguities in the term "nation" (for example, a Basque nationalist [*abertzale*] is not necessarily one who espouses a separate Basque state), among other reasons, have aided the pair's commonality. (See Fishman 1999: 445-46). (Weber, be it noted, tended to use the term "nationality" in an equivalent way, but without the state/polity association [Weber 1978: 395; Fishman 1999: 446]).i [1]

The general consensus seems now to be that the pair of terms designate something between a form of biological and cultural primordialism (or essentialism) on the one hand and a completely deconstructible group identity on the other. Thus, the pair of terms refer to "principles of collective identification and social organization in terms of culture and history, similarity and difference, that show little sign of withering away" (Jenkins 1997: 169-70 in Fishman 1999: 447). Kinship and biological inheritance are common but not absolutely necessary ingredients in this, along with language.

3. Further "topical" examples of ethnicity-talk of a nature more serious than simply an uncritical awareness of the term's ambiguity might be, for example, racial physicalism on the one hand, or claims for historical and cultural uniqueness of a dubious, absolutist kind on the other. For example, the Nazi racial purity claims, or in the Basque case, a similar

and (originally) slightly earlier racialism stemming from the "father of modern Basque nationalism," Sabino Arana y Goiri (d. 1903) (See Conversi 1997: 69-71).. Or, for the latter cultural variant, the notion that an ethnē and culture is a static and enclosed entity, sealed off from cultural transfusion from others. This is sometimes called "primordialism." When people talk about being "pure" French, or "pure" Swedes, or "pure" Basques, one senses something of this, as if we are miming our pure-breed dogs. In which case, it is they who have us for their pets. On the other hand, the trend in some circles of postmodernism to completely deconstruct ethnicity, as if we can willy nilly declare ourselves anything we want, would also be an example of a doxic construction, ignoring history and culture, and their capacity to shape our souls. Or the melting pot view, which seeks to efface cultural particularity. Voegelin would suggest that all such topoi stem from hypostatizing ethnicity and its allotropes, that is, severing the symbol from its engendering experience within the community of being, history, and society.

4. Voegelin was attuned to our issue, but in his non-topos oriented manner, in a number of places. It is not a major category or concern of his work, but if it is not major, it is significant.<sup>ii</sup> [2] I believe he uses the term and its allotropes in a way compatible with our above "mainstream" definition. It is more "symbol" than "concept," in Voegelin's lexicon, but one does not cancel out the other, according to his later usage. The greater number of references occur in *The Ecumenic Age* and circulate around the view that the breakthroughs of noetic and pneumatic differentiation (having to do with the emergence of a "consciousness of common humanity" [EA 2000: 372]) do not abolish "ethnic cultures," but neither do they leave them the same, once each encounters the other. Ethnic cultures can be both help and hindrance, at once providing a cultural context that is hospitable to the breakthroughs, or one that resists the "universal" openness of our common humanity, confusing ecumenic hubris for true, eschatological universality (107, 279-80). This was something already noted by Plato, and it continues to be a factor today. (In AR 1989: 106-7, he refers to the continuance of this problem, both on a minor scale in the USA, and also in "the famous Europe that does not exist"◊).
5. Something that strikes the reader is Voegelin's respect for the ethnic dimension. By this I mean that he knows we cannot and should not try to abolish it, in the manner of ideologues. In his time, Marxist and positivist effacings of the local and particular were the route this commonly took. But while Voegelin respects it, he does not deify it, in the manner of Nazism. His approach is metaxic, balanced. Above all he has a sense of its "mysteriousness," its inability to be completely "rationalized." Why do the breakthroughs occur in some ethnic contexts and not in others, etc◊? (EA: 2000: 280). His general line of approach, which we have endeavored to follow: "The noetic field of consciousness is not a ◊people' in the ethnic sense◊it forms a cultural stratum within an ethnic society" (2000: 280).
6. Our focus now will turn to the intersection between these considerations on ethnicity and "the Basque question," namely, the issue of separatism. This latter issue is, naturally, a larger one than that of ethnicity, although I believe the ethnicity issue brings us to the deeper questions. By this I mean that ethnicity raises the issue of what constitutes Basque identity, and this would seem to be the issue of greatest moment and concern, not

only to the Basques in the traditional Basque Country, but in the Basque diaspora as well. But first some comments on Basque separatism.

- a. Articles 2 and 3 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution are central: (1) art. 2: "The Constitution is based on the indivisible unity of the Spanish Nation, common and indivisible fatherland [*patria*] of all the Spaniards. It acknowledges and guarantees the right to autonomy of the nationalities and regions which form it and the solidarity among them." Art. 3: "Castilian is the official language of the State. All Spaniards have the duty to know it and the right to use it. The other Spanish languages will also be official in their respective Autonomous Communities according to their own Statutes. The richness of the distinct linguistic modalities of Spain represents a patrimony which will be the object of special respect and protection." Art. 145 is also important: "No federation between Autonomous Communities will be permitted under any circumstances."
- b. Currently Spain recognizes 17 autonomous communities; the traditional Catalonia, Euskadi, and Galicia, then Navarre, then Cantabria, etc. (Conversi 1997: 143-44).
- c. Basque separatism might be defined in a very loose sense as a movement to preserve Basque ethnic identity in the midst of the Spanish nation and state. The current constitution's implementation goes a long way toward ameliorating these goals. The Basques have been declared a "nation" although not a "state," but at the same time they enjoy an autonomous governmental status, with their own police force, legislature, and lehendakari (president).
- d. Toward the other end of the spectrum, Basque separatism might be defined as the desire to form a separate Basque state; this would be a radical separatism. Over the years most Basque groups and parties have moved somewhere in-between a very loose, regionalist separatism (as currently exists in the Constitution) and the more radical one.<sup>iii</sup> [3] The reasons for being unhappy with the current Constitution's implementation are many and complex: the separation of Navarre from the three other Basque provinces comprising the Basque Autonomous Community would be an important factor, the Basque question in France (another three traditional Basque provinces), the question of foreign diplomacy being denied Euskadi (the Basque Country), the "divide and conquer" approach of the Constitution's implementation, through separating the autonomous communities and by dividing the traditional Basque provinces, etc.
  - (1) Naturally, when one thinks of radical Basque separatism, one thinks of "ETA," the radical revolutionary movement, employing militarist tactics, to achieve political independence. Actually, ETA is a most complex organization, and there seem to be in fact "many" ETA's, whose goals are ambiguous, and which are highly fluid. It was founded only in 1959, largely in reaction to Franco's policy of nearly trying to eradicate Basque culture and language, along with a deep disappointment over America's failure to support even a moderate Basque independence, despite the widespread belief that America would do so, given Basque resistance-fighters' help during WW II. Once

America turned "friendly" toward Franco, this was too much. ETA was originally quite Marxist in inspiration, and in the early phases of the movement it is not clear how this "meshed" with the nationalist, ethnic aspirations of the Basque people. It has now largely returned to a stress upon culture and ethnicity, without completing rejecting the Marxist dimension. In passing, we should note that it also abandoned the racialist tendencies of Arana, and increasingly stressed the Basque language as a key factor. (See Conversi 1997: 90-108).iv [4]

(2) Another factor involved in giving a "radical" and problematic shape to Basque nationalist movements, according to the helpful study of Conversi, is the generally more exclusivist, closed nature of Basque nationalism vs. the more cultural, open kind generally practiced by Catalonian nationalism. The racialist tendencies of Arana's earlier nationalism, along with its stress upon being Catholic, is a factor involved here. There are signs that this has changed to a more cultural-linguistic approach in the modern Basque Country in Spain today.

e. How might our considerations from Voegelin be of some assistance on this issue of separatism?

(1) I will single out just two features. First, Voegelin noted that when the ecumenic empires of the ecumenic age meet with local tribes and cultures, they will bear the effects and imprint of the "ecumenic-imperial consciousness." They do not remain simply the same, anymore "than in our own time does the withdrawal of Western powers from their colonial empires restore the former tribal societies" (*EA*: 372; Hastings 1997: passim). In such situations, then, one has to expect a mix of formative and deformative processes at work.v [5] In the Basque case, we have the results of the long process of the Western Christian Empire's presence in Spain, trailing off into its contemporary modern and postmodern mutations. For example, Arana's stress upon "being a Roman Catholic" as a sine qua non of Basqueness can be seen as a result of this imperial process. ETA's rejection of that in favor of a Marxist, atheist view reflects the "modern, secular" phase of the Western imperial movement. A more positive example, however, would be the aspiration for self-determinationvi [6] on the part of a people growing conscious of itself as a "demos" in the political sense, thus aspiring for greater forms of political participation and the formation of generally democratic forms of governance. The fusion of the Jewish-Christian and Classical inheritances, with their growing recognition of the dignity of the individual person within the context of the common good, are at work here. Hence, Basque nationalism is but another expression of this more widespread aspiration.

- (2) A second feature of Voegelin's thought is his observation that noetic consciousness (to which we will add pneumatic consciousness, which I think he implies) forms a cultural stratum within the larger, ethnic-cultural reality of a people. In other words, it constitutes a spiritually formative source for order within the latter. In this sense, then, noetic and pneumatic differentiation constitute, let us suggest, the "core identity" of someone who has undergone these differentiations. I borrow the term "core identity" from Gloria Toticagena (1999: 285). She notes that people typically have various "identities, loyalties, and interests," and that these tend to be framed and given a larger meaning by our core identity. In our global age, this is even more to be expected. Voegelin is expressing an equivalent notion in his observation that noetic consciousness forms a cultural stratum within a larger, ethnic-cultural reality.
- (3) Noetic analysis, then, might make a significant contribution to the Basque ethnicity question by focusing upon the issue of Basque identity and its preservation, which would seem to be the key spiritual issue involved here, along with the sociopolitical structures needed to foster this. A key feature, as well, would be the avoidance of doxic, ethnic constructions, noted at this presentation's beginning. Diagnosing such doxic derailments is one of the central features of noetic analysis.
- (4) A key challenge from noetic and pneumatic consciousness would be the "terrible truth," namely, "that the existence of a concrete society in a definite form will not resolve the problem of order in history, that no Chosen People in any form will be the ultimate omphalos of the true order of mankind" (*IR* 2001: 545). In other words, preserving "Basqueness" is not the ultimate goal of humankind. It is a relative goal. Noesis relativizes the "Basque question," just as it relativizes all ethnicity concerns. But to relativize is not to abolish, but to gain a metaxic perspective, which seeks to accord its appropriate due to, in this case, ethnicity concerns. Here I would say that the Christian differentiation, with its implied stress upon the incarnational and particular, is an especially important factor in appreciating the limited but appropriate role of the ethnic. So, too, would be the Jewish emphasis upon the land, once purified from any absolutist claims. The Basque community's aspiration for the autonomy needed to preserve its ethnic identity as a relative and appropriate good is derivative from this. At the same time, noesis indicates that this legitimate goal must exist in a concrete world along with other legitimate claims, for example, that of the Spanish people and their nation and state. We are in the midst of a balance of forces, each seeking its aspirations in a non-utopian framework.vii [7] At this point, noesis intersects with the prudential concerns of statecraft and forms of governance and governmental structures best calculated to achieve these legitimate aims. Most

immediately, in the Basque case, should the strong sense of Basqueness, that is, constituting a Basque "nation," lead inevitably to forming a Basque "state" in the modern, sovereign sense? The "terrible truth" indicates that the sovereign state is not the omphalos of humankind either. In the contemporary context, is the emerging European Union a factor which might work to relativize even further aspirations for such sovereignty? At the same time, we can likely expect a corresponding desire to preserve ethnic particularity as a counterbalance to European collectivism.

### References:

Eric Voegelin:

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i [1] Hastings 1997: 3 adds some nuance: (1) "An ethnicity is a group of people with a shared cultural identity and spoken language." (2) "A nation is a far more self-conscious community than an ethnicity formed from one or more ethnicities, and normally identified by a literature of its own" (3) "A nation-state is a state which identifies itself in terms of one specific nation whose people are not seen simply as subjects' of the sovereign but as a horizontally bonded society to whom the state in a sense belongs." Hastings also notes the important role of religion and literature (especially the Bible) in forming Christian nations (185-209 esp.).

ii [2] One might consult Voegelin's references to Herodotus, who likewise appreciated the ethnic factor. On Herodotus, see now Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 42-49.

iii [3] "According to a survey in 1982, 38% of the Basque population considered ETA activists to be idealists and patriots, and only 31% believed that they were criminals or insane. However, the same survey showed that only 8% of the Basques claimed to support ETA, while 77% said that they were opposed to its activities. This blend of justifications and accusations may derive either from a persisting fear of expressing one own's view, or from the fact that some people really believed in the genuine commitment of ETA's activists. However, successive surveys indicate a slow decline in ETA's popularity, especially after 1987" (Convesi 1997: 159).

iv [4] Clearly ETA drew upon other factors in the formation of its ideology, among which were elements of religious millenarianism, Basque village and hunting traditions, alienated youth, etc. See Joseba Zulaika, *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament*, Basque Series (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1988), and J. Aranzadi, *Milenarismo Vasco* (Madrid: Taurus, 1981). For other factors that continue to foster ETA, see Paddy Woodworth, *Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). "GAR" = "Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación," an anti-ETA secret organization, functioning from 1983-87.

v [5] The Basque question is a good example of how "in the Ecumenic Age, there emerges a new type of ecumenic humanity, which, with all its complications of meaning, reaches as a millennial constant into the modern Western civilization" (EA: 107).

vi [6] See Zulaika, 100, for a stress on this.

vii [7] Interestingly, the Basque Bishops of Bilbo, Donostia and Gasteiz in their controversial pastoral "Bakea Prestatu" (May 29, 2002), follow a noetic-pneumatic style of analysis in arguing that peace is the larger good, and that such options as whether one should aspire to state sovereignty, or to a greater or lesser form of self-government, or to a preference for a more or less strict integration into the Spanish state cannot be "political dogmas" for the Church ("Ondorioz, ez burujabetza nahia, ez autogobernu gehiago edo gutxiagoren alde egotea, ez Espainiako Estatuan lotura handiagoz edo txikiagoz integratzea Elizarantzat ez dira, printzipioz, baldintzagabeko baiezkoka eskatzen duten dogma politikoak" [no. 6, Donostia: Idatz]).