



**Cruset, María Eugenia. *Nacionalismo y diásporas. Los casos vasco e irlandés en Argentina (1862-1922)*. La Plata: Ediciones Lauburu, 2015, 280 pp.**

Basques and Irish present such a remarkable inventory of parallelisms in their social, cultural and political development during the latter centuries, that somehow it makes a lot of sense to try some kind of comparative historical analysis. Actually, both countries share: *a)* the possession of an old, vernacular language not related to the official languages of the kingdoms and states they had belonged to for centuries (the United Kingdom, on the one hand, and France and Spain on the other); *b)* a strong and long-standing sense of self-identity; *c)* an out-of-the-ordinary social presence and popular attachment to the Catholic Church; *d)* a growing nationalistic movement during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; and lately *e)* the creation and long-standing activity of some armed groups (IRA and ETA) that supported the fight for political independence through violence or terrorism. By the end of the twentieth century both the Spanish Basque Country and Northern Ireland were considered the only active focuses of political violence related to nationalistic movements in Western Europe. Even popular culture has somehow assumed the supposed links between the two peoples -or, more precisely, the two terrorisms, as it has been repeatedly shown for instance in blockbuster films such as *The Jackal* (1997) or *Munich* (2005). Public depictions of images and texts on the “Basque struggle for independence” could be found in graffiti all over the main cities of Northern Ireland (Image 1). Similarly, several groups that support the independence for the Basque Country have often tried to link themselves to the evolution of Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland. For instance, when several Basque nationalist groups signed the ceasefire agreement of Lizarra-Garazi (Sept. 1998) in the wake of the Good Friday Agreement in Belfast, both the Basque and Irish flags were raised in the room the announcement was publicly made (Image 2).



**Image 1:** Mention to the Basque conflict in a street of Belfast, 2007



**Image 2:** Representatives of the political parties that signed the Lizarra-Garazi agreement during the press conference.

But parallelisms are not limited only to the political evolution of both nationalisms. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Ireland and the Basque Country were among the European regions with the highest rate of emigration abroad, mainly to the Americas. While the example of early Irish emigration, due to the extreme precedent of the Great Potato Famine of 1845-49 and its subsequent exodus of a million of people that fled *Éire* to England and overseas destination, put the bases of the principal patterns of scientifically understanding international mass migration during the last two centuries; in the case of the Basques the weight of international emigration in the historical development of contemporary *Euskal Herria* has somehow been obscured by other not less important social and economic transformations, such as industrialization and even mass immigration from other regions to the Basque provinces south of the French-Spanish border. Nonetheless, figures of Basque overseas migration were, if not comparable to those of Ireland, at least quite remarkable in its context: it has been sometimes calculated that about 250 thousand Basques could have departed from their homeland to several American destinations between 1840 and 1970.<sup>1</sup> Among the consequences of these migrations, diasporic communities of Irish- and Basque-descendants blossomed in several American countries, from the USA to Argentina, during the second half of the 19th and all along the 20th century.

Cruset deals with two of these diasporic communities, as they were created and even thrived in one of the most attractive destination of European migrants in South America: Argentina. Actually, the main objective of the research that supports her book is to make a comparison between these two communities in relation to the creation and development of each nationalistic movement and their diasporic echoes in Argentina between 1862 and 1922. The choice of this period allows the author to cover the early decades since the beginning of the new waves of European mass migration to Argentina after the process of independence and national organization, up to a very significant year for the three spaces involved, specially for Ireland with the signature of the Anglo-Irish Treaty that gave birth to the Irish Free State.

The book derives directly from the thorough research (based on adequate, abundant primary and secondary sources) that the author made for her PhD. dissertation under the direction of Dr. Santiago de Pablo, a renowned specialist on Basque nationalism, and that was successfully defended at the University of the Basque Country in 2014. I myself was lucky enough to have early access to its content since I was one of the members of the board that evaluated it. The book follows the main structure of the dissertation it is adapted from, formally divided into eight chapters (plus conclusions, sources and bibliography), even though they can be distinguished three main parts.

First of all, in the first chapter (“The New Forms of Diplomacy: Paradiplomacy and Diasporas”). Cruset explores the theoretical background of the research, starting with a state-of-the-art on the diverse theories that has been historically used to understand nationalism, and specifically the crossroads between the traditional elements of understanding nationalism in Western scholar tradition, the changes derived from the new perspectives added to the field after the work of authors like Gellner, Anderson or Smith, up to the new paradigms of transnationalism and paradiplomacy that feed each other when trying to determine the complex relationship between ethnic identity, citizenship, adaptation and political mobilization in the context of diasporic communities. Basques and Irish represent, for this purpose, two very illuminating examples of the parallel processes of adoption, construction and development of a particular, distinct national identity both in the homeland and abroad. In the case of Ireland, the role played by the “American connection” (or, better said, “connections” if we also include other very active Irish diasporic communities, such as the Argentinian one, apart from the well known case of the Irish in the United States) has become common knowledge even outside the narrow boundaries of the academia. Less attention has been paid, on the contrary, in the case of Basque nationalism, whose overseas dimension (apart from the political exile that took place after the end of the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39) has mostly remained basically obscure for historical research because of a combination of lack of interest, difficulty of accession to the sources and – last but not least – the delay of historiographical research in the Basque Country.<sup>2</sup> In several recent books and researches, the spread of Basque nationalism to the diaspora and the political feedback between the homeland and the Basque communities abroad have commenced to emerge. This book, in fact, can be considered one of the earliest examples of these new lines of research, at least from the Basque point of view.

Chapters II and III are, secondly, a quite sintetic review of the two main elements that compose the basis of the research. In the first of them (“Argentinian, Irish and Basque Nationalisms”), Cruset abstracts the main lines that defined “nationalism,” understood both as “national identity” and “political movement,” in the three spaces that converge into the book: Argentina on the one hand, and Ireland and the Basque Country on the other. Cruset explores the similarities and differences of such different ways of constructing the national identity: a creation from the top, under the impulse of the elites and with the support of the structures of the state, in the case of Argentina; in contrast with the

emergence of Irish and Basque national identities as a mixture of culture, language and religion with politics, in a struggle against their respective states and the processes of nation-building they were implementing during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century.

The latter chapter (“Irish and Basque Immigrations”) tries to make a comparison between the processes of immigration to Argentina from Ireland and from the Basque Country, putting the focus, not on the demographic or economic aspects of the phenomenon, but on two elements that are very relevant for the main topic of her research: the social organization of the communities of immigrants through the creation of ethnic associations, and the development of internal systems of ethnic leadership within both communities, in a process inextricably linked to the emergence of the communities themselves. This chapter is mainly based on literature; in the case of Basque immigration, the most relevant studies on Basque migration to Argentina are quoted, with only a few absences – absences that could have been noteworthy to justify.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, even though the author expresses specifically her aim to construct a comparative perspective, this chapter is to a certain extent not more than a juxtaposition of both processes. Only a few remarks on “some comparisons” between Basque and Irish emigration to Argentina close it (115-118), but they are interesting enough to make us ask more questions: for instance, what was the impact of being both cases the most important examples of “early migration” to nineteenth-century Argentina? (115) Was there in any moment parallelism in the processes of economic integration and social adaptation that could create more affinities between the two groups? And moreover, which was the impact of the internal divisions because of the divided loyalties within Basques and Irish, once the new identities grew into the political agenda?

In fact, the ambivalent role of the structures that held both diasporic communities up is the main element of analysis of the third, most original part of the book. Although it could make sense to think that nationalism is essentially a matter of politics, Cruset avoids to analyse the role of political propaganda and activism of nationalistic organizations and parties until almost the end of the book. Therefore, chapters IV, V and VI deal with three institutions that were extremely relevant in the process of construction, first of the elements that converged on the new definitions of Irish and Basque ethnic identities in the diasporas, and second of their transformation into political language. Chapter IV develops the topic of “Diaspora and Community Press”, focused on the most long-standing, impacting newspaper of each community: *The Southern Cross* for the Irish (1875- ) and *La Vasconia* (from 1903, *La Baskonia*) for the Basques (1893-1943). The continuity of both newspapers had somehow turned them into the most visible – if not the only – voice for the inner and outer spreading of news and the image of the communities themselves. Cruset, after describing the creation, evolution and main lines of the topics, opinions and ideology exuded from their pages, attempts to make a cross image of both communities by the way each of them reflected (or not) news, articles or mentions to the other community. This analysis is specially interesting, because it offers the best example



of the dissimilar interest that Basques and Irish had about each other. In fact, if there is a word that could define the relation between the two communities, this would surely be “unbalanced,” because of the existence of a real lack of comparability, or better said, correspondence of interest on each other. While the Basque-Argentinian mass-media, and specially those closer to the postulates and political organization of nationalism, paid sympathetic attention to the evolution and achievements of Irish nationalism, Basque nationalism is defined by Cruset as the “absent news” in the Irish-Argentinian press. This unbalance is also a reflection of the way both nationalisms looked at each other in Europe. Since its inception, the main political organization of Basque nationalism in the homeland, the *Partido Nacionalista Vasco*, whose ideology mixed politics with religion (its main motto, as created by its founder Sabino Arana, was *Jaungoikoa eta Lege Zarra*, “God and the Old Laws”),<sup>4</sup> looked eagerly into the path opened by the rise and action of Irish nationalism. The struggle for the independence of Ireland was for a long time the mirror Basque nationalism wanted to see its reflection depicted in. Diasporic mass media for Basque-Argentinians did nothing more than to follow the practice set by Basque nationalistic journals and newspapers back in the homeland. But on the contrary, there was not the same vinculation backwards: if it were only from the news taken from their mass media, we could assume that very few of Irish nationalists would even know about the existence of a similar movement in the Basque Country, and still less to reach the point to fraternize with it.

Two more chapters are devoted to the role played by women and by the Catholic Church. In Chapter V (“Irishwomen, Basque women, Argentinian women”), after highlighting the stereotypes on the significant role that women had in the traditional societies of Ireland and the Basque Country, Cruset compares the reality and the image of immigrant women of both communities. First of all, the author presents some general ideas about the specific situation of women immigration, based on quantitative and qualitative sources: number, occupation, civil state, and the main fields of activity in which women stood out. Some interesting parallelisms emerge, such as the process of “immigration” of nuns from both homelands; a process whose roots and reasons were mostly linked to an inner development of the Catholic Church in Europe during the age of the so-called “missionary impulse.” Nonetheless these nuns, and specifically some congregations, were able to create a direct connection with the communities of expatriate compatriots. It is therefore interesting to notice how some of these congregations of nuns finished up creating and managing services for the support of immigrants, such as schools, retirement homes for elderly people, and hospitals. Anyway, in part because of a lack of available sources, Cruset declares the difficulties to measure the role that women in the diaspora surely played, like at the homeland, “to conserve and transmit the cultural, religious and political values” of the old country. This is an interesting open gate that I would encourage Cruset to pursue in her research.

If there are two European people for whom speaking of their historical links with the Catholic Church seems rather pleonastic, these would surely be the Irish and the

Basques. Any researcher, or even any person with an average interest and knowledge on both people and their past development, would agree that religion, and specifically the Church as an institution, played a significant role in the transmission and maintenance of elements that constitute some of the bases of their particular identities. It is known, for instance, how the literature in Basque language was confined for centuries to the hands of the clergy, making thus stronger the link between Basque identity and religion. Nationalisms were therefore also based strongly on religion: as a matter of contrast in Ireland (Catholic Irish vs. Protestant English), as a matter of intensity in the Basque Country (Basque piety vs. Spanish irreligiosity). Argentina received waves of priests and monks during the whole nineteenth century from Europe, along with the mass migration; Irish and Basques predominated. Even though Argentinian Catholic Church did not allow the creation of “national churches” for immigrants – like they were created in the United States –, it is nonetheless true that the structures of the Church in the countries of departure became growingly concerned about the impact that all the changes linked to migration could have on the maintenance of faith and religious practice among compatriot immigrants. So several groups within the European Catholic churches started developing some initiatives to provide emigrants with “spiritual help” before they traveled, during the trip, and after they settled down in the Americas. The lack of priests that could attend the immigrants in their native tongue was considered one of the most important elements that put in risk their attachment to the old religion of the homeland; therefore some European churches took the burden of providing them with chaplains and missionaries.

In chapter VI (simply titled “The Church”) Cruset describes a general overview on both the role of the Church and the clergy as leading elements of leadership in the Basque and Irish communities back in the homeland, and also in the Argentinian diaspora. In the comparison, there are several elements of dissimilarity (as it happened with the total number of immigrants, Basques were overrepresented in number and position within the ranks of the Argentinian Catholic Church), but also of convergence: for instance, the special interest given to education, by the creation of schools whose main aim would be the transmission of the religion and culture of the homeland (168 and 175, specially). Once again, the structure of this chapter is closer to a juxtaposition of both cases rather than to a combined, comparative discourse; but the outcome is still worth enough.

Finally, chapter VII (“Politics: Diasporas and National Identities”) describes the parallel processes of introduction and growth of political nationalism within both Basque and Irish communities in Argentina, with the implementation of structures, leaderships, tools for spreading ideology, and so on. As Cruset highlights, the early development of a specific sense of separate identity among Basques and Irish in the context of multi-ethnic, massive-immigrating Argentinian society, actually helped the acceptance of the new political language (in part imported from the homeland, in part developed *in situ*) that turned identity into nationality (193).

The book closes with the main conclusions of the research, which can be summarized in the main idea that, in spite of the similarities between both communities (high level of ethnic identity, similar attachment to religion, parallel processes of immigration into Argentina, and development of a political nationalistic movement), they were looking into “inverted mirrors,” with few or no contact at all; and because of this lack of contacts and common initiatives, the author suggests that both communities played different roles in relation to the political evolution of their respective homelands: contrary to the Irish example, Basque nationalists were never able to turn their diaspora into an instrument of paradiplomacy (226).

*Óscar Álvarez-Gila*

### Notes about images:

Image 1: Mention to the Basque conflict in a street of Belfast, 2007. Source: <https://lasmanzanasdulces.wordpress.com/2008/12/01/%C2%A1zas-en-toda-la-boca-historia-de-700-presos-politicos/>

Image 2: It's a widely known image. I can ask for a better quality one if necessary.

### Notes

- 1 W.A. Douglass and J. Bilbao; *Amerikanuak. Basques in the New World*, Reno NV, University of Nevada-Reno, 1975. Let's take into account, in order to understand the accurate value of these figures, that the current population of the whole Basque region (including the territories both in Spain and France) is about 3 million people.
- 2 It is necessary to remark that the first Basque public University was not created until the end of the decade of 1970, right after the political change in Spain, the return to democracy and, in the case of the Basque Country, the recovery of political autonomy. The boost on historiographical production about the Basque Country is directly related to the implementation of the Basque state University (UPV/EHU), the creation of a Faculty of Letters (that included some departments of History) and, therefore, the formation for the first time of a group of professional historians devoted to study the past of the Basque Country.
- 3 Specially here I am referring to one of the first monographies on Basque emigration to Argentina of the last decades, *Paraísos posibles. Historia de la emigración vasca a Argentina y Uruguay en el siglo XIX*, by José Manuel Azcona Pastor (Bilbao, 1992). Cruset, in my opinion, should have explained the reasons for not using this book, that is only shortly referred to in the initial pages of the introduction.
- 4 Basically referring to the traditional homerule laws that Basque territories of Spain had enjoyed up to the last quarter of the 19th century, that Basque nationalism considered the foundations of a centuries-old political sovereignty of Basque territories.