

*Going against the Tide: Fernando Etxegarai and the Basque Radical Community:  
A counter narrative of the Spanish Transition<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract**

For some time, the Basque insurgent group ETA was the main antagonist of the Spanish political system born from the transition to democracy and its legal manifestation, the constitutional regime promulgated in 1978. This antagonism facilitated the construction of a narrative where ETA represented the last obstacle to the reconciliation among Spaniards upon the conclusion of the Civil War in 1939. The official narrative portrays the Spanish transition as peaceful and non-conflictive. Nevertheless, despite ETA definitively abandoning its armed struggle for independence in 2011, and since then it no longer represents a physical threat to the ordinary citizen in Spain, in 2019 we still lack a historical account that challenges the official narrative of the Spanish transition. This article explores a different narrative of the Spanish transition in the form of the life story of an ETA activist and his disenchantment with the inability of the democratic forces within Spain to break with the previous dictatorial regime.

Keywords: Spanish transition; ETA; Oral history.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a manuscript that is going to be published by The University of Reno, Nevada.

## Introduction

This article's core is the creation of a counter-narrative of the Spanish transition through an individual life story. This story was one of seven ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, or Freedom for Euzkadi in Basque language) activists' life stories compiled during my doctoral research that sought to explain the lengthy Basque armed conflict from since ETA's beginning in 1959, during the ending years of Franco's dictatorship, until the definitive cease fire declared by the organisation in 2011. This article shows how Fernando Etxegarai's story did not form part of the Basque Radical Community at the beginning of the transition; however, as Spain became consolidated as a European democracy in the 1980s, Etxegarai decided to join ETA – a totally contrarian move for an ETA activist. Etxegarai's decision to be part of ETA during a democratic period when, for most of the Spaniards, the organization's armed struggle was no longer relevant, reveals a deep disenchantment unexplored by the mainstream historiography. Using social and oral history, I exposed Etxegarai's disenchantment with the Spanish anti-Francoist forces who were in charge of the transition. From social history we will understand how, before the dictator died in 1975, the Spanish society was already immersed in a 'consumer culture', which survived the dictatorship and the transition, into the democratic era. From oral history, we will see Etxegarai's emotional evolution from having hope in the Spanish anti-Francoist political movement of the 1970s, to his rupture with it in the 1980s upon realizing that the Spanish democracy had a lot in common with the dictatorship, thus causing him to join the Basque Radical Community.

More concrete, the purpose of this article is to shed light on the daily life experience of the Basque insurgent group ETA and the rest of the Basque Radical Community within the period commonly known as the 'Spanish transition' to democracy (1975-1982). The

dominant academic narrative, in which the Spanish transition to a democratic government served as the necessary base for modernization, did not leave much space to explore other interpretations of how the Franco regime had been successful in shaping a new Spanish identity. In this official narrative, the pact after Franco's death between the more moderate political forces of his regime and the diverse democratic political movements (including the Spanish Communist Party) made it possible for Spain to start a new democratic period, which ushered in decades of economic prosperity. However, the disciplines of social and cultural history have taught us to question the glorification of any particular nation-building process. This grand narrative of the Spanish transition obscures other smaller stories, necessary from my point of view, in order to construct a broader interpretation of the Spanish transition.

To this end, this paper offers an analysis of the oral life story of the ETA activist Fernando Etxegarai. It provides a counter narrative of these seven crucial years of the Spanish transition and highlights the very real social conflicts that remain unresolved today. It would of course be an error to idealize the life of a person who has been part of an organization engaged in violence and who is considered a terrorist by prominent international organizations. On the other hand, the life of Fernando Etxegarai, and, more specifically, his personal memories of the turbulent years of the transition reflect the real contradictions within Basque society, which, after almost forty years of dictatorship, was unable to build an environment for peace during and after the transition.

The principal source of this paper is the interview conducted with Fernando Etxegarai on 17 March 2014. The format of oral history, in which the interviewed is able to narrate his life, provides the opportunity to reach what historians cannot achieve when their sources are no longer alive, which is to incorporate the spontaneous and emotional insights of the subject into our research. Indeed, by incorporating Etxegarai's radical critique into the argument of

this paper, this article takes the risk of overlapping my analysis with his opinion. However, this article deals not only with the ideological hegemony constructed by the Spanish elites during the transition, but also with the personal fears and hopes of the individual Etxegarai. It is indeed this connection between his life and his politics that makes his experience enlightening for a period such as the transition. Overcoming the collective psychological fear experienced within Spain during the 1970s, which included the threat of a return to war, is precisely what led many observers to laud the Spanish transition an ‘international prototype’. The efforts of party leaders to contain street protests was subsequently manifested in the image of a non-conflictive Spanish nation built by these same leaders (communist Santiago Carrillo and ex-prime minister Adolfo Suárez among them) who made many sacrifices during the transition.

Notwithstanding the long literature written about ETA and despite recently published books on the Spanish transition that employ a social history approach, the two topics remain, in effect, disconnected. In other words, ETA remains the subject of analysis by experts on terrorism within security studies or by academics in the area of Basque nationalism. However, how can one deny that from the time of its inception until the definitive cease-fire declared by the organization in 2011 that ETA has been part of the daily life and socio-political discourse of most all Spaniards? Why then has ETA been analysed as though it were at the margins of that same society? This is probably due to the same political inertia that fostered the official narrative of the transition, allowing it to go unchallenged for almost forty years, reducing the importance of ETA within this narrative.

In order to explore other narratives of the transition, oral history makes a difference providing the possibility for ETA activists to tell their story. The doctoral thesis written by Carrie Hamilton about women in ETA is the main work on oral history and the Basque

Radical Community done until today.<sup>2</sup> The validity of Hamilton's work or the research presented in this article is susceptible to challenge by traditional historians: How can we know that the testimony of the narrator and the transcription of a written interview 'are true'? However, this kind of question is 'tricky'. If we assume that human beings (and indeed historians) have their own ideological motivations in the creation of any documentation, we must then consider all sources used by historians (primary or secondary) to be contaminated from their inception. In other words, I understand and acknowledge that the life story of Fernando Etxegarai presented in this article does not reveal any kind of universal truth. Our portrayal of intense life stories in our research, as oral historians, is a consequence of our previous attentiveness to the subject and how he/she sought to make sense of his/her life during the interview process. In order to complement this oral testimony as a primary source, the work of Hamilton and this present article have explored other primary sources related to the Basque Radical Community (unions, internal ETA documents, etc.), extracted from archives in the Basque Country, particularly the archive of the Convent of the Benedictines, located in the Basque town of Lazkao. This article continues the work of Hamilton and introduces the element of intersubjectivity to provide a new historical account of ETA and the Spanish transition. The outcome of this article is a product of the intersection of the exploration of Fernando Etxegarai's subjectivity (how he looks to his past and tries to make sense of it), and the emotional burdens I bear as a Spanish citizen who has experienced ETA both as a threat to my country and my personal values.

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<sup>2</sup> Carrie Hamilton, "The Gender Politics of ETA and Radical Basque Nationalism 1959-1982". PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 1999.

At the core of this paper is the thread that connects the Etxegarai's childhood and his family's experience fighting the dictatorship to the 'mature man' who decided to participate in the armed struggle upon democratization. From the 1960s to the 80s and thus a product of the transition, changes in political identity and in the way of understanding political violence shaped the new modern Spanish state. Commonplaces in the historiography of the dictatorship and the transition tell us that the revolutionary rhetoric of working class organizations throughout the 1960s moderated their political speech by the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> These same commonplaces show how the jubilation expressed by a significant part of the Spanish population when ETA assassinated Carrero Blanco in 1973, then the prime minister, turned into the repudiation of political violence by the same population just five years later.<sup>4</sup> However, my previous research in the archives of the Basque Country exploring internal documents of ETA as well as other organizations of the Basque nationalist left proves the existence of a different dimension of the same reality. ETA represented, at least until the 1980s, the strongest social movement in Spain against the official narrative of the transition above described. Indeed, Fernando Etxegarai's frustrations with the transition were not so different from the ones experienced by activists of the unions or the Spanish Communist Party. His life thus elucidates the political and cultural shock of a generation of political activists who, in a period of fewer than ten years, realized that what they were fighting for during the dictatorship did not form part of their daily life in the nascent Spanish democracy.

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Carr and Juan Pablo Fusi, *Spain: Dictatorship to Democracy*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond Carr. "The Spanish Transition to Democracy in Historical Perspective", in *The Democratic Transition and a New International Role*, ed. Robert P. Clar and Michael H. Haltzel. Cambridge: Ballinger Publishing Company, 1987, 74.

## Fernando Etxegarai's Cultural Roots

The Spanish transition, which began with the death of the dictator in 1975, was made possible by a multiplicity of factors, but foremost so by the social and material changes Spanish society experienced during the final fifteen years of the dictatorship.<sup>5</sup> The 'stabilization plans' promoted by the Franco regime to industrialise the country also invigorated new working class social movements. Indeed, taking into account that Spain was an agrarian country during most of the twentieth century, this proletarian culture, living modernity as a challenge to power relations, fostered a common goal of defeating the dictatorship among Spaniards.<sup>6</sup> In 1959, the father of Fernando Etxegarai, an income tax officer, was imprisoned by the police after attending an important political meeting with other members of the democratic forces opposed to Franco (Spanish Socialist Party and the Spanish Communist Party among others).<sup>7</sup> The alleged crime was that he had represented the Basque secular and nationalist political party *Acción Nacionalista Vasca* (ANV) at a meeting in Munich tried, along with the many other pro-democratic forces from Spain, which sought support from European democracies.<sup>8</sup> The arrest was, in the words of Etxegarai, his first contact with 'politics'; at the young age of seven, he witnessed the Spanish secret police taking his father from their home in Bilbao. Observing his upper-middle class family struggle for democracy led Etxegarai to embrace a Basque nationalist ideology.

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<sup>5</sup> Sebastian Balfour. *Dictatorship, Workers and the City: Labour in Greater Barcelona since 1939*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, *A rebellious people. Basques, protests And politics*. Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1991.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

<sup>8</sup> *Acción Nacionalista Vasca* (ANV): Basque Nationalist Action. Political Party formed during the period of the Second Republic (1931-1939). It was based on leftist, Basque nationalist values opposed to the conservative Basque nationalism represented by the Basque Nationalist Party. It did not have a strong political influence in Basque politics but, as we see in the case of Etxegarai's family, its existence shapes the ideals of future generations of Basques.

However, he would distance himself from the classic ethnic nationalism promoted by the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). This was, in large part, due to the modern and secular principles of his parents.

With ETA, Basque nationalism would soon experience a transformation in the principles of its ethnic ideology. In the 1960s, ETA underwent a radical ideological transformation, from its birth in 1959, making similar appeals to ethnic Basque nationalism to that of the Basque Nationalist Party, to later assuming the main political demands of Basque workers.<sup>9</sup> In 1967, at age fifteen, Fernando Etxegarai saw his brother and cousin detained by the Spanish police, charged with being part of one of the first ETA commando units which blew up an office of the Spanish Vertical Unions (OSE) in the Basque town of Elgoibar.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1960s, among the regions of Spain, the Basque Country, along with Catalonia, were the two that experienced long periods of industrial development. Particularly in the former, the decline of both the fishing industry and family farming accompanied this change. This resulted in the political abandonment of the suburbs and semi-rural areas surrounding the industrial centres.<sup>11</sup> Brought about by industrialisation, the neighbourhood associations that emerged in these suburbs, with their high populations of internal migrants from throughout Spain, serve as evidence of this new proletarian culture.<sup>12</sup> These associations, made up of unemployed, semiskilled workers, both immigrants and autochthonous Basques, concerned themselves with specific problems of the neighbourhood. Later, more politically motivated

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<sup>9</sup> In 1962 three of the founders of ETA, Álvarez Empanza, Benito del Valle and Xabier Imaz, left the organization, disappointed with the Marxist ideas gaining ground within the organization. They wrote a letter explaining how ETA wanted to be 'popular' but, in their opinion, this was a mask to undercover a new internationalist/Marxist strategy for the organization. Indeed the attitude of these activists' demonstrates not only the hegemony of the principles of the Basque Nationalist Party at that moment but also among the ETA activists.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

<sup>11</sup> Zirakzadeh, A rebellious people. Basques, protests and politics.

<sup>12</sup> Pamela Radcliff, Making Democratic Citizens in Spain. Civil Society and Popular Origins of the Transition, 1960-78. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

‘white-collar’ workers, such as shopkeepers, joined them along with highly skilled factory workers who had traditionally been more concerned with regional political affairs.<sup>13</sup>

Etxegarai’s childhood in Bilbao, the city in Spain with the most labour militancy at that time, was framed by the mental image of his brother in jail. This occurred in an atmosphere where for the first time the popular strata started taking on national and working class consciousness, portraying in the Spanish national, catholic context, what Walter Benjamin described some decades prior as the new secular cult.<sup>14</sup>

### **Joining the Anti-Francoist Movement**

During the five years Etxegarai’s brother spent in jail, Etxegarai started an undergraduate degree in law in the prestigious Jesuit Universidad de Deusto, in Bilbao.<sup>15</sup> It was, he says, a ‘natural choice’, because in secondary school they told him that every middle-class man who wanted to have a prosperous career should have a law degree. Although he wanted to remain in Bilbao, due to political problems at home, he spent the first two years studying in Madrid, at a branch of Deusto called ICADE (Catholic Institute for the Administration and Direction of Enterprises). During these years in the capital, Etxegarai encountered the wealthy Spanish upper classes, the majority of whom were from families with privileged positions inside the Franco regime. This conservative environment contrasted greatly with Etxegarai’s third year of law school, which he spent in the capital of his homeland, Bilbao. There he took part in massive protest against the Burgos Trial in December of 1970. In this case, Franco’s tribunals sentenced sixteen ETA members to capital punishment for the killing police officer Melitón Manzanás. Succumbing to the subsequent

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<sup>13</sup> Zirakzadeh, *A rebellious people. Basques, protests and politics*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1955; 1969), 224.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

international pressure generated by the decision, the regime commuted the death sentences to life imprisonment.

At the beginning of that year, Franco had changed his approach to ETA. On the one hand, the police tightened control over the opposition; on the other, the regime loosened its censorship of the cultural sphere as it attempted to win the favour of modern European democracies (or to counter the attempts of the pro-democratic forces described above). Thus, during this period, ETA in the Basque Country witnessed the opening of the first *Ikastolas*, or schools that teach in the Basque language. Since the conclusion of the Civil War, Basque people only risked educating children in Basque in their private homes. ETA internalized this new emergence of Basque culture as part of the ‘Basque revolution’ it sought, as every act in favour of the Basque culture represented a step forward in the fight for the rights of the Basque community.<sup>16</sup> Coinciding with this advancement on the home front, the abovementioned pressure from the international community that had brought annulment for the death penalty for the Burgos Basque prisoners by the Francoist authorities was the first time ETA gained attention internationally. Furthermore, it astonished a generation of Basques like Etxegarai who understood that being part of these mass protests symbolized belonging to the Basque Radical Community itself.

ETA’s struggle against the dictatorship remains powerful in the collective memory of the Basque Radical Community today. During the interview, Etxegarai expressed his scepticism of the more optimistic view, prevalent within some circles during the last years of the dictatorship, about the possibility of emerging a new democratic regime:

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<sup>16</sup> Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Documentos Y, 18 Vols (San Sebastián: Órdago, 1979-1981. Volumen 8), 95.

Nowadays, everyone alive at the time says ‘I felt that the regime was close to collapse’. It seemed some people could see everything. Nevertheless, we, the people who were in the thick of it, did not have any idea of what was going to happen. Personally, when people say ‘I saw that everything was going to change’, I doubt it. When you are in the struggle, you do not see any change until just before it happens. (...) I have lived through the Francoist dictatorship and I have lived through the current [democratic] regime. I have heard many people say: ‘when we all fought against Franco in the 1970s...’ This is a pure lie. We, the people who fought against Franco, were a minority. It is only at the end, at the last moment, and in a very concrete situation, that others began to emerge.<sup>17</sup>

The tone of these words expresses the pride of the activist, taking into account that we are talking about the downfall of the last dictatorship in Western Europe. Etxegarai, who in these moments made his first contacts with ETA, implicitly expresses how violence was a catalyst in bringing about democracy in Spain. This collective image among ETA activists of the ‘daily struggle’ during the last years of the transition clashes with the official narrative of Franco dying in bed with a peaceful transition naturally following.<sup>18</sup> Mario Moretti, famous leader of the ‘Red Brigades’, an Italian insurgent group founded in 1970, says “there is no difference between one’s political life and the personal life, between preparing a political pamphlet and taking care of your children”.<sup>19</sup> Etxegarai’s claims of ‘being in the thick of it’ or in the ‘daily struggle’ echoes Moretti’s and bridge the big gap not only between the experiences of ETA activists and the official narrative of the transition but also between their life stories and the impossibility (wanted or not) of the social scientist to navigate this difficult terrain.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

<sup>18</sup> Baby, Sophie and Javier Muñoz Soro, “El discurso de la violencia en la izquierda durante el último franquismo y la transición (1968-1982)”, in *Culturas y políticas de la violencia. España siglo XX*, ed. José Luis Ledesma Vera, Javier Muñoz Soro y Javier Rodrigo (Madrid: Siete Mares, 2005), 281.

<sup>19</sup> Moretti, Mario. *Brigadas Rojas, Entrevista con Carla Mosca y Rossana Rossanda* (Madrid: Akal, 2002; 2008), 40.

In other words, it is easier for scholars to corroborate their analysis the official narrative of the transition rather than try to go deeper into the life stories of ETA activists who so intensely lived the period of the Spanish transition.

### **Breaking with the Historiographical Consensus**

In 2014, three years after the unilateral and definitive ceasefire declared by ETA, the Basque government of Iñigo Urkullu (Basque Nationalist Party) requested that four historians, (Raul López Romo, Luis Castells Arteche, Jose Antonio Pérez Pérez and Antonio Rivera Blanco), prepare a report about the historical context in which terrorism had taken place in the Basque Country. The report concluded by rejecting the existence of a ‘Basque conflict’, that is, the existence of a conflict with political roots.<sup>20</sup> This is normally the first assertion of any insurgent group in any context, including of course ETA in the Basque Country. Instead, the historians claimed, ETA tried to impose totalitarianism Basque society.

<sup>21</sup> More precisely, they argued that during the period of the transition, ETA was at its most violent, marking its highest percentage of killings by year, thus, ETA’s objective was to destabilise the new Spanish democracy and the recently established status of regional autonomy for the Basques.<sup>22</sup> Hannah Arendt observes that “isolation may be the beginning of terror; it certainly is its most fertile ground; it always is its result. This isolation is, as it were, pretotalitarian”.<sup>23</sup> This isolation is definitively not what ETA experienced during the period of transition. Conversely, ETA emerged with a powerful capacity for armed struggle in debt to the strong organizational ties it had made with other social movements, which I will explore in due course.

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<sup>20</sup> López Romo, Raúl. *Informe Foronda. Los contextos históricos del terrorismo en el País Vasco y la consideración social de sus víctimas*, (Vitoria: Universidad del País Vasco, 2014), 119.

<sup>21</sup> Raúl López Romo, Informe Foronda. Los contextos históricos del terrorismo en el País Vasco y la consideración social de sus víctimas, 119-125.

<sup>22</sup> Raúl López Romo, Informe Foronda. Los contextos históricos del terrorismo en el País Vasco y la consideración social de sus víctimas, 64-76.

<sup>23</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego: Harvest Book, 1951;1973), 473.

Upon receiving his degree in law from the University of Deusto in Bilbao, Fernando Etxegarai went to the Basque city of Vitoria to work as a labour lawyer. The Basque social movement displayed its ‘muscle’ in the general strike there in 1976. The city had gone from 70,000 inhabitants in 1960 to reach the figure of 170,000 by the year 1976.<sup>24</sup> The mass recruitment of non-skilled ‘blue-collar workers’ for the assembly lines in a city without an industrial tradition had produced a need for self-organization among the workers. During the strike, more than a hundred workers were wounded and five of them were killed by police forces. After these events, at the end of 1976, more than a million workers participated in different protests throughout Spain in solidarity with the victims in Vitoria. With this ‘spontaneous strike,’ ETA realised the extent to which the working class was becoming increasingly independent of the traditional Spanish left wing labour parties.<sup>25</sup> The workers participating in the strike in Vitoria considered the Spanish unions as mere ‘seat belts’ within the bureaucratic machinery of the political parties. At that moment, the parties were more interested in making pacts with the elites of the dictatorship than defending the rights of workers.<sup>26</sup> Etxegarai participated in the protests as a member of the UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*) and he spent the next five years working in Vitoria working as a labour lawyer.<sup>27</sup>

Following the Burgos Trial, the strikes in Vitoria were for Etxegarai another example of the power of mass protest to challenge the hegemony of the Francoist elites. However, this

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<sup>24</sup> Rodríguez López, Emanuel, *Porqué fracasó la democracia en España. La Transición y el régimen del 78*. (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2015), 28.

<sup>25</sup> The Political-Military wing of ETA did not survive the Spanish transition probably due to its lack of a political and military strategy. But it was the ideology of the Political-Military wing that drove the organization. (ETA “Apuntes” 1976). The “political-military” wing is also the only wing of ETA which had a deep debate from within about the use of the armed struggle in a Spanish liberal democracy. “If the armed struggle is a substantial part of the revolutionary process, then, who theorises about the use of the armed struggle? Who elaborates a strategy?” (ETA “Formas” 1976). Translated by the present author.

<sup>26</sup> Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Apuntes de un debate sobre el futuro de la lucha armada. *Kemen* (ETA-pm). Bilbao: 1976.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

time the political system was even weaker than before, as the dictator died in 1975. The uncertain future of the country had fostered disunity among the political families and elites, which was a clear break from the past.

Etxegarai expressed his memories of the dictatorship and transition during the interview with a very particular ‘mood’. By mood in oral history we understand the “spatial sense of feelings that exists within the dialogue. A sense of mood refers to the intersubjective framing of the oral history dialogue, which includes unconscious feelings”.<sup>28</sup> Etxegarai was the first interview in a series conducted for my doctoral thesis. Apart of the natural nervousness of the beginner, through my previous research, I knew that he was a particularly well-known figure within the Basque Radical Community, which intensified the pressure I felt. Despite the connection that existed between us from the outset, my feeling was that this ‘mature and experienced Basque political activist teaching the young student from Madrid about the real struggle against the dictatorship’ enveloped the entire interview. However, in my point of view, it is essential to play with the unreliability of memory that some historians express as a critique to oral history.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in the Twenty-First Century, oral life historians accept that this ‘distortion’ of memory can actually enrich history as a discipline. In this case, despite my limitations in being critical enough with Etxegarai, he implicitly transmitted, not just to me, but to the rest of Spaniards who do not completely understand the ‘Basque struggle’ against the dictatorship the abundant clarity of his ‘moral superiority’. Indeed, the Spanish transition generated a climax of mistrust within a generation of Basques like Etxegarai who, in the following years, would join ETA out of a deep feeling of frustration.

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<sup>28</sup> Sean Field, “Beyond ‘Healing’: Trauma, Oral History and Regeneration”, *Oral History Society* 34, no.1, (2006): 36.

<sup>29</sup> Alistair Thompson, Fifty years on: An International Perspective on Oral History, *The Journal of American History*. 85, no. 2 (1998): 585-596.

There was a gulf between my political principles and Etxegarai's justification of violence against the Spanish state. This widened with my proposition, a repeated argument by social scientists, that ETA was the principal party responsible for the Basque conflict, considering that the insurgent group was behind most of the murders committed during the Spanish transition. While I had studied in one of the most leftist universities in Spain, the Faculty of Political Science of the Universidad Complutense, and despite trying to win Etxegarai's confidence by showing him my 'open mind' about the Basque conflict, during the interview I could not resist the temptation of placing the blame on him and his organization.

This was his response:

I always...throughout my entire life, had the perception that repression has many faces. While incarcerated, I thought, "who has the need to kill someone when you have a prison?" In other words, when you have an instrument of repression where you can put 20, 100 or 700 people in prison for life, you do not need to kill. You just lock up their entire existence; in effect, you wipe them out.<sup>30</sup>

If we agree that subjectivity is key to making oral history, Etxegarai's memory of realizing while in prison the power of the 'repressive machine of the state' also makes us understand the importance of the process of social and psychological change over the life course.<sup>31</sup> This is to say, Etxegarai came to understand the use of armed struggle, not by reading political books or talking with other activists, but rather by experiencing the absence of freedom in a Spanish prison.

### **The end of the transition and the beginning of Etxegarai's life in ETA**

Returning to the narrative of Etxegarai's activism, the end of the Spanish transition was the beginning of his participation in the armed struggle. In 1982, the closing of the

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<sup>30</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

<sup>31</sup> Sally Chandler, Oral History across Generations: Age, Generational Identity and Oral Testimony, *Oral History*, 33, no.2, (2005): 49.

nuclear plant at Lemoniz generated strong popular support for ETA, the same year that the Socialists won the national elections with a parliamentary majority. This was the first time a first left-wing political party had risen to power since the fall of the Spanish Republic in 1939. However, this fact did not modify ETA's tactics. The group employed a 'passive strategy,' all but ignoring this monumental political change.<sup>32</sup> In other words, ETA did not see any possibility of peace, even with a new left-wing government in power. Also in 1982, Fernando Etxegarai became a member of an ETA commando unit. He began a double life. During the day, he worked as a civil servant and in the evening, he took part in the armed struggle. He set off bombs in large factories and carried out other attacks, all according to the organization's plans. For obvious reasons, Etxegarai did not have much time to dedicate to his family. Nevertheless, his life took the form of many other fathers; that same year, Etxegarai had a daughter.<sup>33</sup>

In 1987, just five years after with the arrival of the Spanish Socialist Party to power the official conclusion of the transition, the Civil Guard detained Etxegarai on the accusation of having carried out armed actions on behalf of ETA and for the possession of weapons at the time of the arrest. During the five days he spent in the police station, he was continuously tortured.

I arrived to the headquarters of the Guardia Civil. The blows started. From the first time they put me in the car, I remember that the police officer got close to me and poked my body with needles. I thought they were employing some form of Chinese acupuncture torture on me. Suddenly, I some clicking sound from the needles and then I jumped up and hit my head on the roof of the car. I realized that they were shocking me with electric prods. Then they brought me to another place where they practiced other methods, by putting a plastic bag over my head (to simulate asphyxiation). Later on, they took me to Madrid, where they waterboarded me (to simulate drowning). In the end, they threw me in jail.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, "Gogoan Zaitugu. Zuzen" (31). Bilbao: 1982.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

Etxegarai was not able to express the facts coherently. He recounted everything in a confused narrative. Something sacred, his body, was violated and he was not able to recall all of this without pain. The cruelty employed by Civil Guard on Etxegarai did not take place during a period of dictatorship when human rights violations were part and parcel of one's interaction with the state. It was precisely the torture of Etxegarai's body at the beginning of the new young Spanish democracy that ostracized him from the system and from society.

It is indeed the omission of this story, the 'a young lawyer from an upper-middle class family who decided to join an insurgent group', by journalists and political scientists, that represents the violation of the sacred (his body) in a theoretically non-conflictive period. As the anthropologist Nahoum-Grappe suggests, "what is eliminated from the scholarly account of the expert is the scene of violence itself that takes place in concrete surroundings in real time".<sup>35</sup> Similarly, much is eliminated from the social account as well. Throughout this democratic era, Spaniards have woken up day after day to the morning news displaying the bodies of victims of ETA in the aftermath of a car bomb. For decades, the current national narrative was reinforced through the repetition of real time accounts of terrorist violence exercised by ETA. This terror, in the sense of the chaos provoked by ETA, its scenes of violence and concrete surroundings are easy to express in clear visual images. The contrast, the other side of the coin, is much more difficult to analyse and explain. The double condition of some ETA activists like Etxegarai, simultaneously perpetrator of societal violence and victim of state violence, in a democracy no less, suggests the difficulties of defining either one in any account proffered in the field of 'conflict studies'.

After having been tortured, Etxegarai spent two years in jail waiting for trial. (Other ETA members had been in prison for as many as four years without a court hearing.)

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<sup>35</sup> Veronique Nahoum Grappe, "The Anthropology of Extreme Violence: The crime of Desecration", *Blackwell Publishers*. 54, no.174 (2002): 555.

The court tried and convicted him to a prison sentence of 196 years. He spent twenty-one years in solitary confinement, with just three hours per day outside. During the interview Etxegarai did not seem to show any indication of seeing himself a victim (similar to other ETA activists I have interviewed). Nor did he show any repentance for having been involved in political violence. ETA ‘lost the war’ with the unilateral and definitive ceasefire declared by the organization in 2011 in the palace of Ayete (San Sebastián). Etxegarai summarized this long history with these words: “I think that ETA decided on the definitive ceasefire in 2011 because we stuck our necks out and they smashed out heads in. Nevertheless we continue thinking that we had our reasons”.<sup>36</sup> With these lines, we understand Etxegarai’s motivation to give the interview; he wanted to explain ‘his reasons’. Having the organisation officially ceased to exist the 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2018, in its last interview ETA asserted that from that date, “we are ex-activists of ETA, but we will carry the identity of having been part of ETA until we die. At the emotional level, we will always be ETA”.<sup>37</sup> As the sociologist Maurice Halbwaches states, “one witness we can always call on is ourselves”, and Etxegarai’s eye witness account, probably inadvertently, for him, ‘proves’ of ETA’s existence.<sup>38</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Fernando Etxegarai’s life has been a case study in political activism, especially considering that he was a member of an illegal armed organization. He risked his life for an ideal. Because of this, his life is difficult to analyse, as is the case for any other life story. As Helen Graham, historian of Modern Spain, states clearly, ‘lives are far more complicated than

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Fernando Etxegarai (Bilbao: 17/07/2014).

<sup>37</sup> Translated by the present author from the original text: “Seremos ex-militantes de ETA, pero llevaremos hasta la muerte haber formado parte de ETA. A nivel de sentimientos, seremos de ETA siempre”. Iñaki. Soto, “Entrevista a ETA. Adelanto del libro de GARA”. *Naiz*. [Online] 7<sup>th</sup> February 2018. Available from: <https://www.naiz.eus/es> [Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> May 2018].

<sup>38</sup> Halbwachs, Maurice, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950;1980), 22.

any theory'.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, there are two more factors why the story of Etxegarai's life is particularly attractive to analyse. The first is, in concrete terms, the nature of ETA as an insurgent group. We are talking about an armed group that fought for 52 years (1959-2011) in the Basque Country, one of the wealthiest regions of Spain and home to a strong middle class society. It is perhaps due to ETA's nature as an equally leftist and nationalist group that it could survive for so many years within the unique social context of a region like the Basque Country. However, this hybrid nature of ETA makes it difficult for the 'general public' to understand its history and its meaning as an organization. In a study of activists of an extreme right-wing political group in Norway, Fangen begins with the following observation: "People ask 'Why?' more frequently when young people join radical nationalist groups than when they join the radical groups on the left".<sup>40</sup> It has been decades since Spaniards stopped asking "why" the violence of ETA occurred in the first place. Probably because by the definitive ceasefire in 2011, the majority of Basque society was fed up with ETA's violence. For these, among other reasons, ETA has not been, at least until very recently, a very attractive object of study.

There is, thus, a second, and more controversial factor to explain why the life of Etxegarai has a special interest for academia: as the title of the paper says, it 'goes against the tide'. We are talking about nothing less than the current Spanish national narrative, which the 'Regime of 1978' represents. This regime, which emerged from the context of economic crisis, such as the oil crisis of 1973, when the hegemonic roots of neoliberalism as a political

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<sup>39</sup> Helen Graham. Helen Graham.mov. *Youtube*. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UcoZzWWQIk>. Accessed 22 January 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Katrine, Fangen, "On the Margins of Life: Life Stories of Radical Nationalists", *Acta Sociológica*, 42, (1999): 357.

paradigm took root in the entirety of the political sphere and daily life, is now suffering another economic crisis that began in 2008. Etxegarai practiced non-violent political activism when a on the left in Spain believed that the use of violence against the Franco regime was justified, even necessary, evidenced by the reactions to the killing of ex-Prime Minister Carrero Blanco. Conversely, Etxegarai turned to armed struggle at a moment when the same left-wing political groups no longer believed in the use of violence, after the arrival of democracy. The Basque region was an exception to this. The fact that in 1978 ETA reached its highest level of militancy, killing more than any other year of its existence, proves the opposite of the academic consensus discussed in the introduction of this paper: it is difficult to analyse the violence employed by an insurgent group in ‘moral terms’. In other words, when experts on terrorism talk ‘well’ of ETA when it declares a cease-fire and badly of it when it uses violence, they do not help us to see the forest for the trees. Only by trying to understand the strong social support among the Basques that the organization received throughout the 1970s and the 1980s will we be able to gain a better understanding of what truly motivated its activists.

This article has tried to balance between ETA as an organization and the life of the ETA activist, Fernando Etxegarai, combining social and oral history. Perhaps, for the reader, Etxegarai’s life story many not have been the most controversial aspect, but rather my relationship with him. Pierre Bourdieu defined life story as “common sense”, whereas Norbert Elias clearly stated that “only small babies, and among adults perhaps only insane people, become involved in whatever they experience with complete abandon to their feelings here and now.”<sup>41</sup> From both sociologists we can see how, in social sciences, the line that

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<sup>41</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “La ilusión biográfica”, *Actes de la Recherche en sciences sociales*, 62/63, (1986): 27.  
Norbert Elias, “Problems of Involvement and Detachment”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 7, no.3, (1956): 226.

separates objectivity and subjectivity is, at minimum, blurred. Social scientists' obsession for objectivity with their objects of study have caused them to disregard the subjectivities that could enrich their knowledge and understanding.

It is thus important to state that 'objectivity', at least in its positivist sense, and oral history, as a field of study, are not in good standing with each other. Indeed, if we use oral history to discuss insurgent groups like ETA, the relation with positivist objectivity becomes far more complicated. It is my life, not only as a researcher but also as a person, that combines with the life of Fernando Etxegarai in the final product of this paper. In other words, my experience as a Spaniard with a political consciousness who witnessed the Basque conflict, at the very least via the TV news and the reaction of my compatriots, is not necessarily as an obstacle to write an oral life story of an ETA activist. My memories of ETA and my particular way of projecting a narrative of the Spanish nation, all the symbols and cultural patterns present in my daily life, enrich the skillset with which I approach this object of study. The 'politics of memory', a term often used recent years, is in part a product of the dissatisfaction of scholars in viewing the social sciences a lens through which to find facts and describe them. The intersection of Fernando Etxegarai's fears, desires and memories shaped his political identity, and thus it is from his subjectivity that I extracted my conclusions. In the first draft of this article, my main mistake was to analyse his personal and political life in separate ways. Additionally, my inability to 'distance' myself from the object of study further hindered my work. It is indeed in avoiding both the separation of his life into 'compartments' and the denial of my emotional implication in this work that this article has been able to find its bearings and to shed light on its true object of study.

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