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From imagination to visualization: Protest rituals in the basque country

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From Imagination to Visualization:
Protest Rituals in the Basque Country

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From Imagination to Visualization: Protest Rituals in the Basque Country

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Zusammenfassung

In diesem Beitrag wird untersucht, wie sich die Bedeutung von Ritualen auf den Bereich kollektiven Handelns übertragen läßt. Rituale, so wird angenommen, sind nicht nur Kräfte des „Seins“, sondern des „Entstehens“ im Sinne der Transformation einer Gruppe von Individuen in eine allgemein erkennbare soziale Einheit. Damit dieser dynamische Prozess auch zur Entstehung eines sichtbaren sozialen Akteurs führt, sind regelmäßige „Zeremonien des Zusammenkommens und des Protestierens“ eine unabdingbare Voraussetzung. Das Baskenland wurde als Fallstudie gewählt, da es nach allen vorliegenden Daten das spannungsreichste Land in der westlichen Welt ist. Es wird die Bedeutung von Massendemonstrationen für die MLNV (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Vasco: Baskische Nationale Freiheitsbewegung) gezeigt, die sich zu einem Akteur entwickelt. Solange sie Gruppensolidarität aufrecht erhält, führt symbolträchtiger, regelmäßig stattfindender und standardisierter Protest dieser nationalistischen Gruppierung zu anhaltenden Verbindungen zwischen den Teilnehmern. Die regelmäßigen Demonstrationen dieses Akteurs, der über eine solide kulturelle und soziale „Infrastruktur“ verfügt, führen zur dauerhaften kollektiven Identität. Neben dem Ziel, sowohl die Verantwortlichen als auch die öffentliche Meinung unter bestimmten Bedingungen zu analysieren, wird auch die Rolle von rituellem Protest zur Gewährleistung des inneren Zusammenhalts des Akteurs untersucht. Hier entfernt sich der Autor von dem instrumentalistischen Ansatz der Analyse kollektiven Handelns und betont die Entstehung anhaltender „Bande der Solidarität“ als einer latenten Funktion rituellen Protests.

Abstract

In this paper, the concept of rituals to the field of collective action is applied. It is argued that rituals are not merely forces of “being,” but of “becoming,” that is, of the transformation of a group of individuals into a mutually recognized social unity. For this dynamic process to enjoy some success and culminate in the formation of a recognizable social actor, regular ceremonies of gathering and protest appear to be an inescapable precondition. The Basque Country is selected as case study, which according to all available data, is the most contentious country in the Western world. The relevance of mass demonstrations for a single social actor is shown, namely the MLNV (Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Vasco: Basque National Freedom Movement), to become and survive as an actor. As long as it generates group solidarity, the performance of symbolically loaded, regular, and standardized protest by this nationalist group creates lasting links among participants. Regular demonstrations staged by this actor, which is endowed with a sound social and cultural infrastructure, impart a lasting character to its collective identity. Besides aiming at influencing the authorities and public opinion under certain circumstances that are analyzed throughout the paper, ritual protest might also purposely bring about inner cohesion. With such an assumption, the author departs from instrumentalist approaches to the study of collective action and highlights the creation of enduring bonds of solidarity as a latent function that ritualized protest fulfills.

Contents

From Imagination to Visualization: Protest Rituals in the Basque Country. Introductory remarks	1
1. Rituals and Collective Action.....	3
2. Demonstration Rituals in the Basque Country	15
2.1 <i>A Contentious Country</i>	16
2.2 <i>Why Protest? A (Mainly) Meso-level Explanation</i>	22
3. Conclusion.....	32
4. Bibliography	33

Figures and Tables

Figure 1: Number of demonstrations in the Basque Country and Spain, 1996–2001	19
Table 1: Participation in lawful demonstrations in the Basque Country, Spain, France, and Germany, 1999/2000.....	20
Table 2: Results of the 1978 Referendum on the Constitution: the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Spain as a whole	26
Table 3: National sentiment in the Basque Country, 1995–2001	26

From Imagination to Visualization: Protest Rituals in the Basque Country*

*"If we desire to lead many men, we must
raise a symbol high above their heads."
— Theodor Herzl*

In the summer of 1925 the German political critic Kurt Tucholsky visited the Basque Country. The reflections included in his travel book published shortly thereafter echo with an economy of language, but with accuracy nonetheless, the reasons why this small country split between France and Spain had attracted so many scholarly men in the past: “No one knows who they are, where they are coming from, which kind of language they speak — nothing. Because neither Latin nor Romanic nor Northern languages are of much help in this case.” He goes on in his characteristic sarcastic style, listing the available theories about the origin of the Basques, all of them pure speculations with no sound ground whatsoever, as his final comment suggests: “First theory, the Basques came from the South; second, they came from the North; third, they are Asians ... for all of them there is evidence, for none there is evidence” (1957: 30).

It was precisely the search for clues that would help solve the many enigmas surrounding the Basque Country which motivated learned people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Louis Lucien Bonaparte among others, to conduct field research there. Were such sensitive scholars to journey again around the Basque Country nowadays, they would no doubt still be astonished for the very same reasons that fascinated them in the first place, most of all by the awkward language of its habitants, their origin, and other mysteries associated with this ancestral people. Yet, as I shall argue in this article, a further distinctive feature of the Basque Country that would not pass unnoticed by attentive observers in our time has little to do with linguistics, history, or anthropology, but with politics in general, and with collective action more specifically. For, to be sure, our sharp would-be observers would immediately appreciate the relative abundance of acts of protest in the Basque Country. Demonstrations, acts of civil disobedience, political violence of low intensity, out-and-out terrorism — all these forms of protest and others commonly associated with the modern repertoire of collective contention are so frequent, socially and geographically diffused, and staged by increasingly professionalized actors that they have become a routine way of doing politics. Basque society is, one might say, an over-mobilized one in which collective protest belongs to everyday life. From a

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sociopolitical point of view protest is, pushing the argument still further, one of the differential factors that makes today's Basque Country peculiar in the Western world.

A telling contemporary example of such an attentive visitor is that of Cees Nooteboom (1996). In his travel recollections around different regions in Spain, the Dutch writer focused on those aspects one would expect to find in this kind of literature: history, literature, architecture, gastronomy, landscape, "character," and religion, to name the most relevant traits covered throughout the book. However — and here comes the highly symptomatic point worth stressing — when he turned to the Basque Country what called his attention was none of these aspects, but a radical nationalist demonstration in a relatively small village.

In what follows I deal with the group-integrative function of protest. The argument progresses in the following steps. In the first part, I conceptualize the notion of ritual and attempt to import it to the field of collective action. Next, and based largely on the extraordinarily high number of demonstrations that took place in the Basque Country in the last years, I first describe Basque society as a contentious society. I then identify the *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Vasco* (MLNV — Basque National Freedom Movement) as the main single cause of the extraordinary level of street protest. Finally, while keeping distance from instrumentalist approaches to collective protest, I highlight the creation of enduring bonds of solidarity as the major function that ritualized protest fulfills. Throughout the article I attempt to show how politics, culture, and collective identity intersect. To advance the general argument, I argue that protest rituals performed by this group, in particular when they take on a mass character, allow its participants to visualize themselves in movement and thus understand themselves as an embodiment of the "true" nation. It might be that the argument about the relevance of physical gatherings by an actor, the MLNV in our case study, may be generalized and extended to all revolutionary movements in Western countries which push and threaten to transcend the limits of the system, be it because they substantially alter its morphology, because they challenge its foundational values, or both. Due to the generalized disapproval some of them generate in the wider society, this kind of movement is in greater need of preserving their group boundaries. Protest rituals are an important, perhaps even essential, way of accomplishing such a task.

1. Rituals and Collective Action

According to a widely agreed assumption in the sociology of collective action, fostering a sustained commitment among participants in a social movement appears to be an unavoidable precondition for it to form, develop, and eventually enjoy some degree of success, if not always in substantive terms, at least in its scale of mobilization. Group solidarity, that is to say, the feeling of being part of a comforting plural and of engaging in a common enterprise called society, lies at the base of this commitment and sense of loyalty. The development of relatively close kinship bonds among its participants is, according to most accounts, one of the defining features of social movements; it is a factor, one might say, that imparts life to social movements in a decisive way. How this feeling of belonging together is created and sustained in a social movement therefore becomes a key research question for a proper understanding of the dynamics of collective action.

Herbert Blumer, one of the most insightful students of collective behavior in general, and of social movements in particular, offers unsurpassed clues in this respect. He identified three distinctive, though not mutually exclusive, means of forging what he labeled an “esprit de corps,” and what we today simply refer to as collective identity (1946: 206–208):

1. First, Blumer distinguished the in-group–out-group relation, by which he referred to a situation in which two groups understand each other to be enemies. Certainly, even if a movement need not brand the “other” in every case as an outright enemy *à la* Carl Schmitt, we may agree with Blumer that setting the boundaries between a challenging group and its adversaries in terms of interest and/or values is a virtually universal pattern in collective identity formation. Whether as adversary or enemy, the identification of a generic other creates bonds of solidarity and intensifies feelings of community. Movement–countermovement dynamics, to borrow from resource mobilization theory (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), is a special case that fits neatly into this solidarity-building strategy, which differentiates between a “we” confronted with a “they,” between established members and outsiders, right and wrong, good and evil.
2. Informal fellowship, that is, “the development of informal association on the basis of fellowship” (Blumer, 1946: 207), is an alternative, perhaps also complementary, way to develop a “we” consciousness. According to this means of fashioning a collective identity, small-scale associational settings within a community or movement that are both autonomous and participated in voluntarily function as the seedbeds of the challenges that, as a rule, precede or accompany mobilization. Sociability networks in which individuals interact face to face and develop alternative cultural codes (like in the case of consciousness-raising groups, clubs of various types, reading groups,

newspapers, workshops) have been referred to by different authors as “free spaces” (Evans and Boyte, 1986; Polletta, 1999).

3. Finally, ceremonial and ritual behavior, including mass meetings, rallies, parades, large demonstrations, and commemorative ceremonies serve, according to Blumer, as fundamental catalyzers of a “we.” At a more specific level of analysis, the symbolic paraphernalia that customarily accompanies rituals (e.g., slogans, songs, salutes, flags, hymns, expressive gestures, uniforms) fosters feelings of common identity and sympathy among participants. Rituals, then, rightly appear to Blumer to be one of the mechanisms by which solidarity groups — social movements in our case — are both formed and mobilized.¹

Fundamental catalyzers of cohesion and value commitment as they are, rituals have received little attention from sociologists specializing in the study of social movements and collective action.² Political scientists have also given them scant attention, in spite of the fact that phenomena as disparate as elections, party conventions, mass strikes, presidential inaugurations, terrorism, revolutions, and even transitions to democracy have often been highlighted as examples of relevant political rituals of our times. Perhaps, we might speculate, this lack of systematic attention is nothing but a mere reflection of the fact that contemporary movements themselves never cared much about rituals. So stated Eric Hobsbawm over four decades ago, the great British social historian devoted to the study of the “people from below.” Fully aware as he was of their relevance for building up and maintaining a collective identity, Hobsbawm pointed out how astonishing it was that modern social movements were seemingly indifferent to deliberately elaborated rituals

1 Note that some of the topics treated since the early phase of contemporary social movement research in the 1970s and its subsequent consolidation as an “industry” within the social sciences one decade later, topics such as collective identity, social movement organizations, and movement networks, are all in one way or another included in the short space of a few pages written by this largely forgotten forerunner, Herbert Blumer.

In their latest collaborative effort to develop a “relational” approach to contentious politics, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly intend to bring the concepts of interaction and dynamics back to the center stage of social movement research: “We think the area of contentious politics will profit most from systematic attention to interaction among actors, institutions, and streams of contentious politics”; and, similarly: “In place of an objective accounting of the opportunities, the organizational capacity, the available frames and repertoires of a given ‘mobilizing structure,’ we substitute a dynamic analysis of the internal debates and interactive processes through which social groups seek to define and act on a shared sense of collective purpose and identity... The most important implication of our agenda is to stress development of contention [*sic*] through social interaction and to place social construction at the center of our analysis” (2001: xvii and 50–51, resp.).

A focus on dynamic processes is, however, hardly a new feature of social movement research, as Blumer already implied. From classical conceptions of mass behavior stressing contagion processes to symbolic interactionism to resource mobilization to the political process approach (represented by the authors themselves!) to framing analysis to new social movement perspectives, the analysis of the interaction between social movements on the one hand, and bystanders, allies, opponents, authorities, and the media, on the other hand, have kept researchers busy. A dynamic as opposed to a steady state, occurrence rather than existence, has been for a long time the hallmark of social movement research. In other words, the study of the interaction between social movements, on the one hand, and some or all of these actors just mentioned, on the other, is what the sociology of social movements has been traditionally, is still today, and probably will be all about in the future.

2 Remarkable exceptions are: Rothenbuhler, 1988; Taylor and Whittier, 1995; Pfaff and Yang, 2001.

(1959: chap. 9).³ Social movements other than nationalist ones, he would have had to add at this point, for that particular social movement family, both in the past and present, has traditionally devoted considerable energy to community building through ritualized performances and, consequently, fares relatively well in comparison with other movements as far as the means of ritual production is concerned.⁴

But, what are we referring to when we speak of ritual? Sociologists and anthropologists have in the last century dealt systematically with this question. This is not surprising, for asking about ritual is directly linked to one of the ultimate questions social theory is concerned with, namely, how societies are held together and, thus, how sociality is preserved in the face of the intrinsic, radical plurality of views of the good life held by individuals and social groups in modern societies (the age-old aspiration to solve the problem of keeping unity within diversity: *E pluribus unum*).

Of the many scholars concerned with rituals, Émile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (2001 [1912]) was the one to set the parameters of modern discussion on social cohesion and formulate what has become the canonical explanation of ritual in cultural sociology, not so much because it is unanimously agreed on in all its details and specifications, but rather because his theory is broadly considered to be a major point of departure with which to establish a dialogue in this respect.

According to Durkheim's interpretation, at the basis of all religious phenomena lie both a number of representations or beliefs and certain ritual practices. Despite their empirical diversity, the combination of these two elements provides the content and form of every known religion. Considering them to be closely interlinked phenomena, he defined religion as a "*unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions, beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church*" (2001: 46, italics in original). As far as beliefs are concerned, the hallmark of religious thought (whether "simple" as

3 As opposed to modern social movements, so-called primitive movements prior to the nineteenth century (e.g., early trade union societies and secret brotherhoods growing from the Masons) deployed rich ritual practices. In such groups, rituals of initiation and of passage, ceremonials of periodic meeting, or practical rituals like the adoption of secret passwords all served to create and sustain group solidarity.

4 Hobsbawm managed to fill this void years later in his co-edited volume entitled *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). On the other hand, it must be noted that Hobsbawm's remark was written well before social theorists started talking about the coming of a new type of society substantially different to that known in the modernity phase of social development (e.g., A. Giddens, U. Beck, Z. Bauman, A. Melucci). According to these authors, one of the most outstanding features of this emerging, discontinuous societal type (postmodern, postindustrial, complex, risk, network, or information society, to name but a few of the labels currently circulating in academic circles to refer to this new stage of society) is the growing number of possibilities available to the individual to recognize him- or herself as an autonomous subject of action, following the demise of traditional identity-holders. Indeed, the possibility of an individual-as-process who strives, in a by definition never-ending and incomplete process, to "design" his or her own biography within a field of possibilities and constraints — and this is what the individualization process is all about — comes hand in hand with the move away from communitarian practices in modernity. Hobsbawm's observation about the demise of rituals, then, is hardly a hallmark of contemporary social movements, but rather of the modern social body as a whole. Not surprisingly, thinkers who are deeply worried about the weakening of shared commitments to beliefs and of social bonds have claimed the usefulness of holidays and public rituals as a means — along with the family and other sources of child-care, especially those provided by educational institutions — for shoring up social integration in contemporary societies (Etzioni, 2000).

among the aborigines of Australia, or “complex” as in the three monotheistic religions is the classification of the universe into two comprehensive domains: the profane on the one hand, and the sacred on the other. Durkheim frequently associated the profane realm with the utilitarian, instrumental activities of individuals pursuing self-interest. This development toward individualism, one of the characteristic features of modernity, in turn weakens shared commitments to beliefs and social bonds and consequently fosters centrifugal tendencies within the social body:

During ordinary days, utilitarian and individual occupations are uppermost in people’s minds. Each one devotes himself to his personal task. For most people this involves satisfying the necessities of physical life, and the chief motive of economic activity has always been private interest. Of course, social feelings would not be entirely absent. We remain in relationship with our fellow men; the habits, ideas, and tendencies that education has instilled in us and that normally preside over our relations with others continue to make their influence felt. However, they are constantly countered and held in check by antagonistic tendencies, which the demands of the daily struggle awaken and sustain. They resist more or less successfully, depending on their intrinsic energy; but this energy is not renewed. They live on their past, and consequently they would dwindle over time if nothing came along to restore the strength they lose in these incessant conflicts and friction (2001: 258)

So the diagnosis by the French sociologist. Next the therapy. A major mechanism that helps counteract these centrifugal, individualistic tendencies and helps recreate and “restore the strength” of society is the second element incorporated into Durkheim’s definition of religion, namely, ritual. It is by worshiping sacred objects (a rock, a tree, a piece of wood, a book, an animal, anything at all, for those objects lack any intrinsic value or meaning) that the members of society share experiences that help form and sustain deep emotional bonds among them. Ritual, then, plays an outstanding role in producing and maintaining solidarity or, to put it in negative terms, in preventing exit or disloyalty options in society (Hirschman, 1970) that might endanger group survival. Physical co-presence, as long as it is accompanied by a shared focus of interest, reveals itself as a condition for counteracting the threat of excessive individualism and, consequently, for cementing society around a core set of values. Periodic assemblies and joint participation in symbolic action thus become the necessary means by which individuals are brought together and ideas and sentiments are propagated: “rituals are ways of acting that are generated only within assembled groups and are meant to stimulate and sustain or recreate certain mental states in these groups” (Durkheim, 2001: 11). In a similar vein, toward the end of his study Durkheim wrote:

No society can exist that does not feel the need at regular intervals to sustain and reaffirm the collective feelings and ideas that constitute its unity and its personality. Now, this moral remaking can be achieved only by means of meetings, assemblies, or congregations in which individuals, brought into close contact, reaffirm in common their common feelings: hence, those ceremonies whose goals, results, and methods do not differ in kind from properly religious ceremonies. What essential difference is there between an assembly of Christians commemorating the principal moments in the life of Christ, or Jews celebrating either the exodus from Egypt or the giving of the ten commandments, and a meeting of citizens commemorating the institution of a new moral charter or some great event in national life? (Durkheim, 2001: 322)

To summarize what constitutes a rather complex (and, as we shall soon see, contested) argument, Durkheim regarded social solidarity as an unavoidable requirement of society for its survival, and ritual as the inescapable element for buttressing it. To put it in a vocabulary beyond Durkheim's reach at the time, symbolic practices such as rituals correlate positively with social integration.

Because rituals' necessary outcome need not be value integration, "solidaristic" (Roth, 1995) understandings of ritual in a Durkheimian vein have been severely criticized. On these grounds, for example, Shils and Young's (1953) interpretation of the British coronation as a univocally binding ritual has been challenged. These authors argued that the coronation of the queen affirmed the nation's moral values; the ceremony was interpreted as a "nation-wide communion" that united British society around the symbols and rituals of the monarchy. The national communion was said to assume the successful integration of all British sections of the population within the political system.

This kind of Durkheimian interpretation of ritual as a mystification of the social order so as to mute social conflict has been called into question. Lukes (1977), for example, criticized first their simplistic conception of social integration, and next their underlying assumption of value consensus in modern societies. As empirical evidence of contention, Lukes pointed out the performance of rituals by subordinate groups (the "ritual powers of the weak" in Turner's terms, 1977: 102; a special case of the "weapons of the weak," Scott, 1985),⁵ such as strikes and other industrial actions, or of May Day parades in capitalist societies.

To sum up the main parameters of the debate, then: so long as the traditional Durkheimian view focuses exclusively on rituals that produce functionally integrative solidarity and unify the social body around value consensus, his theory of ritual has been faulted for ignoring power, conflict, and social change. More specifically, his view

5 The use of the adjective "weak" to refer to resource-poor collective actors of the periphery does not imply a sympathetic stance toward them. As the example of racist and nazi movements makes clear, it is possible to find relatively weak groups that nonetheless are nasty or "distasteful" (Esseveld and Eyerman, 1992) in their ideological or cultural orientation.

disregards ritual practices by social groups which intensify value conflicts, like those by many social movements that are critical of the existing mode of organization of one or various subsystems of society, when not of the system as a whole, as in the case of revolutionary movements.

After having briefly reviewed Durkheim's account of ritual, we are now in a position to deal with a special kind of ritual, namely, protest rituals. First, however, a working definition of rituals is in order. Following Kertzer, I define rituals as a "symbolic behavior that is socially standardized and repetitive" (1988: 9). A symbol, in turn, might be considered "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception — the conception is the symbol's meaning" (Geertz, 1973: 91). If we restrict ourselves to the field of social movements, widely known symbols with a long historical trajectory are the red flag, the First of May, or the closed fist for the labor movement, the smiling sun for the anti-nuclear movement, the white pigeon for the pacifist movement, and the Venus mirror for the women's movement, to name but a few of the many symbols present in the movements' iconography and memory. All of them share the property of condensing ideologies ("Symbols are mediated condensations of ideologies," in Korff's words, 1991: 32) and of encouraging interpretive unanimity among spectators, that is, of providing at first sight an approximate idea of the message their performers attempt to advance in public opinion. Key to the definition is that rituals are understood as a set of symbolic practices. As Kertzer himself pointed out, in the absence of symbols an action that is standardized and repetitive is called custom or habit, but not ritual (1988: 9).

In what follows I make use of the valuable core of Durkheim's theory of solidarity but alter it to deal with the dynamic role that a particular family of rituals, protest rituals, play in the social, political, and cultural life of society in general, and of certain groups in particular. This kind of ritual aims at expanding group solidarity and, often at the same time, also at contracting solidarity when looked at from the perspective of the larger society. Here I define protest rituals as all the regularly occurring symbolic performances staged by social movements in the public sphere with the manifest purpose of influencing both the authorities and public opinion. As is often the case with symbolically loaded activities, rituals might also be performed for expressive, and not just for purely instrumental, purposes. Consequently, and depending on the specific case, bringing about inner cohesion might be a byproduct of the protest ritual, rather than its main purpose. As long as they fulfill the three things required from all rituals — socially effective action that is symbolic, standardized, and repetitive — forms of protest belonging both to the old and to the new repertoire of contention, ranging from rough music to food riots to anti-conscription riots, from demonstrations to strikes to acts of civil disobedience, qualify as protest rituals.⁶

6 A conceptual distinction between protest ritual, protest event, and protest cycle (or protest wave; see Koopmans, forthcoming) seems necessary. Frequency marks the main difference between a protest ritual and a protest event. A

Further specifications of this understanding of protest rituals might be summarized as follows:

1. Rituals are forms of communication through action. In the absence of action there is no talk of ritual in general nor of protest rituals; it is a feature consubstantial with them. Durkheim acknowledged this early in the last century when he separated religious phenomena into the two dimensions mentioned above, beliefs and rites, and immediately added thereafter: “The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are fixed modes of actions. These two classes of phenomena differ as much as thought differs from action” (2001: 36). Furthermore, there is wide agreement among specialists that the main purpose of such action is to communicate meanings (both in an intentional and an unintentional manner) to someone (including the performers themselves, in what constitutes an internal form of communication) about social relations in a relatively dramatic way (Douglas, 1970; Wuthnow, 1987; Kertzer, 1988; Rothenbuhler, 1998). Oftentimes messages are communicated in an embodied form, implying with the notion of embodiment “the anchoring of certain social values and dispositions in and through the body” (Strathern and Stewart, 1998: 237). Elements as varied as clothes, haircut styles, tattoos, or pieces of jewelry are telling modes of allowing the social entry to the human body and thus letting the world know who one is and what one stands for.
2. Equally important in any analytical approach to rituals in general, and to protest rituals in particular, is that they provide a powerful means by which the social dependence of the people can be expressed and shared feelings can be formalized. This is the valuable core of Durkheim’s approach. Awakening individuals’ awareness that they form part of a larger web of relationships, of a community in Buber’s sense (1977),⁷ in which the boundary between self and other blurs, is probably the most outstanding function of ritual. The creation and recreation of new actors and identities before, during, and in the aftermath of performing an act of protest is, therefore, a latent function of this particular kind of ritual we are concerned with. In this sense, ceremonials of the regular gathering are to be viewed as “ceremonials of solidarity” (Hobsbawm, 1959) that occasionally purport to develop emerging oppositional practices and meanings within the larger culture, to foster what Fantasia (1988) has called “cultures of solidarity.”
3. Rituals of protest follow as a rule a highly standardized, relatively invariant, formal sequence. In this sense, rituals belong to customary behavior. Custom in this context

protest cycle, in turn, is an active phase of protest concentrated in a relatively narrow period, whereas a protest ritual spans over a longer period of time and need not be so intense. (I am grateful to Ruud Koopmans for this suggestion.)

7 “Community is the being no longer side by side ... but *with* one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from *I to Thou*” (Martin Buber, quoted in Turner, 1977: 127, italics in original).

implies, on the one hand, a periodically recurring behavior based on the physical assembly of people around a shared focus of attention; it equally entails repetition, in the sense that forerunners have performed in the past the ritual with few modifications, as if it were “a performance of a script” (Rothenbuhler, 1998: 21). Likewise, protest rituals are often enacted at certain places and times that are endowed by the movement with a special symbolic meaning.

4. However, although rituals are patterned social practices and are presented by society to individuals rather than generated by them *ex novo*, this does not necessarily imply that they maintain unchanged their morphology, meaning, or social effects. Rather, just like any other expression of human practice or institution, rituals are subject to modifications and innovations by the more or less conscious, deliberate intervention of individual and collective agents: “people ...,” acknowledged Kertzer, “are not just slaves of ritual, or slaves of symbols, they are also molders and creators of ritual” (1988: 12). To put it differently, human creativity plays a key role in updating protest rituals to new circumstances with a cumulative effect over time, that is to say, in modernizing the repertoire of contention through a collective learning process. Each protest ritual is in every case the accumulated crystallization, the point of arrival, of all preceding protest performances. It is also the germ and point of departure for succeeding ones. If, as suggested, ritual blending is to some extent an activity within people’s reach (unlike in premodern societies, in which ritual processes occurred largely during preordained periods and in preordained ways, much like a “fate,” then protest rituals in modern societies appear always to be a mixture of inheritance and achievement. Of inheritance, because the main features of protest forms like demonstrations or strikes are the product of countless protest performances dating back in many instances to the last centuries; but also of achievement, because the specific actors have the capability of introducing innovations of various types (in the strategies of mobilization, by focusing on new targets, by using protest rituals to address new issues, or by adopting means that are either unprecedented or forbidden in the regime within which the actions take place) and thus help adapt protest rituals to a continuously changing environment.
5. Invariably, participation in protest rituals is accompanied by the arousal of emotions. While performing an act of protest, the bodily awareness of co-presence among “fellows” simultaneously sharing a point of focus transforms the negative emotions that brought individuals to the collective gathering in the first place (anger, indignation, disgust, outrage, fear, defeat, etc.), however momentarily, into feelings of solidarity, enthusiasm, pride, well-being, joy, responsibility, hope, or morality. Their capability to express and transform emotions, then, is another property of protest rituals. Nevertheless, the degree of internalization of the newly experienced emotions varies according to different factors, such as the type of movement resorting to protest

(as a rule, deeper internalization is to be expected in expressive movements than in instrumental ones) or the form of protest undertaken by the challenging group (the more committed the individuals, the more likely they seem to be to join high-risk and high-cost forms of protest, such as acts of civil disobedience, which in turn reinforces dialectically their commitment to the cause advanced by the group, and consequently to the group itself).⁸ Moreover, the effects of participation are not necessarily limited to the moment of performing the protest ritual; whatever feeling is experienced in rituals might also permeate non-ritual behavior and mentality, occasionally with deep and lasting consequences in an individual's life.

6. The Durkheimian assumption that ritual creates the conditions for social integration without requiring uniformity of beliefs (as the above-mentioned case study on the British coronation ceremony makes clear) does not hold true for the ritual family we are considering. In effect, according to several interpreters (Turner, 1983; Kertzer, 1988) a core assumption in Durkheim's theory of social integration rests on the idea that ritual action builds solidarity without requiring the sharing of beliefs. Ritual protest practices staged by social movements do not support such an assumption. More plausible is that social movements staging a protest in the public sphere presuppose a certain degree of ideological coherence among individuals taking part in it, at least in regard to the shared focus of attention that unleashes mobilization in the first place. Hence, if not on every issue of the sociopolitical landscape, participants in protest rituals at least must frame in compatible — though not necessarily similar — terms the issue that brought them to resort to the politics of numbers in the first place.⁹ From this point of view, solidarity in social movements is the outcome of people acting together *and* simultaneously thinking together.
7. Protest rituals are not only mechanisms for reinforcing solidarity in the present and for projecting its bearers toward their imagined future; they are also mechanisms of collective remembrance, of re-enacting together vital and meaningful moments of the past (Connerton, 1989). Relevant symbolic dates for different social movements, such as the First of May for the labor movement or the 8th of March for the women's movement, are outstanding examples of ritual performances that bind simultaneously the past, present, and future. From this perspective, its performers might be seen as

8 Throughout this study I focus on how protest rituals enhance collective identity rather than on how identities are built prior to protest through other means, for example by knitting together sociability networks or by devising a "we/they" sociodynamic, as suggested by Blumer. The distinction is obviously analytical, for in reality both moments, the prior and the current moment of identity formation, are dialectically related and thus hard to disentangle.

9 A good case in point is the recent mobilizations in favor of an alternative form of globalization. Demonstrations in Seattle, Prague, Genoa, and Barcelona showed environmentalists, feminists, workers, nationalists, and anarchists, among other disparate groups, marching hand in hand. Not represented at these mass demonstrations, but equally fierce enemies of globalization trends, are organizations of the radical right spectrum. To be sure, they all share a more or less radical critique of the current wave of neoliberal globalization, and in this sense their stance is compatible enough to join energies in a negative coalition. Their analysis and, given the case, proposal of alternatives, are, however, far from unanimous. In other words, they are together *against* the neoliberal drive worldwide, but not *for* a specific alternative. In this sense, frame compatibility is not the same as frame unanimity.

artificial “communities of remembrance” (Margalit, 2000) that periodically and collectively recall past events that occurred in the course of labor struggles (such as the two cases mentioned), of “foundational” moments and places of the movement (think of the Stonewall clashes in New York City and the birth of the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement in 1969), of assassinations of a movement’s leaders (Martin Luther King, Jr.’s is a good case in point, now established as a national holiday in the United States; Gandhi is another example), and so on. Nationalist movements, whether state-seeking or state-led ones, are probably the best example of a social movement that historically has deployed a battery of ritual celebrations (around recurrent anniversaries and monuments, as well as sacred places such as battlefields — real or imaginary — or buildings where great founding events took place) that remind its people of common myths and shared historical memories (Smith, 1991).

8. Finally, protest rituals are social practices that might be considered a cultural resource for collective action. Resources have been variously defined within the field of the sociology of collective action as “anything from material resources — jobs, income, savings, and the right to material goods and services — to immaterial resources — authority, moral commitment, trust, friendship, skill, habits, and so on” (Oberschall, 1973: 28); more briefly, McCarthy and Zald include within the resources for action the following aspects: “legitimacy, money, facilities, and labor” (1977: 1220). It is only under the recent influence of the cultural turn in the social and human sciences that other kinds of resources have been identified and incorporated within the resource pool available to social movements. Now aspects such as symbols, resonance of historical memory within a given population,¹⁰ social capital,¹¹ and collective action frames¹² are all considered ideational elements that ease the transition from a rather amorphous human collective to a full-fledged social movement struggling to intervene in the process of social change. Because rituals are an important factor in building collective identity and, furthermore, because no sustained collective action is imaginable without a shared definition of who “we,” the actors, are, then a logical inference is that ritual practices are a category of cultural resources available to social movements.

Together with strikes, civil disobedience, and petitions, demonstrations are the major protest form that social movements have nowadays to make themselves known to society.

10 For example, historical memory is a major factor that helps explain why Japan was the country to show a stronger opposition to French nuclear tests during the summer of 1995, precisely the one country in the world that has experienced the consequences of a nuclear attack.

11 In the words of the sociologist who has made fashionable the concept of social capital, “social movements and social capital are so closely connected that it is sometimes hard to see which is the chicken and which the egg. Social networks are the quintessential resource of movement organizers [...] Precisely because social capital is essential for social movements, its erosion could shroud their prospects for the future” (Putnam, 2000: 152–153).

12 See Snow, Rochford, Jr., Worden, and Bendford, 1986; Snow and Bendford, 1992.

The historical record of demonstrations is a long one by now. According to accounts by specialists, the demonstration as a specific and autonomous form of action was first born in Great Britain after 1815 (Tilly, 1995: 373), and only a few years later, at some point during the 1830s, made its appearance in France, although in this last case it only became a standard way of making public claims with the democratic wave of 1848 (Favre, 1990: 16). French people, to restrict ourselves to the country that is best documented with regard to this form of protest (Favre, 1990; Tartakowsky, 1998), still had to wait until the interwar years for demonstrations to become frequent and spread to all sectors of society, thereby establishing itself as a “normal” feature of social and political life. The interwar period, in particular, was a major historical heyday for mass demonstrations organized from below by the revolutionary working class, or from above by revolutionary regimes, whether communist as in Russia (von Geldern, 1993), or fascist as in Germany (Vondung, 1971; Mosse, 1975) or Italy (Berenzin, 1997). A further remarkable moment in its historical process of consolidation and intensification came with the cycle of protest inaugurated by the civil rights, student, and anti-military movements of the 1960s.¹³ Ever since, no Western country and no section of their population have remained immune to calls to demonstrate on behalf of the most varied issues. Suffice it here to mention two indicators of this “normalization” of demonstrations in Western countries, which steadily has been taking place over the last decades. One, in most cases it seems to be to the advantage of both claim-makers and the police to set up collaborative strategies for the demonstrations to take place peacefully (della Porta and Reiter, 1998). Two, under somewhat exceptional conditions (against terrorism in Spain, against racist attacks in France) even prime ministers and other top officials might resort to physically occupying the public sphere.¹⁴ Awkward as it might have seemed not so long ago, to talk nowadays about “demonstrating authorities” in democratic societies is no longer an oxymoron.

After these historical considerations, we are now in a position to define demonstrations. I understand a demonstration to be a collective gathering in a public space aiming at exerting political, social, and/or cultural influence both on authorities and public

13 Referring to the United States, Etzioni stated around this time that “demonstrations are becoming part of the daily routine of our democracy and its most distinctive mark” (1970: 1). Much about the same could have been claimed by other analysts focusing on countries such as France, Italy, Germany, or Great Britain (see Marwick, 1998, for a thoughtful analysis of the “long sixties”).

Precisely in response to this growing culture of protest all over the Western world, neoconservative thinkers began the discussion about the “crisis of governability.” The social movements of the time, with “hedonistic,” “alienated,” and “sensitive” youth at their head, were quickly identified by these authors as the major cause of a “revolution of the rising entitlements” (Bell, 1976). According to their diagnosis, too many social actors asking too much all too often led unavoidably to an erosion in the response capability of the authorities and, as a consequence, to both a fiscal and a legitimacy crisis of the capitalist and liberal systems. On the crisis of governability, the classic presentation still remains: Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki (1975).

14 In the Basque Country and in other places in Spain where a terrorist killing has taken place, it is relatively common for the authorities to organize collective mourning demonstrations, with the presence of the respective top regional representatives and members of the national government, and occasionally also of the president of Spain. Likewise, in France Mitterrand attended demonstrations organized to condemn the profanation of the Jewish cemetery at Carpentras or to pay homage to the Algerian youth killed in the aftermath of a demonstration called by the National Front, to mention but two examples (Tartakowsky, 1998: 214).

opinion through the disciplined and peaceful expression of an opinion or demand.¹⁵ Ideally, these public places combine both high visibility and symbolic salience. Demonstrations are therefore moments for a productive, creative unrest in the realms of life they target. Equally important in the definition is that demonstrations, like other forms of contention performed by social movements, aim at exerting a politics of influence on the authorities (legislative, executive, and judicial bodies, as well as established political actors), on the one hand, and on that diffuse sphere composed of individuals and groups commonly referred to as public opinion, on the other. The concept of influence is key to this normative understanding of social movement activities in general, and of demonstrations in particular.¹⁶ A social movement *X* is said to have influence over *Y* (the authority-complex and public opinion) whenever *Y* takes a given course of action or internalizes a set of values because it is convinced of the persuasive force of *X*'s arguments or public example, never because it has been forced to. Without thereby implying in every case conscious and deliberate behavior on their part, the pursuit of a dualist strategy and the attempt to persuade simultaneously both addressees (authorities and public opinion) hold true for sociopolitical movements.¹⁷ Feminist, environmentalist, or pacifist movements, to name but some relevant contemporary social movements, all have in common that they purport to diffuse a specific set of values alternative to those perceived as dominant in society (a re-evaluation of the feminine as a distinct but equally valuable gender formally entitled just as men are to the right of individual self-determination; a relationship to the environment in a sustainable, respectful way; and an understanding of human relations that promotes justice as the best way to prevent armed conflict). In each case, the values advanced largely surpass the legitimate jurisdiction of liberal, neutral authorities that on principle refrain from violating the private sphere. For under type-ideal conditions, abandonment of the politics of influence is synonymous with betrayal of

15 The cultural, political, and/or social focus of interest distinguishes demonstrations from parades, which are marches “for the sake of marching” and are characterized by “seeming aimlessness, or lack of plot” (Ryan, 1989: 134).

16 I follow Habermas’s argument on political influence: “Naturally, political *influence* supported by public opinion is converted into political *power* — into a potential for rendering binding decisions— of *authorized* members of the political system and determines the behavior of voters, legislators, officials, and so forth. Just like social power, political influence based on public opinion can be transformed into political power only through institutionalized procedures. Influence develops in the public sphere and becomes the object of struggle there“ (1996: 363, italics in original). Likewise, “within the boundaries of the public sphere, or at least of a liberal public sphere, actors can acquire only influence, not political power” (ibid.: 371).

17 Which target in particular the “demonstrating moment” (Favre) is addressing, and to what extent, remain a matter of empirical research and cannot be established beforehand, as influential understandings of demonstrations tend to imply when they emphasize the authority side. Favre, for example, defined a demonstration as “a collective marching organized in a public space with the goal of producing a *political* effect through the peaceful expression of an opinion or a demand” (1990: 15, italics mine). Likewise, Tilly also underscored this aspect when he stated that “a demonstration entails gathering deliberately in a visible, symbolically important place, displaying signs of shared commitment to some claim on *authorities*, then dispersing” (1995: 373, italics mine). A third example of this politically slanted view of demonstrations is provided by Champagne: “contemporary demonstrations, which virtually always, directly or not, address the *state*, have multiplied because the functions attributed to the state have likewise multiplied” (1990: 331, italics mine). Certainly demonstrations are customarily staged to put forward some demand; oftentimes, the addressees of such demands are the authorities. But, as my argument based on the Basque case will show, sometimes there is much more than narrow politics in protest rituals. A one-dimensional stress on politics sometimes appears, echoing Berger, only to be a “convenient rationalization” (1968: 754).

democratic commitments; in open societies in which participation mechanisms are relatively well lubricated, whenever a social movement gives up the realm of the politics of deliberation and attempts to enforce its own view of the good life, the ideal of democracy might be said to have been violated. In democratic politics persuasion, and not imposition, is the weapon of social movements.

Shifting the emphasis away from the “outward” look at demonstrations, which is characteristic of instrumentalist approaches, I contend that under certain circumstances (the existence of a parallel society breaking the limits of compatibility of the system to which its action is addressed) participants themselves might be viewed as the main addressee of the demonstration event. In other words, in addition to its *external* form of communication addressing both the authorities and public opinion, demonstrations are also an *internal* form of communication. In effect, to the extent that they provide participants with the sense of being engaged in a common cause with a large number of like-minded people who share similar feelings about an issue, mass gatherings also work as opportunities to cement a given social group. I next take up the question of how this reflexive, “inward”-oriented dynamic operates in the case of a given social actor in the Basque Country. According to my interpretation, preserving group bonds is not just a byproduct of regular mobilization; it is, rather, its main purpose.

2. Demonstration Rituals in the Basque Country

Cees Nooteboom’s account mentioned in the introduction takes place in the village of Rentería, although it could have happened in many other Basque locations. A few kilometers away from there, in Oresa, for example, the smallest village in the Basque Country. Oresa is an idyllic place in the province of Gipuzkoa, neighboring Navarre, at the core of an overwhelmingly Basque-speaking area. Its 75 dwellers inhabit comfortable traditional farmhouses (*baserriak*), close enough to each other not to be burdened by the inconveniences of loneliness, but far enough to enjoy the privileges of a quiet setting. The hilly and green surroundings would probably count as additional attractive features for all those visitors looking for a pleasant resort to have a taste of peace and quietness.

However, what makes Oresa so peculiar is neither its setting nor its peacefulness. Rather, what is most astonishing about Oresa is that it ranks as a contentious village within — as we shall see shortly — an especially contentious society. According to official data from the Basque police (*Ertzaintza*), in 1998 one public gathering took place in the streets of Oresa, five in 1999, twelve in 2000, and one in 2001. The immediate question is: Why does this handful of people take to the streets? To be sure, conventional, instrumentalist explanations of demonstrations and other protest events are largely helpless to account for this astonishing scale of mobilization. Granted that the habitants who assemble to make

claims do so on political grounds, and that they are not driven by any local precipitating factor that unleashes mobilization, one is led to suspect that the claimants are not addressing their neighbors, that is, their most immediate relevant public. As a matter of fact, they have no need of it, for ideological homogeneity seems to be the most remarkable sociopolitical feature of the village, at least as measured by the choice of political party in electoral contests. With noteworthy stubbornness, election after election eligible voters in Orexa cast their ballot for the political party that is considered to be the political arm of the terrorist organization ETA (*Euskadi ta Askatasuna* – Basque Country and Freedom). According to the results of the last regional elections held in May 2001, out of 70 valid votes, *Euskal Herriarrok* (the name at that point of the party that refuses to condemn the ETA's activities) gathered 62 votes (88.6%), whereas the remaining 8 villagers (11.4%) cast their vote for a coalition of two moderate nationalist parties.¹⁸ Hence, the hypothesis drawn from instrumentalist approaches to collective action, according to which, by exteriorizing their protest, these contentious villagers are attempting to influence authorities (including the single town councilor they recurrently elect almost by acclamation), does not seem very plausible. Finally, if interaction with their cohabitants or with the authorities seems not to explain why these contentious villagers take to the streets, a third possibility, namely, a would-be attempt to get coverage by the media, does not fare any better. Public performances of protest taking place in small villages such as Orexa rarely qualify as newsworthy as measured by media standards: Its handful of performers are neither well-known faces to the broader public nor resourceful in any meaningful sense. Moreover, the actions themselves are not spectacular: They just gather. Nonetheless, were notorious actors to stage the protests or were the actors original in any sense of the word, they still wouldn't gain media attention after, say, the third event. Villagers, however, keep routinely assembling up to twelve times in the course of a single year. Again: why? Providing a sound explanation for the question of the high level of radical nationalist mobilization in the Basque Country and for the function that protest rituals, especially demonstrations, fulfill in the process of group-identity building and maintenance is the main purpose of the remainder of this article.

2.1 *A Contentious Country*

Although certainly an extreme case, Orexa's example is by no means unique. Dating back to the time of the Spanish transition to democracy in the late 1970s, all around the Basque geography the level of mobilization has been extraordinarily high in comparison to

18 In the Basque Country as a whole, *Euskal Herriarrok* (We the Basque People) received 10.12% of the votes. The coalition of the PNV (*Partido Nacionalista Vasco*: Basque Nationalist Party) and EA (*Eusko Alkartasuna*: Basque Solidarity) gathered 42.72% of the votes, thereby becoming the winning party of the elections.

surrounding societies.¹⁹ Relatively reliable information on demonstrations which stems from different sources supports this contention.

First, data from the Basque police on the number of demonstrations for the years 1998 (though only from March through December), 1999, 2000, and 2001 unequivocally back the hypothesis of over-contention.²⁰ Thus, in the last ten months of 1998 a total of 4,000 demonstrations and public gatherings (divided between 1,772 demonstrations and 2,228 gatherings) were registered as effectively having gathered or marched along Basque cities and villages; next year the figure rose to 5,608 (2,270 demonstrations and 3,338 gatherings); in 2000 the number more than doubled and reached a total of 12,465 (3,060 demonstrations and 9,405 gatherings); and, finally, in 2001 the figures fell again, amounting to 8,730 (2,859 demonstrations and 5,871 gatherings).²¹ For the rest of Spain (once the data concerning the Basque Country are adjusted), which is the closest reference point in terms of political culture and other factors, Home Ministry figures show that the total number of demonstrations from 1996 through 2000 averaged at 9,515 demonstrations a year, with the lowest figure of 8,004 in 1999 and a peak of 11,186 in 1996 (Anuario Estadístico del Ministerio del Interior, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000). The *demonstration density rate* (DDR), here calculated as the number of demonstrations per every thousand inhabitants, is roughly 18.3 times higher in the Basque Country than in Spain for this five-year period. In effect, from 1996 to 2000 a mean of 9,126 demonstrations in a country of 2.1 million inhabitants gives a DDR of 4.346; in sharp contrast, the DDR for Spain for the same five-year period amounts to 0.237 in a country of 38 million (data related to the Basque Country have been adjusted once again).

Estimations available for France, the other neighboring country of the Basque Country, show figures very much similar to those for Spain. Using data from press and police sources, Fillieule (1998: 199) has calculated that between 1979 and 1989 in French cities with over 200,000 inhabitants an average of 10,500 demonstrations took place. In West

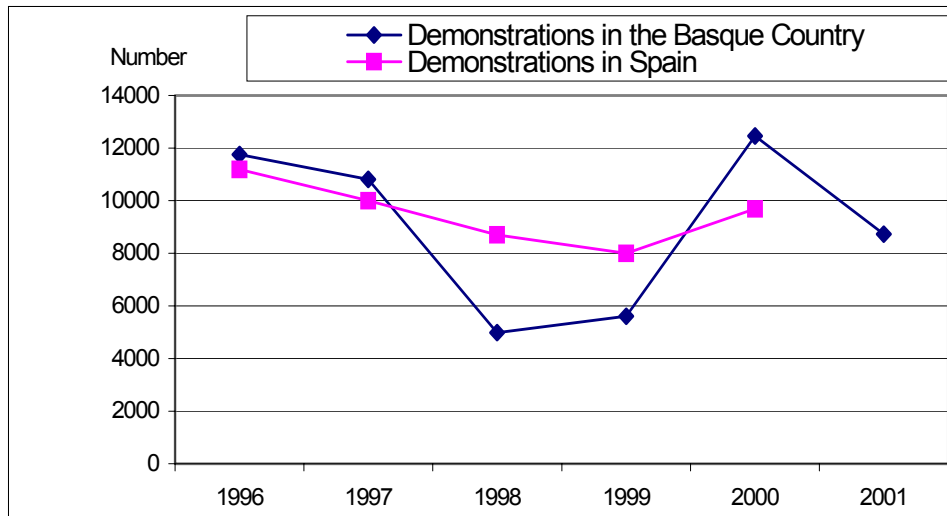
19 The Basque Country showed high levels of social and political conflict under the Francoist regime as well. So, for example, and just focusing on a particular kind of conflict, between 1965 and 1975 the Basque province of Guipúzcoa led in relative terms with respect to work-related conflicts in Spain, as measured by the number of conflicts, workers involved, and working hours lost. Another Basque province, Biscay, also figured among the five most contentious provinces during this decade. See Molinero and Ysás, 1998. Straightforward nationalism-related conflict (because during Francoism political conflict tended to hide behind labor conflicts), especially after the founding of the ETA in 1959, grew steadily over time in spite of the authoritarian rule.

20 Since 1996, the only police body in charge of demonstration matters in the Basque Country is the Ertzaintza, whereas for the rest of Spain it is the National Police. Both operate under the Ley Orgánica 9/1983. According to this law, any group intending to demonstrate must communicate its will to the authorities. A protest event counts as a demonstration whenever 20 or more people gather in a public space. If they are stationary, they are called a “gathering”; if they march from one place to another, they are branded a demonstration. The law regulating this fundamental right uses the generic label “demonstration” to encompass both kinds of events. I keep to this terminology in this article.

21 Partial information for the years 1996 and 1997, as well as for the first two months of 1998, is also available from the Basque police. Hence, in 1996 a total of 11,754 demonstration events (including demonstrations and gatherings) occupied the public sphere in the Basque Country; 10,815 in 1997; and 991 in January and February of 1998. Unfortunately, the volume of demonstrations is the only information we have for those years; no clue regarding its nature (“marching” demonstration or “stationary” demonstration), village or province in which the event took place, or organizer is covered in police data for these years.

Germany for the period between 1968 and 1995, the year with the most demonstrations was 1992, with some 12,000, followed by 1984, with around 9,000 demonstrations (Bundesministerium des Innern; see Rucht, 1994).

Figure 1: Number of demonstrations in the Basque Country and Spain, 1996–2001



Source: Data provided by the Basque police (*Ertzaintza*) and the Home Ministry of Spain (*Anuarios Estadísticos*, 1996 to 2000).

A comparative focus on cities shows results in accordance with those already mentioned. In Bilbao, the largest city in the Basque Country with its roughly 350,000 inhabitants, there were 901 demonstrations in the ten-month period of 1998 from March through December, 970 in 1999, 1,841 in 2000, and 1,759 in 2001. In Berlin, a city of 3.5 million inhabitants, a total of 2,360 demonstrations were counted by the administrative bodies in 2001.²² In Washington, D.C., according to data estimated by McCarthy and his collaborators (1998: 114), throughout the 1990s there were approximately 2,000 demonstrations a year. In Paris between 1979 and 1991, to borrow once again from Fillieule, the yearly average was 1,000 (1998: 199). No question, then, that in social protest, at least, Bilbao occupies the world's leading position.

A second set of data derives from the surveys conducted by the European Values Study (EVS) research group. In the 1999 survey 31 European nation-states plus Northern Ireland were covered. A research team integrated within the EVS designed a sample in the Basque Country, although the results are not included as such in the final report (Halman, 2001).²³

22 In the previous years the figures were as follows: 2,070 demonstrations in 1996, 2,219 in 1997, 1,854 in 1998, 2,440 in 1999, and 2,059 in 2000 (Senatsverwaltung für Inneres, Pressestelle, personal communication).

23 I am grateful to the EVS research group of the University of Deusto, Bilbao, led by Prof. Javier Elzo, for making available to me these as yet unpublished data.

Table 1: Participation in lawful demonstrations in the Basque Country, Spain, France, and Germany, 1999/2000

Country	Form of political action	Attending lawful demonstrations
Basque Country	Have done	54.1
	Might do	26.7
	Would never do	19.2
Spain	Have done	26.9
	Might do	33.2
	Would never do	39.9
France	Have done	39.7
	Might do	33.9
	Would never do	26.4
Germany	Have done	27.0
	Might do	41.6
	Would never do	31.4

Sources: Loek Halman (2001: 156) for the figures referring to Spain, France, and Germany; EVS research team at University of Deusto (Bilbao) for the figures referring to the Basque Country.

The results of participation in lawful demonstrations (see Table 1) are highly indicative of how widespread and favored this form of contention is in the Basque Country. Of the 33 units covered in the study, the Basque Country is, with 54.1%, by and large the place where more people say they have actually attended a lawful demonstration.²⁴ Far behind comes France, with a figure of 39.7%, closely followed by Belgium, with 39.6%.

This scattered and varied set of police and survey data all point consistently in the same direction. Taken together, they suggest that the Basque Country shows an extraordinarily high disposition to take to the streets as compared to other Western countries. However, it must be noted that this readiness to protest is not evenly distributed among different social and political groups. There is a subset of the Basque ideological spectrum that seems to consider the street its tribune *par excellence* and that accordingly occupies the public sphere with a far greater frequency than the rest of the population. This group rejects the Spanish constitutional order, including the autonomous regime the Basque Country has enjoyed since 1980. I am referring to the ideological spectrum of the self-named *Movimiento de Liberación Nacional Vasco* (MLNV – Basque National Freedom Movement). Established in 1974, the MLNV is a complex of organizations, with branches in the fields of feminism, environmentalism, internationalism, Basque culture, youth, students, prisoners’ rights, and trade unions (notably LAB – *Langile Abertzaleen Batzordeak*: Patriot Workers’ Committees), and a political party (now called *Batasuna*, or “Unity,” and previously called *Euskal Herritarrok* and *Herri Batasuna*) (Mata, 1993; Sáenz de la Fuente, 2002). The terrorist organization ETA is not only a part of the MLNV, it also presides over the whole assembly of groups, following the reasoning that those who are more committed

²⁴ A different survey of 16- and 17-year-old youths conducted in 1996/1997 shows that the participation rate among this segment of the population is slightly higher, at 58.5%. See Barandiaran (2002: 468).

to the “cause” (and a readiness to die or be imprisoned serves as an inestimable indicator of such commitment) should also have a qualified, decisive say within the community of believers. In other words, asymmetry of commitment should be reflected in an asymmetry of power within the group. Additionally, the MLNV also enjoys a broad infrastructure of sociability (slightly over one hundred so-called *herriko tabernak*, or “popular bars”) and media platforms (a daily paper, several magazines, Web sites, etc.). All these aspects that, to a greater or lesser degree, duplicate the organizational framework of the broader society in relevant fields for the production and reproduction of society, such as recreation, socialization, and information, allow us to refer to the whole network of groups around the MLNV as a “parallel society.” This dense associative infrastructure is the locus wherein a strong collective identity is fostered and the sociodynamics of ideological stigmatization finds sound ground.

In an attempt to cover the demonstration activities of many of these groups, the Basque police keeps in its records a rather diffuse category under the entry “In favor of Basque prisoners/MLNV/Related.” This category is diffuse and unspecific, because it overlaps with other categories also included in police data, such as “political parties,” “trade unions,” and “students.” This problem notwithstanding, the entry includes in the months from March to December of 1998, a figure of 1,872 demonstration events (46.8% of the total); in 1999 the number of demonstrations reached 3,414 (60.88%); in 2000, 4,573 (36.69%); finally, in 2001 a total of 3,339 demonstrations were staged by this group (38.25%). In the light of these data there is little doubt that responsibility for the high number of protests experienced in the Basque Country in the years covered in this study is to be attributed to the MLNV. Were it not for the protest activities of this group, the overall scale of protest in the Basque Country, although still high, would nonetheless be substantially lower than it actually is.²⁵

The frequent, routine-like character of demonstrations does not in itself justify describing the Basque Country as a “movement society,” as might be tempting to do following recent trends in the field of collective action (Neidhardt and Rucht, 1993; Tarrow, 1998; Meyer and Tarrow, 1998; Rucht and Neidhardt, 2002). Using this description of contemporary Western societies, these authors underscore the greater frequency of protest activities by movements representing ever more diverse constituencies and putting forward an ever broader set of demands than was the case before the protest cycle of the 1960s. Not explicitly stated in this notion of “movement society,” because tautological, is the requirement that the bearers of protest be autonomous intermediary actors with no links whatsoever to decision-taking bodies other than those integrated by its own activists and sympathizers.

25 Remarkable also is the pacifist mobilization against terrorism: there were 451 demonstrations in the ten-month period of 1998 under consideration (9.04% of the total), 14 in 1999 (0.25%), 2,012 in 2000 (16.14%), and 1,337 in 2001 (15.31%). From September 1998 to December 1999 the ETA declared a cease-fire. This explains why during 1999 there were so few demonstrations opposing terrorism. A sociological analysis of the mobilizations against violence in the Basque Country can be found in: Funes, 1998.

This is clearly not the case of the MLNV. Although it certainly meets some of the defining features of social movements (it bases its activities on a broad network of individuals, groups, and organizations, and pursues a new social order to a large extent through nonconventional means), it nonetheless obeys in the last instance a military logic and, on these grounds, should be ruled out of the analytical category of social movement altogether. As a rule, contemporary social movements such as environmentalists, feminists, or pacifists know no lieutenants.²⁶ Therefore, instead of labeling Basque society a “movement society,” I refer to it as a “contentious society,” simply because this expression does not attribute responsibility to any social actor in particular for the long-standing wave of protest activities in general, and of demonstrations in particular, which the Basque Country has experienced over the last years. It just brings to the first plane the volume of protest.²⁷

2.2 *Why Protest? A (Mainly) Meso-level Explanation*

In the first section of this study I have emphasized the relevance of ritual protest for buttressing collective identity in social movements. Now the time is ripe for exploring the working of this mechanism for the case of the MLNV. A few preliminary notes on the nature of this group are, however, in order.

In their hierarchical ranking, the groups and individuals that are part of the MLNV value Basque identity over all other more contingent and transient identities. Charles Taylor has used the term “hypergoods” for those “goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged, decided about” (1989: 63). Some religious (the Amish, Hassidic, and Islamic fundamentalists are but three examples), national, and ethnic groups might be better understood by identifying the specific hypergood that relegates all other would-be goods and identity sources to the point of meaninglessness. In the case of national and ethnic groups, one can contend that whenever they consider as sacred their group identity and value it over all other goods, and moreover dispose of the social infrastructure and mechanisms for collective worship, then they represent a political religion.²⁸

26 Right-wing movements are an obvious exception to this statement.

27 It should be noted that, beyond the widespread glorifying rhetoric all too often surrounding the notion of civil society, history and contemporary society are not short of examples of real civil societies hosting social movements or collective actors — one of the recurring elements in every account of civil society — that might be better characterized as “uncivil,” be it because they engage in egoistic behavior, show little respect for tolerance and for the free exchange of arguments in public, or because they pursue their aims through violent means (Keane, 1996; Dubiel, 2001; Reichardt, 2001). Right-wing nationalism in Germany and the constellation of social groups that together with the ETA form the MLNV are two cases in point (Casquete, 2002).

28 The sociology of religion, from the classic study by Durkheim (1912) to the contemporary one by Charles Taylor (2002), agrees that religion consists both of a certain set of formulations relative to divinity and of a collective experience of sacred things. These two inseparable features of every religion, namely, creeds and practices, also hold for political religions. In the case of the MLNV, I argue that demonstrations serve as occasions for the collective experience of the sacred for all those sharing the same vocabulary and faith, that is to say, for its believers committed to the cause of preserving the Basque hypergood.

From our point of interest, two features of political religions should be emphasized. First, “true believers” tend to suffer from an excess of identity.²⁹ One of the ways this identity excess manifests itself is that individuals within these groups are more or less formally discouraged from revisiting or updating their own vision of the good life, and thus are led to uncritically adhere to a skin-like, essentialized identity largely immune to corrections. Identity to them is no longer a permanent social “construction site,” but an already finished arrangement. Second, political religions revolving around a hypergood are sources of politically relevant emotions. So, for example, in the case of the MLNV the force attached to the national identity is so potent that many of its members and sympathizers might be willing to die for it, and not a few willing to kill for it (or, in any case, they refuse to condemn the killings): “nobody feels him- or herself more legitimated to kill for a Cause than she or he who is willing to die for it; the distance between the martyr and the killer is narrow indeed” (Aranzadi, 2001: 69).

Establishing an independent Basque state is, according to the interpretation by the MLNV, the only way toward the preservation of the hypergood “Basque identity”; it forms the cornerstone of its creed, the core principle of its political religion. The way it frames both the conflict and its praxis leads to an outright breach of the compatibility limits of the systems in which it operates: in Spain in the first place and, because Basque nationalism is much weaker there, to a lesser extent in France as well.³⁰ The challenge posed by the MLNV might be analytically approached from at least two different perspectives, the first morphological, the second moral:

1. Basque nationalism as a whole, including the MLNV, seeks a redrawing of state borders that would alter the current morphology both of Spain and of France. Since the foundation of the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV) in 1895 by Sabino Arana, Basque nationalism in its different organizational expressions has struggled for the right to set

29 Rucht has pointed out that insofar as it fosters social isolation, too much collective identity is a symptom of collective illness: “An excessively strong collective identity encourages cohesion, but leads to social closure” (1995: 19).

30 According to the Italian social and cultural theorist Alberto Melucci, a social movement is an actor “(i) defined by specific solidarity, (ii) engaged in a conflict with an adversary for the appropriation and control of resources valued by both of them, (iii) and whose action entails a breach of the limits of compatibility of the system within which the action itself takes place” (1996: 29–30). I borrow from him the third requirement without, however, referring to a social movement, but to a looser category labeled an “actor.”

It should be noted at this point that Melucci never devoted systematic attention to the study of rituals in social movements, which is all the more surprising as his was a culturalist approach to collective action that was mainly concerned with the problem of how a social aggregate arrives at a shared definition of its joint action, namely, with how a “we” becomes a “we.” And, whenever he did consider rituals, he seems to have followed Durkheim’s lead, that is to say, in a conservative sense: “[rituals are] aggregate phenomena that imply consensus and take place within the limits of a given system” (1996: 32–33). Rituals performed by social movements, as I have already pointed out in the first section of this article and intend to show now building on the Basque case, might also play a role in surpassing the limits of the system to which they are addressed. Melucci distinguished between the following systems: “1) the system that *ensures the production* of society’s resources; 2) the system that *makes decisions* about the distribution of these resources; 3) the system of roles which *governs the exchange* and deployment of the latter; and 4) the lifeworld or the system of *reproduction* in everyday life” (ibid.: 27, italics in original).

up its own state.³¹ The ETA, founded in the midst of Franco's dictatorship in the late 1950s, took up this goal, although discarding the racist and Catholic-fundamentalist overtones with which traditional nationalism was colored since its inception. Be it claimed by the moderate branch of nationalism or by its more radical fringe, the goal of secession appears to be a substantial challenge to Spain and France. However, such a goal per se, when pursued by peaceful and communicative means, is nothing to blame or praise, not evil or good.

2. A second type of challenge has to do with the realm of the moral and with the understanding of political praxis in the framework of a democratic polity. In the sometimes imperceptible gap existing between, on the one hand, framing the other as an adversary whose liberty and individual autonomy deserve respect but who is nonetheless also a person to be persuaded through communication and, on the other hand, targeting the other as an ideologically degraded people — as an outright enemy — who are thus open to attack, lies the most important attitudinal difference between a liberal and an essentialist nationalism. In the Basque case, it can be argued that whenever a political goal, in our case the goal of genuine independence, is carried out without tolerance toward the adversary and, more dramatically, without respect for their life, then the very claim is called into question from a moral point of view. The utilitarian path chosen by the MLNV, which uses other people's lives or undermines their most basic rights (freedom of speech, of movement, etc.) as a means to advance political goals, inevitably corrupts the very content of the claims.

The stated goals and the means used to pursue them make up an explosive cocktail that no doubt entails a profound challenge to the working mechanisms and to the very core of any liberal state. In order to understand the ultimate source of this two-sided challenge posed by the MLNV since the restoration of the democratic system in Spain,³² and consequently of the extraordinary number of demonstrations in the Basque Country since then, it is necessary to go back to the constitutional debate in the late 1970s. Both in the course of preparatory meetings and during the debate in the Spanish Parliament, Basque nationalist representatives attempted in vain to introduce the explicit recognition of the Basque Country as a nation within the Spanish state. The final stage of the drafting of the Constitution was its approval by the public. On December 6, 1978, a vast majority of the

31 With over a century-long existence, any account today of Basque nationalism must delve into history in order to provide a sound explanation of its causal mechanisms. Although illuminating in some respects, recent explanations that look at nationalism as a response to globalization (Castells, 1997, 1999) or to "denationalization" (Zürn, 1998) are at best incomplete. An intensification and broadening of economic, social, and cultural relationships all over the world might explain why some pre-existing feelings and demands are reinforced, but in the case of the Basque Country, as in other cases (Catalonia, Quebec, etc.), it does not account for how they came about in the first place.

32 It goes far beyond the limits of this study to consider, however superficially, the dynamics of protest in the Basque Country since the emergence of the core element of the MLNV, the ETA, in 1958 (see Clark, 1984; Jauregui, 1985; Sullivan, 1988; Waldmann, 1990; Garmendia, 1996). Here I restrict myself to Spain's most recent history, beginning with the transition to democracy in the late 1970s.

Spanish population — 87.8% of the voters — approved the Constitution in a referendum, with a turnout at the state level of 67.7%. Three weeks later, on December 27, the entire process came to an end when King Juan Carlos I formally signed it. The foundations of the constitutional, democratic state were thus established. Its main black spot remained the Basque Country, the only region where the cornerstone of the newborn democratic system was not passed with a clear majority. There, the largest nationalist party, the PNV, asked its militants and sympathizers to abstain, whereas the various political parties and groups closely associated with the ETA at that time called for a negative vote. The strength of these recommendations by both moderate and radical nationalist leaders became clear. As shown in Table 2, the turnout was less than half of the population, of whom roughly three quarters (68.2%) cast a “Yes” vote for the Constitution, and a quarter voted against.³³

33 The idea of constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*) has occupied an important place in intellectual and political discussions in Spain: during the 1980s it played an important role within the Spanish Socialist Party, and in the early 2000s it was key within the Popular Party (PP) led by J. M. Aznar. The debate reached its peak in the party congress of the Popular Party in January 2002, in which constitutional patriotism was elevated to the fore of its program. This stance is clearly meant as an attempt to deal with Basque nationalism, the most meaningful current in Spain that has not been unequivocally integrated into the Spanish framework. However, the idea has been emptied of its original meaning in the work of its leading theoretician, Jürgen Habermas. In the opinion of the German philosopher, the procedure followed to reach the outcome is as important as the outcome itself: “Deliberative politics acquires its legitimating force from the discursive structure of an opinion- and will-formation that can fulfill its socially integrative function only because citizens expect its results to have a reasonable *quality*. Hence the *discursive level* of public debates constitutes the most important variable“ (1996: 304, italics in original). Two additional features of this discursive level are its open, dynamic character (ibid.: 384). It is hard to accommodate such a proceduralist understanding of democracy, one which emphasizes open discussion and efforts to integrate dissident, minority voices, with a nonnegotiable defense of the Constitution as it was passed in 1978, without the straightforward consent of a significant majority of the country. The PP has, one might say, co-opted Habermas’s idea, largely disregarding the argumentation on which the author himself grounds his view of democracy. In other words, it has misused an idea that purports to build broad democratic consensus and has converted it into a weapon against centrifugal forces in general, and against Basque nationalism in particular. Because the PP understands the Constitution to be a process that was already closed twenty-five years ago, the spirit of the PP’s proposal cannot lie further away from Habermas’s notion of *Verfassungspatriotismus*.

Table 2: Results of the 1978 Referendum on the Constitution: the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Spain as a whole

Region	Turnout (%)	Yes (% of those who voted)	No (% of those who voted)	Abstention (%)
The Basque Country	45.5	68.2	23.8	51.7
Catalonia	68.3	90.4	4.6	31.7
Spain	67.7	87.8	7.8	32.3

Source: Laura Desfor Edles, 1998: 105.

“Since no man has any natural authority over his fellows, and since force alone bestows no right, all legitimate authority among men must be based on covenants,” wrote Rousseau in what has come to be viewed as one of the classic statements on the contract and political legitimacy.³⁴ A quarter of a century after the crystallization of the metaphoric social contract in Spain was passed, the legitimacy deficit of the Constitution in the Basque Country is still notable. A telling indicator of such a deficit is provided by survey data on the national sentiment, or, to put it differently, on the diffuse support level for the political community.³⁵ From 1995 through 2001, national attachment among Basques shows a stable majority of the population feeling mainly or only Basque (a minimum of 44% in 1996, and a maximum of 49% in 1997). The single most numerous group is in all but one year (1997) that made up by inhabitants with mixed and balanced national identities.

Table 3: National sentiment in the Basque Country, 1995–2001

	Between Basque and Spanish, how do you define yourself?						
	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Oct. 2001
Only Basque	31	30	33	32	31	31	26
More Basque than Spanish	15	14	16	15	15	16	18
As Basque as Spanish	37	37	32	34	35	38	39
More Spanish than Basque	6	5	5	4	4	4	5
Only Spanish	9	10	8	8	6	7	7
Don't know/No answer	3	4	7	8	7	5	6
%	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Sociómetro Vasco 17 (Fall 2001), Gabinete de Prospección Sociológica-Presidencia del Gobierno Vasco (www.euskadi.net/estudios_sociologicos/estudios_e.htm).

34 J. J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, book 1, chap. 4 (Penguin, 1968, p. 53).

35 Following Pippa Norris, the level of support for the political community refers to “a basic attachment to the nation beyond the present institutions of government and a general willingness to cooperate together politically” (1999: 10).

Along with national self-definition, a further indicator that a regime suffers from legitimacy problems among some citizens is the spread of civil disobedience. In this regard, starting in 1989 the Basque Country has had rates of total resistance to both the military and the alternative service of up to 5% of the population subject to conscription, a rate ten times higher than that in the rest of Spain. Nationalism was a key factor explaining the strength of total resistance in the Basque Country (see Casquette, 1996).

The background against which demonstrations in the Basque Country are to be interpreted is, thus, a Constitution suffering from a legitimacy deficit among a substantial part of the population, precisely that part holding strong nationalist feelings. Furthermore, the stronger the nationalist feelings, the weaker the attachment to the cornerstone of the Spanish order that is the Constitution. The aim of this study, however, is not to remain at this level of explanation concerned solely with legitimacy. Important as it is, rather than extending on the ultimate reasons that drive a social actor to consider the streets his or her tribune, I shall delve into the sociological functions that such a staging fulfills for the social actor. Putting forward demands to the authorities is not the only purpose of demonstrations. Equally or even more important is to devise mechanisms and offer opportunities for group coalescence in the face of an environment interpreted by the demonstrators as threatening to their very survival as a group and, more broadly, as a collective identity. Precisely because of its revolutionary character, and because of the rejection that violent means awaken among the wider population, the group feels itself under continuous attack. A way of counteracting these attacks and thus of preserving group identity is the ritualization of protest. As in the case of every ritual, the “collective effervescence” (Durkheim, 2001) unleashed in the demonstration event supplies participants with the vitality necessary to keep the struggle going, and repeated participation contributes to its revitalization and updating.

In order to clarify this contention on the latent integrative function of protest, I refer to the mass demonstrations (here somewhat arbitrarily understood as those with over 10,000 participants in a single event, as reported by different newspapers)³⁶ that have taken place in the years 1999, 2000, and 2001. All in all, there were eight such demonstrations (two in 1999, both in Bilbao; three in 2000, in Bilbao, Pamplona, and San Sebastian; and three in 2001, all of them in Bilbao) called by one or several organizations of the MLNV. Not included in this account are the hundreds and thousands of smaller and decentralized demonstrations around the Basque geography that were initiated by this same actor.

In order to explore the ritual character of the mass demonstrations performed by the MLNV, I focus on the three aspects included in the definition of ritual mentioned above, namely, on its symbolically loaded, repetitive, and standardized nature:

1. Symbols. The Basque flag, the *ikurriña*, was the most widely represented symbol at every demonstration covered in this study. Apart from the countless *ikurriñak* evenly scattered throughout the demonstration, invariably a huge one held by Basque dancers (*dantzariak*), by relatives of ETA prisoners, or simply by anonymous militants opens the march. Singing is another symbolic element with plenty of significance: It is not hard to hear a classic Basque song that goes “Come, come home boy” (“Hator, hator

36 The newspapers reviewed were *El Correo* (best-selling daily paper in the Basque Country), *El País* (best-selling daily paper in Spain), and *Gara* (the daily mouthpiece of the MLNV).

mutil etxera”), in open reference to prisoners. Occasionally, the “Basque Soldier’s Hymn” (*Eusko gudariak*) concludes the demonstration. Apart from the flag and songs, a third kind of symbolic element present at every demonstration is the portraits of ETA prisoners, around 400–500 in the years covered here.³⁷ These portraits are carried by relatives, who always occupy a preferential place.³⁸ Banners demanding either prisoners’ amnesty or that they fulfill their sentences in prisons located in the Basque Country are also present. “Long life to the ETA” (*Gora ETA*), “Independence” (*Independentzia*), and cries in support of ETA prisoners can also be heard. Songs, cries, and placards are exclusively in the Basque language, in spite of the fact that many demonstrators have no good command of it, or no command at all (according to the last sociolinguistic survey conducted in 1996, only 25.2% of the population was fluent in the Basque language, though language proficiency no doubt is more likely among nationalists in general, and even more so among radical nationalists).

A recurrent episode that conveys the power of symbolism involves the so-called flags-war. The town festivals in which the mayor decides, in obedience with the law, that the Spanish flag should wave side by side with the Basque and local flags are regular occasions for demonstrations, and sometimes for clashes with the police. The best-known case of the flags-war is that of Bilbao. During the town festivals in mid-August for the three years considered here, violent clashes between police forces and demonstrators took place before, during, and shortly after the nearly one hour during which both flags, the Basque and the Spanish, waved side by side. There is a recognizable religious overtone in this behavior. Durkheim referred to the prohibition practices (taboos) that accompany every religion as categorical imperatives for the members of the group. In our case, the profane from the vantage point of radical nationalists (the Spanish flag, the Spanish language) must be kept away from the sacred (the *ikurriña*, the Basque language). This commandment to protect divinity from defilement through pollution might be interpreted as an attempt to protect the sacred symbol from losing its (supposedly threatened) distinctive character (see Durkheim, 2001: 222 ff.; Douglas, 1966). Doubtless, behind this stance hides a refusal to cohabit with other, widely felt identities (in this case, the Spanish one), for the sake of one’s own (the Basque one, in our case).

Dense symbolism of the kind reviewed here (flags, banners, hymns, traditional elements, etc.) reveals the weight of the seemingly “unimportant” stuff of which social and cultural life is made.

37 As a rule, the more social support a group resorting to political violence enjoys, the more people refuse the label of “terrorist” to refer to its militants. IRA members were not called terrorists by its followers, but “freedom fighters”; Palestinians who explode themselves in an Israeli bus station are “martyrs.” In our case, MLNV’s sympathizers would agree that ETA members are *gudariak* (soldiers), but never terrorists.

38 Prisoners’ parents, particularly mothers, play a substantial role in demonstrations. On the symbolism of the mothers in Basque radical nationalism, see Aretxaga, 1988.

2. Frequency. “Rites are, above all, the means by which the social group periodically reaffirms itself,” stated Durkheim in his classic study on religion (2001: 287). One function that periodic mass gatherings perform is the fueling of morphologies of meaning based on the familiarity generated by the repeated exposure to the ritual performance. In our case, two to three mass demonstrations a year can be understood as occasions for the parallel society to reaffirm itself in the face of a hostile political and social environment. Apart from the occasional demonstrations reviewed here, also interesting is the rich array of commemorative demonstrations marking an anniversary. The most important ones are the following: *Aberri Eguna* (Fatherland’s Day, on every Easter Sunday, staged by moderate Basque nationalists for the first time in 1932, and later taken up by radical nationalists as well), *Gudari Eguna* (Soldier’s Day, every 27th of September, a homage to two ETA members executed by Franco in 1974), the First of May, and the eves both of the Spanish national holiday (12th of October) and of Constitution Day (6th of December). Likewise, welcome public events such as the return of recently released ETA members to their home villages, towns, or neighborhoods are commemorative events easy to forecast as occasions for the MLNV community to gather and unleash emotions, as are public funerals every time an ETA member is either shot by the police or killed while manipulating a bomb.³⁹
3. Standardized practices. The most repeated slogans in the eight demonstrations covered here are versions of the “democracy frame”: “Let the Basque Country be. Democracy,” “Constructing the Basque Country. In favor of a democratic process,” or “The Basque Country has the say,” were the claims on the placards at the opening of the march. With variation only in the wording, Basque radical nationalism has been taking to the streets over the last few years around this master framework. As a result, their demands are well known both to the authorities and to the public. Introducing new input into the political system is therefore not the only, perhaps not even the main, purpose of these demonstrations.

The structure of the demonstrations likewise follows a standard, highly predictable pattern. As mentioned above, a huge *ikurriña* usually leads the way. If the demonstration is held in Pamplona, a group of *joaldunak* (a traditional character of the carnival of two small villages in the north of the province of Navarre) might also be at the head of the march. Next comes the main placard of the demonstration, held by several *mahaikideak* (leaders of the political party that backs the claims of the MLNV). Relatives of ETA prisoners, as mentioned already, always have a preferential place in the procession. Immediately thereafter comes the bulk of the demonstrators. A

39 Mourning ceremonies aimed at coping with a perceived catastrophe is what Durkheim labeled “piacular” ceremonies. According to the French sociologist, such ceremonies do not respond to natural impulses caused by a loss, but to a duty imposed by the group (2001: 287, 295). It is, in other words, a social imperative in order to keep the group united.

group in charge of maintaining order, which is set up by the organizers themselves, takes the place of the police all along the way, visibly reinforced at “sensitive” locations such as a Basque police station along the route. No police forces other than local traffic police both at the start and at the end of the demonstration are in sight.

The route of the mass demonstrations taking place in Bilbao (six of the eight considered here) is a further telling aspect of the socially integrative function intended for these ritual events. Instead of marching along the main street of the city, precisely where the most relevant political and economic sites of power are located (headquarters of the provincial, Basque, and Spanish governments; headquarters of the second-largest bank in Spain), and where many other mass demonstrations in Bilbao take place, demonstrations by the MLNV invariably take a route that is all its own. Why does the MLNV mount demonstrations in locations without any politically salient meaning at all? In comparison to the alternative route along the main street of the city, the chosen route presents two distinctive features worth pointing out: (a) It is somewhat longer, approximately 3 km, so that demonstrators enjoy more time to stick together and thus lengthen their liturgical performance, and (b) whereas the main route is completely flat, the two main streets along which the alternative route goes have a sloping topography, so that either from the front or from the back of the demonstration it is possible to enjoy an overall view of the marching crowd.⁴⁰ In this way, those sympathizers unable to attend the demonstration have a chance to see the crowd the next day on the cover page of the *Gara* newspaper. The lengthy coverage of the event on the inside pages provides a detailed description of the event and is accompanied by a photographic report, as well as by interviews with anonymous, rank-and-file participants at the demonstration expressing their opinions and, more important, their feelings.

Demonstration rituals performed by the MLNV such as these reported here enable participants to take part in the worship of themselves as an embodiment of the *herria* (people, nation). For the members and sympathizers of a social group that is (self-) marginalized from mainstream political life because of its refusal to criticize ETA violence, enjoying an opportunity to regularly visualize themselves is of the utmost importance; it amounts to a survival function. In a country where, unlike in other deadly ethno-national conflicts (e.g., Northern Ireland), the supporters and followers of a social group showing “understanding” for violence are not spatially concentrated, but diffused and mixed up with the rest of the population in most relevant spheres of life (work, school, neighborhood, etc.), (mass) demonstrations fulfill the function of giving a form to an

40 The deep emotional impact caused by witnessing the crowd marching is hardly a discovery of the collective actor we are dealing with. Already in 1908, the local socialist newspaper *Der Kampf* suggested that, on the occasion of the First of May parade in Vienna, artificial platforms be built at both sides of the streets so that participants could step up momentarily and see the huge crowd of which they were a part (see Mosse, 1975: 169).

abstraction, namely, to that of the nation understood as an “imagined political community,” according to the celebrated definition by Anderson. “It is *imagined*,” this author explains, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion,” the image of the “beauty of *gemeinschaft*” (1991: 6 and 143, resp., italics in original). Educational and military institutions, as well as museums, monuments, and national symbols (flags, anthems, football teams, etc.), are inescapable preconditions for people to feel and imagine their nation (Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 1991; Koselleck, 1996). Likewise, symbolic practices such as festivals and demonstrations, especially very large ones, provide an opportunity for the people (*Volk, popolo, herria, pueblo*), certainly not to know, meet, or hear of all their comrades, but to be sure to witness themselves simultaneously sharing a physical space as a representative sample of the nation. Shared feelings of struggling for a worthy cause, manifest evidence of being numerous and united, and unambiguous reaffirmation of present and future commitment invariably arouse during the demonstration-liturgical moment.⁴¹ An amorphous crowd simultaneously occupying the public space and sharing a common cult has thereby become a national congregation, not merely an imagined, but an embodied one. Demonstrations are therefore the only device that makes feasible the transition from imagination (a largely individual activity) to visualization (a social one, and provider of resources for imagination), thus providing believers with an occasion to worship the cherished nation.

41 The idea of contentious acts as occasions to display unity, commitment, worthiness, and numbers is borrowed from Tilly (e.g., 1995: 372). But instead of focusing on the authorities as the unique addressee of this multiple display, as Tilly himself tends to do, I pay attention to the consequences that such a display has on the self-production and re-production of the group.

3. Conclusion

Rituals are not merely forces of “being,” insofar as being is a description of the unchanging and atemporal human scene, but of “becoming,” that is to say, of the transformation of a group of individuals into a mutually recognized social unity. For this dynamic process to enjoy some success and culminate in the formation of a recognizable social actor, regular ceremonies of gathering around shared symbols and taking a stance in favor of the same cause appear to be an inescapable precondition. Otherwise, a social group endowed with a set of symbols and willing to put forward a demand in society, but without regular public reaffirmation, lacks the decisive feature for overcoming the test of time. This feature is no other than the building of a strong group identity capable of defending itself against a hostile environment.

Throughout this article, I have shown the relevance of ritualized mass demonstrations in the long-standing wave of street protest in the Basque Country. So long as it shores up group solidarity, the performance of symbolically loaded, regular, and standardized protest by this social actor creates enduring bonds among participants. Regular mass demonstrations staged by an actor endowed with a sound social and cultural infrastructure impart a lasting character to its collective identity and thereby to the movement it represents.

An epistemological note to conclude: in the light of our case study, an expressive correction to instrumentalist approaches to collective action seems necessary. If we ask ourselves why sympathizers of this group take to the streets and march together with such a high frequency, then putting forward demands to the authorities certainly comes up as an obvious answer. Yet this is not the whole story. The unleashing of emotions and their convenient channeling toward the cult of the nation (or the class, or any other social category given the case) is a key function of all ritualized protest events that are staged by groups branded by the larger society as a threat. The opportunity to visualize fellow patriots by the hundreds or thousands is therefore a deliberate goal in itself, a survival strategy, and not merely a byproduct of the protest ritual, as instrumentalist approaches tend to imply. Therefore, instead of underlining *just* the interaction between challengers and authorities or the public, MLNV protesters — and revolutionary movements in a broader sense — taking to the streets might *also* want to interact among themselves and use a unique opportunity to visualize the strength of the group, thus coping with a social and political environment perceived as threatening for the survival of the group.

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