

INTERVIEW

Interview with Antoni Batista, journalist and writer

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Antoni Batista, journalist and writer

Antoni Batista is one of the most knowledgeable Catalans in regards to the Basque conflict. He was a correspondent for the Basque Country for twenty-five years and, as a result of the knowledge acquired, has written nine books about the Basque political and social reality. In this interview, he talks about how the Basque society is experiencing the peace and reconciliation process after five years without any violence from ETA - a process still full of challenges for the future.

This summer you were in the Basque Country, working on a documentary precisely on the Basque conflict. What feelings did you have? Does the enthusiasm generated five years ago with the announcement of an end to the violence from ETA still remain?

The first and most important issue is that the cessation of violence is irreversible. There will be no more deaths, no more extortion, nor people threatened who will have to look underneath their cars when leaving home ... Peace is consolidated. And consolidates - this is the second important issue - despite the fact that the Spanish government does nothing to ensure this. And the third issue is that Basque society, like any society that has lived a nightmarish period, turns over a new leaf quickly. It has been five years since ETA has done anything, but it seems like fifty, in the sense that the Basque society is completely normalized.

The process of reconciliation, therefore, is on the right track?

Yes, it is going on a very good track. The cartography of the Basque society itself facilitates this: there are not so many people, nor do they have a very wide territory, in other words, there are few of them and they are very close together. In the same family there may be a minister of the Basque Nationalist Party (BNP), the father of a BNP businessman who suffered from extortion from ETA, and a daughter imprisoned and tortured for being a member of ETA. Another example is the notorious O'Shea Botín family. Iñaki O'Shea, founder of Herri Batasuna, is the son of a right-wing fascist and Emilio Botín's, Chairman of Banco Santander, brother-in-law. The circumstances of the Basque society allow the reconciliation to continue, not an easy step.

Don't you see a social fracture then?

I've never seen a social fracture and I lived there many years. Those who speak of social fracture are always the same people, the Spanish right wing. Social fracture, no; the society has not been torn apart. Political fracture, totally.

“ Peace is consolidated and the Basque society quickly turns over a new leaf; the reconciliation is going on a very good track ”

The cessation of violence is a firm step towards peace but the conflict still remains because it has not had the classic steps of a peace process, such as the opening a political negotiation. Can we expect any change in this respect?

It is clear that the PP government will not aid the institutional consolidation of peace, namely, the delivery of weapons by ETA, the sealing of the arsenals and a proportionated and scaled solution for prisoners and exiles. If there is another Government that is not from the PP, that continues on the left wing and in which Podemos is involved, I think that things could change. But as it is right now, that is political fiction.

The announcement of disarmament by ETA would not have an impact either?

This disarmament can facilitate other steps; recent history demonstrates that this also is to be seen. The nationalist left has been taking steps and the Spanish government has not done anything. If the Spanish government has not done anything when faced with the fundamental and highly important steps of stopping the killing, the extortion and the interfering with human rights, do we think that they will do something because ETA makes a symbolic delivery of weapons?

Another pending question is the review of the prison policy that affects ETA prisoners. How do you think it should be done?

The prison policy has reached surreal extremes. To make a prison policy as it should be, one only has to apply the current legislation. What do the law and the Constitution say? That those prisoners who have served three quarters of their sentences must be let out of jail, that those who are sick must receive special treatment, that they must be close to their families ... relating to law-abiding prisoners. Only with that, they would be in a détente process. But of course, make the law, make the catch or trick. And tricks, they have made many.

“ There has not been any social fracture in the Basque Country; those who speak are always the same people, the Spanish right wing ”

The report entitled “Investigation Project of Torture in the Basque Country (1960-2013)” registers more than 4,000 cases of allegations of torture at the hands of security forces. Should there be an institutional conviction regarding this?

Of course there should be! But if the Spanish Government is incapable of condemning the Franco regime, which is something obvious, how is it going to condemn the torture in the Basque Country?

A peace process should include the creation of a shared narrative of the past, an agreement on the report that helps to close the wounds and to address the future. The Basque Government has created the Institute of the Report, Coexistence and Human Rights. How do you evaluate the political reports that are being promoted?

I have had enough of that, instead of creating a common narrative, it would be nice to tell all the pieces of history from both sides and have everyone respect the other's point. Everyone has the right to their truth from the veracity of their conscience. I've tried to put myself in the shoes of an ETA member and of a Franco Commissioner to try to understand them. It is difficult to match up the stories but the important thing is that you respect each one. In any case, political reports are always necessary and the people who oversee them have to have the perspective to anticipate a variety of stories.

Next Sept 25th there will be regional elections in the Basque Country. Arnaldo Otegi has finally been disqualified to be candidate, however, he has decided to continue being present and leading the campaign. What do you think may be the power of the Otegi factor? Will it be a catalyst for the abertzale left wing?

Otegi will unilaterally lead the campaign and say whatever he has to no matter what the Spanish government does. Otegi is a brand-new man after coming out of jail, full of confidence and charisma, and the abertzale left wing is ready to face and knows well how to overcome any difficulties. They are not afraid and are indeed full of expectations on this new social and political era. This is already a great wakeup call!

To what extent does Otegi's disqualification *mandelizes* his figure?

I would say that he has been constantly *mandelized*, starting with him being excessively and unfairly sentenced to jail. PP is a great factory of supporters of the independence movement, as it has been stated; however, as they are also great manufacturers of Spanish nationalists, they continue winning elections. With this Spanish nationalist feeling they cover up the corruption scandals in which they are immersed.

Is it predicable that the nationalist left will overtake the BNP?

The overtake was predictable four years ago, after the great results of the local and regional elections. Now, PNB is closing its mandate with a pretty-good mark, Podemos is in crisis, and Otegi – the most well-prepared politician there is in all senses, peacebuilder, with great communicative capacity and empathy and with a vision of modern state- can not be elected. There are too many handicaps nowadays, but there is also good will for the future.

**“ Otegi is the most well-prepared politician:
peacebuilder, with great communicative capacity
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To what extent does the absence of violence increase the independence movement?

It is possible that violence contaminates the pro-independence sentiment, especially for the politics of the PP whereas “everything is ETA,” that the ends and the means coincide and, therefore, if you are pro-independence you are a terrorist. Now this will no longer occur and the absence of this violence can add to the number of separatists. But it is also possible that there will be a rest because with the disappearance of the epic – the prisoner, the tortured – the unifying force also disappears.

But how much sympathy for the separatists do you perceive in the Basque Country?

Sympathy for the independence movement in the Basque Country? The amount that you want. Now, before this fact of “tomorrow we will go towards independence with everything that that entails,” we divide the sympathies in half and we are generous. What I mean is that the utopian independence supporters have more sympathizers than militants may have real independence supporters.

Catalonia has always looked upon the Basque Country with a lot of interest. Now, with the Catalan process underway have the roles been switched? Have we gone from a Catalan Basquetis to a Basque Catalanitis?

They look at us but I would say not with catalanitis, but rather with a lot of caution. I talk in one of my books -“*Catalunya i Euskadi. Nació còncava i convexa*”- of the “resistance” factor as a symbolic and definite element of the Basque nation and Catalonia’s “pact” factor. At this time, Basque politicians look at us with sympathy but with a lot of caution. The Basques have an almost federal regional situation, more advanced than ours: they have their own internal revenue service, and the local rights reserve to the Statute and the Constitution. That’s why the BNP sees the Catalan process as a factor of destabilization from that which they have. The nationalist left looks on with more sympathy but, at the same time, they have already had the experience of negotiating with the right at the national level and it went badly. And what will happen with the Catalan right wing at the national? In a process such as this there will come a time when we will need to consider a confrontation; not military, fortunately, but peaceful resistance: enough is enough.

Photography : Antoni Batista

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