

Fernando Aramburu, *Patria* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 2016) 648 pp., ISBN: 9788490663196, £20

The book 'Patria' (2016), by the author Fernando Aramburu, was a top-ten selling book in Spain and one of the most read books of 2017. The novel 'Patria' (meaning 'Homeland' in English) is centred on the Basque conflict, specifically on the conflict's last two decades from the 1990s until the declaration of the ceasefire in 2011 by the terrorist organization ETA (an acronym for what translates into 'Freedom for the Basque Country'). The book sparked a high level of interest due to a social process of 'lessening tension', that the Basque people have experienced since the peace process began. The novel's success is congruent to this social process, as it details the post-conflict Basque society. By 'post-conflict' society we understand the non-existence of armed actions based on political motivations. Nevertheless, 'Patria' explains the importance of how the non-existence of armed actions does not necessarily mean the end of the conflict.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Basque people lived in an atmosphere of conflict and terror in their daily lives, where even talking about politics generated tensions. According to the author's discourse, those affiliated with ETA were responsible for this environment in the novel's setting, and they represented the nationalistic majority, where those that didn't share their ideas were shunned and even killed. Aramburu depicts this in his portrayal of two families living in a small town in the province of Guipúzcoa, the Basque region where ETA historically channelled most of its social support. In the story, ETA is responsible for the death of one family's father, and, consequently, the second family cuts off the widow. This lack of support demonstrates the ostracism that many ETA victims suffered during these two decades.

Why does Aramburu's novel captivate so many Spaniards? The novel's success is due to its in-depth analysis of the ordinary people who suffered violence, terror and extortion caused by ETA, and the emotional effects, particularly the fears and frustrations, of a long-term political conflict. Aramburu reinforces a narrative commonly used: that ETA is the single cause of the Basque people's suffering; but he disregards other reasons behind the Basque conflict. This common narrative includes the categorization of the Basque nationalist community (from the most politically moderate to those who supported ETA's armed activity) as terrorists or accomplices. Therefore, 'Patria' readers are inculcated with the idea that, as Spanish citizens, peripheral nationalist movements that include groups in the Catalan, Basque or Galician regions are negative.

While terrorism is presented as negative, 'Patria' recently received the Spanish narrative national prize for, among other things, 'integrating all points of view' in the Basque conflict; yet, the different types of violence occurring around this conflict are not always well represented. For example, near the end of the novel, the Spanish security forces tortures one of the antagonists, who is a young ETA militant. The militant, who in the novel is considered a terrorist, is violently oppressed by the Spanish security forces, a common experience to those in the Basque radical community. While this scenario could give cause for the award of inclusiveness for the perspective, it is oversimplified and given less importance than other violent acts portrayed in the book. In order to truly explore the perspective of the Basque radical community, it would be necessary to consider the long historical context of the Basque conflict, beyond the decades of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the role of the Spanish state in its oppression as a cause to its radicalism and terrorist acts. ETA, which grew up in the heat of an industrialization process and during the emergence of a new Spanish working class in the 1960s, cannot be analysed without focusing on the last period of the Francoist dictatorship. Subsequently the Basque radical

community (ETA's social base) experienced in the Basque territories during the 1970s the most violent transition to democracy in comparison with the rest of Spanish provinces. Indeed, in order to understand the ETA of the twenty-first century we should look back to the difficulties of Spaniards in dealing with a fascist cultural legacy which survived the Spanish transition.

Should historical novels be holistic in their story telling? When the *Hispanista*¹ Paul Preston was asked about his opinion on historical novels, he answered that he did not like them because they were almost never historically accurate.² However, as the literary critic Walter Benjamin stated, in order 'to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'³ *Patria*, with the objective of telling of the suffering of ETA victims, is accurate in that perspective and well represented. Because of the emotional burden and the long historical trajectory that armed conflicts have, it is difficult to portray – in a novel or a historical essay – every perspective found in insurgent violence against a state. Nevertheless, following Benjamin, those of us who write about this violence as nonfiction or fiction must try to contextualize the insurgents more accurately (their family, their education, their material circumstances, and, therefore, their culture). This is what *Patria* is missing. The ETA militants are diluted, and their stories appear as mere footnotes of a history that needs to be told.

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² The whole interview: <<http://www.albavolunteer.org/2013/06/the-man-who-cant-say-no-paul-preston-is-working-harder-than-ever>>. Accessed 12/09/18.

³ Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Walter Benjamin. Illuminations. Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 255.