



Impressions of

Bilbao

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First impressions, especially of places, seem to be a game of chance. A few experiences can create a rough and colourful mental sketch of a new city. Surely, some of the strokes are spot on: the curves of a Guggenheim, the straight skewer of a pintxo snack, the waves rippling across a river. At the heart of city life, they will presumably be part of every sketch we make. Other touches might change colour or shape during new visits: the stories or silence of a taxi driver, the umbrellas of people on the street, the music coming from an open bar door. And some touches that weren't part of the sketch the first time could appear a second time and turn out to be just what was needed to tie the image together. A first impression is oftentimes a lasting impression. But impressions are never a full representation of the truth, and they are never complete.

There are more stories about Bilbao than we could gather in a lifetime. And yet, after a few intense first impressions, we are attempting to tie them together. In this piece, two social scientists share their current perspective on what it means to be a citizen of Bilbao. It might be biased. It might be untrue. And it is certainly not complete. But it is truthful to our observations and experiences. We invite you to build on it, expand upon it, and help us turn it into a bigger story about human connection, community, and wellbeing.

A simple story to some

“ We would take a trip to the city from our rural village. The highlight for us children was always the river: what color would it be this time? Pink, blue, green... ”

The city of Bilbao lies in a valley surrounded by green mountains. It only takes fifteen minutes, two of which are spent in the darkness of a mountain tunnel, to get from the brand new airport to the heart of Bilbao: the river. For centuries, the river and surrounding towns were places for trade, ship-building, and iron and steel industry. The river water was constantly polluted with heavy metals and chemicals, and as a consequence regularly turned into the bright colors imagined in fantastical worlds. Although the river was the driving force behind the local economy, citizens of Bilbao would understandably rather not live near its dirt.

The economic crisis of the 1970's hugely affected the metal industry worldwide and forced the entire region surrounding Bilbao to restructure its economic model. Today, everybody wants to live near the river. Children swim in it, hordes of runners cross its bridges. Fancy restaurants, wine bars and luxury stores fill the now expensive buildings along its banks. And of course, there is the Guggenheim.

The story of Bilbao's transformation is simple to some: a few visionary leaders managed to attract the Guggenheim. And with the Guggenheim, Bilbao became a city for locals and urbanites alike. A city for tourism, and a city of services and infrastructure. And maybe most importantly, Bilbao became the protagonist for change in the entire Basque Country.

In reality, the story of transformation seems more complex. People of the Basque Country (not just Bilbao) refer to themselves as resilient and confident – outgoing but tied to home. It was a Basque who first circumnavigated the world. Yet, around 70% of the Basque people eventually (return to) live in the village where they were born. The Basques have created an impressive social system based on the core value of equality. Their collaborative innovative actions, often fueled by pragmatism, have resulted in social structures seldom seen in other places in the world. The Basques have a 0% unemployment rate for people with disabilities, the largest cooperative corporation in the world, and the highest percentage of people with tertiary education in Europe.

The three historical Basque territories hold each other in a delicate balance of power. Even though the territory of Bizkaia holds 51% of the population, the seats in the Basque parliament are divided equally amongst the territories: 25, 25, 25. Through working together with a unique mindset

The Basque Country consists of the three historic territories Álava, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa. We are not referring to the larger cultural region, which also includes Navarre and the French Basque Region.

of collaboration, the value of equality and the liberty of an autonomous tax system (the only one in Europe) as driving forces, the territories have managed to create an incredibly high quality of life for the Basques. It is one of the reasons many Basques who go abroad tend to return home. The Basque education and health systems, that compete with those in Nordic countries, have also made the Basque Country an attractive place for foreigners.

To say that the economic collapse and ecological crisis surrounding the Bilbao river were fixed by inviting the Guggenheim is disregarding the unique structure of collaboration that the Basques have created for themselves. The entire Basque Country (from citizens to municipalities and parliament) helped with the transformation of the region. It did so through enormous investments in the river banks, in Mondragon (the cooperative), in the recovery of language, in the food movement, in the redevelopment of green space and in infrastructure – all in political consensus. Ultimately, the money invested in the Guggenheim was only 10% of the investments made to clear the river banks. Bilbao was able to transform, not in spite of the Basque Country, but because of it. Because the Basques have a strong belief that change is possible.

“ There is no way you can understand Bilbao just from geographically focusing on the city. You need to look at the Basque Country at large. ”



Euskaldunak: those who speak Basque

// *"Do you speak Spanish?" the Basque asked.
"A little," we replied, "we aren't Spanish".
"Neither am I", said the Basque.* **//**

To understand the Basque is to understand the Basque language Euskara. Euskara is unique, because it is a language isolate. There is no single other European language that is even remotely related to it. Early versions of the language are believed to have been spoken since before the fifth century. Basque people historically refer to themselves as Euskaldunak – literally meaning "those who have the Basque language" and therefore: those who speak Basque. To speak Basque is to be Basque.

A language isolate is a naturally evolved language with no demonstrable genealogical relationship to other languages. Language isolates are incredibly rare, there are only a few other isolates we know of. Two examples that are still spoken today are Ainu (spoken by the Ainu people of Northern Japan) and Vedda (spoken by the indigenous Vedda people of Sri Lanka).

Originally, Euskara was an oral language and had seldom been used in writing. It was spoken in different dialects throughout the Basque Country. Euskara was the unwritten but vividly spoken mother tongue for the current generation of grandparents, who expected to raise their children speaking Euskara. But under dictator Franco, who ruled from after the Spanish Civil War in 1939 until 1975, Euskara was prohibited. Although it is important to recognise that the lan-

guage was still being taught and spoken in small clandestine gatherings during the war, an entire generation of children grew up under Franco deprived of their native language. Immediately after Franco's rule, Euskara was reclaimed by the Basques and for the first time became a written standard language in administration. All three historical territories, however, have their own oral dialect.

Today, ikastolak schools (Basque primary and secondary) teach children primarily in the Basque language. A victory to all, but according to some, the focus on Euskara alone creates new divides: between parents who weren't allowed to speak Basque and children who do, and between children in ikastolak schools and children in schools that primarily teach in Spanish. The latter is not just a divide created by chance: migrants from within and outside of Spain tend to choose for Spanish language schools, while traditional Basque families honor their language by choosing ikastolak.

Although Euskara is the official Basque language, it is not free of social judgement. Inhabitants of rural villages, that generally have very strong social ties, are said to be more

"I grew up with Euskara, but after decades of dictatorship I lost the ability to speak the language. That has been something incredibly fundamental to my family. I have started to learn Euskara again to honor my family and myself."



"Euskara was for poor people. It is now mandatory in ikastolak, but before it felt shameful to speak it."

traditional in terms of Basque customs than those living in Bilbao. Speaking Euskara according to some historically not only represented being Basque, but also being working class and coming from a village. In earlier days, Basques from the countryside that moved to the city to look for work are said to have consciously chosen to not speak Euskara but Spanish in Bilbao, because speaking Euskara could harm their chances of getting a job or being seen as an equal. Nowadays, it seems that the status of Euskara is slowly changing: more and more people are (re)learning the language and integrating it in their daily lives.

Those who don't speak Basque

As an economic centre in Spain with a constant need for workers to support economic growth during the late 19th and 20th century industrialisation, Bilbao and the surrounding region have historically been havens for those seeking financial prosperity. Supposedly, 30% of the people in the Basque Country were born in (other) regions of Spain and around 40% of the people living in the Basque Country don't have a single Basque parent.

Speaking Euskara is one way to be Basque. But not all migrants, nor all those born in the Basque Country (due to the Euskara prohibition), are fluent in the Basque language. To

accommodate for this, a new term to describe the Basque identity was coined in the 19th century: *Euskotarrak*, meaning those who are culturally Basque.

With such high numbers of migration, many Basques have family stories tracing back to different parts of Spain and other parts of the world. Some say it has given them the ability to build bridges between different cultures and internally unite multiple family backgrounds. For others, tales of migration are harder to come to terms with. Questions of belonging, cultural displacement and intergenerational grief are still carried around in new generations of Basques.

“ Every time we went back to the Basque Country after spending time in the south of Spain, my mother would refer to Bilbao as ‘El Bolcho’ – the cave: that dark place on earth where it’s always wet and never sunny. ”



Only recently, the Basques seem to have begun to politicise the value of (interpersonal) equality. With a history of pragmatic innovation and a subsequent high quality of life, the call for conservation and sustaining what already is becomes more prominent, especially in Bilbao city politics.

Today, immigrants from the south choose Bilbao because of its central location, the quality of life and the promise of work. Refugees that come to Bilbao are welcomed by some and perceived as troublemakers by others. Because of their legal status, most refugees aren't allowed to work and as a consequence hang around the San Francisco neighbourhood, close to the river. San Francisco, originally the worker's district of Bilbao, is a relatively permissive place with its many small shops, night clubs, and strip joints. Refugees waiting for a legal status and those that were denied one find each other in the San Francisco squares.



According to local organisations, there is a common misconception among Bilbao citizens that refugees or migrants receive government funds. In reality, there is an emergency fund that refugees can turn to upon arrival in the city which gives them access to a bed for three nights. After that, they turn to the street. It seems that the inhabitants of the San Francisco assume there are tensions between different groups of refugees, but the alternative and possibly more realistic story is that tensions mainly exist between those in Bilbao that have something to lose, and those who have very little.

Silence: when words for pain cannot be found

Although the Basque Country did gain more self-rule than any of the other autonomous regions in Spain, the wish for Basque independence is a bruise that does not heal. Since the middle ages, the Basque Country has attempted to become permanently independent or, later, autonomous within Spain. The history of the Basque Country is, therefore, not only marked by the successful transition from an economic collapse to a flourishing region. A longing for independence and autonomy, the Spanish Civil War and the decades of various outings of nationalism, including ETA (the armed nationalist and separatist organisation named 'Basque Homeland and Freedom' that killed over 800 people between 1968 and 2010) are the central stories that many of the younger generations find in their family history. Oftentimes, they are the first ones to speak about these events. To consciously recognise the pain these occurrences have caused, and to ponder the impact on family life.

According to some, it is part of the Basque identity to be closed off. Others describe the Basques as generally close-minded and serious. But it seems that part of the Basque history is so powerful, so overwhelming, that it makes those who have lived through it shut down. A different perspective on this is that some traumatic experiences are chosen to not be shared in order to stay in power, show strength, and create a safe family space built around love. Some Basques are said to have used silence as a strategy for handling the pain. And their silence has transcended people, relations, generations, and historic events.

Stories of male suffering from soldiers both on the Basque and Spanish sides who served on the front lines during the Civil War paint a picture of men that had been relegated to a place where they were forced to provide only physical, while their other needs were continuously dismissed.

Sentiments of the characterisation of men as physical providers still linger but are dissipating. Stories of female suffering show traumatic experiences from fleeing the country and separating from their children in order to keep them safe. Tied to these stories is the often painted image of women as war survivors, who in order to survive had to be or act particularly independent and hardworking. It seems that there hasn't been much recognition for how many and how much people have sacrificed. On both gender sides, there might be a disregard for what the other has gone through. When the personal suffering is so damaging, sometimes it is hard to recognise the suffering of others.

The expression of silenced pain and suffering can be found in the stories of those who lived through traumatic experiences, and stories from later generations. Some people dealt with grief by making babies and neglecting them, abandoning them or aborting them. Others are so full of grief that they lose their mind. Developing psychiatric problems and drug abuse seemed to be the only way for them to be in the present while living with the past: they go mad not to leave, but in order to stay alive.

The impact of pain and suffering on children and later generations is called 'repeated suffering'. They are connected to those who survived, or to those who didn't. Many carry visible grief or secrets that the collective has chosen not to see for a long time because they seemed impossible to deal with. But the first Basque generations are starting to speak up. To address what has happened in the past and how it has influenced their grandparents and parents. To recognise the hurt of others in themselves. To learn to see beyond the hurt behaviour of older generations, so they don't let it influence their future. And to create an opportunity to live their own lives. Because the Basques believe that change is possible.

// *My town Guernica was bombed during the Monday morning market. Everyone and everything got wiped away. My family had to be evacuated from the family house that we had for generations. A group of grandchildren has recently started a movement to educate people on what happened during the bombing. This is one of the first generations to talk about the bombing. In those days, nobody spoke of it.* **//**

Stories yet untouched

The Basques have a history and present infinitely richer than we could share in this piece. A few storylines that we hope to explore in the future, and invite you to add to and explore with us, are for example:

Religion – The Jesuit order was started by a Basque, and had a large impact on the Basque education system. Basque workers unions and strikes are rooted in Christian values. What roles has religion played in Basque history? And what role does it play in communities today?

Food – Basque food culture is much more than pintxo snacks and Michelin-star restaurants. What does food mean for Basque communities and family life?

The youngest generation – Bilbao and the Basque Country have a highly developed education system. As a region, the Basque Country is doing well. What is it like to grow up in the Basque Country today? What are the stories, hopes and dreams of the new generation?

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