86 | the gender politics of political violence: women armed activists in ETA

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abstract

This article aims to contribute to the developing area of feminist scholarship on women and political violence, through a study of women in one of Europe's oldest illegal armed movements, the radical Basque nationalist organization ETA. By tracing the changing patterns of women's participation in ETA over the past four decades, the article highlights the historical factors that help explain the choice of a small number of Basque women to participate directly in political violence, and shows how these factors have differed from those for men. While the gender politics of radical nationalism are intricately linked to cross-cultural associations of militarism with certain forms of masculinity, the article also stresses the importance of understanding women's activism in ETA in the context of the organization's characteristic as an ethnic nationalist movement, as well as the wider historical circumstances of the movement's development, including the modernization of Spanish and Basque society over the past four decades. Although comparisons with women in other armed movements are possible, such historical specificities undermine any attempt to construct a universal theory of women and 'terrorism', such as Robin Morgan's 'couple terrorism' thesis. Finally, the article examines the changing representations of female ETA activists in the Spanish and Basque media. Although women ETA activists are now regarded as 'normal', popular representations continue to link women's armed activism with deviant sexuality and the transgression of their natural destiny as mothers. The different treatment of women is evident as well in claims of sexual torture made by some detainees. The article concludes that although the participation of women in political violence poses disquieting questions for the largely anti-militarist women's movement, case studies of women in armed organizations, as well as their place in the wider practices of conflict, are an important contribution both to feminist debates about violence and to wider studies of political violence.

keywords

women; political violence; terrorism; ETA; Basque country; nationalism

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introduction

Violence has long been a central concern for feminist theory and activism.[1] By and large, however, feminism has defined violence, whether interpersonal or as part of political conflict, as something done to women by men. This focus is understandable in the context of the widespread and cross-cultural reality of violence against women, as well as the evidence that historically the agents of both political and inter-personal violence have been predominantly men. But in recent years, some feminist scholars have begun to move away from the emphasis on women as victims, towards explorations of the complexities of the gender politics of conflict, including the roles of women as perpetrators (Feinman, 2000; Moser and Clark, 2001; Hasso, 2005; Krylova, 2005).

This article aims to contribute to this developing area of feminist scholarship on women and political violence – and more concretely what is commonly termed 'terrorism'[2] – through a study of women in one of Europe's oldest illegal armed movements, the radical Basque nationalist organization ETA.[3] By tracing the changing patterns of women's participation in ETA over the past four decades, the article highlights the historical factors that help explain the choice of a small number of women to participate directly in political violence, and shows how the factors affecting these choices have differed from those for men.[4] Notwithstanding the small numbers of women active in ETA and other armed organizations, case studies of such women help to expand our understanding of the gender politics of political violence by replacing binary models of victims versus perpetrators with historically grounded analyses of how women and men perpetuate, resist and negotiate violent conflict in specific contexts.

Moreover, feminist analyses of women's roles as armed activists provide a necessary challenge to dominant media representations, as well as much of the popular and academic literature on women and 'terrorism'. To date, the analysis of women armed activists has been largely the domain of journalists and criminologists, many with little or no engagement with feminism or gender theory.[5] As one group of critics of this literature noted in the mid-1980s: 'The majority of the explanations of female involvement in political violence tend to be highly individualistic, emphasizing personality factors, social problems, boredom and so on' (Haen Marshall *et al.*, 1986: 22).[6] Such studies offer generalizations based on gender and sexual stereotypes, portraying women's motivations for supporting or participating in political violence in terms of the personal and the private. Thus representations of female armed activists are largely consistent with the classical Western construction of militarism as a sphere of masculine activity separate from the feminine private sphere, a model roundly critiqued by feminist scholars (Lloyd, 1987; Enloe, 1988).

With regard to women in ETA, both nationalist and non-nationalist discourses have defined women's political roles as an extension of their sexuality or

1 Research for this article was funded in part by the British Academy.

2 Studies in English on women in European and American armed organizations movements include Cataldo Neuberger and Valentini (1996), Jamieson (2000), Passerini (1992) and Zwerman (1992 and 1994). I place 'terrorism' in inverted commas to signal its contested meanings. For a critique of the term, see Douglass and Zulaika (1996).

3 This article was written before the public announcement in March 2006 – by a masked, female activist – of a permanent ETA ceasefire. Although ETA still formally exists and no doubt will for some time to come, this declaration opens the possibility of real historical change and a possible peace process to end the 40-year armed conflict in the Basque country.

4 The article draws primarily on three sets of sources: (1) the Basque and Spanish press from the 1960s to 2003; (2) archival sources,

maternity. In contrast, I consider personal relations to incorporate a much broader spectrum, including other family members and friends. Moreover, I stress that personal relationships have been a fundamental factor in both women's *and* men's entry into ETA, and that the particular interaction between the personal and the political in the development of radical Basque nationalism is a vital factor in understanding the development of the organization. In fact, ETA's gender politics are inextricable from its nationalist ideology and its roots in the tight-knit nationalist community in the Basque country. Changes in wider social relations – including gender – over the past several decades have had a significant impact on patterns of women's participation in ETA, with more women entering the organization, especially as armed activists and leaders. But although women have long ceased to be only victims of the Basque conflict, the particular gender politics of political violence continue to shape both representational and material treatment of female armed activists.

women in ETA: a brief history

ETA was founded in 1959, 20 years after the end of the Spanish civil war (1936–1939).[7] Coming of age under the Franco dictatorship, the organization's founders – male university students from predominantly middle-class, Catholic, Basque nationalist families – were preoccupied with the perceived threat to Basque identity and traditional rural way of life, spurred both by the dictatorship's prohibition against Basque language and culture, and a renewed industrialization which attracted large numbers of Spanish-speaking migrant workers to the Basque country. ETA therefore began as a political and cultural movement engaged in actions such as painting graffiti on public buildings, distributing illegal propaganda, and flying the prohibited Basque flag, all highly punishable activities under Franco, which led to a series of arrests of ETA members throughout the 1960s. By the middle of that decade, inspired by the national liberation movements of Algeria, Vietnam and Cuba, the organization had committed itself to a strategy of armed struggle as the route to Basque independence. Following its first casualty and subsequent assassination in 1968, which provoked intense police persecution, ETA instigated a campaign of violence that would last until the present day, claiming over 800 lives and leading to the arrest, imprisonment and death of dozens of its own activists.[8]

Early ETA writings make little mention of actual women, in contrast to the prominent symbolic position of women as mothers and markers of national and cultural difference, reflecting the traditionalist, Catholic legacy ETA inherited from its rival, the mainstream Basque Nationalist Party (PNV).[9] In this regard, ETA's gender politics were similar to those of many other 20th-century nationalist movements (Yuval-Davis, 1997). Conservative nationalism, combined with the reactionary social and political environment of Franco Spain, including a marked

including statistics on ETA prisoners and radical nationalist documents; and (3) popular and academic literature on ETA and radical nationalism. The archival and press sources were accessed at the Biblioteca y Hemeroteca del Convento de los Benedictinos de Lazkao (Guipúzcoa) and the Biblioteca y Hemeroteca de la Diputación de Vizcaya (Bilbao). I have used the primary and secondary documents both for an historical analysis of patterns of women's ETA activism and a cultural analysis of changing representations of female ETA members, drawing on comparative feminist studies of the Spanish press and/or literature on women and 'terrorism' (see especially Radcliff, 2001 and Zwerman, 1992). Because of the scarcity of recorded information on women's roles in ETA, in some parts of the article I have supplemented written sources with material from interviews I conducted in 1996–1997 with women who had been ETA activists from the 1960s to 1980s. For more detailed qualitative analysis of these interviews, see Hamilton, 2000a, 2000b and 2003 and forthcoming.

5 See for example Cooper (1979) and Benson *et al*. (1982).

gender hierarchy, helped ensure that the new radical nationalism would be a predominantly male movement. At the same time, however, the significant social changes of the 1960s, spurred by Spain's 'economic miracle', and in particular the entry of increasing numbers of women into the labour market, opened up new spaces for young women's cultural, social and political activity. Between the mid-1960s and 1970s – the year of the landmark Burgos trial of 16 accused ETA members (among them three women) accused of the 1968 assassination – small but steady numbers of women entered the ranks of the organization, a handful becoming armed activists and/or members of the executive committee.

Following Burgos, ETA's high profile helped the organization attract more young activists, primarily from the radical nationalist heartland, that is, middle and lower-middle class youth in Basque-speaking communities of the semi-rural, newly industrialized interior and coastal villages. Throughout the 1970s there was a gradual but notable rise in the percentage of female recruits who participated in all capacities, from collaboration to direct military activity. But the absolute number of women imprisoned for ETA membership or collaboration was on average less than 10% throughout the decade.[10] Within this small group an even smaller number belonged to the organization's leadership and/or participated directly in military activity (e.g. armed robberies, kidnappings, bombings and shootings).

The levels of women's and men's participation in ETA's first two decades was crucially shaped by the different options available to them. While the social origins of female ETA members did not vary on the whole from those of men, their patterns of recruitment were substantially different. The institutions in which ETA was forged in the 1960s, and from which it drew the bulk of its early recruits, were entirely or predominantly male. While many young middle-class Basque men became politicized through the nationalist youth league EGI, seminaries and local Church groups led by nationalist priests, student organizations (such as Ekin, ETA's predecessor) and their neighbourhood *cuadrillas* (gang of friends),[11] young women's access to activities outside the family home was much more limited. Both state and nuns' schools attended by many middle-class Basque girls were largely loyal to the Franco regime and taught a strict code of sexual and social morals that discouraged girls from mixed socializing, offering them few of the subversive political ideas available to young men in seminaries run by nationalist priests (Hamilton, 2007). Even with the partial lifting of legal restrictions against women's paid labour in the early 1960s, young women who worked outside their homes typically did so in traditionally 'feminine' professions – as secretaries, nurses or primary school teachers (Gobierno Vasco, 1982) – and not in the factories where ETA held clandestine political meetings and recruited young workers. Likewise, during this late Franco period women's access to higher education was very limited,[12] thus limiting their presence in another of ETA's recruiting grounds, the university.[13]

6 For a critique of this literature, see Haen Marshall *et al*. (1986), Talbot (2000/01) and Zwerman (1992).

7 For histories in English, see Clark (1984) and Sullivan (1988).

8 Since the 1960s ETA has undergone many divisions and ruptures. The only wing active today is widely known as ETA, though its technical name is ETA-militar. For simplicity's sake, and because evidence indicates that the roles of women have not varied substantially among different ETA factions, I use 'ETA' here in reference to all factions.

9 For example, *Zutik* 15 (1961) and 'Edición Especial' (1965). The first written record of women participating directly in the organization is dated 1963, when two women are listed as participants in ETA's Second Assembly. Editorial Txalaparta (1993: 297).

10 Based on comparative prison statistics from 1975 to 1983, gathered from press sources and documents of the radical nationalist prisoner solidarity organization *Gestoras pro Amnístia*.

11 See for example Clark (1984).

12 During the 1970–1971 course year 3% of the

Women who entered ETA in the 1960s came into contact with the organization either via friends and family members, or through mixed Church groups and Basque cultural activities (Hamilton, 2007). The repression meted out against the activities of such groups – mountain excursions, local Basque cultural events, teaching Basque language lessons in private homes, and travelling to illegal political gatherings – had the inevitable effect of radicalizing a generation of young Basque people, including women. While a small number became members of ETA, among these the majority remained in the cultural front, or were active as collaborators rather than members of the military or political fronts. But even given the overall gender imbalance among activists, ETA's early focus on cultural politics allowed for a certain degree of mixed activism. In contrast, with the increased power of the military front within the organization in the wake of the 1970 Burgos trial, the gender division of roles became more pronounced (Hamilton, 2000b), corroborating Sarah Benton's thesis that the militarization of a movement tends to accentuate gender divides (Benton, 1995).

Spanish population was registered at university, of which 28% were women (Matsell, 1981: 141).

13 For early ETA recruitment patterns, see Clark (1984), Letamendia (1994) and Sullivan (1988).

Thus women's roles in ETA and radical nationalist politics during the 1970s were conditioned by the tension between an armed conflict in which militarism was defined in narrowly masculinist terms,[14] on the one hand, and the gradual modernization of gender roles in wider Spanish and Basque society, on the other. Through the late 1970s and 1980s – coinciding with the Spanish transition to liberal democracy following Franco's death in 1975 – women's presence in all areas of Spanish public life, including politics, gradually increased (Brooksbank Jones, 1997). During the transition ETA stepped up its military campaigns, killing almost 90 people in 1980 alone (Clark, 1984: 133). This apparent paradox can be explained by the dissatisfaction of many Basques, and in particular of radical nationalists, with the transition process, in particular the negotiations for Basque autonomy rather than independence, as well as the high levels of police repression throughout the Basque country during the 1970s, directed especially, though not exclusively, at ETA and its supporters (Letamendia, 1994).

14 The security forces were likewise overwhelmingly male. Even in 1999 women constituted only 10% of the Basque autonomous police force (Emakunde, 1999: 116).

Inside ETA itself more notable than the actual change in absolute numbers of female activists was the increase in the proportion of women accused of direct involvement in armed actions and leadership roles. By the late 1970s at least one woman – Dolores González Catarain, 'Yoyes' – had become a member of ETA's executive committee. Over the next 20 years, police sources would identify several other women as ETA leaders, and during the 1980s and 1990s increasing numbers of women were charged with armed actions.[15] The public profile of female ETA members increased as women activists were directly implicated in some of the organization's worst atrocities (including the Hipercor massacre in 1987 which killed 21 people at a Barcelona shopping centre), and in particular after women began to 'fall' in action. In 1986, almost 20 years after the death of ETA's first 'martyr' in 1968, the first woman was killed in the course of an armed action.[16]

15 Percentages of female prisoners accused of ETA or ETA-related crimes rose from about 8% in 1983 to 12% in 2002. Throughout the 1990s the percentage fluctuated between 10 and 13%.

As women's roles in ETA changed through the 1970s and 1980s, so too did dominant representations of female activists. But in spite of these changes women's participation in ETA continued to be interpreted as an extension of their private lives and personal relationships. Moreover, this interpretation crossed the political spectrum, both between nationalists and non-nationalists and from left to right. In the case of the press, for example, similar representations were apparent across a wide range of newspapers. Moreover, this trend continued beyond the censorship years of the Franco regime, through the development of a free press during and after the transition period. The homogeneity of representations of female ETA activists can be compared with Pamela Radcliff's finding that images of feminist activists did not vary substantially across the right–left spectrum of the Spanish press during the transition period (Radcliff, 2001), underlining the extent to which gender stereotypes cross ideological boundaries.

16 In subsequent years five other women activists have been killed either by accidental explosions or in confrontations with the police. Nonetheless, women still constitute well under 10% of ETA activists killed 'in action' since 1968 (*El Correo* 24 July 1987; *ABC* 25 July 2001; *Egin* 26 July 2001).

constructing 'couple terrorism'

In the conservative social context of late Franco Spain (i.e. the mid-1960s to mid-1970s) most female ETA members were portrayed as girlfriends of male activists, lured into criminal activity against their will or even their knowledge, as the following report of the arrest of a woman in the course of an attempted armed robbery in 1970 attests:

> ...the young woman, girlfriend of an individual who is in Soria prison as a member of the Basque separatist organization ETA (...) was, it is believed, coerced into taking part in the attack because the organizers thought that the presence of a woman would facilitate the action and would not raise suspicions.[17]

17 *El Correo* 1 August 1970.

Five years later, reports of the detention of a 19-member ETA commando named three men as full-time armed activists while the remaining (nine men and seven women) were charged with lesser actions and collaboration.[18] One story described some of the women as 'housewives' accused of lodging ETA members in their homes, and others as 'girlfriends'.[19]

18 *La Gaceta del Norte* 29 October 1975.

19 *La Gaceta del Norte* 29 October 1975.

On the surface, these portrayals appear to confirm a popular assumption about women's participation in armed organizations, that is, that women are drawn into such movements through their romantic attachment to a male activist. The most comprehensive feminist articulation of this view is found in the work of American radical feminist Robin Morgan. In the introduction to the new edition of her book *The Demon Lover: The Roots of Terrorism,* originally published in 1988 and reissued after 11th September 2001 Morgan (2001, [1998]: xviii) argues that '(F)emale terrorists are rare, almost always 'tokens' (...), and invariably involved because of their love of a particular man, a personal demon lover who draws them in'. In a chapter tellingly titled 'Token Terrorist: The Demon Lover's Woman' Morgan cites

numerous examples of women in armed movements – including Patricia Hearst, the American Weather Underground, the German Red Army Faction, and, bizarrely, the Manson family – to illustrate her thesis that women can only be involved in an armed organization through what she calls 'couple terrorism'. As suggested by the chapter's title, Morgan claims that all women involved in these vastly different movements were motivated by the same single factor: undue emotional and sexual attachment to a male 'terrorist'.

As a feminist study of political violence there is some value in Morgan's book. Unlike the vast majority of studies on war and 'terrorism', it puts sexual politics and gender power relations at the centre of political violence (the first edition was more appropriately subtitled *On the Sexuality of Terrorism*). Moreover, much of Morgan's chapter on the 'token terrorist' draws on evidence of real gender divisions of labour and power relations inside armed organizations. But her radical feminist framework is too simplistic and sweeping in scope, obscuring the historical specificities and complexities of women's motivations for participating in, and their experiences of, armed activism. In spite of its limitations Morgan's thesis has influenced academic analyses of women in ETA. Drawing on interviews with ETA activists from the 1970s to the 1990s, for example, Fernando Reinares concludes that female ETA members tend to join the organization via contacts with a man who is already a member, and with whom the woman has a close emotional relationship (Reinares, 2001). Unlike Morgan, Reinares acknowledges that female armed activists have an ideological commitment to their cause prior to recruitment, but he sees this as secondary to their primary, more personal and emotional, motivation. While Reinares believes that emotional factors motivate male activists as well, his analysis implies a gendered division of activist affect: whereas men are motivated by their hatred of Spain and all things Spanish, women are driven by their love of a Basque man. Thus his thesis echoes Morgan's assertion that the male 'terrorist' is a 'demon lover' who seduces women towards the 'false liberation of death' (Morgan, 2001: 214).

The studies above do not so much invent as simplify and essentialize the 'terrorist couple'. A more detailed analysis of gender roles inside ETA demonstrates that there is evidence of heterosexual coupling inside the organization, but that this phenomenon is more complicated and contradictory than the 'couple terrorism' model suggests. As formulated by Morgan and applied by Reinares 'couple terrorism' provides a unitary and universal answer to a series of related but ultimately separate questions, which will form the basis of the analysis below: What are the popular representations of women armed activists? How do normative gender relations reproduce themselves in practice inside armed organizations, including when these are consciously exploited for 'strategic' purposes? What are women's relationships with male comrades inside the organization? And finally, how and why do women come to enter an armed organization in the first place?

from innocent victims to 'dangerous elements'

What was generally represented in the Basque and Spanish press in the early 1970s as fact – that is, that women were active in ETA as part of a heterosexual couple – masked a much more complex set of personal and political practices among both female and male ETA members. For one thing, the conservative gender politics of the security forces and legal system during the late Franco and transition periods offered considerable strategic advantages to individual female activists and ETA as a whole. In an example of the inextricable link between representation and reality, accused female activists were sometimes absolved or given lighter sentences by judges who accepted the defence that women were merely following orders and/or were ignorant of the nature of their partners' activities.[20] During the 1970s there were several reported cases of lawyers attempting – sometimes successfully – to reduce or eliminate charges against women by arguing that they were ignorant girlfriends or wives of male militants,[21] or simply 'by reason of their sex'.[22] Moreover, as in the examples of women in other armed movements, such as the *moudjahadites* of the Algerian war recorded by Franz Fanon (1989), activists – both women and men – used popular stereotypes to avoid raising suspicion. Some female activists stressed that women were less likely than men to be detected by police, because a woman – either alone or with a man – could provide cover for preparations, armed actions, escapes, etc.[23] In this sense, the 'terrorist couple' in public is best read as an act, a deliberate strategy on the activists' part, as opposed to the reflection of actual male–female roles inside the organization.

This is not to say that ETA members and supporters did not share many of these conventional ideas about female behaviour and heteronormativity. ETA's writings and radical nationalist discourse more generally reveal a tension between a belief in complementary gender roles, on the one hand, and a commitment to gender equality, influenced by feminist discourse,[24] on the other. These competing models in turn sit alongside an awareness of the constructed, and therefore manoeuvrable, nature of both traditional gender roles and of heterosexuality. These tensions are epitomized in a description published in the radical nationalist newspaper *Egin* of the escape of two members of ETA's Madrid commando during a massive police search for a kidnap victim in early 1983:

> … a police force was set up around Pilar Nieva's house. At ten p.m. numerous 'Geos'[25] were present at the scene. Shortly thereafter, María Belén González and José Luis Urrusola, both with false identification, arrived at the door of number 5 Federico Rubio Street. A lieutenant of the Geo comes out to meet them and asks the couple where they're going. 'We live here, ' they answer, by this point unable to turn back. Their ID is checked and the Geo official comments to them, 'Get inside the house because we're going to have a tangle with some *etarras*.' María Belén, without losing her calm, embraces her companion while she says

20 *El Correo* 6 March 1973.

21 Interview with Burgos defendant Itziar Aizpurua, Editorial Txalaparta (1993), Vol. 3: 172, and *Egin* 6 August 1980, 22 November 1980 and 7 February 1981.

22 *Egin*, 26 September 1981.

23 *Hitz* 4 (August 1975, 52). See also the example of Mikel Lejarza (*Lobo*) who infiltrated ETA in the 1970s, and claimed that being paired with a female activist aided their mission because they could pass as a couple (Cerdán y Rubio, 2003: 41–42). I am indebted to one of the anonymous readers of this article for recommending this book.

24 An active feminist movement was not formed inside the radical nationalist community until the late 1970s; but even in the 1960s ETA was influenced by debates about women's roles in socialist and anti-colonial revolutions, and in theory the

> to him: 'Let's get out of here, let's go to Mom's house. I'm really scared of weapons.' And they left the place (...) According to police sources, the couple's capture would have led to the immediate localization of the place where Diego Prado is still being held hostage.[26]

This report about a prominent female ETA activist underlines the extent to which gendered stereotypes surpassed ideological boundaries. But it also demonstrates the shift by the 1980s away from the idea of women as unwitting participants to that of women as cold-hearted killers, from innocent victims of men, to activists who were potentially more dangerous than their male comrades. In contrast to reports of the early 1970s where some women were portrayed as the unknowing girlfriends of male activists, here this innocence is revealed as a cover. There is an implied contrast between González's naïve facade and the hardened – and implicitly masculine – activist underneath (other versions of the same story noted that González was carrying a gun and explosives in her bag at the time of the exchange with the officer).[27]

The image of the female ETA member as deceitful and dangerous retained intact the idea of the 'terrorist couple', reversing the woman's position within the classic gender binary from 'good girl' to 'bad girl'. This portrayal appears as early as 1969, with the detention of the one of the future Burgos defendants:

> ... María Aranzazu Arruti Odriozola, recently arrested and officially considered a dangerous activist of the terrorist separatist organization E.T.A., with a special mission to establish contacts for this organization's subsequent sections in Navarra. The detained had managed, according to official statements at the time of her arrest, to attract to these ends one Gregorio Vicente López Irasegui, of Bilbao, to whom she was married secretly in Guipúzcoa last November 5. [28]

This description presaged the more sensationalist images common in the Basque and Spanish press by late 1970s, as increasing numbers of women were arrested accused of political violence. Accounts of the arrest of accused female ETA members betrayed a particular fascination with the fact that these women had been accused of *armed* actions. As with the example of González cited above, language and photographs centred on women's physical appearance (hair, bodies, clothing, etc.), highlighting the supposed contrast between their external femininity and the masculinity associated with arms and violence.[29] By the late 1970s the Spanish press quoted police sources speaking of female ETA militants as 'dangerous elements'.[30]

Journalists' interviews with female ETA members suggest that many were aware of the irony that being treated as the equals of their male comrades by the authorities did not necessarily reflect equal treatment inside ETA. Several reported experiencing discrimination on the part of their male comrades, especially during the organization's first two decades. In particular, women told of feeling pressure to 'prove' themselves as armed activists,[31] stories that underline the overlap between popular associations of militarism with masculinity and the gender politics inside ETA. Furthermore, in their interviews with

organization was committed to the equal participation of women in all activities, including armed actions. See *Zutik* 29 (May 1965).

25 Grupo Especial de Operaciones (Special Operations Group of the Spanish police).

26 *Egin* 26 April 1983.

27 *Deia* 25 April 1983. The contrast between González and the supposedly stupid police officer relies on an ethnocentric depiction of southern Spanish masculinity as incarnated in the security forces. To date there has been little work on constructions of masculinity in ETA and the Basque conflict; one interesting area of research would be the relationship between gender and constructions of Basque and Spanish ethnicity.

28 *ABC*7 January 1969. Arruti was married to the male ETA member mentioned in the article, but other evidence indicates they entered the organization separately and met inside. Personal communication, 1996.

29 *Cambio 16* 576 (13 December 1982), 29-3; *Deia* 24 April 1983; *Deia* 25 April 1983.

30 *Interviu* 156 (10–16 May 1979), 29.

anthropologist Miren Alcedo (1996: 360) some male activists claimed that women acted more 'coldly' in armed actions, and were more 'bloodthirsty' and 'dangerous' than their male comrades.

As the numbers of women in ETA have increased over the past 20 years, and more women have made the news as suspected members of the organization, there has been a kind of normalization in representations of these women. In recent years, most reports of women accused of ETA-related offences have not dwelled obsessively on their femininity or speculated widely about their sexuality. Instead, the myth of the dangerous female terrorist has been projected onto a small number of female activists who, through their purported actions and appearance, seem to embody popular fantasies about the relationship between female sexuality and violence. This pattern is epitomized in images of accused member of the Madrid commando Idoia López Riaño, whose reported exploits during the 1980s, and subsequent arrest and extradition from France to Spain in 1994 and 2001, respectively, have prompted ongoing speculation and commentary in the Spanish press, incorporating almost every imaginable misogynist stereotype. Few reports about López Riaño (nicknamed, among other things, 'the Tigress' – a name which, tellingly, was also reportedly used inside ETA)[32] have spared descriptions of her appearance ('tall', 'green eyes', 'magnificent beauty', 'spectacular physique', 'slave to her body and her hair')[33] and her lifestyle (in particular her supposed enthusiasm for nightlife)[34] as well as references to her apparently 'cold' and calculated approach to armed actions.[35] Constructions of López Riaño as a 'dangerous *etarra*'[36] play with the tension between women's 'nature', a hyper-sexualized femininity, female rebellion and violence. In the words of one male journalist – whose confessed feelings of simultaneous fascination and repulsion for female 'terrorists' led him to write an entire book on women in ETA based largely on speculation and fantasy – 'Seduction and the pistol were her weapons' (Antolín, 2002: 21).[37]

If images of López Riaño suggest male fantasies of exaggerated femininity and hyper-heterosexuality, a counter-example highlights the anxieties provoked by the phantom of the female activist who does not masquerade her supposed masculinity. Another sensationalist book about the Basque conflict provides the following – unsubstantiated – description of Iñaxi Zeberio, who was killed by Basque police (*ertzainas*) during a raid of the flat where she was hiding in 1998:

> The *etarra*[38] looks like a brute, (with) wide shoulders, and the *ertzainas* who take part in the entry of the house where the *etarra* is hiding are sure, after suitably frisking her, that they're standing beside a man (...) (they) verify that an abundant mop of black hair is coming out of the ETA member's chest.
>
> (Calleja, 2001: 269)[39]

Just as women's armed activism is directly linked to sexual deviance – whether promiscuity or implied lesbianism – it is likewise regarded as a perversion of their

31 Cambio *16* 576 (13 December 1982), 31. Various interviews, 1996–1997.

32 Personal communication, 1997.

33 *El Mundo* 27 August 1994; *El País* 23 May 1998; Antolin (2002: 20); Gurruchaga (2001: 213).

34 *ABC* 26 August 1994.

35 *El Mundo* 27 August 1994.

36 *ABC* 26 August 1994.

37 There is some comparative historical evidence that women in guerrilla or resistance movements have played the role of 'seductress' in order to lure male soldiers or police to their deaths (Schwartz, 1989: 130). But as with the case of 'couple terrorism' such examples should be read as acts, as conscious political performances designed to exploit the enemy's assumptions about

destiny as mothers. Several of the more lurid descriptions of female ETA members make direct reference to their reproductive functions. In 1996, for example, *El Mundo* columnist Martín Prieto wrote of Belén González that '... (she) has menstruated more blood from her gun than from her vagina!'; five years later he repeated the same cliché almost word for word in reference to Lopez Riaño: '*La Tigresa* is more worried about her menstruation than about the blood she lets spill from others'.[40] By linking the spilling of their menstrual blood with their fatal actions these references imply that female activists transgress their natural duty to give life rather than take it.

Historically, radical nationalist rhetoric has defined women's primary role as the reproduction and support of national cultural and male nationalist activists, most concretely as mothers. As with Irish Republicanism, similarly grounded in a strong tradition of Catholicism and Marian worship, in the radical Basque nationalist worldview the roles of mother and warrior have not historically been considered compatible (Dowler, 1997). The power of this opposition was nowhere more clear than in the case of Dolores González Katarain, 'Yoyes', one of ETA's first female executive members, who was killed by her former comrades in 1986, several years after she had left the organization. In an important early feminist analysis of Yoyes's death, the late Begoña Aretxaga argued convincingly that Yoyes's decision to leave activism and to live a civilian life, including having a child, constituted for ETA leaders a threatening collapse of gender identities (Aretxaga, 1988).[41] I would argue further that Yoyes's status as mother has aided the subsequent construction of her as primarily a *victim* of ETA, in spite of her significant role as an ETA activist and leader.

While representations of female ETA members have shifted over the past four decades, from images of innocent victims to 'dangerous elements', these depictions have remained within the same ideological framework, positing women's political activism as an extension of their personal relationships, and specifically their sexuality. But as the next section will argue explanations that associate women's armed activism with the personal and the private, both deny these women full political agency and fail to understand the wider, and changing, historical and social context in which all ETA members joined the organization.

gender and sexuality, as opposed to evidence of the female activist's gender and sexual identity.

38 Member of ETA.

39 I thank one of the anonymous readers of this article for this reference. Like many popular books about ETA, this one is both sensationalist and unreliable. Nonetheless, it was awarded the Espasa essay prize in 2001 by a jury that included several prominent Spanish intellectuals. Thus although I do not consider it a valid source of empirical evidence on ETA or the Basque conflict, it is valuable as an example of the kind of representations of female ETA activists that circulate, largely uncritically, among both general and more elite Spanish readerships.

40 *El Mundo* 3 January 1996 and 12 May 2001.

41 While gender is an important factor in understanding Yoyes's death and the publicity around it, the murder had wider political causes and meanings. For a detailed analysis, see Aretxaga (1988).

beyond 'couple terrorism': friends and family networks

While ETA members remain overwhelmingly male, the qualitative nature of women's participation has continued to change over the past two decades, with increasing police and media speculation that women are active as high-ranking members of the organizations' leadership.[42] Again, these developments are consistent with wider changes in Spanish society and politics generally, and in

42 *The Guardian* 27 August 2002.

Basque society in particular. Over the past decade, a woman has led one of the smaller, non-violent Basque nationalist parties, and women increasingly act as spokespeople of the radical nationalist organizations. In the Basque regional elections in April 2005 women were elected to a record majority of parliamentary seats.[43] Correspondingly, with the steady increase over the last 20 years of women's participation in all levels of education, work, and politics, as well as the creation of a co-ed youth culture within the radical nationalist community,[44] young women have been more likely to enter ETA through similar routes to their male counterparts, even if proportionally their numbers have not risen substantially.

An analysis of the profiles of 14 women accused of armed activity and/or leadership positions in ETA from the early 1980s until 2003, as provided in press accounts of their arrests or deaths,[45] demonstrates that, like early women recruits, later female activists have come from similar social backgrounds to their male comrades.[46] Most entered the organization in their late teens or early 20s. While the majority came from areas with historically high levels of support for nationalism, most notably the small towns of the provinces of Guipúzcoa and Vizcaya, at least a third were from larger urban areas, reflecting a shift in ETA recruitment patterns generally from the 1980s onwards (Reinares, 2004: 481). The majority were from predominantly 'ethnically' Basque families (as suggested by their surnames), several of them Basque-speaking; but a small number were from families who had migrated to the Basque country from other parts of Spain, again in keeping with changes in ETA recruitment over the past 20 years. Regardless of their childhood origins, almost all had been involved in radical nationalist or other forms of activism before getting involved in ETA, strongly indicating that, like their male counterparts, they had a conscious commitment to nationalism and the use of political violence before entering ETA. Finally, women's entry into the organization followed a similar pattern to that of male comrades: they were typically 'legal' activists (i.e. members of ETA who live normal lives) before police identification forced them to go underground and become full-time 'illegal' activists.

The most immediate factor differentiating these female ETA activists from their male comrades (besides their relatively small numbers) was that the significant majority of them (nine of fourteen) reportedly had male partners inside the organization. Although this statistic seems to confirm the 'couple terrorism' thesis outlined above, further analysis shows that this thesis does not account for the specific social and cultural circumstances in which these women joined ETA. First, press reports do not specify when these female activists formed their relationships with male comrades. As the case of Arruti above indicates, we should not assume a woman with a male partner inside ETA was recruited by him. Given the severe restrictions for social and sexual relationships in hiding, and the extreme gender imbalance among armed activists, it is hardly surprising that

43 *El País* 22 May 2005.

44 The youth movement *Jarrai* was particularly active in the 1990s, associated overwhelming in the public mind with the *kale borroka* or street violence of radical nationalist youth. My research did not cover the participation of young women in *Jarrai*, nor am I aware of any study of the gender politics of the *kale borroka*. My overall impression from coverage of the Basque conflict over the past 15 years is that while there have been female spokeswomen for *Jarrai*, and many young women arrested as accused collaborators with the movement, the street violence itself was carried out predominantly by young men. Further research would be required to substantiate this.

45 The information in this section was gathered from a survey of major Spanish and Basque newspapers (*El Mundo, El País, El Correo, Deia*, *Egin* and *Gara*) between 1982 and 2003.

46 For the sociological profile of ETA members from 1977 to 1998, see Reinares (2004). While this article by Reinares makes the same erroneous claims about wo-

many more women reportedly have had sexual relationships with male comrades than vice versa.[47] It is also important to note that while reports of female activists almost invariably include their romantic liaisons, press accounts of the arrest or death of a male activist are less likely to report details of his personal relationships.

But even if heterosexual couples have been a common phenomenon inside ETA, they are only one of a wide range of personal relationships among ETA members. In a discernable pattern dating back to ETA's early days, and noted by several other scholars (Domínguez, 1998; Letamendia, 1994; Reinares, 2001), male and female activists are commonly recruited to the organization through friends or family members. Thus, for example, of the 14 female activists sampled above only one had no reported partner or relative previously or currently inside ETA, and several had more than one, including cousins, siblings, uncles, and even parents, as well as partners. If we consider that many women probably also had activist friends, the network of social relations expands even further beyond the heterosexual couple. While sociological studies (e.g., Reinares, 2004) do not often include specific information on family relationships among ETA members, a cursory look at the profiles of prominent ETA activists[48] suggests that detailed analysis could reveal personal relationships to be as fundamental to the political formation and recruitment of male ETA members as they are for women.

This pattern distinguishes ETA and its membership substantially from other contemporary Western European armed organizations, with the notable exception of the nationalist IRA.[49] Unlike most members of far-left armed clandestine groups in West Germany and Italy, who left their families and local communities – and the liberal or conservative values they associated with them – to become revolutionary activists,[50] ETA members historically have been drawn from the close-knit networks of family, neighbourhoods and friends that make up the radical nationalist community. Far from rebelling against their parents, many activists see themselves as carrying on a family tradition of activism (Hamilton, 2000b). These differences underline the impossibility of understanding motivations for participation in political violence based on universal assumptions about gender or sexuality, or the generic idea of 'terrorism'. Variations on the 'couple terrorism' model not only betray the assumption that women's motivations for participating in political violence must be on some level sexual, motivated by the private, but also obscure a much wider range of personal and familial relations that have been instrumental, from the outset, in the construction and regeneration of ETA and the radical nationalist community around it. Rather than contrasting women's personal motivations for activism to men's more political reasons, studies of armed activists must take into account the complex interaction of the personal and the political in forging both male and female activism.

men's entry and roles in ETA as Reinares (2001), the quantitative data on activist origins is largely consistent with other studies, for example Domínguez (1998).

47 This is not to suggest that heterosexual coupling is natural in conditions of clandestinity, or indeed in any context. To my knowledge there have been no public reports of lesbian or gay male couples in ETA; but this is likely more indicative of the shared heterosexism of the radical nationalist and Spanish media (see the description of Zeberio above) as well as the military organization itself, than the actual sexual preferences and practices of ETA members.

48 See for example the biographies of dead ETA members in Editorial Txalaparta (1993).

49 For an analysis of the gender politics of Irish Republicanism, see Aretxaga (1997).

50 See various articles in *International Social Movement Research* 4 (1992) and Zwerman (1994).

conclusion

Evidence of the patterns of women's entry into ETA indicates that on the whole women's motivations for participating in armed activism have not differed substantially from those of men – that is, a personal and political commitment to the radical Basque nationalist community and to attaining independence for the Basque country through the use of violence. Contrary to popular opinion, there is little evidence that women are lured into activism by men, or that their activism is an expression of their sexuality. What *have* differed historically are the social conditions and opportunities for women's and men's activism, on the one hand, and the deeply entrenched association between militarism and masculinity, both in wider society and in ETA itself, on the other.

The participation of small numbers of women in political violence in the Basque country raises thorny questions for feminist scholars and activists, who have contributed to the development of both important critiques of the gender politics of militarism and vibrant anti-militarist movements. Yet, if as growing comparative evidence indicates (see Hasso, 2005), women are increasingly participating in armed movements across the globe, new theoretical and political strategies are called for to understand the circumstances in which certain women choose armed activism. Moreover, the study of female armed activists can help to break down the dichotomy between victims and perpetrators in conflict. While it is essential to insist on the ethical and political responsibilities of individuals and groups who commit violence, there is significant evidence in the case of ETA that male and female perpetrators are subject to different treatment not only in the press, but also by the security forces. One is struck in reading accounts of arrests of female ETA members in the Spanish and Basque press over the past two decades by the frequent speculation about some of these women's sexual activities in contrast to the almost total lack of reporting of the accusations of sexual and gender-specific torture made by some female detainees.[51] Yet, throughout this period the radical nationalist press reported testimonies that included harassment, threats of rape and actual sexual assault, and in 2000 Amnesty International reported concerns about the claim of sexual torture made by one accused female ETA member. Media silence surrounding these cases is all the more notable given the significant reporting in the Spanish media in recent years – following decades of silence – of cases of domestic violence against women.

51 *Egin* 7 October 1987, 24 November 1990, 28 July 1996, and 30 August 2001.

My point is not to argue that women who commit political violence are first and foremost victims, be it as unwitting girlfriends or as targets of police violence. But nor is it valid to make the opposite claim, that is, that female terrorists are more dangerous than their male counterparts (Antolín, 2002).[52] While several women are currently serving lengthy sentences in Spanish and French prisons accused of armed actions causing multiple deaths, there is absolutely no

52 See also the report of Zeberio's death in *ABC* 6 June 1998.

empirical evidence that women in ETA on average commit more – or more fatal – violent actions than men. To the contrary, sentencing patterns indicate that a substantial majority of ETA members imprisoned for 'blood crimes' are men.[53]

53 Prison statistics 1983–2002.

The implications of this evidence go beyond the case of ETA. As the recent media frenzy surrounding the female US soldier accused of torturing Iraqi prisoners indicates, the supposed exceptionality of female violence can function to make torture itself appear exceptional (D'Cruze and Rao, 2005), foreclosing serious discussion about the systemic use of torture and state violence, as well about the wider gender politics of conflict. In the context of the current global 'war on terror', in which political leaders declare that all 'terrorism' is the same, case studies of female armed activists are an important intellectual and political resource for understanding not only why some women participate in political violence, but also how constructions of the 'female terrorist' operate within the wider frame of political conflict.

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