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## **Environmental Struggles and Ecological Narratives in the Basque Country: The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dialectics of Sustainable Materialism.**

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**Abstract:** In this article, I examine the relationship between environment and political consciousness, articulating an argument that links the organic side and the economical level of environmentalist claims, and exposing some of the social movements and political positions that were coined in the Basque Country in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Some of the protests linked to environmental causes in the Basque Country fit with the narratives that give access to the new century and describe the coming concepts in the form of advent with regards to notions like sustainability, organic, energy policies, post-ideologies and even the relationship between food and environment in more recent years. In this direction, environmental movements have succeeded in confusing the materialistic goals of their claims and the very materialism implicit in nature. Thus, I claim that these movements have complied from conservative positions rather than progressist positions. Therefore, there has been an asymmetry with the ideological (non-material) portion of these claims and protests and the truly emancipatory goals of any progressist position. If the drive for sustainability can counter materialist and idealist proposals, we need to find a solution where “sustainable” means organic without the bodily part of the organic term itself.

**Keywords:** idealism, materialism, dialectics, environmentalism, nature, cuisine, organic, sustainability

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## Introduction

It is Saturday, April 6 1996, the morn is just waking in the horizon of a small valley in a remote area of Navarre, and 8 members of “Solidarios con Itoiz” (“Solidary Peoples with (of) Itoiz”, SI from now on and below) along with 3 journalists who cover the action, carry away an elaborated plan against the construction works of the swamp of the small village of Itoiz (Navarre). This collective sees the light in 1995, when the works already had been progressing for more than one year. The group states that their goal is to offer an alternative (socio-political) landscape to the neo-liberal one represented with the swamp, and somehow this action renders the basics of their philosophy. In fact, that chill and early morning, they cut off the cables that make possible the transportation of the concrete of the construction works.

Located in the west of Navarre, this tiny village before its destruction in 2003 with the infilling of the swamp was less that one hour driving distance from Iruña [Pamplona]. Itoiz had a small population at that time and was part of the network of villages in that region of Navarre that relied on farming as its main economic activity. The execution of the reservoir was part of a bigger strategic plan<sup>1</sup> to transport water using an aqueduct from higher regions of Navarre to regions in the south with historically significant draught problems.

However, the impact of the action carried by SI that day was still significant and established a precedent in the way of protesting and understanding what was called “the cause”<sup>2</sup> in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Basque Country in the social movements that have some ecological concerns and claims. SI achieved a notorious goal with their action: they stopped the works cutting off the cables, which had a very negative impact in the development of

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<sup>1</sup> This plan, named “El Canal de Navarra” [Navarre’s Water Canal], was designed to provide with irrigation water to the southern parts of Navarre. However, as many investigations suggests, there was a myriad of irregularities regarding granting contracts to different companies and later funding of the construction project. The whole project contains many gaps in its execution and financing that suggests the possibility of corrupted elements. Some examples are mentioned in a document titled “Agua Limpia, Manos Limpias” by the *Fundación Nueva Cultura del Agua*. In this document, among other pharaonic works that were aimed to solve problems related to water (mainly destined for farming and crops), they mention some of the major difficulties and irregularities of “El Canal de Navarra”. For instance the documentary notes that in 1989 the Government of Navarra paid 150,000 euros to the Hydrographic Conference of Ebro for a report on Itoiz that was never submitted. The irregularities are listed in this document and they mention how plans were denounced prior to the execution of the works, but they were not taken in consideration by the legal and governmental authorities. Some of these claims include the lack of appraisal of the goods and structures of the town of Itoiz, 54 projects awarded to different companies that were not advertised or opened to a competition, and additional allegations.

<sup>2</sup> In the same vein, Badiou has analyzed the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the century of “the real”. See Badiou “The Century”.

the plan. Although the works would resume few months later, the impact of this action will remain in the popular imaginary for long. The protest also gained valuable attention in the public concerning the estimated budget, timing, and outcomes of such works could had for the population of Navarre, as well as the significant exile effect that the habitants of the former village suffered. We can affirm that it supposed a wakeup call for segments of the population that were never interested in these protests. Significantly enough, national papers at the time narrated this episode as an act against the Navarre society: “eight of the members [of SI] that cut the cables to transport the concrete the past Saturday, denied in a press conference that they are linked to KAS [Patriotic Socialist Organization], as Cesar Milano, the Delegate of the Government of Navarre, suggested” [Author’s Translation](El País, 9 of April 1996). Other news suggested the link of the environmental protest with the political movements aligned with nationalist or pro-independence claims.

But above all, this protest created a new space: it generated a series of consequences only perceivable in this form and impossible to foresee. A type of space that has been already examined somewhere else by Edward Soja<sup>3</sup>. Against all the multinational companies involved in the project, the hegemonic political structure and the pragmatic possibilities of success, these group of people generated a political discourse via a public action that was devoted to stop the construction works and they succeed. And their visibility became notorious somehow because it challenged the Law in a public space: they did cut the ties with capitalism (literally even) and they did recognized and reported the action with the presence of a group of journalist secretly hidden during the action. This procedure has certainly strong similitudes with the myth of a dead brother and the universal love of his sister.

In this paper I will try to establish the coordinates to re-interpret this action. Based in the very claims of these environmentalist groups and following some notions that have been expressed by Slavoj Žižek about ecology, this paper discusses the general confusion or misunderstanding of current ecological claims about the very nature of Nature. Thus, recalling Antigone’s passage’s ethical value as Lacan reads it as one of the key arguments, this paper explains how ecology has become a pornographic spectacle at an ethical level. The first section serves to contextualize culturally the traditional and inherited notion of nature in the Basque culture. Following this section, the second part explores the irruption of postmodern era for this

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<sup>3</sup> See Edward Soja “ThirdSpace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined places” (1996)

traditional world, departing from a pagan reality into urban industrial scene. Thirdly, the paper re-interprets the *evental* action of Itoiz in combination with one previous notorious protests, which was the one at the nuclear plant of Lemoniz. The article ends with a set of conclusions that embody the main thesis of it and stretch some of the presented arguments.

### **Traditional Basque Pagan Mythology and the assimilation of Nature**

Environmental studies are not an exception to the impact of discourses on power and politics. Nature when conceived as a social and cultural construction responds to the laws and norms that act upon citizens. Therefore, any analysis that intends to disclose the social movements that protest -and by doing so they (un)consciously claim for a different status for nature- has to deal with its political discourse, and more concretely, with the concept of nature that each culture elaborates. In this direction, Basque culture and its pagan tradition (as has been extensively exposed in the works of Jose Miguel de Barandiaran, Julio Caro Baroja or Willhem von Humboldt, some inspired in the previous work on Basque legends by Webster) depict an uncommon exception on the concept of nature, opposed somehow to the globalized conceptualization of nature as a financial resource more common these days. Yet, it is not the fact of having pagan elements but the way of incorporating them as a national symbol what makes this case different. In other words, in contemporary times, it is revisiting ancient cultural references underpinned on nationalistic discourses what probably distinguishes Basque ecological discourse from others.

Although Basque culture offers a good amount of pagan remains, even when looking at it from a contemporary perspective, it is how pagan and Christian traditions intermingle what is more surprising. Some authors refer to the first works of Agosti Xaho, Francisco Navarro Villoslada or Arturo Campión as the inaugural moment for the re-presentation of Basque mythological elements in literature. Later, as one of the main references Lope Garcia de Salazar's "Jaun Zuria" will crystalize the combination of pagan mythical figures with clear nationalist ideology, which will serve to main nationalist intellectual figures in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to develop an entire imaginary supporting this romantic ideas. Some authors will also establish the links between the conservative Carlist ideologies and the resilience of traditional Basque culture. Examining Joseba Gabilondo's work in his history of Basque literatures (Gabilondo 2016), one can certainly trace eco-friendly elements that surround the

different stages of Basque literature, which mingle between tradition, the difference and nation. However, the ecocritical perspective is still unresolved in any history of Basque literature. Regardless the intimate socio-cultural perception of nature in Basque society, the references to ecocritical references in literature are atomized and appear randomly, in works and literary critique alike.

In this vein, Basque art beyond literature has shown a deep determination to unveil the immanence of nature in Basque culture. Thus, Jorge Oteiza claimed for the aesthetization of education in a clear effort to restore the fundamental functions of education coming from the industrial and postmodern biased practices. According to Oteiza “without an aesthetic education, you can be sure, any kind of education is politically incomplete” (Oteiza 2003, 457). Oteiza certainly enables the primary notions of modernism in one single line: education, art and politics<sup>4</sup>. This statement anticipates what other authors maintained regarding the reconceptualization of cultural realities around new paradigms elaborated from *uncertain* notions of nation, such as some Latin-Americanist (Moreiras 2001)<sup>5</sup>. It is in part due to paradigms based on the consecution of these concepts during the industrialization of the Basque Country that the region became one of the most successful in Spain. However, the remarks of Oteiza transcend modernity (and modernism) by articulating a hierarchy between art and politics, and therefore, relegating reason to a secondary role in education. Oteiza foresees the death of nature before anyone else in the Basque universe<sup>6</sup>. Somehow his environmental principles already accept nature as a perishable entity regardless of the ecological debates that were taking place in the Basque Country during the 70s and 80s, and rushes nature as a concept that is closer to

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<sup>4</sup> Modernity has been defined by the very transition from feudal societies into more industrial era. At a conceptual level, it represents too the transition from fables and religion, into reason and all the implied consequences of this change. Therefore, Oteiza rightly marks the modern elements necessary for this transition be fully effect: education, arts and politics. Which, has been defined in terms of “conditions of truth” by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. For more in the philosophical approach of Badiou see “Being and Event” (2005) and “Conditions” (2008).

<sup>5</sup> Among other disciplines, literature also serves to conceptualize the notion of nation. Moreover, Alberto Moreiras did an excellent work discussing the various and problematic notions traditionally applied for Latin American nations from a post-colonial perspective. In this direction, *uncertain* nations (colonized, or nations without a proper state) provide with some advantages to elaborate new paradigms. For more on Moreiras’ perspective see “The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies” (2001).

<sup>6</sup> Although death is a recurrent topic in many angles for the Basque artist, Oteiza can foresee that the properties that define the world (and any transcendental entity) respond to an inevitable force that will corrupt life, which is death. Oteiza resolves “Concreté hace ya tiempo la naturalize del ser estético...en los términos ontológicos dela creación, a una auténtica respues de salvación ante Dios...A la angustia por la propia muerte me sucede ahora el descubrimiento de la vida crítica del Padre, agonizando de respuesta estética, humanizado por su propia creación universal” (Oteiza 2006, 162).

nothingness, sometimes in a very mundane (human) take. It is at this stage that any counter-movement aimed to weight up the contrast between an approach that celebrates a “living nature” will be advocated to celebrate at the same time, as we shall see, the triumph of capitalism under the regime of democracy.

Accounting for this perspective requires a preliminary validation of the approach to art in the sense that Theodor Adorno (Adorno 1966) and Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1936) articulated: art happens within the dialectics of the materialism and idealism that surrounds human activity. One fact that unites this clash of antagonistic blocks, and confirms this reality, is how nature is presented in its ideal form and consumed in its material form traditionally speaking.

### **The Literary Postmodern Environmentalism and The Political**

There is in the very beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that ecocriticism emerges as a new discipline that manages to encompass the imaginary reflected in literature with ecological theories<sup>7</sup>. There is an asymmetry however with the social and academic pace in the case of the Basque Country. Although nature as a cultural entity plays a central role for Basque mythology until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its literary projection was not fully developed. The industrialization in the Basque Country provides with material means to a society still struggling to emerge from a more rural universe. However, it is not until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the emergence of industrialization in the Basque Country and its modernization that nature passes to be considered the *Big Other* for capitalism –the hegemonic factor that neutralizes and centers the capitalist discourse in its materialist dimension – instead of the master signifier that used to be in the pagan tradition. The later has not been clearly reflected in Basque contemporary literature yet, however, there are modernist traces in Basque literature yet to be discovered that do reflect the intersections between literary production and a certain sensitivity towards nature and ecology.

Yet, the incorporation of modernization and reason into the collective imaginary of the rural habitants of the Basque Country created a disruption in the traditional narratives that also affected the conceptualization of environmentalism narratives (orality, poetry and more ethereal

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<sup>7</sup> Worth worthy to mention here the emergence of this new literary discipline happened at the English Department at the University of Nevada, Reno, in the mid 80s. The main goal was to show that the role of nature in literary works had ethical, economic and political interpretations that would had a direct impact in the influence of such literary works in society.

traditions were more used than the actual symbolism and power of text until very recent in the Basque Country). In this sense, and in a reflexive manner, one of the major disruptive phenomenon that comes with industrialization is literary production itself. Although all the previous and most notorious works in Basque literature remain closely related to religious topics<sup>8</sup>, some authors like Gabriel Aresti or Xabier Lete in the mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century, let alone the social asymmetry displayed in “Peru Abarka” work by Mogel, incorporated topics related mainly to existentialism, nationalism, and environmentalism in a lower degree<sup>9</sup>. For instance, Joseba Zulaika points out – mentioning the work of Gabriel Aresti in relation to the armed struggle and existentialist fatalism of some of the militants – Aresti “[b]y abandoning the mountaintop (...) submitted himself to the essential tensions of the city: Christ and Zarathustra, Gernika and the working class, Euskara and Castilian” (Zulaika 2015: 72). Certainly Gabriel Aresti marks a turning point in Basque literature enabling the discourses of “literary communities” that were displaced or disrupted: Basque community without a literary reference in Basque along with the Castilian community favoring the political goals of the Basque community. Aresti evokes the downfall of Basque politics in his poem entitled “Untergang” (downfall) but also uses the allegory of the mountain, the nature that is displaced from urban areas fully submerged in industrial activity, alienating nature as such and accepting the conceptualization of nature, even in linguistic terms, as a master signifier. Gabilondo refers to this poem as the catalytic moment where to place the axis of trans-Atlantic manifestations in Basque literature. It is indeed, as Gabilondo remarks while noting the empowerment on the idea of nation in the novel “Sweet Promised Land” by Robert Laxalt “[t]he author does not condemn or glorify the Basque Country as a nationalist space, but rather, inserts in an Atlantic space of passage and migration, in which the ‘garden of our ancestors’ or ‘house of my father’ becomes a traumatic space that cannot be inhabited by a migrant subaltern Basque, although it must be revisited” (Gabilondo 2016: 228). Gabilondo rightly highlights the displacement of the voice of the Basque out of the figure of the nation for the first time. However, there are some signs that

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<sup>8</sup> As one of the most prominent sources of such literature tends to be Sarako Eskola (Sara’s School), which provided with several authors that make possible Basque literature to take off from more medieval starts prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. The very first Basque book was published in 1545 (“Lingua Vascorum Primitiae”) by Bernart Etxepare, and although the themes are religious, the book is able to provide a significant information about the socio-political structure of the habitants of the Basque Country at that time.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the transition and history of Basque literature from religious beginnings into modernism, see Joseba Gabilondo’s “Before Babel: A History of Basque Literatures” (2016).

this journey started from within the nation during the industrialization. This, however, was an immanent transition, a journey for a nation within a nation: the rural nation into the urban nation. I would like to argue, against Gabilondo's opinion, that the trans-Atlantic space for the Basque literature begins within, and not in an external form. Literature thus provokes a mirror effect of nature transformed in the materialist *Big Other* for the late capitalist, articulating both early and late capitalist discourses and the emergence of its first critiques on the conceptualization of nature and the possibility for new narratives (such as ecocritical, eco-composition, postmodern and even post-national ones reflected in the works of Kirmen Uribe or Ramon Saizarbitoria, among others). Although this phenomenon can be analyzed within the axis of the (trans)Atlantic, it is also part of the dialectical process of displacement from materialism, into materialism without materialism (Ruda 2015) coordinates, and therefore, as an inaugural moment for post-national postulates.

However, the awakening in literary terms described by Gabilondo is indeed a political awakening as well. With the eruption of industrialization in the Basque Country in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there are two parallel lines of thinking that interrupt the traditional pagan vision of the Basque world, mainly based in oral tradition with some significant exceptions<sup>10</sup>. On the one hand, there is an appropriation of the capitalist values within a segment of the population that will become the archetypical bourgeois society. With the emergence of national discourses based on a high dependence on *partial objects* such as race, historicism, or family which are slowly left behind in order to articulate discourses around imported notions such as freedom, political subject, or internationalism. In this sense, partial objects respond to this partiality in an absolute form: they become “wholer” than the whole itself, which has a direct impact in the ideologies that are based on these partial objects. It is relevant to introduce here, very briefly, Lacan's contribution as he calls it to *object petit a*, since they are the source for desire. The concept of partial object –or *object petit a*, or semblance as Lacan will put it in his Seminars of 1973- are closely linked to the perpetuation of a passion for the real in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and not for the ideal. For Lacan “[w]hat analytic discourse brings out is precisely the idea that that meaning is

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<sup>10</sup> Starting in 1545 with Bernard Etxepare, it is true that Basque literature has some important references both in Spanish and in Basque, and probably the “Sarako Eskola” (the literary group that was created in this small region of South of France-North of the Basque Country) is the most important one in this sense. However, the permeability of Basque readers for Basque literature has been significantly limited, and has not been settled until the late of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



based on semblance” and not with a direct correspondence with the object itself, and continues saying that “[m]eaning indicates the direction toward which it fails” (Lacan 1985: 79). Again, semblance is this appearance endorsed with meaning. Badiou completes this idea, while he talks about the 20<sup>th</sup> century, asserting that “[i]t is reality that constitutes an obstacle to the uncovering of the real as pure surface. Here lies the struggle against semblance” (Badiou 2007: 64). All these partial objects that embody the discourses of essence and purity within Basque nationalism resemble the idea of a nation that is integral, without a meaning because it has “The” meaning: *wholer* than the whole meaning. In short we see how the partial objects –semblance or *object petit a-* are the source of a certain imaginary that is inaugurated in the Basque Country with the advent of industrialization and that will frame the optimal conditions for neo-liberalism to flourish, preserving in the process the “semblance” of national identity. In order to develop this semblance we need a *locus* where to implement the notion. In the Basque case *body* -in a multiplicity of its assertions- will be the real and phantasmatic space for that.

In the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the years of industrialization, there was a sacralisation of the concept of corpus (or body) in the Basque Country: traditionally (almost mandatorily) Basque people had to be hard workers, honest, faithful to the homeland, and the importance of the body is as the container of the meanings that are articulated within rural tradition and customs and as the sacrificial container of all these interactions with the real. This narrative simultaneously fits with the above described idea of semblance around the real: there is a passion for the real through the idea of identity in the Basque imaginary in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is, somehow, the transition from a feudal state of mind into socialist thinking in the midst of an inner transition from a complete lack of subjectivity in political terms to an immersion into democratic rules. Eventually this will open the door to more recent discourses on post-nationalism or transnational narratives, both in politics and literature, due to a critique on the narratives related to democracy itself and the irruptive allocutions of the discourses of ones who do not belong to any social group.

Nonetheless, the question that arises is relevant for our analysis, and it has been anticipated by Alberto Moreiras (Moreiras 2001) in regard to the location of the narratives of Latin Americanism in the postmodern arena, relating the role of nature and environment after the cultural disruptive moment of modernization and the transition into postmodernism. We ask ourselves what is the presence of politics in contemporary Basque environmental discourse

without having a clear answer for this question. What are the rights that enable us to think of nature as a public place as it is displayed in ecological protests? Is it possible to defend environmentalism from a democratic materialist – cultural sustainability vision – position? This unanswered question forms the core of actual environmental discourse in the Basque Country that, nevertheless, have as a starting point an *evental* happening – a referent in European protest movements on environmental issues – that took place in 1996: the protest action at the swamp of Itoiz, which will serve to illustrate the main problem this article is meant to disclose, namely, the lack of any organic discourse around environmental issues without organic narratives related to power relations.

### **A disruptive political moment: Case study of the struggle of Itoitz’s reservoir in political and environmental terms.**

Alain Badiou describes the inscription of an *event* as a singularity that is not perceptible by its appearing in the world, but by the range of universal consequences that it generates. In recent Basque history, more concretely in the struggle on environmental issues, the protests of Itoiz mark a threshold where some philosophical, sociological and political narratives converge. I will suggest, that there are reasons to affirm that this *evental* episode resembles the nature of the ethical question itself, actively rendered by Jacques Lacan in the myth of Antigone.

In this direction, I suggest, Itoiz represents the “dead brother” that Antigone was trying to save from his mortality and offer to him immortality, a limp of the Navarre family of villages that in its agony cannot be buried under tons of water in this case. Significantly enough, the case of the nuclear plant of Lemoniz anticipates the one in Itoiz, which is the advent of the event in Itoiz. Lemoniz, between the years of 1975 and 1984, stands as a representation of an effort in the contrary direction of Antigone’s will, in this case. The “brother” embodied in the figure of the construction site of the nuclear plant in Lemoniz was never claimed nor buried and stands nowadays as a phantasmatic figure in shore, by the beach. Although the construction of this nuclear plant took place during the last years of Franco’s dictatorship and the energy crisis that accompanied the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Spain, the controversy continued during the first years of an all too young democracy. However, for this study, the most interesting part is how the conflict was addressed on theoretical grounds. How were concepts such as nation, energy, and nature combined to obtain different narratives for what would eventually become

different ideologies? Protestors fought against what was considered a privileged location within the traditional idea of fatherland's landscape, declaring the ecological value of the Basque Country's seaside, and for the first time fighting against a technology that at the time was considered the most advanced. During the industrialization, despite the high levels of pollution and contamination that main urban areas suffered, there was little acknowledgement of the physical and environmental health consequences. Moreover, the disruption of daily lives with new technology was a synonym of progress for many ideologies<sup>11</sup>. It is not until the end of the 70s and the 80s that technology is heavily targeted as an ethically questionable human achievement, and the significant gain of presence of bio-ethical question (which could be understood as a by-product of a Foucaultian perspective on "bio-politics"). In consequence, at this historical moment we start to observe how along with a claim for the incorruptibility of nature in the protests against the nuclear plant, there is an assumption that technology – mainly after the nuclear era – has achieved a hegemonic level of power that is able to corrupt and destroy nature as a whole. It is, at the same time, the crystallization of the concept of society of risk, coined by Ulrich Beck in the 80s. Between claiming the body in a perfectly Christian manner, the environmental protests focus now on claiming the purity of the body instead. Corruption in this case becomes central, and even pornographic since its explicitness even reaches national values: Basqueness as a form of being natural.

It is because of this discourse that nature might need to be kept uncorrupted, beyond the inherent possibility or risk of being corruptible and finally be corrupted. There is a quasi-ancestral desire to illustrate nature as the element that heals humanity, that enables a dialogue between two contradictions: humans or animal; natural or artificial. Thus, I argue that eventually nature is incorporated as master signifier in the discourse of new environmentalism: an empty container of meanings, where we articulate social and political claims in order to habituate a given collective's existence within an unknown – unbearable, completely contingent, unintelligible – world. In other words, the protesters used the concept of nature to cover a set of meanings that are subordinated to this very "empty" container, and it is at this moment that they avoid any catharsis, which in Lacanian terms simply means "the purgation of emotions of fear

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<sup>11</sup> Along with the arrival of industrialization in the Basque Country, there is a significant success for companies that produce home appliances. Probably Fagor Company is the most successful and important company at that this time. In this direction, technology is perceived by industrial societies as source for better living conditions, less cost and more efficient energy sources and a better and shining coming future overall.

and pity” (Lacan 1993: 247), which inaugurates at the same time the era of tragedy -as the desired and forthcoming consequence of the society of risk-. Yet, in more recent discourses, these narratives converge with the ones coming from the conceptualization of nature as the *Big Other*.

In the same terms, when we engage with the ideas of corruptibility and immortality it is easy to connect them with the concepts of continuity and immutability, forcing us to retake the debate of Antigone in Hegel’s and Lacan’s analysis. Again, the concept of body and infinity (in this case, a euphemism for immortality) are crucial to elucidate what will become the disruptive process in the Basque Country regarding its political position towards environmental issues. As the myth goes, Antigone rescues her brother’s body from its perishable destiny, and puts it on its path to eternity, defying what the Law and the chorus say. Antigone is presented as the body that incarnates desire as such, pure desire and nothing but desire: death desire as such (Miller 2007). Against Creon, Antigone defies the binary options of mundane ethics, and goes for a third option: burying the body of Polynices, her brother, turning around the mandates of law and conforming a very special ethical precedent. Lacan in his analysis opens the path for the understanding of the Sublime object. In the Basque Country, in the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there is a tendency to imitate this sublime object, however with some theoretical lacks that inflate the confusion on the understanding of the relationship between nature and capital. This confusion is represented in the two examples cited in this work, both Lemoniz and Itoiz resemble this tendency to imitate the sublime object as Nature, and displacement of the capital in this debate. It is in short the dialects of materialism what is missing, and a proposal of environmentalism without environmentalism as a result of this misunderstanding.

The sublime object of nature is confused with the body of nature in the case of Basque environmentalism during the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the political turmoil coming after fifty years of dictatorship. Accordingly, the fixation with risk as the structural concept works as a twofold mechanism: it recalls the etymological origin of the word “peace” traced by Emily Apter (Apter 2013) and located in the Greek for safety and welfare, which validates by contrast avoiding any risk; and also as Lacan determines the proximity of tragedy, which is “the forefront of our experience as analysts” (Lacan 1997: 243). And Antigone is all a tragedy, or as Lacan puts it “What does find in *Antigone*? First of all, one finds Antigone” (Lacan 1956: 250). After the slain of his father Laius by Oedipus without knowledge of that very fact, Antigone is

related to her sister in a very peculiar manner. Despite the translational debate that both Lacan and Miller follow, there is certainly the prevalence of the *two* around the ethical questions that surrounds the narration of the dead brother and its bury. This body, the organic component of the narration of the protests<sup>12</sup>, represents what Nature means for the ecological discourse, which is notoriously exposed in mottos and banners. The body is an entity traditionally described as a complex system that establishes multidirectional relations with its organs. In the same direction, nature is also described traditionally as a mega-system composed by smaller eco-systems that are able to function autonomously but that need a certain balance and multidirectional relationship with the surrounding ecosystems (Lovelock 2000). The very possibility of nature to be corruptible, to be perishable, rests intrinsically in the natural body *per se*. However, there is a projection of this body that throughout the political subject can achieve a range of infinity and mutate into something incorruptible – pure or divine: an ideological entity that survives politics themselves, namely, a sublime object. This is how traditional Christianity has conceived the body, namely, in its political dimension throughout the religious dimension, a combination that was proven to be already very effective for the Romans and their political system, anyway permeated with a religious factor. More concretely, in the passage of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, the body defies the natural Law and the Roman Law simultaneously (in an asymmetric manner to Antigone’s brother case if we want), and at that moment is conceived of as something pure and infinite, since it achieves the capacity of being incorruptible. Here rests the main difference between Antigone’s dilemma and Christian doctrine: the capability to reach a zero point in the case of Antigone, whilst Catholic tradition obeys God’s will.

Accordingly, nature conceived as the master signifier in the discourses with ecological concerns and convictions achieves the capacity of being perfectly balanced and incorruptible in the moment of the emergence of the political subject in the form of gardener of the world, reaching a semi-God status: this is the Christian way. Elevating nature to a god’s condition enables the necessity to incorporate it as a master-signifier. And at the same time, it forces the

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<sup>12</sup> The *moto* of the protests in Itoiz were all in the direction of “Itoiz Bizirik!” [Itoiz alive!], “SOS Itoiz”, “Itoiz arriskurik ez” [Itoiz no risk] or “Itoiz Stop”. Whilst the ones of Lemoniz were the type of “Nuklearrik ez eskerrik asko” [No nuclears, thank you], “Lemoniz bizirik” [Lemoniz alive], “Terrorismo nuklearraren aurka biziaren alde” [Against nuclear terrorism, in favor of life] or “Lemoniz Apurtu” [Destroy Lemoniz]. In all of them there is a sense of embodiment of a reality, captured in a certain organism that is at risk or may cause serious risk for local population. In short, reminds the “the situation is critical but not serious” scenario recited in Robert Shawn’s book “The Hiding Place” (1960).

discourse of the protests to choose between this very master-signifier (Itoitz) or a dark and hidden never-present agency of the Other (Lemoniz).

As I have shown above, the myth of Antigone helps us to explain this process due to the relationship that Antigone has with his dead brother, and the imposition of the Law with the alterity of the chorus interpellating her. As Joan Copjec explains “[t]hat [action] which Antigone affirms in no uncertain terms in her love for brother, which, she insists, must be proclaimed, must be exposed to the light of day” (Copjec 2004, 41). There is a proclamation of love, but it has to be “exposed to the light of day” because it is simultaneously public and against the Law. Both premises have to be fulfilled in one sole move: public and against the Law must come together in one sole action. As Copjec continues explaining “that Antigone does not give reason for her love does not simple that her brother is unfathomable to her but that she is, as even the Chorus perceives, autonomous” (Copjec 2004, 42). By challenging the Law in a public space Antigone becomes autonomous, throughout love. And it is in this singular moment when Antigone makes his brother eternal, not before and not only challenging the Law or enabling her discourse in a public space. It is important to note that again this twofold action emanates throughout love and in one sole move. It is an encounter (with the public space and facing the law at the same time) at its purest. This perspective exposed by Copjec yet confronts the lack of interpellating the Law by the protesters in a public manner: beyond challenging the Law in the case of Lemoniz, there is a claim for a better Law, namely, a natural law. Moreover, endless reasons are exposed to defend their position in terms of well-being and even survival: it is a love for nature expressed throughout concrete interests. I claim that somehow in the case of the action against the works of Itoitz, there is a public and total interpellation of the Law by the SI.

In this sense, and returning to our argument of how Basque people traditionally have located nature as a master signifier, I suggest that nature is unbearable if it is corruptible – if it abandons its idealized form and accepts a mundane destiny where it can be defeated or terminated – and in a parallel gesture, Antigone makes his brother eternal by the worship and burying of his body. In this analogy I want to suggest how by corrupting the body of his brother Antigone achieves the eternity throughout love, and nature to be eternal should be perceived as – always already- corrupted. As I mention in the beginning of this article, Jorge Oteiza is probably the first Basque intellectual anticipating a notion of nature that is corruptible. It is worth mentioning that this slight difference – the fact that it is Antigone who makes his brother eternal

through his love and that eternity does not emanate from his brother himself, against the idea of prefiguration of an eternal nature before human's intervention – varies the discourse that will be incorporated in the slogans and mottos during the environmentalist protests in the Basque Country from the beginning of the 80s to the end of the 90s at least. As Copjec explains “it is not otherness but the nonexistence of the Other on which Lacan's interpretation turns” (Copjec 2004, 42) with regards to the myth of Antigone. This non-existence of the Other validates both the influence of the *Big Other* and the subsequent symbolic castration as a direct outcome of this structure. In order to make it eternal, Antigone has to make a decision over something that is undecidable, whilst in the traditional conceptualization of nature in Basque culture, it remains eternal regardless the collective will of the community.

In my take on how Basque contemporary discourses on ecology have been implemented, a shifting of the political subject from the body to that of a subject as such would condemn nature to be under the will of men, displacing the traditional view of Basque culture on nature. This vision, however, had not be implemented in a hegemonic pattern until the apparition of late capitalism, seen as the only way to overcome the logic of it and make a transition into postmodernity. And this is not possible in the absence of a subject that remains to modernity. As Fredric Jameson points out “[t]he very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and the moment” (Jameson 1991, 11). There is indeed a separation within the subject that has the internal struggle between adopting the *Big Other* as the social and political reference or establishing a master signifier around nature in order to encompass the entire set of contradictions that later capitalism provokes in order to generate enough meaning processes in order to sustain certain social order. Jameson's question poses that “[i]n an Anglo-American empiricist world of individual subjects and decision makers, what can possibly be the status of this transsubjective ‘logic’ of the market?” (Jameson 1991, 211). Indeed, we need to disclose the contractions that this “transsubjective” logic encloses and relates, in this case, to the struggle around environmentalism. As Jameson affirms “[i]n the wholly built and constructed universe of late capitalism, from which nature has at least been effectively abolished and in which human praxis – in the degraded form of information, manipulation, reification – has penetrated the older autonomous sphere of culture and even the Unconscious itself, the Utopia of a renewal of perception has no place to go” (Jameson 1991, 120). This

penetration responds to the acquisition by the economic model of the projection of nature as the *Big Other* that will symbolically castrate the system itself and in consequence produce the remains of desire necessary to keep pursuing excess (in all its forms) as the ultimate goal of exploiting nature, which confirms again Foucault's diagnosis on how the capitalist economic model and its reduction to commodities produces a corruptible effect on power based on knowledge (Foucault 1980)<sup>13</sup>.

At this point, the appropriation of the concept of nature by capitalism is understood as the element that castrates the subject itself, converting nature into the *Big Other* that regulates the relations of excess. Late capitalism operates always already in situations of excess. As Jameson points out with regards to the problem of representation and its relation to Nature "in full postmodernist late capitalism with its perpetual present and its multiple historical amnesias, it has itself a more genuine existence than that of a stereotype or a cultural fantasy" (Jameson 1991: 169). For instance, it is the implementation of excess of success, pleasure or repulsion, where late capitalism encounters a niche for its reproduction. Therefore, when we are able to detect this sort of model, we can explain excess in political and economic terms, and therefore, we will disclose the links between capitalist modes of production and its relation to the material world that is necessary to accomplish this ideology. As Jameson continues saying we can "ask ourselves whether –far from marking the place of Nature- it does not rather constitute something like the grave of Nature", and unconscious grave so far, "as the latter has systematically eclipsed from the object world and the social relations of a society whose tendential domination over its Other (the nonhuman of the formerly natural) is more complete than any other moment in human history" (Jameson 1991: 169). In other words, capitalism needs to conceive of nature as a big Other that throughout the castration of the political subject demands in the mode of desire the excess of any arousing commodity. For instance, the concept of excess that Joseba Gabilondo has already explained a certain level of excess of nationalism in the academic arena with regards to what were known as Hispanic Studies first, and Iberian Studies later, explains this sort of situation (Gabilondo 2013), which serves to legitimize Gabilondo's political discourse to explain contemporary Basque literature.

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<sup>13</sup> Recent elections in Brazil 2018 embody this perspective: the traditionalist and neo-fascist candidate postulates an idea of nature based on excess and exploitation, and the main corporation support this election for sharing the same idea of nature.



Yet, in order to explain this theoretical frame, we must address our thoughts to what Alain Badiou describes in his work “Theory of the Subject” (2009). In an early attempt to describe where the subject as ontological entity operates, Badiou states that “[t]he true contrary of the proletariat is not the bourgeoisie. It is the bourgeois world, imperialist society, of which the proletariat, let this be noted, is a notorious element, as the principal productive force and as the antagonistic political pole” (Badiou 2009, 7). Embodied in this thick statement we encounter some basic elements of his theory that are fully applicable to the situation we are analyzing.

Following the quote by Alain Badiou I want to relate it to the protests in the Basque Country, and elaborate an argument on the dialectics of these protests. In both the cases of Itoitz and Lemoniz we have dispersed economical interests that we find in contradiction with the means of – intellectual, cultural and economical – production. Marx claimed already that the modes of production are in the back of the mind of any historical change, and these modes of production and exchange frame class struggles. Therefore, these protests that claim to change this modes of production, which produce the protests themselves generating the dialectical circle of the contraries. In the case of Lemoniz, the nuclear plant is part of a wider strategic plan to provide energy as a principal duty for the Spanish state. The protesters that go against the nuclear plan of Lemoniz did not only protest against an energy plan, but against the application of this plan in a certain geographical place: a concrete place in the world. There is a real necessity to “land” the claims against the nuclear plant, and articulate a discourse that “protects” the millennial lands of the Basque Country. In the case of Itoitz, there was a mimetic reproduction of the reason to implement the swamp (economical, corrupted elements of the administration, construction interests, political preferences, ideological determination, etc.)<sup>14</sup> that clash against the very conceptualization of what *bios* means, always in relation to the political subject. Badiou explains how “the competitive dispersion of property (the multiplicity of subjects-profits) enters into a restrictive collision with the process of the organic concentration of the means of production” (Badiou 2009, 26). In this case, as Badiou states the classic vision of Marxism will claim that it is the “motor” of the social history of all humanity. With regards to the clashing interests and policies that both narratives display (one in a clear materialist form belonging to the late capitalist system, and the one coming from a clearly idealist conversion of nature into the

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<sup>14</sup> In addition, there were several claims that the process of validation and assignation of the works were surrounded by irregular procedures. To a more detailed account of these see XXX.

master signifier for a myriad of social principles and transform it into a total postmodern ideology), we are faced with a dead end. However, it is a dead end admitting the narrative torsion of dialectics and therefore revisiting concepts such as materialism, idealism, and organic results. This dead end is already implemented in the logic of late capitalism, vanishing any possibility for the Two and relegating any social and political tradition to the alienation of sameness (the One). In order to overcome the conditions of the economic and political model, protesters find a possibility in the moment of the impossible – the dead end – is the outcome of any of these struggles described above. Between the elaboration of “sustainable” economic models and the emancipation of the political subject, the efforts should be directed to the later in order to create the former. Thus, sustainability (as we have already mentioned above) will be conceived under the conditions of inequality and not with false premonitions of unreal balance.

## **Conclusions**

Following up the arguments I exposed above, I consider that revisiting the concept of natural-nation -the traditional approach some many cited in words of Anderson- and redefine it following a pattern of a cultural-nation in order to elude some of the misunderstandings of ecological movements: an organic nation of the people that can affirm its political subjectivity in a space that only establishes belonging relationships with no need for inclusive (exclusive in reversal) relationships. Firstly, it is important to define a new cultural magma where the political subject can incorporate aesthetics and subjectivity in one affirmative move. Secondly, we need to conceive of nature as the superstructure of nation that can be articulated as such in the original Marxist idea. We need to remember how Louis Althusser (Althusser 1969) divides superstructure into two instances, the political-legal and ideology. This superstructure is validated when we include it with a torsion into the subjectivity of nature itself, instead of the standard reification of it into a (global) garden or backyard, depending on the cultural pattern. In this case, we need to imagine nature as the empty superstructure that allows the articulation of the previously defined idea of nation. An empty superstructure where the imaginary can be hanged so cultures are able to “forget” and “eliminate” culture too, in a real process of organic recycling of ideologies and cultures.

On the other hand, the idea of the political subject changes as we change the master signifier of ideology and political idle, from nature to sustainable culture, without producing any

commodity residue in the process. In this sense, desire (in a Lacanian sense) shows the way to the political subject to arouse her interest in power through the *object petit* as represented in Nature, instead of the traditional Real for the political subject established in the nation as the obsolete object of desire as shown in the case studies of Itoiz and Lemoniz.

Therefore, the event of Itoiz falls into the category of being *evental* in terms described by Alain Badiou. However, this singularity has not been interpreted outside the traditional coordinates of nation and nature: two master signifiers overused with traditional political ideologies, which in a smarter move are able to translate them into *Big Other* and integrate them in the neo-liberal economical practices and interests. Beyond sustainability as a category that helps to coin the “greenness” of any policy, it should be interesting to reformulate the coordinates of human nature, and as Žižek demands, a scenario that contemplates a multiple world with humans that are more humans than humans: the assimilation into totality of the partial object.

Only from premises that abandon current materialism –a materialism without materialism- based on an empty world and construct an identity that can be desired as commodity, a world without consequences of any type and embrace new ones based on idealism –a idealism without idealism- with a thought based not only in the formal concept of idea, but also disclose the idea as an idea. Only in this moment can we emancipate idea from its burden of difference, and can in fact emancipate difference from its partial burden: difference as a partial matter for encyclopedic knowledge and absolute power.

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