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The Emotional Making of the Basque Working Class

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Introduction

The main hypothesis of this work is that class consciousness is an emotional construction, following the so-called “affective turn” that, since the turn of the century, is gaining preeminence within the social sciences. What I want to show is that emotion can be a useful category for the study of how class consciousness is formed. I will propose some ideas to explain why socialism succeed among workers in the Nervion basin (around Bilbao, Basque Country), paying special attention to the socialist emotional expressions.

My central argument, based on the more extense research of my doctoral thesis, is that class experience is not exclusively the product of a context, a culture, or of discursive categories, the most common position found among contemporary social theories. Indeed, thinking about the formation of class consciousness has been carried out in three main channels: social, cultural and linguistic. Broadly put, the English historian E. P. Thompson proposed the idea that class consciousness arises from the lived experiences of women and men (Thompson 1968: 2-10). In the 1970’s and ‘80’s, and reflecting the influence of the anthropology and what has been called the “cultural turn”, class consciousness was seen by historians as a product of culture (Pérez Ledesma and Rafael Cruz, 1997). In late 1980’s language theories entered social science theorizing, bringing the “linguistic turn” (Stedman Jones 1983; Scott 1987; Joyce, 1995; Cabrera, Divasson and de Felipe, 2008). This theory posits that class identity is shaped by language, by the discourse of daily life, which gives meaning to reality. These three historiographical waves have been criticized by different authors. One of the critiques comes from those social scientists who investigate how to overcome social, cultural or linguistic determinism. Among these critics are historians like Gabrielle Spiegel (Spiegel, 2006), W. Reddy (Reddy, 1997:327-51) or B. Rosenwein (Rosenwein, 2002:821-45). The two latest propose using ‘emotion’ as a theoretical category for social analysis.

Alongside with these historians, in this article it is deemed that emotion is a key category for a better understanding of how political movements developed in the past, and specifically, of how class consciousness arises. Indeed, the hypothesis is that socialist language succeeds because it moves, appeals to, and even generates new emotions. For the analysis, it will be used W. Reddy’s proposal. According to him, the linguistic expression of these emotions is called emotives, and the set of them forms the so-called emotional regime. In this latest is where the stability of any political regime lies (Reddy, 2001:128-129). Thus, it will be analyzed the process of arousal of a new emotional expression, which challenges the given one.
In this study, I am analyzing the socialist emotional regime, which challenged the then prevailing bourgeois emotional regime, a regime which did not speak directly to workers or reflect their lived reality. Indeed, socialist emotional regime is formed by emotives like indignation, rage and solidarity. These emotions are directed toward different objects, and show us what is politically at stake at each moment. But, first, let’s start with the category of emotion, to understand how it can be useful for the explanation of social and political change.

Emotion can be a useful theoretical category for historical analysis?

The study of emotion is currently in fashion within the social sciences. Over the past 15 years, several disciplines – history (Stearns and Stearns, 1985), philosophy (Nussbaum, 2001), anthropology (Rosaldo, 1980; Abu-Lughod, 1986; Lutz, 1988; Hochschild, 1983; Wikan, 1990), cognitive psychology (Lazarus, 1982; Hassin, Uleman and Bargh, 2005) and neuroscience (Damasio, 1998) – have engaged with the so-called “affective turn”. Of course, depending on the topic, emotion is used in different ways. In this essay I am neither interested in emotion at the individual, psychological or biological level, nor in presenting a history of the concept of emotion. I am rather interested in what emotion does, how it influences political action, and how it works within both the single subject and the collectivity. Thus, I am going to explain what I understand by emotion, and how this category can be useful in historical analysis.

Emotion is a natural aptitude human being has, one that has cognitive, evaluative and performative dimensions. Emotion then is an important element of human experience. First, emotion is part of

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1 Since Aristotle wrote *Rhetoric* in Ancient times, philosophy has cared about the role of emotion in the human behavior.
the cognitive process (neuroscience, cognitive psychology and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1994; Sartre, 2005; Pintos, 2010) support this idea). Thus, Cartesian dualism separating body and mind is set aside. Emotion also has an evaluative dimension, that is, the personal relevance each person attributes to his or her context. Once the assessment is made, person is moved to act, thus the concept’s performative dimension, and in that action are involved personal goals. W. Reddy defines emotion as “goal-relevant activations of thought material that exceed the translating capacity of attention within a short time horizon” (Reddy, 2001:128). Thus, emotion is a key part of both individual and collective decision-making. We should not, therefore, continue thinking of human decision-making as grounded solely in rationality, but rather adopt the view of the sociologist Randall Collins who argues that is based on the emotional flow (Collins, 2001:27).

Another important idea related to emotion is that it is involved in what may be called the emotional experience. This notion works on two levels: the preconscious, pre-linguistic and pre-cultural level; and that shaped by culture and language: the level of emotional expression. This second level never totally shapes the first. As a result, it offers an escape; we are escaping from cultural and linguistic determinism. Sociologist Deborah Gould defines the first level, naming it affect “to indicate nonconscious and unnamed, but nevertheless registered, experiences of bodily energy and intensity that arise in response to stimuli impinging on the body” (Gould, 2009:19). For emotional expression we use Reddy’s term emotive, defined as “a type of speech act different from both performative and constative utterances, which both describe (constative utterances) and change (performatives) the world, because emotional expression has both an explanatory and a self-altering effect on the activated thought material of emotion” (Reddy, 2001:128).

In this regard, the idea that emotional expression is shaped by culture or by a given discourse, a position associated with cultural anthropology and with authors, such as Lila Abu-Lughod, or M. Rosaldo, to mention just two, is rejected. Although accepting that emotional expression is shaped by culture, I follow the perspective which defends the position that as human beings, we have the natural capability to feel emotions; but their expression relies, in large part, on culture (Reddy, 2001; Nussbaum, 2001). When saying “in large part”, I do not mean that emotional expression is determined by culture, because, although such expression tries to shape affect, it does not always succeed. Failure happens when a person disagrees with an emotional expression, suffers because of it, and encounters a goal conflict or when that expression doesn’t express his or her affect. At that point a self-exploratory process starts, and the person can challenge this expression.

Emotional experience is not just an individual process, but is also cultural. In fact, emotion connects the individual to the community, as the sociologist Sara Ahmed (2004) and historians Joanna Bourke (2013) and Barbara Rosenwein (2006) have proposed. According to them, without an emotional exchange, social groups will not be created, nor will social action take place. As J. Bourke says, “they (emotions) mediate between the individual and the social” (Bourke, 2013:354). Follow a set of emotional expressions introduces the self in the community. In this regard, B. Rosenwein has developed the concept of “emotional community”, to refer to social communities where people share goals, values, feeling rules and modes of expression (Rosenwein, 2006:24). In this sharing, the individual is integrated in the social.

Since emotions bridge individual and community, emotional expression is the locus where lies the exercise of power. Then, the challenge to an emotional expression becomes the challenge to a political regime. For this reason, W. Reddy defines an emotional regime as “the set of normative emotions and the official rituals, practices and emotives that express and inculcate them” is the “necessary underpinning to any stable political regime” (Reddy, 2001:129). For this regime to work, it is not enough to be consistent with the culture settings of the time and place. The emotives also have to successfully appeal the participants, and generate responses that ensure that they recognize
these expressions. This success is something that neither culture nor speech can ensure, because as we have noted, an emotional regime is not determined by culture or discourse.

Reddy says that an emotional regime can lead us to emotional suffering, via “an acute form of goal conflict, especially that brought on by emotional thought activations” (Reddy, 2001:129). When that happens, it can launch a self-exploratory process searching for new forms of emotional expression and challenging the existing emotional regime. In this challenge resides, to a substantial degree, the explanation of political change. This search can overthrow the present emotional regime (and, therefore, the political regime). I find this idea a very suggestive explanation for the social and political changes occurring in the industrialized Nervion basin at the end of nineteenth century. At that time, workers did not feel that the dominant bourgeois emotional regime was expressing their experience or their goals. For example, when the bourgeois emotional regime considered a working class tavern to be a disgusting and immoral place, workers disagreed, because for them their tavern was a nice, comfortable place, one where they shared their experiences and had a good time (Hidalgo, 2013). Thus, taverns became an “emotional refuge” for workers, and acquired a political meaning, becoming an important place for socialist emotional regime. The fact that socialists leader Facundo Perezagua’s tavern was de facto the socialists meeting point evidences this.²

Methodology

In my dissertation, I focus my analysis on the study of emotional expressions, the emotives, which constitute an emotional regime, in this case the socialist emotional regime. At this point, I want to stress the idea that despite I agree with some authors, like R. Nye, who critic that if we only study the emotives, we will be doing an elites’ history (Nye, 2003:920-923), the nature of the sources available for this case allow me to study only socialist and bourgeois emotives. Indeed, the lack of personal testimonies which could show me how workers felt their world has been a great challenge when doing this work, and it is why I focus my work on the socialist movement. Another reason for this choosing is because socialism was the only working class movement which succeeded in mobilising great numbers of workers at the end of 19th century in the basin of Nervion.

For this analysis different sources have been choosen. The main one is the press, and specially the local diaries as “El Noticiero Bilbaíno” and “La Libertad”; and the socialist weekly newspaper “El Socialista”. It also has been analyzed the report of the “Comisión de Reformas Sociales”, which was made in 1884 by political authorities with the aim of study the situation of workers across Spain, as well as some hygienic treaties.

Moreover, my analysis cannot be based only on an intellectual analysis of political thought or discourse. For a better understanding of the past, and specifically of the socialist movement among workers in the Nervion basin in the late 1890s, we cannot just try to understand what Marx understood by emotion. In fact, we need to go beyond abstract theory and complete the analysis with the practices of the population, as W. Sewell claimed (Sewell, 2006:52), which are an evidence of how that thought is received by those who experience it, thus how it worked within a population. For example, the massive mobilization of working class women in opposition to Spain’s war in Morocco in the 20’s is proof of how the socialist discourse of maternal love worked within them.

² The organization of 1890 strike happened in Perezagua’s tavern. That is remembered by socialists as Indalecio Prieto in his memoirs, De mi vida, as by Julian Zugazagoitia in his novel El Asalto (1930), where he collects fin-de-siècle socialist memory.
Socialist emotional regime: a challenge for bourgeois society

How can we use emotion for historical analysis? To explain this, I will briefly describe how I used it in my study of the working class movement in the basin of Nervión toward the turn of the twentieth century. In the last third of 19th century, some parts of Spain, among them the Nervión basin began industrializing. In this case the process was based on mining and the iron and steel industries. A bourgeois society had developed in this part of Spain during those years that was characterized by its economic, political and social conservatism. Industrialization brought social changes, among them the impoverishment of workers and a deterioration of their living conditions. Bourgeois named this impoverishment “social question” (Capellán de Miguel, 2004; González, 2013), while newly born working class movement named it “revolutionary class struggle”. Meanwhile, strikes became more and more common as Marxist and other labor movements were gathering strength in Europe (Eley, 2002), including Spain (Ribas, 1986; Piqueras, 2003:43-47). During the 1880’s general strikes, some of them led by Socialists, troubled political authorities, who feared the advance of revolutionary Marxist ideas within Spain. These changes, significant as they are, are not the only explanation of why Basque workers became Socialists, however. We must also analyze the changes occurring in the emotional realm.

But first, I want to note that when I allude to Basque socialism I refer to the working class movement that arises in the basin of Nervión (Bizkaia) around 1890, led by the Spanish Socialist party, which is part of the Second International. Even if Basque socialist branch presents some particularities when comparing with the socialism was developing in other parts of Spain or Europe, it is not independent from the Spanish Socialist party; rather, it embraces it (Elorza & Ralle, 1989: 188-235). An analysis of the similarities and differences between the branch in Bizkaia and the others in the rest of Spain would go beyond the scope of this work.

In regard to the people who joined the party, we see that they were both native Basque workers and immigrant workers. Between 1875 and 1900, industrialization generated a great wave of immigration. As a result, more than two-thirds of the population of the mining area were immigrants (González Portilla & Urrutikoetxea Lizarraga, 2006: 60). And these were not only males, as almost half of the immigrants were females (García Abad & Pareja Alonso, 2002: 303). However, a more nuanced analysis will show that in 1890 the 24.50 percent of the population of this industrial area was from another part of Spain, another 30 percent was from other parts of the Basque Country, and around 45 percent was native-born (lot of them the children of immigrants) (González Portilla & Zarraga, 1996: 195). Thus, given this complexity, I give the name Basque workers to all the workers (both natives and immigrants) working and living in the basin of the Nervión River. Some of them embraced the Socialist ideas and ideals, and this is the group I am going to focus on, and that is the process I am going to explain now.

The idea it will be defended here is that class consciousness in the Nervión basin was formed within the emotional regime proposed by socialism. The emotives which combine to form this emotional regime appeal to the workers’ experience and shape their affect. I am convinced that this is why they succeeded. Within this regime, workers feel recognized, and they start thinking about their context, their world, in new ways and begin acting so as to actualize these new expressions. In addition, emotions are projected on to an object, and that object shows which elements are politically involved in the formation of socialist consciousness. That defines what is at stake in political realm at each historical moment. To illustrate how these emotives worked, I will describe the bourgeois emotional regime within which these Basque workers lived, stressing how they rejected the dominant regime and started thinking within another emotional regime, evidence of which took the form of strikes.
The bourgeois emotional regime: The working class as object of fear and disgust

As the British historian E. P. Thompson said, “the notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship” (Thompson, 1968:3). The end of the nineteenth century in the Basque Country was the moment of the bourgeoisie’s ascendency, when this group arguably had the most power. Thus, the bourgeois emotional regime was the one within which workers lived. That emotional regime rested on two emotives referring to workers: fear and disgust. The fear emotive was related to the following ideas: internationalism socialism, strikes, and a potential revolution. Due to this “class fear” the Spanish state established the “Social Reform Commission”, in 1884 (Pérez Ledesma, 1993; Castillo, 1985). Its purpose was to study the situation of workers throughout Spain, because “It is not possible to extend this situation without affecting the public peace” (La Gaceta de Madrid, 10-12-1883). Starting from this idea, the bourgeois social order sees workers as dangerous, and the politics towards them will express this emotion. This view was common in late 19th century industrialising societies. In Spain, during the 1880 typographs strike in Madrid, Socialist leader Pablo Iglesias was put in jail. The same happened during the miner strike in Bilbao in 1890, when Perezagua and other socialists stayed in prison in order to “maintain law and order”, as appeared in press (El Noticiero Bilbaino 14-5-1890). Bourgeois authorities feared the leadership of some socialists especially that of Facundo Perezagua, whose charisma and rhetoric triggered emotional flow among workers, attracting them to Socialism.

The expression of disgust is more hidden in the sources, but we can find it during the 1885 cholera epidemic, which largely affected to workers. This emotion appears in the sources mainly expressed by doctors, because of their close contact to the sick person. This was expressed in various ways. A doctor attending choleric cases said to press that: ‘I can’t go into this house because it is disgusting’, referring to a worker’s house (El Noticiero Bilbaino, 4-4-1885). In the same way, in her Treaty of Public Hygiene, doctor Santero proposes for cholera patients “we have to separate the the ill poor from the other sick people, so that (the ill poor) do not disgust the others due to of their miserable physical appearance” (Santero, 1885:447).

The work of disgust in political realm was expressed when industrial and mining villages were isolated by a buffer zone that was literally a cordon sanitaire, as nobody could enter or leave those communities (González Portilla and Zarraga, 1998:55-62). The zone included from Cadagua River to Somorrostro, and integrated the villages of Santurce, Las Carreras, Pucheta, Las Cortes, Regato, Santa Agueda, Castrejana, Burceña y Luchana. (El Noticiero Bilbaino 31-10-1885).

Moreover, it was generally believed among the elite and middle classes that poor people – essentially identified with miners – were themselves the source of disease. This was certainly how the press presented the issue, as is the case of this article: “Why cholera has appeared in miner zone? First, it is due to the higyienic conditions of population living there...also everybody knows that there they arrive people from other regions where cholera has killed a huge part of population...cholera appeared simultaneously in miner zone and in Baracaldo, being in this latest the first victim a begger who was in contact with miner zone” (El Noticiero Bilbaino 27-10-1885)

At the end of 19th, workers lived within this emotional regime. As I have said, at that time workers were defined as a dangerous and disgusting collective by the bourgeois emotional regime. This regime was clearly unsatisfactory for the working class, as it expressed neither their experience nor their affect, but rather denigrated them and presented as somehow not quite human. Therefore, although we do not have much empirical evidence showing emotional suffering, workers practices show, at least, their disagreement with the dominant emotional regime. This is why despite using the concept of “emotional suffering” I prefer “emotional disagreement”. In the Basque case, this divergence takes shape around socialism language.
Here we see the importance of socialism in the making of Basque working class movement. Socialism thus creates an emotional regime for workers, displacing the bourgeois emotional regime and breaking its monopoly over society. This alternative first takes place as ‘emotional refuge’ and later it is consolidated as an emotional regime, which confronts the bourgeois one and will displace it during the II Republic times in 1930’s. This struggle between two emotional regimes—becoming a struggle between two political ideas—is seen very clearly during the miners’ strike of 1890.

**Miner strike of 1890: the settlement of Socialist emotional regime**

In May 1890 it the 1st of May was celebrated as Labor Day for the first time (Ralle, 1991; Miralles, 1990; Ruzafa, 2006; Hidalgo, 2011). Basque socialism joined in the celebration, and demonstrated the extent of its power and popular support. The press reported that thousands of miners joined Socialists on this first Labor Day. The miners’ main claim was the end of “barracks” and the system of “obligatory canteens”, essentially company towns where miners had to live and buy their food in designated places owned by their bosses, thus going into debt with the company. Moreover, they were demanding better hygienic conditions, as press reported: “Miners are angry with the barracks and the obligatory canteens, where they have to provide themselves of food, which is more expensive than in market. They also complain about the hygienic conditions of the barracks, where they are forced to sleep with other miners in poor hygienic conditions, putting in danger their health” (El Noticiero Bilbaíno 6-5-1890)

As said, just five years earlier, during the cholera epidemic, workers were isolated in their villages, and labeled ‘disgusting’ by the bourgeois press, doctors and public authorities. Their demands for healthier working conditions showed they rejected that definition: the working class clearly cared about how it lived and maintaining good physical health. Obviously, these calls for changes express the workers’ rejection of the bourgeois emotional regime and its depiction of them as disgusting. These demands underlay the miners’ strike that soon followed: “Miners complain about mainly two things: the disgusting barracks, sad places where they are forced to sleep by the foreman, and about the obligation to buy their food in obligatory canteens, where they get a bad an expensive products” (La Libertad, 16-5-1890).

The strike lasted 15 days, and it was the first time socialist claims figured prominently in a labor dispute. This strike also saw the Socialist Party emerge as a mass party, thus founding the working class political movement in the Nervión basin. The workers won that strike, partly due to the intervention of liberal General Loma on behalf of worker’s demands, and the authorities forced owners to improve living conditions in miner’s villages.

But during this strike workers also fought against the bourgeoisie’s fear of them as a class. During the strike, Socialist leaders stressed that “we are peaceful men” (El Noticiero Bilbaíno 14-5-1890; El Socialista 23-5-1890), and admonished the strikers to avoid violence, act prudently and exercise good judgment: “Socialists far from encourage workers to the resistance or to some violent action, they advise them to demonstrate their claims having a respectful behavior with police and authorities, because the calm should be predominant in the streets” (La Libertad, 17-5-1890).

The socialists were setting up a new emotional regime that reflected workers’ lived reality, which rejects the idea of ‘dangerousness’, and wants to show workers as peaceful rational men who can function successfully within the political system. This Socialist emotional regime would contribute significantly to forming working-class consciousness in the Basque Country. In fact, Socialism becomes the most important working class movement in the basin of Nervion until the 1920’s.
Conclusion

As a conclusion, I want to stress two points, related both to the theory and to the historical analysis.

First, along this analysis has been showed that emotion can be a theoretical category for the analysis of social and political change. Different authors from across the social sciences have proven this so through their use of the concept. Moreover, history has also incorporated it since turn of the twenty-first century. In this regard, I consider, following W. Reddy’s proposal that emotional expression and political power interact in a strong way. When a social group challenges a given emotional regime -consisted of several emotional expressions -, it is also challenging the political regime underpinned by that emotional regime. Thus, an analysis of emotional expressions could lead historical analysis to new explanations of why social and political change happens.

Second and more specifically, an analysis of emotions can give us a new explanation for how and why class consciousness arises in particular societies, as has shown the study of the so called Basque socialism –name given to the Basque branch of Spanish Socialist Party-. In this case, the analysis of socialist’s emotional discourse has shown that the “emotional disagreement” some workers felt with the bourgeois emotional regime –which labels workers as disgusting and dangerous-, led them to a new ways of thinking, feeling and encountering the world. Thus, Socialist language worked because it resonated with the workers own experience and showed that there could be an alternative emotional regime, within which workers agreed and felt more comfortable. In this regard, the bourgeois emotional regime within worker’s lived did not satisfy them around 1890, and they started seeking for other emotional expressions for refer their experience. As it has been evidenced along the analysis of 1890 strike –first miner and class strike in Basque Country-, workers rejected disgust and fear as expression for their experience. However, their claims show that they take care of their hygiene and body condition, and their practices evidence that they were peaceful people. Moreover, when challenging the bourgeois emotional expressions they are also challenging this political regime, and that is one of the reasons for the political change ocuring in this area and leaded by the working class.
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