

WestminsterResearch

<http://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/westminsterresearch>

Epilogue: Dreams of Autonomy and Owning a State

Tassilo Herrschel

This is a copy of a book chapter published in *Berrikuntza Politikoa / Innovación Política / Political Innovation*, Dr Igor Calzada & Jokin Bildarratz (Eds.).

It is made available here with permission. The book is available from:

<http://www.translokal.com/shop/berrikuntza-politiko-innovacion-politica-political-innovation-zubigintza-5/>

Translokal - Academic Entrepreneurship for Policy Making publishing is guided by Open Access principles under Creative Commons 3.0 license.

The WestminsterResearch online digital archive at the University of Westminster aims to make the research output of the University available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the authors and/or copyright owners.

Whilst further distribution of specific materials from within this archive is forbidden, you may freely distribute the URL of WestminsterResearch:

<http://westminsterresearch.wmin.ac.uk/>

In case of abuse or copyright appearing without permission e-mail repository@westminster.ac.uk

8. EPILOGUE: Dreams of autonomy and owning a state

Dr Tassilo Herrschel
University of Westminster

'Shall we hold on to our dream', so was the question I faced on my recent visit to Tolosa, Bilbao and the Basque Country a good week ago. 'Dreams are important as ideals, as guides and drivers of ambition' so or similarly, I responded. Dreams are a mix of reality and imagination of how things might or should be, despite obstacles found 'in the real world', and the imagined may be somewhat hazy and imprecise. Basque ambitions for independent statehood, or, at least, far-reaching autonomy, contain such elements of a dream - the likely, the do-able, 'reality' and ambitions, and idealised scenarios for the future. Yet, as with dreams, they are also a personal thing, individually constructed and loaded with personal experiences, ambitions and awareness, as well as personality traits, such a being cautious or more 'gung-ho'. So, how to reach a common dream as joint enterprise, where everyone can find themselves and feel being part of it, each with their individually held versions of the 'big dream' of national autonomy or more?

Building bridges, communicating, sharing and involvement are all themes that have been addressed, in varying ways, in this

book. Indeed, the variety of voices, interpretations and underlying dreams provides a needed broad platform for people to find themselves on, and feel related to. Independence, nationhood, identity and territory are all cornerstones of this dream of independence for the Basque nation. Others, by contrast, may see this with disdain and suspicion and seek to dismantle and dismiss this dream as unrealistic, unaffordable daydreaming. Each of these cornerstones represents a big topic in its own right, offering reference points for discussion, positioning, agreement and disagreement. And so they shape lively, at times controversial, but certainly engaged, debates about the links between these big topics. How can one 'get to grips' with, and make accessible and understandable, such things as 'autonomy', statehood, nationhood, or identity?

How real are these things for the individual person with their daily routines, struggles and, yes, dreams about a world where everything will be better and wonderful. The many migrants and refugees coming to Europe in these days from different parts of the world, are driven by such personal dreams of a better world and life waiting for them. But, as often in life, reaching that dream keeps hitting obstacles seemingly coming from nowhere. The dream keeps moving ahead like a *fata morgana*, always in the distance, seemingly reachable, yet also remaining just beyond reach.

Much of this has to do with how they are seen – and perceived – from both angles, the inside and the outside, us, and the outside world. This 'us' can be an individual, a group or a nation. We see the other side as different and 'not us'. Yet, likewise, similar views may exist 'over there', around us. So how to reconcile this in the interest of reaching a dream that we want, and others

can agree with and accommodate in their own dreams. And this stretches across several tensions: the individual and the collective, the local and the international, the urban and the rural, the powerful and the disempowered, the rich and the poor, and the educated urbane and the less educated 'out in the sticks', the old and the young. In this, the sense of togetherness, based on shared imaginations and ambitions – or separateness and difference, based on depicting oneself against 'the other' – matter strongly for the painting of the dream and making it relevant and desirable for people across all those divisions. Bridges need to be built through communication, consultation and explanation. Not everybody will automatically subscribe to the same dream and feel it is theirs.

We see this in the current anxieties, debates about, and political responses to, the mass migration from crisis regions into the EU. They are articulated in different ways in individual countries, regions and cities. Much of this has to do with a stark sense of 'them' and 'us', of difference, intrusion and, importantly, threat. Threat to being in control of, and thus 'owning', the place, territory, state one lives in – and which is an integral part of established personal 'dreams' for leading ones life as imagined. 'Will we still be masters in our own lands' is one of the recurring questions among an increasingly bewildered and insecure population. And here social factors matter, too, including information and understanding of what actually is going on, what the likely implications may be, and how the individual experience relates to the bigger picture in Europe and beyond.

Anxiety about 'otherness' as a source of threat – to security in life and job – is spreading, and the impulse reaction in many instances, especially central and eastern Europe, but also in the

less prosperous regions in western Europe, and among people unfamiliar with the broader, international picture, has been to reinforce defence walls and fences. Pulling up the drawbridges to defend ownership of the territory, society and opportunity one lives in has been a gutt reaction. This, however, is all about an inward perspective, keeping oneself to oneself in one's one little world, leaving the big, threatening unknown, outside. We see this in the image of barbed and razor wire in Hungary. We see this also in the sudden emphasis on borders and border control, as the solution to regain, and ascertain, ownership of state and territory and values, etc.

The previously promoted, but increasingly less well articulated, European dream of openness, unity and shared destiny has suddenly given way to attempts to create protected islands of narrowly defined 'selves'. It reminds a bit like the artificial, small-scale neat order of an allotment area within a tough urban, disconnected and threatening neighbourhood. Ironically, Hungary is the country where the fences of the Iron Curtain were cut open first as people inside wanted to get out. Then, they wanted to escape from a state they didn't feel they owned, and sought the opportunity to reach their dreams of living 'in the West' – on the other side of the fence. So, dreams can be powerful drivers of events, even though they may take some time to bear fruition. Circumstances matter, too.

In Europe, different views, dreams and expectations clash. They do so between countries and their historic baggage, their ways of doing things, but also concerning individual people, depending on age, education and where they live – in a city, or the rural periphery. Arguments of shared responsibility, i.e. humanity, as well as opportunity, are fielded to justify (and rationalise) the accom-

modation of large numbers of refugees. How should one respond to distress, other people's dreams, and expectations? So there is a moral dilemma among people in Europe, and certainly in political circles: how to respond to this self-empowerment to pursue a 'right to a dream' of a better and more secure life. And so dreams may clash. Who is entitled to such, and who not? Are there differences? Can it apply merely to some, but not others, such as the powerful, influential and economically successful, but not the poor, destitute and desperate?

This economic dimension is important, and finds itself never far away from the argument about making choices: are they viable economically, are they justifiable and affordable? Communication with likeminded people, irrespective of existing political, administrative or physical borders and boundaries allows the development of bridges and, then, senses of understanding, trust, even joint ambitions. This includes not just personal choices, but also quests for self-determination and self-governing of regions, cities and, of course, communities that possess a sense of national self. Yet, what we do also affects others. Our decisions are not made in a vacuum. They are shaped by context, our reading of them, and the ideals, visions and dreams on the basis of those. So, understanding each other is important to find a path of changing things that is acceptable to all involved. Only then can it be sustained and beneficial for everyone.

So, a dream can be a powerful driver of people's sense of destiny, and achieving that instils a sense of taking control of matters to get there. Being 'in control' and 'having a stake' in decisions and developments may seem the answer to put a dream into reality by changing some of the surrounding parameters. Being in control, however, also implies being responsible for what happens

and the outcomes of decisions made. Achieving control cannot be the end in its own right. It can only be the first step in setting up a new direction of development towards a mapped out imagined better future (the 'dream'). Important is what to do with this ownership, how to turn it into processes and outcomes that everyone involved can feel part of and thus will support.

Redrawing boundaries and thus defining territories of 'ownership' are not an automatic answer and end to the story. Divisions and differences, shaped by external circumstances and internal responses, take much longer to be overcome. The unification of Germany is a clear example of this. Although divided and under the rule of very different state systems for just under 50 years, the legacies can be felt until today. There have been clear winners and losers of the post-authoritarian adjustment process in eastern Germany, with the losers feeling alienated and left behind by the changes. They clearly feel not in ownership of the new (combined) state, are resentful of, and anxious about, any further changes and forms of 'alienation' they cannot relate to and feel excluded from. And this includes western German investors and functionaries just as much as unaccustomed 'foreigners' as immigrants. The sense among those resentful is that they have lost their familiar circumstances and are not part of the unfamiliar new.

This sense of alienation and separateness between state and people is a powerful force of political opposition and rejection, irrespective of territorial boundaries. It is not those lines that decide so much on ownership and sense of self-governing and independence, as being part of the 'story', as being engaged, involved in political and societal decisions, and, importantly, as benefiting from these changes. The idea of ownership is generally associated with a beneficial, positive effect. Ownership also means 'control' and 'utility'. It is more than about symbolism. That in it-

self is not sufficient. Something more personally meaningful and positive needs to come out of such empowerment. Otherwise it may create more, rather than less, resentment, suspicion, disillusionment and apathy. So, the view needs to be broad as well as specific at the same time: not an easy task. While mapping out a collective future as a narrative of collective gain and self-empowerment does project a positive message, that needs to translate into individual stories of advantages and gains from that. Otherwise, initial enthusiasm may quickly give way to disappointment and disaffection, even embitterment, about failed promises and shattered dreams.

To achieve this, new politics and ways of articulating, justifying and pursuing them may be needed to respond to changing external and internal circumstances, be that economic, political or generational. Not just at the national level, but also beyond, within individual states and across the European Union, a younger generation, for instance, may have different priorities and justifications for their ambitions and subsequent political and personal decisions, than the older. And it is here, then, that political goals, the ways of making politics and policies, and the mechanisms and *modi operandi* used, may be reinvented in a novel way, with new imaginations and interpretations. These may well be different from, and possibly in challenge to, the established ways of doing things. And bringing about political innovation need not necessarily be a prerogative of the young who 'invent' such new ways. 'Radical' older policy makers, too, can play an important role, as the case of Jeremy Corbyn as newly elected, unconventional leader of the Labour Party, shows.

An established scenario, agenda and narrative may be close to the heart of the older generation still in power, but will the same

values and reasoning apply to the younger people, when they reach positions of power and decision-making? These are important questions not just for the shaping of an independent Basque country or state, but also beyond, Spain and the EU as a whole. What dreams do we have, how much do we share in these, and can we make it a shared dream for all involved, while responding to individual expectations and desires? The task is certainly cut out, but let's not be discouraged, because that may mean giving up on dreams altogether. And what would life be without them?