

For the peace process in the Basque Country to be successful, it is vital that authorities understand the discourses which have been used to legitimise ETA's political violence.

by Blog Admin

In October 2011, the Basque separatist group ETA announced the cessation of its armed activities. While studies of terrorism typically focus on the consequences of violent acts, [Javier Martin-Peña](#) and [Ana Varela-Rey](#) argue that the discourses used to legitimise political violence are just as important. Without this legitimisation it would be impossible for groups like ETA to carry out violent acts without alienating their own supporters.



Studies and descriptions of terrorism usually focus on the consequences and harm caused by violent acts. However, terrorism cannot be analysed only in terms of violence and effects. A very important aspect of terrorism is the threat-based communication process. Terrorist actions can attract general attention and can be used to explain groups' demands to society and to seek the support of followers. In this sense, the study of violence legitimisation discourses is fundamental to analyses of conflicts and the ways that they can be resolved.



Violence legitimisation discourses allow us to investigate several aspects of the aggressor group. One of these aspects is the political violence strategy that needs to be legitimated before violent actions can be carried out. This is necessary to keep social support among the aggressor group's supporters. As Varela-Rey et al. highlight in their categorisation of psychosocial analysis of violence legitimisation discourses, the [political violence strategy](#) might be related to the selection of the victim, the definition of the situation as a conflict, and the solutions that justify the aggressor group's actions and the representation of the use of violence. We have focused on the case of the armed group ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna – Basque Homeland and Freedom) in the Basque Country, which, after decades of violence, announced the cessation of its armed activities in October 2011.

ETA has used statements to legitimise and justify the violent acts it has carried out. This discourse has enabled violent acts to gain meaning and to be framed within an explicative and justified context. Several recent studies have examined these issues from a social science perspective. [Sabucedo et al.](#) highlight the relevance of four elements appearing in ETA's statements: 1) The existence of a highly salient conflict for the group, defining the situation in which the hostile group is found as unjust and illegitimate; 2) Displacing the responsibility of the situation of violence to the outgroup and presenting the ingroup as a defender of peace and democracy; 3) Delegitimising victims by means of



Daniel Lobo (Creative Commons BY)

defamation and creating suspicions about the victims' credibility; 4) Presenting the aggressor group as the victim of the situation. [Martin-Peña and Opatow](#) have examined a sample of ETA's statements using a combined exploratory analysis between two psychosocial approaches: 'faces of legitimation theory' and 'moral exclusion theory'. 'Faces of legitimation' describes legitimation discourses within a framework with four facets: (a) statements made before or after violence occurs and (b) statements made for an internal audience or the outside world. On the one hand, the discourse is aimed at the State and the political parties in power, using an intimidation discourse, in which the violent actions will continue until demands are accepted. Moreover, the "didactics" of the acts of violence are mainly aimed at the general society, at the organisations that the victims of these actions represent. On the other hand, part of the discourse is principally aimed at those who sympathise with the organisation's goals, trying to avoid discontent among their supporters.

'Moral exclusion' justifies direct or structural harm and views it as acceptable, normal, and the way things are or ought to be. Moral exclusion can turn violence into acceptable action so those who perpetrate harm can position themselves as principled and respectable people. Moral exclusion has a number of symptoms such as dehumanising others, expanding the target, displacing responsibility, blaming the victims among others, which reduces one's moral standards and thereby legitimates political violence.

Some of ETA statements analysed included both before and after symptoms of moral exclusion. Before symptoms may serve to motivate violent acts, whereas after symptoms may justify violence that has occurred. For instance, "expanding the target" is a prevalent symptom that redefines legitimate victims as a larger category. One example, for instance, states that: "We want to send a clear warning to engineers, technicians, and chiefs of companies who participate in the work. They should stop work and take part in the public debate [on this project] that society is requesting. Unless there is a public debate, these people and their property will be targets of ETA (January 21, 2009)". ETA justified violent acts on the basis of the marginalisation that the Basque Country has suffered at the hands of the state: "As long as the rights of the Basque Country are not respected or recognised, resistance against oppression will continue" (November 6, 2008). Blaming the victim, describes targets of violence as tools of the current repressive situation. Such victim blaming can occur at the organisational, as well as the individual level, such as when ETA attacks the mass media and blames them for acting as agents of repression.

After more than 50 years of ETA violence, a new time has come in the Basque Country. The study of the discourses of legitimation can help us to analyse; the violence strategy of the aggressor group and examine the events which have occurred; and the social beliefs related to the images of the adversary through attributional processes. These beliefs have been shared by part of society for a long time and might be obstacles to future coexistence.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/T8YhDK>

About the authors

Javier Martin-Peña – *University of Zaragoza*

Javier Martin-Peña has a doctorate in Psychology, and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Work at the University of Zaragoza. He has previously worked at the Faculties of Psychology and Law in the University of Barcelona. He is a member of the "[INVICTUS Research Group](#)", at the University of Barcelona. His research interests principally include terrorist violence, psychological violence, harassment, victims of terrorism, and psychosocial effects, among others. His PhD consisted of a qualitative research study on violence and terrorist threats perpetrated by ETA over victims and threatened people in the Basque Country. He was Visiting Scholar at the International Victimology Institute Tilburg (INTERVICT) in The Netherlands, and at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, (City University of New York), USA. Recent articles have appeared in *Peace &*



Conflict, the Spanish Journal of Psychology, Revista de Psicología Social, Psicothema, and Work & Stress.

Ana Varela-Rey – *University of Barcelona*

Ana Varela-Rey completed a degree in Psychology at the University of Barcelona (2002) and in Political Science at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (2007). She holds a Masters degree in Psychosocial Intervention (2010) and is currently a PhD candidate in Social Psychology and a member of the “[INVICTUS Research Group](#)” at the University of Barcelona. She has been awarded a PhD scholarship by the University of Barcelona. Her PhD thesis deals with violence legitimization discourses and their implication in peace processes, and takes the ETA terrorism group in the Basque Country as the main case study. Her research interests include terrorism; political violence; discourse of legitimization; maintenance of violence and selection of the victims, among others.



Related posts:

1. [Basque nationalists are taking inspiration from Scotland and Northern Ireland by using politics as a vehicle for independence.](#) (11.4)
2. [The trial of Anders Breivik shows that we need a better understanding of what drives right-wing extremist violence](#) (10.2)
3. [Five minutes with Gudrun Wacker: 'The Chinese political elite perceive the EU as a successful example of regional integration that has created stability and peace in Europe'.](#) (11.1)