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The Value of Shooting at a Plane with a Rifle: A Reply to Dennis Masaka

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## Abstract

Does it make sense to shoot a rifle at a plane moving away in the sky? Moreover, does this action make sense when the plane is supported by the tanks, warships and aircraft carriers of a powerful regular army? This metaphor illustrates the social myths of the oppressed against the myths and epistemic structures of the great political powers. Currently, the greatest epistemic oppressors are the elites of nations with a political state. The most epistemically oppressed peoples reside in nations without a political state. States may have a social myth, such as ‘we are the first nation-state,’ which resembles a rifle. But their basic myth is that they are ‘nation-states’ or uni-national and, metaphorically, this is already a whole tank. States have warships, planes and aircraft carriers—or epistemic structures of education, information and laws. So, what can the social myths of the oppressed, which function as mere rifles, do? I will argue that, yes, it makes sense to shoot a rifle at a plane receding into the sky. In addition, in this ‘post-Fanon era’ in which capitalist states have won almost all their wars and practice low-intensity warfare such as lawfare, the rifle can no longer support ‘the psychology of the oppressed,’ but social myths can still be trusted.

Dennis Masaka (2023, 42–51), from the Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe and the University of the Free State, South Africa, has given a critical reply to my article ‘Counteracting Epistemic Oppression Through Social Myths’ (Renteria-Uriarte 2023).

I applied the notion of ‘social myth,’ as an idealization of a past successful event that serves to mobilize social awareness in recent literature on epistemic injustice. I delved into the Basque social myth of ‘The Last Indigenous Peoples of Europe’ against the French and Spanish states as a special case of serious epistemic ‘wars’ between epistemic oppressors (in this case, state powers) and oppressed (in this case, minorized nations).

In response, Masaka (2023) makes explicit some doubts about the effectiveness of social myths and the need to argue them more consistently and warns about the reaction of epistemic oppressors.

The state power holders may counter the counteracting power of the social myth of the Basque nation in particular by inventing their own set of myths” and “this is something that might not be avoided in assessing the promise of social myths in overturning epistemic and other social oppressions (56).

Beyond nuances, I proposed a first step on a research path, and as Masaka claims to take the next step into account, I do not see any essential contradictions. However, to continue the discussion, I will clarify and reinforce some common postulates; especially, the idea that ‘any (political and epistemic) myth’ is not a ‘social myth’, at least according to Sorel (who proposed the notion) and Gramsci (who popularized it). While I am not going to perform a

step-by-step analysis of Masaka's points, I hope the following arguments and their related metaphors can clarify the next phase of the discussion from my point of view.

So, what are social myths and how can they counteract epistemic injustices? What myths, social or not, are held by those who exercise epistemic injustices, and how do they make the social myths of the oppressed lose value? Basically, my response can be summed up by the following metaphor: regular armies have M-16 rifles and they also have tanks, warships and planes; so, rifles are not as important to them as AK-47s are to guerrilla movements and are vitally important—even if they will never beat planes and carriers.

Let us begin.

### **Everyone Has Knives to Live with — and maybe an M-16 or AK-47 to Wage War**

The Sorelian sense of 'social myth' is not 'any myth', and such 'universe of discourse' is the starting point of my former contribution (Renteria-Uriarte 2023). For a constructivist, every notion is a sort of conceptual myth. In politics, we have a conception that a large part of the ideas assumed in a given environment can be understood as 'political myths' (Bottici 2007). In this sense, everyone has a myth that is social along with the cognitive tenets to understand the world and act in it (Renteria-Uriarte 2022). Metaphorically, then, everybody has knives as tools for living. However, in the Sorelian and Gramscian sense, a 'social myth' is an idealization of a past successful event that serves to mobilize social consciousness and, at times, social action. A social myth is, like poetry for Gabriel Celaya, 'a weapon loaded with future' (Celaya 1955). More than a knife to cut bread and live, a social myth is rather a 'rifle in hand' to strengthen collective identities and, sometimes, to try to achieve collective goals.

In reference to my opening metaphor: any side of an epistemic injustice and oppression, be it the side of the oppressors or the side of the oppressed, can have social myths to achieve its goals, just as any side involved in a war has a kind of rifle (perhaps an M-16 or AK-47). However, is the social myth a weapon loaded with the same importance or 'future' for oppressors and oppressed? I do not think so. M-16s are of less importance to regular armies (as a common rifle belonging to strong states), than AK-47s are to guerrilla movements (usually associated with oppressed collectives and nations).

The difference comes from the fact that regular armies not only have M-16 rifles, but also tanks, warships and planes. Guerrilla movements tend to be limited to their AK-47s, lacking warships and planes. States often have social myths about themselves, and it is not uncommon to involve the oppressed (as certain 'glorious' battles can do), but when all epistemic structures are controlled, this is of less importance. On the other side, the oppressed have to deal with their social myths, with their rifles, and at times they can control the area from the bell tower with a machine gun, However, when the enemy aircraft arrives, it's time to take cover.

The most common type of epistemic injustice in the world is the epistemic oppression of nations with a political state which try to impose their identities and cultures on the identities

and cultures of minority nations within their borders (Renteria-Uriarte 2022). Obviously, when it comes to epistemic conflicts, social myths are vital as highlighted by Sorel and Gramsci. In such ‘social myth wars’ the key of antiquity is especially important—not only for the oppressed (as I focused on in my article) but also for oppressors and state powers as the main epistemic oppressors. This is where I will focus now, building on Masaka’s reply. In the case of the States, the social myth of ‘we are the first’ may be present, but it is not the most important. This example shows us that although social myths are present in statist discourses, they are not the most important epistemic tools or ‘weapons.’

### **The M-16 of Statist Social Myths: ‘We are the First Nation-State’**

At the level of social groups, being ‘the first or oldest’ is something that grants emotional security. This belief possibly stems from individual psychologies in which ‘being first’ is the position that most satisfies the self or the ego. For this reason, even among well-established states worldwide, there is an occasional race to see who is ‘the first nation-state’ in the history. France is the first country with a bourgeois revolution that managed to control all the political mechanisms of the Old Regime and established a good number of later keys to power, so it is usually considered ‘the first state’ (Móstoles 2022a).

Not to be outdone, Spanish politicians began to say that Spain is the oldest nation in Europe together with France—and now claim that it is the oldest one in the world (Móstoles 2022b). But they merely captured the tradition of “royal lineages, bishops and politicians of various ideologies” that “mythologized the resistance of the Visigoths against the Arabs as the foundation” of the present-day Spain (Moreno 2021, 8–31). This mythification was done despite from the fact that the local Spaniards, currently referred to as ‘Hispanic-Romans’, supported the Arab conquerors against the previous Visigothic conquerors. In any case, the temptation to proclaim one’s own nation-state as the first in history is widespread. China, which has maintained fairly stable borders and structures since ancient times, is often a leading candidate (Yu and Xu 2016), but even the ‘young’ United States of America has been suggested, albeit informally, as “the oldest country in the world” (Stein 2017, 232).

In general, the figure of the nation state has its own ‘Mythology’ (White 2006). The social myth of being ‘the first and the oldest’ is just an M-16 in the hands of the structure of deep myths and extensive powers of the State. In other words, it is very small compared to tanks, planes and aircraft carriers.

### **The War Tank of Statist Myths: ‘Our State is a Nation-State’**

The main myth of modern political states is that of a ‘nation-state’ with sameness between the state as a political structure and the nation as the ethnic culture or ‘people’ who live there. It is claimed that the state has only one nation which, of course, is the nation that holds the mechanisms of power. In fact, the main epistemic activity of political states can be understood as the amalgamation of efforts dedicated to presenting themselves as such a nation-state with resemblance or uniformity between the state and the nation of the state.

## The Nation-State as an Ideal or a ‘Notion’-State

Undoubtedly, these efforts have paid off. The terminology between state and nation, despite being so basic not only for political science but also for everyday life, has become so intertwined that clarifying their difference is important even for scholars (Flint 2016). In basic terms, a nation-state is where “a relatively homogeneous people inhabits a sovereign state” or “[such] state containing one as opposed to several nationalities” (according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

In a broader view, it is a “territorially bounded sovereign polity—i.e., a sovereign state—that is ruled in the name of a community of citizens who identify themselves as a nation” (Feinstein 2023), so within said state resides a single group of people with shared characteristics in language, culture, history and identity, that is, a single nationality or ethnic-cultural group. There are other ways to operationalize the notion, for example, “a stage where a nation has found a common territorial base and is ruled together as one, under a formal government” (Arulpragasam 2012, 701–735), but the problem of such a ‘oneness’, core of the definition, remains.

In fact, there is no nation-state in the world. Or, more precisely, just one, Iceland. A first approach already makes it clear that “most, if not all nation-states are polyethnic” (Zijlmans 2014). Approximately 80% of nation-states in the world include four or more ethnic groups within their boundaries, 15%, three ethnic groups, 5%, two ethnic groups (TWF 2023), and only “Iceland and Japan may claim to a measure of convergence between state and nation” (Mallinson 2021, 128). However, Japan has the Ainu as its first settlers and still present, as different from the later Yamato who control the modern Japanese state.

Iceland was uninhabited when it was colonized by Scandinavians, who are the ones who established and now control its later state (without having suffered invasions or waves of immigrants that lead us to say that there is more than one nation living there). On the other hand, ‘four or more ethnic groups’ is still inaccurate; for example, the 2004 Afghan Constitution cited “Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Turkman, Baluch, Pachaie, Nuristani, Aymaq, Arab, Qirghiz, Qizilbash, Gujur, and Brahwui ethnicities” but in addition “Afghanistan has dozens of other small ethnic groups” (TWF 2023). Therefore, diversity is the norm and there is only one nation-state, Iceland.

Given the circumstances, the most accurate definition of ‘nation-state’ is “the *idea* of a homogenous nation governed by its own sovereign state —where each state contains one nation,” since it is “simply an *ideal*” (Mallinson 2021, 128, italics added). A nation-state is, rather, a *notion*-state. A state is something effectively material, but a nation-state is something epistemic, not really given, but sold to us as real.

The evidence that states generally maintain structures of education, information and law, and that each individual belongs to some state, nation, and identity, surely makes the power of nations with states over nations without a state the main source on epistemic injustices in the world. “This fact has remained in multiethnic societies as a latent source of interethnic

tensions and at certain points in history produces open conflicts or major splits.” (Isajiw 1994, 4-5). Briefly explained:

[E]ven highly multiethnic states have been established and run by one dominant ethnic group ... typically one ethnic group becomes the most active unit in nationality development and nation-state building ... There has been a number of ways in which, historically, one ethnic group would emerge as dominant and others as subordinate. Whichever the historical route, ... one ethnic group (sometimes two) would be perceived to be superior to others not only politically but also culturally and psychologically. [It] imparts its own cultural characteristics to all major national institutions. It is the elite of this ethnic group that forges and becomes the ‘mainstream’ of society. The other ethnic groups are expected to assimilate into the mainstream culture or alternatively become isolated and at best remain part of the total society as ‘exotic’ groups (Isajiw 1994, 4-5).

This harsh crystallization of the idea of the nation-state, as ‘latent source of tensions and conflicts’, leads to the varied literature that discusses nationalism, globalization, and the complexities of modern statehood, such as nations as imagined communities with diverse populations (Anderson 2006), ethnic diversity within nation-states (Brubaker 2004; Breuilly 1993) or the accommodation of cultural diversity within them (Kymlicka 1995; Parekh 2000). The current influences of globalization and transnational flows of people, capital, and information are also related to it, as they challenge the traditional notion of bounded nation-states (Sassen 2006) and lead to some deterritorialized identities (Appadurai 1996). The ultimate reason is that the nation-state is an epistemic construct of states, built with the concept of national identity but but from the ethnic group itself and almost always above other ethnic groups (Smith 1991), and polyethnicity still plays an important role in shaping the conflicts within states (Horowitz 2000).

### **Does the ‘Our State Is a Nation-State’ Myth Have any Success?**

The nation-state may be an ideal and an epistemic construct, but how often does it crystallize as a shared identity for the different nations within its borders? For Mallinson (2021, 128), such ideal is “rendered impossible because the word ‘nation’, with its emotional content, clashes with the cold and rational state.” This seems to be in correspondence with the extensive literature on the subject. Let us see if it is true.

The usual situation is that some ethnic group or nation controls the powers of the state, and the effect on convivence can be the worst, a genocide, or the most peaceful possible, when national differences are forgotten. Yugoslavia would be a paradigmatic case of a state controlled by a nation, Serbia, which could not avoid national secessions (Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo) and disappeared. The United Kingdom (UK) is a state controlled by England that is quite successful in spreading a state identity. Among other things, the UK presents itself not as English but as ‘British’ and common, over the nations of Scotland and Wales and

over a part of the Irish nation in Northern Ireland; still, it has been unable to evade the secessionist desires of those nations.

However, many states have succeeded in fully or nearly fully extending their state identity. In an extreme case are those who have achieved it by physical or epistemic elimination of the other nations within its borders. The United States is a vast political structure created primarily by Anglo immigrants over a multitude of native nations that were physically removed or confined on reservations. In the latter case, the ethnic groups survive, but without economic or epistemic defenses; that is, without being an ethnic group as such.

In the parallel case of Mexico, Spanish immigrants eliminated or displaced local ethnic groups, but to a lesser relative extent. State identity is widespread, but there is resistance to all its implications, such as those of Zapatismo. In any case, there is a great assumption that everyone is 'Mexican', despite being so in different ways. The defenders of the common identity are very active as with the recent assumption of a 'Mexican genome'—where a genetic variation from the time of the conquest would characterize the Mexicans (heard in an informal conversation).

Among the countries that manage their state identity with less tension is Malaysia, a diversely multi-ethnic country in which the original ethnic group, despite not holding power mechanisms, seems to be respected and valued, although some probable tensions can be glimpsed on the horizon (Arulpragasam 2012). Many countries seem to have shape a comfortable state identity, like Kenia or Etiopia, despite some problems, like the later with Eritrea.

Some states have multiple languages, religions, or ethnic groups within them, with no one clearly dominant; however, the results of cohabitation are similar in the long term. In some case the state identity does not prosper and the state is divided, as in the case of Czechoslovakia. In other cases, it is maintained with tensions, as in the case of the common state identity of Belgium that has failed to make residents forget either the pro-independence nationalism in 'Dutch' Flanders or the regionalist nationalism in 'French' Wallonia. However, it may also be that the state identity satisfies the national identities. In the case of Switzerland, Swiss stateness comes to be assumed as a common identity superimposed on the national ones. People feel Swiss without problematic claims, even if they are culturally and linguistically different.

Those are representative cases, but what is actually the main trend? The literature and the media seem to indicate that the most common situation between nations or identities within a nation-state is one of conflict and serious tension. However, a worldwide scan may harbor surprises. Given 193 countries recognized as states by the UN—10 more states are without general international recognition, 10 more states lack general international recognition, and 40 minor territories are 'dependent territories' of foreign states—and roughly 6,000 nations (according to linguistic criteria), there would be approximately 5,800 'nations without a state' within the states of such 193 'nations with a State.' Consequently, if the literature and news

suggested a realistic picture, around 4,000-5,000 nations, or at least around 3,000, would be in conflict or tension. However, the reality is much less exaggerated.

Only about 250 are ‘nations without a state that claim their sovereignty’ with a strong or notable independence movement, such as the Kurds, Tibetans, Chechens, Basques, Quebecois or Mapuches (5%). Of these 250, some 70 are ‘stateless nations that claim or have claimed their sovereignty by armed means’ such as the Kurds, the Irish, the Corsicans or the Basques (1-2%). Within or outside this last group, about 12 are ‘stateless nations that have de facto sovereignty or are close to achieving it’ such as Somaliland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Martinique and Reunion, etc.

There are some 250 nations where the majority of their members, or at least for their most conscious or even armed minorities, strongly feel the national identity over the others, and the struggle for popular sovereignty is on the go and full of enthusiasm and vigor. Parallel to them are about 4,500 ‘nations that are comfortable in the states of others’ that have not confronted the state with armed struggle, do not claim their sovereignty, may be comfortable in such states, and, in many cases, may not even have awareness of being a nation and having nationality rights as such (94.8%).

Briefly stated, the ideal of nation-state is not “rendered impossible” as Mallinson (2021, 128) puts it. The ‘emotional’ nation naturally clashes with the ‘rational’ state, indeed, but confrontations tend to resolve themselves and the nation-state becomes solvent in most cases. And what is the key? On the side of the powerful, social myths like ‘our state is the first nation-state’ or the ubiquitous myth that ‘our state is a nation-state’ are certainly not the cause of it, for sure, but rather the achievement of the state powers of education, information and law, for decades or centuries. This is what makes the different nations end up feeling a common state identity, just as national, cultural and linguistic identity is usually felt.

The M-16 may not have won any state’s war against its internal enemies, and possibly neither did the tanks; rather, the fact they were supported by aviation. Notwithstanding, in the end, after a few generations, the effect is that the oppressed forget that they were conquered by the M-16s, tanks and planes and feel safe with them and justify them as proper and necessary. As in the aphorism commonly attributed to Kwame Nkrumah: “The last stage of imperialism is when the minds of the colonized have been conquered.”

Let us see how such an epistemic victory was achieved in the history of states and nations.

### **Planes and Aircraft Carriers: Laws, Language, Education or Mass Media Supporting ‘Our State is a Nation-State’**

At the time of the French Revolution, only half the population of France spoke varieties of present-day French, and only 10% spoke what resembled the language now called ‘French.’ It was a Parisian and academic French, but the state would take it as a standard to be



imposed throughout the territory, and hence its current extension. At all events, the replacement of regional languages by state French is still an ongoing process.

In Iparralde, as the Basques call the part of their country that the French call ‘the Basque Country’ and Spanish name ‘the French Basque Country’, it may be common to ask something in Basque in a house, and the person who attends there calls someone from the previous generation so that they can communicate with you (if it is the mother, she will call the grandmother, or if it is the daughter, the mother will be called). Language loss can be felt in a single generational change.

In Mauléon, the capital of one of the seven historic Basque territories, a shopkeeper in the central square told me that when he was a child he used to leave home and all his life was in Basque, but now he only came across a few speakers, from what he said that Basque is no longer a national language, since it is fragmented into islands here and there.

The use of language is the most objective aspect of this process, but how is it possible for a people to abandon their language, their customs and their identity, and come to feel the identity of the conqueror? In the case of the Basque Country the process was bloody, and this must be understood literally. About a third of its young generation died in the trenches of the First World War. They spoke Basque and did not speak French well, so they could not understand orders fully. It is not hard to imagine that they were sent to the front line by sergeants to avoid further explanations and hassle. As a *versolari* (popular poet) sang “those of us who managed to live came back from the war knowing French” (see below the exact quote). The same thing probably happened in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) and the wars that started after the French Revolution, when young Basques began to be recruited for the French army, although there is no data. A song from the 1980s by Gorka Knör reminds it: “Euskaraz baizik ez zekiten haiek, morts pour la patrie” (“Those who did not know French, died for the French homeland”). Let’s look at this issue from the beginning.

### **Those Non-French Who did not Know French, Morts Pour la Patrie**

‘Sovereignty,’ or the right to decide public affairs, is a notion that has been understood since the 17th century as ‘national sovereignty’ or ‘of the people’. It is assigned to ‘the people,’ that is, to the ‘collective’ or ‘nation,’ since the times of the bourgeois revolutions. Following the tradition of authors like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Johann Gottfried Herder (Vichinkeski 2014, 801–819), the bourgeoisie argued that not the nobility, but the people themselves, had the right to decide public affairs. But that quickly changed as soon as they took power in several countries. And it changed both towards the ‘people’ or popular classes of the own nation, as well as towards the people of other nations that had fallen within the limits of the feudal kingdom whose springs and mechanisms were taken. Therefore, the change had two faces:

- a) The bourgeois elite of a nation would be the effective decision-making power that ‘represents’ or ‘supersedes, replaces’ all the members of the nation. In this case, the justification was that not ‘the people’ or ‘all of us’,

but ‘the state’ or ‘those who govern,’ became the ‘sovereign nation.’ The ‘people’ and the ‘nation’ of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, characterized more concisely by others like Herder, Johann Gottlieb Fichte or Ernest Renan, gave prominence to the ‘bourgeois state’ of the Abbé Sieyès (Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès). His *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?* a libretto or booklet that was already circulating through the streets of Paris in 1789, stated (in its first chapter) that: “the Third Estate [or the group of bourgeois representatives that controlled such ‘estate’ or part of the advisory council of the French king] is a complete nation.”

b) The elite of that nation would decide and also exercise power over the rest of the nations within the kingdom where they had taken power. In this case, the justification, derived from the above, was that all the individuals of the other nations within the state are precisely of the nation whose elite held state power. In the case of France, Basques, Corsicans, Bretons, Occitans, etc. they were ‘French,’ even though they did not speak their language, nor did they follow French laws until that moment. Thus, the representatives of the present-days ‘French Basque Country’ appeared in Paris in 1789, at the very beginning of the French Revolution, so that its sovereignty would be respected. Étienne de Polverel (1789), in his three-hundred page speech, said, among other things, that Navarre and France were “independent powers with equal powers”. But the revolution, the new central State, would end up reaching all the remote places in the kingdom; the northern Basque Country would soon become militarily occupied.



**Commemorative Plaque to a Basque Victim  
of the French Repression of 1793-1795 (Sara, Labourd).**

Both aspects imply intrusions into epistemic freedom. In the first case, we are talking about class struggle, and how powerful elites convince the entire population to accept bourgeois domination or corporatocracy, as it is now called. In the second case, we are talking about national struggle, and how the powerful elites and their nation convince the rest of the nations within their political state that they are not such nations at all, that they are not different, and that they actually have the same culture and identity as the nation that has taken over the state. How does this last conviction or epistemic domination happen?

Nations that have a political state tend to dismiss and deny, through the epistemic structures of the state (mainly education, media or law), the identity of national minorities living within their borders. Going back to the metaphor, we are not talking about some social myth or ‘rifle’ in hands of a minority nation, but the definition myth or ‘war tank’ in the hands of a State itself; we are pointing to the warships, planes and the aircraft carriers of the the State: its epistemic powers.

### **Laying Flowers to Your Dead Relatives Under a Foreign Flag**

November 11 is the armistice day of the First World War, and a national holiday in France. There are memorials in the villages, with the French flag and the motto *Morts pour la patrie*. Many Basque families go there on that day to lay flowers for their dead relatives. Although the northern Basque Country lost 3% of its population in a war with which they did not seem to agree (according to the comparative data of desertion to mobilization, see Garat 2023), the French state took advantage of this day and these monuments so that the Northern Basques would emotionally distance themselves from the Southern Basques and strengthen the feeling of belonging to France (Bidegain 2014).

The Frenchizing of the Northern Basques had begun after the Great Revolution, with great emphasis on the French language and laws (Grégoire 1794; Urrutikoetxea 2017), but the wars, especially the First World War, turned out to be a key event in the Frenchification (Weber 1976). In previous decades they began to feel French, first because they were constantly taught this at school and in the army, and then because they shed their blood for France during the war, and because they remember it every year.

An army song, later sung by ex-combatants in their hometowns, ran: “L’armée est la grande patronne, qui vous baptise tous français” (“[Wherever you come from,] The army is the big boss, which baptizes you all French”) (Déroulède 1896). And a Basque versolari sang like this: “Heidu girenean, denborak eginik, bazterrak ikusirik, frantsesa jakinik” (“When we returned, after the time, we had known the world and learned French”) (Garat 2023).

Hence the irony that Basques who did not know French died *pour la patrie*, as the song by Gorka Knör recalled. The last bomb of the world wars was when they ended, in the case of minority nations. And it fell in the form of ‘national and patriotic days’ and ‘blood for the homeland’. Flowers for grandfather would make grandsons and granddaughters more French. And stateless nations would foster a common French identity even more than a Parisian civil servant or politician. Non-French people and nations feeling French, nurturing state identity, and preparing to die again for that ‘homeland.’ A round business. Although not without some challenge: in 2022, young people Basques crossed out ‘pour la patrie’ on a banner of ‘morts pour la patrie’, added ‘par la France’, and ended it with ‘Frantziak erailak’ or ‘assassinated by France’ (Erremundegi 2022).

The monuments to the fallen and the flowers are, in any case, just one more among the multitude of epistemic instruments to ensure that national identities assume a state identity, and certify a ‘nation-state’. State powers not only oppose, to the social myths of minorities,

some historical social myth (that the state was born in a memorable historical event that stirs consciences, or that it is even the ‘oldest nation and state’), and a tremendous myth or lie in its own definition as a political structure (that ‘the state is a nation’). They oppose all their state structures to them, in a multidimensional structuring of different injustices and epistemic oppressions.

Education, the mass media and laws can be cited as fundamental, but other apparently more ethereal issues should not be forgotten. As citizens of a State, people have a clear referent: the nation-state itself, with its borders and population under common laws and administration. For all these reasons, the importance of the social myth is less for them: it is diluted among the other socio-political instruments with epistemic implications, and it is not so necessary to sustain the collective identity. The social myth of the ‘we are the oldest nation and state’ is not as prominent in Spain or France (perhaps more so in France) as it is in the Basque Country, but the effective myth of ‘we are a nation’ is already assumed and internalized by the entire population, thanks to epistemic educational, informative and legislative structures.

I hope the nuance can be understood given Masaka’s concern. States may oppose some social myth to those of the oppressed, of course they do, but the oppressed are much less likely to affect collective identity and action, and therefore the value of social myth becomes more relevant in their side of the epistemic war. But what kind of relevance are we talking about?

### **The Power of a Rifle Against Planes, or Of Social Myths Against States, as Conclusion**

Before visiting the guerrillas in El Salvador, with the intention of helping a community set up a cooperative that would allow the combatants to start their civilian life after the Peace Accords, their organization sent me a documentary to get closer to their struggle. In a scene, an insurgent fired his rifle into the sky, against a plane that was leaving the area. I remember him laughing after shooting, but perhaps it's because of my memories and he was still angry. In any case, he was not a foolish rebel, their war was long and he knew that such shots were indifferent to the plane. So why was he shooting at it?

Our brain is rational, but our bodies and lives are emotional. And this fact governs both conventional warfare and the war between social myths. I was born and educated in a social environment, conservative on social issues but Basque nationalist, where the myth of ‘the First Europeans’ was widespread and internalized. Such a myth, in fact, is widespread throughout Basque society, nationalist or not; it is hard to come across someone who has not heard of ‘this stuff that we are the oldest of Europe and all that.’

When I grew up and entered joined friend groups, more leftist than my family but also pro-independence, the myth had taken shape and reached its current form, ‘the Last Indigenous Peoples of Europe’. None of us, although believing more or less that we are in a certain

sense ‘the first settlers’ of our Basque land, trust that this ‘fact’ or ‘belief’ might soften in any extent the force of the Spanish and French states over the Basque country.

For example, I remember ‘our mum’ (in Basque language the self or the ‘I’ has less presence than in Indo-European languages, and ‘we, us, our’ is more the norm) telling us: ‘children, speak in Euskara (the Basque language) and not in Spanish, do not forget that it is our language, and do not forget that it appears in the Museum of Louvre in Paris, in a list of languages, as the oldest European language.’ Nor did she trust that such details could force the oppressors to change their minds or intentions with the Basque Country. Why were we doing it then?

We were and we are rebels firing our rifles at a plane that is moving away. In our group of friends, with different national sensitivities, we all know the belief. For some of us it is not interesting or there is no opinion, for others it has no scientific supports, and for others has some support or even some evident support. But none of us believe, even if the myth is trusted to be some kind of ‘truth’, that it can change the current state of affairs to any degree. I suppose it is a position widely held within the different levels of social knowledge.

Barandiaran (1974, 435–446), the famous and esteemed anthropologist, when he wrote that: “Consequently, it can be said that the Basque myths reflect the shadows and figures of the Paleolithic hunters of the Basque Pyrenees, or, more likely, that they are inherited from them” took it as a scientific fact, unrelated to the Spanish or French states that would come 15,000 years later. The same happens with Estornés Lasa (1967, 87). He wrote that: “It seems that there are certain components or roots in our today’s lively speech [in Basque] that take us back to prehistory.” Both were and felt themselves as Basque. They did not do science in order to change anything, just as people do not do social myths with some kind of specific objective, but simply because they felt like it.

The social myth is held even if it is known to be somewhat exaggerated or idealized—even if it is known that it will not change anything. The social myth, in most cases, will not change the epistemic structures, but it will lighten the emotional weight that other people’s epistemic structures have on us.

Stateless minority nations lack the epistemic advantages that the state bestows; for example, their education and media are often dominated ideologically and financially, and the laws are alien to or contrary to the reality of the nation. In this environment, the identity of minority nations is usually denied or underestimated. It can be directly denied as such, as a nation or socio-historical identity, as in the Basque case, or it can be underestimated or placed as a subsidiary component of the statist identity, that is, the identity of the nation that dominates the state. For all these reasons, the importance of the social myth for the oppressed is greater: they can resort to many fewer instruments with epistemic extensions but, due to human psychology, the social myth seems tremendously necessary and effective to sustain the collective identity.

So why are social myths and the rifles important? Not because of their effective power in changing objective conditions. The guerrilla fighter who, powerless but shouting and activating himself, fires at the plane that has already passed, will never knock it down; yet, he feels a certain subjective power and, with it, gains energy to continue the fight. In a world in which armed wars have been losing effectiveness for the oppressed, the rifle can be replaced by the social myth, almost with the same logic of impotence, but of empowerment. If in the ‘Fanon era’ violence was important for the psychology of the oppressed, in this era in which capitalism has been winning all the wars and uses low-intensity instruments such as lawfare, the social myth recovers its Sorelian and Gramscian importance.

Consequently, when Masaka (2023, 42–51) asks for the social myth of ‘The Last Indigenous People’ or other social myths, and for the epistemic structures that a political state establishes, “can it be effective enough then to disrupt and occasion a transformative turn ...?” My answer, assessing it from the current Basque case, is that social myths do not have the power to gain the epistemic independence for the conquered peoples, but they give them energy to sustain and support the rest of the struggles, epistemic or not.

Their potential is not an absolute revolution in the objective epistemic conditions, at least when they are in the hands of a powerful state, but a support for the identity and moral of the oppressed. Regardless of the power of other instruments to counteract epistemic injustices or that their lack in the case of the oppressed makes the social myth the instrument *par excellence*, it seems that it has not been given the attention it deserves. The Basque case can be illustrative: a social myth that lasts 200 years seems to make it clear that it lacks the power to change the state of things, but it also shows that epistemicide has not yet been consummated, and that the hope and energy to reversing it, or at least to counteract it, also endures and persists.

On the side of the conquerors and oppressors, epistemic convictions and myths continue because they provide not only emotional satisfaction for the members of the dominant nation (and those of the dominated nations that have come to assume the identity of the dominant nation), but more tangible things as well. Greatly simplified, but just to better explain the ideas. In feudal kingdoms, kings wanted to conquer more land mainly to raise more taxes (that is, to collect more money) and get more soldiers to fight (i.e. more land and more money).

In modern times those old interests remain! Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz, president of the Spanish Republic in exile, commented for example: “The Basques are the last to have been civilized in Spain ... they believe they are children of God, but I told the Basque president ... yes, yes! but all Basques, to pay their taxes in Spain!” (Azurmendi 1992, 129: 581). And the Northern Basques began to be recruited as early as the French Revolution, with striking data on population losses in the First World War, as has been noted (Bidegain 2014).

However, in modern states, interests are no longer reduced to taxes and soldiers. The epistemic structure (mainly said triad of education, media and laws) helps to maintain the entire structure of the nation-state in its different facets, including dominance over the

territories of the subject nations that the members of the dominant nation already consider as ‘their territories from all eternity.’

On the side of the oppressed, social myths like ‘we are the last indigenous’ will not by themselves take over educational, informational or legal powers, but they support the struggles that lead to it. In the Basque country, its western and central parts (those that are under the Spanish state) have their own regional government with their own tax collection and police, and in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their own currency was minted. The Northern part continues its struggles to obtain more sovereignty in decisions, such as in education, rural areas or real estate speculation. The social myth of the last natives does not cause all of this but, at least, reflects the national yearnings that do achieve it. And it helps them too. The epistemic side, thus, does help to transform, although not to revolutionize, the objective conditions.

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