

21-O IDEAS FOR THE BASQUE COUNTRY. RATIONALIZATION OF THE ROLE OF PROVINCIAL COUNCILS

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Since the arrival of the democracy, the Provincial Councils have gradually become authentic autonomous governments within the Basque Autonomous Community itself and carry out actions in almost all matters in which the Basque Country has competence.

It intervenes in aspects as transcendental as the management of the country's treasury (which was consigned to it, surely, in a sort of historical reparation for the humiliation suffered by these institutions under Francoism) leaving the Basque Parliament, the seat of the popular sovereignty of the country, without any regulatory capacity in this regard. They also participate resolutely on issues as disparate as social welfare (a natural competence of local administrations that, logically, are also managed by city councils in a sometimes very unstable balance) or the management of the country's roads (star competences of these institutions that the Historical Territories Law assigned them 25 years ago based on criteria that are certainly difficult to understand today from a strictly rational point of view).

Apart from these three great powers that in a more or less clear way everyone assumes are the responsibility of the Provincial Councils, what is most paradigmatic, surprising and questionable is their direct intervention in practically each and every one of the matters: environment, economy, industry, technology, urban planning, agriculture, fishing, culture, housing or sports, to mention fields of competence where it is easy to see the logo of any of the Provincial Councils or find a regional representative with a department under his/her charge. Some of these issues can be interpreted or deduced that they are directly or indirectly covered by the aforementioned law. Others decidedly not.

This process of resurgence and consolidation of the institutions of the three Historical Territories that today make up the Basque Autonomous Community has been developed in parallel to the construction of the country's common institutions and also in parallel to the recovery and empowerment of the role of the municipalities and town halls. Here's the thing.

The General Boards and Provincial Councils, among other ways of understanding them, are badly updated vestiges of an old form of organization of the country that had little to do with that emanating from the Statute of Gernika and even from the Statute of 1936 itself.

Claiming its existence outside of historicism, foralism or other pre-modern traditions is today very complicated since the Basque Government has emerged as the backbone of almost all economic, cultural, educational, health, environmental or technological areas since 1980. and the municipalities seem the most appropriate institutions to complete the set of policies (urbanism or social action, among others). Good coordination between the two would do the rest and, thus, neither of the two institutions would seem to need, in theory, the support of a third intermediate institutional level to carry out their functions, a step that has also been used by many to justify the existence of these provincial institutions. A role that would disappear to the extent that the municipalities were also restructured regionally or that the Government itself, with a much more complete vision of the country, articulated this role of coordination and articulation for the performance of certain activities and the provision of certain services at the local level. .

In any case, this extensive participation in any area of competence is very striking and no one is aware that on many occasions the actions of these provincial entities have conditioned or influenced the actions that the autonomous government itself and that the municipalities themselves have carried out in the within their respective jurisdictions. Sometimes that influence has been used as a counterpower and on other occasions it has surely served to accelerate certain actions or to promote projects of a different nature and greater or lesser fortune at the stroke of a

checkbook.

This complex development has given rise to dysfunctions, duplications or inefficiencies of all kinds. The Basque Government commissioned a study in this sense barely a year ago in which a first estimate pointed to a figure of 400 million euros per year for the cost of these duplications. Making a crude calculation that lacks all rigor, the material cost of duplicities during the 30 years of self-government has cost the citizens of the Basque Country more than 12,000 million euros.

It is clear that, whatever the figure, some kind of serious reform in this country will have to be done because we are not nearly so rich as to allow this waste nor so unsupportive and brainless as to consent to it.

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