cultural politics in an age of statistics: numbers, nations, and the making of Basque identity

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There are probably few features more characteristic of modernity than the notion that we can know ourselves through numbers. Statistics, averages, and probabilities permeate our ways of talking about ourselves and the social world we inhabit, particularly when it comes to describing the modern nation-state and its citizenry: whether the subject is per capita income, industrial productivity, literacy rates, divorce, or military might, statistics have become a routine way of measuring the health and wealth of the nation (Alonso and Starr 1987:3). In the hands of the socially or politically disenfranchised, numbers may also be a language of social contestation, a way that ethnic groups, women, and minorities can make themselves visible, articulate their “differences” from the dominant society, and make claims upon the state and its services.

The centrality of statistical measurement to contemporary Western modes of knowledge and social description raises a number of questions concerning two areas of great interest in the human sciences today: the historical construction of identities and the politics of representation.1 If collective identities, as many now argue, should be understood as products of an ongoing process of “selection, elaboration, objectification, and construction” (Pi-Sunyer 1987:171), we may well ask what role techniques of enumeration have played in the formation and transformation of various types of social identities—ethnic, cultural, sexual, or national. Recent work has begun to take up this issue, investigating how censuses, polls, and other official routines of surveying, counting, and classifying have contributed to the invention of the nation and society itself as a population of citizens.2 But much remains to be said about the role statistics play in the construction of modern understandings of the self and society. How do counting practices elevate certain behaviors or physical features (surname, mother tongue, skin color, or sexual practice, for example) to the status of signifiers and measures of identity? To what extent do ways of sorting and counting people or specific behaviors contribute to the emergence of certain social categories and the elision of others, and what are the consequences of such elision?

This article examines the public uses of language surveys and census data by militant and moderate Basque nationalist language organizations during the first few years of Basque political autonomy. As part of a modern regime of truth that equates knowledge with measurement, statistics occupy a privileged position of authority that gives them heightened rhetorical power in a context of competing political ideologies. Analysis focuses on how specific ways of categorizing and displaying data on Basque speakers create an image of the Basque nation “at risk” and, at the same time, introduce new ways of envisioning the language community, the Basque speaker, and his or her duties to the nation. I conclude by discussing the implications that minority uses of statistics may have for theorizing resistance and the social construction of identities. [statistics, modernity, language revival, ethnic identity, nationalism, resistance, Basque country]

I will address these kinds of questions in analyzing the collection and display of statistical data in the Basque nationalist language movement. In the post-Franco period, various organizations concerned with the revitalization of the Basque language have looked to statistical measurement as a means of focusing attention on the decline of the Basque-speaking population. Before turning to the specifics of this case, however, I want to say a few words about how we might conceptualize the politics of statistics and what is at stake in their use by minority groups. Given their ubiquity, it is curious that statistical practices have not gotten much attention in current debates on the politics of representation. In the past decade, we have seen a wealth of research analyzing the various ways in which Western and non-Western “others” have been depicted in art, literature, museums, and ethnographic writing. Taken together, this research has made us acutely aware of the role of narrative conventions and rhetorical tropes in processes of domination. I extend this line of inquiry to include social technics, like statistics, that operate simultaneously as technologies of scientific knowledge, of government administration, and of symbolic representation. In this fashion, I hope to unite debates on the social construction of identities and the politics of representation with a growing body of work concerned with defamiliarizing the basic concepts and practices of reason that characterize Western modernity (Escobar 1988; Horn 1991; Rabinow 1986; Sachs 1992).

Truth, power, and the statistical imagination

Practices of counting people and property have a long history intimately linked to the fiscal, military, and internal policing mechanisms of the state. Census taking, for example, has been a means of calculating taxes and potential army recruits in both European and non-Western societies. But what we might call the “age of statistics” refers to a recent emergence of faith in statistical measurement as the basis for an objective and necessary science of society. With the professionalization and regularization of statistics-gathering in the 19th century, social statistics, once primarily an instrument of the state, became a uniquely privileged way of “knowing” the social body and a central technology in diagnosing its ills and managing its welfare.

Nowhere are the political and economic consequences of this turn to statistics more apparent than in the modern democratic welfare state, where official statistics and the census play a critical role in determining political representation, access to funding, and the provision of numerous and vital social services. In the United States, where enthusiasm for statistics seems boundless, actuarial calculations based on age, sex, occupation, zip code, sexual orientation, and education have penetrated virtually all domains of social life, influencing whether one can buy a home, pay on credit, or receive health insurance. Who or what gets counted, by whom, and for what purposes are questions of immediate consequence to the distribution of economic and political power and to the experience of everyday life in modern civil society.

Awareness of the very real material consequences of counting has prompted minority groups to take an interest in statistical practices and occasionally to mobilize to change them (Alonso and Starr 1987; Franklin 1989). However, as important as numbers are for determining such basics as cost-of-living increases, political voice, and allocations for education and health care, I intend to argue that the politics of numbers, and the controversies that surround them, go beyond issues of apportionment. As part of a modern regime of truth that equates knowledge with measurement, statistics occupy a place of authority in contemporary modes of social description; they are technologies of truth production. Consequently, at stake in minority concerns with statistics are not only competing claims to resources but also competing claims to truth.

Understanding how statistics operate as a technology of knowledge and power is therefore not limited to showing that numbers are consciously or unconsciously manipulated to suit cultural politics
particular interests or ideologies. More fundamentally, we need to examine how quantification processes in and of themselves constitute our most basic understandings of the social sphere and social actors. In the statistical imagination, society is conceived of as a population, a bounded and quantifiable entity capable of, and indeed demanding, measurement. Counting practices carve up the population in a myriad of ways, sorting and dividing people, things, or behaviors into groups, leaving in their wake a host of categories and classifications. Furthermore, statistical averages, risks, and aggregate rates often serve as standards against which individuals measure themselves or are measured by others. Such norms, while perhaps not inherently oppressive, are a semantically powerful mechanism used to define people and behavior as normal or abnormal, risky or safe. In short, to the extent that statistical practices shape the way we think and talk about ourselves as part of social trends, the way we categorize people and interpret behavior, we must view counting as producing what Foucault has called “subject effects” (1982). More than an administrative technique for the extraction and distribution of resources, statistics have become tools in the crafting of modern subjectivity and social reality.

Analytically, this would suggest that the power of statistics is best seen not as one of disclosure or disguise but as one constitutive of social reality and the social self. This perspective cannot be reconciled with theoretical paradigms that posit a world neatly divisible into objective material reality on the one hand and the domain of symbolic meaning or “ideology” on the other—an opposition that has come under much fire in recent discussions about power (Mitchell 1990). And yet the rhetorical effect of statistical discourse and its persuasive power depends upon, and in fact continuously reproduces, just such a dichotomous model of the “real” and the “ideological.” The deeply rooted Enlightenment idea that numbers are “somehow purer and less susceptible to subjective influences than other sources of information” grants quantitative data a special authority not enjoyed by other “impressionistic” forms of knowledge (Scott 1988:114; see also Gould 1981). Rhetorically, numbers function as pure description or inescapable “facts”; they are a science without a scientist (Bourdieu 1990; de Certeau 1986), rendering them a potent political tool in the arts of persuasion of both dominant and subaltern groups.

In the following case study, I will explore some of the roles statistical surveys have played in the Basque language movement. In the past 20 years, an enormous amount of data on Basque-language speakers has been collected by language activists and the regional government as a way of scientifically describing and debating the past, present, and future of the Basque language. I will be looking primarily at two reports, published in 1979 and 1983, as well as at a community fiesta in which local activists gathered and publicly displayed statistics on the declining use of Basque. The collection, publication, and display of statistics during the first heady years of political autonomy, I argue, served to make publicly visible, quantifiable, and therefore real, an otherwise invisible and paradoxical state of affairs: that is, the persistence of Spanish linguistic hegemony in a period when Basque nationalist political power seemed to be coming into its own. By mapping the declining numbers of speakers onto the Basque territory, activists created an image of the nation as a unitary but shrinking community of speakers. In the hands of militant or oppositional groups, this negative self-portrait continues to be used to motivate people to speak Basque more often and to press for more far-reaching protective language legislation. The Basque government, in return, increasingly appeals to sociometrics and notions of proportionality to suggest that it offers a “fair” distribution of language services at a time when its language policies are attacked from both the Basque left and the Spanish center. Aside from outlining the various strategic or persuasive uses of statistics, I am concerned with showing how the specific modes of categorizing speakers and their linguistic skills introduce new forms of subjectivity—that is, new ways of thinking and talking about Basque language identity and the speaker’s cultural responsibilities to the larger social body.
From the beginnings of the Basque nationalist movement in the 1880s, its political leaders were concerned with collecting population statistics. In this they were hardly unique; throughout most European countries, the 19th century witnessed an "avalanche of numbers" and the formation of ministries devoted exclusively to the collection and centralization of various vital and social statistics (Bourguet 1987; Hacking 1982). As urban business leaders, intellectuals, and professionals joined the ranks of the Basque nationalist cause, the formation of an independent institute of social statistics came to be considered essential to the struggle for autonomy, modernity, and good government.7 In 1918 José Orueta, one of the authors of the first Basque Statute of Autonomy, wrote, "It is impossible to conceive of any collective policy, whether social or economic, that is not based on statistics" (Orueta 1920:277).

The thirst for numbers emerged from the twin interests in national sovereignty and social engineering that moved the Catholic social reformers and middle-class professionals who were the early architects of Basque autonomy in the 1920s. In keeping with their view of themselves as more modern than the leaders of the Spanish state, leaders of the Basque nationalist movement felt that they should follow their continental European neighbors and establish their own statistical institute.8 The collection of statistics was not simply a symbolic issue; having such information was also clearly regarded as a necessary tool for diagnosing and restoring the health of Basque society, which was wracked by dramatic social change and growing worker unrest (Heiberg 1982). Comparing the statistician to the medical examiner, Orueta argued it was only through numbers that true knowledge and the health of the Basque society could be obtained:

Just as for one's health one must weigh oneself, take one's pulse and temperature, know the amount of one's nutritional intake and analyze one's blood and its residue—in sum, know oneself through numbers—the same has to necessarily apply to collective health, and with even greater reason, since it is only numbers that can represent and measure the actual vitality of a people. [1920:276, emphasis added]

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, a small but significant sector of Basque nationalists fully embraced the new age of statistics. For them, the goals of a "healthy" society and an independent government mandated a particular type of quantitative knowledge—statistical sociology. With numbers, said Orueta, "one has science, not mere opinions" (1920:278).

Internal dissent, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, and the subsequent triumph of Franco's forces thwarted the project of autonomy and prevented the Basque Institute of Social Statistics from ever getting off the ground (Estornes Zubizarreta 1983:146). But the alliance made between nationalism, statistics, and social reform was not to be forgotten. In the sixties and seventies, when the Basque nationalist movement began to resurface, it was no longer necessary to argue that statistics were a part of good government; it was now taken for granted. What we find is the extension of this logic to the domain of language preservation. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, various pro-Basque organizations had begun to push for the collection of reliable statistics on the numbers and characteristics of Basque speakers.9 Reams of survey data on speakers—their age, sex, occupation, political affiliation, number of televisions they owned, and what newspapers they read—began to be collected as a way of knowing and documenting the language situation. The numbers and correlations emerging from these studies were reported in two well-known statistical surveys: one published by the Basque Language Academy (Euskaltzaindia) on the eve of the passage of the second Statute of Autonomy in 1979, and the other published four years later by the Basque government (Eusko Jaurlaritza).10 Both reports were published simultaneously in Spanish and Basque.
The meaning these numbers carry for Basque nationalists must be seen in light of the sociolinguistic features of the Basque country and the increasing emphasis on language as a symbol of Basque identity and patriotism in the post-Franco period. Since its inception, Basque nationalist ideology has regarded Euskera, the Basque language, as a key symbol of Basque identity and has proclaimed its preservation an important objective of the struggle for self-determination. This is true despite the fact that, in contrast to both Catalan and Galician, Euskera has been undergoing a steady decline among the native residents. Already by the late 19th century, Basque had become primarily a language of the rural sector, an informal language of family and friends, while Castilian dominated public life, education, and public administration. Such was the state of affairs that when Sabino Arana y Goiri, the son of a Bilbao industrialist and founder of the PNV (Partido Nacionalista Vasca; Basque Nationalist Party), declared Euskera to be one of the defining features of the Basque nation, the first thing he had to do was to learn it himself.1

The links between Basque identity, patriotism, and language, however, may owe as much to Franco's repressive policies as to the actions of Basque political leaders. In punishment for nationalist resistance during the civil war, Franco banned the use of Basque in public and initiated a strong campaign to eliminate its use altogether. There is no doubt that after years of political and cultural repression, an open insistence on speaking or learning Basque had become a political act of defiance against the authoritarian state as well as a marker of the Basque patriot, the abertzale. Indeed, Basque nationalism and resistance to Franco were indistinguishable sentiments fueling popular support for the reemergence of a militant language revival movement in the 1960s and 1970s. As we will see, this political history, and the resulting symbolic significance of Euskera, inevitably colored the meaning given to language surveys and their results.

Specific developments in Basque cultural politics can help us to understand the interest in language statistics and the role these statistics would come to play in the transition to political autonomy. While it is fair to say that support for Basque language preservation is virtually universal among nationalists, cross-cutting political parties and class backgrounds, there is by no means any consensus on what the goal of language revival should be. Some feel it is sufficient to know a few words of Euskera, or to have their children learn it at school, while others believe Basque should become the dominant language of all citizens. Tension and disagreements over how far and how quickly to push for Basque, and even over which variety of Basque to promote (dialect or standard), have divided the nationalist movement from its beginnings.

Disagreements reached a peak in the mid-1960s with the emergence of an important and very vocal group of activists for whom language was the sine qua non of the nationalist struggle. Originating in the Marxist-Leninist nationalist organization, E.T.A. (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna; Basqueland and Freedom), this group, loosely known as the “culturalists,” took as its motto “The only national revolution is a Basque-speaking one,” and they sharply criticized both right- and left-wing nationalists for indifference to the language cause (Jáuregui Bereciartu 1981:ch.12; Unzueta 1980). Often coming from university backgrounds as students or teachers, or simply self-taught, many of the radical language activists turned to linguistics, anthropology, and sociolinguistics for theories to explain the relationship between language and identity, as well as the causes of Basque’s decline.12 They investigated etymologies to show that the words for the Basque language, Euskeria, Basque person, euskaldun, and the Basqueland, Euskalherria all shared the same root. In the writings of the culturalists, language was the essence and barometer of Basque identity and the authenticity of the Basque nation; without it, they argued, political independence had no meaning or purpose. Furthermore, their version of linguistic nationalism made clear that “science,” broadly speaking, was a necessary component of any strategy of language revival.

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These views strongly influenced many of the leaders and supporters of the grass-roots language teaching campaign, popularly known as A.E.K. (Alfabetatzen Euskalduntzen Koordinakundeak), and especially the militantly pro-Basque organization, Basque in the Basqueland (Euskalherrian Euskaraz), making fertile ground for the beginnings of demographic language surveys in the transition to democracy. Nongovernmental language groups played an important role in the 1970s and early 1980s in calling for language planning, protective legislation, and more government funding for Basque language schools. With the gradual transfer of control over the civil service, education, and media to the autonomous Basque government, the militant grassroots language groups have increasingly found themselves in conflict not only with “Madrid” (the central government) but with the moderate nationalists in power, whom they accuse of alternately neglecting or backsliding on their commitment to Basque.

It was in this political and cultural climate of heightened attention to language issues, and a simultaneous divisiveness among nationalists over the ultimate goals of revival, that the Basque Language Academy commissioned SIADECO (Sociedad de Investigacion Aplicada al Desarrollo Comunitario), a pronationalist research organization, to undertake a large-scale statistical count of the linguistic population. Before Spanish Basques obtained autonomy in 1979, there were some estimates of numbers of speakers based on dialectological research (Yrizar 1981), but no official statistics. Consequently, data for the SIADECO report, *Conflicto Linguistico en Euskadi* (Language Conflict in the Basqueland) (Euskaltzaindia 1979), had to be gathered entirely by sample survey. This changed in 1981 when the newly created Basque government ordered all municipalities to begin collecting information about language. Now, every five years the census asks individuals to assess and characterize their knowledge of the Basque language for reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension. The respondents are asked to indicate whether they believe they are able to perform each of these tasks “well,” “with difficulty,” or “not at all.”

In 1983 the government commissioned its Office of Sociological Survey Research (Gabinete de Prospección Sociológica), headed by José Ruiz Olabuenaga, to analyze the census data. They did so and combined their results with additional sample survey data to produce an exhaustive statistical compendium of the linguistic population. Entitled *La Lucha del Euskara* (The Battle of Basque) (Eusko Jaurlaritza 1983), it was followed one year later by a linguistic atlas, also published by the Basque government, containing colorful maps and graphic summaries of La Lucha’s data for popular use: *Atlas Linguistico Vasco* (Basque Linguistic Atlas) (Olabuenaga 1984). With a certain sense of triumph, Olabuenaga introduced the atlas by proclaiming the census, “a bank of information of transcendent significance, heretofore reserved exclusively for Castilian, and only recently Catalan, has at last been put to use for the understanding of Basque” (1984:15).

Despite their different sources of information, the SIADECO report and the Basque government’s study are in many respects more similar than they are different. Both present their effort at quantification as objective science and believe it is free of the romanticism that they perceive to afflict most nationalist discussions of Euskera. Political passions, they imply, have heretofore made an accurate assessment of the language impossible. SIADECO, for example, introduces *Conflicto Linguistico*, by saying:

> This volume . . . is the product of a team of specialists [working] in accordance with scientific methods. It was necessary to leave behind approximations and subjectivism, those of the adversary as well as our own. For these, too, are inevitably partial. [Euskaltzaindia 1979:13]

Both studies echo Orueta’s sentiment that a comprehensive statistical study offers science, not opinions. Armed with numerical tables, they see themselves as able to pierce the “mythologies” and “nostalgic cults” surrounding Euskera and to give a portrait of the language that rises above political prejudices, whether nationalist or antinationalist. Under the clinical eye of the sociologist, Euskera is no longer a dark mystery or a mystic essence but a “social fact” distributed across the population in a specifiable pattern (Eusko Jaurlaritza 1983). This pattern, they argue,
can and should be exposed to the light of reason, measured, and regulated by means of protective legislation.

In analyzing the use of numbers in these two reports, I deliberately set aside the questions of whether, in fact, the statistics generated are accurate measures of linguistic knowledge and of whether they can help predict future language trends. These questions are certainly debatable. For my purposes, what is significant about the reports is their shared belief that language behavior is something that has to be measured quantitatively in order to be preserved. What we find in a context of intense political schism and competing ideologies is a professed conviction in the objectivity of numbers and the power of measurement to set aside politics and reveal the truth. The question to be asked here is how techniques of quantification—namely, counting and classifying—do more than simply describe Basques. In what ways have they introduced new ways of imagining Basques and the Basque nation?

mapping the Basque nation

Nationalism, writes Richard Handler, “is an ideology concerned with boundedness, continuity, and homogeneity encompassing diversity” (1987:6). One of the most common ways in which these features are visually conveyed is through maps. Conflicto Linguístico’s maps, tables, and charts use as their unit of analysis all seven of the Basque provinces that nationalists call

![Figure 1](image-url)
Euskalherria, the Basqueland. Place names in Conflicto Linguístico's maps are given in Basque, and the Spanish and French territories are referred to as Southern and Northern Basqueland respectively, in symbolic defiance of the Spanish/French border, which has divided the Basque provinces into separate states, separate juridico-administrative entities, and separate histories since the 16th century. The nationalist slogan "Zazpiak bat" ("[Of] seven, one") succinctly conveys the remapping of boundaries in the nationalist imaginary. In the maps, provinces and municipalities are represented as parts of a single whole, the Basqueland, rather than as "regions" of Spain or France (see Figure 1). As Peter Sahlins (1989) has argued, the idea that nations are geographic spaces with clearly defined and fixed boundaries is a relatively recent historical development. Today, this bounded visual image, detached and floating in space, is a central feature of the nationalist imaginary. Reproduced on countless souvenirs, bumper stickers, posters, and banners, this "logo map" functions as a constant reminder of the boundaries between the nation and its others (Anderson 1991[1983]; Segal 1988).

Following in the tradition of Louis Lucien Bonaparte's first dialectological map of Euskalherria published in 1863, the Language Academy has remained faithful to the principle of geographic unity and has continued to include all seven provinces in its maps of the Basque country. By 1983, this way of representing the Basqueland had begun to change in at least certain sectors of the nationalist community. During the transition to democracy in Spain, enormous popular support for the Basque and Catalan movements had forced the Spanish central government to make some gesture acknowledging the legitimate claims to autonomy each had gained prior to the civil war. As a compromise intended no doubt to defuse separatist sentiment and to appease the still-powerful right wing, Spain was divided into 15 semiautonomous "communities" or regions, each with its own regional government. In the southern Basqueland, this has

Figure 2. The Basque Autonomous Community, post-1979. This unit is the background map for most illustrations in La Lucha and the subsequent linguistic atlases published by the Basque government (see Fig. 5).
resulted in the creation of a semiautonomous Basque government, Eusko Jaurlaritza, with political jurisdiction over only three of the seven Basque provinces (Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, and Araba), otherwise known as the Comunidad Autónoma Vasca (Basque Autonomous Community). In what was a bitter defeat for some Basque nationalists who had hoped to unite the south under a single statute of autonomy, Nafarroa (Navarre) was established as its own separate autonomous region. Unaffected by the statute, the three French Basque provinces remain incorporated into the department of the Basse Pyrenees without special political status. This administrative restructuring has engendered new kinds of linguistic maps and information gathering practices. Most significant is the fact that the Basque government, armed at last with its own statistical data bank, has chosen to use this new administrative unit, the Basque Autonomous Community, rather than Euskalherria, as the unit of analysis in all of its maps and statistical charts, including those of *La Lucha* (see Figure 2).

In the highly charged political climate of the southern Basque country, differences in maps and statistical units of measurement cannot help but resonate with symbolic and political meanings about the integrity of the Basque nation. Radical nationalists—that is, those who support a seven-province independent socialist state—refuse this new mapping and view it as yet another indicator of the moderate Basque government’s willingness to sell out the goal of full independence and territorial unification. A few cryptic remarks in the introduction to *La Lucha* make clear that the author, José Ruiz Olabuenaga, wishes to deflect such a reading; the maps were dictated, he suggests, solely by the scope of the census and the available data. Nevertheless, from the perspective of radicals, *La Lucha*’s maps recall a long history of deliberate attempts by the Spanish state to administratively fragment and thereby deny the cultural bonds among Basque people (EGIN 1988:3). The cartographic shift between *Conflicto Linguístico* and *La Lucha* vividly illustrates the autonomous government’s ideological differences with the

![Figure 3. “The primitive territories of Euskara” (after Euskaltzaindia 1979).](image-url)
radical nationalists, as well as its growing power to control the production and representation of scientific knowledge. The ire that La Lucha’s maps provoke among radicals stems from their understanding that the “units of measurement” are never innocent or without consequence. What concerns them, very simply, is that with political recognition may come a gradual acceptance of the Autonomous Community as the “natural” context for the discussion of Basque cultural issues.

Both Conflicto Linguístico and La Lucha, use maps as a backdrop for representations of the Basque-speaking population so that the linguistic community is not only quantifiable, it is “grounded” and symbolically tied to the land. This technique of mapping the euskaldun population onto a territorial unit, either Euskalherria or the Autonomous Community, gives rise to a visual narrative of linguistic retrenchment, so that land and its boundaries are represented as unchanging while the geography of the language community appears to be spatially dynamic and shifting over time. Figures 3 and 4, taken from Conflicto Linguístico, depict a gradually shrinking Basque-speaking territory, receding in the face of Spanish and French linguistic domination. Basque is shown to have extended well beyond the seven-province territory in the distant past (see Figure 3). In the 20th century, however, the Basque-speaking nation appears as a small but solid core, surrounded at its outer limits by a dangerous “contact zone” of Castilian and French speakers (see Figure 4). These images, made before census or survey data on speakers were available, drew primarily on written documents and toponyms to retrieve, as it were, the geography of Basque from the archive. The more recent population-based survey and census information collected by SIADECO and the Basque government on the linguistic...
knowledge of individual speakers, has given rise to a more dramatic image, shifting from that of a shrinking core to what the author of *La Lucha* calls an “archipelago” (Olabuenaga 1984:12).

Figure 5. Basque-speaking areas in the Basque Autonomous Community (after Eusko Jaurlaritza 1989). These maps, which appeared in an atlas subsequent to the 1986 census, vividly illustrate how mappings of statistical data create an image of geographical fragmentation.
This kind of map, like the one taken from the 1989 linguistic atlas (see Figure 5), conveys an image of a fragmented Euskalherria; the Basqueland becomes a jigsaw puzzle of municipalities of varying quantities of Basque speakers. Basque speakers exist as cultural islands in a sea of Castilian hegemony—the heartland is gone, “the enemy” has penetrated within, and the battleground with Spanish is everywhere.

Handler (1987) has said that nationalist ideology is typically fueled by a “negative vision” of impending assimilation and imminent death. Nowhere is this vision more acutely expressed than in the discussions surrounding Euskera. In their mappings and interpretations of the shrinking population of Basque speakers, the authors of Conflitto Linguistico present a dramatic portrait of a nation and a language besieged by an unnamed aggressor:

Declining moment by moment, they are rendering us empty. The weapons that can be used against Basque are infinite; they have been used and will continue to be used, all of them. They are the result of a long state of siege and aggressions.

We, Basque speakers, are now reduced to the status of the American Indians on the reservations.

Because that is what we are, the Indians of Europe; let us set aside euphemisms. [Euskaltzaindia 1979:17]

Clearly borrowing from the culturalist equation of Basque speakers with the Basque nation, SIADECO describes language decline throughout the book as a weakening of the nation. The disappearance of Basque is attributed primarily to a history of external political domination and, to a lesser extent, internal betrayal. Underlying this embattled narrative of struggle and survival is, however, a positive vision of the nation as fully autonomous, linguistically homogeneous, and secure in its borders. Indeed, the author of La Lucha explicitly refers to a presumed “golden age” of Basque hegemony in the remote past:

We begin with the historically irrefutable hypothesis of a universal presence of Euskera prior to the arrival of Castilian throughout what is today the Autonomous Community. That moment will serve as a reference point for understanding the actual social situation of Basque. [Eusko Jaurlaritza 1983:14]

In the analysis of statistical results, these negative and positive visions of national linguistic integrity are cast in terms of the “normal” and the “pathological.” Euskera’s decline and fragmentation are equated with degeneracy and the “amputation” of the Basqueland (Euskaltzaindia 1979:24). Its meager presence in the public world and its relegation to the domain of family life are frequently referred to as a “disease” or abnormality (Euskaltzaindia 1979:19, 202). Such rhetorical strategies, more emphatically used in Conflitto Linguistico, than in the less impassioned La Lucha, place language measurement and reform in a medicalized or therapeutic framework. If Basque is diseased, its active promotion is not an imposition but a “cure”; and, very important, statistics are not just facts but instruments of diagnosis.

The goal of the language movement as described in both studies is not a return to monolingualism, which is regarded as excessively utopian and perhaps not even desirable, but “normalization.” As used in these texts and in recent legislation, “normalcy” refers to a social state in which Basque enjoys legal equality, is widely known, and is “habitually” used by the general population. Normalization has never been explicitly defined in statistical terms, and yet it is impossible to read these texts, especially the images, and not link the goal of normalization, or at least the measure of its success, with a filling in of the gaps in the map of Basque speakers, an increase in their numbers until the map becomes one continuous color. A critical part of the mechanism for gauging Basque “abnormality,” statistics, at least indirectly, participate in the definition of language “health” and “normalcy.”

As the linguistic population is increasingly quantified and percentages are tabulated, it is important to consider the ways in which the language community is categorized for purposes of enumeration. Counting, writes Ian Hacking, “is hungry for categories” (1982:280). Indeed, argues Hacking, it is in the sorting and dividing of the social world into groups that statistical practices may have their most profound effect on the social construction of reality (cf. Hacking
Historically constructed in the context of conflicting social, political, and economic interests, the ways in which enumerators classify societies or individuals are neither natural nor inevitable. Rather, as researchers in the sociology of language have often noted, categories of counting are notoriously shaped by the prevailing winds of regional and ethnic politics (Khubchandani 1983; Lieberson 1981[1966]). If we cannot always take them at “face value,” statistics can serve as windows on these politics and the sociopolitical concerns of the enumerators themselves (cf. Anderson 1988; Cline Cohen 1982; Cohn 1987; Scott 1988).

When Basque speakers are counted, what existing categories of people are buried and what new categories are introduced? How do particular ways of classifying speakers reconfigure the image of the language community? If we look at the categories used in the 1981 census, we see that some of the criteria Basques customarily employ to distinguish among themselves have been abandoned and new ones introduced. In popular speech, Basque speakers divide the linguistic universe into two mutually exclusive categories: Basque speakers euskaldunak, and non-Basque speakers erdaldunak. In the last 25 years or so, two new terms have emerged: euskaldun zaharrak (old Basques), native Basque speakers who tend to be primarily from farming and fishing communities, and euskaldun berriak (new Basques), the emerging corpus of urban professionals, civil servants, and teachers who have mastered standardized Basque, Batua. While differentiated, these two kinds of Basque speakers, the “old” and the “new,” are still part of the universe of the euskaldunak and conceptually distinct from non-Basque speakers.

In contrast to the popular practice of categorically designating individuals as either Basque or non-Basque speakers, the census uses three categories: those who know Basque “well,” those who function “with difficulty” in Basque, and those who do not know it at all. Into the intermediate category may fall native speakers who, for lack of education or practice, feel they do not speak “well” (such linguistic insecurity is not uncommon among native speakers who are illiterate in Basque). Here we would also find individuals who are learning Basque for the first time. Much to the chagrin of Olabuenaga, the first census did not ask speakers to list their first or mother tongue; hence there was no way to tell if the intermediate category represented generational loss or gain in Basque speakers. This question was added to the subsequent census, and in following reports, a great deal of attention is devoted to charting the expansion and contraction of Basque language skills among Basque and formerly non-Basque speakers (see Eusko Jaurlaritza 1989).

Significantly, by measuring levels of linguistic competence, the census opens up the possibility of envisioning “degrees” of Basqueness and presumably movement across what are otherwise presented in the reports and in popular speech as mutually exclusive ethnolinguistic identities: Basque and non-Basque. A careful study of La Lucha’s statistical graphs and tables, which draw on the census, gives the reader a complex, shifting sense of the boundaries of “the Basque language community.” And yet the maps, which offer visual summaries of the data, seem to disavow this complexity and remain wedded to an image of a shrinking core similar to the one depicted in Conflícto Linguístico. In La Lucha census data is used to create a tripartite division of the linguistic population: “non-Basque” speakers, those who don’t understand Basque well; “Basque” speakers, those who understand Basque well; and “active Basque” speakers, those who can both speak and understand Basque well (Olabuenaga 1984:16–17). Mapped onto the territory, the active Basque speaker becomes a core within the larger Basque language community. Although we have no way of knowing whether people in this group actually speak Basque in their everyday lives, the word “active” to describe them is noteworthy. As we will see, it reflects the language movement’s increasing emphasis on measuring and fomenting Basque language use, not just knowledge.

Another point of difference between the ways native speakers and the census classify speakers has to do with dialects. If Basque speakers frequently refer to themselves by the common term
euskaldunak, they nevertheless differentiate between the speakers of the various Basque dialects. Basque dialect categories are popularly used to mark not only differences in speech but a range of perceived differences in moral, social, and intellectual qualities (cf. McDonald for a similar phenomenon among Breton speakers [1989:289–293]). Internal dialectal variation has often been invoked by antinationalists as evidence that Basque is not a modern civilized language suitable for science, art, or philosophy. Consequently, it has been an important objective of the language movement both to refute such arguments and to convince Basque speakers that they do all fundamentally speak the same language. In the 1979 and 1983 statistical reports alike, we find Basque dialects such as Bizkaera and Gipuzkera collapsed into the single category of Basque speaker, or euskaldun. Nor is any distinction made between old and new speakers, which is another way of distinguishing between people who speak dialect and people who speak or at least know standard Basque. What counts in the new census, or what the census counts, is not linguistic varieties and local speech communities but degrees of literacy and comprehension of “Basque.” This method of counting, I would argue, does not simply impose homogeneity where there is multiplicity. Certainly, it sets aside socially relevant dialect differences and identities in order to treat the Basque language and language community as a single entity. But it also inscribes a new set of internal markers of difference based on language skills—that is, reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension. Once again, both reports frequently use the terms “Basque” and “non-Basque” to describe the population. However, maps aside, the census data is offering the possibility for destabilizing such categorical distinctions and identities by breaking them down into discrete abilities.

The introduction of census categories, of course, does not mean that other ways of construing the linguistic universe or identity have vanished, but those categories can tell us a lot about what interests the social scientists and language planners who design them. As we have seen, in singling out “active Basques” La Lucha and subsequent linguistic atlases give special emphasis to speaking as a criterion of Basque identity. And although literacy in Euskara is still relatively uncommon, it is becoming an increasingly meaningful social marker and skill as Basque becomes a requirement for jobs in public administration. By using literacy as a category of counting, the census is providing information on the potential corps of Basque functionaries and teachers for its administration. But it is also doing something else; the categories themselves unsettle longstanding stereotypes of the euskaldun as an illiterate and uneducated farmer. Not only can both studies point to the statistics as unequivocal proof that thousands of people do read and write in Euskera, the census endows the Basque language community with a critical sign of modernity. Subjected to these kinds of measures, Euskera is symbolically transformed from a babble of tongues, or an antiquated oral tradition, into the language of a modern nation-state.

In this brief discussion of the maps and categories of Basque speakers, I have suggested that the process of objectifying the Basque language community through specific kinds of measurement exhibits processes of both homogenization and fragmentation. Speakers of different varieties are aggregated into a single and endangered “Basque” linguistic community. At the same time, euskaldunak are differentiated from one another by degrees of literacy and expertise in Basque. In highlighting literacy and eliding dialects, the census categories refute the longstanding assumptions that Basque is not a fully modern language and that Basque speakers are not a single language community. Although presented in the seamless language of objective measurement, quantification does not, of course, simply describe the linguistic reality; it constructs a vision and a knowledge of that reality which reflects the sometimes contradictory interests of nationalist ideology on the one hand and a bureaucratic passion for exactitude on the other.

So far, I have looked at the ways in which statistics have figured in recent publications of the Language Academy and the Basque government in the first few years of autonomy. In what
follows, I will turn from an analysis of texts to examine the use of statistics at the level of popular language campaigns. It is there that we find statistics deployed to persuade Basques to speak their language in order to preserve it.

being Basque, speaking Basque

The recuperation of Euskera constitutes a social movement of enormous proportion and high visibility in the Spanish, or Southern Basque provinces today. In the post-Franco period, the movement began with a few clandestine language schools, and it has grown to encompass an impressive network of Basque language academies and schools, as well as television, radio, the press, a fledgling music industry, and numerous other cultural institutions. Throughout the 1980s, the streets were filled with a constant barrage of publicity campaigns, demonstrations, and graffiti aimed at encouraging people to learn or speak Basque. Campaigns came from a number of sources, public and private, and used a variety of techniques, from nostalgic appeals, humorous cartoons, poetry contests, and Basque music concerts to confrontational “guerilla” tactics such as spray painting over Spanish-language signs.

In 1983 in Usurbil, a small, predominantly Basque-speaking town near the provincial capital of San Sebastián, a local abertzale youth group decided to organize its own language campaign in order to spread awareness of Euskera’s precarious and marginalized status. With backing from the town council and technical assistance from a regional Euskalherrian Euskaraz group and SIADECO, they developed a plan to carry out a pro-Basque language campaign as part of Usurbil’s annual fiesta.

In the European ethnographic literature, annual patron saint days or fiestas are typically regarded as moments when symbols of community identity are vividly displayed and celebrated (Brandes 1980; Pitt-Rivers 1984). Jaiak, as they are called in the Basque-speaking area, are annual events during which, to use Durkheim’s phrase, the collectivity is periodically made and remade. It is not surprising, then, that in towns like Usurbil, where radical and moderate nationalist sentiment is strong, symbols of “Basque tradition” such as the ikurrina (Basque flag) are raised and the stereotypical costume of the Basque farmer, baserritarra, is dusted off and worn about during the week-long festivities. Various forms of “traditional” sporting competitions are held (rock lifting, log chopping), and dance troupes from various parts of the Basque territory are brought in to perform. The fiesta constitutes a cultural pastiche of Basque signifiers, a mix of local and imported folk traditions accompanied by highly popular performances of Basque rock music (MacClancy 1988).

In the weeks preceding Usurbil’s fiesta, the language campaign got under way by recruiting a few schoolteachers, local residents, and youths to document how much Basque they heard spoken in the streets, bars, stores, and handball courts of Usurbil’s neighborhoods at a particular moment in time. In contrast to the demographic focus of the two previous reports, the purpose of this survey was, in the words of one of its organizers, to record, or “take a snapshot” of the presence of Basque in public life. The findings were predictably low; even in neighborhoods of primarily native Basque speakers, Castilian was pervasive. In a small town where everyone knows each other at least by sight, the presence of locals walking around “listening” for Euskera was not easily disguised, and news of the survey spread before the fiesta began. This certainly may have prejudiced the results of the survey. But the survey design is noteworthy for other reasons.

First, what we see is a shift from the measuring of types of speakers (Basque and non-Basque speakers) or specific skills (speaking, reading, writing) to the measuring of language behavior in a variety of social spaces (the bar, the plaza, the market). We see both a move away from reliance on self-report and a preliminary attempt to measure what people actually do. Surveyors were instructed to go to a designated public space, record the time and date, and indicate the
percentage of people speaking Basque or Castilian at that specific moment. What the group wanted to get at through this method was praxis, not knowledge. As a member of the SIADECO team explained to me, all the efforts to teach Basque would not help preserve the language if people did not use it. With the census now in place, activist survey researchers were focusing their interests on documenting, with an eye to influencing, patterns of language use. This focus on communicative practices relies upon and reinforces a behavioral conceptualization of the language community and of Basque identity itself. Second, the organizers used local residents as tabulators deliberately, in an attempt to transform the terms under which social science is usually conducted—that is, by outside experts. Adopting a participatory action research model, the organizers saw community residents as simultaneously subjects and objects of scientific analysis. Their explicit aim was not only to provide facts but also to appropriate social science as a tool of community empowerment and public self-representation.

At the inauguration of the fiesta, the survey results were listed on a large billboard on the front of the *ikastola* (Basque language school) in the central plaza. The elementary schoolchildren of the *ikastola* painted a colorful mural, and this too was hung in the plaza. At the top of the mural was written “When you go to have fun, speak Basque” (“Irten farra egitera, hitz eginaz euskara?”). This slogan was also printed on hundreds of buttons that were passed out for fiesta participants to wear. Throughout the week-long celebration, these two messages literally faced each other in the plaza, the center of celebrations. The statistics, revealing the “hard facts” of Spanish language use, served as a counterimage of the town, unsettling the confident displays of Basque “tradition” that dominated the festivities. At the same time, the mural, painted by the children in exuberant splashes of color, reminded residents that their linguistic heritage was something to be enacted and moreover enjoyed, not simply displayed. Euskera, the mural said, was a language for having fun, for celebrations, for expressions of community solidarity, not just for political slogans. At the fiesta’s grand finale, and in view of hundreds of spectators, the slogan enjoining everyone to speak Basque was attached to hundreds of balloons and sent floating off into the sky, carrying the message of the children to the neighboring towns about to begin their own fiesta cycles.

Children and statistics, powerful symbols in the Basque cultural imagination today, were brought together in the symbolic space of the town plaza, focal point of social life, as emblems of two central strategies in the Basque nationalist struggle against what many perceive as cultural absorption. Statistics have been seized upon as a tool for diagnosing or exposing an endangered Basque identity, and Basque-speaking schoolchildren as a way of solving the problem. It is not coincidental that the young should acquire such symbolic importance in an increasingly demographic conception of the Basque nation. As the future generation, children have become the mythic harbingers of a fully restored Basque identity and culture, and they are frequently featured in propaganda promoting Basque language use. Children, I should stress, do not signify pronatalism but a change in habitus. A new generation of schoolchildren, who not only speak the mother tongue, the *ama hizkuntza*, but also read and write it, figure as the hope of a continuing Basqueland, capable of turning the somber numbers around and returning the Basque nation to a state of normalcy or good health. Despite the rhetoric of “restoration” and “revival,” the symbolic apparatus of the language campaigns are by no means promoting a return to the past. For, given the close association of literacy and print standards with the modern nation-state (Anderson 1991[1983]; Grillo 1989), Basque schoolchildren, educated in the newly created standard Basque, also signify the Basque language community’s entrance into modernity.

Such a public and dramatic display of statistics was, to my knowledge, a unique creation of Usurbil’s youth group. Although statistics on language use are readily available and sometimes printed in the mass media, I am unaware of any other town’s incorporating them into their annual fiesta. The event vividly illustrates the strategic use of quantification by activists as a kind
of collective self-portrait. That portrait, whether printed in newspapers, in books, or on the front doors of Usurbil’s ikastola, is intentionally displayed to confirm the view that Basque culture is endangered. It is certainly not the only way Basque language or culture is represented in the public sphere. In fact, recent cultural activism, the music movement, pirate radio, and magazines seem intent on linking Euskera with the future, cosmopolitan values, youth culture, and modern lifestyles. Not one but several images of the Basque language are emerging, each of which is deployed to various ends. One of the roles that language statistics seem to be playing at this particular historical moment is to help “make real” the persistence of Spanish or French linguistic domination despite the newfound autonomy. For militants in an array of oppositional cultural organizations, like Usurbil’s abertzale group, statistics on the low numbers of speakers or the low levels of language use serve to shore up demands for urgent action: more schools, more legislation, and more use of Basque. They are also potent weapons with which the militants can challenge the moderate government’s language policies and its commitment to Basque culture as a whole.

In evaluating the social and cultural consequences of the turn to quantification, we must recognize that statistics are more than effective tools in the public contest over national priorities. The public discourse on and display of language statistics are also means of constructing a new form of Basque subjectivity—that is, new ways of thinking about the self as part of a larger social pattern. In the publication of census data, the linguistic atlas, and local language campaigns such as Usurbil’s fiesta, pro-Euskera activists have begun to articulate the idea that Basque speakers are a linguistic population in the modern sense of the word: a bounded, scientifically quantifiable entity with particular characteristics, rates of growth or attrition, and patterns of behavior. Produced in and through statistical measures, the term “population” has come to denote “a natural entity, an issue about which neutral statements can be made, an object open to human control and management” (Duden 1992:146).

This is quite different from Humboldt or Herder’s romantic conception of language as a transcendental soul or geist of the nation, a conception reiterated in countless nationalist texts. Language in its statistical guise is not a spiritual or ineffable link between Basques; it is, as the atlas states explicitly, a quantifiable “social fact.” Being a Basque speaker no longer means sharing an essence or an inherited identity; it means sharing a set of behaviors or skills that can be measured and comprehended quantitatively. From this perspective, the “truth” of the language is revealed not in expressive culture, poetry, and folk songs, as the romantics argued, but through measurement. This is not to say, of course, that nationalists cease to offer eloquent testimonies to the value of the language as a unique cultural treasure. Faith in the language’s unquantifiable values abounds in Basque oral poetry, for example, and continues to fuel nationalist efforts to revive Basque (Aulestia 1981, 1982). Alongside this faith, however, we see the emergence of a new way of thinking and talking about the language community as a sociological entity, subject to economic and political forces, amenable to statistical measurement, analysis, and, of course, intervention.

Indeed, social reform or planning has historically been intimately linked with the collection of statistical knowledge. This was true for many of the statistical surveys of criminality, alcoholism, and prostitution carried out in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it is no less true for Basque language surveys today. The emergent demographic understanding of the language community has brought changes in the strategies chosen to save Euskera, as well as new ways of claiming rights and protection from the state. Concern has shifted away from the purging of Spanish loan words, a goal that obsessed the early nationalists, and greater emphasis has been placed on expanding the public use of Basque and getting it into the schools to ensure the social reproduction of the Basque speaker. The Basque parent who does not teach his or her child Euskera is viewed as nothing less than a cultural traitor, one who not only abandons the “traditional” practice of speaking Basque to children but sabotages the demographic growth
of the Basque-speaking population, helping to finish the work Franco started. The solution is not to have more children but to speak Basque more often. Increasingly, language campaigns, in appealing to individuals to speak or learn Basque, invoke demographics and statistical trends, in addition to patriotism. The individual is reminded in many ways that his or her language choices in the home or in the street have a direct impact on these trends and thereby the historical fate of the language. Patriots are asked to speak Basque at the fiestas, to read it, and to write in it, not only because it is their heritage or because it is inherently melodious, but because its use promotes a larger public presence that will help undermine the social prejudices that lead to the abandonment of Euskera. In listening to these appeals, responding to the census, and participating in surveys, the individual is brought into a kind of statistical subjectivity, encouraged to engage in a sociological monitoring of his or her own linguistic behavior and that of the population as a whole.

Finally, in the last several years, the Basque government has begun to use population statistics as a means of implementing language rights for its citizens. The idea that individuals have “language rights” is a new phenomenon in the Basque country and Spain as a whole. The first step was taken in 1979, when the Statute of Autonomy made Basque co-official with Spanish and guaranteed all residents under its jurisdiction the right to know and learn Basque. In 1983 these rights were further delineated in education and public administration with the passage of the Law of Normalization of Basque. This law went beyond guaranteeing people the right to know and learn Basque; it aimed to facilitate use of the language by giving hiring priority to Basque-speaking applicants for certain public service jobs. No sooner approved, such linguistic “affirmative action” was challenged in the Spanish courts as anticonstitutional and discriminatory to Spanish speakers.

In the ensuing controversies, Basque government officials have turned to census data on the geographic distribution of Basque speakers as a way of “objectively” resolving the conflict of competing rights. Since 1986, one’s right to use Euskera in public institutions has become partly determined by the percentage of Basque speakers in one’s municipality. So, for example, municipal and county offices in areas with high proportions of euskaldunak are required by law to have more Basque-speaking employees than those in areas with lower percentages. Like language policies adopted by Finland and Canada, those in the Basque country define access to services in the minority language not as an absolute right but as a privilege more or less guaranteed by the relative proportion of one’s “group” in society (Laponce 1987).

The government’s language policy angers many militants who would prefer a “territorial” language policy similar to that of Catalonia—that is, one mandating equal rights and duties throughout the Basque region. Anything less, they argue, is a violation of a basic cultural right and, moreover, will at best maintain Basque’s minority status, not reverse it. Recourse to population statistics and the concept of proportionality brings with it a new set of political issues and potential conflicts; no doubt we are going to see census data and statistical methods become the subject of increasing political scrutiny and public debate in the years to come. At the same time, the Basque administration gains a rhetorically powerful language of social justice that has substantial currency in the prevailing spirit of democratic pluralism of post-Franco political culture. Most important, the administration can appear fair and reasonable to all residents while still claiming to serve the needs of the authentic Basque-speaking nation. It can also avoid incurring the unrest that would inevitably ensue if it had to displace civil servants who do not know or learn Basque. Furthermore, administrators argue that “demolinguistics” help them to calculate the potential demand for Basque language services and to allocate a limited supply of Basque-speaking personnel more effectively (Gardner 1990). Statistical formulas thereby become not only “objective” and “fair” but also “practical,” and “efficient,” associated simultaneously with democratic representativeness and bureaucratic rationality. In sum, by turning to population measures, the Basque government has found a way to carve out for itself...
and its language policies a seemingly neutral ground that is both rare and advantageous in a politically charged atmosphere.

cultural politics in an age of statistics

In analyzing the collection and display of language statistics by a variety of social organizations actively pursuing Basque language revival—the Basque Language Academy, the Basque government, and a local abertzale youth group—I have wanted to draw attention to some of the ways in which numbers enter into the discursive field and tactics of contemporary Basque cultural politics. In turning language into countable things, militants and moderates have found an authoritative means of documenting Basque cultural and linguistic marginalization and of managing competing language rights. My point has been that we can most profitably look on the deployment of statistics as neither description nor pure propaganda but as a technology for the production of social knowledge and subjectivity. The quantifying sciences are a potent weapon in what is fundamentally a struggle over the terms of truth. We have seen that the decline in the numbers of speakers sometimes shores up longstanding romantic nationalist perceptions of the Basques as a besieged nation. By counting in certain ways, nationalists contest the image of the Basque country as a “region” of Spain, or of the Basque language as a language of illiterates. I have suggested that the statistical practices and categories introduce new ways of conceptualizing the Basque speaker and his or her characteristics, rights, and patriotic duties to the larger social body. I have even speculated that counting practices may be breaking down the categorical and contrasting identities of “Basque” and “non-Basque” speakers. In sum, something other than the “defense” of Basque culture or nationalist ideology is going on. Inherently multiple and ambiguous, identity is “constructed in and through discursive fields, produced through disciplines and narrative conventions” (Kondo 1990:26). At stake in the turn to science is not the liberation of an essential cultural identity that was always there, but the bringing into being of new forms of subjectivity and ways of representing and responding to cultural domination.

Basques, of course, are by no means unique in attempting to appropriate statistics as a strategy of resistance. Other minorities are seizing the symbolic power provided by numbers to protest social inequities and to articulate their own alternative truths. A particularly vivid example in the United States was the recent media campaign organized by several rap groups and the National Urban League called “Stop the Violence,” which aimed at bringing public attention to the destructive social problems facing the African American urban community (George 1990). In a booklet by the same title, statistics on poverty, crime, and mortality rates were juxtaposed with the lyrics of rap songs and personal testimonies of tragedy, creating what Roland Barthes (1982) calls “reality effects,” as a means of documenting the epidemic of violence in the African-American community. As these actions indicate, minorities understand that in the current political economy of knowledge, numbers function as authoritative “facts.” They have responded in some cases by attempting to deploy those modes of techno-representation to serve their own purposes: to make themselves visible, to make claims upon the state, and to describe who they are to themselves and to society.

What are we to make of these forms of resistance and counterdiscourse, and what implications do they have for our theories of resistance? It is clear that such tactics do not fundamentally challenge the power of statistical discourse to define social reality. Contemporary identity-based minority movements like Basque language revival resist not by refusing the worldview of statistical measurement but by strategically appropriating it. The very technologies of documentation by which the nation-state has come to power have become part of the tactics and language of contestation. This should not surprise us, because the Basque nation, culture, language, and identity are all, in part, constructs of modern forms of scientific knowledge, documentation,
and classification: anthropometry, philology, archaeology, historiography, and statistics (cf. Urla 1988, 1989). Consequently, these new forms of expert knowledge become the terms in which oppositional truths and experiences of domination are frequently voiced.

Basque activists, like African-American rappers, use statistics astutely to persuade others and to better understand themselves and their marginalization. The texts from Conflicto Lingüístico and La Lucha reveal a hope and belief that the mythos of science and numbers will reveal the truth of cultural domination, a truth not displayed in the dominant media. To interpret these uses of statistics as just savvy manipulation, however, would be to miss the very important point that statistics, rates, and social trends have become part of the ways in which subjectivity is constituted in the modern world. Articulated within these terms, minority uses of surveys and statistics do not conform to a view of resistance as something independent of, or in opposition to, dominant discourses. These are not the actions of an “authentic” resistant subject, nor are these strategies untouched by the purview of hegemonic discourse and power, but they may be, as Abu-Lughod has suggested, clues that can tell us “about forms of power and how people are caught up in them” (Abu-Lughod 1990:42). Rather than view the emergent uses of statistics as indices of “co-optation,” we may see them as indices of new sites of struggle in modern society.

As anthropologists struggling to find ways to describe and understand the historically changing structures of power, and the role that scientific knowledge and practices have played in systems of domination, we must begin to unpack and defamiliarize that most mundane of social facts—the statistic. Given the representational authority statistics often seem to enjoy in public discourse, cultural anthropologists need to be fully aware of how numerical counts operate as instruments of social description, especially in heterogeneous cultural contexts marked by conflictual or competing constructions of reality. In asking how quantifying techniques and discourses operate as technologies of power, we cannot assume that quantification is always a form of domination imposed upon an unwitting and silent populace. There is no doubt that statistical surveys have most often served various state interests. However, as the Basque language movement shows, minorities may also turn to statistics as a means of contesting state power and hegemonic constructions of social reality. Further studies of the political uses and discursive effects of statistics may help us gain greater insight into the complex ways that power, social identities, and counting intersect in modern stratified societies.

notes

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2. See Linke (1990) on the historical relationship between statistics, statecraft, and the construction of the notion of the Volk in 18th- and 19th-century German folklore studies. Also see Segal (1988), Cohn (1987), Cohn and Dirks (1988), Appadurai (1990), Le Bras (1986), and the revised version of Anderson’s Imagined Communities (1991[1983]), which contains a new chapter on the roles of the census, map, and museum in the invention of community.


4. For a discussion of the differences between ancient and modern census taking, see Starr (1987). Stigler (1986) and Porter (1986) provide useful overviews of the emergence of statistics as a social science in the 19th century. Foucault (1979:12–14) situates the mandate for a statistical knowledge of the population in...
Europe in the rise of the administrative state, whose aim was no longer securing obedience to the authority of the ruler, but the efficient regulation, optimization, and management of life. Ian Hacking’s work has gone the furthest in bringing Foucauldian conceptions of knowledge and power to the analysis of statistical discourse (1981, 1982, 1986, 1990).

The novelty of the statistical view of the world is emphasized in the work of certain philosophers and historians of science who argue that statistics, as well as probability theory, enabled a profound, even revolutionary, shift in our ways of understanding the world, chance, the social sphere, and human behavior. See the two-volume collection *The Probabilistic Revolution*, edited by Lorenz Kruger, and others (Kruger, Daston, and Heidelberger 1987; Kruger, Gigerenzer, and Morgan 1987); and also see Rabinow (1989), Hacking (1990), Donzelet (1988), and Horn (1988).

6. Health care is an arena in which individuals increasingly confront statistical assessments of themselves. Recent studies of genetic counseling, for example, point to the role ethnography can play in giving us a nuanced understanding of how age, class, and ethnicity influence the degree to which patients accept, reject, or redefine the worldview of statistical risk (Handwerker 1989; Rapp 1991).


8. Partial administrative statistical surveys have a long history in Spain as they do in many other European countries. Spain’s first major compilation of national statistical information was published in 1850. In 1856 the Comisión General de Estadística was created and two years later began publishing the *Anuario Estadistico de España* (cf. Sánchez-Lafuente 1975; Sanz Serrano 1956).

9. Signs of a growing concern with the sociological dimensions of the linguistic population were apparent as early as the 1920s. There was some talk of producing a new linguistic atlas at the time; however, most attention was devoted to the study of Basque grammar, dialectology, and standardization (Urla 1989).

10. Other sociological studies correlating language with political and demographic features were carried out during this time (see, for example, Linz et al. 1981), but my concern here is with internally initiated studies which explicitly addressed themselves to the Basque people.

11. In his treatise ¿Qué Sómos? (What Are We?), published in 1895, Arana identified language, race, laws, customs, and history as the five fundamental features of the Basque nation. In general, pre–civil war nationalism tended to emphasize Basque descent, manifested by surnames, and adherence to Catholicism more than it did language (Arana 1965; Granja 1985). Further, while all Basques would probably agree that Euskera is an important aspect of their cultural heritage, many consider themselves to be ethnically Basque even though they do not speak it (cf. Linz 1985).

12. On the prominent role of students and urban intellectuals in ethnic minority movements, see Smith (1981) and McDonald (1989). The latter’s study of the Breton movement offers many parallels with the present analysis.

13. Established by the Language Academy in 1968, AKE operates a network of community-based night schools (gau eskolak) throughout the seven Basque provinces, teaching oral and written Basque to native and nonnative speakers.

14. In 1986 the moderate Basque Nationalist Party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco) or PNV, lost majority control of the autonomous Basque government and was forced to form a coalition government with the Spanish Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español), or PSOE. In the opinion of some language educators and administrators, pressure from PSOE has contributed to the slowdown in implementing language normalization.

15. The Basque provinces are also frequently referred to as “Euskadi,” a term for the Basque nation invented by Sabino Arana, or País Vasco or Pays Basque (Basque country) in Spanish and French, respectively. Although Basque nationalists typically refer to themselves as a separate “nation” or “people” (herria) and the Basque provinces have enjoyed varying degrees of political and economic autonomy over the centuries, they have not been a single independent political unit since the Kingdom of Navarre split apart at the beginning of the 11th century.

16. The term “normalization,” believed to have been introduced by the Catalan sociolinguist Luis Aracil (Vallverdu 1991), remains largely ambiguous in meaning in the Basque country. The definition offered by another sociolinguist, Rafael Ninyoles—“placing a language on an equal footing with other languages (neither ‘above’ nor ‘below’): on the same level” (1972:75)—is virtually identical to the one given in *Conflicto Lingüístico* (Euskaltzaindia 1979:203). In the 1984 linguistic atlas, normalization is described at one point as a situation, rather than a process, in which “the population, or at least the immense majority . . . have Basque as their own and customary language [lengua propia y habitual]” (Olabuenaga 1984:12). As it is currently understood, normalization involves deliberate interventions on two fronts: the linguistic corpus and social patterns of use.

17. Abertzale in Euskera refers to a Basque patriot. It is predominantly, though not exclusively, used by members of the radical wing of Basque nationalism to describe themselves. The youth group in Usurbil identified itself as abertzale, patriotic, but did not claim any particular political affiliation.

18. In an analysis of somewhat similar to the one offered here, Bernard Cohn has argued that the census in 19th-century India confronted Indians with “the question of who they were and what their social and cultural systems were” (1987:248). He suggests that it was probably the enumerators, rather than the whole population, who became most directly engaged with this mode of self-knowledge. It would seem reasonable to assume that the statistical objectification of language use in Usurbil also had its greatest impact on the
survey-takers themselves. However, one would need further ethnographic data to determine how both activists and nonactivists interpreted the survey.

19. Children not only signify a future Basque-speaking nation, they also help to defuse an otherwise potentially divisive language conflict. As Woolard (1983) has noted in discussing the Catalan movement, the use of cartoon figures of children in language propaganda helps to make language revival policies appear less threatening, more light-hearted and playful, than an imposition of the state upon its citizens. For further examples of the symbolic role of children in Basque language campaigns see del Valle (1988).

20. Policies concerned with sustaining and expanding the Basque-speaking population would seem to have special impact on women. Traditionally associated with the home and childrearing, women are perceived as bearing a special responsibility for teaching Basque language and cultural values to young children (del Valle et al. 1985).

21. The relationship between language statistics and language use rights was established by Decree 250/25 (November 1986), Uso y Normalización del Euskera en las Administraciones Públicas de la Comunidad Autónoma de Euskadi. This law lays out the criteria determining whether Basque will be a considered a requirement or simply extra “merit” for certain civil servant positions in the public administration of the Autonomous Community. The law establishes language requirements for positions according to the relative proportion of Basque speakers in each area, along with various other criteria having to do with the nature of the job and the degree to which it requires interaction with the public (see note 22 below). Municipalities and counties are divided into five categories, based on their percentages of Basque speakers: 0 to 20 percent (1), 20 to 40 percent (2), 40 to 60 percent (3), 60 to 80 percent (4), 80 to 100 percent (5). For purposes of the law, Basque speakers include those who claim to speak Basque “well” or “with difficulty.” Note that in the 1984 linguistic atlas, the category of “Basque speakers” (euskaldunak), is restricted to those who say they speak Basque “well.”

22. This approach follows in principle what sociologists of language call the “personality” rather than the “territorial” approach to language rights (McRae 1975). The territorial approach treats the language community as an (ideally) homogenous whole in which each individual is accorded identical language rights and obligations. The personality approach, in contrast, treats society as an internally differentiated entity, and seeks to accommodate the linguistic preferences and needs of minorities by providing services selectively. Associated with these distinct notions of the linguistic population are distinct notions of linguistic justice. The territorial approach, following in the tradition of individualism, advocates treating everyone exactly the same, while the personality approach, aligned with pluralism, advocates apportioning goods and services on the basis of differential needs—or in this case, the proportionality of one’s group (cf. Williams 1981).

23. The formula for determining the percentage of bilingual posts in a given public institution is the percentage of people who claim a good oral command of Basque plus the percentage of those who claim to speak it with difficulty, divided by two. Administrators are of course aware of and even explicit about the fact that politics are deeply implicated in these statistical formulas. In a footnote to his address to a Welsh language planning group, Gardner notes that “the choice of percentages of this sort (and their rigid or flexible application) is not a technical matter, but a political one: there is no ultimate technical justification for this particular formula” (1990:29, n.3).

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