

Andreas Hess

“Working the Waves”: The Plebeian Culture and Moral Economy of Traditional Basque Fishing

Brotherhoods The Basque fishing fraternity (*cofradía de mareantes*) is the institutional manifestation of a rich local plebeian culture and the moral economy that once grounded it. Its original *raison d'être* was to facilitate a collective voice for local fishermen. Political and economic conditions, however, began to submerge this collective voice during the late nineteenth century, eventually muting it entirely within the twentieth century. A proper understanding of the *cofradía's* long history, as well as its demise at the hands of modernization, requires a familiarity with the concept of *hidalguía*, the notion that every Basque was a nobleman.

In his groundbreaking study *El 'igualitarismo' vasco: mito y realidad* (Basque Egalitarianism: Myth and Reality), Otazu attempted to deconstruct the idea that since time immemorial, a notion of egalitarianism has prevailed in the Basque Country. Against the idea that every Basque was a *hidalgo*—a nobleman—Otazu shows that some people were not only more noble than others but also that the very idea of equal and widespread noble origin usually served those in the ascendancy, often helping the powerful to defend their privileged positions. Contrary to the idea that Basque society and culture were somehow free of class distinctions, and against nationalist tendencies to idealize a glorious past, Otazu describes the many historical layers of class conflict that arose when a country embarked on the long transition from the Middle Ages to the era of modern capitalism.¹

Otazu's groundbreaking study led to a number of important investigations that related social inequality and class to modernization. Yet, notwithstanding its insight that the stratification of Basque society was not just imposed by the outside world (in this case, Castile or the Spanish state), two specific points were obliterated.

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1 Alfonso de Otazu, *El 'igualitarismo' vasco: mito y realidad* (San Sebastián, 1986).

ated. First, Otazu and those historians and social scientists who accepted the logic of his argument looked only at the objective dimensions and the historically verifiable data and circumstances that supported their claim; the collective-subjective and moral dimensions of past and present conflicts disappeared. Second, attention to peculiar Basque motives and occurrences, such as the obvious appeal to the common good and the prevailing egalitarian and subjective sense of justice, drifted, at best, into the background.

In a new study, *El espíritu emprendedor de los vascos* (The Entrepreneurial Spirit of the Basques), which in many ways extends the argument first presented in *El 'igualitarismo' vasco*, Otazu and his co-author take the argument about the instrumental aspect of ideological egalitarianism a step further, laying the foundations for the proper “export” of the (male) Basque surplus population to the Kingdom of Castile and the Castilian colonial empire to become “spiritual” entrepreneurs in an almost Weberian sense. They show these Basque entrepreneurs replacing the old supply structure of the elite, consisting mainly of Jews and/or *conversos*. What remains problematical, however, is the view of a “trickle-down” effect of this new Basque egalitarian ideology. Not by chance is the subject hero of the new study the *emprendedor* (the entrepreneur)—almost never the Basque shepherd, peasant, artisan, or fisherman, all of whom are at the receiving end of the modernization effort. In this “top-down” history (maybe against the intent of the authors), Otazu and Durana rely heavily on sources that stem mostly from those who had the privileges of writing and power. The subaltern classes rarely expressed themselves in any formal way. The Basque *emprendedores*, however, the pro-active modernizers, must have also produced a counterweight to the documented view, expressing the reluctance of the subaltern classes to be only pawns in the modernizing effort.²

Although the two studies mentioned above have unearthed a wealth of historical, anthropological, and sociological material, they remain incomplete. A different conceptual framework, however, produces other readings and leads to new insights, and a different emphasis helps to contextualize the rich empirical findings and lend a new interpretation to them. The conceptual approach of Edward P. Thompson and the insights of other social scientists,

2 Otazu and José Ramón Díaz de Durana, *El espíritu emprendedor de los vascos* (Madrid, 2008).

such as Albert O. Hirschman, are of primary relevance in this respect. Thompson's work on plebeian culture and moral economy offers an insight into why and how the egalitarianism ethos emerged, showing that it was not just handed down from the elite and simply accepted. A Thompsonian perspective further explicates the persistence of this ethos, as well as its eventual demise. Such an approach can examine social and economic conflict without subordinating local, regional, and even national contexts to ruling-class behavior or treating them as the mere "consolidation processes" of new ascending classes striving for elevated and distinguished positions. It can take a deeper look into what have been called "Basque peculiarities" or "singularities" without stereotyping, reducing, or confining them to a purely nationalist discourse.

In his writings on late eighteenth-century England, Thompson suggested that plebeian culture and moral economy were intrinsically linked—*plebeian culture* being one of his auxiliary terms to describe a situation in which *class* deviated from strict Marxist assumptions. Thompson proposed a conceptual framework that placed less emphasis on the objective notions of class and class consciousness in favor of the subjective-collective contributions that the "crowd" or the "plebs" made to culture and customs. Thompson preferred to see the older prototypes or forerunners of the English working class as heterogeneous constellations consisting of many dimensions and layers in which traditional popular customs played a major role. These customs tended to sustain a moral economy that could assume various meanings—common rights, norms or obligations, and day-to-day habits or practices—but that, taken together, could constitute a force that was alien or opposed to the powers that be.³

Thompson was not the only scholar to write about plebeian culture and moral economy; Smith did so much earlier. Moreover, in *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), Hirschman demonstrated that early political economy was motivated by a strong moral impetus. In other studies, he fine-tuned his general approach by inventing a number of closely related concepts that refer to the micro-links between political economy, customs, and morals. If applied to the Basque context, and to Thompson's larger

3 Edward P. Thompson, *Plebeische Kultur und moralische Ökonomie* (Frankfurt, 1980); *idem*, *Customs in Common* (London 1991).

notion of plebeian economy and moral economy, Hirschman's approach could provide, if not precisely a history from below, at least a window into the other side of the modernization process, which so far has remained a conceptual black box for historians, sociologists, and anthropologists of the Basque Country.⁴

THE LONG HISTORY OF THE COFRADÍA The peculiar shape of the Cantabrian coast offers only a few easily accessible opportunities for embarkation. Hence, the first efforts to build and fortify landing places were focused on areas where navigable rivers ended in the sea and provided natural access. From east to west, these *villas ribereñas* were Fuentarrabía, Orío, Deba, Lekeitio, Gernika/Mundaka, and the settlements at the mouth of the river Nervión. Starting in the eleventh and stretching into the twelfth century, anchorage and simple launch facilities developed into proper ports, encouraged by a parallel take-off phase of two types of activity, whaling and coastal fishing (*pesca litoral* or *pesca de bajura*). By the fourteenth century, coastal fishing had developed to such an extent that Basque fishermen were encouraged to try their luck further afield, in what would become known as *pesca de altura* (high sea fishing).⁵

In the sixteenth century, coastal fishing continued to be practiced, but coastal whale hunting had almost completely disappeared. Whale hunting continued, together with cod fishing, only along the coast of Newfoundland. At the end of the sixteenth century, the Spanish Armada and its campaigns began to place a heavy demand on both the financial and the human resources of the ports. Despite these and other constraints, like changing patterns of fish migration and breeding grounds, regular fishing expeditions continued, covering the entire area of the North Atlantic and returning enough profit to cope.⁶

4 Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); *idem*, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton, 1977); *idem*, *Entwicklung, Markt und Moral* (München, 1989); Hess, "The 'Economy Of Morals' and Its Applications—an Attempt to Understand Some Central Concepts in the Work of Albert O. Hirschman," *Review of International Political Economy*, VI (1999), 338–359.

5 Julio Caro Baroja, *El laberinto vasco* (Madrid, 2003), 244–245. This paragraph and the following ones owe much to Mariano Ciriquiain Gaztarro's detailed history of ports in the Basque Country in *Los puertos marítimos del País Vasco* (San Sebastián, 1986) and Josu Iñaki Erkoreka Gervasio's comprehensive study of *cofradías* in *Análisis Histórico-Institucional de las Cofradías de Mareantes del País Vasco* (Vitoria, 1991).

6 Basques were both winners and losers in their dealings with the Spanish Empire and its

The increasingly complex fishing operations demanded an appropriate representation of interests and a functioning organization responsible for the ports. The oldest written documents that reveal the existence of the *cofradías* date from the fourteenth century, though they are probably just the legitimation of a much older activity. The influences that led to the institutionalization of *cofradías* were initially religious ones. The establishment of a corporation for professions and jobs had already taken root in France, the idea eventually reaching the Cantabrian coast and thence spreading from nearby monastic orders. Yet the speed with which the *cofradías* went into practice hint at the unique professional conditions of fishermen. Exposed to the sometimes brutal forces of nature and often restrained from working by seasonal circumstances beyond their control, the fishermen were naturally inclined to solidarity and mutual aid.

The fishermen's organizations were first supported in their effort by the Kingdom of Navarre, which equipped them with special rights (*fueros*). These judicial privileges, and the exclusivity of the *cofradías*, could have raised the suspicion of the Kingdom of Navarre's conqueror, the Castilian monarchy, about their independence. But the two sides eventually came to terms with each other. The authorities either renewed the *fueros* or replaced them with other official authorizations, including the ratification of *ordenanzas* (statutes) with fiscal agreements and legal procedures that the fishermen's assembly had to follow and enforce. This process of amending and refining the statutes, which continued throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, was an attempt to find balance along the thin line between solidary aspects, common traditions, and the complicated politics of the

naval power. Although some Basques benefited from first building and then helping to maintain the Empire (including its naval force and commercial trade), other Basques who were not part of the colonial enterprise were heavily burdened with taxes. Moreover, although fishing for whales and cod was prized in some parts of the Spanish Empire, fishing closer to home was not. The salt tax was an issue, as were other levies. From the sixteenth century onward, the money and men that the *cofradía* had to contribute to the *levas de marinera*, the levies that kept the Spanish royal fleet afloat, seriously damaged the political economy of fishing on the Basque coast. In a study of Bermeo's contribution and taxation levels, Juan Gracia Cárcamo, "Las levas de marinería y la cofradía des pescadores de Bermeo en el Siglo XVIII," in *idem et al.*, *Historia de la economía marítima del País Vasco* (San Sebastián, 1983), 97–134, reported that the levies almost bankrupted the local *cofradía*. The high levels of taxation may also explain the absence of an early capitalist take-off phase in Spain. The demands of high taxation, however, should not imply that other factors (complex migration patterns of fish or declining fish stocks, for example) did not play a role in the diminishing returns of fishing communities.

Basque lands, each with their unique constitutional-historical design and their respective local dimensions in the towns and *villas* and market forces. Table 1 shows the main developments in each Basque port until the late eighteenth century.⁷

Table 1 clearly shows a continuum starting with the official acknowledgment and the granting of special rights in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, leading to a gradual formalization of the fishermen's confraternities in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and, in part, sixteenth centuries. These developments are followed by the further rationalization and improvement of the related infrastructure even beyond the eighteenth century.

What the table does not make explicit are two slowly developing trends. The first one relates to the earliest harbors and *cofradías*. Although they were located at the mouth of rivers providing easy access, they could not survive into modern times because they did not allow the newer fishing vessels to dock—the main examples being Zarautz, Deba, Ea, Mundaka, and Plentzia. Their business slowly transferred to neighboring ports—Getaria (Zarautz), Motrico (Deba), Lekeitio (Ea), Bermeo (Mundaka), Bilbao, and, again, Bermeo (Plentzia). The second trend concerned two huge, joint harbor complexes—that of Pasaia and San Sebastián and that of Bilbao and the other ports situated on the river Nervión. These big harbors developed an internal division of labor between merchant and fishing activities (San Sebastián and Bilbao had both *cofradías* and a consulate). A later and further distinction—that between these two merchant ports and all of the smaller fishing harbors—affected the entire Cantabrian coast (Bilbao versus Bermeo is a good example). Pasaia/San Sebastián and Bilbao, together with the Nervión ports, came to dominate the

7 Erkoreka Gervasio, *Análisis Histórico-Institucional*, 35–36; Tomás Urzainqui Mina and José María De Olaizola Iguñiz, *La Navarra Marítima* (Pamplona, 1998), 167–252. A more detailed account of the development of each *cofradía* in Hegoalde (the southern, Spanish part of the Basque Country) is provided by Erkoreka in *Análisis Histórico-Institucional*. The appendix to this study contains also all of the original historical documents that are related to the history of the Spanish Basque *cofradías* (441–664). The documentation for the ports and *cofradías* of the French part of the Basque Country (Iparralde) has been excluded because of the different path that they took after the French Revolution, when all feudal institutions and associations that held special rights were disallowed. Erkoreka's account of the history of the individual ports and *cofradías* relies in part on Ciriquiain Gaiztarro, *Los puertos marítimos*. Erkoreka distinguishes between “old” and “new” *cofradías*, although it is highly likely that a *cofradía* existed even before a town had received official recognition. Erkoreka himself acknowledges that it might be better to imagine the emergence of the different ports as a continuum rather than as a separate historical development.

Table 1 Main Developments of Basque Ports and Cofradías from the Thirteenth to the Nineteenth Century

| | FIRST OFFICIAL TITLES OF TOWN ("CARTA PUEBLA"); FUERO GRANTED OR OTHER OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION | FIRST MENTION OR OFFICIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF PORT; CONFIRMED EXISTENCE OF COFRADIA OR FIRST WRITTEN COFRADIA STATUTES ("ORDENANZAS") | NEW OR MODIFIED COFRADIA STATUTES; OTHER SIGNS OF MODERNIZATION OR RELEVANT PORT ACTIVITIES |
|------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Fuentarrabia/ Hondarribia | 1203: fuero de Navarra granted to Irun and Hondarribia | 1339: existence of cofradía confirmed | |
| Pasajes/Pasaia | 1320: titles of town | 1799: existence of cofradía mentioned | 1740: home base of the Compañía de Caracas 1778: home base of the Compañía de Filipinas |
| San Sebastián/ Donostia | 1014: first mention; 1200: <i>fuero</i> granted | 1489 Cofradía Santa Catalina; Cofradía de San Pedro | 1807: official cofradía statutes 1539: statutes modified 1642: statutes modified |
| Orio | 1379: fuero de San Sebastián granted | 1320: existence of cofradía first mentioned | |
| Zarautz | 1237: fuero de Navarra granted to San Sebastián | 1465: existence of cofradía first mentioned | |
| Getaria | 1201: confirmation of privileges; 1204: fuero of San Sebastián granted | 1337: existence of cofradía first mentioned; 1658: written cofradía statutes | 1738: construction of new port after the old pier has been damaged by storm 1747: statutes modified 1753 and 1783: storms damage infrastructure considerably 1825: statutes modified again |

Table 1 (Continued)

| | FIRST OFFICIAL TITLES OF TOWN ("CARTA PUEBLA"); FUERO GRANTED OR OTHER OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION | FIRST MENTION OR OFFICIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF PORT; CONFIRMED EXISTENCE OF COFRADIA OR FIRST WRITTEN COFRADIA STATUTES ("ORDENANZAS") | NEW OR MODIFIED COFRADIA STATUTES; OTHER SIGNS OF MODERNIZATION OR RELEVANT PORT ACTIVITIES |
|---------------------|--|---|---|
| Zumaia | 1292: first mention; 1347: fuero Navarra de San Sebastián | 1385: officially acknowledged as port; 1610: cofradía founded | 1925: track and train connection between Zumarraga and Zumaia |
| Deva/Deba | 1294: fuero of Vitoria granted; 1343: titles reconfirmed | 1448: Cofradía de Mareantes de Deba and written statutes | |
| Motrico/ Mutriku | 1209: titles of town | 1599: Cofradía de Mareantes de San Pedro and written statutes | 1815–1831: cofradía owns the entire <i>muelle</i> |
| Ondarroa | 1327: titles of town; Fuero Navarra de Logroño | 1353: first mention of cofradía 1593: first written cofradía statutes | 1638: cofradía statutes modified; 1847–1895: improvement to piers in the harbor |
| Lekeitio | 1325: titles of town; Fuero Navarra de Logroño | 1334: officially acknowledged as port 1485: royal confirmation 1488: first written cofradía statutes 1884: acknowledgement as port | 1892–1932: canalization of river— 1766: statutes modified |
| Ea | 1777: first mention of settlement | | |
| Elanxobe | 1783: construction of <i>muelle</i> ; 1782: titles of town after separating from Ibaranguela | 1850s: development of port | |

- Mundaka
 1335: first mention
 1606: development of port facilities
 1656: first mention of natural harbor
 1697: first mention of existence of cofradía
 1755: first written statutes
- Bermeo
 1082: first mention;
 1236: Fuero Navarro de Logroño
 1269: titles of town known to exist
 1352/53: Cofradía de Mareantes
 1353: written statutes
 1503: existence of pier for disembarkation officially documented
- Plentzia
 1299: titles of town and Fuero Navarro de Logroño
 1524: written statutes
- Algorta
 1545: mention of port development and improvements
- Bilbao
 1300: titles of town
 1372: first maritime code granting Bilbao's port freedom and privileges
 1511: guarantee of primacy over other ports of the Nervión river; with the founding of the Cofradía de Mareantes y Mercadores (later: Consulado de Bilbao), development of internationally operating merchant fleet
 1527: construction of improved port facilities
- 1833: statutes modified
 1723: repair work to piers
 1862–1881: modernization of harbor infrastructure
 1866: statutes modified
 existence of three ports: Puerto Chico, Puerto Mayor and Portuondo
 1694: statutes modified
 1791: statutes modified
 1858: construction of harbor facilities
 1785: full port facilities
 1658: construction of muelle in Deusto
 1712: existence of two access canals (one via Santurtzi and the other via Algorta)

Table 1 (Continued)

| | FIRST OFFICIAL TITLES OF TOWN ("CARTA PUEBLA"); FUERO GRANTED OR OTHER OFFICIAL DOCUMENTATION | FIRST MENTION OR OFFICIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF PORT; CONFIRMED EXISTENCE OF COFRADIA OR FIRST WRITTEN COFRADIA STATUTES ("ORDENANZAS") | NEW OR MODIFIED COFRADIA STATUTES; OTHER SIGNS OF MODERNIZATION OR RELEVANT PORT ACTIVITIES |
|------------------------|--|---|---|
| Portugalete | 1322: titles of town; Fuero Navarro de Logroño | 1463: agreement between Portugalete and Bilbao ports 1532: construction of new <i>muelle</i> 1651: cofradía founded 1652: written cofradía statutes 1670: first modification of statutes | 1803: cofradía statutes modified; although the Consulado de Bilbao and the Casa de Contratación are located in Bilbao proper, Portugalete continues to function as the "proper" harbor of Bilbao |
| Santurce/ Santurtzi | 1075: first mention; 1318: existence of old town and church confirmed | 1561: activities confirmed without proper harbor facilities 1690: first mention of existence of cofradía | |

NOTE The table lists only the ports of the southern Basque country (*Hegoalde*) in geographical order from east to west.

SOURCES Mariano Ciriquiain Gaztaro, *Los puertos marítimos del País Vasco* (San Sebastián, 1986); Josu Iñaki Erkoreka Gervasio, *Análisis Histórico-Institucional de las Cofradías de Mercantes del País Vasco* (Vitoria, 1991); Tomás Urzaínqui Mima and José María De Olazola Iguñiz, *La Navarra Marítima* (Pamplona, 1998).

merchant trade, while the rest of the ports became harbors where fishing was the dominant form of activity.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, signs of change became visible. New liberal ideas began to challenge the medieval exclusivity and monopoly of the *cofradías*. But not until the beginning of the nineteenth century did this change in outlook begin to threaten the existence of the *cofradías*. Its political and judicial implementation proved to be sporadic and often inconsistent. In 1813, for example, a new law established freedom of industry only to be withdrawn two years later and then re-introduced in 1820. The validity of the law was finally confirmed once and for all in 1834 by royal decree.

In the Basque Country, one association subscribed heavily to the liberal agenda, the Real Sociedad Vasgongada de los Amigos del País—comprised of Basque and Spanish intellectuals dedicated to the liberation of rural Basque society from its medieval conditions. As part of its agenda, the society conducted various campaigns against the *cofradías*, which in their mind represented the old regime. The government took their advice seriously and issued official decrees against the *cofradías* first in 1842 and again in 1847. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of the *cofradías* was re-confirmed in 1848, and it remained secure enough to withstand another official attack in 1864. Only in 1873 did the government finally succeed in abolishing the exclusive rights of Basque fishing communities.⁸

The *cofradías* survived the legal wrangles mainly because the liberal proposals and models did not turn out to be viable alternatives, as in other instances when established practice eventually managed to trump ideology in the Basque lands. During the course of the nineteenth century, at least in the Basque country, no industrial-capitalist fishing project was able to replace or even challenge the old institution of the *cofradía*. Two factors, alluded to above, contributed to its persistence. The first was the peculiar sense of equality/nobility (*hidalguía*)—derived from the old *fueros*—by which the Basques defined themselves. The fishermen's brotherhood represented the values of solidarity, togetherness, and respect for the individual—within a profession fraught with physical risk. The second factor was the natural encourage-

8 Ernesto López Losa, “*Unas notas sobre el asocianismos pesquero en el norte de España: Las cofradías de mareantes del País Vasco*,” undated ms., 11.

ment that these values acquired through membership in an exclusive and monopolistic assembly. Against such shared experiences of the brotherhood, the new liberal ideas sounded like a threat—not only because they seemed to impugn the idea of mutual support under hazardous working conditions but also because they subverted a traditional way of life that had provided the fishermen with basic social security and income for centuries. Egalitarianism, as the *cofradías* construed it, was an ideology that worked.⁹

FUNCTION AND CRISIS OF THE COFRADÍA Although the statutes of the different *cofradías* represent the particular local conditions and constituencies from which they derived, they also shared, and continued to shape, many common features and traditions. The functioning of the *cofradías* until the late eighteenth century, and their relationship to local communities and local administrations, or to other ports and *cofradías*, take the structure of concentric circles. The inner circle consisted of the local confraternity or the brotherhood itself, including all of those who were directly involved in fishing at a particular port—the owner of the boats or vessels (*maestros* and *dueños*); then the working crews or fishermen (*marineros* or *pescadores*); and finally the helping hands and apprentices (*grumetes* and *muchachos*). Surrounding these groups were the people who, by virtue of election and employment, supported the *cofradías* and guaranteed their proper functioning—the executive head (*mayordomo*), the chief accountant or auctioneer and his bookkeeper (*contestador* and *contra-contestador*), the signalmen (*señeleros*), and so on. On occasion, family dependents of members, representatives, and employees (including women) would also have had access to *cofradías*; however, they would not have had the right to vote.¹⁰

9 José María Portillo Valdés, “El país de los fueros: Política, instituciones y Derecho en las provincias vascas durante la Edad Moderna,” in José María Imízcoz (ed.), *Redes familiares y patronazgo: Aproximación al entramado social del País Vasco y Navarra en el Antiguo Régimen (siglos XV–XIX)* (Bilbao, 2001), 83–112. The Basque *cofradías* differed from their Cantabrian, Asturian, and Galician counterparts further to the west, where the old institutions were abolished, and the fishing sector became subject to industrial development much earlier. See Erkoreka Gervasio, *Análisis Histórico-Institucional*, 80; Kepa Astorkiza and Ikerne Del Valle, “Fisheries Policy and the *Cofradías* in the Basque Country: The Case of Albacore and Anchovy,” University of Navarra working papers (Pamplona, 1988), 5.

10 The literature on women in the fishing sector is still small compared to the overall scholarly output. For instructive insights on women in fishing communities, see, for example, Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, “Fishmongers and Shipowners: Women in Maritime Communities

The wider circle of people in various degrees of contact and exchange with the *cofradías* included fish merchants, both small and large; the operators of fish and tinning factories; intermediate buyers for national and international markets; occasionally workers contracted for the maintenance of the port infrastructure or the construction or launching of ships; and members of the local political administration—an entity that always, however, remained separate. Finally, in the outer circle were the *cofradías*' contacts with neighboring ports and other *cofradías* and the relevant provincial or state agencies and authorities.

The most important decision-making powers rested with the general assembly of the confraternity, the *junta de cofrades*. In its annual meetings, it elected an executive council that could represent the general interests. Other meetings might have a consultative function but not a legislative one. The executive council mainly handled pressing matters that could not wait for the annual meeting: the conditions for sailing, the determination of local quotas, the discussion of changing prices, or the settling of internal conflicts.¹¹

The initiative in calling for a general assembly lay with the *mayordomo*, who was also elected during the annual meeting. However, the mayor of the town was often present during elections, functioning as the president and ensuring the order of the annual proceedings. To guarantee full representation, the statutes of the *cofradías* demanded that all members attend, and help out at, the annual meeting. In the early years, assemblies took place in a church or one of the local shrines, but progressive secularization eventually led them to a local *plaza*, hospital, the house of the

of Early Modern Portugal," *Sixteenth Century Journal*, XXXI (2001), 7–23; C. Joanne Crawford, "The Position of Women in a Basque Fishing Community," in William A. Douglass, Richard W. Etulain, and William H. Jacobsen, Jr. (eds.), *Essays in Honour of Jon Bilbao, Desert Research Institute Publications of the Social Sciences* (Reno, 1977), XIII, 145–152; Juan Antonio Rubio-Ardanaz, *Lemanes, sardineras y pescadores: Realidades marítimas en perspectiva antropológica* (Santurtzi, 2006).

11 The following descriptive paragraphs about the *cofradías* are based mainly on Erkoreka Gervasio, *Análisis Histórico-Institucional* and the historical documents reprinted therein, as well as on Juan Thalamas Labandibar, *Aspectos de la vida social vasca: el campesino, el pescador, el obrero* (Zarautz, 1935); Juan Garmendia Larrañaga, *Gremios, oficios y cofradías en el País Vasco* (San Sebastián, 1979); Juan J. Bikandi, "Aspectos sociales de la actividad pesquera: Ciclos laborales y Compañías," *Itsasoa*, IV (1989), 149–174; Gracia Cárcamo, "Los conflictos sociales en la cofradía de pescadores de Bermeo a través de sus ordenanzas," in *Congreso de Estudios Históricos: Vizcaya en la Edad Media* (Donostia, 1985), 371–373.

mayordomo, a building near the harbor or—at a later stage—their own facilities.

Sometimes two mayordomos were elected (effectively job sharing) to minimize the risk that a *cofradía* would be without leadership during temporary absences; otherwise, the elder of the two usually had the final say. In most *cofradías*, mayordomos had to be respected and knowledgeable people with good communication skills; many of them were *maestros* or *dueños* of vessels. Once elected, they were obligated to serve, and they could not go to sea or to accept any other post. Since they were in control of the *cofradías*' finances, they could not bid in the *subasta*, the *cofradías*' public auction of the catch, over which they often had to preside. They received either a regular salary or a fair share of the sale from the overall catch.

Usually election procedures allowed for more than one candidate (the number of candidates depending on whether one or two mayordomos were to be elected). Election procedures varied; they were not always explained or made explicit in the statutes. The normal method entailed exiting through the door of the assembly. Some ports required the highest number of votes for election, and others a full majority.

Mayordomos had support teams. Since an administration had to account for its activities and report back to its constituency, it was of utmost importance that the books be kept in proper order. *Cofradías* typically employed a *contador* and a *contra-contador* (the chief accountant and his bookkeeper) to manage the accounts and retained an auctioneer (*ventador*) to preside over the public fish auction (unless the mayordomo did so). Most *cofradías* also had a limited number of other staff, occasionally referred to as *guardas*, to provide security and function as watchmen. Others might be responsible for keeping an eye on the catch or doing minor jobs during public auctions.

Señeros (signalmen) had the important tasks of controlling the arrival, docking, and departure of all boats and vessels and enforcing a mayordomo's decisions involving security and permission to sail, which were often made in consultation with others. Before the arrival of personal watches and home clocks, *señeros* might also have to organize the wake-up call for the fishermen. Many *cofradías* employed an *atalayero* (watchman) to spot whales from a watchtower and inform the fishermen and whalers of a potential

catch, as well as a *capellán* to organize various religious functions for the fishermen in conjunction with a church or a chapel (the confraternity originated as a deeply religious organization).

The main event for every *cofradía* was the public auction and the sale of the catch. In the early days, when communication along the coast was limited, transport complicated, and methods of preserving fish limited to salting and marinating, the *cofradías* preferred that the fish on sale come from local waters, be caught by local fishermen, and be sold locally to local buyers. Ideally, the whole process was to take place within a time frame that allowed for maximum freshness of the catch. Eventually, these rules were relaxed, as communication, transport, and methods of preservation improved. Provisions were made for more flexible scenarios, such as the possibility of home-based vessels selling their catches elsewhere, nonlocal ships selling their catches at the home harbor, and *cofradías* reaching agreement about respective payments made, and so on.

A controlled and centralized market meant that fishermen did not have to compete with each other for the timing of the sale and that they could protect themselves as a group from covert deals. Collective sale still rewarded individual effort. Furthermore, a public auction could influence and regulate prices—most importantly, introduce minimum prices—provide enough of a critical mass to permit an equilibrium between supply and demand, and guarantee regular transactions known in advance.¹²

After the auction came the *partija* or *inauta* (the redistribution pro rata), which included a *cofradía*'s *manta*—the portion of the *monte mayor* that derived from the sale of the entire catch before all other costs (that is, before the *reparto* or *monte menor* from which the facilitator and crew were paid). The *cofradía*'s share varied by port and period, but it generally did not exceed 6 percent of the *monte mayor*. Payments from the proceedings of the sale did not constitute a *cofradía*'s only income; the *cofradía* also received payments from fishermen for mooring and entering/leaving the harbor, as well as the taxation from non-home-based sales and various fines.¹³

12 See Thalamas Labandibar, *Aspectos de la vida social vasca*, 102–103, for a detailed description of auction procedure.

13 Ander Delgado Cendagortagarza, *Bermeo en el siglo XX: Política y conflicto en un municipio pesquero vizcaino (1912–1955)* (Zarautz, 1998), 48–49.

A *cofradía's* budget provided for its members' well-being, paid for cultural and religious services, and contributed to the maintenance and development of its infrastructure. Whenever members were unable to work because of poor health, accident, or bad weather, *cofradías* provided assistance. In earlier times, the payouts came in the form of "naturals," direct provision from the overall catch. Later, the needy received a certain percentage of the sale; in modern times, the benefits and payouts became separate from the actual landings and sales, taking the form of a fixed daily sum.

The *cofradías* always supported the local parish, whether by paying for an altar, contributing to the construction of local churches and shrines, or contributing to holy days and fiestas, particularly those related to the saints of fishermen—San Pedro, San Nicolás, and San Telmo. The *cofradías* also paid for special masses, say, at the start and end of expeditions, the launch of new vessels, or the funerals of *cofradía* members. *Cofradías* also organized and financed banquets for its members, usually coinciding with the end of the fishing season or the annual Assembly, often on the same day that the religious calendar reserved for the celebration of one of its seafaring saints.

The *cofradías* increasingly tried to find ways to reduce costs for both fishermen and *armadores* (part shareholders), often by supplying tools and nets, as well as bait. Last but not least, they had a huge stake in the upkeep and improvement of their facilities and the related infrastructure, such as offices, auction halls, warehouses, workshops, and—of prime importance—piers, launches, anchorage, and signals.

The *cofradías* enjoyed the right to fish in certain well-demarked coastal waters, to sell the produce extracted therefrom, and to adjudicate all civil matters that arose in relation to work therein—involving anchorage, loading and unloading, transport to and from a port, sanitation, the sale of fish, the quality of the product, sailing times, seasonal activities, holidays, conflict, contractual matters, and so on.

The *cofradías'* legal jurisdiction over a specific coastal area and a local landing inevitably created tension with governmental authorities and boundary disputes with other fishing communities. *Cofradías* managed to settle the boundary disputes, and the legal issues founded upon them, by clearly explaining in their respective

statutes and agreements which waters and which harbors were under a local *cofradía*'s jurisdiction. Conflicts with political officials, however, were not so easy to resolve, often lingering for centuries. When the special rights, originally granted by Navarre, devolved to the Crown of Castile, they no longer seemed to be part of a comprehensive and sympathetic legal system. The politics of granting *fueros* to *cofradías* became more selective and piecemeal, often favoring one community while restricting and withdrawing support from a neighboring one. This inconsistent policy contained many contradictions. Although in hindsight, it might look suspiciously like cultural-political "trench warfare," it should not be reduced to a general hostility between the local Basque fishing communities and the new Castilian rulers. Rather, the conflict cut across Basque-Spanish lines, particularly since some Basque noblemen and families (*jauntxos*) were happy participants in the new power structures. That said, the *jauntxos* hardly seem to have taken any great interest in local fishing. Economically, they were more involved in land holding and trade, and, politically, in maintaining good relations with the powers that be.¹⁴

Even though the *cofradías* have an impressive record in their long and successful contribution to the livelihood of thousands of fishermen, they were by no means problem-free. Early crisis points concerned internal representation and redistribution measures. Even relatively small communities had enough socio-economic space to allow for the creation of a new *cofradía* when a faction was determined to defect, although exit strategies were not the only solutions chosen. Such troubles, however, did not manifest as a universal crisis of the *cofradías*; they tended to leave the overall institutional framework intact.

Despite the guiding principle of the *cofradía* as an institution promoting full and equal representation, with the support of religious ideals of brotherhood, complete equality did not prevail. The *cofradía* could not have lasted if it had. The *ordenanzas* indicate early stratification, whereby mariners and *tostartekos* (rowers) were seen as simple members, and the *maestros* made all of the important decisions. In some cases, the *txos* (younger apprentices)—often the sons of mariners or *maestros*—could not become mem-

14 J. M. Portillo Valdés, "El país de los *fueros*: Política, instituciones y Derecho en las provincias vascas durante la Edad Moderna," in Imízcoz (ed.), *Redes familiares y patronazgo*, 83–112.

bers with full voting rights or voice their opinion. Furthermore, simple fishermen usually had to suffer some degree of punishment for their offenses, but rarely did maestros. The documentation of such measures as harsh fines for malignant gossip about a mayordomo, indicate at least some discontent among members, though by all accounts, dissatisfaction in the early days of the *cofradías* was limited and contained.¹⁵

From the seventeenth century onward, a hierarchical, sometimes even an aristocratic, element became evident. The domination of the executive council of a *cofradía* by the owners of fishing vessels led first to a metamorphosis in composition and finally resulted in a total hegemony of the maestros and dueños. This new power structure found legal expression in the modified *cofradía* statutes of the nineteenth century, which declared that the position of mayordomo, as well as others, had to be held by a maestro or dueño. The main argument was that since each owner represented a crew, additional representation was unnecessary. Such praxis excluded not only such members as *marineros* (mariners), *tostartekos*, *tripulantes* (crewmembers), *remeros* (rowers), *grumetes* (cabin boys), *muchachos*, *txos*, and *aprendices* but also those who worked in shipbuilding, harbor maintenance, or fish-market transactions. Moreover, from the sixteenth century onward, when technology and capacity encouraged crews to remain far out at sea for long periods, women began to take more responsibility for tasks at home. Yet the proceedings of the *cofradías*, which would usually record all other voices, remained remarkably unresponsive to those of women.¹⁶

Modernization came late to the Basque fishing ports, and it came in two phases, one a prototype and the other a fully developed model. The prototype of industrialization took off slowly in the first half of the nineteenth century, as exemplified in Bermeo

15 Gracia Cárcamo, "Los conflictos sociales," 371–373. Erkoreka Gervasio, *Estudio Histórico de la Cofradía de Mareantes de Portugalete* (Bilbao, 1993), 52–55, lists four conditions for access: (1) being a certified believer (a member of the church), (2) local residency, (3) "purity of blood" (referring mainly to the Basque hidalguía), and (4) payment of a membership or entrance fee.

16 Erkoreka Gervasio, *Análisis Histórico-Institucional*, 124–128; *idem*, *Estudio Histórico de la Cofradía*, 49–61; Abreu-Ferreira "Fishmongers and Shipowners," 7–23; Crawford, "Position of Women in a Basque Fishing Community," 145–152; Julio Caro Baroja, *Los vascos* (Madrid, 1990), 180–181; Clotilde Orlan y Mugica, "Consideraciones sobre la actividad pesquera guipuzcoana en el siglo XVI," in Gracia Cárcamo et al. (eds.), *Historia de la economía marítima*, 18–19.

and Ondarroa, the two biggest fishing ports. The number of vessels and fishermen increased steadily until it broke all previous records. The second phase, occurring in the latter part of the century and during the course of the twentieth century, developed in more compact and concentrated fashion. Bermeo and Ondarroa acquired a new infrastructure (better port facilities for larger ships and better transport and communication systems on land) and began to implement the modern technology (sonar, radar, and refrigeration systems) that eventually permitted the introduction and widespread application of such innovative fishing methods as trawling. Once the technology was in place, the steam engine and later the diesel motor were able to advance the fishing industry even further.¹⁷

Until this modernization process was underway, the fishing communities in the ports and the workings of the *cofradías* had virtually remained unchanged. In the mid-1920s, there were between 6,000 and 7,000 fishermen working on a coastline about 100 miles long—1,600 of them in Bermeo and about 1,025 in Ondarroa. The fishermen were exclusively organized in eighteen *cofradías* located in sixteen ports, seven of them in Gipuzkoa and nine in Bizkaia.¹⁸

The distribution of money to fishermen from the auctions depended not only on the type of expedition but also, increasingly, on whether it involved rowing, sailing, or motorized vessel; the advantage soon lay overwhelmingly with the *armadores* of boats with motors. The differentiated work patterns that resulted from the new technologies led to more opportunities for disagreement. Compared to prior conflicts, these new ones were unlikely

17 For a detailed historical study of the Bermeo and Ondarroa ports and their fleets, see Alfredo Moraza Barea, *Estudio Histórico del Puerto de Ondarroa* (Vitoria, 2000); Ana María Rivera Medina, *Estudio Histórico del Puerto de Bermeo* (Vitoria, 1997). Martin Bermejo, “El pescador actual, la tecnología y la gestión de los recursos pesqueros: extrapolando el caso de Orío,” in Juan Antonio Rubio-Ardanaz (ed.), *La Pesca y el Mar: Cambio Sociocultural y Económico* (*Zainak* special issue) (San Sebastián, 2003), 59–93, lists the following technological developments in Orío: steam vessels (1915–1948), diesel and gasoline engines (1947–1950), cooling system and refrigeration (1947), elevated and towering bridge (1947–1960), modern sextant (1951), sonar (1955), hydraulic systems (1965), radar (1974), the plotter (1990), and heat-detection systems (1995). These observations seem representative of other Basque ports at the time.

18 Fishermen had to make enough money to provide for a family of five or six. See Thalamas Labandibar, *Aspectos de la vida social vasca*, 103; Eusko Ikaskuntza (ed.), *Asamblea de pesca marítima vasca* (San Sebastián, 1928), 320.

to be resolved simply by reference to local conditions and traditions. The lack of appropriate *cofradía* regulations for catches stemming from the new fishing methods, together with the increased buying power of fish factories and wholesale fish merchants, sparked major debates.

In 1925, under the auspices of the newly founded Eusko Ikaskuntza—the Basque Studies Institute—representatives from all of the Basque ports convened to discuss the situation. The *asamblea de pesca* called for major reform. Against the oligarchy that had come to dominate the *cofradías* but also against the threat of massive exit on the part of the *tostartekos*—who were no longer willing to be dominated by the *maestros*, *dueños*, or *armadores*, and who increasingly opted for creating or joining alternative *cofradías* (as they had done in Bermeo)—the Assembly called for moderation and compromise. They conceded that a division between labor, technology, and capital had evolved that neither labor nor capital could control by itself. Yet, the Assembly advised that exiting and founding competing *cofradías* within a single port was not a viable solution. Since a sector that was dominant in a given coastal community might not be so powerful in the larger economic scheme of the provinces, maintaining the solidarity of the fishing industry was still vital.¹⁹

In an attempt to overcome the crisis, the Assembly presented strategies to improve labor and capital relations and to modernize the general workings of the *cofradías*. As to labor–capital relations, the Assembly suggested as a model the Elantxobe statutes, in which representation depended on the size of each embarkation, thereby giving non-owners a major voice in the *cofradías*. The Assembly also recommended that *cofradías* include women in their ranks and that they establish a fund (*caja*) to handle members' crises or long absences from fishing (*días de casa* or *etxe egunek*). This fund would replace the medieval system of occasional individual payouts, which had become unworkable because of the increase in the size of most *cofradías*.²⁰

19 Eusko Ikaskuntza (ed.), *Asamblea*, 320–339.

20 *Ibid.*, 332. This suggestion fell short of turning the *cofradías* into fully functioning co-operatives. However, many of the ideas that were floated in the Assembly resembled co-operative ideas that were the currency of the day. The co-operative movement has always been strong in the Basque country. See, for example, Ignacio Olabarri, “Tradiciones cooperativas vascas y las relaciones laborales,” in Joseba Intxausti (ed.), *Euskal Herria: Historia y Sociedad* (Donostia 1985), 279–307. Co-operatives could be initiated and funded by a rich and

So far as the modernizing program was concerned, the Assembly moved to strengthen the professional character of the *cofradías*; to simplify their administration (for example, by instituting a *caja de ahorros*, which simplified financial payouts); to expand them into full co-operatives with modern merchandising capacities (such as industrialized fish production and appropriate sale facilities); and to form a federation, a *Unión de Cofradías*, with central offices to facilitate liaison with the Fishing Ministry (crucial if the *cofradías* were to develop and handle proper *pósitos*—that is, execute bank or insurance-like functions like other cooperatives). The proposal to modernize also nodded toward the past. The *cofradías* were to retain their confessional dimension and preserve their cultural traditions.

Not everything that the Assembly had envisioned came to pass. In 1936, the Madrid-based Sociedad para el progreso social reported that of the seventeen *cofradías*, fifteen were also *pósitos de pescadores*. Altogether, the membership of these *cofradías* numbered 5,690 individuals, 3,939 in Bizkaia and 1,751 in Gipuzkoa. The Society's study also referred to a minority of fishermen who were not associated, 71 in Bizkaia and 160 in Gipuzkoa. Instead of showing unity in their functions, the *cofradías*, and their statutes, divided into three different types—those that limited participation to *armadores* and *patrones*, those that admitted only *tostartekos* (in which *armadores* and *patrons* could join but without special acknowledgement or elevated status), and those that had both *armadores* and crew. The administration of the *cofradías* was still the same but now properly structured with a representative board, the *junta directiva*, and official titles—president, vice-president, secretary, speaker, and administrative staff, including the *mayordomo*, accountants, signalmen, lighthouse men, and guards.

The practical function of the *cofradías* now had two clearly specified dimensions: First, the *cofradías* regulated all aspects of labor relations among members, docking and landing, the modes of entry and exit to a local port, and the terms of all contracts (most importantly, pertaining to the sale of fish). Second, the *cofradías* provided comprehensive social security through the administra-

benevolent capitalist or by socialist, social-Catholic, or by inter-class groups. Although the Basque *cofradías* never became full-fledged co-operatives, individual vessels and embarkations sometimes took the form of a co-operative, though only for a minority of fishermen.

tion of common funds—the *pósitos de pescadores*—particularly in the case of emergency, injury, incapacity, and enforced periods of layoffs. Furthermore, the *cofradía-cum-pósito* arrangement provided medical insurance, pharmaceutical help, and payouts in the event of death or work-related accidents. Cultural and religious activities were conspicuous in their absence; by this time, the *cofradías* had lost their religious affiliation, becoming more of a secular mixed institution, partly fulfilling state functions.²¹

Few long-term studies show the development of the fishing sector, but Delgado Cendagortagarza's study of Bermeo is an exception. It describes the developments that took place in the largest fishing port on the Basque coast between 1912 and 1955, paying special attention to the conflict about fishing methods in the local *cofradía*. The most important expeditions conducted from Bermeo were the *kosteras* (also known as coastal fishing, *pesca de bajura*, or *pesca litoral*), aimed at catching *bonito* (white tuna), anchovies, sardines, *besugo* (sea bream), and *merluza* (hake). Yet, although the modern *bajura* expeditions used some of the newer elements in fishing, like live bait (*cebo vivo*), which became possible only with the solution of energy and conservation problems, those expeditions differed considerably from trawling in that they maintained their artisanal character.²²

As Delgado Cendagortagarza points out, *kosteras* and *bajura* expeditions were subject to economic cycles; when fish were out of season, economic activity was dormant. They also depended on the industrial production of the tinning industry, which had begun to determine consumer demand and therefore price. These cir-

21 José Manuel Gandasegui Larrauri, *La industria pesquera en Vizcaya* (Madrid, 1936), 22–23. The report also gave a breakdown of each port. The numbers for *cofradía* members in the Bizkaian ports are Bermeo, 860 (exterior port) and 850 (interior port); Ondarroa, 1,100; Lekeitio, 480; Santurtzi, 207; Ciervana, 196; Elantxobe, 116; Arminza, 87; and Mundaka, 43. The numbers for Gipuzkoan ports are San Sebastian, 440; Hondarribia, 336; Mutriku, 312; Getaria, 282; Zumaia, 140; Orío, 80; Pasaia de San Sebastian, 84; and Pasaia de San Pedro, 77.

22 Delgado Cendagortagarza, *Bermeo en el siglo XX*. Bermeo became the biggest fishing port on the Basque coast. In 1935, it accounted for 101 vessels; Ondarroa, the second biggest port, had only about 48 vessels). An estimation of twelve men for each embarkation brings the number of fishermen to more than 1,200. In 1955, Bermeo's fishing sector had risen to more than 2,000 fishermen (45). To be sure, not all of these men were involved in *kostera* expeditions, particularly since the *pesca de altura* also sailed from Bermeo (as well as from Ondarroa and Pasaia). In any case, the majority of Bermeo fishermen were certainly involved in *kostera* expeditions.

cumstances were hardly favorable for the armadores, tostartekos, and txos, or for the small independent fish-market buyers (usually the wives of the fishermen). Unlike engineers, who worked both on land and at sea, others involved in the fishing industry received an income only when fish were caught and brought to market.²³

The price of fish, which was tied to the method of catching them, also added to this insecurity. In Bermeo, between 1901 and 1908, a period of unregulated fishing, the nets of the trawlers that operated within the six-mile zone almost ruined coastal fishing for the kosteras and those who worked on the supply side of an already fragile market. New regulations for trawling did not solve the problem; trawling outside but near the six-mile zone continued to deplete the coastal stock. Moreover, the fish factories and wholesale buyers did not take into account how fish were caught, so long as the catch reached their factories in time and in the right quantity. At this point, 70 to 80 percent of the catch went to fish factories. Not even the fishing industry's introduction of minimum prices could curb the factories' control of the market.

What prevented the process from getting completely out of hand was the property structure of the supply side. Co-ownership and small mixed ownership of vessels (as many as five people) remained the norm; big capital investment and absentee-ownership were the exceptions. Moreover, fishermen refused to capitulate to the armadores, dueños, and patrones then in charge of the executive juntas. In 1907, a number of brothers left the Cofradía de San Pedro to found the Cofradía Goizeko Izarra (they reconciled with San Pedro in 1924). Another split occurred in 1913 when nationalists clashed with Catholics over a reform that would have given each crew a single, collective vote to represent their interests—a measure that fell decidedly short of a previous liberal call for each member to receive one vote. The radical nationalists dropped their other demand for converting the cofradía's funds into more comprehensive pósitos—a policy that the Second Republic endorsed as a way to improve social security. But the Catholic faction objected even to this moderate package, exiting to form the Cofradía Santa Clara. In 1932, the Cofradía de San Pedro split again—this time into the Cofradía Interior and Cofradía Exterior.

23 *Ibid.*, 48.

The schism lasted until the year General Francisco Franco came to power.²⁴

Notwithstanding these internal political divisions, the *cofradías* continued to regulate at least some important aspects of coastal fishing, reaching conclusions *vis-à-vis* trawling and the preservation of the coastal fish stock that were far more long-sighted than were the proposals offered by the buyer's side. Nonetheless, the *cofradías* could not stem the tide of the increasing power and influence of the demand side.

Closer analysis demonstrates that the conflicts within the *cofradías* were not class-oriented in the usual sense; their social relations were more like family quarrels than capital–class oppositions. The *bajura* fishermen were never a salaried class dependent on capitalist entrepreneurs; their income derived solely from the fish that they caught. But most importantly, the market forces that to a large extent determined prices (and thereby income) were clearly outside the *cofradías*' sphere of influence.

The major split was not between *maestres* and *tostartekos*. Although their relationship was not without tensions, it was by no means as distant as that between fishermen and fish manufacturers/merchants. Trawling was an important aspect of this relationship; it threatened the *cofradías*' and fishermen's existence, working to the clear benefit of the demand side. This unequal relationship is the key to understanding the relationship between the *cofradías* and the modern fishing industry.²⁵

Today, professional fishing is subject to a complex web of legislation and governmental interference at the local, regional, na-

24 *Ibid.*, 60–63.

25 Enriqueta Sesmero Cutanda, "Aproximación a las relaciones intracomunitarias de los pescadores bermeanos a mediados del siglo XIX," *Zainak*, XV (1997), 219–232, shows that the conflict between *cofradía* and fishermen on one side and fish manufacturing on the other, also had an architectural expression: Fishermen lived close to the waterfront and the port, whereas the commercial class lived in the better flats and apartments uptown—the irony of this situation being that the fish-manufacturing class had little actual contact with the sea. Sesmero Cutanda also notes that the distinctions in housing between those fishermen who made it into the vessel-owner group and those who remained simple *tostartekos* were not as blatant as the distinctions between those on the supply side and those on the demand side of Bermeo's unique form of class struggle.

The Basque *bajura* fleet has not simply surrendered to the powerful trawler and fish industry. For more information about the extent to which it has kept up with technological innovation, see Bikandi, "Aspectos sociales de la actividad pesquera," 149–174, which examines the changing roles of owners and fishermen. For the type of knowledge that is required to steer a modern fishing vessel, see Bermejo, "El pescador actual," 59–93.

tional, and international levels. Although local laws and customs still apply to individual *cofradías*, the regional Federation of *Cofradías* of Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia determines whether certain types of fishing are approved or prohibited within a given zone. Trawling is regulated at the national level. The main problems associated with it seem to have been solved by a law of 1953, which proscribed it wherever water was shallower than 125 meters. In a revision of 1962, trawling was allowed within the six-mile zone but only at 100 meters or deeper. In 1965, trawling within the six-mile zone was rescinded, and in 1969, this zone was extended to twelve miles. On the international level, the most important regulations concerning coastal fishing were the long-time agreements between France and Spain, but since 1986 (with the entry of Spain into the European Common Market), the quota system of the European Union (EU) has increasingly become the framework for fishing policies. Under EU rules, fishing in foreign waters is permissible by license.²⁶

The Basque *cofradías*' responsibilities still include the sale of fish, though the factories and wholesalers avoid the public auctions, usually buying directly from the larger fishing companies. The *cofradías*, however, continue to establish prices for fish sold at auction. The *cofradías* also retain the power to enforce their own, and the EU's, rules, and they represent the "first port of call" in the case of emergencies and rescue operations. Yet, the traditional role of the *cofradía* belongs largely to the past. Historic rights have now become concessions. But the worst change is that the trawler industry has become dissociated from *cofradía* control. The trawler fleet and its adjunct, the international corporate fishing industry, show little self-discipline and little concern for the environment. Whether the voices of the fishermen who remain in the current *cofradías* will be heard under these conditions is far from certain. Furthermore, as one astute observer has pointed out, the modern

26 Juan Apraiz and Aingeru Astui, "La pesca en Euskalerría: La pesca de litoral," *Itsasoa*, II (1987), 119–220; *idem*, "La pesca en Euskalerría: La pesca de bajura," *ibid.*, IV (1989), 74–148. At the beginning of the new millennium, the Basque fishing fleet consisted of 468 vessels with 4,236 crew members—2,215 of them in the *pesca de bajura*, 979 in the *pesca de altura*, and only 220 in the trawling industry (*arrastre*). The rest of the ships specialized in catching either cod (251) or tuna (571). The number of people working in the entire fishing sector was approximately 27,000 (Bermejo, "El pescador actual," 60). López Losa, "La pesca en el País Vasco durante el siglo XX: Modernización, tradición y crisis," *AREAS*, XXVII (2008), 7–25.

cofradía is—regrettably—no longer at the center of social and cultural activities.²⁷

PLEBEIAN CULTURE, MORAL ECONOMY, AND “VOICE” The traditional cofradía and its moral economy could develop and function properly only because it was an expression of an urban or semi-urban environment that was able to foster a strong plebeian culture. The early harbors functioned as communication posts not only between the coast and the interior but also along the coast, directed mainly toward the sea and the people who made a living from it. Unlike the Mediterranean harbors, which underwent an organic growth, the settlements on the Cantabrian coastline required deliberate planning, only in part because of such daunting geographical features as the steep coastline. These close-knit and internally dense settlements encouraged an infrastructure devoted to specific socio-economic aims.

Fishing, trade, and emerging small-scale industries (iron works and ship building) were the main economic activities. Fishermen, artisans (carpenters, hook makers, etc.), cofradía employees, and small-scale tradespeople, together with their families, comprised the largest part of the working population. Although *jauntxos* gained distinction over the years, no clearly identifiable elite or self-sustaining ruling class emerged in the Basque coastal communities during the last 500 years—at least none that had any major impact on day-to-day working practices, cultural patterns, and civic organizations. The three key institutional players, all of whom are in one way or another connected to the plebeian majority, were the cofradía, the mayor’s office (the town hall and ad-

27 López Losa, “La pesca en el País Vasco,” 7–25; José Ignacio Homobono, “Comensabilidad y fiesta en el ámbito arrantzale: San Martín De Bermeo,” *Bermeo*, VI (1987), 301–392; *idem*, “Fiestas e el ámbito arrantzale: Expresiones de sociabilidad e identidades colectivas,” *Zainak*, XV (1997), 61–100.

For a moving portrait of the decline of the traditional cofradía, see Rubio-Ardanaz, *La antropología marítima subdisciplina de la antropología sociocultural* (Bilbao, 1994). See also *idem*, *Lemanes, sardineras y pescadores*, 30–31, which describes the long twentieth-century struggle between traditional fishing and the more profitable capitalist fishing. Rubio-Ardanaz referred mainly to Santurtzi, at the mouth of the river Nervión (now part of greater Bilbao), but his description applies to the harbors of Bermeo, Ondarroa, and Pasaia. The cofradía has only a symbolic and sentimental presence in most harbors now. In Mutriku, for example, the old Cofradía Zaharra is a museum and the newer cofradía, which is now defunct, houses a sea-food-processing company and a scuba-diving school. One of the oldest ports along the Cantabrian coast is soon to become a sports harbor. Noisy speedboats and elegant yachts, mainly from France, visit during the summer; harbor activities cease altogether during the winter.

ministration), and the local church. This institutional constellation and its supporting social network were responsible for the stable moral economy that emerged.

The plebeian culture was not completely egalitarian. Equality in this context signifies a working majority in a town that (1) depended mainly on seafaring, fishing, and related activities; (2) embodied certain internal distinctions, based on the division of labor, which were primarily functional; (3) encountered no extremes, neither a significant and powerful elite class nor an entirely impoverished one; and (4) established a stable infrastructure to support the working majority economically, socially, and culturally. These four conditions culminated in a sense of community that is unique among traditional fishing communities in Europe.

In his essay on moral economy and the English crowd, Thompson notes that the old economy before capitalism—based originally on commodities produced at subsistence levels and exchanged directly without mediation—embodied certain moral rules and regulations. Even in later local and regional markets, the economic principals still knew one another; the chain of trade was the shortest way possible between producer and buyer, involving few, if any, intermediaries.

Many authors have made the point that this network relied heavily on family ties during the *Antiguo Régimen*, but only a few (such as Delgado Cendagortagarza and Ignacio Homobono) have related it comprehensively to fishing communities. Although Thompson's description applies mainly to rural small towns, with a little tweaking, it could easily apply to any *cofradía's* fish auction. The main features of face-to-face interaction, personal trustworthiness, and the marketplace as a locus of social interaction fit almost perfectly. Even the condition of near-subsistence production is met by the early fish market. One of its most striking features is the absence of middlemen. Even though economic activities were crucial, they were always embedded within a larger context of sociability.²⁸

Only with the emergence of modern fishing and large fish-

28 Thompson, *Plebeische Kultur und moralische Ökonomie*, 80–128; María Imízcoz, “Actores sociales y redes de relaciones: reflexiones para una historia global,” in *idem* (ed.), *Redes familiares y patronazgo*, 19–30; Delgado Cendagortagarza, *Bermeo en el siglo XX*; *Catálogo de la Exposición Lekeitio* (Bilbao, 1992); Ignacio Homobono, “Comensabilidad y fiesta en el ámbito arrantzale,” 301–392; *idem*, “Fiestas e el ámbito arrantzale,” 61–100.

processing industries did the internal cohesion and solidaristic aspects of the *cofradía* erode. Considerably less artisan than traditional fishing, trawling relies less on individual or collective experience than on technical infrastructure and specialized knowledge. The crew on a trawler, which can be hired at any harbor, is like any group of industrial employees; their labor is a mere commodity. On the capital side of the equation, ownership comes either in the form of an absent figurehead or a corporation. In the past, small and middle-sized companies (usually run by families, women being instrumental in this context) and fishing crews (with their dependents) determined local policies through the *cofradías*. But when the demands of the new free market, heavily influenced by incoming capital, ended the fishing fraternities' monopoly on landing and selling fish, the *cofradías*' authority dissipated and splintered and the collective voice of fishermen became submerged.

Attempts to harmonize the different interests of the *cofradías*, under the aegis of Eusko Ikaskuntza and others in the early twentieth century, met with limited success. Under Franco the monopoly was artificially prolonged, mainly for political reasons. Francoist fishing policies tried to re-define the *cofradía* as a corporatist institution, in which members had no political or social control. These economic changes continued to erode the institution even after Franco's death.²⁹

The egalitarian ethos of the old-type *cofradía* has almost disappeared. Many years of centralized decision making—first by local provincial authorities, later by the Basque and Spanish governments, and finally by the EU—eventually created a conception of the sea as a limitless resource to be exploited as if there were no tomorrow, with disastrous consequences. The more recent concern, outside the industry, for ecological balance, limited quotas, and stricter control to this point has had little effect; the institutions that could have given substance to this environmental rhetoric are in a moribund state.

29 López Losa, "La pesca en el País Vasco," 7–25.