

# The Future is Now!

**In Spain's Basque Mountains, anarchists explore earlier forms of community solidarity & mutual aid to design human scale intentional communities.**

Jesús Sepúlveda

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Sales Santos-Vera and Itziar Madina-Elguezabal live in the heart of the Basque Mountains, where the borders between France and Spain are blurred and the mists hide the paths once serving smugglers and antifascist guerrillas. Sales moved here from Extremadura along with his family as a boy.

Itziar was born Basque and like many here accompanied her parents into exile because, as members of the E.T.A. (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Land and Liberty), they were persecuted by the Spanish police.

I first met Sales and Itziar in October 2014 in the small town of Goizueta. The link was a mutual friend, Tad Gail, a California poet self-exiled more than three decades ago. Our encounter was electric, and our conversations about anarchy, poetry and the spirit of magic were eclectic. Together we visited Lakabe, a village dating back to the Middle Ages that is now occupied by anarchists and others opposed to the presently dominant order who have turned it into an intentional, self-sustaining community.

We also climbed hills and mountain passes visiting megalithic stone circles, Cromlechs and Dolmens dating from the Bronze Age (2500–1000 BC).

Itziar is a novelist who writes for that select group of people who read Euskera, the Basque language. The term Basque refers to those who speak Euskera, and who consider the Basque region, Euskal Herria, their home. It is called Vasconia or Vascongadas in Spanish, Pays-Basque in French. The three regions that comprise the Basque Country are: the Autonomous Community of Euskadi (País Vasco); the Autonomous Foral Community of Navarra; and the region of Iparralde-or the French Basque Country.

In 2007 Itziar published the novel *Beste Eguzkia* (The Other Sun), and in 2012 Itziar and Sales published *Comunidades sin Estado en la Montaña Vasca* (Communities without a State in the Basque Mountains), published in Navarra and translated into French in 2014. Both books are available in Spanish from Editorial Hagin and in French from Éditions du Temps Perdu.

What follows is derived from a long conversation we had about their book and other topics.



Lakabe, a Basque country village dating back to the Middle Ages, now an intentional, self-sustaining community.

In traditional Basque society, Batzarre were community or neighborhood meetings where decisions that affected a village, town, city or area were made. Men and women of the community participated in these meetings. With the passage of time, and mounting pressure from the state, however, the number of participants in this community decision-making body was reduced.

The first limitation occurred when only the inheritor of a house was allowed to participate. This caused a great division as it involved a rupture of the basic structure of the community into two different social classes: those who inherited and those who didn't.



Author Jesús Sepúlveda with anarchist rural activist Sales Santos-Vera in the Basque forest, 2014.

For the ancient Basques, the house represented a refuge as well as a confluence between natural and supernatural aspects of life. The inhabitants belonged to the house—they bore the house's name and not their own. The dead were buried around the house and considered to be living there still; the fireplace represented a tunnel to the afterworld, which was in the center of the Earth.

Today the Batzarre has lost all of its decision-making powers. The state, through its city councils and municipalities, appropriated its last vestiges in the early 1980s during Spain's transition to democracy after the 40 years of Franco's dictatorship.

Traditionally, there were two types of community obligations. The first and more general was Artelan, or work taken up by the whole community. This was a means for carrying out projects that concerned the community as a whole, such as bringing in and maintaining the water supply, building and maintaining roads, community paths, bridges, windmills, etc.

The second, Auzolan, was a type of collaboration with neighbors. They were required to help each other in specific situations like the harvest or the building of a new house, re-tiling roofs or cutting and bringing in the hay.

It's clear that under different names, Auzolan and Batzarre represented the complementary forms of mutual aid and community organization that human communities have employed worldwide. These forms lasted until the state destroyed and replaced them. Not only do we believe that they work, but we're firmly convinced it's the only way we have left if we want to live in a free and egalitarian society and a happy one.

The inhabitants of Santa Grazi in the Basque province of Zuberoa, France—say they live in "The Circle of the Mountains." Around this circle, a symbol that is derived from a communalist idea, a circular social organization of equality and anti-hierarchy was born. Through the use of various ceremonies, circularity was present in all facets of life.

The most important was the rite of the "blessed bread"—which preceded the wafer in the Christian Eucharist and symbolized the azia or seed of the woman, similar to that of plants and animals. They knew that only man has sperm capable of impregnating a woman; the feminine azia served to impregnate the bread because it was also life-giving material. On top of that, women believed that by offering this bread they gave life to the inhabitants and ancestors of the house, and this was reciprocal.

Baking bread evoked the care given to newborn infants. The secret to good bread is constant heat. They say: "Bread and infants need heat." So, bread symbolizes the existence of a communitarian principle of consumption.

We know that one of the reasons for the beginning of hierarchy resides in the specialization of work. In Santa Grazi all the jobs were done in rotation. Every day the shepherds changed jobs. They avoided specialization through rotation and alternation. Circularity also signifies solidarity and gives the feeling of belonging to a community-it conveys balance.

This symmetry, along with the philosophy of the circle, is infinite. For example, man is complementary to woman, people to nature, a temporary shelter to a permanent family home. The house is integral to human life.

In Santa Grazi, when a new generation reaches the age of responsibility they say it has "curdled," using the same expression to describe a woman's pregnant womb or to refer to the fermentation of cheese or bread.

When an imbalance is prevalent, social relations become marked by domination and dependency. Without alternation and rotation, the circular organization becomes simply flattened, and tends to become hierarchical.

Although the term colonization generally refers to economic takeover and assimilation of cultures by the imperial powers in the rest of the world, we know that within Europe there were also colonizing movements of peoples and social classes. In Navarra, especially after its conquest by the Kingdom of Castile (1512-1529), the colonization of peoples and territories was twofold. In ideas it was directed by the church and in the political by the monarchy and the state.

Naturalistic, animistic, and pagan practices and beliefs have survived until now. We can identify them in dances, the solstice celebrations, pilgrimages to shrines, beliefs in lunar influences, in spirits, the cult of the dead, etc. These beliefs so closely aligned with Mother Earth formed a natural, animist and matriarchal cosmology. They foster values that give the community a strong collective spirit, a good anti-individualist and anti-hierarchical sense.

The degradation and later loss of this communal spirit is only understandable in relation to the degeneration of values. First, the naturalistic beliefs that allowed a symbolic interpretation of the world based on total confidence in the generosity of nature and the forces that surround it were attacked. This job fell to the clergy and their secular counterparts.

The brutalities committed by the inquisition definitively changed the power relations. The witch-hunt in the Basque mountains involved the murder of 8,474 people, who either confessed under torture or were denounced for witchcraft. This area had a population of about 10,000. Just in the small village of Zugarramurdi (fewer than 200 people), eighteen women were condemned to burn at the stake.

Very close to Zugarramurdi, the commissioner for the parliament of Bordeaux of Basque descent, De Lancre, condemned a total of 200 people, the great majority being women, to die in the same way for the same purported crimes in 1609 and 1610. From terror, the population was driven to pure panic. Those poor people accused each other and attacked those they thought to be witches or warlocks.

Witches were in reality herbalists and midwives. They knew how to control birthrates since they understood the means of contraception. With their knowledge they were a challenge to official medical professionals.

The principle of pleasure was rejected, even criminalized, and severely punished by Christianity. Not only because pleasure militates against civilization, but also because pleasure struggles against a progress that perpetuates domination and forced labor.

The repression and the sexual practices enforced by church mandate, along with an unanticipated economic boom, created a spectacular yet uncontrolled growth of the population, causing a disruption of the demographic balance. This produced a surplus population that would serve as dependent manual laborers. Through this means, the great landowners, including the church, which owned 25 percent of the fertile land in Europe, assured themselves of people compelled to work their estates.

From self-management, communities were reduced to being managed by a diminished council with its own interests. The political rupture of the community left the door open for privatizing the communal lands and forests. Economic colonization led to enlightenment-the new religion, with its god, "progress," and science and technology as its prophets.

Already in the fifth century, Christianity was the dominant philosophy. By the Middle Ages it was present in every aspect of people's lives. Any thought at all, whether political, philosophical, legal, scientific or economic, was considered to be an aspect of theology.

Any dissidence was repressed by the Inquisition from the twelfth century on. Monotheist religions need unanimity. That's why they come down so hard on any differing beliefs or anyone who strays from their orthodoxy.

When Europeans arrived on the American continent (*Abya Yala*, to use the indigenous term now adopted by many anarchists) they found a world full of human and material resources. The experience acquired over hundreds of years of exploitation and pillage in Europe showed the colonizers that only through the use of arms could such wonderful riches be acquired. To justify the taking of the land and the exploitation of the people, they tried to eliminate the beliefs that generated these communal practices, all of their knowledge, their languages. They strove to change the mentality of the Native Americans for that of the colonizers, starting with the demand for acceptance of inferiority and, in the case of blacks abducted from Africa, the demand to accept slavery. Racial purity and racism got added to the pot with all the rest.

A religion like Christianity always uses fear as a recruiting policy. This fear leads people to attack magic and sorcery on all fronts. Not being able to wipe out voodoo, the Inquisition pressured governors and agents to send its practitioners to forced labor and early death in the mines in Antioquia, Colombia.

There is a parallel between the system applied by the Christian-Roman Empire and present-day globalization. Both tried to create a super system of state control based on self-censorship accomplished through domestication in the first years of life, and maintained throughout by political and military repression. The difference lies in that the first tried to gain world control through religion, while today the second is trying to control the world through economic means.

To be independent people must be autonomous, and for that they must take over the territory, and regain knowledge and forms of stateless self-management and self-organization. We must reclaim the values of the philosophy of the circle, taking turns and sharing within the circles of community, using the model of "your turn today, my turn tomorrow."

Living in the world in harmony with nature, at peace, and with freedom, stops being merely a dream the moment we stop believing in saviors, be they sent by the followers of Christ, Mohammed, Marx, or any others.

We must have trust in ourselves and in the planet. We must oppose any strategy that postpones the realization of our utopia for a better, more propitious time. There is no time to lose.

The future is now!

Jesús Sepúlveda is a Chilean poet and a decolonial scholar who teaches at the University of Oregon in Eugene. He is the author of several collections of poetry and two books of essays, including his green-anarchist manifesto, *The Garden of Peculiarities*.

Translated by Tad Gail

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