

# **The Spanish Basque Domingo Ordoñana: Progress, Civilisation and Order in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Uruguay**

## **Abstract**

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Agrarian leaders, the people who headed the agrarian organisations created in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all over Europe and America, have been neglected as an object of study by biographical writing. Whereas industrial or financial entrepreneurs are seen as pioneers of economic development and very often there are companies that consider themselves to be direct heirs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century pioneers –and therefore sponsor biographies of their “ancestors”- and whereas aristocratic families enjoy the charm of a by-gone age of splendour and literary attraction, as well as, very often, a conspicuous written documentation, at first sight agrarian leaders –taken as grey lobbyists- seem to have very little to offer.

However, agrarian organisations were not mere lobbies. Nearly everywhere they were born to represent the landed elites before the State and before other pressure groups, during the Great Depression (1870's-1890's), when agricultural sectors were faced by the double challenge of internationalisation and quick social transformations as a result of urbanisation and industrialisation. But agrarian organisation did not represent agricultural interests in the same way other economic or professional groups did. On the one hand agriculture, even where big estates prevailed, was a highly heterogeneous world, with large numbers of households and very different and often contradictory interests involved, and therefore resources and incentives for collective action had very little to do with those that were present in smaller and more homogeneous activities. On the other hand, and partly for the latter reason, a very different discourse was developed by agrarian leaders to justify their actions and legitimise their claims. They presented themselves as the speakers of rural society, which was, in its turn, represented as the guardian of the essential values and virtues of the nation, including not only the ethno-cultural heritage but social order, political stability and military power. In their discourses and their public gestures, nationalism and reactionary defence of the social order against the threats of socialism, anarchism or secularism –frequent although not universal elements of their texts and programmes- were combined with variable ingredients of populism and, always, with techno-scientific and economic progressivism. Techno-scientific progress, the industrialisation of agriculture and the urbanisation of the countryside (without the negative effects of industry and city life) were in nearly every country displayed in a central position amongst the aims of the agrarian organisations.

The people who launched the agricultural societies and associations and created and adapted the agrarian discourse to national or regional circumstances came from different environments: some of them came from professional groups linked to agriculture (agricultural engineers, veterinarians, journalists specialised in agriculture, professors...), some of them were landowners, although seldom those with the largest estates or those stemming from old lineages. Finally some agrarian leaders were urban politicians but many more became political actors through their agrarian action. Whatever their origin, the leadership of these associations potentially turned them into highly valued mediators among the different types of landowners, among the social groups and classes in rural society, between amateurs and technical experts, between agriculture and the State... a position that demanded many capacities and could be highly rewarding in terms of social and political capital.

The biography and the works of Domingo Ordoñana e Iparraguirre (1829-1897) do not only show the complexities of becoming a rural leader but its potential in terms of social and political promotion. The analysis of his life reveals as well the intertwining between the discourse of progress, in this case of agricultural progress, and the construction of national projects in the

nineteenth century. It finally contributes to unveil the density of transatlantic connections between the old Spanish metropolis and Europe and the new American republics and the social strategies that could be built on these connections..

Ordoñana was born in 1829 in Vitoria, in a middle class family, emigrated to Montevideo in 1842, started to work for a Galician merchant and landowner and eventually joined with him one of the sides of the Civil War of 1839-51 or Guerra Grande. In the army, first, and in Buenos Aires, then, he acquired a basic formation in medical studies. However after the war, he did not become a medical practitioner but a landowner, when he bought in 1856 the estate of Casa Blanca in Soriano. There he was to practice a new type of mixed farming, based on sheep and goat breeding, frequent technological innovation and agricultural experiences. In 1860 he returned to Spain, the first of different long trips (between six months and one and a half year) that he did every six-eight years. In the course of these journeys he visited agricultural establishments and visited the leaders of the agrarian movements in different countries, especially of Spain, where he managed to meet with aristocrats and ministers. His European and American acquaintances and visits enabled him to increase his reputation of worldly and knowledgeable man in Montevideo: he frequently referred to them in his writings. He died in Barcelona, in one of his journeys, in 1897.

Ordoñana was the intellectual element behind the creation in 1871 of the Asociación Rural del Uruguay and became until his death one of its leaders. From his position among the *rurales* he was the main advisor of the dictator Latorre between 1876 and 1880 and preserved his political influence in the 1880's and early 1890's. All together with this socio-political undertakings and career, he was an active cultural producer and promoter: he published three books and a large number of articles and gave many lectures in Montevideo, founded the journal of the Asociación Rural, launched different projects to create the basic iconography of the *historia patria* around the thirty three (the monument in Agraciada, the big historical picture of Blanes, the use of the name Uruguay...). Through agriculture, through political and legal projects, through journalism and through amateur history writing and cultural projects, he dedicated his life to the nation and State-building project in Uruguay. His Uruguayan patriotism worked very well despite (or even because of) the fact that he had a leading role in the Basque Society "Laurak Bat" of Motevideo, contributed to the foundation of the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in the country and over and over again boasted of his Basque-Spanish origins and tried to act as a mediator between his mother country and his country of adoption.