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978-0-521-10707-5 - Unrewarding Wealth: The Commercialization and Collapse of
Agriculture in a Spanish Basque Town

Davydd J. Greenwood

Excerpt

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The problem and the methods

That man does not live by bread alone is a maxim asserting that economic gain is not the sole object of our lives. Most of us would subscribe to the truth of this maxim, yet we forget it when the economic changes taking place in this century are analyzed and when policies to promote economic development are formulated. Partly this is a result of our attempts to simplify the complex changes we observe so that we may comprehend them better; we make an analysis “as if” economic gain were the object of most people’s daily activities. Many analysts and policymakers subscribe to a philosophy of history in which the role of the economy is seen to be large and the direction of history is understood to be toward greater reliance on motives of economic gain in all areas of activity. These simplifying assumptions are convenient; however, they relegate nonprofit activities to the background, and the consideration of their importance to those we have come to call “humanists.”

If they are to be useful, simplifying assumptions must facilitate rather than obstruct analysis. The argument of this book is that these assumptions are wrong, misleading both the analysts of capitalism and the development policymakers. They are wrong because they do too much violence to the complex motives underlying human behavior, a complexity that cannot be reduced to a single goal. Ways must be developed to cope better with this complexity; this book is my attempt to do so.

The Basque farmers studied here are neither non-Western nor particularly exotic; thus the study can qualify as a test of the utility of occidental ideas in an analysis of behavior of occidental people. By demonstrating that the interpretation of economic change in the West solely in terms of motives of economic gain is inadequate, I also imply that transfer of this interpretation to non-Western situations presents an even greater distortion.

The commercialization of farming and the resultant rural depopulation in a coastal Spanish Basque municipality are my subject. I follow the changes in farming as commercialization occurs in

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response to industrialization and international tourism, eventually resulting in rural depopulation and the closing of profitable farms. I use quantitative evidence about farming and a cultural interpretation of farm life, since only an explanation including both types of data can account for the events that took place here during this century. The farmers have considerable economic acumen and operate successful farms at high profit rates and levels, yet they are abandoning agriculture in ever-increasing numbers and moving into lower-paying and perhaps less secure urban jobs. Neither an invocation of “economic man” nor of the “traditionalist farmer” can explain this. I render an interpretation combining economic and cultural variables in a single economic anthropological framework.

Many studies of rural population movements have concentrated on the destinations of the migrants and on the problems they encounter when they arrive at their destinations, whereas my study focuses on the rural economy and society out of which the people are moving. Because of the complex mix of agricultural success followed by agricultural collapse, this study has relevance to the analysis of agricultural development, the cultural dimensions of population movements, and urbanization. Furthermore, it exposes some errors in assumptions underlying current economic policies.

From a methodological point of view, the charter of the study is that it combines, in a single framework, extensive quantitative data with a detailed cultural analysis. Though no single aspect of the farm situation is exhaustively treated, the systematic combination of quantitative and cultural analysis yields some insight into the interaction between pecuniary and nonpecuniary considerations in the evolution of modern Basque agriculture in one municipality, and raises some questions about the interpretation of agricultural development in general.

The setting and the problem

In a century of realism, the Basques of northern Spain and southern France retain an aura of mystery. In their mountainous redoubt, they have withstood the irruptions of a variety of empires and nations, and have retained their language and their unique constellation of blood group antigens. Their uniqueness long ago gave rise to an abiding interest in Basque origins and customs, ranging from popular magazine articles to a considerable accumulation of international scholarship. Such mysteries provide an impetus to scholarship but they also create some difficulties for the student. Emphasis on Basque uniqueness overlooks the funda-

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mental reality that, in spite of language and serology, the Basques are culturally Europeans (Caro Baroja, 1967:7,10). Their technology, their social organization, and their beliefs fit comfortably into the range of variation found in Europe.

That they are Europeans does not lessen their importance. Any study of developments in the Basque country need not be limited to explaining the Basque “enigma;” it can also help to understand phenomena important throughout contemporary Europe—industrialization, international tourism, rural depopulation, and urbanization. We must also remember that the ways in which these developments occurred in the Basque country have evoked unique adaptations in the context of cultural characteristics that are peculiarly Basque. This study is, then, both an analysis of the current history of agricultural development and of the unique ways in which the Basques have dealt with it.

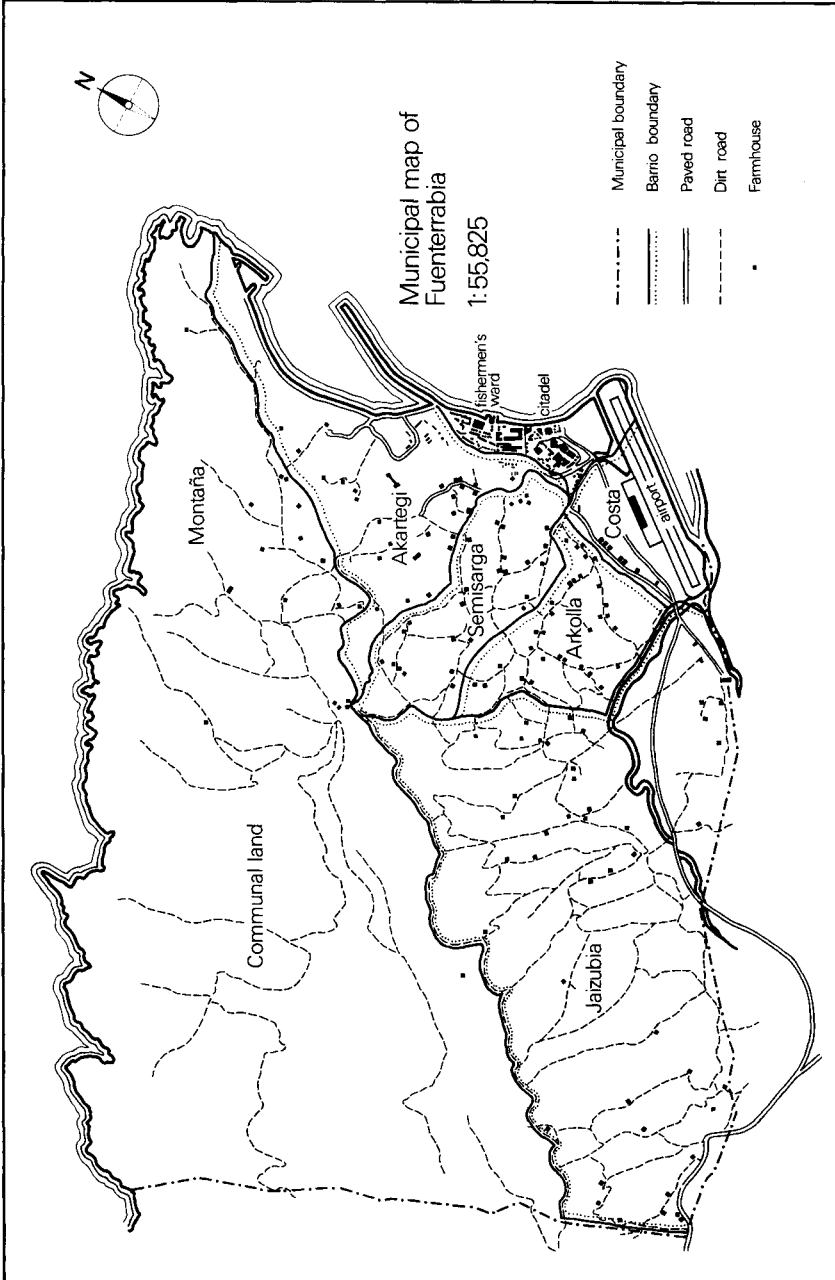
The specific subject is the twentieth-century evolution of agriculture in Fuenterrabia, Guipúzcoa in the Spanish Basque country. I document and interpret the shift from subsistence-oriented family farming to commercial family farming, accompanied by the present period of rural depopulation. By depicting the adaptive efforts of a number of Basque farmers in a rapidly changing world, I am able to explain how the Basque culture and the economic capabilities of the Basque farmers account for both their agricultural success and their abandonment of farming.

The Basque farmers are not dealing with a set of circumstances unique to them; they are responding to the effects of international industrialization, tourism, and agricultural commercialization as they have impinged on the Basque country. This particular case shows that the relationship between these phenomena is even more complex than is often assumed. The particular mixture of pecuniary and nonpecuniary goals suggests questions for further research which I will raise throughout the book.

Fuenterrabia itself is a coastal municipality. In 1969 it had about 10,000 inhabitants, consisting of an urban nucleus surrounded by 168 farms and some 200 villas which dot the mountainous landscape (see map on p. 4). It is a small place, the land surface being a little over 24.5 square kilometers, or about 9.5 square miles. (A conversion table for measurements and currency appears in the Appendix.)

Formed by the mountain spine of the peninsula and its sandy skirt which is flanked by the Bidasoa River, the municipality has little flat land beyond that in the river bottom area. It is a green world. Grass, alfalfa, mountain fern, pines, gardens, fruit trees in

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this rainy, temperate climate, each add their own hue. With few frosts and little snow, even the winters are green. The farms are dispersed over a moderately rugged landscape, some within shouting distance and yet far apart because of the watercourses separating them. Only a few farmers are fortunate enough to have cultivatable flat land.

Mount Jaizkibel, which dominates the municipality, at one time was covered with hardwood trees. The rest of the land was covered with fruit trees, there being only an occasional open field. Now the mountain is covered with pine plantations interspersed with mountain fern—signs of human activity. The hardwood and fruit trees are practically gone from the rest of the land, having given way to the cultivated fields which are the basis of the intensive commercial agriculture presently practiced. These receding fruit trees were not the original vegetation, since moving further back into history, we see the municipality blanketed with vines which gave a sour grape to make Basque wine called *txakoli*. The only trees left are those lining the watercourses eroded in the face of the mountain.

The Basques have even changed the soil itself. Years of patient labor have transformed many hectares of clay soil into sandy loams, a change once made necessary by the climate and exigencies of subsistence, and now by the exigencies of the commercial markets. In the river bottom nearly 90 ha. of sand bars had been reclaimed and were intensively cultivated until recently. This reclamation is a silent reminder of the need for land that had gripped this municipality until about 15 years ago; the sudden abandonment disappoints the old farmers who helped to reclaim the land. Little of the landscape, then, is natural since man has intervened everywhere; this is an utterly domesticated landscape.

Overlooking the rural scene from one of the foothills of the Jaizkibel is a fortified town of impressive proportions. The old city of Fuenterrabia is enclosed by 30-foot walls, originally surrounded by moats crossed by two drawbridges. Though the exact date of first fortification is unknown, Fuenterrabia was already fortified when the reigns of Catholic kings began in the fifteenth century. They ordered the walls strengthened as part of their national defense policy.

Within the walls, narrow cobblestone streets of dark houses with carved eaves and shields of nobility wind upward toward the *plaza de armas* dominated by Charles the Fifth's fortress. Beside this is the church tower which serves the faithful with its bells, and often gave warning of French invasions.

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Panoramic view of Fuenterrabia's citadel.

Once segregated into artisans', soldiers', and nobles' quarters, much of the old town was turned to rubble by sieges throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By 1850, half the dwellings were in ruins, as were the walls.

The fishermen and farmers have always lived outside the walls. Long famous for their exploits as whalers in the Bay of Biscay, the fishermen lived in small dwellings along the beach and around the port. The location of the small, shallow port has moved more than once, but now there is a permanently established fishermen's ward at the base of the city walls. It is a colorful and lively place filled with bars, brightly painted houses, and a large variety of stores; it is the hub of Fuenterrabia's present urban life.

Fishing is a reasonably lucrative commercial endeavor, especially since the advent of tourism and rapid, refrigerated transport. An enormous variety of ocean fish is available throughout the year. The fishermen do not venture far out these days; the only remembrances of whaling days and trips to Terra Nova are an old city coat of arms depicting a whale and the annual whaleboat races, a major sports attraction in the Basque country. Much of the ward is built on reclaimed land, but in spite of its quaint appearance, its present buildings are not very old. Its straight streets, tree-lined *alameda*, and colorful houses are largely a result of planned urbanization during the last 200 years.

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Blanca-enea, example of Basque farm architecture.

Beyond and behind all this lie the farms, called *caseríos* in Spanish and *baserriak* in Basque. They are family farms and are found in a variety of settlement patterns throughout the Basque country. These range from farmhouses clustered in a center with the farmland surrounding the nucleus, to single, dispersed farms on their own land (Caro Baroja, 1958:21–48; Douglass, 1967:85–115). The farmland itself may consist of a single unit or of several separate parcels. In Fuenterrabia, the 168 farms that now operate are dispersed, with each sitting on its own land. The main body of that land is located around the house. Some farms have additional small plots of land, ranging from 0.10 ha. to 1.50 ha., located in the river bottom areas of the municipality. A few have mountain lands used for lumber, firewood, and mountain fern for cattle bedding.

While the variety of farm sizes, topography, and soil types makes the presentation of a typical farm useless, there are some characteristics which most farms share. The farmhouse and stable are combined into one building, with the stable on the ground floor and the living area on the second. In some cases, the kitchen is also on the ground floor. All farm buildings are made of stone and mortar covered with lime. The floors and roof supports are wood and the roofs are tiled. The ground floor is usually packed dirt, though many farmers have put in cement floors. The second

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Matute-enea, a small farmhouse overlooking a one-acre farm.

floor always has a wood balcony which is supported by the extensions of the same beams that support the floors. The balconies face south to avoid the force of the north wind. In addition, the roof peak is used as an attic granary and storage area. All but one of the farms have had electricity for many years, many as early as 1925. There is running water in the houses on 129 farms. The houses vary considerably in size and elegance. These differences will be described later.

Farm sizes range between 0.14 ha. and 31.84 ha. There are all sizes between these extremes but the majority of the farms are under 3.8 ha. The importance of farm size will be analyzed later also.

The soils range from clay through artificially-transformed sandy loams to naturally-occurring sandy loams (see soil type map, p. 27). The transformed soils were made by adding sand and humus to clay soil over many years. Finally, there are about 90 ha. of reclaimed river bottom land.

All farms have the basic hand tools of agriculture such as the hoe, *laya* (Basque hand plow), shovel, pitchfork, scythe, sickle, and wheelbarrow. There are small power tillers on 54 farms and 32 have small power reapers. There are only 4 garden tractors, but all farms own or have access to Brabant wheeled, animal traction plows.

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The labor force on farms is made up of one or two married couples of adjacent generations united by kinship to form a “domestic group” (Caro Baroja, 1958:261–82; Douglass, 1967:59–84). In calling this a “domestic group” and not a “stem family,” I am following a usage suggested by Douglass. He notes that “in Basque society ego’s married siblings and offspring are *not* excluded from his family concept which is not to say that they are regarded as a part of his domestic grouping” (Douglass, 1969:84, emphasis his). The household is a concept including the “constellation of dwellings, furnishings, agricultural implements, landholdings . . .” (Douglass, 1969:87). Finally, the domestic group “encompasses the persons who inhabit an *echea* [farmstead] and, hence, share the same life space, or persons who, while absent, retain the right to return and take up residence. Membership in the *echekoak* [domestic group] grouping may be obtained in one of four fashions: (1) descent, (2) marriage, (3) fictive kinship ties, and (4) consent” (Douglass, 1969:90). This defines the farm domestic groups better than the amorphous “stem family” concept. Thus only the domestic group—the social grouping living on the farms, or members retaining rights to return to them—is included in this study.

According to Basque cultural ideas, the maximum domestic group permitted on a single farm consists of an elder married couple and either spouse’s unmarried siblings; a younger married couple made up of the chief heir, male or female, of the elder couple, his or her spouse, and their unmarried children. A few farms have hired laborers living in.

There are many permutations of this membership due to the dynamics of each family and their point in the domestic cycle. There is one farm with three generations of married couples living on it because of the longevity of the eldest couple. There are a few farms occupied exclusively by unmarried brothers, unmarried sisters, or childless couples. There are only two cases with more than one couple of the same generation living on the same farm. In both, the couples hold separate purses, live in separate apartments, and only one couple is involved in farming.

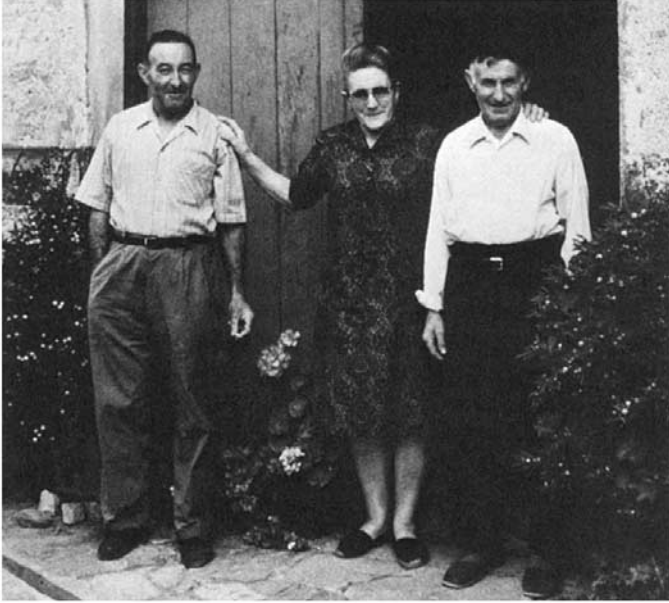
During the developmental cycle of a farm domestic group, the population of a farm may be reduced by the death of the elder couple to a single individual or married couple with or without children. A domestic group may also be reduced in size by infertile marriages or because all of the children remained single. However, there is no farm with less than two adults. Thus the domestic group is only moderately extended and alters in size over time. This exercises a strong effect on agricultural activities.

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An aging farm family.

Basque farm life is difficult to describe briefly. The characteristics of the farm and the domestic group tend to merge into a single social personality. Living on named, independent farms, many over 200 years old, the domestic group members receive an enduring social identity, generally being referred to by the name of their farm rather than their surnames. The farm is felt to be an outward sign of the character of the people who farm it, so that agriculture is at once an enterprise and a way of life. The richness or sterility of the soil, the design and condition of the house, the amount of flat land, all become part of the social personality of these farmers. Often the family names will be unknown even to close neighbors.

Having access to a farm is one part of being a farmer; another is getting an heir to carry the farm and the identity of the domestic group into the future. To achieve this, the Basques do not divide their lands among the heirs. Rather they are free to select one child, male or female, who will marry and will take over the farm, a practice at variance with the Spanish Civil Code. Other children either receive money, an education, a dowry, or may stay on the farm as long as they do not marry and are willing to submit to the authority of the chief heir and his or her parents.

In choosing a chief heir the parents look for a quality of mind