

## [Review]

AGIRREAZKUENAGA, Joseba (director), et alii

La articulación político-institucional de Vasconia: Actas de las *Conferencias* firmadas por los representantes de Alava, Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa y eventualmente de Navarra (1775-1936)

Bilbao: Foral Deputation of Alava, Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia, Bilbao, 1996. Two volumes, 1,736 pages.

---

**Javier Díaz Noci**

**A**s this long title explains, in these great volumes the authors, professor Joseba Agirreazkuenaga of the University of the Basque Country, director of the publication, and his assistants, historians Eduardo Alonso Olea and José Antonio Morales Arce, collect the whole texts of the acts that Basque political and administrative provincial organs, called Deputation, and occasionally Navarre too, celebrated between 1775 and 1936, the acts and informs done in Madrid by Basque deputies and senators, from 1825 to 1908, and also, as annexes, the documents of the conference that some of the three deputations celebrated between 1688 and 1774. A vast collection that takes more than 1.700 pages, and becomes a major historical source, until now not enough recognised, that surely will be used by Basque historians. These documents are accompanied by an introductory study by professor Agirreazkuenaga, that gives the keys to understand the phenomenon of supra provincial relations. The book also has three useful indexes: the first one, about themes in the conferences, more than 130 major items, with numerous sub-themes, and the number of conference in which they can be founded; the second one, a proper names index, than helps us to complete information with other books by same authors, particularly dictionaries of Basque parliamentarians; and the third one, a place names index.

Why a land that is named Wasconia in early times, in eleventh century (nowadays, professor Agirreazkuenaga and other historians prefer this name to refer to the so called in Basque language "Euskal Herria"), that is so recognised as a unit by Basque lawyer, writer and historian Arnaud Oihenart, and later claimed as a political, national entity by Basque nationalism, with its own personality and rights, but, on the other hand, it has been paid so little attention from the point of view of the political relations through the time?

In Basque historiography, provinces have received all the importance, despite a common vision. There is already in this matter a deep unknowledge about the relations between Basque historical lands or provinces, those of the peninsular Basque country (Alava, Guipuscoa and Biscay, the so called by the Spanish

administration under which have been included in the last centuries "provincias vascongadas", nowadays the Basque Autonomous Community), and, occasionally Navarre too. However, as this work demonstrates, there were relations between them.

Joseba Agirreazkuenaga says in the introduction of these volumes. "The lands and districts [comarcas] of Iberian Vasconia developed institutional processes, in some cases converging ones, in some other cases diverging ones". It is due to a special characteristic that has arrived just to our days, and that nowadays also marks our politics: every province or, as it is said in today's Estatuto de Autonomía, the superior law that rules Basque Country Autonomous Community, "historical land", has its own rights and institutions, and under all, there is a common substrate. Only researching both of these two sources can we understand right what has been and what is Vasconia as a political community.

Vasconia, Basque Country, at least peninsular Basque country, is more than a linguistic or cultural community, more than an economic space limited by external customs. In spite of a diverging and changing institutional and political constructions, there were relations between Alava, Biscay and Guipuscoa, and we also could include Navarre. So, we can say that, through the centuries and specially in contemporary history, Basque country has built its own political space.

On the basis of this premise, professor Agirreazkuenaga offers the complete collection and whole texts of the conference that, from 1775 on, signed the political representatives of the three provinces of the peninsular Basque country.

This political articulation must be seen, as Joseba Agirreazkuenaga insists, must be seen in the context of the building of the Spanish state, that was cause of conflicts and was at the beginning of Carlist wars along Nineteenth century. A motto, *Irurac bat* ("three together in one"), a banner, later an ephemeral politics of *Laurac bat* ("four in one", including and impelled by Navarre), all of them are major themes that cannot eclipse the importance of searching a common administrative practice.

These conferences were known by Basque historians, but rarely used as historical source or interpretation element. Is this great hole in our historiography that comes to fill professor Agirreazkuenaga's work, because it is not only a mere collection of documents -and it is quite important-, but also a deep and sage explanation to this phenomenon, indispensable to understand our reality. In Joseba Agirreazkuenaga's opinion, the conferences are "the best political heritage that could transmit the cultural and scientific practice" of the Sociedad Bascongada de Amigos del País, born in 1764, because they also joined once a year, starting up a sentiment of belonging to a common Basque land, and not, as at that moment, a simple provincial adherence sentiment. Later, the risk of losing the *Fueros* (particular laws, rights and privileges recognised to the Basque by Spanish kings since the adhesion of the province to the crown), and reasons of taxes, were another crucial factor to explain the need of surpassing provincial limits to join a superior organisation, although during decades in embryonic state. It is a modern phenomenon. Conference system was really established after 1793 agreements. In 1795, after the Convention war, it happened a fracture in Basque society, and arisen new cultural and socio-economical basis, those of the industrial revolution.

From 1839 on, the conference system arrived at its greatest development, and, as Agirreazkuenaga says, "the decade of 1860's could be compared with a kind of confederate Basque government". These are risky but strongly argued theories, that help to understand the real construction of the Basque nation. There is an evolution, through its renovation, of the ideology about *Fueros* and political autonomy. Inflexion point can be situated at 1876, because of the abolition of *Fueros* after the so called *Convenio de Bergara*. In all that period, in Agirreazkuenaga's opinion, not only is surpassed a provincial concept of politics, but also *Fueros* receive a truly dimension of public law, because inhabitants of the Basque country begin to consider themselves as political subjects of rights and obligations derived from that public law, common for all of them, or citizens in a word. *Fueros*, then, must be reformed, in terms of integration in Spanish liberal state and Constitution (and then born liberal fuerism), or in traditional terms, regaining the spirit of "ancient law" as, some decades later, finishing the century, Sabino Arana does ("*Jaungoikoa eta Lagi zarra*", "God and ancient law" was his motto). This is a theory based on the fundamental idea of "historical rights", that would be later accepted by the Spanish Constitution of 1978, and Autonomy Statute of Gernika (1980). Doubts about development of the degree of autonomy, near to "dual federalism", by liberal fuerists, can also explain in some way the fracture between Spanish state and Vasconia after 1877. Then, for Joseba Agirreazkuenaga is clear that, although dispersed in various documents, can be traced the definition of foral sovereignty, because of the effort of foral representatives to bring up to date those historical rights and, upon then, co-ordinate and harmonise all three provincial politics.

From 1876 on, Basque autonomy turns into tax autonomy, specially when long terms' agreements or pacts are signed between Basque provinces and Spanish government. This fact required an effort to bring all politics near from each other, and go to Madrid with a clear unitary negotiation aim. Once fiscal and economic security was won, voices for a wider political and administrative autonomy were heard. Conferences are now assemblies and, as Agirreazkuenaga says, they play a role of collective representation organ, something like an embryonic parliament. In 1917 it was designed the first project of a political autonomy for the Basque country, a great step between conference system and an Autonomy Statute, through the bridge of the proposed Regional Administration Council. In 1918, deputation of the three Basque provinces plus Navarre founded the Society of Basque Studies (*Eusko Ikaskuntza*), the one that publishes this revue. It was the first attempt to create common organs, and survive just to our days.

Maybe not such a radical interpretation as Agirreazkuenaga proposes -"The origins and formation of the various political cultures, such as Basque and Spanish nationalisms in the Basque Country- could and must be again interpreted at the light of this fabulous political-institutional experience of the conferences"- but a singular element for tight understanding of configuration of a political and administrative autonomy, and a very useful source for historians that will be obligated to consult them (and, if possible, completed; Agirreazkuenaga's team has done, no doubt in it, an exhaustive work) the next decades.