

Popular empowerment, peasant struggles and political change: Southern Catalonia under late Francoism (1968-1976)¹

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ABSTRACT

Despite great advances in “history from below”, the rural world still represents only a small part of studies of the anti-Francoist movement in Spain. This has led to ignorance of the wide range of social responses to the regime that occurred in rural Spain. This article proposes to explain the dynamics of the rural world in relation to the anti-Francoist movement based on a case study of southern Catalonia. We analyze the social struggles arising from the “collapse of the peasant’s moral economy” while paying attention to the political learning process that these confrontations provided for rural workers. Far from being apathetic and demobilized, rural areas experienced a process of opposition comparable in many ways to that of large urban centres.

KEYWORDS

Southern Catalonia, Peasant struggles, anti-Francoist movement, 1968-1976

1 Rural opposition to Francoism

The peasantry has been often identified as a heterogeneous, conservative and politically apathetic social group. Their demands have been considered as pre-political, individualistic and millenarian. Moreover, it was assumed that the peasantry

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was a group destined to disappear with the advance of modernity. Recently, however, several studies have thoroughly reconsidered and overcome these conceptions.² In the historiography of the Franco regime, particularly surrounding the theme of political change, numerous studies have correctly highlighted the key role of the popular classes in explaining the end of the dictatorship: especially the industrial working class, but also the role of neighbourhood movements, students, professionals and intellectuals. Despite this trend, rural social agents and their interaction with the regime and their role in its downfall have often been ignored. Only recently, a few researchers have begun to pay attention to the dynamics of conflict in rural Spain, highlighting its role as a democratizing force for wider social sectors, a fact that resolutely influenced the overall process of political change.³

These few studies have offered the first results about rural social conflicts in predominantly agricultural regions, often where large landed estates and wage labour predominated. Yet there is still a lack of analysis about rural areas on the periphery of the main industrial areas such as Catalonia where there was a clear predominance of smaller family farms that coexisted with other types of landownership and employment opportunities that prefigured a great complexity in the social relationships of the region. Many small peasant landholders also supplemented their incomes as wage earners in the large rice plantations and were also attracted by the better salaries of industrial work in the factories located near the countryside. Moonlighting was thus common, aggravating the precariousness of living off small land holdings. In addition, a determining factor in social conflicts was the organizational maturity of the Catalan political opposition to the Franco regime in general. Catalan society, especially in the industrial belt of Barcelona, but not exclusively, was increasingly mobilized and developed a rich associative structure as it grew in the decade before the end of the regime. So much so that by the early 1970s, the Catalan anti-Francoist movement had already established the first unified action platform of the Spanish opposition, the *Assemblea de Catalunya* (Assembly of Catalonia). Without doubt, then, a study of the Catalan rural periphery may help us to fully understand the complexity of post-Francoist political change, as much in Catalonia as in Spain.

² For classical studies on the peasantry see HOBBSBAWM, Eric J. *Rebeldes primitivos: estudios sobre las formas arcaicas de los movimientos sociales en los siglos XIX y XX*. Barcelona: Ariel, 1983. A critique of Hobsbawm may be found in GONZÁLEZ DE MOLINA, Manuel. "Los mitos de la modernidad y la protesta campesina. A propósito de *Rebeldes Primitivos* de Eric J. Hobsbawm". *Historia Social*, vol. 25, 1996, pp. 113-157.

³ Probably the best book on the role of the new social movements during Francoism and the transition to democracy is DOMÈNECH, Xavier. *Cambio político y movimiento obrero bajo el franquismo: lucha de clases, dictadura y democracia (1939-1977)*. Madrid: Icaria, 2012. Some pioneering studies on the peasantry and rural areas during the political change are HERRERA, Antonio. *La construcción de la democracia en el campo (1975-1988): el sindicalismo agrario socialista en la Transición española*. Madrid: MAGRAMA, 2007 and MARTÍN, Óscar J. *A tientas con la democracia: movilización, actitudes y cambio en la provincia de Albacete, 1966-1976*. Madrid: Catarata, 2008.



Figure 1: Map of the Lower Ebro Region

This paper analyses social conflicts in southern Catalonia, specifically the regions of Lower Ebro and Montsià, both located on the mouth of the Ebro River in the province of Tarragona [Figure 1].⁴ These conflicts were carried out by rural wage workers and proletarianized small farmers who were able to resist and to challenge almost permanently the Francoist agents in the region and, as we shall see, they had a direct impact on weakening the local powers of the dictatorship. Apparently calm, the peasantry was, however, suffering the unwelcome consequences of the so-called *developmentalist* political economy of the 1960s: impoverishment, proletarianization, higher taxation, the necessity to migrate, etc. This led to conflicts not primarily centred on the property of land itself, but on control of the means of production and the final product of the peasants' labour. Franco's *Nuevo Estado* (New State) claimed to be the guarantor of "social peace" so strictly labour conflicts necessarily became larger political struggles, as the latter were defined as crimes in Francoist Spain. Thereby, workers learned how to challenge the regime while they were gradually defining and increasing what was and what was not possible under the dictatorship. Peasant struggles were a useful political learning process for those involved, but they also extended beyond rural workers themselves. Indeed, since the late 1960s peasants had become the social and political vanguard of anti-Francoism in villages on the lower Ebro, mobilizing huge segments of the rural population.

⁴ An important part of the source material constituting this paper is from FERRER GONZÁLEZ, Cristian. *Lluitadors quotidians: L'antifranquisme, el canvi polític i la construcció de la democràcia al Montsià (1972-1979)*. Lleida: UdL, 2014, pp. 48-51, 67-82 and 91-93. Nevertheless, most of the documentary sources used here are unpublished.

2. From the notion of injustice to organized protest

In 1966, the government approved a new *Seguridad Social Agraria* (Agrarian Social Security policy, hereafter SSA). As a result, farmers who employed waged workers, legally identified as “agricultural entrepreneurs”, were required to pay a tax. With the objective of avoiding the development of a black market economy, the government calculated the entrepreneur’s tax for the SSA by a theoretical count of the labour needed to work a farm, based on its size instead of the actual number of wage workers employed. This policy demonstrated a profound ignorance of labour in agriculture. Small and mid-sized farms did not utilize wage work, relying instead on the family unit. The SSA tax was thus perceived as deeply unfair because it forced farmers to pay workers that, in fact, did not exist. In addition, from the 1950s onwards family farms ceased to produce for home consumption and were completely integrated in the capitalist market. Thereafter family farms became dependent on the marketing of the agricultural industry and the new social intermediaries that would arise to perform this function. Many families were not able to maintain production at a sufficient level to cope with high taxes and debts. Many of them began to work in regional industries or they migrated to the big cities. Competition in the labour market became a necessity in the struggle to survive. Many small farmers were forced to make large investments to maximize their production and a significant number decided to sell or lease their lands to their more fortunate neighbours who had not opted to migrate.⁵

Previous studies have alerted us that the perception of injustice involves a central attribution of responsibility. Yet, the subjectivity of a political grievance process also develops within a broader interpretive framework of shared identity that is essential to provide an organized response. According to E. P. Thompson:

[...] these grievances operated within a popular consensus as to what were legitimate and what were illegitimate practices [...]. This in turn was grounded upon a consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, of the proper economic functions of several parties within the community, which, taken together, can be said to constitute “the moral economy of the poor”. An outrage to these moral assumptions, quite as much as actual deprivation, was the usual occasion for direct action.⁶

However, any action also requires what Klandermans calls a “motivational framework” involving the creation and dissemination of beliefs about the effectiveness of collective action. And along with the grievance itself this is one of the keys to the social

⁵ ALONSO, V. L., *et. al. Crisis agrarias y luchas campesinas, 1970-1976*. Madrid: Ayuso, 1976, pp. 41-54; RIQUER, Borja de. *Historia de España. La dictadura de Franco*. vol. 9, Barcelona: Crítica, 2010, pp. 624-627; SIMPSON, James. *La agricultura española (1765-1965): la larga siesta*. Madrid: Alianza, 1997, pp. 321-347; SABIO, Alberto. “Cultivadores de democracia. Politización campesino y sindicalismo agrario progresista en España (1970-1980)”, *Historia Social*, vol. 38, 2006, pp. 75-102, especially pp. 76-77; Interview with T.M. (s.a. [1976-77]): peasant trade unionist, in: BENELBAS, León, *et al. Unió de Pagesos: el sindicat del camp*. Barcelona: Alternativa, 1977, pp. 197-199.

⁶ THOMPSON, Edward Palmer. *Costumbres en común*. Barcelona: Crítica, 1995, p. 216.

construction of protest. Cabana summarizes this as follows “when potential participants in a social movement think strategies and collective actions are useful to change a situation and to reduce its uneasiness, it is when a link between discomfort and the behaviour of protest exists”.⁷ Since the late 1960s, many sectors of southern Catalan peasants demonstrated that they felt part of a common social body (the peasantry, rural people) with common problems. They perceived the regime’s agrarian policy as illegitimate and an attempt to destroy their way of life. In addition, news of the victories and successes from more mobilized regions, especially the triumph of the Workers’ Commissions in the main industries in 1966, where, in fact, some of those who immigrated worked, led some peasants to “defend with our hands our interests, which coincide with the general democratic interests of our people”.⁸ Indeed, some decided to join the *Comissions de Pagesos* (Peasants Commissions, hereafter CCPP) in the struggle against the perspective that “little farmers soon will be wage-workers for intermediaries who eat our fruit like they want to”.⁹

The political demands and methods displayed by the CCPP in Catalonia arose from the customs of the “little everyday rebellions” of the peasantry, by consolidating an action that some of them were already practicing, because it was one of “the most felt claims [...] by peasants and land workers”: that is, a coordinated boycott against the SSA tax.¹⁰ Actions like the denial to pay a tax are easy to repress by the state unless they count

⁷ CABANA, Ana. *La derrota de lo épico*. Valencia: PUV, 2013, p. 53. On the “frameworks theory” see KLANDERMANS, Bert. *The Social Psychology of protest*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.

⁸ Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya (hereafter ANC), PSUC collection, *Extractes de documents de la Coordinadora de Comissions de Pagesos del Camp de Catalunya*, s.a. [1968], sig. 1552, p. 2. For the workers movement in the Barcelona metropolitan area, see DOMÈNICH, Xavier. *Clase obrera, antifranquismo y cambio político: pequeños grandes cambios, 1956-1969*. Madrid: Catarata, 2008.

⁹ Arxiu Històric de la Comissió Obrera Nacional de Catalunya (hereafter AHCONC), Clandestine press, “La necessitat de la Reforma Agrària”, *Camp: Portaveu de les Comissions de Pagesos de Catalunya*, n. 2, s.a. [September-October of 1969], reg. 00/97, top. 0159C015. It provides information about the emulation of the urban mobilizations by people in the lower Ebro. See the interviews of J.V.E. (July 26, 2012): student, socialist, non-tenured professor; E.E.M. (June 3, 2013): agronomist student, peasant and trade unionist; E.T.A. (June 17, 2013): student, worker, communist; AHCONC, interview of C.L.S. (October 22, 1998 – February 18, 1999): communist interviewed by Javier Tébar, and interview of J.S. (s.a. [1976-77]): peasant and trade unionist, in: BENELBAS, León, et. al. *Unió de Pagesos: el sindicat del camp Op.Cit.*, pp. 201-202. Also consult the pioneering study on influence of mobilization, the “political mirror”, in MARTÍN, Óscar J. *A tientas con la democracia... Op.Cit.* pp. 172-182 and 226-234.

¹⁰ About “little everyday rebellions”, see YUSTA, Mercedes. *Guerrilla y resistencia campesina: la resistencia armada contra el franquismo en Aragón (1939-1952)*. Zaragoza: PUZ, 2003, pp. 15-25, quote on p. 18. For a classic study of peasant resistance, see SCOTT, James C. *Los dominados y el arte de la resistencia*. Tafalla: Txalaparta, 2003. Next quote from ANC, PSUC collection, *Extractes de...* sig. 1552, p. 2. We may see the importance of the boycott to SSA tax in AHCONC, Clandestine press, “Continua el problema de la Seguretat Social”, *Camp: Portaveu de les Comissions de Pagesos de Catalunya*, n. 3, s.a. [November-December of 1969], reg. 00/97, top. 0159C015. For a study about conflicts around the SSA tax, see CABANA, Ana and LANERO, Daniel. “Movilización social en la Galicia rural del Tardofranquismo (1960-1977)”, *Historia Agraria*, vol. 48, 2009, pp. 111-132.

on massive popular support. In a village in Lerida province, in inner Catalonia, twenty-nine peasants were arrested in 1972 and their properties were confiscated. This event provoked solidarity by wide sectors of urban and rural society, the boycott was extended and the regime was forced to drop the charges against the prisoners. Mobilizations against the SSA tax in the Lower Ebro and Montsià, with the always-present agrarian unemployment problem, produced demonstrations of over five hundred rural workers in April 1971 and once again in 1972. Despite the repression suffered, the regime was not able to counter the widespread boycott and the Spanish government was forced to exempt small family farms from the tax in 1973.¹¹

The CCPP of the Lower Ebro participated in this massive struggle that involved heterogeneous social sectors with, for example, 50% of the population working as wage labourers. Many of these, however, also “had their piece of land with one or two *jornales*¹² where they planted what was essential for the winter, but they all lived working the land of others”. Many of them also participated in Christian social movements that would inspire the CCPP’s discourse. Others came from a socialist political culture and, especially, anarcho-syndicalism, which was very present in the region before the civil war. But the major political group in the CCPP were, undoubtedly, the communists of the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, hereafter PSUC), who constituted the most active and organized peasants in Francoist Spain. The very strong presence of waged workers with a radical political rhetoric hindered the CCPP’s relationship with less politicized sectors. In addition to the slogans of the PSUC that differentiated waged workers from peasants, although the party later rejected them, led the CCPP to have serious difficulties mobilizing non-communist sectors.¹³ However, it was repression that smashed the possibility of the consolidation of the CCPP’s. As a result of the State of Emergency declared by the regime in 1969, the leadership of the PSUC in the region was dismantled and peasant activists were forced to organize strictly clandestinely for some time.

3. Redefining the possible: transforming the given framework

¹¹ Read a letter sent to the press by peasants of Artesa de Lleida in solidarity with the twenty-nine arrested in Albatàrrech: “Las cuotas de la Seguridad Social Agraria”, *La Vanguardia Española*, May 10, 1972. The mobilizations in Amposta and its effect on the SSA tax may be found in MAYAYO, Andreu. *De pagesos a ciutadans: cent anys de sindicalisme i cooperativisme agraris a Catalunya, 1893-1994*. Barcelona: Afers, 1995, pp. 199-210; ANC, PSUC collection, *Primera Conferència del Comité Intercomarcal Baix Ebre-Montsià del PSUC*, 1978, sig. 5444, p. 6; Arxiu Històric Provincial de Tarragona (hereafter AHPT), Càmera Oficial Sindical Agraria of Tarragona collection, *Libro de Actas*, March 15, 1973, sig. 58, p. 12.

¹² In Spanish “jornal” means “daily salary”, but it is also an ancient land measure equivalent to about 4,080 square metres, a term still used by the peasantry.

¹³ First quote in: interview of E.T.A. (June 17, 2013). Interviews of P.F.M. (June 4, 2013): shepherd, labourer and socialist; J.S. (s.a. [1976-77]): peasant trade unionist, in BENELBAS, León, *et. al. Unió de pagesos...Op.Cit.*, pp. 201-202. ANC, PSUC collection, *Acuerdos de la Primera Asamble General de las Comisiones Obreras Agrícolas y Campesinas*, May 1970, sig. 1552, pp. 2-3.

Despite the CCPP's difficulties, it was able to channel the demands of the peasantry to control the structures of the *Sindicato Vertical*, the official Francoist trade union, known as the "Brotherhood" in the countryside. The CCPP represented a synthesis of the two dominant varieties of Catalan trade unionism that had originated in the 1930s: on the one hand, "reformist" trade unionism with actions like infiltration in the official trade unions and raising legal grievances with the Francoist authorities; and on the other hand, "revolutionary" trade unionism, using unlawful means like the strike or the boycott, classified as crimes and severely punished by the dictatorship.¹⁴ Indeed, peasants started a struggle for official trade union control even before the industrial working class had launched a similar campaign in 1966. Open activism, assemblies and regular confrontations with the Francoist trade union personnel produced some of the first leaders of peasant activism. Such leaders gained recognition and respect that, in fact, helped to better the standard of living for the majority. Screaming "Long Live Democracy" and "Thieves, Go Home", a growing number of peasants participated in the movement, and when their leaders would suffer repression, solidarity campaigns would serve to further consolidate the movement.¹⁵

In the 1971 elections for the Workers' Section in Amposta, six peasants in the opposition movement were elected.¹⁶ In spite of such partial victories, the leeway for advancement was narrow and the costs of repression were high. The Workers' Section was not allowed to control the official trade union because of the impediments of Francoist labour law. Despite this, it was the one legal way to raise larger economic and political demands felt by the population. The dictatorship had imposed an unequal union structure on rural workers; landowners and big agrarian entrepreneurs enjoyed absolute and unquestioned power within official union structures, despite representing only 4.6% of its members. This inequality made it virtually impossible for the vast majority in the "producers' section" to control the union. However, some mobilized peasants started to approach more well-off farmers asking them to organize a "democratic candidacy" together representing all wage workers, peasants and farmers in the anti-Francoist movement. Their ultimate target would be control of the official trade union of each segment; but first they would strategically seek to win in one area, the rice producers'

¹⁴ ANC, PSUC collection, *Extractes de documents...* sig. 1552, p. 3. We may see how José Antonio Serrano Montalvo, the province's civil governor, perceived the "subversive" peasant actions in Archivo General de la Administración (hereafter AGA), Ministry of Governance collection, *Memoria del Gobierno Civil de Tarragona*, 1968, sig. 52/00487. For more information about the "reformist" and "revolutionary" varieties of the CCPP, see: MAYAYO, Andreu. *De pagesos a ciutadans... Op.Cit.*, pp. 197-199.

¹⁵ ANC, PSUC collecton, *Por una vida mejor*, s.a. [1970], sig. 1552. See what has been called "the conquest of solidarity" in DOMÈNECH, Xavier. *Quan el carrer va deixar de ser seu: moviment obrer, societat civil i canvi polític: Sabadell (1966-1976)*. Barcelona: Abadia de Montserrat, 2002, pp. 121-123.

¹⁶ ANC, PSUC collection, *Assemblea de la Coordinadora de les Comissions de Pagesos i Jornalers de Catalunya*, December 5, 1971, sig. 1552, p. 1.

organization, the *Cámara Arrocerá*, “the cooperative with the highest trading volume of Spain”.¹⁷

The attempt to bring together the opposition vanguard and entrepreneurs who were opposed to corruption and greedy intermediaries was fraught with difficulties. In 1972, some communist peasants tried to construct an inter-class candidacy to take control of the *Arrocerá*. Despite the apparent predisposition of some anti-Francoist entrepreneurs to join with their class enemies, it was difficult to convince communist peasants to ally with better off farmers with different political perspectives. As one activist in the campaign, Comrade R, noted: up until “the last moment [...] [they] lack[ed] help from the [PSUC’s] Local Committee and from the militant peasant base”.¹⁸ Yet the mobilization effort for the elections ended up encouraging the most active peasants to participate in the campaign.

Despite open confrontations in the past, the majority of peasants and rural wage workers could still shelter themselves in the rhetorical concessions inherent to what Scott calls the “self-portrait of dominant elites” and elements of the dominant social discourse from the dictatorship: the *falangist* ideology. For the peasantry, rhetorical concessions offered a surprisingly large arena for political conflict by using a low-intensity discourse based on the “flattering self-image of the elites”, despite their actual defenceless situation against a possible open confrontation.¹⁹ Thus, the campaign to win the elections in the *Arrocerá* was made openly and within the established legal framework. Peasant activists travelled the region with cars and megaphones, posted up over three hundred posters by all unions and cooperatives in the area, and organized for an agrarian entrepreneur candidate, well regarded by farmers and workers, to challenge the Francoist leadership of the cooperative.²⁰

The *Arrocerá*’s president understood his power was in danger so he recruited over three hundred non-farmers as new members, especially city shopkeepers, with the promise to offer them low-interest loans from the *Caja Rural*, the rural Building Society, if they voted for him on the cooperative’s Board. Apparently, the President “coerced many farmers [...], falsified ballots with the clumsy ploy to vote by delegation, [...] he did not allow anyone talking during the session and he proved to be a troublemaker”. Despite the difficulties, the opposition candidacy won 30% of the votes. The President “went to the polling place with more than a thousand votes under his arm”,²¹ so it was

¹⁷ “El Bajo Ebro, en los inicios de un proceso de desarrollo económico”, *La Vanguardia Española*, October 26, 1972, p. 53.

¹⁸ ANC, PSUC collection, *Amposta: Junta General de la Cambra Arrosera*, September 3, 1972, sig. 1677, p. 1.

¹⁹ SCOTT, James C. *Los dominados... Op.Cit.*, p. 45. For a study on rhetorical “social justice” from the *falangismo* and Franco’s regime, see MOLINERO, Carme. *La captación de las masas: política social y propaganda en el regimen franquista*. Madrid: Cátedra, 2005.

²⁰ ANC, PSUC collection, Handwritten pamphlet giving instructions on what posters should say and how many copies must be done, 1972, sig. 1677.

²¹ Quotes in ANC, PSUC collection, *Amposta: Junta General...* sig. 1677, p. 2 and interview by E.T.A. (June 17, 2013).

not possible to defeat him in 1972. However, the 30% electoral support encouraged the anti-Francoist movement in the region.

Indeed, despite their partial defeat, a proof that the opposition campaign generated a heated political conflict was the repression that was soon organized by the Francoist supporters. The renovation of the Board assembly “awoke the interest of Ebro’s right wing [...]. The meeting, that had started at 4 in the afternoon, [only] ended at midnight”. Punishment by Francoist personnel in the *Cámara Arrocerá* came quickly and 136 members “considered from the opposition” were “expelled from the *Cámara*” under the pretext of “refusing to register their whole land, including their family’s land which does not belong to the *Cámara*”. Such irregularities were reported by the press, but censorship was quite strict: “a peasant from Amposta sent a letter to the *Correo Catalán*, reporting the irregularities in the *Cámara Arrocerá*”. However, “a month has passed and the letter has not yet been published”.²²

4. The expansion of the anti-Francoist social base

In the same period as the peasants’ campaign in the *Sindicato Vertical*, the movement also began a process of contact with other sectors of workers. In a natural way, rural and industrial workers in villages met in bars; for those who were Christians and churchgoers, in church on Sundays; in cultural and recreational centres as well as amateur theatres. To sum up, they met in social spaces of all kinds. As Thompson wrote, “the chapel, the tavern and the home were their own”. We mean, in that sense, that these spaces were far from the main stage of the class struggle: far from the official trade unions, far from the cooperatives, far from the factories. Nevertheless, these spaces “were their own”. They were spaces that contributed to the contact and engagement between different political and cultural sensitivities. Activists met with other non-activists, and sharing anti-Francoist ideas, they created “safe spaces”. People hostile to the regime converged with peasants unconnected with the movement to begin an uninhibited exchange of opinions. It is hard to ascertain the extent and limits of such safe spaces, but we can affirm that sites of popular sociability were essential to connect activists, eventually contributing to united actions by social Christians, socialists, Marxists, social democrats, Christian democrats, communists, Catalan nationalists or people without any political affiliation in particular.²³

²² “La Cooperativa de la Cámara Arrocerá renovó la mitad de su Junta”, *La Vanguardia Española*, September 8th of 1972, p. 28. ANC, PSUC collection, Amposta’s Local Committee informative to the PSUC’s Central Committee, October 10, 1973, sig. 1677.

²³ Most of the interviewees attest to the importance of recreational association: Interview by J.V.G. (July 3, 2013): cultural activist and worker trade unionist; J.A.B. (July 20, 2012): Christian and later socialist militant; J.L.M.M. (July 9, 2012): bank worker and Catalan separatist leftist; E.E.M. (June 2, 2013); E.T.A. (June 17, 2013); J.V.E. (July 26, 2012). I also wrote about this topic in FERRER GONZÁLEZ, Cristian. “Ulldecona i el canvi polític. Dictadura, contrahegemonia i democràcia (1964-1983)”, *Rails*, vol. 30, 2014, pp. 7-53. Thompson’s quote from THOMPSON, Edward Palmer. *La formación de la clase obrera en Inglaterra*. Madrid: Capitán Swing, 2013, p. 74.

Recreational and cultural activities during these years were a good way to attract young people, then still unconnected with the opposition, to the anti-Francoist opposition. Concerts, recitals, expositions, cinema clubs, theatres, hiking clubs, and debates were activities that offered the possibility of popular involvement. Such activities contributed to the construction of a counterhegemonic culture. Faced with the impossibility of always constructing open political activities, cultural activism became the “bait” which allowed opposition movements to “channel alternatives formulated independently from the officialdom”.²⁴ Civic and cultural associations opened tiny cracks that were used by anti-Francoist activists to open up spaces helping to build a dissident political culture that the regime had no doubt in calling “subversive”. Political dissent surpassed workplace relations and was expressed by expanded activity among the majority in the popular sectors, arriving, in the words of the Ministry of Labour Relations, to “collectives until now peaceful”. The dictatorship, on the other hand, was incapable of promoting an official culture related to their own interests despite counting on the full power of the state apparatus. Official culture was confined to staid commemorations such as the “Liberation of the Village as the National Crusade”.²⁵

The expansion of the social base of the opposition developed beyond the cultural level. Indeed, spaces of popular sociability aided the process of galvanizing different sectors in larger opposition political movements. Moreover, following the example of the *Assemblea de Catalunya*, the rural workers’ movement gave up their sectarianism and started to build united actions. So much so that they definitively rejected the most sectarian ideological formulations of the CCPP organization, beginning to

[...] organize collectively around the most essential demands of the peasantry as a whole and its demands for specific formulations in each region according to its peculiarities. The need to promote cadres and peasants to contribute to its development was also considered, as well as the extension of the network of peasant organizations to all of Catalonia that would be the basis of the peasant mobilization.²⁶

As a result of this operational shift, the rural workers’ movement created a new, more plural and less ideological socio-political movement that was able to unite the whole rural opposition: the *Unió de Pagesos* (Peasants’ Union, hereafter UP). Workers from southern Catalonia participated in its foundation. Some of them were linked to the PSUC, but there was also the obvious presence of socialists and Christian democrats. The UP

²⁴ JAME, Antonieta. *L’oposició al franquisme a Lleida*. Lerida: Pagès, 1998, pp. 99-152, quote from p. 102; also see MARTÍN, Óscar J. *A tientas con... Op.Cit.*, pp. 269-282 and FERRER GONZÁLEZ, Cristian. *Lluitadors quotidians... Op.Cit.*, pp. 82-89.

²⁵ On “subversive” political culture, see the north Catalan case in AGA, Ministry of Governance collection, *Memoria del Gobierno Civil de Gerona*, 1976, sig. 32/11454, c. 5. Quote from MARTIN VILLA, Rodolfo. *Al Servicio del Estado*. Barcelona: Planeta, 1985 [1st ed. 1984], p. 16. Institutional commemorations in AHPT, Public Order collection, *Programa oficial de actos y festejos*, Santa Bàrbara, May of 1976, sig. 2304; “National Crusade” is how fascists called the Spanish Civil War.

²⁶ ANC, PSUC collection, “Reunión de payeses de 16 comarcas de Cataluña”, *Informaciones Campesinas*, s.a. [November of 1974], sig. 1552, p. 1.

was clearly a more plural organization than the CCPP. It arose among Ebro's peasantry during the last year of the dictator Franco's life. It demonstrated that it had the support of a civil society that had already created social spaces for oppositional ideas and politics. This was expressed for example in a relatively large demonstration – 500 people according to the organizers – on May 1, 1975 in front of the *Cámara Arrocerá* demanding assistance against unemployment.²⁷

In the early summer of 1975, large assemblies were organized in the local branches of the official trade unions. They debated the precarious economic situation of families who lived off the land. In their opinion, it was the result of government policies. Indeed, the peasantry was not allowed to negotiate directly with the state, a situation equal to that of the industrial working class before the introduction of collective bargaining agreements in 1958. The only option that rural workers had was to strike to generate enough pressure to win their demands, producing “collective bargaining by riot” in all branches of production. Only in this way could the workers minimize the repressive costs of the strike. Only in this way could they overflow the state capacity to repress the workers' protest and force the state to, in the case of farmers, increase the price of agricultural products.²⁸ The price rise on the market was unstoppable yet what farmers received each year was lower than the previous year. As the harvesters complained: “canned tomato has increased in price [...] except the price received by the farmer”.²⁹

Compensation to agrarian entrepreneurs that the regime had previously offered was disappearing because of the 1973 oil crisis. The dictatorship lost its base of support, the owners, and it was completely incapable of attracting the popular classes and neutralizing the growing “subversion”. The regime was in crisis and the opposition was united and self-assured. The 1975 trade union elections would be the definitive occasion to unseat the “false representatives”, while the real level of the opposition's hegemony among workers and civil society could be verified. The main difference in respect to 1972 was that in 1975 “labourers and owners have come together for the first time [...]; they have fought together helping to each other to clean up the Brotherhood of false representatives”. The opposition had the opportunity to meet and discuss in large assemblies “with frankness and freedom”, constructing a unitary programme to confront the local Francoists, before the elections. The list of candidates was horizontally chosen and the program was approved unanimously.³⁰

²⁷ Centre Documental de la Comunicació (hereafter CEDOC), Viladot collection, “Notícies”, *La Terra*, n. 1, July 1975, sig. 0689GF, p. 11.

²⁸ DOMÈNECH, Xavier. “La otra cara del milagro español. Clase obrera y movimiento obrero en los años del desarrollismo”, *Historia Contemporánea*, vol. 26, 2003, pp. 91-112. For the origin of the term “collective bargaining by riot”, see HOBBSAWM, Eric J. *Trabajadores: estudios de la historia de la clase obrera*. Barcelona: Crítica, 1979, pp. 16-35.

²⁹ ANC, PSUC collection, “El campesino cobra hoy menos que en 1973”, *Informaciones Campesinas*, s.a. [November 1974], sig. 1552, p. 7.

³⁰ On Francoism's crisis, see YSÀS, Pere. La crisis de la dictadura franquista. In: MOLINERO, Carme (ed.). *La Transición, treinta años después*. Barcelona: Península, 2006. Quotes from CEDOC, Viladot collection, “Les eleccions sindicals a Amposta”, *La Terra*, n. 2, January 1976, sig. 0689GF, p. 4.

As in the 1972 elections for the *Arrocera*, pro-Francoists tried to buy the votes of labourers and owners, aiming to “stop the struggle that has been developing in the social sphere in the last years”. The President of the *Arrocera* promoted his own candidates in both the labourers’ and owners’ sections of the trade union. He took advantage of his position as President to use the locals of the cooperative for meetings and attempted to buy favours among the workers and owners using the members’ own money. He wanted to guarantee his control of the official trade union control at any cost. Such despotic and authoritarian methods produced a double and contradictory effect: on one hand, the President dissuaded workers to take a vindictive attitude fearing sanctions—especially getting fired from work—and suffer political repression; on the other hand, he contributed to the radicalization of attitudes among more and more workers.³¹ However, the development of popular empowerment by the opposition made the difference:

The vanguard of workers and employers of the democratic candidacies were at the door of the Brotherhood [Official Trade Union] at the time of the vote. They completely invalidated the [union] bosses—who were used to doing whatever they wanted at the *Cámara*. This time they were booed by workers and publicly denounced the coercion faced by the *Cámara*’s workers who were threatened with dismissal if they did not vote for him.³²

This time “democratic candidacies” won in every union section except among the landowners and the union administrative staff who were formed by personnel loyal to the President. The opposition victory reverberated beyond the world of labour relations. Many greeting cards were received by the union from shopkeepers after the democratic candidacies’ victory.³³ It showed the degree of support garnered by the anti-Francoist movement among civil society that had become aware of its own power as it worked together united with wider social sectors.

5. The partial defeat of a strike and the success of many struggles: towards political change

The success of the southern Catalan political opposition did not improve the living conditions of the peasantry. The horticultural sector had been the centre of agrarian development during the preceding years in the Ebro region.³⁴ But the canning industry exercised the monopoly of intermediation between the peasantry and the market. They earned most of the profits and their greed led to increases in the final price of products.

³¹ ANC, PSUC collection, *Elecciones sindicales en Amposta*, July 5, 1975, sig. 1677, p. 1. MOLINERO, Carme and YSÀS, Pere. *Productores disciplinados y minorías subversivas: clase obrera y conflictividad laboral en la España franquista*. Madrid: Siglo XXI, 1998, p. 226.

³² ANC, PSUC collection, *Elecciones...* sig. 1677, p. 2.

³³ Arxiu Comarcal del Montsià (hereafter ACMO), Amposta’s Agrarian Chamber collection, *Llibre de correspondència de l’entitat sindical*, July 17, 1975, sig. 2243014, c. 8.

³⁴ “Marcha ascendente de la sección hortofrutícola”, *La Vanguardia Española*, September 8, 1972, p. 28.

This reduced the consumption capacity of the popular classes at a time of severe economic crisis.

From 1973 onwards, Spanish peasants had initiated a wave of diverse conflicts to achieve an improved price for their products and, as was mentioned above, to minimize the possibility of repression. The “Pepper War”, for example, took place between October and November 1973. Thanks to massive popular support, it spread along the Ebro Valley, between Navarre and Aragon.

In August 1975, Ebro’s Catalan peasants threatened a “tomato pickup” strike unless they received five pesetas per kilo as a minimum price. The so-called “Tomato War” had started in Navarre in the summer of 1973 and it finished with a general rise in tomato prices for the farmers that year. However, inflation during 1974 decreased the real increase. Throughout 1974 and 1975, several conflicts related to inflation and the inability to negotiate the production price of fruits and vegetables broke out: asparagus, peppers and tomatoes were the main crops in the conflict. The 40% decrease in exports to the European Community led to a decrease in demand for tomatoes by the canning industry since they were still using the stock of the previous year’s tomatoes. However, the peasantry was not ready to pay for a crisis that was not caused by them. While the prices of their products decreased, they noted a 30% increase in the profits of the seven main Spanish banks, prompting them to rhetorically question: “Who should tighten their belts?”³⁵

One democratic workers’ commission from the Amposta official trade union met with the *Arrocera*’s President in early August 1975. Workers aimed to control the profit margin from tomato harvesting. The mood was heated and there was no agreement. The next day more than 250 harvesters met at the union offices and harshly criticized the canning industry that was, literally, ruining them. One of the constant and never satisfied demands of the peasant movement was to buy a cannery to conserve the products they produced. The *Arrocera*’s President “satisfied” their demand at that moment by buying an outdated machine from his nephews’ bankrupt industry. They not only were unable to get a better price for their products, but also had to deal with the debt generated by the purchase of obsolete machinery. It was the straw that broke the camel’s back and “farmers agreed at the last meeting to stop the harvest in the coming days if they were not given the demanded price”.³⁶

From the first time in 37 years of dictatorship, the peasantry of the region took massive collection action through a strike. Picketers visited all tomato farms rebuking those who refused to obey the will of the majority expressed in the democratic assembly of August 8. Four days later, the strike appeared to have little chance of success despite

³⁵ ANC, PSUC collection, “Precios percibidos, coste de vida y beneficios bancarios”, *Informaciones Campesinas*, s.a. [October 1974], sig. 1552, p. 3. Interview of E.T.A. (June 17, 2013); CEDOC, Viladot collection, “Vaga dels colliters de tomàquets a Amposta”, *La Terra*, n. 2, January 1976, sig. 0689GF, p. 6. On these conflicts mentioned see ALONSO, V. L., *et. al. Crisis agrarias... Op.Cit.*, pp. 55-98, especially pp. 81-90 on the “Tomato War” of 1975.

³⁶ “Los agricultores de Amposta, descontentos”, *La Vanguardia Española*, August 15, 1975, p. 24.

the initial enthusiasm of the farmers. The *Arrocera*'s President took advantage of this situation during the weekend to make a bargain unfavourable to the harvesters, acting behind the cooperative's members. A labourer rebuked the President at the assembly of August 11. The President, he said, "breaks the Cámara's rules, he insults a member [...] while he expels him from the meeting". Over 240 harvesters, 80% of the members, left the assembly in disgust. Despite this setback, the strike extended to southwestern Spain, in Extremadura, which went on strike from August 12 to 18. Harvesters in other provinces also struck and the action was reactivated in the north of the country. The Ministry of Agriculture, unable to repress such a widespread action, agreed to bargain with the peasantry and offered help to the sector. "Collective bargaining by riot" was thus the only way to force real negotiations. Moreover, media coverage contributed, undoubtedly, to expand solidarity between the peasants and the people.³⁷

In spite of the eventual tomato workers' defeat in Catalonia by the hierarchies of the regime, the general mobilizing frame extended to several Spanish regions, indicating that the regime's days in power were numbered. Franco's death in November 1975 produced the perception that the dictatorship could be ended, provoking an increase in social mobilizations: industrial strikes, land occupations in the south and the participation in actions of "new" sectors until then "peaceful". These months — from December 1975 to May 1976 — were crucial in avoiding the perpetuation of Francoism beyond the dictator's death.³⁸ Popular empowerment was clear and inedited: in a country where strikes were prohibited, between 1973 and 1976 Spain witnessed the largest number of labour conflicts in Europe in relation to the number of workers involved and the hours lost. Demands for democracy and amnesty for political prisoners and those in exile multiplied with the movements demanding to know if the new king Juan Carlos the First would form a government in benefit "of that immense majority, which is not silent but silenced". The isolation of the dictatorship forced the regime to implement restricted reforms, which failed, making it necessary to embark on more ambitious reforms that were finally achieved through the general election in 1977. This would launch a political process that the opposition did not manage, but conditioned; and, finally, it forced the new regime to break with many of the past practices of the Francoist dictatorship. Despite the quantity of ink that has been spent on the "democratic will" of the king and the political staff of the former dictatorship, it is clear that the genesis of the process leading

³⁷ "Los ingresos de los agricultores de Amposta han disminuido en más de veinticinco millones", *Abc*, September 17, 1975, p. 39. For the tractors' strikes in 1977 and 1978, in a later period, see FERRER GONZÁLEZ, Cristian. *Lluitadors quotidians...Op.Cit.*, pp. 93-97, 102-108 and 135-144.

³⁸ YSÀS, Pere. *Disidencia y subversión: la lucha del régimen franquista por su supervivencia*. Barcelona: Crítica, 2004, pp. 205-211. For rural conflicts and its interaction with the political change throughout Spain see HERRERA, Antonio. *La construcción...Op.Cit.*, pp. 79-91 and 187-244; MARTÍN, Óscar J. *A tientas...Op.Cit.*, pp. 215-234 and 282-297; HERNÁNDEZ, Claudio. *Franquismo a ras de suelo: zonas grises, apoyos sociales y actitudes durante la dictadura (1936-1976)*. Granada: EUG, 2013, p. 375; FUENTES NAVARRO, María Candelaria. *El Partido Comunista de España y la democratización del mundo rural andaluz: la organización de la protesta jornalera y campesina y la difusión de valores predemocráticos (1956-1983)*. PhD Thesis. Granada: UGR, 2013, pp. 285-332.

to democracy was rooted in widespread struggles in the labour, social and political spheres.³⁹

6. Conclusions

We have analysed here a minor part of rural anti-Francoism in Spain. If it is true that the level of agrarian mobilization in southern Catalonia cannot be compared to the conflicts in cities and industrial areas during this same period, this study enables us to better understand the hegemony eventually achieved by the opposition against the dictatorship. It helps us understand the complexity of activist movements. The complex social relations that characterized the Spanish countryside as a whole, but especially in Catalonia, where there was a huge economic-industrial development, helps us to observe closely how rural populations in the villages felt in relation to the dictatorship, areas where Francoism was supposedly very strong in its capacity to organize efficient social control. It may also help us to contextualise the supposed “apathy” and “demobilization” that many people attributed to rural populations and, consequently, to qualify or even discard such arguments.

“Little everyday rebellions”, or what has also been called the “weapons of the weak”, prefigured more substantial actions as described above: they were essential for future collective actions. Furthermore, when these “little rebellions” turned into extended actions or, especially, when they were generalized and coordinated, they represented a huge problem for the dictatorship. The boycott of the SSA tax ended with a victory for the peasants despite the repression. The inability to negotiate issues that pertained to the working conditions and lives of many people led to the political conclusion that it was essential to change the policy framework itself.

The actions that we analysed – supported by documentary and oral sources – allow us to confirm the existence of a shared peasant identity that was essential for an organized response to the grievances of the rural population. Moreover, the successes of actions that were illegal, but supported by the larger community, demonstrated to the workers that it was essential to confront and go beyond the existing structure. Gramsci wrote that ideas cannot live without organization, but this was particularly difficult under the conditions of a dictatorship. Yet despite this, a large group of peasants took up the fight against Francoism. The CCPP was a disciplined group with the clear political ideology and culture of communism. Even though the links with the PSUC assured the rural workers logistical assistance and a clear line of action, the strong communist presence drove away many peasants from the CCPP. Parallel actions in shared spaces, however, contributed to a real extension of the social base of the opposition and overcame the activists’ isolation. This was confirmed in the more plural social-political movement of the UP.

³⁹ Labour information IS from MOLINERO, Carme and YSÀS, Pere. *Productores disciplinados...Op.Cit.*, pp. 120-124. Quote from ANC, PSUC collection, *A su majestad Don Juan Carlos I, Rey de España*, December of 1975, sig. 1677. On political change consult DOMÈNECH, Xavier. *Cambio político y movimiento obrero...Op.Cit.*, pp. 219-223.

It is interesting to pay special attention to the importance of the democratic assembly in this history of struggle. Under the dictatorship, the assembly served as an anti-repressive measure and a way to legitimize the actions of the movement. It was a meeting space where workers could openly discuss their problems and search for solutions. This helped, on the one hand, to legitimize collective actions and, on the other hand, to protect political activists through the anonymity of the crowd. It is no surprise that the assembly has become the most representative aspect of direct democracy and a form of identity in the recent history of the workers' and popular movement in Spain.

Finally, if it is true that the opposition failed to end Francoism as they had planned — through a general strike that would overthrow the dictatorship and form a provisional government that would restore political autonomy to Catalonia— the truth is that social mobilization prevented the perpetuation of an authoritarian dictatorship after Franco's death. The participation of common people fighting to improve their material conditions produced a profound social and political change: sites of social interaction, networks of political relationships and the process of collective self-organization helped to weaken the Francoist power. Far from being apathetic and demobilized, the rural population knew how to challenge and debilitate the social bases of the dictatorship. Far from being a secondary factor, the weakening of the dictatorship “from below” helps us to understand the political decisions taken “from above” after the death of Franco.