

Land conflicts in Formosa, Argentina (1884-1958)

Noemí M. Girbal-Blacha

ABSTRACT

Formosa is located in Northeast Argentina and gained state status in 1884 with a weak political identity. There are few studies in Argentine historiography that have studied social actions and public policies in the region. Precarious settlement plans and poor communication led to conflicts over lands. The indigenous population was disciplined by the state and the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, many factors promoted a population exodus: untrained farmers, poorly demarcated plots, crop production attacked by pests and soil erosion. This historical study focuses on the settlement and construction of space in Formosa, which was historically the poorest region of Argentina. Social conflicts are revealed in the analysis of national government policies and their implementation within territorial logics, especially those related to the use of common property resources.

KEYWORDS

Land conflicts, Formosa (Argentina), 1884-1958, Population exodus

Historical setting

Marginality in modern Argentina (1880-1930) stemmed from the agro-export model, which was structured from the port of Buenos Aires. The cattle raising and cereal region of La Pampa, which received massive immigration from Southern Europe, and witnessed growing urbanization and the concentration of external investments, was the core region of agricultural investment, resulting in regional inequalities. This region represented 27.7 % of the Argentinean territory yet concentrated, on average, three quarters of its population (72.7%), 90.5% of its agriculture, 70.1% of cattle raising and 73% of railways.

The Argentinean Gran Chaco (Chaco, Formosa, Santiago del Estero, North of Santa Fe and the East of Tucumán and Salta) in the northeast of the country represented 18% of national territory. It was crossed by 3 railways and rivers that connected it with the metropolis. Marginality thus did not always mean isolation. The causes that led to the long-lasting underdevelopment of agriculture of this region were complex.¹ A high percentage of state lands was occupied through precarious tenure arrangements, representing one of the causes of conflicts and sustained marginality in the region.

Institutions regulate socio-economic development that motivates the social investments of the active sectors in a given region.² This means that economic regulations, roles and behaviors were socially shaped by institutions beyond strictly legal issues. The institutions that supported “*collective values*”³ were determined through a “*common sense of appropriation*”⁴ that may generate conflicts over economic resources. In the historical case of Formosa, economic development was shaped by the modalities of the appropriation, tenure and usage of state lands.

The poor unequally benefitted from the natural resources in the region and those that society generated. The Argentine northeast (NEA, according to its acronym in Spanish) was mainly formed by National Territories that were created in 1884. They were dependent on the Federal Government and their residents had limited citizenship rights. They occupied 40% of Argentinean Territory and 10% of its total population.

¹ GIRBAL-BLACHA, Noemí M. y CERDA, Juan Manuel. “Lecturas y relecturas sobre el territorio. Una interpretación histórica”. *Estudios Rurales. Publicación del CEAR (Centro de Estudios de la Argentina Rural)*. Bernal: CEAR, núm. 1, 2011, pp. 55-78.

² CORONA TREVIÑO, Leonel. *Teorías económicas de la innovación tecnológica*. México: Instituto Politécnico Nacional CIECAS, 2002.

³GARRABOU, Ramón. *Sombras del Progreso. Las huellas de la historia agraria*. Barcelona: Crítica, 2010.

⁴MARCH, James G. and OLSEN, Johan P. “The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life”. *American Political Science Review*. n.78, 1984, pp. 734-749.



They resulted from struggles by indigenous peoples and generally lacked a local bourgeoisie. The NEA joined the agro-export model late in the game with non-competitive products in relation to the dominant national producers involved in cattle raising, export and import activities, and agro-industrial producers. In the last quarter of nineteenth century, the NEA witnessed the industrialization of sugar production; around 1900, the exploitation of its forest resources and since 1920 the growing of cotton and creole cattle raising.

Formosa – neighbouring Paraguay – was incorporated into the Argentinean Gran Chaco. The land tenure system supported the desertification of soils, frustrating the expectations of native, Paraguayans, and neighbouring inhabitants who lived temporarily on state lands. This generated conflicts over land uses. The preservation of the natural resources of the region, with its heterogeneous productive models and scarce technology, was complex. Cattle raising and forest extraction activities were what attracted settlers to this “Promised Land” to colonize a devastated land lacking any state control. Its inhabitants believed in the short term and intensive usage of the land, which contributed to the erosion of the soil. Formosa was also more linked to the foreign market than to the domestic one.



The centre of Formosa had a network of canals built to avoid flooding, which had an impact on its ecosystem, leading to low profit activities with little capital investment. The indigenous population, disciplined by the state and the church, consisted of untrained producers working limited areas that eroded the land and caused a population exodus.⁵

There is little in the historiographical literature on the social actions and public policies in this National Territory that gained its own government in 1884 and initiated a low-level colonization scheme following the North American model.⁶ As Leoni de Rosciani argues with regard to the Territories: “the lack of connection between different areas that formed each territory, blocked the establishment of supporting structures at the level of territory” and the formation of a political identity.⁷ The population also had to deal with oscillating and negative state decisions in regard to land tenure and economic development.⁸

⁵ROMERO SOSA, Carlos G. “Historia de la Provincia de Formosa y sus pueblos (1862-1930)”. *Academia Nacional de la Historia: Historia Argentina Contemporánea (1862-1930)*. vol. IV, sección segunda. Buenos Aires: El Ateneo, 1967; ALUCIN, Gabriela. *La provincialización de Formosa y la participación popular. Una hipótesis acerca de la modalidad de su concreción (1930-1955)*. Formosa: Original, 2004.

⁶ BORRINI, Héctor R. “Ocupación y organización del espacio en el Territorio de Formosa (1880-1980)”. *Cuadernos de Geohistoria Regional*. Resistencia-Chaco: IIGHI, núm. 24, 1991; RUFFINI, Martha. *La pervivencia de la República posible en los territorios nacionales. Poder y ciudadanía en Río Negro*. Bernal: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes Editorial, 2007.

⁷ LEONI de ROSCIANI, María Silvia. “Los Territorios Nacionales”. *Academia Nacional de la Historia: Nueva Historia de la Nación Argentina*. Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2011, p.47.

⁸ *Ibid.*

This article deals with the occupation and construction of space in the National Territory of Formosa. It explores national government policies and territorial logic in relation to the resources of common property, in which social conflicts related to the usage and appropriation of state lands emerged in the context of the lack of a strong local ruling class.⁹

2. National Government, territorial logic and conflicts

Spatial occupation and land distribution under state intervention determined the early history of Formosa through legislation such as the Immigration and Settlement Law of 1876 and the National Land Law of 1903 which unsuccessfully tried to implant an immigrant population of tenant farmers. Since 1879, Formosa had been integrated into agro-export business through the extraction of forest-tannin and reed beds, and since 1920, cotton cultivation. In 1930 – after the Wall Street Crash- until 1960, cotton cultivation dominated until synthetic fibres replaced this natural product. As a United Nations report stated: “ The division of state lands and the establishment of new colonies meant the introduction of about 5,000 new producers and the introduction of about two millions of hectares into agriculture and livestock production, between 1920 and 1947”.¹⁰ Yet this occurred without the resolution of the conflicts stemming from the poor land tenure system. The organizational processes of territorial agriculture went together with these cycles of agricultural production while “state capacities” were utilized to submit the indigenous populations.¹¹ The territorial occupation of Formosa was carried out from the eastern part to the western.

The natural region of Chaco that formed the Formosa Territory (bordered between the Pilcomayo, Rapaguay, Teuco and Bermejo rivers), was “an extensive area where native cultures, the spontaneous advance from the west of shepherds from Salta and Bolivia” and the Paraguayan immigrant attracted by labour sources converged.¹² It had regions suitable for the exploitation of *quebracho* tannin, and some fertile soil in the national state property in the Eastern part which the state aimed to use to attract foreign and national investment.¹³

The state attributed its own lands in a legally inefficient way. Private colonization was encouraged that ended up putting state lands into the hands of powerful owners from the Argentine coast and from Paraguay. The Office of Land and Colonies under the

⁹ NORTH, Douglass C. *Instituciones, cambio institucional y desempeño económico*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993; DI TELLA, Torcuato y otros. *Diccionario de Ciencias Sociales y Políticas*. Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2006, pp. 508-512.

¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme - UNSO, 2000.

¹¹ LATTUADA, Mario; MÁRQUEZ, Susana y NEME, Jorge. *Desarrollo rural y política. Reflexiones sobre la experiencia argentina desde una perspectiva de gestión*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Ciccus, 2012; IAZZETTA, Osvaldo. “Capacidades estatales, gobernabilidad democrática y crisis global”. Working paper series: *Los rostros de la crisis económica internacional y sus impactos políticos en América Latina*. Buenos Aires: PNUD, 2009.

¹² BORRINI, Héctor R. “Ocupación y organización del espacio en el Territorio de Formosa. *Op.Cit.*”

¹³ Territorio Nacional de Formosa. *Memorias, 1885-1899*. Resistencia-Chaco: IIGHI-UNNE, 1979, pp. 24-28.

Ministry of Home Affairs encouraged - with little success- agricultural colonization. Since the late nineteenth century, a large percentage of Formosa's lands were transferred to authorized private producers. In the mid-1920s, the Land Office recorded: 10 grants of 80,000 hectares (ha) each, 1 of 79,457 ha, 1 of 32,500 ha, 1 of 20,000 ha and another of 4,773 ha. A million hectares thus went into private hands with state support. Besides, 200,000 ha were also donated as prizes by the executive branch of the government.¹⁴ The unproductive territorial concentration of Formosa increased conflicts among those who were not the beneficiaries of such unjust state largesse.

The reconsideration of titles granted by other provinces or before the limits of the National Territories of Chaco and Formosa were defined, added to this troubled territorial organization. The alienation of lands at the beginning of the twentieth century favored authorized private immigrants with capital. By 1890, Formosa had sold 162,650 hectares at an official price of \$ 0.76 per hectare. In Chaco, only 15,000 hectares were sold at \$ 0.93 for each hectare. It is worthwhile noting that the coastlines of the Paraguay and Paraná rivers had an added interest because of their geopolitical importance.¹⁵

The 4167 Law Land in 1903 (valid until 1950) limited the land extension granted to a person or private society in the entire country. The minimum price per hectare was \$2.50 for small farms and smallholdings, to be paid in 6 annual fees; there were also other lands obtained by auction for \$1 per ha. This was the cheapest land in the entire country. The western part of Formosa particularly benefited because of its geopolitical border situation. Yet the reinvestment of the profits incurred was not always made locally. This was another fact that increased the marginality and poverty of Formosa's inhabitants. The official state power remained quite strong and maintained social control. The National Census in 1895 registered 4,829 inhabitants (36.6% of which were Paraguayan) in Formosa, which went hand in hand with the colonization of poverty.¹⁶

However, to put land into agricultural production it cost \$150 per hectare. As Borrini confirms, "this amount was almost impossible for an independent farmer, neither without their own resources nor state loans".¹⁷ The population of the official Formosa colony (1,537 inhabitants) and Bouvier (776 inhabitants) was only utilized as labour for sugar production. The state brought into its domain a large portion of the land yet there were few colonists living there. Land, resources and a cheap labour force paved the way for the concentrated enrichment of large landowners. The investors from La Pampa tried to broaden their profitability in Formosa while the native inhabitants could not occupy the land legally.

Since 1883, modernization of sugar production along the Paraná river in Formosa began as part of the expansion of sugar production whose centre was Tucumán. Between

¹⁴ SLUTZKY, Daniel. *Estructura social agraria y agroindustrial del Nordeste de la Argentina: desde la incorporación a la economía nacional al actual subdesarrollo concentrador y excluyente*. Buenos Aires: IADE, 2011, pp.115-116.

¹⁵ *El Eco de Formosa*. 18 de enero de 1890, p. 2.

¹⁶ República Argentina. Departamento General de Inmigración (1891 y 1897): *Memoria 1890 y 1896*, Buenos Aires, s.d.t.

¹⁷ BORRINI, Héctor R. "Ocupación y organización del espacio en el Territorio de Formosa. *Op.Cit.*

1893 and 1894, the “Formosa” sugar production plant, managed by a Hungarian businessman, Maurico Mayer, started to introduce technological innovations, leading to the 1896 crisis of sugar overproduction. A second sugar production plant was Bouvier, managed by Nougés Hermanos from Tucumán. They were both valued at \$1,292,071 (45% in lands) by 1914. It was the area that produced the cheapest sugar in the country.¹⁸ The power of the sugar oligarchs was exercised throughout the Territory and while they obtained high earnings, they did not reinvest in Formosa.

The arid, little-populated western area of Formosa between the Pilcomayo and Bermejo rivers “was a remarkable area of rural colonization settled by “tenant farmers” who called themselves northerners”¹⁹ which also contained horticultural activities. Rural colonization and the reduction of the indigenous peoples were two points that provoked conflicts between the large landowners and tenant farmers.²⁰

In April 1900, in the southeast of Formosa colony, the Franciscan Order organized a mission, San Francisco de Asis, de Laishi, occupying 74,000 hectares, that gathered together 6,000 indigenous peoples.²¹ “La Formosa”, a quebracho tannin extract factory, was founded at that time. Its main activities were to import and export the quebracho tannin, exploiting native manual labour under slave conditions. Four years later, 15,000 hectares were also allocated to create two Indian reservations under the private management of Domingo Astrada.²² The extensive attempt to establish the borders of Salta and Formosa would delay the initiatives that aimed to reduce the customs and way of living of creoles, immigrants and indigenous peoples. The proposal was delayed because of the lack of railways and navigability on the rivers. The state set aside the possibility of a suitable land distribution scheme and simply moved the native inhabitants, favouring the large predatory forest companies.²³

The centre of Formosa, far from rivers and railways, proved to be a challenge for settlement. In October 1905, the National Executive forbade the transfer of state lands even those donated, rented or sold which were obtained before the Land Law in 1903. The result was the creation of large estates and low productivity. After a decade, the weekly newspaper, *Nueva Época*, was established which locally promoted “the protection of interests of land, progress and development”. From 1917 onwards, it also

¹⁸ TORNQUIST, Ernesto. *El desarrollo económico de la República Argentina en los últimos cincuenta años*. Buenos Aires: E. Tornquist y Cía. Ltda., 1920, pp.51, 55.

¹⁹ BORRINI, Héctor R. “Ocupación y organización del espacio en el Territorio de Formosa. *Op.Cit.* p. 29.

²⁰ CHAPEAUROUGE, C. *Plano catastral de la República Argentina*, s.d.t., 1925, folio 18; IRIBAME, Pablo D. “Un estado de desconfianza. Notas sobre la burocracia estatal y los Territorios Nacionales”. In: QUIROGA, Hugo y RUFFINI, Martha. eds., *Estado y Territorios Nacionales. Política y ciudadanía en Río Negro 1912-1930*. Buenos Aires: EDUCO, 2011, pp.79-91.

²¹DALLA CORTE-CABALLERO, Gabriela. “La Misión Franciscana de Laishi: el proyecto del ingeniero José Elías Niklison (1910-1920)”. *Historia Unisinos*, vol. 3, núm. 17, Setiembre/Diciembre 2013, pp. 203-215.

²² ASTRADA, Domingo. *Expedición al Pilcomayo*. Buenos Aires: Robles y Cía., 1906; COLAZO, S. “Domingo Astrada y la colonización del Alto Pilcomayo”. *Cuarto Encuentro de Geohistoria Regional*. Resistencia: IIGHI, 1984, pp.142-144.

²³ROMERO SOSA, Carlos G. “Historia de la Provincia de Formosa y sus pueblos (1862-1930)”. *Op.Cit.*, pp. 218-221.

shared readers with the twice-weekly newspaper, *La Voz Del Pueblo*. Another local newspaper, *La Semana* (formed in January 1923) expressed Formosa's interests with a strong nationalist bent.²⁴ Lawsuits over land increased without effective results for those plaintiffs less favored by fortune and power.²⁵

In 1916, Hipólito Yrigoyen from the Radical Party assumed control of the national government. The colonization of state lands by medium-sized producers was encouraged to increase extensive cattle raising. Almost 50 % of the colonies created in Formosa until 1930 were dedicated to this productive activity.²⁶ The state acknowledged its legal duty to distribute the land equally. In 1914, plots of land distributed between 0-25 hectares (27% of the total amount) and between 1,000 – 5,000 hectares (29% of the total amount) prevailed. 38.1% of the Formosa population was Paraguayan.²⁷

In 1918, a committee was sent to the National Territories of Chaco, Misiones, and Formosa in responses to conflicts over the land. It proposed to establish small- and medium-sized cattle raising and agricultural production through an organized distribution of space, which had to be provisional, however, since there was no definite or efficient means to measure the lands. The centre of Formosa would be settled only when immigrants from Southern Chaco migrated there.

Unemployment in Formosa became a problem especially after the 1930 crisis.²⁸ There were two tannin factories, the Compañía de Quebracho "*Formosa*" and the Quebrachales "*Dubosc*", in the capital and along the Paraguay River, which suspended their employees three times a year. "Unemployment in this Territory was reduced to a few day labourers, but there were unemployed people in the city area because of lack of employment for young people". This was a partial view of the complex socioeconomic situation of Formosa with the railway from East to West only transporting forest products for tannin instead of settling inhabitants to work in urban centres. A proposal was thus made to counteract the indifference of Paraguayan workers, fostering with little success the arrival of Europeans (Serbian, German and Polish workers).

Cotton oil, tannin, sugar and corn oil companies were hardly encouraged by the state. The cotton lands represented 15% of the total cultivated area in the Territory in the 1920s and 60% by 1937. A population movement took place when "Tobas and Matacos [indigenous peoples] were taken to the sugar plants in Salta, between three hundred and five hundred each year".²⁹ They were taken there and returned when the sugar harvest ended by contractors. The effects of uprooting peoples in this way were not considered.

²⁴ *La Semana*. Formosa, December 26 1924, p. 1.

²⁵ Archivo Históricas de Formosa. Sección Exptes. Judiciales, años 1945-1953. Caja 174, exptes. 271 y 522; caja 194 bis, expte. 243; caja 227, exptes. 114 y 165; caja 245, expte. 609; caja 314, expte. 19; caja 441, expte. 658. GIRBAL-BLACHA, Noemí M. "Reclamos de una población rural postergada. Política y justicia a la carta. Visibilidad en Formosa. Argentina (1884-1955)". *Revista de Historia del Derecho* 45, Buenos Aires, agosto 2013, pp. 73-110.

²⁶ SLUTZKY, Daniel. *Estructura social agraria y agroindustrial del Nordeste de la Argentina...Op.Cit.*, p. 116.

²⁷ BOLSI, Alfredo y MEICHTRY, Norma. "Realidad y política migratoria en el Nordeste Argentino". *Cuadernos de Geohistoria Regional*. Resistencia: IIGHI-CONICET, núm. 7, 1982, p.23.

²⁸ Junta Nacional para Combatir la Desocupación (JUNALD). *Memoria 1937*. Buenos Aires: JUNALD, 1938, pp. 133-135.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.134-135.

The inner semiarid area of Formosa contained the Formosa-Embarcación railway and had 54,786 inhabitants by the mid-1930s. The central areas grew more. The rural territorial population added 73.4% in 1920 and 77.2% in 1934.³⁰ Northern social actors reported to the political power that it was possible to restrict the annual average population growth rate to five hundred. The population rise in Chaco in 1920-1925 was 12.72% and 1.14% in 1955-1960; in Formosa there was a rise of 11.68% in the first period and 4.33% in the second period.³¹ The local power could not establish thriving urban centres since they were only aware of social discipline to reduce conflicts without enacting changes to the inefficient and unjust land settlement system.

The organization of the land market was always in dire straits because of the lack of formal property titles. Local newspapers reported in 1934 “Immigrant families were mostly from Paraguay and had poor conditions, better to say without any resources” which is confirmed by the few official statistics.³² Real-estate transfers were usually informal. The limits between properties also caused conflicts. Large producers and companies remained the principal actors in the land market, which contrasted to the poor economic situation of the majority of the population.

State lands for the colonists and the growth of demand for cotton since the 1930s widened the agricultural border, but did not bring stability. The Cotton Census in 1936 recorded that 0.2% of the population were cotton owners in Formosa and 86.6% of these were occupants with financial status. The exploitation of the forest paved the way – in the context of international crisis – for tannin production. At the end of the 1930s, foreign investors controlled more than 20% of the cattle raising areas of this National Territory with either state indifference or complicity in regard to this fact.³³

The government of 1930 supported the provincialization of the National Territories to redefine the representation system in the National Executive.³⁴ However, the differences between the territories were accentuated. Since 1934, the National Territories Directorate established territorial councils of administration, but it did not establish legislatures. Between 1938 and 1941, several projects fostered provincialization, but they excluded Formosa. The population of the Territories considered that the ones who decided these policies did not know the jurisdictional needs of the population. Yet the federal government insisted on “Argentinizing” the territories. As a consequence of the increase of social control in state policies to confront banditry, the National Gendarmerie was created in 1938.³⁵ Political reform was postponed and the

³⁰ President’s Office. Ministry of Technical Affairs, 1952.

³¹ CHACOMA, Jorge D. “Distribución de la población en Formosa: Ambiente, ferrocarril y algodón (1920-1947)”. *X Encuentro de Geohistoria Regional*. Formosa: Junta de Estudios Históricos y Geográficos de Formosa, 1990. .

³² *La Voz del Pueblo*. Formosa, 25 de mayo de 1934, p.1.

³³ BACQUE, Santiago y BEGUÉ, Pablo. *La industria del extracto de quebracho ante los poderes públicos. Informe presentado a la Comisión Nacional del Extracto de quebracho por los miembros de la misma, representantes de la S. Quebrachales Fusionados*. Buenos Aires: Rossi, 1933.

³⁴ PEREIRA, Daniel A. *La construcción de la ciudadanía en el Territorio Nacional de Formosa (1879-1955)*. Tesina de Licenciatura. Formosa: Universidad Nacional de Formosa, Facultad de Humanidades, 2004.

³⁵ MARI, Oscar E. “Milicias, delito y control estatal en el Chaco (1884-1940)”. *Mundo Agrario. Revista de Estudios Rurales*. La Plata: CEHR-UNLP, 2006, pp. 1-25.

legitimacy of state violence was acclaimed. Each National Territory had its own special features as well as sharing common features yet Formosa was still set aside.

The life of indigenous peoples was characterized by extreme poverty and ignorance of state powers to this plight. “More than 50,000 Indians settled in the areas of Formosa and Chaco – according to the official record of the last Census – and many died from starvation, having a miserable life...”. “...groups of Indians [were] concentrated in official reserves, religious missions and even personal ones, such that we were unable to speak of social progress”.³⁶ This government inertia was a long-lasting situation. Esteban Maradona, a medical doctor who lived in the area for more than fifty years, was a privileged observer and stated that: “when an inhabitant was settled there, whatever their social condition was: gender, nationality, age, religion, their aspirations was already written: it appeared with the well-known project of exploitation of Indians at a low price...”.³⁷ They were paid with vouchers, tobacco or alcohol by sugar production plants. In the tannin and other factories, they toiled as private workers without compensation.

The coup that took place on June 4, 1943 reinforced the state presence in the National Territories. The government wanted to widen the economic and political organization of the Territories. With Peronism in power, the media were politically and socially biased. This was the case of the *Tribuna Peronista* in February 1947, which was an “informative, doctrinaire, trade unionist newspaper and also a newspaper of problems, aspects, Argentinism and culture”. It was the only spokesperson for revolutionaries and of the general Peronist doctrine in the National Territory of Formosa”.³⁸ It protected the interests of “workers, lumberjacks and workers in general” in order to face the “despoilers of indigenous people” and “land-owing oligarchy”. These issues revealed the latent conflicts over the land situation in the region with the local press.

The economy accompanied the gradualness of the political field in the Territories. The big estates near the Paraguay River increased their sale of livestock so that the livestock index went from 13.64 in 1930 to 18.39 in 1947, which also caused conflicts.³⁹ In relation to the granting of lands, documents demonstrate the quick authorization of state land management to limited companies, but at the same time individuals were not allowed to fence in their lands.⁴⁰

Between 1930 and 1960, small cotton plots grew. The given lands reached up to 100 hectares, mainly occupied by poor inhabitants. In 1947, more than 60% of the population settled in dispersed areas without land ownership. The National Census in 1947 recorded that 85.24% of inhabitants had no property titles while the indigenous

³⁶ MARADONA, Eduardo L. *A través de la selva*. Buenos Aires: Talleres Gráficos de la Penitenciaría Nacional, 1937.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁸ *Tribuna Peronista*. Formosa, 12 de febrero de 1947, p. 1.

³⁹ BECK, Hugo. “La etapa peronista en Formosa. Población, economía y política en la transición del territorio a la provincia”. *XI Congreso Nacional y Regional de Historia Argentina*. Córdoba: Academia Nacional de la Historia, 2001, pp.4-6.

⁴⁰ Archivo Histórico de Formosa (AHF): *Libro de Resoluciones Gubernamentales*, 1945-1946, t. 177, expte. 6231, f. 91.

population was excluded from social benefits⁴¹ as they were relegated to the responsibility of religious organs in Formosa.⁴² In December 1948, the official newspaper, *Justicia Social*, paid attention to the indigenous peoples noting that they did not ask for public lands, they asked for working tools. At the same time, *Unidad*, from the local Communist Party, and *Voz Radical*, the monthly newspaper of Radical Party (UCR by its acronym in Spanish), widely reported the authoritarianism of the government.

The land areas granted for agricultural production were progressively reduced. In East Formosa, it was 10 to 15 hectares per each producer. The Census in 1947 and 1960 showed an increase in small-scale land exploitation. The smaller ones up to 25 hectares grew from 42.13% to 59.17% and were used for agricultural production. The bigger extensions were mainly for cattle raising and forest extraction activities. The small areas prevailed, but they only totaled 1.21% of the total surface area of Formosa. This situation also affected the soil and life quality. The inhabitants of state lands and small properties were marginal in relation to overall territorial economic development.⁴³

Cattle raising and forest extraction activities in state lands represented 65% of the surface area in 1947 and they were given as concessions, sold and rented in the first case and through gauging payments for forest areas.⁴⁴ Real-estate concentration took place in the east of Formosa, where the lands were first privatized. The cooperative movement was not successful in Formosa due to the instability of producers.⁴⁵ The discourse of the National Government regularly promised state land to cultivate for farmers from Formosa, Chaco and Corrientes.⁴⁶ Yet these were promises which did not correspond to the reality of living in the margins.⁴⁷

Farm Plots (%)

Legal Regimen	1947		1960	
	Number of Farm Plots	Surface Area Used	Number of Farm Plots	Surface Area Used
Owners	2.31	18.61	4.65	14.13
Tenants	4.28	2.00	4.23	1.91
Sharecroppers	0.6	0.08	0.71	0.08
Occupants	85.24	71.06	66.23	68.94
Other schemes	7.57	8.25	24.18	14.94

⁴¹ Matanza de Rincón Bomba, ver: Aranda, 2012; Zamudio, 2008. AHF: *Libros copiadore de notas oficiales*, 1948, libro 115, fs. 175 y 207; 1949, libro117, fs. 298-300, libro 118, f. 107; 1950, libro 123, f. 17.

⁴² SBARDELLA, Cirilo R. *Los diarios de la Misión Laishi*. Resistencia-Chaco: Centro de Estudios "Brigadier Pedro Ferré", 1991.

⁴³ Programa de Naciones Unidas de Desarrollo-UNSO/PNUD. Oficina de lucha contra la desertificación. Secretaría de Desarrollo sustentable y política ambiental e instituto de colonización y tierras fiscales. Tenencia de tierra en la provincia de Formosa. República Argentina. Informe final de Enrico Formica. Buenos Aires: UNSO/PNUD, 2000.

⁴⁴ SLUTZKY, Daniel. *Estructura social agraria y agroindustrial del Nordeste de la Argentina...Op.Cit.*, p.25.

⁴⁵ *La Cooperación*.Organo de la Asociación de Cooperativas Argentinas. Buenos Aires, 7 de mayo de 1948, núm. 1017, p. 3.

⁴⁶ *La Gaceta Algodonera*. Buenos Aires, octubre 31 de 1953, año 30, núm. 357, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁷ *Tiempo de cambio regional*. Formosa, 23 de febrero de 1996, p. 7.

Total	100	100	100	100
-------	-----	-----	-----	-----

Sources: *National Census* 1947, 1960. Compiled by the author.

In 1958, Formosa became a province because of a national political decision. Land administration would be organized by local organs in Formosa. (Article 35 Subsection 2 of the Constitution). The reduced dimensions of properties predominated in the National Census in 1960. The allocation of state lands (Law 113 of 19/07/1960) regulated colonization. It was organized as a process of settlement for those who “peacefully settled” and regularly cultivated “within the surface [area] that [was] settled” (Article 28), thereby obtaining an ownership title.⁴⁸ It had thus taken a long time for regularization of property titles.

The legislation allowed for forthright buying and renting. The beneficiaries of the Colonization and State Lands Regime would be the large and medium occupants with less than 10,000 hectares, with inhibitions for limited companies or for limited partnerships. 29% of land titles were given mainly to Argentinean occupants in economic units, agrarian cooperatives’, and to people living in the region, and numerous families who were able to work were provided with tools and some resources.⁴⁹ The tenderers would pay the agreed price, fees and taxes, producing improvements, cultivations and area measurements and could not transfer the concession without authorization. This limited the number of candidates who were able to meet these conditions.

Between 1947 and 1960, “4,500 new plots were created, most of them dedicated to cotton production and placed in state lands which occupied 67% of the covered surface, one of the biggest proportions of the country”.⁵⁰ The Census in 1960 showed the extent of “non definite” land tenure in state lands when it was registered that only 1.5% of the cultivated surface was without productive activity. The rest of the Formosa area was occupied by cattle raising and forest extraction activities.

77.5 % of foreigners were farmers, 86% of the producers were “intruders”, 13% were tenants and only 0.2% owners. By 1960, 51.5% of the farms were less than 5 hectares and 35.5% had between 5 hectares and 15 hectares. The lands suitable for the agriculture were limited by the producers’ economy.⁵¹ In this context, social conflict and land tenure were the same: marginality was part of the agro-export model.

4. Final thoughts

This article dealt with Formosa and its territory, production, legislation, institutions and the social and economic condition of its inhabitants who engaged in silent conflicts. They were recorded in the documents. They were expressed in the inhabitants’ requests and reports. If reality is “a heterogeneous continuum” that can be rationalized,

⁴⁸ CÁRCANO, Miguel Angel. *Evolución histórica del régimen de la tierra pública pública 1810-1916*. Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 1972, p.434.

⁴⁹ UNSO. Tenencia de tierra en la provincia de Formosa. *Op.Cit.*

⁵⁰ SLUTZKY, Daniel. *Estructura social agraria y agroindustrial del Nordeste de la Argentina...Op.Cit.*, p. 132.

⁵¹ BECK, Hugo. “La etapa peronista en Formosa...” *Op.Cit.*, p.7.

it becomes history when it is studied from particular cases.⁵² Public and private requests against the abuses of state and economic powers make clear the discretionary nature that led to conflict and also the effects of interregional unbalance which were fostered by the economic model led by the port city of Buenos Aires.

The National Territories were created by the conservative state in 1884. The Radical Party management (1916-1930) aimed to provincialize them, creating legislatures and choosing representatives. The rupture of institutional order in 1930 and the return of neo-conservatism widened citizenship in those Territories, in an attempt to build an electoral base. Peronism (1946-1955) carried out a sustained, but gradual action towards the effective provincialization of territories like Formosa; however, the process was slow. The bureaucracy functioned as an end and means of power relations⁵³ and the junction between them was seen in the conflicts as in this case related to the usage and tenure of the land.

The economic underdevelopment of the NEA and especially of Formosa came from the lack of state attention and lack of an established local bourgeoisie that invested and was aware of regional interests. It was a space that would be occupied by the bourgeoisie of La Pampa and Paraguay. 8.3% of the surface area was cultivated in Chaco and only 1% in Formosa in 1947. These figures increased to 14% and 1% in the 1960s, respectively.⁵⁴ Desertification increased in the western part of Formosa. In the eastern area, the best quality cattle raising attracted investors from La Pampa who obtained significant earnings that were not reinvested in Formosa.

Life along the coastlines of the rivers in Formosa was part of the regional inequalities of a nation like Argentina, built on a native past, but oriented to Europe through the port of Buenos Aires. History provides us examples of the effects of public policies on the economy, the growing bureaucratization of the state as well as the calls for “social justice” that were finally raised in the middle of the twentieth century.

⁵² Weber, Max *Por qué no se deben hacer juicios de valor en la sociología y en la economía*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial-Sociología, 2010, pp. 24-25.

⁵³ MIGDAL, Joel S. *Estados débiles. Estados fuertes*. México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2011.

⁵⁴ SLUTZKY, Daniel. *Estructura social agraria y agroindustrial del Nordeste de la Argentina...Op.Cit.*, p.121.