

Leaseholders in Capitalist Arcadia: Bourgeois Hegemony and Peasant Opportunities in the Valencian Countryside during the Nineteenth Century

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Abstract Scholars tend to interpret the European peasantry's incorporation into mass politics at the beginning of the twentieth century in terms of two equally extreme situations, citing either the peasantry's support for traditional oligarchies, or its anti-capitalist radicalism. By contrast, this article explores how the confluence between a broad network of peasant families and leased agricultural properties in the Valencian region of Spain helped generate mass support for an anti-liberal (and eventually Francoist) legal system. The authors highlight the uniqueness of the social and productive context of Valencian agriculture during the late 1800s and early 1900s, as well as the tensions that existed between landowners and tenants. Such tensions, they argue, did not stop these two groups from efficiently collaborating in favour of an economic orientation that was both developmentalist and politically anti-liberal.

Introduction

Peasants played a central role in the rise of European mass politics at the turn of the nineteenth century, when they experienced some decisive changes in relation to the bourgeoisie. Until shortly before that time, developing bourgeois societies had relied on agriculture as a platform for investment and social promotion. After the late 1800s, however, such expressions of bourgeois power, even when this power was maintained over a long period of time, had to be reasserted continually in a world where constantly changing social structures helped to stimulate new forms of political activism. The peasantry's role in reshaping twentieth-century politics has been subject to different readings, including that which sees the 'peasantry' mainly as a rhetorical construction centred on the ideal of the independent peasant family, as opposed to that of the urban or rural proletariat. Among those subscribing to this view, some have associated the peasant family with a regressive economic programme that reflected the logic of a relatively undynamic landed oligarchy, comprised of notables keen on defending the 'patriarchal'

hegemony of their conventionally conservative political outlook. Others have evoked this same family ideal as part of a nationalistic exultation of the 'folk', portraying the latter as having rejected both modern urban life and traditional oligarchies in all but certain republican areas of rural France. According to this view, 'the people' were said to have brought about a new form of political unity, a kind of communal solidarity akin to the Nazis' *Blut und Boden*, in the name of a State that proclaimed itself to be 'of the people'.¹

From a sociopolitical point of view, a number of questions remain regarding the process through which the last great period in European agriculture gave way to a new economic and political scene among the mid-nineteenth century bourgeoisie after the Great Depression. What forms of collaboration took place between and among the various social classes of European agrarian society, before foreign competition and state intervention became key issues for European farmers? What latent and not-so-latent tensions existed between these groups at a time when large numbers of the bourgeoisie, especially those in Mediterranean Europe, relied on land rents as a basic source of income? How did these conflicts evolve once the peasantry had joined the electorate, and were feeling pressured to opt for more exclusionary nationalist alternatives? Under what conditions could a broad-based peasant activism take root in support of bourgeois hegemony, without adopting the radical qualities of fascist agrarianism?

The present article studies these issues as they applied to a particular region, that of Spanish Valencia. In addition to helping clarify Spain's own global trajectory during the twentieth century, the Valencian case allows us to question some of the more common assumptions regarding the peasantry's economic capacity and its social and political autonomy. In order to do so, however, we must first dismantle one of the most prevalent stereotypes regarding twentieth-century Spain: namely, that the country's agricultural base was incapable of creating wealth, and that it was sustained by community practices and riven by sharp social tensions. While authors such as Eric Hobsbawm, Edward Malefakis, Gerald Brenan, Richard Herr, and Ronald Fraser have tended to support this view in their studies of the agrarian society preceding the long Francoist dictatorship, recent historiography shows that it cannot be generalised to all areas of rural Spain. It is no coincidence that, circa 1930, most of the active Spanish population was not dedicated to agricultural pursuits, and that those who were lived in a world of striking contrasts and constant change.

Rural paradise and the bourgeois developmental Utopia

Let us turn now to two stereotypes, both of which draw on images from Spanish agriculture to describe two very different sociopolitical projects. The first, familiar to members of the political left and centred on latifundian Spain, highlighted the internal cohesiveness of a rural population marked by egalitarianism and largely deprived of the opportunities that accompany modern life. The second, disseminated by the Spanish right from the mid-1800s on, painted a different picture of agricultural Spain: one of peasant families that, it was argued, were not poor but, rather, enjoyed a certain level of comfort, making them a stronghold of religious values and the established order. Versions of this stereotype modelled on different regions were put forth by various conservative political and literary

groups, both anti-liberal and traditionalist. Thus, Castile, the Basque Country, and inland Catalonia were cited as examples of rural concord by those who wished to ignore the social tensions then wreaking havoc in other areas of agricultural Spain.

The concept of a rural paradise began to circulate among the Spanish public at the turn of the nineteenth century, but only after it had undergone some very significant changes. The most important of these happened after the loss of the Cuban, Puerto Rican and Philippine colonies in 1898, when a new wave of Spanish nationalism emerged. Increasingly, a consciousness of the country's urgent need for economic development, without which the success of the Spanish nation would be quite untenable, began to creep into utopianists' insistent calls for social and religious harmony. For Ramiro de Maeztu, an influential and forward-thinking Spaniard, only three regions possessed the balance of economic progress and fidelity to traditional values upon which the country's future depended: the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Valencia. Yet, even here, the idealised world of social stability and economic advancement he proposed, in what can be seen as an attempt to project the religious values of rural Spain onto an urban milieu, was not readily apparent. Industrial developments in the Basque Country had greatly lessened agriculture's power there as a social force, and in Catalonia as well, the crisis following the phylloxera epidemic had provoked bitter land fights beginning in the late 1800s. Did, then, such a harmonious society, one sustained by a progressive rural milieu and uncompromised by urban and industrial expansion, even exist?²

This situation finds its echo in the repressive and reactionary character of the Spanish Francoist right. While a wish to change the course of the country's history can easily be detected in the conservatives' violent attack on the rejected half of Spanish society, such a focus tends to obscure the fact that they also yearned for a solid national economy capable of sustaining a powerful state, whose interests would radiate out to other nations. It is with regard to this that Valencia, the third member of Maeztu's regional trilogy, acquires a special relevance. For the *País Valencià* seemed to hold out the proof that such a world was indeed possible, a place where economic progress and traditional values could coexist under a wide umbrella of popular support.³

Valencia's uniqueness stemmed from the fact that all of these factors came together in the countryside, the seat of its economic efficiency.⁴ In contrast to Catalonia and the Basque Country, rural Valencia did not attract much attention from Spanish men of letters before the end of the nineteenth century, nor was its cultural weight as dense and suggestive as those in the Basque and Catalanian regions. Yet if, at a cultural level, Valencia more closely resembled the rest of Spain than did either the Basque Country or Catalonia, that fact was counterbalanced by its economic singularity as an agricultural region. Between the last third of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth, exports in the Valencian countryside rose sharply, making it into a key player within the Spanish economy. Before that time, land in the region had often been given over to the cultivation of large-scale commercial crops, but the intense wave of export agriculture sweeping over broad areas of the Valencian countryside during the late 1800s and early 1900s was a new phenomenon. The surge in Valencian wine and orange exports greatly compensated the Spanish balance of trade, as economists Romà Perpinyà and Manuel de Torres then noted, and played an even greater role in furthering

the country's economic development right up to the tourist boom of the 1960s. At a time when traditional complaints about routine cultivation methods and the underproductivity of smaller holdings were fairly common, the region's starring role in this developmental process was even more striking because of its minimal reliance on large-scale exploitations. In fact, most of its agricultural workforce came from rural families who lived on the land they cultivated.

In right-wing discourse, this single fact regarding Valencian agriculture outshines all others, obscuring the importance of other key developments such as the growing importance of industry in the region. But the secondary nature of its dominant sectors – furniture, ceramics, paper, shoes, toys – allowed Valencia to cede primacy to its commercial agricultural emporium. The region's politics bore the defining stamp of a republicanism that was greatly influenced by the worker movement then prevalent in the region's capital and in other important Valencian cities. Anarchist unionism flourished in central Valencia, where large numbers of salaried agrarian labourers swelled its ranks, and one of the earliest centres of socialism sprang up in the industrialised south. Nor were labour conflict and insurrectionism absent from the Valencian countryside, as the complaints of salaried rice and orange workers make clear. Why, then, was agrarian life so persistently identified with social stability and economic progress?

The role of family farms provides one answer to this question. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Valencian agricultural techniques continued to rely on labour-intensive farming practices and on family establishments, with relatively little use of machines. A significant, if varied, proportion of farming families within each local community did not own the land they cultivated, but leased it as tenants. In addition to challenging earlier predictions of an ineluctable agrarian backwardness, this highlighted the apparently harmonious nature of Valencia's society, in that the concentration of property in the hands of a few landlords seemed to have gone virtually uncontested. No territorial disputes appeared to have taken place in the region; indeed, issues regarding tenancy and absentee landlordism rarely found their way into the public sphere at all. And when they did, it was in the most innocuous and least socially dramatic of circumstances, almost always in association with some technical consideration or other. Meanwhile, peasant landownership steadily grew in importance over the course of many decades. The trend towards the sale of rented properties began in the late 1800s and reached its peak during the 1940s and 1950s and allowed many tenant families to own their lands outright, just before the expansion of industrial development under Franco.

This trajectory has given rise to a great deal of retrospective speculation. Not surprisingly, the image of rural Valencia as a prosperous, harmonious Garden of Eden has been accepted by many as a fact, with some even pointing to the supposed peculiarities of the medieval Christian conquest as the source of this agreeable situation. It has often been claimed that, after that event, the exceptional smallness of Valencian plots and an especially moderate set of landowner rights worked to protect tenants' stability in the region, eventually allowing them to become property-owners outright. Nevertheless, these stereotypes have not stood up to historical scrutiny. In recent decades, a number of studies have questioned the double paradox represented by this trajectory, casting doubt on earlier readings of many issues now considered fundamental to the study of

agrarian life. These new studies explore the role of the peasant economy in the formation of agrarian capitalism, especially in areas where land leasing was widespread, and also seek to understand the problematic nature of social conflict in its least spectacular forms: those existing alongside a hegemonic discourse that insisted on maintaining class harmony.

The technological and social conditions of irrigation farming: the importance of the peasant family

Historically, Spanish agriculture has been relatively unproductive within the context of Occidental Europe. Nevertheless, the Mediterranean basin represents an exception to this general rule, and Valencia demonstrates this. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, a high-yield irrigation-based agricultural model, suitable to the cultivation of a wide range of crops, developed in the Valencian region, with non-irrigated lands being given over to carob, olive and grape cultivation. During the mid-1800s a new stage in Valencian agriculture opened up, as widening European markets and improved transportation systems provided greater opportunities for exporting Mediterranean products.

Valencia's dominant agrarian model, then, was consolidated in the hundred years between 1850 and 1950. This model differed notably from both the low-yield agricultural model to be found in the Spanish interior, and the mixed-farming model of Atlantic Europe. Its main distinguishing trait was its reliance on a multitude of local specialisations to produce a diverse range of products. Irrigated land, representing some 145,000 hectares in 1860 and 243,000 in 1922,⁵ stood at the heart of this agrarian orientation, where cereal crops were cultivated on a rotating basis that eliminated the need for fallow land and obtained high production yields.⁶ In addition, rice and a wide variety of vegetables, including onions and tubers, were farmed alongside Valencian oranges (a staple crop) while extensive stretches of more arid land were dedicated to grapes, olives, carob, and almonds. Thanks to an expensive improvement programme, involving the development of new infrastructures, parts of these lands were eventually transformed into irrigated fields. This agrarian model, which lent itself to a number of different applications, spurred an important rise in production outputs among Valencian growers during the nineteenth century.

The essential aspect of this agricultural approach was its overwhelming reliance on small-scale farming and the relatively high number of small landowners it accommodated. A tendency to favour the concentration of lands into the hands of relatively few owners, as well as a markedly uneven distribution pattern among holdings, can also be discerned, although this latter tendency was much more pronounced among the *latifundia* of southern Spain. Larger holdings were dispersed throughout a great number of local communities, where they were subdivided into various plots. Thus, the system depended upon the proliferation of productive micro-units within broad stretches of irrigated land, which was kept cultivated thanks to a system of short-term leasing. The process of agrarian change discussed earlier took place under this type of labour distribution, composed mainly of tenant farms but with a number of smaller plots worked directly by their owners. Land tenancy was very common; even many small landowners sought a place in the rental market for land alongside those who lacked land of their own. Probably,

the total numbers of tenants and owners were nearly equal, although the statistics do not allow us to confirm this. If we observe a typical stretch of irrigated terrain, such as that pertaining to the Valencian village of Alzira in 1860, we find numerous individuals of differing economic situations cultivating a relatively modest (5,500 hectares) area. At that time, more than half (564) of the village's 1,082 resident landowners were cultivating lands in addition to their own. One also finds a similar number of non-landholding tenants (509). Both of these groups exploited an average of 1.7 hectares each, although individual situations could vary greatly and many no doubt barely scraped by with what they had: 250 of the individuals listed in the censuses we sampled cultivated relatively small plots of less than .5 hectares. In addition, an important group of landowners (495), those holding the majority of leased lands, were not residents at all but rather members of the bourgeoisie whose roots went back to that area, and/or part of a new class of urban professionals and businessmen. Such statistics show that the social organisation of production in the Valencian countryside was not in the least bit dichotomous, but rather embraced individuals of very diverse situations. At the same time, landownership and tenancy were not mutually exclusive conditions, and landownership itself could be subject to a number of interpretations. For example, many small landholders living close to poverty are described as '*jornaleros*' (day-labourers) in the censuses.

In short, Valencia can be said to have developed a kind of agrarian capitalism, whose organisational structure was quite different from that found in England, the Ille de France or the Piedmont. This model also differed somewhat from the irrigation-based farming of the Vaucluse region of southern France, where leasing was a minority practice among the region's many small independent farms, and where, by the nineteenth century, the great landowning families had lost much of their influence.⁷ In Valencia, the figure of the large tenant did not predominate, and many peasant families found ways to increase their profits between the shackles of tenancy and credit. At the end of the nineteenth century, as debates over the economic efficiency of small-scale agricultural production buzzed throughout much of Europe, the Valencian case proved that small farms and short-term tenancy contracts, often assumed under precarious conditions, were indeed compatible with increased productivity and improved production methods.⁸ They were the end result of actions chosen by individuals from a wide range of social positions, who combined work and capital in a number of different ways. The technical characteristics of irrigation farming conditioned this process, and also had a significant impact on landlord-tenant relations. It is therefore important to take a close look at these characteristics.

Artificial watering is the single most defining technical element of irrigation farming. In Valencia, as in other great irrigation-farmed zones, the land was the basic production factor, since it could store the labour and capital invested in it by earlier generations.⁹ As a consequence, the use of this capitalised land required that its value remain steady. In the Valencian region, most irrigated lands used small-scale hydraulic mechanisms to channel water from the nearby rivers, requiring knowledge of both engineering and popular agricultural practices. This was a decentralised world focused around local communities: at the beginning of the twentieth century, Valencia possessed 265 canals with their respective derivation networks, of which only three were used to water perimeters of

more than 5,000 hectares. The operation and maintenance of this infrastructure lay in the hands of landowners, who met regularly for this purpose and established written rules of conduct. Such organisations, while bringing together individuals from a range of social classes, were not egalitarian but rather maintained an uneven power distribution that reflected the inequalities in rural property ownership. Nevertheless, they represented spheres of cooperation between diverse groups of landowners, and between landlords and tenants, in which a desire to further mutual interests predominated over the need to air conflicts (which often got displaced onto debates over the relationship between different watering canals). In this way, the great landowners responsible for administering the water supply gained legitimacy only to the extent that they were able to guarantee its proper use.

But irrigation also required that the land of each plot be laboriously prepared. Both the hydraulic elements and the conditions favouring the land's ability to receive water were fragile and periodically had to be reconstructed. This necessitated not only an abundant use of labour, but also a body of workers who could perform the necessary maintenance and repair tasks at a moment's notice. Delays in the reparation of damaged canals or the failure to maintain them properly in the first place made it impossible to water the fields, contributing to crop loss. Inadequate soil preparation made poor use of the available water supply, and could hamper productivity over long periods of time. As a result, a constant and qualified workforce was necessary to maintain the high output upon which the region's agricultural and social model depended, a point on which both landowners and tenants agreed. As we shall see, this factor greatly influenced the form that land tenancies adopted in practice.

To sum up, Valencian agriculture was extremely labour-intensive. Not only did the available water supply have to be managed according to a set of very specific rules, but the region's staple crops required that long hours of labour be spread throughout the growing cycle. At the same time, occasional short-term jobs had to be provided for as well. In such a system, more and better labour could bring about very specific gains in the quantity and quality of the harvest, to a much greater degree than in dry farming systems.¹⁰ Paid labour proved inconvenient at certain times in the growing cycle, despite its usefulness during seasons such as rice-sowing and orange-collecting. Above all, the systematic use of day labourers required landowners' constant supervision, something greatly hindered, for all but the most routine tasks, by the dispersed distribution of the holdings.

Intensive cultivation also required a certain amount of capital that could not be substituted by labour, putting small farms at a disadvantage. Such was the case, for example, when growers began to draw water from subterranean sources once all the surface water sources had been exhausted. Wells had to be drilled and pumps installed, signifying a substantial investment. First steam pumps were used, and then electrical or exhaust pumps were imported from France or Great Britain until a Spanish pump industry was established. Like other forms of agrarian mechanisation, this was not a scale-neutral production method, and only farms of a certain size could achieve the required profit threshold. The new subterranean technique allowed some areas to expand their orange crops, but the change generally took place in exceptionally large plots.

Nevertheless, small property-owners could dodge this obstacle by forming associations that shared the costs of buying and installing subterranean pumping machinery.

Intensive farming also made use of other purchaseable resources, such as fertiliser and the heavily-employed animal labour, that were more accessible to the well-to-do landowner than the landless labourer. During the 1840s, the regional farming system's ability to produce organic fertiliser was reaching its limit. The great expansion that followed was first made possible by the accessibility of imported guano and then, a few decades later, by the rise of mineral fertilisers. Valencia began using guano at the same time as Great Britain and before the rest of the Iberian Peninsula, and therefore needed capital to purchase this input. It also needed draft animals to help with various irrigation-related tasks. Although fertilisers can be divided up and animals can be adapted to the size of a given farm, for example by using mules instead of horses, both of these production goods lay well beyond the reach of the numerous poor farmers who could barely make a living after accounting for their own rent and subsistence. Nevertheless, they found ways of overcoming these liabilities. On the one hand, poor farmers limited their buying of fertiliser by exploiting the more readily available organic materials from the densely populated countryside, including abundant vegetable scraps and human waste products. They also scattered nitrogen-fixing plants throughout local crops. These strategies were work-intensive and required an intimate knowledge of the surrounding environment, but they were the only resources abundantly available to peasants.

Animals, on the other hand, had to be purchased, as did any fertiliser that could not be produced locally, creating a widespread reliance on small-scale personal credit. Many farmers managed to get the capital they needed by buying draft animals on credit, taking out small monetary loans, and requesting advances on fertiliser to be paid for at harvest time. The cost of this indebtedness was yet another form of squeezing extra profits from the peasantry, although the few sources available seem to indicate that, despite what Bhaduri's famous model predicts for other regions of the world, this did not stop the Valencian farmers from improving the agricultural system.¹¹ Offers for credit were quite diverse, as lenders of all social classes and persuasions could be found throughout the region, and the influence of the city was omnipresent. At the same time, landlords had a stake in making sure that the system of credits did not strangle their tenants' production ability, on which, as we have seen, the land's profitability and future fertility depended. The working relationship between landlord and tenant, explored below, reflected this dilemma.

Finally, small, poorer farmers experienced yet another important restriction when it came to crop transformation. Whenever one of the annual crops sustaining the cycle of subsistence, rent and credit was substituted by a fruit crop such as oranges, no income could be expected until a few years had passed. This threatened the logic of the small-farming system, making it very difficult for poor farmers to effect such a change. At the same time, landowners also sometimes objected to this kind of changeover because of the loss of short-term income it entailed.¹² Farmers overcame these barriers by planting annual crops between young trees, which allowed them to subsist and provided a continuous rent, but obliged landlords and tenants to agree upon a series of conditions designed to avoid the overexploitation of the soil.

In short, agricultural development forced Valencian farmers to come up with a wide variety of solutions to the financial problems generated by crop transformation, and by the daily practice of a farming model that required large amounts of work, water, and fertiliser. Such solutions imply that agreements had to be reached between various social groups. Thus, while some crop changeovers were brought about by tenants, others occurred through the direct or indirect intervention of landowners. This is not to say that these two groups had equal interests, but rather that a certain degree of cooperation must have existed alongside the conflict (latent or otherwise) between tenants and landlords. In this process, social hierarchies took on new forms of legitimation. After the fall of the old regime, agricultural development ensured the preeminence of a group of elite landowners whose ranks had been renewed and widened by the influx of urban capital into land purchasing. At the same time, it left a margin for the various types of small farmers to ascend the social ladder, allowing tenants to gain access to the land, and enabling lesser landowners to enlarge their holdings until they had reached the comfortable status of '*labradores*' (wealthy farmers). This process happened in successive waves at certain critical moments, for the most part during the final decades of the nineteenth century and the 1920s, and later, on a broader scale, during the Franco years. The key question is just how tenant-landlord relationships helped contribute to this outcome.

Conflicts, hegemony and long-term structural change

During the agricultural expansion of the mid-nineteenth century, a curious situation came about. On the one hand, the landholding bourgeoisie considered the leaseholding system as satisfactory, occasionally praising the customs of tenants in their official reports in terms that were not used for paid labourers. Yet, on the other hand, they refused to attribute any special economic function to tenant farmers when it came to explaining the advantages of the leasing system. In contrast to David Ricardo's proposed division of social classes for the English countryside, representatives of the Valencian landowners equated '*agricultor*' (farmer) with 'landowner' and '*colono*' (tenant) with 'labourer.' In that period, the ideal of the English farmer had gained hold among the principal Valencian landowners, who sometimes presented themselves as having furthered agricultural progress through their specialised knowledge of the subject, their access to capital and, in short, their leadership role in society. Despite the fact that the landowner's ability to farm the whole of his patrimony autonomously had always been limited and that, as a consequence, he had to rely on the work of tenant labourers, most saw themselves as directly responsible for their lands.¹³

For their part, tenants were conscious of their own indispensability, and this represented a potential source of conflict with the landowners. In fact, from the second half of the eighteenth century, they had operated according to what might be called a 'moral economy'. This term should not be confused with the customary rights that are supposed to have taken shape under the old regime. While any type of 'customary right' may be invoked during a legal conflict, what we here refer to as a 'moral economy' consisted of a series of controversial demands and attitudes that contradicted the landlords' own practices. Such demands and attitudes did not translate into overt political action, but rather into behaviour which, during certain critical historical moments, affected the

bilateral relationship between specific owners and those who were or who wished to be their tenants.

During the old regime, the concept of 'perfect property', free of formal obligations towards leaseholders, developed among landowners. In that society of orders and privilege, where the division of inheritance and the sale of noble or ecclesiastical properties were strictly prohibited, landlords saw it as their logical right to seek the highest possible rents and to run their properties as they saw fit, free from formal restrictions. This attitude seems to have been largely accepted among leaseholders as well, although the latter claimed that families of proven reliability should have the right to remain on the land. The appropriate rent, they argued, was not simply any sum contracted between an owner and a tenant; it must also be a realistic amount, equivalent to that being paid for similar holdings in similar areas. This was an important stipulation, for it sought to correct the generally accepted principle that owners had the right to seek the maximum profit from land rents.¹⁴

If such criteria did not question owners' basic rights, they did have a significant impact on tenant conditions. Thus, when important landowners used the auction as a means of raising land rents beyond all reasonable limits, tenants lacked the internal solidarity to stop this from happening, even as they recognised the rivalries that auctions aroused between themselves and fellow tenants. In this situation, owners showed that their true aim was to obtain the highest possible rents on their properties and to foment a tenancy market in which workers were obliged to compete strongly against each other in order to gain access to leaseable land. During the first half of the nineteenth century, neither the Valencian legal system nor the limited solidarity then existing among tenant farmers could prevent such practices from taking place.

Even so, this situation eventually took a turn in favour of the leaseholders, especially within the fertile stretch of land known as *l'Horta*, which surrounded the city of Valencia. What, then, may be said to have caused such an evolution? Research allows us to highlight three principal factors, none of which challenged the landowner's absolute right to the land.¹⁵

First, from the early nineteenth century, land auctions tended to obtain disappointing results for the landowners. In a protracted crisis that only gradually led farmers to develop new market-oriented production strategies, landlords began to see that the high rents obtained during auctions were unrealistic and that they often led to insurmountable rent arrears. Urged on by a need for land, labourers competed against each other on the auction block and, as a consequence, accepted rents that later proved too high for them to pay. Agricultural payments continued to fall into arrears during the war against Napoleon (1808–1814), a situation that worsened between 1817 and the 1840s, when prices for agricultural products plummeted. Although owners tried to force the laggards to pay their debts, there were two factors working against them. First, a basic legal procedure had to be followed during cases of eviction, which meant extra costs and required, at times, that both landlord and tenant produce evidence in support of their respective claims. Second, time was on the tenant's side in irrigation-farmed areas, since the indebted *colono* could continue to occupy his plot while allowing the quality of the soil to be compromised and the fragile infrastructure of the canals to fall into disrepair. As

a result, owners often preferred to make out-of-court settlements with bankrupt tenants rather than to evict them. Sometimes, this meant allowing a tenant to stay on the land under a different lease while offering him a new deadline by which to repay his debts. In the southern Valencian town of Orihuela, for example, more than one in ten labourers taking up new leases in 1821 already owed back rents to the same owner for the same plot of land. While this situation was to change in later decades, debt responsibilities from former lease agreements continued to affect between three and four per cent of 'new' lease-holders. At other times, the indebted labourer agreed to leave the farm after gaining a substantial pardon from his debts, a situation that allowed him to escape economic ruin and gave him the chance to start anew in the farmhand market.

A second influential long-term factor affecting the tenant-landlord relationship was the existence of a legal framework obliging landowners to compensate leaseholders for any improvements they had made to the lands they occupied. Since 1707, Valencia's legal system had been based on the medieval Castilian law code known as the *Partidas*, which required landowners to pay for such improvements whenever a tenant's contract did not state otherwise. Not surprisingly, these improvements were significant in the region's irrigation-farmed zones, where major infrastructures had to be erected and maintained, soil adequately prepared, orchards and fields cared for, and commercial crops periodically rotated. From the early 1800s, changes in the marketplace obliged farmers to reorganise their lands in order to improve soil preparation methods, which were of paramount importance given the frequency of flooding in the region. They parcelled up existing fields and enriched them with new orchards and citrus groves, erecting infrastructures to support crop growth and storage. Although owners participated in these tasks to a varying degree, tenants were also heavily involved despite the fact that their strict short-term contracts lasted an average of only six years. During the first half of the nineteenth century, contracts in Orihuela show that such investments among landlords were on the rise, registering in fifteen per cent of contracts dating from 1821 and 1831 and in thirty per cent from 1841 and 1851. Yet tenants can be seen making the same kinds of investments even earlier than landlords did, and to a greater degree: thus, tree-planting, labour and repair alone appear in thirty to forty-eight per cent of contracts dating from 1821 and 1831. In this context, it is significant that in an overwhelming majority of leases in the area we are discussing (with the lowest figure, for the year 1841, standing at seventy-seven per cent) the leaseholder upheld his right to charge for improvements. Lacking a specific clause to the contrary, owners were legally obliged to remunerate such work. Samples of contracts drawn up during the mid-1800s for other Valencian orchard regions, such as Castellón, Gandía and Elche, show that the vast majority of landlords there accepted this obligation.

This conclusion is confirmed by another, more indirect proof. In their contracts, owners sometimes stated the maximum contribution that they were prepared to pay for improvements, limiting the total amount of such monies, for example, to the equivalent of an annual rent. Or, as was the case with some noble landowners, they might stipulate that an 'expert' of their own choosing be called on to assess improvements should a conflict with tenants arise. In short, landowners seem to have condoned this aspect of the tenant's role, at least to a certain extent. Owners probably found nothing attractive in the prospect

of working their own land. As we have seen, their representatives described this group as 'farmers' (*cultivadores*) and lavished praise on capitalist production methods in the fields; but in reality, their involvement in crop irrigation was quite limited. Although they presented themselves as landowner-farmers in the public arena, most owners invested limited amounts of capital and labour in production while renting out the bulk of their fields. They played an active role in administering land rents (calculated according to the conditions of each individual plot and tenant), which allowed them to keep track of their fields and periodically renew their ties to the market. As administrators, owners routinely sought to avoid any general commitments towards the *colono* as a class. Once an owner had established his absolute and unrestricted predominance over the tenant, often by forcing the latter to renounce all of his existing rights, including at times his right to take any legal action, he could be flexible, depending on the circumstances of each individual case. One type of case came up repeatedly. Because many leaseholders had little disposable income, they were often obliged to go into debt in order to carry on with their work. However, they often preferred to seek credit from merchants such as craftsmen, livestock-vendors, and others, and not necessarily from the landowners themselves. The sources show an extraordinary rise in the volume of such loans during the first half of the nineteenth century, a number that is surprisingly sustained if we take into account the high interest rates mentioned in reports from the period. In this situation, whenever a tenant went bankrupt the landowner would step in to act as his preferred creditor, in order to protect the future credit of his leaseholders in their dealings with third parties. Such flexibility was necessary, for if an owner insisted on obtaining his rents regardless of the circumstances, he might find himself facing a credit gap vis-a-vis his tenants and, eventually, mired in a maddening dilemma: either he temporarily abandon the farm and accept the resultant deterioration, or he assume the risks associated with working the land himself. Again, the legal priority of property ownership could translate, at a practical level, into a need to moderate its consequences.¹⁶

A third factor, and the hardest one to pin down, relates to the practices of leaseholders themselves. That the matters discussed thus far seem to have sparked few collective movements among peasant labourers does not prevent us from establishing that, in many Valencian townships, tenants had their own interpretations of what constituted admissible leasing practice. For example, bankrupt tenants extended the legal process against them for as long as they could in order to prolong their stay on the land. A case might drag on for years, only to end in an informal settlement that essentially stepped around the mess of legal red tape unravelled at the landlord's initiative. Legal reform, which simplified the process whereby labourers could be taken to court during the 1860s, had little impact on this situation. From the middle of the nineteenth century, delays in rent payments appear to have been the fruit of a deliberate strategy among tenants. Thus, when it was time for creditors to collect, tenants often stalled until they could fetch a higher price for their crops, or because their own investments, loans to other workers, or increased consumption made it impossible for them to pay on time. In the Valencian region, tenants also often delayed paying their debts in the hope that, once the landlord had died (it was customary for leaseholders to attend the funeral) his heirs would agree to pardon them. These practices did not challenge the rights of the landowner himself; rather, they stretched the

available margins of action in favour of the tenant, to the point where compliance with the initial strict contract was sometimes difficult to recognise.

In the mid-1800s, a period of faith in progress under the hegemony of private property, the agricultural experts among the Valencian bourgeoisie scarcely took into account the extensive world of the tenant farmer. They saw the latter as economically irrelevant, at the same time believing that under bourgeois leadership tenant support for order and progress was assured. On the rare occasions when social and political commentators did refer to this group, it was to praise the *colonos*' strict work ethic and 'healthy customs'. Such impressions lasted well into the mid 1900s. On the whole, the conservative image of the Valencian tenant farmer suggests that the region's rent-dominated agrarian system must have offered some opportunities for tenants to stabilise their situations, and, over the course of many years, given them a certain degree of access to rural property ownership. This would explain why, as early as the middle of the nineteenth century, bourgeois spokesmen for agrarianism had begun pointing to the Valencian countryside as an efficient barrier against socialism.

To what extent can this presumed stability be viewed as having been wrought by the tenants themselves? That group's ability to overstep the strict economic margins imposed on them pushed landowners to act in ways that they might otherwise have considered unacceptable, given their inclination to view the tenant-landlord relationship as a 'private' affair divorced from the workings of the law and courts. Furthermore, the particular evolution of working conditions in l'Horta shows that its tenant farmers' ability to pressure landlords indirectly, and the unfolding power dynamic between themselves and the latter group during the eighteenth century, cannot be generalised to other Valencian townships. In part, this trajectory may have reflected l'Horta's proximity to a dynamic labour market at a time when the city of Valencia was experiencing a significant rise in urban and industrial development. Possibly, this urban market absorbed part of the area's rural workforce, thereby lightening the pressure on those who sought access to arable land. In addition, some peculiar practices took root among the country's agricultural leaseholders from the middle of the century. At that time, one urban observer lamented, the civilised ways of the city stopped abruptly as soon as one entered the countryside, where suspicion, defiance towards city folk, and a tendency towards reckless violence abounded. Though contemporaneous with the idealised image of the Valencian labourer described by local agrarianists, his view of the region's agricultural husbandmen was quite different from that idyllic figure. A decade later, an English traveller was even more specific in his observations. Valencians were a deeply excitable lot, he claimed, to the point where an evicted tenant might easily set his knife to the farmer who appeared to replace him, without uttering a single word.

Some ten years later, in 1878, the tenant-landlord situation we have been describing burst into the public sphere for the first time, after a prolonged drought compelled many indebted tenant farmers in l'Horta to seek a moratorium or pardon for their existing debts. The Valencian bourgeoisie, however, was extremely worried about the risk of social disorder, which they had witnessed during the short-lived democratic experience ending four years earlier. Their inflexibility led to a generalised suspension of rent payments among tenant farmers. For months, the few agricultural labourers who paid off their

debts and agreed to replace the expelled tenants were made the victims of anonymous acts of violence, such as the burning of crops and storehouses, or the murder of draft animals.¹⁷ The Valencian authorities' own use of force does not seem to have been very effective in this climate, except as a short-term measure. In practice, as legal and social experts were to conclude shortly thereafter, leaseholders managed to impose their own 'tenants' law' on the zone in place of the landowner-dominated legal system, freezing rents and providing a series of safeguards against eviction. This change in the historical flow of property rights, at a moment when the bourgeoisie stood at the height of its glory, acquired epic proportions among republican radicals for whom the rebellious peasantry were like novelistic heroes. Among those preoccupied with discovering the historical roots of Valencian identity, on the other hand, the incident served to confirm the supposed uniqueness of the local legal system. Quite without cause, it was taken for granted that the situation in l'Horta reflected that of other irrigation-farmed zones in the region.

It is not easy to ignore these accumulated assumptions when searching for explanations. In particular, one wonders how landowner rights came to be limited in a context in which property rental as a concept was never questioned, and in which tenants were regarded as the keepers of conservative values. One factor to bear in mind is the special relationship between the payments landlords made for agricultural improvements in l'Horta, and the continuity of tenant families there. In contrast to what has been established for other townships, land leases in the Valencian vicinity often required tenants to renounce their right to charge for improvements: the figures from various sources we sampled are always very high, in sharp contrast to those taken from other agricultural zones. Thus, just under fifty per cent of leasing contracts in l'Horta from the first half of the nineteenth century, approximately seventy per cent of those from circa 1860, and more than eighty per cent of those dating from the last third of the century expressly annul the master's obligation in this regard. This condition must have had dramatic repercussions among tenants. Until the beginning of the century, l'Horta had boasted several large-scale holdings cultivated by prosperous farmers, who paid a high rent for the greater acreage. However, changes in the agricultural system gradually led to the subdivision of these large farms into numerous smaller family plots. According to reports from the period, landowners normally were not opposed to the common practice among tenants of dividing their plots among their children. The fact that property ownership did not seek to limit the opportunities for tenant employment may partly explain why this group tended to accept the concept of private property. Under the circumstances, tenants were probably willing to support the landowner's rights just as long as the latter saw to it that their fields stayed in the family. The changes taking place in the agricultural system in l'Horta during the first half of the nineteenth century must have made peasant labour there an essential aspect of its agrarian economy. If landowners failed to pay for improvements, a situation that perhaps reflected their greater need for cash in order to satisfy the consumption needs of a large city, from the tenants' perspective this outstanding equity obliged their masters to keep the land from ending up in the hands of strangers, who would profit unfairly from the generations who had worked that same holding before handing it down to the evicted family. Again, Valencia provides the example of an overwhelmingly rentier bourgeoisie, one unscathed by the whip of social criticism. All in all, tenants did not direct

their criticisms towards landlords. Rather, tenant farmers were coerced into action from among their own ranks, far below the 'respectable' layers of society, where intimidation and expedient violence, whether self interested or otherwise, could go unnoticed for many years.

Finally, none of the region's new leftist movements or ideologies managed to exploit the changes that leaseholders imposed on landowners' practical rights during the decade following the 1878 'rent strike'. Although these limitations on rural landlord rights and obligations were consolidated just at the moment when the workers' and republican movements began to spring up in the Valencian capital, the latter scarcely penetrated the nearby countryside. In the years before the 1878 revolt, one or two spokesmen for a conservative Catholic agrarianism had advocated making changes in the law in order to improve on the agricultural labourer's traditional subaltern status. Such was the case of the jurist and politician Manuel Danvila. Modifying his previous opinions on the subject, he proposed in early 1878 that the loss of at least fifty per cent of that year's harvest ought to compel rural property owners to reduce land rents and offer tenant farmers the option of rescinding their contracts. In seeking to relieve the financial burdens on the *colono* during times of agricultural crisis, Danvila was referring, of course, to the constant setbacks to irrigation by flooding, in particular, which radically reduced the size of the harvest and could rapidly transform a highly productive farm into a useless patch of sterile ground. Furthermore, and in contrast to the criteria later set forth in the Spanish civil law code of 1889, Danvila proposed that neither the sale of a leased farm nor the landowner's death could serve to remove a tenant from his lands. Despite the fact that his plan freed landowners from the need to pay for farm improvements, the jurist's project was unanimously rejected by the agrarian associations of Valencia, suggesting that the evolution of the region's land leasing system was not the fruit of a deliberate political strategy but, rather, was the offshoot of the historical process, forged by the tensions between Valencian landowners and their tenants.¹⁸

Landlord-tenant relations were not framed in clearly political terms. While all rural landowners accepted the principles of bourgeois liberalism, particularly the intangible nature of property ownership, they nevertheless wanted to be able to apply these principles themselves on a case-by-case basis. In addition, during the last third of the nineteenth century, some agrarianists began to view the figure of the tenant farmer for the first time as worthy of a unique legal and social status. From the perspective of the tenant farmer, on the other hand, acceptance of the master's authority did not prevent him from enacting a general strategy of delays and indirect pressures (not articulated through social action) to the extent allowed by the law and by the inattentiveness of landlords, administrators and authorities. In l'Horta, these self-imposed criteria, coupled with the landlord's option not to pay for improvements, created a situation in which violent action was perceived as a legitimate response to any tenant who dared ally himself to landlord greed. Finally, from the last third of the nineteenth century, political rivalries among the conservative, liberal, and anti-liberal Catholic members of the Valencian bourgeoisie allowed a special bond to emerge among the region's agricultural labourers. Probably, the rise of new alternatives to land rent as a pillar of bourgeois fortune-making, and the republican, anti-clerical radicalism that later came to dominate the Valencian capital in alliance with the

worker movement, opened the door to improvements in the leaseholder's situation which landowners were obliged to accept.

Conclusion

All of this does not add up to a political defeat for the landowners or a victory for the tenants; rather, it points to the emergence of a new phase in bourgeois politics, the beginning of a dynamic that eventually was to prove favourable to peasant property ownership. Faced with the rise of an urban left and of a rural worker movement, conservatives developed their own initiatives to unite the peasantry. Largely the work of priests and ecclesiastics, these projects tended to die out quickly except during periods of strong conflict in the labour market, especially during the First World War. One of the main obstacles to peasant organisation was the scant support this group received from large property-owners, whose economic solvency provided the landless labourer's only access to credit and new fertilisers. Given the predominance of small-scale farmers and paid labourers in agrarian cooperatives, these organisations simply disappeared for lack of bourgeois support. The situation reflects the preferences of landowners, who wished to retain exclusive control over each of their individual tenants, free from general rules and interventions from the clergy.

But landowner aims and desires did not always determine the way the wind would blow. In at least a few important agricultural zones, a core group of leaseholders had the resources and expectations necessary to generate a stable working cooperative. The most modest of savings, guaranteed by a handful of the more comfortable leaseholders, could have decisive effects. Thus, in Vila-real, an area strongly influenced by the Catholic Church, with a strong tradition of anti-liberalism headed by several large landowners, a rise in the prevalence of orange farming coincided with a period of heavy ploughing, both of which served to multiply the number of family farms during the last third of the nineteenth century while expanding the acreage of those who already owned between two and three hectares. In another case, hundreds of families bought up the lands they had been leasing between 1920 and 1940.¹⁹

During the Second Spanish Republic, leftist ministers introduced a number of measures designed to limit the powers of landowners and facilitate worker access to new tenancies. By contrast, right-wing governments managed to eliminate the latter, with support from Valencia's leaseholding majority. Their social policy was limited to providing stable conditions for tenants, whose condition under the hegemony of the landlords was especially marked whenever the latter decided to farm their own lands. The prevalence of right-wing politics among Valencian leaseholders suggests, nevertheless, that the wave of tenant expulsions taking place in other Spanish agricultural zones during the Republic's conservative phase must not have occurred here.²⁰ Again, Valencian landowners' general inability directly to exploit their extensive patrimony must have held out an attractive prospect to tenant farmers, who never came to question the concept of property leasing. This afforded an exceptionally promising horizon for the rhetoric of class harmony. In the long run, Valencian landlords' 'bourgeois capitalism' was first

accompanied and then largely replaced by another type of capitalism rooted in the world of peasants and tenant farmers, one that had never posed a threat to rural landowners.

A number of conclusions, perhaps useful for comparative purposes, may be drawn from the experience of the Valencian 'peasantry'. In the economic realm, it reaffirms the ability of family economies to integrate successfully into a competitive market, to the point where even pressure from land rents and credit obligations were not enough to block the advance of specialised farming. In the sociopolitical and cultural realms, it calls attention to a tenant farmers' generalised support for bourgeois politics and values. The tensions inherited from the patronage-driven politics of the 1800s, when this group was seen as little more than an 'invisible mass' of undifferentiated labourers, took on a fitful protagonism during the early days of mass politics, but that was all. At the same time, the gap between tenant farmers and paid agricultural workers eventually became definitive, despite the similarities in their living conditions. Tensions in the labour market, together with the stability that tenants had come to expect, gradually served to bolster that group's support for right-wing politics. At the same time, their identification with a set of religious values emphasising both a strong work ethic and familial authority fit well with the conservative tenor of their daily lives. In short, the vast mass of leaseholding families did not simply lay the foundation for agrarian capitalism during this critical period in Spanish agriculture. They also supported the values of a bourgeoisie that had abandoned its elite-driven political strategy in favour of a new alliance with the core of the Valencian peasantry, an alliance that sat comfortably with their own hegemonic position in society.

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Notes

1. M. Blinkhorn (ed.), *Fascists and Conservatives* (London, 1990); G. Eley, *Reshaping the German Right* (New Haven and London, 1980).
2. A. Botti, *Cielo y dinero* (Madrid, 1992), p. 65; J. L. Villacañas, *Ramiro de Maeztu y el ideal de la burguesía en España* (Madrid, 2000), pp. 262–70.
3. I. Saz, 'Fascism, Fascistisation and Developmentalism in Franco's Dictatorship', *Social History*, 29:3 (2004), 342–57.
4. P. Preston and I. Saz (eds.), *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 75:5 (1998).
5. R. Garrabou, *Un fals dilema* (Valencia, 1985), pp. 170–76.
6. 24 quintals per hectare of wheat at the beginning of the twentieth century were comparable to the yields of both Germany and Great Britain, more than double the Spanish national average. See J. Simpson, *Spanish Agriculture: The Long Siesta* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 266, and GEHR, *Estadísticas históricas de la producción agraria española, 1859–1935* (Madrid, 1991), pp. 1076, 1080, 1182 and 1186.
7. C. Mesliand, *Paysans du Vaucluse, 1860–1939* (Aix-en-Provence, 1989), p. 283.
8. On small property ownership, see G. Masullo, 'Contadini. La piccola proprietà coltivatrice nell'Italia contemporanea', in P. Bevilacqua (ed.), *Storia dell'agricoltura italiana in età contemporanea* (Venezia, 1990), vol. II, pp. 5–43. For France, see J. L. Mayaud, *La petite exploitation rurale triomphante. France XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1999). Even Great Britain, which was dominated by large-scale agricultural production, had to admire the efficiency of France's

- small fruit- and vegetable-producing farms. See J. Thirsk, *Alternative Agriculture: A History from the Black Death to the Present Day* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 208–16.
9. G. L. della Valentina, 'Padroni, imprenditori, salariati: modelli capitalistici padani', in P. Bevilacqua (ed.), *Storia dell'agricoltura*, vol. II, p. 166.
 10. For France, the process whereby small farms adapted their approach to fruit and vegetable cultivation to the more labour-intensive commercial production methods has been studied by G. W. Grantham, 'Scale and Organisation in French Farming, 1840–1880', in W. N. Parker and E. L. Jones (eds.), *European Peasants and their Markets*, (Princeton, 1975), p. 315. The existence of a wide margin for increasing profits by improving manual labour rather than through technical change is common to many agricultural environments. For the case of nineteenth century France, see G. Clark, 'Productivity Growth without Technical Change in European Agriculture before 1850', *The Journal of Economic History*, 48:2 (1987), pp. 419–32.
 11. A. Bhaduri, *The Economic Structure of Backward Agriculture* (London, 1983). S. Calatayud, J. Millán and M^a C. Romeo, 'El crèdit en el llindar de la societat burgesa' in C. Mir and E. Vicedo (eds.), *Control social i quotidianitat* (Lleida, 2002), pp. 375–98.
 12. S. Garrido, 'El conreu del taronger a la Plana de Castelló: agricultura comercial, propietat pagesa i treball assalariat', *Estudis d'Història Agrària*, 13 (2000), pp. 201–27.
 13. The paragraphs that follow draw heavily on S. Calatayud, J. Millán and M^a C. Romeo, 'Poderes y legitimidad de la renta en el País Valenciano: las elites agrarias en el siglo XIX', *Ayer*, 46 (2002), 233–60; 'El rentismo nobiliario en la agricultura valenciana del siglo XIX', *Revista de Historia Económica*, 18:1 (2000), 79–107; 'La noblesa propietaria en la societat valenciana del segle XIX: el comte de Ripalda i la gestió del seu patrimoni', *Recerques*, 33 (1996), 79–101 and 'Repenser le fermage' in G. Béaur et alii, eds., *Exploiter la terre* (Rennes, 2003), pp. 241–54.
 14. J. R. Modesto, *A ús i costum de bon llaurador* (Catarroja and Barcelona, 1998).
 15. J. Millán, 'Triunfo y límites de la propiedad en el arrendamiento valenciano', in Salustiano de Dros et al., *Historia de la Propiedad, Costumbre y Prescripción* (Madrid, 2006), pp. 373–410.
 16. S. Calatayud, J. Millán and M^a C. Romeo, 'La noblesa propietaria', pp. 98–100; 'El crèdit en el llindar de la societat burgesa'.
 17. During the conflict, peasant women stopped supplying the urban market with vegetables, while their children broke off with their usual trash-collecting activity in the city of Valencia. See M. Burguera, 'Gendered Scenes of the Countryside: Public Sphere and Peasant Family Resistance in the Nineteenth-Century Spanish Town', *Social History*, 29:3 (2004), 320–41.
 18. J. Millán, 'Triunfo y límites de la propiedad'.
 19. S. Garrido, *Treballar en comú* (Valencia, 1996), pp. 188–211.
 20. R. Valls, *La Derecha Regional Valenciana* (Valencia, 1992); V. Comes, *En el filo de la navaja* (Madrid, 2002).