

A CEREAL PROBLEM

Portugal's longstanding Agrarian Question, how to achieve self sufficiency in cereals, has never been resolved. MARIA ANTÓNIA PIRES DE ALMEIDA explains why.

Portugal's historic quest to provide itself with cereal crops always centred on a desire to transform its large southern Alentejo region into a national bread basket. Some blamed its persistent refusal to oblige on unfavourable growing conditions, the large size of its estates, or the feudal patterns of land ownership. Others claimed the problem was a lack of workers, or laziness caused either by the heat or the peasants' Moorish origins.

The solutions always *seemed* very simple: divide the oversized properties, move other people there from elsewhere, build dams, irrigate, innovate. The results have always been precarious. Time, like the water, is now in short supply and government policy no longer attempts to fill baskets with Portuguese bread. The question now is a different one: how to save what is left of the Alentejo's fragile agroecological system, and work *with* it in a sustainable manner.

Food, Sovereigns and Spice

In the fourteenth century, famine, plague, and war prompted state policies aimed at food self-sufficiency, deemed essential for a country striving for autonomy and independence. In 1375 King Fernando issued a law compelling people to remain on their lands and cultivate crops, principally wheat and barley. The amount of cultivated land did increase, but this early attempt at self-sufficiency soon petered out. Other solutions were sought, and the Portuguese instead looked west. Perhaps the answer was to be found somewhere on the distant horizon.

The Agrarian Question became a key motivation for colonial exploration and territorial expansion. From the conquest of Ceuta in 1415 to the discovery of the maritime route to India in 1498, securing a stable wheat supply was a major concern. Settlements on Madeira and the Azores in the early 15th century proved very conducive to the production of wheat and other cereals. From the sixteenth century onwards, spices from afar were traded for cereals from Northern Europe.

But the nagging question of the Alentejo would not go away. Portugal is a small yet sparsely populated country, and this 'under-productive' swathe accounts for 41 percent of it.



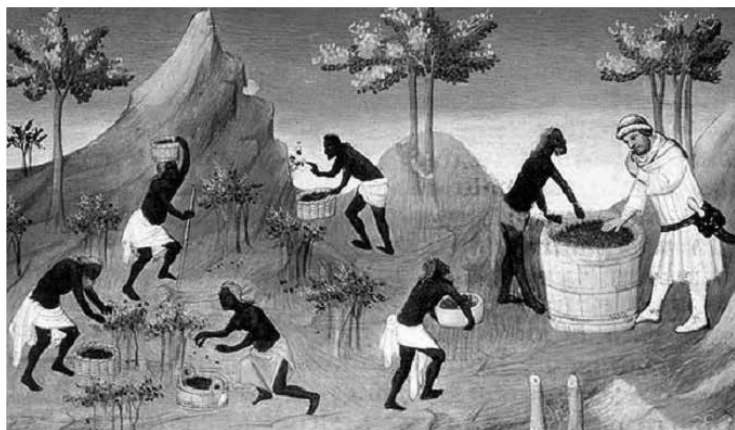
In 1655 Father Manuel Severim de Faria suggested the lack of manpower in Alentejo could be resolved by importing African slaves and redistributing land to individuals from the north. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, African slaves were brought to Portugal specifically to work in agriculture, particularly in rice fields due to their resistance to malaria. (They also made up a significant portion of household servants and skilled craftsmen, 10 percent of the population in cities like Lisbon and Évora.)

In 1789 Soares de Barros, a follower of Faria, proclaimed that the Alentejo would one day become the breadbasket of Portugal. Once the seeds of this dream had been sown, it proved hard to let go.

Montado and Latifundia

Travelling around the Alentejo, the last thing it seems to say is 'here could be another East Anglia'. Without trees the place feels uninhabitable. The heat is intense, even in spring. Cereal and corn production (for humans and animals) has only ever been viable on a small scale, part of a multifunctional silvopastoral system known in Portuguese as *montado*. In Spanish the same system is called *dehesa*.

This landscape, now reduced to around 40 percent of the Alentejo, combines extensive pastures with cork and holm oak woodlands. The oaks provide firewood, charcoal, and acorns for foraging pigs. Traditionally, sheep, goats, and deer grazed the pastures in low densities. Now cattle are more common.



Harvesting pepper in Coilum in southern India. 14th century painting.



Montado scene, c.1950

The region also has extensive olive groves, vineyards, the arable component (including corn), and market gardens in the towns, villages and farmsteads. Cork trees supply an industry that has thrived since the second half of the nineteenth century: Portugal is still a global leader in the cork business.

Well-managed montado plays a crucial role in fire prevention (cork bark protects the wood) and its loss, along with commercial non-native forest planting, has caused an increase in both frequency and severity of forest fires.

Though ownership patterns are changing, the Alentejo is still dominated by large estates, normally ranging between 200 and 2,000 hectares. Originally owned by a handful of aristocratic families, these date back to the Roman system of latifundia (Latin: *latus*, spacious and *fundus*, farm or estate). In antiquity, they approximated to industrialised agriculture, specialising in grain, olive oil, or wine production, much of it for export. Confiscated from conquered peoples, beginning in the early 2nd century BC, their economics depended upon slavery.

The 19th century saw some tenant farmers buy their land and improve their socio-economic position, but this still left many labourers landless and dependent on poorly paid seasonal work. This pattern of endemic inequality was a major factor in the radical 'agrarian reforms' of 1974-76 (see page 38).

Wheat Campaigns

When Portugal's dictatorial ruler António Salazar set up his *Estado Novo* (New State) in the mid 1920s, he returned to the 'cereal question'. Borrowing from Roosevelt's New Deal in the US and from the agricultural policies of European fascist regimes, he marshalled geneticists, mass propaganda, and a formidable bureaucracy to steer the nation back to the land. Wheat campaigns were a major component of this drive. Seventy five hydroelectric dams were built and major irrigation



Montado transformed into intensive wheat fields, c.1960

projects undertaken. National food independence was again seen as essential, both to balance the books and to keep the population engaged in healthy, family oriented activities.

Credit was provided to farmers, and cereal prices were fixed. The need for farm machinery and chemical fertilisers helped drive industrial development, benefiting metalworking and chemical industries. It also contributed to the economic and social empowerment of landowners. However, the old problem of labour shortage, exacerbated after World War Two by mass emigration, meant employing migrant workers from Portugal's northern regions. These workers, referred to by locals as 'little mice', often earned half the going rate and endured extremely harsh living conditions.

Wheat production increased in the post-war period due to high-yielding varieties, but this brought genetic erosion (varieties grown fell from thirty in 1920 to just three in 1970) and rapid soil erosion. By the time Portugal joined the EEC in 1986 it was clear that the model had gone seriously stale. The quest for a national granary was confined to the bread bin of history, and Portugal is now 90 percent reliant on cereal imports.

Cultivation has become much more niche, often supplying a growing artisan market with local organic flour. Many old estate families are still there, though global agribusiness now rules the roost. However, this new master still requires its little mice, the poorly-paid migrant workers, now from countries like Nepal, Pakistan, and Thailand. *Plus ça change.*

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Estado Novo propaganda poster marking 20 years of wheat campaigns. The slogan says 'Life and bread, the soul of the nation'.

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COMRADES IN FARMS

Following the 1974 coup, Portugal's Alentejo region saw a wave of land occupations and expropriations. Much of what happened during this tumultuous period remains contentious to this day. SM PARSONS investigates.

On the evening of the 24th April 1974 Portuguese radio played a mournful romantic ballad, *E depois do adeus* (*And After the Farewell*) by Paulo de Carvalho. The song had come joint last in that year's Eurovision contest, but to this day remains the only song from the kitsch competition to have started a revolution. It was a covert signal, the green light for a section of young Portuguese army officers – the MFA (Movement of the Armed Forces) – that the coup was on.

The final go-ahead came via another sad song – José Afonso's *Grândola, Vila Morena* (*Grândola, Swarthy Town*), about a poor



town in the Alentejo where 'the people hold the greatest power' – which aired at twenty past midnight on a Catholic radio station. There was no turning back for the music loving plotters. The 32 year old Captain Maia (left), now one of the icons

of the movement, readied his troops with a stirring speech and set off to the capital in an ageing assortment of jeeps, tanks and troop carriers (some of which broke down on the way).

En route to Lisbon, so the story goes, the convoy passed a restaurant which was celebrating its anniversary. The owners, understandably, decided to close for the day. Carnation flowers intended for customers were instead stuffed into the muzzles of the soldiers' guns. After 48 years of repressive conservatism, flower power had finally arrived in Portugal.



A New State of Chaos

The action quickly turned into the people's 'Carnation Revolution.' There were only four deaths, at the hands of the hated secret police, the PIDE, as crowds gathered outside their HQ. The *Estado Novo* (dictator Salazar's self-styled 'New State') was finished, going down with barely a whimper. The MFA fired the government, and announced elections would be held within two years. Local and regional political elites

were either dismissed or exonerated by newly formed administrative commissions. The next two years were a remarkable period of transition – the PREC or *Processo Revolucionário Em Curso* (Ongoing Revolutionary Process) – often characterised as a 'revolution within the revolution'. Six provisional governments, each more radical than the last, oversaw a period of social, political and economic upheaval which included mass demonstrations, workplace occupations, nationalisations of banks and major industries, and one the most radical attempts at agrarian reform Europe had ever seen. Portugal, it seemed, was on the verge of abolishing capitalism.



A worker occupied insurance company in Lisbon, c1974. The banner reads "at the service of the people".

The Countryside Heats Up

In the Alentejo, the coup had immediate resonance. Political parties had been outlawed under the old regime except for a few weeks around the time of national 'elections', but this caveat did not include the Portuguese Communist Party (PCP). The region was their stronghold, with a large underground network of activists ready to organise the workers once conditions were favourable.

The PCP drew support from the Alentejo's non-land owning majority, a diverse group of farm servants, journeymen and labourers. It is unclear to what extent tenant farmers and share croppers were also part of the support base, since these groups were in effect part of the new middle classes. This agrarian society had a complex hierarchy, and the ideology and goals of social revolution were not universally shared. Many rural workers had already emigrated (either abroad or to the cities) or were in the army fighting Portugal's colonial wars. However, the peasants who had stayed were united by varying degrees



Revolutionary graffiti. The man is writing 'The struggle continues. On the left: 'Land for those who work it'.

of economic hardship (due not least to seasonal variations in employment and wages) and a desire to own, or have a stake in, the land upon which they worked. The latifúndia estates were so large that around three percent of the population (including many absentee landlords) owned all the farmland in the Alentejo. The revolution was a chance to redress this imbalance.

Many land workers mobilised in the heat and tumult following the celebrated revolutionary date of April 25th. They gathered openly to voice support for the *Revolução* and for *Liberdade*, to denounce fascism, and to demand 'land for those who work it'. Posters and graffiti appeared everywhere, activists working in broad daylight after years operating in the shadows. A newly acquired freedom of speech was being expressed with gusto. The atmosphere was overwhelmingly joyful, almost carnival-like, but there was also tension. Roadblocks appeared in some areas and armed searches were made by 'people's committees' looking for luxury items and other signs of fascism.¹

Worker's committees and unions were set up in all districts, but land occupations did not happen straight away. The PCP was busy at the centre of events in Lisbon, protecting the revolution from right wing counter coups, jockeying for political power, rallying industrial workers, and organising mass demonstrations. Sometimes this included bussing peasants in from the Alentejo, to show solidarity with urban workers and bolster numbers at mass demonstrations. This reflects one of the contested elements of the later occupations, and of agrarian reform in general: were these grassroots processes initiated by the peasants, or actions driven from above by the PCP?



In August 1975, Italian photojournalist Fausto Giaccone witnessed a series of occupations in Ribatejo (then a province bordering Alentejo). This image, and the one on page 44, are in his book 'A Portuguese Story', Focus/Randazzo, Palermo 1987. www.faustogiaccone.com

Alliances

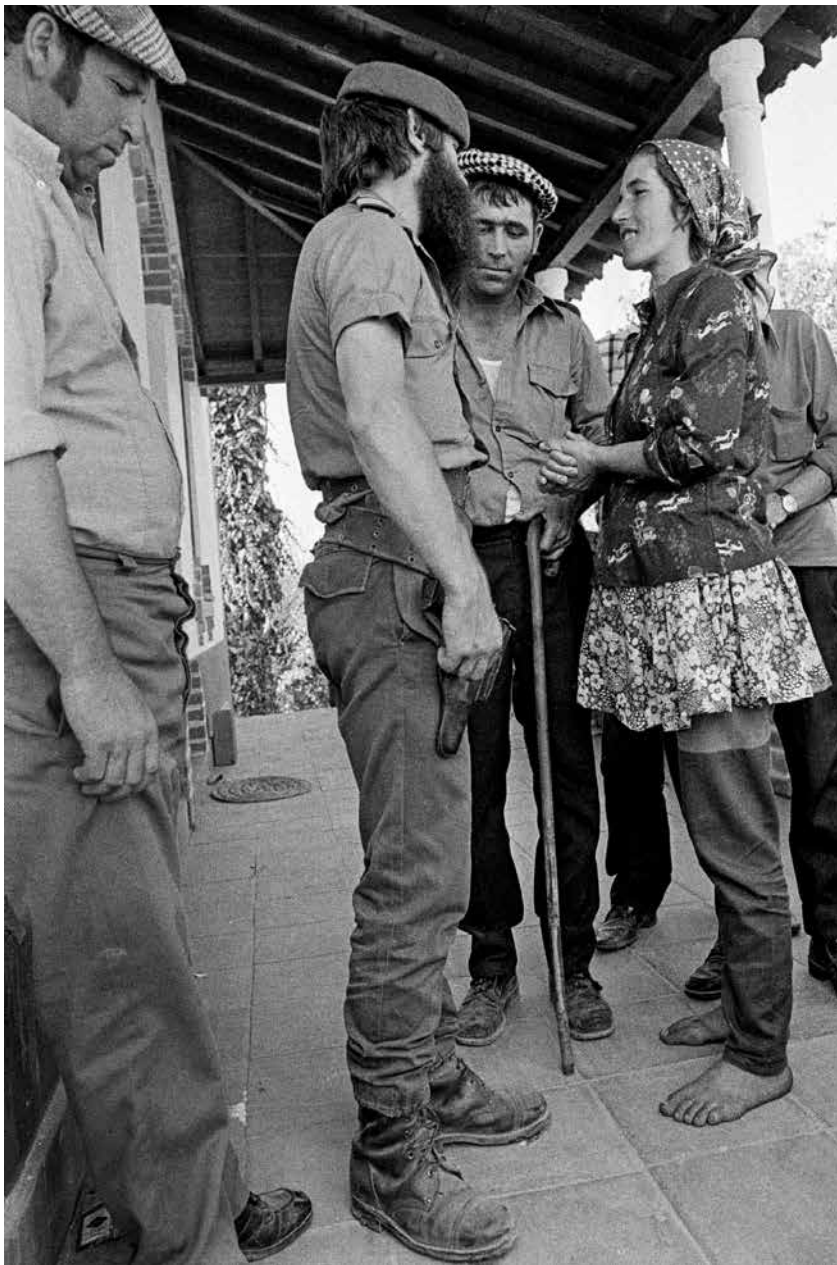
The big landowners immediately realised that the MFA meant business when they proclaimed early on that the revolution must serve 'the least advantaged sectors of the population' and defend the 'interests of the working classes'. Led by entrepreneurs and farm managers, in May 1974, they established the Free Farmers' Association (ALA). Foreshadowing reform, they approved a programme advocating the 'social function of land', including measures aimed at preventing its underutilisation (a major complaint among the peasants).²

A month later the League of Small and Medium-Sized Farmers emerged, seeking to frame and respond to the aspirations of the rural middle classes, whose numbers had increased in the 1960s with increased mechanisation and new food processing industries such as ketchup factories. To begin with there were negotiations; improvements to wages and working conditions were agreed, but the sticking point was full year-round employment which the owners said was not their problem, and that the state should address this.³

Decrees of Occupation

The national economy was at a standstill, paralysed by the general chaos of the PREC. Unemployment was rising everywhere, and the country was struggling to cope with huge numbers of soldiers and returning white Portuguese settlers (*retornados*) from the now abandoned African colonies.

Amidst this backdrop of mounting pressure, the trigger for the first land occupation was a decree by the first provisional government outlining the principles of economic sabotage. In November 1974 the first estates were occupied, citing large scale under-use of the land. More decrees (under different transitional governments) legalised and defined rules for the government expropriation of occupied farms, and also spelled out the underlying ideology.



the quantity of land you have but what you do with it (see pages 36-37).

Still, by the end of 1975, over a million hectares from the largest estates in the Alentejo (around a quarter of all Portugal's agricultural land) had been occupied and handed over to 500 newly formed Collective Production Units (UCPs). 'Bearded soldiers in red scarves' oversaw the occupations, preventing any violent backlash from landowners. The MFA, true to its ideals, made sure boots were on the ground to keep order. Soldiers who a year before were defending the empire against African freedom fighters were now helping Portuguese peasants dismantle the Roman era latifúndia, challenging liberal concepts of property ownership.

How did this happen? One would usually expect the army of a fascist regime to be its staunchest defender. What led significant elements within the MFA to encourage such radical action? The answer lies in the soul and soil of Africa.

Out of Africa

Portugal was the first modern European empire, and the last to let its conquests go. Its 'Age of Discovery' began in the 14th century. Through guile, brute force and mass enslavement the country played a big part in laying the foundations for the current global capitalist system. Wars with the Spanish and Dutch had already whittled away at imperial possessions long before Goa was 'lost' in 1961, liberated by India to the great annoyance of Salazar.

Nevertheless, in 1974 the overstretched Portuguese army was fighting wars in Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Angola, and Mozambique. The MFA captains had long and bitter experiences with these unwinnable guerrilla

Decree 406-A/75, passed in July 1975, aimed to 'liquidate fascism and its bases', to 'destroy the economic and social base of those classes' which exploit 'the mass of agricultural workers' and steal from small farmers. It defined Agrarian Reform as 'a political process which is fundamental to liquidate large landowners, who dominate the fields'. This law created 'a general base for attacking large properties and the capitalist exploitation of land'.⁴

The legal basis for the occupations stressed 'economic sabotage' and the under-exploitation of latifúndio estates. So was land 'productivity' lower in latifúndio counties? How exactly do high levels of land inequality affect the efficiency of the agricultural sector? These questions require far more research and analysis than is possible here. Entire books have no doubt been written on the competing meanings of the term 'productivity'. In this context as elsewhere, some would claim that what matters is not so much



Occupying the house of a bullfighting landowner. Sebastião Salgado, 1975



conflicts. I spoke with a friend recently who had been sent to Mozambique as a young conscript officer. He said that when he arrived he immediately knew he was on the wrong side. Half a century of press censorship, and the threat of prison for speaking out, severely depleted the population's capacity for independent thought. For those whose ears, eyes, and minds were still open (and of course there were many) a crisis of conscience was an understandable reaction to an unjust colonial war.

Allied to this there was, it seems, something of a freer atmosphere within the Portuguese officer corps. The army had no role in maintaining law and order under the dictatorship and it has been suggested that the mess was one of the few places in Portugal where criticism of government policies was possible.⁵

Indeed the first credible attempt to oust Salazar came from General Humberto Delgado, the *General sem Medo* (fearless General) who ran for president in 1958. Salazar, though effectively a dictator, was only ever prime minister. In theory an elected president could have removed him from office, but elections were rigged and the opposition hamstrung. Still, Delgado went all in. When asked by a reporter what, if elected, he would do regarding Salazar, he replied '*Obviamente, demito-o!*' (obviously, I'll sack him!). This was both sensational heresy, and supreme bravery. After 'losing' the election he was forced into exile. Seven years later he was murdered by the PIDE in a Spanish graveyard. Lisbon's international airport is named after him.

Just before the revolution, the fetchingly monocled General Spínola had published a book called *Portugal e o Futuro* (Portugal and the Future). His efforts earned him instant dismissal, but his argument to disengage from colonial rule struck a chord with the



Above: Idealised depiction from FRELIMO (the Liberation Front of Mozambique) showing life without Portuguese masters. Left: Portuguese colonial propaganda warning that supporting independence will end badly: 'FRELIMO are lying, you will die'.

captains and many in the country as whole. Spínola favoured a slow transition with the aim of keeping the newly independent countries within some kind of Lusophone Commonwealth structure. Although Spínola was chosen by the MFA as their figurehead for the coup itself (just as well, as Marcello Caetano, who had succeeded Salazar as PM in 1968, refused to surrender to any rank lower than General) many captains had a more radical outlook. They had been profoundly influenced by the methods and manifestos of the left-wing independence movements they had been sent to destroy.

Bringing Freedom Home

Seeing the conflict from the other side's point of view, sometimes through extended conversations with prisoners, was, as one MFA member phrased it, 'truly a political initiation':

'We were at war with people who speak the same language. We had little sense of racial difference, much less of culture. Badly supplied, badly equipped, very quickly we came to resemble the guerrillas. There was very little difference between a FRELIMO officer and ourselves. What we saw was that Portugal was itself part of the third world. Lisbon and Oporto were an illusion, the country within was underdeveloped, with an illiterate and exploited peasantry.'⁶



Portuguese language printing and typesetting class, Mozambique, 1930

For many of the captains it was obvious that for both Portugal and its colonies it was all or nothing: the system had to change.

Black and White Science

One man in particular epitomises this cross-pollination between oppressor and freedom fighter, empire and independence. The agronomist turned socialist freedom fighter Amílcar Lopes da Costa Cabral was born in 1912 in Guinea-Bissau to Cape Verdean parents, and trained as an agricultural scientist in Lisbon from 1945 to 1951. His degree thesis, encompassing extensive fieldwork, was entitled ‘The Problem of Soil Erosion: Contribution to the Study of the Cuba Region in Alentejo’.



Cabral dedicated his thesis to the ‘workers of the latifúndia, men of errant life threatened by erosion’. His subsequent reports for Portuguese colonial authorities on land exploitation in their overseas territories, the disruptive effects of extractive trade economy, and scientific research on soil and erosion, were perfectly wedded to his parallel calling as a ‘sower’ of African liberation:

‘African land is being devastated day after day. ... In a life that is out of balance, obliged to satisfy not only the new demands created but the requirements of a new social condition ... The lack of balance in the management of Black African soil encourages the emergence of diseases that debilitate the human organism.’⁷

Cabral here echoes Marx’s remark that:

‘All progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress toward ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility.’⁸

For Cabral, the soil was alive, the lifeblood of the earth and the people. It had its own agency in the struggles between those who abused it (colonial and capitalist forces) and those who tended it with more sustainable methods, honed over thousands of years – the itinerant, rotational approach of local African farmers. He looked back to pioneers in soil science like Liebig, Richthofen, and Dokuchaev, and also forward to holistic thinkers like James Lovelock.

In Guinea-Bissau, Cabral set up experimental agroforestry farms with horizontal organisational structures, rooted in local ecology and culture. In 1961, burdened presumably by his double life, he stopped working for the Portuguese and dedicated himself full time to the liberation struggle with his

African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), which he had co-founded in the 1950s.

In areas of Portuguese Guinea liberated by the PAIGC, a system of People’s Stores emerged, serving as ‘outlets for surplus products that were exchanged for imported goods’.⁹ The peasant economy was reconfigured to serve local needs (rather than the towns and cities of Portugal), reflecting Cabral’s call to ‘destroy the economy of the enemy and build our own’.



Experimental farm, Guinea-Bissau, c.1956

None of this was lost on the MFA, who were formed from an earlier ‘movement of the captains’ stationed in Guinea-Bissau. The increasingly disillusioned officers openly admired Cabral both for his military competence and intellect.¹⁰ In many ways he was the kind of leader they envisaged for Portugal. At the very least he held up a mirror for the colonisers. For some Portuguese however, even today, the man was a traitor. An African given the full benefit of the white man’s civilising mission, only to turn against the motherland.

Cabral was shot dead in 1973. Most theories tend towards a Portuguese backed assassin but he was certainly betrayed to some extent by those in his inner circle. His dying words, reportedly, were ‘this is no way to settle disputes’.

Pão-er to the People

Cabral did not live to see independence in his homeland, or the other Lusophone countries he was active in. Nor did he get to see the co-ops set up in the Alentejo during the PREC. He would have taken a keen interest in the latter and could have advised on how to empower humans and soil to work together. In the end, as exemplified by scores of rather nicely designed posters (see opposite), many of the newly set up UCPs looked to Soviet style extensive farming. Ironically there are also strong echoes of the fascist era’s ‘Wheat Campaign’. Bread (pão) was back on the menu. Of course it is easy to over-simplify and criticise this approach. Many of the farmers and land workers would have been all too aware of the environmental limitations and agricultural nuances of the land they knew so intimately.



Accounts of what happened at the collectives differ wildly, and serious bones of contention remain to this day. Detailed ethnographic research by Maria Almeida finds catastrophic drops in crop yields, including a serious collapse in grape and olive harvests.¹ PCP literature, on the other hand, emphasises the social gains inherent

in collectivised initiatives (including new childcare facilities, worker owned shops and social spaces) and a genuine attempt to address the rural population haemorrhages of the *Estado Novo* years. The vision was to revive an agrarian economy based on thriving local communities, while also capable of delivering ample food supplies to urban centres.

Are these twin goals actually incompatible, given the semi arid nature of the Alentejo? Did Soviet-style ideology and methods render this endeavour doomed from the outset? Or did it just need more time and more government assistance to steer it through what was always going to be a difficult birthing process? Could it have evolved into something better reflecting local eco-cultural realities?

In the heady days following the occupations, state loans were made available to the UCPs, but these came with crippling interest payments. When national elections in 1976 returned a more moderate socialist government, the finance tap was quickly turned off. One by one the collectives went bankrupt, and most of the land returned to the original owners. New laws, while reversing earlier revolutionary decrees, did enable more favourable tenancy agreements for small farmers, but the revolution was, for all intents and purposes, dead. Flowers wilt quickly, especially in the heat of southern Portugal.

There was resistance, of course. The UCPs protested against the roll back, and some did survive into the 1990s on rented land, but Portugal was now officially rejoining the global financial order (in reality it was never that isolated from it). The need to align with EEC farming policy and compliance with IMF assistance meant full steam ahead towards a liberal economic future.

Let Them Play Golf

Portugal today, like most countries, commodifies its land, selling to the highest bidder. Mono-crops and tourism are the



A UCP farm building

dominant players across the old latifúndia. Large internationally owned fruit and olive farms provide little benefit to the local communities, rather they are new form of colonial extraction, magnifying rural-urban disparities.¹¹

The collectives were often named after left wing icons and symbols (Red Star, Castro, Guevara), even the fearless General Delgado (labelled by some communists in the 1950s as ‘General Coca Cola’ for his bourgeois tendencies) had one named after him. There are no resorts or golf courses named after Lenin or Marx. But curiously, with a bathos redolent of Paulo de Carvalho’s Eurovision flop, there is one named ‘Montado’ (the Alentejo’s traditional anthropogenic ecosystem). Its strapline reads “A place where leisure and quality are guaranteed”. *Liberdade! 25 de Abril Sempre.*



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