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The Agrarian Reform under the Portuguese Revolution, 1974-76: its Roots and Reversal

—**Maria Antónia Pires de Almeida**

Abstract: The makers of the Portuguese Revolution of 1974 sought not only the overthrow of a dictatorial regime, but also a reorganisation of Portugal's economy on new lines, securing control of agriculture and industry in the name of workers. The present paper examines the process of revolutionary agrarian reform in the Alentejo region, a major agricultural zone, and describes how, after the end of the revolutionary period, 1974-76, the reforms of that period were reversed, when the Socialists and Social Democrats successively gained power.

Key-Words: Portugal, Revolution of 1974, Communists, Movement of Armed Forces, Alentejo, UCPs.

Introduction:

The historic Alentejo region, in the south of Portugal, has been traditionally held to be the granary of Portugal. It is now represented by the districts of Portalegre, Evora and Beja (see Map), being no longer an administrative jurisdiction itself. Though it occupies forty-one percent of the Portuguese territory, it has the lowest population density due largely to its geographical terrain and pattern of water distribution. Many of this region's features have remained the same through some centuries: a heavy concentration of agrarian property, a homogeneous group of landowners and a high percentage of wage-labourers working on the land with some engaged in craft-labour as well. This is the region with which the Portuguese revolution of 1974-76, which overthrew the semi-dictatorial regime of Salazar's successors, was profoundly associated. The revolutionary Agrarian Reform, in turn, altered practically every aspect of the region's politics, economy and its social life after 25 April 1974, the date of the Revolution.

In order to understand this process, we need to analyse a bit of the people's lives before 1974, especially the nature of the agrarian problem. Only then can we understand what went on during the PREC ("período revolucionário em curso"), the revolutionary

period, from 1974 to 1976, up to the approval of the Constitution and the first presidential, parliamentary and local elections, and what happened afterwards: the Barreto Law of 1977, issued by a Socialist Government and the subsequent measures of the Social Democrat Governments that put an end to Agrarian Reform in Portugal.

In order to know in detail how the Revolution affected the region of Alentejo research was undertaken by the present author in local sources and archives in municipalities, local institutions and private companies and family records. Lists of each district's agricultural properties were consulted, as well as deeds for the Collective Production Units (UCPs), created during the revolution, each with its own list of occupied properties and of its members, and the ministerial orders for expropriation published in the official bulletin.

Ethnographic, political and economic studies have proved to be important means for us to create a better picture of the environment of the pre-revolutionary years (Almeida, 2006). Scanning literature, particularly by authors such as Fonseca (1942, 1943, 1951, 1958), Namora (1945, 1949, 1950, 1954, 1963), Redol (1939, 1942, 1961, 1962), Saramago (1980) and others, was also part of the research. Those authors were associated with the Communist Party and their writings embodied rural memories and experiences. Their works provided readers with impressions of workers' misery, class tension, landowners' oppression and so on. However, their stories usually related to life in the 1930s and 1940s (Almeida, 2012). It can be argued that the problems they exposed had been mostly overcome partly by legislation issued in the 1960s regarding social benefits, partly by the easing of pressure on employment through emigration, and partly by the introduction of mechanization and some progress of industrialisation. Yet, despite improvement in work and living conditions for agricultural workers in Portugal by the early 1970s, effects of the earlier trauma were still present in the memories of

Alentejo's rural people and the minds of intellectuals who had read of them if not witnessed them themselves.

Finally, an important source for us has been individual memory: the main participants of the revolutionary process were interviewed, both local ordinary people and some of the main figures in politics, government and unions, such as Vasco Gonçalves, the Prime-Minister in the revolutionary regime from July 1974 until September 1975, and António Barreto, the Minister of Agriculture in the post-revolutionary phase, from November 1976 to January 1978.

Oral history proved to be a major component of our research, with different facts coming out often revealing divergent interpretations of the same events, as well as different angles and perceptions in the assessment of the aftermath.

Before 1974:

The Portuguese "Agrarian Question" has occupied scholars for a long time and created the most imaginative solutions (Cabral, 1974, Santos, 1993a). Our history is filled with treatises and proposals, often compiled with the Alentejo region in mind and the ever-present desire to transform the region into Portugal's barnyard (Santos, 1993b). It had to produce all the corn our country needed to survive and when it could not deliver, which was the case most of the time, something had to be wrong with it. The blame was laid at the door of the lack of water or the lack of people, or the laziness of its population caused by the heat or its Moorish origins. But mostly the fingers were pointed at the large size of its estates and the latifundia regime. The solutions were mostly very simple: divide the property, put other people to work, take people from the North and make them work in the South, and build dams to irrigate the land better. Even though some attempts were made through the centuries to put some of these projects into practice, the results proved to be unpromising. The region's special feature is its

“montado”, a typical Mediterranean ecosystem that includes cork trees, olive trees and pastures for cattle, swine and goats. Corn has always proved to be the poorest of its products, even when incentives were given to farmers. This type of production can only be profitable if carried out in large units. In such a case, only a few could own the land, and a gulf necessarily separated them from the bulk of the population.

How did ordinary people actually live? There was a project in the ISCTE, Lisbon, from 1998 to 2002, titled PACO – Occupations Analysis and Classification Project. In this project, a team of researchers classified jobs in agriculture, industry and fishing and it produced a *History of Work and Occupations*, with three volumes of dictionaries with historical definitions for each job (Martins and Monteiro, 2002). This project (in which I contributed seventy entries) gave me a particular insight as to what life in rural areas was all about. For example, in the 1960s a new middle class had been given the chance to rise in Alentejo’s countryside, such being, for example, journeymen who specialised in providing services with recently acquired machines, paid for with subsidised credit, and tenants who sublet parts of land to tomato growers during the summer season. Yellow cornfields were being turned into plots with red tomato crops to feed ketchup factories. Rural industries had grown, benefiting from Portugal’s adhesion to the EFTA in 1960. They provided an alternative to agricultural work in traditional rural areas. Wages rose and living conditions improved. The children of those workers who had gone to work barefoot when they were 6 years old could now go to high school, and even to the university. Some illiterate grandparents had grandchildren who had become doctors and engineers. But the past was still more than a memory to many people.

Moreover, in rural workers’ memories, resistance against the old regime and working for the Communist Party figured prominently with strikes remembered and

much nostalgia for the heroic times of clandestine work and meetings, prison and resistance as a prestige factor during the revolutionary period.

Gender too was also an important issue. Women described the joys of youth and they also felt the need to participate in the social struggle, but had been stopped by men:

Demographics:

In Alentejo a rural society dominated by landowners and tenants, with a large majority of the population employed by them: according to national statistics, 90 percent of the population of the municipality of Avis (Aviz) in 1940 worked in agriculture as journeymen or farm servants. (Table:1).

Table 1. Avis Population, 1940

Landowners	Tenants	Farm servants	Journeymen
8%	2%	22%	68%

Source: National Institute of Statistics

In the 1970s, agriculture no longer played a dominant role in Portuguese economy. It supplied food and exports, but as source of employment it had been replaced by industry. Nevertheless, agriculture still accounted for 24 percent of the labour force. The rural areas contained over fifty percent of the population dependent upon it. In Avis indeed, farm servants and journeymen still formed 92 percent of the population, as we can see in Table 2.

Table 2. Avis Population 1970

Landowners	Farmers	Farm servants	Journeymen
3%	5%	17%	75%

Source: Agricultural Statistics

Revolution:

Upon the outbreak of the April 25th revolution (1974), all members of the former regime were removed from power. Law number one, dated the day of the revolution, dismissed the President of the Republic and all the members of the government and Parliament. Civil governors were removed by decree, also issued the same day. From 2nd May on, mayors started being removed one by one, with administrative commissions appointed for each municipality. These commissions were supposed be composed of “independent” personalities or groups and political elements who identified themselves with “the Movement of Armed Forces” (the authors of the revolution), and were to function until the democratic local elections were held. In most cases, local citizens’ committees affiliated to the Communist Party presented the lists of the commission members to the Ministry of the Interior and these were approved. In the Alentejo region, this transfer of power was accompanied by a huge people’s movement, led by local Communist representatives. All farm workers were out on the streets and landowners retired in fright. There were road blocks and arms searches made by “people’s committees”, and any sign of luxury became a symbol of “fascism”.

Radical legislation established the concept of economic sabotage: when it was considered that a factory or estate was not producing as much as it could, it was classified as “underused” and made subject to government intervention and nationalisation. This law provided the grounds for the first land occupations in the end of 1974. Farm workers were enthused. When Communist propaganda told them they could take over their landlords’ land, they fell for it (Carvalho, 1977; Garin, 1977; Maltez, 1989). When they heard the military, arriving with red scarves and flags, telling them to move on and occupy the land, they marched in, with the women often in the lead.

Posters and paintings on the walls revealed the spirit of the times, not only in Lisbon, but all over the country, and they were used as huge incentives to action. Inspired by the posters used in the Soviet and Chinese revolutions they called for the solidarity of all workers and toilers, men, women and children.

The laws of the revolution:

There was now a fundamental alteration in the concept of Property that had been so clearly imbedded in Portuguese legislation since the Liberal Revolution of the early nineteenth century. For the first time new laws defined principles of economic sabotage and ownership limits and initiated an unprecedented campaign of land occupation.

Decree n. 203/74, 15 May 1974: defined the programme of the Provisional Government and obedience to the Programme of the Movement of the Armed Forces. It proclaimed freedom for unions; strengthening of the local government, public investment, cooperatives, agricultural improvement, reform of the agrarian structures; and institution of a minimum wage. It announced Portugal's adhesion to the Universal Convention of Human Rights, which, besides providing for democratic rights states that every individual has a right to property and that no one can be deprived of it.

Decree n. 660/74, 25 November 1974 established the concepts of economic sabotage, and provided for government intervention in a firm's management and established a nationalization policy. In agriculture the law was to be applied when farmers or landowners were supposedly under-using their lands.

Oliveira Baptista's law, Decree n. 406-A/75, 29 July 1975, as defined in the preamble, was designed 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. The Agrarian Reform is defined 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.”

These laws were associated with others regarding the nationalization of strategic sectors such as industry, transportation, banks and communications.

Lopes Cardoso law, Decree n. 236-A/76, 5 April 1976, defined the Agrarian Reform Intervention Zone (ZIRA) and prohibited expropriation of land holdings under 30 hectares each and also land belonging to autonomous producers.

There has been a discussion regarding the extent of popular and spontaneous initiative in this campaign of land occupation. While popular enthusiasm did have a role to play, essentially what was done was part of a top-down campaign of agrarian reform. In the whole process considerable importance is attributed to strong charismatic leaders and the early presence of the Communist Party and its well-established structures.

Timeline of the social movement:

As soon as the revolution took place, the first May Day was celebrated all over the country with joyful manifestations and large rallies. In the Alentejo region, the first agricultural workers’ meetings took place in Beja, in early May 1974. Immediately the first Agricultural Labourers Unions were created in each district. Their goals included pay rises, employment to the unemployed, and reduction of work hours. José Soeiro, the leader of the Beja Union, who was interviewed for this project in 1998, claimed, “It wasn’t hard to move forward, because the structure was already in place with work done for decades by the Communist Party.” There were rallies and gatherings throughout the entire Alentejo region. Women were often on the frontline of meetings and organization, which was quite a novelty, after decades of being denied political participation. Here is a woman’ testimony (local Communist Party leader): “I went

spontaneously. But it was the party which organized everything, let there be no doubt about it.”

Slogans were set for the demonstrations: *Give the land to labourers! No more private property! The people in command! Down with the reaction!* There were denunciations of the *fascists*, the *capitalists*, and *latifundia owners*. People in rallies were called *workers* and *comrades*, which implied a sense of class solidarity, particularly among different levels of rural workers, such as labourers, shepherds, herdsman, sharecroppers, servants and others, who traditionally followed some form of status hierarchy.

And the MFA, (the Movement of the Armed Forces), intervened with physical presence on the fields, in the lands and on local meetings. It promoted *The Cultural Dynamisation Campaign* and published the journal, *Movement 25th April. Bulletin of the Armed Forces*, from October 1974, distributed free to the military. It positively called for an Agrarian Reform.

In October 1974, Esteves Belo, the Secretary of Agriculture in the Third Provisional Government of Vasco Gonçalves, sent a team of agronomists to the farms to check how lands were being used. They were supposed to write reports on the possibility of intensifying production. Those reports went missing. But Cultural Intensification Committees were created, there were compulsory assignments of workers to farms and allegations made of landlords' underuse of the lands thereby causing unemployment.

The first land occupation occurred in the Outeiro estate, at the Santa Vitória civil parish, within the municipality of Beja: 774 hectares, owned by José Gomes Palma, were occupied on 10 December 1974 allegedly for “economic sabotage”, applying Decree n. 660/74 and supported by the MFA.

Then there was the Torre Bela case: this estate was owned by the Duke of Lafões and it was occupied on 23 April 1975 by workers from the estate and others, supported by the MFA. In a surviving documentary we can observe an ongoing land occupation and the issues that were discussed among the workers, such as that of ownership of tools. There are several testimonies to this effect from the estate workers. Most estates were occupied and legally expropriated during the period October to December 1975, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Land Occupations in the Agrarian Reform Intervention Zone,

Late 1974 to July 1975	August and September 1975	October to December 1975
12%	24%	64%

Source: Barros, 1979

In order to manage the expropriated land, about 500 UCPs – Collective Production Units — were established as co-operatives. They covered over one million hectares, constituting one-fifth of the country’s farmland (Baptista, 1993: 72). These UCPs obtained their rights under Decree n. 406-A/75 by which production organizations were to be created by local initiative and the will of local assemblies.

The UCPs were from the beginning burdened with excess workforce. In the words of José Luís, the leader of the UCP May 1st (Labour’s day), Avis: “People lived happily around here. And they had jobs. We employed 320 people! Plus their families, we supported 600 or 700 people. We paid seven or eight million escudos every month. We had two accountants in a huge office...” Emergency credit was provided for agriculture, to enable UCPs to pay wages, with over 30 percent interest, however.

Production and productivity levels did not go up during those euphoric years, as claimed in the Portuguese Communist Party reports. On the contrary: corn production did not reach the high levels reached in the 1960s, even though corn fields were

enlarged. Cattle population declined, so did olive oil and wine production, practically to zero, and cork, the region's biggest wealth, was misappropriated by corrupt industrialists. Salaries remained the same as before: the only advantage to the workers was job stabilisation and the end of unemployment. Some sharecroppers who had improved their lifestyles earlier, however, had now to enter cooperatives and this was a step back for some of them, who had earned more earlier. They were the first to leave the cooperatives when conditions were created for them to rent land again (Almeida, 2007).

Reversal of the Agrarian Reform

In first legislative elections on April 25th 1976, the Socialist Party won with 35 percent of vote. The Communist Party got only 14 percent, even though it won in the South of Portugal. The popular elections of 1976 did not validate the choices made during the revolutionary period, but Mário Soares' First Constitutional Government inaugurated on July 23rd 1976 initiated a new political consolidation, which began the process of erosion of the agrarian reform.

António Barreto was appointed Minister of Agriculture and Fishing on 5 November 1976. According to his own words, "I wrote a little note that I've kept. 1st: to write a new Agrarian Reform Law. 2nd: I wanted Carlos Portas and António Campos as Secretaries of State. I asked for the Communist Civil Governors to be dismissed and for the military commands who were favourable to the Communist Party to be replaced. Mostly, I asked for the end of the Agrarian Reform Regional Centres and for the end of the emergency credit for agriculture. That credit line had to be stopped. And it should be placed under the Ministry of Agriculture, and turned into an investment line. And the UCPs were supposed to be forced to pay their debts. Soares looked at the paper and said: 'I agree'. And he signed his name on it. I started in office the day after" (António

Barreto's interview, 1998). Barreto himself was a critic of the entire process of agrarian reform, noting, "The Revolution failed at the elections as it does most of the time" (Barreto, 1987, 334-335).

On 28 March 1977 Mário Soares presented Portugal's formal application to the European Economic Community (EEC). This move also implied that the country would radically change its economic policy. Further, Portugal's frail economy needed a loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the IMF forced the government to undertake austerity measures, and restrain credit expansion. The structures created from the nationalization and expropriation process were seen as incompatible to economic convergence with the rest of Europe. The credit extended to UCPs was in addition to the burdens imposed by the huge state sector, which absorbed 20 percent of the Gross National Product.

The laws that brought an end to the Agrarian Reform were the following: Decree n. 56/77, 18 February 1977: New rules for the Emergency credit for agriculture; Decree n. 58/77, 21 February 1977: Compulsory payments to the Emergency credit for agriculture; Decree n. 221/77, 28 May 1977: Reorganization of the Ministry of Agriculture on a regional basis. A Department of Rural Extension was created for encouraging farmers to improve their work with technical knowledge and management skills and to overcome their difficulties over credit, distribution and prices. Law n. 76/77, 29 September 1977, regarding rural tenancy provided for the first time that contracts had to be signed regarding lands over 2 hectares.

Barreto's law, Law n. 77/77, 29 September 1977; General Basis of the Agrarian Reform, introduced the concept of the autonomous farmer, increased the reserved area to 70.000 'points', and distinguished active from absent landowners. Absent owners would receive only 35.000 'points'. This law allowed the increase of reserved areas for

previous landowners and tenants up to 20 percent in case it was considered technically feasible, up to 80 percent for societies, and up to 10 percent for each member of the family household who relied on the expropriated land's income for survival.

Despite these laws, it was only with Sá Carneiro and the Social Democrat Governments that land devolutions kicked off. The Social Democrat Governments replaced the Socialist Government in 1978. This was the year more landowners demanded that more reserved lands and farms be removed from UCPs and given back to previous owners. With the so-called Sá Carneiro tenancy laws (Ministerial orders n. 246/79, 29 May 1979 and n. 797/81, 12 September 1981), lands were taken away from UCPs and distributed to farmers who could prove that agriculture was their main source of income. Tenant contracts were signed for private use of the land. This was an incentive to land division in the UCPs, and it set a different object for Agrarian Reform, namely, a change from a project of collectivization and large production units, to the old proposals of land distribution among small farmers, even if as tenants, not owners.

There were naturally considerable social conflicts during land devolutions, from 1978 to 1980. According to a local witness and UCP manager, "They started taking the reserved areas from our cooperative. That was the worst part of it all. The guards came in. I was there all the time when parts of the land were taken. We were there to say we didn't want to give them away. Some of the lands were ready to harvest. Others were being watered. They said there was a law that forced us to return the land. The old landowners showed up with the guards and they brought rifles. There were gunshots. And some slapping by the guards. We were over 300 people and there was conflict. We resisted. But then we left. We started noticing that it wasn't worth it. The cooperative had too many expenses. Too much staff. And there wasn't enough income to pay salaries. And that was it. They were all shut down. It was the government's fault.

Because it never gave us any support. The government never supported the cooperatives and they went down. Our UCP had a debt of 7 million escudos. With interest, later on we would have had to pay over 70 million. There was interest upon interest. We went bankrupt.”

Nevertheless, the process was not over. With Cavaco Silva’s government, there was a hot summer in the Alentejo in 1987, with new land devolutions and conflicts. And a new Agrarian Reform Law by Álvaro Barreto, Minister of Agriculture: Law n. 109/88, 26 September 1988, set new goals explicitly “to correct the excesses of the revolutionary period. (...) to create a climate of social stability and peace; to provide for the survival of the private sector; to reconsider the Agrarian Reform in order to accord with the principles of the European Economic Community...”

Portugal’s adhesion to the European Economic Community in 1986 made European agricultural policies applicable to Portugal. In the scope of the European Fund for Agricultural Orientation, a special programme for the development of Portuguese agriculture was created: PEDAP (EEC Rule number 3828/85, December 20th, 1985), with a ten-year deadline and a large amount of money was provided in order to rectify Portuguese agriculture’s deficiencies and to improve its production and marketing. The Alentejo region received 25 percent of the funds, which were used mainly on building roads and fences, and taking electrical power to agricultural establishments. Large estates benefited more since small farms could not compete with them. With the farmers’ new jobs as managers, older and less educated people simply abandoned their lands and retired. Their children had other professions, which were more rewarding. And even landowners with larger properties had to adapt and improve their management skills (or hire someone to do the job) in order to survive. Michel Drain, a long-time observer of the Portuguese revolution and agrarian reform, stated that one of the

negative impacts of the EEC on the Portuguese agriculture has been the increase of inefficient and bureaucratic kind of state intervention that discourage producers' initiative (Drain & Domenech, 1995). On the other side, Scott Pearson had held that Portuguese farmers were quite capable of responding to price changes, and indeed they saved, invested, introduced technology and have therefore prospered (Pearson, 1987). The debate, perhaps, is not over.

What, if any thing, remains now from the revolutionary period? The established local political elites, had been totally supplanted in the Revolution. Landowners would not even run for local elections. Even after the reversal of the Agrarian Reform, landlords are no longer the force in the economy they previously were, and in politics still less so. The change resulted in politics from the fact that elections are now held on a democratic basis, and the Communist Party continues to obtain some success in the region. In the local mayoral elections held on 24 January 2016, the municipality of Avis awarded victory to the Communist Party candidate.

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