ISCTE IUL
REPOSITÓRIO
INSTITUTO UNIVERSITÁRIO DE LISBOA

Repositório ISCTE-IUL

Deposited in *Repositório ISCTE-IUL*:
2026-10-14

Deposited version:
Publisher Version

Peer-review status of attached file:
Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:
Ruivo, C. & Herrera-Pineda, I. (2025). Ghosts of a productive past: Derelict buildings and transformations in food production in the second half of the 20th century in Montalegre, Northern Portugal. In Juan Calatrava Escobar , David Arredondo Garrido , Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga (Ed.), Comida y arquitectura: Casa, calle, territorio (pp. 797?810). Editorial Universidad de Granada.

Further information on publisher's website:
https://editorial.ugr.es/libro/comida-y-arquitectura_139601/

Publisher's copyright statement:
This is the peer reviewed version of the following article: Ruivo, C. & Herrera-Pineda, I. (2025). Ghosts of a productive past: Derelict buildings and transformations in food production in the second half of the 20th century in Montalegre, Northern Portugal. In Juan Calatrava Escobar , David Arredondo Garrido , Marta Rodríguez Iturriaga (Ed.), Comida y arquitectura: Casa, calle, territorio (pp. 797?810). Editorial Universidad de Granada.. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Publisher's Terms and Conditions for self-archiving.

Use policy

Creative Commons CC BY 4.0
The full-text may be used and/or reproduced, and given to third parties in any format or medium, without prior permission or charge, for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes provided that:

- a full bibliographic reference is made to the original source
- a link is made to the metadata record in the Repository
- the full-text is not changed in any way

The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

Serviços de Informação e Documentação, Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)
Av. das Forças Armadas, Edifício II, 1649-026 Lisboa Portugal
Phone: +(351) 217 903 024 | e-mail: administrador.repositorio@iscte-iul.pt
https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt

Ghosts of a Productive Past: Derelict Buildings and Transformations in Food Production in the Second Half of the 20th Century in Montalegre, Northern Portugal

Fantasmas de un pasado productivo: edificios abandonados y transformaciones de la producción alimentaria en la segunda mitad del siglo XX en Montalegre, norte de Portugal

CATARINA RUIVO
ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon, catarina.pereira@iscte-iul.pt
IVONNE HERRERA PINEDA
ISCTE-University Institute of Lisbon, ivonne.pineda@iscte-iul.pt

Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of Montalegre, a small Portuguese town near the Galician border, through the lens of its publicly-funded agricultural buildings and their evolving functions during three key historical periods: the corporatist dictatorship (1933-1974), the revolutionary period (1974-1976), and the years leading to European integration in 1986. These facilities reflect different state-driven strategies to modernize agricultural production. However, these once-vital structures now stand abandoned, symbolizing the decline of food production and investment in Portugal's interior. Yet, signs of resilience remain, such as the weekly farmers' market and the recent occupation of municipal spaces by a new cooperative. This study is based on primary sources from construction, architectural, audiovisual, and local media archives, as well as interviews and conversations conducted in Montalegre between February and December 2024. This diachronic approach looks at past structures to contribute to broader discourse on food production, territorial cohesion, and food sovereignty.

Este artículo examina la transformación de Montalegre, un pequeño pueblo portugués cercano a la frontera gallega, a través de sus edificios agrícolas financiados con fondos públicos y la evolución de sus funciones durante tres periodos históricos: la dictadura corporativista (1933-1974), el periodo revolucionario (1974-1976) y los años que condujeron a la integración europea en 1986. Estas instalaciones reflejan diferentes estrategias impulsadas por el Estado para modernizar la producción agrícola, pero ahora están abandonadas, simbolizando el declive de la producción de alimentos y la inversión en el interior de Portugal. Este estudio se basa en fuentes primarias provenientes de archivos de construcción, arquitectura, audiovisuales y medios de comunicación locales, así como en entrevistas realizadas en Montalegre entre abril y octubre de 2024. Este enfoque diacrónico examina las estructuras del pasado para contribuir a un discurso más amplio sobre la producción de alimentos, la cohesión territorial y la soberanía alimentaria.

Keywords

Agricultural infrastructure, 20th-century rural modernization, Portuguese rural architecture, post-productive landscapes, rural depopulation

Infraestructura agrícola, modernización rural del siglo XX, arquitectura rural portuguesa, paisajes postproductivos, despoblación rural

Introduction

For most of the second half of the 20th century, the small Portuguese town of Montalegre, located in the remote north of the country near the Galician border, benefited from the construction of publicly funded facilities for the development, storage and distribution of food. These structures reflected and enhanced the productive potential of a region with a deeply rooted agricultural tradition. During this period, the territorial dynamics of Montalegre, both urban and social, transformed in parallel with the evolution of agricultural practices. The history of these agricultural buildings and their use over time testifies to different agricultural strategies production spanning three moments: the corporatist dictatorship of 1933-1974, the decade following the 1974 revolution, and the period after European integration in 1986. The "Experimental Station"[1] represented the state's efforts to research new techniques adapted to the region. Large warehouses are symbols of the former importance of seed potatoes in the region. The large building complex of the former agricultural cooperative bears witness to the history of new forms of cooperation. Houses built to attract qualified technicians from the Ministry of Agriculture to Montalegre are an example of investment in the development of rural areas throughout the country. The transformation of an old prison into a large hotel is an example of the strategic change that took place at the end of the 1980s.

This paper examines these buildings and related transformations through two types of primary sources: those found in construction, architectural, audio-visual and local media archives, and a collection of conversations and interviews conducted during several visits to Montalegre between February and December 2024. The study of these buildings provides an insight into the economic and social history of Montalegre. Despite the crucial role they played in the territorial development of the area, they are now abandoned, proofs of the decline in investment in food production and, consequently, in most of the country's rural interior. Nevertheless, some of these spaces continue to resist, such as a weekly market where local farmers sell their produce. In other cases, new initiatives are emerging, such as the recent occupation of the ground floor of a municipal building by a newly formed agricultural cooperative.

Structures of State intervention in the remote North

In 2018, the agro-sylvo-pastoral system of Barroso, which includes the municipality of Montalegre, was certified as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS). Among other factors, this certification was justified by the prevalence of traditional agriculture in the region, developed in harmony with the local natural context and grounded

[1] Directly translated from the Portuguese "Posto Experimental".

on communal practices[2] (fig. 1). Isolated in a mountainous area, the region's population developed a system of mutual support based on the sharing of land owned and managed by local communities for livestock grazing which still accounts for 64% of the region's total Utilised Agricultural Area[3].



Figure 1. One of multiple communal bread ovens in the municipality of Montalegre, Negrões. Photograph by Catarina Ruivo, July 2020.

Today, 22% of Montalegre's population works in agriculture. Small villages are still structured around agricultural activity: a belt of family vegetable gardens surrounds the settlements, followed by more distant pastures for hay production and livestock grazing, then rain-fed cereal fields and finally common land. Much of what is valued in the region has declined in recent decades. Montalegre's agrarian base remains the foundation of its people's identity, as proven in several conversations where residents emphasised the importance of its agro-pastoral character as the basis of livelihood for an important part of the population. However, with a declining and ageing population, traditional practices are gradually being abandoned. A derelict Experimental Station, located about 3.5 km east of the centre of Montalegre, bears witness to the transformations of the last seventy years (fig. 2).

---

[2] Martins, José, Catarina Gonçalves, Jani Silva, Ramiro Gonçalves and Frederico Branco, "Digital Ecosystem Model for GIAHS: The Barroso Agro-Sylvo-Pastoral System", *Sustainability* 14, no. 16 (2022). https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.3390/su141610349. Joana Capela de Campos, "Heritage's Contemporary Values: The Cultural Landscape of Terras Do Barroso", *Cadernos de Geografia* 42 (2020): 43-57. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14195/0871-1623_42_3. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, "Barroso Agro-Sylvo-Pastoral System, Portugal", in *fao.org (website)*, accessed February 17, 2025, https://www.fao.org/giahs/giahsaroundtheworld/portugal-barroso-agro-sylvo-pastoral-system/en.

[3] Associação de Desenvolvimento da Região do Alto Tâmega (ADRAT), "Barroso Agro-Sylvo-Pastoral System - Potential GIAHS/FAO Site", Proposal (March 2018).



Figure 2. View of the derelict Experimental Station, Montalegre. Photograph by Catarina Ruivo, May 2023.

Consisting of six buildings, a large plot of land and an artificial lake, it was built in the 1950s and 1960s[4] upon what was then communal land and operated for around five decades until its closure between 2005 and 2010[5]. It was designed for research on indigenous crops and breeds and the development of local agricultural production. The quality of its architecture continues to be valued by those who worked there in its final years. Indeed, during the interviews we held in Montalegre, the various buildings were described in detail, highlighting their innovative technical aspects and solid construction[6]. The building is also appreciated by the general public. The Experimental Station –like several other buildings that were once linked to the dynamics of agricultural production in the municipality, but now punctuate the landscape, unused and dilapidated– has come to be seen by the people of Montalegre as a core part of the town's cultural heritage.

In the 1930s, half of the country's working population was employed in agriculture. Mechanical means were introduced in the 1960s as they became the more economical option when growing industrialisation drove a significant proportion of the rural population towards urban areas and the poor living conditions in the country associated with the start of the Portuguese colonial war motivated many to move abroad[7]. The north of

---

[4] Posto Experimental de Montalegre – Construção de um estábulo, 29 June 1950 – 8 February 1952, box DGEMN:DSARH 005 3736, Arquivo da Direção-Geral do Património Cultural, Forte de Sacavém, Sacavém, Portugal; Posto Experimental de Montalegre – Processo de Construção, 25 February 1958 – 17 April 1961, box DGEMN:DREMN 1321, Arquivo da Direção-Geral do Património Cultural, Forte de Sacavém, Savavém, Portugal.

[5] Elói Pereira (member of the administration of Montalegre's agricultural cooperative), in conversation with the authors and Anabela Vassalo (member of the administration of Montalegre's agricultural cooperative), Montalegre, Portugal, October 2023.

[6] Adelino Bernardes, technician of the Ministry of Agriculture, and António Basto, retired technician of the Ministry of Agriculture, in conversation with the authors, Montalegre, Portugal, October 2023.

[7] E. A. Lima Basto, António Faria e Silva and Carlos Silva, *Inquérito à Habitação Rural - A Habitação Rural Nas Províncias Da Estremadura, Ribatejo, Alto Alentejo e Baixo Alentejo,* vol. 3 (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, 1943).

the country was characterised by family-run smallholdings for subsistence agriculture, whose farmers were also often employees or tenants of large landowners[8]. Public policies for agricultural development were hampered by the internal contradictions of the ruling corporatist dictatorship. The historical access to protected markets in the colonies and the consequent weakness of the domestic market meant that, as industrialisation and urbanisation intensified, "Portuguese agriculture was unable to respond adequately to the growing market demand [...] thus forcing an increase in imports of basic foodstuffs"[9]. With conservative landowners as one of the regime's key support groups, structural policies designed to increase domestic production, such as the parcelling of latifundia in the south, the inverse reparcelling of smallholdings in the north and centre, or the expropriation of poorly used land, were never fully implemented[10].

Nevertheless, Montalegre was profoundly transformed by public policies. A government policy to promote potato production during the Second World War led to its proliferation in the region (fig. 3)[11]. The landscape was transformed as marshlands and pastures were ploughed up and potatoes replaced livestock as the main production[12]. Thatched roofs were replaced by tiles as potato seed became known as "white gold" and brought wealth to local farmers[13].

This coincided with the launch of the 1938 Forest Plan, which provided the basis for extensive afforestation in the country until the late 1960's. The practice of expropriating common land for the creation of forest areas contributed to the reduction of traditional practices, such as pastoralism, and accelerated the depopulation of mountainous areas[14]. The plan included the construction of 940 forestry guard houses, several of which were built in the municipality of Montalegre. Two of them –both derelict and deteriorating– are located right by the town. These houses followed the same standard designs as others

---

[8] Instituto Nacional de Estatística, "IX Recenseamento Geral Da População No Continente e Ilhas Adjacentes Em 15 de Dezembro de 1950" (Lisbon: Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 1952).

[9] Dulce Freire and Daniel Lanero Táboas, "The Iberian Dictatorships and Agricultural Modernisation after the Second World War", in *Integration through Subordination: The Politics of Agricultural Modernisation in Industrial Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 188.

[10] Dulce Freire, "Experiência e Ciência: Modernização Da Agricultura Nas Últimas Décadas Do Estado Novo", in *Da Economia Moral Da Multidão à Arte de Não Ser Governado: E. P. Thomson e James C. Scott Na Ibéria* (Castro Verde: 100Luz, 2013), 91-108; Freire and Lanero Táboas, "The Iberian Dictatorships...".

[11] "O Barroso Na Assembleia Da Repúbliva - Intervenção Do Deputado Bento Da Cruz Em 16 de Abril de 1984", *Correio do Planalto,* April 1984.

[12] Oliveira, Flávio, "O Concelho de Montalegre No Período 1958-1984. Utilização de Um Sistema de Informação Geográfica Na Avaliação Da Dinâmica Da Ocupação Do Solo", Master Thesis, Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade do Porto, 2011.

[13] Associação de Desenvolvimento da Região do Alto Tâmega (ADRAT), "Barroso Agro-Sylvo-Pastoral..."; Adelino Bernardes (technician of the Ministry of Agriculture), in conversation with the authors, Montalegre, Portugal, October 2023.

[14] Ana Sofia Ramos, "Reconhecimento Das Casas Florestais Do Parque Nacional Peneda-Gerês: Contributos Para a Preservação Do Património Construído e Paisagístico" (Master thesis, Escola de Arquitetura, Arte e Design, Universidade do Minho, 2022).

throughout the country and the same guidelines for their location: isolated but in the vicinity of existing settlements so that forest guards could control entrances and exits to the forests, on high ground with good visibility, near fertile land and water sources that gave the houses self-sustainability. The state's forced deforestation of communal land was a catalyst for popular opposition to the regime, which continued long after the 1974 Revolution and into the 1980s. Municipalities and local communities continued to claim their right to forest houses for decades.



Figure 3. View of Montalegre, surrounded by potato crops. Photograph by Artur Pastor, 1950s, Eco-Museu do Barroso.

An agricultural cooperative for the revolutionary period

The existing literature on agrarian policy in post-1974 Portugal focuses on ruptures, of which the struggle for communal land in the north is often central[15]. However, most of the public policies adopted after 1974 do not appear to have represented a break, but rather "manifested various influences, some of which were rooted in the modernisation proposals of previous years, some of which were described as 'conservative', and some of which resulted from the national and international economic and political situation"[16]. Additionally, the decade following the 1974 coup d'état was marked by political instability and contradictions between successive governments, which led to inconsistencies between the laws enacted and those applied. The history of the Montalegre Cooperative reflects these broader tensions (fig. 4).

---

[15] Dulce Freire, "Da Ditadura à Democracia: Continuidades e Mudanças Na Política Agrária Em Portugal (Anos 70)", *Arquivos Da Memória, Portugal 1974-1976: Processo Revolucionário Em Curso*, no. 12-13 (2002): 145-167, 156.

[16] [manifesta diversas influências, umas ancoradas nas propostas modernizadoras sugeridas nos anos anteriores, outras apontadas como "conservadores", outras ainda decorrentes da conjuntura económica e política nacional e internacional] Freire, "Da Ditadura à Democracia...", 156.



Figure 4. View of the most recent buildings of the original Agricultural Cooperative, Montalegre. Photograph by Catarina Ruivo, April 2023.

Located at one of the highest points of the old village, this complex of buildings dating from different periods is now largely abandoned. The Cooperative was created in 1938 by large landowners to market seed potatoes in conjunction with government bodies, at the same time as the state became interested in its nationwide production[17]. After April 1974, the institution diversified its activities. In May 1975, a new administration was appointed by the Secretary of State for Agricultural Structuring, which led the cooperative to intervene in the various agricultural sectors in the region, providing its members with pesticides, feed, fertilisers, machinery, storage and technical assistance. Membership doubled the following year. Shortly afterwards, in March 1976, its administration board resigned because of measures taken by the new government, which it considered detrimental to the cooperative's activities[18]. Similar claims echoed in the last years of the 1970s. Various bodies, either composed of or representing farmers in the region, made public claims against government action or inaction concerning subsidies to farmers, the setting of prices for potato seed, and the return of communal land to the local population. In November 1974, the Montalegre City Council and the various parish councils of the municipality demanded the return of the region's communal land to be managed by the local cooperative structure, the compensation of local bodies for the abusive occupation of the land, and the return of the Experimental Station "to the immediate possession of the people from whom [it] was usurped"[19]. Although a Decree-Law was passed on 19 January 1976, returning the communal land to the "use, exploitation and management" of "the inhabitants who carry out their activities on the site and who have the right to use it following the uses and customs recognised by the community"[20], demands for its proper enactment continued for at least a decade.

---

[17] "Entrevista à Cooperativa Agrícola de Montalegre", *Correio do Planalto* (February 1976).

[18] "A Comissão Administrativa Da Cooperativa Agrícola de Montalegre Pede a Demissão", *Correio do Planalto* (March 1976).

[19] [imediata das populações a quem foram usurpados] "Contraproposta Do Povo Do Barroso Sobre Os Baldios", *Correio do Planalto* (November 1974).

[20] Decreto-Lei no. 39/76, de 19 de Janeiro, Diário Do Governo no. 15/1976, Série I, January 19, 1976: 89-91. https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/decreto-lei/39-1976-506039.

Meanwhile, in January 1975, an editorial in the local newspaper claimed that the Experimental Station had functioned as a "fascist showpiece, where huge sums of money were spent on [...] experimental plots were built that either did not lead to anything or were experiments that did not benefit local agriculture". The same article reaffirmed the important role that the station could still play, stating that "in no region or country in the world has agriculture prospered without effective scientific and technical support": it should be "the centre from which the technical knowledge that [local] farmers urgently need radiates"[21].

Housing for technicians facing the Common Agricultural Policy

Much of the public policy adopted in Montalegre during the 1980s sought to respond to the perceived challenge of European integration, as Portugal joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986 and the marketing of seed potatoes became subjected to the EEC Common Agricultural Policy. Government programmes were introduced to improve traditional irrigation systems, build collective milking structures and develop roads and other infrastructure. Some vocational training schemes were set up with financial support from the European Social Fund but were considered by both central and local authorities to be woefully inadequate[22]. In an attempt to improve the competitiveness of Montalegre's potato seed, the Ministry of Agriculture developed a project to develop a larger-scale economy in the region. Technicians were sent to villages to meet with farmers and persuade them to coordinate annual production according to a four-year rotation, to create large plots dedicated to the same crop, which, together with soil analysis and control, was also intended to hinder the development of nematodes and ensure that the crop produced was of a high enough quality to be certified for sale on the European market[23].

In the same vein, the Northern Regional Directorate of Agriculture (NRDA) organised a local meeting in Montalegre, which lasted several days and included visits to practical cases of land reparcelling, to discuss with farmers the consequences of joining the EEC and to provide guidance for the transition[24]. During the meeting, both local government representatives and farmers expressed concern about the forthcoming changes. In various interventions, participants expressed their concern about the capacity of local potatoes to compete with cheaper production from large-scale plantations, as well as the loss

---

[21] [O Posto Experimental é, com efeito, uma obra de fachada do fascismo onde se gastaram enormes somas de dinheiro [...] em nenhuma região ou país do mundo a agricultura prosperou sem apoios científico e técnico eficientes. [...] deve ser o centro de onde irradiem os conhecimentos técnicos de que tão carecidos estão os agricultores do Barroso] "Os Baldios e o Posto Experimental de Montalegre", *Correio do Planalto* (January 1975).

[22] "Falta de Apoios Em Montalegre", *Jornal Da Tarde RTP 1*, accessed January 18, 2025. https://arquivos.rtp.pt/conteudos/falta-de-apoios-em-montalegre/; Direção Regional de Agricultura de Trás-os-Montes, "Actividades Zona Agrária Do Barroso - 1 Quadro Comunitário 1986/1993", 1994.

[23] "Exploração e Produção de Batata de Semente–I", *RTP*, July 24, 1988. https://arquivos.rtp.pt/conteudos/exploracao-e-producao-de-batata-de-semente-i/. "Exploração e Produção de Batata de Semente–II", RTP, July 31, 1988. https://arquivos.rtp.pt/conteudos/exploracao-e-producao-de-batata-de-semente-ii/. "Exploração e Produção de Batata de Semente–III", RTP, August 7, 1988. https://arquivos.rtp.pt/conteudos/exploracao-e-producao-de-batata-de-semente-iii/.

[24] "Actividades Zona Agrária Do Barroso...".

of sovereignty and the consequences for the national economy from becoming dependent on a product of such importance. For the representative of the local union of cooperatives, this would be "a huge loss for the country; [...] almost a criminal offence"[25].
The post-revolutionary period did not see the construction of public buildings of the same size and importance as before, but evidence of this surge in investment remains in the occupation of a building by the NRDA as well as a pair of semi-detached houses built on the southern edge of the old town (fig. 5). These were part of a project in the early 1980s to build twenty houses in the region to provide free accommodation for technicians from the Ministry of Agriculture who were transferred to remote areas in the interior of Portugal.



Figure 5. One of the houses built for relocated technicians, Montalegre. Photograph by Catarina Ruivo, December 2023.

Adelino Bernardes was one of them. When we met him in 2023, he was still working for the NRDA, which he had seen change over the past few decades. He moved to Montalegre in the mid-1980s and, as a young technician arriving from a coastal town, was given one of the four houses that now stand empty. During our conversation, he described how the NRDA's specialists inspected fields, provided technical assistance to improve production and introduce new agricultural practices, and offered administrative assistance to farmers in applying for subsidies. The success of this work depended on their close relationship with the local context[26]. According to Adelino:

> We seized the mayors and the priests to disseminate our information. [...] The priest would read it in church! Then, when [the farmers] left the church, they discussed it with each other. And with all this, perhaps without them even realising it, we got everyone involved. [...] There was a very strong bond between everyone. At that time, here in Montalegre, [...]

[25] [para mim seria um prejuízo enorme para o país: seria quase um crime] "Exploração e Produção de Batata de Semente – III...".

[26] "Actividades Zona Agrária Do Barroso...".

> it was usual [...] for the agricultural services, the town council, the cooperative, all to be together. [...] When we all spoke with the same voice, people had confidence and joined in.[27]

The importance of the Experimental Station as a physical space of connection with local farmers was also emphasised by Adelino Bernardes, who described its main role as an example of good and innovative agricultural practices, a place where "any farmer could come and see how it was done"[28]. The crop rotation recommended by the Ministry of Agriculture "was carried out religiously at the Experimental Station"[29]. The technical and scientific aspects of the work conducted there continue to be appreciated by some of those currently involved in farming in Montalegre. In an interview with two members of the administration of a recently formed agricultural cooperative, Elói Pereira and Anabela Vassalo mentioned the consequences of the abandonment of the Experimental Station and its past work in preserving and improving crops and local breeds:

> There were indigenous crops [...] that have practically disappeared. [...] There could have been dozens, hundreds of local products that could have been adapted. [...] We won't realise it until a few years from now, when we don't have these plants [...]. [Adelino Bernardes of the NRDA] is working with us to see if we can create a gene bank to preserve these crops. [...] If not, we won't be able to get plants from [southern Portugal] to grow here. They won't adapt.[30]

Derelict buildings and those who stay: agriculture as centre stage

Despite the efforts of the central government and local organisations to implement policies and incentive practices to counteract the negative effects of the nematode that was present in most of Montalegre's soils in the 1970s and 1980s, the technicians we spoke to believe that its proliferation is to blame for the decline in production of certifiable crops and, ultimately, the abandonment of seed potato production. Today, livestock numbers are lower, as

---

[27] [Nós aproveitávamos os presidentes das juntas e os padres para serem os nossos difusores da informação. [...] E o padre lia na Igreja! Depois à saída da Igreja começavam logo a conversar uns com os outros. E com isto tudo, se calhar quase sem dar por ela, eu estava a envolver toda a gente. [...] Havia uma ligação muito grande entre todos. De facto, naquela altura, aqui em Montalegre [...] Era usual [...] os serviços agrícolas, o Ministério da Agricultura através da Zona Agrária, a Câmara, a Cooperativa, estarem sempre todas juntas. [...] Ao falarmos todos na mesma voz, as pessoas tinham confiança e iam aderindo] Adelino Bernardes (technician of the Ministry of Agriculture), in conversation with the authors, Montalegre, Portugal, October 2023.

[28] [Qualquer agricultor podia vir ali ver como é que se fazia] Adelino Bernardes in conversation with the authors.

[29] [era cumprida religiosamente no Centro Experimental] Adelino Bernardes in conversation with the authors.

[30] Houve produtos autóctones [...] uma espécie que praticamente desapareceu. [...] Só nos vamos aperceber daqui a uns anos quando não tivermos essas plantas. [...] O engenheiro Adelino está a trabalhar connosco nesse sentido, a ver se conseguimos fazer um banco de genes, para conservar esses genes [...] Se não não vamos buscar plantas ao Algarve para pôr aqui. Elas não se vão aqui adaptar] Anabela Vassalo (member of the administration of Montalegre's agricultural cooperative), in conversation with the authors and Elói Pereira (member of the administration of Montalegre's agricultural cooperative), Montalegre, Portugal, October 2023.

is the amount of cultivated land in the municipality, and the population has been in steady decline since the 1960s. In 1994, the Ministry of Agriculture reported:

> ... the differential accumulation of capital between Portuguese regions and between European regions has led to an increase in the standards of those who will have to choose between the attraction of the receiving countries, consolidated by the news, testimonies and success of the majority of those who leave, and settling in an agriculture that generates comparatively little income.[31]

This tension between staying and leaving was described in more drastic terms in a 1996 television documentary: "Land, which acts as a shackle, prevents people from escaping to the cities far below [...] and this is accepted because, tacitly, there are always those who accept this imprisonment"[32].

Even though staying and taking over their parents' land isn't the most common choice for young people in Montalegre, it is not unanimously seen as a kind of captivity. Diogo Freitas, a young fireman who was 19 years old when we met him in 2023, aspires to stay in his home region. He acknowledges that there are few job opportunities in the area: a factory that wasn't accepting applications at the time, cafes, and restaurants. Apart from these, Montalegre's main employers are the town hall and the volunteer fire brigade. According to Diogo, only those whose parents are landowners pursue a life in agriculture, although many still choose to leave. He plans to stay, help his parents run the farm and submit his own project for European funding. He'd like to work with the local horse breed, breeding, training, marketing and setting up rides in the nearby National Park. As only five of his high school classmates stayed in Montalegre, Diogo understands he's an exception:

> What happens a lot these days is that people want to be doctors or engineers, but when they get to the job market they can't get a job. Or they're not valued for their studies and they end up somewhere else, like a supermarket, for example. There are lots of places here where you can work, maybe not in the field you've chosen, but in something you like and are used to. Tourism, for example. Doing what I want to do, setting up horse rides. Maybe I'm not in my field, because my field is mechanics, which I studied, but I'm doing something I like. And I know it will make my hometown better. And one day, when I go somewhere else and talk about where I'm from, I'll be proud of it and proud to know about it. There are a lot of people who don't know what their home place is really like. There are a lot of people who travel around the world, go to France and so on, and they don't even know where they come from. I have a lot of friends who don't really know where they come

---

[31] [a acumulação diferencial de capitais entre regiões portuguesas e entre regiões europeias levou ao aumento dos padrões de vida daqueles que terão de escolher entre a atração dos países recetores, consolidada por via da notícia, do testemunho, do sucesso da maioria dos que partem e a instalação numa agricultura que, comparativamente, gera poucos rendimentos] Direção Regional de Agricultura de Trás-os-Montes, "Actividades Zona Agrária Do Barroso - 1 Quadro Comunitário 1986/1993", 1994.

[32] [A terra que se tem por algema, impede a fuga para as cidades lá longe, lá em baixo [...] e aceita-se isso porque, tacitamente, há sempre quem aceite esta prisão] Viriato Teles, "Montalegre: No Rasto Do Passado", *O Homem e a Cidade IV, RTP 2* (April 14, 1996). https://arquivos.rtp.pt/conteudos/montalegre-no-rasto-do-passado/.

> from. If they stopped to think for a moment and walked around the country, they'd find more incredible places than where they go on holiday.[33]

The idea that tourism could contribute to local economic dynamism, which is present in Diogo's future projects, has surfaced since at least the mid-1970s. The region's rich cultural heritage, history and landscape are seen as contradictory to the lack of tourist facilities in the municipality, such as hotels, campsites or the type of activities proposed by Diogo[34]. In 1996, Montalegre's Town Hall decided to take steps to encourage the development of tourism by supporting private initiatives, investing in advertising, and even restoring and expanding an abandoned prison building from 1958 to be used as a hotel. By 2018, the space was empty again, joining the ranks of abandoned buildings that dot the territory of Montalegre as a reminder of its recent history. In 2023, the municipality had only some short-term accommodation available for tourists. For those in the agricultural sector, tourism tends to be seen as an accessory, dependent on much-needed investment in agriculture. In a region with no industry, Adelino told us that all that is left is agriculture. Trade, he says, "does not create wealth. Because when we exchange money among ourselves, it doesn't increase. It may be more in my hand or yours, but it doesn't grow"[35].

While the old cooperative buildings are largely unused, the ground floor of the old tax office building was recently occupied by the newly-formed cooperative. During the Covid-19 lockdown, when all the small local businesses closed, Anabela told us how the cooperative arranged with the supermarket franchise Pingo Doce to buy products from Montalegre's livestock farmers. Continuity of such a project is difficult because, as in 1988, the local farmers can't compete in the market with products coming from extensive farming. Most of the area's agriculture still consists of small family farms that survive only with the help of European subsidies. As subsidies have decreased, the cooperative has focused its efforts on promoting small-scale production of quality products. Despite the constraints faced by local farmers, Anabela and Elói see agriculture as the main means by which the region can hope

---

[33] [O que acontece muito hoje em dia - Muita gente quer ir para médico, ou para engenheiro ou assim, mas chegam ao ponto de sair para o mercado de trabalho e não têm trabalho. Ou não são tão valorizados pelo estudo que tiveram e têm de se agarrar noutro sítio, numa caixa de supermercado, por exemplo. Aqui tem vários sítios para sair, se calhar não na área que se meteram, mas numa coisa que gostam e estão habituados a ver. Por exemplo, no turismo. Por exemplo, fazer o que eu quero fazer, passeios a cavalo. Se calhar não estou na minha área, que a minha área é mecânica, que estudei, mas estou a fazer uma coisa que gosto. E sei que vai valorizar a minha terra. E um dia que chegar a um sítio e falar da minha terra tenho orgulho e tenho orgulho de saber o que é a minha terra. Que há muita gente que não sabe como é a terra deles, propriamente. Há muita gente que vai conhecer o mundo, viagens, vai a França e não sei quê, e nem a sua terra conhece. Eu tenho muitos amigos meus que não conhecem a terra. Se parassem um bocadinho para pensar e fossem dar uma volta pela terra, encontravam sítios mais incríveis do que encontram noutros sítios que vão de férias] Diogo Freitas (firefighter and local resident of Montalegre), in conversation with the authors, Montalegre, Portugal, October 2023.

[34] Teles, "Montalegre: No Rasto..."; António Lourenço Fontes, "Montalegre Sem Turismo - Porquê?" *Correio Do Planalto* (July 1976).

[35] [O comércio é, eu costumo dizer que não cria riqueza. Porque se andarmos a trocar o dinheiro entre nós, não aumenta. Pode estar mais na minha mão ou na vossa, mas não aumenta] Adelino Bernardes in conversation with the authors.

to combat ongoing desertification. Tourism, they point out, is seasonal and depends on the existence of grazing animals and well-maintained fields.

In recent decades, certain state responsibilities regarding agriculture have been transferred to local cooperatives and associations[36]. The abandoned Experimental Station evidences this, as is the dwindling number of professionals working at the NRDA, as Adelino testifies. These professionals are no longer involved in providing technical assistance to farmers, but only administrative support for subsidy applications. This trend has also been observed in cooperatives and associations throughout the country, as agriculture has become largely dependent on European funding for its survival, with most of the resources of these organisations directed towards helping their members with legal and administrative procedures. It was in this context that Anabela told us: "the cooperative is currently the mainstay of agriculture in the municipality"[37],supporting the slow reactivation of long-abandoned buildings. The administration has plans to expand into the first floor of the old tax office, and it is now working on recovering two potato warehouses originally developed by the National Fruit Board in 1964 and 1974 and offered to the now-defunct Montalegre Agricultural Cooperative[38] (fig. 6). By the time the National Fruit Board went bankrupt in 2008, these two buildings had long since fallen into disrepair due to the abandonment of potato seed production in the region.



Figure 6. One of the abandoned potato warehouses (1974) considered for renovation by the new Agricultural Cooperative, Montalegre. Photograph by Catarina Ruivo, February 2023.

Conclusion

The certification of Barroso as a GIAHS in 2018 values aspects of its agro-sylvo-pastoral system that appear to be almost frozen in time, such as the permanence of traditional agricultural and the maintenance of communal practices. However, tradition is not the remnant of peaceful inaction in the remote northern region of Montalegre, but the consequence of

---

[36] Pereira, Fernando, "Associativismo e Cooperativismo Agrário Em Trás-Os-Montes e Alto Douro, Portugal", *RURIS* 2, no. 1 (2008): 39–72. https://doi.org/10.53000/rr.v2i1.662.

[37] [A cooperativa é, neste momento, o pilar da agropecuária no concelho] Anabela Vassalo in discussion with the authors.

[38] Armazém de Batata de Montalegre – Projeto de Construção, 1964 September, Arquivo de Obras Públicas da Câmara Municipal de Montalegre, Montalegre, Portugal; Armazém de Batata de Montalegre e Posto de Transformação, 1974 December, Arquivo de Obras Públicas da Câmara Municipal de Montalegre, Montalegre, Portugal.

only semi-implemented measures during the Portuguese corporatist dictatorship, uncoherent or contradictory action in the years that followed, and late strategies as a largely unmodernised agriculture was integrated in the stronger economy of the EEC. Tradition itself has changed as a result. Cattle production was abandoned as the primary agricultural activity in the years when potato-seed dominated the landscape and the common land where it grazed was used for afforestation. Fertile land was flooded by the construction of dams. Nevertheless, a large proportion of Montalegre's population still works in the agricultural sector, and most of it owns small patches of land for self-production (fig. 7). While many young people search for better economic opportunities in urban areas, for at least some of those who stay, agriculture continues to be seen as the way forward. The decrease in state competencies and its transfer to local cooperatives and associations whose resources are only enough to provide administrative aid for subsidy application, without a systemic strategy and investment in agriculture, is petrified in a set of buildings, constructed throughout the 20th century for assisting the production and storage of foodstuff, that are now abandoned and deteriorating.

When asked about demolition, Diogo replied that "that's a lot of history to throw away, belonging to a lot of people"[39]. As local life and initiatives prove, the abandonment of these structures may also be a present thrown away, as Montalegre's future may still lie in these remnants of agricultural architecture.



Figure 7. People in line for the bus that goes through the municipality's villages after the morning farmers' market, Montalegre. Photograph by Catarina Ruivo, December 2023.

Funding Acknowledgment

This research paper has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 949686 - ReARQ.IB) and from the University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL), DINÂMIA'CET-Iscte, Centre for the Study of Socioeconomic Change and the Territory, Lisbon, Portugal (Project UIDB/03127/2020).

[39] [É muita história que se deita abaixo, de muita gente] Diogo Freitas in conversation with the authors.