

## Modern land reforms across Europe (20th century)

Carlos Manuel Fáisca  
Universidade de Évora, Centro Interdisciplinar de História, Culturas e Sociedades  
(CIDEHUS), Escola de Ciências Sociais  
carlos.faisca@uevora.pt  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7501-021X>

Dimitris Angelis-Dimakis  
Hellenic Open University  
dim.angelis@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0678-899X>

Sergio Riesco Roche  
Complutense University of Madrid, Department of Applied Economics, Structure and History  
sriesc01@ucm.es  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1429-8111>

### 1. A comparative historical exercise on agrarian reforms

Agrarian reform constitutes one of the major vectors of transformation in the twentieth century. Although its presence in today's political agenda is fading, its study remains essential for understanding how modern states have managed rural inequality, territorial integration, productive modernisation, and democratisation. As Hobsbawm observed, the most compelling argument in favour of agrarian reform is not grounded in productivity, but in equality. This statement encapsulates the structural tension running through all the processes analysed: the need to redistribute land in order to correct historical inequalities and, at the same time, to ensure the economic viability of agricultural holdings in a context of increasing international competition<sup>1</sup>.

Beyond this tension, agrarian reform also reveals how societies negotiate the balance between historical legacies and developmental aspirations. In many regions, land redistribution was not only an economic measure but a symbolic act aimed at redefining citizenship, redressing past injustices, and integrating peripheral territories into national projects. The twentieth century

---

<sup>1</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Historia del siglo XX*, Barcelona, Crítica, 1994, p. 357.

shows repeatedly that the agrarian question functioned as a litmus test for the capacity of states to mediate between competing social demands and to articulate long-term strategies for rural transformation.

The concept of agrarian reform is, however, polysemic. From the privatisation of common lands in the eighteenth century to the collectivist reforms of real socialism, passing through the redistributive reforms of Latin America or the internal colonisation policies of southern Europe, the term has encompassed very different realities. A classic operational definition conceives it as a “set of operations aimed at transforming territorial structures through the modification of social relations, with the purpose of improving cultivation techniques and increasing production”. More recently, emphasis has been placed on the notion of integral agrarian reform, understood as redistribution accompanied by credit, technical assistance, infrastructure, and an institutional framework capable of sustaining the transition<sup>2</sup>.

This evolution reflects a broader shift in development thinking: from reforms centred on land tenure alone to approaches that recognise the interdependence between property rights, technological change, market access, and institutional capacity. In this sense, agrarian reform has increasingly been interpreted as a multidimensional process, requiring not only legal and administrative tools but also sustained political commitment and the mobilisation of significant public resources.

This dossier brings together case studies approached from a long-term perspective. It includes experiences from different European contexts and extends to the late twentieth century in post-socialist Romania. Along the way, it pays great attention to two cases we describe as “countercyclical”: Spain and Portugal. This allows us to place the dossier within the two major reformist waves: the one that followed the First World War, marked by the collapse of empires and the Russian Revolution, and the other that emerged after 1945, driven by reconstruction, the Cold War, and international organisations. In this context, the trajectory initiated by various European states—at a time when liberal agrarian reforms were still unfolding across the continent—extends into the interwar period, intersecting, in some respects, with the actions undertaken by post-civil war Russia in the “sovietised” territories. To these waves we add the two countercyclical cases—Spain in the 1930s and Portugal after 1974—

---

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Le Coz, *Las reformas agrarias. De Zapata a Mao-Tsé-Tung y la FAO*, Barcelona, Ariel, 1976. The most up-to-date definition can be found in Elisa Botella y Ángel L. González Esteban, “Land to the tiller: debates en torno a las reformas agrarias latinoamericanas durante la guerra fría” in Francisco J. Rodríguez Jiménez; Lorenzo Delgado Gómez-Escalonilla y Benedetta Calandra (eds.), *El americano imposible. Estados Unidos y América Latina entre la modernización y la contrainsurgencia*, Madrid, Sílex, 2023, p. 199-232.

which help to nuance the broader narrative. The reader is thus introduced to a set of case studies with distinct geographies, each of them highly enriching for comparative analysis: Spain, Portugal, and Romania, together with broader references to other reformist experiences in Europe and beyond.

The objective is twofold: on the one hand, to offer a comparative synthesis that integrates both global and local scales; on the other, to identify the structural dilemmas that run through all twentieth-century agrarian reforms. In this introduction, we wish to draw attention to five key issues: the contexts in which reforms originated, peasant mobilisation, property regimes, capitalisation, and state capacity. Taken together, these elements underpin an interpretation that weaves together aspects of social, economic, and political history, with particular emphasis on state-building processes and on the interaction between local actors and supranational frameworks.

At the same time, these dimensions reveal the extent to which agrarian reforms were shaped by broader geopolitical forces – reconstruction after major conflicts, ideological competition during the Cold War, or the growing influence of international organisations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for situating each reform within its historical context and for appreciating the diversity of trajectories that agrarian transformation adopted across the twentieth century.

## **2. The Waves of Agrarian Reform in Modern History**

Once the redefinition of property rights in those territories that underwent a transition—revolutionary or otherwise—towards liberal regimes in the nineteenth century had been completed, or was in the process of being so, the landscape of the “century of conflicts” took on a different character and operated recurrently through cycles and waves of reform. The two most significant waves, which set the course, were those that followed the First World War and those that emerged after the Second. Both world wars, needless to say, corresponded to critical junctures—imperial collapse, food crises, economic reconstruction, fear of revolution or communism—and both generated profound transformations in the agrarian structures of vast regions of the world. Yet their internal logic, actors, and outcomes were markedly different. This section offers a comparative synthesis of these two waves, integrating the most relevant elements for understanding the cases analysed later in the dossier.

First World War radically altered Europe’s political and social map. The collapse of the AustroHungarian, Ottoman, and Russian empires opened

a space for territorial redefinition in which the agrarian question acquired unexpected prominence. In this context, agrarian reform became an instrument of political stabilisation, state-building, and the containment of social unrest. As historiography has noted, it was perhaps the most significant social, political, and economic development of the postwar period<sup>3</sup>.

The new states that emerged after 1918—Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Poland, Romania and Yugoslavia—faced a dual task: consolidating their sovereignty and stabilising deeply unequal rural societies. Agrarian reform became a mechanism for achieving both objectives. The redistribution of land formerly held by the imperial aristocracies not only responded to peasant demands, but also weakened elites regarded as “foreign” and reinforced the legitimacy of the new governments.

The volume of land mobilised was extraordinary: around 30 million hectares, equivalent to 10% of the agricultural surface of the countries concerned. The reform was presented as a triumph of the peasantry, which succeeded in prevailing in the “discursive competition” against landowning elites. However, its character was more moderate than revolutionary rhetoric suggested: redistribution with compensation predominated, along with the creation of small and medium-sized holdings and the consolidation of a market-oriented family farming sector<sup>4</sup>.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 acted as an ideological catalyst. Its impact was not limited to the subsequent collectivisation, but also reinforced the idea that land should pass into the hands of those who cultivated and worked it. The creation of the Peasant International (Krestintern) in 1923 symbolised the Soviet ambition to project an alternative model of agrarian organisation. However, outside the USSR, most governments opted for redistributive rather than collectivist reforms, partly to prevent the peasantry from becoming radicalised and gravitating towards communism<sup>5</sup>.

In parallel, Mexican Revolution (1910–1920) inaugurated a reformist cycle in Latin America that would have lasting effects. The restitution of communal

---

<sup>3</sup> A brief summary still very useful, Juan Díaz del Moral, “Prólogo a Historia de las agitaciones campesinas andaluzas” in Antonio Prieto (coord.), *Historia de Andalucía*, Sevilla, Fundación José Manuel Lara, 2006, Volume 8, p. 170-176.

<sup>4</sup> Avner Offer, *The First World War: an agrarian interpretation*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990. Countries implied in Paul Brassley, “Land reforms and reallocation in interwar Europe” in Rosa Congost & Rui Santos (eds.), *Contexts of property in Europe: the social embeddedness of property in land in historical perspective*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, p. 145-164.

<sup>5</sup> Beatrice Penati, *Rural history of Soviet Central Asia: Land reform and agricultural change in early Soviet Uzbekistan*, Leiden (Netherlands), Brill, 2025.

lands under Lázaro Cárdenas in the 1930s, conceived as an act of historical justice, became a reference point for peasant movements across the continent. Although Latin American contexts were highly diverse, Mexico offered a reform model that combined redistribution, restitution, and the construction of a new social pact between the state and the peasantry<sup>6</sup>.

Spain and Italy occupied singular positions within this landscape. In Italy, the *Bonifica integrale*, initially conceived as a policy of technical modernisation, was appropriated by fascism as an instrument of propaganda and social control. In Spain, the Republican agrarian reform arrived late, in a context of economic crisis and extreme political polarisation. Its countercyclical character—a reform undertaken in the midst of the Great Depression and without a prior shock that might have weakened the landowning classes—helps to explain, in part, its failure and its violent interruption in 1936<sup>7</sup>.

Second World War generated a scenario very different from that of 1918. Economic reconstruction, fear of communist expansion, and the emergence of international organisations such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank shaped a new framework for agrarian reforms. This second wave had a global reach, affecting Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

In Western Europe, agrarian reform was incorporated into the reconstruction programmes of the Marshall Plan. Italy is the paradigmatic case: United States investment was directed towards strengthening family farming in the Mezzogiorno, regarded as a bulwark against the influence of the Italian Communist Party. Agrarian modernisation thus became linked to the consolidation of liberal democracies and to integration into international markets<sup>8</sup>.

It is impossible to understand the geography of agrarian reform without widening the lens to the Asian continent: Japan, South Korea and Taiwan carried out some of the most successful agrarian reforms of the twentieth century.

---

<sup>6</sup> A very valid summary by one of its protagonists, Arturo Warman (<https://www.fao.org/4/j0415t/j0415t09.htm>, accessed at 2026.02.01). Enrique Florescano (coord.), *Historia de la cuestión agraria mexicana*, México D.F., Siglo XXI-UNAM, 1988-1990, 9 vols.

<sup>7</sup> A comparison with Italy, Sergio Riesco, “La reforma agraria italiana vista desde España (1918-1953). Un comentario crítico”, *Segle XX: revista catalana d’història*, 13 (2020), p. 123-145. Spain in James Simpson & Juan Carmona, *Why democracy failed: the origins of the Spanish Civil War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020; Ricardo Robledo, *La tierra es vuestra. La reforma agraria. Un problema no resuelto. España: 1900-1950*, Barcelona, Ediciones de Pasado y Presente, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel y Leonardo Bernardi, “Estados Unidos y la reforma agraria italiana (1947-1953)”, *Historia Agraria*, 54 (2011), p. 141-174. Simone Misiani, “Colonización interior y democracia: la reforma agraria italiana de 1950”, *Historia Agraria*, 54 (2011), p. 105-140.

Promoted by the United States in the context of the Cold War, these reforms combined redistribution, credit, technical assistance and sustained state support. Their objective was twofold: to prevent the expansion of communism and to create a social foundation for accelerated industrialisation. The result was the consolidation of a highly productive family farming sector, which served as the platform for subsequent economic take-off<sup>9</sup>.

In Latin America, the situation was more complex. Agrarian bimodality—large estates alongside impoverished smallholders—generated deep social tensions. Studies conducted by CIDA and ECLAC (CEPAL), led by Solon Barraclough, revealed the extreme concentration of land: 5% of holdings controlled 80% of the cultivated area. The FAO and other international organisations promoted structural reforms, but their implementation was uneven<sup>10</sup>.

The Cuban Revolution of 1959 introduced a new element: agrarian reform as a revolutionary political project. The United States responded with the Alliance for Progress, which promoted moderate reforms in countries such as Chile, Peru and Ecuador. However, expectations of modernisation collided with internal resistance, social conflict and, in many cases, violent counter-reform processes<sup>11</sup>.

At the end of this cycle, the Portuguese agrarian reform that followed the *Revolução dos Cravos* (1974) constitutes a late case. At a moment when agribusiness was gaining ground globally, Portugal experienced a massive process of land occupations, the restitution of communal property, and the creation of collective production units. Subsequent integration into the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reoriented the model towards concentration and modernisation, generating tensions that remain the subject of debate today. Yet, reinforcing these dynamics, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 reopened longstanding issues that had

---

<sup>9</sup> Cristobal Kay, “Why East Asia overtook Latin America: agrarian reform, industrialization and development”, *Third World Quarterly*, 23-6 (2002), p. 1073-1102.

<sup>10</sup> León Zamosc & Estela Martínez Borrego, “Modernización agraria y participación política campesina en América Latina” in Manuel Chiriboga, León Zamosc and Estela Martínez Borrego (coords.), *Estructuras agrarias y movimientos campesinos en América Latina (1950-1990)*, Madrid, Ministerio de Agricultura, 1996, p. 11-24. In this context, there were especially relevant the ECLAC-CEPAL (Economic Commission for Latin American and the Caribbean) and ICAD-CIDA (Inter-American Committee for Agricultural Development). Solon L. Barraclough, *Agrarian structure in Latin America: a resume of the CIDA land tenure studies*, Lexington, Lexington Books, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> About Chile, Claudio Robles, *Jacques Chonchol: un cristiano revolucionario en la política chilena del siglo XX*, Santiago, Universidad Finis Terrae, 2016 y Joana Salem, “Tierra y derechos humanos en Chile: la contrarreforma agraria de la dictadura de Pinochet y las políticas de reparación campesina”, *Historia Agraria*, 80 (2020), p. 209-242.

remained unresolved both in the interwar period and, of course, during the Soviet era: the case of restructuring and land grabbing in Romania offers a perfect example of the peculiarities of this process.

### 3. The Singularities of the Iberian Agrarian Reforms

The agrarian reforms undertaken in Spain in the 1930s and in Portugal after 1974 constitute two distinctive cases within the global landscape of the twentieth century. Both unfolded against the grain of the major reformist waves: the Spanish reform arrived late in relation to the interwar cycle; the Portuguese reform emerged when the postwar cycle had already run its course and agribusiness had become the dominant paradigm. In a sense, by finding themselves *out of place*, they shaped not only their design and implementation, but also their limits, conflicts, and subsequent trajectories. Analysing these two cases allows us to understand how agrarian reforms depend critically on political conjuncture, state capacity, and international insertion.

The Spanish Second Republic (1931-1936) addressed agrarian reform in a profoundly adverse context. Unlike the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Spain had not experienced an imperial collapse, a peasant revolution, or a military defeat that might have weakened the landowning elites. Nor was there a sufficiently broad political consensus on the need for a structural transformation of the countryside. The reform therefore emerged in a political environment already deeply polarised between its supporters and its opponents.

The Spanish agrarian question had accumulated decades of tension. The concentration of landownership in the south, the precariousness of day labourers, the absence of collective bargaining, and the weakness of family farming created a scenario of extreme inequality. The Republic inherited this problem without the benefit of an exogenous shock that might have facilitated its resolution. As historiography has noted, the Republican reform was the belated expression of a “longstanding unresolved problem”<sup>12</sup>.

The 1932 *Ley de Bases* established an ambitious redistributive framework, based on expropriation with compensation and the creation of peasant communities. However, the administrative capacity of the state was insufficient: there was a shortage of technical staff, up-to-date cadastral information, financial resources and supervisory mechanisms. The Agrarian Reform Institute was overwhelmed by the scale of the task. Bureaucratisation slowed

---

<sup>12</sup> Ricardo Robledo, *La tierra es vuestra...*, cit..



the process and generated frustration among day labourers, who expected a rapid and visible redistribution.

The reform became a political battleground. The conservative governments (1933–1936) halted its implementation, returned expropriated land and dismantled part of the reformist apparatus. The arrival of the Popular Front in February 1936 reactivated the process, but the coup d'état of 18 July abruptly ended any possibility of consolidation. The violence unleashed during the Civil War—both the peasant revolution in Republican zones and the systematic repression in rebel-controlled areas—closed the reformist cycle definitively. It must always be borne in mind that General Franco's dictatorship rejected entirely the idea of a redistributive reform, replacing it with what the regime itself termed a “technical” reform (*sic*), based on land consolidation and irrigation development<sup>13</sup>.

Spain attempted an agrarian reform at the worst possible moment: in the midst of the Great Depression, without a prior shock that might have weakened the landowning classes, with a fragile state, and in a context of extreme political polarisation. The efforts of the reformist governments of the Republican period do not diminish its historical significance: they reveal the limits of agrarian reforms when they confront the implacable opposition of the political, institutional and economic conditions required to sustain them.

By its own, the Portuguese agrarian reform constitutes one of the most intense and controversial episodes of twentieth-century European history. After the *Revolução dos Cravos* (25 April 1974), the country experienced a rapid process of peasant mobilisation, land occupations and the creation of collective production units, particularly in the Alentejo. Unlike interwar Spain, Portugal did indeed undergo a profound political shock: the fall of a dictatorship of nearly half a century and the opening of a revolutionary process<sup>14</sup>.

Between 1974 and 1975, thousands of rural workers occupied large estates, claiming lands they regarded as unjustly appropriated during the nineteenth century. This movement combined elements of historical justice, labour demands and the aspiration to a new model of agrarian organisation. The state, immersed in a process of institutional redefinition, oscillated between supporting the occupations and attempting to channel them into a legal framework.

---

<sup>13</sup> Carlos Barciela, “Historia del Ministerio de Agricultura (1936-1965)” in Ricardo Robledo (coord.), *Historia del Ministerio de Agricultura, 1900-2008. Política agraria y pesquera de España*, Madrid, Ministerio de Agricultura, 2011, p. 145-220.

<sup>14</sup> Afonso de Barros, *A reforma agrária em Portugal: das ocupações de terras à formação das novas unidades de produção*, Oeiras, Instituto Gulbenkian, 1979.



From 1977 onwards, with political stabilisation and the end of the *PREC* (Ongoing Revolutionary Process), the Portuguese state initiated a counter-reform that returned part of the occupied land and limited the scope of the collective units. Agrarian reform ceased to be a revolutionary project and became a more moderate public policy, oriented towards modernisation and European integration.

Portugal's accession to the EEC in 1986 introduced a new and decisive vector which, through the CAP, became a counterpoint that, viewed in the long term, would have prevented the development of such an advanced agrarian reform. The CAP encouraged the concentration of holdings, penalised the small-scale agriculture of the north, and reoriented Portuguese farming towards European markets. Agrarian reform thus became subordinated to a supranational framework that privileged competitiveness and modernisation over redistribution.

The Portuguese trajectory—radical reform in 1975, counter-reform in 1977, Europeanisation in 1986—shows how agrarian reforms can undergo abrupt shifts depending on political conjuncture and international frameworks. Its countercyclical character lies in the fact that it emerged when the global reform cycle had already concluded and when agribusiness was consolidating itself as the dominant model.

In short, Spain's *out-of-place* character can be explained by reactionary resistance, and Portugal's, perhaps, by revolutionary acceleration. To the resistance of the most conservative sectors in both countries, one must add the role of a barrier to modernisation that, in the Portuguese case, was represented by the prospect of accession to the EEC. All this unfolded within state apparatuses that faced significant limitations and were interrupted and reoriented by abrupt political shifts: a civil war in Spain; a process of transition and Europeanisation in Portugal. Yet their outcomes were very different: Spain failed to consolidate any alternative model until more than twenty years later and in a very different context; Portugal did manage to transform the agrarian structure of the south, albeit only partially, briefly, and with ambivalent effects.

#### **4. Three Case Studies: Patterns and Divergences**

The three cases analysed—2nd Spanish Republic, post-1974 Portugal and post-socialist Romania—allow us to observe with precision the internal mechanisms of the twentieth-century agrarian reforms. Although they emerged in very different contexts, they share structural dilemmas that run across the

entire century: the tension between redistribution and productivity, the centrality of the peasantry as a political actor, the importance of capital and technology, and the decisive role of state capacity. The starting point of each reform profoundly shaped its scope, speed and viability, and the three cases represent a broad typology of critical junctures.

Spain represents a singular case: the Second Republic attempted a redistributive reform in a democratic context but without a prior shock that weakened the landowning classes, as Juan Carmona and James Simpson argue. Unlike Eastern Europe after 1918, Spain had not experienced military defeat or state collapse. The reform was born with a structural deficit of political strength and in the midst of the Great Depression, which exacerbated social tensions and limited the state's capacity to intervene effectively. Portugal, for its part, experienced an oscillating sequence: a radical rupture in 1975 with massive occupations in the Alentejo, followed by recentralisation and moderation from 1977 onwards, and finally adaptation to the CAP after 1986, as Antonio Themudo's reflections show. It was not a single process, but a succession of shifts shaped by financial crises, changes of government and external pressures. Its initial revolutionary character distinguishes it from the rest of the European cases of the twentieth century. In Romania, agrarian reform after 1989, especially through 18/1991 Law, took place in a context of abrupt transition to capitalism. As Hestia Delibas demonstrates, the restitution of pre-1945 property and the dissolution of socialist cooperatives generated extreme fragmentation. Unlike other countries, where the state built new agrarian institutions, in Romania the state dismantled existing ones without creating solid alternatives, producing vulnerability, rural poverty and fertile ground for land grabbing.

In all cases, the peasantry played a central role, though with very different degrees of agency. In Portugal and Spain, mobilisation from below acted as a driving force, but it advanced only when the state aligned with its demands. In Spain, day labourers pressed for rapid reform, but the institutional structure of the Republic limited their impact. In Romania, restitution produced millions of microplots, but did not generate a politically articulated peasantry. Peasant agency always depended on the balance of forces and on state support: where the state was weak or ambivalent, mobilisation failed to consolidate a new agrarian order.

Twentieth-century agrarian reforms oscillated between combating latifundia and avoiding minifundia, and all the cases illustrate this tension. Spain and revolutionary Portugal targeted large estates, though with uneven results. By contrast, Romania, Portugal in the 1980s and even 2nd Spanish Republic faced the opposite problem: the proliferation of plots too small to be viable. The debate

on the “inverse relationship” between size and productivity—according to which small family farms are more labour-efficient—revealed its path dependence. Spanish aridity or Romania’s extreme fragmentation showed that no universal relationship exists between size and efficiency.

A common feature across the three cases was the importance—and scarcity—of agricultural capital. Redistribution only worked when accompanied by investment in infrastructure, credit, technical assistance and technology. Spain failed in part due to insufficient administrative and financial capacity; Portugal depended on external credit and EEC incentives; Romania dismantled large productive units without creating support mechanisms. Without capitalisation, redistribution led to poverty, fragmentation or reconcentration.

State capacity was another decisive factor. Spain had prior information, but did not make the budgetary effort in personnel and resources needed to deepen the process; Portugal oscillated between revolutionary interventionism and liberalisation; Romania dismantled institutions without creating new support structures. Without solid institutions, agrarian reform risks remaining a symbolic gesture or a chaotic process rather than a structural socioeconomic transformation.

As the dossier will show, the outcomes were heterogeneous. Spain failed to transform the agrarian structure of the south; Portugal experienced an intense but short-lived reform; Romania suffered extreme fragmentation that weakened family farming and facilitated land grabbing. Reforms were not unidirectional processes: many were followed by counterreforms or reconcentration, as occurred in Spain, Portugal, Chile or Romania. Subsequent reconcentration revealed that agrarian reform cannot be sustained without continuous support policies.

Comparative experience allows us to identify three structural dilemmas. The first is equity versus efficiency: redistribution seeks to correct historical inequalities, but may generate holdings too small to be viable, while productive efficiency may require scales that reproduce inequalities. The second is redistribution versus capitalisation: without investment, redistribution tends to fail or be reversed. The third is modernisation versus inclusion: mechanisation, intensification and integration into global markets can exclude small producers, as occurred in Latin America, Portugal or Romania<sup>15</sup>.

---

<sup>15</sup> In order to avoid repetition in the citations for the case studies, we refer to the articles in the dossier. An overview of the geography of agrarian reform in Latin America in Germán Carrillo, “Revoluciones y reformas agrarias durante el siglo XX latinoamericano” in Germán Carrillo & Justo Cuño (coords.), *Historia agraria y políticas agrarias en España y América Latina desde el siglo XIX hasta nuestros días*, Madrid, Ministerio de Agricultura, 2017, p. 147-238. William

The international dimension acquired increasing weight in the second half of the twentieth century. The Cold War acted as a reformist vector in East Asia and Latin America, while European integration functioned as a counterreformist vector in Portugal. Spain and Romania, by contrast, lacked international support at critical moments, which exacerbated their internal limitations. Agrarian reforms were also long-term processes that required institutional continuity, political stability, sustained investment and technological adaptation. Those conceived from the outset as rapid interventions—Spain, Portugal, Romania—faced greater difficulties than those embedded in long-term state-building projects.

Finally, agrarian reforms operated as mirrors of the models of modernisation adopted by each state: democratic and redistributive in Spain and Portugal; neoliberal in post-communist Romania; supranational in Portugal once integrated into the EEC. Each model produced different outcomes, yet all confronted the same structural dilemma: how to redistribute without undermining productive capacity, how to modernise without excluding, and how to balance equity and efficiency. An enormous challenge in every case.

## **5. Results, trajectories and structural dilemmas**

The comparison between the major reformist waves of the twentieth century and the three case studies analysed here makes it possible to identify common patterns, significant divergences and structural dilemmas that cut across all agrarian reforms. Far from constituting linear processes, they were complex trajectories marked by advances, setbacks, contradictions and unintended effects. The outcomes were heterogeneous: none achieved complete success, although some produced lasting transformations.

Other processes produced more ambiguous or clearly unsuccessful results. Spain failed to transform the agrarian structure of the south; the Republican reform was interrupted by the Civil War and subsequently reversed by the Franco dictatorship. Portugal experienced an intense but short-lived reform, as counter-reform and Europeanisation reoriented the agrarian model. Romania underwent extreme fragmentation that weakened family farming and facilitated the reconcentration of land in the hands of large companies. These cases show that agrarian reform can fail through excessive ambition, insufficient state capacity, lack of capital or political instability.

Reform trajectories were not unidirectional and remind us that these are highly contingent processes shaped above all by political conditions. In many countries, initial redistribution was followed by counter-reforms or reconcentration. Spain experienced a conservative halt between 1933 and 1936; Portugal limited occupations and returned land between 1977 and 1986; and Chile stands as a paradigmatic example of violent counter-reform. Even where reform advanced, subsequent reconcentration was common: in Romania, restituted microplots were absorbed by large companies; in Portugal, the CAP encouraged concentration in the south for productivist purposes; in Latin America, capitalist plantations replaced traditional haciendas. Reconcentration reveals that agrarian reform cannot be sustained without continuous support policies.

Comparative analysis allows us to identify three structural dilemmas that run through all twentieth-century agrarian reforms. The first is the dilemma between equity and efficiency: redistribution seeks to correct historical inequalities but may generate holdings too small to be viable, while productive efficiency may require larger scales that reproduce inequalities. This dilemma is visible in the unviability of small plots in arid Spain, in the limited productive capacity of Romanian microplots, or in the CAP's bias towards large, competitive farms. The second dilemma is that of redistribution versus capitalisation: redistribution is politically attractive, but without state investment it leads to poverty or reconcentration. Neither Spain nor Romania resolved this dilemma through massive state investment, Portugal resolved it partially thanks to the EEC, though at the expense of the redistributive logic. The third dilemma is that of modernisation versus inclusion: mechanisation, intensification and integration into global markets can exclude small producers, as occurred in Latin America under the Alliance for Progress, in Portugal after Europeanisation, or in neoliberal Romania, where millions of smallholders were left on the margins. Here, the backdrop of the Green Revolution emerges as a transversal force shaping all the processes examined<sup>16</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

Agrarian reform stands as one of the great utopias of the twentieth century, though one marked by significant compromises and uneven steps towards

---

<sup>16</sup> Wilson Picado, "Breve historia semántica de la Revolución Verde" in Dulce Freire & Daniel Lanero, *Agriculturas e innovación tecnológica en la Península Ibérica (1946-1975)*, Madrid, Ministerio de Medio Ambiente y Medio Rural y Marino, 2011, p. 25-50.

implementation. It embodied the promise of a rural world that was fairer, more egalitarian and more fully integrated into the national project, yet it also exposed the limitations of states, the tensions between competing development models and the contradictions of capitalist modernisation. This utopia did not disappear; it was transformed. In the twentyfirst century, the agrarian question reemerges in debates on food sovereignty, climate change, rural depopulation, ecological transition and territorial justice. The agrarian reforms of the twentieth century offer valuable lessons for understanding these contemporary challenges with an awareness shaped in the long term<sup>17</sup>.

The comparison between the cases presented in this dossier yields several fundamental conclusions. Agrarian reforms are not technical processes, but political ones: they emerge in critical junctures—revolutions, annexations, transitions, collapses—and depend on the balance of forces among social actors. The peasantry is a central actor, but its agency depends on state support: mobilisation can drive reform, but it only prospers when the state backs it. State capacity is decisive: without solid institutions, an updated land registry, technical personnel and financial resources, reform becomes a symbolic gesture. Capitalisation is indispensable: redistribution without investment leads to poverty, fragmentation or reconcentration. International frameworks, as the three case studies make clear, profoundly shape reforms: the Cold War, the Alliance for Progress and the CAP reconfigured national agrarian policies. Despite everything, agrarian reform remains relevant: in a world marked by climate crisis and food insecurity, the agrarian question once again occupies a central place.

Taking all the above in consideration, the agrarian reforms—very much deeper than the land reforms—of the twentieth century show that transforming agrarian structures is possible, but it requires time, institutions, investment and a deep understanding of the social and ecological realities of the countryside. No case fully resolved the dilemma between social justice and productive efficiency, but all offer valuable lessons for the present.

---

<sup>17</sup> Very interesting debates all around this question in James Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998. Ronald J. Herring, *Political Conditions for Agrarian Reform and Poverty Alleviation*, Brighton, IDS Discussion Paper 375, 2000. Albert Berry, “The Case for Redistributive Land Reform in Developing Countries”, *Development and Change*, 42-2 (2011), p. 637-648.