

THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE RETURN TO FARMING IN THE CANARIES

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I. INTRODUCTION

The economic crisis has caused a reversal of a phenomenon that we have witnessed: the abandonment of agricultural activity. The fall of the building subsector, which was one of the driving forces of the economy of the Canary Islands, together with other related services has led to the return and incorporation of many workers to the primary activity. A return that is carried out basically outside the official systems of control and has become one of the reasons for the so-called irregular economy that supports many households in the Canaries.

This phenomenon, confirmed by the island and regional authorities, because of its special features, presents significant quantitative problems to the extent that while recognising the phenomenon, governments are unable to provide specific figures about this growth. We have, therefore, a source problem which emphasises, and is in itself already problematic, in assessing the extent of agricultural involvement in the labour market of the Canaries.

There is no doubt that the role of the primary sector is broader and more complex than the statistics that have been collected indicate. Often the figures do not properly reflect the extent of agriculture as a secondary activity (part-time farming), nor do they understand the importance nowadays that agriculture is a principal activity for many who are officially unemployed as well as the role of the non-active population, which although well known as such, in reality are agricultural workers. All these problems have led us to build on this work using qualitative sources such as the press and interviews conducted in the countryside; a methodology that not only allows us to determine the existence of an upturn in agricultural activity but also serves to characterise this process as a particular way of adapting to a particular structure and economic situation.

II. PANORAMA OF FARMING ACTIVITY IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

Abandoned to an uncertain future, without politics of support for food production, in recent decades, subsistence farming has declined in prominence in economic, labour and spatial terms. This process results in a mass of circumstances among which are a progressive loss of income and revenue brought about by the huge differences between the prices paid by the consumer and those paid to the farmer, a corporate commitment which is manifested in importing cheaper products before promoting local agricultural produce and a marked urban pressure on rural land which increasingly tempts the farmer-owner to turn his farm into yet another addition to urban space.

III. THE COUNTRYSIDE: A REFUGE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

At this juncture there occurred, abruptly, the current structure which ended in one fell swoop the apparently inexhaustible ability to provide duo construction services in order to generate higher wages and create more jobs. Driven by the crisis and abandoned by what had been the levers of the Canarian economy many unemployed flocked to the countryside or intensified their contact with subsistence farming activities. And those who own land do so, in the first place as a strategy for home-consumption or to complement the social protection mechanisms (unemployment benefits or pensions). Then, when their economic situation worsens due to the intensification of the crisis, they begin to produce surpluses and increase the extent of their operations, thereby passing from the level of subsistence to the marketing of surplus locally with the object of obtaining a necessary income to compensate for the losses incurred by the cuts in pensions and subsidies.

IV. THE PROBLEMS OF MARKETING: THE INCREASE OF 'GUACHINCHES' OR STREET VENDORS

The surpluses produced are sold outside the official markets as one more rung in the underground economy. In this situation, the 'guachinches, whose function and occupation used to be to sell their own wine and products of the countryside from the living-rooms of their homes, have overflowed in number, and in islands such as Tenerife, there is an almost continuous supply in certain parts (in the north of the island). Another example is the proliferation of unlicensed street vendors selling from the roadside or from house to house, a clear indicator of the growth of this activity and the increasing role of selling on the black market to a population who seek cheaper foodstuffs.

V. INSTITUCIONAL CHANNELLING OF THE RETURN TO THE COUNTRYSIDE: BANKS OF LAND AND URBAN ALLOTMENTS

The way for the unemployed who have no land of their own to enter into farming, and, who for social and occupational reasons are unable to buy land, is to rent. This is accomplished on an individual basis or by ascribing to formulas such as land banks. The demand for land has stimulated the public authorities, following years of turning their backs on the problem of the abandonment of farming, to create land banks. One proposal is a system

of negotiation between farm owners and those seeking work on the land, so that the latter rent their land. The outcome has not been negative although in the majority of the cases the demand has outweighed the supply. Furthermore, as the land banks solely affect the sphere of production they have not solved the serious problem of marketing nor of combating the imports and the low prices, beyond some partial solution via farmers' markets and the production of organic products. The other method for channelling agricultural demand has been the deployment of town allotments for the cultivation of subsistence crops. This is a worse solution than the land banks, because it is not worth it for families only to produce food for personal consumption. The needs of a family are much more extensive than simple sustenance, even though that is of prime importance. Therefore, an allotment where it is forbidden to sell when there is surplus produce, and the fact that the plots are extremely small, appear to make it seem more like a hobby and a pleasurable pastime than a real answer to the crisis.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this very profound crisis that we are undergoing the primary sector in the Canary Islands has changed from being an occupation of low appeal and a continuous loss of cash to become a means of survival. This reaction is contrary to the dominant view of the administration which has for decades been defending agricultural land not in the strict sense as its use in food production but more as 'natural' open space or for leisure activities even though that much of it is outside the scant farming activity defining its supposed naturalness or its tourist attraction. In this sense, it can be said that the crisis has highlighted, through sheer necessity, the importance of food production, versus environmental, sustainable and multi-functional speeches.

In the same way, the crisis has brought to the forefront the dire difficulties of farming for the internal market of the Canary Islands. In the area of production there is the high cost of farming land for fair competition regarding other uses, difficulties in renting land and the increasing costs of water, seed and fertilizer. Whereas, in the field of marketing there is a massive influx of imported goods at low prices, fluctuations in income and reduced revenue, decreased by the huge difference between the prices paid by the consumer and those received by the farmer. All in all, there are a number of aspects that require urgent protection and management of farming land as space for the production of food. Access to water and land, both private and public, should be encouraged for those who, nowadays, demand it, speculation should be limited with drastic measures for the protection of farming land, help should be provided for farm buildings, the fiscal and bureaucratic excesses that the farmers are faced with should be reduced, imports should be limited or taxed to ensure benchmark prices for farm produce.

