

LA GOMERA: AN ISLAND IN THE HANDS OF LARGE LAND OWNERS

Luis Manuel Jerez Darías

Víctor Onésimo Martín Martín

Departamento de Geografía. Universidad de La Laguna

luismjd@hotmail.com, vbmartin@ull.es

I. RESEARCH ON LAND OWNERSHIP IN SPAIN AND IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

Studies regarding the structure of land ownership on La Gomera are virtually non-existent, a matter which highlights how complex it is to address this subject for this island. Contrary to what happens in other places on the Canary Islands and on the mainland, on which various disciplines, such as social sciences, history, law, economy and geography, have historically been used to study the subject of landownership. It is a matter which has provoked passionate debates, (particularly in the 70s and 80s), leading up to the present day, due to the fact that, on the basis of the research into land ownership, great controversy built up between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries regarding whether or not to consolidate the capitalism of Spanish land.

The process of transition from feudalism to capitalism in Spain did not develop in the same way as in other countries in Western Europe such as England, France or Germany, to mention a few paradigmatic cases. The Spanish model of capitalism which was implemented denotes an anaemia which distanced it from development in that part of the continent. In our country a backward capitalism evolved with a heavy load of paralysis, weighed down by the survival of elements from the so-called Old Regime or 'Antiguo Régimen'. Basic economic elements, (the structure of land ownership and production relations), were reflected in the social sphere, (prominence of nobility and aristocracy, landowners, etc.), politics, (tyranny) and ideology, (such as a semi-feudal culture or the great weight of the Roman Catholic Church).

Spanish land has been characterised to date by the contrast between large and small properties. That is to say, on the one hand there is a strong concentration of large properties shared by only a few, and on the other hand, an enormous fragmentation of small plot divisions providing little revenue. These are the two sides of the coin which define the main Spanish agricultural problem; in other words: the land problem. On this matter a

whole amalgam of vicissitudes has arisen which has affected both large areas of land and Spanish society itself, (poverty, emigration, exploitation of the work force, the existence of semi-feudal production relations, semi-serfdom, tyranny, etc.), until the point where it still manifests itself today in regions like Andalusia or Extremadura, just to mention the most obvious. That dichotomy, which was never resolved by any agricultural reform, (revolutionary or institutional)¹, always constituted a clear obstacle to the introduction of capitalism in agricultural areas. For this reason, it is considered that the weakness of capitalism was a patent reality in the farmlands of the nation.

But the debate remains open. Those who defend the culmination of that process suggest that the old, great, feudal landowners gradually became agricultural, capitalistic businessmen, and their dependent and servile workforce became day labourers and farmhands. Those who deny this conversion speak of the survival of a semi-feudal property system on Spanish agricultural land which continues to maintain exploitation methods indirectly from the pre-capitalistic cut. The bulk of the property is based on social, economic and political power due to the ownership of the land, hence the importance of analysing its system of structure and possession.

We are therefore addressing a subject with a long historical trajectory within the scientific-social investigations of our country. A subject to which we attempt to supply with more arguments and empiric material which could help to re-enforce the theory on backwardness, being aware beforehand that the geographical scope that we are analysing is a fraction of the total of the national land area.

II. GEOGRAPHICAL FRAMEWORK

La Gomera is one of seven islands which make up the archipelago of the Canary Islands. With a surface area of only 370 km² it is the second smallest in the group. It has an uneven topography with deep gullies and steep gradients resulting in incessant and prolonged erosion. All this leads to a variety of ecological situations. Administratively, it is divided into six municipalities, those in the north: Hermigua, Agulo and Vallehermoso (which also extends down the southern side); and those in the south: Valle Gran Rey, Alajeró and San Sebastián (where the island's capital is).

As in the rest of the archipelago, on La Gomera two opposing agricultural systems came into being, though both are intimately interwoven: the traditional or subsistence system, on the one hand, and the commercial or exportation system, on the other. The former was oriented towards auto-consumption, which developed small plots of a family nature. The latter was controlled by medium to large property owners and foreign capitalists, (mainly British), who exploited their estates combining paid work relating to semi-feudal production.

From the decade of the 70s, agriculture was hit by recession due to a strong wave of emigration and the appearance of new, economic activities such as tourism, construction and service industries

III. THE SUBJECT OF SMALL SCALE FARMING ON LA GOMERA

It has always been said that most of the work undertaken on the agricultural land of La Gomera, is, in the main, small scale farming, a factor which has caused the poverty of the

peasantry who form the majority of the population of the island. In our opinion, this is only a half truth, though it is true to say that the size of the plots are small this does not explain the cause of the backwardness but rather the degree of land concentration, that is to say, how many plots an owner possesses. And our analyses confirm this to be so.

On La Gomera, there has historically been a strong contrast between small and large landowners, with an elevated number of the former with little land and a minority of large landowners who have consolidated a large proportion of the land.

If we pay attention to an analysis only based on the sizes of the plots, it is obvious that the “power” of the smallholding will be talked about, but when we study this in more depth, focusing on the system or degree of landownership, the result presents a different solution; that is that La Gomera is an island of great property. A great deal of property which causes, due to its large concentration of plots of land, an extraordinary division of plots which serve as minimum sustenance for the numerous peasant families.

IV. LA GOMERA IS AN ISLAND OF LARGE ESTATES

The reasoning regarding the structure of land ownership on La Gomera is not recent, quite the opposite. It is, in fact, a long, historical trajectory which began with the process of the Conquista at the end of the fifteenth century and has lasted to the present day.

The comparative study of the rural land registries of 1957 and 2001 confirms our hypothesis. By applying a superficial criterion to distinguish the different types of landowners, we have established the following categories: small landowners, (those who own less than 5 hectares), medium landowners, (between 5 and 20 hectares), and large landowners, (with more than 20 hectares; and the result of the stability of large properties on the island becomes evident with a simple, comparative table.

Table 1
NUMBER OF LANDOWNERS AND SIZES OF PROPERTIES ON LA GOMERA

Groups	1957				2001			
	Owners	%	Hectares	%	Owners	%	Hectares	%
Small	10.302	90,4	9.080	26,2	12.316	92,1	10.704	30,7
Medium	908	8,0	8.109	23,4	900	6,7	7.891	22,6
Large	181	1,6	17.447	50,4	162	1,2	16.299	46,7
Total	11.391	100	34.637	100	13.378	100	34.894	100

Source: Rustic land registry of 1957 and 2001. Own publication.

As can be appreciated from the table, large estates monopolised the majority of the land area as opposed to the numerous of smallholders. The latter had to survive on a framework of poor estates which were completely insufficient for minimal survival, and, therefore, had to offer their labour to the medium and large landowners in the form of semi-feudal exploitation.

V. SOME FACTS ABOUT THE LARGE ISLAND PROPERTIES

Until the decade of the 80s, the moment when the island's economic structure changed to the service sector and construction activity, in each municipality of La Gomera there were a series of members or families of large landowners who were leaders of the local economy and society. By observing the figures of the land registry in 1957, it is evident that the majority of them were local title holders, although foreigners were amongst the greatest land owners.

In Hermigua we can mention, amongst others, the lineage of the Trujillo family, (>100 hectares). In Agulo the Bento family stands out, (>100 hectares). In Vallehermoso Oliver Méndez García stands out in the northern part of the municipality, (>200 hectares), whilst in the south the leading figure of José Duque Martínez stands out, (>90 hectares). In Alajeró and San Sebastián the leading protagonists were two outsider companies: "Álvaro Rodríguez López S.A." (>1.000 hectares), and the Norwegian Company "Agrupación Noruega S.A."¹ (>800 hectares), who led the rankings of the greatest landowners of the island. Of all the great landowners of La Gomera, both companies were the greatest protagonists within the island's economic system.

All these landowners followed a pattern common to the other great landowners of the archipelago, that is to say, they had at their disposal plots located in different geographical areas, (from the coast to the mountainous zone. In this way, in the higher part of the island, they had estates dedicated to the plantation on dry land, (vines, cereals and fruit trees), and on the lower part, those oriented to irrigation and export, (banana plantations, vegetables and fruit trees). Equally, together with the cultivated estates, we cannot ignore the extensive uncultivated land which was used by livestock for grazing. Therefore, we can see the uniqueness of this great land area which did not concentrate the whole of its assets on only one plot but on many and in different areas which allowed diversification of agricultural production, the historic basis of the local economy. In a rural area such as La Gomera, the monopoly of the land has been the starting point for the economic and political control of the population of the island to the present day.

1 Ancestor of the current company "Fred Olsen S.A" on La Gomera.