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Cooperation, technical education and politics in early agricultural policy in Catalonia (1914-1924)

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Abstract: After the crisis of the late nineteenth century, the role of the state in European agriculture expanded to many new areas: education and technical innovation; commercial policies and market regulations; farm support policies, and sometimes interventions in property rights. The development of these policies was a difficult and costly process, without the intervention of intermediary organizations like agricultural cooperatives and farmers' associations. This article analyses the early agricultural policy in Catalonia (Spain) and the role of cooperatives in its implementation. It argues that this regional case was quite exceptional in the early twentieth-century Spain context, where state intervention in agriculture was extremely limited. In 1914, an autonomous government was set up in Catalonia, and a modern agricultural policy was introduced in which technical education and cooperatives played a crucial role, as well as politics. The agricultural policy promoted and developed by the Catalan government was part of a state-building project based on a regionalist ideology.

1. Introduction

State intervention in European agriculture underwent dramatic changes after the agricultural crisis of the late nineteenth century. Mainly limited until that time to trade policy, the role of the state now expanded into many more areas: education, scientific innovation, and market regulations on the quality (and even the quantity) of produce and prices.¹ At the same time, after the crisis the countryside underwent growing social and political mobilization, with the spread of cooperatives and other agricultural

¹ M. Tracy, *Government and Agriculture in Western Europe, 1880-1988* (New York, 1989); N. Koning, *The Failure of Agrarian Capitalism: Agrarian Politics in the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA, 1846-1919* (London and New York, 1994); P. Moser & T. Varley, "The state and agricultural modernisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe", in P. Moser & T. Varley (ed.) *Integration through Subordination. The Politics of Agricultural Modernisation in Industrial Europe*. (Turnhout, 2013), pp. 13-39.

associations.² The state played an essential role in regulating their framework and, eventually, in promoting their expansion with specific legislation as well as technical and financial support. Agricultural associations, in turn, were vital intermediaries in the implementation of agricultural policies.

In Spain, state intervention in agriculture in the early twentieth century was less extensive than in other Western European countries. Although after 1900 the role of the state certainly expanded, the Ministry of Agriculture did not exist as a single institution until 1933, and the ability of the state to implement farming policies was hampered by the weakness of the administrative bodies and by insufficient funding.³ Moreover, the state was reluctant to promote farmers' associations because the dominant landowners, who controlled the parliament through rigged elections, feared social and political mobilization.⁴ Most scholars have pointed out that agricultural cooperatives appeared later in Spain than in other Western European countries, and their diffusion was weak.⁵

² On the process of politicization, see R. Hubscher, "Syndicalisme agricole et politisation paysanne", in *La politisation des campagnes au XIXe siècle: France, Italie, Espagne, Portugal. Actes du Colloque international de Rome des 20-21-22 février 1997* (Rome, 2000), pp. 135-52, and M. Cabo & X. R. Veiga, "La politización del campesinado en la época de la Restauración. Una perspectiva europea", in T. M. Ortega López & F. Cobo Romero (ed.) *La España rural, siglos XIX y XX. Aspectos políticos, sociales y culturales* (Granada, 2011), p. 21-58.

³ L. Fernández Prieto, "La política agraria del estado español contemporáneo hasta 1936. Del propietario innovador al fomento de la innovación en la pequeña explotación", *Historia Contemporánea*, 17 (1998), 237-286; J. Pan-Montojo, "Landowners, technicians and associations: the formation of the agricultural public institutions in Spain, 1847-1936", in N. Vivier (ed.) *The state and rural societies policy and education in Europe* (Turnhout, 2008), pp. 111-134; R. Robledo (ed.), *Historia del Ministerio de Agricultura, 1900-2008: política agraria y pesquera de España* (Madrid, 2011); J. Planas, "State intervention in wine markets in the early twentieth century: Why was it so different in France and Spain?", *Revista de Historia Económica – Journal of Iberian and Latin American Economic History*, 35/2 (2017), 175-206.

⁴ S. Garrido, "Alentar y obstruir. Las vacilaciones de la política estatal sobre cooperativismo en los inicios del siglo XX", *Noticario de Historia Agraria*, 7 (1994), 131-54; S. Garrido, *Treballar en comú. El cooperativisme agrari a Espanya (1900-1936)* (València, 1996); J. Simpson & J. Carmona, "Explaining the presence and absence of Spanish farm cooperatives before 1936: a political economy approach", Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Working Paper 17-09 (2017).

⁵ J. Simpson, "Cooperation and Cooperatives in Southern European Wine Production", *Advances in Agricultural Economic History*, 1 (2000), 95-126; S. Garrido, S. (2007): "Why Did Most Cooperatives Fail? Spanish Agricultural Cooperation in the Early Twentieth Century". *Rural History*, 18/2 (2007), 183-200; E. Fernández, "Trust, religion, and cooperation in western agriculture, 1880-1930", *The Economic History Review*, 67/3 (2014), 678-98; F. J. Medina-Albaladejo, M. D. Añón-Higón, A. Díez-Minguela & J. M. Lana-Berasain, "Local constraints and knowledge transfer in the formation and development of cooperatives: Catalonia, 1860-1939", *DT-AEHE* 1838 (2018).

Within Spain, Catalonia was a notable exception to the rule. Catalonia was one of the regions where agricultural associations spread most rapidly in the early twentieth century, and indeed a third of the country's agricultural chambers were created there after the decree of 14 November 1890, which was the first legislative measure passed in Spain to promote agricultural associations. In the early twentieth century, Catalonia was also one of the regions with the most agricultural cooperatives.⁶ Before 1936, Catalonia was home to 70% of Spain's wine cooperatives, although it accounted for roughly 20% of the country's vineyards.⁷

From the turn of the century onwards the Catalan large landowners were very active in promoting cooperatives and other agricultural associations, and the main landowners' association (IACSI) tried to organize and take control of the spread of these new entities. In 1899 they founded the first regional federation of agricultural associations in Spain (the Catalan Federation of Agricultural Associations, expanded in 1902 to the Balearic Islands), which comprised of more than a hundred cooperatives and other agricultural associations. At its 1901 congress, this agricultural federation launched the initiative for the approval of the Agricultural Syndicates Act to boost the creation of agricultural cooperatives before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.⁸

Within Spain, Catalonia was also the only region to create institutions of self-government before 1936. In 1914 the region achieved limited autonomy with the creation of an administrative organization named the *Mancomunitat*, which coordinated the provincial services. A regional government was set up, with limited competencies and financial resources (only those corresponding to provincial bodies) which lasted until 1924; it was then suspended by the dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera, who would finally do away with it altogether in March 1925. The political framework for the creation of regional governments could have been applied in other Spanish regions, but the Catalan government was the only one that came into being.⁹

⁶ S. Garrido, *Treballar en comú*; J. Planas, "Cooperativismo y difusión del cambio técnico en la agricultura. La contribución de las cámaras agrícolas (Cataluña, 1890-1930)", *Historia Agraria*, 30 (2003), 87-117; F. J. Beltrán, "Commons, social capital and the emergence of agricultural cooperatives in the early twentieth century Spain", *European Review of Economic History*, 16/4 (2012), 511-28; J. Simpson & J. Carmona, "Explaining the presence"; F. J. Medina-Albaladejo et al., "Local constraints".

⁷ J. Planas, "The emergence of winemaking cooperatives in Catalonia", *Business History*, 58/ (2016), 264-82.

⁸ J. Planas, "El Instituto Agrícola Catalán de San Isidro y la organización de los intereses agrarios (1880-1936)", *Revista española de estudios agrosociales y pesqueros*, 217 (2008), 13-48.

⁹ E. Ucelay-Da Cal, "La Diputació i la Mancomunitat: 1914-1923", in B. de Riquer (ed.) *Història de la Diputació de Barcelona* (Barcelona, 1987; 2nd edition 2007), vol. II, pp. 37-213; A. Balcells et al., *La Mancomunitat de Catalunya i l'autonomia* (Barcelona, 1996).

This article analyses the agricultural policy of the regional government of Catalonia over this period, highlighting the crucial role played by cooperatives, and also the influence of politics. The agricultural policy was part of a state-building project based on a regionalist ideology, in which the Catalan authorities tried to compensate for the limited economic aid provided by the Spanish state.

Section 2 is an overview of the agricultural policy of the Catalan regional government. The following section describes the Conference on Catalan Agriculture organized in 1919 by the regional government, in which the aims of this agricultural policy were reflected. Two further sections analyse, respectively, the roles of cooperatives and of politics in this agricultural policy. The article ends with some brief conclusions.

2. The agricultural policy of the *Mancomunitat*

The economic policies of the *Mancomunitat* were mainly oriented towards the modernization of public services and territorial organization (i.e., the construction of roads, schools, libraries, telephone lines and other facilities), in order to help to spread the economic development of Barcelona to the whole of Catalonia.¹⁰ According to its leaders, the development of the Catalan economy had been constrained by the deficiencies of public services provided by the central government in the past century. In 1920, the president of the regional government compared the poor state of public services in Catalonia to those of the European countries that were devastated by the war:

‘In the ravaged countries they lack public buildings, the roads have been destroyed, the bridges have sunk ... In Catalonia, due to the tradition of bad governments, we also suffer from this devastation. We have not suffered the suffocating gases of the enemy, but we have suffered the suffocating effects of long-standing neglect, which has meant that the country lacks the tools that are needed for its development’.¹¹

As a reaction to this situation, the task of the *Mancomunitat* was to modernize public services in a framework of regional planning in order to boost the development of the Catalan economy. In the area of agriculture, its aim was to promote education and technical change so as to make farms more productive and competitive in the international markets; it thus followed the example of other nations that were creating specialized schools, institutes, laboratories and training centres. In 1919, the regional government stated:

¹⁰ F. Roca, *Política econòmica i territori a Catalunya 1901-1939* (Barcelona, 1979), pp. 85-102.

¹¹ J. Puig i Cadafalch, “Una tasca de civilització a realitzar per la Mancomunitat de Catalunya”, *Dues conferències* (Barcelona, undated), p. 21.

‘Farming in the way we are doing it today is not enough. It is necessary to intensify production using the applications of the biological, chemical and mechanical sciences; we have to organize production in order to enter the world markets, since isolation is impossible, and we have to be able to transform agricultural products into useful foodstuffs (milk, wine, oil, canned food). These objectives are achieved with a general improvement of the agricultural culture, with the proper training of technicians in order to make the most of the land and take advantage of its crops, and with government-sponsored action that guides the dispersed activities in a fruitful orientation’.¹²

Farming intensification and industrial processing of agricultural products were also important targets in order to guarantee the social stability of the Catalan countryside. Since the late nineteenth-century crisis there had been social unrest in some areas, especially wine-growing lands, and the government relied on improvements in production to enhance the viability of farms and avoid social conflict. As the regional government did not have jurisdiction to legislate on land property, no measures for land reform were taken, the *rabassaire* struggle was never discussed, and social stability in the Catalan countryside depended on the economic modernization.¹³

Given the focus on education and technical change, the Upper School of Agriculture was a central institution in this programme. It was to contribute to the transformation of Catalan agriculture by training a new generation of experts in agriculture and cattle farming, conducting research and encouraging the diffusion of new techniques. Although in this area the central government promoted projects such as the viticultural and oenological centres of Vilafranca (1902) and Reus (1906), they were insufficient and there was no general plan for education in agriculture.¹⁴

The Upper School of Agriculture was created in 1912 by the provincial government of Barcelona to replace the old school founded the previous century, and it was reorganized by the regional government following the model of other such schools in Europe such as the Agricultural and Horticulture School of Gembloux in Belgium.¹⁵ The number of students that attended the school was limited (fewer than seventy in the

¹² Mancomunitat de Catalunya, *L’obra a fer* (Barcelona, 1919), p. 110 (author’s translation in this and following citations).

¹³ About the *rabassaire* struggle, see J. Pomés, *La Unió de Rabassaires* (Barcelona, 2000) and J. Colomé et al., “The *Rabassaire* Struggle: Long-Term Analysis of a Social and Political Movement”, *International Review of Social History*, 63/1 (2018), 1-27.

¹⁴ J. Maspons, “Agricultura” in F. Carreras Candi (ed.), *Geografia General de Catalunya*, vol. Catalunya (Barcelona, undated), p. 573. About the two oenological centers in Catalonia, see A. Saumell, R. Arnabat & J. Romeu, *Estació de viticultura i enologia de Vilafranca del Penedès 1903-2003. Cent anys d’història* (Vilafranca del Penedès, 2003), and A. Arnabat, “L’Estació Enològica de Reus”, in E. Giralt (ed.), *Vinyes i vins: Mil anys d’història* (Barcelona, 1993), vol. I, p. 213-23.

¹⁵ J. Casanovas, “L’ensenyament agrícola a Catalunya (1912-1939)”, *Recerques*, 37 (1998), 81-108.

courses with the highest enrolment: 1920-1923), but the *Mancomunitat*'s leaders were confident that the school would train an elite able to disseminate scientific and technical knowledge.

An agricultural laboratory was also set up to carry out chemical analyses for institutions and individual farmers,¹⁶ and in 1917 the *Mancomunitat* organized several Agricultural Technical Services to spread innovations and provide technical assistance to farmers. These services were conceived of as a complement to the educational functions of the Upper School of Agriculture, and they organized itinerant teaching courses in villages to provide technical training for farmers, just as the Upper School of Agriculture had done since 1915.¹⁷ At the beginning, this itinerant teaching was carried out on a small scale, but these short specialized courses proved very successful, 'making it necessary to raise the number of courses on offer and to increase the funding'.¹⁸ The Agricultural Technical Services also created a network of 34 experimental landholdings devoted to a range of different crops in Catalan villages; they organized numerous conferences, exhibitions, publications, prizes and campaigns to bring the new agricultural innovations to a wider public, and also provided legal and technical assistance for the cooperatives.

However, farm support policies were difficult to implement, because the competencies and economic resources of the *Mancomunitat* were very limited: the central government did not transfer any state competencies; nor did it assign any new funds or allow the creation of any new taxes. The financial resources of the *Mancomunitat* depended mainly on the provincial government of Barcelona (in fact some 75% of the resources of the regional government came from this source) and on borrowing.

The limited economic means were, indeed, the most significant barrier to the development of the regional government's policies. Its expenditure on agriculture, cattle farming and forestry amounted to 3.4 million pesetas, barely 2.5% of the Catalan government's total expenditure during the whole period (1914-1924), a miniscule sum in comparison with its spending on public works and communications (30%) or even on culture and education (7%).¹⁹

Nevertheless, given the limited role played by the Spanish government in Catalan agriculture, the agricultural policy of the *Mancomunitat* was far more significant, a fact much emphasized by the Catalan government. According to its calculation, when the

¹⁶ From 1919 to 1923 it carried out a total number of 3386 analyses. See Balcells et al., *La Mancomunitat*, p. 391.

¹⁷ From 1915 to 1917, about 8,000 farmers had participated in 47 courses organized by the Upper School of Agriculture. See Casanovas, "L'ensenyament agrícol", p. 93.

¹⁸ *Mancomunitat de Catalunya, Report del Consell Permanent a l'Assemblea* (Barcelona, 1917), p. 29.

¹⁹ Balcells et al., *La Mancomunitat*, p. 386.

Mancomunitat was established in 1914, the total expenditure of the Spanish government in Catalonia amounted to 19 million pesetas, invested mainly in public works (80%), while the expenditure on agricultural services amounted to only 373,450 pesetas (1.9%).²⁰

The *Mancomunitat*'s goal was to use its scarce financial resources to compensate for the inertia of the Spanish government in the area of agriculture and elsewhere – a lack of activity that was often highlighted by the Catalan government. For instance, regarding cattle farming, when the *Mancomunitat* was set up and the zootechnical studies began, the new government stated:

‘it was unknown what livestock breeds were in Catalonia, what was the value of the livestock, how this wealth was passed on, what its state of progress was, or what its place in the Catalan economy was. It was unknown whether livestock farming provided enough wealth to devote to it; whether it was susceptible to improvement, bearing in mind the idiosyncrasies of farmers and the rural economy, and, if so, what means should be used to position our cattle farming in accordance with our time and with the possibilities of the economy ... two hundred years of centralist administration or, in other words, of absolute abandonment, could not produce any other effects than those of a totally obsolete form of cattle farming’.²¹

To obviate (or at least to limit) the financial restrictions, the regional government created a public savings bank shortly afterwards; it was approved on 6 May 1914, only one month after the creation of the regional government on 6 April. The bank aimed to provide credit for rural villages for public works and improvements, and also for agricultural cooperatives to carry out building work and to purchase machinery. But its capacity was limited; as it could not lend money at a low interest rate, its potential influence was restricted.

The agricultural policy of the *Mancomunitat* had to face another obstacle: the brevity of its mandate. Though it was created in 1914, the competencies for agriculture were transferred only some years later. The Upper School of Agriculture was transferred to the regional government in 1918, when it began to organize the agricultural technical services. The Viticulture and Oenology Service, the Cereals Service and the Fruit and Olive Trees Service were created in 1918; the Cattle Farming Service and the Social Agrarian Action Service were created in 1919, and the Agricultural Analysis Laboratory was transferred to the regional government in the same year; the Forestry Service and the Institute of Agricultural Mechanics were created in 1920. In 1921, the regional government purchased an agricultural estate for practical training, where a new Zootechnical School was to be housed. However, this project was delayed and, after

²⁰ Mancomunitat, *L'obra a fer*, pp. 17-18; Puig i Cadafalch, “Una tasca”, p. 25.

²¹ Mancomunitat de Catalunya, *Els concursos de bestiar. Per què es van fer, per què s'han suprimit* (Barcelona, 1922), pp. 5 and 14.

Primo de Rivera's *coup d'état* in 1923, it was suspended (along with other projects of the regional government)²² and the agricultural technical services were closed down.

However, according to a qualified observer, the agricultural services that the *Mancomunitat* had created were so solid and well organized that 'they could have honoured the most demanding modern state; ... they endured the shock of the military dictatorship and passed on almost undamaged to the new regional government',²³ which reopened them in 1931 under the Second Spanish Republic. In his view, 'in no other branch of culture did the regional government go so far, starting from nothing; ... the miracle happened precisely because there was nothing organized by the state ... and there were no closed walls or dead weights of created interests, ... obstacles that make organizations as impervious as they are impenetrable'.²⁴

3. The Conference on Catalan Agriculture (1919)

In 1919 the Catalan government (*Mancomunitat*) organized a 'Conference on Catalan Agriculture' (significantly, it was initially named 'Conference of Agricultural Associations') which was to bring together in Barcelona several hundreds of delegates of agricultural associations from all over Catalonia, to discuss the future development of agriculture in Catalonia.²⁵ The conference was organized thematically, in the following four sessions: 'Legal organization of Catalan agricultural production', 'Insurances in agriculture', 'Agricultural credit' and 'Agrarian social organization of Catalonia'.

These sessions were to focus on four fundamental issues for the development of Catalan agriculture. The first was the establishment of social norms of mutual respect for all the actors involved in agricultural production, in order to intensify the cultivation and thus increase individual and collective wealth. The second was the improvement of the farmers' protection from crop losses in order to guarantee the sector's economic stability. The third was the creation of an agricultural bank to help cooperatives expand their produce and improve its commercialization, avoiding market fluctuations. The

²² J. Casanovas, "La intervenció de les institucions públiques en la formació de la ramaderia catalana (1912-1939)", *Estudis d'Història Agrària*, 14 (2001), 209-28.

²³ A. Galí, *Història de les institucions i del moviment cultural a Catalunya (1900 a 1936)* (Barcelona, 1982), vol. VI, p. 7.

²⁴ Ibid. Alexandre Galí (1886-1969) was a prestigious teaching expert who participated in the *Mancomunitat's* educational services of and later, in the 1930s, in the new regional Catalan government.

²⁵ Three hundred agricultural associations and nearly two hundred municipalities from all over Catalonia had supported the Conference, many of them sending two or three delegates (*Agricultura*, 20.5.1919).

final issue was the development of agricultural associations,²⁶ which were ‘totally deprived of any precise guidelines’.²⁷

Josep M. Rendé, who was to lead the fourth session, summarized the socio-economic doctrine of the conference in three words: Brotherhood, Well-being and Wealth. But these three objectives could not be attained without the social organization of agriculture, which made the fourth issue essential for its development: ‘without social organization of agriculture there is no credit, no insurance, no brotherhood, or anything else’.²⁸ Rendé stated that all the lecturers at the conference concluded their presentations by stressing the urgent need for agricultural associations, and encouraging the Catalan government to promote the creation of agricultural cooperatives by all the means at their disposal.

The project that Rendé was to present at the conference included the organization of all existing cooperatives into county federations as well as a general organization with authority over federations, with specialized economic sections for each crop, as ‘the only way to bring together in a single system all wine growers, olive growers, livestock farmers, etc., etc., in Catalonia’.²⁹ Rendé conceived of the organization of Catalan agricultural cooperatives in 38 county federations. Some of these federations had already been created, and in some cases there were cooperative organizations that were already carrying out these functions.³⁰ However, the geographical limits of the existing federations had to be re-established and their functions had to be specified. To sum up, as he pointed out, ‘some agricultural cooperatives had been created, but not enough, and the existing ones had to be consolidated; some federations had been created, but many more were needed, and the existing ones had to be consolidated and needed some guidelines’;³¹ finally, a global confederation had to be created.³²

The ‘Conference on Catalan Agriculture’, scheduled to take place in Barcelona on 7-9 May 1919, was finally called off by the military authorities because of the social unrest in the city. It was finally cancelled by the regional government. The projected agrarian

²⁶ *Agricultura*, 5.5.2019.

²⁷ J. M. Rendé, *Pla d’organització social agrària de Catalunya* (Barcelona, 1924), p. 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³⁰ In 1924, this was the case in Berga, Manresa, Martorell, Girona, Vilajuïga, Banyoles, la Bisbal, Cervera, Tortosa, Conca de Barberà, Alt Camp. The last two were created in 1916 and 1919 with Rendé’s direct intervention. See Rendé, *Pla d’organització*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

³² In his view, the motto of the Catalan farmers should be ‘Association, Federation and Confederation’ (*Agricultura*, 20.6.1919).

bank for agricultural cooperatives was never created, and the confederation of agricultural cooperatives was not set up until 1931, under the Second Republic.³³ Nevertheless, the way the conference was prepared and the issues that were to be discussed clearly reflect the aims of the *Mancomunitat* regarding agricultural policy, placing the cooperatives at the forefront at all times.

4. The role of the cooperatives

Agricultural cooperatives became key agents in the educational missions of the agricultural services of the *Mancomunitat*: first, because the scarce funding by the regional government for farm support policies meant that the cooperatives had a vital role to play in the modernization of agriculture; and secondly, because the dissemination of innovations and technical developments had longer-lasting effects when cooperatives were used as channels of transmission.³⁴ In other words, to modernize agriculture it was necessary to enhance not only human capital but social capital as well, and in both these endeavours the role of cooperatives was essential.

The *Mancomunitat* soon began to study ways of promoting agricultural cooperatives. In 1916, an agreement was made to provide technical and economic assistance for the foundation and functioning of agricultural cooperatives, taking into account ‘the beneficial results that this type of institution, now beginning to spread in our country, has achieved abroad ... We are convinced, by the contemplation of the situation beyond our borders, that cooperatives are an instrument capable of building profound economic and social transformations’.³⁵ In 1919, the *Mancomunitat* set up the Social Agrarian Action Service, whose aim was to promote the creation of cooperatives (especially ones that carried out the industrial transformation of agricultural products, such as cooperative wineries and cooperative olive oil mills with high value-added production) and to provide guidelines and legal assistance for their functioning.

Josep M. Rendé was appointed head of the Social Agrarian Action Service, which was considered ‘one of the most important services created by the regional government’.³⁶

³³ When it was founded, on 12 July 1931, the Union of Agricultural Syndicates of Catalonia grouped together most of the existing agricultural cooperatives: that is, more than 500 out of the 800 in operation at that time (*Agricultura i Ramaderia*, 15.7.1931). On this confederation, see M. Ribas Banús, *La U.S.A. de Catalunya* (Universitat de Barcelona, 1974).

³⁴ In fact, the conferences and courses organized by the agricultural technical services across Catalonia were often arranged at the request of agricultural cooperatives. See *Mancomunitat de Catalunya, L’Obra Realitzada. Anys 1914-1923* (Barcelona, 1923), p. 441.

³⁵ *Mancomunitat de Catalunya, Projectes d’acord presentats a la quinta reunió ordinària de l’assemblea* (Barcelona, 1916), pp. 66-67.

³⁶ Galí, *Història de les institucions*, vol. IV, p. 132.

Rendé was a landowner who had been very active in organizing agricultural cooperatives: in 1913, he had founded one of the first wine cooperatives in Catalonia, and in 1916 he set up the first agricultural federation with more than twenty agricultural cooperatives and cooperative wineries.³⁷ A few months before his appointment to lead the Social Agrarian Action Service, he was to present his vision of the ‘Agrarian social organization of Catalonia’ at the *Mancomunitat*’s ‘Conference on Catalan Agriculture’ mentioned in the previous section. As noted above, the conference was finally suspended, but as head of the Social Agrarian Action Service, Rendé had the opportunity to bring his idea to fruition.

Rendé used his previous experience to boost the cooperative movement ‘so that there would be no village in Catalonia without a cooperative or agricultural association’.³⁸ Rendé’s cooperative model followed the example of these associations, which brought together large and small landowners as well as sharecroppers. The focus of these cooperatives was mainly technical and economic, and social and political questions were avoided. According to Rendé, ‘the agricultural cooperative must be the means to obtain the highest price of the main product of the land’,³⁹ which meant using cooperation for the industrial processing of agricultural products such as wine, oil, and flour, so that large and small producers could take advantage of the cooperative services in spite of the social differences.

Rendé gave many lectures on cooperation (60 out of the 71 organized by the Social Agrarian Action Service between 1920 and 1923) and participated in many meetings where the creation of new agricultural cooperatives was discussed. About one third of these lectures (22) focused on cooperative wineries and were each attended by between 100 and 350 participants, making a total of 4410 (35% of the 12,565 participants at these meetings). Other topics discussed at these meetings were the rural savings banks (nine, with 1590 participants), cooperative olive oil mills (five, with 900 participants) and cooperative distilleries (three, with 380 participants).⁴⁰

The foundation of cooperative wineries was, as can be seen, an important objective of the *Mancomunitat*. In fact, some of the lectures were organized as a final step in the process of the foundation of wine cooperatives. From 1917 to 1924 (the period when the agricultural technical services were functioning), 51 cooperative wineries were created in Catalonia, nearly two-thirds of the total number that were founded before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.⁴¹ More than half of them had been assisted

³⁷ A. Gavaldà, *Josep M. Rendé i Ventosa* (Valls, 2005).

³⁸ Rendé, *Pla d’organització*, p. 9.

³⁹ J. M. Rendé, *Organització i guiatge de sindicats agrícoles* (Barcelona, 1923), p. 56.

⁴⁰ *Mancomunitat, L’Obra Realitzada*, pp. 475-77.

⁴¹ Planas, “The emergence”.

by the agricultural technical services of the *Mancomunitat* in various ways: planning the construction of new cellars and modifying or enlarging old ones, providing advice regarding the machinery to be acquired, and in some cases assisting in the process of winemaking.⁴²

The Social Agrarian Action Service was involved in the creation of some 30 cooperatives, including two federations, 14 rural savings banks and 10 cooperative wineries. It also assisted in the drafting or modification of more than 70 statutes of cooperative entities.⁴³ The service arranged for the participation of agricultural cooperatives at three commercial exhibitions in Barcelona and helped more than a hundred Catalan cooperatives to take part in the Exhibition of Cooperation and Social Works held in Ghent, Belgium, in 1924.⁴⁴

The regional government also aimed to provide financial assistance to agricultural cooperatives. As noted above, ever since 1914 the public savings bank had provided loans to agricultural cooperatives. The amounts lent could not exceed 50% of the assets that were offered as a guarantee, which were mortgaged with the joint responsibility of the cooperative members. In addition, the annual payments could not exceed 75% of their average net revenues, and the projects were supervised by the credit bureau.⁴⁵ But the limited capacity of this savings bank restricted its activity, and it was unable to provide credit at a low interest rate. As Rendé acknowledged, the interest rate offered by the savings bank was too high for the agricultural cooperatives, which were forced to borrow money from private banks or from their own rural savings banks.⁴⁶

In 1921, since the public savings bank could not attend to the needs of the numerous agricultural cooperatives, a project was presented in the *Mancomunitat* assembly for the creation of a Cooperative Agricultural Bank by the existing local agricultural savings banks and cooperatives, with the support of the regional government. The project aimed to bring together the agricultural cooperatives of Catalonia under the auspices of the new savings bank, in which the financial deposits of Catalan farmers would be centralized and from where the funds for Catalan agriculture would be obtained,

⁴² For instance, in 1922 the Viticulture and Oenology Service provided assistance to seven cooperative wineries (Falset, Guiamets, Bellmunt, Ripollet, Sant Cugat del Vallès, Rubí and Igualada) which produced 50,000 hectolitres. See *Mancomunitat, L'Obra Realitzada*, p. 467.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 477-78.

⁴⁴ *Mancomunité de Catalogne, Les Syndicats Agricoles de Catalogne à l'Exposition de la Coopération et Oeuvres Sociales de Gand* (Barcelona, 1924).

⁴⁵ *Mancomunitat de Catalunya, Caixa de Crèdit Comunal: Reglamentació provisional de les condicions amb què es podran fer les concessions de préstecs als ajuntaments i sindicats agrícoles de Catalunya, i dels requisits que llurs sol·licituds hauran de reunir* (Barcelona, 1917), pp. 13-14.

⁴⁶ Rendé, *Organització i guiatge*, p. 131.

according to the needs of each county. The *Mancomunitat* would provide its initial capital with a loan of 10 million pesetas (with an issue of 20,000 shares of 500 pesetas) and would have a stake in the management of the bank until the initial capital was repaid. From then onwards, the bank would be managed only by the agricultural cooperatives participating inside it, and without any political intervention.⁴⁷ But this project was not even discussed, as it was considered beyond the possibilities of the regional government at that time. To avoid any discussion, the president of the *Mancomunitat* concluded: ‘We already have the instrument: our public savings bank. What is missing is the money ... We have to be realistic. When we have the means, we will do what we can: modest things, possibly; not miracles’.⁴⁸

Between 1918 and 1922, only 30 agricultural cooperatives applied to borrow funds from the public savings bank; and, after an assessment of their situation, only ten received loans.⁴⁹ The total amount lent to agricultural cooperatives was 757,250 pesetas (some 18% of the public savings bank’s capital) ranging between 20,000 and 150,000 pesetas, with repayment periods of 15 to 50 years. The loans were mainly used for the construction of wine cellars and olive oil mills. For the construction and fitting out of wine cellars the financial assistance of the regional government amounted to 447,100 pesetas (60% of the loans provided for cooperatives); but only six cooperative wineries received financial assistance of the fifty or so that were created between 1917 and 1924.⁵⁰ So most of the wine cooperatives had to look for funding elsewhere. A plan drawn up by the Catalan government to create a Technical Service for Agricultural Constructions to assist the building of cooperative cellars and olive oil mills had to be abandoned in 1918 because of the lack of funding.⁵¹

Cooperatives also played a critical role in avoiding class conflict in the countryside, not just by facilitating technical improvements and making farms more competitive, but also because they were cross-class associations that included both landowners and sharecroppers. When the *Mancomunitat* created the Social Agrarian Action Service in 1919, the vine sharecroppers were mobilizing in the Catalan countryside, a process that led to the creation of the largest peasants’ union, the Union of *Rabassaires*, in 1922.⁵² It

⁴⁷ Barcelona Provincial Archive (AHPB), *Mancomunitat*, Assembly acts, 2nd session of the 14th meeting, 24.2.1921, pp. 31-37.

⁴⁸ AHPB, *Mancomunitat*, Assembly acts, 4th session of the 14th meeting, 26.2.1921, p. 83.

⁴⁹ J. Casanovas, “La *Mancomunitat* de Catalunya i el foment del sindicalisme agrari (1919-1923)”, in J. Barrull, J. J. Busqueta & E. Vicedo (eds.) *Solidaritats pageses, sindicalisme i cooperativisme* (Lleida, 1998), p. 407.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 415; Planas, “The emergence”.

⁵¹ C. Martinell, *Construccions agràries* (Barcelona, 1923).

⁵² Pomés, *La Unió*; Colomé et al., “The Rabassaire Struggle”.

was no coincidence that the campaigns launched by the Social Agrarian Action Service to promote agricultural cooperatives coincided directly with this period of social struggle. As one of the deputies of the *Mancomunitat* put it: ‘an agricultural cooperative is a true mixed association. In it, owners, sharecroppers and workers live together and co-operate ... It is in essence a conservative association, in the noble sense of the word: it is the only means of giving development to all forms of foresight and mutuality, which, in the end, are nothing else than conservative institutions. For this reason, from a political and economic point of view, it is more practical to favour and strengthen cooperatives than to pass a law to favour land reform’.⁵³

This was precisely the reason why sharecroppers’ unions were reluctant to accept this type of agricultural cooperative. In their press they stated that they stood for ‘class entities, as are the workers’ cooperatives of consumption and production’, and against ‘the habit of creating mixed unions [of landowners and sharecroppers], which block the good results of their work’.⁵⁴ The Union of *Rabassaires* challenged this cooperative orientation and defended the creation of sharecroppers’ cooperatives without any tutelage from landowners. Some cooperatives aligned with the sharecroppers’ federation were so angered by the regional government’s ideological orientation in favour of landowners that they decided to cancel their subscription to the *Mancomunitat*’s newspaper.⁵⁵

5. The role of politics

As mentioned above, early agricultural policy in Catalonia had a very small budget within the already limited financial resources available to the *Mancomunitat*. Agricultural modernization was only one of many programmes within a much broader policy of human capital formation, modernization of the Catalan economy, and territorial organization envisioned by the regionalist party the *Lliga*, which led the *Mancomunitat* throughout its existence. Its creation was an initiative of one of the founders of the party, Prat de la Riba, who was the president of the provincial government of Barcelona from 1907 and leader of the *Mancomunitat* from its beginnings in 1914 until his sudden death in 1917. He was succeeded by another member of the *Lliga*, Puig i Cadafalch, until the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera put an end to the Catalan autonomous government in January 1924.

⁵³ AHPB, *Mancomunitat*, Assembly acts, 2nd session of the 14th meeting, 24.2.1921, p. 35.

⁵⁴ *La Terra*, 30-4-1923 and 1-3-1924.

⁵⁵ *La Terra*, 5-7-1924. See J. Pomés, *La Unió de Rabassaires* (Barcelona, 2000) and J. Planas, “La Unión de Rabassaires y el cooperativismo”, *Ayer* (forthcoming).

The *Lliga* had been founded in 1901 by sectors of the Catalan bourgeoisie as a reaction to the political crisis in Spain in the late nineteenth century, after the loss of the American colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico. Disappointed with the role of the Spanish government and aware that Catalan interests were different from the rest of the country, its leaders aimed to gain autonomy for Catalonia in order to promote the region's economic, political and cultural interests, as well as to regenerate Spanish politics.⁵⁶ The *Lliga* had immediate electoral success after its foundation, not only in Barcelona but in rural districts as well, and its political influence increased steadily from 1901 to 1923 (when Primo de Rivera's military *coup d'état* suspended elections), but especially after 1914, when the *Mancomunitat* was created.

In the early twentieth century Catalonia was the most industrialized region in Spain, yet its influence in Spanish politics was slight. The central government was not given to favouring Catalan interests. But the *Lliga* was not just the party of the Catalan industrial bourgeoisie:⁵⁷ its ideologues and leadership came mostly from a rural conservative background, and its growing political influence was also based on the support of rural landowners. The party's position on the agrarian sector was summarized by the Marquis of Camps; in Catalonia, he said, unlike other Spanish regions, the agrarian problem was solved by the existing civil agrarian institutions, which had traditionally harmonized the combination of capital, land and labour. The marquis also highlighted the need for the creation of agricultural cooperatives.⁵⁸

The regional government of the *Mancomunitat* comprised members of the *Lliga* and other political parties, but the *Lliga* always held the presidency and its leadership was undisputed, firstly because of its political strength in the provincial elections, and also because the limited competencies and resources of the *Mancomunitat* left hardly any room for political disputes inside the government.⁵⁹ Moreover, Prat de la Riba was successful in involving members of other parties in the *Mancomunitat*'s programme of economic modernization, human capital formation and cultural development. Significantly, the agricultural department of the regional government was headed not by members of the *Lliga*, but by two Catalanist republicans; however, both of them were politically moderate landowners, who came not from the province of Barcelona (the

⁵⁶ I. Molas, *Lliga Catalana. Un estudi d'estasiologia*, 2 vol. (Barcelona, 1972); B. de Riquer, *Lliga Regionalista: la burgesia catalana i el nacionalisme (1898-1904)* (Barcelona, 1977).

⁵⁷ Ch. E. Ehrlich, "The *Lliga* Regionalista and the Catalan Industrial Bourgeoisie", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33/3 (1998), 399-417.

⁵⁸ *Lliga Regionalista, El pensament català davant del conflicte europeu* (Barcelona, 1915), pp. 225-63.

⁵⁹ Balcells et al., *La Mancomunitat*.

centre of the *rabassaire* struggle) but from areas where inter-class agricultural cooperatives were developing smoothly.⁶⁰

In 1920, at a time of acute social unrest in Catalonia and against the background of the discussions of land reform in several European countries, the *Mancomunitat* presented a project ‘to accomplish a more equal distribution of revenues, without damaging the principles of justice or undermining the general wealth’.⁶¹ The project was designed to provide financial assistance to sharecroppers to purchase land and to create affordable housing in rural towns (with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants), in order to discourage the migration of agricultural workers to the cities. However, the plan was hampered by the lack of financial resources and in 1921 it was still being discussed in the assembly, albeit as a general project ‘to indicate the orientation of the future involvement of the *Mancomunitat* in the agrarian social question’,⁶² without the proposals of any specific measures.

The agricultural programmes of the *Mancomunitat* avoided land redistribution and any contractual changes that would have diminished the political support from landowners, and relied on economic modernization alone to reduce social discontent. In doing so, they strengthened the *Lliga*’s political power, playing down the struggle between landowners and sharecroppers which had mobilized other left-wing political parties such as the republicans, who had given strong support to the *rabassaires*.⁶³

The promotion of agricultural cooperatives sought to spread technical change, but also aimed to maintain the social stability of the Catalan countryside by limiting the spread of unions and class associations. Last but not least, it also sought to reinforce the *Lliga*’s political influence, which was based on the support both of the industrial bourgeoisie and middle classes in Barcelona and other cities, and of rural Catalonia as well. The agricultural cooperatives and other agricultural associations that had participated in the social and political mobilization in the Catalan countryside since the late nineteenth-century agrarian crisis also played a significant role in the *Lliga*’s political success.

6. Conclusion

⁶⁰ Josep Mestres was head of the department of agriculture from 1914 to 1919 and Pere Mias from 1919 to 1924. Mestres, a doctor, was born to a well-off farming family, and participated in the organization of several agricultural cooperatives; Mias was a lawyer as well as the largest landowner in his municipality, and he personally managed his agricultural estates. See also Balcells et al., *La Mancomunitat*, p. 389.

⁶¹ Mancomunitat de Catalunya, *Projectes d’acord presentats a la tretzena reunió ordinària de l’assemblea i acords que recaigueren* (Barcelona, 1920), p. 15.

⁶² AHPB, Mancomunitat, Assembly acts, 4th session of the 14th meeting, 26.2.1921, p. 79.

⁶³ Colomé et al., “The Rabassaire Struggle”.

In the early twentieth century, Catalan agriculture had to deal with two important challenges: first, the introduction of technical changes to increase productivity and thus compete in the international markets, and second, the maintenance of social stability. These challenges, which in fact were the same as the ones facing other European countries, were not easy to meet without state assistance. The *Mancomunitat* tried to compensate for the limited intervention of the central Spanish government in Catalan agriculture by developing an early agricultural policy based on education and technical assistance to promote farming intensification and the industrial processing of agricultural products.

As the *Mancomunitat* had very limited competencies and economic resources for farm support policies, the creation of agricultural cooperatives seemed to offer a solution for the modernization of agriculture. The regional government sought to promote the creation of cooperatives as channels of transmission of technical change and provided guidelines for their functioning.

The government's role in maintaining social stability in the Catalan countryside was also important. When Rendé envisioned the organization of Catalan agriculture divided into local cooperatives, county federations, and a global confederation, his project aimed to encourage technical change inside the Catalan agricultural system, but also to create a more organized rural society and thus to prevent social tensions. The *Mancomunitat* did not have competencies for legislating on land ownership, and the *Lliga's* political agenda did not include any changes on land ownership or farming contracts. The social stability of the Catalan countryside was regarded as a by-product of the economic modernization of agriculture and of the social organization of agriculture based on cooperatives. This belief was shared by the leaders of the *Mancomunitat* and the staff in charge of its agricultural technical services.

Finally, though, this objective was not fulfilled. The Catalan government supported the cooperative movement, but by 1923, when Primo de Rivera's military *coup d'état* put an end to its agricultural policies, many rural villages had not yet set up their agricultural cooperatives; only a few federations had been founded, and the Catalan confederation of agricultural cooperatives had not been created. In stark contrast, when the Union of *Rabassaires* was founded in 1922, it placed the class struggle at the forefront of its agenda, and it fiercely opposed the cross-class agricultural cooperatives promoted by the Catalan government.

Catalonia's early agricultural policy was revived under the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1936), when the region received a new government, the *Generalitat*, with more competencies and resources than its predecessor the *Mancomunitat* between 1914 and 1924. The new Catalan government was led by a new left-leaning party, *Esquerra Republicana*, and it was supported by the Union of *Rabassaires*, which had become Catalonia's largest agricultural union. The new Catalan government sought to favour the sharecroppers' interests, and proposed legislation in the Catalan parliament

regarding contract farming which had become the most pressing question in the political arena, at a time of growing social tensions between landowners and sharecroppers.

In the 1930s, the new Catalan government did not subordinate the issue of social stability to the economic modernization of agriculture, but the *Mancomunitat*'s project to promote agricultural education and technical change was revived: the agricultural technical services that the dictatorship had closed down were reopened, and the staff and the heads of the department were reappointed.⁶⁴ Like the *Mancomunitat* before it, the new regional government saw technical education and the promotion of cooperatives as key elements of its agricultural policy. But again, it was to prove short-lived: in July 1936, Franco's *coup* set in motion a civil war that would last three years and would put an end to the Catalan autonomous government and all its policies.

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⁶⁴ In 1933 Pere Mias was appointed head of the Department of Agriculture and Economy, and Josep Mestres also had responsibilities in this department.