TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD: PEASANT MASSACRES IN GALICIA IN THE FIRST THIRD OF THE 20TH CENTURY AND THEIR IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION

Miguel Cabo¹ (Departamento de Historia Contemporánea e de América, Universidade de Santiago de Compostela)

1. GALICIA: A BRIEF OVERVIEW.

A brief introduction to Galician agriculture and modern history is necessary, as they are completely different from those commonly identified abroad with Spain. Galicia, a region with a culture and language of its own, was divided into four provinces (A Coruña, Lugo, Ourense and Pontevedra) along artificial lines by the Spanish liberal regime in 1834, imitating the French départements. It is situated in the North-western corner of the Iberian Peninsula and its climate is typically atlantic-oceanic, rainy and with a small thermic oscillation over the year. At the beginning of the XXth century its population reached almost two million inhabitants, which represented 10.6% of the Spanish population, a percentage that constantly decreased afterwards (9.9% in 1920; 9.5% in 1940 and only 7.2% in 1981) due mainly to emigration. In the first eighty years of the XXth century Galicia suffered a net loss of almost one million people, the so-called “fifth province”, and during most of the XXth century Buenos Aires was the biggest city of Galicia. It should be taken into account that industrial activities had lost weight during the XIXth century because most of their products (linens, iron industry, tanned leathers) had been replaced by those coming from Catalonia. As a result, an overwhelming majority of the active population was employed in agriculture, 86% in 1900 and still 72% as late as 1950, after a decade of autarchic stagnation after the Civil War (1936-1939) had interrupted the slow decline of the agricultural active population.

¹ This paper stems from the research Project “La gran transformación tecnológica y social de las agriculturas ibéricas: viejos, nuevos y novísimos paradigmas. 1950-2000” (HAR2013-47934-P, main researcher Lorenzo Fernández Prieto). For the sake of clarity references have been cut down as soon as possible. For more details and empirical evidence please refer to the bibliography provided at the end of this paper.
The Galician farming system was characterised by the predominance of small farms, by the "foro" as the prevailing system of land ownership (it could be defined as a kind of long-term agricultural contract with division of domain which assured the tenant his stability on the land) and by a model of family exploitation where the main source of income was the export of beef, while crops (potatoes, corn and rye) were mostly dedicated to fodder or self-consumption. Common lands played a key role, supplying wood, fertilizer, graze and other resources (Balboa, 1990). In spite of not being compatible with the liberal concept of ownership, the “foro” (which traced its origins to the XIIth century) emerged unscathed from the XIXth century reforms in Spain (including the sale of the Church lands or Desamortización)\(^2\). The fundamental changes started with the fin-de-siècle agricultural crisis which eroded the bases of the “fidalguía” power (lower nobility which acted as intermediary group in relation to land ownership). Social and economic changes developed for half a century up to the abrupt and bloody interruption of 1936. The long postwar period meant suffering and repression, still alive in the collective memory of Galician people, who refers to them as “os anos da fame negra” (years of black famine). From the mid-1950s the dictatorship promoted a model of development based on state-sponsored industries and a second wave of mass migration, directed not to South America but to the booming European Western countries.

One Galician peculiarity has been the gap between its obvious ethnic peculiarities within Spain and the weakness of its political expression in comparison with Catalonia and the Basque Land. After a cultural revival during the second half of the XIXth century (Rexurdimento), Regionalism developed demanding Home-rule, but internal divisions ballasted its development\(^3\). At the moment of the Desastre of 1898 it was a movement with a remarkable ideological development but unable to find popular support out of some intelligentsia circles. It was not until the Second Republic (1931-1936) that a unified modern party emerged, the Partido Galeguista, with a significant electoral weight and the capacity to

\(^2\) The foro meant a form of “impure” and mixed ownership, and collided with the liberal concept of a “free and perfect ownership” (“propiedad libre y perfecta”). However, both peasants and low nobility (Church had been eliminated as landowners by the Desamortización) had not interest at all in eroding a system on which they depended, and the liberal forces feared that any change would throw the peasants into the arms of sectors opposing liberalism (mainly the carlistas). The classical study on this subject is that of Villares (1982).

\(^3\) A short introduction in English about Galician nationalism can be found in Beramedi & Núñez (1995).
win seats in the Madrid Parliament and to impulse the recognition of an autonomous regime for Galicia in 1936 (never put into practice because of the outbreak of the Civil War).

2 THE AGRARIAN MOVEMENT

In the last decade of XIXth century, precisely after universal suffrage was introduced in Spain (1890), agrarian organizations emerged in both the Western provinces of Pontevedra and A Coruña, part of the wave of mobilization in the countryside which affected the whole European continent. Political groups excluded from the political power such as republicans and socialists tried to foster peasant organizations in order to erode the base of power of the monarchist parties, which rested on a net of relationships at the local level, the partisan use of administration and the demobilization of rural masses. Until the very last years of the XIXth century, the only agrarian organizations existing were the small-scale cattle insurance companies, mostly apolitical and developed after traditional institutions that assured losses would be shared by all the cattle-owners.

Agrarian unions would develop as a result of a double impulse. From below, they expressed and took advantage of the force of surviving parochial ties such as woodland common uses or neighbours helping each other in farming chores, so that in many cases they succeeded in getting their own interests identified with those of the local community as a whole. From above, agrarian unions matured and widened their field of activity thanks to the involvement of journalists, urban workers or lawyers. This explains the paradox of agrarian unions flourishing first in the surrounding of cities rather than in purely agricultural areas. In this matter, two questions need be emphasized: the role played by workers employed in the cities but who kept ties or even land in their places of origin, and the influence of emigrants, mostly in South America, who changed their perspectives when confronted with political and unionist strifes in cities like Buenos Aires or Montevideo.

It is hard to find a rural parish in Galicia with no agrarian union between the 1890s and the Civil War. The agrarismo sought for an end of the foral system and unjust distribution of taxes. It is commonly agreed that only after these grievances were satisfied, especially that of access to full property, was it possible for technical innovation to concentrate most of the attention. Agrarian

4 It is interesting to mention the fact that it was unusual to find more than one agrarian union in a given parish, and many cases are documented in which people with leftist and rightist ideas let them aside to work together.
leaders and technicians held after 1908 a series of Assemblies in which a reformist programme was designed to secure the survival of smallholdings in the context of a capitalist economy: cooperative societies, removal of the foro system, and technical modernization. Peasants were finally recognized as the protagonists of necessary changes in agriculture. It could be argued, however, that many of the leaders of the unions were not real peasants (clergy-men, wealthy propietors, rural primary-school teachers), but that was to change, especially from 1920 on, as revealed by local studies (often former emigrants who had assimilated new experiences in the trade-unionism of Cuba, Argentina or Uruguay played a key role). Only catholic syndicates remained firm in their paternalistic approach (Martínez, 1989: 94).

As the "agrarismo" expanded, different political forces tried to influence the movement for their own benefit and goals. Socialists attempted to widen their support base out of the few industrial areas, catholics sought to build a bulwark against collectivism and secularization, nationalists wanted to back their projects of self-government and so on. Is it possible therefore to talk about a Galician agrarismo as a whole, given its political and geographical differences within Galicia? To most observers, who longed for a green party or at least a common federation for the whole region, agrarian unionism did not fulfil their hopes and was only useful for unscrupulous social climbers who used their followers for their own personal and political goals. Nevertheless, all of these varieties of agrarismo had in common most of the organizational aspects (parochial basis unions later united in municipal or provincial federations), clearly as an answer to the demands and determining factors imposed by the communities at the base. In the rest of Spain, for instance, socialists defended peasant organization at a municipal basis, but in Galicia they had to adapt themselves to the force of parochial feelings. Leaving aside the more clearly political goals, most of the objectives and activities were shared by the vast majority of the agrarian unions. Furthermore, the dream of unifying under the same flag the formidable force represented by all the Galician unions was always present, even after successive failures. Furthermore, the reformist programme elaborated by different factions of agrarismo with the advice of technicians in the Agrarian Assemblies between 1908 and 1915 was adopted first by the nationalists and later by other forces, even by members of the two monarchist parties who tried to adapt to the new circumstances. This process could be seen as a triumph of the agrarismo or as its corruption and distortion of its message, because as one of the early supporters of the Agrarian Assemblies (Joaquín Arias Sanjurjo) wrote bitterly in 1918, even those who had opposed them were later, like the geese of the tale, wearing their feathers.

Many observers, and many historians, spoke about the "manipulation" of the peasantry by their leaders. However, if we study this subject more carefully some doubts arise. If unions of
different political orientation offered the same services to their members, couldn't we maintain that ideologies and partisan convenience and beliefs had to adapt themselves to the peasantry, contrary to what is commonly assumed? The Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and its trade-unionist branche UGT believed, following the orthodox marxist analysis, that smallholders were doomed to disappear before big estates, but in Galicia they promoted achievements aimed at securing the survival of smallholders, such as cooperatism. Their leaders argued that this kind of measures would allow peasants to assimilate little by little collectivist notions. In the same way, catholic leaders had to accept the end of the foro system, even if it was part of the idealized pre-liberal society they were trying to restore. Refusing to do so would have meant losing much of their appeal among peasants who were seeking to become full proprietors of their land, so that soon catholic unions joined the chorus asking the government to promulgate a law about the subject, though seeing to it that rentist received proper compensation. There are many examples of unions being organized by opponents of the political group dominating a given area or council which soon failed after their members realized the promoters were only interested in their own political goals. Politics meant for ordinary rank-and-file members of the agrarian unions little more than seizure of the municipal power. They sought to make their voices heard on matters of fundamental importance for them such as local taxes and public works. Issues such as tariffs on corn (necessary for cattle-feeding) or imports of frozen meat from South America helped to elevate the perceptions of peasants to a higher scale. It was possible for politicians to entice peasants towards more abstract goals (Republic, autonomy and so on) only by using more immediate questions as a bait and persuading them that under the new political conditions the agrarian reform almost everybody agreed upon could be put into effect.

The agrarian movement had deep long-term effects in almost any field (cultural, educational, economic...). Focusing on the dimension more closely related to the subject of this session, from a political point of view, agrarismo as a whole can be regarded as a step towards modern practices of political representation and mobilization. The agrarian unions adopted a strong attitude for "clean" elections, the only way they could take advantage of their political value as masses.

The liberal system in Spain until the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in 1923, known as Restauración, was based upon the demobilization of rural masses, to assure the control of the situation by the two monarchist parties that took turns in control of the Government in turns. The monarchist parties, liberal and conservative, alternated in government under the arbitrage of the Crown conforming to a watery imitation of the British political system. Republican, working class and regionalist parties were excluded from power, and the whole assemblage was based
on the demobilization of the electorate and the systematic electoral fraud, in spite of the existence of universal male suffrage as early as 1890. Both were in fact notable parties, with very loose organization and not very strong ideological constraints and organized around a series of leaders at different levels. Most of deputies in Galician districts were elected with slight or no electoral contest until the changes brought by the agrarian movement from the first decade of the XXth century. In any case, the dominant parties did on their own initiative little to widen the political conscience and promote political mobilization, quite on the contrary. They even mistrusted forms of mobilization which would play in their favor, such as the catholic peasant unions, because any kind of mobilization could on the long run erode the basis of the system.

Nationalist witness could be discarded as partial and interested in giving the impression of a central state absolutely isolated from the needs and ways of life of the bulk of Galician population, but plenty of observers with no nationalist background at all can be quoted who confirm the same diagnosis. As a sample, in 1904 Prudencio Rovira, a representative in Pontevedra of the maurista faction within the conservative party described as follows the relationship between Galician peasants and the state:

“Every single personification of the state powers reach him [Galician peasant] as robbery, sacking, fraud outrage. Safeguards reserved for his rights in the laws are feared as ambushes laid to his freedom or his wealth. He prefers, therefore, to put his destiny in the hands of his neighbours before trusting the tutelage of foreign powers”.

Some cities and peripheral regions like Catalonia became eventually hard to control as forces "out of the turn" (socialists, republicans, regionalists) were able to take a hold on them, and the Galician establishment tried to forestall any “contagion”. In Galicia, republicans were strong in some cities (especially A Coruña), but as long as they remained confined to urban districts they were not a threat for the system as a whole. Monarchist parties had several weapons to keep the situation under control: firstly, cities like Lugo, Ourense or Santiago remained firm in their hands, not casually all of them episcopal sees and inland cities lacking industry. Secondly, cities were surrounded in electoral terms by rural districts more easily controlled by the caciques, and so could prevent a republican from being elected to the Congress.
From 1907 on, following the successful pattern established in previous years in Catalonia, the main political forces excluded from power (Republicans, regionalists and traditionalists, only the working-class movement did not take part) united their forces under the so called *Solidaridad Gallega* (Galician Solidarity) to break the supremacy of the corrupt monarchist parties. The *Solidaridad*, particularly strong in the province of A Coruña, set as part of its strategy the fostering of, and alliance with, agrarian unions to defy the power of local *caciques*. They took advantage of previously existing phenomena such as the local press or the agrarian unionism, but redefining them to shape a new way of understanding politics in Galicia, not based (or not primarily) upon personal influences and a net of local bosses who distributed threats and protection, but upon the mobilization of the electorate, first of all the peasants. Political rallies, something unheard of in Galicia outside urban centres, were held before masses of peasants by speakers who urged them to make use of their rights as citizens. Real campaigns took place before elections, traditionally restricted to rounds of negotiations among *caciques* at different levels. There was also the increased influence of the local press, often acting as the public voice of agrarian unions and federations, and the abuses of local administrations were painstakingly monitored by periodicals whose journalists were usually politically involved as activists. Many politicians so started their careers. The *Solidaridad* failed to gain any seat in the general elections, in spite of winning many seats of town councillors in 1909, due mainly to internal strife and defections. Even so, they developed a model of rural political agitation that survived their failure. Future elections, until the *pronunciamiento* of 1923, were much tougher at all levels, although the endemic difficulties of agrarian leaders to organize their forces under a unified umbrella organization helps explain the fact that not a single deputy was elected in the four Galician provinces outside of the two monarchist parties. The adaptation of liberals and conservatives, who appropriated both leaders, tactics and ideas of the agrarianists, also explains the election results. To secure their dominion they had to learn from their enemies, creating their own docile unions, bargaining for the State to set up agricultural stations in their districts or supporting cooperativism from the town councils.

Year 1923 was probably the moment in which the Galician *agrarismo* came as close to unity as it could. In that year, most of the non-catholic unions were united under a common federation (*Confederación Regional de Agricultores Gallegos*) which boasted of gathering 419 unions with almost 62,000 members (that's to say mostly households) (Cabo, 1998: 122). At the same time, catholic unions were roughly as many, and only a third of Galician municipalities had not at least one catholic union in any of their parishes. After that, its would become politically more and more heterogeneous, first opposing those sectors who accepted collaboration with the Dictadura of 1923-30 and those who refused it, and later the lack of unity aggravated in the Second Republic as every
party tried to win over as many agrarian unions as possible. The military régime after 1936 disbanded most of the agrarian unions, seized their buildings and bank accounts, imprisoned many of their leaders and controlled the peasantry through corporate institutions, so that State interests (and later those of the big companies) prevailed over those of the peasants. The majority of the agrarian unions were seen as potentially hostile because of their leftist, republican or nationalist orientation, and that gives historians a clue about the balance of power within the agrarismo in the former years.

The agrarismo created new nets and places for the rural social life, such as the so-called "agrarian festivals", the meetings and their own headquarters, often built thanks to the free help of the members. The assemblies, even if complaints about absentism are not uncommon, were an unique opportunity for the members to discuss public affairs that no other institution gave them at all. The behaviour of local authorities was examined and possible abuses denounced, but current events on a larger scale were also discussed. Many unions suscribed to periodicals, and reading was often aloud to inform the illiterate or semi-illiterate. Until the Civil War, agrarian unions were the main vehicles for politics and ideologies to penetrate the countryside. Many unions stated in their standing orders that the electoral behaviour of their members should follow the guidelines fixed in an general assembly. Even during the Second Republic (1931-1936), when political activities found less obstacles and political rights were legally endorsed, political parties knew that the only way to secure support among the countryfolk was either through surviving nets of caciquismo and misuse of the Administration or through links with agrarian unions, these last being the only working mass organizations in the countryside (that not being the case obviously of local sections of political parties). In 1923 the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera had understood that agrarian unions were in many areas the only existing political opposition and therefore filled vacancies in town councils with agrarian leaders.

The peculiarities of the political situation in Spain, with a liberal system with restricted access to power resting upon demobilization of potential voters, avoided the possibility of the Galician agrarian movement adopting a political low profile and concentrating on economic and cooperative goals as happened in Scandinavia. In addition, full ownership of land by the cultivators required a political action, given that the end of the foro system had to be achieved by a law passed through the Spanish Parlament. Under such conditions, even unions that tried to develop exclusively economic activities could not help, in the long term, from getting involved in political strife, because the power group controlling that territory could not be unconcerned by the fact of peasants being more independent thanks to a succesful cooperative or saving bank. Their dominion was based
upon controlling any single source of power, and people working together to achieve certain goals, even if not directly political, was something they could not tolerate.

3. CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN MODERN RURAL GALICIA: AN OVERVIEW.

A certain degree of conflict and violence under one form or another is inherent to any kind of human society, the challenge for scholars is to understand its logic and patterns.

According to Charles Tilly (Tilly et al., 1975: 66-72), all the variety of forms of popular collective action in modern Europe is comprised in three categories:

a) Competitive collective action, opposing families and communities at an horizontal level, reflecting competition for local resources and contest over local power.

b) Reactive conflicts: those of a defensive nature, caused by popular reactions against the interference of state agents in the local sphere. Tax revolts, food riots, anti-draft demonstrations or ritual destruction of modern machines or fences in former communal lands are typical examples. Their nature is defensive because the objective of the participants it to preserve existing rights and ways of life, and common resistance often allows the coalescence of popular and elite elements of the local communities against external forces such as the state or capitalist market.

c) Proactive forms are characterised by a group reivindicating rights and resources never enjoyed in past times. Proactive collective action is not about resisting state meddling, but about challenging authorities making use of a national repertoire. Organizations are more formal and less dependent on preexisting ties and solidarities expressed at the local level. These are properly speaking social movements, and its forms of action are strikes, election rallies, public meetings, demonstrations and the like, more suitable to combine with other challengers to act at a broader level.
The first two forms share the “old” repertoire of collective action, parochial addressing local actors and leaders (often under patronage varieties) and putting an end to action as soon as the immediate grievances had been satisfied by the local representatives of the state. On the contrary, proactive forms introduce a new or “modern” repertoire, more national in scope and “as compared with the older repertoire, its action are relatively autonomous: instead of staying in the shadow of existing power holders, users of the new repertoire tend to initiate their own statements of grievances and demands. Strikes, demonstrations, electoral rallies, and similar actions build, in general, on much more deliberately constructed organization that used to be the case” (Tilly, 1983: 466).

These three categories are neither exclusive nor strictly consecutive, and the same happens with old and new repertoires. However, a chronology has been established for different national cases, dating the transition between the predominance of the old and the modern repertoire between 1830 (repression of the “Swing” rebellion) and the next two decades in Great Britain, in the 1850s in France and in the turn of the century in Italy and Spain. The reactive forms are the result of the state expanding its fields of action at the expense of local notables and communities, and when the transition between the hegemony of reactive and proactive forms is completed that would indicate the triumph of the national state, appearing before the eyes of the citizens as the target of reivindications because it is recognized as the instance charged with, and able to, solve their grievances (Tilly et al., 1997: 304).

Are these concepts and categories applicable to rural Galicia? The countryside of northern Spain has been traditionally presented by the contemporary press and observers, but also by historiography, as a paradigm of social peace. According to this view, Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria or the Basque Country, away from built-up urban areas, represented a redoubt of arcadian peace, where the prevalence of farming families and the preservation of religiousness and traditions had brought about a situation of stability that was, however, more and more fragile. External dangers such as urban development, anticlericalism and the contagious political and union extremism called into question the alleged virtues attributed to farmers from this conservative viewpoint. All this was obviously a counterimage to southern Spain, where large estates and the massive presence of day labourers were deemed to be at the root of endemic violence, as well as the rootlessness of the industrial proletariat.

---

5 For example, as recently as 1998, Eduardo González Calleja excludes Northern Spain from his meticulous book on public order and violence in Spain in the age we are dealing with. According to him, rural society in Northern Spain was “politically inert” (González Calleja, 1998: 543). For Spain as a whole, he accepts Tilly’s chronology.
The supposed harmony of traditional rural society was part of an idealised view created from different ideological perspectives (Catholicism, nationalism or Francoist National Catholicism, among others) and has been debunked by recent historiography, which has brought to light the internal conflicts that are inherent to any human group in any historical context (Hervés et al., 1997). There were, however, certain expressions of evident, uncomfortable violence that called those arcadian visions into question, such as the intervillage clashes which, with dramatic regularity, resulted in loss of lives and seemed to go unscathed through economic and social transformations and the different political frameworks (Cabo & Vázquez, 2015).

First of all, I will briefly present the different modalities of conflict and collective action in rural Galicia under the light of Tilly’s methodology, grouping them together in competitive, reactive and proactive forms.

1. Competitive forms of collective action.

Plenty of observers described Galician rural society in terms of an arcadic paradise in which life flew along lines of harmony and respect for the authority of the father within the family and the local nobles and the priest within the local society, with inequality being accepted as the natural order. Reality never fit that idyllic picture, used mainly by conservative catholics to deplore what they saw as contamination from the urban world that had eroded the moral standards of the countryside.

Local communities, usually at a parochial level, implied strong solidarity ties among its members and they kept an important material dimension. An endemic form of competitive collective action took place at an horizontal level, I am referring to the quarrels among the youth of competing parishes. Neighbour local communities competed for common lands, graze rights and even the marriage market: a girl marrying a man from outside the community restricted the chances of the local youth, which would react angrily if the foreigner did not comply with a given set of material and symbolic compensations. Intervillage clashes would last until the 1960s (Cabo & Vázquez, 2015)

2. Reactive forms of collective action.

---

6 Rural parishes had an average of slightly under 600 inhabitants at the beginning of the XXth century. It must be taken into account that parishes lacked any kind of official recognition, the municipality being the lowest level of the state administration.
This kind of conflict against the expansion of the nation-state predominate along the XIXth century, as the liberal authorities assumed responsibilities until them performed by nobility or the Church. Tax revolts dot subsequent decades, with occasional waves of protest as happened in 1892 in the surroundings of several cities and towns against the hated consumos (municipal taxes on food), whose collection was rented to individuals who charged even 100% more for their own profit. Those 1892 revolts were still purely reactive: protagonism of women, lack of permanent organizational structures, destruction of tax offices and short-lived character, being dismantled after their reivindications were met or before repression. A second kind of reactive conflict were the draft revolts against the impopular and class-biased compulsory military service Other reactive conflicts were ignited around the common lands question. Spanish legislation did not recognize the communal ownership of forest and scrub, which however was vital for the subsistance of the smallholders. Everybody involved in agrarian economy understood the catastrophic consequences of disrupting the key role played by the montes. Local communities resorted to a combination of judicial appeals and disruption of the efforts of the forest engineers: officials were menaced or stoned when they tried to examine and measure the lands, seedlings were uprooted in the night, cattle brought ilegally to newly afforested areas, enclosures built by those who dared to buy ancient common lands were destroyed...

3. Proactive forms.

Proactive forms appear in the last years of the XIXth century along with new modalities of association in rural society. In this paper particular attention is reserved for the emergence of the agrarismo. The transition between reactive and proactive forms can be placed in the turn of the century, when new forms of permanent and formal organization superimpose the previous community basis, or in Tönnies classical dichotomy, the Gesellschaft gradually replaces the Gemeinschaft. This transition marks a new conscience of the closeness of the nation-state, progressively seen not merely as a menacing external force, but as an structure which could grant advantages to agrarian producers and with which negociation was possible, subject to a previous organization of interests.

A question that must be underlined is that the transition from reactive to proactive forms is a matter of predominance, not of exclusivity. Thus, even in the years of the Great War,

---

7 Vallejo (1990); an interesting approach to this forms of popular protest in Logroño in Gil (1995).
8 Balboa (1990). This form of collective but private property only found a first legal recognition in 1968.
specially in 1917 and 1918, food riots and assaults against retailers in the old style were common in Galicia. To satisfy the demand of the contending countries, speculators deviated great quantities of foodstuffs from the inner market, causing the rise of the prices, and the situation further deteriorated due to the scarcity of fertilizers and pesticides. A 1905 conflict in the town of Tui (Pontevedra) symbolized this trend. The conflict started the old way, when female vendors from the surroundings protested against an increase in taxes on agrarian products, such as milk, introduced in the town market. But times were changing, as shown by the agrarian unions taking charge of the protest and promoting a three-week boycott which forced the mediation of the provincial authorities and the withdrawal of the rise. Only the discipline and common action of coordinated unions could maintain the “siege” of the town until the final success.

Agrarian unions had solid roots in communitarian ties and solidarities, but went further. They tried to have representatives elected in elections at different levels, municipal, provincial or even general. Peasant leagues not only resisted state action, when and if necessary, but also tried to be heard by its representatives and to bargain with officials and office-holders. Agrarian leaders were aware of the fact that to achieve the reforms they wished, the decisive step would be legislation in the Spanish parliament. That was the case with the demands of a law promoting full ownership for foro tenants, changes in tariffs to promote Galician cattle production or amendments in the taxation system to prevent unjust and politically biased distribution of local taxes such as the consumos.

Agrarian unionism thus absorbed the reactive forms of conflict, but to a certain degree it did the same with competitive violence. Most of the unions were organized at parochial level, although later federated at higher levels. A strong stimulus to create an agrarian union in a parish was emulation, with locals reacting when a “rival” parish took the lead by constituting its own. These rivalties were often the explanation behind unions of different parishes in the same municipality having opposed political tendencies, and of course in occasions made permanent collaboration among several unions rather difficult. This mixture of permanence and change is a common feature of collective action in rural Galicia until 1936.

Agrarian unions combined conventional (political and legal) and disruptive (boycott, massive non-payment of rents, resistance to foreclosures) forms of action, but for the most part disliked open violence. That preference for legal means is remarkable when one takes into account that the Administration was not neutral and that the judiciary system was for the
most part corrupted\(^9\). The use of violence meant for the agrarian unions the risk of being illegalized by the authorities, which in general would be too glad to do it (they even forged such excuses in several occasions), and it is well known that for social movements with a broad basis the employment of violent means reduces support among initial sympathizers and allies. After all, the legitimacy of the agrarian movement was to a large extent based on its reivindication of rights formally recognized (association, suffrage) but subject to countless hindrances in practice. That’s why political opponents and hostile press never failed to point out any violent incident whatsoever or to link any crime with the activities of the local unions. Moreover, the potential use of violence is more effective to social movements than its actual use, because it creates uncertainty in the target groups and authorities, therefore bringing a tactical advantage (Tarrow, 1994: 182).

Verbal violence was part of the discourse of agrarian orators, but mainly as an instrument to mobilize and inflame their auditory, skeptical and cautious by nature. Agrarian leaders compared now and then caciques with vermin peasants should get rid of, the same way they chased wolfs or wild boars. Another classic piece of rethorics was the invocation of the memory of the Irmandiños revolt in the XVth century, when peasant crowds assaulted the castles of their feudal lords, establishing an obvious analogy and at the same time eroding the myth of the passiveness of the peasantry. Basilio Álvarez, charismatic populist priest, even said in 1913 that “there are times that dynamite smells like incense”. However, if we examine the rare massive violent episodes associated with the agrarian movement in Galicia up to 1936, we verify that the dead belong exclusively to one side: that of the peasants, usually at the hands of the Guardia Civil. If we consider violence in the purest sense of the word, the agrarian unions were mostly innocent of that sin. The best proof of the above assertion was the ease with which the bulk of the agrarian movement was dismantled by the military in 1936, in spite of being for the most part opposed to the ideals and interests backing the coup. Whatever amount of violence existed in rural Galicia prior to July the 18\(^{th}\) 1936, it would pale in comparison with the bloody nightmare that was about to fall upon Galicia and Spain.

 Violence forms related to the agrarian unions can be summarized in the following categories:

1. Those “everyday forms of peasant resistance” or “weapons of the weak” defined by Scott (1985; 1986), widely used against rentists and authorities and also to

---

\(^9\) A notorious example of impunity was the murder in 1911 in Ponteareas (Pontevedra) of one unarmed agrarian leader at the hands of the town clerk and three of his sons. In spite of having confessed their crime and having committed the assassination before dozens of witnesses, they were finally cleared.
reduce the number of free-riders (Olson, 1965). Maiming of animals, boycott, arson and the like were forms of coercion widely used against individuals who refused to affiliate or who disobey the decisions taken in the assembly.

2. Competitive violence between unions, usually two associations of opposing ideology trying to hegemonize a given territory. The competition would often follow the patterns of weapons of the weak or the above mentioned endemic intervillage clashes.

3. Violence derived from disputes to control the local job-markets. Given the peculiarities of the Galician farming-system, this kind of conflict arose mostly in vineyard areas where wage-earners were a significant lot, or linked to public works (roads, railways...) when unions tried to have a say in the hiring of underskilled workers. Finally, sometimes a “contagion” happened in areas close to urban centres, when strikes originated in the factories were supported or not by the population in the surroundings.

4. Violence surrounding the fight against the foro system to force renters to accept the redemption of the land: threats, boycotts, arson... not unlike those well known for Ireland during the Land War.

5. Violence developed within the context of conflicts with the State, most likely local authorities. Unions acting as defenders of the legitimate rights of the local community could oppose decisions perceived as unfair: new taxes, corruption, electoral fraud and so on. Depending on the reaction of the antagonists, protests could escalate, as will be examined for some specific cases in the following pages.

4. FOUR EPISODES OF MASS VIOLENCE AGAINST PEASANTS AND THEIR AFTERMATCH

Long-term sociopolitical changes are processes, not single facts, and therefore harder to analyze by historians than battles or single elections. I have chosen four episodes in which rural protesters were repressed with an iron hand. I do not imply that this was the norm, quite on the contrary: if they left an indelible memory in the Galician society was because such amount of victims was highly unusual, not only in the countryside but in urban environments as well. By analyzing these four massacres
and the reactions they provoked, we hope to get a deeper understanding of the undercurrents and developments in society as a whole.


If we employ Tilly’s terminology, what happened in 1909 in Oseira (Western Ourense), would be a reactive conflict. Although agrarian unions were strong in other parts of Galicia at that moment, there were none in the municipality of Cea, to which the parish of Oseira belonged. The closest town is O Carballiño, where there existed some trade unions since a decade before.

Oseira is well-known for its monastery, one of the biggest in Spain, which at that moment was ruined as a result of the desentailment of Church properties of the 1830s. However, the church of the monastery was still used by the local community for masses. It contained a huge canopy which the bishop of Ourense Eustaquio Ilundain decided to remove and take to the provincial capital arguing that it was deteriorated. The decision was unpopular, because the villagers had not been consulted and there existed a popular belief according to which the canopy hid a golden dove, so giving currency to the rumour of unconfessed reasons behind the decision of the bishop. A commission was sent to convince the bishop, but to no avail. The mood was so stormy that the local priest decided to leave after being threatened. On April 1909 a group of carpenters was sent to begin the removal of the canopy but the hostile attitude of the neighbours forced them to give up their task. On the 22nd the carpenters came back with an escort of twenty members of the Guardia Civil, a peculiar constabulary created in 1844 with a military structure and regulations with the primary mission of preserving order but also land ownership. For rural Spaniards the Guardia Civil constituted the most obvious embodiment of the State. They had been assigned by the governor of Ourense at the request of the bishop and were commanded by a lieutenant, the Teniente Salinas.

The bells rang so that the biggest possible crowd congregated, a behaviour we will find in other episodes because bells were a crucial instrument of communication in the countryside, as well as an identity factor. Another recurrent fact: women were a majority, an particular in the first ranks facing the guards. It was widely believed in

---

The following reconstruction of the four episodes is based on my personal research, my own Ph.D. Dissertation (Cabo, 1999), information collected in press, the Fundación Maura in Madrid and other archives. For Sofán Riesgo (1997) provides valuable data.
that age that the officers would hesitate to open fire if women could be victims. At the same time, that same presence could be presented as a proof that the riot was “apolitical”, taking advantage of the notion that females were incapable of holding abstract ideas beyond the immediate needs of their families. Tension increased, the crowd refused the warning to evacuate the building in spite of admonitory shots into the air and finally the guards opened fire at the command of the lieutenant. Although the official version claimed that there had been a first shot by the protesters, no firearms were ever found, although there is ample evidence that stones were thrown at the guards.

Ten deaths were reported, among them a pregnant woman and a young girl. A dozen people were badly wounded and many others suffered minor injuries.

The massacre of Oseira was followed by riots in the provincial capital of Ourense and meetings of condemnation in the main cities of Galicia. The bishop of Ourense had to stay outside the city while the demonstrators stoned his palace, as well as other religious buildings and the local conservative newspaper. A campaign was launched both in press and parliament against both the government and the Church hierarchy. Interestingly enough, it was led by liberals, republicans, socialists and (Catalan and Galician) nationalists to erode Maura’s hold of power. This charismatic conservative leader had been promoting an ambitious programme of reforms (electoral law of 1907 and the stillborn local government law among others) and this broad coalition saw the opportunity to debilitate him while portraying him as a repressive heartless bigot. Anticlericalism was shared by a broad arch going from the liberals to the workers’ movement and the details of Oseira’s slaughter made possible a combined attack against the Church and the conservatives at the same time. The whole affair has an astonishing resemblance, at a minor scale of course, with the campaign after the riots in Barcelona at the end of that summer, the so-called Semana Trágica (tragic week) which put an end to Maura’s government and somehow signalled the beginning of the end for the liberal regime in Spain. A taboo was broken in both cases: one of the monarchist parties (the liberal one) had sought an alliance with forces outside the so-called “turn”, which ad guaranteed the peaceful alternation in power between conservatives and liberals since 1874.

To make things even more complex, a sector of the local clergy was satisfied with the situation and lent a hand behind the scenes because the measures of Ilundáin
against some traditional practices of the priests had gained him the ill will of many of them.\(^{11}\)

The interpretations of the facts in the press and the Parliament were of course very different, but they show also some interesting points in common. To conservatives and catholics alike, the peasants had only a limited accountability in the whole affair. They were portrayed as naive, childlike, ignorant irrational beings who were sincere believers but mixed their faith with superstition and a deep suspicion against authorities of any sort. Several republicans who did not live in Cea but had relatives or land there were named as instigators who had promoted the misunderstandings between the bishop and his flock. They could not be sentenced, but interestingly enough, some of them were *paseados* (shot without trial) at the beginning of the Civil War almost thirty years later.\(^{12}\) It seems some accounts had to be settled when the opportunity arose.

On the other hand, liberals, republicans and trade unionists condemned the massacre as a proof of authoritarian reflexes and the callous indifference of the bishop and the conservative authorities towards the citizens. Solidarity with the victims however could not hide an undertone of repproach: the slaughter should help peasants understand who their real allies were and help them take distance from their oppressors instead of showing them respect and obedience. The naiveté of the peasants was stressed in order to make the repression appear even more blameworthy and unforgivable. In any case, peasants still had to fulfill some steps in order to achieve the status of conscious citizens, mainly organizing themselves in modern forms and understanding the relevance of suffrage.

Finally, no one was sentenced to jail, neither the officer of the Guardia Civil nor any of the protesters, and only five youngsters were imprisoned for short terms because of their taking part in the incidents during the demostration in Ourense. A popular ballad was composed relating the incidents and blaming the inflexibility of the bishop and the cruelty of the guardias for the tragedy and it asked the Virgin to punish those guilty given that Justice had not been done.

---

\(^{11}\) As revealed by recently available documents in the Archivio Secreto Vaticano

\(^{12}\) A hagiographical biography of the bishop Ilundain written after his death still shares this view. It is also worth noting that the author (a priest himself) cannot help rejoicing the death of one of the supposed instigators as a fair punishment for his role in the Oseira affair (Tovar, 1942). Revenge seems indeed to be a dish better served cold.
The next episode took place only seven years later but in a different context. One of the main differences with Oseira was that the conflict was channeled through a peasant union. The context was World War One. High prices for agrarian products benefited the peasants as producers, but other consequences were not so positive: inputs such as fertilizers, fodder or machinery became much more expensive due to the submarine warfare and the disruption of international trade, and as consumers their economies were damaged as the Spanish industrial sector focused in exporting to the warrying countries. Riots were frequent from 1916 onwards, including the tragic one in Narón in March 1918 when a crowd of textile workers plundered several shops and the house of the mayor. Peasant Unions acted as mediators in many occasions, trying to make the authorities conscious of problems such as the lack of copper sulphate for the vineyards or the increasing land rents.

One can speculate that the Peasant Unions played a role in deactivating potential conflicts and gained recognition in the eyes of the public opinion and the authorities, but a blatant exception took place in Nebra in October 1916. Nebra is a parish of Porto do Son, a seaside municipality in the southern part of the province of A Coruña. Porto do Son was part of the political feud of Raffael Gasset, a liberal leader who was minister in several occasions and who played the agrarian card, pretending to assume many tactics and goals of the agrarian movement and even adopting the label of “liberal agrarian”.

The conflict had a fiscal spark. The town council decreed an extraordinary tax for the sake of deficit reduction. The widespread displeasure with the situation was channeled through two organizations: the Protección Obrera de Porto do Son (founded in 1901) and the Peasant Union of Nebra (Liga de Labradores), which had been founded in 1909. The slogan of “non-payment” is spread, posters announcing the tax are sistematically torn off, demonstrations are called and those willing to pay are threatened. The situation becomes tenser, as the local detachment of the guardia civil informs the civil governor, and finally it explodes when the mayor tries to unblock the impasse by ordering the seizure of the properties of some of the people who had refused to pay the taxes in a place called Cans (parish of Nebra) to set an example. As soon as the word spread, neighbours congregated before the houses of the families affected to avoid the seizure. As usual, women were closest

---

13 Given that they were mostly women the local authorities opted for accusing “some bandits” for inciting them.
to the guards. When the crowd refused to dissolve the Guardia Civil (thirty-two guards escorting the judicial officers) opened fire, killing three people on the spot (two of the wounded would die days after). Four of the dead were women.

The Peasant Union of Nebra was immediately closed (it would be authorised to resume its activities a few months later). It is important to highlight that this association had been relatively unimportant between its foundation in 1909 and 1916. It had less than fifty members but during the conflict this number rose about threefold. However, in later years it would decay and finally dissolved itself in 1923 due to lack of membership and non-payment of member fees. The workers’ associations in several cities and towns in Galicia organized public meetings to condemn the repression and demand a thorough investigation. In Santiago de Compostela a general strike was called and money was collected for the families of the victims. At the Congress in Madrid, three republican deputies (none of them Galician) denounced the facts and pointed out caciquismo and corruption as the real causes. The liberal government commissions an official report which exonerates the Guardia Civil and the mayor. According to it, the taxes were not so heavy and the real cause of the popular reaction had been the disruptive propaganda of the associations which had created a problem were there was not one.

However, the solution came through half-secret negotiations between the civil governor, representatives of the Gasset political family and the leaders of both the Liga Agraria de Nebra and the Protección Obrera. The whole corporation of Porto do Son resigned and a new one was designated, while no new seizures of tax-offenders were ordered. In 1917 new local elections took place and the liberal party did agree to let the agrarian societies of Porto do Son monopolize the seats. The self-organization of the peasantry made all the difference with Oseira seven years earlier: an interlocution with the authorities had been possible and although the bloody repression of the resistance against the taxes could not been avoided a negociated solution put an end to the conflict.


Sofán is a parish in the municipality of Carballo, which is situated 35 km South of the city of A Coruña, the capital of the province. For gerrymandering reasons, however, it was included in the electoral district of the capital (where three deputies were elected) so that the republicans had it more difficult to attain a seat. In 1919 a conflict arose after the local
government (controlled by the conservatives between 1902 and 1923) decided to change the location of the parish graveyard. The explanation was related to public health: in 1918 the epidemics of influenza had left almost no available burying place in the existing graveyard. The priest and most of the neighbours preferred to widen the old cemetery while the municipal doctor and the mayor opted for a new one. To make things worse, a place was chosen which would be too close to two springs. A commission was constituted under the leadership of some of the well-to-do farmers in the parish, who had an interview with the civil governor and hired a lawyer, but no agreement was met. Meanwhile, corpses were still buried (illegally) in the old graveyard. The village community felt the cemetery as a sacred place and a key place for collective identity and practices.

The final act happened on February the 16th 1919 when the judge ordered the exhumation of a recently buried child. The judicial officers were as usual escorted by the Guardia Civil. The crowd was even bigger than expected because by chance another (illegal) funeral was taking place that same day. The warnings of the officer at command were not obeyed and finally the guards opened fire, with the result of four women dead and several wounded.

As in similar occasions, the press controlled by the monarchist parties blamed demagogues and the irrationality of the populace, who did not understand the medical reasons behind the decision of closing the old cemetery. It is true that local republicans and agrarists had supported the resistance, allied with the leaders of the peasant unions (particularly one created in 1909 for the whole municipality as part of the Solidaridad Gallega federation) who were defying the conservatives and were gaining an increasing number of councillors. Nevertheless, they articulated the preexisting mistrust of the villagers, who had good reasons to be suspicious of the local politicians. The conservative caciques were determined to teach their agrarian challengers a lesson and they took advantage of a problem which, after all, could have been solved with a moderate dose of goodwill. The slaughter left permanent scars in the parish, where most of the inhabitants boycotted the few supporters of the conservative caciques. After three months they grouped themselves in a Catholic agrarian union which however never attained more than 25 members.

Solidarity with the victims was expressed in meetings in A Coruña by agrarian and tradeunionist federations. The Galicianist press paid great attention to the Sofán incident, showing it as a new ring in the chain begun in Oseira a decade earlier. For the nationalists it became another proof of the need for deep reforms in the structure of the State (autonomy,
local reform, legal recognition of the rural parishes) and for the depiction of the monarchist parties as alien bodies hostile to any action from below which could threaten their hold of their Galician districts.


During the years just before the Dictatorship of Primo de Rivera (1923-1930) which put an end to the liberal regime, the agrarian movement reached its peak from any point of view. Most of the non-confessional unions were grouped under the banner of the Confederación Regional de Agricultores Gallegos (CRAG), which claimed 419 unions with 62000 members in February 1923. As a counterforce, roughly the same number of Catholic unions (although weaker in total membership) defended order and social harmony as recipes for a better future. Under the charismatic leadership of the abovementioned priest Basilio Álvarez, the CRAG launched the final offensive against the foro. The official course of action of the Confederation was denying the rentiers any right to compensation, thus creating peasant ownership without indebtedness. In practice, many local federations were less ambitious and simply tried to force an beneficial agreement out of the rentiers.

To achieve the end of the foro, the CRAG used a combination of political means (meetings, striving for political power at different levels, lobbying MPs...) and pressure against the rentiers. This included non-payment, threats, arson and the whole panoply of Scott’s weapons of the weak. The rentiers declared that the right of ownership itself was under attack and claimed that the campaign was a translation of Bolshevik ideas, which was senseless given that the objective was to achieve full property and not collectivization. One has to keep in mind the international (Russian Revolution, instability in many European countries) and Spanish context (agrarian unrest in Andalucia, violence in Barcelona) (González Calleja, 1998).

Most of the incidents linked to the campaign against the foro would qualify as low-intensity violence. There were however some exceptions, the bloodiest of which took place in the village of Sobredo, parish of Guillarei, in the municipality of Tui, in the province of Pontevedra bordering on Portugal. The spiral of violence had an apparently irrelevant start. The Peasant Union of Ribadelouiro, founded in 1904 in this parish of Tui, instructed the local tobacconist to sell only to members of the peasant unions, thus excluding symbolically those who refused to join the union from the village community. After being reported, the civil governor arrested the leaders of the union. A strike was called as a protest in the whole province of Pontevedra at the beginning of November 1922 by workers’ and peasants’ organizations. New arrests and closures of peasant unions followed when strikers blockaded
the towns and intimidated those trying to sell milk, vegetables or any other product to the town-dwellers. On November the 26th the Provincial Federation of the CRAG, nine peasant unions in the municipality of Tui and eleven in the municipality of Pontevedra were closed by the authorities.

The rentiers in Tui saw an opportunity to force the peasants to pay their delayed payments, reporting them before the courts. As a result, a series of seizures took place during one of them, in Sobredo, on the 27th, the Guardia Civil and the judicial officers were met with hostility by a crowd of 1500 people (according to the estimation of the civil governor). They were neighbours from different parishes who had been alerted by the bells and fireworks as the representatives of the law approached. The official version, as usual, exonerated the guards because they had been at the receiving end of stones and even some shots, one of them even making a hole in the hat of one guard (although no evidence was ever released). Three people (one woman and two men) lost their lives and a dozen were seriously injured.

Contrary to the expectations of the rentiers, the peasant unions had been dismantled but an underlying and traditional form of association, the village community, had been successfully mobilized against the seizures.

A subsequent story tells us how important keeping the inner solidarity of the village community (often incarnated in the peasant union) was. One of the victims in Sobredo was a pregnant woman. Her widower was excluded from the money collected in the Galician societies in America after it was known that he had left the peasant union and accepted a job offered to him by the conservative MP for Tui Ordóñez, who wanted to clean his image.

The political background threw even more fuelwood to the fire. Mariano Ordóñez had inherited the seat from his father and had been elected year after year since 1903. To add insult to injury, he was at that moment Minister of Justice, nonetheless, and he was suspected of asking the civil governor of the province to take a hard line against the peasant unions in his electoral feud.

The impact in the Galician society was immense. A general strike of 24 hours was called immediately in the provinces of Pontevedra and Ourense, as well as in several cities and towns in the other two provinces. Money for the families of the victims was collected by associations both in Galicia and the American countries. In the Parliament Manuel Portela Valladares (one of the leaders of the CRAG and a maverick within the Liberal Party, later head of the government in 1936) attacked the conservatives and particularly Ordóñez and blamed the caciquismo for the tragedy. The agrarian leaders found a symbol for their manicheist and
messianic interpretation of the Galician reality\textsuperscript{14}. Their Catholic rivals opted for blaming both the demagogues who spread messages of hate and class-warfare in the countryside and the caciques. The result was that the peasants were losing any trace of respect before any authority: the Church, the Administration and the rentiers and landowners.

In the medium term, the slaughter of Sobredo meant the end of the foro system. Rentiers began to seek agreements with the peasants, accepting meagre compensations, because it was clear that collecting rents would be increasingly difficult. At the end, a decree in 1926 opened the way to the end of the foral contracts, unless the peasants did not want or could not redeem the rent (that’s why some foros lasted until 1973).

CONCLUSIONS

The Galician agrarismo is a clear example of the fight of subaltern groups in Western societies for “the right to have rights” (Somers, 2008). It was a struggle for social inclusion, not against integration in the wider society, and for being recognized as active citizens. In the Spanish case they enjoyed the advantage of the early recognition of (male) universal suffrage in 1890 and of the right of association (1886), although there was a long way ahead in order to put those theoretical rights into full practice. That constituted part of the essence of the legitimacy of peasant unions in Galicia (and other regions of Spain as well), together with their claim to articulate the force of the village community, which had been under pressure for decades but was still alive and kicking by the beginning of the XXth century. Other activities promoted by the agrarismo movement helped create a more inclusive public sphere, creating the conditions for the incorporation of broad layers of the population to it. As a whole, they spread for example a culture of accountability, keeping and eye on the behaviour of the civil servants and politicians through their modest press, rotating members so that there were always some of them during the sessions of the town council or debating the budgets of municipalities in their press and assemblies. They made voters aware of the importance of their suffrage, denouncing the manipulations and the purchase of votes. Through their implication in the building of schools, the surveillance of existing ones, their keeping of libraries, their subscribing to periodicals and similar initiatives, peasant unions helped overcome the illiteracy which hindered the conscience and practice of political rights. Last but

\textsuperscript{14} In fact the memory of Guillarei is still alive. In 1932 a monument was built by popular subscription. After being destroyed at the beginning of the Civil War it has been replaced by a new one after the death of Franco. Every year an act is organized every 27\textsuperscript{th} of November to pay homage to the victims.
not least, although not always faultless, the internal functioning of the peasant unions themselves helped make their members familiar with the practice and nuances of democracy: assemblies were held, leaders were elected and each member had a right to vote and express his (or even her) opinion. If a strong network of associations of every kind builds “social capital” and provides a pre-requisite for democracy (Putnam, 1993; Bermeo & Nord, 2000; Hoffmann, 2003), the Galician agrarismo was a force pushing in the direction of democratization.

As before mentioned, contrary to the message of the monarchist press, extreme forms of violence linked to the activities of the peasant unions were quite a rare occurrence, and where it happened it depended basically on the decisions of the authorities, as seen above. A different balance would be made if one focuses on relatively minor forms of violence, such as the weapons of the weak against landlords or those employed to press or retaliate neighbours who refused to join their ranks or second their decisions. There was structural violence in rural Galicia, as in any other society, and it seems plausible that peasant unions reduced the incidence of violent conflicts, channeling them and offering a partner to negotiate before external instances. They also fought against the traditional village clashes and created informal juries where people could settle their disputes peacefully without going to the courts (expensive, slow and politically biased) or resorting to violence.

When open and bloody clashes took place, such as the four incidents analyzed in this paper, surprise was the first reaction in the Madrid press and political and intellectual circles. Such things were supposed to happen in urban centres or among the landless proletariat in Southern Spain. Property, or at least a solid position on land as assured by the foro (much better in that sense than any other form of tenancy or lease), was supposed to avoid precisely that kind of things, making peasants respectful of authority and order and suspicious of radical ideologies such as anarchism or socialism. Combined with the notion of Northern peasants as pre-political creatures, that explains that external actors were immediately blamed. Peasants had been manipulated by workers, republicans, radicalized former emigrants or demagogues of any sort. Even if a peasant union was present as an autonomous form of organization from below, the message was that peasants could never have been the real promoters of it and “people without calluses in their hands” were really those pulling the strings.

Although of course it is easy to find dubious procedures in some cases, such as denying women their right to vote (which by the way they did not get until 1931 in Spain), collective suffrage (in some unions all members had to support a candidate once decided in the assembly) and the like.
For Galician nationalists, peasants were the purest keepers of ethnicity (as happens in most nationalisms) and episodes such as those of Oseira, Nebra, Sofán or Sobredo were the most blatant proof that the Spanish State was alien and an obstacle to the development of Galicia. They hoped that such excesses would open the eyes of the peasantry and lead them to support nationalists and provide them with a real massive support. In that sense, the victims were somehow sacrificed in the altar of the (Galician) nation.

Agrarian leaders and ideologues, on their part, saw the events through the lens of an emotional rhetoric, which was commonly used as a mobilizing tool quite in contrast with the prosaic nature of most of their activities. Frequently religious terms were used, so that victims were “martyrs”, the same way as defectors were “Judas”, agrarian leaders “apostles”, electoral tours were “crusades”, peasants were suffering “slavery” etc.

Several forms of collective action (and violence) can be seen as alternative or complementary forms of political participation (González Calleja, 1998; Cruz, 2015). Politics is not confined to the ballot box. Peasant unions under the liberal regime of the Restauración played as a whole a significant role in incorporating broad sections of the Galician society to democratic forms of political participation (Miguez & Cabo, 2013). In that sense, violence was counterproductive and it can be seen as the result of the tensions within a changing society.

Prevailing conceptions about the Northern peasantry explain the deep commotion caused by these slaughters at the hands of the Guardia Civil, in comparative terms bigger than in similar occasions when the victims were industrial workers or landless labourers. As Atticus Finch explained to his daughter in the novel by Harper Lee, one has always to keep in mind that it is a sin to kill a mockingbird.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY.**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Cause</th>
<th>Fatal casualties</th>
<th>Peasant unions involved</th>
<th>Ruling party in the municipality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oseira</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Ourense</td>
<td>Conflict with the bishop</td>
<td>Ten</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nebra</td>
<td>1916</td>
<td>A Coruña</td>
<td>Fiscal resistance</td>
<td>Five</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofán</td>
<td>1919</td>
<td>A Coruña</td>
<td>Civil graveyard</td>
<td>Four</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sobredo</td>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Pontevedra</td>
<td>Foros</td>
<td>Three</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>