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Rural co-operatives and empowerment of peasantry in agrarian collective action at the beginning of the twentieth century

Jordi Planas

e-mail: j.planas@ub.edu

Departament d'Història i Institucions Econòmiques

Universitat de Barcelona

Av. Diagonal, 696

office 460

08034 - Barcelona

Abstract: At the beginning of the twentieth century landowners promoted some agrarian associations that tried to integrate peasants by offering co-operative services, as acquisition of agricultural inputs. Such associations were different from those that were set up by landlords before the agrarian depression in the late nineteenth century. Focusing the analysis on rural co-operatives that were created at the beginning of the twentieth century in the district of Igualada, a vine-growing region near Barcelona (Catalonia), this paper tries to explain the participation of landowners and peasantry in these associations, considering that the aims of both social groups taking part in the co-operatives were different. Besides, it tries to analyze the social implications of this participation in the rural co-operatives, such as the contribution of this new agricultural associationism to the integration of peasantry in the new market conditions and to the prevention of social conflicts in the rural society.

Author: Jordi Planas is lecturer at the University of Barcelona (Department of Economic History and Institutions). His main research interests have been institutions and agricultural organizations in Catalonia and Spain, with special attention to co-operativism and associationism, and the evolution of large rural estates (19th and 20th centuries). His publications include: « Os proprietários e o associativismo agrário na Catalunha », *Análise Social*, XLIV-3, 192 (2009), pp. 511-531; « 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), pp. 13-47; *Els propietaris i l'associacionisme agrari a Catalunya (1890-1936)*, Girona: Universitat de Girona – Documenta Universitaria (2006), 322 pp.; « Accounting Records of Large Rural Estates and the Dynamics of Agriculture in Catalonia (Spain), 1850-1950 », *Accounting Business & Financial History*, 15-2 (2005), pp. 171-185 (with Enric Saguer); « Cooperativismo y difusión del cambio técnico en la agricultura. La contribución de las cámaras agrícolas (Cataluña, 1890-1930) », *Historia Agraria*, 30 (2003), pp. 87-117; « Sharecropping and the Management of Large Rural Estates in Catalonia, 1850-1950 », *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, XXVIII-3 (2001), pp. 89-108 (with Ramon Garrabou & Enric Saguer).

Rural cooperatives and empowerment of peasantry in agrarian collective action at the beginning of the twentieth century

1. Introduction

In the early twentieth century there was in Europe a rapid proliferation of agricultural associations offering cooperative services. They were associations with various features (promoters, participants, form of organization, type of service, scope) but they were very different from agricultural associations that were founded during the nineteenth century.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century agricultural markets underwent profound alterations in agricultural markets that required changes in production systems. Rural cooperatives became an instrument of adaptation to these changes. They facilitate the adoption of new farming techniques (diffusion of knowledge, cost reduction in the incorporation of inputs from outside the sector, credit) and the improvement of industrial elaboration of agricultural products processing in common. The technical modernization was, without doubt, one of the most important functions of co-operatives and their contribution to agricultural development helps to explain their proliferation in the early twentieth century and their continuity until today.

However, these organizations had other equally important functions as were the representation of interests and connection with the authorities. In addition, while formal voluntary associations, cooperatives had a social dimension that can be useful to better understand the characteristics and changes in rural society. The organization of cooperatives was an initiative of some members of rural society who managed the participation of other members, there was thus a process of mobilization. This involvement responded to targets of different types (economic, social, political) and could also be different depending on the interests of the different actors who were part of the associations.

Considering the complexity and internal diversity of rural society, which embraced very different social situations in terms of access to land, farm type, size of property, etc., the propensity of farmers to join these organizations also had to be different depending on the position they occupied in the rural society. For example, it was possible that some objectives of a cooperative leaders were not coincident with some of the participants.

These differences between the targets pursued by the promoters of cooperatives and those of other participants in these organizations have been underlined in the historiography of agricultural cooperatives in Spain. Since a large part of cooperatives that were organized in this country at the beginning of the twentieth century started with the initiative of some members of the landowner classe or of the Catholic Church, it has been pointed out that the targets of the promoters were different (and even antagonistic) to those of the members of cooperatives.

In a context of social conflict such as existed in rural Spain during the first third of the twentieth century, these differences could be relevant. Some studies have interpreted the Catholic-agrarian cooperativism as an instrument of counter-revolutionary struggle of the Spanish landowners and political subordination of the small peasantry¹. Others, however, have questioned the subordinate role of the peasants who participated in these organizations, noting that cooperative services suited to their economic interests and favored the consolidation of family small-holdings². Moreover, cooperatives were social spaces for peasants and permitted the establishment of class solidarity and social mobilization that could be dangerous for maintaining the status quo, especially in a political

¹ Cuesta (1978); Castillo (1979).

² Arribas (1989); Fernández Prieto (1992); Garrido (1995, 1996, 2007); Sabio (1995, 1996).

system where power was based on the demobilization and isolation of most of the rural society.

Did rural cooperatives contribute to reducing social inequalities? Were they an instrument for the lower classes in their struggle for greater equity? Or were they rather a tool of landowners' "class efficiency"³ to legitimize their status and reduce social conflict? By establishing agreements between owners and farmers in these associations, were they not blocking the bargaining power of farmers to improve their situation? It is not easy to answer these questions categorically. The answer depends in large part on the social situation in each analyzed area and the experience of cooperative organization. However, these are relevant questions that deserve the attention of the researcher.

This paper attempts to answer them from the analysis of a winegrowing area where social conflict was outstanding during the first third of the twentieth century. In the first section I explain the features of this region and the crisis in the wine sector, which acted as external stimulus that prompted farmers to group together in cooperative associations. The next section deals with some experiences of agricultural cooperatives that took place in this area at the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, in the conclusions, I focus on the relationship between rural cooperatives and social conflict, and I try to answer the questions of the first section to the light of the experiences discussed.

2. The winegrowing crisis in the region of Igualada (Catalonia)

The region of Igualada is located about 50 km northeast of the city of Barcelona (map 1). It was a major wine-growing area in Catalonia (Spain). It started its specialization in viticulture in the seventeenth century, which was intensified during the second half of the nineteenth century taking advantage of the destruction of French vineyards by the phylloxera plague and the extraordinary demand for export wine⁴. In the late nineteenth century the vineyard occupied two thirds of the cultivated area and in some municipalities more than 90% of arable land. It was one of the regions of Catalonia with the largest area of vineyards and wine production: in 1890, with 20 450 hectares, was the second district of the province of Barcelona in extension of vines and, with 309 900 Hl, was the third region in production wine⁵.

These production figures have to be considered a record. During the years 1860-1880 Catalan viticulture had experienced strong growth as a result of the destruction of French vineyards by the phylloxera plague. This situation had led to export large quantities of wine at very remunerative prices. However, the phylloxera insect also invaded Catalonia and in the last decade of the nineteenth century the plague also completely destroyed the vineyards of this region. This led to a crisis (economic, social and even demographic) of large proportions, since the wine was the main economic activity for much of the population of the region of Igualada.

Facing the destruction of the vineyard, farmers had to choose whether to undertake a costly process of replanting vines with American stocks immune to the phylloxera, or change the land use and plant other crops. But most of the vines had been planted thanks to a contract *rabassa morta*, widespread in Catalonia since the eighteenth century, which stated that the transfer of land to the cultivator (*rabassaire*) was extinguished with the death of most of planted vines. The phylloxera crisis meant, then the loss of land rights of farmers who cultivated it since time immemorial. Many of them left their farms and migrated to urban centers with greater opportunities to obtain gainful employment. Others, however, fought for recognition of their rights and to gain access to land ownership. In the 1880s and 1890s started in Catalonia a union movement of *rabassaires* and in the

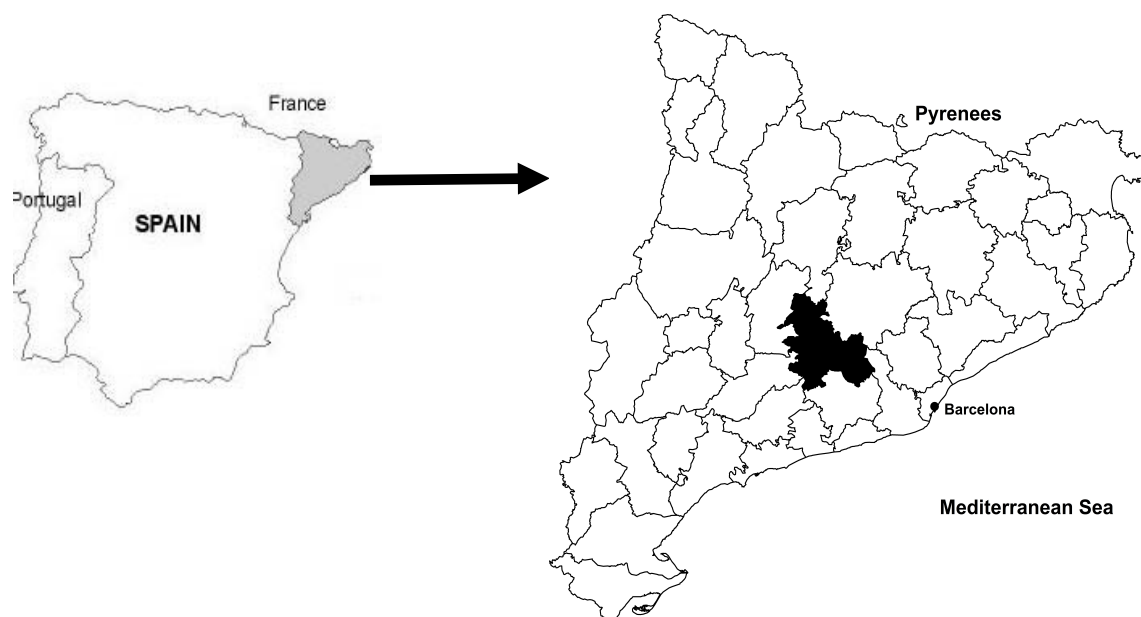
³ Badhuri (1991, 1998).

⁴ Valls-Junyent (1996); Gutiérrez Poch (1992).

⁵ Roig i Armengol (1890: 25).

early 1920s a large union was created to fight for the rights of these farmers: *Unió de Rabassaires*. The question became a source of social conflict and even politics for many years⁶.

MAP 1. LOCATION OF THE REGION OF IGUALADA



Unlike other areas of Catalonia, in the region of Igualada the vineyard recovered almost its entire length. At the beginning of the third decade of the twentieth century, the vineyard occupied 18 577 hectares, ie over 90% of the extension that had been before the phylloxera⁷. However, the enormous effort of replanting was not rewarded, since the early years of the twentieth century the markets situation led to several overproduction crisis⁸. The American vine was more productive than the former and, consequently, replanting resulted in physical yields progressively higher than saturated markets. It was also more demanding in work and in some inputs (products such as sulfur or copper sulphate, necessary for the treatment of diseases of the vine as the oidium and mildew) leading to higher production costs. Winegrowers were trying to offset the falling prices for wine by increases in productivity, which necessitated the application of greater amounts of chemical fertilizers, thereby increasing production costs⁹.

The establishment of rural cooperatives was based, firstly, on the need for these purchases outside the farm, ensuring quality and reducing cost. Also on the advantages of elaborating wines in common (wine cooperatives) and rewarding the products of the wine industry (production of alcohols and tartrates). Cooperatives could also establish other secondary services that could prove essential to the economic stability of small holdings, as the small credit or the purchase of products for family consumption. Beyond these cooperative services, these organizations had the potentiality to bring together farmers in the fight against adulteration of wine with industrial alcohol and other campaigns in defense of wine producers¹⁰.

The pursuit of fraud with the wine became one of the main targets of winegrowers and led to the creation of the largest association of Catalan winegrowers and one of the most important

⁶ Giralt (1965); Balcells (1968); Iglésies (1968); Carmona & Simpson (1999); Pomés (2000); Planas & Garrido (2006).

⁷ Junta Consultiva Agronómica (1923).

⁸ Pujol (1984); Garrabou, Tello & Cussó (2008).

⁹ Pujol (1998).

¹⁰ Puig (1984, 1994); Pan-Montojo (1994); Pan-Montojo & Puig (1995).

agricultural associations in Spain: the Union of Winegrowers of Catalonia (*Unió de Vinyaters de Catalunya*). It was precisely in Igualada where this association held its first public event (January 29, 1911) and was in this region where it started its expansion. This meeting event was attended by more than two thousand winegrowers. Then, in the region of Igualada, the Union of Winegrowers of Catalonia, and had 1,200 members¹¹. In a few months this association established branches in over 200 locations of Catalonia and had more than 20,000 members¹². Among these were large and small landowners, as well as sharecroppers and *rabassaires*. They all shared their interests in the wine sector and the association acted as a lobby in the fight against fraud with the wine and demanded protection for the wine market¹³. It was therefore a cross-class movement, avoiding the demands of the *rabassaires* and any social confrontation inside the wine sector.

Facing the winegrowing crisis in the early twentieth century there were four types of responses in the agricultural association movement: 1) the cooperatives, 2) the winegrower lobby aimed at limiting competition in the wine market, 3) the *rabassaire* unionism, and 4) the landowners associations that faced the *rabassaires* demands and defended the property rights. The last two associations were defending class interests and the first two were more horizontal; but class boundaries between different social groups were often highly permeable, given the variety of contractual forms and different degrees of access to land ownership. Furthermore, the diversity of strategies of these organizations meant that there were often contacts and junctions among them. In the next section we will focus on cooperative organizations, from a few examples studied in the region of Igualada.

3. Some examples of cooperative organizations

One of the first rural cooperatives to be founded in this region was the Cooperative Society for the elaboration of wine alcohol of the district of Igualada. Its aim was to build a factory to distill wine and by-products of wine from the harvest of the members of the society. Distillation freed winegrowers from dependence on private distilling factories, that were buying the by-products of wine at very low prices. In addition, the winegrowers could take advantage of non-drinking wines to produce alcohol and profitably sell it in the market.

The Cooperative Society for the elaboration of wine alcohol was created in 1906 by a small group of vineyards owners, which soon got the membership of 1,500 winegrowers in the region of Igualada. However, distillation was not the only target of this initiative. Their leaders had also planned other cooperative services such as fertilizers supply and agricultural credit, as well as the defense of winegrowers interests. That is why, just two years later, the Agricultural Chamber of Igualada was created. This new organisation absorbed the Cooperative Society and developed other cooperative. It also promoted the establishment of the Union of Winegrowers of Catalonia (*Unió de Vinyaters de Catalunya*) in the region of Igualada, as well as other activities to defend agrarian interests¹⁴.

The chambers of agriculture were associations was county level or even regional representation employed as agricultural interests i of promoting agriculture. As advisory bodies of the State, they prepared reports for the various public administrations and they organized exhibitions, lectures, awards and publications, which spread new agricultural techniques. Although they were run by well off landowners, they also established cooperative services for their members. With these cooperative services they managed the participation of many peasants in these organisations¹⁵.

¹¹ *Boletín de la Cámara Agrícola Oficial de Igualada y su Comarca*, 1.2.1911.

¹² *Revista del Instituto Agrícola Catalán de San Isidro*, 20.11.1911.

¹³ Fernández (2008).

¹⁴ Planas (2010b)

¹⁵ Planas (2003)

Among the membership of the Chamber of Agriculture of Igualada there were landowners, sharecroppers, agricultural laborers and even *rabassaires*. However, the presence of peasants among the leaders was absolutely testimonial: the first board of directors, a total of 15 members, was reduced to a single member listed as a laborer. But without the participation of peasantry the Chamber of Agriculture could not have achieved the registration of more than 2,000 members from over twenty different locations, in addition to the city of Igualada.

The participation of peasants as members of the Chamber of Agriculture was the result of the cooperative action that it developed. First, the distillation of alcohol, continuing the work of the Cooperative Society, but the Chamber of Agriculture increased its activity with other services such as provision of agricultural inputs, mechanical threshing and brokering in the sale of agricultural machinery. It also established a field to test the application of fertilizers and the productivity of different kinds of seeds of cereals, pulses, potatoes and forage crops.

These services improved farmers' access to markets and since the beginning of the twentieth century became increasingly necessary to maintain the economic stability of small farms. Although these organisations were led by landowners, farmers valued highly the economic services and placed in a secondary position the social and political affinities with the leaders. Peasants were often drawn into a common front with the landowners to face the economic difficulties of the agricultural sector. But it did not mean that their interests subordinated to those of the landowners. Proof of this is that their participation in rural cooperatives run by landowners did not prevent their membership in unions to defend their own interests and face the landowners¹⁶.

However, the development of such services was limited. The attempt to create an agricultural credit section failed and it happened the same with other major projects of the Chamber of Agriculture, as a wine cooperative and a flour mill. The characteristics of this partnership model didn't make easy the development of cooperative action. First, the landowners who ran these associations were not in need of services because their bargaining power in markets (supply of inputs, credit, industrial processing of agricultural products) was higher and assuming greater commitment to cooperative action could limit their freedom of enterprise¹⁷. Second, its own organizational structure was inadequate to the cooperative functions: its regional scope made the provision of supplies difficult to remote locations of the headquarters; they had to establish branches with a storage capacity of products and their economic management was complicated. Its organizational structure was appropriate to other functions of these associations, as the articulation of extensive lobbying in defense of economic interests or social mobilization.

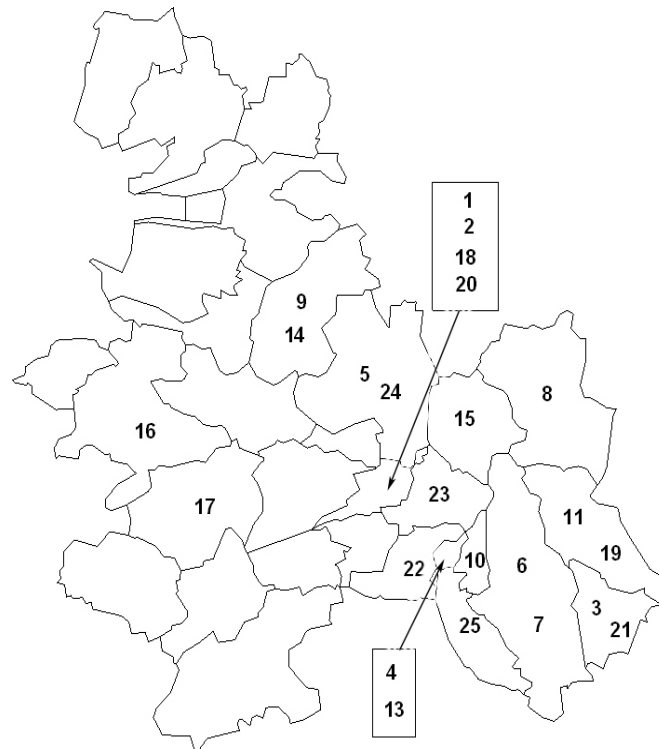
Most cooperatives founded in the early twentieth century worked within a local area. In most rural villages of Catalonia there was a cooperative association and, in many cases, more than one, since it was often difficult that all farmers work together in a single cooperative because of the social division. This was especially true in the wine-growing areas, because of the social conflict between *rabassaires* and landowners, and the wine crisis of the early twentieth century had not done anything but worse. In the region of Igualada, after the founding of the Chamber of Agriculture (1908), a new cooperative association was created every year: Caja Rural de Masquefa (1909), Sindicato Agrícola de Capellades (1909), Centro Agrícola de Òdena (1910), Sindicato Agrícola de Piera (1911), Sindicato Agrícola de Sant Jaume Sesoliveres, in the same village of Piera (1911), Sindicato Agrícola del Bruc (1913), Asociación Agrícola de Rubió (1913), Cooperativa Vallbonenca (1914), Cooperativa Agrícola de Pierola (1915), Sociedad de Agricultores de Capellades (1915), Sindicato Agrícola de Rubió (1916), Cooperativa La Mutual Agrícola de Castellolí (1917), Centro Agrícola Cooperativo de Clariana, in Argençola (1918), Sindicato Vitícola de Tous (1918),

¹⁶ Planas (2010a).

¹⁷ Caballer (1982).

Cooperativa Agrícola de Igualada (1919), Sindicato Católico Agrícola de Hostalets de Pierola (1919).

MAP 2. RURAL COOPERATIVES FOUNDED IN THE REGION OF IGUALADA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY



1) Sociedad Cooperativa para la elaboración de alcoholes vínicos, Igualada (1906); 2) Cámara Agrícola de Igualada (1908); 3) Caja Rural de Masquefa (1909); 4) Sindicato Agrícola de Capellades (1909); 5) Centro Agrícola de Òdena (1910); 6) Sindicato Agrícola de Piera (1911); 7) Sindicato Agrícola de Sant Jaume Sesoliveres, Piera (1911); 8) Sindicato Agrícola del Bruc (1913); 9) Asociación Agrícola de Rubió (1913); 10) Cooperativa Vallbonenca (1914); 11) Cooperativa Agrícola de Pierola (1915); 13) Sociedad de Agricultores de Capellades (1915); 14) Sindicato Agrícola de Rubió (1916); 15) Cooperativa La Mutual Agrícola de Castellolí (1917); 16) Centro Agrícola Cooperativo de Clariana, Argençola (1918); 17) Sindicato Vitícola de Tous (1918); 18) Cooperativa Agrícola de Igualada (1919); 19) Sindicato Católico Agrícola de Hostalets de Pierola (1919); 20) Sindicato de Viticultores de Igualada (1921); 21) Sindicato Agrícola de Masquefa (1921); 22) Sindicato Agrícola de Espoia, la Torre de Claramunt (1921?); 23) Sindicato Agrícola de la Pobla de Claramunt (1921?); 24) Sindicato Agrícola Cooperativo de Odena (1924); 25) Cooperativa de Santa Eulalia de Cabrera de Igualada (1926).

The latter association, Sindicato Católico Agrícola de Hostalets de Pierola, was created just when another rural cooperative had begun to develop the cooperative activity in the same locality. The number of members of both cooperatives was similar (less than a hundred) and the services offered by the two cooperatives were almost identical: the supply of fertilizers, sulfur, copper sulfate and other agricultural inputs as well as agricultural credit, although the catholic organization also established a cooperative oil mill. Undoubtedly, the establishment of these services from a single cooperative would have improved the conditions of the joint purchase, reduce costs of investment and management, strengthen the economic capacity of the cooperative and offer more and better services to all partners. Why, then, were they competing in a so small areal?

The answer lies in the social context: since for the participation of farmers in cooperatives trust was a key element, social and political cohesion was a determining factor. In a context of social conflict as it existed in the Catalan wine regions in the early twentieth century, the collaboration between different social groups at a local scale was problematic. As collective organizations, cooperatives could not be abstracted from social and political dynamics in which they were embedded. While

leaders of the Cooperativa Agrícola, which were of more modest social background, adopted policy positions more or less leftist, the orientation of the catholic organization was more conservative¹⁸.

The creation of this catholic cooperative in Hostalets Pierola was part of the counterrevolutionary offensive of social Catholicism deployed since 1917 in response to the rise of social unrest that occurred in Spain and other countries of Europe after the triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution. The Catholic Agrarian Federation of Barcelona was founded precisely in 1917 to group the existing agricultural cooperatives in the area of the diocese of Barceloma and to encourage the creation of new rural cooperatives affiliated to the Church hierarchy. It was part of the National Catholic Agrarian Confederation and acted as an intermediary between affiliated rural cooperatives and other federal organizations in Spain¹⁹. Although its implementation was poor, it was most remarkable in zones where the winegrowing crisis had increased the influence of *rabassaire* unionism²⁰. With the help of the Catholic Church, the landowners tried to counter the peasants unionism with a cross-class and anti-socialist organizations, seeking social peace through a paternalistic and religious orientation.

With the support of some large landowners and of the ecclesiastical institution, some of these associations made a remarkable cooperative effort. One example is the cooperative created in 1911 in Piera. Among its founders we find a large rural landowner who was vice president of the Catholic Agrarian Federation of Barcelona, secretary of the Agricultural Chamber of Anoia (also linked to Catholicism) and member of the board of the Instituto Agrícola Catalán de San Isidro, the main association that grouped Catalan large landowners. Some of the largest landowners in the area were members of its board. In 1918 the cooperative had 121 members, in 1920 this number had increased to 192 and to 442 in 1933²¹. The village of Piera had then about 3,400 people, which confirms the importance of the social involvement of the local peasantry in this cooperative.

The evolution of cooperative activity is a reflection of the increase of membership: membership of small farmers was achieved only if they could provide efficient cooperative services. In 1920 agricultural inputs sales to the members of the cooperative amounted to 29 530 ptas. In 1924 they had risen to 70 975 ptas. and in 1929 reached 128 360. Then the cooperative's total assets amounted to 263 920 ptas., a figure very similar to that of the Agricultural Chamber of Igualada (271 624 ptas.)²². In addition to the supply of fertilizers, fungicides, seeds and fodder for livestock, the Catholic cooperative of Piera had a threshing-machine, flour mill, bakery, credit service, oil mill and wine cooperative. Its clubhouse had a cafe and even a cinema, indicating that in addition to the cooperative activity the association developed an important activity in the area of local sociability.

The most important wine cooperative in the region was created in the town of Igualada in 1919. This achievement was not due to the Agricultural Chamber of Igualada, since, as we saw, the project to create it failed. In this case the initiative came from a sector of small farmers. Some board members, including the president, were laborers and their founding manifesto was published in the press organ of local Republicanism. From this newspaper they expressed their willingness to meet with all cooperatives in the region "to deal purely agriculture, since there is an urgent need to act directly and manage our interests ourselves,"²³ a hint that may be understood as an attempt to free themselves from the protection of landowners in the organization of rural cooperatives.

The small peasantry had great difficulty in creating cooperative without any help of landowners,

¹⁸ Planas & Valls (2009).

¹⁹ Cuesta (1978), Castillo (1978), Garrido (1995, 1996).

²⁰ Pomés (2000).

²¹ Boletín Oficial de la Provincia de Barcelona, 1.7.1933.

²² Archivo General de la Delegación del Gobierno en Cataluña, Fondo de Asociaciones, exp. 6.909 y 6.158.

²³ L'Igualadí, 5.2.1920.

especially when it was necessary to finance the construction of costly infrastructure such as cooperative wineries²⁴. In this case the cooperative leaders had access to loans from the Savings Bank of Igualada, an institution ruled by the municipal administration that was in the hands of left-wing Republicanism. These farmers openly called for the vote to his candidacy in the 1920 municipal elections to ensure continuity in municipal government: "We all farmers reflective know what the council has done for our class, something that never had done the former local rulers who caused so much trouble and so many tears throughout their unworthy period, which could we call their sad reign"²⁵.

The first activities of this cooperative were the supply of fertilizers, seeds and other agricultural inputs, the joint sale of surplus products after consumption of the peasants, and mechanical threshing. With the introduction of the threshing machine, which started to work already in 1919, its founders demonstrated the practical orientation of the cooperative and that "they will never allow our organization to be a den of bureaucrats"²⁶, probably an indirect reference to the Agricultural Chamber. In 1921 they created the wine cooperative and gave way to a new association, the Union of Winegrowers of Igualada (*Sindicat de Vinyaters d'Igualada*), which soon increased their cooperative activities: in addition to the winery and the threshing machine, they set up a straw tank, oil mill, rural bank and other services. In 1930, even with a much lower number of members to the Chamber of Agriculture (about 200 partners, as usual cooperative wineries in Catalonia), its total assets (325 118 ptas.) already exceeded those of the Chamber of Agriculture (319 650 ptas.)²⁷.

4. Cooperativism and social conflict. Some conclusions

In describing the agricultural cooperatives in the region of Igualada we have seen very different experiences. But most of them were more or less inter-class organizations and in many cases the leaders were wealthy landowners or, in the case of Catholic organizations, priests. Within a context of growing social mobilization, some members of the landowning class were deeply involved in organizing these cooperative associations as a tool to disseminate technological change and, at the same time, to gain legitimacy as a social class and contribute to the social peace, strengthening ties with the peasantry and avoiding autonomous mobilization of small farmers that could put in danger their class interests.

One of the main concerns of the owners who promoted the founding of the Agricultural Chamber of Igualada was the social question, ie, using their own words, "the divorce between landlords and tenants [that] has begun to be felt in our region"²⁸. The joint mobilization of landowners and peasants in inter-class partnerships was the formula to prevent the organization of small farmers in unions aimed at the class struggle. For landowners, the cooperative services offered by the Chamber of Igualada had, in addition to the commercial function, the mission of attracting peasants to the association.

The participation of peasants and landowners in the same associations could decrease interclass social tensions, creating a space for interinfluence and dialogue where they could settle disputes.²⁹ This was the aim of the leaders of these cooperatives, but it is doubtful that this participation prevented social conflicts. First, because the linkage of farmers to cooperative associations did not imply subordination to the social and political targets of the landowners, but was due to their

²⁴ Saumell (2002).

²⁵ Varios Agricultores, "Los agricultores y las elecciones Municipales", L'Igualadí, 5.2.1920.

²⁶ L'Igualadí, 24.6.1919.

²⁷ Archivo General de la Delegación del Gobierno en Cataluña, Fondo de Asociaciones, exp. 6.158 and accounting records published by the Sindicat de Vinyaters d'Igualada.

²⁸ Boletín de la Cámara Agrícola Oficial de Igualada y su comarca (1.1911).

²⁹ Gallego (2007: 80).

pragmatism: only in so far as cooperative services facilitated the adjustment of their holdings to market conditions, these associations had their membership. As the economic target was the only one that merited their interest, whenever cooperative services were inefficient, they didn't join the cooperative or, if they were already members, they left the cooperative. Many agricultural chambers failed due to the defection of its members because of the inefficiency of their cooperative services³⁰. On the other hand, the peasants commitment to the cooperative did not prevent their participation in other class associations that facilitated the expression of conflict. Finally, social unrest also limited or made difficult the development of cooperatives.

The region of Igualada provides us with examples, as it was the scene of land conflicts during the first third of the twentieth century, because of the “rabassaires problem” and the winegrowing crisis. We have seen, for instance, as the social division in small agricultural communities hindered the collaboration of different social groups in the same cooperative, limiting economies of scale in purchasing inputs in common and cooperative development of other services. The creation in the small village of Pierola Hostalets of two different cooperatives performing the same functions is a good example.

Of course, collaboration between different social groups was more difficult when the social context was more confrontational, as it was in the thirties. The proclamation of the Second Republic opened up great expectations to achieve legislative changes to facilitate small farmers access to land or at least improve their contractual terms. In the government of Catalonia there was a political party in favour with the interests of rabassaires. This increased mobilization of peasants and landowners also moved against the rabassaires movement and the Republican government.

The Union of Rabassaires, the major union in Catalonia defending the interests of the small peasantry, had a spectacular growth. During the twenties had been a minority union, which never exceeded 5,000 members, but in 1932 it had over 20,000 members spread over 173 local organizations and a year later they had risen to 224. Then the union had branches in almost all municipalities in the region of Igualada.

Some of them were created as farmers' unions and developed cooperative functions, although this was not their main activity. Others were created from a rural cooperative that was already running. This was the case of the Agricultural Cooperative of Pierola, which served as organizational platform for the local *rabassaires* in their fight against the landowners for the revision of contractual terms. A local branch of the Union of Rabassaires was created in 1932 driven by their own leaders. It was an agricultural union that grouped the same sector of peasants who were members of the Agricultural Cooperative, but it had other targets aimed at the class struggle.

The landowners, meanwhile, also moved to defend their interests that felt threatened by rabassaires and the Republican government. In October 1931 they created a landowners association, Igualada Agricultural Action to defend their interests throughout the region: reports, acts of propaganda, legal aid, etc.. In 1933 it had about 400 members and their leaders were some of the most prominent members of the Agricultural Chamber of Igualada. Again, this double militancy indicates that they assigned different roles to both associations: social and political targets the former and economic and cooperative targets the latter.

However, whereas collective organizations, cooperatives had a social and political aspect which was stressed in a context of conflict. The Igualada Winegrowers Union tried to avoid political conflicts that interfere with their orientation essentially cooperative, but this was not easy and it caused even some resignation among their leaders.

³⁰ Planas (2010a).

One final example. We have seen the Catholic cooperative of Piera was one of the most successful, with efficient services and a solid social setting in the locality. Its leaders were well-off landowners and the initiative was part of the logic of counterrevolutionary Catholic unionism. But the existence of this successful cooperative didn't prevent the land conflict: it was in this municipality where the rabassaire movement was more important and where land conflicts in the thirties were most outstanding in the whole region. During the 1920s, two of the three branches of the Union of Rabassaires existing in the region were located in this locality, and some of its major national leaders came from the village. At the beginning of the 1930s it was also the municipality that concentrated a greater number of applications for the revision of contractual terms in the entire region of Igualada: 590 claims out of 1 870. This is an evidence of the high incidence of land conflicts and, at the same time, a proof of the empowerment of small farmers, even though they participate in the associations promoted by the landowners.

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