AGRARIAN PARTIES IN EUROPE PRIOR TO 1945

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Uneven Harvest: Agrarian Countries in Europe

Agrarian parties were of relevance in many parts of Europe (especially in Scandinavia and Central-Eastern Europe) between the late nineteenth century and the Second World War, although some continue to exist as marginal political forces in the present. Up until now, historiography has barely reflected their objective importance, which includes their decisive role in the politicisation of the peasantry and in many cases their experience of governance. **This chapter aims to explore under what conditions these parties appeared and prospered and their effect on the political systems and societies of their countries. A Europe-wide overview and general hypotheses are provided, although occasionally paying the tribute of the loss of some nuance when analysing a phenomenon that was present all across the Continent. Among the few exceptions one could list the United Kingdom, Italy, Portugal or Russia, although the Russian social-revolutionaries could plausibly gather arguments to be considered as an agrarian party.**

Agrarian parties are another manifestation of the politicisation of the masses in Europe that began during the final decades of the nineteenth century, with the *fin-de-siècle* agrarian crisis as its trigger. The State's prominent role in resolving the crisis (tariffs, promotion of technical change, facilitation of access to property etc.) grew evident, and with it the inevitable need for each social group or economic interest to present itself before the

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State as a coherent and well-organised interlocutor. Opportunity structures were broadened, clearly in accordance with the nuances and rhythms of each country, thanks to the expansion of the electoral census, the regulation of freedom of association, the presence of the agrarian question in political and cultural debates, and rising levels of literacy. The 'agrarian defence',[2] to use Pierre Barral's (1968) expression, took many forms across the European continent, which we can summarise into the following four categories:

1. The creation of pressure groups, which appear as such precisely when State policy is perceived not to reflect the needs of a given economic sector. Hence, for example, the influential German *Bund der Landwirte* (Agrarian League, BdL) emerged in 1893, just when chancellor Caprivi was championing a series of trade agreements that would reorient tariff policy in an anti-protectionist direction. This organisation was able to introduce modern elements (mass mobilisation) into conservative praxis with anti-democratic aims, while control was effectively monopolised by large landowners from the east (Puhle, 1967; Aldenhoff-Hübinger, 2002). Pressure groups lent their electoral support to candidates, regardless of the party to which they belonged, as long as they pledged to defend their demands. In order for this tactic to be successful, it was necessary to ensure control over the maximum possible share of the rural vote, for which a network of services and cooperatives was used, as well as a unitary discourse of agricultural interests and exaltations of their role within society. This rhetoric also served to meet one of the basic requirements for any pressure group: to portray their interests as coincident with those of society as a whole.

2. The surging of currents within existing political parties, such as the agrarian wings of Catholic parties in Germany (supported by the *Christliche Bauernvereine*) and Belgium (in the *Boerenbond*). These sought to adapt the party line to their own interests, competing as

[2] Years later Urwin (1980) would use the same expression, which has received criticism because it seems to imply that agricultural interests are all one and the same.

they did so with other currents that represented factory owners or trade unions.[3] In this case, remaining a minority in competition with other interests within the party in question was a constant risk.

3. Unions and cooperatives were to be the most widespread way to defend agrarian interests. Beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth century, they made up a motley ensemble of organisations that varied according to the peculiarities of each State or region, because this was an eminently local and regional phenomenon, although higher-level federative structures were formed too. Despite unions and cooperatives professing different aims and often obeying different legal ordinances, they can be grouped into the same category because the former almost always included the functions of the latter, and because in practice it is often difficult to draw a clear divide between them. The bulk of their affiliates were of peasant origins, though this did not preclude the participation of individuals belonging to non-peasant groups within rural society. **Agricultural associations negotiated their support for different political parties, as shown for Catalonia in the chapter by Planas and Soler.**

4. Agrarian Parties, which are the topic that interests us in this paper.[4]

The four modes of organisation were of course not mutually exclusive, and in fact it was usual for them to overlap and reinforce each other. Thus, pressure groups could build a cooperative network to augment the critical mass behind each of their proposals to the public authorities. Likewise, agrarian parties would prove more influential and solid in places where they were built upon a consolidated network of cooperatives and agricultural unions, as was the case in Scandinavia. Agrarian wings were generally constituted by trade union

[3] Hübner (2014) and Van Molle (1990) respectively.
[4] We do not consider the agrarian (**focused on professional issues**) vs peasant parties (**with a more radical and comprehensive agenda**) dichotomy, which is used on occasions, to be operative.

representatives, as in the case of the German *Zentrum* or its Belgian equivalent. And in practice, even agrarian parties often acted as pressure groups, concentrating their attention on a small range of issues while their positions were unclear in other areas, and their line of action could become quite erratic with regards to issues that were not part of their core programme.

Agrarian parties —and this is one of the theses that we intend to demonstrate— only appeared in places where there existed discontentment with the policies of existing parties and the other three modes of representation of agricultural interests were seen by a sufficiently wide sector of farmers as insufficient or unsatisfactory. For example, in the Czech case, after there having initially been a pressure group within the National Liberal Party (with which the agrarian associative movement shared a political and national programme **as detailed in Řepa's chapter in this same volume**), an agrarian party was founded in 1899 when it became clear that the interests of urban groups were coming to dominate the party agenda (Kubricht, 1979; Broklová, Tomeš and Pehr, 2008). In Catholic areas of Germany, peasants found representation in Catholic associations and the *Zentrum*, but when in Bavaria it was perceived that these organisations were not defending their interests with enough zeal, and that the *Zentrum* was prioritising religious issues over economic ones, the anti-clerical *Bayerischer Bauernbund* was formed in 1893 (Farr, 1983; Hochberger, 1991). Unionism was the main strategy in France, thanks to an extensive capillary network of associations that culminated in national federations (a Catholic one and a republican one). However, during the 1930s, when the economic crisis' effects were harshly felt and both traditional mechanisms and State aid failed to mitigate them, these organisations were challenged for the first time by agrarian parties: Dorgères' 'greenshirts' and the *Parti agraire et paysan français* (Paxton, 1996; Lynch, 2005). To cite a final case that reinforces the argument, no agrarian parties were formed in Ireland until after breaking with the United

Kingdom. Nationalists had been able to channel the support of the peasantry since the days of the Land War (1879-1882), but after the formation of the Free State frustrated expectations gave rise first to the Farmers Union (1922-32) and later to *Clann na Talmhan* (1938), which consistently attracted around 10% of the vote (Dooley, 2004; Varley, 2010).

Literature Review and Research Obstacles

The first texts assessing agrarian parties were published during the second post-war period among circles of exiles who had fled countries controlled by the communist bloc.[5] These were politicised interpretations that fundamentally sought to vindicate the historical role played by those organisations and certain agrarian leaders, as well as to blame their opponents for developments on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Another of their objectives was to deny any continuity between the agrarian parties of the interwar period and the puppet parties that in some countries (GDR, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania) facilitated control over the peasantry. In the US, some works were published with greater theoretical pretensions, though their perspective is rather limited because they analyse these organisations through the lens of a rigid right-left dichotomy that hinders the ever-necessary ability to empathise with the object of enquiry and to approach it according to its own logic (Mudde, 2001). As soon as the Second World War ended, the British historian Hugh Seton-Watson published his influential *Eastern Europe between the Wars, 1918-1941*, which ultimately attributed agrarian parties' failures to the long-term isolation of the peasantry in the region, to the distance between their base and leadership, caused by the joining of leaders of urban and intellectual origins, to their

[5] Especially in the pages of *International Peasant Union. Monthly Bulletin*, published in New York between 1950 and 1971 (Cabo, 2018).

ideological inconsistency, poorly concealed behind evanescent romantic rhetoric, and to the fact that they represented the wealthiest sector of the peasantry rather than the whole.[6]

The first attempt to conceptualise the problem, from the perspective of political sociology, was made by Lipset and Rokkan, who in 1967 attributed the emergence of agrarian parties to a reaction against the alliance between national elites and industrial and commercial interests. According to these authors, a party's viability depended on four conditions: the predominance of family agriculture; the weakness of the urban vote; a marked cultural opposition between city and country, accompanied by farmers' resistance to integration into the capitalist economy; and finally it was essential that the Catholic Church could not exercise a high level of social control.

The publication of *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert* in 1977 was a milestone in this field of study. Edited by Heinz Gollwitzer, the volume comprised a general study by Gollwitzer himself, which is still highly useful, and a series of case studies. Of a total of twenty papers, four were written in English and the rest in German, which probably meant that the book did not have the impact it deserved. Equally ambitious was the work of the British author, based at that time in Norway, Derek U. Urwin (1980): *From Ploughshare to Ballotbox. The Politics of Agrarian Defense in Europe*. For Urwin too, the landowning peasantry represented the main base of support for agrarian parties, and from the book's title it is clear that what he posits is the 'defensive' theory, since the most important factor to consider would be the agrarians' reaction to threats: collectivisation, the expansion of State administration, an economy focussed on urban centres, and a great many others besides.

Both authors had the merit of providing analytical frameworks for a phenomenon about which there was still scarcely any literature to be found. Since then, a considerable

[6] Seton-Watson (1945: 258-260). Jackson (1966: 41) would make a very similar judgement two decades later.

number of monographs about specific agrarian parties have been published, as well as partial approaches within the context of more general studies devoted to the agrarian or political history of specific countries or regions. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a revitalisation of interest in these organisations can be observed, and in them antecedents for an alternative path between right and left-wing interwar dictatorships and possible suppliers of democratic legitimacy and pedigree for post-communist political systems have been appreciated. Several of these parties have been re-founded after a four-decade hiatus, although only the Polish PSL has achieved significant electoral success.[7]

Despite the availability of a considerable amount of research on this peculiar political family, a work of synthesis still has yet to be carried out to update those provided by Gollwitzer and Urwin almost four decades ago, in tune with the concepts, methodology and debates developed by historiography and political science since then.[8] Recently, Alex Toshkov (2019) proposed a comparative study of the Yugoslav, Czechoslovakian and Bulgarian cases to underline the key role of agrarianism in interwar Europe, a work that we will refer to again, given its importance. The difficulties posed by this subject of study are numerous and explain the lack of generalising approaches.

The first difficulty is that most interwar agrarian political parties have not enjoyed an uninterrupted existence into the present, except in Scandinavia where in the fifties they changed their name (to that of 'Centre') because explicit references to the peasantry or agriculture risked restricting their support to an ever-receding electorate (Arter, 2001). In Central and Eastern European countries, they were banned first by fascistised and later by communist regimes. The result was the dispersion (in the wake of the exile of their

[7] The PSL vindicates its predecessors and also the role of the peasantry under communist rule, sustaining that peasants were the main bastion of resistance and made it impossible to collectivise agriculture (Zalewski, 2007).
[8] Daniel Brett (2011) is a partial exception. Beginning with his study of the Romanian national agrarian party, he has done comparative work with Poland, Sweden or Ireland, as well as Landwehrlen (2009) in the Germanic regions. Furthermore, De Waele and Seiler (2009) offer a very complete European panorama from a political science standpoint, though they focus on modern agrarian parties with only very brief historical references.

leadership) or destruction of their archives and today, unlike other political parties, the lack of historical continuity explains the fact that there are barely any organisations that expressly vindicate their memory, compile sources, create foundations, fund monographs etc.

Secondly, a great majority of studies deal only with specific agrarian parties, examining them from the point of view of the political history of the country in question, often without proposing debates or developing hypotheses in terms that facilitate comparison with other realities.

Derived from the above, a further obstacle is the fact that many studies of agrarian parties have been published in languages that are not commonly used within the academic community. English, German and occasionally French serve as intermediaries, since in the best of cases articles or book chapters are published which expound upon the main contributions of monographs originally written in languages that are normally only accessible to natives and foreign scholars specialised in that particular country. Most syntheses and manuals about twentieth-century history on a continental scale are the work of anglophone or francophone historians or political scientists who pay little attention to a phenomenon that in their own countries was marginal, and which was most significant in European regions that, from their position, are peripheral.

The Challenges of Definition. A Political family?

What is meant by agrarian party? The question must be clarified because there is a blurry line between agrarian parties and other formations, for example Catholic confessional parties with a strong agrarian imprint, or regionalist and nationalist parties that exalted the

peasantry as the social group that most purely incarnated the identity of the territory in question.[9]

Based on a minimum definition such as Urwin's (1980: 165), agrarian parties would be those that primarily target the rural electorate and demand the representation and defence of the peasantry as a social group and also the cultural values associated with it, as well as agriculture as a fundamental economic activity. Ruralism itself is taken for granted in parties of this mould but is not a defining variable, as it ended up imbuing forces across the political spectrum with the exception of communist parties (Cabo, 2016).

Going into more detail, ten defining elements can be identified. Firstly, agrarian parties are not easily placed on a right-left axis. Until the 1970s, they tended to be framed as mostly conservative, traditional or even 'travelling companions' of fascism. This was derived in part from the prevailing view on the political role of the peasantry; one need only recall the role that Barrington Moore (1966) consigned to it in his ambitious modelling of national roads to modernity. Since then, the trend has reversed and there is now a tendency to highlight their contribution to democratisation in the difficult interwar period (Eellend, 2008; Toshkov, 2019).

In their rhetoric, most of these organisations defend a third way between capitalism and socialism. They defended private property but with a social function (expropriation and distribution of estates, cooperativism...). Therefore they opposed communism and socialism, which they also identified with unions and their promotion of low food prices for urban consumers.[10] They were divorced from capitalism by their proposed limitations to the free market and financial speculation, made in support of rural values and agriculture, as well as

[9] Both Gollwitzer and Urwin offer lists of agrarian parties by country, which for spatial reasons we will not reproduce here.
[10] A mutual distrust, given that there exists an inexhaustible bibliography of Marxist theory and practice in relation to the complicated integration of the peasantry. For an illuminating overview, see Blok (2002).

their distancing from capitalist individualism that clashed with agrarian social design's family and community base. It was therefore only an apparent equidistance, since socialism was rejected fully but capitalism, rather than the system itself, was denied in some of its manifestations, a repulsion that on many occasions was tinged with anti-Semitism (Struve, 1999).

Thirdly, the trajectory of agrarian parties is marked by pragmatism; they were parties defined by interests more than ideologies, as Gollwitzer (1977: 11) points out. This does not mean that they lacked ideology, although it was not articulated with the depth and clarity of other forces. Elements taken from liberalism, social-Catholicism, socialism etc. were combined eclectically, together with the Russian populist tradition whose influence, however, has often been overestimated as a result of the leading role of Slavic studies in dealing with this issue.[11]

The actions of these parties revolved around the defence of agriculture as a sector but mainly of small and medium holdings, facilitating access to property and its viability in the framework of the market economy. Therefore, even while waving the flag of agriculture in its entirety, it was usual for agrarians to display suspicion or hostility both towards large landowners and agricultural labourers.[12] The specific measures proposed did vary according to the characteristics of the agricultural sector in each country, for example most of them supported protectionist policies but the Danish *Venstre* positioned itself in favour of free trade as part of a reorientation of production which was to benefit cattle farming.

[11] That influence was also exercised because many *narodniki* and later Russian social-revolutionaries were exiled in Central Europe, particularly in Prague. The influence of Russian populism was not limited to Slavic countries, in fact the Romanian agrarian theorist Constantin Stere (born in northern Bessarabia, under Russian control until 1918) disseminated it in his country (Kitch, 1975).

[12] In the Bulletin of the Green International (BBIA) published by the International Agrarian Bureau of Prague between 1921 and 1938 we see numerous cases in which parties are theoretically in agreement with the extension of social rights to agricultural workers, but this is combined with scepticism about a potential increase in production costs and the possibility of guidelines designed for industrial work being applied with little thought to the rather distinct field of agricultural work.

In their praise of the virtues of rural society we find anti-urbanism, anti-individualism, anti-intellectualism and the rejection of bureaucracy. These were not purely rhetorical elements, as is evidenced by the statutes of the Serbian Peasant Party (created in 1920 and unifying three previous formations from Serbia, Bosnia and Dalmatia), which prohibited intellectuals from making up more than a quarter of the executive committee, which in any case had to be chaired by a peasant (Avakumovic, 1979), or certain measures taken by the Stambolijski government in Bulgaria like the establishment of mandatory work periods in the countryside, designed in particular for youths of urban extraction.

Agrarian parties also shared a pacifistic approach to foreign policy, stemming from peasants' traditional rejection of military adventures that for them entailed nothing but sacrifice (mobilisation, rising taxes, the confiscation of cattle...). The Bulgarian agrarian leader Stambolijski is the most symbolic figure in this sense, having been imprisoned for his opposition to the war against Turkey in 1912, and subsequently between 1915 and 1918 for the same reason (Bell, 1977).

Another generalised characteristic was their regional character or, in the case of parties at the national level, the possession of 'strongholds' in certain regions, while in other regions their presence was very minor. This fact mirrored the diversity of agrarian structures and the ethnic mosaic of Central and Eastern Europe, above all in recently constituted States. In general terms, agrarian parties opposed centralism, for example it is significant that the only Serbian party open to decentralising solutions was the agrarian one (Avakumovic, 1979: 61).

In relation to the previous point, in the context of the nationalist tensions which were so frequent before and after the Great War,[13] parties might well identify strongly with a territorial identity through the overlapping of the concept of 'peasantry' with that of 'people' and ultimately 'nation'. A paradigmatic case is that of the Radić's Peasant Party, which gained a hegemonic position in Croatia, within the State of Yugoslavia born out of the peace treaties, and which opposed the proponents of Serbian centralism, having previously fought for autonomy within the Habsburg Empire (Biondich, 2000). However, nationalism rarely played a central part in agrarian parties' ideology, except in cases of marked ethnic opposition between large landowners and the peasantry, as was the case in Estonia (Koll, 2006). Toshkov (2019: 61) concludes with these parties' "contingency of national expression", depending on each specific context. Generally speaking, the 'class' factor prevailed over the national one.[14] The identification of the peasantry with the 'people' as a whole, or at least its healthy and most representative part, was a metonymy potentially leading to manifestations that can be defined as populist.

Organisationally, agrarian parties had clear shortcomings and were prone to schisms and personalisms. However, in Duverger's (1994) classic terminology they would be considered mass-based parties, not cadre parties, and though in practice their development left much to be desired, they had participatory mechanisms at the base level and their finances also essentially depended on the contributions paid by their members. Their leadership was frequently charismatic and well-fitted to the populist style (of anti-intellectualism, emotional rhetoric, analysis of reality in Manichaean terms...) by which these parties are often characterised.

[13] Which also conditioned the development of cooperativism in Central and Eastern Europe from its initial stages, as is shown in Lorenz (2006).
[14] Kai Struve (2005: 295) illustrates this thesis with regards to Ruthenians and Poles in the parts of Galicia controlled by the Hapsburg Empire.

Finally, a party that did not maintain solid connections, whether organisational or informal, with sectors of a certain magnitude within agrarian associations cannot be considered an agrarian party.

These criteria, taking into account the nuances of every case, permit us to group agrarian parties under a common definition, a 'political family'. This concept is situated at a higher level than the political party, which in fact would be included within it. A party is an organisation designed to seek power, while a political family, according to Serge Berstein (2000), can include several political parties or forces and also associations, media or even individuals who are not responsible for any specific political action but who "have a shared political culture, that is, a common vision of history, of society, of institutions and of the evolution that is to be desired, structured around a philosophical, religious or ideological ideal that serves as cement and confers it global coherence". All this does not logically exclude tactical and strategic differences, personal rivalries, contradictions etc.; look no further than the heterogeneity of classical families such as liberalism, socialism, Christian-democracy and communism.

The shared visions and ideals that Bernstein mentions are the same ones listed above to explain the common features of agrarian parties: ruralism, the defence of cooperativism etc. Admittedly, this is not a perfectly elaborated ideo-system and it does not boast reference works that are comparable to classic texts on Marxism or liberalism. However, we can still affirm the existence of common principles that allow us to define the main features of this political family. Putting their differences to one side, the case of agrarian parties would appear similar to that of fascism, which until not so many years ago was often claimed to lack ideology and to profess a worldview that consisted solely of action and a series of oppositions (to democracy, to socialism, to pacifism etc.).

Another argument in favour of this political family's existence is that the parties within it maintained multiple lines of contact and closely followed the initiatives and vicissitudes of their counterparts in other countries (Daskalov, 2014). This was true to such an extent that they were able to create permanent organisational links through the so-called Green International (Haushofer, 1977; Kubu and Sousa, 2010; Toshkov, 2019). In 1921, the International Agrarian Bureau was created in Prague, where an annual congress was held and its quarterly press organ published from 1923 onwards. The key personality of the Green International was Antonin Švehla, the touchstone of the Czechoslovakian Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants. It coordinated highly diverse parties, from those that held positions of power in their respective countries to those in opposition, others of marginal electoral weight and the remains of those banned under dictatorships. The absence of Scandinavian parties (except for the Finnish) weakened it. The Hungarian Small Farmers Party was also not integrated, probably due to anti-Slavic sentiment (Von Krusenstjern, 1981). Some Western European parties did join.[15]

In 1929, sixteen programmatic points were established, the obeyance of which was obligatory for parties to be accepted as members: the promotion of cooperativism, the adherence to parliamentary democracy, pacifism in foreign policy etc.[16] The Green International was relentlessly attacked by the communist *Krestintern* or Peasant International (Jackson, 1966; Van Meurs, 2018). Founded in Moscow as an auxiliary to the *Comintern* in 1923, the *Krestintern* did not achieve its objectives because it attracted very little support and ceased to function after 1932, being only partially replaced as a centre for studies and documentation by the International Agrarian Institute (Moscow, 1925-1940). The criticisms made by pro-Soviet organisations could be summed up as objections to agrarian parties'

[15] Agrarian parties from Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain and, the most active of all, the *Parti agraire et paysan français*, led by the eccentric Fleurant Agricola (Lynch, 2005). The Greek one also joined ephemerally in 1930-1931.
[16] BBIA, 1929: II, p. 99.

bourgeois character, their philo-fascism, their merely reformist nature that would ultimately make them auxiliary to capitalism, and policies that would favour only the middle and well-to-do peasantry.[17] However, the Green International's death knell was sounded by the Depression and the consolidation of dictatorships in one country after another, with the consequent illegalisation of the parties that were members prior to its disappearance in 1938.

The Historical Trajectory of Agrarian Parties

To study every party's trajectory in detail would exceed the scope of this article. Instead, we shall highlight a series of key developments. The first is that agrarian associationism's emergence in Europe began in the context of the late nineteenth-century agricultural crisis, although in a handful of cases we also witness the formation of agrarian parties before the turn of the century, such as the Danish *Venstre* (1888), the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (1889), the *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe* (Polish Peasants Party, 1895) in Austrian Galicia, and the *Česká strana agrarní* (1899) in Bohemia-Moravia. This party won twenty-eight seats in the Austrian parliament in the 1907 elections —the first held with universal suffrage—, in this way becoming the most significant Czech party. The oldest parties would also prove to be the most long-lasting and influential.

The Swedish case deserves special mention, **because of its long tradition of formal political representation for farmers, as analysed by Bengtsson and Hägglund in their chapter** . In 1866 the *Riksdag* of the Estates was replaced by a bicameral parliament chosen via census suffrage for men. An agrarian fraction, the *Lantmannapartei*, was constituted in the first parliament, though it would not articulate an internal party structure until the latter

[17] The deliberations of the First European Peasant Congress (Berlin, March 1930) are an example of this. Available in *Agrarprobleme*, (1, 2, pp. 173-185), the journal published by Moscow's International Agrarian Institute.

part of the century. Being of a centre-right persuasion, its main demands were to lower taxes and reduce State bureaucracy. During the First World War, it gave way to two other parties that were more closely connected to agrarian associations, and which in 1921 merged to form the *Bondeförbundet* (Farmers' League), a new organisation harbouring corporatist tendencies that at times degenerated into direct anti-parliamentarianism (Jonasson, 1977; Morell, 2001: 111-120).

Agrarian parties were late arrivals, appearing on the political scene when other parties (liberal, Catholic, socialist...) already had decades of experience, a fact that was truer the further west one went. Their consolidation was conditioned by the opportunity structures that were available in each case, obviously beginning with the existence of formal freedoms and parliamentarism. **This explains their absence in Portugal, where political rights were restricted and suffrage denied to most of the (male) population until the First Republic (1910) and only sixteen years later a military dictatorship was established, thus leaving a very brief window of opportunity.** A proportional electoral system and a federal State structure also facilitated their emergence, which helps to explain why in Germany agrarian parties were more successful than in France, though on a regional basis. In Switzerland, where there had been no agrarian party despite the strength of its associative movement, an electoral law modification in 1920 that aimed to move the country towards a greater proportionality encouraged the formation of a party in the German-speaking cantons (Tanner and Head-König, 1992: 222). The same is true for Norway, where an electoral reform along the same lines encouraged the Norwegian Agrarian Association (*Norsk Landmandsforbund*), created in 1896, to take the next step and turn itself into a political party (Aasland, 1974).

If the late nineteenth-century crisis had led to the appearance of the first parties, the next major upset was caused by the convulsions of the First World War and the birth of post-war States. In defeated countries, pre-war elites and traditional parties were discredited, for

example in Bulgaria, while in some victorious countries promises of land redistribution and expectations of prosperity that had been built up during the war were defrauded, as was the case in Romania. A good number of agrarian parties had been founded between 1918 and the early twenties, and some had risen to power, for example in Bulgaria (1919) and Romania (1928). However, the Depression and the implementation of successive dictatorships marked a setback that was to culminate in 1945-1948, when most were dissolved as 'popular democracies' came into being. In some of them, peasant parties that were subordinate to the communist party were tolerated but limited to an auxiliary and tightly controlled role, with no continuity in relation to the agrarian parties that preceded them. Official discourse dismissed the prewar agrarian parties as counterrevolutionary forces, except in Bulgaria, where the communist party maintained the National Agrarian Union (BZNS, its acronym in Bulgarian) as a satellite party and appropriated the charismatic figure of Stambolijski, having filtered out the less assimilable aspects of his person such as his clashes with the communists, named one of the main avenues of Sophia in his honour and erected a statue of him in front of BZNS headquarters.[18]

The great exception was Scandinavia, where, in order to deal with the economic crisis, respective agrarian parties formed governments with social democrats. In so doing, apart from safeguarding social order, they laid the foundations of the future Nordic model of welfare. Despite the differences between the agrarians and social democrats, what prevailed was the fact that both of their voter bases were made up by those social groups that were hardest hit by the crisis. In Finland, the pact, embodied in a coalition government in 1937, also had the added value of symbolising the healing of wounds opened by 'reds' against 'whites' during the 1918 civil war (Hoddanen, 1977). There is an unconscious tendency to separate the Scandinavian agrarian parties from the Central European ones —comparative

[18] Bell (1977: 246): a historiographical implementation of Tishev's (1977) rereading of the relationship between communists and agrarians.

studies are in fact few and far between—, and to attribute the positive characteristics of this political family to the former and its less attractive aspects to the latter. The issue is deserving of a more detailed analysis than can be attempted here, but certain questions that add at least a degree of nuance to this dichotomy are needed. For example, the scholar who has most thoroughly researched the Swedish case sees a traditional and anti-modern character in the make-up of its agrarian parties, and even detects disturbing sympathies with Nazism and a defence of scientific racism (Mohlin, 1989ab). Equally in Denmark, the minority *Bondepartiet* (Farmers' Party), created in 1923 as a splinter group of the *Venstre*, forged links with local Nazis and some of its leaders were tried for collaboration after the war.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that few new agrarian parties have been created since the Second World War. The most notable of them are the Dutch *Boerenpartij* (Farmers' Party, 1958), which channelled the discontent of those unhappy with growing State intervention, the culture of consensus and Dutch corporativism, but which tarnished its own image by signing up former NSB collaborators (Vossen, 2015; Tames, 2013: 131-135), and the Finnish Rural Smallholders' Party (*Suomen pientalouspoikien puolue*). Said party emerged in 1959 as an excision of the Agrarian Union, which it accused of neglecting poorer farmers (Jungar, 2015). In addition, after the fall of the Wall agrarian parties (re)appeared in countries across the former communist bloc, although their electoral clout was already fairly reduced (De Waele and Seiler, 2009). That said, it is true that in their political programmes and rhetoric, newly created populist (non-agrarian) parties have generally shown special concern for rural issues in a way that harks back to the agrarian parties of the interwar period. These parties have also obtained levels of support in rural areas that are slightly higher than the national average (De Lange and Rooduijn, 2015).

Ultimately, agrarian parties ended up disappearing sooner or later or, in the face of agrarian population decline, they became catch-all parties like in Scandinavia and started

defining themselves as the 'centre'. Traditionally, beginning with Gollwitzer and Urwin, their failure has been blamed on external causes: their status as latecomers, the dictatorial tide that swept Europe in the wake of the 1929 crisis, and the shrinkage of the agrarian population that had been their preferred electoral niche. Daniel Brett, on the other hand, maintains that this emphasis on external factors ignores parties' own agency and diverts attention away from weaknesses that undermined their trajectory, specifically their anaemic ideology, poor internal discipline, inability to garner support beyond the confines of their natural electorate, conflicting interests derived from the agricultural sector's heterogeneity, and their propensity for splits and personalisms.[19]

While these last points are true and innumerable examples could be cited, they are still unsuitable as explicatory factors, for two reasons. The first is that what agrarian parties should be compared to are other parties in their respective countries, which were also far from exemplary in how they were run. At the very least, agrarian associations provided agrarian parties with a territorial infrastructure and participatory element that was lacking in other formations and that could partially compensate for their organisational deficit. Secondly, there were some dynamics over which agrarian parties had little control and which ended up overwhelming them. We could mention Czechoslovakia, where the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants became an invaluable partner in successive coalitions under the leadership of Antonin Švehla (head of the government for most of the 1920s) and made ties with German minority parties (incorporating them into the coalition governments after 1926) to set up Central Europe's most politically stable country (Miller, 1999). But there was little it could do about the rise of Nazism, and in the end the country's fate was decided in the corridors of high-level diplomacy.

[19] Brett (2011; 2018) and "What was the National Peasant Party? Internal Division and Organizational Conflict, 1900-1947", unpublished paper available at www.academia.edu (access: 14-V-2016).

The aforementioned factors explain the unequal trajectory of these different parties, but an examination of the available bibliography seems to point to another key issue: the agrarian associative framework upon which they relied, either through organisational or informal links. From it they obtained electoral support, financing, refuge in times of repression, and leaders.[20] Agrarian parties were most successful in places where their emergence was preceded by an extended period of flourishing associationism, as in Scandinavia, Bohemia-Moravia and Bulgaria. Parties had worse prospects if they emerged in parallel with or shortly after the creation of an associative network, or in the aftermath of redistributive land reforms, hastily applied following nationalist criteria in countries born of the peace treaties, and that created hundreds of thousands of precarious properties. Along the same lines, another positive factor was the depth of their previous political experience and peasant suffrage, which again were considerable in Scandinavia and in the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[21]

Conclusions

The first conclusion must be the revindication of this atypical political family, not with apologetic intent but in reference to its historical importance. Secondly, the characterisation of agrarian parties as 'reactionary' and 'anti-modern' that Marxist historiography and various modern authors have propounded is mostly unwarranted.[22] Behind this characterisation, in my opinion, lie two preconceptions: that of the innate conservatism of

[20] Kubu (2013) provides numerous examples of this last aspect.
[21] Hence, for example, the contrast between Slovakia (ruled from Budapest) and Bohemia-Moravia, which was nestled in the Austrian half of the Empire, where universal male suffrage had been instituted in 1907 and people enjoyed great associative freedom. The contrast between the three regions of Poland, integrated into the same State in 1918, is also worth reflecting upon.
[22] These authors include some of the contributors to Schulz and Harre (eds.) (2010). The book's introduction groups agrarian parties and the agrarian associative movement together and assigns them a conservative essence, except in the Balkans.

the peasantry (which would affect the organisations to which it made the greatest contributions), and that of there being a single model of and single path to modernity —that followed by the leading countries in the West—, which can be contrasted against the concept of 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt, 2000). Despite certain rhetorical excesses and often speaking in tones of nostalgic romanticism, agrarian parties proposed an alternative form of modernity (as did communism and fascism in their own way), and to this end employed unequivocally modern methods (Toshkov, 2019: 39). Applying diverse solutions, they tried to reverse a situation of double marginalisation: that of rural societies within their respective countries and that of those countries with respect to the continent's more developed countries (Brett, 2018).

Agrarian parties, and in a broader sense the associative movements from which they emanated, made a notable contribution to the extension and consolidation of civil society and the public sphere: educational work, placing value on suffrage, the dissemination of habits of participation in public affairs, the press etc. With a style frequently labelled as populist, typical in such periods of profound social transformation, agrarian parties played an essential role in the political socialisation of the rural masses within their countries, and also served to foster new forms of leadership, both in the style and in the social origin of their local and national leaders.

As defenders of a specific sector of the population and the economy, they had ample room for manoeuvre in order to reach agreements on issues beyond their immediate interests. This has often been pointed out as a flaw and proof of their ideological inconsistency. However, it could also be considered a strength because it facilitated stable government coalitions in the interwar period, when, in Duverger's terminology, in Central and Eastern Europe, pluralist party systems predominated, varying between extreme and moderate multi-

partisanship (or extreme to polarised pluralism, in Sartori's classification), which was further aggravated by the fact that many parties had ethnic connotations.

The historiographic debate regarding agrarian parties' contribution to the advancement of democracy in Europe remains open. Personally, in global terms I favour a positive assessment, based on arguments such as the stability provided to Czechoslovakia by the Republican Party of Farmers and Peasants prior to its disappearance,[23] their pact with social democrats in Scandinavia, and the (retrospectively fruitless) efforts of groups like the Croatian and Romanian agrarian parties to integrate their electorate into the countries' unstable political systems. Obviously, there is no lack of counter-arguments, such as the initial sympathies displayed by a minority group among the Polish agrarians towards Piłsudski's 1926 coup, Estonian and Latvian parties' support for anti-communist preventative dictatorships in 1934, or the authoritarian tendencies evident in the Stambolijski government of 1919-1923. Nonetheless, on the whole agrarian parties to the best of their abilities contributed to the maintenance of the liberal and parliamentary institutional framework that was a prerequisite for their own existence.

Abbreviations

BBIA: *Bulletin du Bureau international agraire* (Prague)

BdL: *Bund der Landwirte*

PSL: *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*

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[23] This does not only apply to the Czech agrarian party. The Sudeten Germans (BdL) agrarian party were able to reach an understanding and even agreed to enter the government in 1926, although from the mid-thirties they ceded ground to Heinlein's Sudeten party, which later became a tool for Nazi expansionism (Sobieraj, 2002: 85).

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