A Cereal Problem

Portugal's longstanding Agrarian Question, how to achieve self sufficiency in cereals, has never been resolved. Maria Antónia Pires de Almeida explains why.

Portugal's historic quest to provide itself with cereal crops always centred on a desire to transform its large southern Alentejo region into a national bread basket. Some blamed its persistent refusal to oblige on unfavourable growing conditions, the large size of its estates, or the feudal patterns of land ownership. Others claimed the problem was a lack of workers, or laziness caused either by the heat or the peasants' Moorish origins.

The solutions always *seemed* very simple: divide the oversized properties, move other people there from elsewhere, build dams, irrigate, innovate. The results have always been precarious. Time, like the water, is now in short supply and government policy no longer attempts to fill baskets with Portuguese bread. The question now is a different one: how to save what is left of the Alentejo's fragile agroecological system, and work *with* it in a sustainable manner.

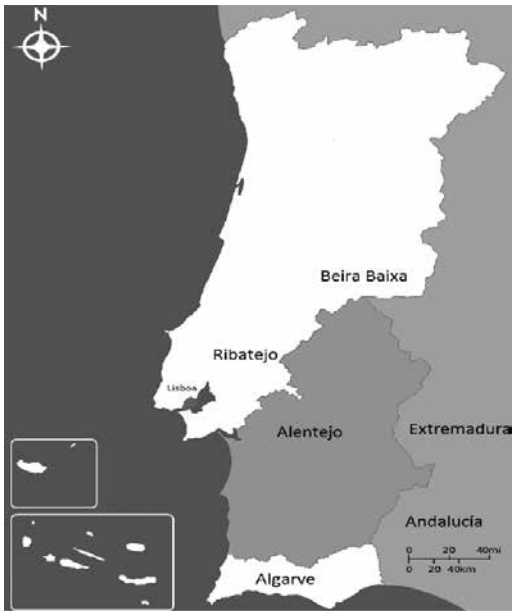
Food, Sovereigns and Spice

In the fourteenth century, famine, plague, and war prompted state policies aimed at food self-sufficiency, deemed essential for a country striving for autonomy and independence. In 1375 King Fernando issued a law compelling people to remain on their lands and cultivate crops, principally wheat and barley. The amount of cultivated land did increase, but this early attempt at self-sufficiency soon petered out. Other solutions were sought, and the Portuguese instead looked west. Perhaps the answer was to be found somewhere on the distant horizon.

The Agrarian Question became a key motivation for colonial exploration and territorial expansion. From the conquest of Ceuta in 1415 to the discovery of the maritime route to India in 1498, securing a stable wheat supply was a major concern. Settlements on Madeira and the Azores in the early 15th century proved very conducive to the production of wheat and other cereals. From the sixteenth century onwards, spices from afar were traded for cereals from Northern Europe.

Harvesting pepper in Coilum in southern India. 14th century painting.

But the nagging question of the Alentejo would not go away. Portugal is a small yet sparsely populated country, and this 'under-productive' swathe accounts for 41 percent of it.



In 1655 Father Manuel Severim de Faria suggested the lack of manpower in Alentejo could be resolved by importing African slaves and redistributing land to individuals from the north. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, African slaves were brought to Portugal specifically to work in agriculture, particularly in rice fields due to their resistance to malaria. (They also made up a significant portion of household servants and skilled craftsmen, 10 percent of the population in cities like Lisbon and Évora.)

In 1789 Soares de Barros, a follower of Faria, proclaimed that the Alentejo would one day become the breadbasket of Portugal. Once the seeds of this dream had been sown, it proved hard to let go.

Montado and Latifundia

Travelling around the Alentejo, the last thing it seems to say is 'here could be another East Anglia'. Without trees the place feels uninhabitable. The heat is intense, even in spring. Cereal and corn production (for humans and animals) has only ever been viable on a small scale, part of a multifunctional silvopastoral system known in Portuguese as *montado*. In Spanish the same system is called *dehesa*.

This landscape, now reduced to around 40 percent of the Alentejo, combines extensive pastures with cork and holm oak woodlands. The oaks provide firewood, charcoal, and acorns for foraging pigs. Traditionally, sheep, goats, and deer grazed the pastures in low densities. Now cattle are more common.

Montado scene, c.1950

Montado transformed into intensive wheat fields. c.1960

The region also has extensive olive groves, vineyards, the arable component (including corn), and market gardens in the towns, villages and farmsteads. Cork trees supply an industry that has thrived since the second half of the nineteenth century: Portugal is still a global leader in the cork business.

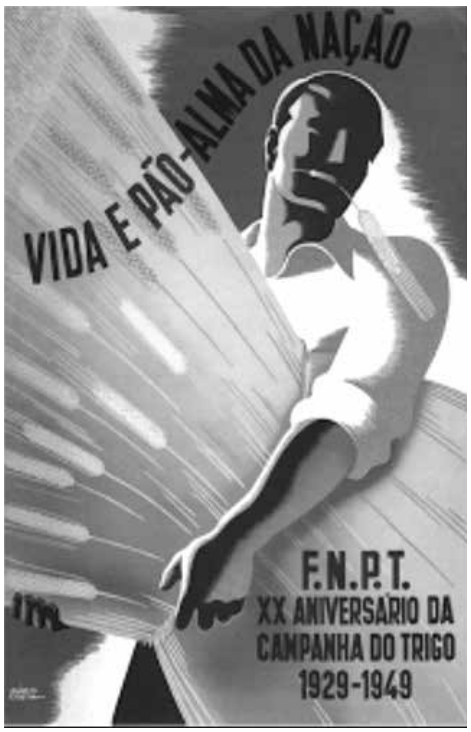
Well-managed montado plays a crucial role in fire prevention (cork bark protects the wood) and its loss, along with commercial non-native forest planting, has caused an increase in both frequency and severity of forest fires.

Though ownership patterns are changing, the Alentejo is still dominated by large estates, normally ranging between 200 and 2,000 hectares. Originally owned by a handful of aristocratic families, these date back to the Roman system of latifundia (Latin: *latus*, spacious and *fundus*, farm or estate). In antiquity, they approximated to industrialised agriculture, specialising in grain, olive oil, or wine production, much of it for export. Confiscated from conquered peoples, beginning in the early 2nd century BC, their economics depended upon slavery.

The 19th century saw some tenant farmers buy their land and improve their socio-economic position, but this still left many labourers landless and dependent on poorly paid seasonal work. This pattern of endemic inequality was a major factor in the radical 'agrarian reforms' of 1974-76 (see page 42).

Wheat Campaigns

When Portugal's dictatorial ruler António Salazar set up his *Estado Novo* (New State) in the mid 1920s, he returned to the 'cereal question'. Borrowing from Roosevelt's New Deal in the US and from the agricultural policies of European fascist regimes, he marshalled geneticists, mass propaganda, and a formidable bureaucracy to steer the nation back to the land. Wheat campaigns were a major component of this drive. Seventy five hydroelectric dams were built and major irrigation projects undertaken. National food independence was again seen as essential, both to balance the books and to keep the population engaged in healthy, family oriented activities.



Estado Novo propoganda poster marking 20 years of wheat campaigns. The slogan says 'Life and bread, the soul of the nation'.

Credit was provided to farmers, and cereal prices were fixed. The need for farm machinery and chemical fertilisers helped drive industrial development, benefiting metalworking and chemical industries. It also contributed to the economic and social empowerment of landowners. However, the old problem of labour shortage, exacerbated after World War Two by mass emigration, meant employing migrant workers from Portugal's northern regions. These workers, referred to by locals as 'little mice', often earned half the going rate and endured extremely harsh living conditions.

Wheat production increased in the post-war period due to high-yielding varieties, but this brought genetic erosion (varieties grown fell from thirty in 1920 to just three in 1970) and rapid soil erosion. By the time Portugal joined the EEC in 1986 it was clear that the model had gone seriously stale. The quest for a national granary was confined to the bread bin of history, and Portugal is now 90 percent reliant on cereal imports.

Cultivation has become much more niche, often supplying a growing artisan market with local organic flour. Many old estate families are still there, though global agribusiness now rules the roost. However, this new master still requires its little mice, the poorly-paid migrant workers, now from countries like Nepal, Pakistan, and Thailand. *Plus ça change.*

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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