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REVIEW ARTICLE

The Peasant Farmer Schools of Ávila as a Model for Rural Development: The Influence on the Agro-Food Quality Policy of the Ávila Peasant Farmers' Union in the El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita District (1977-1990)

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Abstract:

Introduction:

Interest groups are a key analysis category in political science. However, agricultural interest groups have merited considerably less attention from Spanish academics in this field.

Explanation:

The aspect least adequately addressed in interest group studies is the influence they exert on public policy processes. The agricultural dimension of the *Escuelas Campesinas* (Peasant Farmer Schools) movement in the Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita area of Spain has not been examined from this perspective.

Conclusion:

The present article seeks to remedy this gap in knowledge by analysing the participation and influence of the *Unión de Campesinos de Ávila* (Ávila Peasant Farmers Union) on agro-food quality policy during the period 1977-1990.

Keywords: Ávila Peasant Farmers' Union, El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita, Influence, Interest group, Peasant Farmer Schools, political science.

I. INTRODUCTION

Along with political parties and social movements, interest groups are one of the three major collective forms of interconnection between government and civil society. As organisations, they are recognised and recognisable and should therefore not be confused with social groupings. They defend an interest created by their members, even if this interest is not perfectly identifiable, and they seek to influence the political process albeit without aspirations of governmental responsibilities.

The *Unión de Campesinos de Ávila* (Ávila Peasant Farmers' Union, known by its Spanish acronym UCA), an interest group representing agricultural interests, can be placed in the category of professional interest groups. To understand the important place occupied by the union among the different social formations adopted by the *Escuela Campesina* (Peasant Farmers' School, ECA) for organisational purposes in the district of El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita between 1977-1990, it should be noted that, as far back as 1980 -shortly after its creation-, the *Escuelas Campesinas*

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phenomenon in the province of Avila had already attracted the attention of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as an unusual and unique experience in Spain.

Spanish political science includes a small amount of literature on agricultural trade unions in Spain from the Transition onwards [1 - 7] and from the perspective of contemporary agricultural history [8, 9]. However, despite the significant presence, social visibility and importance of the ECA in El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita as of the latter Franco years, its agricultural dimension -embodied in the UCA- has been virtually ignored by scientific literature during the four decades since its creation, compared to its sociocultural, educational and community education aspects, which have merited more extensive treatment [10 - 21].

From the late 1970s onwards, the UCA played a highly active role as a conduit for the interests of local peasant farmers. Foremost among these was the process to apply for and achieve protection for locally-grown beans in the form of a Protected Designation of Origin, within the 'differentiated quality' category -which includes the protection of products covered by designations of origin- of Spain's agro-food quality policy [on designations of origin [22 - 28]. Other public policies and policy areas which appear in the article were relevant for the UCA but not strategic or preferential. Although the UCA achieved full state recognition -and recognition at international level by the European Communities (EC) and OECD- and enjoyed institutional links with the State, even becoming an 'insider' at national level in matters concerning quality differentiation in agro-food policy, academic literature has not yet explored whether the union actually influenced central government in the manner intended.

The research question posed in this investigation is as follows: what role did the UCA play in the El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita district in the process for requesting and securing protection for local beans through a protected designation of origin during the period 1977-1990? The working hypothesis is as follows: in the El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita district, the UCA played a central and decisive role in the process for requesting and securing protection for local beans through a protected designation of origin during the period 1977-1990.

During the aforementioned period, the ECA in the area -the heartland of the movement at the provincial level and where it achieved its strongest presence and development- adopted a variety of social formations (schools, associations, cultural centres and cooperatives, among others) for organisational purposes. One of the most important of these, and the pillar of the socio-political dimension of the ECA as an institution was the UCA union.

Tamayo [29] defines public policy as "the set of goals, decisions and actions by a government to resolve the problems considered to be a priority at any given time by the public and by the government itself". Most authors divide the public policy process, which is cyclical in nature, into the following stages: a problem is identified, defined and included on the public agenda; options for action are formulated and one or more are adopted; the option or options are implemented; the results are evaluated and the public policy is redefined. The present research focuses on the first two stages given that, if the UCA wished to achieve protection for local beans through a designation of origin -deploying various mobilisation and influence strategies to that end [30, 31], it had to be capable of influencing these first two aspects.

The process followed to seek and secure protection for local beans through a designation of origin was the field in which the UCA demonstrated its most intense focus, interest and advocacy, all of which were sustained throughout the period studied (1977-1990, spanning the creation of the union to the achievement of the designation, after which the ECA began to decline in the area). The process saw the UCA table demands from its very birth in 1977. In fact, the union arose essentially from the desire of the peasant farmers to self-organise to formulate their demands, which -as the work carried out for this research shows- were viewed by both the UCA and ECA in the area as the key agricultural issues for El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita.

The vast majority of the demands, all of them inter-related, of the local peasant farmers centred on the designation of origin for the beans, which allows conclusions to be drawn concerning the influence of the UCA on farming issues generally. Lastly, this particular case allows us to examine the influence of the UCA on a process which, although entailing demands aimed primarily at central government, also involved the local and regional governments.

2. APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

We will adopt the neo-institutional approach, which predicates the importance of institutions in explaining the development of politics, and pays special attention to actor mapping, *i.e.* to identifying relevant and secondary actors, their resources, the nature of their participation and their relations, strategies, alliances and dynamics in the face of different problems. Measuring influence is a complex matter that is difficult to resolve, and simple quantification poses

extraordinary problems. For this reason, the present article does not aim to merely quantify this influence but to examine it in detail. A qualitative-interpretative methodology will be used to explain and characterise said influence:

1) A review of the scientific literature containing theoretical and empirical contributions most relevant to the public policy process and to the study of agricultural interest groups in Spain generally and the district of El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita specifically; 2) A review of printed media from the period, particularly local and regional press -regardless of their political outlook- (accessed using newspaper libraries and Internet), and of a substantial volume of internal UCA documents (meeting minutes, memoranda, letters and communications) facilitated by its leadership and by the local ECA; and 3) Qualitative, focused and open-question interviews conducted with key informants and complemented by press interviews and testimonies contained in information and outreach publications. The latter were used because the universe was extremely limited given the small size of the geographical area and also because the process commenced four decades ago and the majority of the protagonists and knowledgeable persons are either deceased or not in a position to be interviewed.

3. THE UCA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ECA IN EL BARCO DE ÁVILA-PIEDRAHITA

El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita is situated in the south-west of the province of Ávila, on the northern side of the Bajo Gredos mountain range. It includes the upper basin of the River Tormes, which is characterised by extremely hilly terrain and an extreme climate. According to data published by Cáritas in 1980 [32], the district was one of the most depressed in Ávila (and Spain), with a population of just 28,000 and an average population density of 23.5 per km², well below the Spanish average of 67.8 per km². The population was falling and ageing due to high emigration by young people. Almost 90% of the population of working age were (mostly self-employed) peasant farmers in the primary sector. The extensive parcellation of the land prevented mechanisation and only around one-third of the land was under cultivation. The main sources of income were beans -production of which was in decline due to ageing and emigration-, apples and livestock. Literacy was low, with a sizeable proportion of the people totally illiterate.

The ECA movements arose in 1978 from “the analysis of the reality of peasant farmers in the area, with special emphasis on the dependency and the economic, political and cultural overexploitation suffered by the families”. According to Díaz [33], “the Peasant Farmer Schools movement [...] has established a working model for Adult Education in poor rural parts of Spain. [...] The name *Escuelas Campesinas* was an umbrella for a range of Adult Education experiences that took shape during the latter years of the Franco regime and were implemented in rural environments in Barco de Ávila during the Transition”.

Of the four closely interlinked areas of activity of the ECA movement -sociocultural, educational, services to peasant farmers, and community education- this article focus on the third, namely, services “to a social sector made up of producer and consumer family units. The social and economic organisation of peasant farmers, whether tenants, sharecroppers, day labourers or small landowners, is based on farming and/or animal husbandry. These groups network within broader communities with whom they live in solidarity” [34]. Of the projects explicitly formulated by the ECA movement during the period 1978-1980, all also closely interlinked, the project for “integrated and community development at district level” was to serve “as the basis for the cooperative, union and political movement as a tool for local community development” [35].

The founder of the ECA movement in Ávila was Tomás Díaz González, a local educationalist who hailed from a town in Salamanca close to the Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita area. He was also a priest who favoured a renewed Catholic Church with closer ties to the community.

“Tomás Díaz began his educationalist career in Paris, where he studied for a degree in Pedagogy on the eve of the May 1968 events. ‘In those days -he says- we were convinced that it was possible to change the world. Our classes were full of the utopian ideology that was to hit the streets two years later, in ‘68. Self-management, joint committees, social creativity ... these were all daily experiences in class, where people from over 20 countries seemed to cultivate the same utopia, based on the belief that ‘values are not inherited or imposed, but created day by day personally of in groups’ ” [36].

According to Díaz [37] -whom we will quote at length to outline the origins and evolution of the ECA movement in Ávila-, the movement arose in 1970. Between 1970-1973, an action group was created in the El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita district for the purpose of leading an action which was then part of the rural Christian movement. The work continued from 1973 onwards through the Almanzor Rural Family College, a private lower-level agricultural college which became a resources centre for the ECA movement in 1978.

The origins of the UCA union within the broader ECA movement can be traced back to the months leading up to the general elections of June 1977. It was initially a grouping of peasant farmers created with a view to the elections and later became a union [38]. In this regard, it is important to mention a second key figure in the movement: José Luis García García, also a priest (serving in the town of La Carrera in Ávila), who shared the pedagogical and theological approaches of Tomás Díaz and subsequently assumed the ideological leadership of the socio-political and union wings of the ECA movement through the UCA, in which he was a driving force as well as its spokesman and technical officer.

“The need for change is taking root in consciences and the time to bring about the change has arrived: by participating in new structures which are currently being modified, such as education, town halls, unions, new forms of working, buying and selling. And by valuing the products of labour: meat, milk, beans [...]” (Interv-2).

“The stance taken by the priests was a brave and important one in an adverse climate and this triggered the beginning of the fight, the demonstrations, the organisation and the actions [...]. When they left, the whole apparatus began to unravel to some degree” (Interv-7).

In October 1980, the OECD and Spanish Ministry for Education and Science (MEC) organised a seminar in the area to analyse the experience of the ECA movement during the period 1978-1980 [39]. The seminar gave it further impetus and allowed the project to be reformulated more effectively in organisational terms. ECAs began to reach public opinion and connect with other experiences, networks and actors, such as Spain’s National Research Council (CSIC), the University of Salamanca and the Interregional Literacy and Community Development Seminar sponsored by the United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO, 1980-1982). Internally, the ECAs began to self-organise on different levels and their various areas of activity began to operate autonomously.

“When the Avila Peasant Farmers Union (UCA) and Campesina Tormes Cooperative were emerging, the Almanzor Centre promoted an educational organisation known as *Escuela Campesina* which aimed to restore dignity to rural farmworkers [...] In tandem with this educational approach, [...] the Almanzor Cooperative Training Centre was set up to help peasant farmers organise themselves in the form of associations” [40].

The internal organisation of the ECAs developed as of 1983 and the schools enjoyed their peak of activity in the years up to 1986, a period in which “[...] a balance was reached in the peasant farmer movement between ECA as an educational movement and its various development platforms (cooperatives, unions...). There was a healthy independence and mutual collaboration for local development” [41]. The ECA of the El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita district began to decline at the end of the 1980s and its activities have diminished considerably since.

“The main actions of the movement took place between 1977 and 1989. Its antecedents date back to earlier times, namely, the latter years of Francoism and the Spanish political transition, and in later years it continued to have impacts which were disseminated and incorporated by many other groups” (Interv-2).

4. THE DESIGNATION OF ORIGIN FOR LOCAL BEANS

Of the district’s 114,000 hectares around 2000 were used to grow beans, a quality and prestigious product and highly-prized commodity. However, commercialisation of the beans had been affected by fraud which made media headlines in the 1970s, including at national level, even if the existence of the fraud was initially questioned by the authorities. The fraud stemmed from the fact that beans grown in the area represented a mere 3% of Spain’s total bean production yet around 90% of beans on the market were labelled as being from there:

“The fraud was caused by [...] the Barco wholesalers [...] and, according to the UCA, ‘this caused confusion among consumers, who had to pay a higher price for the product’. The beans were from other parts of Spain [...] and were even imported from South America. Loads of beans arrived by boat [...] and this helped force down the prices paid to local farmers” [42].

On 16 November 1978, representatives from 10 towns and from the local UCA met with sector intermediaries and wholesalers in an attempt to agree on a price for the beans. The meeting failed, with the intermediaries and wholesalers calling for prices to be fixed by the market. The UCA publicly denounced -including in newspapers such as *El Diario de Ávila-* the fraudulent packaging and commercialisation of beans from other parts of Spain and abroad as locally grown beans. It then decided to withhold all the beans and use every possible means to prevent the departure of bean transportation vehicles until an agreement was reached [43].

“The peasant farmers founded the UCA and decided not to hand over their beans to wholesalers, creating their own commercialisation networks instead. Their endeavours have come at a price given that they are still selling the beans

harvested in 1978 and have had to store the 1979 beans along with those harvested in recent days” [44].

In the meantime, the UCA was to keep all the towns informed of the steps taken, seek the best outlet for the harvested and stockpiled beans as quickly as possible and contact the authorities, the media and the towns of origin of the bean pickers to denounce the situation. On 28 November, in a press release on the subject, it stated that “we are fighting for two things: 1/ To eradicate the fraud and achieve a quality label for our product and 2/ To sell all the beans together at the best possible price” [45]. The release stressed the need for a label to guarantee the origin of the product and reported that an investigation had been launched to determine the locations from which outside beans were being acquired and packaged as local beans by wholesalers and intermediaries. It also gave details of the visit paid on 27 November by a Peasant Farmers Committee to the Office of Internal Trade in Ávila, which promised to put an end to the fraud and to arrange a visit to the government to explore possible solutions, adding that a response would be issued within days (the Office had tried unsuccessfully to broker an agreement between the peasant farmers and wholesalers).

The UCA also stated in its release that intermediaries were visiting towns in the area to buy up beans and break the union’s collective action but the majority of growers were refusing to sell and remained firm and united (also to highlight the fraud since, despite the refusal, wholesalers continued to sell outside beans as local and at a higher price). It also indicated that it was exploring the best way to sell all the withheld beans together. According to the unions, all the towns and their populations had come together to form a great alliance and such alliances had in the past served to confront and resolve other issues successfully and could do likewise for the beans. The UCA urged the alliance to hold firm and called for resilience, particularly since the beans were not a perishable product. It asked for the total amount of beans in kilograms to be notified promptly to the UCA and for meetings to be organised in the various towns to discuss the contents of the press release and to disseminate it more widely [46].

On 1 December 1978, the Spanish government’s Agriculture Delegate in Ávila (from the Union of the Democratic Centre party, UCD) visited the town hall in El Barco de Ávila to meet with the UCA, local peasant farmers and intermediaries, telling them: “I will defend the legitimacy of Barco beans, which are the best in Spain due to their quality and reputation. I will end the fraud, if it exists, using all possible means. I do not want people who buy Barco beans to be duped”. He suggested that a trademarks expert might assist the *Unión de Campesinos* with obtaining the protected designation of origin, stressing also that Barco beans had to be valued appropriately and “people wanting quality beans had to pay for them”. During the formal meeting, the Delegate also expressed his willingness to initiate proceedings to establish the truth regarding the bean fraud, if found to exist, and facilitate sales channels [47].

The meeting also agreed that a UCA committee would visit Madrid on 4 December to meet with officials and senior figures from the Ministries of Trade and Agriculture (some of whom believed that the denunciations of fraud would damage the reputation of the product generally and that prices should be set by the market), including the Director of the National Institute for Designations of Origin (INDO-Ministry of Agriculture). On 7 December, the UCA held another assembly and issued an information note on the visit to Madrid on 4 December. It stated that, in order to obtain the designation of origin, the district needed to self-organise not just with a view to the coming year but for future years also, and to put in place a stable organisation and structure offering legal guarantees.

The assembly held on 7 December also reviewed the situation in each town and agreed on the following steps: to jointly sell the entire production of beans grown in the area; to initiate the application formalities for the designation of origin; to bulk sell the year’s withheld harvest, although keeping a fund as a deposit for the following year; to ensure a committee in each town monitors all producers; and to include specific details in sales contracts of how control of the beans would be guaranteed [48]. On 10 December, representatives from 32 towns and 2000 families gathered in El Barco de Ávila and drew up and approved a written protest at the failure of a UCD senator for Ávila to attend a meeting scheduled in the town to discuss the bean issue [49].

On 6 January 1979, journalist Miguel Vila Pernas published a feature article entitled *A 2 billion peseta fraud* in the *Hombres del Campo* newspaper [50]. According to the article, the fraud had gone unnoticed because the peasant farmers had kept silent until that year, when the wholesalers had refused to buy up their production.

“Peasant farmers have just gone about their work and have allowed the intermediaries to take the profits” (Testimony from peasant farmer [51]).

The article published the names of wholesalers involved in the boycott and stated that, in the absence of an agreement with these intermediaries-packagers, the peasant farmers had offered their withheld beans to two food supermarket chains (SPAR and GRUMA), and to the CIDACOS cannery. The supermarkets responded that they

preferred to continue to use beans from outside El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita, while CIDACOS did express an interest but an agreement was not reached as the price offered fell short of the UCA asking price, which was the same as that paid previously by the wholesalers. The newspaper article also mentioned the possibility offered by a UCD senator to supply machinery for the peasant farmers to package their own beans, although the proposal was rejected. The farmers' representatives also met with UCD Members of Parliament for the province of Avila and used the meeting to press for an enquiry into the fraud -in line with the offer made by the government's senior Internal Trade official in Avila- as they considered there was sufficient evidence to warrant the measure. "The UCD MPs had no idea of the problem, they knew absolutely nothing", according to a UCA spokesman quoted by the newspaper.

A further assembly was convened by the UCA on 18 January 1979 to report that wholesalers in the area were still importing non-local beans, camouflaging them in animal feed bags. After voicing their discontent at being deceived by all those who had promised to help, the peasant farmers discussed coercive measures, which they had already indicated to the province's Civil Governor, who had asked the union representatives to visit him.

According to the note, the visit to the Governor took place on 16 January 1979 and the union representatives told him he was "the only person not to have let us down so far... but we will soon see" and the Governor promised to apply existing legislation. It also stated that, according to *El Diario de Ávila*, the wholesalers had undertaken to change the labelling on their packaging. Lastly, a meeting between the conflicting parties was set for 22 January, with the Civil Governor acting as mediator. The union set two conditions by way of strategy: the new labels had to state clearly the origins of the packaged beans, and prices had to increase in line with inflation [52]. Earlier, on 20 January, the UCA had written to Spain's prime minister, Adolfo Suárez, to express their discontent at the situation of the peasant farmers and demand a solution.

The meeting of 22 January 1979, at which the Presidents, respectively, of the Ávila Employers' Federation (FAE) and the Chambers of Agriculture stood in for the Governor, did not satisfy the peasant farmers' demands, as reflected in the information note issued by the UCA on 24 January [53], which also contained a warning to the Governor by the union that it accepted no responsibility for possible incidents that might arise in the protest actions. The peasant farmers reiterated their insistence that they would not give in a single inch to what they considered blackmail and unsatisfactory solutions.

"Even though 700,000 kilos of beans were being withheld [...], the position that not a single kilo should be sold grew stronger. We were willing to eat all the beans ourselves and our families, every single one ... the meeting was not a defeat, it was us positioning ourselves as we should as peasant farmers" (Interv-5).

"[...] we knew it would involve many risks and even personal disrepute. [...] The fight went on, it was quite tough and took a personal toll. Fighting against organised fraud that had existed for years [...] on the one hand, and trying to avoid our members suffering, on the other" (Interv-5).

On 12 February 1979, representatives from almost all the bean-growing towns attended a meeting called by UCA and the decision was taken to make the votes of peasant farmers in the forthcoming general and municipal elections conditional upon a solution to the bean issue [54]. Meanwhile, an article by Aradillas in the *EL IMPARCIAL* newspaper entitled *Disgraceful Fraud* highlighted a new element with respect to the elections:

"*Is it worth voting? Treat parties with the scorn they have treated you with. Keep your vote for better times. How can you vote for people who show disregard for agriculture?*" These are the rallying cries reiterated forcefully by the *Unión de Campesinos de Ávila* in the Barco area to denounce the sad and ruinous consequences of the fraud involving their internationally-renowned beans. They have received no joy from the authorities to whom they have turned for help, including the province's head of Internal Trade, local MPs, the Ministry of Agriculture and even Prime Minister Suárez, in whom they placed their trust as a fellow-Avilan" [55].

On 5 March 1979, given that the bean harvest was still being withheld as a form of pressure, the UCA arranged a mass distribution to friends and acquaintances of members of the union from outside Ávila as a cost-effective way of selling the stocks which had been kept back in warehouses, cooperatives and shops [56]. During the same month, at the initiative of the UCA, the Ministry of Agriculture's National Institute for Agricultural Reform and Development (IRYDA) commenced work on the preliminary plans for a facility in the Barco de Ávila area for the classification, selection and packaging of beans. The project made reference to the following lines of action agreed during the course of the contacts between the UCA and the Ministry:

- a) INDO would carry out a study of the production area and set the perimeter for certified beans, thus aiding

production discipline in terms of quality and the selection of varieties. Together with the designation of origin, these measures would facilitate the pursuit of fraud and the control of commercialisation channels; b) a cooperative or processing company would be created with the bean growers to commercialise the product, with a view to greater continuity and stability for the proposed facility.

“At the union level, the ECA in Barco got involved through the creation of a union to defend our interests. 1978 saw the creation of the Unión de Campesinos de Ávila, which joined COAG. On the economic level, the influence mechanism adopted was the creation of the cooperative and the designation of origin for Barco de Ávila beans” (Interv-1).

“The main goals were to motivate peasant farmers to turn difficulties into opportunities, to see the possibilities for developing their capacities in the face of adversity. This general goal then had various sub-goals; in terms of economic development, helping form cooperatives and a development unit, [...] at union level, involving itself in the creation of a union to defend their interests; at the municipal level by participating in local governance [...]” (Interv-1).

Moreover, the Ministry of Agriculture looked favourably on the construction of a simple and functional facility to enable the peasant farmers -organised in the form of a cooperative- to classify, select, package and commercialise the beans directly.

UCA members stood as independent candidates in the municipal elections of April 1979 and achieved representation in 28 towns, with a total of 14 mayors and 80 councillors.

On 14 June 1979, the union published a note in various media in which it set out its analysis of the situation and announced that a logo was to be included on all bags of beans sold by the UCA in order to guarantee their authenticity (*Beans from Barco de Ávila*). In addition, the sale of the withheld harvest was to commence *via* COEBA shops, with strict quality controls implemented [57]. In July 1979, the UCA decided to commercialise and package the beans in bags clearly marked *Genuine Barco beans* and featuring the UCA anagram and address, along with a number identifying the exact origin of the beans and a telephone number for customer enquiries.

On 9 October 1979, the *Diario 16* newspaper published an article by García Rivas entitled *Ávila beans: a 2 billion fraud* and setting out in detail the peasant farmers’ battle, along with the possibility that local beans would be granted a protected designation of origin, something the head of technical services at INDO’ indicated would be possible if a motion were addressed to the government once an inspection visit had been made to the cultivation zones. On 24 October a protection application was filed with the Director of INDO and on 12 November two Ministry officials visited the area. However, the application failed because the law only provided for protected denominations of origin for wine, oil, ham and cheese. However, Royal Decree 972/1982, adopted on 2 April 1982, extended the possibility to dry beans and other products, allowing them to be covered by designations of origin and specific designations, and the application process recommenced at the end of 1983.

The Campesina Tormes Cooperative, which covered the entire district, was formally created in Barco de Ávila in 1980.

“Financial help in the form of loans from IRYDA was decisive in the setting up of the cooperative, which began to commercialise the beans once the necessary classification from INDO had been received” (Interv-6).

By February 1980, UCA had managed to place beans on the domestic market through large stores (the aforementioned COEBA, Vinoselección, Mantequerías Leonesas and El Corte Inglés/Hipercor), although the following month a new problem affected this first direct commercialisation by the producers: a drastic fall in prices, which was discussed in local assemblies and, as UCA later discovered, was caused by the rise in imports of farm products from countries such as Argentina and Chile.

In the May 1983 elections nearly all the candidates put forward by the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) in the area were members of the union, with one even elected as a socialist MP for the province of Avila for the period 1983-1987 (the People’s Alliance party -AP- secured 11 seats and the Democratic and Social Centre party -CDS- 6). Following the elections, the UCA also secured control of more town halls (54).

Following the submission of a new designation of origin application, signed by 730 producers, 24 town halls, 34 local chambers of agriculture and 5 farm cooperatives, the Ministry of Agriculture of the new socialist government provisionally approved the Specific Designation for *El Barco Beans* on 27 July 1984, pending completion of the definitive formalities.

In February 1985, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries signed a ministerial order approving the urgent construction of a bean storage and classification facility in El Barco de Ávila for the 200-member Campesina Tormes Cooperative. Months earlier, the UCA had commenced seed enhancement trials in collaboration with the University of Salamanca and the National Research Council, and efforts were stepped up the following year with a view to selecting the different varieties produced. In tandem, it worked to ensure there were no hold ups in the aid requested from IRYDA to build a new selection and packaging facility, as part of the Supplementary Works Plan included in existing farm management legislation.

“I am writing these notes to you in the belief that the delays may have been deliberate and aware of the risks of such apathy [...] -these reflections are also valid for everything concerning the Barco Beans designation of origin, which has made no progress of note [...] - for the rural people of these districts, whom I am duty bound to represent [...]” [58].

However, the commercial *war* between producers and intermediaries worsened, with the former in a hurry to speed up and the latter seeking to delay the process and, where possible, prevent it from materialising since it would be a massive impediment to the use of the name El Barco de Ávila for beans not covered by the designation of origin.

“- The floor was requested by [...] [representing the wholesalers]: He said production was very low, as was quality, and the approach [designation of origin] was inappropriate. There was consternation in the hall and questions from the peasant farmers: - Why does Mr [...] have his industry here if the name serves no purpose? – Are the loss of prestige of the product and poor seed selection not the fault also of Mr [...]? - [...] [Beans from elsewhere are being sold as if from here [...]. The meeting proceeded and warned Mr [...] that he was but a small part, albeit a self-interested one, of the stakeholders” [59].

“A change in mentality allowed cooperatives to be created to exploit and sell the area’s star product, the beans from El Barco de Ávila, [...] after a tough battle with the entrepreneurs, who were adamantly opposed to recognition. A key part was played in the process by the peasant farmers’ unions and various local mayors [...]. The battle was a tough one [...] because UCD and later the PP party gave their unconditional support from the outset to the packaging sector and this caused serious delays that jeopardised the designation [...]” (Interv-6).

“Those now in charge of the businesses have the same business and the same, or even greater, commercial zeal and are earning bigger profits [...] Back in those days, the UCD and PP parties supported the packagers. [...] These two parties were against changes that entailed reforming structures. However, their support for the bean wholesalers-intermediaries meant everything stayed as it was, unchanged; continuing on the road to certain death” (Interv-4).

In August 1984, the *Diario de Ávila* newspaper [60 - 62] was the scenario for mutual criticism and accusations by the UCA and local wholesalers. On 14 August it published a letter by a group of wholesalers to the provincial head of the Agricultural Promotion and Development Service (SPYDA):

“Of the 1000 hectares they ‘claim’ are used for beans, over a third has not been sown, another third is used for alfalfa and other forage, and the remainder is used for growing beans, fruit trees and potatoes. [...] Of the 1000 or 1200 annual tones they ‘claim’ are harvested, the Barco zone accounts for a mere 250 or 300. [...] Of these 300 tonnes, [...] they sell around 10% and use the same methods and mechanisation used by our grandparents, more or less. [...] Given the custom of (many) growers to keep the beans back to sell the following year, the good beans go bad because they get hard [...][,] Vigilance is needed to ensure no beans from previous years are marketed under the ‘Barco beans’ designation [...][,] The farmers need to be made aware that it makes sense to change seeds and sell the production within the same year, with the added advantage of ensuring better quality [...]”.

The UCA Provincial Board responded to the wholesalers with an open letter which was published on 22 August in the same paper and signed by a local union leader and by the president of the Campesina Tormes Cooperative:

“The designation of origin endangers your business, which involves passing off as quality products things you have purchased from unknown sources. How come you, with your sales capacity, [...] are incapable of absorbing the negligible production you claim exists in the area? How can you say that the Barco farmers are happy to keep back production from one year to the next? Could it not be that we simply refuse to sell at rock bottom prices what has taken so much effort to produce? Who is to blame more than you for the fall in production and the confusion in sales?”

On 31 August, the *El Diario de Ávila* published the response by the warehouses and packagers:

“Has anyone banned your Cooperative from paying more and commercialising the beans as they see fit? Has anyone banned people from coming from any part of Spain or the world to buy them? Has anyone banned the farmers from

taking their beans elsewhere to sell? [...] There are [...] farmers who used to give you their beans but now prefer to sell to us because they were losing out. [...] Growers always sell to whoever pays best, which shows that it is your cooperative that is the one interested in rock bottom prices [...] We are prepared to buy at market prices anything the producers offer us, in open competition with you and any other wholesaler in Spain”.

As a preliminary formality, an Interim Regulatory Council for the Designation of Origin had to be set up to draft the internal regulations to govern the body. Producers and packagers were to nominate representatives for the Council from among their ranks. In November 1985, given that no proposal had been agreed and finalised, the designation of origin applicants received a joint letter from the Ministry of Agriculture’s Provincial Office and the Ávila Office of the Department of Agriculture of the regional government of Castilla and León urging them to submit their nominations or risk the application being cancelled by the authorities. Eventually, on 16 April 1986, the Directorate General for Food Policy of the Ministry of Agriculture appointed an Interim Regulatory Council that included five representatives from the packaging sector (including the president of the Campesina Tormes Cooperative) and five producers. The Council was chaired by a technical officer from the Administration, who also appointed the final technical member. It set to work drafting the internal regulations, which proved difficult given the conflict described above. Meetings took place throughout 1987 and 1988 and culminated in the approval of the draft regulations.

In the very final stages of the process, the packagers endangered its successful completion when three of their members, who were also members of the Regulatory Council, stated publicly that the designation of origin should be halted because the area did not produce sufficient beans. Mobilised by the UCA, the producers gathered signatures and requested institutional support from town halls, while also launching an extensive media campaign in favour of the designation of origin. On 29 November 1988, a delegation from the area -comprising the Presidents of the Interim Regulatory Council and the Campesina Tormes Cooperative, the general manager of the latter, two UCA representatives, a packager and the mayor of El Barco de Ávila- travelled to Madrid and were received by the Director General for Food Policy of the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries, two senior INDO officials and the Ministry’s Provincial Director for Avila, to whom they delivered a 1650-signature petition calling for the immediate declaration of the designation of origin.

Finally, on 5 January 1989 the Ministry of Agriculture signed the Order approving the Regulations governing the Specific Designation of *Beans from El Barco de Ávila* and its Regulatory Council. In this way, beans from the area became the first dry legume in Spain to obtain quality recognition through a specific designation. The same year saw the first commercialisation campaign launched under the umbrella of the designation. By then the peasant farmers had secured not just the designation of origin but had also set up the Campesina Tormes Cooperative, and the warehouse/packaging facility for the beans had been built. In addition, a commercialisation network with a sizeable portfolio of clients had been established. Lastly, the price of the beans rose considerably as a result of the designation and the tighter quality control that came with it.

5. ANALYSIS

Faced with fraudulent trade in beans, falling prices and the lack of sales security for producers (with annual losses estimated at around two billion pesetas) -and spurred also by the success of common actions such as bulk buying of fertilisers, animal feed and seed potatoes, and the battle over cider apple sales- the UCA launched its big collective action. The bean battle was to defend the interests of peasant farmers but also had repercussions for agro-food quality policy, food fraud and consumer rights. The origins of the UCA can be traced back to the collective purchase of fertilisers in 1976-1977. Its management body was established in May 1977 and in December 1977, at a first general assembly of approximately two hundred peasant farmers [63], it became formally established as a self-managing class union. It was legalised in 1978 and joined the Peasant Farmers’ Union of Castilla and León (UCCL) and the Coordination Movement for Farmers and Livestock Organisations (COAG).

“We all say that the Union and organisation are the only way to resolve the current situation. It is important to attend the meetings, to give up some of our individual interests for the common good. The other day a rural worker remarked [:] ‘I am beginning to think that it is more productive to attend the meetings than to cultivate the best land’ ”.

“We believe that only by organising ourselves in a union will we be able to defend what is ours You see it everywhere. You get nowhere if you don’t organise strikes and to organise strikes you need to be well prepared” (Testimonies from peasant farmers [64]).

The union’s awareness-raising and pedagogical work through the ECA in El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita played a key

role in creating a collective conscience in the area as regards the general threat posed by the bean fraud and in ensuring the UCA demands were taken up by the community. This thinking served as a theoretical basis to draw the lines of defence of a professional sector (peasant farmers) and a flagship product (beans), both of which were considered an essential part of the idiosyncrasy of the local people and area. The defence of the beans was viewed as an agricultural struggle as well as a territorial one, involving the population, the newspapers, local politicians and members of the Catholic church in district parishes.

“These changes had a major influence on active policies. Moreover, people who were not part of the UCA benefited from its actions” (Interv-4).

Given that the impact of the UCA’s interests extended beyond its own members, the mobilisation capacity of the union was much greater from the outset.

“ ‘The Barco beans -explains the director of the centre [the Almanzor Training Cooperative], Tomás Díaz- are identified considerably with the mindset and interests of many producers. [...] To speak of beans is to recall cultural and historical roots, along with mentalities, that lead many more resources to mobilise than the beans actually deserve’ ” [65].

From its very beginnings, a combination of external and internal elements shaped the ECA’s capacity for influence, in particular, the capacity of the UCA. Firstly, the transition to democracy offered a context of democratic opening and a paradigm shift that facilitated the inclusion of new actors and new demands on the government agenda, thanks to the new formulation spaces offered by democracy [66]. The coming to power of the socialist PSOE party (to whom the UCA was closer ideologically than to the UCD party) at the end of 1982 facilitated the articulation and consolidation of the demands, leading to interim approval in 1984 of the Specific Designation of *El Barco Beans*. However, in April 1982 the UCD government had already adopted the legal provisions to extend the designation to dried beans.

A second element to bear in mind is the background of the founder of the ECA movement, the educationalist Tomás Díaz, whose status as a priest -at a time when the Catholic Church remained a highly influential actor with a strong presence in education- helped him disseminate his ideas. Equally important was the social prestige of the priesthood, with its personal and professional links to political leaders in Spain and contacts at European level. In fact, the ECA movement initially capitalised on the Christian rural movement of the Franco period to spread its ideas. The decision of the Almanzor Rural Family College to side with the approach of Tomás Díaz and others, as opposed to those who advocated a more regulated, formalised and traditional education, proved crucial to the successful establishment of the ECA in the district.

In this regard, the fact that a second leading figure in the movement, José Luis García García, was a priest also proved highly important. As noted above, he was the ideological head of the socio-political and union wings of the ECA movement, embodied in the UCA, of which he was one of the main driving forces as well as its spokesman and technical officer. The earlier pedagogical and awareness work carried out by the local ECA helped convince the peasant farmers that the realities that lay ahead for farming in the new democratic and European context required permanent, coordinated and cooperative action if they were to produce and commercialise their products.

“Rural unionism is set to play an important role. [...] the UCA is a union of small and medium sized farmers, which positions it as a union for the rural working class. [...] It has a clearly progressive, left-wing outlook therefore. The UCA will continue to work to change agricultural structures in the mountainous areas of Ávila, it will promote cooperativism, as it has already done in many parts; culture, as a basis to secure these achievements; training of cadres (experts in commercialisation), union and community leaders who work to promote the population of the area and heighten awareness among the people, etc; it will do everything required to effect change in agricultural structures. [...]” [67].

This action materialised in the shape of the UCA, which succeeded in establishing and legitimising itself in the eyes of the peasant farmers as a valid, unique and representative interlocutor, free from internal differences that might threaten its continuity or undermine its capacity for influence, thus enabling it to confront and overcome considerable external (institutional, legal, social and political) and internal (lack of material resources) obstacles and play an influential role. The UCA leaders (political entrepreneurs), who carried out much of the mobilisation work, succeeded in channelling the demands and negotiations and in unifying interests to prevent splits. Another crucial element was that the UCA was able to attract to its cause local opinion leaders and persons of social standing such as academics, journalists, schoolteachers and other public servants, and other priests. Moreover, the union possessed considerable

organisational resources.

“The ECA movement in Ávila aims to train leaders, work as teams and assume responsibility for its own actions” (Interv-2).

“The mechanics of the actions carried out in the rural community consisted essentially of creating an environment and attitude in order to press for solutions to current problems (commercialisation of agricultural products). Added to this was an alternative concept of adult education. All this was bolstered by methods such as mass movements, assemblies, protests, courses, etc” (Interv-3).

At the same time, the UCA managed to establish and legitimise itself in the eyes of the State as a valid, unique and representative interlocutor. The full recognition achieved enabled it to maintain institutional and formal links with the State, to the extent that it became a highly formalised “insider” thanks to its participation in government bodies such as the Interim Regulatory Council for the designation of origin, which comprised members of the union (both producers and packagers).

“The aim was clearly to create a movement with social and political weight, capable of influencing policy [...]. The first big consequence was to force-persuade [...] the Ministry of Agriculture to grant the Designation of Origin for the beans. In my opinion, they probably did not want it to become consolidated but the exact opposite happened thanks to the efforts of the Interim Regulatory Council, which drew up the first regulations and put them into effect [...]” (Interv-3).

Despite enjoying this insider status, the UCA chose another primary arena for its actions, namely, the media -local and regional newspapers for the most part- and public spaces, and these proved decisive in helping it achieve greater presence and public visibility. Of the most common strategies for political mobilisation used by groups to exert influence (following the categories proposed by Berry [68, 69]), the union thus combined those of an eminently institutional nature, in this case direct provision of information to political authorities on the problem in hand, with institutional and non-institutional confrontation and (very intensive) protest, while also raising voter awareness through campaigns and the media. The extreme situation of the farmers and the precarious economic plight of the area intensified and legitimised the union’s strength and determination, encouraging it also to adopt non-conventional, forceful forms of political participation such as information campaigns and street demonstrations involving the use of effective methods to attract media attention.

[...] “We were living in slave-like conditions” (Interv-4).

“The working day was from sunrise to sunset. There was almost no time to look after the children or help at home. [...] The farms were neither big nor profitable [...] and were so diverse and primitive that no other way was possible. [...] The Union allowed, at least in the short term, agricultural family economies to be planned and valued” (Interv-7).

“The consequences for the authorities were undeniable given that the demands took the form of different forms of pressure based on protests, including gatherings, demonstrations and tractor traffic jams [...]” (Interv-6).

“Even the provincial and regional governments in Ávila and Castilla León feared us. The social change that occurred back then brought other changes for the peasant farmers as well as for politics. We peasant farmers entered politics. [...] The biggest changes were the intensive training and specific information campaigns for the peasant farmers” (Interv-4).

“The precedent of protest and pressure to achieve important things for rural worker life was established, and this was something totally new to the area. [...] Strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protest had a major effect in these parts, where nothing tended to happen [...]. The actions were channelled in the right direction [...]” (Interv-7).

In fact, the inclusion of the UCA demands on the government agenda was aided by the extensive media coverage given to the process by the local and regional -and to a lesser extent national- newspapers of different ideological leanings. Many journalists sympathised with or were directly affected by the cause and often had direct or personal links with UCA members.

“We published three feature articles in three consecutive issues of *Hombres del Campo* in January 1979. News-wise the topic was becoming tired but there was still no solution to the bean conflict. From Madrid, where I studied and worked, I was in phone contact with Tomás Díaz, who gave me all the information I needed to write the three features. He also put me in touch with the UCA” (Interv-8).

The union was hostile to media such as *El Diario de Ávila* or Radio Gredos -whose editorials and opinion columns tended to side with the wholesalers and intermediaries- to whom it sent open letters and press releases as well as letters addressed directly to their respective heads.

“Other anti-UCA groups that did receive the support of politicians opposed to the union saw their position improve in parallel with the successes achieved by UCA members” (Interv-4).

The UCA entered the electoral arena from the very outset. However, this involvement did not only take the form of a series of communiqués in which, by way of pressure, it explicitly linked the votes of its members, sympathisers and family members to a solution to the problem, or its indirect questioning in February 1979 of the electoral guidance given publicly and in writing by the Spanish Episcopal Conference (this was particularly relevant given the Catholic leanings of the ECA movement). In addition, UCA members stood separately as independents in the municipal elections of 1979 and, legitimised by their demands and protest actions, were returned as mayors and councillors.

Moreover, in the next municipal elections (1983) nearly all the PSOE candidates who stood in the various towns in the area were not actually members of the party but UCA members. The union capitalised on the negligible presence of the PSOE in the area to strike an agreement with the party’s provincial leadership in Avila to put in place left-wing local policies, thus enabling it to use the party acronym and institutionalise its demands through elected representatives.

At the same time, the PSOE succeeded in establishing closer ties with peasant farmers and voters generally in the area, aided by a political Transition in which political parties and associations (interest groups) were not clearly defined or categorically differentiated actors.

“The weakness lay in the lack of institutional support, except for the period which saw support from the PSOE although this was almost exclusively on education issues. Many leaders saw it all as a threat to their position but when they realised that it might be of interest they were willing to help, although only if they could control matters. This was true of local, provincial and state authorities, whether political, education, trade union or religious ... Nobody in power was keen for the people to wake up and do so in the way they did” (Interv-2).

“The changes were evident, particular the creation of the bean cooperative, participation in town halls and the creation of the UCA union. Changes in thinking were also evident and this was very positive for creating new structures. The achievements of this period would have been inconceivable a few years earlier” (Interv-4).

UCA even managed to have a councillor (a UCA member) who had been elected in the town of La Carrera elected also as an MP for the province of Avila for the 1983-1987 term. His formal membership of the parliamentary socialist party did not prevent him from continuing his primary defence of rural worker demands, although this did not come without tensions with the PSOE. As a result of these tensions the UCA did not stand in the 1987 local elections under the banner of the party, which had by then secured a greater presence in the area. In fact, UCA members did not stand at all in the elections.

“We advocate a more direct and integrated form of collaboration, allowing a more effective connection, with each side retaining its identity and freedom. We are not rigid in our discipline because we view things from a more pluralist angle, not enslaved in any way by the quest for votes” [70].

“I have to inform you that our UCA representation has decided to [...] cancel the meeting and postpone it for another time to be decided in due course, given that your present political context [...] is of concern to us and we want the agreements reached at previous meetings to be honoured [...]” [71].

“It was never our desire for the Schools movement to be trapped by any of the de facto powers at the time” (Interv-2).

The UCA was the central actor in the process, especially in terms of defining the policy area, and it succeeded in placing the designation of origin on the public agenda. It, therefore, exercised considerable influence, which equated in practical terms to its capacity to shape said agenda. The description and analysis offered here allow us, therefore, to confirm our initial hypothesis and conclude that the evidence demonstrates that, between 1977-1990, the UCA played a central and decisive role in the El Barco de Ávila-Piedrahita area in the process for seeking and securing protection for local beans through a designation of origin.

CONCLUSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results of this research show how the UCA firmly established itself in the study area as a counterweight to

governmental actors and other, non-governmental actors. During the period examined, the union exercised significant influence, acquiring total autonomy and modifying pre-established rules, which were unfavourable to its interests.

UCA also influenced agro-food quality policy during the period 1977-1990 thanks to the new structures for the political opportunity -and the structural ideologies that generated public policy frameworks in Spain- which were offered by democracy in various political arenas and which enabled it to involve government actors at the national level in the process. This facilitated new resources, as well as new rules not imposed by the dominant actors. During the aforementioned period, Spain's democratic structures gradually grew accustomed to open participation by interest groups in policy-making, and the UCA showed it was capable of overcoming the obstacles that still lay in the path of its participation. It succeeded in establishing and legitimising itself in the eyes of the State and the peasant farmers as a valid, unique and representative interlocutor, free from internal differences that might threaten its continuity or undermine its capacity for influence.

Although our analysis of the relationship between the UCA and other actors shows that the union aligned itself strategically around one of the traditional divides in Spanish politics (left-right), it also proved it was capable of creating an independent political space for its activities. Lastly, although the UCA succeeded in forging close links to government actors and became an *insider* group, it did not come under any form of group discipline despite receiving certain benefits from the relationship. Consequently, the possibilities of government actors to control the process or legitimise their position socially were not enhanced.

CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Not applicable.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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