

**BEFORE THE LIBERAL *DESAMORTIZACIONES*.  
THE SALE OF *BALDÍOS* IN 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CASTILE**

Alberto Marcos Martín  
Universidad de Valladolid

This work analyses how and to what extent the sale of *baldíos* promoted by the Crown in the 16th Century with a view to obtaining extra income made a contribution to the depression that affected Castilian agriculture in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. Apart from providing an account of the chronology of the alienations, two preliminary questions are analysed in detail before an assessment is given of the effects that the aforementioned sales had upon public ownership and the traditional system of tenancy and land exploitation: first of all, exactly what types of land were affected by this process, what the legal situation was and who held ownership of the land involved; and secondly, what changes in the use and exploitation of the plots of land led to their being sold, or what amounts to the same, in what way did they modify the conditions under which the peasants could gain access to working the land.

In contrast to those who following the postulations of the theory of the rights of ownership put forward and supported by the so-called New Institutional Economy, which are clearly revisionist in nature, that is to say, that the crisis affecting agriculture in Castile would not so much have been a consequence of the sale of *baldíos* but rather a result of the “inefficient definition of ownership rights”, this paper supports the argument that the alienation of *baldíos* ordered by the Monarchy were, along the lines of what was stated at the time by the contemporaries who were most critical of the process and by Las Cortes themselves, one of the causes (albeit not the only cause) of the rural crisis that began towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The aforementioned crisis was due to a complex network of factors that had been brewing up – and were already beginning to manifest themselves – during the preceding period of expansion. A decrease in agricultural productivity as from a specific point in time, which led, amongst other negative effects, to a rise in prices and an increase in production costs was one of these factors. Another factor, was the ongoing reduction in the amount of land that the peasants owned, or to put it another way, the progressive concentration of the territorial wealth in the power of the privileged sectors of the community. Another decisive factor was the gradual increase in the *tasa de exacción*, a consequence on the one hand, of an increasing pressure brought to bear by the gentry and landowners on the peasants and, on the other hand, as a result of the intensification and increase of the taxation requirements of the Crown, in view of the fact that the distribution of income that it gave rise to slowed down, or quite possibly put a stop to the possibilities of expansion in the sector... The sales of *baldíos* helped to accentuate many of these problems, of that there is no doubt, in the sense that they contributed to bringing about a concentration of ownership and made much more expensive the possibility of peasants gaining access to arable land and pastureland; but it is also true to say that those negative effects would not have taken place if the phenomenon had not coincided with those other factors.

However, the aggression suffered by collective ownership was not caused only by the sale of *baldíos*, in the same way that such sales were not the only decisive cause

of the changes undergone in the ways of making use of public territorial assets. Such changes were enhanced to no lesser extent by the sale, pawning or privatisation of the use and/or ownership of the of the collective assets that were carried out by the local boroughs themselves with a view to responding to the ever-increasingly burdensome taxation requirements imposed by the central powers, and these had just as negative an effect or an even great negative effect upon the peasant economies as the other changes that were brought about by the transfer of public domain to private domain, suddenly imposed by the Crown. And what is more, the sale of *baldíos* is not properly explained or fully understood unless it is analysed within the context of an alienating activity of the Monarchy that was much more widespread, to the extent that it also affected *jurisdicciones* and *vasallos*, royal rent, trades, titles and nobility, etc. The elevated cost of opportunity of the sale of *baldíos* operation and how that cost affected the medium- and long-term economic and social processes can only be understood from this perspective.