ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

A Look at Olive Grove Monoculture: Public Policies around Private Production

Mirando el monocultivo del olivar: políticas públicas en torno a una producción privada

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ABSTRACT

Given its widespread growth and economic importance, the olive plays a significant role in the society of the province of Jaén. Its magnitude has sparked far-reaching debate, both in terms of time and form, between those who insist that it is a necessity that must be engrained in the province and those who argue that this crop constitutes a burden for its development. The existence of a crop landscape determined by human action—in which public policies converge with the search for the greatest profitability in land exploitation in most cases, as opposed to other cases where this is seemingly the only possible alternative—has led to the crop becoming identified as an unmistakable part of the essence of Jaén. This trait has not only been promoted but also desired by the public authorities, who have seen in the olive and its cultivation an opportunity to build common identity markers in a territory and population that are much more than simply economically dependent on the crop. These reflections are based on the analysis of public policies in the land market during contemporary times and how these policies are essential for the expansion of olive growth when the appropriate moment arises, turning it into a sign of identity and public expression of Jaén and, by extension, other olive-growing areas of Andalusia and Spain. And yet, this imagined cultural reality remains stagnant in an increasingly distant past, facing a present everyday life where agricultural work and non-mechanised human labour are residual, while the olive grove continues to expand into the increasingly scarce areas of land that remain uncolonised. And this is before we even consider the social and environmental costs that the monopoly of olive cultivation has generated and continues to generate.

KEYWORDS: olive grove; innovation; market; rationality; cultivation.

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RESUMEN

El olivar, por su extensión e importancia económica, es determinante en la sociedad jiennense. Su magnitud ha generado debates de largo alcance, en el tiempo y en la forma, entre los que sostienen su imbricación necesaria con la provincia frente a los que defienden que este cultivo constituye un lastre para su desarrollo. La existencia de un cultivo-paisaje determinado por la acción antrópica, en el que confluyen políticas públicas con la búsqueda de la mayor rentabilidad en la explotación de la tierra, en la mayoría de los casos, frente a otros casos donde se convierte en la aparentemente única alternativa posible, ha llevado a la identificación del cultivo con el ser de Jaén, algo no solo potenciado sino deseado por los poderes públicos, que han visto en el olivar y su cultura una oportunidad de construir unas señas de identidad comunes, en un territorio y unas gentes que son mucho más que la dependencia económica del cultivo. Estas reflexiones parten del análisis de las políticas públicas en el mercado de la tierra durante la época contemporánea, y cómo estas son imprescindibles para la expansión olivarera cuando se dé el momento apropiado, llegando a suponer un signo de identidad y expresión pública de Jaén y por extensión de otras zonas olivareras de Andalucía y España. Y, sin embargo, esta realidad cultural imaginada solo existe estancada en un pasado cada vez más lejano, frente a una cotidianidad presente donde las labores agrícolas y el trabajo humano no mecanizado en las mismas es residual, mientras el olivar sigue expandiéndose en los cada vez más escasos predios que aún siguen sin colonizar. Todo lo anterior sin tener en cuenta los costes sociales y ambientales que el monopolio del cultivo ha generado y genera.

PALABRAS CLAVE: olivar; innovacion; mercado; racionalidad; cultivo.

Andaluces de Jaén,
aceituneros altivos,
pregunta mi alma: ¿de quién,
de quién son estos olivos? ("Andalusians of Jaén, to whom do these lofty olive trees belong, my soul asks?")

Miguel Hernández

1. Introduction. A tree in context

The province of Jaén encompasses 587,932 hectares of olive groves—almost 25% of all of Spain's olive trees, producing 2,779,265 tonnes of olives each year—which are responsible for 47.2% of Spain's total olive oil production, some 525,360 tonnes (Andalusian regional Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development, 2021). It is interesting to compare these figures with those of the quantity of Andalusian olive oil that is exported: 506,429 tonnes is sold in bulk and 347,694 tonnes in bottles, totalling 854,122 tonnes. This means that Jaén produces roughly the same amount of olive oil as the total that is exported in bulk. Without there being full equivalence, it is a fact that the producers do not participate in the sale of packaged oil; in fact, the oil mills themselves do not export packaged oil, which is the

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task of the packaging companies, and the provincial market is therefore controlled by a few people who are tiny players in the global food market (Blas, 2022). These data show that the province of Jaén, in addition to being the largest producer of olive oil in Spain, is dependent on an export crop sold in specialised global markets, and, therefore, dependent on said markets. In this article we will discuss the origins of this situation of monoculture and dependence, analyse the main causes and examine the proposed alternatives.

In the first section we will begin by addressing the historical context that, through the freeing up of land, allowed cultivation of the crop to grow. We will continue by analysing public policies and support for the advancement and modernisation of crops. We will then turn our attention to the new production models that are constantly being introduced in the field. Next, we will focus on the creation of a cultural model that is separate from the reality of productive practice before ending with our conclusions, which suggest that the future is only bright inasmuch as it continues to be profitable. This work is the result of myriad conversations, reflections, readings, notes, previous works and participant observation by its authors, as well as the active practice of the profession of olive growers and/or the participation in mill management bodies and second-degree cooperatives. Likewise, it owes much to informal interviews with people linked to olive growing, direct producers, suppliers of mills, managers of cooperative societies, mill owners, managers of distribution companies and laboratory managers. After all this, and with the risk of turning into heretics:

> In fact, in all these groups there is a degree of distancing that none of its members can overcome without appearing in the eyes of the group as a heretic (and turning into one), regardless of whether their ideas or theories agree with observable facts and approach what we call truth (Elias, 1990, pp. 26–28).

But as a substantial method, and substantiated by the work presented here, it is about understanding the functions of human groups where it is necessary to know from within how subjects experience the groups of which they form part and those that are alien to them—and this cannot be known without active participation and commitment. It's only a matter of coming to grips with it, of understanding actions and their causes:

> [...] the historian or sociologist also does not trust the pure narrative logic that emerges from the chronological concatenation of events but tries to understand them using comparative analyses. It is, in fact, a matter of understanding and interpreting the phenomenon with the help of concepts and even theory, but without the concept or theories going beyond what is necessary for the interpretation of the meaning that individual or collective subjects gave to their action and the understanding of the structural determinations that make it possible (Juliá, 1989, pp. 74–75).

Without further ado, from this heuristic perspective, we can address this work and consider the history of the olive grove as an example of continuous innovation in

crop management, product production, oil uses and marketing. We understand innovation to be the incorporation of technical improvements in our tools—in addition to human improvements—which, within the logic of the market, involves making changes so as to increase profits. The counterpart of this innovation is the cost it has on society, the environment and landscapes. These innovations are closely tied to liberal public policies and the development of capitalism since the beginning of the period dubbed as the world economy by Wallerstein (1989), during which time the crops of the Guadalquivir valley were oriented towards export to the American market, with an increase in olive oil demand thanks to its liturgical, food, lighting and other uses (Bernal, 1974). This naturally increased the amount of land used for olive cultivation, although it was still limited to the worst plots of land.

The arrival of liberal reforms, and their corresponding political innovations, which led to modifications to the medieval land tenure structures, something more apparent than real, lay the foundation for the constant increase in area and production of olive cultivation. The logic of market profit (Weber, 1984), conservative individualist public policies of change, under which new owners were able to defend their acquisitions/appropriations, are part of the new liberal society in which political and economic power merge. These changes can be traced back to the end of the 18th century, when physiocracy prevailed and capitalism was in its infancy, and—as stated in Jovellanos' 1795 Report in the Dossier of the Agrarian Law—attempts were being made to increase the profitability of the land, which gave rise to the privatization of wasteland and communal forests, the dissolution of the *Mesta* (an association that protected livestock owners, established in the 13th century and active until 1836), the closure of farms and the contractual freedom of leases, all to the detriment of traditional ways of production and life, in the case of the *Mesta*, and of the granaries that controlled grain to limit the impact of the unrelenting subsistence crises. The Spanish War of Independence and the subsequent independence of the American territories directly affected the income of the elite, and land became the main source of value—with the best land being of a higher quality, having access to water and located closer to urban settlements—which contributed to the emergence of the urban phenomenon.

The dream of creating a class made up of property owners who were in favour of the new regime, truncated by the State's debts caused by the successive wars, was not achieved with the confiscations of the Cortes de Cádiz (1810–1814), the Liberal Triennium (1820–1823), Mendizábal (1836–1837), Espartero (1841) and Madoz (1854–1856), which created richer, more powerful property-owning classes, which coincided with those that already existed under the Ancient Regime, while the less favoured—the tenants, sharecroppers, day labourers and small farm owners—were stripped of their traditional livelihoods. If we take the confiscation of 1836 as an example, the municipal councils in charge of the plots made sure they were of such a size that small landowners would effectively be ruled out from purchasing them, but not the wealthy oligarchies.

The creation of a land market was supposed to be an innovation that reflected social revitalisation, through greater private land ownership thanks to an increase in the number of small- and medium-sized landowners, but not only did it lack the sup-

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posed "invisible hand", it was even designed in such a way so as to promote inequality of ownership. In the end, the innovation of liberalism, joining property with freedom, was divergent, bifurcating liberalism itself into two political currents, based on social commitment and clearly differing in political and economic views. In some geographical areas, based on their geographical or historical characteristics (such as feudal rights), a class of small- and medium-sized landowners was also established, which is fundamental in understanding the expansion of the olive grove. An example is the case of the Sierra Mágina region, and the land distribution made after the Reconquista (Quesada, 1989).

During the 19th century, beyond conflictive political alternation, we can identify some constants: the intensification of confiscation and the division and use of new lands for cultivation at the expense of forests and communal land (Araque, 1993). The conservative restoration of the late 19th century, when the new elite was consolidated, brought about protectionist public policies (Garrabou, 1990) thanks to diverse types of legislation, bureaucratic obstacles, and elaborate procedures. These conventions and regulations were decisive in promoting the expansion of the olive grove, coinciding with the arrival of the grape phylloxera plague, which ended with grape vines being replaced by olive trees following the crisis at the turn of the century.

Industrialism, the First World War and the new use of olive oil as a lubricant prior to the discovery of synthetic alternatives sparked the so-called "golden age of the olive grove" (Zambrana, 1987). The crop's success was overwhelming, with the area used for olive cultivation increasing by 58.43%—or 121,712 hectares—between 1913 and 1935, dwarfing figures recorded in the rest of Spain (Gallego and Sánchez, 2013), something that would have been difficult to achieve if it were not for the circumstances analysed above. The main cost of this innovation was the social problem caused by the ballooning number of day laborers and small and medium-sized landowners whose livelihoods depended on this crop. At that moment in time, environmental problems, such as deforestation, erosion and fires, were not as prominent as the social issues, even though they were condemned. The dynamics of innovation in cultivation cannot be disentangled from the prevailing land ownership structures. Large estates viewed the olive tree as a viable use for marginal land, whereas smaller landholders —motivated by concerns over soil quality— diversified their production. These proprietors balanced subsistence farming (including food and oil for lighting, at a time when electricity remained largely urban) with the monetisation of their harvests, particularly in years of olive scarcity.It was common practice to pay money on account before the sale of the product—oil in all its forms and involving all kinds of stakeholders—where the mills and their owners replaced the financial institutions, and continue to do so. These interactions were uneven, given that, although mill owners received a percentage for the processing work, they undertook, known as the *maquila* or toll (Zambrana, 1987), the perception was that they used their knowledge of the market to obtain greater profits. These conflicts lie at the root of the rise of cooperativism during the 1960s, the dictatorship's response to the social problems generated by the abuses of private industrialists and which constituted a defense for the most modest owners, in an act of political corporatism that ensured control and power in the towns.

2. The arrival of public policies

In no case did public policies imply an attack on cultivation and its expansion, neither before nor after the Spanish Civil War; freedom of cultivation was already institutionalised in the 19th century and was never cast into doubt. Property ownership reforms and improvements to olive growing were proposed during the Second Republic, with the implementation of irrigation being the main proposal made since the Restoration, formulated during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, and further developed during the Franco regime. After the war, once the Republic's efforts to divide and redistribute work under the Agrarian Reform were undone, the new leaders focused on solving the social problems surrounding farming, accentuated by the ruralisation that occurred upon the conclusion of the Civil War and the autarchic policies and the international isolation to which the triumphant party was subjected. The National Institute of Colonisation was set up for this purpose, although in the case of the olive it did not slow down the sustained implantation that was happening in the province of Jaén (Araque *et al*., 2002; Gallego, 2014). Overall, the public policies were focused more on creating infrastructure, including colonisation villages, and increasing the total irrigated area, with the miraculous logic that an increase in the production of irrigated olive groves would solve the existing problems. The goal of these colonisation villages was to allocate a certain number of people to live in these villages and work the surrounding estates, which only grew other crops in the event that they offered higher yields—like cereal, cotton and beetroot—in line with the protectionist logic of the dictatorship, as well as olives. These crops, in addition to those required for subsistence outside the large commercial markets, resulted in the province becoming an exporter of products that were either unprocessed or underwent minimal transformation, following the logic of underdeveloped economies. It is interesting to note how nowadays these areas correspond to those in which *super-intensive* olive groves were planted (Sánchez *et al*., 2022), although it remains to be seen whether they are only limited to these spaces. Everything depends on the profitability of the crop and the decrease in costs through manual labour being completely replaced by mechanised means, which may mean that this form of cultivation can be extrapolated to large areas susceptible to new plantations that replace the scarce existing alternative crops and/or the replacement of traditional olive groves.

Meanwhile, the private sector increased its cultivation on forest land. Postwar ruralisation and the impossibility of emigrating led to land being tilled that otherwise would not have been. Action was taken in the public sector through 1953's Jaén Plan, which constituted the Francoist dictatorship's attempt to plan the industrial development of the province and resolve the dramatic social situation. Regarding olive groves, in addition to training policies and the constant expansion of irrigation, we must highlight the interest in by-products beyond their traditional uses in livestock feed, oil mill boilers and the pomace, soap and oil industry: they served the double purpose of avoiding waste and obtaining an economic profit. It is significant that the authors who delve into the Jaén Plan, both in the full studies (Gallego, 2013) and

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in partial studies, and particularly those on the use of the aforementioned by-products (Martín, 2017), talk of failure or lost opportunities, which already indicates that these measures were successful. The lack of success of the industrial policy stands in contrast to the innovation involved in the cultivation of olive trees and the consequent increase in the cultivated area—which spiked again in the sixties thanks to emigration—as a result of the progressive mechanisation of agricultural work, leading to olive cultivation taking on an agro-industrial character. The emigration to the industrialised cities of northern Spain and/or the rest of Europe was the perfect solution to the province's social problems; in particular, emigration was the only job opportunity for the olive groves' surplus workers, landless day labourers and small- and/or medium-sized landowners who supplemented their income from the olive grove with other jobs, and who in all cases found themselves in a precarious economic situation. The solution to the social problem in Jaén—a lack of job opportunities—was, and still is, solved by emigration.

Although the emigration that took place in the final decades of the twentieth century differs from contemporary patterns —particularly in terms of migrants' educational profiles— the underlying dynamics remain unchanged. Labour in the olive sector continues to be seasonal, requiring large numbers of low-skilled workers during short, intensive harvest periods. Outside these windows, such labour becomes surplus to the system's needs, a structural dilemma that, as the scientific literature repeatedly underscores, has historically been resolved —and continues to be— through emigration. As for the labour needs of the olive season, these have been met through hiring temporary, itinerant workers who take precarious and seasonal jobs (Menor, 2007). This aspect is shared with other capitalist Western countries (Bruder, 2020), in our case non-EU countries, who replace their workers with those from the Maghreb or sub-Saharan Africa, something well studied in the case of strawberries in Huelva (Pinto and Castro, 2023). In any case, the variety of contexts in which the activity takes place, as well as the variety of farms, means that the maximum influx of low-cost labour is still decisive, replacing mechanisation, which involves higher costs (Graeber, 2018). As for the province's social problem, the emigration-based solution has been so successful, as backed up by the data, that the population in Jaén does not stop decreasing. Therefore, for the year 2022:

> The official population figures of the Municipal Register as of 1 January 2022 show that the population in the province of Jaén stands at 623,761, which represents 7.34% of the regional total and 1.31% of the national total. While in Andalusia and Spain the population has increased over the last five years by 1.38% and 1.61%, respectively, in the province of Jaén it has dropped by 2.25% (INE, 2023).

This social situation explains why the different plans devised to "modernize" the province, namely the Provincial Magna Assembly of 1924, the Jaén Plan of 1953 and even more recent ones such as Activa Jaén, have tended to consider olive monoculture as a problem, although none offered any serious alternatives to the prevalence

of its cultivation, among other reasons because doing so would mean acknowledging that there is no other alternative within a market economy where agriculture is subordinated to the specialization of the productive space within the world's largest markets (Krugman and Wells, 2016) and the logics of world capitalism, something very flexible and adaptive, even *axiomatic* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Therefore, although we are talking about agricultural production areas, it is not too difficult to observe the emergence of *archipelagos* of specialisation and the circulation of both material and human regional *flows* (Lacour, 1996, pp. 25–48), as well as, in many contexts, paradoxical processes like hyperspeculation, mechanisation and productive flexibility (for *Taylorist* logics, see Coriat, 2000; Palerm, 1999, pp. 154–180), together with the *essentialisation* and identity heritage of certain products or crops, whether via organic production or designations of origin.

3. New production models

We pointed out above the importance of small-medium properties in the expansion of olive groves (Infante, 2012). Large properties became interested in growing crops later than other crops such as cereals. Among the reasons highlighted, in addition to productivity, are the progressive increase of food consumption and the protectionism that had prevailed since the beginning of the 20th century, but was particularly decisive during the Franco administration, when ration books were handed out; new markets were created in areas where other fats were traditionally consumed, as is the case of the north of the peninsula; and the prices of the controlled market were regulated, which guaranteed profits for the owners, who began to gain importance and power based on the size of their property. In the end, it is possible to identify a parallel between the political-social elite and olive grove ownership, establishing a scale that rises from the local level to the provincial and national level, wherein wealth becomes indistinguishable from owning olive trees and one's level of wealth is measured in hectares of land and/or number of trees. Guaranteed prices, beyond the black market—profiteering and corruption—were key to achieving state support for increased production and a captive market. State protectionism, and the international changes that occurred from the 1970s onwards, had a significant impact on cereal markets that fuelled expansion to replace other less profitable export crops (Blas, 2022). This *status quo* was altered with the arrival of political change, the Transition, resulting in the forced liberalisation of markets and offensive by multinationals in the vegetable fat sector (sunflower, soyabean and rapeseed) at the end of the seventies, with the market for these products exploding, production increasing following the green revolution and production subsidies leading to increased surpluses. In these trade wars, marketing strategies touched on international academic studies that pointed out the carcinogenic properties of the oil, which resulted in near-reaching responses on the national and local level, precursors of the academic-institutional development of support and defense of the industry, creating a social consensus to defend the product and its prosperity, with the social consensus becoming a sign of identity. In this commercial dispute, the sector was "helped" by the tragic toxic oil syndrome scandal caused by the consumption of denatured rapeseed oil (rapeseed

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oil mixed with industrial oils), which occurred in the early 1980s, leading to death and associated diseases and society's eventual rejection of this type of fat, as it began to connect its consumption with the scandal, thus destroying the market possibilities of this fat. Another improvement brought about by this unfortunate event was greater control around sale and packaging, the creation of digital object identifiers (DOIs) and protected geographic indications (PGIs), which, together with the EU's agricultural policies—which now applied to Spain since its accession to the EEC in 1986—put a stop to the sale of oil as had been done traditionally: in containers without any type of approval and guarantee, a source of all kinds of scams and corruption.

Since joining the EEC, European agricultural policy has had an influence on the olive grove, but as we have pointed out throughout this work, it has not negatively affected the increase in cultivation, which has continued to grow (Cuesta *et al.*, 1998). However, it is true that, during the early stages, the productivity phase encouraged more cultivation, which went hand in hand with production subsidies. Being a single payment, we could be led to believe that it discouraged cultivation, but the increase in production and production areas seem to indicate otherwise. With Agenda 2000 and the introduction of rural development policy, alternatives were sought that never ended up being viable replacements for olive cultivation. It must be acknowledged that thanks to Europe, there has been a trend in some areas towards more sustainable models of cultivation, and even organic cultivation, although most production continues to follow productivist models of income maximisation. This micromanagement does not only come from Europe; provincial institutions have also been promoting the protection of the olive grove landscape sought by UNESCO. Without going into whether or not this is the correct thing to do, we can see that the constant identified throughout this work—the private ownership of the crop and the logic of searching for maximum profits that sustains it—has meant that this initiative has been rejected by some of the owners, which has all but ruined it.

Limiting the analysis of olive cultivation to a purely market-based perspective —a common analytical tendency— risks falling into a form of economic determinism that this work seeks to avoid. Innovations in crop management and processes of specialization are seldom reducible to market pressures alone. As we have already demonstrated, public policies were not merely relevant but essential to the expansion of the olive sector. Nonetheless, other explanatory factors must be considered. We have no systematic evidence of the reason for choosing one crop over another over time, beyond the usual economic profitability, though we can consider other factors: the problems of mechanisation (it is possible to grow olive trees without it); the lower quality of the land; the orography of the mountainous areas of Jaén, which are more useful for tree cultivation; the size of the farms (for example, cereal harvesters stopped using certain plots for their regular harvesting cycles due to their isolation or size); the costs of harvesting surpass those of cultivation, as occurs in the classic example of a continuous drop in cereal prices; the productivist incentives of the common agricultural policy (CAP); the need for new, costly machinery that is not worth the expense given the size and concentration of the plots. We could even speak of the olive tree being a crop of resistance for small owners, as it does not require a large investment when grown on small plots and it covers the fam-

ily's oil needs with few working days a year. The opposite is true when it comes to large properties, which seek investments that make labour as cheap as possible, as long as it is not so cheap that it makes the acquisition of another technology to replace it inefficient, or the control of the market is so powerful that it makes any innovation in the search for greater profit unnecessary. The ultimate goal of innovation is always to obtain greater profit with lower costs, at least from the perspective of marginalist theory. These explanations can be considered alongside others that have been studied in greater depth, such as the structure of ownership, manufacturing, and sale. By this we seek to explain the complexity and richness of the olive grove, and the separate ways of approaching it, although a more heuristic vision is required. But, before we tackle the issue from the cultural viewpoint, we will briefly discuss the state of the oil industry in the province.

An analysis of the production data, in the traditional sense proposed by econometrics, shows us greater uniformity, in other words, that it has great continuity. We continue to see that the majority of the product is still sold in bulk, amounting to 473,146 of the 795,207 tonnes in total, with packaging companies bottling 322,061 tonnes and also selling 148,905 tonnes in bulk (mills and refineries sell everything in bulk, at 157,470 and 161,903 tonnes, respectively) (Observatorio de Precios y Mercados, 2022). As we can see, there are large volumes sold in a market that is controlled by very few people, an oligopoly that is interested in maintaining the *status quo* that generates large profit margins. Economic logic tells us that this productive-commercial structure represents a *pyramid system*, which is obviously associated with the existence of *oligopolies* at the commercial level (López Ontiveros, 1978, pp. 19–40). Such a productive structure certainly seems to be linked to all cash crops, from tea to opium poppy and coca, although it appears to be much more evident in "longer-term" commercial crops, such as coffee, and not so much in products with less commercial potential like olive oil (Palacios, 2007).

It is interesting to note that in the ranking of sector companies (ElEconomista.es 2024) based on the sales data of companies with the national economic activity code 1043: Manufacture of Olive Oil, of the 511 existing at the national level, only 88 are based in Jaén. These include Descuella Aceites del Sur-Coosur S.A., which finds itself in second place in the ranking with a turnover of 876,713,632 euros, behind only Dcoop S. Coop. Andaluza, which recorded a turnover of 1,236,973,106 euros and which, although based in Málaga, is a second-degree cooperative and includes a few of first-degree cooperatives from Jaén. Far behind these companies in the ranking we have Aceitunas Jaén Sociedad Limitada at number 18, with a turnover of 42,125,615 euros, and Emilio Vallejo S.A., with 38,750,617 euros, in 19th place, both of which are traditional companies operating in the province. We have to jump all the way down to number 32 to find the next one, Explotaciones Jame SL, with a turnover of 24,316,352, and further still to number 50 in the ranking to find the first cooperative, Sociedad Cooperativa Andaluza Unión de Úbeda, with 16,924,417 euros in turnover. Of the 88 existing companies, 15 (17.04%) have a turnover of more than 12 million euros. There is no data available for the remainder, although 25 (28.41%) indicate that they have a large turnover, which suggests that they have assets of over 40 million euros, although we do not know this for sure. These companies are all found between number 71 and 169 in the ranking. A smaller proportion—26 companies (29.54%)—represent

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medium-sized companies, with up to 40 million euros in assets according to Spanish law. Small companies, with assets of less than 4 million euros, account for 22 (25%) of existing companies. A reading of this data shows that there are few large companies with a strong turnover compared to many medium and small companies with low turnover. So, we can identify a few constants regarding sales: the large number of bulk sales, the concentration of packaged sales with an increasing dependence on exports and the fragmentation of sales to the domestic market.

4. The universalisation of an archetype

When we talk about the olive-growing culture, we understand both the general public's perception and the construction in the collective imagination of the universe of the olive grove in which elements of traditional cultivation converge with accessories typical of economic and political marketing, seeking to create an identity of the ilk of Benedict Anderson's (2005) imagined communities, which do not correspond to the socio-economic reality of it, historically based on the productivist logic of the market where only profit mattered and where other costs such as social or environmental, loss of land, desertification, the disappearance of fauna due to the use of pesticides and plant protection products, among others, are only resolved by circumstances unrelated to cultivation. The social costs because of a result of emigration are mitigated in the case of environmental costs thanks to the obligations imposed by community policies regarding monetary aid or penalties on collection of CAP aid and subsidies. Today we are witnessing a greater concentration of exploitation, via ownership and other forms of tenure, and forms of cultivation that are typical of agribusiness (Etxezarreta, 2006).

Alongside this model of agriculture oriented toward industrial export, a constructed imaginary has emerged —one rooted in a social reality shaped by the pervasive presence of the olive grove. After more than a century of crop substitution, the olive tree has become intertwined with virtually every stratum of Jaén's society, to varying degrees. This symbolic association transcends economic logic, embedding the olive grove not only in the landscape but also in the collective cultural memory and identity of the region. Aside from the fact that the province's economic activities are linked to the olive grove and its crops, as can be seen from the data on agricultural income from the Andalusian regional Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, Water and Rural Development (2022), there is also an interdependence with other economic sectors that are related to the profits of the harvests. This central place in the economy, historically connected to the crop's pre-eminence as regards employment, means that in the imaginary of the inhabitants of the province the agricultural tasks surrounding the olive tree—and within these tasks, the main job being the collection of olives for olive oil production—embody the image of work par excellence. Although the tasks have evolved over time with the introduction of innovations (the mechanization of production processes, developments within the industry, tillage and harvesting, as well as in the management and forms of cultivation), in the collective imaginary of the population of Jaén, which for the most part no longer has any ties to the olive grove, or at least not directly, the romanticized image of harvest persists. In terms of moulding this image, certain public Andalusian television

programmes have had an undeniable and indelible influence, wherein the difficulty of the work was compensated by the supposed values on which it was based: friendship, companionship, and simplicity. And all this took place within a job structure that divided by gender, where the men shook the trees and the women collected the olives off the ground using the traditional tools such as poles, baskets, and canvases. This image has also become a kind of idealised model of popular clothing, something that it shares with other territories in mainland Spain, where these new popular, regional "costumes" are interwoven with a strong feeling of belonging and differentiation, such as, for example, the Huertanos in Murcia and the white festive uniforms of Navarre and Aragón, where the only difference is the colour of the scarf worn around the neck: red in Navarre, green in Huesca, blue in the towns of Zaragoza, alongside the traditional *cachirulo*, which is more typical of the latter and, by extension, the surrounding region. The institutions, municipalities and councils have played a fundamental role in creating this imaginary through the establishment and institutionalisation of designated days throughout the year dedicated to the harvest (such as Town Council of Martos, 2024), something that we also find in the rest of Spain, each with its own local specificity. In the case of Jaén and its towns this is embodied in the oil festival (in other cases it is the harvest, saffron or orchard festival, among many others), where the public don the typical uniforms we have described and recreate the "traditional" work of harvesting the olive grove while they wait for speeches by local, provincial and/or regional dignitaries, before participating in a tasting of the local product, the typical bread and oil, the basis of the Mediterranean diet that we will talk about later. These community exaltations, in the most Durkheimian sense of the term, lead to the creation of strong bonds of solidarity among the members of the community, which, beyond the institutional airs and graces, penetrate the social fabric, amplified through social networks, and acquire their own characteristics and a broad symbolic sense of belonging.

The role of public authorities is further reinforced through the deliberate entanglement of local festivals with educational institutions. Here, as part of the younger generations' learning experience, they participate in this ritual and become the protagonists by wearing the typical costumes, a source of pride for parents and grandparents, thus internalising the discourse and, thanks to custom, acquiring a set of uses and values that only existed during the harshest decades of the Franco dictatorship. Here it would be interesting to highlight how this imaginary operates in a feedback loop, because when it comes to disseminating news associated with olive trees, regardless of the topic covered, the archetypal image of the shakers in the olive trees is omnipresent, even though today this figure is merely testimonial. If newspaper archives are used to provide documentary support, then the situation is redundant. However, these actions are not only limited to these festivities; this intertwining exists in many more events, from holding town festivals, establishing connections with the social and cultural fabric, such as through football—the *frente aceitunero* ("olive tree front") ultra group of FC Jaén—or leisure spaces, such as Olivo Arena, a municipal sports arena in Jaén. This aims to, and in fact does achieve, establish a shared identity between the essence of Jaén in the broadest sense and the olive grove, which makes everyone from Jaén experts in olive growing. This also has to do with another institutional development that supports the industry, which is the sale of the product—olive oil—and *mar-*

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keting around the product, in addition to the support of the academy, which has played a fundamental role in history, establishing a linear continuity between the Roman mills, passing through the Arabs and continuing to the present day, all based around the thousand-year-old olive trees, together with the "virtues" of olive oil that make it a kind of Fierabras potion against all evils—perhaps it is!—that seeks to distinguish itself based on price rather than quality (López-Miranda *et al.*, 2018).

To this day, the link between the province and the olive tree and its oil is firmly rooted among the general public and the institutions, becoming an identifying symbol of the province, something that sets it apart and turning all inhabitants into bearers of the values of rusticity, an updated version of the family-friendly comedies used as a kind of Andalusian propaganda during the Franco regime (such as *Vente para Alemania Pepe* and *El abuelo tiene un plan* by Pedro Lazaga; *Los días de Cabirio*, by Fernando Merino; and *El calzonazos* by Mariano Ozores), which depicted small town-living as being the most authentic way. If under Francoism the enemy was the "evils" and dangers of the city, today it is the complexities of post-modern societies and the unaffordable development of communication technologies. Social media is where these supposed differences are most apparent. In addition to using it to spread the word about different festivities and events, it is a place where these local differences—which are much more than signs of identity and not just the subject of banter—become differentiating features, resulting in people sharing common places, archetypes and/or prejudices, and where the risks that such discrimination entails rear their heads.

This new form of costumbrismo is not unique to the province of Jaén; rather, it reflects a broader phenomenon observable throughout Spain. It may, in part, be understood as a response to the internal fractures within Spanish nationalism —a way of negotiating the uneven expansion and institutionalisation of certain cultural forms over others. Regional standardisation often coalesces around symbols that are not universally embraced, even when superficially assumed. For instance, it is commonly presumed that all Andalusians accept the cultural hegemony of Seville, or that all Aragonese are fervent participants in the San Fermín festival. These emblematic forms become perceived as models of success, rendering them adaptable and exportable across contexts. What is particularly striking in the case of Jaén is its capacity to construct a distinct cultural model —one that, while shaped by shared national dynamics, asserts its singularity. Despite the similarities between Jaén and other provinces to which its diaspora has migrated, the impulse appears to be less about actual difference than about strategically emphasising it. In this sense, the fabrication of cultural distinction serves to legitimise specific policies and actors eager to consolidate political power.

5. In conclusion. The future is profitability

At this point it is necessary to take into account the post-industrial characteristics referred to at the beginning that have started being introduced into production, like the flexibilisation of the market and the ensuing flexibilisation of production, since areas such as North Africa have emerged as important players in the game tradition-

ally dominated by Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece, thus offering the transnationals that rules the market to diversify. This is especially the case with olive oil, where countries like Tunisia are "lurking" in the background, and countries including Mexico, Argentina, Chile and Australia have all begun producing olive oil. Another characteristic that merits discussion is the trend towards mechanisation in the collection and processing of the product, the disinvestment in labour and the *essentialisation* of the product by local development policies, linked to the use of identity and intangible heritage as something to be valued, either through organic production or designations of origin. However, these characteristics can be seen to a greater extent in the case of Jaén and against the backdrop of its role in Europe. Therefore, one cannot fail to get the impression that in the case of Jaén, we are looking at a technocratic late-modern exercise with a simulation of tradition that is pushing against the idea of progress being imposed from "outside". The contrasts observed across the various socio-economic spaces of Jaén are particularly revealing, especially regarding the blurred boundary between formal and informal practices. A key structural paradox lies in the coexistence of informality with its ostensible opposite: the hyperformalised figure of the *oil corridor* (corredor del aceite), emblematic of Jaén's olive economy. This figure encapsulates the intersection of traditional brokerage roles with contemporary market rationalities —embodied in mechanisms such as oil futures trading and intra-cooperative power struggles. The conceptual arbitrariness of these formal-informal distinctions becomes evident when one considers the contingency underlying their very delimitation.

If we strip the olive business down to its bare bones as a commercial innovation, where few people obtain wide profit margins, there is a popular sentimental vision linked to the independence that the crop gives, independence around the edges and at the margins, in addition to a strong territorial and sentimental link to the olive grove, which leads to an identification, based on the traditional system of inheritance, with the properties and estates and in many cases with the trees themselves, although this identification is deferred to the fluctuations of economic needs and profitability, as the economic rationality of profitability prevails in most people. A special facet of this sentimentality is represented by the reluctance of immigrants to get rid of inherited plots, to maintain their ties to their origins, something which is only broken by subsequent generations. Something similar happens with the product, with the olive oil. The consumption of oil from the place of origin continues, and if the olive groves are maintained, we encounter the pipe dream of imagining that we are consuming oil from the olive grove itself. This imaginary consumption of oil from one's own olive trees offers another twist on the olive oil business, with mini mills that transform the olive, thus guaranteeing its provenance, into yet another chapter of refining it for consumption. Regarding the product, another thing is the tree itself which, like the product, becomes another symbol of distinction and status with the acquisition of old olive trees as a decorative element in public and private gardens. Beyond the so-called conservationism and the other attachments there are—and there are plenty of them, with the film *The Olive Tree* by Icíar Bollaín serving as just one example—the reality is that it is a traditional practice, one that persists to this day, to replace the old olive trees and/or those of less productive varieties with ones

that are more profitable. It is usually preferred to sell them as firewood or to sell more profitable live olive trees, but when priority is given to the economic aspect, the olive tree always ends up being cut down.

We are well aware that the world of olive cultivation is multifaceted, with many of its edges difficult to smooth or reconcile. Nonetheless, the purpose of this article is to reignite debates that appear to have reached an impasse —an inertia that stands in stark contrast to the ongoing innovation taking place within the sector. As in broader society, it seems that what remains stable belongs to the realm of culture, while what is subject to constant transformation falls within the domain of technological or economic innovation, often aimed at extracting greater profits and inflating the value of specific assets. The rest of us are offered an idealised universe of happiness and abundance, which is very reminiscent of the imaginaries we read in stories. In reality, the olive grove is a historical consequence of the globalisation of markets, of the conditions implemented by the political and economic elite, of the instructions of agronomic science applied in each context to help maximise profits, and without considering other marginal alternatives (Lozano, 2011), with a clear stratification of power structures and no consideration of social and environmental costs until very recent times.

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