



# The explanatory theories of the Agrarian Structures of Canary Islands

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## I. Introduction

We intend, with this work to tackle the current issues relating to the formation of society in the eastern Canaries. To do this we believe it necessary to set them out within a global perspective, although it is equally necessary to specify the obvious differences which exist between the different forms of production which are interlinked in Canarian agriculture. These are the capitalist mode, as dominant and determining all social relations, and those of production, and the pre-capitalist and sub-capitalist, as subsidiary and subordinate modes of production.

We consider that the method most suited to understanding the aforesaid Canarian reality is without doubt a Marxist methodology, that is to say, the tools that dialectical materialism provides. This Marxist analysis is justified precisely by the global focus that the study of our society demands, since until relatively recent times the interpretative models erred, some in being partial and others by being descriptive-determinist (see picture 1).

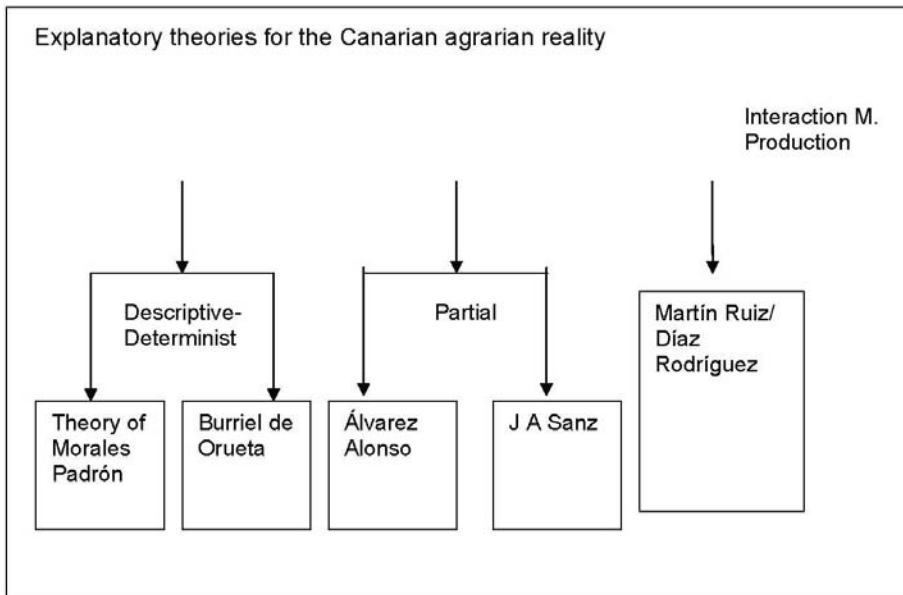
In relation to the first, those that stand out are those which specialise in the analysis of a single factor. In this light, the theory proposed by Juan A. Sanz (Sanz, 1977) should be mentioned, based in the commercialisation of products, that is to say, all the analysis is centred on how the production is sold, without considering other parameters of great interest, such as labour, capitalisation,... Another, even more over-used than the previous one, is based on climatic-geographic criteria, dividing the island in three sectors: coasts, middle zones and mountains (Alvarez, 1976). However, we estimate that climatic changes produced as a function of altitude are not sufficient reason to establish such a serious tautology. This theory has above all been defended by Professor Álvarez Alonso, who set out an explanatory model similar to that used to explain the layers of natural vegetation in the Canarian archipelago. Another reason which undermines this theory is that the crops common to the coasts have been assimilated into eminently capitalist products. However, we must state that below 400 metres above sea level there also ex-

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ists a range of products particularly oriented to rural subsistence. What's more, above the sea level indicated we find, equally, products for the external market, as is the case with some fruits (papaya, avocado, ...) and some tubers (potatoes).

With respect to the second group of explanatory models, that is to say the determinist-descriptive, perhaps the most significant among them is that proposed by Morales Padrón (Morales, 1955), whose explanatory framework is the chronological succession of distinct phases which are identified with a specific type of cultivation, as follows:

- a) Phase or stage one represented by sugar cane, lasting until the end of the 16th Century.
- b) Second stage, viniculture, taking in the whole of the 16th Century.
- c) Third stage, with barilla and cochineal, reaching its apogee in the 18th century.
- d) The last stage of capitalist penetration - the most representative crops being tomatoes and bananas - which developed at the end of the 19th century, and lasted the whole of the 20th century and into the 21st century.



Another classification used excessively frequently and with little justification has been the division of the islands into two antagonistic areas, and treated as if they were two different realities (Burriel, 1984), when in truth the underdevelopment of one area is motivated by the advancement of the other. The lack of rigour of this theory is put into relief when it is now perfectly well demonstrated that there has been a substantial interchange of economic functions between the developed and underdeveloped areas, which are in reality two sides of the same coin. This is demonstrated perfectly through the eruption of touristic activity in the decade of the sixties in the southern zones of the

islands, when the agrarian model had been practically destroyed, with capital and labour moving to the new activity of exploiting leisure areas.

In effect, it is evident that the socioeconomic reality of the islands cannot be justified under these proposals (determinist-descriptive and partial), and that the economic structures of the islands are more complex and globalising.

In any case, we advocate an overall explanation for Canarian social formation, in which we distinguish different forms of production, where one has a pre-eminent function, which determines, in the same way, the functions of the others. This explicative model has been the one also set out by Professors Martín Ruiz and Díaz Rodríguez (Martín et al, 1982), who were the first to propose a global model to explain our social and economic reality.

In our judgement these modes of production, which are interlinked in the agrarian reality of the Canaries, consist, fundamentally, of three types:

A) **Small Mercantile Mode of Production**, which is characterised by use of family labour, non-salaried, with a low organic composition of capital, with production aimed at self-sufficiency and what little excess there is sold in local or internal markets.

B) **Capitalist Mode of Production**, which is defined precisely as the opposite, which is to say, salaried workforce, large capital investments, products destined for external markets (peninsular and foreign), being also a great consumer of materials.

C) **Sub-capitalist Mode of Production**. (Bartra, 1974), constitutes an authentic transitional form between the two previous modes. In other words, this mode of production is found between, and combines the characteristics of, both.

However, this classification is not only valid for Canarian agriculture, but it can also be extrapolated to other economic sectors or activities, such as tourism or fishing. In the leisure zones we find areas provided with capitalist infrastructure dominated by financial capital, such as in the case of the combined locations of Maspalomas-Playa del Inglés, Tenbel and Playa las Américas in Tenerife, the tourist complex of Puerto del Carmen in Lanzarote, and Corralejo and Jandía in Fuerteventura, among others.

In summary, according to the earlier exposition and according to our criteria, Canarian society is certainly not a dual reality, where two sectors are counterpoised, one “modern” against one “backward”, but, on the contrary, it is much more complex, since there are a multitude of intermediate formulas which characterise and complete this apparent dichotomy.

## 1. The Modes of production in the Canarian social and economic formation.

Adopting as an initial hypothesis the evident interrelation that exists between the variables and parameters which define the distinct forms of production, we find that the result of these forms determine an unequal development of productive forces and hence *mutatis mutandi* of social and productive relations.

### 1.1 The Small Mercantile Mode of Production

Its location in the Canarian archipelago is restricted to truly marginal areas. In general terms these comprise mountain zones, middle zones, and even some areas of the coast

(the southeast of Gran Canaria, except San Nicolás de Tolentino – La Aldea). This, of course, for the whole of the island of Gran Canaria. However, in Lanzarote and Fuerteventura, it not being possible to establish a typology as a function of altitude due to there being few places which reach such heights (in Fuerteventura the Pico de la Zarza at 807 metres, and in Lanzarote the Peñas del Chache at 677 metres are the highest peaks), a different classification is required. In the particular case of Fuerteventura we distinguish the southern zone, which comprises the municipalities of Tuineje and Pájara, where the cultivation of tomatoes is preponderant and social and productive relations are clearly capitalist; whilst the municipalities of La Antigua, Puerto del Rosario, and La Oliva combine this capitalist mode of production with certain pre-capitalist forms. The only area decidedly pre-capitalist is that which comprises the municipality of Betancuria, with subsistence agriculture in its entirety, small scale of operation, small sized plots, strong development of tenancies (*medianerías*) and fundamentally, family labour.

This Small Mercantile Mode of Production is, therefore, dominant in the islands of Lanzarote, Fuerteventura, El Hierro and La Gomera, and in some specific areas of Gran Canaria, Tenerife and La Palma.

In this mode of production the workforce is entirely familial. In no case is there a paid workforce but rather, as Roger Bartra (Bartra, 1974) points out well, the benefit in these cases is a self-paid salary. The labour is part-time (of the worker-peasant system) and, as a general rule, the main activity is carried out outside the agrarian sector (tourism, construction, or services), the agrarian labour being truly complementary work intended in the main for the self-sufficiency of the family. Only when there is an excess it is sold, usually in a local market. The principal products are cereals (wheat and barley), legumes (lentils, beans,...) other vegetables (cabbage, pumpkin, carrots, onions and garlic) and, also, forage crops (forage maize in the middle zones of Gran Canaria and alfalfa in Fuerteventura) (González, 2001). Also usually included is a small herd of goats which are never more than thirty animals, or a small flock of sheep of a similar number, and also, some pigs and fowl, whose meat and milk products are for the subsistence of the peasant and their family.

All these activities are of reduced size and low organic composition of capital. In the fieldwork we have only been able to establish as a unique mechanism for this type of operation, a localized watering system distributing by aspersion, and not for all crops, only for potatoes and carrots.

The consumption of materials is low, with scarce use of chemical fertilizers, and with animal manure being used instead. The principal cost of these activities is, without doubt, the cost of water and cement (Martín *et al*).

The dominant form of land occupancy is direct ownership, although other contractual forms (e.g. share-cropping) are becoming more relevant.

Therefore, the selling these products, which is infrequent, is solely to get rid of excess, whilst most is still for family sustenance.

To sum up, the Small Mercantile Mode of Production is characterised by low capital investment, by the use familial labour, by the absence of salaries, by the distribution of products in the internal markets and by fact that the most common form of land tenure is direct ownership.

## 1.2. The Capitalist Mode of Production

Found most commonly in the coastal zones, although areas of exploitation could also be found in the middle zones, although the latter are dedicated to fruit crops and in small measure, to potatoes. This mode of production, in spite of not having a major spatial impact, is highly influential.

In terms of social and productive relations, the capitalist forms of production are dominant in the recent social formation in the Canaries, therefore leaving some specific functions for the remaining modes of production. On the one hand the reproduction of the workforce, and on the other, allowing the peasant's own self-sufficiency, bringing with this a considerable saving in the cost of variable capital.

This mode of production is characterised by a salaried workforce, a high level of development of productive forces, comparable in many cases to industrial activities, high rates of benefits derived as a consequence of obtaining significant relative capital gain. All this produces a high organic composition of capital. The consumption of materials is equally high, and insecticides and chemical fertilizers, among other things, widely used agriculture (González, 2001).

The sale and distribution of the products is carried out in external markets, although this constitutes one of the main challenges to the viability of these operations, due to the strong competition from countries with similar climates and positions, and due to the inadequacy of its channels to market (González, 1989). In general terms, the labour is totally dedicated to the operation (full-time), while in the small capitalist operations it is frequently combined with another activity (part-time).

Capitalist agriculture in the Canaries, until relatively recently, was represented by three principal crops: bananas, tomatoes and potatoes. For the decade of the seventies the range of crops increased considerably. There is a spectacular increase in crops grown under cover (greenhouses), flowers, ornamental plants and other vegetables such as green beans, peppers and cucumbers. Similarly, there is an intensification of crops alternative to those traditionally grown in Canarian agriculture. These are essentially fruits: citrus fruits, avocados, papayas, peaches, pineapple, etc. To a great extent these have replaced "traditional" crops for export, in spite of them having undergone a significant process of reorganisation. For example, the banana, which in the past was watered by flooding the plants, is now watered predominantly through a localized drip technique.

The considerable increase in productive force is not entirely due to a better qualified, more capable workforce, but also to the fact that, in parallel to this development there has been a significant increase in production techniques and systems of cultivation. Thus, in Fuerteventura there is now widespread use of hybrid seeds for the cultivation of tomatoes (seeds resistant to pests, and of high productivity, general of Dutch origin). Equally important is the transformation of the seedbeds, substituting the traditional system of planting in furrows by an innovative system of plugs of peat or better known as a system of "dwarf plants" (González, 2001), which allows a vigorous development of the roots, whilst the stem is of short growth. To the drip watering technique has been added the technique of mulching with sand of the top resulting in an avoidance of evaporation and increasing hygroscopic levels.

In spite of the high levels of capitalisation, the introduction of machinery is minimal. There are various reasons for this. On one hand, the excessive fragmentation of the op-

erations, with a high number of plots, and on the other, the far from negligible topographic conditions, since the fragmentation of the fields by the presence of numerous deep gorges are a significant handicap.

In summary, the capitalist mode of production, despite not being of major social impact on the social formation of the Canaries, dominates and determines it, above all from the 1960s. This mode of production interacts with the other forms of production, giving them very specific roles, essentially the reproduction of the workforce, allowing the subsistence of the worker-peasant and, in conclusion, saving some of the more evident contradictions of this system itself, since it is known that another of the important functions of the pre-capitalist forms of production is that it contributes to the “reserve army” of labour, thereby ensuring a bargain offer on labour which, no doubt, its low salaries make very attractive. The existence of intermediate operations between the two forms of production demonstrably counterposed (pre-capitalism and capitalism), questions the dual theories which supported the existence of two antagonistic sectors for the Canaries, without any type of interaction. In any case, any examination of the interaction which exists in the Canarian social formation undoubtedly must be done with the recognition of these sub-capitalist operations, produced by the transaction which happens within our social formation (González et al, 2004).

For this reason, we must agree that the sub-capitalist forms of production do not only qualify the scheme set out earlier, but also complete and relativise it.

## 2. Conclusions

Up to this point we have tried to demonstrate a basic scheme which serves as a tool for the knowledge of the social formation of the Canaries. Effectively, we bring a different analysis from the interpretative models of Canarian society. This attempts to supersede the models sustained up to now, and which in one form or another, subscribe to a dual model of our social reality. In any case, we reaffirm the incongruity required to sustain this scheme, since the diversity of the social formation in the Canaries is more than evident.

We believe that those positions which sought refuge either in a partial interpretation or in descriptive-determinist models have been superseded. Thus, on the one hand some people, such as Juan A Sanz, orientate their analysis according to the function of the commercialisation of the products, others, such as Álvarez Alonso, maintain strictly climatic criteria. On the other hand, Francisco Morales Padrón has based his particular thesis on the chronological succession of centuries associated with a specific crop identified as sugar, wine, barilla-cochineal and more recently bananas and tomatoes.

Canarian social reality is very distinctive and is not subject to a rigid universal scheme. Quite the opposite, it is the result of the interlinking of different modes of production, in which each exerts a specific function. Our analysis, therefore, adjusts to this diversity and to a methodology based on historical materialism which understands social reality as a dialectical and global whole.

In the exposition, we recognise in the aforesaid Canarian social formation at least three modes of production, which we name as : a) small Mercantile mode of production, b) capitalist mode of production and c) sub-capitalist mode of production. The three

modes of production are interrelated in a particular way, in which the capitalist mode of production leads the functions of the other two.

Through them we have analysed the forms of production of an important activity in the Canaries, at least in the past, which defines its economy and society: agriculture.

In Canarian agriculture, as in other sectors of activity (tourism and fishing for example) we see these three forms of production. The profile of the first is that of operations of the self-operational type, named by M. Gutelman as plot regimen (*regimen parcelario*) (Gutelman 1976). Here the labour is familial, non-salaried, and, to a great extent, the produce obtained (cereals, legumes, vegetables, forage crops,...) serves for self-subsistence (reproduction of the family) and only in some cases, a minimal part of this production, that is to say, the excess, is destined for the local market. In many cases the operation is only complementary to some other activity such as hostelry or construction, which becomes the principal economic activity (González et al, 2007). We can especially place this mode of production in some points in the south-southwest of Gran Canaria, in the north and the interior of Tenerife and in a good part of Fuerteventura, El Hierro, La Gomera, La Palma and Lanzarote.

However, this is subject to the role given by the capitalist mode of production, that is, the reproduction of the workforce and the subsistence of labour, which in the capitalist mode of production is salaried. In the capitalist forms of production we observe a high organic composition of capital, the obtaining of absolute capital gain on the part of the business person-capitalist, and a high consumption of materials in the production process. These agricultural exploitations, fundamentally of bananas, tomatoes and now, from very recently, fruit and vegetables, are located in the coastal zones and in some points of the middle zones of the central islands (Tenerife, and Gran Canaria) and in some zones of La Palma.

Between these first and last modes of production are inserted the sub-capitalist forms of production, which contain elements of both the other two. Hence we find forms of direct ownership such as leasing, partnership,... (González et al, 2007). There is no significant penetration of investment and, therefore of capital, which allows us to situate it at the margin of the capitalist mode of production, with its own features and signs of identity.



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## Appendix of photographs



Photo1. Horizontal precipitation brings a great quantity of water resources to the Canaries.



Photo 2. Water is a powerful factor affecting the agriculture of the islands.

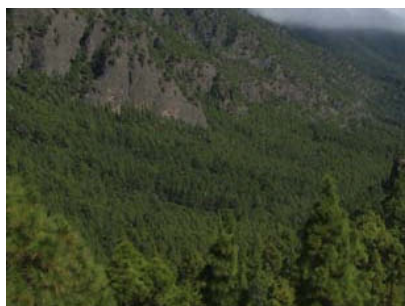


Photo 3. Water is scarce and imposes a high cost on the process of production.



Photos 4,5 and 6. Livestock in the Canary Islands has traditionally been complementary to agriculture. The main types of most frequent livestock are, in this order: goats, pigs, cows and sheep. There are also many hens, rabbits and beehives.



Photos 7, 8 and 9. Capitalist agriculture is dominant and determinant in the social formation of the Canaries. The principal crops are some tropical fruits such as banana, papaya, mango, avocado... some vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, green beans and cucumbers... and some ornamental plants such as, most recently, protea.



Photos 10, 11 and 12. Subsistence agriculture and the supply of the internal market, that is to say that of the pre-capitalist and sub-capitalist forms of production, are represented in the mountains and middle zones of the islands, above all, in the peripheral areas



Photos 13, 14 and 15. Sub capitalist forms are in between the clearly capitalist and the pre-capitalist, acquiring functions from both and being subject to the dominant mode of production in the Canaries, which is capitalist. The crops are of diverse kinds such as

