

On moral grounds: Revisiting acorn theft in 20th-century Spain

MAIKE MELLES

Abstract: Eyewitness accounts and ethnographic interviews with elderly inhabitants of rural southwestern Spain reveal that at the time of Franco's dictatorship in the 1950s and 1960s, destitution was rampant among the landless population. While some of the rural poor did not succeed in finding employment at all, others were exploited on the farms of large landholders. In both cases, hunger and deprivation led people to look for alternative ways to ensure the survival of their families. This talk analyses the theft of acorns from private farm grounds in terms of its threefold meaning as bare survival, as revindicating rights of use, and as protest. The social roles and moral valuation of acorn theft by various actors such as farm workers, foremen, landowners, members of the acorn watch and the Guardia Civil are examined in terms of their preserving or destructive impact on the moral-economic fabric of the rural landscape. Social inequality, customary rights and practices, and an enduring "refusal to let the individual starve" (K. Polanyi) are central components of the *longue durée* of the moral economy that has materialised over centuries in one of Spain's most emblematic landscapes, the *dehesa*.

DISCUSSANT: SUSANNE FEHLINGS

(FROBENIUS INSTITUTE FOR RESEARCH IN CULTURAL
ANTHROPOLOGY AT GOETHE UNIVERSITY FRANKFURT)

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