

Article

Buildings, Lands, and Rents: Understanding the Process and Impact of Monastic Suppression in Spain

Rosa Congost 

Institute of Historical Research, University of Girona, 17004 Girona, Spain; rosa.congost@udg.edu

Abstract: In Ancien Régime Spain, ecclesiastical wealth consisted of not only land, but also the rental income raised from tenancies of which the Church was proprietor. Therefore, the suppression of monasteries and convents in Spain cannot be studied only in terms of the transfer of their principal estates. The incoming Liberal State appropriated the Church's rents for its own use, although many had fallen into abeyance before the suppressions began. To assess the true impact of ecclesiastical confiscation, it is necessary to consider how far developments in religious sensibility, whether or not associated with new conceptions of property, before and after the liberal revolution, may have affected the treatment of these rents. In this article, I aim to examine the geographical distribution of the different property rights of the regular clergy in Spain under the Ancien Régime and to observe the role of the Liberal State in their evolution and in the fate of monastery and convent buildings. We will see, in all cases, the significant roles of the payers and receivers of different types of rents. Thus, territories with the same legal regime and similar institutions passed through the process in very different ways.

Keywords: suppression of monasteries and convents; liberal revolution; Spain; property rights; religiosity; 19th century; ecclesiastical wealth



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1. Introduction

When explaining the subject of ecclesiastical confiscation in Spain to students in class, I usually start by showing them Francisco de Goya's series of drawings portraying excommunicated friars during the Three Liberal Years of 1820–1823 (Shaffer 2012). I tell them that, regardless of the painter's ideological position, which undoubtedly influenced the way in which the mood of his protagonists was captured, those figures challenge all of us social historians today because they remind us of how little we know about the suppression of convents and monasteries in the country despite it being an emblematic subject in the history of contemporary Spain (Revuelta González 1980; Portet i Pujol 2003; Zaragoza Pascual 2007). Such a beginning also serves to justify the focus of this section. Although I am not in a position to accompany those friars on the paths they took in their post-conventual lives, I would like to share a worrying fact with the reader: the usual method of studying the subject of ecclesiastical confiscation has given us few clues and, at times, has led us away from the path that would allow us to more completely analyse the impact of that process on lived experience, not only of those monks, but also of Spanish society as a whole.

Of all the possible angles from which to address the issue of the suppression of monasteries and convents, I have chosen the angle that has undoubtedly received the most attention in Spanish historiography to date. I am referring here to its role as an emblematic measure in the process of liberal revolution and to the assessment of its impact on the economic life of the country, either due to the effect it had on agrarian transformation or to its incidence in the country's fiscal problems. However, I will not offer a synthesis of the results obtained so far, but rather highlight the need to combat some historiographical clichés that have conditioned the common presentation of such results. I believe that this

is necessary if we are to be able to continue moving forward in all possible directions, including that of accompanying those friars along unknown and rocky paths. To this end, I will start with three ideas that have accompanied me for some time in my reflections on property rights, which will allow me to structure this work in three parts:

(a) The first is the idea that in any historical era, there are many possible ways of owning property, and that different conceptions of the nature and legitimacy of certain property rights can coexist for this very reason. Studies on ecclesiastical confiscations have been conditioned by the idea that the liberal revolution meant the end of feudal property and the triumph of a new concept of property which seemed indisputable and therefore unique since it was defined as perfect and absolute. On the other hand, contemplating the different possible forms of ownership before and after the liberal revolution opens up the possibility for many contemporaries of generally viewing the rights of property owned by the Church, and by the religious orders in particular, as having special characteristics. And this, as we shall see, may have influenced the way in which the religious orders experienced suppression.

(b) Second is the idea—closely related to the previous one—that property rights in land could take different forms in the Ancien Régime, but also in liberal Spain, and that this affected the various ways of managing ecclesiastical wealth, which, as we know, consisted not only of the ownership of farms and land, but also of the collection of rents (Saavedra 2009). This fact, which manifested itself differently depending on the region, also affected the process of ecclesiastical property confiscation, including that of property belonging to regular religious communities. One of the main problems of studies on ecclesiastical confiscations is that they have focused all their attention on the processes of property sales, even in those provinces where ecclesiastical revenues constituted the greater part of ecclesiastical wealth in the form of rents known as *censos* and *foros*. The widespread belief that the liberal revolution signified the undisputed triumph of absolute property, as already mentioned, contributed to those studies dispensing with legislative measures on rents (Díez Espinosa 1993; Congost 2007). Furthermore, taking this fact into consideration can help us understand more fully the role of the State and highlight the active role in the process played by those citizens who, already under the Ancien Régime, had translated their social discontent—which could be tinged with anticlericalism—into the non-payment of those rents.

(c) Thirdly, contemplating property rights in the way I propose here, whereby social relations define and transform them over time, necessarily entails a review of the role played by the new liberal institutions, and in the first instance, by the Liberal State, in constructing a new legal and political order that necessarily affected property rights, although not necessarily in the way that historiographical studies on the liberal revolution have tended to proclaim it. In most such studies, the State has been viewed as the architect of the conversion of old forms of property, considered imperfect, into a new type of property that is absolute, modern, and decisive for economic development. However, consideration of the previous points allows us to play down this point of view, which we can easily label as statist and legalistic, and adopt a different way of observing how successive Spanish governments ensured that the old forms of property were maintained, even in the case of the confiscated and therefore expropriated ecclesiastical institutions. In the eyes of many contemporaries, this may have represented much more conservative and coercive positions than previously supposed. Although ecclesiastical confiscation still may be considered one of its most revolutionary measures, the way in which the Liberal State sought to replace the Church in the collection of confiscated rents, alongside the fate of many former monasteries and convents, may have strengthened this coercive image. It does, however, also offer us new clues regarding the weaknesses of a State in the face of resistance by numerous anonymous citizens.

The writings of Pascual Madoz will be essential to all three sections. This politician, who suffered exile due to being a progressive liberal, a status he did not abandon at any point in his life, is best known for his role in the confiscation of 1855, more widely known

as “the civil desamortización”. This is not a subject I will elaborate on here. Rather, it is his earlier writings that will guide us: a pamphlet drafted in 1835, presented in the first section, and his geographical statistical dictionary, written around 1845, presented in the second and third sections. The latter text provides abundant information on both ecclesiastical rents, which constitute the central theme of the second section, and on the fate of the monastery and convent buildings, which are dealt with in the third section. Cayetano Barraquer, the author who most exhaustively discussed the vicissitudes of monasteries and convents in the nineteenth century from conservative and victimist positions, displayed great animosity towards Madoz (Barraquer Roviralta 1906, 1915–1918; Montalbán 2023). Thus, we see that a relevant and well-known figure will serve as our guide to open up new paths, including for those who wish to investigate the whereabouts of thousands of anonymous friars who were expelled from their monasteries in 1809, 1820, and, definitively, in 1835. This is what I was alluding to when I spoke of the seemingly paradoxical nature of this article.

2. Who Owns Church Property?

I borrowed this question from Rafe Blaufarb, who employs it as the title for a chapter of his book on the emergence of a new notion of private property in the French revolutionary context (Blaufarb 2016, p. 125). In said chapter, Blaufarb quotes various authors, such as Guffroy and Abbé Sieyès in their *Observations sommaires sur les biens ecclesiastiques* and Talleyrand in his speeches to the National Assembly of 5–6 October 1789. Both Sieyès and Talleyrand follow [Anne Robert Jacques] Turgot’s approach in distinguishing between individual (natural law) and corporeal property rights to argue that “the clergy is not like other owners, because it has received property for specific functions entrusted to it.” However, the majority of the ecclesiastical parliamentary representatives present in the Assembly demanded to be treated like other owners, sometimes in a threatening tone: “our properties guarantee yours... if we are expropriated, you will be next” (Maury 1789). Maury’s words recall those uttered in 1842 by a Spanish priest, Jaime Balmes, in the liberal era in a desperate but failed attempt to stop the confiscation process (Balmes 1842):

Consider this, you men of high classes, you rich proprietors, you wealthy merchants on whom the plunder of the clergy will surely depend: if you waste so great an opportunity to prevent it as it affords you to be seated on the benches of the Courts, and at the moment when the government consults you on it, if you provoke it, if you consent to it, and if in one of the whirlwinds of the revolution thousands armed with daggers, axes and lit torches arise one day. If, in the name of liberty, equality, public utility, the betterment of the lower classes, the greatest circulation, the most equitable of wealth, they throw themselves upon your wealth and estates, what will you say to them? To the leader of the ferocious mob, what will you say to him when he reminds you of what you did to the clergy? His logic will be terrible, because it will be based on your own example; he will be able to say to you in all truth, ‘I dispossess you, as you yourselves have taught me to’.

Discussions of this kind took place in the revolutionary contexts of many countries in which convents and monasteries were suppressed. Balmes was right about the fact that ecclesiastical confiscation did not help strengthen the sacred character of the idea of property that the liberals sought to impose and consolidate, but regardless of the solution it might suppose for the problems facing the Treasury, some liberals thought it was appropriate to question the legitimacy, not so much of Church property, but of the manner in which some ecclesiastical institutions operated as owners. This idea could be linked to the need to bring an end to corporeal property, as defined by Turgot’s followers in France, so as to ensure the triumph of private property. The behaviours of these institutions could be measured differently from those of individuals. If the legitimacy of their rights derived from specific social ends, for which they had been constituted, and which had not been respected, then their dispossession could be defended on the basis of Christian ideals.

In the same sense of greater or lesser religious compliance, the rents received by friars could be disputed more than those received by secular clerics. An example of how the two types of clergies could be seen very differently is offered in the testimony provided by Charles Pierre Coste d'Arnobat in his *Lettres sur le Voyage d'Espagne*, written at Pamplona in 1756. This pamphlet is full of reproaches for the dissolute and immoral life led by the monks despite the Inquisition, while in contrast, it expresses conspicuous praise for the bishops:

The conduct of the Spanish monks has always surprised me, when I have examined the exemplary way of life of the bishops. They hardly ever leave their palaces and never see women. The considerable income they enjoy is not condemned to the expense of a magnificently served table; their only guests are their grand vicars and a few priests. The great wealth of the bishops is shown here only by the continual alms they distribute to the poor. Without these respectable marks, one would not guess whether they are better off than the rest of the clergy (Coste d'Arnobat 1756, p. 187)

D'Arnobat was writing three years after the signing of the Concordat on the Holy See, which, among other things, stipulated the obligation to dedicate the rents they collected to charitable works, and he added in a footnote that his diatribe on the behaviour of the monks did not include the Jesuits or the Benedictines, among whom he saw no difference in their way of working in Spain than in France (Coste d'Arnobat 1756). However, in both countries, it was the Jesuit order that first suffered the consequences of policies contrary to regular orders, first in Spain in 1766 and a few years later in France in 1773, at the hand of the Holy See by means of the Papal decree *Dominus ac Redemptor*. The Commission des Réguliers, founded by Louis XV, was in operation from 1766 to 1780, resulting in the suppression of more than 400 regular convents and monasteries and the extinction of nine religious congregations. Parasitism and a lack of social utility had been repeatedly invoked as the cause for this by the commission. And these accusations resurfaced again in 1789. How could the State treasuries maintain idle people? The definitive nationalisation of French ecclesiastical assets took place in 1793 and 1794 (Chopelin 2018).

In Spain, too, some of the Spanish liberal rulers and politicians who perceived ecclesiastical confiscation as a way of solving the State's financial problems did not hesitate to justify it by appealing to the uncertain origins of their property rights, with arguments very similar to those we have seen used in France. For example, Madoz' writing published in 1835 reads, "Those who today claim to be the owners of such large estates can only be considered as their administrators, if the dictates of the first acquisition deeds are heeded" (Madoz 1835, p. 57).

Although Madoz referred to the set of ecclesiastical assets, the words he dedicated to convents and monasteries were especially harsh:

... The assets possessed by convents, monasteries and other religious corporations of whatever kind and nature could never have belonged to those who claimed to be their owners and proprietors, because all the deeds of acquisition showed that the needy, and with this title the priests if they were so, should use the immense riches deposited in the ministers of the altar /.../ Is there no contrast in seeing twelve men bathing in leisure and abundance, dwelling in sumptuous buildings, enjoying every kind of comfort, while a farmer listens to his dear wife and tender children in the expressive silence of a mortal swoon ask him in vain for his precise sustenance? (Madoz 1835, p. 66)

And later on, he wrote the following:

There is scarcely a village that does not have a convent or monastery in its vicinity, where, doing nothing, there live men who have falsely made a self-denial of all earthly things, and there is scarcely even in the major cities a place where the sufferer finds deserved consolation in his misfortunes, nor a house of education where ignorance, the mother of all vices, is attacked at the root, where the horror

of idleness and crime is inspired, where ideas of true religion, of pure morality, and of bitter patriotism are inculcated. And is this how the assets left to the church are to be invested? (Madoz 1835, p. 73)

Things were experienced very differently in the different regions of Spain, partly because the starting point was different, as we shall see in the next section, but also because a religious sentiment prevailed in some regions and an anti-religious sentiment prevailed in others. While friars were not slaughtered nor fires lit everywhere the events in Madrid in 1834 and the burning of convents and monasteries in Barcelona in 1835 undoubtedly influenced decisions on the exlaustration and definitive suppression of religious orders, as well as on the way in which those affected received the decrees of exlaustration. Here, too, Pascual Madoz is of use. In the pamphlet published a few months prior to the violent events in Barcelona, the city where he lived, as well as proposing the suppression of the regular religious orders, Madoz presented the abolition of the tithe as a necessary measure for modernising the contributory system once the decline in its collection had been confirmed. Although tithing was probably the most important source of ecclesiastical income in many areas of Spain, it is worth bearing in mind that there were huge regional differences in the way it was perceived (Canales 1982; Saavedra 2009). What I am interested in here are the terms used by Madoz to refer to the important changes in the religious sensibility of his times:

As long as tithing was believed to be an institution of divine right, dissenting against the validity of this levy was not permitted; but at present everyone knows that it is a divine right, as we have said, to feed ecclesiastics; but not the fact that a tenth part of the fruits should be destined to this purpose, with the result that the burden that the farmer and livestock breeder now suffer alone would be distributed among all the classes of society, since all the individuals who compose it enjoy the spiritual benefit. (Madoz 1835, p. 52)

And further on, he warns:

If politics is interested in this change, humanity demands it as well; for it is right that the poor should not miss out on the for some young people shameful alms distributed at the door of a convent. Let the people secure their subsistence through their labour, and in this way the Government succeeds in feeding the needy and moralizing the citizens.

Madoz' words anticipate Marx's criticisms of the way in which the Rhenish jurists who held power in the 1840s proceeded: in the name of the supposed modernization of legal principles, they managed to transform "the self-interested claims of a minority" into legal demands without considering it necessary to contemplate "contingent concessions to a majority". What happened to the convents and monasteries was a good example of this:

The convents and monasteries have been eliminated, their property has been secularized, and in this way justice has been done. But the contingent support that the poor found in the convents and monasteries has by no means been transformed into another positive source of income. By converting the convents' and monasteries' property into private property and, for example, compensating the administrators, has not compensated the poor, who lived off it. On the contrary, a new limit has been set for them and they have lost an ancient right. (Marx 1842, p. 213)

At the same time, Marx's words about the Rhineland remind us that we are dealing with a universal phenomenon. In fact, Madoz refers to the French and English cases as counterexamples to follow:

With the dispossession and division of ecclesiastical property, England only succeeded in having an enterprising and enlightened nobility inherit convents, monasteries and pious foundations, so that when the yoke of theocracy was shaken, aristocratic power rose with almost exclusive possession of English soil.

Was this the banishment of the poverty that so afflicts the English nation? Let the pages of history be opened, let us consult the present situation of this great people; and it will be seen that the poor were little improved by this change.

If the law in France favoured a more equal division of ecclesiastical estates, it did little to really improve the lot of those in whose interest this great change was believed to have been made. For although during the empire, and even during the years of the Restoration, it might have been believed that the well-being of the most numerous class must be the immediate consequence of those great events, the history of our day shows us that the objective the government had in view at that time has sadly not been achieved. (Madoz 1835, p. 76)

And he provides an early opinion on how the process of ecclesiastical confiscation in Spain should be carried out:

In view of the results presented by the systems adopted on this subject in France and England, let us be permitted to ask whether the disposition of ecclesiastical property in favour of bankers and capitalists is the most judicious measure for a country which, like Spain, is entering into the race of reforms and a new structuring; all the more so since it is unquestionable that it possesses an immense patrimony entirely available for the benefit of institutions of the public interest. The first idea that occurs to us in dealing with this question is, that if anyone can be considered as the legitimate owner of the assets that comprise the patrimony of the Church, it is those in need, in whose interest the donations were made, and in whose shadow the Church was enriched.

The relevant and specific role that the regular clergy deserved to play in the necessary ecclesiastical reform could be clearly seen in the first of the six points in its proposal: the suppression of all convents and monasteries. Madoz went on to propose measures of religious reform, which included “a better religious territorial division”, which would improve the numerical ratio between bishoprics, parishes, and parishioners and provide a fair endowment for bishops and parish priests. But the last two points took on the appearance of agrarian reform since it amounted to “abolishing the tithe in its entirety” and, finally, “as the estates that today belong to the ecclesiastical domain become free, and against which there is no claim by a third party, they should be made available for national lease to the benefit of the proletarian class”.

Madoz was neither the first nor the only one to speak of suppressing the convents and monasteries; in fact, he had already experienced it twice during his childhood and adolescence. The first time was during the war with France, between 1809 and 1814, and the second was during the Three Liberal Years, between 1820 and 1823. In both confiscations, the property had been returned to its former occupants. Following the liberals’ return to power in 1834, which allowed Madoz to end his own exile, reforming the regular clergy constituted one of the main points of discussion, and an Ecclesiastical Board had been appointed to this end. To facilitate its work, on 22 April 1834, a decree was passed prohibiting the admission of new friars. The decree of 25 July 1835 allowed for the suppression of convents and monasteries with fewer than 12 professed nuns or monks (Barrio 2000). But these events were precipitated by the burning of convents and monasteries in Barcelona: on 14 September 1835, Minister Toreno was replaced by Mendizábal, who clearly opted for the suppression of convents and monasteries. The decree of 11 October 1835 repeated the provisions of the decree of 25 October 1820, and in February 1836, property belonging to the regular clergy was confiscated (Alfante 2024, pp. 21–22).

As for the perception of an increase in anti-monastic sentiment that Madoz had detected in 1835, it would continue to be present in his dictionary, written when the abolition of the tithe was already a reality. On different occasions, Madoz pointed out that the available statistics on tithes did not serve to measure the evolution of real territorial wealth, reiterating the idea of growing anti-religiosity. In one of the last volumes of the

dictionary, when referring to Tarragona, he attributed a decisive importance to public opinion, especially after 1820, in the growth of the following sentiment “without the absolutist restoration of 1823 being able to prevent little being paid in some regions and transactions being entered into in others”. And in volume XIV, when referring to Teruel, his summary is even more complete, offering a peninsular-wide view:

And it is certainly our opinion, that of all the provinces of the North, the most hostile to this provision, even in the time of absolute government, was that of Upper and Lower Aragon, more than that of Galicia, than that of Asturias, Santander, the Basque Country, Navarre and Catalonia, if in the latter we do not count the towns on the coast and certain regions in the interior.

In the same article, he refers to the first-hand experience of farmers’ refusal to pay the tithe in Zaragoza as a “veritable revolution”. But resistance was not limited to the north. Also, in Valencia, there was a decline in the payment of tithes. Generally speaking, the regions in which Madoz detected a greater anti-religious sentiment due to the decrease in decimal rents were the regions in which ecclesiastical wealth, both secular and regular, was characterised, as we shall see in the next section by ecclesiastical rents representing a greater proportion of all ecclesiastical wealth. Although little research has been conducted in this regard, it is possible that rents experienced the same downward trend, especially in those areas where direct lords were also collectors of tithes.

Assimilating tithes as a form of property was, in fact, the main argument put forward in the nineteenth century by Spaniards opposed to their abolition, who could be distinguished from those in favour of this measure. Among the former, the voice of Juan de Balle stood out, who was quick to highlight the points of contact between tithes and emphyteutical practises in 1842:

In the Province of Catalonia it may be asserted, without fear of the slightest lack of accuracy of the facts, that the tithe has, on the contrary, been the principal cause of progress, because promoting its collection has been the motive behind the immense subdivision of land, by means of the constant hitherto protected emphyteutic system. (Batlle 1842)

Known for his liberal positions in favour of commerce and industry during the Cortes of Cadiz and the Three Liberal Years, De Balle had been and perhaps still was the Duke of Medinaceli’s proxy in Catalonia, undoubtedly the most important direct lord and collector of tithes in Catalonia. His opinion had undoubtedly been influenced by first-hand knowledge of the process of agrarian colonisation experienced in Catalonia in the final third of the eighteenth century (Vilar 1962; Congost 1990). So, the following question arises: what role did religious communities play in this process?

Let us consider as a case study the most important ecclesiastical lordship in the region of L’Empordà in the diocese of Girona. The domain of the Benedictine monastery of Sant Quirze de Colera, incorporated with the community of Besalú since 1592, was recognised in 1036 leases granted on emphyteutic terms by different proprietors during the period of 1768–1845. In most cases, these concerned plots of uncultivated woodland were granted to agricultural workers. The first of these leases underwritten by Don Josep Cremadells were documented in 1779, and it is possible that they were the trigger for the problems that led to the concord of 27 November 1787, proposed by the Abbot of Besalú and approved by the Council of Canons, which had received royal authorization (Carrasco 1997). In it, Cremadells and the Abbot agreed to include new clauses in these emphyteutic grants referring to the payment of tithes to the monastery and the advantages that new occupants would obtain if they paid in a short period of time. In a nearby area, in the town of Rabós, the colonisation projects of Pere Nouvilas, an Honoured Citizen of Barcelona, entailed a different problem. In 1805, a group of agrarian labourers of the villages of Rabós and Espolla signed an agreement with the Abbot of Besalú¹ in which they accused Pere Nouvilas of having increased the rent they had to pay to the Abbot of Besalú in 1788 and 1789. Notable in this case is that the applicants succeeded in altering the rent to its previous level in

exchange for their commitment to pay tithes again, which proves that they had withheld it as an act of defiance. The covenant once again demonstrates an association between leases in this form and tithes.

3. Farms, Land, and Rents: Reflections on Ecclesiastical Wealth in Spain Based on Clues from Madoz—Figures, Tables, and Schemes

In his synthesis of ecclesiastical wealth in Spain under the Ancien Régime, Pegerto Saavedra repeatedly refers to an unquestionable fact: in some regions of Spain, most of the ecclesiastical wealth in the final years of the Ancien Régime consisted of income in tithes and rents raised from tenancies. He posited two consequences of this fact: “The nature of economies based on the perception of these rents made exploiting the useful domain cheaper, and the existence of a certain ‘social consensus’ limited peasant resistance to the payment of rents and tithes” (Saavedra 2009, p. 75). Both conditioned the processes of ecclesiastical confiscation that would begin the liberal era. With regard to the former, the direct administration of farms and the collection of rents resulted in different approaches to the land market and forms of access to land in general. But the second observation is also very interesting because the “social consensus” could be broken at certain times and, in the case of ecclesiastical revenues, the evolution of religious sentiment could have had a lot to do with this rupture. In fact, in his synthesis, Saavedra considered that opposition to the payment of rents had existed in feudal domains since 1811, “but it occurred more in domains belonging to the nobility than to monasteries”. A few years later, when commenting on the same phenomenon in his last monograph, focused on one of these monastic orders, the Cistercians, in the specific region of Galicia, Saavedra somewhat qualified his previous conclusion: “Perhaps it is an exaggeration to state that there was a social consensus among the monks and tenant farmers, and it would be more appropriate to speak of a certain “cooperation” (Saavedra 2021). Either way, this “cooperation” did not necessarily take the same form everywhere because in each case, the way in which the set of rights evolved would depend on the actions of the payers and recipients of the different types of rents. Therefore, territories under the same legal regime, with similar institutions, might evolve in very different ways.

How did this affect the processes of ecclesiastical confiscation? I suppose it is easy to see that the scenario is much more complex in the case of rents than in that of farms. Although the estates were usually leased, if the Church was the beneficial owner, it was necessary to proceed via their public auction. In these cases, the value of the rents was used to appraise the estates. The buyers of the estates could then decide whether or not to keep those tenants. There may therefore have been victims in this process. One possible way to reverse the process in a way that was attractive to the working classes was to divide estates at the time of sale. It was assumed that if the estates were parcelled out and offered in small portions, a larger contingent of the population could have paid their prices and gained access to them. But the fiscal problems of the Spanish State prevented any semblance of agrarian reform from prospering. For example, the last measure proposed by Madoz in his 1835 text states the following: “as the estates today belonging to the ecclesiastical domain become free, and against which there is no claim by a third party, there will be a process of their national lease for the benefit of the proletarian class”. This is a position similar to the one adopted the following year by Asturian Flórez Estrada in a famous newspaper article published at the end of February 1836, where he proposed the system of “emphyteutical leases” for those same lands, highlighting both its administrative advantages—“The emphyteutical system can be brought to fulfillment in a few months; the system of sale will not be supplemented for many years”—and political advantages:

under the emphyteutical system, all the families of the proletarian class would be owners of the land they cultivated, and therefore interested in supporting the reforms and the throne of Isabel, since they would see their well-being encapsulated within it. (Flórez Estrada 1836)

A month later, on 30 March 1836, the Provincial Council of Girona, little suspected of socialist whims, sent the Queen a letter in which it reproduced the words of Flórez Estrada more or less verbatim (Congost 2006).

Flórez Estrada's proposal should serve as a warning that if we are to advance our analysis of these circumstances, it is necessary to take into account a very important difference between Spanish liberal legislation and post-revolutionary French legislation. In Spain, unlike in the French case, far from being abolished, the rights of direct lords came to be considered private property rights. This recognition of the direct domains on the part of the liberal rulers and politicians, in the sense of not questioning them, made the management of the Church's assets in Liberal Spain and, in its first phase, revenues from the convents and monasteries quite complicated. The provisions on ecclesiastical confiscation had to be accompanied by specific provisions on the redemption of ecclesiastical rents. However, the payment of these rents and, therefore, the way in which they were confiscated depended on the "congeniality" of many people, and anti-religious or simply anti-feudal sentiments could therefore greatly affect the process.

From the outset, confiscation legislation was provided for measures on the management of old rents. To better understand what this refers to, in this section, I mapped the percentage of the value of the rents represented at the time when the laws of confiscation and redemption of rents were issued (See Figure 1). Successive volumes of the Madoz dictionary, published in the 1840s, offer an assessment of the values of estates and of "foros and censos" affected by confiscation in each province (Madoz 1845–1850). Regardless of the value finally paid, this information has allowed me to estimate the value represented by rents in the case of both secular and regular clergy at 30%. Here, I mapped the dates relatives to the regular clergy to show the weights of the rents in the convents and monasteries' aggregate wealth.

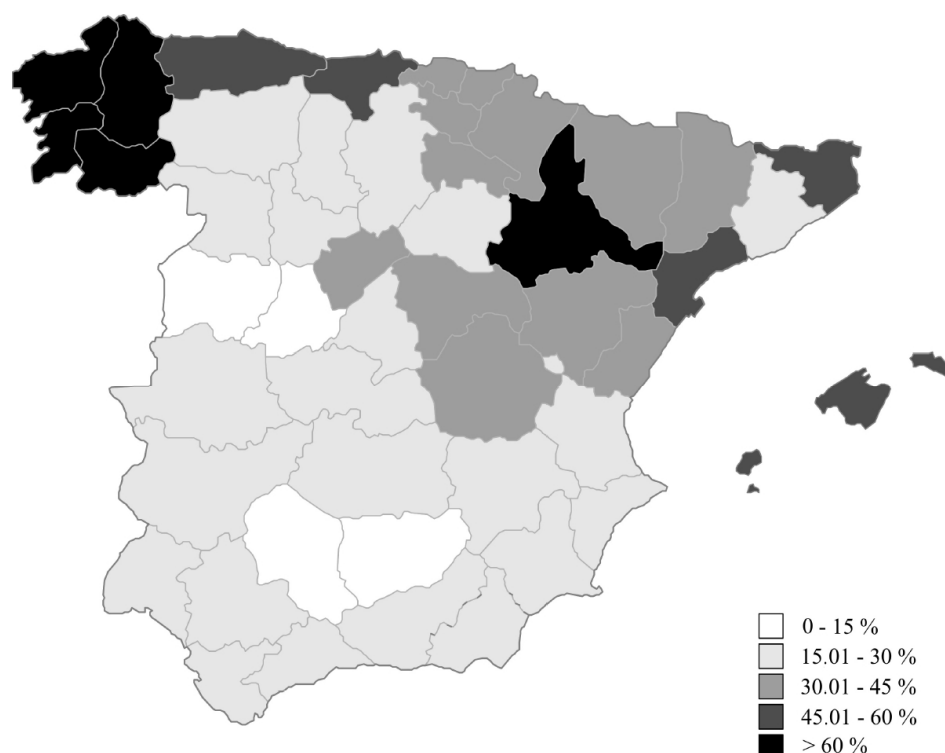


Figure 1. The weights of rents in the wealth of Spanish monasteries and convents. Source: Madoz (Madoz 1845–1850).

The map provides enough evidence to insist on the need to take rents into account in any study of ecclesiastical confiscation. But it does not allow me to go much further since, unfortunately, the information offered by Madoz adds the data from "censos and foros"

in the same calculation. As an Asturian, Madoz used the word “foro” as a synonym for emphyteutic rent because it was the way in which this type of contract was known in the north of Spain, and he reserved the word “censo” as a synonym for annuities, which, in the countries belonging to the Crown of Castille, were known as “*censos consignativos*”, and in the countries belonging to the Crown of Aragon, were known as *censales*. Detailed studies are needed at the provincial level to distinguish between the real weight of each type of rent in ecclesiastical wealth. This distinction is important because the role of one rent or another could be very different for its payers and also for its recipients:

(a) Emphyteutic rents were the annual rents paid by the holders of useful domain to their direct lords. Religious orders could have useful or direct domains over estates. In the former case, the estates were sold, and the purchasers acquired the obligation to recognise the direct domains of lords. Although the confiscation decree of 19 February 1836 only referred to estates, the instruction of March 1 of the same year already provided for those cases in which the estates were subject to direct domains. But the wealth we are referring to is that of the annual rents that the institutions had collected as direct lords. In France, this type of rent was considered feudal and abolished. In contrast, the State became the administrator in Spain, although not without difficulties, as we shall see in the next section. At the beginning of March 1836, a new royal decree declared those rents belonging to communities of monks and regular clergy whose monasteries had been suppressed to be “in a state of redemption”. On 10 April, a royal order insisted that perpetual emphyteutic rents could be redeemed, and that in the event that those affected did not redeem them within the agreed deadlines, they would be publicly auctioned. But many payers had already stopped paying them in the final stage of the Ancien Régime, and resistance to doing so greatly increased in liberal times.

(b) Annuities or mortgage credit agreements, known as “*censos consignativos*” in Castille and “*censales*” in Aragon, were also included among those rents to be redeemed. From the point of view of the ecclesiastical institutions, which had continued to be the main creditors, the reduction in interest on the annuities from 5% to 3%, which occurred in 1705 in the Crown of Castile and in 1750 in the Crown of Aragon, would have resulted in a significant decrease in the volume of ecclesiastical revenues in relation to the capital invested in this type of enterprise, long before difficulties arising from the payment of tithes and seigniorial rents surfaced. But from the debtors’ point of view, difficulties in continuing to obtain money at a low price would have had dire consequences for their day-to-day lives. Herein lies another issue worth investigating: the end of the Church’s role as a lending institution, especially its supplying of money at a low interest rate (Congost et al. 2023).

In a recent study carried out on the redemption of confiscated rents in the province of Girona between 1836 and 1854, the redemptions mostly found to have been affected were annuities (Torrent 2019). However, these rents were already redeemable, even if there had been no confiscation laws. Therefore, the call for a redemption of rents collected by religious communities may not have meant major changes in this area. It was possible to carry out redemption under the same conditions as during the Ancien Régime, from the capitalization of the rent to 3 percent. The fact that this could be achieved with devalued “*vales reales*” was surely the biggest attraction of the measure. On the other hand, scant evidence, in this same study, of the redemption of emphyteutic rents, despite them being important in this province, leads me to suppose that many emphyteutes may have had resistance similar to that detected by Madoz and other authors in relation to the payment of tithes. We will see this more clearly in the next section.

4. From Church to State: The Role of the State in the Confiscation Process

My reflections thus far lead to the review of the role that ecclesiastical confiscation might have played in the construction of a new Liberal State in Spain. At this point, I will not refer to its impact on the Spanish economy, which is under debate, whether in reference to agricultural growth or fiscal problems, but rather to the impact of the decisions of the

liberal government regarding confiscation on Spanish citizenry as a whole. With this goal in mind, I will award great importance to the management of ecclesiastical rents, but I will also look at the use and purpose of the convent and monastery buildings located in the main Spanish cities. All of this may have influenced public perception not only of the suppression of the convents and monasteries, but of liberal change as a whole, represented by institutions that were significantly different but not necessarily less coercive. The nature of the aforementioned impact may have been very different from what has tended to be assumed in Spanish historiography, especially if we take into account that the majority of the inhabitants of those cities could see few positive changes in the set of liberal measures since they did not have sufficient income either to vote or access the supposedly liberated lands. In the popular imagination, the two processes that I will analyse here, the role of the State as collector and manager of the old monastic rents and soldiers and civil servants substituting friars at the doors of convent and monastery buildings, may have resulted in very contradictory feelings, which did not always align with those who shared the same feelings in the field of religiosity on the same side.

(1) The State, administrator of feudal rights

Provisions relating to the sale or redemption of rents may have meant a worsening of the conditions for many Spaniards. This seems to be proven by the decrees and multiple “official” calls through the official provincial gazettes to pay debts to the State with the rents formerly paid to monasteries. How were these provisions perceived by the population? On the one hand, the profusion of complaints reveals the difficulties suffered by the State in managing the thousands of rents that had ended up in its hands. For this reason, in Catalonia, an attempt was made to recover the figure of the *batlle de sac*, that is, the old and surely unpopular collector of seigneurial rents, as a way to ensure continuity in the collection of rents. But the State’s claims were not the only ones, as can be seen in some discussions in the Spanish Parliamentary Courts. Thus, in the session of 11 December 1844, one parliamentary representative called the attention of the government to the abuses of the State as a feudal lord, and Alejandro Mon, the Minister of Finance, acknowledged that the municipalities of Alcañiz and other towns in the province of Teruel had transmitted complaints to him on this subject, clarifying that only those rents “whose legitimacy is incontestable or whose possession does not admit of contradiction” could be collected. The issue was again present in the decree of 24 February 1845, published on 7 March, the beginnings of which give an account of the complaints that were sent to the government by different towns of Aragon and Catalonia through their parliamentary representatives. It may be interesting to consider the terms in which the conflict was expressed:

...on the severity with which they are pressed for the payment of rents in favour of the State, from the extinct religious communities, notwithstanding the fact that many of them are either of doubtful existence, or have expired with time, or have already been redeemed before, or are not sufficiently justified, or lastly, must be deemed to have been extinguished by virtue of the provisions in force on lordships. . .

The response contained in the decree clarified that this type of inconvenience would be avoided while warning that it would continue to “always persecute the holders of the mortgages affected by these pensions”. On 14 April, the parliamentary representative Manso took the claims of the Province of Barcelona Board of Owners to Parliament “in which are expressed the abuses and humiliations that are committed due to amortization”. In his speech, he referred to the ineffectiveness of the order of 24 February as it did not consider amortisation given its interest in the collection of “*censos desconocidos o dudosos*” or those rents charged by religious communities that were initially difficult to collect. Mon’s response is interesting:

In Catalonia alone, in the district of Poblet, more than 500 or 600,000 reales have been hidden, and when the Government considers these claims, it is its duty to safeguard, at the same time as it must protect private interests, the public interests of the nation.

Moreover, another parliamentary representative, Orense—after pointing out that the complaints “are large and widespread throughout Spain”—showed his disagreement with that response through arguments due to the fact that the Treasury, as a mere substitute for the extinct religious communities, could not have attributions that the latter did not have. Previously, payers of censos had the right to go to court if they did not agree with their payments that the State, which was both the judge and interested party, now claimed that they were obliged to pay:

Because, gentlemen, it was enough to find an old book from a convent or monastery in which it said, ‘Such and such a family paid so much’, but it was not stated whether it paid it as alms, as a donation, or because it felt like it. It states nothing other than that they paid, and the supervisors say: ‘Here is an entry in an old book that says that you paid so much, so you must pay’. Thus is the position of a friar given more force than a public deed.

All of these problems must be considered in the study of ecclesiastical confiscation. This climate of confrontation prevailing between people unwilling to pay their feudal rents and a State assuming the role of feudal lord undoubtedly contributed to the scarcity of rent redemptions before the 1855 law. In fact, until 1848, there were more frequent purchases and sales of direct domains than rent redemptions. It was Madoz who proposed new measures more favourable to redemption in 1855, but they fall outside the scope of this study. On the other hand, the Madoz dictionary that has allowed us to evaluate the weights of rents in ecclesiastical wealth will also allow us to draw attention to another aspect of confiscation that could have influenced the same coercive vision of the Liberal State: the public use of many convent and monastery buildings.

(2) The public use of convents and monasteries

In the 21st century, foreigners visiting Spain can still obtain a very religious image of many cities due to the large number of preserved convent buildings, monasteries, and churches. However, from 1835 onwards, which is the year of exclaustation, most such buildings ceased to be occupied by nuns and friars. If the buildings have been preserved, it was because most of them did not pass into private hands, but rather that public institutions, mostly pertaining to the State but also sometimes Provincial and City Councils, decided to keep them and allocate them to a secular but public use ([Bello Voces 1997](#)). The second article of the decree of confiscation of 19 February 1836 reads as follows: “Exempt from this general measure are buildings that the Government retains for public service or to preserve monuments of the arts, or to honour the memory of national exploits”. The Liberal State was being built and, as such, it required public buildings to house offices for government, the Treasury, education, and, of course, the army.

Notwithstanding, by the time the successive volumes of the Madoz dictionary had been written and published, with the war with the Carlists having just ended, the army played a prominent role as occupier of the old convents and monasteries. We can see this reflected in the four cities that had more than 100,000 inhabitants in 1857.

All of these changes may have had some kind of psychological impact on the civic consciousness of the inhabitants of these cities. State presence was growing in the cities. But did their inhabitants feel more protected because of this? Or rather, more controlled? Did children and young people have better access to education than before? How did the change in the use of the buildings, if they remained standing, influence life in the city? Or in the way the inhabitants experienced religion, or their anti-religious sentiment? If the religious orders had not been suppressed, where would these new and necessary institutional headquarters have been located? It is hard to say. However, the fact that the new administrative and coercive apparatus was located in old religious buildings may have taken on an important symbolic weight. It was visible proof that the State was now assuming many of the functions that had previously been performed by the Church.

Table 1 refers only to the four most populous cities in Spain, but the impact on the other provincial capitals was no less important. Let us consider the three other Catalan

provinces: in each of them, the authorities took over buildings to use as secondary schools and to host the Provincial Council. In Girona, of the other six affected buildings, one served as a “warehouse for public goods” and dependent offices, another as a seminar for priests, and in two other cases, private individuals bought them for industrial use. In two cases, they were used for military purposes: the remains of one building were used as a cavalry barracks, and another served as an army warehouse and supplies depot. In Tarragona, where there were only six affected buildings, three were used as barracks and one as housing for the poor. I can provide a little more detail about the case of Lleida, which Madoz knew well. This city, where there were seven buildings, followed the pattern of the other Catalan capitals, with the Secondary School and the Provincial Council being housed in religious buildings. The latter was located in the Franciscan convent, with Madoz clarifying that “it is likely to contain other public offices if the works are carried out, which, although expensive, are required due to the scarcity of public buildings”. The Discalced Carmelites building was appropriated for charitable purposes, and that of the Capuchins was allocated to the construction of prisons. Madoz was unconcerned about the City Council buying the one from the Augustinians in 1836 because it built the theatre and café there that “beautify the city so much”, but he had differing feelings about the two purchases made by private individuals. He had positive feelings in the case of the Discalced Carmelites building because “the current owner of the convent can boast of having done a service to the city by building the beautiful bathhouse, so necessary for cleanliness and health”. He had negative feelings when it came to that of the Mercenaries because “the whole building has passed into private property, to the detriment of the public good, for the lack of lodging in the neighbourhood is unbearable, and no building was more suitable than this for building pavilions for the officers of the garrison”. This simple observation by Madoz reveals an ambivalent interpretation of convents being converted into barracks.

Table 1. The destinations of the buildings of convents and monasteries in the main cities of Spain in 1845.

| | Buildings | For Military Use | Other Public Uses | Private Use | Demolished or Abandoned (Squares, Markets, New Buildings) |
|-----------|--------------------------------|------------------|---|--|---|
| Madrid | 33 | 5 | 10 (prisons in 2 cases) | 9 (returned to the nobility in 5 cases; a factory in 1 case) | 9 |
| Barcelona | 25 | 5 | 9 (amortisation in 2 cases; 1 extension of Charity House) | 6 (1 foundry; 1 cotton factory; 1 Piarists; 1 seminary); in one case, the buildings had been rented, and in another they were reclaimed, successfully, by the Duke of Medinaceli | 2 |
| Seville | 39 (6 in the suburbs) | 6 | 10 | 16 (factories in 10 cases) | 9 |
| Valencia | 26 (12 outside the city walls) | 5 | 3 (1 prison) | 12 (5 factories, foundry); 1 returned to the Templars; 1 religious school | 6 |

Source: Madoz (Madoz 1845–1850).

5. Conclusions

When our main guide on our tour of liberal Spain, Pascual Madoz, died in 1870, he continued to represent progressive liberalism in the eyes of his contemporaries. But things were heavily changed since 1835, the year of the exclaustation and his first writings. There must have been very few exclaustated individuals left from the convents and monasteries, and many confiscated and municipal lands had been sold and passed into private hands. But many old rents were still valid on paper, and many others were eagerly

sought by speculators who pursued thousands of citizens, of different social positions, with the aim of obtaining payments. In 1835, the young Madoz, who had already seen two exclaustation processes in his childhood and adolescence, was convinced of the need to suppress the convents and monasteries, but also that this measure had to benefit the poor. Twenty years later, he would sign the decree of civil confiscation, which, for many, attacked the rights of the poor even more directly, and would dictate new measures on the processes of redemption of ecclesiastical rents inherited by the State. The 1855 law, also known as the Madoz Act, allowed for the resurrection of rents classified as “unknown and doubtful censos”.

If Madoz ever stopped to reflect on what had happened, he must have recognised that, as had happened in France and England, the suppression of the convents and monasteries had not only not solved the problems of poverty in Spain but had also given rise to conflicted feelings in many citizens, and surely in the man himself. This was not only because of the way in which the ecclesiastical estates had been sold, which had not taken into account the agrarian reform proposals led by Flórez Estrada, but also because the Liberal State, by trying to collect the same fees and taxes that the Church had previously collected, had shown the more unpleasant face of liberalism and its more conservative side. It was also the case that the cessation of the Church’s traditional role as a facilitator of cheap credit was leading to difficulties for many people. None of the liberal measures enacted compensated for this loss.

As Madoz pointed out in the case of collecting tithes, many of these processes may have displayed anti-religious symptoms long before exclaustation was issued. This climate probably influenced the fact that many of the exclaustated individuals of 1809 and 1820, especially the younger ones, did not want to return to the convents and monasteries in 1814 and 1823, and that the numbers of friars and nuns had been significantly reduced by the time exclaustation was completed (Zaragoza Pascual 2007). But the liberal revolution did not push forward the incipient changes in the direction desired by the young Madoz. Both those who regretted the exclaustation and confiscation of the convents and monasteries in 1835 because their role as a charitable institution from which they could have benefited had ceased, and those who had participated in or applauded the violent actions against the convents and monasteries from their homes may have been disappointed by the turn taken by the new liberal institutions.

Each of the aspects highlighted in this work may have been experienced very differently in Spain as a whole because they were already starting from a different situation, as we have seen in the composition of ecclesiastical wealth, but also because of the evolution of religious or anti-religious sentiment at the personal level within families and in the social climate. The same diversity can be applied to rent payments or charitable practises. All of this undoubtedly conditioned the way in which the liberal revolution was experienced and, of course, in the case of exclaustated individuals, both those who celebrated their new condition, who we know existed, and those who saw it as tragic. I truly hope that my reflections can help those who try to accompany them on their journeys.

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Note

¹ Arxiu Comarcal de l’Alt Empordà, Notarial, Peralada, 11 (1805), f. 25–28.

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