Living in a depopulated village: sustainable livelihoods and the promise of future

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Abstract

Throughout the last 50 years the Spanish countryside has emptied due to the rural migration from villages to main industrial cities such as Madrid, Bilbao or Barcelona. Now, after decades of demographic decline, depopulation has become central in public and academic debate about rural development. This growing concern of emptying villages has raised questions about the precarious life and the sense of threat to people who live in these spaces and who are exposed to a loss of services and stable livelihood. This research is an ethnographic analysis of locals' perspective living in the depopulated village of Yanguas, in Tierras Altas in the province of Soria, the most depopulated area in Spain. Departing from the concept of precarity within global capitalism I will focus on how people of Yanguas sustain a livelihood and how they perceive the village's livability, while addressing the future perspective of development based on infrastructure creation. The findings in this research suggest that the struggles some people experienced while living in a depopulated village were not derived strictly from the fact that they live in a small community. On the contrary, the experience of depopulation, rather than being the source of precarity, was very often a symptom of other large-scale issues and social changes such as industrialization, delocalization, and patterns of social mobility and migration.

This thesis combines audiovisual and text, and the outcome is this article and a film.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

"Depopulation" is the process of demographic emptying, total or partial, of a territory or settlement that was previously significantly more populated. As such, the depopulation of rural areas is linked in many cases to economic migration, however, it can also be due to other human or environmental causes such as wars, catastrophes or pandemics, amongst others. The emptying of these spaces influences the stability on the life of the peoples since it implies the loss of the social fabric. As populations decline, the local economy is weaker, stores close, services are lost and there are also fewer job opportunities since these opportunities are concentrated in cities. Therefore, it has become a recognized problem in the rural world and has recently acquired its own identity.

From the 60s until the 80s the rural population of Spain fell drastically due to continuous rural migration from villages to cities that had initially begun in the late nineteenth century. Between these decades the total Soria's population dropped from 161.000 to 98.000, turning the province of Soria into the most depopulated in Spain. It was most affected by internal rural-urban migration, and the province with the lowest population density (Martínez 1984). Migrants mostly moved to Barcelona, Zaragoza and Madrid, but also from the villages of the province to the province capital, being the main migration center in the 80s (Córdoba Largo 1983; Martínez 1984). The primary reason for migrants was to seek a better life fostered by industrialization in cities. The wage gap between villages and cities established a radical change in the way people perceived livelihood from an almost self-sustained economy model to a paid job model that allowed a higher level of consumption (Collantes and Pinilla 2019:118).

However, the depopulation of rural Spain is not an isolated social phenomenon since it has occurred in most of the European countries during the twentieth century. Vicente Pinilla and Fernando Collantes (2019) point out the mistake of thinking that the case of depopulation is unique to Spain, while other countries such as France, Germany or the United Kingdom have been prolific in promoting agriculture as a working environment in the rural world. According to these specialists in the economic history of depopulation, the depopulation process was a widespread phenomenon in the post-World War II era throughout Europe. Depending on when the industrialization process ended, depopulation occurred sooner or later in the rural medium, but it occurred without exception. Pinilla and Collantes also deny that in Spain it was more severe than in other countries, since in other cases such as France, which is

often taken as successful, the rural exodus between the 50-70s was the most intense in all of Europe (*ibid*.:42).

The conclusion of this approach to the problem of depopulation is that the global economy, and specifically those under a purely productivist model, has pushed the way in which we distribute ourselves in our environment to the limits. The common denominator in the depopulation of the rural environment in different countries is a structural change in the economy, either due to an industrialization process that attracted people to the cities or a deindustrialization process that took them out of there as in the case of post-socialist Latvia (Dzenovska 2011; 2018; 2019; 2020).

However, in the last decade, depopulation has been placed at the center of an important political debate about rural development. In Spain the depopulation of rural areas is known by the name of "Empty Spain" or "emptied", blaming policies and territorial management as the cause of the emptying of these spaces. For example, in the industry and infrastructures that would have facilitated life in the Spanish hinterlands were distributed. The concept of "empty Spain" was born from the journalist Sergio del Molino in his book *Empty Spain: A Journey Through a Country That Never Existed*[1] (2016), and is deeply rooted in the collective imagination of a sad and rural Spain divorced from the rest of the territory (both physically and culturally), and that it has nothing to do with the bustling life of the cities.

> "There are two Spains: one urban and European, and one interior and depopulated Spain. Communication between the two has been and is difficult. They often seem like foreign countries to each other. And yet, urban Spain cannot be understood without the empty one."

Molinos' effort to describe this presumed gap between the rural world and the city has become a slogan and a point of reference for journalists, politicians, academics, and, ultimately, for a large part of Spanish society that recognizes this process as a problem. The "empty Spain" evokes a history that has already happened that is full of images of precariousness: lonely old people, abandoned villages, small isolated communities on a mountain (and in time), lack of stable jobs and loss of quality of life and services for the villages. This has allowed the mobilization of different activist groups under the same flag. For decades, these groups have been demanding more political attention in those areas of the periphery

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[1] My translation. The original title is "España Vacía: un recorrido por un país que nunca fue".

beaten by rural migrations in the second half of the last century. Groups such as *Soria ¡Ya!*, or *Teruel Existe*, agree that life in these inner provinces is precarious due to depopulation and they often relate it to the lack of infrastructure that allows a stable life. For many, the only solution is to make large investments to reverse the situation, mainly through the creation of infrastructures (transport and industrial).However, now, after the demographic decline of rural areas of Spain seems to slow down (but not stopping), it is important to analyze the situation in villages in post-industrial times in order to understand what are the future perspectives of rural development in these emptying places. In the same way, that the study of mega-cities or global cities has received a lot of attention from the academy, the study of these emptied places reveals an important story about what the effects of global capitalism have on society. Understanding this problem as part of a global reality leaves a path of investigation of great importance.

Theoretical framework

In my research I have focused on studying how depopulation affects the lives of people who live during winter in a depopulated village called Yanguas. Specifically, I have focused on the province of Soria, and within it in Tierras Altas, known for being one of the most depopulated areas in all of Europe and which has come to be compared with Lapland or Siberia.

The motivation for this research was initially to see firsthand the effects of depopulation (lack of services, work, social support, and infrastructure), but as I learned about the subject from within I understood that there is a diversity of opinions that make it a much more complex or fragmented issue than expected. The media have promoted a depressing and decaying image of these spaces in which people still live (even if it's only a few), and of which on several occasions those affected do not feel represented. It is therefore important to thoughtfully analyze whether living in a town is precarious or, perhaps, depopulation obscures other problems.

Precarity

This ethnographic analysis revolves around three fundamental theoretical concepts or debates: precarity, livelihood and the promise of infrastructure. The concept of precarity is the central, to my analysis and I have been largely influenced by the approach of Anna Tsing (2015) exploring the effects of the global economy and the possibility of survival in the ruins of capitalism.

Nonetheless, the concept of precarity in social sciences is not a novelty[2]. It has become popular for explaining post-Fordist labor struggles and current economic struggles. However, it has turned to be used in a polysemic by different authors. In practice precarity is not, anymore, the condition of a specific working class, but has become a class by itself (Standing 2011); is the –widespread– experience of the unemployed or the underemployed (Bourdieu 1998). Therefore, precarity has been mainly connected to labor condition and livelihood, however, precarity also means insecurity in a broader sense of the word. That is, as a common human vulnerability and dependence to other humans (Butler 2004), revealing the

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2 The first time "precarity" appears in social sciences is in an essay written by Dorothy Day for the Catholic Worker movement about poverty and hospitality access of homeless people (Day 1952, cited in Millar 2017).

fragility of society and bodies. For these reasons, precarity does not hold a single meaning and frequently operates as a framework for social analysis.

In order to retain the analytical and political value of the concept of precarity, for this article when I refer to precarity I will use Ana Tsing's use of the term, which she generally defines as "life without promise of stability" (2015:2). A valuable aspect of her use of the concept is that it encompasses beyond economy and the lack of stable wage and livelihoods, which is the common subject of the term. When referring to precarity she does not only address a specific post-industrial labour condition, she frames it in a broader context of globalization and post-modernity, entailing precarity as a common condition of our times and the possibility of survival in the ruins of capitalism. Furthermore, Tsing explains that precarity is not only shared by humans but also with non-humans, and more importantly, the frontier between economy and ecology (Tsing 2018: 75; 2015).

In this study, precarity is presented as a question and a point of reference to inquire how the deficiencies caused by depopulation are affecting rural inhabitants. Depopulation is usually related to the loss of a past wellbeing and services in the place. At another level, the depopulation in villages did affect the local social and cultural capital due to a loss of the social connections and community support (Bock 2016). However, depopulation as a rural exodus occurred decades ago, and current situations might show a changing scenario. For this reason, this critical analysis of the current context of the peoples is vital.

As Kathleen M. Millar argues, there is a risk in recent works about precarity of "losing precarity's analytical purchase" (Millar 2017:4). Drawing from Judith Butler's distinction between precarity as a labour condition, and precariousness as ontological notion, Millar recognizes an emerging field about the political value of its denunciatory discourse. From this critical approach to the concept of precarity, which she calls "politics of precarity", she argues that social movements addressing loss and precarity may also have "unintended ideological effects, which has the potential to serve as a conservatizing force" (ibid: 5). Therefore, she urges academics to work on a more critical view on how scholars frame precarity, while retaining "both its analytical and political value" (ibid: 7) and problematizing the way recent precarity discourses may "occlude" the experience of research subjects across different cultural settings.

The difference between the salary obtained in a city and in the rural environment is a determining factor in migration decisions, and therefore depopulation (Collantes and Pinilla 2019). Taking precarity as a starting point, I approach the analysis of how the people who live in Yanguas (and who are of productive age) build their livelihood. That is, understand how locals thrive in a context of few job opportunities, and to what extent the inhabitants depend on the natural resources

The concept of livelihood has been used in social science, development studies and in political ecology. In these studies, livelihood has usually been related to access to vital basic resources, poverty and hunger; and in the case of political ecology to lands and ownership mostly related to capitalism exploitation (Wolf 1972; 1982). In general, livelihood can be defined as "the ability of that individual to obtain the basic necessities in life, which are food, water, shelter and clothing" (Mphande 2016). In the case of political ecology, the study of rural livelihood has been related to access to natural resources that allow sustaining a source of income mainly connected with agriculture and livestock. although in 2019 90% of rural family units in the world still subsisted from agricultural activities, in Spain already during the 90s the percentage had fallen to 26% (30% in Soria) (Collantes 2007). This is largely due to the strong absorption process of industrial cities and the concentration of agricultural labour in a smaller number of people. However, Fernando Collantes explains that there is a change in the trend and the sources of livelihood have recently changed with the diversification of the rural labour market and with new ways of living between urban and rural spaces. Among others, he points to commuters, to the positive migratory movements between city and country-side, or rural tourism as new forms of subsistence (ibid.). Therefore, it is important to understand that livelihoods now are not the same as 60 years ago.

In fact, there are several criticisms of a purely economic approach to livelihood, stuck on the idea of economic poverty and famine, to which is added the increasing difficulty of defining a "rural livelihood". Some proponents have developed an alternative definition of livelihood known as "sustainable livelihood". This is a holistic concept to understand that livelihoods also depend on other non-economic factors, such as access to material and immaterial goods as sources of wellbeing. Therefore, sustainable livelihood includes all these resources or assets that any individual, household members or group regard as basic for their needs. Leo J. De Haan suggests that livelihood is not the same as having a stable job, and, "although monetary income is important, it is not the only aspect that matters" (2003:5). And, as

he points out, someone who earns less money can be "better off than someone with a higher monetary income (*ibid*.:5).

In this conceptualization of livelihood as an extended notion of "basic needs", we can include assets that are both material and immaterial. That is, access to any means to develop personal stability as transfer of knowledge, lands, social support, and tools as examples. Chambers and Conway (1992), the authors of the concept, support that a sustainable livelihood depends not only on economic capital but also *human*, *physical*, *natural* and *social* capital.

"Human capital"[3] is "labour, skills, experience, knowledge, creativity and inventiveness"; Natural capital is natural resources like "land, water, forests and pastures, but also minerals"; Physical capital can be food stocks, livestock, shelter, equipment and machinery as trucks or utility facilities; financial capital are the money, bank accounts and loans, credits; and, lastly, social capital is the "quality of relations" between people, neighbours, or members of a family or a community, which in the case of the village are the inhabitants.

Infrastructures

The third topic dealing with precarity and livelihood is the lack of infrastructure. Social sciences have turned their attention to infrastructures as they are critical locations to define "experiences of everyday life and expectations of future" (Anand et al. 2018: 3). Infrastructures are those physical constructions[4] that allow the circulation and distribution of "goods, people or ideas, and allow the circulation and distribution" (Larking 2013: 328). As such, infrastructures have the faculty of introducing substantial changes in societies, and its distribution is essentially critical subject to governance, politics and inequality.

In the context of depopulation in Spain, the lack of infrastructure has been widely considered as a cause of depopulation and geographic isolation. Likewise, infrastructures are deemed as a means for creating

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3 In Pierre Bourdieu's terms (1986) "human capital" could be equivalent to "cultural capital".

4 Depending on the theoretical approach non-physical infrastructures are regarded as important as material infrastructures. See Elyachar 2012.

new job offers and consolidating the industrial fabric necessary to "repopulate" the "empty Spain". Among others, the construction of highways, a reopening of a train station, or access to fast telecommunications and industrial infrastructures in villages have become crucial in the debate of rural development, and ultimately a solution to the demography decline. Taking as a reference the group from *Soria¡Ya!* Key infrastructures are "road" (railways and roads), industrial "and" telecommunication ", as part of the basic physical capital for progress. According to this point of view on rural development, a better distribution of infrastructure (road and industrial) would help to alleviate the effects of depopulation and even reverse it, and therefore eliminate the gap between the periphery and the center.

This "promise of future", which is what Bryan Larking, among other authors, defines as a "reflexive point where the present state and future possibilities of government and society are held up for public assessment (Anand et al. 2018: 177) ". That is, the capacity of infrastructures as a platform for social change, a milestone between past and future. The infrastructures promise to create jobs and access, and above all the possibility of reindustrializing inland Spain.

Furthermore, this argument is strengthened by many authors who have pointed out that unequal distribution of infrastructures produces spaces of exclusions (Delgado Urrecho 2018; Vicente and Pinilla 2019; Buier 2020). "differential provisioning of infrastructures" (Anand et al. 2018: 4) may speak about its capacity of inclusion and exclusion (Harvey *et al*. 2015). This thesis has been supported by the anthropologist Laura Bauier (2020), who studies the negative effects of the distribution of the AVE (Spanish High Speed) railway infrastructures on the territory of Spain.

The "promise of infrastructures" are in constant tension between "aspiration and failure" since they may not meet expectations or even be threatened with ruination, break down or failure (Anand et al. 2018: 3). Infrastructures are not neutral elements and, instead, have an impact in the cultural and ontological landscape of human societies based on future expectations, plans and times around concepts of modernity (Larkin 2013; Janseen Bruun 2017; Jensen and Morita 2016; Latour 1993).

Through this last analytical term related to the concepts of precarity and lack of livelihood in the villages I will assess how the lack of infrastructure (road, industry, communication) affects the way of living of people in the village, and to what extent their planning and construction are contested places of social change. I will approach this at the end of this thesis in order to reflect on rural development and sustainability future expectations and debate.

Entering the fieldwork (methodology)

After spending the first few weeks of January in the capital of the province doing preliminary fieldwork and looking for a village where I could start my participant observation, I decided to move to *Tierras Altas*. Tierras Altas, literally translates as "Highlands" and is one of the ten regions of Soria. Features of Tierras Altas include a hilly landscape with sparse vegetation and forest. It is separated from the rest of the province by a mountain range with a pass 1454 meters above sea level. I was told that, if I research depopulation in Soria, Tierras Altas was the epicenter because it suffers a serious demographic struggle, being one of the regions less populated in Europe (only 2,32 inhabitants per km²).

When I arrived on 20th of January to Tierras Altas, it was freezing and the mountain pass connecting the area to the rest of the province was blocked due to the snowstorm Gloria, which had blocked the road for a whole day. I had an appointment in the region's capital with a key gatekeeper, a recognized priest for his social commitment to the assistance of people of Tierras Altas (particularly in winter). Once I met him, I told him I had come with the motivation to investigate the harmful effects of depopulation and record the social unrest, perhaps living with older people who lived alone in some town. He was quick to point out that the local population is somehow uninterested in people wanting to depict the "empty Spain" there, either journalists, researchers, filmmakers or other kinds of reporters. He was hesitant about my presence in Tierras Altas, especially if my intention was to film or depict "the way they live", as he maintained that very often the media just showed negative aspects of living in the region. The media's construction of the "other", the people and culture from the villages, is perceived by locals as biased or even exoticizing. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) expose this representation crisis and incited anthropology to questioning "spatial assumptions" and stereotypical constructions of identity, culture and social groups as definite units bound to a place.

This led me to take a reflexive approach in my ethnographic analysis (Robben and Sluka 2012) about precarity and rural culture and introduce my own positionality as part of the reflection about what "depopulation" means and for whom. Antonius Robben describes reflexive approach as "the conscious self-examination of the ethnographer's interpretive presuppositions, enriched fieldwork by (…) the interactional processes through which they acquired, shared, and transmitted knowledge." (ibid.: 443). As I learned about the subject from within, I understood that there is a diversity of opinions that make it a much more complex and fragmented subject than I expected. In fact, Fernando Collantes and Vicente Pinillas (2019) urge academia to question in advance the debate of depopulation. According to them,

mainstream analyses on the current state and effects of depopulation in rural areas of Spain do not normally account for successful examples of villages who take a stand against becoming empty, or the important role of migration in rural demography (Collantes and Pinillas 2014), among others. For instance, it is not often shown that overall demographic decline had exponentially slowed down in Tierras Altas or that it even gained new inhabitants from other areas of Spain and abroad, as the priest gate keeper contended.

This turning point gave me a different view of the context of Tierras Altas and depopulation in my research. I understood that I needed to look through my presumed approach to "precarity" and see beyond typical ethnographic constructions of village lifestyle. That did not mean that depopulation had never affected people in Tierras Altas, nor that nobody maintains that it is a problem that is still present in everyday life.

Following the priest's suggestions, I moved to a village called Yanguas at north of Tierras Altas that does not fit the regular stereotype of a depopulated village. Firstly, around fifty people live there in Winter but most of them are under fifty years old and have come from other parts of Spain. Yanguas was not successful, nor a ruin, job offers are scarce and has a fragile economy, yet it stands against becoming empty.

I performed participant observation, both while filming and without the camera. I spent time with various interlocutors in their daily work as a form of exploratory ethnographic practice and conducted various interviews in the field. While I gave special attention to the struggles of people making ends meet, I tried to understand the general opinion about depopulation in Yanguas and Tierras Altas and take note of the way people create community life. I was inspired by MacDougall's ethnographic film *Tempus de baristas* (1993) where he follows the daily activities of three shepherds in a context of rapidly changing social environment due to rural migration. In the film he interweaves observational with reflexive mode scenes, taking the viewer close to the inner thoughts of the characters who struggle to sustain a livelihood.

As a film strategy, I relied on observational style in order to show the daily life contrasts of living in a depopulated village. Although, I moved from a definition of observational filmmaking understood by Lucien Taylor (1997;1998) as a way to apprehend peoples' experience by their actions instead of their words, to Christian Suhr and Rane Willerslev's definition of observational cinema as a way "of inquiring into the role played by ordinary lived time and space in the constitution of social life" (Suhr and

Willerslev 2013: 8). However, while filming there was space for personal interplay and momentary interaction in which people will not remain unmoved by my presence and more specially the camera's presence. In fact, as this was my first experience doing visual ethnography, I encountered many difficulties with interlocutors, and I found myself constantly negotiating my role and the time we wanted to share in front of the camera. I relied on observational style as a way of using the camera as an observational fieldwork tool rather than just a cinematic choice, but as a way of data gathering and form of getting access to the social world of Yanguas (Postma and Crawford 2006; MacDougall 1998:94). Therefore, in this thesis both audiovisual and non-audiovisual participant observation methodologies feed each other.

As result, the audiovisual material is heterogeneous and exposes different views of the village as I organically recorded them. However, while in the written part the argument had more space to clearly unfold throughout, the three main concepts (precarity, livelihood and infrastructures), in the film these concepts are presented in a more subtle way. For this reason, I bring the audiovisual one step closer to the text, to address certain issues within the film narrative that did not allow structuring my plot of the film. In the article I use small audiovisual fragments of interviews, conversations or circumstances that enrich the ethnographic representation of the text. The reader will find references of the film in the footnotes with the timecodes and citations to the clips marking when should be watched.

First chapter (Precarity)

1.1 Rise and fall of Yanguas

North of Tierras Altas, we can find a locality in the shores of the Cidacos river called Yanguas. Yanguas, from Latin "ianuas", translates as "doors" referring to the location as the border line between Castilian plateau and the Ebro River, a strategic valley for controlling trade for centuries. It was founded during the wars between Christians and Muslims in the twelfth century and built up for centuries a great economy based on mule drivers and merino sheep transhumance. This led to a thriving economy in the village for centuries. Testimony of that shining past is reflected in its castles and churches and multi-storied buildings. The building facades of the village center are well preserved, displaying marbled heraldries of merino trader families who made a fortune selling wool to Britain and The Netherlands. Walking by its narrow and steep streets is like coming back to the past except for the bustling population which is now absent. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century the permanent population of Yanguas was between 550 and 650. Yanguas could reach a temporal population of thousand depending on itinerant shepherds and traders who departed from the village to the south (Muñoz Jiménez 2016). Life and economy in Tierras Altas used to be prosperous, particularly in the eighteenth century, just the opposite of life in neighbouring cities.

But stability did not last for long in these rustic villages since the international Spanish monopoly of merino wool came to an end. From the end of the nineteenth century to the present, the economic model based on livestock farming entered a crisis, impoverishing the population of Tierras Altas[5]. From the mid nineteenth century to the 30s the local economy of Yanguas was a mix of self-sufficiency and retail trade of goods such as pork, honey and textiles manufactured in a humble workshop located close to the washing place in the river. Due to extreme poverty and changes in life standards, in the 60s and 70s the total population reduced by 83% (*ibid*.), losing thousands of inhabitants who migrated looking for stable wage-jobs in the industries settled at the main ports.

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[5] Between 1845 and 1930 the total population of fourteen thousand remained stable.

Yanguas depopulation occurred just like in other villages in Tierras Altas. Families and close relatives migrated in clusters to the main cities (mainly to Barcelona, Bilbao or Madrid). The Population of smaller villages in nearby areas gathered in Yanguas as their lands were expropriated by the Francoist regime in order to plant pine trees for industry. People were forced out of villages as there were no jobs and their land was taken away, but also because a cultural change in society cities provided the promise of modernity and allowed people a higher level of consumption such as owning a car, a tv and a flat in the cities. According to Luis Camarero (2019) this cultural turn established a difference between the rural and the urban marked by consumerism. This turn was made evident in cinema which recurrently portrayed rural migrants arriving at the cities as boorish yet kind-hearted. In fact, according to the locals who experienced the depopulation in Yanguas, before the industrial migration occurred an educational migration had already happened. Families made a big financial effort to provide education for their children. This allowed youngsters to study higher education degrees out of the villages and pursue a "better life". That is, settle down in the cities, obtain a skilled stable job, buy a house and have a family.

In the nineties Yanguas' population had significantly decreased and aged due to emigration and low birth rates, to the point of almost becoming abandoned as a first residency village. For twenty years the village had remained on the edge of demographic death, while Tierras Altas degrowth slowed because of immigration. Depopulation, understood to mean the ongoing process of rapid decrease of population, had relatively stabilized (but not stopped). Presently, the total population of Tierras Altas is 1500 inhabitants (2,30 per km2), and the 77% is concentrated in six villages out of the fifty villages across the region (Muñoz Jiménez 2016). Nonetheless, while the village capital of Tierras Altas built a chorizo factory providing jobs to immigrant families who settled down in Tierras Altas, Yanguas had no jobs, services and houses in good condition for newcomers. Most of the population gathered in the capital of the region (around 600), as it does concentrate almost any service in Tierras Altas: school, medical assistance, bars, shops, transportation, among others. The last mayor in charge in Yanguas started a crusade to bring new families and individuals to live in the village. After various failed projects as a drug rehabilitation center that also operated as a construction school, he succeeded in reopening the school which had been closed for several decades. Access to education is essential for families settling in a village with children, but the problem is that schools have a minimum requirement of six kids to stay open, and in many cases, this is not possible. In order to achieve that, the mayor guaranteed rooms for families with children and contacted organizations working to relocate people who want to move out of

cities to place his offer. He also promised water and light paid by the municipality to anyone constructing a new house.

Currently Yanguas has slowly prevented the onset of emptiness thanks to the mayor's decoy. Around fifty people live in the village all the year including winter, and the school has ten children. This small community is made up of families from Madrid, Soria (capital), Baleares, Morocco, Romania, Valencia. Even the current new young mayor was not born in Yanguas. To a large extent, migrants seek to live in a village as an increasingly attractive alternative to city life. Fernando Collantes and Vicente Pinilla (2019:126) maintain that if the 60s the cultural turn of future was placed on cities, last decade people are starting to look at villages as appealing locations for starting a new life. The new paradigm is associated with post-industrial and postmodern values, as a new representation of villages depicts them as a source of identity.

1.2 Is life in villages precarious?

One evening I was spending some time with the owner of one hotel, chatting about the neglected villages around Yanguas where just a few houses are restored as second residencies. She said it was so sad for her to see that some people were doing "empty villages tours" for visitors; she also criticized how some people profit from the phenomena of depopulation (either by selling sad news or creating inefficient startups in cities looking for money to "develop" the empty hinterlands). She is one of the few Yanguas inhabitants who was born in Yanguas and have lived in it, and the first person who opened a rural hotel in Yanguas and Tierras Altas. At our side and a few meters away, a family was finishing eating. They were a family of three who own a renovated house in La Vega, one of the abandoned villages of Yanguas, but live in Madrid. When they got up to pay her the dinner, she asked them about La Vega, and they replied it was a mess. Some houses had fallen apart since the last time they visited it and some were poorly maintained. She said it was a pity and hoped to see more families come to live in La Vega again so it could grow and thrive, and they replied that they hoped this never happens. "It is a shame, but we hope no more people start to live there, we are good like that". When they went out, she looked at me and said, "you see? Some people don't want the villages to be repopulated or changed for good".

I was surprised by this because it came so suddenly and unexpectedly. I had always read in the media about the urgency of repopulating the empty villages. She knew that they would reply and so asked because she wanted to raise a question in my mind. What do people want from villages? Do different

people expect the same from these places? They might be an exception to the rule, but I realized that perhaps some people were not bothered about depopulation and the lack of services at all, even though they would own a house (either bought or inherited). Secondly, those who live in the village all year long and those who come only on holidays may not share the same necessities. For that family to spend some time in La Vega is an escape from everyday life in Madrid, because they seek tranquility alone. They do not have internet, electricity or tap water, and do not have a paved road either (they have solar panels and water deposits). They do not have social relationships as virtually no one inhabits the place. In fact, the village was emptied of people before these services arrived. But this family do not miss them either, because they do not have to constantly deal with these deprivations. Temporary visitors or dwellers do not need to sustain themselves there, so they can temporarily live in La Vega on vacations. Only a few individuals and families who seek an alternative way of living disenchanted from technology and urban lifestyle have decided to live throughout the year under these conditions.

Of course, Yanguas is not as disadvantaged as La Vega. It has running water, electricity and relative stable mobile and internet coverage, and road connections suffice. However, it is limited by a shortage of economic investment and population. Almost anytime I asked about this issue in Yanguas I was told that "living in a village is not made for everyone. You have to like it". Choosing this village as a primary residency is a mix of various considerations, and one of them is indeed access to basic services (healthcare, education), entertainment and consumer goods (cinema, shopping centers), and broad social relationships. For some, living in Yanguas would restrain their daily life, and would feel "isolated", especially in winter. Distance plays a part in this issue, as some services are just too far away to be considered accessible and others simply nonexistent. In fact, while villages far away from big urban centers cannot do anything but shrink, "peri-urban"[6] neighbourhoods and villages dependent on cities have mushroomed around them (Delgado Urrecho 2018).

In this regard, the two main services regarded as inefficient are the education and healthcare services. In the absence of a single high school in Tierras Altas, adolescents must take a bus to Soria (capital) where the institutes are located. At present a bus service was provided because local families complained, but

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[6] "Periurban" or "rururban" are liminal bands of settlement between cities and countryside that are not urban or rural, and are dependent on cities.

before that youngsters had to stay midweek in the capital or be transported by their parents early each morning. Still, adolescents who live in the farthest villages might spend up to three hours in the daily commute. With regards to healthcare, the most precarious service is the emergency response. Although the nearest healthcare center is fifteen minutes away, the closest hospital is forty-five kilometers. Medical attention, on the other hand, is relatively stable and a doctor visits the village at least three times in a week, or when requested by a local. Nonetheless, locals fear that the provincial government might decide to cut back or shut down rural clinics in order to centralize them in bigger settlements of the region.

Returning to the problem of the relative lack of services, there is also the problem with the lack of funds of the municipalities, since the fewer people there are in the census, the less public income the village receives. This dramatically limits the ability of local administrations to invest in improving the quality of life of residents. Nonetheless, it is fundamental to highlight that not everything can be reduced to a matter of being precarious or not. There is a degree of subjectivity on what is acceptable for each one's wellbeing. In fact, when I asked about the lack of services most of the Yanguas' neighbors often expressed that they do not feel they have major struggles daily. Some of them explained that they are accustomed to travelling 45km for groceries once a month; or that if they wanted to go to the cinema they just go to Soria because even when they live in the city they do not have the need to go every week. Despite the distance from Yanguas to the cities, Yanguas people do not feel isolated (Clip 1).

Clip 1: About loneliness and services in villages.

Also, some said that many services are adapted to the needs in the village, and in the case of public services, these are operative even though they are not profitable. For example, for a decade in the villages of Tierras Altas there has been a library-bus that allows residents access to free reading; or a truck that parks in the main square and that inside has an ATM to withdraw cash. There are also

ambulant groceries vendors: a truck that delivers fruit to your door, a refrigerated truck with frozen foods, fish, and dairy products, and a butcher who opens his shop twice a week in summer, and once in winter. Although there is no pharmacy in the town, there is one within a 15-minute drive that also does home delivery. A neighbour who was originally from Madrid even told me that in Yanguas the pharmacy service "is better than in Madrid, since here the pharmacist from San Pedro brings me the medicine to my house. In the city I had to go out to look for them and sometimes there was no open pharmacy nearby".

Also, mutual collaboration, or "collaborative survival" in Anna Tsing's terms (2015), between neighbors is a way to overcome the need of services. Communal living is, for better or for worse, unavoidable and to certain extent, necessary. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to romanticize community life in rural villages since quarrels, disagreements and discussions are common. As the local saying goes "small village, big hell". But it is undeniable that collective and individual collaborations are part of daily exchanges between neighbors. Many said that when they lived in the city, they didn't know almost any of their neighbors, even though more people lived in a single building than in Yanguas. One clear example of collective collaboration is the municipality initiative of recovering a traditional communal activity called "vereda"[7]. This tradition is for fixing and cleaning the village, and in the past, it was mandatory for all inhabitants to participate. Otherwise they had to pay a substitute or a fine. Now it is a way to offset the budget shortage as the municipality does not provide finance for street cleaners. It is not obligatory anymore and has turned to be a kind of event, since kids, adults and even senior members gather. After finishing they all have a meal or a drink as a means of repayment for the support.

Nonetheless, this apparent amenity must be taken with a grain of salt. The fact that people who live in the village have accepted certain limitations does not mean that the neighbours do not aspire to bring services closer. Particularly to not lose services that previously existed. Which is the case of medical offices that run a risk of disappearing in most towns as administrations are closing villages small doctor's offices in order to centralize them. In this process of loss, those who suffer the most are the elderly. Both because they witnessed the sudden decrease in assistance, and because of their mobility

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[7] Watch 21:42 – 24:16 in the film to see an observational scene of a *vereda*. Note that the *vereda* may have multiple purposes, in this case was for trimming the trees.

limitations; as well as their need for close medical assistance, making them an especially sensitive group to depopulation. Furthermore, whether these services can be supplanted by alternative options or not, there is a negative perception when a service is lost within the town. Regardless of whether it was deficient, there were many or few people in the towns, or the same service exists in the town.

# Second chapter (livelihood)

2.1 On the livelihood hunt

Life in Yanguas has radically changed compared to 60 years ago. Homes now have central heating, electricity, running water, and telecommunications such as internet. Main roads (for the most part) are in good shape and under continuous maintenance, even under snowstorms. After this material change, cultural needs are also different. There are still some not so old people who insist that "a lot has changed in a short time." A 60-year-old woman fondly recalled going to the river to wash clothes (which was an activity she liked), but at the same time, her biggest dream was to have a water tap at home. Running water arrived in 1983. Until then, people threw the waste into the henhouse and drank the water from the town spring. Another woman who came from Madrid, but whose family comes from Yanguas, also commented that when she built her house in Yanguas, her grandmother complained because she wanted to install heating in her house. "That way, you won't be able to cure your chorizos," he replied since the house must be cold so that the chorizos do not rot. So, if now living in a town is not so far from life in the city in some respects, why is it still difficult for the population to take root?

The answer is evident to many: There is not enough work. Cities grow because they are more profitable than villages. People and resources are centralized, transport and healthcare services are more profitable because of the high demand. Young people are more likely to have a specialized professional career in cities. There are more job opportunities in different labor sectors, and salaries are higher. Some academics even say that cities are "sinks" of talent since they gather most of the academic offer for young students (González-Leonardo et al., 2019). In summary, anyone could speak of depopulation only by talking about overpopulation in cities.

At present, the population of Yanguas is made up mostly of migrant families (national and international) who want to live in the countryside. The reasons are various, from leaving the city's job insecurity during the economic crisis to seeking a more relaxed, independent way of life with fewer expenses. Many of

those who come to Yanguas contacted the city council through associations dedicated to relocating families to villages inside the "empty Spain". They explained to me that this makes Yanguas a unique place in Tierras Altas since thanks to this initiative, it has managed to settle in less than a decade more than double its population. However, getting a job in this environment is not an easy task, and some are unable to create a livelihood for various reasons. For example, a couple of taxi drivers from Barcelona settled with their children in a town near Yanguas seeking escape from the urban hustle, economic pressure and rising cost of housing. They contacted the local council through a Facebook group dedicated to repopulating the "empty Spain" with families. They hoped to "dedicate themselves to taking care of goats or something similar", but they realized that they lacked many resources like knowledge, lands, and a concrete project. Even though it is an "empty" environment of people, the resources are not entirely accessible as they believed. Faced with these difficulties, the only way out they found was to work in a city 60km away (an hour's drive). It is not an isolated case, and many who, even though they have the desire to live in Tierras Altas, cannot carry it out.

An interlocutor explained that he had witnessed many people who had to leave Yanguas because they could not adapt to these living conditions. Success largely depends on each individual or family's ability to access the resources and capital necessary to be able to undertake in rural areas. A clear example is agriculture and livestock farming since it is tough for an outsider to join this labor market. Being able to undertake a role in one of these sectors requires a series of very specific capitals that are usually shared only between family members. It starts with land, economic investment and other physical capital such as tractors or tools and cultural and social capital, as key contacts and professional knowledge shared between parents and children. For example, in agriculture, access to farmland is very limited since, after depopulation, only a few families own the land nearby. In Yanguas, there is only one farmer family, and they cultivate grains such as wheat, barley, or oats to manufacture animal feed. They are the ones who own all the land of the municipality. Its owner must also reconcile this work with his profession as a taxi driver in Zaragoza, the city where his family resides most of the year.
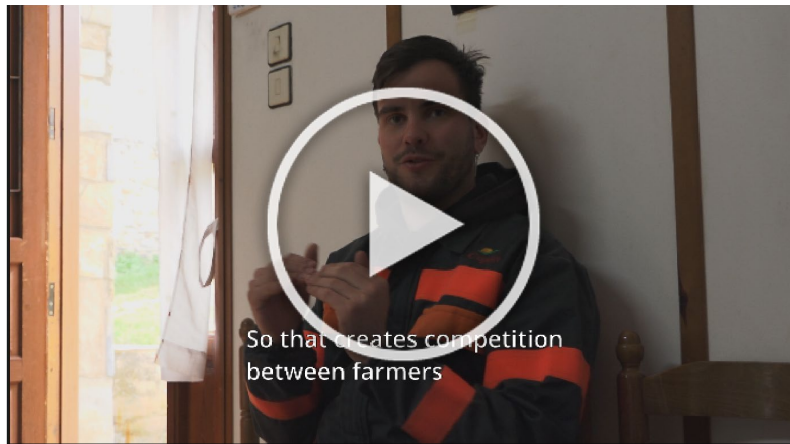
Clip 2: Farmers' struggles

Farming, and especially shepherding, are in decay in the area. In the past, professions that provided jobs for almost 600 people in Yanguas no longer have enough capacity to retain the population. On the one hand, fewer families own the resources; secondly, it is necessary to produce more to earn enough to live. Livestock farmers can no longer earn a living from their work and are dependent on the CAP grant[8] (Clip 2). In this scenario, older extensive practices such as shepherding tend to disappear, while other less sustainable but more profitable arise (as the intensive pork farms). Some people even said that some villages at Soria were empty since factory farming is not compatible with a sustainable life. Therefore, there is a dual problem that traditional sources of income are limited, and the only way to provide work is through the industrialization of the farm sector. This situation corroborates the theory of Vicente Pinilla and Fernando Collantes that the labor problem during depopulation at the end of the 20th century is that work in rural areas was never diversified (2011; 2019).

However, more recently, tourism has generated another way of relating to the environment as an income source. In a small article in a provincial newspaper about villages that "survive" depopulation, Yanguas is mentioned. With the title of "Yanguas: the rebirth of a tourist town"[9] the article briefly explores the reasons for the population growth (about 25 new neighbors in recent years) and attributes it to tourism. According to the mayor's data, 75% of its inhabitants are contributors, there are eight

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[8] CAP stands for "Common Agricultural Policy".

[9] Link to the new: www.sorianoticias.com/noticia/2020-03-02-pueblos-que-sobre-viven-65757 . Note that for some reason the number of inhabitants in Yanguas is wrong. It is perhaps a journalist's mistake.

children and only five retirees, and the leading cause points to tourism as a source of income. Due to the charm of the town and its historical heritage and the natural environment, the town in recent years has had an economic increase based on its environment. This statement is true to a certain extent since many jobs carried out in Yanguas have a direct or indirect relationship with the environment's recreational use. Rural tourism is a recent phenomenon and didn't appear in Yanguas until a decade ago. Towns like Yanguas that have some added value or attraction can opt for this option. Even so, even those who make a living from tourism do not enjoy complete stability since they depend on the summer season, while in the winter months, income may be minimal. Nor is there enough flow of tourists to employ much more population. Also, it must be considered that many people who own homes in Yanguas perceive tourism as a threat to the locals' well-being and tranquility.

For this reason, everything indicates that the sources of income in Yanguas are limited in quantity and variety. However, it is crucial to make a clarification: when I asked about work in Tierras Altas, some people said that there are jobs available, but the problem is that it is not the type of work that everyone likes (especially people raised in the city). The local chorizo factory director explained that more than half of its employees (about 100) are immigrants since "Spanish people are not interested in that kind of work." This information surprised me, I was always told that there were no jobs in Tierras Altas, so the people had to leave the villages for the lack of "any" job opportunity. The role of migration by them is fundamental to explain how some peoples manage to reverse the demographic decline. However, this migration is not economic since its general profile moves to the rural environment to obtain non-economic benefits. Some choose to sacrifice some of the financial gain and professional development for a quieter, healthier, lower-cost life, as well as a more favorable place to raise children. After a short trial period, others give up because they realize that the advantages did not outweigh the shortcomings of what they could get in the cities. The third group of people of this classification lives are pivoting between the rural and the urban, adapting their work with their second residence in the town. For them, internet access is increasingly important, since there will be an increase in teleworkers who decide to locate their first residence in the countryside, even if their livelihood comes from the city. Furthermore, finally, traditional jobs related to the direct exploitation of natural resources are no longer enough. It has become somewhat precarious due to challenging market prices and pressures on small farmers and farmers.

2.2 Precarious shepherding (Ethnographic vignette)

One of the reasons I decided to go to Yanguas for the fieldwork work was to meet a family of young shepherds from an eastern European country. It was suggested that I should contact them because they restored shepherding in Yanguas, which disappeared more than twenty years previous. Also, because migrants have a role in repopulation that is often not recognized. They are part of a social diversity that is often not sufficiently visible.

During the fieldwork, I accompanied Vasile and Michaela[10] numerous times in their daily work, and they explained to me the difficulties that foreign immigrants face if they want to settle in rural Spain. Vasile and Michaela met in Madrid, he worked as a plumber and she as a nurse in a nursing home, but they decided to start a livestock project that was Vasile's dream. They were doing quite well in the city, and they had no shortage of money because Michaela had higher education and a steady job; and so was Vasile, as he was able to make a lot of money. For this reason, their case is not different from that of other migrants who decide to go to rural areas for reasons that are not economic. They knew they were going to earn less, and it was a tough decision. Still, Michaela feels that they left the city behind, sacrificing a comfortable quality of life. In fact, at first Michaela planned to work in the residence of San Pedro Manrique (capital of the Highlands), but after a year when Vasile fell ill, she began to take care of the sheep as well. Neither he nor she had previous experience and didn't come from a family devoted to sheep, although Vasile grew up in a Carpathian village.

Today they affirm that they are more relaxed and keep the sheep in order, but at first it was terrible. The sheep were scattered throughout the mountain, and problems piled up because they lacked the knowledge for handling them correctly. Some people even said that this temporarily attracted wolves from the mountain for the first time in a very long time. They admit that they thought it would be easier, but the difficulties accumulated before they had even started. The first thing was to find a village with available land and neighbours who did not care if foreign migrants settled there. This task was almost impossible. They explained that although the villages are empty, the local people are usually very reluctant to let an outsider take advantage of local resources. Especially if they are immigrants from

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[10] Names have been anonymized.

Eastern Europe. After searching in three different provinces, they found Yanguas, where the previous mayor offered to rent them some precarious warehouses and some lands that belonged to the council. However, even if they had some savings, they soon realized that they lacked the necessary capital to maintain their livelihoods sustainably.

They presented a project to the bank to apply for a rural development grant for new entrepreneurs. They had accepted the credit, but just the day before they received the money, the bank backed down for some reason, and they had already bought the sheep. They found themselves in an extreme situation because they still depended on the savings from their work in the city. They needed to pay for pasture, tools, and a place to shelter the sheep. With three children, they had to live with the mayor and his father in his home. There were no rental houses, and the houses for sale were too expensive or neglected. They didn't have enough money to get ahead, and it took a long time for them to make any profit. The main problem with extensive shepherding is that it is not profitable because of market prices and production delocalization. For each lamb they get paid only forty euros (at normal market rates), and for an old sheep only ten. And it is even worse for wool, since they must pay 2000 euros to the shearers and only get five hundred euros back (if the middlemen want the wool, otherwise they do not get any money). Therefore, shepherds live on the European subsidy from the CAP and not on what they sell, making them feel that they live on charity. For this reason, from an economic standpoint, shepherds' livelihood is very precarious. Vasile told me that there were years when he couldn't even buy his children's books for school.

Even so, Vasile and Michaela received help from the few shepherds scattered around Tierras Altas, and they learned their professional secrets from them. However, almost all stock breeders in the Tierras Altas are single or familyless men who have inherited their forefathers' knowledge. Vasile and Michaela are an anomaly in that world. Firstly, they are an oddity because they are a couple with a family, and secondly, because Michaela is a shepherd woman. One of the reasons there are few pastors with families is that it is very hard to combine work with childcare. Also, gender and the division of labor is decisive. They are also an exception because they are the only shepherds who do not own land since it is normal for someone to become a pastor by generational turnover and inheriting any material asset. Not having this material capital (land, sheep, dogs, warehouses) is a huge limitation because herding

becomes harder. Without land, shepherds must be much more careful not to enter private land, farms, or hunting grounds. Sometimes they even must cross impassable stretches to reach free pastures[11].

One day, I was at the bar chatting with Michaela when a couple of tourists told them they had seen a sheep with her lamb chased by dogs. It was hunting season, and it happened that some dogs had left the hunting ground towards the *dehesa*[12] where they keep the herd. When we arrived, we found some dogs jumping around an injured sheep, and the lamb had disappeared. After chasing the dogs away, Michaela called the *Guardia Civil*[13] and waited for them to come but did not appear in the day. She said she preferred to believe that it was hunting season and police were not enough. It was not the first time the hunting dogs had killed their sheep as the small land they rent is adjacent to the hunting ground. A few years back, some hunters from another village killed a sheep. They negotiated an agreement and decided not to report the police, but the hunters would pay them with their insurance. They never received the money but didn't want to report them to the police. They think that as they are Romanians, they need to be careful not to provoke locals.

Today finances are more stable, although they still do not earn according to their daily work. Nor do they know if they will be able to live off from shepherding for their entire lives, or if there will be another village that will give them more facilities and resources to live and work. Michaela doesn't know whether she feels happy living as a shepherd because it is tough and tiring, and sometimes she misses the ease of living in the city. But at the same time, she says that she feels challenged by her work and stoically moves on. Besides, the two of them, with their sheep, do the unpaid labor of clearing the fields

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[11] Watch 14:32-17:00. In this scene I used footages of Michaela crossing a pine trees plantation. It is a rough route but she had to pass through that stretch of land since lacked of a better way to navigate around cultivation fields. It would be much easier for her if she owns the lands or the crops are fenced.

[12] The *dehesa* is a forest and pasture anthropogenic ecosystem of the Iberian Peninsula. These ecosystems dates to the wars between Muslims and Christians and is still used in a few areas of Spain (mostly in Extremadura). Its purpose was to enclose the herd for feeding and security reasons.

[13] One of the two Spanish national police force. The *Guardia Civil* is military in nature.

from the undergrowth, which is beneficial for agriculture. The only real reason that keeps them working under these conditions is to live in Yanguas[14].

On the one hand, they feel very integrated into the small community. The children have grown up in this town and have their friends here, while they also do a lot of social life with their neighbors. Also, they like the environment and living in nature, and after several years they believe that they would not know how to live in the city again. However, shepherds as they are a becoming a rare minority because when they started the project there were in Spain 21.000 shepherds, now (according to them) has reduced to the half. The case of Vasile and Michaela reflects the dilemma that the people of Tierras Altas face, but also to the extent of Spain.

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[14] Watch 2:30-3:47 in the film. In this fragment is clearly explained the city-village dichotomy in terms of personal considerations on livelihood.

Third chapter (infrastructures)

3.1 Infrastructure of depopulation

On March 31, 2019, some 100,000 people gathered in Madrid to demonstrate for the lack of institutional attention to the depopulated provinces. This demonstration was called "the revolt of empty Spain" and two activist groups organized it (*Soria ¡Ya!* And *Teruel Existe*[15]) dedicated to fighting against depopulation in Soria and Teruel. The protest's objective was to highlight the presumed lack of interest of the government in fighting against depopulation and ultimately sign with it a "state pact for repopulation". This agreement sought the government's commitment to distribute investment based on the territory and not on each province's resident population. In order to achieve this territorial rebalancing, the protestors requested more investment for the construction of infrastructures (road, rail, telecommunications, and industrial[16]). In both Soria and Teruel, infrastructure has been a central issue in the depopulation debate. Since 2004 the activist group *Soria ¡Ya!* has organized several "slow marches"[17] to demonstrate against the slow pace of the construction projects of the A-11 highway. The A-11 highway is called the "Duero highway" because it connects Soria with Portugal and is nicknamed by this activist group as the "highway of shame" since it has not been completed for 20 years. The argument is that these infrastructures would allow better connectivity between Soria and other more populated provinces. They affirm that these infrastructures are necessary to promote investment in the province allowing new companies to establish there and thus achieve repopulation. Therefore, from this point of view, the lack of infrastructure is a cause of depopulation.

Infrastructure has become a recurring theme when discussing empty villages' development since villages are supposed to be isolated because of precarious roads. However, the truth is that infrastructure construction does not always bring benefits to smaller settlements. Luis J. Martín (2019) questions that infrastructures put a stop to demographic decline. In a brief demographic study of fifty villages related

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[15] The name of these two activists group translate as "Soria Now!" and "Teruel exists"

[16] Due to the word-limits I focus solely in road infrastructure.

[17] Here is a slow marches protest video made by an attendant: www.vimeo.com/355875876. The aim of the protest was to drive a long caravan at the minimum road's speed limit.

to highway communication routes, he found out that no benefit in repopulation happened. On the contrary, the villages kept shrinking, and they lost around 25% of their population in twenty years. He suggests that construction of highways serves to create fast access between cities at the cost of generating harmful effects to small municipalities that may remain isolated. He even questions that Spain has a "lack of road infrastructure" since it is the European Union country with more highway kilometers with 15,000 km (surprisingly, the third country in the world after China and the United States).

For example, on the Zamora's section of the A-11 highway, the construction of the A-11 separated the two villages of Villaflor and Villalcampo. The Villaflor Neighborhood Association presented an allegation to the Ministry of Development asking for constructing a bridge over the highway since both towns were isolated from each other. This was a problem for villages, since both villages were closely linked, and Villaflor's neighbors frequently traveled to Villalcampo to go to the bar, the pharmacy, or to use other services that they do not have[18].

This critical analysis of the sustainability of infrastructure in villages is a minority in media and academics. It can be said that infrastructure is in the DNA of the narrative about empty Spain. This rural development vision suggests that villages are empty because they are inaccessible, far from the reference point that cities offer. Nonetheless, this analysis does not exclude the importance of the villages being well communicated, the roads being safe, or having good telecommunications services, among other infrastructure-related issues. However, it is necessary to question the extent to which certain infrastructure projects may have a negative impact on villages (Clip 3).

3.2 The Yanguas' detour

Two years ago, the Enciso dam construction was carried out, which is one of the largest dams in Europe and is partly within Yanguas' territory. The government and other construction companies invested 100 million Euros of public money to this dam created for irrigating 6000 hectares of La Rioja. This dam was poorly received by the people who lived in the town that exists just below its walls since it is a seismic

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[18] This new explains the incident: www.laopiniondezamora.es/comarcas/2019/03/07/fomento-descarta-viaducto-autovia-11-1279601.html

zone and due to the environmental impact on the valley. It is said that, in case of bursting, the inhabitants of Enciso would have barely half a minute to get to safety. Years ago, a local seer had predicted three prophecies, and one of them was that Enciso would one day wake up underwater. Even so, after two decades of inactivity in the construction, the dam began to be built again. At first, they promised that it would employ a hundred people and bring money to the restaurants and hostels that offered services to the builders. However, some people say that those expectations were too optimistic.

From Enciso, the dam has a length of some four kilometers within the Arnedo Valley, so the environmental impact was quite large. The waters submerged a large part of a holm oak forest, an uninhabited town called Las Ruedas de Enciso, and even some ichnites (fossil dinosaur fossils). The old road would also be underwater, so a wider road between Enciso and Yanguas was built over the old one. However, planners did not continue expanding the road until Yanguas, even though part of the dam was inside the municipality. Since planners didn't extend it to Yanguas, three kilometers of the old road remained without renovation. People from Yanguas said that it did not make sense that the government made a millionaire investment and then left a section in such bad condition. Yanguas' council claimed it from the province's government, and it responded that they would accept to build the remaining kilometers until Yanguas but with the condition of creating a detour surrounding Yanguas. The justification was to prevent fast vehicles passing through the village. The road detour would prevent the vehicles from getting inside the village and slow down, making the village safer for pedestrians. Although some people maintain that it is done in favor of the cargo carriers that transit from Soria's capital to La Rioja, thus creating a connection with the N-111 motorway.

Despite that, the planning of this detour outside Yanguas has created opposite positions among its inhabitants. Those neighbors in favor affirm that the village needs good communication and that a better road would make access to Yanguas more comfortable. The external turnoff would also provide more security to the families since the only road passes through a residential street. And it is right that the road is not entirely safe because there is practically no margin between the houses and the asphalt, and there could be an accident. One neighbor who comes only in summer said that, since vehicles will not travel this street, it would be a great idea to transform it into a pedestrian street for the neighbours to enjoy.

On the other hand, those against this infrastructure do not deny that it is necessary to improve the road between the dam and Yanguas. However, the detour would harm the village's economy and its natural

environment. Many say that if an external deviation is made, people will pass less through the town, affecting the few businesses that depend on this flow of people. Also, fewer people would discover the village and visit it since it would be less visible. Also, they justify that expanding the road between the dam and Yanguas is a matter of comfort rather than a basic need. Moreover, instead of making a road detour, some suggest using alternative traffic controls such as automatic traffic lights.

Furthermore, the road would run through the *dehesa* that the municipality rents for local shepherds (Michaela and Vasile). The *dehesa* is naturally delimited by the orography and the river, so the presence of the road within that space would endanger the sheep, and the shepherds will have to be more vigilant. The road's pass through the *dehesa* also has an environmental and landscape implication, since there are protected species around. In fact, to build the road, three bridges must be built over the river Cidacos, a conservation area of the European Natura 2000 Network. Therefore, some people believe that planners do not regard this natural environment worthwhile (Clip 4).

The planification of this road is yet in progress, and yet is not sure whether it will help the village or not in the long term. However, although there is an open debate about the road turnoff, this project has gone unnoticed and neighbors of Yanguas do not have a clear idea of who the decision-makers are. Like many other rural development projects related to the construction of infrastructures, the residents of Yanguas do not have the tools to make critical decisions in their environment. A neighbor said that large amounts of money are often invested in villages, but it is not known where this money comes from or who are involved. Some pointed out that this type of intervention is usually justified by depopulation, but the people of the towns are never asked. The Yanguas variant is a small example of how some rural development and intervention projects are designed without considering the long-term impact. This affects the inhabitants' ability to access and make use of resources, as well as the capacity for self-management and sovereignty.

Clip 3: Infrastructure and depopulation   Clip 4: What's left of the *dehesa*?

Conclusion

The depopulation of the Spanish territories left an indelible scar on society. The idea that there is an empty Spain projects a precarious picture of its territorial system. This portrait of empty villages represents the failure of a society that did not value traditional culture and the older people who embody it. For decades depopulation had not been a visible problem for society, but for the people who were left alone in these places. Now, years after the rural exodus took place, the urban population has once again looked to the towns as that bucolic, but poor place that must be protected. Many journalists and other academics in fact say that the "empty Spain" continues in the process of emptiness and degradation, however, in Tierras Altas, depopulation is perceived in a different way. For the inhabitants of this region, depopulation seems to be a distant event, which occurred several decades ago, and which set the precedents for a changing way of life. In fact, it can be questioned that there is still a demographic decline since in total numbers the population in rural Spain has increased in the last decade, although its distribution has not been homogenous (Pinilla and Collantes 2019: 214; del Pino Artacho and Camarero 2017).

The vision from within that Spain, which is not empty, collides with the one that is imagined from the cities. For many people who live in these places, depopulation is not a problem. In fact, many people who live year-round in Tierras Altas do not want the village to heavily increase its population. Even in the summertime many villagers are looking forward to the tourists and temporary residents leaving the villages to restore the normality. That is, to come back to the tranquility of a village where few people live, only the people they need to live. Most of the people who live in depopulated settlements do not feel alone or isolated, even some who live completely alone feel that their life is perfect as it is. For outsiders who visit these villages with sorrow, the "emptiness", as an ontological reality (Dzenovska 2020), takes on a tragic and precarious meaning, while for the locals it is different.

The precarious representations from the prism of depopulation can sometimes hide other realities (both positive and negative). The "politics of precarity" (Millar 2017) does not contemplate the possibility that life in a depopulated village might be favorable. Cases such as that of Yanguas where a certain stability has been achieved regardless of the low population density. This view on precarity sometimes creates rejection because the inhabitants feel that life in villages is often misrepresented or biased.

However, it is important to note that the way people live in villages has probably changed forever. In the past villages were constructed for fulfilling specific environmental and cultural needs that have not prevailed until the present. Even so, people continue to inhabit these locations although no longer with a survival function, but they have been given new uses according to the needs of the new settlers. At present, the way of living in space is more mobile, providing new life possibilities in villages that are not permanent. It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the rural from the urban, and it must be understood that the profile of its dwellers is more in line with what Luis Camarero (2017) calls "hybrid rurality". This social change has brought advantages and disadvantages, such as the fact that villages have become second homes or summer resorts. This social change has also made it more difficult for new rural settlers to buy or even rent a residence, even though the houses are empty for most time of the year.

On the other hand, people who have a livelihood in the villages must face other difficulties. The access to resources and way administrations manage them, greatly influences how precarity is lived in each family. Villages of Tierras Altas lack of job, but mostly specialized jobs, which makes the region less appealing for young generations. And in the case of farming activities, it is clearer as market prices makes them a distinctive case of labour precarity. However, a new tendency of new rural settlers has appeared in that social landscape, providing new future perspectives of demography and new ways of perceiving that "empty Spain" by its positive traits. For this reason, it is important that sustainable development plans consider the diversity of experiences and profiles of temporary and permanent residents.

The case of the creation of large infrastructures as an engine for promoting repopulation is especially sensitive. As in the case of the Yanguas' road detour, it is crucial to consider what impact these plans have on the natural, financial, cultural and social capital of the local inhabitants in the long-term. In Soria, many of the projects are highly influenced by the idea of repopulating the province. This often leads to justify multi-million-euros investments that generate benefits for only some stakeholders, even when they have a very high environmental cost. These developmental rationalities, I maintain, are not sustainable for conservation of the environment itself, nor for the benefit of the lives and livelihoods of

local people[19]. Why not considering the fields, rivers and hills as "green infrastructures" (Benedict et al. 2016; Mell 2017) needed for social reproduction, sources of livelihood and natural conservation? While other European countries are fostering conservation and nature-based solutions, in the context of Soria local governments and stakeholders want to carry out a "reindustrialization" for the sake of repopulating the province. Developing a better future for villages should consist of localized projects, with finalist funds so that the towns are able to better self-manage their resources.

From this research's findings can be concluded that living and working in a village is increasingly difficult although is becoming desirable. Henri Lefebvre wrote in 1968 about the "right to the city" portraying exactly the other face of rural depopulation during industrialization, but perhaps now we might talk about the "right to the village" as the right to live and work in a village before it becomes a privilege solely for well-off families that can afford it. I suggest that more attention should be put on these spaces since they are crossroads between the past and future. Instead of looking at the villages as passive agents, it should be regarded as dynamic locations permeable to large-scale changes in society and new forms of social inequality that are yet to come.

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[19] It is especially notable the ecological disaster of the *Ciudad del Medio Ambiente* (City of the Environment), a village in the peri-urban area of the capital of Soria. The creation of the CME is a millionaire mega structure (52 million euros) on the banks of the Duero River for the preservation of the environment, but for business purposes. Paradoxically, the pharaonic concrete structure was illegally built on a protected conservation area and its construction was stopped by court order. This year, after a decade immobilized, an aeronautical company managed to get a project subsidized to take advantage of its infrastructure and build an airfield for aircraft maintenance.

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