

ALEXIS SANCHO REINOSO

Austrian Institute for Sustainable Development (ÖIN), Vienna

“Ruralise the urban, urbanise the rural”. Geography and Spatial Planning dealing with the “empty Spain”

In this paper a set of personal thoughts on the past, present and future of rural Spain in the general framework of rural-urban linkages is presented. The trigger of these thoughts is Sergio del Molino’s book *La España vacía. Viaje por un país que nunca existió*. This title can be translated into English as follows: “Empty Spain. Trip through a country that never existed”. On the basis of some of the main (negative) stereotypes that one has traditionally associated to the “deep” rural Spain, the author brilliantly develops his main argument: namely, that large extensions of the Spanish territory (historically being extremely sparsely populated areas -hence the qualifier “empty”) are currently forgotten after centuries of being neglected; therefore, countless places have been abandoned and remain solely as a state of mind, just as if they would never existed.

Even though the book is definitely not a factual one (it rather belongs to travel literature, containing continuous references to the Spanish literature and film history), we do think that it is a valuable contribution to enrich the debates within disciplines such as Geography and Spatial Planning. Del Molino’s provocative discourse addresses among others the following questions, which are key to understand Spain’s history and -not least- to identify a series of challenges this country is inevitably facing: 1) What makes the Spanish interior a unique case in Europe? 2) Why have the Spanish authorities failed to tackle rural decline? 3) What are the ultimately reasons for the Spanish rural areas’ high dependency on urban regions, both in terms of power and capacity of creating own narratives? 4) How can rural-urban relationships (being one

vital element for a balanced and coherent territorial development) be reconsidered in Spain? In this paper these four questions are addressed with arguments from the above mentioned disciplines. The ultimate aim is to contribute to a dialog between scientific and non-scientific knowledge, since only transdisciplinary approaches will allow us to tackle wicked problems of spatial nature in the 21st century.

1. WHEREAS RURAL SPAIN IS AN HETEROGENEOUS TERRITORY, THE GENUINE “EMPTY” SPAIN IS *LA MESA*. The Spanish inner plateau (called *La Meseta* as a metaphor of the idea of “table”) is an extraordinary vast plain (400,000 km² aprox.) with a high average altitude (about 600 masl) and an average population density of only 25 inhab/km². These figures depict an exceptional geographical region within Europe and, of course, within the Iberian Peninsula. Not surprisingly, *La Meseta* (and specifically Castile as the heart of this physical unit) has been depicted as the quintessential Spanish landscape from *El Quijote* on, including the exceptional literature of the so-called “generation of 1898”. This fact somehow inspires Del Molino to locate his “empty Spain” in this region. Since beyond the outer borders of *La Meseta* lies an extraordinary diverse territory that shares relatively few aspects with the Spanish interior. The only exception to this might be Aragon. This region can be compared to Castile on the basis of some central common features such as having a large capital city situated in the middle of their territory (Zaragoza and Madrid, respectively) and surrounded by a truly “demographic desert”. In ad-

dition, both regions are demarcated by large mountain ranges having suffered long-term depopulation processes (the central section of the Pyrenees and the Cantabrian Mountains, respectively).

2. THE RECENT HISTORY HAS DECISIVELY CONTRIBUTED TO ERASE MOST DIFFERENCES WITHIN RURAL SPAIN AND, BY DOING SO, TO WIDEN THE GAP WITH THE REST OF EUROPE. Almost every rural region in Spain experienced the so-called rural exodus in an intensive manner, particularly during the period 1959-1975, corresponding to the second phase of the fascist Franco's regime. The negative demographic evolution of numerous rural areas contributed to iron the manifold differences between them, so that one can actually argue that most of rural Spain has become a kind of synonym of Del Molino's idea of "empty Spain". And the bad news are that this process does not seem to have finished, since the Spanish population spatial concentration in urban areas is still increasing (Sempere Souvannavong 2014). In many cases the only remaining question is how long the last small and medium cities within rural regions will be able to keep their current demographic size.

Undoubtedly, the rural exodus occurred in many other rural areas of Western and Central Europe (not to mention Eastern Europe). Some of these areas (particularly mountain areas) have therefore experienced similar processes than in the Iberian Peninsula. Nevertheless, mountain regions are precisely the exception that proves the rule, since in Spain those areas in which dozens of villages being abandoned for quite a long time are the most frequent. In the Alps, to put an example, one can find some cases of peripheral regions (particularly in the Southern slope of the range); however, they represent rather an exception in the whole Alpine space, so there is no possible comparison with the situation in most Spanish mountain ranges.

3. SO FAR TOO LITTLE HAS BEEN DONE TO AVOID THIS CATASTROPHIC DEVELOPMENT, IN SPITE OF THE EARLY VALUABLE CONTRIBUTION OF THE RENAMED ENGINEER ILDEFONS CERDÀ. Ildefons Cerdà can be considered one of the most fascinating personalities of the Catalan and Spanish 19th Century. He belonged to the first generation of civil engineers in Spain and is considered to be the inventor of modern Urbanism (Soria y Puig 1999). Cerdà is commonly known as the author of the Barcelona extension (the so-called *Eixample*). Indeed, his city extension was truly revolutionary as it allowed Barcelona to become a new city for the new industrial era and the new

means of transport and communication channels. And not least: it managed to do so without renouncing to the intrinsic human dimension of the city. As a matter of fact, however, Cerdà did not trot the *Eixample* out; rather, it was the consequence of his previously published masterpiece: *The Teoría General de la Urbanización* —short: TGU—(or "general urbanisation theory"), published in 1859. What is particularly interesting is that during his whole life, Cerdà was obsessed with reconciling opposite terms such as urban and rural. It is by no means surprising that the motto "ruralise the urban, urbanise the rural" heads his TGU.

There is a number of reasons leading us to argue that almost 160 years after the publication of the TGU very few people and institutions have really taken Cerdà's lessons seriously in Spain, particularly those issues concerning rural-urban linkages. Herewith the recent development of the urbanisation process in rural areas is mentioned as an example. The consequence of the overcrowded urban areas after the rural exodus was the appearance of residential developments (ironically known as "urbanizaciones") in a massive scale, particularly in coastal regions. They represent an ill-fate attempt to implement E. Howard's garden city ideal without any harmonious master plan behind, often even without any accession to basic infrastructures and facilities. The last decades have not meant a trend reversal but on the contrary. The 1998 building act ("ley del suelo") fueled a sort of gold rush within the real estate sector leading to a huge bubble that eventually burst after the global financial crisis in 2007/08. As a result, residential developments (most of them unfinished and uninhabited) spread across the country, including the "empty Spain". This fact reinforces one of the main arguments of Del Molino, namely: rural Spain was always highly dependent on actors and driving forces of external character that often implemented short-term "monoculture" strategies (i.e. either tourism activities, agrarian intensification or real estate developments). Such circumstance may ultimately show an incapacity of creating own narratives and, on the other hand, it would explain why most rural areas have become a kind of "leisure backyard" for urban areas.

4. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE WORST CASE "EMPTY SPAIN". According to the above mentioned arguments, most Spanish rural areas are somehow the expression of a failing national project. Yet, precisely this fact makes the "empty Spain" an interesting "worst case" example from which many other areas in Europe or in the world might obtain valuable lessons. Herewith two

current trends are mentioned as example. The first one is the demographic change running in Europe, in particular population ageing processes in the countryside. The current debates on the future of rural areas in Europe should take seriously into account what has happened in Spain, where most rural areas have not managed to survive after decades of decline generated (at least partially) by lack of policies. Spain shows that doing nothing should not be an option and in this sense current discussions on how to cope with (inevitable) shrinking dynamics (what in the German-speaking countries is known as “Schrumpfung”) seem to be a pretty sensible approach. In my opinion, these discussions should incorporate alternative discourses about the idea of growth (which use to be more reasonable than the BAU approach). The second example is the exponential growth of megacities in the main urban regions of Latin America, Africa and Asia. While most of the efforts are focused to cope with the dramatic urban population growth (keyword: smart cities), very little attention is paid to the catastrophic consequences -in terms of e.g. loss of resilience- of massive land abandonment

processes as it is happening in large areas in Spain and in the whole Mediterranean basin. Forest fires are one of the most illustrative symptom of these perverse dynamics.

CONCLUSION: IS THIS ALL A QUESTION OF *HETERO-PHOBIA*? In his book’s preface, Del Molino unveil that he eventually understood the wicked relationship between urban and rural Spain when he was travelling across Wales. He came up with the word “heterophobia”, which -similarly to xenophobia- means nothing more than fear of those who are different. According to Del Molino, both the city and the countryside have created negative narratives of the opposite because of this underlying feeling. We argue that these fears might ultimately have prevented spatial planning from obtaining a wide recognition in Spain, since this practice demands tolerance and conciliatory attitudes. Following this argument, it is perhaps not by chance that personalities like I. Cerdà have been constantly neglected. Lastly, in my view Del Molino’s work challenges Spatial Planning, but also Geography to make further contributions in order to overcome *heterophobia*.