

Imaginaries, depopulation and deindustrialisation. The case of the Asturian Mining Areas

I. INTRODUCTION

Depopulation is a demographic process that consists of a decrease in the number of inhabitants in a place. It is a phenomenon with a long tradition in the Spanish case and the term “Empty Spain” has become an expression in popular use. The National Institute of Statistics of Spain (INE), in its last Population and Housing Census of 2021, provides important data on depopulation to reflect on. The data speaks of a situation with two dynamics. First, the rural exodus, a trend for sixty years. Second, depopulation due to deindustrialisation. An outstanding situation is that of the Principality of Asturias. Of the 20 municipalities registered by the INE in demographic loss, there are 8 that are on Asturian soil. Similarly, 7 of them occupy the top 8 positions: Cangas del Narcea, Aller, Lena, Valdés, San Martín del Rey Aurelio, Mieres and Langreo. This work seeks to study the empty Asturias in the sense of imaginaries and identity.

Two were the beginnings of this study. In 2004, Jorge Rivero worked on this question in his documentary *Nenyure* (2004) (the problem of identity in the post-industrial present). Likewise, on May 3, 2022, journalist Raquel Peláez wrote: “There is a very specific type of sadness that remains to live in places that were once prosperous and that are now depopulated and dying. The ‘emptying depression’ is a national problem that is not talked about, but it exists” [Pelaez, 2022]. The existence, or not, of this depression in the case of Asturias was the second beginning.

1. GOALS

The purpose of this work was to evaluate the repercussions that depopulation due to deindustrialisation has had on the construction of urban imaginaries, discourses and collective identities in the Asturian mining areas.

2. STATE OF THE ART

Studies of these characteristics have already been carried out in the English sphere. Despite the similarities, studies of this nature in Spain have tended to focus on other issues such as defending jobs. This trend has led to forgetting other approaches, such as the meaning of these closures in memory (in the sense of nostalgia and identity). This study wants to work on these considerations. Especially, the nostalgia about the “emptying depression” based on the work of Cowie (2003) in which the term “nostalgia for chimneys” is used (p. 23). Similar works exist in the Asturian example and are carried out by Alonso (2020), Fernández (2020) and Fernández (2022).

II. METHODOLOGY

The research was mixed and qualitative. The scope had a descriptive-comparative character on an exploratory basis. In addition, the methodological strategy used

followed the guidelines of the “grounded theory”. The fieldwork used research tools among which the method of observation in post-industrial spaces predominated. Subsequently, the semi-structured interview was used as the main tool for collecting opinion data. These were carried out face-to-face between January 30 and February 7, 2023. The interviews followed the conversation model, but with a structure in which questions of territory, architectural elements, and feelings were asked directly. The work methodology was made from two aspects: discourse analysis and the spatial question. The interviewees were shown three references: 1) a graph of the 2021 Population and Housing Census —INE—; 2) a fragment written by Raquel Peláez; 3) the documentary *Nenyure* (2004).

III. RESULTS

The results of the study are shown through three discursive lines. First, identity (spatial, work and patrimonial). The second is the speeches of the empty Asturias. Finally, the personal relationship with empty spaces.

1. THE EMPTY IDENTITY

The interviewees used the term *Cuencas Mineras* to refer to the Nalón area (from Laviana to Langreo) and Caudal (mainly Mieres). The speeches show an ambivalent character and combine the identity of the town with the identity of the city. The historical constitution of identity was created from the industrialisation of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. It is this process that works as an element of social cohesion, even after the closure of the industry.

In a spatial sense, there are structures and architectures linked to the industry (mining towers, cooling towers and mining towns) that function as urban centres of sentimental union and identity with the landscape and territory. Of the 90 elements mentioned as representative, only 8 are not directly linked to industrial heritage. However, these are read as “ruins” or examples of industrial heritage. After the analysis of the speeches, they seem to have lost an important part of their meaning. This question is related to an architectural imaginary built by disappeared urban elements. However, a high percentage of those interviewed said they continue to use these elements to build the spatial imagination in their day to day.

2. THE SPEECHES OF EMPTY ASTURIAS

96.6% of those surveyed said they understood the problem and 100% related the loss of population to de-industrialisation. The analysed speeches had feelings of longing, sadness and the impossibility of changing or improving the situation. In the same way, when asked if they had ever had a reflection of these characteristics, the results deserve to be exposed and analysed. 60% said they had “ever thought about it.” They confirmed that they usually reflect on the sentimental problem associated with the loss of population. Giving a name to the problem and structuring a complex discourse was the trigger for the change of perspective that some of the interviewees experienced during the interviews.

3. EMPTY SPACES

A total of 3 types of spaces have been selected through which to define the visual imaginary that creates the post-industrial landscape of Empty Asturias.

A) Lost spaces: those spaces or landscapes that remain in the collective imagination but that, currently, no longer exist. Its meaning seems to have outlived the infrastructure.

B) Spaces of nostalgia: spaces linked to identity and the memory of the industrial past. Spaces that have managed to avoid their evolution towards emptiness or ruin and have had a reconversion (in the physical, functional or imaginary sense).

C) Spaces of anger: Along with nostalgia and abandonment, anger at the situation experienced has been another of the resilience mechanisms. This trend has been detected in the analysis of spaces. These coincide with the presence of a feeling of deceit and fraud towards past generations. They are idolised and, at the same time, blamed for the post-industrial present.

80% of those interviewed say they are aware of living in a territory that is characterised by the existence of abandoned, deteriorated and ruined spaces. Only the towns of Mieres, La Felguera, El Entrego and Laviana (although with pejorative nuances) do not follow this trend. Similarly, the concept of ruin has a negative meaning as it is linked to “dangerous” and “dirty” spaces. Ultimately, although inhabiting the void has no positive implications, inhabiting the ruin is the worst possible situation.

CONCLUSION

The results show that deindustrialisation and depopulation in Asturias have had strong transformations in the lives of its inhabitants. The interviewees have shown a tendency to confuse and combine both terms. Likewise, it is shown that the population of mining areas is concerned about the phenomenon.

Three tendencies or types of reflection on the depopulation process have been found. First, escape and avoidance discourses that come from those who have emigrated to other areas. Second, resignation to the processes (both deindustrialisation and population loss). These changes are understood as inevitable within the global transformations in terms of production. Finally, a third group that has lived through the process from sadness. Depression has been found in a social sector that understands the process from the tragedy and the loss of work, business and

wealth. This taxonomy allows classifying dynamics on a continuous scale. This moves between simple nostalgia, reflective nostalgia and interpretive nostalgia. All the stories analysed are composed of feelings of nostalgia, hopelessness and frustration at different levels. In sense affective, the concept of mining areas and their social and political ideas are seen from the idealisation of a better past, but that will not return. Despite this, the identity components do not seem to have been lost and continue to function as elements of social cohesion in the population. The relationship with post-industrial remains has been carried out from the sentimental and identity angle. Although the industrial zones have ceased to be inhabited, they do form part of the centres of the urban and visual imaginaries.

Asturian mining areas continue to be mining without being. The only change is to have an identity that is only understood in the past.