

# THE ROUTLEDGE HISPANIC STUDIES COMPANION TO TWENTIETH AND TWENTY- FIRST CENTURY SPAIN

Ideas, Practices, Imaginings

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Twenty-First Century

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## RURAL SPAIN

### Social Landscapes at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century

*Luis Camarero, Jesús Oliva and Rosario Sampedro*

#### **The Rural World in Spain: One Hundred Years of Social Change**

Rural areas in Spain have become diversified and expanded from subsistence farming to non-agrarian, multi-functional and post-productive economies, giving rise to a “new rurality.” This transformation is the result of global socioeconomic trends, population movements, and changes related to the interconnection between rural and urban areas, which has had dramatic effects on the rural social structure.

In 1950, as European post-war construction began, Spain was still an agrarian society with almost half its active population working in the primary sector (agriculture, fishing, livestock, mining, etc.). In that year the agrarian population exceeded five million individuals, its historic maximum. Nowadays, it stands at less than 5% of Spain’s population (Working Population Survey – EPA). Rural areas also reached their highest demographic densities in the 1950s, with 29 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>, which was the moment when urban development began to take off. While the population density in rural areas had fallen by 20% to 23 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> by 2016, urban areas tripled their population density from 139 to 389 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup> during the same period. Urbanization and the decreasing role of agriculture in the economic and social life of rural communities dramatically reshaped the Spanish territory and transformed its social structure during the second half of the 20th century. Both phenomena have their origins in the modernization based firstly on the organization of economies of scale and secondly on the configuration of world economies.

As a result of these processes, at the start of the 2020s, the general panorama in Spain is that of a highly unequally distributed territory in terms of population. Most small villages are undergoing a severe process of decline in demographic and social terms, including ageing, masculinization, and loss of human and social capital. In recent years, the expression “la España vacía” [empty Spain] has become prevalent and reflects the regret and concern about this shrinking rural world that is experiencing a long-lasting depopulation process. The expression was taken from a successful journalistic essay published in 2016 and it has entered the world of politics and media.<sup>1</sup> Citizens’ organizations and social movements with a rural basis have transformed that expression into a new one: “The emptied Spain,”

*la España vaciada*. They want to stress that the decline of these rural areas is the result of political neglect. The emptied Spain is nowadays a political slogan used by these organizations which are seeking to restore first-class citizenship for rural inhabitants. Nevertheless, underlying this general situation, we can find many new and variegated processes that are changing the rural scene, including various kinds of population mobility, such as migration, commuting, and permanent displacements.

Population flows across Spain have intensified since the end of the 20th century, and these trends have significantly transformed the demographic potentiality and social composition of rural societies, as well as the local economies and labor markets. The empty Spain paradoxically coexists with dynamic and vibrant rural environments that are being profoundly transformed as the relations between rural and urban territories and populations become closer. The traditional urban-rural differentiation is dissolving, and, since the 1980s, the postmodern “cultural turn” has redefined the countryside as a good place to live. As Mormont stated, rurality becomes a semantic category useful to criticize the excesses of our development model and to articulate new demands for a better quality of life (21).

The resignification of the concept of “rurality” supports new activities and attracts new residents to small villages. However, it is the economic processes that have attracted a large foreign population to rural areas in recent years. The presence of people from other countries has considerably increased during the first decades of the 21st century, as labor immigration has become one of the most noteworthy trends of this new rurality. The sheer volume is remarkable, and their impact on the capacity of rural communities to survive in the long term is notable. Rural villages, in decline or otherwise, are no longer predominantly agrarian communities, and many face the challenge of becoming increasingly cosmopolitan communities. As Woods states in his article “Precarious Rural Cosmopolitanism,” a new “rural cosmopolitanism” is arising because rural communities are becoming more and more ethnically and culturally diverse. As a property of rural communities, “rural cosmopolitanism” is defined as “the collective practice of openness towards difference and diversity, hospitality towards others and conviviality” (Woods 166). Although the 2008 economic recession stopped the ongoing trends toward repopulation, diversity remains among the most remarkable characteristics of the new Spanish rurality.

### **The Big Change: From Peasant Societies to a Demographically Dismantled Modern Rurality**

The magnitude and importance of the changes experienced by rural Spain in recent decades can be better understood from the perspective of the high lack of mobility of Spanish society in the mid-20th century. At that time, a significant proportion of the population lived and worked in the same locality where they were born, and over three quarters of married couples consisted of residents from the same municipality (an average of 76% for the years 1950–60, National Statistics Institute 134). The prolonged autarky following the Spanish Civil War (1939–1959) and the archaic productive structure reinforced the country’s isolation and halted the development of urban society.

The importance of mobility to the territorial cohesion of the country was not adequately considered by Spanish politicians. The Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923–1930) designed an ambitious public works plan, which included improving secondary roads, establishing bus routes, and constructing over 5,000 kilometers of new roads. However, as Ferrando pointed out, projects such as the National Circuit Special Firm (1926) were meant

to promote elitist tourism able to attract foreign visitors rather than to guarantee territorial cohesion within the country (342–343). In Spain, as in other countries, rural policies were more oriented to the interests of business and to exploiting the rural resources (Woods, “Rural Geography” 161–169).

A clear example of the social and territorial disconnection of Spanish rural areas with the rest of the country, not to mention the rest of Europe, is the 1922 visit by King Alfonso XIII to Las Hurdes (a remote and rural part of Extremadura) at the invitation of the famous Dr. Marañón. In that region near the Portuguese border, which at that time was only accessible by horse, the king discovered the horrors of rural poverty (Cantero 192). The circumstances that the doctor described in his public health report were also the subject of Luís Buñuel’s pseudo-documentary *Land Without Bread* (1932). While Buñuel exaggerated several aspects of life in the region, there was enough truth in it to provoke the censorship of the film on the grounds that it defamed the Spanish people.

Once the republican and progressive Land Reform Law of 1932 was thrown out by the Franco dictatorship, and the social inequalities that it had tried to address were silenced, the regime succeeded in freezing rural society into a kind of medieval austerity that lasted the two decades of the post-war autarky period. This was the society photographed by Eugene Smith in 1950 for *Life* magazine for his report “Spanish Village” in which he underscored that, “it [rural Spain] lives in ancient poverty and faith.”

The regime’s gradual opening to international tourism and foreign investment (National City Bank, USA credits), as well as its incorporation into international bodies (IMF, OECD, GATT) facilitated a supervised economic liberalization (National Plan of Economic Stabilization, 1959). The Development Plans (1963–1975) brought about a modernization that accelerated Rostow’s stages of economic growth to reach the mass consumption society stage (Rostow 4–16). The developmentalism (“desarrollismo”) was carried out with some important social costs and territorial imbalances (Siguán 19–42). During the 20th century, the government encouraged a development model based on the localized concentration of resources, energy, labor, knowledge, and consumers. The so-called economies of agglomeration allowed a higher speed of capital accumulation by cost reduction due to the proximity and localized concentration of supply (Rodríguez-Pose 6). This new model emerged forcefully in Spain after the conclusion of the post-war autarky period,<sup>2</sup> and it sparked the intensive migration of the rural population to urban, industrial centers. In the mid-1950s the borders were opened to Central Europe, and in the 1960s, after the National Plan of Economic stabilization, the flows of migration were also directed towards the emerging metropolitan service centers within the country, such as Madrid, Barcelona, and Bilbao.

The rural exodus and the drastic decline of agrarian activity have combined to cause a socio-territorial change in Spain. The colossal movement of the population from the country to the city placed rural prospective demographics at serious risk. In 1950, 11 million people lived in villages with fewer than 2,000 inhabitants; between 1950 and 1970 more than 3.7 million people emigrated to the cities, so that one in three rural inhabitants left the countryside (Camarero, “Del éxodo” 193–196). The generations that moved to the city became the parents of the Spanish baby boom. The consumer and cultural industries propelled this very real exodus via an ideology of urban modernity opposed to rural backwardness. This change has been interpreted as a necessary modernization. The rural peasant population constituted a burden for the improvement of agrarian production; the abundance of manual workers undermined opportunities for mechanization and the incorporation of technology, whereas it was a resource for the growth in urban, industrial economies.

Rural manual workers were freed up and food production became more economical. Thus, this process enabled the low salaries that fueled urban growth. However, as Etxezarreta has highlighted, the modernization of agriculture also led to its incorporation into global agri-food chains and to the global process of capital accumulation (16–22).

During the second half of the 20th century, a change occurred in agriculture that displaced its orientation from the direct consumption of food to the production of raw materials for transformation processes (Abad and Naredo 89). This process not only reduced agrarian activity but also transformed its orientation from family businesses to a salary-based one relying progressively on foreign manual labor, thereby achieving successful agriculture without the participation of the local inhabitants (Camarero, “Trabajadores” 184–186).

At the end of the 1970s the process of agricultural decline in rural areas had become evident, as agricultural employment was below 20% and had fallen by over 40% when compared to the numbers for 1950 (see Figure 3.1). The 1973 oil crisis slowed urban growth and the rural exodus drastically reduced its intensity (see Figure 3.2). From the mid-1970s to the late 1980s, during the political transition from dictatorship to democracy, Spain’s youth bore the brunt of the rural exodus. Rural migrants sought opportunities in education and access to skilled jobs, feeding a selective migration process both generationally and in terms of gender. In a clear break with the traditional patriarchy associated with family agriculture, it was mainly young girls who went to the urban centers to study and work in the service economy (Sampedro 526–530).

The cumulative impact of the transformations over the last few decades has produced a panorama of considerable ageing (near a quarter of those who live in towns with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants are aged over 70),<sup>3</sup> as well as masculinization in rural areas (Camarero and Sampedro, “Exploring Female” 190). There is also a heavy dependence on extra-local labor markets (Camarero and Oliva, “Understanding Rural” 102).<sup>4</sup>

This rural exodus has been very selective and skewed the country’s generational structure. Today the base of rural life is constituted by the sons and daughters of those who did not emigrate during the 1960s. They play the leading role in the economic activity, devote themselves to bringing up children, care for the high number of elderly people, and with

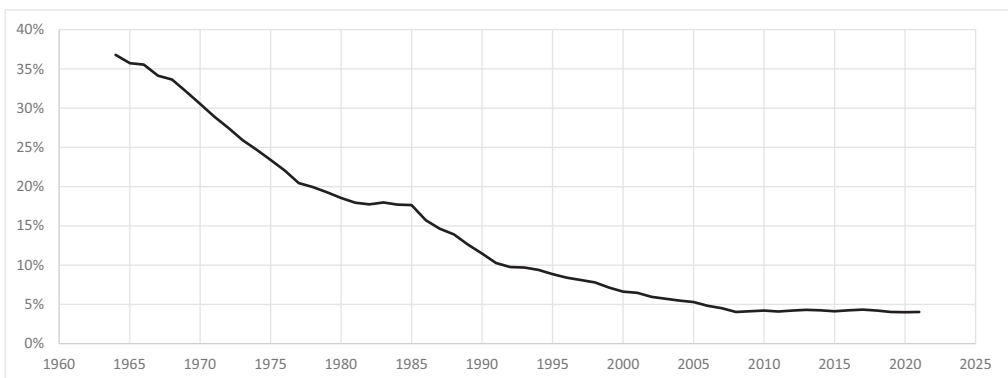


Figure 3.1 Proportion of Population Employed in Agriculture (Annual Average). Progression 1964 to 2021.

Source: Labor Force Survey. Spanish National Statistics Institute. Own elaboration.

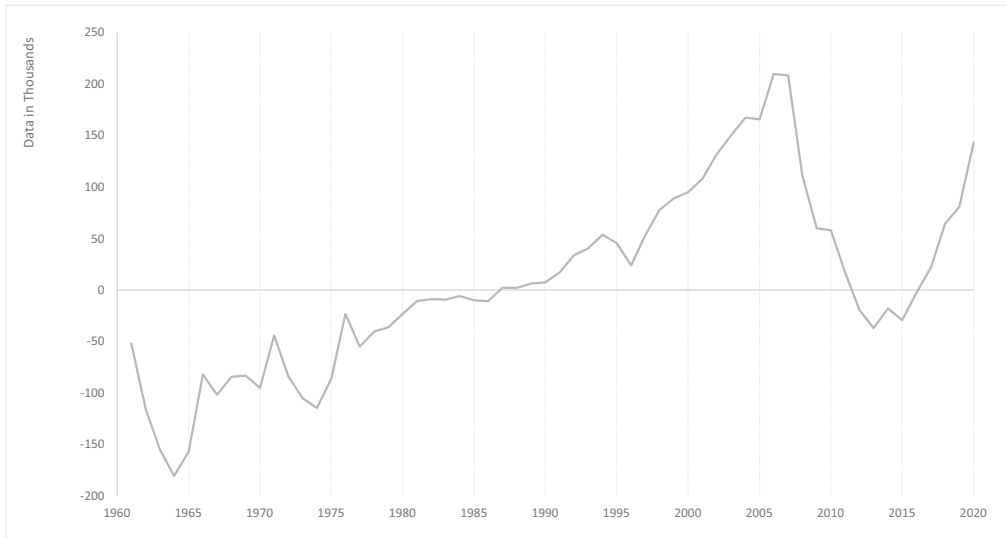


Figure 3.2 Balance of Rural Migration 1961–2020.

Source: Residential Variation Statistics – Spanish National Statistics Institute. Own elaboration.

very little relief from other generations are also responsible for the cultural dynamization of rural communities. All the efforts to maintain a thriving local life fall to this “sandwich” or in-between generation (Camarero et al. 31). It is also a predominantly male generation, since due to the female over-migration to the cities there are considerably fewer women than men.

Gender inequalities are also more pronounced in rural areas. There are fewer professional and job opportunities for rural women, with fewer opportunities for promotion, as many jobs are seasonal and “irregular” (without a contract). Women’s responsibilities in caring for the family make it difficult for them to access extra-local labor markets. The greater population dispersion requires a greater effort in terms of mobility. Moreover, ageing means that there is a population in need of care that is provided for mainly by women within the family, since public care services for the elderly are scarce in rural areas. This environment means that women face greater difficulties in developing their own career paths.

The process of urban demographic concentration has led to a social decapitalization process in rural areas. Not only does youth emigration weaken the reproductive capacity of the rural population but it also means a loss of the human capital needed for organizing economic development and social welfare; furthermore, it has a direct effect on social capital. Social capital defines the capacity of these territories to maintain a culture of civic organization and cooperation and promote civic structures and social networks. In addition, it is linked to the capacity to promote projects and the resilience of rurality to resist the changes in the global order. Areas with a wealth of social capital increase their social opportunities and the welfare of their populations (Li et al. 136).

Figure 3.3 demonstrates the contraction in terms of the demographic vitality that rural areas have experienced, and its consequences with regard to the social and human capital

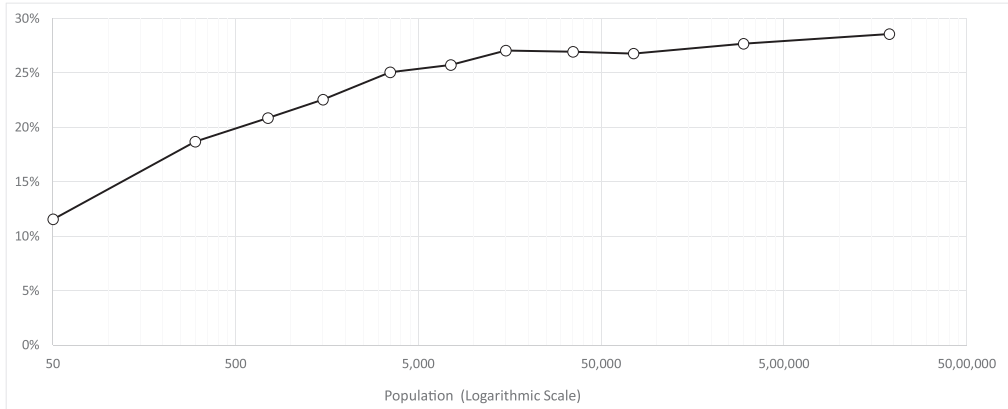


Figure 3.3 Percentage of Population Aged 25–44 by Municipality Size, 2020.

Source: Continuous Survey of the Population. 2020. Spanish National Statistics Institute. Own elaboration.

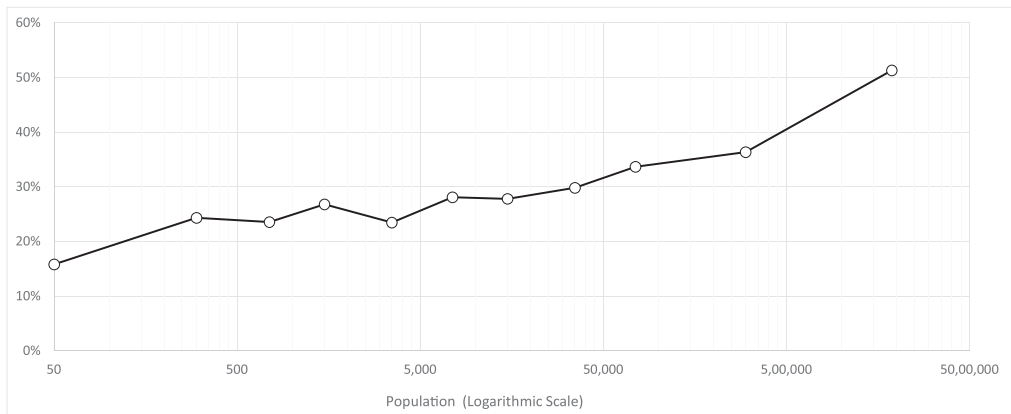


Figure 3.4 Percentage of Population with University Studies by Municipality Size. People Aged 25–44. 2020.

Source: Continuous Survey of the Population. 2020. Spanish National Statistics Institute. Own elaboration.

of these regions. As a summary indicator of demographic vitality, a population group aged 25–44 was evaluated; these are the ages in which the reproductive capacity is concentrated, and the rates of activity and occupation are at their highest level. The relationship between demographic vitality and population size is evident in the figure. They must be interpreted as the result of a process of demographic extraction, from low-density areas to large metropolitan centers.

In accordance with the process of demographic extractivism, a concentration of talent and cultural capital in metropolitan areas can also be observed (see Figure 3.4). There is a severe territorial imbalance in terms of knowledge that hinders the local economies from incorporating themselves into the economic flows that define the information society.

The feedback between emigration, knowledge, and social capital generates vicious circles of declines in demographics, reproduction, and labor, which in the long term lead to the “chronification” of precariousness in work and social exclusion (as these problems become, indeed, chronic).

### **Towards a New Rurality: Globalization, Mobilities, and the Cultural Turn (1978–2000)**

By the end of the 1970s in Spain, the crisis of the Fordist model, urban malaise, and environmental concern, combined with the changes brought about by the political transition to democracy, resulted in a profound cultural and ideological change. The emerging urban middle classes created new idyllic representations of a rurality that had little connection to an actual rurality that they barely knew.

The boost created by joining the European Union in 1986 facilitated urban to rural connections, thanks to the extension and improvement of the highway network. It must also be understood that the accelerated process of urban development in previous years had already established a strong capacity for mobility. Spain had 358,000 cars in circulation in 1961, but by 1970 this number had reached over 2.3 million. Coupled with the increase in car ownership, there was an additional increase in the number of weekly commutes by “worker-peasants” who combined their local agriculture practice with urban jobs. Moreover, seasonal family trips to their former hometown became commonplace for those who had migrated to the city (Moya and Vicente-Mazariegos 97–108).

On the other hand, the nostalgia by first-generation rural emigrants for their abandoned world, combined with the disenchantment of those who grew up in overcrowded cities, promoted the resurgence of regional and local identities, rural festivals, and a return to folk music traditions. This sentiment propelled the emergence of a “second home” market and a demand for plots of land in the countryside (Gaviria 255; García-Bellido 12–14). This cultural reorientation (Morin 45–75; Goldman and Dickens 585; Phillips 138–140) prepared the context for the consolidation of the new economies of “signs and space” (Lash and Urry 1–13; Jameson 1–20). This concept means that the country landscape, the local heritage, the natural world, or regional gastronomy become economic resources that are turned into merchandised goods in a globalized economy (Garrod et al. 118–122; Perkins 245–254; McCarthy 130).

In the last decades of the 20th century, the new productive reorganization that saw the advantages of certain rural areas, for example, competitive salaries and cheap land, combined with the experiences of local development (Vázquez 77–78) and post-productive activities (Cánoves et al. 762–767) to transform local economies. Industrial relocation, residential dispersion, return migrations, residential tourism by foreigners, and counterurbanization projects all contributed to the diversification of the rural social landscape. During the mid-1980s a new migration pattern from rural to urban areas began to emerge, leading to a positive rural migratory balance. This led to a repopulation of the rural environment that coincided with sharp population losses in absolute terms, due to ageing and diminishing birth rates. Deaths began to exceed the number of births for those municipalities with under 10,000 inhabitants. Thus, at that time, there were regions that lost population and settled new residents at the same time. Generally speaking, until the end of the 1990s the new residents fell into three categories: those who moved back to the villages they came from to live out their retirement there; big city inhabitants moving to the rural outskirts in their quest to

find more accessible housing or more attractive environmental conditions; and, to a lesser extent, those seeking new lifestyles and work projects (Rivera 418–430).

The arrival of the new residents meant a substantial increase in social diversity for rural areas. On occasion this diversity has triggered conflict and brought about a lack of harmony as the processes of gentrification excluded the local population from certain resources and as locals faced new demands regarding land and local ways of life. Social diversity also challenged the traditional cultural homogeneity found in rural communities.

In the early 1990s, public concern with rural depopulation and the disappearance of the rural world grew paradoxically even as, in general terms, the rural environment was being repopulated, becoming better connected with urban areas, increasing its internal diversity, and, for the first-time, as policies aimed at halting the economic and demographic deterioration were being carried out by the government.

A key element in the transformation of the rural environment during the 1990s was the implementation of the European Union's rural development policies through its LEADER programs. The LEADER programs were practically the first public initiatives in Spain designed to halt the process of social and economic deterioration in disadvantaged rural areas. They did so by, for the first time, using a territorial focus and a bottom-up perspective to achieve endogenous and integrated development (Esparcia et al. 97–111). This involved implementing a development perspective that sought to dynamize local economies by using local resources and encouraging the involvement of local inhabitants.

In spite of their modest gains in terms of economic investment and employment creation, these programs contributed to generating cohesion and social capital in rural communities. There were 52 local action groups (GAL, or "grupos de acción local," in Spanish) in charge of managing such projects at a regional level in its first programming period of 1991 to 1993, but this figure had risen to over 200 in the most recent period, from 2014 to 2020. These groups established stable networks of cooperation within the country (National Rural Network) and across the European Union.

Rural development policies organized around the LEADER initiative also created the conditions for the upsurge of new identities and a growing political mobilization of the rural population. Numerous organizations that defend the rural world and fight against the threat of depopulation have been set up. For example, the mid-1990s saw the creation of the *Plataforma Rural-Alianzas por un Mundo Rural Vivo* (Rural Platform-Alliances for a Living Rural World), a national platform integrating left-wing organizations and associations. *Plataforma Rural* has proved to be indispensable in redefining rural identity. The group is rather critical of the multifunctionality promoted by European institutions and programs and defends agrarian activity as being crucial to the vitality of the rural world. Even as dominant productive agrarian structures are evolving towards formats that are more industrialized, globalized, and disconnected from the rural countryside, *Plataforma Rural* has emphasized concepts such as peasant or family farming, food sovereignty or agroecology, which have served to more closely connect these social movements with the urban ecology movements.

### **From Rural-Urban Hybridization to Cosmopolitan Ruralities (2000–2021)**

By the end of the 20th century, the transformation of rural societies was due to the intensification of the flows of merchandise, people and ideas that characterize the information society, a real "itinerant society" (Vicente-Mazariegos 5–8). Population mobility between

rural and urban areas is key to understanding the progressive interchangeability of lifestyles among rural and urban populations. The result is a process of hybridization which is the product of ever greater internal diversity, the impact of globalization and increased mobility in social life. This is no longer merely a question of changes in the social composition of rural areas. The very categories of rural versus urban, global versus local, and permanence versus mobility are progressively turning into what we might call “decentered categories” (Camarero and Oliva, “Understanding Rural” 107). They have become unhelpful categories that no longer reflect social reality.

At the beginning of the 21st century, mobility was a key factor for the rural countryside, minimizing the effects of rural demographic imbalance and remoteness from the centers of production and work. In 2001, 48% of the employed rural population residing in municipalities with under 10,000 residents commuted daily to a different municipality, a figure which had grown to 54.7% by 2011. The distances travelled also increased considerably. In 2001, some 5.6% of rural commuters spent over thirty minutes commuting, a figure which had risen to 24% in 2011. Therefore, the importance of the automobile in rural Spanish areas has grown significantly. The dependence of rural life upon mobility is clearly demonstrated by noting that there are 552 automobiles per 1000 inhabitants in those municipalities with under 10,000 inhabitants, which means one car per two inhabitants; this figure is even higher in smaller municipalities, so that for those municipalities with under 2,000 inhabitants the figure reaches 622. Both figures by far exceed the total motorization for Spain, which is 480 vehicles per 1000 inhabitants (Directorate General of Traffic).

The beginning of the 21st century in Spain saw new migratory waves of international workers, decentralization and the intensification of motorization, accompanied by an unusual economic growth. Automobile sales, the number of houses constructed (a real state housing boom), increases in international tourism and the arrival of foreign immigrants all exceeded previous records in Spain. More than a fifth of the resident rural population in municipalities with under 10,000 residents in 2001 came from other larger municipalities, and the presence in rural areas of working-class immigrants from Eastern Europe, the Maghreb, and Latin America had increased to nearly 10% by 2007. Some municipalities turned into new melting-pots (Oliva 279–284) that combined labor-centered international migration and foreign residential tourism (O’Reilly 1–7; Suárez-Navaz 207–239; Gustafson 451–475), as well as residential dispersion caused by Spaniards searching for cheaper houses and/or better environmental conditions (Oliva and Rivera 51–71). These mobilities give rise to a new “translocal rurality” (Hedberg and do Carmo 1–9) characteristic of contemporary societies. A key element in the new 21st-century rurality is its growing ethnic and cultural diversity. Since the late 1990s a considerable proportion of the rural repopulation has been due to the significant increase of foreign labor immigration (see Figure 3.5). The arrival of foreigners reverses the depopulation brought about by the negative rate of natural increase (RNI) in many rural areas.

The new immigrants are young, employment-age individuals who come from Latin America, Eastern Europe, and North and sub-Saharan Africa. The first waves of immigration were closely linked to the need for workers in the agrarian enclaves of the intensive fruit and horticulture production regions in the southern and Mediterranean parts of Spain (Gadea et al. 83). Later, these waves spread towards the peninsula’s rural interior (see Figure 3.6). Immigration gradually arrived at the less economically dynamic rural environments which had been much more greatly affected by depopulation. In those rural regions, immigration represented a vital demographic contribution for the survival of

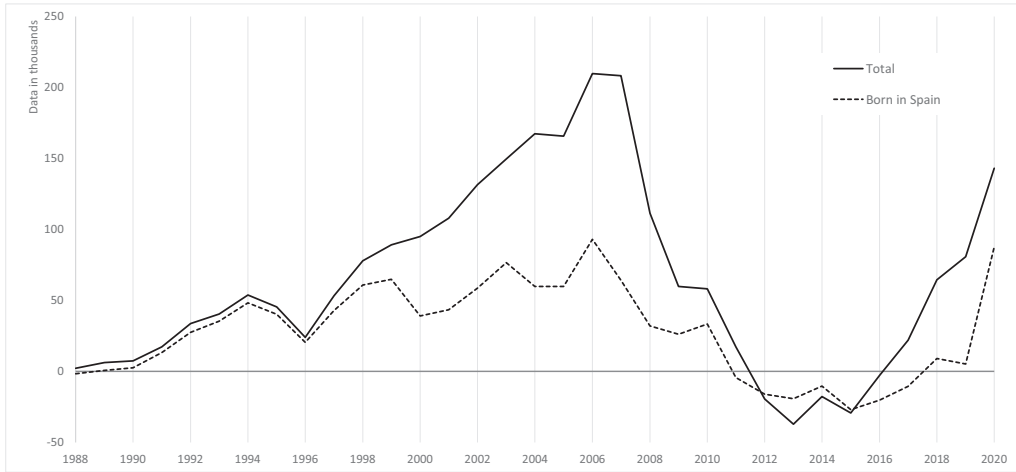


Figure 3.5 Migratory Balance in Rural Areas According to Country of Birth (1988–2020).

Source: Survey of Residential Variations, INE. Own elaboration. Municipalities under 10,000 inhabitants.

rural communities and provided the necessary workers for sectors such as agriculture, cattle ranching, construction, domestic service, and caring for those with special needs.

The 2008 economic crisis had significant effects across the economy and modified the migratory waves. The entry of immigrant populations came to a halt, whilst at the same time the processes of immigrant family reunifications did not sufficiently counteract immigrant departures. Many immigrants returned to their countries of origin or headed for urban areas (Camarero and Sampedro, “Despoblación” 75). However, since 2016 we have observed new signs of migratory recuperation in rural areas, especially with regard to the settlement of foreign populations (Camarero, “Despoblamiento” 62). This confirms the trend that the long-term effects of the crisis were coming to an end before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The foreign immigrant population has had a particularly relevant effect on the demography of rural areas. Patterns in the 2019 data indicate that, on average, one in ten rural inhabitants were born abroad, although in numerous municipalities the figure exceeds 20%. If we focus on the 20–39 age group, the figures are even more striking. On average 15% of the rural population was born abroad, with over half coming from such diverse countries as Romania, Morocco, Colombia, and Ecuador.

The foreign population has significantly contributed to the generational renewal of the countryside by increasing birth rates, in part also due to the arrival and regrouping of families with children. By 2018, some 19.2% of rural births (one in five) were by mothers of foreign origin. Moreover, we must consider the children that arrive in these rural areas at an early age. Table 3.1 shows an estimation of the combined effects of births plus immigration and the reunification of children under 13 years old with their families, in rural areas. All of these children constitute the group of minors that stay and will constitute the new rural generations. This estimate allows us to project the incidence of change in the next generations of rural inhabitants.

Rural Spain

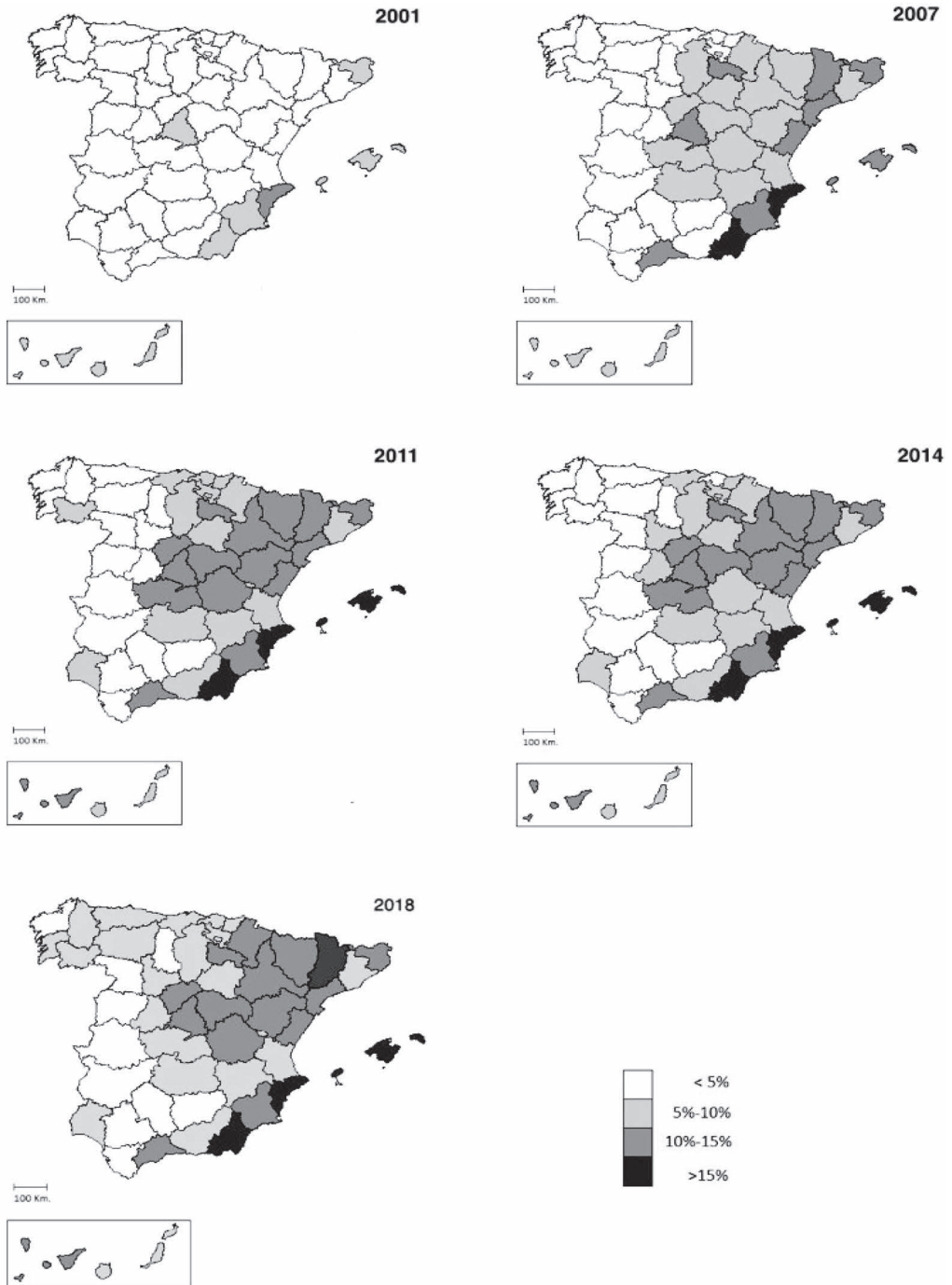


Figure 3.6 Proportion of Resident Foreigners in Rural Areas. Evolution 2001–2018.

Source: Camarero and Sampedro (2019).

Table 3.1 The Generations of Minors of Foreign Origin by Nationality and Size of Municipality.

	<i>Spanish Nationality Since Birth</i>	<i>Not Spanish National at Birth</i>	<i>Mother Born Abroad</i>	<i>Percentage of Foreign Origin</i>
<500 inhabitants	48,715	6,551	10,079	25.4%
501–1,000 inhabitants	70,353	10,197	8,520	21.0%
1,001–2,000 inhabitants	97,548	7,401	9,499	14.8%
2,001–5,000 inhabitants	276,790	25,160	36,664	18.3%
5,001–10,000 inhabitants	440,780	44,866	52,425	18.1%
>10,000	3,524,581	599,481	681,548	26.7%
Spain	4,458,767	693,656	798,735	25.1%

Source: Continuous Household Survey. Spanish National Statistics Institute. 2019.

For Spain as a whole, we can estimate that 25.1% of the population currently under 13 years of age were foreign-born. Such figures are higher in urban areas, but for rural areas these numbers become even more impactful, especially for small municipalities. In villages with under 1,000 inhabitants, between a fifth and a quarter of minors were either born abroad or to immigrant families. Thus, in the context of the depopulation of rural areas, there is also a parallel hidden process of sociological renovation. There are fewer rural inhabitants, but they are increasingly diverse. Rural policies must take into account that such diversity will increase as the new generations start becoming adults.

As Wood stated in “Precarious Rural Cosmopolitanism,” rural communities are destined to be more cosmopolitan, that is to say, more open to differences and diversity, as the nation’s cultural and ethnic diversity increases. That is also true for Spanish rurality more broadly. However, as Woods indicated, rural cosmopolitanism is both an emerging as well as a precarious phenomenon (“Precarious Rural” 165–167). Many powerful obstacles stand in the way of foreign immigrants before they are accepted as welcomed neighbors. The local population tends to perceive them as no more than a labor force, mistrusting foreigners and associating integration with cultural assimilation. Recent qualitative research reveals how the attitudes of the local population and the local communities’ leaders are still not favorable for true coexistence and intercultural recognition. These attitudes persist despite the fact that immigrants contribute to containing the rural depopulation and are key to sustaining strategic economic sectors (Sampedro and Camarero, “Foreign Immigration” 25–26). The construction of cosmopolitan, welcoming communities is not a spontaneous process, but one that requires social awareness, political will, civic strategies and human and material resources (Depner and Teixeira 89). The current rise in xenophobic discourse encouraged by far-right political parties does not help this situation. Cultural diversity has enormous potential for creativity and social innovation and can turn out to be key to the social sustainability of rural areas. But nevertheless, the immigrant population is mostly left out of public debates and policies as drivers of rural development.

### Looking to the Future: The Rural Gap and the Emergence of a New Political Subject

The aforementioned intense migratory wave from the countryside to the cities in the early second half of the 20th century, in the latter years of Francoism, culminated the process of

demographic emptying of rural Spain, and was the origin of the profound demographic and socio-territorial imbalances affecting the country today.

The impact of the 2008 international financial crisis meant a dramatic challenge for local economies. The cuts and disinvestments brought about by economic austerity measures were passed on by the state to local administrations, causing a considerable deterioration in public and private services, for example, the closure of schools, emergency healthcare services, bank branch offices, small businesses, and so on. Under these circumstances, the Spanish rural environment faces great challenges in terms of access to the welfare state and the situation is aggravated by the diminishing opportunities for equitable economic and cultural development in a society where the rights of citizenship should extend to all, regardless of the territory where they live. This rural gap appears to be largely determined by demographic ageing and accessibility conditions. On the one hand, the considerable ageing of the population also increases the need for certain rural social services, such as healthcare, personal care, and mobility. It also progressively weakens the capacity to sustain a social life, such as being able to drive or use information and communication technologies (ICTs). On the other hand, achieving rural hybridization with wider urban and global processes requires connections and effective mobilities (capacity for movement and transport), for example, access to high speed internet, non-standard shared transport, and on-demand transport services, all of which would increase the lure of living in rural Spain.

Finally, the current wave of political mobilization of the rural population around the expression “the emptied Spain,” and the inclusion of rural depopulation problems in the political agenda of various parties and civic organizations, cannot be understood without taking into account the effects of the 2008 economic crisis.

On March 31, 2019, a massive demonstration took place in Madrid under the slogan “The revolt of Emptied Spain.” It was promoted by two citizens’ organizations: *Teruel existe* [Teruel exists] and *¡Soria Ya!* [Soria Now!]. Teruel and Soria are two of the most rural and depopulated provinces in Spain. *Teruel existe* participated in the General Elections held on November 10, 2019, as an electoral platform of voters, managing to win the elections in that province and sending a deputy to the National Congress. Currently, a national platform with the name “The Emptied Spain” is actively demanding that the central government take political measures from to guarantee “first-class citizenship for rural inhabitants,” and this civic organization is also promoting this sort of political participation in both the regional and national elections.

“The empty Spain” has been transformed by the political mobilization of the rural inhabitants into “The emptied Spain;” this expression reveals the sentiment of secular abandon felt by the inhabitants in the rural environment. Perhaps we are witnessing the emergence of a new political subject – the rural people – that will have a great impact on the future process of rural change in Spain. At any rate, Spanish society has clearly become aware of rural-urban territorial inequalities.

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## Notes

- 1 This is the essay by the journalist Sergio del Molino, titled *La España vacía. Viaje por un país que nunca fue* [The Empty Spain. Journey through a Country that Never Was].
- 2 In fact, one of the effects of the Civil War was the return to increasing agrarian activity rates (Leal et al. 183).
- 3 22.6%, according to the register of inhabitants for 2021.
- 4 Around a third of rural inhabitants go daily to an urban center or another municipality to work. Population Census 2011.

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