

The Far Right and the ‘Gifts of Nature’ in Rural Spain

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The 2018 Andalusian elections marked a watershed moment in Spain’s democracy.

Against all forecasts, Vox, founded in 2013 by disgruntled cadres of the Popular Party, the country’s main conservative party, garnered 10 percent of the vote, thus becoming the first far-right party to enter a regional parliament and ushering in a new era in Spanish politics. Vox’s meteoric rise culminated in the 2020 Spanish elections: the party won 15 percent of the vote and became the third-largest in the national parliament, a position that it has maintained since then despite its number of seats falling from 52 to 33 in the 2023 elections.

As is usual with far-right parties, Vox has deployed highly charged rhetoric to construct an “us versus them” dichotomy: a contrast between the “Living Spain” (*La España viva*), which the party claims to represent, and an “Anti-Spain” (*Anti-España*). The latter term, with strong Francoist echoes, identifies the alleged enemies of the nation, a long and growing list that includes migrants, separatists, elites (traditional politicians, international and European institutions), feminists, and environmentalists. These are presented as forces that threaten to dissolve the unity of Spain, natural hierarchy, and traditional values—which is to say, the classic reactionary tetrad of God, nation, private property, and family.

Demographically, three main features characterize Vox’s voter: he is predominantly male, young, and tends to live in a monolingual Spanish-speaking region. Other than that, there is little distinguishing him from the traditional conservative voter. Support for Vox in the 2023 elections showed no major differences across

income or educational levels. The same is true in terms of rural/urban origin, with Vox winning 12 percent of the vote both in municipalities with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants and in those with more than 250,000.

Although support for Vox is not particularly strong in the countryside, the party has placed a strong rhetorical emphasis on rural issues. Its focus is on depopulation and drought, two problems at the heart of a deep-seated malaise in rural Spain. At first, Vox combined lack of attention to environmental problems with outright climate change denialism. More recently, however, in a shift that is widespread among European far-right parties, Vox has sought to build an environmental narrative adapted to its authoritarian outlook.

Indeed, Vox has developed what Camil Ungureanu and Lucia Alexandra Popartan in a recent article in *Political Geography* call a “far-right ecology,” characterized by an “anthropocentric, nationalist, and instrumental vision of nature.” This view of nature is consistent with the fascist vision of freedom: an unbound freedom to dominate, to extract, and to rule over labor and livelihoods, but also over what Marx called the “free gifts of nature.” Vox’s far-right ecology mobilizes emotionally loaded language to present an organicist fusion of nature and nation, while justifying a right to possess and dominate human and extra-human nature that ultimately aligns with capitalist interests.

From its inception, Vox’s politics of emotion have drawn on rural imagery, portraying the countryside as an immortal Living Spain, uncorrupted but languishing under the threat of the immoral, centrifugal forces of Anti-Spain, primarily represented by leftist urbanites. No other issue incarnates the hard realities of rural Spain as much as its rampant depopulation: 90 percent of the country’s inhabitants are concentrated in 1,500 municipalities occupying 30 percent of its surface area, with

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the other 10 percent living in the remaining 6,600 municipalities, on 70 percent of the territory. In the past decade, although the country's population has increased overall, 35 of its 52 provinces have lost inhabitants.

The expression "Empty Spain" (*España vacía*) has been popularized in recent years to describe this process of depopulation and the attendant economic decline. It also expresses the feelings of abandonment and despair—the sense of empty horizons—that pervade the rural population.

Eager to capitalize on this discontent and the idea of Empty Spain, Vox has been positioning itself as the true defender of rural Spain, its peoples, and its environment. It has forged a chain of equivalences connecting party leader Santiago Abascal, the nation, and the rural dweller. In a 2020 interview, Abascal declared: "No urbanite, no progressive will teach me how to know nature; I know it well." In a similar vein, a party promotional video that year argued, "There is no greater conservationist than a patriot." In late 2021, Javier Ortega Smith, at the time Vox's deputy leader, stated in an interview on national television that "farmers, ranchers, and hunters are the true conservationists, environmentalists, and naturalists."

A Vox campaign "in defense of the rural world and its traditions" places hunting, fishing, and bullfighting front and center as organic expressions of a rural culture under threat from progressives. This emphasis strongly evokes ideas of nationalism (bullfighting is also called the national fiesta), male domination, and a desire to possess and use nature that is consistent with Vox's demands for hierarchy and authoritarianism.

Yet Vox's rhetoric belies its base of support. Although the party has had robust electoral showings in some of the provinces of Empty Spain, especially in the center-south, its best results have come in southeastern rural areas with thriving commercial agriculture industries (greenhouse horticulture, large porcine farms), such as Murcia and Almería, two provinces with net demographic gains since the 1980s. This support is undoubtedly connected to the party's promise to cut taxes on agricultural fuel and its anti-migrant stance, which justifies the harsh conditions of agrarian migrant laborers and insists on the farmer's right to hyper-exploit their sweat—and even their blood, as suggested by the infamous memory of the xenophobic

riots in El Ejido (Almería) in 2000, when the killing of three people at the hands of two Moroccan migrants gave rise to mob violence. Thousands of local residents took to the streets for three consecutive nights with the aim of lynching persons of Moroccan origin and looting and destroying their property.

The economic dynamism of these areas is also inextricably linked to the exploitation and privatization of a common resource: water. Agro-industrial activity, especially pig farming, drains the aquifers of an extremely dry region. Yet Vox unabashedly supports the right of industrial farmers to deplete and pollute this resource.

Reviving old Francoist ideas, the party has made water central to its ecological-rural-agrarian vision. The solution to problems of the Spanish countryside, it argues, is "to make Spain green" by extending irrigation. In 2022, Abascal said in the Spanish parliament that with this irrigation plan, "Our nation can become Europe's economic and ecological miracle." This would involve the

centralized management of water resources and the construction of massive hydraulic infrastructure to transfer water between river basins. Vox argues that this plan would repopulate the Spanish countryside and combat climate change. It would also bring copious profits to construction companies, a stronghold of Spain's political-economic elites, and to industrial farmers—at least for as long as the water lasted.

Vox's politics of emotion have drawn on rural imagery.

RENEWABLE REVERSALS

A few months ago, one of us was interviewed in *El Salto*, a left online newspaper, about growing opposition to the rush of large-scale renewable energy projects under way in rural Spain. Since these wind and solar installations require large amounts of land, energy developers have looked to Empty Spain. The fear that these mega-renewable projects will be the last straw—emptying territories and disfiguring agrarian landscapes and modes of life—has spurred myriad local opposition movements, in the most impressive collective action to emanate from rural Spain in recent decades. Though internally diverse, these movements clearly lean to the left, defending degrowth positions, democratic decision-making, and local sovereignty.

During the interview, the journalist, who was sympathetic to this rural resistance, wondered why Vox had not realized the potential gains to be made by tapping into the discontent. After all, Vox bemoans the low-carbon agenda (a diktat of transnational institutions, according to the party, that only benefits non-Western countries), supports coal mining, criticizes what it calls the “gigantism” of existing renewable energy development, and endorses the revamping of nuclear energy as the best strategy to combat climate change and achieve energy sovereignty.

So, why then? After many years of field research on these movements against big renewable energy projects, we have yet to find a Vox supporter among local leaders. Some inhabitants of these territories belong to the far right, for sure, and we have talked to them. They may express dismissive opinions about climate change and renewables, but invariably they support the specific renewable energy projects that make it to their areas. Money for extracting wind and sun? Bring it on! Any local movement opposing renewable energy

development in the name of degrowth or some collective goal such as common territorial stewardship is seen as a fetter to the freedom of the landowner to dispose of his land—to appropriate the “free gifts” of nature—as he wishes.

Vox’s inability to tap into this rural discontent helps make clear the contours, but also the limits, of its far-right ecology. It aims to combine organicist, romantic ideas of an immortal rural Spain with support for economic growth and the domination of nature. If the two come into contradiction, business and the unbound freedom to appropriate must come first.

Yet given the tendency of liberal and left parties to ignore the frustration that many rural Spaniards feel about the way renewable energy is being developed, the possibility that Vox could co-opt part of this resentment should not be disregarded. If they want to avoid such an ideological realignment, the European Union and the Spanish government would do well to take a break from pouring money into large-scale renewable energy projects and listen to these rural voices. ■