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# Depopulation 1.0: Geography and the Factors of Rural Demographic Decline in the Spain of Developmentalism

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The debate on rural depopulation, which has centred on the demographic challenge in Spain, usually starts with consensus on its historical roots. Nevertheless, it's necessary to inspect in detail the sociodemographic factors underlying this starting point in order to understand it and tackle it today. In the last 60 years, 65 percent of the demographic decline in rural areas is concentrated between 1960 and 1981. In the present study, I inquire into two little-known aspects of this crucial phase of rural depopulation: the geographic dimension and the factors that favoured this initial depopulation.

Among the elements that contributed towards the demographic decline of rural areas are geographical isolation of mountain areas, poverty, human capital, and an almost exclusive dependence on agriculture. By contrast, the economic diversity, the demographic dimension of rural centres, disperse and dense settlement, and good public infrastructure favoured demographic resilience in the face of depopulation.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent studies on depopulation have focused on what might be defined as the "Epilogue of the Depopulation Process" or, in other words, a very advanced, almost irreversible phase of the rural exodus. The few populations remaining in large areas of central and northern Spain have dwindled

considerably by comparison with the population that occupied these places in the 1960s, and the socioeconomic conditions of these parts of today's rural world bear no resemblance to what they were 60 years ago.

In the Spanish countryside, it had been difficult in the 1950s to sustain a rural population that had grown with hardly any structural changes in agriculture. The hypothesis of overpopulation prior to depopulation isn't unreasonable, although research is still needed to back it up. The onset of rural depopulation can be traced back to a context of an agricultural sector with low productivity and on the verge of mechanisation that would make way for far-reaching changes. Emigration to the cities, then a way of easing the situation, opened up opportunities for men and women for whom personal advancement wasn't possible in the rural spaces. Once the *Stabilisation Plan* was underway in 1959, the rural zones began a spiral of depopulation that emptied large areas of the territory and wouldn't abate until the onset of a series of economic crises in the latter half of the 1970s. By then, a considerable part of the rural areas had undergone irreversible demographic decline. This study covers the period of what film language might dub *Prequel to Depopulation*. It is an examination of the rural world, its characteristics and, from the standpoint of the zones of origin, the factors that led to the rural demographic decline between 1960 and 1981, which was the most intense and extensive phase of depopulation.

## SOURCES

The data used in this research are from the statistical and cartographic appendix of the publication *Factores Humanos y Sociales. Anexo al Plan de Desarrollo Económico y Social* (Human and Social Factors: Annex to the Economic and Social Development Plan). This source brings together information on demographic change, settlement, active population by sector, family income, female and child employment, unemployment, casual work, food situation, educational level, and infrastructure in all the municipalities of Spain between 1963 and 1964. The data was used to produce zoning of the Spanish rural areas defined by criteria of geographic proximity and socioeconomic homogeneity, in which 360 zones were identified. These offered a highly precise depiction of the Spanish rural world in the early years of the 1960s.

## A RURAL WORLD WITH DIVERSE DEPOPULATION

Some 264 zones (73.3 percent), which showed net population losses between 1960 and 1981, are the focus of this analysis. These areas not only saw the disappearance of all the natural growth gains of a period of high fertility and low mortality, but in addition there was a high degree of net emigration with numbers that were much greater than for those of absolute losses.

A typology of the 264 rural zones in demographic decline has been produced using multivariate statistical methods. We have applied a principal component analysis (PCA), which has used 28 variables on a wide range of aspects. This type of analysis has identified seven factors that characterise the zones. Their most significant correlations with the main variables are shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Factors explaining the diversity of rural Spain (circa 1963)

**Source:** Author, using the statistical appendix of the Annex to the Economic and Social Development Plan (1964).

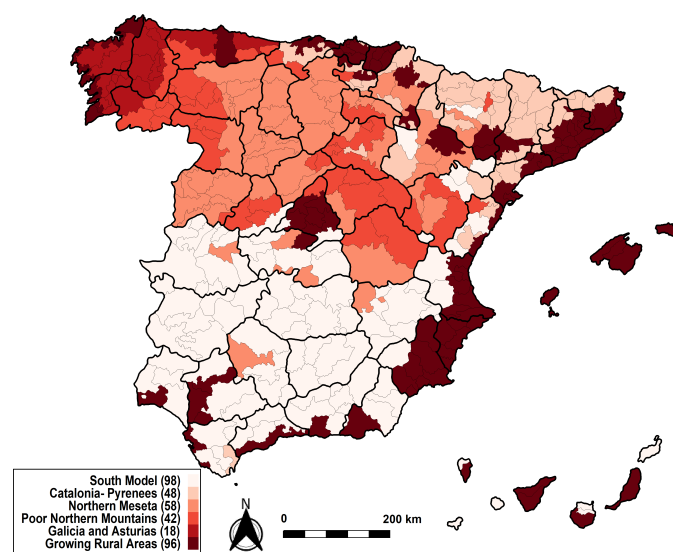
The factors identified by order of importance are: first, the factor associated with poverty; a second factor, which is called agrocity, related with the demographic dimension of the villages, casual work, structural unemployment, and a greater proportion of illiteracy; third, human capital, connected with the proportion of university students and

seminarians, and proximity to Madrid; the fourth, under the heading of agriculture, and closely correlated with productive diversity refers to the importance of the primary sector; the fifth, identified as dense scattered settlement, is linked with single entities per km<sup>2</sup>; sixth, is the factor related with health workers and, seventh and finally, is that defined by availability of basic public infrastructure, related with accessibility by road and municipal water supply.

## A GEOGRAPHY OF RURAL ZONES CIRCA 1963

The unequal distribution of factors in the territory outlines five rural spaces which, obtained by means of cluster analysis, are characterised by their geographic proximity. A sixth rural geographic group corresponds to growth areas (Figure 2).

In the Rural South model, the influence of the factor associated with the agrocity and the demographic dimension prevails. These are zones with low levels of human capital, poverty rates above the rural average, seasonal unemployment, and casual labour.



**Figure 2.** Typologies of rural zones in Spain (circa 1963)

**Source:** Author, using the statistical appendix of the Annex to the Economic and Social Development Plan (1964).

The second cluster brings together entities of a smaller demographic dimension, greater economic diversity (the secondary sector in these zones accounts for almost 20 percent), the highest incomes of all the rural zones, low levels of unemployment and seasonal employment, and better public infrastructure. This is a rural world with better economic advantages, and where the proportion of families with malnutrition is only 11.8%. This is the Catalonia-Pyrenees or Rich Rural World model.

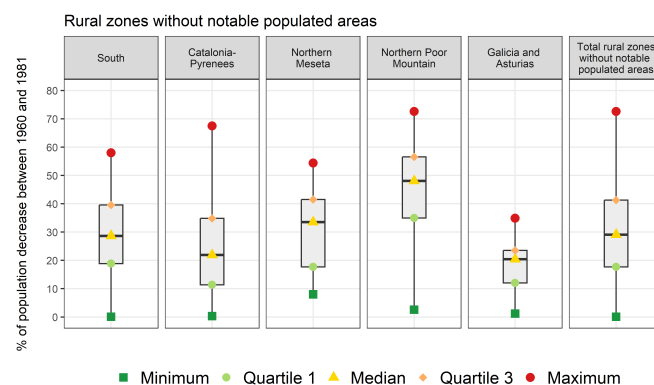
The third group shows a greater endowment of human capital. This is an area of small towns near Madrid, where the Catholic Church is influential in education (so the proportion of seminarians is the highest of all rural zones), of medium incomes, low levels of malnutrition, good communications but poor access to running water. This is the Northern Meseta rural model.

The fourth cluster consists of relatively poor areas in mountain zones, with municipalities far from the provincial capital, inferior infrastructure, high levels of temporary unemployment, and malnutrition affecting almost 50 percent of the families. In this case, almost 90 percent of the working population is engaged in agriculture and livestock farming. This space constitutes the Northern Spain Poor Rural Mountain model. The last of the clusters in demographic decline is a continuous geographic space characterised by high-density disperse settlement, a primary sector accounting for more than 90 percent of the working population, high poverty rates, malnutrition affecting 46.4 percent of families, and the highest proportion of child labour in agriculture among all the rural areas in Spain. This group comprises the Galicia and Asturias rural model.

## POPULATION LOSS IN RURAL AREAS AND EXPLANATORY FACTORS

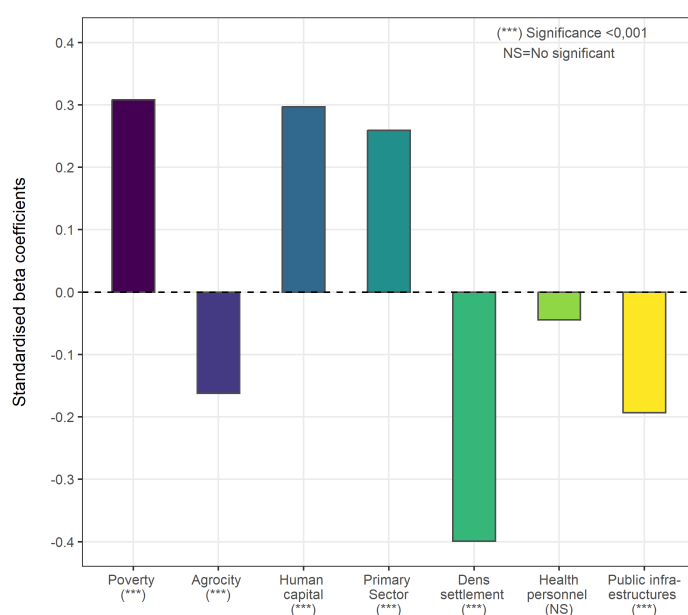
The impact of depopulation is shown by a gradation going from demographic resilience to acute demographic decline (Figure 3). The poor municipalities of the northern mountain region experienced the greatest population loss, which was higher than 60 percent. However, this figure conceals a considerable degree of variation, in which many municipal entities of the zone lost more than 90 percent of their population between 1960 and 1981. The Northern Meseta takes second place in terms of intensity of demographic decline and is followed by the southern area of the country, and the spatial conglomeration comprising Catalonia and the Pyrenees. At the other end of the scale, with less significant losses, is the region of Galicia and Asturias where, despite the negative economic conditions, the peculiar settlement system sustained municipal populations, although there was an intra-municipal population loss in some parishes and districts. Poverty, human capital, and dependence on the primary sector led to depopulation. Conversely, demographic size, economic diversity, dense scattered settlement, and availability of infrastructure favoured population retention

in rural zones (Figure 4). In accordance with these facts, it is evident that small villages in areas of difficult access and exclusively dependent on agriculture were the most affected by the demographic decline. The input of health personnel, which is currently a demand of rural areas, wasn't sufficient as an explanation of depopulation.



**Figure 3.** Intensity of depopulation of rural areas (1960-1981)  
**Source:** Author, using the statistical appendix of the Annex to the Economic and Social Development Plan (1964) and FBBVA (2015).

The simultaneous presence of two contrasting and non-concomitant factors—poverty and human capital—in explanations of population losses shows that they aren't mutually exclusive. Poverty was a factor of expulsion in rural areas, while in other parts of the country with greater human capital, opportunities for social mobility offered by a clearly expanding urban economy led to their depopulation. The loss of human capital in the country's interior areas, a recent focus



**Figure 4.** Factors explaining depopulation in rural zones (1960-1981)

**Source:** Author, using the statistical appendix of the Annex to the Economic and Social Development Plan (1964) and FBBVA (2015).



of academic and media interest, was already a consolidated phenomenon in the 1960s, incorporating a system of social promotion in a land which, with a long-standing higher educational background, offered few opportunities for economic and social advancement.

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST

Between 1960 and 1981, the main mechanism of demographic decline was the migratory exodus. Today, this has been superseded by natural decline associated with demographic ageing. This is no minor change. Even if emigration can be mitigated with costly, innovative economic measures, recovery of the birth-rate is improbable. Moreover, population ageing in rural areas augurs a growing incidence of mortality. This situation leaves immigration as the only realistic alternative for the recovery of depopulated areas. The rural world of the 1960s was as diverse as the present-day world, and its demographic decline was also varied. Accordingly, policies for combatting depopulation can't be identical but must respond to the peculiarities of each rural territory. The circumstances that favoured depopulation are now less significant. Poverty has substantially decreased and

has become entrenched in the south of the country where the larger demographic dimension of the towns traditionally acted as a factor protecting against depopulation. The greater human capital in certain rural areas was already a mechanism for social advancement in the 1960s. Little has changed with this mechanism of social and territorial engineering. If, in the 1960s, the holding of a high school diploma was a guarantee of employment in urban zones, nowadays higher education is the new mechanism for promotion for young rural people whose final destination is the big city.

I have left until last a crucial aspect that must be taken into account, namely the isolation of some rural areas. In the 1950s and 1960s, lack of basic infrastructure might have been seen as playing a clear role as a factor of depopulation in mountain areas but, at present, the infrastructure in these zones has significantly improved. Nevertheless, something has changed substantially: if the geographic isolation of the first depopulation happened in a full world, it is now occurring in an empty rural world with few prospects for demographic regeneration.

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