

How to Solve Spain's Urban-Rural Energy Discord

Article by **Adriana Mayor**

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The transformation of rural areas into renewable energy hubs serving the needs of all-consuming cities is exacerbating Spain's urban-rural divide. Social anthropologist Jaume Franquesa proposes controlled degrowth and decentralised energy production as a possible way out.

"This was a cemetery, and now they've put up crosses," an electrician told social anthropologist Jaume Franquesa while he was investigating southern Catalonia's historical resistance to energy projects. In the worker's words, the cemetery was the region threatened by depopulation, a phenomenon that is spreading, though not uniformly, to the rest of rural Spain. The crosses, of course, were wind turbines.

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A debate about the deployment of renewable energy that rouses tensions in "emptied" – not empty – rural communities is shaking the country to its core, as evidenced by the biggest blockbusters in Spanish cinema over the past year: *Alcarrás* and *As Bestas* (The Beasts).

In his book *Windmills and Giants: The struggle for dignity, energy sovereignty and ecological transition*, Franquesa, professor of Anthropology at the University of Buffalo (New York, US), delves into these conflicts of local resistance in rural communities such as La Fatarella (Terra Alta).

At the end of the last century, residents had to face the consequences of development-driven dreams of the 1970s and have had to put up with the ensuing environmental and social costs of energy production ever since.

La Fatarella belongs to a cluster of small municipalities in Tarragona that generate a third of the energy of all Catalonia via large hydroelectric dams, nuclear reactors, combined cycle power plants as well as wind and photovoltaic farms.

In addition to the exploitation of energy sources carried out against the will of local communities, other projects have also affected this "special laboratory", such as the attempts to divert the Ebro river within Catalonia and even to other areas of the country, as Franquesa explains in an interview with the *Green European Journal*.

"The sheer quantity of projects carried out in the region – especially but not exclusively those involving the production of energy or electricity – provides a good opportunity for understanding the history behind the use of different energy sources as well as the problems and resistance that have subsequently arisen," he says.

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The environmental movement, divided on the issue of the energy transition – as shown by the popularity of the catchphrase “yes to renewables, but not like that” – is reshaping the debate by expressing empathy and solidarity with rural populations, the countryside that sustains the cities, the agriculture that feeds them, and the inhabited lands that need protecting from forest fires.

Underlying this issue is a crucial fact that the UN’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has brought to our attention yet again in its latest report. Nearly 100 scientists – with the support and contribution of thousands more – warn that the window of possibility for ensuring a liveable future is closing with every one-tenth of a degree increase in average global temperature. Luckily, many of the solutions recommended by the IPCC are already available, cheap and scalable, including renewable forms of energy.

Degrowth without pessimism

Franquesa is in favour of the mass implementation of renewable energy and refuses the rhetoric of “climate pessimism”, a narrative that is gaining support among environmentalists, which argues that the imminent collapse of civilisation can only be dealt with through drastic degrowth, or simply “learning how to die out”. In media appearances, physicist Antonio Turiel, author of *Petrocalipsis*, argues that a reduction in energy consumption of 90 per cent is achievable. Critics of this view maintain that such an extreme reduction in consumption would constitute a de facto collapse of society, as defined by “climate pessimists”.

“I’m not a climate pessimist because it is not a politically fruitful stance,” Franquesa asserts. The popularity of climate pessimism in the US may be partly due to the emphasis on survival of the fittest: “There is a certain desire for society to completely collapse so that we can see who really has what it takes to survive”.

Though Franquesa does not embrace climate pessimism, he agrees that “the situation is very serious, and it cannot be fixed with a few green development projects.”

The energy transition debate is furthering the disconnect between the rural and urban worlds.

“I am in favour of degrowth,” he explains, because “there is no evidence that growth can occur without putting strain on resources”.

For this reason, Franquesa does not believe that a Green New Deal (GND) can solve the climate emergency. The GND put forth by US Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey and the European Green Deal supported by Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermans “leave everything up to technological solutions, arguing that technology will save us and allow us to keep growing.” For the anthropologist, growth can be achievable in the future only if it is understood in terms other of GDP.

Moreover, he is concerned with the silence surrounding, at least in the US, the issue of the origin of minerals used in the energy transition.

Decentralising energy production

Global warming is not the sole nature crisis we are facing: “There is also soil depletion, loss of biodiversity, microplastics, an overwhelming growth in the use of pesticides on a global scale over the last 20 years, and so on,” Franquesa explains.

As for the environmental transition, it cannot focus solely on energy policy, but it must also deal with regional development, aiming to protect the dignity of rural communities.

“We know that nuclear power plants in rural areas were met with more resistance in some places than others. This was a combined resistance, made up on the one hand of organised local residents and, on the other, politicised or environmental urban movements that went out to those regions to fight with them,” says Franquesa.

On the contrary, the energy transition debate – marked by rural areas directly opposing renewable macro-projects designed in city offices – is furthering the disconnect between the rural and urban worlds. “It’s a vicious cycle,” he argues. “From a urban perspective, it’s very tempting to think that someone complaining about a wind farm in a village 200 kilometres away is just a country bumpkin who doesn’t understand the bigger picture.”

As *Bestas* and *Alcarrás* “show how renewable energy projects can end up being very real threats to local identity,” Franquesa explains. “All of us, at least when we get to a certain age, think about what our children are going to do, who is going to carry on our work, and these things are very important in rural life because they are tied to land ownership. Power plants are often seen as threats to that way of life, and even more so when their construction results in arguments, confrontations and hostility.”

To avoid these territorial disputes, Franquesa advocates for a model of renewable energy production that is more decentralised, distributed throughout the entire country, and located closer to cities, which are the areas of greatest consumption. Furthermore, he claims, participatory processes should be facilitated. The new anti-climate crisis Royal Decree, condemned by environmentalist parties, does precisely the opposite: in an attempt to relax procedures and accelerate the installation of renewable energy infrastructure, the Spanish government adopted articles 22 and 23 of the decree, eliminating the need for public consultation when conducting environmental impact assessments.

“We have to think about what kind of country we want and for that we need planning, participation, and democratic decision-making,” Franquesa concludes.

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