

Santiago Gorostiza Langa

A historical exploration of ruralist ideology in Spain and its importance for the degrowth and democracy debate

KEYWORDS: degrowth, autonomy, democracy, fascism, ruralism, Spain

ABSTRACT

Ideas of autonomy and self-sufficiency are central to the ideology and practice of a significant part of alternative environmental and historical utopian movements. Be it through the cultivation and consumption of local products to avoid the environmental and social impacts of international trade, or by using renewable energy, recycling or reusing the waste generated, such values are fundamental to lifestyles that are aimed at an improved equilibrium with the environment and more equal and emancipatory social relations. A significant issue for these movements has been – and still is – how to upscale such lifestyle systems and create alternative societies in a democratic bottom-up approach.

Ecology and democracy, from this point of view, have to go hand by hand. In the words of philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (2003:117), “it is indispensable to insert the ecological component into a radical democratic political project. And it is just as imperative that the reappraisal of present-day society's values and orientations, which is implied by such a project, be indissociable from the critique of the imaginary of "development" on which we live”. Also Takis Fotopoulos has highlighted the relevance of this “ecological component” in his ideas of inclusive democracy (2004a, 2004b).

Such concerns have coalesced with the emerging literature on Degrowth, spurring discussions about the role of direct democracy in this ecological movement. One of the main authors related to Degrowth thought, Serge Latouche, has in fact engaged in a debate with Fotopoulos concerning the concepts of democracy and autonomy (Latouche 2007, Asara et al 2013). Such debates will be the focus of the first part of this article. Starting from the ideas of Castoriadis and Fotopoulos, I will review the growing literature about the ecological component of democracy and about the relation between democracy, autonomy and degrowth (see for example Cattaneo et al 2010).

In the second part of the paper I intend to explore the historical roots of conservative anti-urban and ruralism thought in Spain. In sharp contrast to bottom-up alternative approaches for self-sufficiency mentioned before, several historical episodes of the 20th century exemplify how authoritarian and fascist regimes have tried to establish similar economic goals from the top-down. The Spanish dictatorship led by General Franco (1939-1975), in particular, was a long-lived regime that was born through a bloody civil war won thanks to the aid of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. As its German and Italian

counterparts, the discourse of self-sufficiency and non-reliance on imports was central in the formation of the new regime. The objective to be reached was an autarkic state. However, it was far from successful, and the economic levels and standards of living previous to the war did not recover until the mid-1950s. During the first period of the dictatorship, the ruralist and conservative anti-urban ideology played a relevant role in accompanying the autarkic effort.

While historical anarchist and autonomous thought have undoubtedly paid critical attention to the negative aspects of urban living and configured alternative proposals (see for example Masjuan 2000), my intention in the second part of the article is to dig on the conservative aspects related to the very same topics. Therefore, first I will identify and characterise certain present-day approaches to degrowth that can be described as conservative. Second I will emphasise the importance of the historical roots of degrowth thought, something already briefly addressed by Martínez-Alier et al (2010) for the case of France. Third I will briefly review the literature related to the interest that the Nazi regime and other Fascist regimes showed for conservation and nature (see for example Uekoetter 2006). As the case of the Spanish Francoist dictatorship remains mostly unaddressed, finally I will explore secondary literature that has highlighted the importance of the anti-urban and ruralist ideology during the Spanish Civil War and first years of the Francoist dictatorship (see for example Alares López 2010, Lanero Táboas 2011).

In summary, as David Harvey put it, all ecological projects are political-economic projects, and vice-versa (Harvey 1996:182). The first two decades of Franco's dictatorship were no exception. The Spanish autarkic political economy put national natural resources at the forefront in a manner that previous regimes had not imagined. By reviewing the ideological underpinnings of anti-urban and ruralist Francoist thought I expect to improve our understanding on how the institutional arrangements carried out to implement autarkic policies in a violent non-democratic context can produce a long-term impact on the environment. Besides, studying the historical roots and ideological connections of green discourses such as Degrowth with conservative and non-democratic thought can be relevant to prevent green and alternative ideological discourses in relation to self-sufficiency to be captured and manipulated by political forces with a reactionary agenda.

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