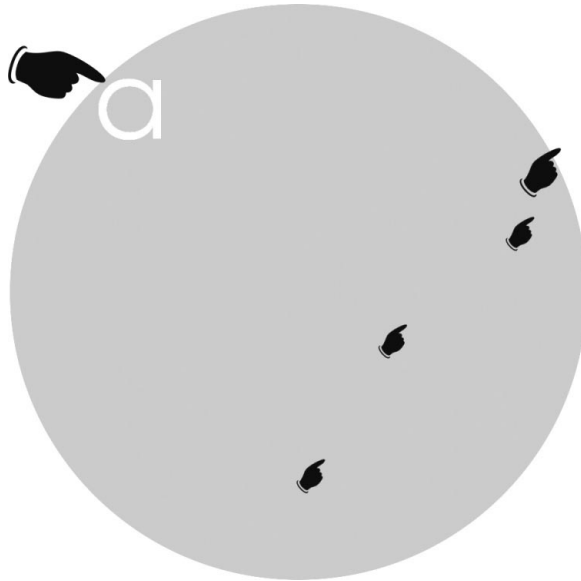


Extended abstract

Strategies of Social Participation in the “Emptied Spain”. An Analysis of Rural Activism in the Mountains of Burgos



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Highlights:

1. Depopulated territories are the scenario of an intensive collective participation.
2. Rootedness and a sense of belonging are key elements to this participation.
3. The new social participation entities are one of the core outcomes of a new rurality.

Abstract: This paper explores the process of social participation that is rising in some rural territories that are part of the so-called 'Empty Spain'. From a theoretical perspective, the study takes up the discussion on social movements and, at the same time, the idea of community and the sense of belonging. It has been selected the rural area Sierra de la Demanda, located in the Southeast of the province of Burgos (Castilla-León, Spain), as the most representative rural area of that empty Spain. The methodological approach is qualitative and is based on participant observation and ten in-depth interviews conducted to those who are engaged in the social spaces studied. The results allow us to consider that a progressive social participation is taking place, fostered by a sense of community that is discursively identified by the discourse and the actions, giving new features to the whole process.

Keywords: Social Participation; Community; Burgos; Rural Activism.

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Extended abstract

1. Introduction

The In recent years, the processes of collective action and mobilization unfolding in certain rural areas of Spain –commonly referred to as “*Empty Spain*” (*España vaciada*)– have gained renewed academic and political attention. This label has encouraged the design of strategies and public policies aimed at reversing the fragile and weakened image of rurality that the term projects onto public opinion. The expression also refers to its population, often portrayed as possessing a vulnerable social and cultural capital, with community networks that gradually erode as depopulation advances.

Against this backdrop, the study analyzes the processes of collective action developing in rural territories that appear, at first glance, to be more recessive in terms of social capital. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: What kinds of social participation are being built in territories with these characteristics? What profiles become involved in these participatory experiences? What claims and demands do they articulate? And what dynamics of organization and continuity sustain them?

The working hypothesis holds that, in these apparently less dynamic areas, significant social mobilization occurs, driven by individuals with strong territorial ties who develop participatory initiatives grounded in rootedness and belonging. The study thus recovers the role of collective action in rural areas and explores a type of mobilization anchored in three interrelated drivers: the revalorization of the idea of community, the recognition of the rural, and the implementation of collaborative actions that transcend the boundaries of political and administrative actors.

Accordingly, the main objective is to analyze and understand the intense collective action observed in the study area –an action capable of generating social and cultural capital, promoting forms of rootedness and settlement, and ultimately redefining the idea of community. One of the distinctive aspects of these entities lies in the largely intangible outcomes they pursue: on the one hand, enhancing the recognition of rural territories, and on the other, advocating for a renewed rural image that challenges long-standing stereotypes.

2. Methodology

The research draws upon theoretical contributions that examine new forms of collective action in rural contexts. Foundational studies by Woods (2003) and Mormont (1987) explored emergent modes of rural mobilization in France, England, and the United States, while more recent work (Luke et al., 2018) highlights connections between activism and place identity (Devine-Wright, 2009), understood as a key factor in the formation of local identity. Béjar's (2000) notion of the "creative community" further informs this study, emphasizing the capacity of collective practices to generate new social meanings and bonds.

The methodological design follows a **qualitative approach**, combining **participant observation** and **in-depth interviews** conducted in two stages. While grounded theory principles were applied –particularly in data coding– the research process was also guided by theoretically informed categories that provided an initial conceptual orientation.

The case study focuses on **Sierra de la Demanda**, located in the southeastern part of the province of Burgos (Northern Spain). This area exemplifies a regressive form of rurality from a sociodemographic perspective. Interest in the field site emerged in November 2020, when one of the researchers became involved in *El Valle Digital*, an initiative promoting digital participation in rural communities. Alongside *El Valle Digital*, four additional initiatives were examined: *Repuebla*, *Ábrego*, *El Bardal*, and *Tierra de Lara*. The latter, founded in 2008, represents the most established case, while the remaining initiatives were created within the last decade. The most recent –*El Valle Digital* and *El Bardal*–emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. These cases were selected for their comparable origins and their shared reliance on **digital technologies and social media** as tools for social mobilization.

3. Results and discussion

The findings reveal a significant revaluation of the rural as territories of opportunity, challenging the persistent narrative of rural decline. This redefinition is driven by local actors who seek to position rural life as active, creative, and socially cohesive. Their mobilization emphasizes the role of rural populations in decision-making

processes and demands the protection of vibrant, sustainable rural territories. This dynamic is sustained by a strong sense of belonging that extends beyond local boundaries. The initiatives demonstrate an innovative capacity to foster collective dynamism, constituting what could be considered an emergent conceptual category of rural mobilization. Rooted in affective components such as attachment to place and community identity, these movements embody a contemporary reformulation of the idea of "community." Unlike traditional associations, these collectives operate through horizontal and participatory governance, often independent from formal political or administrative structures. Although occasional collaborations with Local Action Groups (LAGs) occur, decision-making remains collective and autonomous within each initiative. This mode of organization not only enhances community bonds but also renews the ways in which these entities interact with public institutions at the local and regional levels.

Furthermore, the results also highlight the inclusive nature of these mobilizations. Participants represent heterogeneous social groups –diverse in gender, age, origin, place of residence, and political orientation– who, under ordinary circumstances, might not engage with one another. Nonetheless, certain forms of underrepresentation persist, particularly among migrant populations and newer residents motivated by lifestyle or personal experience, who often remain partially disconnected from community networks. The analysis underscores that the primary motivations for social participation in these contexts possess an **intangible yet fundamental nature**. Rootedness, territorial attachment, and a sense of community emerge as the central drivers of collective action. Following Béjar (2000), it is precisely this community dimension that endows social action with creative capacity and transformative potential. The initiatives studied move away from traditional vertical organizational models, instead adopting **flexible and** horizontal structures akin to the "new social movements" described by Offe (1985). This organizational style reflects a broader trend toward collaborative and affective forms of activism within contemporary rurality.

4. Conclusions and future directions

The study contributes to current discussions on the emergence of a "new rurality," defined by transformation, resilience, and social innovation. These processes reveal the

dynamism of rural areas and offer a foundation for renewed analytical approaches to rural activism.

Future research should further explore the long-term sustainability of these initiatives, their capacity to integrate underrepresented groups, and their potential influence on rural policy-making. Moreover, comparative studies across different regions could provide valuable insights into how digital technologies, affective belonging, and horizontal governance are reshaping collective action in contemporary rural Europe.