COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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The Affective Configuration of the Public Problem of Depopulation: From Resignation to Obstinance

Abstract

Participation in public problems involves diverse strategies, including the challenging and transformation of hegemonic affective configurations. By exposing and disrupting the established emotional norms, actors gain affective agency, enabling resistance against the prevailing status quo and facilitating active engagement in democratic deliberation. To explore this idea, we present a sociocultural analysis of the Empty Spain Revolt (Revuelta de la España Vaciada) as a compelling case study. Employing semiotic-enunciational discourse analysis, we focus on the affective-emotional dimension, utilizing the movement's Manifesto and photographs of banners from the March 31, 2019, demonstration in Madrid as our primary sources. Our research reveals the emergence of affective agency through three gestures: 1) Indignation as a Catalyst: Indignation serves as a driving emotion, stemming from frustration due to perceived neglect. This emotion fosters the assignment of responsibility to political parties and fuels demands for immediate action. 2) Pride and Urban-Rural Dynamics: The appeal to urban subject emphasizes the interdependence between urban and rural areas, advocating for justice, equality, and rural dignity. 3) From Resignation to Obstinance: The transition from a resigned figure to an obstinate figure shifts the enunciative agency. The resolute voices of the obstinate subject sustain a collective identity and enable a politically active subject. Our analysis underscores the pivotal role of affects and emotions in shaping public problems and in the articulation of actor. The process of dismantling existing affective configurations and presenting alternative ones not only influences encyclopedias and imaginaries but also impacts collective agency and power structures. This study offers insights into the intricate relationship among affect, discourse, and sociopolitical change.

Keywords
Depopulation, Empty Spain Revolt, demographic goal, semiotics, emotions, public problems.

1. Introduction

Depopulation, a significant sociodemographic phenomenon that profoundly influences Spain's territorial cohesion (Collantes & Pinilla, 2019; Moyano *et al.*, 2022), has become a prominent issue in the public sphere, capturing notable and exponential attention (Saiz–Echezarreta & Galletero–Campos, 2022). Despite its resurgence, depopulation remains a

consistent concern (Camarero, 2022). A critical view highlights media challenges in countering the deep-rooted catastrophic imagery tied to rural areas, often depicted as stagnant and declining, reinforcing collective memory. The persistently held view of rural areas as a distinct realm disconnected from urban regions by rigid boundaries rooted in significant territorial disparities is being questioned (Gines & Querol, 2019). Moreover, the intricate interrelationship between rural and urban environments receives insufficient attention (Andersson, 2019), which encompasses aspects such as rural cosmopolitanism (Sampedro & Camarero, 2020). Furthermore, the wide-ranging demographic fluctuations that give rise to diverse rural manifestations, particularly the heterogeneous pathways of depopulation, often not being inevitable, remain inadequately explicated (Collantes, 2020).

Nevertheless, there exists a noticeable void in the body of research that undertakes a comprehensive examination and refinement of these assessments, while also encompassing communication as an integral component within the interdisciplinary research on depopulation (Galletero-Campos & Saiz-Echezarreta, 2021).

With the explicit aim of contributing to the advancement of this research domain, we commence with the assumption that social problem, such as depopulation, transforms into a public problem when a series of actors strategically articulates a social apprehension to capture collective attention and construct a public that includes those directly or indirectly affected (Dewey, 2004; Zask, 2008). United by discontent, confronting crisis situations and shared uncertainties, they challenge the established status quo (García-Calahorra & Peña-marín, 2020). To achieve this, they must engender a shared emotional experience capable of resonating across diverse public arena (Quéré, 2017).

The Empty Spain Revolt (Revuelta de la España Vaciada, or REV) is one of the expressions of shared grievances stemming from depopulation (Camarero, 2022), but it has demonstrated diverse trajectories in the public discourse depending on the involved subjects (Sanz-Hernández, 2016). Positions vary both in sociopolitical and affective dimensions. For instance, the far-right's predominant affective mobilization strategy revolves around invoking fear (Aragón-Morales & Ruiz-Jiménez, 2023). The broader rural domain, and more specifically, the depopulated regions, become arenas for sociosemiotic and political disputes, given that rurality functions as a social construct hinging on processes of interpretation and legitimization, in which multiple agents construct and defend their respective visions of the rural and associated identities (Mormont, 1990; Ginés & Querol, 2019).

The primary goal of this research is to analyze one of these trajectories through an in-depth examination of the Empty Spain Revolt, a significant event that took place in March 2019[1]. The aim is to uncover how this movement contributed to reshaping the hegemonic affective order surrounding depopulation. As a secondary objective, we intend to demonstrate the practical viability of the concept of affective configuration as a valuable theoretical and methodological tool. This will be achieved through a thorough semiotic analysis of the discourse found in a selected sample of banners and the manifesto associated with the movement, as these artifacts are considered as inscriptions of the movement's core perspective. Our hypothesis suggests that the foundational manifestation of this movement represented an emotional experience that not only challenged the established affective order and common imaginaries but also proposed alternative perspectives. This, in turn, empowered an affective agency with a distinctive voice, which we believe to be pivotal in its transformation into a significant political actor.

This case study seeks to explore the role of collective emotions and affects in shaping public problems. Specifically, we are interested in investigating how expressions of emotion

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[1] The expression "España Vaciada" can be literally translated as "Emptied Spain." The use of the participle aims to highlight the political responsibility in the depopulation phenomenon, challenging the framework established by the preceding label "España Vacía" that emerged in 2016. We have opted for the expression "Empty Spain," which is the one that has become popular in English.

and affect influence the emergence of pressing public problems, in this instance, depopulation. Moreover, we aim to ascertain the extent to which the questioning of a dominant affective order –particularly concerning depopulated rural areas and their relationship with urban centers– impacts the formation of collective identities, and even potentially contributes to the emergence of new political actors, such as the political party Empty Spain, created as an electoral platform in September 2021.

1.1. *Theoretical Framework: Orders of Feeling*

Understanding, interpreting, and appropriating meanings involve an affective and embodied dimension, not just a cognitive one. Affective dynamics can be understood as mechanisms of meaning that enable particular ways of existing in the world. Thus, our feelings, observations, perceptions, and imaginations are influenced by affective habits that have developed over time (Peñamarín, 2020). These habits enable us to engage with and share emotions in the public space differently from other unique and individualized affective experiences.

In the public space, affects and emotions circulate as entities with a certain autonomy in relation to subjects (Ahmed, 2004). Therefore, we can recognize and establish varying degrees of closeness or distance in our relationship with them. This notion, rooted in the reflections of the affective turn (Arfuch, 2016), not only definitively moves us away from the traditional reason/emotion dichotomy but also challenges the conceptualization of affective experiences based solely on authenticity, reactivity, and immediacy. Moreover, it aids in the interpretation of public affective experiences, highlighting their semiotic, normative, and institutionalized nature. This conceptual framework opens up avenues for further research.

The first direction involves the integration of concepts such as trajectory, path, and network, with the assumption that no affect or emotion manifests in a pure or solitary manner. Instead, they rely on an affective backdrop and an amalgamation of various affects and emotions under tension. The second direction suggests that focusing on discourse and emotional expression based solely on authenticity or correspondence with subjects' personal feelings is not essential. To analyze the common affective order, it suffices to consider its performative capacity, manifested through enactment in the public space, which may even originate from simulation (Macón, 2020a). Lastly, all of these considerations enable us to interpret emotions in relation to objectives and strategies, connecting them with reasoning, arguments, and mechanisms. In essence, emotions are woven into structures of power, becoming stabilized components within encyclopedias, practices, and affective orders of varying scales.

The modes of affective stabilization enable positioning and contribute to the structuring of geographical, social, political, cultural, and symbolic spaces to which we belong and in which we operate, taking into consideration our emotions and affinities. In the field of depopulation studies, this hypothesis is implicated in conceptual propositions such as "shadow landscapes" or "cultures of depopulation" (Bryant *et al.*, 2010). These studies not only encompass geographical and discursive phenomena but also explicitly address an affective dimension (Anderson, 2019; Álvarez–Muguruza, 2021), which is fundamental for identity and community consolidation (Paniagua, 2019).

Several theoretical concepts refer to the realms of emotions in public space, all of which relate to affective experience as a habit and the ability of emotions to shape environments and social interactions (Montes, 2016). The proposals range from those that serve to identify potential yet undefined trends –"structures of feeling" (Williams, 1977, pp. 128-135)– to those that describe highly ritualized and specific contexts, such as "emotional regimes" (Reddy, 2001, p. 129), "affective economies" (Ahmed, 2004), or "affective arrangements" (Slaby *et al.*, 2019). Some concepts refer to how the affective is integrated into daily life, such as "affective atmospheres" (Anderson, 2014, pp. 137-161) or "affective milieus" (Schuetze, 2021), while others discuss the constitution of specific emotional practices endowed with a certain degree of

institutionalization, such as "emotional habitus" (Gould *et al.*, 2019), "affective dispositions" (Saiz-Echezarreta, 2012), or "emotional labor" (Hochschild, 1983).

These diverse conceptualizations enable an exploration of how the affective dimension delineates territories and boundaries within which subjects position themselves, as engaging affectively in a specific context becomes a mode of social participation. These intersecting contexts compel us to manage relationships encompassing emotional proximity, distance, and varying affective intensities, thereby shaping the interpretation and lived experience of each situation. The fluid nature of boundaries between these environments allows subjects to contribute in multifarious ways, influencing the consolidation, maintenance, or transformation of respective affective territories, where their roles diversify based on the intersections they occupy.

To illustrate this concept, consider a scenario in a depopulated area where a Local Action group establishes an "affective agreement," a "material-discursive formation in which affect is recurrently and repetitively shaped, channeled, and modulated" (Slaby *et al.*, 2017). This formation constitutes an organizational culture defining opportunities for affective engagement, often in the form of ritualized scenarios such as meetings and assemblies. Within these contexts, a distinct mode of being and feeling is inscribed, characterized by affective styles or flows, which can lean towards harmonious cooperation or, conversely, exhibit competitiveness and conflict, employing contrasting models. This habit, updated during each ritual, depends on the group's historical backdrop, material conditions, resource distribution, hierarchies, and the idiosyncrasies of participating subjects. Within the framework of this affective agreement, which may either persist and strengthen or evolve over time, subjects engage in affective labor. This entails their involvement in the management and negotiation of not only the practical aspects of the group and its activities but also in handling the internal and external affective relationships that underpin how the group projects itself and interacts with other actors.

It is plausible that this local action group and its members have been involved in shaping affective atmospheres over recent years (Anderson, 2014). We refer to a more fluid and indeterminate process through formal and informal encounters, where subjects have emotionally aligned with others who also view depopulation as a problem. We may suppose that, in many places, an atmosphere characterized by anticipation, optimism, hope, and motivation has gradually emerged as the issue gained increasing recognition in the public sphere, displacing preexisting atmospheres marked by frustration, anger, dissatisfaction, helplessness, or pessimism. Coming together, including within the digital realm, offers an opportunity for affective resonance (Paasonen, 2020), enabling the transmission and sharing of emotional responses to events. This resonance assists actors in attuning, connecting, and engaging with this atmosphere on cognitive, bodily, and sensory levels, thus allowing the expression of shared collective affects concerning depopulated areas and their ways of life.

Analytical scales facilitate a gradual transition of focus between micro and macro levels, as well as across different stages of institutionalization of affective habits, from more explicit rituals to subtler environments and atmospheres in which actors become integrated with less consciousness. The emotional positioning of these actors is further established through a tension-filled combination of various values and emotions, encompassing both positive and negative valences, forming intricate networks.

For instance, within the context of the Empty Spain Revolt, we can examine the emergence of positive emotions such as love, admiration for inhabited places, and a sense of belonging, which pave the way for a collective identity, evident in propositions like "Rural Pride" (Moyano, 2020). This new label of advocacy also fosters enthusiasm for collective action and optimism for change. Conversely, in the realm of dysphoric emotions, subjects grapple with negative feelings, such as anxiety and sadness, associated with the experience of being forgotten and abandoned, coupled with a sense of unease stemming from an anticipated future marked by risk (Sanz, 2016). They also experience shame, humiliation, and resentment,

derived from a cultural memory laden with disdain, upheld by the concept of the Spanish "Leyenda Negra" or "Black Legend" a portrayal that characterizes these areas as violent, illiterate, and uncultured, a narrative that interprets staying in these empty and declining territories as a persistent failure.

This intricate affective-emotional dimension, in conjunction with other factors, contributes to the recognition and legitimization of these actors as political entities, shaping their interactions with other stakeholders and influencing their ability to establish frameworks of meaning and proposals, ultimately impacting their potential to reshape the context. Actors engage in controversies with an axiological-value orientation not only towards the object of value they defend, but also in their manner of participating in the public sphere, which will depend on the emotions they experience in relation to their competence, performance, identity, and actions. As a result, their feelings about their struggle process and their ability to confront it successfully will also shape their public position.

Among the concepts under consideration, we choose the concept of affective configurations as a theoretical and methodological tool. This concept is used to describe the mechanisms that shape the collective affective order in the public sphere within specific contexts and regarding particular issues (Macón, 2020b). The articulation of an affective order, one that is habitual and legitimized, establishes boundaries and norms concerning the appropriate and relevant emotional experiences and expressions within a given domain. This order becomes ingrained in society, forming an encyclopedia comprised of imaginaries, commonplaces, representations, practices, habits, particular affective dispositions, and other material or institutional apparatus (Paolucci, 2020). Affective configurations are often perceived as seemingly unchangeable and inherent to the present, but despite this perception of them as reified orders, they exhibit an ambivalent nature. They operate simultaneously as mechanisms of preservation –acting as repositories of memory, while also functioning as catalysts for social change (Macón, 2020a, 2020b). These configurations serve as pivotal nodes for both consolidation and transformation (Slaby *et al.*, 2017), given their contingent nature, which signifies their productive and performative potential.

1.2. *Public problems and affective configurations*

The concept of affective configurations is well-suited for the scale at which sociocultural analysis of public issues takes place. Publics mobilized around a specific issue engage in democratic participation, seeking ways to capture attention, compel institutions to intervene, and explore and experiment with solutions not only for the defined problem but also to extend and solidify their struggles. The emergence of a public issue often involves the transformation, modification, or displacement of a hegemonic affective order. Intervening, therefore, entails addressing, challenging, and modifying indifference and reshaping a stable, naturalized sensibility, which is often perceived as unalterable or common sense. For instance, this process might involve changing an unjust distribution of emotions, where certain individuals are associated with negative emotions while others are associated with positive ones.

Proposing an alternative affective configuration, i.e., orchestrating new ways of feeling, serves as an act of resistance and democratic emancipation for the public (Macón, 2020a). Objecting to the insensitivity and numbness in the face of an unjust situation that requires challenge constitutes an affective operation as much as a cognitive and political one. It involves more than simply acquiring new knowledge, demonstrating the fallacies in arguments, or highlighting the inefficiencies of measures; the process primarily entails sensitization rather than mere verification (*Ibid.*). The hegemonic affective configuration is deconstructed and contested from within, as it represents a relational power structure in which seditious individuals are deeply entrenched (Lordon, 2019, pp. 120-125). The key to this affective sedition does not hinge on authenticity but on the collective capacity to simulate new affects and emotions, strategically staging them to subvert prevailing power dynamics (Macón, 2020a).

The alternative affective configuration is reclaimed as emancipatory and assumes a strategic role, serving not only to sustain questioning but also to intensify and amplify affective responses as tools for attracting attention, engagement, and the mobilization of individuals. Therefore, resisting a prevailing affective disposition facilitates the emergence of collective agency. This fosters collaborative actions and establishes a distinct temporality–advocating for change in the present rather than projecting it into a distant future–rejecting hope and eschewing the logic of waiting (*Ibid.*). Urgency articulates a present of resistance that combines a past rooted in shared memory with a future already available for living and experiencing, as Macón argues within the context of feminist struggles. The imperative for immediate transformation, the sense of historical inevitability, and the yearning for a transformed public sphere allow us to envision a future that is not merely claimed but already lived. It should have occurred and cannot be denied, despite persistent interests that seek to obstruct and impede the convergence of the present and future (Macón, 2020a). What is desired emerges from the future as something to be lived, unexpectedly breaking into the present, defying prediction, and remaining unforeseen. This unpredictability arises from seditious affects, akin to those proposed by the Empty Spain Revolt, disrupting conventional and naturalized affective configurations.

2. Methodology

Building upon the sociology of public issues (Bernal *et al.*, 2018), this contribution functions as a proof of concept for the notion of affective configuration, examining its theoretical and methodological utility. Within the framework of semiotics and discourse analysis (Abril, 2009; Peñamarín, 2015, 2020), semiotics is regarded as a "methodological practice directed towards the exploration of meaning" (Abril, 2009). This approach involves observing multiplicity, dialogues, transitions, and the articulation of meaning systems (Peñamarín, 2015). These tools facilitate a sociocultural analysis and a nuanced interpretation (Geertz, 2003/1973, p. 39) of public actions within the depopulation controversy context, thus refining the debate and framing future inquiries.

Within the broader project context, the mapping of the depopulation controversy identified the March 31, 2019, demonstration of the Empty Spain Revolt as a pivotal milestone, for tracing the creative and experimental efforts of mobilized publics. This event revealed a challenge to the hegemonic affective configuration regarding the rural/urban axis and the mobilization of an alternative affective order. It also contributed to the construction of narratives surrounding depopulated rural areas. Additionally, it gave rise to a vocal entity capable of articulating and shaping the identity of an emerging collective subject: Empty Spain.

From the perspective of the mediatization paradigm and the framework of hybrid media activism (Treré, 2020, pp. 65-67), our study focuses on gaining insights into public practices through their digital inscriptions (Latour & Hermant, 1999, pp. 174-178). The corpus for this analysis consists of the manifesto from the protest event and a curated collection of digital images capturing the banners carried during the march. To construct this image dataset, we drew upon photographic galleries sourced from news media outlets, content shared on Twitter through the hashtags #Españavaciada and #Revueltadelaespañavaciada on March 31 and April 1, 2019. Additionally, we complemented our data collection with Google's image search feature (see Annex).

Our analytical approach employs enunciational discourse analysis, rooted in the underlying hypothesis that texts function as mediators of various cultural processes (Abril, 2009). By examining the semiotic strategies employed within the texts, including the utilization of thematic elements, arguments, metaphors, and designations, we gain access to the layers of meaning, values, and emotions held by the involved actors. Furthermore, the rhetorical figures present in the statements allow us to scrutinize how individuals construct their identities, not only through their chosen textual forms but also by considering the

assessments and perspectives maintained by those who articulate their stance on the matter at hand (Peñamarín, 2020).

To enunciate means to establish an encyclopedic connection, giving rise to a statement through the fusion of a personal and impersonal voice (Paolucci, 2020). It represents the voice of the shared encyclopedia, shaped by the collective imaginaries associated with a common space. While discourses adhere to prevailing systems of meaning, each discursive practice simultaneously possesses the potential for performative modification, either reinforcing or subverting these systems in varying directions and degrees.

The voice of Empty Spain within the demonstration aims to reshape the shared encyclopedia. It challenges not only the conventional rural stereotypes but also contests the notion that these regions and their inhabitants lack a unified narrative or voice. Additionally, this voice questions the prevailing affective disposition of resignation as the predominant mode of participating in the public sphere, proposing obstinacy as an alternative response.

Our analysis delves into how enunciative positioning hinges on the composition of an emotional network, characterized by a specific intensity level and the capacity to generate affective resonance (Paasonen, 2020). This resonance, in turn, captures attention and mobilizes other actors to engage with the issue being brought to the forefront. The performative effectiveness of the demonstration, and the broader movement, can be evaluated in light of subsequent developments, including their presence in the public and media discourse, alterations in stereotypes, and potential integration into institutional frameworks. This article, however, focuses on more specific objectives.

3. Results

3.1. *Resistance and empowerment of Empty Spain*

A rebellion requires a gesture, not a state of consciousness (Macón, 2020b). In this case of study, a voice projected in public squares:

> Today, March 31, 2019, will remain in our memory as a great day, the day of the Revolt of Empty Spain. The moment when a resolute, peaceful, and poignant cry was heard throughout the country, filled with hope and solidarity. Empty Spain is on the move! Empty Spain will not be silenced!

This cry embodies a gesture seeking recognition as the voice of depopulated rural regions. It goes beyond being merely the polyphonic voice of an emerging social movement; it serves as an auditory connection between territories, symbolized by the presence of bells in the capital (see Image 1). The demonstration, as a foundational gesture, played the role of a ceremony, establishing a collective identity. It was endowed with a name (Empty Spain Revolt), an anthem ("¡Aquí quiero Vivir!" by Ronda de Boltaña), and a flag (the Spanish flag with an empty circle at its center) (see Image 2). These elements signify that this affective uprising does not originate externally but rather emerges from within.

Image 1. Demonstration 31M2019.   **Image 2**. Flag in the demonstration 31M2019.

Source: *El País*.   Source: *El Salto*.

Polyphonic enunciation constructs a multifaceted "we:" we, the forgotten ones who address public authorities; we, the marginalized; we, each individual residing in depopulated territories that define and grant us existence, worth defending, and a source of pride in belonging to; we, the rural inhabitants who appeal to urban counterparts for connection and respect; we, the steadfast ones, those who persevere having "come this far after a long journey."

We describe the process of the emergence of the affective agency of the Empty Spain Revolt through three simultaneous movements or gestures:

- A catalyzing movement driven by indignation as the engine for activating a public voice.
- An interpellation movement that spotlights and advocates for the interdependence of rural and urban areas, addressing both affective concerns and matters of rights and justice.
- A re-signification movement that shifts the hetero-designated enunciative position from the figure of resignation to the self-designated figure of obstinacy.

3.2. *Catalyst movement: from discontent to contained indignation and anger*

In the realm of social movements, the emotion of indignation stands out for its role as a central node in networks of heightened emotions. It primarily serves to visibly express anger in response to situations perceived as unjust. While it doesn't adhere to a single trajectory and can unfold through various paths, interconnecting with other emotions in distinct ways, we can identify a fundamental pattern marked by dysphoria. At the core of indignation lies frustration stemming from the breach of a trust contract.

In the narrative of the Empty Spain Revolt Manifesto, the depopulated regions initially had trust in the actions of politicians. However, the subsequent disappointment resulting from unfulfilled promises, such as the delayed arrival of essential services and infrastructure, led to frustration due to unrealized expectations. In the manifesto, they declare: "That neglected Spain, too often forgotten by the public authorities, is here today to make it clear that it demands attention to its problems and urgently seeks solutions. No more delays or excuses." This sentiment is succinctly and often sarcastically expressed on banners: "Depopulated Zamora. It has been betrayed," "With forgotten Spain," "You only remember us when it's time to vote," "My suitcase is full of unfulfilled promises," "Law 47/2007 on Rural Areas. Ignored."

The demonstration provides an opportunity to demand grievances for what was promised but not delivered and to advocate for essential services and infrastructure. Slogans such as "Granada needs trains," "Got a headache? Paracetamol, and 50 km to get it. Pharmacy now! Villar del Río," "Some from Soria are missing; their train hasn't arrived yet. #SoriaWants Future," "We've come to get coverage," "It's not a whim; it's a necessity. A32 now." Also in the manifesto: "This Spain has come by train… those who have a train; it has traveled by bus or

car on roads that need improvement. And the Mayor of Torrubia, Soria, even walked with his donkey Margarita to the Calatayud station. Just to make it clear that his town needs a bus!" Transport, especially the train, serves as symbols of the lack of connectivity and abandonment.

This situation elicits various emotional responses, with the most evident being discontent and anger, as expressed in phrases like "All my damn life the same." Additionally, there is a growing impatience and intolerance toward the prevailing context, which can sometimes escalate into desperation. This intense emotion is closely tied to the perception of danger, often framed in the most catastrophic discourse, such as "Sorians in danger of extinction," "Zamora. There's no one left here. We are the ones who remain," "Save Soria," "S.O.S. A part of our country is dying. We are the most depopulated area in Europe."

Internally, the protest aims to counteract this discourse with statements like "We must react. We cannot allow rural areas to languish. We will not allow it" (Manifesto). The key to addressing these concerns lies in mobilization, and as a result, demands are articulated with a sense of urgency, seeking genuine commitments compared to previous experiences. Participants call for "[m]ore concrete measures [...]. Depopulated Spain urgently requires a Pact, a significant State Pact with a broad parliamentary majority [...]." A pact to fulfill, not to display" (Manifesto).

A segment of the depopulated areas grew impatient, eroded trust, and intensified emotional involvement. Long-standing discontent across different regions found a common outlet through various media channels. These media entries, including the impact of Sergio del Molino's book (*Empty Spain*, 2016), Jordi Évole's program (What if your town disappeared?, 2017), news about new institutional initiatives, or the cultural trend of revaluing depopulated rural areas in literature (Acosta, 2022), music, or audiovisual production (Martínez-Puche *et al.*, 2022), served as indices, were interpreted and appropriated as signs of an opportune moment, and connected with expectations of change. They provided a platform for expressing indignation that not only demands improved infrastructure but also calls for fresh modes of representation to address the feeling of shame, as reflected in the manifesto's plea: "Enough of disqualifications," a sentiment echoed on banners, proclaiming, "Neither foolish nor abnormal."

At its highest intensity, indignation transforms into anger or rage. However, the tone adopted by the Empty Spain Revolt is not choleric or wrathful; instead, it is more closely related to restrained melancholic affects, expressing a sense of depression and disillusionment. This demeanor combines with the buoyant tone of hopeful pride. The potential for aggressiveness and its consequences are presented as a looming future possibility, akin to a pending explosion. Desires for revenge or resentment due to neglect, at least in this initial phase of constructing public discourse, remain unspoken.

Through this tone, the manifesto establishes a temporal framework, stating, "Depopulated Spain begins its peaceful revolt in Madrid [...]. A Spain ready for battle but extending a hand." It portrays a composed Spain, open to intensifying the struggle, always within established boundaries. This revolt is presented as inclusive and orderly, driven by indignation but not radicalized, aligning with the institutional roles of the involved actors, including local action groups, journalists, associations, entrepreneurs, and others.

3.3. *Interpellating movement: visualizing the equality and interdependence of the Rural-Urban axis*

One of the banners displayed the message: "We need more connection," a slogan with a dual meaning. It calls for improved digital infrastructure while simultaneously serving as an index of the second movement within the Empty Spain Revolt: the appeal to urban individuals from the perspective of dignified rural subjects. One of the primary objectives of public movements is to engage and mobilize a broader audience, expanding the discourse to encompass a matter of national citizenship. To achieve this, several strategies are employed.

The first strategy involves presenting depopulation as a nationwide risk, particularly due to health and environmental concerns, as well as for the sake of territorial, social, and economic equilibrium. This argument is further reinforced in the manifesto: "Without villages, there is no future, but the same holds true for cities, and for the severely deteriorated environment. The cohesion of the country is at stake. Our coexistence, as well as our health, are on the line. We lose population and opportunities, but with this reality, our nation regresses as a whole" (Manifesto).

Confronted with these imminent dangers, depopulated areas are positioned as guardians of environmental stability, a role they emphasize to urban individuals: "What will you do with the countryside when we are no longer here? Spain requires rural life. We are caretakers of 60% of Spain's land, tending to its water and nature for all." This call to attention seeks to emphasize mutual dependence and shift the emotional focal point that traditionally attributes urban areas as superior. There is an effort to allude to pleasure and kindness as means of establishing connection and care: "Spain needs us; without Sorians, there are no fried pork rinds," "Without my winter, your summer doesn't exist." This is coupled with a critique of perceived urban superiority: "€700 for 30 square meters, and I'm the one considered unsophisticated? Your high heels would be perfect for planting chives." The aim is to showcase the multifaceted nature of "Proud to be Rural," "You will experience our way of life. Come," "Life in the village is the best life," and "For a dignified rural life." It is a call to be noticed: "Rural Spain is essential; it deserves attention." It serves as a reminder that the rural is an integral part of our shared history, touching all citizens in one way or another: "Your grandfather was from a village."

The Revolt places a premium on the desire to remain in these regions, both as an individual aspiration linked to lifestyle choices: "I want to study in a rural setting," "I want to work in my village," "I want the option to live in my village," as well as a collective desire: "We want the freedom to choose our place of residence." Reference is made to the legitimacy of these choices, as the right to choose where and how to live is considered fundamental. Hence, the movement asserts that "Addressing rural Spain, addressing depopulated Spain, is a matter of justice" (Manifesto). For public movements to succeed, they must transcend their individual contexts and align their struggles with the democratic principles of equity. To this end, banners bear slogans such as "Being a minority does not diminish our rights!," "Equality: Village and city," or "We demand what is fair."

3.4. *Resignifying Movement: From Resignation to Obstinacy*

Our interpretative hypothesis suggests that in the narrative of the Empty Spain Revolt, resignation –and those who have resigned– have operated as hegemonic figures symbolically encapsulating the affective encyclopedia regarding the inhabitants of depopulated areas. How is the feeling of resignation constructed? Resignation involves relinquishing something of value, whether abstract or concrete, due to encountered obstacles, accompanied by a sense of sorrow over the loss. Consequently, the resigned individual becomes a melancholic subject who, to some extent, resists since they do not fully commit to the act of renunciation; instead, they deny it as external factors have forced them to abandon their pursuit. They cling to their purpose and adhere to principles that contradict renunciation, resulting in enduring suffering over time.

The narrative surrounding resignation attributes qualities of resistance, toughness, and stoicism to the resigned individual as affective dispositions, enabling them to withstand this suffering and adapt to the prevailing status quo. However, this attitude is challenged, to varying degrees, as evident in the slogans displayed on banners, such as "Rural residents are resilient but not immortal." Similarly, the term "Numantino," apart from referring to the inhabitants of a vanished city in Soria, according to the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE), denotes someone "who tenaciously resists to the extreme, often in adverse conditions."

Importantly, this adaptation should not be mistaken for acceptance. The resigned person asserts their individuality as superior and "indifferent to the actual mode of existence ascribed to the subject [...] they surrender, indeed, but from an imaginary horizon rooted in the denial of the world's state of affairs" (Barreto, 2021, p. 95). Therefore, the resigned subject is divided, their emotional competence characterized by tension. They seem to say "yes, but no," with the emphasis on the "no." This entails surrendering the object of value, but the surrender is protracted, insincere, and dysphoric, as it is not initiated by the individual but rather forced by external adversities. Consequently, they leave things to chance, believe in a more formidable opposing force, or yield to another's benefit (*Ibid.*).

From the hegemonic standpoint that has dominated the rural-urban axis, inhabitants of depopulated areas have resigned themselves to living in the given present, lacking not only the necessary recognition and support for survival but also the means to achieve a level of well-being and happiness without having to migrate, on equal terms with urban citizens. While it may appear that this narrative anchors individuals and territories to sad and depressive affects and passivity, in another sense, it provides room for action; its strength lies in their continued attachment to their object of value.

However, this "yes, but no" stance seems to have been insufficient over the years to maintain the affective configuration and power structure that prioritizes capitalist values of urban mobility. Given that the resigned subject has abandoned their struggle, their resignation has acted, allowing other actors within this urban distribution to cease paying attention or become indifferent, either because they don't care or it doesn't directly affect them, or because they accept the adaptational possibility open by the narrative of resignation.

In this context, the dual nature of the resigned figure may have been particularly advantageous, creating a gap and an opportunity for questioning the hegemonic affective configuration ascribed to depopulated areas. In an act of subversion, as indicated by the choice of the term "Revuelta" (Revolt), there is a shift in the enunciative position, giving rise to opposing figures, specifically the obstinate ones. The collectives mobilized by the Revolt aim to emancipate themselves from external narratives and seek to articulate their own discourse, narrative, and voice. This endeavor cannot be realized through a resigned and melancholic subject, whose values and affective dispositions are ineffective in garnering attention, generating empathy, and mobilizing public action. It is imperative to challenge the prevailing imagination, and obstinacy emerges as a pivotal element in reshaping the affective landscape.

Obstinacy is defined by a desire to act despite obstacles, meaning it embodies a "will-to-do that survives the inability-to-do" (*Ibid.*). It involves not relenting in the pursuit of the object of value, in this case, well-being, quality of life, and the status of full citizenship anchored in the territory. Obstinacy is constructed through strong affective intensity, an urgent desire, both in relation to its object of value and the process of pursuit itself–a desire not only to want to do but to be the one who does, to have one's identity visible in the struggle: "The obstinate subject dreams of fulfilling the desire, merging with the object of value, for which they must durably resist, holding onto their will that guides all the processes of struggle, which in a certain way equates to grasping a positive consciousness, the trust that makes the improbable seem probable or the impossible seem possible" (Barreto, 2021).

This yearning is what empowers the obstinate individual to endure contradictions, fully aware of the slim chances of success, yet persisting in confronting opposing forces. Their driving force lies in an unwavering belief in success, even while anticipating potential failure. An enthusiastic spirit propels them forward, and it is precisely this relentless pursuit that underscores the importance of the object they are pursuing. As Barreto (2021) aptly puts it, "for this passion, it is necessary to hold onto an ideal, a belief, or faith in the realm of values, even if it means dedicating one's life. It is perhaps the quintessential passion of seeking."

The obstinate person repeatedly returns to what is inherently theirs, what defines them –their struggle. This ability to persist allows them to project themselves into a long-term future. They envision a possible world, a system of meaning, and an affective configuration where their vision is viable, thereby legitimizing their existential trajectory. To paraphrase Barreto (2021) once more, "the obstinate does not endure because they are durable but rather endures because they are resilient" (*Ibid.*). Their stubbornness is not arbitrary; it serves as a means to resist being overwhelmed by opposing forces and to avoid succumbing to discouragement. Rooted in this resilient essence, there is no room for acceptance or resignation. Giving up their pursuit would entail relinquishing not only their object of value but also their very identity. Obstinacy places the assertion of one's existence at the forefront (Image 3).

Image 3. 31M2019 Demonstration.

Source: *20 Minutos*.

The case of Teruel Existe (Teruel Exists)[2] is paradigmatic, with a two-decade history of advocating for its existence and serving as a beacon of persistence for other regions. As stated by the Manifesto, "We have reached this point after a long journey. Teruel Existe began 20 years ago. Soria Ya! sounded its alarms 18 years ago, followed by Cuenca, Huesca, Ourense, Palencia, Jaén, La Rioja, Zamora, Ciudad Real, Segovia, Ávila, Guadalajara, Cáceres, Badajoz, and many other provinces grappling with depopulation." During the march, one of the most frequently seen banners displays the name of a municipality followed by the exclamation "Exists!" Additionally, slogans such as "Rural Youth Exist. 31M" and "Maintain Rebellion until Dignity is Achieved" underscore the spirit of this movement.

Obstinacy represents a force of resistance against the commonplace and habit. This enunciative voice becomes intelligible in moments of crisis, uncertainty, and discomfort because those who "persist momentarily detach themselves from society, setting aside the impossible, the improbable, or the inconceivable... ignoring other voices to listen only to their own, their truth, which they also speak aloud, making their cry heard" (*Ibid.*). This is why the manifesto states that Empty Spain is comprised of individuals who are "determined," and it extends gratitude "to all those who, without being heard or understood at first, fought to make the world aware that if the life of villages fades away, decline will reach the cities." Some have names of their own, "precursors who began the journey decades ago," such as Labordeta[3]. The appreciation of historical struggle is a key element in positioning Empty Spain as an obstinate subject, in contrast to the disempowered figure of resignation.

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[2] "Teruel Exists" was founded as a citizens' coordinator in November 1999 to advocate for economic and infrastructure development in the province. It ran in the general elections in 2019, securing a deputy, and transformed into a political party in 2021.

[3] José Antonio Labordeta was a singer-songwriter, writer, and politician, dedicated to rural issues, among other activities, such as hosting the television program "A Country in the Backpack" (RTVE, 1995-2000).

4. Discussion and conclusions

Through sociocultural analysis, we have argued the hypothesis that the REV has facilitated the emerging recognition of depopulation as a common problem by challenging the prevailing affective order and calling on the entire citizenry to combat indifference. By reinterpreting and legitimizing a collective memory, it brings forth a seditious subject who, through the mobilization of tactical emotions, alters temporality by bringing the desired future closer to the present. For this movement, unfulfilled promises and the lack of significant changes created an atmosphere of disillusionment catalyzing explicit frustration and indignation. The crystallization of an affective atmosphere, as well as the opportunity contexts of other orders, enabled the foundation of an alternative affective trajectory built upon these sad emotions, acting as a driving force for collective action.

The narrative of the Empty Spain Revolt places value on what could have been but was not. The disillusionment it provokes serves as a catalyst for envisioning an alternative future. As Macón (2020b) asserts, unmet expectations become a driving force for critical reflection on what remains unrealized. The Revolt strategically engages with emotions and enunciative positioning to disrupt the prevailing affective order, which often appears inescapable. In doing so, it articulates an affective agency characterized by resilience and empowerment. This movement challenges the identity of the resigned, resisting categorization as passive and indifferent individuals, and instead, it establishes the figure of the obstinate as a politically engaged and emotionally intense archetype committed to pursuing their object of value: the well-being and conditions of full citizenship in sparsely populated areas.

The utilization of an urgent temporality amplifies the performative and subversive potential of the Revolt's discursive and affective practices. The Revolt crafts its distinctive voice to contest the dominant sense-making systems, particularly the axiological-affective constructs of the rural-urban axis. Simultaneously, it engages in competition with other imaginaries and narratives about depopulated rural areas. Analogous to other social movements, the REV unpredictably disrupts the public sphere, facilitating the reconfiguration of meanings and challenging urban dwellers to acknowledge the fluid interdependence between rural and urban life.

The empowerment facilitated by the Revolt is based on making people feel differently. To achieve this, the movement feigns confidence in the nascent potential of a social movement, expressing optimism grounded in the emerging collective identity. It fosters affection and pride in their regions and lifestyles while cautiously avoiding dwelling on negative aspects that could contradict their narrative. These practices and discourses converge not only in advocating for an affective shift but also in fostering an agency through which the Revolt seeks to position itself as a political entity with influence, both within partisan contexts and on a broader scale.

Despite the declarations of love and pride during the protests, the reality in many areas offered little cause for optimism. Consequently, some parts of the discourse maintain a catastrophic undertone, referencing the imagery of dying villages, thus tapping into sentiments of anxiety, depression, or distress stemming from uncertainty. This rhetoric coexists with enthusiasm, reflecting the conviction of the movement's potential for success, even in the face of prevailing skepticism. This affective strategy aims not only to mobilize individuals with similar experiences but also to engage and connect with urban inhabitants. The reevaluation of affective patterns entails appreciating not only the inhabited places –depopulated rural areas– but primarily underscores the value of the struggle and the enduring memory of their collective endeavor.

The agency of the Revolt is grounded in the simulation of positive emotions, which give rise to a community, an identity that doesn't yet exist but exists in potential terms; their public actions preform it. For 2019, it is difficult to attribute to them a position of decisive strength,

and even some time later, doubts persist regarding whether depopulation will remain a long-term political concern. Consequently, their success hinges on reshaping temporal perceptions through imaginative exercises. They present the future as an ongoing process, challenging any alternative projections. This approach, rooted in urgency, effectively conveys the necessity of altering emotional paradigms and intervening in different dimensions.

In conclusion, we argue that one avenue for practicing democracy and addressing public issues involves modifying affective configurations. We conceptualize this process as an exploration and experimentation exercise undertaken by engaged publics in issue resolution. This process can lead to the development of an affective agency capable not only of resistance but also empowerment. The Empty Spain Revolt provides a pertinent illustration. In this case, they endeavored to articulate an enunciative position characterized by high emotional intensity and the potential to resonate affectively in public arenas beyond their regional and local action groups, reaching individuals outside depopulated areas and other rural territories. Their appeal to an urgent temporality creates a voice marked by tension, stemming from the disparity between their performative semiotic exercises and their actual capacity to exert influence within a specific socio-political context.

A challenge for publics is to explicitly delineate, deconstruct, and displace dominant affective configurations while proposing alternative ways of feeling. This necessitates semiotic endeavors aimed at reinterpreting existing frameworks, transforming systems of meaning, and instating new inscriptions within encyclopedias and imaginaries. Additionally, it entails the creation of agencies –positions of enunciation– comprising epistemic, ethical, political, material, corporeal, and affective dimensions. These agencies facilitate the exploration of multiple temporal trajectories, enabling the anticipation of the future in the present as a performative tool. Acting from a sense of urgency becomes a precondition for these endeavors. Ultimately, the goal is to influence sensibilities –whether nonexistent or unjust– pertaining to objects of value through the practice and simulation of collective emotions, thereby stabilizing and institutionalizing counter- hegemonic systems of meaning and affect. This emotional labor is typically manifested unexpectedly in the public sphere, as Spinoza posits that the transformation of affective orders necessitates the replacement of one affect with another, leaving no room for a void.

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Annex

The complete collection of images is available in the Figshare data repository with the following doi: https://www.doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.24847311