



Power struggles: dignity, value, and the renewable energy frontier in Spain

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'BP sets net zero carbon target for 2050' announced a *Guardian* headline on 12 February 2020. CEO Bernard Looney says BP stakeholders want change. While telling investors that, 'the company plans to keep growing its cashflows and shareholder distributions over the long term' records the article Looney said, 'to deliver [cleaner energy] trillions of dollars will need to be invested in replumbing and rewiring the world's energy system' (Ambrose 2020). After years in which nobody showed any interest, at last now as we enter the second decade of an apocalyptic century, the world's fifth largest oil company is to address the energy transition. And they are going to do it by casting off the past and creating a new future with the use of bold technological innovations. Or so we are to believe.

And yet none of this is true. BP's claim is especially absurd, but similar claims by capitalist firms, be they directly involved in energy or not, do not signal that we are entering a new ecological regime, simply adding baubles to an existing one. Nor is there anything especially new about trashing the past and announcing solutions for the future through the ubiquitous 'technological fix' that offers above all to 'keep growing the cashflows'. This current zombie-like life of modernist reasoning is as sinister as it is duplicitous. For those working in the global south you would need to have come to the show well into Act Two not to be aware that there are multiple forms of livelihood that do not conform to this kind of ecological regime and, as a result, have to combine their daily struggle with another, this one against the expansionist imperatives of capitalist firms and states.

Power Struggles is about the two worlds, the one of high energy modernity that treats energy as an abstract entity detached from social relations, the other the struggle of those who seek to reproduce the package of valued practices that make up their livelihood with as much autonomy as possible. Modernist projects in pursuit of 'renewable' energy are not spatially neutral. Rather they operate by doing the political work that constitutes rural zones of delivery as already impoverished and beneficiary zones as sites of progress. The struggle of those in these constructed peripheries, as a result, is not simply to retain the material conditions of living but also to counter imposed denigration with a positive sense of their own value. Franquesa finds in Southern Catalonia that this is expressed in terms of dignity; dignity expressed in various ways but that takes shape over the course of struggles. Struggling against the relegation of such a life to the past – the wastelands of capitalism – gives voice to dignity making it a material force of its own, as Marx would have put it.

Because in *Power Struggles* the account of these two worlds is not set in the global south but rather in the heart of Europe, it is especially powerful in belying the modernist narrative that turns spatial peripheries into temporal exemplars of the past waiting to be brought into the somehow sustainable future by technical experts. The complicated intertwining of the history of the two worlds that Franquesa describes and deconstructs are those of *the political economy of energy production in Spain* over the past century and *the livelihoods of people living in southern Catalonia*. As we find ourselves embroiled in the particularities of this history of what is essentially Catalonia's extended present, it dawns on us that we are getting insights into a much broader ongoing dilemma and crisis, or series of simultaneous crises – of capitalism, of the liberal state and of the juddering journey that may or may not produce an energy transition. It is the drama of the specific encounter that Franquesa writes of that makes this book much more than a regional study. The confusions, confrontations, continuities and catastrophes we learn about help us to put flesh on the bare bones of discussions we are all having in the anxieties of a present accelerating into what may already be a decided future.

The first chapter is ostensibly a historical account that places current changes within a broader temporal and spatial setting. But it actually introduces themes subsequently enriched as we move through the book. At first, this is rendered in binary terms as, 'a permanent struggle to reproduce autonomous livelihoods in the face of manifold political and economic structures producing dependence and marginality' (20). We are taken from the *regenerismo* of late in the nineteenth century, through the Civil War of the thirties, the period of Franco's *autarquía* up to the mid-fifties and thence to the turn to technocracy – Spain's so-called economic miracle that brings us to the transition following Franco's death in 1975.

As the chapter progresses Franquesa complicates this framing by introducing an underlying configuration that shapes the subsequent historical ethnography. He has already alerted us to the role of uneven development in Catalonia and Spain, à la Harvey or Smith. But unevenness for Franquesa needs a more sensitive temporal/historical dimension because the struggles that accumulate do not occur directly from the contradictions that arise out of the spatial and temporal dictates of the modern state and capitalism (37). Rather they are nonsynchronous in the sense used by Ernst Bloch:

Nonsynchronous contradictions are such not because the objective conditions that lie at their root are noncontemporary or because the groups that experience them are 'out of sync.' Rather ... [The struggles of the Southern Catalan peasantry] was a nonsynchronous struggle because it could only emerge by disrupting a teleological narrative of modernity and economic growth that condemned [these people] to irrelevance and dispossession. (37)

Moreover, insofar as neither the space of southern Catalonia nor the history of its inhabitants lies in isolation, so the forms of their *combination* with the various drives toward modernity taken by Spain configure a complex history that denies the regnant narrative of progress.

The *Terra Alta* of southern Catalonia has been the site of a series of energy initiatives by the developmental state from hydro-electricity, to nuclear energy and finally to wind farms, always in one form or another the result of extra-economic mechanisms of devaluation and dispossession (58). Chapter Two shows how decisions said to be technical and thus above politics characterized expansion of nuclear energy into what was essentially an internal colony. Diverse kinds of resistance built on the longstanding Catalan familiarity with anarchism and *autogestió* met with varying success at least until the arrival of the Socialist government in the early eighties. The opportunities provided by this albeit limited 'democratic opening' are taken up in the next chapter, 'Nuclear Peasants'. Complicating the situation was the fact that an antinuclear stance became hegemonic in the municipal administration of *Fatarella* at the epicentre of the struggle, while many used the income they derived from the construction of the plant and

its subsequent running as a way of making possible the reproduction of agricultural households. And this becomes a crucial feature making viable the livelihood whose reproduction is the driving force energizing the ongoing struggle.

Influenced by the way in which Edward Thompson spoke of 'moral economy,' Franquesa, like Thompson, refuses to disentangle the abstractions of morality from the practicalities of the economy. Local people's use of 'nuclear money' for example had a moral dimension; it could be 'embedded in the long-term cycle of reproduction of local livelihoods' (91) or it could be *malgastat* – badly spent. This entanglement of life's struggle with life's worth provides the basis for the discussion building up throughout the book and taken up in the final chapter's discussion of *dignity*. In fact, Franquesa argues that dominant economic arrangements are no less reliant on their moral claims. Indeed the moral economy of the local people was significantly shaped by their reaction to that of *la nuclear* (86).

Chapter Four, 'Southern Revolt', describes the emergence of a more or less coherent reivindicative project through the extension of combined struggles across neighbouring counties. In so doing it vindicates the importance of struggles *in combination*. Frequently configuring the nature, productivity and wellbeing in different, often incompatible, ways, accumulated struggles nonetheless result in resilience. With Chapter Five, we move to the offices of the advocates of wind energy and their cadres in the field. Failing to understand that, 'Energy transitions are not [simply] technological shifts,' early advocates are soon gobbled up by big capital. '[T]he key issue for the understanding of renewable energy', Franquesa notes, 'does not lie in the intrinsic character of its form but rather in the way it is organized and governed (for instance, as more or less centralized, or more or less democratic)' (131).

Chapter Six details the penetration of the wind farms into the *Terra Alta*, showing how the form dispossession takes influences the responses to it. Because the wind turbines penetrated the very space in which people lived and worked they had a paradoxical effect.

Few locals would deny that the nuclear plants Represented a bigger threat to the reproduction of local livelihoods. Yet [they] also provided the political spark and the economic resources to fight against them. The wind farms ... are more insidious; they constitute a difficult and divisive political target ... And the nuclear plants were always a bit far away, [while] the wind farms have impacted the intimate texture of the local fabric (203)

As an aside it's worth noting how this relation between capital and people mirrors perfectly the paradoxes of finance capital's relation to people.

The final chapter, 'Waste and dignity', is a tour de force, exemplary in anthropological writing, combining as it does the lively details of particular people's lives, more distanced empirical evidence illustrating heterogeneity among households, and a fascinating theoretical argument that emerges out of deep engagement with the particularities of history and of the present. Since, as the first word in the subtitle of this book makes clear, Franquesa wants to make a strong argument for the role of *dignity* in the oppositional world in which these people live, it is important to trace the simultaneous material and ideational nature of this feature as he understands it.

To make his point he threads this chapter through what we might fancifully call the ontology of the dry-stone wall. Itself an undeniably physical feature of the landscape, obviously the dry wall represents an often *longue duree* investment of labour (*apanyar pedra*). Insofar as it sits on the land giving it order and shape, it is also pushes labour and the person[s] of the worker[s] into the land, breaking a division so central to high energy modernity. And less obviously it is never completed. While to the visitor it may be a sign of the timeless effect of 'man' on nature to the *pages* (the countrymen or women), like the fields themselves it is always threatened by neglect, as though the stones once gathered into the order of the wall might return to be

scattered across an uncared for field from whence they came. In this sense, the wall lies there like Bloch's uncompleted past, a remnant that refuses to be abandoned.

Like the wall dignity 'cannot be examined outside of social practice and specific cultural constructions, frustrating any attempt at purely conceptual discussion' (221). If a prerequisite for high energy penetration is the devaluation of this landscape and the denigration of its people, then 'dignity emerges as the "other" of capitalism's *constitutive premise*: the separation of people from their means of reproduction' (222, *italics in original*). This is relatively clear when we see it expressed as indignation in the face of opposition, but 'maintaining this subjectivity and maintaining the land are hardly distinguishable' (224). So 'The *pages*' demand for dignity is part of a struggle to establish the order of elements conducive to the reproduction of the community ... 'faced with forces bent on its disturbance (225). In short dignity condenses relations and practices and gives the whole its coherence through struggle; struggle which is at times confrontational, but struggle which also takes the form of daily suffering. As Iban says on the penultimate page of the book, 'one can only enjoy the *mas* (the dry-stone walled dwelling) through suffering. [But] the suffering of the *mas* is different from the suffering of being jobless' (233).

The nature of the crisis makes it hard not to think in large-scale terms but grandiosity is at least partly why we got here in the first place. *Power Struggles* is one of those rare books that, by the very specificity of its detailed attention to the particularities of history, place and people, gives us the tools to get at the complexities of the many different struggles that arise in the face of capitalism's unrelenting expanded reproduction.

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