

Jaume Franquesa, *Power Struggles: Dignity, Value, and the Renewable Energy Frontier in Spain*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-253-03373-4 (cloth); ISBN: 978-0-253-03372-7 (paper); ISBN: 978-0-253-03374-1 (ebook)

Iban Keeps Resisting

Bernat and Toronto are sitting on the edge of the world. They are both looking in the same direction, but while one sees the end of the world, the latter entertains the idea that this is where, in fact, the world might begin. They are surveying the landscape of Terra Alta, following the double curve of the Ebro as it finds its way to the sea, but what they are both trying to make sense of is the history of energy inscribed in the landscape: the dams, nuclear plants and wind farms that one can see sitting on the edge of the world. The opening pages of *Power Struggles* force the reader to accept, from the very beginning, that this is not a book that seeks to smooth out or explain away contradictions, but one that makes them its central object. Throughout seven chapters, Jaume Franquesa, known to his friends and interlocutors in the Southern Catalan village of Fatarella as Toronto, pushes the reader not to decide who between Bernat and Toronto is right, but to accept their difference of vision as the expression of the contradictory forces that organize the landscape of Southern Catalonia. One does not travel to the edge of the world to resolve contradictions, but to understand them.

Power Struggles is, in the description of the author, a “book about two worlds: about the political economy of energy production and about the livelihoods of Southern Catalans” (p.5), although no attentive reader would conclude at the end of the book that the two can stand apart. It is through the stirring analysis of the mutual containment of these two worlds, in their “contradictory combination of inseparability and incommensurability” (p.8), that Franquesa tells the history of the making of Southern Catalonia as an internal energy periphery and the currents of resistance that have accompanied this process. Analytically, energy transition is at the heart of the book. Southern Catalonia was central to the 1970s and 1980s efforts to establish the Spanish transition to nuclear energy, with four out of Spain’s ten nuclear reactors located in the region. While at the national scale Southern Catalonia’s role in the transition to wind energy is different,

representing a much smaller portion of total installed capacity, once we zoom in regionally its importance becomes manifest: half of the current production of wind energy in Catalonia takes place here, in a region that accounts for a mere 3% in population and 10% of the total surface of the autonomous community. These two energy transitions and the undercurrents that connect them are the focus of an analysis that seeks to reveal the social processes into which a long history of unequal economic and ecological exchange is embedded. *Power Struggles* delves deep into mirror processes to reveal how two fundamentally different energy sources, nuclear and wind, can both take on extractive characteristics. Through its focus on the social relations that govern energy systems it provides a much-needed corrective to the technological optimism that infuses resurgent ruptural visions of renewables. Through its combined treatment of the nuclear and wind transitions, *Power Struggles* reveals the way in which different energy sources can crystallize as similar energy models. Situated in the broader political economic context of center-periphery dynamics, the analysis of processes of opposition and resistance to wind energy development rescues the political potential of both past victories and current defeats.

If energy transition is at the center of the book, its foundation is the historical arch that extends over the two most important periods of economic growth in more than half a century of Spanish history leading up to the present: the lingering combined crisis of the Spanish countryside and Spanish agriculture. The narrative arch is roughly chronological. The first chapter provides a historical overview of the transformation of rural and agrarian relations of dependence as an expression of the transformation of the country-city divide. While Franquesa's research substantially addresses the period that begins with the late Francoist industrial modernization agenda, his analysis of the transformation of relations of production and reproduction in the Catalan countryside is couched in a broader historical context that begins in the last decades of the 19th century. This chapter does the important job of familiarizing the reader with the Other of the modernization of the Spanish economy from the late 1950s onwards, the so-called "crisis of traditional agriculture". The chapter provides a good introduction to the historical processes that underwrite the erosion of the conditions of reproduction of small agrarian producers and the rise of semi-proletarianization in the region. Through the remainder

of the book the author's analysis of semi-proletarianization and the way it operates not merely as an economic process but as a culturally coded social relation stands out as ethnography at its best. Building on the description of the century long rearticulation of the country-city divide, chapters two and three address the history of the nuclear *transaction* as a central process in the making of the post-Francoist political order. Franquesa's argument is that the nuclear transition is a central element of the political transition from Francoism to democracy, and a key element in the reproduction of the socio-economic relations that bridge Francoism and post-Francoism. The ultimately failed nuclear transition, it is convincingly argued, acted as a stabilizing force containing political democratization and opening new opportunities for accumulation through the expansion of the electric sector. The strongest part of the analysis of the nuclear transaction is perhaps the subtle engagement with regional antinuclear opposition. Not only does *Power Struggles* offer a convincing interpretation of the different outcomes of regional antinuclear struggles, it also powerfully argues against those economically inflicted readings that postulate any type of simple correspondence between economic interests and class consciousness. Franquesa's analysis of the antinuclear peasants that defend their autonomy in spite of their dependence on work in the nuclear sector offers a masterful corrective to paternalistic workerism that fails to recognize the autonomy of the working-class subject. It does so by reinstalling the semi-proletarianized peasant as a full political subject (as opposed to constructing them as a victim of circumstances).

Chapter four functions as a bridge between the two transitions, to nuclear and to wind energy. Before moving into the inner workings of the wind bubble in the final three chapters, the author provides an overview of the "Southern Revolt", the collective signifier through which an intense period of regional territorial and environmental struggles in the first decade of the 21st century came to be known. The discussion of the Southern Revolt makes possible two further steps. First, since this was a wave of opposition to large infrastructural projects it allows the author to open a different window upon the development of energy projects. The construction and infrastructural boom are well known environmental processes that have accompanied the most recent period of sustained economic growth in the history of Spain, a period Franquesa

designates as Spain's "Second Miracle", and this chapter rethinks developmentalism through electricity projects as integral parts of this process. Second, this chapter makes possible establishing the connection between opposition to nuclear and to wind energy and a broader genealogy of peasant activism, environmental struggles and composite regional struggles for autonomy.

The remainder of the book deals primarily with the development of wind energy in the region and opposition to it. These are struggles the meaning of which cannot be properly understood without understanding the importance of wind energy at the national level. In 2013 wind became the main energy source in Spain, yet it is in the same year that investment into wind farm development began to decline, a process of boom and bust that is concisely and efficiently presented. The stakes of the analysis become clear early on, even though they are never too didactically stated. The main contribution of Franquesa's analysis of wind energy development and opposition to it is the dismantling of those narratives, popular, corporate or scholarly, that portray opposition to wind energy as backwards looking, nostalgic, reactionary or antimodernist. This is enviably achieved. Through his discussion of the political idiom of dignity and indignation the author recovers the silenced histories, radical potential and alternative social imaginaries that permeate opposition to wind energy. He reveals, in a powerful way, that the Southern Catalan resistance to wind energy is a struggle not against wind energy but against an energetic system and social model that has captured wind energy in favor of a political and economic regime that remains centralized, authoritarian and fundamentally dependent on processes of devaluation. The book begins and ends with the crisis of agriculture, which rather than a fortunate coincidence seems like an elegant narrative choice and a useful analytical device. By the last chapter the reader has well understood that the possibilities of imposing authoritarian energy projects in the region are intimately related to a crisis of reproduction that has its origins in the crisis of agriculture. What the last chapter adds to this is a moving exploration of the ways in which rural livelihoods remain resilient in the face of pervasive agricultural desperation. And by the time the reader reaches the last sentence in the book, "Iban

keeps resisting”, they not only understand what Iban does, but they hang on to the thin possibility that Iban might actually succeed. This writing is a political feat.

Other commentators (Abram 2019; Mazur-Stommen 2019) have described Franquesa’s book as primarily about wind energy, which misses the important point that although the transition to wind energy occupies a larger part of the book, the author’s insights about wind energy are fully dependent on his analysis of the nuclear transaction. Were it not for the implicit and explicit comparisons this affords and were it not for the reconstruction of the historical entanglement of these two transitions this would be a very different book, and certainly a much less interesting one. The point has also been made that “Franquesa is strong on the Marxist analysis of energy interests and masters the intricate political history of the region but is on less firm ground in relation to energy technologies or the functioning of an electric grid” (Abram 2019: 777). In the absence of any explanation of why such a different optic would be important or what it could reveal about the reality at hand, such an observation is primarily a concession to popular trends rather than a critical insight. This line of criticism is one that can be easily anticipated from people writing in the anthropology of infrastructure or energy. But such points are rendered moot by Franquesa’s explicit challenging of fetishistic readings of technology and an increasingly pervasive sensual and hyperempiricist materialism in a way which leaves little room for appeal. To be sure, this is not contextual or accidental, but explicitly assumed: “The real debate around energy transitions is not about shifts in technologies and resources, but about the structures that govern the energy system in specific historical contexts” (p.135).

Franquesa is nominally an anthropologist, but *Power Struggles* is much more than a work of anthropology. The author moves with ease between different disciplines, and his ability to seamlessly bring together resources from anthropology, geography and social history is matched by an equally impressive ability to cut across levels of abstraction. The book, however, is fundamentally the work of an ethnographer, and part of its analytic strength is an echo of the strength of its framing method: historical ethnography. The limits of the book primarily, and perhaps unavoidably, seem to have their origin here as well. This is not only a historical ethnography, but a regional historical ethnography, or in self-description, “an ethnographically

situated, kaleidoscopic history of Southern Catalonia focused on how its inhabitants engaged with energy projects and facilities throughout the last half-century” (p.5). There is little in the writing that seems accidental, and it feels quite reasonable to assume that the more visible limitations of the book (at least upon second reading) are deliberate choices or knowing concessions. Their consequences, however, remain important.

The Limits of Regional Ethnography

The 11 months of discontinuous fieldwork the author conducted between 2010 and 2014 are described as a move through concentric circles of ethnographic inquiry, with the third (and outer circle) leading the author to Barcelona for getting to know those involved in the development of wind energy. Franquesa not only proves his capacity to reconstruct the local idioms he encounters, but what he is extremely good at, a point I will return to, is revealing local idioms as fully operative “local theoretical frameworks” (a self-conscious move which echoes the work of anthropologist Susana Narotzky). However, this makes it rather difficult at times to return to those emic theoretical frameworks that make reality operative at different scales. The one which takes the hardest blow in the book is the national scale. Two aspects of the story Franquesa tells stand out as needing the reinforcement of a broader Spanish history: the crisis of agriculture and the history of antinuclear struggle.

In Southern Catalonia the agricultural crisis takes the form of the crisis of traditional dryland farming of Mediterranean commodity crops. The reader learns enough about the manifestation of this locally and regionally, but what they never truly learn is how this fits into the broader story of the rise of industrial agriculture in Spain. On this point, there is almost complete silence. This serves well the argument about regional internal center-periphery dynamics, but does little to elucidate center-periphery dynamics at the national scale. As far as the antinuclear struggle is concerned, the importance of the diverse political traditions and struggles that feed into it is well established. However, more attention is paid to the international scale than the national scale. This is a rather unconvincing jump, since the antinuclear struggle in other regions of Spain, most notably in the Basque Country, was paramount and produced a

regional tactical repertoire that was at least as important as the more international political languages that we see described for the Catalan case. This also feels like a missed opportunity, since it would seem that the importance of the antinuclear struggle in the presence of a peripheral type of nationalism makes the national scale of the antinuclear struggle potentially much more relevant than the author suggests.

The Elephant in the Room

This effacing of the national scale and the focus on local and regional political idioms brings up a related point. Franquesa is so good at revealing the ways in which emic political language functions as a local theoretical framework that sometimes his ability overburdens alternative voices and marginalizes broader histories. He does not speak for his informants, but allows them to be heard while building an echo chamber that allows local dialects to scale up analytically. It is clear that the author writes in solidarity. Yet, this produces a rather heavy silence on the issue of Catalan nationalism. It is hard to imagine this as anything but a deliberate choice, since so much of the book is devoted to recovering the language of autonomy and *autogestió* without recourse to discussion about Catalan nationalism. And to be fair, the author makes the occasional move to signaling institutional political actors and their involvement with Catalan nationalism. It is also clear that this strengthens the point about the region being an internal periphery of Catalonia, so the stakes are high. Yet, especially in the light of developments in Catalonia after the period of fieldwork, this remains an unconvincing move. In this case, it feels like the author should have moved from the more elegant form of criticizing by way of showing to, at the very least, a direct engagement with the issue of Catalan nationalism. Even if just to support the general argument. In a less important, but metonymically functional move, the author, in what perhaps might be indeed an anthropologist's reflex, constantly foregrounds the local political idiom. Such is the case with *autogestió*, the Catalan rendition of which does more to mystify than elucidate. Self-management, a pretty standard translation of *autogestió* (but which at the very least finds an equivalent in the Spanish *autogestión*, the Italian *autogestione* or the French *autogestion*) is a political term with a loaded history, marked by its different inflections and

different histories of urban workers' struggles for self-management and peasants' struggles for autonomy. Not only Catalonia, but also Spain, bear a special relationship to these different but converging histories of self-management, and any reader slightly familiar with the history of Spanish anarchism will immediately sense the sediments of these traditions in the struggles described. Yet, Franquesa is similarly silent on these histories (he takes them up indirectly through the references to the Spanish Civil War), but otherwise it seems that his nod to these traditions is just too subtle. If for the familiar reader, disclosing that an activist is a member of CNT (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo – the main anarchist union) might carry quite some explanatory weight, this will certainly not suffice for the reader less acquainted with the context. But, more importantly, this will most likely result in overstating the autonomy of the struggles described.

The Burden of Bibliography

Power Struggles is a book that touches on many popular topics: energy, infrastructure, nature-human relations, the production of space, to name just a few. For an anthropologist, to escape the pressure to tune into the latest buzzwords and the subdisciplines mushrooming around them is a meaningful act of academic resistance. Franquesa does something that resonates with this but remains respectful and conversant enough with the more recent developments in the anthropology of energy and infrastructure. But he makes no concession to defining his object of study and selecting his theoretical apparatus from the narrow confines of more or less arbitrarily carved out subdisciplines. The theoretical breadth of the book is impressive, an effect achieved primarily by the fluid way in which different authors are brought into dialogue, and concepts with deep genealogies are mobilized as analytical tools. Raymond Williams, Ernst Bloch, Lewis Mumford, E.P. Thompson (standing on the shoulders of Marx and Benjamin) are clearly in the author's gallery of heroes. These authors, however, are not resurrected in deference to canon, but rather made to feel alive through ticking concepts. Circumventing the all too common habit of reading foundational authors exclusively through secondary literature, the analysis confirms the ongoing relevance of original texts and established concepts. The use of Williams' work on the

country-city divide or Bloch's concept of nonsynchronicity are but two examples in a significantly longer list. But complementing this is a deep familiarity with Spanish social and economic history, regional ethnography and, importantly, political economy. English language writing in the social sciences about Spanish topics all too frequently minimizes the national and regional scholarly contributions and treats the Spanish language academic contributions as commons waiting for enclosure. This is not the case with *Power Struggles*, the indebtedness of which to Spanish scholarly work is made manifest.

This perhaps makes even more noticeable the few concessions that the author does seem to make to more recent conceptual coining. The most evident example is perhaps the recourse to the concept of waste as formulated by Vinay Gidwani (e.g. 2012). The discussion about the dialectics of waste and value is central to the analytical efforts of the book and serves to conceptualize the processes of devaluation that Franquesa shows are central to the accumulation strategies unfolding through electricity production in the region. The idiom of dignity is a political response to the capitalist efforts to reduce livelihoods and land to waste. Waste is not simply unproductive, but also productive of value, since it becomes the raw matter of extraction. The discussion of waste, however, carries with it an unresolved tension about whether the production of waste is a process internal to capitalist dynamics or whether it captures a fundamental relationship between an outside to capitalism and its inside. The reliance on Gidwani carries with it the idea that waste is (also) necessarily about a non-capitalist outside subordinated to capitalist relations of production. Yet, the whole discussion of center-periphery dynamics makes a much stronger point, namely that "peripheries are peripheral *in* capitalist processes of accumulation, but not *to* them" (p.14), an affirmation which well resonates with those processes of devaluation that Franquesa describes as part of the dialectics of value and waste. "The analysis of waste allows us to understand the permanent operation of primitive accumulation, not as a specific historical stage, but rather, using Werner Bonefeld's neat expression, as the 'constitutive premise' of all capitalist relations" (p.204), it is maintained. However, this remains a highly doubtful observation that is not confirmed by the strength of the findings resulting from the recourse to the concept of waste. Rather, what the concept of waste

seems to do for the author is to allow him to identify the specific moral and cultural coding of broader processes that constitute the continuous operation of primitive accumulation. The latter seems to remain the broader and stronger concept, and the reader is left wondering why accumulation by dispossession does not figure more centrally in the theoretical and analytical repertoire of the book.

A more evident concession to recent literature and conceptual coining appears early on. In the introduction a discussion on the *ideology of energy* highlights the processes of *alienation* and *fetishization* that accompany the development of high-energy modernity. Oddly enough, both concepts are introduced through Anna Tsing's (2015) work, which for a book that is quite comfortable on Marxist terrain seems a rather unsatisfactory shortcut. More importantly, though, the prelude to the discussion on the ideology of energy introduces the often-repeated idea in contemporary studies of infrastructure and electricity that it is the *invisibility* of energy from which it draws some of its special characteristics. However, "the unusual experience of *seeing* energy" (p.5) with which the book and this review open appear, by the end of the book, as rather mundane for those struggling against or in favor of energy developmentalism in Southern Catalonia. If anything, *Power Struggles* is a lesson in how, sitting on the edge of the world, electricity is very much visible. The weakness of these initial forays into invisibility as a special marker of energy development and energy systems is augmented by the fact that this is a discussion which is not meaningfully taken up again for the remainder of the book.

Making Sense of Contradiction

"My own analysis is based on a less intimate knowledge than theirs, but reflects a different perspective, from which two things stand out that appear to contradict each other ... I want to try to make sense of these contradictory ethnographic facts in terms of some others" (Narotzky 2015: 66). The recognition that the informants' perspective is intimate knowledge in a way which is not readily available to the ethnographer is a foundational statement about the politics of knowledge production. It is from a political space carved out in the spirit of this statement that Franquesa writes. The reader familiar with the point at which the anthropology of Spain and the

anthropology of class intersect will quite easily notice that *Power Struggles* builds on a tradition which includes important predecessors such as *Immediate Struggles* (Narotzky and Smith 2006), a now disciplinarily commanding historical ethnography of the Vega Baja region of Spain. The Spanish anthropology of class, as articulated in the work of authors such as Susana Narotzky and Gavin Smith, has made a very important contribution to advancing discussions about the conditions under which ethnographic knowledge production can constitute itself as a meaningful political intervention. *Power Struggles* recommends the author as both an outstanding disciple of this tradition and a writer that has the force to move beyond it. In light of its achievements, the limitations of the book look less like shortcomings and more like frontiers waiting to be explored.

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