

Mobilities in Remote Places

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Chapter 10

The Immobilities of Non-automobile Residents of Rural Spain

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10 The Immobilities of Non-automobile Residents of Rural Spain

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The recent financial, health, and geopolitical crises occurring in numerous European countries have deepened disparities between rural areas and metropolitan centers in terms of access to opportunities and services. Particularly in the south of Europe (Döner et al., 2020), budget cutbacks brought in during the long economic recession have exacerbated the dismantling of rural services that had already been in progress through general policies since the end of the last century (Woods, 2005). The consequent intensification of rural automobilization has arisen as a response to peripheralization processes.

Our research, presented in this chapter, is not the first to show how the private car is used (or in some cases, not used) by rural residents to reach a variety of services that urban residents can access far more easily. Recent rural studies have increasingly paid attention to the deficits in accessibility and the role played by daily mobility in the sustainability of rural areas. First in the United Kingdom (Cloke, 1984; Moseley, 1979; Nutley & Thomas, 1995), and then later in the rest of the continent (Camarero et al., 2016; Gray et al., 2006; Osti, 2010), these works challenge the traditional idea of rural accessibility as a mere transportation problem, while focusing on different social conditions it produces, such as immobilized groups, as well as its relationship with gender inequalities and generational differences. An increasing number of studies detail an intensification in daily commutes, distances travelled, and variability of itineraries (Ahern & Hine, 2015; Brovarone & Grunfelder, 2021; Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Osti, 2010). Hypermobility is usually associated with cities, although the use of private cars is more intense in rural areas. This rural hypermobility contrasts with the traditional vision of an isolated and immobilized rural world.

The mobilities paradigm (Sheller & Urry, 2006) shows the clear boom in commuting, migrations, circulation of signs, and commodities that define the globalization era. Research within this paradigm has allowed for a more complex understanding of rural change (Bell & Osti, 2010; Hedberg & do Carmo, 2012; Woods, 2005) and for a conceptualization of the mechanisms that trigger inequalities in accessibility (Cass, Shove & Urry, 2005). Furthermore, these works warn of

the coercive role of the “system of automobility” (Urry, 2004) as the predominant mobility model.

Mobility substantially defines modernity (Canzler et al., 2008) and is a multifaceted and unequal resource that can be transformed into economic, social, and relational capitals (Kaufmann et al., 2004). Such forms of capital provide the structure behind decisive social, economic, and political divisions. This matter has taken a prominent position on the political agenda recently as pressure has grown from regions and social movements that perceive themselves as being left out of projects and investments.

Our study, based on fieldwork conducted in 11 Spanish districts, focuses on the challenges that accessibility and mobility pose for the populations of remote areas. The research presented here sheds light on rural residents’ day-to-day experiences in relation to the complex feeling of remoteness faced by these communities. The findings are based on multi-site fieldwork carried out in 11 rural districts in four Spanish Autonomous Communities (Navarre, Castile La Mancha, Castile and León, and Aragon) (Figure 10.1), which make up a major part of inland Spain. These areas of Spain are very unpopulated and are peripheral with regard to the large urban areas located on the coast. Half of Spain’s inhabitants are concentrated in the metropolis of Madrid and the coastal zones. The other half, inland Spain, occupies the remaining 91% of the territory, with a mean population density

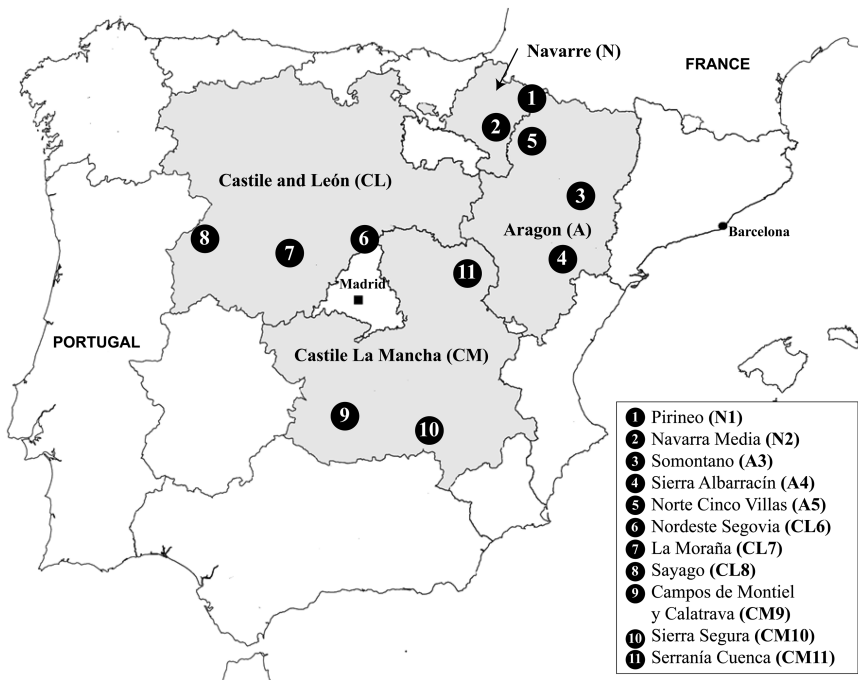


Figure 10.1 Location of the remote rural areas studied.

of 53 inhabitants per km². Within this latter half, there are places with very low population densities: the group of municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants accounts for 28% of the territory and contains fewer than 2% of the population. Its mean population density is around five inhabitants per square kilometer, a value approaching that found in some of the most unpopulated zones of the planet, countries such as Iceland and Canada, which are discussed in this book.

Our studies¹ on the residents of inland Spain draw upon 75 in-depth interviews with key experts and informants, as well as rural residents selected according to their social conditions. The common thread of our multi-site fieldwork has been a focus on how mobility shapes territory and enables and constrains daily life, opportunities, and welfare. Our research over the years has taken place in three waves. The first wave (2012–2016) centered on understanding the role of mobility in the resilience of remote mountain communities such as those in the Pyrenees in Navarre ($n = 22$), on the France–Spain border. The other two waves (2019–2021) have analyzed the problems of accessibility and the rural gap. The second wave centers on the zone of Middle Navarre ($n = 26$) and analyzes depopulation and aging because of dispersion, mountainous terrain, and secondary roads (despite being near the regional capital city). The third wave ($n = 27$) studies the problems of accessibility of public and administrative services. For that study, three zones were selected from each of the most depopulated autonomous regions from the interior of Spain (Aragon, Castile and León, and Castile La Mancha) considering three scenarios². References of the interviews in this chapter go as follows: Code of the district (see Figure 10.1), Sex (M/F), Age and Occupation.

Remote Spain: Rural Gap, Mobility, Accessibility

The concept of remoteness refers to the idea of distance and the difficulty of communication with places considered central. Remoteness is therefore usually defined through parameters of space and time (ESPON, 2017) or by means of ecological distance indicators (McKenzie, 1926). However, absolute parameters are not useful, as shown by other contributions to this book. The remoteness or isolation of a population must be understood in terms of accessibility rather than physical distance. How far two places are apart is a relative measure linked to the types of dependence and interaction that inhabitants of different territories establish. For example, in her study on pregnant rural mothers, Larsson (2020) showed how for them the distance to a maternity center is experienced in terms of risk and is interpreted as the political distance from their community to the decision-making centers. Additionally, mobility difficulties—spatial friction—depend on social processes of differentiation (Kaufmann & Montulet, 2008). Opportunities for mobility are very different for every social group.

Many of the rural areas in the interior of southern Europe have been suffering intense processes of de-agrarization, socioeconomic restructuring, and demographic losses that have intensified their populations' subaltern status. While Europe has become more and more metropolitan, many rural towns and villages have remained separate from the main economic hubs and their innovation flows.

As a result of the rural exodus of the last century, the demographic characteristics of rural populations have changed drastically. For example, the number of young people has fallen to such an extent that it has inverted the required balance between generations to maintain productive economic activities, as well as the practices of caring and reproduction. The process of rural restructuring itself—diversification of activities and multifunctionality—has been affected by the demographic decline. The effects of a second demographic transition must be added to this scenario. Aging and reduced fertility (Van de Kaa, 1987) have been even more intense in a highly imbalanced population such as the rural one.

Rural areas are not just remote because they are away from the major productive flows, but also because, in the context of the demographic decline, they have become peripheral in terms of their opportunities to access welfare state structures and providers of various social services and equipment. As a result, rural populations become second-class citizens (Camarero & Pedreño, 2021). Like other regions of Europe, rural Spain suffers from these trends. The rural areas of Spain register the need for greater displacements and people must travel far greater mean distances to reach the nearest service (12.4 kilometers) than in the rest of the continent (7.6 kilometers in France or 4.7 kilometers in Italy) (Alloza et al., 2021). A recent report by the Bank of Spain (Banco de España, 2020) shows that a rural inhabitant must commute an average of around 22 kilometers to reach a school, health center, or sports center. That is ten times farther than an urban dweller needs to commute. Moreover, only 20% of rural dwellers have broadband access, whereas the coverage reaches 82% of urban homes. Such differences can be extended to encompass access to an infinite number of resources, services, and equipment.

The set of social spatial inequalities makes up the urban–rural gap, understood as the incapacity of rural areas to achieve the standard of living, services, and opportunities that urban areas have. These differences are not only the result of the spatial friction process itself but also of public policies. On the one hand, the rationalization of public services is based on adjusting the provision of services to larger-sized demographic thresholds. On the other hand, the disconnection of many rural areas from urban processes and economic flows complicates maintaining population levels (OECD, 2016). Adjusting policies in terms of aggregated demand ultimately implies that the rural population has unequal access to public services (Bock, 2019; ESPON, 2017; Shuckmith & Brown, 2016).

The remote nature of Spain's rural areas has forced its inhabitants to increase their mobility both in broad terms and more specifically with regard to daily commutes. This has meant that the rural population has managed to maintain links to the regional labor markets as their main source of activity (Oliva & Camarero, 2019). Access to employment, schools, medical services, or essential daily products is generally only possible by commuting to other population centers and generally by means of a private car. The increase and intensification of mobility in rural areas must be seen as a response to restrictive public policies. The efficiency criteria based on cost–ratio *per capita* entail reducing the presence of service points in rural areas, thereby forcing their population to move outside to access health, education, and retail services. These policies have put aside collective welfare in order to

maximize the needs of the populations they serve. Operators and private companies have also been pulling their activity out of the zones with low demographic density, thus making the rural inhabitants even more dependent on mobility.

Such a context means that there is often confusion between accessibility and mobility (Brovarone & Grunfelder, 2021). From the view of the approach to regional planning, accessibility is generally measured as the distance between the user and the facility where the service is provided (Kompil et al., 2019). The important deficiencies in accessibility in rural and remote areas have been reduced through mobility. Mobility, in other words, has been hiding accessibility problems. From the perspectives of spatial justice (Soja, 2013), and also of social justice (Farrington & Farrington, 2005), these distance-based indicators offer a very reduced consideration of mobility. Not all people have the same mobility opportunities. For example, the immigrants, the elderly, or low-income homes have a lower capacity to move around.

In short, we can express accessibility as the right to live in the same conditions and develop our life projects regardless of the place, town, or parish of residence. The idea connects with the “right to the city” expressed by Lefebvre (1967), a notion that can also be extended to rural territories as the “right to the territory.” Lefebvre claims the city as a space for public life and citizen support, a city that can be subtracted from the mere process of accumulating capital. The right to territory would recognize rural and natural spaces as spaces to live in. It also implies full recognition of the rights and duties of citizens to inhabit and make use of these territories beyond their mere economic values and the labor and resource extractivism processes.

The Mobility Point of View: Meanings of Rural Remoteness

Mobility is an ongoing concern for rural residents. Throughout our interviews and focus groups, remoteness could be observed from three perspectives: physical, interactional, and social. These three perspectives are profoundly interwoven, and it is not always easy to distinguish them. The physical dimension is the one that stands out as the most obvious (the difficulty of providing services in rural surroundings, the need to move about to be able to live in these places). But the research participants’ experiences also shed light on the deep-rooted feeling of remoteness: there is an interactional dimension (the need to *be able to* interact, independently of whether the *spatial* mobility is necessary), and a social dimension that is extremely complex, and is often only latent in the discourse that structures rural life depending on the resources and styles of mobility.

Regarding physical remoteness, in the first place, it is the decreasing population, the dispersion (sometimes extreme), and the mountainous terrain that are the physical characteristics, which mark the remoteness of Spanish rural areas with regard to access to the services and activities otherwise available in cities. This is a physical remoteness, which requires an effort to maintain social interactions (especially in very remote areas) and, above all, to ensure accessibility to services. The Justice of the Peace of a small border town describes the situation

of the settlement as “[being] at the back, way at the back (...), we have always been a bit abandoned.” For decades, the struggle against physical remoteness was fought through the demand for road networks. However, when they were built, they were then cursed for facilitating emigration from these places and increasing remoteness. That situation no longer exists. The demands for infrastructure focus now on broadband internet and mobile telephone reception. As a trade unionist explained, “We’ve got doctors with three different mobile phones for work. One for each operator, because in each town they work in, there is different reception.”

The demands for transport are also intense, but improvements are needed in the operation of public transport services (mainly buses) and in flexible solutions such as on-demand transport.

[some elderly people] have to ask someone who has a car to take them (...) there’s no bus now, there isn’t one, at least during the week there isn’t one, I don’t know about the weekend, if someone comes from the town and so on, maybe they’ll come to the town to bring them but apart from that, you can’t, there isn’t any.

(N1.M56—Employee of disabled persons association)

A second perspective on remoteness concerns the role of social interaction. The space is socially produced by the interaction between the members of society. What is relevant in this perspective is the mere possibility of communication with others, regardless of the physical distance. As with the physical perspective, these relationships do not refer only to the face-to-face interactions between persons (relatives, friends, or neighbors) but also to the whole framework of interactions with persons and institutions that enables day-to-day problems to be solved (sending a package, receiving medical care, acquiring goods, sending a form, etc.).

There are two dimensions that increasingly shape the interactional space in these places. The first dimension stems from the polarity between the physical and the digital. There is a very clear awareness of the opportunity that the internet offers as a means to overcome remoteness. In addition to the lack of digital infrastructures (with broadband connections being the most demanded), different limitations are observed.

On the one hand, there is a significant digital divide between the young and the middle-aged, who are more inclined to use and enjoy new technologies, and the elderly. On the other hand, there is widespread acknowledgement of the value given to face-to-face interactions, both to ensure the purposes of interaction in instrumental actions (such as complying with bureaucratic procedures) and to enjoy sociability itself as a form of community expression (for example, in the doctor’s waiting room). As a local development technician pointed out, “Going to the doctor is a social event. I had to go to the doctor the other day (...) and I found half the village there ... I was there for two hours, it’s another meeting point in the village.”

The second dimension is that given by the polarity between movement and staying. Mobility has a profoundly ambivalent character. The same processes that some people interpret as hurdles to settling, on other occasions, are the conditions that make it possible to stay fixed to a territory. This is the case of the roads in the Sierra de Albarracín, which enable some teachers to live in the city and to work in remote areas, and which, conversely, attract foreign professionals to live in the village due to the type of dwellings and the surroundings, without losing social and labor networks, presumably through digital media (as reported by an Education Inspector, A4. M50).

Thirdly, discourse on remoteness refers to a strictly socio-structural dimension, which denotes the link of local life to the whole society and its social structure. The experience of remoteness generates a collective consciousness of being a part of a social unit. Constant mobility and also the increasing rural–urban connections act as drivers of this feeling. Going to other places to access goods and services or relating with tourists and summer holidaymakers or with commuters is a day-to-day experience. Such comings and goings generate a broad awareness of social unity and territorial differences.

The feeling of remoteness is not static nor is it constant in rural areas; it depends on what it is compared to. Cities represent the most general reference that determines the remote character of places in a way that is, to a certain extent, abstract. Far more present is the experience of peripheralization with regard to local district centers, where the services that small nuclei with populations in the tens or a few hundreds depend on are concentrated (health, schooling, administrative, leisure, etc.). Even within the small remote villages, there are fundamental differences between those people who live in the population centers, who are somewhat better supported socially and provided with basic services, and those who live more scattered and more exposed to access difficulties.

Coupled with the idea of belonging to a broader society, the second pillar of the awareness of remoteness is that of finding oneself in a situation of inferiority with respect to the center, generically represented by the city. This inferiority affects a multitude of aspects of daily life (work, bringing up children, leisure, participation, caring, etc.), but has two fundamental axes, which mark the discussion on the rural gap: the lack of job opportunities and the difficulty to access services, ranging from a small shop that provides daily groceries through to medical attention.

If there are no people, there is no work and if there is no work, there are no people (...) In [place name] you can only get sick on Monday or on Friday. You can't get sick on Tuesday, nor on Wednesday, nor on Thursday, because there is no doctor.

(CL7.F30—FG Mothers with small children)

Finally, a fundamental aspect is the socially structured character of remoteness, which enables the dynamics of this broadening of the rural gap to be better understood. The socially structured inequalities among agents lead to remoteness in every dimension. Aging populations or those with limited resources see

the physical distances growing due to their situation (disabilities, lack of skills, faraway services, need for help, etc.). Likewise, the relational space is marked by specific needs for care, access to health and social services, or socialization spaces, depending on the age. This socially structured propensity to remoteness means that each rural community, as a whole, faces mobility management problems to overcome remoteness.

Mobility, Immobility, and the Spiral of Remoteness

Insufficient local services force mobility (transport, digital connectivity) to become the essential tool to bridge the rural gap. However, the provision of resources to do so (roads, buses, broadband, ambulances, couriers, etc.) is also insufficient. A great deal of the practical solutions to the problem falls on the shoulders of individuals, domestic groups, or the local communities, with their unequal endowment of resources. Accessibility, understood as equal access, is called into question and the rural gap broadens.

The predominance of individualized mobility (car, smartphone, internet connection) contributes to the survival of remote places but also generates greater dependencies, risks, and vulnerabilities. Mobility amplifies opportunities for those who can support individualized access to it but penalizes those with fewer opportunities. For the latter groups, the loss of mobility has consequences on the homes and on the help networks that they have to organize to cover the needs of those persons who cannot move. An example of these effects can be found in the daily management of the movements of children and the elderly. These groups concentrate the greatest attention of communities and family groups in order to resolve their mobility needs, which radiate like a problem through to relatives and neighbors.

[As a consequence of the transport difficulties] many adult children are taking their elderly parents away. (...) They take them away in winter, the hardest months, and then when spring and so on arrives, well, perhaps, they bring a person from where they live to look after the relative here in the village in summer.

(CL8.F38—Trade unionist)

The little one who goes to 0–3 [kindergarten] we have to take and pick him up because there is no school bus for that age group. I usually have to go to pick him up. When I arrive from [the regional capital] at 4pm, I go up to [another village in the valley], pick the little one up and come back down, and I there wait for the other who comes by bus (...) and then, we take them up to the after-school activity for an hour and then bring them back.

(N1.F38—Commuter)

Mobility problems reduce the opportunities and effort that can be dedicated to other matters (work, participation, leisure, etc.) and increase as the economic, social, or cultural resources become scarcer. In the case of foreign immigrants (often from

North Africa or Eastern Europe), who constitute the main factor revitalizing the villages of Spain, it is paradigmatic. For many immigrants—with language difficulties, without a driving license, with limited resources, poor community support, and residential settlement difficulties due to a lack of housing—being able to undertake daily commutes is very demanding. This puts them in an extremely vulnerable position, which makes them face daily immobility by taking on larger radius mobilities and temporary stays.

Other collectives, such as disabled persons or elderly persons living alone, offer experiences of immobility that severely complicate their welfare, such as a disabled woman who has to spend the whole day travelling to attend a medical appointment for just a few minutes (CM10.F35—FG Low educational level). When several of these characteristics concur in the same individual or in one home, then mobility multiplies the effects of social exclusion.

Our fieldwork corroborates the impact of aging on the immobilized rural population groups. Not only does aging increase the mobility needs for caring, medical visits, etc., but also entails a progressive loss of autonomy to drive vehicles and diminishes the elderly persons' capacity to be an active resource in their community.

If they want to apply for anything, come on over, have doubts, or, or this, just to talk or do group support, then, well, then, more and more, they don't come as much because, well, you know, because they don't have that capacity to do so, or, I don't know, although they have a car, well, if they are very old, they don't want to drive anymore.

(N2.F40—Technician from association supporting disabled persons)

The youngsters with limited resources also appear to be particularly affected by the deficits in accessibility, especially because of the special connection between mobility and their chances in the job market. The possibilities for training of working in another municipality or attending job selection processes for those without a car seem to be completely limited and dependent on others. As a local social worker stated, "If they have no way of coming here, even though they want to study, they can't. And, nowadays, if you are not qualified, you can't opt for a good job. It's a chain" (N2.F32).

Although these examples show the vulnerabilities faced by the population in remote scenarios that are highly dependent on mobility, the most disturbing social process surrounding immobility is played by invisible actors, whom the social services technicians offer up only a few notes about: immigrants who pass weeks in the same place and who nobody knows anything about, elderly persons with advanced dementia, women exposed to gender violence, and so on. These are people who are immobile in a place, whose demands for care, for work, or for participation are often not formulated nor attended, thus making groups who are excluded that go beyond the vulnerable groups. As a development manager and a social worker stated:

The population, in [village], specifically, it's as if the immigrants didn't exist. (...) I mean, the village folk we are from the village (...) And these people are passing through, well, they're passing through, they've been here for 20 years.
(CL6.F51—Development manager)

A woman [North African] who, because of a matter of violence, (...) has separated from her husband (...) we needed her to open a bank account to receive (...) a benefit [and] for her, that was a real effort because she had to travel [to the local principal town] by bus, with her small daughters... Such trivial day-to-day things, due to the lack of communication resources between villages, etc., well they can suppose a real challenge.”
(N2.F25—Technician for social services)

Ultimately, the rural gap and the key role played by mobility act as expelling factors:

There is a generalized problem in the rural world, mobility, the elderly people to get about, then the young people who are not used to having to be self-sufficient in mobility end up in the city (...) When the elderly people have their license taken from them and they have no option to get around, what they do is take their money out of the bank and buy themselves a flat in the capital, where they are offered food, proximity, hospital, leisure, etc.
(A3.M58—Hotel entrepreneur)

Conclusion: Rural Immobilities and Car Dependency

Deficits in mobility lead to rural exclusion given their capacity to aggravate other unfavorable social conditions, often shaped by class, gender, generation, or place of origin. The mutual recombination in remote areas of physical, relational, and social remoteness consolidates peripherization processes and immobilities that must become visible.

Rural studies noted sometime ago that these processes of exclusion through mobility were already happening, even within family groups themselves (Cloke, 1984; Farrington et al., 1998; Moseley, 1979; Nutley & Thomas, 1995). Since then, technological developments, the intensification of automobility, and the austerity policies paradoxically have deepened the rural gap in regions such as the south of Europe.

In this context, the “car dependency” traditionally analyzed as a phenomenon reconfiguring the modern city plays a contradictory role in the rural world, where its effects have hardly been studied. In remote areas, both the hypermobility that characterizes certain groups (commuters, parents with children, caregivers, service sector professionals, etc.) and the immobilization that determines those we have analyzed here are the result of the coercive flexibility that the system of automobility provides (Urry, 2004). Even those persons without a car aspire to similar mobility strategies through their relatives and contacts.

Not having a family car constitutes a factor that is indicative of “absolute poverty” (European Commission, 2008), and in remote areas it also favors other related processes. These include “health poverty,” which refers to giving up on seeking help and is induced by distance, lack of transport, scarcity of services, and digital gaps (Manthorpe & Livsey, 2009).

Aging and the loss of autonomy to drive (Shergold et al., 2012) mean that the elderly not only increase their physical and relational remoteness but that they also stop being a resource for mobility in their social circles and become help-seekers for their own mobility. Rural youngsters also experience the significance of mobility in their lives, especially when entering the job market (Black et al., 2019). The precarity of rural accessibility may condition their opportunities for gaining qualifications or employment and may relegate them either to vulnerable trajectories in their village or to emigration.

Public opinion in Europe highlights accessibility, transport, and connections as the main needs of rural areas (European Commission, 2021). Despite this recognition, rural policies focusing on the economic dimension and the objective of equalizing income have made the strategic role played by rural mobility in territorial and social cohesion invisible. The experts’ discourse gathered throughout the fieldwork identifies vulnerable groups and individuals—such as children, international immigrants, and the disabled, among others—who, when faced with restricted mobility, see their status as citizens with rights diminished. Although shared, on-demand, and non-conventional forms of mobility offer possibilities for addressing some inequalities, recent crises, and challenges such as the aging of the rural population raise serious doubts about mobility.

The analyses carried out in Spanish remote regions show how deficits in accessibility determine the private hypermobility of certain sociological profiles and the immobilization of others. This set of practices and social situations challenges the traditional image of a rural world that does not require commuting. Our study enables us to understand how rural areas generate ways of adapting through mobility, but also, how mobility brings about new dependencies and fragilities.

Notes

- 1 The analysis is based on findings from the research projects funded by the Spanish Program of Research, Development, and Innovation: “Mobility, Social Diversity and Sustainability” (CSO2012-37540); “Focus on Rural Gap: Accessibility, Mobilities and Social Inequalities” (PID2019-111201RB-I00). An important part of the field work comes from the study *Oficinas de Justicia* (Ministerio de Justicia-Fundación General de la Abogacía), which counted on the participation of the professors Vicente Pinilla, Antonio Sáez, and Sebastián Castillo.
- 2 The first scenario whose depopulation has been slowed or even reverted, thanks to the presence of a thriving district center and a certain amount of economic diversification (Somontano de Barbastro, Northeast of Segovia, and Campos de Montiel y Calatrava). A second scenario of districts that are in a clear depopulation process in spite of incipient tourist activity (Sierra de Albarracín, La Moraña, and Sierra del Segura). The third scenario is of extreme depopulation, increased aging, and disconnection due to its peripheral location (mountainous or frontier) (North of Cinco Villas, Sayago, and Serranía de

Cuenca). This third wave also completed the fieldwork with three focus groups directed at social collectives.

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