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Masters and Slaves in Empty Spain: A Philosophical–Political Reading of Rural Depopulation

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ABSTRACT

Rural depopulation in Spain reveals not only demographic decline but also the persistence of unequal power structures. Drawing on the classical elite theories of Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, alongside Hegel's master–slave dialectic, this article offers a socio-philosophical and political interpretation of the phenomenon. The case of Aguaviva illustrates how repopulation policies often reproduce hierarchies of subordination, with local elites preserving their privileges by attracting immigrants to fill low-status roles. Far from addressing structural inequalities, such policies sustain the symbolic and material dominance of rural elites. This reading reframes depopulation as a contemporary form of hegemonic crisis, where the exodus of the masses constitutes an act of resistance against stagnant elites. By reinterpreting rural flight through the lens of recognition, subordination, and elite reproduction, the article calls for a renewed understanding of public policy grounded in power relations, not just population statistics.

1 | Introduction

Blas Rosell, son of Blas Rosell and a farmer by profession, was born in Orones, province of Lleida, Spain, around 1874. He married Mercedes Borrell, from Áger (also in Lleida), in 1908, and they emigrated to Argentina. Like Blas Rosell, many inhabitants of Orones followed the same path. In 1842, Orones had only five households and 26 residents. It was administratively incorporated into Fontllonga, along with other small localities such as Ametlla, Figuerola de Meyá, Masana, and San Hoisme. These annexations caused Fontllonga's population to grow from 71 to 1329 inhabitants between 1842 and 1857. However, it soon entered a period of decline: By 1960, the population had dropped to just 273. In the 1970s, it was merged with Camarasa, forming Camarasa Fontllonga with 1233 inhabitants. Since 1984, it has simply been known as Camarasa. Today, after incorporating San Lorenzo de Mongay, it has 795 residents (INE 2024). Orones, by contrast, remains only as ruins. Blas's story is that of millions of Spaniards who emigrated from rural Spain to cities or other countries in search of better opportunities for themselves and their families. Of Spain's 8125 municipalities, about 5416 have less than 1000 inhabitants, and 1286 have less than 100. Even between 2015 and 2016, while Spain as a whole lost 67,374 inhabitants overall, the population of its cities increased by 14,000 (Rodríguez-Rejas and Díez-Gutiérrez 2021).

The demographic evolution of rural Spain since 1900 can be divided into three main phases: a first stage (1900–1950) of gradual decline; a second period (1950–1990) marked by intense emigration and depopulation, amounting to a true demographic collapse; and, from 1990 onwards, a differentiated phase, characterized by a moderation of decline and signs of recovery in certain areas (Collantes Gutiérrez and Pinilla 2019; Silvestre Rodríguez 2002). The most intense period (1950–1990) coincided with the process of industrialization, which had a

particularly strong impact on the interior and northern regions, while rural areas near major cities showed greater resilience. This emigration was driven by the income and the employment gap between rural and urban zones, the lack of productive diversification, deficits in public services, limited opportunities for women in rural contexts, and a cultural shift increasingly favoring urban over rural life (Pinilla and Sáez 2017).

Thus, rural emigration in Spain can be understood as a gradual and highly selective process: first came the day laborers, followed by small landowners, with young people and women representing the most significant flows. For women, migration was motivated both by the search for better job opportunities and by resistance to the subordinate roles assigned to them in rural society, which explains the marked gender imbalance among middle-aged cohorts (Recaño 2020) as well as in access to public services (Saiz-Echezarreta et al. 2022).

In the early 21st century, particularly after the 2008 economic crisis, rural depopulation in Spain consolidated as a structural issue of political and media relevance. It extended to provincial capitals and medium-sized cities (where local elites reside) and was exacerbated by the exodus of young, qualified individuals to major urban centers (Del Romero Renau 2023). However, it was not until the end of 2016 that the demands and claims of various affected groups converged, transforming a socially and geographically localized problem into one of public interest for the broader citizenry and, eventually, a matter of state-level policy (Sáez Pérez 2021).

Although migration is a multifactorial phenomenon explained by various theories, data consistently show that migrants tend to occupy lower-income, low-skilled, or secondary jobs (International Labour Office Genova 2015). Following Pérez Rosales (2018), one of the historical motivations for immigration was the prospect of owning land. In the 21st century, this idea can be reformulated: Immigration is often driven by the opportunity to access better jobs and salaries and thus a higher quality of life (Mahía Casado and Medina Moral 2023). Elites, understood as organized minorities that concentrate power and direct the majority (Blacha 2020), take on specific forms in the Spanish rural context, linked to the political, economic, and symbolic control of local resources (Esparcia et al. 2015). Migration threatens the reproduction of these privileges, generating a paradox: Without subordinates to sustain their position, the "masters" themselves fall into crisis, which in turn motivates the need for repopulation policies to restore the lost balance.

This research adopts a nonconventional approach to analyzing depopulation and public policies, employing theoretical frameworks rarely used in this field and inviting reflection on sociology, philosophy, and public policy. In this context, the classical contributions of Pareto (1916), Mosca (1992), and Michels (2001) are essential for understanding how local elites establish, maintain, and reproduce power. At the same time, the incorporation of Hegel's master–slave dialectic enriches the analysis by introducing a relational logic that transcends the formal structure of power. Although academic interest in rural depopulation has grown (Loras-Gimeno et al. 2025), few studies have approached it from this perspective.

This raises key research questions: What are the implications of viewing rural elites as "masters" facing the gradual loss of their centrality? How does the dynamic change if the traditionally subordinated, "the slaves," become aware of their position and withdraw from that relationship of recognition? Could depopulation be interpreted as a contemporary update of the Hegelian dialectic, in which symbolic dependencies dissolve? These rarely explored questions in public policy analysis open space for a critical and alternative reading of rural repopulation processes.

The main objective of this research is to analyze the causes of rural depopulation in Spain and to examine how the policies designed to address it are mediated by power structures that often reveal paradoxical dynamics. These policies can frequently be interpreted less as genuine social initiatives aimed at collective solutions and more as strategies employed by local elites to preserve their power positions. Specifically, the study seeks to (i) analyze how rural elites manage the loss of their centrality in depopulating contexts, (ii) examine the symbolic and social consequences of the withdrawal of subordinated sectors from the relationship of recognition, and (iii) reinterpret rural depopulation as a dialectical process in which relations of power and dependency are transformed.

The article presents a case study based on methodological triangulation combining documentary analysis with qualitative and quantitative data drawn from official sources. The results are interpreted by examining dominant discourses on depopulation, exploring their symbolic construction and their social, economic, and political functionality. At the same time, it proposes to expand the conceptual framework of public policy analysis through a socio-philosophical and political lens capable of reinterpreting the phenomenon from a critical perspective.

In doing so, the article seeks to broaden the conceptual tools available for a deeper and more innovative understanding of depopulation. In this scenario, the masters are no longer only the landowners (some ruined by crises and others living elsewhere) but also the new political administrative and academic elites who, in alliance with them, perpetuate and reactivate power structures in search of new "slaves," embodied by the new immigrants seeking a better life. Therefore, the proposed hypothesis is that the difficulty of accessing quality employment in rural Spain drives workers and farmers to emigrate, whereas new local elites emerge and occupy privileged positions. This cyclical process of social power can be reinterpreted as a contemporary rearticulation of Hegel's dialectic, in which subordinates break the bond of recognition and new elites consolidate their power in a context of demographic emptiness, seeking to legitimize this structure through public policy proposals against depopulation that, in most cases, fail when analyzed in the long term.

2 | Theoretical Framework

2.1 | Power, Elites, and Social Order

The thought of classical authors such as Pareto (1916), Mosca (1992), and Michels (2001) continues to offer key

conceptual tools for interpreting the dynamics of power and the role of elites in contemporary societies, including rural ones. For these theorists, social order rests upon an organized minority that dominates a disorganized majority, reflecting a profound asymmetry of power (Blacha 2020). Elites prevail through their internal cohesion, organizational capacity, and control over resources and narratives, whereas the masses are more often guided by emotions (Yannuzzi 1993). As Pakulski (2012) points out, the effectiveness of elites lies in ensuring that all major groups and interests are represented and coordinated within a governing elite.

Power dynamics, moreover, tend to be cyclical. In his *Treatise on General Sociology*, Pareto (1916, 476) argued that "the ruling class is restored not only in number but also in quality by families that rise from lower classes, bringing energy and new elements to maintain power." Similarly, Ugarte (2020) and Piano (2019) emphasize the need for the renewal of elites to avoid social decay. Bianchi (2016) notes that the theory of circulation distinguishes between the governing elite, which occupies positions of power, and the nongoverning elite, composed of capable individuals such as academics or social leaders. ŘÁDEK (2017) adds that when this circulation becomes obstructed, revolutions emerge.

Michels (2001) formulated the famous "iron law of oligarchy": Every organization inevitably leads to the rule of a minority seeking to preserve its power. Authors such as Drochon (2020), Caparrós Valderrama (2008), and Ribeiro (2012) stress that the division between the ruling minority and the governed majority is unavoidable. Accordingly, Bonnell (2011), Ugarte (2020), and Miguel (2014) argue that leaders present themselves as defenders of the general interest, build alliances, and employ various means to strengthen their influence. In this sense, Higley and Burton (2006) remind us that those who hold power must ensure mass support and adapt their discourse to the interests of those outside the elite. Today, such control extends to social media and debates about fake news, raising questions about the very definition of truth. However, Carrasco Brihuega and Lemus Delgado (2016) argue that when leaders lose legitimacy, the masses may withdraw their recognition, paving the way for new elites. "The submission of former leaders is ostensibly an act of homage to the crowd, but in reality, it constitutes a prophylactic measure against the threat of a new elite" (Michels 2001, 196).

Mosca (1992), for his part, maintains that the division between the ruling minority and the governed majority is a historical constant. Cisneros (1996) and Busquets et al. (2015) note that the majority lacks organization and resources, whereas economic power, technical knowledge, and organizational capacity are concentrated in the minority. However, "political classes decay inexorably when they can no longer exercise the qualities that brought them to power" (Mosca 1992, 126). Thus, Anaguano (2016) and Miguel (2002) emphasize that the power of elites erodes over time; their decline opens the path to conflict or the emergence of new elites.

Bahena Armillas (2019) observes that the three classical authors agree that elites tend to act in their own interest rather than in that of society as a whole. Domination is sustained not only through organization but also through control of material resources, political decision-making, and cultural narratives (Bolívar Meza 2002; Osorio Rauld 2015), thereby hindering renewal (Cisneros 1996). In democratic and globalized contexts, these dynamics acquire new nuances: The central question becomes how elites renew, adapt, and consolidate their influence in relation to citizens and competing elites. Moreover, power develops a rational egoism, recognizing that its legitimacy depends on ensuring access to goods and services that keep the social and political space habitable and sustainable (Alonso et al. 2024).

In contemporary societies, power is not confined to formal politics. Mills (2000) demonstrated how political, economic, and military elites are interconnected, forming a power bloc capable of comprehensively shaping social and economic decisions. Schumpeter (2015) added that democracy does not embody the direct will of the masses but rather functions as a competitive mechanism for the selection of elites, though they must still adhere to accountability mechanisms. This competition, in principle, allows for the circulation and renewal of leadership, yet it does not eliminate the tendency toward power concentration described by Michels (2001) and Pareto (1916). Dogan and Higley (1998) further emphasized the interpenetration of political, economic, and technocratic elites, showing how the boundaries between spheres of power have become increasingly blurred.

Higley and Pakulski (2012) extended this framework to global governance, where transnational elites coordinate policies, economic flows, and information agendas. Crouch (2004) highlighted that even in formal democracies, strategic decisions remain concentrated within small politico-economic elites, reinforcing the notion of contemporary oligarchies. Hunter (1953) had already shown that crucial decisions were made by a small group of economic elites operating beyond public scrutiny, while Dye (2015) expanded this perspective at the national level, revealing how a ruling elite controls the main institutions of the state. Both agree that democracy, in practice, is governed by a minority. Contemporary developments indicate that power remains concentrated, though in increasingly complex forms, giving rise to innovative proposals in the social, economic, and political realms (Sanagustín and Brunet Icart 2017).

2.2 | Spanish Elites: Power, Adaptation, and Legitimacy

The study of political elites in Spain reveals a persistent historical continuity. Far from radical transformations, political change has often consisted of rotations among elites and institutional adjustments that preserve the fundamental structures intact under the guise of ideological renewal (Villena Oliver 2017). In this sense, elites maintain their power by manipulating collective perceptions and emotions through strategies that generate obedience and reinforce legitimacy (Blacha 2005; Villena-Oliver and Romero-Reche 2024). Within this framework, deception becomes a central, though not always effective, instrument (Linz 1987). However, the emergence of social networks has transformed this scenario: Although they amplify the risks of misinformation and fake news, they also challenge the truths and narratives that elites seek to perpetuate (Bouvier and

Machin 2018). Following Martín-Cabello et al. (2025), it can be argued that Spanish sociology has paid greater attention to social issues than to the study of elites, thereby contributing to their invisibility. Moreover, their historical evolution shows an increasing appropriation of political and bureaucratic structures, as well as strong ties to dominant economic sectors.

At the local level, political power is configured less as a formal partisan space than as a constellation of clientelist loyalties (Botella 1992). Mayors have become local leaders who combine representation with management, reinforcing the predominance of proximity politics (C. Navarro and Magre 2018). This dynamic has produced a municipal elite with strong decision-making capacity, relatively independent from political parties and focused on day-to-day governance and direct contact with citizens (C. Navarro and Ruiloba-Nuñez 2009; Ruiloba Núñez 2014). At the same time, local elites are increasingly distancing themselves from citizens (Jerez Mir et al. 2019). These local elites have also played a decisive role in implementing rural development and depopulation policies. As demonstrated by Navarro Valverde et al. (2014) and Esparcia et al. (2015), the Local Action Groups developed in Spain between 1991 and 2013, with funding from the European Union, paradoxically reinforced pre-existing power structures, benefiting established entrepreneurs at the expense of women, youth, and precarious workers. Cases such as Ávila (Cabezas Avila 2000) or Galicia Lanero Táboas (2018) illustrate the adaptive capacity of local elites.

In sum, recent sociological research confirms that at both national and local scales, Spanish elites have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation. Rather than disappearing, they have transformed their modes of domination by combining ideological, clientelist, and proximity-based strategies, which explains their continuity across political regimes and historical contexts. Following Martín-Cabello and García-Manso (2022), it can be argued that elites constitute the most dynamic segment of the society capable of reorganizing their position and redefining their legitimacy even amid demographic and institutional decline.

Although elite theory reveals how organized minorities concentrate power and reproduce themselves across different contexts, including rural ones, these perspectives do not fully capture the relational and symbolic dimensions of power. To understand what occurs when subordinates cease to recognize elites and how such recognition becomes essential for the survival of local power, Hegel's master–slave dialectic offers a particularly useful analytical lens.

2.3 | Recognition and Subordination: A Hegelian Interpretation of Power

In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel (2017) explains the evolution of human consciousness. He begins with the idea that life in society generates an unintentional subjugation of the individual to social structures that, being unknown, are beyond their control. Following Debnath (2020), this arises the concept of alienation, which Hegel defines as the process whereby human actions become externalized and take on a life of their own, no longer subject to the individual's will.

de la Maza (2019) argues that human beings intentionally produce a society that later feels alien and experiences the society as an independent object with its own rules and vitality, and in a second phase, the individual recognizes society as a product of their own making, learns to control it, and thereby achieves liberation. Gkoutzioulis (2020) asserts that through this realization, humans develop self-consciousness, because one can only understand their own thinking by interpreting the thoughts and feelings of others who co-construct the society. Following Sebastian and Hühn (2023) we maintain that identity is therefore constructed dialogically, in response to others and by recognition of others who affirm one's subjectivity, and this experience produces self-reference, whereby individuals internalize the social value attributed to their identity. In this process of self-reference, individuals discover that identity is not a fixed fact but the outcome of symbolic exchange with others. As emphasized by Hegel (2017) and notes by Osorio (1997), relationships among individuals are determined by a dialectic in which each consciousness is constituted and transformed through interaction with others' self-consciousnesses.

Recognition by others is, according to Hegel (2017) a specific human need. Potamias (2024) points out that humans are not only biological beings with natural needs; they are rational and self-conscious beings who require acknowledgment by their peers and this need for recognition drives consciousness beyond itself, toward others. Modzelewski (2007) specifies that in knowing others, one negates their independence as a means of affirming one's own existence, making the relation between self-consciousnesses mutually dependent: Each needs the other to affirm itself. This reflects the relational nature of knowledge, where individuals not only identify themselves but also recognize the other as essential to their own being (Massé Narváez 2003). From this process, knowledge is internalized and becomes part of consciousness, effectively "negating" the object as external. The problem arises when the subject seeks self-knowledge, since negating the object would necessarily imply negating oneself. Thus, self-consciousness requires other self-consciousness to observe and recognize it as an object. Denz (2016) argues that self-consciousness identifies itself through the other and needs the recognition of the other to affirm itself fully. Hence, humans, unable to fully know themselves in isolation, seek recognition from others as a means of self-knowledge, attaining full humanity only when recognized as equal by another human; the absence of recognition diminishes self-worth. From this emerges the struggle between self-consciousnesses, each seeking recognition from the other to confirm its identity. "Consequently, the relation of the two self-consciousnesses is such that they test themselves and each other through a life-and-death struggle. And they must engage in this struggle, for they must elevate the certainty of being-for-itself to truth in the other and in themselves. Only by risking life is freedom preserved; only in this way is it proved that the essence of self-consciousness is not bare being ... but the pure being-for-itself" (Hegel 2017, 254).

This results in the master–slave dialectic, a life and death struggle resolved through asymmetric recognition, domination, and servitude, between masters and servants. Delgado Lombana (2015) argues that this asymmetry prevents mutual recognition—either because the master sees the slave only as a means to consumption or because the slave retreats into labor as a means of being seen as useful. If one consciousness is annihilated, the other also disappears, as their mutual reflection ceases. Thus, it is essential to maintain the tension between both self-consciousnesses without annihilating the other. In this context, authors such as de la Maza (2019) highlight two key aspects: one consciousness is dependent, existing "for another" that perceives it as an object; meanwhile, the other appears independent, attempting to negate the other in order to achieve autonomy. What self-consciousness ultimately desires is its own desire. Thus, all human desire is, in fact, a desire for recognition. But because the other also desires recognition, this produces a deadly struggle between competing desires. The outcome requires one consciousness to recognize the other as a victor, without itself being recognized. Al-Sewwi and Awad (2020) assert that the victor transforms its desire into independent existence (master), whereas the other becomes dependent (slave), and to preserve the relationship, the master must subjugate but not destroy the other, leaving the slave alive and conscious. Castro (2016) notes that the master sees the slave as a living corpse, denying their humanity while still being able to recognize their own dignity through the slave. Human relationships are thus divided between those who seek recognition without offering it (masters) and those who offer recognition without receiving it (slaves). "But the moment is still lacking for mutual recognition: that what the master does to the other, he also does to himself; and what the servant does to himself, he also does to the other. Only a unilateral and unequal recognition has thus occurred" (Hegel 2017, 258). The slave interacts with objects through transformation, through work, whereas the master uses things only to satisfy desire. The master's identity arises from the slave's recognition. But this recognition is ultimately unsatisfying because it does not come from a peer. The master is thus dependent on the slave for recognition, yet denies the slave's humanity. In contrast, the slave may attain recognition by rising up and becoming a master. Hence, the slave has the potential to transform, move, and change, whereas the master has only two options: remain a master or die. To change, the master would have to become a slave, an option he rejects. Hence, Cadahia (2017) argues that the master becomes passive and idle, consuming what the slave produces. The slave, through work, can liberate himself from bondage.

Castro (2016) synthesizes the Hegelian dialectic in three stages: first, the thesis, involving the emergence of two self-consciousnesses, the abstract origin of history; second, the antithesis, where one self-consciousness subjugates the other through struggle; and third, the synthesis, or negation of the negation, where the subjugated consciousness transcends its condition through work, culture, and history. In this final stage, the slave negates the master and becomes more master than the master himself.

3 | Epistemological and Methodological Framework

3.1 | Methodology

To address the research questions and test the main hypothesis, this study employs a case study design with methodological triangulation. The selected case, Aguaviva (Teruel), functions as an analytical lens, similar to a microscope, to explore micro-level dynamics that can be extrapolated to explain broader macrosociological processes.

The research methods and techniques include (1) document analysis and (2) secondary data analysis, which encompass (2a) quantitative data and (2b) qualitative content data.

Document analysis followed these criteria: Initially, the Web of Science database was used to locate academic articles. The initial search term was "public policy" in "All Fields," yielding 625,207 documents. Then, "rural depopulation" was added using the Boolean operator "AND" (i.e., "public policy AND rural depopulation"), which returned 175 results. Finally, the location filter included Spain and reduced the sample to 49 academic articles.

Out of those 49 articles, 45 were open-access articles and 4 were not; one of the closed-access articles were accessed through alternative means. After applying all search criteria, the final sample included 49 indexed academic articles: 34 were written in English, 13 in Spanish, and 2 in Portuguese.

This review indicates that although rural depopulation is widely studied, the integration of sociology, philosophy, public policy, and rural depopulation remains almost nonexistent. This gap motivates the adoption of a novel perspective connecting contemporary challenges with innovative analytical categories.

Secondary data analysis is based on the following:

2a. Quantitative data from the National Institute of Statistics (Spain) and the Aragonese Institute of Statistics (Aragón), covering two temporal scopes: a historical context (1900–2024) and a detailed analysis of the critical recent period (2000–2024).

2b. Qualitative data derived from speeches and content collected through a systematic press review. Specifically, searches were conducted in the digital archives of *Clarín* (Argentina) and *Diario de Teruel* (Spain) using the keywords "Aguaviva" AND "Bricio," covering 2000–2025. This approach aimed to isolate documents directly related to the case study and its public dissemination. The review yielded 186 documents (9 in *Clarín* and 177 in *Diario de Teruel*). All articles were fully read and analyzed via content analysis, focusing on discursive constructions regarding repopulation, migration, and local power relations. Given recurring narrative patterns, only the most representative articles were selected, capturing the central thematic and discursive structures identified.

3.2 | Epistemological and Theoretical Orientation

This study situates itself at the intersection of classical political theory, Hegelian philosophy, and contemporary analysis from the sociology of public policy. Rather than providing a merely empirical account of depopulation, it seeks to examine the relational logics underlying it, employing theoretical frameworks uncommon in this field.

The methodological strategy seeks to develop an alternative conceptual framework that enables a rereading of the phenomenon from an unconventional theoretical stance. As such, the study represents an innovation within public policy analysis, applying a sociological and philosophical–political lens to the field of rural policy. Additionally, the theory of recognition (Boxó Cifuentes et al. 2014; Robles 2023) is employed to reinterpret migration, abandonment, and decline. The notion of "abandonment strategy" is also incorporated as a form of structural denial by elites.

4 | Results Analysis

4.1 | Context: Demographic Decline and the Institutional Response

Rural depopulation is a global issue affecting numerous countries. According to the United Nations (2018), by 2050, more than 68% of the world's population is expected to live in urban areas. Depopulation is a broad demographic and territorial phenomenon that impacts the structure and dynamics of towns. It manifests as a decline in the number of inhabitants in a given area compared to a previous period. In Spain, this trend gave rise to the concept of "Empty Spain" (*España vacía*) (Del Molino 2016), a notion that entered public debate less than a decade ago to highlight and make visible a historical problem affecting a significant portion of the country, namely rural Spain (Table 1). This phenomenon can be explained by two key features: On one hand, the natural population decrease (more deaths than births); on the other, they migrate toward larger cities (Andrés Cabello 2024).

TABLE 1 | Population by place of residence in Spain (1900–2020).

Year	Urban, %	Intermediate, %	Rural, %
1900	23.5	27.1	49.4
1910	23.9	27.5	48.6
1920	26.3	27.4	46.2
1930	28.9	27.3	43.7
1940	32.4	27.2	40.5
1950	35.3	26.8	37.9
1960	40.4	26.5	33.1
1970	49.8	25.9	24.3
1981	55.5	25.9	18.6
1991	56.2	27.3	16.6
2001	55.2	29.6	15.2
2011	53.8	32.2	14.1
2020	54.2	32.6	13.2

Source: Author's elaboration based on Goerlich and Mollá (2021).

Although "Empty Spain" functions primarily as a metaphor, it can be literally understood as an interior territory characterized by low population density, high agricultural employment, and predominance of small settlements. These conditions are concentrated mainly in Castilla y León, Castilla-La Mancha, Aragón, Extremadura, and La Rioja, but they also appear in parts of Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, Murcia, and Andalucía. Although no universal definition of "rural" exists, organizations such as the OECD consider areas with fewer than 150 inhabitants per square kilometer as rural, whereas national statistics institutes generally use settlements under 5000–10,000 inhabitants. This reinforces the relevance of the term for describing Spain's most depopulated interior areas (Figure 1) (Martín-Cabello 2021).

Spain is organized into 17 autonomous communities and 50 provinces, encompassing a total of 8131 municipalities. Within this framework, Aragón exemplifies rural depopulation, with Teruel province, including the municipality of Aguaviva, standing out (Figure 2).

The province of Teruel, in particular, has been described as a "demographic desert," with a density of fewer than 10 inhabitants per square kilometer (Ayuda Bosque et al. 2000). The decline has been sustained from 251,994 inhabitants in 1900 to barely 135,858 in 2001. Aguaviva clearly reflects this trend, shrinking from 1778 inhabitants in 1900 to 547 in 2024 (Figure 3).

This historical context is essential for understanding the emergence of local initiatives. Depopulation has significant repercussions for the social, economic, political, and environmental fabric of affected communities, often leading to the closure of schools, health centers, and businesses, which further deepens the cycle by reducing employment opportunities and access to basic services (Pinilla and Sáez 2017). Countries like Spain began taking action and implementing public policies to combat rural depopulation more than 20 years ago. One such example is the creation of the Spanish Association of Municipalities Against Depopulation, founded in 2002 to share the experiences of repopulation policies from the town of Aguaviva (Sáez Pérez et al. 2008), along with countless daily initiatives by local, regional, and national governments to confront the challenge. Nonetheless, the hemorrhaging continues and rural towns in Spain every year lose population and demographic weight.

One of the most recognized initiatives in Spain began in 2000 in Aguaviva, Teruel. The town's mayor decided to tackle depopulation by attracting immigrants, mainly from Argentina, offering financial assistance for relocation, employment, and decent housing (Collantes et al. 2010). The most important requirements for participation included having two children under 10 years, not holding a university degree, and committing to reside in the town for at least 5 years (AEMD 2008). As a result, 55 families, including 112 adults and 144 children, moved to Aguaviva. This apparent success prompted many other towns to express interest in joining the program (Sáez Pérez et al. 2016).

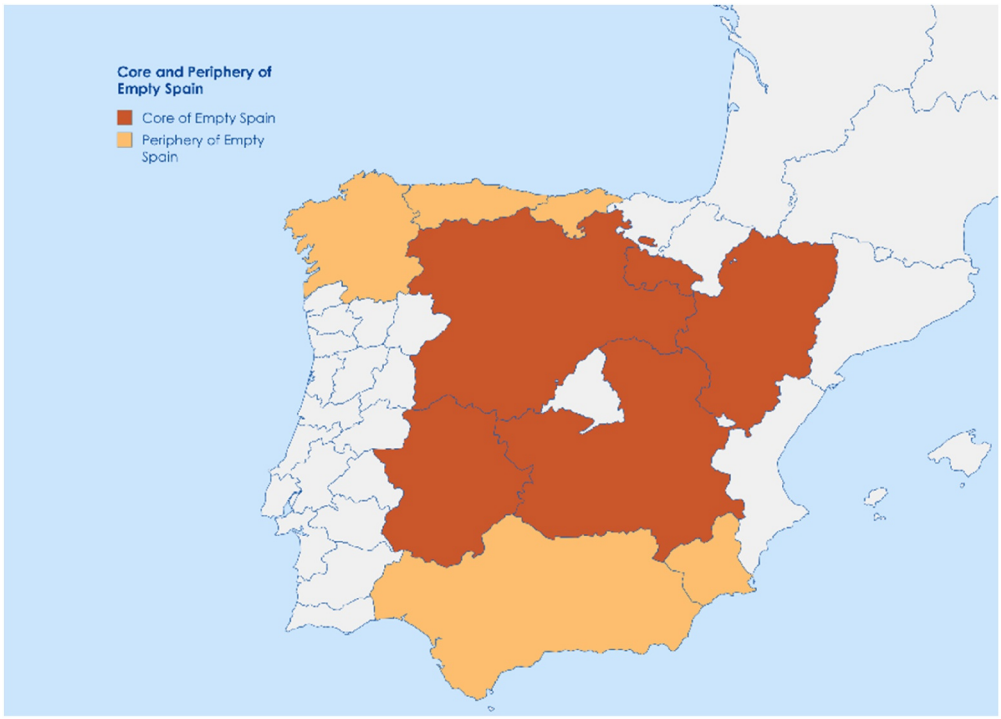

FIGURE 1 | Empty Spain. *Source:* author's elaboration based on Martín-Cabello (2021), using Mapchart (2025).

FIGURE 2 | Location of Aguaviva. *Source:* Google Maps (2025).

However, its success proved to be short-lived: By 2024, the population had declined by 7.6%, from 592 residents in 2000 to just 547 in 2024 (INE 2024), with only two of the original immigrant families remaining.

The political leadership of Aguaviva was decisive in this process. Mayor Bricio Manzanares, who held office between 1991 and 2013, not only promoted the immigrant attraction program but also played a central role in the founding of the Spanish

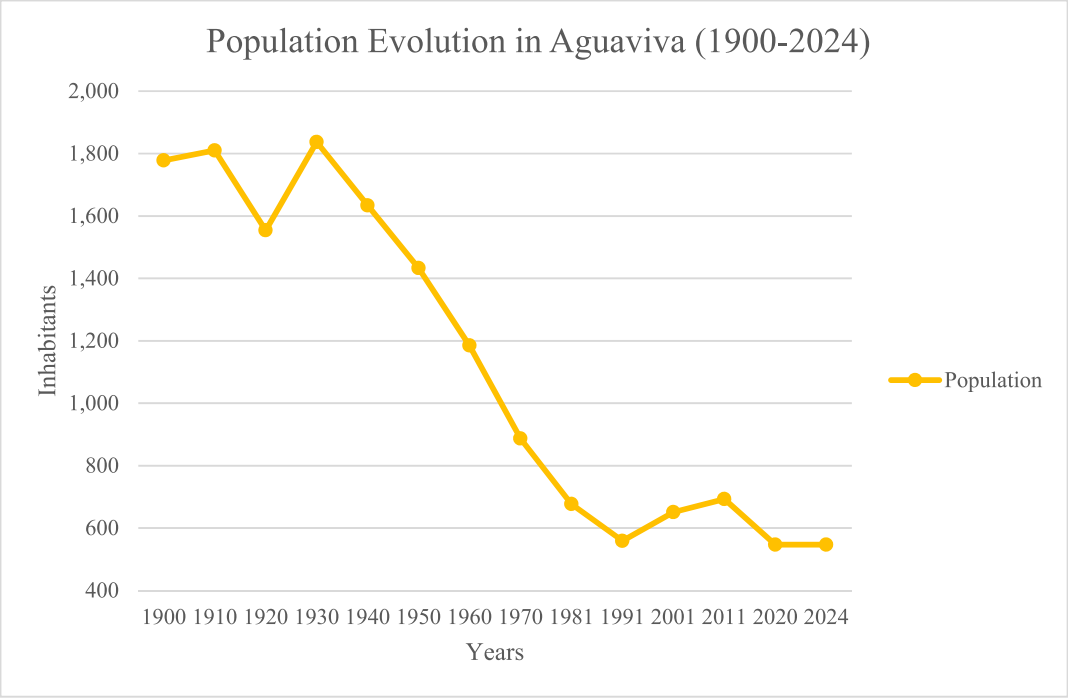

FIGURE 3 | Population evolution in Aguaviva (1900–2024). *Source:* author's elaboration based on INE (2024).

Association of Municipalities against Depopulation. His strategy even included trips to Argentina to personally engage with potential migrants (García 2017; Sáez Pérez et al. 2016). Thanks to this policy; Aguaviva became a pioneering laboratory of rural repopulation in Spain, while simultaneously articulating broader institutional networks, with the participation of 49 Aragonese municipalities in the Association.

Nevertheless, the current demographic structure of Aguaviva remains marked by aging and the progressive loss of inhabitants, in line with general trends in the province of Teruel and the so-called "Empty Spain" (INE 2024). Low birth rates and youth migration to urban areas have resulted in a municipality with a growing proportion of residents over 65 and a limited number of young households, which conditions the social and economic sustainability of the territory (IAEST 2024).

The local labor market relies heavily on the primary sector and on activities linked to construction and proximity services, with seasonal and low-skilled employment demonstrating structural fragility (García 2017; IAEST 2024). Economically, Aguaviva maintains a small-scale productive fabric, dominated by small agricultural and livestock farms and family-owned microenterprises, with little presence of industry or advanced services, which reinforces its vulnerability to demographic and economic shifts (IAEST 2024).

Regarding housing, the underutilized housing stock has facilitated the implementation of repopulation programs, allowing new families to access low-cost accommodation (Timoneda 2002). However, the quality of the housing and the lack of associated services, such as nurseries, permanently staffed health centers, or digital infrastructure, represent a critical factor that limits the consolidation of new residents (García 2017; IAEST 2024).

4.2 | Depopulation as Dialectic: Elites, Loss, and the Search for Recognition

Drawing on the preceding theoretical framework, it is possible to link Hegel's master–slave dialectic with the phenomenon of rural depopulation, understood not merely as a demographic process but as one deeply shaped by relations of power and recognition. Within this framework, one might interpret the migration of individuals from small rural towns as a response to the absence of recognition from local elites (the "masters"). Lacking the essential mirror for self-consciousness, these individuals choose to relocate in search of settings where they can fully realize themselves as subjects. This decision represents an active negation of those who had previously denied them, leaving elites without the "mirror" that validates their own identity, and thus undermining their self-definition. In this way, Hegel's dialectic is reactivated in the contemporary context of rural depopulation, where rural elites, limited in real power and often trapped in their own rigidity, embody a paradox: They become both masters without slaves and slaves of a system that no longer guarantees them recognition or continuity. This oxymoron gives rise to a new figure: enslaved rural masters.

Faced with the loss of recognition, local elites respond by mobilizing strategies to restore their hegemonic role. New elites emerge, including political representatives, managers, and new settlers, through institutional and symbolic mechanisms such as public policies to combat depopulation, nostalgic narratives, or media campaigns aimed at attracting new residents willing to occupy the role of "slave" in the local social structure. As Michels (2001) anticipated, these elites appeal to collective sentiment and emotional manipulation as tools to preserve their interests and legitimize their continued presence in power. More than pursuing the comprehensive development of the territory, their actions are aimed at reconstructing their own

self-consciousness as a ruling group. Repopulation policies are not driven by the desire for structural transformation but by the need to recover the lost mirror: new subjects whose subordinate presence reaffirms the existence of rural elites now fading into symbolic solitude.

As García (2017) argues, when the population declines, industry, commerce, and services suffer the consequences; moreover, the municipality itself experiences a reduction in revenue, because local budgets depend on the size of the resident population. The data from Aguaviva confirm this pattern: Its population decreased from 1863 inhabitants in 1930 to only 547 in 2024, with 22.5% aged 65 years or older and an average age of 46.3 years (IAEST 2024). Historical depopulation not only reduced the demographic base but also eroded the pool of subordinates necessary to sustain both established and emerging elites.

This research contends that framing rural depopulation as a public issue reflects an elite-driven agenda, primarily designed to safeguard privileges. Confronted with the symbolic death of masters, loss of slaves, the elites face a dilemma: promote immigration to their localities or become themselves subordinate in other cities. Within this context, depopulation has been inserted into the political agenda (Saiz-Echezarreta et al. 2022).

In Aguaviva, the Argentine families who arrived in the early 2000s have already left, with only two remaining (M. Navarro 2025). At present, Romanians constitute the largest group of foreign residents, numbering 48 individuals, more than half of the town's foreign population. "All those South Americans were delightful to chat with, to have coffee or beers. But making an effort at work and sustaining that effort, that was not possible," one employer told García (2017), whereas another remarked, "Completely the opposite ... with the Romanians, their approach to work was entirely different. They learned quickly and did not complain." This situation persists today, as local policies continue to encourage the arrival of low-skilled workers, who mainly fill positions in agriculture, construction, and light industry. Statistical data confirm this trend: In 2023, 67% of recorded contracts were temporary (IAEST 2024).

It is striking, and profoundly revealing, that many Spanish policies against depopulation are designed to attract labor for secondary roles, thereby perpetuating inequality between newcomers and local elites (García 2017). The case of Aguaviva, led by former mayor Luis Bricio, is paradigmatic. In the documentary *Aguaviva: La vida en tres maletas* (Burbano and Marchiaro 2004) and in multiple interviews, Bricio openly stated that they did not want migrants with university degrees. This statement, often overlooked, reveals the underlying logic: attracting people who will not question existing power structures. The defunct official website of the repopulation program made this even clearer by listing among its eligibility criteria: "not having a university degree" (AEMD 2008). This detail reflects a clear intention: to recruit individuals to play the role of "slave" within the local structure, subjects whose social position prevents them from challenging the hierarchical order imposed by the elites, the "masters." As Canceran (2026) argues, even advocates often perpetuate subordinates' objectification and silencing via dominant frames. "We have focused on the Spanishness of the people; the idea is that they should resemble us as closely as possible so that integration is immediate. We must tread carefully and ensure that the project does not fail, because we believe it is the only serious short-term alternative," stated the mayor (Lorenzo 2000a).

The attempt of Mariana, a migrant from Argentina who arrived through the program, to enter the primary sector is paradigmatic. She had worked in the banking sector in Buenos Aires for more than 7 years, and upon arriving in the town, she submitted her résumé to both local banks. The response was unequivocal: "They were not interested in knowing about my work in Argentina" (García 2017). This situation aligns with the persistence of an agrarian structure dominated by 42 farms, 90% of which remain in the hands of local individuals, according to the agricultural census (IAEST 2024). Land continues to be the strategic resource controlled by the elites, which helps explain the logic behind immigrant selection as a mechanism for replenishing subordinates.

Thus, far from being genuine efforts to revitalize rural towns under conditions of equality, these policies appear designed to perpetuate a system in which local elites continue to wield power by securing their survival at the expense of those seeking new opportunities. These policies do not aim to attract people to fill primary jobs but rather to take on undesirable and low-paid tasks that local residents reject. As Delatolla (2024) illustrates, such invisible hierarchies demand reorientation toward dominant norms without equal recognition, perpetuating local exclusion. Mayor Bricio stated in an interview that immigrant integration was successful because one Argentine immigrant had become a counselor and another served as secretary of the Spanish Association of Municipalities Against Depopulation (Faci 2007). However, academic research by Marhelka (2019) shows that newcomers mainly work in construction or in preexisting businesses. Expanding on the program, the mayor stated: "To prevent them from leaving, both the husband and the wife will be given employment; secondly, the families have between two and eight children, which makes it more difficult for them to move; and thirdly, they will live in rental housing with an option to buy, which will oblige them to take on a mortgage" (Lorenzo 2000b).

The labor market in Aguaviva is characterized by a limited primary sector dominated by "natives" with socio-economic privileges and strong connections and a secondary sector driven by industry and construction, where employers are accustomed to hiring foreigners García (2017). Immigrants, first Argentinians and later Romanians, inserted themselves precisely into these labor niches, thereby validating the subordinate role assigned to them. In this regard, Bricio remarked, "The jobs that will be offered to these immigrants will be as truck drivers and bricklayers, although other needs will eventually arise" ("Siete Familias de Argentina Se Instalarán En El Municipio" 2000).

Thus, the "slaves," who now understand how power operates in these communities, prefer to migrate to larger cities, where they can initiate a new struggle for a role beyond that of subordinates, or at least fantasize about being free (Han 2018). Faced with the difficulties they encountered, many immigrants chose to leave the town in search of better opportunities. This gave rise to legal disputes in which families and the municipal

council accused each other of failing to comply with the agreements (Timoneda 2002). By contrast, the two families that still reside have shifted into the role of entrepreneurs, and in one of these families, the children have already emigrated from Aguaviva (M. Navarro 2025). Meanwhile, the masters watch their own children being forced to leave in search of quality jobs, as such jobs no longer exist in the village.

For example, the closure of a local school is often framed as catastrophic by the media and by the local "masters." But the underlying issue is not the school's closure; it is that the teacher, a member of the local elite and a master in this framework, is left without students to teach. Their position becomes precarious, as their role ceases to make sense in a town without children. Consistent with this logic, the repopulation program required families to have two children under 10 years, an interesting criterion for ensuring the employment of educational elites. One might argue that the real problem is not the disappearance of schools but that the children of the elites lose their social purpose in those territories.

The arrival of migrants and their children after 2000 generated great excitement among the local population. As Elena, a native inhabitant of Aguaviva, recalled in García (2017), "It was an emotional moment, hearing that the school would remain open and seeing new faces." For his part, Bricio remarked, "When the 36 children enroll in the local school, we will have to hire at least two more teachers" (Pérez Beriain 2000). As Tena-Sánchez (2024) illustrates, enthusiasm in collective action is ambivalent: It drives self-sacrifice and commitment to change yet fosters irrational beliefs that undermine long-term success. However, by 2023, there were only 10 students enrolled in early childhood education (aged 0–3 years), and the municipality had just one educational center with three teachers (IAEST 2024). The fragility of the school system illustrates how the survival of educators, one of the few quality jobs in the local context, depends directly on repopulation policies.

Added to this is the classical elite theory insight, drawn from Pareto (1916), Mosca (1992), and Michels (2001): Elites are organized minorities, whereas the masses are disorganized. But when the masses leave, the elites are no longer a minority, they become the majority by default, as the masses no longer exist. There is no one to appeal to and no one to sustain their power and privilege. Furthermore, economic resources vanish: There is no one to consume in these towns, no one to pay taxes, and no one to value the elites. What remains is a solitary elite, deprived of meaning and purpose.

The evidence confirms a dialectical reading of power in the rural sphere. The elites of Aguaviva designed explicit mechanisms to ensure the subordination of newcomers. This could be seen as a paradox: The masters do not trust in the permanence of their slaves and must bind them through mortgages, contracts, and family obligations, revealing their structural fragility. At the same time, in the absence of internal recognition, they seek external validation, as illustrated by the claim that "Aguaviva is the best-known Spanish town in Argentina" (Lorenzo 2000b).

Yet, the legal disputes with families who abandoned the municipality demonstrate an inversion of the dialectic: The master becomes a slave to an institutional apparatus that forces him to be accountable. Furthermore, the persistence of only two Argentine families from that "first wave" is equally revealing: Unlike the majority who left, these families managed to integrate and even assume active roles within the local elite, showing how certain "slaves" could transform into members of the elite, in line with Pareto's insights on the circulation of elites.

In this sense, the category of "enslaved rural masters" finds empirical support here: elites who depend on subjects unwilling to remain subordinate, and who resort to media discourses and public policies not to transform the social structure but to restore, albeit precariously, the lost mirror of recognition. Unless new models of social and institutional innovation are adopted, such as the one proposed by Sanagustín and Brunet Icart (2017), local elites will face a slow yet inevitable disappearance. If the slaves are not saved, neither are the masters.

5 | Conclusions

This study has examined the phenomenon of rural depopulation in Spain from an unconventional perspective: applying the Hegelian master–slave dialectic to the case of Aguaviva (Teruel). Through an analysis of demographic data, hemerographic sources, and the repopulation program implemented between 2000 and 2024, we show that depopulation is not merely a neutral demographic problem but the outcome of asymmetric power relations between local elites and rural masses.

The analysis reveals that the real problem is not the disappearance of villages per se but rather the disappearance of the elites along with them. The core issue for the "masters" is that they have become idle and stagnant. In this new context, the self-consciousness of the masters no longer wishes to engage in the life and death struggle required to sustain mastery, thus condemning them to a slow and painful decline into what they once were but are no longer. As a final attempt at salvation, they seek to attract new residents whom they can deny recognition to in order to preserve their position.

The case of Aguaviva is paradigmatic. The repopulation policies promoted by Mayor Bricio Manzanares did not genuinely aim to revitalize the municipality on equal terms, but to restore the preexisting structure of subordination. The selection criteria (families with small children, without university degrees, and willing to accept low-skilled jobs) reveal an explicit intention: to recruit individuals to occupy the role of "slave" within the local order, subjects whose social position would prevent them from challenging the hierarchy imposed by the elites.

Nevertheless, the immigrants are not recognized as equals; their very existence is denied in the logic of the master–slave dialectic. Yet, the contemporary slave is now aware of what awaits in such places: either perpetual subordination or rejection. Recalling previous experiences of denial, the slave refuses the prospect of belonging to a place that offers neither joy nor dignity. In this situation, they opt to continue the struggle elsewhere, in another city, where they might find fulfillment, or even become a master themselves. This explains why only two

of the original 55 Argentine families remain in Aguaviva and why the municipality has lost 7.6% of its population since the beginning of the program.

Classical elite theories all agree that struggles are not between elites and the masses, but among ruling elites and emerging elites within the masses. In small rural communities, the emergence of new elites is virtually impossible, making the renewal of local leadership highly unlikely. In response, the masses opt to abandon the locality and seek spaces where elites are less decadent, more vital and robust. Thus emerges the paradoxical figure of the "enslaved rural master": elites who depend on subjects that refuse to remain subordinate, forced to rely on media narratives and public policies not to transform the social structure, but to precariously restore the lost mirror of recognition.

As a direction for future research, we propose exploring a new dimension of elite theory: the idea that in contexts where elites have entered a phase of decline, due to rigidity, lack of renewal, or loss of legitimacy, and where internal leadership circulation is limited or absent, the masses do not necessarily respond with open revolt or opposition. Instead, they adopt a quieter, yet equally disruptive strategy: abandonment.

This gradual withdrawal from participation represents a structural rupture observable not only in rural depopulation, but also in phenomena such as political disaffection in parties or even in state legitimacy crises, as seen in the Venezuelan case. When elites become insular, resist alternation, and detach themselves from their social bases, what emerges is not confrontation but emptiness: The masses simply leave. This logic of abandonment manifests itself in the decline of party membership, in mass emigration in the face of state paralysis, and in rural flight triggered by elites unable to renew their ties to the community. This withdrawal can be understood as a new form of negation of the elite, not through direct confrontation but through structural indifference and disconnection.

Unless new models of social and institutional innovation are adopted, local elites will face a slow but inevitable disappearance. If the slaves are not saved, neither will the masters. In this sense, the future of empty Spain does not depend solely on demographic or economic policies but on a profound transformation of the structures of power and recognition that have perpetuated subordination in rural areas.

Thus, Blas Rosell, who left Orones and settled in Salto Grande, Argentina, began his life anew with his family. There, his grandson, also named Blas Rosell, was born, later married, and had children of his own. These children also married and had children. Today, the great-great-grandchildren of Blas Rosell, young, like him in 1908, are once again considering emigration. The master–slave dialectic continues, now crossing generations and continents.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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