



In the name of the people: The populist redefinition of nature conservation in post-crisis Spain



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ABSTRACT

The global surge of right-wing populism and its impact on environmental policies are attracting the attention of political ecologists. However, little of this debate has reached the nature conservation literature. In this paper, I explore the emergence of populist logics in conservation as a result of the entrenchment of neoliberalism after the 2008 economic crisis. On the one hand, neoliberalism has incited the roll-back of public institutions that hitherto monopolised the management of protected areas (PAs), as well as the roll-out of market-based and network-based forms of PA governance. At the same time, it has also had a significant impact on rural communities, imposing austerity policies that have caused a great deal of social and economic precarity and vulnerability, generating feelings of abandonment, dispossession and disenfranchisement. To illustrate how these two phenomena intersect and motivate the surge of right-wing populism in conservation, this paper dissects a number of parliamentary debates on a recent policy reform that seeks to decentralise the management of PAs in Asturias, a region in the north of Spain. These debates brought together stakeholders and members of several rural groups with different political orientations and views, including public administrators and policy-makers, farmers and livestock breeders, farmers' unions, landowners, tourism business owners, hunters and academics. I analyse how right-wing populist discourses framed this policy change, scapegoated the public management of conservation for all the problems suffered in rural areas, and co-opted popular demands of rural communities, reducing them to the economic interest of private landowners. I will also describe the various attempts made to negotiate a left-wing, progressive democratic alternative that hinges on the recognition of the social complexity of rural communities and the diversity of problems that affect them. The paper ends with a reflection on the lessons that the critical studies of conservation and public participation can learn from this negotiation.

1. Introduction

Right-wing populism has increased worldwide since the 2008 economic crisis. This is particularly visible among rural communities (Scoones et al., 2018, Borras, 2019, Franquesa, 2019). One of the reasons is that the entrenchment and re-entrenchment of neoliberalism after the crisis has particularly worsened the material and symbolic conditions in rural areas, generating anger, uncertainty, precariousness and feelings of abandonment, dispossession and disenfranchisement. However, such discontent has rarely been capitalised by left-wing and progressive movements (Franquesa, 2019), paving the way for the co-optation by right-wing and authoritarian discourses (Borras, 2019).

This new phenomenon has direct implications for natural resources and environmental policies, and is attracting the attention of political ecologists. At present, there are two main lines of enquiry. One of them looks at the links between right-wing populism and the rise of authoritarian neoliberalism as part of a pro-capitalist political project that

promotes further destruction and depletion of ecosystems (McCarthy, 2019). The other, rather than dismissing populist logics altogether, is looking at the potential for left-wing and radical environmental politics (Andreucci, 2018, Borras, 2019).

Surprisingly, little of this rapidly growing debate has reached the nature conservation literature. To redress this gap and to introduce the political ecology of populism and the critical study of conservation into the equation, I explore the emergence of different types of populism (which I will later describe as right-wing and left-wing populist logics) and the tensions between them as they try to enter conservation policies in post-crisis Spain. In particular, this paper focuses on recent policy reforms that seek to decentralise the management of natural protected areas (PAs) in Asturias, a region in the north of the country that has been the target of numerous top-down park designations in recent decades, while also suffering from high unemployment rates, economic precarity, lack of infrastructure and public services; a situation that has rapidly worsened after the imposition of neoliberal austerity policies

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since the 2008 financial crash.

An analysis of the relation between the surge of populism, conservation policies and PA management is necessary for several reasons. For example, there is a need to explore how right-wing populism is reinventing and redefining the idea of local community in rural settings—a highly complicated issue in conservation (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). We should also investigate the links with the imposition of the neoliberal agenda in conservation (Büscher et al., 2012, Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016) and the subsequent redefinition of public participation (Ferranti et al., 2014). Furthermore, it is also important to explore the possibilities of what Franquesa (2019) defines as class-conscious, popular democratic expressions of populism, not only to keep at bay the right-wing co-optation of social reactions to people–parks conflicts, but also to rethink our contribution as critical and radical scholars to these problems.

To illustrate my analysis, I dissect the contents of different parliamentary debates held in 2016 and 2017 on the decentralisation of PA management in Asturias, from a top-down model monopolised by the State to what Swyngedouw (2005) would call a form of public–private network-based governance. These debates brought together stakeholders and members of several rural groups with different political orientations and views, including public administrators and policy-makers, farmers and livestock breeders, farmers' unions, landowners, tourism business owners, hunters and academics. My analysis deals with how advocates and opponents argued over a legislative proposal that (a) oversimplified the idea of local communities, (b) fetishized participation, and (c) co-opted general demands.

These debates signalled the emergence of what I would refer to as a right-wing populist approach to conservation. First of all, I will describe the key discursive mechanisms that constitute this model and I will connect it to the neoliberal project it serves. I will then examine different efforts made during these parliamentary sessions to negotiate a progressive democratic alternative. By highlighting significant gaps in the discourses of this policy reform, opponents called into question the co-optation of participatory conservation by private landowners (Ferranti et al., 2014), while suggesting a more diverse and democratic approach to public participation inspired by the principles of recognition (Paloniemi et al., 2015). However, before developing this analysis, it is necessary to clarify a few concepts about populism and participatory conservation.

2. From demands of participation to populism

No definition of populism, either left-wing or right-wing, can accommodate the wide variety of movements that usually bear such a label. However, as Borrás (2019:3–4) argues, if we approach it as an 'inherently relational' discourse logic (ie. as the means to an end, not as an end in itself), the terms right-wing and left-wing populism become heuristic tools that allow us to differentiate between diverging political projects advanced in the name of 'the people' (Laclau, 2005). By right-wing populism I mean a 'regressive, conservative, or reactionary type of populism that promotes or defends capitalism' (while sometimes being xenophobic, nationalist, racist, and/or misogynistic, although not necessarily) (Borrás, 2019: 3). By left-wing populism, I refer to popular democratic movements that offer 'a potentially emancipatory response to disenfranchisement and dispossession' (Franquesa, 2019: 537).

Such differentiation is proving fruitful to advance the analysis of populism in the political ecology literature. Those looking at the surge of right-wing populism find connections with authoritarian neoliberalism on seeing how strategies to promote extractive capitalism, colonialism and militarisation are hidden behind rhetorics against corporate elite, big state or business as usual (Huff and Van Sant, 2018, Neimark et al., 2018, McCarthy, 2019). In this sense, one particular aspect of rural areas, as Franquesa (2019: 584) notes, is that right-wing populist discourses tend to react most notably against 'environmentalists' and 'the urban society', which are seen as the nemesis of the 'rural people',

in what Zizek (2009) would call a fetishistic reaction.

A second line of enquiry looks at the potential of the populist discursive configuration of 'the people' vs. 'those in power' for left-wing and radical environmental politics (Andreucci, 2018). This research highlights the capacity of these discourses to build bridges between different movements, interests and demands around a common identity, 'splitting the ranks of right-wing populists while expanding the united front of democratic challengers' (Borrás, 2019: 2). As such, the identification of a common source of frustration—a common 'enemy'—can serve to create and mobilise a new political subject; a strategy that could well suit the progressive agenda of, say, anti-capitalist agrarian movements (Borrás, 2019).

In short, following Laclau (2005), we can identify four key steps in the emergence and configuration of a populist discourse, regardless of the political project pursued. (1) The multiplication of unsatisfied social demands. (2) The identification and unification of these different demands, understood as mutually equivalent, into a popular demand; and—as a result—the configuration of 'the people' as a new political subject. (3) The definition of an external other that is to be held responsible for these unsatisfied, popular demands (whether they are oligarchs, the state or immigrants). (4) The constitution of a new hegemonic relation by means of the synecdochic identification of one particular demand as representative of all popular demands; and, by extension, of all 'the people'.

A populist logic thus operates discursively through equivalences, synecdoche and internal and external generalisations; yet as Laclau (2005) argues, the content of such figures of speech varies substantially from one political project to another and from one context to another. Therefore, they must be approached from a historically situated perspective. In fact, as we will see in what follows, the surge of populist discourses in the field of nature conservation and PA management in countries like Spain can arguably be connected to the long history of conflicts with local communities and demands of public participation; as well as to more recent moves towards neoliberal conservation, particularly after the 2008 economic crisis.

Since the 1980s, public participation has become a buzzword in nature conservation and PA management; although actual implementations are still limited (Adams, 2017). The participatory agenda emerged as a response to decades of criticisms of the elitist top-down logics that dominated conservation in the past, making way for multiple and widespread experiments with different forms of participation and devolution (Bixler et al., 2015). Nowadays, there are two main motivations impelling the search for new participatory strategies. On the one hand, moral–ethical motivations defend a more equal redistribution of the benefits and burdens of conservation among local communities (Paloniemi et al., 2015). On the other hand, pragmatic arguments defend participation as a way of helping local communities engage with conservation (Agrawal, 2005), alleviating tensions and conflicts, and reducing managerial costs (Andrade and Rhodes, 2012, Diez et al., 2015).

While moral motivations go back several decades and focus on the negative social effects of conservation and on demands of distribution and recognition (Adams and Hutton, 2007), pragmatic arguments have gained momentum following the 2008 economic crisis, in the context of decreasing public funding, state disinvestments, cutbacks in public budgets and staff, and renovated attempts to exploit protected areas economically under both green and ungreen pretenses (Brockington and Duffy, 2010, Büscher et al., 2012, Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015). The effects of economic constraints and neoliberal austerity have been especially significant in the Global North, where public administrators have historically monopolised conservation efforts, such as in Europe or Canada (Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015, Youdelis, 2018). These issues have provoked the search for new sources of funding (other than public), market-based forms of management (e.g. biodiversity offsetting, payments for ecosystem services), new forms of commodifying nature, and more cost-effective conservation strategies: different

initiatives usually described as ‘neoliberal conservation’ (Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016).

Participatory conservation strategies have been restructured in this context, now including not only civil society groups, but also private companies and multinational corporations, mostly for pragmatic reasons. This has resulted in what Ferranti et al. (2014) call a new ‘economy first’ model; a model that prioritises business interests and market logics, instead of a more equal distribution and devolution of responsibilities to vulnerable communities, mostly living in peripheral and economically constrained areas. Institutional rearrangements, such as public–private partnerships (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2018), are instances of how the traditional state-centred forms of conservation and PA management are now being replaced—if not fully, at least to some extent—by new forms of network-based governance dominated by economic interests (cf. Swyngedouw, 2005).

As I will describe in the case of Asturias, it is in this context that populist logics are entering the conservation field. By appropriating demands of public participation and by scapegoating environmentalism for the socioeconomic problems of rural areas, right-wing populist discourses are trying to advance the privatization of PA management, which further subjugates these areas to market rule. On the other hand, by providing a more nuanced understanding of conservation conflicts and by considering the social complexity and vulnerabilities of local communities, left-wing types of populism are suggesting more democratic models of participatory conservation.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to reveal how populist narratives and discourses are shaping the social reality of protected areas. In particular, I apply CDA to the examination of parliamentary debates (Dupret and Ferrie, 2008) because it allows me to address both: (a) how language and meanings are socially shaped, defined and used with regards to particular social conflicts and inequalities (Scollon and Scollon, 2004) and (b) the conditions and consequences of language for people (Pietikäinen, 2016).

My discourse analysis of parliamentary interactions in Asturias is the result of two different kinds of research work. Firstly, auto-ethnography—the use of the researcher’s personal experience in a particular study (Ellis et al., 2011)—for I myself participated in the role of academic expert in several of these parliamentary debates in 2016 and 2017. This special role gave me dual access, as active participant and researcher, to the different logics and strategies behind the articulation of particular discourses throughout the debates. Furthermore, it was also an opportunity to witness and reflect on the intended and unintended impacts of critical and radical scholarship on current conservation conflicts.

Secondly, long-term qualitative research (2005–2015) with experts, bureaucrats, policy-makers and conservation professionals in Spain, looking at recent changes in conservation management. Through this work, which included in-depth interviews and participant observation of different conservation practices, I gained profound background knowledge allowing me to put these parliamentary debates in Asturias into historical perspective and place them within a complex set of ideologies, discourses, interests and relations around the neoliberalisation of conservation and the redefinition of participation in Spain following the 2008 economic crisis.

4. Policy changes and protected areas in Asturias

Being the region where the first Spanish National Park was established in 1918, Asturias had a rather early experience with the kind of top-down, state-centred conservation regimes that were dominant worldwide in the late 19th and most of the 20th century. Yet, it was not until the mid-1980s that the number of PAs grew exponentially in the region. Now they cover 21% of the total terrestrial area of Asturias; one

of the highest percentages in Spain and well above the 17% target of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) for 2020.

At the same time, rural Asturias is also one of the most territorially marginalised, economically constrained, and ageing regions in Spain. Lack of infrastructures and high unemployment rates, particularly after the closure of the hitherto extensive coal mining sector, can be considered signs of what Franquesa (2019) calls the slow process of dispossession in rural areas that began long before the 2008 economic crisis. The exponential growth in the number of PAs in the region over the last three decades was linked to this situation. They came alongside integrated conservation–development plans that promoted new activities such as ecotourism in order to distribute the benefits of conservation and guarantee the acceptance of farmers, landowners and the local community. However, actual participation in park management was rather limited. A participatory governing board—called *Juntas*—was created for each park with representatives of different stakeholders (farmers, landowners, hunters, university experts, park officials, NGOs, among others). Yet, the *Juntas* were only consultative and, in practice, public administrators monopolised PA management through an executive Commission (called *Comisión*), formed by members of local and regional governments and park administrators (Maurin-Alvarez, 1994).

After almost two decades, mounting concerns about the poor financing of conservation—which became poorer still following the 2008 economic crisis—brought about a number of important changes to this model. Throughout Spain, the crisis acted as an excuse to impose austerity and public disinvestments in conservation, including funding cuts and park staff reductions (Cortes-Vazquez, 2018). Widespread economic troubles and rocketing levels of unemployment reinforced doubts and criticisms about the poor contribution of conservation to economic growth and job creation; an issue particularly relevant to certain sectors of rural communities that have traditionally seen conservation as an urban imposition that impedes their economic development. In response, conservation professionals, policy-makers and park administrators began to search for strategies to devolve managerial responsibilities to civil society groups and to attract big corporations, private companies and profitable public–private partnerships (Maestre-Andrés et al., 2018).

It was amid such turmoil that, in 2016, a legislative change to centralise PA management in Asturias¹ was proposed for parliamentary debate. The proponent was the right-wing political party Foro. The proposal² argued that PA management in Asturias did not represent the interests of ‘affected rights holders, who are only allowed to take part in the consultative *Junta* [the Board, in what follows] and not in the executive *Comisión* [the Commission, in what follows]’. It continued:

‘Considering that the Commission is the institution with actual executive power in parks, and that parks encompass private properties and other legitimate interests, it seems logical to demand more participation from affected inhabitants.’³

The proposal highlighted the economic burdens of conservation for rural communities (moral arguments). It also argued that local participation would make conservation more effective and efficient (pragmatic arguments). This was illustrated with the example of one of the five natural parks in Asturias, the Fuentes de Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Natural Park, which was designated in 2002; a particularly problematic case with the highest percentage of private land compared to any other Asturian PA. Eventually, the actual change suggested was to modify the

¹ Since the 1980s, regional governments in Spain are responsible for nature conservation policies and PA management.

² The official text is available online: <http://anleo.jgpa.es:8080/documentos/Boletines/PDF/10A-2701.pdf>

³ The original text is in Spanish; the translation is mine. All the texts and quotes analysed in this paper have been transcribed into English by the author.

composition of the Commission and include ‘representatives of affected right-holders’—a term that in reality refers to landowners (Ortiz-Miranda and Hodge, 2012).

The proposal went through three days of parliamentary debates with several invited speakers. I attended them both in person and remotely via online streaming.⁴ The following sections describe how it was defended, challenged and negotiated by different participants with diverging ideological orientations.

5. Generalisations, equivalences and synecdoches of right-wing populism

The first session of debates took place on 11 April 2017. Members of the Asturian Parliament (MAPs in what follows) and invited speakers were summoned at 10am to Oviedo, the capital city of Asturias. The parliament hall resembled a tribunal court. Richly decorated wooden seats and stained-glass windows gave it a solemn appearance. One MAP from the governing party (the centre-left Socialist party, PSOE) was moderating the debates, sitting behind a large desk. Invited speakers sat on benches facing her, at a slightly lower level. MAPs from other parties sat on stands either to the side or the back of the speakers, at a slightly higher level. Visitors could witness the event from two raised galleries overlooking the room.

The order of participation was structured as follows. At the beginning of each session, several invited speakers had three minutes to explain her/his view on the policy change. After they all had spoken, one MAP per party had twenty minutes to discuss the proposal with each speaker. Three speakers, all of them invited by the proponent party, Foro, were scheduled for the first round of presentations.

The first one (#1, man, around 60) represented the centre-left wing Union of Asturian Peasants (UCA). He gave his full support to the change:

‘I would like to ask each of you [MAPs] to put yourself in the place of the livestock breeders and the people who own almost 90% of the land [of the Fuentes de Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Natural Park]. As a person and as a landowner I think it’s an abuse [that we are not represented in the Commission].’⁵

The next speaker (#2, man, around 50) represented the Union of Agricultural Sectors of Asturias (USAGA, undefined ideology). He shared the same view:

‘We believe that when they talk about preserving a rural area in Asturias they don’t consider the people who live there. [...] If we want to conserve a natural environment, either we also focus on the needs of the population or it isn’t going to work.’

The third speaker (#3, woman, around 50) represented the left-wing Coordinating Committee of Farmers and Stockbreeders Associations COAG (which is associated with Via Campesina). She used similar arguments:

⁴ I first heard about this legislative proposal from a academic colleague. He had been approached by representatives of the left-wing party Podemos in the Parliament of Asturias, who were looking for expert assessment in preparation for the parliamentary debates. I had no previous personal or professional contact with this party. Full sessions can be seen here: First session: <http://videoteca.jgpa.es/library/items/actos-institucionales-x-legislatura-ch-comision-de-desarrollo-rural-y-recursos-naturales-2017-04-11>; Second: <http://videoteca.jgpa.es/library/items/actos-institucionales-x-legislatura-ch-comision-de-desarrollo-rural-y-recursos-naturales-2017-04-25>; Third: <http://videoteca.jgpa.es/library/items/actos-institucionales-x-legislatura-ch-comision-de-desarrollo-rural-y-recursos-naturales-2017-05-09>

⁵ Instead of quoting the entire speech, which would make this paper longer than needed, I have selected shorter quotes that summarise the full intervention of each participant.

‘We all know how unhappy local residents, landowners and livestock breeders are. [...] For generations, they have created their environment with their work and daily effort. The conservation law violates their constitutional rights to a protected environment. [...] These citizens own practically all this land and what is happening is basically a concealed expropriation. [...] Approve this policy change so that landowners have a voice in decisions that affect their property, lifestyle and livelihood.’

These three quotes respond to widespread views shared by farmers and landowners (not only in Asturias, but also elsewhere in Spain), which consider conservation an impediment to the economic development and prosperity of rural areas and that is imposed by urban citizens and bureaucrats (Maurin-Alvarez, 1994, Cortes-Vazquez, 2012). After these three interventions, it was the turn for MAPs to participate. The representative of Foro (#Foro, woman, around 40) came first. She began by saying:

‘These people are the representatives of the rural community and should have a say in this matter. They all agree that the owners of assets and rights within the park should be represented in the Commission.’

And then she asked them:

‘Do you see any problems in increasing the participation of landowners?’

#3 replied:

‘This area can be now a natural park thanks to the people who have always worked here, the landowners who have always looked after it. [...] But what we see now is exactly the opposite: the people who live in the area and look after it can no longer do what they have always done. And the result is that the park has clearly deteriorated. The involvement of landowners, farmers and stockbreeders in decision-making can only improve the current situation.’

#1 added:

‘The people’s frustration [...] would be ameliorated if they could participate and decide what they want to do.’

Finally, #2 insisted that conservation policies are imposed on rural communities, but designed by urban elites. And he added:

‘Either we take this issue into account or we will bring further rural abandonment and degradation to these areas.’

Through these first interventions, we can start to see the elaboration of an important discourse strategy. Building on the narratives of the three speakers, #Foro constructed a discourse that equated the demands of local and long-established residents with those of landowners. It could be summarised in the formula: E1{locals = landowners}. The insertion of E1 within a discourse about the burdens of conservation provided the kind of compelling, pro-policy change arguments that were presented at this first session.

After a couple of hours, a second group of speakers were invited on stage: a representative of managers of hunting reserves (#4, man, around 50), a representative of hotel owners (#5, man, around 50) and the president of the hunting federation of Asturias (#6, man, around 60). All of them had also been invited by Foro. They declined to give a presentation and asked to move on to the debate straightaway. #Foro began by explaining:

‘We are trying to modify the existing law so that the owners of assets and the people who live and work in the park can be part of the Commission.’

She then asked the invited speakers if their participation would be beneficial for the park. Speakers #4 and #6 agreed with this:

‘Yes, because well-managed and regulated hunting is positive even for the animals.’

Speaker #6 added that parks should be managed by the people who

know the countryside, like hunters and local residents. Focusing on the burdens of conservation, #Foro then asked #5:

‘I understand that natural protected areas should also be a tourist attraction [...] but the park regulation is only about prohibitions... Do you think that the owners of local businesses providing tourist services, [...] would be able to improve on plans for the park?’

#5 replied:

‘Yes, the locals should participate; we must make this place attractive to tourists, that would be a really good thing.’

#Foro was subtly expanding the logic of equivalence used during her first intervention. She now added nuance to the idea of local communities in order to include the demands of the speakers convened at this second session (hunters and tourism business owners). Such a move began to reveal her strategic use of vague categories such as ‘local community’. As Laclau (2005: 29) argues, such vagueness signals a very specific rationality: it is the means to the formation of floating signifiers such as ‘the people’, which is a crucial step to aggregate disparate demands within a populist discourse.

The second day of debates took place on 25 April 2017. Two more sessions were scheduled on that day. Of the ten invited speakers, only six actually attended. The first one (#7, man, around 70) represented the association of landowners affected by conservation measures in the Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Natural Park (undefined ideology). He had also been invited by Foro. In his initial presentation, #7 argued:

‘We think that the existing conservation law is perfect for protected areas on public land. The problem is that this park is on private land, contravening the rights of the legitimate owners. And not only that... The government does not even have the funding to economically indemnify for the loss of those rights!’

After combining moral and pragmatic arguments for very specific demands (landowners’ demands), he then broadened his criticism and linked conservation with growing unemployment and the economic devaluation of land in PAs:

‘Little by little, almost inadvertently, there is less economic activity in these areas, fewer young people, fewer jobs, less wealth... and more elderly people, more needs. [...] This could be reversed with this legislative change.’

The next speaker (#8, woman, around 50)—also invited by the political party *Foro*—was an environmental lawyer, who introduced herself as a specialist in overturning conservation policies. She had been advising and defending landowners in Asturias and elsewhere in Spain in their attempt to deregulate PAs and other conservation initiatives. She made three points: (a) conservation is a form of concealed dispossession and goes against international treaties and constitutional rights, like the right to equity, to economic prosperity and to reasonable use of natural resources; (b) land-use zoning plans in parks do not guarantee citizens these rights; and (c) there is a lack of citizen participation in the elaboration of conservation regulations. She then added:

‘This legislative change does not solve the main problem: the size of the area that is currently protected in Asturias [...] I would suggest reducing what I consider to be disproportionate levels of environmental protection.’

These two presentations hinged on another important discourse strategy. During session one, what seemed to be simply an attempt to highlight conservation burdens in order to discredit the existing policy, turned out to be another equivalence in itself. This equivalence linked conservation restrictions with the crisis of local, rural communities (unemployment, ageing population, outmigration), as in the formula $E2\{\text{conservation} = \text{local crisis}\}$.

Taken alone, E2 might not be very credible. Conservation has brought about substantial investments and generated new forms of

business, like ecotourism; and the roots of this rural crisis derive mostly from the modernisation of agriculture, the decline in non-intensive farming, the neoliberal roll-back of welfare policies, and the internal re-territorialisation between productive centres and service provider peripheries within the EU over the last four decades (Coca, 2009, Martínez Alvarez, 2019). Yet, when combined with E1, it enabled the synecdochic identification of diverse public demands with those of a particular group; in this case, private landowners ($E1 + E2\{\text{conservation} = \text{local crisis} = \text{landowners' crisis}\}$).

After the intervention of one more speaker—the Dean of the Faculty of Biology at the University of Oviedo (#9, man, 60), who openly defended the previous legislation —, #Foro opened another round of questions. She started by asking #7 whether ‘citizens are respected’ in parks nowadays. Speaker #7 replied that they ‘were never taken into account’. #Foro then asked #8 the reasons why ‘landowners’ should be part of the Commission. Speaker #8 replied that landowners are among those most interested in protecting the natural environment, and added:

‘In Asturias, there are forms of private property that fulfil what we call the social function of private property. People own the land collectively and each owner has a small quota. [...] It is a kind of life insurance: if someone falls ill or a son or daughter wants to get married, they could sell their quota of timber from that land. [...] It was their main wealth.’

#Foro then asked about the ecological benefits of conservation. Speaker #9, the biologist, answered that they were vast. But #7, the landowner, disagreed:

‘Years ago, when conservation didn’t exist and people could move around normally with their livestock, a tree could be cut down and then three more trees would grow in its place; the countryside was in equilibrium. [...] But now brambles and trees grow in the middle of paths. The environment is not well preserved, and that generates wild fires and species decline.’

A third strategy of equivalence was introduced during this intervention; one that hinged on moral arguments around the idea of ‘life’. As shown in the discourses of speakers #7 and #8, as well as in several others during previous sessions, the idea of life is interwoven with the feelings of dispossession and material and symbolic eviction that many local farmers, stock-breeders and other stakeholders experience in PAs (Cortes-Vazquez, 2012, Cortes-Vazquez and Zedalis, 2013). This idea of life has a dual meaning: (a) it suggests conservation goes against the ecological value of PAs, rather than preserving it; and (b) it indicates that park designations jeopardise the livelihood of local communities, creating impediments for their subsistence and reproduction.

According to this third equivalence, the participation of local communities is a necessary step to defend the social and natural life of PAs ($E3\{\text{participation} = \text{local life}\}$). When combined together with E1 and E2, it suggests that keeping PAs alive—in a biopolitical sense (Foucault, 2008)—requires the devolution of managerial responsibilities to private landowners. At first sight, the ultimate goal of such discourses might seem to fetishize public participation as an end in itself. But, in practice, such fetishization appears clearly as an instrument to justify landowners taking control over park management.

The debate was still to go through a third session, on 9 May 2017, which brought together PA directors, park rangers and the Minister of Environment in Asturias. Afraid of losing control of park management, they tried to challenge the proposal. Firstly, they questioned the legitimacy of the Fuentes de Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Natural Park representing all PAs in Asturias, seeing that some of them consisted of less than one-third private land. Secondly, they denied that conservation was the cause of all the problems in PAs and identified the economic crisis and the dismantling of extensive farming and stockbreeding as the real culprits. Thirdly, they argued that the PA legislation concentrates on regulating and promoting tourism, beneficial to the local population. And finally, they criticised the lack of participation of farmers and

landowners in the existing consultative Board (*Junta*), compared to the significant involvement of other stakeholders, such as the tourist sector and environmental NGOs.

To contest these arguments, #Foro began by asking whether the speakers were for or against participation. They were all in favour. She went on the offensive using pragmatic arguments:

‘Now that the [Fuentes de Narcea, Degaña e Ibias] park plans have been rejected by the Court, do you think that if rights holders had been represented at the Commission, they would have had a better perception and acceptance of the park?’

It is important to note that landowners in this PA had recently won a lawsuit against its land-use zoning plan. The Court concluded that some required formalities had not been followed, and declared the plan null. However, #Foro was linking this formal problem with lack of participation, while insinuating that the park policy would not have been questioned if the demands of landowners had been satisfied. Her use of such pragmatic argument was intentional in a context of budgetary constraints and park staff downsizing.

#Foro had thus introduced a fourth equivalence: E4{Landowners’ participation = Conservation success}. Together with E1, E2 and E3, these four equivalences formed a populist discursive apparatus whereby a particular social group (landowners) acquired the legitimacy needed to control the network-based, participatory governance system that was proposed for PAs in Asturias (regardless of the amount of land they owned or the economic activity the land was used for). As we will see in what follows, this move was seen by some of the speakers and participants as a way of both privatizing conservation management and leaving it at the expense of market rule; in other words, as a kind of right-wing populism, as defined in the introduction. They problematized and resisted these discourses and raised doubts about the actual proposal.

6. Defending a more democratic alternative

Of all the speakers that participated in these parliamentary debates, Foro had invited 27 of them. The left-wing party Podemos was the only other political party that proposed additional speakers⁶: a biology professor,⁷ a rural hotel owner, two ex-mayors of local councils, a local cheese maker, a local beekeeper, and a social anthropologist (myself). In the event, not all of them attended.

I had a meeting with the representatives of Podemos in preparation for this debate. They were openly sympathetic to the idea of more participatory PA management, but they also had some reservations about the real interests of the proponents. They thought Foro, a newly born regional party, was merely trying to gain the sympathy of voters from rural constituencies, where they still had little support, and where the Socialist party had been governing for several decades.

In her intervention during the first day of debates, the representative of Podemos (#Podemos, woman, around 50) asked speakers #1, #2 and #3 (all of them representatives of farming associations, some of them left-wing) if they had taken part in any participatory meeting in the past. Speakers #1 and #2 said no, and #3 added that, even if they had, their participation would have been useless because authorities never comply with their demands. This answer reflects the analysis carried out by many critical scholars on conservation policies in Spain, which denounces the widespread lack of participation (Diez et al., 2015, Cortes-Vazquez et al., 2017).

⁶ None of the other four political parties with parliamentary representation (Izquierda Unida [IU, left], Partido Popular [PP, right], Partido Socialista [PSOE, centre-left], and Ciudadanos [Cs, centre-right]) proposed any participants. For this reason and for the sake of brevity, I focus only on the discourses of representatives of both Foro and Podemos, who led the debates.

⁷ Who has already been introduced as Speaker #9.

#Podemos then asked whether this problem could be due to a lack of funding for conservation and rural management. All three speakers agreed that funding was insufficient but neither should the government have all the responsibility for conservation strategies. They argued that a more pragmatic solution would be to simplify bureaucratic procedures and allow local people to have some control over their land (e.g. through hedge cutting and controlled fires). #Podemos used the same question on the second group of speakers (#4, #5 and #6) and received similar answers.

Concerned about the reach and impact of the proposal, #Podemos then highlighted three shortcomings: (a) the vagueness of the idea of ‘local community’; (b) the emphasis on landowners as representatives of the locals; and, therefore, (c) the contradictory composition of the second round of speakers (two representatives of hunting associations and one representative of tourism business owners). She asked:

‘They [proponents] are referring exclusively to landowners in this change in the law. Do you agree with this? Or would you also consider hunters, like yourselves, who might not be landowners but still use the park?’

Speaker #4, representative of hunting associations, answered:

‘Yes, all those who are affected by parks should have a say in their management.’

Speaker #5, representative of hotel owners, then added:

‘I think it should be the locals—those that live there.’

On the second day of debates with speakers #7, #8 and #9, #Podemos focused again on the discursive ambiguities of proponents. After #Foro had addressed the environmental lawyer (#8) and the representative of landowners affected by the Fuentes de Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Natural Park (#7), #Podemos asked #7 if he was defending the privatisation of conservation management. Until then the discussions had been generally quiet and calm. But tension escalated abruptly after this question. Visibly upset, #7 snapped back at her rather loudly:

‘Would that be a bad thing?’

He added that if the government wanted to regulate parks, then they should buy the land. #Podemos hesitated for a second and changed topics, asking whether they should include, as part of this policy change, references to a particular methodology or training in public participation, shared governance and common benefits. In a visibly hostile tone, #8 replied:

‘I have the feeling that the government thinks the inhabitants of rural communities are utterly ignorant.’

#Podemos then asked again who should be represented in the Commission. Speaker #9, the Dean of the Biology Department of the University of Oviedo, replied that all the different stakeholders should be represented; but #7 and #8 remained silent. Later, when asked by other MAPs, speaker #7 said:

‘We are in an area with the potential to produce a great deal of wealth and resources and we are letting it die. We must encourage people with initiative, ideas... potential investors... to come here and invest. It is the only way to prosper.’

Before the end of this session, #8 would also add:

‘There are experts and scientists from the university and from the Spanish Council of Scientific Research, who argue that participation is usually nothing more than a blank page.’

To my surprise, #8 was explicitly citing the kind of research work in which several colleagues and I were involved at that time, which examined participatory conservation from a critical perspective (Cortes-Vazquez et al., 2017). She was appropriating our arguments about the limitations of participatory conservation in Spain and rephrasing them to scapegoat conservation policies for the problems of rural

communities, while also advocating for a de-regulatory and pro-business agenda.

As mentioned, three more speakers invited by Podemos took part in the second round of debates: an ex-mayor of a municipality within the Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Natural Park (#10, man, around 60), a rural business owner (#11, woman, around 40) and myself (#12, man, around 35). In their initial speeches, both #10 and #11 agreed with the need to involve local inhabitants, but also expressed doubts about the discourses of the proponents. For example, speaker #10 said:

‘Yes to more participation and to new policies that improve the quality of life of park residents.’

Yet, for him, the challenge was how to make conservation compatible with the economic development of these communities, instead of merely satisfying landowners’ interests. Speaker #11 also believed that lack of participation was responsible for the negative attitudes towards conservation. Although she argued that all local groups—not only landowners but also others such as young people and retired people—should be included in PA management.

I spoke next and argued that, though making conservation more participatory was necessary in order to distribute burdens and benefits more evenly, participation could also reproduce social imbalances if it ignored two key issues: the social complexity of local communities and the need for a fully transparent participatory process. I said that the proposal disregarded both of these issues.

#Podemos opened this round of questions. She asked me what would be the necessary requirements for a successful participation strategy. I replied: ‘The focus should be on who we want to be involved in conservation’. She then asked:

‘Then which method would you apply to make park management more democratic?’

I mentioned various possibilities, such as prior informed consent for every conservation initiative. #Podemos then asked #11 about the kind of inclusive participation that she would ask for. Speaker #11 replied:

‘We must all participate, not only landowners, but everyone who lives here, who have their business here and pay their taxes. For example, women do not often appear on documents as property owners or joint owners. Yet we are the ones who are leading farming and tourism activities in the countryside.’

After some further questions, it was then the turn of #Foro. So far, only E1{locals = landowners} had been called into question, but not E2, E3 or E4. As a result, though opponents were rejecting the synecdochic co-optation of rural demands by landowners, as well as the fetishisation of participation, they were also partly replicating the proponents’ populist rationale, as well as their equivalences and internal and external generalisations (local people vs bureaucrats and public administrators). Aware of this, #Foro asked one simple question:

‘Is there any problem with making conservation more participatory?’

Speaker #10 answered that there would not be any problem, but then clarified that participation should be more equal so that more people would participate. I pointed out that, if taken at face value, participation could be co-opted by certain groups or private agents (a mining company, for example), who could become landowners. #Foro asked no more questions.

On the last day of debates, #Podemos used her turn with PA directors and environmental authorities to develop her criticism of the proponents’ synecdoches and fetishisations. Her first question was whether there were women in executive commissions or any selection criteria to include women from rural areas. The speakers said there were not. She then argued:

‘My question really points to the methods that will be used for the election of representatives of rights holders. I wonder if you would

consider improving this proposal in order to give a more balanced representation of all different social groups.’

All speakers agreed. #Podemos then finished by openly expressing her main concerns: landowners could not be considered the representatives of the local community. In order to avoid the pitfalls of privatisation, a more democratic selection of local representatives should be included in the policy change.

A five-minute intervention by all MAPs closed the final session. #Foro argued that conservation policies were a failure and a form of land expropriation that degraded the lives of rural communities. To a larger or lesser extent, many other MAPs agreed and accepted this discourse. #Podemos said that she was worried that nothing in the policy change ensured the representation of different social groups because the proposal only mentioned private owners. And she finished, quoting something I had said earlier:

‘Participation could become a fetish when we don’t clarify who is going to participate and how, thus reproducing existing discriminations, such as the invisible role of women in rural communities.’

7. In the name of the people: Tensions between two different political projects

Weeks after these parliamentary sessions ended, the policy change was eventually approved. For the first time in Spain, PA executive commissions included representatives of ‘rights holders’. However, the final version was more nuanced than what the proponents originally intended. It clarified that the number of representatives of rights holders would be proportionate to the total area of private land in PAs, with a maximum of 49% of votes in the Commission. This was a demand of park officials so that public employees could never be outnumbered. The final version also stipulated that the selection of representatives should be gender-balanced, encompass different rights holders (not only landowners), and follow a democratic and transparent procedure, as the opponents of the change had requested.

Although the actual policy change might seem small, it signalled a defining moment in nature conservation in Spain: the penetration of populist logics and the subsequent redefinition of participation. As outlined in the first half of my analysis, proponents used two different discursive strategies that resonated with the kind of pro-capitalist, right-wing populism defined by Borrás (2019) and Franquesa (2019). On the one hand, internal generalisation reduced local interests (‘the people’s demands’) to those of a particular sector: private landowners, operating and struggling under market rules. On the other hand, external generalisation described the local people as antagonistic to a powerful ‘other’, held responsible for all their tensions and troubles. This external other was the environment department of the regional government in Oviedo, the capital city of Asturias. It justified the proponents’ attack on public conservation bureaucracies and collective environmental entitlements.

To develop these generalisations, four different equivalences were used: E1{locals = landowners}, E2{conservation = local crisis}, E3{participation = local life} and E4{participation = conservation success}. As summarised in Table 1, these equivalences were combined into different discursive sequences (or chains of equivalences, in Laclau’s terms). Through the strategic mediation of these chains of equivalence, an attempt was made to establish the dichotomy ‘private landowners’ vs. ‘the government’ as the basis of a new ‘hegemonic’ regime for public participation; a regime that pursued the eventual privatisation of PA management, albeit hidden behind moral and pragmatic arguments (the social impacts of conservation and the inefficient and ineffective work of conservation experts and bureaucrats).

However, as shown in the second half of my analysis, this right-wing populist model was resisted. Those opposing the proposal challenged the hegemonic relations that it established. They criticised both the

Table 1
Some instances of discourse sequences in proponents' discourses.

| Combination of equivalences | Discourse sequences |
|-----------------------------|---|
| E4 + E1 | Conservation success = Landowners' participation |
| E3 + E1 | Local life = Landowners' interests |
| E4 + E3 + E1 | Local life = Conservation success = Landowners' participation |
| E2 + E1 | Conservation = Landowners' crisis |

Source: the author.

synecdochic identification of all rural demands with those of landowners, and the fetishization of landowners' participation as a means to improve conservation and rural livelihoods. They did this by adding nuance to the idea of 'local people' and by demanding the recognition of social diversity and uneven power relations as a prerequisite for a more equal PA management model (cf. Cornwall, 2008). They chose to focus mostly, though not solely, on the uneven representation of women as landowners and business owners in order to evidence the flaws and bias of the original proposal. By doing this, they transformed the right-wing populist logic developed by the proponents into a more progressive, left-wing populist approach to participatory conservation.

8. Conclusions

It is well established in the conservation literature that the penetration of neoliberalism in the last decade has incited the roll-back of public institutions that hitherto monopolised the management of protected areas, as well as the roll-out of market- and network-based forms of governance (Büscher et al., 2012, Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016). At the same time, neoliberalism has also affected rural communities, causing a great deal of economic precarity and vulnerability, displacements and dispossession, which is triggering feelings of abandonment and disenfranchisement. This has created a new social scenario, with implications for our understanding of people-park conflicts. As I argue, this scenario could be seen as directly related to the surge of populist logics and the subsequent redefinition of public participation in conservation.

The analysis developed in this paper shows how right-wing populist logics are appropriating social demands for the distribution of conservation benefits and burdens (Adams and Hutton, 2007) and, more generally, for solutions to the social and economic marginalisation of rural areas where PAs are located. Furthermore, these logics are able to align such legitimate demands with the neoliberalisation of conservation and the defence of private and business interests, under either green or ungreen pretexts (cf. Apostolopoulou and Adams, 2015). However, such right-wing logics can be resisted. Despite the limitations of the additions made to the policy change analysed in this paper—which fell short of tackling other structural problems affecting rural communities and causing widespread feelings of anger and discontent with public institutions—the Asturian case points the way towards a more progressive and democratic version of participation: a left-wing populist logic aiming for the redefinition of management of protected areas.

The key in this case was the defence of an alternative participatory model that ensures both recognition and procedure—two features that environmental justice considers essential for equitable distribution and participation in conservation (Paloniemi et al., 2015, Martin et al., 2015, Apostolopoulou and Cortes-Vazquez, 2019). Recognition implies acknowledgement of the power relations and inner diversity of any community and how they affect the outcomes of participatory conservation policies. Procedure focuses on actual measures that make conservation plans visible and accessible to different social groups, and ensure prior informed consent and complete transparency of decision-making (Zafra-Calvo et al., 2017).

Eventually, both logics advance new specific forms of PA

management 'in the name of the people'. The difference is in who might ultimately benefit from such different participatory models. This is why we could talk of right-wing vs. left-wing populist conservation models. Without suggesting whether or not populist rationales have a greater potential than other political strategies to combat the impacts of neoliberal capitalism both in nature conservation and in rural communities (cf. Borrás, 2019), which is a discussion that I leave for another occasion, I believe there are several lessons that can be extracted from the analysis of the Asturian experience that challenge and develop the field of critical conservation studies.

The social contestation of conservation feeding the surge of right-wing populism is not new. Since the 1970s, we have witnessed growing evidence of negative social impact in protected areas, ranging from the physical removal of people to the loss of land-use rights (Oldekop et al., 2015). Although the most coercive versions of fortress conservation have never been implemented in Europe, still fairly restrictive 'fence-and-fine' regimes have generated different forms of alienation among local communities (Vaccaro et al., 2013). As a result, there have been growing demands for more participatory and people-oriented conservation models, and a rejection of elitist, expert-based approaches and their disregard for vulnerable communities. Thus, in the last quarter of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st, there has been a widespread transition towards more participatory and community-based approaches in PAs (Brosius et al., 2005, Bixler et al., 2015).

However, unlike the more democratic models advanced by left-wing populism, right-wing populist discourses should not be seen simply as a new form of participation that adds to the long list of participatory models already in practice in Spain and elsewhere. In reality, they seek to privatise conservation by co-opting the very idea of community, leaving it to market rule. Furthermore, by reinforcing dichotomies such as 'rural people' vs. 'urban people' or 'locals' vs. 'environmentalists', right-wing populist discourses bundle together disparate interests and demands, reinterpreting to suit their needs the idea of community—a concept whose complexity has always muddied participatory strategies (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999, Cornwall, 2008)—. This puts further pressures on already questioned and economically constrained conservation policies, as they are seen as the sole culprits of the social and economic problems of rural communities, following a logic that is blind to power relations based on class, gender, generation, race, ethnicity, nationality and/or place of residence. In the end, it also does little to emancipate rural communities from the imperatives of global capitalism and other forms of ecological and social exploitation.

Furthermore, the redefinition of the idea of community based on such dichotomies favours the production of new political subjectivities that can also be co-opted by the neoliberal political project. In the light of research highlighting the importance of the changes in conservation strategies brought about by neoliberalism and how such changes are internalised by different agents (Rutherford, 2007, Fletcher, 2010, Holmes and Cavanagh, 2016), it seems crucial to explore the kind of right-wing 'populist environmentalities' that might be emerging among communities in protected areas, in order to understand not only how these new initiatives are discursively framed in new legislative proposals, but also how they are defended and supported by different stakeholders with disparate, even opposing ideologies.

Finally, the right-wing populist reinvention of community

participation has not only the capacity to appropriate the demands of those living in rural areas, but also to appropriate some of the key arguments coming from the critical conservation literature, such as the need for more equal distribution of burdens and benefits and devolution of management responsibilities in PAs. As critical scholars, this should urge us to fine-tune our own work and find new ways to channel our analysis of conservation policies. In this sense, right-wing populism as a discourse is radically different from other forms of left-wing or progressive populism. Although they all share a critical view of the status quo (McCarthy, 2019), they seek a way out through extremely different ways. As Borrás (2019) argues, we should not simply ridicule or condemn right-wing populist discourses, but propose alternatives and construct different institutions that can tackle the root cause of the problem (ie. the neoliberal destruction of social and natural life in rural communities), while being, inter alia, class and gender sensitive. As shown in this paper, it is only by using our critical work directly to engage with other progressive allies that we can channel our critical analysis and help construct alternative institutional configurations for more democratic conservation management.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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