

BEYOND THE RIGHT TO THE ISLAND: EXPLORING PROTESTS AGAINST THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF NATURE IN TENERIFE (CANARY ISLANDS, SPAIN)

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Received 27 November 2020 · Accepted 4 January 2021

Summary: Islands worldwide experience the commodification of land and natural resources owing to touristic activities and urbanization. Islands represent the epitome of commodified spaces, power, and territorialization. Therefore, focusing on islands reveals how the production of socio-natures shapes the dynamics of capital accumulation, dispossession, and resistance. By paying attention to the interplay between insularity and socioecological transformations, we aim at expanding the literature on the neoliberalization of socio-natures. We explore the contestation against urban tourism development in Tenerife in recent decades, such as the intense expansion of artificial land use since the touristic boom in mid-20th century, which was intensified through neoliberal capitalism by commodifying elements of everyday life. Environmental struggles inevitably facilitate greater mobilization than other claims. An empirical survey on the spatiotemporal evolution of this island illustrates and helps to deepen the conceptual development of the right to the island and to nature. We found that social contestation and its political emancipatory potential with the defense of nature and the demand for a different social and territorial island model highlights ‘right to nature’ as a central element in the fight for ‘right to the island.’

Zusammenfassung: Aufgrund von Tourismusaktivitäten und Urbanisierung erleben Inselarchipele weltweit eine zunehmende Kommodifizierung von Land und natürlichen Ressourcen. Inseln lassen sich in diesem Sinne als der Inbegriff von kommodifizierten Räumen, Macht und Territorialisierung verstehen. Der Blick auf Inseln offenbart dabei, wie die Dynamiken von Kapitalakkumulation, Enteignung und Widerstand durch die Produktion von Sozionaturen geformt wird. Indem wir das Zusammenspiel von Insularität und sozioökologischen Transformationen in den Blick nehmen, streben wir eine Erweiterung der bestehenden Literatur zur Neoliberalisierung der Sozionaturen an. Dabei untersuchen wir den Widerstand gegen urbane Tourismusprojekte auf Teneriffa während der letzten Jahrzehnte. Dazu zählt etwa die fortschreitende Expansion der künstlichen Landnutzung seit dem Tourismusboom Mitte des 20. Jahrhunderts, die durch den neoliberalen Kapitalismus im Zuge der Kommodifizierung des Alltagslebens eine weitere Intensivierung erfuhr. Im Gegensatz zu anderen Kämpfen lassen sich in Teneriffa durch Umweltkämpfe zwangsläufig größere Mobilisierungen erreichen. Eine empirische Untersuchung der raumzeitlichen Entwicklung Teneriffas kann dabei anschaulich helfen, das Recht auf die Insel und die Natur konzeptionell weiterzuentwickeln und zu vertiefen. Die zentrale Erkenntnis unseres Beitrags ist, dass gerade durch soziale Auseinandersetzungen und deren politisch emanzipatorischen Potenzialen zur Verteidigung der Natur und dem Einfordern eines anderen sozialen und territorialen Inselmodells das „Recht auf die Natur“ als zentrales Element im Kampf um das „Recht auf die Insel“ zur Geltung kommt.

Keywords: island, territory, neoliberalization, tourism, right to nature, right to the island

1 Introduction

The semi-peripheral islands of the capitalist world-economy assume subordinate functions, such as tourism and real estate, production and export of plantation crops, extraction of mineral resources, and so on. This is also the case with the Canary Islands. Here, the island of Tenerife acts as a gateway for tourism, which constitutes Spain’s contribution toward the international division of labor (MURRAY 2015), receiving 10 million international visitors (INE 2019). The interests of capital and rul-

ing elites, through their control of institutional powers, regulated the territorial transformation of these islands, establishing systemic cycles of accumulation which ultimately led to crises (MURRAY et al. 2017). The exploitation of local nature, including cultural knowledge, generates serious environmental, labor, migratory, and economic interest-related conflicts, to name a few (SCHMITT and BLÁZQUEZ-SALOM 2003; ARMAS-DÍAZ and SABATÉ-BEL 2020). Among these, territorial disputes reveal the physiognomy of the biophysical and metabolic background of the socio-economic structure (CARPINTERO 2015).

We focused on the territorial transformation processes that triggered the maximum social opposition in insular societies, assuming the role of grassroots movements as popular epistemic communities and their social movements (VALDIVIELSO and MORANTA 2019). First, we proposed the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the territorial dispute in terms of right to nature and space with insular singularity (awareness of the limits due to the daily experience of finitude, coexistence culture, caciquism, colonialism, etc.). Subsequently, we synthesized the processes of territorial transformation involved in our case study and the most significant levels of response they generated.

Being activist academics in our respective territories where we were raised and to which we remain linked as citizens, we adopted participant observation as our methodology. Our academic, professional, and political tasks led to our involvement in social debates, particularly on territorial transformations, for which geographic knowledge is crucial. This work reflects the link between theoretical analysis and our political practice. The analysis is framed within theoretical reflections surrounding the right to space (LEFEBVRE 1978), territory and the island (CLARK 2013; ARMAS-DÍAZ and SABATÉ-BEL 2020), examination of political debates through their public expression, and regulatory measures that crystallize in the public and executive and legislative administration. The social disputes were evaluated qualitatively.

2 Insularity, territory, urbanization, and nature: right to nature and to the island

2.1 Insularity, territory and urbanization

Insularity was defined, with an attempt at quantification, by BARCELÓ (1997) based on the magnitude of the island, its distance from the mainland, and its microcosm of internal variety. From a more qualitative perspective, the myth of the island (PERON 2004) is linked to calmness, sedentarism, and relaxation, as opposed to the myth of the road that represents nomadism, movement, and action. Other attractive elements of islands include the image of security and refuge (Tortuga Island, hideout of pirates of the Caribbean treasures), their referent condition of utopia and paradise, their images as a place to reconnect with nature and with oneself, where “there are moments when all the accumulated anxiety and effort are appeased in the infinite indolence and rest

of nature” (THOREAU 1849); as spaces more dominated by colonial or capital control, and a status symbol for those who can access them because their scarcity provides a stamp of distinction. PONS (2016) doctoral thesis reviewed, in detail, the constituent elements of insularity, while RULLAN (2019) defined differences and coincidences between the Balearic Islands throughout their historical geography. Both authors argue that urbanization processes in these can be explained mainly based on the “island (isolation) condition” and not mainly because of social struggles on the defense and protection of nature (PONS and RULLAN 2020).

There is an extensive literature that addresses the uniqueness of the islands (MOUNTZ 2015). Without disregarding these particularities, islands are still well-defined territories, which are the “most clearly demarcated of all” (GILLIS 2004, 114). Borders are a basic element (but not the only one) in territorial delimitation and practice (PAASI 2003). Islands do not cease to be territories and, as such, the notion of power is essential to understand them (KEATING 2014). However, territoriality constitutes an essential force in capitalism, which materializes through support from state policies to economic processes (HARVEY 2003), as is the case with the redefinition of insular areas as regions dedicated to energy supply (CEDERLÖF and KINGSBURY 2019). Further, with tourism as the organizer of territoriality of some islands (CELATA and SANNA 2010; ROWEN 2014), which is a very lucrative option for governments, the private sector and international organizations, as a way for economic growth (DUFFY and MOORE 2010), incorporate peripheral or semi-peripheral economies into the global market (PONS et al. 2014). Other perspectives on territoriality address the unequal and conflictive character inherent in ‘territory,’ that is, they emphasize on the disputes to exercise control over resources and people within established limits (CORSON 2011). Thus, in recent decades, the use of territory has been expanded in the discourse of movements and groups that dispute it, while another use of territory that reflects the element of irreconcilability produced by the language of the government has been expanded (BEUF 2019). That is, the territories are not given but produced socially through the disputes and reflections of those who inhabit them (CLARE et al. 2018).

States used islands as places to experiment, exercise control, claim sovereignty or extract resources in different ways (MOUNTZ 2015). However, the link between insularity and sovereignty prevailed, regardless of other perspectives on power (CLARE et

al. 2018). Precisely, one of the contributions of this work is an approximation to power, not from that perspective, but from the social movements that dispute the territory in the case of the specific insular territory studied. Here, it is worth considering the extent to which the concept of island corresponds to a space with visual and natural characteristics different from continental spaces, and how this idea has been (re) produced and molded into a “reductionist rendition” (BALDACCHINO 2012, 57). In other words, whether a territorial entity used in the official discourse and configured as an abstract space (LEFEBVRE 1991), that is, understanding it as a simple container (AGNEW 1994), implies a fixed and unquestionable limit; or whether, on the contrary, ‘insularity matters’ because its conception as disputed territory remakes the official scale (ALLEN 2017, 82).

Although the austerity regime, imposed after the 2008 crisis, and state repression continue to prevent the establishment of a broader front against neoliberalism (PECK et al. 2013), protest movements develop a diversity of strategies to confront hegemonic power, creating more variegated places of protest (KÖHLER and WISSEN 2003) and appropriate resistance scales (SMITH 1996). Spatial scales are not fixed but produced socially through struggles and contestation (BRENNER 2001; JESSOP et al. 2008), and they also respond to the biophysical characteristics of the places where protests are circumscribed (URKIDI 2010). In this sense, insularity plays an essential role not only because of its capacity to territorialize projects, but also because it produces a scale for the collective struggle for resources and against specific projects (ALLEN 2017; ARMAS-DÍAZ and SABATÉ 2020). These and other reasons attracted the attention of geographers due to the physical location and the spatial form in which the changes are manifested with respect to how power operates and is disputed (DAVIS 2011), which is a scientific debate that started decades ago and continues to explore the uniqueness of islands in their different dimensions (BALDACCHINO 2018).

Globalization promotes the acceleration of processes, flows and networks of activities, transforming social organization, societies, and exchanges on a global scale (SHEPPARD 2016). The power of corporate capital increases because of this ‘compression of space and time.’ Islands are among the most profitable spaces for tourism and real estate investment, particularly some of those located outside the centers of the world-economy wherein they are called the “peripheries of pleasure” (TURNER and ASH 1975). These offer favorable conditions for prof-

it rates: availability of cheaper land, labor and natural resources, and subject states (which charge less taxes, devalue regulations and their local currencies), optimizing capital investments with shorter amortization periods and an income differential that makes consumption cheaper.

The paradox of the defensive reactions of the islands’ population may arise, making these territories even more attractive to capitalist interests. Legal restrictions regarding new urban growth and tourist accommodation offers, which are the result of the social rejection of commodification and dispossession, favor the monopolization of income. According to the theory developed by HARVEY (1974), the owners of real estate and tourist establishments are logically favored by those regulations that hinder or prevent the appearance of new offers, which would contribute to devalue theirs or to make them compete. This conflict of interest configures local cliques that defend degrowth, selecting tourists and immigrants with greater purchasing power. These social alliances promote debates (GÓMEZ LLABRÉS 2018) and propose solutions to tourist saturation through the establishment of limitations (WTO 2018) based on increase in prices, thus favoring the revaluation of real estate, the income they provide, and the privileges of the elites that monopolize them. This process contributes socio-spatial segregation through dispossession and gentrification.

This coincidence of conservationist and capitalist interests favored the formation of territorial defense alliances, such as the urban and tourist moratoriums (BIANCHI 2004). However, the systemic crisis of 2008 broke the consensus on the containment of growth, causing the defense of the territory to take a back seat. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to already deepen this mutation of social discourses.

When the real estate speculation accelerates during a bubble and cases of political-business corruption proliferate (DARIAS et al. 2012; ZACARÉS 2020), debates are censored and protectionist regulations are repealed (ARMAS-DÍAZ and SABATÉ-BEL 2020). Democracy creates discomfort among the ruling classes. Hence, the criminalization of social responses in defense of the right to the city, accusing them of tourism-phobia and assimilating them into xenophobia, homophobia or misogyny is witnessed (BLANCO-ROMERO et al. 2018).

HARVEY (2012, 22) pointed out that urbanization plays a key role in absorbing the surplus of capitalism and does so by introducing processes of creative destruction and dispossession of the masses. However, such processes give rise to periodic revolts that could

potentially define new forms of urban life different from those imposed by the promoters of capitalism. Reinventing the city requires the development of collective power forms over the urbanization processes (HARVEY 2012, 4) that are led by the social majorities (LEFEBVRE 1978, 123). These are still a response to the imposition of public policies that support the interests of the ruling classes and clash with those of the working classes and other popular strata (NAVARRO 2007, 78).

2.2 Right to the island and right to nature

The concept of the right to the city, coined by Lefebvre, went beyond the limits of urban environment (MARCUSE 2009) and originally arose from the relationship between the city and the countryside, linked to the imprecise right to nature (GILBERT and PHILLIPS 2003). Based on this, APOSTOLOPOULOU and ADAMS (2019) defined the right to nature as the right to influence and redirect the urbanization processes, promoted by capitalism, this is a radical transformation of nature-society relationships under non-capitalist/postcapitalist logics in order to achieve socio-environmental justice, through radical democracy, whereas reducing the global ecological footprint. In the same way, CLARK (2013) associated this right with that of spatial justice, that is, the deepening of democracy and the de-commodification of space and nature, placing it in an even more concrete framework of the islands. SCHMELZKOPF (2008, 137) expressed himself in the same way when analyzing the protests of the people of Viesques island against the American military installation and the consequences on health, environment, and the daily life of those who inhabit it. Likewise, CLARK (2013) criticized the adoption of standardized socio-economic models of island development from conventional and hegemonic theories, claiming the right to the island as a “means to reinforce the social and political processes aimed at a fair and sustainable island development” (CLARK 2013, 129). The right to the island understands the social production of the island as an open process subject to permanent political struggle. Therefore, through the right to the island we pretend to repoliticize the analysis of the social production of the island.

Under commodification and financialization mechanisms, nature is increasingly incorporated into the accumulation and circulation of capital (SMITH 2007). Its qualities and singularities are simplified, equating it to a quantifiable and interchangeable as-

set (ROBERTSON 2012). Thus, the value of nature appears as being key to environmental policies, understood as a financial element (BÜSCHER et al. 2012). The so-called green capitalism constitutes an appropriation of nature as an accumulation strategy (SMITH 2007, 2), promoting conservation measures through green grabbing (FAIRHEAD et al. 2012). However, and evidencing its contradictory character, capitalism resorts to other mechanisms of nature destruction, such as the withdrawal of policies for the protection of ecosystems and species (un-green grabbing) (APOSTOLOPOULOU and ADAMS 2015, 16). This was promoted with greater intensity after the 2008 crisis, with the application of new legislative frameworks and reorientation of the environmental policies to reactivate urbanization (APOSTOLOPOULOU and ADAMS 2019).

The neoliberalization of nature is verified in a similar or different way (but not totally different) in all places, regions, and countries (CASTREE 2008). These nuances are important, since the specific practices of each government are closely related to the composition of the local political-economic power and class relations (HARVEY 2011, 6), although the general trend of governments is still the same, that is, promoting neoliberalization (PECK et al. 2013).

Parallel to the growing commodification of nature, the urban and rural struggles for environmental justice intensified globally (TEMPER et al. 2018). Environmental aspects are one of the most powerful sources of opposition against neoliberalism (HEYNEN et al. 2007), and they also offer radical alternatives for the future (SMITH 2010). Thus, environmental protests mobilized the most groups and people on the Spanish Islands (SÁNCHEZ 2015; VALDIVIELSO and MORANTA 2019). For this reason, it is not surprising that the condition of the island is highlighted as a relevant space for studying political geography (MOUNTZ 2015).

3 Islands: accumulation and contested territories

The attraction of investment capital for insular territories takes into account the development and restructuring of the built environment (HOF and BLÁZQUEZ-SALOM 2013). This process is accentuated by the increased risk of war, terrorism, inflation, health, etc. This territorial transformation materializes through the tourist appropriation of housing, agricultural land, infrastructures, the coastline and the sea, or the public space. In addition to chang-

ing their use, exchanges are accelerated by means of commodification and financialization due to their financial interests. This is the case with the tourist accommodation plants, especially hotels wherein the real estate property is divided, adopting the model of a condominium or condo-hotel and attracting investment funds, as occurs with housing. In other words, financial capital increasingly focus on touristic services, commodities, hotels and other actors involved in the touristic sector (YRIGÓY 2020). These changes are reflected in the enclosure of the space, a necessary requirement for its commercialization (DEVINE and OJEDA 2017; DOMBLÁS 2020) and that focus on natural marine resources – especially in islands –, a process defined as blue grabbing (HILL 2017).

Socio-spatial segregation does not only affect the islands. The insular cases exemplify, to the extreme, the exclusion based on social class and power with Dubai's artificial islands as epitomes of “neoliberal dreamworlds” (DAVIS and MONK 2007). The Maldives, for example, are set to compete as a destination for real estate investments with a place-related branding based on their high profitability that positions them as a premium destination. In the Balearic Islands, the islet of Tagomago, next to Ibiza, is also positioned in this luxury residential tourism segment (STRASSMAIR 2015). A real estate agent, Matthias Kühn, acquired its only house and obtained the concession of the lighthouse and its port, establishing a monopoly control over all the island's facilities. Kühn also created a foundation for the defense of nature to avoid the inconvenience of the Natura 2000 protection Network, using conservationism as an alibi to maintain a very lucrative private use (ARTIGUES-BONET and BLÁZQUEZ-SALOM 2016). This example shows how conservationism (green grabbing) can be instrumentalized in favor of the privatization of natural spaces by not opening them up for public use, limiting them only to the enjoyment of the elites who can access them (*ibid.*).

The economic recovery in Spain after the 2008 crisis was based on a ‘tourism bubble.’ This triggered social conflicts due to tourist commodification of housing (COCOLA-GANT 2016), job insecurity (CAÑADA 2018) and overtourism (BLANCO-ROMERO et al. 2018). The defense of the territory and the landscape drew the attention of different interest groups, namely environmental conservationists, defenders of local identity, and rentiers favored by their ownership of the land as well as hotel establishments or homes located in privileged locations. The alliance of these local sectors is reflected in their common demand to contain growth – given that the urbani-

zation and building reduce their monopolistic profitability – and improve the physiognomic aspects of the territory, such as natural spaces (BIANCHI 2004; MÜLLER and BLÁZQUEZ 2020). On the other hand, metabolic and social conflicts generate less consensus, especially: 1) energy consumption and its contribution to the climate emergency, 2) social exclusion based on class, gender, origin, ethnicity, etc.; and 3) expanding the capacity of the transport, supply, and waste treatment infrastructure.

Thus, while the protectionist demands focus on the physiognomic aspects, they received the support of large social majorities (as confirmed by the demonstrations in defense of the territory in Tenerife and other islands, such as Mallorca in the Balearic Archipelago). However, after the systemic crisis of 2008 and with more profound socio-ecological demands, the old strength of social movements in defense of the territory declined.

The degrowth debate illustrates this divergence (KALLIS et al. 2020). On the one hand, there is a greater social consensus regarding its meaning, limited to dispensing with the less favored sectors, such as working-class tourists with lower purchasing power and immigrants, excluding from the latter, the wealthy who mostly come from rich countries. On the other hand, degrowth, understood as a redistributive political project and oriented toward an eco-social transition, is less accepted (FLETCHER et al. 2019).

4 Touristification and the destruction of nature: Tenerife 1960-2020

Tenerife is the largest of the islands of the Canary archipelago, located in central-eastern Atlantic, near the African continental coast (Fig. 1). At the beginning of the 1960s, along with other Canary Islands – although not all of them – it experienced an extraordinary growth in touristic activities, making this region the third preferred Spanish destination for foreign tourism in 2019 (FRONTUR 2020). Tourism activity accounts for 35% of the GDP and employs 40% of the working population (EXCELTUR 2018).

A double institutional discourse was configured regarding the particular ‘remote insularity’ of the Canary Islands (remote, in any case, from Europe – about 1,500 km – since the continental African territory is only 96 km away), which successfully spread the conceptual label of ‘ultra-periphery.’ The Canary elites led a process to obtain posi-

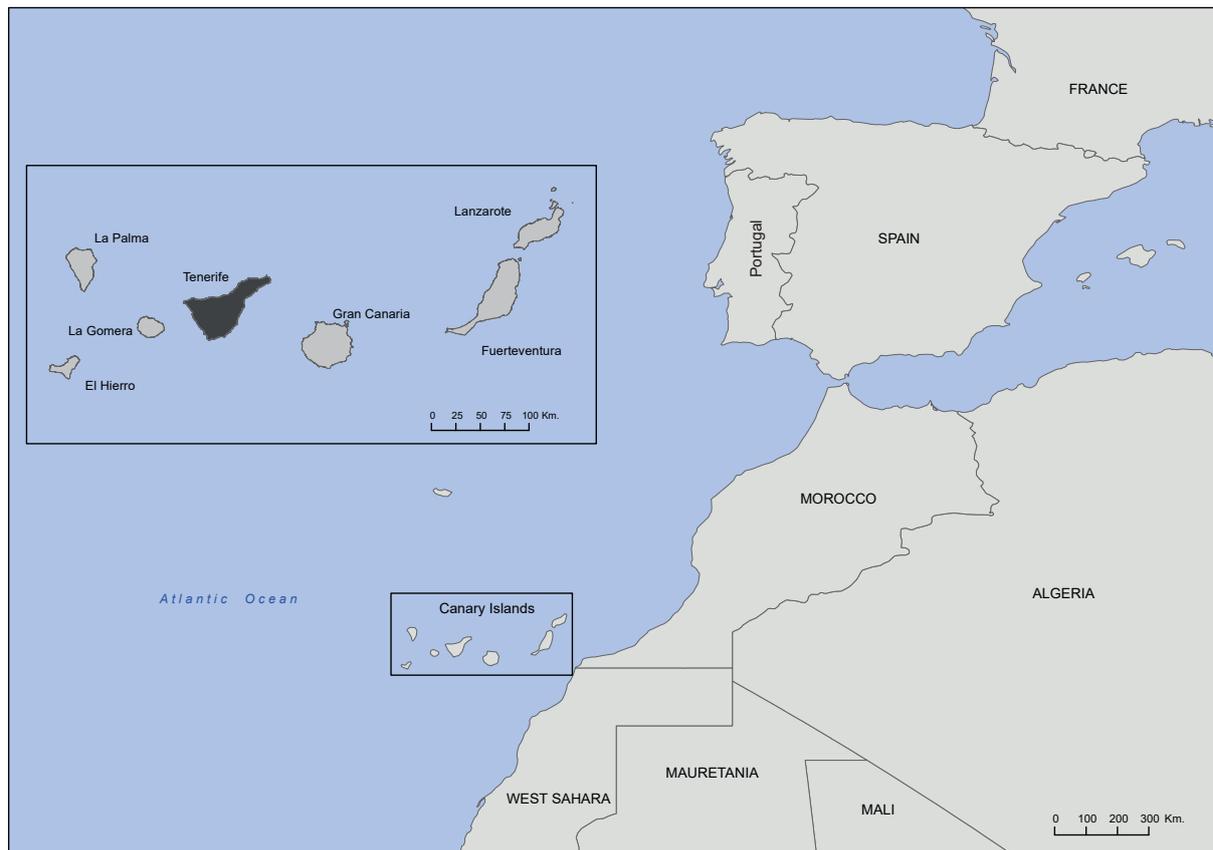


Fig. 1: Location of Tenerife and the Canary Islands.

tive advantages and discriminations in different European Union policies, which also applied to the Atlantic insular regions of Portugal and the overseas departments of France in South America and Africa – old colonies that updated their administrative status and dependence on France. On the one hand, the double ultraperipheral discourse assumes the opportunities that the insular condition (and its climatic and geopolitical derivatives) brings to the Canary Islands in sectors, such as tourism, logistics, and export agriculture. On the other hand, another more or less dramatic argument is simultaneously wielded based on supposed disadvantages derived from the ‘ultra-peripheral’ situation and the difficulties involved in joining the global market (AGUILERA 2006). This results in paradoxes. For example, a territory with alleged international connectivity difficulties due to remoteness receives 16 million visitors in a year, or, in case of the Canary Islands, these are grouped together with other insular regions with difficulties arising out of supposedly climatic extremes despite the fact that it is the good weather that attracts most tourists; or what

allows the region to specialize in export-oriented extra-early agricultural productions. The second discourse is the one used to demand European subsidies for the construction of transport mega-infrastructures, whose beneficiaries are strong, local, and transnational business groups (ibid., 45). It serves as the basis for authoritarian decision-making and the long-established hegemony of liberal-conservative political forces of a regionalist nature (DENIZ 2006).

During the second part of the past century and late on, the massive tourism industry was established almost a decade apart from other Spanish islands, like the Balearic case because it had to wait for further development of the jet plane - charter flight in order to make medium distances profitable, such as those between the archipelago and the European airports where tourists come from (VERA 1993). It started in the two central islands (Tenerife and Gran Canaria), with an expansion to the two most eastern islands (Lanzarote and Fuerteventura) in the 70s, currently forming the four most popular tourist islands of the region.

The first tourist boom (1960-1973) was marked by a fundamental feature, which was maintained in all subsequent thriving periods: the subordination of the travel industry to the capital gains of the construction-real estate dimension. The boom ended in the year of the oil crisis. This was not so much because of the increase in fuel and travel prices – although it had an influence – but because of the growing gap between a soaring promotion of hotel and non-hotel accommodation and a much lower rate of increase in travelers (VERA 1993). From a territorial point of view, the phenomenon was concentrated in a few foci but with a high urban density. This affected the insular ecologies, including human ecology. However, for some time, it coexisted with traditional agricultural activities, fishing, and the stunted processing industry, without completely destroying them. However, this made emblematic places, such as the Teide (National Park and future World Heritage), available to mass tourism due to the construction of the cable car. In this phase of the late Francoism, the state apparatus, with the development plans, created the impression (prolonged until the subsequent democratic period) that increasing the number of tourists was mechanically equivalent to the general expansion of prosperity (VERA 1993, 479). In this phase, under a dictatorial regime and with a population with semi-colonial roots plunged into chronic poverty, social contestation was almost impossible. The first conservationist circles emerged (in professional and university environments) from the concern about the incipient landscape deterioration and with a focus on the preservation of nature, unrelated to the criticism of the social problems derived from tourism (to avoid their identification as foci against the regime and consequent prohibition) (DÁVILA 2006; DE CRUZ 2010).

The second tourist boom (1985-1989), closely linked to a phase of acceleration of the international circulation of capital, had a very large territorial impact despite its short duration wherein the urbanized land for tourism doubled (MARTÍN 2000), and the demand for water (to the detriment of agricultural irrigation), energy consumption or waste generation multiplied. Besides, for the first time in the contemporary history of the Canary Islands, labor force was imported. The contestation was marked by myriad conflicts driven by local groups. With weak regional (or even insular) coordination, these groups separately faced every single impact of the real estate-tourism process: collectives called ‘*Salvar Veneguera*,’ ‘*Let’s save the Dunes of Corralejo*,’ ‘*Coordinator in defense of El Rincón*,’ etc. However, this scattered action, combined with scientific proposals, succeeded when a narrow pro-

gressive majority in the regional Parliament permitted the Canary Islands Law of Natural Spaces (1987) to be approved: two articles and a cartographic annex safeguarded more than 40% of the regional surface from the direct urbanization (almost half in Tenerife). The abrupt completion was produced again by the lag between real estate growth and tourist influx (the latter never stopped growing, but not at the same rate of the former).

Between 1997 and 2006 Spain witnessed a housing boom, exceptional due to its intensity and duration and especially intense in big cities and tourist areas like the Canary Islands (BURRIEL 2008). This growth was possible because of the consolidation of conservative and nationalist political actors supporting a new regulation frame (liberalization of land) (BELLET 2020) and the selective extraction of land rents. In this regard, since the 1990s, power groups in Tenerife have been carrying out a political and class-based assault (first on neighbourhood and labour movements, and then on left-wing forces), which has paved the way for their long-sought-after territorial remapping of the island. A crucial aspect was control of political institutions, weaving a network that began on a local scale (city councils) in the mid-1980s, quickly spreading to the Tenerife island government and then to the Canary Islands government in the early 1990s; this control facilitated the building of strong client networks (ARMAS-DÍAZ AND SABATÉ-BEL 2020).

Around 2003, the well-known international real estate expansion began. Unlike the previous boom, it affected most of the insular urban territory, and it was not limited to the increase in the tourist supply. It extended to habitual homes, second homes, apartments, and luxury villas for foreign seasonal residents as well as an intense development of infrastructure and megaprojects. However, some megaprojects did not end due to the dramatic burst of the housing bubble in 2008. In the rural areas, the Canarian government assisted with European funds promoted the implementation and expansion of rural tourism that became a new tourism commodity frontier since the nineties. There is a movement for the rehabilitation of real estate with vernacular architecture operated in alliance with civic sectors and landowners under the pretext of landscape conservation.

The previous experience of the 80s, its environmental ravages, and consequent opposition gave rise to another contradiction: a dual model that aimed at the containment of tourism growth via moratoriums in some areas, though unleashing other types of conflicts. The so-called moratorium – Law 6/2001, of Urgent Measures in matters of Territorial

Organization and of Tourism in the Canary Islands –, proposed for the four tourist islands – Tenerife, Gran Canaria, Lanzarote, Fuerteventura –, was a result of the strong opposition of environmental groups and other collectives in order to stop the expansion of tourist urbanization, and was established by applying guidelines for the rationalization of the increase in the accommodation supply and the limitation of new land consumption by tourist urbanization (RODRÍGUEZ-DÍAZ and RODRÍGUEZ-DÍAZ 2018). That measure prioritized the containment of lodging supply, renewal and requalification of the consolidated tourist areas instead, the incentive for infrastructure linked to ‘higher quality’ tourism as well as permissiveness in the expansion of residential use, for which the urbanization growth continued (GARCÍA-CRUZ 2014). Far from containing it (which would have been equivalent to a decreasing trend), growth itself was sustained and redirected. The expansion of the tourism fabric was only stopped by the 2008 crisis when the collapse in real estate revenues temporarily limited the construction pressure (GARCÍA-HERNÁNDEZ et al. 2018). This once again proved that real estate interests directed the process to the detriment of tourism and its sustainability (GARCÍA-CRUZ 2014).

The moratorium had other three perverse and unexpected (at least for its honest promoters) effects (SIMANCAS et al. 2011): 1) The ‘call effect,’ seeking to guarantee the requalification before the new legislation was approved (or hastily culminate those obtained previously and about to expire), leading to the promotion in a few years, which otherwise would take much longer under ordinary conditions. 2) The aforementioned residential development coincided with a new international acceleration of capital turnover cycles, encouraged by geo-economic phenomena, such as the economic stabilization of post-Soviet Russia, the influx of capital of ‘irregular’ origin ultimately associated with southern Italy, or the availability of global financial instruments). 3) The territorial impact associated with increases in the size of the new tourist structures: a trend toward ‘horizontal hotels,’ imitating the Caribbean resort model (SIMANCAS et al. 2010): high qualification, low height but large surface proportion not built and destined for green areas, swimming pools, and sports and leisure facilities for its customers. In short, fewer but much larger establishments, with greater accommodation capacity and a much higher ecological footprint: double water consumption and waste generation, quadruple demand for electricity, and so on (HERNÁNDEZ 2001, 177). However, if successive regional governments

were characterized throughout that period by barriers to citizen participation, in practice they contributed to a growing social indignation being channeled through extra-institutional actions, such as the environmental protest (BRITO 2020, 92), or taking critical advantage of certain gaps in the institutional sphere itself. In this regard, popular legislative initiatives in the Canary Islands exceeded the rest of the country. This happened, in particular, during this third real estate-tourism boom (1993-2008), coinciding with the rise of the insular liberal-conservative political regime (BRITO 2018, 78). The succession of mobilizations led to the normalization of this type of protest that, around 2004-2005, reached an almost permanent conflict character (ibid., 73-74). Thus, in recent decades, environmental mobilizations added more people in the Canary Islands than all those focused on social issues (health, education, housing, etc.) (SÁNCHEZ 2015). The recurrent mobilization against the destruction of the natural backbone reinforces protest in the Canary Islands (BRITO 2018, 288-289), as occurred with the demonstrations in Tenerife in opposition of the installation of a high-voltage line that impacted the interior landscape of the southern region (and that caused the appearance of approximately 100,000 people on an island with just under a million inhabitants); or against the construction of the Granadilla port and its effect on some species and protected environments, with equally massive mobilizations (ARMAS-DÍAZ and SABATÉ-BEL 2020). The commitment against the destruction or commodification of the archipelago continued to mobilize the population even till 2008, after the unfolding of a social crisis that acquired dramatic dimensions in the Canary Islands (GARCÍA-HERNÁNDEZ et al. 2018). This was attested by other protests with extraordinary citizen participation, such as those against the project to extract oil at a short distance from the archipelago, with large-scale demonstrations on all the islands (HERRANZ et al. 2018)¹⁾.

¹⁾ The last expression of environmental struggle took place just after the COVID-19 pandemic confinement period (when it could be thought that the concerns were focused exclusively on other issues). After several demonstrations held in 2016 rejecting the construction of a hotel on La Tejita beachfront, southeast of Tenerife, and a collection of more than 86 thousand signatures trying to preserve one of the few undeveloped beaches on the island, a group of activists climbed the cranes of the recently started construction works and, with extraordinary following in the media and social networks (the ‘new normal’ conditions impeding the organization of mass concentrations), they achieved the government paralysis of some work pertaining to doubtful legality.

The social nature of the protest throughout this last stage was characterized by articulation and coordination among groups, creation of broad platforms for joint action that unite the defense of local territories, with the insular environment as the common cause, the confluence of diverse social layers (professional and intermediate sectors – with a greater potential for post-materialist values – with much broader popular strata – whose presence makes possible the vastness reached) (SABATÉ-BEL 2006). A fraction of the movement participants, after reflecting on the absence of political figures that could transfer such widely extended demands to the institutions, considered the “leap to politics” (DÉNIZ 2014): a socio-political initiative that somewhat anticipated the emergence of a new constellation of municipalist parties in several Spanish cities and the political phenomenon of Podemos, which would emerge at the level of the entire state almost a decade later. Podemos, that emerged after the Spanish social unrest of the 15M movement in 2011, channeled part of that social mobilization (FLESCHER FOMINAYA 2020).

In the Canary Islands, tourism, and above all, construction were the most damaged economic activities from of the 2008 crisis. As the Spanish real estate and banking sectors underwent a profound restructuring, the Spanish and regional governments focused on tourism as a fix for the crisis. Therefore, it is not surprising that the expansion of tourism has become a priority of the regional administration with the enactment of a set of boosterism policies. To this end, the transformation of rustic land, until then partially protected, into urban areas was facilitated shortly after the onset of the crisis, allowing activities other than the agricultural ones (BOP 2008). This was followed by other measures focused on the expansion of the tourist activity (BOC 2013) and, more recently, a new territorial policy that delved into the liberalization that began with the global crisis (BOC 2017). In this manner, the regional administration applied neoliberal recipes to territorial planning: land deregulation, reduction of state control in environmental and territorial planning, reducing control elements or decentralizing powers to more local administrations (THEODORE et al. 2011). This materialized in the power as per which the island councils and, above all, the town councils (with very limited human and technical resources, and more susceptible to being appointed by tourism-real estate companies) can approve the planning. The result was the intensification of the processes of commodification, privatiza-

tion and financialization as well as their expansion to other areas and spaces as principles that support the circulation of capital (PECK 2004). As is the case everywhere else, the future socioeconomic, geopolitical, and cultural consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are yet to be confirmed (HALL et al. 2020; HIGGINS-DEBIOLLES 2020). In the field of tourism, trends seem to point to an increase in concern – turned into an obsession– for security, which could favor the upsurge of the three westernmost Canary Islands not yet touristized (La Palma, La Gomera and El Hierro) and therefore, are less visited. A trend that can be extended to the recolonization of the whole of the non-coastal insular space, under different formats (rural tourism, vacation rentals, villas or rural houses; and to a compulsive mystification and transformation of the preserved landscape, almost more ‘frozen’ than in full use, in the towns and rural areas of the Canary Islands: definitive extinction of traditional crops –except for fruit trees for greening reasons– compulsive rise of swimming pools, accessibility rolled up to the last corner where a property is commercialized, etc.).

5 Final reflections

The singularities of insular regions have been addressed by different authors, especially associated with debates on sovereignty, biodiversity, etc. (MOUNTZ 2015). This analysis of the protests in Tenerife highlighted the complex relationship between neoliberal projects and tourism, their scales, the commodification of nature, and the opposition it provokes.

First, the rapid urbanization supported by the construction of infrastructure and tourist specialization resulted in significant capital flows in the real estate sector of tourist areas, such as the ones we studied. Capitalist logic that seeks to satisfy the desire of the dominant classes to integrate into the global economy (HARVEY 2003), resorts to peripheral territories exploited for that purpose (KESHAVARZIAN 2010; PONS et al. 2014). Tenerife is no exception, since its strategic position and insular condition are exploited by powerful groups (supported by public policies) to satisfy their interests. Tourism constitutes the articulating axis of the government in the territoriality of the peripheral region (ROWEN 2014).

Second, nature is central to the accumulation process (SMITH 2007), combining different forms (un-green grabbing and green/blue grabbing) with new environmental regulations that reduce the pro-

tection of species as well as the exploitation of natural areas (APOSTOLOPOULOU and ADAMS 2019). Both strategies in combination aligned with capitalism to meet the needs of the urban development, especially after the financial crisis of 2008 (ibid).

Third, this analysis highlighted how protests in defense of the environment and territory can converge to create a critical discourse with the capitalist growth model. The lack of participation and the indignation at the commodification or destruction of nature stimulate groups that can mobilize other scales to access new political opportunities (SMITH 1996). The spatiality of protests acquires an important dimension because the groups need specific places to establish themselves as a social movement and which represent the symbolic headquarters of some of the institutions and issues they criticize (KÖHLER and WISSEN 2003; HARVEY 2012). In this sense, the appropriation of the scale through the struggle acquires collective importance: on the one hand, climbing scales to achieve international, national or regional alliances, for example, among other islands of the same archipelago (BRITO 2018, 276); on the other hand, conforming to a territoriality confronting the official discourse that claims a different island model, consistent with environmental conservation (CLARK 2013) and linked to the demand for the right to nature (CORTES-VAZQUEZ and APOSTOLOPOULOU 2019). The defense of this becomes the articulating axis of the social movements, protests, and demands at the same time as it is circumscribed to an insular scale and proclaimed as a right to the island (SCHMELZKOPF 2008; CLARK 2013; ARMAS-DÍAZ and SABATÉ-BEL 2020), which recognizes the singularities of the islands while defending the right of those who inhabit them to control urbanization processes (HARVEY 2012).

Acknowledgements

The present work has been possible thanks to the financing of the projects “The urban conflict in the spaces of reproduction. Housing as a scene of social conflict (RTI2018-094142-B-C22)” and “Overtourism in Spanish Coastal Destinations. Tourism Degrowth Strategies (RTI2018-094844-B-C31)” by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, the State Research Agency and the European Regional Development Fund of the European Union as well as the project of the European Union’s research and innovation program Horizon 2020 with the reference Marie Skłodowska-Curie number 873082 (CONTESTED_TERRITORY).

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