

# ENERGY GRABBING

[On how the current Spanish energy model requires external violence and how to transition to a model that respects other peoples and future generations.]

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Energy is vital to any society. The Spanish economy has been driven to levels of dependence on third countries that oscillate between 74-82% from 2000 to the present day (Ramos, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. That is to say, more than three quarters of the Spanish energy model comes from imports, principally oil and gas, from countries such as Algeria, Nigeria or Russia. That is without taking into account that Spanish nuclear power stations are generating energy inside the Spanish State, using foreign technology and nuclear fuels extracted from mines situated in countries like Niger.

It is well known that the Spanish energy model is not really a "model" as such, but rather the result of the incoherent overlapping of the interests of the oligopoly and government zigzags such as the recent decision to punish the generation of renewable energy using the excuse of shortfalls in energy tariffs. From a domestic

perspective it is absurd to destine around 5% of GDP to paying for energy imports, if we consider the geophysical characteristics of the Peninsula in terms of solar and wind potential, and the (for some) unbearable music of austerity, with its endless refrain of 'there is no money', while the debts owed to speculative financial markets continue to be serviced, and the rights of the population continue to be curtailed. It is as absurd externally as it is internally. External energy dependence is not only linked to Spain's international position of energy vulnerability, as indicated by strategic Government documents such as the "Spanish Strategy on Security" (Spanish Government, 2011), but it also describes, as we will see below, a form of modern eco-fascism that is well summarised by the emerging new concept of "energy grabbing", created as a syllogism of other modern forms such as land grabbing or water grabbing.

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent available data at the time of writing suggests that in 2011 Spain's dependence stood at 76.4%, compared to 54% which was the average of the EU27. [Data from Eurostat.](#)

## ENERGY GRABBING

Energy grabbing is exercised using a variety of practices by which a country (principally its government and transnational companies) gives itself the right to acquire the energy resources of foreign countries by a variety of different means, including military intervention and occupation when market options prove insufficient. It is a concept that is applied principally to large deposits of hydrocarbons and uranium. However, it can also be applied to the land and water grabbing (claiming of fertile lands and water resources) necessary for the production of the large agrofuel energy crops that are replacing tropical forests in countries such as Colombia, Cameroon or Indonesia; and to the construction of mega-hydroelectric dams. It will certainly also come to refer, in the future, to the grabbing of lands associated with the mining of lithium and other strategic minerals for batteries with high energy autonomy and renewable technologies (Scheidel & Sorman, 2012). The concept draws attention to a phenomena that is not new, but which is becoming more radical as we pass peak oil (a point which some situate around 2005); and the age of cheap oil and gas draws to an end, and the effects of the climate crisis begin to be felt. Global energy consumption continues to increase, pushed up by the new global consumer class and by the attempts of central countries to escape from the crisis through more growth. We are not only seeking a debate about who is the legitimate beneficiary of territorial energy resources in any corner of the world. There is also a more transcendental issue in that energy grabbing implicitly involves the appropriation of collective and individual rights. It prevents populations from enjoying good health, sustaining their lands, their forests and their water, and maintaining peace in their communities or enjoying self-determined democracy.

Energy grabbing has a strong geopolitical significance in terms of foreign control over the energy markets, and two forces converge to bring this about. The first force is that the grabbing economies, particularly those energy-intensive metabolisms such as the European and US economies, where productivity and growth are directly linked to the price of energy<sup>2</sup>. that is to say, when growth is the result of increases in energy intensive capital, it requires stable flows of energy at reasonably low prices. For example, fishing in waters ever deeper and further from shore requires more energy- and capital-intensive fishing boats (as is the case of the Spanish industrial fishing fleet). When international prices rise, these economies suffer, and productivity falls. This phenomena is considered by many to be the basis of the current Great Recession. As a consequence, any attempt by government leaders of exporting countries to change the *status quo* of low prices under what experts have dubbed “energy nationalism” is perceived by dependent countries as a global threat. Such was the case in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, the Khomeini’s and/or Ahmadinejad’s Iran, Gaddafi’s Libya, Hugo Chavez’s Venezuela, Evo Morales’ Bolivia, etc. In order to keep prices low (but not so low as to act as a disincentive to new production) it becomes strategic to control international markets by creating a **global regime** (Lebben, 2011). To do this they simultaneously combine hard domination (militarisation of infrastructures and transport routes, military interventions and the boycotting of disobedient governments, etc.) with softer options (energy cooperation to promote the liberalisation and privatisation of the markets, control of the futures and derivatives markets where prices are negotiated, guarantees of judicial security, etc.)

The second force, closely linked to the first, is that which stems from the interests of the energy companies based in the grabbing countries to grow in third

<sup>2</sup> See Ramos, J. (2013) [Dependencia energética en España](#). Visited 1/6/2013.

countries. That is to say, to control new markets, obtain new reserves, access new consumers, diversify risks. It is not related to guaranteeing supply in the home country, however it is related to the global market. This is the case, for example, of Repsol in Latin America, who exploit oil reserves for export to the United States, not to Spain. Even worse in Western eyes, is the Chinese State Energy Trident (CNPC, CNOOC, SINOPEC) that is silently acquiring shares in the North American market, not to supply China, but to make gains in a strategic hub and access the latest technologies, principally in hydraulic fracturing ("Fracking"). Grabbing may take place in order to obtain controlling regional or global positions that generate high financial performance (Philips, 2012).

Energy grabbing results in interference with populations whose territory is (by chance) located in areas rich in energy resources, in transit zones (energy corridors) or within states governed by energy exporting administrations. It also means the systematic degradation of the environment by the contaminating and environmentally destructive extraction industries (including the production of agrofuels). It accelerates CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and degrades the carbon sinks (oceans, forests, marshland, etc.) that keep the planet's climate constants in equilibrium. Finally, grabbing is dispossession by accumulation, and means the loss of the people's sovereignty over their own common wealth (Cotarelo et al., 2014). What this means is that energy grabbing is anticooperation, the opposite of cooperation: it may benefit the contracting parties,



but it damages third parties who live near (or not even so near) to these natural resources (Llistar, 2009). Usually it is a case of minorities against majorities. This is the so-called "resource curse", whereby the more natural resources you have, the worse off you are (Acosta, 2009). The populations and natural environments of Iraq, Iran, Algeria, Guinea, Ecuador, Russia, Libya, Peru, Colombia and Sudan, or the Indigenous peoples of the Amazon, the Niger Delta, Alberta or Papua New Guinea have all experienced this curse. Now, as a result of the "fracking bubble", peripheral populations in the North, in places such as Ohio, Pennsylvania or Texas in the USA, or Áraba, La Garrotxa or Burgos on the Iberian Peninsula are also learning what it means<sup>3</sup>. Although the concept of grabbing is principally defined as a

<sup>3</sup> A 2.0 mapping of hydraulic fracturing wells in the US is available at <http://shalebubble.org/the-map/> (last visited 1/6/2013). This map forms part of the work of Hughes, *Drill, Baby Drill*, 2013.

phenomena that takes place between countries, it may be extrapolated to an intrastate level, when it results in displacement or interference by some in the lives of others in the name of the use of energy resources. This is not only exemplified in the cases of communities affected by the so-called “useless imposed projects” as denounced by the anti-fracking platforms, the anti-nuclear movement, the movements against High Speed Trains, and mega-infrastructures or gas prospecting on the coast. It is also an issue for the new “alliances against energy poverty” where we are seeing electricity blackouts in the poorest homes as a result of grabbing by mafias known as the “Energy Oligopolies”, giving rise to a kind of class struggle in the sphere of energy.

A highly dependent, centralised and voracious energy model must, by definition, be a grabber, and as a result, will have a high ecological and social impact. The following table shows the distribution of negative impacts and transnational interferences:

**THE RHETORIC OF SECURITY**

The concept of “energy security” in the abstract is a *container word*, it can be traced back to different meanings, it encompasses vernacular uses such as staying warm in winter even when it is very cold, but also the bombing the populations of states that interfere with crude oil reaching the supply networks. The official rhetoric tends to hide the “grabbing” factor behind the idea of “securing” energy supply on a global stage replete with dangers. Although, as we have already pointed out, in reality it is not just a question of ensuring foreign supply, but also of taking control of the markets and protecting them with favourable international rules of engagement (the so-called “*lex mercatoria*” (Juan Hernández Z. & Pedro Ramiro, 2009)). When the collateral damage becomes known, it is accepted as necessary and justified for domestic reasons: first we must protect those at home, they claim. However, these energy security policies, which, at first sight, seem reasonable from a domestic point of view, are one of the principal sources of anticooperation on the part of the high-energy-consuming countries and groups towards the rest of the world

INTERFERENCE IN THE EXTRACTION AND ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURES IN CONTACT ZONES.	INTERFERENCE IN DEMOCRATIC GOVERNABILITY AND SELF-DETERMINATION.	ECONOMIC INTERFERENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expulsions (environmental refugees).</li> <li>- Physical insecurity (resulting from militarisation, armed violence, the introduction of settlers, etc.)</li> <li>- Deforestation and biodiversity loss.</li> <li>- Land, water and air pollution.</li> <li>- Health issue (cancers, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Corruption.</li> <li>- De-institutionalisation.</li> <li>- Militarisation and armed violence.</li> <li>- Savings are made through perks rather than taxes meaning that governments do not have to be accountable to their citizens. (Hughes, 2013)</li> <li>- Destruction of the people’s energy sovereignty.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Energy poverty.</li> <li>- Debt resulting from paying for export infrastructures.</li> <li>- Over indebtedness due to guarantees based on future extraction.</li> <li>- Loss of control of the energy markets (financialisation) and the externalisation of the economy.</li> <li>- Dutch disease (inflation, etc.)</li> <li>- Increasing socio-economic inequality.</li> </ul>

and future generations. As The Corner House's book "Energy Security. For Whom? For What?" concludes: energy security for some implies insecurity for others (Hildyard, Lohmann, & Sexton, 2012).

Nevertheless, consultations on energy grabbing among both *policy makers* and *policy takers* of the Spanish domestic energy system, conclude that their idea of the phenomena is amorphous at best, a mix of ignorance, delegation of responsibilities ("others are worse than us") and fatalistic resignation (Barbero & Llistar, 2014). The value chains of energy are long, and few get through the smoke screen to understand first hand the consequences of each of the links in the global supply chain. Devices such as publicity campaigns, corporate social responsibility, junk science and mercenary scientists, and public-private partnerships are promoted by companies and government elites interested in increasing the confusion and lack of interest that surrounds the issue.

Nevertheless, a corner of the movements for global social and environmental justice is fighting against this distortion by constructing the concept and increasing the focus on "energy grabbing". This is a new concept in the service of the epistemology of the poor; another lever in the interests of constructive coexistence. To enable us to see clearly, to judge and to act in times of torment and energy crisis.

### GRABBING VERSUS SECURITY IN THE SPANISH STATE

Collaterally, the Spanish model has, since the 1960s, been gradually driven towards policies of increased energy grabbing<sup>4</sup>. These are principally in the form of

foreign policies centred on the geopolitics of oil, gas and uranium, with particular interests in North Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, Russia, France, and singular countries such as Nigeria, Angola and Equatorial Guinea. There is no doubt that energy is one of the Kingdom of Spain's three priorities for foreign policy (together with trade and security). Energy security is defined by the International Energy Agency as "the capacity to guarantee energy supplies at reasonable prices", and it forms part of the three pillars of both Spanish and EU energy policy. In the Spanish case it also includes securing the State's 10,000km of high pressure gas pipelines, or the 4,000km of oil pipelines that connect the refineries to storage facilities such as the Castor Project, from threats like terrorist attack or natural disaster. However, above all, it is centred on threats to the supplies (at cheap prices) coming from abroad, as is made clear by (Segoviano, 2011) (IEEE Ministerio de Defensa, Comité Español del Consejo Mundial de Energía, Club Español de la Energía, 2014).<sup>5</sup>

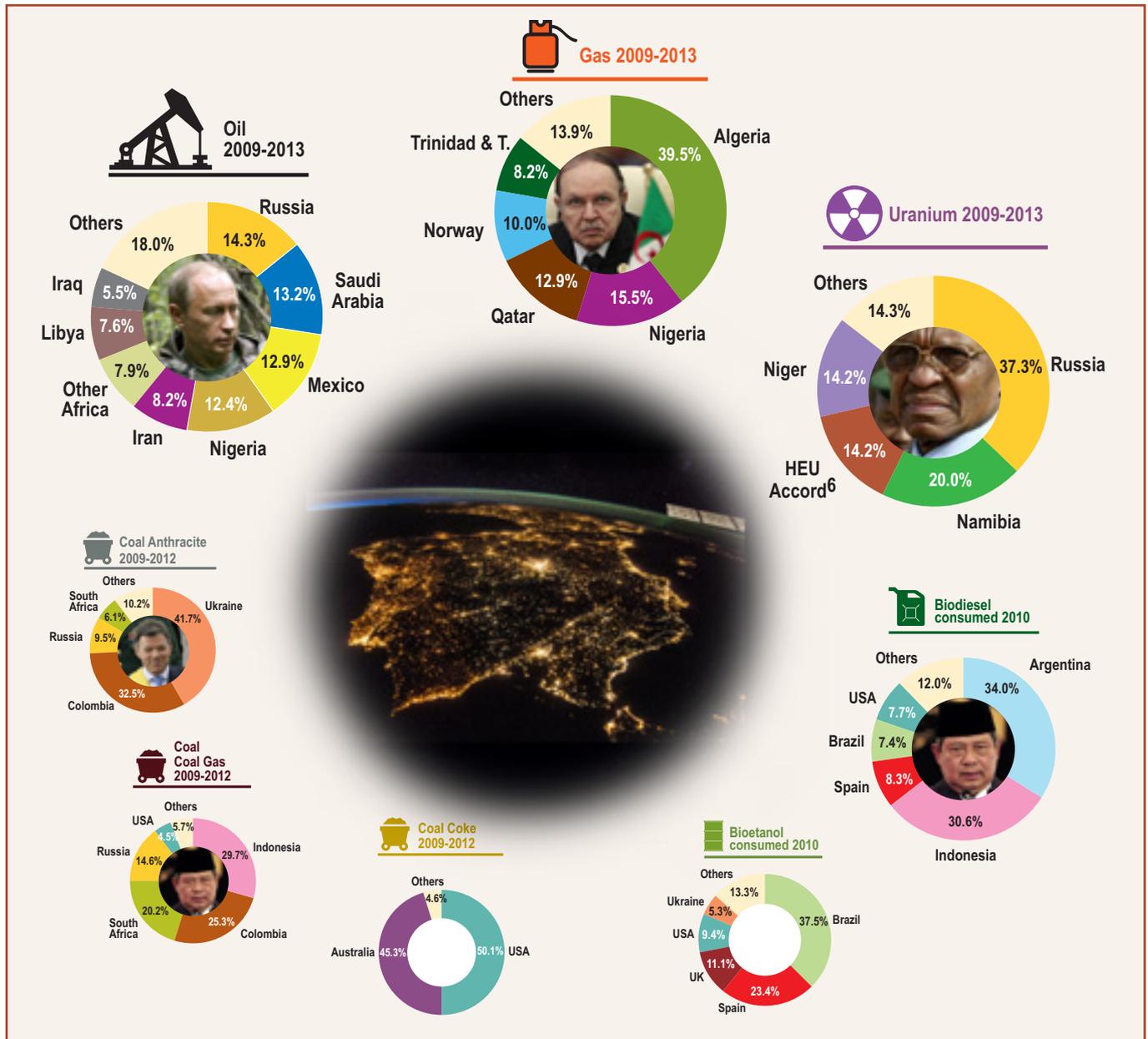
Let us look at who Spain is grabbing from abroad, although, more recently, we are also seeing grabbing going on within our borders:

According to calculations made by ODG for the study "Energetic anticooperation of the Spanish model" the different "cocktails" of fuel that move the Spanish economy come, according to the available data, from specific supply zones in the countries, and in the proportions (in physical terms) indicated in the following table:

<sup>4</sup> It is a Dependent and Intensive Economy Addicted to Fossil Fuels.

<sup>5</sup> The Spanish Minister of Defence Eduardo Morenés stated on 12/5/2014 that EU energy policy "should not confine itself to environmental aspects, but it should go beyond this issue in pursuit of a truly common energy policy, that encourages inter-connections and guarantees supply and storage".

Country of origin of energy supplies to Spain (2009-2013)



Sources: Own creation, based on data from CORES, Datacomex, Eurostat, Enusa, CNE and Carbonuni3n (ODG, 2015).

The table indicates that the large part of Spanish energy grabbing is taking place in countries held hostage by authoritarian oligarchies that tend to repress any popular

resistance or internal opposition<sup>7</sup>. These countries have terrible indicators for corruption, health, democracy, personal security, environmental conservation etc., and are

6 Agreement between the USA and Russia for the conversion of uranium from military to commercial use.

7 Some local resistances are giving rise to transnational environmental justice convergences such as the Oilwatch Network ([www.oilwatch.org](http://www.oilwatch.org)), however, on the other hand they also feed local adhesion to armed groups under the banner of radical Islam.

condemned by an effectively global energy regime, that is actively fed by predatory capitalist economies such as those of the West, but also other emerging powers, including, although it is often less visible, the Spanish factor.

### HOW TO MAKE THE TRANSITION TO AN ECONOMY THAT IS COHERENT WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF OTHER PEOPLES AND WITH PROTECTING FUTURE GENERATIONS?

A model that does not grab foreign rights must re-localise its energy use, bring it closer, decentralise it and democratise it. That would very probably lead to a degrowth in foreign supply (although it is important to avoid domestic aggressions resulting from energy mega-infrastructures). Through a transition to distributed renewable energies, it would contribute to freeing many of the World's peoples from their exporting dictatorships and to liberating ourselves from the Oligopoly and the addiction to hydrocarbons and uranium, which has led us to the absurd situation of climate crisis and violence between peoples.

The climatic, geographical and morphological characteristics of Spanish territory, characterised by fierce sun, powerful winds and steep rivers, are optimum. Clean technologies are, today, an economically viable reality.

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