



Urban Geographies in Transition. A Vision from Spain

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Habitual statements in academic and journalistic fields on the growing inequality of our cities call for multiple reflections. There are numerous indicators of inequality, and territorial specificities give rise to important and subtle differences. What is less debatable is the spatial expansion of inequality (from more outlying, poorer countries to the most developed ones) and its generalization on all scales (from rural to urban areas, and from large metropolises to small cities). Mobility and housing, which inspired the title of this Special Issue, lie at the root of many of these processes, which are represented by phenomena that are often interconnected, such as gentrification and the elite social classes; impoverishment and immigrants in search of work; segregation and refugees; among many others. In this monographic issue, we try to offer a Spanish-based vision of what we call urban geographies in transition—that is, urban geographies in which the key stages, for the purpose of analysis, are the real estate bubble (1996–2007), the subsequent crisis (2008–2013), and the ensuing recovery (2014–2020), without overlooking the impact of the current COVID-19 crisis on the configuration of a new spatial order in cities.

Since the mid-1980s, Spanish economic policy opted for secondary circuits of accumulation and for the financialization of the economy as its main growth mechanisms [1,2], all the while maintaining an advanced process of post-Fordist capitalism. The outcome was the consolidation of an economic system in which real estate speculation became the main means of generating surpluses for economic agents [3] and savings for the population through constant price increases. From the late 1990s, financial credit became the driving force behind this circuit, financing the purchase of housing for a large part of the population. The securitization of loans on secondary markets was used as a mechanism to boost this process [4]. This contributed to high economic growth, a demand for workers in the secondary sector of the labor market, in the building sector in particular, and, by extension, the arrival of high numbers of immigrants. All of this resulted in rising housing prices and high private indebtedness.

When the world crisis hit the United States in 2008, resulting from the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers Holdings Inc., the Spanish economy was affected by the same patterns. The gigantic real estate bubble burst, with huge knock-on effects on the economy, a drop in housing investment, and big impacts on family wealth, leading, in turn, to a reduction in consumer expenditure. With the credit crunch and financial difficulties faced by purchasers, there was a sharp drop in production activity. All of this represented the end of the so-called “second Spanish miracle”.

Among the numerous urban processes that were triggered by these events, four main processes offer insight into Spanish cities: (a) the internationalization of the real estate rental market and the growth of holiday rentals as strategies for mobilizing the toxic assets generated by the previous crisis; (b) new forms of international mobility that are associated with lifestyle migrants and new ways of working; (c) growing segregation, precariousness, evictions, and housing displacement; and (d) the appreciation and growth



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of central areas of the city in contrast with the suburban growth phase during the pre-crisis period. Hence, in keeping with the concept coined by Mollenkopf and Castells [5], globalizing neo-liberal capitalism is giving rise to an increasingly dual city. Seen from this perspective, the post-crisis is a new stage of intensified unequal geographical growth in increasingly segregated urban spaces, with higher numbers of precarious areas compared with other, more and more gentrified ones, triggering new emerging conflicts [6]. It should not be forgotten that this growing inequality in urban spaces is a sign of other lingering inequalities that are increasing at a social level in this new scenario of real estate and housing market internationalization in Spain, which has been in progress since the middle of the last decade. This growing duality in urban areas is a sign of rising disparities among the city's inhabitants and is more apparent depending on nationality, income, and gender, with increasing numbers of vulnerable foreign migrants, women, and members of the middle classes [7]. The process of social and urban fragmentation determines social-spatial inequalities and accentuates existing spatial segregation, since it is still a specific form of geographically located segregation based on increasingly polarized, isolated, and different social groups [8].

As the scars of the 2008 crisis were still healing and a new urban and residential scenario was taking shape in Spain, the COVID-19 crisis highlighted the weak structure on which this supposed economic recovery was based and the sharp social inequalities on which it was founded. The virus and the means used to contain it have not only become new indicators of inequality but also brought new signs of old urban problems to light [9]. One good example is the evolution of mortgage foreclosures and evictions due to the non-payment of rent, now key indicators of the social crisis in Spain over the last fifteen years [10–12]. Property seizure proceedings have increased as 2021 advances, and a dramatic increase is envisaged from September 2021, just as the vaccination campaign is starting to contain the pandemic and as economic indicators are improving. According to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística (the National Statistics Office), mortgage foreclosures in Spain rose by 253.2% between April and June 2021 in comparison with the same quarter in 2020. The lockdown, due to the State of Alarm decreed by the government on 14 March 2020, meant that hundreds of these proceedings were brought to a standstill at the Land Registry and law courts; however, it did not prevent the number of foreclosure proceedings from growing for the first time since 2014. The lockdown, in addition to the “social shield” (a series of measures to protect the vulnerable) and the state's anti-eviction decree, halted them during the months of the pandemic. Although the moratorium for certain situations of vulnerability brought about by the pandemic has been extended until 31 December 2021, the return to business and administrative activities has set mortgage foreclosure proceedings in motion once again. These are a reflection of the real estate bubble: a total of 45.9% of the foreclosures initiated in the second quarter of 2021 correspond to homes bought between 2005 and 2008, which is when the price of housing reached historic maximums. In short, as previously mentioned, we are witnessing new signs of old urban problems.

In the Special Issue “Fragmented City: International Mobility and Housing in Spain”, many of these new processes are studied, as they are related to changes in Spain's capitalist model and the urban planning and social consequences of the last two decades. In total, this issue is made up of ten articles written by authors from ten universities: eight Spanish and two German ones.

These ten articles can be divided into four main groups based on their subject matter. The first group features two articles that offer a diachronic vision of processes, socio-economic dynamics, and new mobilities in Spanish cities. One of them, “The Urban Mirror of the Socioeconomic Transformations in Spain” (Domínguez-Mujica, University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria), stands out for its global analysis and capacity to summarize the situation, since it studies the most significant characteristics of Spanish cities in the post-Fordist capitalist era as a mirror of the economic and social transformations that have led to them. From what might be regarded as a more metropolitan viewpoint,

the article by Gil-Alonso, López-Villanueva, Bayona-i-Carrasco, and Pujadas (University of Barcelona, and Autonomous University of Barcelona) studies population changes in 69 Spanish functional urban areas (FUAs) during the crisis and post-crisis phases, confirming that, during the post-crisis period, the distribution of the inhabitants in urban areas has changed.

The second group deals with the evolution of neo-liberal urban planning in recent decades. It is made up of three articles by Bellet (University of Lleida), Brandis (Complutense University of Madrid), and Hübscher and Ringel (University of Leipzig), featuring case studies of medium-sized Catalan cities, Madrid, and Santa Cruz de Tenerife. All of them show that spatial planning has heralded processes of appreciation and even the city's gentrification.

The third and fourth groups focus on specific subjects and more recent timeframes that can be associated, in general, with the development of unequal cities. The articles by Checa and Nel.lo (Autonomous University of Barcelona) and Alberich, Pérez-Albert, Muro, and Bustamante (University Rovira i Virgili) deal with residential segregation and unequal living conditions. The areas they concentrate on are Catalonia, which is considered from various spatial perspectives, and the city of Tarragona, respectively. Finally, three articles by Parralejo and Díaz-Parra (University of Seville), Domínguez-Mujica, González-Pérez, Parreño-Castellano, and Sánchez-Aguilera (the Universities of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, the Balearic Islands and Barcelona), and Hof (University of Leipzig) explore touristification, evictions, and gentrification. In all three cases, the authors study recent dynamics on an urban scale, featuring comparative analyses in two chapters (the Andalusian cities of Sevilla and Cádiz and the island cities of Palma in Mallorca and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands).

To sum up, this Special Issue offers enriching insights into Spanish cities and Spain's urban geography over the last few decades. This is a field of expertise rooted in a committed, critical approach, and it is steadily adapting to new circumstances, in particular to processes derived from the COVID-19 pandemic, which will no doubt be the focus of future research studies.

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