



Abstract

Socio-Territorial Fractures and Multi-Scalar Cohesion Policies [†]

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Abstract: Current sociodemographic, economic, and ecological dynamics present substantial challenges across Spanish territories. In response, there is a critical need to bolster our capacity for evaluating public policies, enhance the production of actionable data to inform policy design, and reinforce socio-territorial cohesion from a multi-scalar perspective. This approach is pivotal in improving coherence in the pursuit of shared objectives such as equity and sustainability.

Keywords: demographic challenge; development; territorial gaps; geography of discontent; global city; metropolitan area; inequality; residential segregation; affordable housing; mobility

1. Introduction

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has sparked widespread discussion about territorial divides in Spain. Much of the country is grappling with depopulation stemming from outdated economic development models [1] (pp. 58–61). Furthermore, efforts to rejuvenate these regions often rely heavily on commuter mobility, dominated by private vehicles [1] (pp. 78–83). Conversely, escalating inequalities, housing accessibility issues, and residential segregation in major urban areas underscore the repercussions of draining extensive rural territories, thereby undermining broader territorial cohesion [1,2]. These dynamics are emblematic of contemporary economic development, which frequently yields zero-sum effects, underscoring the enduring relevance of dependency theory. Behind these trends lie urbanization processes that have not been effectively planned or guided [3].

Looking ahead, projections indicate mounting challenges. Rural areas are expected to face an old-age dependency ratio exceeding 85% within the next two decades [1] (p. 87), a demographic imbalance that demands correction. Meanwhile, urban areas face bleak prospects in the medium and long term without substantial international immigration. Urgent measures are needed to secure greater stability and socio-economic quality for younger segments of society. This approach represents the most viable and socially acceptable means to enhance work–life balance and align actual fertility rates with desired levels among women. Addressing these intertwined challenges requires an integrated approach, bridging fragmented knowledge and public policies. Understanding their interconnected synergies is crucial for effective governance and planning, minimizing contradictions in public interventions amid constraints on resources, and reinforcing the principle of policy coherence [2].



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2. Methods

This paper analyses the repercussions of a tripartite analytical and conceptual model (social, economic, and environmental system), understood as a dystopian ideal type against which future scenarios will be proposed and corroborated using available data for the Spanish case. The consequences derived from these scenarios will entail a series of challenges for which planning and governance should be prepared.

- **Social System:** Characterized by intersectional stratification, the analysis examines a dystopian scenario marked by escalating inequality, potentially leading to socio-political instability and insecurity. In this context, there would be a significant rise in territorial disparities, residential segregation, and socio-spatial distancing, severely limiting access to opportunities and aspirations for vulnerable groups. Public policies would be challenged to foster equity and socio-territorial cohesion across multiple scales.
- **Economic System:** Defined by global capitalism, the analysis presents a dystopian model of unconscious developmentalism that fails to justify its role in meeting human needs. This scenario forecasts increasing market tensions and ongoing challenges in housing accessibility, particularly in regions with concentrated job opportunities like agglomeration economies. Amidst growing inefficiencies in meeting basic needs, discontent, uncertainty, and perceptions of relative deprivation would persist. Public policies would face the imperative of demonstrating efficacy in improving overall quality of life.
- **Ecological System:** Characterized by a planetary biosphere with predominantly finite resources, the analysis highlights a dystopian scenario of ongoing ecological degradation due to inefficient utilization of limited resources and non-circular metabolic processes. Public policies would confront the urgent necessity of promoting a just ecological transition, emphasizing the transformation of unsustainable mobility and transportation models.

3. Results: Challenges and Contradictions

3.1. Socio-Territorial Scenarios and Their Consequences

The demographic transition, facilitated by technological and ideological advancements, has reshaped humanity's population dynamics from high birth and mortality rates to lower birth rates and increased longevity. This transition unfolds in three phases: initially, high birth rates persist due to declining mortality; in the intermediate stages, birth rates gradually decrease while longevity temporarily mitigates losses; and in the final stages, despite low birth rates, losses remain manageable until the exit of baby boom cohorts, often supplemented by significant immigration. In this contextual framework, our welfare provision systems have been designed to be linked to economic and demographic growth. The former could lead to unsustainable long-term outcomes with the current model of consumption and waste, and the latter will ultimately conclude once all societies complete the demographic transition. The challenge here is determined by the importance of long-term socio-historical cycles. Not all societies have experienced development produced by successive ideological and technological revolutions equally. They did not all start at the same time, nor did they begin from the same initial stage or have the same structural starting conditions. Additionally, the speed of induced changes has not been equivalent, nor have the contextual variables or relational structures of interdependence with other actors been comparable [2] (pp. 74–79).

This results in enormous territorial imbalances both between and within countries. In Spain's case, most of its population exhibited all the structural characteristics of the Ancient Regime until the early 20th century. From then on, its development model and

population growth in the initial and intermediate phases of the demographic transition led to a consequent concentration of this increase in human capital in major metropolitan areas. For instance, the territory occupied by the six largest metropolitan areas in Spain (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Málaga, and Bilbao) housed 2.5 million inhabitants in 1900 (15% of the total population), while in 2021, they accommodated 18.2 million people (40% of the total population) [1] (pp. 134–135). The opposite side of this concentrated urbanization is the gradual and continuous depopulation of large territorial areas coinciding with regions of difficult terrain, historical socio-political borders, or areas of significant past extractive value. Today, 85% of Spanish territory faces depopulation dynamics, many in contexts of very low density, and the challenge of structural and migratory over-aging. The overall Spanish population is aging due to the final phase of the demographic transition and the inability of public policies to bring actual fertility rates closer to the desired rates (which, according to CIS surveys, are around the replacement level). This territorial imbalance (Figure 1), along with the differential prospects across various urban regions, is already producing geographies of discontent, translating into different partisan versions of nationalism, regionalism, and localism [2] (pp. 293–438).

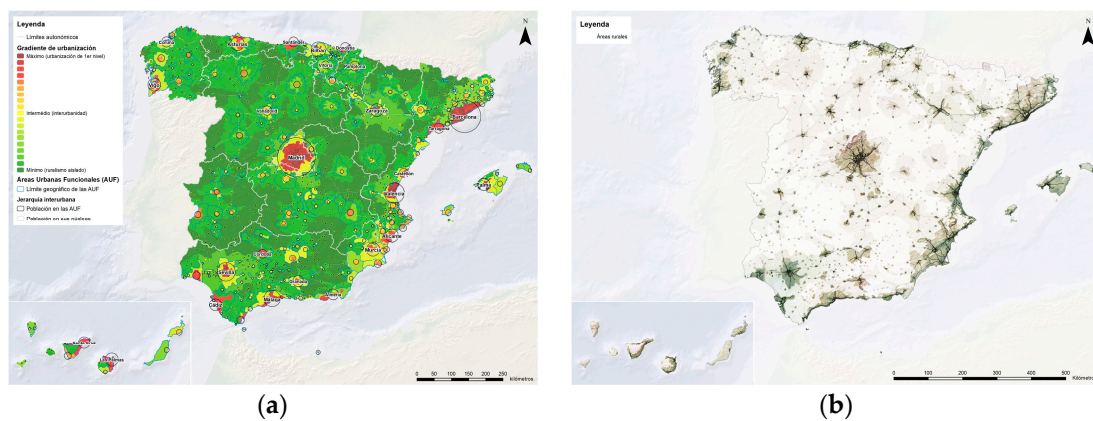


Figure 1. Territorial imbalances in Spain: (a) Urbanization gradient; (b) Urban versus rural.

Major metropolitan areas reproduce models of residential segregation, polycentric decentralization, suburbanization, and increased private vehicle use, exacerbating inequality and socio-spatial distancing [4]. Urban markets' inaccessibility due to rising housing costs forces families to peripheral areas, perpetuating socio-labor conditions that undermine work–life balance, particularly for disadvantaged groups [5]. Immigration, driven by demographic needs, reinforces global labor hierarchies within Spanish urban systems, further widening inequality and spatial disparities. The National Institute of Statistics forecasts that the Spanish population could exceed 54 million in 50 years [6], comprising 40% children of Spanish parents, 20% second-generation immigrants, and 40% international migrants, underlining future demographic complexities. Furthermore, while the richest quintile of the global population holds 83% of the wealth and only has 14% of the young population, the poorest quintile holds only 1% of the wealth but has 25% of the young population. This generational replacement suggests an increase in inequalities and the convergence of these two worlds in global cities. All this foresees an amplification of 'neighborhood effects', meaning a positive feedback loop in the social reproduction of inequality conditioned by the environmental characteristics of primary socialization.

Undoubtedly, this will create socio-political conflicts with unpredictable outcomes. Ignoring these issues will not prevent us from having to face them. Building fully democratic and intercultural citizenship requires civic education in values, social consensus, sufficient resources, and highly innovative political management. Various studies indicate

that inequality in Europe has been rising since 1980 [7], approaching levels seen before the two world wars.

3.2. Tension in Urban Markets: The Housing Problem

Against this social backdrop, the rise in housing prices and rents in the country’s largest cities has accelerated extraordinarily since the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. In rural Spain, over 50% of the housing stock is either vacant or used as holiday homes. In the metropolitan region of Madrid (Figure 2), this percentage represents only 15%, indicating congestion due to incomparable differential demographic growth. The same occurs with the island territories and the Mediterranean arc, further pressured by tourism and the pursuit of profit through domestic savings and international investment. This situation presents a dichotomy: to invest in new models of territorial rebalancing or address the residential emergency in urban areas where the situation is truly urgent. What is clear so far is that market solutions have been ineffective, and social discontent among younger generations and the most vulnerable groups continues to grow.

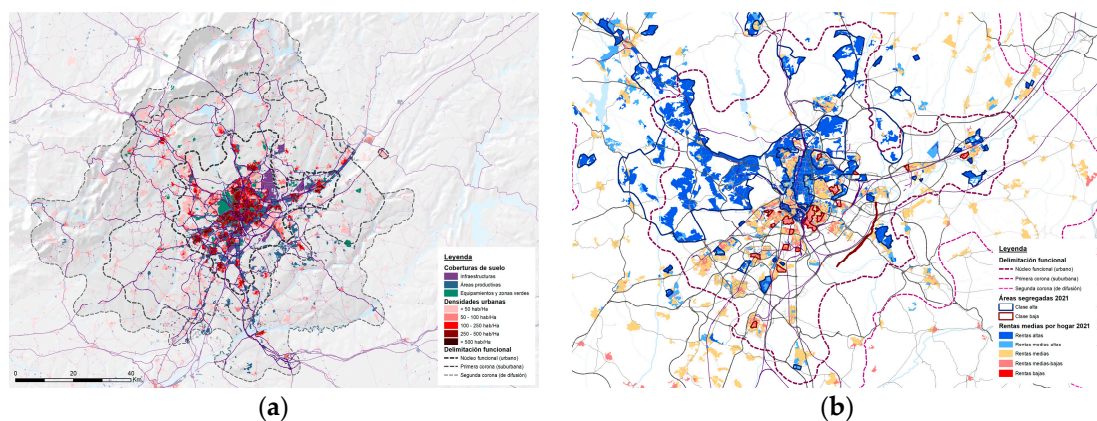


Figure 2. Metropolitan Area of Madrid: (a) Extent; (b) Core residential segregation patterns.

3.3. Transport and Mobility: Technology as an Unsustainable Incrementalist Escape

Transport emissions in Spain, comprising 30.7% of total emissions, have risen due to increased passenger and freight mobility, briefly interrupted by the 2008 economic crisis and COVID-19 pandemic. This is not merely contextual; in the current climate emergency, CO₂ emissions have once again reached record levels globally.

Since 1950, Spain’s urban peripheries have seen rapid population growth, driven by unsustainable car-dependent models. Economic concentration and global pressures have strained urban centers, exacerbating housing crises without effective policies. The proliferation of road infrastructure and private vehicles has further complicated metropolitan mobility, neglected public transport, and increased vehicle use.

The democratization of the automobile and the improvement of road infrastructure, resulting in a network explosion, have led to dynamics of extended urbanization, suburbanization, and changes in the location of economic activity, significantly complicating the needs and patterns of metropolitan mobility. All this has occurred in the absence of territorial planning at the scale of physical transformation processes. Consequently, successive mobility surveys show that private vehicle use continues to rise [4].

Furthermore, we lack sufficient data to evaluate whether the ongoing ecological transition models are as equitable as they should be. It is crucial to understand the demographics of populations that have received public funds for energy efficiency improvements in their homes or for the acquisition of electric vehicles. Despite this, the number of cars in Spain continues to increase, and they are becoming older and more polluting. We cannot burden

the costs of the necessary ecological transition on the most vulnerable groups, many of whom were expelled from central areas. This would be unacceptable for a democratic society and could potentially lead to reactionary movements capable of generating significant socio-political instability.

4. Discussion: Complex Context and Opportunity

The Spanish public agenda presents a unique opportunity to analyze the socio-territorial repercussions of economic planning policies within the framework of regional decentralization, which, despite fostering high levels of well-being, has also revealed significant challenges. The restructuring of the interurban system and the decoupling of territorial dynamics from governance have created eco-social issues: the expansion of metropolitan peripheries highlights deficiencies in affordable housing and job stability for younger households, fosters residential segregation, and exposes the lag in adapting public transport to new commuting patterns, leaving ecological transition measures inefficient and generating social discontent among those displaced from central areas. Simultaneously, rural depopulation and the decline of inner urban centers perpetuate extractivist and hyper-productive economic models that, despite emphasizing environmental and heritage value, exacerbate negative externalities and seasonal commuting. Housing shortages and the lack of stable employment in rural areas further compound these issues. To address these crises, the urgent implementation of public policy evaluation methodologies is essential, integrating social, territorial, and ecological dimensions to overcome the current lack of reliable data and avoid ineffective decision-making.

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