

The Goals of *The New Geography of Post-COVID Catalonia*

Jesús Burgueño Rivero
Josep Oliveras Samitier

Since the 1970s, Geography has undergone major positive changes throughout the world and, in this regard, Geography in Catalonia is no exception. Yet, generally speaking, this transformation has gone unnoticed by the wider public, albeit that the results of these changes occasionally feature in the media (though not as often as they should). Never before have so many maps been used in the press, on television and on the social platforms; new geopolitics is attracting a growing audience; the geographical analysis of space is identifying interrelationships that can be confirmed using advanced statistical techniques; and thanks to geographic information systems, the merging of statistics and automated cartography is producing remarkable outcomes.

This increasing specialisation — quantitative and highly experimental in the case of Physical Geography; more qualitative and subjective in that of Human Geography — is immediately verifiable in the articles that appear in the SCG's journal *Treballs de la Societat Catalana de Geografia* as well as in other publications.

Yet, perhaps, this specialisation is not the best letter of presentation for Geography. Professionals to-

day seem to specialise to such a degree that they end up forgetting that Geography is a science of multiple connections. They are producing excellent studies, but often they are only intelligible to those that share the same passions and degree of expertise. This is further aggravated by the fact that universities, intent on securing a good position in the world rankings, attach greater and greater importance to research — of varying degrees of utility — than to training good professionals and citizens for the future. All their efforts are focused on climbing up the rankings. We seem to have lost sight of the fact that in a democratic European society what is required are honest geographers, capable of working with both common sense and a critical sense to examine actions that impact at the spatial level. An education in Geography is very much a matter of emancipation through self-reflection rather than mimetic conformity, to reiterate an earlier idea expressed by Tim Unwin (1992).

The professional, understandably anxious to obtain stability in the workplace or to climb the ladder in the world of academia, writes solely for specialist journals (typically in English) and dedicates all their efforts to

1. English translation of Jesús Burgueño and Josep Oliveras' introduction to the book Burgueño, Jesús (Ed.): *La nova geografia de la Catalunya postcovid*. Barcelona: Societat Catalana de Geografia, 2021, pp. 7-17.

one aspect, or sub-aspect, of a given theme. This professional often forgets to carry out in-depth analyses, such as that of an area or region, in an effort at understanding what is happening in their own living space. Geographers should be exploiting their rigorous scientific expertise to reflect on a social reality. Unfortunately, the geographer today is not greatly concerned with bringing to the attention of a much larger public how certain elements of the economic, political, legal and ideological structure affect the organisation of the space in which they live and the physical elements of the continent on which their social groups have settled. It should come as no surprise to us then that the public have little appreciation of the role played by Geography today and of the function of professional geographers — an ignorance that fully complies with the interests of powerful social groups that prefer this state to that of engaged scientific knowledge.

The analysis of a specific space or region has been seen by many geographers as constituting the core of the discipline, the sum — in a given framework — of the knowledge of different themes and their connections, but which is not the same as conducting a study in which each section has little bearing on all the others. David Harvey in *Explanation in Geography* (1969) considered that geographers tend to concentrate their attention on meaning at the regional scale and that, as such, one of the principles of geographical thinking is that the geographers' domain is best approached at a regional level of resolution. Years later, and from other perspectives, Derek Gregory (1984) stressed the need for geographers to know about the constitution of regional social formations, of regional articulations and their transformations. These proposal were very much

shared by Doreen Massey, who in the same years called on geographers to study the problems experienced by regions, as these were closely connected to their economic and political organisation; and three years later, David Stoddart claimed that studies in geographical research could be combined to demonstrate the distinctive characters of places and regions, but that the key lay in identifying geographical problems and using that knowledge to alleviate and even fix them.

These beliefs, with certain variations, continue to be held to this day, with the addition of the importance of studying regional or national identities and the corresponding sense of belonging, as in the case of Catalonia. These spaces — or regions as Geography would have it — should be understood as systems, which while not fully closed are not entirely open either. Such

Back cover of the book la Nova Geografia de la Catalunya postcovid, illustration made by Raül Gesalí



spaces are the product of history yet, at the same time, they are under constant construction, in a process that emphasises their role for identity, representation and belonging, but also their role as a functional environment of management, action, intervention, domination and control. These are all reasons that more than justify the need for their analysis and diagnosis.

Alexander Murphy (2018) likewise argues the need to be able to diagnose spatial transformations, and claims that understanding current changes requires Geographers to make a major effort on various fronts. Change cannot be understood if there is no awareness of problems, that is, “if students and scholars lack the analytical perspectives and tools needed to assess the evolving spatial organisation and material character of places and regions” (p. 20). Reflecting on problems using geographical criteria means taking into account a set of variables that interact within a certain territory. Catalonia in our case.

We should also understand that, for a single person, to carry out an analysis on different aspects of a specific geographical region — be it an administrative or functional region, a historical nation or social formation — is a very difficult task if it is to be done with sufficient scientific rigour and with the intent of identifying the multiple connections that make up its fundamental structure. Pierre Vilar a geographer and disciple of Albert Demangeon, before becoming a historian, saw this very clearly when writing *Catalunya dins l'Espanya moderna* [*Catalonia in Modern Spain*] (1962): “to take an object that is too vast in its entirety requires learning that is overly varied to the detriment of the effectiveness and precision to be gained from the handling of each specific research instrument. There is a certain contradiction in each

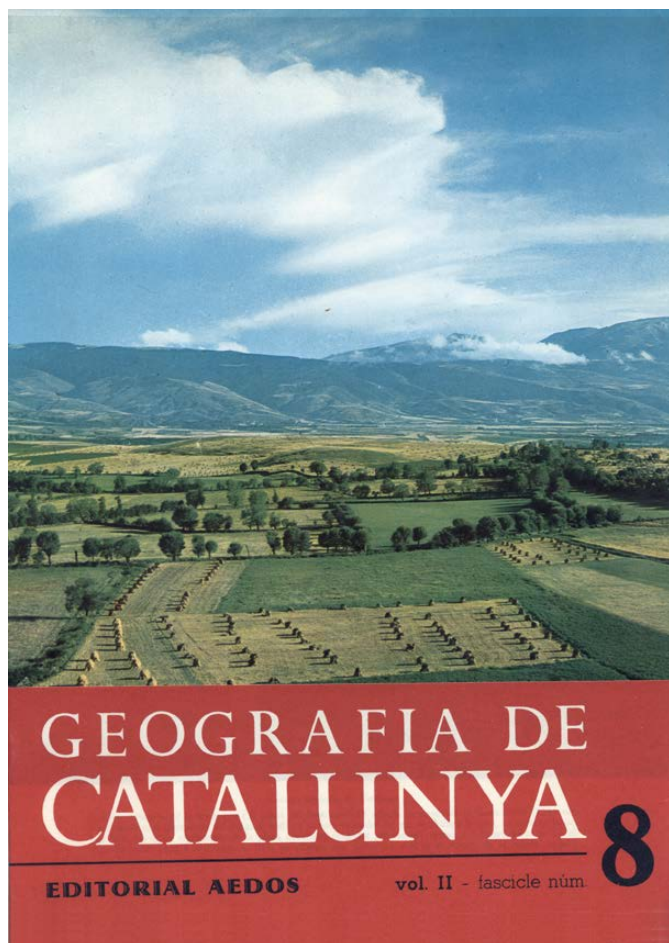
scientific essay between breadth and depth, between variety and solidity”, and taking on a regional monograph would constitute a veritable struggle of conscience for the geographer.

This explains why regional geographies have — for years now — been collective works, the case, for example, of the *Geografia de Catalunya* (1958-1974) [*Geography of Catalonia*], published by Aedos, and of the work the SCG published in 2021 thanks to the efforts of geographers drawn from different branches of the subject, with the aim of capturing, understanding and making proposals about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on different aspects and spaces of Catalonia's territorial and national reality.

From Aedos to COVID-19

In 2014, the SCG initiated a series of round table sessions commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of its magnum opus, *Geografia de Catalunya*, published by Aedos and coordinated by Professor Lluís Solé Sabarís. The first of the seven sessions counted on the participation of Professor Joan Vilà-Valentí, the only surviving member of the book's editorial board.

The motive for the commemoration was none other than remembering the importance that this *Geography* — published originally in the form of instalments, with a number of insightful photographs and maps — had had. The book was acquired not only by those with an interest in the world of Geography, but by many people working in other professions and with other interests, who saw in it an opportunity to be able to read about, and understand, the physical and hu-



man structure of a country subjected to a dictatorship prone to cultural and scientific illiteracy, especially as regards anything referring to Catalonia.

Aedos' *Geography* strengthened the Catalan national movement, at the same time as it provided an interpretive framework, not only for ramblers and enthusiasts of geographical knowledge, but also for university graduates keen to put their geographical knowledge

into practice. And this effect was not limited solely to the Arts Faculty but applied also to the Faculty of Sciences in the field of the Natural Sciences, which in the course of time would be transformed into the specialist disciplines of Biology and Geology, and also in the new faculty of Economic Sciences, where this *Geography* was well known to, and used extensively by, the initiators of studies of the regional economy.

Other works would follow the *Geography* but they did not enjoy the same acceptance, despite the interest of some of their content. Yet between 1974, the year in which the third volume was finished, and the present day, the landscape of Catalonia has undergone significant changes in many aspects, including its vegetation cover, infrastructure, mobility, types of farming, population and migration patterns. Urbanisation has tended to dominate rational urban planning guided by good practices, the tourist phenomenon has unfolded in parallel to deindustrialisation, while digital communication has become indispensable. Regarding these interconnected phenomena, geographers are expected to have opinions and to be able to offer explanations that are of interest to the general public.

In recognition of this expectation, in the 2017-2018 academic year, a proposal was presented to the Society's Governing Council to write and edit a new Geography of Catalonia that would address the main transformations — by thematic area — undergone by Catalonia in the recent past, so as to be able to provide fresh interpretations of its physical, social and economic structure. The proposal adhered to the guidelines provided by J. F. Hart, president of the Association of American Geographers, who in a memorable speech in 1982 highlighted the advantages of so-called Regional Geography for its unique educational value,

for young and old alike, and as a means of knowing and interpreting the conditions of complex realities: A protocol that can equally be applied to Catalonia. The SCG, always keen to promote the geographical education of young people, also felt the need to make a renewed contribution to the teaching of Geography in high schools, and one that might, at the same time, be extended to adults.

The proposal was academic in format and embraced such a variety of themes that the finished work threatened to be excessively long unless the content could be whittled down considerably. After various debates, many of an epistemological nature, the complexity of the task meant the project was assigned to the back drawer of good intentions. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the idea was overhauled and a new selection of themes was made to illustrate both the situation before the first wave of the virus and the consequences of the health crisis and its side-effects, which impacted almost all sectors throughout Catalonia.

An editorial board was set up. Each of the Catalan universities teaching geography was represented, while Jesús Burgueño was entrusted with overseeing the project. Once the themes to be addressed had been agreed on, suitable authors were sounded out, on the understanding that they should be SCG members and experts in the chosen theme, as reflected by their publishing record. While initially one author was selected per chapter, the authors agreeing to take on the task could choose to do so jointly with other colleagues (as long as they were also SCG members). The board also agreed that a series of short articles would be commissioned expressing a well-substantiated opinion on some specific aspect of the theme addressed in each chapter.

A Work that Reflects the Multi-crisis of the Period

It is commonplace to say that the pandemic has impacted greatly on every one of our social structures, on our daily habits, on our very perception of the world even. Indeed, the crisis has been an unprecedented event for all aspects of contemporary life and we have experienced radical changes at all levels. We have had to face a health emergency at a scale that has triggered an economic crisis, albeit that in this latter sphere deep underlying trends were exacerbated that had been developing for years, most notably processes of digitalisation with the emergence of online commerce and remote work.

On the eve of the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, the world had one basic concern in mind: that of climate and environmental change, captured in the disquieting expression the ‘climate emergency’.

And in Catalonia, all of this was unfolding against the backdrop of a major political crisis, which was not unlike a global cultural and political process of social polarisation, but which here presented its own defining features, derived from the problem of just where Catalonia fits within Spain.

Finally, the city continues to be the scene of conflicts — one of its essential facets it would seem — albeit no more than before the pandemic. Some of the most pressing problems faced by contemporary society manifest themselves above all in the urban environment. It remains to be seen whether or not the lockdown, which was experienced most intensely in the cities, will have consequences for the settlement model. Reality often disproves hastily made forecasts, showing them to be no more than urban legends, such

as the increase in birth rates that the lockdown was supposed to provoke.

Thus, we faced major crises on four fronts and, indeed, following the publication of the book these conflicts have only grown, acquiring an increasingly greater global scale. But at that particular moment in time that there should be four main themes to the book seemed logical, with the incorporation of a fifth, a brief reference to the urban world and, more specifically, to the city of Barcelona, where some of the territorial changes and conflicts take on a paradigmatic dimension — even at the international scale — as in the controversy surrounding tourist apartments. We should not lose sight of the fact that Catalonia is fortunately a multifaceted country — we say fortunately as the opposite would be a country without character, tending towards simplicity and irrelevance, which would be much worse.

One of the primary goals of the book was to showcase the work that geographers do and to highlight the diversity of fields in which we work. The book highlights the fact that the gaze of those who dedicate themselves to Geography is transversal, and that it embraces an extraordinary variety of objects of study. Geographers are professionals whose work needs to be taken into account in a multitude of ways when seeking to address a problem, because not only do we dedicate ourselves to considering such problems, but because we can make valuable, well-documented, original contributions, given that we — unlike other experts — see the prevailing reality with a greater awareness of its complexity. We are more aware of the repercussions that a specific decision may have in terms of less obvious, unforeseen aspects. This is exactly what the pandemic has highlighted: the complex chain of unsuspected

repercussions that a specific limitation or prohibition can generate. If we lock Barcelona down, the beaches are overwhelmed and bikes aggravate mountain path erosion in the city's Collserola park. If we unlock the doors after confinement, the number of mountain accidents and mountain rescues soars. It is the task of geographers to detect such butterfly effects.

It is self-evident that our politicians and decision-makers should be taking into closer account the geographical gaze. The management of the pandemic — which left much to be desired — has shown that they have little understanding of Catalonia, that they do not have the measure of the territory. There have been many examples — including, the lack of foresight with regard to the health problem posed by the high number of floating population, living in very precarious conditions, in the city of Lleida during the fruit harvesting season. And, perhaps most tellingly, considering the *comarca* of Barcelonès (with its nearly 16,000 inhabs/km²) as if it were comparable to a bucolic rural region demonstrates a short-sightedness comparable only to that of those who believe that the 5 inhabs/km² of Pallars Sobirà merit the same mobility restrictions as, say, Tarragonès (the *comarca* of Tarragona).

Returning to the book, an inspection of the contents page — plural in scope, but without seeking to be exhaustive either — shows the reader the versatility of the different gazes afforded by Geography and its interest for a wide range of topics.

The first section addresses the health crisis, albeit not in its strictly medical sense (unfortunately neglected by Catalan Geography to date) but in terms of the social issues directly associated with the pandemic: its demographic repercussions, the territorial manage-

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the foreign trade balance. Mobility is a transversal feature of the social reality that cuts across the whole of this section, and is one that could have been included in all the others, because it is also an urban characteristic of great importance, because mobility restrictions have been the watchword of the management of the pandemic (when in reality the aim was to reduce human interrelations) and because obviously transport has notorious environmental repercussions.

It would have been inexcusable not to address Catalonia's environmental problems, particularly those linked directly with the climate emergency, starting, obviously, with the climate itself, but also turning to consider various aspects of risk management and the elements of our natural environment: water control, the specific problem of a fragile coastline in regression, wildfires, the landscape and its protection.

ment of the crisis and the lockdowns, the territorial organisation of the Health system, the impact on the health of disadvantaged social groups and the increase in violence suffered by women isolated during the confinement.

The second section describes the impacts of the pandemic on the economy in various sectors, starting logically with its effects on employment and continuing with agriculture, industry, trade, tourism and

The climate emergency calls, above all, for a change in the energy model for one based on sustainability, a discussion that rounds off this section.

A section dedicated to urban conflicts and to Barcelona, in particular, was also considered worthy of a place in this book — albeit not a major one, given that these issues are examined in studies in other sections, in terms of political questions and the social impact of the pandemic, etc. It was imperative, however, to

analyse the aftermath of the last great economic crisis, following the bursting of the housing bubble, a disaster from which Catalonia had largely recovered in terms of employment, economic activity and mobility, but which has left an indelible mark on the cityscape and society as a whole. It was also essential not to ignore the processes of gentrification or expulsion of the working classes from certain city neighbourhoods, partly as an effect of the tourist boom that has been particularly exaggerated in Barcelona — the contrast with the deserted city streets of the lockdown was extraordinary to behold. Facing these different crises, Catalonia's capital was left reeling and is still struggling to find a path out towards stabilisation and progress. This situation deserves consideration in this section, but also from other perspectives, as in the last section.

Catalonia finds itself in an unprecedented political impasse of enormous proportions. The region, which years earlier had prioritised the integration of the generations of migrants from the rest of Spain and the establishment of a single people, has been split into two blocks condemned to indefinite stalemate. The deadlock calls on all Catalans to forget the extremes of the past and to seek out constructive spaces of shared experiences and goals that can be aspired to by the majority. Any reflections on the pro-independence movement of the years 2012 to 2017 — such as those we have just made — are open to partisan criticism. It is for this reason that this book has considered it appropriate to include contrasting thoughts, personal and non-transferable, without enhancement or limitation, but above all, well-argued views that might enrich the debate. This section has also made it possible to give a voice to the other Catalans, those

from the North (France), in the article contributed by Joan Becat.

Twenty-eight chapters plus an epilogue by Oriol Nel-lo — IEC delegate with a seat on the SCG's Governing Council — and twenty-three brief articles are the outcome of the work of sixty-four Catalan geographers. To these, we have added a further two contributions from members working in the professional fields of law and history. This constitutes one of the riches of our Society: the fact that it is open to everyone with a certain sympathy for Geography, a feeling that goes well beyond a mere academic qualification.

The authors are drawn from across the generations — from retired (as opposed to inactive) teachers to young students completing their doctoral theses — and from many different backgrounds — from the university (certainly the most represented group) to government entities, by way of those geographers making their way as freelance professionals. This is a collective work, which highlights the vitality of a professional field, albeit small, but one that is endowed with a personality full of creative potential. The authors were given considerable freedom in the approach they adopted: although they were each asked to provide an analysis of the current state and to situate their discussion within the framework of the evolutionary context that describes or explains the theme being addressed, specifically within the first decades of the current century.

Sixty-six members of the Catalan Society of Geography, who wanted to make it quite clear that Geography matters and that geographers can make relevant contributions for a better understanding of our reality, have come together in creating this book.