

Epilogue

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Geography in Turbulent Times

We are living in turbulent times. An interrelated set of crises combine to reveal the weaknesses, yet also the rich potential, of contemporary societies. The environmental emergency and the climate change process show that the impact of human action on the environment, accelerated in an extraordinary fashion over the last two centuries, is exposing the world population to unprecedented risks and uncertainties. In parallel with this, the persistence of inequalities in the distribution of wealth, between the Global North and South as well as within each country, condemns a large part of humanity to extreme conditions of vulnerability and precariousness.

To these permanent, systemic crises, we have to sum other disruptive events that are becoming increasingly more frequent. On the one hand, the capitalist economy, while capable of promoting technological advances, is exposed to periodic crises, which –like the financial crisis of 2008– hit the most disadvantaged hardest. On the other hand, the pressure on the world’s resources –energy, food, water, forestry– results in changes to the environment that, among other problems, facilitate the spread of epidemics, the most significant of which, COVID-19, has been responsible for nearly 7 million deaths. Finally, geo-

political tensions, closely related to this set of upheavals, lead to an aggravation of systemic crises and an increase in armed conflicts, with resulting devastation and suffering.

Paradoxically, these crises coexist with feats that are indicative of enormous potential. Despite the extraordinary growth in the world’s population, which has tripled since the middle of the last century, humanity manages, somehow or other, to feed itself. Likewise, despite the fact that evident injustices persist, collective action has led to progress –uneven, obviously, but significant– in promoting the rights of women, children and workers. Moreover, technological advances and digitalisation enable an unprecedented level of exchange of information and knowledge. The reduction in transport costs also greatly facilitates the mobility of goods and people and interrelations between different cultures. We should also not forget that humanity has never had such a large number of active scientists and that their work results in a constant stream of discoveries, in the fields of genomics, physics, medicine and the material sciences, to name just a few.

All in all, the simultaneous presence of crises that put the future of humanity at risk and yet which offer unprecedented potential in so many fields characterises the critical moment of global change in which we find ourselves. A moment in which “the old world is

dying, and the new world struggles to be born”, in the words of the Italian philosopher.

Against this backdrop of change, space, far from being a passive stage of ongoing processes, constitutes a crucial factor in our evolution. The forms of production and distribution of wealth, and the social relations that result from them, depend on the resources made available by the environment and are embodied in the organisation of space. The spatial structures inherited from the generations that have preceded us constitute, in turn, both a point of departure and a limit for the development of our societies. In this way, space, on the one hand reflects the functioning of society and, on the other, conditions it: hence, the crucial importance of its study; hence, the relevance of Geography.

The aim of this publication is to demonstrate the contribution made by Catalan Geography when describing, analysing, interpreting and governing ongoing social and spatial transformations. As we have seen, the book comprises five chapters. Rather than summarise them here, I prefer, by way of an epilogue, to comment on the reasons why its content constitutes, in my opinion, a good sample of the potential (and also of the limitations) of Geography for understanding the evolution of contemporary societies.

The Catalan Society of Geography and its Emblematic Trajectory

The history of the Catalan Society of Geography (SCG), as told by Enric Bertran in the first chapter of this book, is an excellent example of the interrelationship between the evolution of the practice of Geography and the vicissitudes of the society it seeks to study.

If the development of all science is heavily dependent on the conditions of the socio-economic and political environment, this has been particularly true of the history of Catalan Geography. This is reflected, as we have seen, in the upheavals experienced by the SCG throughout its nearly ninety years of existence.

Founded in the mid-1930s, as the Second Spanish Republic (1931–1939) ushered in the hopes of democracy, the learned Society was born as a meeting place for those who, in the first decades of the 20th century, had taken the first steps of modern Geography in Catalonia. The SCG was from the outset affiliated to the Institute of Catalan Studies, the Catalan academy for both language and science, promoted by the autonomous government of Catalonia. However, in 1936, shortly after its foundation, Civil War broke out following the uprising led by General Franco, supported by Hitler and Mussolini. Many of the organisation’s members were directly involved in efforts to counter the fascist uprising, giving their support to the legitimate government and contributing to various initiatives, including the establishment of a new administrative division of Catalan territory. The contributions of a number of Catalan geographers during the Republic —most notably Pau Vila and Gonçal de Reparaz— constitute invaluable examples of geographical practice placed at the service of society and the democratic cause.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that with the victory of General Franco in 1939 and the establishment of his dictatorial regime, the Society entered into a state of apathy. The new regime suppressed the institutions of self-government in Catalonia, banned both labour organisations and democratic parties and persecuted the Catalan language and culture. Many of

the most prominent members of the SCG had to go into exile and those who stayed in Catalonia saw how the Institute of Catalan Studies was obliged to suspend its public activities. This meant that during the 1940s the meetings of the members of the Society had to be held in virtual secret.

In the early post-war period, despite the laudable maintenance of some of its activities, the life of the

SCG was quite subdued. However, from the end of the fifties, a certain liberalisation of the political situation allowed various initiatives to be resumed. For example, the earlier project—first muted in the 1920s—of providing Catalonia with a series of regional geographical monographs, in keeping with French possibilist geography, could be reinitiated. This facilitated the writing and publication of the *Geografia de Catalunya* [*Geography of Catalonia*], edited by Lluís Solé Sabarís, in the course of the sixties and the first half of the seventies. At the same time, a renewal and institutionalisation of university Geography took place, which also served to rejuvenate the discipline. Thus, the paradox arose that, just as the *Geografia de Catalunya* was being published, new methods and concepts were beginning to be disseminated in geographical practice—theoretical-quantitative, radical approaches—which to a good extent would overcome prevailing geographical traditions.

The Society was not to let this opportunity escape. From the end of the seventies, abetted by the return of political democracy, the restoration of self-government in Catalonia and the full recovery of the Institute of Catalan Studies, the SCG resolutely relaunched its activities. Finally, it was able to enter a phase of normalisation, organizing lectures, courses and regular field trips, which have very much set the tone for the last four decades. In 1984, the SCG began publishing its journal, *Treballs de la Societat Catalana de Geografia*—issue number 95 appearing in June 2023—and which has established itself as a point of reference for Catalan geographers. The Society, which today has nearly 500 members, has organised two Congresses of Catalan Geography—in 1991 and 2008—and this year, 2023, it has been recognised as a corresponding member of the International Geographical Union.

Estudiant, fes-te de la SCGeografia!



Rebràs:
 Revista *Treballs de la SCG* + un llibre anual +
 una publicació de la SCG a escollir +
 descomptes en les activitats organitzades +
 informació dels actes + carnet de la Biblioteca de Catalunya...

La Societat Catalana de Geografia és una filial de
 l'Institut d'Estudis Catalans. Organitza nombroses activitats
 d'interès acadèmic i divulgatiu i vol aplegar totes les persones
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In parallel with the normalisation of the work of the SCG, the last forty years have witnessed a remarkable flowering of geographical studies in the territories of the Catalan language domain. As the last chapter of the book documents, Catalonia, Valencian Country, the Balearic Islands and Northern Catalonia today boast a total of nine universities that teach Geographical studies. Some 300 faculty members from the various branches of Geography are involved in these courses and, in the last five years, they have seen in the region of 200 students graduating each year. These universities, moreover, are home to 50 research groups in all areas of geography and offer dynamic training on PhD programs. At the end of the 2022–2023 academic year, to cite just one example, 72 students (62.5 % women and 37.5 % men) are enrolled on the doctorate program in Geography at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, 63.8 % of whom come from abroad.

One of the main characteristics of the practice of Geography in recent years has been its internationalisation, a trait that is also evident in the large number of studies published by Catalan geographers in international journals. In the Catalan language domain the following journals stand out in terms of their impact and longevity: *Cuadernos de Geografía de la Universitat de València* (published since 1964), *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica* produced by the Departments of Geography of the University of Girona and the Autonomous University of Barcelona (first published in 1982), the University of Alicante's *Investigaciones geográficas* (1983), the aforementioned *Treballs de la Societat Catalana de Geografia* (1984) and *Scripta Nova. Revista electrònica de Geografia y Ciencias Sociales* (which appeared in 1997 as the continuation of the *Geocrítica*

series, coordinated by Horacio Capel at the University of Barcelona since 1976).

Catalan Geography Facing a World in Transformation

The evolution of Geography in Catalonia as a whole, and that of the Catalan Society of Geography in particular, highlights, as we have seen, the connection between the evolution of the discipline and the society that hosts it. This book, however, is not limited to simply detailing this evolution, but, rather, in its second and third chapters, it documents the contributions currently being made by Catalan Geography to the description, analysis and governance of ongoing social and spatial transformations.

In common with its neighbours, over the last two decades, Catalan society has had to face a series of global economic, health and environmental crises. In the third chapter of this book, Valerià Paül and Rafael Giménez-Capdevila, in summarizing the contributions of a collective monograph published by the SCG, explain how these crises have materialised in Catalonia according to specific traits and characteristics. Thus, in Catalonia the crisis that hit the world economy in 2008 deepened inequality and exacerbated the conditions of much of the population, so much so that in 2011 more than one in five people found themselves in a situation of poverty. The “austerity” measures adopted as a result—at the European, Spanish and Catalan level—further aggravated the social impact of the crisis and undermined the provision of many public services, with lasting consequences.



When the impact of the economic crisis had not yet been fully overcome, Catalan society was hit by the COVID-19 health crisis. Between February 2020 and May 2022, the virus was responsible for 27,386 deaths in Catalonia and the complete disruption of life, clearly evident in the 11.4% fall in Catalan GDP, a figure that was higher than the European average. The largescale roll-out of vaccines was instrumental to limit the impact of the pandemic, while the economic measures adopted by the authorities—quite distinct from those employed in the 2008 economic crisis—managed to contain the social consequences. However, the epidemic hit the most disadvantaged sectors of society hardest, both in terms of the infection rate and social hardships.

The third global crisis that has hit Catalonia in recent decades has been the environmental emergency, as manifest most clearly in the processes of climate change. Given its dependence on energy and other resources, as well as its geographical position in the Mediterranean, Catalonia is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. For example, in the *Tercer informe sobre el canvi climàtic a Catalunya* [Third Report on Climate Change in Catalonia], it was estimated

that between 1950 and 2014 the air temperature rose at a rate of 0.23°C per decade and precipitation rates fell by 1.2% per decade. The future scenarios point to a continuation of this rise in average temperature, as well as to an increase in the irregularity of precipitation, with recurrent episodes of severe drought. At the same time, rising sea levels are already having a considerable impact on the Catalan coast, most clearly evident in the regression of the Ebro Delta.

As in so many other areas of the planet, the concurrence of economic, health, environmental and resource crises has been accompanied, in Catalonia, by an increase in geopolitical tensions. In the Catalan case, these have mainly manifest themselves in a powerful political and civil movement in favour of independence from the Spanish State. This movement was sparked by the Spanish Constitutional Court's rejection of key articles of the new Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia, which the citizens of the country had endorsed in 2006. The conflict came to a head on 1 October 2017, with the holding of an unofficial referendum on independence that was forcibly repressed by the State's security forces. Since that date, evidence of the unviability of independence in Europe as it stands today, the action of the State and the rifts in the independence movement itself have calmed the situation. However, the fundamental problem remains, that is, the difficulty of fitting Catalonia within the Spanish institutional order, and large sectors of the Catalan population continue to aspire to a modification of the current *status quo*.

In recent years, Catalan Geography has devoted much of its efforts—as both Burgueño and Oliveras and Paül and Giménez-Capdevila explain in this book—to the analysis of the relationship between



spatial dynamics and the crises which I have just outlined. Thus, geographers have paid particular attention to the socio-spatial impacts of the economic crisis—most notably, the difficulties faced by increasingly larger sectors of the population to access housing. Various studies report in detail how the increasing financialisation of the housing market—which, in fact, was at the root of the 2008 crisis—is leading to a concentration of property and a notable rise in prices. This situation, together with restrictions on borrowing, have excluded the most vulnerable sectors—the young, the low-income population and single-parent households—from the housing market. In a context in which social housing represents just 2% of the total housing stock, these sectors have had to turn to the free rental market, which is also under considerable pressure because, among other reasons, of the demand

for tourist accommodation. The outcome has been a marked increase in the difficulties faced by the young to emancipate themselves, an increase in residential mobility and an escalation in the number of evictions. Catalan geographers have monitored these worrying trends not only in published studies but also by supporting the institutions and social movements that seek solutions to the problems arising from the housing situation.

A second far-reaching phenomenon, linked to the evolution of the economic situation, has been the increase in residential segregation. Recent decades have been characterised, on the one hand, by the increase in income inequality and, on the other, by the tensions in the housing market. In this situation, the tendency of social groups to segregate themselves spatially has become apparent in function of their ability to choose a

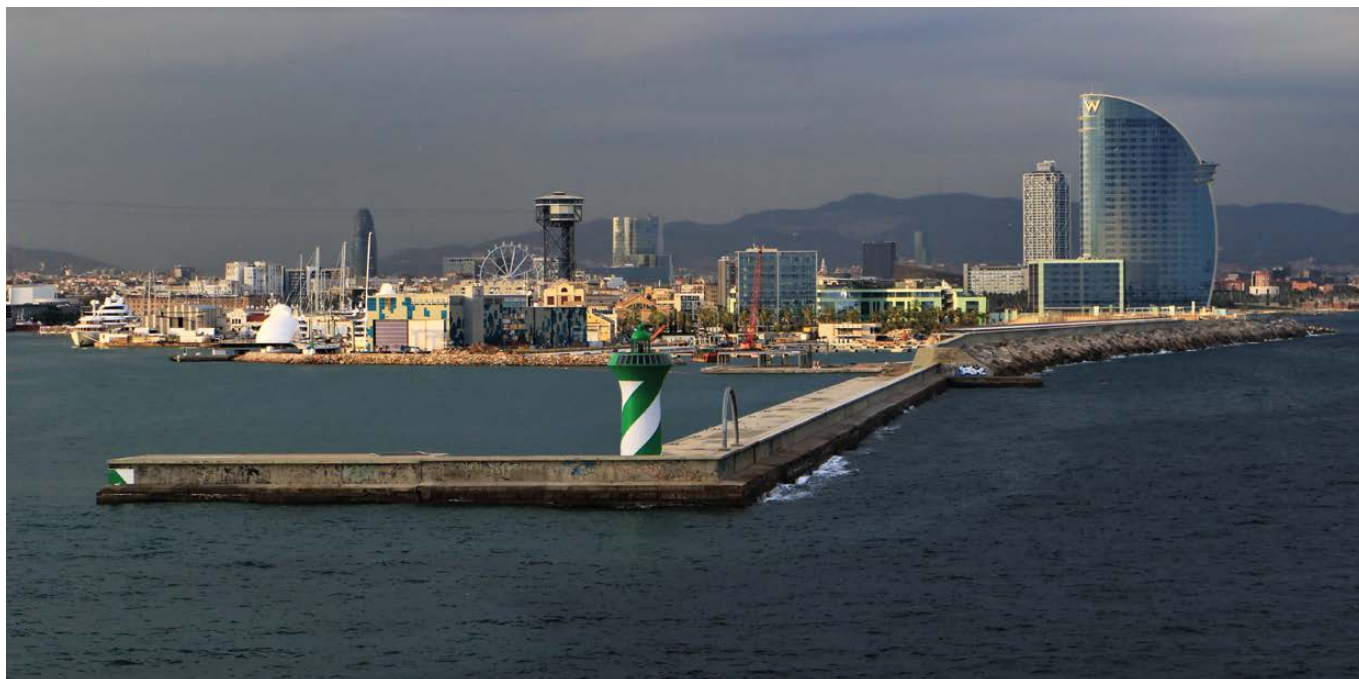
place of residence. Catalan Geography has devoted its undivided attention to the causes and consequences of these dynamics, highlighting that while segregation is a structural phenomenon of our society, it is currently acquiring relatively new features. On the one hand, with the expansion of urban areas, segregation is now apparent at the metropolitan scale, so that what becomes socially marked is not, as in the past, the streets or neighbourhoods of each town or city, but municipalities and, often, entire metropolitan axes. On the other hand, segregation increasingly affects all social groups and is the result not only of the confinement of the most disadvantaged groups in neighbourhoods where prices are lower, but also of the desire of the most prosperous social groups to separate themselves from the rest. These circumstances contribute to the fact that residential segregation, far from being a mere reflection of inequalities, is today a key factor in its maintenance and reproduction.

Meanwhile, the health crisis has contributed to bringing to the fore another classic concern in geographical studies: the relationship between areas of high and low population density, or, if you prefer, between urban and rural areas. Studies of urban geography in Catalonia showed how, from the last quarter of the 20th century, the urbanisation process underwent a marked inflection. At this point in time the spatial concentration of population and activity, which had been predominant since the beginning of the industrial revolution, gave way to a new stage characterised by a tendency towards the expansion of urban areas, spatial integration and the dispersion of urbanisation. In this new context, the densest and most populated urban areas tend to lose relative weight and the country as a whole finds itself becoming increasingly inte-

grated, in such a way that the old distinctions between city and countryside become obsolete. However, with the advent of the pandemic, dense urban areas became associated with greater risks of contagion. This negative perception has been further reinforced by the challenging conditions in which their residents had to spend the lockdown. This, associated with concerns about climate change and access to resources, has reopened the debate on urban forms and the settlement system. It is not surprising, then, that in recent years Catalan Geography has produced a good number of contributions on the processes of urbanisation, internal migrations and the new realities of old rural areas.

The health crisis has also highlighted the importance of the provision of care in our society, in terms of access to public and private services as well as family and interpersonal support practices. Catalan Geography has a long tradition of studying the distribution of social infrastructure and services as key elements in the configuration of spatial structures. In recent times, the study of the relationship between social inequalities and public services (schools, healthcare, commerce,





culture and leisure) has attracted increasing research interest. At the same time, Catalan Geography has also conducted a good number of studies focused on time use, the distribution of tasks in the home and the care economy, all stressing their, often hidden, importance for the functioning of our society. This interest forms part of the introduction of gender studies and the gender perspective in spatial studies, in which Catalan geographers have often played a leading role in Spain.

While the contributions made by Catalan Geography to our understanding of the spatial implications of the economic and health crises have been notable, the field that has attracted the most research in recent times has been that of the spatial causes and consequences of climate change. This is not surprising

given that in this crisis the relationship between society and the environment—the quintessential concern of Geographers—lies at the heart of the matter. Thus, Catalan Geographers have made an outstanding contribution to studies on the evolution of the climate, sitting on some of the most important national and international panels. Equal importance has been attached to studies of land cover changes, in which, in Catalonia, a remarkable increase in urbanised areas is combined with the staggering growth in areas dedicated to forests, to the detriment of agricultural land. In the field of energy and resources, geographical studies have focused especially on the issue of spatial and social equity in accessing these resources. The contribution of Catalan Geography to

mobility research has also been remarkable, both in terms of quantitative studies —with the preparation and exploitation of periodic surveys— and in terms of the study of its environmental, social and gender consequences. Finally, mention should be made of the work being undertaken to catalogue and manage the landscape, a field in which Catalonia has exercised a certain degree of leadership within Europe, above all since the foundation of the Landscape Observatory of Catalonia in 2004.

To conclude this overview of the latest contributions made by Catalan Geography, mention should be made that in recent years there has also been a flourishing of studies of a geopolitical nature —as Paül and Giménez-Capdevila explain in their chapter. These range from research on the spatial distribution of collective action to electoral studies. Particularly recurrent have been, since the beginning of the present century, analyses of territorial conflicts, which have given rise to multiple studies and even to the publication, during a number of years, of a yearbook on this subject. Less attention had been paid, on the other hand, the institutional crisis over self-government and the independence movement that resulted from it. Indeed, despite the acute political turmoil that Catalonia has suffered during this period, articles about this subject in Catalan (and Spanish) geographical journals have, for much of the conflict, been quite rare. However, this situation has to some extent been corrected in recent years, with the publication of a number of studies on the evolution of the conflict over the independence of Catalonia and its territorial implications. To a certain extent, studies in this field are linked to a traditional concern of Catalan Geography, which, throughout the last century, had as one of its main subjects of interest

the debate on the territorial organisation of public administration in Catalonia.

Conclusions: Tradition and Innovation, Relevance and the Social Commitment of Geographical Studies in Catalonia

We have seen how within Catalan Geography, which is honoured to host the 9th EUGEO Congress, tradition and innovation have combined. On the one hand, geographical studies in Catalonia boast a long history, reflecting the evolution of our science and providing evidence of the link between the practice of Geography and the evolution of Catalan society over the last few centuries. On the other hand, Catalan Geography is today characterised by its capacity for innovation and by the vigour of its presence both in academia, as well as in public administration and in public debate.

The capacity of Catalan Geography to innovate and intervene publicly is captured, first and foremost, by its internationalisation, the organisation of the EUGEO Congress being a good example of this. It is also reflected in the contribution of Catalan geographers to international publications and research projects, as well as the growing presence at Catalan universities of foreign students on postgraduate programs in Geography. Second, the innovative nature of Catalan Geography is seen in the breadth and relevance of its fields of study and in its interrelationship with the other natural and social sciences. Finally, the practice of Geography in Catalonia is specifically characterised by the desire to involve itself in public debates and to incorporate critical thinking —on environmen-

tal, social and gender issues– so as to generate useful knowledge for society.

This book, despite the limitations of the format, has been designed to facilitate understanding and dialogue between Catalan geographers and their collea-

gues from all over Europe and the world. Hopefully, it will contribute to strengthening existing collaborative links and enhancing the contribution of Geography to our understanding of the world in these turbulent but expectant times.