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# **ARTICLES**

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# GEOGRAPHY AND TERRITORIAL ANALYSIS IN SPAIN: ISSUES TO REFLECT ON

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## ABSTRACT

The fundamental aim of the present contribution is to analyze the magnitude of the transformations which have been succeeding during the last thirty years and their importance for the geographical analysis. Indeed, since 1980 the spatial changes keep on producing in Spain. Among these, the urbanization of the territory, the indiscriminate construction of new buildings and the dynamics of metropolization excel. All this should be considered in a context of uninterrupted economical growth and population enrichment. At the end of the 1970s, Spain experiences the political transition towards democracy. At first, this transition culminates in the conformation of the State of the Autonomous Communities. It implies a shift from a strongly centralized administration deriving from Madrid to an administration which is similar to the one of the federal European models. The Autonomous Communities have taken over an elevate level of administrative competences and have at their disposal considerable budgetary resources, which have weakened the financial possibilities of the local administration.

In this scenario of increasing moves, until the beginning of 1990s, the Geographical Community benefited from an initial phase of expansion, later on it benefited from a second period of stabilization. Geography keeps on being located mainly in the Universities. In our country, it is unquestionably led by a democratic association of academics, which is called Association of Spanish Geographers (Asociación de Geógrafos Españoles, AGE). The AGE has nourished the debates about the professionalization of the discipline and about the creation of a College of Geographers, which is the second important reference of our Community. During this stage, the space and the territory are no longer less important variables for the explication of the social phenomena; indeed, they become very relevant factors for the understanding of the actual globalized world. This reinforcement of the spatial/territorial dimension inaugurates a new scenario in which Geography can affirm itself as the central discipline for contemporary debates or it can be substituted by other Sciences in its basic objects of study. The future of the Geographical Community is uncertain, as at the beginning of the XXI century the discipline shows, at the same time, encouraging and negative symptoms of evolution.

## 1. THE INTENSITY OF THE RECENT SPATIAL CHANGES

The main factors which justify the acquired importance of the spatial transformation are the economical growth and the improvement of the Welfare. In fact, since 1980 in Spain the GDP at constant prices multiplied by 2,5, while the total human effective only increased of the 22,3%. The economical growth has been continuous, except for punctual stages of crisis. Generally, it placed itself in moderate taxes of 1 to 4% a year. In this context, the insular Autonomous Communities and Madrid obtain better results. This is undoubtedly the consequence of the boom recorded in the services and construction sectors. The State apparatus modernization and the property market have been related to the improvements of the economical system, in fact, the territory is completely urbanized. In front of a cities based growth which characterized the anterior period (1950-80), nowadays the urban peripheries and the coast areas have an elevate density. Since the beginning of the XXI century, Spain presents a metropolized reality, where wide urban archipelagos are connected between themselves and expand themselves for the major part of the territory. The boom of the building industry is calculated according to the following value: there is a shift from 12 millions of housings in the 1980 to 41 in the 2001. This dynamic has been possible thanks to a considerable improvement of the levels of territorial connectivity and accessibility. The net of motorways and highways has expanded notably, the railway has been recuperated as a modern means of transport and the air traffic is continuously increasing.

Another news of this period is the generalization of the leisure culture and the popularization of tourist practices. Citizens travel daily, weekly and according to scheduled periods in order to enjoy their free time. It took place an urbanization of big commercial and recreation centers in the urban peripheries and practically all appetizing sectors of the coast have been built, together with all the landscape and environmental problems that this implies. During the last three decades the number of foreigners visiting Spain tripled, so that our country is progressively being integrated in the fluxes of usual mobility of the European Occident. The globalization leaves its traces in the new position of Spain in the international context. Our country integrated itself since the half of the 80es and has actively taken part at the construction of a continent which was united since then. Moreover, Spain has been perfectly adhering to its role of economical and cultural bridge towards Latin America, with which all kind of relations have been tightened. Finally, all these transformations are translated into profound changes in the lifestyles. Since 1980 the number of sons for each couple has fallen from 2,2 to 1,4. During this time-lapse there has been a shift from a car for each five persons, to one for each two persons.

## 2. THE GEOGRAPHICAL TRANSFORMATION OF SPAIN

The second big change recorded in Spain in recent times has been the territorial one. It is a process parallel to the one of the democratic transition: the country is no longer characterized by a very centralized (and inefficient) government system, but an authentic desconcentration of the power occurs. With reference to the Constitution of the 1978, it founded 17 Communities and 2 Autonomous Cities which define the new political-administrative Spanish map. This profound change was the result of an association, which was very popular

at the end of the 1970s and which put in relation public liberties to the right to autonomy of the nationalities and of the regions. All this happened in a deep discredited context of the Spanish Nationalism and with some municipalities which were still pre-democratic ones. The autonomous map culminated rapidly between 1979 and 1983. The constitution of some territories did not present any doubt about their delimitation (Cataluña, Galicia, Andalucía, Canarias, etc.), while other ones were object of certain agreement (Castilla y León, Madrid, Murcia, etc.). By means of its handbooks, the Regional Geography inspired this new division of Spain, but only a few geographers had a real protagonism in this process of definition of the Autonomous Communities. It is even appreciated a sort of delay of the geographic collectivity to understand the magnitude of the change occurring.

Without doubts, the Autonomous Communities, which are organized according to districts, have become powerful administrations both for the assumed competences and the budgetary resources they manage. An analysis of the evolution of the public expenditure in Spain proves that the Autonomous Governments presupposed the 41,1% of the available money for the public sector in 2007, in comparison with the 40,9% of the Central Administration and the 17,7% of the local entities, without considering neither the National Security nor the financial costs of the system. With reference to this, two Autonomous Communities, Euzkadi and Navarra, occupy a more advantageous position than the other ones. They are entitled to collect their own taxes without depending on the fund transfers from Madrid. In other cases, the autonomous structure has introduced meaningful changes in the urban and city system. The centrality of Madrid has been reinforced, but with a new meaning, and medium and big Spanish cities (Barcelona, Seville, Murcia, Valladolid, etc.) have turned into autonomous capitals. Of course, there are more modest urban centers that have benefited a lot from their new condition of regional power centers (Vitoria, Santiago de Compostela, Mérida, etc.). Finally, the Spain of the Autonomous Communities has contributed to a moderate reduction of the interregional development. This is demonstrated by an improvement of the richness indicators of emblematic Autonomous Communities, as Andalucía and Extremadura.

On its hand, the gaps among the territories reveal contrasts, which emerge in the case of Autonomous Communities that have guarded proper languages and proper Identity marks. This is the case of the Catalan, the Euzkaldún and the Galician world. Another element which produces differences is the stability of nationalist and regionalist political parties. Opposite to this, the historical speeches, the creation of myths and of referents of regional peculiarities obey to a similar mechanism in all territories. Some Autonomous territories are well consolidated in comparison with the weakness of the municipal power (if the main cities are excluded) and with the difficulties of recognizing the metropolitan and district realities.

### **3. THE GEOGRAPHICAL COMMUNITY**

In our country, Geography is a discipline which is mainly articulated around the University. The University institutionalization of the Geographic Community settled during the 1970s and until the 1990s departments expanded. At that time it was possible to talk about stability. Nowadays, there is an overwhelming majority of the public superior educational institutions and it is possible to assess more than 800 academics and researchers of the discipline all around the country. About thirty Universities impart the degree in Geography and, maybe more important, is

the fact that there is an active participation in teaching other courses as tourism, school teaching, humanities, cartography and environment, and these are the most representative ones. As a result of this academic hegemony of our Community, a democratic association of academics (AGE) leads the claims and the debates about the importance of the territorial analysis in the present society.

The AGE has played a central role in sustaining the professionalization of the geographers. First of all, it gathered in its bulletin the debates about the pioneer experiences in this field. Later on, it fostered the creation of the College of Geographers, which was approved in 1999. Throughout these ten years, the College has been working out an intense agenda. It supports the professional work of many certified geographers and relies on more members than the AGE itself. In spite of this, its influence on the disciplinary community is still minor. Another relevant aspect of the recent evolution is the participation of many colleagues in public life, for instance they are political representatives or influent public managers. This confirms the abilities that the territorial analysis confers in fields such as territorial planning, tourism and environment. Also the meaning of the autonomous power seems to favor our professional position. Anyway, the Geographical Community is still dominated by strong inertias of academic origin and it is not possible to conclude by stating that the growing protagonism of the spatial/territorial of the beginning of the XXI century would end by turning into a reinforcement of the social science in which we integrate.

#### **4. THE FUTURE OF THE TERRITORIAL ANALYSIS. IS GEOGRAPHY NECESSARY?**

During the last times, the hegemony of the global scale has been considered as explanatory fact of the contemporary reality. This situation reveals the meaning of whatever is related to the space and to the territorialization, as numerous influential intellectuals of our times confirm. Together with the globalization, the protagonism of the local dimension and the one of the fields related to a concrete existence of the individuals has been reinforced. Consequently, a study of the different scales is fundamental to understand the present. A good way to take on this analysis is the use of the New Technologies, among which, and in relation to the discourse until now formulated, the Geographical Informational Systems (GIS) stand out. The GIS allow ordering multiple Geo-referenced data according to an informatics structure which makes it possible to prove the magnitude of the spatial changes produced. Moreover, it enables the elaboration of new detailed cartographic images of various territories. It is a very useful tool that Geography has strongly helped to consolidate.

This reinforced aim of the territorial dimension in not only proved thanks to the GIS, but also thanks to the fact that the recent dynamic of the critic social theory reinforces the meaning of anything is geographic. Geography has conquered a lot of new ambits of work, as the urban and the territorial planning, tourism environment, logistic, climate, etc., thus revealing the advancement of its utilities. Without doubt, the upkeep of University dominant component in its organization as scientific community and the various routines installed in a part of its members can draw a more somber scenario. For this reason, the final conclusion of this contribution remains opened. Geography can take advantage of its doubtless interest as social science, which is aware of the mechanisms which justify the main transformations of the contemporary world. On the contrary, a spatial and territorial analysis perspective can become the main competence of other professionals, while the Geographical Community languishes.