

THE CONSTRUCTION OF URBAN CATALONIA

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There is no doubt that when trying to interpret the present urban Catalonia, the existence of the Barcelona metropolis appears as a predominant fact, as a directional centre of all the system and summary of all the process of concentrational urban growth. Starting from this confirmation of reality, a mechanical interpretation of the history of the confirmation of urban Catalonia from the sole point of view of the "capital-city" or the "industrial-city" cannot be inferred, as if all urbanizing process should necessarily go through the sequence "industrial growth-urban dynamics", and as if the "urban project" were only possible in those prototype situations.

On the contrary, the understanding of the diversity of situations and the close description of the small nuclei and regions, explains a process of formation which has been complex and heterogeneous, and can also help us to evaluate the capacity of some urban structures which exist in the rest of the Catalan territory to plan on their own their own urban role, up to a certain point "independently" from that of Barcelona.

In short, the problem is, therefore, to point out in these tightly packed notes a first hypothesis about the most important episodes of the formation process of an urban net, which already appears to be consolidated in the Middle Ages, which acquires a certain functional complexity at the end of the eighteenth century due to the agricultural prosperity, and which with industrialization will suffer a selective process which anticipates the fundamental traits of the new contemporary territorial structure which is already clearly polarized around the metropolitan area, the great transport substructures or the tourist development of the littoral.

We might emphasize some special points of each episode. Of Romanization, its capacity to sum up the previous territorial traits and understand the Catalan territory, by pointing out the agricultural traces and urban locations which we shall see revive later on. Of the centuries of medieval splendor, the consolidation of two Catalonia, the Old one and the New one; the one of the first Reconquest, through the reorganization of a territory which is at the same time mountainous and agricultural in which the "farm" sums up the way of the intensive exploitation of the land and the one of the colonization by villages of the dry lands. Of the agricultural prosperity of the eighteenth century, the consolidation of the head of region cities and the first projected extensions. Of the nineteenth century industrialization, the idea of the elementary urban project, as a technical instrument which supports the orderly growth around a "promenade", the new road, the avenue, the railway

station, contemporary to or the predecessor of the expansion plans of the mature cities; an urban project which is also thought out through partial interventions of the construction of public buildings and of the works or urban services, and which also reflects the will of a qualitative change in the minor city.

A first understanding of the geographic medium.

The relations between poor regions-rich regions, mountain-littoral, shelter-passage, are the constants which the first prehistoric movements begin to confirm. The compartmented structure which the Catalan relief shows has its first "historic" correspondence in the tribal localizations. The natural region will later be fundamental in the understanding of economic attitudes, urban dynamics and territorial form which history will gradually settle.

The Roman period seemed to underline in this Catalonia the physical and productive characteristics of the territory: the relationship between mountain-coast, the association between Mediterranean agriculture exporting commerce, middle sized agricultural exploitations with advanced techniques, the high density of population along the coast... Somehow this period shows traits and vocations which we shall find again in later periods, a continuity in the territorial organization which is not the result of the permanence of the Romans' task but of the capacity of these colonizers to recognize the invariables of the natural medium which show themselves to be capital when the country rationalizes and extends its agricultural exploitations.

The formation of the historical city and the medieval colonization.

Urban decadence and the predominance of rural associations were the result of the crisis which started in the third century and which was to lead to the fall of the empire and to the invasion by the Barbarians and later to the conquest by the Muslims.

Reconquest and repopulation are the keys to the new period during which the territory was shaped, which was carried out in two stages which were separate in time and which generated different forms of occupation. The repopulation of Old Catalonia, the first in time, was carried out by the feudal lords and by the monasteries delegated by the king. The farmers ploughed the waste-land and established farms which became the basic unit of repopulation and also the type of building of the primitive cities. On the other hand, New Catalonia is built on the foundation of cities and villages expressly sponsored by the king in confrontation with the feudal power and also by the different physiocratic characteristics of the newly conquered land which consisted of unirrigated ground which advised more

extensive farm-lands and larger and more distant from each other human concentrations.

In the thirteenth century a new urban economy made its appearance, which had been born in the shadow of a colonial and mercantile drive started at the end of the Reconquest with the arrival of capital from Languedoc which was fleeing from the Albigense crusade. This is the period in which the first urban nuclei are formed, when new crafts and mercantile activities are started and where the human and economic surplus from the fields flow together.

The urban dynamic which the new situation generates disqualifies the first towns of the Reconquest and refocuses attention on the coast and on New Catalonia. The confrontation between the king and the feudal lords and the improved conditions for war accelerate a process of urban relocation and spread which is to become another of the constants of this stage of history.

The plague in the middle of the fourteenth century killed off almost half of the population and opened a period of social agitation in the country-side which lasted for sixty two years and this, together with the generalized crisis, closed the period of abundance of the Low Middle Ages. The war of Remença, as that civil struggle was known, was the final landmark of this period. The demographic loss emptied the cities and all traces of population and cultivation disappeared from the country-side which had appeared due to the wars and to overpopulation. Old Catalonia was full of empty farm-houses and New Catalonia saw the unirrigated land of the interior depopulated. War weakened the economy in crisis but it also broke the more regressive aspects of feudal domination and left the countryside clear for another juteial framework which was to be the basis of the reconstruction of the agricultural economy in future centuries.

Agrarian transformation and urban growth.

The period of medieval crisis was followed by a gradual ascent in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. After the solution of the Remença conflict agrarian exploitation experimented a remarkable concentration and prosperity, especially in Old Catalonia. In the middle of the seventeenth century new crops are introduced (potatoes, maize and grape-vines) and the unoccupied land is populated: these are indications of the agrarian and demographic abundance to come in the following century.

The urban growth and new developments can be understood from the point of view of this transformation in the country-side. Once the repopulation of the scattered farms has been consolidated and their dimension is readjusted, the regional urban focuses absorb their demographic surplus.

The urban constellation which had been checked since the fourteenth century, or had given support to its timid growth on the roads out of the territory, experimented significant change: there were never great provisions for growth non an idea of a city from a project, simply a small network, like a fitted form, to transform the farm which was to take as a small-holding module the "casa de cós", a reduction of what that artisan house had been. On the other hand, within the walled city the medieval urban factory was almost completely replaced. There were almost no public buildings to give a new dimension to the Gothic holding, only some isolated cases of hospitals, paving works and almost always the construction of a baroque church. The loss of municipal autonomy after the Nova Planta Decree does not have as a counterweight the baroque supervision which from a position of real power shapes potent morphological introductions.

Urban expansions and projects.

The appearance of capitalism in Catalonia is an early process. Since the end of the eighteenth Century, coincidental with a scant expectation of selling agrarian products to the interior and with a generalized rise in salaries, agricultural income and the capital accumulated in American trade were directed towards a new sector: textile. This embryonic capitalism was fed by the fields. It is possible that large and small trade, craft and industry were born simultaneously everywhere. The towns of the end of the eighteenth century received from the country-side the demographic and economic help which they needed to grow.

The demographic and economic crisis produced by the French war had effected a selective process which showed clearly in the cense taken at the end of the century. Two very distinct types of urban nuclei began to take shape: the agrarian town and the service town where developing industry becomes stabilized. The demographic curve of the first reflected the agrarian changes of the region and the demographic curve of the specifically industrial town situated almost always in the regions close to Barcelona shot upwards.

This ambivalence in the urban process shows up also at a more global level in the territory. From the central instance the territory is understood as an abstract space in which to locate a system of roads and railway lines in order to guarantee the connecting between important towns. This is, in part, the same logic which in the eighteen century located the military fortified towns and which gave the initial impulse to the first cartographic and urban layout drawings.

Territory and city become polarized only gradually. The nineteenth century was not to see, except in the case of mountains towns, the stagnant agrarian town. The idea of a project for urban growth is, therefore, a general key with which to

interpret urban development - albeit with different forms and dynamics.

Thus, the city which was the head of an agrarian region formulated towards the middle of the century its urban project: an avenue lined with trees, or a square, and on this project, by the simple system of alignment, the small residential networks mount up; the enclosed house reflecting the traditional workman's house of the eighteenth century is the topological guideline; the rented house of the bourgeois is only beginning to appear timidly. The arrival of the road and of the railway line are not the motor which generates urban growth but the opportunity to communicate the old precinct with the station by means of the avenue on to support suburban growth.

However, the mainly industrial town will experience more profound transformations. From the first decades of the nineteenth century a series of municipalities which were close to Barcelona —Gràcia, Badalona— or Terrassa and Sabadell in the Vallés began to extend the list of the streets which had existed in the eighteenth century. The enclosed house or small lot is the morphological guideline for establishing an order. As the rhythm of immigration grew so it became obvious that the central problem was to be urban quality.

The nineteenth century sanctioned the urban project as the key element in the "reform" of the city. This is a generalized factor and it is "independent" of the different urban dynamics; the scale and capacity to anticipate the elements of the present day city change. The episode characterized by the expansions and the industrial localization and the substructures of the territory somehow anticipate the fact that the construction of the City does not come from successive sedimentations of the agrarian landscape but from the consideration of the territory as a "possible city".

Somehow, in certain zones (what was to be the future metropolitan area of Barcelona) the geographic and economic logic which bound the urban nucleus to its region began to change. The region which was a stagnant zone characterized by a market and by productive vocations begins to transform its stability and to become more and more and abstract territory capable of gathering up the new urbanization phenomena.

Antoni FONT, José Luís OYON i Ricard PIÉ