
Social bonds and territorial fractures

ORIOLO NELLO

Autonomous University of Barcelona
Institut d'Estudis Catalans
oriol.nello@gmail.com

How are social bonds conditioned by the place where we live? To what degree do these bonds depend on our ability to move around the territory? How are the conditions of access to housing related to the configuration of the public space, the provision of basic goods like water and energy and the landscape quality? These, among many others, are the questions we ask ourselves when reflecting on the relationship between social bonds and territorial factors. This relationship is both complex and crucial: complex because the territory is neither a neutral backdrop nor passive subject, but instead both cause and effect, engine and consequence of social transformations; and crucial because the organisation and use of the space not only reflects the social structure, with all its inequalities, but also contributes decisively to maintaining and reproducing it.

Geographic studies have traditionally addressed the question of territorial inequalities through dichotomous conceptions of space, particularly represented by the dyads country/city, urban/rural. What was assumed to condition the social bonds in each town the most was whether it was urban or rural. Likewise, on the regional or national scale, social bonds theoretically depend largely on the relationship between city and country. Access to education and services, jobs, family structures, living conditions and social bonds and relations as a whole were associated with the country/city opposition, which thus became axiomatic and totalising.

It is worth noting that this perception has not been exclusive to traditional geographic studies. Even today, the country/city duality is often found in citizens' commonsense, the news reported by the media, public debate and artistic representations. This dyad is often associated with an entire series of other oppositions referring to such tangible issues as moral values: nature/culture, agriculture/manufacturing, authenticity/artificiality, tradition/innovation, sociability/solitude and safety/danger. In these sets of oppositions, the first concept in each of the dyads,

which is given a positive connotation, is associated with the country and the second one with the city. This is not the place to outline the origins and consequences—social, cultural and political—of the prevalence of these perceptions; instead, what we are interested in here is pointing out that they reflect an imaginary geography more than the factual reality.

Indeed, the social and territorial transformations that have taken place in recent decades—in Western Europe since the second half of the twentieth century in particular—question the efficacy of the old classifications of space. On the one hand, the proportion of the working population involved in farming activities has dropped everywhere until it has become virtually reduced to its minimal expression. This has led farmers to almost disappear as a class, thus endangering a set of living conditions, habits and centuries-old knowledge. On the other hand, the spread of rural areas, the encroachment of urbanisation, the expansion of networks and the radical improvement in communications have led to an economic and functional integration of the territory, which is increasingly filled. Thus, today the old rural spaces are essentially areas of services or operational spaces for the production of energy or environmental services. On the other hand, the urbanisation process has led the urban networks to encompass the entire territory and create urban macro-regions which span huge tracts of land where it is quite difficult to clearly and scientifically distinguish what is city and what is country.

This evolution has led to a kind of homogenisation of the average living conditions. Services, information and goods are now much more easily accessible from anywhere in the territory than they were in the past. People's mobility has become easier to an unprecedented extent, such that a very large proportion of the population works outside the town where they live. The average incomes of people living in the former rural and urban areas are quite similar today, rendering the old contrast of poor rurality versus wealthy urbanity obsolete. In fact, it may be the very opposite: the highest average income is often found in low-density areas. As a consequence of all these transformations, habits and lifestyles, family structures and cultural practices have also tended to become more homogeneous.

In no way does this mean that important territorial inequalities do not persist. First, the legacy of the implosive phase of urbanisation is still omnipresent. As is common knowledge, this phase, which gained momentum in Catalonia in the nineteenth century and reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s, concentrated people and activity in the territory and decisively weakened the demographic base of the old rural spaces. The subsequent encroachment of urbanisation—what some authors have called urban sprawl—has tempered the losses and reversed the trend in some areas, but low population density and ageing of the population are still an obstacle to the provision of certain basic services in large swaths of the territory.

In any case, the most decisive spatial inequalities today are not associated with population density as much as they are with residential segregation, that is, social groups' tendency to separate themselves in the territory according to their ability to choose their place of residence. This ability is known to be based on two factors: family income and land and housing prices. Thus, households

with the lowest economic wherewithal are logically going to end up wherever the prices are the lowest, while the wealthier ones will congregate in more exclusive and exclusionary areas, where they enjoy the benefits of living amongst each other and being able to access the best services. The inequalities that arise between average living conditions in wealthy versus vulnerable areas—on issues like access to education, a healthy lifestyle, employment and services—are considerably more noticeable than those that arise between high- versus low-density territorial areas.

The paradox is that as the inequalities associated with the country/city distinction decline and those associated with residential segregation rise, the citizen debate still largely revolves around the old urban/rural dichotomy. As philosopher Karl Marx once said, ‘the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living’. The onslaught of literary works, films, essays and newspaper reports on the survival of the traditional country/city opposition and its corollaries in recent years could be seen as confirmation of that statement. In fact, it clearly says more about the twilight of the old country/city dichotomy than about its survival.

Let us conclude. We have seen how when analysing social bonds it is essential to consider territorial factors, as they reflect, condition and mediatise people’s social relations and living conditions. However, territorial structures are constantly evolving, just like the society that sustains and fashions them. Thus, though still vividly alive in the collective imagination, the old distinctions between country and city common in earlier social structures are inadequate today both for studying the territory and society and for designing and applying public policies. In contrast, other territorial fractures that may be less visible and less common in public debates are becoming more and more firmly entrenched, such as residential segregation, an insidious structural phenomenon which is becoming more pronounced, affecting all social groups and encompassing our entire territory, thus reflecting and consolidating social inequalities in both low- and high-density areas.

The debate on territorial structures and fractures is an essential requirement for understanding the evolution of contemporary social bonds, conflicts and inequalities. However, this debate will only be fruitful—scientifically and politically—if we overcome the inherited conceptions of the territory which are so laden with ideological content and instead analyse the space with fresh eyes based on reality.

References

- CHECA, J.; NEL·LO, O. (2021). “Residential Segregation and Living Conditions. An Analysis of Social Inequalities in Catalonia from Four Spatial Perspectives”, in *Urban Science*, 5, 45, p. 1–18. <<https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci5020045>>
- NEL·LO, O. (2001). *Ciutat de ciutats, reflexions sobre el procés d’urbanització a Catalunya*. Barcelona: Empúries.
- NEL·LO, O.; CHECA, J. (2021). “El procés d’urbanització”, in FOLCH, R. et al., (eds.). *Natura, ús o abús 2018-2019*, p. 1–30. Barcelona: Institut d’Estudis Catalans. (DOI: 10.2436/15.0110.22.4).
- NEL·LO, O.; LÓPEZ, J.; MARTÍN, J.; CHECA, J. (2016). *La luz de la ciudad. El proceso de urbanización en España a partir de las imágenes nocturnas de la Tierra*. Bellaterra: GURB, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona.