EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Title: The role of social infrastructures in neoliberal urban space. Social cohesion in Barcelona's neighbourhoods.

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Abstract: The dominant neoliberal social model is characterised by a continuous deregulation and liberalisation of the economic system, a thinning of government regulation, increasing precariousness of labour with significant processes of underemployment and unemployment, commodification of social relations and unbridled consumerism. As a result, there has been an increase in the dynamics of social polarisation, uncertainties related to ethnic and cultural diversity, the predominance of an individualistic and hedonistic philosophy, feelings of insecurity and instability. Social dissatisfaction with this model, together with the perception of some social groups as losers in neoliberal globalisation, among other factors, would partially explain the increase in support for populist or extreme right-wing parties in Western democracies. Although these dynamics are global, it is especially in the urban space where the contradictions of this social model are best visualised. In this sense, however, it must be recognised that the policy response to the COVID-19 crisis has been a breath of fresh air compared to the austerity policies used to tackle the Great Recession (2008-2014). The call for more government spending, the temporary suspension of fiscal rules in the EU, NEU funds, mutual debt issuance open a question mark over the model of social recovery towards which today's European societies are heading.

However, at least until now, the social contradictions have been accentuated in many countries in the current COVID-19 situation. Studies can be found that show how confinement and the need for social distance and security have accentuated processes of social vulnerability. It has even affected the sense of well-being and mental health of the most vulnerable population and reinforced the demand for greater social contact and access to spaces and areas for socialisation.

In this vulnerable context, the spaces in the city where it is possible to establish connections with other people and create a sense of community and social cohesion become particularly important. In this sense, the sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2018) considers that in the city we can find a series of physical and institutional infrastructures that are crucial for the development and maintenance of social connections, the social infrastructures (SI). That is, social places such as libraries, parks, sports facilities, schools and community centres that play a main role in fostering processes of social integration and cohesion in the city (Latham and Layton, 2019). To date we can find a recent literature that from a predominantly qualitative approach is studying the sociabilising role of SI in the city (e.g. van Melik and Merry, 2021; Layton and Latham, 2021). Other studies have analysed the distribution of SI as an element to study the level of territorial equity and social integration of the most disadvantaged groups in the city (Iglesias-Pascual et al., in press). However, there is still a need for further research on the relationship between SI and the different socio-territorial contexts in the city, as well as to analyze the relationship between SI and a better level of social cohesion and satisfaction with the socialisation models developed.

In this regard, to study the level of social cohesion in a community we can find an important literature that highlights the relevance of analysing existing patterns of residential segregation, especially of the most vulnerable population, especially the low-income population and the population with a different ethnic background from the host society. That is, people have different live experiences because they live in different areas of the city. But relationships between people is not only, and maybe not mainly, a question of residence: people interact in many other social spaces: workplace, leisure, sports, cultural activities. The role that these other places for socialization plays has not been researched as extensively as residential segregation.

To fill this gap, this paper proposes a study in Barcelona, the second most populated city in Spain, which analyses the relation between the presence of SI and degree of social cohesion at neighbourhood level. The aim is to explain and the relationship between the degree of social cohesion and citizen satisfaction with social cohesion and the presence of SI. In other words, to test for the first time using statistical methods whether the presence of SI in the city is really related to higher levels of social cohesion. In order to develop what has been proposed so far, we set out to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the distribution of SI in Barcelona aims to develop a pattern of social equity and therefore are present in the most vulnerable areas where social integration processes are most needed? Do the spatial distribution of SI facilitates the social integration and therefore are they located in those places where are more needed?

RQ3: Is the greater presence of SI related to more positive social coexistence processes and related to higher levels of satisfaction and sociability in Barcelona neighbourhoods?

Answering these research questions allows us to make a particularly novel contribution to the academic literature that analyses the processes of integration, coexistence and social cohesion on an urban scale. Our study is the first to statistically analyse the distribution of public SI and its relationship with the socio-territorial equity model developed by each city. At the same time, for the first time we measure the relationship between the distribution of services and spaces that support public activity aimed at meeting citizens' socialisation needs and its effects at the neighbourhood level.

To this end, firstly, an approach has been developed for Barcelona based on the distribution of the main SI in the city which, through the activities that take place there, produce better social cohesion, i.e. the SI in which services, educational, cultural, sporting and green areas are located. Finally, a regression model is used to analyse the link between the presence of SI in the neighbourhoods and the level of coexistence and social cohesion, its change and trend between 2014 and 2017.

As indicated at the beginning of this research, the situation of cyclical economic and social crisis that accompanies the neoliberal economic policies makes it especially important in the city to foster spaces and situations that allow counteracting social isolation and becoming familiar with the diversity of race, gender and wealth (Latham and Layton, 2019). Therefore, before developing our analytical approach, it is important to review what other studies show about both the possibilities for social contact offered by SI and the sociabilising effect of social contact in space and the distribution of public resources.

Whatever infrastructure is present in the city is the implicit sign of an ideology or social interests. Thus the uneven distribution of infrastructure and public services in the city often shows a spatial pattern of exclusion of the most vulnerable population groups (Talen and Anselin, 2021). Potentially SI is designed and planned for primary functions other than promoting social cohesion (e.g. health, sports, education, culture, green spaces). However, the social connections that promote the development of its functions encourage interaction across social, ethnic and cultural differences (Klinenberg, 2018). Thus, as highlighted by Latham and Layton (2019), SI can be defined as networks of spaces, facilities, institutions and groups that create possibilities for social connection and thus enable cities to function as social spaces. In this regard they are spaces of social contact and where one interacts with the different or the stranger. It is this possibility of experiencing strangeness in an everyday, regulated and safe context that fosters the social integration of the different (Wilson, 2017). Through the use of SI, the idea of togetherness and community feeling is developed. This need for spaces for contact and community feeling becomes especially evident if we analyse how, in the absence of public spaces that encourage socialisation, processes of appropriation of public spaces by the population take place, which reuse them for a socialising function. Indeed, this complexity of encounters is not unique to inter-ethnic or religious relations but is also extensible to different age groups, ideology, social class or other personal characteristics. This is why SI as spaces regulated by the development of their different functions become socially perceived as safe and therefore conducive to interaction.

Analysing the role of SI as spaces for promoting social interaction and encounters, we can find numerous studies that specify the way in which they affect socialisation. Thus, we can consider numerous studies that analyse the socialising and meeting-enabling role of libraries, schools and schoolyards, sports areas, parks and green spaces. These spaces become particularly important in the case of migrant populations or those with a higher degree of social vulnerability (Latham and Layton, 2019). In this way, the importance of SI is not limited to its sociabilising role but extends to perceptions of mental, social and health well-being. Therefore, we can consider that the distribution of SI and public investments shows us the model of equity or social justice developed in the city. Consequently, following the academic literature, it is evident that the analysis of the distribution of the SI in a territorial area allows us to analyse the degree of social equity of a city, as well as the integrating and cohesive nature of the political model developed. Our objective in this research is not only this step, but also to empirically confirm this relationship between the distribution of the SI and the population's greater degree of satisfaction with coexistence in the city.

Based on this theoretical basis, the methodological approach designed and the results of previous studies developed along these lines (Iglesias-Pascual et al., in press), we

consider that the results to be developed in this contribution may be of particular relevance and novelty for those studies that aspire to analyse and measure the levels of territorial equity and social cohesion of any area or territory.

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