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## *Defining the urban periphery: concepts and terminology*

The pace and scope of urbanisation at global scale has reached an extraordinary dimension since the mid-twentieth century. Different statistics show a sharp increase in urban population around the world, leading to a considerable growth of urban fabric and the emergence of new forms of urbanisation in the periphery of cities.

The evolution of worldwide urbanisation is a phenomenon of global interest, as it constitutes a social, environmental and economic challenge. This can be observed in debates about the depletion of natural resources, climate change or social inequalities among others, as a result of a growing concern with the future of the Earth. *An Urbanising World: The Global Report on Human Settlements* was released by the United Nations in 1996 and predicted the arrival of an Urban Age due to the rapid increase in urban population. In 2007, the number of urban dwellers overtook rural population for the first time. However, it should be noted that the UN statistics show important weaknesses, since they are based on data provided by the different countries, in which there are strong divergences about what is rural and what is urban, consequently, the so-called Urban Age is more of a statistical artefact as Brenner and Schmid (2014) have pointed out.

Difficulties to distinguish the rural from the urban are the result of the consolidation of forms of urban periphery. These are radically different from the traditional dichotomy between rural environments and the compact city (Champion and Hugo, 2004). The urban has historically been delimited with accuracy, often as an administrative or statistical unit. Yet nowadays, complex urban

regions overcome these boundaries and show a shape that is difficult to delimit. Therefore, the analysis of contemporary urban forms should be released from those limits (Amin, 2004). This opens a blind field of uncertainty between the urban and the rural, as contended by Lefebvre (1970).

Extensive research has delved into urban peripheries with the aim of shedding some light into the definition and explanation of these intermediate spaces. This collective effort has resulted in the appearance of a multiplicity of terms, which is also related to the rapidity, diversity and scale of transformations in urban peripheries. This taxonomic fury has focused particularities and specificities rather than on seeking more abstract definitions that can have stronger acceptance. The scientific community appears to take long to name phenomena. As Prost (1991) contends, changes in urban peripheries are so rapid and explosive that existing categories do not fit.

Semantic richness is not only the result of the existing diversity of languages, but is also due to the multiple ways in which these phenomena are perceived and comprehended. Yet, the predominance of terms like suburb or sprawl to refer to peripheries demonstrates the global prevalence of the English language, not only in the academic field, but also in other fields (McCrum, 2011). In contrast, it seems increasingly clear that certain terms referring to urban peripheries have fallen into disuse in their respective languages. Somehow a certain *Weltanschauung* is lost, in which each language is nothing more than the struggle of societies to understand and assimilate what surrounds us (Lledó, 1970).

It has been shown that the effort to conceptualise the reality of urban peripheries has not articulated an accurate theoretical framework but has instead generated abundant, yet inefficient terminology which emphasises differences rather than similarities and leads to persistent confusion. This is apparent in the indiscriminate use of terms that end up distorting or changing their original meaning. Some have turned into plastic words given their malleability and their unusual uses that seem to adapt to any situation (Porksen, 2010); or as Domingues (2013) explains, when the reality named by words is not well understood, these words turn into sponge and absorb any theme and, if they are squeezed, any answer will be obtained from them.

Scientific disciplines are subject to continuous renovation, new approaches, findings and evidences that enable them to thrive and widen the scope of our knowledge (Santos, 1990). Every paradigm change involves a process of assimilation where the definition of new concepts is fundamental. Conceptualisation begins with interpreting reality and its aim is to explain and comprehend the different phenomena we perceive. In this vein, reflecting on urban periphery from the perspective of the difference between its nominal and constitutive parts is essential (Sayer, 1984; Martínez Toro, 2016). Thus, this article delves into the hypothesis that the form of occupying space that is neither urban nor rural lacks exact definition. Aiming at increasing knowledge about these intermediate landscapes and clarifying their description, this paper analyses those terms that have been most important in academic literature.

Terminological confusion is also the result of the coexistence between different concepts that, despite describing similar phenomena, have been conceptualised seeking singularity. As such, minimal difference has served to coin a new term. Yet, in spite of continuous change, dramatic spatial transformation and intense deliberation around the spaces that surround cities, some terms enjoy certain stability and recognition. By contrast, the fleeting prominence of other concepts is linked to the name of the author who coined them.

The fact that English has become a lingua franca in academia has helped the homogenisation of certain concepts and encouraged the creation of neologisms, while words from other languages have fallen out of use. For instance, terms like *sprawl*, *suburbanisation* or *counterurbanisation* have come to define terms that do not fit that spatial reality while words such as *extrarradio* or *arrabal* have disappeared.

It is therefore fundamental to distinguish forms from processes, that is, the recognisable areas for their appear-

ance or functionality from the processes that generate, transform or end them. In this vein, three theoretical frameworks have obtained recognition from academic research. One of them considers peripheral spaces as a discrete phenomenon and focuses on the task of delimiting those spaces. Some authors have reacted to the diffuse dichotomy between urban and rural replacing it for a trichotomy in which peripheries – as radically different from traditional urban and rural landscapes – have been conceptualised in a variety of spatial units such as fringes, rings or areas. Another of these frameworks considers peripheral spaces as a continuum with different gradients. From this perspective, urbanisation is the result of a process or urban diffusion from cities towards adjacent or remote rural areas. Finally, some research has aimed at defining the temporal phases that articulate peripheral urbanisation. This research has generally followed a cyclical model where conclusions are obtained from the study of population variation in the core and periphery. These three theoretical frameworks constitute the ground of our knowledge of urban peripheries. The rest of models, reflections and interpretations are derived from these frameworks and have contributed to enhance confusion or egos, or both.

The concept of suburb – urban development where low-density and socially homogeneous residential functions predominate – is one of the most significant forms of urban periphery that is widely recognised in Anglo-Saxon academia. In Spanish, the term *suburbio* includes, on top of its peripheral location, a reference to the socio-economic aspects of its population. Thus, direct translation between these terms is not advisable. Suburbs can be easily delimited due to their physical and social characteristics, yet other spatial units have been defined: fringes or suburban, rururban or peri-urban areas. Fringes stand for the union of several suburbs that show continuity with the urban fabric. Rururban areas are dispersed rural spaces that receive urban dwellers who change their traditional functions and building typologies. Peri-urban spaces are also characterised by discontinuity, but also show heterogeneity in territorial uses and functions, maintenance of agricultural and farming activities and high mobility of their population. Apart from these units, the theories that are based on the hypothesis of a complete urbanisation of society have introduced concepts that regard urban peripheries as a continuum that is hard to delimit. These terms therefore point at the dissolution of cities, the relocation of urban functions in rural areas or at the role of socioeconomic issues and infrastructures in the configuration of the spatial model.

On the other hand, words of action or verbs name processes of peripheral urbanisation. As such, the word suburb turns into suburbanisation as the process of construction of urban peripheries characterised by the prevalence of low-density residential uses. Rururban and peri-urban follow a similar pattern. In the case of suburbanisation, this phenomenon in North America has grown to huge dimension as a result of a variety of political and fiscal reforms. Yet, its development has been diffuse and uneven, generating what is known as sprawl. Different European authors contend that the term sprawl is not the most accurate to define suburban areas in Europe, even if the term is frequently used in that context. Likewise, other definitions focus on the comparative dynamics of urban and peripheral populations. In this context, suburbanisation is conceptualised as the movement of dwellers from a

compact urban fabric towards suburbs; counterurbanisation, deurbanisation or exurbanisation are described as the movement of population from urban areas – including the compact city and suburbs – towards rural ones.

On balance, language, as much as landscape, is a dynamic entity as well as an instrument through which a society comprehends what surrounds it. The peripheries of cities are complex and ever-evolving territorial realities which therefore generate intense academic discussion and an extraordinary amount of terms. However, efforts to synthesise concepts, fix meanings and outline the main features of these processes and forms have not been frequent. Perhaps the time has come to abandon an individualistic search for the magic word and to enhance collective work that can articulate a sound and long-lasting theoretical framework.