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The expansion of urbanisation in the Balearic Islands (1956–2006)



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Abstract Since the mid-20th century the Balearic Islands have experienced significant changes as a result of their incorporation into the global economy as a mass tourism destination. The expansion of urbanisation has become a main change, given that the archipelago's urbanised surface has increased fivefold since 1956. The territory of the islands has been organised internally to meet the demands of, first, tourism, and, second, the residential demands of Central European countries. The process has generated a whole new territorial model, dominated by new urban coastal and metropolitan areas in larger cities. This new model overlaps the regular traditional scattered centres inland with some walled coastal towns, from the pretourist model. This paper quantifies, describes, and explains these changes based on data from a series of land cover maps of 1956, 1973, 1995, and 2006, paying special attention to the particularities of each of the islands: Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza and Formentera.

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Introduction and objectives

As many authors have pointed out, both the expansion of urbanisation and the internal transformations of cities over the past 50 years are two sides of the same coin that reflect the significant socioeconomic changes experienced by the Western capitalist world since the end of World War II (Turner et al., 1990; Prud'homme and Lee, 1999; Catalán et al., 2008; Valera et al., 2007; Pons and Rullan, 2014; Arellano and Roca, 2010; Fulton et al., 2001; Galster et al., 2001).

The last big push of urban growth in the Western world is part of the dynamic that Arrighi (1994) defined as the “long twentieth century”, a cycle of accumulation articulated around the hegemony of the United States, a nation that ultimately has led neoliberalism (Harvey, 2005), the financial phase of this cycle. This last capitalist cycle, as the previous ones, generated a remarkable amount of surplus capital that absorbed, as stated by Harvey (2008), by the fixed capital of companies, government infrastructures, and the urbanisation and construction held by companies and individuals. This facilitated the necessary landing of accumulated capital to dissipate over time the recurring crises of capitalist overproduction.

This process has been clear and convincing in the United States, where suburbanisation after World War II has been its greatest exponent. In Europe, cities have traditionally been more compact than modern American cities. Nonetheless, the pace of growth and transformation was also accelerated during the second half of the 20th century through the adoption of a more extensive model than in previous eras (Arellano and Roca, 2012; Aguilera et al., 2011). Suburban trends, encouraged by powerful new communications and transport systems, have been affected all around.

The environmental, social, and economic consequences brought by this change are very important (European Environment Agency, 2006a). In urbanised areas, however, the overall figures, in percentage terms, are not that flashy, although the local concentration of these changes have had a significant global impact (Turner II and Butzer, 1995), considering that these are irreversible phenomena (European Environment Agency, 2003) with cumulative effects in the medium and the long term.

South Mediterranean Europe has participated in this expansion, especially its coasts, which have become surfaces suitable for building, with a faster growth rate compared with inland areas (European Environment Agency, 2006b), the encouragement of leisure activities in general and of tourism in particular being one of the most important causes of this development. The consequences are obvious: artificialisation, fragmentation of areas, loss of biodiversity and habitats.

Much like all major investments, the Mediterranean coastal urbanisation over the past 50 years would not have been possible without the transfer of capital from countries of Central and Mediterranean Europe derived from other economic activities. This has been called “capital switching” (Harvey, 1981, 1982), that is, the shift of capital from activities

with decreasing profits to activities with better prospects. In the Mediterranean area, this investment generated what Gormsen described as a third coastal tourism periphery (Gormsen, 1997, p. 42).

The Balearic Islands (Fig. 2), which dominate the west of the western Mediterranean, constitute a good example of the expansion of urbanisation in the second half of the 20th century through the reinvestment of both local and foreign surplus capital. During the 1970s, Albert Quintana¹ linked the industrialisation of Europe with the widespread urbanisation of Mallorca, the largest of the Balearic Islands, stating the following: “*The area of our island is primarily organised according to the exploitation as an economic asset for the leisure of the industrial populations in Europe, and this production of recreational space is an asymmetric consequence of capitalist industrialisation. (...) The current urbanisation of Mallorca is the result of the industrialisation of the leading capitalist countries of Europe, the standard of living of which allows them to use the island as a recreational space, rearranged for this purpose*” (Artigues et al., 2008, translated).

This paper will measure and analyse the urbanisation of the Balearic Islands since they joined the European tourism map in the mid-20th century.

The analysed period (1956–2006) corresponds to the expansive economic cycle that began in the second half of the Spanish 20th century with the first measures of economic liberalisation adopted by Franco’s dictatorship (López and Rodríguez, 2010). For the Balearic Islands, this period spans the incorporation of the Balearic economy into the global economy as a mass tourism destination until the beginning of the financial crisis of 2008. During this half century, the Balearic Islands experienced a radical economic transformation. Gross domestic product (GDP) increased from 1626 to 18,527² million, 14,000 tourist accommodations became 423,259, and the 222,253 tourists that had visited the islands in 1956 added up to 12,526,600 in 2006 (Murray, 2012). Obviously, urban growth has not been alien to these macro-magnitudes, and, as will be studied in this work, the 56 km² of urbanised surface that covered the archipelago in 1956 became 310 km² in 2006, and the artificial areas multiplied by 5.5.

In any case the neighbouring islands and the Balearics are no exception. Otherwise, the degree of coastal urbanisation is lower compared with other Mediterranean coastal regions. There are several explanatory factors that will be studied in another work (Pons and Rullan, 2014).

This process generated a whole new territorial model, dominated by new urbanized coasts and metropolitan areas in larger cities. This new model is what we want to measure and analyse.

¹ Albert Quintana (1948–1978) was the first geographer that studied urban geography in the Balearic Islands using modern methods. A compilation of his works can be found (Artigues et al., 2008).

² In constant 2000 euros.

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