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Gaps in Transformation: The Foundations of a New Social Contract?

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The vulnerabilities of the 21st century unfold around the classic material dimension (equality/inequality axis), but also extend to additional dimensions: spatial (mixing/segregation axis), relational (community/disconnection axis), and cultural (recognition/discrimination axis). The gaps in this era of change follow logics of social inequity, urban fracture, community fragility, and cultural discrimination. The main risks of exclusion take shape at the intersections between them. These dynamics and their intersections do not operate in the abstract; they operate in the territory, mapping everyday life with specific levels of inclusion or mixing, with the presence or absence of connections and recognitions. Crises, transitions, and multiple gaps outline a time to rebuild the architecture of collective solidarity: a framework of rights connected to the era of change; a range of policies connected to the new structure of risks and hopes. It is necessary to enable the deployment of a new ecosocial agenda and to do so within frameworks of more democracy and more local politics: with more power placed in the hands of the people and close to the people.

Introduction

Social gaps will be the common thread of this article, manifesting in various forms: inequalities, segregations, disconnections, discriminations, asymmetries. Ancient and emerging gaps pose challenges for the reconstruction of citizenship. To provide context, a brief reference to three recent crises and three ongoing transitions is necessary.

- We have experienced a long decade marked by intense socioeconomic upheavals: the great recession, with its enormous social impacts in a framework of austere management; the pandemic, with its effects on health, productive activity, and living conditions in vulnerable neighbourhoods and communities; and the inflation spirals triggered by the invasion and war in Ukraine, impacting prices of many basic goods and supplies. With the 15M movement first and COVID-19 later, the grammar of the common, the collective, resurfaces, perhaps more as a transversal human need than as an ideological option: public services are defended in the streets, and mutual support networks are activated in neighbourhoods. The old austerity bunker then becomes the source of European Next Generation funds. All of this reshapes gaps and solidarities.

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- Beyond these crises, underlying vectors are altered: a cycle of intense, multiple, and accelerated transitions is unleashed; a logic of changing eras. In the socio-community sphere, an emerging mosaic of vulnerabilities and crosscutting segregations takes shape, and cooperative networks and relationships are also rearticulated. In the cultural sphere, a world of everyday complexities (new affective and gender relations, multicultural spaces) emerges, along with biographical ruptures and uncertainties (global migrations, transitional ages). In the ecological sphere, socially produced environmental risks intensify urgently (climate, drought, biodiversity, food, etc.), and a new urban/metropolitan era takes shape, coexisting with extensive depopulation geographies. All of this occurs in territories crossed by asymmetrical capacities for institutional and collective action. All of this reshapes the background coordinates, and it is here that the dichotomy of gaps/solidarities takes on (historically) unprecedented forms.

A new distribution of social risks, structured by multiple axes with strong interactions between them, emerges forcefully in this framework. 21st-century vulnerabilities unfold around the classic material dimension (equality/inequality axis), but also around other key dimensions: spatial (mixing/segregation axis), relational (community/disconnection axis), and cultural (recognition/discrimination axis). The gaps of this era of change follow logics of social inequity, urban fracture, community fragility, and cultural discrimination (gender, life cycle, origins, etc.). The main risks of exclusion take shape at the intersections between them. These logics and their intersections do not operate in the abstract; they operate in the territory, mapping everyday life with specific levels of inclusion or mixing, with the presence or absence of connections and recognitions. Let us explore this.

1. Social inequalities: broader and more complex gaps

The growth of social inequalities has been intense in much of the world over the recent historical cycle. By the late 1970s, a global inflection occurred in the dynamics of social income distribution (Piketty, 2021). The following four decades (1980-2020) marked a time of sustained increase in inequalities, with significant variations. In Europe, the most egalitarian region on the planet, the share of income in the hands of the top 10% increases from 32% to 38%, and in North America, it jumps from 34% to 47%. In Russia and China, the concentration of income in the high-income segment is growing by more than 20 percentage points. Moreover, in Latin America, in countries such as Chile, Brazil, and Mexico, the wealthiest individuals continue to amass over 60% of the income. The incremental dynamics of social inequality are leading to a rapid advancement towards more polarized societies, with weakened middle classes, an increase in the population at risk of poverty, and a heightened concentration of wealth. When intersecting with variables such as gender, age, origin, and residential status, this growth in inequality gives rise to more complex and fragmented socio-spatial structures.

Spain

In the entirety of the Spanish state, during the most severe period of the great recession, social policies underwent drastic cuts, ranging from 12% (health and social services) to 15% (education), thereby halting an uninterrupted trend of growth since the democratic transition. Of the €25,000 million reduction in public spending, 65.8% corresponds to regional social spending: the welfare state and the autonomous communities endure the most of the austerity measures. Not only were there reversals in public policy trends, but also in their effects: trends towards cohesion were halted, and inequalities were exacerbated. Between 2008 and 2014, household incomes decreased, indicative of the impoverishing effects of the crisis. However, austerity widened the gaps. Income inequality grew to its historical peak in the Gini index (34.7 in 2014). The relative poverty rate increased by 4.8 points, reaching 22.5%, and the indicator of severe material deprivation (difficulty covering basic needs) doubled, reaching 7.1% in 2014. The combination of these trends (relative poverty and material deprivations) elevated the risk of exclusion to 29%, compared to 23% in 2008 (Foessa Report, 2019). The post-crisis recovery period unfolded with some strength but also with vulnerabilities, characterized by precarious

employment and the consolidation of housing as a focal point of inequalities. Emergencies were overcome, but the economic stress for broad sectors of the population became chronic. Then, the pandemic struck. Upon its arrival, society was still recovering, and the welfare state remained weakened. A new blow that altered the scenario once again, with two key vectors:

a) On one hand, economic vulnerability increased in intensity (situations of poverty moved further from the risk threshold), and income losses were asymmetrical: in the lower quintile, the population losing over 40% of its income doubled the average.

b) On the other hand, when considering the diversity of social profiles, the most vulnerable experienced differential impacts. With Covid-19, a map of new vulnerabilities emerged: the risk of poverty for single mothers reached 40.6%, child poverty escalated to 31.5%, youth unemployment showed a 20-point difference compared to the overall rate (39.3% versus 18.9%), and the exclusion rate for migrant populations tripled that of the native population. In the socio-residential realm, the housing cost burden rate rose to 53.1% for households in rental housing, and energy poverty surged to 10.2% in the same period (Sarasa et al., 2022). Therefore, the numbers seem to affirm the overarching global trend mentioned: in Spain as well, over the last decade, inequalities have widened and become more complex.

However, a recent and hopeful development has emerged in contrast to the austerity years: far from implementing cutbacks, governments are activating shields of social protection with substantial increases in spending (ERTE, Minimum Vital Income, etc.) and paradigm shifts that depart from labour neoliberalism (expansion of indefinite contracts, increase in the minimum wage, etc.). The response in terms of public policies to the post-pandemic inflationary crisis follows the same protective logic (reduction of public transportation fares, intervention in the energy market, new taxes on large industrial and banking corporations, etc.). Beyond policies, practices of solidarity support are reinforced, and there is an awareness that only through a collective approach can future scenarios be envisioned. A new era that allows for reflection on the reconstruction of a possible social citizenship, post-neoliberal, for the 21st century.

City of Barcelona

In Barcelona, the employment destruction spiral triggered during the years of the great recession, coupled with the austere management of the crisis, led to a rapid and intense increase in inequality, reverting to levels reminiscent of the early nineties. In a short period, the metropolis experienced a setback of almost two decades in terms of social cohesion. Some central elements shape the post-crisis metropolitan framework (Porcel and Gomà, 2020):

a) The employment creation model is defined by the rise in temporary contracts (accounting for over 85% of new hiring), false self-employment, involuntary part-time work (especially among women), and a reduction in real wages (approximately 5% in 2019 compared to 2010). A particularly serious aspect is the increase in labour poverty¹ in the metropolitan area, rising from 13.3% in 2011, amid the crisis context, to 15.4% in 2018.

b) The housing issue emerges as the central axis of exclusion risks in the metropolis. The surge in rents in Barcelona since 2014, rapidly spreading throughout the metropolitan area, affects a significant portion of the population. Almost a third of the residents in the metropolis live in rental housing, of which 35.8% allocated more than 40% of the family income to housing expenses in 2018. This situation also differentially affected low-income groups and the age group of 16 to 34 years. It is crucial to note that the urban rental bubble occurred in a context of absence of price regulation, near non-existence of limits on speculation, and significant weaknesses in the public housing stock.

1. The rate of workers at risk of poverty refers to the proportion of the population between 18 and 59 years old that, being employed (a minimum of 6 months a year, self-employed or employed), has an income equivalent to below 60% of the median of the reference territorial area.

The most potent impact of the pandemic unfolds in Barcelona in the form of poverty: the population at risk increases by 92,000 people in the metropolis. Not only does its scope grow, but its intensity also expands (the average income of the poor population moves away from the risk threshold), and its distribution becomes notably asymmetrical, with very intense effects on the working classes, children/young population, and migrants.

a) A class gap emerges: poverty among the metropolitan working classes ranges between 27% and 30%, while executives and professionals evade the impact.

b) The pandemic has also widened the age gap as an axis of inequality. Discomfort was more intense in children with family risk situations, precarious housing conditions, and a lack of tools for non-face-to-face education. Metropolitan child poverty, already high before the pandemic (27%), increases by around 6 points. The youth unemployment rate grows, but unevenly: migrant youth unemployment doubles that of natives, and residents in popular neighbourhoods have triple the unemployment rate of youth in affluent neighbourhoods.

c) The migrant population shows the most severe situation: an increase of almost 7 points, starting from a risk rate that already approached 40%, in contrast to the 12% of the native population (Table 1). Finally, housing continues to be at the core of exclusion risks in the metropolis, especially intense for those living in rental housing. The percentage of tenants experiencing housing cost burden (above 40% of their monthly income) increases from 36.8% to 45.6%. More critically, one in five of these individuals allocates more than 60% of their income to housing expenses. The housing crisis was not resolved; COVID-19 exacerbates it (EMCV, 2021-2022).

Table 1. Poverty risk rate by social characteristics (per cent of population)

	City of Barcelona	Rest of the Metropolitan Area	Barcelona Metropolitan Area
Age dimension			
Under 16 years old	25.7	33.6	30.1
65 and older	14.0	19.1	16.3
Origin dimension			
Spain	11.9	11.5	11.7
Rest of the world	34.6	54.2	43.3
Labour dimension			
Employed	14.3	14.9	14.6
Unemployed	39.1	30.4	34.2
Total	18.6	23.7	21.2

Source: Institut Metròpoli and IDESCAT (EMCV, 2021-2022).

The most recent years, 2022 and 2023, reveal combined elements of change and continuity in the Barcelona metropolis concerning the trajectory of inequalities. Changes can be identified in two dimensions:

a) Socioeconomic dynamics. Post-pandemic recovery shows signs of strength. The average net annual income of households increases by 6%; employment grows at an annual rate of 2.2%, and unemployment steadily decreases. However, these trends coexist with the intense social impact of inflation on the most precarious groups: severe material deprivation reaches 10.3%, indicating realities of housing insecurity, energy poverty, and food vulnerability.

b) Public policies and social practices. The general abandonment of the neoliberal/austerity paradigm has direct effects on the metropolis. Labour market reform leads to a reduction in temporality in new hires: from 85% to 56%; and the protection system (social transfers) causes a significant reduction in poverty: from 52.9% to 21.2%. Structural benefits explain two-thirds of this reduction; the social shield against the pandemic and inflation, another 30%; the IMV (Minimum Living Income) as a new stable tool falls far short of its goals for now: it reaches a very low percentage of households and barely manages to overcome poverty situations, only

decreasing their intensity. Finally, the territories themselves activate responses. Metropolitan municipalities have implemented over a thousand initiatives aimed at protecting vulnerabilities and creating cohesion. More than 25% of these have formed agreements with community actors (Martí et al., 2020). This fact leads to the strengthening of mutual support networks in the metropolis as a response mechanism to the crisis and as a process of building new subjects and social protagonism. The articulation between the new welfare municipalism and the sphere of urban collective action emerges here as a challenge and as hope (Nel-lo, Blanco, and Gomà, 2022).

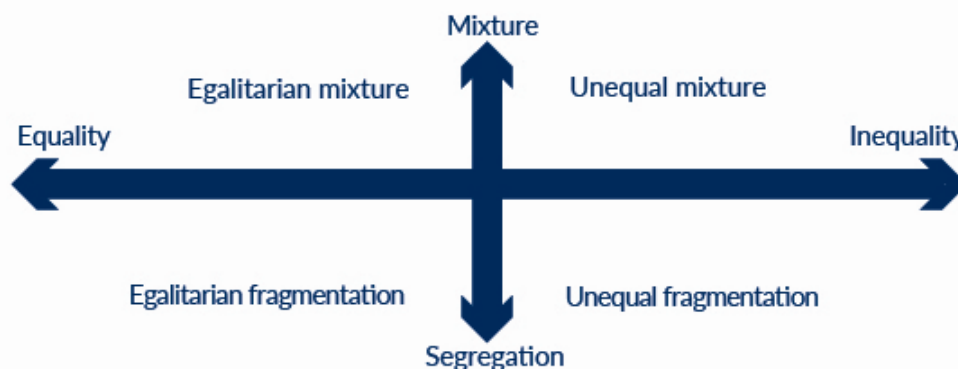
2. Everyday Segregations: Lives and Territories More Fragmented.

The recent trend towards a broader and more complex map of inequalities occurs within a framework of intense interactions with social segregation dynamics. Segregation points to dynamics of separation between groups in various aspects of their daily lives, creating scenarios where the lives of different groups tend to unfold in non-shared spaces, making interaction between them less likely. Segregation implies the (practical) absence of mixed scenarios, expressing the fragility or absence of communities with crosscutting connections: spheres of life where daily life is divided.

The antithesis of inequality is equality, and the counterpart of segregation is the mixture of profiles: daily spaces shared by diverse groups of origins, ages, and classes. When the construction of equality weakens, segregations tend to expand; the progressive crystallization of segregated spheres generates new conditions for the widening of inequalities. Conversely, the existence and quality of mixed spaces, diverse communities with high relational density, act as a promoting factor for horizons of equity, compatible with autonomy and differences (Blanco and Gomà, 2022).

We consider, therefore, two axes that tension social structures: segregation/mixture and inequality/equality (Diagram 1). They are distinguishable but intersect, shaping multiple scenarios at their intersections. At the pole of egalitarian mixture, material well-being is constructed while shared spaces are woven. On the other pole, unequal fragmentation causes mutual reinforcement between separations and inequities. In between, hybrid scenarios emerge: unequal mixture, where geographies of blending may harbor noticeable inequalities in tension, and equal fragmentation, where material redistribution struggles to solidify into diverse communities.

Diagram 1. Equality/inequality, mixture/segregation, and Socio-spatial Scenarios.



Source: Own Source: elaboration, based on Blanco and Gomà (2022).

These are theoretically plausible models, but they crystallize in specific socio-spatial configurations that develop in specific historical and territorial contexts. All scenarios are tendential and unstable since interrelation factors remain active and changing; they can describe various trends, even contradictory ones, coexisting in the same time and place. Therefore, the importance lies not in the theoretical construction itself; it is relevant to try to understand how

reality approaches one scenario or another, as well as the social consequences and political challenges this entails.

Do our everyday lives traverse spheres of segregation? Do they do so with more or less intensity in some areas than in others? Do these fragmentations operate as a driver of inequality growth? The set of existing thematic studies (Blanco and Gomà, 2022) provides valuable elements for an answer. The features that characterize the multiple scenarios of unequal fragmentation are gradually being outlined: spheres of life where inequalities crystallize in logics of segregation between groups, where daily life fractures. In summary, the following aspects emerge:

- a) Processes of residential fragmentation rooted in economic and ethno-cultural factors, along with class and gender-biased segregations in daily mobility dynamics, and socio-spatial inequalities in public collective transportation services.
- b) Childcare and early education services with strong access inequalities, segregated schools and school enrolment networks, and highly exclusive extracurricular educational spaces. Also, socio-territorial inequalities in cultural participation and the absence of recognition of community cultural assets.
- c) Segregated spheres of healthcare based on income levels and health-segregated territories based on levels of urban vulnerability.
- d) Geographies of food segregation: "healthy food deserts" in vulnerable neighbourhoods, "food mirages" in areas with healthy offerings not affordable for low incomes, and greater exposure to unhealthy foods in school environments in popular neighbourhoods.
- e) Concentrated institutional and collective capacities in municipalities and neighbourhoods with middle-high incomes and low social needs, alongside areas of strong urban vulnerability deprived of municipal resources and the relational capital needed to reverse their multiple disadvantages. The accumulation of these dimensions gives rise to the mosaic of daily segregation; a reality that also creates conditions for the expanded reproduction of inequalities.

In the metropolis of Barcelona, expanded and complex social inequalities are also reflected in terms of urban fractures. Many central spaces remain subject to visible *gentrification* dynamics, with a hidden and peripheral face: a grammar of *vulnerability*.

- Gentrification is not a transient reality; it is an urban expression of economic gaps and power asymmetries. It is inscribed in the logic of social inequalities and their manifestation in residential segregation (Gomà, 2018). It largely operates today as the spatial logic of financialized economy. It is a process of transforming an urban area through which the resident collective is gradually replaced by higher-income populations over time. It involves, therefore, a restructuring of space based on income inequality and results in the expulsion of lower-class inhabitants. This process has an urbanistic dimension: physical degradation followed by reinvestment in fixed capital. Improvements in the built environment increase real estate values and rental prices, generating an expansion of the *rent gap* as a mechanism driving class residential replacement. However, that is not the only dimension. Gentrification also operates in the symbolic sphere. It entails a change in the fabric of social relationships, consumption patterns, and patterns of space use. The new middle classes, with more social capital, appropriate urban areas to deploy lifestyles, projects, and identities. Gentrification, in summary, involves a process of physical and symbolic reappropriation of space by groups with high economic and relational capital. It is an exclusionary dynamic with material displacement and cultural dispossession of popular sectors. In fact, physical space not only frames or supports a network of social relationships but is also a constitutive factor of these.

Gentrification, therefore, expresses a complex urban logic of social and spatial differentiation, straddling economic inequalities and power asymmetries.

In the metropolis of Barcelona, gentrification dynamics are complex. Central spaces, on the one hand, have maintained a strong presence of middle classes rooted in neighbourhoods. Moreover, they have, at the same time, been territories in dispute where gentrification forces have clashed with urban and residential fabrics that are difficult to restructure, with a property regime above 75% that has operated as an anchoring mechanism for the working classes. Metropolitan spaces, on the other hand, have been configured from the dual logic of the *peripheralization* of poverty (reception areas for migrant populations) and the suburbanization of middle classes (townhouse developments). The most recent phase, in terms of gentrification dynamics, is characterized by three parameters:

- a) Processes of displacement are advancing in central territories that sustained urban disputes: from the Gothic and the Born to the Vila de Gràcia; from Poblenou and its waterfront to the Right of the Eixample;
 - b) The center-periphery gap intensifies on a metropolitan scale: the fracture between a prosperous municipality of Barcelona and a first ring where vulnerability grows: for every person at risk of poverty in the central city, there are 1.7 in the first metropolitan ring (Porcel et al., 2018); and
 - c) Gentrification in some central neighbourhoods in cities in the metropolitan area and the appearance of highly segregated municipalities at the upper end of the income distribution throughout the metropolitan region: from Sant Just Desvern to Argentona; from Sant Cugat to Matadepera and Ametlla del Vallès.
- At the other end of segregation, urban vulnerability defines areas where risks of exclusion are expressed in a multidimensional way. The Urban Vulnerability Index (UVI) (Porcel et al., 2023) constructs a solid proposal for the conceptualization and measurement of this complex reality. The UVI, in its most recent and precise version, adopts as a theoretical reference approaches according to which urban vulnerability results from the combination and feedback of social and residential vulnerability processes occurring in the territory (Alguacil et al., 2014). The design of the index, therefore, revolves around these two dimensions (social and residential), informed through three indicators each. To complete the UVI, some of the effects deriving from urban vulnerability are introduced: impacts on the housing market and the residential unattractiveness of these areas; the low presence of middle-class population and one that integrates the core of research traditionally studying the so-called neighbourhood effects: the education levels reached by the resident population in the territory (Table 2).

Table 2. Dimensions, Concepts, Indicators, and Data Sources of the UVI

Dimensions	Concept	Indicator
Social vulnerability	Poverty	% of population with income < 60% of the median
	Aging/Loneliness	% of population ≥ 75 years old living alone
	Foreign immigration	% of foreign population from low-income countries
Residential vulnerability	High poblational concentration	Urban density (inhabitants/hectare)
	Residential fabrics at risk	% of very old dwellings and housing estates
	Low quality of buildings	% of buildings with low construction quality
Neighbourhood Effect	Low residential attractiveness	Distance to median rent
	Low presence of middle classes	% of population without high incomes
	Premature school drop-out rates	% of individuals aged 25-34 without post-obligatory studies

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Porcel et al. (2023).

When the UVI is projected onto the territory of the Barcelona metropolis, a logic of urban vulnerability emerges with three key components: concentration (spatial focus), complexity

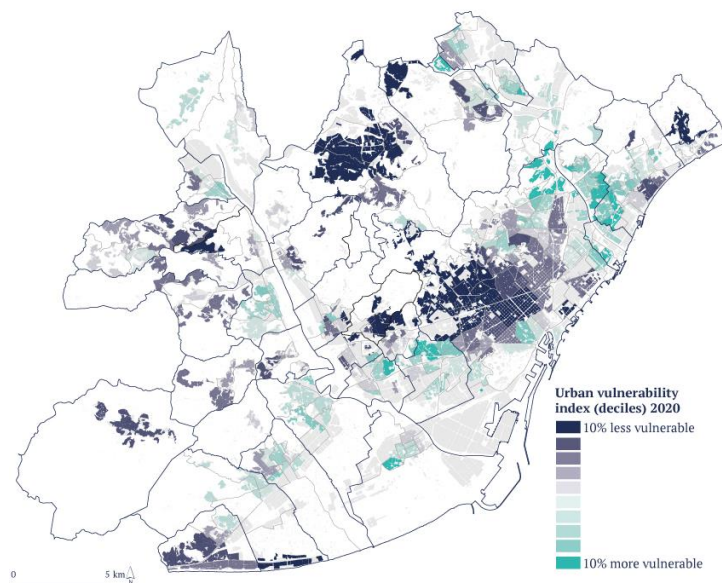
(various connections between social and residential aspects), and persistence (poverty areas become chronic).

a) Concentration. Exclusion strongly manifests along the Besòs and Llobregat axes, affecting extensive transmunicipal areas configured on a clearly metropolitan logic but with a significant impact on certain municipalities as well. Only 10 out of the 36 metropolis municipalities harbour neighbourhoods in the highest vulnerability range. In the Besòs axis, 25 out of 32 metropolitan neighbourhoods with the highest UVI are located. 24% of the population in this area resides in neighbourhoods with a high concentration of sociourban issues, compared to 13.1% in the entire metropolitan area. 45% of Santa Coloma de Gramenet's inhabitants live in neighbourhoods of extreme vulnerability, 33% in Montcada i Reixac, and 28% in Badalona (Figure 1).

b) Complexity. A general pattern of double vulnerability (social and residential) unfolds, with some exceptions: neighbourhoods with high levels of social exclusion where significant urban regeneration processes have taken place (Sant Cosme, Baró de Viver, etc.); neighbourhoods with lower poverty levels but degraded living conditions (Les Planes, La Florida, etc.).

c) Persistence. Sustained improvements in vulnerable neighbourhoods have not succeeded in breaking the urban hierarchies of the metropolis, its socio-spatial inequality structure, which goes beyond the goals of regeneration programs.

Figure 1. The segregated metropolis: the urban vulnerability index



Source: Porcel et al. (2023).

A final element to consider, completing the trajectory of segregations, is the growing role of residential insecurity as a driver of new urban fractures. Data from the latest urban cohesion survey (ECURB, 2022) show a substantial increase in residential mobility in the metropolis. 24% of this mobility is forced due to the inability to meet rental payments. These are invisible evictions, expulsions generated by a speculative and unregulated housing market. The widening gap between incomes and rental prices acts as a lever for segregation and as a factor of uprooting. Invisible evictions break support systems and networks, placing us squarely in the next dimension of gaps: disconnection.

3. Dynamics of Disconnection: Weak Links, Vulnerable Communities

In interaction with broader inequalities and more fragmented territories, dynamics of relational-community weakening emerge. Disconnection points to the erosion or absence of relational

frameworks; it outlines processes and situations of community vulnerability. In the former Fordist framework, the basic axis of inequality was expressed in a class structure that polarized income distribution but did not break the cohesion networks. The redistributive policies of the classic welfare model generated higher levels of equality, and class and neighbourhood cultures developed weaving relational densities and community building processes (Rebollo and Pindado, 2022). Later, the stagnation and reversal of some social policies – in contexts of strong neoliberal pressure – not only translated into widening inequalities and segregations but also eroded collective frameworks: more *loneliness* and isolation than bonds and connections (*togetherness*). New logics of relational fracture, beyond the income distribution scheme.

When disconnection dynamics are analyzed from a spatial perspective, diverse scenarios emerge again, depending on the intensity of these dynamics and their intersection with the segregation/mixture axis. Fractured territories, where social fragmentation coexists with strong community vulnerabilities, are configured at one extreme. Territories of fraternity, where diversity also weaves strong bonds, emerge at the opposite extreme. In tension between these two extremes, fragile territories, where lower segregation is articulated with community weaknesses, generating difficulty in facing crises, and resilient territories, where the capacity to address adverse contexts relies on relational strengths, though traversed by social fragmentation logics (Table 3).

Table 3. Relationships between segregation and links: resulting scenarios

	Low disengagement	High disengagement
Reduced segregation	Territories of fraternity <i>Social diversity with community strength</i>	Fragile territories <i>Social diversity with community vulnerability</i>
High segregation	Resilient territories <i>Social fragmentation with community strength</i>	Fractured territories <i>Social fragmentation with community vulnerability</i>

Source: Author's own elaboration.

These are also trend-setting and dynamic scenarios. What configurations crystallize in the Barcelona metropolis? This is a complex question. It can be considered that three key elements are present, generating conditions of cohesion or community strength:

- a) Proximity facilities, i.e., the set of urban social infrastructures that can help promote links and collective forms of involvement in the territory (community centres, libraries, cultural centres).
- b) Associative fabric, as an organized expression of solidarity (organizations, NGOs).
- c) Practices of social innovation, such as emerging grassroots initiatives aimed at building well-being through community empowerment and mutual support (urban gardens, cooperative housing, and solidarity economy). Crossing the three connection factors with segregation indicators (metropolis neighbourhoods according to urban vulnerability quintile), it can be observed quite clear (Table 4) that the distribution of facilities, associative fabric, and innovation practices adopts a pattern of inverse relationship with the level of segregation: less presence in more vulnerable neighbourhoods; more cohesion elements in less vulnerable areas (Blanco et al., 2021). For example, in the distribution of social infrastructures, there is a nearly 10-point differential between the highest and lowest vulnerability quintile (16.2% to 25.9%), which increases to 15 points in the associative sphere (13.6% to 28.5%). In the field of social innovation, the differential persists, though smaller (18.3% to 22.1%).

Table 4. Community strength and urban vulnerability in the Barcelona metropolis (%)

Elements of community cohesion	UVI Neighbourhoods				
	(Quintiles: from less to more vulnerability)				
	1	2	3	4	5
Proximity Facilities	16.2	17.7	20.2	19.8	25.9
Associative Fabric	13.6	16.3	18.4	20.3	28.5
Social Innovation Practices	18.3	22.3	20.3	16.8	22.1

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Blanco et al. (2021).

It is relevant to pay particular attention to this third vector, as it has been the most dynamic in the recent cycle, from the great recession to the post-pandemic period. The socio-spatial distribution of the set of social innovation and mutual support initiatives that have emerged in recent years reproduces the mentioned pattern: collective action is not generated more strongly in low-income neighbourhoods but in middle-class areas with stronger associative articulations and a potent tradition of social participation. Vulnerability, therefore, does not seem to be a sufficient lever to activate solidarity innovation in the absence or weakness of resources for collective action. Citizen practices require, in fact, a certain awareness of risks related to material difficulties or new precarities, but they also require significant pre-existing social capital. The overlay of social innovation (connection) and urban vulnerability (segregation) maps clearly reflects this logic: of more than 250 initiatives developed in the metropolis in pandemic times, 43% correspond to high-middle-income neighbourhoods with low segregation (Nel-lo and Checa, 2022).

In summary, a metropolis with a significant degree of polarization seems to be shaping up between neighbourhoods with low segregation and high community cohesion (territories of fraternity) and vulnerable neighbourhoods with weak community capacities (fractured territories). Thus, a new dimension in the mapping of social gaps emerges. In this section, it is necessary to incorporate a last piece of evidence that operates as a reproducer or even amplifier of relational-community gaps. Not only does the capacity for collective action, but also institutional capacity, present strong socio-spatial inequalities. Let us see.

The average per capita spending of metropolitan municipalities is €1232.2, with a wide disparity between the lowest and highest quartile: €874 versus €1,441.4. 75% of the vulnerable population resides in municipalities in the first segment, and 96% in the 81 cities with expenditures below the average. Regarding the inhabitants of the first quartile, the vulnerable population constitutes 13.2%, reaching only 0.8% in municipalities with higher expenditures. At the other extreme, the affluent population represents only 6.1% of the first quartile and reaches 31.4% of the inhabitants in the municipalities with more resources (Donat, 2021) (Table 5).

Table 5. Municipalities by expenditure quartiles and relative weight of vulnerable and affluent population

Quartile	Municipalities grouped by quartiles of expenditure		
	Average per capita expenditure (in euros)	Vulnerable population / Total for the quartile (%)	Affluent population / Total for the quartile (%)
1	874.0	13.2	6.1
2	1,012.7	4.4	10.5
3	1,143.5	5.6	12.8
4	1,441.4	0.8	31.4
Total RMB	1,232.2	9.1	11.2

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Checa, Donat, and Nel.lo (2022).

The figures indicate, therefore, that metropolitan municipalities with a higher concentration of vulnerable neighbourhoods, necessitating intensive protection and support policies, are also those with lower capacities for public spending. Conversely, those with more affluent neighbourhoods, where social demands are less intense, exhibit higher spending capacities. This inverse relationship between social needs and institutional strengths contributes to and reinforces the metropolitan gap between cohesive and fractured territories (Checa et al., 2022).

In summary, a new, much more complex map of risks and vulnerabilities emerges. The increase in inequalities has not only polarized society but has also created conditions of segregation and disconnection. Without shared spaces and community ties, any equality project becomes more distant and complicated. In Barcelona, the metropolis of inequalities maps out fractures in multiple spheres of everyday life. Territories are delineated where, beyond the absence of diversity, bonds and connections also weaken. Additionally, the cultural dimension of injustices is added: a set of discriminations linked to difficulties in recognizing gender diversities, life cycles, and cultural backgrounds. The following section will provide some insights.

4. Diversities and Discriminations: Gender, Age, and Origin Gaps

Indeed, the current scenario of gaps involves expanded inequalities and their connection to spaces of segregation and disconnection. The changing times also affect sociocultural spheres in three key dimensions: relationships and identities related to gender(s); ages and life cycles; and urban multiculturalism. Various genders, ages, and diverse origins traverse new daily realities, which entail great transformation potential and risks of discrimination to address in building citizenship. Gender gaps, those related to the life course or cultural diversity, barely formed agreements and public policies in the 20th-century social contract. However, the heteropatriarchal, *adultocratic*, and uniformizing reality, seemingly marked only by material inequalities, has given way, in recent decades, to much more complex daily worlds: realms of affective and sexual diversity, less linear life trajectories, and multicultural neighbourhoods and cities.

- **Gender Relationships and Identities:** In the context of industrial society, gender relations remained substantially unchanged. A reproductive logic of the heteropatriarchal model predominated, involving a skewed construction of the dichotomy between public and private life; attribution and segmentation of roles; asymmetries between the male-dominated and rights-anchored workplace and the female-dominated and unrecognized domestic sphere; invisibility of caregiving; exclusion of the LGBTQ+ agenda. Over the past decades, significant changes have occurred due to the connection between feminist thought, collective action, and public policies: the multidimensional formulation of gender justice in terms of redistribution, recognition, and representation (Fraser and Honneth, 2003), queer theory, intersectionality, the significant increase in the agency capacity of the feminist movement (from #MeToo to the March 8 strikes), alliances with the LGBTQ+ community, and the development of gender regimes in post-Keynesian welfare states: policies expanding female employment, the establishment of public care services, and a progressive feminist rights agenda. However, the impacts of the great recession and COVID-19 have once again highlighted significant gaps. Gender-specific discriminations intersect with material inequality axes, ranging from differential risks of exclusion and relational vulnerability to persistent labour gaps connected to maternity experiences, and expanded asymmetries in the intertwined context of caregiving and telecommuting in the pandemic scenario (Moreno et al., 2023).
- **Ages and Life Cycles:** Industrial society and its welfare model developed within a framework defined by biographical continuities, alongside a scheme of stable age-based role assignments: childhood education, indefinite occupation in adulthood, and social protection in old age. All of this is now subject to intense transformations: a context of vital uncertainties and discontinuities (residential, labour, affective, ideological); overcoming the fixation of specific age roles (lifelong learning, active aging); new temporalities (early childhood, complex emancipations, longer lifespans); and new intergenerational relationships. In this new scenario of diverse and uncertain life transitions, personal itineraries and collective connections are forged, offering unprecedented opportunities for autonomy and mutual support. Life cycles can become spaces where protection is combined with respect for differences, personal self-determination with the creation of shared spaces, and the exercise of the right to decide on a life project under equal conditions. However, ages also gain strength as configurators of vulnerabilities. New and persistent age gaps; intersecting discriminations and inequalities. On one hand, there is an increase in risks of isolation and loneliness with aging, within a

framework of fragile care (Lebrusán, 2019), as well as youth discriminations of socio-cultural origin. On the other hand, there tends to be a reproduction of job exclusions in advanced adult ages, impossible emancipations, and high rates of child poverty, especially in migrant-origin families and households with young children.

- **Migration and Multiculturalism:** Migration dynamics and human mobility are not recent phenomena; they are an essential part of universal history. However, the current scenario redefines them in some key aspects: the global scale of mobility gains strength and the factors generating it expand and transform. Currently, around 300 million people reside outside their country of origin, representing an increase of over 100 million in the last two decades (Pinyol-Jiménez, 2021). Many of these migration trajectories create new life horizons, life projects shaping metropolises where a great diversity of human backgrounds is expressed daily. We live in an urban era, and cities have transitioned towards cultural heterogeneity. Barcelona is a clear example. In 2000, only 3.5% of the city's inhabitants were born abroad; today, they represent 31.3% (ranging from 23% in Sarrià to 62% in Ciutat Vella): a growth from 53,428 to 519,066 people in just over two decades. Current Barcelona hosts residents from 196 nationalities (present in all neighbourhoods and districts, with 161 in Eixample and 138 in Horta-Guinardó); 28 of these nationalities have more than 5,000 residents each. Around 300 different languages are spoken daily in the city. Diversity has been and continues to be the main driver of socio-cultural dynamism in Barcelona: a constant source of creativity and interconnected bonds. However, the reality derived from the migratory phenomenon is also a space where gaps accumulate and intersect. Cultural discrimination episodes based on ethnicity, origin, religion, etc., persistent patterns of inequality and segregation, and a fracture of citizenship are added here. The state immigration regulatory framework is exclusionary: it tends to generate vital and residential insecurities, as well as difficulties accessing political rights and the job market.

Table 6 compiles some key indicators related to relationships in Barcelona. Systematically, women, older individuals, and those born outside the country experience relational exclusions (isolation and loneliness) and vulnerabilities (weakness of bonds and supports) more than men, adults, and the native population (ECAMB, 2022). The perception of loneliness and fragility of bonds is particularly noteworthy in the 75 and older age group and the foreign-born population. The global discrimination index reproduces gender and nationality gaps; in the age dimension, the discrimination rate concentrates the highest levels in the young population (41.2%) (Murrià et al., 2022).

Table 6. Relational Gaps and Discrimination by Gender, Age, and Origin in Barcelona (%)

	Relational exclusion		Relational vulnerability		Discrimination
	Isolation	Loneliness	Weakness of bonds	Weakness of supports	Global Discrimination Index
GENRE					
Women	7.5	13.6	13.9	12.4	32.6
Men	6.9	8.3	11.1	9.5	24.7
AGE					
Elder (+75)	10.1	19.1	22.2	14.3	5.4
Adults (30-64)	7.4	10.1	11.9	11.2	27.4
ORIGEN					
Rest of the world	11.6	16.9	19.1	16.3	33.1
Spain	5.7	9.1	10.4	9.3	27.4

Source: Own elaboration based on ECAMB (2022).

Table 7 finally allows visualizing housing and occupational gaps in this population group. The intersection between an excluding housing market and a precarious labour market places the young population and their emancipation paths under very challenging conditions (OHB, 2022; EPA, 2023).

Table 7. Young population and the double housing-labour gap in Barcelona (%)

	Young people (16-29 years)	Adults (> 30 years)
Housing market		
Residential exclusion	45.3	21.4
Expense overload	22.1	10.2
Labour market		
Unemployment rate	22.0	8.5
Temporary employment rate	48.3	14.3

Source: Own elaboration based on OHB (2022) and EPA (2023).

In summary, the new diversity patterns related to genders, ages, life cycles, and global migrations acquire an unprecedented daily presence and, far from being temporary realities, become structuring elements of the new social fabric. The challenge here lies in incorporating these new realities into the citizenship project. The collective horizon of social justice depends on overcoming inequalities, segregations, and disconnections. It also depends on recognizing the differences that shape the daily life of the neighbourhoods and cities we inhabit, in the possibility of developing all life projects together.

The complexity of these axes maps the current gap scenario. It is an emerging time where it should be possible to rebuild solidarities and rewrite the social contract. Forging collective projects and governing them democratically.

5. Rebuilding the architecture of solidarity: foundations of a new social contract?

Crisis, transitions, and multiple gaps. A time is unfolding in which rebuilding the architecture of collective solidarity is imperative: a framework of rights connected to the changing times; a range of policies connected to the new structure of risks and hopes. A new ecosocial agenda must be deployed, and it should be done within frameworks of more democracy and more local politics: where power is placed in the hands of the people and close to the people. New social policies and new ways of producing them must be explored. Three key axes emerge:

- **Innovating in social policies.** Between the new geographies of multiple gaps and the welfare state inherited from the 20th century, there is a significant gap, a true temporal mismatch. Therefore, it is necessary to rebuild citizenship and rewrite the social contract: weaving spaces of equity (forging equality), diversity (recognizing differences), personal self-determination (generating autonomy), and community (articulating bonds and mixtures). The grammar of possible social citizenship for the 21st century arises from the dual connection of equality with diversity and autonomy with bonds between different people (Gomà and Ubasart, 2021). Materializing equity construction within a diversity framework may require, in terms of public policies, at least four substantive shifts in the terms of the old welfare model: towards predistribution, beyond classical redistributive logics; towards feminisms, beyond dominant gender identities and relations; towards interculturality, beyond traditional integration concepts; and towards ages, beyond adult-centric approaches. Materializing autonomy construction within a fraternity framework (diverse communities) may require four new transformations: shifts towards basic income, to guarantee the material foundations of life and, therefore, real freedom; towards ecosocial transition, to build global climate justice and local sovereignties (water, energy, and food); towards caregiving, as relational common goods aimed at addressing daily vulnerabilities; and towards the urban agenda, to ensure housing and city rights, weaving territories of fraternity and overcoming various daily segregations.
- **Democratizing social policies.** The reconstruction of the collective today requires transforming social rights and public policies into spaces of democratic deepening. A new welfare governance model structured by a deliberative public administration, public-community alliances, and collective action defined in terms of cooperation and construction, rather than resistance. Governance oriented towards articulating the common and generating active democracy; far from bureaucratic and market-driven logics. This new paradigm requires at least two major trajectories of change.

- a) Towards a participative and relational public administration. Transitioning towards a model with reference values, flexible and responsible, strategic and creative. An administration with tools to incorporate collective knowledge, articulate dialogue and cooperation, and activate mediation dynamics between actors. The networked architecture distances hierarchical action from administrative apparatuses and tends to replace it with multiple interactions between management scales, organizations, and citizens (Bonet, 2021).
- b) Towards coproduction relationships between public policies and social practices. The creation of policies is also challenged by the project to democratize social citizenship (Nel-lo et al., 2022). The guiding idea of transitioning towards the construction of the common can be materialized in at least three types of initiatives: neighbourhood plans and urban commonalities, to strengthen neighbourhood capacities and activate intercooperation logics (territorial axis); policy co-creation, to ensure the protagonism of the social fabric and people as active subjects of democratic governance (sectoral axis); citizen management of facilities, to transition from public services to common goods (infrastructural axis), what Klinenberg (2021) calls "people's palaces": from *welfare* to *commonfare*.
- Localizing social policies. Over the past years, the neo-municipalist cycle has kept the democratic window open, confronting global markets and state borders; facing logics of unprotectedness and authoritarian formulas (Roth et al., 2019). It has made a responsible bet on reconnecting institutions and citizenship. These are the coordinates that make it possible to position proximity politics as the third axis of the new social contract, from a grammar of daily life (Miralles, 2022). The right to the city operates as a key dimension of well-being production, concretized in a triangulation of public policies.
 - a) Facing the urban map of injustices, the challenge arises for the (re)social construction of proximity from a strongly innovative perspective. It is about returning to cities the mechanisms of collective solidarity that the 20th century reserved for nation-states and doing so through policies that inhabit the peripheries of those mechanisms: redistribution, caregiving, recognition.
 - b) Facing the legacy of unsustainable and spatially unjust cities, the challenge is to generate ecosocial transitions based on hybridizing environmental and urban logics. A democratic and feminist urban agenda to guarantee and recover housing, streets, and neighbourhoods; to create mixtures and bonds. Moreover, a proximity ecologism to protect life: climate, air quality, healthy food, and water as a common good.
 - c) Facing an economic scheme where cities operate as landing platforms for financial capital that inflates bubbles and spreads vital insecurities, the right to the city advocates for a digital transition without gaps; for productive and consumption fabrics with strong components of science, culture, and creativity; for green and cooperative territorial ecosystems.

In summary, in a scenario of great transitions marked by multiple gaps, the 21st-century welfare state can only address the construction of justice through public policies with the capacity to connect equality with differences, personal autonomy with bonds of fraternity. In addition, the 21st-century welfare state can only address the construction of democracy from a new paradigm of public administrations, from the coproduction of policies and social practices, and from a proximity dimension located at the core of the project axis.

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