



Towns in historical perspective

Towns were uniquely important for all sectors of pre-industrial societies. For the peasant a town was a foreboding place because it was alien to his rural way of life, the source of power which conditioned his existence and drained away an important part of any surplus he might have via taxes and rents. Yet he needed it in countless ways for his own economic and spiritual survival: it was the market for many of the goods he produced, the center of religious and civil authority where conflicts could be resolved or petitions made, and the place where he could take refuge in times of crises. For the Crown, towns were a vital part of the entire structure of royal authority and taxation; for the nobility, especially after the end of the fifteenth century, they were ideal places to live; for the bourgeois and artisan sectors of society, they were essential to their very existence. Societies in which towns were numerous and large were considered prosperous; societies with few towns were backward; Italy and the Low Countries, on the one hand, and European Russia, on the other, are examples of this.

For students of historical societies, towns, urban areas and urban systems are no less important. They have been considered the hallmark of industrialization and modernization processes, and, more generally, an important stimulus for change. Most authors insist on the fact that towns can only be understood within the context of the society as a whole, and yet high levels of urbanization (especially when not centered on one parasitical city) are often considered key indicators of general economic well-being and modernization.¹ The

¹ In *The Structures of Everyday Life* Fernand Braudel stated that urbanization was “the sign of modern man.” He did, however, qualify this by insisting that: “these densely populated cities, in part parasites, do not arise of their own volition. They are what society, the economy and politics allow or oblige them to be. They are a yardstick, a means of measurement . . . Above all, a great city should never be judged in itself: it is

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Excerpt

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idea of towns as motors of change has provoked widespread debate among historians. Many authors feel that towns were often mere theaters for economic processes whose origins had little to do with their existence, or at least that towns should be viewed as parts, or manifestations, of social, economic and political systems.² Few authors, however, doubt that high levels of urbanization and integrated urban systems have traditionally been the signs of economically healthy societies.³

The present study, however, is not primarily concerned with the role played by towns for economic growth in society as a whole. Rather, it is an attempt to understand human behavior patterns in towns. While these patterns have demographic, economic, social, cultural and geographic implications, basically they are all modes of individual and collective human behavior. Urban residents rather than towns themselves will be central to our analysis. Ultimately we will ask whether, from a behavioral standpoint, as Braudel once said, "a town is always a town."⁴ Despite its apparent simplicity, the question is a complicated one and, if we are to address it adequately, several different analytical frameworks must be used.

Some years ago, Roger Mols in his monumental *Introduction à la démographie des villes d'Europe du XIVE au XVIIIe siècle* defined towns by their demographic importance (population density and size) and the economic and administrative functions they fulfilled. While, much like most other historians and geographers, he ended up using a threshold size to identify towns (in his case, 4,000 inhabitants), his definition emphasizes the importance of towns as links between the rural world and the rest of society, and between rural areas and other urban centers. The key here is the central function performed by the

located within the whole mass of urban systems, both animating them and being in turn determined by them" (1981: vol. 1, pp. 556–557).

² The classic analysis of the role played by towns in economic growth is E. A. Wrigley's paper on the importance of London for English society and economy (1967). At a more theoretical level, and to some extent contradicting both Wrigley and Braudel, Philip Abrams (1978: 23) feels that towns played no causal role in economic growth but rather were simply the places in which those processes of growth took place. Numerous other authors have participated in a debate which touches on a wide range of subjects, from the parasitical nature of large towns to the economic significance of entire urban systems. See, for example, Wrigley (1978), Daunton (1978), de Vries (1984), Ringrose (1983), Hoselitz (1953, 1954), Sjoberg (1960), Reisman (1964), Hohenberg and Lees (1985).

³ Hohenberg and Lees suggest that this may not be entirely true when referring to Mediterranean Europe (1985: 108).

⁴ See Braudel (1981: 481). This opinion is vigorously opposed by Abrams (1978: 9, 17, 24–25).

Towns in historical perspective

3

town linking its hinterland to the outside world.⁵ Both the rural world and society as a whole end up being essential components of Mols' definition of towns.

The importance of the extra-urban world for an adequate understanding of the make-up and functions of urban societies, and possibly of urban behavior as well, should not be underestimated. Individual towns were tied both to their own hinterlands and to other towns. The relationship of towns to their surrounding countryside was based on more than the mere perception of rural rents, the subjugation of rural areas to urban administrations, the export of urban-produced goods to rural markets and the purchase of rural agricultural products in towns. Urban behaviour patterns were different from those in rural areas, and frequently towns have been considered agents of change for their surrounding areas as well. To what extent are these ideas empirically sound? To what extent was urban behavior different? Were towns in pre-industrial societies motors of change? There are no ready answers to these questions and there is even evidence that the existence of towns may have helped reinforce social and economic structures in rural areas, especially insofar as they provided an escape valve for rural populations.

A more basic question deals with the extent to which people in towns lived apart from their rural roots. Here, once again, the answer is unclear. It is not easy to identify the directionality of influence between the rural and urban worlds. In Braudel's words (1981:486), "the towns urbanized the countryside, but the countryside 'ruralized' the towns too." Braudel was speaking of economic relations; might the same "reciprocity of perspectives" be said to exist for human behavior as well? Probably the influence was mutual, and rural behavior patterns were not entirely dissimilar to those of the inhabitants of towns. Migrants themselves were probably the key agents of many of these links. Their movement from the village to the town, and often back again, ended up being an on-going contribution of rural attitudes to urban life, and perhaps also of urban attitudes and patterns to rural areas. The role of migration and, more generally, of human exchanges between towns and their countryside, loom as essential parts of our entire discussion. The nature of the relations linking urban and rural behavior patterns is an open issue of vital importance if we are to reach

⁵ Mols' entire approach to societies is based on the conviction that they are completely integrated systems. "Dès qu'une agglomération remplit vis-à-vis des localités environnantes le rôle du cœur ou du cerveau chez un être vivant, cette agglomération possède une fonction centrale. Ainsi, en toute rigueur, le noyau paroissial ou administratif d'une commune, même rurale, remplit une fonction centrale vis-à-vis des hameaux" (Mols, 1954-1956: vol. 1, pp. xxi-xxii).

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[More information](#)4 *Town and country in pre-industrial Spain*

an adequate understanding of the role played by towns in early modern societies.

The factors influencing urban behavior were not restricted to local dynamics. Demographers studying more recent periods have considered that regional "cultural" variables played a key explanatory role during the demographic transition in Europe.⁶ One of the most remarkable aspects of Spain has been and is the existence of pronounced regional patterns of human behavior, cultural structures, and economic realities. Spanish regional variation seems to be even more pronounced than in most other European nations. The fact that urban populations participated in larger regional cultural patterns would help explain why striking similarities between urban and rural dynamics always seem to crop up when one studies Spain's past. This was unquestionably the case between 1860 and 1930, and was probably also true at earlier dates.⁷

Yet urban behavior cannot be entirely explained either by rural or by regional influences. It is also true that "a town is a town" and life there differed radically from life in rural areas. Population densities were much higher, infections spread more easily, economies were monetary, practically everyone depended on the marketplace for food, and active population structures differed completely from those in the countryside. These were the symbols of urban culture and society and were bound to affect urban patterns of behavior. An understanding of these specifically "urban" aspects of towns is essential if we are to approach the subject in a fruitful way. If behavior was influenced by immediate economic and social factors, then urban patterns were bound to differ from rural ones. We already know that nuptiality and fertility tended to be lower and mortality higher in urban areas, and these may only be the most visible differences. One of the goals of this book is to arrive at a clear empirical understanding of the specificity of urban behavior.

Studying towns and behavior is clearly a question of perspective, or rather, perspectives. Urban patterns must be seen in conjunction with those of their own hinterlands, of their regions and of those common to all urban areas. In this book a number of key issues will be analyzed from these different perspectives. In chapter 2 the basic economic and social structures of towns will be defined and their development

⁶ This was one of the basic results stemming from the Princeton European Fertility Project. See Coale and Watkins (1986).

⁷ For recent work emphasizing the regional diversity of Spain's population history, see Reher (1986, 1989a); Iriso Napal and Reher (1987); Nadal (1988); Pérez Moreda (1988a); Rowland, (1988); Livi Bacci (1988). William Leasure (1963) was one of the first to point out the demographic importance of regional variables in Spain.

Towns in historical perspective

5

traced, and patterns of urbanization will be analyzed.⁸ Much of the rest of the book will be dedicated to analyzing aspects of collective and individual urban behavior. Demographic patterns, the relation between economic fluctuations and vital events, human and institutional responses in times of crisis, family and inheritance practices, and migrational patterns will all be discussed. In every case the existing patterns of behavior will be defined as precisely as possible. The extent to which these patterns are specifically urban, or rather reveal rural and/or regional roots, is central to our entire discussion, and I have therefore made abundant use throughout the book of comparative examples taken from both rural areas and towns.

The task, though, is not a simple one because it hinges not only on detecting the similarities, but also on defining the directionality of influence. Did towns influence their surrounding areas, did the rural areas influence towns, or was it perhaps a combination of both? The subject of migrational patterns (rural to urban, urban to rural, and urban to urban) looms as a key issue not only for behavioral patterns in individual towns, but also for the structuring of the entire urban system. Braudel (1981: 489–490) felt that basically it was the poor who migrated to towns from local rural areas, and bourgeois migrants only came from other towns. Was this true? Evidence would suggest that perhaps Braudel over-simplified the social make-up of migrants, their geographical origin, and the direction of their movement.

The rural and the urban worlds were connected in numerous ways. The flow of rents and crops from the countryside to the town, that of manufactured goods, authority and culture from towns to villages, and that of migrants between both worlds were not the only points of contact. Family economies, marriage and job markets, and inheritance patterns often implicated both worlds simultaneously. Times of crisis tended to bring rural and urban areas into often conflictual contact. In this book I argue in favor of a holistic vision of pre-industrial society which includes both town and countryside as socially, economically and culturally interdependent entities.

Ultimately the central theme of this book addresses the question of urban structures and urban behavior patterns, whether or not they were influenced by rural, regional or specifically urban factors. In other words, it is a book about towns and human, economic and social

⁸ Several valuable studies of Spanish towns have appeared since Bennisar's magnificent monograph on Valladolid was published in 1967. Our understanding of overall urbanization processes, however, has not fared so well. Other than some very general notions, very little is known about pre-1850 urbanization patterns in Spain. Ringrose's study of Madrid (1983) is the only attempt to analyze regional urban systems during the pre-industrial period.

6 *Town and country in pre-industrial Spain*



Map 1. The province of Cuenca

behavior in towns. It is also a book about the Castilian town of Cuenca and its inhabitants between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. This micro-analytical perspective will enable me to pinpoint more precisely a number of the mechanisms I have already mentioned and will stimulate more far-reaching discussion of urban areas in general. Taking Cuenca as a case in point, I hope to be able to verify or refute a number of the hypotheses mentioned earlier.

With a population today of just over 40,000 inhabitants and located midway between Madrid and Valencia, Cuenca is one of the smallest capitals in the Spain (Map 1.1). This has not always been the case. Originally the center of one of the *taifa* kingdoms in Al-Andalus, Cuenca was taken from the Muslims by the Christian armies under Alfonso VIII in 1177. In the centuries following its conquest Cuenca's geographical location worked to its economic advantage, and growth affected all sectors of urban society. Situated in the foothills of the Iberian mountain range which separated Castile from Aragon, it was able to control a good part of the transhumance along the Cuenca *cañada* which acquired such importance in Spain between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁹ The result was an economy centered on the wool industry which provided raw material for export as well as for home manufacture.

The importance of the town grew steadily, especially after the latter part of the fourteenth century when the frontier of the Kingdom of Castile had moved definitively to the South and the political, demographic and economic turmoil of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had passed. The fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were ones of great prosperity for the town. During this period Cuenca, which had been given ample privileges in its *Fuero* (municipal charter) after the Conquest, increased its political, religious and economic importance in Castile. It was an episcopal see, one of the 18 Castilian towns with a vote in the Cortes, and the home of one of the early tribunals of the Inquisition (1489). It had a royal corregidor as well as a mint. The times of prosperity ended abruptly during the seventeenth century when the town's population diminished and it lost much of its economic importance. Despite a hesitant recovery of some of its earlier vitality during the eighteenth century, Cuenca was never again a significant national or even regional economic force. Throughout this period, however, it never lost its specifically urban nature: it continued to be a source of royal and ecclesiastical power and farming never occupied more than a very small part of its active population.

⁹ *Cañadas* were the routes used by the transhumant flocks of medieval Spain. For more on this subject, see Klein (1920) and Iradiel Murugarren (1974).

8 *Town and country in pre-industrial Spain*

One of the most characteristic aspects of Cuenca was and is its physical location. For the traveler in early modern Spain, or the peasant from some local village, the approach to the town must have been a very impressive one. Possibly the most prominent of all Spanish hill towns, Cuenca straddles the ridge leading from the valley floor towards the top of the Cerro de San Felipe, some 250 meters above. The town, and the ridge, are flanked by two canyons, two rivers and two hills as high as the Cerro de San Felipe. Cuenca often gives the impression of being perched above two abysses, and at some sections of the upper part of town, the distance between these two canyons is less than 75 meters. From the bottom of the town to the uppermost urbanized district around the castle, there is a gain in altitude of almost 150 meters, making for an incline of almost 15 per cent in the relatively short distance separating the two.

Cuenca has traditionally been a joy to contemplate, but hell to walk around in. This was in the minds of many travelers, both then and now. Antonio Ponz in his famous *Viage de España* (1789) points this out with a certain irony:

... the city of Cuenca is situated on a great hill, between two even taller hills, separated by two chasms made by the Jucar and the Huecar rivers. The walls of the city begin at the very base of the hill, and end at an extraordinarily high altitude. If you want to walk its streets, especially some of them, it is practically necessary to make use of pulleys; and I have been told that sometimes mules have been known to collapse if, after a normal day of work, they have been made to go to the top of the town under a full load. In order to reach the inn where I was staying ... which was not very far up the hill, I proceeded very slowly, not just out of compassion for the horse I was riding but also to keep from falling down on the streets of Cuenca, which seem to be made precisely for that. (Ponz, 1789: vol. 3, Carta primera, pp. 4-5)¹⁰

The town itself reflects the constraints of its geographical location. As Ponz pointedly stated, walking there was difficult and often dangerous. The laconic annotation in the parish registers that "he slipped on the ice and fell over the cliff" is not infrequent during the winter months. Available space was hard to come by and as the town began to grow during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, ingenious solutions were devised. At first, Cuenca descended from the medieval heights of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in search of the valley floor; but once there, an unhealthy environment and more hills made

¹⁰ There are a number of historical descriptions of Cuenca and most of them make special reference to its impressive geographical location. See, for example, Mártir Rizo (1629: 4-6), Quadrado and Fuente (1978: 243-247), and Doré and Davillier (1862-1873). An interesting description of Cuenca and life during the latter part of the eighteenth century, based on the magnificent view of the town made by Juan de Llanes y Massa, can be found in Jiménez Monteserín (1983).

Towns in historical perspective

9

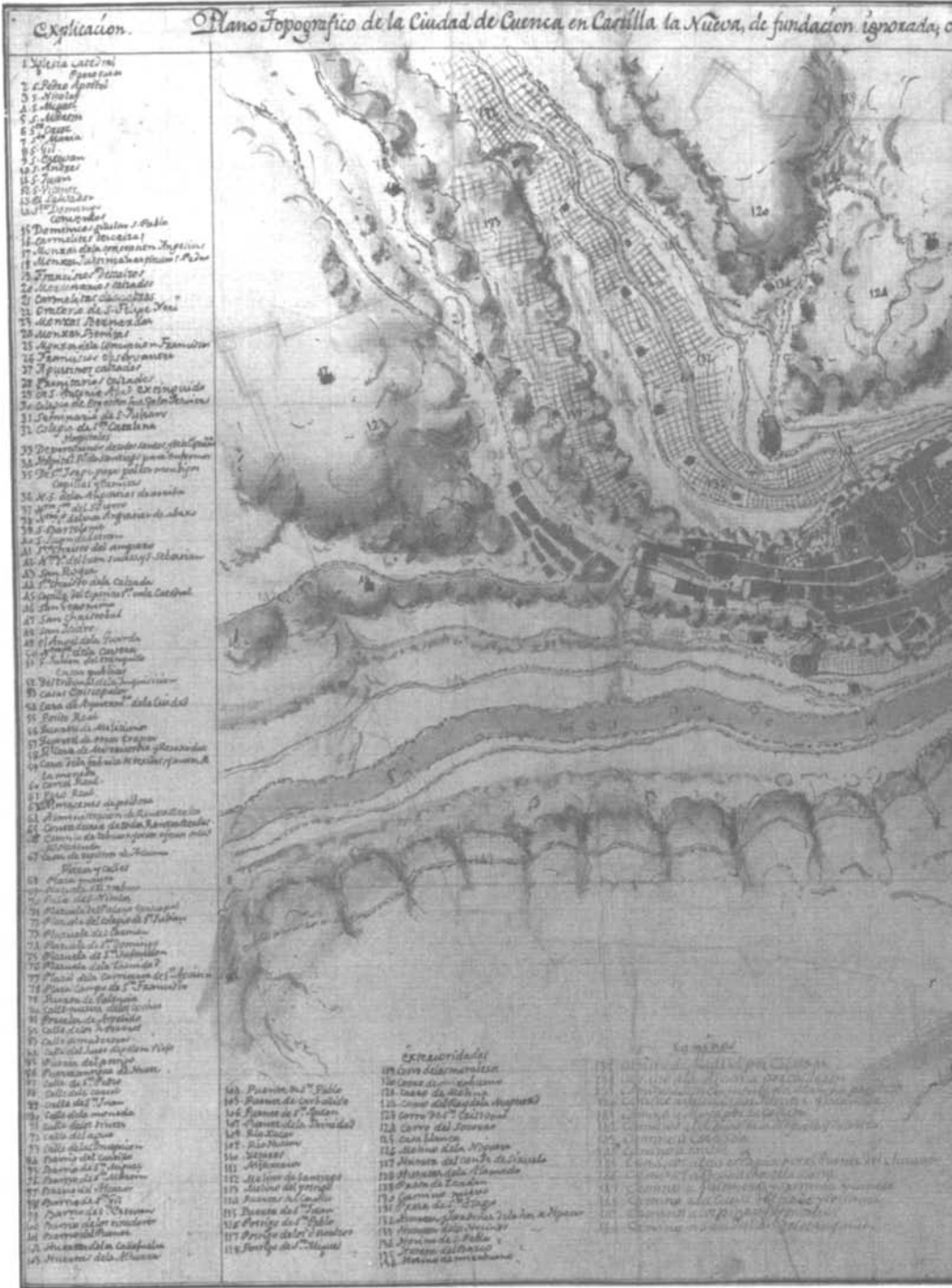
further expansion difficult. Unlike any other medieval town in Spain and possibly in Europe, space was found by building upwards. The result was a unique distribution of urban space and probably the highest population density of any urban area in Spain. Once again the pen of Antonio Ponz gives us a succinct description of Cuenca:

Some of the houses, which practically hang from the cliffs in Cuenca, are 10 and even 12 stories high, and above the roofs of those you can see the foundations of others in such a way that from outside town you can normally see jackasses peering out of some window which seems to be the living room of one house, but is really the stable of another. (Ponz, 1789: vol. 3, Carta quinta, p. 127)¹¹

Ponz was not exaggerating. All around the town, houses were practically perched at the edge of the cliffs, and there is a neighborhood in the vicinity of the parishes of San Martín and Santa Cruz, noted for its “skyscrapers.” When seen from the east (from the Cerro del Socorro) these buildings were – and are – up to 10 stories high, while on the other side they are only three or four stories high. In this whole area of town the main entrance to houses always has two stairways, one leading up and the other down.

Cuenca is located between two impressive canyons shaped by two rivers, the Jucar and the Huecar, each of which has had differing importance for the town. To the West, the Jucar river, which originates in the mountains of Cuenca some 75 kms away and drains into the Mediterranean Sea south of Valencia, winds its way beneath the town through a very abrupt canyon. The Huecar, tributary to the Jucar, is little more than a stream, but it has always been by far the more important of the two for the life of the town. One of the springs feeding it was and is the source of potable water for the town and its waters irrigate many of the small farms along its banks which produce many of the vegetables consumed in town. Once it reaches the town itself, its valley opens up towards the flat lands to the south and thus it was also the river which has occasionally flooded the lower areas of town, fed the swampy lands which were only fully drained during the nineteenth century, and where most of the wool was washed. It closes off the entire old town to the south, and then flows into the Jucar. A fair idea of the lay-out of the town can be derived from a close inspection of the eighteenth-century map of Cuenca by Mateo López (Map 1.2).

¹¹ In 1778 the French traveler Jean François Peyron insisted on the same point: “and then in front of you appears the eagle’s nest of the town of Cuenca. I have seldom seen a more picturesque or surprising sight. Imagine a town built in the heights on a naked outcropping of rock, and dominated by still more rugged mountains; and with houses whose doorways, you might say, are on the rooftops of the neighboring houses” Peyron (1783: vol. 2, pp. 132–133).



Map 1.2 Cuenca in the eighteenth century