

# The quest for the regional city : new identities and institutional conditions in a context of metropolitan fragmentation

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## Mitteilungen aus der Forschung / Research Notes / Notes de recherche

### The Quest for the Regional City

New identities and institutional conditions in a context of metropolitan fragmentation

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#### 1 Introduction

The social, economic and institutional conditions of urban life in metropolitan Europe have changed so much in the past 20 years that, as a result, entirely new patterns of spatial configuration are beginning to appear virtually everywhere. From a spatial perspective, the change can be summarised as the transition from a traditional structure in which the centripetal urban systems contrasted sharply with the rural ones, to new, extended metropolitan regions in which urban characteristics are beginning to show in various places. Urban identity therefore no longer coincides with the boundaries of the cities proper, and the original core cities are no longer necessarily the epicentres of urban identity. In this article I shall first briefly categorise the relevant trends in social, economic and institutional conditions, then investigate their repercussions on spatial configuration. After that I shall consider several substantial institutional matters which are exerting a strong influence upon the opportunities for metropolitan development. Finally, I shall address the question as to how established urban identities can be given full play in the new metropolitan configurations.

#### 2 Urban conditions in the post welfare state

As far as the *economic conditions* of urban development are concerned, the ongoing globalisation of the economy can be regarded as a fundamental trend. In Europe, the opening of internal borders has provided a strong impetus to international links. On a wider scale, innovations in information and communications technology have contributed to the intensification of economic ties. Companies which were originally more closely tied to the regional economy are now forging all sorts of international links, and their core activities are being co-ordinated within functional networks on international markets. Both the financial and managerial industries and the infrastructural complexes have to a large extent been regrouped – creating new, global hierarchical networks. The significance of such networks and network nodes, and in more general terms the

emergence of «flows of space» at the expense of territorial spatial ties, has been extensively described and discussed (SASSEN 1991, CASTELLS 1998). The impact of such global upheaval can be seen clearly in the functioning of regional economies. In the past, even when industries did operate internationally, their operations remained embedded within national and regional cultural institutions and – not infrequently protectionist – governmental frameworks. Nowadays their strategic behaviour is increasingly determined within functional networks. One specific example is Rotterdam, which during the 1960s grew into the world's largest port partly thanks to the efforts of a number of «home entrepreneurs». Today, the phenomenon of the home entrepreneur has more or less disappeared in Rotterdam.

But the globalisation of business does not mean that companies have become entirely «footloose». The globalisation of the economy has in fact reinforced the competition between regions over their specific characteristics as business locations. The need to operate in functional networks does not detract from the fact that companies need a highly specialised context, with a pool of specifically qualified labour and specialist suppliers and customers, nor that direct contacts with the consumer remain essential in client-sensitive industries (SCOTT 1998, GRAHAM & MARVIN 1999). What it does mean is that companies are going to consider their spatial behaviour in a different way – as regards choices both between international regions and within metropolitan regions. *Accessibility* and *connectivity* are factors which particularly appear to be gaining in importance (BERTOLINI 2000). This fact is one of the driving forces behind the relocation of centrally positioned managerial offices such as banks, head offices and business services to new nodes spread across the metropolitan region. Airports and major highway interchanges in particular, and to a somewhat lesser extent public transport nodes, seem to exercise a strong magnetic effect in this respect. In cities like Munich, Milan, Frankfurt, Brussels, Amsterdam, London and Paris, such regional spatial restructuring has already manifested itself. When this happens the original core cities – and certainly their historic centres – often shift their focus to «the cultural or creative complex», with key functions ranging from the arts, universities, research and the audiovisual industry to tourism or retailing.

Important trends in the *social conditions* for urban development centre firstly around the combination of growing prosperity and increasing individualisation. When prosperity increases and, at the same time, individualisation results in households becoming smaller, the consumption of space tends to increase considerably. For this reason, many core cities have been struggling with population decline – although in some cases, as in Amsterdam, this has been compensated for by a compact building programme. Almost everywhere, these trends have contributed to the physical expansion of the urban area. A second general trend is that migration into and out of the cities largely appears to be selective. It is often the middle classes, the households with children, which disappear. As a result, the demographic differences between the city's population and that of the surrounding area can sometimes be extremely pronounced. Moreover, economic and political immigrants usually concentrate in or around city centres, not only in the expectation of finding work – although, in fact, it is often outside the city centres where employment opportunities are growing most strongly – but also particularly because of social networks there and the easier access to housing markets. Thirdly, the tendency towards spatial segmentation in urban regions is increasing (MUSTERD & OSTENDORF 1998). The segmentation of housing and living environments which already occurred long ago and more intensively in the metropolitan United States is now beginning to leave its mark in the European urban regions, too.

The changes in the *institutional conditions* of urban development are also striking. The importance of social initiatives is increasing at a time when the government is commanding and controlling far less than during the days of the welfare state. The expectations of the civil society have grown sharply, but these are expressed very differently from one region to another. The extent to which broad support for directive regional approaches can be derived from social networks is strongly dependent upon the historical embedment of the social organisation (PUTNAM 1993). On the metropolitan scale, this embedment is generally not very deep. Moreover, there is now greater scope for commercial development in particular economic markets, something which is primarily evident in those for public services which were previously provided by the government. There is a noticeable tendency for utility companies – such as water, gas and electricity suppliers – and physical or social services like public transport, social housing corporations and sometimes even hospitals, to end up in the grip of international markets following privatisation. In the electricity market, for example, it is expected that most of the thousands of existing local and regional supply companies will fall into the hands of no more than

six or seven major pan-European players within a decade. As for public transport, not all barriers have fallen – but the trend is becoming evident (SALET 2001). Another striking institutional change concerns the relationships between the various branches of government. An increasing differentiation has appeared during the past 20 years in the relationship between the layers of administration. In the heyday of the welfare state, the national government evolved into the dominant layer throughout Europe. But that has not been so obvious since 1980. On the one hand, the importance of international administrative alliances – especially the European Union – has considerably increased. On the other, the responsibilities of decentralised administrations have grown. The rise of meso-government has been quite spectacular in all countries with a long tradition of centralisation and unitary government (SHARPE 1993).

The importance of local and regional institutions has grown, but they find it extremely difficult to cope with the spatial dynamics of urban regions. Every such region in Europe is struggling with the problem of finding an appropriate administrative response to the new spatial dynamics. Government has lost its fixed point of reference and is not very successful in organising the co-ordination of the fragmented metropolis (SALET & FALUDI 2000, GUALINI 2001).

### 3 New forms of metropolitan urbanity

Under these new conditions, a transition is under way in many European countries: from traditional cities and city-centred conurbations to more complex configurations on a metropolitan scale. Patterns of urbanisation in different regions of Europe have always varied widely, of course. As well as the great metropolises like London, Paris, Berlin and Budapest, which have always been characterised by their *concentric* expansion, there are metropolitan regions which have traditionally expanded *around historically scattered cities*. The «Four-City League» in Switzerland is one example of these, as are the «Flemish Diamond» in Belgium and the «Randstad» in the Netherlands. Then there are the so-called «coalfield conurbations», in which the highly *diffuse spatial structure* is closely linked to the distribution of historic mineral deposits and other conditions for locating industry. The Ruhr valley in Germany and the English Midlands are examples of these. Naturally, from such varied historical and cultural backgrounds different new urban structures have grown under the recently changed conditions. The process of transition is highly dynamic and still far from complete. Many new terms have appeared in the academic literature to describe the variations of current urban transformations. These

include «polycentric configurations», «urban networks», «Zwischenstädte», «dual cities», «edge cities», «metropolises», and so on. SOJA even introduced several radical variants, such as the «exopolis» – a city abandoned by whites – and the «carceral archipelago», a fragmented city inaccessible to large sections of the population as a result of the privatisation of its public space (SOJA 1996).

The many differences in urban transformation processes cannot conceal the fact that there are clear common factors underlying all the changes: the external forces of urbanisation have considerably gained in significance – and they no longer act as an extension of the historically evolved city or conurbation. During the previous period of urbanisation, expansion of the city and suburbanisation were still prominent. Those people who moved to the suburbs still, for the time being, remained dependent upon the central city in many respects. Suburbanisation in certain respects implied expansion of the city, which incorporated the new suburbs into its «daily urban system». What is becoming increasingly clear about the current urban transformation, however, is that it should no longer be described as «expansion of the core city» but rather as a post-modern stage of urbanisation (FISHMAN 1987). Beyond the existing city's sphere of influence, new urban concentrations are appearing which cannot be regarded as belonging to the core city. Meanwhile, the original core city is increasingly evolving in a more selective way, for example as an exclusive housing area or a draw for visitors. This means that the new urbanity is going to be increasingly typified by individual urban concentrations distributed on a metropolitan scale, and at best linked to one another. It really seems that the vision contained in *The Living City* – a 1958 urban design by FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT which for nearly 50 years has been completely ignored in all government plans and academic debates precisely because it regards the city not as a cohesive, organic whole but as an expression of diverse individual aims in the post-modern era – has begun a new and triumphal progress (WRIGHT 1958).

The co-ordination of public and private initiatives in this new context of metropolitan fragmentation is a complex challenge. Administrative delineations do not correspond with the dynamics of spatial developments in practice. Moreover, allocating spatial developments to a territorial field is not straightforward. The increasing significance of functional spatial networks cuts right across territorial delineation. They effectively create their own geography. Nowhere in Europe has any form of metropolitan administration – if even present – been able to respond adequately and durably to the issues surrounding the new fragmentation and spatial dynamics. New forms of administration are

being created, economies of scale are being implemented and administrators are «playing chess» on a whole series of boards at once – the scale of the local authority, co-operation between authorities, regional partnerships, and so on. Sometimes they are actively co-operating with the private sector. In practice, however, hierarchical solutions do not appear to work well because they do not adequately address the complexity of location-related considerations. Conversely, a reliance upon decentralised solutions only makes the fragmented nature of the new regions even more obvious. The stalemate of the fragmented metropolis has not yet been effectively broken anywhere, and there remains a real question mark as to whether it ever can be by purely administrative means. Solutions will probably have to be found more through governance than through government. Nevertheless, it is extremely important that the administration be able to operate from clearly delineated positions. So we shall now examine the institutional positioning of the administration in the new metropolis.

#### 4 Institutional dilemmas

The less the scale of the administrative levels in a metropolis corresponds with the dynamics of spatial trends, and the more the competences needed to be able to conduct policy are distributed amongst different parties, the more metropolitan administration will be dependent upon coalitions between governments or between them and private entities. But in such administrative coalitions a lack of legitimacy and effectiveness can all too easily arise. There is nothing wrong with local authorities or regional administrations entering into coalitions with other bodies, but if they do so it is all the more important that they operate from clearly defined positions. In this respect at least two fundamental institutional dilemmas arise, both of which are closely related to changes in the post-war welfare state.

The first of these dilemmas pertains to the proper allocation of policy competences. There are two kinds of policy issue which require constant attention in a metropolitan context: those of «development policy» and those of «redistribution». In the case of *development policy*, various administrative bodies and private players can enter spontaneously into partnerships if they offer added value for all involved. This is a frequent occurrence. Development policy should in principle be as decentralised as possible, because it is at this level that all the particular circumstances pertaining to the project in question can best be considered. In the free market it is individual companies – sometimes united in a consortium – which assume the risk of investing in a project. On the government side, it is the local author-

ity which leads involvement. The advantages of such decentralised responsibility for investment are that, at this level, all particular circumstances are taken into account and that costs and benefits can be weighed directly. Economic theory therefore assumes that, in principle, allocation policy should be as decentralised as possible (PETERSON 1981, 1995, RIVLIN 1992). If higher levels of government do play a role in development policy, this should in principle be a selective one, legitimised by the argument that decentralised administrations are not in this particular case actually capable of carrying through the developments on their own. In theory, there exists broad agreement on the principle of decentralised competence for this type of policy. In practice, however, during the era of the welfare state national governments often assumed responsibility for allocation policy themselves – both actually financing projects and deciding how the money was spent. This is now gradually changing, but in many regions – particularly in the former unitary states – local players still have too few independent decision-making powers.

As far as *redistribution policy* is concerned, the theoretical arguments are precisely the opposite: distribution is conducted most efficiently by higher levels of administration (PETERSON, RIVLIN, *ibid*). One reason for this is that, in principle, as broad a consensus as possible is required in favour of redistribution. Otherwise far too much of its costs would be borne by too few parties. Moreover, redistribution policy does not tolerate wide differentials between local authorities: a «level playing field» for all must be established at a higher political level. This policy concentrates by nature upon equal treatment for all, so it is unwise to devolve competences to lower levels of the administration. In practice, though, this too is often unfortunately ignored. Many attempts to achieve co-operation between local authorities in metropolitan regions have been frustrated through being encumbered with a mission to share policy responsibility between rich and poor authorities. Examples include fiscal responsibility or social policy for specific target groups. Given the huge differences between the generally poor core cities and their rich suburbs, this is a common problem.

It will be clear from the above that the resilience of metropolitan areas can be considerably reinforced by a good distribution of competences. Ideally, responsibility for development policy should be as decentralised as possible and competences in redistribution policy – generally speaking – should be more centralised. By consciously implementing this institutional framework, the ability of both government and private entities to act effectively in the metropolis can be enhanced.

The second fundamental institutional dilemma concerns the relationship between the *electoral principle* and the *principle of accountability*. The first of these refers to the political process which ensures that politicians represent the interests and objectives of their electors. The principle of accountability ensures that administrations generate sufficient income and that they balance their books. The equilibrium between these two principles is incredibly delicate (ELKIN 1987). If local authorities have to generate too much of their own income – as is the case in the US, for example – then it is much more difficult to satisfy the social wishes of the electorate. Because of their overdependence upon local taxes, many American local authorities have become entangled in competition with one another to attract businesses to their areas. Meanwhile, the wishes of the electorate are neglected.

In some European countries, precisely the opposite can be observed. As one of the continent's most centralised nations, the Netherlands is perhaps the prime example. Local authorities here have so little responsibility for generating their own income – barely 10 percent comes from local taxes, the remainder being provided through central government – that the principle of accountability hardly applies at all. As a result, local authorities have long been able to concentrate single-mindedly upon social policy, in accordance with their electoral promises, and present the bills to the State. There has been barely any motivation to invest in the local economy. One area in which the one-sided effect of this can be seen is the housing stock: in the largest cities, Amsterdam and Rotterdam, 85 percent of homes are rented. Even after the beginning of the economic crisis of the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s, when virtually all the urban areas in the west of the country were quite abruptly confronted with issues of structural unemployment and poverty, municipal politics remained single-mindedly focused upon social issues for some considerable time. Whilst cities in the UK and the US were having to «cut their cloth according to their coat» in order to achieve economic revitalisation, the erosion of the urban economy at first had virtually no effect upon the policies of the Dutch cities. As their problems grew, so did municipal claims for support from the national government. Only when the national welfare state itself was forced to implement budget cuts in the early 1980s were the cities forced to generate more income of their own. Since then, local accountability has increased again (NETHERLANDS SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL FOR GOVERNMENT POLICY 1990, KREUKELS & SALET 1992).

The extreme examples above show how important it is for the two principles, of accountability and electoralism, to sustain one another in their delicate equilibrium. Combined with the other institutional

requirement – structural allocation of competences for development and redistribution across various levels of government – that of achieving a reasonable balance between accountability and electoralism provides a fruitful institutional basis for flexible development of the new metropolitan regions. The conditions are necessary but, of course, not sufficient to cope with the complex issues facing metropolitan environments. Those issues require many different answers. In the final section of this article, I shall concentrate upon another important condition: the cultural and social foundations underlying the identity of the new metropolitan regions.

### 5 Regional urban identities

As far as the traditional cities and conurbations are concerned, a strong identity has generally grown over the years. Visitors recognise the typical characteristics of a city, and residents identify themselves with their city through a whole range of cultural manifestations. The identities of cities have become established over time. But the problem is that those same cities now no longer exist. Large parts of their economies, their housing markets and their infrastructural hubs and spokes have dispersed and regrouped around new urban nodes on the periphery of the traditional city. These sometimes do not even have strong links with the original core city. In many urban areas, a remarkable paradox can now be observed. Whilst a significant part of modern city life has shifted to new nodes and new functional centres, for the time being the «old» city continues to define urban identity – not only for visitors, but also for residents. Almost all the symbols of urban cultural identity are still found in the core city: the old architecture, the main squares, the universities, the churches, the theatres, the football grounds, and so on. But the more functional urban life expands over a wider area, the more these visible cultural symbols of urban identity are also going to spread out. Regional shopping centres, universities, multiplex cinemas and typical urban entertainment industries are no longer by definition confined to the traditional city centres. But the cultural transformation of the urban identity is going to take much longer than the physical transformation. The adaptation of both citizens and their political administrators to the new urban environment – which in any case has yet to crystallise fully and does not appear to be following straightforward territorial lines – seems to be lagging behind what is actually happening.

The absence of strong social and cultural support for new urban patterns is generating considerable friction and many impasses in issues of metropolitan co-ordination. With the support of higher levels of govern-

ment, the core cities are sometimes able to prevent urban entertainment and cultural activities – such as cinema and theatre complexes, universities or regional shopping centres – locating outside the city centre. The result may be that the traditional centre also remains the cultural centre for the time being, but this also means that the outlying housing and working areas develop into monotone, single-purpose centres of other urban activity.

Centralised urban planning in a real environment that is no longer centripetal, can long frustrate the potential for developing a new, high quality and varied metropolitan region. Established power relationships are often more attuned to the position of the core cities – including their existing policy coalitions with higher levels of government – than they are to the abstract effort to create new metropolitan regions. There are still only a few examples of regions which have defined the transition from traditional cities, towns and villages to a new metropolitan configuration as a cultural mission. One of the rare examples is the way in which public and private parties in the Ruhr valley have taken the initiative, through the International Building Exhibition, to tackle the regeneration of the entire region as a cultural task. Not coincidentally, this is a region which due to its specific history is not dominated by one core city. Prompted by the decline of traditional industry, it is also no accident that a new regional image is being sought. By using the remnants of the obsolete economy as cultural symbols for the transition to a new one based upon a knowledge infrastructure, by creating ecological projects in the most heavily polluted areas and by giving some 100 widely distributed industrial monuments new cultural functions, a conscious effort has been made to develop a new image for the region. This example shows how – by recombining deeply-embedded standards and values and by stimulating new discourses on a metropolitan scale – a process of regeneration which is able to mobilise the social and economic forces in society can be set in motion.

New regions will not be developed successfully by creating new, single-purpose economic centres at the periphery of traditional cities – office parks by highway interchanges, property developments at airports, and so on. As the new millennium begins, the true sense of urban identity first and foremost demands cultural involvement.

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**Summary: The Quest for the Regional City. New identities and institutional conditions in a context of metropolitan fragmentation**

The significance of urban identity is beginning to extend outwards from the cities into metropolitan regions. This article has examined how institutional frameworks affect the flexibility of these new regions. It has been noted that spatial development policy

should ideally be conducted at the local level in close collaboration with initiatives in the private sector. However, the structure of policy competences is not always perfectly arranged to achieve this. Issues of redistribution, on the other hand, are a matter which should be addressed at the central level. It is further argued that the principles of local accountability and electoralism should be carefully balanced. If their relationship is biased too much in one direction or the other, this can frustrate the flexibility of metropolitan regions. Finally, it is emphasised that new metropolitan regions have generally not yet developed a strong identity of their own. Citizens and politicians still tend to identify too much with the old core cities, which are no longer the sole heart of urban life. It is therefore important that new regional identities be mobilised.

**Zusammenfassung: Die Suche nach der regionalen Stadt. Neue Identitäten und institutionelle Voraussetzungen im Kontext der metropolitanen Fragmentierung**

Die Bedeutung der Urbanisation beginnt sich von den Städten auf großstädtische Regionen auszubreiten. In diesem Artikel wurde untersucht, wie sich die institutionellen Rahmen auf die Schwungkraft dieser neuen Regionen auswirken. Festgestellt wurde, dass die «Raumentwicklungspolitik» im Idealfall auf örtlicher Ebene und in enger Verbindung mit Initiativen im privaten Sektor Gestalt annehmen sollte. Die Struktur der politischen Zuständigkeiten ist aber noch nicht überall optimal darauf eingestellt. Fragen der «Neuverteilung» müssen dagegen auf zentraler Ebene angesiedelt sein. Des Weiteren wurde dargelegt, dass zwischen den Prinzipien des «local accountability» und des «electoralism» ein subtiles Gleichgewicht herrschen sollte. Wenn sich das Verhältnis zwischen diesen beiden Grundbedingungen zugunsten der einen oder der anderen Seite verschiebt, kann das die Schwungkraft der großstädtischen Regionen behindern. Abschließend wurde unterstrichen, dass neue urbane Regionen im Allgemeinen noch keine starke Identität entwickelt haben. Bürger und Politiker identifizieren sich offenbar noch häufig mit den alten Zentrumstädten, die in Wirklichkeit nicht mehr den exklusiven Kern der Urbanisation bilden. Daher kommt es darauf an, neue regionale Identitäten zu mobilisieren.

**Résumé: En quête de la ville régionale. Nouvelles identités et conditions institutionnelles dans le contexte de la fragmentation métropolitaine**

Le sens de l'urbanisation s'étend progressivement des villes aux régions métropolitaines. Le présent article étudie les répercussions des cadres institutionnels sur le dynamisme des nouvelles régions. Il s'avère, en effet, que la «politique de développement du territoire» doit idéalement prendre forme au niveau local, en étroite

relation avec des initiatives émanant du secteur privé. Comme on a pu le constater, les compétences politiques ne sont toutefois pas organisées partout selon une structure optimale. Les questions de «redistribution» doivent, par contre, être traitées au niveau central. De plus, il convient d'atteindre un équilibre subtil entre les principes de «responsabilité locale» et l'«électoratisme». Si la balance penche unilatéralement en faveur de l'une des deux directions, le dynamisme des régions métropolitaines risque d'en pâtir. Enfin, l'article insiste sur le fait qu'en règle générale les nouvelles régions métropolitaines n'ont pas encore développé d'identité forte. Les citoyens et les hommes politiques s'identifient trop souvent encore avec les anciens centres urbains qui ne représentent plus, en réalité, le cœur exclusif de l'urbanisation. Il est donc impératif de mobiliser de nouvelles identités régionales.

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