

IF URBAN REGIONS ARE THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE QUESTION? Thoughts on the European Experience

Mariona Tomàs, Universitat de Barcelona

Article published at **INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF URBAN AND REGIONAL RESEARCH**, 39 (2): 382 - 389

DOI:10.1111/1468-2427.12177

Abstract

This essay contributes to the current debate in the field of critical urban and regional studies on the meanings of the 'regional' and the 'urban'. From a political science perspective, we focus on the European case. Firstly, we argue that the conception of the regional scale is not the same in various languages and traditions. Regions in Europe carry meanings and connotations that are not always easy to translate without losing their specific histories. Secondly, our analysis of contemporary debates on the 'regional' in the field of urban studies reveals that both practitioners and academics consider the regional scale mainly as a functional space, as the space for economic competitiveness. However, urban regions are also to be regarded as spaces for social and political mobilization. I argue that the political dimension of the 'regional' deserves more attention and that further research needs to be undertaken in this respect.

Introduction

The question 'what is a city?' was at the heart of the debates on the 'urban' at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sociologists such as George Simmel, Louis Wirth, Ernest Burgess and Robert Park had different views on the positive and negative aspects of urban societies. However, they all agreed that there was a specific urban way of life, the result of the interaction of large population, high density and high heterogeneity of people and activities. Subsequent processes of suburbanization and metropolitanization (mainly in North America and Western Europe) prompted the proliferation of other key concepts in urban studies such as 'suburbs' and 'metropolitan area'. From the 1950s, censuses in countries like the United States of America and Canada started to include a statistical definition of metropolitan areas. The process of metropolitanization has continued to develop and expand across the rest of the world in parallel with the process of globalization. Traditional words like 'city' are still being used to characterize new processes (e.g. 'global cities', 'world cities' and, more recently, 'creative cities' and 'smart cities'). Nevertheless, there has been a proliferation of other concepts, often used as synonyms: metropolis, postmetropolis, megalopolis, urban agglomeration, urban area, conurbation, metropolitan region, *métapole*, city-region, megaregion, urban region, metropolitan macro-region, etc. The use of the words 'region' and 'regional' has increasingly been applied to the development of urban areas, both in policymaking and academia, and has challenged the meaning of other words like 'urban' and 'metropolitan'.

The aim of this essay is to contribute to the current debate on the 'regional', which is enriched with ideas from a diversity of disciplines. This contribution is developed mainly from a political science approach and is focused on the European experience. I show in the first part of the essay that the conception of the regional scale is not the same across various languages and traditions. Regions in Europe carry meanings and connotations that are not always easy to translate without losing their specific histories. The second part is devoted to the analysis of contemporary debates on the 'regional' in the field of urban studies. Both practitioners and academics seem to have enthroned the regional scale as the space for economic competitiveness, describing it as a functional space. However, urban regions can be also conceived as spaces for social and political mobilization. I argue that the political dimension of the 'regional' deserves more attention and that further research needs to be undertaken in this respect.

The European urban and regional mosaic

Dealing with the application of 'local', 'urban', 'metropolitan', 'regional' and even 'national' is especially hard in Europe, thanks to the continent's history and the richness of its languages, cultures and political and territorial organizations. Just looking at the different territorial reforms and names of recently created metropolitan institutions, we can see this diversity and the lack of a common definition of the 'regional'.

Decentralized countries like Germany, Italy and Spain are rich in urban and regional terminology. Germany has a federal organization whereby the *länder* (the federal states) are primarily responsible for urban affairs and for the creation of metropolitan bodies. Thus, we find a wide range of solutions for metropolitan regions with different degrees of institutionalization. Two examples of this diversity are Verband Region Stuttgart, the directly elected metropolitan authority of Stuttgart responsible for public transport, urban planning and the environment (created in 1994), and Regionalverband FrankfurtRheinMain, a regional planning agency for the Frankfurt conurbation (in existence since 2011, substituting a previous planning agency). Italy is another decentralized state, where regions have directly elected representatives and some powers shared with central government. In the last 20 years there have been attempts to create 'metropolitan cities' (*città metropolitana*); the latest law (56/2014) establishes the creation of metropolitan cities in several agglomerations, starting with Milan (with effect from January 2015).

In Spain, after the process of decentralization in the 1980s, 17 *comunidades autónomas* (autonomous communities) have directly elected assemblies and share powers with central government. The 1978 Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation but recognizes the existence of 'regions' and 'nationalities', the latter indirectly referring to territories with specific identities (like Catalonia and the Basque Country). When it comes to local and urban affairs, the sub-national or regional governments have the power to create metropolitan or supralocal authorities. Instead, in the 1980s these governments abolished metropolitan structures created during the dictatorship years, like Gran Bilbao (Greater Bilbao), Consell Metropolità de l'Horta (Metropolitan Council of Valencia), Corporació Metropolitana de Barcelona (Metropolitan Council of Barcelona) and Comisión de Planeamiento y Coordinación del Área Metropolitana de Madrid (Planning Commission for the Metropolitan Area of Madrid). Nowadays, the only metropolitan authority with several functions is the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, created by a law of the Catalan Parliament in 2010 and inaugurated in 2011 after local elections. This body comprises the political representatives of Barcelona and its 35 surrounding municipalities. These representatives also constitute the Strategic Metropolitan Plan of Barcelona, a voluntary association created in 2003 to build a common vision of the development of the metropolitan area. The 36 municipalities are considered the heart of a larger metropolitan region composed of 164 municipalities. This area is pertinent for purposes of spatial and transportation planning by bodies like the Metropolitan Transport Authority. The adjective 'regional' is thus applied to the whole Catalan territory, with other political connotations. In Madrid, by contrast, the territorial reform of the 1980s limited this autonomous community to the capital and 178 surrounding municipalities, with no other administrative divisions. This territory includes the urban agglomeration, leaving metropolitan policies in the hands of the regional authorities. In other words (and entirely contrary to Barcelona's situation), in Madrid the 'metropolitan' identifies with the 'regional'.

In unitary countries, there are no regions (or if they exist they are devoid of political powers). In Portugal, the meanings of 'regional' and 'metropolitan' are differentiated: there are administrative regions and two recently created metropolitan areas (Lisbon and Porto, by an array of legislation, most recently in 2013). Differently, in the Netherlands the debate on the urban and the regional is shaped by the existence of the Randstad. Considered in terms of regional planning, it refers to the polycentric urban agglomeration of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht.

In a different vein, the United Kingdom (UK) and France are two examples of traditionally unitary countries that have started processes of political decentralization. Since the end of the 1990s, the asymmetric UK system of devolution has resulted in the creation of the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly, all with direct elections and some legislative powers. Since the 1982 decentralization reforms in France, a 'region' is an administrative

division (or *collectivité territoriale*) and is constitutionally recognized as such. In both countries, however, metropolitan reforms and core urban policies are directed by central government. In England, six metropolitan counties and the Greater London Council were abolished in the 1980s; the Greater London Authority was established in 2000. In France, territorial laws in 1999 created different types of supramunicipal structures according to population, the largest being the *communauté urbaine* in cities like Lyon and Lille, heirs to the *agglomérations urbaines* of the 1960s. In Paris, where there is no *communauté urbaine*, the Region of Île-de-France has several responsibilities, mainly in transportation and regional planning. However, central government intervenes directly in policies affecting it, as with the 'Grand Paris' initiative to foster economic development. Meanwhile, in 2009 the City of Paris and almost 200 surrounding municipalities and other *collectivités territoriales* created a voluntary association called Paris Métropole to develop common projects. The adoption of the law of 27 January 2014 (modernization of public territorial action and affirmation of metropolitan areas) represents the institutionalization of this cooperation, as it provides for the creation of a new body of intermunicipal cooperation, the Métropole du Grand Paris, with effect from January 2016.

These examples demonstrate the diversity of expression when referring to the 'urban' and the 'regional'. Moreover, the regional debate in Europe is intrinsically linked to the rise of the politics of decentralization since the 1980s, expanding the creation of regions in traditionally unitary Southern European countries and also in the United Kingdom and Ireland. During the 1980s, political leaders from Catalonia and Lombardy envisaged Europe as an opportunity to develop a new conception of the continent ('Europe of the regions') associated with the federalization of Europe (Loughlin, 1996). But European regions are diverse in respect of their powers, accountability and origin. Keating and Loughlin (1997) identify four kinds of regions: economic, historical/ ethnic, administrative/planning and political. In fact, the reasons explaining the decentralization process are both political (historical demands for more autonomy) and functional (allocation of European Union funds). The analysis of the regional question is, then, confusing due to differing political and symbolic connotations of the term.

The European urban debate is also characterized by the disparate population, size and density of cities and states, making it difficult to apply a single definition of the 'urban'. Population varies enormously between small countries like Malta (around 400,000 inhabitants) and Luxembourg (around 500,000 inhabitants) and big countries like Germany (over 80 million inhabitants). In Germany and France we find different categories of urban agglomerations (small, medium, big), while in less populated countries there is just one 'big city'. In Luxembourg, for example, the largest agglomeration has 130,000 inhabitants; this contrasts starkly with Germany's Rhein-Main agglomeration, with nearly 4 million inhabitants. The definition of an urban area also depends on the size of municipalities and the degree of local fragmentation. Northern and Central European states have fewer municipalities (because of territorial reforms mostly undertaken between 1950 and 1970). For instance, Denmark's last wave of amalgamations (in 2007) reduced the total number of municipalities to 98. At the other extreme, France has more than 36,000 municipalities, and Spain and Italy more than 8,000 municipalities each. The degree of urbanization varies also from country to country, and within each country. Central Europe (The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany) is a densely populated area; Northern and Southern Europe are thinly populated, except for their coastal zones and the areas around their capital cities (Eurostat, 2011).

Since the publication of the European Spatial Development Perspective in 1999, there has been an increasing focus on the territorial dimension in policymaking among the member states of the European Union (EU) and within the apparatus of the EU itself. However, the harmonization of a European territorial perspective is very difficult because of different traditions in spatial planning among EU member states (for details see Faludi and Waterhout, 2002). Moreover, national settlement structures, as well as data and methodological problems, render the completion of a picture of the European urban system difficult. Although there have been numerous attempts to classify and compare the 'urban', the 'metropolitan' and the 'regional' in Europe (e.g. the Urban Audit and the Metropolitan European Growth Areas), existing databases for urban research on cities across Europe are inadequate (European

Commission, 2010: 62).

In order to harmonize data from different countries for use in designing European policies, the EU has a statistical office, Eurostat. This agency uses the NUTS (nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) classification, a hierarchical system which divides up the EU's member states into regions at three different levels (NUTS 1, 2 and 3 respectively, moving from larger to smaller territorial units). However, the different units correspond to diverse realities (for details of data collection and classification see Eurostat, 2009), making comparative research using NUTS difficult. As an example, a research project called 'The Case for Agglomeration Economies in Europe' compared Manchester, Barcelona, Lyon and Dublin (all classified as NUTS 3) in order to examine the relationship between agglomeration economies and city- regional governance. In this research, financed by the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON Programme 2006), NUTS 3 criteria did not take into account continuous built-up areas or functional areas in terms of economic and employment integration. Moreover, the powers of the different territorial governments were heterogeneous, necessitating extreme precision as to the nature of each institution (Harding, 2010).

To sum up, there is a diversity of European metropolitan and regional meanings, demanding pinpoint accuracy when undertaking research. Nevertheless, viewed from outside, for instance from China, these specific traditions of European countries may be subsumed into seeing Europe itself as a 'region', a homogeneous territory with two metropolises (London and Paris) and a network of large, medium and small cities. This idea of Europe as a 'region' clearly differs from the conventional perceptions of Europe held by its citizens and political decision-makers, revealing the complexity of these territorial concepts.

Functional versus political urban regions

Having seen the plurality of European urban and regional scales, we might expect that the theoretical debate has its own specificities compared to the North American case. In fact, recent academic transatlantic debates share some aspects but differ in others. The common point since the 1990s is the 'urban-regional renaissance' or 'the current round of globalization-regionalization' (MacLeod, 2001: 804, 806), the idea that urban regions have become the locomotives of the national economies within which they are situated, meaning new opportunities and challenges. Authors use different names to define this process and highlight its complementary dimensions, but they agree on the significance of the urban region as an effective arena for situating the institutions of post-Fordist economic governance.

In North America there are different kinds of new regionalism literatures (Painter, 2008), including the so-called Los Angeles School of geography and urban planning, which encapsulates a political science approach as well as social and environmental activism. The contribution of this heterogeneous group of authors has been comprehensively analysed (see Lovering, 1999; Frisken and Norris, 2001). Among other aspects, neo-regionalist literature supports new forms of collaboration between governments and private and non-profit organizations within regions—the shift from 'government' to 'governance' (Savitch and Vogel, 2000). In Europe, the study of the connections between the regionalization of governance and the changing nature of the state has been especially fruitful. The nation-state as built during the nineteenth century has to face pressures emanating from above (international organizations and the EU) and below (the emergence of regions and cities). In this context, when referring to the urban/regional debate, European authors do not use the term 'new regionalism' but 'metropolitan governance' (Le Galès, 1998; Jouve, 2003), even if they share the general questions of North American authors. This difference is understandable, taking into account that some US urban regions, described as 'geographical areas of subnational extent' (Scott, 1998: 1), are larger than many European countries. Moreover, we have seen that European regions have political and historical connotations lacking in North America.

The more recent rescaling and re-territorialization approach focuses on issues of economic development and competitiveness (Brenner, 2004). This perspective has provided a new frame for understanding the restructuring of the state through urban regions, highlighting the uneven development that new urban policies produce within countries. However, it has been criticized for its economic

determinism and for underestimating the significance of political and institutional variables that shape urban policies (Beauregard, 2006; Le Galès, 2006). The same criticisms apply to the concept of 'city-region' (see e.g. Jonas and Ward, 2007a; 2007b). This approach would fail to integrate the role of politics and the mechanisms through which the agents attempt to influence change (Harding, 2007). Indeed, there would be a tendency to consider city-region formation as a 'by-product of macro-restructuring' (Jonas and Ward, 2007a: 175), that is, to think of city-regions in terms of economic agency. This trend in theoretical debates can be applied to European policymaking, where the regional scale is increasingly considered as a 'functional space' for economic planning and political governance (Keating, 1998). Indeed, the concepts of regional and urban competitiveness have been the primary focus of attention for European territorial development policy discussions and plans like the 'Europe 2020' strategy (European Commission, 2010). In the same vein, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development has launched a new methodology to identify functional urban areas (OECD, 2012).

However, urban regions are not just statistical units for planning purposes. Metropolitan regions, city-regions or urban regions, whatever we call them, also have a symbolic and political dimension. As Jones and MacLeod (2004: 435) have explained, we can distinguish between 'regional spaces' and 'spaces of regionalism'. The first is meant to denote the economic or functional dimension, while the second deals with political attempts at constructing regionalism. Regional spaces are claimed to be the heart of the new globalized economy, and spaces of regionalism are the expression of claims for political and citizenship rights linked to a social constructed territory. To what extent are urban regions spaces where a collective narrative is being built? Paasi (2003: 477) identifies different elements that compose narratives of regional identity: ideas about nature, landscape, the built environment, culture/ethnicity, dialects, economic success/recession, periphery/centre relations, stereotypic images of a people/community, etc. Do we find them in urban regions? Who are the actors behind these narratives? Do citizens recognize metropolitan regions as a suitable arena for their political aims and ideals? Are urban regions becoming new spaces of solidarity and citizenship?

The analysis of legitimacy and democracy at the metropolitan scale has generally been associated with the degree of institutionalization of metropolitan governance (Heinelt and Kübler, 2005). According to the reformist approach, the creation of metropolitan governments with juridical and financial autonomy and directly elected representatives should enhance the output and input legitimacy of urban regions. However, there are no European examples of pure metropolitan governments. In the case of pseudo-metropolitan governments, like those recently created in Stuttgart and London, the political power of urban regions clashes with long-established political boundaries and modes of representation. This is especially evident in Europe, where many levels of representation already exist—local, regional or sub-national, national and European—even if they are unequally rooted (Ascher, 1995).

We find an illustrative example in European urban policies (Atkinson, 2001). While urban regions are the target of Europe-wide economic development policies, cities and neighbourhoods of the same urban regions are the focus of other European programmes with a social dimension. For instance, the URBAN programme seeks to foster social cohesion through urban regeneration at the municipal or neighbourhood level. The actions are concrete and the results clearly visible. Conversely, European plans concerning urban regions (like the European Spatial Development Perspective) are abstract and unknown to citizens. In addition, European programmes like URBAN have been implemented using a bottom-up approach, seeking local community participation, while EU plans relating to urban regions mainly deploy a top-down approach. Last but not least, citizens readily recognize neighbourhoods and cities: they have tighter boundaries, history and a collective story. The definition of an urban region, by contrast, remains a matter of debate among specialists.

In order to study the meaning that urban regions have for citizens, surveys have been conducted in several countries including Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Poland; initial results show the emergence of an intermunicipal interest and a metropolitan identification (see Lidström and Schaap, forthcoming). However, the specificity of urban regions challenges the traditional methods of participation and

asks for other means to include the views not only of residents but also of commuters, visitors and property owners. Indeed, urban regions are by definition discontinuous and changing territories, spaces for day-to-day life but usually lacking political institutions and collective symbols to identify with. At the same time, political conflicts taking place in urban regions challenge issues of identity and legitimacy as well as traditional ways of mobilization. In this regard, Purcell (2007) claims that the question of democracy in urban regions merits more critical attention. More specifically, he highlights the need to counterbalance the idea that neoliberal globalization has negatively affected cities and urban regions by exploring the politics of democratization. In sum, there is a need for research analysing urban regions as spaces for political mobilization. In doing so, the debate on the 'regional' would be richer and overcome the dominant functionalist view on urban regions.

Conclusion

The notion of 'regional scale' has been increasingly used to describe the growing importance of urban regions in the global economy. This essay has addressed three main questions that guide urban and regional studies. The first is 'what is an urban region?'. The definition of urban regions has generated a wide range of indicators and databases compiled by different institutions like the OECD and Eurostat. However, the use of the 'regional' is problematic in Europe, where it can describe both an urban region and various types of decentralized territorial units of the state. This diversity can lead to conceptual confusion when comparing the 'regional question' between countries and especially across continents. For Europeans, a 'region' can be understood as a unique territory with a specific political identity, while from the Chinese perspective Europe itself can be seen as one region. In the urban and regional debate it is thus necessary to clarify the way in which the researcher is using the terms.

There has been a tendency among practitioners and academics to underestimate these differences and thus to consider urban regions as reified spaces. In particular, urban regions have been considered as the best scale for enhancing economic competitiveness, emphasizing their functional dimension at the expense of their political dimension. However, urban regions are living territories where political struggles take place around issues of economic development, social cohesion, sustainability, etc. The second key question is, then, 'what are the political processes taking place in urban regions and who are the main actors?'. Finally, there is a normative debate on the values that should be enhanced at the urban and regional scale (i.e. social justice or better democracy) and the proposal of solutions to achieve those (i.e. changing urban policies). The third debate strengthens the ideological component of urban regions and can be synthesized as 'what kind of urban regions do we want?'.

Mariona Tomàs, Research Group on Local Studies (GREL, SGR 838), Department of Constitutional Law and Political Science, University of Barcelona, Av. Diagonal, 690, 08034 Barcelona, Spain, marionatomas@ub.edu

References

- Ascher, F. (1995) *Métapolis ou l'avenir des villes*. Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris.
- Atkinson, R. (2001) The emerging 'urban agenda' and the European spatial development perspective: towards an EU urban policy? *European Planning Studies* 9.3, 385–406.
- Beauregard, R.A. (2006) Book review. *Urban Affairs Review* 41.3, 416–23.
- Brenner, N. (2004) *New state spaces: urban governance and the rescaling of statehood*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- European Commission (2010) *Future orientations for cities* [WWW document]. URL http://www.espon.eu/export/sites/default/Documents/Projects/AppliedResearch/FOCI/FOCI_final_report_20110111.pdf (accessed 22 June 2012).
- Eurostat (2009) *Regional and urban*

- statistics reference guide 2009* [WWW document]. URL <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/ramon/statmanuals/files/KS-RA-09-008-EN.pdf> (accessed 20 June 2012).
- Eurostat (2011) *Eurostat regional yearbook 2011* [WWW document]. URL http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-HA-11-001/EN/KS-HA-11-001-EN.PDF (accessed 20 June 2012).
- Faludi, A. and B. Waterhout (2002) *The making of the European spatial development perspective: no masterplan*. Routledge, London.
- Friskén, F. and D. Norris (2001) (eds.) Regionalism reconsidered. *Journal of Urban Affairs* 23.5, 467–78
- Harding, A. (2007) Taking city regions seriously? Response to debate on 'city-regions: new geographies of governance, democracy and social reproduction'. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31.2, 443–58.
- Harding, A. (Coord.) (2010) *The case for agglomeration economies in Europe* [WWW document]. URL [https://upcommons.upc.edu/e-prints/bitstream/2117/12832/1/report7-CAEE Final report. pdf](https://upcommons.upc.edu/e-prints/bitstream/2117/12832/1/report7-CAEE%20Final%20report.pdf) (accessed 20 June 2012).
- Heinelt, H. and D. Kübler (eds.) (2005) *Metropolitan governance. Capacity, democracy and the dynamics of place*. Routledge, London.
- Jonas, A.E.G. and K. Ward (2007a) Introduction to a debate on city-regions: new geographies of governance, democracy and social reproduction. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31.1, 169–78.
- Jonas, A.E.G. and K. Ward (2007b) There's more than one way to be 'serious' about city-regions. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31.3, 647–56.
- Jones, M. and G. MacLeod (2004) Regional spaces, spaces of regionalism: territory, insurgent politics and the English question. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 29.4, 433–52.
- Jouve, B. (2003) *La gouvernance urbaine en questions*. Elsevier, Paris.
- Keating, M. (1998) *The new regionalism in Western Europe: territorial restructuring and political change*. Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.
- Keating, M. and J. Loughlin (eds.) (1997) *The political economy of regionalism*. Frank Cass, London.
- Le Galès, P. (1998) Regulations and governance in European cities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 22.3, 482–506.
- Le Galès, P. (2006) New state space in Western Europe? *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30.3, 717–21.
- Lidström, A. and L. Schaap (eds.) (forthcoming) Special issue on citizenship in city regions. *Journal of Urban Affairs*.
- Loughlin, J. (1996) 'Europe of the regions' and the federalization of Europe. *Publius* 26.4, 41–162.
- Lovering, J. (1999) Theory led by policy: the inadequacies of 'the new regionalism' (illustrated from the case of Wales). *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 23.2, 379–95.
- MacLeod, G. (2001) New regionalism reconsidered: globalization and the remaking of political economic space. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25.4, 804–29.

- OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2012) *Redefining 'urban'. A new way to measure urban areas*. OECD Publishing.
- Paasi, A. (2003) Region and place: regional identity in question. *Progress in Human Geography* 27.4, 475–85.
- Painter, J. (2008) Cartographic anxiety and the search for regionality. *Environment and Planning A* 40.2, 342–61.
- Purcell, M. (2007) City-regions, neoliberal globalization and democracy: a research agenda. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31.1, 197–206.
- Savitch, H.V. and Vogel, R.K. (2000) Paths to new regionalism. *State and Local Government Review* 32.3, 158–68.
- Scott, A.J. (1998) *Regions and the world economy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.