

REGIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION EUROPEAN CONFERENCE 2012
DELFT UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY
CALL FOR PAPERS

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Gateway Theme: G- City-regions, networks and urban systems

Reading heterogeneous city-regions: perspectives on the urban region of Porto

1. Introduction

This paper is a theoretical and methodological reflection about ways to understand and the role of city-regions in a country's territorial organisation. It appears in the context of ongoing discussions in Europe about regionalisation, to discuss different and more fluid ways to organise it based on territorial evidence rather than political abstraction. It builds on the idea of the prevalence of cities as physical organisers of territory and source of socio-economic relations and describes the specific case of Northern Portugal, focusing on the metropolitan region of Porto. The aim is to discuss the implications of Porto's diffuse model of extensive urbanisation to its future development and to envision the narratives that can enhance it through greater political autonomy. It does so by depicting the urban forms of the city region to see how they could generate multi-scalar governance structures whose scope and perimeter is not based on political-administrative conventions but on a material analysis of the urbanised territory. The centralism of an allegedly macrocephalous nation and the functional undersizing of its other regions, and the apparent mismatch between the regional urban structure and its decision-making frames, add relevance to the discussion. The maps currently orienting the regional debate do not stress the focus on cities and their spheres of influence, nor do they lead to more versatile and multi-scalar regional governance structures.

2. Does space matter?

"I see the city and urban life, today as well as over the entire 12.000 years of urban societal development, as generatively and causally spatial [...] the historical development of human societies does not just take place in cities but is also, in significant ways, generated FROM cities" (Soja, 2003, p.271, 275)

Archaeologists, anthropologists and geographers have often raised the issue of what came first, the city or the economy. Although the most widespread view states that the agricultural revolution- an initial form of organised economy- preceded and allowed the settlement of significant agglomerations, authors like Jane

Jacobs¹ and Edward Soja² questioned this timeline, using recent research in old settlements like Çatal Huyuk (Turkey) and Jericho (Palestine), to suggest that the shaping of cities may have been not only prior to, but may also have spurred the creation of the material and social surplus that allowed new economic needs and the agricultural revolution. More recently, Peter J. Taylor has further developed this argument, by simply asking why such a revolution would happen if there was no demand for it. He finds this “*supply-side model*” (Taylor, 2010) not very credible and replaces it by a demand-led vision of permanent trading and production places creating stable networks and leading to complex cities, which then generated the need for technological improvement of food supply. Instead of seeing increasing social and technological complexity as an incremental, evolutionary process, this view argues that “*complex cities seem much more likely locales for agricultural invention than conventional evolution from hunter-gatherers*” (Taylor, 2010). The keyword here is ‘locales’: growing complexity is not linear and inevitable, it is generated by need and attached to the specific generative effects of a particular space.

Even if the definitive shape of this process cannot be confirmed, these arguments raise the issue of agglomeration and intensity of human interaction as a necessary condition for the emergence of collective phenomena, such as political structures or organised economy. The different terms connected to this view highlight “*the economic and ecological interdependencies and the creative synergies- and occasionally destructive- that emerge from the intentional agglomeration and collective cohabitation of human beings in space*” (Soja, 2000). Jane Jacobs further stressed the generative and innovative forces linked to human agglomeration in a 1997 interview to the Los Angeles Times: “*There is a concentration of need in cities, and a greater incentive to address problems that haven’t been addressed before. This is the essence of economic development. Without it, we’d all be poor*” (Jacobs, 1997).

To remember such visions, constantly corroborated by daily urban life, is relevant as a framework for the argument developed here, because its main premise is that spatial context is generative, not only of social relations but also of its own interpretative tools and management models. And it would be almost redundant if that spatial specificity of urban territories was not often neglected in the name of a supposed irrelevance of physical space in the immaterial economic processes, or, at most, of a vision of territory as a static background of human interactions and not as an active prompter of development. Against this, and defending the need to see material space as an economic asset, Vinicius Netto states that “*a certain view of the economy as an abstraction, something immaterial, almost as if produced in thin air or under any sort of material condition still dominates how we look into our societies. Nothing could be farther from the case. An economy may only emerge in profoundly material and localised conditions*” (Netto, 2010).

Discussions about what is so special about cities have been sometimes attacked as expressions of spatial determinism and therefore as politically-laden ways to neglect the prevalence of self-explanatory, partly autonomous social conflicts as engines of development. Manuel Castells mentions that “*to consider space as a physical given and not as a certain historically-constituted social relation is not a neutral point of departure*” (Castells 1972, p. vii-viii). But two years earlier Henri Lefebvre had written about urbanisation as *the fundamental human condition*, asserting that “*the urban phenomenon supplants industrialisation as the force of historical change and the motor of capital accumulation*” (Ruppert, 2003). This is not spatial determinism because Lefebvre’s argument is that the urban is “*not yet complete, and its current trajectory not inevitable. It is therefore full of possibility*” (Ruppert, 2003). Soja adds to this opening up of possibilities

¹ In the alternative sequence proposed in *The Economy of Cities* (1969)

² Building on Jacobs’ theory in *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000)

by defending the explanatory power of urban space as being so diverse and contradictory that it escapes the binary “*terrorism of the either/or*”, thus being less determinist than more “*categorical or exclusive forms of critical thinking*” (Soja 2003, p.271). Doreen Massey has a similar take on ‘space’ as “*always in construction [...] a simultaneity of stories-so-far*” (Massey, 2005, p.9), but refuses to see it uncritically “*as purely a sphere of flows*” (Massey, 2005, p.99). Even after dismantling structured views of urban vs. rural by acknowledging that the footprints of the city are everywhere, Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift remind us that “*yet we still name cities and think of them as distinctive places*” (Amin and Thrift 2002, p. 1).

These arguments do not address the same levels of analysis. Some are about cities as physical entities, others about urban society in general; others still refer to the knowledge and discourse about cities. But they share the notion of centrality of the urban and its role not as a static background but as a source of new possibilities. This is a relevant standpoint to assess the implications of effectively aligning the spatial features of urban territory with its governance structures, in what has been called “*spatial-institutional isomorphism [...] a mirroring that takes place between urban spatial constructs and the networked governance constructs that purport to manage them*” (Neuman and Hull, 2008, p.777).

3. Nation-states, cities and in-between

The formation of modern nation-states and their prominence in many processes of modernisation and social/territorial intervention led to fact that most developmental features are measured today according to ‘national’ benchmarks, that define the political, economic and cultural geometries that structure the territory. And even when the focus is on cities, they are treated as flagships of a desired ‘national’ project, as the policies that benefit them are still inherently centralist and defined on a national level. A recent account of this apparent focus on cities still centred on the nation-state perspective, neglecting or even limiting the cities’ perspectives of development beyond a chosen flagship (usually the capital), is given by Crouch and Le Galès, in *Cities as national champions* (2012). But it has not always been that way; the city was once an essential framework of politics, economy and culture. Daniel Innerarity reminds us that “*one can understand why the city has always been a utopian promise of political and economic emancipation, the proper space of civic liberties: from a civilizational point of view it was a space of self-governance; [...] Cities became therefore innovation centres and took a leading political and cultural role in modernisation processes*” (Innerarity, 2010, p.110-111).

If such a compact and well-defined city-state no longer exists, the framework of the nation-state also seems insufficient to describe current economic, social and territorial relations. Some suggest that the nation-state is obsolete and close to its demise (Ohmae, 1995). It is probably not so. The nation-state is still an essential actor in the success or collapse of cities, by direct and indirect investment, fiscal and legislative packages and the creation of the political-institutional context where cities operate, not to mention cultural identities and historical consistency. But it is nevertheless a convention and its scope is not fit for every purpose: Kerwin Datu, at the Global Urbanist (LSE), argues that “*there is a three-way mismatch between the political territories of governments, the economic territories of mega-regions and the social territories of trans-local populations.*” (Datu, 2010). One important question is what efforts can be made in present times to further match these territories.

This raises the hypothesis that national territories, as far as political governance and economic autonomy are concerned, could be more accurately framed by their city regions, and not by the nation-state or a

spatially indifferent, regionalised 'slice' of it. According to P. Healey "*if city regions could be understood as objectively existing phenomena, [...] bounding within them the major relations of all aspects of social, political and economic life, then there is a case for co-aligning political jurisdictions with such functional entities*" (Healey, 2010, p.832). This does not mean that regional subdivisions of government that download the tasks of the nation-state are not important, but that such models can be set up according to territorial reality and not political abstraction, fine-tuning the scales of physical territory, economic interaction, population movements and cultural identity in a political frame able to grasp the catalytic effect that cities generate. What follows is an attempt to understand what this means, what idea of 'city' can be summoned for such an endeavour, and what visual metaphors can be used to interpret it.



01. Cities as physical agents of territorial organization: Portugal's urbanised coastline (Google Earth screenshot, layer NASA Earth at Night)

4. The triumph of cities didn't happen right where expected...

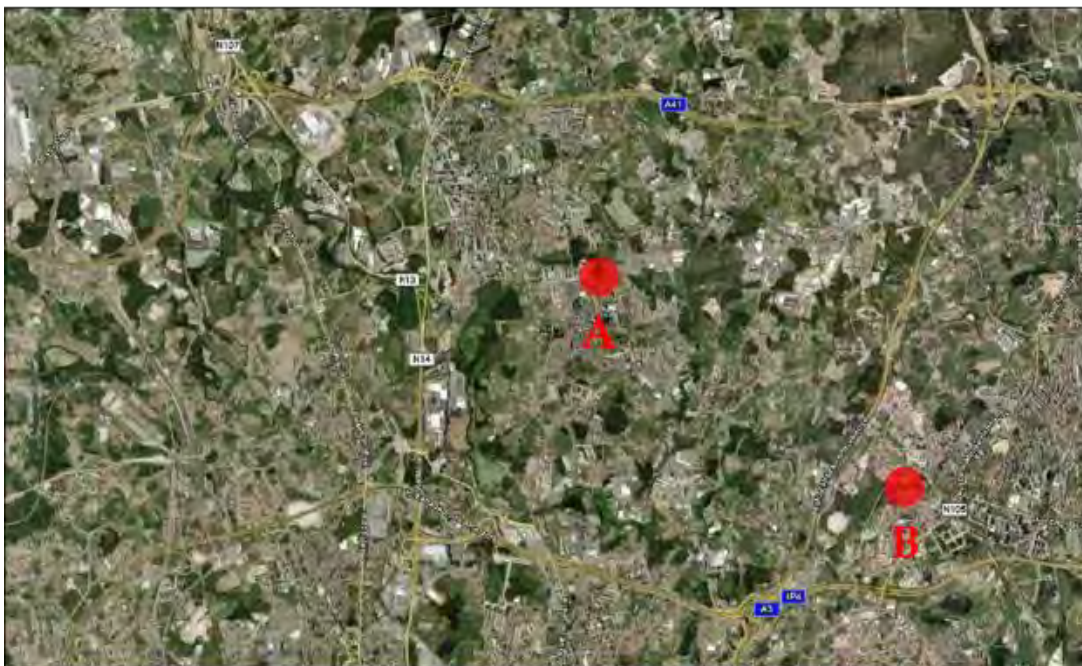
"The first part of the 21st century will be the age of the city- the Urban Age." (Urban Age, 2005)

And yet...

"Individual cities are losing their prominence in the international political economy, ceding that place to larger economic regions, as recent reports have heralded." (Datu, 2010)

Cities are on the top of the political and economic agenda of many countries, and many formerly radical descriptions have left the academic context to occupy space in the media, the narratives of politicians and popular imagination. Environmental, economic and social reasons are presented to celebrate cities and present them as 'assets' that everyone should aspire to. Most of it is old news, exhaustively repeated by "*popular urbanology*" (Gleeson, 2012, p.931). These generally optimistic commentators often popularise

cities as nodes of global, immaterial networks of mobility of people and capital, able to be measured and classified in world rankings as well-defined entities. Those “*deceiving maps*” (Domingues, 2008) show urban centres separate from each other, as if nothing worth describing outside the ‘nodes’ was interacting with them. Such views look at cities as bounded, compact entities, stable enough to have “*immanent trends, even laws, which define their possibilities*” (Gleeson, 2012, p.932), and emphasise “*unity, not contradiction; connection, not disconnection; certainty, not contingency*” (Gleeson, 2012, p.936).



02. Analogies of the disperse and rhizome-like ‘city-cloud’: **(top)** Internet visualization map, Britt M., according to data by opte.org, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Internet_map_1024.jpg>; **(bottom)** Porto metropolitan region, Google Earth screenshot

Against the explanatory power of urban space as source of possibility, open-endedness and unbounded mutual dependencies, such simplifications thrive on spatial determinism: urban processes are seen as implacable, natural forces tending “*towards closure- urbanisation as destiny (and salvation)*” (Gleeson, 2012, p.936), with automatic positive results coming from features traditionally attributed to cities, such as size, density and heterogeneity. However, such features “*no longer provide fruitful criteria in analysing the urban reality of today*” (Schmid, 2006, p. 173). Urban spaces today imply far more illogicality, imbalances and conflicts than the celebratory rhetoric is ready to accept. The potentials of urbanisation can be constructive or destructive: they are “*matters of concern, not matters of fact*” (Latour, 2004, p.231).

Regarding size, density and heterogeneity of cities, such simplified descriptions fail to recognise that size and boundaries are undeterminable, density variation does not correspond with intensity and quality of use, and heterogeneity is so embedded in urban landscapes that it is no longer distinctive for particular places. In most urbanised territories, no man’s land no longer exists: space ‘between cities’ is also urban space, produced at different paces, with specific strengths and weaknesses, but co-dependent with the urban system we depict in maps. To describe this city, many analogies converge, in an appropriately nebulous way, in the idea of an extended urban ‘cloud’ spread throughout the territory, free from rigid physical, social and functional hierarchies, and unsuited for qualifications of centre and periphery. This vision has replaced the city as a coherent and bounded entity by a notion of ubiquitous and disperse ‘urban potentials’, dense and consolidated in some places, less so in others, but as a whole inhabited and infrastructured as urbanised space, as “*the city lost the monopoly of infrastructure*” (Domingues, 2008).

There seems to be no irrelevant space inside the networked tapestry of the urban working as a continuous field of relations and interaction. What happens in point A is related to what happens in point B, even if we cannot necessarily retrieve the path between both. The reach of this field of intersections can be regional or planetary, depending on the phenomenon we are analysing. But if the urban is everything, then maybe there is nothing distinctive left. Only a critical perspective assessing the relevance of each link for each object of study can make the notion operative and keep it from falling into vagueness and abstraction.

This context of interaction between distant and apparently disconnected processes, whose difficulty of visualisation and description makes them seem immaterial and independent of space, leads to a problem of some contemporary narratives about cities- greatly overstating virtual processes over physical space. It is common to refer the logics of global economy and communication and to celebrate the wonders of frictionless relational distance, but the tendency to see those processes as indifferent to spatial context is deceiving- after all, the physical interventions needed to support this economy were never heavier and more complex, from airport expansions to industrial clusters or new museums, from waterfront renovations to whole new ‘cities’ in the desert. Immaterial processes affect and are affected by spatial context, through relocation, densification and expansion of urban activity. Moreover, the very competitive struggles fought by cities in their quest to detach from their territory and earn a higher ranking in the fluid and immaterial global maps are mainly spatial: more and better infrastructure, prime location, enhanced natural and built environment. All these matters have increasing significance because of “*trends towards the ‘unbundling’ of the legacy of comprehensive publicly provided infrastructure networks, in favour of private provision and consumer choice*” (Hague, 2005, p.15). Physical space is thus subject to increasing pressure.

To recognise the physical media through which relational processes occur is important because they are more prone to affect people’s lives and their manipulation is an important source of power. On this aspect, it is important to remember that not everyone is ‘hyper-mobile’ and able to benefit from the freedom of the

relational city. Imbalances are embedded in the urban, and ways of disregarding certain places, uses or functions in favour of others, more directed to the strategic objectives of urban marketing, often reproduce and perpetuate those imbalances. Spatial intervention in such relational contexts is actually more complex than ever, as it comes from many actors, often with non-overlapping and contradictory logics, and no hope for a comprehensive 'common good'.



03. The ranking of cities in the fluid and immaterial global maps is achieved at the cost of increasingly heavy and complex physical interventions.

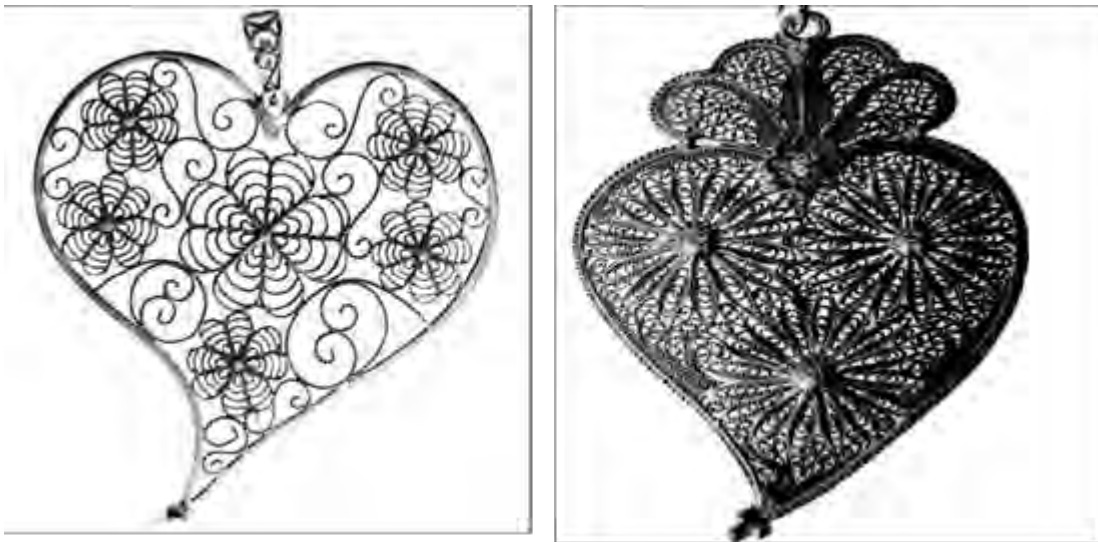
Santiago de Compostela, Ciudad de la Cultura (Google Earth screenshot)

After establishing this set of references, several consequences come to mind:

- The 'unbounded urban' is today a more or less ubiquitous landscape: it is the set for most people's daily experience, including those that formerly sensed 'the city' as something relatively distant. This transition implies replacing the urban-rural dichotomy by a "*transgenic assimilating some classic properties of deep urbanity and rurality*" (Domingues 2007, p.142), which has changed beyond recognition and is actually neither of those. 'Rural' territories are a misnomer: the installed infrastructure, general lifestyles and the level of artificiality of agricultural soils bring them back from mythicized narratives of 'authenticity'.
- The growth patterns of urban space can be more about densification than expansion. If the 'potentially urban' pre-exists, it makes less sense to describe urban growth like an oil stain, progressively occupying a territorial void, than to talk about densification of a patchwork of inter-urban interstices, spreading from different centres, towards a contiguous urban region, as if a kind of 'territorial filigree' was already in place. But a quick glimpse at a piece of filigree is enough to understand that the distribution of centralities, densities and symmetries does not follow clear models and simple geometries. In the same way, in such a

model of extensive city one cannot talk about a 'progression' of urbanisation in time or in space: it does not create hierarchies of density and functions as linear and clear as the expansive oil stain model.

- finally, the distinctiveness of the traditional, compact city is no more than a 'thickening' of events and meanings, an increase of critical mass in the urbanised field- a centrality among many. There are other kinds of thickenings in the general context: the polarising effects of shopping centres, industrial parks, airports or stations are relevant, and the logic leading to their attractive power is not the same that structures the fragments of classical city centres. Nevertheless, the principle of physics stating that greater masses have stronger gravity is valid for both: these polarising elements do acquire a gravitational power that feeds and justifies them circularly. The more they attract the more reasons they have to keep attracting. But the issue of where they appear, what kind of phenomena they promote, what they bring to their context has more to do with the unpredictable dynamics of the whole than with internal factors of each. This means that similar events and decisions have different meanings and consequences according to the place where emerge and their immediate context- model policies and dysfunctional urbanisation coexist inside the same regulatory and territorial framework. This suggests again that, despite the doctrine of digital immateriality, nothing happens in a void.



04. Extensive urbanisation: densification of existing structures
Pieces of portuguese filigree; source unknown

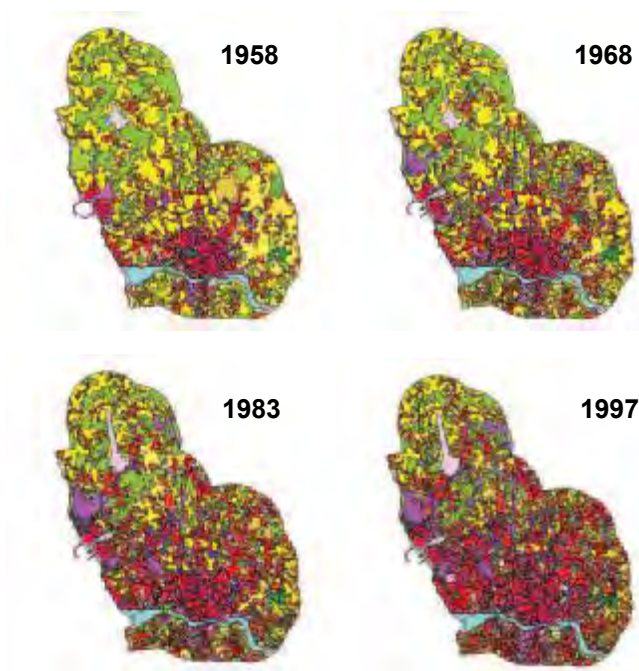
5. Porto as a city-region: filigree urbanisation

The previous description is a useful framework to assess the diffuse and polycentric spatial structure of the urban region of Porto. This is relevant because the alternative ways to organise it will be discussed as consequences of this structure and its specific potentials. The unique features of the region will be interpreted together with Porto's role as a national second city, an important European tradition of mid-sized cities operating as more liberal and extrovert alternatives to the capital, with a more outward-looking stance and less affected by the concentration of power institutions.

Porto is a case of embeddedness in a diffuse urban region comprising a set of centres with some mutual differentiation but lacking a single dominant core city concentrating population, economic and functional

centrality and higher order services. Porto and its neighbouring municipalities build a large, compact urban area that is further extended by countless micro-centralities across the nearby territory. This is a diffuse and polycentric urban region, with no clear limits, great differences in density and functional asymmetries, in turn inserted in the ubiquitous urbanisation strip of the Portuguese coastline. While to the east the degree of urbanisation decreases, conditioned mainly by topography, in the coastal area (north-south) the occupation is constant, and consistent with the main road network. In fact, some studies (namely Lopes, 2010) draw attention to the size of the urban region around Porto, extending to Galicia, whose population is larger than the region of comparable size around Lisbon. Obviously, this is a merely quantitative vision, but it connects with the problem signalled much earlier by J. Ferrão, that “*concentration in the Lisbon metropolitan area is more functional than demographic*” leading to the “*functional undersizing of Porto given its demographic weight*” (Ferrão, 2000).

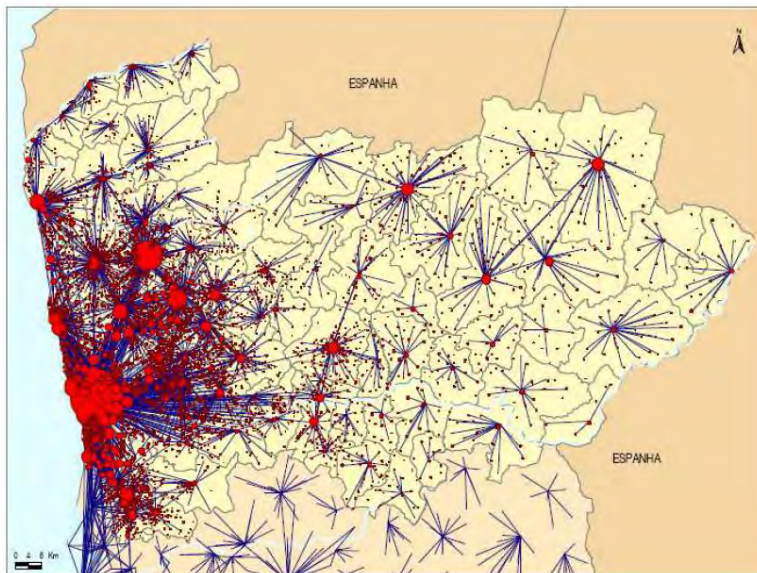
The linkages of the urban region are fostered by the main mobility axes, and fragmented urbanisation progresses along them, as “*the intense flows moving through them are their biggest asset and their own justification*” (Domingues, 2009). This unstable condition goes beyond the notion of functional clarity and urban/rural distinctions. The conditions of such dispersion have been generally discussed in the European context, and an important indication of it is that in most cities built-up areas have grown much more than population since 1950 (Kasanko et al., p.126). However, other factors bring further complexity to the Porto urban region, since growth did not seem to generate from a core city deconcentrating into a city region, but from the concurrent densification and progressive gathering of the inter-urban interstices of many micro-nuclei of different nature and age, that did not suffer significant polarising effects of a core city. According to Nuno Portas et al. (2009, p.4), “*smallholdings have always supported the proliferation of more or less isolated villages, farms and hamlets; and the greater demographic densities have always overlapped with the best agricultural soils. The ancient process of ruralisation and urbanisation of the territory left behind a very extensive network of mobility (from simple pathways to the former national roads), that characterises the territorial porosity and built the sufficient infra-structural support for the post-1960 construction boom*”. In the same way, industry in the region was traditionally small-scale, labour-intensive and thus located in places that “*favoured residential proximity to work*” (Portas et al. 2009, p.4).



05. Urban growth of Porto, showing progressive densification of several micro-nuclei
 Source: LAVALLE C. et al., 2002, Annex 1, p. 92

For these reasons, the disperse occupation did not progress in a clear timeline from a single centre. The formerly described image of 'filigree urbanisation' allows us to visualise what happens in the territory: no single centrality, no regular spatial and temporal progression and no clear distribution of hierarchy. Urbanisation progresses in a capillary way, like "water through a sponge" (Domingues, 2008). What in other regions is considered a fundamental change in urban processes³, here seems to be endogenous to the territorial structure, even if clearly at a smaller scale and with lesser impacts.

Such an extensive model, as opposed to an expansive model, implies the absence of a single strong nucleus in the region. In fact, Porto was never strong enough to absorb the population movements and to attract the great urban magnets. Specifically, it lacks the capacity to retain high-end directional functions and high-value services, in a context of regional economic decline (see the recent Eurostat statistics) and a national economy too small to foster two great cities, even considering that Lisbon's primacy is more functional than demographic (Ferrão, 2000). Therefore, unlike cities like Lisbon or Barcelona, Porto is not a hegemonic city, consistently sipping regional resources. And what happens around Porto ends up being more diverse and multifunctional than the urban region around Lisbon. Although both have different public investment policies, Porto "never clustered tertiary functions (in quantity, diversity and attractive power) able to produce a periphery with the same dimension and degree of functional dependence as the AML [Lisbon Metropolitan Area]", where the "metropolis effect, conventionally marked by the predominance of the centre-periphery model, is still very visible" (Portas et al., 2007, p.29, 33). An important implication of this is that the tendency for self-assertion of the municipalities around Lisbon- when facing an hegemonic metropolis, satellites tend to construct as much autonomy as possible- should not necessarily be repeated here. Nevertheless, political narratives still stress the competitive and conflictive local tantrums.



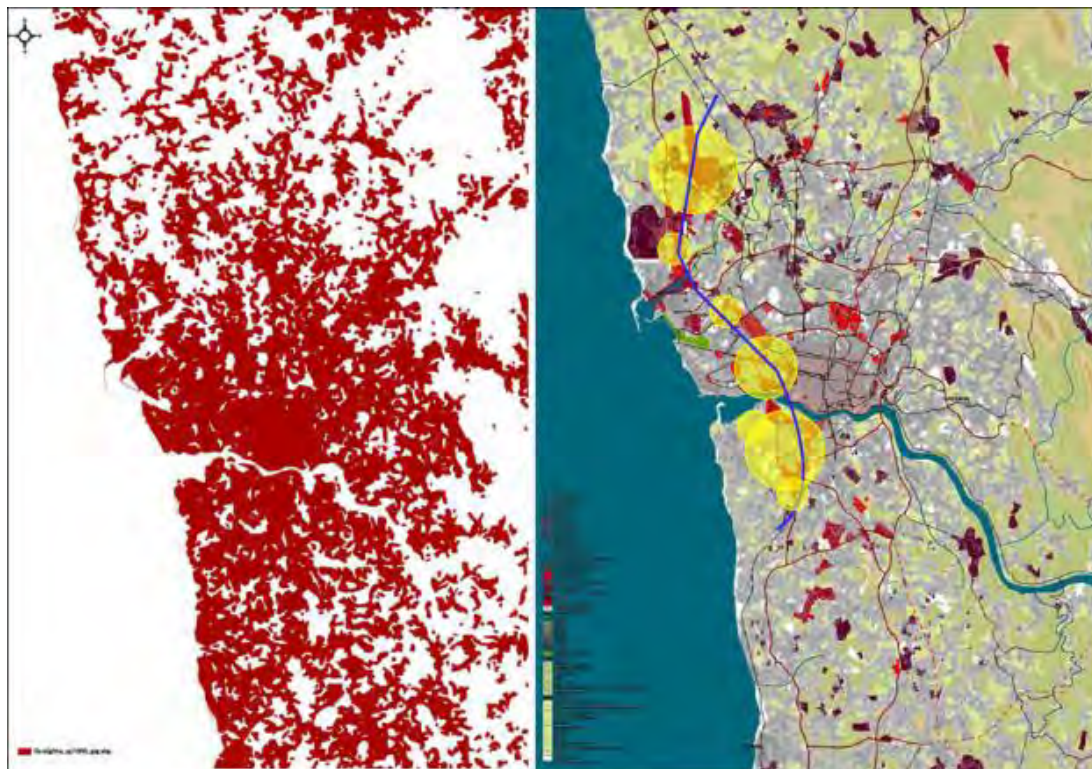
06. Porto region, commuting patterns, 2001
Source: INE, 2001, in CCDR-Norte, 2009, p.25

³ See Schmid (2006, p. 164): "The process of urbanisation has changed fundamentally in recent years. For more than a century, the dominant form of urbanisation was concentric, with suburbs arranged like belts around an urban core. This is how the large agglomerations of the twentieth century emerged. Around the end of the century, however, the way in which cities grow began to change, as manifested in a wide variety of places: the process of urbanization has become undirected; existing urban forms are beginning to dissolve; centrality is being replaced by polymorphous, eccentric urban configurations."

6. Dispersed centrality

When a consensual traditional core is missing, centrality factors easily appear in different places, indifferent to the compact city. An urban centre is usually described as the area with greatest accessibility, concentration of services and amount of local identity, power and cultural symbols (Domingues, 2008). In the urban region of Porto, these features are spread through different places. If the criterion is maximum accessibility, centrality is stronger to the North, where the airport, the main highways and the greatest density of links to Porto and beyond gather. If we choose to address concentration of tertiary activity, several centres emerge, partially in Boavista (the 'modern' centre of the compact city) but also in Gaia, south of the river and Maia. If we look for cultural, historical and institutional symbols, the traditional centre does prevail, but if we consider such urban symbolic references in the citizens' mental map, the research widens at least towards the ring of shopping centres embracing the metropolitan region. Depending on the chosen criteria, "*centrality is becoming general, omnipresent, and yet ephemeral*" (Schmid 2006, p.164).

While it is relatively common for large urban regions to diversify their centralities and build new functional nodes in late expansion areas disconnected from historical centres, in the specific case of Porto the general structure is so diluted and the weakness of functional concentration is so clear, when compared to the built-up continuum and the demography, that there is hardly redundancy, only addition: centralities are not competing nodes, mutually effacing each other in an old centre vs. periphery battle. More than functional links and mobility flows, the spatial distribution of complementary, not competing urban programmes transcends administrative boundaries and hierarchic constrains, namely some important anchors of regional economy- port, airport, associated logistics, universities, private health services. The relevance of Porto as a functionally 'complete' urban entity happens foremost at the urban region scale.



07. Porto urban region; **left:** built-up continuity <50m; **right:** structural plan with land use patterns (source image) and superimposing distribution of centralities (yellow) over an axis (blue)
Source images: *Portas et al., 2009*

A significant 'Porto', can only be defined by accepting its plasticity and scope and the dilution of its boundaries. This is a relevant feature of the urban region: without a dominant core, it follows a structure where unity, or completeness, appears only in multiplicity. And this favours some aspects of the region as a whole. Commuting patterns are not exclusively centred on a core (the light rail network map shows a clearly divergent pattern, crossing but not centring in Porto); other cities "*concentrate functions and employment of high polarising content, favouring greater balance and polycentricity*" (Portas et al. 2009, p.13); and generally micro-centralities and quality of life are more balanced throughout the territory. Certainly there are mono-functional areas, declining neighbourhoods and apparent edge-cities, but the territory also supports a large amount of places- or fragments, many of ancient origins- with the necessary functional mix, a certain degree of self-sufficiency and density for a better quality of life. And they are nevertheless participants in the general construction of completeness as a whole: living in any of those small-scale fragments also means being a city-user of a large and highly accessible urban region.

Some of Porto's features seem to be more typical of national 'second cities'. Such cities are a typically European tradition of non-capital cities, whose development models were historically alternative and semi-autonomous from the capital and the national frameworks. Hanseatic cities were an example of this: a network of cities with some economic autonomy from their nation-states. Being away from the circles of power, and sometimes neglected by their national governments, these cities developed an outward-looking approach, highly based on commerce and were strongly influenced by foreign trends. Their cultural discourse was somewhat individualist and their political stance often functioned in opposition to the capital and power in general. About that specific European tradition, Peter Cook mentioned in a 2010 interview that "*I have always thought that second cities are fascinating. They don't have to look up to the establishment because power is not centralised there. People in capitals are normally pompous. Second cities try harder; they are more enterprising, first of all because nobody is watching. [...] The most transgressive architecture, the most assured attitude towards creativity is in second cities. Capitals, paradoxically, become more parochial.*" (Cook, cited in Rato, 2010)

Such a statement suggests a specificity of second cities in cultural, political and economic levels. But also urban form may suffer some influences of that condition. The essential aspect is that such cities lack the centralising force of capitals in terms of presence from the state, power institutions and state-driven economy. Because of this, their territorial distribution can be less constrained by the powerful attractive power of top level public and private directional functions, traditionally occupying classic city centres, rather following different models of specialisation in countless high-value ancillary services that support larger economic entities whose headquarters are usually in large capitals (Sassen, 2005; 2006).

Therefore, their ability for distributing urban programmes into a larger urban area, without the institutional, historical and identity constraints of capitals may be enhanced, leading to more dispersed patterns of urbanisation, and escaping more easily from the rigid 'charged core' vs. 'insipid periphery' models. This may not apply to housing patterns, but mainly to services, office space, institutions and cultural facilities- exactly the more balanced, polycentric distribution identified in Porto, as opposed to Lisbon (Portas et al. 2007, p.33) An important debate should be what are the advantages of such a territorial structure if, as said, individual cities are ceding their central role to large urban regions in terms of economic activity.

7. Sliced nation-states and inclusive city regions

“Cities are far from realising their power [...] inventing this new type of political project they will need; part of that new politics will have to be thinking about groups of cities that share concerns and challenges and how they produce that instrumentality.” (Sassen, 2005)

One of the main problems affecting the Porto urban region is the territorial splintering due to the existing decision-making frames. There are countless municipalities, socially and economically very different, not very collaborative and stuck to party loyalties and institutional power voids. There is an absence of intermediate political structures between the municipal scale and the nation-state, as regionalisation has not been achieved in any form. And a large amount of nationally-run sectoral policy-makers act on the territory- airport and port authorities, highways, public service providers- under their own criteria, with no contextual knowledge of the region or will to articulate inside a larger framework. Notwithstanding the immense impact on territory of these agents, regional coordination is deemed impossible.

All scales seem inadequate for effectively developing the region: the frameworks are either too broad- the central state; too narrow- municipalities; or too weak- the metropolitan area, the regional coordination commission and other entities with no real power. Attempts to collaborate, when they happen, tend to operate by a sum of parts, not internalising the idea that in such complex environments, the whole has emergent properties that cannot be anticipated and derived from its constituent parts. The insipid regional endeavours are therefore too broad to have visible local effects, too rigid to adapt to specific objectives and too vague to acquire true power. A meta-project layer is missing, working as an encompassing vision articulating all the conjunctural objectives.

But is such a meta-project possible? How can one show that a certain scale is wrong and other could be right, in this case the interdependent urban region scale described for Porto? Patsy Healey warns that *“the search for a city region area which encompasses some stable ‘coherence’ and ‘integration’ relations may be misguided”* (Healey, 2009, p.832) and suggests to replace that illusion by the recognition that city regions *“are not objectively ‘there’, but are imagined concepts, constructed in particular places for particular reasons”* (Healey, 2009, p.832) and that *“an integration of diverse relations in urban areas cannot be assumed to exist”* (Healey, 2009, p.833). In a way, this cannot be predicted before the actual implemented experience. However, stressing again the predominance of territorial evidence over political abstraction, it may imply that physical space defines the political frame: the scope of decision-making and the scale of intervention can correspond to consistent sections of territorial occupation, in terms of built continuity, infrastructure, functional patterns and mobility. This is in itself no guarantee of effective governance but a city region is, most of all, a *“focusing device”* (Healey, 2009, p.841) rather than a spatial fixity. The intention behind aligning the spatial context with the institutional framework is giving political, social and cultural acknowledgement to fragmented dynamics and relations already happening on the territory. In other words, it is not about spatially bounding this dynamics but about making it visible and explicit, and finding an arena where different discourses meet and interventions can be articulated. The city region arena, more fine-tuned with the actual territorial structure, would have the potential to allow:

- a more effective selection of priorities and a more accurate sense of how regulable they are;
- a more interdependent understanding of the most strategic places of intervention, regardless of their prior administrative boundaries of local socio-political confinements;

- the definition of a more relevant place of confrontation between the local/metropolitan level and the European/global context, going one level of scale further in articulating interdependences that have, in many cases, even larger scopes.

For this case-study, such a project could respond to J. Ferrão's suggestion that Porto "*would have to grow functionally faster than its demographic expansion, which implies being able to reinforce its pivotal role between internationalisation processes and dynamics of development not only of Northern Portugal but also of a good part of Northwest Iberia*" (Ferrão, 2000). Actually, cities do address the joint dynamics of their city regions regardless of the political frame behind them, and they do project their cultural and institutional images towards the urban region as a whole, for greater touristic attractiveness and broader city marketing. This happens with or without formalising political jurisdictions. But the crucial point is that a city region framework, when it echoes physical realities, is an arena that focuses such events into locally defined agendas and programmes, making them operational and easier to negotiate. This institutional level of the concept is the link between city regions and political regionalisation: instead of slicing the nation into territorially bounded, smaller 'nations' that reproduce the abstraction and randomness of political boundaries, making the political frames emerge from the territory itself, accepting the premise that areas of disperse, polycentric and interconnected urbanisation, where infrastructures and urban programmes build more complete entities at larger scales, where collaboration is more effective than competition, are the most able to autonomously build their own project of city region- something that "*is not actually there*" (Healey, 2009), but is 'invented' for this particular purpose.

This is why the debate about regionalisation, in Portugal and elsewhere, should be more based on territorial knowledge than on an abstract subdivision of the country. The decision of merely slicing the nation-state into smaller but analogous reproductions does not change the fundamental features of such approaches: the mismatch between scales, the randomness of boundaries and the rigidity of interactions. The issue is that regionalisation implies a redistribution of power and a review of the frames, limits and scope of decisions. Therefore, by proposing to articulate the scales of governance with the real territorial consistence (which must also be, at a certain point, a convention), with its flows, nodes and agents, we are defining an organisational criteria for regionalisation, more operative and versatile than the current maps roughly slicing countries into 'regions' with vague administrative, historical and topographic criteria.

Certainly there are obstacles to this vision of urban-based regionalisation. To start, it is important to discuss, in Porto and anywhere, if there is a common political consciousness and a cultural 'glue' that helps to sustain such territories, or if the city region entity spreads in such a thin way over such a wide territory, that trying to contain everything it ends up emptying out of value. Healey comments on how many functional realities are aligned with administrative jurisdictions (Healey, 2009, p.832) and fail because they do not enter popular imagination as a 'place'. She proposes that the city region as a policy tool is coupled with "*some kind of more specific and localised place development project*" (Healey, 2009, p.834). In the case of Porto, it is important to see if the 'Northern region' makes sense in these terms, or if the sphere of influence of the urban region and the cultural discourse of the 'second city' is more close to proximity to the coast, for example. If this is so, a further problem appears: can a nation be regionalised with different models, some based on strong city region concepts, and some more abstract, or does this lead to more favoured, resourceful regions and 'leftover regions' with no visible criteria?

Massey, Amin and Thrift (2003) pose a deeper problem, when they argue that power should not really be devolved to regions, but rather dispersed, literally speaking, throughout the territory. Using the UK as a

case study, they suggest that the political and cultural institutions that build a nation's power and identity structures are spread, so that instead of having regions building their own autonomy project, they have a voice in all national affairs. This is a different view, distrustful of any kind of centrally-run power devolution that presupposes, or at least leads to, a more or less balanced political and economic structure everywhere. The Portuguese case could hardly adopt such a solution, due to the lack of a mid-sized city level in the national urban network. As Ferrão (2000) describes, Portugal is functionally much centred in Lisbon and demographically bicephalous between Lisbon and Porto. The other cities lack population, a diversified economy and enough critical mass. Many find it difficult to attract economic investment beyond public services, and these services are usually outposts of the capital. This makes them functionally and economically closer to Lisbon than to Porto, even if they lie in the Northern Region. Furthermore, those cities find it difficult even to attract their own local hinterland: people are spread around countless micro-settlements, especially in the North, also due to the historical inertia of the smallholding tradition mentioned above (cf. Portas et al., 2009). Local politicians usually support such dispersion because it is 'socially just' and 'fights desertification', but it also overloads the territory with underused infrastructures and artificial soils and keeps mid-sized cities from using the benefits of greater human agglomeration. It is a small country and for industry, services or culture, Lisbon and Porto are close and accessible anyway. Many authors agree that top-down regionalisation, that breaks down the state into little states with their centres and peripheries (Massey et al., 2003) does not work. For Massey, Amin and Thrift, that is because it perpetuates centralist visions and goes against the inevitable linkages of a society threaded at every scale. For Healey, it fails to construct an idea of 'place' that can articulate the different agendas. Neuman and Hull write that "*images and models of a truly sustainable city region have not yet begun to populate the collective consciousness*" (Neuman and Hull, 2009, p.785). The essential issue is that the city region is a constructed concept with a purpose, not a way to download resource distribution to smaller, more controllable parts: it should therefore emerge from the specificity of each territory, with sufficient power and versatility to build an arena for encounter, and no predefined formal structure. If generic recipes and abstract subdivisions are to be surpassed, the responsibility of each region, and its social forces, to build their own territory must be stressed. This is a learning process implying "*collective action, and so is linked to governance*" (Neuman and Hull, 2009, p.785), and leads to a debate about "*what locally specific, endogenously grounded but exogenously positioned, place development strategies might look like*" (Healey, 2009, p.840).

The Porto urban region is witnessing a struggle between forces of centralisation (mainly institutional) and decentralisation (more vaguely cultural, economic and territorial). But this comes with a rather disappointing lack of inspiring visions proposing future scenarios at the urban region scale. With no narratives about a desirable future emerging from the territory and its communities, the political-institutional void may turn into a wider cultural immobility bypassing every opportunity to empower the urban region according to its specific features. Considering that Portuguese regionalisation has not been done yet and can still be conceptualised, here lies the crucial relevance and utility of this discussion.

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