

RSA Research Network on Regional Urban Systems and their Performance met in Washington (USA) and Delft (NL)

- workshop report -

Most participants of the workshop on 'Urban Systems 2.0', that was held in Delft on 16-17 September 2010, got a taste of what the workshop was about simply by landing at Amsterdam's Schiphol airport and taking the train to Delft. Within this 45 minute ride, a variety of historic cities would pass before their eyes, with green, cow-dotted landscapes providing for brief intermezzo's. From Amsterdam, the train would stop in Leiden, The Hague and Rijswijk before reaching Delft. Would they have stayed on board for 20 more minutes, they would have stopped in the old port cities of Schiedam, Rotterdam and Dordrecht. To be true, next to pastures, fields and waterways, they might also have seen the congested motorways – at least if they were able to obtain a window seat in the at times jam-packed trains. Yet, the urban and rural scenery that unfolds on such a train ride must have given food for thought on the theme of the workshop: cities and the relations between them.

This theme tends to get much emphasis in the contemporary literature – the position of cities in networks appears to explain their economic, social and cultural functioning to a large extent. However, a reason for organizing the workshop was our concern over the short memory we as researchers sometimes have, and our fear that we may reinvent the wheel from time to time. Hence the title of the workshop: 'Urban Systems 2.0'. This title obviously puts the issue on the agenda what we can learn from urban systems research in the past, it had its heydays in the 1970s and 1980s, to understand contemporary issues on urban systems, and whether our contemporary research issues and ways to address them are really different from before. We were very delighted that one of the most preeminent scholars of the urban systems "1.0" literature and thoughtful writer on contemporary concepts addressing urban systems was willing to give a keynote. Prof. John B. Parr from the University of Glasgow gave an excellent overview of developments in our understanding of urban systems and many presenters fell back on his thoughts and considerations in their presentations.

The universality of the topic of urban systems was reflected in the wide variety of origins of the presenters. 12 different nationalities were present, and papers addressed European, African, South American, US and Chinese urban systems. The 14 plenary presented papers were organized under three themes: Urban-spatial structure; Planning the modern-day Metropolis; and, the Economics of Urban Systems.

Polycentricity was a keyword in the first sessions, and it was explored on a variety of spatial scales. Next to describing trends towards polycentric settlement patterns, we discussed issues such as its impact on economic performance and social segregation, the challenges it poses for classifying urban areas by data providers and the way in which, and whether mental maps of people's urban environment were changing.

The session that focused on planning explored the challenges for policy-makers arising from a reframing of once local issues in the regional context of the urban system a city is part of. This often leads to new perspectives on the nature of these issues, and opens up new opportunities for addressing them. Yet, the fragmentation of government in an urban system remains a complicating issue.

The third session had a more economic focus. It explored urban systems from the perspective of clusters and economic diversity, wage differentials, competition between cities and science parks and innovation.

In a final discussion, it was concluded that more research effort is needed to understand the impact of spatial structure on the performance of cities and regions. Yet, this requires uniform sets of definitions of key concepts. A more conceptually coherent framework for research, as in the heydays of urban systems research, is required. It was also concluded that the role of policies in shaping urban systems is highly neglected. These are not necessarily spatial or regional development policies, but their absence, and therewith a holistic view of the urban system, may result in suboptimal development. Finally, we turned to the question of whether there is such a thing we could call 'urban systems 2.0'. It was felt that urban systems had become substantially more complex than 30-40 years ago. However, new concepts are not always that new, and there is a rich heritage to build on. Yet, given the absence of major breakthroughs, it is probably better to characterize contemporary research as 'urban systems 1.2' rather than '2.0'.

The workshop in Delft was the second meeting of the RSA Research Network on Regional Urban Systems and their Performance. It was preceded by an organized session at the American Association of American Geographers annual conference, held in Washington D.C. on April 17, 2010. These successful sessions brought together another 14 papers under the theme 'The Spatial Organization of the Regional City' and was visited by over 60 conference participants. Preparations are going on for a final in 2011.

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Some pictures on following page



Prof. John B. Parr.

Participants in the Delft meeting.



