Theses on Metropolisation

Ten discussion points for research and education

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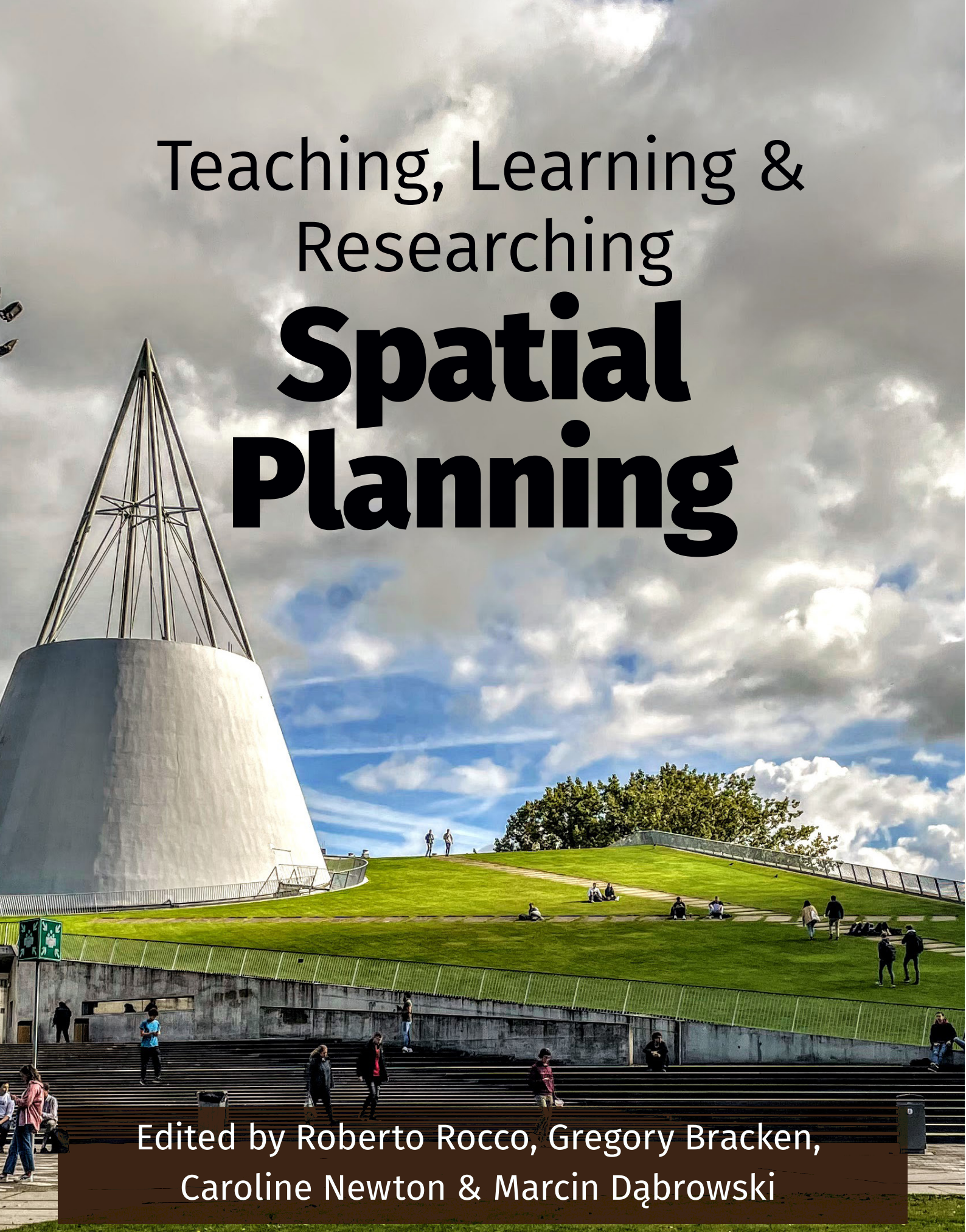

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URBANISM

Theses on Metropolisation

Ten discussion points for research and education

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This chapter introduces the concept of metropolisation, a framework to describe and understand the dynamics of territories undergoing extensive urbanisation. Metropolisation is defined as the transformation of fragmented urbanised areas into coherent and consolidated urban regions through the effects of long-term and intertwined processes of spatial, functional, institutional, and symbolic integration. The metropolisation story is told through ten theses formulated as open-ended discussion points. Individually, the theses aim to provoke debate and inspire further explorations in research and education. Together, they uncover the novel conceptual transformations, real-world mechanisms, and policy and planning implications of the processes of metropolitan integration.

METROPOLISATION, URBAN FIELDS, AGGLOMERATION BENEFITS, URBAN REGIONS, METROPOLITAN GOVERNANCE

Introduction

This chapter discusses the foundations, mechanisms, and implications of the concept of metropolisation. Over three quarters of the European population lives in urban areas (Eurostat, 2016) but the definition and boundaries of such areas have long surpassed conventional understandings of 'cities'. Once distinct cities have gradually become embedded in large and multicentric urban regions, following diffuse and pervasive urbanisation processes where stable distinctions between oppositional socio-spatial categories – urban, suburban, rural, natural – no longer hold. These processes of unbounded and extensive urbanisation (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021a) are arguably the dominant form of contemporary urban development. Their constituent elements knit together and interact on multiple scales and through various spatial and non-spatial dimensions, and in the process shape increasingly integrated urban regions. Metropolisation is a framework to describe, as well as a lens to interpret, these dynamics of interaction between long-term, intertwined processes of spatial, functional, institutional, and symbolic integration of urban regions, as they gradually transform fragmented urbanised territories into coherent metropolitan systems at a larger spatial scale (Cardoso, 2016a).

The theoretical framework of metropolisation has been introduced and discussed at length elsewhere, together with its fundamental triggers, concrete manifestations, and implications for policy and planning (Cardoso & Meijers, 2020; 2021a). In this chapter, the key features of metropolisation are presented in the form of ten theses. The reason to formulate them in this way is that while all the theses are interdependent, each one can be read and discussed as a relatively self-contained topic to provoke debate in research and education. Indeed, each captures a claim which is far from complete and is open to confirmation, contestation, or falsification. The theses follow a fluid order. Together, they arguably tell a coherent story; individually, each aims to be a nugget of useful knowledge and a trigger for the discussion of relevant problems in urban research, suggesting paths for further investigation.

1. Urbanisation processes bring about the citification of the region, not the regionalisation of the city

The urban is (nearly) everywhere, but more than a one-way process of urbanisation of what was formerly not urban, current developments denote a convergence of the spatial, functional, and socio-economic features of the spaces of human activity, whose categorical differences and boundaries become harder to pinpoint. The outcome is a generalised 'urban field', dense and consolidated in some areas, scattered and incomplete in others, whose elements differ more in degree than in kind. In this context, the typical features that define urbanity – spatial typologies, urban functions, economic activities, cultural encounters, social relations – can be found again at the territorial scale, rather than being exclusive of predefined nodes (Indovina, 1990; Sieverts, 1997). The qualities, expectations, and

demands usually reserved for 'proper cities' (Phelps et al., 2006) are thus reconstructed at the larger scale. The urban planning toolkit is duly rescaled, and liveability sought 'at any point of the territory' (Balducci et al., 2011) as 'city' programmes, networks, and devices (amenities, transport, urban design features) become 'urban region' programmes, networks, and devices. Metropolisation pays attention to this process of ***citification of the region***, not interpreting cities as dissolving into shapeless urbanisation, but rather regions made of urban fragments consolidating into extensive cities. This kind of thinking in research acknowledges the variety of forms, flows, and activities that constitute contemporary urbanity, and avoids neglecting important manifestations, effects, and challenges of urbanisation just because they are outside presumed spatial categories, it also helps us include areas, people, and institutions beyond our typical assumptions of where cities begin and end in the debate about urban futures (Sieverts, 1997; Piorr et al., 2011).

2. The image of the urban network can be superseded by the image of the urban field

The sprawling morphological, demographic, and functional patterns present in many urban regions can be represented by zonal concepts such as 'field' alongside nodal concepts like 'network'. This shift suggests that some popular spatial understandings, such as polycentricity, might be inaccurate. Indeed, the polycentricity lens sees singular nodes forming networks while actually looking at continuous urban fields where 'it is difficult to disentangle the nodes from the in-between' (van Meeteren, 2016: 6). This echoes similar paradigm shifts in twentieth-century physics from particles to fields as key physical entities, and happens not only spatially but also in terms of functional and demographic distributions and governance arenas. As a way of seeing, the network abstraction is spatially selective and therefore incomplete in its understanding of large urban regions whose main feature is spatial diffusion, with some being ***also*** relatively monocentric and others ***also*** relatively polycentric (Soja, 2011; Hajrasouliha & Hamidi, 2017). These places are defined by regionalised common processes rather than localised and distinctive physical characteristics – constitutive sociospatial processes rather than nominal settlement typologies, in Brenner's words (2013: 98). The demographic, functional, economic, or environmental manifestations of urbanisation can consequently be seen as fluctuations of agglomeration externality fields, defined as zones of influence of urbanisation which are to some extent detached from network nodes or hierarchical roles (Burger & Meijers, 2016). As an analytic and normative concept, metropolisation is to the image of the urban field what polycentricity is to the image of the urban network (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021a).

3. Understanding contemporary urbanisation demands taking a historical perspective over the urban region rather than the city only

The default understanding of urban region formation processes used to be that they originate from large cities gradually expanding over a regional hinterland in a long-term process of decentralization and redistribution of urban forms and functions:

from small to large, from simple to complex. But the history of territories matters: urban regions can also be shaped by collections of well-connected, similarly sized, historically distinct cities operating in conjunction (the so-called polycentric urban regions, like the Randstad or the Rhein-Ruhr), or by mixed models in which cities of different types, sizes, and growth stages loosely expand towards each other until they build a relatively continuous urban landscape (Champion, 2001; Cardoso, 2018). As a result, the vast majority of European cities have several other cities in their close surroundings and the urban systems that they eventually form come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and functional relations. The image of cities expanding over a relatively passive and historically non-problematic hinterland is thus only one of the possible paths to an urban region, but taken as a blanket assumption, it neglects the differentiation allowed by a historical perspective over that scale of the urban. A lesson for planners and urbanists emerges here: we have grown accustomed to thinking about the city as an historical body, but not the urban region. The latter tends to be quickly categorised as a 'recent' outcome of urban expansion under contemporary socioeconomic conditions, but that is mainly because the discipline of urbanism was invented to deal with the city, not the region, and we lack conceptual tools to historically observe that scale (Grosjean, 2010). However, there is a long history of ***urbanisation*** alongside the history of ***urbanism***, and territorial urbanisation processes do not appear from nowhere: their patterns have remained remarkably stable in time and the imprints left by the history of their territories partly guide contemporary transformations (Batty, 2001; Hohenberg, 2004; Cardoso, 2018). Different origins lead to different outcomes and to understand the shape and direction of urban regions today, we need a historical perspective beyond the boundaries of the city.

4. Metropolisation processes entail spatial-functional, political-institutional, and cultural-symbolic dimensions

As a lens over long-term, intertwined, multi-dimensional interaction processes, metropolisation requires the differentiation allowed by an historical perspective over the space of the urban region. But metropolisation processes are not just about spatial transformations. They involve 1) functional interdependencies carried by the redistribution of specialised urban function, economic activities and transport linkages across urban regions, 2) political-institutional integration managed by new governance bodies and networks operating at different scales and arenas, and 3) cultural-symbolic reinterpretations of urban settings changing the scale and scope of place attachments and urban identities. These three dimensions are intertwined and interdependent, establishing feedback relations which can stimulate or hinder the unfolding of metropolisation processes over longer time periods. Therefore, looking at metropolisation from only one perspective or as a snapshot in time isolates events from other contingent processes along other dimensions, of which they are both outcome and trigger. For instance, governance cooperation (institutional integration) is important to deliver metropolitan functional redistributions and transport links (functional integration), which may enhance the perception by citizens of a common identity and

priorities (cultural integration), which in turn provides more legitimacy for further institutional and functional integration. This was the case at the time when symbolic aspirations, political urgency, and a bridge across the river interacted to drive the integration of the cities of Buda and Pest as Budapest in the nineteenth century, as much as in the self-reinforcing feedback between the delivery of infrastructural projects and the emergence of new institutional bodies in the south wing of the Dutch Randstad (Cardoso & Meijers, 2020). The three dimensions of metropolisation may play these changing roles as enablers, carriers, or beneficiaries of processes, always in interaction. Metropolisation does not happen in a vacuum, it is embedded in spatial and temporal contexts whose interaction returns unique, uneven, and arguably path-dependent integration trajectories in every urban region. The advantages of strong integration, as well as the drawbacks of poor integration, are experienced differently among, as well as within, urban regions.

5. Metropolisation is an example of a concept developed in parallel research traditions whose overlaps remained unnoticed

Many theoretical concepts do not travel well between different geographical, historical, or cultural contexts. Travelling theory (Connolly, 2008) may create inappropriate reference frameworks to analyse different places, ultimately making urban theory abstract, bland, and lacking explanatory power. But sometimes the opposite happens: scholars in different traditions 'know' similar urban phenomena and develop similar ways to explain them, but observe them from slightly different vantage points and under different names. The conceptualisation of urban regions is a case in point, as it often amounts to local syntheses based on empirical observations and specific research traditions (Cheshire & Gornostaeva, 2002; Cardoso & Meijers, 2021a). Metropolisation, as defined here, bridges these mutually unintelligible traditions which lingered in linguistic and academic silos. It builds upon the notion of French ***métropolisation***, a concept to denote the demographic and economic accumulation in the largest urban areas since the 1980s, as their growth trends detached from the rest of the territory. It considers the approach of economic geography, that stressed the functional selectiveness of these detachment processes, based on specific services and industries, and their spatial impacts leading to a polycentric distribution of activity across regions (ESPON, 2012). It revisits the regional scale systems thinking of Dutch planning (van Meeteren, 2020), namely the concept of ***metropoolvorming***, which, in its aspirational application to the Randstad, aimed to turn the patchwork of urban fragments of that 'disassembled city' into an integrated 'assembled city' of regional scale (Neutelings, 1989; Deltametropool, 1998), precisely through functional, spatial, institutional, and cultural integration. It echoes the related notion of the ***Zwischenstadt***, by Sieverts (1997), in the sense that the city is characterised by a set of devices and relations rather than a predefined type of space and boundary and that these are actually the 'in-between' spaces where people live, work, and should care about: a concept so far from regular understandings of urban space that Sieverts' plea was initially translated to English as 'cities ***without*** cities'. Finally, it resonates with the idea

of ***metropolizzazione***, advanced by Italian scholars who had been looking at what happens in Northwest Italy when urban spaces, functions, activities, and people spread across the territory and interact across extensive territories like in a conventional city, but without ever clustering as compact urban cores or hierarchical structures (de Carlo, 1962; Quaroni, 1967; Secchi, 1989; Indovina, 1990; Balducci et al., 2017).

6. Tighter, broader, and deeper urban region integration became an important policy aim in contemporary capitalist economies

The positive externalities of urban agglomeration amount to the socioeconomic benefits delivered by size, density, and diversity accessible primarily in large cities (Jacobs, 1969; Melo et al., 2009). But these benefits are limited by the problems of excessive concentration – congestion, pollution, spatial competition, higher prices, ungovernability, among others. Capturing the added functional and demographic mass and diversity spread across an urban region carries the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of agglomeration while reducing the costs of overconcentration. Urban centres operating in close interaction engage in network economies that may replace typical agglomeration economies based on local size and proximity (Johansson & Quigley, 2003; Meijers et al., 2016). However, tapping into these metropolitan benefits needs strong integration across the urban region. Indeed, the added economic and functional performance of a set of nearby cities is usually not as high as a single large city of similar size (Meijers, 2008) because flows do not travel seamlessly across urban regions (Parr, 2004). This is due to several barriers that single large cities do not experience as strongly: institutional fragmentation, functional redundancies, uncoordinated transportation, disconnected housing markets, disparities in investment, and lack of common cultural and political references able to shape joint strategic priorities (Lambregts, 2006; Nelles, 2013; Cardoso, 2016b). As a result, policymakers are keen to nurture integration processes to mitigate these obstacles and exploit the potential of the metropolitan scale. This includes building transport links, encouraging complementary functional specialisations, envisioning various institutional governance models – from strong metropolitan authorities to informal cooperation networks – and reframing city branding and symbolic place attachment strategies to explore the urban region scale (Cardoso & Meijers, 2017). This is sometimes seen as an 'upward cycle of metropolisation' (Meijers et al., 2012): integration measures dismantle stable core-periphery equilibria and induce regional-scale urbanisation, which in turn increases the (metropolitan) agglomeration economies present in the urban region and creates the need and incentive for further integration measures (Cardoso and Meijers, 2020).

7. Different types of city search for different gains from urban region integration through borrowed size effects

Being able to synergistically combine the size, mass, and diversity of several places into a larger and well-connected entity is quite attractive for large core cities hoping to redistribute their over-

concentrated activities while still leveraging their economic and political agenda onto the urban region. However, integration must also be perceived positively by smaller cities, which may wonder what is in it for them if they give up some autonomy and redirect priorities for the benefit of the larger scale. The arguments here entail the concept of borrowed size. As initially formulated by Alonso (1973), smaller cities which are part of a larger urban region perform economically better than they would in isolation due to their easy access to nearby agglomeration benefits of other cities (both a large core city and a network of similarly sized cities), including population, amenities and workforce serving the whole region. This definition has been successively expanded (Meijers & Burger, 2017) to note, first, that borrowing size is not only an ability of smaller cities 'upscaled' by a strong urban region. Large cities also borrow from smaller ones and the region as a whole, for example, by hosting even larger higher-order functions which build upon the additional critical mass of the region. Second, the word 'size' is imprecise, as cities can borrow ***performance*** (e.g., faster economic and population growth rates by building upon the economic externalities of the larger region) and/or borrow ***functions*** (e.g. hosting more important activities, infrastructures or amenities than they would attract and support by themselves). Different places in the urban region can borrow in both these dimensions, only in one, or none at all. A satellite 'dormitory' town close to a core city may attract substantial population growth and wealthier demographic groups but still be poorly served by services and amenities. An historic city may host urban functions well beyond its local scale (such as a large university) but the economic and demographic benefits of such functions are not necessarily localised. Large urban regions, such as the Dutch Randstad, are prodigal in such examples.

8. Metropolisation processes necessarily imply urban region unevenness through agglomeration shadow effects

Stronger integration contributes to better functional and economic performance (Meijers et al., 2018). But these net results of the urban region may hide strong unevenness within the region. Indeed, the generative effects of metropolisation processes can result in intra-regional distributive effects producing both borrowed size dynamics and their reverse, known as agglomeration shadows. Some cities may even be unable to keep stable socioeconomic conditions, let alone borrow performance or functions, as they are emptied of population, amenities, investment, and opportunities due to the presence of other larger or more attractive cities nearby. Here, the strong integration enabled by good transport links, coordinated governance, and functional interdependence results in an optimised flow of competition effects which further differentiates among cities and channels the advantages to a handful of privileged places in the urban region (Dembski et al., 2017; Cardoso & Meijers, 2021b). Existing advantages (amenities, people, capital, etc.) tend to attract more advantages and the privileged few perpetuate their condition. On the other end, undesirable urban functions and socioeconomic groups are gradually pushed to the regional (rather than the urban) periphery and tend to stabilise in the places already suffering from agglomeration shadow effects (Cox & Longlands, 2016; Dembski et

al., 2017). This affects the urban region integration efforts, as stakeholders in cities on the receiving end of such redistributions are unlikely to see the benefits of further autonomy loss towards integration. This means that, paradoxically, the places which could arguably gain more from tighter, broader, and deeper integration are those less willing to do so because the advantages are not visible to them – and if they are still willing, they are not likely to engage in balanced power relations to further their integration agenda rather than the one promoted by the urban region winners. In short, need, willingness, and ability to integrate are three different, and eventually contradictory, things which need careful distinctions.

9. The structure of relations within the urban region influences and is influenced by the development of metropolisation

Rather than a grand structural movement with a definite beginning and end, metropolisation is a contingent and uneven process-in-the-making that colonises the unique conditions and contexts of each urban region, namely the intra-regional structure of relations between cities. In some cases, metropolisation processes are constrained and eventually harmed by these pre-existing conditions. For instance, urban regions dominated by a large core city – especially politically powerful capitals – are prone to experience barriers to fair and balanced integration. Large contrasts between cities in terms of size, economic weight, and political-institutional capacity distort the competition for jobs, population, economic activities, and urban functions, creating relations of dependence rather than cooperation (Phelps et al., 2006). They also affect the perception of a fair distribution of gains among places, increasing the necessity but reducing the willingness to cooperate by stakeholders (Feiock, 2007; Cardoso, 2018). Both real and perceived imbalances affect cooperative intensity (Cardoso, 2016b; Nelles, 2009), which points to the role of inherited historical power relations and cultural habits formed over centuries of interaction. On the other hand, the lack of a leading city mobilising the necessary resources to drive metropolisation strategies, taking the initiative to gather actors around common goals, and providing a common identity to the urban region is also an obstacle to integration. Polycentric urban regions lacking a clear anchor point may remain as collections of disjointed cities (Lambregts, 2006) in search of a driver and their identity tags (‘Randstad’, ‘RhineRuhr’, ‘Flemish Diamond’) may be conceptually strong but remain policy buzzwords with insufficient implementation and recognition. Only some types of urban region are able to successfully walk the thin line between undesirable dominance and loose indifference to engage in a generally positive metropolisation process. Identifying and overcoming historical legacies, developing variable geometry governance frameworks where individual agency and horizontal cooperation are encouraged, and developing a strong metropolitan identity – a shared understanding of the meaning and value of the urban region – are key aspects for policy to consider.

10. Individual city features affect the winners and losers of metropolisation

Cities in the same urban region can experience widely contrasting fortunes in terms of their engagement with, and outcomes of, metropolitan integration processes (Volgmann & Rutsche, 2019). The role and positionality of each city in such integration processes – for instance, their ability to borrow size or likelihood to remain under an agglomeration shadow – are influenced by several other factors beyond the relational dimension provided by the structure and size of the urban region. While the direction of causality remains unclear, cities may be benefited by 1) larger size enabling agglomeration economies, 2) historical importance constraining path dependent processes, 3) a greater number of relations to other cities, from transport to tourism flows, 4) spatial-environmental features linked to (perceived) liveability, 5) a demographic profile with high levels of population diversity and that avoids the overconcentration of vulnerable groups, 6) the presence of top-level functions, 7) transport connectivity (Cardoso & Meijers, 2021b; Meijers & Cardoso, 2021). No single place in the urban region congregates all these assets, and all kinds of combinations are possible. According to these combinations, cities can occupy different quadrants of a matrix but a preferred quadrant cannot be assumed. High functional performance may help a city occupy a key position in the region, but poor connectivity will limit its success, while demographic contrasts to other cities may affect institutional cooperation and cultural proximity. Culturally and institutionally proximate cities may be willing to cooperate but this may stimulate the perception of strong functional or economic contrasts. Cities with high attractiveness and liveability, beneficial demographic profiles, and good functional performance may still be embedded in unfair distributions of political power. Each city inherits positionality within the urban region and has a different bundle of incentives, deterrents, and possible trajectories to engage in metropolisation. The bottom line is that metropolisation is an ongoing project, not a condition, and planners and policymakers have the responsibility to bring that project from the potential to the operative level, integrating rather than alienating partners, and reducing both real and perceived inequalities between places.

Closing remarks

This paper told the story of metropolisation through ten theses, each framed as a set of related claims which may be discussed, expanded, and contested. The bigger story certainly covers many different aspects, from the more theoretical (see theses one, two, and four) to the quite pragmatic and policy-oriented (see theses eight to ten), reflecting along the way on methodological aspects about how to look at the urban in contemporary times (see theses three and five). But in a publication like the present one, it is also appropriate to think about what these theses tell us about our work as researchers and students of the urban. It might be useful, therefore, to extract some key practical messages which might be useful to inform urbanism studies. Not trying to exhaust theoretical interpretations or conceptual implications, but rather aiming for concreteness and usefulness in our observation and documentation of the urban, we conclude with the following practical summary for urbanism studies, in the same order of the theses:

1. Do not think of cities within predefined assumptions and prejudices about what they are and what they look like

2. Do not stop looking for urbanity after one network node stops and before the other begins

3. History does not stop at the city gates; look for territorial histories wherever space and human activity have coexisted

4. Do not assume that functional, spatial, cultural, or political processes happen neatly in a void or in a laboratory

5. Learn languages, read beyond the English-language canon

6. Consider the explanatory value of relations between places and events, not just places and events themselves

7. Qualify what happens in urban regions; what is exactly happening where, and why?

8. Do not be satisfied with general net results; look closer to identify winners and losers

9. Delve into the reasons behind the unevenness (of power, of assets, of opportunities) determining those winners and losers

10. Engage in planning, design, and governance practices that give all cities and all spaces and opportunity to participate in a just and balanced metropolisation process

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