

## Book review

### The Polycentric Metropolis

Peter Hall and Kathy Pain. Earthscan/Sterling, 2009, ISBN 978-1-84407-747-2, £75, 248 pp.

This major research work is the output from the international Polynet project, led by Professor Sir Peter Hall, coordinated by Kathy Pain and involving teams of researchers in seven European countries. It reports on the 'emerging mega-city regions' across highly urbanised northwest Europe from Dublin to Zurich, and explores how 'polycentric' they are and what that concept means for them. It deploys three ways of looking at each city-region cluster

- measuring their polycentricity on a variety of scales (the four chapters in Part 2)
- a more qualitative look at firms, locational choice and accessibility (three chapters in Part 3)
- a tour of the eight mega-city regions (Greater Dublin, southeast England, Paris, central Belgium, Randstad Holland, Rhein–Ruhr, Rhein–Main and north Switzerland each get a chapter in Part 4).

The final conclusions chapter, From Strategy to Delivery: Policy Responses, is a characteristic Hall closing – he has been the most *engagé* of all planning academics for over three decades now. Not for him the researcher's cool summing-up: he wants you to get on and do something!

Nonetheless, this is very much a source book, with a wealth of area-specific and sector-specific knowledge and a depth of literature reviewed and brought coherently together. It is densely packed with data and analysis, and is not light reading despite Hall's customary deft summaries and easy written manner. If you want to learn something very useful very quickly, go to 'Key conclusions' on pages 197–198; these summarise the essentials of locational roles in twenty-first century Western Europe, which strategic policy makers across the seven countries in which the research teams are based (and indeed the EU) could usefully digest.

This reviewer homed in on one particular section: The Informational Geography of Europolis: Mapping the Flow of Information (Chapter 5). This is a serious attempt to dig into the *actual* flows (of information and of people) between firms and places in order to understand who is communicating with whom and where the densest 'traffic' is in the advanced producer services (APS) that drive these metropolitan economies. It builds on, and acknowledges, John Goddard's pioneering work (Goddard, 1973) in the 1970s. But – and possibly because life has become more complex and electronic since Goddard's study – the team is forced to admit that the research 'produced results that fell far short of the team's original hopes' (p. 86) leading them to conclude that such flow analysis may now be 'almost impossible to achieve satisfactorily' (p. 87). Maybe. Though perhaps what it shows is rather that such work is hugely labour-intensive (and therefore very costly) and also needs the corporate involvement of companies who provide for (and therefore monitor) data flows. But still worth trying – this is the bloodstream of modern business interchange. Despite the caveats, the chapter gives some powerful insights, based on research (however limited) rather than anecdote. Two examples – on p. 87

in spite of the widespread and ever-increasing volume of e-mail flows, face-to-face contact proves to be of crucial importance for the exchange of high-value information and knowledge, vital to APS.

and regarding the peripheral urban regions around Paris (p. 83)

they are linked to Paris, but the Paris economy is not linked to them.

The wider study covers many other aspects of these relationships, and looks to explore what 'polycentricity' means and particularly what it might mean for European urban policy. Under the rubric 'Geographical phenomenon or Holy Grail?' the authors explain that, in thinking about these polycentric mega-city regions, 'POLYNET adopts a basic hypothesis that they are becoming more so over time...' (p. 3) – a hypothesis to be tested in the study. The European dimension of the whole study is of course at its core, and part of the original rationale. This was a heavily EU-funded study and it attempted to illuminate concepts and policy questions raised by the European spatial development plan (ESDP) in the following terms (p. 179)

The objective behind the ESDP's concept of polycentricity is to achieve territorial cohesion between economically strong areas and the weaker less dynamic rural areas or smaller cities.

How ambitious this objective is, is underlined by the study's conclusion (p. 211) that

...polycentricity, whether morphological or functional, fails to provide a solution to issues of territorial social and economic inequity.

(by 'morphological' versus 'functional', the authors mean spatial distribution of places versus flows of information and firm organisation). Thus

the focus should be on addressing uneven economic and social equity as opposed to balancing the spatial distribution of development. Polycentric regional development does not necessarily enhance the quality of life.

This takes head-on the thrust of (French-influenced?) thinking in EU urban policy about spatial 'equalisation'.

So what about 'the hypothesis'? Well, after some 200 densely packed pages, the breathless reader waits in vain for a straight answer! Instead, what the final section brings up is the complexity of the ideas and questions involved: nowhere better illustrated than by two of Hall and Pain's conclusions, both illustrated by reference to southeast England.

First, the contrast between

a residentially-driven 'commuting polycentricity' which should be restricted

and

functional polycentricity, constituting a market-driven 'clustering polycentricity' beneficial to regional development

and second,

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the interview evidence paradoxically suggested that in reality morphological polycentricity is associated with rather weak intra-regional functional linkages. Just as paradoxically, depth of global concentration in London... was found to produce the most concrete evidence of regional functional polycentricity.

Similar paradoxes and subtleties emerge in relation to other sorts of issues, and other city-regions studied, throughout this very comprehensive analysis.

Furthermore, in some ways the 'hypothesis' turns out not to be the interesting question anyway. Measuring whether they are 'becoming more polycentric over time' seems to matter much less than working out roles and relationships for key activities. So, whether a mega-city region is very monocentric or more of a polycentric cluster, an important conclusion is that the 'first cities' in each mega-city region – whether hugely dominant like

Paris or *primus inter pares* like Frankfurt – are still the key locations for the highest order APS and thus the growth potential.

The last sentence of the book concludes that 'the mysteries of the polycentric metropolis have been partially unravelled'. Then, like all good researchers, the authors add 'but there is much work still to do'. Even while we wait for that further work, there is a wealth of analysis and insight here for anyone grappling with planning and economics at the metropolitan scale.

Martin Crookston

#### REFERENCE

Goddard JB (1973) *Office Linkages and Location: Progress in Planning*, vol. 1. Elsevier, London, UK, pp. 109–252.