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Metropolitan Areas

Arturo Orellana

Associate Professor of the Institute of Urban and Territorial Studies, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (PUC). Doctor in Human Geography, University of Barcelona, Master in Urban Development PUC, Economist of University of Chile. Research lines: metropolitan governance, urban planning and urban quality of life. amorella@uc.cl

Luis Fuentes

Associate Professor of the Institute of Urban and Territorial Studies Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (PUC). Doctor in Architecture and Urban Studies, Master in Urban Development and Geographer (PUC). Research lines: urban growth, socio spatial transformations, urban middle classes. lfuentes@uc.cl

Abstract

In this paper we make a brief characterization of the concept of "metropolitan area", showing the main debates about its conceptual delimitation and practice. Metropolitan areas correspond to a spatial formation characterized by the advance of urbanization and concentration of population in cities. It has been studied and the difficulty of definition has led to multiple attempts to delimit it as a concept and also from the theoretical point of view. Currently the advance of urbanization has made clear the difficulty of governing these spatial units for their complexity and dynamism.

Key words: Metropolitan area, Urbanization Process, Metropolitan regions

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1- Introduction/Brief definition

The concept of a metropolitan area can be defined in different ways, as not only has it been associated with different definitions over time, but also because such definitions also vary (perhaps only subtly) in differing contexts. In general, it can be said that the concept is used to refer to an urban area or region made up of a densely populated center, and by peripheral concentric rings and nodes near to the urban territory, which share economic dynamics and thus infrastructure, services, housing, industries and labor force. This structure implies that the central city fulfills an important role regarding the provision of employment and services for the rest of the related urban rings and spaces, and often the functionality of the entire metropolitan region is contained in more than one administrative unit.

In the following, the concept of metropolitan area will be reviewed from three points of view: (1) the evolution of the conceptual definition; (2) the primary classifications that have been established over time

as approximations towards a definition and delimitation of the concept; and (3) a review of the latest paradigms for the concept, mainly regarding the ideas proposed from new urban geography.

2- Historical background and early debates

As Harvey points out, the 20th century has been the century of urbanization; before 1800, the size and number of urban concentrations were quite limited. During the 19th century, it was possible to observe the increase in the urban population of American and Western European industrial cities, in which London was without a doubt the largest city, with seven million inhabitants by the beginning of the 20th century. During the second half of the 20th century, urban populations experienced explosive growth not only in the developed world, but also in developing countries (Harvey, 1996: 1).

Using the beginning of the industrial revolution as a starting point, cities and metropolitan areas have experienced a process of expansion characterized by suburbanization, the de-concentration of population, and the transformation of urban areas by various uses, in which urban territory grows and the urbanization process begins to contribute to economic growth (Janoschka, 2005: 1; Scott & Storper, 2014: 5). In this context, new cities that achieved the scale of a city-region are often considered as a basic component of global economic dynamics (Jonas & Ward, 2007: 170), or as a fundamental geographic unit (Brenner, 2003).

Throughout the 20th century, planners and geographers have been seeking out new methodologies to describe and understand the phenomena related to urban areas. One of the pioneering works in the analysis of the complexities of metropolitan areas is that of Jonas (1942), which sets the basis for the observation of problems associated with the dynamics of contiguity and movement, and the provision of services among local authorities, among other issues (Orellana, 2013). In his work *“Metropolitan Government”*, he uses as examples the 17 metropolitan areas that existed in the United States at that time, which concentrated a significant portion of the population, and the borders of which surpassed state-administrative boundaries, including entire cities, municipalities, villages, sanitary districts, water districts, and various transport authorities. The author distinguishes how a complex scenario is demarcated that is as aesthetic as it is operational, financial and political (Blanshard, 1942). At the same time, regarding the challenges of governability, he categorizes the cases into those that require minimal reforms or those without need for structural adjustments (*ad hoc* districts, inter-governmental cooperation, or an extension of the state or federal government administration), and those that require more substantial alterations to their administrative structure (Seasongood, 1943). He also goes into depth on the structural, fiscal and legal aspects of the administrative integration of metropolitan areas, together with the issue of the politics of integration (Gaus, 1942). For the author, the only real solutions to the problem are municipal mergers and consolidation, into a federated metropolis, or a city-state metropolis (Wager, 1942).

Some decades later the contribution of Davis (1959), expressed through his work *“The World’s Metropolitan Areas”*, pointed towards the search for a method that would serve to demarcate

metropolitan areas throughout the world, using a standardized methodology. The research reflects a colossal effort to connect data on metropolitan areas from all over the world, including their primary cities and populations during the previous two decades. In this way, this research made comparable data on the total population of the largest urban agglomerations in the world available for the very first time (Hauser, 1960). In order to perform an international comparison, Davis and his team, using a demographic and administrative boundaries criteria, defined a metropolitan areas as: "An area with 100,000 inhabitants or more, containing at least one city (or continuous urban area) with 50,000 inhabitants or more, and for which the contiguous administrative divisions of the city (or continuous urban area) meet certain requirements of a metropolitan character" (Davis, 1959). This classification differs from the one utilized at that time in the United States, known as the "Standard Metropolitan Area" (Hauser, 1960). For those familiar with the field of urbanism, this work implied a very significant contribution, especially regarding possible methodologies for analyzing the behavior of metropolitan areas. In this way, it represented a more instrumental and descriptive contribution than that of Jonas.

In the 1960's the contributions of Jean Gottman are especially noteworthy, specifically through his book *Megalopolis* (1961). This work represents the completion of the work started by R.D. McKenzie three decades prior, involving a concept previously proposed by Patrick Geddes, who was the mentor of Louis Mumford and is considered to be one of the greatest urban planners of the beginning of the 20th century (Thomas, 2000: 50). Gottman's work came to describe how urbanization processes were undoing the scale of the metropolitan area, specifically through a vigorous analysis of the phenomenon of a giant urban corridor (which had previously consisted of separate urban entities) running from the north of Boston all the way past Baltimore-Washington DC, traversing the northeastern coastline of the United States. He called his area "*The Urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States*". Just as McKenzie had proposed, this wave would inevitably run westward, where the movement of individuals, goods and services would imply a redesign and reformulation of land use, as agricultural land was changed to residential and industrial use, and reforestation would partially compensate for the inevitable loss of native tree cover. To deal with these and other problems related to the inequality of access to goods, a new system of regional administration was required, as the old local, state and national system of authorities and jurisdictions were no longer apt to fulfill their duties in the face of the new challenges of urbanization in the second half of the 20th century (Thomas, 2000: 51).

Each of these contributions marked a period in the sense that they express and visualize, through landmark observations, the most significant phenomena that were seen to be on the rise regarding the behavior of urbanization processes. These works also made up the basis of a discipline that was developed throughout the century, with a predominantly scientific-technical focus.

Currently, both a quantitative and qualitative aspect is recognized with regards to metropolitan phenomena. The former refers to a significant mass of people and economic activities and services within

a heavily hierarchical territory, while the latter points towards the provision of specific public and private services to companies and people in an efficient and convenient manner (Indovina, 2007: 527).

3- Traditional definition/classification

The scale achieved by the urbanization processes described above motivated the discussion about metropolitanization. As this urban process progressed around the world, approaches were defined to better classify and understand the characteristics, functionalities and potentialities in particular ways in different countries in order to facilitate the planning and analysis of their development. Naturally, more robust progress was made in developed countries. The particular historic characteristics, cultural and political traditions of each country were key factors that influenced the various approaches for the development of mechanisms and methodologies to define the metropolitan borders in North American and European cities (Borja, 1998).

For example, in the United States the demographic criterion at the beginning of the 1950's represented the basis for the development of a definition of a metropolitan area, in which a population of over 50,000 inhabitants was considered to be a requisite, together with the fact that a metropolitan area had to be made up of one or more contiguous municipalities surrounding a central municipality. In the same way, it was a requisite of this dynamic to have a certain degree of social and economic integration. Afterwards, in the 1960's, together with the criteria of population and physical proximity, the economic and labor-based character of the municipalities included in the area was also taken into account. According to Rodriguez and Oviedo (2001), the population had to consist of: (1) At least 75% of economically active, non-agrarian individuals; (2) have a density of at least 50 inhabitants per square kilometer; (3) at least 15% of the economically active population had to have their place of employment in the central city (Orellana, 2013).

More recently, the Federal Registry of the United States uses a demographic and economic integrations criteria: It defines a metropolitan area as a territory that consists of a central nucleus with a large population, together with other contiguous populations that express a degree of social and economic integration regarding the central nucleus. Canada also uses demographic criteria: the official statistical definition establishes that metropolitan areas are made up of an urban territory with a nucleus that has at least 50,000 inhabitants and a total population in its entire territory of at least 200,000 inhabitants (Orellana, 2013).

In the case of European cities, the multiple forms of state organization (unitary models, federal models, autonomous communities, etc.) further complicate the definition of the concept. However, an economic vision has predominated the definition of the concept of a metropolitan area. One example is the case of England, in which for decades metropolitan areas were established based on job markets, which implies accounting for the most frequent work-related trips among individuals who travel between contiguous municipalities and the central municipality. The Spanish experience for the definition of metropolitan areas was established in the mid 1960's when the Ministry of Housing utilized two fundamental criteria based on the work of Davis (1959): (1) The existence of a central city with a population of at least 50,000

inhabitants; (2) an economic and social connection between the central city and the peripheral municipalities, reaching a minimum total population of 100,000 inhabitants (Rodriguez & Oviedo, 2001).

The OECD (2013) has proposed the challenge of demarcating this new urban reality based on criteria of population density and work-related trips, differentiating between urban nuclei and their areas of influence or 'hinterland'. This methodology first identified urban areas or high-density cells (1,500 inhabitants/Km²), in order to then delimit urban agglomerations that correspond to a set of urban areas or high-density cells grouping over 50,000 inhabitants. Based on this, the urban nuclei are defined. According to this methodology, an administratively definable territorial unit makes up part of an urban nucleus if over 50% of the population lives in an urban agglomeration. An urban nucleus can be made up of one or more municipalities. Finally, the hinterland or area of influence of each urban nucleus is defined, corresponding to those territorial units that do not meet the conditions to be considered part of a nucleus, but send over 15% of their employed resident population to work in one of these nuclei (OECD, 2013).

In addition to the search for a definition and classification, there has been another line of research that concentrates on studying the role and function of urban zones in economic and social development of the countries and regions in which they are located, leading researchers to pay close attention to metropolitan areas as strategic places (Brender et al., 2007).

This focus recognizes the importance of analyzing in more detail the elements that define a metropolitan area, instead of utilizing a classification that relies solely on a certain number of inhabitants, or a certain characteristic physical scheme of the settlement. Such elements might be various kinds of infrastructure such as transportation, basic housing, services and spaces for leisure and culture, or the productive structure.

For example, Markusen and Schrock (2006) propose that cities compete among themselves as sites of production and consumption, designed for companies and homes. Distinction can be found in the productive structure, consumption and identity. In this work, the contradicting tendencies towards homogenization and distinction of the 50 most important metropolitan areas of the United States are analyzed, based on their occupational structure. The evidence suggests that those cities with an employment structure in certain, more innovative market niches are economically resurging more quickly compared to those with an employment structure based on traditional consumption.

Another example is the work done by Brezzi et al. (2012), who seeks out a methodology to describe urban areas and understand the relation between the size of the area and the level of economic development. The author points out that, "the transformation of the spatial organization of cities and the extended territories in which they are located, directly affect the quality of life of their inhabitants, the demand for transportation infrastructure, the surrounding environment, capital and migratory flows, and the global environmental footprint of urbanization" (Brezzi et al., 2012).

4- Debates on traditional definition/classification and the change in the urbanizations process

From the beginning of the 20th century, thinkers such as H.G. Wells, Patrick Geddes and Oswald Spengler have proposed the hypothesis regarding an explosion of urbanization. More specifically it was Kingsley Davis who was able to prove the urban transition on a global scale empirically (Davis, 1955; Brenner & Schmid, 2013; Madden, 2014). In a more recent context, and as a result of a variety of factors, this thesis has gradually been demonstrated in numerous countries around the world, as urban transformations have taken place that are often characterized as “a new round of urban metamorphosis” in the context of a new phase based on a market economy structure (Soja, 1989: 173; De Mattos et al., 2014: 198). This alters the social, economic and environmental equilibrium on a metropolitan scale, through processes such as dispersion, diffusion and low density that often occur within such territories, leading to a reconfiguration of a new urban geography (Indovina, 2007: 527).

Following the above argument, Soja (2011) argues that in recent years there has been a far-reaching structural change regarding the very nature of the process of urbanization, in which there has been a shift from the metropolitan mode of urban development towards a process of urban-regional development. The author proposes that although this phenomenon is still in the initial stages, it is a process that has already been analyzed and understood, providing signs of a possible end to the era of the modern metropolis. For Soja, there are three primary forces that have effected the process of regional urbanization and that have influenced the form of the new city-regions: (1) the globalization of capital, employment and culture; (2) economic restructuring; (3) the bounties of the information and communications technology revolution. At the same time, transnational flows have re-densified the central city, following suburban migratory processes (Soja, 2011).

For Schmid (2014) the process of urbanization on a global scale not only alters traditional forms of agrarian societies, but also results in the structural transformation of cities. This change has affected urban forms shifting the debate from the product (for example metropolitan areas) to the process (urbanization). The phenomenon of urbanization is expressed through an enormous expansion of urban agglomerations and urban networks spread out over territory. “The metropolis is exploding, scattering innumerable urban fragments all around it. Small and medium-sized cities become dependent, becoming virtual colonies of the metropolis” (Ibid.). In this context, the concepts that seek to characterize traditional, structural notions of urbanization (among them the idea of the metropolitan area) are directly challenged.

Although there has been the influence of political, economic, social and historic factors, there are two constitutive elements of the new forms of urbanization: (1) The economic dynamic of the market economy based focus; (2) time-space compression (Harvey, 1990; De Mattos et al., 2014: 198). Dematteis

(1998:25) proposes that the urban expression of changes produced by the variety of previously mentioned factors are translated into an urban form without a clear spatial limit. In reality, they are presented as “connected grids in centers and small or large urban systems within macro-regional territorial expansions”.

This tendency recognizes the transition from the “city” urban form to the phenomenon of generalized urbanization, an issue that had already been postulated by Henri Lefebvre in 1970, and which has been dealt with more recently by several academics. Lefebvre proposed a radical hypothesis for his time; that society had become completely urbanized, and that although at that time urbanization was virtual, it would become real in the future. This reality could not be dealt with by using the categories of “cities” and “countries”; rather, it must be analyzed by utilizing the concept of urban society. In his work, Lefebvre also argues that theory can and must elevate the concept of urbanism to an epistemological level, rather than a scientific and technological practice.

On the other hand, for Castells (2010: 273) this phenomenon deals with: “A new form, because it includes urbanized and agricultural land, open space and high-density residential areas in the same urbanized spatial unit: there are multiple cities within a discontinuous landscape. It is a multicentered metropolis that does not correspond to the traditional separation between the central city and its suburbs. It contains nuclei of differing sizes and functional importance distributed throughout a wide territorial expanse along lines of transportation”. For De Mattos et al. (2014), the presence of this form has given way to the appearance of expressions such as the “diffuse city, overflowing city, city of cities, post-metropolis, city region, urban region, low-density city, metropolitan archipelago, etc.”, terms that seek to contrast those concepts that sought to characterize the industrial city.

Brenner (2013: 61) points out that: “within this field of urban development, extended and increasingly universal agglomerations constantly form, expand, contract and transform, but always through dense networks of relations with other places, territories and scales, including the spheres traditionally classified as far from the urban condition”. In addition, specialized national and international organisms such as the European Union (Damon, 2012) and the OECD (OECD, 2012) have published studies that consider new criteria and methodologies in order to better recognize and identify the previously mentioned urban situation, in the context of the ongoing debate in the background.

However, these processes have also produced urban challenges, such as the intensification of economic inequity, social polarization, and more concretely the imbalance and lack of coordination regarding access to employment, housing and transportation. For Brenner and Schmid (2015), the new forms of urbanization that have emerged since the 1980’s are clearly challenging the conceptualizations inherited from the idea of the urban as a fixed, spatially limited and universally generalized settlement. They identify contradictory processes such as stagnation, contraction, urban marginalization; they also confirm the situation of the traditional city as a remnant of spatial development that is characteristically capitalist,

on a higher scale, and different by nature. Finally, these authors also recognize the reconstitution of the urban governance approach.

Faced with this assessment and the situation in which urbanization is no longer contained within a model that we know of as the city, Brenner and Schmid argue in favor of the need to revise and rethink the epistemological assumptions regarding the urban and urbanization; more specifically, questioning which are the categories, methods and maps needed to understand urban life (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). They propose a series of theses that seek to shed light on this and other issues regarding the new urban epistemology: (1) The urban and urbanization are theoretical, and not empirical, categories; (2) the urban is a process, not a universal form or a kind of settlement, nor a contained unit; (3) urbanization involves three moments: concentrated urbanization, extended urbanization, differentiated urbanization; (4) the urban fabric is multidimensional; (5) urbanization has become planetary in scale; (6) urbanization contains patterns and landscapes of unequal spatial development; (7) the urban is a collective project in which the potentials produced through urbanization are appropriated and tested (Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

The urban era or global urbanization thesis has also gained international prominence since the 2000's, due to the work of the "*Urban Age Project*", a series of conferences and research initiatives carried out through the *Cities Programme* of the *London School of Economics* (LSE), funded by *Deutsche Bank* (Brenner & Schmid, 2013). Up to now, the project has published two volumes entitled *The Endless City* and *Living in the Endless City*, in which the general thesis is focused on understanding how issues regarding urbanization have become globalized (Ibid.).

Roy (2013) proposes that cities are once again placed on the theoretical and political agenda, but interest lies in the conurbations of the "city-region". He suggests that this is resurgence rather than a new interest, based on the interest of urban historians in conurbations. He argues in favor of rethinking the geographies of urban and regional theory, as a large portion of theoretical work on city-regions refer to cases of urban experiences in North America and Western Europe. Faced with the resurgence and explosive growth of cities in the global south, such as Shanghai, Cairo, Mumbai, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Dakar and Johannesburg, the author questions whether these urban experiences can reconfigure the theoretical basis of urban and metropolitan analysis.

The change in the urbanization process, increasing the metropolitan dimension, creates the political challenge of governing a complex spatial structure. Two of the biggest challenges is its sustainability impact (social, economic and environmental), especially at the global south city regions. For Duhau (2013), an implicit characteristic of the cases of the global south and city regions of the developed world is the social division of metropolitan space. This division is expressed through an unequal spatial distribution of different social groups, either by class or social strata, ethnicity, race or religion. The author proposes that any joint vision on the socio-spatial order on a metropolitan scale should consider the issue of the social division of space, understood as: "A relation between the social and

class composition of a society and its manifestation in the structure of inhabited metropolitan space". He proposes that in the case of the metropolis, if it is sought to research the social division of space, it is necessary to base the analysis on conceptual apparatuses and the use of available sources of information regarding the distribution of socio-economic strata.

Finally, it is important to mention the growing and urgent issue regarding the sustainability of city-regions. Urban areas have continually expanded while fears related to climate change and a global environmental catastrophe are increasingly present (Angelo & Wachsmuth, 2014). Organisms such as the United Nations (through UN-Habitat) have made sure to instill these issues within the discourses on the planning and politics of urban development. In this context, the authors propose the issue of the role of urban political ecology in the debates on an increasingly urban planet; they argue that urban political ecology has the potential to be more than just the study of nature in the city, and could contribute to a new theory of urbanization that simultaneously places nature first, as the city takes on a secondary role.

5. Closing remarks

Historically in urban studies the definition of "metropolitan area" has been discussed. But perhaps the main complexity has been to try to bring this concept into practice. This objective is paramount for political reasons due to the need to examine it spatially so as to establish forms of government. Delimitation attempts have been based on administrative, and economic criteria, among others such as population size.

Currently the rapid and dynamic process of transformation experienced by our cities has brought even more complexity in the discussion of this concept. From the theoretical point of view the main conceptual discussions raised the need to focus on the process (development) rather than the product (spatial unit). From the practical point of view the need to delimit the concept persists. The formation of metropolitan regions has generated a political challenge given the spatial dimensions that reach these spatial formations and the complexity of the problems they face.

The main challenges in material research in this area pertains the analysis of the forces that push the urbanization and generation of spatial forms that mutate from metropolitan areas. It is also necessary to investigate, describe and analyze their impacts, as well as the struggles, negotiations and political agreements between the actors that are produced to try to govern their development.

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