

On poles and centers: Cities in the French Style¹

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The “multicentric city” is an oversimplified view of the contemporary city. The term “center” covers a multi-faceted reality. A center is not only a concentration of activities. It also means domination, power, creation and interaction. Consequently, the “secondary centers” do not necessarily replicate the main center and they are clearly differentiated. We define the “pole” as a concentration of activities, whatever their nature, and the “center” as a concentration of high-order and strategic activities, so that the so-called multicentric cities may be both multipolar and monocentric. This suggests what we call the Multipolar-Monocentric hypothesis. The paper sets out theoretical foundations of the pole-center distinction, and shows that the Multipolar-Monocentric hypothesis is supported by the spatial pattern and the specialization of employment clusters in a sample of large French cities.

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Hablar de ciudades multicéntricas representa una visión muy simplificada de las urbes contemporáneas. El término “center” abarca diversas facetas de la realidad: el “center” no es sólo la concentración de actividades, sino también dominación, poder, creación e interacción. Consecuentemente, los centros secundarios no reproducen, necesariamente, al principal y están claramente diferenciados. Así, hemos definido el “pole” como una concentración de actividades, cualquiera que sea su naturaleza, y el “center” como una concentración de orden más elevado y actividades estratégicas. Entonces, las llamadas ciudades multicéntricas pueden aglutinar a ambas, sean multipolar o monocéntrica. Esta afirmación es lo que llamamos la hipótesis multipolar- monocéntrica. En nuestro trabajo proponemos fundamentos teóricos que distinguen entre polos-centros, que explican que la hipótesis multipolar-

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monocéntrica se sustenta sobre un modelo espacial y sobre la especialización de los “clusters” de empleo, ilustrado a través de una muestra de grandes ciudades francesas.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 21st century, even in the highly urbanized countries, cities, especially large cities, are continuing to grow. In France, the concentration of population in large cities is increasing. Eleven urban areas making up 34% of the French population in 1990 accounted for one half of French population growth from 1990 to 1999 (Julien, 2001).

But growing cities are also changing cities. The most visible change is urban sprawl: cities expand, with population and employment increasing more on the periphery than in the center of the city.

Indeed, employment sprawl is far from uniform. A large proportion of employment growth on the periphery is becoming agglomerated in a small number of “secondary centers” or “peripheral centers”, giving rise to “multicentric” urban structures. This phenomenon is quasi-universal (Anas et al., 1998) and is noticeably reshaping urban economic space. It is a prominent feature in the United States and has led to the well known model of edge cities which “contain all the functions a city ever has” (Garreau, 1991), as if these secondary centers would replicate the main center.

However this is clearly an oversimplified model of the contemporary city. Even in the United States, urban structures are differentiated, and peripheral concentrations never exactly replicate the central one. In France, peripheral poles can hardly compete with the central city in terms of size or of economic functions. The multiplication of employment clusters is not only a spatial restructuring, it involves a significant reorganization of the economy of cities and an economic differentiation of clusters. City cores concentrate more and more advanced services and high-order activities while more common (standardized) activities are going to be pushed away. Thus, the term “center” is not sufficiently precise, and may even be confusing, because it covers a multi-faceted reality. The first aim of this paper is to question the meaning of the center and of the multicentric city.