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The polycentric metropolis unpacked : concepts, trends and policy in the Randstad Holland

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Chapter 8

Polycentrism: Boon or Barrier to Metropolitan Competitiveness? The Case of the Randstad Holland

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It has been slightly edited to fit the format of this book.

Abstract

This article reports on the ways Dutch planners try to come to terms with some of the more problematic aspects related to the polycentric make-up of the Randstad. As such, it aims to provide some counterweight to the sometimes overly enthusiastic belief among policy-makers that polycentricity or polycentric spatial development offers a solution to a wide array of urban and regional problems. In addition, the article draws attention to the fact that in order better to understand both the potential value of the concepts and the problems and challenges experienced in polycentric urban regions on the ground, it helps to take into account the variety of (morphological) origins out of which polycentric urban configurations can emerge.

8.1 Introduction

In 1958, the Randstad was first conceived as the would-be Dutch metropolis. Its scattered layout was viewed as a unique asset that would give the region a considerable advantage compared to cities such as London and Paris. It offered its four million residents ease of access to omnipresent green and healthy environs, while the absence of a massive central, congested core would ensure the free flow of people and goods between its centres for years to come. The expectation was that if the population reached five or six millions, the various centres would as a matter of course start to integrate and evolve into a coherent, competitive metropolitan system. It would be a boon to the country's economy and simultaneously, due to its dispersed nature, keep the nation free of the troubles and despair that were associated with the traditional, monocentric metropolis (Werkcommissie Westen des Lands, 1958*a, b*; see also Lambregts and Zonneveld, 2004).

Today, almost 50 years later, the Randstad still survives as the *would-be* Dutch metropolis. The optimism that accompanied its first introduction, however, has toned down a bit. Of course, and not unimportantly, the region has retained its economic motor function, seen its population grow considerably and, as a pleasant bonus, acquired some fame among the international planning community (e.g. Hall, 1984), but at the same time it has become quite obvious that the originally assumed 'advantages' either no longer serve or never did materialize. The region's inhabitants still enjoy relative ease of access to fairly omnipresent green environments, but the latter are increasingly fragmented and, with the Randstad qualifying as one of Europe's air pollution hotspots (BBC News, 2005), it cannot automatically be associated with 'fresh air' any more. Congestion, in turn, has become as big a problem as elsewhere in North West Europe. And in spite of the fact that the population has reached seven million or so, planners are still desperately trying to forge this repository of smaller and larger urban centres, suburban settlements, rural villages, industrial estates, food production sites and green fields into a coherent metropolitan system 'capable of meeting the test of international comparison and competition' (e.g. MVRM, 2004; Regio Randstad, 2003, 2004*a*). In between the lines of recently published planning and discussion documents, the region's polycentric makeup is considered to be as much a part of the problem as a valuable asset.

This article uses the Dutch policy-makers' ongoing struggle with the singularities of the Randstad to show that – from a spatial planning perspective – not all is rosy in this archetypal polycentric garden. As such, it aims to provide some counterweight to the sometimes overly enthusiastic belief among, notably, European policy-makers that polycentricism or polycentric spatial development offers a solution to a wide array of urban and regional problems. In addition to that, the article wants to draw attention to the fact that in order to better understand both the potential value of the concept of polycentric spatial development and the problems and challenges experienced in polycentric urban regions on the

ground, it is necessary not only to distinguish between normative and analytical uses of the concept at different spatial scales (e.g. Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001; Nordregio *et al.*, 2005) but also to take into account the variety of (morphological) origins out of which polycentric urban configurations can emerge. With the help of a hitherto little used scheme developed by Champion some years ago (Champion, 2001), it is shown that a polycentric urban region's (morphological) origin and consequent spatial development trajectory to a large extent determine the nature of the overarching challenges a region faces at a particular stage.

After a brief explanation of Champion's scheme and the place of the Randstad in it, we move on by discussing the ways in which Dutch planners are currently trying to cope with the polycentric features of the Randstad. The focus is on one of the most thorny questions that continue to exercise many Dutch planners' minds and which may be summarized as 'how to make a metropolis of a region that refuses to become one'. Two competing strategies will be reviewed and receive some comments based upon POLYNET findings.

8.2 History matters: alternative routes towards polycentricity

During the past decade it has become good practice to emphasize the polycentric nature of the many newly perceived urban and regional forms, no matter whether they are termed 'post-industrial cities' (Hall, 1997), 'polynucleated metropolitan regions' (Dieleman and Faludi, 1998), 'polycentric urban regions' (Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001), 'global city-regions' (Scott, 2001) or 'mega-city regions' (Hall, 2004). Doing so has helped to open a number of challenging new avenues in on-going debates such as the ones on agglomeration economies (as illustrated by, for example, Anas *et al.*, 1998; Phelps and Ozawa, 2003) and strategic planning (e.g. Albrechts, 1998; Turok and Bailey, 2004). The concept of polycentricity itself is still not free from ambiguities (Davoudi, 2003) and interpreted in a variety of ways (Waterhout *et al.*, 2005), but it has become increasingly clear and accepted that it may be applied in both analytical and normative ways (e.g. Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001) and that it may be used to describe or promote different phenomena at different spatial scales (Nordregio *et al.*, 2005). A further refinement that deserves to become part and parcel of further (comparative) studies into polycentric urban phenomena concerns the recognition of the variety of origins out of which they evolve. Champion (2001) introduced this proposition in 2001, but it has been taken on board in relatively few contributions since. Yet, as we will demonstrate, sensitivity to the different ways in which particular polycentric structures have evolved is of great help in making sense of the differences one tends to observe between one polycentric region and the other.

A starting point is that polycentricism at the metropolitan/regional level comes in many different forms, as illustrated by the eight mega-city regions that occupy centre stage in this special issue: they all display symptoms of polycentricism yet their spatial arrangements vary greatly. Some are characterized by a fairly

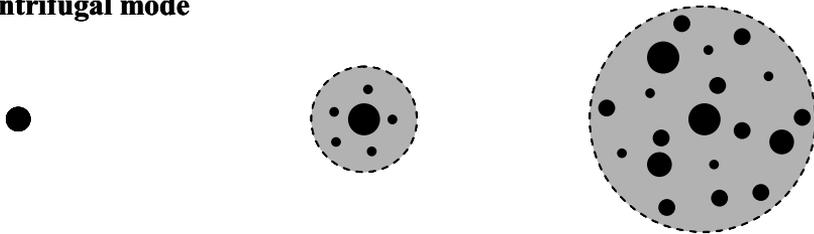
even distribution of more or less equally sized cities across space (e.g. the Randstad, RhineRuhr, EMR Northern Switzerland), others take the shape of a larger urban agglomeration surrounded by several smaller centres (e.g. the Paris Region, Greater Dublin and South East England) and again others are perhaps best characterized as something in between (RhineMain and Central Belgium). Putting these differences into perspective starts by recognizing that each of the urban systems has come from a different starting point, followed its own, path-dependent development trajectory and, over time, has been shaped and moulded by its unique mix of broader structural forces and place-specific contingencies (see also Tilly, 1992; Hohenberg and Hollen Lees, 1995).

In an attempt to reduce complexity to manageable proportions, Champion (2001) has introduced a simple but clarifying distinction between three different modes of polycentric development: a *centrifugal*, an *incorporation* and a *fusion* mode (Figure 8.1). In the words of Champion, the centrifugal mode is characterized by a situation 'where the continuing growth of a monocentric city imposes such severe strains (e.g. escalating land rents in the CBD and growing problems of access to the central area from the ever more distant outer residential areas) that the most affected production and service activities are squeezed out to alternative centres'. In due course these centres 'may, in combination or indeed separately, come to rival the original centre in size'. The incorporation mode in turn, refers to the case in which a large urban centre expands its urban field 'so that it incorporates smaller centres in the surrounding area that had previously been largely self-sufficient in terms of both employment and services'. These other centres then may form 'a more powerful catalyst for attracting extra non-residential activities than the centres emerging through the centrifugal mode' and they may perhaps provide 'an even stronger challenge to the main original centre.' The fusion mode, finally, concerns the situation where 'several previously independent centres of similar size [fuse] as a result of their own separate growth both in overall size and lateral extent and particularly because of the improvement of transport links between them.' (Champion, 2001, pp. 664–665).

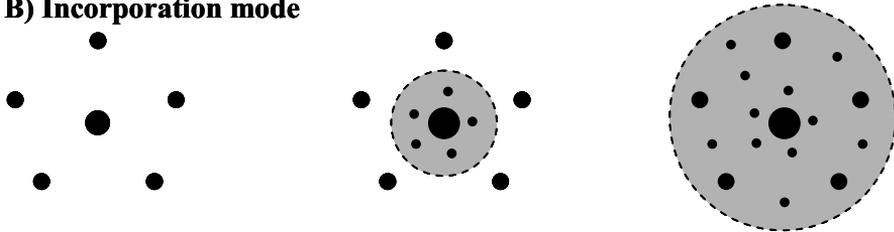
Champion's typology of evolutionary modes thus draws attention to the fact that today's 'polycentric mega-city regions' have indeed developed from different morphological points of departure. It makes clear that polycentricism at the regional level not only refers to the outward diffusion from larger cities to smaller centres within their spheres of influence, but also to the kind of development in which the spheres of influence of several smaller or medium sized cities start to interfere. While the former description applies to regions such as South East England, the Paris Region and Greater Dublin, the latter (i.e. the fusion mode) offers a better fit to the development trajectories of regions such as the Randstad, RhineRuhr, EMR Northern Switzerland and Central Belgium. Within these categories, different regions may find themselves at different 'stages' of polycentric development. From the regions that appear to develop according to the fusion mode, the Randstad and RhineRuhr, for example, may be located somewhere in between stage 2 and 3 while regions in which interference

between separate centres amounts to less may be closer to stage 2 (as represented in Figure 8.1). In addition to this, we may also deduce from Champion's framework that different modes of polycentric development are not mutually exclusive and may be at work in a particular region at the same time. In the Randstad, for example, the fusion mode may best describe developments presently taking place at the level of the Randstad as a whole, while simultaneously incorporation and centrifugal modes of polycentric development are affecting the city regions of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht.

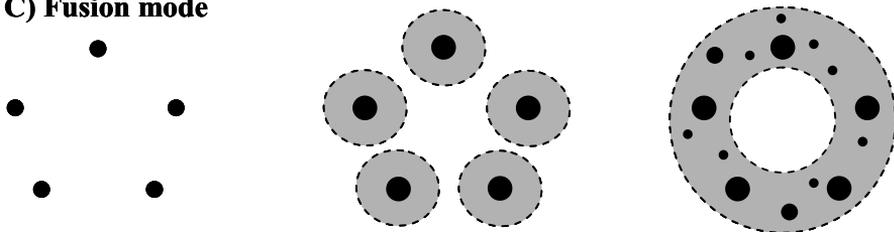
A) Centrifugal mode



B) Incorporation mode



C) Fusion mode



Phase 1

Phase 2

Phase 3

● Centre

○ Urban region

Figure 8.1 *Alternative paths for the evolution of polycentric urban regions. Source: redrawn after the example of Champion, 2001, p. 665.*

Finally, the alternative evolutionary pathways also provide a useful context for understanding why (spatial) policy-makers in different polycentric mega-city regions are concerned with such different issues and hold such different opinions about the potential of the concept of polycentric territorial development. They help us to see why in some regions the concept of polycentric spatial development is welcomed as a possible answer to such problems as urban congestion, regional imbalances and unbridled sprawl while in other regions polycentricity is rather seen as a barrier to interaction and (economic) efficiency (Ipenburg and Lambregts, 2001; Lambregts and Röling, 2005). Below we will illustrate the latter using the case of the Randstad.

8.3 To close the circle or not: the search for metropolitan qualities in the Randstad Holland

The Randstad as we know it today would probably not exist if Amsterdam had been able to extend its then uncontested world city status from the seventeenth century into the centuries that followed. For a variety of reasons, however, the city had to give way to other cities, both within and outside The Netherlands (for an extensive account, see for example, Israel, 1998). This opened the road to a more balanced urbanization of the western part of The Netherlands and paved the way for, eventually, a fusion mode of polycentric urban development (Figure 8.2). As a result, today the Randstad consists of a large number of more or less equally sized and historically distinct cities of which the majority dates back 400 years at least. Over time, these cities have grown considerably and in places their spheres of influence have actually started to overlap (Van der Werff *et al.*, 2005).



Figure 8.2 *Historical development of the Randstad built-up area and main transport links 1870, 1950, 1990. Source: De Boer, 1996, pp.185–189.*

The Randstad presents a wide array of problems and challenges to the planners and policy-makers that are responsible for it. They include transport networks being used to full capacity or more, elevated air pollution levels, increasing pressure on open space, institutional arrangements that are out of line with functional structures, and so on. These are anything but unique to the Randstad and are shared with most if not all urbanized regions in North West Europe. We may

speculate about whether or not the Randstad's particular, polycentric layout makes some problems just a bit worse and others just a bit less serious compared to other regions. But as long as systematic, comparative studies into the relationship between spatial structure and such issues as congestion and air pollution are yet to be carried out, there is no way to be certain about this.

However, apart from these, there is yet one other major challenge that commands the attention of the Dutch planning community. It may be phrased as the search for a 'Dutch Metropolis' or the ongoing fascination of Dutch planners with the questions: (a) whether or not the Randstad comes with the label 'coherent and metropolitan', and (b) how such qualities could eventually be made characteristic of the region. Obviously, it is a direct product of the Randstad's fusion mode of polycentric urban development and the correlated absence of a dominant metropolitan core.

This issue runs like a red thread through the region's planning history and has grown so big as to become one of the major themes of Dutch spatial planning. Chronological accounts have recently been given on a number of occasions (e.g. Lambregts and Zonneveld, 2004; Zonneveld and Verwest, 2005) and will for lack of space not be repeated here. It is useful, however, to keep in mind that the issue is not only a pure planners' challenge but also part of a complex geopolitical struggle among various Dutch regional coalitions (of which the Randstad is just one) and between the Randstad region and the national government (see also Terhorst and Van der Ven, 1995; Van Duinen, 2004). The state of the economy, the political balance of powers and national government's prevailing attitude towards the regions very much determine the intensity and the direction of the debate, with the tables being turned every once in a while (Lambregts and Zonneveld, 2004).

Currently, at the start of the twenty-first century, the issue is highly topical again. The Dutch economy is going through hard times, worries about the diminishing of competitive strengths are mounting and the view that cities and notably metropolitan regions matter most in the international competition over mobile resources is increasingly dominant. Typically, under such conditions, policy attention gets directed towards the question how the competitive strengths of the Randstad, as The Netherlands' main representative in the global competitive arena, can be fortified. Part of this attention is usually aimed at resolving the most obvious problems such as road congestion and the tediousness of (spatial) decision-making. Another part, however, focuses on the more abstract notion that the Randstad will not be able to stand the test of international competition as long as spatial policy does not succeed in bringing to life the 'metropolitan' or the 'world city' qualities of this scattered region (Regio Randstad, 2003).

'Metropolitan' or 'world city' qualities in this debate are very much associated with the presence of agglomeration economies. These are, together with high-quality international transport and communications facilities, considered to be crucial for firms that compete internationally (MVRM, 2004, p. 9). Since the Randstad hosts Europe's largest port, the fourth largest airport and a major

Internet exchange hub, international connectivity is not the region's biggest problem. Only the relatively slow and partial connection to Europe's high-speed train network causes some anxiety. The real concern, however, relates to the perceived lack of a sufficiently rich metropolitan milieu and the accessory agglomeration economies. The region's seven million inhabitants and 350,000 firms theoretically would make it Europe's fifth largest agglomeration after London, RhineRuhr, Paris and Milan (Regio Randstad, 2004*b*), offering mass and diversity, and hence agglomeration economies at a competitive level. The basic complaint, however, is that the region's fragmented and dispersed layout impedes social and economic interaction, keeping it at (much) lower levels than one would expect to find in 'real' metropolises such as Paris, London, Madrid and Milan. As a result, the mass and diversity that are indeed present remain a 'statistical' quality only and fail to get 'functional', so turning the Randstad into a 'potential' metropolis at best or a 'powerless', disjointed collection of middle-sized cities at worst. The resulting and overarching policy challenge is therefore defined as overcoming the barriers posed by the region's polycentric layout and hence 'setting free' the metropolitan potential and the agglomeration economies that are locked into it (Regio Randstad, 2003, 2004*a*).

The two main authorities concerned with Randstad planning affairs are the national government and the Regio Randstad¹ (Randstad Region). They roughly agree with each other on the problem analysis and the overarching objective, but propose different strategies to arrive there.

The national government here is represented notably by the Ministries of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment (MvROM) and Economic Affairs (MEZ). It does conceive the Randstad as a single urban network and aspires 'to enhance the international competitive position of the region *as a whole*' (MvROM, 2004, p. 154, emphasis added), but at the same time it divides the area into three so-called 'economic core areas', arguing that these constitute functionally meaningful entities and more or less distinct regional economies. These core areas are the 'North-wing' (centred on Amsterdam), the 'South-wing' (the Rotterdam/ The Hague area) and the 'Utrecht region' (centred on Utrecht). In the national government's view, the best way to boost the competitive strengths of the Randstad as a whole is to let each of the economic core areas build on its own comparative advantages and thus capitalize on the Randstad's economic, cultural and spatial diversity. It means that in effect the economic core areas are perceived as the main arenas for the creation of agglomeration economies and that the Randstad's intra-regional diversity is seen as a key selling point in the international competitive struggle (MvROM, 2004; MEZ, 2004; see Figure 8.3 for a schematic representation).

The local and regional authorities united in the Regio Randstad take a partly different view on the issue. They do recognize that many social and economic processes are defined at the level of the 'economic cores' as defined by the national government, but they emphasize that in order for the Randstad to really enter the 'premier league' of European metropolitan regions, it is necessary to

give primacy to the Randstad-wide perspective. Their starting point is that none of the individual cities or even the economic core areas is large enough to compete with the most powerful of European metropolitan regions. They acknowledge the opportunities that result from the region's diversified, polycentric make-up, but simultaneously observe that it does not offer the same 'points of excellence' and 'quality of place' as 'real' metropolises such as London, Paris and Frankfurt (Regio Randstad, 2003, 2004a). The critical mass that is considered to be necessary for high-end metropolitan functions, amenities and places, in their view can only be made to work if the Randstad is really encouraged to function as one. According to the united Randstad authorities, this means that interaction between the various economic core areas must be enhanced and that policy measures should mainly aim at strengthening relationships *between* the various parts of the Randstad and not so much at improving conditions *within* these areas. In their view, the Randstad as a whole is supposed to become the arena for the production of agglomeration economies (see Figure 8.3), and the resulting high-end qualities then become the key selling point in the international competitive struggle.

Which of the two strategies eventually may yield the best results in light of the overarching objective is hard to say. Referring back to Figure 8.1 and assuming that the Randstad finds itself somewhere in between stage 2 and 3 of the fusion mode of polycentric development, it would seem as if the national government's strategy implies a move back in the direction of stage 2 while the strategy of the Randstad authorities should be explained as an attempt to reach stage 3. While the Randstad authorities' strategy may be more appealing theoretically and in terms of vision, the national government's may be the more feasible.

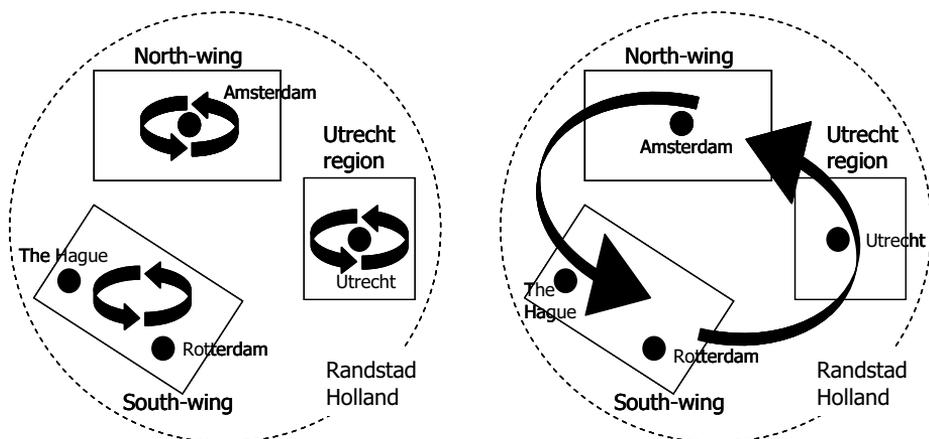


Figure 8.3 Schematic representation of the spatial development approaches for the Randstad by the national government (left) and the Regio Randstad (right)

POLYNET findings for the Randstad provide support for both views. Analyses of travel-to-work patterns and the office networks of business services firms

point out that the lion's share of commuting indeed remains confined to the level of the individual city-regions or economic core areas (Van der Werff *et al.*, 2005) and that large segments of the markets for business services (notably those for small- and medium sized firms) are divided between them (Lambrechts *et al.*, 2005a, b). However, the POLYNET analyses also indicate that for another category of issues the Randstad may indeed form a more meaningful level for analysis and policy-making. For business service firms that service larger companies and multinationals the entire Randstad constitutes a market. This is true in more than one sense; such firms tend to see the Randstad both as a rich and diversified pool of labour and as a major concentration of potential clients. Even though many such firms for a variety of reasons prefer to be located in the Amsterdam region, it is the business potential offered by the Randstad as a whole that attracts them to the area (if they come from abroad) and that enables them to prosper and eventually become European or global players of their own (if they originate from the area itself). It is such findings that support the Randstad authorities' call for market integration and their claim that it is especially (the survival and strengthening of) the high-level, international functions of the Randstad that demand an integrated, metropolitan approach.

8.4 Conclusions

The aim of the article has been to provide some counterweight to the sometimes overly enthusiastic belief among policy-makers that polycentricism or polycentric spatial development offers a remedy for all kinds of urban and regional problems and to show that a certain sensitivity to the variety of (morphological) origins out of which polycentric urban configurations can emerge, helps to understand and put into perspective the overarching challenges a region may face at a particular stage.

The above account of the ways Dutch planners try to come to terms with some of the more problematic aspects related to the polycentric make-up of the Randstad has served this purpose. The perception of the problem by the policy-makers may be judged as being based upon assumptions and stereotypes rather than on solid facts, and coloured by the respective and partly conflicting (geo)political agendas of the actors involved, but it does touch upon a weak spot in the polycentric spatial development thesis as it is used, for example, in European Union circles. Whereas the *European Spatial Development Perspective* promotes polycentric spatial development as a concept that may enhance both competitiveness and cohesion (also) at the regional level (EC, 1999), the case of the Randstad shows that those responsible for the planning and development of a region that actually *is* polycentric, are mainly concerned with overcoming the (perceived) barriers posed by this characteristic in their attempts to boost competitiveness.

However, the use of Champion's (2001) typology of evolutionary modes for polycentric urban development has also made clear that the experience of the

Randstad may be exemplary for a limited range of 'polycentric urban regions' only. It may be symptomatic in particular for regions that lack a dominant urban core and which (as a consequence) evolve according to the 'fusion' mode of polycentric development. As soon as policy-makers in such regions are captured by the thought that it is metropolitan mass and density that counts in the global competition over mobile resources, they have a problem indeed.

Notes

¹ *Regio Randstad* is a formal cooperative platform, the origins of which date back to the early 1990s. It unites the four Randstad provinces (North- and South-Holland, Utrecht and Flevoland), the four largest cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht) and their respective city-regions. Its mission is 'to strengthen the international competitive position and to improve the quality of life in the western Netherlands and in Randstad Holland' (www.regio-randstad.nl). It acts as the discussion partner of the national government as far as issues relating to the Randstad at large are concerned.

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