De polycentrische stedeling centraal: een onderzoek naar het veranderende palet van plekken in een polycentrische stedelijke regio

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SUMMARY

The title of this study ‘THE CENTRALITY OF THE POLYCENTRIC URBANITE’ (in Dutch: De polycentrische stedeling centraal) refers to the focus on a new type of urban dweller. However, it might also be seen as a contradiction in terms. For, as a result of numerous changes, activity locations are now scattered across regions and have thus diluted the meaning of ‘centrality’. This study, which was conducted in the region of Amsterdam, explores the extent to which individual inhabitants of polycentric urban regions actually make use of the region in their daily lives. A polycentric urban region is a region in which places are strongly interwoven as a result of the complementarity between the places. Many studies on urban geography stop short at municipal boundaries. Most of the time, there is no regional knowledge infrastructure to guide us to more subtle spatial insights. This is regrettable, all the more so when one considers that, for several decades, the urban area has been greater in size than the area enclosed by the municipal boundary. Car ownership and the affordability and social acceptance of mobility are enabling people to make use of the complementary polycentric urban region. Not only has this enlarged their spatial action radius, it has also – and more importantly – created greater diversity in travel patterns. Increased opportunities for mobility are giving individuals unprecedented freedom in the organisation of their daily lives.

The findings of this study will add to the academic debate on the rise of polycentric urban regions and boost academic and public discussions on spatial organisation, trends in travel and mobility, and the way people shape their lives spatially. Certain questions can be raised regarding the description of the polycentric urban region as a constellation of options within which people create their own ideal urban living environment or ‘virtual city’ by compiling a personal palette of locations. It is entirely plausible that some urban dwellers may be unable to pursue a polycentric lifestyle because of care burdens or physical or financial constraints.

The question addressed by the study:

Has there been an increase in the number of inhabitants in the Amsterdam region that visit a diverse palette of locations – the polycentric urbanites – and, if so, how far can this trend be explained by changes in the composition of the population?

Significant improvements in travel options coupled with growing prosperity have greatly widened the action radius of many people. At first, this new situation prompted many households to move to the suburbs, but activities were still largely concentrated in one central municipal hub. As time progressed, the city outskirts and former suburban areas also emerged as attractive locations for various facilities and functions. So much so that, in recent decades, the suburbs, once largely mono-functional living areas, have gradually evolved into more layered and more complex parts of the
urban region. At that point suburban municipalities could conceivably have developed into autonomous cities, but this is not what happened. In fact, the intensive interconnections between the different cores in the region continued to exist. But a change did occur in the traffic flow patterns, which became more criss-cross. People who lived in a hub could now work outside their municipality and people from the suburbs could work in the old urban centre, their own municipality or another – originally suburban – municipality. These developments have made urban regions more and more polycentric. The concept of the polycentric urban region is applied in different ways and on different scales both in the academic literature and the practical aspects of policy. In this study it is applied on the scale of the city district and relates to functional changes in the different cores within a region (not integrated functionality across the region as a whole). The city district scale was chosen because it was considered most representative of the scale on which people organise most of their daily activities. First, in the new polycentric urban region, cores are situated at short distances from one another (morphological characteristic). Secondly, the uses and amenities are spread across different cores (functional characteristic). Thirdly, important flows take place between these cores, thereby implying the existence of one urban region. The area therefore acts as a daily urban system (mobility characteristic). As soon as people actually make use of different locations in their own lives they become polycentric urbanites (user characteristic).

In effect, the new spatial structure has led to the development of a new type of region, characterised by different interconnections and different functional cohesion between the locations. This study aimed to show how much use people make of this new spatial constellation. To what extent do people visit more places than before and use locations that match their tastes? The very existence of the polycentric urban region begs another question: Is there any such phenomenon as the polycentric urbanite? It appears that there is. What distinguishes the polycentric urbanite from the other inhabitants of a polycentric urban region is the fact that he uses a palette of locations. Palette of locations is a term used to describe the various locations that an individual chooses for everyday activities. The palette may consist of many locations or just a few. These locations may be close to one another or far apart. A person uses this palette to – as it were – give colour to his or her own life. The term was coined to reflect the fact that people are using an increasingly complex set of locations for activities in their daily lives. It refers to the locations actually used by the individual and not to a continuous spatial area or an enclosed territory. A significant increase is expected in the spatial spread of the locations. A century ago the spatial environments of different groups in the city still converged to a considerable degree. This scenario has since given way to an ‘archipelago’ of environments. Spatial and social change have individualised the palette, transforming it into a personally determined constellation of activity locations. However, when people compile their palette they are confronted with constraints in the organisation of time-space behaviour. A person joins the ranks of polycentric urbanites as soon as his palette of locations is spread across at least
three cores in a region. Hence, not every inhabitant of the polycentric urban region is a polycentric urbanite.

The results of the analyses in the Amsterdam region demonstrate that the polycentric urbanite definitely exists and that their number is increasing. Analysis of data from the time-allocation study of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research shows that inhabitants are making more use of locations outside their own district in their daily lives. Though the study using the data from the Dutch National Travel/Dutch Mobility Survey data points to only a small increase in the number of region-users between 1987 and 2007, it still supports the theory of an ever-widening spatial spread. One particularly striking revelation is the increase in the percentage of respondents from the old central cities of Amsterdam and Haarlem who visited a location inside the region but outside their own district on the day pinpointed by the survey. Whereas, in the past, regional locations were used mainly by people from suburban areas, they are now being used by inhabitants of Amsterdam as well. People from the region are also making more use of other places in the region and less use of places in Amsterdam. The rise in the percentage of region-users and the observed shifts provide strong support for the theory that the municipality of Amsterdam is turning into a polycentric urban region. The analyses with data from the Dutch National Travel/Dutch Mobility Survey show that regional boundaries do apply: the vast majority of inter-municipal movements take place within these demarcation lines. This study also made use of a large number of local datasets, which showed that, in seven municipalities in the Amsterdam region, there is a growing group of inhabitants that fit the criteria for polycentric urbanites.

The results of the empirical research show that socio-demographic and socio-economic variables have an influence on the probability that a person will pursue the lifestyle of a polycentric urbanite. Elderly people, poorly educated people, and women are less likely to behave as polycentric urbanites than young adults, highly qualified people and men. There is however a chance that, through time, more people will behave as polycentric urbanites regardless of their socio-demographic or socio-economic background. Finally, the increase in the population in the region is pushing up the absolute number of polycentric urbanites even further.

The results of the empirical analyses suggest that lifestyle changes are largely responsible for the increase in the number of polycentric urbanites. The very fact that polycentric urbanites usually have a strong social position and a large measure of freedom in the way they organise their lives raises questions as to why they are so attracted by a spreading palette of locations. After all, polycentric urbanites, like everyone else, run into different kinds of constraints in the spatial and temporal organisation of daily life. Travel between locations, for example, always costs time and good coordination is needed to participate in activities at many different addresses. The results of this study allow us to hypothesize that the increase in mobility is not
due solely to the complementary attraction of locations but also to a desire for maximum freedom in the organisation of one’s life. A polycentric spatial structure has evolved in the meantime, so the spatial spread is not necessarily the result of choices alone; it is also, to some extent, caused by the environment. Logically, the transition to a polycentric urban region could lead to social deprivation for groups with limited mobility. Although this applies only marginally – if indeed at all – in the Netherlands, it still raises questions about the kind of effects that will ensue from new government policy to reduce travel and mobility.

The problems connected with the emergence of the polycentric urbanite are, in any event, closely tied in with mobility. More traffic and more environmental pollution can be expected. Another potentially negative effect is that the polycentric urbanite will have a weaker bond with the community in which he lives. That said, there are no indications that polycentric urbanites experience this weaker bond as a hindrance or a problem. The outcome of several local omnibus surveys suggests that it is precisely the groups with a local orientation who say they feel more and more alienated from their immediate environment. A combination of economies of scale and a restrictive mobility policy can sow the seeds of social and spatial isolation. The housing policy, particularly the urban renewal policy, needs to shift its focus from the role of the neighbourhood as a centre of daily life to the role of the home as an operational base at the centre of daily life.

Not only did we address the question of how far the rise of the polycentric urbanite could be empirically demonstrated, we also looked at whether this trend has been stimulated by government policy and whether the appearance of the polycentric urban region and the polycentric urbanite are regarded as positive developments. Much of the policy in recent decades has been inspired by the negative effects of suburbanisation on the support base for the cities. For a long time government policy has tried to reverse developments, spontaneous and otherwise. Though people sing the praises of the polycentric urban region because of the synergy it will presumably create, the appearance of the polycentric urbanite is rarely described in positive terms. In many policy documents reducing travel still takes precedence over strengthening the mutual ties within the metropolitan region of Amsterdam. In the eyes of the policymakers the ideal resident still engages in any number of activities close to home. Situating all activity locations at a short distance from one another will automatically cut travel to a minimum. Participation in many different activities in a compact setting at one location does not, however, fit in with the lifestyle of the polycentric urbanite. A chequered palette of locations is more in keeping with the trend towards individualisation which has been evolving for decades. The phenomenon of the polycentric urbanite therefore requires a new approach to regional developments and the meaning of (daily) mobility.