EVENT REPORT OF THE RSA RESEARCH NETWORK ON POLYCENTRIC URBAN REGIONS

By John Harrison and Michael Hoyler (in collaboration with the other research network organizers, Xingjian Liu, Evert Meijers and Ben Derudder).

The RSA Research Network on Polycentric Urban Regions in nutshell

'Polycentric urban regions' (PURs) have become a key concept in regional studies and described extensively in our previous article published in Issue 4. In that issue, we reported on our first event **'Conceptualising, Identifying and Analysing Polycentric Urban Regions'** held in Delft in January 2019. In this Issue 5 of Regions, we are pleased to be able to report on the workshop recently held at Loughborough University.

The event 'Planning and Governing Polycentric Urban Regions'

The aim of the event titled 'Planning and Governing Polycentric Urban Regions'

that took place in Loughborough, UK, on 2-3 September 2019 was to examine new insights into the effectiveness of the polycentric regional development model in general, and the planning and governance of PURs more specifically. This followed a series of special sessions during the RSA conference in Lugano in 2018 to launch the research network, and the first workshop in Delft where the focus was on conceptualising, analysing and identifying PURs.

The relevance of PUR-related research has been reinforced by the fact that the concept has attracted considerable interest from policy makers and regional planners. A range of normative plans and policies have been proposed advocating 'polycentric regional development'. In policy terms, PURs have been championed by advocates as an innovative way to manage urban-rural relations and framed by the normative goal of sustainable spatially balanced territorial development. We see this in Europe, where following the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP), European Spatial Planning Observatory Network (ESPON) and the Interreg IIIB programmes have advanced PURs as a key mechanism to achieve territorial competitiveness and cohesion. We see it in post-reform China which has seen its fast-paced urbanisation, initially characterised by decentralisation and rescaling of state power leading to intercity competition, captured by collaborative projects such as plans for PURs in recent years. Meanwhile, more generally, a spatial planning agenda focusing on 'megaregions' – large-scale regions centred on multiple, more-or-less closely located urban centres – has been devised, emphasising the supposed benefits for competitiveness and resilience. This said, the development of (polycentric) urban regions is not a spatially and socially homogenous process. It is important to identify people and places that are 'winners' and 'losers' in city-regional processes. Equally significant is identifying the successes and failings of the polycentric development model.

Key themes for the workshop included:

- Local, regional and national development policies for PURs
- Coordinating planning and governance of PURs across fragmented arrangements
- Similarities and differences in approaches to planning and governing small-scale, medium-sized and large-scale PURs
- The challenge of planning and governing cross-border PURs
- Assessments of the impacts that polycentric regional development has on
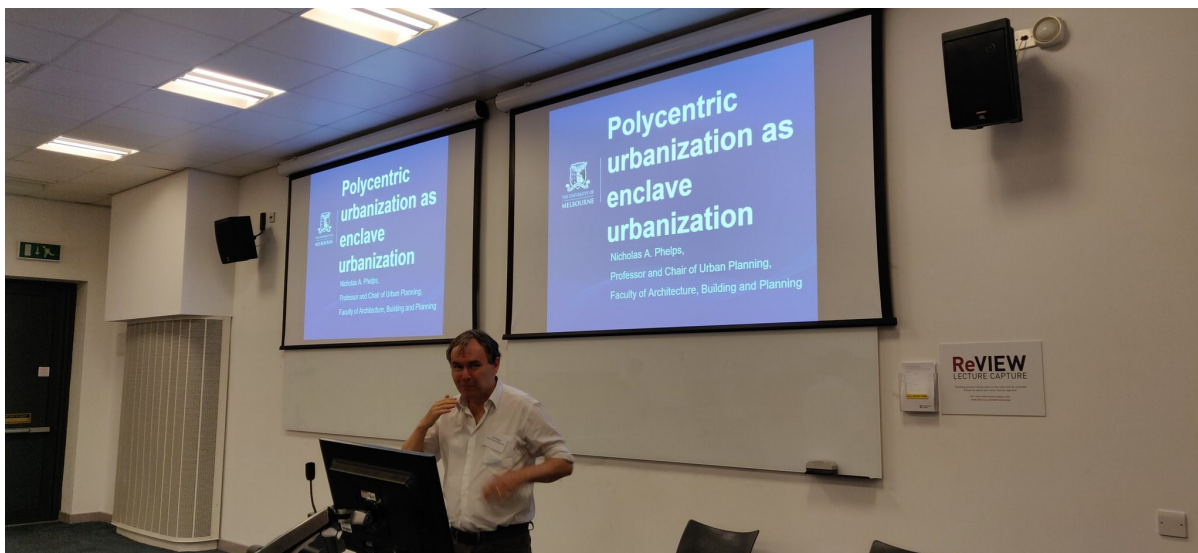
peoples and places.
- (Overcoming) constraints to polycentric regional development
- Planning and governance in, for and beyond PURs
- Achievements, failings, future for the polycentric development model
- Illustrative cases where the PURs development model has been implemented (un)successfully

Keynote presentations and thematic sessions

The event was structured around three keynote presentations by:

Nicholas Phelps (University of Melbourne) on 'Polycentric urbanization as enclave urbanization.

Christophe Sohn (Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research) on 'Polycentric imaginaries and the rescaling strategies of cross-border metropolitan regions'

Kathy Pain (University of Reading) on 'Rethinking the polycentric urban region: thinking about space as socially constructed and consumed'.

Alongside this, we had five thematic sessions comprising three papers each, exploring the themes of:

- Interplaces and PURs
- Ports, airports, rail and infrastructure in PURs
- Planning and governing infrastructure and transportation in PURs
- Integration and tensions in planning and governing PURs
- Cooperation and strategy for PURS

The workshop was attended by delegates from 10 countries across 4 continents and included an equal balance of participants across those who were PhD researchers, early-career, mid-career and senior professors. The event was

documented on Twitter via #RSA_PURs.

About the authors

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