Contextualising Regional Identity and Imagination in the Construction of Polycentric Urban Regions: The Cases of the Ruhr Area and the Basque Country

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Summary. In this contribution, we aim at positioning and sharpening the concept of 'polycentric urban region' (PUR) by comparing it with preceding approaches to interurban interdependency and by discussing its potentials and pitfalls. The main outcome of the comparison is that the notion of a PUR constitutes a strategic rather than an analytical concept. To unravel the pros and cons of the concept of PUR, a link is made between the strategic interpretation of the PUR concept and the notion of regional identity. The argument put forward is that the strategic dimension of the PUR concept rests on, and mobilises, the identification of a region as an area with distinct morphological and functional characteristics, and a unique cultural identity. In practice, the way these strategic, functional and cultural dimensions interact varies between specific cases of PUR. Two examples are presented here. The Ruhr area in Germany shows how strategic action, supported by an existing functional integration and identity, is geared towards reshaping and mobilising the cultural identity. The Basque country reveals a reverse pattern, in which 'geo-strategic' considerations, fed by a strong cultural identity, shape and invoke functional images to support the concept of a 'Basque polynuclear system'. We end by discussing the possible success of PUR as a core concept in urban planning in western Europe.**

Introduction

The concept of polycentric or polynucleated urban regions (PURs) has become a fashionable notion in the present literature of urban and regional science (see, for example, Jauregui Fernandez, 1993; Dieleman, 1996; Dieleman and Priemus, 1996; Albrechts, 1998; Dieleman and Faludi, 1998a, 1998b). The claim is made that in contemporary society many of the non-metropolitan, but yet larger, cities that are distinct but geographically close to each other can increasingly be seen as interdependent, as tied together in functional regions. The theoretical arguments as well as the empirical evidence for the claim of the existence of PURs stems mainly from western Europe. In this contribution, we zoom in on the theory and western European cases by which the rise of PURs is

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explained. Section 1 presents 'PURs' as one concept among various addressing interdependency between cities. The approaches include the 'urban field' concept, the 'city systems' approach and the concept of 'urban networks'. Section 2 addresses the issue of regional identity and its constituent dimensions (strategic, cultural and functional) in order to contextualise further the potentials and pitfalls of the concept of PURs. Section 3 focuses on the narrations of the developments in two often-quoted examples of PURs: the Ruhr area and the Basque country. Section 4 critically evaluates the concept and concludes.

1. Interdependency between Cities

The matter of interdependency between cities has come a long way in the theory of urban geography and urban economics. This section will discuss the various concepts that, by presenting different images of interdependencies, have informed the notion of polycentric urban regions. In particular, three concepts are highlighted: 'urban field' as introduced by Friedman and Miller, Pred's 'city systems' and the concept of urban networks.

1.1 The Urban Field

In their much-cited article on 'The urban field' in 1965, Friedman and Miller start their argument with the following quote of Don Martindale as written in his introduction to Max Weber's essay, 'The city',

> The modern city is losing its external and formal structure. Internally it is in a state of decay while the new community represented by the nation everywhere grows at its expense. The age of the city seems to be at its end (Weber, 1964, p. 62).

Friedman and Miller use this quote as an enforcement of their argument: the coming of the urban field. The idea of the urban field is based on interdependency between different urban regions. The urban field would replace the traditional and separated concepts of town and countryside, of rural and urban regions, of city and periphery, in line with Stein's (1964) work on the "*Regional City*" and Gottmann's (1961) name for the urbanised north-eastern seaboard of the US, Megalopolis. These views were in sharp contrast with the then popular theory of central places of Christaller (1933/1996) and Lösch (1954). While interesting in the way the 'urban field' was able to capture new spatial trends in urban development, the concept did not provide a clear notion of spatial interdependencies within and around the urban field. Other concepts, such as 'city systems' and 'urban networks' have stepped in to address this issue.

1.2 City Systems

In his thought-provoking publication "City systems in advanced economics" of 1977, Pred used the term city systems to describe all those individual urban units in a country or large region that are to some extent economically interdependent with other individual urban units in the same country or region (Pred, 1977, p. 13). He makes a distinction between the interdependence among the cities in a country or region and the openness of the set of cities as a whole. A matrix of four categories of conditions arises from this distinction, varying from low interdependency and low openness ('the case of medieval Europe') to high interdependency and high openness ('the case of modern industrialised countries and regions'). The indicator he uses to measure the interdependency in the city system is the circulation of specialised information, the kind of information that is used by the decision-makers of a territorial unit. Since specialised information is spatially biased, Pred argues that the circulation and availability of information makes up a reliable indicator for the growth of channels of interdependence. Compared with Friedman and Miller, hence, Pred is much clearer about the nature of interdependency between urban areas. Using information time-lag surface maps for individual cities at selected dates in time, he found that for the evolution of the

city system in the US the circulation of specialised economic information was most readily available in the largest cities, and that this presented a major source of business innovation and economic dynamics. He particularly stressed the ways in which communications and interaction networks underpin innovative behaviour among businesses, since such networks

> provide ideas, conceptual stimuli, observations, and other bits of information that are less available under conditions of relative geographic isolation (Pred, 1977, p. 99).

Also, Pred makes an effort to demonstrate that Christaller's model and the empirical findings based on this model—for example, as found by Berry (1972, 1973)—are not valid (Pred, 1977). The channels of interdependence should be seen as much more complex. The diffusion pattern he found is much more variegated than that described in the hierarchical model. The diffusion of specialised information between large cities occurred and occasionally even the diffusion proceeded from small to large cities. For the post-industrial urban system, Pred foresaw a growing role of multilocational organisations in city-system interdependence and growth in the circulation of specialised information via the channels of interorganisational and intraorganisational linkages between the head offices and the different subordinate units.

1.3 Urban Networks

With this latter line of thinking on linkages, Pred cleared the way for the evolution of yet another concept to describe city systems, one which has become popular since the beginning of the 1980s: the concept of urban networks. This concept expressed the growing belief that next to vertical, horizontal co-operation and linkages between cities are also important. Post-industrial urban systems would increasingly be 'deChristallerised'. In Europe in particular, as a consequence of the process of European integration, the concept of urban networks became fashionable (see Ministry of Education and Science, 1987;

Pumain, 1992; Batten, 1995; Camagni and Salone, 1993). Many scientific and political documents emphasise that the European integration process between countries can and must be guided by a stimulation and growth of the networking between cities in Europe. Batten, for example, foresees the development of an 'innovative class' of urban networks, which through co-operation and sharing complementary assets achieve significant economies of scope. In claiming this, he draws a parallel with business networks.

> The co-operative mechanisms may resemble those of inter-firm networks in the sense that each urban player stands to benefit from the synergies of interactive growth via reciprocity, knowledge exchange and unexpected creativity (Batten, 1995, p. 313).

Core factors to reach the 'innovative class' are the availability of transnational human resources and corridors of high-quality transport and communications infrastructure.

The latter aspect, that of physical infrastructure, has gained prominence in empirical approaches as well as in policy-oriented work. The competitiveness of urban regions has become associated more closely with their physical position in, and connection to, the European communication system. The terms 'missing links' and 'accessibility' became key elements in stressing the necessity of the filling of the 'structural holes' (Burt, 1992) in the European urban network (see Bruinsma, 1994; Nijkamp, 1993). In the 1990s, the notion of urban networks was complemented with images of spatial corridors at national and international levels. Spatial corridors, containing major routes of communication, present the gateways for urban areas to other major economic areas. In the Dutch case, for example, the notion of spatial corridors structured around major transport axes towards Germany and Belgium has become a leading image in present debates on spatial planning and the role of the city (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 1999). In this view, corridors are the spatial

manifestation of economic power relation-
ships that condition and shape the develop-
ment of urban networks. For urban networks,
corridors thus play a double role. On the one
hand, they present spatial gateways for urban
communication and competitiveness. On the
other hand, they provide a wider spatial
frame of reference for the strategic position-
ing of specific urban networks in a wider
competitive space.

   The development of the 'urban network'
concept has been crucial for the actual inter-
est and application of 'PURs'. In particular,
what is important is the increase in the dis-
cursive emphasis on the strategic element of
networks, referring to the competitive posi-
tioning of adjacent areas. It is this strategic
aspect which has underpinned the popularity
of the term PURs.

1.4 Polycentric Urbanisation and Polycentric Urban Regions (PURs)

The label polycentric is not new. It has been
used for a long time now, mostly in the field
of urban and regional planning for individual
cities, as distinct from monocentric urbanisa-
tion. The concept of polycentric urbanisation
has gained renewed attention in the past few
years, not as a definition of an urban struc-
ture in a region or country alone, but more as
a strategic planning concept. In the introduc-
tion to a special issue of European Planning
Studies on PURs, Dieleman and Faludi
(1998b), argue that the concept, referred to as
polynucleated urbanisation (PU), fits all post-
industrial cities. They refer to Hall's (Hall,
1997) paper on "Modelling the post-indus-
trial city" to back their argument. In line with
Pred, Hall stresses the 'informationised' na-
ture of economic activities, which has put
advanced services at the top of the economic
development priorities. Hall argues that cities
can increasingly be characterised as having
multiple centres in one functional territory,
while they are also more and more embedded
in global networks. Because of the increase
in transport possibilities and the congestion
and high prices in inner cities, a differen-

tiation between inner and outer city centres
has emerged in most post-industrial cities.
The development of the outer areas of large
cities—what Soja (1996) refers to as 'exopo-
lis' and Fishman (1990) terms 'tech-
noburbs'—and the evolution of major
employment and commercial centres in
metropolitan peripheries—Garreau's (1991)
'edge cities'—have been a significant focus
of recent urban research and policy work.
The evolution of the notion of polycentricity
is thus a consequence of how the shift to an
advanced service economy has fundamen-
tally changed the meaning of urban centres
and the way spatial infrastructures are used.

   While drawing on Hall, Dieleman and
Faludi (1998b) move to a higher spatial scale
than (metropolitan) cities, the level of PURs.
They apply the idea of interrelated multiple
centres to regional configurations. The argu-
ment is made that compared to the typical
metropolitan areas like Berlin, Paris and
London, polycentric urban regions could be
discerned in the dense spatial pattern of cities
in Europe. Many of the non-metropolitan,
but yet larger, cities that are close to each
other can increasingly be seen as interdepen-
dent, as tied together in functional regions,
they claim. The authors quote the examples
of the Randstad, the Flemish Diamond and
the Rhine–Ruhr area. They point to com-
muter patterns in these urbanised regions to
validate the claim of functional togetherness
between these formerly separated cities.
Moreover, so the argument goes, the in-
creased competitiveness between cities in the
modern economy validates the necessity of
such functional interdependence, since these
cities by themselves are not large enough to
compete with the metropolitan areas.

   Dieleman and Faludi (1998b) themselves,
however, do not give a clear and concrete
definition, or potential indicator, of the con-
cept of polycentrism. Following largely the
recently presented definition of the European
Commission (1999), a PUR can best be
understood as a spatially closely connected
and strategically planned region, with histori-
cally and politically distinct cities, without a
clear hierarchy ranking between them, and

separated by open spaces. The present debate in literature around the concept of PURs appears to focus on these larger urban configurations.

1.5 Comparison between the Concepts of Interdependency between Cities

How does this latter notion of PUR differ from the previous concepts on interdependency between cities? We see four main differences.

The first difference with previous concepts of urban interdependency is that the concept of PUR presents a blend between the concept of urban interdependencies and the classic concept of urban hierarchy. A PUR is clearly a modern application of the urban network concept with its explicit focus on the horizontal linkages between adjacent cities as part of a way to label and position the larger urban area with a notion of a wider (competitive) space. While the previous concepts stressed the importance of 'deChristallerising' the urban make-up of society, the concept of PUR, however, flirts with the classic hierarchical model of cities in its stressing of the importance of central places by its continuous rhetorical reflection on supposed competitive rankings between metropolitan cities and urban conglomerations.

Secondly, the concept of the polycentric urban region is presented as a planning concept rather than a theory or a hypothesis, although it is endorsed by theoretical arguments and empirical justifications. *A priori*, the territorial shape of PURs is not based on an empirically grounded functional logic, but on images of functional integration. Note the difference from the model-based views of Christaller and Lösch, who outlined a non-existing, theoretical model of functional interdependencies between cities (markets, in the case of Lösch). In the case of PURs, the interdependency is set up explicitly to guide and structure planning thoughts and ideas, whereas previous concepts of the interdependency between cities were first of all models or theories and were then used as a planning concept afterwards (see also Blotevogel, 2000).

Thirdly, despite the emphasis on the role of information, non-tangible assets and electronic communication, attention on the functional coherence between cities has, since the concept of the urban field, shifted increasingly to physical linkages between urban centres. Attention is drawn to the perceived need to link physically the main centres in the polycentric region. This also explains why, more than in the case of the previously mentioned concepts, maps, and the visualisation of spatial corridors on them, play such an important role.

The fourth difference with the previously mentioned concepts rests on the facts that the boundaries of polycentric regions are drawn more explicitly and that the concept is affiliated to the notion of existing urban centres. The region is a strategic (re)production. Within the concept of the PUR, the territorial component of the urban system is thus given more importance. The configuration of the urban system is territorially bounded and much attention is paid to the positioning (including 'competitiveness') of the enclosed area. The concept is restricted to one region, whereas the other concepts were focused on the (future) development of the interdependency between cities in time and space, without drawing boundaries around these cities *a priori*.

2. PURs and their Identity

PURs, as argued so far, are first and foremost strategic tools for planners and policy-makers. This brings us to a crucial factor in the shaping of PURs: the role of regional identity. PURs develop and position themselves through a process of regional identification, in which labelling ('Randstad', 'Flemish Diamond') and the setting of common images, perspectives and goals play an essential role. In general, we would argue that what makes a region identifiable, consists of three congruent interpretative dimensions: strategic, cultural and functional. A region will have its own identity if it is different from others in terms of its politically induced strategic plans, its believed or produced cultural assets and its functional/

morphological dimensions. For the case of PURs, we would argue that its regional identity contains a strong strategic component. The cultural identity of a PUR facilitates common strategy-making and also provides elements for the creation of common images and perspectives at the PUR level (*Leitbild*). The third dimension is functional identity which, besides facilitation of interaction and communication, provides an important basis for legitimisation for the development of PUR concepts and policies in practice. The three dimensions of regional identity distinguished (strategic, functional, cultural) and their interactions will now be discussed in more detail for the case of PURs.

2.1 Strategic Identity

The strategic identity of PURs builds on an identification of a subject territory and the intention to create a common perspective and objective for this area. Maps play an important role in this process. Indeed, the more concrete spatial image of PURs has especially appealed to top-down approaches to spatial planning. In the literature on polycentric regions, the functional coherence of these regions is often shown on maps in which cities are linked through arrows and separated with spatial buffers. What is striking about the formulation of a geometric shape on a map, be it a 'Flemish Diamond' or a 'Dutch Randstad', is that practically in all cases the argument for the drawing of the shape is rather defensive and astonishingly simple. PURs are perceived against the backdrop of increased competition between urban conglomerations. The basic argument then is that, because of a fierce and increasing international competition, there is a need to co-operate at the regional level, because, it is argued, networking stimulates growth.

As a result of this context, PUR strategies are generally based on the acknowledgement of the polycentric regions in the international urban system and corridors. The discursive, geo-strategic argument that is often used concerns the need for a strategic location on a major European development axis. The intention is to shape and reshape the geographical configuration of cities and regions by words of intent, by strategies (see also Priebs, 1996). PURs thus present examples of a voluntary geo-strategy, where the will and intention come before the actual reality of interdependency. Besides the external positioning of the area, the strategy also serves another purpose: the objective to create internal synergetic advantages. The aim is to create associational structures in the defined and demarcated region, which not only serve as moderation for planning but may also stimulate an endogenous growth of affiliation between the cities.

Both elements—external and internal strengthening of PURs—can be noted in practically all the policy-oriented documents on PURs. It may be illustrative of this voluntary character of the concept of PUR that most scientific contributions on PURs are policy-oriented as well. The emphasis often is on the future and the need to change or adjust to the alleged new conditions of competition. Essentially, this discourse mirrors the literature on business competitiveness, with its emphasis on the value of networking for business competitiveness (Rosenfeld, 1996) and on core competencies and marketing (Sadler, 1993). However, many questions remain unanswered in the application of the business metaphor to spatial entities. Not only is the concept of spaces competing, be they cities, regions or countries, disputable as such (see Krugman, 1994), the idea that cities joining forces through networking will indeed contribute to economic performance lacks proper justification. Moreover, it remains unclear what exactly the subject of networking is. Who is networking in polycentric urban networks? To address these issues, it is necessary to look at the other two distinguished dimensions of regional identity.

2.2 The Cultural Identity of Polycentric Regions

Another important dimension of the shaping of a regional identity of a PUR is the nature

and role of the subject in the collective representation in the cultural 'other' and the cultural 'we'. We define this element of a PUR as the formulation of a 'cultural identity'. The common cultural identity of a region is not an *idée fixe*, a static phenomenon. It is a dynamic and ongoing process, through which the collective consciousness of belonging and imagination of citizens in a certain community may be strengthened (Anderson, 1983). Following Harris, culture is here defined as

> the total socially acquired life-style of a group of people including patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Harris, 1993, p. 104).

Territories and their cultural identities are made in an interactive, often even strategic, process, and so is a PUR (see, for example, Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 1984; Murphy, 1991; Paasi, 1996; Werlen, 1992). Illustrative for the 'production' character of the cultural identity of a PUR, is the process of name creation (Paasi, 1996; Moscovici, 1981). The 'Randstad' and the 'Flemish Diamond' are both examples of trying to symbolise and express the unity of a certain urban system. As Albrechts, one of the founders of the concept of the Flemish Diamond, states in his essay on the evolution and contents of the concept, the planning concept of the Flemish central area was 'a play on words' (Albrechts, 1998). As the author continues, the metaphor of the Diamond they finally chose

> decodes what is susceptible to bringing forth from this urban network not what is actually there, but what may be said about it in terms of its potentials (Albrechts, 1998, p. 420).

The idea then is that, to be effective, this potential, shaped by labelling and invoking local symbols, should become part of the 'common destiny' felt across the area.

Besides a suitable name, other symbols also serve as illustrations for the production character of PURs. As argued above, the instrument of maps is often used. The complex coherence in a spatial plan is often powerfully outlined on a map (see, for example, Faludi, 1999). Next to their internal function, these maps are also used for external reasons—namely, to endorse the positioning of the PUR within a wider 'competitive' space (such as Europe). Indeed, the saying holds that a picture is worth a thousand words. What is more, a map of a PUR is not just a mirror of reality; it is a simple image of a certain structure that people invented, want to believe in or hope for. By representing places via the powerful tool of images, they also construct them (see Harvey, 1989; Wood, 1992). Maps, therefore, are an expressive and vigorous form of 'geostrategy'. They 'invoke' rather than interpret.

As a consequence, a PUR could be considered as a normative approach to city networking. It includes and excludes places in space by its appeal to a common future and destiny, and sometimes common origin and history. In doing so, a bordered cultural identity is (re)produced. In social psychology, the formulation of the 'we' is generally referred to as the assimilation effect (Koomen, 1988). The value of the in-group, the 'we' is mostly determined by social comparison with other regional identities. Demarcating the 'other' simultaneously demarcates and promotes the 'we' (Koomen, 1988; van Houtum, 1998, 1999). In fact, other regional entities are necessary to be able to compare and value the characteristics—such as coherence, status and performance—of the own entity and, hence, to formulate the own regional identity. The perceived homogeneity of individual members in the out-group (the 'other', also referred to as 'them') is much greater than that of the in-group—conversely, a greater variety and heterogeneity is perceived amongst the people of the own region.

For PURs too, comparing and mirroring seem essential. What 'the other' does, what urban configuration and policy configuration 'they' have for 'their' urban structure, and what configuration 'we' have, are apparently more important than a profound research into the question why do 'we' need to establish a

polycentric urban network in 'our' country? Hence, a common feature in the exploitation of the planning concept of PURs is that much effort is made to antagonise other urban networks in order to compete more successfully. The competitive strength of 'them' asks for a forceful 'us'. The cultural identities of two regions will grow stronger if the differences between them are more pronounced. Albrechts (1998) explicitly argues that this was indeed an important strategy in their construction of the Flemish Diamond. The creation and antagonisation of the 'them'—the 'enemy', as Albrechts puts it—helps to identify and to position the own urban network in the believed fierce competition among them and would help partners to join forces and close the ranks (Albrechts, 1998). For the Randstad and the Rhine–Ruhr area, the same mechanisms have been and still are important. This may explain the emphasis on the fierce competition that is supposed to exist in the justification of (and investment in) the 'own' PUR. So it is the cultural identity factor, rather than the business metaphor, that underscores the link between urban competition and urban regional networking. Framing PURs in a context of urban competition is part of, as well contributing to, the shaping of regional identity.

In summary, within the wider context of regional identity, the cultural dimension relates to the strategic dimension in two ways. First, the creation of 'us' and 'them' is a pre-condition for the shaping of strategic capacity and for the demarcation of the territorial *subject* of a PUR strategy. Secondly, the cultural identity may contribute to shaping *objects* of strategy-making. Cultural elements serve to create powerful images, beliefs and labels that help to conceive a PUR as an entity that requires a common agenda and more integration. They also help to position and market a PUR externally.

2.3 Functional Identity

Next to strategic and cultural identity, we distinguish a last category, namely functional identity. With this identity is meant the territorial demarcation of the region and the coherence of the linkages and ties, be they economic, political or social, between the cities involved in the polycentric region. In this case the term '*Vergesellschaftung*', representing the evolution of the functional unity or a territory, as opposed to '*Vergemeinschaftung*', representing the cultural identity of a territory, might be indicative (Weber, 1964; Zijderveld, 1983). Within the detection of the functional identity of a polycentric region, attention is paid to the measuring, labelling and interpreting of the linkages and ties. This latter kind of interpreting and advancing the entity of a polycentric region receives a great deal of attention in the present debate.

In various respects, the functional dimension presents an ambiguous side of the PUR concept. On the one hand, the functional dimension carries an analytical connotation. Data on commuting and other linkages, as well as the lay-out of urban areas and communication infrastructure, may support the idea that co-located cities are already strongly interdependent and thus should be labelled as a PUR on analytical grounds. On the other hand, the mere spatial agglomeration of cities, even when interdependency cannot be verified, seems to justify the notion that there is scope for more functional integration generally based on the assumption that such integration will also improve the external competitiveness of the area. Such more normative claims are generally supported by the expression of the potential for further interconnection and functional coherence. In drawing the lines around and arrows between cities, one simplifies spatial reality into two categories: inclusion (that which functionally 'belongs' to the polycentric urban region) and exclusion (that which does not fit the image). A problem may thus be that the map of a PUR is a binary solution to a problem that is not clearly defined. While the functional dimension is vital to justify the application and development of the PUR concept, the ambiguity stems from the fact that the functional dimension invokes a mixture of both more positive and normative
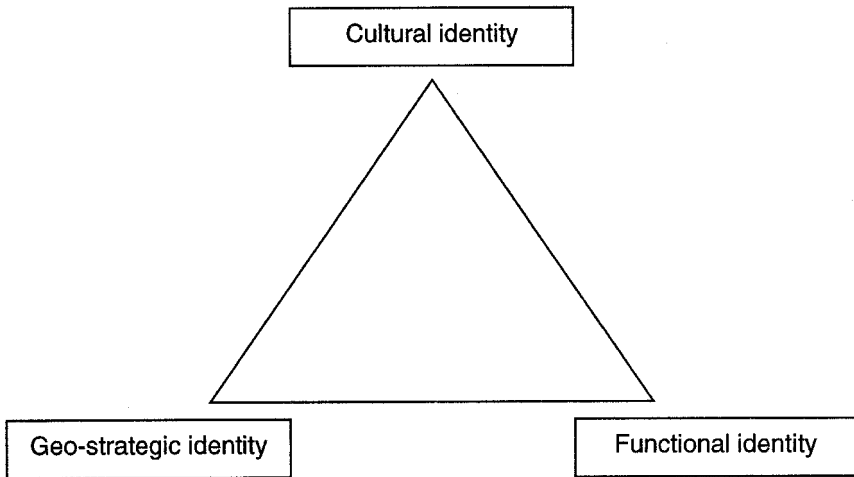
Figure 1. The interpretative dimensions of the identity of PURs

claims. Because of this ambiguity, there is no real need for the strategic actors behind the PURs to prove that a PUR—demarcated on often rather arbitrary grounds—has a significant higher internal correlation between the cities involved than for the cities outside the chosen area. Their argument is that what matters is not what is important *de facto*, but what strategic direction should be headed for.

The ambiguous nature of the functional dimension has important repercussions for the interaction between the various dimensions of regional identity and the way PURs evolve. Various forms of dynamics can be envisaged. When a PUR strategy is successful, and the perceived functional 'holes' and 'missing links' are filled with new concrete lines of communication as well as stronger institutional relationships, the strategy may well become self-fulfilling: functional coherence increases. This will especially happen when accompanied by a strengthening of a positive cultural identity at the level of the PUR. The strategic dimension may thus help to strengthen the cultural and functional identity. However, against these centripetal forces, steps towards improving 'gateway' connections (for instance, along corridors) may have countervailing, even centrifugal impacts, by linking fringe areas to other spa-

tial networks. Antagonistic feelings between cities within a PUR may also have negative consequences. In more difficult times—for instance, when an urban area is confronted with economic decline—fringe cities may be tempted to look more outward than inward. They may even be inclined to become 'unfaithful', shifting their affiliation towards another urban network. When new functional images and claims are brought forward, an overall change in positioning strategy may result.

2.4 The (Re)production of a PUR Identity

What follows from the discussion so far is that the interaction between the three dimensions of regional identity cannot be understood on the basis of a single chain of causality. The three dimensions are all interdependent (Figure 1).

Territorial identities, of which regional identities form part, cannot be seen as merely cultural residues resulting from past social interaction, although cultural factors play an important role (Paasi, 1996). Our argument here is that, within the communicative process of (re)making and (re)negotiating PURs, the three dimensions of identity—cultural, functional and strategic identity—all play a crucial role in helping to illuminate the

understanding of this process. We would argue that the strategic (re)production of identities, in particular, should be perceived in the context of the subjective interests of dominant actors, such as key politicians and business people, planners, consultants, scientists and local media. Identity-shaping, in this light, is part of a political process, in which actors attempt to promote and align a particular interest. Such a process of identity-shaping also contributes to constructing strategic capacity at the regional level, to shape the 'locality as an agent' (Cox and Mair, 1991). It is often economic business interests, mediated through local policy networks and growth coalitions, that are behind such processes. PUR constructions often rely on appealing slogans invoking a strong economic logic, such as "The Randstad as motor of the Dutch economy". Interestingly enough, this economic logic is often inspired or ratified by images, fashionable concepts and the discursive management rhetoric of consultants and academics who have or wish to have influence on the political debate. In the supposed assumption that the creation, reshaping or sustenance of the PUR is helping the economy forward, the concept of the PUR as such is remarkably little debated analytically, but much more strategically and financially. Besides the economic logic, cultural assets and images are also mobilised. Indeed, in its most proactive forms, it is the link between economic promotion and cultural place marketing that underpins identity-building. As Gregson *et al.* (1999, p. 3) observe

> place marketing through culture and its commodification [in] shopping malls, theme parks and heritage museums, cultural festivals, even 'exotic' ethnicities and culinary cultures … have become tools of economic boosterism.

The sound of the scientifically and culturally empowered commercial 'we' is certainly heard by politicians, as they have a keen interest in the economic well-being of the municipality, province or state. Yet, within a territory, such as that of a PUR, there are more political interests at stake—namely, of the different cities as the 'members' of that particular PUR. A PUR is not a province, a municipality or a state. It is somewhere in between, a geo-strategic region, but without any legitimate power. Hence, there is no such thing as a PUR politician. Nationally operating politicians are primarily focused on keeping the balance of power between the regions in the country and politicians at the city level are most interested in serving the interests of the local community. As a consequence, the promotion of the 'we' feeling at the PUR level by politicians can be ambiguous. This may and often will induce a distortion in the subtle balance between the forces of competition, co-operation and community feeling between the separate cities that is striven for in a PUR. The result might well be then that the members of the PUR—i.e. politicians of the different cities—are competing with each other, sometimes rather fiercely, perhaps more than competing with other PURs.

The question is thus to what extent a strategically constructed identity which is, to a large extent, instrumental to the particular interests of the actors involved, may also be born by social reproduction of the people residing in such a territory. Indeed, some authors are rather critical about the way policy-makers and other actors, by invoking cultural and functional elements, create elusive images of their territories, largely for place-marketing purposes (Lovering, 1995; Sadler, 1993). So, one may ask: do the people from the German Ruhr area or the Dutch Randstad, for example, associate themselves with the PUR concepts 'imposed' upon them, and if so, to what extent, and when do they do that—that is, at what time and in which place? A next question may be why would people associate themselves with a certain PUR—would they have the same strategic reasons? Would whatever reasons they might have be as strong as those of who invented or constructed the concept in the first place? The latter seems highly unlikely. The motives of the 'producers', the identity-setters and the people, as identity-followers, may vary considerably and so may their identity. The motive of the people to claim and sus-

tain a certain regional identity is generally less strategic and less obvious than that of the 'producer'. In addition, the 'producers' will generally attach much value to a single identity, associated with a 'produced' strategic unity, whereas for the people the spatial, cultural identity is a much more multilayered concept. People have several cultural identities at the same time. One can, for example, be a global citizen, European, Dutch, 'Randstedeling' and Amsterdammer at the same time. Territorial identity is a feeling that is expressed most vividly through the borders of that territory. It is a relational concept; the 'other' frames the definition of the 'us'. The proclamation of the PUR identity, therefore, is most notably uttered to and by people outside that PUR region. Within the PUR region, however, people—as well as politicians—tend to identify themselves more with the own city or neighbourhood (see, for example, Moles and Rohmer, 1972; van Houtum, 1998).

So, while the strategic aspects of identity-shaping should not be played down, the wider social resonance of what can be considered as partly 'imposed' identities should also be taken into account. In sum, actors who 'produce' a particular PUR concept, will have more interest in justifying its existence and upgrading it, than those for whom the PUR means merely another level with which possibly to identify.

3. Empirical Cases of Polycentric Urban Regions

Using the triangular framework of Figure 1, the particular process of identity-shaping will be illustrated for two cases. The two cases, the Ruhr and the Basque country, are often cited as examples of PURs (see, for example, Rechmann, 1992; Jauregui Fernandez, 1993; Gobierno Vasco, 1997; Dieleman and Faludi, 1998a, 1998b). We have chosen to deal specifically with these two regions, since both have a past of strong industrialisation, decentralised urbanisation and recent economic decline. Yet, we would argue that the differences in terms of identity between these

two regions are striking in the context of the three interpretative dimensions of the identity of PURs.

3.1 The Ruhr Area

The functional dimension: a historically integrated Ruhr. The reason to address the functional dimension here first is that the Ruhr is often regarded as an illustrative case of a functional entity with a distinct economic specialisation (coal and steel) and regional identity. As a starting-point for this perception can be taken the significant role of the Ruhr area in the Hanseatic trading system. The central position of the Ruhr cities on major axes of trade in northern Europe has for a long time provided a major source of wealth and growth. The discovery of the region's natural resources and its massive exploitation in the last century ushered in a period of industrialisation and continued urbanisation. The region, however, is at the same time generally not seen as a political entity with strategic power. In the words of Neuschwander and Berthe (1992, pp. 47–48)

> The economic and geographical reality of the Ruhr town only exists when they are taken together as a whole and not when they are separated into administrative commune-level units … it is not so much the inter-communal structure that provides a consistent whole, but rather the way in which they function and the relationships they establish between each other.

In present literature, the Ruhr is usually described as a conurbation without a real centre, but which still exhibits a hierarchical functional specialisation through the role of the central cities. Moreover, increased diversification of activities since the 1970s has fostered functional specialisation between the cities. Functional interaction is supported by one of the densest infrastructure systems in the world and by a great variety of institutional networks. Within Germany, the Ruhr stands out in having a plethora of intercommunal management systems and partnerships, a phenomenon that goes

back to the 1920s. In addition to the public-sector-based forms, the Chambers and business associations have traditionally played a strong role. The networks thus thrive, in the words of Neuschwander and Berthe (1992, p. 48), on the "economies of partnerships".

In the past decade, the 'economies of partnerships' have been nurtured through new initiatives based on dialogue, moderation and the search for innovative concepts and processes. These initiatives were triggered by the wish to find new approaches to address the industrial crisis which has hit the area since the 1960s. The initiatives present a deviation from the traditional German planning culture with its emphasis on a strong and well-defined role for the public sector, on balanced spatial development and the principle of hierarchy of places. New forms of planning are more regionally based and rely more strongly on a network philosophy.

One ambition of these regional initiatives was to cover regional functional areas, by bringing together adjacent urban areas with strong interaction. Problems of spatial demarcation, however, resulted in the use of formal boundaries (based on Chamber of Commerce districts). With a few exceptions, this made it difficult to find groups of actors jointly committed to the regional initiatives (Waniek, 1993). Indeed, despite an impressive number of innovative projects and approaches, the impact so far has been limited. In the view of some observers, this is due largely to the institutional and political obstacles to change which, in the end, keep the region locked into old habits and old routines (see, for example, Grabher, 1991). Others point to the deliberate attempt of higher authorities to keep the 'powerhouse' of the Ruhr area under control (see, for example, Wood, 1995, 1997). A salient detail, for instance, is that the Ruhr was even prevented from having its own universities until the 1960s, to force engineers to be educated outside. In the mid 1980s, when the state government of North Rhine–Westphalia launched its policy of decentralisation—some say for reasons of flexibility, others say for financial reasons—one could argue that a

political choice was made not to homogenise politically the Ruhr area, but to divide it among the different political regions. The Ruhr area was and thereby stayed an intersection of the different political regions in North Rhine–Westphalia. It seems likely that the political will, of mainly the dominant political party still, the Social Democrats (SPD), to divide and thereby stay in control in the different regions, instead of in the Ruhr area alone, has played a role of some importance in this respect.

The strategic dimension: 'towards a competitive Ruhr in Europe'? In the past, the Ruhr has clearly witnessed the shaping of a regional strategy. The institutional basis for such a strategy was created with the establishment of the Siedlungsverband Ruhrkohlenbezirk in 1920. This association grew out of need to address the problem that, despite the concentration of industrial power, the region lacked an adequate physical and institutional infrastructure. The SVR filled the planning deficit and became an important actor in the shaping of the spatial infrastructure in the area. The SVR was not so much focused directly on the position of the Ruhr in national or international space, but on co-ordinating the provision of a suitable development infrastructure (Rechmann, 1992). The scope for strategy changed in the 1960s and 1970s, when the Ruhr was hit hard by the crisis in coal mining and heavy industry. Previous sources of unmatched success now gradually turned into a liability. At the same time, however, as argued above, higher authorities decided to intervene with what was seen as too much a concentration of power in the hands of one organisation. The planning mandate of the SVR was split up and transferred to the three larger counties (*Bezirke*) in which the Ruhr cities are located. In 1979, the SVR was transformed into the Kommunalverband Ruhrgebiet (KVR), with a new, much more limited, strategic mandate in the areas of land and landscape protection, leisure and tourism, waste management and wood areas. In the past decade, the KVR has especially embarked on an outward cultural

strategy, in which the industrial heritage as well as many other aspects of the Ruhr area are used to market the area in a positive rather than a negative way. Responding to the aggravating economic and social conditions in the region, the *Land* government launched several initiatives to incite strategic initiatives at the Ruhr level, such as the Ruhr Conference in 1979, but this has not filled the institutional deficit. On the contrary, since the mid 1970s, new conflicts have emerged due to planning fragmentation, and the existence and role of the KVR, by some regarded as merely a 'paper tiger', has been the subject of constant discussion. Some cities on the Ruhr fringe, such as Wesel and Duisburg 'am Rhein', have considered leaving the KVR (located in Essen), largely because of its association with industrial decline.

The deliberate trimming down of the SVR is clearly one reason for the absence of strategic planning capacity at the Ruhr level. Another reason is the impact of interurban competition. Observers have pointed at the need to come to a new geo-strategic perspective. Rechmann (1992), who is working for the KVR, asserts that the Ruhr through becoming a federal metropolis will be a 'driving force in Europe'. Neuschwander and Berthe (1992, p. 40) stress the position of the Ruhr on Europe's major axes of communication ('corridors') resulting in an "unrivalled circulation of people and goods". The most recent strategic planning notions have even outlined a functional perspective for the Rhine area, focusing on creating a macropolycentric Rhine–Ruhr conurbation— a concept that seems even further from a foundation in reality (Knapp, 1997; Blotevogel, 1998; Faludi, 1999)

'The Ruhr is us?': the shaping of a cultural Ruhr identity. The Ruhr presents a clear case of layered identities. Within the Ruhr area taken as a whole, the cities share a common past which has shaped a kind of Ruhr identity, at least for people from outside the area. At present, much of the perception of the Ruhr identity is still based on the industrial

heritage. Partly, this involves a negative connotation, the association of the Ruhr with an area of pollution, unattractiveness and congestion and, for the past three decades, severe economic decline. In recent years, there have been various more positive empowerments of the Ruhr identity inspired by the industrial heritage, particularly through new forms of spatial planning (see, for example, Blotevogel, 1999). The IBA initiative ('Internationale Bauaustellung'), for instance, provides an illustrative case in which old industrial heritage has been transformed into new spaces combining modern functions with creative designs (see, for example, Wood, 1995).

Inside the Ruhr area, there is considerable doubt, however, whether a common identity exists. Not only are the edges of the Ruhr area unclear—Where does the Ruhr identity begin? Where does it end?—but, more importantly, the heart of the citizens does not lie with the area as a whole but with their city (see, for example, Blotevogel, 1999). The Ruhr cities are renowned for strong feelings of (positive) local identity (in some cases, such as Bochum, primarily at neighbourhood level), based on high levels of place-attachment. These feelings, not seldom inspired by geo-political arguments—as is the case, for example, with Duisburg and Kreis Wesel, who favour being associated with the attractive and green region of Niederrhein instead of the Ruhr area—often result in a rivalry between cities, hindering the shaping of common policies and the co-ordination of spatial planning (Blotevogel, 1999).

Nevertheless, through centuries of parallel development, the cities have built up a specific culture of collaboration, sustaining the recent partnership trend. Apart from specific common interests, collaboration has been based on a shared ambition to have comparable rates of growth—that is, to avoid the dominance of one prime city. The will to avoid dominance, which was to a large extent also inspired and stimulated by the state authority of NRW as argued above, did indeed lead to some sort of balance of power

between the neighbouring cities in the Ruhr area.

Many of the developments in the Ruhr must be seen in terms of the tension between intercity competition and the need and wish for collaboration and joint action. This already provides an important clue for the strategic dimension. The Ruhr does not fit the notion of self-assertive, self-willed urban networks as can be found in France or Britain. This is a group of cities that has come together not to become stronger jointly, but to create a network structure with its own specific functions (Neuschwander and Berthe, 1992).

At present, the ambition of having comparable rates of growth is still alive. While the lack of certain metropolitan functions is recognised due to the relatively small size of the Ruhr cities, some scholars argue that the Ruhr should not aim at fostering one central city. Those most in favour of such decentralised development, are the political voices who have a clear interest in the development of a polycentric urban configuration. Rechmann (1992), for example, from the KVR—the organisation that would like to play the role of animator and moderator in the Ruhr area—argues that 'The Ruhr is a type of federal metropolis'. The area does not need one urban centre to help it on its way to becoming a European metropolis. He continues the argument by saying that what the region needs is planning co-ordination and an independent advisory authority: a 'brain'. It is the KVR that, in recent years, together with regionally active business people, newspapers and representatives of local authorities, has tried to change the image of the Ruhr externally and to create the image of a common legacy and fate internally in order to create social and economic cohesion. Economically, new hopes are set on clean and green ICT and high-tech service developments in the region. However, these developments are still relatively small in number and unemployment in the region remains high. The result of the image campaigns has been that in some domains, such as culture and tourism, a specific form of geo-strategy has emerged largely based on place-marketing.

> We attempt to do Ruhr area marketing … With the new campaign, we want to sharpen the profile of the Ruhr area (Nellen, PR director of KVR in an interview with a local newspaper, *Transferbrief*, 1998; our translation).

Nowadays, one can find leaflets and brochures in the Ruhr area saying that the Ruhr area is an adventure (*Abentuer Ruhrgebiet*) and a region worth making a tour in ("*Tour de Ruhr*"). Just as at the beginning of this century, when the region changed its image from 'green' (rural) to 'black' (coal and steel) and an image campaign was needed to enhance the enthusiasm for this change in economic structure, now a similar attempt is being undertaken to reverse it: "*Der Pott kocht*" (The bowl—representing the coal and steel industry—is bubbling), but now the bowl is presented as historically interesting and green, not black.

In sum, the Ruhr has been presented as an example of a PUR where, despite functional interaction and recognition of the need for joint strategic action—the latter as a consequence of the massive rationalisation of key industrial sectors (coal and steel) and substantial out-migration—only a weak form of geo-strategy has emerged. This situation is attributed here largely to the presence of a layered identity which is a result of the striving for local instead of regional interest ('parochialism'), institutional lock-in and a consequence of the state policy to keep the 'powerhouse' of the Ruhr area under control. Hence, while a common Ruhr identity exists relative to, or perhaps mostly in, the external world, strong local attachment and intercity rivalry have reduced the potential to strengthen institutional capacity at the Ruhr level. The lack of internal capacity has been compounded by the drive of higher authorities to prevent the concentration of power in the Ruhr. At present, it is still uncertain what the identity of the Ruhr area is. Is it an industrial region, a region with an industrial heritage, or a post-industrial region (see

Wood, 1995)? And to what extent is it (still) a region?

3.2 The Basque Country

Whereas the Ruhr area displays high levels of functional interaction in a densely populated urban conurbation, and strategic actors aim at reshaping the cultural identity, the Basque country shows the reverse. In the Basque case, the construction of the PUR concept, while drawing on a strong cultural identity, is focused on the shaping of a new functional identity. The functional image is based on the reinterpretation of the urban structure of the Basque country as a polycentric network. The three provincial capitals, Bilbao ('Bilbo' in Basque), San Sebastian (Donostia) and Vitoria (Gasteiz) present urban areas spread out over the region but within reach of each other. In reality, the level of functional interaction between these areas has been surprisingly low. The Basque case, therefore, will be discussed taking a 'left turn' in our interpretative scheme. Its cultural identity is linked with geo-strategic considerations, which aim to invoke functional integration.

A historical cultural identity. That identity is a crucial issue in the Basque country does not need further explanation, although much more could be said about the nature of this identity. For the present discussion, it is sufficient to say that the strong place-attachment of the Basque country strongly supports the shaping of regional strategies. Obviously, there are strong tensions about the political status of the area, and one cannot disregard the territorial claims some organisations make towards Navarra and the French border area (Precedo Ledo and Rodriguez, 1989). Also, one cannot ignore the cultural differences and feelings of rivalry between the three Basque provinces (Guipúzcoa, Vizcaya and Alava), as well as at lower levels. What is most important here is the way a common cultural identity has been shaped further by the economic developments over recent decades, notably the process of deindustriali-

sation, combined with the development of the autonomous regional government as a result of the ongoing decentralisation since 1975. At present, the regional development perspective is built around a neo-industrial approach, in which relationships with the service sector play a dominant role. Over recent decades, deindustrialisation has affected the valleys more than the cities, so it is generally argued—especially in the non-urban industrial areas—that new development perspectives need to be developed. While some specific areas in the Basque country suffer from a negative image due to their industrial past and recent economic decline, the overall perception of the Basque country tends to be more positive than for the Ruhr area.

The geo-strategic dimension: a competitive Basque country in Europe. An important condition for the development of a geo-strategic perspective for the Basque country has been the new planning system developed since 1990 (Jauregui Fernandez, 1993). Unlike the Ruhr, the Basque country has its own regional government with full responsibilities in the area of spatial development. Between 1990 and 1996, an integrated approach was developed with as a major ambition being the establishment of polycentric urban system ('Basque polynuclear system of capitals'). The perception of the Basque country's position in Europe, particularly its economic position, plays a fundamental role in the design strategy. The integrated perspective was laid down in a government planning document published in 1997 (Gobierno Vasco, 1997). This document stressed the way spatial planning should contribute to the strengthening of the polycentric structure as well as its position in European space. In particular, the polycentric structure is proposed as a strategy to compensate for the way Bilbao's position in Europe has been dented due to industrial crisis, with the explicit aim of reviving the position of Bilbao:

The adaptation of the Basque Polynuclear System of Capitals needs to be a process

facilitating the loss of the Bilbao Metropolis in the context of Europe. In any case, this adaptation needs to take the challenge of renewing, revitalising and strengthening the Bilbao Metropolis as a highly significant territorial area, with a great impact on the whole of the economic, social and cultural life of the Basque Country (Gobierno Vasco, 1997, p. 52; our translation).

The need for such a strategic perspective is empowered by the rhetorical notion that, in general, Spanish cities have a low ranking within the European urban hierarchy. The aim of strategic positioning is thus to

capture economic, social, and cultural innovation generated in Europe's most dynamic spaces and to diffuse them in an equal manner among the centres and territories in the Basque Country (Gobierno Vasco, 1997, p. 87).

Hence, internally, the polycentric system is presented as a response to the perceived poor integration of the Basque city system at present and as a 'regional solution' for urban problems. According to Jauregui Fernandez, who headed the development of the new territorial model in the early 1990s, the Basque country already exhibited an almost-model form of urban spatial distribution, which only needed to be strengthened. The new government planning document contains explicit guidelines to encourage suburbanisation to reduce congestion in the existing urban centres and various concepts of intercity connections. By doing so, spatial planning is reinterpreted in a regional strategic context. One of the practical outcomes of the new plans is that the formerly isolated drafting of urban structure plans will now be formally linked to strategic planning at the urban and regional levels.

The strong cultural values of and in the region take a core position in the strategy development. The new planning explicitly seeks to find the right balance between integration and variation, and between local cultural values and functionality. Much attention is paid to overcoming the rural–urban dichotomy by concepts of integration and transition.

Invoking functional images: 'A well-connected Basque country in Europe'. Striking in the Basque approach is the gap between the functional image and the reality of today. There are several indications that functional interaction is low. Commuting between the cities is low, and it is still common for people who work in other cities to have accommodation there. Regarding communications, the intercity rail infrastructure is more than obsolete. The Bilbao–San Sebastian narrow-gauge connection offers a wonderful scenic experience, but it takes more than two hours. The motorway network, most of recent date and still not complete, has reduced travel time substantially but is not intensively used, at least not by north European standards. Indeed, according to Precedo Ledo and Rodríguez (1989), despite the new connections, industrial decline in recent decades has actually reduced the dynamism of the urban system. The coastal zone in particular (including Bilbao and San Sebastian, and stretching towards to Cantabria) displays in their view a "disintegration of a space that was more functionally coherent in the previous period" (Precedo Ledo and Rodríguez, 1989, p. 31). Only intermediate areas such as Alava (around Vitoria) and Navarra have grown and become more interconnected.

This intercity picture contrasts sharply with the situation within the urban regions. Despite the presence of certain problem areas, the urban conurbations have enjoyed substantial growth particularly in the 1990s, based on expanding financial and producer services (particularly Bilbao), tourism (San Sebastian) and public administration (Vitoria). The conurbations thus present dynamic economic areas. Bilbao and San Sebastian in particular match other European cities in traffic congestion and the impact of peak-hour traffic jams. Within these areas, moreover, the rail infrastructure (suburban train links and the Bilbao Metro), already offering

rapid and frequent services, is receiving sub-stantial sums for further expansion and is intensively used.

Meanwhile, the Basque territorial strategy employs various functional images which map out the way new territorial patterns will improve the economic and social position of the region. Two kinds of image can be dis-tinguished. First, images that exhibit physical notions of connecting and the capturing of territorial flows—i.e. spatial axes and corri-dors. Secondly, images that refer to special areas of innovative activity and high (non-territorial) accessibility that support central functions, such as technology parks. These two images will be now discussed in more detail.

Spatial linkages and corridors. Strength-ening physical connections is a major com-ponent in the perception of the Basque polycentric system. The arguments and pol-icy recommendations fit within the discourse generally used in the boosting of the PUR concept. It is, for instance, rhetorically ar-gued that, within the European space, the Basque country does not have a central loca-tion. However, this perceived drawback is qualified by the observation that the Basque country

> finds itself in a much more central position than other Atlantic regions such as the Cantabrian Cornice, Galicia and Portugal) (Gobierno Vasco, 1997, p. 79).

What represents a consolation, in particular, is that the Basque country is closer to what is called the 'orbit of high technology' in north-western Europe. Such overarching spatial concepts play an important role in the posi-tioning of the Basque PUR in Europe. To achieve the anchoring of the Basque country in the European urban system, different spa-tial scenarios are invoked that predict specific axes for urban development and linkages (Gobierno Vasco, 1997; Precedo Ledo and Rodriguez, 1989). Most relevant for the Basque country are the Euro-region concept of the Atlantic Arch and the Spanish image of the Ebro corridor (along Logroño,

Zaragoza, Barcelona) which links the Basque country with the Mediterranean Banana (from Alicante via Barcelona to the Po val-ley, thus intersecting with the much-cited and even more often criticised image of the Blue Banana towards London). In addition, in many reports, the Paris–Madrid axis is featured as a communication link with reference to the motorway system and the construction of high-speed rail links. The latter is presented as a possible connection with the three Basque capitals. In particular, expanding the road infrastructure is seen as essential for creating corridors containing growth centres with important connecting functions.

Areas with central functions: urban milieus and attractiveness. Besides the air-ports, a specific example presenting a non-physical connection to outside centres of growth is the Zamudio Technology Park, east of Bilbao. The idea is that such high-tech hubs will become major nodes of access and absorption of new technology with strong spillovers to the wider regional economy. Again, the image of functionality presents a strong deviation from reality. In particular, observers have been sceptical about the role of Zamudio. Gómez Uranga and Etxebarria (1993), for instance, argue that, around 1990, the park did not contribute substantially to regional development, because of dominance of large Spanish firms (aeronautics) and the fact that no new industrial fabric was created.

Another area charged with functions of centrality is that of the metropolitan inner cities. Bilbao, in particular, has undergone a facelift and received new facilities with glo-bal prestige, such as the Guggenheim mu-seum and the metro architecture. Further quayside developments are seen as vital steps in improving the urban and environmental conditions to enhance its global attractive-ness. Outside Bilbao, also, environmental improvements are perceived in the same con-text, to supplant the 'dirty' image of an old industrial area by a creative image which combines functionality with 'high' cultural

values, thus contributing to improving regional identity.

4. Conclusion

In this contribution, we have tried to analyse and assess the concept of polycentric urban regions (PURs) from a wider conceptual and empirical perspective. The first part of the paper argued that the concept could be placed in line with other concepts interpreting the interdependencies between cities. The concept of PURs differs from these concepts in several ways. Most significantly, PUR presents a strategic planning concept, rather than a theory. Agents using and promoting PUR concepts invoke geo-strategic images of urban areas, using empirical and theoretical justifications, instead of the other way around, as tended to be the case with its precursors. The more strategic focus on the study of the interdependency of cities has also been accompanied by a shift towards emphasis on physical linkages, corridors, axes and maps. While 'urban networks' have also been used in a more strategic sense recently, PURs place a stronger emphasis on the spatial demarcation and positioning of a specific urban conglomeration—in other words, on its identity. In the case of a PUR, therefore, the concept of interdependencies between cities is translated in terms (of the construction) of its common identity.

To grasp the meaning and characteristics of specific PUR entities, a division has been made between three kinds of regional identity: cultural, functional and strategic. It was argued that these three dimensions of the regional identity of PURs are necessarily correlated, but that the contested nature of the interrelationships differs in time and space. Both functional and cultural identity play a double role in their interaction with the geo-strategic dimension. On the one hand, functional and cultural identity sustain the shaping of PURs by supporting communication and associational trends, as well as by facilitating and justifying the drawing of boundaries on historical and analytical grounds. On the other hand, the functional

and cultural dimension provide objects of change for PUR strategies: elements of new cultural identities and images of future functional interdependencies. The triangle of regional identity thus allows for various forms of interaction between the dimensions distinguished, something that was supported by the case studies.

The two case studies were drawn from two regions with comparable economic conditions and urban structures. Both cases endorsed the notion of close interaction between the three dimensions distinguished—cultural, functional and strategic identity—but also the differences in how the interactions have evolved in time. While the Ruhr area provides some evidence of functional interaction, this does not translate into a strong strategic capacity, much to the regret of the regional development agency (KVR). Specific institutional and political factors come into play here—notably the long-established resistance of state authorities to a strong Ruhr—but also the nature of identity, with its strong local place attachments, appears to be a vital element. Interestingly, much of the strategic and political gap seems to be filled by a myriad of local partnerships and policy networks that draw heavily on the existing socioeconomic and institutional links, geared to improving regional competitiveness in more localised and partial forms. In addition, common strategic capacity was and is geared largely to shaping a new cultural identity in an attempt to reverse the negative image of the area. In the Basque country, the reverse pattern is distinguished—that is, a weak functional integration with a well-articulated, geo-strategic perspective that revolves around the functional image of the Basque country as a 'competitive' polycentric region in Europe. This case showed how the functional gap is being filled with powerful spatial-functional images consisting of communication axes, growth centres and corridors.

The two areas discussed here only present a few PUR cases among many others that have arisen in the past decade. Other claimed examples of PURs, such as the 'Flemish

Diamond', 'Midlandton' in the UK and the Dutch Randstad, will reveal other dynamic paths of development. By distinguishing various dimensions of regional identity, we have tried to present a conceptual framework that may help us to understand the processes of construction and reproduction of individual PUR cases in a systematic way. Fundamentally, we have argued that, as a common factor, the 'polycentric urban region' should be interpreted primarily as a geo-strategic concept. Analysis plays a supportive, but not a decisive, role. In many cases, the map and pencil seem to decide the shape of the PURs. It is the invocation—the appeal to (future) functional coherent developments, to cultural identities and to strategic positioning—that counts most. As a result, image-making is a crucial part of a PUR strategy. The present popularity of the term 'PUR' is apparently the hidden expression of a more basic need— that is, the need for the image of the urban structure, in order to have a conceptual basis for organising network-based strategies for urban development in a world dominated by issues of competitiveness.

Looking back at the history of concepts presented in the beginning of paper, we may finally ask ourselves, how successful will PURs be as core concepts of urban planning? While the stories and images of functional and cultural interaction seem to present vital support for PURs, they may also contain serious pitfalls. Since the stories are strategy-driven, they may present, in the long term, a picture too much detached from reality. They may, for instance, in creating flashy, primitive images of integration, take too little account of the complexity of spatial relations and identity at different spatial levels. In reverse, they may read correlation and systematic interaction from spatial patterns where there is, in reality, only co-location. Proximity is not a cause for interaction. What is lacking in such reasoning is the motives and actions of the agents, the people.

Moreover, PURs create a pervasive binary division between the included and excluded, while paying scant attention to the relation between the PUR and outside. As a result of this, outsiders appear as being irrelevant to PURs. Only other PURs are generally called upon as significant external entities, but largely as rivals framed within the story of PURs being in competition with each other. PURs are highly normative, but beyond the rhetorical reference to 'competitiveness' there is little attention for the questions of what, whom and why the concept and strategy should serve.

To conclude, the framing of PURs in strong discursive logic of competitiveness, coupled with a vital role for functional and cultural coherence, allows the concept to be interpreted in a predominantly technical fashion. Planning is then reduced to making and reproducing pre-imagined PURs. What can be ignored and missed in this way is the establishment of a critical and democratically accountable setting in which the foundation, contents and meaning of the concept can be adequately debated. The strength of the concept—namely, its capacity to incite spatial strategies around one, captivating spatial vision—may thus, for its lack of deeper analytical and political accountability, also hold its major weakness.

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