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## **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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### **Introduction**

The concept of polycentric or polycentric or polynucleated urban regions (PURs) has become a fashionable notion in the present literature of urban and regional science (e.g. Jauregui Fernandez, 1993; Dieleman, 1996; Dieleman and Priemus 1996; Albrechts, 1998; Dieleman and Faludi, 1998). In this contribution, we aim at positioning and sharpening the concept by comparing it with preceding approaches of interurban interdependency and discuss its potentials and pitfalls. One of the outcomes of the comparison is that the notion of a PUR, more than its predecessors, constitutes a *strategic* rather than an analytical concept. To unravel the prospective and scantiness 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 here is that the strategic dimension of the PUR concept rests on, and mobilises, the identification of a region as a *functional* unit, as well as an area with a distinct *cultural* identity. The way the strategic, functional and cultural dimensions interact may vary between specific cases of PURs. Two examples are presented here. The Ruhr area in Germany shows how strategic action, supported by an existing functional integration and identity, is geared to at 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.

The structure of the paper follows this line of argumentation. Section One 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 Two addresses the issue of regional identity and its constituent dimensions (strategic, cultural, and functional). Section Three presents the two case studies. Section Four 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

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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.

### *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, 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 work on the "*Regional City*" (1964) and Gottmann's (1961) name for the urbanised North-eastern Seaboard of the United States, *Megalopolis*. These views were in sharp contrast with the then popular theory of central places of Christaller (1933) 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.

### *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 (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 formation 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 way 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" (p. 99).

Besides, Pred makes an effort to demonstrate that Christaller's model and the empirical findings based on this model, such as been 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 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 multi-locational organisations in city-system interdependence and growth in the circulation of specialised information via the channels of inter-and intra-organisational linkages between the head offices and the different subordinate units.

#### *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, which has become popular since the beginning of the 80s: the concept of *urban networks*. This concept expressed the growing belief that next to vertical, also horizontal co-operation and linkages between cities are important. Post-industrial urban systems would increasingly be *'de-Christallerised'*. In particular in Europe, as a consequence of the process of European integration, the concept of urban networks became fashionable (cf. Ministry of Education and Science, 1987; Pumain, 1992; Batten, 1995; Camagni *et al.*, 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. Competitiveness of urban regions has become associated more closely with the 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' (cf. Burt, 1992) in the European urban network (cf. Bruinsma, 1994; Nijkamp, 1993). In the last decade, the notion of urban networks has been complemented with images of spatial corridors at a national and international level. 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 transportation 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 relationships that condition and shape the development 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 positioning of specific urban networks in a wider competitive space.

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

#### *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 to distinguish it from mono-centric

urbanisation. The concept of polycentric urbanisation has gained renewed attention the past few years, not as a definition of an urban structure in a region or country alone, but more as a strategic planning concept. In the introduction to a special issue of *European Planning Studies* on PURs, Dieleman and Faludi (1998), argue that the concept, referred to as polynucleated urbanisation (PU), fits all post-industrial cities. They refer to Hall's paper on "modelling the post-industrial city" to back their argument. In line with Pred, Hall stresses the 'informationised' nature 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 of transport possibilities, the congestion and high prices in inner cities, a differentiation 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 'exopolis' and Fishman terms 'technoburbs', and the evolution of major employment and commercial centres in metropolitan peripheries – Garreau's (1991) 'edge cities' - has been a significant focus of recent urban research and policy work. The upcoming of the notion of polycentricity is thus the result of how the shift to an advanced service economy has fundamentally changed the meaning of urban centres and the way spatial infrastructures are used.

While drawing on Hall, Dieleman and Faludi (1998) 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 argument 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 interdependent, 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 commuter patterns in these urbanised regions to validate the claim of functional togetherness between these formerly separated cities. Moreover, so the argument goes, the increased 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 (1998) themselves however, do not give a clear and concrete definition, or potential indicator, of the concept of polycentricity. Following largely the recently presented definition of the European Commission (1999), PURs can best be understood as a spatially closely connected and strategically planned region, with historically 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 at these larger urban configurations.

#### *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 'de-christallising' 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.

Second, the concept of polycentric urban region presents 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 with the model-based view 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 on the interdependency between cities were first of all models or theories that have been used as a planning concept afterwards (see also Blotevogel, 2000).

Third, despite the emphasis on the role of information, non-tangible assets and electronic communication, the attention on functional coherence between cities, has, since the concept of urban field, shifted increasingly to *physical linkages* between urban centres. Attention is drawn to the perceived need to physically link 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 fact that the boundaries of polycentric regions are drawn more explicitly, and that the concept is affiliated with the notion of existing urban centres. The region is a strategic (re-)production. Within the concept of 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 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 PUR's 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 legitimatisation 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 PUR's.

### *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 in 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. "A strategic location on a major European development axis" (Priebis, 1996) is an example of what can be labelled as a 'geo-strategy' for PURs. The intention is to shape and reshape geographical configuration of cities and regions by words of intent, by strategies. 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 for 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 it cities, regions or countries, disputable as such (cf. 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 this issue, 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 e.g. Lefebvre, 1991; cf. Massey, 1984; Murphy, 1991; Paasi, 1996). 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". 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 is then 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 e.g. 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, maps of PURs are not just mirrors 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 (cf. Harvey, 1989; Wood, 1992). Maps therefore are an expressive and vigorous form of 'geo-strategy'. It 'invokes' rather than interprets.

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 on 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 seems essential. What 'the other' does, what urban configuration and policy configuration 'they' have for 'their' urban structure, and what configuration do 'we' have, is 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 done 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 antagonization 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 of 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 precondition for the shaping of strategic capacity, and for the demarcation of the territorial *subject* of a PUR strategy. Second, 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 it 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; Zijdeveld, 1983). Within the detection of the functional identity of a polycentric region attention is put on 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.

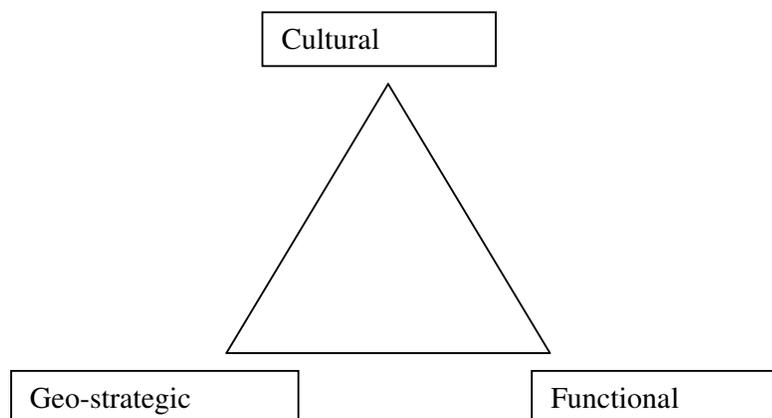
In various respects, the functional dimension presents an ambiguous side of the PUR concept. On the one hand, the functional dimension carries an analytical connotation. Data on commuting and other linkages, as well as the lay-out of urban areas and communication infrastructure may support the idea that 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 of 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 what functionally 'belongs' to the polycentric urban region) and exclusion (that what 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 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 not what matters and 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 spatial 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 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).

Figure 1 -The interpretative dimensions of the identity of PURs



*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 PUR’s the three dimensions of identity, to wit 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 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,

1992). 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 discursive management rhetoric of consultants and academics that 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 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 foremost interested in serving the interests of the local community. As a consequence the promotion of the well-being 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, cooperation 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 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 of those 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 sustain a certain regional identity is generally less strategic and less obvious than 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 much more a *multi-layered 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 (e.g. 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 for those for which the PUR means merely another level to possibly identify with.

### **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, Ruhr and the Basque Country, are often cited as examples of PUR's (e.g. Rechmann, 1992; Jauregui Fernandez, 1993; Gobierno Vasco, 1997; Dieleman and Faludi, 1998). We have chosen to deal with specifically 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.

#### ***The Ruhr Area***

##### *1. 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, p. 47-8),

"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 have 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 inter-communal 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, 48), on the 'economies of partnerships'.

In the last 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 of 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 amount 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 habit and old routines (e.g. Grabher, 1991). Others point to the deliberate attempt of higher authorities to keep the 'powerhouse' of the Ruhr area under control (see e.g. 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 80s, when the state government of North-Rhine Westphalia launched its policy of decentralisation, some say for reasons of flexibility, others say because of financial reasons, one could argue that a political choice was made not to politically homogenise 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 the Ruhr area alone, has played a role of some importance in this respect.

## *2. 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 60s and 70s, 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 last 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 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 subject of constant discussion. Some cities at 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 inter-urban 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 the functional perspective to the Rhine area, focusing on creating a macro-polycentric Rhine-Ruhr conurbation, a concept that seems even further off from a foundation in reality (Knapp, 1997; Blotevogel, 1998; Faludi, 1999)

### *3. 'The Ruhr is us?': the shaping of a positive 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, since 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 e.g. Blotevogel, 1999). The IBA initiative ('Internationale Bauausstellung'), for instance, provides an illustrative case in which old industrial heritage has been transformed into new spaces combining modern functions with creative designs (see e.g. 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 (Where does the Ruhr identity begin? Where does it end?) unclear, but more importantly, the heart of the citizens does not lie with the area as a whole but with their city (see e.g. 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, such as, for example is the case with Duisburg and Kreis Wesel, who favour to be associated with the attractive and green region of Niederrhein in stead of the Ruhr area, often results 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 was based on a shared ambition to have comparable rates of growth, that is, to avoid to 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.

Much of the developments in the Ruhr must be seen in terms of the tension between inter-city 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 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) from the KVR for example, 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 of becoming a European metropolis. He continues the argument by saying that what the region needs is a planning co-ordination and 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 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 the unemployment in the region remains to be 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 translations). Nowadays, one would find leaflets and brochures in the Ruhr Area saying that the Ruhr Area is an adventure (Abentuer Ruhrgebiet) and a region worthwhile making a tour in ("Tour de Ruhr"). Just as in 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 undertaken to reverse: "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 to or perhaps mostly in the external world, strong local attachment and inter-city rivalry has 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 concentration of power in the Ruhr. At present, it is still not sure what the identity of the Ruhr area is. Is it an industrial region, a region with an industrial heritage, or a post-industrial region? (cf. Wood, 1995). And to what extent is it (still) a region?

### ***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 to the geo-strategic considerations, which aim to invoke functional integration.

#### *1. 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 the last decades, notably the process of de-industrialisation, combined with the development of the autonomous regional government as a result of the ongoing decentralisation since 1975. Presently, the regional development perspective is built around a neo-industrial approach, in which relationships with the service sector play a dominant role. Over the last decades, de-industrialisation has affected the valleys more than the cities, so it is generally argued that 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.

#### *2. The geo-strategic dimension: a competitive the 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 has been developed with as a major ambition 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 to revive 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.” (p. 87).

Internally, hence, 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 sub-urbanisation to reduce congestion in the existing urban centres and various concepts of inter-city 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 an urban and regional level.

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.

### *3. 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 inter-city 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 according to North-European standards. Indeed, according to Precedo Ledo and Rodríguez (1989), despite the new connections, industrial decline in the last decades has actually reduced the dynamism of the urban system. Particularly the coastal zone (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 inter-city 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. Especially Bilbao and San Sebastian 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, are receiving substantial sums for further expansion and are 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 images can be distinguished. First, images that exhibit physical notions of connecting and the capturing of territorial flows, i.e. spatial axes and corridors. Second, 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.

#### (a) Spatial linkages and corridors

Strengthening physical connections is a major component in the perception of the Basque polycentric system. The arguments and policy-recommendations fit within the discourse generally used in the boosting of the PUR concept. It is, for instance, rhetorically argued that, within the European space, the Basque Country does not have a central location. 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)” (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 positioning of the Basque PUR in Europe. To achieve the anchoring of the Basque Country in the European urban system, different spatial 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 Valley, thus intersecting with the much cited and even more often criticised image for its deficiency 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. Especially expanding the road infrastructure is seen as essential for creating corridors containing growth centres with important connecting functions.

#### (b) Areas with central functions: urban milieus and attractiveness

Besides the airports, 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. Gomez 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 global prestige, such as the Guggenheim museum and the metro architecture. Further quayside developments are seen as vital steps in improving the urban and environmental conditions to enhance its global attractiveness. Also outside Bilbao, environmental improvements are perceived in the

same context, 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 socio-economic 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 last decade. Other claimed examples of PURs, such as the 'Flemish Diamond', 'Midlandton' in the UK, 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 to understand the process of construction and reproduction of individual PUR cases in a systematic way. Fundamentally, we have argued that, as a common factor, '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' apparently is 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 for 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 skipped 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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