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**European Metropolitan Regions in Germany:  
a new spatial planning strategy in Europe\***

by

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\*This text is based on the author's publications listed in the bibliography. It was kindly translated into English by Gaby Müller, M.A. (assistant at the Chair of Social and Economic Geography at the Chemnitz University of Technology).

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# **European Metropolitan Regions in Germany: a new spatial planning strategy in Europe**

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Since the turn of the century a new concept of regional planning has established itself in Europe which is closely linked with the long-term development of metropolitan areas in post-industrial countries. Although the conceptual debate about such regions started rather late in the Federal Republic of Germany, it has meanwhile become a constant in spatial planning and research. While in the past areas of metropolitan character were described as ‘city regions’ or ‘agglomerations’, the term ‘European Metropolitan Regions’ first came up at the end of the 1990s. In the legal framework on regional planning of the German state they are defined as ‘motors of the societal, economic, social and cultural development’ that ought to preserve the achievement potential and competitiveness of Germany and Europe and contribute to the acceleration of the European integration process (Bundesministerium für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau (BMBau) 1995).

On the basis of this superordinate objective, the Ministerial Conference on Regional Planning (MKRO) assigned seven European Metropolitan Regions (Berlin/Brandenburg, Hamburg, Munich, Rhine-Ruhr, Rhine-Main, Stuttgart and Halle/Leipzig-Saxon Triangle) which were complemented in 2005 by four more regions: Nuremberg (including further cooperation partners in Franconia), Hanover (including Brunswick and Göttingen), Bremen (with Oldenburg) and the Rhine-Neckar Triangle (Fig. 1).

## **1 Definitions, backgrounds, objectives**

The term ‘metropolis’ has been widely used for a long time. It refers to a prominent major or capital city that represents a political, economic and societal centre within a country (Brunotte et.al. 2002:378). On the other hand, the term ‘metropolitan region’ refers to a metropolis (in some cases more than one) and its respective hinterland. It thus describes a ‘region’, or in other words, an area of medium spatial dimension within a larger territory, characterized by particular features, functional interdependences or a specific perception (Wolf 2002:126).

Similarly to other conceptual innovations, the term ‘metropolitan region’ had various forerunners, most of which are of Anglo-American origin. In this context, concepts such as ‘World City’ (Friedmann 1986) or ‘Global City’ (Sassen 1991) were established that are synonyms for modern locations integrated into the network of the global economy. Both terms reflect a new understanding of the function of higher-ranking cities in the global urban system. The focus is now on the specific function of metropolises as outstanding locations for the international flow of trade and as nodes for financial and information transfers (Adam and Göttsche-Stellmann 2002:515).

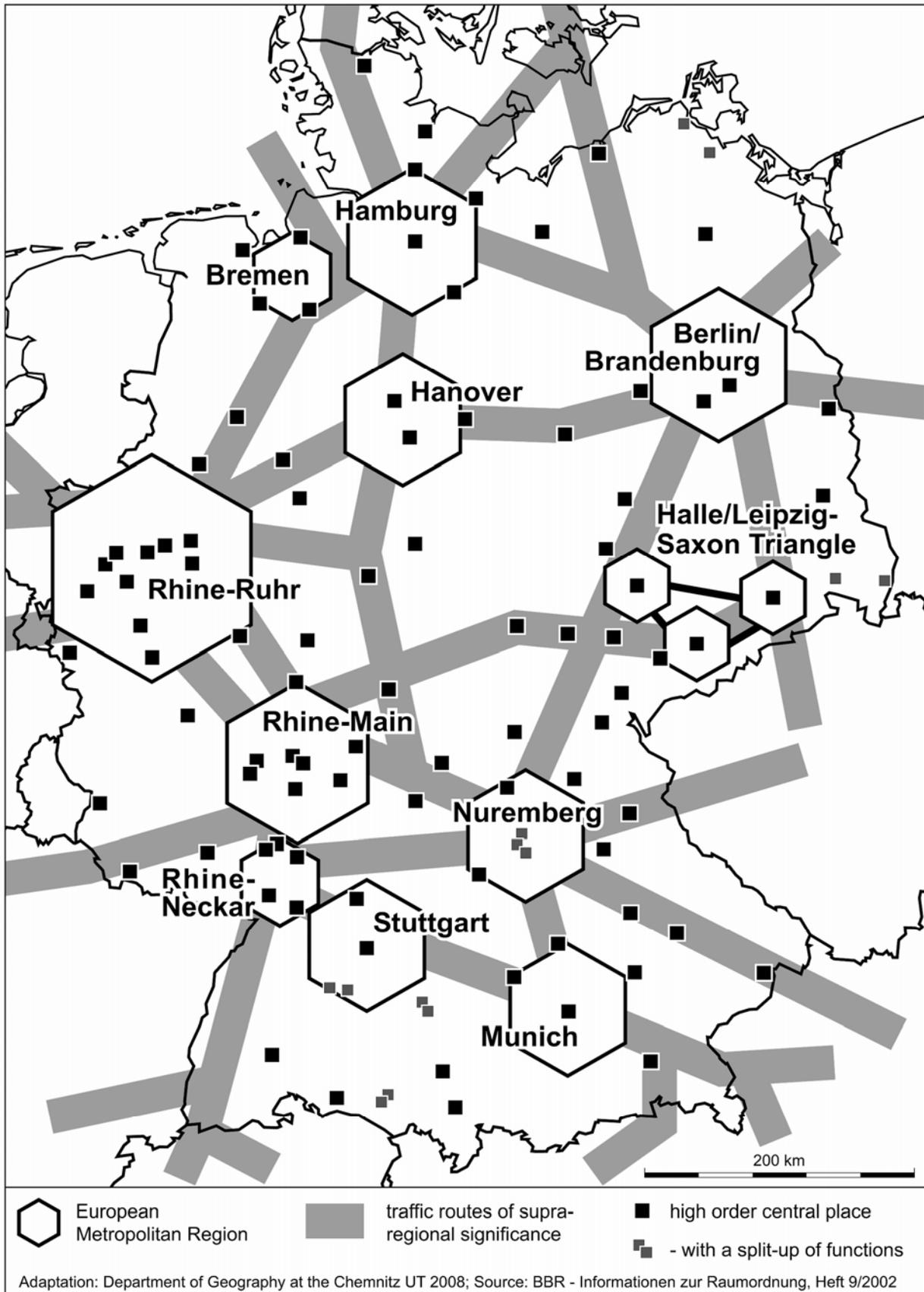


Fig. 1: European Metropolitan Regions in Germany 2005

It can thus be stated that the economic function of metropolitan regions takes the centre in the current debate, both on the part of spatial research and practical planning. This becomes especially obvious in Kujath's definition. He points out the three following node functions determining such a region (Kujath 2005:20f.):

- High-tech production location  
Export quota, gross value added (in relation to the size of the labour force), ranking order of economic sectors (size and proportion of labour force) (...). Within this first function, the branch structure, especially the significance of the second economic sector, economic power and the role the respective region plays as a (high-tech) export location for goods is of importance.
- Node of metropolitan services  
Number of company headquarters, employees in company-related services (...) The indicators of the second node function represent the distribution of the power of decision-making and controlling expressed by the allocation of centres of decision-making as well as high-grade financial and company services (instrumentality and decision-making function).
- Communication and traffic node  
Number of trade fairs (foreign exhibitors and visitors), air traffic (number of flights and passengers), air cargo (...). The nationally and internationally oriented infrastructure is the third function that represents the significance of a region as node of passenger and freight traffic as well as of communication and information exchange (...).

What are the reasons why the debate about metropolitan regions in Germany has received such a noticeable boost since the 1990s? One of them certainly can be found in the vigorous discussions on the European level resulting in specific concepts. Those were initially inspired by worldwide considerations on the systematisation and configuration of regions of metropolitan character. This, however, also implies that the moving power of this debate is not only an intra-European competition, but also an intercontinental one which influences the principles of regional planning and, above all, aims at a permanent strengthening of further economic developments. Against this background, the following general conditions set the framework for a broader concept of metropolitan regions (Blotevogel 2001: 158f.):

- *First, the reassessment of the German urban system as a consequence of the German re-unification:* During the division of Germany, a relatively stable structure based on the division of labour had established itself. In the Federal Republic of Germany, Hamburg had taken over the function of wholesale and media centre, Frankfurt was the bank and traffic centre, Bonn was the seat of government etc. Comparably, in the GDR big cities like (East) Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig and Rostock had their specific place in a system of complementary functional specialisations. This structure began to stagger in the aftermath of the German re-unification (...).
- *Second: the integration of the German cities into the European urban system as a consequence of the political and, more importantly, the economic unification of Europe:* This development also led to a stirring up of the formerly stable urban system based on the division of labour that had characterised the West German centres since the Second World War. With the realisation of the Single European Market, Germany's big cities are no longer only in competition with each other, but also with London, Paris, Milan, Brussels and Randstad/Netherlands for direct investments, company headquarters, management personnel, tourists, cultural significance and knowledge.
- *Third: the structural change in the economy:* This development can shortly be described as the *change towards a flexible specialisation of the economy, a flexible 'network economy'*. This change is connected with far reaching and still only outlined transformations in the

spatial organisation of the economy. Underneath, one highly effective process is in progress: the new key position of economic management, service and financial functions as well as the function of communication and traffic node replacing the formerly dominant industrial production.

- *Fourth: The nation states' decrease of significance:* The thesis that economically strong regions with metropolises at their cores will increasingly become the decisive units in the world system while traditional territorial states will lose importance, has been gaining wide acceptance. In fact, nation states and their traditional forms of governance do not seem to be able to cope with the new global economic and political challenges anymore. On the contrary, there is a development towards a complex political multi-level system with at least three levels: first, the supranational level (e.g. European Union), second the nation states and thirdly the local-regional level (...).
- The *fifth factor* is the persistent crisis on the labour market and the financial crisis of the public authorities that is partly connected with it. The result is a change of focus on the part of the cities and regions towards *economic-political development aims*. As early as in the 1970s, the stable post-war order with permanent growth, full employment and welfare systems etc. began to approach a crisis. Consequently, the general conditions for urban and regional policy took a fundamental turn. In order to avoid sliding deeper into the crisis, cities made local economic policy a central area of urban policy.
- The *sixth* and probably most important factor is *globalisation*, in other words, the transformation of the former mosaic of the now sometimes anachronistically called 'national economies' into '*one world economy*'. Due to the dismantling of trade barriers, merchandise markets that used to be even nationally segmented, become increasingly globalised. Today you can purchase the same products nearly everywhere in the world at roughly the same prices.
- The *seventh factor*: our old-established concept of space, dating from the era of nation states and national economies, was shaped by areas and territories. On this basis, a '*mosaic social science*' developed using data (...) and assertions referring to territories. Now, a new spatial semantic has established itself in opposition to that: a space defined by flows and nodes, a network space. As a consequence, a new '*network social science*' must now be developed (...).

Against the background of this detailed set of general conditions, it becomes apparent why at the turn of the century it was an absolute necessity that also Germany had to give more attention to the concept of metropolitan regions and, moreover, to try to rapidly implement it.

## **2 Characteristics, functions, forms of organisation, network formation**

As already mentioned in the introductory chapter, the Ministerial Conference on Regional Planning in Germany has assigned 11 metropolitan regions so far: Berlin/Brandenburg, Hamburg, Munich, Rhine-Ruhr, Rhine-Main, Stuttgart and Halle/Leipzig-Saxon Triangle, Bremen, Hanover, Nuremberg and the Rhine-Neckar Triangle. Among those, there are larger as well as smaller metropolitan regions. With regard to spatial dimensions, the metropolitan region of Hamburg is the largest one, followed by the metropolitan regions Rhine-Main and Halle/Leipzig-Saxon Triangle. In contrast to this, the Rhine-Ruhr region is by far the largest one in terms of population with a number of 10 million inhabitants. Partly highly varying figures can also be found with respect to the other population indicators.

As far as economic power is concerned, the metropolitan region of Munich has the highest gross domestic product, followed by the metropolitan regions Rhine-Main and Stuttgart. Compared to this, the Halle/Leipzig- Saxon Triangle performs less well with rates that are

50% below those of the above named regions. In general it must be stated that the data of the economic indicators show higher variations than those of the population indicators.

Beyond certain basic structures concerning population and economy, metropolitan regions have to fulfil specific functions which are listed in the latest Report on Regional Planning (BBR 2005: 177ff.):

- The *decision-making and control function* refers to the spatial concentration of political and economic centres, in which financial and information flows are being controlled. ‘Compared to former approaches, the newer concepts attach greater importance to the economic function than to the political decision-making and control function. The development of a company is directly determined by its headquarters. Ministries affect the development of a country or region. In addition to that, metropolitan regions also have an indirect influence on economic and political decisions. Today, enterprises providing company services (...) have a noticeable impact on the decisions made by those companies. Furthermore, institutions like banks, stock markets or insurance companies, which control and influence financial transactions, also tend to concentrate in metropolitan regions.’
- With regard to their *innovation and competition function* it can be stated that metropolitan regions are innovation centres as a rule. ‘The basis for this is a high density of scientific as well as research and development facilities and the presence of creative milieus. (...) Above all that, metropolitan regions offer adequate infrastructural conditions for big cultural and sports events. Cultural and scientific qualities are ascribed the potential to support innovations in their environment. (...)’
- As far as the *gateway function* is concerned, ‘good accessibility from international locations and multiple options for ‘face-to-face contacts’ (...) are essential factors for the exchange of knowledge and information. A high quality traffic infrastructure network is a typical characteristic of metropolises. The integration into international and intercontinental traffic networks via airports, express railways and highways does not only ensure a good accessibility of the metropolises, but in combination with other location factors it contributes to a high access potential to knowledge, information and markets. Trade fairs, congresses and a technologically advanced telecommunication infrastructure are further characteristics of the gateway function of metropolitan regions.’

The three main functions described above have, at least in the European sphere, reached wide consensus. Only in terms of the identification and specification of the sub-functions there are partly considerable discrepancies. Therefore, one currently tries to develop a more efficient measuring system in order to better integrate the relevant indicators. In this context, the following preconditions set the framework (Adam, Göttsche-Stellmann and Heidbrink 2005:421f.):

- The data collection is based on a tight location concept (...)
- An international approach is pursued which is open with regard to the locations surveyed (...)
- A pure functional examination and analysis is carried out (...)
- On the international level, only those indicators are included whose data are complete in factual and spatial terms.
- Population size will be excluded as a separate criterion and only be included into the data set as side information.

Altogether, 17 indicators have been included into the analysis on the international level (...). Due to the better data records for national comparisons, further indicators were complementarily examined (currently 24 indicators). Apart from that, it can be expected that

the research on the methodology for the definition and classification of metropolitan regions will be further pushed forward in the future on both the national and international level.

Other significant characteristics refer to the form of organisation and assignment of tasks of metropolitan regions. Here, the most important principles are as follows (BBR 2005: 188f.): Metropolitan regions need a strong regional self-government: ‘A political, legal and organisational re-arrangement of local and regional tasks and responsibilities is one of the essential elements of a metropolitan regional planning policy (...). The regions’ competences ought to comprise of at least the following fields of activities:

- Development of strategies (mission statements and overall concepts)
- Regional planning
- Co-ordination of regionally significant projects and measures
- Provision of adequate infrastructure in areas such as communication, mobility, fair and conference industry, social welfare, recreation and environmental protection
- Regional strategies for environmental protection
- Strategic planning of projects (e.g. regional parks) and infrastructure as well as regional development via regional management and marketing
- Representation of regional interests inwardly and outwardly
- Regional business development
- International marketing.’

*Metropolitan regions can be understood as regional alliances with common responsibilities:*

‘The question of the spatial boundaries of metropolitan regions can only be answered by its basic participants, i.e. local authorities and regional players. Only the common will of all municipalities within the metropolitan region to co-operate can result in the stronger regional self-government described above (...). For the promotion of such regional alliances with common responsibilities (...) the following courses of action are of paramount importance:

- Infrastructural and organisational optimisation of the interconnectedness of the centres within the metropolitan region
- Integrated urban development and traffic planning for the improvement of the regional network of public transport
- Organisation of the co-operation between the core cities and other municipalities in the metropolitan region without a status of privilege
- A common regional strategy for a sustainable settlement development and for the preservation of free spaces
- Promotion of intraregional exchange processes and circular flows
- Common social political strategies on the basis of a regional equalisation of burdens with regard to tax revenues and social costs
- Common financial basis for the accomplishment of common tasks.’

*Metropolitan regions require specific regional location policies:* ‘In order to strengthen international competitiveness, particular location policies must be pursued that highlight those economic sectors which determine the regional profile (...). The following measures are fundamental for the specific regional location policies of metropolitan regions:

- Expansion of the quality of connections to other metropolitan regions across Europe and the world, especially with regard to international air traffic and trans-European networks
- Expansion of knowledge-oriented services for companies
- Strengthening of regional human capital through the improvement of offers for professional qualification in the area of higher education
- Common development of commercial zones and general location policies within the region

- Concentration of EU, national and federal state business development measures on growth poles within the metropolitan region.’

Another aspect is the co-operation between metropolitan regions. On the national level, they joined in the initiative ‘European Metropolitan Regions Germany’ to represent their common interests, co-ordinate their activities, learn from each other etc. Lively communication processes also exist on the European level; in some areas cross-border alliances have been established or co-operations motivated by the aim of being able to compete with the growing number of globally significant metropolitan regions (with more than 10 million inhabitants). This was also the background for the foundation of the METREX network, in which European Metropolitan Regions have become organised.

### 3 Future prospects

Recent evaluations suggest that the significance of metropolises and metropolitan regions is most probably going to increase in the future. Against this background Blotvogel (2001:164f.) raises the question whether it would be more efficient for Germany to have one single prominent but world-wide operating metropolis like France (Paris), Great Britain (London) or Japan (Tokyo) instead of having a larger number of maybe less influential metropolitan regions. On the other hand, this would be in contradiction to the federal structure of the state – even though the principle of equivalent living conditions enshrined in the Regional Planning Act has lately been more and more challenged. However, in the light of the trend towards globalisation, the development function of the European metropolitan regions is continuously gaining priority in German regional planning policy.

In any case, it is of great importance to precisely identify both the advantages and the disadvantages of the metropolis approach and to juxtapose them. Thus, a number of essential *advantages* are listed below that determine the way decision-makers of German metropolitan regions think and act:

- Voluntary participation and co-operative collaboration
- Involvement of a large number of participants
- Involvement of the private sector, particularly large enterprises
- Introduction of fresh accents and new stimuli
- Intensification of the commitment of the decision-makers
- Extension and promotion of the innovative power
- Chance for tying together existing endogenous potentials
- Improvement of the co-operation ability
- Basis for the formulation of a strategic development concept on a national and, moreover, an international scale
- Ideal starting point for the formulation of a professional mission statement as basis for future-oriented provisions for continuity
- Improvement of the supra-regional degree of popularity as well as the inner and, more importantly, the outer image
- Good prerequisites for the setup and extension of a modern infrastructure
- Opportunity for the reduction of the disparities between cities and surrounding areas

In contrast to this, there are also numerous *disadvantages* that can influence activities in the metropolitan regions negatively. The most significant ones are as follows:

- Complex, complicated and thus poorly working organisational structures
- Danger of an only temporary instead of a permanent commitment of the participants
- Often no employment of additional staff for the management of the metropolitan region

- Potential overlapping of competences (e.g. business development, urban and regional planning)
- Possible distraction from actual problems (e.g. remote location, insufficient transport connections, unfavourable economic development)
- A mere imitation of (inter-)national role models
- Partly only national importance with few chances of gaining international significance
- Often high pressure of competition between the metropolitan regions
- Danger of overrating their functions and effects
- High expenditures for achieving the status as metropolitan region
- No state subsidies as they are not (yet) granted for these purposes
- Permanent pressure for modernisation
- Possible predominance of one or more metropolises at the expense of suburban areas and/or rurally structured parts of the region

In view of this rather large number of negative aspects and the still existing indeterminacies, it is self-evident that careful consideration will be taken in the further development of metropolitan regions in theoretical and practical terms. Some approaches to solving the problems are listed below (Adam and Göttsche-Stellmann 2002:524):

- Development of spatial typologies
- Agreement on definitions and boundaries
- Setup of inter-regional networks
- Development of regional mission statements
- Promotion of intra-regional co-operations

In this respect, the ability of German metropolises and metropolitan regions to integrate into a correspondent European network is increasingly gaining significance. Nevertheless, the notion that there are no ‘Global Cities’ in Germany is widely agreed upon. Blotvogel (2002) regards the metropolitan regions Berlin, Hamburg, Munich, Rhine-Main and Rhine-Ruhr as less significant within Europe than London, Paris, Brussels or Randstad/Netherlands (now called ‘Delta-Metropolis’). DATAR, the office for regional development in France (2003), even ranks the metropolises Berlin and Hamburg in the third and Cologne/Düsseldorf and Frankfurt upon Main in the fourth category within Europe.

Particular studies partly come to very specific conclusions. While Freund (2004) and Kulke (2003) argue that Berlin is not a ‘metropolis’ or ‘Global City’, Beck holds the view that the Nuremberg agglomeration should in any case be acknowledged as a European metropolitan region. On the other hand, Frankfurt upon Main is regarded as the internationally most significant German metropolis (BBR 2005:186) and the metropolitan region Rhine-Main is the one with the ‘unequivocally most international character within Germany’ (Blotvogel 2002:349). This has also been proved e.g. by Schamp (2001) as well as Fischer, Freytag, Hoyler and Mager (2005).

Other research questions focus on the problem whether metropolitan regions should, or even must co-operate in order to be successful in the long run. This cannot be answered clearly since active co-operation can produce synergy effects, but it does not have to be an automatism. In certain fields metropolitan regions will remain competitors because one of their primary aims is the consolidation or improvement of their own position in competition.

Some issues, however, have not yet received sufficient attention, such as the role suburban and rural parts of the metropolitan regions play. Do they gain significance by participating in those regions or do they lose their specific character and endogenous potential? It is similarly

difficult to say whether the proclamation of metropolises and metropolitan regions leads to more ‘glory’ or more ‘misery’ on the part of the citizens affected (Kaltenbrunner 2001). Long-established ways of life, such as urban life or urbanity with all their advantages are in danger of being restricted or might even vanish. These problems are also in the centre of the sceptics’ critical debate about the currently (inter-)nationally propagated metropolitan regions. Time will show which spatial structures are able to prevail in the long term and how regional planning and policy will deal with them.

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