

# METROPOLIZATION STRATEGIES IN THE CITY OF VALENCIA IN THE AUTONOMOUS PERIOD: CENTRALITY QUESTIONED IN POSTCHRISTALLER REGIONAL PLANNING MODEL

**Gabino Ponce Herrero**

Departamento de Geografía Humana, Universidad de Alicante  
Gabino.ponce@ua.es

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of Spain's autonomous regions, a number of strategies have been implemented in the city of Valencia aimed at enhancing its central role in the Valencia urban system. During the first stage, which lasted until the mid-1990s, local strategies luckily coincided with official strategies of the various autonomous regional governments aimed at creating a metropolitan region and enhancing the rank/size of the new autonomous regional capital. At the same time, the Valencia urban system was constructed as a functional network within a fragmented territory. A hierarchical pyramid model based on Christaller's central place paradigm was proposed by the Progressive Governments. This was in line with the theoretical orthodoxy prevailing at that time and based on European Community guidelines and aid for regional planning (European Commission, 1995 and 1999).

The second stage began with an expansion of the economy, and focused on the tertiary sector (after an extensive redeployment and reduction of the industrial system), overseen by conservative and neoliberal governments which deregulated the complex *modern* legal framework, with a view to establishing regulatory flexibility as a new paradigm for Valencian regional planning, and defining a clearly *postmodern* context. The *Christallerian metropolitan programme* thereby fell into a crisis. Valencia's nascent urban system was affected by the loss of guidelines in a situation in which some municipalities, such as Valencia, developed strategic plans to increase their competitiveness and hierarchical position over a disorientated territory, which showed some signs of polycentricity and networked structures that affected the hierarchical role of the central city.

We aim to identify the model of the metropolitan structure that was established based on an analysis of territorial, functional and political aspects. According to the «neoclassical»

hypothesis, a central city's loss of dynamism is followed by the emergence of new centralities, so that the initial suburbanization (subordination to the central city) becomes a decentralized and polycentric space.

Recent quantitative studies use a new hypothesis, according to which the new centralities must not only be significant concentrations of labour, but also real structural nodes within the territory, and must exert a clear economic, social and cultural influence on them. According to Nel.lo (2002), the polycentric space consists of a city of cities. Feria (2010) points out that during this phase, the municipalities in the metropolitan area cease to be mere passive recipients of decentralization from the central city. This phase involves a considerable degree of maturity in the metropolitan area, in which the entire conurbation acts as a single city where functions are distributed based on selective strategies according to the needs of each activity and what each territory can offer - in the same way as in a traditional city, but on another territorial scale.

Based on an analysis of the morphological variables, population changes and trends, the housing market, the territorial evolution of economic activities, urban development plans and strategies at autonomous regional and local level, and using evidence from statistical sources and the *Atlas Estadístico de Áreas Urbanas de España* (Statistical Atlas of Urban Areas of Spain) (*Atlas Digital* version), we aim to analyze the recent development of the Valencia metropolitan agglomeration and its morphological trends according to the theories mentioned above, while analyzing the strategies used by the city of Valencia to maintain its position as the central node.

## II. THE ADMINISTRATIVE CONFIGURATION OF THE FUNCTIONAL SPACE: FROM PROVINCIAL CAPITAL TO AUTONOMOUS REGIONAL CAPITAL

The economic recovery that began in the late 1980s coincided with the assumption of decentralized powers (approval of the *Statute of Autonomy* in 1982) and with the progressive design of Valencia as a regional capital - a process in which the construction of a functional metropolitan area was considered crucial. Under the terms of the *Revised Text of the Land and Valuations Law* of 1976, and beginning with the establishment of democratic town councils, the Law of 31 December 1986 created the *Metropolitan Consell de l'Horta*, with 44 member municipalities (subsequently 45) from the first ring under the direct influence of the city of Valencia, containing 1,557,907 inhabitants in 2010.

*Metropolitan Coordination Regulations* were proposed to regulate the urban growth of the Valencia Metropolitan Area - VMA - which called for the review of all local planning institutions. The new space, which was well hierarchized by the central city of Valencia, had to create a new urbanized space with new urban forms that were less dense than their predecessors, in which three main categories of functions were selectively distributed:

- new productive forms in the old industrial subsectors (affected by fragmentation and atomization)
- new production and consumption activities (often in the form of new shopping and leisure centres)
- new residential areas, the design of which was influenced by the concept of the *garden city*, albeit in formats that were much more sparsely equipped in terms of facilities and services.

The autonomous regional strategies followed the guidelines of the European Community's regional policy, which identified the «*Valencia fracture*» to the south of Catalonia as a functional discontinuity in what it called the *Latin Arc* (European Commission, 1995). In 1999, as part of the *European Territorial Strategy*, it advocated the creation of *metropolitan regions* for the development and integration of peripheral Europe. These new regions were to be structured with a tiered pyramidal urban system, so that specific public services and facilities reached the entire territory from their urban base. Emphasis was placed on the fact that the investments and political decisions with a territorial effect to be made by the European Union needed to be focused on strengthening this model (European Commission, 1999: 26)

Christaller's *central place theory* was the most effective paradigm for structuring a new urban system (the new *País Valencià*) in the Spanish State of autonomies. To achieve this, the rank-size rule was the most effective method for the diagnosis and correction of the imbalances in the Valencia urban system under construction, assuming that cities were nodes for accessing Valencia's new network of public services and facilities.

These guidelines were compatible with the proposals made by the regional government in the *Strategies for territorial structure of the Valencia Autonomous Region* (COPUT, 1995a and b), which stipulated a series of measures aimed at strengthening the rank of Valencia, by means of a polarized regional planning policy for Valencia which sought to create an urban network with a hierarchical tree structure, and with the regional capital at the summit.

According to Christaller's theory and *gravitational models*, the processes for reinforcing the centrality of Valencia were crucial in the dynamic interplay of influences and hierarchies between various centres and areas of influence, in order to build an urban system. Additionally, the larger the *hinterland*, the greater the potential for Valencia, and its facilities and services, to be integrated within the network of European cities. Also, the more competitive the Valencia urban system as a whole would be, as it would benefit from the benefits of European integration due to the well-structured top-down network.

### III. RELUCTANCE REGARDING THE VMA METROPOLITAN MODEL AND POSTMODERN AND NEOLIBERAL DEREGULATION

Nevertheless, from the outset the management by the *Consell Metropolità de l'Horta* and implementation of the *Metropolitan Coordination Regulations* were strongly influenced by the different political stances of each of the actors involved, as well as by the various urban development models discussed. The main city, which was governed by conservatives from 1991 onwards, felt that its proposals were determined and its aspirations limited by the other municipalities (which were mostly governed by progressive parties) and by the autonomous regional government (which was governed by progressive parties until 1995). Various authors have highlighted political conflict as the main reason for the absence to date of a joint plan for the VMA.

Meanwhile, in the early 1990s the city of Valencia launched a strategic plan to be presented in 1995 (CEyD, 1995), in which while it agreed with the objectives to project the city internationally as the «*capital and backbone of the Valencia Autonomous Region and the coordinator of the system of European and Iberian cities with the Mediterranean,*» it

relegated the metropolitan area to a mere medium for decentralized functions, and saw the regional territory as an opportunity for the implementation of initiatives that were «surplus to requirements» in the central city.

The morphology and functional specialization of the territory of the VMA were ultimately affected by the new cycle of economic expansion in the second half of the 1990s, together with an uninterrupted sequence of neoliberal regional governments that has continued to the present day, which have defined regulatory flexibility as the new paradigm in the regional planning of the Valencia region. The *hierarchical model* was shelved and no other territorial model was defined until the 2011 model, which was clearly *postmodern* in its conceptions.

The robust suburban expansion of the VMA since the second half of the 1990s therefore took place in a territory without a metropolitan model. From 1996 onwards, with all the useful land designated as suitable for building (and with no planning having taken place) and in a more permissive legal environment, the conditions were ideal for unlimited real estate development. During this phase, each of the 45 municipalities in the VMA gave free rein to their municipal urban development, encouraging isolated initiatives in direct competition with other municipalities, and fostering speculation at a local microlevel and a fight to attract investment and capital.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

The VMA was a participant in the major changes that have taken place in all metropolitan areas since the turn of the century, and which call into question the classic model of locating productive investments according to clear centre-periphery gradients. The individualized dynamics of the suburban and periurban municipalities - the emerging polycentricity - have led to structural changes in the economic relationships within the urban conurbation, which may eventually threaten the leading role of the central city (at least in sectorial terms and in the long term). Hence the «need» for the *strategic plan* of the city of Valencia, in order to further reinforce its centrality.

The labour market variable defines a functional metropolitan area - FMA - of 85 municipalities linked with some evidence of polycentrism. However, the subordinate nature of the VMA (45 municipalities) is reinforced by the territorial strategies of the city of Valencia, which are based on the strategic plan which, inter alia, proposes the creation of «new centres» within the municipality itself. This permits the internal reallocation of functional loads and also provides a strategy to avoid the relocation of these highly skilled functions to other municipalities in the VMA.

However, this same territorial expansion, fostered by the dense network of infrastructures and private mobility, appears to be creating a new functional space - the FMA - that is much larger and much more complex than the one established within the first belt - the VMA. In this vague space, which is roughly defined by the labour market, patterns of residential mobility appear to be beginning to free themselves from the influence of the central city and unidirectional flows from the centre to the periphery. Some subcentres of labour are thereby emerging, and are beginning to call into question the monocentric model characteristic of a subordinate metropolitan region, and perhaps start the process of a *metropolitan city*, in which functions are redistributed according to criteria that are more complex than decentralization and accumulation.