

Working paper

Quality of Life in the Old European Cities Belt Historical development, structural profiles and modern living conditions¹

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This paper focuses on the quality of life in the cities situated in the OECB (Old European Cities Belt). These cities present common characteristics in terms of historical evolution and economic development and therefore constitute a quite homogeneous sample to be analysed in order to study urban living condition in Europe.

The origins of the OECB can be located in the Middle Ages. Its evolution was, especially at the beginning, linked to the geographical site of the cities. Since X century, Northern Italy and Low Countries were the most urbanised areas of the Europe and constituted the natural poles of a commercial continuum from the North to the South of Europe along the Rhine river.

Cities located in these areas were not only privileged by their geographical position, close to the trade routes, but were supported also by the high fertility of the surrounding territories crossed by several long rivers and therefore by a general surplus of foods and goods. For example the prosperity of Lombardia and in particular of Milan was due to its position in the middle of the rich Pianura Padana, near to Genoa and also to Venice through the river Po. For the Low Countries the traditional commercial vitality was also explained by the fruitful network of important rivers like Rhine, Mosa, Escaut.

The emerging polycephalic system of cities, resulting from the ongoing process of urbanisation, was based on small and medium sized towns concentrated in the European core and dominating for a long period the mercantile development of Europe.

As Pirenne points out in his famous book: *Medieval Cities* (1925), during the Middle Ages the European cities become primarily commercial cities. The *bourgeoises*, inhabitant of the *new bourgs* inside or close to the old towns, were overall merchants or craftsmen. They constituted the symbol of the economic and civil freedom of group of population from the Church and from the Aristocratic power. In the XII and XIII century the *bourgeoises* developed a tradition in the public administration of the cities as well as specific laws oriented to protect commercial activities. Modern schools and education system were organised in order to improve the knowledge of the new generation in commercial performances. New severe measure were adopted to prevent the criminal events especially against the trade movements. The transport system was consolidated for developing commercial activities. In general the local government tried to

¹ This paper presents some results of the research with the same title carried on in the Mzes (Mannheimer Zentrum für Europäische Sozialforschung - University of Mannheim) for the Commission of the European Communities in 1995-1996.

determinate the best social and economic condition also in term of solidarity, reduced social conflict, health care provision, transport and services facilities (specially banks) in order to improve the business volume. These primitive forms of *quality of life* were the result of a self-interested response by a specific social class (bourgeoises) to the economic transformation, were not caused by a real humanitarian fervour. However determined a general progress in the living conditions of the population.

The development of a set of independent cities geographically well located, and arranged to commercial and financial activities, was also possible because of to the slow consolidation of the respective central States. „Here strong central states were slow to consolidate, while commercial and protoindustrial capitalists thrived, from early Italian and South German bankers to Dutch merchants or Belgian iron master and clothiers“ (Hohenberg and Lees, 1985:72).

As Rokkan points out, the combination of political and spatial factors contributed heavily in determining the economic hegemony of the cities. „The city structure of each territory reflects the distances between the state-building core areas and the dominant trade routes: the greater the distance the greater the dominance of the capital city, the shorter the distance the more even the distribution of the city strengths whether measured in terms of demographic size or in terms of territorial functions. The territories to the west as well as to the east of the central trade belt are largely monocephalic: they were built up around strong state-building core areas and there was no serious competition from the cities nearer to the old South-North routes“ (Rokkan, 1973:83).

City-State in Europe probably constitute the best example of rich commercial cities located along the dominant trade routes that maintained for a long time their independence. The Italian case² is the prototype with very closed example in Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany³.

In general cities located in central Europe show a dynamic trend oriented toward very intensive economic activities also in the phase of industrialisation. The rise and the triumph of the national economies and commercial activities in contrast with the fragmented ones, based on autonomous cities, is one of the causes that determined the development of the industrial sector in France and in England during the XVIII and the XIX century. Nevertheless also the Low Countries (especially the Walloon region), the Rhine regions of Germany (Rhur), Switzerland and, later, some cities in North-west of Italy, after the National State formation, followed the example becoming highly industrialised areas.

Once more cities in the OECB were able to avoid a rapid decline, adapting their expansion to the exploitation of the natural resources (the coal mines in Belgium, the hydroelectric compartment in Switzerland) as well as to the improvement of other industrial activities in the metallurgic and mechanical sectors (Germany and Northern Italy). This testify the never ended vitality of a set of cities that never completely lost the leading character because of their productive flexibility and multifunctional features. It must also be considered that the infrastructure and services system developed during many centuries in the central European cities provided a suitable *milieu* also in supporting the growing industrialisation, although it was evident that singles urban units lost their absolute supremacy in determining the economic course.

The number of books and articles that confirm similarities between the medieval and the modern urban network in West Europe is quite large. For instance, comparing the typology of Juillard and Nonn (1976) with the typology of Hechter and Brustein (1980), Hohenberg and Lees (1985) show that both these two typologies are equally

² In the year 1200 there where between 200 and 300 cities in North and Central Italy which could be described as autonomous (Burke, 1986).

³ It is moreover interesting to observe that in some cases physical-external variables reinforced the autonomy of the cities. The geographical configuration was for example determinant in shaping the historical independence of the cities in Switzerland.

based on three fundamental classes of regions called Rhenish, Parisian and Peripheral. „Like the old Roman-Germanic core, the “Rhenish” areas are densely urbanised and tightly bound together by transportation network. A number of medium-sized cities share organising functions with no one place dominating. This model holds sway from the English Midlands to Switzerland, and it also applies to much of eastern France and parts of northern Italy. The “Parisian” regions, strongly organised by a dominant city but more rural overall than the Rhenish, are recognizable descendants of their “feudal” counterparts. While Paris and London remain archetypes, cities from Vienna to Lisbon fit this model“ (Hohenberg and Lees, 1985:245).

In the next table the historical configuration and diversity between the monocephalic (Great Britain, France, Portugal and Spain) and the polycephalic urban systems emerge quite clearly also if the two models are converging in the period of the general European urbanisation consequent to the industrialisation.

Tab. 1 - Cities with more than 100.000 inhabitants or five largest cities in different Western European Countries (in thousands).								
	1400	1700	1850			1400	1700	1850
Great Britain				France				
London	45	575	2236	Paris	275	500	1053	
Liverpool	...	6	376	Marseille	21	90	195	
Glasgow	2	13	345	Lyon	33	97	177	
Manchester	..	8	303	Bordeaux	30	45	130	
Birmingham	...	7	233	Rouen	35	50	101	
Edinburgh	2	36	194					
Leeds	...	5	172					
Bristol	10	20	137					
Sheffield	2	3	135					
Bradford	...	7	110					
	1400	1700	1850			1400	1700	1850
Portugal				Spain				
Lisboa	55	180	240	Barcelona	38	34	220	
Porto	18	25	74	Madrid	...	140	281	
Braga	19	Sevilla	70	72	113	
Coimbra...	11	18		Malaga	40	30	93	
Ponta-Delgada	16	Valencia		36	50	87
	1400	1700	1850			1400	1700	1850
Germany				Italy				
Berlin	5	55	437	Napoli	45	339	409	
Hamburg	22	70	149	Milano	90	125	209	
Koeln	40	40	110	Roma	33	135	175	
Dresden	4	40	97	Palermo	27	100	168	
Magdeburg	20	10	72	Torino	4	40	137	
				Genova	100	65	128	
				Venezia	100	138	127	
	1400	1700	1850			1400	1700	1850
Netherlands				Belgium				
Amsterdam	3	200	225	Gent	56	52	107	
Rotterdam	...	51	90	Bruxelles	26	80	132	
Hague	5	30	72	Antwerpen	5	67	88	
Utrecht	9	30	48	Liege	30	45	76	
Leiden	6	65	37	Brugge	125	35	50	
	1400	1700	1850					
Switzerland								
Zurich	5	8	46					

Geneve	8	18	45
Bern	...	8	42
Basel	10	15	35
Lausanne	5	6	19

Note: - (...) data not available

Source: selection on Bairoch, Batou and Chèvre (1988)

Nowadays the situation in Europe is, in some sense, very similar to the medieval one. First, the cities are interested by strong phenomena of tertiarisation that remind us commercial activities. In fact, cities are loosing their pure productive-industrial function and result more and more oriented to the creation and exchange of information, *know-how* procedures, technological systems, formative or educational training, financial items, and so on. Second, it is evident that important differences are appearing between regions of the same State. Some regions, like the old *Cities-State*, are looking for a more political and economic independence as well as for a new set of strong and stable contacts with other privileged areas in other countries⁴.

New model of decentralised and network economy are today emerging (Perulli, 1995) and the cities constitutes once more one of the main protagonists of these processes⁵. Therefore they will be asked more intensively to develop their economy without generate negative effects in terms of living conditions.

The OECB pattern of development can be easily compared with the recent model of the *Blue Banana* by Brunet (1989). According to such a model the core of the European socio-economic and infrastructural progress is going to be progressively concentrated in the urban agglomerations of the central dorsal (banana shaped)⁶.

The following three maps show the strong similarities between the geographical evolution of the industrial settlement in the XIII, in XIX century and the *Blue Banana* of the XX century, confirming the leading role of the cities located in the axis from the Low Countries and England to the Northern part of Italy.

Naturally, this is only one of the possible interpretation of the European growth. Another view, for example, could be based on the monopoly of the two main European cities: London and Paris, today reinforced by the construction of the tunnel⁷. Another approach could stress the growing importance of the cities located on the borders between West and East Europe (Berlin, Vienna) due to the fundamental role they play in the integration process. At the same time, the boundaries of the OECB itself seem to be quite unstable and therefore tend to include or exclude regions in different periods. The South of Great Britain (excluding Gales and South-West) in the North and Catalonia in the South could at present be considered as the new two extremes of a curvilinear axis

⁴ On regional disparities, hierarchisation of urban region and regional network structures in Europe see in particular Part II of Getimis and Kafkalas (1993).

⁵ „History is coming back: networks of cities“ is the title of a paragraph of Perulli, regarding the similarities between the premodern Europe and the imminent economic system based on crisis of the national models and the predominance of trans-national relationships between region or cities.

⁶ The *Blue Banana* area of Brunet seems to be very similar to the OECB. There are only few differences. Due to the fact that the OECB has historically been characterised by nations with urban *polycephalic systems*, the South of Great Britain and the regions in the East border of France have been excluded because of the dominance of London and Paris, while all the Northern part of Italy and also some regions of the Centre have been included, because of the socio-economic importance of the cities located there.

⁷ Another version of this model is the *Capital Triangle* of Palomäki (1991) which also includes Brussels in the group of the three main European decision centres.

corresponding to the extension of the old dorsal. This model can be regarded as the combination of Brunet's (1989) *Blue Banana* and *Sunbelt* (North of South)⁸.

A more complex regional model, based on the North-South, East-West and Core-Periphery divisions, was presented by Jordan (1988). It emphasizes the presence of a specific *Franco-Italian Industrial Core* (including the Southern-Central regions of France, the Northern regions of Italy and few German regions) opposed to a *Germanic Protestant Industrial Core* (including the Netherlands, Denmark, Great Britain, Northern Ireland, most of West Germany, part of Belgium, of Sweden and of Austria), while Switzerland, the rest of Austria, of Germany, of France and of Belgium constitute mixed areas.

Recently Kunzmann (1992) criticised the *Blue Banana* (Brunet, 1989) and the *Japanese Corridor*⁹ (Commission, 1992) models. He argues that is not possible at all to subdivide Europe into different homogeneous areas and proposes a *Grape* approach characterised by innumerable areas of influence for each important European city¹⁰.

The rapid evolution of the European scenario makes it difficult to determine which one of these approaches is more appropriate for clustering European regions or cities from a geographical, cultural and socio-economic point of view. Moreover, several methodological differences contribute to the fact that research findings are not easy to compare.

The study discussed here, is based on the assumption that the OECB axis remains, at least, one of the main privileged areas for the present and future socio-economic development of Europe.

The general historical and economic development in the OECB does not exclude, of course, other privileged geo-economic paths. At the same time, it does not mean that the quality of life in all OECB cities is excellent or even sufficient.

The inherited political and administrative autonomy, the experienced productive adaptability and flexibility, as well as the geographical aspects (size, location, etc.) of these cities can be surely considered important features in dealing effectively with the problems of quality of life. Nevertheless, different patterns and levels of living conditions inside the OECB should be considered. As a matter of fact, *exogenous* or local variables such as negative political-administrative events, economic crises in specific sectors, erosion of solidarity values or even environmental circumstances, etc., can intervene in determining new and separate trends in objective or subjective well-being. It is also, the size of the cities that by itself may be more important as regards generating different living conditions than the city's location.

The aim of this paper is therefore to start by looking at the historical similarities between cities belonging to the European core and to finish by finding out differences between them in terms of quality of life.

⁸ Hypotheses of extension or modification of the first *Blue Banana* also go into other directions. It is in particular Noble et al. (1991) who expect the shift to the East of the *Lotharingian core* in the long run with positive effects on cities such as Berlin, Prague, Warsaw, Vienna, Budapest and Trieste.

⁹ This model is based on four areas: the *Blue Banana*, the *Baltic Banana* (from Aberdeen to Helsinki through Copenhagen), the *Western Mediterranean Middle Europe Corridor* (from Portugal, Madrid to Minsk through Austria), the *North-Hellenic Corridor* (from Stockholm to Athens, through East Germany and Yugoslavia).

¹⁰ Two main scenarios can be defined in order to describe the future evolution of the European urban system. One of them is based on the growing process of *specialisation* and *concentration* of the functions in the largest and most important cities (*metropolis*, *europolis*, *eurocities*). The other one is based on the so-called *Chain* model characterised by a trend of *decentralisation* along contiguous areas (Randstad, Rhur, Padania) (Migliorini e Pagliettini, 1993).

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