URBAN NETWORKS ON THE MOVE

Germany has a polycentric urban system with four cities of over a million inhabitants each (Berlin, Hamburg, Cologne and Munich) on top of numerous mid-sized cities. This characteristic can be generally said to be an indication of a balanced spatial development, for instance, when comparing Germany to countries like France or the United Kingdom, where the dynamics of growth are strongly concentrated on the capital region. Essentially, however, the question as to whether a centralised or rather a decentralised network is advantageous appears futile given the historical path dependencies of urban systems and their interconnectedness. Noticeable changes inherently require historical fractures, such as the division of Germany after the war. During that period, new networking patterns developed, which have in turn been reordered again after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the major turning point in recent Germany history.

Decentralisation – just as centralised structures have their specific costs – cannot be sustained without paying the price for mobility and transportation. This applies above all to supra-regional transportation. In the course of structural change, major corridors have significantly gained importance while at the same time experiencing growth pressures. The road and rail transportation routes between the conurbations are – similar to the nodal points of air and sea transportation – confronted with limits to growth and capacity. In contrast, the volume of traffic is static and even decreasing in other, more peripheral regions of Germany.

The metropolitan regions are anchor points for Germany's relatively balanced spatial structure. They bundle the central functions for densely populated areas; are usually connected to prime nodes of the transportation and communication networks; and are considered to be generators of commercial development on the basis of their population potential, their economic strength (even in the knowledge economy), and ultimately because of their role as gateways for global flows of people, goods and information. Transport growth along the major transport corridors reflects the importance of these hubs.

Examination of the urban network structure and international accessability has received theoretical stimulus in recent times through the 'New Economic Geography'. Accordingly, large agglomerations particularly represent the centres of gravity for economic development, based on productivity advantages, economies of scale and low transport costs. Consequently, they are at the centre of development-oriented political concepts. Regional planning policies have also embraced this viewpoint and promulgate a strategy of 'stengthening the strong': encouragement and support of a few growth cores instead of well balanced development everywhere.

Admittedly both 'draft theories', the New Economic Geography as well as growth-oriented spatial development policies, still lack convincing empirical evidence. Firstly, not all densely populated areas by far are economic engines for growth. On the contrary, old industrial regions like the Ruhr Basin, despite high density and excellent connections, are icons of decline rather than places of optimism. Secondly, many prosperous regions in Upper Swabia or Lower Saxony belong to the so-called 'silent stars' remote from metropolises, basing their success on factors other than centrality and motorways, airports or container terminals. Transportation and accessibility are however vitally important for both areas: the major centres as well as the prosperous periphery.

Noteworthy differences can be seen in lifestyle choices, which reveal parallel spheres of life. Supporters of the modern, international structure of metropolitan regions are the business élite. They travel predominantly by airplane between major nodal points and practice mobility as a form of global nomadism. It is no coincidence that this élite also makes a significant contribution to the transportation demand. According to recent studies on long distance travel, 10% of the transportation users in Germany account for approximately 50% of the total transportation demand.

For the majority of the population actual travelling remains confined to the localised realm of everyday life actitivies. The frequency of journeys and travel times show only a slight increase, even though travel distances are getting longer due to the spatial division of labour and individual preferences. Other than vacation or business trips, most people are still mainly concerned with how to organise their intra-urban mobility rather than how to access international networks.

The mobile lifestyle of the business élite and the mobility patterns of the majority of the population can however no longer be distinguished from one another, and they especially cannot be played against one another politically. Long-distance commuters constitute the new middle class mobile nomads, who regularly fill the ICE trains on Mondays and Thursdays, with their double lives of separate places for living and working. A second example is the growth in air traffic, which today owes less to the business class than to the short trips made by John and Jane Q Public, who gratefully take up the offerings of low-cost carriers for shopping in London etc. Low energy prices still allow this type of mass individualisation and democratisation of mobility.

However, the conflict over the expansion of infrastructures – as the example of airports in Frankfurt demonstrates – makes political regulation of these matters complex. For one thing, the roles of perpetrators and victims are distributed diffusely amongst the airline passengers and those plagued by aircraft noise. Additionally, the network economy of transportion and goods handling attracts many regions, which hope for compensation for ongoing deindustrialsation. The phrase 'job machine', however, has an empty ring, since the newly created jobs offer only a fraction of what was lost, in terms of quantity and quality. If it is true that energy in the future will never again be so inexpensive and ubiquitously available as in the twentieth century, then we face what is a suspenseful question about the transformation of mobility – and its consequences for the urban system.

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