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THE METROPOLITAN NAME GAME: THE PATHWAYS TO PLACE NAMING SHAPING METROPOLITAN REGIONS

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Abstract

The centrality of metropolitan regions in policy and research does not mean they are perceived by their population as having a meaningful identity. This affects their political legitimacy, economic development prospects and place qualities. However, the ongoing scalar expansion of our spatial attachments creates the potential for a metropolitan identity, which can contribute to a stronger metropolitan region vision. As a component of identity formation, place naming becomes relevant both to represent and construct this scale. This article evaluates the geographical, institutional and social factors that shape naming processes in metropolitan regions undergoing integration. We consider historical examples representing different modes of name formation: New York, Stoke-on-Trent, Budapest, Charleville-Mézières, Metroplex and Thunder Bay. We find that metropolitan toponyms emerge from a nexus of interdependent factors, some of which decisively push naming processes into specific paths, and that such processes reflect the socio-political and cultural contexts shaping metropolitan regions. This provides a framework of questions that metropolitan institutions can consider to envision the names they are more likely to develop.

Keywords: metropolitan regions, place name studies, place attachment, metropolitan identity, toponymic rescaling

“Swedes are now facing a land grab of a different sort: Denmark wants to rebrand Skåne as ‘Greater Copenhagen’ to better compete with other city destinations. […] ‘I don’t feel that in the current situation we are prepared to leave Malmö behind,’ the city’s mayor said.” The Guardian, 5.3.2015

The concept of the ‘metropolitan region’ has been receiving considerable attention as the most appropriate scale to understand the functional structure, economic activity and policymaking scope of urban agglomerations. Large urbanised areas are becoming spatially, functionally and institutionally more integrated, as they are increasingly connected by networks, and more people, activities and ideas flow through them. In recognition of this process, metropolitan region formation is being advocated by policy-makers and scholars as a way to build upon the potentials of larger population, greater functional mass and diversity, more efficient use of resources, and stronger political influence in national and supranational debates (Katz and Bradley, 2013).

However, attempts to turn such concepts into meaningful realities, with the capacity to be recognised as specific ‘places’ by their inhabitants, and to mobilise people and institutions around a shared vision of the future, have often failed. Metropolitan regions are widely criticised as concepts emerging from technocratic decision-making, focusing only on external recognition as ‘brands’ (Lloyd and Peel, 2008). They are seen as fragile policy constructs, lacking a relation to historical, cultural or geographical features of the territory, and too fragmented to create a sense of shared identity among the individual and collective actors enclosed by their ad-hoc boundaries (Van Houtum and Lagendijk, 2001; Lambregts, 2006; Healey, 2009). Shared identity is defined here as a generally agreed recognition of the metropolitan region as a functionally, socially and politically relevant spatial arena (Vallbé et al., 2015; Kübler, 2016), as well as the manifestation of emotional ties to the specific locality that lead to the emergence of expectations and goals shared by citizens, communities and institutions (Nelles, 2009).

Understanding the components of identity building in metropolitan regions is important because a weak metropolitan identity hampers institutional integration, as widely legitimised governance structures become more difficult to implement (Nelles, 2013). But it also affects the economic dimension: the perceived lack of a common "metropolitan milieu" (Lambregts, 2006: 119) leaves polycentric metropolitan regions as loose collections of cities with no 'sense of region', avoiding the release of "the metropolitan potential and the agglomeration economies" (ibid.) locked into them. Van Houtum (1998) has shown that 'mental distance', expressed by cultural contrasts between partners in such regions, has indeed a negative effect on the likelihood of building economic relations.

Despite these structural difficulties, recent research has developed concepts like 'metropolitan citizenship' (Lackowska and Mikula, 2015) to denote the upscaling of the attachment to places and the political engagement of metropolitan inhabitants brought by increasing mobility and inter-municipal cooperation. Such an upscaling has potentially positive impacts on the pursuit of a fair distribution of economic benefits, the wider legitimacy of metropolitan governance structures and the role of citizens in deciding matters pertaining to the larger scale (Vallbé et al., 2015; Lidström, 2015;

Kübler, 2016). This implies that identity at this scale can be developed and should be nurtured. At a time when so many metropolitan regions are being proposed as triggers of economic growth, adding a *metropolitan identity* to a metropolitan region becomes a significant policy priority.

One of the factors contributing to identity building in geographical spaces is place naming. Naming a particular place is a key practice to create, stabilise and disseminate its identity (Paasi, 1986; Rose-Redwood et al., 2010) and wherever policy-makers seek to define a new metropolitan region, they actively search for a suitable name, not only to *represent* the region under their preferred light, but also to *create* a new scale of place that was not previously acknowledged (Rose-Redwood, 2011). But the metropolitan scale is still an unexplored area of toponymic research, just as place name studies have not been central to metropolitan debates. As such, there are important knowledge gaps to fill: first, the specific challenges presented by this territorial scale to place naming practices have not been explored; second, the pathways to metropolitan place naming within the process of formation of a metropolitan region are not understood.

This paper tries to innovate not just by explicitly focusing on the metropolitan scale, but also by trying to identify common features shaping metropolitan naming processes in different periods and locations through a comparative historical approach, which provides a complement to the majority of toponymic studies that focus on single case studies. Such an approach is instrumental to reach our aim of understanding how geographical, political and sociocultural factors influenced the conception and inscription of names in newly formed metropolitan regions across history, and how those factors mutually relate and combine to shape a typology of place naming modes. This can help us locate the key relations affecting the wider acceptance and use of those new names – in other words, their ‘success’ as tools of metropolitan identity formation - turning our typology into a valuable framework to inform contemporary regions shaping their own place naming processes.

The next section will frame our theoretical approach and focus the discussion on the key aspects of critical place name studies which can clarify the challenges metropolitan regions present to place-naming practices. Then, we present the empirical approach and discuss historical cases of newly-named urban entities, in different periods and at different spatial scales. We then identify the socio-spatial factors that make names fall into specific categories, shaping the features of names themselves and the unfolding of naming processes, and point out which factors play a bigger role. We conclude by discussing what metropolitan regions currently seeking integration can learn from these examples for their own identity formation processes.

Place naming practices and the metropolitan scale

There is no lack of creative names being proposed by policy-makers in their quest for increased metropolitan integration, with different degrees of internal popularity and external recognition. Such proposals may be interpreted differently in different parts of the urban area and therefore are prone to be contested; the recent debate about renaming the Danish-Swedish Öresund region ‘Greater Copenhagen’ is different when seen from Copenhagen or from Malmö. Danes are enthusiastic about it, while the Swedes hesitate to accept what they see as a symbolic effacement of their regional identity for the sake of some added international notoriety (Crouch, 2015). Clearly, policy names designed for external branding purposes may fail to produce widely endorsed internal identities; but, more importantly, debates such as the one in Öresund suggest that the process of place naming and the features of a name reveal something about the underlying socio-economic and political contexts in which metropolitan region formation occurs.

Despite the topicality of the theme, toponymic research has focused on streets, neighbourhoods and cities, following the preferred scales at which place attachment is studied (Lewicka, 2011), and has yet to consider this new territory and role of place naming in metropolitan identity building. The metropolitan region is particularly interesting, not only because it is the scale at which the daily life of citizens and firms unfolds today, but also because it is a scale that does not previously exist as a recognisable spatial form or administrative object (Paasi, 2010).

Therefore, place naming at the metropolitan scale demands a different focus. A great amount of studies have focused on naming as a way to represent existing and well-defined places (cities, streets, public spaces) as ‘brands’ in a commodified way (Ashworth and Kavaratzis, 2010; Medway and Warnaby, 2014). Either by public policy or corporate intervention, place names become a medium for place marketing (Rose-Redwood, 2011), supposedly turned uncontroversial by the potential economic gain. This is broadly the approach of the Greater Copenhagen project. Yet, the tensions created within that metropolitan region show that this is a fuzzier and more complex territory of intervention than a street, infrastructure or public space, and stress a second dimension of place naming – its ability to *make* a place that was not there, rather than just mirror it for external observers. An important insight of relational geography is that a (metropolitan) region is not a predefined entity, but can be constructed in multiple ways according to different criteria (Paasi, 2002). It is not something that *exists*, but rather that *becomes*, through “a plethora of practices, discourses, relations and connections” (Paasi, 2010: 2298). Drawing from critical toponomy literature, place-naming can be considered one of such practices of region-building.

Therefore, place naming in this context is not a way to represent and communicate an existing place under a particular light, but a practice through which a place is *created anew* and a new scalar configuration is legitimized. It involves not only policy decisions and official decrees, but an active enactment of the toponym in all kinds of formal and informal discourses and contexts, by which it acquires the desired symbolic force. This has been called ‘toponymic rescaling’ (Rose-Redwood, 2011; Hagen, 2011; Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015) and metropolitan regions provide a still unstudied arena to apply this direction of toponymic inquiry. How does the process of place-naming unfold within a process of formation – or invention[1] - of a metropolitan region?

Considering the question in this way emphasizes a dimension of metropolitan regions whose importance has often been dismissed by an excessive focus on their functional dimension (Lloyd and Peel, 2008). ‘Metropolitan visions’ have evolved around the need to upscale and create synergies between urban functions and nodes of economic activity, reduce institutional and infrastructural inefficiencies, improve sustainability, and trigger economic growth through external recognition and a competitive position in international rankings (Ravetz, 2000; Scott, 2001). This somewhat technocratic approach has limited their capacity to be acknowledged *internally* as integrated entities, providing common symbols, identities and a sense of rootedness to what is mostly an unstable construction (Cohen and Kliot, 1992). This may explain why metropolitan regions often fail to become meaningful places for their inhabitants.

Therefore, an alternative project promoting “city region place qualities” (Healey, 2009: 833) needs a long-term mobilisation of coalitions between citizens, experts and authorities, which together develop a ‘story’ about the future that people and institutions can endorse. This arguably includes defining a name for the new entity (Van Houtum and Lagendijk, 2001). Names are critically important to embed spatial identities into geographic territories (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010), and they often go back centuries, carrying a shared heritage and retaining emotional attachments to space (Hakala et al., 2015). In other words, names may not just foster *identification with* the metropolitan region, in the sense of recognising oneself as part of that physical space for all practical matters, but also *attachment to* the metropolitan region, in the sense of having an emotional bond with a specific territorial demarcation (Rose-Redwood et al., 2010).

So the question is how to positively combine place identification and place attachment – in other words, the cognitive and emotional dimensions of metropolitan identity (Rollero and De Picolli, 2010). A suitable toponym is likely to be a necessary, although not sufficient, factor for this to occur, and the assumption here is that a newly attributed name to an urban area undergoing integration, which is widely adopted and appropriated by citizens, firms and institutions, and is generally uncontested, has contributed positively to this combination.

However, these attachments are often associated with cities or neighbourhoods, and seem more difficult to build at the vast scale of metropolitan regions. Studies show that place attachment is negatively associated to place scale (Lewicka, 2011), as emotional ties rely on the physical experience of the territory rather than policy abstractions (Tuan, 1975). But the boundaries of our spatial experience, and hence spatial identification, have also changed: although ‘metropolitan regions’ often do not leave the imagination of politicians and planners, recent research shows that the increasing daily mobility of citizens “leads to an upscaling of their territorial identities at the level of the city-region” (Kübler, 2016: 1; see also Lackowska and Mikula, 2015). We may feel greater proximity today with the larger urban region in which we travel every day, than the citizens of Buda and Pest felt towards the other side of the Danube when both cities merged in 1872. In that sense, metropolitan regions today are not akin to ‘regions’, as “less important objects of emotional attachments or self-definitions” (Lewicka, 2011: 212), but rather a conceptual reconstruction at a larger scale of the concept of ‘city’, “the perfect exemplification of the place concept” (Lewicka, 2011: 212). Therefore, metropolitan regions can become a key scale to bound our attachment to place and sense of identity, similarly to what the ‘city’ was in the past.

Names as creators of place can also play an important role in supporting the political legitimacy of metropolitan regions. The upscaling of territorial attachments may come with greater political alienation, caused by institutional and spatial fragmentation, which challenges the democratic legitimacy of the metropolitan region as a political space (Kübler, 2016). A possible way to reduce this detachment and spread what has been called a ‘metropolitan idea’ (Nelles, 2013) is the inscription of a name for the new entity being created. This does not happen necessarily through the creation of a new name, but can imply merging existing names or expanding the name of a city to a larger scale. Such different paths to naming are politically relevant because they reflect the different power relations between actors in particular places, and are likely to attain different levels of success as accepted, used and generally appreciated toponyms.

Yet, metropolitan regions are rarely contained into single and undisputed power structures – while a municipality can name a street and a nation-state can name a city, naming a metropolitan region is a careful and usually long negotiation, which may involve appropriating organically-evolved popular designations or implementing new policy inventions. Metropolitan naming is a complex process, but it speaks directly to the concerns of place naming in general. It involves the need to find common interests and symbols and propose a shared identity to what have been mostly autonomous and often competitive urban centres; to override historical, administrative, political and cultural divisions; to embed the concept in popular imagination in a way that it gradually replaces, or at least matches, the attachment to particular town or city names; and to inspire a vision of the future that mobilises the efforts of many actors towards a recognisable outcome. A ‘successful’ process in this respect involves issues of language, evocativeness, cultural grounding, political tactfulness, among others. A generic policy name, often hastily applied to metropolitan regions in Europe and North America, arguably does not achieve this, which is in part why many such territories have not managed to develop a spatial identity shared by more actors. An historical investigation of names and naming processes may provide contemporary metropolitan regions with valuable insights about what’s in a name after all.

Research approach

The discussion above summarizes some recent directions of place-name research, since it experienced the so-called ‘critical turn’, the shift from toponyms seen as neutral objects, to be collected by linguists and historians, to place naming as a socio-political process reflecting underlying power relations (Berg and Vuolteenaho, 2009). Yet, while we acknowledge the important directions in which the field is going – namely the notions of performativity to understand how place identities are enacted through place naming (Rose-Redwood and Glass, 2014) and the various connections between toponymy and scale (Hagen, 2011) – here we are mainly interested in the historical process of formation of metropolitan regions, of which place naming is an important component. We particularly want to know whether similar factors contribute to the place naming process in different times and places, whether some factors are consistently more important than others, and whether a tentative typology of paths to metropolitan place naming can be constructed.

Therefore we will conduct a historical comparison of several case studies to look for patterns in the way metropolitan toponyms are devised and implemented within a process of metropolitan region formation. A heterogeneous selection of cases, covering different periods, locations and spatial scales, is essential to distil such patterns of consistent factors shaping the paths to metropolitan place naming. We consider a comparative historical approach not as a way to provide normative guidance for present problems, but as a divergent method comparing imaginable possibilities and outcomes beyond pre-set conditions, asking “questions that will inform a situation regardless of whether specific answers emerge” (Abbott and Adler, 1989: 469).

The analysis focuses on integration processes of formerly distinct cities into new metropolitan entities, from well-known cases of institutionalisation, such as the merger of the cities of Buda and Pest in 1872 or the consolidation of New York City in 1898, to cases of widespread adoption of names informally given to urban regions, such as the ‘Metroplex’ in the United States. The selection covers the different ways names are defined and applied to the new scale: designations emerging from the expansion of a leading city, from the merger of the names of several cities, or from the invention of a new name. This distinction may reveal common social, political and cultural contexts pushing names and naming processes into specific types, and clarify whether they fundamentally influence the prospects of new place names.

Case studies

As discussed above, the historical analysis is based on short vignettes about how names were devised and implemented in urban areas undergoing integration processes. An effort was made to capture different scales and time periods. Table 1 enumerates the cases, organised according to a purpose-built typology: the horizontal axis shows the possible ways in which the denomination can emerge: the expansion of the name of a particular city, the merger of existing city names, or the creation of a new name. The vertical axis provides subjective indications about how much the new names were institutionalised and incorporated, either totally replacing former toponyms or, alternatively, coexisting with others.

	Expansion	Merger	New Name
Replacement	BUDAPEST (1872)		
↑	STOKE-ON-TRENT (1910)	CHARLESVILLE-MEZIERES (1966)	THUNDER BAY (1970)
	NEW YORK (1898)		
Coexistence			METROPLEX (1972)

Table 1. List of case studies

Cases of expansion

New York

The famous sonnet “The New Collossus” by Emma Lazarus (1883), engraved in the Statue of Liberty to welcome immigrants – *give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free* – also tells us that the statue’s “[…] mild eyes command | The air-bridged harbour that twin cities frame.” The twin cities mentioned are New York (currently the borough of Manhattan) and Brooklyn, by then the largest and fourth largest cities in the country. But when the consolidation of no less than five counties was achieved in 1898, New York simply took over and expanded its name to the metropolitan area. Historians argue that the promoters of consolidation used the example of the rival ‘world city’ of London, which had created the London County Council in 1888 (Burrows and Wallace, 1999). But London was a case of an expanding dominant city, and cannot be compared with New York and Brooklyn, two large and often rival municipalities: “between New York and Brooklyn there is nothing in common, either in object, interest or feeling”, announced Brooklyn politicians in the 1830s, when the movements for consolidation started (ibid.: 1220).

So, there were contrasting feelings on both sides of the Hudson river. The trend in New York was strongly pro-consolidation, in an early recognition of the advantages of agglomeration: the port united the cities and hoarding territorial advantages was not sensible; now, the prosperity of one city would promote the others. Moving faster than the rapidly growing Chicago and the vision of New York’s business elite of being ‘the greatest city in the world’ also played a role. But Brooklyn feared to lose its identity, more than its name, as its more conservative social composition would be subject to the ‘evil’ influences of Manhattan (Hammack, 1982). When the consolidation referendum took place in 1894, Brooklyn voters said ‘yes’ by just 300 votes out of 129,000.

Several factors came together to consider New York as the natural name for the larger city. The first was economic and infrastructural domination. Despite the similar size of both cities, New York controlled the river traffic since the early 19th century. Brooklyn Bridge, built in 1883, did not balance economic weight on both sides, but rather created the ‘world’s first commuters’ (Hammack, 1982), Brooklynites working in ‘the city’. Brooklyn needed access to water and needed money, so negotiated from a disadvantageous position. Second, there was urban form. New York grew in the island on Manhattan as a dense, compact city, while Brooklyn slowly emerged from six small separate towns, only incorporated into one in the 1850s. Despite the explosive growth that followed, it was not perceived as a ‘core city’. Third, there was the cultural and historical value of the name. New York was the name of the original colony since the English took it from the Dutch, and was also the name of the state. The whole area was informally associated with New York, despite the individual toponyms. Fourth, there was the direction of the pressures for consolidation, and, importantly, the charismatic person leading the process. Most of the lobbying came from New York, led by its elites and media, most of all the lawyer and activist Andrew Haswell Green, who naturally did not envision a new designation: New York had an “imperial destiny” to fulfil (Burrows and Wallace, 1999: 1223). So, and despite all the fears about consolidation proper, the expansion of the name was never contested, while the five borough names persist as source of local identity and pride.

Stoke-on-Trent

The amalgamation of six towns into the city of Stoke-on-Trent, in England (1910), represents a case where the existence of an older ecclesiastical and political toponym, that happened to correspond to the name of one of the towns, directed the naming of the new urban entity. Yet, while the new name was not an issue in the amalgamation debates, it did leave some ambiguities behind, which still emerge today.

The towns comprising Stoke-on-Trent – Stoke-upon-Trent, Hanley, Tunstall, Burslem, Longton and Fenton – define a region collectively known as The Potteries, due to its predominant role in the ceramic industry. Geographical proximity and the engagement in a single industry established close relations between the towns and pushed them to integration. The first attempts at institutionalisation happened between 1820 and 1840, led by the town of Hanley, the largest centre in the area. Hanley was the commercial and population core, not Stoke that eventually named the new city. However, the mainline railway station providing access to the individual towns was in Stoke-upon-Trent. Stoke – a very common toponym in England – was also the oldest place name and therefore the name of the ecclesiastical parish and the parliamentary borough implemented in 1832. So the area was already known as Stoke to travellers and locals before the integration.

However, and perhaps to avoid the unduly influence of one town over the others, attempts at amalgamation included other more neutral names, such as the 1888 proposal to implement the *County of the Potteries* (Jenkins, 1963): Hanley was supposed to become a municipal borough and wanted to expand that designation to the other five towns; notably, the proposal did not expand the name of Hanley to the larger entity, but institutionalised the 'Potteries' designation. This and later schemes eventually failed, not due to naming issues, but mostly to disagreements about tax rates and mechanisms to balance the accounts in all towns. In the end, the agreed scheme simply preserved the older parish and parliamentary name and the city of Stoke-on-Trent (with the change from 'upon' to 'on' denoting a distinction from the old town) was created. The naming did not seem to influence the popular debate, as the whole process "aroused no great feeling either for or against federation" (Jenkins, 1963).

The names of the individual towns were never erased, though, and '*goin' up Hanley, duck*' is still the way locals refer to going to the city centre. Local loyalties periodically re-appear, as illustrated by a recent ambiguity caused by this unusual naming process: the city centre of Stoke-on-Trent is in Hanley, but visitors tend to follow the signs to peripheral Stoke and assume that is the centre, which potentially affects the city image and the visitor flows to the centre's retail offer. To avoid that, the council proposed to improve the city's 'brand' by removing Hanley from street signs, names of businesses etc., and rename the area as City Centre (BBC News, 2009). That designation was indeed adopted by the local authority's Core Spatial Strategy (2009), but led to the re-emergence of strong rivalries and criticisms about the erasure of the identity of one of the towns for commercial purposes (The Sentinel, 2009).

Cases of merger

Budapest

Budapest, the capital of Hungary, is not unlike New York, in the sense that the unification of several cities into one served a vision of 'imperial' grandeur on par with the great metropolises of the late 19th century. But in this case, both political and linguistic factors conspired so that the new name would result from the merger of the names of the existing cities.

Before their unification in 1872-73, the cities of Buda and Obuda, on the west side of the Danube, and Pest, on the east side, played only a small role under the Habsburg empire, whose capital was Vienna. However, their role as 'capitals' of Hungarian identity dated back to the 13th century. The two cities summarised the identity and the social and political tensions of the time: Buda was hilly, loyal to the Habsburgs, German-speaking, conservative and catholic; Pest was flat, left-leaning, revolutionary, and the hotbed of Magyar radical nationalism (Lukacs, 1988). Unification was therefore not an obvious outcome, with distrust and conflict between both sides of the river (ibid.). However, the quicker growth of vibrant, commercial and modern Pest, with the less dynamic Buda lagging behind, helped the former lead a unification project infused by Hungarian identity and culture.

The process started with the construction of the Chain Bridge in 1849, that would notably “not only definitely unite Pest and Buda for the first time, but also the whole country” (Dent, 2007: 8). Such was the symbolism of uniting the two cities. Indeed, radical Pest had been the origin of the 1848 Hungarian Revolution, which, despite the repression that followed, made the Habsburgs reshape their empire into a Dual Monarchy, with capitals in Vienna and Buda-Pest or, more often by that time, Pest-Buda. Additional care was needed not to alienate either city, as each captured an essential part of Habsburg Hungary identity: this is illustrated by the 1867 coronation ceremony of Emperor Franz-Josef, tactfully divided between Buda and Pest. After that, unification was also in the interest of the empire, with the purpose of creating a major city, which could be compared not only to Vienna but also to the great European capitals (Lucacks, 1988).

Pest-Buda was a common denomination of the urban agglomeration before the unification, and coexisted with Buda-Pest for some time. But within a year the hyphen had disappeared from official and non-official documents and the city was definitely designated as Budapest. Euphony factors are likely to have played a role, as Budapest sounds like a single word and seems easier to pronounce, at least for non-natives, than

Pest-Buda. The fact that both names are short certainly contributed to their merger as a single word. Finally, the political and cultural contexts also contributed to the place-naming strategy: there was no dominance of one city, like in the case of New York, or an older, informally used, political or ecclesiastical designation, like in Stoke-on-Trent. Buda and Pest had equivalent historical and cultural value, each captured an essential part of national/regional identity as it was understood at the time, and each possessed important political and economic assets – culture, commerce and progressive thinking on one side, juridical and political institutions on the other – which recommended a complementary approach rather than the alienation of one city. The naming process of Budapest is the outcome of these conflating factors.

Charleville-Mézières

Charleville-Mezieres, in the Ardennes (Northern France), the outcome of the union between Charleville, Mézières and three smaller towns in 1966, is another illustration of the merger case, although here the individual names are longer and the hyphen was kept. Maybe for that reason, more recent inter-municipal networks have abandoned that designation in search of a shorter and more euphonious name, inspired by place-branding criteria.

Like Buda and Pest, but on a smaller scale, the two towns on the River Meuse were quite different: Mézières was an old medieval town of narrow, meandering streets, and the departmental ‘préfecture’, representing central power. By contrast, Charleville was more commercial and progressive and, by its neighbour’s standards, a ‘new town’: it was newly planned and built from 1606, following the urban design rules typical of the Renaissance, with a grid plan of symmetrical streets.

There was rivalry and animosity between both cities, but that faded earlier than in other cases treated here, and by the early 19th century, fusion was already discussed, based on their proximity and functional relations (Simonet, 2016). The first attempt, in 1805, curiously proposed a new name for the united city: Napoleonville-sur-Meuse. That project, and the associated name, eventually faded away, despite joint large public works having been carried over the course of the 19th century. Two wars, which strongly affected the Ardennes region, did not allow much progress in the first half of the 20th century, but the fusion project was resumed in the 1960s, with the purpose to create a ‘capital’ for the Ardennes. Adding critical mass to climb in city size rankings was an objective, together with the more immediate need to collaborate in large social housing projects which the agglomeration urgently needed (Dardard, 2008).

The demographic importance of Charleville (contributing with more than half the population of the new city) and the historical importance of Mézières (although smaller in size) centred the naming debate around both cities, and the smaller communes were not considered for the new city designation. The simplest solution was chosen: it would simply be Charleville-Mézières, keeping the hyphen due to the length of the individual words and also denoting the individual history and identity of each town.

However, place-branding oriented names tend to be shorter, more pleasing to the ear and easy to pronounce and memorise (Medway and Warnaby, 2014). So, when the recent French trend for inter-municipal integration saw the creation of the *communauté* *d'agglomération* Charleville-Mézières-Sedan, in 2014 (gathering 65 communes, including the nearby town of Sedan), the councillors almost immediately voted to change its name to Ardenne Métropole. The new name, created by a Parisian advertising firm, allows easy memorisation and pronunciation also by non-natives, strengthens the association between the region and its ‘capital’, and suggests a ‘metropolitan’ scale (although in France a ‘métropole’ has a different formal status). It illustrates new demands of place-naming which were not a topical issue when Charleville-Mézières was formed.

Cases of new names

The Metroplex

The area now known as the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex did not have a history of regional integration before the 1970s. Dallas and Fort Worth are 50 kilometres apart and had mutual relations since their early settlement in the 1850s, but it was only after the construction of the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport (1969-1973), halfway between the two cities, that the decision to combine and rename both Statistical Metropolitan Areas was made. According to the North Texas Commission (NTC), the regional agency gathering businesses, public service agencies and city authorities, there was at that time no ‘sense of region’, and a survey showed that the name ‘North Texas Region’ was not sufficiently recognised by the population. But the economic returns anticipated by the airport development led to the rapid expansion of both cities towards each other and forced the authorities of Dallas and Fort Worth to find common ground.

That common ground was formalised in 1972 as the Metroplex, a term invented by an advertising executive hired by the NTC to provide the region with a ‘sense of unity’ (NTC, 2014). More than proposing any institutional integration between Dallas, Fort Worth and other cities (which remain separate municipalities and still lack an official metropolitan authority or planning agency), the intention was that the Metroplex could be identified across the country as the site of ‘an airport as big as Manhattan’ and attract new businesses. However, the term had immediate success and started being adopted much more widely. In 1978, a study of ‘perceptual regions’ in Texas (Jordan, 1978) asked people what was the vernacular term they most identified with their home county. Despite a weak recognition at the scale of the state, Metroplex was already the preferred name in the Dallas-Fort Worth Area, surpassing older names with strong geographical and political connotations. The Metroplex was “daily drummed into the consciousness of local residents by newspapers, radio and television announcers, and business owners who incorporate Metroplex into the name of their firms” (ibid.: 299). The name has served the region’s recognition well, but it was never adopted as an official denomination of the area (not even to rebrand the very promoters of the term, the North Texas Commission) nor did it trigger any form of institutional integration attempts.

While the integration of Dallas and Fort Worth, and other smaller towns, into a multi-centred and interconnected urban region became irreversible, its original name did not fully stand the test of time. There is perhaps a futuristic ‘seventies’ sound to the ‘Metroplex’ and more recent metropolitan agencies tend to use it less. Today, no significant media organisations, sports teams or transport companies carry the denomination, unlike the more organically evolved but equally colloquial designation of the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and St. Paul), used by all kinds of organisations and groups for more than a century. In the Metroplex, the regional marketing and tourism agencies tend to use the more contemporary-sounding ‘DFW’ acronym (which is also the airport code) or simply refer to Dallas-Fort Worth. The Dallas Local Business Directory (Dallas Business Journals, 2016) returns only three firms using the ‘Metroplex’ name, against 27 using ‘DFW’. So, despite its great success, Metroplex remained a sobriquet, associated to a specific period of place branding, and gradually lost penetration in popular consciousness as an identity-building factor.

Thunder Bay

Canada has a prolific history of municipal reorganisations and creation of upper-tier municipalities covering whole city regions, such as the cases of Winnipeg, established as a metropolitan municipality in 1972, or the successive amalgamations of Toronto into larger entities, the last of which (in 1998) still triggers divisive debates. But the case of Thunder Bay, the result of the merger of the cities of Port Arthur and Fort William in 1970, is unique because it is the only case in the present sample in which a new name was created and institutionalised, and because it resulted from popular vote.

Like all the previous cases, the participant cities were geographically close and historical rivals. Port Arthur and Fort William were similarly sized cities overlooking the large Thunder Bay, which was also the name of the district created in 1871 by the Ontario Provincial Government. Researchers have written about the fierce rivalry between both cities (Rasporich, 1990) and attributed that to their isolation as the only urban agglomerations in a very large territory, being therefore able to aspire to dominate a region with extensive natural resources. Other factors contributing to a competitive mentality were the tensions caused the unequal ethnic compositions in both cities, and the tradition of ‘urban boosterism’ at the time in North American cities – the act of exaggerating a city’s assets or qualities to the purpose of improving its public image.

In such a context, integrating the cities was not a popular idea and two referenda about that proposal were defeated in 1920 and 1958. The naming issue was always present, and civic activists wrote down amusing proposals of new names and mergers (City of Thunder Bay, 2016). The amalgamation was eventually achieved as a top-down decree by the provincial government, after an extensive report strongly recommended that decision. The Ontario government then redacted the City of The Lakehead Act (1969), that, notably, included an order that a “vote of the electors of the city to determine the name of the city shall be taken at the same time as the election for the final council” (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs, 1969). ‘Lakehead’ was an informal designation of the region around both cities, and was expected to become the new city’s name, preferred by a majority of the population. However, in a strategic move to associate the name of the city to the already existing district and to the most important geographical reference (thereby suggest greater regional dominance), the authorities included three names in the ballot: ‘Lakehead’, ‘The Lakehead’ and ‘Thunder Bay’. Predictably, Lakehead supporters were divided between keeping or removing ‘The’, and ‘Thunder Bay’ won by a narrow margin. Today, the name has been widely adopted and is used without contestation, although Lakehead continues to appear in the names of sports teams or the local university. Morphologically, Thunder Bay is bi-centric, with a less dense ‘buffer zone’ between the two former cities. As such, Port Arthur and Fort William, with their respective ‘downtowns’, continue to be used by the population to refer to specific and visibly different parts of the city.

Factors involved in naming metropolitan regions

A set of factors influencing the naming process of urban areas undergoing integration emerges from these six cases. Their variable impact can be detected in all periods and scales, making them highly relevant. They can be divided into geographical, socio-political and historical-cultural factors.

Geographical: number of cities. Metropolitan integration can involve two main cities, either similarly sized or not, or a higher number of participants, although the latter does not imply that all cities are equally considered.

Socio-political (1): power balance. This is associated to population size, which tends to imply economic and political dominance over other cities, with consequences in the naming decisions. In the cases above, this varies between a clearly leading city and a more balanced distribution of power.

Socio-political (2): functional centrality. This factor detects whether one of the cities plays a key functional role, e.g. in terms of urban functions or transport interchanges, regardless of size and power. The most visited city in the region (namely in daily job commuting) may become predominant in the perception of identity by the population.

Socio-political (3): leadership. The presence of leaders championing the integration idea and defining the direction of socio-political pressures can help a particular toponym gain metropolitan predominance. But the forces of integration can also be multi-centric or come from a higher level of government.

Historical-cultural (1): historical precedents. The existence of a previous and historically significant place name (administrative, religious, geographical) can turn the adoption of a name for the integrated urban entity more 'natural' and obvious, regardless of its association with the name of particular city.

Historical-cultural (2): components of identity. There are cases where the most important metropolitan identity symbols are clearly situated in one city, while in others different but complementary components of identity are distributed across several places, and naming may reflect that configuration. More rarely, the main identity symbols already appear associated to the metropolitan region as a whole.

As a tentative theoretical description, the naming process of an integrated metropolitan region can be seen as emerging from the nexus linking these factors. These linkages can be represented as straighter or more meandering paths, depending on how each factor varies, and the outcome of the naming process changes according to the shape of the path. Figure 1 represents the paths to place naming of the six case studies.

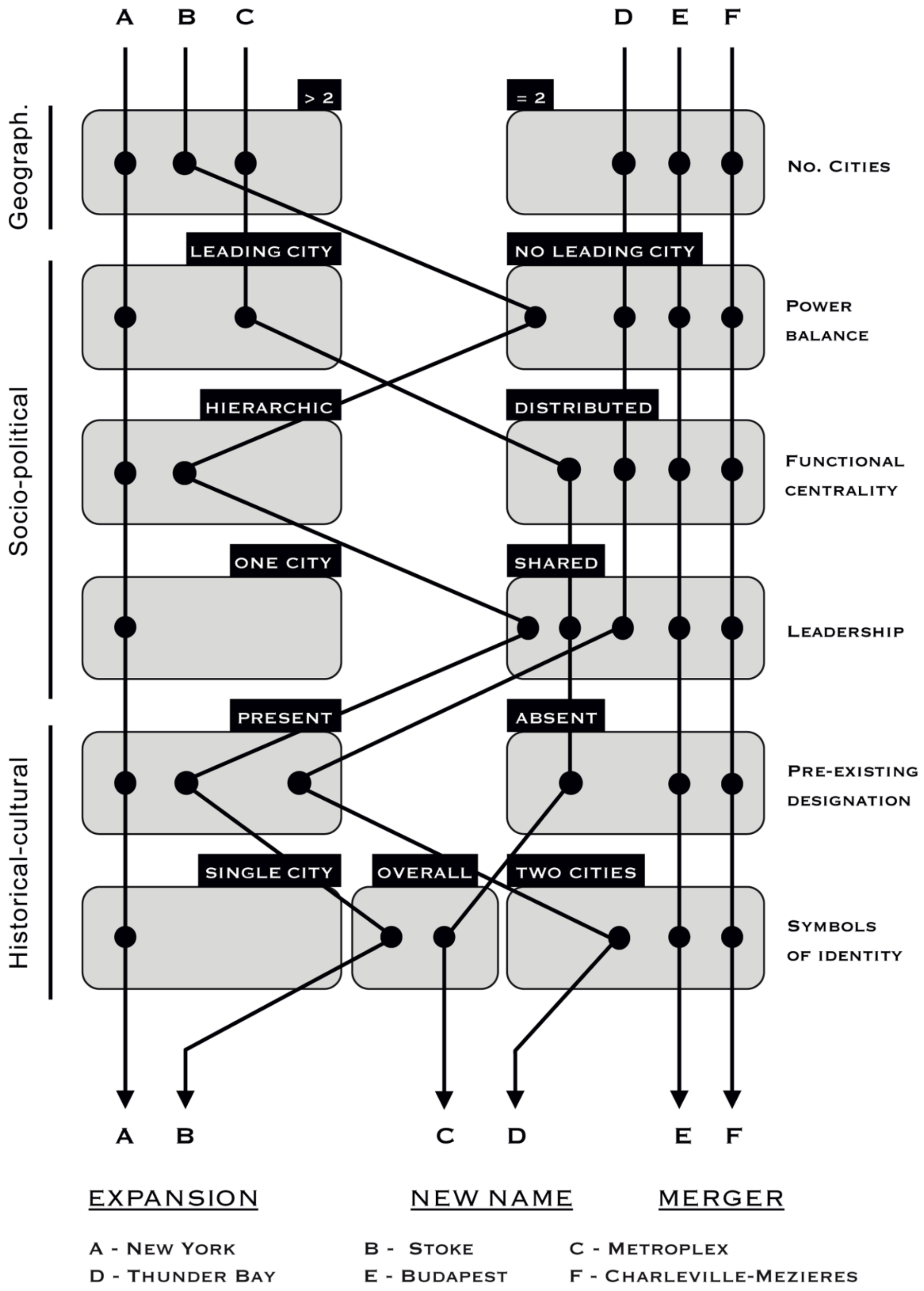
A B C
D E F
Geograph.
Socio-political
Historical-cultural
> 2
= 2
No. Cities
Leading city
No leading city
Power balance
Hierarchic
Distributed
Functional centrality
One city
Shared
Leadership
Present
Absent
Pre-existing designation
Single city
Overall
Two cities
Symbols of identity
A B C D E F
Expansion
New name
Merger
A - New York
B - Stoke
C - Metroplex
D - Thunder Bay
E - Budapest
F - Charleville-Mezieres

Figure 1 – Paths to place-naming in metropolitan regions

New York, on one side, and Budapest and Charleville-Mézières, on the other, represent the more direct paths to the expansion and merger processes of naming. We can describe their progression along the factors, one by one: in the case of New York, there were more than two cities involved in the consolidation project (although Brooklyn and New York were larger), avoiding that the predominance of the name of one city was seen as an obvious devaluation of the other. New York was the economically and politically dominant city, and also attracted the largest flows of people and the more significant urban functions. The socio-political pressures for integration were mainly directed from that city towards the others. Finally, New York carried a historically and culturally more valuable name, and gathered the main built symbols of metropolitan identity. All those factors lead in a straight line to the option to expand the city's name over the larger region. Many contemporary large cities share this path.

Compare that with Budapest and Charleville-Mézières, also following a straight path at the opposite end. Here, there were clearly two equal cities involved in the process, and naming the integrated area after one would result in a direct alienation of the other. So greater balance had to be sought, suggesting merger as the simplest solution – the same can be said of Thunder Bay, whose main difference is that they could use an existing designation which performs the same balancing function between the two actors. But Budapest and Charleville-Mézières have further contrasts to New York: political and economic power was distributed between both cities, and none could be said to concentrate the main daily flows of people or the most important urban functions. There were also no stronger socio-political pro-integration forces in one particular city, and the promotion or contestation of the process had actors on both sides. No pre-existing name had sufficient historical or cultural value to naturally designate the region. Finally, both cities possessed important components of regional or national identity, which had to be considered in complementarity to produce a more widely endorsed vision; this is particularly important for the case of the ‘dual’ national identity embodied by Buda and Pest by then.

Between these two combinations of factors representing the less bumpy roads to ‘expansion’ and ‘merger’ naming processes, other, more ambiguous cases illustrate the different weight of these factors. In the case of Stoke-on-Trent, starting from six independent towns, the name of one of them could have emerged without directly alienating an adversary. But Stoke was not dominant like New York: the distribution of political and economic power was balanced, although Hanley was the commercial centre. Stoke also did not exert any particular leadership in the political debate and was not the location of the main symbols of regional identity (‘The Potteries’ were diffused across the region). Overall, there was no particular reason for it to emerge as an obvious name for the integrated city. However, Stoke was similar to New York in two key aspects. First, it had functional centrality, due to the presence of the railway station. It acted as a transport interchange between the other cities and was the point of entry and exit to the region. Second, the name of the town corresponded to a previously existing name, whose historical and cultural value defined the informal designation of the region. These two factors overrode others, more suggestive of ‘merger’ or ‘new name’ modes, and pushed the naming process to the ‘expansion’ variant.

Functional centrality and the presence of a pre-existing name are thus likely to be the most important factors influencing metropolitan place naming. The cases of the Metroplex and Thunder Bay, which would seem to invite ‘expansion’ and ‘merger’ solutions, respectively, illustrate this. The Metroplex aggregates several important cities besides Dallas and Fort Worth (Arlington and 11 other cities over 100,000 inhabitants) and Dallas is by far the largest and most important city. Therefore, the expansion of the leading city name over the region would not be unexpected. But the location of the airport – a top-level urban function and trigger of integration – in an ‘unnamed’ territory between the two main cities, made that scenario less obvious and contributed to create a name which is more defined by the functional centrality than the core city. In the case of Thunder Bay, all other factors – two cities, balanced power, no single functional centrality, shared leadership, complementary identities - suggested a name merger option, but the willingness of politicians to associate the new city with a pre-existing designation (which had the added advantage of suggesting political dominance of the district) was enough to strategically manipulate the process towards that goal.

The importance attributed to functional centrality and the presence of a pre-existing name is consistent with the arguments of place attachment and place naming research. First, functional centrality implies that a specific city will attract a great part of the daily flows of people, either for work, transport interchanges or to enjoy existing amenities. It becomes the most visited place in the metropolitan region, therefore facilitating the association of its identity with the identity of the larger territory. Research has indeed shown that time spent in a place, and repetitive exposure to it, is the strongest predictor of place attachment (Lewicka, 2011), as people “develop attachment to place(s) via their everyday spatial practices” (Kübler, 2016: 3). Being the ‘everyday place’ in the region, the functionally most important city also has the capacity to expand its name to the larger scale, as the toponym is repeatedly invoked until it becomes ingrained in everyday speech and practices (Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015). We can thus appreciate the capacity of names to enact a ‘process of rescaling’ (Hagen, 2011), rather than seeing scale as a bounded container where a place naming process occurs.

Second, place naming theories have argued that a long history is one of the most important features of successful names, making “people become attached to toponyms just as they become attached to places” (Hakala et al., 2015: 265). The longevity and stability of names are important to retain the memory and history of places, and carry their heritage forward. As such, it is also not surprising that a strong, pre-existing name in a region, regardless of its origins and correspondence to a specific city, is able to override all other factors and be adopted as the designation for a newly-created urban entity. Perhaps this is also the reason why new names with no visible geographical or historical associations are apparently not strong enough to be institutionalised (like the Metroplex as opposed to Thunder Bay), and also seem to be waning in face of other designations (Dallas Fort Worth; DFW), perceived as more contemporary and specific to their urban regions.

Conclusion: informing contemporary metropolitan regions

The centrality of the metropolitan region concept in policy and research does not necessarily mean it is seen as meaningful by the population. Metropolitan regions often lack a widely endorsed sense of identity, which affects their political legitimacy and economic development. However, inter-city cooperation and mobility are allowing a scalar expansion of spatial attachments and creating forms of metropolitan identity, which need to be nurtured to improve metropolitan region visions. Place naming is one of the factors contributing to identity formation, not only at the scale of the city or neighbourhood, but now at the metropolitan scale. Research must advance in the search for the factors which play a role in metropolitan place naming and the combinations which influence a successful name. Our paper contributes to this debate, by focusing on the undertheorized scale of metropolitan regions, by using a historical comparative approach to understand common features of naming practices in different periods and locations, and by offering a theoretical description of the nexus between different factors to start sketching a typology of metropolitan place naming.

Several conclusions emerge from this analysis. First, the importance of place names has increased in recent decades, due to the new focus on their external recognition and branding qualities. This is illustrated by the willingness of local authorities to erase historical identities in Stoke-on-Trent, as well as by Budapest and Charleville-Mézières, which followed a similar nexus of factors shaping a similar naming process, but then the latter eventually sought an alternative, ‘better’ name to communicate its identity. Linguistic quality is arguably a key factor of long term success for place names, defined here as longevity and widespread adoption: names that are not memorable, easily pronounceable, too long, or simply sound bad, tend to be replaced by other names.

Second, there is no one-size-fits-all model towards metropolitan identity building through toponymic rescaling. Different combinations of factors may direct naming practices into new directions, with functional centrality and the existence of a previous denomination as key issues in the long run. Nonetheless, the tendency to rebrand geographical spaces according to new criteria, regardless of whether they already experienced historical processes of social construction of place, may be imposing the expansion mode; policy-makers may assume “the starting advantage that the name of the dominating centre also serves as the ‘brand’ for the region, with the effect that tedious and conflict-ridden discussions become unnecessary concerning the name of the metropolitan region” (Franz and Hornych, 2010: 2669). However, even apparently superficial changes may create unwanted barriers to a widely endorsed metropolitan identity, as the Greater Copenhagen debate illustrates (there is the added barrier of the national border, a factor we did not consider in our framework).

Third, our research also suggests that the long term success of names relies on a mix of institutionalisation and common usage (Tucker and Rose-Redwood, 2015). Names that remain media and policy buzzwords and coexist with stronger and older local names are more vulnerable to passing trends and may fade away. Hence the little attention generally paid by communities to the hasty brands invented by policy-makers for their regions. The name of a metropolitan region may not be a great popular concern, when compared to other, more urgent economic, infrastructural or administrative decisions. But a memorable, euphonious, uncontested and well recognised name can play a positive role in developing a metropolitan identity, even without institutionalisation, as it becomes adopted by firms, associations and all kinds of networks. More importantly, perhaps, an unsuitable name – its associations, embedded messages, alienation of parts of the urban region, etc. – may create barriers to identity formation in the long term. Of course, institutionalisation is always prone to contestation (as it implies municipal mergers, erasure of existing toponyms, etc.) and may be too high a price to pay to secure a long-lived and widely adopted name. But it can be worthwhile in the longer term and future research can evaluate in which contexts and timeframes it becomes an acceptable risk.

We do not intend to overstate the importance of place names. While we assume that a strong metropolitan identity – combining place identification and place attachment - is an asset for a metropolitan region, it is likely that citizens and institutions can develop it without the presence of a name (although maybe not when an unsuitable name carries unnecessary tensions). Names do not explain why some places overcome their rivalries to form integrated and collaborative metropolitan regions and others do not.

However, our research provides two further important contributions: first, it shows that naming processes are representative of, and help to shape, larger social, cultural, historical and political processes, which are more decisive for metropolitan integration and identity formation. Finally, it offers a theoretical nexus explaining how naming processes in metropolitan regions emerge from an interplay of consistent factors, which can result in a set of questions about key factors that metropolitan region leaders today can ask themselves. Maybe in Greater Copenhagen, but in many other places, they can interpret this framework as a decision tree, check their own combination of factors, shed understanding on their underlying contexts, and envision the toponyms that are more likely to succeed. While they may not rely on that alone to build a metropolitan identity, they can make a positive contribution, using the name to carry a metropolitan vision, expecting a wider adoption and greater endorsement, and, at the very least, avoiding the tensions and barriers created by unsuccessful name choices.

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[1] ‘Invention’ here is used in the sense given by Anderson (2006): imagining and creating rather than fabricating or falsifying.