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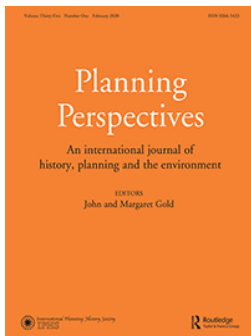
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Perspectives on decentralization past, present, and future: a review of conferences in Grenoble, Milan, and Delft (2017–2019)

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ABSTRACT

Decentralization has actively engaged various fields of sociology, economy, and governance in the development of urban regions and territories. As a multifaceted strategy, decentralization contributes to enrich our understanding of national and international forces, power struggles, economic factors, and their impacts on the built environment. To frame the discourse of decentralization on urban development, three institutions of ENSAG Université Grenoble Alpes, Politecnico di Milano, and the Delft University of Technology closely collaborated to organize three conferences in Grenoble, Milan, and Delft, respectively. They called scholarly attention re-thinking of urban and regional planning of the twentieth century through the lens of decentralization's values and ideologies. These three conferences laid out how decentralization and its evolution engaged with the field of planning, and in turn, affected urban transformation and regional development worldwide. Focusing on the role of decentralization in urban and regional planning, these scholarly events offered an innovative perspective on research on planning history. This report, therefore, reflects upon the discussions took place at these three conferences to outline the diversity of perspectives on decentralization and its role in urban and regional planning in the past, present, and future.

KEYWORDS

decentralization; urban and regional planning; territorial fragility

Theories of decentralization: a cycle of three conferences

Decentralization is an enigmatic term that intersects and acts upon various dimensions (including political, administrative, economic, planning, social, and demographic)¹ of the development of urban regions and territories. These fields are interconnected and all play out at several spatial scales in response to different manifestations of territorial decline. In the late nineteenth century, decentralization was firstly put forward through social revolutions and emerged as a reaction to the phenomenon of metropolization and the urban–rural dichotomy. This resulted in the emergence of anti-urbanism discussions and, over time, to regional planning.² More specifically, since the early twentieth century and interwar period, many modernist urban planners – such as Benton MacKaye, Frank Lloyd Wright, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and Erwin Anton Gutkind – advocated decentralization and dispersal of the settlements, industries, and people to achieve a newly balanced form of spatial organization that was intended to shape a more egalitarian society.³ Throughout the

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¹Settlements, *Metropolitan Planning and Management*.

²Hall, “The Centenary of Modern Planning.”

³See Conn, “Americans against the City”; Vellinga, “The End of Cities.”

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twentieth century, the spatial application of decentralization and regional planning posed a challenge to the sustainable development of settlement patterns by strengthening linkages between urban and regional areas.

Although there is a well-established body of scholarship studying political, economic, and institutional decentralization,⁴ the spatial aspects of decentralization policies, their values, and principles merit more investigation. In order to frame the discourse of decentralization on urban and regional development and to offer a new insight into planning history, ENSAG Université Grenoble Alpes, Politecnico di Milano, and Delft University of Technology collaborated on the organization of conferences in Grenoble (2017), Milan (2018), and Delft (2019). These gatherings have directed scholarly attention towards re-thinking twentieth-century urban and regional planning from a multidisciplinary perspective, and questioning decentralization and its impact on urban planning discourses and practices.

The first conference convened by Catherine Maumi on ‘The Idea of Decentralization and Regional Planning, in the 20th Century’ was held at ENSAG, Université Grenoble Alpes.⁵ It explored various theories of decentralization aimed at solving political, economic, ecologic, and social issues and the way they were converted into spatial proposals. More specifically, it re-visited the relevant projects since the turn of the twentieth century to investigate the principles of decentralization, the conditions which mobilized it, and the tools that influenced the conceptualization of decentralization in conjunction with new visions on the urbanized world. The Grenoble conference notably focused on decentralization as a politico-economic concept; re-structuring the social and economic order by fighting against the centralization of capital. To explore diverse principles of decentralization, the Grenoble conference discussed extensively the definitions and translations of the term ‘decentralization’ in various political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Building upon the discussions that took place at Grenoble, the second conference ‘The Idea of Decentralization and Regional Planning: Projects, Visions, Ideologies between the Cold War and the Welfare State’ took place at Politecnico di Milano in 2018, and was organized by Patrizia Bonifazio, Gaia Caramellino, Alessandro De Magistris, and Nicole De Togni.⁶ Participants explored the impact of values concerning, and ideologies of, decentralization on theories and practices of regional and territorial planning in the timeframe of the Cold War via a number of case studies with diverse cultural foci and scales of projects. They examined the complexity of the phenomenon with regard to the actors and media of the debate, and to its relation with the changing cultural and political positions of the Cold War. Focusing on ‘Theories, Visions and Policies’ of decentralization, the Milan conference unravelled diverse perspectives and narratives of decentralization existing in history of urban planning, and elaborated the spatial translation of the idea of decentralization by focusing on case studies beyond the consolidated narratives in various geographical regions.

The last conference ‘Decentralization and Energy: Perspectives on the Reciprocity of Energy Transitions and Space’ was held at the Delft University of Technology and was organized by Carola Hein and Elmira Jafari.⁷ While the first two conferences looked mostly to inter- and post-war theories and cases, the latter took a fresh look at the history of urban planning by incorporating the issue of energy into the discussions on decentralization. In particular, it examined how decentralization concepts and energy systems intersected in both theory and spatial practices. By reflecting on the debates on energy transitions (from centralized fossil fuel to decentralized renewable energies), it

⁴Conyers, “Decentralization and Development.”

⁵See: <https://decentralisation201718.wordpress.com/colloque-international-1/call-for-papers/>.

⁶See: <https://decentralisation201718.wordpress.com/call-for-paper-2018/>.

⁷See: <https://decentralisation201718.wordpress.com/call-for-paper-2019/>.

addressed the role of energy as fuel facilitating urban and regional decentralization, and more importantly, discussed the role of energy on the further development of theories and practices of decentralization. Through the lens of energy production and consumption, the conference sought to develop new methods of addressing the reciprocity of energy and spatial configuration bridging past, present, and future.

The three conferences singularly proposed different perspectives from a chronological, dimensional, disciplinary, and methodological point of view. Together they shed new light on the discussions of decentralization and regional planning. From the contributions to the conferences and the related discussions, four approaches to discussions of three scales of urban, regional, and national decentralization stand out. These are briefly explored below.

Decentralization as a socio-political and economic tool

Referencing the variety of disciplinary backgrounds from which decentralization can be approached, a group of speakers examined selected social and politico-economic initiatives of decentralization. Guillaume Vallet (Université Grenoble Alpes) discussed the concept of decentralization of ownership during the Progressive Era in the United States. He did so by examining Albion Woodbury Small's (1854–1926) reflections upon the social inequalities which emanated from the concentration of capital. Focusing on industrialization and the anti-urban results, Catherine Maumi (ENSAG, Université Grenoble Alpes) referred to the ideas developed by Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) and Benton MacKaye (1879–1975), illustrating their respective approaches in order to favour a balanced reorganization of productive activities and their impact on the built environment. Hartmut Frank (HafenCity University) further developed the definition of decentralization by reflecting on the radical functionalist Ludwig Karl Hilberseimer (1885–1967), who advocated a gradual dissolution of major cities and their extension to the surrounding areas in such a way as to integrate the natural environment with built structures. Moreover, Frank underlined the vulnerability of concentrated settlements in the post-war period by the advent of modern weapons such as the H-bomb. The topic was further developed by Sang Pil Lee (University of Pennsylvania) who reviewed the 1956 Urban Design Conference of Harvard, where the impact of an atomic bomb on decentralization of cities was first discussed.

Decentralization as a tool for nation-building

In the post-war period, many emerging national governments utilized decentralization as a means to unify their nations and accelerate their national economic growth.⁸ Focusing on the communist Bloc, a group of papers highlighted interest in decentralization as a political tool stimulating national and regional development. Even if the theories of decentralization in communist countries and in the United States shared some points, the dissimilarities in the political and economic agendas were highlighted by Marija Dremaite (Vilnius University), who discussed the large-scale regional and urban planning projects implemented in the Baltic region after its incorporation into the Soviet Union. Additionally, Aleksa Korolija (Politecnico di Milano) and Marija Martinovic (University of Belgrade) introduced the case of Yugoslavia, arguing that the theory of decentralization was proposed as a tool of self-management intended as a third way of governance between the Soviet Union policies and the American capitalism. They unravelled the impact of self-management policies on

⁸Conyers, "Decentralization and Development."

the development of new cities in Yugoslavia in general and urban growth of the capital city of Belgrade in particular. Florian Faurisson and Clara Sandrini (ENSA Toulouse) proposed an alternative reading of decentralization in the eastern countries as a continuous process of negotiation between the concentrated power of the state, a progressive regionalism based on European policies and tolerated self-management. Sila Karatas Basoglu (Çankaya University) shifted the discussion of decentralization towards post-war development in Turkey and discussed the impact of industrial decentralization on national housing programmes and the emerging new housing typology for Turkish industrial workers.

Decentralization as a tool for physical re-organization of cities and regions

This set of papers approached decentralization as a means for the expansion of urbanization. Speakers asked if, and how, the latter might be managed by polycentric development at regional level. Carola Hein (TU Delft) discussed several studies of Japanese cities which underwent major transformations in the 1930s–1950s, and the interpretation and hybridization by Japanese planners of various European models of decentralization. Maria Fiorella Felloni (Politecnico di Milano) reflected upon the emerging idea of polycentric urban development that was promoted by Cesare Chiodi (1885–1969) in Milan in the 1920s. Elmira Jafari (TU Delft) presented Victor Gruen's (1903–1980) master plan for the capital city of Tehran in the late 1960s and argued that in the political atmosphere of the Cold War Gruen's polycentric urban proposal became a political tool to re-organize the city and society. The relevance of the region as a recognized scale of scholarly focus emerged from two contributions. First, Alena Kubova (ENSA, Lyon) assessed the Czechoslovakian avant-garde during the 1940s and 1950s and its role in the definition of a territorial-industrial project based on an original relation between nature and the working spaces at a regional scale. Second, Rémi Baudouï and Manel Kabouche (University of Geneva and Université Grenoble Alpes) re-contextualized the 1930s work of Le Corbusier (1887–1965) in the framework of an industrial decentralization leading to a new theory of territorial management.

Decentralization as a tool for energy transitions

Several presentations provided historical insights into the role of energy (transitions) in the theory and practice of decentralization and connected the latter with visions for future development, in particular, post-oil scenarios. Filippo De Dominicis (Sapienza Università di Roma) examined the role of the international actors and agents who promoted energy-related decentralization, particularly in the fields of mining and hydropower, in Africa in the mid-twentieth century. Chiara Cavalieri (UC Louvain University) discussed the global energy crises of the 1970s as a starting point for new reflections upon energy transition and urban decentralization. By shifting to the patterns of energy systems in the North Sea, Nancy Couling (TU Delft) argued that energy decentralization is a strategy employed by energy industries to perpetuate their infrastructure. Alberto Verde and Alessandro Massarente (Ferrara University) discussed how scattered and decentralized oil infrastructures in Italy might potentially be re-used for green infrastructures. Dominic Boyer (Rice University) highlighted the role that electricity has played in modernity and urban decentralization by exemplifying wind power development and grid expansion in Mexico. Paola Viganò (IUAV, Venice) studied the relation between energy and space by mapping energy production and consumption in two different types of compact cities and decentralized territories, arguing that the correlation between energy and space is still a very ambiguous topic necessitating further investigation.

Coda

The evolution of decentralization principles and their adaptation over time and space have had long-lasting impacts on urban and regional planning across the world. As a multifaceted strategy, decentralization contributes to enriching our understanding of national and international forces, power struggles, economic factors, social changes, and their immediate impacts on the built environment. The scholarly debates summarized above demonstrated the extent to which principles of decentralization vigorously bind political, economic, social, and ecological dimensions to space at various local, regional, and national scales. Via the examination of a variety of examples from all over the world, the three conferences underlined the circulation and hybridization of the idea of decentralization and its various models. In addition, they called for scholarly attentiveness to the terminology and translations of the term 'decentralization' in various cultures and contexts as a means for providing opportunities to develop a cross-cultural discourse in the field of urban planning history. The contents of this cycle of conferences and the results of the related fruitful debates will be gathered together in a publication addressing linguistic, disciplinary, thematic, and further possible definitions of decentralization. The publication will aim to explore different scales of theorization and actualization as well as the actors and vehicles which participate in the circulation of the concept. Finally, the projected work will open to visions of, and strategies for, future concepts of decentralization.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Elmira Jafari is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment, Delft University of Technology. Her research interests focus on the transmission of visionary urban models to Iran in the mid-twentieth century, and the way that integration and implementation of these urban initiatives transformed Tehran's socio-spatial structure to this day.

Nicole De Togni is a postdoc research fellow at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano. Her research addresses the post-war debate about tasks, limits, tools and references of architecture and planning which shaped the concrete reconstruction and expansion of cities, while influencing the urban imaginaries and modelling the role and self-perception of professionals, technicians and bureaucracies.

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