

Chapter 3

Policy–Oriented City Networks in Cyberspace: A Methodological Approach to the Understanding of Social and Political Articulations between Cities Based on the Concept of Policy Web Spheres

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ABSTRACT

Whereas the academic debate on global networks used to be dominated by a focus on economic and financial flows, partially on strategies of technological or infrastructural integration, much less attention used to be dedicated to local/global articulations emerging around a wide variety of sociopolitical issues such as the fight against poverty, the strengthening of human rights or protection of the environment. In this chapter the authors endeavor to point out the limitations of traditional approaches in capturing the complexity and diversity of the emerging city networks and use the methodology of web sphere analysis to map and analyze new articulations of sociopolitical governance between different cities in the context of environmental policy as it is carried out in Curitiba, Brazil. The study is based on the mapping of Internet hyperlink connections and shows how a virtual transnational public space with the potential to support environmental governance processes in cities is emerging.

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of cities in the globalization process and the role they play in supporting the current global economic system have been the subject of a large number of studies in recent decades (Friedmann, 1986; Sassen, 2002, 2007; Taylor, 2010; Taylor, Walker, & Beaverstock, 2002). However, the activities of cities on a global scale, whether in the shape of local governments themselves or civil-society or private-sector organizations, are not limited to an economic dimension but take place in a wide variety of fields, such as the fight against poverty, the strengthening of human rights or protection of the environment. In this chapter we endeavor to point out the limitations of traditional approaches in capturing the complexity and diversity of the emerging city networks and use the methodology of web sphere analysis to map and analyze new articulations between sociopolitical governance in different cities in the context of environmental policy as it is carried out in Curitiba, Brazil. The study is based on the mapping of Internet hyperlink connections and shows how a virtual transnational public space with the potential to support environmental governance processes in cities is emerging.

CITY NETWORKS: TRADITIONAL APPROACHES AND THEIR LIMITATIONS

As Taylor (2010) points out in this collection of works, city rankings have become increasingly popular in the current context of neoliberalism, in which the principle of economic competitiveness is no longer limited to the economic field but invades all social sectors, which are also increasingly evaluated in terms of economic efficiency and their contribution to the global economic process.

Traditional studies of global city networks share the premise that these networks are formed essentially from the financial and economic rela-

tionships that exist between companies with offices in the cities in question and that any studies of these new network configurations must focus primarily on the economic and financial flows that connect the cities and support the current global economic system. Hence, according to Sassen (2007, p. 36), there are today around 40 cities that make up a “network of global cities [that] constitute a power space containing the infrastructure and capacities needed to manage the international operations of global companies and markets.” The criterion for including cities in the category of global cities is the “intensity of the transactions between these cities, especially those related to finance, services and investment” (ibid., p. 41). Similar emphasis is also placed on economic, financial and service flows by Taylor, for whom the world city network is based on the working flows that connect companies in different cities. For Taylor, the position in the network occupied by each city is measured by the services it renders to global capital, i.e., an attempt is made to determine the “service value of a city to a firm” (Taylor, 2010; Taylor, Catalano, & Walker, 2002) in order to arrive at a “new economic geography of services” (Taylor, et al., 2002, p. 98). A similar leaning towards the economic dimension can also be observed in Friedmann, who highlights the economic variable as “likely to be decisive for all attempts at explanation” (Friedmann, 1986, p. 69) and therefore uses “the form and extent of a city’s integration with the world economy” (ibid., p. 70) as the criterion for identifying the position of each city in the World City Hierarchy or, even more simplistically, posits “a cut-off point for identifying world cities in national economies of less than \$200 billion GNP in 1989 prices” (Friedmann, 2001, p. 2536)¹.

Notwithstanding the methodological differences between Friedmann, who arrives at his World City Hierarchy by using attributes that characterize the cities themselves, Sassen, who focuses on the contributions made by cities to the global economic system in terms of finance,

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