# Peripheral areas: conceptualizations and policies. Introduction and editorial note.

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*ABSTRACT*

*The aim of this Special Issue is to further our understanding of development policies and their relevance in relation to European peripheral areas, by presenting some empirical studies that investigate different aspects of these mechanisms. The definition of what a peripheral area is entails the reference to multi-layered concepts, whose connotations are often not sufficiently problematized in the policy-making process. Therefore, in this introductory editorial, the two editors present a conceptual framework to study peripherality based on its "relational"*

*character, on the one side, and investigate the typologies of policy instruments used to address developmental issues in peripheral areas, on the other. The studies presented in this Special Issue, which is the first of two, assuming a trans-disciplinary, policy-oriented perspective, focus on different aspects of development issues in European marginal, low-accessibility areas. Together they help shedding light on challenges faced by these territories, highlighting the viability and potential pitfalls of their pathways to development.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, European peripheral areas have had to address the challenge of re-inventing themselves and to undertake the task of finding their place in a more and more globalized and interconnected world. A number of new opportunities have been provided by increased mobility and the greater importance acquired by information and communication technologies, which have resulted in different perceptions of how development policies are interpreted and designed.

Special attention has been increasingly given at the EU and country levels to the outermost, sparsely populated regions, differently labelled as "inner", "peripheral", "remote" (ESPON and University of Geneva, 2012; Barca, Casavola, & Lucatelli, 2014). In most cases, these territories possess a "territorial capital" of exceptional value and diversity but which is largely unused as a consequence of the long-term demographic decline due to urbanization processes. Coupling with local development projects, improving the quality and quantity of the key welfare services (education, health, transport) in inner areas is considered a central pillar in policies that tackle them (as is the case of the Italian "National Strategy for Inner Areas"). This is in line with the underlying principles of territorial cohesion which has emerged as an important objective for European Union, particularly since the Treaty of Lisbon: one important strand of territorial cohesion is citizen access to affordable public infrastructure services.

Discussing development strategies of peripheral areas, as is in the objective of this collection of studies, provides an intriguing starting point for broader reflection on development trajectories of these territories, addressing some crucial issues in the geographic, planning and regional studies debate.

This introductory editorial, after illustrating the main conceptualizations attached to these territories, briefly reviews the evolving policy approaches which have dealt with development issues of peripheral areas over time.

The aim of the issue is to bring together papers that focus, from a trans-disciplinary, policy-oriented perspective, on the many diverse facets related to the complex, challenging pathways to development of these areas.

## REMOTE AREAS, PERIPHERAL AREAS AND SEMI-PERIPHERAL AREAS: SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This section is going to briefly analyse three approaches to the concept of distance, intended as a relationship between an urban centre and its surrounding, namely its peripheries. The first approach is Anthropological and deals with the way in which the category of "remote" is socially and historically constructed. Secondly, following a Geographic point of view, it will be shown how a critical approach to the concept of peripherality can emphasise its relational model. Lastly, through a Sociological perspective, the paper will address the issue of semi-peripheral areas as a possible catalyst for different dynamic forces.

*Anthropological approach*

Much of the current anthropological debate on remoteness originated from an essay by Edwin Ardener, which was published in 1987 (Ardener, 2012 [1987]). In this work, the author maintains that in a historical Western/European perspective, "remoteness" can be understood only in relation to "central areas", and therefore is

perceived to be linked with alterity, and even with places somehow imaginary and mythicized, as for example "India", "Brazil", "Africa" have been during the age of discovery. This perception is well represented by the etymology of the term "remote", which derives from the Latin *removeo*, literally "removed", that according to the author implies the removal of an area from Western reality, which therefore enters the realm of the "imaginary" (Ardener, 2012 [1987], p. 521–522).

Such a theorisation of the concept seems to consider remoteness not as the result of the co-existence of particular characteristics, but rather as form of relation with a dominant area that is only expressed through more or less distance, as Ardener (2012 [1987], p. 532) maintains:

> The lesson of "remote" areas is that this is a condition not related to periphery, but to the fact that certain peripheries are by definition not properly linked to the dominant zone. They are *perceptions* from the dominant zone, not part of its codified experience[1] [italics our emphasis].

Hence, the distinction between definition and (the right to) self-definition in these areas seems to be crucial, as the author Ardener (2012 [1987], p. 532) points out:

> The feature of a "remote" area […] is that those so defined are intermittently conscious of the defining processes of others that

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[1] Interestingly, distance from centres delivering specific services is the only indicator that has been used for the selection and definition of Inner areas in SNAI.

might absorb them. That is why they are the very crucibles of the creation of identity, why they are of great theoretical interest.

These theoretical inputs have been picked up in a later discussion – edited by Harms, Shafqat and Shneiderman (2014, p. 362) – aimed at pointing out that Ardener's work inspired a series of reflections that

> all show that the idea of the remote can be detached from its geographical moorings and understood not simply as a spatial concept, but as a relativistic social construct. Remoteness is not so much a place as a way of being.

Therefore, the authors maintain that remoteness is a relational category that is being made, unmade and transformed. They, moreover, introduce a further concept linked to remoteness, that of *social edginess*, intended as a sort of *liminal* status:

> this term describes the way in which people living on urban fringes oscillate between a sense of power and danger that comes from their position in relationship to the larger city against which their marginal position is defined (Harms *et al.*, 2014, p. 363).

*Geographic approach*

By accepting the statement that remoteness is "a process situated in dynamic fields of power" (Harms *et al.*, 2014, p. 364) as true, the analysis of SNAI case studies could provide a further step in demonstrating that degrees of remoteness can be negotiated through particular agency models.

The consumption and commodification of peripheral areas has also been the focus of an extensive article titled "Vanishing Peripheries: does Tourism consume Places?" (Hall *et al.*, 2013), which includes a variety of theoretical perspectives on the conceptualization of the periphery. In this paper, the authors agree on the relative character of the concept of peripherality – "where the periphery is depends on where you stand" (Hall *et al.*, 2013, p. 72).

In providing a recollection of the attributes often linked with "periphery", Hall (Hall *et al.*, 2013, p. 73) emphasises that most of them are linked with distance, again not only intended in an Euclidean sense, but also figuratively as opposed to the characteristics of urbanised areas. Therefore, periphery is often associated with words like "rural" or "wilderness", which symbolise this kind of alterity.

Consequently, peripheral areas seem to have a set of common characteristics (i.e. geographic remoteness, weak economies, out-migration, high state intervention, lack of control over decision-making processes, high aesthetic values, etc.) that are both the cause and the result of their remote character.

*Sociological approach*

In a totally different theoretical setting, sociologist Marina Blagojević (Blagojevic-Hughson & Bobic, 2014; Blagojević, 2009), after analysing gender issues in the Balkans originated after the 1990s transition from ex-Yugoslavia, came to a different conceptualisation of the relationship of core-periphery, adding a new element to the equation, that is the existence of a semi-periphery:

> The semiperiphery is positioned between the [centre] and the periphery and it contains the characteristics of both, therefore it is

a large scale social hybrid. It is essentially shaped by the effort to *catch up with the core*, on one hand, and to *resist the integration into the core*, so not to lose its cultural characteristics, on the other hand (Blagojević, 2009, p. 33–34).

Although Blagojević applies her analysis to a larger scale than the object of this contribution (that is, intra-European state relationships, where the Balkan countries supposedly represent a semi-periphery to central Europe), the hypothesis of the existence of a third component that functions as a catalyst as well as a mediator of the ongoing processes in the two endpoints – centre and periphery — of a continuum, adds an important factor to understanding how such relational systems are constituted. This is particularly true if we imply that the existence of such power relations influences policy-making strategies, as well as identity-making processes.
In this sense, Blagojević (2009, p. 37) maintains that

> In a comparison to the core, the semiperiphery is in a condition of "being different, but not being different enough", while from the perspective of the periphery, the semiperiphery is "different, and not similar enough". This results in an attitude of the core which is reflected in constant efforts to "improve" the semiperiphery, through some kind of paternalistic behaviour.

Therefore,

> The real challenge is to understand how the core is reproducing the semiperiphery and how the semiperiphery is reproducing both the core and the periphery, through their exchanges and interconnectedness. (Blagojević, 2009, p. 37)

It could then be maintained that "peripheries" can be considered as constituted by some sort of linguistic convention: they are situated away from the centre, though at different degrees and through a variety of scales, to the extent that they can turn into centres themselves, when we consider the effects that i.e. the leisure market can have on their relations with the "elsewhere".

These kinds of spatial conceptions inevitably influence policies addressing peripheral areas, a point that will be extensively addressed in the contributions included in this special issue.

## PERIPHERAL AREAS: A POLICY-ORIENTED PERSPECTIVE

As emerged in the previous paragraph, the concept of "periphery" is not a static one: it goes much beyond the mere interpretation in terms of geographical distance from a centre and of location on the fringes of a country or a region ("spatial peripherality", see Herrschel, 2011), a condition which is difficult if not impossible to change in a short period. It instead incorporates a dynamic dimension. Net of objective disadvantages linked to low accessibility, low population density and high levels of young, high-skilled migration, peripheries are very much a social configuration (Kühn, 2015). They are also "produced" as a result of unbalanced (power) relationships and more or less unintended marginalization processes due to side effects of political interventions (the reference is to that type of peripherality defined as "network", see Herrschel, 2011). The question of power is a vital one (Herrschel, 2011; 2012) from a governance perspective: processes of peripheralization are indeed directly linked to "exclusion from networks" and from political power in decision-making:

Marginalised actors, in their varied forms, may find it difficult to join, so as not to upset the existing relationships and balances of power negotiated between those who are part of the system and thus "included" in the process of shaping and implementing decisions and control, and those who are not (Herrschel, 2011, p. 98f).

Those places, which are outside the primary network between the urban centres, "will find themselves with a weaker bargaining position, potentially being ignored, 'shut out' or marginalized" (Herrschel, 2011, p. 98f). Rural actors and their concerns are indeed deemed of little interest to the agendas of the key actors belonging to the dominant policymaking network.

The relevance of this issue for spatial planning is plain to see. Many, even opposite, policy approaches have directly or indirectly tackled peripheral areas over time. To begin with, dating back to the turn of the nineteenth century when the acceleration of urbanisation and the intensification of the urban-rural dichotomy were at their peak, two schools of thoughts emerged, one of that has long persisted and makes its presence felt in doctrine still today: an anti-urban – "which idealised and regretted the disappearance of rural life" – vs. a pro-urban view – "which considered urbanisation as the engine of progress, innovation and modernisation" (Davoudi & Stead, 2002, p. 2). A greater and greater polarization between fast growing urban areas and rural ones has been brought about, with the result that a higher and higher number of "towns and regions are increasingly 'left behind'. This is true of sparsely populated rural areas" (Kühn, 2015, p. 367), which are the focus of this special issue.

Cities, and more recently, city-regions or metropolitan areas have become a major category in spatial planning, being promoted as growth centres in the global competition (Kühn, 2015) with

peripheries often conceptualized in terms of a mere negative opposition, i.e. "non-metropolitan areas" (Herrschel, 2012; Lang, 2012), with little space for a "de-peripheralization" or a "re-centralization" (Kühn, 2015). As Faludi (2003) observes, for a long time primary attention has been given to the building of city regions as champions of national economic power and competitiveness. Already in 1989, Harvey accounted for this race of cities towards ever higher levels of attractiveness, which informed also European policies:

> Urban governance has thus become much more oriented to the provision of a "good business climate" and to the construction of all sorts of lures to bring capital into town. (Harvey, 1989, p. 11).

The long-lasting emphasis on cities as economic nodes and focal point of pro-growth policies aiming at strengthening competitiveness, as well as on their connectivity through corridors of networks, has reiterated the urban-rural divide, with a system of well-connected urban cores and "in between cut through, marginalized surrounding "peripheralities" (Herrschel, 2009). The whole process seems essentially "pro-cyclical, creating stronger cores and weaker spaces in between them" (Herrschel, 2009, p. 241).

Little interest has been traditionally devoted to the likely economic opportunities of peripheral areas and potential for endogenous development. In opposition to "core regions" which constitute the poles of intense technological, economic and social innovation, they are conceptualized as weak innovation areas due to a lack of human capital, as in Friedmann's "Theory of polarized development" (Friedmann, 1973). They are therefore presumed to benefit from secondary "trickle-down" effects (Herrschel, 2009), spilling over from urban areas. The metaphor is the one of modern metropolis as

being the "locomotives" of the economic competitiveness and rural areas the "carriages" being pulled along in their wake. This logic in some respect underpins the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) (Shucksmith, 2008; Harrison & Heley, 2015), published in 1999, with harmonizing yet also competitiveness-oriented goals. As well depicted by Copus (2013, p. 7),

> since growth pole theory failed to deliver in the 1980s there has been a tendency for spatial planning and regional development policy documents to rely upon a range of concepts, such as 'city regions' and 'urban-rural partnerships' without fully articulating the underpinning 'intervention logic'. Cities are described as 'the engines of growth', and rural spill-over benefits, driven by the increasing interconnectedness of functional areas, are assumed to follow.

While ESDP advocates polycentrism and rural-urban cooperation as a way to more balanced spatial development prospects, it also aims at fostering dynamic and competitive cities and city-regions. It does not provide then "an answer to that conundrum between the localizing/atomizing effects of pursuing competitiveness, and maintaining regional and local cohesion across territories" (Herrschel, 2009, p. 241). This shows that in reality policy approaches, due also to institutional inertia, proved to be reluctant or slow in escaping the discursive frame grounded in the notions of geographical centrality and hierarchies, which have produced some distortive consequences by dividing, polarising and marginalizing places. Though a new sensitivity towards peripheral areas and territorial disparities emerged in the ESDP, the policy implementing dimension is still essentially unbalanced towards the urban counterpart. In the Territorial Agenda (TA2020) which strongly draws from the ESDP, while reiterating the

need for rural-urban cooperation to help rural regions to reach their potential (Copus, 2011), cities are still interpreted as the "carriages" of development:

> While cities are the main motors connected directly to the European and global networks, rural areas have to be well connected to the city network. Peripheries and rural areas with a high share of vulnerable groups particularly need to have sufficient connections to centres [...] The intensifying relations between cities and the rural territories surrounding them call for deepening the connections and cooperation between urban and rural territories, between cities and their regions. (COPTA, 2011, p. 81).

However, this accent on the operational/practical category of "rural-urban partnerships" accounts for a nuanced version of the traditional city-centric approach, calling for a more "region-first" perspective and the need to take into account semi-peripheral and peripheral areas, too. This should be capable of implementing all the fundamental features of the concept of polycentric development and territorial cohesion (Coombes, 2014). This is perfectly in line with the Leipzig Charter, which requires that:

> Co-ordination at local and city-regional level should be strengthened. An equal partnership between cities and rural areas as well as between small-, medium-sized and large towns and cities within city regions is the aim. We must stop looking at urban development policy issues and decisions at the level of each city in isolation. Our cities should be focal points of city-regional development and assume responsibility for territorial cohesion (CEC, 2007, p. 3).

This issue keeps on attracting policy-makers' attention and does not seem to lose political momentum as is proved by the publication of the OECD Report (2013) "Rural-Urban Partnerships: An Integrated Approach to Economic Development" and the launch of policies directly tackling peripheral areas in different EU countries, as is the case of the Italian "National Strategy for Inner Areas" (SNAI). A very recent interest in these areas both from a theoretical and a practical point of view comes from the ESPON call "Inner Peripheries: national territories facing challenges of access to basic services of general interest". Public services, formally known as "Services of General Economic Interest" (SGEI), are then "now understood by EU authorities to play an essential role in territorial cohesion" (Clifton, Díaz-Fuentes, & Fernández-Gutiérrez, 2016, p. 359): accessibility to them is understood at the EU level as a prerogative for the enjoyment of the citizenship right.

This reviews clearly shows how difficult is trying to "square the circle" in making two different goals, that seem mutually exclusive, converge: balancing social, economic and environmental development (Eskelinen & Fritsch, 2009), on the one side, and managing competitive differences of urban and non-urban spaces avoiding that this results in uneven prospects.

**CONTENTS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE**

The development strategies of peripheral areas in Europe address social, political and cultural priorities, i.e. reversing the depopulation and marginalisation of these areas, improving essential services and triggering local development processes. These areas, in fact, have distinctive features. Firstly, they are fragile areas from a socio-demographic point of view because of population ageing. Secondly, they are unstable from an environmental (physical, eco-systemic)

point of view as a consequence of insufficient maintenance of their semi-natural capital. Lastly, and more importantly, these are areas in which a significant part of the territorial capital is underexploited or unused. These three characteristics have a crucial social, economic and environmental importance at both a national and local level.

The debate on inner areas in Europe is complex and wide, and many questions are still open. The ambition of this Special Issue is to enrich the theoretical and empirical literature on these topics, proposing papers which can help shed light on development policies in peripheral areas, unfolding further research avenues:

- the urban/rural dichotomy and urban/rural interactions;
- future trajectories of remote, mountainous, rural areas;
- theoretical and practical approaches to the concept of peripherality;
- welfare, social policies and access to essential services;
- mobility and accessibility in peripheral areas;
- culture, tourism and destination marketing in marginal territorial contexts;
- the language of policy-making.

The special issue begins with Veronica Lo Presti's methodological reflection on the use of the "positive thinking approaches" in the context of the Italian "National Strategy for Inner Areas" for the promotion of capacity building in the framework of local development projects in peripheral territories.

Loris Servillo and his colleagues propose an interpretative and policy framework for inner peripheries at the EU level, concentrating on an integrated multi-scalar perspective to policy design, grounded on the notion of spatial disparity, known as "place-based" approach. Authors describe the experience of the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI), reflecting on both its innovations and shortcomings.

The paper then outlines a sophisticated analytical framework, which looks at foundational economy, spatial justice and territorial cohesion as normative paradigms and bridges theory and practice, crucially assuming multi-scale governance design as a more proper approach between top-down and community-led initiatives.

The contribution by Punziano and Urso explores local development policies produced across different Inner Areas by analysing the role played by the "cognitive element" in the decision-making process. In this paper they investigate, through a multidimensional content analysis of the plan documents available online, how language shapes the way problems are conceived, fixes priorities and delimits the range of strategic options in the local development strategy design, in cases chosen among the pilot areas of the Italian "National Strategy for Inner Areas".

The last contribution by Grazia Di Giovanni, using a descriptive approach, focuses on the purposes and contents of the post-seismic mid-term Reconstruction Plans in the Abruzzo region. The study questions the on-going reconstruction process as an occasion to foster long-term socio-economic recovery, urban renewal, and innovative inter-municipal governance besides the rebuilding of urban fabrics in the light of the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas.

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