

THE THRESHOLDS OF THE MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES¹

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ABSTRACT: Medium-sized cities have been presented as an important research topic in urban studies. Transformations in transportation and communication systems have allowed greater agility and acceleration of spatial displacements, thereby reducing production costs and intensifying the process of interiorization of urban spaces in several countries. The urban networks that result from this process are marked by the diversity of cities, including cities treated in the literature as medium-sized cities. Thinking in this plurality, this work problematizes the notion of thresholds of medium-sized cities. It begins by presenting the epistemological challenges that involve the concept of the medium-sized city. An analysis of the evolution of studies and the recurrent approaches to such cities is then developed. Finally, the notion of thresholds of medium-sized cities is presented as an analytical resource for urban-regional studies.

Key words: Medium-sized cities; Thresholds of medium-sized cities; Urban-regional studies.

OS LIMIARES DAS CIDADES MÉDIAS

RESUMO: As cidades médias têm se apresentado como um importante tema de pesquisa no âmbito dos estudos urbanos. As transformações nos sistemas de transporte e comunicação permitiram maior agilidade e aceleração dos deslocamentos espaciais, diminuindo custos de produção e intensificando o processo de interiorização do urbano em diversos países. As redes urbanas que resultam desse processo são marcadas pela diversidade de cidades, incluindo as cidades tratadas na literatura como cidades médias. Pensando nessa pluralidade, o presente trabalho problematiza a noção de limiares das cidades médias. Inicia-se apresentando os desafios epistemológicos que envolvem o conceito de cidade média. Na sequência, desenvolve-se uma análise sobre a evolução dos estudos e as abordagens recorrentes sobre tais cidades. Por fim, apresenta-se a noção de limiares das cidades médias como recurso analítico aos estudos urbano-regionais.

Palavras-chave: Cidades Médias; Limiares das Cidades Médias; Estudos Urbano-Regionais.

LOS UMBRALES DE LAS CIUDADES INTERMEDIAS

RESUMEN: Las ciudades intermedias se han presentado como un tema de investigación importante en los estudios urbanos. Las transformaciones en los sistemas de transporte y comunicación permitieron una mayor agilidad y aceleración de los desplazamientos espaciales, reduciendo los costos de producción e intensificando el proceso de urbanización en varios países. Las redes urbanas que resultan de este proceso están marcadas por la diversidad de ciudades, incluidas las ciudades tratadas en la literatura como ciudades intermedias. Pensando en esta pluralidad, el presente trabajo problematiza la noción de umbrales de ciudades intermedias. Comienza presentando los desafíos epistemológicos que rodean el concepto de ciudad central. A continuación, se desarrolla un análisis sobre la evolución de los estudios y los enfoques recurrentes en tales ciudades. Finalmente, la noción de umbrales de ciudades medianas se presenta como un recurso analítico para estudios urbano-regionales.

Palabras clave: Ciudades intermedias; Umbrales de las ciudades intermedias; Estudios urbanos-regionales.

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INTRODUCTION: MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES – A CONCEPTUAL CHALLENGE

Each historical period brings with it new challenges for scientific development in the various fields of knowledge. Particularly in studies regarding urban areas and cities, in various areas of knowledge, the complexity of the dynamics observed today demands research that best portrays the diversity of these spaces and their production and consumption processes.

Considering the recent transformations in the Brazilian urban network, a series of changes in the roles played by non-metropolitan urban spaces is observed, more precisely among cities called medium-sized cities by many. However, due to the complexity of these spaces in the urban network itself, in addition to the different regional contexts in which they are inserted, it is important to study these cities from two perspectives. The first aims to explore what these cities have in common. That is, one seeks to understand processes and dynamics common to the set of medium-sized cities that contribute to their definition.

However, considering that the Brazilian urban network is marked by diversity, a basic premise encourages studies to develop in a second direction, the search for what is particular to each urban and regional context.

To mark this analysis, some of the ideas developed by Cheptulin (1982, p.91) are employed here; for Cheptulin, the formation of representations of outer reality – and of the world as a whole – and the interpretation of the phenomena that occur there require an explanation for the appearance and relations of different things and their common essence.

Thus, an understanding that the movement of thought is structured by the connection between singularities, generalities and particularities in the construction of knowledge is expressed here; then, in successive dialectical movements, there is a return to previous instances of knowledge but at higher intellectual levels. These dimensions were interpreted by Cheptulin (1982, p.194), for whom the singular consists of properties and bonds that are unique to only one material formation and do not exist in other formations. However, in each formation, in addition to what marks its uniqueness, there is something that belongs not only to it but also to other formations; that is, in addition to what is singular and not repeated, there is something that is repeated and present in other material formations. In the author's words, "the properties and connections that are repeated in material formations (things, objects, processes) constitute the general." The author also emphasizes that the singular and the general do not exist independently but rather only by means of particular material formations. In this manner, the particular carries with it the two dimensions described above, it is the unit of the singular and the general, it is the material formation itself.

This explanation becomes important because the categories singular, general and particular will permeate through this work in the search for a systematization of the notion of threshold² that contributes to the advancement, or revision, of the conceptual dimension of the medium-sized city. By adopting this perspective, the course of the research will be conducted in two complementary directions because on one hand, it is a means to advance the concept, and on the other, it is a perspective that aims to understand the reality to be studied.

² The notion of thresholds of medium-sized cities was proposed by Batella (2013).

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Regarding medium-sized cities, we should warn in advance that there is no theoretical-conceptual consensus. Corrêa (2007, p.23) highlighted the difficulties surrounding the construction of this concept:

(...) it is a question of discussing a vague expression, open to multiple meanings and impregnated with idealism, which conceives it as an ideal to be achieved, presenting the advantages of the small town without having, however, the disadvantages of the large cities.

On the other hand, the term "medium-sized city" is consecrated among researchers, being used to refer to certain cities, of a specific size, that play specific roles in the urban network.

The more traditional approaches to the theoretical-methodological content of medium-sized cities converge towards a causal relationship between demographic and functional dimensions. This understanding stems largely from the idea of an extremely rigid hierarchy, which considers only the national context, with medium-sized cities having a "middle position" within this national hierarchy, both demographically and functionally (FERRÃO, 1995).

In recent years, the debate has broadened and incorporated new themes, scales and methods, demonstrating the diversity of theoretical perspectives and procedures aimed at the study of medium-sized cities, largely due to the complexity of recent urbanization and the diversity of these cities in their local, regional and global contexts.

This multifaceted scenario is representative of a complex object, in which the wealth of empirical constructions did not engender an epistemology capable of advancing its concept because the term "medium-sized city" is a widely used notion in Geography and other fields of knowledge.

In this context, we seek in this text to gather imperious elements that can contribute to a more rigorous conceptual construction. Therefore, the proposed thresholds are used as an analytical strategy and as a tool for analysis. The text is organized in three parts, with the first focused on the contextualization of the origin and evolution of studies on medium-sized cities, followed by an analysis of the general aspects that have guided the discussions about these cities, and ending with a reflection on the question of thresholds.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF STUDIES ON MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES

The topic of medium-sized cities has received much attention in recent years, due not only to the recent and consistent growth in the number of urban centers that exceed 100,000 inhabitants but also to changes in the urban and regional dynamics of these cities. The transformations brought about by changes in contemporary capitalism, on their varied and increasingly complex scales of existence, have produced, as we would assume, changes in demographic flows and demands for new spaces of production and consumption. In addition to a range of other factors, these changes have modified and continue to modify the urban network in the world and in Brazil, and they have aroused and still arouse the interest of scholars who prioritize the urban question, particularly that of medium-sized cities, in their studies, in order to contribute with greater conceptual rigor and the development of more adequate instruments to understand this new reality of the debate about conceptions of urban spaces today.

Although these issues have gained more attention in recent decades, the first academic and territorial planning incursions involving medium-sized cities were in the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially in France (AMORIM FILHO, 2007). According to Costa (2002, p.102), the vanguard of these reflections can be divided into two main groups: the first refers to studies about medium-sized cities considering their urban space, whereas the second, which emerges in a later period, pays special attention to planning policies at the regional level.

Before advancing these concepts, however, one cannot say that the period in question marks the origin of interpretations involving the size and the roles played by cities, recurring issues in studies regarding medium-sized cities. Considering mainly the intra-urban scale, Costa (2002, p.103) agrees that the "interpretation of the medium-sized city associated with urban design refers to the optimal size of the city" and notes that since ancient times, there have been inquiries about urban equilibrium, that is, the factors that would allow an urban agglomeration to rise to the condition of an "economically and socially balanced entity". According to the author, this proposal has its origins in the conceptions of Ancient Greece:

(...) considering the first perspective, that is, the medium-sized city as an agglomeration with a physical, economic and social dimension that allows its self-sustentation, we can affirm that the first allusions to the medium-sized city arise with Aristotle (COSTA, 2002, p.103).

It should be noted that the notion of equilibrium has permeated the scientific and planning research involving medium-sized cities since remote times. In this conception, a balanced city would be one that presented a population mass in sufficient proportion to not overburden the functions of that city (COSTA, 2002; FERRÃO, 1995). Thus, it should be organized in such a manner as to ensure the balance of its demographic, territorial and functional dimensions.

This perspective of the ideal *urbe* is at the heart of more traditional contributions to the idea that has been built around the medium-sized city, which is mainly associated with a determined demographic scale, a variable based on the urban reality of each country. This component of demographic dimension is associated with another dimension of a functional nature. Among these, a causal relationship would be established, as if it were legitimate to deduce the functional dimension from its demographic dimension, what Ferrão (1995) called "dimensional determinism".

In addition to the necessary criticism of the equilibrium view, recourse to the notion of population mass and the search for "sufficient" proportions suggest an idea today associated with the sustainability debate³ (COSTA, 2002).

The notion of the medium-sized city associated with a sustainable dimension has permeated, directly and indirectly, urban history over several years. Long before the emergence of conceptual concerns about medium-sized cities, the importance of the endogenous equilibrium in urban systems and its relation to planning was already discussed. At the turn of the twentieth century, utopian idealism influenced the ideas of the English urbanist Ebenezer Howard, who pointed to two major evils of society at the time:

³ Costa (2002) attests that this has been an important paradigm in the study of medium-sized cities. This is an attempt to interpret the concept of sustainable development associated with cities. The debate is broad and controversial, but it will not be explored further at this time because it is not the focus of this work.

depopulation of the countryside and overconcentration in new and growing industrial cities. “City and countryside acted as magnets, trying to attract populations to them, but each presenting advantages and obstacles” (CLARK, 1991, p.232). It was in this context that there emerged cities planned for a certain number of inhabitants, such as in Howard's plans for garden cities:

Each garden city should have 32,000 inhabitants, and Howard predicted they could be developed in groups of six around a well-planned central city of 58,000 to make planned urban units with a quarter million inhabitants. The city should be self-sufficient in jobs, owning its own industries, commerce, shops and agricultural production, in other words, all the requirements of the population (CLARK, 1991, p.233).

These reflections greatly demonstrate the importance of demographic size when considering equilibrium, indicating that a city that exceeds a certain number of inhabitants would face increased difficulty in its administration (COSTA, 2002). Notably, there was no conceptual concern with the topic of medium-sized cities, but attention to the dimension of equilibrium can be considered a prelude (which remains to this day in other discussions) to many of the issues surrounding contemporary medium-sized cities. In other words, it is emphasized that the notion of equilibrium has been central in several studies of medium-sized cities, whether in urban discussions focused on the size and functions of these cities or those concerning the scale of the urban network.

This notion expanded and gained new meaning with the first theoretical interpretations regarding medium-sized cities. As previously noted, concerns with this category of cities developed concurrently with regional planning policies during the 1950s and 1960s in France and were widespread in the following decades:

The remote cause of the diffusion of ideas about medium-sized cities in the 1970s must be sought in the convergence of two systematized theoretical principles in the first half of the 1950s. Elaborated by Gottmann and others, the principle of regional planning (which was later transformed in the famous “*Aménagement du Territoire*”) resulted from a geographic reflection on the search for a more balanced and organic distribution of activities, wealth and people in the regional and national space. In a similar direction, three years later, the economist Perroux expounds his “Economic Space Theory”, which has as its central idea the concept of the *growth pole*. (AMORIM FILHO *et al*, 1999, p.4, emphasis added).

The period after the end of World War II has, however, revealed the intensity of the imbalances in European urban networks, particularly in France. The work led by Jean Gottmann⁴ and François Perroux⁵, mentioned above, emphasized the importance of urban and regional planning, which in France would be called “*Aménagement du Territoire*”, to correct such imbalances that were manifested at regional and national scales (AMORIM FILHO, 2007). Particularly in the work of Perroux, there is a significant contribution to studies regarding medium-sized cities, mainly for highlighting the role of some cities for the dynamics of the regions in which they are inserted. The French economist noted that certain urban agglomerations could be characterized as “growth poles” located in a space in which economic growth would not spread homogeneously. The essence of this idea lies in an

⁴ *L'aménagement de l'espace: planification régionale et géographie. Paris, Colin, 1952.*

⁵ *L'économie du XX siècle. Grenoble, Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1955.*

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interpretation of equilibrium on the regional scale, in which space is understood as a field of forces that presents a certain degree of uneven development that can be equalized through planning because it manifests itself at a given point, that is, a city or urban region extending from there to other centers. This diffusion would occur thanks to the adoption of innovations on the part of the cities, which would guarantee, in turn, their development (PERROUX, 1977).

Even with these contributions, it is important to emphasize that during the 1950s, theoretical-conceptual incursions on medium-sized cities were incipient, even if their use was recurrent, and these cities were only a particular element of the urban network that stood out for promoting economic growth of the region. That is, economic roles and functions begin to gain strength in the analysis.

In the 1960s, the work of geographer Michel Rochefort marks the first major effort with a focus on understanding medium-sized cities, "*L'organisation urbaine de l'Alsace*", a study whose objective was to know how and under the pressure of which factors cities are located, organized, hierarchized and diversified to meet the needs of the region. Rochefort defines three functional hierarchical levels for the studied urban network: large cities, medium-sized cities and elementary urban organisms. The study considered demographic criteria, the internal organization of cities and their space of external relations, constituting one of the first methodological contributions to the study of medium-sized cities (AMORIM FILHO, 2007).

From this study, it is noted how the notion of the medium-sized city becomes more sophisticated. Central questions such as regional demand, the roles played in the urban network and differentiation of intra-urban space are incorporated into the criteria for classification of cities. The analysis becomes more complex since Rochefort proposes a challenge that is still present today, that is, the need to advance in the approach of space and time considering varied scales and their articulations.

From the point of view of a greater diffusion of these studies, it is during the 1970s that research regarding medium-sized cities began to be developed in contexts other than the European context. The period in question also marks the appearance of studies in Brazil, as emphasized by Sposito (2001, p.615):

In the scientific academic field, we emphasize as a pioneering work concerned with understanding the medium-sized city, the doctoral thesis of Oswaldo Bueno Amorim Filho, which was defended in France in 1973 and whose object of study was the city of Formiga in Minas Gerais state.

After that decade, an effort was focused on the conceptual improvement in relation to medium-sized cities. Reflections hung heavily on the potential size of the population. Michel (1977) drew attention to the importance of the demographic criterion but warned about what he called the statistical illusion. This author agreed that the starting point for understanding a city as a medium-sized city was in the quantitative population, thus being a numerical category. However, he also warned of the importance of relativizing, in time, this and other criteria, such as the regional context in which the city is inserted and the multifunctional characteristics of these cities.

The notion of the medium-sized city became increasingly complex, particularly because of the socioeconomic scenario that emerged in the early 1980s. This period was a new milestone for these cities because "the growing internationalization of the economy and

increased competitiveness gave way to a new framework of relations, where medium-sized cities play roles different from previous roles" (COSTA, 2002, p.163). At this stage, the outbreak of economic and population decentralization processes in some countries is highlighted, a fact that has attracted researchers' attention to the growth of some medium-sized cities due to the reversal of polarization, previously marked by concentration in large cities (TOWNROE; KEEN, 1984).

Contradictory to this context of transformations involving medium-sized cities, the 1980s did not represent an expressive growth in the number of studies about these cities. Moreover, in the first half of the 1990s, "aspects that conditioned the economic structure and relations between the various territories were accentuated" (COSTA, 2002, p.163), where the growing dynamics and processes of internationalization of the economy implied an expansion of economic relations and, consequently, in the alteration of the roles played by the medium-sized cities. There was a transformation in the territorial division of labor, which expanded the scope of relations involving medium-sized cities, including the international sphere.

Since then, there has been an intensification in studies regarding medium-sized cities, as Amorim Filho (2007, p.77) explains:

(...) in the 1990s and in the early years of the 21st century, the number of studies, publications and events on medium-sized cities reached such an amount and intensity that it is practically impossible for any researcher to follow everything that is done in this field.

The dynamics of the urbanization process, intensified by globalization, have broadened the very themes addressed in studies regarding medium-sized cities, including typical problems of more complex urban forms:

The phenomenon of urbanization, associated with the need to be competitive, had negative effects on the quality of life of the populations and the preservation of the natural environment. Pollution, social exclusion, marginality and degradation of the quality of life are aspects that characterize the large but also small and medium-sized cities. (COSTA, 2002, p.163).

On the one hand, there is a broadening of the studies and the themes related to medium-sized cities; on the other, it is seen that the complexity and diversity of this object are also increased. From this point of view, it reinforces the position that is being constructed in this work, according to which the concept of medium-size city does not have a consensus, and its notion is produced from diverse elements employed to analyze varied realities, as will be shown below.

MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES IN PERSPECTIVE

The study of the city is a challenge that, by itself, is already great, mainly because it involves a diversity of elements that demand analyses for better understanding. In this text, in particular, the search for the theoretical and methodological bases regarding the medium-sized city comes up against the first major limitation, that is, the concentration of urban studies focusing on metropolises and large cities.

Consequently, there are recurrent studies that attempt to understand medium-sized cities using this scientific framework geared to other urban realities. Although the difference is notorious and not limited to quantitative aspects, the scarcity of a theoretical and methodological accumulation about these cities made such appropriation imperative. On the other hand, there are already, albeit in limited numbers, a series of studies regarding medium-sized cities that try to understand them in their own urban and regional contexts.

Even so, it is considered here that the concept of a medium-sized city is still being elaborated, as the notion is used with greater recurrence. According to Michel (1977, p.642, *our translation*),

We know very well what is not a "medium-sized city". But it's hard to say what it is. The concept is so vague that we wonder whether the medium-sized city is not an illusion or at least a notion of strong mediocrity.

As mentioned earlier, the term "medium-sized city", in the common sense, immediately raises the quantitative dimension of a city. Additionally, in the scientific environment, this is a significant variable, as Michel attests (1977, p.642, *our translation*):

(...) the concept of "medium-sized city" is based, first, and all agree, on the criterion population size. Therefore, the inevitable but futile discussion takes place, usually in the extreme limits for this class of cities.

However, at the epistemological level, the demographic criterion is insufficient for its conceptual construction, as Costa emphasizes (2002, p.105):

The diversity of values proposed by the various international organizations and in the studies carried out in several countries demonstrates the inadequacy of a criterion based exclusively on the population dimension.

In the Brazilian case, considering the classifications of Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), the demographic parameter allows the identification of so-called "medium-sized cities", which are those with between 50,000 and 500,000 inhabitants (SPOSITO, 2006a). It should be noted, still based on the mentioned author, that not all "medium-sized cities" are, in fact, medium-sized cities because in general, it is necessary to explore more elements, such as regional roles and the intermediation capacity played by these cities in the urban network.

One agrees with Sposito (2001, p.613-614) when emphasizing that the definition of "medium-sized city" via quantitative criteria contributes little to the construction of the concept, approaching more of a notion, mainly because it is sustained only on an empirical basis. To reinforce her argument, the author notes that "there is no direct correspondence between the demographic size of a city and its role in the urban network", that is, cities with similar sizes can play very different roles. In addition, the author notes that the recent period of Brazilian urbanization is marked by multiple forms of well-integrated urban agglomerations from the functional point of view. In this manner, the degree of integration between the cities that compose a certain agglomeration limits the identification of the city that plays the role of the medium-sized city. This argument is even more valid in Brazil owing to the regional diversity and inequality in Brazil.

Nevertheless, even pointing to the fragility of the quantitative criterion, it should be considered a first step in the definition of a medium-sized city, largely because of its potential for analyzing the structural dimension of a city. This allows us to use demographic size to infer the degree of complexity of urban centers through their infrastructure, local market size

and concentration of activities, mainly tertiary. Amorim and Serra (2001, p.2-3) synthesize this relationship as follows:

The demographic criteria (though comfortable and non-negligible) is only capable of identifying the group or the range that medium-sized cities may contain. Other criteria should also be taken into account in the definition of these cities. (...) The criterion of classification based on demographic size has been the most used to identify medium-sized cities, at least as a first approximation. Such a criterion takes the urban population as a proxy for the size of the local market, as well as an indicator for the level of existing infrastructure and degree of concentration of activities. From this point of view, although there is no absolute agreement on the maximum and minimum demographic thresholds that may contain the set of medium-sized cities, there are, in each historical period, coincident demographic levels that define this set of cities in the most varied regions of the world.

It is important to note that the functional dimension, notably considered based on economic relations, has also been widely explored as an important variable in the definition of medium-sized cities. Considering that the set of cities that form the urban network have diverse economic activities, the medium-sized cities would be

(...) designated not only because of their size, but because they were at intermediate levels of the urban hierarchy and, as such, they performed functions compatible with their position in the urban network of the countries (COSTA, 2002, p.109).

According to Ferrão (1995, p.12), this perspective is due to a conception of a strictly national urban system, in which there is a rigid hierarchy. In this manner, medium-sized cities would be those that would stand out because they occupy a "middle position" within this national hierarchy, both from the demographic and functional points of view. It was not conceivable that they could perform functions with a certain degree of qualification or specialization higher than their size suggested.

In this context, medium-sized cities would have a "regional leadership" or regional capital status, as some classifications attest, and would represent for their hinterland what the larger agglomerations represented to vast spaces in the national territory. "The medium-sized cities were, therefore, miniature replicas of the big cities" (FERRÃO, 1995, p.13), but with strictly regional roles.

In the contemporary period, this view is limited in the face of the growing trend towards urbanization. In the words of Sposito (2007a, p.236), "the relations between the medium-sized city and its rural and regional space are no longer sufficient to understand the context in which it is inserted." It must be considered that the recent changes engendered by capitalism alter the technical systems and consequently the forms of production and commerce, demanding transformations in the cities. The principles governing recent changes in urbanization are no longer restricted to hierarchical and horizontal aspects alone, but the interactions between cities belonging to distinct urban networks from different countries and different levels of complexity are recurrent, which Sposito (2007) called transverse relationships because they extrapolate the urban networks in which they are inserted.

From the epistemological point of view, the development of new methods for the study of medium-sized cities are being discussed, but they do not rule out traditional approaches to geography, such as the ideas of the geographic situation or position.

Taking up these concepts, it should be noted that French Urban Geography, which had a great influence on geographic thought during most of the 20th century, when developing empirical studies with the objective of ascertaining the geographic situation and position of the cities, contributed particularly in the methodological plan for the identification and definition of medium-sized cities (SPOSITO, 2001).

Thus, the study of the geographic situation or position of a city involves the particular and relative conditions around the city, considering aspects of the physical and human environment, in addition to their spatial relationships that occur in diverse scales, through circulation in a long time.

Regarding the importance of these studies for the definition of medium-sized cities, Sposito (2001, p.626) states that

(...) not all "medium-sized cities" play the role of "medium-sized cities", for our discussion, what matters most is to assess the weight of the geographical location of these cities as one of the determinants of their roles in the urban hierarchy.

As already noted, cities are not equal, which allows us to deduce that when classified as medium, there is no implication that there will be a correlation of functions or roles, since the condition of the medium-sized city is directly associated with a favorable geographical situation, either from the point of view of the ease of movement, or by the proximity of resources etc., although there are peculiarities in each of these situations (SPOSITO, 2001, p.627).

The author highlights important reflections on this issue, such as the impossibility of a medium-sized city belonging to a large urban area. Thus, the degree of functional structuring of these agglomerations presents such internal cohesion that makes the individualization of the city with medium-city roles unfeasible. In this manner, we would not find medium-sized cities integrating megalopolitan, metropolitan or agglomerated areas. Another important element is the relation of these cities to other urban centers of higher hierarchy. In the author's words,

(...) the urban roles of a city may be greater the more distant it is from other cities, which belonging to higher levels of the urban hierarchy, can offer more goods and services to society (SPOSITO, 2001, p.627).

In this manner, the more distant a medium-sized city is from large urban centers, the greater the chances of it having its roles expanded. This is not a deterministic relationship because it must be considered that a medium-sized city should have the capacity to intermediate relations between nearby spaces and distant spaces.

There are other contributions that, on the other hand, problematize the location of nearby medium-sized cities or even those inserted in the context of urbanized areas. Brigitte Adam (2006), addressing medium-sized cities from the perspective of German urban and regional planning, highlighted the role of these cities based on strategies to create urbanized areas marked by polycentrality. Embracing an operational perspective, the author considers medium-sized cities those with a total population in the range between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants and classified as "medium-sized" or "higher-order centers" in the typification of that country, which takes into account the centrality given by the predominant functions, the labor market, etc.

The aforementioned analysis is based on pragmatic methods, i.e., Euclidean geometric bases because urbanized areas are defined by a radius of 50 kilometers from a large city.

It is noted that the conceptual dimension was deprecated to the detriment of an operational proposal, geared less to the exploration of the roles played by medium-sized cities and their spatial contexts and more to a rationality in the division of the activities in the area, so as not to overload the larger cities. In this manner, the idea of equilibrium is again evoked, now between a city and its region, which permeates the notion of the medium-sized city not only from the conceptual perspective but also associated with regional planning.

This notion of equilibrium has been strongly associated with medium-sized cities since the 1960s in France, to a large extent from a model of development confident in the virtues of concentration/dispersion. This is the resonance of the ideas of the growth poles developed by Perroux, where the equilibrium of a region would be linked to the centrifugal diffusion capacity of the benefits of economic growth, from the poles to their respective hinterlands. In this manner, medium-sized cities were privileged as an instrument of territorial planning, favoring the localization of people and activities in these urban centers, trying to contain, and in some cases to reverse, the excessive concentration that was observed in metropolitan areas. Medium-sized cities thus emerged as an alternative to the concentration of the metropolis because the functional dimension that they developed ensured the occurrence of external economies, which were associated with the hinterlands, guaranteeing the widespread diffusion of the benefits of the concentration of activities (FERRÃO *et al*, 1994).

This view of the medium-sized city associated with the functional perspective typical of hierarchical networks discussed throughout this text is not, however, sufficient to understand the contemporary dynamics of urbanization in these cities. Due to the expansion of telecommunication and transportation possibilities, there is an increase in the relationships developed by medium-sized cities, once limited only to intermediation roles in the urban network, but which now involve flows originating from them and destined to them established with cities near and far (SPOSITO, 2006b), thus surpassing the perspective of mere regional balance.

Ferrão (1995, p.13) warns of the need to consider what the author called the "new urban system vision". According to the author, the current period calls for attention to three fundamental differences in relation to the conventional view of the urban system ruled only by hierarchy. The first refers to the need to incorporate the international dimension. The globalization of economic life enables

recognizing, within each country, centers that belong exclusively to the national urban network and centers that have a dual membership, by integrating not only the national system but also networks of international scope (p.14).

This is the case for many medium-sized cities that have specialized in very expressive functions in the international economy, overcoming the understanding that these cities are necessarily limited to the functions performed in the hierarchies of regional and national urban networks.

The second difference involves the organization of urban centers not only hierarchically but also in a reticular manner. Traditionally, hierarchical urban systems have

limited the roles of medium-sized cities at the regional or subregional scales. However, certain functions and equipment found in these cities exceed the merely hierarchical principles and, in addition, are likely to be organized in a network perspective, such as those cities that perform functions with the same or complementary specialties. According to Ferrão (1995, p.15),

a demographically medium-sized agglomeration, but with a strategic position within a dynamic network, will certainly be able to develop activities at a level well above what one might expect from a rigidly hierarchical view.

Finally, the author presents the differentiation between dynamics that occur in the geographical spaces and spaces of flows. In the first case, the medium-sized city is considered from a perspective in which physical proximity is very important, with the understanding of these cities from regional or subregional poles. This presupposes a strong articulation in which the geographic distance between the pole city and the other urban centers are, in addition to the physical contiguity, fundamental factors. However, in the second case, the growing internationalization of some urban centers has led some medium-sized cities to expand their flows and articulate independently of their hinterlands.

This last consideration, which was also noted elsewhere in this text, raises the need to understand the roles that medium-sized cities have presented in the territorial division of labor, as was done by, among others, Sposito (2005). In this manner, it is an attempt that prioritizes the analysis, from the spatial perspective, of the articulations of processes at different scales in which the technical (or economic) division of labor and the social division of labor occur. As the author notes, "the analytical mediation between the economic division of labor and the social division of labor can be understood by the territorial division of labor, condition and expression of these two forms of division of labor" (SPOSITO, 2005, p.170).

Resuming Marxist thought, Sposito (2005, p.170) recalls that "the social division of labor is imposed a posteriori by the process of competition and the technical division of labor occurs a priori in the factory." From this perspective, the technical division of labor refers to the analysis of the production, inside factories, trying to interpret it in correlation with the urban space. Insofar as it is taken as an economic division of labor, the analysis requires expansion to understand "how intra-urban relations express inter-urban relations which, in the present period, are defined at regional, national and international scales" (SPOSITO, 2005, p.170). Regarding the social division of labor, there is also a need to expand the territorial scales for interpretation, following the movement of the transformations from the larger territorial scales to an analysis that privileges the geographic scale. It is not restricted to the multiple scales of territories but rather considers the "combined and contradictory overlaps between them, observing the complex relationships that take place between different levels of territorial divisions of labor" (SPOSITO, 2005, p.170).

In summary, based on the texts cited here, this paper proposes to analyze the capitalist mode of production and its determinants and development processes that are found in cities to be the most appropriate context for their reproduction. The concentration of diversity and the functions of decision and command that intensify the process of globalization of the economy require that the analyses consider and articulate increasingly complex scales.

In light of the above, the aim is to present the context of the transformations that involve the roles played by medium-sized cities in the territorial division of labor, including

not only the intensification of economic relations but also the expansion of the scales on which they occur, especially from the period that marks the transition from the Fordist production system to the period called by some researchers "flexible accumulation".

In this perspective, some Brazilian medium-sized cities have stood out, in the last decades, for presenting high and competitive functional specialization (SILVEIRA, 2002), which is materialized in the technical command of agricultural production, in the supply of increasingly differentiated trade and services, and in the increase in important functions that consolidate the regional leadership role of these cities, such as health and education. Added to this is the presence, in these cities, of economic agents acting on international scales, which makes the economic roles of medium-sized cities increasingly complex. All this contributed to medium-sized cities surpassing the mere "relay function" (SILVEIRA, 2002, p.14), when they were limited only to intermediation between small cities and metropolises, inserting themselves recently in global dynamics and assuming roles previously restricted only to hierarchical urban networks.

It should be noted that this is not a break with the regional scale and with hierarchical urban networks. From the transition from the Fordist system to the flexible system, we have observed the enlargement of the relations scales in which the medium-sized cities are inserted, but without disregarding their regional roles. In Sposito's view (2005, p.172), what is observed is a "prevalence of changes over permanence".

This observation demonstrates the complexity inherent in the analysis of the roles played by medium-sized cities in the territorial division of today's work because if the increasing transformations of their roles have been a trend, it should be noted that continuities, even retractions, also deserve attention:

It is not less important to analyze the regional contexts in which the permanencies, especially of a political and cultural nature, are more dense than transformations, allowing not only the prevalence of hierarchical relations, such as the relative decrease in the roles of medium- and often large-sized cities and a deep reduction of the roles of the smaller cities of the respective urban network (SPOSITO, 2010, p.53).

In view of the above, the extremely plural scenario that surrounds the medium-sized cities theme is emphasized, which is a diversified and dynamic object that demands study of not only its more general processes but also its particularities. To advance in this analysis, it is proposed to reflect on the thresholds, which will be contextualized below, as a contribution to the study of medium-sized cities.

A PROPOSED THRESHOLD FOR MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES

Benjamin (2006, p.535) asserts that "we become very poor in liminal experiences." The German philosopher, by attesting to the scarcity of these experiences, contributed to the delimitation of such a comprehensive concept, that of threshold, which inspired other thinkers with interests in different themes, here problematized in the perspective of the medium-sized cities.

One of the first aspects that drew attention to the analyses that other authors have made about Benjamin's contributions is the analytical perspective. This issue is highlighted by Barrento (2012, p. 41, emphasis added) when the author states, "this method, thinking

about the places in between, makes Walter Benjamin a paradoxical thinker par excellence, that is, someone who thinks about the margins, or the threshold". It is a subtle proposition of shifting the analysis of what is nearest to what is more distance, from what is more general to the particular, from what would be homogenizing to differences. This is because in light of what has already been produced regarding medium-sized cities and already briefly explained in the previous items, the threshold is presented as the privileged context for the contemporary problem of the notion of the medium-sized city. It is an eminently geographical concept.

Therefore, when considering the discussion about thresholds as the guiding thread of the analysis that is presented in our research, we find that it is insufficient to move to the threshold conditions. It is urgent that the manners of thinking in the contexts of thresholds be organized. To better delineate this proposal, an analysis of the concept of threshold follows.

An important contribution to this debate was provided by Amorim Filho and Rigotti (2003). These authors elaborated a study regarding the demographic thresholds of medium-sized cities. Using the Discontinuity Theory⁶ from Roger Brunet, the authors presented proposals of demographic ranges to think of the quantitative markings of the cities considered medium sized, mainly those that are located near the lower thresholds of hierarchical urban networks, that is, in the transition band between smaller cities and those classified by authors as emerging centers.

Although the authors' perspective is not central to this work, mainly due to prioritizing exclusively the demographic discussion and remaining within hierarchical networks, the merit of the study was to bring to the academic-theoretical debate the question of thresholds of medium-sized cities, thus allowing a rich contextualization of this theme. Considering Roger Brunet's theory, the authors attest that

the hierarchical, temporal, spatial and other "discontinuities" correspond to a kind of "zone of imprecision", whose manifestation is marked by the transposition of one or more "thresholds". Thus, "discontinuity" has a more abstract identification, while the "threshold" is an evident and concrete manifestation (AMORIM FILHO; RIGOTTI, 2003, p.26).

According to this perspective, the discontinuity would be a "zone of passage" that presents some complexity but always marks the transition from one system or subsystem to another, where the threshold is the line that separates two realities. This proposal limits the complexity of the thresholds, which are often presented as limits.

The threshold proposal defended here differs from this perspective because it advances in relation to the notions of a limit or boundary. The starting point for such reflection is sought in Ferraz (2012, p.2), who argues about the difficulties of Latin languages in operating with the distinction between limit and threshold:

if we remember that limit, frontier, *grenze* comes from the Latin *limitis*, a masculine noun that means "the path that borders a domain", to limit, limitation, delimitation; while threshold, sill, *schwelle*, derive from *limen*, *liminis*. The phonetic similarity between *limie*, *limitis* and *limem*, *liminis* has caused *limitaris* to be confused with *limiaris* in Roman languages.

⁶ BRUNET, Roger. *Les phénomènes de discontinuité em Géographie*. Paris: CNRS, 1970.

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It is believed that such similarity lies at the heart of the explanation for the indistinct use of synonyms of the words limit and threshold. However, Ferraz warns (2012, p.3, *emphasis added*)

Although all these terms point to a separation between two often opposing domains, such as "proper" and "common", for example, we forget that the threshold does not mean only separation, but suggests (...) an intermediate and, in this sense, indeterminate place and time, which may therefore have a variable, even indefinite extent.

The author's concern was inspired by the rigorous conceptual distinction Benjamin (2006, p.535) emphasizes in stating that "the threshold must be strictly differentiated from the border." From the perspective of this philosopher, the concept of boundary is related to and results from delimitation exercises that yield well-defined forms and avoid, so to speak, something transgressing its borders. This is also the understanding of Gagnebin (2010). In addressing Benjamin's thinking, the author emphasizes, "the border contains and maintains something, avoiding its overflowing, that is, it defines its limits not only as the contours of a territory but also as the limitations of its domain" (p.13).

In this manner, the border presents itself as a limit, a membrane that limits and confronts another. This is even the conception that is applied from the origin of the concept, in the political perspective, to contexts of territorial delimitation.

The political origins of the concept are associated with the very formation of Nation States, which in their consolidation process had and still have to clearly delineate the dividing lines because it implies in the limit of the order, the norm and the established power (NOGUEIRA, 2007, p.29).

This line, whose trace and thickness can vary, separates interests and intentionalities. Thus, its transposition without prior agreement or without regulative control means a transgression, most often interpreted as a potential conflict (GAGNEBIN, 2010).

On the other hand, recalling the contributions of Benjamin (2006, p.535), the following is noted:

The threshold is a zone. Change, transition, and flow are contained in the word *schwellen* (...), and etymology should not neglect these meanings. On the other hand, it is necessary to determine (maintain, verify) the immediate tectonic and ceremonial context that gave the word its meaning.

The concept of threshold is inscribed in a broader record, involving movement, passages, overflows, and transgressions. The threshold differs from the boundary by not limiting itself to separating territories but rather allowing transitions between two different and/or often opposite conditions. Although the terms border and threshold allude to separation between two or more domains of the real, the philosopher Fionna Hugues, during a lecture⁷, compared the threshold to a bridge of variable importance and intensities (GAGNEBIN, 2010). A threshold, in this manner, is not a mere classification that separates the differences, but it approaches and is characterized as "rites of passage", to use an expression proper to Benjamin (2006). In this manner, the threshold

designates the intermediate zone to which Western philosophy opposes so much resistance, as well as so-called common sense, since, for the most part, demarcated and clear oppositions are preferred (male/female,

⁷ Lecture given during the COLÓQUIO DE ESTÉTICAS DO DESLOCAMENTO, conducted in April 2007 in the Philosophy Department of UFMG, in Belo Horizonte (GAGNEBIN, 2010).

public/private, sacred/profane, etc.), even if one tries to later dialectize such dichotomies (GAGNEBIN, 2010, p.15).

This is also the understanding of Barrento (2012), for whom the threshold in Benjamin does not correspond to a dividing line between two realities but rather to a zone that contains some of these parts. The threshold corresponds to the hybridity that is in a transition condition.

Benjamin (2006) already argued that in modern life, these transitions have become increasingly unrecognizable and difficult to experience. "We become very poor in liminal experiences" (p.535). From the perspective of urban life, such transpositions are also compromised, as Gagnebin states (2010, p.15):

Transitions should be shortened to the maximum not to waste time. The best thing would be to be able to cancel them and move as quickly as possible from one city to another, from one country to another, from one thought to another, from one activity to another, in the same way as it happens from one television program to another with a mere touch of the so-called "remote control", without undue delay on the threshold and in the transition.

The proposal that is presented is related to the challenge of thinking about the thresholds of medium-sized cities beyond the typologies. In this sense, it is sought to construct a notion of threshold that is not restricted to the idea of a limit but rather allows us to explore the contexts of transition in which many medium-sized cities are being thought about. One of the elements discussed refers to the need to articulate the temporal and spatial dimensions in such studies because the threshold condition must be understood as the transition zone. Disregarding this movement would imply the negation of the threshold condition itself, which would contradict its function. However, it was noted that the urbanization process transforms the roles and contents of the medium-sized cities in a heterogeneous manner, according to the particularities of each city. In this manner, below, we present some markings for apprehension of the thresholds of medium-sized cities.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS AND NOTES ON THE THRESHOLDS OF MEDIUM-SIZED CITIES

Brazilian medium-sized cities have, in a very heterogeneous manner, transformed very quickly in the context of urbanization in recent decades. This change reinforces the importance of appropriating the debate about thresholds as an analytical resource for this reality, even though speed hinders a reflection about these thresholds because of the rapid nature of these transformations. In this manner, the concept of threshold implies the necessary articulation between space and time: "it belongs to the order of space but also, essentially, to time. As its spatial extent, its temporal duration is flexible, it depends on both the size of the threshold and the speed or slowness" (GAGNEBIN, 2010, p.15).

Hence, considering that time has been ephemeral, especially the time of capitalism, reducing to "a succession of equal moments under the veil of novelty, it follows that every transition, that is, every threshold must be annulled" (FERRAZ, 2012, p.3), to cancel the transitions would be to construct homogeneities between spaces and between cities. However, this is not the perspective that involves medium-sized cities in the territorial division of labor because the spatial diffusion of capital in the territory is significantly

selective, not encompassing all places. This revalues the importance of the study of thresholds for cities in the perspective proposed by Benjamin, as Barrento (2012, p. 47) states: "the modern city is, by excellence, the threshold, the stage, of all the experiences that are offered to the look of passerby-philosopher Walter Benjamin".

However, because the threshold is therefore a mark that attracts by what it promises, that is, by the possibility of interpreting the transition, one must pay attention to the reflection that another philosopher makes on the concept of threshold. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's contributions to this debate, Gonçalves Neto (2010, p.4) states that "the threshold then expresses a space that corresponds to the unfinished, place of transit, conflict and tension (...). It opposes the limit, a space that corresponds to the closure, to the finish, to perfection ". With this fact, it is emphasized that the threshold can acquire such a thickness that one cannot get out of it, which ends up denying its function (GAGNEBIN, 2010). This is another apprehension of the threshold concept that should be considered.

Finally, the threshold is revealing of the very complexity of urbanization. It overcomes the taxonomic dimension and allows capturing hybrids, changes and mutations. Its essence lies in the tensions produced by the articulations of temporal and spatial scales essential for the understanding of contemporary medium-sized cities.

To deepen the discussion of thresholds in the perspective of medium-sized cities, three analytical dimensions are recommended: the necessary articulation of scales in studies regarding medium-sized cities, recognition of the tensions inherent in the process of urban space production and identification of what is general, particular and singular to these cities.

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