

Analysing gateway cities at different scales: From global interlinking and regional development to urban branding

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Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Abstract

Gateway cities connect vast hinterlands to the outside world, being vital for our highly globalised and networked society. Studying them complements the understanding of urban nodes in global networks from the world city literature because it draws attention to the diversity of these nodes and city-to-hinterland relations. This article first discusses which features mark gateway cities. Logistics, industrial processing, knowledge generation and perhaps other dimensions of global interlinking should be taken into consideration – in addition to corporate control and corporate services. Second, the article sheds light on the impact of gateway cities upon regional development. Whilst some argue that gateways are a filter to economic gains and thus reduce the prospects of their hinterlands, others suggest that they may serve as engines of growth, transmitting impulses to subordinate locations. The author then elaborates on dynamics at the urban scale. He contends that there is need for research on cities (or organisations from there) as actors that resort to, for example, urban branding to become a gateway or reinforce this status. Research along these lines must also address the dark side of urban branding, most importantly the sharp divide between globalised and sidelined urban districts.

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KEYWORDS

gateway city, interplace, regional development, relational city, resource periphery, urban branding, world city

1 | INTRODUCTION

We live in a highly globalised and networked society, as demonstrated by the on-going COVID-19 pandemic. To enable the countless flows that criss-cross the globe, cities play an essential role. Whilst the world city literature – shaped by the influential Globalization and World Cities (GaWC) research network – deals with command and control or, more modestly, management and organisation of global networks, the concept of ‘gateway cities’ broadens our understanding of global interlinking. Unlike world cities, gateways may merely be spatial intermediaries (Phelps, 2017; Scholvin et al., 2019; Sigler, 2013). They are a step in-between, connecting, for example, resource peripheries to global markets in numerous ways that go beyond corporate control and corporate services.

Geographers already investigated gateways at a time when the subject was still about deriving economic, political and social outcomes from the naturally given and man-made material configuration of the Earth (e.g., Brigham, 1899; Hance & Van Dongen, 1957). The closely related literature on ‘entrepôts’ explained how some cities monopolised flows of commercial traffic (e.g., Beaver, 1937; Smith, 1910). To my best knowledge, Burghardt was the first to advance a modern social-scientific understanding of gateway cities. He defined them as ‘an entrance into (and necessarily an exit out of) some area’ (1971, p. 269). The independent variables Burghardt referred to – hotels and restaurants as a basic condition for travelling businesspeople, loan and trust companies as well as real estate agencies – are somewhat outdated by now and indeed, contemporary research on gateway cities has been inspired by the GaWC approach, rather than by Burghardt’s seminal article.

Gateways are, of course, a real world phenomenon, but they are often used as an analytical lens that draws attention to how cities interlink other locations globally. Hence, the term has been applied to places that have, at first glance, little in common, ranging from world cities such as Singapore to far-flung ports like Beira, Mozambique. It is not surprising that a search for the keyword ‘gateway’ on JSTOR or ScienceDirect leads to seemingly countless publications that use the term but are hardly related to one another.

The present article shows how the gateway concept serves to analyse dynamics and features of cities at the global, regional and urban scale. Recent publications on gateways reveal the diversity of global interlinking. The state of the art also covers the impact of gateways upon regional development, although the corresponding findings remain inconclusive. With regard to intra-urban processes, it has been analysed how gateways are shaped by external forces. Future research ought to shed light on gateway cities (or organisations from there) as actors. Urban branding is a particularly interesting topic that allows to study strategies to become a gateway or reinforce this status.

2 | GLOBAL INTERLINKING BY GATEWAY CITIES

Publications on gateway cities that stand in the GaWC tradition deal with corporate services and, to a lesser extent, corporate control. Major players such as Deloitte and KPMG are seen as those that globally interlink large hinterlands through their subsidiaries, which spread across urban hubs all over the globe. Taylor et al. (2002) label these hubs ‘regional command centres’. Single-case studies by Brown et al. (2002) and Parnreiter (2010) show how providers of corporate services in Mexico City and Miami connect the respective spheres of influence to worldwide networks. Rossi et al. (2007) distinguish between ‘decision cities’ (for corporate control) and ‘service cities’ (for corporate services) that interlink Brazil globally.

Assessing headquarter–subsidiary ties, Martinus et al. (2021) identify ‘gatekeepers’, which enable the outside world to access a specific area, and ‘representatives’ of a specific area vis-à-vis the outside world, amongst further types of gateways. Hennemann and Derudder (2014) as well as Martinus et al. (2015) uncover regional sub-networks of sector-specific global networks, drawing conclusions on how geographical clusters of cities are integrated into the world economy.

These are insightful contributions, but they do not fully capture the variety of interlinking by gateway cities. Concentrating on issues beyond corporate control and corporate services, Sigler (2013) conceptualises ‘relational cities’ quite broadly as intermediaries in flows of capital, goods and ideas. Phelps (2017) elaborates on various ‘interplaces’ – from export processing zones to trade fairs to logistics hubs. Li and Phelps (2019) assess flows of knowledge, showing how Shanghai serves as a conduit from and to the Yangtze river delta. Many of these functions are not defined by control over/management of global networks. None of the just mentioned authors is a post-colonial scholar, but their research reinforces a fundamental critique of the world city literature first made by Robinson (2002, 2005): referring to London, New York and Tokyo as a blueprint and analysing to what degree other cities are similar generates a partial and probably misleading picture of urban nodes in global networks.

In all fairness, the GaWC literature recognises ‘multiple globalisations’ and, therefore, a certain variety amongst world cities (e.g., Krätke, 2014; Toly et al., 2012). Nonetheless, even scholars who have shaped this literature since its beginning have become critical of some recent tendencies. Watson and Beaverstock argue that quantitative assessments of the world city network have reached an impasse. They call for research on cities in global networks that is “grounded” in the specificity of the individual processes [...] through which [these] networks are formed’ (2014, p. 419). Such an approach is suitable for uncovering diversity in global interlinking. It does so in a bottom-up manner (starting at individual nodes in order to learn about the network), complementing the insights gained by GaWC-inspired quantitative research, which tends towards a top-down perspective (beginning with the network and deriving conclusions on the nodes).

Against this backdrop, Scholvin et al. (2019) propose an open heuristic for gateway cities. This heuristic results from a comprehensive literature review. Gateways are (1) logistics hubs, (2) sites of industrial processing and (3) places where knowledge is generated or at least transmitted from the global to the regional scale and vice versa. Scholvin and his co-authors add (4) corporate control and (5) corporate services, meaning the standard features from the world city literature. For gateways, corporate control is about regional headquarters that are in charge of branches at peripheral locations, instead of global headquarters controlling worldwide networks. Service provision covers all services needed in the hinterland, not only services in/on accountancy, advertising, banking/finance and the law, which are taken into consideration by the GaWC approach.

Being open, the gateway heuristic can (and should) be expanded by follow-up studies that uncover further dimensions of global interlinking and I contend that there is need for such research because Scholvin and his co-authors apply the concept only to the oil and gas sector, which is very different from other sectors, say information technology or retail. Moreover, the five dimensions are not necessarily additive. The category of gateway cities comprises powerful hubs that exert corporate control, seemingly disparate locations where bulk cargo is shipped and places marked by any possible combination of the five dimensions (Scholvin, 2020a). There is also variation regarding the spatial scope of gateways. For example, Breul and Revilla Diez (2017) find that most gateways in the South-East Asian oil and gas sector connect nationally delimited hinterlands globally, whereas Singapore matters to the entire region.

3 | THEIR IMPACT UPON REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

As noted, research on gateway cities draws attention to city-to-hinterland relations. It ties up with the vast literature on regional development. In particular with regard to extractive industries, that literature is focussed on failed diversification of the local economies under consideration and the formation of enclaves therein (e.g., Arias

et al., 2014; MacKinnon, 2013). It derives outcomes at the local scale from global dynamics, usually neglecting spatial intermediation by gateways.

Breul et al. (2019) seek to close this gap of knowledge. They argue that gateway cities influence the extent to which resource peripheries benefit from integration into global networks, as they host many high value-added activities. The reason for this concentration is that institutions in resource peripheries and gateways bargain with extra-regional corporations, trying to attract foreign investment. Gateways usually outcompete secondary hubs in their hinterland and smaller mining towns. The existence of a gateway also decreases the need to carry out activities such as logistics and warehousing in the periphery. The spatial intermediaries benefit from other path dependencies too, once firms have invested in industrial processing or established corporate headquarters there (Andersson, 2000). Further to that, gateway cities may enable what Parnreiter (2019) calls a 'geographical transfer of value', meaning that value generated in the periphery is captured elsewhere (see also: Scholvin & Breul, 2021).

Breul and his co-authors conclude that the strategic coupling of resource peripheries with global networks is sometimes unsuccessful because of gateways and suggest that they act as a filter to economic gains. Gateways 'inhibit opportunities for [...] development' at subordinate locations (Breul & Revilla Diez, 2018, p. 9). In unrelated research, Burger et al. (2015) and Cardoso and Meijers (2016) demonstrate that secondary cities often fall into the shadow cast by nearby hubs (such as gateways), suffering from a competitive disadvantage regarding everything but basic products and services. They host fewer functions than they are capable of supporting.

However, the state of the art on gateways and their impact upon regional development is not as conclusive as the last paragraphs imply. Scholvin (2021) warns against overestimating the relevance of gateway cities. He reminds us that resource peripheries suffer from challenges typically encountered by small and medium-sized enterprises (insufficient finance and management capabilities, unawareness of business opportunities and the like). Rent-seeking by and subcontracting of local suppliers are other obstacles unrelated to gateways. In an article on the oil and gas sector in Africa, Scholvin (2020b) explains that the concentration of technical service provision in Cape Town, which serves as a gateway, is due to endogenous deficiencies in the resource-rich countries of the continent, rather than path dependency and successful bargaining strategies by Cape Town.

Moreover, at least some of the activities that concentrate in gateway cities are far beyond what one can realistically expect in resource peripheries because of entry barriers that mark capital and technology-intensive sectors. In the ideal case, gateways and resource peripheries assume complementary roles, with the former serving as growth engines that generate impulses for the latter – for example, when firms based in the gateway open branches at peripheral sites, triggering various linkages that push local development (Scholvin, 2017; on linkage-based development, see: Morris et al., 2012). Whether such dynamics lead to a structural transformation of the economy under consideration and outweigh the filtering by primary hubs still needs to be assessed more closely. Comparative research could reveal the context factors that determine when gateways filter the gains of participation in global networks and when their impact is more positive.

4 | URBAN BRANDING BY GATEWAY CITIES

Robinson (2005) criticises the world city literature for privileging rather small sections of the urban economy: highly globalised central business districts from where corporate networks are controlled. The much larger 'ordinary' city is disregarded. Smith (1998) similarly argues that policies inspired by this literature are a project of urban elites based upon an idealised and supposedly monolithic city-economy. I would use less drastic formulations and point out that the world city literature is meant to explain global networks and nodes therein, instead of, for example, the shanty towns home to billions of people in the Global South. Still, I agree that there is need to relate cities in global networks to dynamics at the urban scale.

There is corresponding research on gateways. To begin with, Grant (2008) as well as Grant and Nijman (2002) show how the integration of Accra and Mumbai into worldwide networks influences the development of business

districts, amongst other features of the two cities. Thompson and Grant (2005) analyse migrant business spaces in Johannesburg. Gateways in development corridors have been studied too. Elliot (2020) demonstrates that being part of a corridor changes the imaginaries for cities and towns, having a profound impact upon local policies. Lukas and Brück (2018) uncover the influence wielded by transnational corporations in urban planning initiatives that shape gateway cities according to corporate interests.

Whereas the just mentioned contributions deal with intra-urban processes that are due to external influences, we do not know much about gateway cities (or organisations from there) as actors. More research is necessary to understand the strategies applied to establish a city as a gateway in a development corridor. In the following lines, I address a topic that allows to delve into elite politics: urban branding. Today, probably all cities refer to some sort of branding. In the case of gateways, it aims at attracting key players that turn the city into an intermediary in global networks. Gateways whose role is limited to logistics and basic management functions seek to attract more knowledge-intensive activities, hoping to increase local value addition and related linkages. Well-established gateways refer to urban branding to compete with global hubs.

Branding often relies upon the attraction of cities, instead of hard location advantages. Scholvin (2019) notes that the pleasant lifestyle of Buenos Aires boosts the city's gateway role because transnational corporations can hardly convince their skilled employees to move to towns in resource peripheries where their work is applied. Buenos Aires hence becomes a step in-between, necessary for globally interlinking the Argentinean hinterland. To provide another example, Cape Town impresses first-time visitors with breath-taking natural settings, multiculturalism – most importantly, by emphasising its Cape Malay heritage – and is an attractive place to live and work. A manager of an international engineering company, to whom I talked a few years ago, said that his employer had offered him a higher salary for working from South Africa's economic hub of Gauteng. He explained that 'I know that [most of] the business is there, but I will never move to Johannesburg' (pers. comm., 2 August 2016). Another interviewee simply pointed to the window of his office, which offers a stunning view from Bloubergstrand at the Atlantic Ocean and Table Mountain, asking 'where do you get something like this?' (pers. comm., 5 March 2014).

To advance research along these lines, the literature on 'place branding' should be taken into consideration. Place branding or, more specifically, urban branding, is a process of image construction, communication to a target audience and management, usually driven by public authorities or special purpose corporations at the municipal level. It aims to affect the perception of a city, positioning it favourably in the minds of target groups (Anholt, 2007). Urban branding comes along with the notion that cities compete for investment and skilled people (Kavaratzis, 2004; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005). Its adherents argue that a city's position in the global economy depends upon its success in attracting the highest possible value from global flows so as to promote local development (Anttiroiko, 2014).

A liveable environment and an inclusive society are important assets in this regard. Florida (2002) famously argues that ours is a people-driven economy and cities that are attractive to live and work in succeed economically. Attraction also 'comes from place-bound activities, events and services [...], which make visitors and residents feel inspired, involved and connected to the place [under consideration]' (Lorentzen, 2009, p. 840). For instance, FIFA World Cups and Olympic Games are a public demonstration of being globalised and world-class. For many places that seek global recognition, iconic architecture and large-scale real estate projects play a vital role too, as Sigler (2016) notes. Just like events, they put a city on the map, announcing that it belongs to an elite league, whose members shape the world (Musa & Melewar, 2011; Parmenter, 2011).

Many gateway cities engage in these forms of branding. However, the corresponding strategies suffer from major downsides and pitfalls. Buenos Aires and Cape Town are not amazing places to live and work for everyone. In the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the poverty rate in Argentina's capital rose to 21.5 per cent, which is still low compared to 53.5 per cent in the adjacent metropolitan area (Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina, 2020). Twenty-one per cent of Cape Town's inhabitants, equivalent to 780,000 people, live in crime-ridden shanty towns (South African Cities Network, 2017). Few places around the world are geographically as

close but economically and socially as far apart as the up-market neighbourhoods of Bishop's Court and Camps Bay are to Gugulethu and Khayelitsha. In other words, the vast majority of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires and Cape Town do not matter to the gateway status of these cities. They are sidelined in urban branding strategies.

Indeed, Florida-inspired creative-class agendas do little to improve the life chances of poor, low-skilled and unemployed citizens, as Ponzini and Rossi (2010), amongst others, observe. Large-scale events epitomise the 'concentration on spectacle [...] rather than on the substance of economic and social problems' (Harvey, 1989, p. 16). In the course of such events, urban spaces are opened up and extraordinary performances are staged therein, whilst more mundane activities and needs are pushed out of sight (Johansson & Kociatkiewicz, 2011; see also: Fernandes, 2004). Similar pitfalls mark iconic architecture, which Sklair (2017) accurately describes as creative destruction of urban landscapes that inevitably leads to the displacement of already marginalised people.

5 | CONCLUSION

This article reflected on the GaWC-inspired literature on gateway cities. I first summarised contributions that deal with corporate control and corporate services. I then suggested that gateways fulfil more functions, namely in logistics, industrial processing and knowledge generation/transmission. Future research could, of course, uncover additional dimensions of global interlinking. In terms of city-to-hinterland relations, which are emphasised by the gateway concept, some scholars find that gateways serve as growth engines for subordinate places, driving linkage-based development. Others argue that they are a filter to gains of global network integration.

Besides global and regional processes, dynamics at the urban scale are part of research on gateways. Whilst there is a robust literature on how external forces influence what happens within these cities, we know little about them (or organisations from there) as actors. Hence, there is need for research on the strategies pursued by cities that seek to position themselves as a gateway. A particularly interesting route to advance the state of the art is urban branding. It appears that the attraction of some cities as places to live and work reinforces their gateway status. Related policies rest on large-scale events, iconic architecture and real estate projects as well as creative-class agendas. In addition to investigating how these are designed and play out in different cases, researchers ought to be aware of downsides and pitfalls because the vast majority of the inhabitants of cities that seek to position themselves favourably in the minds of privileged target groups benefit little from or, even worse, see their needs sidelined by the corresponding strategies.

The present article did not cover all perspectives of contemporary research on gateways. Issues that matter more in Social Geography and Urban Geography – for example, 'glocalised' personal networks and new residential patterns, which appear to be outstandingly dynamic in gateways – were not addressed. The apparent relevance of gateway cities to geographers from distinct backgrounds indicates that this topic holds an integrative potential. It may serve as a bridge from one branch of Geography to others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

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How to cite this article: Scholvin, S. (2021). Analysing gateway cities at different scales: From global interlinking and regional development to urban branding. *Geography Compass*, 15(7), e12579. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12579>