

ROLE OF SUB-REGIONAL POLES IN THE PROCESS OF CAPITALIST ACCUMULATION FROM THE SPATIAL DIVISION AND URBAN HIERARCHY IN RIO GRANDE DO NORTE

Papel dos polos sub-regionais no processo de acumulação capitalista a partir da divisão espacial e hierarquia urbana no rio grande do norte

Role de polos subregionales en el proceso de acumulación capitalista de la división espacial y la hierarquia urbana en Rio Grande do Norte



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ABSTRACT

The centrality of cities in capitalist society is undeniable. The city is the privileged locus in which productive forces manifest themselves in the most vigorous way in capitalism. The article aims to understand the role played by the poles (cities), especially the sub-regional ones, in the process of capitalist accumulation. For this, a bibliographical research was carried out and the study on the Regions of Influence of Cities (REGIC) was adopted, taking as reference the spatial division and the urban hierarchy in Rio Grande do Norte (RN). The results indicate that the flowering of polarizing cities in the interior of the RN was almost always due to the commercial expansion that ensured the differentiation of some cities and from this point reaffirmed the command of the process of accumulation of market base, whose predominance ended up shaping the current intra-regional productive structure. It is concluded that the most prominent positions that the sub-regional centers reached in the urban network resulted from the role of locus facilitator of the capitalist accumulation process, initially in the mercantile sector, after them as poles of acceleration of the rotation of capital and by the ability to attract some public and private investments.

Keywords: Capitalist accumulation process; Subregional poles; Spatial division; Urban hierarchy; Rio Grande do Norte.

RESUMO

A centralidade das cidades na sociedade capitalista é inegável. A cidade é o locus privilegiado em que as forças produtivas se manifestam da forma mais vigorosa no capitalismo. O artigo tem como objetivo compreender o papel desempenhado pelos polos (cidades), especialmente os sub-regionais, no processo de acumulação capitalista. Para tanto foi realizada pesquisa bibliográfica e foi adotado o estudo sobre

Article History

Received: 05 november, 2020
Accepted: 08 february, 2021
Published: 15 june 2021

as Regiões de Influência das Cidades (REGIC), tomando-se como referência a divisão espacial e a hierarquia urbana no Rio Grande do Norte (RN). Os resultados indicam que o florescimento das cidades polarizadoras no interior do RN se deu, quase sempre, pela expansão comercial que assegurou a diferenciação de algumas cidades e a partir de tal ponto reafirmou o comando do processo de acumulação de base mercantil, cujo predomínio acabou por moldar a estrutura produtiva intra-regional vigente. Conclui-se que as posições mais destacadas que os polos sub-regionais alcançaram na rede urbana decorreu do papel de locus facilitador do processo de acumulação capitalista, inicialmente na seara mercantil, empós como polos de aceleração da rotação de capitais e pela capacidade de atrair alguns investimentos públicos e privados.

Palavras-chave: Processo de acumulação capitalista; Polos sub-regionais; Divisão espacial; Hierarquia urbana; Rio Grande do Norte.

RESUMEN

La centralidad de las ciudades en la sociedad capitalista es innegable. La ciudad es el lugar privilegiado en el que las fuerzas productivas se manifiestan de la manera más vigorosa en el capitalismo. El artículo tiene como objetivo entender el papel desempeñado por los polos (ciudades), especialmente las subregionales, en el proceso de acumulación capitalista. Para ello, se llevó a cabo una investigación bibliográfica y se adoptó el estudio sobre las Regiones de Influencia de las Ciudades (REGIC), tomando como referencia la división espacial y la jerarquía urbana en Río Grande do Norte (RN). Los resultados indican que la floración de las ciudades polarizadoras en el interior de la RN fue casi siempre debido a la expansión comercial que aseguró la diferenciación de algunas ciudades y a partir de este punto reafirmó el dominio del proceso de acumulación de base de mercado, cuyo predominio terminó dando forma a la actual estructura productiva intrarregional. Se concluye que las posiciones más destacadas a las que llegaron los centros subregionales en la red urbana resultaron del papel de facilitador de locus del proceso de acumulación capitalista, inicialmente en el sector mercantil, después de ellos como polos de aceleración de la rotación del capital y por la capacidad de atraer algunas inversiones públicas y privadas.

Palabras-clave: Proceso de acumulación capitalista; Polos subregionales; División espacial; Jerarquía urbana; Rio Grande do Norte.

1 INTRODUCTION

Feudalism was a mode of production based on the exploitation of serfs' work and had the feud as a central spatial element, without consolidated national states, with economic activities, predominantly agropastoral. Capitalism, on the other hand, consolidates itself as an eminently industrial and urban mode of production, which flourishes and consolidates itself under the aegis of strong national States capable of assuring the general conditions, private property, contracts, currencies, etc., so that production capitalist occurs without further awkwardness.

The city becomes the operating center of the new mode of production, since it is constituted as the privileged locus in which the productive forces¹ carry out the production of goods, thus constituting the central axis of the economy in England, the country that originated from the Industrial Revolution, later, a similar phenomenon occurs in the other countries that adopted capitalism. It is understood that the industrial city presents itself as a counterpoint to the lifestyle linked to the rural, makes it archaic, starts to represent the breaking of the ties and obligations of the old feudal system and, in this sense, represents freedom, the possibility of material progress, constituting itself as a synthesis of the new Capitalist Mode of Production (CPM) (HARVEY, 2005).

The city unites the population, bringing together free labor, seller of labor power and consumer of varied goods, becoming the space, par excellence, of exchanges and facilitating the full functioning of the market, in short, a synthesis of the phenomena of industrialization and urbanization. Thus, as capital accumulation intensifies, new geographic structures are forged and ceaselessly modify existing relationships and spaces (HARVEY, 2005).

The industrial city facilitates production, as it brings together the infrastructure and labor necessary for the development of the activity; it is the market's operating locus, as it brings together the fair and consumers; facilitates access to public and private services; it represents a myriad of possibilities that have attracted billions of residents since the Industrial Revolution, as demonstrated by the degree of urbanization that continues to increase practically all over the planet. Over time, the city gathered/gathers the material and social conditions to guarantee the continuous expansion of the MPC and, when it became/becomes necessary, capitalism (re)creates the city, consequently, the dynamism of any geographic space becomes materializes, becomes visible, in the city (HARVEY, 2005).

It appears that the permanent process of (re)configuration of spaces does not occur completely freely. The hierarchy is well known and the rhythm is dictated from the center of capitalism through the integration of areas that offer lucrative perspectives, resulting in new structures and dynamics for the chosen spaces, as well as, reaffirming control over areas

¹ "Productive power is nothing but the real capacity of living men to work: the capacity to produce by means of their work and with the use of certain material means of production and in a form of cooperation determined by them, the material means for the satisfaction of needs. social needs of life, which is to say under capitalist conditions, the ability to produce 'commodities'. Everything that increases this useful effect of the human capacity to work (and therefore, under capitalist conditions, inevitably also the profit of its exploiters) is a new social 'productive force'. (KORSCH, 2015, p. 01).

homogenized by market consolidation and also keeping many other spaces almost excluded from the economic process, simply because they do not present anything significant for capitalist exploitation.

In Brazil, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) periodically publishes surveys on the Regions of Influence of Cities (REGIC). The studies contribute to understanding the roles and functions that cities play for the benefit of capitalism and present data and information on the various economic structures and urban dynamics that are established and consolidated in line with the movement of capital, offering subsidies for the delineates the commodification of social relations (VIANA, 2018).

There are several purposes for conducting research, but the central objective is the production of reliable data and information to support state planning and ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness in the allocation of scarce resources, as well as improve the distribution of public services and equipment (IBGE, 2008). The generation of data and information by the IBGE offers elements for carrying out research on the roles that cities play, because: a) it highlights the changes in the roles of some cities that gain status, ascending hierarchically from the creation or intensification of relationships along the network (polarizing cities); b) demonstrates the continuities and heterogeneities of the process of configuration and reconfiguration of spaces and; c) indicates the scope that the city has in the urban network and the relationships it maintains in the influence area .

In this sense, he believes that the differences between cities and the functions they perform in the urban network are important elements to understand the actions of capitalist forces, however the last version on the Regions of Influence of Cities was published in 2008 and having as reference the year 2007, suggesting that some regional dynamics have already changed since then (IBGE, 2008). Probable changes in the classic hierarchization between cities, from the Local Center to the megalopolis, result from the intensification of the globalization process. This is because one cannot lose sight of the fact that the technological advances of recent decades have allowed the interconnection of the most distant spaces directly to the most modern centers, making existing relationships in cities increasingly complex. The speed with which changes occur seems to be increasing and the (re)configuration of space in the face of international and national contexts imposes new challenges on the roles that different types of cities play for the benefit of the MPC. Based on the above, the objective of this work is to understand the role played by the poles (cities), especially the sub-regional ones, in the process of capitalist accumulation.

For that, a bibliographical research was carried out in authors such as: Marx (1983), Harvey (2005), Santos (1999; 2008a; 2008b), Lima Jr. (2014), Araújo (2009), Dantas and Clementino (2014a; 2014b), among other researchers who deal with the MPC, sub-regional poles, spatial division, urban hierarchy and the process of formation and differentiation between cities. The study on the Regions of Influence of the Cities (REGIC) was also adopted, taking as a reference the spatial division and the urban hierarchy in Rio Grande do Norte (RN). It is believed that the data and information available in REGIC (2008), even with some lag, notices also the greater complexity of relationships between cities as a result of the intensification of globalization and technological advances, plus academic studies on the subject are sufficient for the exposition of arguments referring to the roles of cities, especially the sub-regional poles, in the process of capitalist accumulation.

In addition to the introduction, the paper has four sections. Section 2 deals with the process of capitalist accumulation, emphasizing the Marxist interpretation. Section 3 addresses the existing heterogeneity between cities. Section 4 presents the results and discussions, finally, section 5 brings the conclusions.

2 THE PROCESS OF CAPITALIST ACCUMULATION

The dismantling of the feudal order caused by the new emerging forces (commercial, industrial, financial bourgeoisie) triggered the process of consolidation of a new mode of production: the MPC. To do so, a significant accumulation of capital was necessary, the process of which, in most cases, took place with enormous violence and was called “primitive accumulation of capital” (MARX, 1983). Thus, forces set in motion undermined the ancient and archaic forms of social organization, imposing themselves, in all corners of the planet, as universal laws of the functioning of the capitalist system. In such a perspective, it is clear that the archaic forms of social organization would not have the means to resist the overwhelming impetus that arose along with the MPC.

Marx (1983) highlighted the violent aspects that determined the dispossession² in substantive part of the population of the minimum material conditions it had to survive, throwing it at the mercy of the market in an attempt to sell the workforce. Thus, after the spoliation was completed, the necessary conditions were presented for money to be

² Lencioni (2012, p. 01) makes a distinction between primitive accumulation (spoliation) and capitalist accumulation (exploitation): “The first, the process of primitive accumulation, is related to spoliation and the production of new capital, while the second, the reproduction of capital is related to exploitation and has as its starting point an already constituted capital.”

transformed into capital, obeying the following logic: M – M – D': a) existence of a class possessing money, means of production and means of subsistence and who wish to value the sum-value they possess through the purchase (exploitation) of other people's labor power and; b) existence of workers willing to offer their own labor power for sale and, in this sense, they can be considered free people, since they do not belong to the means of production as slaves or serfs and neither do the means of production belong to them (MARX, 1983).

The ability to command other people's work ensures the extraction of surplus value by extending the working day beyond what is necessary to produce enough goods to pay workers' wages. The privileged position in negotiation gives the owner of wealth the attribution of organizing the productive activity and the work process and this is done so that the quantity of goods produced is sufficient to cover production costs and ensure an increase in the capital employed in production. (MARX, 1983).

Knowing that the extraction of surplus value stems from the exploitation of other people's labor by the capitalist class, one has to understand how primitive accumulation took place. For Marx (1983, p. 340):

Saying that primitive accumulation was the result of the industriousness, parsimony and intelligence of what today corresponds to the bourgeois elite is the same as saying that other people [current workers] were vagabonds who vilified their goods. In real history, as is well known, conquest, subjugation, murder to steal, in short, violence, play the main role.

The author is emphatic:

The so-called primitive accumulation is, therefore, nothing more than the historical process of separation between producer (worker) and means of production. It appears as primitive because it constitutes the prehistory of capital and the mode of production that corresponds to it (capitalist) (MARX, 1983, p. 340).

Marx (1983) highlighted that the separation between workers and the means of production occurred over time (historical process) and that the outcome was the concentration of capital in the hands of a few (capitalists) and the existence of a large contingent of people impelled to sell their workforce as the only perspective of guaranteeing survival (workers).

According to Gorender (1983, p. XLIV): “Capital accumulation means valorization of capital, which, in turn, means increment of advanced capital through the production of surplus value”. It is a process that stems directly from the exploitation of wage labor carried out by capitalists. When referring to the exploitation of salaried work, a social relationship of domination is already evident, because the class that owns the means of production accumulates wealth from the exploitation of the class that directly produces the goods (MARX, 1983).

The process of capitalist accumulation becomes a historical fact after the English Industrial Revolution, constituting the starting point for the generalization of the surplus value extraction system, however its genesis cannot be adequately apprehended when separated from the transformations of reality that occurred in the feudal period, since they constituted preconditions for capital and served as the basis for the great economic advance resulting from large-scale production from factories (MARX, 1983).

Some transformations of reality, or embryos of the new society, are found in the previous matrix, but it is fundamental to focus on the determining characteristics of the new reality, since it reached proportions to “[...] imprint its mark on the whole of society and exert influence in principal shaping the trend of development.” (DOBB, 1987, p. 21).

Among the modeling characteristics of the new system, there are the prominences of industrialization and the intensification of the urbanization process, making it possible to establish the interconnections between the production of space and the expanded reproduction of capital. For Lefebvre, space is socially produced and historically determined. Limonad states (1999, p. 73):

For Lefebvre, the expanded reproduction and the new material conditions of capitalism would be closely related to the processes by which the capitalist system as a whole manages to expand its existence through the maintenance and socio-spatial dissemination of its structures. Both in terms of the reproduction of everyday life, the reproduction of the workforce and the means of production, and in terms of the reproduction of general conditions and general social relations of production, where the organization of space plays a fundamental role. It would be in the socially produced space, the urban space of capitalism even in the countryside, where they would reproduce the dominant relations of production through a social space concretized, created, occupied and fragmented according to the needs of production and capitalism.

Thus, the dissemination of the capitalism structures requires the “organization of space” for the dominant relations to materialize and for the role of the State to ensure the materialization of the capital reproduction (respect for private property, compliance with

contracts, investments in infrastructure, etc.). The new economic and productive structure erected by industrial capital expanded commercial enterprises, ensured renewed impetus to the banking sector, promoted great advances in transport and communication, produced (and reproduced) the adequate conditions for the expansion and growth of capitalist accumulation on a planetary and manifest scale. Its expandable character by (re)creating “[...] specific types of geographic structures.” (HARVEY, 2005, p. 43).

This movement makes evident the spatial dimension that the MPC assumes, since the geographical structures created favor the process of capitalist accumulation. Capitalism creates and reconfigures the necessary structures to enable continued expansion, in which cities, transport and communication systems serve as good examples of space organization. In this sense, the process of capitalist accumulation configures and reconfigures cities, including small ones, giving them different dynamics and revealing “[...] the (globalized) world and a socio-spatial formation, contradictorily constructed by society over time” (JURADO DA SILVA, 2011, p. 21).

Dialectically, accumulation on an expanded scale determines the need to expand production, distribution, consumption and reinvestment, as capital is justified through its progressive increase. In this sense, the need for continued growth gives rise to the perspective of periodic crises (HARVEY, 2005). The impetus for continued expansion occurs by the very nature of capital (search for profit) and the process takes place in an environment of competitiveness among capitalists, more precisely, the need for expansion results in recurrent imbalances, since in the capitalist reality numerous mishaps can impede the conversion of money capital into productive capital, commodity capital and its reconversion into money capital ($M - M \dots P \dots M' - M'$), whose typical example is the crisis of realization³.

The periodic crises of the MPC appear as a cyclical behavior of the economy, motivated by disturbances in the functioning of the markets, for example, excessive interference from the State and resistance from the trade union movement. This neoclassical reading of crises, based on Say's Law, implies that the functioning of capitalism would naturally be the promotion of harmonious and balanced growth, except for external and inopportune disturbances. Marx (1983) takes a stand against this conception and argues that crises are phenomena inherent to the MPC itself, functioning as a kind of tidying brake for the reestablishment, even if momentary, of a new equilibrium.

³ “Capitalists constantly tend to expand the volume and total value of goods on the market, while trying to maximize their profits by keeping wages flat, which restricts the purchasing power of the masses” (MARX, 1983, apud HARVEY, 2005, p. 45).

In critical moments of economic crises, the most common occurrences are: rising unemployment and underemployment rates, excess capital with no prospects of obtaining gains compatible with the expectations of capital holders, reduction in effective demand with consequences for the work market and in decisions about investments making, the most obvious manifestation of the fall in the rate of profits, among other cumulative aspects inherent to the very functioning of capitalism, whose engendered solutions tend to promote quantitative and qualitative changes in the accumulation process, including geographic expansion and the reconfiguration of already integrated spaces, giving them new functionalities (HARVEY, 2005).

Taking into account the centrality regarding the reduction of effective demand, Harvey (2005) points out the ways to achieve expansion: through the penetration of capital into new activities, creation of new desires and needs, through population growth and geographic expansion to areas still not fully incorporated.

Santos (2006) considers that the understanding of the roles played by cities, in the scenario of intensification of the globalization process, whose most evident manifestation is the growing financialization, is only viable from the analysis of the successive crises faced by the MPC. This is because, more and more, the real estate market has become a safeguard mechanism for capitalist reproduction by absorbing part of the plethora of capital, subsuming the production of urban space to the laws of capitalist accumulation. The social costs resulting from the crises are evident, but such adjustments create the conditions for the beginning of a new cycle, for example, through the recomposition of the industrial reserve army (cheaper labor force), renewal of fixed capital and expansion of demand effective and/or, as Santos (2006) suggests, through the inter sectorial migration of the capitals.

3 DIFFERENT CITIES AND URBAN DYNAMICS

The technology allows a person in the rural area of Viçosa/RN to purchase goods over the internet in New York, as well as allowing a Parisian tourist to make a reservation at a hotel in Portalegre/RN, settling his obligations through the sophisticated financial sector. and relying on the support of the logistics and transport segments to carry out operations. However, the existence of such possibilities does not change the reality of such cities: two global cities and two small towns in the semi-arid region, whose globalization process tends to reaffirm the centrality exercised by the metropolises of rich countries, but requires

analytical effort to apprehend the particularities small towns and mechanisms for transferring surpluses to higher urban centers.

As suggested, the occurrence of direct operations involving agents located in the largest and smallest centers is possible, making reality more complex and requiring that small cities be studied in terms of their relationships with other cities with a higher position in the urban hierarchy, but without neglecting the socio-spatial formation and of the roles and functionalities they play, not least because the possible interactions between small towns and metropolises cannot be considered sufficient to analyze the striking differences that exist.

It is observed that the differentiated urban dynamics reflect the social relations that occurred over time, that is, a Territorial Division of Labor is processed that determines the specialization of the different geographic spaces in line with the process of capitalist accumulation:

According to Henderson (1974), the explanation for different sizes of cities in an urban system is due to the role of each one of them in the production of goods and services. As the external economies of scale are specific to particular activities, each city tends to specialize in a few activities, which, in turn, require efficient and differentiated minimum scales of urban size (LEMOS et al. 2003, p. 668).

Such relationships are established in the mode of production⁴, making it possible to contextualize the production of spaces from the development of the productive forces, demonstrating how the workforce produces the goods, the technology used, the methods and techniques of production and the forms of work organization (family work, partnership, associations, wages, etc.). For Santos (2006, p. 102):

The city realizes its moments of insertion in the logic of capitalist reproduction, exercising roles that differ according to the characteristics of the type of accumulation that occurs, predominantly, at a given moment and extension of the productive forces in contemporary societies. It meets, at each transformation in its meaning for the valorization processes, a series of social demands elaborated within a powerful logic aimed at accumulation.

⁴ The existence of extra economic factors is recognized, but in this work, priority is given to economic categories.

Thus, the division of labor implies spatial differentiations⁵(production of heterogeneous spaces), although the process of capitalist accumulation promotes homogenization based on its intrinsically expandable character. This homogenization-heterogenization movement indicates the different historical contexts in which the productive forces operate, the different endowments of available natural resources, in addition to extra economic factors, such as: the power structure, sociopolitical relations, cultural aspects, etc.

In this sense, the global village substantially reduces the attributions of the State (minimum size), however the process of accumulation on a global scale does not occur in a vacuum, with a clear hierarchy existing, whose visualization is facilitated by the study of the roles that cities play in the capitalist system.

For example, Lima Jr. (2014), studied the evolution and conformation of the urban network in the state of Ceará, focusing on the period of 1980-2010, whose urban organization resulted from the existing “objective conditions”: initially (until 1950), determinations from the economic structure assembled from livestock activity, as well as the influence of cotton farming and the implications of such activities on the urban network of Ceará (primacy of Fortaleza/CE and deepening of the “dendritic pattern”); later, in the period 1950-1970, the centrality exercised by Fortaleza/CE intensifies due to government interventions, with emphasis on the implementation of the 3rd Nordeste Industrial Pole in the capital of Ceará; finally, in the most recent period (after the 1970s), the changes induced by the attraction of investments, especially for agribusiness (irrigated fruit growing), by the encouraged industry (Metropolitan Region of Fortaleza and some intermediate cities that received industrial textile plants, shoes and food) and the expansion of tourism.

Dantas and Clementino (2014a) dealt with the hierarchization of the potiguar urban network, for which they used the four REGIC's studies (published in the period from 1972 to 2008) and concluded that there were no substantial changes in the picture over time, pointing out as a determining factor the absence of a regional development policy capable of breaking inequalities and poverty. Due to the existing social inequalities in the Northeast, the authors pointed out two distinct dynamics in the regional urban network: the capitals and main Metropolitan Regions are on the coast, with the exception of Teresina/PI, concentrating most of the populations of the states and economic activities, differing from the interior,

⁵ Santos (2008b) calls the spatial differentiations “roughness”, in which capital appropriates existing differentials in space (the result of the historical context) or created (simulacra) to reproduce itself. Spatial differentiations imply distinct urban dynamics.

which generally has a scattered and frayed structure, with few medium-sized cities and several cities functioning as sub-regional hubs.

Gomes (2009) dealt with the Potiguar socio-spatial formation through urban-regional dynamics, stating that the analysis was carried out from the urbanization and regionalization processes, demonstrating the interrelationships between the poles and the hinterland. It should also be highlighted that the “marriage” of smaller urban centers to a more dynamic regional space is a recognized characteristic in the national reality based on the data and information generated by the IBGE, mainly in the publications of the REGIC's. Still according to Gomes (2009, p. 153):

[...] it is necessary to emphasize the fundamental assumption that, in the relationship between the Brazilian socio-spatial formation and the formation of the Potiguar state, the whole explains the part, and, however, the part constitutes a form of the diversity of the whole. It is also considered that urbanization and regionalization are inseparable processes in the approach of spatially reflected socioeconomic development, thus constituting significant variables in the study of the Potiguar formation.

In this sense, the differentiated urban dynamics can be treated from the perspective of the urban network, pointing out the spatial articulations (modals of transport, sharing and/or dependence on infrastructure) and the level of development in each space.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The formation of a good part of the 167 municipalities in Potiguar dates back to the dominion of the sertões by the conqueror, predominantly bordering the main existing water courses (intermittent rivers such as the Apodi). The first sesmeiros obtained land donations due to the proximity they had with the representatives of the Portuguese court and the impetus for the occupation came from the expansion of cattle raising in the regions already dominated by the colonizers. When requesting the donation of land, they already informed the purpose of using it in cattle raising, allowing them to dominate the land and strategic articulation with the sugarcane activity on the coast (IBGE, 2013).

About this process of land occupation and economic exploitation, Araújo (2009, p. 14) warns that:

[...] the exporting colonial heritage of the Northeastern Complex imbued the region with a specific dynamic of accumulation that had external demand as

the main determinant of the regional economy expansion. This heritage was reproduced in subsequent centuries, reaffirming the productive structure set up in the 16th century – concentration of land ownership and income, priority to export agriculture, marginal/functional maintenance of subsistence agriculture and the imposition of a regional political system that resembled to a plutocratic type – which contributed to a low social division of labor and a territorial organization marked by low urbanization.

The colonial heritage bequeathed a productive structure that did not require an accentuated urbanization process, however, as it could not be otherwise, the towns and settlements in RN emerged as a result of the productive activities developed: Natal, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte, was formed around a fort and a church, located in the sugar cane producing region, consolidating itself, over time, as the main economic center and with the highest population concentration. The second most populous city in the state, Mossoró, was formed from the exploitation of salt pans, favoring the manufacture of dried meat (associated with livestock) and the consequent flourishing as a commercial center. Also associated with the expansion of livestock, important cities were set up, such as Caicó (to this day recognized for the excellence of sun-dried meat), Currais Novos and Pau dos Ferros (names alluding to origins linked to livestock) and Ouro Branco (associated with the cotton cycle)

Araújo (2009) states that the cotton crop contributed decisively to the Northeastern urbanization process, bearing in mind that it was structured with salaried work on large properties and family work on small ones:

[...] from the point of view of northeastern urbanization, after livestock, it was the culture that most contributed to its dynamism, since it radiated countless activities that became eminently urban, such as, for example: processing, commercialization, and manufacture of sacks, fabrics, etc. (ARAÚJO, 2009, p. 18).

Araújo (2009) says about the direct relationship between the urbanization process and the economic structure:

[...] it is stated that the urbanization of the region and, therefore, of Rio Grande do Norte, has been secularly subject to the designs of its economic, political and social structure. That is, on the coast, a primary economic structure was formed that was not very diversified: basically sugarcane agriculture and, to a lesser extent, subsistence agriculture. Much later, at the turn of the 19th century, at the peak of international cotton prices, space was given to this crop. The interior consisted of cattle raising, subsistence agriculture and cotton (ARAÚJO, 2009, ps. 01-02).

The author offers explanations for the Potiguar economic backwardness: it is a historically and structurally underdeveloped region, marked by predatory mercantile capital.⁶, victimized by the greed of local oligarchies and their strategies to accumulate wealth in the area of circulation and, finally, falls within the area of the polygon of droughts (ARAÚJO, 2009, p. 68).

The initial concentration of wealth that occurred in the backlands of Potiguar resulted from land ownership, *pari passu*, with the expansion of trade, which contributed to the process of mercantile accumulation. It is important to retain the base of support that allowed social differentiation and ensured control of sources of income and earnings and, consequently, political power for a few families that can be called the Potiguar regional oligarchy.

The predatory nature of mercantile capital refers to the mercantilist maxim of buying cheap and selling high, ensuring gains for some to the detriment of others and, above all, subjecting debtors to the power of merchants. It is illustrative that it is still relatively common, for example, in the Alto Oeste Potiguar (AOP), to carry out credit sales, duly noted in books, for payment when the debtors get some resource. Such transactions are called “credit”.

The predatorism of mercantile capital outlines the productive structure that is being established and consolidated in line with the movement of capital, as well as, it highlights the changes in the roles of some cities that gained status, ascending hierarchically from the creation or intensification of relationships throughout of the network and demonstrates the continuities and heterogeneities of the configuration and reconfiguration process of the cities and regions of RN. In such a process:

At the same time, from an intra-regional point of view, different central places can be developed, in order of size and functionality in the supply of goods, in order to conform to hierarchical urban systems. Thus, an urban nodal hierarchy is configured, formed by the largest center, which has the function of supplying specialized services to smaller centers in its surroundings, especially the services offered to the regional productive sector, which require a small urban scale relatively high. (LEMOS et al. 2003, p. 668).

In this sense, different forms were adopted to carry out the geographic (re)division (regionalization), making them compatible with the different objectives that were presented in different periods, because the spatial configurations altered by the movement of capital

⁶ The term “predatorism of mercantile capital” is used by Araújo (2009, p. 68).

demanded (and continue to demand) instruments compatible for the construction of public policies and for the execution of actions by public and private agents.

The official division of Brazil into regions began with the creation of the IBGE by Getúlio Vargas, the first regionalization being published in 1942, adopting natural aspects as a criterion for regional differentiation. In 1970, a version was published in which economic aspects were considered fundamental, in view of the importance of regionalization for economic development (CONTEL, 2014). In addition to the five regions (North, Northeast, Southeast, South and Midwest) the IBGE⁷:

[...] sought to 'demarcate homogeneous spaces and polarized spaces' in the Brazilian territory (IBGE, 1970, p. vii). Regarding the definition of homogeneous spaces, it can be said that these were seen as a 'form of organization around production' and would be expressed 'by combinations of physical, social and economic facts' (IBGE, 1970, p.viii) [...] that allowed the definition of another innovation of the division established in 1970: the so-called 'homogeneous micro-regions' (CONTEL, 2014, p. 08).

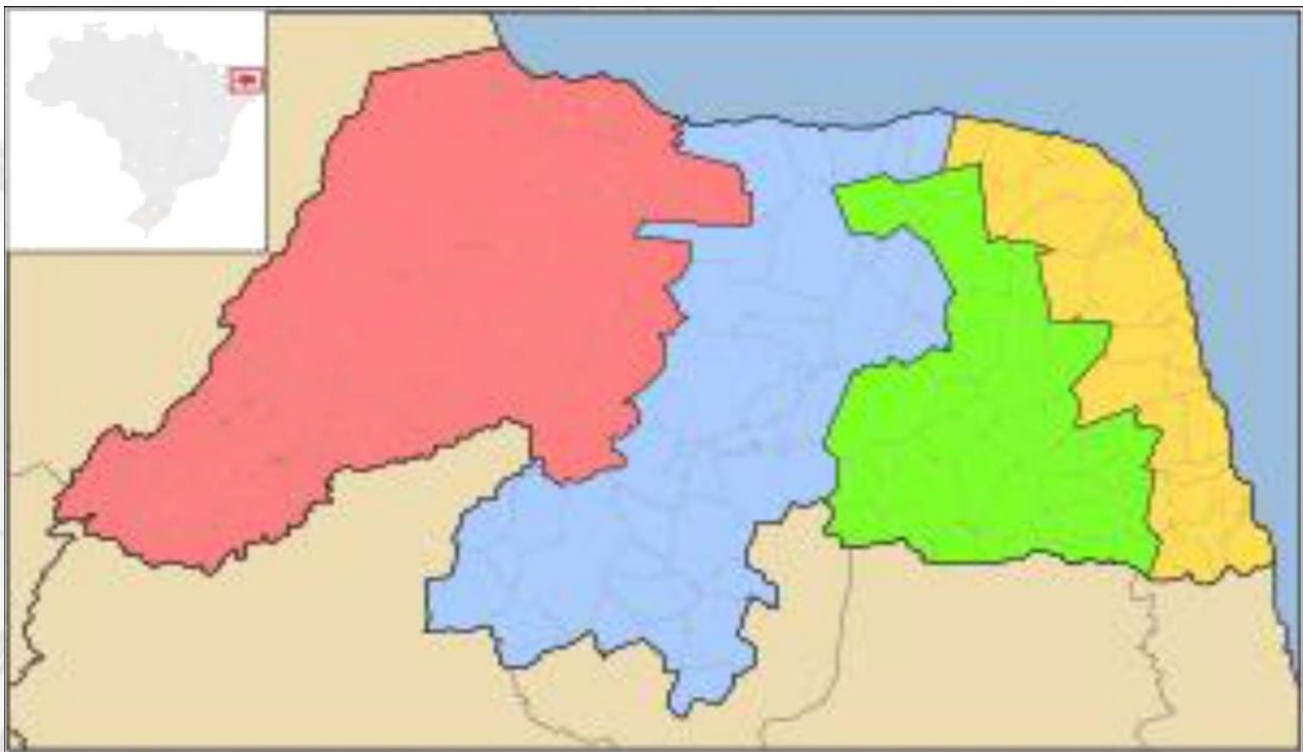
In the 1990s, the IBGE began to use the name microregions and geographic mesoregions:

[...] the mesoregions appear defined as follows: individualized area[s] in a unit of the Federation that presents[m] forms of organization of the geographic space defined by the following dimensions: the social process as determinant; the natural framework as a conditioning factor; and the network of communication and places as an element of spatial articulation (IBGE, 1990, p. 08, apud CONTEL, 2014, p. 11).

The official regionalization adopted by the IBGE, starting in 1990, divided the RN into four mesoregions (Figure 01) and 19 microregions (Figure 02). The West Potiguar mesoregion had seven microregions and 62 municipalities; Agreste Potiguar had three micro-regions and 43 municipalities; Central Potiguar had five microregions and 37 municipalities and Leste Potiguar had four microregions and 25 municipalities (IBGE, 2016).

⁷ "According to the document Territorial Division of Brazil (IBGE, 1980) – which brings the new divisions by which the 1980 Census took place – the mesoregions would be defined as homogeneous Units at a higher level than the Microregions, but smaller than the State or territory. They were created in order to allow the elaboration of more detailed statistics in larger territorial units, obeying the same principle of the microregional classification" (IBGE, 1980, p. ix, apud CONTEL, 2014, p. 14).

Figure 01 -RN mesoregions.



■ West Potiguar Mesoregion. ■ Potiguar Central Mesoregion
 ■ Agreste Potiguar Mesoregion. ■ East Potiguar Mesoregion

Source: Abreu (2011).

The criteria extrapolated the natural aspect by considering the “social process” as determinant for the fragmentation of space. This “process” is dynamic, so is regionalization, therefore requiring historical research to understand the formation of space, as well as to consider the guiding forces of the process of capitalist accumulation. It is highlighted that:

[...] the evolution of historical determinations takes place through a process of preferential regionalizations and the constitution of corresponding geographic centers. This process implies a continuous clash, in each place, between the legacies of the past and the hegemonic forces and actions of the present, and implies the selectivity and lags of economic and social development. The regions thus differ in the socio-spatial formation of the country, according to the conditions of this clash that particularize them in each period (GOMES, 2009, p. 152).

The spatial dimension ceases to be just a datum of nature to become a socially constructed process, whose “objective conditions” must be observed, over time, in different spatial cuts.

The microregions were defined as parts of the mesoregions that have specificities regarding the organization of space. These specificities do not mean uniformity of attributes nor do they give the micro-regions self-sufficiency, nor the character of being unique due to its articulation to larger spaces, either to the mesoregion, to the Federation Unit, or to the national totality. These specificities refer to the structure of agricultural, industrial, mineral extraction or fishing production. These differentiated production structures may result from the presence of elements of the natural framework or from particular social and economic relations (IBGE, 1990, p. 08, apud CONTEL, 2014, p. 11).

The “organized space” presents certain attributes resulting from the construction of that space, being the result, therefore, of the actions of social groups. The assembled structure is the visible result of the social process, whose materialization is conditioned by the interests of capital (changeable over time) and/or by natural aspects.

Figure 02 -Microregions of RN.



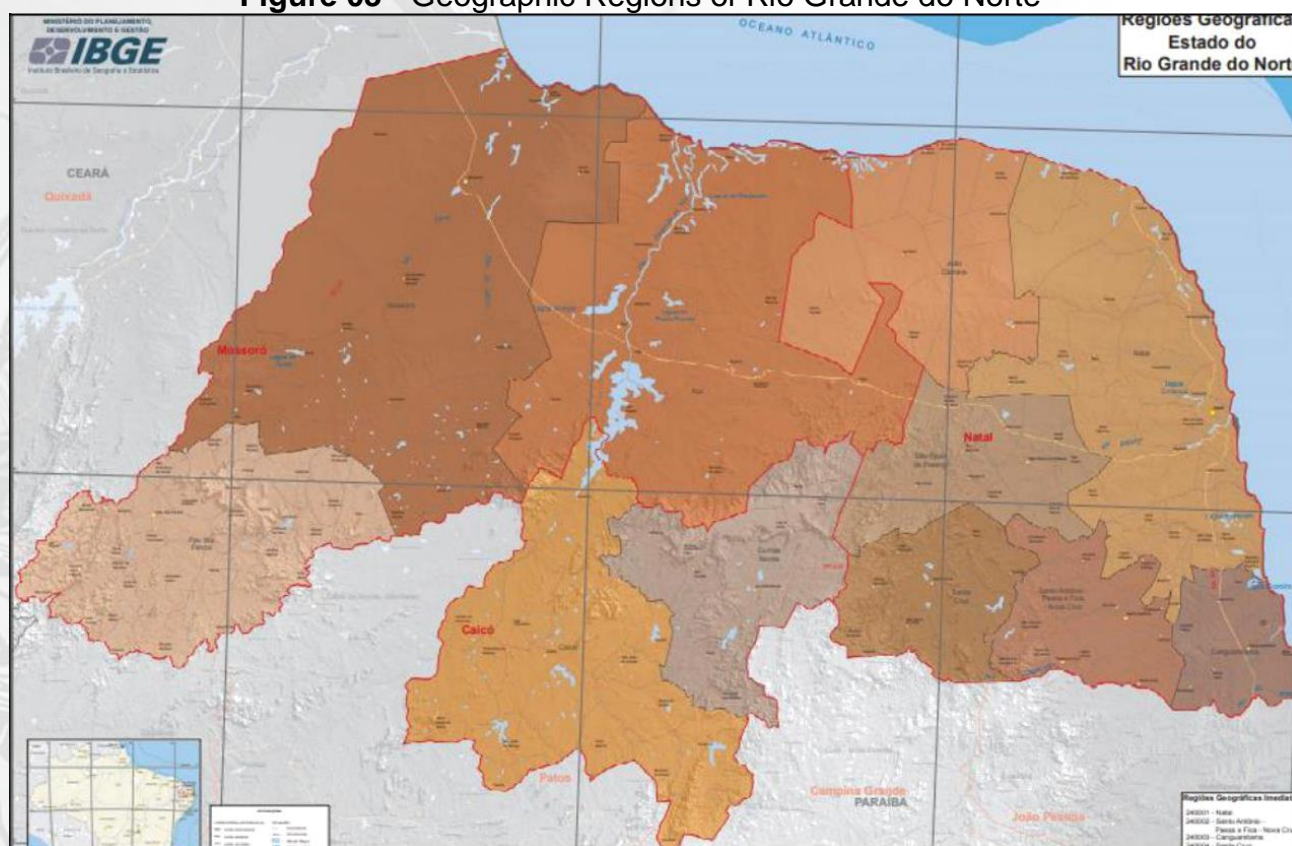
Source: Abreu (2012).

The aggregation of municipalities in intermediate scales based on common characteristics facilitates some analytical aspects, but “[...] does not mean uniformity of attributes [...]” (CONTEL, 2014, p. 11). It is worth mentioning that the settlements that resulted in the formation of municipalities in the different micro-regions occurred at different times and resulted from different socioeconomic relations (again, the importance of historical

research is evident), therefore, responding to specific needs arising from the social relations existing in the different areas, although exogenously conditioned.

More recently, IBGE (2017) adopted a new regional configuration⁸, with the establishment of Intermediate and Immediate Geographic Regions. The RN now has three Intermediaries (Natal, Mossoró and Caicó) and eleven Immediates (Natal, Santo Antônio-Passa and Fica-Nova Cruz, Canguaretama, Santa Cruz, João Câmara, São Paulo do Potengi, Caicó, Currais Novos, Mossoró, Pau dos Ferros and Açu) (Figure 03).

Figure 03 - Geographic Regions of Rio Grande do Norte



Source: IBGE (2017).

The justification for updating the regional division was that it was necessary to review the classification in order to ensure that the new division reflected changes in the roles of cities, pointing out new centralities and existing relationships IBGE (2017). In this sense, the methodology adopted for the new regionalization:

⁸ According to IBGE (2017): “Throughout the 20th century, 4 main regional divisions were elaborated: Zones Physiographic (1942), Homogeneous Microregions and Mesoregions (1968 and 1976) and Geographical Mesoregions and Microregions (1989). In this way, the regional division of Brazil has not undergone significant updates in almost 3 decades, thus making it necessary to review its classifications, for a better understanding of the dynamics of the Brazilian urban network.”

[...] was made from the identification of the hub cities and the municipalities that have a direct relationship with each one of them, and takes into account two concepts:

Network-territory: set of population arrangements located in continuous areas of conurbation municipalities and have flows in a territorial portion.

Territory-zone: control exercised by cities, through their intra-regional and inter-regional functions and activities.

In addition, other variables were included in the new regionalization (urban network, hierarchy of urban centers, management flows, etc.) obtained in other studies. (IBGE, 2017).

The new regionalization takes into account the functionality, scope of existing activities in cities, hierarchy and positioning of cities in the urban network, among other aspects. The information presented (Table 01) does not refer to the complete typology of the IBGE, but only to the existing categories of cities in the RN, it should be noted that the state is part of the northeastern urban network as an area of influence of Fortaleza/CE and Recife/PE.

Table 01 - Hierarchy of Urban Centers in Rio Grande do Norte.

Typology	Description	Occurrence in the RN
capital regional A	They have a regional area of influence, being referred to as a destination, for a set of activities, by a large number of municipalities; Consisting of 11 cities, with a median of 955 thousand inhabitants and 487 relationships.	Natal
capital regional C	They have a regional area of influence, being referred to as a destination, for a set of activities, by a large number of municipalities; Consisting of 39 cities with a median of 250,000 inhabitants and 162 relationships.	mossoró
sub-centers regional A	They have a smaller area of activity, and their relationships with centers outside its own network occur, in general, only with the three national metropolises; Consisting of 85 cities, with medians of 95 thousand inhabitants and 112 relationships.	Caicó and Pau dos Ferros
sub-centers regional B	They have a smaller area of activity, and their relationships with centers outside its own network occur, in general, only with the three national metropolises; Consisting of 79 cities, with medians of 71 thousand inhabitants and 71 relationships.	Currais Novos and Assú
centers of zone A	Restricted to its immediate area; exercise elementary management functions; 192 cities, with medians of 45 thousand inhabitants and 49 relationships.	João Câmara and Macau
centers of zone B	Restricted to its immediate area; exercise elementary management functions; 364 cities, with medians of 23 thousand inhabitants and 16 relationships.	Canguaretama, Passa e Fica, Santa Cruz, Santo Antonio, Sao Paulo Potengi, Parelhas, São Benedict, Alexandria, St.

		Miguel, Apodi, Patu, Umarizal
local centers	The remaining 4,473 cities whose centrality and performance are not extrapolate the limits of their municipality, serving only to its inhabitants, have a population predominantly less than 10,000 inhabitants (median of 8,133 inhabitants).	147

Source: IBGE (2008). Elaboration of the authors (2020).

The IBGE study (2008) shows that the urban hierarchy in Rio Grande do Norte is marked by the strength of the capital, Natal. The preponderance is demonstrated in the existing relationships, because all the other 166 Potiguar municipalities are influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the capital. The most obvious link is administrative subordination, since all administrative bodies are headquartered in Natal/RN, in addition to population concentration and increased economic activity, illustrating the power exercised by Natal/RN (IBGE, 2008).

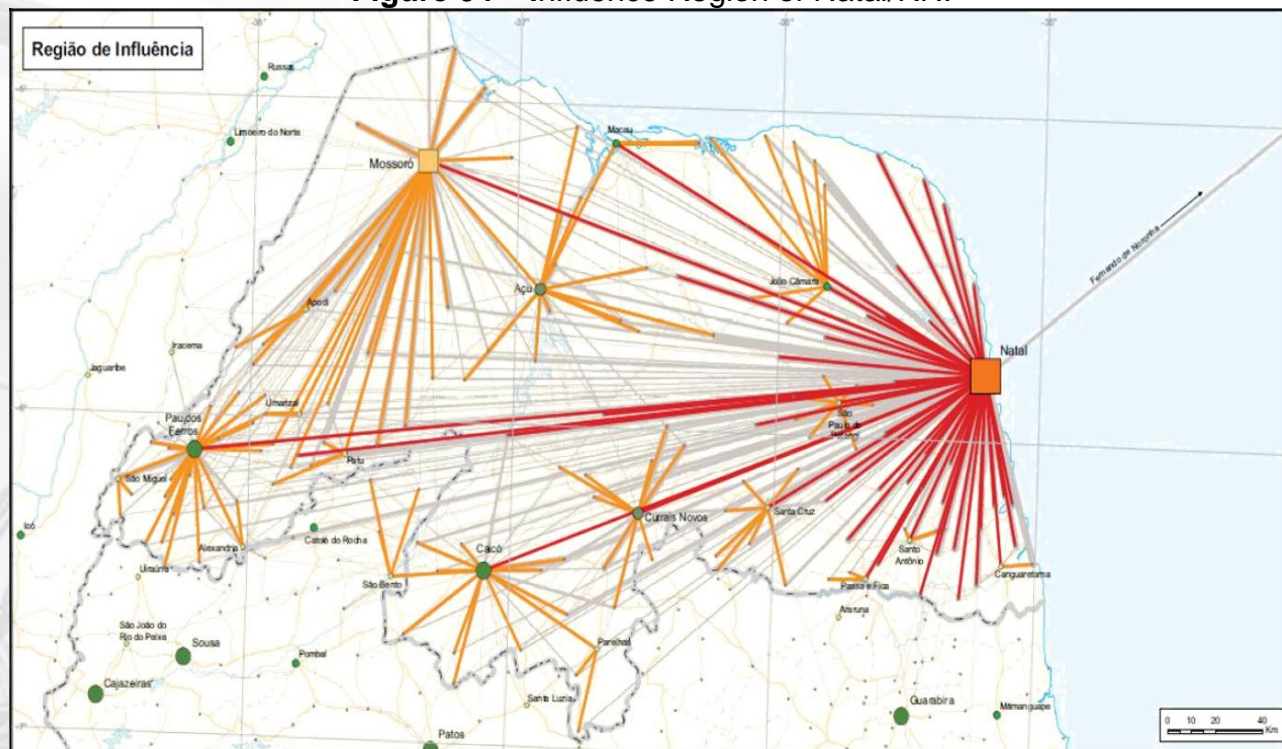
The chart 01 indicates the existing hierarchical levels in the RN, evidencing the supremacy exercised by Natal/RN, regional capital A, in relation to the other cities of the state, however, no Potiguar center reaches the status of metropolis, with all the cities in the area polarized by the metropolises of Fortaleza/CE and Recife/PE. The second city with the highest hierarchical level is Mossoró/RN, regional capital C, emerging as an economic center in the northeastern interior due to the relevance achieved by some activities, such as: irrigated fruit growing, the salt industry, the oil sector and the provision of services more sophisticated in the areas of health and education.

Then, in the third hierarchical level, there are four cities, with Pau dos Ferros/RN and Caicó/RN classified as sub-regional centers A and Currais Novos/RN and Assú/RN as sub-regional centers B. In the fourth hierarchical level, referring to the center of the zone, there are the presences of João Câmara/RN and Macau/RN (centers of zone A) and the cities of Canguaretama/RN, Passa and Fica/RN, Santa Cruz/RN, Santo Antônio/RN, São Paulo do Potengi/RN, Parelhas/RN, São Bento/RN, Alexandria/RN, São Miguel/RN, Apodi/RN, Patu/RN, Umarizal/RN (zone B centers).

Figure 04 shows the influence region of Natal/RN and presents the relationships with the other cities in the state. The relationships can be visualized by the red and yellow lines, which indicate, respectively, direct link to the main center and links to secondary centers and the gray lines that indicate the search for goods and services (the thicker the line, the greater the intensity of the link) and the levels of administrative, legal and economic centrality of the cities, from the lowest level to the highest, highlighting Natal/RN and

Mossoró/RN, in addition to some cities that perform functions of sub-regional poles, such as Caicó/RN and Pau dos Ferros/RN.

Figure 04 – influence Region of Natal/RN.



Source: IBGE (2008).

Figure 04 presents the regional cities with the greatest power of polarization over the surroundings, configuring the spatial pattern of accumulation in the state from the existing economic structures, whose primacy exercised, especially by Natal/RN, suggests the expansion of intra-national regional differentiation. due to the concentrating effect inherent to the most populous cities, with greater density of economic activities and which have more complex equipment and services in relation to polarized areas.

The hierarchy is well known and the rhythm is dictated from the most dynamic center of capitalism through the integration of areas that offer lucrative prospects, resulting in new dynamics for the chosen spaces and reasserting control over areas homogenized by market consolidation, also maintaining many other spaces almost excluded from the economic process because they do not present anything significant for exploration.

The flourishing of the polarizing cities in the interior of the RN was almost always due to the commercial expansion that ensured the differentiation and from that point onwards reaffirmed the command of the mercantile accumulation process, whose predominance

ended up shaping the current intra-regional productive structure. Considering the methodology used by the IBGE (2008), it appears that, in the case of the RN, the polarizing sub-regional centers stand out in relation to the surroundings formed by many small cities, with very low economic dynamism and high dependence on intergovernmental transfers, whose centrality and performance do not exceed the municipal limits.

Dantas and Clementino (2014a), analyzing the Potiguar urban network based on the IBGE study (2008), pointed out the prominence exercised by Natal/RN, followed by Mossoró/RN and highlighted the roles of “sub-regional centers, which command [...] intermediate networks, form regions with medium centralities and have variable population and area according to their location.” What was new, according to the authors, was that cities like Caicó/RN and Pau dos Ferros/RN polarized small surrounding towns, generally with a population of less than 10,000 inhabitants, and assumed “[...] the functions of medium-sized cities by to offer services, including specialized services in the areas of education and health, as well as to act as a 'jobs basin' for the region” (DANTAS, CLEMENTINO, 2014a, p. 80).

Lima Jr. (2014), based on the IBGE study (2008), pointed out the “primacy” exercised by Fortaleza/CE and the existence of a “dendritic pattern” for the configuration of the urban network in the interior of Ceará. Dantas and Clementino (2014b) highlighted the existence of an “organized” network on the coast and a pattern of dispersion and thinning in the Potiguar interior, therefore, approaching in interpretation, although using different terminologies. The works also dealt with the relevance of medium-sized cities and sub-regional centers and the roles that these types of cities, generally located in the semiarid region, have assumed more recently.

Dantas and Clementino (2014b, p. 106) pointed to the existence of “about two dozen medium-sized cities” in the northeastern interior (interiorized northeastern urban network), noting that some cities, even with a reduced population contingent, began to play important roles. “[...] of intermediation in shaping regional development”. From there, the authors advanced to the use of the concept of intermediate/intermediate city in order to encompass the qualitative aspects and functions performed by urban centers in the northeastern interior that do not meet the demographic requirement for classification as a medium-sized city (DANTAS, CLEMENTINO, 2014b, p. 107-9).

The changes in the economic dynamics observed in some cities in the Semiarid Region, in general, and in the RN, in particular, resulted from greater capital accumulation, mainly in the mercantile area, greater capacity for political articulation of local elites to win

public investments for the provision of infrastructure, installation of equipment and public services, in addition to natural benefits such as geographical positioning. Over time, the differentials existing in some cities allowed the polarization of surrounding areas, consequently generating cumulative benefits through greater diversification of economic activities, receiving more offices/representations from public bodies and expanding the offer of services and equipment.

It is important to note that the interventions carried out by the State were (and continue to be) fundamental to ensure the “geographical mobility of capital” and the consequent homogenization, but without breaking the structure erected from the dominance of merchant capital⁹. Thus, sub-regional hubs play a relevant role in pooling public (constitutional transfers to city halls and amounts transferred directly to citizens) and private resources, maintaining the primacy of mercantile capital at the sub-regional scale through the Services Sector. In the accumulation process, capital mobilizes the necessary elements to ensure the success of the undertaking, highlighting the alignment of internal social segments of the area being integrated (or already properly integrated) to act in the establishment and/or reinforcement of interdependencies, assuming positions of complementarity (transport, storage, distribution, retail, etc.) and thereby ensure participation in the appropriation of part of the surplus.

The sub-regional surplus is, in part, agglutinated at the poles, ensuring gains, including speculation in the real estate market, of regional mercantile capital and more quickly sent to the central areas through the acquisition of sophisticated goods and/or services. The other facilitator of the process is the State, acting through its power structure, represented by various bodies of the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary powers, and carrying out the necessary interventions, mainly, the provision of infrastructure. Capital is in command of the process and materializes in space, in its different forms: companies, stores, supermarkets, malls, universities, roads, etc., through private social production and state action, resulting in existing differentiations.

⁹ The loss of relative participation of the Primary Sector due to the worsening of the drought and the inability of Public Policies to change the scenario and the almost irrelevance of the Industrial Sector suggest that the idealized development plans were not successful in promoting structural transformations in the semi-arid region of Rio Grande do Norte and it is likely that they have contributed to amplify intra-regional imbalances, favoring the polarizing effect in a few sub-regional centers.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Regarding the RN, since the Captaincy of Rio Grande was created in colonial times, the project has been to ensure the domination that a privileged few exercised over the mass, assuring them the generation of profits, in accordance with the command exercised by merchant capital. It is admitted that the colonial heritage is present throughout Potiguar economic history in the structures set up and in the strategies pursued by the elite.

The domination exercised by the economic elite of the RN, associated, most of the time, with the strategies of outside capital, until now has served to maintain the oligarchies and to ensure the control of the benefits coming from the public spheres. Political domination, legitimized by the control of the means of production, allowed the capture of public bodies to make their interests viable. Associating themselves with external capital, they captured a good part of the resources for the installation of the few industries in the RN, they also became the biggest beneficiaries of the water structuring works (the famous “drought industry” persists at full steam) and continued to deserve differentiated treatment and privileged in obtaining tax breaks (“fiscal war”), subsidies and access to cheaper credit.

It should be noted that the subordinate insertion of the RN has been remarkable since the beginning of the occupation by the Portuguese conqueror, whose exploitative nature of wealth resulted in the setting up of an economic structure aimed at the interest of merchant capital, as the mutual interest of capital from outside the state associated with the strategy of the local elite to carry out mercantile accumulation, reserving some dynamism for specific economic segments, almost always linked to exports and controlled by foreign capital, as well as, a more prominent role for some cities in the interior, the sub-regional poles, which assumed, over time, the role of facilitating locus of the process of capitalist accumulation, both by accelerating the rotation of capital, as well as the ability to attract some public investment in infrastructure and private investment in the Services Sector.

The existing economic differential in favor of the sub-regional centers does not suggest the perspective of irradiation to the surroundings, but a trend of concentration driven by the tertiary sector and limiting the reach of the economic expansion of the Potiguar regional centers, since such centers polarize small cities and with very low dynamism (depending on intergovernmental transfers), making it plausible to state that they polarize poverty by meeting some more satisfactory conditions (supply of public services, more sophisticated commerce and specialized private services), but whose economic repercussions in the mentioned centers tend to reaffirm the imbalances.

It should be noted that the current scenario does not seem conducive to building a broad consensus for the preparation and execution of regional development plans. The focus of current economic policy makers is building a consensus to justify a severe fiscal adjustment, and the political agenda of current northeastern rulers (governors and mayors) is restricted to efforts to fund the public machine.

In a strict sense, the power of domination exercised from the center does not prevent advances from occurring in the most remote areas and in the most unlikely circumstances, mainly because economic irrelevance does not arouse attention and does not require the direct control of big capital and thus the apparent autonomy of urban collectivities in the face of opportunities to realize their potential is the facilitating counterface of the control exercised by capital in its inexorable monopolistic journey.

It is argued that the process necessarily has economic predominance, constituting a determining condition for changes in the status of some cities, even for sub-regional poles. It is the movement of capital that creates spatial patterns, albeit gradually, altering the urban dynamics of some centers, promoting commercial growth and spatial reorganization, demanding more and more investments in transport, communication, the electricity sector, water supply, construction etc. Investment requirements that fell on the State, requiring greater capacity for planning and carrying out investments in works to provide the necessary infrastructure for the circulation of capital, because, according to Harvey (2005), the geographic circulation of capital, both in commodity form as in the capital form, requires the existence of permanent structures for the $D - M - D'$ to properly function.

The resulting spatial pattern of accumulation facilitates the attraction of investments (public and private) to the sub-regional poles and contributes to the consolidation and hypertrophy of the tertiary sector as a characterizing element of the economy, since the dynamism in these cities is greater than the surroundings, but insufficient to attract large private investments, as the cities that are at the top of the urban hierarchy have, as they are the headquarters of the country's large business groups.

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