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THE FORMATION OF AN EUROPEAN URBAN SYSTEM

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With the construction of the European Community, the European urban system appears more and more integrated. Even if this level of organisation seems to be emerging, looking at the history of the European cities, one can recognize different signs of the long existence of interaction between them. Today one can observe the international processes, even if national level is always relevant. The paper underlines this historical and contemporaneous processes, using large databases, constructed with the preoccupation of homogeneity.

Key words: Europe, Urban Systems, Dynamic

Introduction

Since World War II, the national borders of West Europe countries have opened progressively. At first this was limited to a few products like coal or steel and to a group of six countries only. The construction of a socio-economic European entity has expanded spatially as well as in the variety of functions. In this process, the importance of exchanges between countries has multiplied. The increase in the number and size of long range flows is also a result of a more general trend of internationalization of the economies. Among the consequential effects of this upon national urban systems, is the emergence of a few cities which happen to be in the position of centres within those networks and which act at an upper geographical level. There is an increasing influence of such cities beyond their national boundaries and the importance of their international relationships is increasing when compared to their communications with their regional or national environment.

The question of interest for this paper is the possible substitution of an integrated (west) European Urban System for the former juxtaposition of less interconnected national urban systems. Is such an integrated supra-national urban system already perceptible? Which types of emerging structural characteristics are recognizable, or detectable, from the actual observation of west European cities today?

In order to answer such questions, we shall first recall the main significant historical meaningful "events" (or structural divisions) which shaped the specific features of the European set of towns and cities. Second, we will identify the main properties which characterize the European settlement system compared to those of other continents, especially North America. Third, by using both recent observations of large European

cities and theoretical knowledge of the dynamics of urban systems, we shall try to predict some possible emerging characteristics of what could be considered in the future on relevant observation as a "European urban system".

1. Historical path dependance of the system

Recalling briefly a few steps of the progressive building of the European national settlement systems over a long period, it will be shown how the long distance exchanges between towns and cities already had strong effects in shaping variety of structures of urban systems.

1.1 A very old connected network

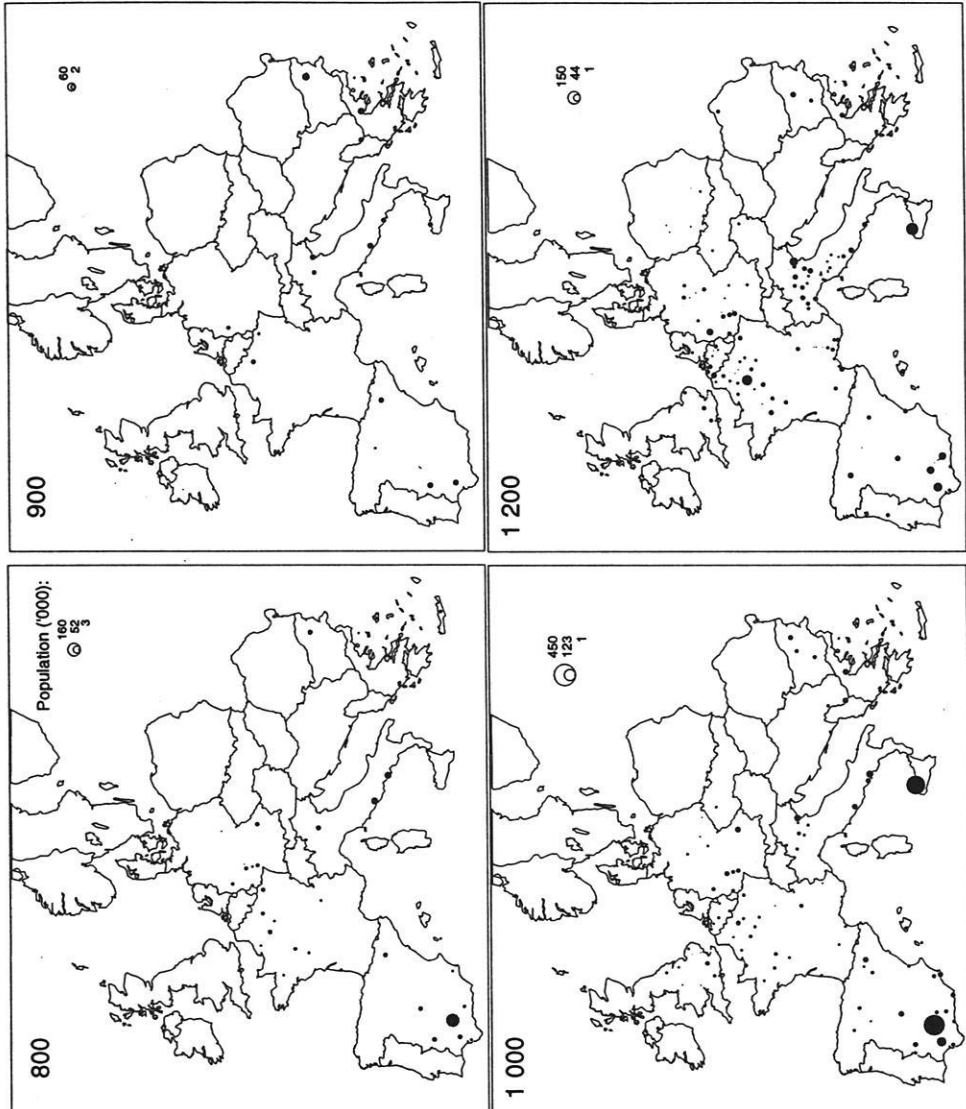
Over several centuries, the urban network which now appears on European maps has been shaped by trade relationships. The resulting flows of goods, population, and information created linkages of interdependancies and competition between towns and cities (i.e. between the individual actors and corporate institutions or various centres of power within them).

Everywhere in Europe, the creation of urban systems followed a "basic urbanization" comprising networks of a small agricultural markets serving rural population (Figure 1). By oversimplifying a complicated history, two main divisions can be identified since the middle-ages (BRAUDEL 1979; DUBY 1985): a first wave of urbanization occurred at the time of the crusades, due to a weakening of feudalism and to a strengthening of an urban bourgeoisie linked with the reopening of commercial routes (PIRENNE 1939). After an unstable period of war, a second stage of urban development in the XVIth century lead to a more selective process of growth of a few large cities which concentrated the economic boom of the time. The most rapidly growing cities were either political capitals, or centres of the long distance and maritime trade. The set of cities become more hierarchical, and monocentric, as the old mediterranean area (Napoli, Venice, Milano, Genova), lost its relative importance whereas the north sea urban network around Bruges, Gent and the towns of Flanders, and then London was reinforced.

The development of small and medium size towns was sustained by demographic growth and by the Industrial Revolution. The urban hierarchy was meanwhile completed and its contrast was reduced without changing its spatial pattern much (DE VRIES 1984).

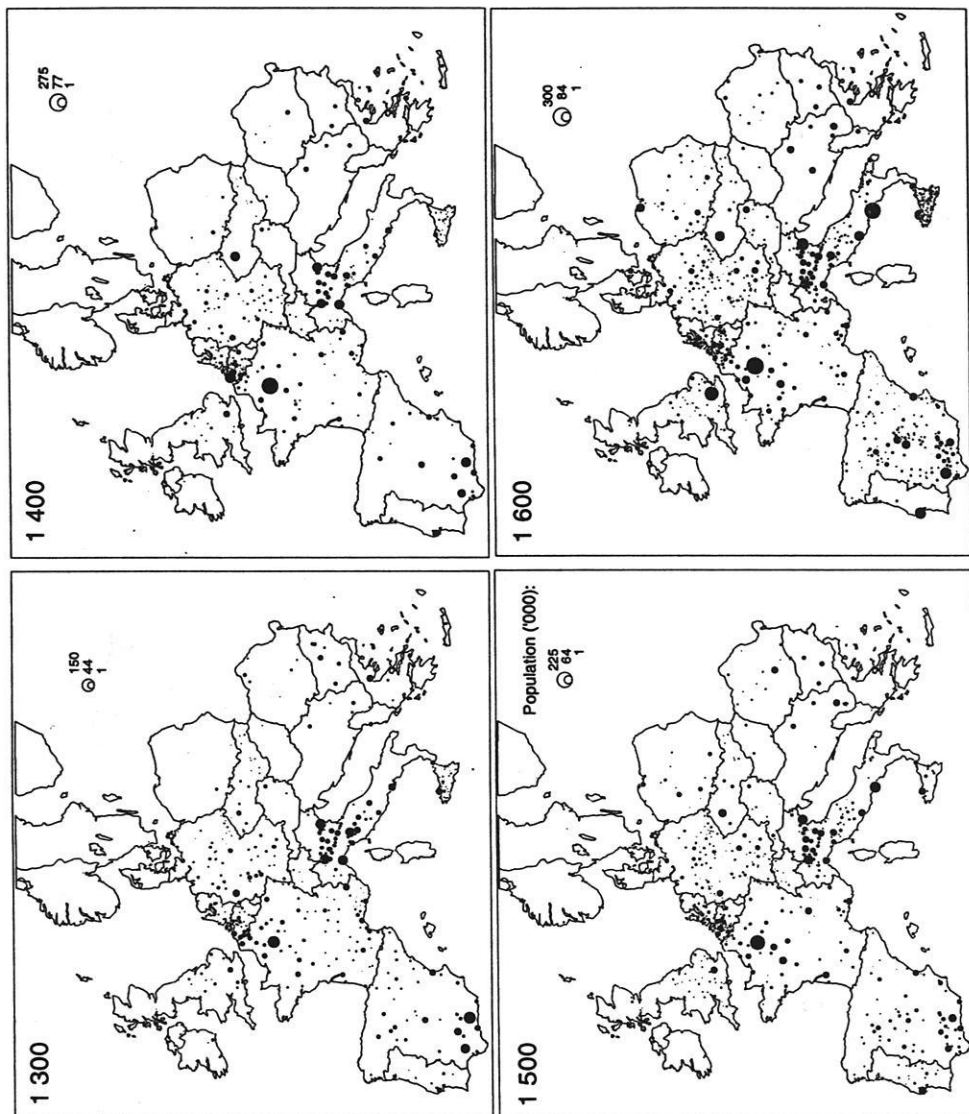
The individual histories of those European towns and cities exhibit, at several points during that long period, general similarities in trends which prove that even in those ancient times, they did not evolve in an isolated manner, but by interaction. To that extent is it possible for this past period to use the expression "European urban system" without it being an anachronism, even if the urban development at that time was not precisely the same everywhere.

Figure 1 European Cities from 800 to 1850



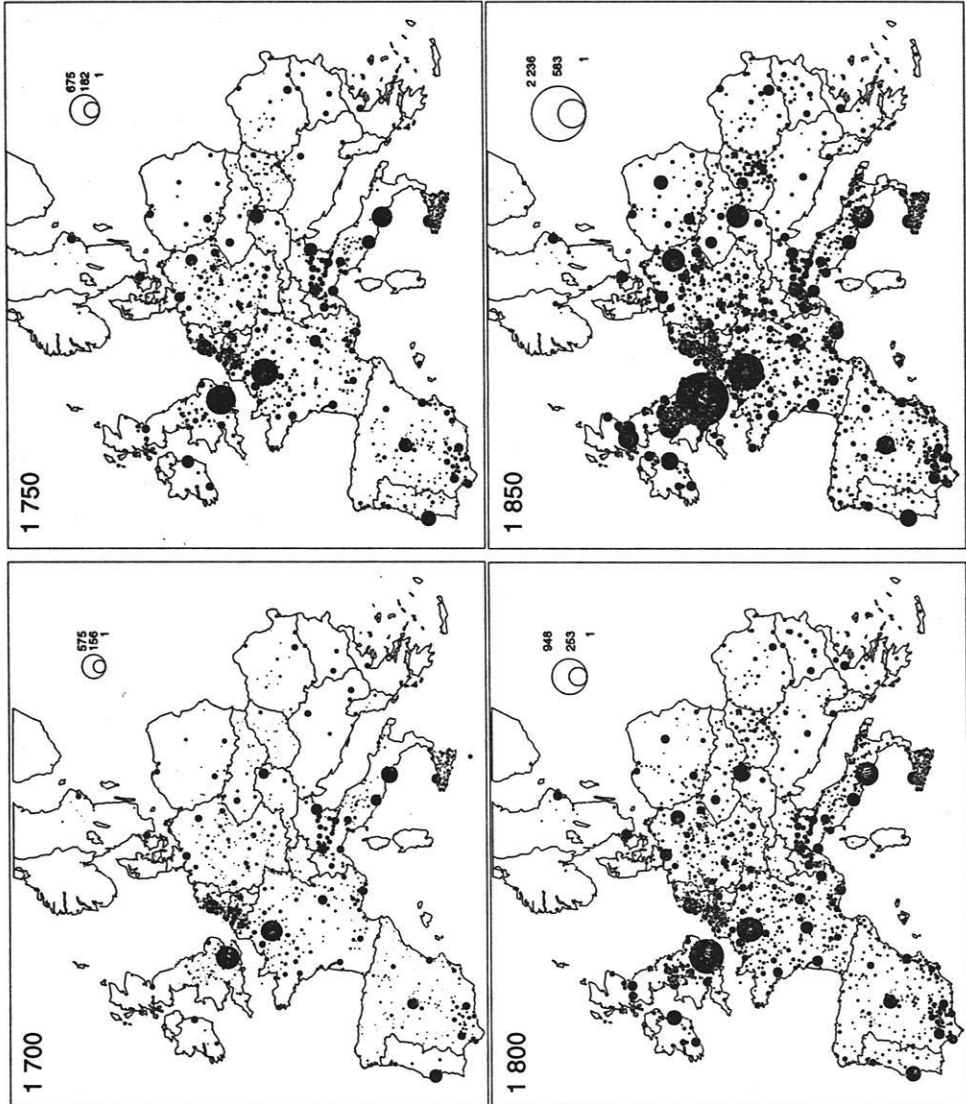
Source: BAIROCH and al. 1988

Figure 1 European Cities from 800 to 1850 (continued)



Source: BAIROCH and al. 1988

Figure 1 European Cities from 800 to 1850 (continued)



Source: BAIROCH and al. 1988

1.2 Partial and progressive restructuring

During the various stages of urbanization, inequalities in development occurred between the various parts of the continent. The three important phases in the formation of the European urban system may be analysed in connection with the successive valuation of main communication roads. The situation of cities relative to the principal trade axes was decisive in establishing the upper level of the urban hierarchy (HOHEMBERG & LEES 1985). The center of the so-called "world-economy" after F. BRAUDEL shifted from Venice at the beginning of XVIth century toward Antwerpen and Amsterdam from the beginning of the XVIIth century onwards. The geographical position of the towns and cities within the communication networks is well demonstrated by a measure of their population potential. That index is a synthetic measure of the accessibility of one town to all others according to their size, so it may also be interpreted as a number of possible interactions with other urban centres or for individuals living in one particular city. Between 1500 and 1800, the maximum values of the European urban potential (as measured after the population of all towns and cities over 10.000 inhabitants) shifted from northern Italy to the lower Rhine valley and finally to London (DE VRIES 1984). The famous main axis of European urbanization which appears nowadays as a real megalopolis was meanwhile built and reinforced over a duration of several centuries, as it is shown by such a geographical move of the largest potential values.

The main centres of the former long distance maritime trade and the cities which were at that time the capital accumulation centers have generated most of the largest cities of Europe today. The few exceptions like Paris reflect the rare processes of extreme political centralisation of large territories. Not only the differences in city sizes, but sometimes also in the nature of their economic basis, are still deeply rooted in that ancient period. The Industrial Revolution did not much alter the main feature of the structure of the urban system established by the shift of the area with highest density from south to north-west Europe. It merely amplified it due to the powerful impulse given to urbanization by the industrial development of the XIXth century. Moreover, the Industrial Revolution deeply modified the structures of the cities which were developed at that time, since those cities still appear today with the highest specialisation level within the European urban system.

1.3 A global translation

There is actually a surprising inertia of the hierarchical dimension within the structure of the European urban system. Towns and cities which already had over 10.000 inhabitants in 1500 still accounted for 2/5th of the 364 European towns and cities over 10.000 inhabitants in 1800 (DE VRIES 1984). They concentrated 2/3 of the number of urban citizens at that time. Even if the Industrial Revolution "created" several very large cities as in the Ruhr region, or in northern England, or in the north

of France and Spain, there was a broader general stability in the urban pattern of southern Europe (SCHMALL 1981). Cities with a glorious past like Venice have been relatively weakened, but for instance Napoli is still today the third Italian city.

By definition, the function of cities is related to trade and exchange. It creates, between them, a multiplicity of links of interdependencies and competition. Those connections ensure the continued existence of the mesh of the urban system. Because it promotes a quick diffusion of new ideas, competition is the main cause of the persistence of the possible former inequalities. Competition is the regulating force which widely contributes to maintain the structure of the urban systems (PUMAIN 1992). Other factors lead to the same result, as the administrative or political mode of organisation of the territories; when they function for long periods of time in the same way, federal systems tend to favour urban systems where inequalities between cities are less important, whereas centralised systems lead to more pronounced hierarchical contrasts (MORICONI-EBRARD 1993). The existence of the communication infrastructures, as they most of the time adapt to the pre-existing urban hierarchy, is also a condition of the stability of the urban systems (PRED 1977).

2. Main structural characteristics

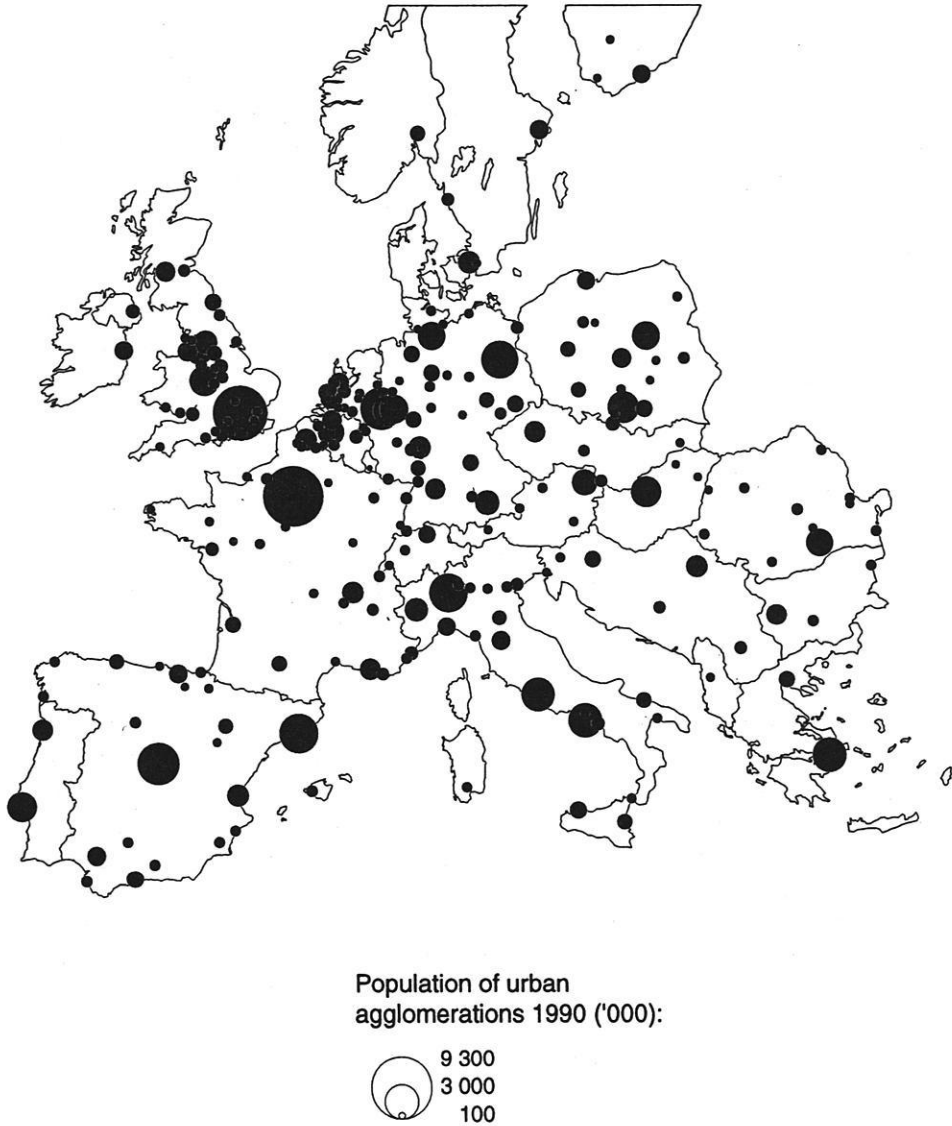
The European urban system of today is the result of the accumulation of the affects of several successive organisation of power, which have modelled it (Figure 2).

2.1 An old urbanization

As its settlement system is very old, Europe has a very high density of towns and cities when compared to other continents. Another linked characteristic is the large share of small and medium-sized towns in the urban system. There is inversely a relative lack of very large metropolises: if one considers cities over 200.000 inhabitants, their average size is about 800.000 in Europe against 1.300.000 in the United States and in Japan (MORICONI-EBRARD 1993).

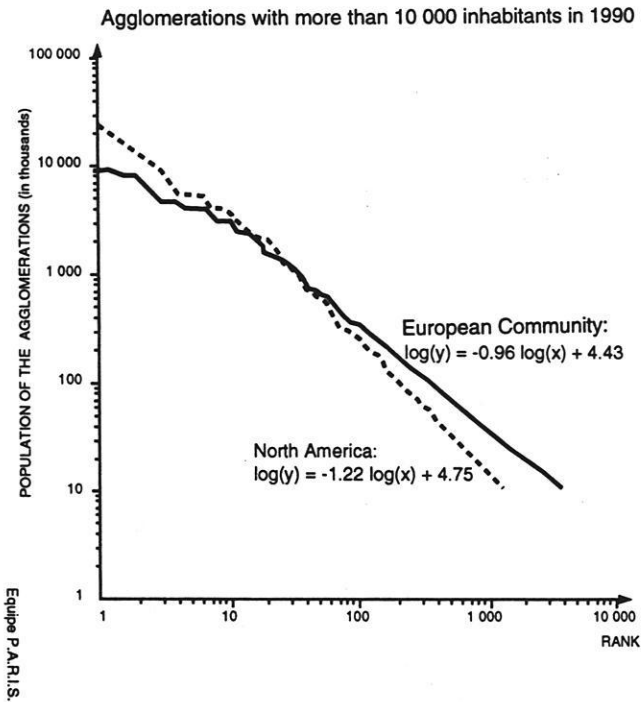
Those main features are revealed by a simple comparison of the distributions of the number of towns and cities according to their size in USA and in Europe (Figure 3). The inequalities in size are much higher in the USA as indicated by the higher slope value of the adjustment line. On the other hand, there is no example in Europe of the huge megalopolis like the one around New York or even of a very large urban area like Los Angeles.

Figure 2 The European Cities in 1990



Source: GEOPOLIS 1993

Figure 3 Rank Size Distribution of The Cities in Europe and North America



Source: F. MORICONI, GEOPOLIS 1993

2.2 The inherent spatial organisation

The European urban system is without doubt dominated by two large agglomerations, London and Paris, which have been by far the largest for more than a century. Whatever the criteria, they stand well over the other cities, mainly when measures of economic power and weight are considered, like for instance the number of headquarters of large companies (Figure 4). In those two cities alone are concentrated more than half of the headquarters of the 300 largest European firms in 1990. The explanation of such a concentration is a matter of historical accumulation reinforced by a factor of proximity to political power, more than of population size and density: the comparison with the lower number of headquarters located in the large urban area of over 10 million inhabitants concentrated in the Ruhr region (Essen, Düsseldorf, Duisburg) demonstrates it.

Figure 4 The Largest European Firms

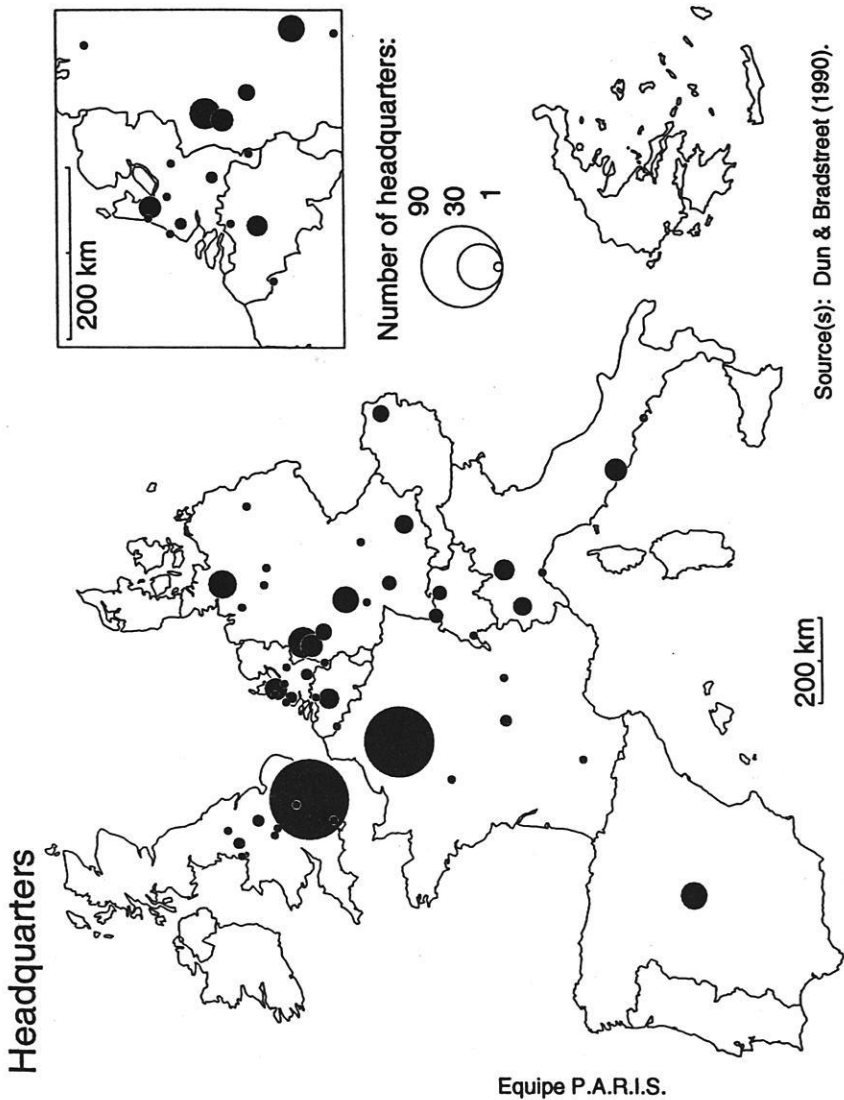
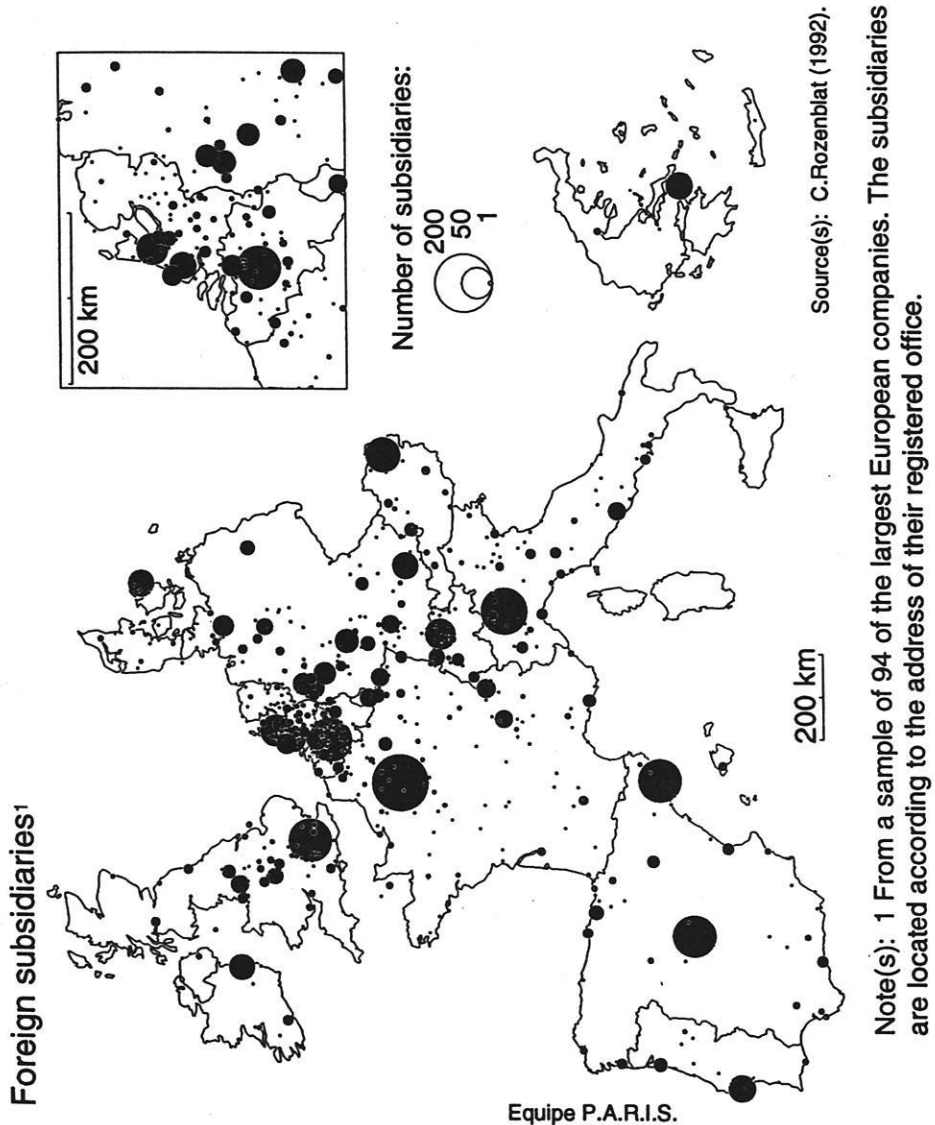


Figure 4 The Largest European Firms (continued)



Generally, international functions are highly concentrated in the largest cities, which offer favourable conditions for their development: their number and variety is correlated with the presence of international airports and important traffic connections, with the importance of high-level business services and luxury accommodation capacities (ROZENBLAT & PUMAIN 1993). However, a specific aspect of such functions like the attraction of international congresses may give a broader, not only economic, view of the international dimension of cities (Figure 5) (PALOMÄKI 1991). The main European cities for congresses are still Paris and London, but Geneva, Brussels, and Wien appear to be in good positions. The main large cities of eastern Europe are still lagging behind those of western Europe, even for such an international cultural function which is much less concentrated than the purely economic ones.

The European regions with highest densities do not concentrate many international functions but have developed a high intensity of international links. It is in those cities which are close to several national borders that the branches of multinational firms, looking for an access to large potential markets, have their highest density of linkages (Figure 6). Such a relative preference is explained by the existence of very well connected networks of cities which is characteristic of the rhenanian type of cities network (JUILLIARD & NONN 1976).

3. Previsible developments

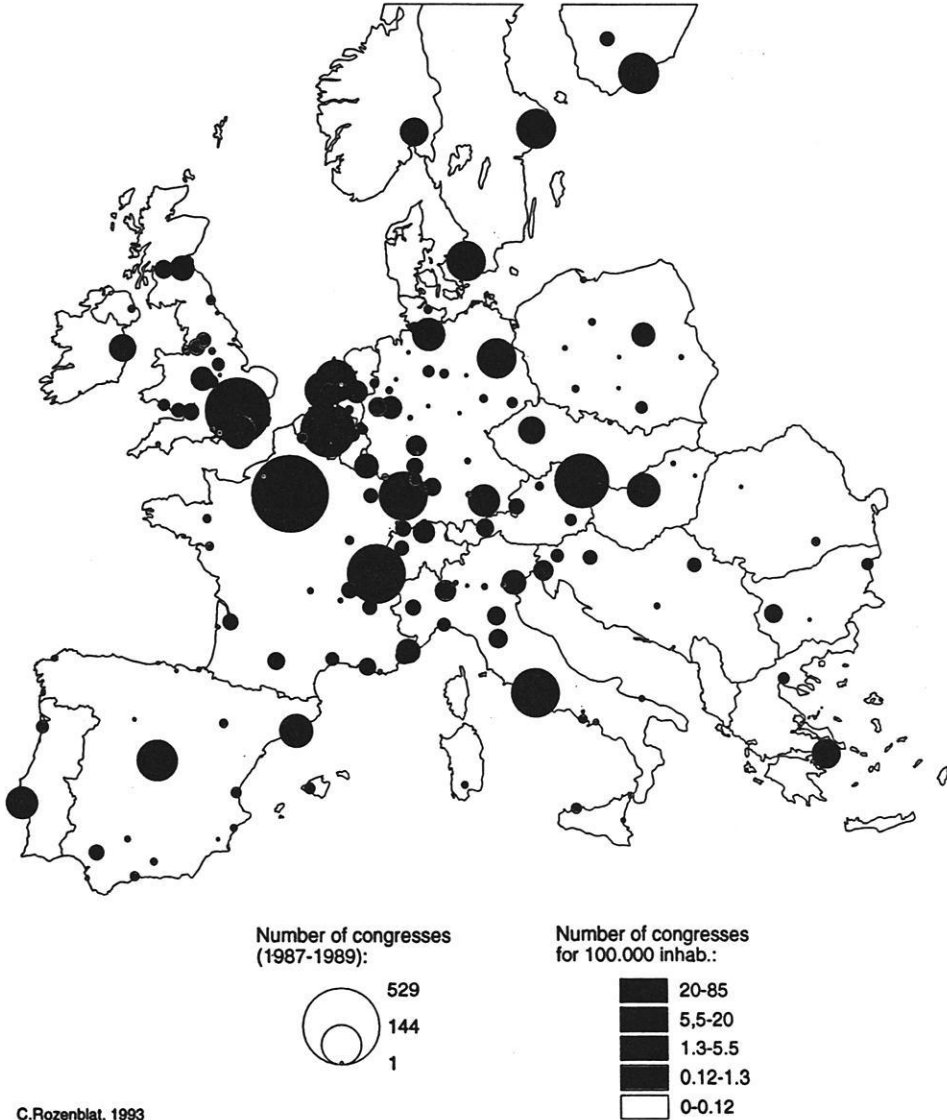
According to the large inertia of urban systems, and to the slow demographic and economic growth rates of the period in the whole European area, one cannot expect strong upheaval of the structural features of the European urban system in the near future. However, a few trends can be identified which may slightly alter the pattern as described above.

3.1 Shifts in urban growth

During the last four decades, a double shift occurred in the demographic and urban growth pattern of Europe (CATTAN and al. 1994; KUNZMANN & WEGENER 1991): the first one from the north to the south, and a second one from the west to the east may both be explained by a diffusion process (Figure 7). Such a process includes the last stages of demographic transition, rural exodus, and suburbanization (HALL 1993; CHAMPION 1989). The decrease in fertility rates has been surprisingly rapid in several countries, except in some part like Sweden and France. So the main growth differential in the future is to be expected from international migrations, whose intensity depends on political decisions and may be higher in the vicinity of the former border between the two blocks. High urban growth rates may also be expected in most of eastern countries where the growth of the largest cities had been contained by deliberate policies of housing shortage or migration regulation. The

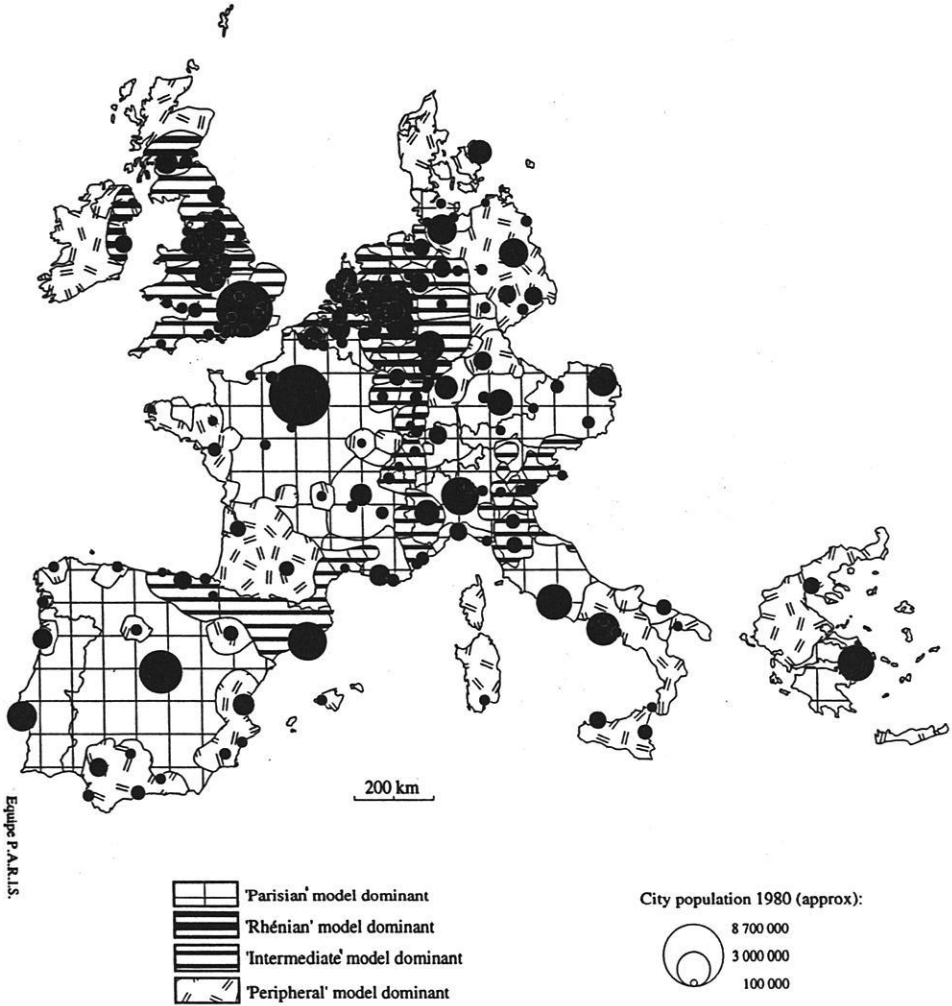
opening of trade and the development of communication means will also in a first stage favour those main economic and political centers of eastern Europe.

Figure 5 The Congresses in European Cities



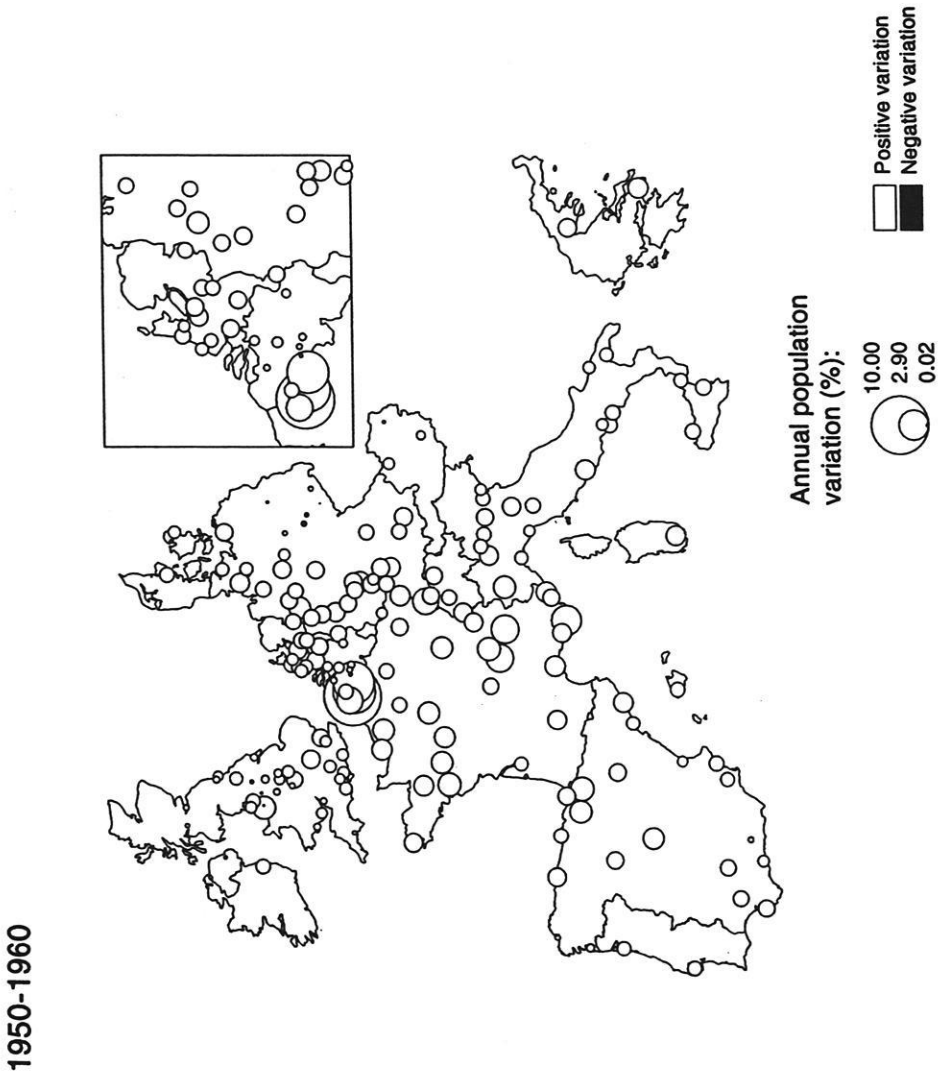
Source: International Congress Calendar (1987-1990)

Figure 6 Regional Models in Western Europe



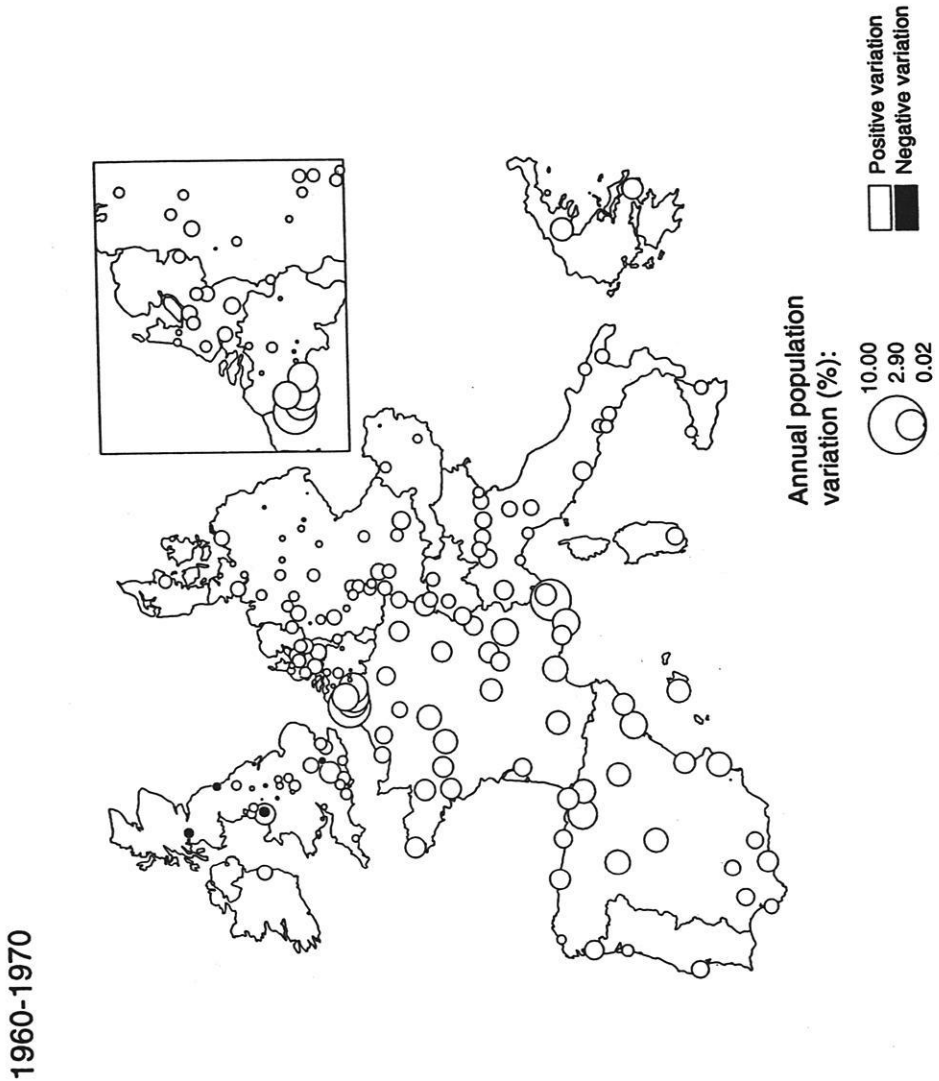
Source: After E. JULLIARD and H. NONN 1976; CATTAN and al. 1994

Figure 7 European Urban Population Change (1950-1990)



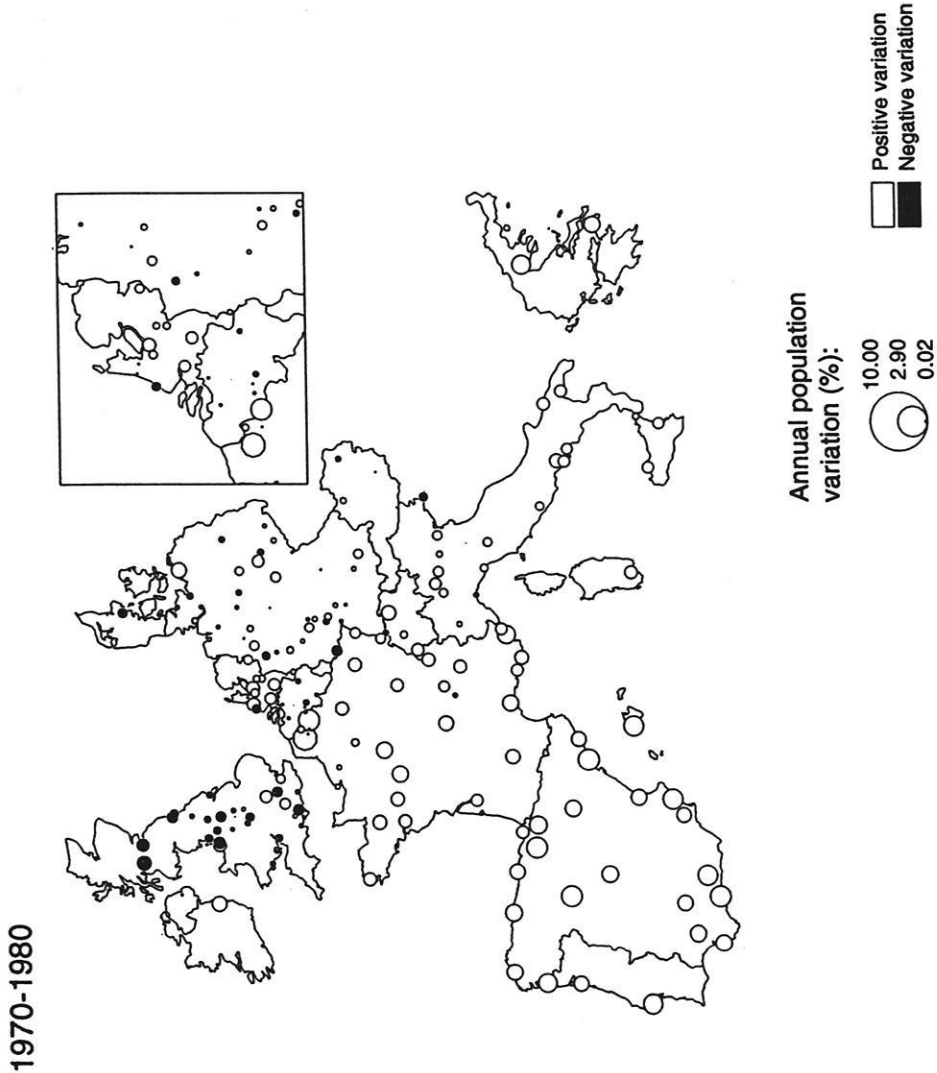
Source: MORICONI-EBRARD 1993

Figure 7 European Urban Population Change (1950-1990) (continued)



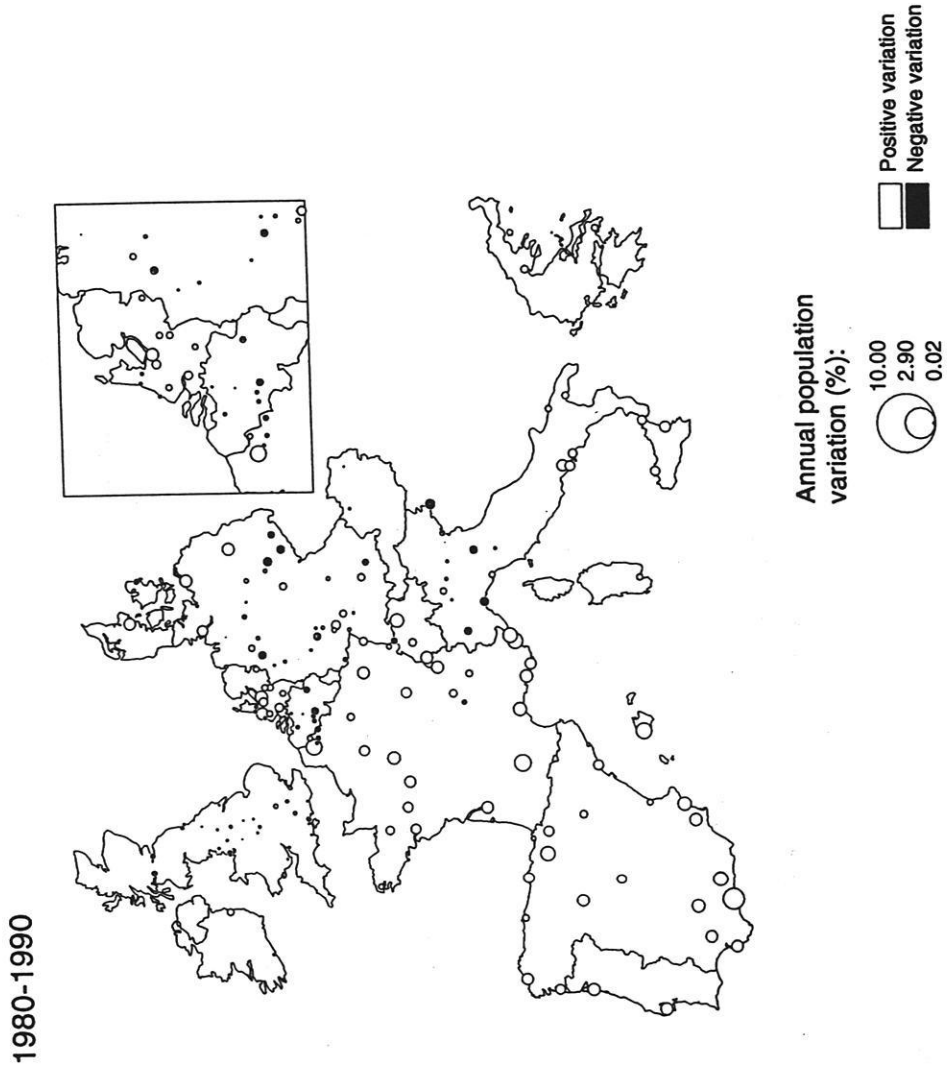
Source: MORICONI-EBRARD 1993

Figure 7 European Urban Population Change (1950-1990) (continued)



Source: MORICONI-EBRARD 1993

Figure 7 European Urban Population Change (1950-1990) (continued)



Source: MORICONI-EBRARD 1993

3.2 Weight of national organisation

Despite the growing internationalisation, the development of the urban system is still for the main part occurring within each particular country. National borders are still strong barriers in the geographical pattern of exchanges of all types. The presence of such borders still divides by a factor six or seven the importance of flows of migration or of goods, by train as well as by air (CATTAN 1993).

Moreover, the impression of national patterns is such that the actual position of a city within the emerging European urban system depends more of its relative weight within the national urban system it belongs to, rather than to its relative position in the European urban hierarchy. It is very likely that such a ranking which raise the level of a few relatively small but first-rank cities of small countries compared to the larger but second-rank cities of larger states, will continue to affect the reorganisation of the European urban system.

As a conclusion, one may assess that the future position that cities will occupy in the emerging European urban system will depend first on:

- their level in the general European hierarchy of city sizes;
- the role they have in their own country, as political or economic main centers;
- their specialization in various international functions like financial services, or transportation, as well as culture and tourism;
- their geographical position, giving an advantage to cities which are already more open to international connections because of their location close to several borders of a small country or at main junctions of wide-range transportation networks (CATTAN and al. 1994).

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