The Importance of the Territory: Postal Logistics and the Urban System in Brazil

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Abstract:

This paper aims to discuss the Brazilian urban system and the postal topology in the country. The mail has being connecting the Brazilian territory since the 17th century, when it was officially set up. From that time on, the urban system has been allowing postal services to succeed and also has had its development influenced by the development of mail. Since the creation of the enterprise Correios in 1968, the mail has played an important role in Brazil’s use and connection of its territory. The methodology for this paper consisted of using the last urban system study made by Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE in 2007, which demonstrates the present structure of the urban system in Brazil, considering all administrative centers of the 5565 municipalities in the country. We analyzed different data from Correios’ network, such as: delivery time from and to metropolis and other major cities; the location of major postal logistic centers in Brazil; the most important route lines for the mail in the country. The results showed that metropolises and major cities are more connected than other urban centers in the territory due to express services that ensure a faster temporality of flux. Because of postal services, a big city in far Amazonia can be virtually approximated, more than a small town near São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro. Even though there are differences in temporality in postal topology, every city is somehow connected to the other parts of the territory, only because of a particular characteristic of Brazilian mail: it is a State monopoly, extending the service throughout the country in all cities. It is the only institution with such capacity in Brazil.

Key words: urban system; mail; State; logistics
Introduction

This paper aims to discuss the Brazilian urban system and the postal topology in the country. In this study, we will focus on the relationship between the main characteristics of the urban system as well as its current transformations and the topology of the mail network in Brazil.

In the late 1990s and in these first years of the 21st century, it was argued that mail would disappear due to radical changes in the transport and communication techniques, affecting the way people send and receive messages and information worldwide. In many places, mail state departments and companies were treated as obsolete, rather than of strategic importance for the country sovereignty and important for the integration of the territory. These thoughts would surely allow neoliberal politics to privatize most of the mail public companies in all continents.

The advent of the internet brought other temporality in communication and the “instantaneous” was possible for the first time in history. From this time on, it was not necessary to wait days or even weeks for a letter or document to reach another part of the world. The electronic mail – e-mail – put a gap between the past and today’s communication. Even though the telegraph and the fax are much more ancient than the computer, they never had the spread and the embeddedness the internet has today.

What is not commonly recognized is the fact that great global mail operators – FedEx, UPS and DHL, for example – were created almost at the same time as the internet and talk of the obsolescence of the (public) mail companies. The existence of these global companies reveals at least two points: first, the mail did not and will not disappear, but it is certainly changing in content and meaning; second, mail continues to be or is now even more lucrative than before.

Actually, instead of eliminating the mail service, the advent of the internet improved it considerably. One great reason revolves around what we call e-commerce: after the internet, a new way of shopping (online) is rising all around the world and seems to be irreversible. Nevertheless, the operation in a cyberspace does not mean it does not need its material equivalence to succeed, that is, every product bought must be delivered in a specific place.
and in a certain time. This new content opens up a great opportunity for mail companies to improve its performance today, but it also implies more rigid delivery times and a variety of services. Even if many other non-postal companies deal with e-commerce solutions, most of the products bought online are delivered by mail companies, imposing a transformation of activity from the traditional postal services to modern logistics enterprises.

Studies of the mail are not common in geography. In general, many geographers may not have attended to the importance of this activity today or are studying it according to other perspectives, not trying to understand its role in the territory structure and in the urban system. The study led by Reguera (2007), for example, despite its inviting title “la lucha postal por el territorio”1, is mainly about geopolitics and philately, describing how the conflicts for territory and boundaries are represented in postal stamps from all continents. The study of mail today is important to reveal the relations between material and immaterial contents of the territory. It can also consider the importance of circulation in the production process and the different connections among cities in the same region or country.

The methodology of this paper consisted of using the last urban system study made by Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística2 – IBGE in 2007, which demonstrates the present structure of the urban system in Brazil, considering all administrative centers of the 5565 municipalities, officially the “city” or “town”, in the country. Afterwards, we analyzed different data from the Correios’ (mail) network, such as: delivery time from and to metropolis and other major cities; the location of major postal logistic centers in Brazil; and the most important route lines for the mail in the country. This analysis uses a system of concepts and ideas developed by geographers from a range of nationalities. Some expressions in Portuguese are all translated to English by us, but presented in the original language in the footnotes (or vice versa). The figures’ legends are also in Portuguese.

The text is divided into five parts: this introduction, presenting the text and contextualizing the theme; the second part is Brazilian mail service: historical notes, where we try, in few words, to bring up an idea of the principal transformations of the mail service in five centuries in the country;

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1 “Postal war for the territory” (our free translation)
2 Brazilian institute of geography and statistics (our free translation)
in the third part we present the current structure of the Brazilian urban system in the beginning of the 21st century, according to the last study led by IBGE and try to identify some important transformations by comparing it to previous studies in the past decades; the fourth part is called Postal logistics and the urban system in Brazil: differences and similarities, where we analyze how cities are included/excluded in the mail network and its consequences for the territory; finally, we brought up a conclusion from the ideas developed in previous parts, more indicative of questions than conclusive itself.

**Brazilian mail service: historical notes**

The letter written by Pero Vaz de Caminha, informing the King of Portugal about the new lands “found” in South America by Pedro Álvares Cabral’s expedition, in 1500 is considered the first official Brazilian correspondence. This fact, however, did not inaugurate the mail service at the same time as colonization, once only in the 17th century, in 1663, the mail operation initiated in the colony after the institution of the postmasters. This period was marked by an emergent mail service that did not connect the colonial cities, most of them in the coast, but did ensure a slow communication between the metropolis (Portugal) and some parts of its colony (Brazil), according to Rosario (1993). The first postal communication between Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo was realized in 1773, very late in comparison to the development of the activity in other countries. The first city in the interior to be connected by mail services was Campos dos Goytacazes in 1798.

In the early 19th century, the arrival of the Real Family in Brazil changed the capital of the kingdom from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro, beginning important changings in the colony. In 1808, the Banco do Brasil, a public and the greatest bank in Latin America was established. For the mail service, a direct connection between Rio and London replaced the old hub in Lisbon, a sign of the relative autonomy of the colony by that time. Fourteen years later the country became independent of Portugal and the mail services started to develop internally. From this period, residential delivery of correspondences was initiated – until that time, addressees got their mail
directly in the post office. The spread of the service to some major interior cities was also established (Poupard 1979).

The technical conditions of the late 19th and the early 20th century ensured an acceleration of the postal system in Brazil. First, the installation of the electric telegraph in 1852, then, the beginning of the transportation by airplane in 1921, changed the material conditions and made the postal network more complex. The Departamento de Correios e Telégrafos - DCT, created in 1931, was a decisive mark in this process of modernization (Correios 2012b). During the military period of the Brazilian government, under the ideology of the national integration and the colonization of remote areas such as Amazonia, the DCT was transformed into a public company called Empresa Brasileira de Correios e Telégrafos – ECT or simply Correios.

This process led to the fragmentation of the mail service and the creation of a new modality, the Serviço de Encomenda Expressa – SEDEX. The express mail service was created in Brazil in 1982 (Correios 2012a) and inaugurated a new temporality in the mail, in conformity with the flexibility and just-in-time ideas introduced in production by that time. Later the SEDEX itself was also fragmented into new modalities even more rigid and rapid.

This new business sense, according to Gertel (1991), turned the postal object (letters, packages, etc.) into a commodity, with differences in prices, types and clients served. It also resulted in the possibility of the private companies offering mail. In order to guarantee the public status of the mail, the State created a rule, the law 6538 in 1978, known as the Postal Law. It ensured that the mail service in Brazilian territory could only be offered by the State, which it does through Correios, creating a postal monopoly in Brazil. In addition, it also obliges the State to offer the service in every city and town of the country, expanding its influence to the whole territory. This prerogative was kept even after the military period, when a new Constitution was written in 1988 continuing to prohibit any another agent to offer a mail service in Brazil. The foreign companies, such as FedEx, UPS and DHL can

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3 Mail and telegraph department (our free translation)
4 Brazilian mail and telegraph company (our free translation)
5 Express mail service (our free translation)
operate only from Brazil to other countries and/or with postal objects over the Correios’ specification. Those global couriers tried unsuccessfully to break the postal monopoly before the Brazilian court in 2009.

What is astonishing talking about Brazil’s postal history is the 1990s’ period. The neoliberal thoughts could be found in almost all Latin American governments, as well as in Brazil. In this country, most public services, including banks, telecommunication and transportation were targets of privatization, marking a new period in the history of these services. The postal politics, however, were not to privatize, instead of what was happening in most of neighboring countries, but to modernize and keep it public at the same time. Today, the company Correios is the biggest public employer in the continent (Latin America) and the most respectable institution in Brazil.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Correios suffered other complex transformations, including: the function of correspondent bank, offering bank services in its agency all over the country; a kind of “logistics arm” of the State, collecting, treating, transporting and distributing objects in big operations such as the elections, the educational books distribution, vaccine distribution and donation aids in case of catastrophes; the “logistics arm” of the e-commerce market, the only logistics company operating in the whole country.

**Brazilian urban system in the beginning of the 21st century**

Since the studies led by Labasse (1955) and Rochefort (1960) in France, urban system analyses became important in geography. It does not mean that it was not studied before, but it started to receive more attention from that moment on. The classical study of Central Places in Southern Germany from Walter Christaller in 1933 (Christaller 1966), besides all the criticisms, inspired many geographers on their studies of the early twentieth century.

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6 Correios carries up to 30 kilos and limited-size objects only
7 According to Correios (2012b)
In Brazil, official studies called *Regiões de Influência das Cidades* - REGIC have been made by the IBGE, a state institute of research. The latest study was concluded in 2007 and launched in 2008; the previous ones were presented in 1966, 1972, 1987 and 1993. We will now analyze the Brazilian urban system according to the results of the REGIC in 1966 (Figure 1) and in 2007 (Figure 2).

Traditionally a simple colonial urban system, with an important center in the coast and many undifferentiated small towns connected to it (Corrêa 2007), the post-war Brazilian urban system is a lot more complex, but heterogeneous in its territorial structure. In 1966, São Paulo had already reached the highest degree, considered from that time on the “great national metropolis”. Rio de Janeiro was considered “national metropolis” and the other metropolises, with a regional role, were: Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, Salvador and Recife. The brand-new capital, Brasília, did not appear with an important national role at that time. The territory, analyzed from the urban system structure, showed a hard east-west differentiation, with most cities (metropolis or small towns) concentrated by the coast. Another differentiation was starting to appear between northern and southern parts of the territory, revealing a higher concentration and complexity surrounding São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, what later Milton Santos (Santos and Silveira 2001) called the “Brazilian core area”9, including the states of the Southeast, South and part of the Center-West regions.

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8 Cities’ influence region (our free translation)
9 Região concentrada do Brasil (our free translation)
In four decades, the changes in the urban system are still ongoing, due to new material conditions – new roads, airports, the industrial migration, new agricultural areas, among others – and immaterial ones – informational flows, new rules and lows, etc. Many cities emerged in the western part of the territory, characteristic of a new urbanization, while the metropolis phenomena extended to other cities. São Paulo continued to be the only “great national metropolis”, even more powerful as it can capture, create and transmit information to the entire territory – it is the “omnipresent metropolis”, according to Santos (1993). Now Brasília and Rio de Janeiro are both considered “national metropolis”, once Brasilia has an important public and administrative role (in contrast of the economic command from São Paulo). This structure is now even more complex because the list of four
regional metropolises Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte, Salvador and Recife has now increased to at least five more important metropolitan centers, with strong regional roles and national importance in some activities; they are: Curitiba, Goiânia, Fortaleza, Belém and Manaus. The urban system became more concentrated in the east part of territory, but also more complex in the southern “core area”, presenting many intermediate centers and a deeper territorial division of labor among them.

Figure 2 - Brazilian urban system in 2007. Source: IBGE, 2008
Postal logistics and the urban system in Brazil: differences and similarities

The analysis of the postal topology finds a correspondence in Jacques Lévy’s thought (Lévy 1993). The topologic metric has connections to the idea of network and has nothing to with the physical distances in the territory. A topologic analysis of a company or service can offer elements to discuss centrality and the role of each center in the urban system.

In the Brazilian postal topology, using the topology of the public company Correios as a proxy, the metropolitan areas have a central role. It is, first of all, caused by the origin of the main flows (in quantity of objects), obvious in case of population and economic activities concentration. But this central role is reinforced by many special conditions of the postal logistics activity. The first of it is the location of major postal logistic centers in Brazil: dealing with almost ten billion objects/year (Correios 2012b) requires a large logistics structure in order to collect, treat, transport and distribute the postal objects to each of the 5565 cities in Brazil. In this tangle of origins and destinations, some cities become logistics centers, gathering the objects and redistributing them to other cities. In theory, every city has its centrality, similarly to the urban system. The schema goes like this:

- Post offices exist in every city, but some major cities have much more than just one;
- From the post offices, the objects (packages, letters, etc.) go to a regional center;
- Then, from the regional center the objects follow to the capital of each state10;
- At last, each state capital sends the postal objects to one important logistics center.

Only few metropolises possess all functions, that is, have the local post office of the neighborhood and the logistics center. These metropolises, with a role that covers more than its own state, are: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro,

10 Brazil is divided into 26 states and the federal district, where is located the capital Brasília.
Brasília, Recife and Curitiba, in the top stage, Fortaleza and Salvador, in the second one. Metropolitan areas such as Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte and Manaus are connected to one of the previous centers. In any case, the most important route lines for the mail in the country benefit the capital and metropolitan areas, allowing connections between them despite the rest of the territory.

Medium cities have also an important role, as they allow the connection between local cities and the state capital/metropolis. Generally, their role is restricted, not connecting to other medium cities or cities located in other states. However, recent changes in the postal topology started to break this structure, choosing some non-metropolitan/capital cities as logistics centers. These cities, except for Feira de Santana (BA), are all in the countries “core area”, revealing the complexity of the urban system in this area. Examples are: Campinas and Bauru (SP), Uberlândia and Juiz de Fora (MG), Londrina and Maringá (PR) and Joinville (SC). These cities can connect to distant parts of the territory without the intermediation of the metropolis, allowing faster links and another temporality.

Delivery time is an important content of the postal topology. The basic express service – SEDEX is offered in all cities, but the delivery time differs according to the location of the city. This location does not always have to do with distance, but how central is the city in the urban system. Under the slogan “mandou, chegou”11, it seems the whole territory is connected quickly, ignoring the differences of the geographical space. This express service connects all metropolises, capitals and major cities in one day. In Amazonas, for example, the capital Manaus is more rapidly connected to very distant cities, such as Porto Alegre in the far south of the country, than to neighboring cities where the faster way for the mail to get there takes five or six days, usually by boats in the rivers of Amazonia. The country’s “core area” has the shortest delivery times, as well as some other metropolises and capitals in other less developed regions. This is in accordance with what Milton Santos called the constitution of a techno-scientific-informational milieu12 in Brazil (Santos 1996), a part of the territory with a greater presence of technique, information and science in its constitution and

11 “Sent, delivered”
12 Meio técnico-científico-informacional
operation. This milieu appears as a continuous space in the “core area” and just as points and spots in the other three regions.

The express service is even more selective if we consider its variation. In three decades, new modalities of the SEDEX were created, always pursuing the frenesi of the speed. The SEDEX 10 offers an express service with a shorter and precise time, delivering the postal object until 10 a.m. of the following day. The SEDEX 12 is similar to that one, but the delivery time is at noon. More rapid is the SEDEX Hoje service, delivering the objects on the same day of the post. These faster services are even more selective, connecting, as priority: metropolises; state capitals; cities located in metropolitan areas; important medium cities, generally in the national core area; international tourist centers; important industrial cities; one or other medium city in the modern agricultural areas. These cities could be considered as spaces of the speed13, as Santos (1996) called some areas endowed with upper conditions of fluidity.

**Conclusion**

The State’s role in the urban system continuous to be central and it seems to be even more important in countries with such regional differences, like Brazil. An analysis of the bank topology in Brazil shows that, due to privatization, state capital cities lost centrality as they did not continue to be centers of territorial management14, as pointed out by Corrêa (2007). The private banks chose São Paulo as the hub of their activities. In the case of mail, cities that are state capitals still have an important role due to the public status of the activity. The Brazilian postal topology is similar to other public services in the country, with a strong centrality in Brasília and in the other state capitals. This model of hierarchy seems to be less concentrated and spreads functions through the territory. While the market seems to result in concentration, State intervention seems to result in diffusion.

The express services are selective and impose fragmentation and differentiation in the urban system. Even when just some parts of the

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13 Espaços da rapidez
14 Centros de gestão do território
territory have conditions for fluidity, the market anticipates differentiation by requiring speed wherever it is possible, including some cities and excluding many others. It’s about a network of networks, where the delivery time is one special condition to be part of a new temporality in the “spaces of speed”.

The rules have an important role in the territory. Even selective in some express services, the mail has a unique capillarity in Brazil, covering all cities and bringing more equality to the urban system. This has nothing to do with market, but surely it is about the obligation the Postal Law imposes to the State to offer the service in the whole territory. This aspect points to the inseparability between material and immaterial contents of the territory, the geographical space itself being considered as a “set of systems of objects and systems of actions”15 (Santos 1996).

The importance of location is reinforced in times of globalization. The territory, the distances and the geography remain highly significant despite the writings of many authors at the beginning of this century. The possibility of rigid delivery time and the frenesi of speed increases the selectiveness, which differentiates the cities in the urban system, specializes them and increases the importance of the urban system itself to the success of capitalist activities.

Logistics is another word for corporate circulation. The understanding of what does mail mean today passes by the introduction of logistics concepts in its activities and the increasing role the logistics services (generally related to e-commerce and big operations) are playing in opposition to the old (but still existing) communication function of the letters. The mail does not disappear in times of digital communication, but changes in content and form. In Brazil, the postal topology causes a reinforcement of the existing urban system structure, connecting the metropolises and major cities, but also ensuring the connection of every city in the country and the regional role of the state capital cities.

15 “Conjuntos de sistemas de objetos e sistemas de ações”
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