

THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ANALYSIS PROPOSAL ON SMALL CITIES, LOCAL CITIES, SMALL LOCALITIES, MIKRIPOLITAN SPACE

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze and define the appropriate terminology for "small cities," "local cities," "small localities," or "mikriopolitan space." To achieve this, one of the methodological procedures was a comprehensive literature review regarding the subject, highlighting key authors of Brazilian geography, such as Pierre Monbeig, Milton Santos, Roberto Lobato Corrêa, Tania Maria Fresca, and Ângela Maria Endlich. The study underscores the lack of available research on these geographical spaces. Monbeig (1957) argued that small cities warrant investigation due to their unique complexity. Santos (2008) also acknowledged the paucity of studies on these cities, accentuating their significance as entities comparable to large cities in developing countries. In Espaço e Método [Space and Method], Santos (2008b [1985]) expounded on how complexity increases as the scale of study diminishes. While Endlich (2017) reported an increase in academic production on small localities, she nonetheless observed that it remains insufficient. Data from the 2022 Demographic Census demonstrated that in 88.01% of Brazilian municipalities the population is less than 50,000, thus reflecting the importance of this topic. In order to exemplify, the study also proposes to analyze the network and the intermediate geographic region of Cascavel in the state of Paraná.

Keywords: Small Cities; Local Cities; Small Localities; Mikriopolitan Space; Geographic Region.

Resumo / Resumen

PERSPECTIVA TEÓRICO-METODOLÓGICA E PROPOSTA DE ANÁLISE SOBRE PEQUENAS CIDADES, CIDADES LOCAIS, PEQUENAS LOCALIDADES, ESPAÇO MIKRIPOLITANO

Este trabalho visa analisar a terminologia mais adequada para "pequenas cidades", "cidades locais", "pequenas localidades" ou "espaço mikriopolitano", buscando estabelecer parâmetros de definição. Para tanto, um dos procedimentos metodológicos foi um resgate teórico sobre o tema, com destaque para autores clássicos da Geografia Brasileira como: Pierre Monbeig; Milton Santos, Roberto Lobato Corrêa, Tania Maria Fresca, Ângela Maria Endlich etc. O estudo destaca a carência de investigações sobre esses espaços geográficos. Monbeig (1957) argumenta que pequenas cidades merecem estudo por sua complexidade única. Santos (2008) também menciona a falta de estudos sobre essas cidades, ressaltando seu interesse comparável às grandes cidades em países em desenvolvimento. Em "Espaço e Método", Santos (2008b [1985]) discute a complexidade crescente à medida que se reduz a escala de estudo. Endlich (2017) observa um aumento na produção acadêmica sobre pequenas localidades, embora ainda insuficiente. Dados do Censo Demográfico 2022 mostram que 88,01% dos municípios brasileiros têm menos de 50 mil habitantes, refletindo a importância desse tema. O trabalho também propõe analisar a rede e região geográfica intermediária de Cascavel no Paraná como exemplo.

Palavras-chave: Pequenas cidades; Cidades locais; Pequenas localidades; Espaço Mikriopolitano; Regiões Geográficas.

PERSPECTIVA TEÓRICO-METODOLÓGICA Y PROPUESTA DE ANÁLISIS SOBRE CIUDADES PEQUEÑAS, CIUDADES LOCALES, PEQUEÑAS LOCALIDADES, ESPACIO MIKRIPOLITANO

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo analizar la terminología más adecuada para "ciudades pequeñas", "ciudades locales", "localidades pequeñas" o "espacio mikriopolitano", buscando establecer parámetros de definición. Para ello, uno de los procedimientos metodológicos fue una revisión teórica del tema, con énfasis en autores clásicos de la Geografía brasileña como: Pierre Monbeig; Milton Santos, Roberto Lobato Corrêa, Tania Maria Fresca, Ângela Maria Endlich, etc. El estudio destaca la falta de investigaciones sobre estos espacios geográficos. Monbeig (1957) sostiene que las ciudades pequeñas merecen estudio por su complejidad única. Santos (2008) también menciona la falta de estudios sobre estas ciudades, destacando su interés comparable al de las grandes ciudades de los países en desarrollo. En "Espacio y método", Santos (2008b [1985]) analiza la creciente complejidad a medida que se reduce la escala del estudio. Endlich (2017) observa un aumento de la producción académica en localidades pequeñas, aunque aún insuficiente. Datos del Censo Demográfico de 2022 muestran que el 88,01% de los municipios brasileños tienen menos de 50 mil habitantes, lo que refleja la importancia de este tema. El trabajo también propone analizar como ejemplo la red y región geográfica intermedia de Cascavel en Paraná.

Palabras-clave: Pequeñas Ciudades; Ciudades Locales; Pequeñas Localidades; Espacio Mikriopolitano; Región Geográfica

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine which is the most appropriate terminology to use in contemporary contexts for “small cities”, “local cities”, “small localities” and even in certain cases, “mikripolitan space”. In order to address the challenge of establishing parameters for defining these terms, we will draw upon the research of some prominent authors of Brazilian urban geography, particularly Milton Santos and Roberto Lobato Corrêa. This proposal is justified primarily by the relative dearth of research focusing on these geographic spaces, especially when compared to other urban geographic themes. Furthermore, the limited number of studies that do explore this topic, aside from the term “mikripolitan space”, frequently employ one of the three aforementioned terminologies without distinguishing one from the other. Additionally, according to Monbeig (1957, p.36), small cities warrant investigation because they are as interesting “[...] as modern urban beehives and it is almost always more difficult to specify their mechanism and the calm rhythm of their life than to analyze the well-oiled gears, running at full speed, of the imposing metropolises. [...]”.¹ Therefore, the justification meets the need to bring visibility to these often overlooked small cities.

Similarly, Santos (2008) also refers to this relative lack of studies on the smaller cities addressed in this study, and the prevailing preference for studying large cities in underdeveloped, or, slightly more preferable, developing countries. “[...] However, on closer examination of both the statistics and the reality, we see another urban phenomenon emerging, that of local cities which, in our view, merit as much interest [as large cities] [...]” (SANTOS, 2008, p. 85).

Santos (2008b [1985]) goes on to highlight the complexity of studying the “smaller”. Thus, the larger the scale of study, the simpler it is to examine. On the other hand, “[...] the more complex and capable of subdivisions then the smaller the scale. The smaller the place being examined the greater the number of levels and external determinants that affect it. Hence, the complexity of studying the smaller” (SANTOS, 2008b [1985] p.13).

Although academic production regarding small localities has remained below the necessary level, various contributions have deepened our understanding of their realities (ENDLICH, 2017). Thus, “the academic agenda has increasingly included the topic of small cities, although, proportionally, much less than would be necessary to account for the complexity of the large group they represent [...]” (ENDLICH, 2021, p. 103). According to data from the 2022 Demographic Census, Brazil had a total of 5,570 municipalities, of which 4,902 municipalities had a resident population of less than 50 thousand inhabitants, representing 88.01% of Brazilian municipalities. The Southern region of the country has a total of 1,191 municipalities, of which 1,078 municipalities have a population of less than 50 thousand inhabitants, i.e., 90.51% of the total (Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics - IBGE, 2022).

A secondary objective seeks to present a proposal for analyzing networks and intermediate geographic regions, together with the insertion of their local and/or small cities and small localities. As an example, we present the case of Cascavel, located in the intermediate geographic region in the Southern Brazilian state of Paraná.

The article is divided into five parts. In addition to this introduction, there is a discussion on the terminology used in the analyzed theme, followed by a study proposal regarding the inclusion of local/small cities into the network and the intermediate geographic region of Cascavel. The discussion concludes with considerations and respective references.

It should be emphasized that this text aims to stimulate debate with publications that have focused on the analysis of this topic. To achieve this, one of the methodological procedures has involved a comprehensive literature review, with particular emphasis on prominent authors of Brazilian geography, such as: Monbeig (1957); Santos (1982; 1988; 1993; 2008; 2008b); Corrêa (1989; 1997; 1999; 2006; 2011); Fresca (1990; 2000; 2001; 2009; 2010); Soares (2007); Endlich (2006; 2017; 2021), etc.

SMALL CITIES, LOCAL CITIES, SMALL LOCALITIES AND MIKRIPOLITAN SPACE: A DISCUSSION

The main distinctions between the concepts of small city and local city lie in the fact that a small city (medium, large) is often equated by some researchers with demographic and territorial size,

therefore, reflecting a quantitative focus. In contrast, a local city (regional, national, global) is characterized by its roles, functions, and respective spatial reach within the urban network, therefore, highlighting a qualitative perspective.

The terminology “small localities” has been used as a synonym for local cities. This has been indicated in a number of studies by Endlich (2021; 2017; 2006), who has emphasized that “[...] local cities should be the concept adopted to capture this traditional role of small localities. The term small cities, on the other hand, may be used with a different meaning and perhaps encompassing new dynamics and meanings” (ENDLICH, 2017, p. 50).

It is crucial to emphasize that it is mistaken to believe that a quantitative analysis would be sufficient to understand the specificity and function of the city under analysis. It is essential to remember that each city is different, regardless of its demographic size, and that no two cities are alike (SANTOS, 1988). Consequently, when investigating “small cities and local cities”, qualitative analyses should be used, recognizing that these two terminologies are not interchangeable; they differ in their theoretical and methodological foundations and must be distinguished as such (CASARIL, 2010; FRESCA, 2010). Thus, as Fresca (2001) asserted, to characterize a city as small, it is imperative to understand its position within a specific urban network. Moreover, an urban network should be understood as “[...] a set of functionally articulated centers” (CORRÊA, 1989, p. 8).

Even if the author of a particular study accepts the use of either of the two terms, it is essential that at the beginning of a given research project, the understanding of the notion of “small city and/or local city” is presented. This is often overlooked in most academic works. Thus, it is for this and other reasons that Santos (2008) used the term “local cities”, since, when referring to “small cities”, the notion of demographic numbers immediately comes to mind. Reflecting on the urban from this perspective constitutes a lack of knowledge on the particularities of each city. Therefore, as mentioned, an explanation on the understanding of the notion of the aforementioned urban agglomeration is indispensable. “[...] Accepting a minimum number, as several countries and the United Nations have done, to characterize different types of cities worldwide, is to run the risk of a dangerous generalization [...]”, because an approach from the “[...] functional viewpoint is primarily a qualitative phenomenon and presents certain morphological aspects specific to each civilization and admits quantitative expression, which is another problem” (SANTOS, 2008, p. 86).

Thus, when using population data to classify a city as small, there is a risk of equating cities that are essentially different. In other words, relying solely on demographic data may lead to cities with similar populations being categorized as small, but will fail to provide a full understanding of the unique characteristics of each city, including their specific roles, their areas of influence, their spatial interactions, among other basic qualifiers for considering a city as small. These aspects provide a more nuanced approach to understanding a small city, focusing the analysis on its position within the urban network (CASARIL, 2010; FRESCA, 2010).

However, starting from Santos' viewpoint (1982), he observes that:

A local city is the smallest dimension from which agglomerations cease to serve the needs of the primary activity in order to serve the pressing needs of the population with the real specialization of space. [...] We may then define a local city as an agglomeration capable of meeting the basic needs, real or created, of an entire population, a function that involves a life of relationships (Santos, 1982, p. 70-71).

Thus, it is necessary to find the foundation, i.e., the minimum limit, of “[...] complexity of the urban activities that are capable of [...] simultaneously ensuring a self-sustained growth and territorial dominion” (SANTOS, 1982, p. 70). Otherwise, we would be working with pseudo-cities.

The viewpoint presented above,

[...] allows us to understand the minimum size from which it is possible to speak of a real city, and in this case, of central localities. However, this refers to the complex conditions and elements necessary to consider other cities as being small. From the minimum level of activities [...], there is a significant diversity of cities, whose complexity of urban activities exceeds the so-called minimum level. But this does not automatically generate the necessary elements for them to be considered intermediate cities or metropolises, meaning that

even with a certain complexity of urban activities above the minimum level, they continue to be small. Thus, here lies the reason for the use of the expression small city for those cities that are not central localities (FRESCA, 2010, p. 4).

Therefore, reinforcing what has already been mentioned, Fresca (2001) emphasized the indispensable fact that to characterize a city as small, it is necessary to understand its insertion into a given urban network. Hence,

Small towns still play a significant role in providing immediate goods and services to a substantial portion of the population. However, it should be considered that the nature of these has changed qualitatively compared to previous historical periods. In other words, goods and services have become much more comprehensive due to the needs or the demands of the consumer system on the urban population. Quantitative and qualitative changes have occurred in the tertiary sector of small cities, partially meeting the demands of their consumer market, whether through the presence of physical establishments or through e-commerce. This last possibility of acquiring goods, coupled with consumer income, has led to many changes in previous analytical frameworks regarding the tertiary sector. (FRESCA, 2010, p.6).

For Santos (2004; 2008), the terms “primate city”, “medium-sized cities”, and “small cities” are only applicable when a country is considered in isolation. Thus, these terms lose their comparative value, and therefore, he preferred to adopt the terms “complete and incomplete metropolises”, “regional cities” and “local cities”, which are much more qualitative than quantitative. These terminologies were not chosen arbitrarily. Santos recognized that in reality concreteness is constantly evolving, leading to spatial, economic, social, and political transformations in local cities. These denominations/terminologies are metaphors that, according to Kosik (1976), are used to try to break free from pseudo-concreteness and reach real concreteness, i.e., attempting to explain reality, contemporaneity, and the current ever-changing spatial landscape.

Thus, small cities experience both qualitative and quantitative transformations, modifying their contributions to commercial and service activities. Moreover, these changes are accompanied by shifts in productive consumption. It is important to emphasize that these developments represent just one of the various ways in which regional development occurs. The more pronounced the social and territorial division of labor within a region, “[...] the more cities emerge and [...] the more different they are from one another”. This also leads to increased opportunities for productive specialization. In this context, it is crucial to highlight that, “[...] rural productive consumption does not adapt to cities, but rather, it adapts cities” (SANTOS, 1993, p. 50-51). Thus,

[...] These are designed to address the specific needs of particular productions, leading to a greater differentiation between cities. They become increasingly differentiated by the fact that the nexus of productive consumption is linked to the need to find timely, localized solutions for the march of production. This phenomenon, formerly confined to cities, which served as ‘depositories’ for the factors of industrial production, now extends into rural areas. However, the difference is that, from that moment on, the regulation of the rural world is no longer undertaken within rural areas. Today, [...] all agricultural regulation data are generated in the urban areas [...] (SANTOS, 1993, p.56).

According to Santos (1988, p. 53), theoretical and methodological development teaches us what ceases to have theoretical and methodological value, and prompts us to replace traditional categories with more current categories. Hence,

[...] Local cities are changing in content. Previously, they were the cities of the notables, today they have become transformed into economic cities. The city of the notables, where the outstanding personalities were the priest, the notary public, the primary teacher, the judge, the prosecutor, the telegraphist, gives way to the economic city, where the agronomist (who previously lived in the capitals), the veterinarian, the banker, the agricultural pilot, the specialist in fertilizers, the person responsible for specialized businesses are indispensable. (SANTOS, 1993, p. 56).

Corrêa (1999) similarly categorizes these urban agglomerations as small centers or small nuclei, situated at the interface of rural and urban areas. He defines them as having a population of under 50,000 inhabitants. According to Corrêa, the globalization of the economy leads to a refunctionalization of small cities, which can occur in two ways: the first involves “[...] the relative or absolute loss of centrality, often accompanied by the emergence of new non-central functions directly tied to rural production” (CORRÊA, 1999, p. 48). The second entails “[...] a productive specialization in the pre-existing nucleus, inserting it differently into the urban network, introducing a more complex territorial division of labor. [...]” (CORRÊA, 1999, p. 50).

It is essential to recognize that small cities are varied with distinct specificities, functions, and spatial patterns. However, it must be understood that in urban studies, it is necessary to develop analyses in a way that bonds history, geography, and economics into the interpretation of the reality being investigated. Isolating these interconnected elements would oversimplify the complexity of urban realities and hinder our ability to analyze them effectively.

Globalization has expanded the spatial transformations generated at all urban scales of the network and is also present in the cities that occupy the base of this network.

Globalization has a profound impact on the economic, social, political, and cultural spheres, as well as on the spatial organization that both reflects and shapes these spheres. In other words, globalization has an impact, albeit uneven, on forms, functions, and social agents, altering them to varying degrees and, in some cases, replacing them entirely. This spatial restructuring manifests itself at the most general level, in the recreation of differences between regions and urban centers, as well as in the links between these and between the centers (CORRÊA, 1999, p. 44).

Small or large cities, as places, are unique, and each city is different from the other. Each place combines, in a particular manner, variables that may be common to several places (SANTOS, 1988). Thus, according to Fresca (2009, p. 5), “[...] a city with around 10,000 inhabitants in the urban network of Manaus will be quite different from a similar city in terms of population in the northern urban network of the state of Paraná, even if both are considered small”.

This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of a city as being small, thus avoiding the pitfalls of population-based classifications, of recent discussions suggesting that Brazil is less urban than commonly believed, and of the generalization that small cities are mere suppliers of basic goods and services to the population of a restricted area of influence (FRESCA, 2009, p. 5).

Along the same lines of thought, Endlich (2017, p. 37) presented a question: “when we refer to a city as small, are we referring to its population, to its territory, or to its functional aspects and its roles in the urban network?”. A question that the author herself answers as follows:

[...] Our most common reference for comparison is generally based on demographic factors. Therefore, it is important to clarify that this refers to what is demographically small. Likewise, when referring to small municipalities, it is essential to specify, since they may be extensive in terms of territory but are still demographically small (ENDLICH, 2017, p. 37-38).

The aforementioned author's question and clarification are of particular relevance to the discussion. They are consistent with the line of reasoning thus far presented and should be considered when developing research on this topic.

Furthermore, discussing the demographically small, Endlich (2021, p. 116) comments that “small cities/peripheral localities are those that present the greatest difficulty in maintaining their population [...]”.

Therefore, it is clear that these small cities/localities face numerous difficulties, most markedly economic, social, and demographic. Hence, aiming to present the terminology put forward by this article, we have thus far failed to highlight the concept of “mikripolitan space,” even if briefly, since this was a concept formulated during the discussion and elaboration stages of Mikripoli- Rede de

Pesquisadores de Pequenas Cidades [Researcher Network for Small Cities], formed and registered with the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) in 2021, headed by Prof. Dr. Paulo Fernando Jurado da Silva and Prof. Dr. Ângela Maria Endlich. The concept of "mikropolitan space" arises from the aim to consider the diversification and diversity of the urbanization process generated in Brazilian urban spaces, moving beyond approaches that solely focus on the larger cities within the urban network. A holistic understanding of small cities in their territorial context is crucial. Therefore, it is essential to gather knowledge that encompasses these localities at the intersection of the field, at the local and regional scales, and within the urban network, aiming to concretize, and expand the visibility of these geographically peripheral spaces. It is important to note that the primary emphasis is on the local cities and small cities that do not belong to metropolitan regions.

Thus, mikropolitan spaces are characterized as a counterpoint not only to metropolitan spaces but also to larger-scale urban networks that have been more extensively studied, and that enjoy greater visibility, and more resources for planning and management. By focusing on mikropolitan spaces, we aim to acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of Brazil's rich urban landscape³.

Through the next subsection of this article, we will discuss a proposed study on the network and intermediate geographic region, focusing on its local cities and small cities. As an example, we will examine the network and intermediate geographic region of Cascavel, in the state of Paraná.

A STUDY PROPOSAL ON THE LOCAL CITIES AND SMALL CITIES IN THE NETWORK AND INTERMEDIATE REGION OF CASCAVEL, PARANÁ

When presenting a study proposal such as this, it is necessary to consider that, at the regional and network level, there will be a significant variation in the condition of each intra-regional city. Thus, the network and the intermediate geographic region of Cascavel has been considered as the spatial cross-section, composed of eight immediate geographic regions (IBGE, 2017).

This division is recent, resulting from a review by the IBGE in 2017, which replaced the geographic mesoregions and microrregions (1989) with intermediate and immediate geographic regions. This change reflected the growing internal differentiation of the Brazilian territory due to economic, demographic, political, and environmental changes over the past three decades.

The immediate geographic regions (RGim) are based on the urban network, meeting the immediate needs of the population, such as purchases and work (IBGE, 2017). The intermediate geographic regions (RGinter)⁴, in turn, are located between the federative units and the immediate geographic regions, generally including either metropolises or regional capitals (IBGE, 2017).

The concepts of network-territory and zone-territory (HAESBAERT, 2004) have guided the methodological choice of regional divisions. Based on the urban network, the model sought internal coherence and stability, although the IBGE highlights the need for constant reviews so as to keep up with changes across the national territory (IBGE, 2017).

Cascavel was classified as a Level B regional capital in the most recent REGIC – Areas of Influence of Cities study (IBGE, 2020), polarizing municipalities into the Western, Southwestern, and Central-Southern mesoregions of Paraná. Cascavel's area of influence exceeds the delimitation of the Western mesoregion, thereby making the regional division proposed by the IBGE, of immediate and intermediate regions, more appropriate, according to the dynamics of the urban network.

With this regional division, in Brazil as a whole, the IBGE established 510 immediate geographic regions (RGim) grouped into 133 intermediate geographic regions (RGinter). In the state of Paraná, six RGinters were established, composed of 29 RGims.

As a spatial division, as mentioned above, the proposed study sets out to address the network and intermediate geographic region (RGinter) of Cascavel, composed of eight immediate geographic regions (RGim) (see Figure 1): Cascavel, Foz do Iguaçu, Toledo, Francisco Beltrão, Pato Branco, Laranjeiras do Sul- Iguaçu Falls, Dois Vizinhos, and Marechal Cândido Rondon. In total, this RGinter of Cascavel groups 100 municipalities (IBGE, 2017).

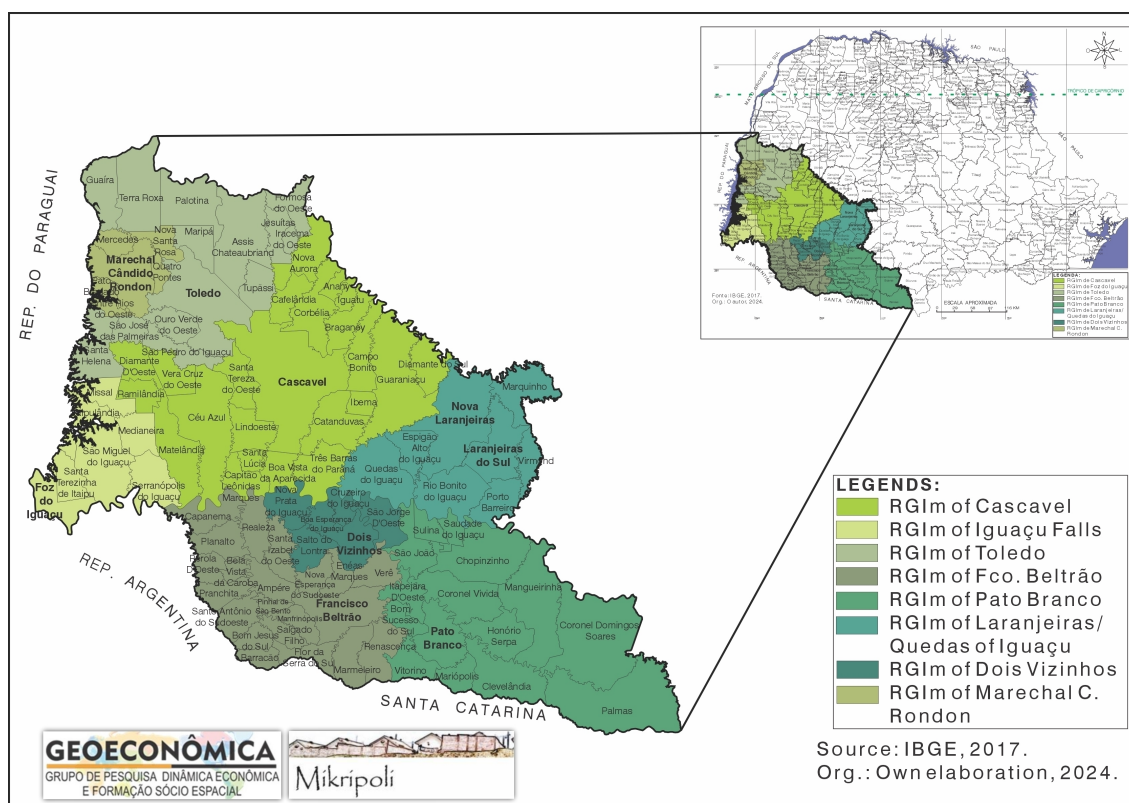


Figure 1 - Intermediate Geographic Region of Cascavel and the Immediate Geogrpahic Regions of which it is composed. Source: IBGE, 2017.

The 100 municipalities in the Cascavel RGinter make up eight RGIm, which are presented in Table 1, considering the number of municipalities grouped by demographic size.

RGIm. / Municipal size	Up to 5	5 to 10	10 to 20	20 to 50	50 to 100	Over 100	Total
RGIm of Cascavel	6	6	10	0	0	1	23
RGIm of Foz do Iguaçu	0	1	2	2	1	1	7
RGIm of Toledo	2	5	2	4	0	1	14
RGIm of Francisco Beltrão	6	7	7	0	1	0	21
RGIm of Pato Branco	2	5	4	3	1	0	15
RGIm of Laranjeiras do Sul/ Iguaçu Falls	3	1	2	2	0	0	8
RGIm of Dois Vizinhos	2	1	2	1	0	0	6
RGIm of Marechal Cândido Rondon	2	3	0	0	1	0	6
Total RGInter of Cascavel	23	29	29	12	4	3	100

Table 1 – The RGinter of Cascavel and the RGIm that make up the total of municipalities per demographic size, 2022 (thousand inhabitants). Source: IBGE, 2022. Org.: Own elaboration, 2024.

The information presented in Table 1 shows the distribution of the 100 municipalities that make up the Cascavel RGinter, per demographic size, and Figure 1 presents the spatialization of the Cascavel RGinter together with the RGIm of which it is composed.

The data reveals a region primarily composed of local cities and small cities, of which only four municipalities have a population of over 50,000, and three over 100,000. Therefore, the reality of the

regional urban network is densely populated by the presence of mikriopolitan spaces, that is to say, by cities at the base (smaller/lower level) of the national urban network.

As previously mentioned, the reality/totality is constantly undergoing change hence, seeking a more effective analysis, here we present a study proposal for the local cities and small cities located in the network and the intermediate geographic region of Cascavel. Therefore, it is essential to employ the sociospatial formation as an analytical framework, which encompasses a society's evolution, current situation, historical change, and relationships, considering its historical reality within a specific geographical location. The very basis of the explanation is production, i.e., labor, where humans transform space. Studying this aspect will enable "[...] the apprehension of the particular as a scission of the whole, a moment of the whole, as well as the whole reproduced in one of its fractions. [...] although always specific knowledge, apprehended at a given moment of its evolution" (SANTOS, 1982, p. 12).

The urban network constitutes a "[...] set of functionally articulated centers" (CORRÊA, 1989, p. 8), reflecting and conditioning the socio-economic transformations of society. It should be understood that the genesis and dynamics of a given urban network are inserted into the historical process, conferring it with an eminently social nature. Thus, the urban network is "[...] a social product, historically contextualized, whose crucial role, through spatialized social interactions, is to articulate the entire society in a given portion of space, guaranteeing its existence and reproduction" (CORRÊA, 1997, p. 93).

The urban network, as a socio-spatial dimension, reflects the processes of creation, appropriation, and circulation of surplus value, influenced by the territorial division of labor. It is essential to consider its dynamic and mutable character, since it changes according to social transformations (SANTOS, 1989). The urban network relates to other spatialities through the circulation of goods, people, ideas, and information, forming an articulated set of fixed items and flows that express geographic reality and production relations.

To study an urban network or region, such as the intermediate geographic region of Cascavel, it is necessary to understand its genesis, the conditions under which it was created and the circulation of surplus value, and the origin of the cities, understanding their foundation and functionality. However, it is also important to understand the social dynamics and the translation of these dynamics into the regional network, considering internal and external changes, the agents involved, the regional articulation, and spatial transformations (CORRÊA, 2006). How and why are some cities more outstanding? What changes occurred after the 1980s and 1990s, and which of these transformations were more visible and enable us to obtain a clearer understanding of what has changed, always seeking to reach the essence rather than concentrating on appearances.

It is crucial to analyze the current regional urban network, considering the process of creation and the circulation of surplus, social agents, the role of the local elite, the spatial form of the network, the urban drainage of ground rent, agricultural commercialization, investments and job creation, and industrial relations (CORRÊA, 2006).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated changes in society, particularly in digital transformation, the internet of things, artificial intelligence, and the platformization of work, thereby altering the regional network and its theoretical characteristics. Currently, many services are accessible via the internet, however, the more sophisticated, such as specialized medical treatments, among others, still require displacement. Additionally, higher education is made possible in small localities through distance learning, although for higher quality courses, it is necessary to move to urban centers with major hierarchies, which offer undergraduate, master's, doctoral, and postdoctoral programs, generally in person.

The geographer's fieldwork is essential for this study proposal, although some data must be analyzed beforehand. Basic information regarding the region and the cities, obtained from secondary sources such as national and Paraná state surveys and bibliographic studies, is important in order to obtain some initial knowledge before the field activities. Included in these sources are databases obtained from both national and state and municipal agencies. Among this information are data on population dynamics from the IBGE censuses and population counts; the REGIC studies issued by the IBGE in the years 1972, 1987, 2000, 2008, and 2018, which present the changes that have occurred in the regional urban network; articles, dissertations, theses, and books that report the history, economy,

and geography of the region and cities. Data searches across public authority departments are also important, such as IPEA – the Institute of Applied Economics, IPARDES – the Paraná Institute for Economic and Social Development, FIEP – the Federation of Industries for the State of Paraná, and various federal ministries, such as the MTE - Ministry of Labor and Employment, which issues publications on RAIS - Annual Report of Social Information and CAGED - General Registry of Employed and Unemployed. Thus, Table 2 and Table 3 are presented as an example, based on RAIS data for the years 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020, and 2022, with the evolution of the number of establishments and number of industrial, trade, and service jobs for the total Cascavel RGinter, presented grouped by totals of the RGims that compose it. These are essential data for conducting research on any regional geographic network.

	1990			2000			2010			2020			2022		
	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.
RGIm Cascavel	690	1541	1383	1323	2961	2313	2229	5480	3965	2999	5941	5599	3556	6726	6404
RGIm Iguaçu Falls	494	1582	1268	805	2626	2186	1252	4112	3306	1690	4360	4324	1915	4851	4921
RGIm Toledo	453	994	841	912	1898	1410	1588	3422	2308	2126	3762	3307	2318	4200	3689
RGIm Francisco Beltrão	387	775	558	661	1460	985	1253	3194	1948	1622	3564	2995	1877	3733	3301
RGIm Pato Branco	502	905	712	800	1424	1224	1125	2863	2044	1532	2787	2829	1769	3303	3331
RGIm Laranjeiras do Sul	118	188	137	182	419	265	272	813	457	295	846	598	347	902	702
RGIm Dois Vizinhos	95	216	153	188	428	312	372	886	542	564	1007	823	621	1110	938
RGIm Marechal Cândido	152	291	245	341	617	462	514	1070	731	571	1085	918	669	1161	966
Total RGinter Cascavel	2891	6492	5297	5212	11833	9157	8605	21840	15301	11399	23372	21393	13072	25986	24252

Table 2 - Evolution of the number of Industrial, Trade, and Service Establishments for the total of the Cascavel RGinter, grouped by the totals of the RGims that compose it. SOURCE: RAIS – Annual Report of Social Information from the MTE, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020 e 2022. Org.: Own elaboration, 2024.

	1990			2000			2010			2020			2022		
	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.	Ind.	Trade	Serv.
RGIm Cascavel	8712	10299	19148	13024	14638	30427	40721	30609	46466	51085	37197	60609	56479	41580	71886
RGIm Iguaçu Falls	7401	9636	18003	8449	12421	21892	15007	20531	38361	19611	24758	47454	21795	28119	55042
RGIm Toledo	7313	5822	12889	12318	7591	14667	28362	16328	23365	35439	21236	34428	38423	23139	43413
RGIm Francisco Beltrão	5238	3873	6470	8407	4749	9868	18843	12692	16575	19980	16699	21387	22594	17981	27437
RGIm Pato Branco	5662	4639	8593	8257	5711	10082	17194	13906	17521	23695	16694	24521	26174	18479	28056
RGIm Laranjeiras do Sul	2205	944	2277	2631	1322	2960	3325	3502	4747	4049	4076	5841	4148	4573	6921
RGIm Dois Vizinhos	2514	1013	1945	3156	1305	2211	6928	3303	5242	8319	4301	7710	8510	4891	9022
RGIm Marechal Cândido	1020	1389	2981	2556	2445	3712	7377	4983	5926	6635	6003	7699	9918	6291	8583
Total RGinter Cascavel	40065	37615	72306	58798	50182	95819	137757	105854	158203	168813	130964	209649	188041	145053	250360

Table 3 – Evolution of the number of Industrial, Trade, and Service jobs for the total of the Cascavel RGinter, grouped by the totals of the RGims that compose it. SOURCE: RAIS – Annual Report of Social Information from the MTE, 1990, 2000, 2010, 2020 e 2022. Org.: Own elaboration, 2024.

The analysis allows us to understand the evolution of establishments and employment ties in the industrial, trade, and service sectors in the RGims, polarized by the Cascavel RGinter. This data is essential for assessing the economic dynamics and should be represented in a geoeconomic map for effective visual reading. The information in Tables 2 and 3 demonstrates that from 1990 to 2022, a period of 32 years, the total evolution of industrial establishments was 10,181 establishments and 147,976 jobs; the evolution of trade was 19,494 establishments and 107,438 jobs; and the evolution of services was 18,955 establishments and 178,054 jobs, thus revealing very significant advancement when studying the economic dynamics of a given network or region.

In addition, it is imperative to undertake a thorough examination of the demographic data of each municipality, particularly when focusing on the smaller cities and localities within a region. A pivotal demographic analysis involves a meticulous delineation of the total population of municipalities based on the trends revealed by the demographic censuses. This enables patterns of population decline or growth to be identified, which is essential in order for both researchers and readers to obtain a clear understanding.

For example, Table 4 presents the number of municipalities that demonstrated a demographic decline between censuses. This allows us to verify that the number of municipalities with a population

loss was 51 between the 2000/2010 Censuses and 25 between the 2010/2022 Censuses, i.e., for this analyzed geographic region, it may be stated that population loss is not a trend, or was not a trend in the last decade when compared to the previous decade.

Immediate Region	No. of Municipalities	Municipality with loss of pop. total, 2000/2010 Census	Municipality with loss of pop. total, 2010/2022 Census
RGIm of Cascavel	23	14	10
RGIm of Foz do Iguaçu	7	2	0
RGIm of Toledo	14	8	1
RGIm of Francisco Beltrão	21	12	7
RGIm of Pato Branco	15	8	2
RGIm of Laranjeiras do Sul/ Iguaçu Falls	8	4	3
RGIm of Dois Vizinhos	6	4	2
RGIm of Marechal Cândido Rondon	6	0	0
Total RGInter of Cascavel	100	51	25

Table 4 – Cascavel RGinter: number of municipalities with a total population loss per immediate region, between the 2000/2010 and the 2010/2022 Censuses. Source: IBGE, 2000, 2010 and 2022.

Once a foundational understanding of the geographic region and its constituent cities and municipalities has been established, fieldwork should be undertaken to acquire primary information. This entails technical visits to companies and collecting data from municipal governments, encompassing public agencies, institutions, class associations, and private companies operating at both the local and regional levels. Sources such as semi-structured interviews with managers, workers, entrepreneurs, public officials, and others should also be used.

Subsequently, the analysis should prioritize understanding and identifying small cities within the context of their network integration. The spatial cross-section is always the regional network, enabling us to examine how these small cities are positioned and influenced by social, cultural, and productive changes. Analyzing spatial interactions will facilitate mapping the areas of influence exerted by these small cities.

The local city, the smallest unit of a real city, fulfills not only primary activities but also essential urban requirements. Santos (1982) characterized the local city as an agglomeration capable of meeting the fundamental needs of an entire population, fostering a life of interconnected relations.

To ensure self-sustaining growth and territorial dominance, it is imperative to identify the minimum level of complexity of urban activity. Failing to do so would result in the creation of pseudo-cities (SANTOS, 1982). Even cities with urban activities exceeding this minimum level may not qualify as intermediate cities or metropolises, and are often categorized as small (FRESCA, 2010). The term “small city” encompasses those with urban and economic complexities surpassing the minimum threshold, distinguishing them from local cities, but not yet reaching the level of intermediate cities.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has examined the terminologies used in academic research in geographical science: "small cities," "local cities," "small localities," and "mikropolitan space," defining parameters for each. The analysis was constructed using research undertaken by prominent authors of Brazilian urban geography. This approach was justified by the lack of specific research into these spaces when compared

to other areas of geography, and because small municipalities are equally as interesting as large cities. Furthermore, small-scale studies can reveal greater complexity and nuance.

From the readings and analyses conducted, it became apparent that the concepts of “small city” and “local city” are differentiated by their underlying perspectives. While a “small city” is often defined by its demographic and territorial size, adopting a quantitative approach, a “local city” emphasizes the roles, functions, and spatial reach of cities within the urban network, taking a qualitative perspective. These distinctions are crucial for comprehending urban dynamics and formulating tailored policies and strategies for each type of city. By acknowledging these differences, we are able to gain a more nuanced understanding of the specific needs and potential of cities, ultimately leading to more effective urban-regional planning.

The analysis of the terminologies used in the academic literature revealed that “small localities” are frequently treated as being synonymous with “local cities”, according to studies by Endlich (2021, 2017, 2006). Endlich (2017) suggests that “local cities” describe the traditional role of small localities, while “small cities” could encompass new dynamics and meanings. This terminological distinction is crucial for broadening the understanding of the functions and characteristics of these spaces, thereby enabling a more detailed and contextualized approach in urban geography.

When studying cities, it is essential to avoid purely quantitative analyses, since they fail to capture the specificity and function of each city, which stand unique regardless of the demographic size (SANTOS, 1988). To analysis “small cities” and “local cities” effectively, a qualitative approach is necessary, recognizing that these terminologies have distinct theoretical and methodological bases and, therefore, need to be differentiated (CASARIL, 2010; FRESCA, 2010). To characterize a city as small, it is essential to understand its position within the urban network, understood as a system of functionally interconnected centers (CORRÊA, 1989). The qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of urban dynamics and the interactions between different urban centers, providing a more solid basis for urban planning and development.

A local city is defined as the smallest agglomeration capable of meeting the basic needs of the population, implying a life of relationships and spatial specialization (SANTOS, 1982). To distinguish a real city from a pseudo-city, it is essential to determine the minimum complexity threshold of urban activities that ensure self-sustained growth and territorial dominion. This concept helps us to understand the minimum size required to classify an agglomeration as a real city, especially in the context of local centers. While some cities may exhibit complex urban activities above the minimum level, this does not automatically elevate them to intermediate cities or metropolises; they remain small. Thus, the expression “small city” is used for those that are not local centers (FRESCA, 2010). These insights highlight the importance of qualitative analyses to understand the functions and complexities of cities, helping to formulate appropriate policies and strategies for different types of urban agglomerations. Thus, von Dentz and Lemos (2023) recall the importance of small cities for regional studies of urban geography, especially in interior regions, such as Cascavel. These authors demonstrate with maps and qualitative data that despite the tendency of capital and population concentration in a few cities, small cities continue to be important from an economic and social, as well as political and cultural, standpoint, especially in interior regions.

Small cities evolve in their roles as providers of essential goods and services, adapting to historical changes and contemporary demands of the urban consumption system. This adaptation includes not only physical establishments but also e-commerce, reflecting a qualitative expansion in the services offered, influencing economic and political analyses that need to adjust to new market dynamics and consumer needs.

The concept of “mikripolitan space”, as outlined within the context of the Mikripoli Network, is fundamental to broadening the understanding of Brazilian urban dynamics beyond large metropolises. This approach recognizes the often overlooked diversity and relevance of small cities, by highlighting their specific geographic and social characteristics. Unlike traditional metropolitan centers, small cities present unique characteristics that require adapted public policies and development strategies.

This approach not only augments urban studies by diversifying analytical perspectives but also suggests paths for fairer, more sustainable urban planning, better adapted to local realities. By considering mikripolitan spaces as essential components of the Brazilian urban network, it opens up

space for a more inclusive understanding of urbanization, promoting a more equitable and comprehensive vision of regional development.

The text also presents, as a secondary objective, a proposal to analyze the intermediate geographic network and region and the insertion of its local and/or small cities and small localities. As a way of exemplifying the use of terminology, the proposal was developed for the case of the intermediate geographic region of Cascavel in the state of Paraná.

The intermediate geographic regions (RGinter) and immediate geographic regions (RGim) are recent regionalizations developed by IBGE technicians. These regions are based on the dynamics of the Urban Network, structured from the Areas of Influence in Cities (REGIC). This is why this regionalization has been used as an example for an analytical proposal. However, it is important to note that an article is currently under construction to analyze the urban network of Cascavel. This article will be based on the theoretical-methodological matrix presented herein.

The text has highlighted the continued importance of small cities within the modern urban economy, emphasizing their continuous adaptation as vital elements in the broader economic network. This underscores the need for public policies that recognize and support these evolving dynamics, thereby promoting the sustainable and equitable development of these smaller urban centers.

NOTES

1 –This and all other non-English citations throughout the article have been translated by the author.

2 - Mikripoli – from the Greek mikri (small) and poli (city).

3 - For those who wish to expand their knowledge on this topic, we suggest reading the most recent proceedings of SINAPEQ – Simpósio Nacional sobre Pequenas Cidades [National Symposium on Small Cities]. In 2024 the VII SINAPEQ was held at UNIVAP – Universidade do Vale do Paraíba – São José dos Campos, São Paulo, Brazil.

4 – RGim is the Portuguese acronym for Regiões Geográficas Imediatas and RGinter is the Portuguese acronym for Regiões Geográficas Intermediatas, and both have been maintained and used throughout his article.

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