



Metropolitan Region without a Metropolis: the case of Ribeirão Preto and its Structuring Factors

Região Metropolitana sem MetrÓpole: o caso de Ribeirão Preto e seus Fatores Estruturantes

Región Metropolitana sin MetrÓpoli: el caso de Ribeirão Preto y sus Factores Estructurantes

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Abstract

The metropolitan regions institutionalized after the Federal Constitution of 1988 are marked by undeniable differences compared to the metropolitan regions originated from Complementary Law 14 of 1973. Based on this observation, this paper seeks to understand some particularities of this new metropolitan framework in light of the



study of the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto (RMRP), in the State of São Paulo. From the theoretical framework of metropolization, the objective of the article is to identify the state and private agents and understand which elements structure the RMRP. In this sense, it is argued that the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto has its territorial development ordered by environmental resources, transport flows, and radial polycentric interaction. Unlike the pioneering metropolitan regions created between 1973 and 1974, the RMRP does not have an industrial metropolis as the basis of its formation, and the function previously performed by this core is replaced by multiple functions of different scales and more related to territorial restructurings derived from regional urbanization.

Keywords: Metropolitan Region, Ribeirão Preto, Guarani Aquifer, Transport, Policentricity.

Resumo

As regiões metropolitanas institucionalizadas após a Constituição Federal de 1988 são marcadas por inegáveis diferenças em relação às regiões metropolitanas originadas da Lei Complementar 14 de 1973. Partindo dessa constatação, o presente artigo busca compreender algumas particularidades desse novo quadro metropolitano à luz do estudo da Região Metropolitana de Ribeirão Preto (RMRP), no Estado de São Paulo. A partir do marco teórico da metropolização, o objetivo do artigo é identificar os agentes estatais e privados e compreender quais elementos estruturam a RMRP. Nesse sentido, defende-se o argumento de que a Região Metropolitana de Ribeirão Preto tem seu desenvolvimento territorial ordenado pelos recursos ambientais, pelos fluxos de transportes e pela interação policêntrica radial. Distintamente das regiões metropolitanas pioneiras criadas entre 1973 e 1974, a RMRP não possui uma metrópole industrial como base de sua formação e a função antes desempenhada por esse núcleo é substituída por múltiplas funções de diferentes escalas e mais relacionadas às reestruturações territoriais derivadas de uma urbanização de âmbito regional.

Palavras-chave: Região Metropolitana; Ribeirão Preto; Aquífero Guarani; Transporte; Policêntrico.

Resumen

Las regiones metropolitanas institucionalizadas después de la Constitución Federal de 1988 están marcadas por innegables diferencias en relación con las regiones metropolitanas originadas por la Ley Complementaria 14 de 1973. Partiendo de esta constatación, el presente artículo busca comprender algunas particularidades de este nuevo cuadro metropolitano a la luz del estudio de la Región Metropolitana de Ribeirão Preto (RMRP), en el Estado de São Paulo. A partir del marco teórico de la metropolización, el objetivo del artículo es identificar los agentes estatales y privados y comprender qué elementos estructuran la RMRP. En este sentido, se defiende el argumento de que la Región Metropolitana de Ribeirão Preto tiene su desarrollo territorial ordenado por los recursos ambientales, los flujos de transporte y la interacción policéntrica radial. A diferencia de las regiones metropolitanas pioneras creadas entre 1973 y 1974, la



RMRP no posee una metrópoli industrial como base de su formación y la función antes desempeñada por este núcleo es sustituida por múltiples funciones de diferentes escalas y más relacionadas con las reestructuraciones territoriales derivadas de una urbanización de ámbito regional.

Palavras-chave: Região Metropolitana, Ribeirão Preto, Aquífero Guarani, Transporte, Policêntrico

INTRODUCTION

The Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto (RMRP) is the first metropolitan region in the state of São Paulo created outside the Macrometropolitan Paulista area (metropolitan regions of São Paulo, Campinas, Vale do Paraíba and North Coast, Sorocaba, Baixada Santista, Piracicaba, and Jundiaí, as well as the Bragantina Microregion). The RMRP has significant relations with the states of Minas Gerais, Goiás, and Mato Grosso do Sul, mainly due to its intermediate geographic location between these states, the capital of São Paulo, and the port of Santos, as well as the economic activities related to agribusiness. It was institutionalized on July 6, 2016, by State Complementary Law No. 1,290 (São Paulo, 2016), formed by 34 municipalities grouped into four sub-regions. Its headquarters is Ribeirão Preto-SP, which, according to IBGE data (2008; 2018), is classified as a regional capital A and is therefore not considered a metropolis.

Despite this assertion, it is important to clarify that the IBGE criterion was adopted because the proliferation of definitions of metropolitan regions by the states and the absence of precise concepts by the Metropolis Statute prevent a standardized definition for the country. And although the idea of a metropolis is closely linked to the urban phenomenon and the urbanization process with very particular and historically recognized characteristics, it is the extent of its radius of influence, its role in the urban network and the system of cities, as well as how it organizes a region, that give it recognition and distinction from other cities. In this sense, the definition is not only appropriate to understand the classification comparatively in the national framework but also important to exemplify how – institutionally – metropolitan regions without metropolises have become common.

This characteristic is not unique and highlights a contemporary movement related to the determinations of the 1988 Federal Constitution, Article 25, § 3º (Brazil, 1988), in which states have the responsibility and autonomy to create metropolitan regions, urban agglomerations, and microregions. Since then, in approximately 20 years (between 1988 and 2019), the country has gone from nine metropolitan regions (Belém, Recife, Fortaleza, Salvador, Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Curitiba, and Porto Alegre) to 82 regional organizations (metropolitan regions or similar entities, such as urban agglomerations and integrated development regions), according to IBGE (2019).



The nine metropolitan regions were created according to criteria defined by studies by EPEA (Office of Applied Economic Research) and IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) since 1967, based on the regionalization of the country by homogeneous regions and polarized spaces, the latter under the influence of regional metropolises, important centers with a high degree of urbanization and concentration of industrial activities, but also services. With the state-level definition of metropolitan regions, the country began to have metropolitan regions without a common set of criteria. To illustrate this condition, according to the National Forum of Metropolitan Entities (FNEM, 2022), it can be identified that the state of Santa Catarina is entirely divided into metropolitan regions (11 in total), the state of Paraíba has the highest number of metropolitan regions among all Brazilian states (12 in total), and in the state of Rondônia, the Metropolitan Region of Porto Velho consists of only two municipalities (Porto Velho and Candeias do Jamari).

This contrast has been widely investigated by government bodies (such as the Institute of Applied Economic Research – IPEA, IBGE) and academic and research entities (such as the Observatory of Metropolises, among other consolidated and emerging groups). It requires a more precise understanding of the elements that have structured these regions, justifying their metropolitan definition. From this central issue, the article seeks to understand which public and private agents collaborate for the institution of the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto and which elements structure its socioeconomic dynamics.

The problematization is done based on the conceptual framework of metropolization and methodologically, the analyses involve theoretical understanding from empirical field observations and research on plans (municipal master plans, integrated urban development plans, land use and occupation) and laws (urban and environmental). The methodological issue is completed by adopting the regional planning theories, which enables the investigation of economic, social, and environmental movements from the integrated, territorial perspective of public and private investments resulting in transport infrastructure, institutional organizations, and the expansion of the real estate market for housing and industrial activity.

PROBLEMATIZING BRAZILIAN METROPOLIZATION AFTER THE 1988 FEDERAL CONSTITUTION

The definition of the first metropolitan regions in the 1970s had, among other motivations related to the existing authoritarianism, the purpose of prioritizing areas for public investments in logistics and social and urban infrastructure. This establishment was more linked to political decisions than to processes of metropolitan territorial planning (Blanco Júnior, 2021). From the 1988 Federal Constitution onwards, the criteria were altered by, among other factors, the enhancement of the municipality as a federative entity. Municipal prominence resulted in an approach that often neglected metropolitan issues, such as the



recognition of socio-territorial problems and the development and implementation of instruments and public management at the metropolitan scale (Rossbach et al., 2018).

The Metropolis Statute, Federal Law 13.089 (Brazil, 2015) established a framework for planning and inter-federative governance at the metropolitan level. However, it is difficult to advance the debate on metropolitan territorial planning that does not merely aggregate municipal Master Plans but focuses on the governance of this planning (Rossbach et al., 2018). According to Ribeiro, Azevedo, and Rodrigues (2024), metropolises represent important assets for a national development project that transcends the structurally concentrative pattern prevailing since the 1970s. However, they also present liabilities, revealing a dynamic of weakening social cohesion in these territories, with significant social impacts on a national scale. The challenge faced is twofold: on the one hand, establishing metropolitan governance; and on the other, implementing urban reform policies that address the trends of social disintegration present.

To this end, it is important to locate the new metropolitan regions in the metropolization process. Moura (2008) defines metropolization as a complex phenomenon that transcends the mere clustering of cities and involves a series of social, economic, and spatial dynamics, including the interconnection of different urban and rural areas, forming urban-regional arrangements that demonstrate a new spatial configuration characterized by multiscalarity, where different levels of urban organization interact.

Metropolization can also be understood from the environmental perspective, its growing capitalization by rural areas, and the diversification of activities carried out in them, along with the advancement of communication, information, and transportation technologies. In other words, the discussion about the urbanization of the countryside requires deepening, considering the characteristics of the metropolization process associated with capital reproduction and the expansion of labor (Ferreira, Ruas, Mattos, 2014).

Lencioni (2006) defines metropolization as a continuous process of spatial transformation strongly linked to three interdependent movements: the globalization of the economy, productive restructuring, and territorial reorganization. This phenomenon is characterized by a spatial organization based on the current logic of capitalist accumulation, manifested by the intensification of flows of people, goods, and capital. Moreover, it is associated with the growth of service activities, the demand for immaterial labor, the concentration of management activities, and the increasing use of information and communication technologies.

Culturally, metropolization involves a profound alteration of the mercantile logic, with broad implications for all spheres of life and various types of spaces. The urban cultural values and habits, typical of large metropolises, begin to spread beyond their physical limits, inaugurating a new cycle of urbanization that Lencioni



(2017) identifies as a higher stage, incorporating and transforming the traditional characteristics of the urbanization process.

There is a tendency to concentrate wealth in the most important cities, expanding their territorial extent and integrating spaces that were previously discontinuous and heterogeneous, including rural, natural, and leisure areas. This process also fosters the development of multiple centralities and requires the improvement of the circulation of people and goods, as well as the immaterial flows of communication and information, thus promoting the interconnectivity of places. It is highlighted that metropolization leads to the homogenization of metropolitan habits and values, regardless of location, reflecting the cultural hegemony of metropolises on a global scale (Lencioni, 2020).

In this context, Klink (2024) points out that it is necessary to work on the idea of belonging that necessarily involves the issue of representation, so that the theoretical framework does not get lost in inactivity and, more than that, contains guidelines that, in practice, will contribute to addressing metropolitan challenges.

METROPOLITAN REGION OF RIBEIRÃO PRETO AND ITS AGENTS: STATE INSTITUTIONALIZATION AND THE SOCIOECONOMIC DYNAMICS OF AGRIBUSINESS

The institutionalization of the RMRP has origins dating back to 1995 (Miranda, 2022), through seven supplementary bills proposing the creation of the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto: Complementary Bill 59/1995 (Leo Oliveira); Complementary Bill 17/2003 (Adilson Barroso, PTB); Complementary Bill 23/2007 (Darcy Vera, DEM); Complementary Bill 16/2012 (Pedro Bigardi and Leci Brandão, PCdoB); Complementary Bill 16/2014 (Rafael Silva, PDT); Complementary Bill 65/2015 (Rafael Silva, PDT); and Complementary Bill 16/2016 (Governor Geraldo Alckmin, PSDB), which officially institutionalized the metropolitan region. Gradually, over about two decades, the recognition of a socioeconomic dynamic and territorial role by the prominent geographical position for the state of São Paulo was consolidated.

This definition was recognized and justified, among other reasons, by the importance of the main trunk line of Ferrobán that connects Brasília to the port of Santos, passing by Dr. Leite Lopes State Airport, located in Ribeirão Preto-SP. Since 1999, the municipality has housed an Inland Customs Station, a dry port for handling and storing goods and cargo, in addition to being a region that stands out for the presence of an urbanized rural dynamism. Besides the agro-industrial activity, especially the production of sugarcane for ethanol since the 1970s, it has been shaped by a system of cities led by Ribeirão Preto-SP, which, according to EMPLASA (2011, p. 88), still includes the municipalities of Sertãozinho, Serrana, Dumont, Cravinhos, Barrinha, Pradópolis, and Jardinópolis.



According to FIPE data (2021), the agricultural production of the region is dominated by the cultivation of sugarcane, responsible for 72% of the agricultural production value and 83% of the harvested area in 2020. The refined sugar from the region's mills accounts for 62% of the RMRP's export agenda. Among permanent crops, coffee cultivation stands out, the second crop in production value in the region in 2020, representing less than 3% of the harvested area.

According to Elias (2008), the Ribeirão Preto region was one of the first to be widely exposed to the production and globalized exchanges of agricultural activities. Beginning in the mid-20th century, this stage of economic development assimilated techno-scientific transformations and, with the new forms of material and non-material production appropriated by them, underwent successive modernizations. In this context, the author refers to this production as one of the Agribusiness Productive Regions (RPA), since agro-industrial networks associate all activities inherent to agribusiness, whether agriculture itself, or activities that precede and succeed this production and are fundamental to it (agricultural research, production of agricultural inputs, machinery development, industrialization, trade and distribution, financial services, technology, and innovation). They also include industrial transformation activities, whose raw material comes from agricultural activities by distributing ready-to-eat foods, among others. In the same way, they evidence a production/storage/distribution network, articulating all stages of the production process, in its different geographical scales and urban dimensions, as a restructuring of space by globalized agribusiness.

In this process, the concentration of a substantial part of the industrial park of the RMRP in the municipality of Sertãozinho stands out. The relative weight of the RMRP headquarters municipality is particularly highlighted in the services sector, accounting for more than 77% of the value generated in this municipality and for 62% of the value generated by the services sector in the RMRP. The municipalities of Ribeirão Preto and Sertãozinho together hold 36.77% of the total industrial jobs, influencing land use in these municipalities. However, the production chain is distributed across other municipalities, driven by the demand for goods, services, and local research and technology production by the Sugarcane Phytosanitary Engineering Research Center (CPE) at Unesp Jaboticabal.

It is also worth highlighting the case of smaller municipalities such as Pradópolis and Luís Antônio with less dynamic economies, but that have sugar mills, or even the case of Nuporanga, with the JBS-Seara industrial complex, where a single company is responsible for most of the municipality's labor demand and production. In these cases, the financial situation of the municipality is closely linked to the production and investment decisions of the company (FIPE, 2022). In this sense, the development of agribusiness and industry results in changes, such as the conversion of rural areas into urban areas, the expansion of agricultural activities at the expense of natural areas, and the concentration of land ownership by large producers or companies/industries.



STRUCTURING TERRITORIAL ELEMENTS: ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORTATION, AND POLICENTRALITY

Given the reality of the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto and observing its land use and occupation process, it is possible to affirm that there are three territorial elements structuring its development and organization: the Guarani Aquifer System; the regional technical transport network composed of highways, railways, and airport; and a polycentric core, formed by three radial axes to the headquarters municipality, which gathers in a fragmented and dispersed – yet articulated – manner the main economic and symbolic activities of the new metropolitan lifestyle.

Guarani Aquifer System (SAG)

The Guarani Aquifer is a large underground water reserve that covers the RMRP territory and ensures, for example, the headquarters municipality's autonomy for potable water consumption. It is composed of the Botucatu and Pirambóia formations, situated in the central-eastern region of South America, covering a total area of 1.2 million km² distributed among the territories of Brazil (840,000 km²), Paraguay (58,500 km²), Uruguay (58,500 km²), and Argentina (255,000 km²).

The creation of a protection area, named the Guarani Aquifer System Protection Macrozone (MPSAG, 2021), was a strategy to manage water resources properly and prevent negative impacts such as contamination and excessive depletion in the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto area. The MPSAG (2021) is part of the territorial and environmental planning of the RMRP and establishes guidelines for land use and occupation to protect the aquifer against contamination and ensure its natural recharge.

The presence of the MPSAG in almost the entire eastern area of the RMRP implies restrictions on land use due to the SAG outcrops, a factor that determines less dense occupation in this zone, contributing to more intense concentration in the western area, especially for activities related to agribusiness and the sugar-alcohol industry, as shown in Figure 1. It is noteworthy, therefore, that in the eastern area of the RMRP, there are limitations on urban density (both constructive and demographic). The Development and Environmental Protection Plan for the Guarani Aquifer System (PDPA-SAG) of the State of São Paulo also collaborates in preserving the Guarani Aquifer System (SAG).



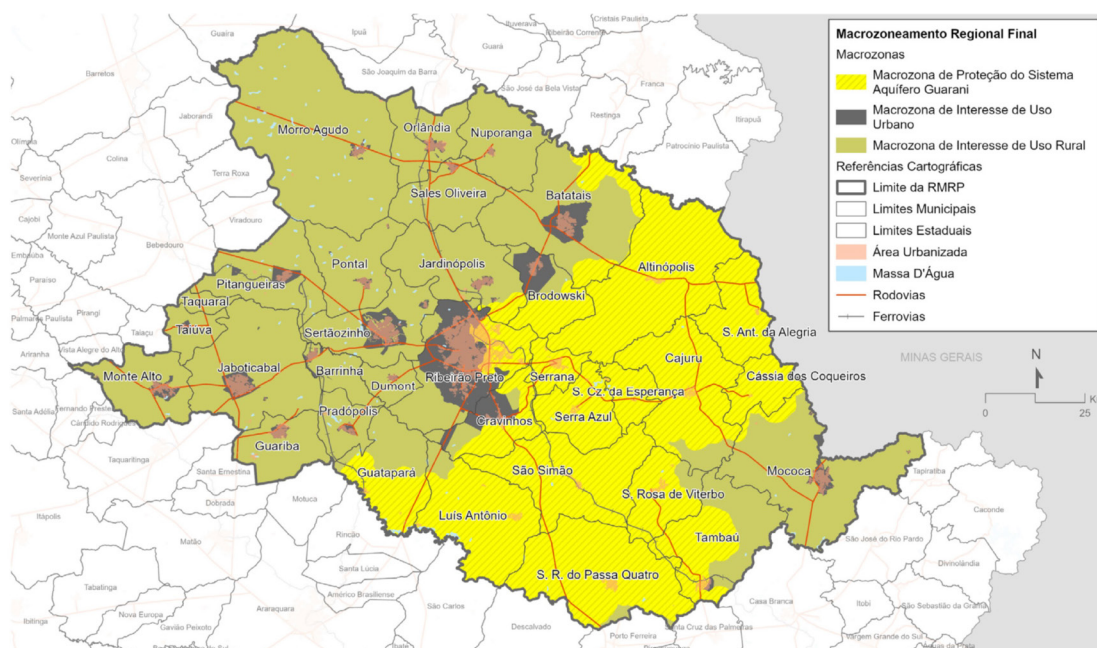


Figure 1: Final Map of the Macrozonation of the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto, considering the Guarani Aquifer System Protection Macrozone. Source: FIPE (2022).

In this context, environmental zoning plays a regulatory function by identifying and classifying areas of higher contamination risk, establishing restrictions on land use and occupation to mitigate possible environmental impacts. This zoning is essential to promote a balance between economic development and environmental preservation, especially in areas with greater vulnerability, such as intensive agricultural and urban regions, where the pressure on water resource use is more pronounced, as is the reality of the RMRP. Territorial-wise, the SAG and its regulation system structure a significant part of the occupation by regulation, limiting the concentrations of agro-industrial networks.

Rail, Road, and Air Transport

The transportation structure plays an essential role in the territorial configuration of the RMRP, particularly concerning land use in urban-regional growth areas, albeit in different proportions and distinct natural/environmental realities. The most critical components include the railway system (Centro-Atlântica Railway–VLI Logística, Paulista Railway–Rumo Logística, and four currently deactivated sections); the tolled highways (dual carriageways, single carriageways, and toll plazas); and the airport facilities (Jaboticabal, Monte Alto, Mococa, Batatais, and primarily Ribeirão Preto). This technical transport network is linked to logistic centers and the pipeline network (oil and ethanol pipelines).

In the railway sector, the Paulista Railway located in the western area connects the municipalities of Pontal, Barrinha, and Pradópolis, essential for the flow of agribusiness products, particularly from the sugar-alcohol industry. The Centro-Atlântica Railway,

extending on the North-South axis, also contributes to the transport of agribusiness goods, linking the state of São Paulo to Minas Gerais. However, the region faces challenges with four deactivated railway sections that impair the infrastructure's functionality, particularly in the eastern area, where railway coverage is limited, except for the partial operation of the Centro-Atlântica Railway in the southeast.

Concerning highways, there is also greater traffic capacity in the western area of the RMRP, mainly due to attracting more intense land use by low-income residential condominiums and industries. Conversely, the eastern area relies mainly on secondary and tertiary roads. The ring road around the headquarters municipality of Ribeirão Preto has consolidated new forms of urban dispersion by providing fronts for the expansion of land subdivision by gated communities and the establishment of three shopping centers, predominantly in the southern sector of the headquarters municipality.

The presence of Dr. Leite Lopes State Airport has been a significant attraction for agribusiness fairs. The network of aeroclubs or aerodromes in the surrounding cities creates opportunities and attractions for large investors. The oil and ethanol pipelines (underground) that follow the North-South axis represent strategic infrastructure for the transport of fuels and derivatives, integrating the region with productive and consumer hubs. Figure 2 illustrates the transport system and the structure of centralities in the following section.

Polycentric Core

The functional centrality of the headquarters municipality stems from a strong interdependence with three radial axes that consolidate other centralities related to it. Thus, it is possible to affirm that the land use and the functions performed by the headquarters municipality have deep connections with three vectors of urban-regional growth that extend towards Jardinópolis (north vector); Cravinhos (south vector); and Sertãozinho, Barrinha, and Jaboticabal (west vector). In this sense, it is essential to highlight the systemic correlation between the SAG, whose regulation restricts the intensification of agro-industrial productive activities in the eastern strip (either towards Serrana or Brodowski-Batatais) and the importance of the transportation networks, especially the highway axis that connects Ribeirão Preto to Cravinhos (Anhanguera Highway, SP-330), which, in recent decades, has contributed to an intense process of urban dispersion

The north vector includes new subdivisions (2010-2020) along the route between the headquarters municipality and Jardinópolis. Notably installed along the transportation system, specifically the Anhanguera Highway and Dr. Arthur Costacurta Highway. The south vector is also characterized by the profusion of land subdivisions between the 2010s and 2020s, but strongly linked to the southern zone of Ribeirão Preto, where the highest concentration of high-income residents in the municipality is located. The west vector signals an intense linear



regional urbanization from the headquarters municipality towards Jaboticabal, conditioned by the transportation system, marked by industrial plants and activities related to agribusiness. In common, all have intense and diverse real estate relationships that characterize each portion of the metropolitan region, with particular emphasis on the differentiation concerning the subdivisions of the headquarters municipality (Scussel, 2023).

This system of cities articulated by differentiated land uses composes a polycentric core of complementary activities. Radiating from the headquarters municipality, these axes form a fragmented, non-conurbated structure with varying landscapes (urbanized or natural) that, when articulated, demonstrate a new physiognomy of the metropolitan region. Together, they impact the territorial organization of expansion and dispersion areas that contribute to metropolitan structuring.

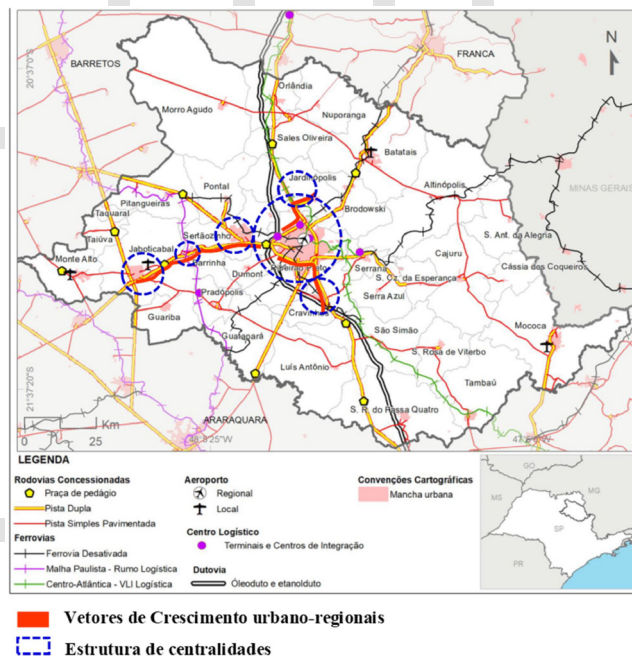


Figure 2: Map of centralities structure and transport infrastructure: Railways, Highways, Airport Facilities, with authorial graphic interventions. Source: Adapted from FIPE (2022).

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Based on the analysis of the Metropolitan Region of Ribeirão Preto, it is possible to affirm how the processes of creating metropolitan regions after the 1988 Federal Constitution recognize new and multiple characteristics of their configurations. From what has been analyzed, it is possible to highlight the importance of urban centers (in various forms); circulation axes (in their diverse functionalities); and sub-regional arrangements formed by the regulations of natural reserves, which

surpass the idea of metropolitan regions solely as subsidiaries of the influence radius of a regional metropolis.

Morphologically, they are characterized by the regional dimension of urban relations (economic, social, etc.). Evidently, there is a concentration of people and capital in its headquarters municipality, which also holds cultural and symbolic importance, but this concentration relies on a functional redistribution in other municipalities, challenging the traditional idea of a metropolis.

Strictly speaking, this new pattern accentuates some segregations, such as the concentration of high-income class in the southern zone of Ribeirão Preto, low-income class in the northern zone of Ribeirão Preto and in the municipalities of Jardinópolis and Cravinhos (towards the headquarters municipality), and industrial activities in the municipality of Sertãozinho, with urban dispersion influencing the municipalities from Barrinha to Jaboticabal along the same highway axis. The functional division, therefore, seems to accentuate regionally what was observed locally, demonstrating a more intense urban-regional articulation through land use. This characteristic emphasizes the fragmentation of the metropolitan fabric and its reorganization in a polycentric radial manner because, being of regional dimensions, it implies a territorial articulation of urbanization fragments related to the movement of capital, labor, natural resources, and opportunities.

The territorial domains structuring the RMRP confirm this process by concentrating investments in the new centralities as agribusiness capital nodes, in regionalized arrangements of environmental regulations, and in transport axes for people and products. Thus, these structural elements of the RMRP serve the function of connection, integration, and flow of a network that assumes a more fragmented and articulated topology, diverse in landscape and predominant activities and functions. However, they are closely linked to national and global movements derived from agribusiness, based on the real estate market and the very exploitation of natural resources.

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