

FROM UNIFORMITY TOWARDS UNEQUALITY IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT POLICY: THE CASE OF FRANCE

Ildikó EGYED^a

^a Junior research fellow. Hungarian Academy of Sciences Centre for Economic and Regional Studies
Institute for Regional Studies. egyed@rkk.hu

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Abstract

The French national territory is characterised by a rich variety of landscapes and regions upon which the post-revolutionary Jacobin Republic imposed its homogenising territorial administration with the objective of achieving uniformity and a greater transparency. Territorial unity formed the basic pillar of the Republic, which no successive regimes were able to undermine and no peripheral bottom-up regionalisation movements could challenge until the end of the past decade. However, from the second half of the 20th century, the unified national territory was increasingly subject to a „two-speed” development, with declining socio-economic conditions outside the zone of influence of the capital city. Spatial disparities and the fear of the desertification of rural areas due to the generalisation of industrialisation and the rapid extension of the Fordist capitalist accumulation regime constituted the background of the genesis of spatial planning to serve as a counterbalance to spontaneous processes of spatial polarisation.

Keywords: regional development policy, spatial planning, decentralisation, France

INTRODUCTION

Historians agree that the unity, indivisibility and inalienability of the Republic (forming the basic pillars of sovereignty as conceptualised by Jean Bodin in the 16th century) as well as administrative centralisation are rooted in the pre-Enlightenment Ancien Regime. According to the historian Alexis Tocqueville, the Jacobin era known for its aptitude for centralisation was a direct legacy of pre-1789 France. The absolute nature of sovereignty, a central idea to monarchic rule, has not changed, but was transferred from the ruler to the people (Lupel, 2009). The notions of public good and public services also date back to the pre-Enlightenment period. However, in a retrospective view, the ancient structures can be qualified as pre-national, since they permitted the emergence of only certain features of the nation-state, into which they were incorporated with certain modification (Balibar, 1991). The post-revolutionary Republic, with its homogenized territorial administration (whose pillars were the 90 homogeneous *départements* and the myriad communes created in 1792) and the ideal of equality and laicity at its centre, despite its universalistic pretences, is just a particular way

of representing reality. The „French exception” based on a „certain idea of France” (republicanism) is the culmination of a long period of nation-building under the dominant influence of Rousseauian ideas of popular sovereignty. Rousseau’s radical democracy, by connecting individual liberty to popular sovereignty, envisaged a maximum liberation of the individual vis-à-vis all forms of religious and other external sources of authority based on the inequality of rights. Its distinction between particular and universal interests shaped the republican concept of *laïcité* based on the defense of political autonomy, inalienable individual rights and the primacy of the public good (*res publica*) automatically excluding the possibility of specific group interests based on class, culture or ethnicity (Hayat, 2013). Individual egoisms were not allowed to distort the abstract notion of the common good as it was based on the idea of citizens freely consenting to the sacrifice of their private will to a common interest – extending beyond the sum of individual interests. The private realm was strictly separated from the public sphere. Society was conceived as a contractual association of citizens (*Gesellschaft*) without any exogenous basis of their communion. It is noted by scholars that France, the classic example of a nation made by the state, was much more hostile towards the idea of local autonomy than other countries where the state was made by the nation (Blindenbacher et al, 2002)¹. The ancient provinces operated in a largely decentralised framework, enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, with their own system of measurement, weights and a wealth of local dialects, the duchies of the period had no interest in the francisation of an overwhelmingly rural population. In contrast, the Jacobin Republic, a heritage of revolutionary France, refused to recognize the autonomy of local collectivities, preferring to treat the space between the particular (the individual) and the universal (the state) as a vast empty void (Rosanvallon, 2004, Wright–Jones, 2012).

The state was the prime guarantor of territorial cohesion. The idea of regionalism was seen as posing a threat to the indivisibility of the Republic by its association with the ancient provinces. Intermediary bodies were redundant from the point of view of exercising personal and political autonomy. Cultural – linguistic differences, alterities, particular features of local societies were devalorised in the course of the homogenising and modernising project of the state. The period of the Third Republic (1870-1940) signified the most accomplished form of the French nation according to French historian Pierre Nora, editor of the monumental *Sites of Memory* series celebrating republican values.

¹ The complexity of nationhood-statehood is highlighted by Wallerstein (1991), in whose view statehood always pre-exists nationhood, as in the case of France. Gellner (1983) holds that the existence of the state is a (necessary but not sufficient) prerequisite for the emergence of nationality – firmly grounded in a shared identity of citizens, and that both belong to the realm of contingency.

In an effort to transform „peasants into Frenchmen” (Weber, 1976) through repressing local peasant cultures and particularisms, accelerate the francisation of the peripheral population as a part of a process of internal colonisation (Weber, 1976, Aldhuy, 2010, Liebich, 2011) and to mold a real cultural and linguistic community of Frenchmen, French (which, from 1536, was the official language of the administration, law, the educated and literate few) was imposed on the entire nation. The main achievements under the Third Republic included the generalisation of the republican system of schooling, instilling the patriotic sentiment and the cult of the nation into the minds of the youth through history and geography text books, implementation of the fundamental institutions of the system of meritocracy, introduction of universal civil service and the progressive extension of French citizenship. Despite the ambitious projects, local dialects survived and France remained predominantly rural – its rural population exceeding the number of city dwellers – until the 1930s. Weber (1976) pointed out that the ultimate nationalisation of peasantry and the decline of the patois coincided with its dissolution as a majority class in the first half of the 20th century. Hence, France was able to escape the massive desertification of its rural areas and conserve its agricultural patrimony until the mid-20th century, much longer than England, for instance, whose agricultural sector retreated due to the generalisation of industrialisation already in the 17th century.

Albeit the autonomy of intermediate bodies is a recent element in French political history, Jacobin centralisation encountered resistance and was subject to criticism even during periods when regionalism was absent from the official hegemonic discourse. Criticism came from multiple sources depending on the various historical eras. Post-revolutionary politics emerged in the final years of the Third Republic, advocating pluralism as a way of promoting the growing power of intermediary units. This post-revolutionary turn (Wright–Jones, 2012), a peripheral movement along the dominant trend of republicanism, was extensively discussed by recent scholarly work, e.g. Julian Wright’s study on Belle Époque regionalism. From the second half of the 19th century, regionalism gained momentum in the framework of peripheral, mainly cultural-linguistic movements, not as the antithesis of nationalist sentiment², but rather, contributing to its reinforcement, as Wright (2004) demonstrates. Among the counter-revolutionaries, Paul Boncour represented the federalist strand³ (advocating economic federalism), Charles Maurras the traditionalist line, which preceded the

² 19th century Herderian cultural nationalism emphasizing ethnicity, language and culture was a revolt against the bloodless, rationalistic nationalism of the Enlightenment which preferred the love of liberty and abstract humanism.

³ See e.g. Boncour-Maurras „*Débat nouveau sur la République et la décentralisation*” (1905).

anti-republican era of the Vichy-regime with the rising power of corporatism (Wright–Jones, Kaplan, 2001, Dard, 2016). In addition, Pierre Rosanvallon refers to liberalism as an „alternative history of France” which paved the way for the dismantling of state power and a more federalised concept of France in line with the idea of the „Europe of regions”, i.e. granting a greater role to supranational and global stakeholders in shaping the everyday lives of French citizens.

Spatial justice and the national territory: the genesis of post-war spatial planning policy

A society of equals was a revolutionary idea conceived in pre-capitalist France. However, with the transformation of the mode of production entailing the domination of man over nature, economic inequalities and social exclusion increased from the mid-19th century which demanded a reevaluation of the notion of equality (Rosanvallon, 2013). Social inequalities generated by physical conditions were incompatible with the spirit of republican egalitarianism, geographical, hereditary, physical aspects were seen as irrelevant factors in individual success and the notion of spatial determinism – an individual’s life prospects being shaped by the physical milieu – was unacceptable. The discourse of the republican ruling elite revolved around notions such as uniformity, equality and spatial harmony. Quintessential to the idea of uniformity and equality is the powerful myth of rurality with its origins in 19th century France still largely composed of villages. The stability of rural France was an essential pillar of centralised state-building. Philippe Estèbe (2015), while not undermining the ideal of spatial equality specific to the Jacobin state, argues that it is a historical construction and must be viewed accordingly, i.e. within its specific social, economic and geographic context. Inherent to the particular context was a static view of the French citizen characterized by low mobility, a mainly sedentary way of life, a strong attachment to its commune of origin. Agricultural production dominated the economy, rural society was composed of small household farms operating in a relative isolation from each other.

Rurality exerted a powerful influence on regionalist movements as well, which often found recourse in the mythic perennity, diversity and richness of small patrias. The authentic France of the *pays* was seen as an antipode to the accelerating pace of industrialisation entailing the proliferation of homogenized, artificial spaces and urbanisation dismantling an age-long structure evolving in the *long durée*.

According to Estèbe (2015), the relative underdevelopment of French cities compared with their European homologues is partially due to the joint deliberation of the political and industrial elite to implant industrial firms in villages and small settlements in the name of

spatial justice, a practice largely maintained until the Fifth Republic (1958-). The anti-urban and rural-biased attitude of the political elite was also a means to prevent cities from challenging the exclusive power of the state. Equality of status, however advantageous, was counterbalanced by the limited autonomy of the local sphere: local affairs were controlled by the state's agents (the system of prefects installed under Napoleonic rule).

The second half of the 20th century was characterised by a growing preoccupation and awareness of spatial disparities fragmenting the national territory, which constituted the subject of a series of debates and resulted in the emergence of a new scientific discipline whose task was to integrate space into economic analysis (and the region, more specifically). Post-1945, spatial disparities were no longer viewed as merely the external manifestation of the diversity of landscapes, climates, flora and fauna characterizing France, but alarming signs of a highly differentiated economic space, indicators of significant social inequalities (Leménorel, 2008).

The primary indicator of social injustice was the apparent unequal access to physical infrastructure and public services. The principle of spatial justice demanded that each region (and local collectivity) be capable of the provision of a maximum amount of public goods to its inhabitants and constituting a high standard public good in itself. Hence, each settlement, regardless of its geographical position was to be granted an equal access to the basic public services.

Since the consequences of regional disparities corresponded to unacceptable forms of social injustice in a broader context, public intervention targeting the reduction of socio-spatial inequalities and guaranteeing an equal access to public goods and services were deemed necessary. The post-war years were ripe for the emergence of spatial development as a state-managed policy targeting the redistribution of the effects of growth to promote lagging areas in order to achieve a more balanced national spatial structure. Political deliberation and courage were also required in order to empower the nation to choose between „decline and rebirth, the conquest of the periphery and internal colonisation...” (Gravier, 1947: 147).

Industrial decentralisation: justification, rationale, instruments

An example of the „French exception” characterised by a voluntaristic approach is *aménagement du territoire*, i.e. spatial planning as it emerged in France in the 1950s. A conceptual clarification might be useful to facilitate a better understanding of its overall purposes and guiding principles. The term *aménagement* literally means taking care of and

arranging one's household. It is worth noting that the latin root of *aménagement* is *mansio*, referring both to family and household. The Greek equivalent of household is *oikonomia*, a comprehensive space encompassing political and economic relations. In geography, the term *aménagement* refers to the voluntaristic action of a local community oriented at its own territory (Brunet, Ferras, and Théry, 1992). Since an area may procure economic advantages through extra investments and a more favourable position than other territories deprived of such investments, corrective measures are necessary in order to restore a hypothetical spatial equilibrium. Hence the need for a comprehensive approach to spatial development which allows room for the expression of its adaptive capacity. Pierre Merlin (2007) defines spatial development as a future-oriented action and praxis of the spatial reorganisation of individuals, activities, facilities and communication networks according to a certain guiding principle. The geographer highlights the practical and pragmatic character of spatial development at the expense of scientific, technical or artistic pretensions, and in the spatial restructuring of functions and relations, he emphasises the utilitarian notions of cost-efficiency, convenience and harmony. Returning to the analogy of the household, just as in the premodern era when the household head represented the common interest and the single opinion and prevented disunity between family members, so was the state expected to guarantee the integrity of its territory, i.e. arrange the „household” in the most convenient way that also complies with the requirements of spatial justice.

Spatial justice remained the main preoccupation of post-war spatial planning during the „glorious three decades” referred to as the golden age of western social democracies. Reference to a „hypothetic” spatial equilibrium became a central element of political discourse on spatial equality in the 1950s (Wendeln, 2014). Due to its optimistic voluntarism, spatial planning policy represents a definite break with geographic determinism, expresses a positivistic and rationalistic attitude and a commitment to transformative, future-oriented action (Woessner, 2008). Policy-makers were convinced that the relative position of regions would improve as a result of collective action limiting the growth of the capital city. The rationale behind centrally coordinated spatial planning was that market forces, if left to their own devices, produce excessive spatial polarisation and contribute to exacerbating interregional disparities. The spatial harmonisation objective orienting spatial development interventions until the neoliberal turn from the eighties justified every effort to diminish the excessive concentration/overaccumulation of factors of production in the main locomotive of the French economy.

Jean-Francois Gravier played the key role in directing the attention of political stakeholders to the disproportionate weight of the capital city which concentrated the dominant share of economic, higher educational, administrative, financial, cultural and political decision-making units. The geographer highlighted the historically rooted centre-periphery relationship characterising the national territory represented in the popular image as „Paris and the desert” which was evident in the significant regional disparities of GDP per capita values and heterogeneous demographic conditions. The geographer pointed out that the most disadvantaged part of France, the so-called „*diagonale du vide*”, an area extending between the Pyrenees to the Ardennes, revealed signs of severe demographic and economic decline. The scapegoat according to Gravier was the capital city, sterilising the population and depriving rural areas of their essential human resources. The generalisation of vulnerable zones suffering from a variety of crises (economic, financial, political) was, according to Gravier, a direct impact of the existence of the oversized capital city. The plight of the rural population necessitated further outward migration towards the capital city, hence rural localities incapable of collective action and interest enforcement were experiencing depopulation and desertification. The devastating picture painted by Gravier of the future of Paris and the „French desert” had a profound impact on the state-led interventions of spatial planning policy.

Essentially, spatial development associated the overall prosperity of the national economy with the territorial redistribution of the benefits of growth. Industrial decentralisation policy became the principal instrument through which the state intended to restore the balance between the center and the periphery. The region was viewed as a suitable framework for narrowing the developmental gap and attaining the objective of a more balanced spatial development within the national borders. The three decades between 1945 and 1982 were characterised by the predominance of voluntarist state intervention (*the era of the planning state*). This period was also referred to as the era of *tamed jacobinism* due to its centralising tendencies and the predominance of Jacobin structures counterbalanced by local interest enforcement, particularly on the behalf of powerful city mayors (Grémion, 1976). Effective decentralisation was hindered by the complex web of relations between the local elite, the political leadership and senior government officials.

Industrial decentralisation – the spatial restructuring of industrial labour, the implantation of Parisian firms in the periphery – and spatial planning policy went hand in hand. Industry was regarded as the primary engine of growth and the central planning objectives appeared to match the deconcentration strategies of large companies. Spatial development policies were

coordinated by the Delegation for Spatial Planning (DATAR), a Prime Ministerial department established in 1963. Spatial planning objectives contributed to boosting economic development, and economic growth occurred in a favourable socio-economic context, amidst rising living standards and rapid urbanisation. Between 1960 and 1974, the rate of the urban population increased from 62 to 73% (Le Bras –Todd, 2013). Afterwards, cities continued to grow at an uninterrupted albeit slower pace, by 2015 the rate of urban dwellers had reached 80%.

The first decree on the reduction of the hegemony of Paris was issued in 1955 requiring a special permission for the creation of companies (with over fifty employees) in the Paris area. The decentralisation of scientific activities was also strongly supported by the state. Between 1960 and 1980, 520 000 jobs were created in rural areas (outside Île-de-France), new firms located outside the Paris region were granted 7250 decentralisation premiums. The spatial planning fund (*PAT*) integrated formerly isolated sources of funding from 1995 on and was distributed in function of a firm's distance from Paris. The spatial location of new companies was decided by the state in a highly arbitrary manner. Automotive industry played a strategic role in decentralisation due to its large growth potential and number of employees. During three decades, the three major manufacturers (Peugeot, Renault, Ford) established their presence in western, northern regions, in Alsace and Lorraine.

The French policy of counterweight metropolises represented the most emblematic programme during the interventionist phase of spatial planning in the 1960-70s. It involved the selection of a limited number of counterweight metropolises – Lille, Nancy, Strasbourg, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes – counterbalancing the excessive dominance of Paris. The state-led programme was inspired by the growth pole theory of Francois Perroux, the founder of French regional science. The concepts Perroux used (growth poles, region, equilibration, propulsive industries, asymmetric power, dominance, etc.) cannot be interpreted outside the context of his theory, as he himself pointed out.

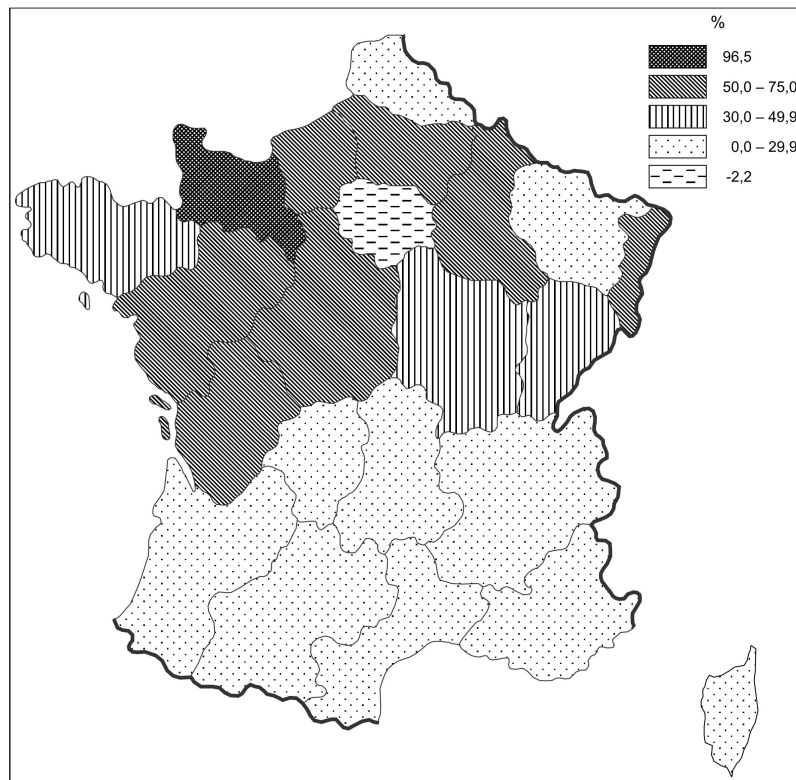
In Perroux's theory, the region does not represent the physical-geographical (banal) space, it is not confined within pre-fixed geographic/political boundaries. It is an economic space conceived as a field of forces, an area of planning, never in a state of perfect equilibrium. Perroux's theory is not interested in the geographical location of growth poles, however, it points out that the spatial agglomeration of economic activities has a favourable effect on the competitiveness and growth potential of a pole (Asheim, 1996). Perrouxian poles are constituted by industrial complexes, one or several interrelated firms of a propulsive sector (so-called industrialising industries). In the ideal case, they are located at the core urban agglomeration

of highly structured regions with a hierarchical settlement network and are expected to generate growth in their region automatically. It is noted by Perroux that the impacts of growth are not limited exclusively to the central agglomeration but are transmitted to the hinterland through centrifugal *spread effects* and in the form of new investments triggered by the anticipated advantages of the spatial proximity of the pole. As instruments of spatial planning, poles were created in objective (banal) spaces, and growth via spread effects was expected to be transmitted from the planned poles towards the hinterland.

A deficiency of Perrouxian growth pole theory is that albeit it explains the operative mechanisms of poles, it does not discuss the factors leading to their emergence. Later research unveiled that in order to avoid the creation of „cathedrals in a desert” and to ensure the efficient functioning of a pole, besides the presence of a lead sector, a network of suppliers (for the diffusion of innovation), interfirm linkages, a sufficiently integrated regional economy, a qualified workforce, the proximity of a consumer market, freely disposable capital, urban agglomeration, research facilities, and financial services are also required. The absence of any of these factors may limit the scope of potential poles. In French practice, the planned poles were either unable to induce growth in their hinterland, behaved as isolated units or tended to produce so-called backwash effects through depriving their regional environment from the most valuable resources (Parr, 1999). Backwash effects occurred when the presence of new, cost-efficient and export-oriented firms reduced demand for local SMEs formerly producing for the regional market and labour force migrated to the growth pole. The „centripetal effect” of the pole was manifest in growing concentration of capital, widening the development gap between a reinforced pole and a devitalised hinterland. The fact that top-down investment strategies contained no built-in compensatory mechanisms for those areas which were excluded from the circle of beneficiaries and suffered from the consequences of the absence of growth mechanisms demonstrates the short-sightedness of strategy-makers. No attention was paid to the fair redistribution of benefits of growth at the regional scale either. The lack of corrective or ex-post compensatory mechanisms was due to the expected functioning of counterweight metropolises as effective Perrouxian growth poles, inducing intraregional equilibration mechanisms via generating economic growth in predominantly rural, less industrialised western regions. The propulsive sector through the existence of strong backward linkages was expected to generate cumulative growth. Policy-makers relied on this effect when they undertook investments in peripheral towns often lacking sufficient conditions for the successful implementation of the strategy.

Public subsidies are most efficient if they target the elimination of bottlenecks in lagging regions, such as infrastructure or the lack of qualified labour force (Faragó, 2013). However, in the case of the French poles, the exclusive focus on infrastructural investments was not sufficient to tackle the problems of disadvantaged regions where, in addition to a shortage of physical capital, lacking institutional, social and geographical assets also posed serious obstacles to the successful implementation of the strategy. Growth poles are meant to be examined in a wider theoretical framework, i.e. they should not be separated from their context. They constitute an integral part of the development process which is not the equivalent of growth (Perroux, 1988).

Figure 1 The growth of industrial employment, 1945-75, percentage



Source: Braun-Collignon 2006

Albeit employment data (*Figure 1*) demonstrates the success of the growth pole strategy, it is a subject of debate whether the peripheral metropolises experienced growth as a result of exogenous processes related to globalisation and spontaneous metropolisation, new corporate strategies of delocalisation or regional policy interventions and the mobilisation of the meagre resources of spatial planning policy. The new investments targeted the implantation of large Fordist industrial units in the metropolises (vehicle industrial sector, chemical industry, steel industry). The 2745 industrial decentralisation operations conducted between 1955–75 led to the creation of 429 489 new jobs and 3200 enterprises (Merlin, 2007). However, over half of

the new jobs were located in the proximity of Paris, only one-fourth were created in the southern and southwestern regions, and 8% in industrial restructuring regions. Industrial decentralisation produced spectacular results in the Central region, Upper Normandy, Lower Normandy and Picardy regions where most of the newly established rural jobs required a low-skilled workforce.

Nonetheless, quantitative growth was unable to put an end the predominance of the capital city, hierarchical and asymmetrical relations between Paris and the peripheral towns were reproduced along different lines. Paris remained the primary beneficiary of industrial decentralisation: it managed to get rid of a substantial proportion of its manufacturing industrial employees between 1954–75 (29%) and while the inner ring underwent successful desindustrialisation, the outer ring saw a rise of manufacturing employees (+154 000). Besides, the majority of company headquarters were established in a 50 km radius of Paris and 42 % of the new jobs were created in the Paris Basin. As a result of the new spatial division of labour, a new type of qualitative differentiation (heterogeneous qualification levels, content of workplaces, wages, prestige) replaced the previous quantitative differences. In this respect, regional policy has expressly contributed to the rigidification and conservation of relations of dependency and increasing concentration of company headquarters in the centre. The geographical deconcentration of labour occurred in a period characterised by constant and high demand for low-skilled jobs, which explains the success of Fordist-type investments leading to regional convergence, as capital flowed to peripheral regions where wages were low and labour force migrated to advanced regions.

Table 1 The evolution of the demographic weight of counterweight metropolises

	Population of the eight cities (million)	Share in the total urban population (%)	Rate as percentage of the capital city (%)
1962	4.4	13.6	59.5
1968	4.9	13.9	59.8
1975	5.3	14.1	63.1
1982	5.6	14.0	64.3
1990	6.0	14.0	64.5
1999	6.5	14.7	67.4
2007	7.1	14.8	68.9
2014	9.6	18.5	78.2

*Lille, Nancy, Strasbourg, Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes
Source: INSEE, World Bank data.

By the end of the 20th century, the counterweight metropolises of the 1960s had developed into fully-fledged metropolises or showing signs of metropolisation (Nancy-Metz, Strasbourg,

Grenoble, Montpellier, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes, Rennes), by which they contributed to the development of a more polycentric urban network.

Table 2 The classification of French cities

1	Paris	International metropolis with global functions
2	Lyon, Marseille, Lille	European metropolis Population > 1 million
3	Nice, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes, Strasbourg, Grenoble	European metropolis 400 – 1 million
4	Rouen, Metz, Montpellier, Rennes, Orléans, Clermont-Ferrand, Dijon, Caen	Mid-sized city 200 – 550 000
5	Toulon, Douai-Lens, Nancy, Tours, Saint-Étienne, Béthune, Avignon, Le Havre, Mulhouse, Angers, Reims, Brest	mid-sized cities < 200 000

Source: INSEE.

Embarking on the road to decentralisation (1982-2015)

The *Trente Glorieuses* between 1945-75 were marked by General De Gaulle's commitment to the reconstruction of France, massive state-led projects, the reaffirmation of the „French exception” and the valorisation of a „*certain idea of France*” analogous with its greatness. The basic units of the decentralised institutional system were laid down in tandem with state-interventionism and the industrial decentralisation policy reviewed in the above section. During this period, French regions were no more than instruments of spatial planning put in the service of a more balanced spatial structure. Economic regions were delineated in to fulfil economic planning objectives since no other administrative unit provided an adequate framework for state intervention. The basic administrative units of regionalism exist since the delimitation of the 22 programming regions in 1954. Regional action programmes were launched in 1955 to promote the socio-economic development of lagging regions. The state established a special fund (economic and social development fund) to finance regional projects integrating previously fragmented regional aid instruments. The state-led modernisation and infrastructural developments advanced at a rapid pace. The programming regions included 2 to 8 counties each, 14 regions maintained the names of former provinces. Regional action districts implemented in 1964 (*CAR*) were placed under the control of prefects, regional affairs were delegated to the regional development council whose members included local politicians and various experts. (Piercy, 2009).

The idea of regionalism appeared at the level of political discourse in a 1968 speech of the President De Gaulle in Lyon in which he termed the century-long centralising trend of the

French Republic obsolete and announced a new era of regionalism which alone would guarantee the economic hegemony of France. However, pursuant to a failed referendum in 1969 marking the end of the Gaullist presidency, the political recognition of a France of regions was postponed until 1982. Meanwhile, various factors contributed to weakening the power of the centralised state, among which decolonisation deserves special attention for it marked an end to the self-proclaimed civilisatory mission of France directed at „savages”, a myth based on cultural superiority underlying the French ideology of greatness. This historical role had to be abandoned and thus, it was no longer viewed as a glorious aspect of the narrative of national greatness. Neomarxist critics underlined the inherent contradiction between the myth of republican egalitarianism and the historical reality of exploitation, domination and colonisation, namely that it was embedded in a particular hegemonic order which defies the myth of its universal exportability. The decisive blow to the centralising state-interventionist era was the growing dominance of the Anglo-Saxon neoliberal ideology from the 1980s attacking the majority of the foundations of the social state, which coincided with the accelerating pace of European Integration (Single Market, EMU). The 1980s were characterised by the overall crisis of the welfare state relying on the prospect of illimited growth. Rosanvallon (1981) mentions three aspects of the crisis, the first is financial, the second related to the efficiency of public policy (capacity of offering a solution to mass unemployment) and the third is related to legitimacy (capacity to offer a viable alternative to the neoliberal paradigm).

The republican solidarity-based system based on massive redistribution and settlement autonomy was challenged by the phenomenon of metropolisation and the privatisation of public services. The dominant trend of metropolisation produced a territorial structure described by Pierre Veltz as the *urban archipelago*, where the distance between the constitutive elements of the system are far less remarkable than the rural-urban divide in the previous era (Lévy, 2013). This is in line with the world city thesis (Friedmann, 1986) which emphasises that a limited number of cities concentrating the primary control functions play the key role in the spatial organization of the world economy. These strategic functions are assumed in essence by the layer of “cadres” (middle and top managers) defined by INSEE as *superieur metropolitan employees (EMS)*. The presence of EMS highlights the command power of metropolises. In France, apart from one global city (Paris) which still captures the essential part of cadres, their presence in regional capital cities has significantly progressed.

It was President Mitterand who embraced the idea of regionalism and implemented a series of decentralisation reforms named after the Minister of Interior Affairs Gaston Defferre.

Pursuant to the Defferre Laws of 1982, regions became territorial collectivities of their own right. Pursuant to formal decentralisation, cities were granted a large degree of autonomy coupled with the advantages of massive state redistribution guaranteed by the system of republican solidarity. The 1999 Chevènement Laws introduced various intersettlement cooperative frameworks (EPCIs)⁴ in the view of achieving economies in terms of the organisation of public services, and finally, the MAPTAM Law and the NOTRE Law (2015-2016) defined the new territorial organisation of France based on the supremacy of metropolises and supersized regions⁵. The proponents of the reform claim that traditional centre-periphery relations formerly characterizing the national territory are no longer relevant in a context of European-scale competition between cities of similar size and where Paris competes with London and Tokyo.

Decentralisation has been a costly adventure for the French state, resulting in an extreme spatial fragmentation of power and a plethora of administrative tiers. (In 2015, the republic counted 36 529 communes, 101 counties and 27 regions, i.e. 40% of the local collectivities of the EU⁶.) Since 1982, each successive legislation added a supplementary tier to the existing territorial-administrative system, while the traditional county-based structure maintained its legitimacy despite successive attempts of left-wing governments to suppress it. The traditional structure constituted by six distinct tiers forming the arena of action of spatial development policies (the settlement, the county, the EPCIs, the region, the state, Europe) is redundant and its relevance is questioned by the series of new reforms which *highlight the preeminence of the economic over the political*. Despite its declared radical objectives, the reforms left an extremely fragmented settlement structure intact, whereas Europe-wide countries are aiming at the fusion of settlements. Besides, fears concerning the „hollowing out” of the settlement scale (the basic cell of local democracy) are realistic in light of the text of the reforms which leave an alarmingly narrow scope of areas of intervention for the communal level.

The economic role of the region is valorised by the reforms, and a marked division of labour between the new and existing tiers (regions, metropolises, counties, settlements) is targeted through the specialisation and definition of tasks. The region is granted substantial liberty to define its economic development strategy whose objectives are fixed in the Regional

⁴ Despite the traditional resistance to such intercommunal structures, the number of EPCIs with own-source tax revenue in 2016 was 2062 which entails the diminishing number of isolated settlements (27). Plantevignes S, Sebbanc L, 2016)

⁵ Pursuant to the Maptam law of 2014, the Republic saw its large cities transformed into metropolises: Nice, Lyon, Rennes, Bordeaux, Toulouse, Nantes, Brest, Lille, Rouen, Grenoble, Strasbourg, Montpellier, Grand Paris, Aix-Marseille-Provence, Nancy.

⁶ TRÉSOR-ÉCO – n° 154.

Economic Development, Innovation and Internationalisation Plan. Sustainable development goals are to be included in another strategic document, the Regional Sustainable Development Plan. Both documents are to be elaborated by the regional authorities.

Power relations reproduced between settlements within administrative regions reflected the way the state organised its relations with subnational units, giving a birth to „mini-states” as regions were referred to. Power did not simply wane or weaken as a result of decentralisation; on the contrary, it began to dominate inter-settlement relations. However, their equal status affirmed by legislation did not empower settlements to exercise control over administrative units of inferior ranking, i.e. no hierarchical relations were allowed between settlements in terms of competences. The general system of competences meant that each local community could freely exercise tasks outside those prescribed by the law, provided that they served the community’s interests. This resulted in a complex web of competences, which was inefficient and imposed a great burden on public expenditure. The new decentralisation laws which initially targeted the suppression of the counties, decided to finish off with the system of general competences in the case of counties and regions, determining the specialised competences of each territorial administrative level. In reality, it is an instrument of control which seems to be contrary to the spirit of decentralisation. The anticipated greater transparency and visibility evidently serve the interests of the superior levels of the administrative hierarchy. The regionalisation agenda is in part a response to European processes demanding a continuous reorganisation of power relations between nation-states and subnational units, demonstrating preference to supra-state forms of political organisation and forms of cooperation across the continent. The requirement of strong, self-governing units matching in size the German „*Länder*” became crucial for the country to boost its economic competitiveness. It was widely held that French regions were too small and lacking sufficient resources to initiate their own programmes. The maintained attachment to counties destroyed every illusion of an imminent and radical transformation of the administrative structure despite the siren calls of proponents of a „new geographical contract” relying on the elimination of old forms of attachment, rendering them obsolete against the backdrop of increasingly deterritorialised spaces constituted by a variety of flows inherent in the functioning of the global economy. Geographers, planners, entrepreneurs hail the new territorial reforms granting a greater autonomy to regions and achieving a greater transparency in the field of programme funding. The benefits derived from reducing the number of regions from 26 to 13 in Metropolitan France via the directives of the *Notre Law* of 2015 are substantial according to preliminary statistical calculations. The claims of the

proponents of the reforms seem to outweigh the disadvantages voiced by those who regard those as a possible end to the decentralisation project and claim that outside their excessive bias towards metropolitan areas, reforms neglect rural France, i.e. 90% of its territory, 2/3 of its settlements and 27.3 million inhabitants (over 40% of the total population). On the opposite extremity are situated progressive thinkers such as the geographer Jacques Lévy who sees an overwhelming need to transform a century-long rural-based structure into an almost exclusively urbanised space, whose hypothetic uniformity and unity is but a mere relic of the past and whose maintained legacy produces excessive inequalities and undermines the rhetoric on spatial justice. The rigidity of the past structure as manifested by the importance of physical frontiers, separation, geometrical forms, dividing lines is contrasted with the growing influence of shapeless networks and poles. The new structure which highlights the dominance of the *region-metropolis-EPCI* triangle disrupts former structures based on the hypothetical democratic equality of settlements. The role of regional prefects is also reinforced in the new system of multi-level governance, who collaborates with the metropolitan level administrative structures, a new level of the representation of asymmetrical power relations in the administrative structure. If the reallocation in power shifts towards the strongest elements in the system, this will evidently lead to an asymmetry of interest enforcement capacity, evidently at the expense of the weakest elements, the rural settlements. These areas are lacking *visibility*, which is apparently the most significant objective defined for French metropolises. Visibility in the economic space almost always implies a high level of urbanisation, density and concentration in the view of achieving economies of scale. Hence, lagging, handicapped territories, e.g. extremely sparsely populated remote rural spaces as detected by INSEE, which are estimated to make up an alarming 26 percent of the territory of France with 5 percent of its population and 14 percent of its settlements, remain in the domain of the „invisible”.

Regarding the government's plans to drastically reduce the level of funding (dotation globale de fonctionnement, DFG), territorial collectivities will fall short of 11 billion euros between 2015-17 in compliance with EU-objectives to reduce the state deficit below 3% of overall GDP. For the local collectivities, it will result in a cutback on investments and operating costs (Le Pors 2015). In the case of local collectivities jeopardised by the loss of funding, this means a significant deviation from the democratic functioning previously ensured by a comfortable level of state funding. According to Le Pors (2015), the reform reveals a bias towards enterprises to the detriment of households. In another approach, the new territorial reforms can be interpreted as an attempt to harmonise the institutional system

with the exigences of the global economy. In this framework, the objective is to ensure a greater coherence between the geographic reality of local collectivities and the territorial economic geography which would produce substantial benefits in terms of economic efficiency, while, at the same time, a greater adaptation to the „lived spaces” constituted by the everyday trajectories of citizens. By transferring the tasks and competences of the communal level to the intercommunal and metropolitan levels of governance, the basic units of the practice of local democracy are at the risk of losing their instruments and role in the provision of services of proximity.

Not all territorial stakeholders share the enthusiasm of the ruling elite about the benefits of the extension of communal integration, resistance is most evident in the case of peripheral communes attached to their autonomy. Mayors of smaller communes highlight the dangers of technocratic top-down governance styles and the danger of being dissolved in intercommunal structures which should be regarded as instruments and not ends in themselves. Apart from peripheral voices opposing the reforms with their exclusive focus on size and efficiency, it seems that mid-sized towns rejoice over the possibility already open to a number of new entrants into the selective club of French metropolises instituted with the MAPTAM Law. As of August 2016, five additional French agglomerations have become eligible to obtain the status of metropolis, namely St-Etienne, Dijon, Orléans, Toulon. For St-Etienne it is vital to ensure the visibility of the agglomeration in a region where the dominance of Grenoble and Lyon creates a highly unbalanced structure. Intensive lobbying on behalf of city mayors preceded the modification of the Law which rendered further candidates eligible to obtaining the rank of metropolis. In fact, a supplementary text in the law made it possible for each regional capital city to obtain the status of metropolis regardless of the level of preparation of the given city. This resulted in an interesting conflict between Tours and Orléans, for instance, the latter obtaining the title automatically, while the former, whose preparedness would more likely have justified its eligibility, was refused in the first round.

Mainstream politicians, irrespective of party affiliation, have manifested their commitment to the prescriptions of new economic geography establishing a relation between the growth potential of cities and their size, indicating that the ideology of *big is beautiful* has reentered the scene after a temporary interlude in the politics of DATAR marked by its support of medium and small sized cities in the 1970s-1980s. By succumbing to the logic of the functioning of the economy and supporting the strongest elements in the spatial hierarchy, spatial planning has abandoned its traditional focus on redistribution and spatial equilibrium. This poses the question of whether it is still possible to refer to it as an autonomous policy

committed to ideas of spatial justice, harmonisation, equilibration. By eradicating the traditional „territorial millefeuille” and enforcing its rationalising logic, the state contributes to the possible emancipation of the richest regions and their ambitious metropolises more interested in competition outside the national borders than in aiding disadvantaged settlements who, up until now, have enjoyed the benefits of the generous redistributory policies of the state. Laurent Davezies, by introducing the notion of „new territorial egoisms”, refers to the autonomisation of rich regions (Catalony, Northern Italy, Scotland) based on superior GDP values in the 21st century known as „regional nationalisms” and their eventual liberation from the burden of providing for the needs of poorer regions within their countries. Such behaviour in the case of France would imply disastrous consequences, entailing the disruption of the unity of the Republic.

CONCLUSION

Albeit centralisation contributed to shaping a „certain idea of the nation” based on indivisibility, uniformity, homogeneity, a capacity to transcend differences and particularities, constituted the geographical translation of political and social equality (Estèbe, 2015) and was enforced via the voluntaristic actions of central agencies adhering to the principles of intra-national solidarity in order to counterbalance the detrimental effects of market forces, it is considered inefficient and too costly in the context of the current valorisation of metropolitan growth and the advantages of integration into various flows and networks transcending national boundaries. The preeminence of economic growth objectives in the background of the recent territorial reforms led to a drastic reduction of state funding accorded to local collectivities, and reinforcement of the role of supersized autonomous self-governing units (the supersized regions). It is likely that asymmetrical power relations, private players, powerful mayors’ lobbies and pressure from the EU contributed to the recent reorganisation of the territorial administrative system of the Republic. All these factors point towards the contingent nature of the reform process culminating in a unique system of governance, considered as an unachieved experience and not as a *terminus ad quem*, i.e. an ideal representation of the national territory. It is a division corresponding to a specific perception of the national territory from the perspective of the functioning of the global economy which disregards the organic development of historically embedded communities. In the words of Jacques Lévy, the need to redefine the traditional post-revolutionary structures stems from the overwhelming prevalence of the „urban fact”, largely ignored by the political elite until recently. The outstanding speed of urbanisation in France rendered senseless a division based

on the hypothetic equality of settlements – itself a product of egalitarianistic enlightenment thought. Under these circumstances, multi-speed development will become a permanent feature of the national territory divided between winners and losers of supra-national processes.

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