



# What territories do we need in Europe, today?

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## WHAT TERRITORIES DO WE NEED IN EUROPE TODAY?

### Communication au Congrès de l'Association des Géographes Américains (AAG), 6-10 mars 2006.

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When I ask the question **"What territories do we need in Europe today?"**, I wouldn't like you to think that I am making any intellectual or scientific claim to advise all the countries of Europe on how to reform their local or trans-national political structures. That would require a certain number of fine distinctions, as well as a lot of fieldwork I haven't done. My somewhat ambitious title merely expresses a sort of general hunch: the old relationship between power and territory, that which actually defines a State and its local avatars, needs to be invented anew, and it is this renewal which I wish to touch on today. The only example I'm really able to speak of in any knowledgeable way is France, whose changes in territorial organisation primarily reflect the political relationship it has with its own national area. All industrialised urban democracies have now become information societies concerned by the changing ways in which politics produces territory and vice versa.

Before beginning, I would first like to define the way how the rather loose concept of "territory" will be used here. The word "territories" refers to political constructs of space which take on institutional forms, and even constitutional ones for the most durable, such as local authorities. Such political spatial constructs have two basic roles: the assertion of local power, now based on the principles of representative democracy, and the organisation of collective action, mainly via taxes, administration and community services.

As we all know, such constructs are invariably the result of pressure and compromise, with local bodies struggling for partial, multi-faceted freedom from a central State whose spatial existence is entirely dependent on the constructs themselves. The latter thus continue to be the subject of social debate and political horse-trading, as well as of scientific investigations into how local power is exercised, participatory democracy, the territorial devolvement of public policies, decentralisation, the regulation of community services and so on. With everything evolving from year to year, such debates highlight the need for territorial redefinition (or reform), as if society were never properly in step with its own territories.

I would like to begin by briefly examining two of the major features of this sort of ongoing redefinition: the enlargement of scale and the quest for territorial integration. However, this will lead up to the assertion that today Europe is not so much in need of new, larger, more integrated, more pertinent territories, as for inter-territoriality to be organised politically so as to regulate

the division of national and local territorial sovereignty, and thereby radically transform the relationship between power and territory.

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Ever since it began building itself as a political territory, Europe has as an actor brought about, and as a region undergone, three major fields of territorial redefinition: that of municipal mergers, that of regionalisation, and that of the confirmation of urban metropolitan governments. Although there has never been any question of a European territorial model (except discreetly via the **Statistical Area Naming System, SANS**), these three fields are transforming local authorities in Europe in two related ways.

The first is the enlargement of scale. Since the “areas of action” of individual and collective stakeholders are becoming larger, their territorial regulatory framework also has to be enlarged. This was initiated in the 1960s and 1970s with the basic territories, deemed to be too small and too weak. At the same time, the concept of the region contradicted the republican, Napoleonic heritage of the French departments and the northern-Italian and Spanish provinces. It is the same thinking which is naturally presiding over the passage from a Europe of nation-states to a European federation. **Fig. 1 : The enlargement of scales in Europe.**

Territorial integration is the second transformation. As metropolitan areas mark out new spatial systems (mobility systems, service systems, production systems, residential systems, etc.), it seems logical to aspire to govern them in terms of a new functional solidarity. Every European conurbation sighs after a metropolitan government, and if it lacks one, tries hard to bring an area of governance into being. **Fig. 2: Urban areas and urban authorities in France.**

Larger, more integrated, more “pertinent” or more “European” in scale, the new territories created over the last generation - with France lagging behind – have nevertheless not in themselves met the needs which brought them about. There are four reasons for this:

1. They have caused clashes of identity everywhere. These may well be seen as the Old World resisting the arrival of the New, but they at least show that not all of society marches to the beat of the same drum, even if that beat is that of modernisation.

2. They have shifted the scale of problems, without solving them: in France, for example, competition between territories defined as economic areas producing tax resources has changed from municipal to district level, while remaining just as cut-throat.

3. They have chased after the functional reality of metropolitan areas without ever catching up with them (something which is in any case now starting to be thought of as impossible).

4. They have entirely focused political attention and effort on territorial redefinition and integration, at the very moment when a network society, based on commercial and not political issues, has been coming into being.

That is why, in response to the question asked in the title, my hypothesis is that today Europe does not so much need new territories at new scales as the

organisation of political efforts among already-existing, sufficiently-numerous and adequately-varied territories.

As political stakeholders with collective interests, territories are confronted with three separate challenges, which they cannot face on their own by keeping up façades of individual sovereignty. The first challenge is how to manage the flows and services carried by public and private operators through major networks unaccountable to any democratic process. The second is how to deal in a more global way with issues unrestrained by borders, such as environmental and public safety ones – particularly those concerning human health. The third challenge is that of raising taxes on increasingly slippery wealth creation based on the electronic transfer of financial assets.

When territories no longer operate within frameworks adapted to the construction of the collective action of a society whose functioning and expectations outflank them, their political credibility is threatened. Here it seems safe to say that politics isn't "lagging behind its territory", as the supporters of territorial reform have been saying for some time, but is quite simply running out of room.

Unlike many others I am not going to preach in favour of "the end of territories" – quite the opposite, in fact. Building territories, from extremely local to trans-national levels, is still, and will keep on being, a response to other necessities than the ones for political action. In the political field, however, the pertinence and power of any territory at whatever scale are both necessary and insufficient. Necessary, in the sense that territories remain historical means – albeit not the only ones - of providing structures for collective stakeholders; insufficient if stakeholders don't extend their organisation beyond themselves (which the territorial principle actively discourages them from doing). Hence the idea that inter-territoriality is essential.

Inter-territoriality refers to a fact which already exists but is not yet accepted in political action: in today's network society, the effectiveness of collective action depends more on what is organised between territories than within them.

Like other European countries, France has many types of cooperation between territories: between municipalities, between regions, between French regions and their European neighbours, and of course the longstanding system of international relations. There are innovative examples of "territorial conferences", such as the Latin Arc, other older, very concrete ones like cross-border urban areas, and some promising ones like territorial alliances within the framework of decentralised cooperation. **Fig. 3: Emerging forms of inter-territoriality.**

None of these forms of cooperation, however, has as yet led any territories to give priority to real inter-territorial toiling. They sometimes aim at eventually setting up "super-territories", such as a super-national Europe, or super-municipal metropolitan governments, but this corresponds to a territorial concept which I have already described as outmoded. In particular, it does not meet two requirements essential to the credibility of political action: the need to coordinate levels of action without being tied to traditional hierarchical

principles, and the need to coordinate the action of disconnected territories whose interdependence relies on networks.

Inter-territoriality involves neither ending nor going beyond territories. It ought to be what organises the vital sharing of sovereignty all along the chains of territories defined by economic function, ecological phenomena and social behaviour.

What territories do we need in Europe today? All those that exist, but much more focused on inter-territorial political effort, and much less on asserting their identities, power and autonomy of action. In other words, a radical change in the territoriality of politics, which seems to be getting away from its feudal origins very slowly indeed.

This slowness leads me to put forward one final explanation: the inability of the State and its local avatars, that is local authorities, to move from their original territorial principle to the principle of inter-territoriality which would allow them to resuscitate their political credibility is not basically due to the resistance of institutions, the system's inertia, the congenital backwardness of the political to the social, or the eternal struggle of the old against the new. It is in global capitalism's interest to put as many obstacles as possible in the way of an inter-territorial State – or, as some have put it, a "glocal" State – the only one able to impose multi-scale regulations. As long as inter-territoriality remains a political pygmy, the main private economic actors will monopolise essential inter-territorial functions through their dominance of major technological networks. As long as politics continues to shut itself up inside territories, inter-territoriality will be a lucrative market, and the conditions for its fructification will remain unrestricted. Laissez-faire economic supporters call unceasingly for "less government" and "fewer territories". Never will they call for "more inter-territoriality"...