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An ideology of metropolitanisation?

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At the beginning of the 1990s, the world was going through a process of metropolitanisation which I defined at the time as “the action of centripetal forces leading to the concentration of people and activities”¹. However, with time, this process has proved extremely uneven. Looking at the different territorial laws voted in France in recent years, one may wonder whether the national authorities do not confuse the process with an “ideology of metropolitanisation”.

All through the history of humanity, cities have profited, at least when they were not badly governed, from their large population, which allowed them, in some cases, to play a political role and, more generally, to offer a greater variety of goods and services, as well as a broader range of jobs, than those of non urban, less densely populated territories.

► The factors behind metropolitanisation...

At the beginning of the 1990s - in a context of globalisation, internationalisation and worldwide development² - urbanisation, born of the industrial revolution, evolved into a process of metropolitanisation, and this for a number of reasons.

First, the expansion of the tertiary sector, which became by far the most important provider of jobs, translated into job creations mostly profiting metropolitan areas.

Secondly, confronted by the increasing diversity of trades and job mobility, voluntary or otherwise, households settled down inside the widest labour markets, thus favouring large urban areas.

Thirdly, the growing importance of world-space necessitated multimodal connections, for instance via international airports or ever higher bandwidths within digital networks, again benefitting metropolises, where such equipments are quickly amortised and therefore profitable.

Moreover, these areas offer such advantages as “agglomeration economies”, thanks to the concentration of many activities - design-research, intellectual services, B2B, management, or culture and leisure.

Finally, firms are often gregarious, settling next to each other.

By Gérard-François Dumont



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However, the objective factors which might be beneficial to the most populated agglomerations do not automatically generate better results in terms of attractiveness and innovation³. These also depend on local governance⁴ and on a climate more or less favourable to business. Moreover, because of their high density of population and activities, large urban areas also suffer from diseconomies of scale: higher property prices, time lost in transports, etc. The combination of these positive and negative factors plays in favour of some areas and against others, such as Paris, which lost a number of decision centres during these last few years⁵. And it can be observed, in France as in Europe and in the rest of the world, that, far from trying at all costs to settle within a large city, many firms with an international market remain, or chose to locate, in a medium-sized town, even sometimes in a small one⁶.

As for innovation, even if it is true that synergies linked to the proximity between universities, firms and research centres are of interest, they are in no way exclusive. It is entrepreneurial drive rather than localisation in a big city that nurtures innovation, which explains the many innovative products developed outside metropolitan areas.

A country must add value to all its territories. It is a delusion to believe, as the French Parliament seems to do, that in order to make some territories more dynamic it is enough to call them “metropolises”⁷ and to redistribute a few competences between territorial collectivities, while effecting a recentralisation. As the size of a territory is in no way an indispensable factor of attractiveness and innovation, it would make more sense to develop the conditions that give access to better territorial governance everywhere. ☺

(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)

1. Dumont, Gérard-François, proceedings of a seminar on « Métropolisation et internationalisation », Commissariat général au Plan, Paris, January 1994.

2. « Les territoires dans la « mondialisation » : sur un trépied », *Population & Avenir*, n° 721, January-February 2016.

3. This is also true of urbanisation; cf. Dumont, Gérard-François, « L'urbanisation dans le monde : un processus diversifié », *Accomex*, n° 104, May 2012 ; « L'urbanisation : un processus global, une réalité locale », *Population & Avenir*, n° 715, November-December 2013.

4. Dumont, Gérard-François, *Diagnostic et gouvernance des territoires*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2012.

5. *Fuite des centres de décision, quelles réalités ?*, CCI Paris-Ile-de-France, October 2014.

6. Dumont, Gérard-François, « Territoires et potentialités de développement », *Relief*, n° 41.

7. The status of a metropolis as a public organisation of inter-communal cooperation was created by law on 16 December 2010, and then enlarged on 27 January 2014 with the law of modernisation of territorial public action and affirmation of metropolises (MAPTAM).