'Metropolises’ and their surroundings: what kind of influence?

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‘Metropolises’ and Their Surroundings: What Kind of Influence?

In France, two territorial laws in 2010 and 2014 introduced a new legal status, designated as ‘metropolis’, applying to 14 territories with a large urban population: Aix-Marseille, Bordeaux, Brest, Grenoble, Lille, Lyon, Montpellier, Nantes, Nice, Paris, Rennes, Rouen, Strasbourg and Toulouse. Will these 14 administrative territories, now labelled ‘metropolises’, automatically spread their influence around?

These laws – voted by both the right and the left – were implicitly based on a double assumption. First, that the future of France in a globalised economic world would critically depend on the dynamics of its more densely populated territories, which must thus be given a specific legal status. Second, that these administrative ‘metropolises’ would interact all the more efficiently with their surrounding territories. Nobody can deny that, given the size of their population, mainly reflecting their important administrative functions, these 14 cities benefit from better connections, via airports for example, and, in view of the number of consumers they concentrate, offer significant catchment areas. But is that enough to generate primordial advantages?

The lessons of urban history

To answer this question, let us first look at the history of urban areas in France. It shows the existence of urban territories that lay at the top of the urban structure of the Hexagon, starting with Paris, Lyon, Marseille and Lille, the four most populated conurbations in France, and for a long time the only ones with around 1 million inhabitants or more. Did the size of their population allow them to help other areas of the region become more attractive? In the Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur region, the attractiveness of other locations, such as Sophia-Antipolis or Fréjus Saint-Raphaël, has little to do with the influence of Marseille. The latter, despite major investments – e.g. the planning and economic development programme Euroméditerranée – essentially remains an administrative town, and is only marginally responsible for jobs created in other parts of the region. In the Rhône-Alpes region, it would be absurd not to underline the industrial role of Lyon in such sectors as pharmacy, health or chemicals. However, the economic dynamism of Grenoble or Saint-Étienne owes nothing to Lyon. Indeed, had the influence of Lyon over its region been undeniable, Saint-Étienne or Roanne would not have suffered so much from the restructuring or closing of their traditional industries.

In the North, after a century and a half of holding an unenvi- able position at the end of a line, away from European networks, Lille has in effect benefited, thanks to Pierre Mauroy, from a structural change in its position in the French and European railway networks. With the implantation of TGV lines and the new Lille–Europe station, Lille became a tri-dimensional hub of networks serving Paris and the south of France, England, and Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany. This new geographic asset – introduced in 1994 and later enlarged with the gradual improvement of the Belgian, English and German rail tracks opening the way to high-speed trains - allowed Lille to better respond to the challenges of industrial decline, but this did not automatically give rise to a new dynamism in its hinterland. Favourable developments intervened only in territories benefiting from efficient territorial governance, such as Loos-en-Gohelle, which became a ‘laboratory’ town in the field of eco-building.

1. Loi de réforme des collectivités territoriales of 16 December 2010, Loi de Modernisation de l’action publique territoriale et d’affirmation des métropoles (Mapam) of 27 January 2014 (effective since 1 January 2016). Loi portant nouvelle organisation territoriale de la République (NOTRe) of 7 August 2015. Note that these laws give rise to distinct institutional modalities, in particular between Île-de-France and the other French territories.

2. This, however, is in no way established; cf. Poupart, Gilles, « Développement local et emploï productif : un monopole des métropoles ? », Population & Avenir, n° 725, November-December 2015. [www.population-demographie.org/revue04.htm]

3. The use of the word ‘metropolis’, which means, etymologically, ‘mother-town’, is not restricted. For example, the Châteauroux urban community, 75,000 inhabitants, has been called Châteauroux Métropole since 1 March 2015, while keeping its status of ‘Communauté d’agglomération’.


**Territorial successes that owe nothing to metropolitan effects**

As for successful developments observed in territories over the last decades in France, what do they owe to the 14 cities now designated as ‘metropolises’? Not much is the answer, since a number of these success stories rest on the creativity, entrepreneurship and attractiveness of territories, following a logic of endogenous development. One can cite a few examples. In Aquitaine, the revival and growth of the production of Espelette chilli peppers cannot be explained by the proximity of a metropolis. In Brittany, the achievements of Saint-James clothes or Vitré enterprises owe nothing to the Rennes ‘metropolis’. In the Midi-Pyrénées, the health of Bénéteau, world champion of pleasure boating equipments and systems, has no links with any metropolis whatsoever. In Poitou-Charentes, the success of Legrand, world leader for electrical equipments and systems, has no links with any metropolis whatsoever.

Therefore the status that French legislation has conferred onto these fourteen metropolises is yet to be justified. In fact, no impact assessment has been realised on the effects of these administrative changes, which have been deemed positive a priori.

To avoid the risk of ‘metropolises’ becoming disconnected from their geographic environment, they will need to deploy particularly sound governance.

*(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)*

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8. Research and development.
