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Gérard-François Dumont

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'Metropolises' and Their Surroundings: What Kind of Influence?

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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 laws¹ – 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 territories², which must thus be given a specific legal status. Second, that these administrative 'metropolises'³ 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,

1. *Loi de réforme des collectivités territoriales* of 16 December 2010, *Loi de Modernisation de l'action publique territoriale et d'affirmation des métropoles* (Maptam) 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. Poupard, Gilles, « Développement local et emploi 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'.

By Gérard-François Dumont



Professor at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne ; President of the journal *Population & Avenir*.

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, health⁴ 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 unenviable 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-building⁵.

4. Duchesne, Alexandre, « Dynamique des espaces productifs en France. Un territoire de l'innovation : Lyonbiopôle », *Population & Avenir*, n° 726, January-February 2016. [www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm]

5. Cf. *Population & Avenir*, n° 714, September-October 2013. [www.population-demographie.org/revue04.htm]

» Paris, mother-town or territorial vampire?

Now let us consider Paris. In the 1960s and 1970s, following constraining decisions linked to national policies, establishments previously located in the heart of Greater Paris, including the peripheral arrondissements, were relocated to the new industrial zones in new towns, or in those within an hour from Paris, like Rouen or Orléans. Such implantations had little to do with any beneficial effect of Paris, but a lot to do with regulations that influence location choices. As a matter of fact, in the long run, Paris has not stimulated but stifled. Far from contributing to the upswing of the Paris Basin towns, which in the Middle Ages had been among the most populated in France, Paris has vampirised them, relegating them to secondary rank within the French urban structure.

» 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 influence of Bordeaux. In Auvergne, the success of Michelin, or of Limagrain, fourth largest producer of seeds in the world, cannot be explained by the proximity of a metropolis. In Brittany, the achievements of Saint-James clothes or Vitré enterprises⁶ owe nothing to the Rennes 'metropolis'. In the Midi-Pyrénées region, the development of pharmaceutical activities around Castres and the Fabre Laboratories⁷, created in 1962, owe nothing to Toulouse. On the contrary, it is the Toulouse metropolis which has benefited since then from their success,

6. Dumont, Gérard-François, *Diagnostic et gouvernance des territoires*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2012 ; « Villes à système productif industriel et gouvernance territoriale », *Bulletin de l'Association de Géographes Français*, vol. 92, décembre 2015.

7. Penan, Hervé, *Histoire des Laboratoires Pierre Fabre*, Toulouse, Éditions Privat, 2014.

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

with e.g. the opening in 2010 of the Fabre R&D Centre⁸ on the Oncopole campus in Langlade (Toulouse). In the Loire region, the health of Bénéteau, world champion of pleasure boat builders, or Fleury-Michon, French number 1 for ham, owe nothing to the Nantes metropolis. In Poitou-Charentes, the endogenous growth of the Futuroscope area owes nothing to a metropolis – there is none close by – or even to Poitiers. In Limousin, 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*.

» The risks of cities disconnected from their hinterland

On the other hand, the risks inherent to the creation of the metropolis status cannot be overlooked: difficulty to create synergies with other territorial units, including departments and regions⁹; overblown bureaucracies; increasing gap between decision-makers and citizens; complexity, generating a multilayered structure of unequalled proportions; risk of more and more people shunning elections, feeling that they have lost contact with their representatives; difficulty to understand the distribution of responsibilities; difficulty to find one's way in the greatly increased opacity of the financial system of territorial units ; lack of flexibility, in the long term, of the perimeters of metropolises, as the laws imply rigid territorial boundaries¹⁰, etc.

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

(Translation: Sylvie Vanston)

8. Research and development.

9. Elements which all go against the increasingly reticular reality of territories; cf. Dumont, Gérard-François, « Territoires : un fonctionnement radial ou réticulaire ? », *Population & Avenir*, n° 723, May-June 2015.

10. While the reconfiguration of territories requires flexibility; cf. Zaninetti, Jean-Marc, « Villes de France : en pleine recomposition », *Population & Avenir*, n° 726, January-February 2016. [www.population-demographie.org/revue03.htm]