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The Golden Age of Metropolises Loïc Vadelorge, February 2026

Summary (short abstract)

In **The Golden Age of Metropolises**, the fifth volume in the Cahiers POPSU (Autrement) cross-disciplinary studies series, historian Loïc Vadelorge examines contemporary debates on metropolitanism from a historical perspective. He points out that the concept of 'metropolisation', popularised in the 1990s to describe the concentration of economic resources in a handful of major global cities, has gradually been extended in France to include cities of various sizes, exerting influence at a regional level. The spread of the term 'metropolisation' in the media and academic literature from the 1990s onwards was intended to describe the economic power of major globalised cities. A statistical 'portmanteau' adopted by economic geography and subsequently by legislation (the MAPTAM-NOTRe Act 2014–15), the term 'metropolis' refers equally to administrative and economic realities, which partially overlap. Etymologically meaning a colonial 'mother city', then a 'provincial capital', the term was formalised by DATAR in the 1960s when it established the 'métropoles d'équilibre' with a view to regional planning and rebalancing the national territory.

The author traces the institutional 'long march' which, from the municipal associations of the late 19th century through to the territorial reforms of the 2010s – via urban communities and the 1999 Chevènement Act – has gradually consolidated metropolitan powers. This trajectory is as much a result of the evolution of urban capitalism as it is of the rise of inter-municipal cooperation as a means of organising local public action. Loïc Vadelorge also discusses the supposed ecological shift championed by current executives: far from being a radical turning point, the management of water, industrial risks and infrastructure reveals the strength of the technical, legal and financial legacies that today constrain the metropolises' room for manoeuvre.

Finally, the book examines recent controversies surrounding 'barbaric metropolises' and the critique of the CAME (competitiveness, attractiveness, metropolisation, excellence). It argues for moving away from essentialisation, taking metropolitan public policies seriously, and distinguishing between urban narratives and territorial marketing in order to better understand the actual socio-spatial effects of contemporary metropolitan governance.

Abstract (long)

This fifth Transversal POPSU issue, written by the historian Loïc Vadelorge, offers a historical perspective on metropolitan areas that sheds light on contemporary debates and issues concerning metropolitan governance, policies and urban planning.

The first chapter examines **the contribution of history to the definition of the terms ‘metropolis’ and ‘metropolisation’** (pp. 7–16) in order to understand their historical legacies. The term ‘metropolisation’ first appeared in France in 1990 in the newspaper **Le Monde** to denote a shift in the scale of urbanisation. A year later, the geographer and sociologist Saskia Sassen published **The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo**, which brought the metropolitan issue to the forefront of academic debate. In France, the work of Pierre Veltz and Olivier Dollfus established the idea that large cities have become the spatial units of the globalised world. The concept of ‘metropolisation’ replaced that of ‘urbanisation’ to highlight the fact that demographic or spatial data alone are insufficient to describe reality and must be supplemented by economic indicators better suited to explaining the new power of (large) cities. A ‘portmanteau word of our time’ (pp. 9–11), the metropolis is analysed as much by statistics (in France, by INSEE) as by urban research. In the late 2000s, the launch of the journals **Métropoles** and **Métropolitiques** reflected the spread of the concept, whilst the Platform for the Observation of Urban Projects and Strategies, established in 2004 by the Ministry of Infrastructure, funds and oversees research into public policy and the governance of major cities. Finally, in 2014 and 2015, Parliament passed the MAPTAM and NOTRe laws, which conferred ‘metropolis’ status on some fifteen major cities. However, the author points out that the ‘popularity’ of the term prevents its meaning from being clarified, insofar as its geographical connotation (regional capital) differs from that relating to the administrative sphere (EPCI) or the economic sphere (cities in the context of globalisation). For example, the ‘metropolises’ enshrined in the MAPTAM Act bear no resemblance to the *‘global cities’* found in the literature. The author proposes a return to historical etymology (pp. 12–15) to better grasp the term’s current contours. However, the term has its roots in two distinct meanings, beginning with the ‘mother city’ of ancient Greece – as exemplified by the founding of Marseille in France, for instance. In the nineteenth century, this meaning was revived to describe French colonial power and the links maintained by the ‘metropolis’ maintained with its possessions. The second meaning refers to the Roman Empire and takes on the sense of ‘provincial capital’, denoting the city—and later the town—where the so-called ‘metropolitan’. This ecclesiastical meaning persisted in dictionaries until the early 18th century before being secularised. From then on, the term was used to denote the principal city of a province, by virtue of its size or influence. This is more or less the definition adopted by DATAR in the 1960s to promote ‘metropolises of balance’.

The starting point for the second chapter, which examines **‘metropolitan space-time’** (pp. 19–40), is provided by the laws of 2014 and 2015 establishing the 22 institutional metropolises. Loïc Vadelorge attempts his hand at the exercise of metropolitan onomastics (pp. 19–21) by highlighting the variety of names chosen by these metropolises: either based on the name of the central city (such as Bordeaux or Brest), or by adding ‘Grand’ (such as Nancy or Lyon), or by emphasising their cross-border European roots (such as Lille or Strasbourg). Others, finally, emphasise their regional dimension (such as Aix-Marseille or Rouen). The author notes here that the names chosen by metropolitan areas reflect less a nostalgia for the Ancien Régime than an affirmation of their integration into their wider urban region. This primary spatio-temporal framework of metropolitan areas sometimes obscures the boundaries of their sphere of influence, as in the case of Brest, which emphasises its ‘western’ or ‘oceanic’ influence rather than its Breton identity. Finally, the author highlights the fact that this objective of territorial anchoring, evident in the names of metropolitan areas, challenges the common misconception of a disconnect between central cities and their

neighbouring territories. On the contrary, the

metropolitan space-time frameworks enable us to understand 'the interlocking of scales' (pp. 21–30). These interplay of scales, the author reminds us, are rooted in a history of urban development spanning more than a century and place spaces in relationships that are both complementary and contradictory. Three such spaces are analysed, beginning with the *city-regions* at the heart of DATAR's 1964 policy on 'balanced metropolises', though the concept dates back to 1913 in the writings of the geographer Jacques Levainville. The city-region brings together demography, urban functions, industrial activities and suburbanisation. It is the studies arising from this pioneering work which, despite their dated nature, have informed concepts ranging from statistical models to the current notions of catchment areas and productive metropolises. The second scale is that of *international urban economies*, characterised by the historical influence of local economic actors (chambers of commerce, industrial shipowners, insurance companies, etc.) in shaping metropolitan areas. Finally, it is *the rise of the suburbs* that has shaped metropolitan areas over the long term. The integration, through merger or annexation, of the suburbs into the cities prior to the Industrial Revolution, and then during the Second Empire, accelerated the growth, densification and expansion of both the major cities and their outskirts. This process ultimately raised the question of the infrastructure and planning of what would become the metropolitan areas. One of the contemporary challenges facing metropolitan policy, the author notes, is accessing and moving through metropolitan areas (pp. 31–39). Whilst the concept of 'mobility' seems to have supplanted that of 'transport', the latter is not merely a thing of the past for metropolitan areas. To conclude this chapter, Loic Vadelorge discusses the *short timeframe within which the transport and mobility remit was established*, a legacy of the legislation from the end of the 'Trente Glorieuses' which introduced the 'transport levy' and created the

'transport organising authorities' in major cities, foreshadowing the development of inter-municipal cooperation alongside *the long-term dependence on major infrastructure* (bridges, expressways, rail), a factor contributing to the inertia of metropolitan spatial organisation.

A third chapter offers a critical review of 'the legacy of the 20th century', which aimed to **'develop and equip metropolitan areas'** (pp. 43–63). Structured in reverse chronological order, the argument begins with the creation of metropolitan public inter-municipal cooperation bodies (EPCIs) under the presidencies of Sarkozy, Hollande and Macron, who shared a desire to strengthen inter-municipal cooperation and metropolitan powers. This 'metropolitan moment' (pp. 44–46) in decentralisation, which emerged from the 2009 Balladur Committee, is also a by-product of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the principles of neoliberalism (competition, attractiveness, territorial competitiveness) and the environmental agenda arising from the Grenelle Environment Forum and its associated legislation (2009–2010). However, it was not at this juncture that major cities first became aware of the metropolitan reality. The latter is the result of a 'long march' (pp. 46–51) towards decentralisation, of which it constitutes a stage rather than a final destination. The constitutional revision of 28 March 2003 had appeared to enshrine the principle of a 'decentralised organisation' of the Republic, even though, in practice, it remained one of the most centralised countries in Europe. This centralisation stemmed from the impossible reconciliation between a liberal urban culture of governance, based on the defence of local freedoms, and a Bonapartist culture that was wary of local countervailing powers, preferring to rely on prefects to control them. Whilst the communes (1789) and the departments (1790) were 'creations' of the Revolution, it was not until 1890 that the Third Republic authorised the formation of associations of communes. Mayors seized this opportunity, particularly in the interwar period, to set up technical management services (sewage, water, electricity, waste collection and management). Far from being purely technical matters, these were viewed by municipal administrations as opportunities to learn about metropolitan governance. The economic growth of the 'Trente Glorieuses' reinforced this trend, and the Fifth Republic granted mayors – despite the Gaullist governments' conflict with them – the power to create

multi-purpose inter-municipal associations (1959) which

could exercise powers in the field of housing. It was their development that gave rise to the issue of the 'administrative mille-feuille', which has continued to underpin every attempt at reform since the 1960s. The Act of 31 December 1966 established the urban communities of Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon and Strasbourg, which were responsible for planning, development and the management of public facilities. The Act of 6 February 1992 revitalised inter-municipal cooperation by allowing the creation of communities of municipalities for the smallest local authorities. The Act of 12 July 1999, known as the 'Chevènement Act', made this option the norm and established metropolitan communities for towns with more than 50,000 inhabitants. This chronology thus shows that the 'metropolitan moment' of the 2010s does not represent a break, but rather a continuation of the process of strengthening the powers of urban agglomerations. The author therefore draws on the case of 'housing' as a 'metropolitan lever' (pp. 51–55), from *the first half of the 20th century*—when social policy centred on the issue of housing for the urban working classes—to the post-war period, which instead marked a weakening of the metropolitan dynamic that had been underway until then, as the State reasserted its control over planning in the construction sector. The policy of large housing estates from the 1950s onwards did not contradict this trend towards recentralisation led by the prefects. 'Major metropolitan facilities' (pp. 55–62) are cited as a second example of the gradual rise of metropolitan power and constitute, in this instance, a 'symbol of the alliance between the State and the cities'. These include hospitals, universities and cultural facilities (theatres, museums, libraries) that have existed in major cities for centuries. Recent history confirms the importance of this issue, championed by local councillors and supported by the State.

The chapter devoted to **the 'ecological transition'** (pp. 64–83) examines the scope of this 'historic shift'. The metropolitan areas established under the MAPTAM-NOTRe laws have made environmental issues (climate, biodiversity, pollution) a key priority for action. But does this constitute a 'turning point' (pp. 65–69)? This is what seems to emerge from recent regulatory measures (ZAN, food sovereignty, etc.) and from social movements centred on the climate crisis, which criticise – sometimes sharply (Extinction Rebellion, Soulèvement de la Terre, ZAD protests against infrastructure projects) – the inadequacy of policies (both national and local) in this area. These struggles align with certain metropolitan policies in their condemnation of the planning logic of the 'Trente Glorieuses'. Loïc Vadelorge criticises this instrumental reading of history, which fails to account for the constraints imposed by the legacy of infrastructure and obscures the ecological dimension of post-war urban policies, which cannot be reduced to the 'Trente Pollueuses'. Furthermore, the author points out that the environmental policies of metropolitan areas are not solely the result of social mobilisation or the growing awareness of local councillors; they are also linked to the framework of decentralisation and the territorial reforms of the 2010s, which confer powers in this area on local authorities – and in particular on EPCIs – making them 'leaders in decarbonisation' (pp. 69–73). The chapter concludes with a closer look at the challenges of *water* management and *industrial risk*, demonstrating that the history of local management of environmental issues – what the author terms 'ecological legacies' – has resulted in the need to 'supply water to and protect metropolitan areas' (pp. 73–83). In both cases, this cannot be reduced to the regulatory frameworks of the 2010s, but has its origins in a longer and more complex historical context. There is no ecological turning point or political rupture here, but rather an 'updating of the management agenda imposed by the legislator' under the weight of historical legacies, particularly those relating to infrastructure.

The concluding chapter sets out to revisit the recent debate surrounding criticism of metropolitan areas. '**Down with the metropolitan areas**' (pp. 85–92) seems to have been the watchword of a section of academic research since the publication of Guillaume Faburel's book, **Les Métropoles barbares**. Metropolises are blamed for all manner of ills, primarily by works inspired by American radical geography, which criticises the social effects of neoliberal policies of which metropolises are said to be the spearheads. This academic critique sometimes transcends the boundaries of scientific controversy to venture into activist territory (anti-capitalist, feminist, ecological). However, the work undertaken by Michel Grossetti and Olivier Bouba-Olga is quite different; it analyses the unspoken assumptions underlying CAME (an acronym standing for competitiveness, attractiveness, metropolisation and excellence) and deconstructs the promotional discourse surrounding metropolitan areas in order to call for a rethinking of the analyses concerning these spaces and the agendas of these institutions. Loic Vadelorge concludes his book by proposing three ways to move beyond the stigmatisation of metropolitan areas: moving away from the essentialisation of metropolitan areas (through case studies), taking metropolitan public policies and their socio-spatial effects seriously, and distinguishing between urban narratives and territorial marketing.

Issues and public policies

The book examines the role of metropolitan areas as key levels of public action, raising a series of debates and issues relating to public policy.

Between the normative legitimisation of metropolitan areas and the democratic deficit

Debates on territorial governance are often reduced to a discussion of the 'administrative mille-feuille'. The author contextualises these debates over the long term, tracing a historical trajectory of the gradual strengthening of metropolitan powers. However, whilst metropolitan areas possess numerous prerogatives in the field of public policy, there remains a lack of direct universal suffrage for the election of metropolitan executives, thereby raising questions about their legitimacy and their distance from citizens.

Technical legacies, social pressure and political choices

Public decision-makers must contend with historical 'paths of dependence' that shape current choices. Metropolitan areas have inherited heavy infrastructure (bridges, rail networks, motorways) designed in the 20th century. Nowadays, any construction project of this kind provokes strong resistance and protests. Furthermore, how can this legacy be transformed to achieve the objectives of the transition?

The green transition: leaders who are too modest

The legislature has designated metropolitan areas as the leaders in ecological transition. However, their ambitions are deemed insufficient by the most active sections of the population, and the results remain modest.

Territorial cohesion and criticism of the metropolitan model

Public policies favouring metropolitan areas are strongly criticised by some academic literature, which condemns the obsession with competitiveness and attractiveness, and the draining of resources from medium-sized towns and small municipalities. The challenge for public authorities is to move from a logic of competition between territories to one of cooperation, solidarity and socio-territorial justice.

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Why is history the essential compass for the metropolises of today and tomorrow? 🏙️📖

The 'age of cities' (of the Renaissance) is often contrasted with the 'age of the urban' (of the 20th century) and that of 'metropolisation' (of contemporary globalisation). But building a metropolis requires us to stop viewing these eras as isolated blocks.

@Loïc Vadelorge reminds us here that historical analysis can serve as a strategic tool for contemporary urban planners, enabling them to address the challenges and pose the following questions:

Between the normative legitimisation of metropolises and the democratic deficit

Often reduced to a discussion of the 'mille-feuille' structure, the debate on French administrative organisation, viewed from a long-term perspective, reveals a trajectory of gradually increasing powers for urban agglomerations. Despite this strengthening, metropolitan executives are still not elected by direct universal suffrage, thereby raising questions about their legitimacy and their distance from citizens.

📖 Technical legacies, social pressure and political choices: public decision-makers grapple daily with 'paths of dependence' that shape current choices. Metropolises have inherited heavy infrastructure (bridges, rail networks, motorways) designed in the 20th century. Nowadays, any construction project of this kind provokes strong resistance and mobilisation. How can this legacy be transformed to achieve the transition objectives?

📖 The green transition: leaders who are too modest: Whilst the legislature has designated metropolitan areas as the leaders in the green transition, the most active sections of the population consider their ambitions and implementation to be insufficient. How can we regain the ambition and room for manoeuvre needed to meet the challenges posed by climate change?

📖 Territorial cohesion and critiques of the metropolitan model: Public policies favouring metropolitan areas are strongly criticised by some academic literature, which condemns the obsession with competitiveness and attractiveness, and the draining of resources from medium-sized towns and small municipalities. How can we move from a logic of competition between territories to one of cooperation, solidarity and socio-territorial justice?

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