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Regions and Metropolitan Areas

Philippe Estèbe & Sacha Czertok

Summary (short abstract)

This book by geographers Philippe Estèbe and Sacha Czertok, the sixth cross-disciplinary volume in the Cahiers POPSU (Autrement) series, analyses the complex relationship between metropolitan areas and regions in France. The legislative reforms of 2014–2016 (the MAPTAM and NOTRe Acts) cemented the rise of two institutions often perceived as ‘intruders’: the regions and the metropolitan areas. Although the legislature sought to forge an alliance between them, these institutions maintain complex relationships, oscillating between structural rivalries and mutual dependencies.

The book demonstrates just how fundamentally their approaches to territorialisation diverge. The regions, heirs to a tradition of state functionalism, seek to build their legitimacy by promoting the geographical territory and a sense of belonging. To compensate for their distance from the grassroots, they adopt a protective stance towards rural areas and medium-sized towns, displaying a certain detachment, or even mistrust, towards metropolitan developments in their spatial planning schemes. Conversely, metropolitan areas exert their influence through networks, often operating independently of the regional sphere to prioritise territorial marketing and international diplomacy.

A political asymmetry exacerbates these tensions. Regions often have ‘paper powers’ – broad in scope but strictly regulated by the State – whilst metropolitan areas benefit from more direct financial and operational leverage. Faced with regional competition, some metropolitan areas adopt a ‘conquering’ stance, seizing strategic issues that extend beyond their boundaries or their initial legal powers, thereby encroaching on regional or state domains.

The book draws on four regional case studies, taken from the monographic studies of the POPSU Métropoles programme:

- Orléans Métropole is entering the health sector to assert its role as a regional capital, despite the absence of explicit legal powers.
- Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole is seeking to establish itself in integrated coastal management to compensate for its administrative downgrading and forge local alliances.

- The Eurométropole de Strasbourg is capitalising on its status as a city on the Rhine and its international academic networks to counter its marginal position within the vast Grand Est region.
- The European Metropolis of Lille prioritises cross-border diplomacy centred on urban systems (water, energy) to navigate what are at times strained regional relations.

In conclusion, the traditional, vertical and territorial mode of administration is being challenged by horizontal and hybrid alliance systems. Regions can no longer do without metropolitan areas, and the challenge for the future lies in the ability of these two 'outsiders' to coordinate their development strategies.

Summary (long)

The book opens with the pivotal period between 2014 and 2016, marked by the adoption of the MAPTAM and NOTRe laws, which created the 'metropolises', as well as by the merger of the French regions. This **'review of a sequence of institutional changes'** highlights the emergence of two powerful actors, each with distinct roles: the regions, whose powers in the areas of spatial planning and economic development have been strengthened; and the metropolitan areas, tasked with driving socio-economic development on a broader scale. The 2016 'State-Metropolises Pact' seals this intention by establishing the metropolises as global competitors and 'driving forces' for regional and rural development. This legislative framework, the authors note, constitutes a new doctrine of spatial planning compared with previous decades. In its report 'Aménager la France de 2020' published in 2000, DATAR favoured a polycentric approach in which all territories (urban, rural and the countryside) were considered equal in capacity and had a 'right to development', through contractual frameworks governed by the State-Regions Planning Contracts. Since 2014, this equivalence has been called into question as metropolitan areas have emerged as actors with a specific mission of 'benevolent support' for other territories, thereby establishing a more hierarchical interpretation of the national framework. Does this hierarchy signify that the legislature is aligning itself with a vision that makes the strengthening of metropolitan territories a central element in the process of accumulating financial, technical and human capital, or does it form part of the historical continuity of France's spatial planning, seeking a balance between Paris and the provinces through support for

'balancing metropolises'? The answer to this question is not clear-cut. The label 'metropolis' applied to the 22 entities masks the significant heterogeneity between them. Indeed, they do not carry the same demographic or economic weight. The authors identify a 'top tier' of seven conurbations of European stature, whilst others are more akin to regional capitals or have been promoted for political or strategic reasons. At the same time, the merger of the regions was the result of complex political negotiations and 'patchwork solutions' (such as the Grand Est or Occitanie), far removed from a purely functional analysis. Thus, although the legislature calls on them to work together on complementary areas of competence (innovation, the economy), their hasty creation and the political compromises involved complicate this potential alliance.

The second chapter explores the reasons behind the **rivalry between outsiders**—namely the regions and metropolitan areas—within the French political and administrative system. Regional ambiguity is a historical phenomenon, oscillating between 'regionalism' (in the sense of the pursuit of identity-based autonomy

, as in Alsace or Corsica) and 'regionalisation' (as a quest for administrative and functional efficiency). Geographers continue this classic debate here, pitting advocates of the 'natural' region (supposed to guarantee geographical stability) against supporters of the 'functional' region (reflecting a system of exchanges centred on cities). In France, from this perspective, the regions have struggled to assert themselves. Although they became fully-fledged local authorities in 1982 and now manage European funds, the regions suffer from structural weaknesses. The authors thus describe their prerogatives as 'paper powers'. As lead bodies without any real regulatory power, the regions carry out direct action that is often limited to secondary schools and regional transport, with the rest remaining strictly controlled by the State. Metropolitan areas, for their part, face a form of political illegitimacy. The French tradition of 'urbophobia' and positive discrimination in favour of rural areas has left a powerful mark, as demonstrated by the reactions of experts and elected representatives to the institutional creation of metropolitan areas, denouncing a divide between resource-draining metropolitan areas and 'peripheral France'. The processes of territorialisation in regions and metropolitan areas thus diverge fundamentally. The former seek legitimacy through geographical territory and a sense of belonging, often adopting a protective stance towards rural areas and medium-sized towns to compensate for their distance from the grassroots. Conversely, metropolitan areas break free from the regional framework through territorial marketing (*Hello Lille, OnlyLyon*) and extend their influence through networks, horizontal alliances and international diplomacy. This asymmetry is also financial: metropolitan areas have more direct leverage and less constrained budgets than the regions. Consequently, regional development plans (SRADDET) tend to marginalise the metropolitan dimension in favour of polycentrism and territorial balance, out of fear of urban 'regional Jacobinism'.

The third chapter analyses how certain metropolitan areas are breaking free from their 'territorial straitjacket' to enter fields that theoretically fall within regional or state remit, thereby transforming the mode of local administration. Centring on the dichotomy of **'expansionist metropolitan areas versus administrative regions'**, the book explores four case studies analysed in the POPSU Métropoles monographs:

- Orléans Métropole and the Centre-Val de Loire Region: in order to assert its role as regional capital in the face of its neighbour Tours, Orléans is moving into the field of healthcare, despite having no initial legal authority to do so on paper. By coordinating the recruitment of healthcare professionals and transforming its Regional Hospital Centre (CHR) into a University Hospital (CHU) in 2023, the metropolis has become a key player in the 're-medicalisation' at regional level, making up for the shortcomings of the State and the region.
- Montpellier Méditerranée Métropole and the Occitanie Region: politically sidelined by the designation of Toulouse as the capital of the new Occitanie Region—formed from the merger of Languedoc-Roussillon and Midi-Pyrénées—Montpellier is seeking to reposition itself through coastal management. By shifting from an 'imperialist' stance to a diplomacy of reciprocity, it has established itself within the complex framework of the 'Littoral 21' plan and integrated land-sea management, bringing together neighbouring inter-municipal bodies.
- The Eurometropolis of Strasbourg and the Grand Est Region: situated on the periphery of the vast new region created by the merger of Alsace, Lorraine and Champagne-Ardenne, Strasbourg is capitalising on its status as a riverine and Rhine-based metropolis. It is engaged in intense diplomatic activity, forging international alliances with cities on the Upper Rhine (Basel, Freiburg, Karlsruhe) and establishing a

- , whilst managing the growing tensions between port activities and urban needs.
- The European Metropolis of Lille (MEL) and the (new) Hauts-de-France Region: faced with strained regional relations with the coal-mining basin or other towns in the area (Valenciennes, for example), the MEL prioritises cross-border cooperation. It has established a network for public action with its Belgian neighbours by setting up a European Grouping for Cross-Border Cooperation focusing on issues relating to urban metabolism – water, energy and waste management – thereby becoming a 'bridgehead' for its region's international outreach.

These examples lead the authors to conclude that metropolitan areas are no longer merely urban administrators, but rather agents of inter-territorial policies who use their capacity for action to create hybrid 'coalitions of actors' that cut across traditional administrative levels.

In conclusion, the authors emphasise that **implicit** alliances between metropolitan areas and regions could provide a way to overcome rivalries. Metropolitan areas are engaging in initiatives that effectively fall within the scope of regional development plans, but without a rigid contractual framework. By tackling regional 'problem areas' such as healthcare in Centre-Val de Loire or industrial regeneration in Hauts-de-France, they are revitalising the traditional modes of intervention by local public institutions and disrupting horizontal alliance systems by breaking down administrative boundaries. Faced with this challenge, three scenarios are open to the regions: maintaining a regulatory stance through the plans to provide a framework for these initiatives; retreating to a compensatory stance by focusing on territories neglected by the metropolitan areas; or opting for selective participation in these metropolitan schemes by providing specific regional added value. Whilst the authors consider a combination of these three approaches to be the most likely outcome, they emphasise one final point: regional policies can no longer do without metropolitan areas. The key challenge for the future lies in the ability of these two 'outsiders' to coordinate their strategies and forge **implicit alliances** in order to ensure the cohesion of the national territory.

Issues and public policies

The book raises several major issues and debates that shape regional public policy in France, particularly since the reforms of 2014–2016.

The shift from a polycentric spatial planning doctrine to a hierarchical approach

A central debate concerns the shift in the philosophy of spatial planning. Until the late 1990s, the doctrine (embodied in particular by the Voynet Act of 1999) favoured a polycentric approach aimed at granting an equivalent 'right to development' to all territories, both rural and urban. Since 2014, the legislature has introduced a hierarchical approach: metropolitan areas are now designated as 'driving forces' of the national economy and 'catalysts' for regional development, breaking with the idea of equivalent capacity across all territories.

The political legitimacy of metropolitan areas and the debate on the 'territorial divide'

The book highlights the debate surrounding the perceived illegitimacy of metropolitan areas, fuelled by a tradition of 'urbophobia' in France. Metropolitan policies and institutions face growing criticism accusing them of failing to ensure 'trickle-down' benefits to neighbouring territories and of capturing resources at the expense of 'peripheral France'. This debate has been reignited in the context of environmental policies. The objectives of 'Zero Net Land Take' (ZAN) and 'Low-Emission Zones' (ZFE) are perceived by some elected representatives, experts and citizens as policies driven by metropolitan authorities who are out of touch with rural realities.

The asymmetry in capacity to act between regions and metropolitan areas

A structural challenge lies in the contrast between the powers of these two institutions:

- Regions have broad powers (spatial planning, the economy) but these are sometimes seen as 'powers on paper', as they lack real regulatory authority and are heavily constrained by the State.
- Metropolitan areas, although geographically limited, benefit from more direct financial and operational leverage and greater responsiveness.

Metropolitan areas as new implementers of regional policies

The book highlights the emergence of 'expansionist metropolitan areas' that are taking on challenges extending beyond their original legal remit, thereby creating instances of overlapping competences: in Orléans in the health sector, in Montpellier in coastal risk management, and in Strasbourg and Lille in the context of cross-border cooperation

Towards governance through 'horizontal alliances'

Finally, the book raises the debate concerning the possible demise of the vertical model of territorial administration. Public action is shifting towards systems of horizontal alliances and a form of 'territorial diplomacy'. Metropolises now operate through networks of hybrid stakeholders (professionals, voluntary organisations, institutions) that cut across traditional administrative levels to develop flexible strategies.

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📖 Regions and Metropolises: an impossible alliance or a new driving force for the regions?

Since the reforms of 2014–2016, the French administrative landscape has been shaken up by two major players often perceived as 'intruders': the regions and the metropolitan areas. Although the legislature intended them to form a complementary partnership, the reality is more complex, oscillating between structural rivalries and mutual dependencies. What are the findings, interpretations and prospects?

📖 Divergent territorial approaches: The regions, seeking legitimacy, adopt the role of protectors of rural areas and medium-sized towns. Conversely, metropolitan areas transcend administrative boundaries to operate as networks through territorial marketing and international diplomacy.

📖 An asymmetry of power: Whilst the regions have 'paper powers' – which are broad but strictly regulated by the State – metropolitan areas benefit from more direct financial and operational leverage, enabling them to be more responsive.

📖 The emergence of 'expansionist metropolitan areas': To assert their role, certain metropolitan areas are taking on issues that extend beyond their legal remit (Orléans and healthcare, Montpellier and coastal risk management, Strasbourg and Lille and cross-border cooperation).

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