



Territorial Equality in France: A Historical Perspective

Matthew Wendeln

Once the basis of French regional planning, the goal of national balance has made a comeback in France under the banner of “territorial equality”. The postwar experience suggests that redistributive regional policies can promote growth in a period of economic turbulence.

Over the past two decades, the twin goals of competition and competitiveness have gained increasing sway in French urban and regional policies (Baudelle and Montabone 2008, p. 3). Following the Left’s national victory in March 2012, however, the national administration has changed its tune, proclaiming its commitment to “territorial equality” (Laurent 2013).¹

This discourse of equality has its roots in the 1950s and 1960s (Wendeln 2011). Remembered in France as a golden age of unprecedented growth and modernization—“*Les Trentes Glorieuses*”, or the “Thirty Glorious Years”—these postwar decades were in fact marked by extremely uneven development. Even as Paris, large provincial cities, and a handful of manufacturing regions experienced record growth, the majority of the national territory was menaced by economic decline. In this context, a generation of national leaders considered that steering part of France’s growth to struggling areas was not just a good social policy, but also necessary for maintaining the nation’s economic growth and their own political fortunes. In 1963, Georges Pompidou, then prime minister, thus demanded that French territorial planning, known as *aménagement du territoire*, tend toward “distributive justice in the allocation of economic activities” among France’s regions (cited in Laurent 2013, pp. 5 and 11).

Then as now, redistributive efforts stirred controversy. Is development destined to concentrate in the largest metropolitan areas or can state policies diffuse growth more evenly across the country? Does aid to struggling areas increase overall national development or uselessly tax the most competitive regions, the “locomotives” of the national economy (Baudelle 2006, Brenner 2004, Storper 2013, pp. 204–223)?

Despite the profound changes of the past half-century, the postwar period remains a reference in this debate. Hailed by some in France as a golden age of regional planning, it is equally often cited as proof of the errors and excesses of egalitarian ideals (Davezies 2008, pp. 80–85 and 108–109). For its severest critics, postwar *aménagement du territoire* was fundamentally a backwards defense of traditional balance against big cities and modern economic change (Marchand 2009).

I argue that the dominant goal of postwar regional policy was, on the contrary, to accelerate France’s adaptation to a changing world economy and that it reinforced Paris and provincial capitals more than it harmed them. Far from an even spreading of growth, as the discourse of equality would seem to imply, government programs in fact pursued a complex, often contradictory mix of polarizing and equalizing logics—correcting some disparities while aggravating others.

¹ The ministry charged with territorial planning was renamed the Ministère de l’Égalité des Territoires et du Logement (Ministry for Territorial Equality and Housing) in 2012 (subsequently renamed Ministère du Logement et de l’Égalité des Territoires in 2014), and a number of national planning agencies were fused into a new Commissariat Général à l’Égalité des Territoires in March 2014.

Twin Goals of Economic Growth and Social Justice

The association of French regional policy with a ruralist attack on big cities, above all Paris, is due to an inordinate focus on its earliest proponents. Some early proponents of *aménagement du territoire* used territorial planning to pursue the anti-urban, anti-labor politics of the 1930s Right and the wartime Vichy government (Gravier 1947). Yet these early activists failed to gain much political traction. Economic decentralization did not emerge as a major national policy until the mid-1950s, in a new context of rapid postwar growth and extreme regional disparities.

Beginning in the early 1950s, unproductive sectors such as textiles, coal mining, and family farms shed millions of jobs, transferring labor and capital to booming service and consumer industries. This economic turnover created a regional problem. In most of France, the precipitous drop in farm and factory work trapped labor in declining communities and fueled opposition to modernizing policies like European trade integration and tax reform. Expanding cities, meanwhile, were overwhelmed by an influx of migrants looking for work and by new demand for factory and office space. The Paris region was particularly challenged. Long overstretched, the capital's housing market and transportation network hit a politically intolerable breaking point in the 1950s.

This extreme imbalance led Pierre Pflimlin, then finance minister, to proclaim regional development “the main goal of [the administration's] economic policy” in 1955.² Pflimlin ordered a state-funded development program for each of France's regions and reinforced efforts to decentralize new factories away from Paris. These efforts would gain steam over the next two decades.

According to Pflimlin, redistributing future growth was a win-win strategy that could help Paris and the provinces alike. In struggling provincial communities, he hoped, new jobs and investments would create a virtuous cycle of economic expansion by simultaneously reducing unemployment, increasing consumer demand, diffusing industrial innovations, and reinforcing pro-growth politicians against protectionist local coalitions. Meanwhile, decentralization also reinforced Paris—albeit with negative effects on its industrial workers and small manufacturers. In the urban core, factory closings freed up space for new housing and offices, facilitating the French capital's transition to a more finance- and service-oriented economy. In the surrounding suburbs, limits on new growth curbed the spiraling costs to the national treasury of providing housing and infrastructure in one of the world's densest urban regions. And state-subsidized decentralization was a boon to many industries headquartered in Paris, which took advantage of cheaper land and labor in the provinces.

Regional redistribution was not just a matter of economics, though. The 1950s and 1960s produced an expansive notion of social and territorial justice in which all regions had the “right to participate in [Europe's] general economic growth,” as René Pleven, a Breton politician and former prime minister, wrote in 1961 (Pleven 1961, p. 256).

A series of social and political movements translated this abstract principle of equality into concrete claims on the national government. Workers faced with mass layoffs demanded new jobs close to home, popularizing the slogan *travailler au pays* in the 1960s. Local growth coalitions, led by politicians and business leaders, demanded ever greater job creation and investments from Paris. Sometimes true regionalist movements emerged. In Brittany, for instance, region-wide protests and a powerful regionalist coalition forced the national administration to concede exceptional development packages in 1961 and 1968 (Martray 1983, pp. 125–136 and 189–204). Finally, government leaders interpreted the anti-establishment political movement led by Pierre Poujade in the 1950s as the revolt of the nation's “underdeveloped” periphery, excluded from the postwar prosperity concentrated in urban regions (Wendeln 2011, pp. 208–212). These movements convinced national officials that letting territorial inequalities fester had an electoral cost as well as an economic one.

² *Journal officiel. Débats parlementaires: Assemblée nationale*, session of 18 March 1955, 1682–1683.

Redistribution and Renewed Inequalities

The hope for a national convergence of growth and wealth thus reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet far from evenly spreading growth across the country, national programs corrected certain inequalities while accepting and even promoting others—most notably reinforcing the gap between the France’s largest cities and their surrounding regions.

Parisian industries decentralized some 600,000 manufacturing jobs toward the provinces between the 1950s and the 1970s, transforming entire regional economies (Bastié and Verlaque 1984). The pursuit of *aménagement du territoire* also justified major national investments in housing, urban renewal, and the provinces’ farming, tertiary, and tourist sectors (Merlin 2002). This economic manna was unevenly distributed, however. Most decentralized factory jobs remained within a 125-mile radius of Paris. The state’s ability to steer investors to more peripheral locations proved limited; national incentives mainly benefited Brittany and Nord–Pas-de-Calais, two lagging regions that directly bordered high-growth areas (Bastié and Verlaque 1984, pp. 112 and 121–122). In addition, the geography of growth and decline evolved rapidly, redrawing the map of regional inequalities. By the early 1960s, some formerly depressed rural regions were attracting cutting-edge industries, while the northeastern manufacturing belt and Paris’s working-class suburbs began their descent into a long cycle of deindustrialization.

Industrial decentralization played a contradictory role in these shifting fortunes. It brought better-paying jobs to poor areas, but also undercut thousands of workers and small manufacturers in the Paris region.³ Since the new factories often specialized in the least-skilled production jobs, moreover, “decentralization” actually reinforced Paris’s control over the national economy. More than ever before, the French territory reflected a hierarchical division of labor in which Paris concentrated business headquarters, finance, and research; regional capitals served as intermediaries; and the rest of the country executed industrial orders (Veltz 2005 [1996], pp. 23–36).

This reinforcement of the “urban hierarchy” was an explicit goal of national planners. Over the course of the 1950s, a more decentralist school of planning thought had gradually given way to the promotion of big urban regions, hailed as the lynchpins of national economic performance, innovation, and social betterment (Guichard 1965, pp. 55–75). Then, in the 1960s, powerful Gaullist administrations invested considerable resources in this metropolitan ideal. The Paris region benefited from unprecedented state programs, such as the construction of planned new towns, the international business district at La Défense, and a new regional transit network (the RER express metro system). The largest regional capitals also received metropolitan development plans that aimed to cultivate high-tech industrial clusters—such as aerospace in Toulouse and nuclear energy in Grenoble (Merlin 2002, pp. 180–187). The Gaullists also strengthened big cities politically, creating France’s first metropolitan and regional institutions.⁴

In theory, big cities were supposed to be “growth poles”, their development spreading out to the rest of the country. In reality, they absorbed a disproportionate share of national development spending. Far from being neglected in favor of the provinces, as is often claimed, the Paris region absorbed more than half of France’s urban capital investments (for less than a fifth of the French

³ Industrial decentralization destroyed around 200,000 jobs in the Paris region between 1954 and 1984, but these losses varied over time and space (Bastié and Verlaque 1984, p. 84). Concerning the complex relationship between state decentralization programs and the deindustrialization of the Paris region, see Wendeln 2011, pp. 41–43, 89–134 and 387–397.

⁴ The French government first created administrative regions during World War II and revived them for planning and development purposes in 1954. But it was the administration of Georges Pompidou that greatly reinforced the regions’ responsibilities in 1964, partly in a bid to bypass the traditional political class (Grémion 1992). The idiosyncratic planning agency for the Paris region known as the District de la Région de Paris was created in 1959. The largest provincial cities were endowed with metropolitan planning agencies (*organismes régionaux d’étude et d’aménagement d’aire métropolitaine*), and the first intermunicipal cooperation bodies, called *communautés urbaines*, were set up in four of these metropolitan areas (Lajugie *et al.* 1985, pp. 213 and 285–286).

population) in the early 1960s.⁵ State programs created similar disparities between provincial capitals and surrounding areas.⁶

Government efforts to reinforce the nation's largest city regions ran into major obstacles. Representatives of non-metropolitan areas contested the urban concentration of state investments and beat back the political reforms that weakened their power (Grémion 1976). Moreover, the fantastic demographic growth planners had announced for big cities never materialized. Already by the mid-1960s, population and industry began shifting to suburbs, smaller cities, and rural areas. Most unexpectedly, the Paris region's age-old absorption of provincial demographic growth suddenly reversed, the capital now losing more internal migrants than it received, and long-depressed regions in the South and West experienced net in-migration (Lajugie *et al.* 1985, pp. 439–446). France's most ambitious effort to accelerate metropolitan growth had shown its limits in less than a decade.

Conclusion

The debate over territorial equality is again on the political agenda in France. As in the 1950s, the economic crisis has accelerated the decline of struggling local economies and aggravated large-scale disparities (Davezies 2012, pp. 7–8, 31–32 and 38). Social and political movements are demanding national aid for regional development (Pasquier 2013) and the far-right vote is widely interpreted—rightly or wrongly—as the revolt of a “peripheral France” excluded from the prosperity of urban centers (Davezies 2012). The debate between territorial redistribution and the concentration of investments and political power in metropolitan areas is thus as relevant as ever.

What can the postwar experience teach us in this context? First, redistribution and growth need not be opposed. In the 1950s and 1960s, development aid to struggling areas helped France adjust to a changing world economy and created new opportunities for expansion. Yet redistribution is not just a matter of economics. Social contestation, political mobilization, and French conceptions of justice and community attachment also shaped national policies. Finally, economic shifts are constantly reworking the geography of economic growth; today's “winners” could well be tomorrow's “losers”. This instability of regional fortunes—built on a complex history of polarizing and equalizing logics—is perhaps the best reason to make territorial redistribution a durable concern of national politics.

Bibliography

- Bastié, Jean. 1984. *Géographie du Grand Paris*, Paris: Masson.
- Bastié, Jean and Verlaque, Christian. 1984. “Trente ans de décentralisation industrielle en France (1954-1984)”, *Cahiers du CREPIF*, vol. 7.
- Baudelle, Guy. 2006. “La géographie sociale et la cohésion territoriale: une question d'échelles”, in Séchet, Raymonde and Veschambre, Vincent (eds.), *Penser et faire la géographie sociale: contribution à une épistémologie de la géographie sociale*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Baudelle, Guy and Montabone, Benoît. 2008. “Les échelles de la cohésion spatiale en Europe”, paper presented at the ERSA Congress, Liverpool.

⁵ Conseil Économique et Social, *Le Problème du financement du développement économique régional*, 1962, cited in Michel Philipponneau, *La Gauche et les Régions* (1967), p. 92.

⁶ Rennes, the capital of Brittany, initially attracted 95% of all industrial decentralization in the region; its metropolitan plan envisioned a tripling of its population. Michel Philipponneau, *Le Modèle industriel breton 1950–2000* (1993), pp. 145–146 and 158.

- Brenner, Neill. 2004. *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Davezies, Laurent. 2012. *La Crise qui vient: la nouvelle fracture territoriale*, Paris: Seuil.
- Davezies, Laurent. 2008. *La République et ses territoires: la circulation invisible des richesses*, Paris: Seuil.
- Gravier, Jean-François. 1947. *Paris et le désert français*, Paris: Flammarion.
- Grémion, Catherine. 1992. “Le général de Gaulle, la régionalisation et l’aménagement du territoire”, in Institut Charles de Gaulle (ed.), *De Gaulle en son siècle, Tome III : Moderniser la France*, pp. 438–502, Paris: La Documentation française.
- Grémion, Pierre. 1976. *Le Pouvoir périphérique. Bureaucrates et notables dans le système politique français*, Paris: Seuil.
- Guichard, Olivier. 1965. *Aménager la France*, Paris: Robert Laffont.
- Lajugie, Joseph, Lacour, Claude and Delfaud, Pierre. 1985. *Espace régional et aménagement du territoire*, Paris: Dalloz.
- Laurent, Éloi. (ed.). 2013. *Vers l'égalité des territoires*, Paris: La Documentation française.
- Marchand, Bernard. 2009. *Les Ennemis de Paris: la haine de la grande ville, des lumières à nos jours*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Martray, Joseph. 1983. *Vingt ans qui transformèrent la Bretagne: l'épopée du CELIB*, Paris: Éditions France-Empire.
- Merlin, Pierre. 2002. *L'Aménagement du territoire*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Pasquier, Romain. 2013. “Bonnets rouges: un laboratoire idéal de la démocratie territoriale”, *Le Monde*, 14 novembre 2013.
- Phlipponneau, Michel. 1967. *La Gauche et les Régions*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Phlipponneau, Michel. 1993. *Le Modèle industriel breton 1950-2000*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Pleven, René. 1961. *Avenir de la Bretagne*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy.
- Storper, Michael. 2013. *Keys to the City: How Economics, Institutions, Social Interaction, and Politics Shape Development*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Veltz, Pierre. 2005 [1996]. *Mondialisation, villes et territoires. L'économie d'archipel*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Wendeln, Matthew. 2011. *Contested Territory: Regional Development in France, 1934–1968*, PhD thesis in contemporary history, New York University and École des hautes études en sciences sociales.

Matthew Wendeln teaches at Sciences Po in Paris, where he is an associate member of the research group “Cities are Back in Town” at the Centre d’études européennes.

To quote this article:

Matthew Wendeln, “Territorial Equality in France: A Historical Perspective”, *Metropolitiques*, 4 June 2014. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Territorial-Equality-in-France-A.html>.