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**PLANNING IN A CHANGING CONTEXT:
French policies of regionalisation since 1945**

Abstract: This report synthesizes the main strands of regional planning in France since the end of the Second World War. It highlights the principally political reasons behind the creation and subsequent recreation of instruments used for and in the process of 'planning spaces'. 'The region' long since held to be a staple of geographic enquiry, here emerges as a highly contested and politically charged concept that is subject to frequent abrupt changes in government policies. The report concludes with a brief outlook upon changes brought about by the French legislative elections earlier in 1997.

Key words: regional planning, planning policies, regionalisation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Possibly the most geographic of concepts, 'the region' has enjoyed both prominence and criticism within the spatial human sciences. As a consequence of both prestige and critique, 'regions' rather often than not have become naturalised to the point of rendering their essentially constructed nature opaque to those engaged in scientific or lay discourses. The following essay seeks to reclaim 'the region' as a political concept by reminding the reader of its often changing fortunes at the hands of French planning authorities. France is particularly good exemplar for such a timely reminder given its long standing tradition of centralised government and the rootedness of spatial modification and planning in the various bureaucratic cultures that have swept the country since the days of Henry IV.

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It is in this administrative context that geography at times appears to embody but the bad conscience of economics. Geography here is the recurrent reminder that the results of economic activities not only manifest themselves in prices and temporal scales but also spatially. Economic activities happen not in the neutral and isotropic spaces prevalent in the equations of the economist but, if we may use this much abused term, in 'the real world'. The arbiter between both theory and practice came to be known as 'planning': the art of arranging spaces in a manner that brings together economic effectiveness with ongoing economic activities – and which adds to this a more or less clearly defined goal of making space more equal across a defined spatial unit (in our case: the nation-state). Born of Keynesian economics, 'regions' were thus enmeshed in a wide and changing net of conceptual links and representations. In what follows, some of these nets and speculate on possible futures for the concepts that create and recreate 'the region' will be discussed.

2. THE HISTORY OF REGIONALISATION AND PLANNING IN FRANCE

2.1. Origins of present-day French regional policy 1945–1981

It was between 1945 and 1960 that the French land-use planning policy came into being, as both the authorities and public opinion became sharply aware of geographical imbalances and the dangers of excessive regional disparities in revenue and living standards. The predominant sentiment at the time is nicely mirrored in the title of Jean-François Garvier's *Paris et le désert français* (1947). This policy was implemented in two phases: the first, covering the decade from 1945 to 1954, witnessed the emergence of the idea of land-use planning and the transition from an order-conferring conception of this to a more creative conception. The second phase (1955–1960) marked a decisive turning-point in regional development policy: France endeavoured to replace its piecemeal and trial-and-error efforts by a systematic and coherent policy involving more extensive technical and financial resources. After the decentralisation of industry, the country entered into a period of decentralised expansion, with two essential objectives in view: to encourage the conversion of outmoded firms and to foster the development of backward regions. To promote this expansion, five series of measures were taken: (1) the prior approval condition for setting up companies in the Paris region, with the intention of restraining industrial growth in Paris; (2) the setting up of expansion committees and regional action programmes, to facilitate analysis and collect documentary material of regional problems; (3) the creation of private and semi-public bodies to promote regional action; (4) financial

assistance for the state for decentralised expansion – FDES or *Fonds de développement économique et social* (economic and social development funds) and capital equipment grants; (5) and, lastly, decentralisation of administrative, scientific and technical activities.

This second phase of regional policy had in turn three major planks: a firmer and more harmonious administrative structure for regional policy, stronger measures to combat the congestion of Paris, and increased state aid for regional development and the extension of that aid to help rural areas as well as tertiary activities and small trades. The efforts to harmonise the administrative structures of regional policy involved a reorganisation of the central government departments and the delimitation of regional action zones. This zoning of the national territory replaced the 'programme regions' of 1956, Headed and executed by a *préfet de région*, who was in turn assisted by an advisory body of locally elected representatives, the functional idea of a region that emerged out of these administrative reshuffles was hence purely an economic one.

In 1963, to co-ordinate the operations conducted by the various ministries and to make sure that decisions were always geared to the changing situations, the government placed all planning related functions in the hands of DATAR or *Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'action régionale* (office of land-use planning and regional action). That office was responsible, guided by the general objectives laid down by the plan, for preparing the background information necessary for governmental decisions by co-ordinating the work of technical government departments. Those responsibilities were operational, and DATAR has been, and still is, the leading public institution for the furtherance of land-use planning policies in France.

The other major options of this period that had a direct bearing on the construction of regions in France concerned especially the second of the mentioned planks of regional development. The decentralisation of industries was becoming a necessity in order to distribute the country's economic energy more evenly, and it was carried out with considerable success. But it proved insufficient mainly because tertiary activities were tending to become centralised in Paris. DATAR therefore launched a policy to decentralise the tertiary sector and research. That policy was based on the modernisation efforts of the *métropoles d'équilibre* – towns which were specifically designated to counterweight the influence of Paris and which had to be equipped with universities, international airports and the like. During the 1960s and 1970s, however, this policy lacked coherence and was thus not effective on a national scale.

The French experience of planning, with its long and varied history, could hence not allow regional policy to develop as an independent sector. It was integrated with national policy by DATAR; in the main, regional planning remained merely a 'local version of national planning'. This regionalisation from

above dates back to the time of the 'fourth plan' in the early 1960s and was modified only cosmetically in the plans to follow.

2.2. Principles of regional planning from 1981 to 1992

The new political era which began in 1981 when the Socialists came to power had marked in turn a new departure from the previous trend.

Decentralisation. The history of a strongly centralised political, administrative, economic and cultural system in France dates back as far as the fifteenth century. And while it is true that movements for decentralisation have played some part in the various policies adopted since then, it is a key concept in the blueprint for society only on the Left. Consequently, 1981 saw a commitment of the country to the course of decentralisation. The law on decentralisation dealt essentially with institutions and the way they are run. However, thanks to a series of measures it radically changed the distribution of power. Subsequent laws stipulated that 'communes, departments and regions shall be freely administered by elected councils' and described local authorities as 'constituting the institutional framework for participation by the citizens'. Hence, regional councils now become responsible for promoting their own, broadly defined, land-use planning: substantially new regions emerge.

Table 1. Principal periods in the history of planning in France

Period	Principal events and realisations
1945–1960	The birth of spatial planning policies. The creation of administrative regions. Industrial decentralisation.
1961–1981	The creation of DATAR. Regional reform (1964) – the creation of <i>Préfets de région</i> . Regional reform (1972) – the region as a public geographic entity <i>métropoles d'équilibre</i> . Reinforced relations between national and regional planning.
1982–1992	Administrative decentralisation. National planning reform. Contracts between individual regions and the central state. The reconversion policy.
1993–1997	National debate on planning. The orientation law of 1995. The creation of suburban <i>zones franches</i> .

It should be noted that this reform did not concern the regions alone; rather, it is part and parcel of a plan which covers the whole spectrum of area authorities, most notably so in the 1982 'Defferre Law'. The tasks assigned to the regional authorities are many and considerable, one of the most important being that of preserving regional identity (Article 59). This marked the first time that such a goal had been enshrined in legislation, thus marking a shift in attitude: the region here for the first time emerge as geographic entities by their own and

immanent right, rather than simply being governmental tools administered from above. This shift in turn was reflected in the wide range of tasks now assigned to regional authorities, including the authorisation of studies concerning regional development. In short, the 1982 Law defined new regulations governing the functioning of area and local authorities, according to a twofold principle: (1) autonomous administration of local communities; (2) abolition of central offices for administrative, financial and technical supervision. Facilitating both, as we can say with hindsight, was a different conceptualisation of 'the region' as a meaningful scientific and administrative tool.

2.3. The relationship between regions and the state

Institutionalised in 1982, the idea of contracts between the centralised state and its member regions at the time comprised the pinnacle of the very idea of spatial planning in France. (National) uniformity and (regional) individuality here once again were held in an unpredictable balance. The general premise of the 1982 law was generally to allow for agreements to be entered into between the French state and territorial subunits, as well as between public and private enterprises. These contracts themselves were subjected to approval by an interministerial committee on planning (*Comité du territoires* – CAT), hence it is fair to say that the overall balance between national and region remained largely unchanged by this institutional innovation. Still, a new precedent had been set: the need for collaboration between different territorial scales had been acknowledged and had left a visible trace in the set-up of institutions relevant to the planning process in general. Dialogue between different actors on a host of related scales was now institutionalised and hence democratically controllable in theory.

The first generation of these contracts, between 1984 and 1988, saw 22 regions entering into some form of contract with the state and 600 more specific contract ratified. (And we need to note in passing that in many of these cases, the region of Ile-de-France was the last to sign its respective contract). As a direct result, spatial dimensions were now accepted parameter in almost every economic, social or political discussion within the various bureaucracies in France. Education in particular emerged as one of the central themes in the ensuing discussions, as did, predictably, transport infrastructures and health, with the eventual impact of the actual plans varying between a factor one and three, according to regional priorities. Here as elsewhere, the structural reorganisation of planning in France aimed for with the introduction of spatialised contracts more often than not remained in the shadow of persisting dependencies. The concrete choice of regions or *départements* still was circumscribed by prior financial decisions being made within powerful central ministries. If the centre decided to favour certain economic sectors at the

expense of others, the ability of the geographic core to counteract this decision remained weak indeed.

A second generation of contractual agreements began in 1989 and lasted until 1993. A review of existing procedure by the CIAT in 1987 applauded the overall scheme but saw fit to introduce a new sense of judicial pragmatism into the set-up of the contracts and to stress aspects of decentralisation even further. This was done chiefly to avoid unnecessary delays in the implementation of contracts but had the unintended result that the national planning process became rather detached from the concrete formulation of state-regional contracts. More selectivity and a simplified structure complemented the recommended changes which were applied to largely the same set of topical priorities as before, to which now increasingly the goals of technology transfers and specific measures to alleviate unemployment were added. The overall input of the state alone augmented from 42 billion francs (which characterised the first period) to 52 billion francs in the second generation.

In sum, then, the implementation of these contracts clearly brought forth a shift of emphasis from the nation state towards the regions, however financially circumscribed such a shift in practice happened to have been. For the first time, regions like the Bretagne, the Limousin, Rhône-Alpes or Lower Normandy produced medium or long term studies of their regional potential better to direct their particular discussion with the central state – and beyond: by this time, regional policies coming from the EU had become a genuinely third partner in the all too familiar duality of state and region, particularly so in geographically marginal regions such as Midi-Pyrénées, Lorraine and Corsica through the implementation of the European Fund for regional development (*Fonds européen de développement régional* – FEDER). It is these regions together with those that underwent a transformation of their industrial bases which clearly profited most from contractually implemented policies. Although it is still too early to single out any consequences especially of the second generation of contracts, what is remarkable is the apparent ease with which regions incorporated contracts into their political life; the eagerness with which larger cities and departments strove to become equal partners in the contractual process; and how quickly the resulting contracts became genuine reference points in the overall planning process in France. Lacking clearly defined quantitative objectives, it is somewhat more difficult to evaluate the overall effectiveness of this policy.

A third generation of contract was entered into in 1994 to last until 1998. As before, it was launched under one government only to be continued by another: a sign, we may deduce, of how deeply planning routines are by now engrained into French public life. Even more central than before, it is education, and here the implementation of the *Université 2000* plan, together with the globalisation of economies, that became a core element of this third generation. Regional prefects

were invited to bring forth a strategic document outlining their responses to overall changes in key areas of development. Beneficiaries of financial reallocations were now in particular the regions of Auvergne, the Bretagne, the Limousin, Lorraine, the North and Poitou-Charentes. Furthermore, a series of interregional contracts sought to tie especially the Paris region with its surrounding neighbours.

3. OPEN QUESTIONS SINCE 1992

The autumn of 1993 saw the inauguration of a new planning regime through the launch of a 'National debate about planning' initiated by the administration of Edouard Balladour. This debate led directly to a new orientational law for spatial planning and development in 1995. It is to this document that we will now have to turn our attention since in it the construction of the region as a political as well as geographical entity become plain yet again.

Not surprisingly, there was a large-scale consensus among those participating in the debate and the formulation of the subsequent law that the immediate goals of any national planning regime should be to balance out any negative side effects of 'free' market economies and the increasing integration into the European Union. This, in effect, was simply an updating of older positions held within the planning community and was thus again not surprisingly a position that came directly out of DATAR. Hence the task that emerged was as much to do with defining and eliminating spatial inequalities within France as to forge a new national identity *vis-à-vis* the emerging new realities within Europe. The French region thus again was to serve the dual purpose of maintaining a distinct profile all the while being representative of France.

While we lack the space to elaborate upon the debate – which itself would warrant a paper of its own – its results need some spelling out. Principally, the region was to emerge as a more autonomous spatial scale from these debates while the financial backing necessary for the enactment of autonomy, itself still centrally administered, remained unclear. These and other matters became law in 1995, in turn subsumed under the general objective of guaranteeing the equality of living standards across France. Faced with geographical inequalities, it was now widely accepted that fiscal policies would have to be applied and distributed unequally to achieve spatial equality. The three main avenues through which to pursue this goal were designated as (1) planning, (2) financial measure and (3) territorial cohesion. As to the first, no real change was introduced since the existing planning structures were largely maintained, if now in a more focused manner. However, the concretisation of national plans was now increasingly

seen as a matter of region or local planning institutions to decide. Financial and fiscal matters were reorganised under the law and generally rendered more ambivalent so as to allow regionally specific implementations. In particular, special 'priority areas' both within rural and urban regions were designated to guarantee that regions with special needs would be financially prioritised (figure 1).

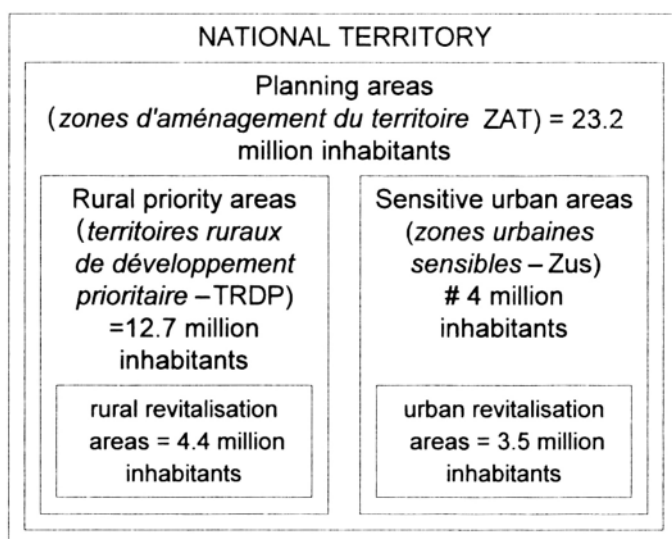


Fig. 1. Scheme of the special 'priority areas'

In addition to these relatively precise reorganisations in French planning policies since the early 1990s, however, a number of less specific policy goals have been formulated, which we need to note in passing. Most important among the latter is an attempt to reorganise fiscal and financial responsibilities across the country. After ten years of an explicit approach designed to decentralise a host of functions within the national territory, such an attempt was indeed timely. However, and well stopping short of reorganising local responsibilities, this attempt did not yield a genuinely new and progressive reform to date. Despite many attempts at reform, it is the local in all of its 32,000 permutations in France, that remains solidly opposed to any genuine change in the organisation of the national territory. Note, furthermore, that the general trend towards decentralisation established during the 1980s was not nominally abandoned in the 1990s. If anything, this trend was accelerated and more clearly focused through the attempt to institutionalise a 'link' administrative level located between the national government and the departmental bureaucracies. In the medium term, this is hoped to lead to the establishment of a genuinely

coherent 'pays' – a medium sized regional planning region. It is at the scale of these 'pays' that mutual interdependencies between urban and rural spaces should in the future be recognised and reconciled in dialogue. It remains to be seen how and to what extent this new bureaucratic sphere will prosper and thus generate a genuinely new form of regional identity. As it is, it is hard to argue with those that see it as simply having added yet another layer of bureaucracy: in France, there are now seven spatial bureaucracies involved from the Commune to the EU. The most promising steps in the direction of establishing a genuine hierarchy among these has come from the Economic and Social Commission of the Bretagne in 1994 where the 24 'pays' for this region are addressed as the conceptually most fruitful geographic frame in which to pursue issues related to development and planning. Some would argue, however, that an even more radical approach to the re-organisation of the region would seem to be called for. Here, as elsewhere, the underlying question is at what scale should we envision and work towards a democratic society all the while not being blind to the economic, social and political realities of the present and the future. Which of the current manners of dividing space into regional units, from the individual commune to the 'pays', regions to the old established departments will prove to be most effective in this respect is anyone's guess (figure 2).

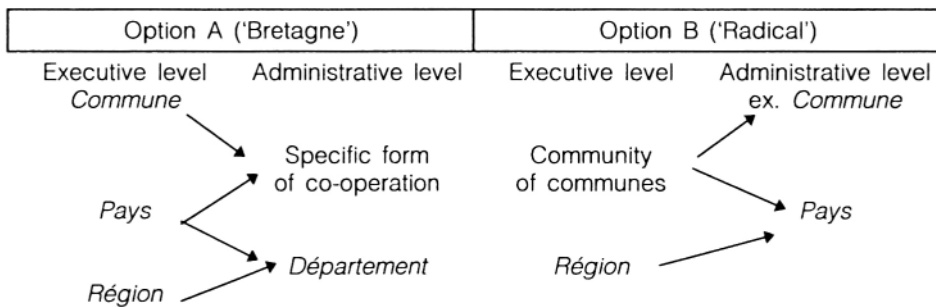


Fig. 2. Actual and possible decision-making hierarchies and territorial administration

Needless to add that in this prolonged period of change, the expertise of those active in planning processes continues to be sought. Reports, studies and evaluations chased one another at often quite remarkable speed. The majority of these, however, has still to develop the middle ground so necessary to reconcile the opposing needs of a more clearly delimited and defined organisational structure and the participation of local actors in the definition of development targets. This need, in a nutshell, remains the core problem of any areal reorganisation for it is here that different conceptualisations of regions compete – however implicit this competition may be. In the current climate, many necessary decisions depend on the voluntary co-operation or transfer of decision-

making bodies between local communities; the same problems that beset issues concerning integration and co-operation at the European scale also trouble the reorganisation of planning processes at a smaller scale: 'intercomunality' thus seems just as likely as a federal Europe – if not outright less likely so!

4. NEW AMBITIONS SINCE 1997

In May 1997, the president of the Republic decided to put forward the elections to the *Assemblée Nationale*, the results of which created the necessity of a renewed cahabition, now between a center-right President and a coalition of socialists, communists and greens. The new Prime Minister, Lionel Josin, entrusted the Ministry for Planning and the Environment to Mme Dominique Voynet, a spokesperson for the Green Party. For the first time in French history, a member of this latter party was invited to participate in governing the country.

The program that was launched subsequently in the realm of planning had already been widely publicised in the publications of 'green' authors (Voynet, 1995; Lipietz, 1993; 1996). In addition to those concerns one would expect to see implemented by 'green' politicians, this new government has embarked upon a number of wide ranging social policies, in which some detect the thoughts especially of Alain Lipietz, a widely known and respected economist. The main axes of these programs are grouped around ideas such as a redistributed work share within society at large, a redesigned tax code, a new minimum wage and better transfers between regions in France. However, as is customary in France, it remains up to the Prime Minister, traditionally an arbiter between different ministries, to scale down the ambitions expressed in these and other 'White Papers' published by 'green' planners within the government. As this papers goes to press, it is thus decidedly too early to analyse, let alone judge, the impact the Greens have had on the ongoing history of planning in France. As it is, the future is awaited with curiosity and with some expectations.

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