

DECENTRALIZATION IN FRANCE:
NOTES ON GOALS AND METHODS

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Assisted by K. McCusker

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Reasons given for a policy of decentralization will vary depending on whether the question is posed to a provincial or a Parisian. The mayor of Grenoble, M. Dubedout, suggests that the aims of decentralization should allow for fuller exploitation and utilization of the national wealth. He emphasizes the need for development of human resources whose potential is presently stifled by Parisian primacy.¹ Pierre Merlin, professor in the Department of Urban Studies at the University of Paris, notes the possibility of a constructive "dialogue", leading to a solidarity, between Paris and the provinces.² Jerome Monod, delegate to DATAR*, feels that the question of decentralization and balanced regional development is important for the future of both the French economy as well as the general living standards of the French people, if not also for the continuing attraction which France, and its capital, must exert beyond its borders.³ These opinions outline the goals of decentralization: it must enhance France, Paris and the provinces. Three distinct axes are of concern, and it is unlikely that the realization of these objectives will mesh perfectly; indeed, it would be fortunate if they did not prove antithetical.

* Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale.

The official objective behind decentralization purports to achieve a more balanced distribution of activities across the entire country. At the same time, though, it is necessary to play the economic "trumps" and promote regional, if not national, development.⁴ In this way Monod justifies efforts like Fos, Languedoc-Rousillon, and Dunkirk, where new industrial projects are strengthening the economies of the Rhone valley, the southeast, and the north (respectively), yet accentuate the economic imbalance between the eastern and western halves of the nations. Clearly, incongruencies arise: social exigencies favor decentralization yet economic requirements lead to, and are aided by, regional polarization.

Already by 1947, Jean-François Gravier, in his book Paris, or the French Desert, had crystallized the discontent of provincial officials who felt themselves treated like children by the Parisian administration. The post-war industrial expansion and the accompanying decline of agricultural zones resulted in the departure of the farmers for distant regions, a migration which unbalanced the regional economic structures. Massive emigration of the population of Brittany and the Southwest was feared: would these lands become deserts like the Massif Central which underwent this exodus a few decades earlier?

In the Southwest, emigration, entailing an aging of the population, is not compensated for by an increased fecundity amongst the younger population. The West and Southwest still live largely on agriculture. The development of other sectors

must be accomplished within a generation or the population count will have fallen below the threshold necessary to suscite a viable economy.⁵ Henri Mendras, however, referring to national statistics, asserts that the population of a town of less than ten thousand inhabitants remains constant in an absolute sense.⁶ Nevertheless, the differences in population densities between regions in France and the variation in median ages of farmers (see Table I and II) are unavoidable facts creating economic disadvantages, particularly in the Southwest.

A study*, published in 1965, forecast an agglomeration of eighteen to twenty million inhabitants by the end of the century for the Paris region, and gave the impetus for decentralization. With nineteen percent of the population of France and thirty percent of the national income, Paris acts as the greatest point of disequilibrium. Preventing its overly rapid growth will form a major step in validating the success of the decentralization policy.

However, Paris has its own peculiar problems associated with decelerating growth. The extent of growth control must correspond to the interests of the financial and administrative concerns centered in the capital. That is, decentralization cannot lead to a reduction in the dominance of the central administration; at the same time, Paris must retain, and expand accordingly, the industries which keep it a dynamic

* "Rapport prospectif pour la Région Parisienne".

TABLE I

POPULATION DENSITY (km²) for 21 regions: 1968

Region Parisienne	832
Nord	313
Alsace	170
Rhone-Alpes	137
Haute-Normandie	120
Provence, Cote d'Azur	116
Lorraine	98
Franche-Comte	90
Bretagne	87
Picardie	81
Pays de la Loire	81
Basse-Normandie	69
Languedoc-Rousillon	61
Aquitaine	57
Midi-Pyrenees	57
Poitou-Charentes	56
Centre	51
Champagne	49
Auvergne	48
Bourgogne	47
Limousin	43
FRANCE	91

(aménagement du territoire et développement régional, p. 392)

TABLE II

PERCENT OF FARMERS OVER 55 YEARS OLD BY REGION

Nord	36.6
Picardie	37.1
Region Parisienne	38.6
Pays de la Loire	39.9
Bretagne	40.3
Champagne	40.5
Basse-Normandie	41.3
Haute-Normandie	43.4
Franche-Comte	45.0
Bourgogne	46.7
Poitou-Charentes	46.8
Centre	47.9
Aquitaine	49.0
Midi Pyrenees	51.4
Auvergne	51.6
Lorraine	51.9
Rhone-Alpes	53.3
Limousin	53.4
Alsace	55.0
Provence-Cote d'Azur-Corse	57.0
Languedoc-Rousillon	62.0

(la transformation du monde rural, p.84)

city. While the administration and a multitude of tertiary activities must continue in order to sustain the Parisian technostructure, industries cannot be farmed out to the provinces, otherwise this geographical apportionment leads to the "deportation of the proletariat to the periphery",⁷ and possibly a repetition of the schizoid urban character similar to that, generated by Hausmann, which led to the Paris Commune of 1870.

The imperative for limiting growth is the lack of public investment capital for urban facilities. While the level of public services continues to be inadequate, municipal per capita expenditures are twice that of regions outside Paris.⁸ How strong the restraints should be poses an additional problem. The proposal of zero growth, were it possible, is rejected on the basis of the London experience, which shows an annual decrease of 56,000 inhabitants as compared to an annual increase of 102,000 to the population of Paris. Although London has expelled superfluous industries, specialization in certain areas has taken place, and the English capital manages, despite out-migration, to maintain dynamic industries.⁹ However, Pierre Merlin suggests that a city that stops growing loses its dynamism and attributes part of the responsibility for the economic stagnation of Great Britain to the rigorous policy of localizing activities.¹⁰ A similar viewpoint notes that an agglomeration such as Paris generates technological initiative and creativity invaluable to the national economy. Although as a European

financial center, Paris compares unfavorably with London, its place as an "international" city, capable of furnishing needed services for multinational organizations, remains unchallenged. The pursuit of a policy of decentralization ought to lead to an improvement of this position as indispensable urban functions return to an effective level.¹¹

Apart from a comprehensive territorial management program, methods used expressly for decentralization consisted of locating a number of industrial projects, and creating jobs, in the provinces. In 1966, Paris received thirty-five percent of total French wages. The employment/labour force ratio and wage level in the capital exceed the national average, the latter due in part to the high level of skills of Parisian workers. Forty-three percent of female salaries were paid to Parisian women, who make up a larger proportion of the labour force in the principal city than in France on the whole.¹² (See Table III). Between 1962 and 1968 Paris lost 90,000 jobs in manufacturing which led to profound imbalances in the employment structure; between 1961 and 1971, 450,000 jobs became available in the rest of the country. In contrast, overall employment in tertiary activities has increased, so that in the time span from 1965 to 1975 1.4 million jobs would be added.¹³ Table IV pictures the predominance of Paris in research. Although now Parisian universities can admit no more than a third of all French students, the effects of this policy are limited.

TABLE III

NET SALARIES (millions of francs) : 1966

	<u>Paris Region</u>	<u>France</u>	<u>PR/France</u>
MEN	30685	91931	333
WOMEN	9642	22706	424
TOTAL	40327	114637	35.1

1
∞
1

(aménagement du territoire et développement régional, p.462)

TABLE IV

Comparison of the Demographic Weight of Paris and its
Research Potential.

Paris represents:

- 18.6% of the French population
- 21% of the employed
- 22% of science graduates
- 51% of the doctors of advanced studies
- 58% of the "doctors of state"
- 61% of persons engaged in research

(Jerome Monod - Bulletin d'Information de la Région
Parisienne)

It follows that many industries, seeking proximity to research centers, prefer to locate in the Paris region.

Policy for decentralizing industries' functions through financial incentives: the classification of the region - there are three categories at present - the amount of land area needed, the reasons for, and the general utility of, the location choice, and the "age" of the industry (is it a newly created firm or one in the process of decentralizing?) are evaluation factors used to determine the degree of financial aid. The regions that receive the most assistance are the West, the Southwest, the center, the island of Corsica, and regions of industrial change (i.e. the mining basins of the North and the East), but in effect only the Lyon and Paris regions are completely excluded from aid. Within the latter region, industrial establishments and office building sites are taxed, separately per square meter. Above a certain amount of space, the project plan is submitted to the administration for approval. Additionally, DATAR recently advanced a strategy for defining long-range plans for decentralizing big businesses. Approximately ten large firms - primarily banks and insurance companies - have already signed "decentralization" contracts and dozens of other agreements are under discussion.

The first stage of French territorial management sought equilibrium in a policy of growth centers or "métropoles d'équilibres". However, it soon appeared that this did not

fulfill the requirements of decentralization. Rather, the centers generated problems similar to those affecting Paris: traffic congestion, long journey-to-work time, noise pollution and high living costs. In addition, the most feasible "growth poles" were located in the eastern half of the country while the western part was calling for urbanization and stimuli to growth.

The eight "métropoles d'équilibres" include both 'real' centers with inter-urban economic complementarities and artificial conglomerations that are simply growing, industrialized regions. Aix-Marseilles, comprising over one million inhabitants, forms a complementary whole, although the cities are thirty kilometers apart. While Aix is a residential and university town, Marseilles, as a port city, wields a good deal of commercial power. Fos, located fifty kilometers away, having been the recipient, if recalcitrant, of a large industrial project, may reinforce and accentuate the position of this area. The regional solidarity within the Lyon-St. Etienne-Grenoble pole is actually quite weak, but Lyon, as an energetic city second only to Paris, and Grenoble, a major center for scientific research, combine to create a region of great activity and promise. Located in a densely populated area adjacent to the Belgian border, Lille-Roubaix-Tourcoing-Armentieres sustains a strong economy. However, as its basis is coal mining, it must,



for obvious reasons, begin to orient itself towards alternative industries. The USINOR steel complex in the nearby port of Dunkirk to a certain extent insures the region's economic future.

These three "métropoles d'équilibres" comprise the major growth poles in the regional development of France. Another area worthy of consideration is the northeastern Nancy-Metz-Thionville conurbation where the metal industry makes up the dominant productive activity. This group of cities constitutes a problem area as it manifests internal discord; moreover, DE WENDEL-SIDELOR, the prominent metal firm, is in financial trouble. Another center in this section of the country is Strasbourg, an important actor in the economy of Alsace but heavily dependent on the German market.

In the Southwest, Toulouse, Bordeaux and Nantes-St. Nazaire form the principal urbanized areas. The latter region experiences some severe social problems and Bordeaux is little more than a lethargic port. Toulouse, specializing in aviation and electronics, has been expanding rapidly, but the areas around it are analogous to the desert which encircles Paris.

Due to large investments, prompted by the government, the Languedoc-Rousillon coast has become a zone to attract tourists. Instead of benefiting the inhabitants of the area, however, the profits are fed back indirectly to Paris due to the influx of national - or international - chains.

That is, the residents have been forced away from the coastal area by rising prices and reduced to marginal incomes.¹⁴

In addition, tourism, as a seasonal activity and furnishing only temporary employment, creates neither a stable economy nor continuous and diverse development.

Since the policy of stimulating growth by implementing a variety of projects in the "métropoles d'équilibres" only tended to aggravate the national disequilibrium, new methods were essential. The subsequent strategy emphasizing the development of medium-sized cities (20,000 to 200,000 inhabitants) would allow for a more balanced population distribution. As pointed out by Oliver Guichard, Minister for Housing, Building, and Tourism, people prefer to live in this size city as the related housing conditions and lifestyle are more conducive to the continued existence of the nuclear family and improved social relationships.¹⁵ Also, economic opportunities may be generated such as do not occur in larger cities.

Studies undertaken to accompany the implementation of this policy have arrived at two conclusions.¹⁶ First, within medium-sized cities there are three size categories, each with a specific characteristic. A town of 20,000 to 50,000 inhabitants tends to be dynamic; those with populations between 50,000 to 100,000 inhabitants are not very attractive, and those ranging between 100,000 and 200,000 are extremely active cities. Secondly, cities below 100,000

but more than 20,000 do not have inherent tendencies towards further urbanization and particular incentives must be used to promote growth.

Additionally, a number of "New Towns" have arisen, primarily as extensions of suburbs of the larger cities: Cergy-Pontoise, Marne la Vallée, Evry and Melun, to name a few around Paris; Fos Berre near Marseilles and le Vaudreuil by Rouen. Although they cannot serve as redistribution centers for the entire population, they should enable the restructuring of the regional urban pattern. As new concepts in urbanism, New Towns will be vital for diffusing urban population into - hopefully - more amenable environments.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 H. Dubedout, pp. 21-22.
- 2 P. Merlin, pp. 13-14.
- 3 J. Monod, pp. 9-11.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 H. Mendras, p. 300.
- 7 H. Lefebvre, p. 248.
- 9 J. Beaujeu-Garnier, pp. 35-37.
- 10 P. Merlin, pp. 13-14.
- 11 Travaux et Recherches Prospectives, "Paris-Ville Internationale," p. 47.
- 12 Institut d'Études Politiques, aménagement du territoire et développement régional, p. 462.
- 13 M. Bastié, pp. 4-8.
- 14 R. Lafont, p. 365.
- 15 Aménagement du territoire, les villes moyennes, préface.
- 16 Ibid.

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