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On Comparing Two Social Science Traditions: The "Metropolitan" Question in France and the US

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Abstract

With the globalization of social sciences, comparing national traditions is usually perceived as an epistemological and methodological issue. This challenge has been adopted for the analysis of one element of the French territorial reform, the institutionalization of the "métropole" in January 2015.

The analysis is framed around a comparative perspective with the American literature on metropolitan areas (MAs). Three core questions will be addressed: How to explain the choice of such a methodology? What are the similarities and the differences between the two national contexts as expressed by their social science traditions? What can be learned about the governmentality of MAs from each national approach?

Our societies are living in an era characterized by the ‘global turn’, which refers to the intensification of flows (capital, information, trade, tourism...) based on the use of digital systems. The expression “global turn” is also used when researchers talk about the change happening in social sciences. Some do not hesitate to question the use of the English language and insist on maintaining the principle of the plurality of languages. Others prefer to compare national approaches as a way to elucidate epistemological differences. The intention of this paper is to discuss the challenges offered by the comparative perspective between two social science traditions (French and American) through the case studies of “metropolitan areas” (MAs) in France and in the US. The comparative perspective between the French social science approach and the American one will address three core questions: How should the choice of such a methodology be explained? What are the similarities and the differences between the two national contexts as expressed by social scientists? What can be learned about the governmentality of MAs from each tradition?

In France, MAs were institutionalized in January 2015, and are part of the ‘territorial reform’, which is reshaping the French territory and, to some extent, the relationship between a centralized state and its territory. This reform has been largely discussed over the last decade, but it is François Hollande’s government that is implementing it. This new context raises a political debate opposing “la France des métropoles” and “la France périphérique” (territory located outside the MAs).

In order to make sense of this debate and decenter it, this paper compares the French social science approach to the American one. Two questions may be raised: 1) Is there anything Europeans can learn from the American approach; and 2) Is there anything Americans can learn from the French approach?

1- The reasoning behind the comparative analysis: The national and international contexts

A large number of analyses on the spatial and urban impacts of globalization recognize the emergence of metropolitan areas (MAs) as new economic and social entities (Sassen, 1991). MAs are, to some extent, spatial, social and economic reconfigurations around large urban centers. In the Anglo-American tradition, researchers talk about the economic power of “global city-regions” (Scott, 2001) or MAs (Downs, 1994; Katz & Bradley, 2013; Scott, 1998) while others stress the need for more social and spatial justice at the metropolitan scale (Chapple, 2015; Holston, 1999; Pastor & al., 2009).

MAs are recognized in international circles. A recent OECD report (February 2015) refers to the twenty-first century as the “metropolitan century”¹. It starts by stressing the ongoing urbanization process and how it is improving economic conditions as well as the well-being of the world’s population. Even though the report focuses mainly on OECD member countries, its analysis and insights are relevant beyond the OECD. Urbanization is beneficial for people who move into cities because they benefit from higher wages and the proximity to amenities. It is beneficial for countries because cities are more productive and innovative than rural areas. It is also beneficial for the environment because the environmental impacts can be made lower in a city than in a population spread out over a large rural area. The OECD report stresses the shift of power towards large metropolitan areas within countries while recognizing that economic competition between countries is likely to increasingly turn into economic competition between metropolitan areas. In order to respond to the needs of both the residents of a state and to those of global

¹ http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/urban-rural-and-regional-development/the-metropolitan-century_9789264228733-en#page1

competition, it becomes urgent to correct outdated governance arrangements. The report states that countries should give increasing levels of accountability to metropolitan areas (MAs).

The “Metropolitan Century” report may serve as a tool for policy-makers to seize the opportunities provided by urbanization. French scholars (Halbert, 2010; Veltz, 2005) and American economists (Downs, 1994; Katz & Bradley, 2013) go as far as to say that MAs represent the national economy in the context of a globalized and connected world.

MAs refer to a territory that includes cities, suburbs and exurbs. In the US, a “metropolitan statistical area” (MSA) has been a census category since the middle of the twentieth century, but without any meaningful political power². In France, MAs became a political and jurisdictional entity in January 2015 through a national law, which is part of an ambitious ‘territorial reform’³ concerning regions and metropolises. This political reform is raising a debate opposing the inhabitants of the metropolises and the inhabitants of the periphery located in exurbs, small cities, and rural areas: “la France des métropoles” versus “la France périphérique”.

“La France des métropoles” includes the inhabitants living in cities, suburbs and “cités” or “quartiers sensibles”. These last two French words – which are synonymous - refer to neighborhoods with a high concentration of housing projects located in the suburbs. Most of the households belong to the working class and low

² . For a current definition of a MSA, see < <http://www.census.gov/population/metro/data/omb.html>>. For a historical perspective, see <http://www.census.gov/population/metro/data/pastmetro.html>

³ . The nation law of January 27th, 2014 see <http://www.vie-publique.fr/actualite/panorama/texte-discussion/projet-loi-modernisation-action-publique-territoriale-affirmation-metropoles.html>

middle class population and have an immigration background. Some are French, and represent the second or third generation of immigrants. “La France périphérique” includes the people living at the edge of MAs often mixed with rural inhabitants in small towns. Christophe Guilluy (2014) does not hesitate to refer to the French middle class whiteness and talks about “petits Blancs”. “La France périphérique” refers to territories which are neither connected to economic opportunities nor receiving public investments. Their inhabitants think of themselves as the losers of globalization and are against it. Very often they express their votes in favor of the extreme right party, *Front National*, like in the city of Carpentras.

“La France des métropoles”, on the other hand, designates territories taking advantage of globalization. This includes the wealthy “creative class” (Florida, 2003) as well as immigrant populations. The “creative class”, according to Richard Florida, refers to people who belong to different fields, such as arts, media, finance, architecture and accounting and who are known for their creativity. Working class immigrants living in the *Cités* are also part of “la France des métropoles”; some of them are take advantage of economic opportunities offered by MAs.

The opposition between these two groups was largely framed in Christophe Guilluy’s book. How does this political framing compare to the American debate on MAs? Comparing the French and the American social science traditions on the issue of MAs is understood as a methodology for decentering the current French debate. By stressing the similarities as well as the differences between the two social science traditions, the analysis raises the question of what could be learned from each tradition and what may be relevant for future action.

2- A comparative perspective of the American and French social science approach: Similarities and differences

The comparative analysis stresses first the similarities and then the differences before answering questions about what could be learned from each approach.

Similarities

In both countries there is a social science debate on MAs involving different fields such as political economy, geography, economy and urban studies. MAs are perceived as representing the national economy in the context of a globalized and interconnected world. In the last twenty-five years, American social scientists have created new concepts to explain the changes happening in cities and suburbs, and a large number of them have since been borrowed by French social scientists.

Sociologist and journalist Joel Garreau (1991) is responsible for the use of the term “edge city”, which designates the creation of jobs in typically residential areas (suburbs) outside of cities. Saskia Sassen (1991) was the first to talk about a “global city” and stress the role of cities in the globalized economy. Allen Scott (2001) preferred the term “global-city region” to stress the importance of the hinterland around a large city. Transportation Specialists started to talk of “reverse commuting” when their observations led them to conclude that the commuting pattern between cities and suburbs was changing and that more and more commuting was happening between suburbs (Cervero, 2002; Ihlanfeldt, 1997), given the new spatial distribution of jobs. Sociologist John Kain (1992) coined the expression “spatial mismatch” when he discovered that households living in central cities and not owning a car could not have access to jobs located in edge cities because of the lack of transit between these locations. The geographer Wei Li (2011) created the word “ethnoburb” to talk about the change happening to migration flows in MAs. Migrant populations were no

longer concentrated in cities. Some of them – even those lacking fluency in English – are today living in suburbs that, until the 70s and 80s, were mainly inhabited by traditional American households.

Political economist Myron Orfield (2002) invented the term “metropolitics” to stress the idea that, given social and spatial inequalities among municipalities within metropolitan territories, a metropolitan council may be legitimate. For him, the political sphere should no longer be limited to the municipality because of their rivalry for getting jobs and wealthy households. The role of a metropolitan council is to invest in regional infrastructures, services and amenities while leading a redistribution policy. Wealthy municipalities may then be obligated to share their fiscal revenues with poor municipalities in order to maintain sustainable regions (Chapple, 2015; Weir, 2005).

The French social scientists borrowed most of the terms invented by American social scientists, such as “edge city”, “global city”, “creative class”, and “reverse commuting”. They also often use the added word “gentrification” for describing social changes happening in old urban neighborhoods. Wealthy households are buying and renovating buildings and stores, a process that increases property values and displaces low-income families. The only word that French social scientists do not borrow is “ethnoburb”; they prefer the terms “cités” and to “périurbain”. These two French words designate places that are racially marked but not expressed explicitly: The first, “cité”, refers to neighborhoods with large concentrations of immigrant families and the second, “périurbain”, refers to French middle class whiteness. The term “metropolitics” is not commonly used in France, excluding a recent French e-journal of social sciences borrowed it; “metropolitiques⁴” is the French translation.

⁴ . The web address of the e-journal <<http://www.metropolitiques.eu/Qui-sommes-nous.html>>

However, this particular journal focuses on general urban issues over metropolitan governmentality.

In both contexts, research has been committed to the theme of MAs and concepts are circulating from one context to another. In the US, a think-tank initiated the “metropolitan policy program” (MPP) in 1999, which translated into regular publications on American MAs⁵. In France, a national institution located in Paris has taken a similar initiative: La Datar⁶. In both contexts, studies stress the economic role of MAs as well as the need for a political reform to overcome their territorial fragmentation: A MA usually includes several municipalities responsible for economic development, zoning plans and fiscal decisions within their own territories. This institutional and territorial context is then described as fragmented.

Differences

The idea of a “metropolitan revolution” became prevalent in America with the publication of two books. In 2006, the historian Jon Teaford used “revolution” in his title in order to stress the radical economic, social, and cultural changes happening in cities and suburbs as well as the political challenges raised. In 2013, two researchers from the Brookings Institution, Bruce Katz and Jennifer Bradley, incorporated the same title, and added as a subtitle: “*how cities and metros are fixing our broken politics and fragile economy*”. Like Teaford, they recognized the drastic changes occurring in the American society, but they went a step further in acknowledging that Washington couldn’t solve these new challenges. Instead, they argued that networks of metropolitan leaders (including mayors, business and labor leaders, educators and

⁵ . See the MPP website <http://www.brookings.edu/about/programs/metro>

⁶ . See La Datar website <http://www.datar.gouv.fr/toutes-nos-publications>. La Datar has merged with the Commissariat Général à l’Égalité des Territoires (CGET) since March 2014.

philanthropists) needed to step up and power the nation forward. They acknowledged that state and local leaders are doing the hard work to grow more jobs and make their communities more prosperous while investing in infrastructure and making manufacturing a priority. The role of local leaders for facing the challenges of the twenty-first century is an idea also shared by the political economist, Benjamin Barber (2013) who, in his recent book, "*If Mayors Rule the World*", argued in favor of nominating mayors of large cities as new political leaders.

In France, people never referred to metropolization as a 'revolution' even though it became a new institution in January 2015. As mentioned in the national law⁷, the metropole is a territorial unit that includes at least 400.000 inhabitants. In 2015, the Grand Lyon was created along ten others: Bordeaux, Brest, Grenoble, Lille, Montpellier, Nantes, Rennes, Rouen, Strasbourg, and Toulouse. The metropole of Nice was created in 2012. The Lyon metropole went through a drastic change with the annexation of the urbanized portion of the Rhône *département* in 2014. Today this *département* is mainly a rural territory. The Grand Paris will include the city of Paris and the three surrounding *départements* in 2016. It will have around 5.5 million inhabitants whereas the current city of Paris has 2.2 million inhabitants.

A second difference between the French and the American approaches rests on the explicit reference to the spatiality of social class, race and ethnicity. In the US, the critique is mixing social and racial data whereas in the French context inequalities are mainly dealt in social terms. The methodology adopted by the Institute of Metropolitan Opportunity (University of Minnesota) is to draw a typology of municipalities (within each metropolitan area) while aggregating statistics on the

⁷. The law of January 27th 2014 is called the law of "modernization of public territorial action and recognition of metropolises" (Modernisation de l'action publique territoriale et d'affirmation des métropoles, Maptam).

number of jobs, fiscal revenues and household incomes. The analysis addresses the unequal access to public services based on race and class. It shows the tension between wealthy municipalities -which are mostly white and have good public schools- and *municipalities at risk* (mainly multiethnic) which lack amenities and social services and, where unemployment is important. In France, the designation of the type of neighborhood (*cités, périurbain ...*) implicitly refers to the racial and/or ethnic categories. The word *cités* refers to the foreign born population and to the population with an immigration background whereas *périurbain* refers to the white population. Inequality among municipalities located within MAs is usually identified through the criteria of the percentage of social housing units. According to the Observatory of inequalities⁸, only half of the municipalities (which have more than 50.000 inhabitants and which are located within MAs) have a minimum of 20% of social housing in their housing stock. This percentage was requested by a national law of 2000, SRU⁹. This situation raises some critiques for most social scientists arguing for a social mix within each municipality.

A third difference between these two national approaches lies in the expression of two fundamental critiques formulated by American social scientists, who raise the issue of (1) institutional racism -as expressed in the “incorporation procedure” and the “exclusionary zoning plan”- as well as (2) the myth of a ‘local’ democracy limited to a ‘municipal’ territory. In a recent article (2013) historian Connor explains how the legal creation of suburban municipalities in the Los Angeles County has been embedded in the search of social and racial homogeneity. Most of the suburban municipalities in the 60s and 70s were white and most of them adopted an “exclusionary zoning plan”, which prevented the construction of apartment buildings.

⁸ . See the Observatoire des inégalités website http://www.inegalites.fr/spip.php?page=article&id_article=848

⁹ . SRU stands for Solidarité et renouvellement urbain (solidarity and urban renewal).

An “exclusionary zoning plan” may be perceived as a tool for maintaining social and racial homogeneity within a homeowners’ municipality. Tenants are excluded as well as people of other race. The critique of ‘municipal’ democracy is undertaken by political scientists, who, like Myron Orfield, are advocating in favor of *metropolitics* and by philosophers who also venture in the metropolitan debate. Iris Marion Young (1990) is the first philosopher advocating in favor of spatial justice at the metropolitan scale. She criticizes the local democracy ideology based on social and racial homogeneity and argues in favor of a democratic metropolitan government. According to her analysis, municipalities tend to behave as ‘private clubs’ since they want to preserve social and racial homogeneity.

In France there is no serious critique of the political fragmentation of MAs even if there is a commitment to “intercommunalités” which refers to the recent institutional cooperation between municipalities (DF, 2005). There is however a debate about the tension between the inhabitants of the MAs and those living outside the MAs in the exurbs, small towns and, rural areas. The inhabitants of MAs are seen as people getting advantage of globalization processes whereas people living outside of MAs are perceived as the losers. The cultural distance as it is linked to race and ethnicity between the different populations living within MAs is missing in the French social sciences production. Some social scientists, like Patrick Simon (2008) would argue that France should adopt ethnic and racial categories for the census like the US, but they represent a minority.

In France and in the US, MAs are part of an intense debate in the social sciences. The debate concerns their role in the economy of the nation and their spatial reconfiguration beyond the traditional divide between cities and suburbs. One of the main differences between the two national contexts is

that in France the institutionalization of MAs in 2015 is leading to a serious public debate about territorial inequalities between MAs and the rest of the national territory whereas this issue is not central in the American context. In the US, the researchers who are talking about social inequalities within MAs are also addressing the issues along racial and ethnic lines, which is not the case in the French context. The social distance between the *cités* and the other neighborhoods is not dealt in terms of race and ethnicity yet.

3- What could be learned from the comparative framework?

In both countries MAs are seen as the heart of the economy, the hubs of research and innovation, and the centers of cultural transformations. Given their growing economic and political clout, researchers are arguing in favor of new institutional forms of governmentality beyond informal cooperation and local arrangement. If both social sciences traditions are raising the issue of the governmentality of MAs, some American researchers are sharing the argument of Neil Brenner (2004) in favor of the reconfiguration of the State.

Formal institutions vs. *metropolitics*

In the American context, MAs are not formal political institutions like in France (2015) even if some of them may be organized around a metropolitan planning organization (MPO)¹⁰. There is however a debate on *metropolitics*. Social scientists talk about the creation of a political and institutional scene at the metropolitan scale and they view

¹⁰ . One of the main task of an MPO is to deal with future infrastructure investments (Chapple, 2015) which are funded by the Federal and the states.

Portland (Oregon) and Minneapolis/St Paul (Minnesota) as models. After studying these two models, Myron Orfield (2002) stresses the role of states for dealing with spatial coherence, social and, environmental sustainability within MAs. The reference to states is not really shared by Katz and Bradley who are more inclined to stress the Federal role and its influence in the making of a political scene at the metropolitan scale. For them, the Federal State should launch public policies in favor of MAs.

Equality of territories at the national scale vs. spatial justice at the metropolitan scale

In France, where there is a historical tradition in favor of the equality of territories under the leadership of the centralized State, the debate is mainly centered around the issue of the coming inequalities between MAs where economic development is happening and non-MAs where the economy is limited to local and residential consumptions (Davezies & Pech, 2015; Guilluy 2014)). These authors stress the economic and social disparities between MAs and the rest of the national territory (rural areas as well as small and middle cities). They talk about the 'divergence' between the two categories of territories as well as about the risk associated with the development of MAs if central State is not ready to maintain and reinforce its policy of social redistribution at the national scale.

The issue of spatial inequalities between MAs and the rest of the national territory is not central in the Anglo-American tradition, which tends to stress the inequalities within MAs. The work of Myron Orfield (2002) centered on the need of launching redistributive policies within metropolitan territories lies in the perspective of spatial justice as expressed by Iris Marion Young (1990). This argument can also be found in a recent book on equitable development by

Karen Chapple (2015). The researcher argues in favor of intra-regional equity and regional sustainability planning. She stresses the current convergence between 'blueprint planning'- which refers to collaborative planning processes that engage residents of a region in articulating a vision for the long-term future of their region - and the 'sustainable development movement'. She also recognizes that the implementation of equitable policies is indeed difficult, given the lack of a real government structure "(p.30).

Rescaling the State

The most challenging argument of the Anglo-American tradition comes from Neil Brenner's book (2004), *New State Spaces: Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Brenner does not address the issue of the governmentality of MAs, but he instead raises the question of the nature of the relationship between the State and MAs. For him, the nature of the metropolitan territory is different from traditional cities and suburbs since it is embedded in global flows (goods, capital, information, migration, tourism), an argument raised by Saskia Sassen in the 90s. Brenner uses the concept of "rescaling" the State in order to describe the role of the metropolitan leadership, which has to deal with economic development as well as with social and spatial inequalities. In a centralized country such as France, it is up to the State to deal with social inequalities and launch for instance a law concerning rent control. However, it should be up to the MAs to decide precisely the percentage of the rent increase, given the specificity of its housing market.

It follows according to Brenner's argument that the relationship between the centralized State and its national territory may need to change. His position may be regarded as an innovative one, since it is not limited to the

governmentality of MAs and since it concerns the changing role of the State. It may also allow for a renewed representation of MAs as a mediation space between the State and the people. Brenner's argument offers a real challenge to the traditional representation of the State.

As a conclusion offered by the comparative analysis, it may be said that it is up to the French social science tradition to find its own way and methodology to address explicitly the ethnic and racial dimension of the metropolitan population along with social inequalities. The Anglo-American social scientists may learn about the principle of equality of territories within a national territory, from the French social science tradition. As mentioned by the sociologist Robert Putnam (2015), the class divide is growing in the US while the racial gap is shrinking. Both of the traditions may elaborate on Brenner's argument on the 'rescaling' of the State.

Conclusion:

Comparing two social science approaches: Circulation of concepts and diversity of arguments

The comparative analysis is a way of stressing the circulation of concepts in a context characterized by the globalization of social sciences. Connecting social science traditions through a comparative analysis may also enrich scientific as well as political debates, and open new perspectives. It may mean discovering new arguments (such as '*rescaling*' the State), which help decenter national debates. The concept of "rescaling" the State - even if it not explicitly defined by its author- helps understand the future nature of the relation between the State and its territory. This concept is all the more important to consider in a

centralized State like France. In this 'metropolitan century', as mentioned by IECD, the use of a comparative methodology allows for the plurality and diversity of arguments on MAs. MAs are to become a real challenge for the State.

The main differences between the two social science traditions concern ethnic and racial inequalities along with spatial inequalities. Anglo-American researchers are keen to stress the racial and ethnic divide in terms of metropolitan opportunities whereas the French researchers are raising a public debate on the imperative to maintain the principle of equality between MAs and non- MAs within a national context. French researchers may work on how to address racial and ethnic inequalities within the French tradition and American researchers may learn on how to address social and spatial disparities at the national scale. The comparative perspective may then be seen as a learning process between researchers engaged in two different social sciences traditions.

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