



COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Strasbourg, 5 May 2008

CDL-UDT(2008)011
Engl. only

T-04-2008

EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW
(VENICE COMMISSION)

**UNIDEM
CAMPUS TRIESTE SEMINAR
"MODELS OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT"**

**Trieste, Italy
21 – 24 April 2008**

REPORT

**REGIONALISM SEEN FROM THE NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE:
THE FRENCH PROCESS OF REGIONALISATION**

by

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The French regionalisation process: some lessons learnt from history:

1. In France, the concept of regionalisation takes its roots very far back in history more than two thousand years ago and we can identify five great periods.

1. From the Roman Gaule provinces (52 BC) to the French Revolutionary departments (1789 AD)

2. After the Roman emperor Julius Caesar defeated the Gaul Prince Vercingetorix in Alesia in 52 BC, Gaule – now called France, became one of the most powerful and best organized regions of the Empire, Empire which exemplified one of the most successful centralized and deconcentrated forms of Government.

3. With the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, the territories and thus the regions and provinces again became each of them somewhat autonomous under the rule of different and often conflicting tribes and were managed by princes often waging wars again each other.

4. Some important landmarks can be summed up by illustrious kings like Clovis, the king of the Franks in the 5th century – a tribe which later gave its name to the country, and Charlemagne who became some sort of first European emperor in the year 800.

5. But the first king who really re-started the process of institution building was Hugues CAPET who was elected king in 987. As prince of the Ile-de-France “region” he was the most powerful prince, *primus inter pares*, and once elected by the other regional princes he became legitimate and his hereditary dynasty lasted for 8 centuries until the revolution at the end of the 18th century when Louis XVI was beheaded in 1793. His centralized power was vested in the allegiance of his vassals.

6. At the beginning of the 17th century, **Louis XIII**, advised by Cardinal de **RICHELIEU** decided to put an end to the feudal system, to destroy the old feudal castles and to make the feudal lords transform them into beautiful mansions. The uprising – called “*La Fronde*” (1648-53) of first the Parliament then the highest regional / provincial lords during the infancy of **Louis XIV** and the rule of Cardinal **MAZARIN**, mark the last attempts to counterbalance the absolute power of the king of France.

7. At his majority Louis XIV, the future “Sun king”, took power in his own hands and declared “I am the State”. He insisted on having all his regional lords at his court – with no longer any real political power. His governance was based on a strongly organized institutional framework with professional ministers – notably **COLBERT**, who designed the modern centralized public administration of the State and developed an economic theory of territorial development based on protectionism favouring all national products. The territories – corresponding to the historical provinces, were administered by powerful *fermiers généraux*, in charge of levying taxes for the royal treasury.

8. The economic development of the territories was fostered, notably by the building of roads and infrastructures (canals between rivers and seas), as it improved the yield of tax recovery and thus filled in the forever empty coffers of the king.

9. Thus when in 1789 the Revolution produced a Constitution and started a major reform of the French State, the concepts were not invented from scratch. The new institutions were built on the former royal administrative framework – except for regions / provinces that represented the aristocratic power of a privileged elite which the new politicians wanted to see abolished. Thus smaller territorial units, the “departments” were created with a “capital” city in each of

them and their sizes and the location of the *chef lieu* were determined by the distance covered within a day's ride on a horse.¹

2. From the prefect (1800) to the Regional *Commissaire* of the Republic (1944):

10. In 1800 – 28 Pluviose An VIII, **Napoleon**² introduced a law institutionalizing Centralization as the mode of administrative governance and created the prefects and sub-prefects, representing the State, the Government and all the ministries at departmental level. He thus set up a powerful political and administrative network able to implement his decisions all over France. Prefects referred to the Minister of Interior, at the time Lucien BONAPARTE, younger brother to the Consul. Their first mission was to keep the country together and implement national policies.

11. Progressively, notably under Louis-Philippe, the “Bourgeois King” (1830-1848) and the second Republic (1848-1852), the missions devolved to the prefectural corps extended to economic development policies.

12. **Napoleon III**, the first emperor's nephew, gave prefects much economic development responsibilities. Prefect HAUSSMAN for instance is still very well known for his modernization of Paris. He had many small medieval Paris streets pulled down and he imposed strict building and construction rules – which have modeled Paris and the French regional capitals at the end of the 19th century and up to the 1st World War. This big overhaul of the capital city had a security objective – to prevent riots, but it also had an economic impact on commerce and industry and thus local development.

13. The third Republic granted more autonomy to Departments and Communes in 1884 but did not yet consider reviving the regionalisation process.

14. Regions as a relevant administrative territory only reappear in an Ordinance of 10/1/1944 when General de GAULLE as Head of the Government of Free France created special regional representatives for security matters, the Regional *Commissaires* of the Republic, with very extensive powers. These regions will again disappear when he leaves power again in 1946.

3. From security matters to economic development, regions slowly reappear (1944-1963):

15. After the 2nd World War the reconstruction of France was partly funded by US funds called **the MARSHALL Plan**. In order to manage these funds in the most efficient way and to ensure a good absorption capacity a General Secretariat for the Interministerial Coordination in matters concerning European Affairs (former SGCI now called **SGAE**, General Secretariat for European Affairs) was created in 1948. For efficiency sake its coordination policy was centrally designed and implemented.

16. In 1947, a book entitled *Paris and the French desert* by Jean-François GRAVIER, underlined vividly the risk of seeing the country develop in a very unbalanced way with an oversized capital city and undersized regions. Its concept of regional development had a strong and lasting impact on successive Governments' policies and on the public opinion.

In 1948 **the IGAME**³, General Inspectors of the Administration were created to coordinate, in

¹ Today, Departments are NUTS 3.

² In 1800 Napoleon BONAPARTE was Consul. He became emperor in 1804.

³ IGAME : inspecteurs généraux de l'administration en mission extraordinaire

the framework of the military regions, the actions of the civilian and military authorities in charge of maintaining order. Economic missions were soon added.

17. In 1954, **Regional Development Committees**, created on a private sector basis, received official agreement and, in a decree of 30/6/1955, 21 economic regions, called “**Programming Regions**” were created.

18. By a law of 2/8/1961, **the District of the Parisian Region** is created.

19. This post-war reconstruction period is known as “the 30 glorious years”⁴, during which economic development was at its most efficient. But it soon appeared that Paris was attracting most of this development and that the risk identified in *Paris and the French desert* was becoming a threat (cf. SWOT analysis terminology).

20. To reduce this severe risk of unbalanced development the French Government launched a voluntary policy in two stages: by the Decree N° 60-1219 of November 19th 1960 it created a permanent Inter-Ministerial Committee for the Issues related to Regional Policy and Spatial Planning (CIAT) and by the Decree N° 63-112 of February 14th 1963 it institutionalized the Committee into a **Delegation for Spatial Planning and Regional Action (DATAR)** and defined the competencies of the Delegate. DATAR was placed under the direct responsibility of the Prime minister but could be put at the disposal of various ministries if needed.

21. From 1963 DATAR was first devoted to the reconstruction of France after the war and to the monitoring of the very dynamic entrepreneurial efforts all over the country. Modernizing and extending the infrastructures were the first and foremost priorities, roads, motorways, rapid trains, improved river navigation etc. then all the basic networks, water, electricity, gas, oil etc., including atomic energy, without forgetting the management of used water and all the basic utilities, central heating, public transports, waste management etc.

22. After the first decade of intense rebuilding of “concrete” France, a new policy was initiated to favour the development of several big cities in the provinces: Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse, Strasbourg, Nantes, Lille etc. called “métropoles d’équilibre” or big cities to ensure a balance with Paris. A law of 31/12/1966 supports this process by creating Urban Communities comprising a big central city and the communes around it wishing to join a common developing effort without merging into the central commune and losing their identity. Four are created: Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon and Strasbourg.

But “**Regional Action**” means Regional Policy, not yet Regional territorial administration.

4. From Regional Action (1963) to Regions as Self-Governments (1982):

23. By a decree of 14/3/1964, 10 years after the creation of the Programming Regions, **21 Region Prefects** were created and the Programming Regions became administrative regions – not yet decentralised self-governments. The Region Prefects were thus the deconcentrated regional executives.

24. By a law of 10/7/1964, 8 new departments were created in the Parisian Region and Paris itself becomes both a City and a Department, i.e. two self-governments for one territory

25. In 1969 De GAULLE failed to get approval for his referendum on 27/4/1969 aiming at creating administrative regions with an elected executive. The French say “No” but it is more a

⁴ “Les 30 Glorieuses”

“No” to de GAULLE himself than to the regions themselves. Nevertheless this “No” stops for a while or at least slows down the process of regionalisation in France

26. The law of 5/7/1972 marks a new start of the regionalization process with the creation of a “Public Establishment” named “**Region**” with a **Regional Council**. This Regional Establishment is given a juridical existence and receives a budget but it is not democratically elected and is not yet a Self-Government. It is composed of the Members of Parliament elected in the regional territory plus representatives from the Departmental Councils of the region plus some representatives from communes of more than 30 000 inhabitants.

27. **A Regional Economic and Social Committee** is created to represent the economic and social private sectors and NGOs.

28. By a law of 6/5/1976 the District of the Parisian Region takes the old historical name of **Ile-de-France Region** but does not yet become a self-government as such.

29. The law of 3/1/1979 created a very powerful financial instrument, **the DGF** or Global Functioning Allocation, calculated by the Ministry of Interior (General Directorate for Local Collectivities) and distributed to the Local Authorities by its deconcentrated representatives in the territories, the Prefects. DGF enabled equalization and the implementation of a policy of solidarity at territorial level.

30. A law of 10/1/1980 enables Departments and Communes to vote the rates of their local taxes.

31. **The great decentralisation laws of 1982-1983** at last created fully-fledged territorial units called regions at NUTS II level.

32. **Regions** become fully competent and autonomous territories with an elected regional council chaired by a powerful executive, the president of the region. The region has the power of raising taxes and the autonomy of managing freely its own budget.

33. Regional, Departmental and Local Self-governments no longer need the authorization of the prefect to act. They act, then the prefect controls the legality of their acts ***a posteriori***.

34. If the prefect identifies something illegal, he can first make observations to have the problem remedied. If nothing is corrected, he can then defer the act to court, an administrative act to the Regional Administrative Court and a budgetary or financial act to the newly created Regional Chamber of Accounts.

35. **Regional Chambers of Accounts** (CRC), first level of the financial judiciary branch of which the Court of Accounts is the supreme court, have been created by a law of 10/7/1982 to assess and judge self-governments’ budgetary acts.

36. Decentralisation was a true revolution as the new executive in charge of a region was now democratically elected and responsible and accountable in front of its electors and in front of the administrative and financial courts.

37. Of course, a slight risk was soon identified of seeing some process of “re-feudalisation” at regional level – if one may use that coinage, to refer to the increasing power and influence of the Region Presidents. And politicians from opposite sides sometimes underline this risk ... when they are not in power!

5. From the first (1982) to the second “wave” of Decentralisation (2003-2004): a strengthening of the Regionalisation process, supported by a parallel Deconcentration process

38. Decentralisation led to the division of the Civil Service into 3 branches, one for the State, i.e. central and deconcentrated administrations, one for the local and regional self-governments, called Territorial Civil Service, and one for the Health sector. The three of them share the same law (1984) for their rights and obligations and each then has a particular law for its specific missions and tasks (1984 for State and Territorial Civil Service, 1986 for Health).

39. In 1992, 10 years after Decentralisation, Parliament voted an important law on the Territorial Administration of the Republic (6/2/1992): “*the Territorial Administration of the Republic is ensured by the Territorial Self-Governments and the Deconcentrated services of the State*” and, in order to counterbalance the risk of “re-feudalisation”, the Government issued, also in February 1992, a decree given the solemn name of Charter for Deconcentration.

40. Deconcentration consisted in much transfer of powers and competences from central administrations, ministries and agencies, to Prefects, notably Region Prefects, in order to empower them to fully accomplish their new missions and to enable them to discuss on par with their elected counterparts – the powerful presidents of the Regional and even Departmental Councils.

41. Since 1992, in an on-going process, an interministerial analysis is made every year to identify what new competence could be deconcentrated.

42. Since 1982, more than 25 years ago, more and more competences -- and the financial means to implement them -- have been decentralised i.e. transferred to the self-governments and, since 1992, more and more competences have been deconcentrated to maintain a fair balance of power at all levels and thus to ensure good governance at regional level.

43. In 1991, it is to be noted, the Corsica Region is granted a special status and becomes a *sui generis* territory – the statute of which is still being reformed.

44. On 28/3/2003, the French Constitution has been modified to state in its first article that “**France has a decentralised administrative organisation**”. Article 74 has also strengthened local and regional autonomy, notably thanks to more fiscal power (cf. “Good Governance of Regions”).

45. On 29/7/2004 an Organic Law guarantees the financial autonomy of Local and **Regional** Self-Governments and stresses the importance of their own resources.

46. The law of 13/8/2004 on Local Liberties and Responsibilities transfers more competences to Self-Governments and clarifies the different attributions of each:

- **Regions** are the level of orientation and programming, economy and regional infrastructures;
- Departments focus on solidarity and local infrastructures;
- Communes are entrusted with local policies.

47. All these transfers are fully compensated by the corresponding financial and human resources means.

48. Last, but not least, on 10/7/2006 the French Parliament ratifies the Council of Europe Charter for Local Autonomy ... signed in 1985 (!), when the Congress of the Local and

Regional Powers is already finalising a Charter for Regional Democracy.

CONCLUSION:

49. Regionalisation in France has been a very long process, dating back to Roman and feudal provinces then to the administrative territories of the *fermiers généraux* ensuring tax collection for their kings. The French Revolution has marked some sort of a pause in the process by creating smaller more manageable and controllable units: the departments. After some partial steps forward towards creating regions from 1944 onwards, the regionalisation process has been going on until the creation of fully-fledged regions with an elected executive, Regional Council and President, in 1982 and the deepening and enlargement of its competences since then.

50. The deepening of the regionalisation process shows how closely the quality of **territorial administration -- or good governance**, both deconcentrated (State) and decentralised (Self-Governments), is linked to the **regional policy** of both and conditioned by the coordination of these two complementary policies, which in their turn have also to take into account the policies of the territory above, i.e. the EU, and the territories below, i.e. NUTS 3 Departments and NUTS 4 / 5 Communes (cf. Good Governance of Regions).

51. Two historical quotations can summarize the two great stages of the French Regionalisation process:

1. During his political campaign for regional reform, General de GAULLE, President of the Republic (1959-1969), made an important speech in Lyon on March 24th 1968, in which he stated:

“The multi-secular effort, which for a long time was necessary for our country to achieve and preserve its unity in spite of the divergences of the provinces which were successively added to it, is no longer a necessity today. On the contrary, regional activities appear to be the springs of its economic power of tomorrow.”⁵

2. Just after being elected President of the Republic, in order to announce his most important institutional reform, decentralisation and the transformation of administrative regions into regional self-governments with an elected executive, a regional council and a President, François MITTERRAND proclaimed in the Council of Ministers of July 15th 1981:

“France has needed a strong and centralised power in order to bring its pieces together. Today it needs a decentralised power in order not to break down to pieces”.⁶

NB: For more details on the above administrative chronology:

<http://www.assemblee-nationale.net/histoire/decentralisation.asp>

⁵ « L'effort multiséculaire, qui fut longtemps nécessaire à notre pays pour réaliser et maintenir son unité malgré les divergences des provinces qui lui étaient successivement rattachées, ne s'impose plus désormais. Au contraire, ce sont les activités régionales qui apparaissent comme les ressorts de sa puissance économique de demain. »

⁶ « La France a eu besoin d'un pouvoir fort et centralisé pour se faire. Elle a aujourd'hui besoin d'un pouvoir décentralisé pour ne pas se défaire. »