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# Polycentrality within the Greater Paris: a polysemic figure

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WITH

NATHALIE  
ROSEAU

Polycentrality within the  
Grand Paris:

A polysemic figure

Challenged by scale overlaps, obsolescence processes and the erasing of frontiers, large cities are facing a chronic crisis. Urban terminology is regularly fed with new concepts trying to grasp their whole complexity. Megalopolis (Gottmann, 1961), metapolis (Ascher, 1995), *hyperville* (Corboz, 2000), *Zwischenstadt* (in-between city, Sieverts, 2003), porous city (Secchi, Vigano, 2011), light-weight city (Lin, Andi, 2009): words for the large city embody various and superimposed representations of urban dynamics. They adapt to multiple city dwellers' practices. They are captured by various parties involved in urban fabric – political representatives, institutions, experts, technical structures, whose discourses draw on the metropolitan construction. This polysemic imagery is as concerned with these multiple representations down through the years as it is with the phenomena and policies impacting on the metropolis, rendering the issue of its *imagibility*, trickier.

#### EXPRESSING POLYCENTRALITY

One figure regularly appears that deals with the issue of polycentrality. Pre-eminence of this term over planning discourses may be understood through the recognition of dimensional, functional and institutional changes affecting urban space, thus reassessing the traditional image of a centralised structure where the heart would decide alone on its extensions, functions and dependencies. Three spatial changes address this issue. First of all, the gigantic size of urban agglomerations urges us to think in terms of million-inhabitant populations as well as hundred-mile perimeters (Sudjic, 1993). Then follow the redeployments of inhabiting practices, economic and commercial fields, resulting from mobility changes as well as new production and distribution chains. Institutional evolutions finally act on the opening process endured by systems of actors, through decentralisation and globalisation. All these changes favour new forms of mutual-interest relations between city fragments, less hierarchical and more interdependent.

This recurrent figure also embodies each time in a concrete spatial configuration and within a contextual system of actors. Polycentrality appears both as a conceptualisation for the present and a projection for the future. Appellations such as the *Randstad* or, more recently, the *Flemish Diamond*, may be understood both as the recognition of a spatial configuration and the elaboration of a strategic concept for its transformation. Certainly the *Randstad* urban ring is inherited from a large historical municipal autonomy as well as an integrated network of relations, based on communications and a well-balanced complementarity of economic,

commercial and symbolic powers. However, its designation as a supra-urban entity – very early on identified by urban theorists such as Lewis Mumford or Kevin Lynch – in turn captures projects and policies for its reinforcement (Taverne, 2006).

Institutional processes of metropolitan enlargement, such as the Paris annexation of 1860 (Bourillon, Fourcaut, 2012) or the Greater New York creation in 1898, also need to be contextualised, since they recognised a present situation – an urban development overflowing the existing frontiers of the city – while in the meantime enlarging the realms of possibility within the shifting frontiers. Once the urban constraints were released, the city could open up to its regional environment, setting into motion new relations between the widened city and the suburbs. Even within the greater city's enlarged frontiers appear new peripheral centralities such as Gambetta and République squares in Paris, Brooklyn and Harlem in New York, or Metropolitan Centres in London. All these movements redistribute balances between various fragments of the reconfiguring metropolis.

Planning approaches implemented in the Hong Kong Archipelago in the last 20 years can also be understood within this enlarging scale, both urban and regional. The city-state has achieved a vast redevelopment plan of its territory, managing a double process of deconcentration and reconcentration of its urbanisation within peripheral new towns and renewed hypercentres. This spatial redeployment – due to both authoritarian and liberal planning (Haeringer, 2002) – places the Hong Kong territorial configuration in the heart of a mega region spreading along the *Pearl River Delta*, the polycentric figure of which is stated and developed quasi simultaneously (Koolhaas, 2000).

Terms and words pointing out new urban configurations embody a narrative function, inasmuch as they tell about the metropolitan structure in process while designating in the meantime the future of its transformation. However, rhetorical figures may obscure other phenomena at work. This performative function of the polycentrality figure, which acts onto the structure it reveals while masking other potential dynamics, will be now explored within the context of the recent "Grand Paris" debates.

#### THE STATE AND THE METROPOLIS

Launched by the French State in 2007, the international consultation for the future of the Grand Paris gathered 10 teams led by renowned architects. This consultation firstly aimed to embrace societal, political, architectural and urban issues within the topic

of the Paris metropolis. Discussions and proposals have stimulated various debates, the influence of which is now noticeable in the professional milieu. The consultation also marked the State intention, more or less shared with the local municipalities, to reaffirm the position of Paris on the world metropolitan arena, together with New York, London and Madrid or Shanghai and Beijing.

The consultation fell within the scope of a tense political situation, although typical for Paris history. Initiated by the State (right-wing at the moment), the approach aimed to counter local institutions of the capital, municipal and regional levels, situated on the left wing of the political chessboard. State supervision over the capital region's future has been chronically observed through history, either expansionist with Haussmann and repressive during the Commune slaughters, regionalist during the interwar and Malthusian with planning policies inherited from the violent pamphlet written by Jean-François Gravier on "Paris and the French Desert" (Gravier, 1947) or modernising with the large perspectives drawn by General De Gaulle and Georges Pompidou. Atomising urbanism responsibilities among the 1281 communes that form the Paris Region, decentralisation laws launched as soon as François Mitterrand was elected, paradoxically comforting and keeping control over Paris's destiny in the hands of the strengthened State, the recent consultation being its last milestone.

Dating back more than 150 years, the "Grand Paris" idea always suffered from this chronic ambiguity, resulting from tensions between an imperious State and local municipalities claiming their independence despite their weakness or isolation. Such is the figure of polycentricity, relevant when considering a metropolis of millions of inhabitants (more than ten million today). Yet this idea always confronted the Parisian inheritance of the concentric configuration.

Resistance to change may be first of all understood through the pre-eminence of the city of Paris as a place for concentrating many metropolitan functions: political, cultural, symbolic as well as economic. Thus, peripheries were subjugated to this powerful central magnet, from *Faubourgs* to *Banlieues*, from *Grands Ensembles* to *Villes Nouvelles*. Born in the wake of the regional planning scheme of 1965, led by Paul Delouvrier, these latter were supposed to be autonomous. However, far from embodying independent "Parallel Paris" – as promoted by the "Visionaries of architecture" such as Paul Maymont, Claude Parent or Michel Ragon (Collectif, 1965) – they were planned as satellite cities. Endowed with functions Paris urgently had to share because of their

increasing size, they were not powerful enough to challenge the symbolic power of the capital city. Controversy between extension and regionalisation, perceptible from the turn of last century, was ongoing.

Grand Paris frontiers also need to be investigated through a historical perspective, as they have been strongly determined by this centralised structure while reinforcing it in the meantime. The edification in 1841 of Thiers fortifications, a 35km peripheral and 500m wide glacis, was a key factor definitely acting on future Paris frontiers, sealed with the annexation decree, fixed by Eugène Haussmann in 1860. Walls would be useless in the context of the 1870 Prussian invasion. Their destruction from 1919 would progressively leave the place to other "walls", certainly less sterile and defensive, however more long-standing. From high housing buildings named HBM (Habitations à Bon Marché) to various equipments – such as green spaces, sportive areas, cemeteries – from transportation networks – roads, metro hubs or tramways – to the edification of the monumental highway ring-road: the fulfilling of the "fortifs" materialised a triple ring – hygienist, progressive and circulatory – still strongly influencing the relations between Paris centrality and the "Banlieues" (Cohen, Lortie, 2000).

#### POSITIONS AND MODELS

The issue of Grand Paris representations, configuring the city from a different point of view than just the single enlargement of the city centre – as suggested with the ambiguous term of "Grand Paris" – took up much space within the consultation frame. Both descriptive and prescriptive, spatial configurations expressed various senses for polycentricity. Of course classifications always have a simplifying character. However, plans and projects made it appear that two fields of positions were still influencing debates on progress.

The first position foresaw the big city from its exceptional places of intensity. Devoted to being the new metropolitanist emblems, the academic campus, transportation hubs, central business districts, cultural or commercial mega centres, were localised at the intersection of a rapid communications network, interlinking key strategic nodes. Within this polycentric vision taking advantage of the city's potential global resources, each pole was devoted a unique and exemplary role, which Paris could no longer fill: first world scientific cluster in Saclay, one of the bigger CBD at La Défense, first European airport hub in Roissy, etc....

This change of focal length, looking at a global and discrete metropolis, rather than

a city with its extensions, was at the same time followed with an enlargement process dealing not only with the metropolitan territory (such as the Seine Métropole design from Antoine Grumbach, planning the metropolis from Paris to Le Havre harbour), but also with the architectural size of city-buildings embodying these poles. Distinctly named collectors, hubs, hyperstations or technical cities, these latter often echoed metabolist megastructures or metropolitanist superblocks.

The second position foresaw the large city, not from its apparent icebergs, but from the ocean surface they emerge from: *sprawl*, on which Robert Bruegmann wrote an American contextualised history (Bruegmann, 2006); *in-between city* as named by Thomas Sieverts, evoking his IBA Emscher Park experience; *città diffusa* as scrupulously analysed by Bernardo Secchi and Paola Vigano; or *light-weight city*, key strata for Finn Geipel to maintain the urban conurbation's cohesion (Geipel, Andi, 2009, 16-17). According to these views, the metropolitan condition was both hyperurban and suburban, and designers leaned on this in-between tension to understand and plan the metropolitan context.

How was spatial isotropy generated from the diffuse city; what were the means of its peripheral pluricentricity? Investigating this issue, Studio 09 and Lin Italian and German teams multiplied centralities that did not count themselves by dozens, but by hundreds, while incorporating through a straight and solid net as figured in *Fiber City* (Ohno, 2006), a Tokyo project led by Hidetoshi Ohno. Framed in the context of Tokyo's shrinking perspectives – due to its ageing population as well as a compactness injunction – *Fiber City* aims to relocate suburban areas around communications arteries and all their points of contact: railway and subway stations, halts, etc. 730 compact cities become part of a net-city which aims to offer accessibility to the whole metropolitan area and to maintain, even develop public transportation networks. The regionalist approach defended by Grand Paris teams espoused this decentralising approach. Here again, proposals claimed to be as close as possible to local needs, while sketching a large-scale metropolitan grid. Far from being heroic or monumental, here transport-placed architectures were discrete, in search of the best archetypes for spatial diffusion and urban discontinuity.

#### QUESTIONS ADDRESSED TO THE METROPOLITAN PROJECT

Consultation debates on polycentricity have also dealt with transportation techniques and their capacities, confronting the metro system – more capable for a hyperpolycentric network – to the tramway system – more qualified for the multicentric network. Visions had then differently foreseen the *station* object. Teams arguing in favour of a polarised metropolis dedicated the railway station as a *haut-lieu*, a collector, a *commutator* or a technical city, while in-between city architects proposed to sprawl the infrastructure and its points of convergence as seen in the Lin team *micro-centralities*. Certainly the hub figure as an urban generator was common to visions; however their spatial materialisation was much distinct through the proposed sketches, thus addressing new design contours for the metropolitan mobility system (Roseau, 2012).

While creating in 2010 the Atelier International du Grand Paris, which gathered the ten Grand Paris teams within a uniform structure, rhythms have been accelerated by political decisions. In particular, the mobility issue appears a key topic, all the more crucial that its effectiveness was materialised through new transport megaprojects among which figures the new Grand Paris Express subway network.

Grand Paris Express network, as proposed by the government and discussed with the Region Ile de France, was the technological reply aiming at concluding this consultative episode. With four new subterranean metro lines interlinking with RER and subway networks, through 72 existing and new stations, this project is largely inspired from an inherited spatial vision for networks, both technical and institutional. The birth of the Société du Grand Paris, a public institution in charge of this project, reinforced this specific character of a territorial exception. However, numerous questions are still being addressed, getting back to the previous consultative debates. Actually, it deals with the nature of infrastructure as this latter espouses the scales and topics of the metropolis. Can the metropolis be summed up in a few spatial points, even if these latter are named "gateways", "clusters" or "large stations" with a "power of influence" (*Urbanisme*, 2012)? When viewing stations as a place for spatial mobility practices, articulating flows and places (Castells, 2000), hyperurban and suburban, the various visions for a polycentric Greater Paris reassesses differently their planning and design, that is their perimeters, functions, forms, envelopes and management. Another metropolitan programme was the Saclay cluster project. The site of Saclay

is part of a vivid geography including the Yvette River Valley and the rural crop fields on the plateau itself. Seen from above, the site also presents a dense concentration of resources and intellectual skills – the largest concentration of researchers in France – driven by high-speed links both terrestrial and virtual. Yet seen from ground-level, the area is a fragmented set of enclaves – large transplants, networks, grand landscapes, urban nodes – that seem oblivious to one another.

The site raises the issues of the local on a grand scale and interplays between a diffuse urbanisation and megaprogrammes. Spatialising his visions for Saclay, landscape architect Michel Desvigne, winner of the consultation launched by the Etablissement Public Paris-Saclay, proposed two figures (Desvigne, 2012): on the one hand, the American reference of the parks system, theorised and implemented by Frederick Law Olmsted in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Beveridge, Hoffmann, 1997); on the other hand, a form named “Chaîne de lieux publics” (Chain of public places), closer to a French vision for a continuity of symbolic places. Both figures aim to consolidate a spatial structure which would cope with the site discontinuity, and at the same time, create dialog between apparent opposites: spatial distension with discrete urbanisation, large transplants with small nodes, urban pressures with desire for nature, mass of flows with personalised services. The main issue here for the projects in progress is how to avoid the double process of introversion and sprawling within such a discontinuous context.

Risks of rupture between metropolitan representations and local projects currently being carried out in an operational logic could be that much clearer. Today, visions suffer from the lack of places being able to raise conflicts and tensions between perspectives, actors, projects and temporalities. This is another challenge for the emergence of a specific Grand Paris polycentrality: to localise the arena for debating on metropolitan projects, which could transcend aporias and invent new directions.

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FIGURES

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1. Michel Desvigne, Paris-Saclay, Plateau Sud, Park System, 2012, Source Michel Dsvigne

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