



GEOGRAPHY AND DEMOGRAPHY

Geography of Inequality

Territorial Inequalities

**Coordinated by
Magali Talandier
Josselin Tallec**

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Territorial Inequalities

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Which Geographical Figures Should Be Mobilized Against Particular Territorial Inequalities?

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3.1. Introduction

Territorial unity is a vital issue for nation states, one that is compounded by the fact that this unity is never self-evident¹. To endure this, national unity must demonstrate a specific advantage by creating a distinction between the inside and outside. This specific advantage obviously involves the rights on which citizenship is based, the driving forces of which are firstly civic rights then social rights. Even if the results are imperfect and are the subject of much debate, this project can easily be expressed in terms of public policy objectives: the reduction of income gaps, access to decent living conditions, equal opportunities and the capacity to act. The problem is much more difficult vis-à-vis the territorial issue. France is made up of various territories – consolidated, acquired, annexed or even attached – and so it is necessary to demonstrate the advantages of being part of it, or else secessionist sentiments may

¹ This text is a heavily edited version of a paper presented at the *Festival international de géographie de Saint-Dié-des-Vosges* in 2018.

arise. Today, nation states are potentially fragmented because of secessionist movements. Indeed, among the 28 Member States to become part of the United Nations (UN) since 1990, 15 are European! In addition, secessionist tendencies are strong, particularly in Spain, the United Kingdom, Moldova and Belgium. Across the continent, governments must express their concern for the condition of the territories they govern and establish alliances with localized alliances to ensure the unity and cohesion of the nation as a whole.

How can the unity of a territory be ensured? When the term “territories” is used in contemporary French political debates, it is used to refer to small or medium-sized, low-density local authorities, which are presumed to be in a state of social and economic difficulty, perhaps even “abandoned”. By extension, in political-administrative language, the term “territories” refers to any territory out of the larger cities governed by an intermunicipal body called a *métropole*. It is more common for the plural to be used to designate smaller entities rather than the singular: for example, culture versus cultures, history versus histories and land versus lands. Consequently, the idea has gradually emerged that territories are both part of and in tension with the territory (as a singular unit). In other words, the territory designates the national space, that is, the territories and its components. As such, we are faced with the following recurring questions: does the development of the territory necessarily equate to the development of its territories? Is promoting the equality of citizens necessarily the same as promoting the equality of territories?

In this chapter, which focuses on the case of France, we will analyze three territorial inequalities that have been the driving force (at least, in terms of their existence having been denied) behind long-term public policies since the French Revolution: the Saint-Malo-Geneva line, the rural-urban divide and provincial France. While other representations and geographical discourses exist of course to denounce unbearable inequalities (notably between France and the conquered regions outside of Europe), we have chosen to isolate these three, because they continue to infuse, quietly and sometimes unconsciously, contemporary public action.

Firstly, we will highlight the writings, maps or figures that have exposed, with the greatest repercussion – but not always with scientific rigor – a territorial difference deemed as harmful. We then review some of the public policies that these discourses have inspired and attempted to identify their main effects. What are the social and political systems that lead to a representation of a territorial difference as being perceived as an inequality? How are actors, over a period of time, brought together to work on mitigating it? Finally, what effects do such policies produce in the region over time?

Spatial planning has embraced the idea of dealing with territorial inequalities by focusing on equipment logic on a national scale, and then economic development on a local scale.

Today, this issue is creating new angles of debate with strong political resonances (e.g. Brexit, French *gilets jaunes* movement). Interpretations of these movements are often quick and binary, such as: the contrast between metropolises and peripheries, between cities and the countryside, between the north and the south or between the east and the west of the European Union.

Territorial Inequalities sheds light on the social, political and operational implications of these divergences. The chapters cover the subject at different scales of action and observation (from the neighborhood to the world), but also according to their interdependences. To deal with such a vast and ambitious theme, the preferred approach is that of territorial development in terms of public policy, namely spatial planning.

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