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The improbable metropolis: decentralization, local democracy and metropolitan areas in the Western world

Metropolitan areas have become the new spatial fix of globalised capitalism. However, their economic strength is not matched by their political strength because metropolitan areas remain politically weak. This article reflects upon the process of building metropolitan areas as political spaces. Considering this process as a conflicting one because it challenges the power of existing players, it seeks to expose the general failure of metropolitan institution building — including most of the South European urban areas — focusing on two elements: on one hand, decentralisation as a process favouring other territorial scales than the metropolitan one, notably the regional and municipal levels; on the other hand, local democracy favouring the municipal and neighbourhood levels but forgetting the metropolitan scale.

Keywords: metropolitan areas; governance; decentralization; local democracy.

A metrópole improvável: Descentralização, democracia local e áreas metropolitanas no mundo ocidental

As áreas metropolitanas tornaram-se o novo padrão espacial do capitalismo globalizado. No entanto, as suas capacidades económicas não são acompanhadas por uma correspondente capacidade política, mantendo-se politicamente débeis. Neste artigo reflecte-se sobre o processo de construção das áreas metropolitanas como espaços políticos. Considerando tal processo como conflituoso — pois desafia o poder dos actuais agentes —, o texto procura expor a incapacidade global na consolidação de instituições metropolitanas — incluindo na maioria dos territórios urbanos do Sul da Europa — focando duas tendências: por um lado, a descentralização como um processo que tem favorecido outras escalas territoriais que não as metropolitanas, nomeadamente os níveis regional e municipal; e por outro a democracia local, que tem favorecido os níveis municipal e intra-municipal, mas tem igualmente menosprezado a escala metropolitana.

Palavras-chave: áreas metropolitanas; governança; descentralização; democracia local.

In the most recent literature on economic geography, urban planning, urban sociology, or political science, metropolitan areas or city-regions are presented as the new "spatial fix" (Harvey, 1985) of the present period of globalised capitalism. In other words, metropolisation is viewed as a process

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very much connected with globalisation, in which city-regions are advanced as *loci* where the most salient societal issues are taking place: economic growth and wealth, social inequalities, environmental degradation, multi-cultural integration, and so on.

In her seminal works, S. Sassen (1991) showed that some cities concentrated headquarters and executive offices of some crucial international activities, notably in the Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate sectors, and as such were becoming places of command in the global economy. She thus identified three "global cities", London, New York, and Tokyo. Although, or because, Sassen's theory has been very much criticised, it paved the way for a long series of research in the fields of urban economy and geography. All have subsequently demonstrated the importance of the largest metropolitan areas for the economic development of the world for various reasons. A. Scott (1998) has shown that city-regions were attractive for firms because they provided low transaction costs, and this largely explained their concentration in metropolitan areas. M. Storper (1997) has stressed the significance of non-market interdependencies to explain why city-regions were so appealing to business. P. Veltz (1996) has presented city-regions as places offering what he called "*assurance-flexibilité*" for enterprises and also for individuals, meaning by this expression that metropolitan areas are attractive because they provide firms and people with choices, alternatives, and opportunities (in finding jobs, in finding the appropriate qualified staff, etc.) that no other territories could offer. All these works were largely corroborated by sophisticated comparative international data, studies, and rankings produced by P. Taylor's team in his Globalization and World Cities Research Network (Taylor, 2003).

In all these works, the political dimension of the metropolisation process as a new spatial fix of global capitalism is absent either because it is not taken into consideration or because it is viewed as automatic. For instance, A. Scott (1998) assumes that once a city-region[1] develops economic agency, political organization will automatically follow in a rather functionalist way.

If city-regions are relevant and crucial spaces for the production of actions and policies necessary to deal with most important societal issues (Rodriguez-Pose, 2008), this means they must be governed for these policies to be produced and implemented. To be governed, they must become political spaces.

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[1] In this article, city-regions and metropolitan areas refer to the same space and scale. For a presentation and a discussion of the various expressions used to define these spaces and scales, see Rodriguez-Pose (2008).

What is a political space? We can define it as a space of involvement of political, economic, and social players (Cox, 1998) where a legitimate collective action is produced, an action necessary to address existing issues and orient the future. Following Boudreau and Keil (2004), a political space contains three inter-related elements: (*i*) a political and institutional entity; (*ii*) public policies; (*iii*) modes of social regulation. Regarding city-regions, by political and institutional entity we mean any political and institutional structure or arrangement at the metropolitan scale possessing political legitimacy and responsibilities; by public policies we mean the production of policies dealing with societal challenges and problems and their implementation at the metropolitan scale by various actors (states, local governments, or any other public bodies); by modes of regulation we mean the existence of structures, arrangements, mechanisms, and instruments at the metropolitan level capable of producing the mobilisation of actors, creating mediation between actors, allowing processes leading to the production of collective action at the metropolitan scale.

The question of city-regions as political spaces is not new. Already in the 1960s, the "Reformers" (Wood, 1958), considering metropolitan areas emerging as social and economic spaces notably because of the evolution of transport and communication technologies, forecast that such an economic and social "community" should have a political representation. But they assumed this political representation could not be the "natural" result of the evolution of societies and cities and as such should be imposed. The history of metropolitan reforms in the US and in Europe, which is largely a history of failures, proved they were wrong (Lefèvre, 1998). However, they were not wrong in their diagnosis (the making of a new political space is not automatic) but in the way they wanted to create it (i.e. a top-down imposition), because the making of a new political space is inherently a conflicting process.

This is indeed the focus point of both the work of Boudreau and Keil and of our own. Boudreau and Keil apprehend the production of new political spaces as a conflicting process. For them, "new political spaces are the result of power struggles for constituting coherence and common objectives" because they challenge already existing political spaces (the state, the municipality, etc.). As such, the making of city-regions as new political spaces is the result of conflicts between actors and interests and by no means the logical result of the economic agency that city-regions have gained from the process of globalisation.

In this article, we will carry this idea of political spaces as a conflicting process in the case of metropolitan areas further by arguing, based on some empirical evidence from Southern European cities, that not only has the western experience not attained success in this field, but several present trends work in other directions. In the first section, we focus on the re-

lationship between decentralization and the building of metropolitan institutions, showing that metropolitan areas have been neither the focus nor the target of decentralisation processes, and consequently have not gained much from this process. In the second section, we move onto the question of local democracy and show that this process, too, has not favoured metropolitan areas.

DECENTRALISATION AND METROPOLITAN AREAS

The decentralisation processes that can be observed in most European countries and elsewhere in the world have not favoured metropolitan areas, on the one hand because they have favoured other territorial scales (regions, provinces, municipalities) and on the other hand because the building of strong metropolitan authorities has been impeded by state and local actors.

DECENTRALISATION AGAINST METROPOLITAN AREAS

In most European countries, metropolitan areas have been the "forgotten territories" of decentralisation. Generally speaking, decentralisation laws and decentralisation processes have transferred responsibilities and resources to already existing governmental tiers, that is, municipalities and provinces, and in some countries to regions as well. Although the "metropolitan fact" has emerged as a strong socio-economic and spatial phenomenon, it has not had any significant political or institutional responses, as we shall see. In the UK, decentralisation — understood as a devolution process — has been given to "peripheral regions" such as Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. In England, the most important attempt to decentralise at the regional level was killed off in 2004 when voters in the North-east strongly rejected a referendum to create a directly elected regional council. Since then, the process has stagnated, apart from the relative exception of London. But the establishment of the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 1999 must not be seen as a sign of decentralisation toward the metropolitan level, mostly because in the British institutional system, Greater London is indeed a region and the London situation was seen as a pioneering step toward a more general political regionalisation, which has not been pursued so far.

Elsewhere the situation is approximately the same. In Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Scandinavian countries, decentralisation, albeit timid in some cases, has favoured the regional level (Germany and Belgium) or counties (Scandinavia and the Netherlands).

The experience of Southern Europe (France, Spain, and Italy) confirms this. In France, since the first decentralisation laws of the early 1980s, the state has transferred responsibilities and resources to all local governmental

tiers: regions (created in 1982), *départements,* and municipalities. As a whole the various decentralisation laws have been very careful to distribute more or less evenly the various transfers of powers amongst local governments. In this process, metropolitan areas have been "forgotten" until very recently — 2009 — but so far no significant changes have been made. Generally speaking, the "metropolitan phenomenon" has been institutionally — and in rare instances, in public policy making, as well — addressed through *intercommunalités*, i.e. the voluntary grouping of municipalities belonging to the same urban area. The last *"intercommunal"* Act, passed in 1999, established new *communautés urbaines* for areas grouping more than 500,000 inhabitants (hardly a metropolis by international standards), but these structures are closely politically controlled by municipalities.

The innovation may come from the last proposal, made in May 2009, by the Commission Balladur on Territorial Reforms, which proposed establishing eleven *métropoles* in the eleven largest urban areas, with these *métropoles* being local government authorities in their own right with their own directly elected councils and significant responsibilities and fiscal and financial resources. It remains to be seen whether this proposal will be implemented or will be lost in political debate.

There is one major exception to this, the Paris-Île-de-France region, which is by far the only French metropolis of international ranking. In this territory, decentralisation has always been less important than in the rest of the country, and the state has retained major responsibilities and control over the development of the area. In most recent years, although several laws have transferred new powers (planning, public transport) to the regional level, the trend seems to be toward a "return of the State," with reforms pushing toward a re-centralisation, one good example of this being the establishment of a "ministry for the capital region" in 2008.

In Spain, the decentralisation process has greatly benefited regions, the "autonomous communities", to the extent that it is today a quasi-federal country. However, the downward pursuit of decentralisation has not benefited the metropolitan areas, on the contrary. To start with, one of the first actions taken by the Spanish regions was to abolish the existing metropolitan authorities, established during the Franco period. Thus, the Basque region abolished the *Metropolitan Corporacion* of Bilbao in 1980, the Valencia region got rid of the *Corporacion* of Gran Valencia in 1986, and one year later the *Generalitat de Catalunya* eliminated the Metropolitan Authority of Barcelona. None of those metropolitan structures were replaced by democratically elected institutions of the same dimension. Second, the next step in Spanish decentralisation that is pursuing decentralisation processes below the regional level, the so called *"pacto local"*, has not taken metropolitan areas into consideration. Although with great difficulties and conflicts, this

process has benefited municipalities and not the urban area as a whole. Finally, the most recent laws and national reflections dealing with cities (the 2003 Act for large cities and the 2005 local government white paper) hardly consider the metropolitan scale, except for the white paper suggestion of establishing "metropolitan agreements" on a voluntary basis. In fact, the 2003 Act was more interested in strengthening the powers of central cities than addressing the metropolitan issue.

In Italy, decentralisation has been following a very long and hectic path but has benefited all traditional local government tiers, from the regions, established in the 1970s, to the provinces and the municipalities. The process has been and still is rather confusing but, once again, metropolitan areas have not been favoured. On the one hand, it is true that the Italian constitution introduced "metropolitan cities", i.e. metropolitan authorities, as parts of the Italian Republic, thus giving metropolitan areas a constitutional legitimacy. But, on the other hand, these "metropolitan cities" do not exist. Indeed, their establishment has been on and off the political agenda for about two decades now (since the 1990 142 Act) but none have been formed, as we shall see in the next section. In the late 1990s, Italy was heading toward regional level federalism and part of the political elite seriously envisaged the formation of a national senate body composed of only regions and metropolitan cities. This would have given the metropolitan areas strong political recognition but did not happen for several reasons, among them the political turmoil of this period and the opposition of traditional local governments like the municipalities and in some cases provinces. As a result, those institutions which benefited from decentralisation laws (such as the Bassanini laws of the late 1990s) were those already existing, regions, provinces, municipalities, and not the metropolitan areas.

THE FAILURE OF BUILDING METROPOLITAN AUTHORITIES

In Europe — although the situation is similar elsewhere in the world — there have been many attempts to build metropolitan authorities, that is, local government units covering more or less the urban area and benefiting from political legitimacy with significant and adequate responsibilities and resources (Sharpe, 1995). By and large, they have not met any real success (Lefèvre, 1998, 2008 and 2009) and in most "successful" cases, these authorities have been weak. At least three major reasons explain this. First, states have been unwilling to decentralise at that level because they have been and remain afraid about establishing strong political counter-powers to their authority. This is all the more the case when dealing with metropolitan areas which are at the same time the capitals of their respective countries (Lisbon, London, Paris). Second, generally speaking, local governments

belonging to the metropolis have opposed the establishment of such authorities also out of fear of losing powers and having actions and policies imposed by those metropolitan bodies. Third, when these authorities have been established, they have encountered the rivalry of central cities which have been able to significantly reduce their juridical powers. We illustrate this in the following section by focusing on Southern European countries (France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain).

France may be described as the "good pupil" of metropolitan government because — with the important exception of the Ile-de-France area — all major big cities possess their own metropolitan authorities: the *communautés urbaines* for the largest and the *communautés d'agglomération* for those with between 50,000 and 500,000 inhabitants. In this article, we focus on the largest urban areas.

The eight largest cities (Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Nice, Strasbourg, Bordeaux, Nantes, and Toulouse) are all covered by a *communauté urbaine*. Such a body is a grouping of municipalities (a grouping imposed by the State in Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, and Strasbourg at the end of the 1960s, on a voluntary basis for the others) which by law has responsibilities for most policy sectors of metropolitan interest (public transport, economic development, planning, waste management, etc.) and financial and fiscal resources of its own to carry out these responsibilities. In theory, *communautés urbaines* can be considered strong metropolitan authorities. When looked at closely, the situation is different.

First in terms of their geographical scale, most *communautés urbaines* do not cover their real functional areas (measured by daily trip patterns for instance), the reason being that most of them were established at the end of the 1960s and have not expanded their territorial range since, although urbanisation was already taking place in that period. Second, in political terms, municipalities belonging to the same metropolitan area, whatever their political partisanship, have agreed to limit the powers of those authorities and have been able to do so because they control the boards of the *communautés*, very often dominated by the central city. The rule has been that the *communautés* should not impose any decision or policies on a single municipality. As a result, until very recently, the *communautés* have been politically very weak and have not been able to produce and implement metropolitan policies in most cases. This situation has been constantly denounced by several national reports and reviews (Dallier, 2006) accusing municipalities of getting together more to benefit from central government financial help[2] than to work collectively.

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[2] When municipalities form a joint authority with its own fiscal resources (which is the case of *communautés urbaines)*, the State gives this joint authority a significant financial bonus.

One of the most illustrative examples of such a failure is the Marseille metropolitan area situation, where, although this area is functionally completely integrated, it is "administered" by no less than 4 *communautés*, each controlled by a central city (the most important being Marseille itself) and each pursuing its own strategy and its own policies.

In Spain, as we have seen, metropolitan corporations were abolished in the 1980s and have not been replaced by metropolitan authorities since. True, the *Corporacion Gran Valencia* was replaced in 1986 by the Metropolitan Council of the Horta, a much less powerful body, but this council was also abolished in 1999. In Barcelona, the *Corporacion* was replaced in 1988 by a *Mancomunidad,* i.e. a joint authority grouping 31 municipalities essentially in the domains of urban planning and land protection. This body is very weak and is chaired by the city of Barcelona like other smaller structures such as the Metropolitan Transport Entity. Essentially, the metropolitan area of Barcelona has no metropolitan authority (but see the next section).

The same can be said of all the largest Spanish urban areas with the exception of Madrid. Indeed, Madrid may be the only large world city with a metropolitan government in its own right. However, this metropolitan authority — the Autonomous Community of Madrid, the CAM — was established… by chance. The creation of the CAM in the early 1980s was the result of a political compromise between the young political parties of that period, since Madrid was neither a natural nor an historical region of Spain. The compromise was to set up a new region which would cover the municipality of Madrid and what was left from the establishment of the surrounding regions (Castilla La Mancha, Castilla y León). In that compromise, the idea of giving Madrid an institution covering the functional area never came about. It is thus by chance that the Madrid metropolitan area got a regional body which in the long run proved large enough to envelop the growing metropolitan area, and since in the "State of Autonomies", Spanish regions are strong institutions, almost federated states in federal countries, the Madrid area got a strong metropolitan authority (Rodriguez-Alvarez, 2002).

In Italy, the issue of metropolitan government was directly tackled by Act 142 in 1990. In this Act, *citta metropolitane* (CM) were envisaged for the ten largest urban areas. CM would be new local government units, covering the whole urban area and possessing area-wide competences (public transport, planning, urban development, physical networks, etc.). They would be administered by directly elected councils. Act 142 envisaged the merger of small municipalities within the respective metropolitan areas as well as the splitting up of central cities and the substitution of provinces covering these major urban areas with the new *citta metropolitane*.

Considering the direct attack against local governments and notably central cities and in some instances provinces, it is no wonder that Act 142 was

never implemented. Several attempts were made, the most innovative in Bologna (Jouve and Lefèvre, 1996), but none succeeded and Italian cities still do not possess *citta metropolitane,* after about two decades of Act 142. The failure of Act 142, as far as the building of metropolitan authority is concerned, is largely due to the opposition of central cities and provinces, which strongly resisted the implementation of CM on the very grounds that this implementation would mean their total disappearance. For instance, Milan was to be split up into ten new municipalities and Bologna into seven. Although this process was supported for a while by the municipality of Bologna but for very specific reasons (Jouve and Lefèvre, 1996), it was strongly rejected by the city of Milan. In other metropolitan areas, the idea of building CM did not even go through a debate stage.

Special mention must be made of the capital, Rome. Although concerned with 142 Act, no CM was established for that territory either, in spite of various proposals made by the central city, notably during Veltroni's mandates. However, in 2001, the Italian government inscribed the issue of metropolitan governance of the Capital into the Constitution. Since then, nothing has happened due to the opposition of the Regional and Provincial councils. However, things began moving again in late 2008 with the creation of various local and national working groups and commissions in charge of debating and implementing the *Citta metropolitana per Roma capitale* and the declared willingness of Central Government to go ahead with such an initiative. It remains to be seen whether these moves will be sufficient to establish such a metropolitan authority.

Finally, in Portugal, although the urban areas of Lisbon and Porto have had metropolitan governments since the early 1990s, these are relatively weak. They are weak because their political legitimacy resides largely in the member-municipalities, which control both the metropolitan authority's council and its executive (e.g. the *junta* is composed of the presidents of the member-municipalities). In that context, central cities have resources to oppose metropolitan interests, as is the case in the capital (Nunes Silva and Syrett, 2006). They are also weak because the state remains in charge of several significant domains, among which are transport, economic development, and planning.

BUILDING METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT BY GOVERNANCE: UNCERTAIN "SUCCESS"

Faced by the abolishment of metropolitan authorities and/or the incapacity of political systems to establish any such structure, some urban areas (Barcelona, Bilbao, Bologna, Florence, Turin, and Venice, amongst others)

have launched experiments based on "procedural policies" (Duran and Thoenig, 1996). These undertakings seek the establishment of metropolitan forms of government via a complex process of coalition building and project elaboration through specific instruments and arrangements. Strategic planning has very often been the policy domain used to monitor these processes. In Europe, the two emblematic cases of such experiences are Barcelona and Turin, but it remains to be seen whether these have been successful, because for the time being both Barcelona and Turin are still waiting for a metropolitan authority to emerge.

Barcelona is very famous in the world for its pioneering role as a "strategic city". The first strategic plan was indeed launched in 1988 in preparation for the 1992 Olympic Games. It was followed by two other plans which had only a municipal dimension. In 2000, the first metropolitan strategic plan was approved; it concerns the metropolitan area of Barcelona (AMB), more than 3 million people spread out over 31 municipalities. The metropolitan strategic plan is not a master plan but more an "orientation" that has set guidelines for the development of the whole area. It is "managed" by a complex structure made up of a General Assembly composed of all the major actors of the metropolis (about 300 members including the chamber of commerce, universities, the city of Barcelona and the 30 other municipalities, the joint authorities, banks, business associations, unions, cultural associations, and foundations) and an executive commission of 30 people, representing the most important stakeholders, in charge of plan administration. This commission is assisted by several committees and working groups whose missions are: (*i*) to feed the plan with reflections and data; (*ii*) to ensure that the plan is linked with sectoral plans (transport, environment, land use, housing, etc.) and existing procedures of cooperation. This complex arrangement is chaired by the Mayor of Barcelona and is used as a tool to mobilise the whole metropolitan society. It is through this mobilisation and this "organisational engineering" that political actors can "govern" the metropolitan area.

In many ways, the situation is similar in Turin. Here also, there has been a first strategic plan approved in 2000 and a second one in 2006. These two plans cover the whole metropolitan area and are managed by a structure comparable with that of Barcelona: the "metropolitan assembly" is composed of 122 members (the suburban municipalities, the central city, the province, business associations, chamber of commerce, unions, cultural foundations, etc.). An executive committee of ten persons ensures day-to-day decision making and a specific agency, *Torino Internazionale,* is in charge of day-to-day plan administration. Both the assembly and the committee are co-chaired by the Mayor of Turin and the President of the province. However, one single feature differs significantly from the Barcelona experiment. In the

case of Turin, the building of a metropolitan government as an institution has been one of the aims of strategic planning. To this purpose, a metropolitan conference composed of the 39 municipalities and the province was established in 2000. The idea was to use the strategic planning process as a feeder for a metropolitan development project, this process resulting in the establishment of a metropolitan authority, of the *citta metropolitana* type, for instance. So far, the process is still on but no significant moves toward the building of such an authority are to be seen and the creation in 2007 of a "metropolitan table" composed of 17 municipalities may only be interpreted as a setback.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND METROPOLITAN AREAS

Local democracy considered as the development of institutional arrangements to enhance the involvement and participation of citizens and civil society in local affairs has significantly expanded in recent decades in Europe. Presented almost everywhere as a sign of a more politically vibrant society and an instrument that allows us to address existing problems more successfully, local democracy can nevertheless be questioned in its relationship with the process of metropolisation. In other terms, the modalities of local democracy development may be analysed as being at odds with the making of metropolitan areas as political actors.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN EUROPE

Local democracy usually is pursued through two types of instrument: (*i*) the making of infra-municipal institutions; (*ii*) the direct involvement of citizens through the procedures of referendum and initiatives and the establishment of neighbourhood councils. Both instruments have been used and developed in European countries.

In many metropolitan areas, infra-municipal institutions have been created in the last decades. Although they may vary in their responsibilities, political legitimacy, and resources, they have emerged in almost every country. For instance, one finds 12 *bezirke* in Berlin, 15 *stadsleden* in Amsterdam, 21 *districtos* in Madrid, 19 *municipi* in Rome, and 20 *arrondissements* in Paris. These institutions are generally administered by locally elected councils and receive their budget from their municipality. In more recent years, they have spread over many more cities, but one common element is the fact that they are usually limited to the central cities of the largest urban areas.

In addition to these institutions at the infra-municipal level, many countries have set up other structures aiming at the direct involvement of inhab-

itants but usually on a smaller scale, a type of neighbourhood council. One finds this type of council in many Italian cities, in some London boroughs such as Tower Hamlets and Islington, in Copenhagen, and more recently in France in all municipalities with over 80,000 inhabitants, as this is made mandatory by the 2002 Act on "democracy of proximity". Generally, these bodies are politically weak, partially appointed by the municipality, and have no decision making capacity because they are essentially consultative.

Finally, the procedures of local referenda and initiatives, once restricted to a few countries like Switzerland in Europe or the United States, have proliferated in Europe in the recent period. In Germany, all *Lander* have now introduced these measures into their constitutions. In Italy and the Netherlands, these instruments are ever more commonly used at the local level. Even in countries that have traditionally been the bastions of representative democracy and that have opposed these procedures, such as France, local referenda and initiatives have been made not only legal but have been given a decision making character in some specific cases. In France, local referenda were legalised in 1992, and the 2003 and 2004 Acts have made them decisional (hence, when the referendum is approved, it becomes law).

If the development of local democracy instruments can be regarded as theoretically positive because it enhances the involvement of citizens and thus contributes to making municipalities more democratic, the question remains as to the political existence of the metropolitan scale and territory in that context.

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AGAINST THE METROPOLIS?

The vast majority of local democracy instruments established in the recent period have not focused on the metropolitan level. By and large they have favoured smaller scales to the extent that it may be argued that they have politically strengthened non-metropolitan territories and in some instances have been used against the political recognition of the metropolitan area.

First, one major result of the development of these forms of local democracy has been the strengthening of infra-municipal territories. Certainly, this is at the same time logical and inevitable since these local democracy instruments have been created for that purpose. However, the impact of the strengthening of infra-municipal territories on the metropolitan level is ambiguous and must be made clearer.

On the one hand, it is possible to argue that the strengthening of infra-municipal territories is an obstacle to the emergence of the metropolis as a political actor because these infra-municipal territories will tend to use their new powers and resources to get more autonomy from their municipality

and above, from the metropolitan area, and at the same time because they contribute to increasing political and institutional fragmentation. The Berlin and Rome cases are good examples of such a situation because *bezirke* and *municipi* have constantly gained powers and resources over the years to the extent that they have been able to challenge the power of the central city, and in the case of Berlin to isolate themselves from it (Röber and Shröter, 2007). In Rome, it is expected that the *municipi* will become municipalities in their own right in the framework of a possible *città metropolitana*.

Of course, the political development of infra-municipal territories is not automatically synonymous with autonomisation or the separation from the central municipality as long as metropolitan counter-forces and instruments are established in order to preserve the whole. But these counter-forces or instruments are not to be seen in the various institutional reforms, and therefore the risk is high of further fragmentation and autonomy due to the use of powers and resources given by decentralisation and local democracy instruments to infra-metropolitan bodies.

One good example of such a risk is given by the many referenda that have been used to secede from the central city or to oppose the establishment of metropolitan authorities.

The country in which local referenda have been most widely used on the issue of metropolitan government has been the United States. For several decades, citizens of many metropolitan areas have been asked to approve or to oppose the establishment of metropolitan authorities. In general, they have opposed such a creation, which partially explains the very small number of US metropolitan areas that possess some sort of metropolitan government.

However, the United States is not the only country where such a situation has occurred. In Europe as well, local referenda have been used to reject metropolitan governments. One can mention the largely negative referenda on the establishment of "city-provinces" in Amsterdam and Rotterdam in 1995. One can also cite the negative referendum regarding the merger of the *Lander* of Brandenburg and Berlin in 1996, which would have allowed the setting up of a *de facto* metropolitan *Land* over the Berlin area.

To be fair, the successful referendum over the creation of the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 1999 must also be mentioned, but this positive result needs to be judged with caution because the London situation is very peculiar; firstly, because it is the only metropolis that has had a metropolitan authority for a long time (the London County Council was created in 1889, it was then followed by the Greater London Council, abolished in 1986). Thus, the establishment of the GLA was only somewhat a "return to the past", to a situation that Londoners had known for quite a while; secondly, because London has no central city and the conflicting relationships between

the center and the periphery have less institutional grip there than in other metropolitan areas.

Local referenda have also been used to secede from existing municipalities, usually central cities, which is both constitutionally possible in the United States and generally accepted by state legislatures. For example, in the 1980s, West Hollywood seceded from Los Angeles. In 1993, the voters of Staten Island, one of the five boroughs of New York, approved their secession from the city, although this secession was later rejected by the state. Several attempts have been tried in Los Angeles in the decade after 2000.

This phenomenon of secession from municipalities or even metropolitan authorities has been experienced in other countries as well, with relative success. One may mention the successful referendum in Montreal in 2003, which allowed the newly merged municipalities into the Metropolitan city of Montreal to "de-merge", which some of them have done. One may also point out the various unsuccessful referenda asking the voters of Mestre to secede from the municipality of Venice (Italy) in recent years.

All these examples are pointed out not to conclude that the development of local democracy, *per se*, runs counter to the political emergence of metropolitan areas, but to stress the risk that this development may incur as long as local democracy measures and instruments do not take the metropolitan scale into consideration, measures and instruments that would act as counter-forces to the elements of "nimbysm" or localism that local democracy inevitably bears. It is also arguable that such situations have not been frequent because in Europe, contrary to the United States, national constitutions usually do not grant such "secessionist" powers to citizens.

CONCLUSION

The making of metropolitan areas as political spaces is a conflict-laden process, as we have seen. In this article, we have focused on two major obstacles preventing such a process from succeeding: the opposition of political-institutional actors such as the state and local governments in their use of decentralisation and the ways local democracy is developing and practised, at least in Europe and North America. However, coming back to the inter-related elements necessary for a political space to exist according to Boudreau and Keil (2004), the importance of other actors such as business and civil society should be mentioned, although the attempts of Barcelona and Turin described above may be interpreted with caution.

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