



## Territorial development + local autonomy = spatial (in)justice?

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For several decades, international organisations (especially European ones) have dedicated an important share of their development policy to strengthening the autonomy of local authorities (sometimes referred to as "*empowerment*" of the local). The recipes are known and amount to implementing the doctrine that western states have applied to themselves since the 1980s: to deconcentrate and decentralise public action as much as possible at the local level (Brenner, 2004), especially urban policies<sup>1</sup>. This revival of localism benefits from a favourable situation mainly on two levels.

In the first place, some research claims, and international institutions use this as an argument, that state action alone is insufficient in terms of development. For example, the Council and the Parliament, the Committee of the Regions and the Economic and Social Council of the EU state, in a joint communication entitled "*Empowering Local Authorities in partner countries for enhanced governance and more effective development outcomes,*" that "*centrally-led, top-down development policies and programmes alone cannot succeed in addressing the complexities of sustainable development and fighting poverty*" (2013).

In contrast, local authorities benefit from a positive outlook. Seen as being "*closer to the citizens*", they would have the "*responsibility to meet their primary needs and to ensure access to basic services for all*" (ibid). The latter pushes Jaafar Sadok Friaa<sup>2</sup> to claim, in the context of the development of the programme of urban development and local governance for Tunisia: "*In order for decentralization to work, local authorities must gain autonomy, capacities and responsibilities*" (World Bank, 2014). In their development programmes, international organizations thus advocate for multilevel governance that strengthens the power of the local level, which is supposedly more legitimate and more effective in its capacity to produce development. More local autonomy would thus be synonymous with more distributive justice for the benefit of local territories and their populations.

In the second place, this rebalancing towards the local is also seen as being more democratic. It is presented as a response to a claim from the citizens themselves to participate more in decision-making. This is one of the responses to the very diverse requests for increased autonomy from specific territories, populations and

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<sup>1</sup> In the French context, see for example number 2 of the journal *Esprit* dedicated to "*gouvernement des villes*" (2008) or number 1 of the journal *Pôle Sud* focusing on "*la nouvelle critique urbaine*" (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Described as lead urban specialist at the World Bank.



communities that seem to be increasing internationally (Catalonia, Scotland, Quebec, New Caledonia, Greenland, for example...). And nation states often choose to increase their autonomy to avoid independence (Castellarin, 2018).

Here again, international organisations are moving in the same direction. In the 2012 Rio Declaration entitled *"The Future We Want,"* participants at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development underline the growing importance of local and subnational levels, especially in their ability to *"engag[e] citizens and stakeholders and providi[e] them with relevant information, as appropriate, on the three dimensions of sustainable development"* (paragraph 42). In a nutshell, local autonomy is advocated as a positive development because it would help solve part of the current democratic crisis, bringing citizens closer to the political decisions, making them more transparent and more open to accountability. Increased local autonomy would also greater procedural justice.

This call for papers takes as a starting point autonomy as it is defined by international organisations (e.g. OECD, Council of Europe, for the most commonly cited). Essentially centered on an institutional dimension, their definition of autonomy generally covers two elements, identified by Clark in 1984: the power of initiative (the capacity of the local to carry out tasks in the interests of the local) and the power of immunity (the possibility of the local to act without control by higher levels). As for "local", we refer in this call to the spatial anchorage of the closest possible proximity to the spatial injustices experienced and targeted by territorial development policies. This "local" refers preferentially to the institutional actors (e.g. local and regional authorities), but also to private and associated actors who mobilise themselves to implement, challenge or even to by pass them.

This call for papers intends to critically question the links between local autonomy and spatial justice in the context of territorial development policies that aim to strengthen the room for manoeuvre conferred on the local. In particular, this call invites contributions presenting concrete examples of application of or resistance to these policies. The envisaged policies and programmes are, in particular, those set up since 2000 by large international, supra-regional and / or national organisations targeting peripheral, semi-peripheral (but also their inner peripheries) territories and / or for the benefit of minorities. These include for instance the development policies of the World Bank or the UN, the European cohesion policy as well as the European development policies for the rest of the world, UsAid national development programs, etc.).

This call is not about these policies as such. Some critical scholars have already largely analysed the ethical and epistemic limits of such international positions and approaches (e.g., Duffield, 2002, Ilcan and Lacey, 2011). Nor is it our intention to discuss the institutional evolutions allowing this transfer of competences to the local

from the perspective of the political and legal sciences, the latter being already well discussed in the specialist literature<sup>3</sup>. The objective here is to focus on what policies that could be described as development policies empowering the local produce in terms of spatial justice from the point of view of social sciences (geography, sociology, anthropology) and from the local (i.e. based on field work, not only urban). In this broad context, this call for papers specifically addresses three questions:

**1/ How does the local grasp these recent territorial development policies? In particular, do these policies support a more equitable spatial distribution of wealth and opportunities?**

In a first axis, this call suggests characterising the local development actions instigated under the initiative of the reinforced autonomy, or in resistance to it. The purpose is to document, specify and put into perspective what this generalised injunction produces in different contexts, in terms of distributive justice. What injustices are targeted? What concrete results are achieved (to whose benefit and at whose expense)? We aim to investigate the capacity of the local to control the production of space in a more just manner (DeFilippis, 1999).

**2 / By whom and with whom? What initiatives, what checks are carried out at the organisational and procedural levels, in the proposed "democratic renewal"?**

In a second axis, this call suggests to characterising the adaptations that this reinforced autonomy can mean at the organisational and democratic level, at the local level. What are the effects in terms of procedural justice? In addition, to what extent does enhanced local autonomy in the management of development policies allow better access for the excluded, minorities, those to whom these spatial justice policies are supposed to benefit, to decision-making? This part of the call aims to examine head-on the participative processes set up for and by local self-government. Beyond the mere access to the agenda, the question posed is that of the reality of the rebalancing of powers within the decision-making process by the local authorities. Do territorial authorities, as Preciado and Uc could hope, represent "*both decolonising practices of resistance and the creation of local power*" (2010)? Or are they just a kind of second best?

**3/ Beyond the effects in terms of procedural and distributive justice in the targeted territory, what does local empowerment produce at different levels and between them?**

The third axis of this call invites analyses on the social, economic and political consequences of scalar reshuffling produced by local empowerment. At all levels,

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<sup>3</sup> See for example No 44 of the "Revue d'Etudes Comparatives Est-Ouest" entitled « Gouverner le local à l'Est de l'Europe » (2013), or the No 44 of the journal « Savoir/agir » : « Régions, territoires locaux et proximité » (2010).



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from the local to the national (as well as within the "local territory" itself), the empowerment agenda often represents, under the guise of valuing local traditions and identities, a spatial xenophobia that does not say its name, a form of "*territorial discrimination*" (Hancock et al., 2016) or "*territorial stigmatisation*" (Wacquant, 2007). But beyond this expected observation, does it allow the emergence of new forms of cooperation between so-called peripheral areas? Can autonomous local development constitute a "model of joint action"<sup>4</sup>? Is it conceivable and achievable in solidarity between populations in a given territory, but also with neighbouring territories and other territorial organisations at higher levels? Or is it, by its logic, condemned to be reactionary?

Full texts (see the authors guidelines) expected before February 15th 2019 at:

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<sup>4</sup> Following the example of what Cyria Emelianoff writes on the forms of decentralised cooperation in the field of political ecology (2009).



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