



France's territories, challenges and promises

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With “*La France des territoires, défis et promesses*” (France's territories, challenges and promises), Pierre Veltz offers a stimulating prospective analysis. By anchoring it in the long term and drawing on his in-depth knowledge of socio-economic transformations, particularly those concerning globalisation and ‘hyperindustrialisation’, he deconstructs many of the misconceptions that clutter public debate and manages to articulate France's political challenges in new terms. His hypothesis is that we are witnessing a local turning point which, if well negotiated, could constitute a decisive lever for the future of the country and its territories.

How can this local turning point be characterised? It is obviously embodied in the many economic, social and environmental initiatives that can be observed in the territories. Supported by local institutions, citizen groups and even individuals, these initiatives reflect a desire to make a concrete commitment to tackle inequalities as well as climate change and its consequences. They are all the more remarkable because, at the same time, the state does not show the same readiness to respect its environmental commitments. Many of these local projects are based on horizontal approaches and aim to achieve tangible results. Whether they concern energy, mobility, organic farming, food, landscapes, the environment, they are part of a search for proximity, sociability, care, shared values, links and meaning. They are local responses to the loss of the great common narrative of modernity. They also reflect the expectations of a new generation whose aspirations are resolutely different from the ideals of success and consumer behaviour of previous generations.

This enthusiasm for local action is promising, but also comes with caution. According to [Pierre Veltz](#), it will not be enough to meet the challenge of climate change and ecological transition on its own, nor can it remedy the shortcomings of governments. Its drifts that lead to a quest for autarky and identity withdrawal are just as counterproductive. The interest of this reinvigorated local action lies in its articulation in the ‘global community’, made possible by communication networks: local initiatives will be all the more effective if they are shared, discussed, enriched by being pooled, disseminated, supported and consolidated by concomitant commitments from states and major organisations, at the national and international levels. Finally, relying on the local level alone, in a country such as France where solidarity and security mechanisms are played out at the national level, would encourage the growth of inequalities and the weakening of certain territories.

However, we cannot understand local action without considering the context in which it is set. It is through his analysis of changes in economic production, globalisation and geography that Pierre Veltz gives this local turning point the required credibility. The globalised economy is no longer based on a division of labour between countries, with designers and consumers on the one hand, and implementers on the other, nor on this ‘fine-grained’ globalisation that reconciles global value chains and extreme fragmentation of production, with its share of uncertainties for local links that can be substituted at any time. It is increasingly based on vast regional urban ecosystems,

organised around concentrated and powerful hubs, often large metropolitan areas. Among these are the Pearl River Delta in China, the urban regions of coastal California including San Francisco and Los Angeles, Tokyo and Osaka in Japan, and soon, Lagos in Nigeria. On this scale, it is not the Parisian metropolis alone that must be taken into account in France, but what the economist calls the 'French metropolis' – i.e. the entire French metropolitan system that connects the capital and the other French metropolitan areas in a network. Seen from a global perspective, Mont-Saint-Michel, the Alps, Bordeaux and Paris are all in the same metropolitan region. It is a perspective effect, but also a consequence of territorial interdependencies and efficient transport and trade facilities.

It is thus increasingly what is happening within these systems rather than their exchanges with the rest of the world that must be taken into account. We are not experiencing a process of 'deglobalisation', but already a shrinking of value chains and a relocation of certain activities, including production. The hierarchy of the global system is transformed with a fine re-articulation of the different scales, from the global for massive components to the local level for finalisation, personalisation, and consumption.

At the same time, production has changed considerably with what the author calls '[hyperindustrialisation](#)', namely the increasing integration between industries, services and digital technology, which in many ways makes obsolete both our statistical measures and our ways of representing the current industry, with the blinders of the old world. These regional metropolitan systems each have different levels of polarisation-distribution: the distribution of activities in their constituent territories can thus vary greatly, creating more or less balanced situations. While the London system is extremely polarised, with a great imbalance between London's development and that of the rest of the UK, the French system, contrary to many preconceived ideas, is one of those where the level of distribution is the highest – i.e. the most balanced.

In this new economic system, physical capital is a less important factor of production than the quality of infrastructure, the strength and justice of institutions, and the wealth of human and social capital. Spatial determinism is much less important since any territory – if it knows how to organise itself, equip itself, enhance its activities and sectors, train its inhabitants and welcome external resources, build links and trust, fluidify exchanges of information, develop complementarities with the other territories of the system – can integrate itself and find its place. The territories that succeed, and that will succeed in the future, are those that will be able to reconcile the dynamics of local initiatives and projects with the integration into the regional metropolitan system. These are territories that will be able to develop their relational capacity by capitalising on a common experience and memory, on trust and shared values, on an ability to cooperate and to enter into reciprocal relationships. This is the other dimension of the local turnaround that Pierre Veltz praises as being of interest, while arguing that it could be very favourable to France.

Without contesting the inequalities between people and territories, both objective and perceived, the author points out that France is one of the least concentrated and unequal countries, has the highest level of distribution between the different territories – in terms of facilities and services, mobility, exchanges, solidarity, income – and has a strong territorial culture, favourable to the endorsement of this local turn. It is not a question of denying the French difficulties, in particular the inequalities that are less and less acceptable and accepted, but of resituating them in order to rationalise the debate and adjust the political responses to be provided as effectively as possible. Pierre Veltz thus strongly affirms the social and cultural nature of the French divisions, denouncing the often caricatural analyses that attribute them primarily to geographical reasons,

fuelling tensions between territories in a counterproductive way, while the future of all depends on strengthening the intensity and quality of their cooperation.

A new development model is thus emerging. It combines individuals and local initiative capacity, regional metropolitan system and integration and outreach capacity. To be included properly, France must overcome certain difficulties: promote the necessary investment in this increasingly capital-intensive economy; open borders to diversify and consolidate its resources rather than close them; take over a territorial organisation that the latest reforms have not sufficiently consolidated, particularly in Paris; put an end to the culture of opposition between territories that makes no sense in metropolitan France; regain confidence and the desire to move forward together, by generalising cooperation between territories, sectors of activity, public and private actors; and finally, and not least urgently, change environmental paradigm by placing sobriety at the heart of development, from production to consumption. The main part of this point of view remains to be done.



VELTZ Pierre, *“La France des territoires, défis et promesses”*, L’Aube, 2019.

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