

## *The territorial debate in France*

Pierre Veltz has published his last book entitled *La France des territoires, défis et promesses* in the editorial of l'Aube.

In the introduction to this work, the author emphasizes that, through the expression of rage and through the silent changes that have taken place in the territories, French society is renewed (VELTZ, 2019: 7). The pessimism that prevails in the French political-media sphere and the social crisis opened up by the Yellow Vests movement (ALGAN, BEASLEY, COHEN and FOUCAULT, 2019) must not hide the creativity and innovation of these territories; knowing that “the diversity of trajectories and local [initiatives, constitutes] an immense richness” (VELTZ, 2019: 8). In this sense, contemporary mutations demand “multiple-scale experimentations”, since the circulation of ideas and experiences allows “local learning to be transformed into collective learning” (VELTZ, 2019: 8).

This work is based on an observation and defends three basic theses. The finding concerns “the emergence of a powerful local upsurge movement”, so we can speak of “local spin” (VELTZ, 2019: 9). It alludes to the geographical dimension as well as to the collective imaginary and philosophy that inspires the projects. In this context, “a new paradigm [appears: the] local development where the territory is an active matrix and not just a receptacle of development. The culmination of this movement has been the launch of the competitiveness poles [or clusters] in the early 2000s” (VELTZ, 2019: 9-10). If this representation of the territory still survives, it is gradually replaced as a consequence of the central position occupied by ecological imperatives. Today, the ideas of

short circuit, sobriety and circularity “extend to all areas. Proximity becomes a value in itself, translating a cultural mutation” (VELTZ, 2019: 10). Its strength comes from the fact that it resonates with “the dominant values in a large part of the youth, that of millennials [...]: the value of autonomy; [...] the search for meaning of work; the balance between professional life and personal life; [and], finally, the will to do [and] to see the concrete result of their actions” (VELTZ, 2019:10). The transformation is equally political, because the citizenry is increasingly convinced that local powers are capable of carrying out progressive policies (VELTZ, 2019: 11-12).

For this reason, this book wishes to renew the perception of territorial dynamics by giving priority to three issues.

- The first is the development model, in a context marked by the gradual blurring of “the frontiers between services, industry and the digital world” (VELTZ, 2019: 13). Indeed, the emerging economy “is focused on individuals, their bodies [and] their emotions. But, at the same time, it [implies] the creation of collective systems that are strongly territorialized, sources of innovation and employment [that require] multiple levels of qualification” (VELTZ, 2019: 13).
- The second topic concerns the spatial dimension. Actually, productive activities have some freedom in choosing their location. In a country like France, “where infrastructures are plentiful and competences widely distributed, neither territory

is [completely] condemned” (VELTZ, 2019: 14). Indeed, if most enterprises and services are concentrated in metropolitan areas, several medium-sized cities perform better in relative terms than large cities (VELTZ, 2019: 15).

- The third theme, of a political nature, rejects the distinction between the globalized and enriched metropolises, on the one hand, and the disadvantaged and marginalised urban peripheries, on the other (VELTZ, 2019: 16).

In the first chapter, devoted to the context marked by the economy of knowledge and the renewed industry, the author observes that, in face to the quick mutations and the multitude of information, we have not a global vision (VELTZ, 2019: 21).

It notes that the only way to be competitive with emerging countries is to bet on innovation, based, in turn, on “science, technology [and] knowledge” (VELTZ, 2019: 21). In a knowledge economy, the main growth factors are human capital and institutions (VELTZ, 2019: 21-22); as long as the produced ideas are shared. “Its dynamics obey [...] to the model of open pollination” (VELTZ, 2019: 22-23). The novelty of the current period, emphasizes Veltz, is “the revolution of the media and the reproduction that allows this economy of ideas” to spread widely and rapidly. Connectivity, therefore, represents the essential technological change. Thanks to Internet, social networks and the mobility of people and goods, “the most advanced techniques are available all over the planet in a very short time” (VELTZ, 2019: 23). In terms of human capital, France is part of the leading squad, but is still behind Finland, Singapore or South Korea (VELTZ, 2019: 25). If the overall level of education of French citizens is among the best in the world and the country is among the first in research, the latter “is fragmented [and] poorly structured, impairing its effectiveness and visibility” (VELTZ, 2019: 26). At the same time, its deficiencies are evident when it comes to transferring knowledge and achieving its economic valuation.

As the author recalls, if “the high technology has a drag effect, it creates few direct jobs, its impact on the transformation of more traditional sectors needs to be improved” (VELTZ, 2019: 27). In this perspective, the central topic is “the modernization [of] the basic productive fabric”, which is situated in France or outside the French territory (VELTZ, 2019: 27). There is a convergence between industry, services and digital, and this convergence works in both ways. Thus, “services are increasingly adopting the methods of industry, and the

industry is consuming more and more services” (VELTZ, 2019: 29). This new economy differs from the previous one in several respects.

- The first is the growing role of externalities, because businesses are increasingly dependent on their national and local environment. “Modern competition does not develop between isolated [companies], but between landscapes, ecosystems [and] territories” (VELTZ, 2019: 30).
- The second trend is the crucial nature of the relational dimension of the economy, that is to say “the capacity of the actors to discuss the objectives and means of performance, within the [companies], between the [companies, or] between them and their partners” (VELTZ, 2019: 31). In that world, competitive values, common experiences, memory and trust continue to play a decisive role. Here too, the most competitive regions are those with a high level of cooperation.
- The third major trend is “an increasingly capital-intensive economy” (VELTZ, 2019: 31).

To find a place in this context, France has a number of assets: “advanced technological skills, very rich ecosystems in certain fields [...], a high level of general training, modern infrastructures”, etc. (VELTZ, 2019: 32). The value of these assets depends largely on the trust between the actors that conditions the potential of cooperation and the ability to innovate. However, it also faces certain shortcomings, such as its dominated position in the digital world (VELTZ, 2019: 33).

At demographic and economic levels, France is a modest country, representing 1% of the world’s population and just over 4% of world product (VELTZ, 2019: 39). In addition, the model of the centralized and cohesive nation-state is not very developed “in an [international] context in which this configuration is [...] a minority” (VELTZ, 2019: 39-40). In turn, digitization has triggered “a new cycle of recomposition, especially turbulent. The first major change is the growing hybridization of traditional actors and sectors” (VELTZ, 2019: 40). The second relevant transformation alludes to the fact that “activities that seemed to be [indissociable] today, can be dissociated in time and spread over multiple sites” (VELTZ, 2019: 40). This fragmentation is accompanied by the strengthening “of the poles where all the commercial, financial, intellectual [and] human flows and networks” (VELTZ, 2019: 43).

Global exchanges take place between a number of large metropolises and large urban of regions “which

function as hubs [...] of this globalised economy. These urban regions concentrate intelligence, wealth”, but also much of poverty, a dimension that is often neglected in numerous analyses (VELTZ, 2019: 43-44). This metropolization is intensely linked to globalization, “because it is fuelled by capital flows, since investors tend to concentrate in more developed areas” (VELTZ, 2019: 44). They are also increasingly supporting the movement of people (VELTZ, 2019: 44). Two major concepts, both organizational and geographical, dominate the current productive world: ecosystems and *hubs*. “The logic of the ecosystem is that the diversity of actors and cultures allows creativity by hybridization [...]. The logic of the *hub* is [...] different but complementary” (VELTZ, 2019: 46). In fact, hubs “are formed when the fluidity of flows allows actors to express their preference for the best connected network nodes” (VELTZ, 2019: 46). The problem is that the spontaneous logic of these processes leads to ultra-concentration, obeying a market logic.

In France, however, although the majority of skilled and highly skilled jobs are concentrated in metropolitan areas. “The differences in [training] levels between metropolitan areas and the rest of the country [...] are still much smaller than in the United States”, for example (VELTZ, 2019: 47). Moreover, in France, the territories are solidified by multiple public-private transfers that attenuate territorial inequalities (VELTZ, 2019: 47-48).

In the third chapter, which analyses the end of geographical determinism, Veltz notes that the association of activities with the territories has been replaced by a growing fluidity of society as a result of the predominance of chosen ties and increasing mobility (VELTZ, 2019: 51).

Over a long period, the resources that a territory or a company could mobilise to ensure its development were obvious: the ability “to position oneself on the good level of the value chain [...]; the capacity to emerge and mobilize [these resources]; the quality of the links between public and private sectors” (VELTZ, 2019: 53). But, actually, “the modern activities can [...] develop almost anywhere, from the moment when the [basic] logistic conditions are guaranteed, which is effective in all the French territory” (VELTZ, 2019: 54). If the location of companies is not indifferent, the options have greatly increased. Something similar happens to the workers and it will be more and more so in the future, since “companies will go, more and more, where their workers will want to work or, more precisely, live” (VELTZ, 2019: 55). In that scenario, the challenge will be to “attract and fix [talent and] skills” (VELTZ, 2019: 55). At the national level, “the mobility of

people becomes a key factor in the new geography of the world” (VELTZ, 2019: 56).

In territories and companies, the structural changes are sometimes not visible. “In the company, what changes profoundly are not the techniques, but the expectations and values [of] the new generations” (VELTZ, 2019: 58-59). At work and in other areas, it is no longer a question “of obeying an external discipline, but of [...] realizing and developing one’s personal potential” (VELTZ, 2019: 59). In the world of work, “when wage-earners are invited [...] to choose individualized paths, in a world of multiple opportunities and precariousness, they more or less fit into this new context” (VELTZ, 2019: 59). In general, “new ways of living together and new ways of [living] the territory are emerging” (VELTZ, 2019: 60). In this sense, “the increase in mobility is at the heart of these new relations with the territory and with society” (VELTZ, 2019: 60). That they are desired or suffered, “the new mobilities expand the life horizon of many people” (VELTZ, 2019: 61).

In the fourth chapter, which is interested in the remodelling of France between 1975 and 2018, the author notes that many citizens establish a cause-and-effect relationship between the international opening up of national economies and the rise in unemployment, although the data contradict this perception because, from 1975 to 2011, “employment in France has increased by more than 20 % [and] national output [has] multiplied by seven between 1975 and 2015” (VELTZ, 2019: 67). At the same time, the composition of employment has changed considerably, with three changes: tertiary education, feminisation and increasing qualifications. In terms of residential mobility, there has been a great re-orientation towards the West and the South, despite the fact that French citizenship is generally not very mobile (VELTZ, 2019: 69).

These transformations produce two opposite dynamics depending on the chosen perspective. At the national level, there is a certain tendency towards homogenization, a decline in regional specializations and a reduction in the old divisions, such as the opposition between the urban and the rural. On the other hand, when we look more closely, we see “increasing differentiations, sometimes at a very short distance” (VELTZ, 2019: 71). On the one hand, the country appears to be increasingly homogeneous, “where particularities are attenuated”, while its symbolic reaffirmation occurs (VELTZ, 2019: 71). On the other hand, if the inequalities between regions and large territories are reduced, the inequalities increase within the cities and local territories (VELTZ, 2019: 73).

Although the distinction between rural and urban is foundational, this difference tends to gradually disappear. Thus, “the average difference in disposable income between dense and sparse areas is reduced now” (VELTZ, 2019: 76). Furthermore, the crowns of the major urban centres are 12.3 concentrated million inhabitants and are “the ones that know the strongest population growth and the highest average incomes” (VELTZ, 2019: 77). Similarly, multipolarized municipalities, at the junction “of several urban areas, have 3.5 million inhabitants, [and] small poles and their own crowns [bring together] 3.5 million” people (VELTZ, 2019: 77). These territories are also witnessing an increase in their population.

To this old opposition has been added, more recently, another reading of the French territorial fracture. The division between “the elites, the winners of globalization, grouped in the metropolises, and the forgotten, the losers [of globalization], scattered on the outskirts of the city” (VELTZ, 2019: 79). But, Veltz tells us, if urbanization and metropolization are unquestionable, the territorial differences are smaller in relative terms (VELTZ, 2019: 80). In fact, “certain non-metropolitan territories know growth trajectories that surpass those of the metropolises” (VELTZ, 2019: 80). Moreover, the strongest inequalities are those that cross the same territories and, above all, the big cities. Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the great variety of the non-metropolitan France (VELTZ, 2019: 81).

In the fifth chapter, which looks at future trajectories, Veltz observes that, today, “the winners are the most educated, [residents] in the big cities in particular, but not only”, while the losers are the workers of a fragmented and invisible working-class that has lost its bargaining power (VELTZ, 2019: 87). In face to this division, the author tells us, there are two major possible regulations. “The first goes through individuals and their behaviours. It is mobility, which can be geographical or professional, [...] or both at once. The second goes through the collectivity and the redistribution processes that cushion the shock” (VELTZ, 2019: 87-88). Actually, regulation through social transfers predominates over regulation via mobilities. Moreover, when it occurs, geographical mobility is at close range (VELTZ, 2019: 88). This relative residential immobility contrasts with the multiplication and expansion of daily mobility. Furthermore, French citizens “often change jobs, but not so much in occupation, since the vast majority of changes take place in relatively tight job blocks” (VELTZ, 2019: 88).

Right now, territorial dynamics are increasingly disconnected from the old determinisms (VELTZ, 2019: 91).

There are several useful perspectives for understanding the components of development. The first part of the analysis come from of land rents (VELTZ, 2019: 92). The second is based on the differentiation between exposed and sheltered jobs; knowing that the first are those who produce goods and services that can be exchanged across borders, while the second (VELTZ, 2019: 93). At the same time, “the digital transition, [driven] by powerful economic actors and interests, is [advancing] much faster than the ecological transition” (VELTZ, 2019: 95). But, at the same time, “the ecological issue is beginning to dominate the agenda of [local administrations]” (VELTZ, 2019: 95). Many territories see in it “renewable energies, spatial planning, urban agriculture, the mutation of mobility, new opportunities for development, job creation and income” (VELTZ, 2019: 95). However, says Veltz, the addition of local policies is insufficient, so that, in parallel with territorialized policies, it is necessary to take generic measures, such as the setting of a carbon tax at an appropriate price (VELTZ, 2019: 96).

In the concluding section, the author points out that “the great paradox of our hyper-concentrated world is that [we] are simultaneously heading toward [a greater] anchoring and [a greater] integration” (VELTZ, 2019: 149). The territories constitute the privileged laboratory of the main challenges facing contemporary societies. The local shift is a reality in innovative areas such as education, health, mobility and energy (VELTZ, 2019: 151). Although his book has not a normative claim, Veltz draws several conclusions:

- Firstly, “we should adopt a more open [and] less fatalistic view of the strengths and weaknesses of the territories” (VELTZ, 2019: 153).
- Secondly, “the divisions that saturate the public debate on the territorial question” should be stopped (VELTZ, 2019: 153).
- Thirdly, it would be useful to measure better “the depth of the interdependencies and synergies linking [these] territories” (VELTZ, 2019: 154).
- Fourthly and lastly, we should “give priority [...] to the metropolis-France linking Paris and the major regional metropolises” (VELTZ, 2019: 155).

After reading the book *La France des territoires, défis et promesses*, it is necessary to recognize the originality of the reflection developed by the author on the evolution of the territories and the productive system. In the present work, opposing the theses that prophesy an inexorable decline of them, he emphasizes the “local shift” that would

have undertaken the development model, which results, at the same time, from organizational transformations, technological and economic, and a cultural change that turns proximity into virtue. It also questions the thesis of an impoverished and abandoned peripheral France, and recalls that the main inequalities lie within the main metropolises. If this book is documented and harmoniously combines the different disciplines, thanks to the author's extensive economic, historical and urban culture, it is somewhat optimistic and voluntaristic. It also raises many questions to which it does not necessarily provide answers.

This work enters into resonance with another book published almost simultaneously, entitled *La revanche des villages. Essai sur la France périurbaine* (CHARMES, 2019). The latter, which offers a different and complementary view of the territorial question, is interested in the revenge of the villages, trying to reflect on peri-urban France. Its author observes that, "over the last few decades, numerous city dwellers [have] settled in [rural] areas", without becoming peasants, as they remain urban (CHARMES, 2019: 7). In fact, the majority of the active people in many villages work in the city (CHARMES, 2019: 7). Neither the distribution of income make possible to distinguish clearly urban and rural areas. Indeed, "high rents are not concentrated in cities in general, but in a very particular type of spaces: the [urban] centers and the affluent suburbs of a dozen large metropolises" (CHARMES, 2019: 7). At the same time, income is very high in villages located in the west of Paris and in the border areas with Switzerland and Germany (CHARMES, 2019: 8).

This gradual blurring of reference points results from certain mutations that reflect the fact that the old opposition between rural and urban areas or between towns and cities is outdated (CHARMES, 2019: 8). In the seventies, Henri Lefebvre (1970) was already theorizing "the extension of the urban [beyond] cities" (CHARMES, 2019: 8). The error, Charmes tells us, consists in associating rural landscapes "with forms of life that were formerly associated with them" (CHARMES, 2019:8). In fact, "urbanization has [profoundly transformed] the old economic, social, and political divisions between cities and [villages]" (CHARMES, 2019: 8). Precisely, this book wants "to clarify the characteristics of this change and analyze its consequences. "One of the most important is the revenge of villages after decades of rural exodus" (CHARMES, 2019: 8).

Thus, the extension of the urban beyond the cities is manifested in the peri-urban, where the main transforma-

tions of contemporary societies are expressed. This work focuses precisely on the peri-urban that is often associated with consumerist alienation or ugliness (CHARMES, 2019: 9). In addition, it is presented as a peripheral territory, synonymous with relegation and contestant voting. According to the French researcher, however, it is a partial and caricatured image of the peri-urban. In reality, the peri-urban translates an aspiration to combine the advantages of the city and the countryside. This dream has become a reality for many citizens thanks to the development of means of transport. Today, it is possible to live in the countryside and move regularly to a city (CHARMES, 2019: 9).

Through this process, city dwellers move to rural areas. Indeed, "peri-urbanisation, defined as the integration of the countryside into the orbit of cities, is one of the most [significant] manifestations of that movement" (CHARMES, 2019: 9-10). It has progressively changed "territories and lifestyles in depth" (CHARMES, 2019: 10). It concerns, at present, about a quarter of the French population. The author tackles this topic from four perspectives: the first one "explores the theory of the urbanization of the field" (CHARMES, 2019: 10), the second examines "the environmental impact of the movement towards the field" (CHARMES, 2019: 10), the third analyses "the existential value of life in the urban field" (CHARMES, 2019: 11), and, the fourth "discusses the political power of the field" (CHARMES, 2019: 11).

In the end, the movement of the Yellow Vests has led researchers, and especially the geographers, to renew their perspectives on the territorial issue, questioning categorical analytics and theoretical approaches that revolved around peripheral France (GUILLUY, 2014) and territorial fracture (DAVEZIES, 2012). These fractures would be the consequence of the financial, energy and social crises that are hitting the country and are having a significant impact on the destiny of the territories. These shocks would have structural effects, putting an end to a mode of development that has prevailed for thirty years. One epoch would end : "the one of growth and development of suburban territories, based on consumption, itself financed by public deficits and debt" (DAVEZIES, 2012). Weak economic growth, lower public spending and credit restrictions, associated with rising energy prices and the crisis of the residential economy, would lead to a return to production and to metropolitan areas (DAVEZIES, 2012).

In short, the debate has only just begun.