

A socio-political analysis of obstacles to inclusive regional development: The case of Marseille metropolitan area

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Abstract

After a long and heated debate, and outright opposition from many mayors of Bouches-du-Rhône towns, the creation of Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole was passed in 2013. In January 2016, the Marseille metropolitan area expanded to include surrounding areas, where nearly two million people live. It will equal, or exceed in size, other French metropolitan areas, and it will lead to coordinated policies in terms of urban planning, transportation and economic development. Finally, a more cohesive territory between the metropolis (Marseille) and its periphery is expected to carry out joint projects more efficiently. By adopting a socio-political understanding of the Marseille metropolitan area, the article points out that territorial fragmentation and widening social inequalities between different towns are a real threat to the complete success of the project. Since World War II, the Marseille city has not built strong ties with its close neighbors, trying to find the sources of its future development in a European hinterland, the port of Fos-sur-Mer being the entry point. Facing the imperialism of the metropolis, the periphery has developed its own strategy of expansion, leading to the appearance of powerful entropic forces. How could Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole overcome its internal contradictions and promote the emergence of an integrated urban area?

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1 Introduction

The city of Marseille, supported by a few “dissidents” of neighbouring cities, obtained from the French government the establishment of a large metropolitan zone called Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole; the latter has been an institutional reality since January 2016. The figures provided by the National Institute of Statistics unambiguously underline that we are facing a “heavyweight” representing nearly two million inhabitants, and spreading over more than 3,000 km², that is to say 62% of the surface area of the Marseille metropolitan area [1]. In short, a mediterranean territory with an impressive size and a density significantly higher than that of the four other large comparable urban areas in France. A territory based on economic, social and cultural exchanges between the city of Marseille, where some quarters are plagued by unemployment, and its close neighbours, some of which benefit from a number of industrial, business and service resources. At the centre of violent political debates over the past few years, in particular with the revolt of 109 mayors of the Bouches-du-Rhône, Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole has a long-term view of the new globalised spaces that can no longer endure the presence of limited urban territories. This is in line with Jonas’ analysis [2] for whom the region represents an assemblage of proximate and distant social, economic and political relationships, the scale and scope of which do not necessarily converge neatly around geographical spaces.

The new administrative entity wishes to correct the heavy inequalities regarding the spatial distribution of wealth: while at the borders of the city of Marseille powerful and rich neighbours spread out, the increasing pauperisation of many of its quarters since the 1970s is a proven fact [3]. Without doubt, from Paris, Brussels and Athens, Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole appears like a unique opportunity to redistribute the cards by creating a new dynamic for an entire department, or even a region. After all, a consistent territory cannot be defined by the strong solidarities, by its capacity to promote a redistribution of revenues and employment in order to avoid a social dislocation? This also explains the success of the idea of “regional identity” underlining the implicit presence of an economic cohesiveness and a social integration in a region [4]. Here is the paradox of Marseille, the quintessential cosmopolitan city: it gets its dynamism from the ethnical melting pot that has constantly remodelled it over time, while asserting itself as a regional capital that must not benefit from the solidarity of neighbouring cities. Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole is without doubt a beautiful project and must be pursued in that direction. As if history had been written long ago and it simply needed time to achieve this happy ending.

However, another reality appeared for those who accept to go back into recent history, that of the “*Trente Glorieuses*” (Glorious Thirty) that witnessed France moving in modernity. In the 1960s and 1970s, the city of Marseille clearly expressed its desire to seek the sources of an economic renewal far from its neighbours, after the crumbling of its captive colonial markets, and the

progressive decay of fats industries. Rather than building alliances with the communist cities of the Etang de Berre or with Aix-en-Provence, an intellectual upper class city, the mermaids of Lyon cradled the political ambitions of a city slowly but surely losing ground to powerful competitors like Rotterdam, Le Havre or Antwerp. In this way, through the project of the *Grand Delta* (Great Delta), or more precisely of the *Association du Grand Delta pour l'Essor Economique et Social du Sud-Est de la France* (Great Delta Association for the Economic and Social Development of the Southeast of France), created in 1966, Lyon presented itself to the elite of Marseille as the privileged partner, helping them open the doors of an ambitious European *hinterland*, far from the local mediocre baronies, exceeding the traditional vision of the *hinterland* seen as the nearby backcountry that spreads inland. As from the 1980s, Marseille started paying a high price for the cultivation of its disdainful egoism towards the “vassals” living in periphery. It is no longer ignored, in particular through unprecedented archive studies [5], that the project of the Great Delta failed under the pressure of multiple tensions, in particular political, making impossible the building of a new territory dreamed on a European scale. The competition between two cities, Marseille and Lyon, may be too proud to accept to conform to the requirements of the other? History cannot be rewritten, but one can only be perplex to see how the city of Marseille rediscovers (and woes) its neighbours throughout the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole, and finds many virtues in the territorial footing based on the ideas of “local”, “proximity” and “exchanges with its neighbours”. More than ever, it appears evident that a territory is a political construction, even if the economic and logistical dimensions remain significant to understand the dynamics of development. The aim of the present article is to go *back to the future*, to paraphrase the title of a famous film, the often forgotten moment of history when the German and Italian markets seemed more important to the city of Marseille than the building of a strained relationship with its nearby industrial “backcountry” fabric.

2 The impossible collective vision

Radiating on the Southern departments of France, with an economic influence largely spilling over Spain and Italy, as indicated in the Figure 1, Marseille is a singular Mediterranean city in many aspects. One of the most specific is the unwillingness to build economic and political alliances with neighbouring cities in order to promote a powerful territorial dynamic. This is even more true in the period following World War II. In the 1960s, the French *elite* understood that powerful regions were essential to dynamise the national economy, in particular in a perspective of capital accumulation [6]. The approach is totally technocratic, with no consideration regarding the integration of the dimensions of human geography. The *elite* think that administrative decisions are sufficient to radically

change the reality of urban organisation and create metropolitan areas able to be competitive on a European level. The misinterpretation is evident: any territory is first and foremost the place where the economic and social actors lead a political action to capture various resources for their own advantage. The Marseille metropolitan area is a good illustration of the difficulties to implement territorial inclusive dynamics faced with the historical legacy of political forces.



Figure 1: The city of Marseille in Europe

Source: Adapted from <http://www.investinprovence.com> [retrieved January 27, 2016].

Therefore, in 1966, the emblematic mayor of the city, Gaston Defferre (in place from 1944 to 1945, then again, continuously, from 1953 until his death, in 1986) declined, mainly for political reasons, the offer of General de Gaulle to create five balancing provincial metropolises (Marseille, Lyon, Lille, Bordeaux and Strasbourg). Marseille was then the only large French city to refuse to be part of the law dated December 31, 1966, creating urban communities. Olive and Oppenheim [7] indicate that this refusal was within the logic of the “Defferre system”, then, based on the alliance between socialists, centrists and right-wing liberals, to oppose the tendency of a power takeover of the hypothetical urban community by the “reds” of the Etang de Berre. The local elite of Marseille, from political circles as well as from business circles, thus agreed on a common will of isolating the city of Marseille, considering that the future of the city is only within its walls. The

egoism of the elite of Marseille is a constant in history, and their vision corresponded to a strategic short-sightedness, which corresponds to the generally accepted idea that “*the task of the local political process is to activate the promotion of local resources, supporting local enterprises in their attempts at innovation and development*” [8:6].

For their part, the cities of the periphery learnt long ago to live outside of the ecosystem of Marseille and to organise their own ecosystem. Saurel [9] therefore underlines how Martigues, yet so close to the *metropolis*, as from the XIXth century, developed very powerful fishing and shipbuilding industries, working nearly self-sufficiently. The author especially describes how technical innovations were developed with local resources. Such as, for example, the *bourdigues* [fishnets], a very ingenious system in which reed barriers, firmly tied together, are associated with a mobile net creating a type of round chamber in which, pushed along by the current, the fish enters without being able to get out. Saurel [9] notices that the process was so efficient that the fleet of available ships was sometimes insufficient to transport the fish caught. This led him to state that Martigues’ existence is due to the existence of *bourdigues*. The city of Marseille being too far, its resources revealed useless in the operation of the ecosystem generated by Martigues. Which is also the case of several other towns of the Etang de Berre. This brings us back to the extensively developed idea today that the regions are not bounded and discrete from frontiers clearly identified, but discontinuous forged through a set of spatially stretched articulations [10].

It was not until the end of the 1960s, with the spatial planning projects and policies, that the first significant experiences of urban coordination were introduced in Marseille, while the State wished to intensify the appearance of balancing metropolises, after the success of the first four; more broadly, the issue at stake was to play a key role in the large spatial planning operations [11]. The development plan of the Marseille metropolitan area thus was given the task to prepare a global spatial planning strategy for 59 out of the 199 towns of the Bouches-du-Rhône. The plan, finally adopted in 1969, organised a hierarchy of various urban poles and suggested having recourse to “territories”, a “development project” and a “governance unit”. Indeed, the development plan outlined in particular what is a good scale to for the metropolis of Marseille, involving the creation of a comprehensive project shared across the territory and calling for a unique governance to unite the urban poles committed to a ruinous competition in terms of projects of public-interest, sometimes repetitious (each town wanting its own performance hall, Olympic-size swimming pool, commercial area, etc.). The aim is clearly to take advantage of the collective firepower to benefit from a geographically favourable location, making the Marseille metropolitan area a unique point of access to the Latin Mediterranean Arc and a natural outlet of the Rhône valley (see Figure 2).

Like a sort of unavoidability written in geography as well as in politics, a collective vision associating the city of Marseille to its periphery in a metropolitan state of mind can only be possible in the movement of the development plan of the

Marseille metropolitan area. On a geographical level, Marseille is a vast city, without true suburbs, which can make it seem economically self-sufficient. For that matter, at the end of World War II until the mid-1960s, the city of Marseille resembled a sort of district founded on a community of people, administrations and companies that revolved around the port and tertiary activities. Morel [12] and Pujol [13] show how the district is marked by the presence of support networks within which the golden rule is that of *giving a hand to friends*. Besides, the city can count on overabundance of public jobs at the level of the municipality, the transport company, the hospitals, etc. In other words, an “administered” economy impermeable to economic cycles of metropolises hosting a majority of companies subject to the tough market conditions. On the political level, the city of Marseille fell into the hands of a socialist-centrist alliance of which the tutelary figure was Gaston Defferre. He was unquestionably at the root of the masterwork of urban modernisation. However, he refused that his city be subject to the will of other communities, be dissolved in a shapeless nebula that he would no longer control [12]. A development of Marseille outside of its natural frontiers was possible on the only condition of annexing the new spaces, considering them as simple excrescences of the *metropolis*.



Figure 2: The Marseille metropolitan area: at the confluence of the Latin Mediterranean arc and the Rhône delta

Source: Adapted from Morel [14].

While the collapsing colonial trade sounded the death knell of the golden age of the port of Marseille, economic and political elite exercised surprising short-sightedness: blurry in the distance, and clear only where the nearby territory lays, the 23,000 hectares of the municipality. Following Morel [12], we can say that there was a genuine disconnection between the *intra-muros* and the *extra-muros* that, for decades, made a mark on the development of the Marseille metropolitan area. An area crossed by a sort of one-upmanship madness leading the periphery to play a solitary game with repetitious and sometimes colossal investments, in an *All against Marseille* approach. A situation the elite of Marseille did not enjoy because the decline of the *metropolis* rightly came from the capturing of resources and activities by the periphery. This dialogue of the deaf within the metropolitan territory had disastrous consequences in terms of dualisation of spaces. While Marignane and Istres (with aeronautics), the Etang de Berre (with petrochemicals), Cadarache (with nuclear) and Aix-en-Provence (with high tech) experienced a remarkable economic increase, the city of Marseille started a long descent into hell, while continuing to claim a metropolitan *imperium* that was not lived well, and seeking for new economic allies beyond its neighbours.

3 A frustrated utopia: the Great Delta project

While the Common Market was opened with success under the aegis of Jean Monnet, the business circles of Marseille, usually so risk averse outside of the capturing of colonial markets, developed an ambition of European outreach. It is clearly from this reading grid that the creation of the Great Delta Association should be interpreted, at the beginning of 1967, subsequent to the international economic days held by the city in June 1966, under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce. While the challenge was to imagine how the city of Marseille could transform into a Mediterranean megaport, it was presided by Paul Berliet, the industrialist from Lyon [5]. It appeared evident that the industrialists in Lyon were actively seeking for an efficient and geographically close port outlet. Given that Marseille had just lost the captive colonial markets, the industrialists in Lyon made it clear that the Southern city should now bet on its European *hinterland* and, in particular, the German market, for which Lyon would be a hub. Pierre Terrin, the president of the *Union Patronale de Marseille* (Employers' Union of Marseille), and especially the *Société Provençale des Ateliers Terrin* (the Provençal Company of the Terrin Workshops), specialising in the naval repair, rapidly understood the issues at stake. In short, the Great Delta project emerged from the will of the employers' world of Lyon and Marseille to imagine an enlarged geographical space ignoring the local confinement. For that matter, the Great Delta project was practically entirely financed by the Chamber of Commerce, the *Port Autonome de Marseille* (Port of Marseille) and the

Compagnie Nationale du Rhône (National Company of the Rhône), while the local authorities were noticeably absent [5].

If the Great Delta project holds the interest of the elite of Marseille to open to the vast European market, it also and mostly resonates favourably for Lyon, and more generally for the Rhône-Alpes region, which were then in a position of weakness, and needed the South to broaden its prospects towards the Mediterranean arc. Marseille and Lyon therefore found a well-understood interest into thinking their complementarity, rather than the ruthless competition, that would be destructive for the both of them, in a vast triangle embracing the Mediterranean coastline and the three regions of the Southeast of France, including Auvergne and Bourgogne [15]. A triangle that could be, for its promoters, the powerful symmetry of the Ruhr industrial region, to its Northwest, and of the vast North Italian industrial region, to its Southeast. It is clearly in this point of view that the Fos-sur-Mer port complex was imagined, which *hinterland* did not have a local focus, but was intended to spread, thanks to the Rhône, towards the North of Europe. This conclusion appeared in the study led by Joly and Chamussy [16] after visiting the facilities in Fos-sur-Mer at the end of the 1960s, and especially after they met with several other decision-makers of the Port of Marseille.

Joly and Chamussy [16] noticed that the Fos-sur-Mer port complex, wanted by General de Gaulle, was firstly intended to complete the historical facilities of the *intra-muros* port of Marseille, smothered in a confined and barely functional space, and its geographical positioning, in the Rhône's immediate outlet, would give access to a large northern backcountry. The Figure 3 shows that the companies now established in Fos-sur-Mer, 40 km from Marseille, participated in priority in an outward-looking economic development. Certainly, the initial question was the establishment of a few client or supplier activities in order to constitute a real industrial port complex, but the priority was to lean on intermodal connections in order to capture new markets thanks to a desired link between the Rhône basin and the Rhine basin. Better yet, Joly and Chamussy (1969) underline that the catchment area of the port complex of Fos-sur-Mer as an economic hub could spread to the East beyond the Alps, to Northern Italy. The analysis ends with the *pro domo* defence of an outward looking, or even, centrifugal growth: the expected induction effects are located on broadened scales in which the local consumption market is a little out of place.



Figure 3. Fos-sur-Mer, land of international opening rather than regional cohesiveness

Source: Adapted from <http://www.marinelink.com> [retrieved May 26, 2016].

While the port complex of Fos-sur-Mer was focused on General de Gaulle's will to guarantee France's prime position in the hierarchy of large economic powers [17], and that the Great Delta project arised from the employer's world of Marseille (and some of the employer's world of Lyon), we must admit a surprisingly shared understanding. Indeed, the constant of the Great Delta project was to ignore the possible local spill over effects of the dynamics started by Fos-sur-Mer. That explained Claval's unambiguous conclusion [18:35]: "*What was created around Fos-sur-Mer? Not what was expected, or not quite.*" As indicated by Lafi [5] from his unprecedented archive analysis, it would not be until 1976 that the start of a reflexion would emerge regarding a potential "backcountry" for Marseille. A well too late shift to convince the "vassals" on the periphery of the *metropolis*, ignored (despised?) for years, that a reasoning in a collective manner within the broadened territory would be a promising alternative. The Great Delta Association for the Economic and Social Development of the Southeast of France died out in 1977, without ever managing (wanting) to foster a metropolitan dynamic.

The lessons of the Great Delta project had been learnt long before, and to immerse ourselves in this frustrated utopia may shed light on the political obstacles of the building of the Marseille metropolitan area both expected... and unwelcome. The idea of the Great Delta project of identifying and enhancing the coherence on the level of the Mediterranean French departments is not an issue *per se*, and Morel [14] appropriately underlines that a sense of legitimacy could be understandable in an efficient interaction of the construction of the Mediterranean arc and the opening to Northern Europe. The mistakes made by the elite of Marseille was to

think the port complex of Fos-sur-Mer as an artificial and rootless space, a simple extension of the city of Marseille with the aim to have a free hand to conquest Europe, without really worrying about the nearby *hinterland*. A port complex of which the construction itself was seen by some as a genuine damnation [19], a quasi *no go area* in the middle of nowhere where procurers and prostitutes, shady temporary employment agencies, and revolutionary leftists stood alongside. Furthermore, some geographically close municipalities suffered having to support a significant part of the cost of collective planning linked to the population influx; this is particularly the case of Martigues, the city of ancestral *bourdigues*, facing the massive arrival of what was then called the “Lorrains” [20].

Even if Lyon has powerful rivals, starting with Geneva, it found how to seize opportunities after the failure of the Great Delta project to assert its influence in various industrial, logistical and service activities, by clearly taking advantage of the progressive weakening of the city of Marseille as from the 1980s. There are many examples of the establishment of administrations and tertiary activities that transformed Lyon in a genuine metropolis that captured resources and skills and that no longer needed a nearby port, at its South, and by rightly mobilising the logistical infrastructures of the Benelux in a well-known “trade deflection” logic [21]. A purely opportunistic behaviour, some may say, but the city of Marseille did not show a genuine will to unite with its peripheral territories to create a new dynamic. Understanding the disappointment of De Roo [22], bitterly regretting the absence of emergence of a powerful metropolis, based on “*an environment sufficiently open and interconnected, dense in internal and external relationships, capable of putting pressure and applying leverage*” [22:278], we must seek the true culprits.

However, underlining the progressive escheat of the city of Marseille, and the correlative expansion of increasingly rich peripheral territories, is now trivial. The unemployment rates show the dramatic situation of the metropolis, even if other “pockets” exist elsewhere, for example in Berre-l’Etang, Miramas, Port-Saint-Louis-du-Rhône or Port-de-Bouc. Beyond the unemployment figures, Marseille is first and foremost a *poor* city, both in regards to the standard of living of its inhabitants, the level of education and the economic potential. The escheat is at the root of a parallel economy with dramatic effects: “*Marseille is a city of multiple unofficial economies, from the makeshift economy of repair services to the international trade of human trafficking [and] drug economy*” [23:106]. However, we could underline that some zones of wealth remain, in particular in the southern quarters, but the observation is dramatic in terms of social inequalities, even though we observe similar situations in other pauperising European cities. Thus, in the middle of the years 2000, the revenue ratio between the richest 10% and the poorest 10% was 23 for Marseille, 13 for Paris and only 8 for Lyon [24]. Yet, we can be pleased that the plethoric number of civil administrations in Marseille enables to efficiently activate the buffer against the crisis, avoiding an even more significant part of the population to drown in an exacerbated precarious situation.

Paradoxically, while Marseille appears as a solidary and tolerant city, it is actually characterised by a segmentation that makes the situation potentially explosive, against which the periphery seeks to defend itself at all costs. Various studies have reported the multiplication of bloody revenge attacks, property corruption, insalubrity of the poorest quarters and the constant delinquency [13]. In short, the city of Marseille is an economic drag and a social counter-example, Ronai [24] wrote, from which we seek to shelter ourselves with a *protectionist* approach. The strategy of the peripheral cities “*going it alone*” explains this surprising cluster approach around the six consolidated city-counties, jealous of their fortress-territory, in the early 2000s, while the urban community of the Marseille-Provence Métropole, that is one of them, did not succeed in uniting the 17 towns surrounding the city of Marseille, concluded Olive and Oppenheim [7], it then appeared difficult to call on the most prosperous neighbour cities, armed with their powerful ecosystem built over time. Cities that probably want the elite of Marseille to pay, decades later, for the wandering of the Great Delta project.

4 Redesigning the cohesion of a divided territory

Whether they are French economic organisations, like the National Institute of Statistics, or international economic organisations, like the OECD, the diagnosis is similar on all aspects: the Marseille metropolitan area is one of the most fragmented in Europe, regarding governance as well as territorial organisation. While the analysis led by these organisations is nearly deprived of socio-political depth and historical perspective, we must admit that the situation risks of jeopardising what no one, in the 1960s, saw as the future French California [12]. Though the dreams of greatness have disappeared, however, the third French metropolis is under the threat of centrifugal forces that could shatter the considerable assets it holds. For the past fifteen years, the *leitmotiv* has been to develop a consistent vision of an economic space with strong potential, firstly from the French State, then the local elite from political and business circles. Fighting the balkanisation was a long walk, paved with many obstacles, and while Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole is now an institutional reality, nothing proves that it will be simple to leave the past behind, especially difficult for the despised periphery to forget the bitter taste of the metropolis’ assumed imperialism. Any metropolitan cooperation approach inherits controversial issues, Forester [25] notes, which overcoming often appears difficult to encourage.

While the union of political and economic circles for the constitution of a powerful Marseille metropolitan area is a known fact, it is potentially that the observation of a divided territory can be subject to no discussions, from Brussels, Frankfurt and London’s point of view. The comparative study led by the OECD [26] therefore shows the Aix-Marseille metropolis as one of the most fragmented zones of Europe, even though this characteristic also concerns other French

metropolises. By taking the number of towns functioning on a metropolitan territory out of 100,000 inhabitants as an indicator, the fragmentation index of the Aix-Marseille metropolis is twice the level of the countries of the OECD. In short, an economy of archipelago and “small kingdoms”, incidentally made official by the Top 20 club with its *Project*, “small kingdoms” that have managed to keep their prerogatives by refusing to merge in an open space. This analysis is comforted by the works of Barret *et al.* [1] for whom, more broadly, Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole is a broken-up territory, in which solidarities still need to be invented and made a reality. Indeed, the social balance is absent and while geographical zones communicate together, in particular regarding the daily commutes between home and work, the socio-political reality is that of areas, hermetic from one another, that do not promote real mutual assistance between them. This runs counter to the French culture based on an ideal of social regeneration through an urban policy based on the cohesion and sharing [27].

Watching the motorway between the cities of Marseille and Aix-en-Provence at peak hour, in a Parisian ring road-like congestion, could lead people to believe in a powerful territorial interdependence in a spatial *continuum* where physical frontiers of local communities disappear. It is not the case here. While it is very difficult for travellers to experience the transition between two cities, through the window of a bus, the social diversity remains an illusion, a vision of the mind. By travelling only four or five kilometres, the environment transforms from prosperous-looking residential zones into sad large buildings. A few kilometres more, and the average tax revenue crashes by over 25%, while some neighbourhoods are in the fourth world... As noted by Jones *et al.* [28], this is a clear example of the *political geography*, underlining that all territories are the outcome of powers exerted on them to capture resources, attract investors and reject the external negative effects onto the neighbouring territories. The birth of the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole in January 2016, of which Figure 4 defines the components, unquestionably aims at breaking this segregationist curse by introducing a metropolitan governance based on a *vision of common strategy* of the future of this high potential geographical zone [26].



Figure 4 : The components of Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole

Saying that the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole was a forceps-assisted delivery is a realistic image, and the political protest of its President's conditions of election in December 2015 is an excellent example. The rejection of this federating project on the metropolitan scale should however be analysed according to two different historical stages: a stage of rejection of the periphery by the centre city and, on the contrary, a stage of rejection of the *metropolis* by the periphery. As noted previously, the city of Marseille turned away from its periphery under the impulsion of the employers' world of Marseille by seeking new sources of prosperity in the European *hinterland*; the Great Delta project is the most emblematic image of this. But let's not forget that Gaston Defferre did not want an urban community that would have threatened his leadership, by abandoning a share of his decision-making flexibility to nearby communist cities. In short, an alliance between well-understood economic and political interests, at the time when General de Gaulle thought in terms of "balancing metropolises" [29]. There was nothing surprising in the fact that the rejection of the periphery by the *metropolis* led to deep and durable divisions, or more exactly, to gaping scars, that would lead various cities of the Bouches-du-Rhône to create their own dynamism by attracting, sometimes in a total anarchy, private investors on multiple industrial and logistical zones.

On the basis of the skills attributed to the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole, common sense is present. Indeed, the new entity has vital skills regarding the urban design of the metropolitan area, which include three aspects: (1) the definition of a territorial coherence programme and overall urban planning, the development of joint development zones (ZAC) and the constitution of land

reserves; (2) the organisation of sustainable urban mobility, the design, the planning and the maintenance of roads, and the formalisation of a coordinated plan of urban transports; and (3) taking into account a global development programme and the determination of planning sectors in the sense of the town planning code. For those who have experienced the often-anarchic urban travelling within the Marseille metropolitan area, the coordinating action aiming at finding a solution to the scheduled asphyxia is natural. According to the TOM-TOM Europe ranking data of March 2016, Marseille is the sixth most congested city in Europe, and, by far, the most congested in France. A situation that has been pointed out by Sanmarco [3] for sometimes now, but, ironically, let's note that since the 1980s, Domenach and Quercy [30] have drawn public authorities attention to this burning issue, which had been closed *without further action* by the local political circles. Yet, who would not be appalled to learn that there is no public integrated transport system within the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole area, regarding the infrastructure as well as the pricing? The reality is that the networks are overlaying one another, some cities having created rather efficient communication spaces, and are not connected together and especially not with Marseille [31].

One of the most virulent points of contention linked to the institutional birth of the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole obviously remains the tax resources. Why hide that the Marseille-Provence Métropole, that only managed to federate 17 cities around the *metropolis*, lives sparsely outside of its southern neighbourhoods? Taking the professional tax as a reference point, the inter-communalities' key tax resource, the greater Lyon has a total base twice as high as that of Marseille-Provence Métropole, for a Lyon territory that is 20% smaller than the territory of Marseille [32]. It is true that the Marseille-Provence Métropole is losing the financial windfall of industries around the Etang de Berre, and the trade area of Plan-de-Campagne, at the city's doorstep, welcoming thousands of potential clients coming from Marseille every weekend. The figures are unquestionable when making reference to the tax potential per inhabitant for the six inter-communalities (see Figure 4): 2,212 euros for the richest, *Syndicat d'Agglomération Nouvelle Ouest Provence* (Western Provence New Town Association), 1,680 euros for the *Communauté d'Agglomération du Pays de Martigues* (Urban community of the Martigues region), 748 euros for the *Communauté d'Agglomération du Pays d'Aix-en-Provence* (Urban community of the Aix-en-Provence region), 627 euros for the *Communauté d'Agglomération Salon Etang de Berre Durance* (Urban community of the Salon, Etang-de-Berre, Durance region), 470 euros for the *Communauté d'Agglomération du Pays d'Aubagne et de l'Etoile* (Urban community of the Aubagne and Etoile region), and, finally, 413 euros, for the very poor *Communauté Urbaine Marseille Provence Métropole* (Urban community of the Marseille Provence Métropole).

In his speech regarding the absolute priority to boost a global management approach on the Marseille metropolitan area, De Roo [22] claims that the city of Marseille and the Bouches-du-Rhône department make up a single system, and the

metropolitan dispersion is unnatural in an approach of openness to the world-economy. A metropolitan area making up a “system”? There is no evidence for that when doing a socio-political reinterpretation since World War II of the way with which the *metropolis* positioned itself regarding its periphery. That is not the most serious aspect. Indeed, the author continues by claiming that the city of Marseille should be the engine and the pilot of a metropolitan logistical complex and its adjoining territories intend to be specialised according to their resources and skills in support activities to ease the conquering of markets, the only way for the Marseille metropolitan area to reconnect with the international level to which it belonged in the past. In other words, the departmental consistency should be supported by Marseille, naturally recovering the intermediation tertiary functions with the outside world. While the partisans’ argument for a body capable of boosting coordinated land planning, transport and development policies, the hardly dissimulated residues of a metropolitan *imperium* in the hands of Marseille may be difficult to accept for the former “vassals”, now allies. At the risk of durably disturbing the collective learning dynamics, and miss an opportunity of metropolitan development that may not present itself again a second time.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In an interview given to the magazine *Accents* in March 2014, published by the *Conseil Général des Bouches-du-Rhône* (Regional Council of the Bouches-du-Rhône), the director of the Bouches-du-Rhône Tourism, coordinating and implementing the strategy of the sector’s public and private players at the level of the department, recognises it without difficulty: the Marseille metropolitan area was built around three strong Mediterranean identities, that is to say the Provence, the Camargue and the city of Marseille. Cezanne’s Provence majestically radiates on an international level while the Camargue represents for the tourists the endless and wild moors on which Arles leans, a living open-sky museum, a better place in which to live, still haunted by the majestic Van Gogh. Regarding the city of Marseille, it has slowly been breaking off from its dirty and violent underworld image since the relative success of the MP2013 operation [2013 European Capital of Culture]. Three identities within the same department, the living symbol of a territory still broken-up, a territory in which history, then economy, have introduced powerful centrifugal forces at the risk of disjoining them facing a globalisation requiring, on the contrary, competitiveness that can only be achieved with synergy. Again, going over the analysis of Camagni and Capello [33], the city of Marseille did not manage to bring out a territorial capital to boost a regional competitiveness, by focusing on synergies between the economic zones and its close proximity.

By offering a socio-political interpretation of the evolution of the Marseille metropolitan theory, both at the level of the *metropolis* and at its periphery, this

article would like to show how the journey is still long before the cooperation institutionalisation of the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole pays off. It is impossible to easily unravel a story composed of mutual misunderstandings, barely hidden hatreds, or even sometimes-violent conflicts. As noted by Boulesteix [34], the city of Marseille is still perceived by its neighbours as a *hungry ogre* devouring everything in its path, and in these conditions, it is clear that a regional consciousness cannot be decreed overnight. As various studies in political geography have shown, it is conditioned by two intertwined contexts: a cultural-historical context and a political-economic context [35]. The path to build an Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole regional identity of its own will be a long journey, requiring the new governance to assert its *legitimacy* and develop its *capacity for action*: legitimacy regarding the concerned citizens, as well as players of the private sector; capacity for action in terms of budget and finance structure. Lefèvre [36] forcefully highlights how these two dimensions are essential to efficiently govern a modern metropolis. The violence of some comments heard, in particular in the town of Aix-en-Provence, during the municipal election campaign in March 2014, can generate serious concerns regarding the support of some local players of the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole. It is not so much the principle of the metropolitan cooperation itself that is contested, but rather the *imperium* of the city of Marseille and, in an underlying way, the capturing of resources that the *metropolis* hopes to organise for its own benefit. It is common knowledge that the city of Marseille is the most indebted in France and that it has been funding its operating deficit by borrowing money for the past ten years. This does not encourage its rich neighbours to share the weight of the abysmal debt, each preferring to stay home with a purely egoistic approach of autonomous management of its financial resources. Many observers highlight that the “playing as a team” *leitmotiv* has never performed effectively in the Marseille metropolitan area, and that a territorial player equipped with the capacity for new actions has never appeared [37].

Beyond the exemplarity of the case of the Marseille metropolitan area, a broader vision is possibly conceivable in reference to the on-going territorial reform. It is based on the decrease in number of French regions since January 2016, the redefining of economic centres of gravity, and the reorganisation of skills between municipalities. This should result in a basic movement that will certainly deeply shuffle the cards again and suggest a new territorial architecture with heavy consequences for the concerned players. The case studied in this present article, obviously testifying a very southern “immoderation” in the excessiveness and standpoints with one another, is without a doubt symptomatic of tensions that we can suppose will occur elsewhere, in particular during difficult periods when financial resources become increasing scarce. From this point of view, even if it would be wrong to draw hasty assumptions of a spasm from Marseille, it must be admitted that it requires us to see the spatial dynamics from a fresh perspective, by tempering the optimism of the decentralisation apostles. As mentioned by Martin [38], the will of spatial rebalancing of the British economy, wished however by

the Authorities, has not come up with the expected success since the end of the years 2000. On the contrary, the decentralisation collides with historical obstacles that hinder a more balanced regional development.

The Marseille metropolitan area, in the end, is representative of the limits of a purely economic vision of the territory's spatial planning strategy [39], just like this vision is insufficient to understand the company strategies. A more "political" paradigm is essential in order to analyse the nature of trade relationships, and the way with which power, dependency, conflict and cooperation articulate according to a subtle game. From this point of view, organisational theory, and in particular organisational sociology, have undergone extensive progress over the past thirty years, in particular in France [40] [41]. Notably, it appears that power structures relationships in public and private organisations, by designing implicit and explicit rules, as well as collective group behaviours (coalitions) more or less stable over time. In our opinion, putting these analytical approaches into practice within the context of the metropolisation process could offer a new and promising perspective to seize the nuances and contradictions. Returning to the painful delivery of the Aix-Marseille Provence Métropole, this would possibly enable to explain the emergence of political coalitions that were behind the *ad hoc* action system in which final aim was to defend a precious decision-making flexibility obtained over time, when the *metropolis* disdainfully turned away from its neighbours.

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