

Territory between local dynamics, organisational processes and players' thinking

Interest in the concept of “Territory” is nothing new even if it is once again in the spotlight due to the world’s social, economic, geopolitical, health and environmental crises. Territory has long been used in some disciplines such as geography, local planning and history, and now regularly features in work by researchers and practitioners in many other human and social sciences (political scientists, economists, sociologists, lawyers, managers, etc.), but also in the fields of health, biology, ecology, IT and many more.

Territory has thus taken on connotations that are certainly changing over time and come from various sources but are generally strong in meaning and issues. When we think of traditional areas³ of countries, land that brings forth life and fertility, areas earmarked for communities, ecosystems based on social or economic ties, or government agencies that mark off areas of all sizes and categories, it is all about distinguishing between here and elsewhere, whilst highlighting the pros and cons of inward or outward looking. So, the various concepts and variations of the notion of territory occasionally fluctuate between proximity and distance, and

probably represent extremely varied connotations and facts but which are increasingly mentioned these days. This is particularly the case with regard to globalisation and the world’s major climate, social and health challenges. While these issues may have led to fears of 'the end of territory' (Badie, 1995), in reality what seems to be happening is more of a return to territorial needs, aimed at finding new, more inclusive forms of balance (Brasseur *et al.*, 2022).

Going back in time, the term 'territory' appeared in the French language during the 13th century, and took off from the 18th century onwards (Paquot, 2011). According to the geographer Maryvonne Le Berre (1995), three criteria allow us to trace when the word was first used in the modern era: domination, area, and limits. Under this approach, the institutional, organisational and social quality of territorial logic makes it a necessarily important study topic for public sector management specialists.

Studying territories naturally leads to decentralisation and devolution issues, and raises the ever-recurring

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³ The French notion of “terroir”.

question how state responsibilities and powers should break down between central and local government. This can be approached from two complementary angles: first in terms of territorial dynamics as we will see in the first two papers; but also in terms of organisational processes and players' thinking as highlighted below.

Régent Benoit, Véronique Favre-Bonté and Marie Da Fonseca endeavour to show that a territorial area is above all a melting pot of project dynamics, which are based on striving for attraction, competitiveness and liaising between multiple stakeholders. This analysis also recalls the work of researchers who have highlighted territorial dynamics in the context of local economic development (Peres, 2020). In this respect, strategic management approaches can be conducted by government decision-makers in an attempt to mobilise resources and skills, as well as players and their underlying values, in a single territorial project.

Such dynamics, however powerful and factual they may be, are not free from varying perceptions and views depending on everyone's personal viewpoint and experience. This is what Jean-Paul Seloudre and Laurent Sempé meant in their paper, where they put forward the notion of "territorial imagination" to address the issue of perceived territorial authenticity. In managerial terms, such analysis could lead to taking account of players' perceptions in territorial tourism marketing, with each one's multitude of different views and experiences, and considering visitors and their specific experiences as helping to build territories.

Local dynamics then lead to taking into consideration organisations, groupings and individuals that shape territories (Trebucq and Bartoli, 2020). An essential player in territories in most countries of the world is local government. French local government bodies, which first formally appeared as early as the 1946 Constitution and were given more powers by 1982 devolution legislation, constantly have to undergo numerous reforms. The current bill dubbed the "3DS" bill (Differentiation, Decentralisation, Devolution, Simplification) updates the still unresolved allocation issues between the various government agencies working in territories, while mitigating the risk of over-complex organisations that put people off.

As explained by Philippe Cohard and Isabelle Bories-Azeau, local authorities are in the front line on this issue and must themselves innovate in order to tackle it head on. These are fundamentally managerial innovations, as they affect operating processes and approaches to resource optimisation so as to improve personal services. Based on project case studies, the authors also conclude that there is a need to mobilise both internal and external dynamic capacities in order to help make sure such innovations succeed.

However, such mobilisation cannot just be ordered up, if so it will stay as theory. Among key players too often forgotten in territorial dynamics are territorial officials. As Fatéma Safy-Godineau, Amar Fall and David Carassus show, such officials risk losing their way at work in the face of multiple transformations and innovations where they do not always feel involved. This can lead to absenteeism, which is well known but often poorly analysed in terms of cause and effect. The authors show that organisational backing perceived by employees plays a big part in securing their buy-in, and highlights the potential contribution of ethical management likely to foster a work environment conducive to mobilising staff.

On review of the arguments in the different papers in this issue, we see the importance of global approaches to current territorial issues: strategic, finalised and inclusive projects that are conducive to appealing dynamics, taking into account stakeholder perceptions and views, overseeing managerial innovations including marketing and staff mobilisation, and organisational support for officials themselves, within communities and organisations that make up the territorial fabric. In this twenty-first century, already well under-way, which certainly has not finished producing local and global challenges, territorial roots combined with the necessary opening up to the world constitutes a real managerial and strategic challenge for everyone.

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