Title
Invention Politics of the Agglomeration

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4225k1c4

Journal
International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 28(1)

ISSN
0309-1317

Authors
Nicholls, WJ
Nicholls, WJ

Publication Date
2004-03-01

License
CC BY 4.0

Peer reviewed

The ‘actor’ is making an important comeback in studies concerning the formation of political territories at the sub-national level. Actor-centered approaches suggest that despite the state’s efforts to apply standardized political units throughout its domain, territorial outcomes vary according to how local actors mobilize to either apply state-led reforms, resist them, or appropriate them for purposes not initially intended by the state. France’s recent top-down reform to create intermunicipal governing bodies is used in this volume as a strategic case to examine how the local play of politics determines emergent political territories. By providing a series of carrots, sticks and relatively wide margins for negotiating its application, the Loi de Chevènement of 1999 intended to federate many of France’s municipalities into intermunicipal governing structures and, in doing so, move one step towards overcoming France’s highly fragmented political geography. Moreover, by fusing the functions and fiscal resources into a single intermunicipal governing structure (‘Communauté d’Agglomération’), the law intended to increase the efficiency of urban governance while reducing conditions for intermunicipal rivalries and fragmentation. This volume demonstrates that despite the state’s relatively sophisticated strategy to rationalize France’s political geography, the road has not been smooth and has resulted in some territories that resemble the state’s early visions and others that do not.

The editors posit that the Loi de Chevènement should be considered ‘as an ensemble of prescriptions, constraints, and opportunities that remain virtual as long as they have not found a terrain, that is to say, a territorial configuration’ (p. 17). Whether or not the law ‘finds a terrain’ is contingent upon the existence of local governing regimes which see in this law an opportunity to advance their interests. Such regimes are necessary because they diffuse destabilizing minorities, and they work to contain local contradictions. It is within this context that the editors introduce the concept of ‘leadership’, denoting the crucial roles played by actors bearing sufficient power to create and sustain stable governing regimes. Without leadership, there cannot be a stable governing regime and therefore the likelihood of the law’s success is reduced.

Each case provides wonderfully detailed analyses of how local actors have been spurred in different directions by the Loi de Chevènement. While the editors chose not to do this, we can break down the cases into three distinct categories: cases where a strong Communauté d’Agglomération took shape, cases where a weaker form of intermunicipal cooperation took shape, and cases where fractured intermunicipal
structures have formed. In the first category we find three of the eight covered in the volume: Mantes in the Yvelines, Pays Voironnais and Chambérien. In each of these cases we find three factors that have facilitated the successful implementation of the law: (1) the prior existence of cooperative institutional frameworks; (2) strong economic and/or political interdependencies between actors; and (3) the existence of leaders with sufficient power to build stable regimes. Despite tensions, actors participate in the law’s implementation because there is a high degree of certainty that partners gain more from cooperation than competition, and leaders work to assuage any doubts.

In the second category we find Bordeaux, Montpellier and Plaine Saint-Denis. We find weaker cooperative institutions, increased competition over economic and political resources, and, most importantly, no leaders with the capacities to build and sustain consensual majorities. While there is a plethora of important leaders (ex-Prime Minister Alain Juppé in Bordeaux, Georges Frêche in Montpellier, and powerful Communist and Socialist Party leaders in Saint-Denis), these leaders find powerful local adversaries who can successfully contest their efforts. In this stalemate context, actors are inclined to pursue diluted compromises that allow them to secure state incentives, avoid state sanctions, and avoid the transfer of their powers to other political bodies. Thus, it is not simply leadership that determines a successful outcome, but leaders who enjoy a dominant position within the local political field.

In the third category we find Marseille and Béziers. There is virtually no history of institutional cooperation, a high degree of inter-territorial competition and weak political leadership. In both cases, we find authorities in the peripheral municipalities generating relatively potent intermunicipal partnerships, further depriving their center-cities of wealth and power. Deprived of key resources for bolstering their leadership, center-cities lack the capacities to do anything but develop intermunicipal structures with weak municipalities.

These studies clearly demonstrate that local politics — and not institutional or structural functions — determine the form, function and power of emergent political territories. The primary weakness of the volume results from the concept of leadership, which is linked primarily to frontline actors (mayors, prefects, and councilors). Such an approach reduces urban politics to the interests, stakes and strategic plays of a series of local political bosses, ignoring the fact that stable governing majorities are not simply established between politicians, but between civil and political actors as well. Despite this weakness, the volume makes an important contribution to our understandings of reterritorialization as a political rather than a functional process.

Walter J. Nicholls, California State University, Long Beach, USA