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Participatory democracy and urban governance in France: Are they still utopian views'

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43rd Congress of the European Regional Science Association (ERSA)

Peripheries, centres, and spatial development in the new Europe

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**Participatory democracy and urban governance
in France : are they still utopian views ?**

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Can one be interested in the theoretical link between economics, politics, and public finances without considering the notion of urban governance ? A negative answer to this question may be contended, according to the noticeable amount of papers, congresses and current contributions to the literature. Thus, since the notion of urban governance stands for the involvement of a larger diversity of actors (beyond State and local public actors) in the urban management of French cities, it seems easy to give way to temptation by assimilating urban governance to participatory and democratic features of the government of these cities.

Isn't it exactly to answer to more and more frequent demands from citizens to get a higher level of personal involvement in urban management that local governance and grassroots democracy are advocated together, and mostly that a law has been currently voted (law 2002-276, 2002 February 27th on local democracy) ?

The point of view conveyed in this paper will challenge this commonly prevailing (or even implicit) belief in France. The geographical frame of this study will be limited to this given country, which is consistent with our purpose, for it can be considered as the birthplace of democratic modern ideas, notably since the 18th century. Moreover, one must underline that France comprises more than 36000 cities, that is to say more than all European countries as a whole, and that this country has been long ago characterised by a very strong tradition of centralism and Jacobin power. For all these reasons, France appears to be a stimulating geographical frame to observe the evolution of local democracy.

The main assumption which will be tested refers to a former contribution¹, in which governance had been seen as a solution to a limited range of urban managerial problems, namely operational patterns, contrary to strategic ones. As a matter of fact, as a starting assumption, proceedings belonging to urban governance will be supposed not to be favourable to the emergence of a reinforced local democracy, embodied by a higher participation of French citizens to the government of their cities.

¹ Thomas O. (1999) : “*Urban* government of French cities : between operational governance and oligarchical strategic management, congress of the European Regional Science Association, Dublin, August .

In order to confirm or to weaken this ideal and utopian image of urban governance, the adequacy of this notion to actual urban economics and politics will first be questioned (1). Then, looseness relating to adoption of the word “governance” from corporate and development patterns to urban ones will prompt us to emphasize the structural obstructions due to the French municipal organisation (2), and several special weaknesses of the way associations try to get involved in urban government (3).

1 : French cities and governance : a conflicting match

1.1 : Ideal images and loosely assumed vocabulary

The actual popularization of the notion of governance in political and scientific discourses is notably based on the increasing advertising made about this ideal model, embodied by the participatory budget in Porto Alegre (Brazil)². People living in this city are asked to take part to the choice of public investments which are to be undertaken, and to think about the improvement of their daily environment. Therefore, that special kind of expression is quite different from a purely representative democracy, as it is currently stressed. Actually, a participatory council, which is elected, is debating on the way to allocate financial resources for investments within 16 boroughs and 8 thematic groups.

The understanding of the governance, as to the management of French cities, must get further this somewhat specific example and take the more general notion of urban government into account. This comparison is all the more important as the prerogatives of local government have markedly increased since the beginning of the trend of French local decentralisation. Thus, urban governance has been highlighted as a special modality of urban government which is rested on a wide diversity of actors (public as well as private ones) and granting a privilege to the potential participation of each citizen, as well as searching for compromises. Governance, thanks to mixed public and private partnerships, differs from relations which would be restricted to public institutions. Thus, local public managers only represent one of the numerous influential actors, within an heterogeneous and broken up string of potentially intervening persons and organisations³.

² Abers R. (1998) : “La participation populaire à Porto Alegre au Brésil”, *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, n°80-81, pp 43-54.

³ Thomas op. cit.

However, the fact that this vision of urban governance is based on the importation of the notion of corporate governance from the United States since more than 50 years, should not be overlooked, as it is currently passed over in silence. As a matter of fact, this notion stands for a different semantic reality. The “graft” of this notion in the French political context has resulted in a noticeable change on the meaning of this word. Thus, we must bear in mind that the analysis developed by Coase⁴ in 1937 introduces governance as the whole set of devices used by the firm in order to improve the way markets enable coordination, and referring either to hierarchy, or to contracts and rules.

Consequently, it seems rather strange to confuse a governance which aims at making big firms’ coordination easier and a governance which is supposed to account for the rising complexity of local public management. Using this same word with at least a double meaning leads to an inversion in respect to institutional economics. Besides, going thoroughly into the historical evolution of the nature of French local power makes a second difference become visible.

As a matter of fact, decentralisation generated an alteration from a State and concentrated administration to an increasingly presidential government for cities, directed by the mayor and a few experts. In other words, this amounts to noticing the change from a hierarchical management at the local level (mainly apart from market considerations) to a new government, allowing various partnerships and market tools (prices, contracts, ...). Thus, it is misleading to talk about governance in this second case, according to the initial definition of Coase, for it suggests that this notion is linked to the complexity of costs and structures. Therefore, as mentioned by Lorrain⁵, this would result in stressing the opposite equation of Coase’s principle : “governance of firms = reduction of transaction costs”.

In addition to this historical borrowed meaning, a geographical one, relating to the importation of the notion of “urban governance” from the British to the French context must be detailed. British public context has long been characterised by a progressive decrease of the prerogatives of local governments , in favour of a global State reinstatement. Actually, conservative national governments have emphasized the expensive and ineffective features of

⁴ Coase R.H. (1937) : « The nature of the firm », *Economica*, 4, November.

⁵ Lorrain D. (1998) : “Administrer, gouverner, réguler”, *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, n°80-81, p 86.

local governments in order to justify this State reinforcement. In this special context, the notion of urban governance was supposed to reveal that local actors must share their power with State actors. Accordingly, this notion does not suit the French reality, since this latter is merely characterised by the growing importance of local power holders.

Finally, borrowing the World Bank's "good governance" is also confusing, because it only deals with the specific problems of developing countries. This notion was supposed to challenge the current discussions about structures and reforms by advocating a healthy management without political interference. Problems could be tackled on a technical point of view, without political advice.

Nevertheless, this vision of governance is not consistent with an increasing involvement of citizens and the development of mixed cooperations, as supposed in western countries. It is beyond argument that enacting moral, managerial and caution rules is not in favour of a spontaneous emergence of grassroots intervention, since all these technical criteria appear to be hardly understandable for people without public and political culture. All these historical, geographical and political different contexts suggest that we should raise local French managerial problems with the more traditional notion of urban government.

1.2 : Towards the persistence of the traditional notion of local government

The consistence of the actual expression of a representative democracy in French urban government will be contended, contrary to a direct democracy advocated by Rousseau. Then, one may assume that citizens are not able to hold a real local and participatory power. Even though a gap of several centuries, Montesquieu and Schumpeter seem to come to an agreement, by stressing that politicians are supposed to define long run policies for the population, whose part is restricted to choose the candidates who will carry on these tasks. Thus, the "ordinary man" should let elected people manage the city⁶. According to Montesquieu⁷, the vicious feature of former democracies was to allow basic citizens to take active resolutions, whereas they were completely unable to do it, at least for cognitive reasons.

⁶ Schumpeter J. (1951) : "*Capitalisme, socialisme et démocratie*", Payot.

⁷ Montesquieu : "*L'esprit des lois*", livre XI, chapitre 6.

By emphasizing the actual persistence of a representative democracy at the local level in France, we hint that the mayor disposes of the central regulating role, at the head of a centralised and authoritative power. The mayor and its town council make decisions and enforce them. That is why they are elected. Independently of an increasing number and variety of participatory experiences, this kind of government is exerted in a wide majority of the 36000 French cities. As mentioned by Caillosse⁸, it is just as if elections had to represent all democratic virtues. The fact that this idea would not be defensible does not prevent it from deeply marking the French local democracy. This persistence of a weekly participatory kind of government, even though citizens would assert a higher direct democracy, may be justified by three typical advantages.

The first of these advantages precisely deals with democracy. The representative feature of local governments makes a strong democratic irrigation of society possible, due to the huge number of cities and town councillors : approximately 1% of the national population is elected at the local level. The second advantage concerns the separation of powers which is allowed by this representative network. Citizens would rather get rid of a lot of political tasks, which are delegated to specialised actors. Restricting the management of cities to professional people (experts or elected) would generate a higher level of efficiency, according to Stumm and Corrigan⁹. Last of all, a representative government gives to citizens the interesting possibility to profit by a strictly bureaucratic management of their problems. As a matter of fact, this latter guarantees a formal and anonymous resolution of tasks, and prevent citizens from the negatives influences and interference of lobbies, since this system is expected to be in favour of both the independence of the manager and the upholding of common interest.

In addition to these advantages, one may wonder why all current experiences willing to promote grassroots participation¹⁰ actually failed, in spite of unanimous demands for an increased participation of citizens, and even if politicians pretend to comply with these requests. How can the actual lack of grassroots mobilisation in France be tackled ?

⁸ Caillosse J. (1999) : “Éléments pour un bilan juridique de la démocratie locale en France”, in CRAPS & CURAPP (eds.) : *“La Démocratie Locale : Représentation, Participation et Espace Public”*, PUF, p.75.

⁹ Stumm T.J. & Corrigan M.T. (1998) : “City managers : do they promote fiscal efficiency ?”, *Journal of urban affairs*, vol. 20, n°3.

¹⁰ Norris D.F. (2001) : « Prospects for regional governance under the new regionalism : economic imperatives versus political impediments », *Journal of urban affairs, winter, vol. 23, n°5, pp 557-571.*

2 : The failure of institutional attempts for a participatory local democracy

Even though displaying participatory spirits is fashionable as to the global management of French cities, and even if citizens clearly refuse to remain passive individuals, all the forecasts of a noticeable evolution seem to be thwarted. We will try to highlight the reasons why several measures which were thought to promote grassroots participation and consultations failed. The “revival” of local referendum and the development of inter-communality and tax consolidation since the eighties will be successively presented.

2.1 : The endemic weaknesses of local referendum

The official establishing of a real local referendum clashed several times into the opposition expressed by associations on the one hand, and elected mayors and councillors on the other hand. Indeed, associations are rather against local referendums insofar as they fear to be dispossessed of the dialogue with citizens , since mayors could easily gerrymander this “democratic” vote. Several surveys showed that, in merely all cases, an association which was opposed to municipal plans was bound to loose at the end of the referendum. This statement seems rather critical at first sight in terms of local democracy , insofar as local referendums are supposed to make participation easier ... and insofar as people who wish to participate often gather within associations.

The reasons why locally elected people have always been extremely reticent as to the setting up of local referendums is obvious : they naturally intended to preserve their power. The French Association of Mayors (AMF) expressed several times its refusal of any kind of referendum, although it may be purely in an advisory capacity. AMF echoed to the decision of anticonstitutionality of local referendums which has been pronounced in 1991 may 9th by the French Constitutional Council. That is the reason why legislators, before 1992, have always refused to acknowledge the “illegal” referendums which have been locally organised.

In other respects, it seems that local referendums could thwart the expression of an urban participatory democracy instead of promoting it, due to the smallness of the percentage of people who vote. As a result, the low participation which has been always observed, up to now, for such public approbation would entail that decisions would be taken by a minority of

the population, contrary to the democratic effect which is expected. Moreover, a perverse trend of demagogic diversion could appear. Municipal authorities could search for plebiscites, just by carefully defining the question which is submitted to vote.

All these reasons entailed the establishing in 1992 of a “new” local referendum, which has been restricted to a purely advisory vote, but in no case a decisive one. Therefore this amounts to saying that any significant progress of participatory democracy has willingly been hindered, whereas representative democracy has been strengthened. As a matter of fact, the use by the laws 92-125 (1992 February 6th) and 95-115 (1995 February 4th) of the ambiguous word of “referendum” must be underlined, for this term represents a real grassroots possibility to make a decision, at the national level, whereas it conveys no power at all at the local level. People, by indirect means, only give a simple opinion on a key issue which could be tackled without asking for this opinion, or even without taking this expressed opinion into account !

As a matter of fact, according to the law, municipal authorities are not compelled to respect the final results of the vote. Thus, the referendum appears to be rather a local consultation or merely an opinion poll. It has been formed by the legislators (that is to say Deputies of the National Parliament) to be devoid of any constraining feature, and to avoid the risk of diversion in a view to compulsory decisions. The amazing insistence of local laws (“Code des Communes” and “Code Général des Collectivités Locales” – CC & CGCT), which repeat 44 times the word “consultation” has been quoted by Leclerc¹¹.

These legal “safety measures” include the conditions which must be respected for a popular initiative, that is for people in order to generate a referendum on their own will. In fact, this possibility, which has been created by the law of 1995 (previously mentioned) seems rather virtual, because no referendum happened thanks to this mean (since this date), except in a little village of 151 inhabitants. Then allowing and closely foreseeing the organisation of such a referendum amounts to prohibit this possibility. As a matter of fact, the condition for the allowance of people’s initiatives are rather restrictive : 20% of the electors of the city must sign for it. This constraint is very powerful.

¹¹ Leclerc S. (2000) : “Le référendum communal en France”, 4th congress “Rencontres Ville-Management” November 16th & 17th, Nancy.

Accordingly, this is not surprising that 60% of local referendums have been organised in cities gathering less than 3500 inhabitants, since it is all the more expensive and difficult to appeal to people, as they are numerous. However, such a grassroots combine can only result in a simple debate of the town council. The assumed power of this popular mobilisation is annihilated by the fact that the town council is retaining its real power, that is to decide to start the referendum or to refuse to do it. Popular initiative, which is quantitatively hard to appear, may have no results at all. This strongly restricts its supposed democratic and participatory virtues.

Even though this great ratio may be reached and its expression may be taken into account by local authorities, it is important to highlight the constraining agenda which defines, according to the law, the dates which could be fixed for starting such referendums. In the present case, the popular seizure cannot be scheduled before the second year and after the fourth year of the election of the town council in a given city (article number 2143-3 CGCT). Therefore, two referendums at most can be scheduled during the six years of a municipal mandate.

All these shackles to popular initiative result in the leading part of the mayor as to the decision to organise a referendum. The municipal team is entitled to choose the question which will be referred to people and the way to write it. Thus, although indirectly, the choice of electors may be strongly influenced. Counter-plans will not necessarily be integrated into the information documents given to people, since the law does not compel mayors to do it (article 125-2 CC). Then, several points may be observed : on the one hand, mayors frequently give their point of view, and on the other hand the vote generally ratifies their solution.

For instance, mayors who are not in favour of the integration into a metropolitan area will have a propensity to let people choose, thanks to a referendum, in order not to be directly responsible for the refusal to join such an inter-municipal structure. Nevertheless, we must point out that more than 90% of electors used to refuse to join a metropolitan area when their advice has been previously asked¹². Thus, the referendum is rather a way for the mayor to legitimate a decision which has already been taken, however positive (building sports

¹² Demaye P. (1999) : “La recherche de la démocratie intercommunale”, in CRAPS & CURAPP (eds) : “*La Démocratie Locale : Représentation, Participation et Espace Public*”, PUF, pp 237-270.

infrastructure) or negative (refusal to increase local taxes) it may be. It is not an actual way to take the advice of people, or to express a will to increase grassroots participation.

2.2 : The shackles of metropolitan areas and districts

The same issue may be stressed at the level of districts and metropolitan areas. Let us consider the general case of Public Institutions of Inter-Cities Co-operation (EPCI). Taking the advice of people belonging to an EPCI, that is to say to a set of several cities, depends on the suggestion of all the mayors of member cities, whereas the other solution is a written request from 20% of the electors of the whole EPCI. But the EPCI council is not compelled to respect the results of a referendum, as mentioned before for cities.

Moreover, the very features of French EPCI represent an additional hinder to participatory democracy. The main reason is the lack of direct election for the members of EPCI councils, insofar as co-operation between cities has no political origin but rather depends on management goals, in order to avoid wasting money by multiplying expensive infrastructure in each city. This situation results in a noticeable sinking of the proximity between each citizen and EPCI councils, for there is no elective link between them. Thus, it is not surprising that 71% of a sample of 157 presidents of EPCI and mayors may be opposed to a direct universal suffrage for the election of EPCI councils¹³.

It is also amazing that the law about “proximity democracy” (2002-276, 2002 February 27th) finally dismisses in its last version this principle of a direct vote for EPCI councils, due to reticence of the members of the French Parliament. Therefore, EPCI’S executive power is fiercely opposed to the indispensable condition for democratic lawfulness, that is the direct election by citizens. Various arguments have been put forward in order to justify this wide gap, in relation to the emerging aspirations of people : the will to restrict the number of elections, the refusal to latently suppress the French “départements” (administrative level between cities and Regions), or merely the too important loss of the managing power of cities.

¹³ Demaye op.cit.

Accordingly, the power and the constitution of EPCI councils are directly determined by municipal executives, which is not inconsistent with the new laws about EPCI and decentralisation. These laws intended to “dust and boost” co-operations between cities more than to promote the democratic feature of their management. As a result, the share of citizens in EPCI councils is extremely symbolic. As a matter of fact, EPCI councillors almost exclusively come from town councils, and most of them belong to the municipal political majority. Thus, the democracy at the EPCI level would be taken away by politicians and notables, and would restrain itself to a dummy democracy which would be mastered by town councillors and representatives¹⁴.

These cumulative powers, and the obscure understanding of the actual working and internal influences of EPCI structures by citizens naturally results in their relinquishment of any participatory slight desires. The easier solution for “basic” citizens is to ascribe EPCI actions to the nearest elected actor, that is their mayor. Besides, numerous presidents of EPCI used to magnify this confusion in people’s mind, by thinking that it is up to town representatives to diffuse EPCI information.

Consequently, the essence of co-operations between cities is to consider citizens like “simple” consumers, rather than electors. What matters most is economic rather than democratic features. This lack of democracy derives from the impossibility for citizens to disapprove (thanks to their vote) the policy of their EPCI. This situation entails various efficiency problems, insofar as cities belonging to an EPCI will naturally work for their own interests, even to the prejudice of EPCI’S global and common interest. Finally, we are still very far away from a participatory democracy between co-operating cities, since this given democracy is not even representative !

Beyond this central weakness, the most thorny issue is based on the rising importance of the EPCI level of administration in a rising number of strategic urban fields. It seems that the main hinder to local democracy is not the impossibility to vote (positively or negatively), but rather the current transfer of entire parts of the government of cities from the town level to the EPCI level. Thus, the new powers and the new fiscal resources granted to EPCI structures are disconnected from any democratic lawfulness and from any possibility of grassroots

¹⁴ Demaye op.cit. p.247

actual participation. As a matter of fact, people are aware neither of the level of local taxes which are integrated into the budget of the EPCI to which they belong, nor of the level of public services as against this.

To sum up, all the previous arguments suggest that local referendum and co-operation between cities markedly failed to promote an increased participatory democracy. However, succeeding in this difficult task does not compel to confine oneself to public actors and to proposed or imposed laws. Associations must not be forgotten, because of their number, dynamism, and their ability to spontaneously seize themselves as to specific urban issues.

3 : The weaknesses of local democracy expressed by the existence of local associations

Nevertheless, such an ability will appear to be relatively tenuous. As a matter of fact, the difficulty to be beyond punctual, temporary and “personal” problems (in order to privilege common interest) will be underlined. Then, we will proceed to apprehend the reasons of the very low participation of people to those associations, amounting to a risk of conflicting lobbies.

3.1 : Local associations : some defective and embryonic tools of participation

First of all, the sense of the word “participation” which will be referred to throughout our purpose must be defined. Participation may be seen as a simple diffusion of information, as asking people’s advice (which has no constraining effect to the final decision), or finally as a real dialogue and work in co-operation. Only this third meaning will be considered as actual participation.

Most of the time, associations are the best structures for isolated citizens to create lobbies, to raise their complaints and claims to public entities, which otherwise would have been impossible. Their main strength consists in the sum of people they represent, since their supporters may also be local electors. In some very specific cases, associations succeeded in re-orientating decisions which had already been taken by town councils, or even in cancelling them. Nevertheless, these situations are rather scarce, for it is quite difficult to spontaneously

generate a very strong rounding up of opposed people (which is required). The French case of the popular lobby intending to delete the toll-gate of the urban highway at Roques sur Garonne may be advocated.

Thus, the participation of each citizen to urban government must use collective entities in order to have a real effect. Isolated individuals, or even little associations remain politically invisible and left out of any kind of participation, since local authorities are not compelled to pay attention to people who are devoid of power. Symmetrically, powerful associations may diverge from their initial goal (that is representing the opinion of a specific part of the population) towards a narrow-minded political opposition and an official or unofficial strategy to conquest power. According to Hamilton¹⁵, associations would not have an earthly chance to succeed if they would not politicise their plans. Insofar as public authorities generally pay more attention to rebellious people rather than co-operating citizens, there is a risk for associations to become “aggressive” lobbies. As a result, do associations embody real stepping stones in order to make grassroots participation easier ? Are they only becoming “American” lobbies, searching for power, clash and struggle ?

As stressed by Haeringer¹⁶, developing associations and promoting democracy may sometimes be inconsistent, contrary to the common belief. As to the case of Porto Alegre, Abers¹⁷ emphasizes that promoting grassroots participation amounts to promoting the most provided part of the population, notably for cognitive reasons. The efficiency of the action exerted by a given quarter in order to be in favour of a given public investment will strongly influence its priority level, independently of its collective cost and final utility.

This low level of democracy through associations seems to echo the low level of grassroots participation. There is often a wide gap between the will of associations and their supporters to be more involved in urban management on the one hand, and the real level of participation of people on the other hand. Thus, people at the head of associations and lobbies would intend to conquest power, however symbolic it may be. They would not be really interested in the development of a complementary democratic participation. Actually, they

¹⁵ Hamilton D. K. (2002) : “Regimes and regional governance : the case of Chicago”, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, winter, vol. 24, n°4, pp 403-423.

¹⁶ Quoted by Souami T. (1998) : “Participer à la gouvernance ?”, *Les Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, n°80-81, p 171.

¹⁷ Op.cit.

would rather fight for a substitution to established authorities. The request for an increased participation of the population could paradoxically only be in favour of individual and selfish interests.

Independently of the political goals of associations, the fact that they are naturally characterised by punctual and narrow-minded plans and claims must be pointed out¹⁸. Most of associative mobilisations are only temporary and deal with very punctual and actual cases. Therefore, these associations are often dissolved when the municipal plans they were fighting against are realised, in spite of their opposition, or even relinquished. Considering once more the case of Porto Alegre reveals that grassroots participation, although moderate (8,4% of adults during 5 years) has been decreasing at the same pace of the availability of financial resources. Thus, grassroots participation would not survive without the actual ability to satisfy selfish interests.

This statement raises the previous problem of the incompatibility between democracy, grassroots participation and associative lobbies. Considering urban public management as a clash between a potential multiplicity of selfish interests endangers the fulfilment of common interest¹⁹. The risk lies in the insidious development of a “patchwork democracy”, of a customer society which would be more interested in the width of pavements, in the breach of the peace caused by night clubs, in the financial resources of given sports clubs, than in a global and consistent urban policy. Could one promote the attraction of new firms, cultural and social investments, a healthy budgetary management, by only dealing with “individual” claims ?

All these limits can be illustrated in some specific urban associations : quarter councils. In our mind, as their action is quite punctual, and as quarter councils only gather few citizens, with a very low level of participation, the opinion of authors stressing the “good governance” they create must be challenged. The two main weaknesses of quarter councils are their inability to extend the limits of their actions and thoughts beyond the restricted geographical area which defines them, on the one hand, and their low representative feature on the other hand. By the way, yearly general meetings of quarter councils or even the

¹⁸ Thomas op.cit.

¹⁹ Glaser M.A., Parker L.E. & Payton S. (2001) : “The paradox between community and self interest : local government, neighbourhoods, and media”, *Journal of urban affairs*, vol. 23, n°1, pp 87-102.

number of their supporters are known to represent at most 2% of the population of each quarter²⁰. This results in a low lawfulness, which is magnified by a strong financial dependence on municipal resources.

Moreover, local democracy and quarter councils would almost be naturally inconsistent insofar as this local level would be completely unable to overstep its particular interests and concerns. Even though all quarters may fittingly put their individual goals together, in favour of common interest, as if by magic, it would not actually be enough. As a matter of fact, living close to someone else in the same quarter does not necessarily entail the emergence of a common interest, however little this quarter may be. Finally, the irreparable lag between territories for daily life (quarter) and for actual urban management (EPCI) must be underlined.

3.2 : Are we getting farther away from local democracy ?

The very low level of grassroots participation to urban government and management illustrates the inability to compel to participatory democracy. One must have overestimated the ability of people to join new contractual partnerships, and most of all to have a say in the matter. One of the potential explanations of these failures could lie in the difficulties to import private devices into the public area. Nevertheless, this graft may partly divert or totally loose the initial spirit and efficiency of these devices. Intending to develop contracts and horizontal relations actually failed, since it has led to the promotion of partnerships which are often restricted to public entities, as expressed by the strong supervision exerted by municipal authorities in most of urban plans.

Consequently, urban actual government is still based on the prevailing powers of notables, that is on a merely representative democracy. Decentralisation did not bring the question of this current equilibrium up again. Conversely, it has contributed to reinforce the presidential and almost monarchic features of municipal power. As a matter of fact, the mayor can cumulate executive and legislative powers, contrary to the President of the Republic, whereas he is only indirectly elected by citizens (NB : citizens vote for a municipal council which chooses the mayor). The key influence of the mayor as to strategic patterns of urban

²⁰ Rangeon F. (1999) : “Les comités de quartier, instruments de démocratie locale ?”, in CRAPS & CURAPP (eds) : “*La Démocratie Locale : Représentation, Participation et Espace Public*”, PUF, pp 329-345.

government seems to be an unavoidable feature. Don't we spontaneously connect a French city with its mayor, which sometimes entails the election of his wife or his son for the following mandates in order to succeed him ?

In other respects, it would be misleading to correlate democracy with diversifying and multiplying involved actors. Ignoring the strategic and political links between these actors would give support to a false idea, according to which participatory democracy would be spreading. Thus, powers and influences must be taken into account , so that a kind of consolidation of public structures may be revealed. Despite the lack of financial links and property rights between such public entities, it would be useful to draw what could be called the "local and public strategic heart"²¹. As a matter of fact, an EPCI, an association and the town council cannot be considered as independent one from another, if the same persons belong to all these entities, and mostly when the mayor can impose his strategy to all peripheral political structures.

Therefore, it would also be misleading to correlate decentralisation with local democracy, insofar as decentralisation looked rather like de-concentration, which does not entail to decentralise powers. As previously mentioned, grassroots participation and local democracy cannot be compelled, even if several laws (notably article 10, law 1992 February 8th) have tried to promote them. Nevertheless, in most cases, this promotion has been restricted to a simple right to be informed.

However, giving downstream or even upstream information to people does not require any change of the division of powers. Do additional town-halls in each quarter, in order to make dialogue with people easier, really imply a significant sharing of actual powers ? Municipal information does not allow the setting up of debates, in which both sides are given a full hearing (since that is not their purpose at all), even if the current (2002) law about "proximity democracy" tried to modify this feature.

The mere concern of municipal information is still to prompt people to accept the decisions of the town council, which used to be taken without previous significant advices. Nevertheless, even if the advice of people is taken upstream, it has no real influence, for

²¹ Cf. the notion of "financial hearts" notably developed in : Morin F. (1994) : " Liaisons financières et coopération des acteurs systèmes", *Revue Économique*, n°6.

instance on the laying out of the underground, in respect to the opinion of technical experts. Besides, the lag between two elections is in favour of municipal authorities, the agent, and to the prejudice of citizens, that is the principal²².

Finally, it seems that the spreading of participatory democracy is actually expressed in an increasing number of debates, whereas it remains a virtual trend, in daily life. Thus, the government of the French cities and local democracy would not be suitable. Determining the fundamental reasons of this antinomy will be contended in further researches²³.

²² Fama E.F. (1980) : “Agency problems and the theory of the firm”, *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 88, n°2, April.

²³ Thomas O. (2003) : “Gouvernement des villes et démocratie participative : quelles antinomies ? ”, *Pouvoirs*, n°104, pp 145-158.