



Encyclopedic Dictionary of Public Administration

The reference for understanding government action

TERRITORIALIZATION

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Defining territorialization is not an easy task, especially because this term generally means something different depending on whether it is used in French or Anglo-American research. Alain Faure (2004) has defined territorialization in relation to renewal in the meanings attributed to the term “territory.” While a territory was for a long time a space in which national sovereignty was exercised, since the 1980s it has become increasingly associated with the capacity building of local spaces. In the words of Faure:

The first transformation occurred in the 1980s and 1990s with the growing role played by analyses of the conditions for implementing public policies at the local level in government action studies. The second, more contemporary change stems from the growing empowerment of local communities. It is characterized by the evolution of the language used by scientists and experts to describe the public action surrounding the derived term of “territorialization” and descriptors such as “territorial” and “territorialized.” These changes are undoubtedly symptoms of the crisis of the French administrative model, in the sense that, in relation to theory, they reveal the totally new political issues of “territoriality” associated with the general process of decentralization in all national political systems. [Our translation]

As conveyed by this quotation, the issue of territorialization is strongly related to the study of public policy. Territorialization, in this view, suggests that territory (or territorial difference) is an important category of such research. Territory may acquire importance to the extent that central bodies become sensitive to the specificity of environments and allow territorial actors (local, regional elected officials, etc.) to participate in shaping and instituting public policy. In addition to this first modality of territorialization that Daniel Béhar (2000) calls territorialized policies, there is also the modality of territorial policies, which are public policies set out by the territorial actors themselves (Faure et Douillet, 2005).

However, upon reading the definition proposed by Neil Brenner (1999, p. 43), the relationship to public policy becomes considerably less straightforward:

I understand globalization as a double-edged, dialectical process through which: 1) the movement of commodities, capital, money, people, images, and information through geographical space is continually expanded and accelerated; and 2) relatively fixed and immobile socioterritorial infrastructures are produced, reconfigured, redifferentiated, and transformed to enable such expanded, accelerated movement. Globalization therefore entails a dialectical interplay between the endemic drive towards space-time compression under capitalism (the moment of deterritorialization) and the continual production of relatively fixed, provisionally stabilized configurations of territorial organization on multiple geographical scales (the moment of reterritorialization).

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Brenner's contribution contextualizes (re)territorialization within the evolution of global capitalism. The current phase of capitalism is premised obviously on a reduction in territorial forms of regulation (the Keynesian welfare state) in favour of greater fluidity in global trade. Paradoxically, however, the spread of global capitalism requires the creation of new territorial regulations, but on other scales (metropolitan areas, regions, urban networks, etc.). The construction of these new regulatory spaces is what Brenner calls reterritorialization.

These two general meanings of territorialization are not unrelated, inasmuch as they relate to the same realities and spaces – i.e., institutions engaged in the construction process on the sub-national territorial scale. Yet, the interpretation of these realities goes in different, even contradictory directions.

In the case of French research, territorialization has been constructed in response to sectoral public policies that grant little or no leeway to local territories. Territorialization corresponds to a certain notion of autonomy, or as has been argued by Faure and Douillet (2005) (see also Faure, 2007), to the community of interests of its members. This autonomy is also witnessed in the ability of territories to decompartmentalize public action in order to foster cross-sectional steering capacity. Clearly, for these actors, autonomy is completely relative, since territories can never gain full autonomy from the weight of the sectoral logics underlying national public policies (De Maillard and Roché, 2005).

In the context of rescaling, the issue of territorial autonomy does not appear to come up. In this case, territorialization stands in contrast with what other authors (Badie, 1995) would qualify as networks or spaces of flows (Castells, 1996). However, reterritorialization (or new territorial regulations) is for Brenner and others nothing more than a very inadequate response to the crises caused by the expansion of capitalism (Brenner, 2004, p. 260 and following). The construction of territorial institutions cannot be seen as any sort of affirmation of the autonomy of territories, but rather as a necessary condition of globalized capitalism.

It would be something of an exaggeration to confine each of these understandings of territorialization to the Francophone and Anglophone worlds. These worlds are not exactly sealed off from each other and yet, on the other hand, there is not a multitude of research to create dialogue between both meanings of territorialization (Faure et al., 2007). Such interaction seems a priori entirely desirable, since it would foster dialogue between the Anglo-American macrosocial view, which is often reproached for its lack of sensitivity to the empirical differences of territories (Blatter, 2006), and the French microsocal view, which is criticized for being unyielding regarding the specificity of territories.

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