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The Politics of French Territorial Governance

Introduction

The expression ‘territorial politics’ refers to the way in which territory relates to the political system, how different political ideologies interpret this relationship, and how political parties and movements put their interpretations into practice. Of course, ideological discourse may be simply rhetoric and far removed from actual practice. From the analysis presented so far in this book, it is clear, nevertheless, that different, competing models of territorial politics have co-existed throughout French history since the Revolution and, indeed, to some extent, already existed in the tensions between a centralizing monarchy and powerful fiefdoms in the possession of the nobility. The dominant model has been towards centralization initiated by the monarchs, continued by the Jacobins and completed, at least in its political and administrative outline by Napoleon I. To this centralizing thrust the Jacobin and Napoleonic heritage added at least the aspiration towards the standardization of political and administrative structures but also of culture and society. While political and administrative standardization became a reality by the early years of the Third Republic, cultural and societal standardization would take much longer. The second major tradition of thinking about territorial politics questioned whether this degree of standardization was even desirable. This is what we have called the Girondin tradition, from the revolutionary faction which did not question the gains of the Revolution nor indeed the advent of the Republic but which proposed a decentralized and even federalist organization of the new state regime precisely to accommodate the great diversity of France. The French political debate on territorial organization has oscillated between these two positions. As we shall see in this chapter, the pendulum has for a number of reasons swung back in recent years to the Girondin conception.

During the 19th century, political movements divided around issues such as the acceptance or rejection of the Revolution and of the democratic
republican regime to which it gave birth. But, although several regimes succeeded each other – two monarchies, two empires and two republics – throughout the century, it was the republican and democratic system which consolidated itself with the founding of the Third Republic in the period 1870–1875. During each regime period, those in opposition tended to support decentralization but, if they came to power, they forgot the demands they had previously made and made use of the centralized state as a way to consolidate their power. Nevertheless, the broad traditions of French political history are associated either with a predominantly Jacobin or centralizing orientation or, on the contrary, with a Girondin decentralizing orientation.

Thus, the left has tended to favour centralization and standardization as a way in which it could best implement its aims of equality and the redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor. As we saw in the last chapter, they also regarded with suspicion movements such as regionalism and federalism which they thought signified reaction and backwardness. In this they saw themselves as the heirs of the Jacobin faction of the revolution. At the same time, this picture needs to be nuanced by recalling that some of the left – the anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists – were hostile to the state as such, but particularly to the centralized state. Furthermore, the socialist left – as represented by the old French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO – Section Française de l’Internationale Ouvrière) was itself divided between Marxists and non-Marxists, perhaps it would be better to say between revolutionists and reformers, since the latter sometimes used Marxist rhetoric. In practice, the reformist branch of French socialism, although they were fierce Jacobins in their rhetorical discourses were quite sympathetic to the local dimension of French politics and even towards moderate decentralization. This is not surprising given that, since the 19th century, they built strong local fiefdoms in areas such as Nord, Pas-de-Calais and Marseille. Revolutionary socialism, on the other hand, as represented by the French Communist Party (PCF – Parti Communiste Français), founded in 1920 by those members of the SFIO (the majority at the Congress of Tours) who supported the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia, were even more extreme Jacobins. This is, perhaps, because their hero Lenin was a great admirer of Robespierre and the ruthless methods the latter used to impose the ‘Republic of Virtue’. Besides this imitation of the Leninist role model, the communists shared with the socialists the distrust and dislike of regionalism since they were even more strongly rooted in the urban proletariat and hardly likely to favour anything that smacked of provincial France. Finally, both socialists and communists regarded the central state as a prize to be captured and an instrument of political and social change. For the socialists, this change could happen in a piece-meal and gradualist way, while for the communists, following the Leninist theory of the party, the state was to be dominated by the party on behalf of the proletariat before its eventual ‘withering away’.