

## Reviews / Comptes rendus

### **Le pouvoir aux régions : La reconstruction géopolitique du territoire français (2nd ed.)**

by François Hulbert, Editions L'Harmattan, Collection Questions Contemporaines, Paris, 2011, 242 pp., paper €22.00 (ISBN 9782296547131)

François Hulbert, the author of *Le pouvoir aux régions*, is a well-known specialist in urban political geography, first of all with his work in Québec and later in France and Africa. During the last decade, his research has led him to analyze the territorial structure and role of the *départements* and regions within the French geopolitical territorial context, and to achieve a critical appraisal of spatial planning and regional development in France. Most Canadian geographers are aware that in all Western countries, in North America as well as in Western Europe, regional power is often a sensitive issue in political affairs, especially during electoral campaigns. Of course, in federal regimes (Canada, USA, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland), the political weight of regional entities is considerable, and the political rules of the game are based upon a *rapport de forces* between the federal and regional levels of government. Moreover, in the case of Europe, the last three decades have seen the political empowerment of regions within more centralized countries (as, for example, in Spain, Italy, or the United Kingdom). According to Hulbert, France remains archaic by comparison; as a matter of fact, with more than 36 000 *communes* (municipalities), it comprises more than 40 percent of the total number of *communes* of the European Union's 27 member states! This is all the more paradoxical since, in 1982 to 1983, the then Minister of the Interior pushed through Parliament the so-called *Lois sur la décentralisation*. Those comprehensive laws on decentralisation provided for a far-reaching transfer of decision-making powers to the 22

regional entities of metropolitan France; twenty-five years later, this reform has been subverted by petty politics and power plays.

Hulbert's book is well documented, especially in terms of municipal, departmental, and regional statistics; perhaps its major shortcoming is the lack of maps, except for the one on the front cover showing the various regional zones of influence within France. Interesting though the book might appear as a highly critical appraisal of the French regional system, its major interest lies in the set of proposals made by the author: he would reduce the number of regions from 22 to a dozen, each new region thus reaching a critical mass of at least 2.5 million inhabitants. He would also abolish the 100-odd *départements*, a fossilized structure inherited from the French Revolution. In order to achieve this, Hulbert suggests the organization of regional referendums, so as to harmonize the new regional territories with what he calls the citizens' *espace vécu*. He does not go so far as to remodel the French regions along the model of Spain's 17 autonomous or semi-autonomous regions, given France's tradition of centralisation.

To sum up, Hulbert's book is a significant contribution to a public debate which is often minimized or set aside by the political elites in France and elsewhere. But the book, in its present format, is primarily aimed at the academic community. It would be worthwhile to have a more concise, better illustrated version of the book, half-way between a scholarly essay and a political pamphlet. Such a publication, more accessible to the non-specialist, would turn this geographic essay into an interesting toolbox aimed at a major overhaul of the French regional system. It would also serve as a good example of the geographer's role as a catalyst for political and social change in France as well as in other industrialized nations.

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