Call for papers (Géocarrefour)

Capitals: scales, evolution, usages

Seats of political power, capital cities have been poorly studied as such by geographers (Andrew et al. 1993; Rapoport 1993; Sohn and Weber 2000; Kirsch 2005). Capitals are more than administrative centers, and local concentrations of powers induce specific morphologies and urban landscapes as well as a commanding status/function in urban networks. The study of capitals is at the crossroads of several research fields, such as political and urban geography, historical geography or regional science. This call for papers is not only interested in the specificities of capitals compared to other objects of urban research -global cities, metropolises...- but also tries to gather papers which would address political and social usages in capitals as well as question their evolution and their relationship with the territories they administrate.

This call aims at receiving papers embracing the three following themes: the relationship between capitals and the geo-historical evolution of their territories, the position of capitals in the governmental networks, and their specific political and social practices in relation to their status of capital.

1) The geo-historical evolution of capitals

Several recent studies are dealing with the question of capitals through a historical geography approach (Djament-Tran 2011; Montès 2008, 2014). They draw from the idea that capitals contribute to the territorial construction of the area they are governing on the long time and that they are creating a national identity embodied in clusters of symbolic or functional places. Moving capitals on the national territory is a moment when the identity of the seat of the power of a state or a territory is put once again into question and debate, when the spatial representations of a society -or of its leaders- are expressed (Musset 2002; Djament-Tran et Laporte 2010; Vidal 2003). Such spatial moves of capitals also enable ambitious urban and architectural projects that link political messages and urban morphology (Sonne 2003). We welcome paper questioning the conditions through which seats of power –with cases from the “North” as well as from the “South”- are kept in their location or moved.

2) Capitals within the hierarchy of territorial scales

The word “capital” is mostly used to define the sole seat of a state. Since states are imposing the most structuring norms, since they are considered as the most significant scale, their capitals have obviously become the quintessential seat of power, the most accomplished model of power concentration and representation. However, the morphology and the status of capitals vary a lot according to the types of territorial organization, from federation to unitary state. The idea that the influence of capitals spreads on a territory with borders and not on a customer catchment area as for economic functions is to be questioned. Decisions taken in a state apply to a given territory but might exert an influence largely beyond its borders. On another level, the question of the decentralization of powers, an already ancient trend of the administrative geography of many states, re-questions the specific role of capitals in relation to other cities in the state. One has also to question the relationship between the capital city and the shape, the range, and the status of the regional level it might be included in (special status province, custom-made region, federal district…), with regard to the local or metropolitan governance of the capital, be it specific or not.

If the state is not the sole agent of power, other territorial levels might be capable of embodiment in the urban fabric. The regional or federated level might give way to emerging cities that, although they are not national capitals, bear some of the latter specificities or attributes, particularly in federations or largely decentralized states. Munich or Barcelona might be given as examples as are the American state capitals (Montès 2014). The architectural endeavors of some French Regional Councils provide good instances of such evolutions. Papers on Brussels (Hein 2006; Chilla 2009) and Washington, D.C. (Blaser 2005, 2007) are positing the hypothesis that the rise of
supranational structures is leading to the affirmation of capitals, the influence of which largely exceeds sovereign states.

3) Political and social practices in capitals

The way political power becomes integrated in urban spaces is also a promising theme in terms of research perspectives. The settlement process of institutional power may create a spatial system as in Berlin (Laporte 2012) and in Rome (Djament-Tran 2005, 2011), which might be analyzed through the exploration of the multiple professional networks that support policy making, in institutions, medias, lobbies or diplomacy. The distortion between ways of decision making, which produce space at the local or micro-local scale, and their national or international impacts, makes capitals very original spaces and/or places. It is also necessary to question the relationships between the power at a level beyond that of the capital city (except in the very few cases of city-state or city-federated state) and at the level of urban governance.

Capitals are thus places of political and social usages. The association of the city and decisions that are taken there frequently sparks contestation or even revolt. The fight for civil rights in the USA, several episodes of the Arab Spring or the recent events on Maidan Square in Kiev are underlining the importance of such political iconic places. The places and routes of demonstrations create some kind of counter-capitals, juxtaposed to the spaces of political work. In wartime, capitals are often strategic places where conflicts are settled, from the battle of Berlin in 1945 to the takeover of Tripoli by the anti-Khadafi forces in 2011. This « place struggle » between power and counter-power in capitals remains a largely uncharted urban geography.

Paper submission

The deadline for submission is November 1st, 2014.

Articles might be written in French or in English. The typical length of the paper is about 40,000 characters, i.e. 6,000 words, spaces and figures included. They will strictly follow the editorial norms of the review that can be found on the following webpage: (http://geocarrefour.revues.org/index1017.html). Papers must be submitted online through the following webpage (http://manuscrits.revues.org/index.php/geocarrefour). Geocarrefour is a peer reviewed journal, papers will be evaluated under a double blind review process.

Notifications to authors will take place in January, 2015.

If the paper is accepted but needs to be partially rewritten, the new submission will be March, 2015.

The goal is to publish the present special issue during Fall 2015.

For any problems or questions, send an email to the coordinators (antoine.laporte@ens-lyon.fr or christian.montes@univ-lyon2.fr) or to the journal editor (geocarrefour@revues.org).


Hein, C. (2006), « Une capitale européenne polycentrique et opportuniste », in Brussels Studies, 10, 2
Kirsch, J. (2003), Hauptstadt. Zum Wesen und Wandel eines nationalen Symbols, Münster, LIT