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The Political Construction of Agglomerations: Institutional Transitions in France and Quebec

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This article presents an examination of the political construction of agglomerated communities from three perspectives. Agglomerations are perceived as territories, political institutions and sources of public action. Reforms to consolidate two agglomerations in Quebec and France were analyzed to determine whether the transition from the municipal level to the agglomeration level involved a minor shift or a major transformation of the logic underlying territorial, political or public action. The analysis is based on two case studies: the creation of the agglomeration of Rennes Métropole in France and the establishment of the Ville de Saguenay, or City of Saguenay, in Quebec. The evidence showed that the municipal mesh in agglomerations was highly resilient, even during the merger process and the transformation of the relationship between territory and politics.

En este artículo presentamos una revisión de la construcción política de las entidades de aglomeración desde tres perspectivas: las aglomeraciones que son percibidas como territorios, como instituciones políticas y como fuentes de acción pública. Estudiamos, en concreto, los procesos de reforma que han consolidado dos aglomeraciones en Quebec y en Francia, para determinar si la transformación del nivel municipal al de aglomeración se produce en mayor o menor medida, desde el punto de vista territorial, político o de acción pública. El análisis está basado en dos estudios: la creación de la aglomeración Métropole en Francia y la construcción de la City of Saguenay en Quebec. Los resultados muestran que la malla municipal en las aglomeraciones es muy fuerte, incluso durante los procesos de fusión y en las transformaciones de las relaciones entre política y territorio.

Key words: agglomeration, local government, France, Quebec, amalgamation, inter-municipal cooperation, institutional transition

JEL classification: R11, R12, Z0

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INTRODUCTION
This article addresses the political creation of agglomerations or, more accurately, the constitution of supra-local political structures in urban environments. The goal is to examine the political and institutional phenomena that occur when new political and administrative institutions taking on innovative forms are established on supra-local territories. In this context, the political construction concerned the institutionalization of the structure of political authority and public action. The agglomeration is understood here as a process. The goal is thus to identify and understand the dynamics underlying the creation of agglomerated communities. From this perspective, the institution in itself is less important than the process it results from, since the process reveals a set of values underlying the institutional project (Lefèvre, 1994).

The political construction of agglomerations is examined through case studies of the creation of the Rennes Métropole agglomeration community and of the City of Saguenay. These two new institutions resulted from the implementation of the Chevènement Law in France in July 1999 and the municipal reform in Quebec, which began in 2000. The goal is to understand how municipalities reacted to and participated in the implementation of territorial reorganization policies, which were mostly initiated by central governments and, more broadly, how the creation of these new agglomeration structures unfolded. We therefore focus on the genesis of these agglomerations as political and administrative bodies covering multiple municipalities in an urban setting. In fact, the French agglomeration communities and the Quebec municipal mergers are considered as experiments to institutionalize an already functional urban territory. The connection between the new and the old structures is established through the concept of “agglomeration.”

In order to discuss the creation of the agglomeration as observed in Rennes and in Saguenay, we will first present the manner in which the agglomeration is constructed and understood through the concept of “institutional transition” (1). In the second part of this paper, we will discuss the main results of the transition from the municipal to the agglomeration level (2).

1. AGGLOMERATION AND INSTITUTIONAL TRANSITION

Toward a useful definition of “agglomeration”
“Agglomeration” does not have an explicit, universal definition in the
research literature or in statistics. Geographers, sociologists and economists cannot agree on a common definition for the agglomeration, no more can they for other types of territories, such as the city or the region. Similarly, national institutes of statistics such as the INSEE in France or Statistics Canada do not agree on how to define what an urban region is, even though both go beyond the concepts of continuity of a built-up area or population density (INSEE-INRA, 1998; Collin, 1998) and include commuting flows to define urban territories.

In fact, it is important to clarify what is meant by “agglomeration” in order to determine the main components of the concept. Our definition is based on the concept used in metropolis studies, which does not, however, convey the full meaning of the word. The two-process definition of the metropolis as proposed by Bassand (2001) does not quite fit the profile of groups of medium-sized urban municipalities that underwent amalgamation in the cases described here. The first process refers to the internal structuring process of urbanization resulting from household and business location strategies. Urban sprawl then occurs and leads to the creation of new, specialized territorial functions and new city cores. The second process is broader and emphasizes the development of a system of metropolitan regions within the economic context of generalized competition.1 The size of the groups of urban municipalities analyzed here prompted us to question the usefulness of these two components for developing a concept of medium-sized communities, so we looked elsewhere for components that might generate a useful definition of the agglomeration. Drawing on literature on the territory and local public administration and on urban studies research, we identified three major components to circumscribe the concept of “agglomeration.”

Figure 1: The three components of the agglomeration

Firstly, the agglomeration is indisputably a territory, the main feature of which is that it extends beyond municipal boundaries. In this sense, the agglomeration is supposed to support the urban form in giving expression to a new, more effective distribution of political and administrative functions through integrated planning and management. The agglomeration is a manifestation of a quest for a consolidated territory that comes close to the concept of an ideal, optimal but unattainable territory (Mény, 1990; Sharpe, 1995; Barlow, 1991).

Secondly, as a political and administrative institution, it is considered an arena for exercising political leadership. The agglomeration exists if it is led by a government that is elected by direct or indirect franchise and which has the authority to make decisions on the territory concerned. Born out of the amalgamation of municipalities, the agglomeration inherits the many issues surrounding local power or, more accurately, the ongoing debates between elitist and pluralistic theories (Hunter, 1953; Jordan, 1990), and it also fuels the debate on the autonomy of the local areas (Grémion, 1976; Cochrane, 1995) and governance mechanisms (Stone, 2001; Le Galès, 2002). These studies address the issue of power in the cities, but it is questionable whether the concepts conveyed in them can encompass the specific characteristics of the agglomeration. Does this new political space constitute a specific political arena or, on the contrary, are we witnessing the creation of a supra-local public space that simply reproduces the same local logic of conquest and exercise of power?

Finally, to superimpose its structure on existing territories, the agglomeration must be given legitimacy, which is essential for generating public action. Above and beyond the mere sharing of financial costs for supra-local facilities, social issues such as housing and caring policies require special attention at the agglomeration level. The aim is to have a better distribution of tax revenues and to propose equalization payments to compensate for free rider behaviour (Olson, 1965). The confusion in local public action, or the “who does what” dilemma caused by financial overlap, multiple-tier governments and stakeholders (public, private and third sector) intervening in project management, means that the reliability of political leaders is debatable. These issues highlight the core condition for public action: the capacity to act only exists if accompanied by formal authority, or what one may call the legitimacy to act (Duran, 1999). The institutionalization of the agglomeration challenges not only the scope and content of its actions but also the conditions surrounding it and, ultimately, its legitimacy.
If take all three components — territory, government and public action — into account, we can approach the agglomeration as a political and territorial construction from a broad perspective while considering the specificity of each local configuration.

**Birth and transition of the institution**

To gain a better understanding of how municipal political systems have succeeded in controlling the new institutional structures proposed by the State or have failed to do so, we examined the birth of the agglomeration institutions. We proceeded by identifying “institutional transition” periods, or more precisely, the interval between the announcements of the reforms and the implementation of the new institutions concerned. For the French municipal reform, we considered the period between July 19, 1999, when the Chevènement Law on the simplification and reinforcement of inter-municipal structures was adopted by the National Assembly, and January 1, 2000, when Rennes Métropole was officially created. For Quebec, we studied the period from June 2000, when the white paper on municipal restructuring was published, to January 28, 2002, when the City of Saguenay officially came into being.

In short, we studied preparations for the institution, not its implementation. The neo-historical institutionalist perspective (Evans et al., 1985; Steinmo, 1993) presumes that the three components (territory, government and public action) of the agglomeration are influenced by the way they were defined at the birth of the institution (positive feedbacks) but that they are also influenced by the cooperation context preceding the reform. Without relying too much on a reflection based on path dependency (Pierson, 1994), we mainly analyzed the processes that occur with the territorial implementation of reforms and policies of upper-tier organizations.

We analyzed the genesis of the agglomerations through the concept of institutional transition, or the passage from one stable legal status to another stabilized legal status. Rennes went from the legal status of the district to the legal status of the agglomeration community of Rennes Métropole. In the case of Quebec, the legal existence of seven Saguenay municipalities was replaced by the legal status of a single city encompassing all seven. Although the legal dates are considered a valid basis for establishing the study timeframe, they do not mark any immediate changes in the political and organizational reality. They are used primarily to target a subject of study that must be put into the historical, politi-
cal and institutional context preceding the transitions, while including the early months or years of operation of the new institutions. The Rennes case study covers the 30 years of the district’s existence and the first 15 months of Rennes Métropole, including the 2001 municipal elections. The City of Saguenay case study covers the last 30 years, from the first wave of mergers in the early 1970s to 2002.

Under the impetus of specific reforms (Mévellec, 2005), the institutional creation of the agglomeration is accompanied by a transition, the practical and symbolic forms and effects of which need to be clarified. Viewing institutional creation as a dynamic process, we can analyze the three main components of an agglomeration in terms of change. These changes result from external constraints (institutional policies of government) and the internal issues of each territorial configuration. Using the ideal-typical agglomeration as a benchmark, we studied the institutional transitions from three operational perspectives. We first examined territorial construction by looking at the transactions and discussions around territorial structures and boundaries. We then explored political construction by considering the political perspectives of elected officials in relation to these institutional creations. Finally, we looked at legitimacy construction, or how the institution asserts its authority to take public action.

Methodology
Once the concepts of agglomeration and institutional transition were defined, it was possible to compare the way they found practical expression in Rennes and Saguenay. We compared two contrasting national examples and tried to identify common elements. The contrast between Quebec and France is significant, since the legal heritage of Napoleonic France and that of Great Britain have influenced the present municipal landscape.

That being said, the contrast is mitigated by three common elements. First, both France and Quebec considered that municipal fragmentation was a problem. Amalgamation was a response to the dominant discourse, according to which the country/province was plagued by large-scale municipal fragmentation and this was the main cause of the ineffectiveness of public action in France (Guéranger, 2003) and fiscal unfairness in Quebec. Secondly, the reforms in both France and Quebec were designed to consolidate agglomerated communities. Their primary goal, though expressed with different degrees of explicitness, was
to strengthen the upper-tier government. The inter-communal structure is not the same as at a merged city, but both reforms chose to create a unified agglomeration level, contrary to the institutional fragmentation preferred by Great Britain (Keating, 1995). Consequently, we are closer to the consolidation model than to public choice theory. Thirdly, in both France and Quebec, central authorities imposed a relatively tight schedule for reform implementation, making it easier to observe the results.

However, the two governments pursued very different strategies as they moved closer to consolidation. France put an end to the inter-communal practices initiated at the end of the 19th century by reducing the number of available institutional tools and, above all, by reinforcing its instruments in urban areas. Still, the Chevenement reform complied with the Republican Pact (Le Lidec, 2001) since voluntary action by the municipalities remained the basic principle of inter-communal cooperation. The reform was a logical development of past structures. There was no fundamental disruption in the instruments used nor in the philosophy behind it. The situation was very different in Quebec. Over the preceding 30 years, municipal merger incentives, some successful, some not, had coexisted with the promotion of inter-municipal cooperation. Minister Harel imposed a clear change in approach. First, the reform imposed mergers on the communities at the expense of a more cooperative solution. Second, mergers mostly concerned the urban sector, whereas traditionally it had been applied to the rural sector. Third, the mergers were carried out in an authoritarian way.

The two case studies — one on the creation of Rennes Métropole in France and the other on the creation of the City Saguenay in Quebec — involved research on inter-communal history, existing practices before the Quebec and Chevenement reforms, the events, decisions and processes that occurred with the transformation of pre-existing supra-local units into new agglomeration institutions, and the political discourses promoting the creation or the existence of the new institution during the electoral campaign and at other times. In order to cover all these elements, the methodology included a review of the literature on the subject (grey literature, assembly proceedings, academic works on Rennes and Saguenay), and a comprehensive review of local newspapers such as Ouest-France and Le Quotidien (Chicoutimi) from 1998 to 2003. We also conducted 80 interviews, mainly with municipal politicians and senior municipal and supra-local officers.
Rennes is the administrative and political capital of Brittany. With 212,000 inhabitants, it is the urban core of an agglomeration with 350,000 inhabitants. The inter-communal history started in 1970 with the creation of a district to solve the lack of space in the city of Rennes — space that was needed to build universities and other institutions of higher learning that the central government promised at the time.²

The political history of Rennes is fairly “homogeneous”, since the city has had only three mayors since 1945. The socialist mayor, Edmond Hervé, who was first elected in 1977, strongly influenced the style of the inter-communal cooperation in the agglomeration. District chairperson between 1989 and 2008, he benefited from the support of a majority of socialist mayors in the agglomeration. The inter-communal history of Rennes reflects an inclusive, proactive strategy made possible because of the numerous front-line organizations, consisting of inter-communal syndicates who took charge of difficult issues (transportation, waste management) or experimental policies (specific taxes). Consequently, the district tackled these issues after they had already been solved by these syndicates. These front-line organizations were also useful to local politicians, who could familiarize themselves with inter-communal operations before taking on their role in the district or the agglomeration community.

Finally, we can say that the Rennes district was an ideal candidate for a natural transformation into an agglomeration community (Baraize, Négrier, 2001). The implementation of the Chevènement Law did not bring substantial changes since the district already provided variety of strategic services such as regional planning and development, economic development and housing and had been operating a specific tax system since 1992.

The Saguenay agglomeration was very different. It was organized around three main cities: Chicoutimi, the central city and regional administrative capital (60,000 inhabitants); Jonquière, its twin city (54,000 inhabitants); and the smaller city of La Baie (20,000 inhabitants). These three cities were themselves the offspring of three previous municipal mergers in the early 1970s. The creation of a single big city had been in the air since then. This three-pole configuration was very strong, not only because there were three municipalities but also becau-

² For a detailed presentation of the history and inter-communal institutions in Rennes, see Le Galès, 1993; Michel, 1999; Guy, Givord, 2004; and Mévellec, 2008.
se there were three different organizational cultures as well as three distinct political elites. Inter-municipal cooperation was infrequent and fraught with difficulty. The mandatory supralocal unit (the Regional County Municipality) operated at a legal minimum. The implementation of municipal reform in Saguenay occurred late in 2001. In fact, the merger was both inevitable and planned. The process unfolded in three stages: (1) Saguenay citizens and politicians could present territorial reform proposals to a government representative who, in turn, made his recommendations to Minister Harel (November 2000–February 2001); (2) an arbitration committee was appointed by the Department of Municipal Affairs with a mandate to help municipalities prepare a common merger request (March 2001–June 2001); and (3) the Department designated a transition committee whose role was to provide the baseline for the new city (July 2001–February 2002). The merger project proposed by the government representative did not win the unanimous support of the mayors affected by it, but the process nevertheless continued until the new city of Saguenay was created in February 2002.

Agglomeration is thus viewed from an institutional perspective, in the political and legal sense. Attention is focused on the institutionalization of the agglomeration, whether it is a new city or an agglomeration community. To be more precise, the focus is on the political phenomena that occur with the implementation of these new institutions, including the choice of territories, political strategies of local politicians, as well as the efforts made to legitimize the new institution.

2. The political construction of agglomerations: from resistance to transformation

There is a close connection between the results achieved at the end of this exercise and the three-part analysis of agglomerated communities applied to the two case studies. This enables us to understand how the transition from the municipal to the supra-local level is achieved and how the political and territorial issues are continuously interrelated. The cases of Rennes and Saguenay clearly show that the implementation of a new municipal government body is very dependent on the historical and political contexts. Knowledge of local configurations (Elias, 1993)

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3 The president of the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, a former chief administrative officer of Jonquière, and the La Baie school board chairperson made up this committee. They also went on to be members of the transition committee.
helps us to assess the effects of establishing a new institution on a given territory and the way the process fits in with existing plans. Local buy-in to national reforms is contingent on a process of translation and integration into existing political tactics and relationships. In this regard, we follow the lead of other researchers in stressing the need to give special consideration to the long term (Fontaine, Hassenteufel, 2002).

The birth of a new institution should be considered as a project that not only brings out the existing dynamics but also serves as a platform for a new political blueprint from which the political configuration of the territory is reshaped (Lefèvre, 1995). The existing dynamics help to determine the three components of each agglomeration — territory, type of government, and the public action for which it takes responsibility.

**Territorial construction of the agglomeration**

The composite nature of the agglomeration territory is based on the municipal mesh, even though the goal is to try to break away from that mesh. Above and beyond this fact, the case studies showed us that the agglomeration’s boundaries were initially ill defined and subsequently broadened during institutional genesis. Defining the outer perimeter is based on multiple logical frameworks or rationales: technical and fiscal, public action, and political. They determine municipalities’ decision whether to enter the agglomeration or not and the agglomeration’s decision to include certain municipalities.

The technical and fiscal rationales highlight the presence of specific assets on certain municipal territories that make them attractive to future agglomeration institutions. For example, Noyal-Sur-Vilaine is located at the entrance of the Rennes agglomeration, on the main road to Paris. Many businesses, which provide important tax revenues, chose this municipality because of its geographical location. In Saguenay, the municipality of Larouche had a potential landfill on its territory, which would be very useful to the new city in the near future. In both cases, the agglomeration institutions desired to include the municipalities concerned in their new territory, while the municipalities would have preferred to remain self-governed or to be associated with other municipalities.

The second rationale that we identified is more closely linked to public policies developed by the agglomeration structures and to the agglomeration’s capacity to take on “the problems” in one area and devise

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4 This typology is loosely based on the work of Massardier (1994).
“solutions” for the entire territory. In Saguenay, for example, the industrial facilities in the harbour in La Baie could not be maintained outside the new, larger city. It was a transformative component of the economic development policies for the region. In the case of Rennes, the issues of land-use planning and housing were more important. Since the city of Rennes is unable to handle a population influx, the agglomeration’s growth will depend on the suburban communes. Territorial interdependencies are thus used to define an “operational” perimeter for the new institution.

Finally, there are also political reasons for defining the perimeter. In both Rennes and Saguenay, the institutionalization of the agglomeration was interpreted as a strategy launched by the mayor of the central city to broaden its territorial power base. At the same time, the mayors’ choice of an agglomeration could be influenced by party allegiance or electoral strategies. This intricate game of constraints and opportunities influenced the layout of the final perimeter. In both cases, the legislator had designed a legal framework allowing for boundaries to change in the first few years of the new agglomeration. In other words, it factored in the progressive and open nature of the perimeter.

The territorial issue is not just about setting the outer perimeter; it is also about structuring boundaries within the new territory. The agglomeration territory is often organized around more or less ad hoc intermediate divisions, combining old municipal boundaries and the new agglomeration perimeter. In Rennes, as in other French communities, the territory is divided into “sectors.” The chairperson of Rennes Métropole encouraged these sectors to become the territorial foundations of the agglomeration. They organized the projects and the dialogue between the central city and the municipalities of the first and second suburban rings surrounding the city. Presented as a tool for planning and public policies, this intermediate mesh was also the locus of a political project. In becoming the fundamental level for thinking and providing proximity equipment and services, the sectors could make the existing munici-

5 In Quebec, we call it the “see-saw” principle, which includes the annexation of a rural municipality as an industrial extension of the neighbouring city. In France, the Gouze amendment provides for extending the community’s perimeter in the first three years of its existence.

pal structure obsolescent. In orchestrating this dynamic, the people in charge of Rennes’ inter-communal structures strived to initiate extensive transformation on the basis of cooperation. Mayor-chairperson Edmond Hervé stated: “I believe that the sectors will be the great innovation of this agglomeration community. (...) I always say that the sector is to the agglomeration community what the neighbourhood is to the city.”

Nevertheless, the support sectors were, at the time of the transformation of the district into an agglomeration community, mostly symbolic divisions. The municipalities, as electoral and political units, remained the basic reference points for elected officials and citizens.

In Quebec, a number of new cities were organized as boroughs, facilitating a “spatial” transition from former municipalities to the new, larger city. In some cases, boroughs correspond to former municipalities or to intermediate groupings. In Saguenay, three boroughs were created based on each of the three former cities of the agglomeration and their surrounding municipalities. These boroughs are essentially lower-tier structures for providing local services. The electoral districts are also based on the former municipal boundaries. Furthermore, each municipality integrated into the new city, whatever its size, is represented by a municipal councilor. This represented a gain for the politicians of these small municipalities during the transition period. In short, the former municipalities in Saguenay showed a resilience that went far beyond the municipal merger. Maintaining traditional municipal divisions softened the “radical” nature of the merger.

The territorial construction of the agglomeration was fraught with contradiction. On the one hand, a middle-tier structure (borough or sector) was created to “de-municipalize” territorial and public action in the agglomeration. On the other hand, maintaining the municipal electoral mesh seemed to build the resilience of the electoral divisions of the municipalities in some measure. Examination of the agglomerations’ internal and external boundaries shows the strength of the resistance at the municipal level. The search for reconciliation between an operational territory and an institutional one is strongly influenced by the


8 For a study of the political construction of boroughs in the city of Montreal, see Alain, 2007.
resulting municipal inertia. The territorial construction of agglomerations affords an opportunity to explain the truly resilient nature of the municipal model. In fact, the agglomeration superimposes itself on the municipal infrastructure more than it eliminates it, including during municipal mergers.

Political construction of the agglomeration

Our purpose in this section is to find out whether political activity at the agglomeration level is different from political activity at the municipal level. To answer this question, we chose to look at the local politicians’ work and determine the central role of mayors during the birth of the agglomeration institutions. Note, in this regard, that the transition from municipality to agglomeration features a growing hierarchical organization of local political mandates.

Contrary to the findings of research on urban governance (Le Galès, 2002), economic players have been mostly absent from the processes involved in the creation of the Rennes and Saguenay agglomerations. This absence at the local level does not apply to all cases, since other research on French inter-communal structures highlights the presence of the economic elite. Furthermore, their absence at the time of the institutional genesis does not foreshadow their involvement in the development of public policies for the new cities and agglomeration communities. Economic players remained discreet during the institutional genesis for different reasons: in Rennes, the district’s transformation into an agglomeration community did not change anything for them since the inter-communal fiscal system was already in place; in Saguenay, certain economic players gave their opinion to the government representative but, with a few exceptions, they never expressed it publicly.

Not only were economic players very discreet, but municipal councillors were also marginalized during the institutional transitions. The transition processes were “confiscated” by the mayors, who controlled the political discourse precisely because they did not control decisions concerning the creation of the new institutions. In France, the inter-communal structure was known for being controlled by the mayors, especially the mayors with the biggest base of support and political capital (Le Saout, 2000; Bué et al. 2004). Negotiations and decisions concerning transformation of the Rennes district into an agglomeration community were prepared within the “mayors’ council,” a closed structure out of the public eye but at the heart of the city’s inter-communal ope-
rations (Dormois, 2004). Municipal councillors, like the district assembly, could do nothing but rubber-stamp decisions, and seldom were divergent views within the municipal councils reported on in newspapers.

As mentioned earlier, the Saguenay merger was led by government officials appointed by the Department of Municipal Affairs, making it a very “technocratic” process (Dubois, Dulong, 1999). Only the mayors were invited to sit with the “technocrats.” Yet, as the transition committee sketched out the overall structure of the future city, the Mayors’ council acted as a mere consultant. The main concern of the “technocratic” transition committee was to keep the amalgamation issue separate from local politics. They achieved these considerations by keeping their distance from local politicians and marginalizing the power of the democratic assembly.

The question of institutional transitions also affords us an opportunity to examine the content of the day-to-day activities of French and Quebec mayors. This is particularly relevant to Quebec since little research has been conducted on this aspect of politics. Faced with a reform imposed by the central government, Saguenay politicians developed new conceptions of their role (Lagroye, 1997). Marginalized in a transition process where they could not even pretend to be “decision-makers,” the mayors adopted the role of middlemen, or intermediaries. They became representatives of their communities in dealings with the “technocratic authorities.” For example, the intermediary role prompted them to try to prolong the existence of their community within the new city by ensuring that one municipal councillor would represent each municipality or that the acquired rights and benefits of the former municipality were maintained. In Rennes, elected officials took on a more proactive role: since the Rennes district strived to be a model of integrated cooperation, it was “natural” to transform it rapidly into an agglomeration community and thereby benefit from the financial windfall that came with the creation of the agglomeration community on January 1, 2000. The institutional transition was thus inescapable. Only a few politicians criticized the speedy process, and some municipal councillors expressed their fear of being marginalized.

Finally, examination of political work during the institutional transitions brings out the partisan nature of the French inter-communal structure and of the Quebec municipal world. While the dominant discourse of local politicians seemed politically neutral in both cases, it was not...
neutral on the ground. In Rennes, the chairperson proposed to operate the inter-communal institution based alternately on “a majority of ideas, a majority of sensitivities, and a territorial majority.” Meanwhile, both political parties (the Socialist party and the Union pour un Mouvement Populaire) organized political platforms at the agglomeration level for the 2001 municipal elections. Furthermore, newspapers used the political spectrum of the agglomeration to rank the teams or independent candidates and determine where they stood. For example, one report stated that independent candidates were “definitely are on the side of the majority of communes that make up Rennes Métropole.”

Traditionally, the municipal world in Quebec rejects any form of politicization, especially the intrusion of provincial or federal parties (Tindal and Tindal, 2004). However, during the institutional transitions, access to the Quebec government was highly valued. The mayors mobilized personal and partisan networks. For example, the mayor of La Baie publicized his meetings with Premier Lucien Bouchard, and the mayor of Larouche highlighted his relationship with the Lac-Saint-Jean member of the National Assembly (MNA). Personal and partisan networks were engaged for electoral purposes.

Finally, the institutionalization of the agglomeration intensified the hierarchization of local mandates by favouring the politicians with the best political and partisan resources—the mayors of the central cities. The setup of the new agglomerated communities widened the distinction between different types of local politicians. In Saguenay, four categories of elected officials were created: mayor, member of the executive committee, borough chairperson and municipal councillor. In the French model, we find five levels: mayor-chairperson, mayor-vice-chairperson, mayor, deputy mayor and municipal councillor. In France, as in Quebec, there was a concentration and hierarchization of the local mandates at the expense of democratic institutions.

Construction of the agglomeration’s legitimacy
We can analyze the recognition of the agglomerated community as a legitimate and “customary” territory by examining the integration of the agglomeration legitimacy theme in behaviours, discourses and symbols.

A geographical name signals recognition of the existence and identity of the area concerned. A name designates the individuality of the new territory and also characterizes it (Debarbieux, Poisat, 1999). The naming issue is typical of the French and Quebec reforms. In an inter-communal system, the name of the public institution is added on to the existing municipalities, while in the merger process, the name of the new city replaces the names of the former municipalities. In France, urban and agglomeration communities have selected names for the purpose of promoting and positioning themselves in dealings with the outside world. In Quebec, the names of the new cities were primarily designed for self-affirmation inside the territory. In most of the amalgamated municipalities, the name of the central city became the name of the new entity.

In Rennes, the issue was raised rather discreetly. It appeared in the press once the agglomeration community had been established. The former name of “Rennes district” was challenged because it referred to an obsolete legal status. The transition to an agglomeration community was an opportunity to rename the inter-communal institution and confirm the territorial image. The choice of a new name was made internally, inside the inter-communal structures, without consulting the citizens. Toward the end of February 2000, the citizens’ assembly voted for the adoption of “Rennes Métropole” as the new name of the agglomeration community. This choice confirmed the communication strategy already developed by the district in its development plan (2000–2006): “Une métropole forte pour une Bretagne européenne.”

The word “metropolis” conveys a number of objectives, relating both to the urban form (urban planning and development, population increase) and to metropolitan functions (R&D, European outreach). The word “Métropole” is supposed to characterize the agglomeration of Rennes and position it among European metropolitan centres, although it is not as big as they are. The “metropolis” qualifier was used to upgrade the agglomeration in a competitive environment. The name is thus a tool for marketing the new city and asserting its distinctive potential. It reflects an ongoing, voluntary approach resulting in the positioning of the agglomeration community (Noisette and Vallérugo, 1996). Strangely, Rennes chose the word “metropolis” at a time when it had become commonplace. Four out of 14 existing urban communities in 2000 had adopted this term: “Le Mans Métropole,” “Marseille Provence Métropole,” “A strong metropolis for a European Brittany.”
“Lille Métropole” and “Brest Métropole Océane.” More significantly, nine agglomeration communities had also chosen the word. In becoming banal, the label lost its symbolic value.

In Saguenay, contrary to other issues surrounding municipal reform, the name of the future city was addressed neither by the arbitration committee nor by the transition committee. The Minister offered the Saguenay community the opportunity to choose its name by public debate, which was mostly a way to avoid the question. There were very few mergers where the debate took on as much importance as in Saguenay.

This calls for three comments. Firstly, the name issue came up as soon as the merger was decided on in February 2001. As the debate over the principle, advantages and disadvantages of urban municipal amalgamation died down, the battle over the name was joined. The name issue symbolized the debates around the merger, allowing citizens to express their opinion on the municipal amalgamation: an annexation by the central city, a regional opportunity, etc. Furthermore, the technocratic institutional transition process ignored the matter, probably considered marginal by the government. However, the name of the new city remained the subject of statements and comments in the local newspaper for more than two years.

Secondly, the name was politically ambiguous for municipal politicians, who tried to avoid the debate during their political campaign. The issue was to determine the ways and means of providing guidance for the choice of a new name. Should a referendum on the name be held in conjunction with the municipal elections? The mayoralty candidates were divided on this question. While the former mayor of Jonquière recommended a simultaneous vote, the mayor of Chicoutimi was opposed to it. The name issue was a tricky one for him because Chicoutimi, as a central city, was part of a potential solution but at the same time represented the annexation of the others municipalities by it. That is why he wanted to separate the electoral campaign from the referendum and thus continue projecting an image as a unifying force. In addition, the municipal council of Chicoutimi advised the transition committee to create a “council of elders” to identify different scenarios for choosing the name of the future city. The naming issue remained outside the electoral campaign, and even outside new municipal council’s duties. The council of elders organized an open consultation process in April 2002 to consider three proposed names: Chicoutimi, Chicoutimi-Jonquière and Ville (de) Saguenay. The consultation was preferred to a referendum in order
to avoid stifling debate and polarizing opinion during the first few months of the new city’s existence. In spite of the council’s precautions, the supporters of the Chicoutimi and Saguenay names joined battle, using two teams, two sets of arguments and two communication strategies. In the end, Saguenay won with 52.5% of votes cast.

Thirdly, above and beyond the two sides’ respective arguments, the two names reflected two different interpretations of the merger. Chicoutimi is consistent with the rationale applied in the other cities produced by the Quebec municipal reform. Yet, in this particular community, adopting the name of the central city was inseparable from the idea of annexation. According to a performative rationale, naming the future city Chicoutimi would have meant accepting annexation to the regional capital in the municipal amalgamation. The mayor of the city was so aware of this fact that he refused to take a position in the debate. A member of the National Assembly (MNA) explained: “Each time we talked about the amalgamation, we talked about the Ville de Saguenay. Why? So it wouldn’t look like an annexation. Listen, it was a merger. So, when there was talk of a merger, we had to find something other than the names of the three cities.”

Saguenay was the name proposed initially by the government, but it was not imposed; it was presented as a unifying name. The name won support because it was not distinctive or specific, and did not designate any of the cities. Since it did not belong to any of them, it best suited a community born out of the synergy of amalgamated municipalities. But the Saguenay name still designated a river, a region and an electoral division. As far as its detractors were concerned, there was a high risk of confusion with this multiplicity of names. However, the indistinctive quality of the name was an asset for its promoters. Its vagueness made it much more inclusive. In the end, Ville de Saguenay became the name of choice as a “totem” (Durkheim, 1960) for the new municipal institution. No municipality could claim ownership of the name Ville de Saguenay, which thenceforth characterized the new territory and eliminated the former municipal referents.

The “naturalization” of the agglomerations took a different path. In the case of Rennes, politicians insisted on stating that the upper-tier political and territorial structure was added onto the existing municipal framework. The starting point for such a strategy is the choice of a name representing continuity with the existing territorial marketing and logi-

cally aligned with other plans such as a communication policy and the narrative construction of a coherent history (Mévellec, 2008). Image construction is part of political work. However, in the Saguenay case, the naturalization process was much more fragmented because the political authorities were marginalized during the transition and had no control over it. Since no legitimate voice could be heard during that period, alternative discourses on identity occupied the empty space. The naturalization of the agglomerations followed the reforms that gave birth to them. In Rennes, elected officials oversaw the choice of a name that gave greater credibility to a political enterprise designed to create a new political community. In Saguenay, elected officials withdrew from the issue and entrusted it to experts (the council of elders). The choice of a name was not used to identify a political project, which remained a technocratic undertaking at the time of the transition. The agglomeration institutions were not only built out of the former municipalities, their territories and their organizations but also drew on their modes of legitimacy.

**Conclusion**

The ideal type of agglomeration, articulating territory, government and public action, has proven to be a rich vein of ideas and concepts for gaining an understanding of the political motivations behind, and the genesis of, the Rennes and Saguenay agglomeration institutions, revealing a number of anticipated and unanticipated hidden phenomena. The three processes used to make the new agglomeration operational — territorial construction, political construction and legitimacy construction — could be adapted for studying both the institutional genesis and actual operations of agglomerations.

The study of the political construction of these agglomerations clearly showed the strength of the municipal model. In fact, we can say that the agglomeration represented only a “shift” or “drift” from the municipality. Political rationales, specific organizational models (Mévellec, 2008) and even forms of legitimacy associated with the former municipalities are appropriated in their entirety by the agglomeration or are positioned one beside the other. This resilience of the municipal mesh and of its representatives in building territorial political structures can be considered as a force of inertia or as a guarantee of continuity in territorial government models. In any event, it stands in opposition to the idea of a revised territorial model or the creation of a new territorial model.

Nevertheless, the drift also represents a transformation that took pla-
ce in the backrooms of public action. The creation of agglomeration institutions reshaped the ties between territory and politics. The institutional transitions forced politicians to redefine their role. In reconciling, however imperfectly, the functional territory and the institutional territory, the Harel and Chevènement reforms created first and foremost a new action framework for territorial stakeholders, who, like the politicians of Rennes and Saguenay, have to manage different territorial structures. The political construction of agglomerated communities is thus the product of the tensions between the resilience of the traditional municipal model and the dynamics specific to upper-tier governments.
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