

# Iconography and circulation on the Atlantic seaboard: Europe and North America

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## Michel Phlipponneau

*From his appointment as a lecturer in 1950, the author has spent all his academic career within the Department of Geography of the Université de Haute-Bretagne à Rennes, of which he was acting Head for a long while, until his retirement in 1984, when he became an emeritus fellow. After his doctorate thesis in 1955 and a short stay at Chicago and Northwestern Universities, in 1956 he met in Princeton Jean Gottmann who was then putting the first touches to his major work Megalopolis. Jean Gottmann was to play a decisive role in directing the young Breton geographer towards research work in applied geography. In France, applied geography suffered from severe backwardness until the publication of Géographie et action. Introduction à la géographie appliquée (1960). Forty years later, La Géographie appliquée: Du géographe universitaire au géographe professionnel (1999) showed the way covered on a national and worldwide scale. Michel Phlipponneau was chairman of the Commission on Applied Geography of the I.G.U from 1968 to 1980. He was himself an actor in regional planning in Brittany and abroad as an expert for the United Nations, and at a political level as a departmental and regional Counsellor and as Deputy-Mayor of Rennes and President of the Urban District.*

## Introduction

Jean Gottmann being one of the most significant authors of *Ekistics*, a half a century long and faithful friendship brings me to quote a few exchanges of ideas that were to be published in the *Proceedings of a Symposium on European Iconographies*.<sup>1</sup>

Considering, as a Breton geographer, the spatial distribution of men and activities in the great urban areas on both sides of the Atlantic, I had been wondering for a long while about the striking opposition between the North American and European seaboard. In 1956, I had the opportunity to visit Jean Gottmann in Princeton. He was already working on *Megalopolis* and devised it as the model of urbanization which would prevail on a worldwide scale at the dawn of the third millennium. I was on my way back from a three-month stay in Chicago where, within its universities, its business schools and main companies, I had been looking for new ideas and methods which could contribute to the revival of the Atlantic European seaboard, its "Finisterres," and in the first place Brittany, from where, due to the lack of modern equipment and activities, a growing number of young people were then moving towards the hinterlands.

Jean Gottmann had encouraged me in such research work,

while well established French geographers were then hostile to the first research works in "applied geography." "Carry on, be determined in urging geographers to action and application ... on behalf of our discipline, for the sake of Brittany and for the progress of facts and mankind" was what he wrote to me, in his dedication of *La politique des États et leur géographie* and following an analysis in the *Geographical Review* of the first research works in regional planning achieved by young French geographers.<sup>2</sup>

## The North American Atlantic seaboard: Mobility and iconography

In 1956, answering my questions about Megalopolis, Jean Gottmann observed that the ancient Megalopolis, founded in the 4th century BC, in the heart of the Peloponnese, did not match the ambitions of Epaminondas, probably because of a lack of movement. The commitment to symbols, images, thoughts, iconography, while inducing a compartmentalization which limits movement, stops growth.

On the American shoreline of the Atlantic, it is definitely movement, as a factor of change and transformation, that leads to a tremendous urban development. But iconography itself adds its own effects: it ranks in the front row mobility, pioneer spirit, and the image of a perpetual advance of the "frontier."

With the arrival of successive floods of migrants, some ports are building up the cores of an implantation, at first limited by the Appalachians. They are used as ground bases for the conquest of the Wild West, but also to capture external markets. From the end of the 18th century, the largest North American fortunes are linked to the leading maritime trade companies, the Civil War ensuring the commercial supremacy of the northern ports. After the two world wars, the assumed leadership of World Trade leads to the United Nations headquarters being based in New York.

At the ultimate stage of the westward march, the Californian megapole has experienced a marked economic growth linked to the Pacific Zone countries, and on the opposite seaboard, the "Tokaido Megapole," the subject of Jean Gottmann's last research, concentrates 40 percent of a population whose activities rely mainly on maritime trade. These megapoles act like

hinges between oceanic and continental flows.

If the factor mobility is essential on the North American East Coast, iconography does not show as a factor of resistance to change and innovation. On the contrary, it gives itself advantage to mobility. At the top of the social hierarchy comes the stratum of the Descendants of the Mayflower. The Statue of Liberty welcomes flows of immigrants, ready to blend in a melting pot, marching westwards and adding new spangling stars to the Banner. The symbolism of the skyscraper and of the car, shaping the urban structure and the way of life, shows that iconography is not by itself an obstacle, but a major component of the Atlantic megapole.

After the publication of *Megalopolis*, Jean Gottmann was of course bound to compare urbanization, as a whole, in Northern America and Western Europe.<sup>3</sup> If he admits that, in the United States, town planning and architecture owe a lot to the European schools, from the British garden city to the German Bauhaus and the Cité Radieuse of Le Corbusier, he also specifies that North American urbanization shows original forms and structures which tend to spread all over the world. In 1964, Jean Gottmann wonders about the phenomenon in his famous article "Why the skyscraper?"<sup>4</sup> If the skyscraper is definitely born in Chicago by the functional use of a metal skeleton, seen by G. Eiffel as a work of art, it is indeed in Manhattan that the skyscraper will acquire its symbolic value, since it gathers all the factors explaining its success. To meet the needs of a civilization based on immaterial transactions, it is essential to bring together numerous specialists, clients and decision makers. As defined by Jean Gottmann, the main objective of the World Trade Center twin towers was: "a one-stop service and information center for world trade." On September 11, 2001, world terrorism could not have chosen a better target.

But the challenge will be taken up, not only because of the material advantages offered by the skyscraper, but also for its symbolism, the same that motivated the cathedral builders, a work of art related to an art of living, a both social and aesthetic permanent feeling, more especially at night with its tinted glass walls. My wife and I can well recall the night tour of Manhattan we were invited to by Bernice and Jean Gottmann, our shared enthusiasm for the golden light of the Seagram Building framed in dark bronze and the silvery light of the Union Carbide Building framed in glinting stainless steel. And in the 1960s, this ultimate expression of a new Gothic architectural style had not yet been achieved.

The second novelty is due to the sprawling structure of the megapole, the skylines of urban cores occupying less space than the huge suburban individual housing units. Even before the generalization of the automobile, the daily commuting movement was already more developed than in Europe, and the difference is increasing with the systematic use of at least two cars per family, until growing traffic and parking difficulties command resort to rapid mass transit facilities. The structure of these individual housing suburbs is often modelled on the British garden city pattern; more original and typically North American is the loose structure of park cities, keeping or recreating the original forest cover.

But if the differences are well marked between North American and European models, they are even more marked if only considering the two shorelines. How to explain then, that on the European shoreline, the starting point of Megalopolis' founding fathers, a demographic and economic stagnation, a scattering of men and activities and a limited urbanization, contrast with the extraordinary dynamism of the North American shoreline? The European Megalopolis, this "Blue Banana," as it appears on the night satellite surveys, lies well behind the shoreline, from London to Milan, on that European isthmus where the flows of continental trade prevail over the maritime flows linked to the Atlantic seaboard.

## The European seaboard: The golden age of mobility and the decline, as the result of the continental blockade

Would iconographic elements have introduced, by a partitioning, such an obstacle to movement and change, that the modernization of activities failed to take place on the shoreline, being carried out well behind, on the European isthmus? With the difference that, with the American shoreline, the place of arrival of dynamic immigrants prepared for the conquest of a new continent, the Atlantic Ocean has for long blocked the flows of people coming from Eurasia. Some remained stuck there, and the iconography of the Basque nation depicts a good example of partitioning, to which the division between two states did not even put an end, even though many Basque people migrated across the Atlantic. Others sought, through meridian coastal navigation, to resist the invaders coming from the continent. The Celts remained, with their specific characters, in their "Finisterres," from Scotland to Brittany and Galicia. These meridian coastal trades, dating back to the Neolithic, could explain the shared elements found from North Cape to Gibraltar.<sup>5</sup> They affect the farm-running system, the scattering of human settlements, the multiplicity of small-sized towns, service rather than production centers and, in terms of human behavior, religiosity, individualism and naturally the maritime vocation which plays an essential part.

It is this maritime vocation, which ensures, until the end of the 18th century, the dynamism of the Atlantic seaboard, high densities of rural population, combining industry and agriculture, a concentrated network of towns and seaports. For a start, coastal shipping gains in importance, overflowing the Mediterranean, the North and the Baltic Seas. Then, from the 15th century along comes the intercontinental maritime trade, which will later prevail. From Glasgow to Cadiz, the Atlantic seaports are amassing wealth, livening up their hinterlands, and the rural industries are working for export. The states consider their maritime provinces as the ground basis of their colonial policies, but this does not prevent the seaports from developing their commercial relations, even during periods of war.

This Golden Age, well analyzed by the Breton historians, is broken off by the Continental Blockade policy, whose consequences mainly affect the French maritime seaboard. Discontinuity is a source of weakness. It is not the rivalry between the seaports of the Atlantic seaboard and their areas of influence that explains their decline, but rather a national centralizing policy which gives priority to the capital city and the continental regions, richer in coal and iron deposits, thus more qualified for modern industries. The facilities offered by the railroad networks can easily be accounted for. In France, it is in Le Havre and not in Brest that the transatlantic traffic is concentrated. The decline of the French Atlantic seaports results in the decline of the industrial activities of their hinterlands, and in the high density rural areas leads to intense migratory movements, disastrous for a region like Brittany.

If the British Atlantic seaports are making headway until the Second World War, it is mainly those of the London area as well as the continental ports of the North Sea that know a tremendous development, linked to the industrialization of the European isthmus and the growing needs for oil, while the Mediterranean ports continue to forge ahead after the opening of the Suez Canal, despite the end of the colonial era. Consequently, the European Atlantic seaboard, with its discontinuities, its migratory flows, either internal to the European continent or external, in the case of Ireland, cannot match the development of the North American seaboard, which despite US government restrictions remains largely a land of immigration.

There is no doubt that in a region with a strong maritime

iconography, such as Brittany, the sea will always arouse individual vocations, or overseas settings up. But it does not come to collective actions. The Breton diaspora, well scattered, with brilliant successes, does not weigh much compared to the massive migrant contingents that ranked Paris as the first Breton town, while back in Brittany, the emigration of young people causes the deterioration of the demographic situation and the possibilities of recovery.

## From the Breton revival to the "Arc Atlantique"

It is by relying on an old cultural and historical collection and a maritime iconography, by launching the slogan "Export your production instead of losing your workforce" or the one aimed at manufacturers "Establish your plant in the land of your holiday," that the Bretons managed to score ahead of most French regions, to take control of their own future. In the 1950s, with the C.E.L.I.B. (Comité d'étude et de liaison des intérêts bretons) a new regionalism is setting up, turned towards economic concerns and in the first place on to the priority to assign to an opening-up of Brittany the measures and means to overcome the "curse of distance," to restore the circulation flows essential for a revival of the region. This psychological transformation, initiating an economic recovery, has spread to other regions with an undefined iconography, and has, in the end, prompted the State to give up its continentally orientated concentration policy, responsible for the decay of the Atlantic seaboard.<sup>6</sup>

The links are close and mutual between cultural and economic concerns. The Bretons are strengthening them with the other Celtic nations, multiplying twinnings, cultural and musical festivals. If the European Community, by organizing a vast continental territory, accentuates the peripheral situation of Brittany, the latter still trusts the community to help reduce its handicaps, for "it starts from the Ocean." And when the E.C. is enlarged to include Great Britain and Ireland, while the Breton Shipping Line reactivates the trans-channel links, the C.E.L.I.B. sets up, in 1973 in Saint-Malo, the "Conference of the maritime peripheral regions" which wants to use the "Atlantic Stream" to reopen the meridian traffic links. With the entry of Spain and Portugal and the development of the ferry traffic, it is the whole Atlantic seaboard which is affected. In 1989 in Faro, near Cape Saint Vincent, from where Henry the Navigator used to launch his caravels, the Conference of the maritime peripheral regions adopts a resolution to promote cooperation and the multiplication of exchanges between the regions of the "Arc Atlantique."

The image given by the "Arc Atlantique" has a considerable impact on the media and arouses an abundant and mainly geographical literature.<sup>7</sup> In the meantime, in the popular consciousness, as well as with academic researchers, economic and political officials, the elements of a once neglected maritime culture are surfacing again. Sailing, ocean races, old ships meetings are renewing an iconography which does not induce a partitioning, but on the contrary gathers these Atlantic regions, by relying on movement.

But meridian circulation between peripheral regions conflicts with the usual reticence of the decision makers. Should one take the risk of improving ways of communication, when the actual traffic is rather weak, even non-existent? Can these same ways, by themselves, create traffic? On the maritime level, ferries have restored this traffic from Great Britain to Spain, but the Eurotunnel is a severe rival. Will the support of the European Funds, for the program "Atlantis" which intends to boost coastal shipping traffic, or for the program "Arcantel" weaving an electronic information network, allow a revival of the seaports? The project of the "Estuaries Motorway" took more than 25 years to be achieved, and the completion of an "Estuaries High Speed Train" remains a myth. The air links, ini-

tiated by pilgrimages and the development of tourism can only expand with the establishment of business flights. They are increasing in number; nevertheless, although for the external balance of Brittany, Great Britain and Spain hold a good position, traffic remains weak.

However, the links between the "Arc Atlantique" and the London-Milan megapole must be largely improved, and unfortunately intercontinental trade with the latter is still avoiding the Atlantic seaports to the benefit of the estuary ports of the North Sea. Can one imagine Brest or Nantes becoming main "feeder" ports for Europe, in order to avoid the pollution risks in the Channel and the North Sea, or that a new intercontinental airport, based in Nantes, serves as a "hub" for the European sky? One can always dream, but such perspectives are highly improbable.

Does one have to regret that the European Atlantic seaboard did not become, and has very few chances of doing so, a megapolitan area? Shouldn't a development plan for the "Arc Atlantique" keep a major spatial characteristic inherited from a faraway past? An urban and seaports scattered network, with a regular spacing out of small and medium-sized towns, often hosting cultural, academic and scientific activities which are usually reserved for a metropolis? This original spatial structure would be jeopardized as much by a linear urbanization of the shoreline as by a metropolitan concentration.

From an architectural and aesthetic point of view, the skyscraper does not have its place on this side of the Atlantic Ocean; even the towns rebuilt after 1945 did not seize the opportunity, and the isolated attempts, such as the Brittany Tower in Nantes, appear shocking in centuries-old urban skylines. The quality of the environment, surroundings adapted to the "civilization of daily leisure" as opposed to the "Weekend civilization" should take a great place in this concept of the "Arc Atlantique." This concept, based on an ancient iconography, gives the image of a well balanced and dynamic whole, with multiple circulation flows and junctions. But Jean Gottmann himself wondered: "If circulation is the principle of movement and iconography the principle of stability, are they, in fact, in such continuous opposition?"<sup>8</sup>

## Notes and References

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