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Place naming and neotponymy: French experiences through the lens of a theoretical framework

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Abstract: The social, political, cultural and economic dimensions of toponymy are expressed in the act of naming, that is, in the contradictory production of toponyms. The place naming is thus an object of toponymy distinct from the place name itself. Its study from the point of view of motivations and representations has been developed in the social sciences, and in particular in cultural and political geography. The study of the naming of places presupposes the observation and documentation of the process, and therefore focuses on neotponymy. Such neotponymy is both the study of new place names and the corpus formed by them. In addition to collections of names whose meaning and origin can be worked on, it offers, by definition, information on its mode of production, its actors and on possible controversies or debates related to it. Neotponymy is the result of a process of substitution or addition (renaming, plurinaming) or of nominations of emerging places. Depending on the context, the type of places and the motivations linked to it, issues and techniques will be different. The contemporary history of France since the Revolution offers an abundance of neotponymies from successive or simultaneous contexts that will allow us to test a theoretical framework on place naming.

Keywords: Place naming ; Neotponymy ; Political toponymy ; Critical toponymy ; Theory ; French place names ; Territoriality

This chapter deals with neotponymy, i.e. toponymy resulting from the voluntary naming of new geographical objects or the renaming of old ones. The French experience over more than two centuries provides material to illustrate the issue and also to consider its logics, since experience over the long term has a heuristic value.

We will focus in particular on the names of the units of territorial organization: both public administration and local government. They have been crossed during the period by several major changes linked first to the establishment of a new revolutionary order, then during the XX and XXI centuries, by the new regionalism and its municipal declensions.

Toponymic production is an object in itself (Amilhat Szary 2008; Berg & Vuolteenaho 2009; Boyer & Cardy 2011; Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2008 a & b; Guillourel 2008; Pourtier 1983; Rose-Redwood et al. 2010). It is the result of a complex interplay of actors and takes place in specific contexts which determine the issues, objectives and techniques available (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2016; Puzey & Kostansky 2016). The result of this production is the corpus of new toponyms that can be called neotponymy (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2022). The field of study of this neotponymic production can be described as Place naming studies. It is at the heart of critical toponymy, which focuses on the stakes, the logic and the effects of place naming and renaming. It includes the contemporary processes of commodifying naming rights and place branding (Light & Young 2015; Medway & Barnaby 2014; Rose-Redwood et al. 2022).

We have recently developed a framework dedicated to issues and rationales in place naming (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2016) . We will first outline it. The second part will then be devoted to the French revolutionary experience of setting up departments and communes in place of the units of the *Ancien régime* : provinces and parishes, with a system of names that broke partially with the previous toponymy. The third part will be devoted to the longer-term experience of adapting the territorial system to a new regionalism, to decentralisation and to metropolisation. The introduction of new toponymic layers is then marked by local geopolitics and territorial marketing. We will thus be able to qualify the successive logics that can intervene in the setting up of the territorial neotponymy.

1 Neotponymy : a framework

This chapter is based on a theoretical article published in the journal *Geopolitics* called “Place Naming as *Dispositif*: Toward a Theoretical Framework”. Together. with Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, we suggest that renaming practices (neotponymy), as varied as they are throughout the world, present some commonalities. These practices and processes can be broken into three elements: contexts, actors, and technologies.

Framework:

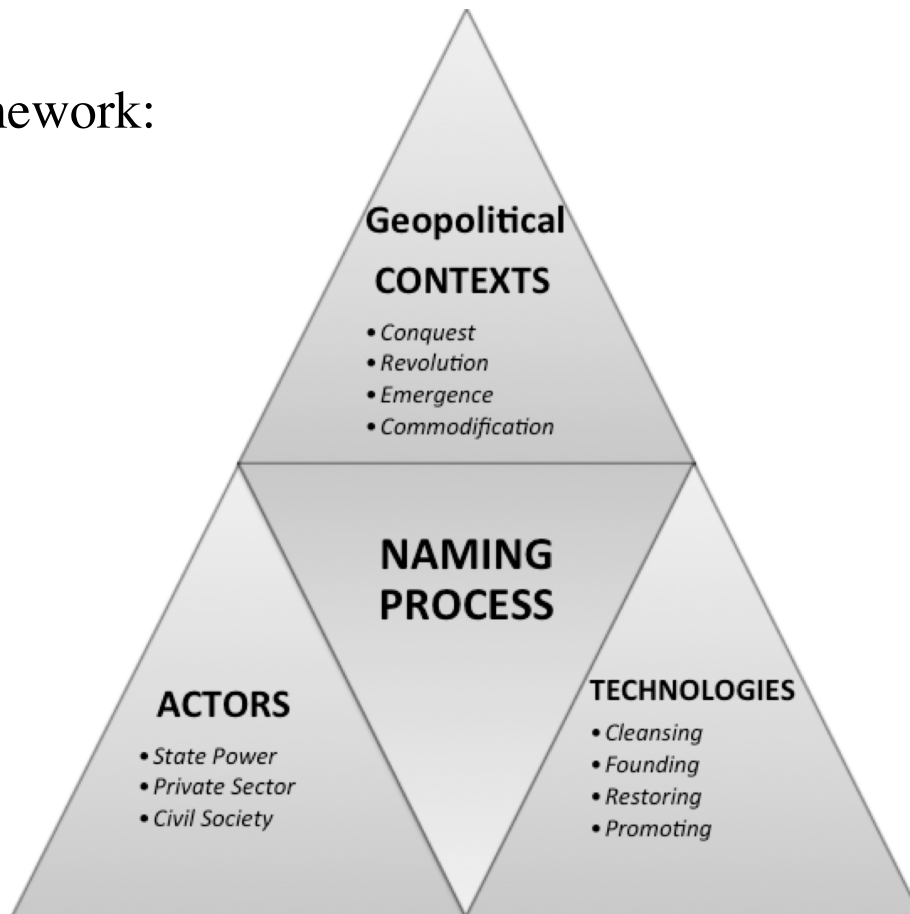


Fig 1: Framework showing the main components (*dispositif*) of Place naming processes namely contexts and technologies. From Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2016, p. 8

These elements are constitutive of a theoretical framework inspired by the Foucauldian notion of *dispositif* as a complex and historically contextual arrangement of norms, knowledges and technologies of power. All elements of contextualization do not have the same potential for generalization, but both the geopolitical context and the objectives of renaming point to more general trends that can help theorize the renaming process, as actors are more context specific.

We argue that four types of political contexts are especially conducive to neotoponymic production: those of **Revolution** (radical change of political regime), **Conquest** (colonial and imperial), **Emergence** (urbanisation and territorial restructuring) and **Commodification** (competition between places in territorial marketing and branding). In turn, renaming practices aim at four main objectives turned into toponymic power technologies: **Cleansing**, **Restoring**, **Founding**, and **Promoting/Branding**.

• **Cleansing** aims at discarding the toponymic imprint inherited from a culture, a language, and/or a previous political order. Cleansing an existing toponymic landscape can be done by erasing place names, renaming, or translating them, and removing them from all official language and legal documents.

• **Founding** inscribes cultural and political references in the toponymy in order to create, legitimise, and, ultimately, sustain a new political and cultural order at the local, or the national, level. Naming places after founding fathers, ideological values, or founding events shapes the

toponymic landscape and helps “legitimate existing power structures by linking the regime’s view of itself, its past, and the world, with the seemingly mundane settings everyday life.”

• **Restoring** strives to reinstitute ancient, or dominated, memories and cultures by deploying previous toponyms from such a culture in order to atone for (newly considered) historical injustices, or to legitimise territorial claims.

• **Promoting** is the way to brand a place, a development, a resort, a territory, or a city through its name (or nickname), which is used as valuable and marketable symbolic capital. It is an attempt to attract investors and consumers, and to be well placed in international, or national, rankings in the context of places’ fierce competition between places for economic and political gain. At its most extreme, promoting technologies include speculating on a place name’s economic value. For instance, private companies create a new toponym to market a leisure destination, or acquire an existing toponym by renting it temporarily, or by purchase. Whatever the case, promoting considers a place name as both symbolic and economic capital.

From Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2016, p. 9

While the link between a type of context and the objectives of renaming is not straightforward, less alone deterministic, preferential combinations or nexuses can be identified. We will now illustrate this framework with the French territorial restructuring experience.

2 The neotonymy of the French revolutionary new territorial order

As early as 1789, the revolutionary project was to be embodied in a radical territorial reform on two levels. On the one hand, the Constituent Assembly decided to generalize the status of municipality to more than 40,000 localities, which became communes, and on the other hand to create 83 *départements*. This replaced the heterogeneous system of *provinces* and local entities: villages, towns and parishes with various types of franchises.

The communes: permanence and toponymic selection

If the municipal system is revolutionary from a political point of view, it takes over the jurisdiction of the basic localities, i.e. the villages and towns, which were instituted both as parishes and as tax-collecting localities (Nordman & Ozouf-Marinier 1989). Also, the major institutional change that endowed these entities with municipal assemblies did not lead to any change in the jurisdictions (still not precisely established until the generalisation of the cadastre under the Napoleonic Empire) or in the names, apart from a few rare cases. Thus, when the communes were created, the heterogeneous toponymic layer of locality names was preserved. However, the revolutionary craze was to result for a few years, from *An II* (1793) to the fall of the Napoleonic Empire (1814), in radical name changes concerning about 10% of communes (Maréchaux 2016). These changes aimed to erase some of the mainly religious and secondarily aristocratic or monarchical traces. Thus hagiography (names after Saints) is particularly targeted and many qualifiers of Saint disappear temporarily (*Ste-Croix-à-Lauze* becomes *La Lauze*; *St-Geniez-de-Dromon* becomes *Dromon*); sometimes to promote an entirely new name, thus *Saint-Ouen* is renamed *Bains-sur-Seine* and *Saint-Etienne* becomes *Ville-d’Armes*. References to religious places in the toponymy of localities (church, chapel, basilica, monastery...) are also deleted (*Les-Églises-d’Argenteuil* becomes *Argenteuil*). Aristocratic and feudal references are also removed. Thus *Aisey-le-Duc* became *Aisey-sur-Seine*, *Pagny-le-Chateau* was renamed *Pagny-Egalité*. It is interesting to note that of the

nearly 10% of renamed communes (about 3000) that had their names changed, about 90% regained their names from 1814 onwards, but several hundred retained their revolutionary names. As Xavier Maréchaux (2016) shows, this contributed to the partial de-Christianisation of French toponymy according to a national political geography that largely overlapped with that of the radical secular and republican strongholds.

If we want to interpret this process of limited implementation of a communal neotoponymy in terms of the proposed framework (Tab. 1), we should first emphasise the revolutionary context of the French **Revolution**. Its actors are the public authorities that emerged from this revolution and certainly committed segments of civil society that carried the revolutionary process locally. As for the toponymic technologies, it is mainly a question of **Cleansing** *Ancien Régime* references with the promotion of revolutionary references and values. Conversely, the (partial) end of this toponymic parenthesis in an equally revolutionary context (**Revolution** in the sense of a radical change in the political order) at the end of the Empire involved the technology of **Restoring**.

<i>Neotoponymies</i>	<i>Contexts</i>	<i>Technologies</i>
Revolutionary municipalities	Revolution	Cleansing / Founding
Post-imperial municipalities	(counter-)Revolution	Restoring

Tab. 1 Contexts and Technologies involved in French municipal neotoponymies. See: F. Giraut 2022

The naming of revolutionary départements: erasure and neutralisation

The creation of the *départements* - a new institution in a completely new territorial framework - is exactly contemporaneous with the creation of the institution of municipalized communes on a village basis. As early as 1789, the French Revolution, through its *Comité de Constitution*, set out to eliminate the complex map of the *provinces*. Territorially and culturally, they embodied the history and power of the *Ancien Régime*, which was at once royal, religious and aristocratic, and even bourgeois through certain franchises and assemblies. These provinces are made up of a number of area based institutions with different jurisdictions: *Généralités* (fiscal function), *Gouvernements* (military function), *Parlements* and *Baillages* (judicial function), ecclesiastical *Provinces* and *Diocèses* (religious function). They had to give way to a new and unique institution, which was both a framework for exercising the authority of the new state and a set of new assemblies for expressing regional wills. The idea was to free oneself completely from the old order and to produce a new system, so the temptation of pure abstraction was exercised. The initial projects are thus strictly speaking utopian.

A first map is proposed made up of 81 squares, themselves subdivided into 9 entities. A standard and replicable module was therefore envisaged, based on logical nesting and a dimension that ensured average internal accessibility in line with the travel capabilities in one day (Meuriot 1917; Ozouf-Marignier 1988). But no centrality is predefined and the function of the chief town is potentially rotating. The highly critical reception on the ground given to these utopian proposals is territorial in nature, highlighting functionalities and identities with their own history and spatial framework. The critique calls for the recognition of historical social entities, natural entities (hydrographic, topographic) and their boundaries linked to natural discontinuities.

The final draft of the new *Comité de Division* retained the standard approximate module (83 *départements* instead of the 81 proposed) but adapted the definition of the contours to the inherited entities, natural discontinuities and the jurisdiction of certain cities.

However, the system of naming which intervenes in fine (February 26, 1790) will be without compromise contrary to the cartography.

NOMENCLATURE DES DEPARTEMENTS EXAMINEE LE 26 FEVRIER PAR LE COMITE SUR PROPOSITION DE
PINTEVILLE DE CERNON

(Ain), <i>Rhône-et-Saône, Bresse</i>	Finistère	Maine-et-Loire
(Aisne), <i>Aisne-et-Oise, Soissonnais</i>	Gard	Meurthe, <i>Lorraine</i>
Allier, <i>Bourbonnais</i>	Gers, <i>Armagnac</i>	Meuse, <i>Barrois</i>
(Ardèche), <i>Sources-de-Loire</i>	Gironde	Morbihan
Ardennes	Haut-Rhin	(Moselle), <i>Basse-Moselle, Pays-Messin</i>
Ariège, <i>Foix</i>	Haute-Garonne	Nord, <i>Deux-Flandres</i>
(Aube), <i>Aube-et-Seine</i>	Haute-Loire, <i>VeLAY</i>	(Nièvre), <i>Yonne-et-Loire, Nivernais</i>
Aude	Haute-Marne, <i>Champagne-Méridionale</i>	(Oise), <i>Oise-et-Thiérain, Beauvoisis</i>
Aveyron, <i>Rouergue</i>	Haute-Saône, <i>Saône, Franche-Comté Septentrionale</i>	Orne
Bas-Rhin		Paris, <i>Lowre</i>
Basses-Alpes, <i>Haute-Provence</i>	Haute-Vienne, <i>Haut-Limousin</i>	(Pas-de-Calais), <i>Détroit, Artois</i>
(Basses-Pyrénées), <i>Pic-du-Midi, Béarn</i>	Hautes-Alpes, <i>Dauphiné Oriental</i>	(Puy-de-Dôme), <i>Mont d'Or</i>
Bouches-du-Rhône, <i>Ouest-Provence</i>	Hautes-Pyrénées, <i>Bigorre</i>	Pyrénées Orientales, <i>Roussillon</i>
Calvados	Hérault	Rhône-et-Loire
Cantal, <i>Haute-Auvergne</i>	(Ile-et-Vilaine), <i>Vilaine</i>	Saône-et-Loire, <i>Bourgogne-Méridionale</i>
Charente	(Indre), <i>Indre-et-Creuse, Bas-Berry</i>	Sarthe, <i>Haute-Maine</i>
Charente-Inférieure, <i>Aunis</i>	Indre-et-Loire, <i>Touraine</i>	Seine-et-Oise
Cher	Isère, <i>Nord-Dauphiné</i>	Seine-et-Marne, <i>Brie-et-Gâtinais</i>
Corrèze, <i>Bas-Limousin</i>	Jura	Seine-Inférieure
Corse	Landes	Somme, <i>Picardie</i>
Côte-d'Or, <i>Dijonnais</i>	Loir-et-Cher, <i>Blésois</i>	Tarn, <i>Albigeois</i>
Côtes du Nord	Loire Inférieure	Var, <i>Est-Provence</i>
(Creuse), <i>Haute-Creuse, Marche</i>	Loiret	Vendée, <i>Deux-Lay, Poitou Occidental</i>
Deux-Sèvres	Lot, <i>Quercy</i>	Vienne
Dordogne, <i>Périgord</i>	(Lot-et-Garonne), <i>Garonne, Agénois</i>	Vosges
Doubs	(Lozère), <i>Hautes-Cévennes, Gévaudan</i>	Yonne
Drôme, <i>Bas-Dauphiné</i>	Manche, <i>Cotentin</i>	
Eure	Marne	
Eure-et-Loire	Mayenne, <i>Anjou</i>	

- les noms en lettres droites furent retenus définitivement. Les noms entre parenthèses furent retenus bien que n'ayant pas été proposés par Pinteville de Cernon
- Sources : Archives nationales, série NNx 9 à 15; Maurice Brun, opus cité pages 67 et 68.

Fig. 2 Table showing the different names used by the *Comité de Division* when examining the final list of 83 *départements* on the 26th of February 1790 (See Masson 1983 ; Archives Nationales)

While all the work of the committee had been carried out on entities bearing the names of potential chief towns or parts of dismantled provinces (Fig. 2), the final names refuse all references to cities and provinces¹, retaining only natural references, mainly hydrographic: 59 *départements* out of 83 are thus named after watercourses. The name of a river alone in 23 *départements* and in combination with another one in 11 cases. It may also be the subject of a demultiplication with precision of the part of which it refers (*haute, basse, inférieure...*) in 6 cases. Thus the referent *Seine* is found in three initial *département* names, once in combination with *Marne*, once with *Oise* and once specified as *Seine-inférieure*. It will soon (1795) be found alone in place of the referent *Paris*. *Paris* which was until then the exception by referring to a city, the capital city of the Kingdom. Secondly, the topography and orography are mobilised through references to mountain ranges alone (Jura; Vosges; Ardennes) or multiplied and specified when the main ranges are involved (*Hautes* and *Basses-Alpes*; *Hautes, Basses* and *Orientales Pyrénées*). Finally, certain geographical specificities (river mouths, estuary, strait, finistere, island, source, volcano, geological formation, etc.) are

¹ Garat Aîné, D., P. Samary, J. X. Bureaux de Pusy, L. m. d. Foucault de Lardimalie, G. J.-B. Target, J.-B. d. b. d. Pinteville de Cernon, J. A. E. Fos de Laborde, H.-G. R. c. d. Mirabeau and J. S. Maury (1880). Discussion sur la dénomination des départements, lors de la séance du 26 février 1790. *Archives Parlementaires de la Révolution Française*: 711-711. https://www.persee.fr/doc/arcpa_0000-0000_1880_num_11_1_5850_t1_0711_0000_16

promoted as names of *départements* in about fifteen situations, often in coastal situations, less marked by the presence of major rivers.

Apart from a few departmental creations named according to the same logic (two in 1794, one in 1808), a few ephemeral changes will occur, as for the communes, from the An II of the new Republican Calendar (1793). The royalist *Vendée* and the protesting *Gironde* momentarily lost their names, which had become synonymous with regional opposition to the Jacobin revolutionary doctrine. They then took the names of *Bec-d'Ambes* and *Vengé* (an allusion to the republican revenge following the treason) respectively. This was only for two years.

If we disregard the imperial *départements* in the first decade of the 19th century, then the colonial departments, particularly in Algeria, the main change in the rationale of naming the *départements* will come with the annexation of new territories in the context of the *Second Empire*. In 1860, Savoie was integrated into France, and this territory retained the reference to the historical entity of *Savoie* by giving the two names of *Savoie* for the *département* formed in the south around *Chambéry* and *Haute-Savoie* in the north around Annecy with the French *Genevois*. At the same time, the entry of the County of *Nice* into the national territory resulted in the creation of a *département* with a classic name: *les Alpes-Maritimes*.

In the second half of the 20th century, there were several new names. On the one hand, some *départements* were partially renamed, and on the other, the new *départements* resulting from the reconfiguration of the *Paris* region had to be given new names. The renominations, which were staggered from 1941 to 1990, therefore concerned a few cases, six in all. The aim was to rid them of qualifiers that were considered negative and stigmatising: *Basse* and *Inférieure*, and to replace them with the qualifiers of *Maritime* or *Atlantique* for river names (*Charente*, *Loire*, *Seine*) or mountain names (*Pyrénées*). However, two *départements* reverted to names evoking either a former *province* (*Alpes-de-Haute-Provence* replaced *Basses-Alpes* in 1970) or a regional language, in this case the Breton language, for *Côtes-d'Armor* in place of *Côtes-du-Nord* in 1990 (Le Bart & Procureur 2011).

The territorial restructuring of the Paris region in the 1960s introduced hitherto exceptional referents into the new *département* names and broke with the logic of toponymic neutrality of the preferential use of hydronymy and oronymy. The re-creation of a *département* of *Paris*, this time centred on the city alone, in place of the *département* of the *Seine*, definitively establishes the possibility of an exception for the capital city. Until then, only *Paris* (in a short-lived manner) and the *Territoire-de-Belfort* (created between the two World Wars after the return of Alsace to France) constituted a reference to a capital city or chief town. A principle which derogates from that of the original nominations. This practice is found again in one of the six new *départements* created under this reform on the former departments of the *Seine* and *Seine-et-Oise*. This is the *département* of *Seine-Saint-Denis*, which has a name that combines the name of a river and an historical royal city, and which is also hagiographic (the name of a saint) and therefore doubly taboo in relation to the original revolutionary naming principles. The other names are either the classic use of a river name alone (*Essonne*), or a river name associated with a landscape and territorial evocation (*Val-de-Marne*; *Val-d'Oise*; *Hauts-de-Seine*). Finally, the name *Yvelines* refers to a forest name which is also that of a local *pays* of the *Ancien Régime*.

We can see (Tab. 2) that the initial revolutionary context generated a neotponymy motivated by **Cleansing** (of *Ancien Régime* references), **Neutralising** (of cities) and the **Ordering** of modules on an egalitarian basis of alphabetical order. The subsequent conquest of new territories anchored them in the departmental system (**Founding**) while opening the possibility of **Restoring** the provincial reference. In the twentieth century, the changes in names considered as derogatory must be interpreted as taking place in a context of **Commodification** of territories. Questions of image have an economic value and not only an

identity value (Grégory 2011). Promotional technologies may therefore involve the restoration of *Ancien Régime* references or regional languages (**Promoting** and **Restoring**). Finally, the creation of new *départements* to accompany metropolisation takes place in a dual context of the **Emergence** of new functional entities and the relative marketing of territories (**Commodification**). This leads to a neotponymy that borrows from the technologies of **Promoting** and **Founding** a new metropolitan device.

<i>Neotponymies</i>	<i>Contexts</i>	<i>Technologies</i>
Revolutionary <i>départements</i>	Revolution/Emergence	Cleansing/Neutralising/Ordering
Annexed <i>départements</i>	Conquest	Founding/Restoring
Renamed <i>départements</i>	Commodification	Promoting/(Restoring)
Restructured <i>départements</i>	Emergence/Commodification	Founding/Promoting/(Ordering)

Tab. 2 Contexts and Technologies involved in French *départements* neotponymies.
 Sce: F. Giraut 2022

3 The neotponymy of the contemporary French territorial restructuring: administrative regions and new communes

The second part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first will see the emergence in France of two new types of political and administrative units: the administrative regions and the jurisdictions of inter-municipal cooperation and mergers of communes. (Giraut 2002; Offner 2006; Vanier 2008).

The naming of French administrative regions: the return of the repressed

In 2016, brand new French regions were given names. These new names complete the process of simplifying the map from 22 to 13 regions. The toponymic equation seemed difficult, but clearly identified: a) to ensure internal cohesion, i.e. to overcome internal geopolitical tensions, and b) to ensure a regime of visibility at the international level by valorising identifiable regional resources (Giraut 2016). Do the new regional naming meet this double challenge?

The map of the 13 regions called for new names for at least the 7 new merged regions. Two chose to remain as the sum of their former merged regions: *Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes* and *Bourgogne-Franche-Comté*, while 5 have adopted a new name, possibly supplemented by the names of the former regions. We thus have the regions: *Hauts-de-France*; *Grand-Est* (with *Alsace Champagne-Ardennes Lorraine* as a secondary name); *Nouvelle Aquitaine* (with *Aquitaine-Limousin-Poitou-Charentes* as a secondary name), *Occitanie* (with *Pyrénées-Méditerranée* as a secondary name) and *Normandie*.

As far as the toponymic positioning of these new entities is concerned, they reveal the aspirations of the regional government who steered the operation and of the citizens who took part in the various types of prior consultation. These were organised in a participatory democracy perspective that is now systematic for questions of neotponymy. On this occasion, the limits of the exercise became apparent, with consultations intended mainly to bring out or

validate proposals that were filtered and completed by ad hoc committees under the control of the regional presidencies. Thus, the name Grand-Est, which was ultimately retained, was introduced by the regional government into the proposals submitted to the vote, even though it did not appear on the list drawn up by the committee of experts and citizens.

In order to appreciate this neotponymy, we must first go back to the previous map drawn up at the end of the 1950s, that of the so called *regions de programme* which were first endowed with economic and social councils and then, during the decentralisation process in the 1980s, became full-fledged territorial authorities, with elections, budget and taxes (Masson 1983). The introduction of this regional level and the technocratically produced map constituted a break, including a toponymic one, with the exclusive territorial system of the *départements*. The latter, as we have seen, had been substituted for the tangle of different jurisdictions of the *Ancien Régime*. Their names did not recall any of them. In this sense they were neutral because they related to water or orography or geographical position, but never to history nor regional language.

The names of the 21 and then 22 regions were based on a number of references, in particular those of the *Ancien Régime*, alongside references to the major rivers and mountain ranges (*Rhône; Loire; Alpes; Pyrénées*) and to the position in the national ensemble (*Nord; Centre; Midi*). It is well known that the notion of *province* in the *Ancien Régime* is rather overused because it corresponds to multiple and changing institutions and maps (*Généralités, Gouvernements, Diocèses, Parlements ...*) and that only the jurisdictions of the *États* and *Parlements* were intended to embody territories truly endowed with autonomy and recognised particularities, yet these so called *Pays d'État* existed essentially on the periphery of the Kingdom (*Bretagne, Languedoc, Provence, Bourgogne, Franche Comté, Dauphiné*) and not in the vast Parisian and Ligerian areas. In any case, the map of the 1950s invoked a number of *provinces*, referring instead to the map of the Governments which subdivided the whole of the Kingdom. In a number of cases it made the contemporary administrative region a subdivision of the reference entity (the two Normandy regions), or on the contrary an entity encompassing more than the reference Province (*Provence-Alpes-Côte-d'Azur; Languedoc-Roussillon; Poitou-Charentes*).

While the new map and names recreate an integral *Normandie*, they do away with *Alsace, Lorraine, Bourgogne, Limousin, Poitou, Languedoc, Champagne* and *Picardie*, and do not satisfy aspirations for an integral *Bretagne* despite the name. Among the toponymic inventions, some allow for reference to historical and cultural spaces while adapting to the new geography. Thus the *région Centre* did not change its perimeter as a result of this reform, but its name. This was done by adding a reference to the *Val-de-Loire*, a real touristic brand that makes the name less banal.

The Occitan reference is in fact an hold-up (Aigouy-Campoy et al. 2019). Indeed, *Languedoc* referred to a well circumscribed former *Pays d'Etat* centred on *Montpellier*, whereas the Occitan belonging, or the Occitan speaking area, could also be claimed by *Aquitaine*, the former *Limousin, Provence*, and part of *Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes*. But this successful hold-up by the new region resulting from the merger of *Midi-Pyrénées* and *Languedoc-Roussillon* is paid for on another scale. It is *Roussillon*, in other words French Catalonia, that is paying the price with its toponymic erasing. This is a rule of political geography: integration on one scale generates losses of recognition and peripheralization on another. In the end, it is mainly a question of territorial marketing, despite the pretence of participatory management of the naming process. What do the new names say from this point of view?

Apart from the Occitan hold-up and the Norman evidence, only *Nouvelle-Aquitaine* does not sacrifice the historical reference for internal cohesion. But this is done with the use of the pirouette that is the addition of the qualifier *nouvelle*. Taken independently, it is a positive keyword that would naturally carry the new entity towards the future and progress, but in toponymy this construction is rather reminiscent of colonial names that transferred the names of European regions to the other side of the world. There is therefore a great risk that *Nouvelle-Aquitaine* will be seen internationally as a region distinct from *Aquitaine*.

This is a problem that is even more acute with the two new regions of *Hauts-de-France* and *Grand-Est*. In both cases, the reference point is strictly national. The challenge of creating large regions was explicitly to position them in international competition. In the case of *Hauts-de-France*, it is not so much the direct reference to *France* that poses a problem, but the absurd height claimed by transposing the position 'at the top' on the map of France. It ignores the qualifier *septentrional* and the pure convention of orienting the North *en haut* in cartography! As a result, the whole is situated in an exclusive national framework, its name already has no meaning in itself, but no meaning at all if one leaves the image of the oriented hexagon. The *Grand-Est* is a case of the same confusion. The reference to *grandeur* allows one to try to mobilise in territorial competition on the basis of supposed power, but this is done at the expense of heritage resources.

To summarise and interpret the two phases of contemporary French regional naming (Tab. 3), it can be said that they were first carried out in the context of the **Emergence** of a new functional scale, and then in the context of a competition between territories seeking to enhance their symbolic and economic resources (**Commodification**). From the point of view of the toponymic technologies deployed, the foundation of the new entities involved recourse to references to the restored *provinces* of the *Ancien Régime* (**Restoring**). In a second phase, the new names of the merged regions were essentially a matter of **Promoting** and branding. This was achieved at the cost of erasing certain historical references, but also by spectacularly promoting the reference to *Occitanie*.

<i>Neotoponymies</i>	<i>Contexts</i>	<i>Technologies</i>
First <i>régions</i>	Emergence	Founding/Restoring
Restructured <i>régions</i>	Commodification	Promoting / Participating

Tab. 3 Contexts and Technologies involved in French *régions* neotoponymies. See: F. Giraut 2022

The naming of the new communes: from localities to territories

Finally, let us return to the narrow municipal grid inherited from the Revolution. This was initially made up of more than 40,000 entities. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it underwent a number of mergers, which brought it down to about 36,000 entities. These mergers, often linked to urbanisation (Edelblutte 2000), mostly took the form of absorption by the central city, which gave its name to the new entity.

Also during this long period name changes occurred (Guerrin 1998). They were relatively few: 1863 from 1943 to 2006 (Delattre 2007). They mainly allowed the names of communes to be specified in their location with the mentions *sur* (most of the time a river) or

en (most of the time an old rural *pays* name²) or *les* (*pays* or town name). This is to avoid confusion with other French communes of the same name. From the end of the 19th century onwards, these changes were also motivated by economic and notoriety reasons. Thus, many localities tried and often succeeded in distinguishing themselves by adopting a name complement in *les-bains* or *sur-mer* or ...-*plage*.

The recent movement to create the *nouvelles communes* through mergers is well underway since the 2010 law. At the end of 2019, more than 800 entities were recorded, grouping together more than 2,500 former communes for nearly 2.5 millions inhabitants (Bideau 2019). The choice of name, often presented as a secondary detail, turns out to be an issue in itself that focuses the debate during the project phase, just like the fiscal effects of the merger. The choice of name also often appears to be an opportunity to enhance some specific resources. The debates on the choice of the toponym, often relayed by the regional press, can therefore reveal many burning questions of *glocal* geopolitics: positioning of the constituent localities in terms of centre/periphery relations, and positioning of the new entity in a regional and global landscape.

This new process of merging French communes must be placed in the broader international dynamics of territorial restructuring related to metropolization and critical local government size (Brenner 2004; Barlow & Wastl-Walter 2004; Bulkeley et al. 2016; Cardoso & Meijers 2017). It follows, in France, the systematic creation of a generalized double intercommunality layers: project intercommunality, and service management intercommunality which is also a project for metropolises and urban communities (Booth 2009; Gerbaux 1999; Guichard 1976). This creation of intercommunal entities has already generated an intensive production of new names, less supervised by the state, which have been the subject of analyses (Bailly 2008; Brunet 2021; Delfosse 1997; Giraut & Lajarge 1996; Landel & Senil 2008), as well as those of the French cantons following their redrawing (Brunet 2015). The first generations of inter-municipal entities were rather endowed with multi-barreled names or with the names of former rural *pays*, allowing the component communes not to be symbolically dissolved in the reference to the central town or city alone. Subsequently, the issue of economic promotion, and in particular tourism, through a name that is gratifying or evokes a regional resource as landmark, became the main focus. This is part of a territorial branding and marketing approach (Alaux et al 2015) which is also connected to metropolitan new regionalism at international level (Guo & Zhang 2019; Lu et al. 2018).

In particular, the new movement of mergers of French communes is part of the mergers that have taken place in Europe since the middle of the 20th century, mainly in countries where, like France, the municipal grid was based on that of the parishes. Thus, Switzerland, in a very different institutional context, has been experiencing a significant movement of mergers of communes for the last thirty years (Destrem 2016; Raffestin 2000). Elsewhere, a movement of creation of communes by progression of the so-called incorporated domain to municipalization, or by process of decentralization, has produced a very large number of new communes in the last decades in very different contexts (Antheaume & Giraut 2005; Baldersheim & Rose 2010; Meligrana 2004). These processes of massive creation of new communes have been the subject of analyses, including the toponymic component (Adam 2008; Boujrouf & Hassani 2008; Cardoso & Meijers 2018; Destrem 2016; Hoffman 2000; Ji 2018; Lehr & McGregor 2016; Lima 2008; Masuda & Bookman 2018; Sogel &

² Regarding the historical and geographical aspects of these French rural so called *pays* see Gallois 1908 and Chamboredon 1988.

Silberstein 2015; Verdeil 2011; Zimmerbauer & Paasi 2013). A certain number of neotoponymical stakes and challenges run through the great diversity of situations (Giraut 2005; Giraut & Houssay Holzschuch 2008 a). The main one is the question of the always complicated toponymical relationship with the city-centre, which is both a pole of centrality and an unavoidable magnet for any territorial reform, and a dominating and predatory chief town that threatens the identity of the peripheries with its hegemony. There is also a tendency for all local authorities, and in particular those administering small or medium-sized towns and cities, to capture by naming the resources, including heritage resources, of a hinterland for which the city would constitute a gateway (Giraut 2005). This is expressed in the neotponymy resulting from territorial recompositions (Giraut & Houssay-Holzschuch 2008 a).

In the case of France and the creation of *nouvelles communes*, which are not immune to these trends, it is necessary to take into account national specificities as well as previous experiences of naming and renaming concerning communes and their groupings. The issue of naming these entities has not escaped the attention of the central government (*Commission nationale de toponymie* and *Direction Générale des Collectivités locales*). The latter issued a circular on 18 April 2017³, addressed to the *préfets* responsible for validating the names and to the municipal councils responsible for drawing up the project including the name proposal. This circular recalls the rules that should govern their choice and determination. In addition to a reminder about spelling (hyphens, capital letters, accentuation), which was abused in many of the names of the first generation of *nouvelles communes*, the circular and a more recent guideline advise⁴ the use of the initial names of the merged communes or (where appropriate) 'an old name with which the commune can identify'. Furthermore, it recalls that the *Conseil d'État* does not accept 'names based on considerations of simple tourist or economic publicity'.

The objectives of the project leaders of new communes may be significantly different and include questions of plural internal identities and external identification, coupled with the valuation of resources, particularly touristic ones. Finally, the process of choosing a name appears to be a means of involving people around the project. Thus, in 2017, in the public presentation of the (aborted) merger project between *Doussard* and *Faverge-Seythenex* in *Haute-Savoie*, we learn that the name can and must be "Support for a common territorial project, a vector of image for the inhabitants and the outside world, evocative of the territory and its assets. (...) The question of the name constitutes a challenge which must at the same time seek to respect each individual and each inhabitant in his or her history and identity, but also enhance the value of this exceptional territory in the tourist sense (one of the only French communes which will benefit from a beach and a ski resort as well as a certain number of high-quality outdoor activities or sites) or even try to identify the new commune geographically, quite simply (...) The search for the name of the new commune can be a formidable vector of solidarity and joint construction between all the economic, associative and political players and with the inhabitants. In order to build, through the choice of a name, the beginning of a common identity, the elected representatives have decided to engage in a very broad consultation process with the inhabitants and local players, representatives of associations, entrepreneurs, shopkeepers, partners, etc. ”

³ Direction générale des Collectivités locales, 2017, « Fixation du nom d'une commune nouvelle », Online: http://cnig.gouv.fr/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Indications_nom-commune-nouvelle_18042017.pdf.

⁴ Commission Nationale de Toponymie 2021, *Décider du nom d'un lieu. Guide pratique à l'usage des élus*, Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France.

Initial observations on the new names issued from *nouvelles communes* show that they often mention a reference to a former rural pays, a landscape feature or a province of the *Ancien Régime*. The prepositions *en*, *au* and *de*, but also *les*, *lès* and *sur*, are over-represented among the names of *nouvelles communes* already in existence. The use of *en* followed by the name of a rural *pays* or *province* thus rises from less than 2% among the names of merged communes to almost 7% among the names of new communes. And this more than doubles (to nearly 15%) if we add the *de* and *au* followed by a rural *pays*. This is in line with the observations already made on the numerous requests (not always validated) to modify the names of communes over the last few decades, with a clear tendency to add hydronyms and especially regionyms (Guerrin 1998), among other examples: *Châlons-en-Champagne* and *Saint-Dié-des-Vosges*.

We also note the frequent assimilation or association of *nouvelles communes* with a *val* or *vallée*, which avoids referring to one of the constituent localities and refers to a topographical and possibly historical and economic territory. Thus 85 *vaux*, *vallées* or *vallons* are included in the names of the 810 *nouvelles communes* created between 2015 and 2019, i.e. almost 11%, whereas only 10 occurrences existed among the names of the 2525 initial communes (less than 0.5%), five of which were already the result of previous mergers. Thus, the names chosen in the end may be fairly neutral compromise names that are the result of neutralising initial proposals that enhance the value of a particular constituent locality (the city centre in particular) and/or of highlighting a generic resource, for example *Entre-Vignes* between *Montpellier* and *Nîmes* or *Valforêt* in rural *Côte-d'Or*. There is therefore a tension around the reference to the city-centre, between internal fear and external need. There is also a tendency towards toponymic neutralisation, excluding the names of localities in favour of generic references to the landscape, the topography and/or the local and regional environment in the form of references to *pays* and *provinces* (typically: *Val-en- ...*; *Monts-du- ...*; *Terres-de ...*).

The very few changes in the recent names of *nouvelles communes* that have already taken place could indicate a certain return to the reference to the central town after a period of toponymic neutralisation. In fact, in 2017, the *nouvelle commune* formed by the communes of *Plémet* and *La Ferrière*, freshly named *Les Moulins*, abandoned this generic referent to take on the name of the largest former commune: *Plémet*. At the end of 2021, *Capavenir-Vosges*, with the marketing name of an ex-commune of 3 communes, became *Thaon-les-Vosges* with the name of its ex-centre commune; and *Le Hom*, from 5 communes, became *Thury-Harcourt-le-Hom* by adding the name of the local hydrographic figure common to that of its ex-centre commune

At the same time, there is a heritage issue with the fear of losing heritage and local identity to the imposition of generic or off-ground or regional references for territorial marketing purposes. More specifically, concerns about the conservation or loss of onomastic heritage are expressed. This is true from three points of view :

- linguistic with, in particular, the risk of erasing Breton for French in the new names (Bourges 2017; Larvor 2017). However, this has not been proven for the moment (Bideau & Giraut 2022). There is even a case of neo-Breton in Ille-et-Vilaine;
- religious : hagiographic toponymy with the *Saint.es* would disappear; indeed, from the beginning of 2015 to the end of 2019, it was present in 18.5% of the names of merged communes to 4.3% of the names of new communes, a trend that increases even more

if we take into account the disappearance of references to churches, crosses, chapels, abbeys, etc.;

- historical : disappearance of references to localized events or to specific historical statuses of localities or to historical personalities....

These fears and denunciations are mainly expressed in the regional press. They will have to be verified precisely, but it can be assumed that while certain generic names are appearing, a certain erasure of local linguistic and historical specificities is at work. This is true of the new names, since those of the former communes may remain and be displayed in the signage if they become *communes déléguées*. More generally and more profoundly, there would be a shift from communal references linked to localities (ex-parishes) to references linked to landscape and territorial environment.

In terms of interpreting the reasons for the neotponymy linked to the *nouvelles communes* (Tab. 4), it can be said that the new names linked to inter-communal cooperation and the merging of communes take place in a context of the **Emergence** of new functional entities linked in particular to urbanisation. Since the end of the 19th century, the symbolic valorisation of resources for notoriety and economic development has also been an element of context that is similar to toponymic **Commodification**. The combined and successive technologies may have involved the neutralisation (of the domination of the chief towns) (**Neutralising**) and the promotion of the image and value of the new entity (**Promoting**).

<i>Neotponymies</i>	<i>Contexts</i>	<i>Technologies</i>
Urban municipal merger (XIX-XX)	Emergence (agglomeration)	Absorptioning
Municipal cooperation areas 1st generation	Emergence	Neutralising
Municipal cooperation areas 2d generation	Emergence/Commodification	Neutralising/Promoting
<i>Communes nouvelles</i>	Emergence/Commodification	Neutralising/Promoting/Participating

Tab. 4 Contexts and technologies involved in French municipal cooperation and mergers neotponymies: F. Giraut 2022

Conclusion

With the three last centuries French territorial restructurings, it appears that radical political changes and territorial conquests are particularly favourable contexts for the eradication of old territories (the *provinces* of the *Ancien Régime*), the production of new ones (the *départements*) and the change of status and partial renaming of inherited entities (the parishes and cities). It also appears that the redistribution of the population as a result of urbanisation has led to the emergence of new territorialities and related denominations either through the constitution of new types of entities (*régions*, inter-municipal cooperation areas) or through mergers (new large *régions*, *nouvelles communes*). Finally, a context of marketing and competition between territories is likely to generate renaming. The toponymic goals and technologies that govern the choice of new names are diverse and can be combined. Thus, *cleansing* consists of not including in new names toponymic references to former entities belonging to a bygone political order or a denied tradition (in the rarer contexts of our case of

conquest). *Neutralising* will generate names which do not recall those of former entities or which do not give primacy to a central place in a territorial entity. Its implementation favours generic names referring to the environment and landscape or possibly to a specific regional environment or heritage. They erase references to localities to favour references to local territories marked by landscape or heritage sites or areas. The promotion will consist in the valuation of symbolic or material resources. These can range from the notoriety of a site, a town or an environmental element to the evocation of the greatness of the entity or its capacity to provide access to a whole region.

Finally, it appears that contemporary naming or renaming practices are increasingly using the technology of public participation in the choice of name. This can range from elementary and superficial modalities such as a vague online consultation based on a pre-selection, to the constitution of real workshops to elaborate an initial list which is then submitted to a wide consultation and debate. The neotponymy linked to territorial restructuring is therefore marked by a succession of toponymic technologies that are recombined according to the context and the issues at stake.

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