

# Capital city

Generally speaking, the capital, or capital city, can be defined as a city that is the seat of the administration and government of a «State». There is only one capital, and it has considerable political and symbolic importance on the scale of the national «territory» to which it belongs. However capital cities do not necessarily dominate large global urban networks, and their role is increasingly challenged, as indeed is that of the States that they represent. Yet capital cities have never been more numerous than they are today, on account of the increase in the number of States since 1945. They are mainly seats of power and decision, including the economic sphere. At the same time, despite the very wide diversity of the forms they take, they are geographical objects with particular features.

Etymologically, the word "capital" (from the Latin *caput*) refers to the city at the "head" of a territory. In other languages the term can also be derived from the expressions meaning the "main city", as in German *Hauptstadt*. In French the word *capitale*, as in English, gives precedence to the link with the State government. In French it is distinguished from "*chef-lieu*" (literally "head place") which for its part can be a very small local "capital" or administrative centre. While capital cities have often been the subject of monographic studies, their "capital city" identity as a category or concept has rarely been studied. Dictionaries of geography, if they mention the word, generally include short entries around the theme of typologies. In the contemporary period, only a few theoretical texts have broached the issues of capital cities (Kirsch, 2005; Djament-Tran, 2005; Laporte, 2011; Vidal, 2002), often favouring a geo-historical approach.

Capital cities take on very diverse forms, in particular because, unlike other urban entities, neither their size, nor their morphology, nor even their overall function, contribute to their definition. There are four essential characteristics for a State capital. The capital city has a unique status in its territory; its existence is essential for that territory; it is urban in form; it entertains a symbolic link with the State.

The logics behind the location of capital cities exhibit two main trends, combining the need for adequate «accessibility» and the ability to control the territory. The first requirement tends to favour central spaces, which means that certain present-day capitals carry the mark of earlier «centralities» (Berlin, Moscow, Washington DC). Other capital city locations put more emphasis on their role as an interface between the outside world and the rest of the country, in particular taking the form of large ports (Bangkok, Buenos Aires, Copenhagen, Dakar, London).

Capital cities contribute to making up the history of the State they administer. From a geo-historical viewpoint, modern capitals cannot be envisaged solely in the setting of Westphalian sovereignty, running a minimal administration and wielding power over a territory. The cities the most long-established as capitals were often the first cities to be the seats of a sedentary power (rather than a provisional location for a travelling court). Then in the modern era they came to house institutions at national level (parliaments, ministries etc) and the beginnings of a diplomatic corps established in Embassies. In 18th century Europe, the capital city also became an urban entity that the national power tended to shape to promote itself, by way of the construction of palaces, national monuments, and large avenues with grand perspectives.

Today state capitals are not necessarily in a dominant position in urban networks, because being the seat of state power is not the only factor generating metropolisation. The capital is obviously a decisional centre, extending to the economic sector, and it contributes to the international outreach of the urban area. But this is not the only condition. Cities like New York, Shanghai or Sao Paolo, or Barcelona and Milan in Europe, appear as highly prominent metropolises despite the fact that they are not capital cities. In city systems increasingly governed by globalisation, involving above all economic logics that escape state influence, the status of the capital city seems to be losing importance. Thus a "capital city" is no longer a "metropolis", nor is it a "global city". In many States, the capital is not a large city. The function of seat of power is extremely flexible, ranging from highly centralised States to those that function in federal or decentralised manner. The importance of the capital in the structuring of the State is also very variable. Often the capital houses most of the national institutions, but in some cases its status is reduced to a symbolic dimension. Similarly, there are States in which the capital houses neither the parliament nor the ministries, for instance Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

Capital cities, even when they are small, tend to draw fairly wealthy populations, and contribute to the prosperity of the regions in which they are located. They are characterised by a marked concentration of certain specific functions, often with substantial fallout in terms of employment, direct or indirect, generally well-paid, although this is difficult to quantify. In addition to their political functions, the large numbers of jobs in the administration, in embassies and consulates, in the media and even in tourism and luxury retailing

are marked features. The influence of these sectors can of course vary considerably according to the position of the city in the national urban network, and according to the power of the State concerned, which will determine the numbers of diplomats, journalists, and prominent guests frequenting the city. However capital city status generally produces regions that are wealthy. In the European Union, the Berlin Land is the only capital city region where GDP per inhabitant is below the national average.

Depending on the State, representations of the capital city can vary considerably. In France, Paris is contrasted with "la province" (in the singular, as if it were a distinct whole; the "provincial" part of the country) or else with whatever is situated "en région", again in the singular, and as if the Paris area (Ile de France) were not a region in itself: what is not the capital is treated as a peripheral space. In Switzerland or Germany, (especially when Bonn was the capital of the German Federal Republic) it is not unusual to form an oxymoron by adding the adjective "provincial" to the seat of government. In the USA, and in countries that have taken Washington DC as a model (Australia, Brazil, Canada, Pakistan) having a small capital located in a city with solely political and administrative functions is viewed as guaranteeing the federal and democratic functioning of the State.

In all cases, the capital city possesses a symbolic dimension that distinguishes it from other towns and cities. Its name is sometimes used to refer to the State and its government in phrases such as "Washington responded to these events.....". Like the flag or the national anthem, the capital is an attribute of the State and of its identity. It becomes the incarnation of a history that is not only local but national, its architecture is designed to reflect the power of the country or the political leanings of the regime at a given time. The monumental grandeur of the capital can remain fairly discreet, as in the case of Bonn in post-war western Germany, or it can take over the whole city via spectacular forms, as can be seen in Brasilia built in the 1960s, or more recently Astana and Naypyidaw.

This rather marked aspect of state capitals also explains the mechanisms that come into play when they are displaced. Choosing to move a capital can be motivated by territorial changes affecting the integrity of the State, but it often follows on from political upheavals or significant events for national unity (for instance in Russia after 1917, or in a quite different context with the reunification of Germany in 1990). When the decision to move the capital is submitted to a parliament or to public debate (the United States in 1790, Rome in the 1860s, Brazil in the 1950s, Japan in the 1980s, Germany in 1991), the animated debate and the arguments used are frequently pervaded by a very strong affective charge, because the place that is to become the centre of power symbolically carries a large part of the emotional charge linked to the construction of the nation or State. Moves of capital cities often occur at times of clear-cut political or territorial breakaways, when the authority of the State, its links with history, the integrity of its territory and its future perspectives are challenged or altered. Moves motivated by more strictly urban factors, such as natural disasters (as after the Lisbon earthquake in 1755), or linked to urban congestion, as in Japan or Korea, have never progressed beyond the project stage.

By extension, the word capital can refer to cities predominant in spaces on various scales. Federal states have capitals, as do certain regions, while in France these capitals are referred to as *préfectures*, a trend observed in other centralised systems. The word is also used today for cities housing supranational institutions. Brussels is often referred to as the "capital of Europe". The word capital is likewise used to refer to the dominant position of a town or city in a sector that has nothing to do with politics. Thus we can encounter expressions such as "economic capital", "cultural capital", or "religious capital".

The term capital is indeed fairly flattering, and has a wider, much more identifiable semantic field than "metropolis" for instance. It is thus not surprising to find it used for marketing purposes. For instance, Stockholm since 2005 has promoted itself by taking on the title of the "capital of Scandinavia". The same logic is found in the title of "green capital" or "European capital of culture" awarded to certain cities.

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