

Spatial Determinism and Territorial Public Action in France : Challenges and Evolutions

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Slide n°2 This paper aims to explore the relationships between urban space and politics. In 1973 Henri Lefebvre defined urban space as being a political space, which means not only a political product, but also a support, an instrument and a challenge for contradictory strategies and confrontations¹.

So I aim to explore the political contemporary space in France.

I will take as a starting point the French case and some concrete examples of the “*politique de la ville*” implemented since the 80s and the political ideas that made it possible. Then I will focus on the status and on the exact place that space occupies in public action and in the thinking of the various actors – politicians, urban planners, architects... I will speak therefore about urban ideology² and its consequences.

To put it differently: Do the political contemporary representations consider space as a mere instrument – as a means – or rather as a real challenge for social change? I will therefore describe the way space is used as a tool in contemporary public action, starting from the representations of the relationships between space and society dating back in the 70s, that led to the “*politique de la ville*” from the 80s.

First of all, I have to say a few words about this French “*politique de la ville*”, about its history and the context that witnessed its birth, and to explain what it is.

In a second step, I will speak about the stakeholders that defended this policy and about their ideas.

In a third step, I will present the transfer of these ideas into action. I will therefore concentrate on the study of the ideology underlying this public policy, on the evolutions and adaptations

¹ LEFEBVRE (Henri) (1973), *Le Droit à la ville II : Espace et politique*, Paris, Anthropos, 2000

² BUSQUET (Grégory), *Idéologie urbaine et pensée politique dans la France de la période 1958-1981*, thèse de doctorat en urbanisme et aménagement, Institut d’urbanisme de Paris / Paris XII–Val de Marne, 2007 ; BUSQUET Grégory, 2009. « Le spatialisme et la pensée politique progressiste sur la ville », in BAUDIN (Gérard), BONNIN (Philippe), *Faire territoire aujourd'hui*, Paris, Editions Recherches, pp. 281-299 ; BUSQUET Grégory, 2007. « L’idéologie et l’espace urbain dans les années 60-70 : le cas du discours du Parti socialiste unifié », in VIALA Laurent, VILLEPONTOUX Stéphane (sous la dir. de), *Imaginaire, territoires, sociétés. Contribution à un déploiement transdisciplinaire de la géographie sociale*, Mutation des Territoires en Europe - CNRS, Montpellier, Publications de l’Université Paul-Valéry-Montpellier III, 2007, pp. 311-324.

of these systems of ideas facing reality and, last but not least, on the identification of their social and spatial consequences.

I - From the “grands ensembles” to the “politique de la ville”

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The “*politique de la ville*” appeared in fact in France in the 80s, after the arrival of the political left-wing to power. It is a multi-ministerial policy that essentially aimed to enhance positive aspects of “difficult” suburbs and districts, by managing the town planning heritage of the “*grands ensembles*”, - which are large social housing complexes built in the period of economic growth from the 50s to the 70s, and from scratch in a voluntary manner by the state. Since the 50’s up to the 70’s, France was indeed a place where the state has built a large number of dwellings. It built in city peripheral areas that were not yet urbanized, often with no urban utilities. The goal was to build fast a large number of dwellings, at the lowest cost possible, in virgin areas, in order to house the work force, especially the immigrants and the rural migrants attracted by the needs of the industry. It was in this context that large social housing estates appeared and multiplied.³ They were created and reproduced employing standardised construction techniques and the design principles of the Charter of Athens⁴. These housing complexes should also have allowed for the mixing of middle class and workers.

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But starting from the 70s, in these neighbourhoods of social housing, started to appear what we call in France - especially in the media - the “trouble of the suburbs” (“*mal des banlieues*”).

First difficulties in cohabitation between different social classes were noticed⁵, then a certain type of boredom inherent to a rational and minimalistic organisation of space, to the lack of services, of leisure infrastructures - and to summarise - lack of attractivity⁶.

Moreover, a series of observations added up :

- the fact that these housing complexes grew old, as it could be noticed in the degradation of the built structures, as well as in the social decay;

³ DUFAUX (Frédéric), FOURCAUT (Annie) (sous la dir. de), *Le Monde des grands ensembles*, Paris, Créaphis, 2004.

⁴ LE CORBUSIER (JEANNERET Charles-Edouard, dit) (1941), *La Charte d’Athènes* suivie de *Entretien avec les étudiants des écoles d’architecture*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, Coll. « Points Essais », 1957

⁵ CHAMBOREDON (Jean-Claude) et LEMAIRE (Madeleine), « Proximité spatiale et distance sociale : les grands ensembles et leur peuplement », *Revue française de sociologie*, n° XI-1, Paris, 1970.

⁶ LEFEBVRE (Henri), « Les nouveaux ensembles urbains (un cas concret : Lacq-Mourenx) », *Revue française de sociologie*, 1960, réédité dans *Du rural à l’urbain*, Paris, Anthropos, 1970.

- the fact that the middle class left in order to acquire private houses, this tendency being favoured by a policy supporting individual housing;
- the fact that these estates concentrated a population that was the most likely to be riveted by this way of living.
- the decrease in industrial employment of workers following the economic crisis of the 70s and the growth of unemployment which particularly hit these areas.

On top of all this, in the beginning of the 80s the first riots of young people took place in the “*grands ensembles*” neighbourhoods.

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It was in this context that the “*politique de la ville*” was first created in the 70s, in an incipient phase, and then was institutionalised in the 80s and 90s.

Since the 1980s, the “*politique de la ville*” has been divided into several components. The first of these components, that could be called police-enforced or repressive, aimed to precisely target specific “populations” in order to control crime in districts designated as being “sensitive”. It was followed by a socio-economic component : emphasis was placed on education, public services, tax exemption for companies, in order to favour employment in these districts, etc. The third component was specifically urban and spatial. It aimed to link the suburbs to the city centres and to open up certain districts. This involved an intervention that was not only material and in which the social mix objective appeared once again: the departure of the middle class should have been prevented, by making these areas more attractive, more secure (for the population, as well as for companies).

Shortly put, facing the observation of the obsolescence of the large social housing areas, in the last thirty years, the French state tried to repair, more or less successfully, what it did for two decades, since the 50s and up to the 70s, in a former context of economic growth.

So the French “*politique de la ville*” consists of a series of measures introduced in order to provide a remedy to social and economical problems, that are regarded as isolated and confined in space: this type of territorialised public action is set in a context that is resolutely spatial. And that bears certain hidden effects, that I will point out further on.

But in order to get to a more detailed approach of this matter, we need to explore the complex sum of stakeholders that supported this “*politique de la ville*” as well as their ideas.

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II - The actors of the “politique de la ville” and their ideas

At its beginnings⁷, this policy was promoted by a small team of high civil servants and experts, that were graduates of the “Ecole des ponts” and of the National School of Administration (ENA), members of the elected local governments, NGO representatives, stakeholders that were coming from the social movement scene and of architects, to whom the authorities had granted this mission of reconnecting the suburbs⁸. Most of the stakeholders who took part in the creation of this policy are still pursuing it at present.

But from an ideological point of view, the “politique de la ville” was created in the 80s through an infusion of dissenting ideas in the state apparatus, a process that had been taking place since the 70s.

While it is true that an ideology guided the “politique de la ville” at its origins, later, like all ideologies, it was constructed in opposition to another ideology⁹. In this situation it could even be said that we are facing continuity.

Let us go back to the 1950s and 60s. At that time urban policies revealed a desire to reinforce the role played by the state in town planning and construction. This period was dominated by the state intervention policy applied by General De Gaulle, through a rationalist urban ideology. The large suburban areas and the type of housing they proposed, were based on the *spatialist ideology*, as we call it in France, which is a sort of spatial determinism over social activity, a subject particularly examined by the sociologists Jean-Pierre Garnier¹⁰ and Yves Chalas¹¹ and by the geographer Michel Lussault¹². This spatial determinist ideology integrated technical and architectural progress, as well as improved lifestyles and comfort,

⁷ DUBEDOUT (Hubert), *Ensemble, refaire la ville. Rapport au Premier ministre du Président de la Commission nationale pour le développement social des quartiers*, Paris, La Documentation Française, 1983.

⁸ Roland Castro, Michel Cantal-Dupart, mission « Banlieue 89 ».

⁹ MANNHEIM (Karl) (1929), *Idéologie et utopie*, Paris, Librairie Marcel Rivière et Cie, 1956 ; GABEL (Joseph), *Idéologies*, tome 1 : Recueil de textes partiellement extraits de divers revues et publications, 1948 – 1972, Paris, Anthropos, 1974.

¹⁰ GARNIER (Jean-Pierre), « Urbaniser pour dépolitiser : la rhétorique du spatialisme et du localisme », Ecole thématique « Violence, consensus, sécurité », Ecole Nationale Supérieure – Lettre et sciences humaines de Lyon, du 12 au 16 novembre 2001, Mercredi 13 Novembre 2001 : « Le débat contemporain », Lyon.

¹¹ CHALAS (Yves), « Les périphéries dans le discours urbanistique », in : CHALAS (Yves) et la., *Urbanité et périphérie. Connaissance et Reconnaissance des territoires contemporains*, Paris, ministère du Logement, Plan Construction et Architecture (Programme « Evolution des territoires contemporains »), 1997

¹² LUSSAULT (Michel), Item « Spatialisme », in : LEVY (Jacques) et LUSSAULT (Michel) (sous la dir. de), *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l'espace des sociétés*, Paris, Belin, 2003, pp. 864-866.

and combined these positive elements with the need to offer accommodation to the entire French population. It was an ideology developed on the premises of a prosperous society, of modernization of architecture and of lifestyles, a context in which slums, shantytowns and housing shortage could no longer last. The ideology of modernity and of a strong central government has therefore seized urban issues and imposed its contents¹³.

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But in opposition to the essentially *quantitative* approaches (the rapid construction of a large number of housing units), critics developed other social arguments concerning the social housing estates, that were more *qualitative* : social unrest, deteriorated social life, tedium and improper housing. Some of the first critics of these housing complexes were sociologists and, as a consequence, urban sociology began to develop in France starting from the end of the 1960s¹⁴. Based on the themes of “living environment” and “quality of everyday life”, it was particularly developed by Marxists and by public figures, such as Henri Lefebvre¹⁵.

In parallel, social and urban movements were multiplying in France and, along with the others, they were criticizing the mono-functionality and the lack of community facilities within districts occupied by social housing. These themes were also subject to a great deal of debate among the French “Second left-wing” movement (which was non-communist and promoting self-management), and which, in the 1970s, introduced the urban issue into French institutional and political life, through bodies such as the Unified Socialist Party, the CFDT union, and the *Groupes d'Action Municipale*¹⁶.

The French urban sociologists, the members of the *Second left*, the participants in the social movements, as well as some of the left-wing catholic civil servants, began discussing “*urban self-management*”. From the 1960s on, these groups advocated for residents and users to be taken into consideration, along with their hopes and desires and, consequently, with their contributions. The idea of participation or of self-management was therefore developed in response to the city planning practices of the preceding Gaullist period that had been technocratic and state-controlled.

¹³ FOURCAUT (Annie), « Trois discours, une politique ? », *Urbanisme* n° 332, dossier « Le grand ensemble, histoire et devenir », janvier-février 2002, pp. 39-45.

¹⁴ AMIOT (Michel), *Contre l'Etat, les sociologues. Eléments pour une histoire de la sociologie urbaine en France (1900-1980)*, Paris, éditions de l'EHESS, 1986.

¹⁵ LEFEBVRE (Henri) (1947), *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, tome 1 : *Introduction*, Paris, L'Arche, Coll. « Le Sens de la marche », 1958 ; *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, tome 2 : *Fondements d'une sociologie de la quotidienneté*, Paris, L'Arche, Coll. « Le Sens de la marche », 1962 ; *La Vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, Paris, Gallimard, Coll. « Arguments », 1968 ; *le Droit à la ville*, Paris, Anthropos, 1968 ; *Du rural à l'urbain*, Paris, Anthropos, 1970.

¹⁶ BUSQUET (Grégory), *Idéologie urbaine et pensée politique dans la France de la période 1958-1981*, *Op. Cit.*, 2007

Later on, throughout the 70s, the successive right-wing governments chose to increasingly base themselves on the participation of citizens and to go back to a *qualitative* town planning that is closer to the “human scale”¹⁷. In this manner, they broke away from the preceding period and recovered the slogans of the left-wing and of the social movements. This led to the implementation of the first “*housing and social life*” programmes (HVS). We should keep in mind that certain promoters of the “Second left-wing” movement had advocated these procedures. They participated in the HVS focus group, set up by the government, aiming to improve social life in large social housing areas.

Then, in 1974, a large number of the *Second left* members joined the new Socialist Party. As a result, participation, self-management and new town planning ideas found themselves integrated into the party discourse and had a considerable influence on the decentralization of public policies. Above all, they influenced the “*politique de la ville*”, that the socialists introduced following their accession to power at the national level.

Therefore, it can be stated that the “*politique de la ville*” appeared at the convergence of different legacies:

- the leftist principle of self-management;
- urban sociology;
- the high civil servants (civil engineers, graduates of the ENA)
- the catholic thinking, through the intermediary of the *Second left*;
- social urban movements.

What still needs to be discussed now is the ideology of this “*politique de la ville*”, its application, its social effects and its evolution.

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III – The ideology of the “*politique de la ville*”, its application, and its evolution

Starting with the “*politique de la ville*”, the territory becomes a challenge of political discourses and of public action.

The 1970s were already witnessing a focus on urban issues at the local level : the neighbourhood¹⁸. Problems and their solutions became increasingly qualitative. A critique of authoritarian town planning led to another form of spatial determinist ideology. By assimilating local space as a social issue, this urban ideology implies that space becomes a challenge. This ideology determines collective identities, which were generally defined in

¹⁷ ARCY (François d’) et PRATS (Yves), « Les politiques du cadre de vie », in : GRAWITZ (Madeleine) et LECA (François) (sous la dir. de), *Traité de science politique*, vol. 4, *Les Politiques publiques*, Paris, PUF, 1985

¹⁸ GENESTIER (Philippe), « Le sortilège du quartier : quand le lieu est censé faire lien », *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, n°82, 1999.

relation to the living environment, as, for example, people living in shantytowns or in large social housing estates etc... This logically led through to the idea of “*politique de la ville*”.

The spatial component of this policy, that I’ve already mentioned, has led to the programmes *Mission Suburbs 89* (“*Banlieue 89*”) which, at the beginning of the 1980s, targeted the reconnection of a certain number of spaces. The other spatial aspects of this urban policy were urban renewal, housing improvement, renovation, demolition of housing blocks and towers and led to the recent programme of the National Agency in charge of Urban Renewal (ANRU).

This program sets forth the demolition of the most dilapidated housing and its replacement by new and more varied housing units (detached homes and collective housing). However, in practice, as the former housing estates are destroyed, their residents are being relocated to social housing elsewhere. Hence the ideal of social mix has disappeared. In accordance with the spatial determinist ideology, more emphasis was placed on spatial segregation than on the structural causes of exclusion. However, it is not enough to raze the old housing in order to solve the social problems, that are in this way being relocated elsewhere. The approach engaged was to demolish and to find the simplest solutions available: it is pure spatial determinist thinking that is being translated into public action, in a similar way as when these housing estates had been built.

However, even if it deals with space, as in the case of urban renewal, or even if it doesn’t concern space directly, for thirty years the “*politique de la ville*” has been translating social problems in spatial terms. Neighbourhoods have been targeted in relation to zoning principles and this aspect has recently been reinforced by the concept of “priorities geography”.

Taking as a starting point the morphological indicators (as, for example the presence of social collective housing estates), as well as social and economic indicators (school dropout rate, crime, percentage of young people, of unemployed, of single-parent families etc.), precise territories were being targeted, they were circumscribed and then the state was putting forward the necessary funding for taking action in these precise areas. It therefore targeted the “neighbourhoods” and “problematic populations”. It sought to localize and to translate social problems in spatial terms, thus representing an expression of spatial determinism.

The result of this practice was the stigmatization of certain populations in relation to their location and to their socio-demographical characteristics, and even more, to ethnical characteristics, as the French sociologist Sylvie Tissot pointed out¹⁹.

¹⁹ TISSOT (Sylvie), *L’Etat et les quartiers. Genèse d’une catégorie de l’action publique*, Paris, Seuil, Coll. « Liber », 2007.

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Through urban renewal and zoning, spatial determinism is being perpetuated, and moreover reinforced, in the “*politique de la ville*”. It was already present when the zones treated by this policy had been conceived.

We have already seen that the social mix through housing, part of the “*politique de la ville*”, at least in theory, was already present in previous urban policies.

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However, concerning the idea of self-management or of participation that has been dominant throughout the 70s and 80s²⁰, it has gradually disappeared, mainly since the 90s, when we have witnessed a comeback. The role played by the state has been reinforced, as it has multiplied measures and funds, in spite of a continuity of the actors present since the beginning of this policy.

In the 80s the “*politique de la ville*” was based on the contract between the state and the local authorities. The projects were generated by the local initiative and they were based on the negotiation at different levels and on different scales.

Later on, after more riots and since the creation of a Ministry of the City in 1990, *heavy machinery* has been put into practice, a bureaucratic mechanism that strictly regulated all initiatives. Nowadays, all the more since the creation of the National Agency for Urban Renewal (ANRU) in 2003, an extremely centralised administration is distributing the finances²¹. The “*politique de la ville*” is nowadays conceived at the national level and passed further on to the local administrations. Ready-made solutions are being proposed and the administrations pick one or another, without any diagnosis of the specific problem.

Along with all this comes a change in the discourses dealing with these neighbourhoods since the 80s. Initially the “*politique de la ville*” was valorising these “difficult neighbourhoods” and their potential, based on the competences of the inhabitants, through the idea of participation. Nowadays, the discourse is more and more compassionate and negativist: these neighbourhoods are presented as being socially homogeneous²². In a certain way, this idea

²⁰ HATZFELD (Hélène), *Faire de la politique autrement. Les expériences inachevées des années 1970*, Rennes, ADELS, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005.

²¹ EPSTEIN (Renaud), *Gouverner à distance. Quand l’Etat se retire des territoires* », *Esprit* n°11, 2005.

²² TISSOT (Sylvie), *L’Etat et les quartiers. Genèse d’une catégorie de l’action publique*, Paris, Seuil, Coll. « Liber », 2007.

goes along with a certain homogenisation from one neighbourhood to another and among their problems, since local contexts, be they social, economical or spatial, are being neglected.

To sum up all this, three ideologies go beyond the urban policies of 60s, as well as the following “*politique de la ville*”, even if they take up different forms: spatial determinism, social mix or the importance of state intervention. Opposing this last idea, the promoters of the “*politique de la ville*” have proposed self-management, and afterwards the idea of participatory democracy. However this idea, even if innovative, did not last long.

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Conclusions.

I would like to finish by three conclusions. Two concern the “*politique de la ville*” and territorial public action, and one concerns urban ideology and space.

- Firstly, concerning the “*politique de la ville*”. The aim of urban policy is at present to remedy the problems related to the town planning heritage dating back to the Gaullist period, and to respond to the slogans and criticisms that dominated the end of the 1960s and the urban social movements of the 1970s. If left-wing and urban sociological criticism have had any influence whatsoever on this policy, then it has been only indirect. It was conveyed by concepts and slogans, such as “participation” and “quality of daily life”, that were imposed by urban sociologists, the “Second left” and by urban social movements. It has been an ill-defined set of stakeholders and slogans, rather than a set of ideas that has created the link between this criticism and its answers.
- Secondly, the state intervention, in accordance with the wishes of local elected representatives, targets territories rather than people. Thus the spatial categorization of social groups and the social categorization of spaces justify and legitimize public action. But this approach runs the risk of producing an amalgam, mixing people and the built structure. This has, of course, as a consequence the strengthening of stigmatisation of “sensitive” neighbourhoods, or of neighbours presenting the risk of riots, that includes the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods. The urban renewal policy covers therefore a symbolic aspect: in the discourses the destruction aims to smear the image of these areas by encouraging the return of the middle class, and by driving away the unwanted.

- Finally, concerning urban ideology, despite changing and evolving discourses and methods, a continuity can be noticed between the urban policies of the 60s and the “*politique de la ville*”. A desire to treat social aspects through spatial facts remains, even if the goal sought is no longer the same. Space has a dialectic status: it is always criticized and it always becomes the salutary tool in discourses and practices. As a political instrument, urban space crystalizes contemporary political thinking and becomes a means for intervening on the social aspects : in the past, by means of building activities, and now, by razing former dwellings. We can therefore ask ourselves if the “*politique de la ville*” isn’t actually trying to manage the inherited large housing estates by the same kind of thinking that made possible their coming into being. Spatial determinism, as well as social mix, principles that lay at the origin of these housing complexes in the 50s up to the 70s, are thus supposed to cure their problems, as well as to remedy contextual outcomes, such as riots, segregation and the anomie of suburban neighbourhoods.

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