



**HAL**  
open science

# Centre and Centrality in the 19th Century: Some Concepts of Urban Disposition Under the Spot of Locality

Pierre-Yves Saunier

► **To cite this version:**

Pierre-Yves Saunier. Centre and Centrality in the 19th Century: Some Concepts of Urban Disposition Under the Spot of Locality. *Journal of Urban History*, 1995, Vol.24 No.4, may 1998, p.435-467. halshs-00002771

**HAL Id: halshs-00002771**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00002771>**

Submitted on 3 Sep 2004

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## CENTRE AND CENTRALITY IN THE 19TH CENTURY: SOME CONCEPTS OF URBAN DISPOSITION UNDER THE SPOT OF LOCALITY \*

published in *Journal of Urban History*, Vol.24 No.4, may 1998, p.435-467.

In the fourth volume of *Histoire de la France urbaine*, Françoise choay contributed a chapter entitled "Pensées sur la ville, arts de la ville"<sup>1</sup>. This chapter gathered contributions of French historians about way to conceive of the city, with particular attention given to the themes of circulation and sanitation. Since this point in the development of French urban history, several other scholars have brought to attention other elements from the "common language" of urban thought in the 19th century. Building on the foundation build by Pierre Lavedan <sup>2</sup>, Michel Coste demonstrated the importance of the strong theoretical work with respect to the concept of centrality <sup>3</sup>; while, Anne Querrien and Marcel Roncayolo insisted on the concept of network in order to bring a new perspective urban traffic <sup>4</sup>. Those works enabled a global apprehension of the concepts and stakes which framed the questions of urban disposition in the middle of the 19th century. Nevertheless, this has taken place in a traditional framework of "history of ideas" framework where the object is the concept or the notion rather than the circumstances of its making, diffusion and use. Both these approaches

---

\* This paper was translated with the help of Michael Miller, who turned my english into something readable, and that was a hard task.

1 DUBY (Georges) (dir): *Histoire de la France urbaine*, Paris, Seuil, 1983.

2 LAVEDAN (Pierre): *La question du déplacement de Paris et du transfert des Halles au conseil municipal de Paris sous la monarchie de Juillet*, Paris, Ville de Paris, 1969.

3 COSTE (Michel): "Peyrremond, un théoricien des quartiers et de la restructuration", *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*, n°22, 1984. See also "Croissance, quartier, centralité: le débat de 1840-1844" by Marcel RONCAYOLO in *Cities and merchants, French and Irish perspectives on urban development, 1500-1900*, Dublin, 1986.

4 Those questions and the concerned bibliography are to be found in the chapter "L'aménagement du territoire, XVIII°-XX° siècle" written by Marcel RONCAYOLO in BURGUIERE (André) et REVEL (Jacques): *Histoire de la France*, tome II, *L'espace français*, Paris, Seuil, 1989.

are essential to those wishing to undertake a history of urban disposition <sup>5</sup> which would not be a concretion of biographies and monographies in which the "ideas" play the strange part of a bizarre material who would take shape, spread and vanish without supports, without work, without stakes, without interests and without any strength than the one it would "naturally" carry within it self. In trying to find a better direction, that indicated by Christian Topalov in his various works seems attractive. May be even more when it appears that, to date, French urban historians ignored it while it was followed by political scientists or sociologists <sup>6</sup>. The present paper is located in this going-on scholarship of urban thought, by putting into question two key-notions in the common language of those whos task is to give shape to the city. In this way it is possible, I believe, to undertake a social history of urban disposition which is not merely the outcome of the combination of biographical studies of the "great men", monographies of doctrinal schools and a long and painful percouse through pertinent legislation. One of the possible routes is to concentrates on notions employed by agents involved, in order to re-establish their social implications.

---

5 I will use the term of "urban disposition" rather than "urbanism" or "town planning". There lies a sort of immunitary defense, even if not perfect. A social history of these practices must not take for granted the present state of professional or conceptual structures and so become a mere genealogy. This attitude would lead to transpose a contextual notion of "urbanism" to periods as the 19th century when this scienfic and institutional form of giving shape to the city was ignored. Thus, it would open place to the deshistoricization of the idea itself, which stands for a sphere of public policy, a professionnall aim and a codified knowledge. The aim of social history is precisely to unravel this knot and to understand the genesis of the present situation whilst scrutinising former or parrallel configurations of this possible institutional and theoretical autonomisation which came to be called "urbanism". In this sense, urbanims is just a possible state in an evolution, and not the unavoidable end towards which all would have lead, as the french town-planning history written by french town-planners tends to say (the "native" history of the profession seems rather different in the U.S.A.).

6 See "De la cité-jardin à la ville rationalisée: un tournant du projet réformateur. Etude comparative France, Grande-Bretagne, Italie, Etats-Unis", *Revue Française de Sociologie*, vol.28, n°3, juillet-septembre 1987 (with Suzanna MAGRI); *Naissance de l'urbanisme moderne et réforme de l'habitat populaire aux Etats-Unis 1900-1940*, Rapport de recherche pour le Plan Urbain, Ministère de l'Equipement, 1988; "La ville congestionnée. Acteurs et langage de la réforme urbaine à New-York au début du XX° siècle", *Genèses*, n°1, septembre 1990. As for the works rooted in this social history of urban disposition, see *Dossiers des séminaires TTS*, "Quels dess(e)ins pour les villes? De quelques objets de planification pour l'urbanisme dans l'entre-deux guerres", n°20-21, octobre 1992; *Dossiers des séminaires TTS*, "Villes réfléchies. Histoire et actualité des cultures professionnelles dans l'urbanisme", n°11/12, mars 1990; and the major works of GAUDIN (J-P): *L'aménagement de la société, la production de l'espace XIX° et XX° siècle*, Paris, Anthropos, 1979, *L'avenir en plan: technique et politique dans la prévision urbaine 1900-1930*, Seyssel, Champvallon, 1985, "Savoir et savoir-faire dans l'urbanisme au début du siècle", *In-extenso*, n°11, 1987; CLAUDE (Viviane), *L'association générale des techniciens et hygiénistes municipaux. Ecole et/ou lobby, 1905-1930*, Ministère de l'Equipement, rapport pour le Plan Urbain, 1987, *Les projets d'aménagement, d'extension et d'embellissement des villes (1919-1940)*, Ministère de l'Equipement, rapport du Plan Urbain, 1991; BAUDOUI (Rémi): *La naissance de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes Urbaines et le premier enseignement de l'urbanisme en France des années 1910 aux années 1920*, Ministère de l'Equipement, rapport du Plan Urbain, 1988.

In this framework, I have chosen, on the one hand the notion of "centre", as point or area, and on the other, the concept of "centrality" as the characteristic or set of characteristics linked to this point or area. Two factors seem to necessitate the examination of these terms. Indeed, the notions of centre and centrality are too often taken for granted, not just by urban historians but by all those who use them. We tend to employ those terms as objective descriptions which can be attributed to all times and all places<sup>7</sup>. Thus, in the matter of residential localisation, at the end of the 19th century, the centre of a city is considered as a good place to live in France but as a poor neighbourhood in England. It can also be said that the "average" French notion of centre pertaining to commercial and residential density does not necessarily overlap with the "average" English notion for which the concentration of economic decision making structures is essential. If the term of "centre" was used only to designate a geometric point, this discrepancy would only be a minor problem. But it is used to explain, justify and legitimate social attitudes and public policies, including, from the mid 19th century, urban disposition policies. In other words it appears that the notion of centre has become an operative concept which is used without forethought, without questioning its "magical" dimension (for example in France the idea of a dynamic source, positive place, location of the highest material and moral values) or critically examining the social senses which the term conveys. In other words, from descriptive, the concept of centre has become evaluative.

More generally, the concepts of centre and centrality seem to be places which are unquestioned in european cultures. Drawing on the work of Rolan Barthes which showed how occidental philosophy made each centre a "*place of truth*", Jérôme Monnet has recently suggested how the logic of centrality is linked to the production of power in order to naturalize the State and to shape national identity, in a complex relation between absolute control of the centre and the maintenance of the centre as the common place of a national

---

<sup>7</sup> This is more particularly noticeable in the omnidirectional use of an analysis concept like the one of center/periphery, or in the success of gravitary models in the analysis of urban armature (central places theory)

territory<sup>8</sup>. It might be pointed out that some societies are founded on non polarised conceptions of space and society and are deprived of centres. It demonstrates that polarised thought, where centre is the source and the point of arrival of each thing, is only one cultural variation of the possible ways to comprehend physical, political or social space<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, one should not lose sight of the fact that the value given to centre and centrality comes from a primary structure of understanding, classifying and acting, whose origin, as Jérôme Monnet drawing on Jean Pierre Vernant<sup>10</sup> suggests, is to be at least referred to the sacred aspect attributed to the centre in the antique Greek civilisation. This particular logic of centrality is important for our understanding of all the policies which work to strengthen, symbolically and practically, the role of the centre, be this centre the capitale city or the city centre of this capitale. Jérôme Monnet's book shows this work of sacralisation, both practical and symbolic, in the centre of Mexico-City through restoration policies, academic and popular history texts and urban disposition decisions (monuments-building, street layouts,...). Nevertheless, it would be dangerous to extend his conclusions to urban policies of "normal" towns. Not all cities are not controlled by a state apparatus concerned with the naturalization of its power, and the symbolic functions of the centre are not necessarily of the same nature, nor of the same extent. Moreover, the shift of the centred primary logic structure mentioned above to the sphere of urban disposition requires to be documented. It is necessary to understand how this structure has been translated in terms appropriate to this sphere where it was to become a reified and yet intangible concept. It is thus an other aim of this paper to reflect upon the use of some spatial understandings, perception and actions categories, in order to better comprehend the analytical tools that we use in the study of urban phenomena.

---

<sup>8</sup> "To control the center is to control society, but controlling the center also means destroying its quality of center and so losing all control over a society in which the common denominator is dissolved", says the author to show the tension which underpins the actions of the State towards the center of Mexico-City. MONNET (Jérôme), *La ville et son double. Usages et images du centre: la parabole de Mexico*, Paris, Nathan, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> In particular see Joël Bonnemaïson's work on the Vanuatu islands and their network organisation which clashed with the centralised notion of the Nation-State when the Republic of Vanuatu was proclaimed in 1980. *La dernière île*, Paris, Arléa/O.R.S.T.O.M, 1986.

<sup>10</sup> VERNANT (Jean-Pierre): *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, Paris, Maspéro, 1965.

In the sphere of theory, this reification of the concepts of centre and centrality in urban disposition can be attributed to the early 20th century, when the first international meetings which marked the apparition of planning as an autonomous field of thought and knowledge production, agreed on some common terms whose definition could be nothing but vague. It seems that the definition of the "centre" was a necessity, but that a strict definition was avoided in favour of a soft definition in geometrical, historical or anthropomorphical terms ("heart" or "brain" of the city). Thus, the concept was amongst the structuring notions which had given birth to a theoretical and practical discourse of planning by the middle of the 20th century. Since then, the reification of these notions in urban matters has only been exacerbated by national urban policies. In France the "*congestion des centres urbains*"<sup>11</sup> had become a commonplace subject with respect to the layout of Paris as early as 1910-1930, and then later in governmental reports of planning organisations in the 1960's. And if the research by sociologists or geographers did challenge the notion of centre by demonstrating the range of subjective and collective criterias which could shape the notion, urban historians did not see any need to question their own use of such a spatially and socially polysemic concept<sup>12</sup>.

This disregard has not been without consequences. To return to a history of urban disposition, it is not reasonable to question dispositional practices with notions that had been forged through these very practices without trying to get a grip on the bias it could carry. But urban history acts so when it speaks about renewal or reconquest of "the centres", as evidence and not as an idea, as a *praxis* and a policy generated by intense social engineering amongst the agents involved. More generally, is it helpful in urban history to consider the centre as an objective phenomenon, be it be recognised through quantified indicators or by contextual "common sense", rather than considering both its form and definition as social products? To adress the notions of centre and centrality, it seems

---

<sup>11</sup> The congestion of urban centres.

<sup>12</sup> See for example VANT (André): "La perception des espaces urbains, essai sur les images de centres-villes", *Travaux de l'Institut de Géographie de Reims*, n°20, 1974 et *Imagerie et urbanisation, recherches sur l'exemple stéphanois*, Saint-Etienne, Centre d'études Foréziennes, 1981, chapitre VII "Du centre de la ville au centre-ville" or LEDRUT (Raymond): *les images de la ville*, Paris, Anthropos, 1973.

necessary to reestablish the stakes and processes which defined these key-notions of urban disposition, in some way other than merely making the history of the words themselves. It could be noted here that the academic exercise of situating the case study in the whole range of theoretical and scholarly developments which surround the notions of centre and centrality would not be useful here. If one were to proceed in this way, one must accept these notions as natural and legitimate, and participate to their reification. If the aim is precisely to study the construction of those notions and their reification, this is clearly an inappropriate way to proceed, despite the academic and rhetoric benefits of this "they and me" game. In fact, it only allows for a fallacious mastering of analytic tools at our disposal through a long enumeration of conflicting or converging versions, all considered as scientific points of view, never located in a precise point of the social space. This might be enough for a "genealogic" history, but it is also possible to consider this conflict amongst versions as a first object of analysis, by reconstituting the genesis of those versions and the circumstances of their coming together.

For this reason, it would seem useful to employ a specific case study. In fact, it is thanks to a detailed work of reconstructing decision making, ideas and individuals shifts that it is possible to turn the concepts of centre and centrality into research objects. The local case study work on a local basis has a second use. The spread of urban disposition concepts is often said to be a shift from Paris to the provinces, and so the choice of a provincial city allows this hypothesis to be checked. Consider the urban centre theories developed by saint-simonian engineers in the Parisian journals of the 1840's. What did the necessity for a unique and stable centre for Parisian prosperity, a necessity which will be met by prefect Haussmann, mean to Lyon? How were they translated or imported? To choose a provincial field work ground is also part of the analytical position which addresses the use of spatially referenced categories in social science. It permits the establishment of a perspective upon centre/periphery scheme which also tends to be evaluative. As opposed to the view which locates each of these in a closed sphere, limiting interaction to the domination/resistance alternative, it can be useful to leave aside this strictness. A "peripheric" case study, a major

provincial town for instance, can thus be used to show the limits of the centre/periphery scheme.

All this is not to suggest that a "micro-approach" necessarily brings us closer to understanding practices, nor to unearthing "the" truth. It is merely to say that this sort of approach allows to answer the questions concerning the definition, spread and use of urban dispositions concepts which are at the core of this paper. One might argue that Lyon is not France and that it is pretentious to aim at developing a re-reading of the history of urban disposition from the case of Lyon. I will only point out that a broader perspective on the contextualised genesis of the concepts of centre and centrality is not possible in the current state of scholarship. On the other hand, and despite of the French academic division of scientific work which associates the local with "vulgar" analysis and the national with "noble" synthesis, should social scientists renounce to the possibility of methodological and problematical involvement being derived from "vulgar" objects <sup>13</sup> ? Last but not least, the point is not to construct an other "new" urban history, but simply to seek the necessary answers to precise questions.

To proceed, it is necessary to explain why Lyon, second city of France in the 19th century, can provide an instructive case study. The first reason is that the city is one where the official policy of urban renewal was institutionally unhampered. In fact, municipal government was suppressed from 1852 to 1870. Urban disposition policy was consequently overseen by the prefect department of the Rhone, acting as a mayor, and by a Ponts et Chaussées engineer who was given the task to rule the municipal service for public streets and highways. But Lyon is also interesting because it is possible to trace there, through a web of journals and associations, the existence of a local field of urban disposition, with its own distinct agents, terminology and stakes. Last, the *commune* of Lyon was growing both in geographical and demographical terms, which tended to highlight the problems associated



with mobility of population. It is then possible both to examine the emergence of the themes formulated in the Parisian spheres of urban reform and government, and to seek for a possible "native" understanding of the notions which I intend to examine.

I will attempt to fulfill those aims in two stages. First, by analyzing three experiments in 19th century urban renewal which proposed to remodel the centre of Lyon, we will follow the notions of centre and centrality as put into practice through urban operations specifically formulated around those notions. Secondly, we will trace the changing notions of centre and centrality on a larger time scale, addressing the definitions and uses of those notions at particular times and places which were marked by a specific debate between different definitions of centre and centrality.

### *Three large renewal projects and the struggle against the displacement of the center*

The three projects considered here belong to two different periods. The first is the period 1853-1865 which saw the opening of rue Impériale and rue Impératrice, two large streets in the geographical centre of the town. The second period is thirty years later and marks the "Grôlée area" operation, which involved the opening of a new street in an area close to these two streets. Political conditions of these two periods are quite different. The first two operations are directed by the prefect while the last one was under the control of an elected municipal council, the return to the common municipal law having been authorised under the IIIrd Republic. The management of the operations was also different : the private sector for Rue Impériale and Grôlée, while the Rue de l'impératrice operation came under city control <sup>14</sup>. Also different were the end result of these projects with the financial success of

---

<sup>13</sup> This question becomes even more significant given that this devalorisation of the local can be linked to the struggles around the emergence of a professional and public field of historical research, and dates from the establishment of the university field right up to the creation of the first public research bodies. See particularly DUMOULIN (Olivier), "Les sciences humaines et la préhistoire du CNRS", *Revue Française de Sociologie*, avril-juin 1985, XXVI-2. There are thus no grounds to accept this local/national opposition as naturally founded and based on a fundamental epistemological and qualitative distinction.

<sup>14</sup> See LEONARD (Charlene): *Lyon transformed, public works of the Second Empire (1853-1864)*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961.

Rue Impériale contrasting with the unremarkable results for Rue de l'Impératrice, and above all with the fiasco of Grôlée <sup>15</sup>.

Despite these differences, it is the same anxiety that we find expressed in the preoccupations of those who authorized or undertook these works. Over and above the social (providing work for the unemployed) or strategic (getting rid of strategic urban guerilla places) concerns, which were motivational factors as much as tactical arguments used to obtain the approval of the authorities, these three operations exhibited a preoccupation which had been present since from the beginning of the 1830's : a preoccupation over the "*removal of the center*". In other words, all those projects demonstrated a great fear that there might be a movement of population and business toward the left bank of the river Rhone, all the as greater that the area was been included in the territory of the *commune* of Lyon following the incorporation of the suburbs in 1852. Moreover, all wished to maintain the existing distribution of land and building values. The attention focussed upon the theme of the regeneration of the centre and around ther notion of centre itself, very present in all three operations, indicates the importance and the persistence of this concern. We will focus on this common point, although this is not to say that it manifests itself indentially in each of our three cases.

The first case, the Rue Impériale drawn up by the municipal architect Dardel <sup>16</sup>, is part of the rich line of North-South street projects which have been toyed with since the end of the 18th century. Moreover, it satisfied the recent requirement to regenerate the *Presqu'île* <sup>17</sup> in order to maintain its land and building value. The displacement of the population towards the left bank of the Rhone, and specially of the wealthiest sectors of the population, had increased continuously since the beginning of the 1830's. Its implications had come to weight in many

---

<sup>15</sup> RIVET (Félix): *Une réalisation d'urbanisme à Lyon, le quartier Grôlée*, Lyon, Institut d'études rhodaniennes, 1955, specially p.59-70.

<sup>16</sup> René Dardel (1796-1871), son of a master builder and grandson of an architect, became "architecte-voyer" (in charge of street opening and maintenance, public building construction and maintenance) of the city of Lyon in 1831, after studies in architecture in Lyon and Paris and a few years of private practice. He left the job in 1854 after the split of the the municipal service of public buildings, public streets and highways in two parts ; public buildings and public streets. The man appointed as head of the new public streets service was a Ponts et Chaussées engineer paid 1.5 times more than Dardel.

<sup>17</sup> The central part of Lyon is so-called because it is located between the two rivers (the Rhône and the Saône) that converge to its south end.

disputes around urban projects, including the incorporation of nearby communes or the location of railway stations<sup>18</sup>. The construction by stages of Rue Centrale in the 1840's, the first wide and straight street to run from the north to the south of the *Presqu'île*, was a result of this concern. The prefect Vaïsse<sup>19</sup>, whose power came directly from the government and whose mission was to undertake major public works to attract the *élites* of a city deprived of its municipal rights, was thus simply ratifying an native demand when he asked Dardel to draw up a plan for a street which would link the Place de la Comédie, around which the silk negoce was concentrated, to Place Bellecour, in order to facilitate access to the railway station.

This project defended the centre as the point at which land and building values were highest, as was the wish of a large part of the local *élites*. The agreement of the municipal commission<sup>20</sup> and of the Lyonese press confirms the warm welcome given to the prefectural project. Of course, one can question these very controlled demonstrations of support, but other signs of approbation can be identified. Amongst the clearest, the speed with which the capital of the Rue Imperial society was met (48 hours) and the way in which it brought together many landlords of the area concerned<sup>21</sup>. Amongst the most discrete indications, one can cite the the declarations at the public utility enquiry, which insisted on the urgent need for the "*regenerating project*". Particularly interesting is the one whose author said he was "*stricken by the necessity to preserve the old Lyon from the decline which menaces at the profit of the left bank of the Rhone and especially of the beautiful neighbourhood of les Brotteaux*"<sup>22</sup>. The success of the regeneration of the centre in this first chapter is thus explained by this convergence between governmental projects and local wishes. A handful of

---

<sup>18</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see SAUNIER (Pierre-Yves): *Lyon au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: les espaces d'une cité*, thèse de doctorat en histoire, Université Lumière-Lyon II, 1992.

<sup>19</sup> Appointed prefect of the Rhone on the 25 Mars 1853, Marius Vaïsse held this post until his death in 1868. After training in law, he had joined the prefectural administration in 1830 in Marseille, and was recommended for the Rhône office by Persigny, a close relative of Napoleon III.

<sup>20</sup> This commission, appointed by the prefect, is not there to substitute the municipal council suppressed in 1852: its role is purely deliberative.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. BERTIN (Dominique): *Les transformations de Lyon sous le Préfet Vaïsse, étude de la régénération du centre de la presqu'île, 1853-1864*, doctorat d'Université en histoire de l'art, Université Lumière Lyon II, 1987.

<sup>22</sup> Archives Municipales de Lyon, O<sup>1</sup> 124, "Rue de la République, dossier général 1854-1905", registre d'enquête n°4.

years later, one does not find we the same unanimous consent for the Rue de l'Imperatrice operation.

This project, however, was far better managed. The chief engineer Bonnet <sup>23</sup>, appointed by the prefect to direct the public streets commission and to plan new public works, gave precise functions (to convey traffic) to the new street and assigned to it this role within a a general and coherent conception of the centre of the city. The new street was the spearhead of an intentional concept of centrality which chief-engineer Bonnet tried to impose. His report of 3 September 1858 displayed a depth of understanding of global urban issues which was absent in the 1853 projects <sup>24</sup>. Bonnet's project was quite simple : by opening up the blocks of old housing which still separated Rue Impériale and Rue Centrale, the new street would "*admirably complete the work of regenerating the old Lyon*" and put the final touch to a whole area of buildings "*appropriate to the needs, mores and habits of the rich population*". The ultimate aim of Bonnet, by creating this continuum of "*splendors of the civilization*" is to create "*a Cité , that is a town for business*" in which would be concentrated offices and shops as in the City of London which served as a model for Bonnet. The only difference, but a major one, was that he also allowed housing for the wealthiest section of the Lyon's population in this City.

In proposing this model, which he considered the only suitable for an era where business and industry were so important, he also presented two other possibilities of evolution which show "what could not be done ". One was in the direction the parisian case where "*business is everywhere <...> except in the center*", a solution far much inferior to London's system according to Bonnet. The other possibility demonstrated the threat of the Brotteaux, an area from on the left bank of the Rhône which ambitious speculators would transform into another "*Chaussée d'Antin*" <sup>25</sup>, and so would compete with the City of the *presqu'île*. This presentation was particularly clever, since Bonnet managed to present his

---

<sup>23</sup> Gustave Bonnet (1810-1875), after a less than smooth training at the Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole des Ponts et Chaussées (especially because of his saint-simonian attitudes), was engineer in the river service of the departement of the Aisne when Vaïsse asked for his appointment in Lyon in 1854.

<sup>24</sup> Archives Municipales de Lyon, O<sup>1</sup> 83 "rue de l'Hôtel de Ville 1858-1864".

<sup>25</sup> The Chaussée d'Antin is a Paris business area which was developed in the 1830's.

project both as a modern model of urban organisation appropriate for the industrial era and as a specific solution to the local problems associated with the possible removal of population. It is on this last point that he ended his report, underlining that only the creation of a complete and uninterrupted City could "*prevent the depreciation of land and buildings, a depreciation which would cause both the ruin of the long-time landlords and recently-formed companies*". Keeping business activity in the centre of Lyon was thus not only in the general interest, but also met more specific interests, in conformity with the "universal" urban rules of strong and stable centrality acting as an "invisible hand".

In formalizing his vision, Bonnet demonstrates links with a distinctive school of thought. The analogy with the considerations concerning development of Paris elaborated by the utopian engineers who wrote in the *Revue Générale d'Architecture* in the early 1840's is striking. This is particularly true concerning the insistence about the need for an urban organization to be centred around a stable nucleus, which is similar to the one developed by Peyrremond in 1842 and 1843<sup>26</sup>. Bonnet's career path confirms this comparison. He graduated from the Ecole Polytechnique, as did other urban utopians such as Victor Considerant and Peyrremond, and he had also saint-simonian convictions as were Victor Considérant or Michel Chevalier. Bonnet was thus one of those "utopian engineers" who brought to their professional activity the results of both a scientific education and an industrialist ideology. If he did not leave us any fundamental text, nor any "studies on the city of Lyon", to paraphrase Peyrremond, he dealt nevertheless with the same principles and aims than the pseudonymous author of the *Revue générale d'architecture*.

This idea of creating in Lyon a centre adapted to the requirement of the necessities of the industrial age did not receive an enthusiastic reception, despite the skill with which Bonnet presented it as the only way to maintain the real estate and property values of the area between Place des Terreaux and Place Bellecour. Prefect Vaïsse was very insistent on

---

<sup>26</sup> Cf. The paper by Michel COSTE cited in note 3.

this point in his several reports to the municipal council <sup>27</sup>, which he always concluded by emphasising that the project "*maintains and strengthens in favour of all existing interests, the possession that time has created and consecrated*" <sup>28</sup>. This did not, however, avoid the project being greeted by the municipal council with "*a lively exchange of comments and discussions*" as recounted in the Lyonese press of October 1858. The daily *Gazette de Lyon* was amongst the adopt a clear stance against the project which it sa as "*excentric, out of keeping with the topographical requirements of the heart of the town, with the real needs of traffic, with individual and local interests, with the requirements of monumental art, all in a word with the principal necessities of a well understood and well directed public service*" <sup>29</sup>. To this opposition was added the mighty voice of the Rue Impériale Society, whose position was not as yet certain, and who complained about the competition provided by the new project to the nearby street opened in 1854<sup>30</sup>. All these objections, and the vigorous press campaign that followed were sufficiently strong to scupper the fund-raising campaign launched in Lyon by the Swiss Bank which was in charge of financing the operation. The bank then pulled out and prefect Vaïsse decided that the *Commune* would execute the project, thanks to a public loan. Here was a failure which recalls that the apparent acquiescence that the lyonese landlords gave in 1854 to urban organization principles (traffic, centrality) was far from being an positive support, and had much to do with contextual positions.

It has been difficult to know to what extent the conceptions developed by Bonnet and publicised by Vaïsses's reports found support. In the municipal council itself, if the project presented by the senator was finally approved, the deliberations were motivated by the aim of preserving the *status quo* in matter of land and real estate values. It is also on this point that the project seemed to get a warm welcome from those it most immediately concerned,

---

<sup>27</sup> The municipal commission re-adopted this title in 1855, but its members were still nominated and its role remained consultative.

<sup>28</sup> From *Projet de traité entre la ville de Lyon et la Banque Générale Suisse de Crédit International pour l'exécution d'une rue allant de la place des Terreaux à la place Bellecour, rapport de M.le sénateur au Conseil Municipal le premier octobre 1858*, Lyon, s.e., 1858.

<sup>29</sup> *Gazette de Lyon*, 3 août 1858.

namely the landlords affected by the opening of the new street. As already remarked by Bonnet in a report of January 1855, landlords were in that time as much in favour of compulsory purchase and street alignment as they were opposed to it in the 1830's<sup>31</sup>. The bargains obtained by landlords of Rue Impériale thanks to the good will of the valuation juries explain this new attitude. Therefore it was self-interest which ensured that landlords made no objections to the project during the public inquiry of November 1858. Thus, the debate around the Rue de l'Impératrice project and the validity of the centrality concept was also a struggle between landlords who already enjoyed substantial profits in their property values as a result of the Rue Impériale and thus had been able to invest in the financial society building the new street, and those who were eager to have the opportunity to do the same.

Nevertheless, there are some tiny clues that general ideas of urban organisation developed by Vaisse and Bonnet since 1853-1854 slowly penetrated the *élites* social circles. The men of the municipal council, chosen under the 2nd Empire or who chose it for its potential to accelerate the modernisation of France and Lyon, were amongst the first to be convinced. If they were not unaware of the immediate profits available from such operations and of their usefulness in maintaining the stability of the urban rent, they also seemed to pay heed to the concepts themselves. Bruneau, council reporter for the Rue de l'Impératrice project, developed in his report the themes of the functional specialization of urban areas and the adaptation of street lines to the necessities of time: it was a call to support the urban disposition policy advanced by the prefect, even if this was done under the guise of "*natural laws*". Moreover, Bruneau spoke about the centre as "*the part from which everything radiates, and which must maintain equilibrium amongst all the other parts*"<sup>32</sup>. Thus he established the centre as the knot and the principle of a self-regulating urban system. We

---

<sup>30</sup> Archives Municipales de Lyon, O<sup>1</sup>83 "rue de l'Hôtel de Ville 1858-64", lettre des administrateurs de la Société de la Rue Impériale du 16 juillet 1858.

<sup>31</sup> Archives Municipales de Lyon, 923 WP 174, "Rapport joint aux plans des nouveaux alignement à donner aux rues du centre de Lyon".

<sup>32</sup> *Rapport sur un projet de traité entre la Ville de Lyon et la Banque Générale Suisse de Crédit International pour l'exécution d'une rue nouvelle allant de la place des Terreaux à la place Bellecour*, 29 octobre 1858, Lyon, s.e., 1858, p.1.

can of course wonder whether this sustain to a model-based urban disposition is a pretext, an argument or a conviction. Nevertheless, it bears witness to a close consideration of Bonnet's arguments.

Some twenty years later, the renewal of the Grôlée area seemed to contradict this first sketch of "acculturation" of Bonnet's model, even if this operation also embraced the same issue of the "displacement of the centre". The reconstruction of this quadrilateral area brodering rue de la République (formerly Rue Impériale) between Place des Cordeliers and Place de la République in effect marked both a return to large municipal public works and a "return to the centre" in municipal policy, in the spatial and the political sense of the term. In fact, the town council finds stability in the 1880's around the figure of the radical-opportunist Dr Gailleton, whose urban policy abandon the post 1870's concern for areas lying beyond the *presqu'île*. The reconstruction of Grôlée witnesses this shift : conceived at the same time as plans outlying other areas, it was by far the most swiftly realised.

This "return to centre" is all but conceptualized. The diminishing power of the public street service is one expalnation, since the first years of the Republic saw a reduction in the number of its personnel, and the role of its chiefs confined to technical aspects. They are no longer required to conceive of the city, but simply to ensure its day-to-day functioning. The plans concerning Grôlée, for which the first sketches appeared in 1879, came significantly from private societies which brought together architects and business-men who proposed the *commune* projects which were more financial than urban. It is on this basis that the municipal council accepted in March 1888 the proposal of the Ferrand-Delamarre group, which had the double promise of increasing the income from licenses for the development of the retail trade in the area and of adding luxury buildings to the municipal building stock after the 60 years lease granted to the group. Felix Rivet has shown how this hasty agreement, based upon a contract with unclear financial clauses, had proved to be costly both to the city



and its mayor Gailleton<sup>33</sup>. Political and social concerns seem to have been the other decisive factors for a municipal administration anxious to find work for a population hit by a recession which the financial crisis of 1881-1882 had only worsened. Clearly, from the evidence contained in the the deliberations of the municipal council, the project was very poorly controlled with respect of urban disposition. The justifications given by the mayor to some of his more sceptical town councillors were indeed very summary, as were those presented by the investigator in charge of the public enquiry. The area was described as a creary nucleus, whose moral ("*unbridled debauchery*"), pathological (a centre for contagious diseases) and esthetical (its ugliness in such close proximity to the beautiful rue de la République) miasmas would jeopardised the very city. Invoking the spectre of the shift of the centre, which, according to the mayor's arguments, only renewal could prevent, took a ritual form without much vigor. Within few months to the municipal elections, the argument was tied up with several other promises by which Gailleton affirmed his wish to keep an even balance between the new and the old part of Lyon, between the left bank of the Rhône river and the rest of the town.

Confronted to this spineless project, the landlords of rue de l'Hôtel de Ville (former rue de l'Impératrice), rue Centrale and rue de la République attacked the Ferrand-Delamarre operation. The Society of the Rue de la République, supported by the right-wing press, once again launched an attack on this project which represented a new competition for real estate and land value. In fact, the "removal of the centre" argument used by Gailleton was doubly out of date. Firstly on a social level, because the major part of the *presqu'île* landlords were now more interested in preserving their own position than in fighting against the left bank : the conceiving of land and buildings income had changed in such a way as to favour location rather than density, and the spectre of total removal had vanished as a result of urban evolution. Secondly, Gailleton's argument was also out of date on a political level, because the landlords and the social groups who might have been directly interested to the regeneration through investment or compulsory purchase did not sustain the republican

---

<sup>33</sup> RIVET (Félix): *Une réalisation d'urbanisme à Lyon*, op.cit.

mayor and his municipality. Given no consideration by the municipal council, forgotten by the landlords, the centre question was the major absent from this last big renewal operation to take place in the *presqu'île*.

Having said this however, there are undeniably indications of a certain definition of the centre, for example through the confidence of the municipality towards the future value of the Grôlée buildings. But in this case the notion of centre is bound to land and buildings values, without any reflection as to the role of the area in the urban system. The "centre of the city" which figures in the municipal council's definitions is a magic place where should naturally materialize the highest values and the largest incomes. After the completion of the project, the difficulties in renting the new buildings thus became a puzzling problem for the municipal council, a painful enigma that might account for their slowness in finding a solution to the judicial and financial confusion which resulted from this failure. At that point in time, the "centre of the city" seem to have been conjured by financial or esthetical facts <sup>34</sup>, far from having been an urban disposition concept. Based upon this uncritical and passive definition of the centre, it can be said that the "lessons" of the Second Empire had been lost.

This detailed examination of three projects which were vowed to initiate the "*regeneration of the center*" by their promoters demonstrates demonstrates the non-linearity of the spread and use of concepts. We do not progress unavoidably towards a better mastery of the notions of centre and centrality. Political accidents at both the national and local levels, which manifest themselves as cuts in the human webs of urban disposition (municipal councillors, commission of public streets, collaboration technicians-politicians), bear in our case a large responsibility for this evolution. But it is also necessary to return to the "indigenous" notions of centre and centrality to fully understand this non-linearity, whilst enlarging our time scope to encompass the whole of the 19th century.

### Center and centrality

Confronted with the history of urban disposition in Lyon, where local inertia seems only to be overcome by the active prefectural administration of the Second Empire, one is tempted to think that innovative concepts, including centrality, are only ushered in by an authoritarian regime strong enough to sweep aside local opposition and the resistance of landlords. It is in fact true that the major urban reshaping takes place at a time where the commune is an "administered society" deprived of any political representation. Moreover, historical scholarship has noted the absence of locally generated discussion around the theme of centrality and its respect, and the incapacity of municipal administrations in the first half of the century to launch an urban renewal project demanded by a growing number of voices. Are there not, however, certain reasons to conceive of the urban renewal of the 1850's and 1860's as something other than the imposition of general schemes on otherwise the local sphere? There are some elements which seem to support this view.

In opposition to the temptation to reduce the formation and circulation of ideas to a simple scheme of opposition between centre and periphery or Paris and the provinces, let us outline some significant considerations. As Marcel Roncayolo said about the links between the theoretical reflections of Peyrremond, Considérant or Meynadier and the practical problem of what was called the "*removal of Paris*", "*modern reflection about centrality is born in a ranged around circumstances debate*"<sup>35</sup>. Studies by Michael Darin or Michel Lacave also recall that local resistance can succeed in a struggle which we too often see as unbalanced<sup>36</sup>. The previous of this paper have attempted to show how local interests and the renewal fancies of imperial administrators could get on together, or how official policy could draw inspiration from local context in order to impose an urban reorganisation whose

---

<sup>34</sup> In the press and in the municipal council, a favourite theme in support of the project was the necessity to erase "*from the center of Lyon*" a filthy hole which was both unworthy of a large city and a source of surprise for visitors.

<sup>35</sup> in DUBY (Georges), (dir): *Histoire de la France urbaine*, op.cit., tome 4, p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> LACAVE (Michel): "Stratégies d'expropriation et haussmannisation: l'exemple de Montpellier", *Annales ESC*, 1980, n°5, DARIN (Michel): "Les grandes percées urbaines du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle: quatre villes de province", *Annales ESC*, mars-avril 1988.

motivation could be eminently political (winning the support of social and economical elites for the régime in the Lyon case).

In fact, the local sphere is not totally deprived of functional definitions of centre and centrality. It is not an unconquered land opened up to the knights of the national urban thought, nor a virgin territory devoid of any standing in the matter of urban disposition. I will give here only one example, which concerns a private project which, in 1838, proposed definitions about centre and centrality. At this time Mr H.Gors, landlord of La Croix-Rousse<sup>37</sup> and who lived in Paris, published his *Plan pour la ville de La Croix-Rousse*, in which he proposed an ambitious operation of real estate speculation concernaing the proprieties he owned. This project was based on the creation of a vast central square, with dimensions appropriate to welcome the town hall, the market, the public promenade and the abodes of the members of society. Gors added that it was also necessary to establish new lines of communication "*radiating from this common center and reassemble around it the elements, so long separated, which form the city of La Croix-Rousse*". Place of exchange and meeting, seat of wealth and public authority, pivot of the symbolic organisation of the commune and of its public street network, guarantee of the town unity, the centre as conveyed by Gors unites all the virtues of centrality that Peyrremond will preach later. This should not be seen as some sort of "premise" or a flash of inspiration, rather should one recall that before the necessity of centrality became a battle-cry for engineers, a "non-learned" conception of the centre existed, a conception that equally made the centre the key-place for urban system. The fact that this conception had no impacts, that it was formulated in a small booklet which did not form part of the corpus of great texts or reports on local urban disposition indicates precisely why it is useful to work on the local scale in order to be able to identify and use this kind of source. It is precisely this type of *mediocre* document which encourages us to take seriously the ways in which centre and centrality can be locally defined, and to consider the diffusion of concepts in terms other than that of the imposition model.

---

<sup>37</sup> A commune which adjoins Lyon to the North of the city, and which was incorporated to Lyon in 1852.

In Lyon also, it was also a conjonctural debate which contibuted to construct and solidify the idea of the centre. In the beginning, there is the spatial growth of the city. The definitive conquest of the Perrache area on the rivers <sup>38</sup>, the efforts of the town council of La Guillotière to construct embankments and flatten its territory provide new spaces for urban growth. One should also remember that it was at this same time that the city re-established an economic and demographic profile close to that which it had prior to the siege of the city by the armies of the Republic (1793). After that bloody episode, the population of the city had diminished by one quarter. In the context of this urban recovery, the threat of the displacement of population and business assumed a new importance, in an institutional context where incorporation projects for suburban communes were formulated several times between 1788 and 1852 <sup>39</sup>. These provoked a fear that the various barriers (bridge tolls, tolls on goods, etc.), which served to divide a space which both human and building density was becoming increasingly uniform, might be removed, with sever repercussions for the map of land and building values. The conflict over the distribution of benefits from urban growth became sharper and sharper between the communes of the "*lyonese aggregation*", and everyone wished or feared the "*removal of interests*".

It is through this question of the displacement of population and interests that the notion of centre was constructed. Through conflicts between various socio-spatial entities where everyone boasted of the proximity to "*the center of business*", just as today cities claim to be at the centre of Europe, the notion of centre slowly lost its mere topographical content. This process can be illustrated by the the distinction that the landlords of the municipal district of the Midi<sup>40</sup> made between "*heart*" (linked to core functions) and "*center*" (linked to topographical position) of the city in a quarell provoked by the removal of the Courthouse. At

---

<sup>38</sup> The polder of Perrache, build at the junction of the Rhône and the Saône from the 1770's, is only definitively healthy in the years 1820.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. SAUNIER (Pierre-Yves) "Logiques de l'*aggrégation*: l'agglomération lyonnaise au XIX° siècle", *Bulletin du Centre Pierre Léon*, 1992, n°1.

<sup>40</sup> In 1796, the municipality of Lyon was done away with by the gouvernement who mistrusted this centripetal city agitated with monarchists plots. Police power was then assigned to a representative of the gouvernement, while the administrative tasks were shared by three "*municipal divisions*" named North, Midi and West. When the municipality was reestablished in 1805, the three divisions continued to be used for several administrative functions (census, street improvement, état-civil) or, as in our case, for representation in public protest.

the same time, the projects of incorporation of the suburbs contributed to the spread of the idea that the basis for land and buildings value was rooted in their location with respect to the flows of goods and people in the city, and more generally that this value was established by a market of supply and demand in which scarcity (and thus value) was expressed through location.

These local debates gave birth to an "indigenous" conception of the centre, based on the protection of values linked to relative location. Long contested by landlords reluctant to accept this new theory <sup>41</sup> or those less fortunate with respect to the location of their properties (those of the right bank of the Saône for example, far from the hub of traffic), this conception became manifest in some major urban projects of the 40's. Both the ambitious city plan of 1840 and Monmartin's report of 1845 on street alignments in the centre of Lyon illustrate this turn of tide. It is in the name of this new but passive conception of the centre that a remodelling of the area between Place des Terreaux and Place Bellecour is demanded. This would have involved both an improvement of street lines routes to accommodate the requirements of local traffic and of the new national railway network <sup>42</sup>, and a social and architectural remodelling through this action. The defenders of this "central cause" hoped to achieve the disappearance of a "*population degraded by misery, insalubrity and vice*" which caused the flight of foreigners and the wealthiest tenants, or at least to build for this disadvantaged group "*houses in which they could become accustomed to order, cleanliness and the social virtues which these characteristics promote*" <sup>43</sup>. It is this idea of preserving values in the *presqu'île*, this passive conception of the centre linked to location, which underpins the first major urban operation, the opening of Rue Centrale in 1846.

The first wave of public works launched by prefect Vaisse in 1853 was nothing more than a ratification of these earlier choices and ideas. If Vaisse worked towards the

---

<sup>41</sup> Which is, in a way, a change similar to that between Malthus's and Ricardo's conceptions of agricultural land value.

<sup>42</sup> Monmartin evokes specially "*a street leaving from place de la Comédie <near les Terreaux> and directly reaching place Bellecour*", that would put into communication the trade area with the forthcoming railway station: this is the line that followed the Rue Impériale several years later ("*Des améliorations à introduire dans la partie centrale de Lyon*", *Revue du Lyonnais*, 1845, t.XXI, p.181.

<sup>43</sup> idem, p.178.

remodelling of the centre, it was first because this seemed to be the wish of a powerful social group in a city which he had been given the responsibility of conquering. His public works program in fact included several elements intended to gain the indulgence of diverse social and spatial groups in Lyon : to La Guillotière its waterfronts, to La Croix-Rousse its house for the aged, to the right bank of the Saône another waterfront, etc. The opening of the Rue Impériale, the most expansive project of all, was then an offering to the dominant Lyonese groups, those most distressed by the loss of municipal autonomy. The imperial political logic, whose aim was the conquest of the town, thus accommodated the regime's desire for modernization. Prefect Vaïsse, through the medium of Dardel who knew the ins and outs of any urban project undertaken since 1830, satisfied with the Rue Impériale project the demand for the regeneration of land and building values in the centre of Lyon. His project solved the problem of North-South traffic movement, erased a substantial number of narrow and unhealthy street and ensured the medium term reassertion of the value of the whole area : this is the "*grand design*" that Monmartin demanded in 1845 as the only mean to prevent population displacement. It was thus a very coherent program that the senator presented to the municipal commission at the end of 1853 <sup>44</sup>, one which strengthened the "indigenous" notion of centre. So these efforts were therefore characterised, not by imposition, but by happy agreement.

In fact, if there is a clash between two conceptions of the centre, it happened in 1858, with the project for rue de l'Impératrice. The engineer Bonnet, through the mouth of the prefect, told then about the beauties and costs of centrality defined by functions and not by location. This revelation received a cold welcome, as we saw. It introduced a total rupture with the local notion of centre, as the question of financial values was only alluded to as a happy end, while the major concern was about the functions to be attributed to the centre in the urban system. Bonnet's project, committed to the functional modernization of the city, clashed especially with the interests of the Rue Impériale investors, and also with a section

---

<sup>44</sup> *Rapport de M.le conseiller d'état chargé de l'administration du Rhône à la commission municipale sur le projet de Rue Impériale et divers autres projets de travaux extraordinaires*, Lyon, s.e., 1853.

of public opinion which considered that enough public works (and loans) have been undertaken<sup>45</sup>. This "londonian" conception of urban centrality funded upon administrative and commercial functions did not survive the regime and the men who tried to forge it.

This must be linked to the many changes that the new conception required. In fact, it demanded an expensive renovation and public works programme, and defined a functional hierarchy which implied a reallocation of urban status. The concentration of the "command functions" sought by the prefect and his engineer was there a threat to an urban system marked by a logic of "possession" of public buildings and of the benefits attached to their location. As a study of the conflicts linked to the displacement of these public buildings has shown<sup>46</sup>, public buildings and offices were considered in a similar way that of land values : a Courthouse, a Town Hall, a slaughter house were "belonging" to the area that housed them, and the complains about their removal were made in the name of the "*rights*" of the landlords and inhabitants of the district. In the medium term, this possession would inevitably have been challenged by the logic of concentration and functionality developed by the Empire's administrators. Likewise, the process of creating a hierarchy of areas could disturb all the "*vested interests*". All these limits had been tested realised by the Empire administrators themselves, and the restraints of political necessities did not allow them to go beyond a specific point of coercion with respect to the local sphere. The limits of the public works carried out between 1853 and 1870, which reinforced the gains made rather than overturning them, throw light on these very limits that the new conceptions of the urban system must respect.

Nevertheless, besides the large street openings outlined above, a range of public works came to enforce the concepts of centre and centrality. First in the "City" defined by

---

<sup>45</sup> It was for the benefit of this part of the population that municipal councillor Brölemann said in a 1861 report that the budget of a city must not be managed in the same way as the budget of an individual, because the individual dies while the city is eternal (quoted by Charlene LEONARD in *Lyon transformed...*, op.cit.). This affirmation of radical difference between the time-scale of the individual and the family and that of the city and urban disposition might be one of the most important shifts introduced by Empire administrators. In opposition to the Empire, both republicans and monarchists stood for a "father of the family" type management, which envisaged urban business run on the same principles as family business. William B. Cohen stressed the same shift in his work on five provincial towns in the 19th century, in "Les emprunts municipaux au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle", communication to colloque "la ville en Occident du Moyen-Age à nos jours", Bourges, septembre 1995.

<sup>46</sup> SAUNIER (Pierre-Yves): *Lyon au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle...*, op.cit., tome 2.



Bonnet, with several examples of street widening or straightening, and above all beyond this area with the creation of direct route between this "City" centre and other parts of town. On the whole, however centrality was enforced, the centrality concept was weakened by the confrontation with urban local structures. If the ideas of Bonnet seem to have been understood and followed by some members of the municipal council or by some agents of economic life (for example the new Lyonese banks, Credit Lyonnais and Société Lyonnaise des Dépôts which established themselves in the new remodelled district), they failed to make an immediate impression on the local history of urban thought.

It has already been noted that the first years of the Third Republic were characterized by the hostility of municipal governments towards the centre of the city, which symbolized the fallen regime and its prestigious operations undertaken at the expense of the "excentric" areas. As for the 2nd *arrondissement*<sup>47</sup>, which included the main part of the area between Bellecour and les Terreaux, this symbolic resentment of the first years of the Republic is accompanied by a growing political resentment. The "aristocratic" area of Ainay-Bellecour and the rich new streets (Impériale, Impératrice) are regularly identified by the municipality as the "reactionary district". The consequences of all this can be seen in the years 1870-1880 which saw the repeated rejection of projects intended for the upkeep and embellishment of the streets of the *presqu'île*, rejection that was a matter of principle for the municipal majority until the middle of the 1880's.

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that there did exist a definition of the centre of the city, which can be described as a spineless notion. After a few years of municipal policy favouring non-central areas, some municipal councillors argued on this base. We might include in this group the councillor Bessières who protested against his colleagues who had just rejected a proposal for the repaving of Place des Jacobins saying "It is clear that the areas of the center deserve a certain preferential treatment"<sup>48</sup>. It is with this tone, with this sort of evidence and with this lack of definition that the many public works "in the

centre" were referred in these years, as we saw in the case of the Grôlée area. This continued until the first years of Edouard Herriot mayorship<sup>49</sup>. Even if the degree of political resentment grew after the elections of 1896, marked by the right-wing vote of the 2nd *arrondissement*, it is clear that a consensus existed around the existence of something called "centre", as the busiest and most active part of the city, where the heaviest traffic and the most important monuments were to be found. This conception, which owed much to aesthetic factors and the restrictive definition of certain urban phenomena, was in no way an attempt to explain urban organization. Urban centrality therefore did not seem to be a meaningful notion in the local political sphere. In certain respects, the years of 1870-1900 saw the uprooting of the vague and passive idea of centre that had flourished in the decade 1830-1840, and also marked the disappearance of the concept of centrality. This was a widely held attitude in Lyon.

In *La Construction Lyonnaise*, the local journal of master-builders, more emphasis tended to be given to demands for the growth of public works activity than to reflections on urban organization. In a large series of articles in 1891, entitled "*Les grands travaux*", the authors of the journal did enumerate the qualities of the centre : a privileged geographical situation, monuments, retail shops, manufacturing firms offices and branch banks. But, if the journal sided for the maintenance of this area's dominance, it specified neither the functions that the centre should preserve or get rid off, nor the methods by which the area might maintain its position. Valrose, an ardent defender of this area of the city which he called a "*disinherited district*", strongly critical of the trend to enforce the areas beyond the Rhône river, referred particularly to a magic quality that would ensure the eternity of this area "*that will for ever stay the true rendez-vous of business <...>, the only attractive district of the second city of France*"<sup>50</sup>. He never explained or justified his defence of the real estate

---

<sup>47</sup> As in 1796, the 1852 suppression of the Lyon municipality resulted in the division of the city into five and then six "arrondissements municipaux" that hosted the primary functions of the municipal administration (état-civil), the directive functions being left, as we know, to the Prefect of the Rhône.

<sup>48</sup> Archives Municipales de Lyon, Procès-verbaux du Conseil Municipal, 8 février 1873.

<sup>49</sup> Elected municipal councillor in 1904, this young literature teacher of the Lycée of Lyon was elected mayor in 1905. He did not leave this post until his death in 1957 (with the exception of the 2nd world war period).

<sup>50</sup> *La Construction Lyonnaise*, 15 février 1892.

interests of the area by means of a which would have drawn upon the useful or unavoidable aspects of centrality. His conception of the centre was purely descriptive, as was the case with all those who commented on the evolution of Lyon. Amongst the sphere of technicians and learned *amateurs* who ran the *Construction Lyonnaise*, the concept of centrality which had been formulated and applied under the Second Empire also seem to have been forgotten.

In fact, it was only on the eve of the outbreak of World War 1 that can be identified definitions of the centre expressed in terms of principles of urban organization. The "Transformations de Lyon" which the architect Henri Moncorger presented to its fellow citizens in 1909 is focussed almost entirely on the zone between Bellecour and les Terreaux<sup>51</sup>. He proposed an explicit reinforcement of the centre, in two different manners. The first involved a reorganization of the whole traffic network around a Paris-like "Place de l'Etoile", so named for its star-like form, where streets from all directions would meet at the single point in the centre of the city<sup>52</sup>. The second consisted in the clustering between Bellecour and Les Terreaux of all the key-institutions of the city: library, post office, hospitals, general stores, show-rooms, banks, etc. This place for luxury outlets and business, which would also have been the city's administrative and traffic hub, is close to the original vision of Bonnet, with the addition of a republican "public service" role. For the first time since Bonnet, the centre was considered as a whole, and envisaged as the essential axis of city life which all other elements should reinforce.

Paul Cuminal, a socialist schoolmaster interested in urban studies, was another important contributor of this reflection<sup>53</sup>. From the 1st of July 1911, he wrote several papers on the theme of the "*Forum lyonnais*" in which he highlighted the role of the central areas of

---

<sup>51</sup> MONCORGER (Henri): "Transformations de Lyon", *Annales de la société académique d'architecture de Lyon*, 1909-10, p.61-70.

<sup>52</sup> The role of a center of gravity for traffic would be further promoted by a ring project published two years later. MONCORGER (Henri): "Encerclement de la ville de Lyon par trois grands boulevard concentriques", *Annales de la société académique d'architecture de Lyon*, 1911-12, t.XVIII, p. 309-310.

<sup>53</sup> He would become later a member of the Lyon's Municipal Council of in the 1920's.

the town<sup>54</sup>. These had, according to Cuminal, the special function of satisfying "*public life, the life or relationship*". To meet this purpose, Cuminal called for every public building with a role to play in public life to be established or re-established in the "*natural forum*" of Lyon, that is between Bellecour and les Terreaux. Moreover, Cuminal sought an "*improvement*" of the Forum through the expulsion of industry and housing "*as much as possible, the absolute never being good*". His model was the Roman forum, with the idea of equal access to public institutions and services for all citizens, more than the London City. Anyway, Cuminal's papers represented a reexamination of the positive aspects of haussmanism good, and his forum concept was not far from Bonnet's City. If Cuminal criticised the process of driving streets through urban areas and the accompanying demolition, he supported the aesthetic aspects of Hausmann's work, and above all his general vision of the city and the role of functional and relational pivot he assigned to the central areas in his general scheme. In addition, Cuminal openly praises the "*science of city organization*", citing German scholars on this matter and advocating the proposed law on urban extension plans which was in discussion in the Chamber of deputies<sup>55</sup>. In this way, in the period which saw the emergence of town planning legislation, the threads of local thought concerning centrality were drawn together. This after a period of more than forty years when they had been ignored.

The modern history of the notion of centre in Lyon might be seen in three different stages. The first stage, until the middle of the 19th century, is marked by the new awareness of values in the centre, both lands and buildings values, and of the necessity to preserve these values. In the context of urban growth, it was a passive conception, expressed in terms of cost and income, which framed all the urban projects carried out in this "citizen-landlords" society that was a *commune* in a *censitaire* monarchy. It is difficult to speak of break or continuity with the period which followed grand projects of the Empire and the figure

---

<sup>54</sup> These papers are collected in CUMINAL (Paul): *Etudes sur l'organisation esthétique et topographique de la ville de Lyon*, Lyon, Ecole Socialiste 1914.

of chief-engineer Bonnet. If the political orders given to Vaïsse (increase the number of public works) and the urban conceptions of Bonnet gave rise to projects which aimed to enforce centrality in the manner advocated by the utopian engineers of the 1840's, the pursuit of strictly urban disposition aims was mainly a by-product of the political conquest of the town. As the centrality concept in Paris was the result of certain specific circumstances, so too in Lyon it was a tool for a policy which had extra-urban aims and had wider concerns than simply reorganising the urban system. This administrative and political aspect contributed to the short life of the concept of centrality. The Republican municipal governments dismissed it as much for its links with the imperial regime as for the urban inequality which its spatial hierarchy implied. The notion of centre was then emptied of its former contents, those linked to values and those linked to urban disposition schemes. Until the themes of urban planning arrive on the scene, the local notion of centre remained uncertain and fuzzy, geometrical and only vaguely linked to aesthetic, economic or geographic aspects of this part of the city. From a functional category, it became a purely spatial and descriptive one : from centre-core we return to centre-middle. Nevertheless, allowing for this vagueness, the question of centre was becoming part of the specialised urban vocabulary even as it was losing its precision. So when the debate about urban growth re-emerged at the start of the 20th century, the question of the centre was a major element in discussion and in the common language about town that was specific to this discussion. In this way, the lost heritage of the 1854-1870 period was rediscovered.

From this evaluation, two conclusions can be drawn. The first is local, French and Lyonese, and concerns the spread of 19th century urban disposition concepts. The present century seems to be the one when, in Lyon as elsewhere, the urban object and its growth began to be considered as a spatial phenomenon capable of being tamed and directed. Efforts to establish the centre and develop centrality were part of this process. But this very

---

<sup>55</sup> The outcome of this project will be the law of 1919 about plans of disposition, augmentation and adornment of cities, known as the Cornudet law. See GAUDIN (Jean-Pierre) : *L'avenir en plan* ....op.cit.

process was uncertain. The emancipation of the idea of the city as a closed spatial object whose parasitic growth was a proof of bad health was slow, and the idea of the open and extending city was long misunderstood<sup>56</sup>. The new models and concepts that allowed the mastery of the urban realities of the industrial age were spread very slowly. Such was the case in Lyon, partly because of the geography of land and buildings values, partly because of political upheavals and their consequences on urban policies as on the turnover of technical and political administrators, and partly because of the lack of a structure for discussion and "think tanks"<sup>57</sup>. The transfer of theoretical reflections on centre and centrality to the Lyon was slow, and marked by sharp breaks and many adaptations with local circumstances. If the main lines of 19th century urban thought well and truly rooted in the local history of urban disposition, it must be admitted that in the local concert they lost a large part of the analytic powers (abstraction, objectivation, mastery management) that derived from their theoretical status. Power relations existing inside local society overruled the mechanical effects of the theoretical concepts derived from Peyrremond or Meynadier. Coming from the same background, Gustave Bonnet had to contend not with urban forces as impersonal and quantifiable currencies of traffic and goods, but with human groups bound by opinions, interests and properties. This human city gives this history of local urban thought its peculiarities. Such irregularities might provoke perplexity if we believe that the history of urban disposition is a purely a history of ideas. But it seems to be the necessary price for a social history of urban disposition and of urban practitioners, that would pay tribute to a "bottom-up" approach about human networks, local agents, local structures and local projects without neglecting aside the "top-down" long-term approach founded upon laws, great men, schools and theories. Such a binary opposition, that goes along with each generation's execration of former scholars would certainly be counterproductive.

---

<sup>56</sup> See as a first guide LEES(Andrew): *Cities perceived*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985 and LEPETIT (Bernard): "L'évolution de la notion de ville d'après les tableaux et descriptions de la France 1650-1850", *Urbi*, n°II, 1979

<sup>57</sup> *La Construction Lyonnaise*, founded in 1879, was in fact the only revue where these urban questions were discussed. Architects' and engineers' professional associations paid little attention to the themes of urban disposition.

But there is a second line of conclusions that can be drawn from the historical analysis of some key-issues in urban planning. To trace the notions of centre and centrality is to witness the chaotic and complicated emergence of a local field of urban disposition. When one can observe the degree of definition of these concepts, their uses founded upon criteria proper to a specific knowledge of the city and its disposition, one can also gain an idea of the degree of autonomy of this field. It can then be asserted that "hard definitions" do exist when these two notions are built both by and for urban disposition. On the opposite, "fuzzy definitions" are produced by the primary structure of action and understanding which constitutes the centre-based logic of the spatial, social and political organisation of western societies, or constructed both for and by spheres of action other than urban disposition<sup>58</sup>. This process of autonomisation is neither linear, nor simple. It is not linear because it incorporates U-turns and retreats, as between 1870 and 1910 when hard definitions were put left aside. It is not simple because there are several types of definitions, be they hard or fuzzy, borne by different groups in order to satisfy different interests, often merging or conflicting, in different fields or at different scales. The fuzzy definitions of the local sphere can either accommodate with hard definitions as proposed by the town-planning movement in the start of the 20th century, or oppose them as was the case with the rue de l'Impératrice. Therefore it is so necessary to study these aspects and to try to draw from them the possible emergence -or not- of specific urban disposition practices. Especially if we consider the histories of town-planning and town-planners which aim is to construct, across centuries and in different contexts, the history of never-changing practices upon the town, featuring similar stakes, aims and agents irrespective of the situation. There are many costs to this anachronical operation, and for example the incapacity of French urban history to situate "*Urbanisme*" as a social and political reform movement as much as a technical knowledge or an emerging academic discipline. Consequently, it is necessary to consider the formation of notions which might have permitted urban disposition to be thought as a legitimate, or rational or non-private activity, to identify the social and professional groups who act in this direction,

---

<sup>58</sup> For example the notion of center as the point of highest real estate values.

to pinpoint the relevant agents, and to seek for clues which might assert or deny the emergence of an autonomous field. To avoid the hollow satisfaction of pronouncing upon a pseudo-historical object, it is then necessary to carry on an history of urban disposition which addresses genesis and not genealogy, one which works to understand the conditions that made possible the present state of the urban disposition thought and field, rather than merely justify or criticize this state.

This, however, is a delicate operation for at least two reasons. First because analytical tools which we employ in order to write the history of this urban disposition field have been forged precisely by the very ones who fought to build or modify this field, those who tried to make the town recognised as a scientific object or to assert the existence of professional experts in mastery of present and future urban forms. This is the case with the established planning profession in France. Concepts such as network, traffic, centre and centrality provided the cement for public policies, urban theories and professional groups. In employing these notions without being aware of the determinants which give them life, one runs the double risk of falling under the power of these determinants and of embarking on the traditional game of "legitimation or criticism" which is not the final aim of the historian. Employing one or the other of the available definitions without understanding the cleavages which they contain or without recognizing that they necessitate certain analysis while excluding others is to fall victim of the original struggles over the definition of these concepts. The historian might thus misidentify the object of his study. Of course, this is not the only example of where such things can happen ! But this is one particularly serious because it is deceptive, because we carry it with us but give it less attention than to a mismatch of dates or an erasure in a document. The remedy to this problem might be found in the position adopted by Christian Topalov 's study of the notion of "*congestion*", which was a central notion in the common language upon which american town-planning was founded<sup>59</sup> : it is necessary to carry out a comprehensive a social history of the notion. The overlap of our analytical tools with the practical tools of the agents we study provides yet another problem



for existing scholarship. In France, the first histories of town-planning, such as the exemplary work of Pierre Lavedan <sup>60</sup>, have been written by men who tried to assert the scientific character of *urbanisme* and thus the right of the new discipline to demand the monopoly of knowledge and ability in the shaping of urban forms <sup>61</sup>. The writing of a teleological history was part of this attempt, and the very title of Lavedan's work demonstrates this will to give to a new discipline the quality of *déjà vu*, a tone of permanence, through historical scholarship <sup>62</sup>. This book, of a still unrivaled quality, is the most frequently quoted in French urban history. It thus occupies an important position in the history of urban disposition, while its role as an agent of this very history goes uncredited. This indicates the pressing requirement to make also a close inspection of our bibliographical tools.

The second aspect that makes this kind of work difficult is the one that was outlined at the beginning of this article, i.e our uncritical use of certain spatial categories. As Henri Lefebvre said <sup>63</sup>, we must ask about the way in which thought is spatialized. By this he meant the way in which spatial schemas structure our understanding, our sense of analysis and our actions (on economic, cultural, social or political phenomena) through notions like place, limit, crossroad or through opposing pairs (and so schemas of reasoning) like up/down, left/right or centre/periphery. The implicit reasoning that this spatial thought facilitates, as for example the association of spatial and social proximity which establishes our attitude towards social groups, shows how this reflex use of spatial thought works to the detriment of social science. This is especially true when it is applied to space and the processes invented by man to master it, as the history of urban disposition. Here again, the solution might lie in attempting to historicize those categories and so develop a history of space. What would exactly this history consist in ? Let's briefly state its two major axes:

---

<sup>59</sup> See article quoted in footnote 6.

<sup>60</sup> *Histoire de l'urbanisme*, Paris, Laurens, 1926-1962

<sup>61</sup> Pierre Lavedan was an influent member of the Société Française des Urbanistes, and he was director of the Institut d'Urbanisme de l'Université de Paris.

<sup>62</sup> Quite interestingly, the title changed from the doctoral thesis (*Introduction à une histoire de l'architecture urbaine. Définitions, sources*) to the edited version (*L'urbanisme. Définitions, sources*)

<sup>63</sup> *La production de l'espace*, Paris, Anthropos, 1986, éd.or. 1974.

1. Space as a category of understanding. That is, the way in which space is thought both in theoretical and practical knowledge. The subject areas for research are numerous. It would be as necessary to study the kantian distinction between empirical reality and the transcendental ideality of space -and the effects of this distinction as the conceptions of space in sahel-saharan societies. It is also necessary to try to control the spatial schemas we employ by a better knowledge of their implicit postulates and their consequent effects upon the objects to which we apply these schemes. A possible subject in this direction would be the spread and success of the centre-periphery model in social sciences. This first axis really directs our possible attention to a wide range of different topics, from the history of euclidian geometry to the spatial vocabulary of the political field, but also to various cultural spheres, from the ones dominated by a centralist logic of the social and the sacred world like that of ancient Greece, to those rooted in a-centreed logics like some Melanesian societies.

2. The relationships between collective formations (social groups, professional groups, institutions, etc.) and space as defining a volume and a set of boundaries. It is particularly interesting to examine the processes of control and management of this volume and of these boundaries. Here again the subjects are many : from the administrative division of areas to urban disposition, from ways of travelling to narratives of exploration, from domestic spatial demarcations to the methods for transferring land ownership, from the social meanings given to certain places to the permanent re-use of urban elements.

Taken as a whole this might seem extremely diverse. It is clear that those suggestions overwhelm the intelligence and abilities of who writes. But at the same time it is a try to respond the problem raised in the introduction to this paper, that is the status of "double agents" of some of the urban historian's most familiar tools. If ever one is prepared to agree that there is a problem in being fooled by a hammer, and that there is duplicity in the picks and shovels of our trade.