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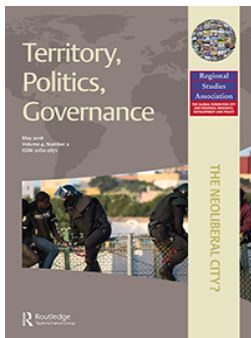
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Beyond Neoliberal Imposition: State–Local Cooperation and the Blending of Social and Economic Objectives in French Urban Development Corporations

GILLES PINSON and CHRISTELLE MOREL JOURNEL

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ABSTRACT For more than 15 years, the French central State created *Etablissements publics d'aménagement* in a series of major cities. These EPAs are in charge of large urban development projects mixing infrastructure, office development and housing projects and have been given formal authority over land use regulation. The similarities between French EPAs and British Urban Development Corporations created in the 1980s are striking. In many ways, the case of the EPA fits with the neoliberalization framework provided by radical geographers. Nevertheless, this case also shows limits to the generalization of this theoretical framework. Firstly, the distinction between two clearly distinct periods characterized by different agendas, policy instruments and systems of relations between actors and levels is far from convincing in the French case. Secondly, evolutions that could be attributed to neoliberal urbanism are rather the result of processes of rationalization within organizations or professions which may have little to do with neoliberalism, or the result of a transformation of the welfare State and the reassessment of ways of producing social justice. On this basis, we argue for theoretical frameworks that put neoliberalization at its right place and allow its articulation with other trends of change such as rationalization and the refinement of Welfare mechanisms.

EXTRACTO Desde hace más de 15 años, el Estado central francés ha ido creando *établissements publics d'aménagement* (EPA) en varias ciudades principales. Estos establecimientos públicos de ordenación se ocupan de grandes proyectos de desarrollo urbano que combinan proyectos de infraestructura, vivienda y desarrollo de oficinas, y han recibido autoridad oficial en el ordenamiento territorial. Hay que destacar las similitudes entre las EPA francesas y las corporaciones británicas de desarrollo urbano creadas en los ochenta. En muchos sentidos, el caso de las EPA encaja con la estructura del neoliberalismo sugerida por parte de los geógrafos radicales. No obstante, este caso también muestra los límites de la generalización de este marco teórico. En primer lugar, la distinción entre dos periodos claramente desiguales caracterizados por diferentes agendas, instrumentos políticos y sistemas de relaciones entre actores y niveles no es nada convincente en el caso francés. En segundo lugar, las evoluciones que podrían atribuirse al urbanismo neoliberal son más bien el resultado de los procesos de racionalización dentro de las organizaciones o profesiones que tal vez tengan poco que ver con el neoliberalismo, o bien el resultado de una transformación del Estado del bienestar y la revaloración en el modo de generar justicia social. Sobre esta premisa, abogamos por marcos teóricos que sitúen el

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neoliberalismo en su lugar justo y permitan su articulación con otras tendencias de cambio, tales como la racionalización y el perfeccionamiento de los mecanismos del bienestar.

摘要 法国中央政府十五余年来, 在一系列的主要城市中创立了公共发展机构 (*Etablissements publics d'aménagement*)。这些EPAs负责大型的城市发展计划, 混合了基础设施建设, 办公楼开发与住宅计划, 并被授予土地使用规则的正式权力。1980年代成立的法国EAPs和英国城市发展公司, 两者之间具有惊人的相似性。就诸多方面而言, EPA的案例, 符合基进地理学者所提出的新自由主义化之架构, 然而此一案例同时显示出此一概括化的理论架构之限制。首先, 在法国的案例中, 区辨两个以相异议程、政策工具, 以及行动者层级的系统关系为特徵的时期, 并不具说服力。再者, 被归因于新自由主义城市主义的进展, 其实是在组织或专业中的理性化过程之结果, 并鲜少与新自由主义相关, 抑或是福利国家变迁以及社会正义生产方式再评估的结果。在此般基础之上, 我们主张理论架构应将新自由主义化置放于 ‘对的位置’, 并使其得以与其他诸如理性化和社会福利机制精炼的变革风潮相互接合。

RÉSUMÉ Depuis plus de 15 ans, l'État français a créé des *Établissements publics d'aménagement* dans un certain nombre de grandes métropoles. Ces ÉPA sont chargés de la gestion de grands projets d'aménagement urbain qui combinent construction d'infrastructure, de bureaux et de logements, et se voient accorder des compétences extraordinaires en matière d'urbanisme réglementaire. Les similitudes entre les ÉPA français et les Urban Development Corporations britanniques créées dans les années 1980 sont frappantes. À bien des égards, le cas de l'ÉPA correspond bien au cadre théorique de la néolibéralisation proposé par les géographes radicaux. Toutefois, cette étude de cas montre aussi les limites à la généralisation de ce cadre théorique. Primo, la distinction de deux périodes clairement distinctes du point de vue des priorités et instruments de l'action publique et du systèmes de relations entre acteurs centraux et locaux est loin d'être convaincante dans le cas français. Secundo, des évolutions qui pourraient être attribuables à l'urbanisme néolibéral sont plutôt imputables à des processus de rationalisation au sein des organisations ou des professions, processus qui peuvent ne pas avoir grand chose à voir avec le néolibéralisme, et sont plutôt la conséquence de la transformation de l'État providence et de la réévaluation des voies à emprunter pour parvenir à la justice sociale et spatiale. Dans ce contexte, on plaide en faveur de cadres théoriques qui mettent la néolibéralisation à sa bonne place et qui permettent de l'articuler avec d'autres dynamiques de changement, telles la rationalisation de l'action publique ou encore les transformations de l'Etat-Providence.

KEYWORDS *Etablissements publics d'aménagement* France neoliberalisation Saint-Etienne urban development corporations urban regeneration

INTRODUCTION

For more than 15 years, the French central State has been creating Urban Development Authorities (*Etablissements publics d'aménagement*, EPAs hereafter) in a series of major core cities (e.g. Marseille, Saint-Etienne, Bordeaux and Nice) and in several areas in the outskirts of Paris. Created by State decree and formally controlled by central ministries, these authorities are in charge of large flagship urban development projects, mixing infrastructure, office development and housing projects. To this end, they have been given formal authority over land use regulation and negotiations with property and development interests, thereby bypassing the local governments.

French EPAs have received very little attention from the international literature in urban studies, policy analysis or local government studies (French urban historians being the exception, cf. VADELORGE, 2005). This lack of interest contrasts with the scholarly attention that quite similar bodies have attracted over recent decades, namely British Urban Development Corporations (UDCs) created in the early 1980s by the Thatcher governments. At first glance, the similarities between French EPAs and British UDCs

are striking. Both types of bodies were meant to accelerate the conversion of urban planning practices to more market friendly approaches and to shift the focus of urban policies from land use regulation, social housing and collective consumption infrastructures, to market led regeneration, public–private partnerships and the attraction of affluent social groups. In both cases, new administrative structures were set up to attain these goals more efficiently: agencies taking their authority from central government, endowed with extraordinary powers and borrowing management rules and forms of action from the private sector.

Most of the scholarly publications on British UDCs have depicted them as almost pure examples of neoliberal recipes applied to urban policies. According to Raco,

UDCs are underpinned by the logic of market-driven development and the belief that markets can and will deliver to meet social ends. They embody many of the characteristics of “rolled-out” neoliberalism. They are unelected, yet possess strong planning powers. They represent market freedoms at the same time as they wield relatively large amounts of state power and resources. (2005, 336)

Imrie and Thomas concur when they state that UDCs exhibit ‘the institutional and political features of the emergent neoliberal local state, propagating an elite localism linked to central state powers, while seeking to restructure the nature of policy programmes in and through the market’ (1995, 491).

These apparent similarities between French EPAs and British UDCs provide an exceptional opportunity to test the applicability of the claim that there has been a neoliberalization of urban policies beyond the contexts where it was first articulated, namely the Anglo-American world.

There is now a vast literature in geography, urban studies and political economy that upholds the thesis of neoliberalization of urban policies. This notion subsumes an ensemble of place-specific, path-dependent and contested processes that, its proponents claim, have gradually modified the content of urban policies, the forms of urban governance and the resulting balances of power within urban societies. More specifically, the neoliberalization of urban policies has produced a situation where the imperatives of competition and competitiveness, the necessity to create a good business climate and to attract investments as well as affluent and educated social classes dominate urban agendas at the expense of redistributive objectives. Neoliberalization also designates a trend among policy-makers to consider market mechanisms as the most appropriate mode of regulation to develop land, deliver services, and their propensity to use public institutions and policies to spread the use of these mechanisms (BRENNER and THEODORE, 2002a, 2002b; PECK and TICKELL, 2002; HACKWORTH, 2007). Thus, neoliberalization does not mean the demise of the State but rather a shift of the focus of State intervention from redistribution and socialization to the promotion of market mechanisms and competitive behaviours in an ever-wider range of social spheres.

For its users, the notion of neoliberalization has both descriptive and analytical virtues. As a descriptive notion, it helps to depict broad social, economic and political changes and distinguish contrasting historical epochs. Neoliberalization is useful to make sense of the end of a so-called Fordist–Keynesian era, characterized by the prominence of progressive objectives in urban policies, and its replacement by a post-Fordist and/or neoliberal age that stands out by its focus upon competition and market mechanisms. Brenner, for example, describes a shift from ‘spatial Keynesianism’ to ‘locational policies’ (2004). Jessop evokes the transition from a ‘Keynesian national welfare state’ to a ‘Schumpeterian post-national workfare state’ (1997); and Harvey establishes a link between the post-modern, post-Fordist and neoliberal breaks with the past (1989b).

Moreover, neoliberalization is also an analytical notion. It usually fits within analytical frameworks that try to give meaning to the evolutions and epochal changes evoked above. Inspired by political economy approaches focusing on the transformation of capitalism and forms of accumulation (HARVEY, 2005), or by a Foucauldian approach putting emphasis instead on the silent and partially unplanned transformation of rationality and governmentalities (LARNER, 2000; BROWN, 2003; ROSSI, 2013), scholars that have used the notion all consider that neoliberalization is the main source of social and political change. Here, neoliberalization not only depicts, it also explains change.

The aim of this paper is to challenge the theories of urban neoliberalization on both these fronts. Firstly, on the descriptive front, the case of French EPAs and their comparison to British UDCs will help us show that the distinction between two clearly distinct periods characterized by different agendas, policy instruments and systems of relations between actors and levels is far from convincing in the French case. Crucial elements of our neoliberal present were actually present in the Keynesian or progressive period; conversely, elements of this progressive period clearly remain crucial today. Besides, if some elements of neoliberalism have undeniably modified the purposes and governance devices of urban planning in France, they have not erased pre-existing institutions such as policy paradigms and objectives and intergovernmental relationships. Secondly, we will challenge theories of neoliberalization on the analytical front. It is not our purpose to question the existence and the significance of all of the signs of change identified by the authors concerned. For instance, we consider that the recent promotion of market mechanisms in urban policy-making processes is undeniable. However, we consider that this phenomenon is not reducible to an effect of neoliberalization. It can also be interpreted, like other changes in urban policy-making, as the result of processes of rationalization within organizations or professions, which may have little to do with neoliberalism, or as the result of a transformation of the welfare State and the reassessment of ways of reaching redistributive goals through urban policies.

This article is based on data produced through fieldwork on the case of the *Établissement Public d'Aménagement de Saint-Étienne* (EPASE thereafter). Saint-Etienne is a medium-sized city of 170,000 inhabitants (in 2008), that lies at the centre of an urban region of 0.5 million inhabitants, located 60 km from Lyon, the thriving 'second city' of France. Saint-Etienne is well known for having suffered from the decline of its traditional industries (coal mining, weapons manufacturing, metal works and textiles) and for being one of the rare examples of shrinking cities in France. The central government created the EPASE through a decree published on 24 January 2007. For this research, we conducted a little more than 20 semi-structured interviews with actors involved in the creation or the management of the EPA and with the major stakeholders of Saint-Etienne planning policies. Documentary sources (board meetings minutes, planning documents and newspapers) have also been analysed. The results of this research on Saint-Etienne were compared with two other empirical studies: one on the EPA Euroméditerranée in Marseille inherited from a previous research project (PINSON, 2002), the other on the EPA Euratlantique in Bordeaux. These two 'counter-points' have allowed us to control the results forged from the case of Saint-Etienne.

The article is structured in five sections. The first presents the British UDC experience and the theoretical literature about neoliberal and neomanagerial urban policies that has grown out of it. The second section provides an overview of the process that gave birth to the Saint-Etienne's EPA and relocates it both in the story of French urban policies and in that of central State interventions in Saint-Etienne. The third section provides evidence of strong similarities between UDCs and the EPASE in terms of neoliberal policy objectives and neomanagerial policy instruments. Nonetheless, the two last

sections explore the limits of such an interpretation. Mobilizing empirical evidence from the EPASE case, the fourth section presents three challenges to the descriptive dimension of the notion of neoliberalisation. The fifth and last section articulates a critique of its analytical counterpart.

BRITISH UDCS: ENFORCING NEOLIBERAL URBAN AGENDAS WITH NEOMANAGERIAL INSTRUMENTS

The creation of urban regeneration agencies has often been described as one of the most brutal instrumental innovations for enforcing neoliberal agendas. British UDCs offer the best example of this break in urban policy objectives implemented by the creation of a new policy instrument (ANDERSON, 1990; IMRIE and THOMAS, 1999). Foreshadowing the wave of agencification of the 1980s and 1990s, the 1980 Local Government, Planning and Land Act created the UDCs. In a context of extreme tension between the Conservative central government and urban governments mostly controlled by the Labour Party, the former created 11 UDCs placed under its direct control. Within their 'jurisdiction' (the Urban Development Area, UDA), UDCs were in charge of designing plans, delivering building permissions, as well as buying, reclaiming and selling land instead of local government. UDCs were supposed to break with the then prevailing practices of passive and obstructive regulatory planning and to opt instead for a proactive practice of urban development based on the activation of real estate markets.

Four features have led many scholars to see UDCs as an almost pure incarnation of urban neoliberalism. First, they were probably the most emblematic element of the policy arsenal developed since the early 1980s by the Conservative central government to impose neoliberal recipes in the realm of urban policies.

Government policy towards the protracted problems of the inner cities brought forward many initiatives, such as Business in the Community, Task Forces, City Grants, and City Challenge, yet arguably none matched the level of resourcing, or political zeal, which underpinned the government's support for the UDCs. (IMRIE and THOMAS, 1999, 3)

In particular, M. Thatcher's Secretary of State for the Department of the Environment, Michael Heseltine saw the UDCs as a way to privatize urban policy, make the free enterprise spirit the core dynamic of inner cities regeneration, and reduce the role of the public sector and of an interfering local state (GURR and KING, 1987; STOKER, 1991). As a result, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, UDCs absorbed most of the central government funds set aside for inner cities.

Second, once established, the UDCs pursued policy objectives clearly marked by neoliberal ideology. Indeed, most of them promoted property-led answers to urban problems whereas previous policies (the Urban Programme introduced in 1968) had focused on social and community programmes. Before the neoliberal shift imposed by the Thatcher governments and the UDCs, the problems of inner cities were considered as a complex interplay of social, environmental and economic factors, requiring mixed approaches acting on these various dimensions. With UDCs, however, the Conservatives clearly reduced the focus to physical transformation of places, expected from the intervention of the property private sector lured by massive public intervention in the urban infrastructure. The task of UDCs was to activate property markets through the deregulation of urban planning and the circumvention of local government supervision of land use. 'Nit-picking' and 'anti-business' municipal planning practices were accused of being at the origin of the decay of inner cities. Consequently, most of UDCs' resources were dedicated to land purchase and reclamation. 'In contrast, [for the 1990-91] only 1% of total

expenditure [of the UDCs] was directed to housing and support to the community' (IMRIE and THOMAS, 1999, 19). Another feature of the UDCs' action clearly fits with the idea of a shift from 'people welfare' to 'corporate welfare' (HARVEY, 2005, 47) that lies at the heart of the thesis of neoliberalization. Grant-giving to the property industry was a critical function of the UDCs. Indeed, Lawless considers that 'the sector which benefited most from urban policy in the 1980s was the private sector in general and the development industry in particular' (1991, 26).

Third, UDCs are a clear example of the promotion of neoliberal policy objectives through the recourse to new public management (NPM) recipes. Neoliberalism and NPM share the same creed that the adjustment of behaviours through competitive mechanisms is the most effective way to produce goods and services and deliver policies. Consequently, NPM proponents advocated the application of competitive incentives and adjustment through price mechanisms in the public sector in order to improve efficiency and responsiveness (DUNLEAVY and HOOD, 1994). Hence, the diffusion of internal markets, competitive bids, league tables in public administrations and intergovernmental relations in the UK under Conservative governments. Another manifestation of this neomanagerial revolution was the multiplication of agencies. Agencies are administrative bodies that are specialized in execution and production tasks leaving « big policy issues » (POLLITT *et al.*, 2005, 3) to the ministries (or local governments) and their administrations. Detached from ministerial administrations and embedded in economic sectors, agencies and their personnel are supposed to develop the same professional capacities, manners and ethos as people working in the private sector. Responsible for their own budgets and personnel recruitment and management, evaluated on their abilities to reach targets, focused on efficiency rather than on regularity, the agencies' managers embody a new breed of public managers, more sensitive to market rationales than their predecessors (POLLIT and TALBOTT, 2004; POLLITT *et al.*, 2005; BENAMOUZIG and BESANÇON, 2008). UDCs clearly embodied this logic of agencification and unbundled government. They were meant to be provisional and to be dismantled once the activation of property market dynamics was ensured. They were detached from ministerial administrations and controlled by a Board composed of central government but also private sector representatives. Their staff was made up of public servants but also of individuals, whose previous experience was in the private sector, mainly in the real estate and development sectors.

Fourth and finally, the UK central government used the UDCs to marginalize local governments and their Keynesian urban agendas. If UDCs managements enjoyed a great deal of autonomy, the Secretary of State for the Environment defined the area of competence of the UDCs (UDA) and appointed the Boards that formally controlled them. Conversely, UDCs escaped from the control of local government, bypassing its traditional role of deliverer of urban policy and planning permissions. Within each UDA, the regulation of land use and the delivery of building permission were transferred from local government to the UDCs. In a context marked by the introduction of expenditure targets for local government and sanctions for overspending, by the utilization of local tax-capping, UDCs embodied the apogee of the redrawing of central-local government relations within which powers of policy formulation were shifted to the former.

THE ETABLISSEMENT PUBLIC D'AMÉNAGEMENT DE SAINT-ETIENNE: AN EXTRAORDINARY POLICY INSTRUMENT FOR A DECLINING CITY

In this section, we examine the process that gave birth to the EPA of Saint-Étienne and describe some of its main policy objectives and projects. We also relocate this central

state intervention in a longer story of statist efforts to revive the economy of Saint-Etienne.

Local mobilizations in front of an acute urban crisis

Without being born of the Industrial Revolution, Saint-Etienne nonetheless experienced rapid urban growth from the 1820s onwards when an extremely fast process of industrialization transformed the whole city-region. Coal mining, metalworking and weapons manufacturing were the driving activities of this industrialization. Meanwhile, the central state was a key actor in the development of the city industrial structure. State civil engineers organized the modernization of coal mining and the connection of the city with the national industrial system. The population of the city rose constantly during most of the 19th and 20th centuries passing from 20,000 inhabitants in 1821 to 223,000 in 1968 when the city reached its demographic peak. From the late 1960's on, however, the city went through a dramatic industrial crisis: coal pits, large metalworks and consumers goods plants successively closed. This industrial decay triggered a strong demographic decline. Since 1968, Saint-Etienne has lost 50,000 inhabitants. This decline strongly struck some of the most central areas of the inner city, which is quite uncommon in large French large urban areas. Saint-Etienne is thus one of the rare French cities where deprived populations and ethnic minorities live in the city centre, and its derelict private dwellings in particular. Indeed, poor housing conditions in the inner city was one of the key motivations for the creation of an EPA.

The roots of this creation can be traced back in 1999 when the National Census revealed a considerable acceleration of the demographic decline of the core city with the loss of nearly 20,000 residents between 1990 and 1999. While local actors had interpreted this demographic decline as the result of a lack of economic dynamism, thus requiring measures to favour the arrival of new businesses, they now considered it as resulting from a lack of attractiveness of the urban environment, in particular for the middle class (BÉAL *et al.*, 2010; MOREL JOURNEL and SALA Pala, 2011). A civil servant of State field services in Saint-Etienne phrased this 'necessity' in the following terms:

The economy, job creations ... it was not enough! We were creating business parks, yet people would not come to live in Saint-Etienne. If we wanted to host large infrastructures and new economic activities, we had to offer decent homes for the executives in the city. We needed to switch to a service economy and develop the housing strategy that went with it. (Interview, 5 June 2011)

Local policy-makers started considering the founding of an EPA as the only suitable solution to dealing with the specific problems of the city centre. To be more specific, this vision grew inside State field services, in particular within the local offices of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment. This first circle then enrolled the chief of the City urban planning department, the mayor and his cabinet, and finally the Prefect of the Loire *département* (i.e. the head of the central State field services). In 2004, this mobilization led to the drafting of a document that the Prefect transmitted to the Ministry of Infrastructures and Environment. The ministry decided to create a preliminary mission (*mission de préfiguration*) to check the actual necessity for creating an EPA and to draft the first lines of the regeneration project. In January 2007, a State decree officially created the EPASE and gave it the following missions: 'carrying out development and infrastructure building projects'; 'acquiring, by expropriation if required, built or non-built land'; 'selling the acquired lands and buildings'; 'exercising the pre-emption right' and 'undertaking surveys and the work required to carry out its mission'. The

same decree that created the EPA also created an *Opération d'intérêt national* (OIN), a perimeter on which the EPA can deliver building authorizations instead of the municipality. The EPA was quickly set up over the following months and endowed with a 55 million € budget for the 2007–14 period.

The projects of the EPASE

The EPASE is in charge of a 970 hectares large area, which represents about 12% of the city of Saint-Etienne (Figure 1). Five distinct territorial entities are composing this perimeter (see map 1). In the *city centre*, the EPA's main objective is to reinvigorate the structure of shops and outlets. *Old and degraded neighbourhoods* are the second target of the project. Here, the priority is to reinforce attractiveness through the renovation of housing and public spaces, as well as the construction of new housing and infrastructures. The *Chateauxcreux station district* is supposed to become the second largest business district of the Lyon metropolitan area. The *Manufacture Plaine Achille* zone is dedicated to cultural industries. It already hosts the *Cité du Design* within the walls of the former national weapons plant and the Norman Foster's Zenith. *Pont de l'Ane Monthieu* is the fifth intervention site of the EPA. It is a large and ill-organized retailing zone that the authority intends to transform into a more urban 'city gate'.

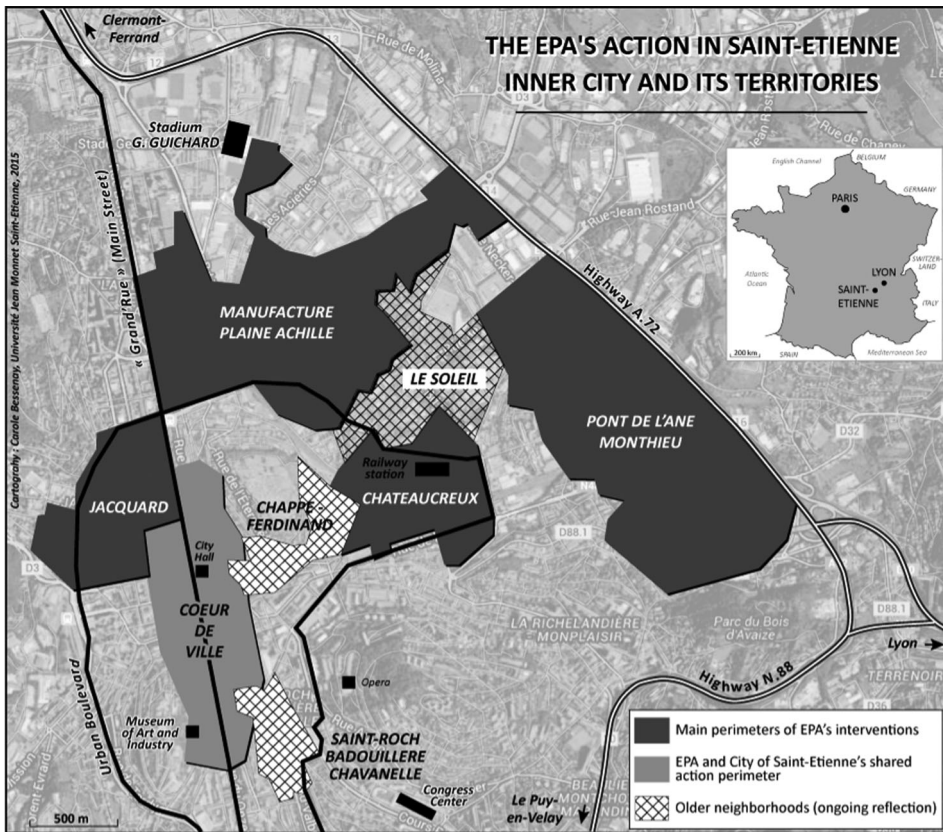


Fig. 1. The EPASE project areas and other large renewal programmes.

Source: Carole Bessenay.

Two main narratives structure the marketing of the overall project: design and architectural quality. First, the EPA website proudly presents Saint-Etienne as a capital of design. Indeed, for many years, local stakeholders have decided to put design activities at the centre of their marketing strategies. This has given rise to the construction of the *Cité du Design*, which groups together the School of Fine Arts and Design and a dedicated exhibition centre hosted in a former weapon's factory. A Design biennale has also been organized since 1998. That strategy is based on the industrial past of the city and in 2010 was awarded the Design city label by the UNESCO. Second, taking Barcelona, Valencia, Glasgow or Manchester as examples, the EPASE demonstrates a strong interest in planning and architectural quality. This has entailed systematic recourse to 'big names' in the field (Forster, Maki, Chemetoff, etc.). It has also involved a search for labels and rewards given by State or professional bodies. For instance, the former mayor, Michel Thiollière (1994–2008) considered the organization by the Ministry of Infrastructures and Environment of the 'Urban project workshop' (*Atelier projet urbain*) in Saint-Etienne to be a major issue. This workshop is actually a series of conferences, visits and meetings, which usually give rise to broadly diffused publications. Local policy-makers consider that the organization of this event signifies the professional recognition of the excellence of their planning practices at the national level. The EPA website also proudly emphasizes the award of a prize for the Manufacture Plaine Achille project by the Ministry within the framework of the national EcoQuartier competition in 2011.

Another episode of state interventionism in Saint-Etienne?

Direct intervention of the French central State in Saint-Etienne is hardly a new thing. As mentioned above, already in the 19th century the State identified Saint-Etienne as a strategic location, due to the presence of coal and the concentration of arms production factories. The first signs of industrial crisis after the Second World War gave new impetus to State intervention in the city. BÉAL *et al.* (2010, see also LEVY, 1999) have identified three periods of State intervention corresponding to various objectives.

The first period that run from the end of WW2 to the early 1970s was placed under the sign of modernizing *dirigisme*. The central State bureaucratic elites and the management of large national companies undertook the modernization and concentration of sectors that made up the backbone of the local economy (coal mining, metal works, and arms) and tried to organize the location of new activities with higher technology content. Furthermore, since the mid-1960s, Saint-Etienne benefited from the *métropoles d'équilibre* policy implemented by the DATAR, the State agency in charge of regional policies. As a component of the Lyon–Grenoble–Saint-Etienne *métropole*, the city received extra grants for housing, transportation and welfare infrastructures.

The second period opened during the 1970s with the deepening of the industrial crisis and ended at the end of the 1980s. As a city deeply hit by deindustrialization, Saint-Etienne again received extra attention from the central government. During this period, State intervention was typical of what has been labelled the 'stretcher bearer' State (COHEN, 1989) because it granted aids to several endangered local and emblematic businesses. Yet, after the 'austerity turn' imposed by the Socialist government in the mid-1980s, this strategy gave way to another focused on the identification of alternative forms of industrial development. For this purpose, the DATAR created a *pôle de conversion* which was supposed to support the creation of new business in promising sectors. Progressively, State intervention became more symbolic and oriented towards the management of the social impact of the crisis. In the early 1990s, the creation of a sub-prefect in charge of economic development embodied this symbolic turn.

The third period opened in the 1990s and ran up to the creation of the EPASE. During this period, an 'expert State' replaced the 'stretcher bearer' State. Another feature of this period is the comeback of the Ministry of the Industry which tried to regain a place in local policies following the early 1980s decentralization reforms, by developing policies targeting SMEs. In Saint-Etienne, the Ministry of Industry and its local field services (DRIRE) established branches of some of its satellites organizations like the National Agency for the Promotion of Research (ANVAR) and the Agency for the Development of Applied Industrial Engineering (ADEPA). In their respective fields, these agencies provided expertise in the automation of industrial processes, product improvement and technology transfer to SMEs.

A CASE OF NEOLIBERALISATION OF FRENCH URBAN POLICIES?

We have just seen that the strong presence of the central State in Saint-Etienne policies, compared to other French cities of equivalent size, is not a new thing. Nevertheless, with the creation of the EPA, this intervention took a different path. First, the focus switched to urban regeneration rather than supporting industry and job creation. Second, State's objectives and forms of action appeared to be characterized by the strong footprint of neoliberal and neomanagerial recipes.

Promoting a neoliberal urbanism

There are four traits which support the idea that the creation of the EPASE has been a major step towards the neoliberalisation of Saint-Etienne urban policies: the obsession with attractiveness and economic competitiveness; its very selective approach to planning; the activation of private property market mechanisms as the primary dimension of urban planning and a quest to convert local planners to that conception; and the focus on several privileged social groups as primary beneficiaries of the project. On all these items, the similarities with British UDCs are striking.

The obsession with attractiveness and economic competitiveness is highly visible in the EPASE's objectives. The authority is presented as 'reinforcing Saint-Etienne in its position as the second urban pole of the Lyon/Saint-Etienne Eurometropolis', 'perpetuating the economic dynamism of the employment area' and 'restoring the residential appeal of the city centre'.¹ The failure of past strategies – based on the reassertion of the traditional industrial vocation of the city through the development of new industrial parks – is often invoked by stakeholders during interviews as a way of legitimizing this neoliberal turn.

Second, to enhance the attractiveness of the city, local stakeholders have adopted a selective approach to planning which has moved away from the comprehensive conception of planning embodied by land use regulation operated by the municipality (PINSON, 2009). Various scholars (HARVEY, 1989b; DENTE *et al.*, 1990; INDOVINA, 1993; GENESTIER, 1993; MOULAERT *et al.*, 2003) have identified this selective approach to planning that consists of concentrating public efforts where market dynamics can relay public investment as a hallmark of neoliberal urbanism. The EPASE's action is thus just another example of this 'planning by projects' approach that targets 'strategic areas', and operates through 'exceptional tools' and 'architectural gestures' to generate property value. Indeed, in order to have an efficient impact on land value creation, the idea has been to focus on 'hot spots' where public investment and efforts to attract investors are concentrated. This approach has resulted in the setting of a special perimeter, the OIN (very similar to the UDAs), within which the EPA has authority over the delivery of building permits. More crucially, it has resulted in a focus of planning efforts and

public investments upon flagship operations located in areas where the creation of property value is the most likely. In Saint-Etienne's case, the EPASE has clearly identified two 'hot spots'. The first is the district surrounding the Chateaucieux railway station where the EPASE has made considerable investment in public spaces and selected a star of international architecture, the Japanese Pritzker prize winner Fuhimiko Maki, to design the area. The second is the Manufacture Plaine Achille area where prestigious cultural venues have been concentrated (*Cité du Design*, *Salle des Musiques Actuelles 'Le Fil'*, *'La Comédie'* theatre and the Zenith Arena designed by Norman Foster).

The third striking feature is the strong emphasis on market mechanisms in the discourses and the practices of EPASE planners and developers. According to them, a liveable city is one where property markets are dynamic and where a constant level of private investment generates a self-sustaining dynamic of regeneration (DORMOIS *et al.*, 2005). The EPASE's projects clearly aim at creating land value and activating or reinforcing land market dynamics. Public money is invested only provisionally in order to activate private property dynamics. On interview, one of the executives of the EPASE *mission de préfiguration* clearly proclaimed claimed this vision of planning as an activity aiming at activating dynamics of land value creation:

What we do is create projects to create markets. [...] In the end, the operation should be without gain or loss for the State [...] The State is not here to subsidize investments without getting its money back [...]. One of the conditions for the regeneration project to be a success is to design and implement scenarios of value creation able to attract investors and developers. My first priority then is to make the market rise. Without this, you cannot build your project. (Interview, 10 March 2011)

In the discourses of EPASE's officials and of the stakeholders that have supported the creation of an EPA, planners of the Saint-Etienne city council and metropolitan authority are clearly stigmatized as lacking the professional abilities to organize the mechanisms of land value creation. These stakeholders consider that only the creation of an EPA has enhanced these abilities:

At the time of the creation of the mission de préfiguration, there was no financial and technical culture of land development in Saint-Etienne. That's rightly one of the things the mission's director wanted to change with the creation of an EPA. He wanted to facilitate the arrival of high-level planners and developers from elsewhere. Instead, we had local planners who had lost these capacities. (Interview, 12 February 2011)

Thus, as a 'creature' of the central State, EPAs can be interpreted as a means for the central State to force the conversion of local governments to market-oriented place promotion strategies. In fact, once created, the EPASE clearly sought to quickly establish its ability to elaborate a marketing strategy, to seek out investors and to deliver development projects. To do so, the authority rapidly launched three special planning procedures (*Zones d'aménagement concertée*). A territorial marketing unit was created within the services of the EPASE. Economic developers were recruited in order to find investors. The EPASE also commissioned a study from a consulting firm in order to refine the positioning strategy of its project. Not surprisingly, the study asserted that one of the issues to tackle in order to attract economic activities is to enhance urban amenities so as to satisfy the needs of businessmen and women.

Indeed, and finally, the EPASE project was clearly designed also to satisfy the needs of specific social groups. During our interviews, stakeholders specifically mentioned 'executives' and middle class families as the primary targets of the EPASE's regeneration strategy. These groups tend to favour Lyon and the communes surrounding

Saint-Etienne as residences and the authority's first aim is to 'repatriate' them through quality housing, improved urban environment, amenities and job opportunities in the service and creative activities. Thus in Saint-Etienne as in many other cities, and as highlighted by MOREL JOURNAL and SALA PALA (2011), neoliberal urban policies are characterized by settlement strategies (better captured by the French expression of *stratégies de peuplement*). These strategies distinguish the social and ethnic groups considered the most suitable for a city's development objectives and calibrate urban policies according to the specific needs of these groups. Within these strategies, social groups that are not yet living in the city are more important than those that are already there. To use Harvey's words, 'the speculative construction of place' to appeal well beyond the city's jurisdiction is more important than the 'amelioration of conditions within a particular territory' (1989a, 8).

Adopting neomanagerial instruments

There are therefore strong similarities between the EPASE and the British UDCs in terms of planning objectives. But similarities do not end there. As with UDCs, the EPASE incorporates the typical characteristics of the agency model. Everything happens as if neoliberal policy objectives were enforced through neomanagerial instruments. More specifically, there are three domains in which the resemblance between the EPASE and the agency model is striking: its forms of organization; modes of action, coordination and allocation of resources; and methods of recruitment and human resources management.

Concerning organizational forms, EPAs like UDCs reproduce some of the characteristics of agencies. They enjoy a great deal of autonomy and operate within simplified circuits of command. In particular, the EPA director officially reports only to its board and not to the municipal council. That specific rule tends to emancipate his action from the various levels of control and approbation upon which the technical services of a city council or a ministry are dependant. For most of his daily activities but also for more strategic decisions, the general director only has an obligation to inform his board of directors.

Today, said a former director of the EPASE, I can buy land, sell serviced land with planning permission, conclude deals about large works or consultancy, sign agreement, without the obligation of having a formal agreement from the Board ... simply using my own powers given by the decree. (Interview, 1 July 2011)

In terms of internal organization, EPAs differ from the organization of ministries and municipal councils. EPAs planners work within task forces and project teams enjoying large autonomy; they are evaluated on their capacity to reach targets and objectives rather than on the strict respect of rules and procedures.

The forms of action, coordination and allocation of resources applied within EPAs also fit with the agency model. Just like UDCs, EPAs operate through 'externalization' (*faire faire*) rather than through direct 'production' (*faire*). EPAs' capacity to deliver is based on their capacity to mobilize, select and coordinate external service providers (planners, consultants, property developers, investors, etc.) and steer private resources. For the EPASE's developers, the time when production of the city was mainly the result of the mobilization of public resources and investments is long past. Today, private resources and investments are the raw material of urban development, which require professionals able to understand and embrace the private sector's logics. The promoters of the 'EPA formula' see urban policy-making as an activity that does not aim to

substitute for the private stakeholders and processes that built the city, or even to counter their strategies and their actions, but instead to use levers allowing to influence the behaviours of these private actors. We are thus not far from a conception of planning as a regulatory or steering activity.

Finally, methods of staff recruitment and management are another similarity between EPAs, UDCs and the agency model. EPAs are subject to standard labour regulations and not to civil service ones. In Saint-Etienne, in 2012, only 2 out of the EPA's 31 employees were civil servants. Many of EPA managers have worked previously in professional real estate, urbanism and development sectors or have held posts in public-private land development companies (*Sociétés d'économie mixte d'aménagement*), in the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations branches,² in social housing, real estate or development companies. According to our interviewees, this staffing model provides professionals who have an accurate knowledge of the rationale of real estate operators. This neomanagerial tropism in the management of human capital is also to be seen in the performance-based system of remuneration of the EPA executives. In an email, an EPA manager told us that a large part of the senior directors' salary was calculated according to performance indicators.

All the senior directors have a variable part of their salary (20%) based on precise objectives representing twenty points and organized around the Ministry's themes: housing, economic development, sustainable development, quality of the establishment's management. These objectives are fixed annually during meeting with the DGALN³, a typical example being to launch construction of XX housing projects, create YY square meters of offices, achieve TT exogenous installations, etc. And the result is assessed the following year. (Email received by the authors, 20 July 2011)

THE LIMITS OF THE DESCRIPTIVE CAPACITY OF THE THESIS OF NEOLIBERALISATION

The previous section displayed obvious signs of neoliberalisation and neo-managerialisation of urban policies in Saint-Etienne and showed that an EPA could be a crucial tool to accelerate the neoliberal conversion of these policies, very much like what UDCs were in the UK during the 1980–90s period. The two following sections introduce counterfactual elements that limit the strength and scope of the thesis of neoliberalisation in Saint-Etienne and the French contexts. In the present section, we present limits to the descriptive strength of this thesis. In particular, we show that the distinction between clearly distinguishable periods characterized by distinct policy objectives, instruments and central-local relationships is difficult to apply in the French case.

Urban agendas and policy objectives

The thesis of neoliberalisation's proponents provides a 'periodization' of the process that distinguishes a 'before', usually labelled 'Fordist' and 'Keynesianist', and an 'after' characterized by an ongoing process of destruction of the institutional arrangements of the Fordist-Keynesianist era and by the recreation of new unstable neoliberal arrangements. This second phase is itself usually considered to be structured by different sub-phases. The most famous periodization of the 'after' phase is the distinction between the 'roll back' and the 'roll-out' phases established by PECK and TICKELL (2002). During the 'roll-back' phase, that covers the 1980s and most part of the 1990s, national and/or urban governments systematically destroyed the institutions of Keynesianism. Systems of central government fiscal support to local government were dismantled; local

welfare service provision was retrenched; public monopolies for the provision of services were privatized or exposed to market competition; and ‘bureaucratized, hierarchical forms of public administration’ were eliminated (Brenner and Theodore, 2002b, 369). Then, in the late 1990s, came the ‘roll-out’ phase during which governments tried to correct the errors or excesses of the preceding phase and to institutionalize the prominent principles and achievements of the neoliberal programme.

The agenda has gradually moved from one preoccupied with the active *destruction and discreditation* of Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions (broadly defined) to one focused on the purposeful *construction and consolidation* of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations. (PECK and TICKELL, 2002, 384)

Within this framework, the EPASE could be considered as a sign of the emergence of the roll-out phase. It is an agency controlled by the central government, endowed with strong powers, dedicated to the activation of property markets and replacing ‘bureaucratized, hierarchical forms of public administration’, embodied by the municipal services of land use regulation. The problem is that there has not been such thing as a roll back phase in Saint-Etienne policies, nor in the history of the relations between the central State and local government. The French central State never imposed a harsh policy of fiscal austerity upon local government. It never imposed a strong reduction of social service provision, and its field services maintained a strong presence to manage the effects of the industrial crisis. As far as the municipal and metropolitan governments were concerned, no clear signs of retrenchment of the urban social policies preceded the creation of the EPASE. Obviously, for fiscal reasons, these policies became increasingly difficult to fund, but they remained key aspects of the city’s agenda. On the contrary, the very same municipality (led by Michel Thiollière, centre-right mayor from 1994 to 2008) that campaigned for the creation of the EPA was also the one that developed area-based social policies targeting at deprived neighbourhoods. While before 1994 and the election of Thiollière as mayor, the municipality did not really get involved in the contractual policy frameworks provided by the State to address the issues of these neighbourhoods (*Développement social des quartiers, Contrats de ville*), Thiollière’s administration reinforced its intervention in this field as of the late 1990s. In the early 2000s, the city even applied to the *Grand Projet de Ville* national bid in order to regenerate Montreynaud, one of the most deprived outer neighbourhoods of the city.

Finally, the programme of the EPASE itself evolved since its creation introducing, in particular, more concern for social housing. Indeed, 2008 was a turning point for the EPASE, an organization only created one year earlier. This year saw the election of a new mayor, the Socialist Maurice Vincent, and the beginning of the global economic crisis. The new mayor did not challenge either the managing team of the EPASE nor its core objectives, but he insisted on giving more importance to social housing within its programme. The global financial crisis also led the EPASE managing team to reconsider this issue. With the rarefaction of available investors, social housing developers became more attractive as a way to achieve the authority’s goals.

Urban policy instruments

As mentioned above, there are many common features between UDCs and EPAs, such as agency status, formal control by central government and a focus on property markets and attractiveness issues. However, in contrast with UDCs, if the EPA formula has certainly been revived in recent years, it was not born with the so-called neoliberal turn of

the early 1980's. In actual fact EPAs were born during the Keynesian–Fordist phase. More interestingly, they always held various types of objectives, both redistributive and pro-market. They did in the 1960s; they still do nowadays. They can thus be considered as evidence of the limit of the descriptive dimension of the thesis of neoliberalization which identifies a clear-cut historical break in the instruments of urban policies.

The first EPA was created in 1958 to implement the construction of a business district in the Western periphery of Paris, an area known today as La Défense. The issue for the French State was already to compete with London and to stimulate the structuring of a real estate industry specialized in the development of office buildings. In this case, the *Etablissement Public d'Aménagement de la Défense* (EPAD) embodied the rise of a French developmentalist State eager to structure new markets and facilitate the rise of powerful market actors, and this, right in the middle of the Keynesian period! The central State was seen as the strategist best suited to directly taking charge of this project and thus to take it away from local authorities.

Another element further blurs the very ontology of the EPA and the divide between a Keynesian/progressist era and a neoliberal one. Indeed, the most favourable period for the foundation of EPAs was between 1969 and 1973. During that period, nine new towns were created in the outskirts of Paris, Lille, Lyon, Marseille and Rouen and their planning was endowed upon EPAs. Here again, the choice of EPAs was justified by the huge development tasks they supposedly had to accomplish, tasks said to exceed the capacities of the local authorities (VADELORGE, 2005, 39; CLAUDE, 2005). New towns can be seen as the archetype of spatial Keynesian strategies, project through which the central State aimed to alleviate forms of urban congestion, control and organize a spatial redistribution of the processes of land value creation, and provide decent housing conditions near employment zones. To this end, the control of land and planning procedures was seen as crucial. Thus, as Brenner put it, the 'broad diffusion [of new town policies] in the Western European context must be understood above all in relation to the distinctive types of state spatial strategies that emerged under the Fordist-Keynesian configuration of capitalism development' (2004, 157).

The end of the new towns experiment marked the end of a first epoch of the history of State urban policies. The crisis of the 1970s and above all the Decentralization reforms of the early 1980s could have rung the death knell of EPAs. Indeed, one of the main aspects of these reforms was the transfer of urban planning and land use regulation functions from the central State to municipalities. Yet, against all odds, a series of new EPAs have been created since the mid-1990s in Marseille, Nice, Bordeaux and a series of locations in the Paris suburbs. Their development programmes mix developmental issues (flagship projects, office properties development) and redistributive issues (social housing, collective consumption equipment). The EPA formula has continued to be chosen because, for various reasons (political fragmentation, inter-municipal conflicts and lack of technical expertise), local authorities have been seen as unable to develop their own operational planning instruments.

The long story of French EPAs thus highlights two things. First, it is quite difficult in the French case to distinguish a clear divide between two epochs characterized by two sets of policy objectives and instruments (the claim of proponents of neoliberalization theorists). Practices of property-led urban development already existed during the so-called Keynesian period; conversely, redistributive issues remain key components of EPAs' agendas. Second, same policy instruments can be used for a variety of objectives and even a mix of potentially contradicting objectives (THELEN, 2012). It is therefore misleading to categorize EPAs in particular, and agencies in general, as indicators of

the adoption of NPM and neoliberalism. EPAs were, and still are, used for mixed policy objectives.

Central–local relationships

The third limit to the descriptive potential of the theories of neoliberalization concerns central–local relationships. In most accounts of neoliberalization of urban policies, urban governments are usually victims of radical changes decided by higher levels hitting the very core of their activities: redistribution, collective consumption, welfare provision, etc. (see HARVEY, 2005 and the example of New York). Neoliberalism and NPM not only changed the substance of urban policies, they also changed the very nature of State–city relationships. In the ‘roll-back’ phase of neo-liberalization, the transformation of central–local relationships took quite a paradigmatic shape, in particular in the UK. Central government deliberately cut grants and capped local tax rates in order to force local governments to cut social expenses, and thus re-establish brutal forms of control by the centre over the peripheries (GOLDSMITH, 1992; COCHRANE, 1993). In later phases however, central control took more subtle shapes. Competitive bids, evaluation and league tables, and the distribution of awards and labels progressively supplemented if not replaced more brutal forms of control (LE GALÈS and SCOTT, 2010).

In the French case, EPSTEIN (2013) has precisely documented this shift towards a competitive model of resources allocation in central–local relationships using the example of the National Program for Urban Renewal (*Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine*). Launched in 2003, this programme embodied a break in policies targeting deprived areas and, more generally, in central–local relations. Whereas previously State and local governments designed and implemented these policies within a partnership-based and contractual framework, the PNRU inaugurated a device where local governments were placed in a competitive situation, through bids and applications, to obtain central grants. A central agency, the *Agence Nationale de la Rénovation Urbaine* (ANRU), arbitrates the competition, organizes the bids, sets the rules and deals out the grants. In order to explain this new situation, Epstein uses FOUCAULT’S (2004) insights on neoliberalism as a form of governmentality where the State enhances its control on individual conducts through the contradictory promotion of freedom, a freedom that appears to be defined in strictly economic terms. Thus, the central State set rules and devices that will drive local policy-makers to act as rational, competitive and calculating actors. While the State has gained control through central agencies with almost no local ramifications, it has progressively dismantled its field services suspected of being involved in too cooperative and empathic relations with local government. Thus, Epstein describes a shift from a negotiated coproduction of territorial policies to a logic of government ‘at a distance’, or at arms’ length, in which a remote position offers the State a better capacity for steering.

The creation of EPAs could be interpreted as another manifestation of this new trend towards arms’ length government allowing the State to spread competitive behaviours among local governments through agencies. First, EPAs were designed to be technical and managerial ‘islands’ protected from local influences. Second, they have benefited from exceptional powers (in terms of land use regulation in particular) and are not hierarchically linked to local authorities. Third, the recent wave of EPA creation corresponds historically to the creation of the ANRU and the deployment of the logics of the government at a distance.

Nevertheless, our material shows great difference between the EPAs and the ANRU case that makes it difficult to consider that EPAs are mere vehicles of a neoliberal form of

government ‘at a distance’. First, this model implies that the central level has elaborated and imposed clear policy objectives and methodological guidelines upon the local level through the agency instrument. In the case of the EPASE, those elements are almost totally absent. During one of our interviews, a former director of the EPASE explained his dismay when he arrived in Saint-Etienne, having a very strong feeling that ‘Paris completely disappears from the game’. The setting up the agency took place without any support from the central administration:

The people from the Ministry had not set up any EPA for a long time. For example, they didn’t know what kind of labour law we had to apply. They’re civil servants; they don’t feel concerned by these issues. (Interview, 1 July 2011)

In fact, EPASE’s executives found relevant technical support instead from the Marseilles’ EPA management team. More fundamentally, EPASE’s managers do not consider their relations with the central State as a structuring on for defining the authorities’ methods and strategies. Formally, they are supposed to be important. For instance, a specific meeting gathering the executives of the EPASE and the representatives of the central State in the board precedes every plenary board meeting. Despite this specific arrangement, these ‘Meetings of State Administrators’ are not occasions when the EPA gets instructions from the central administration.

Second, the relationships with State field services seem much richer in content than those with the central services. They seem to be the real place where a ‘State strategy’ is invented. Again, this contradicts many research findings that claim that the once powerful State field representatives at the *département* level – the Prefect, the field services of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Environment – were the first victims of the recent neo-managerial reforms of State organizations (BEZÈS and LE Lidec, 2011). In our cases, the density of the relations with these field services compensates for the poverty of the relations with the centre. This is how the EPASE director represents this issue:

It is the Prefet and the DDT [Directeur Départemental des Territoires, head of the Ministries of Infrastructures and Agriculture field services] which somehow, and still now, bring together the State’s word, organize the State’s word, organize the State’s taking the floor in the Board. [...] So this ‘Meetings of State Administrators’, we shunt it with lunch at the Préfet’s at which there is the DDT, the Préfecture General Secretary, there’s the Préfet, the Treasury representative ... and they’re much closer to my concerns, the issues, the difficulties ... of the strategic positioning of what we do ... (Interview, 1 July 2011)

Third, the relations between the EPA’s staff and local elected officials and bureaucrats are also dense, which also departs from the neoliberal model of government at a distance. In Saint-Etienne, if the *Mission de Préfiguration* corresponds to a period of tension in the relations between State and local authorities, on the contrary, the arrival of the first director and the setting up of new collective work devices made it possible to ease relationships and install a genuine system of partnership. For instance, the EPASE gave back to the municipal administration the granting of building permits in the OIN perimeter, whilst its status allowed it to take charge of this procedure. The general director regularly reports to the mayor and he has perpetuated, at least initially, the coordination system called the ‘G group’ which brings together around him the managers of certain State field services, the city council, the metropolitan authority and the urban planning agency. Finally, having good relations with the mayor is essential for the EPA director. This is of course linked to the important political influence that local elected officials have in the French political system (GREMION, 1976). The president

of the EPASE is the mayor of Saint-Etienne and even if an EPA director's legitimacy is based on the national decree rather than on a local political nomination, he cannot neglect having good relations with local prominent figures, and firstly with the mayor of the city. In the 2008 municipal election, the Socialist Maurice Vincent beat the incumbent centre-right mayor, Michel Thiollière. Playing the card of loyalty to the municipal power, the director offered his resignation to the new mayor who refused it. So, at the end of the day, an EPA implements a local project as much as a project imposed by the central State. If the EPA bears some elements of the neomanagerial system, it departs radically from it as far as central–local relations are concerned.

THE LIMITS OF THE ANALYTICAL CAPACITY OF THE NEOLIBERALIZATION THESIS

Neoliberalization is not only a descriptive notion depicting dynamics of social, economic and political change and contrasted historical periods. It is also an analytical notion encapsulating theories that give meaning to those changes, and identify independent, causal variables. According to the various authors mobilizing this notion, changes can be explained either by the transformation of capitalism and the socio-political arrangements in which it is embedded, and in particular the abandonment of the Fordist compromise, by the success of an ideological crusade or by the spreading of new forms of governmentality. In all cases, processes of neoliberalization affecting economic transactions, political choices and social relations are considered the main *explanans* of social change at various scales.

In this last section, we argue that if neoliberalization might be one *explanans* of the rebirth of EPAs, and more generally of the transformations of urban policies in France, it is not the only one. We consider that there are other sources of change that explain either the focus on the redevelopment of centrally located urban spaces, the emphasis on specific social groups or the choice of an agency to implement the project. Some of these alternative sources of change are specific to Saint-Etienne's case, others have a more general scope.

Indeed, there are peculiarities in Saint-Etienne's case that explain the focus on the redevelopment of central urban areas, the emphasis on urban quality and the choice of an agency and that prevent from considering these choices to be a mere alignment on a neoliberal agenda. Industrialization severely marked the landscape of Saint-Etienne. Industries developed right in the centre of the city and the demise of industrial activities left huge quantities of brownfield sites. Moreover, housings and industries were intimately imbricated in the urban fabric. The result today is the poor quality of housing in the city centre, a situation that the absence of local policies targeting specifically at old housing stock has not improved. That poor housing quality triggered the flight of populations towards the surrounding communes, the concentration of deprived populations and ethnic minorities in the central areas and a lack of investment from property owners. Thus, the alarming state of the housing stock is an explanation to the focus on inner areas as much as the wish to foster dynamics of gentrification.

On a more general level, it is not evident that the choice for the agency model embodied by the EPA is the mere outcome of neoliberalization. Indeed, another interpretation of the choice for an agency model is possible. The EPA is part of what is called 'operational planning' (*urbanisme opérationnel*) in the French planning milieu, a practice that is also embodied in the ZAC special planning procedure.⁴ The development of this practice was rooted since the 1960s in the collective recognition by the milieu that land use regulation was not enough to steer the process of urbanization and make it

compatible with the public interest. To make this control more effective, public authorities had to intervene directly in property markets, by buying land, preparing it and selling it to developers. By doing so, public planners gained leverage over developer choices but also drove them to participate in the funding of public amenities. In a way, the EPA formula proceeds from the recognition that planners need to support land revaluation processes in order to master them and make them contribute to redistributive policies. Thus, we cannot simply explain the recourse to this kind of instrument as the mere sign of the conversion of planners to neoliberal principles. Instead, it came out of the acknowledgment of the limit of passive land use regulation.

Similarly, the very objectives of the EPASE's project, and more generally of contemporary urban planning policies, cannot be reduced to the pressure of neoliberalism. First, the new focus on city centres and the quality of housing and public spaces in inner areas certainly results from a will to make profits from the new appeal of these spaces for the upper classes and property interests. However, it also results from the urbanization of economic development in the more advanced countries. With the shift to more intensive forms of growth, relying on the intensity and productivity of factors of production, innovation in its various forms has become a key aspect of economic competition. As STORPER (2013) writes, innovation occurs through the development of non-codified, non-routinized forms of economic operations. These operations usually blossom in places characterized by the density of social interactions. That is why the most crucial operations from the point of view of innovation tend to concentrate in urban agglomerations and more routinized ones, requiring less interactions and proximity, tend to be relegated to peripheral zones. The fact that cities' elites are willing to seize the opportunities that the urbanization of development brings about and to offer the proper material frames for those interactions to develop cannot thus be interpreted as a mere submission to a neoliberal agenda, but rather as a way to create the conditions to benefit from this new 'urban moment'. Considering that the new geography of economic activities and the urban policies that seek to adapt to these new conditions are the results and/or manifestation of neoliberalization runs the risk of stretching the concept beyond its limits.

Another alternative explanation to this focus on central areas and urban quality has more to do with reactions to the shortcoming of former dogmas in urban planning. To a degree, the kind of planning objectives that the EPA is pursuing are the results of the social and professional critics of functionalist recipes applied to the production of the city. Indeed, the new focus on centrality, the preservation of urban heritage and concern for the quality of public spaces emerged from a critique of Fordist urban policies, leading to privileging the construction of brand new spaces either at the peripheries or in central areas where slums had been eradicated. In France, this critique was formulated by social movements denouncing the poor quality of architecture and infrastructure in high-rise peripheral social housing estates and the destruction of old inner neighbourhoods (TOMAS, 1995). This in turn led to the abandonment of the *grands ensembles* policies and to new planning doctrines more respectful of inherited urban forms and social practices. This wave of critiques also engendered important transformations in the balance of power between the professions involved in planning and urban policy-making, in particular between engineers and architects. The former were considered responsible for the disaster of functionalist planning. They were criticized for their excessive focus on technical networks, their obsession with circulations, the industrialization of housing, zoning, and their complete lack of sensitivity to urban experience. The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a sort of revenge of those professions able to envision and plan the city in a more sensitive way, able to take on board the imbrication of functions within the urban space and to design public spaces. The rediscovery of inner

urban areas, the new awareness of public space and urban design, and the concern for the inherited city is thus as much a matter of increasing authority enjoyed by professions like architects, landscapers or urbanists than the result of the spreading of neoliberal conceptions in urban planning.

Finally, a crucial element that is always present in the accounts of urban neoliberalization is missing in Saint-Etienne, and more largely, in France: a political majority at the national level imposing a neoliberal agenda in a variety of policy sectors and upon sub-national levels of government. If there have been 'neoliberal moments' in French politics (e.g. the fiscal austerity turn adopted by the Socialist government in 1984 or the Chirac government between 1986 and 1988), these have never been long and cross-sectoral enough, and have faced too many veto points, to produce the effects the Thatcher and Reagan crusades did in the UK and USA. If some segments of the French central State, in particular the Ministry of Finance (JOBERT, 1994), have converted themselves to market friendly policy principles, they have always faced countervailing tendencies among elected officials and other ministries. More importantly for us, these neoliberal trends have been contradicted by the long term effects of the decentralization reforms of the early 1980s that have led local and regional government to multiply their intervention in a vast variety of sectors, often along redistributive lines. Moreover, there is no relationship between the neoliberal inclination of national governments and the creation of EPAs. Since the new wave of creation of EPAs started in the mid-1980s, both right and left wing governments created EPAs. In many cases, for the central government the creation of an EPA was a way of rewarding a mayor of the same political majority. Thus, EPAs may have been involved in the implementation of urban policies with neoliberal features, but they can hardly be considered the vehicle for the French government's imposition of a neoliberal agenda.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that while the theories of neoliberalization urban policies and governance might explain some aspects of EPAs objectives and modes of operation, they do not capture the complexity of the reasons that led stakeholders to create such structures and of the very objectives of this kind of agency. Theories that analyse the recent transformation in urban policies and governance in terms of neoliberalization have undoubtedly immense merits. They have relocated capitalism and modes of production at the heart of debates in the social sciences, an achievement that is important given that the latter have tended in recent decades to lose sight of any material foundations for social life. They have especially encouraged re-examining the influence of a capitalism that has changed since the 1960s, a period when the Marxism and Structuralism was dominating continental social sciences. It went global and financial, and its interactions with States, territories and cities have substantially changed.

However, the case of EPAs has led us to consider that the thesis of neoliberalization is insufficient. On its own, it does not provide a sufficiently sharp analytical framework. The mono-causal perspective its proponents propose does not explain the variety of processes of change, motivations and justifications that led to the processes and situations labelled as urban neoliberalism. It might apply to specific situations like the UK or the USA where both neoliberalism and NPM have had dramatic effects and changed profoundly the social and urban fabric and even the field of possibilities for a political change. However, this mono-causal perspective proves ethnocentric when applied to different social, political and urban settings. Recent refinements of the thesis that show more sensitiveness to the varieties of neoliberalization (BRENNER *et al.*, 2010), or

try to show how neoliberal recipes alter while travelling (MC CANN and WARD, 2011), fail to correct this bias precisely because they cannot accept that neoliberalization is just one trend of change; a powerful one yet just one among others.

Thus, we need analytical frameworks that guide research to analysing processes of neoliberalization alongside other transformation processes. We need frameworks that can articulate the logics of neoliberalization with logics, whose effects might reinforce, neutralize or contradict the effects of neoliberalization. As we have tried to show with the example of the EPAs, modifications of main policy objectives or the choice for new policy instruments might be the outcome of logics of bureaucratic rationalization or of the transformation of the balances of power between professions involved in policy-making. They might thus have nothing to do with a neoliberal project. We also need frameworks that would help to think how bearers of neoliberal projects struggle, sometimes win and sometimes lose or compromise with other kinds of political projects, professional habits and moral values. For instance, neo-keynesianist (GENESTIER *et al.*, 2008) or neo-welfarist visions (FERRERA, 2013) that consider that markets might fail and that economic interactions are not enough to produce social links, remain powerful in several policy-making spheres and urban policy-making networks in particular. Neoliberalism and neoliberalization should not be concepts that end discussion. They deserve better than an enclosure in an all-encompassing grand theory.

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NOTES

1. <http://www.epase.fr/fr/L-EPASE-un-outil-d-exception/Grand-projet-urbain>
2. The Caisse des Dépôts is the public bank collecting the funds of the local savings banks and it has become a traditional source of funds and expertise for urban policies since the post-Second World War period.
3. Direction générale de l'Aménagement, du Logement et de la Nature du ministère de l'Ecologie et du Développement durable (Directorate for Planning, Housing and Environment of the Ministry of Ecology and Sustainable Development).
4. The *Zones d'aménagement concerté* (concerted planning zones) are derogatory planning procedures that enable local authorities to accelerate the development processes in areas considered as strategic. The ZAC procedures enhance the capacity of the body in charge of it to preempt lands and negotiate with investors the funding of equipment and public spaces.

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