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**Politicizing the debate on urban sprawl:  
The case of the Lyon metropolitan region**

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**Abstract**

The fight against urban sprawl has become an international motto for planners. However, recent urban policies promoting "smart growth" and "new urbanism" are the subject of growing criticism from various scientific disciplines. This paper goes beyond the debate for or against sprawl to examine the political and social issues behind anti-sprawl policies. We show how and why urban compaction can be perceived as a burden or a resource, depending on the different sub-metropolitan territories concerned. These issues are discussed in the case of the second largest metropolitan area in France, the region of Lyon. The paper analyses how the national legislation on urban sprawl and the "compact city" is implemented in the very diverse territories within Lyon's metropolis and how some of those territories use it to their advantage. It reveals that the resulting compromises are deceptive and raise spatial justice issues. It also shows how compaction or densification are negotiated in the suburbs to preserve the *status quo* in wealthy municipalities.

**Keywords:** Social Justice, Local Government, Land Use, Built Environment, Planning, Sprawl, Compaction

## **Introduction**

Today, there is a firm international consensus on anti-sprawl policies. Among the general criticisms that denounce sprawl, three main streams stand out. The first is a stream of critical social geography, inspired in particular by the Los Angeles School (Soja, 1989). Many researchers consider that the Los Angeles metropolis was the epitome of the ills associated with urban sprawl. With its endless suburbs, the Los Angeles model has inspired the emergence of a field of urban research that strives to characterize the social, spatial and political organization of the suburban and post-suburban landscapes that are taking over cities throughout the world (Keil, 2017; Guney *et al.*, 2019). A second stream of criticism inspired by the issue of sustainable development (Urban Task Force, 1999; Emelianoff, 2007), has put the containment of sprawling cities on the international agenda. Indeed, suburbanization threatens not only the countryside and, therefore, food security, but also ecosystems and global equilibrium by contributing to the climate crisis. Thirdly, the planning community is critical of urban sprawl, which it views as a symbol of unorderly growth, generating costly, unpleasant, and car-dependant environments (Duany *et al.*, 2000; Herzog, 2014). In general, the professional world of planning praises dense and compact urban centres, which echoes the other two critical streams. These three lines of criticism have coalesced in support of various policies designed to contain urban sprawl and

densify already urbanized spaces (Fregolent and Vettoreto, 2017; Bovet *et al.*, 2018; Robert *et al.*, 2019).

The consensus against urban sprawl should be considered carefully. The issues involved are not purely environmental or technical. As urban political ecology demonstrates, they are political, economic, and social. It highlights the unequal distribution of the costs and benefits associated with environmental change and shows how changes tend to exacerbate existing inequalities in urban populations (Heynen *et al.*, 2006; Krueger and Gibbs, 2007; Béal *et al.*, 2011; Souza, 2016). Until recently, little attention has been paid by urban political ecology to suburban, post-suburban and periurban territories. Yet, they are the most affected by the fight against sprawl (Keil, 2017; Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2015). Following on from several recently published studies (Keil and MacDonald, 2016, Güney *et al.*, 2019), this paper aims to further our understanding of periurban territories – the metropolitan hinterland, where urban and rural land uses mix.

Up until the 2000s, the debate on sprawl was generally pre-empted by libertarian American scholars and pundits, as discussed by Thad Williamson (Williamson, 2010). In a book that is still a major reference for the libertarian view on the issue, Bruegmann (2005) claimed that, historically, anti-sprawl discourses and policies express a more general movement fuelled by class resentment. He suggests that anti-sprawl policies could be analysed as the predictable reaction of the elite, who wish to protect their exclusive lifestyle outside the city and deny access to the masses, who are accused of making the “wrong” choices. In the contemporary period, the gentrification of major urban centres has changed elite discourses on the city. However, the question of class resentment is upheld by critics of new urbanism and smart growth, like Joel Kotkin. Though less openly libertarian than Bruegmann, Kotkin (2016) clearly advocates

suburban expansion. He analyses the current attempts by policymakers to direct growth to city centres in class terms. In his view, promoting a dense city centre is deeply unjust because it ultimately serves the interests of wealthy residents to the detriment of ordinary Americans.

In this paper, our main aim is not to offer a normative perspective on sprawl. Instead, our primary concern is spatial justice, in the same vein as the approach adopted by proponents of urban political ecology. Therefore, this paper does not strive to determine the pros and cons of sprawl, but to show how the fight against sprawl and densification policies serves specific interests (Quastel *et al.*, 2012; Moore, 2013). We highlight the political and social stakes underlying the current policies that promote the sustainability of cities. Based on a comparative analysis of the various local policies implemented in a single metropolitan area, our argument differs from the general critics of the anti-sprawl movements presented above. Its main starting point is that, since compactness and density can be defined in various ways, the local policies they inspire are inevitably diverse (Touati, 2015; Charmes and Keil, 2015; Mustafa *et al.*, 2018; Rousseau and Harroud, 2019). Behind the consensus for the compact city and the fight against sprawl, there is considerable scope for implementing a range of policies. Resulting local policies reflect the fragmentation of large metropolises in a subtle and complicated way. We thus underline the importance of considering the diversity of local contexts because it sheds light on the political and social issues behind the apparently technocratic anti-sprawl policies at local and metropolitan scales.

## **1. Study Area and Methodology**

This paper examines the issues at stake in the context of the local densification and anti-sprawl policies implemented in the Lyon metropolitan region. In this region, Greater Lyon or “Grand Lyon” constitutes the “metropolitan core”. Greater Lyon has an inter-municipal body made of 59

municipalities, 1.4 million inhabitants and covers most of the continuous built-up area (or agglomeration), including low-density suburban municipalities (e.g. the Monts d'Or area). Beyond Greater Lyon lie the outer suburbs, which include territories that are commonly known as periurban in France. These latter territories are functionally dependant on the metropolitan core<sup>1</sup>, despite being physically detached from the agglomeration. Most periurban municipalities look like villages or small towns (Charmes, 2019). The combination of periurban rings and central agglomeration constitutes the “metropolitan area” or “*aire urbaine*” (See Figure 1). According to the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Research (INSEE), the Lyon metropolitan area has more than 2.3 million residents and 500 municipalities (for more details see Bouron, 2019). It is one of France’s fastest-growing metropolitan area: between 2007 and 2017, Greater Lyon welcomed more than 12,000 new inhabitants each year, a growth rate above 0,9 %; the periurban municipalities grew even faster, with more than 1.1 % each year<sup>2</sup>. To meet this demand, Greater Lyon aims to build between 8 to 9,000 new housing units every year, of which less than 10 % should be individual housing<sup>3</sup>. The building effort is made mostly through urban renewal, brownfield development and densification, in places well served by public transportation (especially the subway and tramway lines). A significant part of this effort is also dedicated to social housing, which currently represents 24 % of the housing stock, a figure that is increasing in order to meet the 25 % threshold required by the 2014 law on Access to Housing and New Urbanism (ALUR). This effort is however insufficient to meet the demand, and the

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<sup>1</sup>Functional dependency is measured by the intensity of commuting.

<sup>2</sup> For more details, see Scot agglomeration lyonnaise 2030 (2020). *Le développement territorial à l'œuvre. Décryptage*, #3

<sup>3</sup> The figures of this paragraph come from Greater Lyon website: [www.grandlyon.com/metropole/habitat-et-logement.html](http://www.grandlyon.com/metropole/habitat-et-logement.html) (accessed in July, 2020).

private market is tense, either for rental or for buying. Within Greater Lyon, the average price for new apartments is close to 4000 €/m<sup>2</sup>. For most lower middle-class families, typically earning 2,500 to 3,000 € per month, prices are too high. They are pushed to the outer suburbs. Such move often implies car dependency since public transportation is sparsely developed.

Outside Greater Lyon, housing production was for long dominated by individual housing (see Figure 2). This is less and less the case, as requested by a national anti-sprawl policy (Costet, 2020), which is progressively gaining momentum since the 2000 Solidarity and Urban Renewal (SRU) law. Old village cores are redeveloped with collective housing and urbanization of agricultural or natural land is more and more discouraged.

Housing production and urban development governance is also much more fragmented outside than within Greater Lyon. Although France is perceived as a centralized state, municipalities have considerable political autonomy, especially when it comes to regulating local land uses (Wollman, 2012). Moreover, many of those municipalities are very small, especially periurban and rural ones. Like elsewhere around French metropolitan core, Lyon's outer suburban municipalities are sparsely populated, being villages in most cases (81 % of Lyon's periurban municipalities have less than 2,000 inhabitants). Inter-municipal cooperation has developed, but the effects remain limited. The situation is evolving, but within the scope of the present paper, the

only significant exception is for metropolitan cores like Greater Lyon (Geppert, 2017)<sup>4</sup>. This is why, for the sake of clarity, this paper focuses on two local government situations: outer suburban municipalities, on the one hand (which policies are the focus of section 2), and Greater Lyon and its member municipalities on the other (which internal relations are the focus of section 3).

Please insert Figure 1 here

*Figure 1: Lyon metropolitan area (or “aire urbaine”)*

This enquiry into the politics of densification and the control of urban sprawl in the metropolitan area of Lyon is based on a cumulative series of research work. The first research began in the 2000s to investigate how suburbanites and periurbanites were taking control of their residential environment (Charmes, 2005, 2011). In the early 2010s, research on densification and compaction policies in the Lyon metropolitan area focused on Greater Lyon suburban municipalities (Charmes and Rousseau, 2014; Rousseau 2015). Lastly, ongoing doctoral research that began in 2016 is investigating how anti-sprawl policies are implemented in outer suburban municipalities (Amarouche and Charmes, 2019). All this research work was based on qualitative fieldwork. Over the years, more than 130 interviews have been conducted with elected and administrative officials from the municipalities and inter-municipal bodies in the Lyon metropolitan area. The surveys also included a systematic investigation of the different scales of

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<sup>4</sup> Greater Lyon was an inter-municipal structure composed of 59 municipalities until the end of 2014. The structure became a fully administrative government called “Metropole de Lyon” in 2015. The Metropole is governed just like any other “municipality”. It is unique in France. This administrative status includes direct universal suffrage for the election of the representative body at the metropolitan level.



government involved in compaction and anti-sprawl policies, from the state to municipal levels. This multi-scalar research approach is one of the important contributions of this paper.

## **2. “Fast and Furious” Sprawl: The Metropolis and its Periurban Hinterland**

Periurban municipalities might be expected to oppose anti-sprawl policies designed to limit demographic growth for the benefit of a few central municipalities well served by public transport. As we shall see, the reality is more complex. Periurban territories and their interests are diverse. Some are keen to limit their own growth or stop it altogether and have joined the international bandwagon that supports no growth or slow growth (Purcell, 2000). In Lyon’s case, there has been a convergence between Greater Lyon, which is eager to concentrate urban growth within its territory, and the periurban inner ring municipalities keen to adopt land regulations that severely restrict urban growth. Yet the convergence is deceptive. It does not concern all periurban territories and periurbanization is a dynamic process. Indeed, the alliance between the metropolitan core and the periurban inner ring does not actually limit urban sprawl, it exacerbates it.

### **2.1. When the Inner Ring Joins the Fight Against Urban Sprawl in the Name of (Periurban) Gentrification**

Since the early 1990s, under the influence of a new generation of elected officials from centre right (Michel Noir, from 1989 to 1995, followed by Raymond Barre from 1995 to 2001) and

centre left (Gérard Collomb, from 2001 to 2020), Greater Lyon embarked on the path of economic entrepreneurial development (Galimberti *et al.*, 2014). Its strategy centred on attracting external investments and developing the local economy's service sector (Jouve, 2001). However, the focus on Lyon's global competitiveness appears to collide with the growing demographic weight of peripheries beyond Greater Lyon's perimeter of influence. The outer suburbs, especially the periurbs, have expanded rapidly. They offer a mix of urbanity and rurality to the middle classes in search of a home that is in direct conflict with the development model promoted by the metropolitan core.

Please insert Figure 2 here

*Figure 2: Municipal densities in the Lyon metropolitan area (source: INSEE)*

The periurban territories defend their historical model of development, based on individual housing. They are in direct competition with Greater Lyon for resources and development (asset flows, structuring facilities, economic activities). To contend with this, Greater Lyon seized the opportunity provided by the new national legislation designed to encourage densification (especially in areas well served by public transport) and to limit sprawl. As stated above, local authorities have strong incentives to densify. For instance, the ALUR law abolished the possibility to cap the floor area ratio or establish a minimum plot size in local land use regulations. Moreover, these laws strongly discourage the conversion of natural and agricultural land to urban uses.

Paradoxically, at the metropolitan area scale, these laws plus Greater Lyon's desire to generate growth in its territory via densification met with unexpectedly little resistance. In the periurban

municipalities closest to the centre of Lyon, the expansion of built environments usually hits a sort of ceiling. Their rate of urbanization remains very low and natural areas and agriculture are still important features of their landscape. In fact, when households move to a periurban municipality, they are looking for accommodation (usually a detached house), as well as a village-like environment (Fonticelli, 2018) characterized by abundant undeveloped natural or agricultural land with a clear physical separation from the neighbouring metropolitan agglomeration. Thus, around Lyon, like other large French metropolises, municipalities located within the periurban inner ring - i.e. less than a dozen kilometres from the limits of the main agglomeration - tend to adopt land regulations that restrict the urbanization of natural and agricultural land. This is especially the case in the numerous small residential municipalities where municipal councils are strongly influenced by residential interests (Fischel, 2004). Indeed, the primary concern expressed locally is to limit urban growth to preserve a village-like environment.

Although periurban municipalities are very diverse and some even have significant urban development plans, few if any want to become part of the suburbs and be swallowed up by Lyon's continuous built-up area. For example, the mayor of Soucieu-en-Jarrest describes his project for its 4,500 residents "village" as follows:

"We are on the fringe of the metropolitan area and because of our size and our configuration still rather "countryside". We appreciate being a little outside Lyon urban area even if we belong to it [...] The inhabitants, once they are settled in the village, they do not want the village to change, keeping a village aspect.

Globally, people rather prefer that the village does not change and they don't want the population to grow" (Interview, mayor, Soucieu-en-Jarrest, 2018).

In the Lyon metropolitan area, the most preservationist municipalities are in the western periurban ring (Amarouche and Charmes, 2019). This reflects the fact that they are more attractive and welcome higher income households than other periurban municipalities (Bouron, 2019). Indeed, by limiting growth, municipalities restrict supply and raise prices. This ensures a social sorting mechanism. Similar mechanisms have been described outside France (see Fischel, 2004 or Schmidt and Paulsen, 2009). Thus, in the periurban inner ring, fighting urban sprawl is highly compatible with the main objective of (periurban) gentrification (Bacqué *et al.*, 2016; Tommasi, 2018).

In this context, periurban and Greater Lyon projects are compatible. Nonetheless, the joint issues of densification and combating urban sprawl mask political rivalries. The inner ring, particularly in the west, views changes in the national legislation as an asset to help secure a model based on preservationist land regulations, maintain high real estate prices and ensure social homogeneity for middle and upper middle classes. This strategy is barely called into question by Greater Lyon, which has a rather indulgent attitude. By closing itself off to urbanization, the western periurban ring becomes the metropolitan area's "green lung" (Amarouche and Charmes, 2019), i.e. a residential territory for middle and upper middle classes, as well as a recreational area that helps to promote Lyon's quality of life to new enterprises and professionals.

Relations with the state<sup>5</sup> are not strained either. The state intervenes in the Lyon context through its legislative output, as well as through a specific planning document: the spatial planning and sustainable development directive (*Directive territoriale d'aménagement et de développement durable*, or DTADD). The directive applies to a large portion of the Lyon metropolitan area. It stipulates the need to fight urban sprawl, in accordance with current legislation. It sets objectives that converge with those of Greater Lyon and the periurban territories: preserving the patrimonial landscape, maintaining agricultural areas, and reducing soil sealing (Amarouche and Charmes, 2019). Many periurban municipalities are quite happy with being assigned a role to preserve the green belt around the metropolis, despite their complaints about state interference in their affairs. They have readily adopted the discourse on the need to fight urban sprawl at their local level. They claim that they can no longer create new residential neighbourhoods because of this directive and also partly due to the cost of collective facilities and public services (e.g. bus network).

## **2.2 When the Struggle with Urban Sprawl Pushes Out Modest Homebuyers**

The emerging compromise between the metropolitan core and its periurban rings is deceptive. Periurban spaces are diverse and, above all, periurbanization is a dynamic process. Thus, limiting urbanization in the inner ring simply displaces it. Young families with children, looking to buy a

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<sup>5</sup>The European Union does not have a significant role, apart from providing general recommendations to fight sprawl.

detached house, are forced further afield because the property in the inner ring is unaffordable (Wiel, 2010; Charmes, 2011). Similar dynamics have been described outside France (see Schafran and Wegmann, 2012). Cheaper plots of land are available beyond the periurban inner rings, where rural municipalities are pleased to welcome new families to revitalize their village and boost the number of children at the local school. In addition, property owners stand to gain as the value of their land increases. In Lyon's second periurban ring, building land is commonly worth a hundred times more than agricultural land. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the state's sectoral policies are somewhat contradictory. The urban sprawl, which planning and development regulations seek to contain, has been exacerbated by the homeownership policies that encourage low-income households to buy new homes – which is only possible if they move a long way from the metropolitan cores (Charmes and Rousseau, 2014).

Indeed, recently periurbanized municipalities are likely to adopt the same pattern of urban development and land-use policies (Charmes, 2011). It does not take long for increased market pressure, combined with the fear of urbanization, to drive mayors to modify their policy and sharply reduce the rate of population growth. For instance, the municipality of Yzeron grew rapidly when it was being incorporated into Lyon's periurban ring. Its population increased by over 30% from 750 in the mid-1990s to 1,000 at the end of the 2000s. This growth was well received because, as the mayor explained, it helped “stabilize business” (including the school). Yet, the growth rate is now being called into question. Once the cap of 1,000 inhabitants was reached, the adoption of a new local land use plan (PLU) in 2008 provided the opportunity to take steps to curb population growth. At the last count in 2017, Yzeron's population was still just above 1,000. Although Yzeron became part of Lyon's periurban ring, it has maintained its

village-like character and avoided being swallowed up by the sprawling suburb. Now people looking for a buildable plot must go further afield.

Therefore, cities expand in waves: a new periurban ring is added to an older ring, when the latter closes itself off to urbanization (Wiel, 2010). Thus, Lyon's area of influence has spread outwards into municipalities that, until recently, were very rural and relatively inaccessible because of the relief. It is easier to urbanize the metropolitan area's outer margins because they are located outside the perimeter zone covered by the state's spatial planning directive (the DTADD). In addition, metropolitan actors do not generally perceive the city's outer margins as strategic territories. They are considered rural areas and some policies even encourage their development to combat rural depopulation. The evolution of Lyon's metropolitan areas between 1999 and 2010 is telling. Despite the anti-sprawl legislative framework, it gained more than 200 municipalities in a decade, going from less than 300 to over 500, largely due to periurbanization. This phenomenon is not specific to Lyon. At the national scale, the areas covered by periurban rings around large cities (offering more than 10,000 jobs) expanded by 39 % in the same period (Floch and Levy, 2011).

This has a major impact on lower middle and stable working classes (hereafter called modest households). Those wishing to purchase a single-family home around Lyon either have to abandon the idea or move further away. The latter choice has high individual and collective costs, as it involves longer commuting distances. Although employment is growing within periurban rings, it does not match the population growth. In 2017, greater Lyon was home to more than

73 % of all jobs within the metropolitan area, with a share of only 60 % of the population<sup>6</sup>. Given the extremely poor public transport services in periurban rings, especially the outermost one, people often travel the extra distance by car. This has not only a significant environmental impact, but also a social one. For a household with two working adults, the additional cost of a 10 km increase in commuting distance is approximately 200 euros per month for home-to-work commutes alone. Yet, in 2017, in the Lyon region, the net monthly income of a fifth of housebuyers was below €2,400 or double the minimum wage (Mouillart and Vaillant, 2018). This point should be stressed: the problems associated with spatial expansion of periurbs are not merely environmental, they are also social. They call into question the right to mobility, as well as access to employment (Cochez *et al.*, 2015).

Undoubtedly, the development of Lyon's outer periurban ring goes some way to answering the thorny question of home-ownership for modest households. Nevertheless, the extension of the metropolitan area comes at a high cost for the working people who live there. Some people consider that this cost is unjust in comparison to large metropolitan centres that have cheap public transport. Indeed, the idea is spreading in France that there is a strong political bias in favour of large metropolitan centres when it comes to public policies, be it health care, education or transport (Bouba-Olga and Grosseti, 2019). Whether or not this bias is genuine is a tricky issue. However, the perception of bias is growing and partly explains the high far right's election scores in the outer periurban rings (Charmes, 2019). Ultimately, this issue had a major impact on the Yellow Vest uprising. The revolt started in November 2018 after the government announced an

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<sup>6</sup> For more details see: Agences d'urbanisme de Lyon et Saint-Etienne (2015) *Dynamiques de métropolisation. Repères*. march.



“eco-tax” on car fuel. The price rise, albeit limited, was the last straw. The resulting discontent triggered a massive revolt, which, at least initially, was much more apparent in the outermost periurban rings than elsewhere (Genestier, 2019; Depraz, 2019).

### **3. “Densify and Conquer”: The New Challenge of the Metropolitan Inner Suburbs**

Periurban territories are being allocated an increasing share of fiscal and “social” resources through their gentrification programmes. Consequently, Greater Lyon must accept changes to its urban morphology (i.e. densification) to pursue its territorial development plans. This is a complex process and not simply a technical solution that stems from the moral imperative of sustainability (Quastel *et al.*, 2012; Rousseau, 2015). To decipher this, our analysis “zooms in” on the metropolitan inner suburbs (located within Greater Lyon limits), focusing on the variations in local densification policies.

The densification strategy adopted at the metropolitan scale was supposedly designed to rebalance the agglomeration’s urban form. Yet the strategy has failed to reverse the historical segregation between the largely upper middle-class western suburbs and predominantly working-class eastern suburbs (Authier *et al.*, 2010). Locally applied policies are quite conservative. Indeed, Greater Lyon’s authorities have come up against very diverse political, social, and economic municipal configurations. Lyon’s suburbs are negotiating forms of densification that could preserve their profile.

### **3.1 Western Suburbs: Controlling Densification to Preserve the Social *status quo***

The densification that national legislation has imposed on all territories constitutes a greater political threat to mayors in western municipalities than in eastern municipalities. This difference is primarily related to the different social composition in the two areas. The frequent revolts in the vicinity of East Lyon's high-rise tower blocks, home to low-income residents of North-African origin (Dikeç, 2011), caused moral panic among detached homeowners, thus, increasing their hostility towards a dense urban form. This resistance occurs in low-density residential neighbourhoods, where land-use regulations cannot be relaxed without sparking defensive reactions. In West Lyon, residents have successfully managed to block even limited densification. With such severe opposition, elected officials from western municipalities often agree on a compromise with Greater Lyon that involves limited densification: building small collective housing units in old built-up town or village cores. The idea is to use a small town design like the one commonly promoted by advocates of suburban smart growth or new urbanism (Duany *et al.*, 2000).

Greater Lyon accepted this compromise for two main reasons. First, its centre left president, Gérard Collomb, needed the support of the West Lyon centre right mayors to be elected (Galimberti *et al.*, 2014). Second, public infrastructure, especially transport, is underdeveloped in West Lyon after decades of local planning policies that promoted low-density housing and car mobility. Therefore, major urban development would have been far more expensive than in East Lyon, as we will see below.

The West Lyon mayors recognize that the densification of their old centres has some advantages. Firstly, it responds to a real demand from older local residents, who wish to move closer to local services and shops. Secondly, it helps stabilize local commercial structures. Thirdly, it boosts the municipality's fiscal resources. However, over and above these public arguments, targeting old centres for densification constitutes a hidden compromise: in exchange for limited densification in the old centres, low-density residential neighbourhoods preserve a *status quo*. By accepting a densification plan restricted to small collective buildings in their old centres, western municipalities are making a gesture of goodwill. The Greater Lyon authorities can then claim that the "burden" of densification weighs equally on western and eastern municipalities.

In response to the legal requirements to develop social housing, new densification projects often include up to 40 % of social housing units, especially in the west, where municipalities have long been reluctant to accommodate low-income households. This densification is thus clearly associated with social downgrading (Fonticelli, 2018), and spark opposition in well-off suburbs. Yet, the *status quo* in West Lyon is not genuinely under threat because mayors can control not only the form of constructions, but also the profile of incoming populations (Desage *et al.*, 2014). Mayors play an important role in the allocation of social housing. Consequently, the social housing units built as part of the new programmes often serve to accommodate young people who work for the municipality, or relatives of people who already live in the municipality. Indeed, there is a high demand for social housing among young households, including the middle classes because of the rise in real estate prices since the end of the 1990s. Mayors often mention this to their reluctant constituents to justify why the social housing thresholds imposed by the 2000 SRU law should be respected. As a real estate developer stated about outer western suburban municipalities:

When we say that it is necessary to produce social housing, everyone thinks that we will bring people from the “Minguettes” [a district in Vénissieux, a deprived suburb in East Lyon, see Figure 1] or La “Duchère” [a deprived neighbourhood in Lyon] into their municipalities. But, social housing in suburban municipalities is often occupied by young couples starting out in life. So, it's children of families who already live there (Interview, real estate developer, Nexity, 2019).

The *sine qua non* condition for densification is that residential municipalities in West Lyon have demonstrated their capacity to regulate the population that moves into the new housing units. Although the complaints filed by residents' associations rarely succeed, they can disrupt construction projects because of the additional costs incurred by the delays. Therefore, the tight political control of densification allows for a compromise that is acceptable to all parties. It limits the social impacts of morphological change in western municipalities.

In short, the suburban municipalities in West Lyon perceive the obligation to densify as a threat: they risk losing their “village character” to make way for the big city. In other words, as a result of intensifying urbanization, they risk losing their status as purely residential, socially (and racially) homogeneous and relatively closed spaces. However, the compromise reached between Greater Lyon and the mayors in West Lyon allows all parties to claim that they have respected their obligations regarding densification, at the same time as preserving the basics: a relative *status quo* in urban and social terms.

### **3.2 Eastern Suburbs: Promoting Densification in the Name of Growth**

By contrast, densification has generally received far more support from the municipalities in East Lyon's working-class suburbs. There are two reasons for this. First, densification increases the demand for public facilities (schools, transport, etc.). Over the last 3 decades, several eastern municipalities have experienced population decline, mainly due to deindustrialization, pauperization, and loss of appeal for new households (Authier *et al.*, 2010). As a result, they have the public facilities required to meet the demands of a new population. Thus, densification is a way to make their facilities profitable once more. This is the case for Bron, an eastern suburban municipality that lost 16 % of its population between 1975 (when its population peaked at almost 45,000) and 1999, as the mayor explains:

We have facilities for more than 40,000 people. The population has fallen to 37,000. We can densify. On the contrary, we must prevent further population decline, as this would jeopardise the city's facilities which were designed for 40,000 inhabitants (Interview, 2011).

Second, several mayors in East Lyon perceive the modification of the urban form as a lever for social change: densification helps attract members of the middle classes and transforms the characteristics of the local population, which they consider to be too poor and not sufficiently white. Here, the incentive to densify, as expressed by elected officials in declining industrial cities, reflects the desire to promote social upgrading by encouraging the settlement of middle-class households (Rousseau, 2009). In addition, the municipalities in the eastern suburbs tend to be left wing. Up until 2020, the mayors in these municipalities belonged to the political majority governing Greater Lyon. Thus, they had access to community resources to stimulate densification

through the public transport policy, for instance, as demonstrated by the expansion of the subway and tram networks towards lower-class inner suburbs, including Vénissieux and Vaulx-en-Velin (Lévêque, 2018). It is indeed remarkable that no similar expansion has taken place towards the western suburbs. With this support, the mayors in the East accepted the injunction to densify imposed by Greater Lyon. For example, the mayor of Vaulx-en-Velin, one of Lyon's poorest suburbs, stated in the municipal newsletter that "there is [a] need for housing in the city and we reject the logic of urban sprawl" (*Vaulx-en-Velin Journal*, April 2013).

For the elected officials and municipal technicians, the social transformation that results from modifying the urban form makes it possible to "break ghettoization". This term is frequently used by French politicians in cities where poverty is widespread. Municipalities, such as Vénissieux and Vaulx-en-Velin, are taking advantage of the rapid increase in real estate prices in the centre of the agglomeration with a view to breaking ghettoization. They have thus targeted a specific population: "Young first-time buyers with no children, young, hailing mainly from East Lyon" (Interview, Urban Planning Department in an eastern municipality, April 2011). Those targeted are not affluent residents from the rest of Greater Lyon, but young, upwardly mobile households from East Lyon. In that case, the link established by the national legislation between densification and social mix is reversed. The aim of the densification policy is not to attract the working classes to middle-class neighbourhoods, but quite the opposite.

Thus, in the working-class suburbs, the spaces of urban renewal differ markedly from the tower blocks that long dominated their urban landscape. Tower blocks have a negative image associated with "communitarianism," poverty and insecurity. On the contrary, urbanization is now driven by large private real estate groups that reproduce a dense urban form, designed to attract the middle classes. Vénissieux is a good example of this. A working-class city, it developed during the first

wave of suburbanization, when the population went from 15,000 in 1946 to 75,000 in 1975. For several years, most of its residents worked in the local factories. The factory closures in the 1970s caused major social problems. The city's population declined rapidly, falling to 55,000 by 1999. Vénissieux experienced a sort of French white flight. Residents who left the municipality were primarily those who could afford to purchase a home. In the *ZUP des Minguettes* - the well-known scene of several urban riots that symbolizes "the problem of the suburbs" in France - several tower blocks were destroyed to make room for small collective housing projects supported by the municipality. The re-densification observed in Vénissieux since the mid-2000s (the city has regained 9,000 residents) was promoted by a communist municipality that took advantage of Greater Lyon's transport policy, with the opening of a new tramway line in 2009, linking directly Vénissieux to the centre of Lyon. The municipality negotiated a financial support with the National Urban Renewal Agency (ANRU) for a major project along this line.

Therefore, the densification of the eastern suburbs allows the declining post-industrial eastern suburbs to "move upmarket" (Rousseau, 2014). The main problem caused by this change for the lower-income groups is related to the demolitions and subsequent rehousing programmes. The residents of the public estates have been relocated to neighbourhoods that they did not necessarily choose, where rents are higher and flats smaller (Lelévrier, 2015). The resulting discontent is channelled through the social services in the Eastern municipalities and has not led to the creation of a structured political opposition. More generally, the densification of Lyon's eastern suburbs is facilitated by the lack of resident mobilization. This inertia contrasts with the situation in the western suburbs. It should be noted, however, that movements against densification have recently been organized in East Lyon. These movements originate mainly in old village cores and residential islets established between tower blocks (Rousseau, 2012). Thus, beyond the rift that

divides eastern and western suburbs, the main opposition to policies of urban compactness stems from a specific type of urban fabric: residential neighbourhoods.

### **Conclusion: Politicizing the Debate on Urban Sprawl**

As this paper demonstrates, anti-sprawl and compaction policies are by no means purely technical and consensual, despite their appearance at the national policy level. When considered at local scales, anti-sprawl and densification policies appear to be highly political (Moore, 2013). Cases presented in this paper are in line with other urban political ecology studies. They show that a sustainable urban environment is not merely an ecological matter. Within periurban territories, nature preservation is deeply interwoven with urbanization processes (Sandberg *et al.*, 2013; Keil and Macdonald, 2016). It also has very different social and political implications depending on the local context (Souza, 2016). The same applies to densification in the suburbs, which takes various forms, for example, the densification of village cores rather than the transformation of neighbourhoods of detached houses (Touati, 2015; Charmes and Keil, 2015). Anti-sprawl policies may also be offset by other national policies, including those that support the residential construction sector and favour access to homeownership. In this framework, local choices are possible, and they reflect political, economic and social values. Furthermore, in geographical terms, the benefits of these choices are unevenly distributed and interlinked.

In Lyon's periurban municipalities that are close to the metropolitan core, anti-sprawl policies reflect the residents' desire to limit growth and control the social characteristics of the local population. The resulting policies qualify as exclusionary zoning (see, for example, Schmidt and



Paulsen, 2009). At the same time, they help transfer the demand for housing away from the metropolitan core. The fight against urban sprawl and the corresponding preservation of undeveloped land around metropolitan cores restrict building rights in sectors where demand for housing is high and real estate market operators would willingly intervene. The current densification projects are unlikely to match housing needs. The structural housing deficit will probably continue and be absorbed, at least in part, by expanding the metropolitan area further into the metropolitan region (Charmes and Rousseau, 2014). These observations recall the debate about the effects of London's green belt (Gant *et al.*, 2011) and the criticisms of North American pro-sprawl pundits and scholars, as mentioned above (e.g. Bruegmann or Kotkin). In any case, spatial justice is a major concern, whatever one's political tendencies might be. Modest homebuyers bear the brunt of anti-sprawl policies. Real estate market dynamics and periurban centrifugal forces make the situation difficult for them, exacerbating their precarity.

Within the metropolitan core, the responses to densification policies vary, depending on the municipalities' economic, social, and political specificities (Quastel *et al.*, 2012). They may be perceived as a threat in terms of social downgrading or as a tool for new-build gentrification (Davidson and Lees, 2010). The compromise reached between several West Lyon mayors and Greater Lyon has helped turn densification into a vector to consolidate the residential character of the Monts d'Or municipalities. Similarly, the compromise struck between some East Lyon mayors and Greater Lyon has helped make densification into a vector to strengthen East Lyon's economic development. As a result, the metropolitan *status quo* has been preserved and the social division that marks Lyon's suburbs has been reinforced (Rousseau, 2015).

All this is possible because densification and compactness are “chaotic concepts” (Martin and Sunley, 2003). Beyond very general and consensual ideas and notions, these concepts can be associated with very different types, processes, and scales of urban transformation. Thus, anti-sprawl and pro-densification policies can be implemented in different ways, depending on the municipality’s profile. They can be used differently to maximize the interests of both residents and their elected representatives. This consolidates the consensus on urban compactness, at least within the metropolitan core: why oppose an imperative head on, when it allows a high degree of freedom? Yet, the consensus is superficial and may simply be a deceptive compromise. It is important to look beyond the apparent consensus to grasp the local political dimensions that characterize the fight against urban sprawl. In so doing, this paper contributes to the ongoing critical discussion about the depoliticization of issues associated with the rise of consensual discourses on sustainable development (Swyngedouw, 2009; Béal *et al.*, 2011; Pinson and Rousseau, 2011).

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