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# **The Geopolitics of Urban Green Belts**

## **Between Exclusionary Zoning and the Militarization of Urban Space**

**Maryame Amarouche**

**Eric Charmes**

**Max Rousseau**

### **Introduction**

This paper aims to combine French and English approaches to urban geopolitics, a discipline that means different things to French and English scholars (see the part “an introduction to urban geopolitics and *la géopolitique urbaine*”). In the French-speaking sphere, geopolitics developed a specifically urban dimension in the 1990s, when it became known as *la géopolitique urbaine*, hereafter called *GU* (Hulbert 2009; Subra 2012). It focuses on the territorial dimensions of power struggles in cities. By contrast, in English-speaking scholarship, the concept commonly refers to an approach, which emerged in the 2000s and was geared to analysing the militarization of urban space in relation to new forms of international conflict (Graham 2004a). Later, this school of urban geopolitics (hereafter, called UG) gradually included other issues, such as postcolonial power relations, inter-ethnic relations (Rokem and Boano 2018), formal and informal planning and numerous studies on phenomena relating to everyday life, which Fregonese (2012) calls geographies of peace. As the French academic sphere has long been (and still is overall) quite separate from the English-speaking academic sphere (Boudreau and X 2018), both schools developed independently, with little discussion between them apart from a promising attempt by Lopes de Souza (2016) through the analysis of urban eco-geopolitics in the case of Rio de Janeiro. Lopes de Souza however decided to side with UG. This paper aims to go another way by proposing a combination between the two schools, between *GU* and UG. To do so, this paper builds on the recent evolution of UG, taking better account of the territorial dimension of conflicts (Cociña and López-Morales 2018; Ortiz and Boano 2018; Sultan Khan et al. 2018).

As this paper explains, the two schools have many differences (see the part “the main differences between urban geopolitics and *la géopolitique urbaine*”). For example, UG develops a critique of geopolitics (Graham 2004), whereas *GU* uses geopolitics as a method for criticism (Lacoste 1976). While both approaches recognize that geopolitical stakes are multi-scalar, UG has largely focused on national and international stakes, until recently at least (Fregonese 2012). In contrast, *GU* does not put a premium on national and international scales (Subra 2012). Despite these differences and the misinterpretations that arise when the same words are used to refer to different paradigms, this paper discusses the theoretical possibility of combining both schools of urban geopolitics (see the part “building a bridge between the two approaches”) and shows how both approaches can be usefully combined.

To establish the empirical potential of this combination, the paper examines two case studies that analyse policies designed to preserve non-built open spaces. Combining the UG framework, which regards urbanism as ideologically charged policies, and the *GU* method, which emphasizes the territorial dimension of power relations, we compare two similar environmental policies set in two different contexts and involving different stakeholders. One case study is located in the Global North (Lyon, France, presented in the part “West Lyon’s green belt: the local government’s deceptive implementation of a national policy”) and the other in the Global South (Rabat, Morocco, presented in the part “South Rabat’s green belt: militarizing urban planning”).

With this North/South comparison (Rokem and Boano 2018), this paper aims to make a contribution to comparative research built on the richness of differences (Rokem and Boano 2018; Purenne and Palierse 2016). Indeed, while urban policies have been circulating globally for several decades (McCann 2011), urban research did not take global comparisons seriously until the 2000s (Robinson 2011). To overcome this, several researchers have tackled methodological and theoretical issues head on (Brenner 2001; Roy 2009; Schmid et al. 2018), in order to go beyond particularism and incommensurability. Postcolonial urban studies (Robinson 2016a; Roy 2014) emphasize the importance of global comparison in terms of urban theory through taking local specificities seriously (Robinson 2011; Robinson and Roy 2016; Robinson 2016b, 2016a; Schmid et al. 2018). Indeed, as this paper will demonstrate, comparing cities in contexts as different as France and Morocco, helps to understand how approaches like *GU* and UG may be heuristically combined.

The cases of Rabat and Lyon were chosen partly because the authors of this article have connections in both cities. Despite the contextual difference between a burgeoning city in the South and a city in the North, which is more concerned about improving the quality of life, the choice can also be explained by the fact that Rabat and Lyon are fairly similar in size. There are 2.3 million people in Lyon’s metropolitan area and 1.9 million in Rabat. The comparison of a French and Moroccan metropolis should also be considered in the light of the long history of policy transfers between the two countries. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French protectorate used its colonies in the Maghreb as a laboratory for new town planning techniques. Some were later applied in France, in particular with the *villes nouvelles* (“satellite towns”) (Picard 1994). The marks of colonial town planning are still visible in Rabat’s policies today. The satellite towns developed by the central state on the periphery of the city demonstrate this clearly (Wagner and Minca 2014; X *et al.* 2016; Harroud and X 2019).

The green belt is one of the planning tools that are used all over the world (Gant et al. 2011). Rabat and Lyon are no exception. However, as we will see, given the situational and historical differences between the two cities, protections from urbanization offered by green belts have very different political implications. They provide an interesting subject for geopolitical analysis, from an allied perspective of *la géopolitique urbaine* and urban geopolitics (Webster 2002; Blinnikov et al. 2006). From the *GU* viewpoint, green belts are the result of bitter struggles between actors to control a territory. This control, as the case of Lyon confirms, generally benefits the better off. From the UG viewpoint, green belts outline buffer zones, which can play a role in international conflicts to separate two opposing groups, as confirmed by the case of Rabat. Therefore, depending on the context, UG may provide a very

pertinent analytical framework, whereas *GU* may be a better choice in a different context. As the paper will show, the two approaches can be complementary in a given situation. In Lyon, for example, the issues that are key to UG, particularly the militarization of control methods, are present.

It is important to specify that this paper partly results from a process involving serendipity (Merton and Barber 2004). It stems from a collective research project funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR). The project developed within the French-speaking academic sphere and initially applied the French geopolitical approach to compare anti-sprawl and growth control policies in France and Morocco<sup>1</sup>. To start with, green belts were considered as a tool for controlling urban sprawl in a research framework, and following on from Philippe Subra's work (2007), the aim was to identify how local stakeholders were affected by anti-sprawl and growth control policies decided on a broader national scale. The research was thus embedded within *GU* perspective. We started to focus on UG with the idea of presenting our research findings at international conferences. In particular, we wanted to present them at a RC21 conference dedicated to UG, organized in Leeds in 2016 by the editors of this special issue, Jonathan Rokem and Camillo Boano. This paper is in large part the result of a discussion we had during the conference, which we pursued with the editors of the special issue and later with anonymous reviewers.

### **An Introduction to Urban Geopolitics and *la Géopolitique Urbaine***

English-speaking researchers commonly understand UG as an approach designed to study “the telescoping between transnational geopolitical transformations and highly localized acts of violence against urban sites” (Graham 2004b,191). This approach developed in the wake of 9/11, with a focus on several very specific case studies (former Yugoslavia, Palestine, Lebanon). It analyses the growing importance of the local scale for restructuring the governance of security issues (Fregonese 2012). Indeed, since the end of the Cold War and especially in the last two decades, international conflicts, which may be violent, have been rescaled: old state wars have given way to new forms of conflict, involving state and non-state actors, like cartels, militias or terrorist organizations (Kaldor 2012). This shift has come with a change of scale: the state scale lost its primacy as the main target of violent operations. As more than 50% of the world's population lives in cities, cities have become the perfect setting for war and now crystallize global conflicts (Rokem and Boano 2018; Bhavnani et al. 2014). Conflicts increasingly target and kill urban dwellers, destroy urban sites, block access to cities or prevent them from operating. This “urbanization of violence” may even go as far as “urbicide”, i.e. “the deliberate denial, or murder, of the city” (Graham 2004a, 25). The term urbicide was coined by the critical urban research conducted in the 1960s. Initially, it was used to criticize the American federal state's urban policy, before being adopted by urban geopolitics in various works, such as those compiled by Graham (2004a) in the 2000s. It has been applied to diverse cases, ranging from urban planning during the Cold War (Farish 2004) to the militarization of Western cities in response to the proliferation of anti-globalization movements (Warren 2004).

Within UG, violence appears to be increasingly channelled towards urban sites. This “new military urbanism” is a major concern (Graham 2009). One of its most striking features is the

way it abolishes the divisions between war and peace. A sort of “diffuse war” emerges (Gregory 2011), characterized by a set of discourses and practices, such as prevention, security, surveillance and resilience (Coaffee 2013). The internationalization of the new military urbanism, through war policy transfers, constitutes a further topic of urban geopolitics. For example, the construction of new settlements can be analysed as an important feature of Israeli geopolitics (Weizman 2004) and the destruction of Palestinian housing appears as an equally central tactic (Graham 2010). A similar tactic was later adopted by the United States as part of their “War on Terror” programme (Graham 2004a). This “new military urbanism” is strongly criticized because of its impact on segregation, discrimination and civil liberties.

UG, however, is subject to some criticism. For example, Hills (2004) calls into question one of the main assumptions of urban geopolitics, by indicating that urban warfare has hardly changed since the Second World War. Many critics also argue that the hypothesis of a “rescaling” of war is somewhat simplistic. For instance, Flint (2006, 217) questions how today's car bomb attacks differ from those of the IRA in the 1970s and “why we are heading towards an urban geopolitics and what that may be when we arrive, and how it will be different from an undefined initial geopolitics”.

Those critics aside, the main features of UG can be summarized in five points:

- (1) Geopolitics is approached from a critical perspective and is, thus, considered as a framework
- (2) The rescaling of geopolitics at the urban level is a key aspect
- (3) States are key (but not exclusive) actors
- (4) Nation states' borders lose their importance, since they are blurred by the rise of new forms of conflicts territorialisation
- (5) The most pressing questions are about military or police control.

By contrast, French geographers use the term *la géopolitique urbaine (GU)* to refer to a research stream that has little in common with UG. *GU* emerged in the 1980's with the publication of Hulbert's works on Québec (1989). Hulbert demonstrates how the municipal reforms in Eastern Canada, which were implemented to adapt local government and governance to extensive urbanization, are also used by municipal actors to equilibrate negotiations between urban centres and peripheries. Hulbert's work was deeply influenced by Yves Lacoste's pioneering work. Lacoste, a then-Marxist geographer was known for his 1976 publication, which had a major influence on the French-speaking academy: *La géographie, ça sert d'abord à faire la guerre* (“Geography is used primarily to wage war”). Lacoste's argument was simply that geography is not a neutral, purely descriptive science applied to the analysis of population distribution or to the spatial distribution of natural resources. The year his book was published, Lacoste and a group of other scholars launched a new journal, *Hérodote*. The journal's subtitle was “Ideologies, geographies, strategies”. The cover of the first issue showed the bombing of rice fields in North Vietnam. It also included an interview with Michel Foucault on territorial control. With *Hérodote*, Lacoste developed his initial

argument by calling for a precise account of local conflicts to improve our understanding of the evolution of what was then called the “Third World”.

Initially, in the context of the Cold War, the questions raised by Lacoste were quite similar to those subsequently developed in UG. In the 1970s, geographers were very wary of the notion of geopolitics because the concept was instrumentalized by colonial powers, the Nazis, in particular (Giblin 1985). Thus, geopolitics itself was initially a subject of criticism. However, geographers that came together around *Hérodote* gradually reconsidered the meaning of geopolitics and shifted away from the normative vision of classical geopolitics. Over time, geopolitics came to be used as a method for the critical analysis of the political issues involved in territorial rivalries and conflicts. In the light of this evolution, *Hérodote*'s subtitle was eventually changed in 1982 to the *Revue de géographie et de géopolitique (Journal of geography and geopolitics)*. Shortly afterwards, following the French decentralization reforms of 1982, the geopolitical approach was applied to the study of intra-national power relations and the analysis of multi-scalar governance. Béatrice Giblin, who will later become director of *Hérodote*, carefully applied the geopolitical approach in her analysis of the French regions (*régions*) that had just gained democratic legitimacy, by focusing on the territorial actors' different interests, as well as their rivalries, conflicts and negotiations (Giblin 1990).

Together with Hulbert's research, this pioneering work paved the way for *GU* and a new French-speaking geopolitical approach to territories and their actors. Over the years, the French school has diversified its range of topics and developed new works on local and urban geopolitics (Douzet 2001; Subra 2007; Hulbert 2009). As it gave more room to urban issues, francophone geopolitical analysis came to share many features with North American research on urban governance, especially issues relating to the role of territorial boundaries and the spatial dimension of power conflicts (see, for example, Keil 2000; Boudreau 2007). As Douzet (2001,67) explains:

Urban geopolitics concerns an urban territory, which according to the issue at stake may have various boundaries. These may include conflicts between cities, rivalries between cities and suburbs, or even conflicts within the same city between rival forces with conflicting interests, struggling for political, economic or social control of the same territory, or seeking to attract to their own territory a share of the resources of an entire city.

Compared with the five main features of UG listed above, the main features of *GU* can be summarized as follow:

- (1) Geopolitics is considered as a methodological resource for analysing conflicts
- (2) Access to urban resources through territorial control is a key issue
- (3) Many actors are considered and special attention is paid to their networks, coalitions and convergences of interest (see below).
- (4) Territories and their limits (both state and municipal or territories claimed by occupy movements) are a key focus
- (5) The rule of law is considered as a resource, even if access to it is unequal (see below).

## **The Main Differences between Urban Geopolitics and *la Géopolitique Urbaine***

There are many differences between the two approaches. A key feature of UG is its attention to other scales than that of the nation state. The latter remains relevant, but UG also emphasizes the need to work at scales that differ from those classically considered within geopolitics. It underlines the need to work at various scales, airports for example relocating border control within metropolis. Overall, however, UG's main focus remains directly linked to international or transnational relations. It gives less importance to political conflicts that arise at the urban scale. Indeed, the city is often reduced to a passive scene for conflicts that originate beyond its perimeter. On the contrary, *GU* does not prioritize international dimensions. The French-speaking approach to geopolitics also sees the state as merely one player among many. Indeed, it considers that urban actors play a vital role and, in some cases, are the main or sole actors. In *GU*, conflicts, tensions or compromises linked to the control of territories are examined at all scales, including cities or neighbourhoods. As Subra (2012, 53) wrote about the Basque conflict:

The Basque conflict, for example, is mainly a matter of [...] an "internal state conflict" because its main issue is the birth or not of a Basque state on a territory that until now was part of another state, Spain (and incidentally on territories, the "Northern Basque Country" in the Etarra vocabulary, which are currently French). But it also obviously has a local, secondary dimension, because it takes the form of a series of local conflicts between supporters of ETA<sup>2</sup> and other parties in the provinces, municipalities and Basque districts, with issues that are local (control of a town hall or the executive of a province, control of the street). Just as it also has, in a way that is also secondary, an external or international dimension insofar as it involves the French State and Franco-Spanish relations. Analysing this type of conflict therefore implies dealing with it at all the scales where it occurs, taking into account the specific context, the issues and the actors involved at each of these scales.

The nation state-city binary are the two key points of reference in UG. In contrast, the *GU* method takes into account the interests pertaining to various scales. Therefore, investigating micro-local conflicts (for example, over land use rights), negotiations, coalitions and networks between multi-scalar stakeholders is central for grasping the issue at stake (Subra 2007). Until recently (see below), this approach was rare in UG. Again, although the UG approach recognizes the need to consider several scales (as the airport case shows), the dominant geopolitical issue in UG remains directly linked to international relations (see de Souza 2016 for a discussion on the issue).

Another important difference is that, even though UG and *GU* both focus on struggles and conflicts, their primary concerns differ. *GU* is less concerned with police or military control than UG. The latter places particular emphasis on armed conflicts or the militarization of police operations because of the obvious link with the central role played by

states, which have the monopoly of legitimate violence. In contrast, *GU* focuses on unarmed conflicts, which generally have less national or international media coverage. These very different views on the nature of geopolitical conflicts determine the methods used by the two approaches.

On the basis of this brief comparison, we can conclude that applying *UG* seems more appropriate in urban situations where citizens' basic democratic rights are being violated. By contrast, *GU* methods are more relevant when the rule of law is relatively well established (Subra 2012), i.e. in a context where conflicts can be mitigated without systematic repression. However, these differences are not irreconcilable when it comes to the theoretical and empirical dimensions. In the case of the latter, as parts 4 and 5 demonstrate, the rule of law has some scope in most situations, while certain citizens are almost always denied rights (this will be discussed in the conclusion). As far as the theoretical dimension is concerned, the next part will show that combining the two approaches can be useful: *UG* can be applied to conduct a critical analysis of the broad context and issues at stake, while *GU* can be of heuristic importance to consider the territorial dimensions of local conflicts.

### **Building a Bridge between the two Approaches**

While there are many differences between *UG* and *GU*, the two schools are complementary. A bridge can even be built between them for analysing specific sets of local urban policies. Indeed, several proponents of one approach made a move towards the other. Recently, *GU* began to move towards *UG* regarding international conflicts, the militarization of urban space and conflicts involving state power intervention, issues that are important to *UG* (Fuentes-Carrera and Subra 2018; Robine 2016; Douzet and Robine 2013). From *UG* perspective, the possibility to combine *GU* and *UG* was recently discussed by Lopez de Souza (2016) in the Brazilian context. He raised important theoretical questions. After developing one of the few critical discussions comparing *UG* and *GU*, he demonstrates the value of a geopolitical approach, not only for analysing security issues, but also for understanding other policies – urban environmental policies, in his case. Lopez de Souza's (2016) key argument is that environmental protection policies in Rio de Janeiro are implemented in a socially selective manner: the more affluent families are, the better their quality of life is protected. In the case of Tijuca National Park, the poorest families who live in the nature reserve are evicted to 'protect' the site, while the richest families are allowed to stay and enjoy the protected natural area.

We concur with Lopes de Souza's idea that local environmental policies are particularly suitable for an analysis that combines the two geopolitical approaches. Indeed, urban environmental policies involve different scales of government, where the state usually plays an important (yet not exclusive) role. Urban environmental policies are also frequently shaped by major conflicts, particularly between different social or ethnic groups fighting for territorial control. The social and ethnic conflicts underlying environmental policies may well be confined to a symbolic and discursive level. However, they sometimes take a quasi-military turn, as the case of Morocco demonstrates. Lastly, environmental policies question the notion of boundaries – both symbolic and physical - within metropolitan regions.

Nevertheless, Lopez de Souza sides with the UG approach, by simply proposing that its scope can be extended to environmental issues. While he acknowledges the importance of *GU*, he ultimately considers that geopolitics should remain the subject of normative critics. This is an important point, which makes resorting to UG incompatible with *GU* according to de Souza. He argues that one cannot criticize geopolitics and use it as a tool for criticism at the same time. He also maintains that focusing attention on state actors and the national level is consubstantial to a geopolitical analysis. Consequently, the emphasis that *GU* puts on the role of local actors (i.e. local elected officials, but also various decentralized state services, residents, non-profit organisations and economic actors) is inappropriate in the framework of a geopolitical analysis. These arguments are strong, but they are debatable. If one carefully circumscribes validity domains for both the *GU* and UG approaches, one does not have to choose between them. The theoretical contradictions identified by de Souza no longer prevent analysis because, on the one side, the focus is on issues determined by geopolitics as a framework, while on the other side, geopolitics is used as a method to examine the territorial dimension of power relations. The main problem here is that the term geopolitics has two different meanings. We will come back to it in the conclusion. Before that, we get round this problem by using two different acronyms to distinguish UG et *GU*.

In any case, de Souza's findings would have clearly benefited if he had given more consideration to *GU*. For example, in the empirical analysis he proposes, *GU* would have helped identify how the middle-classes, who settled in preserved natural areas, were able to defend their interests. De Souza suggests that the interests of the middle-classes are in line with those defended by state policies. However, he only establishes a correlation and fails to provide sufficient empirical evidence to show how state and middle-class interests were aligned. An examination of the convergence of interest, coalitions and networks of actors involved in protecting Tijuca National Park, as *GU* proposes, would have helped fill this gap. It would have revealed details of the negotiations, which ultimately ensured that middle class interests were supported by the state. As the case of Lyon will show, the state does not fully control urban planning tools. They are largely in the hands of local elected officials. The future of Lyon's peri-urban rings depends on where local policies can find common ground with national policies to protect natural spaces and reduce urban sprawl.

By building on these links between UG and *GU* approaches, we will try to demonstrate their complementary features empirically. As the rest of the paper will show, combining UG and *GU* is particularly useful for comparing environmental policies. We compare a similar set of anti-sprawl and growth control policies, the so-called 'green belts' or 'green ring' in Lyon and Rabat, while focusing on the political, social and territorial issues at stake. One of the rationales for combining UG and *GU* here is that the relevance of each approach very much depends on the context. As we will see, the selective use of UG and *GU* enhances the comparison between Lyon and Rabat and our analysis of the social and spatial effects of anti-sprawl policies. In the case of Lyon and Rabat, using the two approaches helps identify the power relations and social inequalities behind the consensus regarding sustainable development policies. It is a way to politicize the debate.

## West Lyon's Green Belt: The Local Government's Deceptive Implementation of a National Policy

As a consequence of the decentralization laws passed in the 1980s, French municipalities have become key players in urban planning and development. Since the end of the 1990s, decentralization has been tempered by the promotion of intercommunal governments, which are gradually becoming more and more integrated (Le Galès 2006). Yet even within the most integrated metropolitan governments, mayors still have considerable weight (Desage and Guéranger 2010). In this context, *GU* is particularly relevant for understanding the negotiations and coalitions established at the local level (Béhar 2007; Estèbe 2008). In fact, anti-sprawl policies promoted at national level must be implemented by municipalities. While the state still plays an important role in France, the decentralization laws enacted in the 1980s changed the balance of power at the municipal level, as well as the interests at stake in territorial policies. In the case of urban sprawl, the process of local appropriation is by no means neutral. As demonstrated below, the fight against urban sprawl may even be reversed, i.e. it may become a vector of urban sprawl (X 2014).

This paradox is particularly visible in the affluent suburban and peri-urban municipalities located in the Western part of the Lyon metropolitan region (hereafter West Lyon), where the local actors (especially the mayors) carefully negotiate anti-sprawl measures with the state. The state acts primarily through a planning document: the territorial directive for the development (DTA) of the Lyon metropolitan region, approved in 2007. This document imposes limited demographic growth in the West Lyon metropolitan region. Urban development is concentrated within the heart of the metropolis, as well as more low-income eastern suburbs. An elected representative of a West Lyon municipality summarized the role of the DTA as follows (see Figure 1):

[The challenge] is to control population growth. We have (...) strong land pressure now. (...) In central areas, each time an individual house went down, there are thirty homes that are built. (...) So we went to review the planning documents, to find tools, to try to control [this pressure] as much as possible. (...) The DTA met well ahead the role of Brignais as a buffer, precisely, between the urban sprawl of the Lyon metropolitan area and all the stake of green belt and the green pole beyond with the Monts du Lyonnais. So, the stake is to achieve this balance with the preservation of natural and agricultural areas. (...) When you look at all the local planning documents of West Lyon municipalities, there is nothing that opens to urbanization as it was usual before (Interview, May 2018)

Within the logic of the DTA, West Lyon municipalities should be limiting constructions in order to densify area, which is well served by public transport. In West Lyon, several areas have been classified for natural protection, through various land-use regulations. This general protection ultimately led to the creation of a '*couronne verte*' ('green ring'). The term designates an area that the state wishes to sanctify because of its greenery, mainly for landscape purposes. Therefore, the West Lyon area was designated to preserve the 'quality of life' in the metropolitan region (X and X 2014). The green ring was imposed by the state to concentrate the housing supply within the metropolitan core and reduce urban sprawl. At first, local officials in West Lyon protested against the constraints imposed upon their territory by

the state. However, they gradually worked out how to take advantage of the DTA and related measures for curbing new urban extensions. Indeed, anti-sprawl regulations were re-interpreted locally as Malthusian land-use tools. They were applied to preserve the village-like character of the municipalities (most have less than 3,500 inhabitants).

Yet, these restrictive land-use policies pushed young households further away in search of low-density areas and new detached houses. The process accelerated sprawl and the extension of peri-urban areas to the west. In addition, it increased the average length of commuting trips (X, X and X 2020). These policies also reinforced segregation on the metropolitan scale. Access to the inner peri-urban ring was earmarked for the affluent households, excluding more modest homebuyers. The latter had to move to remote rural areas and deal with higher petrol costs, which fuelled the growing discontent and played an important role in the recent *Gilets Jaunes* (“Yellow Vests”) movement (Depraz 2019; Genestier 2019).

The case briefly presented here shows the analytical potential of *GU* in terms of understanding how zoning rules, territorial policies and land-use regulations may be transformed through the negotiation process involving various stakeholders at different scales. In the case of West Lyon, the environmental policy promoted by the state was reinterpreted locally by the village-like municipalities to match their preoccupations, namely, to preserve social exclusiveness under an environmental label. The Lyon green ring became an exclusionary zoning tool (see Figure 1). This example demonstrates that the state is not the only major player in urban geopolitics in France. The municipalities’ political projects also have considerable weight. Municipalities can make their interests prevail when negotiating with central and metropolitan governments. *GU* is particularly relevant for analysing this phenomenon.

Nonetheless, *GU* is not the only relevant approach for examining the case of Lyon. Mobilizing the UG approach reveals another important aspect of the local preservation of West Lyon, i.e. the urban riots, which have been a regular feature of the working-class, low-income eastern suburbs of Lyon. They received considerable media coverage and political attention both locally and nationally. The riots are often referred to in terms of ethnicity by the right-wing media and have even been described as the first signs of a coming ‘civil war’ in France (Dikec 2011). The riots reshaped the political landscape in the Lyon metropolis and go some way to explaining why urban development is so much feared in West Lyon (X,X and X, 2020).

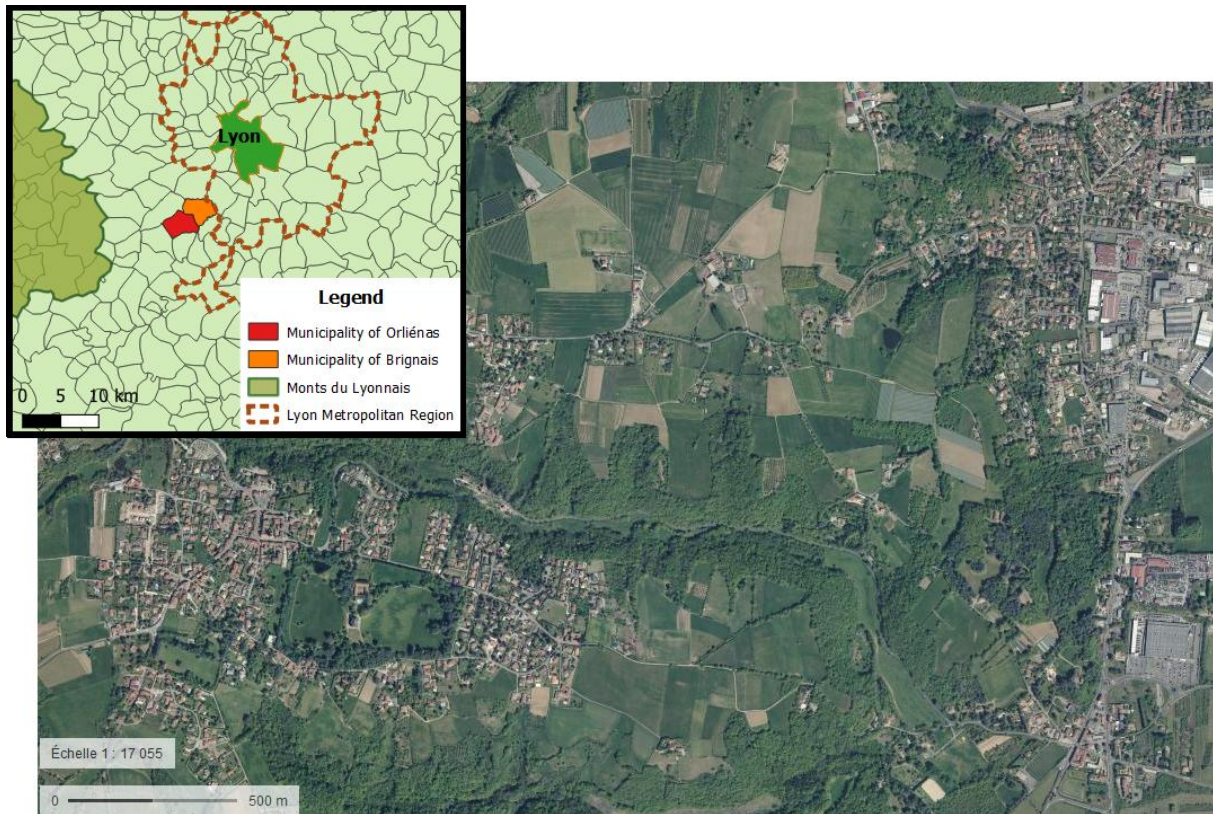


Figure 1. West Lyon's green ring;

Notes :where agriculture and nature preservation prevent peri-urban villages with small detached family homes (like Orléans in the centre) from expanding and becoming part of the metropolitan core suburbs (the edge of which corresponds to the limits of Brignais, the suburban town on the right).

Source: IGN- [Geoportail.gouv.fr](http://Geoportail.gouv.fr))

### **South Rabat's Green Belt: Militarizing Urban Planning**

Unlike France, Morocco's urban planning is still highly centralized. The reigning King, Mohammed VI, firmly promotes urban development (Barthel 2010; Bogaert 2018) and several megaprojects have gradually given major cities the role of showcasing the country's success and openness. Yet, despite this change, the central government still monitors Moroccan cities closely and oversees various development and strategic plans. Although a recent 'communal charter' provides the municipalities with new capabilities, human and financial resources are very limited. Consequently, local decision makers lack the means to become prominent actors in urban development.

Therefore, the changes introduced by Mohammed VI failed to reverse the centralization of power established under King Hassan II, who reigned from 1959 to 1999. The latter's power was based on rural areas and their politico-administrative structures (Leveau 1985). This power base was reinforced by the urban riots and the two military coups in 1971 and 1972, which generated a strong anti-urban bias in the Moroccan regime. The

state's repression of left-wing movements and its increasing oppression of slum dwellers are remembered as the 'Years of Lead'. This period was characterized by a climate of 'diffuse war' (Daoud 2007). State repression worsened in the early 1980s, which were marked by 'bread riots'. Poor people from the slums rioted in the wealthy neighbourhoods in Morocco's main cities to denounce the liberalization of the price of basic goods, a policy implemented under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank. The central state used punitive measures to quell the urban uprising. There was impressive militarization of Rabat and Casablanca (the political and economic capitals of Morocco). But the militarization took different forms.

In Casablanca, where the most violent riots took place, demonstrators and slum dwellers were evicted from the city centre and forced out through slum clearance (Rachik 2002). In parallel, the Ministry of the Interior implemented policies to promote the gentrification of the city centre, modelled on the Haussmann boulevards in Paris. Consequently, the poor flocked to the suburbs. The latter were separated from the city centre with the construction of a coastal highway in the early 1980s (Berry-Chikhaoui and Deboulet 2002). Those move generated numerous new tensions, and tough measures were taken to control the impoverished suburbs. In the case of Lahraouiyine, a booming suburban shantytown separated from Casablanca by the coastal highway, the police enforced an embargo on concrete materials in the 1980s in order to block self-construction in what was perceived as an insurgent town (Belarbi and X 2019). The Ministry of the Interior also set up an urban agency with the clear aim to prevent unrest through urban projects. This ministerial supervision demonstrates how urban planning can be designed and used by an authoritarian state to maintain the social order (Rachik 2002; Bogaert 2018).

In Rabat, the kingdom's capital, the main response to the "bread riots" was the creation of a green belt as part of the 1981 masterplan (see Figure 2). Under the guise of environmental preservation, Rabat's green belt was as much a military tool as Casablanca's coastal highway. Covering 61 hectares, the green belt was officially designed to contain the spread of Rabat and separate the capital city from the municipality of Témara. At the time, Témara was an expanding peripheral municipality dotted with slums, which welcomed poor populations from rural areas. As an agent of the Ministry of the Interior stated:

In the beginning it was for that, to control the urban space and to separate Rabat from Témara... The agglomeration was booming, it was generating problems of management and security. (...). The objective was to delimit Rabat and Témara. The two cities don't have the same identity. There was no border between Rabat and Témara. Therefore, the urban pressure was generating enormous tension regarding the management of the flux between both cities. (Interview, technician from the Ministry of the Interior, May 2017)

The design and management of the green belt was deeply influenced by military concerns. Indeed, King Hassan II entrusted the project to his right-hand man, Driss Basri, the minister of the Interior. He was in charge of the regime's security programme during the 'Years of Lead'. He had 'enormous means' at his disposal to create the green belt between Rabat and Témara (interview, Ministry of the Interior 2017). The belt was totally surrounded by fences and fifty agents were deployed to guard it. Several watchtowers (see Figures 3 and 4) were

built in the forest inside the belt, officially to prevent fires. However, as an agent of the Ministry of the Interior admitted, it was above all 'to watch (...) whoever would cross the forest'. Although the green belt is now marketed in the brochures on Rabat's green spaces as proof of its claim to be 'Africa's greenest capital', its conception clearly confirms that growth control policies in Morocco were implemented, first and foremost, for purposes of security and urban control.

In contrast with Lyon, the case of Rabat shows the analytical potential of UG in terms of understanding how Morocco's recent history of urban violence and repression shaped an environmental policy, such as South Rabat's green belt. Conversely, the *GU* approach seems less relevant since the green belt was always conceived and managed at the central level. Notwithstanding these important differences, both green belts hide a similar political dimension of social control and separation behind a seemingly neutral and technical feature.

As with the Lyon case study, although UG appears to be the most relevant approach for analysing how sprawl is managed in Morocco, *GU* also provides important elements of understanding. Indeed, urban sprawl is not controlled solely by the central state. It is also shaped by local actors, such as municipalities. Despite the fact that they are still politically weak overall, they have been empowered by the recent decentralization reform and, above all, by owners of large unbuilt areas of land. These landowners take advantage of the pressure on land for informal urbanization due to the influx of poor rural populations (Abouhani 2011). This process allows landowners to gain political support from the poor newcomers. In turn, it increases their influence and boosts their bargaining power with local authorities and central administrations. They use this power to enhance their control of peripheral urban growth and increase their profits from developing their land.

*GU* also provides new insights into Rabat's green belt policies. Eventually, local authorities rather cynically realized that the green belt could be used to their advantage: today Rabat's urban forest is a marketing tool used to enhance Rabat's image as 'Africa's capital of sustainable development'. The green belt is also used by the well-off population in Rabat's southern neighbourhoods. It prevents the city from expanding, creating artificial scarcity on the housing market. Consequently, the houses located on the 'good' side of the green belt, inside Rabat, are now worth twice as much as identical houses in Témara on the 'bad side'. Therefore, it is not surprising that three decades after it was created by the Ministry of the Interior, the green belt is strongly supported by the well-off. They even founded an association to protect the forest, officially in the name of 'preserving the green lung of Rabat' (interview, leader of the environmental association), unofficially to prevent slum dwellers from squatting there. This example shows how *GU* complements UG and sheds light on the rationale of anti-sprawl and growth control policies in Morocco. This approach helps to analyse the green belt, not only as a tool for population control used by an authoritarian state, but also as a justified anti-sprawl policy. *GU* also permits to consider a larger convergence of interests i.e middle-class pressure groups, planning agencies and institutional representatives. This convergence explains why Rabat's green belt was immutable and highly respected, despite strong pressure for urban development.

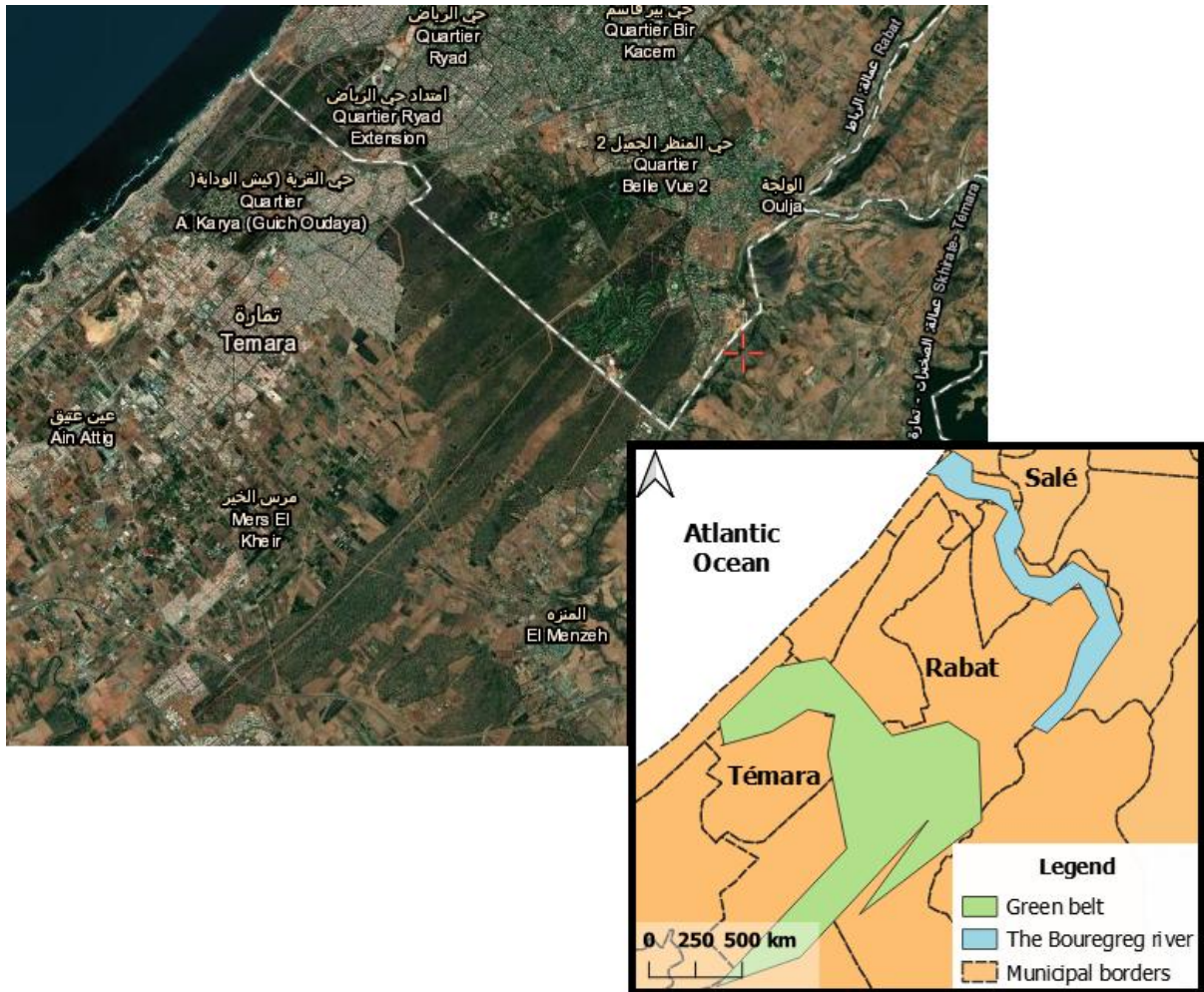


Figure 2. South Rabat's green belt.

Notes: an impenetrable forest that prevents the junction between the unplanned, high density, fast growing suburban town of Témara (left and bottom) and the capital's well-planned, low density neighbourhoods (top of picture).

Source: Zoom Earth



Figures 3 and 4. The urban forest as a military tool.

Notes: the fence surrounding the green belt (left) and a watchtower in the forest (right)

Credits: Max Rousseau.

## Conclusion

The two cases described in this paper illustrate the interest of combining the anglophone and francophone geopolitical schools. Several recent studies (De Souza 2016; Ortiz and Boano 2018) discuss the merit of both approaches. However, despite their potential complementarity, to our knowledge, there has been no attempt to combine them so far. UG defines a framework for the issues to be studied and *GU* provides methodological tools to analyse the specific role played by territories, borders and frontiers. As illustrated here, the combination of UG and *GU* demonstrates that the gap between English and French academic scholarships is not insurmountable, despite their different conceptual views of urban geopolitics. In reality, the hurdle is not theoretical, but nominalist. The main problem that the combination of the two approaches comes up against, is knowing what to call it.

At the moment, combining the two approaches means using two different normative definitions of geopolitics: it is a critical object in one case and a critical tool in the other (De Souza 2016). In this paper, we overcame the problem by using two different acronyms to identify the two. However, this device falls short of providing an integrated theoretical

framework that can draw on the notion of geopolitics. Choosing between UG and *GU* appears to be necessary. If we stay within the framework of anglophone discussions, which is the case here for our contribution to the special issue of Geopolitics, the most relevant choice is undoubtedly the one that several authors have already made (De Souza 2016; Rokem and Boano 2018), i.e. start with the theoretical framework of urban geopolitics and extend the scope of its relevance and analytical field. However, we maintain that even the extended framework of UG does not do justice to the intuition that *GU* stems from, i.e. local actors can be considered as territorialized actors that have geopolitical relationships with each other. In fact, if we have to find a research field that is homologous to *GU* outside French-speaking circles, we should probably look at the work that has been conducted on urban governance. From that perspective, the main merit of *GU* is to draw attention to the importance of the territorial dimension.

If we put this nominalist problem aside, UG and *GU* can be combined. By doing just that, this paper discusses the politics behind green belts and the discourse on environmental preservation (which is common practice for UG). Simultaneously, it demonstrates how and why green belts may be diverted from their stated purpose, by opening the black box that reveals how local actors and stakeholders interact (as proposed by *GU*). This line of research is promising, but additional research is required on different issues and in different contexts to further demonstrate the potential of the combined approach.

Lastly, this paper contributes to the recent attempts in UG (Rokem and Boano 2018, Subra 2018) to bridge the gap between urban research on both sides of the North/South divide. The comparison reveals the differences, by focusing on the local idiosyncrasies (fostered by *GU*). It also reveals the similarities, by focusing on the broader picture (fostered by UG). As we have shown, this type of comparative analysis is valuable for studying apparently similar environmental urban policies in very different contexts. The combined approach sheds light on how anti-sprawl policies may serve certain interests, i.e. already advantaged populations. It reveals how a policy, which is presented as an effective tool for preserving the natural environment on the fringes of large cities, actually has major negative environmental and social consequences. On the one hand, the pressure due to urban sprawl is transferred further afield and on the other hand, commuting is longer and harder for those who are excluded from the privilege of living in the metropolitan cores. As the two examples clearly show, this phenomenon occurs in the Global North *and* in the Global South and is obviously not limited to Lyon and Rabat. Various case studies on garden planning (Dooling 2009), residential areas in green belts (Webster 2002; Blinnikov et al. 2006) or national parks (De Souza 2016) have revealed a similar pattern across the North/South divide.

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## Notes

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<sup>11</sup> The data used to analyse the case studies was drawn from 70 interviews with the different actors, who helped shape and reshape the peripheries of Lyon and Casablanca (e.g. elected representatives, civil servants at different levels, associations, residents and farmers).

<sup>2</sup> *Euskadi ta askatasuna*, “Basque country and freedom”, is a party calling for the independence of the Basque region.