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## What's in a name? That which we call sprawl.

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"What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet", Juliet says in William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, scene I). Sprawl is undoubtedly not a rose, but as Richard Harris and Charlotte Vorms (2017) recall, the term is by no means neutral and is difficult to replace. It has an obvious moral content. When used to refer to a person, sprawl means "an ungainly or carelessly relaxed position in which one's arms and legs are spread out"<sup>1</sup>. By extension, the term also refers to urban development "spread out over a large area in an untidy or irregular way". Controlling sprawl, therefore, involves rectifying a situation characterised by sloppiness. Fighting sprawl involves correcting the production of urbanisation, particularly on the fringes, where the city is growing and spreading. Hence the title of this special issue: the debate on sprawl refers to the more fundamental question of growth control. As highlighted by Alex Schafran (2019), political questions lie behind the struggle to control urban sprawl: who controls the development of the city fringes? What are the goals? What problems, compromises and alliances are there between the different actors involved?

Sprawl is socially constructed as a gap between an existing situation and an ideal, which is why this introduction will not provide a definition of sprawl. This special issue considers sprawl not as an object that can be defined a priori, but as a matter of empirical analysis. Sprawl is what some actors in a city consider to be problematic when it comes to organising the city peripheries and their growth. This special issue shows that there are as many definitions of sprawl as there are actors and cities. In fact, some actors do not think there is a problem. What some disqualify as sprawl, others consider to be urban growth. And to many, such growth is desirable. In the United States what is now commonly called sprawl was the spatial manifestation of the Fordist regime for years: the detached house with a fridge, washing machine and lawnmower, the shopping mall, business park and motorway. These were the vectors of the middle and working classes' accession to comfort (Hayden, 2004). In many ways, they still are, especially in fast growing countries. This lifestyle is now widely criticised for being consumerist and for its negative environmental impact. However, it remains an important feature of urban landscapes and is still being widely replicated all over the world (Keil, 2017; Berger et al., 2017).

The criticisms now used to justify the fight against sprawl focus on environmental issues. Yet, the climate emergency should not prevent discussions and debates on anti-sprawl policies. Following in the tradition of urban political ecology (Swyngedouw and Heynen 2003; Keil, 2019; 2020), we will explain the socio-political context in which this fight is now taking place. There is no single solution to the environmental problems raised by urban sprawl, there are several. The difficulty is that by choosing one solution over another, there are inevitably winners and losers. The awareness of these inequalities is growing, with an increasing critical literature dealing with growth control measures of all kinds, including the wide ranging literature on urban growth boundaries and greenbelts (Macdonald et al., 2021a; Macdonald et al., 2021b; Amarouche et al., forthcoming). Analysing the socio-political background of growth control is essential, not only for evaluating environmental policies in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Oxford Dictionary of English

social and spatial justice, but also, more pragmatically, because policies may simply be jeopardised when they are perceived as unfair. This was demonstrated by the Yellow Vest movement, which emerged in French small towns, rural areas and metropolitan fringes at the end of 2018 following an increase in the so-called “carbon” tax on fuel. Although this tax was presented as an environmental measure, drivers claimed it was unfair. They argued that, as they were living outside metropolitan cores, they had no alternative to driving to work. They also pointed out that less essential air travel was not subject to the same tax. In the wake of this crisis, the carbon tax increase was shelved indefinitely in France. More on this below. These problems are global and will undoubtedly get worse. Thus, in this special issue, Vafa Dianati underlines that when environmental policies overlook local social problems, similar social movements emerge, as in the outskirts of Tehran, in Iran.

### **1. Politicising the fight against urban sprawl<sup>2</sup>**

On an international level, few urban policies are applied as widely as anti-sprawl policies. Urban sprawl has been blamed for causing a wide range of adverse effects. The broad set of criticisms against urban sprawl can be divided into three main categories. The first is the current of critical social geography epitomized by Mike Davis’ seminal book, *City of Quartz* (Davis, 1990). Los Angeles, to this current, was perceived as the metropolis that displays most of the ills associated with urban sprawl. A second stream of critics is inspired by sustainable development issues (see Christian Silva’s contribution in this issue). Containing sprawling cities, where suburbanisation not only threatens the countryside and, therefore, food security, but also ecosystems and the global equilibrium (linked to the climate crisis), has gradually become a major international issue. Lastly, these criticisms echo the planning community’s praise of dense and compact urban centres. Indeed, planning professionals generally present urban sprawl as a symbol of disorder or chaos driven by “perverse” subsidies and incentives that discourage more sustainable urban forms (Blais, 2011). This criticism is not new: within the planning community, anti-sprawl campaigns emerged in Britain and France in the 1920s (Bruegmann, 2005).

These lines of criticism have congealed to strengthen various policies designed to curb urban sprawl using measures, such as restrictive land use plans and environmental regulations (Squires, 2002; Nuisssl and Couch, 2007). These policies have gradually spread in the Global North and the Global South, despite major claims that they are inappropriate when rapid urbanisation and high density are already a reality (see below).

As anti-sprawl discourses gained momentum, different issues were, until recently, quite depoliticised, especially with regard to sustainable development (Pinson and Rousseau, 2011). A moral consensus against sprawl – shared widely among professionals – emerged, obliterating discussions along lines of class, race or other distinctions of social and economic power. In addition, technical discussions were increasingly limited to a restricted circle of political and economic elites. This was the case for the consensus among policymakers on urban containment according to which density and compactness are key to urban sustainability (OECD, 2012). Considering the moral strength of such ambition, the measures taken to promote urban compactness were presented as almost totally devoid of political content, which made it hard to disagree with them. This was all the more so that, in liberal public opinion, the notion of sprawl tends to evoke individualistic lifestyles, neoliberal ideology (new districts are generally built by private developers), social entrenchment (epitomised by gated communities), consumerism (large shopping malls) and environmental degradation (car dependency, encroaching on natural land).

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<sup>2</sup> This section develops and updates certain elements drawn from the introduction by (Charmes, Rousseau, Amarouche, 2020). It takes into account the changes that came with the Yellow Vests protests.

These criticisms and opinions reflect a social context. They are generally expressed by liberals who live in gentrified neighbourhoods in large urban centres. In France, this was pointed out by the mainstream media coverage of the Yellow Vests, at least when the movement began. The protest changed fast, bringing together many social groups. Originally, the Yellow Vests were largely from the lower-middle and working classes, many of whom lived on the outskirts of large metropolitan areas. Media coverage and liberal intellectual opinion were riddled with social contempt, echoing the famous comment by the secretary of state for the economy and finance, Benjamin Griveaux, claiming that Yellow Vests were “blokes who smoke and drive diesel cars. This is not what we want for 21st century France”. This comment was made when the protests began. The Yellow Vests went on to make history and become a major social movement of the 21st century. This movement is quite different from the protests that had spread across the planet throughout the past decade with the Indignados, the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement, the Tahrir Square revolution and the Gezi Park protests. Unlike these movements, the Yellow Vests started by gathering at roundabouts, not in central urban squares. Their movement stems from the periphery (Kipfer, 2019, Jeanpierre, 2019). For this reason, along with the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri, and some other recent campaigns (Neel, 2018), they added another proof that the suburban planet’s future may not necessarily involve submitting to the actual capitalist rationale.

This emergence of class issues does not come as a surprise. In social sciences, anti-sprawl policies that promote compact, walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods and, more generally, densification in the name of environmental preservation, have long been a subject of criticism along this line. In a book that is still a major reference for the libertarian view on the issue (Williamson, 2010), Bruegmann (2005) claimed that anti-sprawl discourses and policies express a more general movement fuelled by class resentment. This should be analysed as the predictable reaction of an elite that wants to prevent the masses (who are accused of making the “wrong” choices) from gaining access to the lifestyle outside the city, a lifestyle that the elite enjoy exclusively: “wherever and whenever a new class of people has been able to gain some of the privileges once exclusively enjoyed by an entrenched group, the chorus of complaints has suddenly swelled” (Bruegmann, 2005: 116). Today, this analysis may seem a little outdated, since one need to take into account the “great inversion” of the American city (Ehrenhalt, 2012) – the dramatic process of gentrification and “super-gentrification” (Lees, 2003) of the biggest metropolis in the last two decades. Kotkin (2016) does just that. Like Bruegmann, he uses class terms to analyse the current attempts made by policymakers to direct growth to city centres. Yet, current anti-sprawl policies now appear to be driven largely by an elitist disdain for citizens’ preference for suburban living. In Kotkin’s view, this approach to promoting a dense central city is deeply unfair because it disproportionately serves the interests of wealthy residents to the detriment of most Americans.

In a different, less openly political way, powerful critics of anti-sprawl policies have established a link between tighter anti-sprawl regulations and the overall reduction in less affordable housing due to the housing bubble that is affecting many major cities. Four decades ago, Hall *et al.* (1973) demonstrated that post-WWII, the British planning system set out to protect the countryside through the “containment of urban Britain”, which led to an increase in land prices. A similar claim was recently updated and generalised by Wendell Cox and Hugh Pavletich (2016). By analysing data from 87 major metropolitan areas in eight countries, they conclude that “the largest losses in housing affordability have been in markets with more restrictive land use policies. Severely unaffordable housing (...) has occurred only in major metropolitan areas that have [a] more restrictive land use policy, especially urban containment boundaries or their variations” (Cox and Pavletich, 2016: 26). Somewhat paradoxically, urban containment policies push residential areas away from the centre because people looking for a house with a garden have to move farther and farther away from large urban centres. At the same time, public investment favours large metropolitan centres for reasons of economies of scale

and because major centres are considered to be the best engines of growth in a globalised economy. The tensions between those two trends are major sources of discontent for protest movements like the Yellow Vests.

However, the main aim of this special issue is not to offer a normative perspective on sprawl, but to focus on spatial justice. The papers presented here do not strive to determine the pros and cons of sprawl, but to show how densification and anti-sprawl policies serve specific interests (Quastel et al., 2012; Moore, 2013). They highlight the political and social stakes underlying the current policies to promote sustainable cities. Behind the consensus for the compact city and sprawl control, there is considerable scope for implementing a range of policies. The resulting local policies reflect the fragmentation of large metropolises in a subtle and complicated way. The papers gathered in this special issue, thus, underline the importance of considering diverse local contexts because they shed light on the political and social issues behind the apparently technocratic anti-sprawl policies at local and metropolitan scales.

## **2. Putting land rent back on the table**

Land rent was an important subject of urban sociology and economics in the 1970's, which has since been somewhat forgotten (Ward and Aalbers, 2016), with only a few exceptions like work by Anne Haila in Singapore (2015). One of the reasons for this change is the difficulty of establishing a relatively stable theoretical framework. However, relegating land rent to minor status is also one illustration of the methodological cityism criticised by Hillary Angelo and David Wachsmuth (2015). Within the dominant framework, studies on land conversion and speculation were replaced by studies on real estate development, which drew on David Harvey's work on the "spatial fix" and on research on the financialisation of real estate (Guironnet et al., 2016).

There is a reason for this bias. In the richest countries, sprawl is still well and alive, but policies against it have gained momentum, and had some effect. Restrictions on building rights have been growing in order to protect farmland and natural spaces (especially in Europe see, Bocquet and Cavailhès, 2020). Aside the streams of criticism mentioned above, post-materialist concerns played an important role: over and above housing (which remains a problem for many), quality of life has become a major concern for large fractions of the population. Such concerns translate into strong political pressures to preserve residential environments and limit the urbanisation of farmland and natural spaces. In parallel, demographic growth in large cities in rich countries has fallen significantly and the rural exodus is a long forgotten episode. All this reduce the possibilities for generating income through urban extensions. In this context, as Peter Walters shows in his portrait of Australian metropolises in this issue, the main profits to be made from the land and real estate markets are in the centre of cities, through operations to densify or to requalify run-down areas or brownfields. Even the peripheries are limiting their extensions and directing their growth to new hubs, as in the case of Brampton, on the edge of Toronto, presented by Roger Keil and Murat Üçoğlu. In such cases, land conversion from agricultural use is not an issue, land is already expensive. Or when it is cheap, like in the brownfields, it is because of the high cost of complying with environmental regulations, which includes decontamination (Léger et al., 2016). That is no doubt one of the reasons why the subject of land rent has been somewhat neglected in recent decades.

Having said that, people are talking increasingly about urban exodus, particularly since the Covid-19 crisis (Nathan and Overman, 2020; Florida et al., forthcoming). The scale and exact nature of the current spatial and demographic dynamics have yet to be assessed. However, in the countries concerned, it is clear that around major cities, land price increase is spreading to more remote areas,

which were previously protected from such inflation and, therefore, were attractive to modest households. With teleworking, in particular, many of the so-called “creative” professions, concentrated in the big cities, can now set up in the rural hinterlands. The land and real estate purchases linked to this dynamic reduce the available housing and raise prices away from the centre. As a result, populations with modest incomes are pushed even further from the metropolitan hubs. In France, like elsewhere, the hinterlands have become more of a social tinderbox than the working class districts in large conurbations due to the fact that a high concentration of populations have been relegated to these outlying areas (Neel, 2018). In this context, it is increasingly difficult for urban studies, especially critical scholarship, to remain centred on major conurbations and to ignore medium-sized towns and rural areas.

That’s for the global North. In Southern cities, which are marked by rural exodus, and are experiencing rapid demographic growth, land conversion is taking place on a massive scale. The discourses proclaiming that it should be limited are ineffective. The land issue is central to these conversions. It is the key to mechanisms of accumulation and rent extraction. China has become an emblem of these mechanisms because of the rapid and radical transformations of land use (Kan, 2019). But such mechanisms can be found in many other southern countries, as this special issue shows. Incidentally, if this introductory text highlights the often neglected subject of land rent, it is because it also examines the control of urban sprawl from the so-called “Global South”.

The question of land rent is central to managing sprawl. In general, sprawl control largely aims to limit the conversion of natural areas or agricultural land to urban uses. The conversions are largely driven by the demand for housing, work premises, infrastructure and places to consume, which are linked to processes of urbanisation and the metropolitanisation of rural places (Harris and Lehrer, 2018). They are also driven by the property market because land for urban use is worth manyfold more than agricultural land. This rent gap pushes landowners to abandon existing activities and convert land for urban use. The figures vary hugely from one context to another. Around large cities, it is common to see a one to two hundredfold increase in land value between agricultural and urban uses (Mori, 1998). As this special issue reveals, such a rent gap can be found all over the world. The link between land rent and (peri-)urbanisation is universal. Its impact on economies rises as available capital increases as it is switched out of the productive economy which becomes comparatively less profitable.

Therefore, one of the main obstacles to controlling urban growth is simply the financial stakes associated with land rent. The stakes are so high that the urbanists’ or planners’ projects cannot compete, however, attractive they may be. Several papers in this special issue (especially the ones of Bérénice Bon and Maryame Amarouche *et al.*) are a reminder that land rent is the key to controlling growth on the outskirts of cities.

It is also central to the political and moral issues raised by the fight to reduce urban sprawl. Essentially, who has the right to appropriate the land rent generated by urbanisation? The landowner? The developer? The banker? The local authority? In the event where the local authority manages to extract an annuity, which social groups does it act on behalf of? For all those questions, it is important to remember an obvious fact, the political implications of which are seldom taken into account: the creation of value linked to urbanisation is commonly qualified as rent because it is a social product that does not result from individuals’ work or from the mobilisation of factors of private production, unlike the value that a farmer could give to a plot of land by making it into a terroir, for example. When the owner of a plot of agricultural land splits and sells it as buildable lots, the resulting profit has little to do with the work of dividing the land. Most of the gain is due to the advancing urban front.

On this basis, many specialists defend a form of socialisation of land ownership, in the steps of 19<sup>th</sup> century economist Henry George. This socialisation has been applied to varying degrees in numerous countries, not only in the bosom of the Soviet bloc, but in capitalist countries as well, e.g. the Netherlands (Needham, 1997). However, during the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the ideal of market regulator was upheld and these policies receded and almost disappeared. Some remarkable exceptions survive, for example, Singapore (Haila, 2015), but none of the cases studied here feature the socialisation of landownership. The idea of socialisation only survives in a very muted form, for example, through civil society initiatives with the comeback of some community-based utopias (Lokyer, 2017) and also through taxation, particularly on capital gains, which is more significant. Nonetheless, this taxation has a marginal role and is never mentioned in articles.

Rather, this special issue underlines how influence, anticipation and speculation are used by the different actors involved in the production of peripheral spaces. Examples are drawn from actors with huge capital resources as well as from the most “invisible” ones (see Bérénice Bon’s article on the periphery of Nairobi). The ferocity of these struggles reflects the high stakes. The amounts are often phenomenal, at least for those concerned. Multiplying the value of land by one or two hundred is never insignificant, even if the land in question is worth little to the major actors in international finance. Obviously, those who earn the most are those who already have the most. As Fernand Braudel highlighted (1985), if the ideal of market regulation sets out to be egalitarian, the idea is shattered as soon as capitalist rationale comes into play. The capacity to mobilise capital is central in property markets and it is clearly unequal.

### **3. Provincialising the fight against urban sprawl**

In 2000, when Dipesh Chakrabarty proposed to “provincialise Europe”, he was thinking about colonial history, which should be written from non-European perspectives, even if it implies using critical resources forged by Europe (a point often ignored). This special issue focuses on a more modest topic than Europe’s imperial history: it considers the fight against urban sprawl from the point of view of countries that are often grouped together under the label “Global South” (Parnell, Robinson, 2012). This label is certainly not very satisfactory, even if one accepts the idea that Australia is a northern country. In the field of urban studies, it is getting harder to justify the binary distinction between the Global North and the Global South. The notion is less and less relevant for appreciating the differences between trajectories that are the result of unequal development (Pike, 2020). Local situations do not just vary in terms of geographical regions: the trajectories of major cities in the same country are increasingly divergent as a somewhat paradoxical result of globalisation and the spread of neoliberalism in regional development policies (Brenner, 2004). In southern countries, urban trajectories are sometimes similar to those seen in northern countries. For example, the concept of “subaltern urbanisation” developed by Roy (2011), which refers to the informal strategies used by slum dwellers in the South to improve their environment, is highly relevant for analysing the dynamics found in shrinking cities in the North (Schindler, 2014). Yet, the southern turn points to an important academic gap that still needs to be addressed. This is why this special issue keeps making reference to the “Global South” (see also Vafa Dianati’s discussion of this notion in this issue).

The call to de-westernise urban studies (Roy, 2015) is also not new. However, few studies on urban sprawl compare the phenomenon in different national contexts. The monograph is still the most common approach, which limits the possibility of generalising. As a consequence, the conceptualisation of urban sprawl usually depends on national or local situations. Some comparisons exist but they tend to focus on countries in the North (e.g. Hamin and Guaran, 2008), apart from a few

rare studies in the South (e.g. Chaléard, 2014). A wider view is needed, especially since, as Garth Myers points out (2011), the genuine “post-metropolis” is now more likely to be found in Africa than in California. Yet, in Africa, the conceptualisation of urban spread promoted by northern countries is ineffective because suburbanisation follows a different logic and concerns very heterogeneous populations (Myers, 2011; Mabin et al., 2013). North and South comparisons will thus help build a more general critical analysis on urban sprawl (Wilson and Chakraborty, 2013). This special issue aims to fill the gap, by offering a global approach to urban sprawl and the policies designed to curb it, with a special attention to innovations emerging from the South (like in Christian Silva’s paper).

In the Global South, many studies consider that urban sprawl is the inevitable result of demographic and economic growth and/or the rural exodus (Fazal, 2001; Roy, 2009). Some studies also highlight the governance of urbanisation, with the elite’s increasing capacity to make the city, the local authorities’ weakness with regard to planning, the failure of urban planning documents and, lastly, corruption (Olujimi, 2009; Polidoro et al., 2012). This special issue reviews and complements these existing studies, by including the impact of sprawl control. Viewed from the South, particularly from cities where demographic growth is very high and significant fractions of the population live in informal settlements, this battle often seems incongruous because building decent housing is so important (Angel et al. 2011). Indeed, the discourses on the subject remain largely rhetorical. Yet, they should not be ignored. The circulation of standards and instruments for public action encourages “good practices”, which are generally designed in North America and Europe. With the injunction to fight urban sprawl in order to combat global warming, which is clearly a global problem, standardised planning tools are being introduced in many southern countries, like green belts, new towns, etc. This is rightly criticised because it erases local diversity and leads to the use of tools that are often unsuitable and may even be even harmful, i.e. when they make the poor more vulnerable (Peck and Theodore, 2015).

The diverse contexts and contrasting developments have a significant impact on the representations of urban sprawl, as well as on the strategies and tools chosen to curb it. For example, in the dynamic metropolises in Europe and North America – and leaving aside the increasing but largely invisible informal peri-urbanisation fuelled by trailer parks or campsite dwellers (Lion, 2018) as well as young people living in trucks – the pioneering front of peri-urbanisation is now primarily driven by modest households. These households include an increasing number of immigrants and their descendants, who have been pushed to the fringes by centrifugal property market forces and two decades of sharp price rises in the main city regions (Schafran, 2019<sup>3</sup>; Charmes, 2021). Therefore, controlling urban sprawl primarily targets modest working populations, despite their major contribution to the city’s economic development (Halbert, 2010).

In Europe and North America, an increasing number of shrinking cities have also been deserted as a result of deindustrialisation and peri-urbanisation (Cauchi-Duval et al., 2016; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2016). In many cases, shrinkage largely concerns the city centre. The decline contrasts with the suburbs and periurbs, which attract the middle classes and economic and commercial activities. In shrinking cities indeed, urban sprawl is primarily caused by white middle and wealthy classes, whose exodus has caused financial, social and economic problems for urban governments (Béal et al., 2021). Therefore, above all, urban sprawl concerns the populations that the city governments would like to see “return to the city”. Consequently, the fight to reduce urban sprawl is influenced by specific issues against a background of intense competition to attract these populations.



In contrast, in southern cities, the pioneering front often concerns the entire social spectrum. The case of the Bouregreg Valley, presented in this issue by Maryame Amarouche, Max Rousseau and Kawtar Salik, is a good illustration. The hinterlands of major cities in Latin America, Asia or Africa, have long been associated to the rural exodus, and populations bundled into slums. However, recent years have seen the proliferation of “mega-projects” designed to house the wealthier urbanites fleeing the congested city centres in search of space and nature. The model of “satellite towns” now spreading in the South, which is generally reserved for elites, confirms this process of fragmentation in peripheral areas (Van Leynseele and Bontje, 2019). Such a diversity has been recently convincingly encapsulated in the region where it might be the more spectacular: sub-Saharan Africa, where Meth et al. (forthcoming) describe five distinct but overlapping logics of peri-urbanisation (speculative, vanguard, auto-constructed, transitioning and inherited). Such a geographic proximity of very heterogeneous populations causes significant political and social tensions, leading to the development of new enclaves. It also generates new claims, like a “right to the centre” (to use the idea that Vafa Dianati proposes in his paper).

#### **4. Controlling urbanisation from the periphery.**

Several papers in this special issue highlight how the control of urbanisation has shifted to the periphery, i.e. it is less and less controlled by the central city and regional or national powers, and increasingly in the hands of peripheral regions. The case of the Brampton municipality, in north-west Toronto, discussed by Roger Keil and Murat Üçoğlu, provides a very eloquent account of the empowerment of the city peripheries. This empowerment is clearly relative, but the relationship between the centre of large metropolitan areas and their peripheries is becoming less based on dependence. The key word is now interdependence.

This is a major shift, although it does not concern all metropolises. Most often the relationship between the centre and the periphery is based on control, as in the case of Rabat, which is discussed in this special issue by Maryame Amarouche, Max Rousseau and Kawtar Salik. In fact, the fight against urban sprawl fits into this control framework. It is the tool that city centres use to control the peripheries (Schafran, 2019). Above all, this control logic still prevails in most of the cases presented in this special issue, the most obvious being the case of Tehran (see Vafa Dianati’s paper). As already mentioned, talking about sprawl inevitably includes a critical moral judgement about what is happening in peripheral areas. This judgement is imposed from city centres because sprawl is defined in relation to density in the centres. And this definition is used to justify the restrictions on the way peripheries tackle the growth dynamics induced by the centres.

The moral dimension of the way urbanisation of metropolitan fringes is dealt with is evident in the case of green belts (Amarouche, Charmes and Rousseau, 2021). In the urban centres, the term “parks” is used to qualify protected green spaces. But the term green belt is preferred when it comes to conserving natural areas and agricultural land in the peripheries. The word “belt” clearly refers back to the centre. When considered from the centre, the conservation of natural spaces on the fringes is partly to protect areas for leisure activities. Conserving the agricultural production potential is also a guarantee of food security for major cities, a major issue brought to light by the recent Covid-19 crisis. In addition, as Peter Walters recalls in his portrait of Australian cities, limiting the possibilities of building in peripheral areas mechanically boosts the city centre’s major urban projects (see also the case of Lyon in France, Charmes, Rousseau and Amarouche, 2020). Yet, viewed from the peripheries, green belts are a mechanism that prevents them from benefiting from the land rent generated by the adjacent metropolitan core.

This may seem rather perverse. On the one hand, the pressure on the property market in city centres is forcing households to move to the peripheries, while, on the other hand, planners are imposing restrictions on development to combat urban sprawl. It is not surprising that this comes up against resistance from the local authority. As several papers in this special issue underline, peripheral local authorities are often reluctant to implement the regional plans. This makes it easier for private actors to exploit the loopholes in anti-sprawl policies, which thus often stays merely rhetorical, especially in the global South.

In large urban regions in rich northern countries, resistance in and by peripheries is not just latent, it is out in the open. Sometimes the peripheries are capable of standing up to the adjacent city centres. This is due to several factors. One factor is demographic. While the planet has become urban, it is predominantly suburban (Keil, 2017). In many metropolitan regions, the suburban governments weigh more in demographic terms than the central ones. However, demography is not the only issue. The suburbs have also diversified to become what some scholars call post-suburbs (Teaford, 1997; Phelps, Wood, Valler, 2010). This diversification is especially marked by the development of economic and commercial activities. In fact, some suburbs, like Brampton, have become genuine hubs of employment and economic activities that match or even outdo the centre (Garreau, 1991, Beauregard, 1993). In other cases, jobs and commercial activities are dispersed, but the result still breaks with the suburban dormitory model given that the suburbs' economic weight is added to the already considerable demographic weight (Lang et LeFurgy, 2003). The shift, first reported in the United States, has developed all over the world. This dominance of the suburbs is particularly clear in shrinking cities, as discussed above. As a result, the political projects in peripheral areas have diversified. For years, those projects were caught in a schematic opposition between the spread of housing estates (to take advantage of land rent) and the nimby syndrome that prevails once the estates have been built (Davis, 1990). Today, the political discourses and debates within the peripheries, as well between the centre and the peripheries are far more complex (Hamel and Keil, 2015).

In this context, the fight against urban sprawl is changing direction in two ways. First, it is no longer the vector of the centre's dominance over the periphery, instead it has become an object of transaction. The peripheral areas can agree to reduce their expansion, but this involves negotiations, where they may find themselves in a dominant position (especially in shrinking cities). In this case, and this is the second major change, the fight against urban sprawl is influenced by what the peripheries want. Sprawl control can then take the form of exclusionary zoning (Charmes, 2011; Fischel, 2015). This has always been the case and anti-sprawl policies are often most effective when this potential for local appropriation exists. Thus, the green belts established to protect areas around large cities in England were highly effective because they matched the wishes of residents in towns and villages, who were keen to preserve their quality of life and defend their rural idyll (Benson and Jackson, 2013). Fighting urban sprawl in a picturesque village is a way to prevent it from being spoilt by housing developments and to stop the village losing its prestige, which may be threatened by the potential influx of households. This is a genuine concern in many peripheral areas and is one of the main channels to encourage the appropriation of anti-urban sprawl policies (Lopez de Souza, 2016).

Exclusionary zoning is not the only option. A second one is growth. As suburbs grow denser and more diverse, fighting urban sprawl is a way to strengthen the emerging hubs. It also limits the competition between individual and collective housing developments in the new hubs. The case of Brampton is a good illustration (see the paper by Roger Keil and Murat Üçoğlu). In parallel, curbing urban sprawl favours the major actors on the property market (Amarouche, 2021). The most remote peripheries are typically the playing field for minor actors with little capital, as highlighted by Bérénice Bon in this special issue. Restricting sprawl pushes up land prices. This makes bigger operations that require large

amounts of capital more viable. The success of discourses that promote densification, i.e. the flip side of anti-urban sprawl policies, owes a great deal to these mechanisms. If the claims about density's environmental value had not suited the interests of the major real estate actors, they would clearly have been less successful and the ecologists who defend small towns or rural areas rather than densification would have been heard better (Charmes and Keil, 2015).

## **6. Conclusion: losing control over growth?**

In all papers presented in this special issue, several major issues remain constant. One is losing control over growth, in the sense where state or city authorities only partially achieve their objectives to control growth or sprawl. Apart from the classic problems that block the implementation of plans in general and urban projects specifically (e.g. the weight of local interests and the difficulties public authorities' have in regulating property markets), several mechanisms specific to anti-urban sprawl policies are at issue.

Green belts, for example, only limit the demand (for urbanisation) within their perimeter. Similarly, when local authorities use anti-sprawl policies to preserve quality of life, they exclude modest households – which may be one of their implicit aims. Households with modest incomes may have to look farther afield for accommodation, which ultimately increases the environmental and social damage caused by car dependency. However, anti-sprawl policies are not just Malthusian. They also often attempt to concentrate urbanisation in specific hubs. Yet, satellite towns and new towns, which are spreading on a massive scale, particularly in Africa, are not a panacea either. They encourage speculation on the fringes and the urban sprawl that goes with it. They are transmitters for metropolitan growth. In addition, such major projects are regularly undermined by myriad rival smaller projects, which take advantage of new infrastructure without paying for it.

These factors, which limit the fight against urban sprawl, are widespread. Besides these recurrent problems, the situations and configurations are very diverse. Governance and local government play a key role here (Hamel and Keil, 2015). Depending on the city and the country, local authorities are integrated to a greater or lesser extent and are involved at different levels. While in some situations the state and its agencies play a determining role in drafting urban planning documents and in others the local authorities are in charge. Yet, it is very difficult to grasp the effects that these differences have. In France, for example, local authorities are very fragmented, especially when it comes to matters of urban planning. However, intercommunal cooperation has developed significantly since the 2000s. While the state may not be directly involved in developing plans, it imposes major constraints, by drafting and approving laws. How should the French case be classified? Is power centralised or is it shared and decentralised? These questions can only be answered empirically.

This example points to the need for more case studies. Different situations have to be examined in detail in order to gain a deeper understanding of local realities. The papers in this special issue do just that. Examining a case in depth costs time and energy. All the papers are thus singular case studies, with the noticeable exception of Alan Mabin's contribution, which, in the Forum section, compares two very different urban regions, Paris and Gauteng. In the same vein, one of the main reasons for compiling this issue of *disP* is to give the readers a global perspective that goes beyond the rather artificial divide between the Global South and the Global North. We hope this introduction will provide readers with several transversal keys to further their understanding.

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