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ARTICLE

Varieties of right-sizing strategies: comparing degrowth coalitions in French shrinking cities

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to understand the varieties of "rightsizing" strategies in French shrinking cities. Empirically, the article examines the issue of "rightsizing" in France. It reveals that urban shrinkage is still considered as a minor issue nationally, and that "rightsizing" ideas have not gained momentum on urban agendas or within the planning community. Despite this lack of interest, local strategies aimed at adapting the built environment to a reduced population have been "silently" implemented in France's shrinking cities, over the last 15 years. The article focuses on the strategies elaborated in two cities: Saint-Etienne and Vitry-le-François. These strategies are both emblematic of an acceptance of population decline and of a will to reduce the housing stock. However, these two strategies rely on different actors and rationalities: the first is based on a selective understanding of "rightsizing" which aims at replacing deprived social groups by a long-awaited middle-class; the second is fueled by the worsening financial situation of the main social housing landlords. By pinpointing the factors that explain varieties of "rightsizing" strategies, the article calls for a more careful use of the notion of austerity urbanism, based on case studies which are sensitive to contextual issues.

1. Introduction

On the 23rd of June 2015, the *Union Sociale* de *l'Habitat* – the federation which groups together all social housing landlords in France – organized a conference on urban shrinkage in one of the country's most emblematic declining cities, Le Creusot. The conference aimed at shedding light on the issue of urban shrinkage and revealing the increasing financial difficulties of social housing landlords in shrinking cities.[1] It led to the publication of a "manifesto for a housing policy in deindustrialised cities." This publication urged the French (central) government to take into account the issue of shrinkage and to set up an appropriate public policy for shrinking cities. In many ways, the conference and the Manifesto can be considered as the first step in the emergence of the issue of urban shrinkage in the French public debate. By putting the emphasis on urban strategies and local policies, this conference has raised the idea of "rightsizing"

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which had always been a very low priority within the planning community (Cunningham-Sabot and Fol, 2009). It has also demonstrated that despite this long-lasting lack of interest at the national level (Cauchi-Duval et al., 2016), local strategies dealing with the issue of shrinkage have been "silently" implemented in French shrinking cities over the past 15 years.

1.1. *The international debates on right-sizing: the necessity to focus on local contexts*

The aim of this article is first to demonstrate that such "rightsizing" strategies *do exist* in France even if neither academic research nor policymakers qualify them as such, and second to take the opportunity of a "new context" to enrich the current international debate aimed at theorizing such strategies. We define "rightsizing" strategies as urban policies which deal with decline and try to adapt the built environment to a reduced population size. There is now a substantial literature trying to understand these strategies. Originally, this literature emanated in the planning field (Popper and Popper, 2002; Schilling and Logan, 2008; Mallach, 2012; Hollander and Nemeth, 2011; Brachman, 2012; Schatz, 2010). These works highlight the different planning principles upon which these strategies are based, such as the acceptation of shrinkage, the creative reuse of vacant spaces, or the participation of deprived groups (Dewar & Thomas, 2013; Hummel, 2015; Schwarz, 2012). They also identify some of the main tools used in "rightsizing" policies: land banks, zoning ordinances ("floating zoning", "garden zoning", etc.), comprehensive plans, etc. While some planning scholars tend to celebrate "rightsizing" strategies – in their words "smart shrinkage" – as alternatives to traditional pro-growth urban policies, critical geographers have been recently more cautious in their analysis. Using an urban political economy approach, they have argued that "rightsizing" strategies – especially in the US case – have a limited capacity to challenge the contemporary neoliberal production of urban spaces and that they could even accentuate some of its worst exclusionary tendencies (Aalbers, 2014; Newman and Safransky, 2014; Clement and Kanai, 2015; Rhodes and Russo, 2013; Hackworth, 2015; Safransky, 2014). According to these scholars, "rightsizing" strategies can therefore be viewed as experiments of "austerity measures" (Davidson & Ward, 2014; Peck, 2012). They should be considered as embedded in a more general "short-term fix" of the financial crisis in which classical market responses – downsizing of local governments, fiscal retrenchment, public service cuts, reduction of the social housing stock – are increasingly imposed to restore budgetary integrity and above all capital accumulation (Akers, 2014; Peck, 2014). As such, "rightsizing" would simply appear as "another brick in the wall" of neoliberal urban restructuring.

Notwithstanding their quality and their contribution to the understanding of urban policies in a context of spreading urban decline, both approaches of "rightsizing" strategies suffer from limitations. Generally speaking, they are characterized by a tendency to underestimate the influence of the context and the role of actors in the socio-political construction of "shrinkage" and "rightsizing". Actually, most of the existing literature tends to provide a rather unified vision of "rightsizing" which (over)generalizes some of the trends identified in a few emblematic places such as Detroit or Youngstown in the United States, or Leipzig in Germany.

Except a few articles (Hackworth, 2015, 2016; Bernt et al., 2014), these works hardly deal with the heterogeneity and the ambiguities of "rightsizing" strategies (Béal et al., 2016).

1.2. *Local "degrowth coalitions" and the heterogeneity of right-sizing in french shrinking cities*

In order to fill these gaps, we will examine "rightsizing" strategies in French cities. We argue that these strategies can neither be described as "pure" alternatives to neoliberal urban policies nor as examples of austerity urbanism. This does not mean that French municipalities are not concerned by fiscal austerity and budgetary pressures: on the contrary, after 20 years of continuous financial consolidation, they have recently been even more constrained by both national government reforms and macroeconomic trends (Guengant, 2014; Le Lidec, 2011; Epstein, 2013). However, in France, it is above all heterogeneity, which mostly characterizes the so-called "rightsizing" strategies. The absence of a national policy framework has led to a wide variety of local strategies depending on cities' profiles, the nature of local governance arrangements, and the relationships between local authorities and the State (i.e., the central government or *l'Etat* in French) and its agencies. These nascent strategies are constructed by "degrowth coalitions": i.e., governing coalitions which partially move away from traditional pro-growth entrepreneurial policies. In France's shrinking cities, these coalitions are pub-licly-led and generally bring together local government actors, State representatives and social housing landlords. Their agenda is dominated by the issue of demolition, which is considered as the most effective solution to deal with housing vacancies, market deficiencies and more generally urban shrinkage. However, beyond this general feature, the objectives of the French "degrowth coalitions" appear to be plural. On the one hand, in some cities, the issue of demolition has given way to (rather) progressive urban policies aimed at solving the housing crisis and saving social housing landlords. The coalitions supporting this political agenda echo the "degrowth machines": i.e., progres-sive coalitions which focus on the "objective to improve the quality of life in the city rather than simply augment the value of land and spur economic growth" (Schindler, 2016: 3) recently identified by Schindler (2016) for the city of Detroit. On the other hand, in several other French shrinking cities, the same issue of demolition is used strategically in order to attract public funding and to form "grant coalitions" (Cochrane et al. 1996; Bernt, 2009; Jones & Ward, 1998) and/or to legitimate a (conservative) political agenda (Rosenman & Walker, 2015).

To demonstrate these coalitions and their strategies are producing hybrid forms of austerity which are highly dependent on local contextual dynamics, the article will follow two steps.[2] We will start by analyzing the way urban shrinkage has (not) been integrated in French national public policies, leading local actors to "invent" and produce their own policy framework and tools. Then, the article focuses on the strategies elaborated in two cities: Saint-Etienne and Vitry-le-François. These strategies are both emblematic of an acceptation of urban decline and of a strong will to reduce the (social) housing stock. However, despite these similarities, these two strategies rely on different rationalities: the one in Saint-Etienne emanates from the municipality and aims at both transforming the image of the city and retaining its middle-class, while the

strategy in Vitry-le-François has mainly been elaborated and implemented by the quasi-hegemonic social landlord. This latter strategy aims at stabilizing the social landlord's loss-making business model which is threatened by the continuous decline of the city, even if the objective of attracting the middle-class is important in Vitry-le-François. In discussing these two cases, the article engages with theoretical debates on austerity urbanism and calls for more empirical use of this notion which goes along careful case studies sensitive to contextual issues.

2. France's non-politics of urban shrinkage

Unlike some countries affected by urban shrinkage such as the United States, France's central government and its agencies are important actors in urban policies. If cities have been on the rise in the past 30 years, issues like housing, urban development, taxation or social cohesion are still mainly framed at the national level. For this reason, one cannot understand "rightsizing" policies without having a close look at national policies and political debates. Until 2015, these debates were very limited concerning urban shrinkage and no dedicated public policy has been elaborated to address this issue. After having discussed the specific features of urban shrinkage in France and how they have hindered the emergence of this issue, we will show that national policies have tended to ignore or even accentuate urban shrinkage.

2.1. *Is there such a thing as urban shrinkage in france?*

Until 2015, the issue of urban shrinkage was not part of the national political debate in France. This situation can be explained by the fact that French urban shrinkage is relatively weak compared to other countries and mostly concentrated within small and medium-size towns and cities. Indeed, in a country where the population is still growing and where the fertility rate (about two children per woman) is one of Europe's highest, urban shrinkage has not been a very significant phenomenon in French urban history over the last decades. Only 20% of French urban areas experienced net population loss between 1975 and 2007 (Wolff et al., 2013),[3] and the share of France's urban population living in a shrinking city did not exceed 9% in 2007. As shown by Nicolas Cauchi-Duval (2015), this situation has evolved in the last few years: between 2006 and 2011, over 38% of urban areas experienced population loss. However, the intensity of urban shrinkage is limited in comparison to the situation in other European countries (Wolff and Wiechmann, 2017).[4]

French shrinking cities are mostly small: three quarters of them have fewer than 50,000 inhabitants (See Figure 1). While nearly a quarter of the small towns in this category did experience population losses between 1975 and 2007, only five large urban areas with over 250,000 inhabitants were similarly affected (Wolff et al., 2013). In the most recent period (2006–2011), the size divide was still visible, even though population decline increased in every category: populations fell by 21% in large urban areas, 41% in medium-sized urban areas, and 48% in small urban areas (Cauchi-Duval, 2015). These small towns were often specialized in economic sectors now in recession (Paulus, 2005). They are usually poorly connected to transport networks and suffer from the competition with large urban centers for services, activities and jobs (Bretagnolle, 2003). Besides
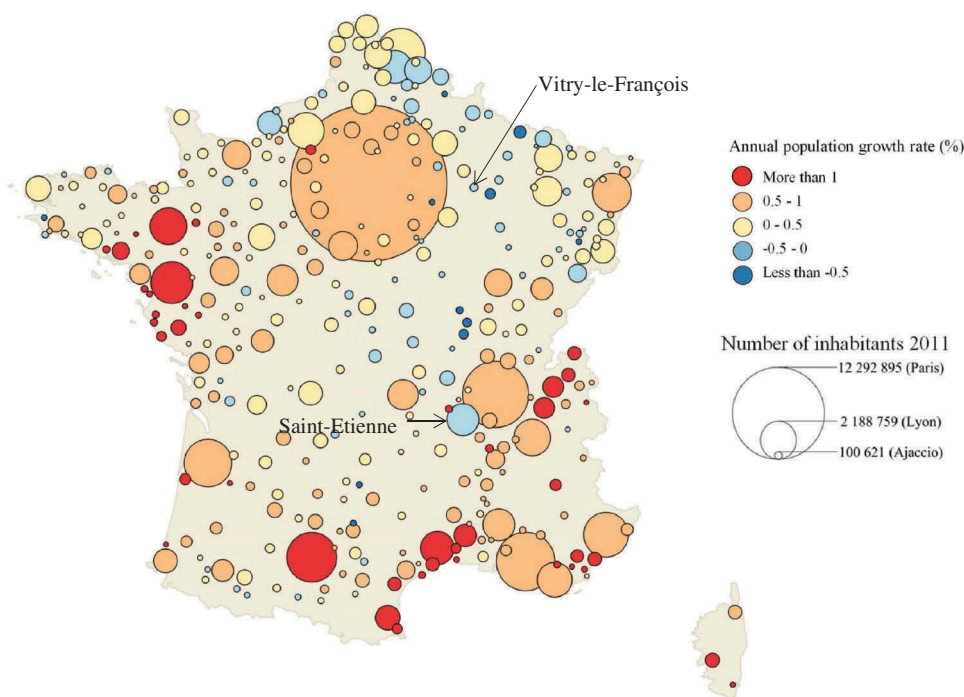
Figure 1. France's shrinking urban areas (1975–2011) (Source: INSEE, RGP 1975 and RRP 2011) (Author, M. Rudolf).

the size effect, urban shrinkage in France also has a clear regional dimension reminiscent of the "diagonal axis of emptiness" and has primarily occurred in the old industrial regions of the North and the East: in the Champagne-Ardenne Region, three quarters of the urban areas experienced population losses between 1975 and 2007, while in Lorraine and in Burgundy, half of the urban areas were also affected (Wolff et al., 2013). The typical profile of a French shrinking city is a small industrial town located in a traditional mining or industrial area. Such towns are far removed from major cities and so have not captured any of the development spilling over from bigger cities.

This geography of decline explains partly why urban shrinkage appears as a "silent process" (Cunningham-Sabot & Fol, 2009). Despite its steady spread, the phenomenon has been absent in the national political debate (Cauchi-Duval et al., 2016). Declining towns and cities seem to have little economic and political weight.[5] They are marginalized on the national political agenda which is dominated by large cities and declining rural areas – the two main targets of state planning policies.

2.2. National policies: ignoring or accentuating urban shrinkage?

In addition to the lack of a national strategy addressing urban shrinkage directly, several policies have had an indirect influence on the demographic and economic decline of French cities. The difficulties of adapting national policies to the variety of local situations, and the rolling out of fiscal and public service austerity have considerably

accentuated urban shrinkage in the past 10 years, amplifying the differences between growing and declining cities.

Despite an ongoing process of decentralization since the early 1980s, the central government still appears as a key actor in urban policy. Moreover, its urban policies are shaped by a relatively uniform and homogeneous vision of France's national territory, which is often blind to local contexts. Paradoxically this may accentuate the effects of decline. For example, for the last three decades, in order to address critical shortages of housing in major cities, urban policies have been focusing on quantitative targets for building new housing. The aim is to reinforce housing construction in those areas where markets are tight and fail to meet the needs of poorly-housed persons, thus creating structural crises. As a result, until recently, the objective of France's national housing policy has been to significantly increase the national housing stock. This has led to the construction of social housing not only in large cities where the provision of housing was insufficient but also in all parts of the country, including towns and cities where the demand was low. The production of new housing in these low-demand environments tended to increase vacancy in the older parts of the housing stock.

Similarly, tax exemption measures allowing buyers of homes for rental to benefit from substantial tax reductions in order to encourage the construction of private rental housing, have been initially implemented with few and powerless geographical restrictions. The implementation of these tax measures, largely supported by the lobby of property developers but also by construction companies, has led to some cities being flooded with quantities of housing that in no way corresponds to local needs.[6] In shrinking cities, the housing market is fragile, and these phenomena have accentuated vacancy problems affecting some segments of the housing stock. In such cities, social housing is characterized by uncompetitive rents with respect to private sector rents, so that it is losing occupants. This may also happen in some parts of the private rental sector, especially in older housing located in decaying city centers, such as in Saint-Etienne, or in the new private rental sectors encouraged by tax reductions. Similarly, national policies favoring home ownership have contributed to producing new supplies of housing, especially in urban peripheries. This in turn is leading other segments of local housing stock to be emptied out – in shrinking cities – and is therefore worsening housing vacancy, as in towns like Vitry-le-François.[7]

Urban decline has also been accentuated in France by the policy of "rationalizing" public services which started in 2007 with the *Revision Générale Des Politiques Publiques* (RGPP), a national spending review which has a strong territorial impact. This reorganization of French public policies, administrations and services has primarily affected small and medium-sized towns in decline. These towns used to be a key link in the territorial organization of state services (Estèbe, 2015). They frequently had a sub-prefecture office, a government tax-collection office, a court, a branch of the *Banque de France*, and a hospital, etc. During the last decade, the reorganization of public services has led to the closure of many of these institutions, which were essential in supporting local employment and development. Such withdrawal of public services has strengthened territorial and social inequalities (as shown by de Viguerie, 2013). It has also manifested itself in major closures of military barracks, as those in Champagne-Ardenne or in Lorraine. This in turn has led to the departure of many

households which previously contributed to the local development of small and medium cities.

In the end, one can consider that these national policies are blind to urban decline, or even tend to aggravate it. However, analysis of some policies and measures adopted by government highlights the existence of strategies that do in fact constitute tools for tackling shrinkage, even though such decline is not specifically targeted.

2.3. *"Unnamed policies" to deal with urban decline and shrinkage*

While urban shrinkage had not been identified until recently as a public problem, several tools have been created by the central government over the last decades to encourage the redevelopment of areas affected by urban decline. However most policies have focused on industrial decline and have been targeted on regions rather than cities. The first programs on economic reconversion were created in 1968 to support the redevelopment of mining and industrial regions (Lorraine and Nord Pas-de-Calais). In 1984, the DATAR (*Délégation À l'Aménagement Du Territoire et À l'Action Régionale*) created the "*poles de conversion*" and intensified the support given to de-industrialized regions. The "*Fond National d'Aménagement Du Territoire*" (FNADT) was set in 1995 to provide financial support to various programs, some of them dedicated to the economic redevelopment of declining territories. Two types of funding were initiated: the first one, to help investment in declining or deprived regions, takes the form of direct financial support to enterprises (*Prime À l'Aménagement Du Territoire*); the second one, dedicated to local programs of redevelopment ("*contrats de site*" and "*contrats territoriaux*"), support local governments' projects. These programs aim at facilitating the implantation of new economic activities, improving the local economic environment and creating employment opportunities. The French State has also helped the implementation of active land policies in the regions where the effects of de-industrialization have been the strongest. Four *Etablissements Publics Fonciers* (EPF) were created in 1968 (Basse-Seine), 1973 (Lorraine), 1990 (Nord Pas-de-Calais), and 1998 (Ouest-Rhône-Alpes), the last one located in a growing region but targeting the Saint-Etienne area. These economic redevelopment policies have never been identified and presented as strategies to tackle urban shrinkage.

More recently, the *Agence Nationale de Rénovation Urbaine* (ANRU) was created to tackle exclusion and social difficulties in deprived neighborhoods. This policy has been strongly criticized by French urban scholars: in a context of housing shortages in large cities, urban renewal, that is to say the destruction of social housing, can be qualified as "a cure worse than the disease," which takes its roots in the tradition of social engineering of the French state. Baudin and Genestier (2006) especially criticize the spatialist vision of the French state resulting from a wrong diagnosis of the problems of what the bureaucracy considers (wrongly again) as ghettos which could be reopened through urban morphology actions. They also criticize the hegemony of the ideal of social diversity and its many negative effects: the return of the middle class to low-income neighborhoods after the demolition of social housing appears as illusory and contradicts the allocation of social housing to the poor.

The most important redevelopment tool is the *Programme National de Rénovation Urbaine* (PNRU) introduced in 2003. This €45 billion budget program applies to the

whole national territory and especially to poor suburban neighborhoods (the *banlieues*) in large cities more than to declining towns.[8] However in recent times, declining cities have taken the opportunity of offering the very advantageous funding of this policy to demolishing a large number of housing units, and restructuring their social housing infrastructure. Similarly, the National Program for the Redevelopment of Old Declining Districts (*Programme National de Requalification Des Quartiers Anciens Dégradés* or PNRQAD), set up in 2009 to rejuvenate the old town centers, does not specifically target shrinking cities. But a significant share of the 40 cities selected in the call for projects do indeed belong to this category (Sedan, Maubeuge, Saint-Dizier, Saint-Quentin, Le Havre, Châtellerault, Vierzon, and Saint-Etienne).

The recent creation by the State of a category of weak market areas can be considered as an important step in the politicization of urban shrinkage. If this category does not mention the issue of urban shrinkage *per se*, it does acknowledge – no less explicitly – the existence of areas where the housing market is not functioning optimally. The distinction between "strong" and "weak" market zones emerged in the vocabulary of national housing policies in 2003, as "zoning" was being established to limit the negative effects of tax exemption schemes. Indeed, as mentioned above, government support for the construction of private accommodation using tax rebates contributed to the oversupply of housing in territories where the market could not absorb such new supply. The aim was therefore to take into account the changes in territorial dynamics and to adapt as closely as possible to local market realities. This binary opposition between weak markets and strong market areas has subsequently been reused in many areas of housing policy, to distinguish between areas where housing needs justify the targeting of state support (whether through direct aid or via tax incentives), and those territories where the State should not intervene to promote house building. This "hollow" or "negative" view of declining territories, however, has recently led to growing criticism by some local actors and social housing associations. They deplore the fact that the targeting of housing subsidies in strong market zones (i.e., especially big cities and metropolitan areas) leaves declining cities without the financial resources to conduct demolition and shrinkage polices to adapt their housing stock.

In short, it is possible to say that French national policies have never, at least explicitly, addressed the increasing issue of urban shrinkage. Although some of the policies that have been put in place to tackle economic decline or social problems can in some cases be used by local actors in declining contexts, there is probably a lack of a national policy framework adapted to the specific issues faced by shrinking cities. In addition, national policies, often blind to local contexts, have to a certain extent even accentuated the phenomenon by developing inappropriate tools, which have aggravated the processes of decline rather than addressing them. If declining cities still lack lobbying capacities to set the agenda at the national level, the situation has evolved slightly in the last few years. With their strong local roots, the organizations federating social housing associations at the national level have put urban shrinkage on the political map. By organizing various events to alert the public authorities on the specific situation of declining areas, they have enhanced the visibility of the issue of shrinkage and foster the discussion about funding and public policies targeting shrinking cities. This unusual form of agenda-setting indicated the crucial role of non-state actors in the

governance of urban decline and the necessity of scrutinizing local arrangements and especially the specific relationships between the State, local authorities and housing associations. The emergence of urban shrinkage through the social housing associations at the national level results from their strong relationship with local actors in shrinking cities. These connections allow the national associations to publicize the rightsizing strategies that are progressively taking shape at the local level.

3. Varieties of "rightsizing" strategies in france

The cases of Saint-Etienne and Vitry-le-François highlight some of the trends described at the national level. Both cities have been affected by processes of economic and demographic shrinkage for several decades. However, their specific situations have long been ignored by national policies, which have indirectly and partly accentuated processes of decline through fiscal and zoning policies. The reception by the local actors of the last set of national urban policies has finally led to the emergence of an interesting phenomenon: the "silent" implementation of "rightsizing" strategies which have been reshaped several times during the past 10 years, depending on the evolutions of the national and local contexts. In both cities, the constraints, actors and objectives appear as being very different. Local factors have generated two strategies based on contrasting rationalities: in Saint-Etienne, the strategy is grounded in a selective under-standing of "rightsizing", which aims at replacing deprived social groups by the long-awaited middle-class, while in Vitry-le-François, the strategy appears as far more progressive and is fueled by the worsening of the financial situation of the main social landlord.

3.1. *Saint-etienne: "rightsizing" the social housing stock*

Saint-Etienne can be considered as an exception among French cities since it was one of the very few "booming cities" to emerge from the industrial revolution in France. It grew up in the 19th century with the development of coal mining, as well as the textile and steel industries, before experiencing a classical process of boom and bust cycles until the mid-20th century when the city entered a process of long-term decline. As a result, it is not surprising that Saint-Etienne is one of the rare big French shrinking cities today. From the 1980s, local actors in Saint-Etienne have developed different "rightsizing" strategies within existing urban planning and using policy tools to deal with a context of structural decline that has long appeared as exceptional for a big-sized French city. Generally speaking, these strategies have been characterized by an emphasis on urban renewal and demolition as means both to adapt selectively the urban fabric and to modify the social structure of the population. Over the last few years, this "rightsizing" strategy has become clearer, with the objective of reducing the social housing stock, increasingly considered by local actors as an urban stigma and as the major cause of the decline of the city.

3.1.1. *The early socio-political construction of urban decline: the escape of the middle-class as "the problem"*

In Saint-Etienne, the economic crisis started in the late 1960s when the mining and textile industries suffered a downturn. During the 1970s, the industrial sector of the city was dramatically affected. About 20,000 jobs were lost and several major companies (Manufrance, Creusot-Loire, etc.) left the city. This had a strong impact on the local productive system, as small-sized local enterprises lost their clients and started experiencing economic difficulties. At this time, the decline of Saint-Etienne was only conceptualized as a temporary economic crisis, both by public officials and by the population. There were only a few voices trying to connect this economic downturn to the larger urban process of a city also losing large parts of its population (See Figure 2).

It was only in the late 1990s that the meaning of Saint-Etienne's decline changed. Local public actors started to consider the decline as a structural process which went far beyond economic restructuring (Béal *et al.*, 2010). Three main triggers can be identified to understand this shift. First, there was a local political change, with the election in 1995 of a new center-right mayor who introduced an entrepreneurial agenda using physical redevelopment of the city as a tool of economic redevelopment, whereas his predecessors were focused on the mere attraction of new firms. Second, the results of the national census of 1999 had a huge impact on the image of the city. It showed that Saint-Etienne was the fastest, big shrinking city from 1990 to 1999 (with 19,000 inhabitants leaving the city). More importantly, this loss could no longer be considered as the result of deindustrialization only, as the city had witnessed a period of economic stabilization, with the creation of several SMEs. As a result, alternative explanations of urban decline started to emerge, such as the escape of the middle-class to the fringes of the city,[9] or the excess supply of poor quality housing (both within the public and private housing stocks).[10] Finally, at the same time, new urban renewal tools have been introduced at the national level by new laws such as the Voynet Act (1999) or the SRU Act (2000).
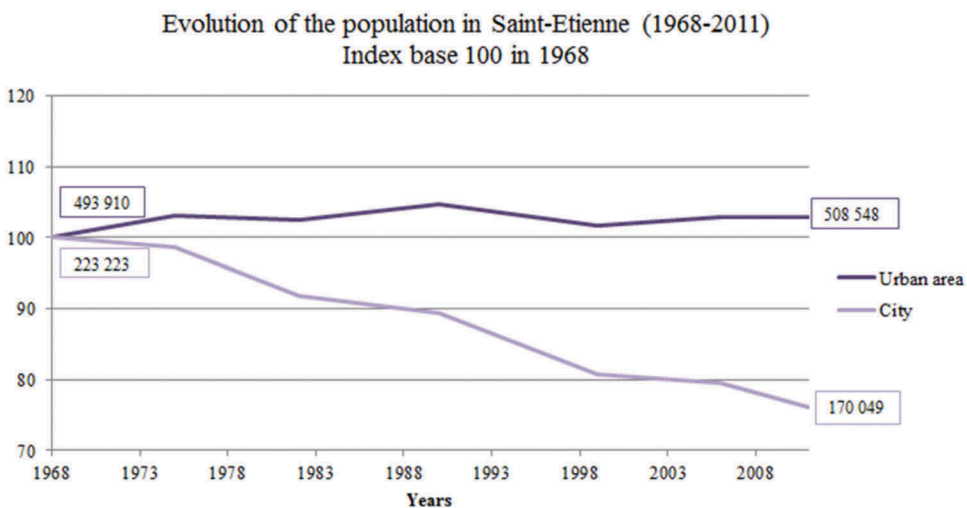

Figure 2. *Population change in Saint-Etienne and its metropolitan area* (Source: National Census, INSEE).

3.1.2. *From demolition to growth*

This context in the early 2000s led to new momentum in housing policies and urban renewal in the city. The implementation of a new set of public policies at the national scale led especially to the *Grand Projet de Ville* which provided €120 million to redevelop two central declining neighborhoods (Crêt de Roc and Tarentaize-Beaubrun-Séverine) and two peripheral ones (Montreynaud and the Quartiers Sud-Est). This opened a space for the emergence of a "grant coalition" (Bernt, 2009) involving local elected officials and state representatives.

The main objective of this coalition was to provide a strategic framework to transform the housing stock, and more generally the housing market. More precisely, its strategy is based on three main rationalities: to stretch the housing market again; to reduce housing vacancy rates; and to increase the social diversity of the city population, which in a city such as Saint-Etienne was equivalent to launching a policy of gentrification. While the production of new housing units (mainly private) was planned, the main tool for implementing this strategy was the demolition of a large part of the housing stock. Interestingly, of the 4,000 housing units set to be demolished, only 1,000 were part of the social housing stock and the rest were part of the private housing stock, where the vacancy rate was at the time higher (8% in the private housing stock and only 4% in the public housing stock) (Miot, 2012).

This demolition-oriented strategy had only started to be implemented when it was reshaped as part of a more growth-oriented strategy, based on a spatially selective redevelopment of the city. This downgrading of the demolition objective was first linked to the belief that Saint-Etienne's housing market would quickly become more dynamic. In a context of rising housing prices in all French cities in the 2000s, and of the implementation of the Robien national tax policy (see footnote no. 6), private developers such as Bouygues or Nexity started to return to Saint-Etienne and its fringes, giving the impression that the city's housing market was recovering. This wishful thinking was fueled by an audit by a consultancy firm (Stratis Conseil), which in 2005 emphasized the opportunities of attracting middle-class households from the nearby city of Lyon, in search of more affordable housing. The demolition strategy was also weakened by the launch in 2003 of the National Program for Urban Renewal (PNRU), set up to demolish high-rise buildings of social housing in the French *banlieues* and to recreate more diversified housing landscapes and social mixes. Despite a few attempts to negotiate the "1 for 1" ANRU rule and to adapt it to a weak housing market, local actors were strongly advised to rebuild exactly the same amount of the social housing units demolished.

At the same time, the Central government decided in 2007 to set up an *Etablissement Public d'Aménagement* (EPA), an urban development agency managed by government appointed administrators and including local board members. This agency was created through a specific procedure (a National Interest Initiatives) which is quite unusual in France. It has strong planning and urban development powers in several areas in the city, which have been selected for their strong potential of (re)development. This perimeter concerns 2,300 acres of land mainly situated in the city-center and in its fringes (Chateaucreux, Manufacture-Plaine Achille, Pont de l'Ane-Monthieu, Jacquard) (See Figure 3). In these areas, the EPA has the power to bypass local authorities and to develop master plans to build new housing units and sell them on the market. Its
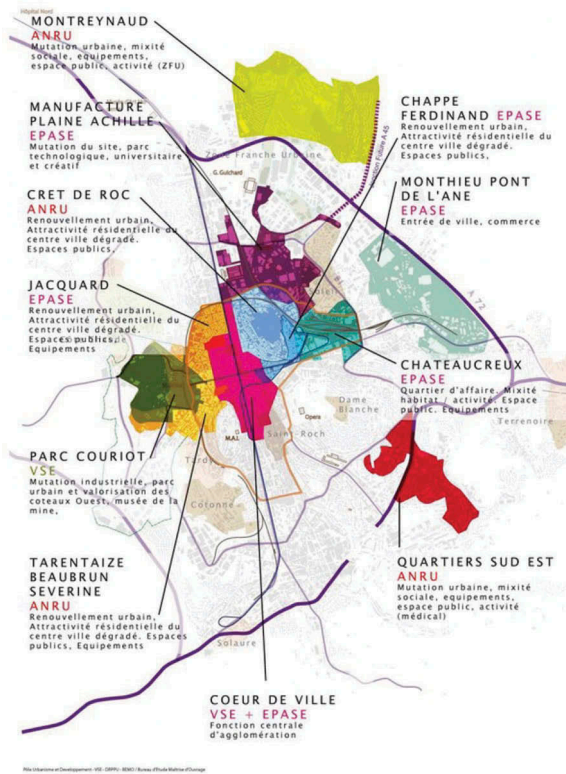
Figure 3. *Map of the intervention of different actors: EPA, ANRU (with its PNRU) and the city of Saint-Etienne (referred to here as VSE, source: Ville* de *Saint-Etienne).*

budget of €255 million for the period 2007–2014 was mainly dedicated to the development of flagship projects to make Saint-Etienne more attractive. Interestingly, according to several local actors, the main objective behind the creation of the EPA was not primarily to "save" Saint-Etienne, but more to make it competitive in order to reinforce the growth of the Lyon conurbation.

Generally speaking, the period from 2005 to 2014 was ambiguous. The acceptance of shrinkage seemed to be weaker than in the early 2000s, and the urban strategy less unified than the one developed a few years earlier. The different and often contradictory urban redevelopment policies had materially and symbolically divided the city into three kinds of spaces: the poorest neighborhoods had been integrated into the PNRU with its demolition/reconstruction rationale; the neighborhoods with a strong potential were part of the EPA perimeter and were transformed through aggressive property-led logic; finally the other neighborhoods were managed by local authorities with classical tools. Until 2008, the municipality, which took on substantial structured loans to finance its strategy, developed an ambitious plan to redevelop some of these areas, mainly to attract affluent social groups. After 2008, the financial crisis severely weakened the already fragile local finances and, therefore, threatened the capacity of local authorities to develop urban projects. This gave way to a more modest municipal housing strategy implemented by the newly elected left-wing administration (2008–2014), and aimed at attracting "stable"

families rather than upper and middle-class inhabitants from Lyon (Sala Pala and Morel Journel, 2013).

3.1.3. *An emerging "degrowth coalition": toward consensual austerity*

The municipal election of 2014 can be considered as a tipping point in the understanding of urban decline in Saint-Etienne. The issue of demographic and economic decline had been at the center of the electoral campaign, and the new right-wing mayor had based his electoral campaign on the objective to make Saint-Etienne expand to 200,000 inhabitants again by 2030. The new path to urban growth, however, was different. In a context of increasing social difficulties in the cities (19% of the population is unemployed today and 21% is living under the national poverty threshold), and of the rise of an anti-North African feeling within parts of the population, the new municipality has decided to set up a strategy against social housing. It is characterized by two main objectives: to stop the construction of social housing in the city (for example, by refusing to serve as a financial guarantor for social housing landlords) and to demolish derelict houses and especially social housing which are considered as responsible for the pauperization of the city and for its bad reputation. As the new mayor has clearly stated:

> "In the short term, I want to reverse the demographic evolution by attracting new inhabitants. To do this, we need to improve the quality of life and provide a better environment. Simultaneously, we need to act on the housing policy by stopping the construction of new social housing. We will focus on the rehabilitation of the existing stock, a third of which was built in the 1970s. We will demolish when it will be necessary, and we will create new green spaces and parking spaces." (Interview of Gaël Perdriau, LeMoniteur.fr, 11/12/2014)

At the municipal level, this reduction of the social housing stock has been accepted by most actors. A strong consensus has emerged between the municipality, the local state representatives and the social housing landlords on the pertinence of this strategy. For the municipality and its electoral clientele, social housing is considered as housing for poor people and ethnic minorities, two "groups" which are tacitly considered as obstacles to the "renaissance" of Saint-Etienne. By contrast, for central government representatives and above all social housing landlords, the reduction of the housing stock is considered more as the "least bad" solution to limit the increase of vacancy rates (which rose from 7% in the early 2000s to 11% in the early 2010), and so to avoid bankruptcies.

If it is still too early to draw general conclusions about this strategy, one can consider that in a context of weakening financial capacities of local authorities, the demolition of social housing has been constructed as a "natural" solution to deal with decline. Notwithstanding the important demand for social housing within deprived social groups, the demographic decline is being used by the right-wing municipality as a resource to impose austerity and to legitimate a classical neoliberal solution: downsizing the social housing stock. Such a representation of "rightsizing" in the city contrasts vividly with the policy adopted in Vitry-le-François.

3.2. *Vitry-le-françois: "rightsizing" as a solution for the troubled social landlord?*

Vitry-le-François is a small-sized city of 13,000 inhabitants in the North East of France. It is located in Champagne-Ardenne, which is the only region currently losing population in France. As an industrial city weakly connected to the main transport infrastructures, Vitry-le-François has experienced a strong process of economic and demographic decline since the 1980s. In many ways, Vitry-le-François can be considered as a paradigmatic example of the decline of small and medium-size cities in the French "diagonal axis of emptiness". Until the late 1970s, the population of the city had been growing with the continuous arrival of migrants coming from the rural surroundings and then persons repatriated from Algeria. This helped to counterbalance the departure of young people to bigger French cities, such as Reims, Nancy or Paris, and the move of more affluent classes (lower and middle classes) to suburban spaces.

3.2.1. *The early socio-political configuration of urban decline: the quasi-hegemonic social landlord as "the problem"*

Deindustrialization really started in the early 1980s leading to the loss of 50% of industrial jobs in the urban area between 1982 and 2012. This occurred together with a process of demographic decline: the central city and the urban area lost respectively 32% and 10% of their population between 1975 and 2012 (See Figure 4). Pauperization too has been important, as today 21% of the population is unemployed and 27.5% of the population is living under the national poverty threshold (See Figure 5). The 2008 economic crisis contributed to a worsening of this situation by accelerating the departure of young people and families and by adding to an already depressed market an important number of vacant houses. These difficulties were also faced at the same time by most small and medium-sized cities in Champagne-Ardenne (Saint-Dizier, Epernay, Charleville-Mézières, etc.). The problems led to discussions between local actors and State representatives about urban shrinkage. However, it was only in the early 2000s
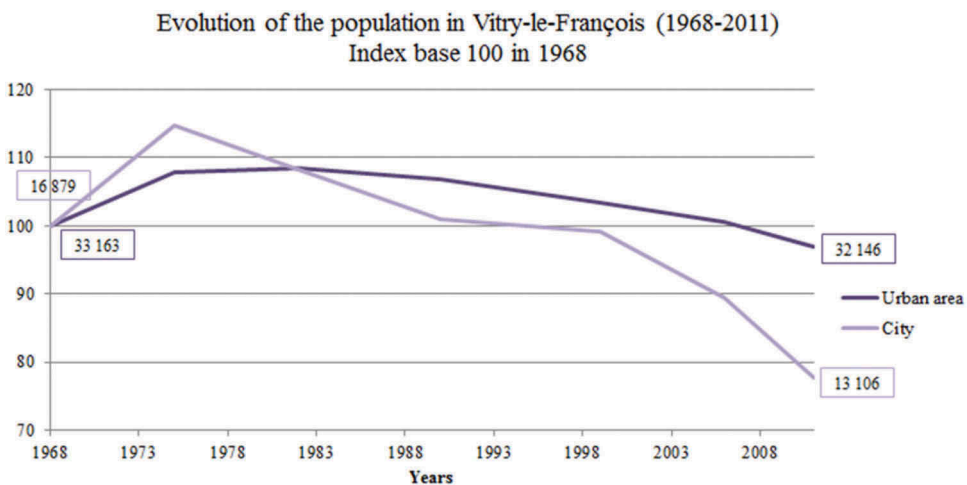

Figure 4. Evolution of the population in Vitry-le-François and its urban area (Source: National census, INSEE).
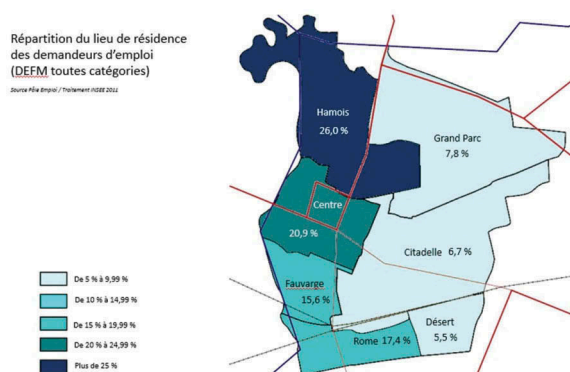
Figure 5. *Unemployment rates in the different neighborhoods of the Vitry-le-François (Pôle Emploi and INSEE).*

that these initial discussions gave way to a nascent strategy of "rightsizing," which has aimed at demolishing two neighborhoods of *grands ensembles* (major housing estates) of the city before rebuilding the sites on lower densities (individual houses, green spaces). Contrary to Saint-Etienne, this strategy was first developed by a social housing landlord, at a time when the local authorities still believed in "mainstream" entrepreneurial principles. In the 2000s, the implementation of the PNRU national policy favored an alignment between local authorities and the social landlord, without eliminating their divergences: the municipality aimed at implementing "rightsizing" without abandoning definitively the regrowth objective, while the social landlord was motivated above all by financial imperatives, leading it to reduce its housing stock in order to struggle with the rising costs of an increasing vacancy rate in the city.

During the 1970s, State representatives tried to develop linkages between local authorities to limit interurban competition and respond collectively to initial signs of urban shrinkage. If this initiative went unheeded, it was taken up again in the 1990s, with the creation of an inter-municipal network (with the neighboring medium-sized post-industrial cities of Saint-Dizier and Bar-le-Duc), which has implemented several strategies to deal with urban and regional decline (Gaunard, 1996). This inter-municipal management of decline appeared as highly innovative in the French context, and the acceptation by the local State of such a structure was another sign of the lack of prospects of the region. This inter-municipal coordination was, however, weakly connected to municipal strategies. Indeed, in Vitry-le-François, the municipality initiated an entrepreneurial strategy during the 1990s, centered on a twofold objective: to maintain the production of new housing units (in order to limit demographic decline), and to diversify the housing stock (in order to maintain and attract middle-class residents to the city). The objective behind this strategy was above all to limit the influence of the main social landlord – Vitry-Habitat – which was controlled by local economic actors and had adopted a central and paternalistic role in the city since the WWII, both in terms of housing and urban policies. The social landlord had been the

key player behind the urbanization of Vitry-le-François, ahead of the municipality which lacked strategic planning capacities, and which was thus confined to routine decisions. In 2012, Vitry-Habitat still owned 55% of housing stock and was nicknamed "the real mayor" of Vitry-le-François (interview with an executive of Vitry Habitat, July 2015). In the 1990s, deindustrialization and its consequences led to a violent conflict between a municipality turning to entrepreneurialism and a quasi-hegemonic public housing provider accused of implementing "conservative management" (interview with an executive of the department of urban renewal of the city council, July 2015) of its stock. Thus, the diversification of the housing stock has also been used as a political tool to challenge the control of Vitry-Habitat concerning the social housing stock, by fostering the emergence of rivals: other social housing landlords, producers of private housing units (which were nevertheless targeting the same population due to the decreasing housing prices). This strategy achieved its goal, but it strongly reinforced the financial difficulties of Vitry-Habitat. Furthermore, the demographic perspectives of the city and its urban area provide a framework for explaining the conversion of the social landlord to a "rightsizing strategy".

3.2.2. *A complete volte-face: "rightsizing" the city to save the social landlord*
Consequently, in the early 2000s, the intensification of urban decline and of the difficulties of the social landlord led to the emergence of a "rightsizing" strategy. Indeed, Vitry-le-François was one of the few cities which successfully managed to negotiate, at a very early stage, an exemption from the "1 for 1" rule of the PNRU.

> "Our main problem is vacancy, which has been continuously increasing since the early 2000s […]. Regarding the PNRU, we had to respect the '1 for 1′ rule, but we obtained an exemption in order to rebuild only a third of the housing units demolished. In *Le Désert* neighborhood, we demolished 252 housing units and rebuilt only 37. The contracting authority is the municipality. We have been lucky to work with them. […]. We implemented the first impact assessments in 2001 and the PNRU started later. With the PNRU or not, we were prepared to demolish. When the PNRU was launched, we were buying whole plots in the city. The municipality was not involved because it was not the landowner. We could have done without the municipality" (Interview, Social landlord, June 2015).

However, this impetus for demolition has been spatially uneven. It has focused on oldest social neighborhoods or on functionalist high-rise buildings considered as off-market housing stock. If this strategy has been implemented by both the local authorities and the social landlord, it has been characterized by a consensus between local and national actors, which followed the same objective despite different representations of the problem. While the national actors acknowledged the financial difficulties of the social landlord and viewed demolition as a way to deal with the spatial concentration of social problems in a context of urban riots in deprived cities (both neighborhoods targeted for demolition in Vitry-le-François have experienced urban riots over the last decade), local actors considered it above all as a means to reduce housing vacancy. Moreover, while national actors advocated social diversification as a way to reinforce social control in deprived areas, local actors supported this solution either to limit the escape of middle class residents to suburban areas (the municipality), or to increase their revenues (the social landlord).

This "rightsizing" strategy had however contrasted with a growth strategy at the intercommunal level. During the 2000s, the Local Housing Program (PLH) of the intercommunality of Vitry-le-François (which brings together the central city and the suburban towns) advocated an increase in the housing stock in the central city and on its fringes, in order to promote the city and to display political intervention-ism to fight demographic shrinkage. This unrealistic strategy, in a context of strong tax and financial incentives provided the State level, led to the development of 700 new housing units between 2003 and 2009, although the urban area was still losing population. Many of these new housing units were built on the fringes of Vitry-le-François. Alongside the economic crisis, this strategy had an impact on housing vacancy in the central city and in the social housing stock of Vitry-Habitat. Due to the high vacancy rate of its housing stock (35%, 800 housing units), the finances of Vitry-Habitat are severely weakened, and in 2011 it was finally forced to solicit the Loan Association for Social Housing (CGLLS) and to hand over the control of its housing stock to Le Foyer Rémois, a larger social landlord, which now owns 86% of the capital of Vitry-Habitat.

3.2.3. *A de facto "degrowth coalition" lying on contradictory visions of rightsizing*

The emergence of Le Foyer Rémois as a new key player in Vitry-le-François did not contribute to a change in strategy. On the contrary, it led to a reinforcement of the existing "rightsizing" strategy. And while this strategy was elaborated behind closed doors in the 2000s, it started to become more visible and publicly proclaimed. For Le Foyer Rémois, the objective was to develop a strategy which could both make the finances of the social landlord healthier and be respectful for the inhabitants (by increasing the participation of the inhabitants in town planning), the historical social role of Vitry-Habitat. It has three main objectives: intensifying demolition – especially in Le Hamois neighborhood where several tower blocks (844 flats) will be demolished through the PNRU 2, while only 135 housing units will be rebuilt as individual houses and small-scale collective housing to convert the modernist neighborhood into an "eco-garden city"); selling flats located in rural and suburban towns; and finally focusing only on housing activity. This demolition strategy has been coupled with a municipal-led development strategy which has focused on energy transition and environmental pre-servation, ultimately aimed at increasing the well-being of the population of a city which has been qualified by a high-ranking municipal public servant as a "reservation of poor people." Such a combination of anti-growth politics by the social landlord and the progressive public policy implemented by the municipality mean that Vitry-le-François strongly echoes Schindler's recent analysis of the emergence of "degrowth machine politics" in Detroit (Schindler 2016). As for now however, the link between both strategies is still loose and as a consequence, the outcomes of the policies implemented in Vitry-le-François remain unclear. In particular, the demolition strategy has not been publicly accepted by the mayor, who still refuses to speak about "right-sizing" and who maintains a pro-active public discourse about the regrowth potential of Vitry-le-François, based on the "green economy." This municipal conception of right-sizing (accepting short-term degrowth in order to better bounce back later) vividly contrasts with the views of the social landlord (decreasing the housing stock of the city

over the long term). As a result, the future of such a *de facto* "degrowth coalition" may be questioned.

4. Conclusion

This article has demonstrated that "rightsizing" is not a hot topic in the French political debate where national public policies hardly address urban shrinkage, and may even act as an amplifier of this phenomenon through tax schemes and various policies that are oblivious to local contexts. At the local level, the situation is different. Local authorities, state representatives and social housing landlords are increasingly involved in "rightsizing." They are part of "degrowth coalitions" which aim at both reducing the housing stock of cities to address population and economic decline and at "promoting a political consensus that frames curbing housing devaluation as the primary municipal role" (Rosenman & Walker, 2015: 3). Moreover, the observation made by Rosenman and Walker (2015) out of their analysis of a US shrinking city can be extended to their French counterparts: such coalitions cannot neither be described as purely progressive nor neoliberal, as they are producing a hybrid form of austerity through local arrangements and negotiations, which we argue is highly dependent on local contextual dynamics.

To some extent, the "degrowth coalitions" currently emerging in French shrinking cities share common traits: they focus on housing and urban renewal; they use demolition as a tool to deal with urban decline; and finally, they are spatially and socially selective. However, despite these similarities, their strategies are clearly different in their nature and objectives. In Saint-Etienne, these strategies could be compared to US austerity urbanism, with their objective of reducing the social housing stock. Conversely, even if the will to bring back the middle-class to "save" the city from shrinking and pauperization is also manifest in Vitry-le-François, "rightsizing" strategies in this case could however be considered as less exclusive in their desire to "save" the social landlord (and therefore the remaining social housing stock), and to empower deprived social groups in order to reinforce their influence on the long-term process of rightsizing.

Based on the two case studies, it is finally possible to identify four main characteristics of these "rightsizing" strategies.

(1) *These strategies are patchy*. "Rightsizing" strategies are not limited to one circumscribed urban policy which would have been elaborated in order to address urban decline directly. On the contrary, in a context where "rightsizing" is a political taboo, these strategies have developed through numerous autonomous urban policies (housing policies, planning policies, urban renewal policies, etc.) which do not always have the same spatial perimeters and sometimes even pursue contradictory goals.

(2) *These strategies are constantly evolving*. Due to their patchiness, "rightsizing" strategies are evolving quickly. They seem to be highly permeable to contextual changes. In both cases, "rightsizing" strategies have been reshaped many times over the past 15 years. They have been transformed by the changes in the local context (local elections, emergence of new actors such as the EPA in Saint-

Etienne or Le Foyer Rémois in Vitry-le-François) and the national/international context (the evolution of the PNRU, the beginning of the Great Recession, etc.).

(3) *These strategies are elaborated and implemented by "diverse" actors.* Local actors involved in "rightsizing" strategies are not monolithic. Their interests, logics and rationalities are not stable and can evolve over time. For example, the "rightsizing" strategy elaborated by the social housing provider in Vitry-le-François was initially challenged by the newly entrepreneurial municipality, before the two stakeholders reached an agreement on the social selectivity of this strategy.

(4) *These strategies are heterogeneous.* There is a wide variety of "rightsizing" strategies in French cities. These differences are shaped by different factors such as: the local representation of the problem of urban decline (considered irreversible in some cases like Vitry-le-François); the composition of "degrowth coalitions" (actors involved, the political orientation of the municipality, etc.); and the location of the city, or its size.

If these general trends are only based on the experiences of two French cities, they are probably valid for other cities in France and in the Global North. If most Western cities – especially declining ones – are now operating under conditions of austerity, "rightsizing strategies" are locally and politically-negotiated spatial fixes which could be more or less progressive or neoliberal. "Right-sizing" per se can therefore not be glorified or demonized as a uniform strategy implemented by shrinking cities in a monolithic way. As we have tried to demonstrate, in some cases these strategies appear as a implementation of austerity in impoverished shrinking cities. In other cases, they might well appear as a hopeful tool in order to redevelop the shrinking cities in a more progressive and inclusive way, by looking beyond the traditional obsession for economic and demographic urban growth. This heterogeneity is, therefore, a crucial aspect of rightsizing and as such, it needs to be tackled by international urban research in a deeper way. However, it can only by highlighted by an approach which takes local context, actors and governance arrangements seriously. This is why we plead for such an empirical approach based on the comparison of contrasted case studies to be systematized to various "rightsizing" strategies implemented across the global North – and also in the global South – in the coming years.

Notes

1. Many French shrinking cities are former industrial cities where the share of social housing is rather high and the role of social housing institutions significant in local governance. Social housing landlords have experienced increasing difficulties in shrinking cities such as high vacancy rates and higher management costs due to the rising residential mobility of their tenants. The organizations federating the social housing institutions at the national level have been alerted of these growing issues by their local adherents.

2. The "national" data used in the first part had been collected through a mix-method approach: quantitative data analysis of the French national census had been made to understand the demographic trajectories of shrinking cities and 15 semi-structured interviews had been conducted (by the authors and Rémi Dormois) with central administration public servants, state agency officers, and representatives of housing and local governments' federations. The two case studies – Saint-Etienne and Vitry-le-François –

had been selected for their long history of population loss and for the presence of strategies aiming at addressing the issue of urban decline. For these cases, the empirical work had been based on documents analysis (local plans, reports, etc.) and interviews. In each city, about 20 semi-structured had been conducted with local elected officials, city officers, social housing landlords' representatives, or urban developers. These interviews were conducted collectively and partially transcribed. Their analysis was made without coding software.

3. They were 354 urban areas in 1999 in France. An "urban area" is a statistical category defined by the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE). It comprises a group of municipalities which together make up an urban center, with a minimum number of jobs, and an urban periphery. At least 40% of the resident population in the periphery is employed in the urban center.

4. Only one French urban area experienced annual population loss greater than 1% in the period 1975–2007.

5. As a matter of fact, the *Fédération Des Villes Moyennes* – the lobbying association for medium-sized cities – seems to have a weaker access to Ministries and State agencies than the other local authorities lobbying groups, such as the *Association Des Maires de France* (AMF) or the *Association Des Maires Des Grandes Villes de France* (AMGVF).

6. The first incentive scheme for investment in rental housing was set up in 1984, by the Socialist government (the Quilès policy). Subsequently, such measures (Perissol, Robien, Borloo, Sellier, Duflot, and Pinel) have increased, and their cost to the government today far exceeds direct support for construction of social housing: 41% of public housing subsidies in 2012 went to tax incentives supporting private rental construction, compared to 16% spent directly on building social housing. The growing role of these measures reflects the changing role of the State, which now acts more to support the construction of private accommodation by market actors, rather than contributing to the building of social housing (Pollard, 2010). It also has strong impacts on local housing markets: The prevalence of small flats, increased vacancy rates, the creation of a "de-spatialised" regime of property, etc. (Vergriete, 2013).

7. The "no interest loans" that help low-income households become homeowners contribute to the new supply of housing in urban peripheries, while housing in town centers is being emptied out.

8. Large French cities were the main targets of this program. As a matter of the fact, the program introduced a new rule in urban planning: The "1 for 1" rule which considers that for each social housing unit demolished, a new one must be built. Negotiations on this "1 for 1" rule have been an important issue in declining cities such as Saint-Etienne or Vitry-le-François, where local actors wanted to rebuild less housing units.

9. During the 1980s and 1990s, the metropolitan area of Saint-Etienne gained population. It was only in the 2000s that the population of this area started to stabilize and then to decline. Due to long-lasting opposition between the central city and its surrounding towns, metropolitan institutions have always been weak in Saint-Etienne. As a result, the issue of urban decline – mainly experienced by Saint-Etienne and a few industrial medium-size towns of the metropolitan area – has always been very low on the metropolitan agenda, leading to unrealistic demographic forecasts in almost all metropolitan and city-regional planning documents: Local Housing Plan (PLH), Territorial Coherence Scheme (SCOT), etc.

10. Saint-Etienne has 23% of social housing, which is above the national threshold of the SRU law. However, its main specificity lies in the existence of a so-called "de facto social housing stock" constituted by poor quality private housing (mainly located in the city center), with lower rental prices than in social housing. While in most growing French cities, the city center is the area where housing prices are the highest, in Saint-Etienne it comprises a lot of deprived people and ethnic minorities, and housing prices are very weak: Around €1,000 per m^2, whereas in a city like Lyon housing prices in the city center are around €3,000 to €4,000 per m^2.

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