



City image in an urban system

Denise Pumain

► To cite this version:

Denise Pumain. City image in an urban system. *Acta Geographica Lovaniensia*, 1991, 31, pp.56-60.
hal-01524077

HAL Id: hal-01524077

<https://hal.science/hal-01524077>

Submitted on 17 May 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

CITY IMAGE IN AN URBAN SYSTEM

Denise PUMAIN (2)

ABSTRACT.

The image of a city is a concept of growing importance among local urban managers. It is currently used by journalists in their periodical comparative studies of urban amenities and successes, and it leads the municipalities to spend a lot of money for their advertisement campaigns. ten years ago, this concept was put forward by geographers, in order to identify the main factor of differentiation in the socio-economic structure of the French urban system. Further studies have shown the role of such a factor in the attractivity differentials of the cities. A comparison is made between the criteria which are included in the scientific and "grand public" approach to the concept. the underlying representations which emerge are shown to be related to the contemporary processes of restructuration in the urban system.

RESUME:

L'image d'une ville est un concept de plus en plus souvent invoqué par les responsables des collectivités territoriales. Les journalistes l'emploient couramment dans leurs présentations périodiques des avantages comparatifs et des performances des villes, et cela conduit les municipalités à de lourds investissements dans des campagnes de publicité. Le concept d'"image de marque" a été proposé par des géographes, il y a plus de 10 ans, comme identifiant un facteur essentiel de la différenciation socio-économique dans un système de villes. Des travaux ultérieurs ont souligné l'intervention de ce facteur dans les différentiels d'attraction des villes. On compare ici les critères qui sont utilisés dans les approches de ce concept par les scientifiques et par le grand public. Les représentations sous-jacentes qui émergent sont liées aux processus contemporains de restructuration du système urbain.

The objective of this paper is to draw attention to the connection which could develop between the analysis of urban scientists and the processes which produce the positions of the cities in the mediatic space. It is also wanted to emphasize the relationships between the urban characteristics which can be defined in an objective manner and the subjective valuations which are conveyed by the publicity.

However dealing with the concept of "image", the main focus of the study is not the geography of perception. The general framework is about the structure and the dynamics of urban systems. As data concerning interactions among a set of cities are very scarce, we are used to identify the essential features of differentiation in a set of cities by the mean of "latent dimensions" (Parr and Reiner, 1980), and to assess what the evolution of those "latent dimensions" can reveal about the dynamics of the system (see for France Pumain, Saint-Julien, 1978 and 1989). The emergence of a new way for cities to compare themselves and to compete has to be studied as a potential change in the evolutionary processes of the urban system. The main interest is in the possible consequences of such a process for the restructuring of the urban system.

1. GROWING IMPORTANCE OF IMAGES

According to Yi-Fu Tuan, the acquisition of visibility is essential in the creation of places (1977; pp.161-178): "identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life". However, he shows an evolution in the means by which a city draws attention to itself: in the past, a city was "achieving power and eminence through the scale and solemnity of its rites and festivals" (p. 173). Monuments and various symbols contribute to keep this glorious story in the collective memory. As such public events became more rare, and specially for new towns without any visible landmarks from the past, the boosterism appeared, for instance in the frontier settlements of North America. The arguments used are then more abstract and general, like those about centrality or size, which have to hold records: "the most central", "the biggest", "the tallest", and so on.

Today there is a more acute and general concern in the increasing role of information, and a larger consciousness of competition effects in the growth of cities. A real urban marketing has developed, including the identification of target groups (investors, entrepreneurs, organizers of congresses...), image building and market research for the attraction of new firms (Buursink, 1987).

This commercial promotion implies usually the valorisation of an image of the city. In France for instance, the budget for the publicity of the cities has strongly increased, since 1982. The total amount of such expenses was evaluated to about 500 millions of francs in 1988. Its represents from 0.5 to 1.5% of the total budget of the cities.

The importance of the accepted effort is not always related to the size of the city: for instance, this kind of budget is for Montpellier ten times the one of Lyon. The content of such advertisement is not only political, but is more often concerned with the advantages that the city offers to its residents and to the economic activities.

Many specialized private offices have been created for designing those urban images. A large variety of advertizing medias is used: special brochures for professionals have appeared besides the usual folders for tourists; posters are designed on walls or more often in the press: newspapers, magazines, especially in the ones edited by air companies for travellers. The foreign press supports are used also, among many other, sometimes unexpected possibilities... As an example, the city of Brest has even painted a coastal landscape with slogans ("Brest, une ville du tonnerre", "eine tolle Stadt", "een gekke stad"...) written in French, German and Dutch, on the flanks of heavy lorries carrying goods on international lines.

The urban advertisement has then become a special branch of the publicity, to the extent that an annual trade show is devoted each year since 1988 to what publicist modestly call "the communication of local communities". Under the title "la décentralisation à l'affiche", a full book has been published on this subject by Benoit and Benoit (1989), with a collection of images. Actually, this book is not entirely devoted to the cities, but shows as well images which were designed for the departments and the regions. Indeed, even if the tendency appeared almost simultaneously in other countries, the fact that the boom in geographical marketing started in 1983, at the occasion of local elections, cannot be thought of as a random contingency for France. This explosion is certainly related to the law about decentralization of 1982, which gives more autonomy to local authorities, particularly for economic issues.

Those preoccupations of local communities are resumed, encouraged and illustrated by the mass-medias, mainly by weekly magazines which publish charts, lists of the "top fifty" of cities. The first attempt was made by Le Point, in 1984, with a "palmarès des villes les plus écologiques" where Dijon, the city whose mayor was Minister of the Environment, ranked first, whereas Marseille appeared in the last position. The same magazine published again in 1989, with a slight shift in the topic and a significant enlargement of geographical scale, a "palmarès de la qualité de la vie dans les villes européennes". Other magazines are more interested in economic rankings, like Tertiél, who published in 1988 and 1989 a list of the "most entrepreneurial" or "most dynamic" cities, and l'Expansion, which gave in 1988 an honours list of urban dynamism.

There is then a growing interest in the media and possibly in the grand public for a comparative information about the places and the cities. The classification of 165 european cities made by the GIP RECLUS (Brunet, 1989) after measurements of their level in a hierarchy of international

functions has immediately be reprinted by the newspaper Le Monde. The context of intensification of relationships inside the European Community and the interrogations about the consequences of the changes in scale of the markets is another important determinant of such concern.

2. WHICH IMAGE FOR THE MEDIAS?

Detailed analysis of the marketing policies of the cities have still to be undertaken, and this research needs both long surveys, and perhaps a longer period of time if one wants to evaluate the efficiency of those policies and their effects on urban development. Only a few remarks will be made here from a rapid analysis of published material, on advertisement bills, and of comparative analyses in the medias.

The ideas which appear on bills and posters are rather simple and not very often really specific to a city. Among the about thirty images which are reprinted in the book of Benoit and Benoit, only seven could not have been used for a different city! Only one refers explicitly to tradition, with the intention of getting out of it. Very often, the magnified values are the dynamism, the progress and entrepreneurship (six cases), which are close to the references to technology, leading activities, and technopoles (three cases), and to the savoir-faire (two cases). The quality of life is another valuable reference, with six images, to which can be added two mentions of sport facilities, three to cultural one, one to leisure amenities, and two to charm and beauty. There is only two mentions of accessibility, in very different context (one in the case of Lyon, the other in the case of Brest...) and one to the financial power.

The results of the ranking of the cities, according to various criteria, by the magazines are highly questionable, even when the quality of the data and of their comparative treatment are acceptable, mainly because there is no test of the stability of results. Even when such classifications are made on the same topic and at the same time, the results are by no means comparable, and one may doubt of their usefulness. For instance, l'Expansion and Tertiel have both published in 1988 an honours list of the most enterprising cities. Only six cities are ranked in both lists among the first sixteen, and only two of them with the same rank... This do not prevent some cities to use the result of such classifications in their advertisement campaigns (of course, like Montpellier, when they appear in first position!)

It should be emphasized that cities may not be sold like detergents and that their specificity is in their non-interchangeability. Cities cannot be conceived as independant competitive units. They are basically parts of an urban system, where complex mechanisms of regulation and self-organization occur, and in which the evolution of one element is tightly interrelated to the one of every other cities. Careful studies of interurban differenciation and of its evolution should be

used as a background when it is needed to build an image of a city.

3. IMAGE AND INTERURBAN DIFFERENCIATION

Since ten years, a systematic research about the qualitative properties of the French towns has been conducted with T. Saint-Julien (see 1978 and 1989). The aim was to describe the socio-economic structure of the urban system and its evolution over the last forty years. Several tens of qualitative indicators were used, as age, economic sector and professional groups of the population, unemployment rates, level of the wages, indicators of wealth.

Principal component factor analysis have shown a very stable dimension of interurban differentiation in France. It corresponds roughly to a nord-east-south-west gradient, and combines the intensity of tertiarisation of the economy, the scarcity of blue collars workers in the labour force, the level of wealth, the cost of housings and the age of the populations. This factor opposes then at both extremes, urban agglomerations where tertiary activities are associated with favoured social groups, which are wealthy, with high costs of dwellings and a rather old population (e.g. Cannes, Aix-en-provence, Nice, Montpellier) and urban agglomerations marked by heavy industries, which are associated with many blue collars workers, a low standard of living, and higher proportions of young people (e.g. Lens, Denain, Forbach, Montceau-les-Mines).

We called this factor "image de marque" (brand image) because the ordering of cities along this axis was a rather good reflection of their quality and attractivity in the common mental representations of the mid-seventies. The position of the cities remains very stable along such an axis, since the correlation between their scores in 1954 and 1982 is of 0.8. There is also little change if this main differentiating factor of the French cities is measured according to their social or to the economic composition of their labour force only, or when both are included, and even when other indicators concerning the age structure or the income and wages level are considered.

Obviously, the "image de marque" factor is an inheritance of the first Industrial Revolution, and of the unequal diffusion of this innovation cycle on the French territory. A second dimension has emerged in the French urban system, since the end of the seventies only, as a consequence of the passage of the more recent cycles of economical and technical innovations. We called this factor "technical modernity" because it appears as a result of the unequal diffusion of economic modernity and integration in the urban system. It shows the relative concentration in a few "central" cities of the fastest growing activities and social groups of the period (technicians, managerial staff, executives) and the relative relegation in "peripheral" cities of the declining activities and social groups (manual workers, foremen, salesmen and tradesmen). Whereas the "image de marque" axis is correlated with the indicator of total wealth of the cities, the

"modernity" axis is correlated with the level of the wages. This axis is also correlated with the unemployment rate, which is higher in the "peripheral" towns.

The dimension of "image de marque", which was identified after objective and measurable indicators, and coincided rather well with subjective collective representations, happened to take a large significance in the future of the cities. There was a noticeable shift in attractivity between the last two periods of observation: during the 1968-75 phase, the most attractive cities, as measured by net migration rates, were cities with a good level of technical modernity. This is in agreement with classical economic theory, since the migrants chose the cities with highest wages and less unemployment. But during the 1975-82 period, the most attractive cities were cities with the better "image" of the previous period, despite the fact that they had not the highest wages neither the lowest unemployment.

For a large part, this turning around can be assimilated to the "shift towards the south" that was observed in many countries. But the impact of the "image" was not limited to the net migration, it also had feedback effects on the economic structure of the cities. There is a rather high positive correlation between the position of cities along the "image" axis of the sixties, and their position on the modernity axis of the last period. So the cities with a good image improved their socio-economic profile. This is not only true for the southern cities, but also for most of the large metropolis or capitals of regions, which have better resisted to the economic crisis than the other towns, and which have increased their already strong concentration of the highly skilled labour force.

4. CONSTRUCTED AND SOLD IMAGES

If the image of cities has taken a growing importance in the restructuring of the urban system, which consequences can be expected on future dynamics of the urban system from the mediatization of the image of the cities?

Further studies should test the hypothesis that this innovation will spread through the urban system like a classical innovation diffusion process. It appeared first in a few pioneer cities, like in Montpellier, and it is becoming more and more general.

Our previous observations of change in a system of cities have shown that the most important part of changes were common to all agglomerations, and occurring at about the same time and with the same intensity, because of the generality and acceleration of the diffusion process. They do not change then the initial relative position of the cities and do not alter the structure of the urban system. Only a few lags are amplified and may contribute to reorganize the system by leading to durable differences.

The hypothesis can be made that the mediatic elaboration of the image of a city is an innovation like many previous ones, which is destined for diffusing through the urban system. Under its simple promotional form, it will not create sensible differences between cities. Nobody can think seriously that a slogan like "Béziers in the centre of Europe" or "Clermont-Ferrand at the crossing of European roads" can give to those cities any comparative advantage. However, it is possible that a well conducted urban marketing, which really valorizes a specificity of a city, with a language adapted to the required populations or enterprises could have more important differential effects.

This is then of the responsibility of geographers or regional scientists to provide information about the necessary variety of places and the diversity of urban qualities. For instance, it was shown by C. Zanin (1988) that when all the available indicators of quality of life are considered, it is impossible to draw up a single univocal scale which would range cities from the best to the worse. On the contrary, several dimensions have always to be considered, according to the various significance that are taken by the concept of quality of life, for instance for sub-groups of population. The stiffening of competition and rivalry in the urban system should not let forget about the complementarity between cities.

This is an invitation to a reflection upon the "mirror effect" of the image of cities on their future development, which always should be thought of in the framework of the whole urban system.

REFERENCES

Benoît J.M. and Benoît Ph., 1989, Décentralisation à l'affiche. La communication publicitaire des villes, départements et régions. Paris, Nathan.

Brunet R. ed. 1989, Les villes "européennes". Paris, La Documentation française.

Buursink J., 1987, "City marketing: a new trend in urban policy in the Netherlands". Communication to the IGU Commission on Urban Systems in transition, Dublin meeting.

Parr J.B. and Reiner T.A., 1980, "A note on the dimensions of a national urban system". Urban Studies, pp.223-230.

Pumain D. and Saint-Julien T., 1978, Les dimensions du changement urbain. Paris, C.N.R.S..

Pumain D. and Saint-Julien T., 1989, Atlas des villes de France. Paris, La Documentation française.

Robic M.C. et al., 1989 "L'iconographie dans l'aménagement du territoire: changer la donne et/ou donner le change? ". Unpublished manuscript, Laboratoire STRATES, Université Paris I.

Yi-Fu Tuan, 1977, Space and place. London: Arnold.

Zanin C., 1988, Qualité de la vie et diversité des villes françaises. Université Paris I, thèse de troisième cycle.