HAL
open science

Multiplication of logistics parks and invisibilisation of blue-collar workplaces in post-industrial metropolises

Nicolas Raimbault

To cite this version:

Nicolas Raimbault. Multiplication of logistics parks and invisibilisation of blue-collar workplaces in post-industrial metropolises. Lo Squaderno, 2019, March (51), pp.65-69. hal-02157182

HAL Id: hal-02157182

https://hal.science/hal-02157182v1

Submitted on 18 Jun 2019

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.

Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Multiplication of logistics parks and invisibilisation of blue-collar workplaces in post-industrial metropolises

Nicolas Raimbault

The global development of logistics activities and good flows entails the construction of thousands of warehouses, distribution centres and terminals, which mainly concentrate in large urban regions (Dablanc & Frémont, 2015). The logistics industry is moreover one of the few sectors experiencing blue-collar jobs growth, concerning both warehousing and deliveries (Bonacich & Wilson, 2008; De Lara, 2018). About 80% of the workers in logistics are blue-collars[1] . Furthermore, in the context of the fall of manufacturing jobs, logistics blue-collar workers are now dominant within the blue-collar social group in large urban regions, often more numerous than blue-collars in manufacturing. In this way, logistics zones correspond nowadays to emblematic blue-collar workplaces in current post-industrial metropolises.

This paper proposes to explore the geography of logistics zones as a way to understand the current dynamics of the blue-collar workplaces. Based on fieldworks conducted in the Paris region (case studies of several logistics zones and interviews with logistics real estate developers and investors, members of local public administrations and employees of para-public urban development companies) as well as comparisons with European and North-American city-regions (Raimbault et al, 2018; De Lara, 2018; Barbier et al, 2019), the paper shows that the silent privatisation of the production and the governance of logistics zones largely contribute to the invisibilisation of blue-collar workplaces in post-industrial metropolises.

Nicolas Raimbault is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nantes and researcher at ESO (Espaces et Sociétés, UMR CNRS 6590). He teaches urban geography, urban planning and urban policies and his research deals with the transformations of blue-collar places and their governance in the dual context of the rise of logistics blue-collar jobs and the fall of manufacturing jobs in European and North-American urban regions.

nicolas.raimbault@univ-nantes.fr

Logistics sprawl and the transformation of blue-collar workplaces geography

In most European and North-American urban regions, the spatial patterns of logistics industry geography have followed a very similar evolution (Dablanc & Frémont, 2015; Raimbault et al, 2018; Barbier et al, 2019). From the 1970s to the early 1990s, logistics providers and shippers found suitable spaces in the existing industrial zones to build the warehouses they needed to expand their logistics networks. They replaced former factories or built on plots that became available when the demand for new manufacturing sites started to decline. This led to a silent conversion of existing industrial zones into logistics zones. In other words, in most of metropolitan areas, historical industrial districts and suburbs, which are (still) the main residential places for the working class, became the first logistics belt. For instance, in the Paris Region, the historical industrial suburbs, known as the "red belt" because of their strong communist history, was the focus of most of the logistics sites over this period (Raimbault & Bahoken, 2014).

1 Blue-collars are defined here are employees concerned with routine or semi-routine manual occupations, characterised by weak autonomy within hierarchical work organization, relatively low incomes, and reduced promotion opportunities.

In the mid-1990s, an important geographical rupture occurred. Since then, new warehouses have been set up in increasingly remote suburbs. This phenomenon has been analysed as a "logistics sprawl", which is defined as the relocation of logistics facilities away from inner urban areas to outer-suburban areas. This literature shows how this spatial change significantly affects the urban goods movement and thus the urban environment (Dablanc & Ross, 2012). However, this also entails a rupture in terms of the socio-economic and political features of the logistics territories. These new outer-suburban logistics zones are developed in municipalities with a smaller population than in the previous period. Moreover, they are places often with no industrial history. Their economy is thus much more specialized: their development often being limited to logistics activities alone (Raimbault & Bahoken, 2014). Then, contrasting with the working class profile of the first logistics belt, the population of the new logistics places is characterized by an intermediate sociological profile: intermediate professions (technicians, civil servants, lower supervisory occupations. . .) are over-represented, and incomes are close to those of the regional median. Eventually, right-wing municipalities often predominate.

The lens of logistics dynamics sheds light on important evolutions of post-industrial working class places during the last decades.

In this way, the lens of logistics dynamics sheds light on important evolutions of post-industrial working class places during the last decades. Along with the gentrification dynamics and the subsequent displacements of working class residents within metropolitan suburbs, the delocalization of blue-collar jobs towards the middle-class outer-suburbia must also be taken into account. This impacts the everyday life of logistics workers, such as housing and commuting, as well as the governance of these workplaces and, in this way, the political and trade union involvement of blue-collars in their local communities and workplaces.

The silent privatisation of the production of logistics parks

The spatial rupture described above is strongly linked to a major change in the mode of production of logistics spaces. Indeed, since the 1990s, logistics firms (shippers and logistics services providers) have tended to opt for flexible real estate solutions and thus to look for warehouses to rent rather than building and managing their own facilities. This has contributed to the emergence of a global and financialised market dedicated to logistics real estate (Raimbault, 2016). In connection with the general dynamic of the financialisation of business property, the logistics real estate market is dominated by international firms, which specialise in logistics and manage global investment funds[2]. These companies take themselves in charge the development of the warehouses they buy as investment fund managers. In order to lessen their dependence on negotiations with local public authorities, which traditionally publicly developed directly the business zones, they also tend to be the land developers of the logistics zones in which they invest. In other words, instead of building warehouses scattered around different business zones, the industry leaders develop private logistics zones containing several warehouses. These "logistics parks" are entirely owned and operated by the same investment fund manager responsible for property management. They are fenced and protected by private security. Property management firms can also provide services for the companies renting the warehouses and their employees, such as canteens, crèches or even transport services (Raimbault, 2016).

2 The market leaders are Prologis (United States), Global Logistic Properties (GLP, Singapore), Goodman (Australia) and Segro (United-Kingdom).

Even if such private logistics parks must be authorised and supported by local governments - which are responsible for issuing spatial planning documents and building permits -, by definition, the production of logistics parks leads to the privatisation of the governance of logistics spaces. To the extent that logistics parks are entirely private, real estate firms become the *de facto* owners and managers of the streets and green spaces that constitute the public spaces in the logistics parks. Moreover, it also enables real estate companies to decide on local economic development issues, insofar as they select the firms that settle in the municipality, which considerably affects the latter's economic specialisation and prospects.

The consequences concerning the governance of current logistics territories are twofold. At the local scale, local governments negotiate only with property developers and investors. They rarely meet the users of the warehouses, the workers, the unions or even the logistics firms themselves. Managing the relations with the firms that rent the warehouses becomes the task of the property manager alone. Logistics parks developers sometimes face environmental or neighbourhood oppositions. However, the social movements focus exclusively on land development issues, approaching them from an environmental or quality-of-life perspective. This very limited form of politicisation does not concern the working and living conditions of warehouse workers. Logistics parks are not locally identified as blue-collar workplaces. At the regional scale, the financialisation of the production of logistics zones directly challenges planning policies. As this real estate product is particularly attractive for outer-suburban areas, where local authorities do not have the resources or the desire to develop logistics zones alone, the financialisation of logistics real estate largely has contributed to urban sprawl since the 1990s. It therefore intensifies the decentralization of blue-collar jobs without connections with the evolution of blue-collar residential geographies.

The invisibilisation of blue-collar workplaces

The "logistics sprawl", that is to say the decentralization of logistics blue-collar jobs towards small outer-suburban municipalities, leads to the spatial disconnection between the blue-collar residence places and the blue-collar workplaces and thus to the spatial mismatch faced by logistics workers. This blue-collar geography clearly contrasts with the relative social and spatial coherence of the former industrial suburbs. This spatial rupture is a powerful driving force contributing to the urban invisibility of blue-collars during the last decades according to three mechanisms.

First, the geography of logistics parks directly contributes to the disappearance of blue collars' strongholds inherited from the industrialization era, which used to concentrate both blue-collar jobs and residences. Historically, the labour movement has been structured on particular territories, which are the blue collars' strongholds of the 20th century. In other words, the working class was built not only on the empowerment of a socio-professional group but also on local territories and policies, connecting residential and working conditions issues, of which the "red suburbs" is the most obvious example. Blue-collars are still numerous, around 20% of the population in most of urban regions (Mischi et al, 2014), but they are now much more dispersed in space between disconnected residences and workplaces. This social group does not identify anymore with specific places.

Second, the logistics sprawl and the subsequent spatial mismatch between home and work result in a weak local anchorage of logistics workers. Then, because of their localisation in the outer-suburbia, their disconnection with main blue-collar residential places, as well as their design consisting in hiding the warehouses behind landscaped embankments, logistics zones are physically less visible in urban landscapes than former industrial zones. These remote suburbs are very little invested by left-wing activists, trade unions, and more generally associative and political networks. This geography clearly limits the emergence of workers social movements from warehouses. For example, the Fedex logistics site in Memphis, in the USA, is commonly described as "one of the great non-union industrial

complexes in the US" (Allen, 2015).

Third, blue-collars and their interests are largely absent from the governance of logistics zones. From a general point of view, due to the spatial mismatch, blue-collar workers are generally not voters in the territories where they work. Then, because of the dominance of financialised logistics real estate industry on local governments presented above, local political agendas do not include the diverse issues faced by logistics workers while unions do not involve in the local politics of these territories. Logistics zones are thus not seen as blue-collar workplaces even if workers are almost exclusively blue-collars in these zones (Gaborieau, 2016). At the same time, blue-collars tend to be excluded from local politics and urban regeneration policies in the historical industrial spaces which do not label anymore as blue-collar places (Rousseau, 2009).

However, more and more numerous strikes and struggles have quite recently emerged in logistics zones, contrasting with previous social movements focused on land development issues (Barbier et al, 2019). On the one hand, many activists have identified logistics zones as vulnerable choke points within supply chain networks (Cowen, 2014; Alimahomed-Wilson, Ness, 2018). Blocking logistics zones proves to be an efficient tactic within contemporary struggles, such as during the current "yellow vests" movement in France (2018-2019). On the other hand, logistics workers themselves have more and more frequently entered into strikes. In this way, they directly experiment the power that blocking those choke points afford them (Cuppini et al, 2015). Besides struggles in logistics zones, conflicts have also arisen against the issue of the "uberisation" of deliveries.

Eventually, beyond the tactical interest of blocking logistics flows, current struggles around logistics zones highlight the larger significance of blocking the production of logistics flows, in a way that complements the blocking of the production of other goods and services (such as retailing). Indeed, unlike most of other production sectors, logistics activities and zones now concentrate numerous blue-collars in urban regions. In this sense, blocking the production of logistics flows would not only create economic pressure but would also mobilize these blue-collar workers, and make them more visible as a blue-collar professional group. These social movements would also reinforce the local anchorage of logistics workers, which could constitute in some cases coherent local political actors. Dialectically, a higher social and political visibility of logistics zones as blue-collar workplaces is thus a crucial condition in order to make blue-collar workers more visible in post-industrial metropolises.

References

Allen J. (2015), "Studying Logistics", *Jacobin*. URL: *https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/02/logistics-industry-organizing-labor/*

Alimahomed-Wilson, J., Ness, I. (2018), *Choke Points*, University of Chicago Press.

Barbier C., Cuny C., Raimbault N. (2019), "The production of logistics places in France and Germany: a comparison between Paris, Frankfurt-am-Main and Kassel", *Work Organisation Labour & Globalisation*, in press.

Bonacich, E., Wilson, J. B. (2008), *Getting the goods: Ports, labor, and the logistics revolution*, Cornell University Press.

Cowen D. (2014), *The Deadly Life of Logistics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

Cuppini N., Frapporti M., Pirone M. (2015), "Logistics Struggles in the Po Valley Region: Territorial Transformations and Processes of Antagonistic Subjectivation", *South Atlantic Quaterly*, Vol. 114, n°1, 119-134.

Dablanc, L., A. Frémont (dir.) (2015), *La métropole logistique*, Paris: Armand Colin.

Dablanc, L., C. Ross (2012), "Atlanta: A Mega Logistics Center in the Piedmont Atlantic Megaregion (PAM)", *Journal of Transport Geography*, 24, 432-442.

De Lara, J. (2018), *Inland Shift: Race, Space, and Capital in Southern California*, Univ of California Press.

Gaborieau D. (2016), *Des Usines à colis. Trajectoire ouvrière des entrepôts de la grande distribution*, PhD in Sociology, Paris-1 University.

Mischi, J., Pasquiers, O., Pottier, C., Renahy, N. & translated by Oliver Waine, (2014) "The world of the blue-collar worker: changed, but not gone", *Metropolitics*, 19 February 2014. URL: https://www.metropolitiques.eu/The-world-of-the-blue-collar.html

Raimbault, N. (2016), « Ancrer le capital dans les flux logistiques : la financiarisation de l'immobilier logistique », *Revue d'Economie Régionale et Urbaine*, 1/2016, 131-154.

Raimbault, N., Bahoken, F. (2014), « Quelles places pour les activités logistiques dans la métropole parisienne? », *Territoire en mouvement*, 23-24, 53-74.

Raimbault N., Heitz A., Dablanc L. (2018), « Urban planning policies for logistics facilities. A comparison between US metropolitan areas and the Paris region », in Browne M. et al. (dir.), *Urban Logistics*, London, Kogan Page, 82-107.

Rousseau, M. (2009), "Re-imaging the City Centre for the Middle Classes: Regeneration, Gentrification and Symbolic Policies in 'Loser Cities'", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Resear*ch, 33(3), 770-788.