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Small towns in France: research and public policy (2010-2023)

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The aim of this paper is to present the main trends in research on small towns in France since 2010. Against a backdrop of small towns being put on the political agenda, three topics in particular are explored: the great return of centrality, urban decline and development models.

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Introduction

A tradition of research on small towns in France

In France, research on small and medium-sized cities has a long history (Edouard, 2012) but, as in Germany, scientific debates and the focus of many studies on metropolisation overshadowed them in the 2000s (Carrier, Demazière, 2012; Demazière, 2017; Berroir et al., 2019). Demazière considers that *medium-sized* cities occupy a marginal place in urban research (Demazières, 2012). The revival of interest in medium-sized cities in France was particularly marked in the 2010s, as can be seen from the many scientific and professional journal articles devoted to them (Urbanisme no. 378, 2011; RERU 2012; Métropolitiques, 2013; etc.). *Small towns*, on the other hand, have long been the poor relation of urban studies (Edouard, 2012), but in recent years they too have been the subject of renewed interest at national level: action-research programmes are emerging, such as the POPSU Territoires 'Research for and with small towns' (2018), and the CGET is devoting a study to them in 2019 (Boutet et al., 2019).

In 2008 and 2012, Jean-Charles Edouard published two articles tracing the development of research in geography and urban planning on small towns in France. There has been a tradition of research on small towns since the 1950s and 1960s. Without going into the state of the art in detail, we can recall a few of the main points here. In the 1950s and 1960s, numerous monographs on small towns were drawn up. In the 1970s and 1980s, research focused more on defining the 'small town' object and on the role of small towns in urban-rural relations. In the 1990s and 2000s, research focused on two subjects: 1) the effects of globalisation and metropolisation on small towns (loss of momentum, increased dependence on regional contexts, increased mobility, suburbanisation); 2) small towns as witnesses to wider socio-economic changes, and as observation areas for ongoing public policies (territorial restructuring, heritage enhancement policies, cultural democratisation, innovation support policies, etc.). Demazière notes that this inclusion of small towns in all-encompassing reasoning tends to erase their specific features (Demazière 2017, 2021). The period 1990-2010 was marked by a more general tendency to consider that the rural areas in France are merging with widespread urbanisation (Lévy, 1994).

These two main subjects of research, as well as reflection on the relevance of categorisations and spatial concepts, have continued into the 2010s, but in a political and new media context that is conducive to putting the difficulties encountered by and in small towns, and more broadly in non-metropolitan areas, on the political agenda.

The decade 2014-2024: a "small towns moment" in France

This political and media context was initially characterised by a debate on the "territorial divide" and "peripheral France" around the success of Christophe Guilly's eponymous book, published in 2014: the author denounced a certain abandonment of the inhabitants of rural areas, of small and medium-sized towns and of suburban areas, to the benefit of the inhabitants of large cities and metropolises. Widely disputed in the scientific sphere for the methodology used, for the very binary reading of socio-spatial processes and for the populist and racist overtones of the thesis and its political instrumentalisation by the far right, this book nonetheless had a strong resonance in the public debate. At the same time, the Ayrault and then Valls governments were communicating extensively on the need to take greater account of small towns in urban policy, and then on the call for expressions of interest in small towns. The theme of the territorial divide and the abandonment of the inhabitants of rural and suburban fringes and small and medium-sized towns returned to the forefront of the political and media scene

in 2018 during the *Gilets jaunes* movement, a social movement whose spatial roots in rural and suburban areas and in small and medium-sized towns has never been proven but is sufficiently postulated for the public authorities to launch a series of actions aimed at them - the widespread introduction of *Maisons France Services*, and two programmes to revitalise small and medium-sized towns.

The first public policies specifically dedicated to town centres and small towns were implemented, with the AMI Centres-bourgs launched in 2014 (54 winners, for towns with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants) and then the Petites Villes de Demain programme since 2020 (more than 1,600 towns with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants, including both urban and rural towns).

Small towns, along with medium-sized towns and the countryside, were once again at the centre of the media spotlight during the pandemic: in contrast to the metropolises weakened by successive confinements, small towns were seen as places adorned with all the virtues and a renewed attractiveness... but which is not clearly borne out by the facts (Milet (dir.) 2022).

The great comeback of Christaller and centrality

The dilution of small towns into broad urban or rural categories has characterized research as well as spatial planning in France for several decades. Over the last ten years, however, there has been a comeback of the Christallerian approach, and more generally of centrality.

The small town, an unidentified object in French official statistics

As elsewhere in Europe, the criteria for defining a small town in France are population and centrality within a catchment area or employment area. But once these criteria have been established, there are as many definitions of "small town" as there are authors, studies and programmes. A small town is smaller than a medium-sized town, and larger than a market town.

A study by the CGET in 2019 proposes thresholds of 2,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, with 2,000 inhabitants being the INSEE threshold for urban units. When comparing France and Germany, it is important to bear in mind the fragmentation of the local authority network and the importance that inter-municipality has gradually assumed in France. A town with 3,000 inhabitants in France would be the centre of a commune with 5,000 inhabitants in Germany.

The national office for statistics INSEE is proposing a functional zoning of the national territory in terms of urban catchment areas, replacing the zoning in terms of urban areas: in both cases, an area defines the extent of influence of an urban centre on the surrounding municipalities, based on two criteria: population and employment. This zoning does not allow us to identify a "small town" category, simply the centres of small areas (with fewer than 50,000 inhabitants), which represent only a small proportion of small towns (since those that are part of the catchment area of a larger town are not identified). These are characterised by demographic stagnation (see following documents, urban areas and catchment areas of towns).

The merit of this zoning is that it is compatible with European classifications, but it is highly contested by both researchers and practitioners, particularly when it comes to studying the basis of the urban hierarchy: the "poor understanding of small towns and market towns by INSEE's work" is due to the fact that "small towns are broken down by INSEE into all the urban categories" (Jousseume et Talandier 2016)

Identifying small towns by their level of facilities and services

Two studies attempt to identify small towns differently. On the one hand, Talandier and Jousseume propose redefining the basis of the urban framework in a Christallerian way, no longer according to population and employment, but according to the level of facilities and services, an indicator of urban functions. A small town would then correspond to a municipality equipped with a secondary school, a hypermarket and a hospital. According to Jousseume and Talandier, the dynamism of small cities, measured in terms of changes in the number of working people and jobs (1999-2009), is much more marked than in medium-sized towns.

In addition, commissioned by and in collaboration with ANCT, the CESEAR research centre has carried out an extensive statistical study on levels of centrality to provide scientific support for the identification of municipalities potentially eligible for the Small Towns of Tomorrow programme. The study distinguishes 4 levels of centrality according to the level of facilities and defines their catchment area. The first level corresponds to villages, the 4^{ème} to medium-sized and large towns. Level 2^{ème} refers to town centres and level 3^{ème} to small towns. It is these levels of centrality that the Small Towns of Tomorrow programme is aimed at. The study is extremely detailed and nuanced, and also explores the fragility of these centres, which largely depends on the territorial context.

The explicit return of centrality: reaffirming small towns as structuring centres for rural areas

This revival of the centrality approach to small towns is clearly visible in the ANCT's publications and programmes. The CGET's 2019 study is entitled "Small centralities" (and not "small towns"), thus emphasising the functions and challenges of networking (made explicit by the inclusion of W. Christaller's diagram and the study's reference to the theory of central places). Another example is the "Small Towns of Tomorrow" programme, whose aim is to "improve the quality of life in small town centres and the surrounding rural areas". In fact, when we look at the "Petites villes de demain" (Small towns of tomorrow) argument, the CGET note for 2019, we see a tendency for public players to talk as much about small "centralities" as they do about small towns. From the point of view of public action, the "small towns" moment is therefore quite clearly a "small centralities" moment. This can be explained, in part, by a renewal of public action aimed at rural areas. In this context, small towns and town centres appear to be the right places for the State to invest (investing in small towns also means acting for and on the surrounding rural areas). This return to centrality and Christallerian references is not without its paradoxes. It is a way of rediscovering a kind of golden age for small towns, even though the contexts are now very different: populations are mobile and the market town, the small town or the main town is no longer able to provide all the services and meet all the needs of the resident population. As Estèbe (2018) points out, "the territorial order that served a sedentary population is now obsolete [...] Planning is now that of networks, relationships, lines along which we unwind our nomadic lives". The presentation that Coralie and I will be giving will focus on this shift. The centrality approach can also be seen in recent doctoral research, such as Elodie Texier's thesis on *Les centralités des petites villes: en marge ou au cœur de l'action publique* (The centrality of small towns: on the fringes or at the heart of public action) (Texier 2022).

A focus on urban shrinkage and vacancy

A decade behind Germany, the issue of urban shrinkage and peripherization has been the focus of numerous studies and is at the heart of two planning policies implemented since 2018 for medium-sized cities and since 2020 for small towns.

Exploring urban decline in the French urban system

The CESEAR study reveals a very marked territorial context effect: the fragility of intermediate and structuring centres is most marked in predominantly rural départements and/or those on the low-density diagonal (map). This result confirms the regional effect already highlighted by several studies of the socio-demographic dynamics of the French urban system, studies that seek to identify the dynamics of urban decline (Cauchi-Duval, Rudolph, and Cornuau 2017 ; Glita 2021 ; Wolff et al. 2013). The demographic and/or economic dynamism of small towns is highly dependent on the territorial context in which they are located, on a regional and more local scale (Demazière 2021) :

- Small towns in the most dynamic regions (west, south and south-east) are also dynamic in terms of population and employment, while those in the centre and east are in decline (resources).
- Small towns located within the area of influence of a large city or metropolis are gaining inhabitants and jobs, while the trajectories of "isolated" small towns are more uncertain (distance).
- The contrasts in dynamism between small towns can also be attributed to the willingness and ability of local players.

Small towns are over-represented among those in decline: more than two-thirds of shrinking urban areas are small, whereas they account for less than half of urban areas that are growing or relatively stable. But unlike Germany, the primary factor in urban decline in France is the migration deficit; the natural balance plays a more secondary role, even though the ageing of the population is more marked in small towns than in medium-sized or large cities.

The shrinking of services: small towns on the front line

A series of studies in quantitative geography have shown that small towns have suffered more than others from the shrinking services to the population. The decline of retail activities is particularly marked in small towns (Delage et al. 2020) although in different ways depending on their geographical context (Chaze 2017). Small towns have suffered greatly from the reforms and restructuring of public services in France over the last two decades, for example in the fields of health and justice (Baudet-Michel et al. 2021). In the words of Philippe Estèbe (2018), they used to be the 'favourite children of the Republic', but they have lost their status quo and suffered from the State's disenchantment, in the same way as medium-sized towns.

This work on the shrinkage of public services tends to highlight the fact that the weakening of small (and medium-sized) towns is not the sole product of demographic or economic changes, but is also the result of national sectoral public policies, one of whose mantras is rationalisation, often described as austerity policies (Courcelle, Fijalkow, et Taulelle 2017). The studies on shrinkage are part of a trend towards greater emphasis on 'socio-spatial justice' in territorial sciences in the 2010s, which may have fuelled the argument that 'peripheral France' has been neglected or abandoned.

Vacancy and regeneration

Another area of research has focused on urban issues in a context of decline. The urban management of residential and/or commercial vacancy in town centres or small towns has been the subject of several doctoral theses, often using a comparative approach that includes cases of small towns (Brouard-Sala 2021; Mondain 2021; Sowa 2017; Texier 2022). Urban sprawl and regeneration strategies in declining town centres have also attracted the attention of planning researchers, particularly as part of the POPSU Territoires programme (Miot et Dubeaux s. d.; Morel Journal et al. 2022; Serre et Salvia 2022). Similarly, the issues of structural change in small industrial and/or military

towns, whether from an economic or urban (brownfield) point of view, is documented by several case studies (Gauduchon 2018; Lotz-Coll 2019).

The liveliness of research on urban decline and shrinkage in the 2010s, particularly on the issues of residential and commercial vacancy, is in line with the concerns of local players on these issues. Elodie Texier's thesis (based on a study of four small towns in Aquitaine) shows that local players are almost obsessed with commercial vacancy, despite the fact that this is just one aspect of the important functions of small towns in the eyes of residents and users.

The scientific interest in vacancy issues, and the concerns of local players is relayed by the lobbying work of networks of political players such as the Association de Petites Villes de France (Association of Small Towns in France). It has helped to put the difficulties encountered by town centres, small towns and medium-sized towns on the scientific, political and media agenda, in particular the commercial and residential decline of town centres, but also the weakness of the financial and, above all, human resources of small towns, given the challenges of regeneration. In fact, these are the main issues targeted by the regeneration programmes that were implemented on an experimental basis in 2014 (AMI Centres-bourgs) and then more systematically in 2018 (Action Cœur de ville) and 2020 (Petites Villes de Demain). But at the same time, putting urban decline on the agenda has contributed to a slow rethink of the "CAME mythology". (Bouba-Olga et Grossetti 2018)

CAME and small towns: towards the end of an addiction?

In 2018, an economist and a sociologist published a paper that had a lot of resonance in French territorial sciences: "The CAME mythologie (Competitiveness, Attractiveness, Metropolisation, Excellence): how can we detox?" The title plays on words in French: "came" means drug. The paper does question the dominant narrative, according to which globalization is making it imperative for all territories to be competitive, attractive for talent and leaders, and these cities should be supported by concentrating efforts on excellence. The paper does not focus on small towns and rural areas, but it calls for more attention to be paid to the diversity of situations and trajectories, and it calls for questioning the dominant model of regional development, based on competitiveness and attractiveness.

Development models are a key issue in research on small towns. In France, the question arises of the reference points for public action in small and medium-sized towns. The development models implicitly referred to in the policies implemented in small and medium-sized towns generally fall within the field of territorial competitiveness and are designed in and for other, often metropolitan, territorial contexts (Edouard, Mainet, 2014). This type of framework is all the more important as many small towns lack financial and human resources, making them particularly dependent on national and European funding programmes. Because of the weakness of local engineering, the capacity to respond to calls for tender and to implement these programmes is often limited. It is this weakness that the PVD programme aims to remedy, by funding 75% of the project manager's post for each winning town.

The attractiveness of small towns and its drawbacks

Like large and medium-sized cities, small towns are tending to implement attractiveness strategies (Helene Mainet and Edouard 2017). These strategies are sometimes disconnected from local realities and reflect the influence of the "mythology of competitiveness, attractiveness, metropolisation and excellence" (Bouba-Olga, Grossetti, 2018) on local players. The communication strategies of small towns often draw on clichés about big cities, including a logic of "mimicry" ((Bazin, Beckerich, et Delaplace 2013; Edouard 2014; Hélène Mainet 2011), Roudier, 2019). In small towns, it is above all the residential, economic and tourist aspects of attractiveness that are in vogue....

The advantage of intermediarity between urban and rural areas (Hélène Mainet 2011; Hélène Mainet et Rieutort 2020), the 'minimal urbanity' (Delebarre and Pfirsch 2016) that small towns present, re-emerged spectacularly in research during the Covid 19 pandemic. A wide-ranging study funded by the PUCA showed that, far from causing a generalised urban exodus, the pandemic merely accelerated a powerful dynamic of 'peri-urbanisation'; at the same time, towns with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants experienced a resurgence in attractiveness, both in the central municipalities and in their suburban fringes (Milet (dir.) 2022). However, the major regional disparities (see above) remain: it is above all the most accessible small towns, particularly those on the west coast and in the south-east, that have benefited, while those in the low-density areas of central and eastern France have generally remained outside these flows.

While the promotion of local amenities and the enhancement of quality criteria were given media coverage during the health crisis, they have been on the minds of local players in small towns for several decades. Against a backdrop of developing residential economies and increased population mobility (particularly daily commuting and mobility between home and work), these players have put in place residential attractiveness strategies designed to attract new residents. In these territorial marketing strategies, which emphasise social relations based on mutual acquaintance (far from the anonymity of the big cities), local shops and services and territorial amenities close to 'nature', qualitative elements that play on the 'attractiveness' are put in place. The aim is to promote the image of small towns as places where people live their daily lives, places "where life is good" (Edouard and Mainet 2023). These strategies highlight the attractiveness of the area through the quality of the place. This brings us back to the importance of images, imaginations and the sometimes idealised narrative of small towns.

The tourist appeal of small towns is also the subject of research, notably as part of the POPSU Territoires programme. This work addresses the multiple issues in small towns where a significant proportion of homes are second homes (66% in Quiberon). Attractive to some, these towns are becoming repellent to year-round residents, particularly because of the cost of housing. Other issues linked to tourism and seasonality are also addressed, for example through the tensions revealed by the processes of appropriation of space by residents and tourists in small, highly tourist-oriented towns. (Ouellet 2021). Tourism development also has a major impact on the governance of small towns (Idt, Meunier, et Renou 2022).

At the turn of the 2010s, support for the residential economy and quality of life seemed to be the unsurpassable horizon for public action in secondary towns (Demazière, 2014).

Non-metropolitan productive dynamics, between scientific disinterest and a national programme

In France, small and medium-sized towns have been home to a significant proportion of industrial activity, which has been able to evolve and adapt, sometimes even creating veritable industrial sub-regions. The 1990s and 2000s were relatively fertile periods for scientific and political interest in the dynamics of productive innovation in small towns (industrial districts, clusters, etc.). Over the last ten years or so, however, there has been a relative lack of research interest in innovation and industry in small towns, which may seem surprising. At present, small towns are still the areas where industry accounts for the highest proportion of total employment (de Lapasse et Kaldi 2018). In more than half of small towns, industry accounts for a higher proportion of employment than the national average

(12%¹). On average, industrial employment in these towns is slightly higher (16.4% in 2019) than in medium-sized towns (13.6%) and significantly higher than in towns with more than 200,000 inhabitants (10.5%). For example, the national "Territoires d'industrie" programme², launched in 2018, is designed to contribute to the strategy of reclaiming industry by territories and is targeted at "... inter-municipalities or groups of inter-municipalities located in the countryside, peri-urban areas and small and medium-sized towns" (ANCT website). It mainly concerns small and medium-sized towns and rural areas (148 territories of industry have been selected).

So there is a reality of industrial activity and an industrial economic and socio-cultural heritage in small towns that is relatively little studied. Similarly, the media and politicians visibly rediscovered the importance of industrial, blue-collar, low-skilled employment in small towns during the demonstrations against pension reform in early 2023 (the demonstrations were strong in these areas).

A small number of studies have taken a fresh look at the integration and participation of small towns in processes of economic innovation. Tallec et al. show that, depending on the productive logic of their economic fabric, small towns (in the south-west) are freeing themselves from metropolitan influence while at the same time participating in globalised production and trade chains. (Navereau, Tallec, and Zuliani 2019). Gros-Balthazard, on the other hand, shows that the reterritorialisation of the footwear production revival in the small town of Romans takes place outside the globalised circuit and is part of a movement of economic, social and environmental transition (Gros-Balthazard 2018).

Small towns in transition?

Despite the CAME model being strongly questioned, the implementation of alternative development strategies in small and medium-sized towns still seems marginal in France (Berroir et al., 2019). The contribution of academic research to the emergence of new approaches and models involves, in particular, an interest in environmental and social transitions.

Far from being reduced to areas in decline and in a process of weakening, case studies show that integration into wider territorial systems can help to overcome certain weaknesses (in terms of resources in particular), whether this involves integration into major national and European development projects (Gaudin et Sutton 2019) or in a metropolitan context (Morel Journal et al. 2022). A number of recent studies emphasise the fact that, far from a simple relationship of dependence on the central conurbation, small towns integrated into metropolitan areas play a driving role in the construction of the latter (Berroir et al. 2017). Small towns can thus play a structuring role in metropolitanisation and sprawl, within multipolar spatial logics (Aragau, 2009; Bonnin-Oliveira, 2013). Small peri-urban towns benefit from the search for a "compromise between distance from the big city and maintaining a gradient of urban density in the living environment" (Delebarre et Pfirsch 2016). This work highlights the role of small towns as intermediaries, a role already highlighted by previous research on their intermediarity (Hélène Mainet 2011) and the combinatory logic (the town in the

¹ INSEE 2019 data, at urban unit level (2,000 to 20,000 for small towns; 20,000 to 200,000 for medium-sized towns and over 200,000 for large towns).

² The aim is to: promote the attractiveness of the region and the industrial professions; facilitate the training, recruitment and mobility of employees in order to meet companies' labour needs; support companies and regions in the digital and ecological transitions; speed up administrative procedures, particularly for setting up industrial sites.

country) put forward in the association between the living environment and lifestyles, that of a 'country urbanity' (Guillot and Ambal 2022).

The current dynamics of small towns can no longer be considered without considering the challenges of environmental and energy transitions. In fact, policies based on residential attractiveness, which is itself strongly linked to daily commuting (particularly commuting), raise questions in terms of land consumption, landscape transformation and mobility, and must consider the effects and costs generated by these lifestyles: environmental costs, social and health costs (particularly for the most vulnerable households). Whether we're talking about small towns on the outskirts of cities or more isolated ones, the challenges of transition are high. Indeed, dependence on the private car is high. In a recent study by INSEE (Cornuet 2022), it is clear that households living in rural communes (outside urban units) and in small towns (urban units with fewer than 20,000 inhabitants), which are more dependent on the car and more often equipped with oil-fired heating, appear to be the most affected by the recent economic downturn, appear to be the hardest hit by the recent rise in energy costs, with an average loss of disposable income of 720 euros compared with 2020, despite the introduction of support measures by the State (tariff shield, discount on pump prices, energy voucher, etc.).

There is also work looking at the place of certain population groups in small towns, at the crossroads of geography, sociology and political science. For example, in the case of a small industrial town (Rive-de-Gier, between Lyon and St-Etienne), a research-action project has shown that for decades the sociological make-up of the town, and more specifically the importance of the working classes, had been completely ignored in the implementation of regeneration policies, and how taking them into account could help to revitalise the town in a more coherent way (Morel Journal et al. 2022). Other studies highlight the transformative potential of sociological changes in small towns. For example, the ageing population of Xertigny can be used as an opportunity to redevelop a brownfield site into a nursing home (EHPAD) (Balard, Freichel, and Martin 2022). Similarly, Arfaoui highlights the effect that the installation of an asylum seekers' centre can have on social mobilisation in the small town of Ambert (Arfaoui 2021). Through these categories, and beyond their specificities, the aim is to rethink the development of small towns by and for their inhabitants, and therefore to go beyond the model of residential attractiveness and economy that has long dominated public action and local governance.

The question of the place of residents in small towns also involves a discreet interest on the part of urban research in issues of participation and also conflict, in territorial contexts marked by a greater inter-knowledge of the players than in larger towns (Charles 2020; Ouellet 2021) but also by a tendency for some people to withdraw into closed areas of sociability (Coquard 2019; Renahy 2010). In line with the imperatives of the ecological transition in terms of local planning, stakeholders are being asked to involve residents in the choices planned and the decisions taken, which concern residential models, mobility and consumption practices, and economic orientations (Guillot and Ambal, 2022).

Conclusion

In France, the scientific and public debate on the challenges and future of small and medium-sized towns began to pick up again in the 2010s, with both urban studies and planning policies now devoting specific attention to them. The tendency to consider small towns as urban centres in their own right has been growing for some years now. More than ever, there is a strong need for public players (local and national) and researchers to study and understand small towns as specific places, with a wide variety of situations and trajectories, without forgetting that they are fully integrated into mobile societies and globalised economies, and that understanding links and networks is important for analysing the processes underway.

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