

### Jacques Lévy

The article written by Fabrice Ripoll and Jean Rivère (hereinafter referred to as FR&JR) triggered a debate that is useful both in terms of the ideas it throws into discussion and by its very existence. The opportunities provided by academic publications in French to follow scientific debates are too few and far between. I have already had the opportunity to participate in this type of exchange with the *Annales de Géographie* (Hoyaux, 2002; Lévy, 2002). In another instance, an article by Frédéric Giraut, cited by FR&JR, focused on a similar subject, but was written with such unconcealed bias that the editor did not even suggest that I should respond to it and the author subsequently presented his apologies for having been somewhat offhand in his reasoning. However, in this case, we are presented with a courteous approach for which I would like to thank both the authors and the editor of the *Annales de la Recherche Urbaine*. My only reservation is that, in my opinion, it would have been preferable if the exchange with FR&JR had begun before the article was even published. This would not have detracted from the liveliness of the debate, but would have avoided any misunderstandings, sharpened arguments and offered readers more than just the most obvious aspects of the debate. In my response, I try to concentrate on points that I find essential, omitting digressions and secondary issues.

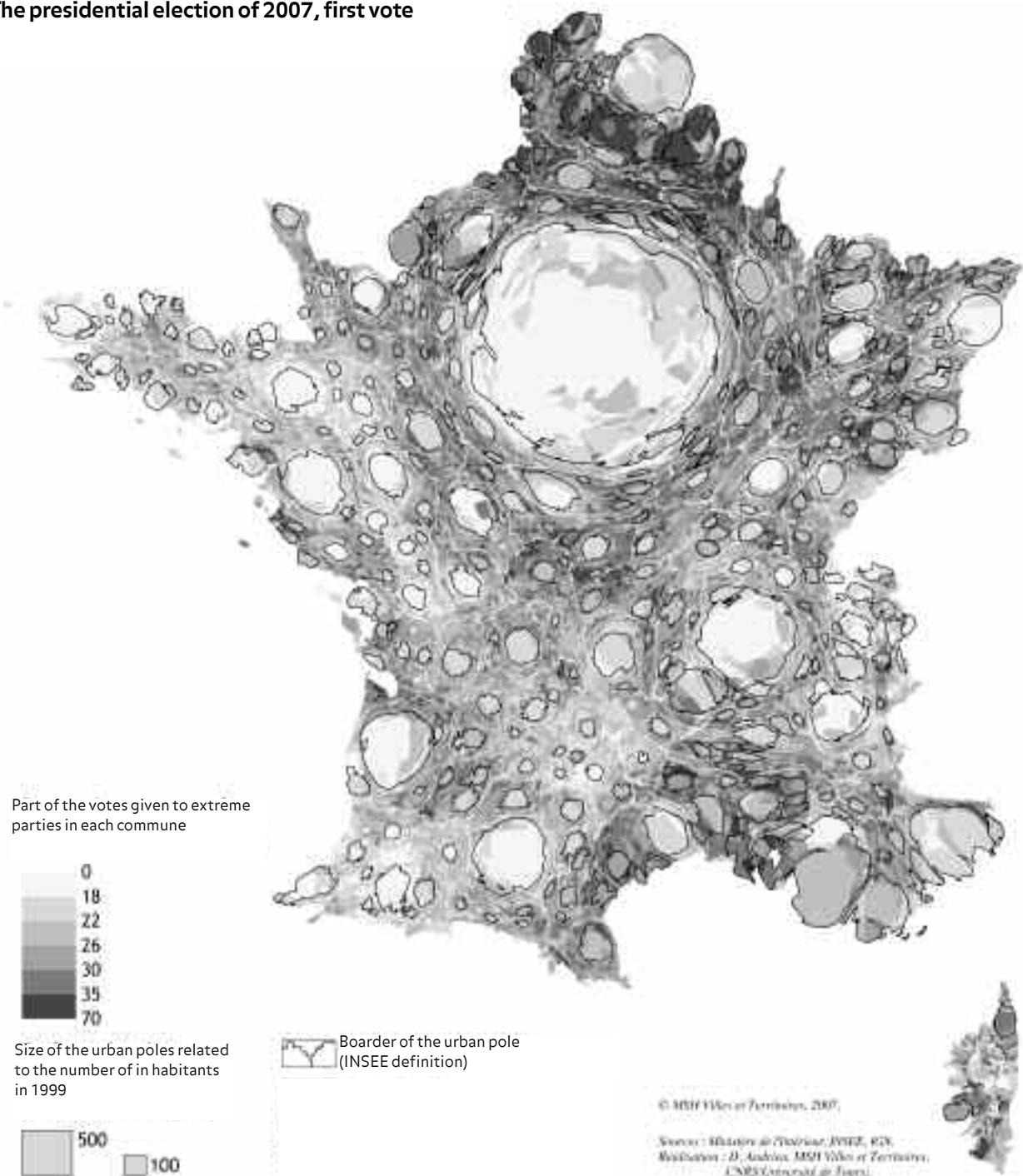
### Researcher and citizen

Let us begin by focusing on methodology. FR&JR composed a corpus with different types of texts; some were scientific articles or books, others were articles written for the mainstream press, others were written from a more socially aware perspective. By publishing all these texts in my name, I assumed responsibility for personal consistency and I continue to do so without any reservations: these contributions are from an individual who thinks of himself

- rightly or wrongly - as a unified person. This does not, however, justify treating them in an undifferentiated manner, especially in a scientific journal. I can frankly see no sense in integrating standpoints from a public debate (I expressed an opinion on the European referendum of 29 May 2005 and this example was used on many occasions by FR&JR) into the analysed corpus, only to reproach me later for having expressed my views. I do not have to justify myself for playing my role as a citizen by making political, or fundamentally, ethical choices, and by striving to convince others of their accuracy. I am proud to say that this aspect is also present in articles written for daily newspapers, also frequently cited. Such articles are hybrid objects, at the boundaries of scientific disclosure using mainstream media (inevitably leading to some simplifications and approximations) and of individual commitments: like many others, I try to be an intellectual too and to participate, not only with reasoning but also with opinions, in community life. By mixing the register of “explanatory model” and “normative responsibility”, to use their terminology, FR&JR create an artefact that detracts from their approach. Of course, as researchers they can legitimately criticise a theory of urbanity, just as they are perfectly entitled, as militants, to refute my opinions. What does not make sense, in my opinion, is to draw an argument from the second register to invalidate the first.

In this respect, the authors’ political sensitivity to the “social issue” is not, in itself, open to criticism, quite the contrary. It constitutes an additional resource for research, by focusing attention, for example, on peripheral or marginalised sectors in society, which could easily go unnoticed in researchers’ studies. To cite but one example, studies conducted by Djemila Zeneidi (2002; 2007) into the homeless and squatters made a massive contribution to our knowl-

## The presidential election of 2007, first vote

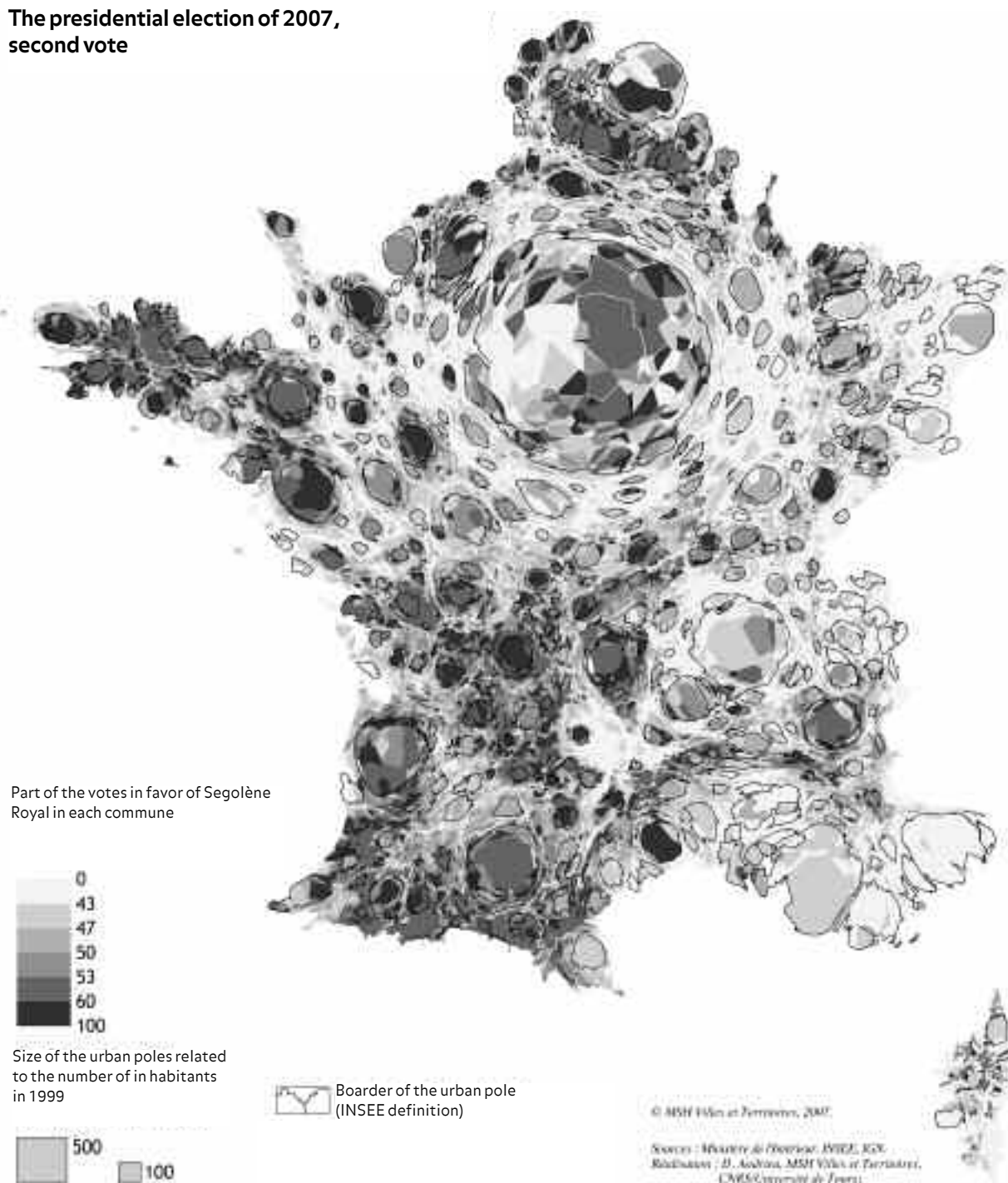


edge of contemporary spatiality. It is only when political commitments push aside specific fields, questions and even answers that they become problematic. Thus, the radical distinction between the “dominators” and the “dominated” could result in a condescending dichotomy: the dominators assigned with intentions and the dominated with the “determinants”. One dare not ask in which category the researcher falls. For example, analysis of the extreme right vote in France was often an excuse, using an *overhang* approach,

to deny the voters’ responsibility for a genuinely political act: by making their political persuasion the product of a sociological mechanism that bypasses the conscious choice of the voter, it seemed we were shutting out the possibility that another conscious political choice might rectify the first.

And yet recent history has shown that it is in fact using a genuinely political field - with argued debates in which individuals can freely express themselves, regardless, inci-

## The presidential election of 2007, second vote



dentally, of their socio-economic situation - that it has been possible to weaken the National Front's influence. This stance whereby responsibilities are alleviated is disturbing on an ethical level since, instead of contributing to a sense of empowerment and a capacity for action for those concerned, it actually pushes them towards a sense of victimisation that tends to dissuade them from assuming their share of responsibility in the life they are leading. To make students from modest backgrounds believe that their

academic success is predetermined and that their personal effort will have no impact on their career is more than "offhand": it is downright dangerous. In the end, the "charitable" approach turns against any plans for emancipation.

On a scientific level, the risk would be to prevent the study of certain phenomena or objects, through fear of unearthing a disturbing reality. We tell ourselves that we cannot burden those who already carry the "weight of the world" on their shoulders with another stigma. And so we

go no further than general remarks about the fact that they are “suffering”, which is sidestepping true analysis.

With regard to all of these aspects, the attitude of FR&JR is somewhat worrying. Apart from the content, which I will go on to analyse later, the article as a whole forms a framework in which the unifying feature is a constant statement, explicit or thinly veiled, which puts the reader ill at ease: “It is wrong (to try) to show that social groups (dominated) residing in peri-urban areas (because they really have no other choice) and living in a less urban space vote more for extreme parties than other urban dwellers”.

### Individuals as players, space as environment

The difference between FR&JR and myself can, of course, be seen in our basis analysis of urban space. At this stage, I am not going to base my argument on the superiority (which is fairly well established in my opinion) of dialogical systemism – i.e. society as a system of interactive actors and objects – over Marxism or, more generally, over structuralisms. Apparently, for FR&JR, referring to players already means having made the fatal leap towards methodological individualism, “neo-liberalism”, the exclusion of the poor and other unspeakable horrors. In principle, it would be entirely acceptable to continue this kind of discussion but would be outside the scope of the rather more modest conversation we are able to conduct in this paper. We can therefore attempt to “come down a notch” in the definition of the objects at the centre of the debate and broach questions that can be more easily defined. With regard to the subject of concern here, two questions correspond to this approach: the “freedom” of spatial players and the explanatory nature of the space.

Let us start with a point of agreement: living is not limited to housing and urbanity is not confined to the city.

FR&JR are right to remind readers that – thanks to surveys in which I participated (Haegelin Lévy, 1997; Scalab, 2004) – I was able to demonstrate that the spatial universe of an individual cannot be deduced from his or her place of residence alone. The recent thesis by Fanny Letissier on urban heritage confirms this statement. It is true that the etymological link between “*habitation*» (housing), “*habitat*» (living environment) and “*habiter*» (to live in) also deserves attention and is not entirely coincidental: in a mobile world where individuals occupy many other locations than those in which they live, the principal residence remains important for it has paradoxically acquired a new position as a «fixed point», a reference point for individuals who, no longer «confined to home», need to give meaning to a myriad of spatial experiences. This helps to understand why the electoral arena, which positions individuals in terms of their place of residence alone, does not seem governed by random mechanisms, even if a detailed exam-

ination of the configuration of urban spaces is conducted. The fact remains, however, that comprehensive spatial characterisation of individuals should take account of the entire range of the geographical areas they frequent for one reason or another. While progress can be made with the characterisation of populations in various localities by combining residential, professional or other densities (Chôros, 2005-2008), we must admit that we are still a long way from being able to complete the spatial “portfolio” of individuals when we analyse their votes. We must be fully aware of this limit when we analyse voters’ spatiality.

However, FR&JR mistakenly attribute to me the idea that urbanity is found in historical centres and nowhere else. Urbanity can be found in city centres and suburbs, in peri-urban areas and in the hypo- and infra-urban countryside. It exists in villages and deserts, and a team of Swiss researchers (Diener *et al.*, 2006) set out to demonstrate that the Matterhorn, a national icon, was steeped in urbanity. Urbanity exists whenever a space offers just a little density in diversity, two parameters that are not only based on material elements, but also on all other aspects of social life: immaterial objects, organisations and institutions, actions, speech, images, etc.

In an almost entirely urbanised world, urbanity is found almost everywhere, although not necessarily to the same degree. Size is a factor (absolute urbanity) but not the only one: we can find urbanity in small-scale locations and we can “urbanise”, i.e. increase the level of urbanity, by adding relative urbanity, for example through a public urban policy. The idea of *urbanity gradients* stems from this. A space that happens to be, at a given moment, denser and more diverse than another is placed at a higher urbanity gradient.

Of course, we can discuss the different instruments used to measure this urbanity. In any case, we can consider that this classification principle is useful for characterising the areas under analysis. In this context, it becomes logical to focus on the meaning that could be given to the location of individuals in space located on one gradient or another. Here it is important to ascertain how much choice these individuals have. In this respect, FR&JR seem to have some difficulty in understanding the concept of “player”. To say that the player has some choice in no way implies that he is totally free. It only means that he can hope to aim for a strategic objective by carrying out deliberate actions. In this effort, he encounters a reality which exhibits varying degrees of resistance and which constitutes a system of constraints with regard to his aims. However, what distinguishes players from agents, is that the former can connect their effective acts to a more ambitious intentionality, with greater spatial and temporal reach, and more deeply rooted in their identity at that time.

We live in a world where the ability to control choices that condition our lives divides society into three: 1) those who do not need to arbitrate between different options since they can accumulate them without limit, 2) those who can

and must arbitrate and 3) those who cannot arbitrate since they lack the means. These categories are not castes (like Marx's "classes"), but rather fluid realities, and individuals may change them throughout their lives. The nature of "options" may vary and even the most 'equipped' player can always maintain that he must give up certain things, while even the most destitute can almost always make choices with significant consequences on his life.

Now that this has been made clear, we can say that the vast majority of the population falls within the second category in the developed countries. The notion of "imposed peri-urban areas" is thus debatable since we cannot see how owning a house (rather than renting a flat), having one, two or more cars (rather than using public transport) and even the fact of having a family (rather than living alone or without children) could be the result of a system of constraints that leaves no room for manoeuvre for those concerned. Perhaps the idea is that those wishing to own a house and travel by car and refuse to rent a smaller flat, must face additional costs, which may lead them to consider the price of land as the balancing item that allows them to carry their project through anyway: they therefore accept to set up home in areas where housing is cheaper and, consequently, quite far from the town centre. Defining priorities by giving up non-essentials to obtain essentials: isn't that a textbook case of strategic arbitration?

The fact that FR&JR deny individuals the status of spatial players is not unrelated to their refusal to recognise that space plays an explanatory role in social sciences. Among the researchers that recognise the player as a possibly relevant notion, we can identify three families of conceptions. Those who consider that only the "big" players are companies and states; those who see space as an issue at the centre of activity of a multitude of players, with the intervention of objects that crystallise earlier actions and are also involved in action systems; those who consider that space is not an issue but simply an effect, the projection on a "screen" of other issues in a specific form. This would seem to be the position of FR&JR, whereas I opt for the second approach. In their review, FR&JR are happy to call me a "spatialist" because I claim that distance is an important issue for social life. In my opinion, spatialism would mean believing in the existence of "spatial laws" that would be independent from the social realities involved in geographical layouts. FR&JR and I agree on this point. Where I differ from them is that they express a symmetric anti-spatialism which seems unproductive and which, moreover, is close to spatialism through their shared structural-functional reading of the social world: for individuals, the difference between spatial laws and "class structures" is only secondary since an obscure but implacable system has already organised everything in their place.

In fact, FR&JR are in a dead-end that they took by basing their arguments on a unique and final explanatory

principle. This principle could be considered sociological. But that is only true on the surface: a sociological approach which allows for the complexity of social relations makes it possible to understand that an individual's spatiality is a component of his/her position in social relations. That is what urban sociologists, from the Chicago School to Isaac Joseph to Henri Lefebvre, have understood and analysed perfectly well. For these researchers, spatiality is treated like a component of an individual's sociological reality, just as rich in explanatory power as his/her economic status or identity within the community. Conversely, FR&JR see it as a closed sociological approach limited to economic criteria or, at best, expanded to Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural capital" and incapable of being disturbed by a changing society. This approach leads them to a black-and-white view of the "dominants" and the "dominated", which would, of course, be upset if other factors, such as spatial capital, for example, were to be introduced. It would be even more shaken if we admitted that all such "capitals" interacted with one another, measured one another and were exchanged at floating rates depending both on the state of society and on the strategy of players within it.

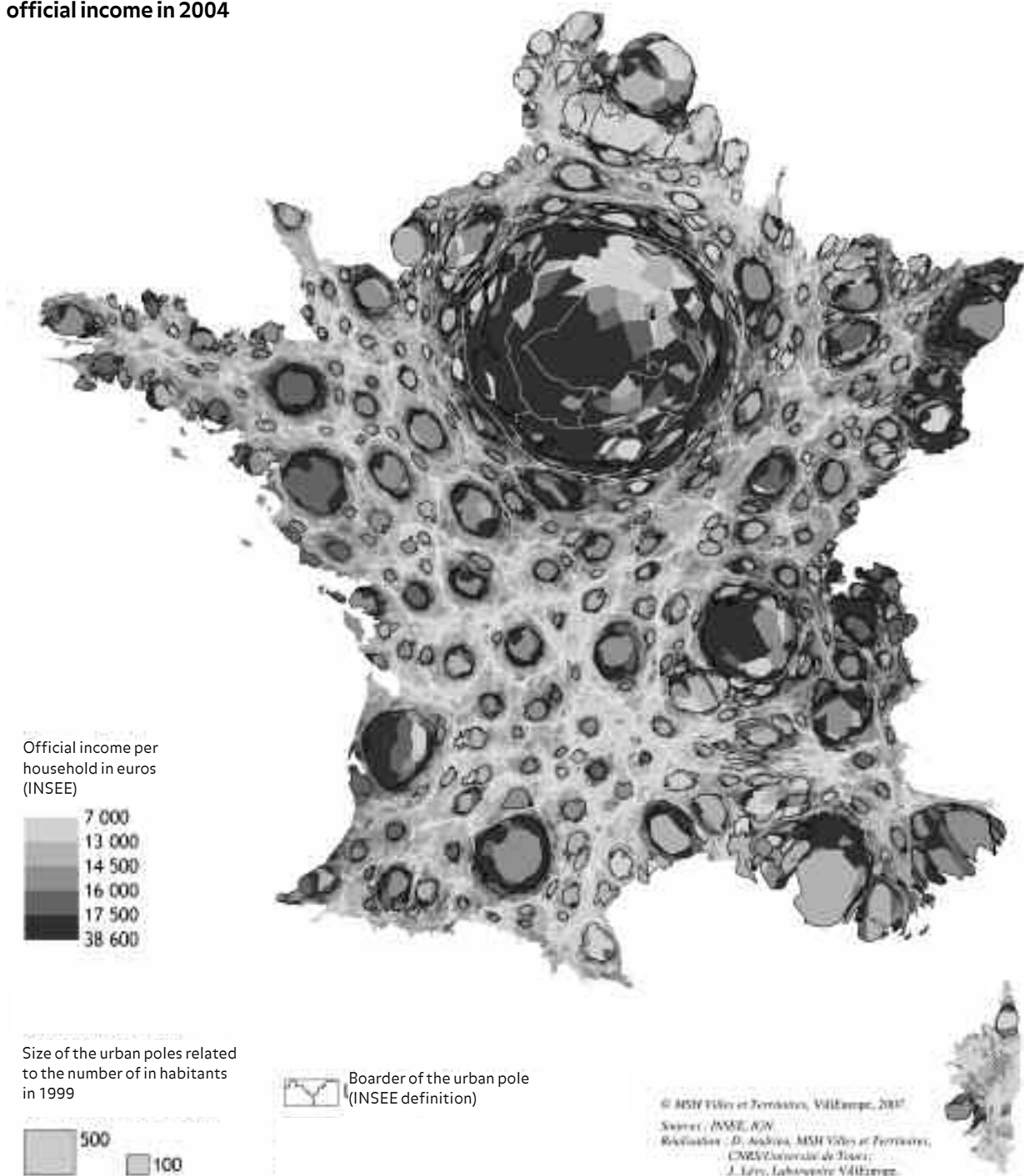
If, unlike FR&JR, we follow the latter path, we come to the idea that we are not forced to accept the dilemma between an ecological vision of space (space is imposed on what it "contains") or an "aspatial" conception (space is merely the expression of something else). We are therefore led to consider that space is not a medium as constructed in biology, but rather an *environment*: it encompasses the players but they act upon it. It is both the context and the purpose of the action.

Individuals-players in a space-environment: we can see why it is logical to compare the choices of individuals in two fields that are equally essential for their personal strategic goals: their place of residence and their vote.

### Theoretical versus empirical

It is no doubt better to adopt an even more restrictive approach and propose the type of discussion that researchers can develop particularly when they would be expected to differ on the essential principles. So what do they do? They try to find empirical experimentation systems with which they hope to be able to settle their debate. They need to find a method for breaking down objects and a data production protocol acceptable from at least two different theoretical points of view. Of course, this is far from easy. It has always been difficult to agree upon "crucial experiments" and it will remain difficult as long as the interpretive framework of empirical realities continues to affect the breakdown of objects and even the protocols of the experiments in question. We can try to get even closer to empirical work and see whether we can identify areas where we can at least

## official income in 2004

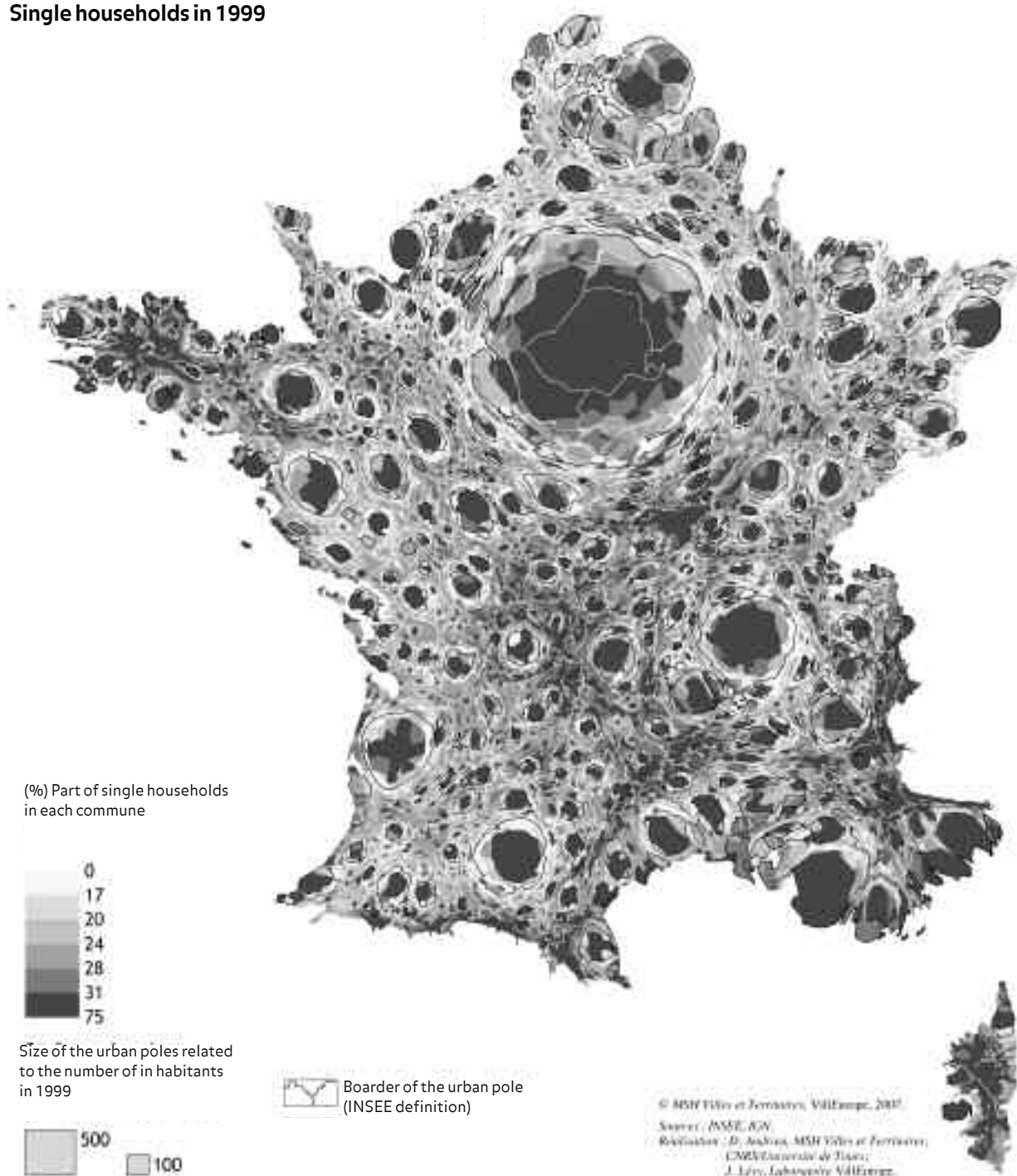


agree upon the “facts”, i.e. minimum theoretical interpretations of empirical realities.

The maps that I have proposed are not to FR&JR's liking. In their view, I have not taken account of areas outside urban areas and I have made mistakes in the way I have grouped together candidates' results in the Presidential election 2002. By accusing me of making deliberate choices to rearrange reality to fit my theory, FR&JR are missing the point of what seems to be a fundamental aspect of scientific

research: permanent dialogue, connected to both empirical and theoretical elements. In fact, if I were to summarise my analysis of the French political arena over the past twenty years, I would say that I have consistently been surprised and that each time, I have waited until after the event to try and set up my [...] and construct measuring devices and a conceptual structure that can provide explanations. Let us sum up this journey by looking back over a few key events.

## Single households in 1999



1. 1986, legislative and regional elections. I observed that, in the Île-de-France region, comparisons between “working-class” and “middle-class” areas could not be used to predict votes. Central districts, formally dominated by working-class populations, were becoming mixed. Their style owed much to what we now refer to as *bobos* (middle class people with a bohemian lifestyle) and they appeared to lean strongly to the left, at least as much as in suburban working-class districts. I therefore suggested the idea of the

“tone” of a location, a notion that steered clear of both the indifference of votes with respect to location (the dominant approach in political science at that time) and a traditional ecological vision in geography (defining the location independently of its inhabitants).

2. 1992, referendum on the Maastricht Treaty. While analysing the results, I noted that almost all central *communes* in large towns voted yes – regardless of their socio-economic composition and of the usual political

persuasions in these areas and their hinterlands. A few weeks later, a federal election in Switzerland concerning closer ties with the EU provided completely the same results. I then spoke of a “new legitimate space” in reference to this string of locations with a high degree of urbanity, united in this particular case on the issue of the emergence of a supranational space.

3. *1997, legislative elections.* At that time, I was working on the delimitation of urban areas and I decided to map out the results of a vast metropolitan area in Paris, encompassing the Île-de-France and its neighbouring *départements*. I was struck by the presence of a powerful belt of extreme-right voters in the peri-urban areas. This fact was made all the more striking by the fact that no one mentioned it at the time: in the National Front’s analysis, new voters (working class) were compared with the old (middle class) and the appearance of a completely new regional configuration was announced. However, maps of the *départements* do not show urbanity gradients, which are extremely meaningful in this case. District base maps offer a certain degree of additional finesse, especially when districts are grouped together to form sets that are relevant in other ways. The idea that a relationship exists between the urbanity gradient and the extreme right vote is backed up by converging analysis from other European countries where populist parties were emerging.

4. *2002, presidential and legislative elections.* The upturn in Le Pen’s score called for a more detailed study of its geographic location. For the first time ever, results by *commune* were published two days after the first round in the Presidential election. On a traditional base map, this made it possible to identify more detailed spatial units. The specific mapping of urban areas (INSEE definition) - which distinguished “urban centres” from “peri-urban suburbs” and from a few central communes (insofar as their surface area made them visible) – provided the opportunity for a stimulating experiment. The base map used did not lend itself to a correct representation of areas outside the urban area, as it would have involved using a purely administrative, *département*-level or regional breakdown, or grouping together the “rural” areas in a single spatial unit. This is why these areas were left blank, thus underlining internal contrasts within urban areas.

In some of these maps, “tribune party” candidates were grouped together. This term refers to research conducted by Georges Lavau (1969) on the Communist Party, which I had integrated into my political analyses since the 1980s. Tribune parties are political movements which, in contrast to “government parties”, are recognised through representation without having passed the test of public action and even avoiding it whenever possible. The concomitant weakening of the Communist Party and the rise of the extreme right gave this notion a new lease of life, for the tribune parties’ base could be considered to have shifted from one end of the political spectrum to the other. This has been a

constant feature of French political society since 1848.

We could then take a look at the composition of the group of tribune candidates. Among those claiming to represent the right – *Chasse, Pêche, Nature et Tradition* (representing the interests of hunters, fishers, naturalists and traditionalists) – was a single-issue movement founded on values close to *Pétainisme* and clearly refused to assume the responsibilities of a general political programme. The cases of Jean-Pierre Chevènement and Robert Hue were more debatable, since their parties had participated in government, but left, having refused to accept responsibility for their action before the election. In these different cases, tests showed that the result would not have differed greatly if the limit had been defined in a slightly different manner. There were two reasons for this: insufficient weight to reverse the trends and too slight a gap between the average distribution of the group to modify any variances.

The first surprise we had after producing these maps was that the extreme right obtained spectacular results in peri-urban areas and particularly poor results in city centres. Once again, most commentators focused their attention solely on comparisons between the major regions, whereas the amplitude of the results was even more striking within urban areas. The second surprise was that, when we joined up tribune parties from the extreme right with those from the extreme left, we had more or less expected the two distribution structures to cancel each other out, whereas the map actually proved more legible. This was because in regions from the south-western half of the country, where the extreme right had few votes, the extreme left had, to some extent, taken over, following a pattern that depended on the type of urban area (in the same way as the tribune party phenomenon had its own geography). This pattern followed urbanity gradients and was therefore based mainly on a dual strategic choice of individuals in terms of living and being together.

5. *2005, referendum on the European Constitution.* This time, thanks to patient group work (VilleEurope, 2002) and to the efforts of Dominique Andrieu, I had a tool better suited to understanding political space: a cartogram showing *commune* populations providing a base which, in theory, avoided the need for a breakdown into urban geographical types. As a result, hypo- and infra-urban areas sometimes seemed to be part of the continuation of the peri-urban area and sometimes did not fit into any specific theory. It is often these areas that represent, with their limited populations, the historical memory of political persuasions often dating back over a long period of time. This base of 25,000 spatial units shattered a spatial image in a way made all the more spectacular by the fact that the same basis for interpreting the map was conserved (no reference boxes distracting us) and no researcher action was required. Furthermore, the self-construction of a tribune party movement, united in the “no” choice, avoided the need to form new groups. Those who would still have



contested the fact that urbanity gradients were connected to votes could make no more objections, unless they refused categorically to look at these images. The map strongly resembled its 1992 predecessor, with one slight nuance: the socio-economic component had shifted, with working-class voters expressing greater dissatisfaction with a right-wing government in 2005, than with a left-wing government. But basically, the configuration remained the same: as the urbanity gradients progressed so, too, (in almost all cases) did the “yes” vote.

6. 2007, *presidential and legislative elections*. These four rounds of elections overwhelmingly confirmed observations and analyses from previous consultations. The tribune party vote was easier to understand and had weakened overall. Its spatiality was unequivocal and confirmed that the 2002 maps did not reflect a phenomenon related to the economic climate of that time (map 1). The differences between urbanity gradients also stood out clearly when the two main political blocks were put side by side, since the left was considerably stronger in city centres than in peri-urban areas, while suburbs appeared both contrasted and torn between other the two other major urban situations (map 2).

It was confirmed that geographical components (city, regions, Europe, world) carried greater weight in the content of political choices, a phenomenon that had grown since the early 1990s, adding a third spatiality to the “civil” arena and the electoral arena. This convergence led to the hypothesis that divisions were caused by *exposure to otherness*.

While preparing work for the Presidential election, Dominique Andrieu and I were led to reinterpret the French situation on a cartogram base map. I had more surprises. Urbanity gradients were relevant to French society as a whole, and not just its politics. It was clearly demonstrated that peri-urban areas were not characterised by low revenue (map 3). We even discovered a ring of higher incomes in the innermost peri-urban belts in what I like to call the Ring of the Lords. On the other hand, people with low incomes tended to reside mainly in areas farthest from cities, either in hypo-urban areas (with external accessibility to urban areas) or, more especially, in infra-urban

areas, i.e. those with poor connections to cities. Overall, the main socio-economic variables were distributed according to geography with a low regional component. This was particularly clear in terms of lifestyles (map 4). It was also true in terms of divisions with strong economic consequences, such as income, education and employment. The large-scale regional contrasts had not entirely disappeared but had less impact than the urbanity gradients. France thus appeared as a collection of urban areas which, in spite of difference in internal areas were extremely similar, with size emphasising the specific features of central areas.

Along with the other techniques used on the map, quantitative data, qualitative observation or survey, the cartogram offers substantial resources that can be used in interpreting the French arena with a vision that is both broader and more precise, better suited to an urbanised, mobile and networked world. With regard to this tool and others like it, it is not enough to fuss about and criticise other people for not having used it correctly. We must also put our own hypotheses to the test of an experimentation system that is flexible enough to prevent the outcome from being a foregone conclusion.

We know how difficult it is to integrate new realities into a structured intellectual framework. To see clearly, we must know how to look; and to know how to look we must at least have some idea of what we can expect to see. We approach objects through explicit concepts of theories that we think we have validated by comparing them with other empirical realities, or, all too often, through categories implicit in our desires or our laziness. This kind of tension is intrinsic to all research work. We always run the risk of being blinded by dogmatism or being rendered useless by empirism. It would seem, however, that the best dynamic imbalance can be obtained by giving full rein to theoretical daring, empirical receptiveness and epistemological reflexivity. Despite appearances, which are actually based on the imperviousness of the different traditional cultures making up the research world, these three postures are compatible. In any case, let those of us who hope to become at least the contemporaries of the rapidly changing society that we study, wager that this is so.

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