

# Are “compact cities” the only legitimate space?

Theory on residential and political practices

**Fabrice Ripoll**  
**Jean Rivière**

« Voyage à Los Angeles :  
même l’anti-ville, c’est encore l’urbanité »  
Jacques Lévy (1995)

In current prevailing discourses, living in peri-urban areas seems to be regarded increasingly as an act that is anti-aesthetic (defaced landscapes), anti-economic (prohibitive costs of providing mains services in housing estates), anti-ecological (ground waterproofing, greenhouse gas emissions caused by commuting) and anti-social (detached houses representing individualism and withdrawal, at the risk of urban and social secession). In parallel, the main analyses of the presidential elections held in 2002 and of the 2005 referendum on the Treaty establishing a constitution for Europe have revealed the high figures, in peri-urban areas, of abstention, of votes for extreme left- and right-wing candidates, as well as for the “no” to the Treaty, all of which are political practices often disqualified both for their effects and their associated values.

This moral division between the city and its outskirts and this association between “protest” votes and peri-urban areas need to be discussed. To present this theory, we will focus here on a series of texts written by Jacques Lévy<sup>1</sup>, for two reasons. First of all, he is the researcher who has conducted the greatest number of analyses aiming to connect changes to the town/city with the election analysis, while seeking to produce a system of theoretical scope. Moreover, he is currently one of the French-speaking geographers with the greatest scientific and media influence: he writes articles and books; he is the joint director of a *Dictionnaire de la géographie*, and director of the *EspacesTemps* magazines; he takes part in *France Culture* radio broadcasts; and he writes post-election analyses for the daily papers *Libération* and *Le Temps*.

The theory proposed by Jacques Lévy is original in that it is based on the assumption that residential location in such and such a type of area (centre or peri-urban) results from the inhabitants’ system of values (relationships with the

World and especially relationships with others), which is also expressed in votes. This explanatory system is built on binary divisions.

On the one hand, there are central towns/cities characterised by a high degree of urbanity (high population density + high social diversity). The inhabitants of these areas voted more than the national average for the parties in the government in 2002 and for the “yes” in 2005. Such so-called “universalist” votes can be explained by an urbanity which is itself regarded as a kind of relationship with others based on openness. It finds concrete expression in the multiple and geographical scales open to Europe and the World and which drive the inhabitants’ system of values: “[...] the centres of French cities propelled their political identity onto the political stage, etymologically accepting their cosmopolitanism (“global cities”). Contrary to the threatened and threatening France that voted “No”, accepted city-dwelling represents a trusting exposure to all kinds of otherness. Europe is part of it. Urbanity logically asserted itself, on 29 May, as a motive and a recourse for Europeanness” (17).

On the other hand, there are peri-urban areas, defined by zero urbanity (low density + low social diversity). In these areas, inhabitants voted more than elsewhere in favour of “tribune” candidates in 2002 and for the “No” in 2005. These so-called “protest” votes can be explained by an absence of urbanity regarded as a form of relationship with others based on withdrawal into oneself. It finds concrete expression in the single, closed geographical scale that structures the inhabitants’ system of values: “Peri-urbanisation actually comprises three key aspects that are inter-linked: creation of a financial heritage, privatisation of space, withdrawal into a semi-community structure. This is definitely

1. Refer to the appendix. References to corpus texts will be mentioned in square brackets.

*Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* n°102, 0180-930-X, 2007, English version october 2008, pp.121-130, © MEEDDAT, PUCA

## Corpus from Jacques Lévy referred to

- [1] 1984, « Paris, carte d'identité : espace géographique et sociologie politique », *Sens et non-sens de l'espace. De la géographie urbaine à la géographie sociale*, Paris, Collectif de géographie urbaine et sociale, pp. 175-197.
- [2] 1985, « Des citoyens contre la ville. Figures décalées, espaces refusés », *Hégoa*, n° 1, pp. 273-289.
- [3] 1988a, « Identités spatiales et identités politiques », dans Georges Benko (dir.), *Les nouveaux aspects de la théorie sociale. De la géographie à la sociologie*, Caen, Paradigme, pp. 221-246.
- [4] 1988b, « Habitat et espace politique », *Espaces et sociétés*, n° 53, pp. 9-32.
- [5] 1993a, « A-t-on encore (vraiment) besoin du territoire ? », *EspacesTemps. Les Cahiers*, n°51-52, pp. 102-142.
- [6] 1993b, « Espace intime, espace légitime. Paris, l'urbain, l'urbanité », *Politix*, n° 21, pp. 52-64.
- [7] 1994, *L'espace légitime. Sur la dimension spatiale de la fonction politique*, Paris, Presses de la FNSP, 442 p.
- [8] 1995, *Egogéographies. Matériaux pour une biographie cognitive*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 188 p.
- [9] 1999, *Le tournant géographique. Penser l'espace pour lire le monde*, Paris, Belin, 358 p.
- [10] 2000, « Les nouveaux espaces de la mobilité », dans Bonnet M., Desjeux D. (dir.), *Les territoires de la mobilité*, Paris, PUF, pp. 155-170.
- [11] 2003a, « Quelle France voulons-nous habiter ? Vote, urbanité et aménagement du territoire », *Territoires 2020*, n° 7, pp. 121-139.
- [12] 2003b, « Périurbain : le choix n'est pas neutre », *Pouvoirs locaux*, n° 56, pp. 35-42.
- [13] 2003c, « Vote et gradient d'urbanité », *EspacesTemps.net, Mensuelles*, 05.06.2003.
- [14] 2003d, *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l'espace des sociétés*, Paris, Belin, 1034 p. (codirection avec M. Lussault).
- [15] 2004, « Malaise dans la pensée urbaine », *EspacesTemps.net, Il paraît*, 16.09.2004.
- [16] 2005a, « Le oui de Jacques Lévy », [www.cafe-geo.net/article.php?id\\_article=650](http://www.cafe-geo.net/article.php?id_article=650).
- [17] 2005b, « Centre-ville, cœur d'Europe », *Libération*, 1<sup>er</sup> juin, cahier central, p. E2.
- [18] 2005c, « Les choix du 5 juin dessinent notre archipel urbain », *Le Temps*, 8 juin, p. 18.
- [19] 2006, « À pied, vite », *EspacesTemps.net, Mensuelles*, 03.02.2006.

a choice of society in which everyday life is organised while avoiding chance encounters as much as possible, building on the assumption that being in contact with other people has more drawbacks than advantages. Living only with people we like is, in a sense, Act I of rejecting society as a political universe, in which the issue at stake is not to like but first to put up with and accept others, before including people in our projects and discussing them with them. In the end, we therefore understand more about the meaning of recent votes.” (12).

But can such categorisations really be adopted and even more, can relationships with the world be inferred from voting patterns or residential locations?

## From votes to urbanity: the construction of urban space

This explanatory model is thus based on a double binary division of the geographical space and the political space. This, however, does raise some major problems. Some of them have already been highlighted, as has Jacques Lévy's probable objective of “proving that low-density urban areas which value “distance” (the American so-called ‘Johannesburg’ model) generally vote for the minority,

whereas dense cities, where interaction is high due to proximity (the European so-called ‘Amsterdam’ model) vote for the majority” (Giraut, 2004). However, it would seem important to go back over these methodological discussions since, firstly they were not exhausted by the criticism, and secondly new texts published since then clarify Jacques Lévy's theory, especially for the inhabitants of urban centres (17, 18).

## A binary division of the geographical space

The fried egg-shaped maps generated for the analysis of the 2002 vote (11, 12, 13) rely on a statistical division of

2. The INSEE (National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies) defines six categories of towns/cities classified either in the “mainly urban” space (consisting of “urban centres” with more than 5,000 jobs, their “belts” and “towns/cities with multiple areas” located between two urban areas), or in the “mainly rural” space (made up of “rural area labour pools” with between 1,500 and 5,000 jobs, their “belts” and the remaining towns/cities).

3. Without any further explanation, Jacques Lévy specifies that “the results of towns/cities located outside “urban areas” have been ignored” [11]. F. Giraut's criticism (2004) took this aspect into account.



Fabien Cantois architecte

Henin-Carvin, European 8th project, as urban part on a former mine field denying the border between the city and the country, North of France

the geographical space, based on home/workplace migrations (the INSEE's ZAU (meaning urban area zoning)). While this division could have some relevance, it is only used partially since only urban areas and their peri-urban belt are taken into account<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the population residing in the four other categories of towns/villages are excluded and especially people living in "mainly rural areas", i.e. about 20% of French people who nonetheless vote as much as the others (or even more frequently). But why such an exclusion? There is nothing to justify it<sup>3</sup>.

Using this nomenclature and above all a binary analytical grid conveys the idea that both "urban areas" and their "peri-urban belts" are socially uniform areas, or even that only concentric organisation logics are pertinent. And yet all empirical works on urban and peri-urban geography highlight the predominant role of sectoral logics or of dials in the social structuring of urban areas (for example Berger, 2002)<sup>4</sup>. Thus, using these deforming and homogenising spatial classifications is a (first) way of removing out of hand from the analysis any explanation by the social properties of inhabitants. However, in an article aiming to refine this analytical grid, Chalard (2006) emphasised the importance of distinguishing between "chosen" and "suffered" peri-urban areas, which amounts to reintroducing an explanation by socio-economic logics, but without criticising the merits of this interpretation or challenging the principle.

Although this division is interesting to analyse polarisation in terms of employment, it does not satisfy the clear ambition to determine "gradients of urbanity"<sup>5</sup>. The overwhelming majority of cities/towns in French "urban centres"

are indeed –just like their neighbours in "peri-urban belts" but with a greater population density– characterised by the omnipresence of single-family detached housing. Yet, it is precisely this type of urban configuration that is accused of being "the exact opposite of urbanity" in Jacques Lévy's theory. In some articles (11, 13), he isolates the central cities from the urban areas of Paris, Lyons and Marseilles, probably to get round this problem. But why was this process not systematised for the central cities/towns of other urban areas?

Would the logic of a pattern built on binary couples have been disrupted by introducing a third type of area (be it suffered or central rural or peri-urban)?

In this case, the choice of the method used to calculate election results is very important from a methodologi-

4. Admittedly, in 2005, Jacques Lévy used maps for some cities together with a cartographic insert specifying that: "the metropolitan Paris area features a contrasted landscape which combines centre/outskirts graduations and a sectoral structure based on a south/west and north/east division" [17]. But the binary discourse prevailed in the comments (supported by a linear representation highlighting the outline of urban areas).

5. Jacques Lévy states that it is simply for "reasons of available data" [11] to justify using the INSEE's ZAU (urban area zoning), while in the same article he empirically tests alternative methods of dividing urban areas motivated by "relative dissatisfaction caused by the intellectual choices made by the INSEE".

6. Chalard (2006) made the same assessment of the impact of the method used to calculate percentages.



Stéphane Degoutin

Magny-le-Hongre, Seine-et-Marne, a gated-community under construction, the gates have been removed now, as asked by the new residents

cal point of view. Given that abstention is generally lower in peri-urban areas (or in rural areas) than in urban centres, the choice of a calculation of percentages according to the votes cast (preferred in the texts of the *corpus* to a calculation according to the number of registered voters) mechanically generates a purely artificial differentiation between the results of urban areas and those of peri-urban belts.

### A binary division of the “political space”

To the binary division of the geographical space corresponds a binary division of the electoral offer, not only for the referendum in 2005 but also for the presidential election of 2002. Jacques Lévy believes that the two elections are connected since he states that “to a great extent, the map of “No” votes can be found in the distribution of the vote for the right- and left-wing tribune parties in 2002” (17). And yet, while this seems to be justified in the case of a referendum as citizens are only given 2 options (but only seemingly, if we consider that on top of yes/no votes, there are those people who choose not to register, there are spoiled votes and above all abstention), such a division is particularly simplistic in the case of a presidential election, particularly as it does not involve the classical battle between left- and right-wing parties.

The texts published after the presidential elections in 2002 explicitly show Jacques Lévy’s stance on votes in peri-urban areas. It is based first on the maps of votes for Jean-Marie Le Pen in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> ballots of the presidential elec-

tion (11). Working solely on a visual comparison of the two maps (the keys of which are not however developed with the same class limits), the author proposes a typology of extreme right-wing voters<sup>7</sup>: “From the comparison of the two globally similar structures, two main positions - “protest” and “radical”- which are differentially distributed across the French territory, can be distinguished. The protest position corresponds to reactive support for the extreme right-wing’s ideas which is not sufficient to make Jean-Marie Le Pen the French president. [...] Conversely, the radical position consists in a global legitimisation, in the second ballot, of the candidate selected during the first” (11).

The analysis is then extended to the entire declared extreme right-wing (Jean-Marie Le Pen and Bruno Méégret) and then to the geographical location of the so-called tribune candidates. Without presenting or explaining it, this category includes: J.-M. Le Pen and B. Méégret, the three Trotskyite candidates and J. Saint-Josse, the CPNT (*hunting, fishing, nature and tradition*) candidate who claimed to represent the rural areas (11, 13). As already highlighted, including J. Saint-Josse amongst the tribune candidates amounts to “amplifying the stigmatised phenomenon of the lack of democratic support in peri-urban areas compared to urban areas [and also to] highlighting a contrast between urban and peri-urban areas in western France not firmly revealed solely by the vote for extreme right-wing candidates. [...] In this case, why weren’t urban votes for

7. Typology of dubious empirical foundations in the framework of a simple ecological analysis.

Chevènement also taken into account, given that they share some of its features? They both criticised Europe, drew on a register of identity that was rural for some, national and republican for others, and rejected right or left-wing labels in the campaign.” (Girault, 2004).

Jacques Lévy did so later (17), adding not only Jean-Pierre Chevènement but also Robert Hue to his category of “left-wing tribune” politicians. But things do not seem clearer for all that. A few weeks beforehand, he had in fact asserted that “for French political life [...], the victory of the “no” would essentially be the victory of the tribune parties over the government, of protesters over progressives, of tension over the project” (16). Apart from the odd “detail”, that confirmed the fundamental divide between the tribune function and governmental exercise of power. But if we go back to this divide, it is contradictory to put Robert Hue (PCF) and Jean-Pierre Chevènement (MRC) in the tribune category given that these candidates and their parties took part in the “gauche plurielle” by being associated with the majority and providing Jospin’s government with ministers. Conversely, if we extend the category and integrate these new candidates, then why shouldn’t others be added, such as Christiane Taubira, the radical left-wing candidate often presented as being the woman responsible for Lionel Jospin’s elimination in 2002? Actually, with this extension of the group of “tribune candidates”, everything happens as if the candidates selected by Jacques Lévy corresponded (retrospectively) to the list of representatives (in 2002) of the political parties who incited people to vote “no” (in 2005), and not to the definition of the tribune function in its traditional sense in political science (as formalised by Lavau, at a time when the PCF had quite a different position in politics than it does today).

### Spatial scale as a system of values?

This binary division of the political space projects onto the geographical space the new divide supposed to structure the French people’s system of values. In parallel to the traditional left/right divide that used to organise the French political and partisan system, a second division has recently gained in importance: the “open society/closed society” divide or even “universalist/ethnocentric” values (Chiche, Le Roux, Perrineau, Rouanet, 2000). Based on the results of public opinion polls, this new divide separated voters into two groups. On the one hand, voters characterised by a negative attitude to supranationalism, high ethnocentrism coupled with moral conservatism, and a negative attitude to economic globalisation and liberalism. On the other, there are voters who are open-minded in terms of immigration and moral standards, who intensively support European construction and are driven by humanist and universalist values.

The correspondence between this pair of political or ideological positions and the reference scale levels of Jacques Lévy’s theory is striking: from towns/cities to Europe and the World for “universalists”; centred on the Nation-state for “ethnocentrists”. This association between scales of values and geographical scale is also found in the analyses of the 2005 referendum: “Single scale, open scale: the stakes of this choice are and will be high” (17). The same is true when he talks about “the ‘single scale’ *credo*” (17) of the “No” voters in the referendum and their supposed “rejection of the outside world culture” (16). Or when he contemplates a possible outcome of this election: “The paternity of the winning “no” would no doubt be disputed between extreme left-wing statist and extreme right-wing statist. [...] This would be the victory of sovereignist statism, that of homeland self-centredness against continental solidarities, that of withdrawal into a national vision of cohesion against the concerted introduction of a European social model” (16).

A further move closer to the core of the explanatory model is made when, in addition to comments relating to geographical scales, Jacques Lévy introduces the issue of urbanity by evoking for instance “a cosmopolitan urbanity to rescue Europe” (17) or by considering that “actually, the no can be interpreted as an assertion of the national scale against all other scales. This choice of a single scale is common to the numerous opponents of the constitution. Their logic is indeed the exact opposite of that of urbanity” (17). Beyond the classification criteria which give the impression of variable-size nomenclatures, the method itself must be discussed.

### The reduction, or even evacuation of structural properties

In Jacques Lévy’s texts, everything is as if explaining the vote by the inhabitants’ social position and class were an ineffective -or even too common- obsolete pattern: “It is tempting to interpret the vote of the 29<sup>th</sup> May as a mere expression of a divide between elementary socio-economic or socio-political groups” (17). And yet, without referring to the questionnaire surveys and without lapsing into ecological error, the persistence of correlations between the electoral practices and social profile of inhabitants (age groups, culture, positions in the labour world, etc.) whether within central urban areas (Girault, 2000; River, 2005) or peri-urban areas (River, 2007) are all arguments against the evacuation or even the reduction of “traditional” social properties.

Social profiles of urban areas are used in the explanation to highlight the mixing of social conditions and thus to reaffirm the resonance of the explanation by gradients of urbanity on the understanding through socio-economic

profiles: “On the one hand this “ecological” indicator (i.e. which is not based on individual attributes) demonstrates its pertinence in relation to the traditional socio-economic variables, even though the latter have some interest in the case of this election. We know that many workers voted for extreme parties. But these maps indicate that a worker living in a suburb does not have the same profile as a worker residing in peri- or hypo-urban areas.” (13) “If this analysis is honed down by taking the sociologic trend of the different areas into account, it can be seen that the gradients of urbanity play a major role” (17).

Even though they may be stylistic devices, some passages in which J. Lévy mentions “the yes to the opening-up expressed by the metropolitan network” (18), or when he asserts that “all the arrondissements in Paris voted yes, including the most working class”, or that “the urban vote [...] expressed the cities’ ability to accept their cosmopolitanism whereas, elsewhere, it is feared”, or even that “the centres of French cities propelled their political identity onto the political scene” (17), show a move towards metonymy (and anthropomorphism) in which votes are allocated to types of areas and not to their inhabitants. Now, this could indicate that the latter vote as one when it is only ever a question of over- or under-representations.

### From urbanity to players: definition of the city

Jacques Lévy’s analysis focuses on the division between urbanity (“compact town/city”) and its opposite face (not the countryside or rural areas which, to him, have disappeared, but peri-urban areas or “sprawling city”) to explain electoral practices: “overall, it is indeed the degree of urbanity (...) that best predicts votes” (18). As for this division, it would above all be the result of residential strategies of individuals seeking to express their social identity, their relationships with others and the World. All of these points raise questions which will only be touched on here.

### Why must we absolutely choose compact cities or avoid them?

The “players” are thus divided into two broad categories: people choosing to live in cities and those avoiding them, thus putting “anti-urban ideologies” into practice (2,7). But why are cities chosen or on the contrary avoided? And why is this so important and significant in relationships with others?

In spite of Jacques Lévy’s recurring attacks on functionalism and economicism, the latter nonetheless builds his definition of the city on that given in the “first Claval” which, as he puts it, comes within a functionalist (Claval,

1986) and broadly economicist perspective: the city is a machine the function of which is to “maximise interaction”, and in particular economic exchanges, while minimising their costs. He said that “all urban systems are the result of a clear choice of society: that of concentrated material and human factors of production in limited areas so as to reduce the cost of exchanges between these factors and to increase the profitability all round” (2, p. 278). If the economist dimension is sometimes removed<sup>8</sup>, it is namely when the notion of production is extended to all existing “social assets”. But a city is above all a functional, rational and “productive configuration” (9, p. 199). Or, let’s say, the truly urban city, because the main function of the notion of urbanity is indeed to bring out this functional essence of cities, “which makes a city a city” (9, p. 200): according to Jacques Lévy, both density and (functional and social) diversity are needed, if we may say so, to “maximise the maximisation”.

While the objective may change, the question of distance remains central to this definition of the words “city” and “urbanity”: comparable to “co-presence” (i.e. zero distance), the city is -together with mobility and telecommunications- one of the fundamental means of “fighting distance”. But why fight distance? Because it is not only seen as the main spatial problem in societies, explaining their entire spatial organisation<sup>9</sup>, but above all a barrier to their existence: distance would in fact be “contradictory to sociality”, the very essence of the societal sphere. “Space is a *problem* for societies insofar as there is a distance between the social objects. This distance is in contradiction with the maximisation of social interactions. [...] The role of *direct contact* between the various social units in the interaction and, subsequently, in the systemic functioning of a society is of the utmost importance. That is why *distance?*\_absence of contact?\_ between these units constitutes its opposite” (7, p. 48, emphasised by the author)<sup>10</sup>. And yet, by organising copresence, the city organises contact, i.e. sociality. It is understood that, from “urbanity” meaning an objective, and as such measurable, configuration (9, p. 207 *sq.*) to urbanity as synonymous with sociality, via urbanity referring to a way of being in (polite) society, politeness or courtesy, there is not only homonymy, but also an association of ideas, a connotation, a conceptual shift. This set of ideas is also found in the definition of “city” given in the *Dictionary*: “Societal geotype based on copre-

8. But it comes up very often: Jacques Lévy considers the city to be the “ideal configuration” to develop innovations, “productive exchanges” based on “‘creative’ activities”, i.e. non repetitive and non programmable” [9, p. 231].

9. “[...] the space of societies expresses man’s answer to a problem: distance” [7, p. 65]. The degree of generality of this proposal is daring and surprising to say the least.

10. For a semantic and theoretical criticism of this question of distance according to Jacques Lévy, refer to Ripoll F., 2005.



Berti Hanna/REA

Are they flying from the city or coming back?

sence” (14, p. 988). The city is put forward as being “societal”, and forms a society itself, or better “the city *is* a society” (15, emphasised by the author) and “in that it is societal, the city involves maximum diversity [and] implies great otherness” (14, p. 988). It is understood that avoiding cities thus means avoiding social interaction, contact with otherness, and society itself. It is also understood that this might be discrediting in many people’s eyes.

But sometimes Jacques Lévy seems to forget, by likening cities to copresence and copresence to contact and sociality, that a city is indeed a space -an “area” as he would put it- marked by distances that are reduced (from a relative point of view), admittedly, but always effective (or even important) between the various constituent elements of it and by a sometimes highly elaborate “functional and social division”, including in “compact cities”. But this is not always or necessarily a problem! To remain in the same frame of reasoning, is it so “functional” to put everything close to everything, and in relation to everything? Proximity and interaction between activities (for instance) can also involve risks, interference, nuisances... which implies organising a separation to secure the survival or “satisfactory functioning of the system”. While Jacques Lévy acknowledges that “partial purposes” of such and such a “social sub-set” may deny contact, he believes that society as a whole “tends to promote interactions and to reduce distances” (7, p. 66). Why such a trend? And can a trend and, above all, a purpose of society as a whole be identified? Nothing proves that the purpose of society (or sociality) is to “maximise social interactions” or is even synonymous with the same. The answers are not therefore easy and this

point undoubtedly marks a limit of the functionalist and systemic thinking.

And, in the end, can society be anything other than urban?

### **Do relationships with cities result solely from the location of the home?**

Let’s clarify the question: can people living in peri-urban areas be considered to avoid (dense) cities, and their inhabitants, solely because they do not live in them? And conversely, can city dwellers be considered to have opted for them, and for one another, solely because they live in cities? Obviously not, and Jacques Lévy himself puts forwards arguments that refute his own tendency to infer relationships with cities (with others or the world, etc.) solely from the location of the home.

Let’s begin by pointing out that, while there is contact between different social groups, it does not always occur -far from it- at the place of residence, be it in the home or in the housing unit and even in some cases in the neighbourhood. This is what many statistical studies on social division or residential segregation and many case studies on districts and social groups suggest. In Paris, for example, what emerges from the works of Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (1989) apart from the tendency of inhabitants of “nice neighbourhood” to live with their own kind? And reciprocally, it’s hard to imagine them spending their afternoons strolling through outlying council-house districts. In

short, if the members of the different social classes in cities can be in contact, it is not only –or even primarily– at their respective place of residence but mainly in the central public urban area (often stressed by Jacques Lévy) but also at places of work (production or exchange) where they do not solely meet occasionally. Conversely, these city dwellers may also meet many people from elsewhere –from peri-urban or rural areas, or from abroad. Saying that amounts to saying that the place of residence itself does not favour meetings: it often (to a greater or lesser extent) only reduces the distance to travel and the costs to pay.

This also amounts to saying that a difference must be drawn between city inhabitants and users. Living in a city does not mean that we do not flee it at the first opportunity, like those Parisians who hit the road every Friday evening. Conversely, not living in the city does not mean that we do not “use” it for various reasons, particularly for professional purposes. After all, isn’t it on the basis of home/work migrations that the spatial division taken up by Jacques Lévy is built? In other words, aren’t the peri-urban areas taken into account defined precisely by the significant number of inhabitants working in the city? Instead of “peri-urban belts”, shouldn’t we consider “mainly rural areas”, i.e. with a smaller number of urban workers, to reduce the portion of city users as far as possible and search for a contrast? But this would involve forgetting that the city can also be used for non-professional purposes, such as for consumption or leisure, which is even highly likely given that shops, cultural activities, or public services are more diversified in these areas than elsewhere, and as concentrated as job opportunities.

Lastly, relationships with distance (telecommunications, media, etc.) as well as subjective relationships with the city must be added to personal uses of it. And here again, living in or using the city does not mean that we love or identify with it. Conversely, as Jacques Lévy emphasises when he refers to a collective survey in which he took part, “one can live in the suburbs and feel like one belongs to the centre” (9, p. 219). More generally, the results of that survey and the typology to which it gives rise seem to indicate that city dwellers of the centre and peri-urban residents cannot dichotomously be divided when defined solely by their place of residence. This leads to the conclusion that the place of residence itself does not determine or mean anything. Besides, from his first works on single-family housing estates, H. Lefebvre warned against this inference reasoning: “This desire for appropriation does not mean that human beings, individuals and groups long to avoid the demands of social practices and to remain isolated among things of their own” (Lefebvre, 2001, p. 179)<sup>11</sup>.

Even if the place of residence is chosen, there is a difference or even a significant disparity between city dwellers who have both their job and a whole range of goods and services (especially the rarest ones) near their place of residence, and the other peri-urban or rural dwellers who must

travel sometimes lengthy distances to reach them. And in the latter category, a difference must be drawn between those who are able to use the city even if it is far from their home and those who are not able to do so (or do not want to make the sacrifice). Thus, even if we sought to explain recent voting patterns on the basis of such a simplistic centre/outskirts division, it could be done without totally excluding the economic factors (relative distance of job offers, goods and services; available resources): a significant portion of the so-called “protest” votes could quite simply be nothing more than an objection to the main parties that have governed over the past decades, expressing a rejection of their politics, made by social classes that were disadvantaged by this choice of economic liberalism, and having even less access to the “advantages” of it given that the jobs and wealth concentrated in cities are further removed from their place of residence. Yet, there would appear to be a tendency to evict working classes (or even “middle-classes”) from centres in modern-day France (Guilly, Noyée, 2004), and these populations, rendered insecure, are accommodated in the most remote peri-urban areas (Rougée, 2005).

### Is it all a question of choice or (individual) strategy?

Jacques Lévy prefers to “take the players seriously”, as well as their “choices” and “strategies” rather than the social constraints, and postulates that, like him, they have significant leeway or freedom, including, or above all, in their residential practices: “housing is a privileged area of individual strategic action. In this sense, we can talk of a “permanent spatial choice” (7, p. 96); or even: “The place of residence results from a *permanent spatial choice*.” (7, p. 239, underlined by the author). This theoretical choice may only be the reflection of the current climate. Be that as it may, it is logically necessary for the reasoning (and simplifications) required to infer “relationships with the world” from places of residence; it’s because housing is a choice and because the choice involves an individual’s social identity that it can be seen as a “symptom” reflecting his representations, values, and relationships with others, etc. (and inci-

11. Or even: “There is no doubt that a single-family housing ideology exists. But the studies conducted and presented here to the reader do not allow us to admit that this ideology coincides with the other levels and entirely determines life in single-family houses [...] . People living in single-family houses [...] have an ideology which is nothing but an ideology, i.e. a set of representations.

12. “(.....) the determination of the place of residence involves the entire social identity of the individual.” [3, p. 228, underlined by the author]. The home “corresponds to a strategic choice made by the individual and thus enables his global social identity to be approached” [7, p. 144]; “any action in this field, including staying put, has a meaning that must obviously be reconstructed” [7, p. 96].



dentally doing without any in-depth and/or extensive field surveys)<sup>12</sup>. It can be seen that to work, this reasoning needs rational human beings, at least from an instrumental point of view, i.e. when choosing means (strategies) suited to purposes. As individuals are considered rational, their subjective relationships with space can be deduced from their place of residence: urban inhabitants can choose to be urban inhabitants amidst urban inhabitants, out of open-mindedness, love of otherness and cosmopolitanism, etc.; peri-urban dwellers can choose to be peri-urban dwellers, removed from urban inhabitants but also from other peri-urban dwellers, in short removed from everybody, out of lack of open-mindedness, withdrawal, or even hatred of others, etc. If, in addition, election analyses confirm this diagnosis..... The players live where they have chosen to live, according to their identity and system of values. This inference is questionable and greatly resembles a shift towards methodological individualism and the orthodox economic theory (nonetheless refuted); two key ideas (which are also logical constraints of the reasoning) can be criticised here: all players are always free to choose and they achieve their aims; they are constantly making choices (and adjusting their strategy).

If Jacques Lévy insists on considering the choice of housing “permanent” saying especially that even staying in a place is the result of a decision, a calculation, a systematic comparison between the existing supply and one’s personal expectations it’s because this permanent nature is necessary to render any place of residence significant..... at the time of the analysis. J. Lévy is undoubtedly not serious when he imagines that inhabitants spend their time questioning their home or housing: he thus refers to the role of “professional, family, psychological changes.....” (3, p. 228). Similarly, he acknowledges that difficulties involved in moving can cause it to be delayed and thus the connection between social identity and housing. These are already some points which help to put the adopted model into perspective. But furthermore, unless we think that the market (and/or the Government) spontaneously adjusts the supply of housing to demand, what do we do with people who just don’t find what they are looking for (or find something they weren’t looking for)? What about those who do not know where they will be in the weeks to come (completion of studies or course, termination of a contract or assignment, job hunting, etc.) and thus have no way to knowing where to look? And to fully depart from intellectualism, what about those people who are fairly satisfied with their home, or even fond of it, and wouldn’t dream of leaving it: be it family heritage, or on the contrary the fruit of a lifetime achievement (by dint of spending a lot of money, time and energy), or even quite simply suited to the functional or symbolic expectations of the time? Or conversely, what about those who are not satisfied but have stopped looking because they are convinced, be it wrongly or rightly, that they won’t find anything better elsewhere or cannot afford to

leave (and thus do not see the point of wasting time, money and energy in looking)?

Admittedly, Lévy sometimes recognises that there are disparities or social constraints, but he generally plays down their role (using “admittedly..... but.....”, “obviously..... but.....”), criticises “economism”, the “class-based” interpretation of residential practices<sup>13</sup>, and the use of professional categories to explain votes, etc. According to him, if people are not players it is because they are “fully devoid of social capital” (7, p. 96). And this is obviously only the case of a minority. In France, “the relationship between the housing commodity and purchasing power has changed in such a way that most of the population has a real ability to choose between different options” (7, p. 144). “Therefore, the choice of place of residence constitutes an answer to the following two questions: what price are we willing to pay? Are we able to pay for the *top* of the network [housing] to also be its *centre*?” (7, p. 245, underlined by the author). As it is a matter of choice, it is not surprising that the question of the maximum amount available for spending on the home is fully put aside. But this question is nonetheless key to the extent that even TV news programmes, usually little inclined to evoke social issues, ended up bringing it to light: at the time of the “Don Quichotte” association’s highly covered actions, but also through recurring themes such as the growing difficulties of students, the French people’s massive overindebtedness, the endless waiting lists for council flats, and of course those much talked-about reports revealing that astonishingly a third of people with no fixed abode in Paris have a job and thus an income, which is not necessarily low..... but not sufficient to put a roof over their heads. They are trivial matters of price, guarantees and other ordinary materialistic concerns. But that does not suffice to convince Jacques Lévy, who believes that poverty and other socio-economic disparities not only explain nothing (or so little) but must be explained by spatial strategies and practices. Thus, on account of the fact that “the near north-east suburbs of Paris [...] are very well served by all means of transport”, that “having a car is only a really discriminating criterion from a monetary point of view for a minority of the population”, and that public transport prices in urban areas “are almost never an obstacle to travelling”, he feels able to assert that immobility explains poverty and not the other way around: “having a means of transport thus appears to be a component, much more than a consequence, of a hierarchically lower social position. It is particularly because they are little mobile that the least privileged populations are the least privileged” (9, pp. 216-

13. The best and most recent example is undoubtedly the annotation in “la ville à trois vitesses” (the three-speed city) published in *Esprit* [15].

14. Also refer to [10, p. 160]. For thoughts on “mobility” and “spatial capital”, refer to Ripoll F., Veschambre V., 2005.

217)<sup>14</sup>. In doing so, not only are the economic constraints set aside, but also inequality and discrimination relating to education, age, gender, nationality, skin colour, the way we stand or talk, without forgetting the place of residence itself which also acts as a symbol or mark depending on the individual case and the employers' views. Through these shifts, we could be led to believe, like any orthodox economist, that poor people have only themselves to blame: they make the wrong choices and are responsible for their situation.

It is all as if the main objective were to defend the relevance and disciplinary independence of geography geography must be "conquering" (3); electoral studies are "a territory to be conquered" (7) and as if that meant going beyond

the dominating explanatory sociologic models by proposing a specifically geographical counter-model, minimising economic constraints and socio-professional identity in favour of "spatial" practices and identities. That, in any case, was the way the research programme was developed and defended from the mid-'80s onwards (1). This is not the first time that geographers, with the independence and survival of geography in mind, go off in search of, or even postulate, the existence of "purely" spatial factors that are self-sufficient and where possible more important than any other. But we expect something else of one who defends a multi-dimensional conception of disciplinary approaches and space.

## References

- Berger M., (2002), *Les périurbains de Paris*, Mémoire d'habilitation à diriger des recherches, Université de Paris I.
- Chalard L., (2006), « Le vote d'extrême droite dans l'aire métropolitaine d'Aix-Marseille », *EspacesTemps.net*, Actuel, 20 novembre.
- Chiche J., Le Roux B., Perrineau P., Rouanet H., (2000), « L'espace politique des électeurs français à la fin des années 1990 », *Revue française de science politique*, n° 50, pp. 463-487.
- Claval P., (1986), « Du point de vue fonctionnaliste au point de vue culturel », *L'Espace géographique*, n° 2, pp. 90-96.
- Girault F., (2000), *Le vote comme expression territoriale des citoyens – Contribution à l'étude des ségrégations urbaines*, Thèse de doctorat, Université de Rouen.
- Girault F., (2004), « Le vote extrémiste à l'assaut de nouveaux territoires. Une théorie, une stigmatisation et quelques éclairages », *L'Espace géographique*, n° 1, pp. 87-91.
- Grésillon M., (1998), « La grande spatialité du vote d'extrême droite », dans Pumain D., Mattei M.-F. (coord.), *Données urbaines 2*, Paris, Anthropos/Economica, pp. 49-58.
- Guilly C., Noyé C., (2004), *Atlas des nouvelles fractures sociales*, Caen, Autrement.
- Lefebvre H., (2001), « Introduction à l'étude de l'habitat pavillonnaire », *Du rural à l'urbain*, Paris, Anthropos, pp. 159-181.
- Pinçon M., Pinçon-Charlot M., (1989), *Dans les beaux quartiers*, Paris, Seuil.
- Ravenel L., Buléon P., Fourquet J., (2003), « Vote et gradient d'urbanité : les nouveaux territoires des élections présidentielles de 2002 », *Espaces, Populations, Sociétés*, n° 3, pp. 469-482.
- Ripoll F., (2005), *La Dimension spatiale des mouvements sociaux. Essais sur la géographie et l'action collective dans la France contemporaine à partir des mouvements de « chômeurs » et « altermondialistes »*, Thèse de doctorat, Université de Caen Basse-Normandie.
- Ripoll F., Veschambre V., (2005), « Sur la dimension spatiale des inégalités : contribution aux débats sur la "mobilité" et le "capital spatial" », dans Arlaud S., Jean Y., Royoux D. (dir.), *Rural – Urbain. Nouveaux liens, nouvelles frontières*, PUR, pp. 467-483.
- Rivière J., (2005), « Vers une analyse contextualisée des comportements électoraux. Le cas de l'agglomération caennaise en 2002 », *Norois*, n° 197, pp. 95-106.
- Rivière J., (2007), « Périurbanisations, changements sociaux, comportements électoraux. Quelques systèmes explicatifs récents à l'épreuve des mutations au sein de l'aire urbaine de Caen », dans Collectif, *Les Mondes ruraux à l'épreuve des sciences sociales*, Paris, Quae.
- Rougé L., (2005), *Accession à la propriété et modes de vie en maisons individuelles des familles modestes installées en périurbain toulousain. Les « captifs » du périurbain*, Thèse de doctorat, Université de Toulouse II.

## About the authors

**FABRICE RIPOLL** is a Doctor of geography, an associate researcher at the CRESO – UMR CNRS ESO.

After presenting a thesis on the spatial dimension of collective action (associations of unemployed people and antiglobalists), he is currently working on solidarity economy networks (around AMAPs (associations for the support of non-mechanised farming)). In parallel, he is developing epistemological thinking on the dimensional approach to space and the geographical concepts (territory, appropriation, marking, mobility, spatial capital, etc.).

fabrice.ripoll@unicaen.fr

**JEAN RIVIERE** is a Doctor of geography, CRESO – UMR CNRS ESO. He is preparing a thesis that questions the relationship between periurbanisation, the social changes it involves and the voting patterns that such changes contribute to producing in three French urban areas.

jean.riviere@unicaen.fr