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Introduction

This book was inspired by a reflection on the patterns of pre-industrial urban development and by a number of telling comparisons. Consider two French towns in the eighteenth century. On the one hand Angers, above all a town of lawyers, academics, clerics and landowners, where economic activity seems to have remained at modest levels and manufacturing initiatives made little lasting impact. Far removed from this rentier atmosphere was Rouen, which despite its parlement was primarily a centre of production, being involved from early on in the rise of the cotton industry and emerging as a centre for trade on a national scale. Yet for all these differences Angers and Rouen had strikingly similar demographic profiles, with both towns experiencing very modest population growth in the course of the eighteenth century. By contrast, at Nîmes, which like Rouen was a manufacturing centre, the number of inhabitants almost tripled between 1720 and 1780. If long-term demographic change is taken as the measure of urban development – alternative measures are in fact rare – contrasts like these can scarcely fail to raise questions.

Satisfactory answers are unlikely to be had by simply juxtaposing all the available urban monographs. The conditions of historical research are such that it would be disingenuous to pretend that these studies represent a range of carefully selected examples. Moreover, scrutinizing studies prepared on widely different criteria for an answer to a single problem gives results of questionable validity; there is a danger that the synthesis thus obtained will simply reflect the lowest common denominator of the various studies. The problem of how to isolate the specific from the general in the economic role of *ancien régime* towns remains intact.

Studies of urban economics indicate that the solution lies with a change of scale. Classification of towns by their activities, identification of the motor sectors of the urban economy, or creation of typologies of urban growth, are frequently undertaken in this discipline through a study of the statistical distributions of economic, demographic and social variables from a large number of towns. The territory of France (within the frontiers fixed by the Revolution) seems to offer a suitable framework

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for this exercise, possessing relatively homogeneous documentary sources for the pre-industrial period, and combining a sufficient number of urban agglomerations to make statistical operations possible with a wide diversity of local situations. Indeed, the sheer diversity of spatial organization found in France is itself a compelling argument for shifting attention from the particular to the general.

Instead of the approach advocated by Lucien Febvre based on a multiplication of regional monographs, close comparison of which was to yield general conclusions, the approach would thus be closer to that of François Simiand, who argued for the social sciences to employ fields of study such that the actual structure of observations would reveal relations between phenomena, relations whose intensity could of course be measured.[1] The idea was not new. In 1833, at the end of the pre-industrial period, Guerry's *Essai sur la statistique morale de la France* attests to a similar desire to draw significant conclusions from the spatial distribution of statistical information. Such an approach offered the additional merit of being in the mainstream of historiographical developments.

Historians for long treated urban analysis more as a means than as an end in its own right. Thanks to the quality of sources and to the special characteristics of the urban milieu, the town appeared the ideal framework for examining a set of questions inspired primarily by social history. For the works prepared according to this logic, the town was really no more than a setting. With a number of studies completed and published between 1973 and 1975, however, the town acquired a twofold autonomy. In terms of research, the specificity of the towns was recognized and it became a legitimate object for study in its own right. And this shift of perspective in turn mirrored reality: more than just a passive framework or the mere sum of its components, the urban milieu was now perceived to be the source of developments determinant for its own future. This identification of urban history as a historical problem and the attention to the questions which would throw light on the impact of towns appeared the correct way forward for an authentic urban history, marking a clear break from the approach which examined the town simply because the real object of interest happened to be in an urban context.[2]

[1] F. Simiand, 'Méthode historique et science sociale', *Revue de Synthèse Historique* (1903), and *Ann. ESC* (1960), 83–119; L. Febvre, *La Terre et l'évolution humaine: introduction géographique à l'histoire* (Paris, 1922).

[2] F. Bédarida, 'The growth of urban history in France: some methodological trends', in H. J. Dyos (ed.), *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968), pp. 47–65; L. Bergeron and M. Roncayolo, 'De la ville préindustrielle à la ville industrielle: essai sur l'historiographie française', *Quaderni Storici* (1974), 826–76; D. Roche, 'Urban history in France', *Urban History Yearbook* (1980), 12–22; F. Bédarida, 'The French approach

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Contrary to the intention, however, such an approach actually hinders understanding. What after all could be more artificial than to treat as neutral the space in which the town is situated? Towns are not like grains of rice on a chessboard, nor does their spatial distribution correspond to the regular alternation of black and white squares. Space is represented in very different ways, themselves the expressions of much larger mental systems. It is the object of conflicts and competing strategies to attain dominance. It bears the trace of technical organization, with field structures, road networks and towns themselves all part of the landscape. Multiple confrontations are to be read in a web of fault lines whose crazy imbrications attest to sharply contrasted rhythms of change.[3] In these conditions it is wholly unrealistic to treat towns as administrative entities, uniform abstractions like those used to present statistical material in the *Statistique générale de la France* from the 1830s onwards. No town can be considered in isolation from other towns. To overlook this basic truth is to overlook precisely those interactions which are central to the renewal of urban historiography. To take full advantage of the riches of urban history it is necessary to envisage the *armature urbaine* or urban framework of France as a form of spatial organization.

Such an approach is not at first obvious. We usually think of towns in bricks-and-mortar terms and as belonging to a given landscape. Yet this familiar view has no place in an analysis based on urban network: the scale of observation precludes it. The urban framework of pre-industrial France has in fact to be constructed as part of an intellectual exercise. It would be naïve to imagine that this could be otherwise. History cannot be expected to limit itself to the study of ready-made subjects. The specificity of the town did not derive from its physical attributes: indeed, material questions actually obscured the issue. The great strength of Jean-Claude Perrot's pioneering analysis of Caen comes from the skill deployed to fashion a subject that was far from obvious at first sight. Revealing the nascent modern town by examining documentary materials from a succession of different standpoints results in a study of exceptional coherence.[4]

Two models are usually offered for the description and understanding of pre-industrial urban frameworks. The first can be described as

to urban history. An assessment of recent methodological trends', in D. Fraser and A. Sutcliffe (eds.), *The Pursuit of Urban History* (London, 1983), pp. 395–406; B. Lepetit, 'La storia urbana in Francia, scenografia di uno spazio di ricera', *Società e Storia* (1984), 639–66.

[3] F. Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century*, translated by Siân Reynolds (3 vols., London, 1981–4); *The Identity of France*, translated by Siân Reynolds (2 vols., London, 1990).

[4] J.-C. Perrot, *Genèse d'une ville moderne : Caen au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1975).

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'maritime' or, more precisely, reticular. It embraces all the major centres active in an international network of exchanges of information, capital or products, and between which exist relations of dominance or rivalry. These towns constitute a sort of 'International of Cities' which dominates the regional systems based on satellite poles and relay points. The operation of this model depends on the logic of flows. The second model is 'continental' or, more accurately, administrative. Political authority and the geographical division of local power are invoked to explain the imbrication of the different zones of territorial dominance. In this model the interdependence of towns is very limited and the system is based on a logic of distribution of infrastructure and dependent population. On the one hand, then, a patchwork of individual *pays*, on the other the web of commercial relations.

Each of these models could of course be tested in the light of the complexity of local situations, and a synthesis could be attempted to take account of the intermediate position of France, a territorial state whose metropolises were integrated in the capitalist commercial network. Yet to do this would be misguided and symptomatic of a flawed logic, since our purpose is precisely that of identifying the bases of the spatial organization of pre-industrial French towns. Tautology is an ever-present danger in this type of historical reconstruction. An illustration of the risk was provided by the studies of *ancien régime* social stratification carried out in the 1960s. When empirical research merely generates statistical evidence for pre-established categories, analysis can scarcely fail to substantiate its own premisses. For the same reason, the geographers who at roughly the same time set out to identify the regional metropolises in the 'désert français' were bound to find them, and even indeed to create them, given that theirs was an exercise in applied geography as part of official policy. The historian, of course, is not yet in this position – while his work may also help to shape the present, he has little control over the realities of the past.

A more or less positive answer can always be obtained to the question of whether France had an urban network on the eve of the Revolution, in the sixteenth century, or even in the Gallo-Roman period. But such an answer is a reflection less of actual conditions in the past than of the criteria chosen to define the network. It also translates an implicit belief in a single model for the operation of networks whose historical particularities were gradually eliminated by development and progress. This is not to say that the study of early urban networks has no object or is anachronistic, rather that a descriptive geographical approach runs the risk of being both ahistorical and finalist, two failings which to my mind are more serious than the first for the historian.

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This is a history book. As such it takes as axiomatic that the structures of economic regulation are historical phenomena, subject therefore to change over time. Central to it is the definition of early forms of economic activity and in particular the transformations these undergo. If economic history is to be more than just an economics of earlier societies it has to take as object the analysis of change over time. 'L'Histoire immobile' presents two dangers – first, the loss of any historical perspective, second, the return of historicism. What matters is not a description of a system in equilibrium but rather the capacity of that system to acquire new features which, though issued from the past, interact with existing structures to generate new modes of operation. Although the solutions they propose seem to me to be based on rhetoric and tautology, the theorists of 'self-organization' have certainly identified an important question, one of authentic historical interest.[5] I don't claim to have answered it, even partially; using my own approach and my own terminology, I have merely sought to take it into account. The more so since analysis of processes seems to me to offer a way out of the circular arguments of the pre-determined descriptions.

The mechanisms of evolution of the last century of the pre-industrial period did not start in 1740. Differing rhythms of development originated in the more or less distant past: many urban settlements certainly dated from the Gallo-Roman period, and while local administration of the kingdom was already several hundred years old by the end of the *ancien régime*, the road network was less than fifty. Nor of course did those mechanisms simply cease to operate in 1840 with the advent of steam power, the railways and factory production. There is always something rather arbitrary about fixing the chronological limits to a study. If, as Fernand Braudel maintained, the past is in the present without being visible, these chronological divisions can best be likened to geological cross-sections which show both the extent and the density of the strata. I believe it would be a mistake to juxtapose two views separated by a century and proceed to catalogue their points of resemblance and dissimilarity. The real interest lies in the shift from one point to another and in the gradual and uneven modification of the landscape. Rereading this book I became aware of having over-employed metaphors borrowed from the language of orienteering. I have not altered them; they closely reflect the idea expressed above.

They may also serve another purpose. I would ask the reader not to be put off by the hypotheses on which my arguments are based. Far from being artificial or irrelevant, these are essential whenever we want to

[5] P. Dumouchel and J.-P. Dupuy (eds.), *Colloque de Cérisy: l'auto-organisation, de la physique au politique* (Paris, 1983).

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assess the role played by any given factor, a role which appears obscure when viewed not in isolation but as part of the whole, the factors being in simultaneous and conflictual interaction with each other. Hypotheses make possible a step-by-step progression. If the object of the analysis has itself to be constructed and not confined from the outset in preconceived categories, it is the actual method of research which must bring it to light and make it explicit. The two processes, the evolution in the operation of the urban framework and our explanation of that evolution, are in fact indissociable. Both progress by a series of stages. At each stage a hypothesis has to be made and tested against the empirical evidence: the initial results obtained orient subsequent testing and determine the formulation of new hypotheses whose examination forms the next stage of the analysis.[6]

The chapters which follow contain many descriptive passages necessary for examining the various questions posed. Hopefully their construction will be found to satisfy the traditional criteria of the historian's craft. None, however, is included for its own sake: my subject is not political economy or the attitude of municipal elites confronted by urban development, nor is it the geography of prices or the development of the first savings banks. Such matters are of interest here only in so far as they shed light on the evolution of urban systems in pre-industrial France, providing a corrective to the static uniformity which appears to bind forms to structures and structures to operations. Multiplying the angles of vision without losing sight of the object and ensuring the logical consistency of the different approaches has thus been a priority. A succession of explicit hypotheses has seemed to offer the best means to this end. Path-finding metaphors are employed to sustain this intellectual approach throughout what follows.

This book is intended as a contribution to the history of the forms of organization of economic space. The reader will judge if I have been successful. Deciding what not to consider is relatively straightforward, but it is harder to define clearly a line of thought, and virtually impossible to grasp all its implications. Thus I fully expect alternative interpretations to be made. Moreover, as I am aware, 'Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual.'[7]

[6] The examination of these hypotheses necessitates the use of elementary statistical techniques. The reader who wishes to explore them in greater depth will find more information in appendix A.

[7] J. L. Borgès, *A Universal History of Infamy*, translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni (London, 1975), Preface to the First Edition (1935), p. 15.

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1 The urbanization of France

The representation of the degrees of urbanization has its own history, one that could be followed in the evolution of cartographical techniques. What follows is simply an overview.

One of the first known examples of a demographic map presents information by means of dots. This is the *Carte philosophique figurant la population de la France*, drawn in 1830 by Armand Frère de Montizon, which shows the population of France by departments.[1] Each department contains a number of dots proportional to the number of its inhabitants, in a ratio of 1 to 10,000. No attempt is made to give a more realistic distribution of the population: the dots are aligned in regular rows, the space between them depending on the level of population. The map thus shows the varying population densities. This was the approach used in the early graphic representations of the degrees of urbanization. In his doctoral thesis published in 1897 Paul Meuriot demonstrated that the development of towns varied from region to region and over time. In his view, the 'advance of the urban agglomerations' was linked to economic development and in particular to industrialization and the growth of trade. Meuriot supported this argument with two graphic representations. On the first, Germany, Great Britain, Russia and France appear as squares whose size is proportional to surface area; inside the squares, each town of more than 100,000 inhabitants – thirty for Britain, twenty-eight for Germany, twelve for France and Russia – is represented by a dot, the dots themselves being evenly spaced on the map. A second map uses the same pictorial principle to compare urbanization in Europe between 1801 and 1895.[2]

Over and above their specific purpose, these images by their schematicism highlight a problem that is central to analysis of the degrees of urbanization, namely the nature of the system of reference used and the

[1] G. Palsky, 'La naissance de la démocartographie. Analyse historique et sémiologique', *Espace, Population, Société*, 2 (1984), 25–34.

[2] P. Meuriot, *Des agglomérations urbaines dans l'Europe contemporaine : essai sur les causes, les conditions, les conséquences de leur développement* (Paris, 1897), figures 1–6, pp. 33–5.

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relation of towns to this system. In the examples from Meuriot, reference is to an undifferentiated spatial context, while the relation is that of uniform distribution. The approach is dated and would not be used nowadays. Precisely because it appears so inadequate, however, it draws attention to a more general point: whatever analytical principle is adopted, it has implications which must first be identified.

Analysis of degrees of urbanization

The first and most widely recognized difficulty involves the criteria used to establish the statistical categories on which the distinction between urban and rural is based. The number of inhabitants in the groups under review, a supposedly synthetic figure that is easily accessible, is usually treated as a dichotomous principle. The obstacle to comparisons posed by the disparity of the thresholds chosen is avoided by confining analysis to cities. The advantages of this solution are twofold. By placing the lower limit well above all the different thresholds the necessary statistics are certain to be obtained. In addition, it usually guarantees an unambiguous grasp on reality, since at the top of the hierarchy of habitats the question of what exactly constitutes a town is pointless: at this level everything is a town.

Matters are a good deal more complicated in the intermediate strata, however. The small towns, *bourgs*, and villages of early nineteenth-century France were not clearly delimited by size but merged indistinctly down to levels of which the name of the so-called '*mille*' ('thousand') inquiry carried out in 1809 gives an idea. And here of course lies the second obstacle: the urban phenomenon is too complex to be forced into categories based solely on a quantitative criterion.

Consider two examples. The 1836 census showed the Finistère department to have forty-eight communes of more than 3,000 inhabitants, the Côtes-du-Nord forty-six and the Morbihan thirty-seven. These figures notwithstanding, on the basis of its economic and social structures Brittany could scarcely be considered one of the most urbanized regions of France. Moreover, taking just the agglomerated population of the *chef-lieu* inevitably introduces other distortions. In the most densely populated and highly urbanized regions, despite the physical breaks in the urban tissue, underlying economic and social bonds may in fact structure an 'invisible' agglomeration. In the early nineteenth century this was without doubt true of much of the Nord region and the Normandy textile area.

An obvious solution comes to mind. Since one-dimensional definitions are inadequate, the answer must be to assemble a sufficiently broad and

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varied range of criteria with which to establish the distinction used to classify communes as either rural or urban. Assuming a blind eye was turned to the disparity of the urban definitions being applied, one might be confident of succeeding thus. Even then, however, a major difficulty would remain. The approach is acceptable only where the regional and chronological differences revealed by the classification are purely quantitative: there can be more towns or fewer towns, larger towns or smaller towns, but the actual type of agglomeration is assumed to be everywhere the same.

But what if urban functions were performed within geographical, economic or social schemata which differed qualitatively in time and space? Under the previous system of classification, these 'other' towns would necessarily slip through the net. Yet if the classification is modified, another and doubtless insurmountable difficulty arises. Urban situations that were qualitatively different would be compared using different combinations of criteria. The value of such a comparison is questionable. All types of classification operate as closed systems: the results they yield cannot but reflect the premisses on which they are based. But what is there to guarantee that the categories chosen for comparison actually correspond to reality?

If all classifications merely reproduce in larger or smaller proportions their component groups, tautology is a constant risk. The results obtained from using levels of urbanization to measure the respective size of rural and urban categories will necessarily reflect the definition adopted at the outset. In this respect our classifications are neither better nor worse than those of contemporaries; the criteria are different but the type of operation is basically the same.

This is not to say that the position is hopeless. Classifications can be used in non-tautological ways. All divisions are based on principles. For example, in one case the urban label might be applied to any community which was walled and enjoyed privileges; in another, the title of town might be reserved for agglomerations of more than 2,000 inhabitants. Each of these classifications has an underlying logic: in the former it is that of the 'bonnes villes' of fifteenth-century France, in the latter it is that of urban functions. Applying either classification to a contrasted reality is bound to show up regional or chronological differences. But these are differences less between the regions themselves than between each regional situation considered in isolation and the principles and logic of the classification being applied. It is in the pattern of these contrasts that clues can sometimes be found.

By the same token, while the geography and history of urban classifications are not those of urbanization itself, they can nevertheless

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provide useful indications. In the middle of the eighteenth century, for example, the multiplication of functional images of the town in contrast to the traditional cultural representations was symptomatic of the changing nature of towns. No society is ever totally blind to its own evolution, even if it is never totally lucid. The range of divisions, the shifts in vocabulary, the incompatibilities between different classifications, can be as revealing of the degree and forms of urbanization as changes in percentage levels. We need to treat the traditional images of the town on an equal footing with our own classifications. By creating an alternative set of regional variants, they shed a fresh light on reality, adding as it were a new dimension to the field of vision. And by subjecting reality to a different system of reference, they serve to remind us that our own classifications and definitions are themselves the products of a certain idea of the town.

There remains the apparently purely practical problem of measurement. A departmental figure for the degree of urbanization is the ratio between the total urban population and the population of the department as a whole. Like any ratio, therefore, it will be influenced as much by the denominator as by the numerator. Consider the following example. In 1806, defining as urban any agglomeration of more than 2,000 inhabitants, the towns of the Côtes-du-Nord totalled 34,769 inhabitants and those of the Doubs 35,902; the degree of urbanization was below 7 per cent in the former yet exceeded 15 per cent in the latter. The reason for this difference lies with the density of the rural population, which stood at seventy inhabitants per square kilometre in Brittany compared with only forty in the Jura. To compare levels of urbanization is also to compare the distribution of the rural population.

This position is acceptable as long as the importance of urban centres is held to be somehow related to the rural population, because they depended on providing services to a hinterland, for example, or on creaming off resources from the rural economy. But did places like Marseille, Nîmes and Besançon really have their most important links with the rural population of their respective departments? The horizons of ports, industrial centres and garrison towns clearly lay elsewhere. Yet their population is nevertheless part of the numerator. In these conditions the ratio is distorted and thus of questionable significance. Alternative measuring instruments have to be found.

To this end I propose to calculate a series of departmental indices of urbanization which take account of just the urban phenomenon. Of simple construction, the index relates the population of towns in each department to the total population of all French towns, and it is weighted according to the differences in departmental surface areas.

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