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Article

Uneven Trajectories and Decentralisation: Lessons From Historical Planning Processes in Saint-Étienne

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Abstract
Once the industrial capital of France, Saint-Étienne has faced the closure of mining pits, steel plants, and textile firms in close succession, leading to population loss and social and economic challenges, and making the city an outlier in France as a large-sized shrinking city. There has generally been a lack of temporal approaches to urban shrinking processes and calls to incorporate historical institutionalism in planning research. This research will use path dependence—a conceptual framework where a critical event causes a process that is marked by reproductive logic—as a central explanatory tool to assess historical planning processes in Saint-Étienne. This article identifies a critical event—the publication of the first spatial plan for the Saint-Étienne region—and then considers temporal self-reinforcing processes, reviewing subsequent local spatial planning strategies through a culturalist theory frame. It shows that spatial strategies have not adapted over time to the reality of shrinkage; local beliefs in growth displayed path-dependent features and resulted in decentralisation and deepening socio-economic inequalities both within the metropolitan area of Saint-Étienne and with its larger neighbour, Lyon. More broadly, for metropolitan areas to be able to adapt to future changes and be resilient, it will be crucial for urban planning policy and research to consider the extent to which planning strategies can self-reinforce and to find ways to adapt these strategies in the face of global urban transformations.

Keywords
historical processes; path dependence; planning policy; Saint-Étienne; self-reinforcing processes; shrinking cities; spatial planning; urban shrinkage

Issue
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1. Introduction

In the global context, a division has emerged between the “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2017, p. 190), or “left behind places” (Martin et al., 2021, p. 12), and thriving, large cities and regions. However, the reality is more nuanced. Just like struggling small and medium-sized cities, larger metropolitan areas have been transforming and some have witnessed their population shrinking; it has been argued that shrinking cities may represent the canary in the coal mine of global systemic transformations (Audirac et al., 2010).

Despite the growing body of research on shrinking cities, a recent qualitative meta-analysis revealed that work on its temporal dimensions is underrepresented in studies (Döringer et al., 2020), although some exceptions should be noted, (e.g., Hartt, 2018; Hoekveld, 2012). Taking this into account, this article focuses on the concept of path dependence and its potential to explain the trajectories of (shrinking) cities and regions. The notion of path dependence is inherently temporal and historical, referring to the idea that past decisions can impact outcomes over a long period through self-reinforcing processes. A path dependence theoretical framework was adopted to consider the evolution of planning policies in a shrinking city in France, Saint-Étienne, and its surrounding area over two decades (1963–1978).

The 1919 Loi Cornudet was the first significant French urban planning law; however, only a quarter of the Cornudet plans were implemented by the eve of the

Second World War. A subsequent 1943 law set the basis for centralised planning and stayed in force until the devolution laws of the early 1980s. The 1960s were characterised by the emergence of spatial planning (*aménagement du territoire*), including the Loi d'Orientation Foncière of 1967, which remained in force until 2000. The latter created the Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme (SDAU), a supra-local planning document setting out development guidelines, and the Plan d'Occupation des Sols, which focused on land use at the local level. These were superseded by the Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbain 2000 law that introduced the Schémas de Cohérence Territoriaux (replacing the SDAU with a broader vision encompassing housing and transport) and the Plans Locaux d'Urbanisme (replacing the Plan d'Occupation des Sols).

In terms of governance structure, the French administrative system has increasingly moved away from a centralised, Jacobinist tradition towards a greater role for local urban areas in metropolitan governance (Demazière, 2021). This included the establishment of eight rebalancing metropolises to counter the dominance of Paris in the French economy in 1963, followed by devolution laws (*lois de décentralisation*) in 1982. In terms of inter-communal cooperation, although some forms of collaboration emerged in the late 19th century, it was not until the 1990s that legislation established inter-communal collaborative structures at different geographical levels, granting them their own fiscal revenues along with compulsory administrative jurisdictions, with an acceleration of inter-communal collaboration between the 1990s and today. The devolution laws did not modify the nature of urban planning documents; however, the planning system began to be led by local authorities rather than by the central government.

The first part of the article will define urban shrinkage and the concept of path dependence in more detail, leading to the theoretical framework and aims of this research. The second part of the article will introduce the qualitative research methodology and data collection approach before the third part presents the results of the analysis of local historical planning processes from the 1960s and 1970s through a culturalist theory frame, and the extent to which they have exhibited self-reinforcing processes and driven decentralisation processes in turn.

2. Urban Shrinkage: A Product of Global Systemic Transformations

To Martinez-Fernandez et al. (2012), a shrinking city can be defined as an urban area—a city, part of a city, an entire metropolitan area, or a town—that has experienced population loss, economic downturn, employment decline, and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis. The term "urban shrinkage" is used to stress the fact that this phenomenon is a multidimensional process with multidimensional effects and has economic, demographic, geographic, social, and physical dimensions.

Urban shrinkage is global, although the causes leading to this phenomenon vary. In Europe, the narrative around shrinkage has had a strong economic dimension; urban shrinkage is predominantly linked to deindustrialisation processes in studies focusing on Western Europe (46%), in contrast to other contexts (e.g., Japan, the Mediterranean region) where demographic change has been the main driver for shrinkage (Döringer et al., 2020). Fol and Cunningham-Sabot (2010) show that urban shrinkage results from inevitable processes of urban evolution, caused by entropy or the preferences of economic agents; processes of suburbanisation, which feed on the development of urban centres; demographic factors; and/or economic innovation cycles.

Due to agglomeration effects, the consequences of shrinkage are greater than the sum of the individual losses, affecting not just basic industries, but also the services these industries formerly supported (Olsen, 2013). Shrinkage has consequences resulting from population loss such as housing vacancies, the underuse of infrastructure or decreasing tax revenues (Haase et al., 2013). These transformations have in turn caused a crisis of mobility, ageing local populations, and social polarisation, and worsened social divisions between growing places and shrinking places (Oswalt & Rieniets, 2006).

3. Path Dependence: A Polysemic Concept?

Events and processes serve as temporal anchors for organising case study research (Mahoney, 2021). These are at the core of the concept of path dependence. It should be noted that path dependence (sometimes "path dependency" is used) has been used somewhat differently depending on disciplinary outlook.

3.1. Emergence of the Concept of Path Dependence and Definitions in Historical Institutionalism

Although the concept of path dependence emerged in the field of economics (David, 1985), its more useful theorisation for social science has been developed by thinkers under the disciplinary umbrella of historical institutionalism. North (1990, pp. 98–99) employs the concept of path dependence in the sphere of governance to mean that "if…the foregoing story sounds like an inevitable, foreordained account, it should not. At every step along the way there were choices—political and economic—that provided real alternatives."

Building on a review of previous works on path dependence, Pierson (2004) argues that to assert that history matters is insufficient unless we are able to explore why, where, and how. Pierson calls for the use of path dependence in a restricted sense in the social sciences, focusing on social processes that exhibit positive feedback and thus generate branching patterns of historical development.

More recently, and building upon earlier work, Mahoney (2000, 2021) has defined path dependence

as a "causal process," where a "critical event" causes a process that is marked by reproductive logic; the explanation of why the case starts down a particular path in the first place is crucial to the analysis. Importantly, "on the front end of that sequence, the requirement that a critical event set things into motion ensures that outcomes cannot be explained adequately on the basis of conditions immediately prior to the critical event" (Mahoney, 2021, p. 295). Ex-ante or initial conditions do not effectively anticipate the outcome, and path-dependent sequences feature theoretically puzzling outcomes that are not well explained by the *conditions prior to the occurrence of the critical event* that launches the sequence. This brings path dependence beyond the idea that the past matters, albeit path dependence is highly sensitive to early events (Mahoney, 2021).

Mahoney (2021) outlines that different types of self-reinforcing sequences can be identified, under the rationalist, structuralist, and culturalist theory frames. In the rationalist theory frame, institutions are reproduced through the rational cost-benefit assessment of the actors, while in the structuralist theory frame, power dynamics explain persistence and continuity, and institutional reproduction creates conflict between collective actors that are advantaged against those that are disadvantaged. Finally, in a culturalist frame, the initial precedent for what is appropriate or normal forms a basis for making future decisions about what is appropriate or normal. In effect:

> Institutionalist reproduction is grounded in actors' subjective orientation and beliefs about what is appropriate. Their own understandings are embedded in larger systems of meaning and overarching norms about the right thing to do rather than cost-benefit analysis or from resource-derived actor power. (Mahoney, 2021, p. 303)

In this research, path dependence processes in Saint-Étienne will be assessed through a culturalist lens.

3.2. Use of the Path Dependence Concept in Urban Studies

In urban studies, path dependence relates to the characteristics of a system that is dependent on the conditions in which it takes place; initial choices by historical actors influence the future forms of the city, and the more the material dimension of a city is established, the less it is likely to disappear; a small initial difference can have lasting consequences (Brun et al., 2020; Pumain, 2018). Bontje et al. (2011) have identified path dependence processes in the development of creative city-regions in several cities in Europe and have observed that some former manufacturing centres have performed well in the post-Fordist era while others are still struggling to recover from deindustrialisation. The authors suggest that city-regions with a long tradition in trade, finance, and/or creativity often have more favourable points of departure for the delivery of effective creative city-regions strategies (Bontje et al., 2011). As Musterd and Murie (2010, p. 37) argue:

> Without denying the importance of breaks and recent changes in political systems and policies, the studies of individual cities highlight the importance of longer development paths. The nature and shape of city economies do not necessarily result from policies and the most recent choices [but from] the importance of long established policies and structures and often a strong inertia.

3.3. Applying a Path Dependence Approach to Historical Planning Processes

In light of historical institutionalist definitions of path dependence above, although urban studies have increasingly considered urban historical trajectories and their consequences for urban development, one could argue that these are different things (although they are both anchored in history and time). For instance, on which hill a settlement is founded can be considered a critical event which sets some spatial self-reinforcing processes into place, creating a form of *settlement* dependence. Longer traditions and political, social and economic, and historical paths are also relevant to the study of urban trajectories, but if we are to use path dependence as a tool to assess more recent urban policy *processes*—which as social processes have the potential to be self-reinforcing—settlements and urban forms defined many decades, if not centuries ago and longer historical paths will be part of the ex-ante conditions, which, following Mahoney (2021), cannot explain adequately a critical event occurring.

In that sense, we believe that two different things are referred to here and agree with Sorensen's (2015) argument that (a) there has been no systematic effort to incorporate historical institutionalism into planning history research and (b) "planning history easily lapses into the telling of interesting stories and fails to further a cumulative project of knowledge building" (Sorensen, 2015, p. 17). Like Pierson (2004), Sorensen calls for a narrower definition of path dependence for application in the field of planning history. Further, he outlines that urban social and political institutions are likely to be contingent and that institutional density and complexity will mean that the range of possible outcomes and a different result will be unknowable until after the critical juncture. This means that the "critical moments of new institution building need to be traced back and identified to be able to determine which institutions have tended to become path dependent, and why, and which actors were influential in institutional choices" (Sorensen, 2015, p. 24). This also encompasses the kind of planning institutions (plans, regulatory processes, infrastructure, urban forms,

and governance arrangements) that tend to change primarily at critical junctures, contribute to creating urban space, and then get stuck in path dependence (Sorensen, 2015). In the same vein, Tasan-Kok (2015) argues that "merely charting the historical sequence of events does not constitute a comprehensive and systematic frame of analysis for understanding the complex transformations observed in cities" (Tasan-Kok, 2015, p. 2185). Through what she calls path analysis in her study of the development trajectory of Istanbul's Levent-Maslak axis, she aims to develop a framework for the use of path dependence concepts in urban development, outlining that organisational and institutional processes produce destructive and creative moments.

4. Methodology and Data

4.1. Aim of the Article

We adopt Mahoney's (2021) view that a path dependence framework must look at a critical event which starts self-reinforcing processes rather than dependence on urban form and historical trajectories (although broad elements of contextualisation will be presented below in Section 4.2). The starting point is that the path dependence concept would be valuable in exploring historical planning strategies and institutions in the case study city: To what extent did they present self-reinforcing processes and path-dependent features? Indeed, whilst Saint-Étienne was facing severe difficulties from the 1960s onwards, leading to urban shrinkage later on, urban policies have not adapted to this new reality. Although we must guard ourselves against teleological interpretations of histories, i.e., interpreting the past with the greater knowledge of the present, hindsight can be gained through looking at historical documentation. The case study is presented next, followed by the data collection approach.

4.2. Saint-Étienne: An Outlier Among French Cities

4.2.1. Historical Development

Saint-Étienne presents a unique profile among French cities, to the extent that it has been called a *ville anglaise* as it experienced mushrooming growth and rapid industrialisation in the first half of the 19th century. Before the industrial revolution, Saint-Étienne was a small town with no administrative, political, and cultural decision centres to boast of. It gained these later as a result of its fast economic growth. It also did not possess a university until 1970.

The city is located in a challenging site, surrounded by seven hills and severely limited in its expansion by topographical constraints. It is part of the mountainous landscape of Massif Central, with harsh weather conditions in the winter, and was disconnected from other axes of circulation for a long time. While one of the first rail tracks in the country was established between Lyon and Saint-Étienne in 1832, the motorway between both cities that also connects Saint-Étienne to the Rhône Valley corridor was only completed in the 1980s.

In light of its geographical situation, this rapid development makes Saint-Étienne an outlier among French cities. The landscape—fertile in iron and coal—explained the boom of the city, building on proto-industrial activities in metal, weapons, and textiles. As a result, the region of Saint-Étienne has long been associated with manufacturing and coal extraction in people's imaginations. Deindustrialisation hit the town in earnest from the 1970s onwards, although the city has experienced several economic shocks during its history, e.g., the European Coal and Steel Community 1951 Treaty that opened a path to the closure of local pits in 1975. Neighbouring valley towns and industrial centres (Saint-Chamond and Rive-de-Gier) were also affected.

4.2.2. Current Socio-Economic Profile

Saint-Étienne is one of the few large shrinking cities in the French context. Since its demographic peak of 223,223 inhabitants in 1968, the city itself has lost over 50,000 inhabitants, falling under the threshold of 200,000 inhabitants in 1990, and standing at 173,089 inhabitants in 2018 (Insee, 2021). The poverty rate was 26% in 2019, compared to a French average of 14.6% (Insee, 2022), and the city is displaying the visual stigmas from urban shrinkage, from degraded and abandoned buildings to empty brownfield sites.

Decentralisation processes locally have been significant, leading Cretin (1995) to assert that Saint-Étienne is not within Saint-Étienne anymore. These are often referred to in the French context as *périurbanisation*, i.e., the extension of built-up areas through greenfield housebuilding in the periphery of urban agglomerations. Within the urban area, the ratio of land artificialisation (artificialised land includes sealed surfaces but also soils of gardens and green spaces in and around buildings and along roads; see INRA & IFSTTAR, 2017) for 1,000 inhabitants went from 24.9 ha in 1999 to 29.6 ha in 2006 (Béal et al., 2020). Inhabitants in the rural or low-density local authorities in the periphery are wealthier (€27,000 average household taxable income) compared to city dwellers in Saint-Étienne (€20,000 average household taxable income; Maury & Bertrand, 2014). Between 2003 and 2008, the city centre lost 4,145 people to the periphery (Bretagnolle et al., 2020).

Miot (2012) has demonstrated that deindustrialisation in the Saint-Étienne region has resulted in the city centre becoming less appealing; the twin processes of deindustrialisation and decentralisation have fostered increasing spatial polarisation in the urban region. In the city centre, low rents have prevented private landlords from maintaining dwellings to an acceptable standard, leading to an increase of derelict housing and vacant dwellings, and local amenities closing as a result.

In many neighbourhoods, housing and industry uses are closely imbricated, as industrialisation has been at the heart of the urbanisation process historically. Decentralisation in the urban region is both residential and economic. Overall, the number of jobs in the urban area of Saint-Étienne decreased by 3.2% between 1968 and 2008, but while it has fallen by 16% in the city of Saint-Étienne, it has doubled in the periphery (Miot, 2012).

4.2.3. The Metropolitan Status of Saint-Étienne

We have defined above what is meant by urban shrinkage and path dependence. Given the focus of this issue, we would like to offer some detail on the meaning of metropolitan areas in the French context. The first designated metropolitan areas were the *métropoles d'équilibre* in 1963 (named as such as they aimed to rebalance growth towards regions outside of Paris). The identification of the metropolitan region of Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble stemmed from the central government. Among the eight metropolitan areas, Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble covered the largest geographical area and population. It should be noted that Grenoble, which became later a leader in R&D activities and in the electronic and IT sector (leading to it being nicknamed the French Silicon Valley), has gone its own way, looking towards the Alpine valley in the East (Insee, 2015), while Saint-Étienne and Lyon still collaborate as part of a large *pôle métropolitain* today, including the two cities as well as a region covering 173 local authorities.

In terms of intercommunal collaboration within the Saint-Étienne metropolitan region, the efforts of the state to accompany deindustrialisation faced individualist attitudes from local authorities constituting the Saint-Étienne urban region (corresponding to the perimeter of the local spatial planning process; see Figure 4); indeed, the devolution laws led to a rise of local interests at the expense of supra-local collaboration (Merlin, 2013). It was only in 1995 that the first intercommunal structure of 22 local authorities was created, later than in most French cities. Nonetheless, decentralisation processes have not yet been fully addressed, as politicians from the periphery are keen to pursue economic and demographic growth within the boundaries of their local authority (Béal et al., 2020).

The term *métropole* was abandoned for years and re-emerged recently with the MAPTAM law of 2014 (Loi de Modernisation de l'Action Publique Territoriale et d'Affirmation des Métropoles) aiming to offer more powers to several French metropolitan areas as part of devolution policies in France (*décentralisation*), to allow metropolitan areas to compete not only nationally, but globally this time. From the inception of the *métropoles d'équilibre*, Saint-Étienne's urban region was part of the *métropole tricéphale* (three-headed metropolitan area) Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble and was only defined again as a MAPTAM *métropole* in 2018 by law (see Figure 1), although the name "Saint-Étienne Métropole" was adopted before that date to designate intercommunal collaboration.

4.3. Data Collection Approach

The data presented in this article originates from archival research at the Municipal Archives of Saint-Étienne (AMSE) between March and July 2021. In order to

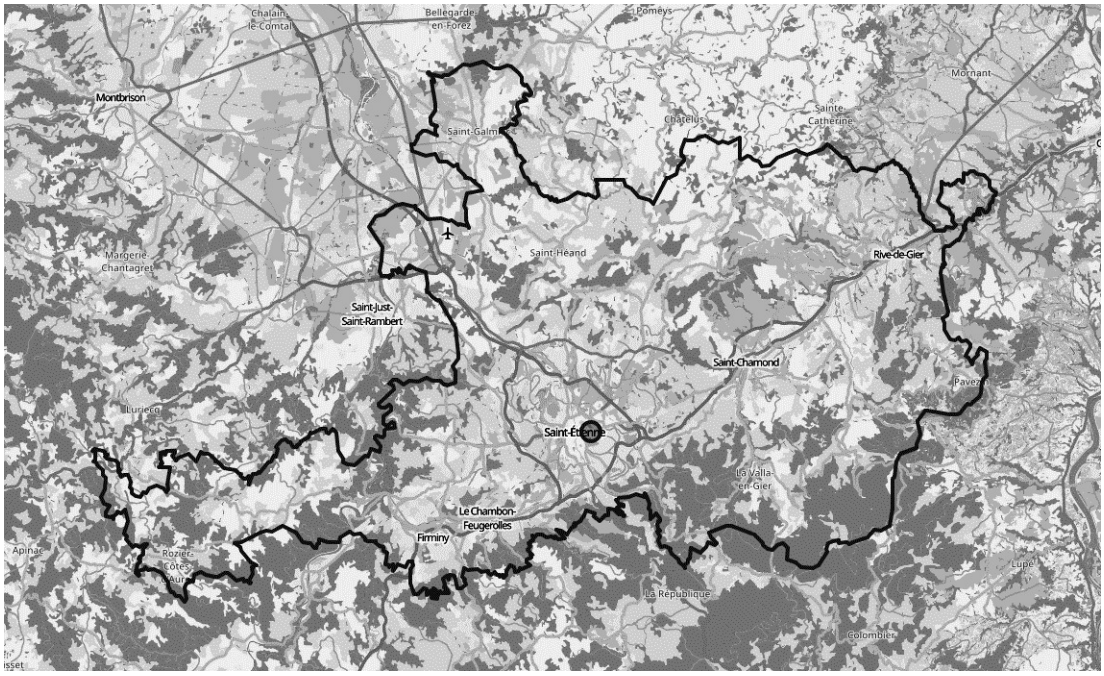


Figure 1. The current delimitation of Saint-Étienne Métropole. Source: OpenStreetMap.

examine Saint-Étienne's trajectory through a path dependence lens, and to assess the extent to which local historical planning strategies and institutions present self-reinforcing processes and path-dependent features, documents gathered include draft and adopted planning strategies, local promotional brochures, internal communications and notes that were previously restricted access, and newspaper cuttings. This data was gathered over the course of several visits to the AMSE. We carefully examined records in archival catalogues relating to urban planning, spatial planning (*aménagement du territoire*), and economic development. All documents gathered are post-1960s, reflecting the rise of spatial planning in 1963 with the creation of the Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire et à l'Action Régionale (DATAR), a French government department working for the Ministry of Territorial Development that created the eight *métropoles d'équilibre*. The limitations are that archival records are by definition incomplete, depending on which documents have been transferred to the AMSE. Documents were then coded using qualitative analysis software. For the scope of this article, data was extracted relating to key planning strategies, decentralisation, metropolitan areas, promotion of the town centre, spatial constraints, and growth discourses. A content analysis was then undertaken to assess path dependence, by identifying critical events and considering self-reinforcing processes through a culturalist theory frame. Excerpts from documents which were particularly informative in terms of actors' subjective orientation and beliefs were translated from French by the author and included as quotations.

5. Analysis of Historical Planning Documents for the Urban Region of Saint-Étienne

We have identified the regional planning process that started with the DATAR inception as the critical event which started a self-reinforcing process in local urban policies, which this section will present.

5.1. The Organisation d'Étude et d'Aménagement de l'Aire Métropolitaine Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble's Schéma Directeur d'Aménagement et d'Urbanisme (1966–1970)

As part of the *métropoles d'équilibre* creation, a spatial planning strategy (SDAU de la Métropole Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble) was prepared by the Organisation d'Étude et d'Aménagement de l'Aire Métropolitaine Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble (OREAM), an organisation acting under the umbrella of the national Planning Ministry (see Figure 2). The SDAU Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble was adopted on 26 May 1970 (OREAM, 1970) after several years of preparation as part of the French fifth National Plan (1966–1970). The OREAM was set up in 1966 for the Lyon and Saint-Étienne plan (both joined by Grenoble in 1968), but collaboration on a spatial planning strategy between Lyon and Saint-Étienne began in 1964.

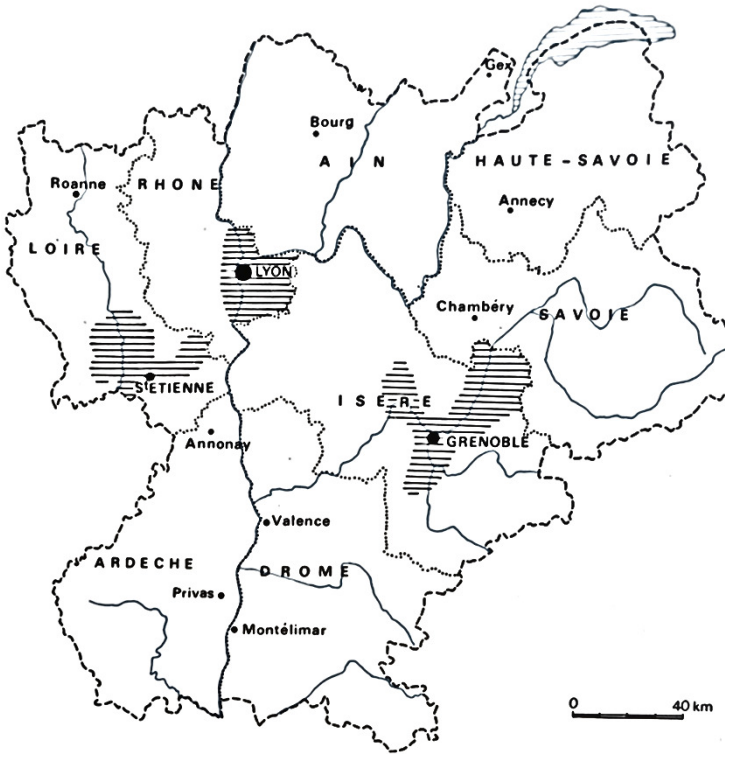


Figure 2. Map of the regional context, including the hatched areas covered by the SDAU Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble. Source: OREAM (1970).

The objectives of the OREAM plan were to build a strong Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble metropolitan area through concentration and polarisation, a term which did not have the pejorative connotation it has today (see, for instance, Lang & Görmar, 2019). The rationale was to manage future growth and the threat to rural space if development was not concentrated and polarised. The idea was also that the three metropolitan areas should be distinct and that Lyon, the larger city, should not overshadow its smaller neighbours. As opposed to the thriving administrative, business, industrial, and cultural centre of Lyon and the potential for tertiary employment growth in Grenoble, the plan considers the difficulties of the Saint-Étienne's urban region, highlighting that "its situation away from the great Rhône corridor constituted for this urban region a disadvantage that was overcome successively by a canal, a rail connection and now a motorway" (OREAM, 1970, p. 12) and calling for efforts to improve access to the city further. Population projections were also prepared on the basis of path growth and are presented in Table 1 (OREAM, 1970).

On the basis of these projections, the plan promoted the "decongestion" of Saint-Étienne towards a Northern extension (*extension Nord*), the only zone allowing for industrial expansion in light of spatial constraints (which corresponds to the east of the Plaine du Forez [Forez Plain; see Figure 3]) and therefore described as an "unavoidable" option (OREAM, 1970, p. 98). This would drive economic expansion with 60,000 jobs forecast. The city centre of Saint-Étienne would focus on

Table 1. Annual percentage of past population growth and future perspectives in the 1970 OREAM plan.

	Past growth		Future growth perspectives	
	1954–1962	1962–1968	1968–1985	1985–2000
Urban region of Lyon	1.90%	2.00%	2.05%	2.10%
Urban region of Saint-Étienne	1.15%	0.85%	1.15% to 1.45%	1.60% to 2.10%
Urban region of Grenoble (except Pontcharra-Montmélian)	3.75%	3.40%	2.10% to 3.40%	1.25% to 2.00%
The three metropolitan urban regions combined	1.85%	2.00%	1.90% to 2.10%	1.80% to 2.10%

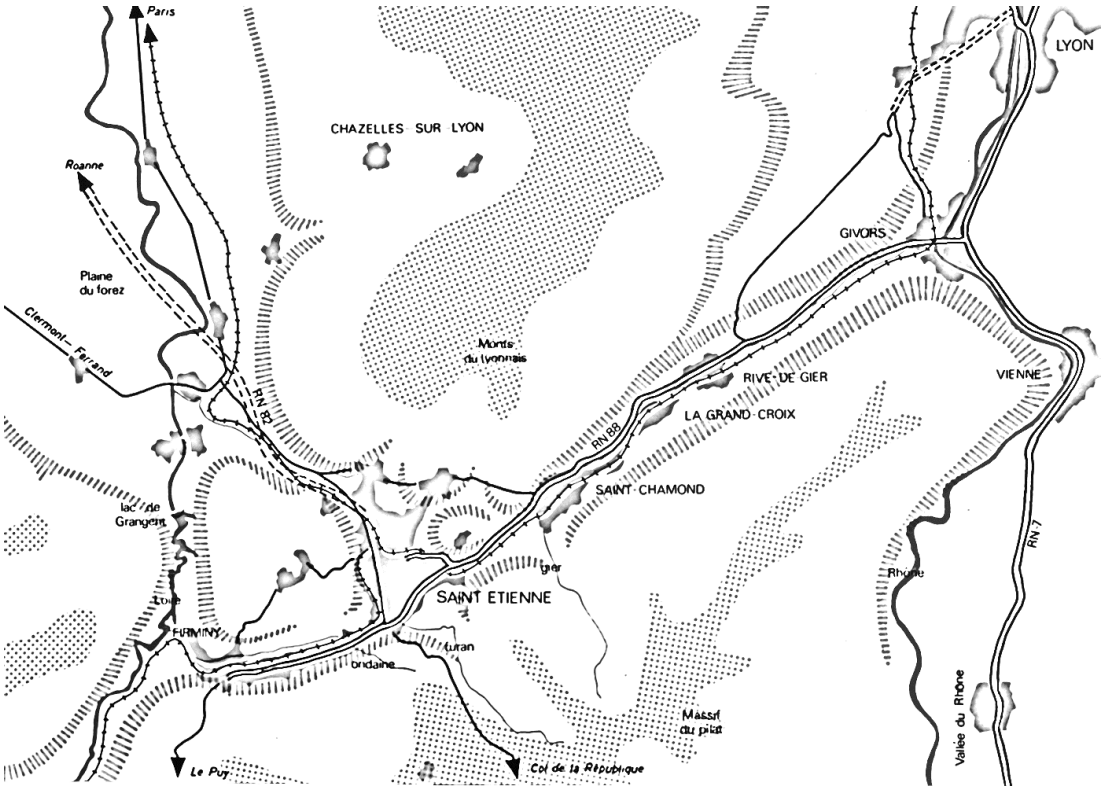


Figure 3. The Saint-Étienne urban region. Source: OREAM (1970).

service-based employment and would be linked with the Forez Plain by public transport.

The plan considered several spatial strategies. Strategy A focused on the restructuration of the city centre of Saint-Étienne, but it was seen as a "long-term endeavour" with too high a cost. It is interesting to note the contradiction here, as although the population "hypotheses" were in the long-term (up until 2000), the plan was rather short-termist. Strategy B—which was deemed unsuitable—was the creation of a parallel Saint-Étienne and the abandonment of the city centre. Instead, a middle-ground, Strategy C, was chosen, with, on the one hand, the northern extension in the Forez Plain for industrial expansion and a new residential zone at Andrézieux-Bouthéon, and, on the other hand, a restructuration of the city centre, i.e., industrial conversion and development of higher education and research activities in the city centre. The attraction of the city centre is qualified as being more of necessity than of genuine appeal in the document, with a size and quality far away than what would be expected in an agglomeration of 400,000 inhabitants. Hence the city centre would need to be "restructured" to support the growth of the tertiary sector, through the renovation of key central sites and the improvement and development of public transport (OREAM, 1970).

5.2. Saint-Étienne's SDAU 2000 Preparation Process

In parallel to the preparation of the OREAM plan, the Loi d'Orientation Foncière of 1967 established the SDAU for agglomerations of more than 10,000 inhabitants, which needed to align with the aims of the OREAM plan by decree. These strategies were led by the central government (through the Direction Départementale de l'Equipement) but in closer collaboration with local authorities. For the Saint-Étienne urban region, Epures (formerly Association Pour l'Étude des Plans d'Urbanisme de la Région Stéphanoise) took up this role (see Figure 4 for the perimeter covered in darker grey).

5.2.1. The 1970 White Paper

As part of the SDAU 2000 preparation process, a white paper was prepared in July 1970. We were able to consult an annotated, internal copy from October 1970 (Epures, 1970b). As expected, the population projections, aims, and terminology align with the OREAM plan: for instance, through the stated need for the "primacy" and "restructuration" of the city centre. The fact that Saint-Étienne did not have a *banlieue* (suburb) was seen as an asset for a region of this importance, as the paper argues that Saint-Étienne's secondary centres already ensure a hierarchy in the level of services offered to the inhabitants. The white paper outlined that demographic growth had two effects on spatial planning: improving living conditions and bringing an innovative spirit, hence the need for voluntarist action, with a "chicken and egg" situation (Epures, 1970b, p. 31) where economic growth and urban growth are tightly intertwined.

However, the tension between local aims and the OREAM plan can be read between the lines. The white



Figure 4. Spatial perimeter covered by the local SDAU process. Source: Epures (1970b).

paper outlines that "the necessity of demographic growth" is just "hypotheses that are justified by events and actions from previous years" (Epures, 1970b, p. 27). As part of the white paper preparation process, a working group focusing on development and industrialisation as well as the position of the Saint-Étienne region within the Lyon–Saint-Étienne–Grenoble metropolitan area qualifies the Forez Plain of "genuine outlet" that could form a new centre for population to settle in the long-term (Epures, 1970a, p. 1). This option is presented as being "virtually inescapable," and requiring "voluntary urbanisation" to accompany the growth of the Saint-Étienne region by occupying "attractive sites" (Epures, 1970a, p. 4). However, the white paper itself outlines that it would not be a desirable option due to the increase in car reliance and impact on the city centre (Epures, 1970b).

5.2.2. City Centre Study (1973)

Likewise, a subsequent study conducted by Epures (1973) on the city centre and published in 1973 critiques decentralisation, arguing for town centre promotion rather than a *laissez-faire* approach; to let the centre degrade "is all the more dangerous that the economic growth of an agglomeration and the quality of life to which the town centre contributes are increasingly linked" (Epures, 1973, p. 10). The study identifies an important reduction of 1,000 inhabitants per year in the city centre, i.e., over 1% of the population—more than 1,500 dwellings each year, especially amongst inhabitants with high incomes. At the same time, the document states that decentralisation stems from the cost of urban land linked to the "current demographic growth," in a puzzling lack of clarity given the figures presented (Epures, 1973, p. 4).

5.2.3. Preparatory Notes on the SDAU 2000 and Local Discourse (1974–1977)

Following the white paper of 1970, further preparatory work was conducted on the Saint-Étienne spatial strategy (named SDAU 2000) over several years. Archival records provided valuable behind-the-scenes preparatory notes for the plan, outlining actors' views. For instance, meeting minutes at Epures dated from May 1975 record participants saying that the figure of 800,000 inhabitants in 2000 is a "political choice," a "postulate" (Epures, 1975, p. 2). In a similar vein, while the city was facing increasing difficulties, in a meeting on the SDAU in September 1976, as the question of maintaining the above hypothesis occurs, one actor replies that we have to stay optimist and say so ("SDAU de la Région Stéphanoise," 1976).

5.2.4. Epures' *SDAU 2000—Saint-Étienne: 7 Questions, Une Volonté* (1978)

The process outlined above led to the preparation of a document by Epures entitled *SDAU 2000—Saint-Étienne: 7 Questions, Une Volonté* (SDAU 2000—Saint-Étienne: 7 Questions, One Vision). We were able to consult a draft version which, whilst we do not have an exact date, is from after June 1975 (Epures, n.d.). The demographic hypothesis of 800,000 inhabitants is still proposed to "convey the economic weight of the Saint-Étienne's urban region within the *métropole d'équilibre*" (Epures, n.d., p. 24). It is stated that this figure only has a "relative value," is a "convenient bias" and an "act of faith" in the economic future of the urban region (Epures, n.d., p. 24), to re-establish its industrial importance in the larger Rhône-Alpes region. Among other things, the document looks to orientate the general development of urbanisation and prevent the fragmentation of urban activities (i.e., work locations away from residential locations and quality of life by avoiding long commuting times; Epures, n.d.).

In the end, although a final version of *Saint-Étienne: 7 Questions, Une Volonté* was released in 1978, the SDAU 2000 was never adopted, and Saint-Étienne spent many years in a planning strategy limbo (Cretin, 1998).

6. Discussion

Through the case of historical planning processes in Saint-Étienne, starting with a critical event that was the creation of *métropoles d'équilibre* and ensuing spatial strategies, some self-reinforcing processes can be observed.

The content analysis has shown that the 800,000 inhabitants projection figure from the OREAM plan endures in subsequent discourse and beliefs, corresponding to the high importance of early events in path dependence. This figure was on the horizon of the years 1985 to 2000, and the northern extension was based on a growing population, a "chicken and egg" situation (Epures, 1970a, p. 31) to quote again the expression of one of the documents examined. However, despite a loss of population from 1968 onwards—the city has not regained its historical peak since—and clear signs of economic vulnerability, it was never questioned. It could be the legal requirement to align with the OREAM plan, the desire to stay in the race with Lyon and Grenoble, and to obtain the state credits corresponding to a growing population; nevertheless, the use of epithets such as "optimist" suggest that actors also were convinced of the future growth of the city. Archival records showed that local authorities in the Forez Plain actively opposed the northern extension ("Les villes du Forez vers un avenir possible," n.d.), which was of course a case of retaining local powers over strategy, but also scepticism about population projections. The local press was also very critical of the aims of the SDAU at the time (Tibi, 1975).

It is hard to say what would have happened in terms of decentralisation if more apt population projections had been carried out, as it may not have prevented decentralisation. This is where we have to be careful about the risk of teleology. Nonetheless, even though

the strategies wanted to maintain the primacy of the centre, and argued that the development of single dwellings must be managed, in the absence of an adequate SDAU for the urban area, the Forez Plain grew as a residential area and a source of industrial employment, at the expense of the city centre (Miot, 2012) as it was easier for industrial employment to settle than to "restructure" the city centre, where tertiary jobs did not replace lost industrial employment.

The expectation of growth set out in the OREAM plan (Table 1) with the idea of bringing Saint-Étienne into the rank of a regional metropolis and rebalancing growth led to the opposite result; as policies were not fit for purpose, Saint-Étienne remained on the periphery of the Rhône-Alpes region (Epures, 1997). This subjective orientation towards growth is surprising, as many of the actors were aware of the challenges faced by the city. For example, a promotional brochure entitled *Une Ville Face à Son Avenir* (*A City Facing Its Future*) from around 1970 affirms:

> It may seem like a paradox to talk about accelerating transformations at a time when our region is facing grave difficulties. One could wish for a slow evolution towards renewal. But our era doesn't care for slowness and acceleration is one of the essential laws of modern industrial economies. (Syndicat d'Initiative de Saint-Étienne et de la Région Stéphanoise, n.d., p. 20)

The same brochure defends the idea that the SDAU 2000 assigned itself "reasonable objectives, that may not even sound ambitious" (Syndicat d'Initiative de Saint-Étienne et de la Région Stéphanoise, n.d., p. 55). Though shrinkage was not a well-identified phenomenon at the time, for a city that had already lost population and faced crises, this belief in future growth lasted for years despite signs of change, displaying path-dependent features.

7. Conclusion

In a column in response to a *Le Monde* article critical of Saint-Étienne's image (Zappi, 2014), several academics defended the city's image but argued that the impetus for city policies in Saint-Étienne had come from the French central government rather than from local actors for a long time ("A Saint-Étienne, pauvreté n'est pas une fatalité," 2014). Although it is beyond the scope of this article to look at path dependence processes over a period of more than 50 years, examining the 15 years following the start of the *métropoles d'équilibre* process suggests that the aims of planning strategies can be particularly sticky and path-dependent. The lack of place-based national policies has had the opposite effect (decentralisation) than the one desired (polarisation) and has entrenched inequalities. Although the Saint-Étienne region presented many topographical constraints and expansion could only take place towards the north, if economic stagnation had been considered, greater emphasis may have been put on Strategy A of the OREAM plan of maintaining the city centre; instead, depopulation has led to persistent difficulties for the city centre and these have yet to be fully overcome. Indeed, the dominant orientation towards growth can intensify the already negative consequences of shrinkage, as Wiechmann and Pallagst (2012) show in their study of Schwedt and Dresden in Eastern Germany and Youngstown and Pittsburgh in the US.

A limitation of this research is the absence of comparison. As cities are affected by exogenous factors of change that in many cases contribute to critical junctures of institutional change in planning systems, Sorensen (2015) argues that the impacts, responses, and capacities to respond vary between different places, which is a significant opportunity for the planning history research agenda. Further, beyond plans, the extent to which governance arrangements, i.e., the lack of intercommunal collaboration, have been characterised by path-dependent features could be considered further, as well as other critical events in the trajectory of Saint-Étienne and its urban region.

Finally, Mahoney (2021) has outlined that as opposed to self-reinforcing processes that follow reproductive logics, reactive sequences follow transformative logics. For metropolitan areas to be able to adapt to future changes and be resilient, it will be crucial for urban planning policy and research to consider the extent to which planning policy and strategies tend to self-reinforce and to find ways to adapt strategies in the face of global urban transformations.

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Conflict of Interests

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