

URBAN FRANCE

Ian Scargill

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URBAN PLANNING



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IAN SCARGILL

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CONTENTS

List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	xi
Dedication	xiii
1. POSTWAR URBANIZATION	1
The Rapidity of Urbanization	1
Population Growth	3
Migration	5
2. THE URBAN SYSTEM	9
Evolution of the System	9
The Primacy of Paris	12
Postwar Movement of Population	14
Analysis of the Urban System	19
The Functional Classifications	20
Spatial and Multi-variate Approaches	24
The Changing System	30
3. PLANNING THE URBAN HIERARCHY (I)	
THE METROPOLES D'EQUILIBRE	34
Lyon - Saint-Etienne - Grenoble	39
Marseille - Aix	44
Lille - Roubaix - Tourcoing	47
Bordeaux	49
Toulouse	52
Nantes - Saint-Nazaire	56
Nancy - Metz - Thionville	57
Strasbourg	59
The Métropoles in Retrospect	60

4.	PLANNING THE URBAN HIERARCHY (II) THE MEDIUM-SIZED AND SMALL TOWNS	63
	Concern for the Medium-sized Town	63
	A Policy for the Medium-sized Towns	72
	A Popular Strategy	77
	The Small Towns	83
	In Retrospect	86
5.	HOUSING AND LAND USE PLANNING	87
	Legislation for Housing	88
	Rented Housing	90
	The Owner-occupied Sector	97
	Housing Estates	99
	Land Use Planning	105
6.	REVOLUTION IN RETAILING	110
	Advent of the Hypermarket	111
	Beyond the Hypermarket	118
7.	RESTORATION OF THE CITY CENTRE	120
	Impoverishment of the Core	122
	Restoration	124
8.	PARIS	134
	Morphology and Housing	137
	Employment and the Journey to Work	143
	Planning for Paris	146
	The Schéma Directeur	149
	Change at the Centre	155
	Transport Planning	159
	Growth Nodes in the Suburbs	162
9.	NEW TOWNS	164
	Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines	167
	Cergy-Pontoise	168
	Marne-la-Vallée	169
	Evry	169
	Melun-Sénart	170
	Le Vaudreuil	170
	Lille-Est	171
	L'Isle-d'Abeau	172
	Les Rives de l'Etang de Berre	173
	Prospects for the New Towns	173

10. POSTSCRIPT

175

Bibliography

177

Index

184



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TABLES

1.	Urbanization	2
2.	Intercensal population change	5
3.	Foreign-born population	6
4.	Annual rates of population change	15
5.	Annual rates of population change according to size of town	17
6.	Population change by size-category of town, 1968-75	19
7.	Proportion of the population living in different size-categories of town, 1954	23
8.	Leading centres of the urban hierarchy according to Hautreux and Rochefort	26-7
9.	Population change and redistribution in the Paris Region	135
10.	Age of dwellings	143
11.	Employment in the Paris Region, 1962-75	144
12.	Anticipated growth of the urban population	149



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FIGURES

1.	The French urban system according to Hautreux and Rochefort	29
2.	Change in the urban system since 1954, after Pumain and Saint-Julien	32
3.	Rank-size distribution of the 30 largest French towns, 1962	35
4.	'Metropoles d'équilibre' and new towns	38
5.	OREAM plan for greater Lyon	43
6.	Bordeaux's industrial estates	51
7.	Le Mirail and Bellefontaine quarter	55
8.	Towns entering into a 'contrat ville moyenne', 1973-79	64
9.	Population change in département of Gers and town of Auch	69
10.	Employment structure of Montauban, 1968	71
11.	Périgueux: location of the 12 projects carried out under the 'contrat ville moyenne'	82
12.	Grand ensemble of Poissy-Beauregard	94
13.	Styles in 'pavillon' housing	100
14.	Location of hypermarkets in the Marseille area	112
15.	Movement of public services from the centre of Poitiers to the suburbs	123
16.	Towns with a secteur sauvegardé, 1980	126
17.	Restoration and rehabilitation in Saumur	129
18.	Interwar lotissements of the Paris suburbs	141
19.	Two unadopted strategies for the Paris Region	151
20.	1975 revision of the Schéma Directeur for the Paris Region	156
21.	The Réseau Express Régional	161



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Chapter 1.

POSTWAR URBANIZATION

Writing in Le Monde, in July, 1981, two newly-elected députés suggested that the recent socialist victory in the general election had been a consequence of the problems of the cities. 'Le monde urbain a voté à gauche ... La ville est malade'. They went on to contrast the city as it used to be, a market and a meeting-place, with the ill-planned metropolis of the present day, its population swollen with rural overseas migrants, a focus of mounting unemployment and of weakened social bonds. What could once have been described as 'un milieu vivant' had become 'un entassement difforme'. Urban life was now the life of the grand ensemble and the distant suburb, summed up by the popular phrase, 'métro - boulot - dodo', which translates roughly as, travel - work - sleep. The authors went on to state that the answers to these problems were to be found only in far-reaching economic and social reforms and in the policies of decentralization proposed by the new government.

Political arguments aside, there are few observers who would dispute the point made by the députés that French cities have been experiencing rapid and, at times it has seemed, almost uncontrolled growth over the last 30 years and that serious consequences have followed. The nature of this urban explosion, and the efforts of planners and others to find solutions to the resultant problems, together form the subject of the present work.

The Rapidity of Urbanization

In 1850 the proportion of the French population officially classed as 'urban' was only 25% of the total and it did not reach 50% until 1928, more than half-a-century later than in Britain or the Netherlands. In 1946, when the urban population totalled 21.25 millions, the proportion was still only 53.2%, but thereafter the urban component increased rapidly in response to changing social and economic circumstances.

Measurement of urbanization depends upon how one chooses to define the 'urban' element in a population. Until 1962 the commonly accepted definition in France was based on the proportion of the population living in communes having a total of at least 2,000 in the chef-lieu. Defined in this way, 61.6% of the population was urban in 1962 (Table 1). It is a method of calculation which tends to underestimate the total, however, excluding as it often does the fringes of a town which have spread into a neighbouring 'rural' commune. The concept of the unité urbaine, introduced in 1962, takes account of this problem by including in the definition of 'urban' the population of an agglomération even if the latter should extend over parts of more than one commune. The idea of agglomération is, in turn, based on association of buildings, none being included that are more than 200 metres from the more closely built-up areas. Using the unité urbaine, the urban proportion of the population was 63.4% in 1962; by 1975 this had risen to 72.9%.

TABLE 1. URBANIZATION

<u>Definition</u>	<u>Percentage of the population 'urban'</u>			
	<u>1954</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1968</u>	<u>1975</u>
Pre-1962	56.0	61.6	-	-
Unités urbaines	58.6	63.4	71.3	72.9
ZPIU	-	-	79.0	82.5

A third approach to definition is one that takes account of the occupational structure of the population, recognizing that many 'rural' communes include a non-farm element of commuters and others who work in industry or tourism. From this arises the concept of the zone de peuplement industriel et urbain (ZPIU) which embraces those localities that are predominantly 'urban' in economic activity. Using these broader areas as a basis for calculation, the 'urban' component of the French population rises to 82.5% in 1975.

It is clear from the above that there is no single satisfactory means by which to calculate the urban share of a country's population. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that different measures of urbanization are presented by different authors. Noin (1976), for example, gives a figure of 77.1% for the urban component in 1975, whilst Vaughan, Kolinsky and Sheriff (1980) suggest a proportion of 'nearly 75%'. The variations arise quite obviously from the method of calculation preferred and there is little to be gained from pursuing them. Of greater importance from the point of view of the present work is the overall picture of a country experiencing rapid and large-scale urbanization. From a

figure of little more than 50% in the late 1940s, the share of France's population that was urban rose to around three-quarters of the total within the next 30 years. In absolute terms, the population of French towns and cities was swelled over that period by the addition of at least 16 million persons, giving rise to a host of social problems but creating, at the same time, a market for the rejuvenated economy.

Population Growth

The expansion of French cities since World War II has come about both as a result of a greatly accelerated rate of population growth and of large-scale migration from the rural areas and abroad.

Pre-war France was remarkable for the country's demographic stagnation. The roots of this situation are to be found in the nineteenth century, especially in the last quarter when the birth rate fell from around 26 live births per thousand population to 22, and then to 20 by 1913. With a death rate of around 18/19‰ in the early years of the present century, there was little absolute growth of population. The Great War resulted in the death of 1.3 million Frenchmen, and if allowance is made for other deaths and for the births that did not take place as a result of the war, the demographic loss to France was of the order of 3 millions. A brief revival after the war, when growth was assisted by the influx of a sizeable foreign population, was followed by a renewed fall in the birth rate which reached a trough of 14.6‰ in 1938. The number of deaths exceeded that of births every year in the late 'thirties. Many families were childless or content to have only one child, and in 1938 the fecundity rate for all women aged 15 to 49 had fallen to the extraordinarily low level of 61‰. The death rate at that time was still 15.4‰, a consequence of an ageing population and of problems such as alcoholism and poor housing. In fact mortality rates remained high, especially amongst the poor who suffered most from the neglect of housing and the social services in general.

At the outbreak of war in 1939 the population of France numbered 41.9 millions, little more than the total recorded at the time of the census in 1911 (41,479,000, including Alsace-Lorraine). Losses in the Second War were appreciably less than in 1914-18, but they nevertheless included the deaths of some 350,000 civilians due to bombing, deportation and other causes. The census of 1946 recorded a population total of only 40.5 millions.

Considered against this demographic background, the growth of the French population since the war has been remarkable. The ratio of births to married women of child-bearing years began to rise during the war years and the birth rate reached 21‰ in the 'baby-boom' period of the late 1940s. Thereafter there was a slight reduction, but the birth rate

was still around 18‰ at the time of the 1962 census. The death rate had also fallen sharply in response to improved medical and social care and by 1962 was as low as 11‰. As a result of these trends, five million more births than deaths were recorded in France between 1946 and 1962. After many years of what Beaujeu-Garnier (1975) has called an 'ambiance anti-familiale', it had once more become popular to have children. The French had not managed to respond fully to General de Gaulle's call for 12 million babies in ten years, but the demographic state of France had nevertheless been transformed.

Although one must be wary of attributing the change to any single cause, there can be little doubt that it reflects in some measure the government's politique familiale or natalist policy (Dyer, 1978). The level of family allowances had been improved as a result of the Code de la Famille of 1939, and subsequent legislation introduced generous tax concessions for couples with children. By a happy chance the parents able to take advantage of these measures were ones born in the earlier 'baby-boom' after the Great War. There were more marriages, therefore, and these were producing many more children.

The birth rate fell, but only very slowly, during the 1960s. It had dropped below 17‰ by the end of the decade but subsequently rose to 17.2‰ in 1971 when 878,600 births took place, the highest number since the war. Children born in the early postwar years were themselves marrying and having children and large numbers of births were recorded also in 1972 and 1973. Yet fecundity was already declining. There were fewer marriages after 1972; more women went out to work; contraceptives were now available on prescription, and legislation to permit abortion before the end of the tenth week of pregnancy was introduced at the beginning of 1975. The birth rate slumped to 15.2‰ in 1974 and to 14‰ in 1975. The death rate had levelled out at a rate of 10.5‰ and dramatically, within the space of a couple of years, the demographic situation had reassumed many of the characteristics of the interwar years.

Fewer births were recorded in France in 1976 (720,000) than in any postwar year. Since that time the birth rate has risen again, notably in 1979 and again in 1980 when almost 800,000 children were born, equal to the total of 1974. Amongst the reasons for this change is the further fall that has taken place in the rate of infant mortality, from a figure of around 18 per thousand births in 1970 to under 10‰ in 1980. Yet despite the increase, the number of births in 1979-80 was still below the level necessary to ensure reproduction of the population and the indications were that the birth rate would fall again in the early 1980s. Pointers could be found in the fact that only 334,000 marriages took place in 1980 compared with 407,000 in 1972 (the highest post-