

J-F Gravier and the French National Planning

Jean-François Gravier, born on April 14, 1915 in Levallois-Perret (a Paris suburb) and dead on November 11, 2005, is a French geographer made famous for his book « *Paris and the French Desert* », published first in 1947 and re-published in 1953 and 1972. This book has inspired French national and regional planning for more than fifty years¹.

Jean-François Gravier obtained one of the highest diplomas in French education : *l'agrégation de géographie*, entitling him to teach in high schools and colleges. As a student, he developed far-right ideas, advocating the destruction of the French Republic and the return of a King. During the 1930s, he wrote various papers in rightist journals : *Combat* and *Le Courrier Français*. After the Nazi victory in June 1940, the IIIrd Republic was abolished and a new regime, under Maréchal Philippe Pétain, was installed in Vichy. Gravier, who taught at the University of Belgrade (1940-41), was invited to Vichy to participate in the new government (Youth Administration 1941-42). He was in charge of the first edition of the governmental journal *Idées*, before becoming director of the *National School for Government Staff*. He was finally recruited in the *Alexis Carrel Foundation*, a conservative institution² dedicated to the “*improvement of the human race*” (*eugenics*). There, he worked on re-localizing activities and organizing population movements in order to develop rural and depleted regions.

In 1942, he publishes *Regions and Nation*, taking a community viewpoint against the individualism of the Enlightenment, advocating decentralization to re-establish “*the citizen within the communal, provincial and national reality.*” “*Parliamentary democracy, whose ideology has been condemned by Pie IX in the Syllabus under the name of liberalism and whose morality was stigmatized by Maréchal Pétain under the name of individualism, lead toward the destruction of French structure and of its natural groups under the weight of particular and short term interests*” (“*Le respect de la personne humaine*”, *Idées*, 1941).

After 1945, he works with a Dominican priest, Père Lebret, engaged in planning and escapes troubles at the Liberation. In 1947, he publishes *Paris and the French Desert* at a small far-right publisher, *le Portulan*, without much success. He gets a job at the French planning agency (*Commissariat général du Plan*). In 1952, the *Desert* is published again by a big publisher, *Flammarion*, and receives a large success. It is again re-published in 1972, after some careful corrections.

Paris et le Désert Français

The book proposes a critical evaluation of the national economy and a program. Gravier sees in French centralization in Paris (administrative, economic, social, political, ...) the source of unbalanced developments and of dangerous inner migrations. He blames for this centralization the revolutionary *Jacobins* (1792-1794) and Napoleon, omitting the fact that it began with the Bourbons kings (XVIIth century). Gravier insists on the centralization of the French railroad network, built mainly in the second half of the XIXth century, with most lines coming to the capital, forgetting that such design was strongly required by smaller regional towns³.

1 Laborie J-P & de Roo P (1985) *La politique française d'aménagement du territoire de 1950 à 1985*, La Documentation française.

2 Drouard D (1992) *Une inconnue des Sciences Sociales : la Fondation Alexis Carrel (1941-45)*, MSH.

3 Leclercq Y (1987) *Le réseau impossible, 1820-1852*, Droz, Genève.

He describes Paris as the main culprit, absorbing migrant flows, seizing French wealth, acting like a parasite and, by its “excessive” growth, ruining the nation :

“And so, in every domain, Paris agglomeration has behaved since 1850, not like a vivifying metropolis fostering its hinterland, but like a “monopolist” group devouring national substance.” (1972, p 60). And further : *“An urban monster like Paris causes each year in France more than three times the loss of human wealth than alcoholism... Any effort to rebuild France would be in jeopardy if big cities were still to grow at the expense of the nation, if Paris continued to swallow up France’s substance.”* (1972, p 111). Big cities are the enemies of children : *“Metropolis against childhood ... the survival of a huge family in Paris is an heroic endeavor”*.

Metropolises should compensate their low demographic growth by accepting migrants, but after a careful selection : *“First, eliminate population from the Middle-East, usually difficult to assimilate and dedicated to parasitism. While Poles, Italians, or Spaniards come to replace the children French households have refused, one thinks inevitably of the already banal comparison with the Low Empire slowly invaded by the Barbarians.”* (p 77).

The housing crisis should be aggravated in big cities : *“No new building in Paris, Lyon, Marseilles or in their suburbs during 10 years ... and renewal of rural and particularly agricultural housing.”* (p 264). With maybe some optimism, he sees his plan realized in some twelve years : *“No urban or rural communes may increase its population by more than 100 % in 10 years, even of 50 % in big cities counting more than 15 000 or 20 000 inhabitants.”* (p 312). Paris remains the main offender : *“Since the beginning of the century, planing in Paris is nothing but a succession of insults to beauty, offenses to good sense, of disgraceful management and sickening business”*. (p 244).

Rousseau already, 200 years ago, wrote : *“Men are not made be crowded in ant-nests but spread on the land they must till. The more they flock together, the more they get corrupt. Body’s diseases, as well as soul’s vices are the necessary consequences of such numerous gatherings. Of all animals, man is the less able to live in herds. Men crowded together like sheep would all die in a short time. A man’s breath kills his fellowmen : this is true literally and figuratively.”*⁴

The book has become the Bible of French national planning. It has been favorably quoted, during half a century, in geography courses and high school manuals, in college and University teachings and, still in 2008, in newspapers or in Senate publications.⁵ Curiously, no review of such a famous text has been published during 47 years. In 1999, a sociologist, Isabelle Provost, dedicated her PhD thesis⁶ (Université d’Evry) to a severe critique of the book (she calls it a *myth*), wondering why spreading population and activities all over the national territory would be better than concentrating them in a few centers. This crucial point, accepted as an evidence by Gravier, already advocated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, does not seem to have been seriously discussed by geographers. André Meynier explains such desire to occupy space homogeneously by the capital role played by maps in geographical research : activities concentrated in a few points would make maps quite useless⁷.

4 Rousseau J-J (1762) *Emile, ou de l’éducation*. Gallica, BNF, p 30.

5 *“In spite of the promise, made at the very beginning of the Regional Planning policy (Paris et le Désert Français), to balance the excessive weight of Paris with an adequate regional growth, the map of France still shows a depressing view : a Paris region living abusively at the expense of a depleted rural France.”* Georges Patrix, architecte, *Le Monde*, 2006.

6 Provost I (1999) *Paris et le Désert français, histoire d’un mythe*, Thèse de Doctorat, Univ. d’Evry.

7 Meynier A (1969) *Histoire de la pensée géographique en France*, PUF, 223 p.

A first critique by a French geographer appears in 2001⁸. *Urbaphobia*, i.e a deep hostility toward big cities, becomes in France a research topic. A 10 days international colloquium is organized (2007) at Cerisy-la-Salle⁹ on *The Unloved City (La Ville Mal aimée)*¹⁰. A book, published in 2009, reviews the origins and evolution of *Urbaphobia* in France since the XVIII th century¹¹. Klaus Bergman writes his PhD thesis at the University of Hanover on *Urbaphobia* in Germany¹². A similar field of research opens in Italy¹³ and in the United States during the 1960s¹⁴. A choice of recent texts about this topic in the world has been published in 2010¹⁵. Economists have finally discussed and evaluated the soundness of Gravier's theses¹⁶. A critical evaluation is now possible.

Gravier's thesis : the background

It reflects its political and historical environment. France, like most modern nations, had experienced a powerful rural exodus since the XVIII th century : farmers left in mass a poor and antiquated agriculture to work in urban and industrial activities¹⁷. The traditional landed aristocracy, broken down and ruined by the Revolution, lost its political power after 1830, replaced by a new urban ruling class made of bankers and entrepreneurs.

A wide economic crisis (1873-1893), due to new technical means (railroads, steamers, electricity, wireless, ...), forced European nations to react. While Germany decided to invest in industry, starting the biggest inner migration of its history from the rural East towards coal and steel in the Ruhr territory, France decided to privilege its agriculture by building a wall of taxes, increasing the cost of life in cities (Meline laws, 1892)¹⁸. Such protection has been preserved until today. Between the two World Wars, French farmers were widely represented as the "true Frenchmen"¹⁹. School manuals exalted rural life as the true life²⁰. Their privileges were still widely increased during the Pétain regime. Hence a general bias, in French opinion, in favor of small cities and the rural countryside.

8 Marchand B (2001) "La haine de la ville : Paris et le désert français de Jean-François Gravier", *L'Information Géographique*, vol 65, pp 234-253.

9 www.ccic-cerisy.asso.fr

10 Communications available on <http://www-ohp.univ-paris1.fr>

11 Marchand B (2009) *Les ennemis de Paris, La haine de la grande ville des Lumières à nos jours*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 380 p.

12 Bergmann K (1970) *Agrarromantik und Grossstadtfeindschaft*, Anton Haig Vlg, Marburger Abhandlungen zur politischen Wissenschaft, Band 20, 405 p. The text has not been widely published but a 30 pages summary, in French, is available on <http://www-ohp.univ-paris1.fr>

13 Mariani R (1976) *Fascismo e "Città nuove"*, Feltrinelli.

14 White M & White L (1962) *The Intellectual vs the City*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Ma. ; Rodwin L & Hollisterr (1984) *Cities of the Mind, Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences*, Plenum Press , 356 p. ; Lees A (1985) *Cities perceived. Urban society in European and American Thought*, Manchester Univ Press, 360 p ;

15 Salomon J & B Marchand (2010) *Anti-Urbain*, Presses de l'Université de Lausanne.

16 Jacobs, J (1970) *The Economy of Cities*, Vintage Book, 268 p. ; Camagni R (1996) *Principes et modèles de l'économie urbaine*, Economica, 382 p.

17 Pitié J (1980) *L'exode rural*, Centre de géographie humaine et sociale, Université de Poitiers, 584 p.

18 Méline J (1905) *Le retour à la terre*, Hachette.

19 Barral P (1968) *Les agrariens français de Méline à Pisani*, Science-Po, n° 164, 386 p. ; Augé-Laribé M (1950) *La politique agricole de la France de 1880 à 1940*, PUF.

20 Thiesse A-M (1997) *Ils apprenaient la France : l'exaltation des régions dans le discours patriotique*, Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 280 p.

The Great Depression (1929-32) led people to believe they were witnessing the end of capitalism and of the liberal economy. *Planism* (controlling an economy through central planning) triumphed in the Soviet Union as well as in fascist countries (Italy, Germany). Gravier wanted to imitate them and see geographers take the lead in France. In *Idées*, he wrote “*We observe to-day a universal tendency towards state socialism, state planning, often combined with a catholic and mystical rebirth.*” Gravier’s book fits in this general situation, which explains its wide success.

Inner contradictions

Gravier wishes a central planning authority, strong and even brutal, able to deplete big cities and throw back to smaller cities some 2 millions Parisian dwellers in order to decentralize activities and population. French Regional Planning, however, has actually been managed, during half a century, by high-level civil servants of the central State²¹ working in Paris. Such contradiction reflects the inner contradiction of the Pétain regime (1940-1944), establishing a centralized, quasi-monarchical power, while advocating regional autonomy and rural development.

Basic Hypotheses

Gravier’s thesis is based on assumptions he does not discuss :

1 – demographic malthusianism : population does not grow much ; he neglects foreign migrations.

2 – Production of wealth (goods and services) is more or less proportional to population. He ignores productivity differences and the effects of capital and of manpower concentration.

3 – Economic malthusianism : combining postulates 1 and 2, he believes that total number of jobs and wealth production are more or less fixed. Thus, developing poor regions implies relocating workers and redistributing existing activities on the national territory.

4 – Planism : the national state can and must decide about the localization of activities and population and, in particular, should determine the size of cities.

5 – There exist an optimal size of cities : an important topic in geographical literature between 1950 and 1980. Economists have refuted such concept.

6 - Urban hierarchy : cities’ role is to organize the activities of their surrounding rural territories. Urban centers and rural land live in symbiosis. But in fact, huge metropolises seem to work with each other, in networks, with little relationship to their rural surroundings.

7 – Privileging rural territories : Gravier wants equality of public investment between territories which, when population is largely concentrated in huge cities, means inducing inequality between households

8 – Nationalism : Gravier considers only the national economy while Paris, Lyon or Marseilles are European and world cities.

The Physiocrats influence

The *Physiocrats*, French economists of the XVIII th century, whose ideas influenced also J-J-Rousseau, refused any State intervention²². Gravier wants a powerful central planning and simultaneously decentralization. His doctrine, in spite of such contradictions, has been deeply

21 See, by the director of the DATAR (the National Planning Agency) : Essig F (1979) *DATAR, des régions et des hommes*, Stanké, 300 p.

22 Mergely A(2010) *L’État des physiocrates : autorité et décentralisation*, PUAM, 586 p. ; Charbit Y & A Virmani (2002) “The Political Failure of an Economic Theory : Physiocracy”, *Population*, Vol. 57, No. 6. pp. 855–83, INED.

inspired by the *Physiocrats*. They taught that big cities, with low natality and excessive mortality, were killing their own population and needed constant inflow of migrants from the countryside. They also believed that all wealth came only from agriculture : big cities were pure parasites, plundering small towns and villages.

Such views might have been partly true at the time, but became false during the XXth century, with the development of education, urban production and the progress of medicine (vaccine). Sanitary conditions are not a declining function of a city size but a direct consequence of its social management²³.

The facts to-day

In 2006, *Ile-de-France* (the Paris agglomeration) had the highest birth rate of the country (15.9 per 1000) and this was not true only in the suburbs. The city of Paris itself had a rate almost double (19.4) of the French one (10.5). Paris population has experienced between 2006 and 2012 the highest natural growth (natality - death) in France : 0.9.

Economists have shown that in developed countries, most of the wealth (goods and services) is produced in a few large metropolises, the remainder living mainly from agricultural subsidies and personal services²⁴. In 2006, *Ile-de-France* with 18 % of the national population, produced 30 % of French added value and paid 30 % of the State budget.. Its productivity was 25 % higher than the national one²⁵. French agriculture produced only 1.8 % of the national wealth.

Gross Domestic product in 2011 :

- France : 1 788 995 ; metropolitan France : 1 756 063 (millions €)

- France by sectors :

- Agriculture 1,8 %
- Industry 12,6 %
- Building 6,2 %
- Commerce 56,8 %
- Finance 22,7 %

Source : INSEE, *Comptes régionaux des ménages*

23 Coleman W (1982) *Death is a Social Disease*, Univ of Wisconsin Press, 318 p.

24 Davezies L & Veltz P (2006) La crise sociale française, *Territoires : nouvelles mobilités, nouvelles inégalités*. ; Davezies L (2004) Paris, capitale économique, *Pouvoirs*, Rev Fse d'Etudes Constitutionnelles, 110. ; Prud'homme R & Gilbert G (1994) *Aménagement du territoire et fiscalité*, 1994.

25 Rousseau M-P (1998) *La productivité des grandes villes*, Anthropos, 256 p.

In opposition to Gravier's statements, Paris metropolis does not plunder France but subsidizes most of the other regions. In 1995, 19 of the 22 French regions received from the State (Versements : public salaries, investments, subsidies, ...) more than they paid to the Treasury (Prélèvements : taxes, ...). *Ile-de-France* paid 97 % of these subsidies. On the average, an household with 2 children located in Paris metropolis sent each year more than 40 000 francs, some 6 600 euros, to the rest of the country. These flows are quite stable :

Prélèvements et versements de l'Etat en 1995 par région et par habitant

Budget 1995	Prélèvt	Versemt	Solde	Pop 95	Prelev/hab	Solde/Hab
Total	-1734807	1734807	-1	59130023	-29339	0
	(millions F)	(millions F)	(millions F)		(F/Hab)	(F/Hab)
ALSACE	-48792	46004	-2670	1679258	-29056	-1590
AQUITAINE	-76262	84662	8220	2852094	-26739	2882
AUVERGNE	-36908	39205	2219	1315046	-28066	1687
BOURGOGNE	-43407	47819	4358	1609860	-26963	2707
BRETAGNE	-74203	83524	9243	2850917	-26028	3242
CENTRE	-67933	68444	598	2405682	-28239	249
CHAMP- ARD	-38715	40739	2015	1345105	-28782	1498
CORSE	-6138	9415	3233	255283	-24044	12664
FRANCHE CTE	-28775	31179	2346	1107167	-25990	2119
ILE DE FRANCE	-463225	343748	-118056	10806282	-42866	-10925
LANGDoc ROUSS	-55968	74195	17566	2205316	-25379	7965
LIMOUSIN	-19301	23734	4331	716894	-26923	6041
LORRAINE	-61790	70133	8263	2308051	-26772	3580
MIDI-PYR	-65910	80401	14310	2491175	-26457	5744
NORD P de C	-99942	119924	19854	3980823	-25106	4987
P DE LA LOIRE	-82530	89364	6783	3140586	-26279	2160
PICARDIE	-47761	51005	3257	1834084	-26041	1776
POITOU CHAR	-42819	47689	4785	1617588	-26471	2958
PACA	-124449	128887	4336	4382029	-28400	989
RHONES ALPES	-164944	160078	-4460	5498054	-30000	-811
BASSE NORM	-36805	43305	6327	1406755	-26163	4498
HAUTE NORM	-48231	51354	3140	1758719	-27424	1785

Sources :* *Economic and Social cohesion in the European Union : the impact of member states own policies, regional Development studies*, N° 29, (1998) Bruxelles.

* Recensement de la France 1990, 1999, INSEE.

NB =

1)- Les dépenses, ainsi que les soldes, sont calculés "par bénéficiaire" afin de permettre des comparaisons avec les autres pays européens, ce qui explique que le solde ne soit pas exactement égal à la différence des prélèvements et des dépenses. En outre, les chiffres sont arrondis.

2)- Les populations de 1995 ont été évaluées par interpolation linéaire entre les recensement de 1990 et 1999