

From “Black City” to “Slum City”: The Importance of Image in Saint-Étienne

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Series: Shrinking Cities

In December 2014, an article in the French daily newspaper Le Monde painted a highly negative portrait of the city of Saint-Étienne, in south-eastern France, generating considerable controversy and intense mobilization. Vincent Béal, Christelle Morel Journal and Valérie Sala Pala place these reactions within the context of a long history of image-related stakes in local society and politics, and highlight the contrasting approaches adopted by inhabitants and local elites in response to the stigmatization of this shrinking city.

“The clouds in the sky hang low but the impression of almost oppressive greyness isn’t due to the weather. In this neighbourhood of Saint-Étienne, it is the run-down buildings that darken the mood. The façades look as if they are covered in soot. On one side, sheds overlook the top floor of a building. As we turn up a flight of steps, a collection of decrepit buildings heave into view. Here, in Tarentaize, a deprived inner-city neighbourhood just a stone’s throw from the Palais de Justice,² even the rear courtyards are home to tumbledown buildings. ‘Armstown’ – the nickname for this city formerly dominated by the Manufrance gun factory – seems to have given way to ‘Poortown’, capital of the slums.”³

It was with these sentences that a *Le Monde* journalist⁴ chose to open an article, published on 9 December 2014, headlined “In Saint-Étienne, a city centre undermined by poverty” (an oblique reference to the city’s mining past) and illustrated with a photograph of run-down buildings in the inner-city neighbourhood of Beaubrun, the city’s poorest district. In the days following its

¹ The three authors of this article are all participants in the Altergrowth research project, financed by the ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche – National Research Agency) and coordinated by Vincent Béal (University of Strasbourg). This research team included Matthieu Giroud, to whom this article is dedicated.

² Translator’s note: the Palais de Justice in Saint-Étienne is a grand 19th-century building that houses the city’s main law courts.

³ Translation of an excerpt from Zappi, S. 2014. “À Saint-Étienne, le centre-ville miné par la pauvreté”, *Le Monde*, 9 December. The original article (in French) is available online at the following URL: www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2014/12/08/a-saint-etienne-le-centre-ville-mine-par-la-pauvrete_4536458_3224.html.

⁴ The article was written by Sylvia Zappi, who is in charge of *Le Monde*’s “Banlieues” (literally “Suburbs” but better translated as “Inner City”) column. The article in question appeared following the publication of a study by the French statistics office INSEE showing how poverty is still present in urban centres, thus challenging the highly publicized work of geographer Christophe Guilluy (2010, 2014), which defined “peripheral France” as a catch-all prism through which to analyse periurban areas affected by poverty and downward social mobility (Girard and Rivière 2013; Charmes 2014). In Saint-Étienne, Sylvia Zappi found an example of a place where demographic decline is a tangible reality and where poverty in the city centre still exists and is even increasing.

publication, many local people and organizations reacted strongly to this publication, criticizing the highly stigmatizing expressions and connotations, the miserabilistic style and the bias in its unnuanced portrayal of Saint-Étienne as a “sad city”, an image that admittedly appears to correspond to the city’s declining demographic trajectory and the impoverishment of its centre, both of which are acutely felt locally. These reactions took various forms: widely shared messages on social media, the publication of parodies of the article, blogs dedicated to the subject, and even a banner unfurled by supporters of the city’s soccer team, AS Saint-Étienne, in their home stadium, Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, inviting *Le Monde* to “come down to the slum”.⁵ In the space of just a few days, a controversy was born, to which *Le Monde* devoted a column by its mediator and a new article, which, while pondering the reactions provoked, did not call in question the line taken by the initial article associating the city with the inevitability of its decline.⁶

The mobilization of residents in reaction to negative media images of their living environment is not specific to Saint-Étienne, however: in 2008, after Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* described Charleroi in Belgium as the “ugliest city in the world”, young artists set up an urban safari in the streets of the city and filmed a documentary called “La Plus Moche Ville du Monde” (“The Ugliest City in the World”)⁷ as part of an approach seeking to “reverse the stigma”.⁸ In 2015, a residents’ collective based in La Villeneuve, a “sensitive” neighbourhood of Grenoble, made an official complaint against national broadcaster France Télévisions, after a report went out stigmatizing their place of residence, and produced an “angry [but] also constructive”⁹ documentary in an effort to move beyond the hurt caused to local inhabitants. More recently still, in Albi, south-west France, elected officials and residents alike protested against the image conveyed by an article in the 28 February 2017 edition of the *New York Times* that cited their town as an example of downtown devitalization and the decline of mid-sized French cities.¹⁰

While the issue of territorial stigmatization is the subject of convincing analyses at neighbourhood level (Bacqué *et al.* 2007), and in particular in those designated as “sensitive” (Wacquant 1993; Kokoreff 2007; Wacquant *et al.* 2014; Rivière and Tissot 2012; Berthaut 2013), it is something that has been rarely considered on the scale of a whole city. And yet image-related issues are increasingly important items on urban agendas today, especially in traditionally industrial cities affected by processes of economic and demographic decline (Beauregard 2003; Rousseau 2013). In a context where the holy grails of competitiveness and attractiveness (to businesses, to the middle and upper classes, to tourists, etc.) dominate urban policies (Harvey 1989; Brenner 2009; Rousseau 2009), these shrinking cities are often considered the major losers of the post-Fordist

⁵ For more on the role of AS Saint-Étienne supporters in symbolic battles over the city’s image, see Ginhoux (2015): www.metropolitiques.eu/Beyond-the-stadium-how-ultra.html.

⁶ See the posting by *Le Monde*’s mediator on 20 December 2014 and the article titled “Retour sur une indignation collective à Saint-Étienne” in the newspaper’s 29 December 2014 edition (both in French). A few months later, a very flattering article about the city – a new artefact, albeit a somewhat clumsy compensatory one, that once again could not help associating Saint-Étienne with its coal-mining past – was published on the occasion of the city’s design biennial in the newspaper’s *M Le Mag* supplement of 13 March 2015, titled “Saint-Étienne, mine aux trésors” (“Saint-Étienne: a mine of treasures”).

⁷ See in particular this blog post (in French) by Chloé Andriès: <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/chloe-andries/blog/150308/charleroi-ville-la-plus-laide-du-monde>; and the presentation of the documentary (also in French): www.kisskissbankbank.com/charleroi-la-plus-moche-ville-du-monde.

⁸ Erving Goffman (1975) defines stigma as the gap between a person’s virtual social identity (categories and attributes that are assumed, *a priori*, of an individual) and actual social identity (comprising categories and attributes that are distinct from those ascribed to a person by others). The social existence of the stigmatized individual is largely organized around the management of this identity gap, which sometimes results in strategies of resistance, such as “stigma reversal”, consisting in appropriating the stigmatized identity and transforming it into an emblem.

⁹ This documentary, produced by Vincent Massot and Flore Viénot, sought to “breathe new life into the collective project” that characterizes the neighbourhood’s history. See (in French): <http://latelelibre.fr/libre-posts/doc-la-villeneuve-lutopie-malgre-tout>.

¹⁰ See the *New York Times* article in question here: www.nytimes.com/2017/02/28/world/europe/france-albi-french-towns-fading.html; and *Le Monde*’s reaction (in French) here: www.lemonde.fr/big-browser/article/2017/03/14/albi-

transition and are associated with devalued brand images, which consequently have an impact on these cities' ability to mobilize resources. Urban stigmatization (which focuses on the “lack of qualities” of urban territories, their ugliness, their dirtiness, their deviation from “the norm”, and so forth) adds to the processes of social and ethnic stigmatization to which these spaces and their inhabitants are already subjected. Like any sort of stigma (Goffman 1975), these urban stigmas are internalized and subsequently act as obstacles to the emergence not just of urban strategies but also of local mobilizations based on belief in an alternative to the model held up as the new urban normality, i.e. successful, attractive metropolitan areas where life is good.

In order to understand local reactions to the article in *Le Monde*, we shall place them within a much longer history of image-related stakes and issues in Saint-Étienne, and then analyse the diversity of approaches at play in the local mobilizations generated by the article.

Images and counter-images of Saint-Étienne: a long story

Having to “make do” with a negative image is not a new experience for Saint-Étienne. The “black city” and its inhabitants have long been the subject of stigmatization, as evidenced in the late 18th century by Jean-Louis Alléon-Dulac, postmaster of Saint-Étienne and lawyer to the parliament of Lyon, who wrote that “outsiders [were] rightly astonished not to see in Saint-Étienne any of the monuments that identify and distinguish an opulent city. [Instead, they] find no rules, no order, and no sense of proportion there” (Alléon-Dulac 1765). From the 1880s onwards, whenever a crisis affected Saint-Étienne and its environs, the question of the city's image would resurface, providing a new source of concern for local elites who used this issue as a pretext for rejecting the establishment of certain activities or controlling the local workforce (Vant 1981, p. 201). This question became increasingly important from the mid-1950s, against a backdrop of declining industry. The city council, employers and the local representatives of the state all came to the conclusion that it was vital to combat the city's “bad reputation” in order to retain – and attract – workers, and create the conditions necessary for economic restructuring.

As in other industrial cities, image-related policies were formalized in Saint-Étienne in the 1960s, in the period Max Rousseau calls “late urban Fordism” (Rousseau 2013). Michel Durafour, Saint-Étienne's right-of-centre mayor from 1964 to 1977, placed the policy of creating counter-images at the heart of his political manifesto (Vant 1981, p. 234). In order to position the city favourably while resisting stereotypes seen as obstacles to economic transition, a range of different tools were created: from 1969, the city council commissioned promotional films about Saint-Étienne and the surrounding area and sought to objectivize, via multiple surveys, the needs and expectations of the inhabitants it wanted to attract; in 1971, the Office d'Accueil et d'Information de Saint-Étienne (Saint-Étienne Visitor and Information Office) became the body responsible for promoting – and controlling¹¹ – the city's image. The targets of these operations – urban marketing before its time – were quite clear: business leaders, executives and their wives! From the outset, this image strategy focused on the environment (thus, Saint-Étienne is not the antithesis of a city but a city in tune with nature – the “green city”), leisure activities, industrial performance, and innovative spirit.

ville-morte-grise-et-symbolique-du-declin-de-la-france-la-contre-enquete-locale_5094463_4832693.html.

¹¹ Indeed, the city's image was so well controlled that, “from 1970, all articles about the city resembled one another. They all dealt with the question of the past in a single short sentence. [...] The city authorities could not stand anyone talking about Saint-Étienne without consulting them first” (Vant 1981, p. 241). According to André Vant, an article that appeared in *Le Monde* on 29 October 1969 was the last not to put forward this new and stereotyped “official” image of Saint-Étienne. In this article, titled “De Saint-Étienne à Saint-Étienne-sur-Loire. Une ville à la recherche d'une nouvelle identité” (“From Saint-Étienne to Saint-Étienne-on-Loire: a city in search of a new identity”), we read that “[f]ew outsiders are ready [...] to succumb to the seductive charms of Saint-Étienne, in its various hues of grey, a city which, in the shadow of its slag heaps, is having great difficulty in burying its mining past and leaving behind its trademark ‘black city’ image” (cited in Vant 1981, p. 241).

In the 1980s, this production of counter-images continued along the same lines as the marketing strategies that were burgeoning in most other French and European cities at this time, which sought to confirm the desired break with the industrial city of the past: local actors developed the image of a technopole, with a business district and multiple business parks, before a shift of emphasis in the late 1990s towards the “creative” city, reinforcing cultural offerings, calling upon renowned architects and implementing a strategy centred on design. In 2014, the city council, led by newly elected mayor Gaël Perdriau (of the conservative Les Républicains party), decided to make the theme of innovation a marker of local identity with a view to ensuring the city is better placed to take advantage of the dynamics of globalization. A publicity campaign titled “*Savez-vous comment Saint-Étienne change le monde ?*” (“Do you know how Saint-Étienne is changing the world?”) highlights examples of the area’s economic excellence and its spirit of innovation, with design “naturally” forming part of the city’s historic and economic heritage. The fact that the launch of this campaign coincided – fortuitously – with the publication of the article in *Le Monde* reinforced the city’s claim of stigmatization by the newspaper.

Figure 1. “Saint-Étienne is the capital of design. Does that surprise you?”, part of the city’s publicity campaign



Source: City of Saint-Étienne, 2015.

From “poor city” to “sad city”: collective indignation and reactions to stigmatization

In Saint-Étienne, the city’s image has long been something of an obsession, both in the social antagonisms that came to the fore with the city’s industrialization in the early 19th century – the smoke and grime brought by industrial development was considered incompatible with the delicate ribbons worn by the local bourgeoisie – and as a motor for urban redevelopment that has often been somewhat disconnected from the reality of the city and its residents. The importance of these factors is something that was no doubt misjudged by the journalist from *Le Monde* when she chose Saint-Étienne as the emblem of rising poverty in central urban spaces. If we ignore for a moment the linguistic approximations, errors and inaccuracies¹² that still made it into her copy after two days spent in the city, the article assigns a role – that of the neglected poor city, a successor to the historic moniker of “black city” in reference to Saint-Étienne’s mining and industrial past – dressed up in narrative that lies midway between journalism and literary pseudorealism. When such writing appears in a newspaper of record, the effect is to bolster the kinds of stereotypes that have become commonplace with regard to ordinary urban realities, thus helping to stigmatize territories that do not conform to familiar metropolitan criteria.

It is in this context that the many reactions to this article – both on social media and in the local and national media – must be viewed. While they all have the same starting point, namely indignation at the article’s style and content, these reactions are far from homogeneous. Within this movement of “identity deployment” (Bernstein 1997), two broad categories can be identified: “counter-image reactions” that seek to show how much Saint-Étienne actually has in common with the canons of the post-Fordist city; and “stigma-reversal reactions” that focus more on what sets Saint-Étienne apart from them.

Figure 2. Banner reading “Come down into the slum; we’ll teach you how to put *Le Monde* [the world] to rights”, displayed during the Saint-Étienne v. Évian Thonon Gaillard match at the Stade Geoffroy-Guichard on 21 December 2014



Source: www.butfootballclub.fr.

¹² While the city of Saint-Étienne is undeniably affected by processes of structural decline (dismantling of its economic base, continual population decline, impoverishment of the city centre, etc.), the data featured in the article in *Le Monde* appear to be highly selective. For example, the article focused on the Beaubrun neighbourhood, whose median income per consumption unit has been the lowest in the city since 2005. It also emphasized the fact that the city’s poverty rate (22%) is much higher than the national average (14%), while neglecting to point out that other large French cities (such as Montpellier and Strasbourg) have poverty rates that are even higher.

The first category could be considered to comprise claims in favour of the “majority” identity (Bernstein 1997), i.e. Saint-Étienne’s place within the post-Fordist “norm”. This includes the majority of spontaneous reactions, in the guise of representations of urban pride, as well as those emanating from local authorities. For example, the day after the article appeared, the city council tweeted a message encouraging Stéphanois – inhabitants of Saint-Étienne – to “show *Le Monde* that Saint-Étienne is a warm, design-conscious and innovative city” and to share their photos using the hashtag “#StéphanoisFiers” (“#ProudStéphanois”). This campaign, publicized on the city’s information display boards, was very successful but did not avoid the pitfall of producing a selective counter-image that focuses above all on the city’s main “assets” (iconic buildings such as the Cité du Design or the Zénith concert hall, spectacular views from the surrounding hills, proximity to nature, etc.) while overlooking other markers of Stéphanois identity (industrial heritage, presence of minority ethnic groups, etc.). In this respect, these reactions have much in common with the mobilization strategies developed in many British cities that seek to engage local citizens with narratives of “urban regeneration” (Collins 2016).

As mentioned above, the second category of reactions is closer in tone to stigma reversal (Goffman 1975) or the defence of a “specific” identity (Bernstein 1997). This involves a strategy of identity-based confrontation by emphasizing – exaggerating, even – the most negative traits highlighted in the article. A recent publicity campaign launched by the city’s main theatre company, La Comédie de Saint-Étienne, illustrates this well. Renowned British photographer Ed Alcock was invited to take pictures for the campaign, which shows residents in desolate urban landscapes, where traces of Saint-Étienne’s industrial past are visible alongside signs of the city’s return to nature.¹³ While this strategy has the merit of partially reversing values and symbols, it typically reveals itself to be “incapable of eliminating the conditions leading to the production of the distinctive trait” (Mathieu 2009, p. 38). Here, the local cultural elites, all *too* conscious of the image associated with their city, seek to manipulate it and aestheticize the most stigmatized markers of Saint-Étienne’s identity, without succeeding in moving beyond the opposition between image and counter-image.

Figure 3. Photographer Ed Alcock taking portraits of local residents for a publicity campaign by La Comédie de Saint-Étienne, in February 2016



Source: France 3 Régions.

¹³ See this page on the theatre company’s website – www.lacomédie.fr/campagne-de-communication (in French) – and this page on Ed Alcock’s website www.edalcock.com/index.php?ongoing/stephanoisfiers (in English). The subjects of these portraits are Saint-Étienne residents who responded to a call for a volunteers published as part of the #StéphanoisFiers project.

Beyond a united stand

The article in *Le Monde* painfully revived the symbolic depreciation to which Saint-Étienne has been subject for several decades. Through the reproduction of negative images of the city, a new layer of stigma – territorial stigma – was added to the class- and ethnicity-related stigmas that already affect a proportion of the city’s inhabitants. The two types of attitudes in reaction to this – assertion of the majority identity or assertion of a specific identity – reflect the very real attachment to the city of a mobilized portion of both residents and the political and cultural elites. However, both groups struggle to free themselves of the inherent constraint of stigmatization (Bourdieu 1998; Fraser 2005), namely deciding what position to adopt when faced with unflattering images and identities, typically imposed by external actors (such as certain media outlets), but also incorporated or even instrumentalized by sections of local society. However intense the mobilization may have been in response to *Le Monde*’s shortcuts – depicting a poor city as a “sad city” – it has not led to the co-construction of an alternative narrative that, based on a demystified reading of local history, could have stood apart from a miserabilistic stance on the one hand and the desire to cling to the narrative of the dynamic, attractive and – above all – creative metropolis on the other. And yet the development of such a narrative is without doubt an essential prerequisite for involving local residents and groups in the production of urban policies and in the transformation of Saint-Étienne – and more generally of many other shrinking cities.

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