From "Local Environment" to "Sustainable Urban Development": the Entrepreneurial Turn of the Management of a Public Issue

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ABSTRACT

Over the last two decades, numerous authors have attempted to interpret the issue of sustainable urban development (SUD). During the nineties these works were mainly focused on the technical aspect of the problem. Current approaches are dramatically different. These approaches, which are not unified, have offered some particularly important insights into the complex issue of SUD. For these urban geographers, SUD cannot be analysed without an understanding of the wider economical, social and political context (Gibbs, 2002, While et al., 2004, Keil and Desford, 2003, Whitehead, 2003). Influenced by the work of David Harvey and the Regulation approach, these scholars tend to consider SUD as a "space of conflicts" which have to be regulated.

Drawing upon the work of these authors we will argue in this paper that the shift from "local environment" to "SUD" is not only a rhetorical one. While "local environment" policies have tried to tackle some ecological problems, "SUD" policies seem to be rather focused on the management of risks which frighten the accumulation of capital. The paper will focus on the examples of two cities – Saint-Etienne (France) and Manchester (UK) – which are not renowned for their SUD policies. Yet, these cities both used SUD as a way to communicate, to improve their image and their competitiveness. However, we think that SUD should not be interpreted as an "avoiding blame policy" only (Weaver, 1986).

The paper will discuss the SUD policies in relation to the evolution of local government in Europe (Le Galès, 2003), i.e. the increase of public/private partnership, the rise of a private ethos in the way of governing cities and the necessity to build a capacity to govern (Stone, 1993). We will particularly focus on the evolution of government/governance logics in the pursuit of SUD. One of the hypothesis which will be tested is that by trying to conciliate environment and economy, SUD should be interpreted as a way to control and to limit the strength of the environmental policies and the protest which are likely to occur in the urban society.

Key Words: environment, governance, sustainability