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– RE-SCALING TERRITORIAL STIGMATIZATION: The Construction and Negotiation of ‘Declining Medium-Sized Cities’ as a Stigmatizing Imaginary in France

SOLÈNE LE BORGNE

Abstract

Loïc Wacquant’s work on the production and reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities in Chicago and La Courneuve has inspired a literature on how imaginaries of low-income, often racialized neighborhoods are spread through discourse and policy, and how residents respond to the stigmatization of their neighborhoods through internalization, deflection or resistance. While this body of scholarship has almost exclusively focused on the marginalization of urban neighborhoods, I argue in this article that the process of ‘territorial stigmatization’ analyzed by Wacquant also operates at the level of entire cities and subnational regions, with comparable political outcomes: the shifting of attention away from the structural causes of poverty onto its symptoms and, ultimately, the normalization and exacerbation of inequalities between people and places. Drawing on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nevers, I analyze the stigmatizing imaginaries surrounding ‘declining medium-sized cities’ in France and how they affect residents’ experience of place. The article contributes to the debate on the internalization/contestation of territorial stigma by showcasing the efforts of Nevers residents to restrict local critical discourse to insiders. It also adds to the literature on resistance through place re-scripting strategies by emphasizing the role played by the physical characteristics of place within alternative narratives.

Introduction

Hello

We acknowledge receipt of your e-mail, which has been given our full attention.

Nevertheless, we do not meet your expectations.

Indeed, our city is not in ‘devitalization’ but in ‘revitalization’ as evidenced by the FISAC, the Action Cœur de Ville, among others, of which we are a beneficiary and the actions we have undertaken for 4 years already.

We are therefore unable to respond favorably to your request.

Best regards

I received this rejection by email during my first period of fieldwork in the French city of Nevers, a so-called ‘shrinking city’—or in local parlance, a *ville moyenne en déclin* (‘declining medium-sized city’). I had already met the mayor, who seemed enthusiastic about my research. Giving me his card, he told me to contact him for an interview, which I did. After several weeks without an answer, I received the above response from one of his staffers. I had blundered by mentioning the ‘devitalization’ of Nevers’ city

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center—the term usually encountered in newspapers. I was duly denied the interview. The blunder sensitized me to the importance of choosing my words when introducing my research. The staffer's reaction spoke volumes and I instead began emphasizing my interest in residents' experience of place. Nevertheless, the theme of Nevers' reputation kept recurring, unprompted, in my interviews, discussions and ethnographic encounters. Following the fieldwork, I pondered how the existence of a pessimistic discourse about Nevers which my interlocutors reported could co-exist with widespread expressions of place attachment and satisfaction. Slowly, what seemed a paradox coalesced into the problem of reputation—and ultimately the *territorial stigmatization*—of Nevers and similar shrinking medium-sized cities in France. Without equating Nevers with Chicago's South and West Side or La Courneuve in Paris—the neighborhoods studied by Loïc Wacquant (1993; 2008: 163–98) in his influential work on territorial stigmatization—I recognized features of his analysis in Nevers.

Wacquant's work on the construction of negative imaginaries of low-income, racialized neighborhoods has inspired a body of urban scholarship on how territorial stigma spreads through media coverage and public policy, and how residents respond to this stigma through internalization, deflection or resistance. This literature generally focuses on urban neighborhoods and, above all, impoverished public housing estates. In this article, I re-scale the concept of 'territorial stigma' beyond its usual focus on urban neighborhoods. Following emergent research on the stigmatization of post-industrial areas (Nayak, 2019; Schemschat, 2021; Hincks and Powell, 2022; Pattison, 2022), I address the stigmatizing imaginaries surrounding so-called shrinking cities. Drawing on Watkins' (2015) 'spatial imaginaries', I use the term *stigmatizing imaginaries* to refer to a specific type of spatial imaginary—one that reflects and reproduces negative, stereotypical discourses and imageries of place. Stigmatizing imaginaries, I contend, are at the core of the production of territorial stigma.

My contribution to the scholarship on territorial stigmatization is three-fold. First, I seek to re-scale the phenomenon by showing that studying the production and operation of stigma to unravel '*the role of symbolic structures in the production of inequality and marginality*' (Wacquant *et al.*, 2014: 1278, original emphasis) can be applied not only to neighborhoods but to entire cities and national subregions. Second, I contribute to the debate on the internalization/contestation of stigma by emphasizing the agentive mitigation strategies deployed by residents to restrict local critical discourses to insiders and limit the reproduction of stigma. Third, I contribute to the literature on resisting stigma through place re-scripting strategies (Slater and Anderson, 2012; Arthurson *et al.*, 2014; August, 2014; Cairns, 2018; Nayak, 2019) by emphasizing the physical characteristics of place in these alternative narratives.

I begin with a discussion of two related literatures that inform my work: one on the territorial stigmatization of urban neighborhoods, the other on the negative representation of shrinking cities. After describing my methods, the two substantive sections offer a re-scaled analysis of territorial stigmatization based on the case of Nevers. Drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork, I analyze how a territorial stigma is constructed around 'declining medium-sized cities' in France, how this affects residents' experience of the urban environment, and how residents respond to the territorial stigma. I show, first, how the stigmatization of medium-sized French cities in decline is constructed through academic, political and media discourses. I highlight the role of the media discourse in particular, which tends to emphasize the local manifestations of broader structural problems alongside the most alarming aspects of the socio-economic trends experienced by these cities. I then turn to the (re)production of a territorial stigma within popular discourse, analyzing how it is internalized and reproduced locally in a pessimistic discourse on place, although residents reveal agency in choosing who can be party to this negativity. The final section discusses how residents contest territorial stigmatization through alternative narratives that re-script negative qualities into positive portrayals of place.

Re-scaling territorial stigma

Coined by Loïc Wacquant (1993; 2008: 163–98), ‘territorial stigmatization’ refers to the way negative imaginaries attached to disadvantaged neighborhoods affect residents’ experience of place and their perceptions of self and others, contributing to the further marginalization of these places. Numerous scholars have examined the late twentieth-century construction of negative spatial imaginaries of neighborhoods in the media and political discourse, showing how these lie at the core of territorial stigmatization (Slater and Anderson, 2012; Arthurson *et al.*, 2014; Kallin and Slater, 2014; Nayak, 2019). Spatial imaginaries consist of collective (mental) representations as well as discourses (the expression and circulation of these representations) about these spaces. They have both representational and performative power, allowing people to make sense of a place while also shaping their actions (Driver, 2014; Watkins, 2015). Through negative spatial imaginaries, territorial stigmatization becomes ‘a consequential and injurious form of *action through collective representation fastened on place*’ (Wacquant *et al.*, 2014: 1278, original emphasis). For low-income social housing neighborhoods, these stigmatizing imaginaries emphasize extreme ethnic segregation, poverty, high crime rates and a surfeit of welfare beneficiaries. As stereotypical media coverage of the ‘reality’ of these places reliably attracts eyeballs (Tyler, 2015), politicians draw on these dramatic representations to appeal to voters, as witnessed in the Danish ‘Ghettolist’ (Schultz Larsen and Delica, 2021) or the notion of ‘broken Britain’ (Hancock and Mooney, 2013; Slater, 2014).

The construction of stigmatizing imaginaries is the first step in the process of territorial stigmatization, the full weight of which becomes evident in its political effects: shifting attention away from the structural causes of poverty and onto its symptoms. Stigmatization makes neighborhoods and their local communities responsible for their problems (Sisson, 2021), eventually turning *them* into the problem rather than the dynamics of late capitalism (Birdsall-Jones, 2013; Hancock and Mooney, 2013). Ultimately, this mechanism legitimizes punitive state interventions against crime and welfare dependency (Hancock and Mooney, 2013)—policies that not only fail to address the root causes of these social issues but which further stigmatize neighborhood residents by marking them as deviant. This stigmatization is also used instrumentally by politicians—for instance, to justify state-led gentrification that displaces local residents (August, 2014; Kallin and Slater, 2014). The concept of territorial stigmatization thus has strong explanatory power, describing processes central to the production and reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities.

A second strand of research emphasizes how territorial stigmatization affects residents’ experience of place and how they negotiate it. Scholars have hotly debated how a stigma can be internalized by the residents of stigmatized neighborhoods. Although Wacquant (2008) initially posited that residents internalize and reproduce the externally generated stigma, thereby underlining their lack of ownership over the discourse that represents them, this depiction of neighborhood residents as passive victims has been critiqued (Kirkness, 2014). Recent work has introduced greater nuance into the multiplicity and ambivalence of perceptions and experiences of stigma, combining place attachment, internalization of stigma and strategies to avoid its taint (Kirkness, 2014; Wacquant *et al.*, 2014; Cuny, 2019; Jensen *et al.*, 2021).

This approach also addresses residents’ strategies in the face of territorial stigmatization. Whereas earlier work focused on various responses—avoidance, deflection and disaffiliation—that ultimately reinforced negative stereotypes, recent studies have highlighted negotiation, contestation and resistance. Residents of stigmatized neighborhoods may engage in disaffiliation practices of ‘mutual distancing and lateral denigration’ (Wacquant, 2008: 116), positively contrasting their own address with the ‘worst’ places (Pinkster, 2014) or deflecting the stigma onto others, thereby reinforcing the sexist and racist stereotypes attached to the area’s

inhabitants (Contreras, 2017). Disaffiliation is often accompanied by the practice of avoidance, such as avoiding certain places in the neighborhood, and middle-class residents of stigmatized neighborhoods in particular often develop such strategies of ‘non-belonging’ (Pinkster, 2014: 825). In contrast, other researchers have shown how residents contest and resist territorial stigmatization—for instance in the form of strong affiliation expressed through pride and attachment to the neighborhood, its residents and culture (Slater and Anderson, 2012). Some residents also re-script denigration into positive identities, reappropriating stigmatizing terms such as the ‘ghetto’ (Jaffe, 2012; Horgan, 2018) and emphasizing the strength and solidarity of the community (Arthurson *et al.*, 2014) or its glorious past (Cairns, 2018).

– Shrinking cities as stigmatized places

While such debates on territorial stigmatization have focused on the neighborhood, in this article I explore how the concept can be re-scaled, focusing in particular on ‘shrinking cities’. The term generally refers to an ‘urban area ... that has experienced population loss, economic downturn, employment decline and social problems as symptoms of a structural crisis’ (Martinez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2012: 214). A multi-dimensional process of decline, since the 2000s urban shrinkage has attracted growing attention from scholars (Oswalt and Rieniets, 2006; Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012; Pallagst *et al.*, 2017). Its causes vary and often combine. Depending on the local context, they include the globalization of production and attendant de-industrialization, demographic change including population ageing, suburbanization and sprawl, out-migration to large metropolitan areas, and post-socialism (Fol and Cunningham-Sabot, 2010). In France, urban shrinkage particularly affects small and medium-sized cities and is often tied to de-industrialization, the growth of suburbs and migration to large cities. The trend has been further fueled by two decades of public cost-cutting and the redirection of public investment towards metropolitan centers (Berroir *et al.*, 2019). The common symptoms of urban shrinkage include demographic decline with middle-class and youth out-migration, housing and commercial vacancy, industrial brownfields, a degraded built environment, and under-used infrastructure (Haase *et al.*, 2014).

Although scholars of urban shrinkage acknowledged early on the negative spatial imaginaries associated with shrinking cities, they have rarely foregrounded them. A few studies examine how local policymakers counter negative media discourse through place-branding strategies to attract investment, middle-class inhabitants, tourists and companies—often at the expense of local residents (Fraser, 2018; Pinoncelly and Schemschat, 2021). Others have begun to consider the performative power of ‘urban shrinkage’ and ‘shrinking cities’ as concepts. Audirac (2018), for instance, points to similarities between the twenty-first-century conceptualization of urban shrinkage and smart shrinkage policies, and the twentieth-century planned shrinkage of racialized neighborhoods in US cities. Cunningham-Sabot *et al.* (2021) similarly criticize the shrinkage metaphor, arguing that it encourages policymakers to literally shrink cities by demolishing buildings to boost real estate markets. Finally, Guérait (2020) shows how middle-class residents are acutely aware of the lower social and symbolic value of place in France’s shrinking cities.

Taken together, these works suggest that the negative imaginaries surrounding shrinking cities work to normalize spatial or market-oriented fixes to urban shrinkage and the neglect of marginalized communities (Berglund, 2020). They also highlight that while a social dimension remains present in negative representations of shrinking cities, the spatial dimension is particularly prominent in these imaginaries and policy interventions. This literature interrogates the spatial and social markers of territorial stigmatization as it happens at the city scale. Nevertheless, how residents experience and negotiate this dimension of urban shrinkage remains under-explored.

In many current fields of research—from shrinking cities scholarship grappling with issues of negative representation to emerging research on the stigmatization of

post-industrial towns, regions and rural areas (Nayak, 2019; Schemschat, 2021; Hincks and Powell, 2022; Pattison, 2022), and from research on geographic scales distinguishing between personal, housing and territorial stigmatization (Horgan, 2018) to that which scrutinizes the varying roles of state, street-level and middle-ground actors (Kudla and Courey, 2019)—the concept of *territorial stigmatization* opens the door to a more comprehensive understanding of how stigmatizing imaginaries are produced, their influence on policymaking and political outcomes, and the way they are experienced and negotiated by residents. Using the example of shrinking cities in France, I show that territorial stigmatization occurs at other scales than urban neighborhoods, and can affect entire cities and subnational regions.

Case study and methods

Nevers is a medium-sized city of 33,005 inhabitants,¹ the largest city and administrative center of Nièvre, a French *département* of 204,452 inhabitants. The city performs historical commercial and administrative functions for the *département*, and although it does have an industrial sector, most industries are located in the surrounding smaller towns. Since its demographic peak in the 1975 census (45,500 inhabitants), the central municipality's population has decreased by 27%, while the larger city-region (*unité urbaine*) has lost 17% of its population over the same period. The whole Nièvre *département* has also suffered a demographic decline since the 1970s.

Nevers serves as an exemplary case, both of a shrinking medium-sized French city and of the processes of stigmatization at work in them. The difficulties of French medium-sized cities generally result from a combination of de-industrialization, suburbanization and cuts in public services (Chouraqui, 2021). Starting in the 1970s, the Nevers city-region experienced a decline in industrial activity, resulting in rising unemployment. The trends of demographic and economic decline slowed down at the turn of the century, before a renewed acceleration in the 2000s linked with cuts in public services (such as the shuttering of a military garrison in 1999), and the 2008 global financial crisis (Warnant, 2022). At the national scale, the 2000s also correspond to a redirection of public investments towards larger metropolitan areas, such as the 'competitiveness clusters' policy, for instance (Berroir *et al.*, 2019). Aggravated by suburbanization, in Nevers the demographic decline and socio-economic impoverishment is more pronounced in the city center, with high rates of unemployment (20%) and residential vacancy (17%), an ageing population, and a low median income. Finally, the city is regularly chosen as an example for media coverage of the decline of medium-sized cities in France.

The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Nevers, where I spent two four-month periods in 2018 and 2020. My data come from 74 semi-structured interviews with residents, fieldnotes of my observations in public spaces and the events in which I participated, and documents (mostly newspaper articles and books on medium-sized cities in France). The documents were collected between 2018 and 2021 while I was following the media coverage on medium-sized cities in France, as well as through the systematic indexing of newspaper articles on the subject between 1990 and 2021. A more in-depth qualitative analysis of the 2018–2021 media extracts was supplemented by the longitudinal indexing, which served to trace the chronology of media production on medium-sized cities. Finally, expert interviews with politicians, policymakers and employees of community centers, mostly conducted in 2018, provided additional context.

I sought to recruit interviewees from diverse socio-economic backgrounds using a snowball strategy with four main starting points: a community center, a service club, respondents to a survey I circulated on Facebook and in the local newspaper, and my

1 Unless otherwise stated, numbers referring to the municipal level are based on the 2019 census (INSEE RP, 2019; see <https://www.insee.fr/en/metadonnees/source/serie/s1321>).

personal connections. Although my final sample is generally representative of Nevers' socio-economic classes and political affiliations as well as the age and geographic background of its residents, women are over-represented. The semi-structured interviews lasted between 90 and 180 minutes and consisted of a detailed biographic section followed by a thematic section with questions about social ties and practices within the city, perceptions of the city's development, and forms of place attachment.

Data analysis involved a grounded, inductive approach, for which I used Atlas.ti to code interviews, fieldnotes and documents. A first phase of inductive coding identified negative representations of place as a central issue and established connections to the theoretical framework of territorial stigmatization. The next cycle of coding categorized the initial codes and followed an iterative process, going back and forth between the literature and the data. As elaborated below, specialists in symbolic production play an outsized role in producing and reproducing stigma. I thus remain mindful of my own role as an academic in reproducing the negative discourse about Nevers by writing about it.

Stigmatized cities: legitimizing decline and socio-spatial inequality

'Declining cities' are denigrated through processes comparable to those leading to the stigmatization of 'ghettos' and *banlieues*. The imaginary of the 'declining medium-sized city' in France grew out of earlier scientific and political discourses, especially those representing national territory in the post-war period. In the 2010s, it crystallized into the media discourse on the decline of medium-sized cities. This section traces the construction of 'declining medium-sized cities' as a stigmatizing imaginary before showing how it reinforces socio-spatial inequalities between cities and regions.

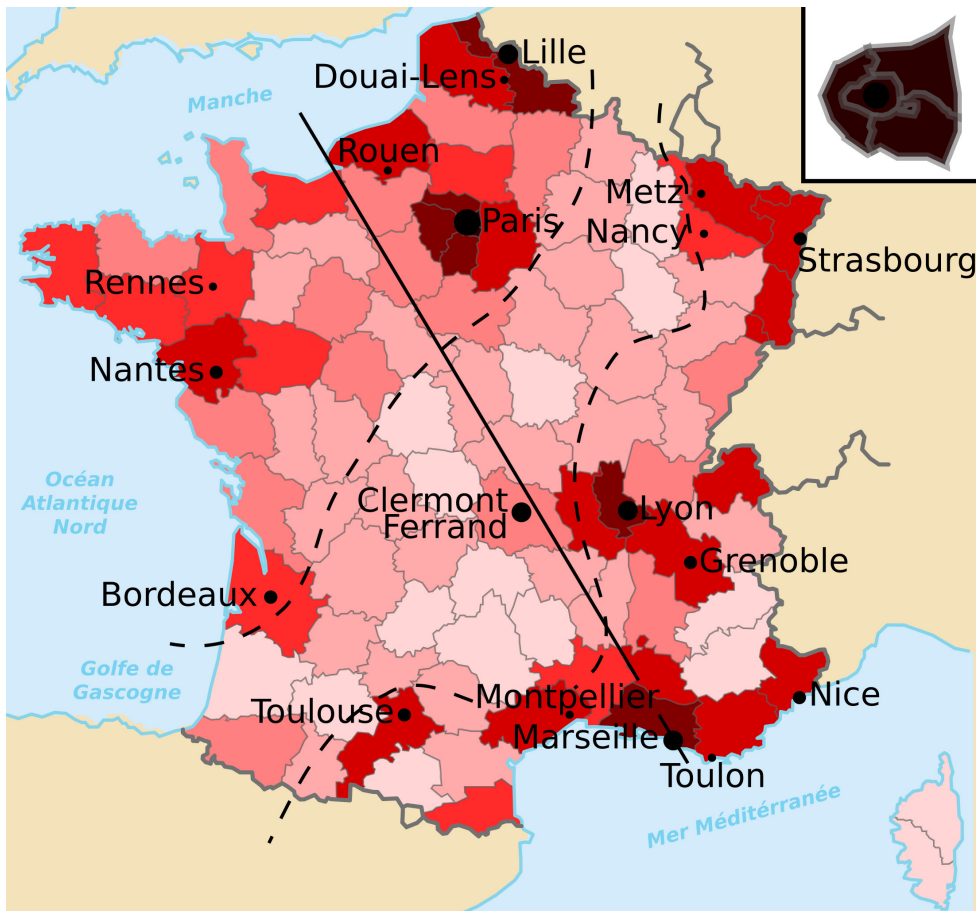
Salomé was the interviewee from whom I learnt the most about stigmatizing imaginaries and how they impact on residents. Both Salomé and her husband are medical professionals and they have three children together. Like other interviewees, she mentioned Nevers' negative reputation, referring to a geographical concept taught at school to represent the French territory (a concept I myself learnt in geography classes): that of the 'empty diagonal', more recently re-named the 'low densities diagonal'.

They keep telling you that you live in the 'empty diagonal'. [With my son], we were still laughing about it at lunchtime. I said, 'well, there's a young student who's coming to interrogate us', and he said to me, 'well, do you think we dress in rags, and paint our teeth black?' ... it's been so internalized by people, that people end up understanding that they are living in the void. So, in nothingness, so, reduced to nothingness ... It's atrocious when you think about it.

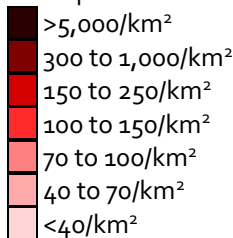
Here we see the power of scientific and political discourses to forge long-lasting spatial imaginaries. The 'empty diagonal' (Figure 1) is the area stretching from the northeast to the southwest of France, an area less urban and less densely populated than the rest of the country. Located in the middle of the diagonal, Nevers is associated with these 'backward' territories. As seen in Salomé's joke above, the idea can become quite stigmatizing, especially as the representation of place rubs off on its people.

The idea of the 'empty diagonal' originates from French geographers' concerns about the decline of rural areas in the twentieth century and how their demographic and economic development was diverging from that of the country's big cities, particularly Paris. The book *Paris et le désert français* (*Paris and the French Desert*) by Jean-François Gravier ([1947] 1958) was emblematic of this scientific discourse. It was highly influential, shaping the decisions of policymakers and regional planners from the 1950s to the 1970s.² While policies targeting medium-sized cities evolved over the decades, the

2 Although Gravier's understanding of low-density areas has been criticized since the 2000s for its overly simplistic and politically biased analysis (Marchand, 2001; Markou, 2020), it remains a structuring imaginary for the general public, as evidenced by the school geography curriculum.



Population densities per
Metropolitan French department:



NOTES: The black dots represent the 18 French cities which have a metropolitan area greater than 400,000 residents; the continuous black line represents the Le Havre-Marseille line (60% of the French population lives east of this line); the dashed black line represents the approximate limits of the 'empty diagonal'.

Population densities are based on the 2007 INSEE (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies of France) legal population numbers. The metropolitan areas are based on the 1999 population numbers and metropolitan area delimitations.

FIGURE 1 In between the dashed lines: the empty diagonal (*source*: Benjamin Smith, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carte_d%C3%A9mographique_de_la_France.svg, based on data from INSEE, 2007)

imaginary of economically and socially backward areas endured. In the 1960s and 1970s, national policies planned to relocate industries from large to medium-sized cities and to improve their built environment, while in the 1990s the plan was to open university

branches there. As national planning strategies in the 2000s shifted from investing in medium-sized cities to focusing investment on larger cities with greater potential for economic development, the public discourse shifted from concern to neglect. The accompanying retrenchment of public services in small and medium-sized cities only served to reinforce the imaginary of places devoid of economic potential (Berroir *et al.*, 2019).

In the 2010s, this imaginary crystallized into a media discourse about the ‘decline of medium-sized cities’. Although this media coverage raised awareness and ultimately led to renewed policies to support medium-sized cities,³ it also spread the imaginary of medium-sized cities as unattractive places. By focusing on spaces where the decline is most visible (city centers) and on its most obvious manifestations (commercial and residential vacancy), the stigmatizing imaginary erases an entire part of these cities’ lives and identity, such as their vibrant cultural and associational lives. A 2014 article in the national newspaper *Libération* headed ‘Medium-sized cities, spaces in danger of extinction’ by two French geographers⁴ was the first of a whole series of articles, books and public reports on the subject which appeared between 2014 and 2020. The book *Comment la France a tué ses villes* (How France Killed its Towns) by journalist Olivier Razemon (2016), for instance, focused on the declining city centers of small and medium-sized cities. Alongside this written discourse, the most prominent image spread by these publications was the empty window of a vacant shop (Figure 2).

Nevers is also often portrayed as a typical example in newspaper coverage of cities in decline. The city thus carries a specific place imaginary (Watkins, 2015), which reinforces the stigma attaching to it. In December 2018, the national magazine *Paris Match* published an article headed ‘Nevers, ville morte’ (Nevers, dead city) as part of an issue focusing on the *Gilets Jaunes* movement:

In Nevers, a criminal scent of waste lingers. In retrospect, it seems as if this chronicle of a death foretold was written a long time ago and in plain sight. As if everyone—from the public authorities to the residents and shopkeepers—had watched the slow descent into hell of their town, arms flailing, desperately thinking, ‘so far, so good’. The wake-up call is brutal (*Paris Match*, 2018; author’s translation).

‘No perspectives’, ‘inexorable decline’, ‘a death foretold’—the article suggests that decline is everywhere and unstoppable. The decline is first and foremost described through the degraded built environment, with buildings that ‘threaten to collapse’ and other examples suggesting a widespread problem. While dilapidated buildings are certainly a manifestation of urban shrinkage (Haase *et al.*, 2014), depicting the degradation of Nevers’ built environment as the norm is a gross exaggeration. The main photograph of the *Paris Match* article depicts four people walking in an otherwise empty narrow street with dark buildings; boarded-up windows powerfully represent the city center’s decline. However, the photograph was shot on Rue des Ouches (Figure 3, left), which runs parallel to the commercial street Rue Saint Martin and never had any commercial importance; its main function is to provide a rear entry into the buildings on the main shopping street. The second picture (Figure 3, right) shows the corresponding shopping street, Rue Saint Martin, at the same level. In this picture, taken in December 2021, we see a vacant shop whose windows have been covered with an advertisement

3 See for example programs such as Centres-villes de Demain, Action Cœur de Ville, Petites Villes de Demain, and the Appel à Manifestation d’Intérêt Centres-bourgs.

4 ‘Les villes moyennes: espaces en voie de disparition?’ by D. Behar and P. Estébe, published in *Libération*, 12 March 2014. URL https://www.liberation.fr/france/2014/03/12/les-villes-moyennes-espaces-en-voie-de-disparition_986611/ (accessed 14 December 2021).



FIGURE 2 A vacant shop in the city center following a hair salon's relocation to a middle-class suburb (photo by the author, September 2020)

for a local cultural festival. But the next shop is a nurse's practice, and on the right is a notary's office. The façades are quite clean and people are walking along the street. In comparing the two pictures, I do not deny that the city center of Nevers contains vacant buildings. Nor do I deny its impoverishment. Nevertheless, we can see that the photograph chosen by *Paris Match* to represent Nevers builds on stereotypes and ultimately reinforces stigmatizing imaginaries.

Last but not least, we see in this article how territorial stigmatization operates by 'responsibilizing' places and communities (Sisson, 2021). The *Paris Match* article raises the question of responsibility, claiming that for decades local actors did nothing to combat urban decline. It even quotes a municipal employee at the Heritage Department who explains that historical buildings 'no longer correspond to people's tastes. Their dream is a house with a patch of garden where they can put Ikea furniture' (*Paris Match*, 2018). The high vacancy rates and degradation of the built environment in the city center, the article suggests, may be due to the housing aspirations of working- and middle-class people rather than decades of out-migration.

By emphasizing the symptoms rather than the causes of socio-spatial inequality, the construction of the 'declining medium-sized city' imaginary forms the core of 'territorial stigmatization in action' (Wacquant *et al.*, 2014). Attention is diverted from the liberalization, globalization and financialization of the economy that consigned these territories to the national margins and precipitated their economic decline. Instead, attention is directed towards the symptoms of decline such as the degraded built environment, vacant buildings, and the population's inaction in the face of decline. As in stigmatized neighborhoods, it is the place itself and its population rather than the structural causes of socio-spatial inequality that end up becoming the problem (Birdsall-Jones, 2013; Hancock and Mooney, 2013).

While the underlying imaginary differs from that of low-income, often racialized social housing neighborhoods, territorial stigmatization at the level of entire cities and subnational regions ultimately has comparable political effects. It overlooks the causes of problems and instead places responsibility for the situation with local actors, thus normalizing and exacerbating socio-spatial inequalities at the national level since the stigma of place negatively affects commercial investment, the



FIGURE 3 (left) Rue des Ouches, reproducing the image that accompanied the *Paris Match* article of December 2018. On the left can be seen the backs of buildings with façades onto the Rue Saint Martin (photo by the author, January 2023); (right) Rue Saint Martin, viewed at the same level (photo by the author, December 2021)

quality of public services, portrayals by journalists and the decisions of policymakers (Wacquant *et al.*, 2014).

Following this discussion of how the media, academic and political discourses have developed and sustained the negative imaginary, I now turn to a consideration of how stigma is constructed, experienced, expressed and reproduced within popular discourse.

Popular discourse, the internalization of stigma, and residents' agency

If the stigma surrounding shrinking medium-sized cities in France is largely produced in scientific, political and media discourses, it enters the popular imaginary by assigning lower social and symbolic value to places like Nevers. Below, I show how stigma is (re)produced in popular discourse as expressed by both outsiders and locals, incorporating stereotypes and notions from the scientific, political and media discourses discussed above. The breadth of responses to territorial stigma exhibited by Nevers' residents shows that these can be reactions to negative media coverage, the retrenchment of public services, negative discourses expressed by outsiders or internalized by locals, and the diffuse negative representations that pervade the popular imaginary of places like Nevers.

The reproduction of such imaginaries in local discourse raises the question—extensively debated in the literature—of how stigma is internalized (Wacquant, 2008; Kirkness, 2014; Wacquant *et al.*, 2014). Departing from the extant literature, I argue that while externally produced stigmatizing imaginaries are indeed internalized locally, residents mitigate the reproduction of stigma and exercise agency by choosing who can be party to the local negative discourse on place.

– 'A place at the end of the world'

This popular imaginary spreads through everyday conversation and shared understandings of the national socio-spatial landscape, with allusions to unattractiveness, remoteness and unimportance underlining the area's low social and symbolic value, in many ways paralleling the neglect of medium-sized cities in public policy from the early 2000s until the Action Cœur de Ville program was launched in 2017. Nevers' lowly place within the national hierarchy of cities and territories structures many residents' understanding of the place as insignificant. Many told me that outsiders did not know of Nevers and could not locate it on a map, sometimes adding that the nearby racing circuit of Magny-Court was more famous. This was not usually formulated as a negative, but simply as an accepted fact.

Through their understanding of the social and symbolic value of various places across the national territory, outsiders contributed to the imaginary of rural and urban areas in decline and the locals' consequent experience of stigma. Camille, a woman in her thirties, grew up in the Paris region but decided to settle in the Nièvre countryside where her family originally came from. As a teenager, her upper-middle class schoolmates had mocked her family's vacation destination:

Everyone laughed at me ... Nièvre was rubbish. There was nothing to do there. It took me a long time to understand why these people were telling me that. All my classmates' parents had gone to Thalès, Polytechnique, Danone, they were all ... 'show-off' people. And as a result, in Nièvre, there are only peasants ... My father was the only working-class parent [in the class]. And when you're a teenager you don't see the disparities in education and salary, and it's when you grow up that you make the connection. You say, 'aah, but in fact we weren't from the same world! ... It's at the end of the world. There's nothing to do there'. They were going to Center Parcs. Well, basically my girlfriends had a pony, a horse, for the vacation the parents rented a car because it was easier ... and then we

would take the parents' old car and go to the family house that was ... very old ... And you can't understand this kind of thing when you're 12 years old ... It's the same people who don't say hello to the cleaning lady. There are classes in the population. The farmer, he's in the dunghill. We pay the cleaning lady to work. And ... I must not be from that social background! [laughs]

The quote reveals the classed assumptions behind imaginaries of place (Hancock and Mooney, 2013), the disregard and stereotypes associated with this rural region two hours south of Paris and yet 'at the end of the world'. To higher socio-economic status outsiders, the Nièvre *département* had lower social and symbolic value—it was a boring and unattractive vacation destination. Such judgments echo the sense of failure experienced by university graduates with a working-class background when they return to Nevers following their studies (Guéraud, 2017; 2021)—an understanding of the national socio-spatial landscape anchored in long-standing representations of geographic mobility to bigger cities as a sign of upward social mobility, while the hinterlands of out-migration remain mired in stagnation.

– Internalization of stigma?

During my fieldwork in Nevers, many respondents referred to other people's negativity and pessimism. It was regularly alluded to and was often present in the background during the conversation. One word particularly embodied this negative discourse and pessimism. *Niévroise* is a local term which combines the word Nièvre (the French *département* where Nevers is located), and *névroise*, or neurosis. While the term was not omnipresent, when it popped up most people knew exactly what it meant. Julie, a childminder in her thirties who had moved to Nevers after meeting her husband from the area, told me:

What I heard most of all when I arrived, it's that story of *niévroise*, that horrible word ... It's in the sense that it's sad, that there are no job offers. It's a bit of a criticism in the sense that it's not great at the cultural level, so we're bored. Well, it's a bit of a cliché about Nièvre. [People talking about the *niévroise*] are worried about the *département*, they don't find it attractive ... it's rather a bad image they have, of their own territory. You can feel that. Ah yes, there are some pessimistic people among the locals, who are worried, you know, eh? Maybe there are unemployed people in their families, people who don't manage or who had to leave because they couldn't find work ... It's not denigrating, precisely because they love their place, it's more that they can see that it's going downhill, so they worry. *Niévroise* ... I interpreted it as either, it's declining, so there's enough to make a *niévroise*, in the sense that you'll be bored to death, and you won't have a job and you'll get depressed, but it can also be the cultural aspect where it remains a small city, so there are not 10,000 festivals, 10,000 things, and so people from big cities can get bored. I think that there are really both aspects ... Maybe it's a little bit, a lack of confidence from the locals, who say to newcomers 'how is it going, you don't suffer too much from *niévroise*?' Well no, I think it's fine here.

Julie's answer followed my question about what other locals thought and said about Nevers.⁵ In her explanation, the term *niévroise* combined what was objectively

5 Respondents were divided between those who pointed to others being critical and those who claimed most residents were happy with the city. Their mixed views do not detract from the fact that the telling term *niévroise* was coined in the first place.

happening in the city with people's subjective experience in the face of decline and stigma. Julie distinguished the reality of economic and demographic decline, which she accepted, from unwarranted negativity and pessimism. For her, *niévrose* included unjustified negative judgments about place.

The concept of *niévrose* provides a window onto the ambivalent experience of decline and stigma, encompassing negative emotions such as boredom, pessimism, shame and anxiety about the future as well as positive feelings of love and attachment. Nevertheless, the various fears contained in the term add together to create a negative outlook on the place. Julie described the state of mind embodied by the word *niévrose*: 'It's not joyful and growing. It's more on the side of depression than growth, that's for sure'. She not only associated the city's fate with 'depression' and neurosis, but also 'tragedy'. Julie further added that locals may fear that newcomers do not like the place, protecting themselves from judgment by asking 'you don't suffer too much from *niévrose*?' This could indicate a degree of shame in the locals' experience of place, although Julie did not mention it directly. Last but not least, this experience of place seemed to contain contradictory feelings of love and anxiety: 'It's not denigrating, precisely because they love their place, it's more that they can see that it's going downhill, so they worry'.

The negative local discourse could—in part and for some residents—be the result of internalized stigma. Wacquant (2008) describes derogatory identities as being produced from outside and above, imposed on local residents stripped of their capacity to define their own identities. The term *niévrose*, however, exemplifies an identity produced 'from within' for in-group consumption. Yet it remains a derogatory concept, suggesting that even when residents maintain ownership of their identity this does not guarantee positivity. The negative local identity likely results both from the influence of media discourse and from the daily experience of real hardships such as unemployment, out-migration and commercial vacancy.⁶

– Negativity for the in-group only

During my time in Nevers I grew puzzled that although I heard many of my respondents criticizing the negative discourse, I rarely heard it directly myself. This sensitized me to when and where it was expressed, criticized or shared with me. Ultimately, I understood that it was its absence in interview settings that had the greatest significance. What I initially thought to be paradoxical revealed the agency of local residents in deciding who could be party to the negativity. That it was heard or expressed quite often in people's daily lives but was criticized during interviews showed there was more at stake for respondents when talking to an outsider, especially an outsider planning to publish books and articles about their city.⁷

Those telling me about the negative discourse provided clues about when and where it could be expressed. Alice told me: '[People say] "Oh well, Nevers, there's nothing left that's going well," ... such remarks, you can hear from the next table at the restaurant'. She also remembered hearing a remark on the street in front of a new shop, to the effect that it would soon shut down anyway. Such pessimism is most often encountered in semi-public social settings—not at private dinners between close friends or in newspaper columns, but on the street, at school, in the restaurant or at the market. Negative comments are expressed as matters of fact, as commonplace opinions in situations where little is at stake.

6 One could add that the term relates to the Nièvre *département*, providing an additional example that stigma affects geographic scales beyond that of the neighborhood.

7 This speaks to Jerolmack and Khan's (2014) point about addressing 'attitudinal fallacy' (inconsistencies between what people declare in interviews and what they actually do) through ethnographic observation. My point is not that interviewees were inconsistent in what they said and did, but that observation was necessary to access a local discourse that was rarely expressed in interviews.

I had a chance to witness this local discontent, produced from within and for in-group consumption, during an outing with the community center I frequented. In September 2020, the center organized an outing to the Forges and Navy Museum in the nearby town of Guérigny. Eight members came on the guided tour, accompanied by one of the facilitators I knew well. I knew four of the people in the group—Pascale, Christiane, Suzanne and Patrick—and had interviewed the last two.

The museum celebrates the history of the Royal Forge of Guérigny which made anchors and chains for the navy. Created in 1642, it was bought by the King in 1781 and remained a state company until its shuttering in 1971. Retracing the history of the forge, the visit echoed the history of the Nièvre *département* itself, a connection stressed by the tour guide. Deploring the museum's difficulties, he complained that no one was interested in Nièvre and that the regional newspaper recommended visiting other old forges in the neighboring *département* of Allier. One of the women I did not know added that the regional television channel France 3 did not cover things happening in Nièvre. I later noticed that the guide explained the creation and development of the forge at length but did not mention its closure in 1971. The official tour celebrated the site's glorious industrial past but glossed over its decline.

The visit was ending and the conversation turned to the decline of the *département*, connecting the fate of the Guérigny forge to that of Nevers and Nièvre. An animated discussion began between the guide and the remaining participants. The guide traced the 'decay' of Nièvre to the 1970s and blamed it on the state's loss of interest in the *département*, adding examples of other industrial towns and former factories. Patrick said it was the fault of Arcelor, the international steelworks company; Suzanne, referring to our recent interview, whispered that this was what she meant when she told me there was nothing left in Nevers. Examples were flying. Someone added that the 'manut' of Nevers (a former factory making canned food for the army) had closed due to competition from elsewhere in France: 'it's always like that', and Christiane chipped in: 'still, there's a willingness to impoverish certain regions'. The guide then turned to the decline of Guérigny following the closure of the forge. This triggered even more examples, such as factories that were supposed to come to the area but never did. While one woman criticized a former mayor of Nevers, her friend complained about the state of the sidewalks, and the guide opined about the out-of-order public fountains and the prefecture building that would be sold if and when the local administration relocated to Dijon. This last complaint I interpreted as hypothetical and exaggerated, because there was no such relocation plan. The conversation ended shortly thereafter and we all exited the museum.

My position during this visit was not that of an interviewer. Although some of the group did not know me, those who did were accustomed to my presence at community center events and were becoming less formal with me. I blended with the group more and was considered less of an outsider. I was struck by the contrast with what I was used to hearing from respondents during interviews, when they would generally acknowledge the area's decline while protesting against its bad reputation and emphasizing the many reasons why life in Nevers is good. It is significant that I witnessed this negativity at a moment when my position as researcher was less clear. Although local residents were more prone to criticizing the fate of Nevers and the Nièvre *département* when they were among themselves, this negative discourse was not meant for the ears of outsiders. During my interviews, respondents may have seen me as a journalist, an outsider writing about Nevers. As residents, they may have felt responsible for the discourse of place that would then be disseminated. At stake was deconstructing the stigma to an external observer who could make or unmake imaginaries of place through her publications. By dissociating themselves from the local pessimism, most respondents sought to prevent me from reproducing the stigmatizing imaginary of Nevers.

Contesting and re-scripting territorial stigma

Tied directly to the debate on how territorial stigmatization is internalized by residents is the issue of its negotiation and possibilities for contestation. The range of responses to stigma is broad and leads to more or less positive outcomes for residents—from reproducing and reinforcing it to challenging and re-scripting it into a positive identity (Wacquant, 2008; Jaffe, 2012; Arthurson *et al.*, 2014; Jensen *et al.*, 2021). Below, I recount the strategies I observed in Nevers as its residents sought to negotiate the denigration of their city. While their strategies reflect those described in the literature—avoidance, deflection, disaffiliation, contestation—strategies to deconstruct or contest stigma prevailed over those which reinforced it.

– From avoidance to anger: negotiating and contesting stigma

The first strategy was to deflect the stigma onto places where the decline is worse. For instance, the concept of *niévrose* concerns the *département* more than Nevers itself, although the latter forms part of it. Julie explained: ‘It’s not especially Nevers because in Nevers there are more jobs, kind of. The disaster is more in the countryside ... apart from being a farmer, what can you do? Remote working? ... It’s everywhere around here that’s emptying out’.

Strategies of disaffiliation offered a second way to attenuate the effects of territorial stigma. Guy, a municipal employee in his late fifties, told me he appreciated his residential (upper) middle-class neighborhood but avoided the city center where the decline is particularly visible. While his office was in the center, he only had to drive three minutes to get out after work. He would never go shopping in Nevers, preferring other cities or malls in the greater Paris region. Although he claimed not to be affected by Nevers’ decline, his efforts to avoid its most displeasing aspects echo the discursive and practical disaffiliation strategies described by Pinkster (2014).

The strategies of deflection and disaffiliation confirm Wacquant’s (2008) initial analysis of residents’ strategies for negotiating stigma. Both risk reproducing negative perceptions and fueling further decline by reinforcing territorial stigma and by diverting business away from the city center and other leisure areas. But deflection and disaffiliation were not the only or even the most common strategies I observed. Guy was among the very few people who shared with me an explicitly negative discourse of place.

Another strategy was to avoid the topic and to emphasize Nevers’ positive qualities. I saw this in my interview with Sylvie, a retired speech therapist whose family was originally from elsewhere. As we began talking about the visible symptoms of decline, I sought to understand how it affected her. I was struggling to obtain a direct answer, and she twice changed the subject. Although she acknowledged Nevers’ problems, she emphasized the city’s positive aspects in what appeared to be an effort to dissociate herself from the critical people spreading the negative discourse (she insisted several times that she was not interested in politics, did not have solutions, and for this reason did not really have an opinion). Would being pessimistic confirm the stereotype of the terrible place with hopeless people? Perhaps optimism was a way to counter this cliché. To dissociate oneself from the stigma attached to a place, it is necessary to dissociate oneself from the stigma attached to its people.

The most common strategy was to acknowledge the negative discourse and explicitly reject the stigma attached to the place and its people. Here my findings echo more recent work that questions the dominance of the disaffiliation and deflection strategies, emphasizing active resistance instead (Wacquant *et al.*, 2014). One dimension of the stigmatizing imaginary of Nevers was particularly contested: its reputation as a place where there is nothing to do.

Interviewer: People are complaining?

Jocelyne: Yes, oh yes, yes ... I’m a bit fed up. I’m a bit fed up with hearing the purebred ‘neversoisés’ complaining about their town. So go and see elsewhere

how it is done, or get things moving, get involved and then things will move. We can't expect everything, uh ... falling from the sky, eh? [laughing]. 'There's nothing to do here.' Well... [angry tone] ... There's nothing to do, but if you don't bother to look for things, there's nothing to do, that's for sure ... But the grass is always greener elsewhere, it's well known.

Annoyance with the internalized stigmatizing imaginary is clear in this quote. Jocelyne was in her sixties. Having lived in Nevers her entire life, she was well aware of the de-industrialization and impoverishment which she had witnessed first-hand through her job as a bank employee. Like others who criticized the discourse of Nevers as a place where nothing happens, she clearly distinguished between Nevers' economic difficulties and its socio-cultural offerings—a sentiment often summarized in the remark 'we have everything we need here'.

Jocelyne contested the denigration of Nevers twice. The first time was in a private social setting with acquaintances. When she heard the negative discourse, she openly disagreed, seeking to deconstruct the negative imaginary of the city internalized by locals. The second time was during our interview, when she criticized people who complained that there is nothing to do in Nevers. This time, she was doing it in front of the external researcher who would write about her place for a broader public.

Similarly, Salomé described how she and her friend Fabien were 'mad as hell' when the *Paris Match* article appeared. The article was badly received in Nevers, especially by the mayor who had been interviewed. This happened a few months after he refused me an interview, illustrating the stakes involved in accepting such propositions. On those occasions where the territorial stigma was on open public display, residents vigorously confronted it. The public response, mainly delivered by the municipality, targeted the magazine, its journalists and its readers—as well as local residents—in order to counteract the article's performative effects (Watkins, 2015).

– Re-signifying negative aspects as positive ones

The final strategy used by residents to negotiate territorial stigma warrants greater attention. Although not experienced as such by respondents, it was the most effective way to deconstruct and counteract stigma, at least locally. Nevers' residents produced alternative and competing imaginaries to re-signify qualities of the city deemed negative. Here, they echoed the strategy of reappropriating the 'ghetto' label identified by Slater and Anderson (2012). First and foremost, my respondents emphasized the quality of life offered by Nevers:

It's this easiness that there is to ... I live almost in the city center, I have enough space with this ground-floor apartment ... to have my own little garden. But I'm a stone's throw from the city and its amenities ... I go by bike, that's it ... we still have the Maison de la Culture, the little theatre, the library, the associations center, we have lots of things. There is no lack of cultural activities, no lack of sports activities either ... The lakes and everything else [are] close by ... a town where it's good to live, where there's still not much delinquency, although there are some hot spots like the Baratte, the Grande Pâture, but it's nothing like, I mean ... other cities ... And we still have a lot of green space ... we are well connected to Paris by train ... since there is ... the A77 [the highway], it's easy to get to Paris. So there you have it, the choice I made to come, and to stay.

Isabelle was not originally from Nièvre but from a rural area in the northeast of the country. She moved to Nevers at the beginning of her career, married there, and decided to stay after her divorce. She lived in an apartment in the city center, used to

work as an accountant, and was about to retire when I interviewed her. On the day of the interview she was preparing a farewell speech for her colleagues. The review of her life and career animated our conversation in the sunny courtyard of her city-center apartment. She summarized the many elements underpinning the quality of life in Nevers mentioned by other respondents to explain their satisfaction with their lives.

Elisabeth, a former employee in the public administration, similarly emphasized an aspect central to this alternative imaginary of Nevers:

You go, I don't know, a kilometer you're in the countryside, eh? Eight hundred meters I'm on the banks of the Loire. It's ... all on foot. You ride your bike, right away, you're in the countryside. Oh yeah, it makes a big difference.

The proximity to nature was central in people's discourse. While Nevers is not a famous city, the natural amenities of its countryside are well-known to people who enjoy hiking, fishing and cycling. The River Loire, the surrounding lakes, the Morvan mountain range and the Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé vineyards were all sources of local pride. Many respondents mentioned having access to both urban amenities such as cinemas and cafés and to nature, only a few minutes away from their house. In this assessment of what constitutes quality of life, Nevers was often compared to larger cities, particularly Paris. In these narratives, it was precisely those qualities that could be stigmatizing for Nevers—its provincialism, slower lifestyle, proximity to rural areas—that were re-scripted into positive qualities. Nevers was primarily defined by the things big cities lacked.

I return to my interview with Salomé to close the article. Here, proximity to nature formed part of a broader range of advantages offered by the spatial characteristics of the environment:

I don't think our territory is dying, I think it has a future. But people don't see it. Because in fact, I'm telling you, the ecological issue is going to change the deal a lot. Especially as Nièvre will in fact have a climate which will be quite interesting. Water, a certain amount of sunshine without being too strong, no risk of flooding, very few storms, a rather stable climate ... Maybe I won't be here anymore to say it, but I think it will be an El Dorado. Honestly. People will fight to come and live here.

Salomé went beyond the narrative of Nevers as a good place to live with a high quality of life: climate change and global warming would turn Nevers into a sought-after place, a future 'El Dorado'. The green El Dorado narrative has been deployed by other shrinking municipalities in rural regions (Pinoncely and Schemschat, 2021), suggesting it could become central to the construction of counter-narratives to territorial stigmatization. This shows how re-signifying the negative aspects of place and emphasizing the positive ones leads to a different, competing imaginary in which Nevers becomes attractive and blessed with a promising future, making it easier to dissociate oneself from the stigma attached to the place and its people.

Conclusion

In this article, I showed how territorial stigmatization—a phenomenon that has been extensively studied at the neighborhood level in the context of low-income social housing estates—can be observed at different scales and in different contexts. Using the example of Nevers, I showed that the stigma attached to shrinking medium-sized cities in France is similarly constructed, experienced and negotiated by residents. My contribution to the territorial stigmatization scholarship is three-fold.

First, I showed that territorial stigmatization affects different geographic scales with comparable political outcomes: the reproduction and exacerbation of inequalities between people and places. As Wacquant and colleagues argue (2014: 1278, original emphasis), revealing ‘the constituent properties and operant mechanisms’ of territorial stigmatization allows us to better understand ‘*the role of symbolic structures in the production of inequality and marginality in the city*’. While much of the scholarship following Wacquant has focused on the production and reproduction of intra-urban marginality and inequality at the level of neighborhoods, I show that a comparable process operates at the level of entire cities and subnational regions. Regardless of its scale and stigmatizing imaginaries, territorial stigmatization directs attention towards the symptoms rather than the structural causes of economic and social problems. For shrinking medium-sized cities in France, it draws attention to the degraded urban environments, commercial vacancy and the inaction of local political actors, obscuring how local economic decline is shaped by globalization and the liberalization of economic exchange and production. Extending Wacquant *et al.*'s (2014) analysis, I argue that these imaginaries encourage policymakers to pursue local spatial fixes to address problems that are in fact structural, national or global in scale; and not just spatial, but also social in nature. This contributes to reproducing socio-spatial inequality at the national level.

Second, my analysis contributes to the debate on the internalization of stigma by highlighting residents’ agentic mitigation strategies. Although the locally produced negative discourse on place testifies, to some extent, to the internalization and local reproduction of stigma, the residents of Nevers chose whom they shared the critical discourse with, keeping it for insiders only and effectively mitigating the reproduction of stigma. This finding brings some nuance to a debate that has thus far been structured around two poles: at one end the internalization and reproduction of stigma via the lateral denigration of other residents, and at the other contestation and direct resistance (Wacquant, 2008; Kirkness, 2014; Nayak, 2019). My fieldwork in Nevers showed a third alternative: residents expressing discontent with local problems and the stigmatization of their city and region *amongst themselves*, while being aware of and seeking to limit the symbolic power of external actors. This raises the question why comparable strategies have not been observed in the literature on urban neighborhoods. One possible explanation is that, unlike most cases of territorial stigmatization analyzed in the literature, the stigmatizing imaginary of medium-sized French cities in decline attaches more to markers of place than to markers of social standing. Pinkster *et al.* (2020) found that stigma ‘sticks’ less to people who are not personally targeted by it, who as a result are more easily able to distance themselves from its corrosive effects. This might explain how Nevers’ residents have been more able to contest and re-script the stigmatization of their city and region than the residents of marginalized urban neighborhoods. Future research could investigate this possibility in greater depth.

My third contribution extends our understanding of resistance to stigma through re-scripting strategies by highlighting how these practices activate the physical characteristics of place. Previous analyses of re-scripting strategies have privileged social and emotional ties to place, invoking solidarity, the strength of the community, or feelings of home and belonging (Slater and Anderson, 2012; Arthurson *et al.*, 2014; August, 2014; Cairns, 2018; Nayak, 2019). Focusing here on the role of physical—alongside social and symbolic—space within processes of territorial stigmatization answers the recent call put out by Hincks and Powell (2022). My analysis shows that different strategies to negotiate stigma co-exist, whereby the narratives that re-script potentially stigmatizing elements into positive ones are expressed most frequently and forcefully.

On a final note, studying the historical trajectories of territorial stigmatization to better understand how the phenomenon unfolds could be a fruitful direction for future research. Throughout this article, I have touched on the histories of stigma, particularly in my analysis of the construction of territorial stigma through spatial imaginaries. The

stigmatization of medium-sized cities in decline—especially those in rural areas, like Nevers—is anchored in recent developments: their demographic and economic decline began in the 1970s, accelerated in the 2000s, and has since become highly visible. However, as we have seen, contemporary imaginaries are also anchored in older imaginaries which assign agrarian regions and their cities lower social and symbolic value. While these findings exceed the scope of the current analysis, they resonate with Wacquant's historicization of neighborhood stigma (Wacquant, 2008; Wacquant *et al.*, 2014). Just as Wacquant acknowledged pre-existing imaginaries about low-income urban areas, a stigmatizing imaginary already existed about France's 'empty diagonal'. Nevertheless, the phenomenon took on a life of its own following and as a result of the structural economic changes of the late twentieth century. The recent turn towards more positive coverage of medium-sized cities in France following the Action Cœur de Ville program and the COVID-19 pandemic—as well as Salomé's faith in the 'future El Dorado'—underlines the importance of a *longue durée* approach to stigmatizing imaginaries of place.

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