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Milhan Chaze, Iwan Le Clec'h

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**French-speaking geography of retail and consumption:  
themes, issues and approaches**

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## Small and medium-sized French cities facing contemporary challenges in commercial systems and consumption

*Les villes petites et moyennes françaises face aux enjeux contemporains des systèmes commerciaux et de consommation*

**Milhan Chaze and Iwan Le Clec'h**

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# Small and medium-sized French cities facing contemporary challenges in commercial systems and consumption

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## Introduction

- 1 Geographers have not extensively discussed commercial systems in small and medium-sized French cities (Edouard, 2012). However, like larger cities, these areas have undergone significant changes in their spatial organization and position in urban networks due to increased mobility. This has led to urban sprawl and disrupted functional relationships between centres, peri-central districts, suburban rings, and nearby cities. As a result, people's living spaces were reorganized, and daily journeys were established to connect different places frequented by the residents of peri-urban areas.
- 2 Retail trade has significantly contributed to these changes by supporting and promoting them. In small and medium-sized (SMS) towns, vast commercial districts have developed at the contact between the dense city and the surrounding peri-urban or rural areas, near the main roads, leading to a reorganization of downtown commercial activities (among other explanations). Recently, picking-up systems have also emerged, and mass retailers have adapted to digital tools. SMS towns retail activities are also seeing changes in consumer behaviour due to increased mobility, expanded supply options, and diversified purchasing methods.

- 3 In this context, we will explore the reciprocal effects of urban development and commercial changes in the specific case of SMS towns. More precisely, how have the transformations brought about by recent commercial dynamics been translated into the spatial organization of these urban areas? Is their originality compared to larger urban areas? What strategies have the local institutional actors implemented to respond to the new challenges generated by commercial changes? This article will therefore tackle the problem of adapting these kinds of towns, as specific urban organisms, to contemporary commercial changes. Our hypothesis is that SMS cities have a variety of specificities in the dynamic of their peripheral retail trade.
- 4 First, we will examine the retail geography in SMS towns. This involves studying retail trade at interurban scale through urban networks and rural-urban relations, while also considering economic and social changes. Additionally, it encompasses the change in perspective at the intra-urban scale, urban planning policies, and questions related to the spatial behaviour of customers. In the second step, we will examine the current and future challenges facing commerce in SMS towns. The evolution of retail trade in SMS towns is accompanied by ex-urbanization, as new markets are captured, and new competition emerges from other urban centres. Additionally, new sales and purchasing practices are emerging, particularly related to the development of transit stores. These are located on the main axes and mobility flows. They thus allow consumers to rationalize their travel time (Gasnier, 2008). Efforts to revitalize declining SMS town centres are also underway, however, they do not prevent the ongoing ex-urbanization of activities. Since 2020, the COVID-19 crisis has disrupted trade in SMS towns.

#### **Definitional elements for small and medium-sized towns in France**

Definitions of small and medium-sized towns remain imprecise and vary depending on authors and national contexts. In France, there is no legal definition of a city. Therefore, to define different levels of cities, two main criteria are often combined: population size and commercial and service infrastructure.

Population limits for small towns vary according to authors, ranging from 2,000 to 5,000 inhabitants for the lower level and 30,000 to 50,000 or even 100,000 inhabitants for the higher level. The highest level for medium-sized towns is often around 200,000 inhabitants. Small towns typically offer services such as high schools, small hospitals, and usual retail trade. Medium-sized towns, on the other hand, provide services such as local hospitals, small universities or higher education institutes, and unusual retail trade.

### **Retailing in small and medium-sized towns: a theoretical and concrete evolution**

- 5 The focus of this study is to examine how French and French-speaking geographers have approached the issue of retail trade in SMS towns. The aim is to understand how their research has been influenced by the theoretical evolution of geography and territorial changes. The study will differentiate between the interurban scale of

networks and urban systems, and the intra-urban scale of retail structures and living spaces.

### **From network to system, the evolution of studies at interurban scale**

- 6 At an interurban scale, research on retail trade in SMS towns has focused on urban networks and rural-urban relations. More recently, this research has expanded to include contemporary issues such as the decline of rural spaces, metropolization, and globalization.

#### **Urban networks and rural-urban relations**

- 7 The first research on retail in SMS cities was the now classic doctoral thesis on the organisation of urban and regional networks (Rochefort, 1960). These works approach the urban phenomenon from a reticular and functional perspective, considering retail trade as an urban function capable of defining hierarchies and urban networks, with SMS cities forming the base. These studies are based on the location of retail trade and services. They bring together earlier regional geography doctoral theses and later works on quantitative geography, influenced by the Anglo-Saxon ‘new geography’ of the 1950s and 1960s (Desse, 2009). The studies introduce new materials, such as figures, and new concepts, such as networks and functions.
- 8 This research aims to understand the role of SMS towns in the commercial offer at the local and regional scale. It also contributes to the French land-use planning policy that aims to reduce territorial imbalances and disparities, such as the “*Politique des métropoles d’équilibre*” in the 1960s and the medium-sized town policy in the 1970s. Furthermore, other analyses have continued the typologies of SMS towns based on their retailing activities (Chaze, 2014; Jousseau and Talandier, 2016). Since the late 1960s, geographers have investigated the commercial relations between SMS towns and their surrounding areas (Veyret-Verner, 1969). The author discusses two ways in which these relations were dealt with: firstly, the commercial polarization of SMS towns on their catchment areas; and secondly, the selling of local food products in SMS markets (Bachelard, 1981). The research highlights the key role of SMS towns in the local commercial offer and in customers’ behaviour.

#### **Retail trade in small and medium sized towns facing current socio-economic changes**

- 9 The impact of territorial changes on the retail structure of small and medium-sized towns has been examined in the latest research. This includes the reconstruction of rural areas, whether in decline or renewal, as well as the effects of metropolization and globalization. The research has identified two main trends. Geographers studying low-density territories have found that the smallest and most remote towns continue to experience decline (Chaze, 2014). Chaze (2014) emphasises the importance of accessibility to retail centres and notes the strengthening of small towns in their surrounding areas due to the decline of rural retail trade.
- 10 However, there has been a trend of revitalisation in territories with high demographic growth or those located near major cities. In these regions, small towns are organising peri-urban mobility (Dugot, 2005; Le Clec’h, 2018). The functional dynamics of SMS

towns make these two opposing trends more complex. Studies of their retail trade dynamics (Chaze, 2014) reveal a diversity of cases, rather than a single profile. Finally, in the context of significant territorial changes, the role of SMS towns in the globalization of distribution networks has not been extensively studied. Available research suggests that SMS towns are integrated into these networks due to the proliferation of mass distribution and franchise networks. However, Chaze (2008) found a delay in the diffusion process between different urban levels, reinforcing the hierarchical connection between small cities and metropolises where major retail companies are based.

### **From retail trade structures to customers behaviours: a change of perspective at intra-urban scale**

- 11 In the 1970s, the analysis of retail trade structures at an intra-urban scale began following urban networks and rural-urban studies (Desse, 2009). This was due to the emergence of specific research on retail trade and on SMS towns.

### **From centre-periphery relations to city centre crisis: the urban planning policy issue**

- 12 From the late 1980s, studies on urban retail trade structures changed as the distinction between city centre and suburban retailing became more pronounced. This was due to the emergence of peripheral retail parks and the functional, demographic, and urbanistic crisis in city centres. French-speaking geographers became interested in the suburbanisation of retail activities around SMS towns, as it was in line with their research on larger cities (Soumagne, 1991; Metton, 1997). The impact of constructing large retail parks at SMS town entrances on the landscape was analysed by the authors, as well as the changes in behaviour of motorized customers who moved away from the city centre to peripheral retail parks. The authors also examined the reorganization of retail trade structure in city centres over the last few decades (Mérenne-Schoumaker, 1979; Gasnier, 2000).
- 13 French-speaking geographers have shown an increased interest in commercial urban planning strategies since the 1990s-2000s. This is due to the rise of public policies aimed at revitalizing city centres and rebalancing between city centres and suburban retail poles. Geographers have expressed their interest through special works on issues relating to commerce in small towns (Soumagne, 1991; Berroir *et al.*, 2019), symposiums, and collective books (Laborie and Renard, 1998). Public policies aimed at revitalising city centres in SMS towns, such as *Cœur de Pays* and *Centre 2000* during the 1990s, or *Action Cœur de Ville* since the end of the 2010s, partially explain this interest. These works have deepened our understanding of centre-periphery relations and analysed the strategies of public and private stakeholders to control the opening of retail outlets and revitalise retail activities in city centres.
- 14 French geographers' research topics were influenced by the French public authorities' interest in SMS towns and the revitalization of their city centre retail trade. However, this shift from geographical studies to commercial urban planning in SMS towns is also part of a broader trend in French academic research. This evolution is associated with the growth of university education in urban planning and the increase in studies

conducted by academic geographers for public authorities to comprehend territorial challenges.

### **Customers' spatial behaviour or the mobility issue**

- 15 In the context of the reorientation of commercial studies towards stakeholders' behaviour (Desse, 2009), the behaviour of customers in SMS towns is of particular importance. This aspect has often been overlooked in French geographical studies on retail trade, which have been limited to the analysis of journeys from home to the place of purchase and the behaviour of market customers. French-speaking geographers have recently taken an interest in it due to the growth of French social and cultural geography, as well as the influence of Anglo-Saxon postmodernism in French and French-speaking geography (Lemarchand, 2009).
- 16 Research on SMS town customers has primarily focused on the issue of mobility. Studies have been conducted on customers as a whole (Chaze, 2014; Le Clec'h, 2018), as well as specific groups such as tourists (Martin, 2015), elderly people (Bésingrand and Soumagne, 2006), and market customers (Bachelard, 1981). These studies have highlighted the impact of increased customer mobility on the dynamics of retail poles in SMS towns, as well as the frequency of daily commutes. Martin (2015) highlighted the importance of tourist customers in the commercial dynamics of SMS towns. Research on retail trade in these towns is linked to the evolution of geographical topics and is embedded in various geographical currents of thought and methods. However, it is less developed than works on larger cities. Furthermore, despite the abundance of literature on retail trade in SMS towns, this subject is often given secondary consideration or is combined with other topics such as demographic decline and city shrinkage, town centre revitalisation or suburbanisation. Therefore, researching retail trade in SMS towns still presents numerous challenges.

## **Growing catchment areas: between capturing new markets for the retail trade of small and medium-sized towns and the emergence of new competitions from other urban centres**

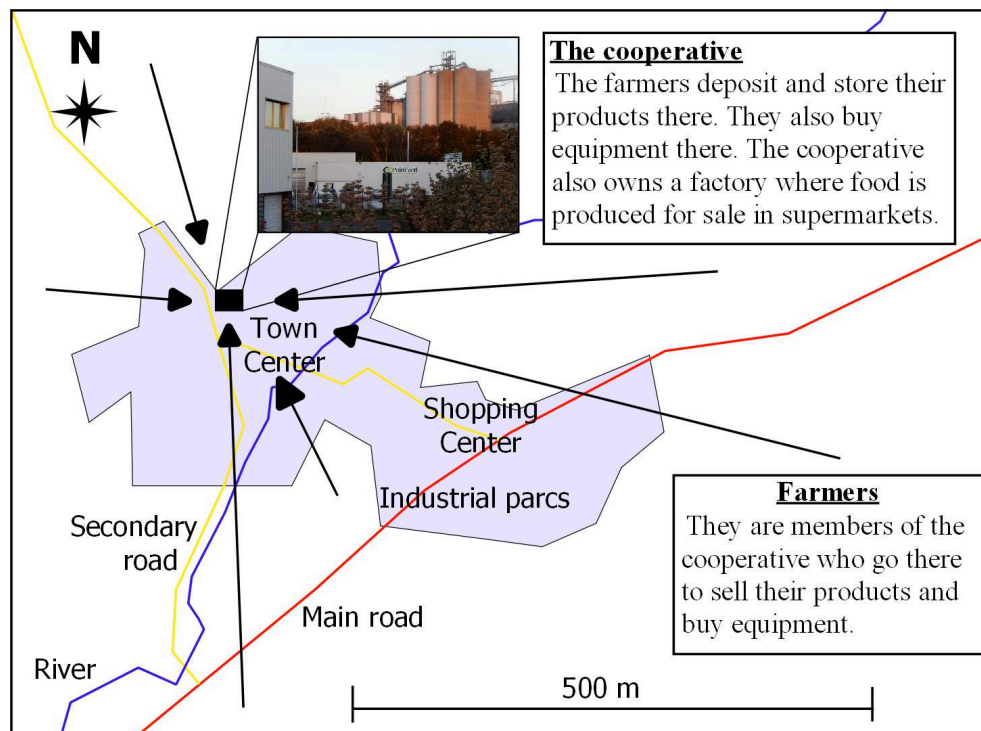
- 17 In recent decades, SMS towns have benefited from an increase in their commercial establishments. This has facilitated the emergence of new market forms and intensified competition among brands in nearby towns. However, the most visible manifestation of this competition between sales spaces is the conflict between urban centres and their peripheries, as well as between physical stores and e-commerce.

### **A recent increase of retail trade due to the expansion of catchment areas and challenges posed by new competition**

- 18 Between the mid-1980s and the late 2000s, commercial facilities in SMS towns were improved. Currently, national brands are present in proportion to the population of urban areas, with some being particularly well-equipped. In 2020, three of the top ten French peripheral shopping areas, in terms of the number of national brands present,

are located near medium-sized towns (Codata, 2020): Bab 2 (Bayonne: 242,000), Parc-Lann/Kerlann (Vannes: 80,000) and Linkling (Thionville: 134,000). Only major craft stores have a significant presence in the localities that polarize peri-urban and rural spaces. In Brittany, in particular, this type of shop partially supports the cooperative system resulting from the regional agricultural model. This distribution is encouraged by the multiplication of formats that allows distributors to adapt to different market sizes. The SMS town will therefore spread over a more or less vast territory depending on its importance. It also causes the decline of localities, former small towns now relegated to the status of rural centres.

Figure 1. Example of a cooperative located on the outskirts of a city.



Conception: Le Clec'h, 2021

- 19 This set includes differences. Thus, size of cities impacts on supply of food stores, new concepts appearing primarily in the cities that are best connected to more global social groups. Status of peripheral supermarkets, integrated into a large company or members of an independent group, has consequences on stores in central neighborhoods. Finally, a tourist town benefits from an additional clientele. This is the case, for example in Albi (71,000 inhabitants), a town studied by three researchers (Fijalkow, Martin et Calvignac, 2017).
- 20 However, a SMS city may face competition from stores in nearby localities, especially if they are larger. For instance, a store like Ikea located on the outskirts of a metropolis can attract customers from shops located several tens of kilometres away and easily accessible by car. In addition, physical stores also compete with e-commerce. Therefore, the downtown areas of these small urban centres are experiencing desertification, which local and national policies are attempting to address.



## The evolution of small and medium-sized towns activities which is accompanied by its ex-urbanization

- 21 The expansion of retail trade in SMS towns has led to the relocation of market activities to suburban areas. In 2017, retail spaces on the outskirts of Saint-Brieuc (with a population of 94,000) were 2.5 times larger than those in the city centre. They accounted for 84% of spending in this urban area in 2011, which is 5.6 times more than all spending on other sites, including the city centre. Over the last three years, the opening of clothing, footwear, and cultural product shops in the main peripheral shopping centre of this medium-sized city has strengthened this trend. Initially, new brands were introduced alongside franchise stores that were already present in the city centre, many of which have now closed. Saint-Brieuc is listed among medium-sized towns that are disadvantaged by the power of their peripheral retail trade, such as Annemasse (population 35,000), Antibes (73,000), Grasse (50,000), Hyères (56,000), Martigues (48,000), or Voiron (20,000). These seven localities are part of larger urban areas (Geneva, French Riviera, Toulon, Marseille, or Grenoble).
- 22 This situation is the result of several factors. Firstly, businesses such as craft stores, car dealerships, and supermarkets located outside of the agglomeration have been able to benefit from larger spaces than before. Secondly, due to their high mobility, peri-urban consumers, who mainly live in households with two cars or more, have stopped visiting the centres of small or medium-sized towns. They now make their purchases either on their way home from work or during a dedicated shopping trip. Jean-Pierre Grimmeau and Benjamin Wayens (2016) describe a similar phenomenon in Belgian towns. In France, territorial fragmentation of the administration and competition between central cities and peripheral municipalities exacerbate these factors. However, in Albi, the development operations carried out by the local public authorities have had the most significant impact on the city centre, despite global economic conditions affecting commercial activity. These operations polarized exchanges without fixing them. They result in strong migrations of businesses within an area (Martin, 2015).

## Adaptation of small and medium-sized towns to new sales and purchasing practices

- 23 At the scale of SMS towns, retailing is currently experiencing four major dynamics. Merchant activity is increasingly concentrated in transit locations, while e-commerce continues to expand. New demands for product quality, environmental sustainability, and social responsibility are driving the emergence of new sales formats. The Covid-19 crisis has also disrupted some purchasing behaviours.

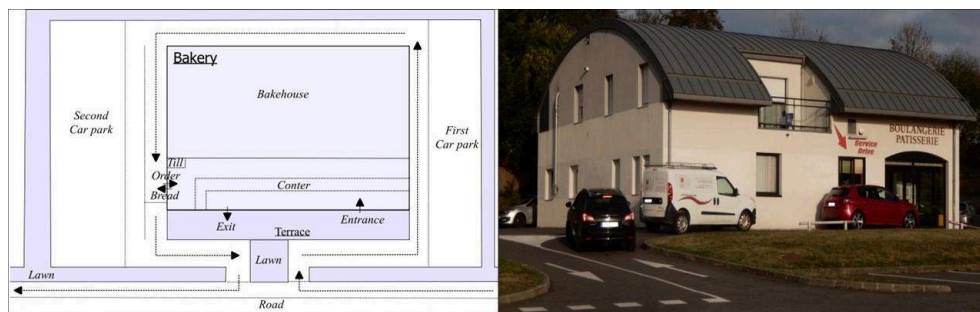
### Transit shops: generalizing drive-ins and minimizing traffic in roundabouts

- 24 From the late 1960s, medium-sized towns saw the emergence of peripheral hypermarkets located near the roads connecting them to neighbouring cities. Two decades later, the establishment of supermarkets on the outskirts of roundabouts that encircle SMS towns has become widespread. Since then, other businesses have followed

these pioneers, such as supermarkets specialising in frozen products, hard discount, soft-discount, organic food, and fast-food outlets. Since the 2000s, there has been significant growth in food businesses at these road junctions, mainly bakeries. This multiplication of points of sale near the various roundabouts that dot the journeys of consumers allows them to set up real purchasing strategies in the form of peregrinations. The emergence of this phenomenon was observed in the mid-1990s in the Brest region, which has a population of 202,000 inhabitants (Desse 1996).

- 25 Some of these shops have a drive-in service. While some fast-food brands have made this one of their characteristics, other businesses are equipped with devices allowing purchases to be made directly from their vehicles. This is particularly the case of bakeries located in the Saint-Brieuc region. Mass distribution, for its part, uses a click and collect systems and connected commerce.

Figure 2. Bakeries with a drive-in system; left, Chateaulin site map (5,600 inhabitants), right, Plaintel (6,400 inhabitants).



Conception: Le Clec'h I., 2021

### The new commerce in the centre of small and medium-sized towns, between gentrification and the appearance of actors-consumers

- 26 The commerce of SMS towns is also reinventing itself. New stores are emerging and selling products that are valued for their quality, ecological impact, and even social responsibility. Claire Delfosse highlights the driving role of dairy and cheese makers in the growth of medium-sized towns such as Chambéry (population 190,000), Colmar (95,000), Nîmes (185,000), and Roanne (80,000) (Delfosse, 2017). In Swiss cities, including medium-sized ones, various housing gentrification phenomena have an impact on commercial activities (Rérat, Söderström and Besson, 2008). Businesses such as tea rooms offering brunches, bookstore cafes, designer boutiques or producers' stores communicate the local, zero waste, organic or vegan character of their activities. These provide additional outlets for farmers, peasants, market gardeners, and artisans located in neighbouring peri-urban or rural areas. However, this search for proximity by certain city dwellers may result in an increase in the distance travelled by consumers in search of direct sales (Le Clec'h, 2018; Pouzenc, 2008; Schneller, 2010).
- 27 City dwellers also attend markets, which are becoming more frequent and popular in central-western France and Brittany, particularly in the evenings and at weekends. However, the size of these markets is decreasing as customers increasingly prefer locally sourced and high-quality products. These urban complexes offer street vendors safe outlets (Navarro 2017). This explains by the specialization of certain parts of the

market such as Bourg-en-Bresse (61,000 inhabitants), the loyalty of consumers including in medium-sized towns, or monopoly situations, for example in the many small urban centers of the Lyon urban region. These city dwellers often have significant purchasing power and identify as both consumers and actors (“*consom’acteurs*”), as evidenced by their membership in local currencies.

## The revitalization of small and medium-sized town centres: space and places

- 28 The evolution of practices and the ex-urbanization of retail trade have a strong impact on the centres of SMS towns. Facing high vacancy rates, collective and public action is being taken to revitalize the hearts of these urban centres.

### Towards Desertification of Small and Medium-Sized Town Centres

- 29 The phenomenon of commercial devitalization in medium-sized towns, described as a form of urban decline (Darmon, 2017), is becoming increasingly common in France. Investigative journalist Olivier Razemon questions the prevalent use of individual automobiles in these areas and their impact on the urban environment (Razemon, 2016). A 2018 study by the Procos Institute on medium-sized town centres estimated commercial vacancy rates at 20%. Similar figures were reported that year for a panel of peri-urban poles and small towns in Brittany (Le Clec’h, 2018). Two years later, 19% of French ground-floor stores were empty (Codata 2020).
- 30 Several cities have experienced high vacancy rates, including Saint-Brieuc. In fact, Saint-Brieuc’s downtown area has the sixth highest vacancy rate among all town centres of medium-sized French cities. Between 2011 and 2017, the vacancy rate increased by 112%, with the hyper-centre alone experiencing an increase of 183%, affecting one in three sales units. This situation is also present in the neighbouring city of Quintin (population 2,800). Prior to the 1990s, commercial activities were spread over six shopping streets. Currently, commercial activity is confined to the Grandrue (Main Street). For instance, Châtelaudren (population 3,900) has a low vacancy rate of only 13%, primarily in peri-central areas. Until 2019, Châtelaudren had been spared from the issue of commercial vacancy. However, two peripheral spaces near a supermarket and a motorway interchange were developed, leading to an increase in vacant commercial spaces.
- 31 Commercial desertification has a greater impact on hyper-centres. In Albi, national brands are concentrated in a small sector, leading to an increase in land and real estate prices. Independent brands, although in the majority in a city centre already divided between spaces reserved for shops intended for tourists and sectors with shops frequented by locals, cannot compete with the shops of large groups. When a national brand leaves the town centre of Albi, it creates an unused space that is not conducive to the establishment of another kind of shop. This commercial vacancy also impacts the peripheries. In 2016, the shopping areas surrounding Saint-Brieuc recorded as many empty square meters as the city centre. In Rostrenen (population 3,100), one of the main urban centres of very rural central Brittany, each of the four entrances to this small town had brownfields. Previously, these buildings were primarily occupied by four supermarkets until they relocated near the national road that connects the east to

the west of the region, which raises the question of the impact of the creation of new road infrastructure on city shops.

- 32 Strategic orientations for spatial planning in urban and rural areas are crucial (Huet, 2017). Additionally, the commercial nature of these territories is diminishing, with issues such as vacant lots and abandoned buildings having negative impacts on the landscape. The visual impact of new projects is also a concern. In the case of SMS towns, they are primarily situated in peripheral areas. They contribute to the expansion of commerce into ex-urban areas, resulting in an increase in sales areas and the migration of consumers from their residential areas.

### **Towards a revitalization of city centres?**

- 33 Urban planners recommend that local public policies be oriented towards revitalising the centres of small and medium-sized towns (Huet, 2017). They suggest diversifying the offerings in these areas, addressing the slight lack of specialty shops, developing new markets in proximity, and controlling land use to limit consumption of space on the outskirts while promoting urban centres. Private actors also support filling their premises. This is exemplified by the Regional Banks of *Crédit Agricole*. For example, the Champagne Bourgogne branch has implemented a trial shop system in Troyes (population 140,000). This system provides affordable rents to young professionals to help them assess the profitability of their business. However, not all private landlords follow this approach, often due to a lack of knowledge about the local real estate market. Some municipalities, such as Saint-Brieuc, are implementing a tax on brownfields to incentivise lessors to rent their premises.
- 34 Since the mid-2010s, there have been global operations aimed at revitalising city centres. In 2014, the French government issued a call for projects aimed at centralities with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. Fifty-four cities received 230 million euros. In 2017, the Brittany Region and its land and property management operator launched two programmes intended for rural municipalities and small towns. The aim is to assist municipalities in setting up or carrying out their projects. In 2018, the French government launched the *Action Cœur de Ville* program, which allocated €5 billion to enhance the town centres of 222 medium-sized towns. The program is based on contractual arrangements between various stakeholders and the principle of a one-stop shop for local public authorities seeking to simplify procedures. These transversal programmes aim to improve trade and revitalise cities through actions on housing, infrastructure, heritage, and tourism development in certain central districts. This type of comprehensive action has enabled the city of Albi to revitalise its city centre commerce, thanks to the classification of the city and its cathedral as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Martin, 2015).

### **Operations that do not prevent the continued ex-urbanization of retailing**

- 35 Town centre revitalization operations have a limited impact on the realization of new commercial programs on the outskirts of towns, even when these have benefited from national programs. This is supported by investigative work conducted by 11 journalism students (CUEJ, 2020). Committees comprising elected officials and experts are

responsible for regulating new commercial town planning projects, but their effects are limited. The weight given to local mayors, who are considered beneficiaries of the establishment of new activities, transforms this decision-making body into a mere approval office, to the detriment of both economic and ecological issues.

- 36 Furthermore, these actions have minimal impact on potential store customers. They have little effect on the demographics of city centres or the purchasing power of certain populations who are forced to leave city centres due to housing or land costs, or who are limited in their purchases. Additionally, they do not affect consumer behaviour or trade. In other words, they have no impact on the willingness to buy. For example, issues related to the flow of people are only rarely considered (Huet, 2017). Likewise, in Albi, the viability of certain stores opened following promotional actions was quickly called into question due to lack of knowledge of the local market by their project leaders. In this same city, shopping time turns out to be unfavourable for downtown shops. These are in fact closed for lunchtime, due to a lack of a culture of opened shops during the lunch break. In addition, the size of the city is conducive to having meals at home. This practice of the inhabitants will also generate additional passages in front of shops located on the outskirts and open continuously throughout the day.
- 37 Also, the only structurally effective response to this crisis in city centres and their highly commercial vacancy rates seem to be the allocation of new functions to the old stores. While some nostalgic municipalities act in favour of the transformation of empty windows into works of art desired as ephemeral, others are taking more radical measures. The city of Saint-Brieuc transforms vacant commercial premises located outside the city centre into housing. Gourin (population 3,800) has experienced a 1.3% annual decline in its population over the past four years. In 2019, the town underwent a redevelopment of its shopping centre. Previously, the shopping centre was organized along the two main roads that crossed the city centre until the completion of ring roads. Since 2019, it has been structured around a small square that originally served as a secondary crossroads. This has contributed to the retraction of the commercial heart of the city.

### **New upheavals induced by the Covid-19 crisis**

- 38 The pandemic has significantly impacted purchasing practices. Many nonessential shops, such as those selling household appliances, clothing, cafes, restaurants, and large shopping centres, were forced to close for extended periods. Open stores had to limit their sales due to sanitary measures, allowing only a restricted number of customers inside at any given time. During times of high virus circulation, containment or curfew measures have reduced shopping time slots, and nonessential products cannot be purchased. Furthermore, some already fragile establishments have permanently closed. However, this has reinforced pre-existing trends (Le Clec'h, 2020). Therefore, the shift towards local purchasing practices has continued to progress. Although some commercial offers have been reduced, the SMS town centres still managed to attract new customers interested in high-quality food products. This success can be attributed to the various measures put in place to limit travel. However, supporting data for these claims is necessary.

39 In addition, some municipalities have implemented policies to support the commercial sector. For instance, some provide vouchers that are valid in local businesses, while others offer technical solutions such as shared delivery systems or assistance for the development of e-commerce. It is now essential for all sellers to have digital technology. For instance, closed restaurants have started selling takeaway meals, and there has been a rise in the use of click and collect services and contactless payment applications. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant changes in business practices in SMS towns. It is uncertain how much progress has been made, but these changes are expected to have a profound impact on the business landscape. The resilience of the most vulnerable institutions, currently receiving government support, will determine the outcome of the situation. What will happen tomorrow?

## Conclusion

- 40 At the end of this study, French geographic research on retail trade in SMS towns is characterized by several salient features. The work carried out has followed the dual trajectory of epistemological developments in French geography and their subjects of study. It is important to note that this analysis is objective and avoids any biased or emotional language. The epistemological dynamic was primarily characterised by a shift from an initial focus on commercial locations and their structuring nature to a more consumer-oriented approach to commercial town planning, in line with the dynamics of French commerce. This shift was reflected in the changing geography of French commerce. Regarding the changes that have occurred in the commerce of SMS towns over the past half-century, it is evident that French geographers have successfully addressed the challenges they have encountered.
- 41 The studies have shown that SMS towns have integrated into the major dynamics of retail trade in France, including the rise of large retail parks and drive-ins at the entrances to towns, the spread of electronic commerce, and the crisis in town centres. The originality of SMS towns lies in the strength of the effects of these changes. Although the central trade crisis affects all types of urban areas, its impact is more intense in SMS towns. Therefore, implementing strategies to revitalize the centres is crucial, although their effects are yet to be seen. The COVID-19 epidemic has created a new challenge for SMS towns, particularly in terms of its impact on retail. Currently, temporary store closures are causing significant difficulties for traders. However, the actions taken by local authorities and the shift of certain businesses towards increased internet usage indicate that this crisis could be an opportunity for a significant reorganization of commerce in SMS towns.

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## ABSTRACTS

In the context of significant changes in commerce and consumer practices, such as the e-commerce boom, discount development, increased household mobility, and consumption relocation, small and medium-sized towns are experiencing similar market structure evolutions to those of large conurbations. These changes include the shrinkage of shopping centres and the growth of peripheries and transit trade, which are accompanied by urban structure evolutions, such as peri-urbanization. This article aims to examine the reciprocal effects of urban development and commercial changes in small and medium-sized cities. It is based on French literature in the geography of commerce, as well as related disciplines such as sociology and urbanism. The objective of this article is to present the epistemological evolution of studies on the subject and current key research issues.



Dans un contexte de profondes mutations du commerce et des pratiques de consommation (essor du commerce électronique, développement du discount, accroissement de la mobilité des ménages, relocalisation de la consommation, etc.), les petites villes connaissent, à l'instar des grandes agglomérations, une évolution de leurs structures marchandes (rétraction des centres commerçants, essor des périphéries et du commerce de transit). Ces évolutions vont de pair avec celles des structures urbaines (périurbanisation). Cet article vise à questionner les effets réciproques du développement urbain et des changements commerciaux dans le cas spécifique des villes petites et moyennes. En s'appuyant sur la littérature francophone en géographie du commerce, mais aussi dans quelques disciplines connexes (sociologie, urbanisme), l'objectif de cet article est de présenter l'évolution épistémologique des études réalisées sur le sujet, ainsi que les principaux enjeux de recherche actuels.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** small and medium-sized cities, retail trade, rural areas, peri-urbanization, mobilities, e-commerce, shopping practices, France

**Mots-clés:** villes petites et moyennes, commerce de détail, espaces ruraux, périurbanisation, mobilités, e-commerce, pratiques d'achats, France

## AUTHORS

### MILHAN CHAZE

Chercheur associé, Université Clermont Auvergne, UMR Territoires

ORCID 0000-0001-7942-6036

milhan.chaze@yahoo.fr

### IWAN LE CLEC'H

Chercheur associé, Université de Haute-Bretagne, Laboratoire de Géoarchitecture

ORCID 0009-0006-2505-8817

iwan.leclech@yahoo.fr