

Territorial revitalization: actions and policies underway in the industrial territory of Belfort since 2019

Extended Abstract (1200-2000 words)

These last decades, territories and their mutations have become critical study objects, in a context of more global trends: globalization, deindustrialization, the rise of metropolitan areas as dominant actors, the European construction process, etc.

The study of ‘regions that win’ and ‘regions that lose’ (Benko & Lipietz, 1992) calls for a robust conceptualization of territorial mutations, especially through a strict typology, which is a precondition for the scientific study of actions and policies intending to help territories reach a new vitality.

In that respect, and as an alternative term, ‘territorial revitalization’ could be an interesting standpoint, but it appears under-conceptualized and polysemous. Yet, scientific fields using this term are numerous: from urban planning, regional planning and geography to economics, political sciences and sociology (Trink, 2007; Maillat, 1988; Coenen, Moodysson & Martin, 2015; Fol & Sabot, 2003; Miles & Paddison, 2005; Couch, Sykes & Börstinghaus, 2011). Archaeology also tackled the concept (Faulseit, 2015). A tangle of concepts associated with territorial mutations and with a meaning strongly related to revitalization also exists. Usually, these denominations have a narrower application (restructuring, renewal, reconversion, regeneration, redynamization, refurbishment, redevelopment, etc.) and focus on specific types of territories. Here again, these concepts can be associated with very varied issues, be it to industry and employment (restructuring, industrial reconversion, industrial trajectory renewal), or urban issues (refurbishment, urban recycling, replanning, urban regeneration, urban renewal). Not only are these notions polysemous but they also seem to betray a fragmentation of Human and Social science fields.

The purpose of the ORTEP-revitalization research project (2017–2021) carried out in Franche-Comté (France) is structured around the notion of territorial revitalization for several reasons. First of all, the purpose is to study territorial mutations, and more particularly the return of positive dynamics in territories under considerable difficulties, from an interdisciplinary perspective. In this respect, the concept of territorial revitalization seems to be a relevant matrix to seize and articulate myriads of related terms (restructuring, renewal, reconversion, regeneration, redynamization, refurbishment, redevelopment, etc.) under a unified theoretical framework. Moreover, it is an attempt to characterize a set of actions and policies intending to renew territorial dynamics and to understand the way it operates.

This is through interdisciplinary discussions and workshops organized in the ORTEP project between March 2018 and February 2020 and an abductive approach (Gasnier *et al.*, 2022) that we developed our reading matrix of revitalization. As a starting point, we considered local territories as complex systems. More specifically, we define them as ‘*complex systems which dynamics result from feedback loops that link a set of actors and the geographical space they use, adapt, convert and manage according to their past, present and future perceptions*’ (Moine & Sorita, 2015, p. 57)¹.

We also make a fundamental distinction between the territorial vitality regime and territorial revitalization. Indeed, we define the vitality of a territory as *its capacity to adapt and to benefit*

¹ The translation is ours.

from more trends – exogenous or endogenous – that lead to disorders at the scale of this same territory.

This definition underlies a capacity of resilience and self-regulation of the territorial system. In other words, the system is able to innovate and to bounce back in a way that allows it to keep its coherence on a given trajectory, despite disorders that can impact it. If the vitality regime is under a slowing down process of its dynamics and if actions are organized to remedy to it, we shall speak of a simple redynamization.

On the contrary, revitalization constitutes a disruption in the trajectory; revitalization as we define it occurs when a situation of turmoil or decline leads to inadequacy between the vitality regime and external constraints originating from within or from larger scales. This inadequacy is to be understood as the difficulty for the vitality regime to take advantage of external constraints or to influence them to its advantage. This can be explained by the incapacity of the vitality regime to overcome surrounding modifications through a limited adjustment. In short, revitalization occurs when a simple adjustment is not sufficient.

Moreover, this revitalization process is not conceived as a spontaneous process but is initiated by actors and their capacity to organize themselves collectively at different territorial levels, even though the results of these actions can be different from what was expected.

Henceforth, we define revitalization as *the capacity to recombine resources and to recompose stakes and relationships between actors, in a way that allows the creation of new compromises and the reshaping of resilience and innovation capacities of the territory through its actors, its collectives and its organizations*. In a nutshell, revitalization is the process that defines a new vitality regime. In the framework of this regime reshaping process, it is no longer a matter of adjustment or renewal, but the introduction of a disruption in the actors' perceptions and relationships between one another in a way that allows them to imagine new models.

Through interdisciplinary research, we defined a set of five principles allowing us to discriminate between what can be considered as revitalization or as another kind of territorial process. Our purpose in this contribution is to show that **our theoretical framework of revitalization is relevant as it allows a renewed analysis of the dynamics of a territory**.

To develop our theoretical framework and to test it, we propose to study the case of the city of Belfort (Franche-Comté, France) during the period from 2019 to nowadays, that is to say during the time when one of the industrial leading groups located in the territory, General Electric, is under an important crisis that strongly impact its local environment. We focus our attention on this territory due to its strong industrial history and identity, which is threatened by a context of turmoil. We will study more specifically how collective strategies shape themselves and whether they manage to make the territory bounce back in face of a series of crises, and for which change of trajectory. Our main question is the following: is Belfort engaged in a revitalization dynamic? And how does the pandemic impact this dynamic?

In order to answer our interrogations, our entry point are territorial actors and resources, and more precisely resources-perceptions-actors' nodes, that is to say the processes through which actors identify resources and recombine them in collective actions. In this perspective, we conducted a series of interviews with local actors. This is extended by an historical account of the main crises that the territory underwent and of the set of actions that were implemented to find solutions.

This analysis allowed us to identify two important collective responses: (1) the General Electric crisis management and the path to regional economic diversification and activity recreation proposed by actors, and (2) the 'Transformation of an Industrial Territory' (TTI) project, which is the result of a successful application to the call for project 'Territory of innovation' in the framework of 'Investing for the Future', a French public program.

Three important results were reached. First, we observe that the diagnosis of industrial crises is widely shared by actors. Nevertheless, this diagnosis is usually limited to industrial or

economic issues, with the danger of forgetting other dynamics and fundamental elements necessary to a relevant assessment of the situation, be it from a social or ecological point of view. The industrial diversification issue also is only really tackled as a collective project in the 'Transformation of an industrial territory' program.

Secondly, the projects' capacity to carry the whole territory toward a new vitality regime is questionable, as it seems to keep the territory in a trajectory which is the continuity of the current vitality regime, based on the industry. However, some elements show that this regime is no longer sustainable as it does not provide solutions on a number of issues (e.g. employment or social exclusion), as it is not based on a deep reshuffling of the power relationships between actors, or on the fundamental recombination of new resources. If signals of the production system bifurcation are noticeable, specifically through the development of a local and fully fledged hydrogen sector, it is unlikely that it will entail a drastic change in the territorial vitality regime. In that perspective, these actions contribute to the adaptation of the vitality regime, but not to territorial revitalization, which would be a transition from the current vitality regime to another.

Thirdly, the pandemic was a strong barrier against social mobilizations and alternatives and daring projects that were not well structured. The covid-19 crisis had less impact on already engaged long-term projects like the TTI which benefited from a sufficient level of institutionalization and funds.

Finally, our theoretical framework of revitalization is relevant as it allows a renewed analysis of the dynamics at work in a territory. Indeed, our matrix draws a new analysis of actions and policies set at the territorial level. More specifically, our approach was a way to revisit the basic component that is the combination of actors, their perceptions and the resources that they use in the framework of collective actions. For the case study of Belfort, our revitalization framework of analysis allows us to enlighten perceptions biases and unexplored possibilities and then propose some recommendations on ongoing actions.

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