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# Deflecting national ideologies: Exploring identity management trajectories of medium-sized cities

## Abstract

This paper focuses on the agency exhibited by municipal governments in modifying or resisting neoliberal policies, by investigating their efforts to manufacture favorable competitive urban identities. In particular, this paper emphasizes how national ideologies are (re)articulated at a local level by medium-sized cities placed within different national contexts and, thus, exposed to different orientations toward neoliberal principles. By performing historical urban research in Leicester (UK) and Reims (France), this study identifies different expressions of local agency through which cities present their identities on a global scenario, by responding to similar pressure of deindustrialization and urban competition from mid-1970s. If the discursive strategies of both cities reproduce signs of respective national ideologies, findings highlight two trajectories whereby cities negotiate and rework the main narratives underpinning those national ideologies. The concepts of active and passive deflection are offered in order to capture the role of local agency and conceptualize how national ideologies are appropriated locally by medium-sized cities in the attempt to engage with perceived increasing world-level forces.

Keywords: neoliberal city, municipal agency, city branding, national ideologies, scale, medium-sized cities

## Introduction

Globalization has contributed to molding new geographies of representation in which the “mise-en-scene” of places (Rabbiosi, 2018) occupies a central role. Large cities in particular have been increasingly envisioned as significant gateways for financial capital accumulation and the attraction of talented workers as well as elite cosmopolitan travelers and consumers (e.g., Paddison, 1993; Evans, 2003; Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005; Gold and Gold, 2008; Turok, 2009; Warnaby, Meadway and Bennison, 2010; Sihlongonyane, 2015). Doel and Hubbard’s (2002) seminal contribution initiated a systematic bridging between the research on “the strategic importance of key cities in the global economy” and the study of “the efficacy of city marketing and place promotion in boosting urban competitiveness” (p. 351). The trickling down of marketing philosophies into the realm of urban management is arguably one of the most notable manifestations of the relevance gained by neoliberal agendas in urban policy making. The ideological shift toward a free-market economy that has occurred since the 1970s has in fact favored the consolidation of a “neoliberal city” model (Hackworth, 2007) that appears to place great emphasis on strategic identity management within a landscape of augmented global urban competition (see Gordon, 1999). In this scenario, the creation of business-type organizational identities or modes of governance (Eshuis and Edwards, 2013) and the implementation of

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communication programs (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005) or staged experiences (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz, 2011) can be understood as materializations of the same neoliberal ethos in urban management.

If both the premises and the implications of such neoliberal ethos have not remained unquestioned within critical urban research, fewer studies have sought to explore the relationship between municipal governments and the nonlocal, albeit prevalent, forces or actors that seem to drive the neoliberal agenda. If it is difficult to deny that the actions of large municipalities (Massey, 2007) can contribute to the shaping of market-led development, the study of municipal governments' agency in modifying, resisting or contesting neoliberal policies warrants further investigation (Sutcliffe, 2011). This is the theoretical problem that this paper intends to unravel through the identification of medium-sized cities as an intellectual vantage point from which to consider the complex relational dynamics occurring among different spatial scales (Milne and Ateljevic, 2001). In particular, by shifting the focus from celebrated centers of globalization, such as "world" or "gateway" cities (Short et al., 2000), to smaller urban settlements, this paper seeks to explore how the local level rearticulates national ideologies to respond to global socioeconomic challenges by designing favorable competitive urban identities (Turok, 2009).

By examining the medium-sized cities of Reims, in North-East France, and Leicester, in the English Midlands, this study provides an opportunity to appreciate the way in which the shaping of competitive urban identities evolve in constant dialogue with national ideologies. The proposed comparative perspective intends to reveal similarities as well as differences in the ways in which these cities respond to "intensified world-level forces" (Amin, 2002, p. 385) by revealing the rich, sometimes ambiguous, nexus between the mobilization of entrepreneurial policies (i.e., the strategic management of urban reputation) and their respective national identities. Ultimately, this study suggests that smaller municipalities are far from being passive "victims" of neoliberalism (Sutcliffe, 2011). The analysis of archival documents, such as official council reports and local newspaper articles from both Reims and Leicester, has therefore been conducted to compare urban discourses and to understand how both municipalities actively contribute to "chart[ing] their own course" (Savitch and Kantor, 2003) and design place-specific neoliberal identities through the creative appropriation of national ideologies at a local level.

The paper is structured as follows. The literature review illustrates the contemporary debate on the neoliberal city and its marketized identity, discussing municipal agency as a crucial issue to further our multiscale understanding of how cities manufacture favorable "competitive identities" (Anholt, 2007). The following section presents an overview of the research context that presents some methodological reflections as well as an illustration of the national contexts of the United Kingdom and France. The findings highlight the trajectories along which the two cities negotiate and rework their national ideologies. The final part elaborates on the theoretical concepts of *active* and *passive deflection* and presents some concluding remarks on the implications of such findings.

## Literature review

This chapter consists of three parts. After an introductory section that reviews the main ideological and economic underpinnings of the neoliberal city and its manufactured identity, the second section identifies municipal agency as a theoretical problem that captures the multiscale of urban identity management. Scale and its challenges are the object of the third section, which contextualizes the positioning of the paper in the wider scholarship and presents its expected contribution.

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## The neoliberal city and its manufactured identity

Since Harvey's (1989) seminal contribution, the idea of "urban entrepreneurialism" has obtained increasing popularity among urban scholars interested in examining the preferential features of the "neoliberal city" (Hackworth, 2007) and the proactive market-oriented attitude of Western urban areas. Extending the main tenets of the "growth machine" metaphor (Molotch, 1976), the idea of urban entrepreneurialism emphasizes economic expansionism as the main political essence of localities, each of which is in competition with one another. "Urban competition" (e.g., Gordon, 1999) is thus an additional relevant corollary of the neoliberal city that is mobilized to justify the stretching of market relationships and to endorse city boosterism. Consistently, "urban competitiveness" (Lever, 1999; Van den Berg and Braun, 1999) is an expression of a city's ability to succeed in a scenario of augmented interurban antagonism. If functional assets, such as infrastructure and road networks, possess a pivotal role in predicting a city's success, scholars also agree that softer, reputational or "cognitive" (Bellini, 2004) assets might be equally important.

In this context, increasing concern about the reputation of urban areas and the rising popularity of marketing philosophy among Western city managers should be noted (e.g., Evans, 2003; Turok, 2009; Pike, 2013). Elaborating on Jessop's conceptualization of the entrepreneurial city, Wu (2003) underscores the concept of glurbanization that suggests that cities can act "like firms" in their attempts to engage in "place-based strategic promotion" (p. 1674). Regardless of the cacophony of the constructs used in the academic literature, such as "image", "identity", "brand" or "branding", an explicit focus on the professional strategic management of reputational capital can be acknowledged as a crucial pillar of the neoliberal city. Often treated as a priority for place managers while supporting urban regeneration (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990) and converting declining, formerly industrial areas into vibrant knowledge centers (e.g., Philo and Kearns, 1993), the generation of reputational capital at the local level epitomizes the neoliberal ethos characterizing contemporary urban governance. This has been related, for example, to toponymic commodification, specifically, the way in which metropolitan regions undertake certain naming processes and the implications of specific associations among the local population to craft different urban identities (Cardoso and Meijers, 2017; Meadway and Warnaby, 2014). If the variety of actors that can contribute to enhancing or hindering the reputation of the neoliberal city is remarkable (e.g., trade associations; resident communities; supranational bodies such as UNESCO) the responsibility of municipal governments still appears to be prominent and decisive. This is why the next section elaborates on the strategic role held by municipal governments in sustaining neoliberalized projects of identity management.

## Reassessing the role of municipal governments

The above section has clarified that the strategic management of urban identity is one of the most prominent forms of neoliberal policy put forward by entrepreneurial cities to strengthen their competitiveness. Scholars seem to agree that this entrepreneurial shift at a local level should be seen as an expression of the more general transition of the capitalist state (e.g., Harvey, 1989; Jessop, 1998) as well as a result of a progressive decentralization. The growing marketization of urban dynamics can in fact be understood as a response to the crisis in public sector planning in the 1970s (e.g., Paddison, 1993) and the decreasing faith in the traditional regulatory instruments of urban planning (Gold and Ward, 1994). Bringing forward this early interest in the nexus between the local and the supra-local level, Wu (2003) investigates the characteristics of an entrepreneurial city in a

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postsocialist context, distinguishing “the entrepreneurial city as a meaningful entity to pursue entrepreneurial advantages from the conventional city which is merely a location where entrepreneurial activities occur” (2003, p. 1675, emphasis added), possibly due to reforms created at a national level. The fact that Wu (2003) selects a Chinese city for his investigation might trigger some legitimate questions. Would municipal government necessarily adopt and perform a neoliberal agenda regardless of the specific context? Further, what is the influence of the particular circumstances in which a municipal government operates such as national ideology?

Brenner and Theodore’s (2002) seminal contribution is relevant in this respect as they stress the opportunity to consider the place-specificity of any neoliberal undertaking and recognize that neoliberal projects should be examined in their embeddedness within national, regional and local contexts. This would be equal to seeking to determine the extent of cities’ leeway for action when coping with the consequences of globalization (see Savitch and Kantor, 2003). During such an endeavor, Sutcliffe (2011) mobilizes Brenner and Theodore’s (2002) argument on the “actually existing neoliberalism” in an attempt to problematize the view that cities, particularly smaller ones, can be passive victims of a neoliberal agenda that is driven by a prevalence of “nonlocal forces” and actors (Hackworth, 2007, p. 38). Sutcliffe goes on to offer a conceptual proposal in which the actions of municipal governments can be placed along a continuum spanning from “complete acceptance” to “complete rejection” (p. 278) of the main pillars of neoliberalism, substantiating Hackworth’s (2007) claim that, today, “the geography of neoliberal implementation is much more complicated” (2007, p. 187) and less unilinear than often described in scholarly reports.

Even though we applaud the author’s attempt to problematize the issue of municipal agency by investigating a small-size Canadian city, we note that this perspective requires additional conceptual integration. In fact, the idea that a city can be “capable of developing an independent policy path” (Sutcliffe, 2011, p. 278, emphasis added) should be nuanced to give due recognition to the processes of negotiation and dialogue whereby neoliberal policies are enacted as multiscalar phenomena. In particular, the present study will seek to bring back into the discussion the meaningfulness of national ideologies, conscious of the national state’s enduring significance (see Savitch and Kantor, 2003). To do so, it is necessary to properly delve into the construct of scale unraveled in the next section. This is an appropriate move to give full meaning to Brenner and Theodore’s (2002) early perspective and to emphasize the relationalities inherent in the geography of urban identity management, specifically, the connections between the different scalar levels that unfold while municipal governments manufacture their competitive identities.

## **The challenges of scale**

Scale is a noteworthy geographical lens that can facilitate this paper’s investigation. Over the past fifteen years, we have witnessed an increasing willingness to question the conventional wisdom of scale as a “self-evident” and “predesignated platform” (Ward, 2008, p. 407) for understanding spatial processes (Brenner, 2001). It is possible to argue that the scalar perspectives adopted in the extant urban studies literature have largely tended to privilege one of the three main facets of scale identified by Howitt (1998), namely, size. For different reasons, the single-location setting offered by global metropolises or large cities, rather than those of small- or medium size, have fascinated urban scholars interested in their reputation management logics, as in the cases of Amsterdam (Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2007), Berlin (Colomb, 2012), Bogotá (Kavaratzis and Kalandides, 2015) and Johannesburg (Sihlongonyane, 2015). Furthermore, explorations of Chinese megacities (e.g., Berg and Björner, 2014) and the narrative of the “Olympic city” (Vanolo, 2008; Zhang and

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Zhao, 2009) have become typical genres.

Another widespread appreciation of scale captures the dimension of hierarchy (Howitt, 1998). Here, the simplification of geographical thinking suggested by business scholars has likely promoted a rigid perspective that views cities as geographical units are embedded within regions, which are, in turn, embedded within countries (e.g., Herstein, 2012). Even disciplines that are more commonly used to capture and render place complexity, such as tourist studies, have sometimes been tempted to reproduce the Russian-doll metaphor in which ‘spatial products’ are nested one into the other (e.g., Therkelsen and Gram, 2010). More recent is the attempt to conceptualize the practices of urban identity management more dynamically, in a way that captures the exchanges among various scalar levels (Giovanardi, 2015) and supports a processual, less structuralistic understanding of scale. These contributions have sought to appreciate scale as a process (Howitt, 1998) rather than stressing only their hierarchical positions based on simple relations of inclusion (e.g., city versus region or regions versus country). The recent contribution of Ntounis and Kanellopoulou (2017) in this journal provides another attempt to overcome the fixed hierarchical view of the mechanisms inherent in identity management by observing their complex scalar arrangements. In particular, the authors suggest that “place branding” can have a role in “facilitating scale jumping in the otherwise vertically aligned legal space”, thus considering the reputation management of urban areas in relation to their contexts.

Surprisingly, there is a relative paucity of studies explicitly examining the nexus between how cities craft strategic local identities (e.g., through city branding campaigns) and the national ideology of a particular country. While most business scholars have focused on the different combinations of attributes of various ‘spatial products’ (e.g., Caldwell and Freire, 2004) and the different managerial treatment required by each ‘product’, social science and communication scholars have suggested more holistic perspectives. For instance, discussing the “ideological underpinning of branding strategies” in the postsocialist context of Skopje, Cvitković and Kline advocate that “the city and nation brand form a permanent cobranding” (2017, p. 34) characterized by a two-way transfer of meanings. The authors attribute this theoretical gap to the illusory belief that branding is an “apolitical strategy” (ibidem) gradually replacing nationalism or politically connoted development discourses. Less concerned about the political aspects appear instead those studies that tend to develop multiscale accounts of place branding by exploring the functional and technocratic angle of multilevel governance (e.g., Syssner, 2010; Ye and Björner, 2018). Consistent with the studies described in this paragraph, this paper appreciates how the shaping of competitive urban identities emerges and evolves in constant dialogue with national ideologies, by examining the medium-sized cities of Reims and Leicester.

One of the assumptions underlying this study is that medium-sized cities provide a relevant empirical focus if we intend to further Sutcliffe’s (2011) argument and generate meaningful theory on the geographies of neoliberalism and the agency of municipal governments in deploying identity management practices. Sutcliffe (2011) himself proposes a thorough illustration of this debate on size, contending that larger municipal governments are often regarded as more capable of shaping independent policies; thus, they tend to be understood as potentially better placed to challenge neoliberal agendas. At the same time, however, large global cities are also seen as the producers of neoliberalism (e.g., Massey, 2007), with smaller municipalities being likely to react more passively. Here, we underscore the importance of learning from medium-sized cities “as emblematic of so-called ‘intermediate cities’” (Bolay and Kern, 2019). In fact, using the prism of medium-sized cities may prevent us from crafting an idealistic and caricatural scholarly narrative where a) smaller urban communities, steeped in local tradition but yet at the service of larger cities and the wider global economy (Véron, 2010), resist or simply surrender to overarching neoliberalist pressure ‘coming

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from outside'; b) large globalized urban centers reproduce and epitomize national governments' neoliberal agenda, or even set the directions for these national policies, given the tight connections between such centers and their respective national authorities in terms of cultural and geographical proximity. Medium-sized cities thus provide a fruitful context in which to scrutinize neoliberalism under alternative and underexplored urban circumstances.

Notably, other authors have refocused the scholarly gaze away from large world cities to ascertain how "second cit[ies]" address "distant or global concerns" (Hodos, 2011, p. 147). Manchester, for example, is a "regional capital" of approximately 500,000 people that emphasized its subalternity to the national capital city (London, in this case) by claiming to be "not quite global but superior to any other nonglobal (national) city around" (ibidem, p. 148). Considering two urban areas that are comparable to the Canadian city of Windsor in terms of populousness (Sutcliffe, 2011), the comparative perspective proposed here is intended to reveal both similarities and differences in the ways European medium-sized cities respond to "intensified world-level forces" (Amin, 2002, p. 385) by revealing the rich, sometimes ambiguous, nexus between the mobilization of neoliberal policies (i.e., urban identity management) and their respective national identities. Before delving into the urban discourses of Reims and Leicester, a discussion of the research approach and context is offered in the next section.

## Research approach and context

### Research design, data collection and analysis

The tension between interpretive undertakings and the quest for objectivity is identified by Lees (2004) as a crucial struggle within urban theory. In particular, Lees acknowledges researchers' "reticence" (p. 104) in discussing their methodological choices when shaping interpretations through the lens of discourse analysis. This section seeks to prevent this *lacuna* by clarifying the paper's research design and the rationale that guided the data analysis. Overall, this study aims at contributing to urban theory by adopting an inductive approach that is based on the investigation of two cities, each of which is examined within its respective national context. The research design thus includes elements of multiple-case study research to enable richer theory-building as well as cross-case research so that some specific aspects can be compared. The sampled cases feature two comparable urban areas: Reims, accounting for 200,000 inhabitants and located in Northeast France's agricultural region of Champagne-Ardenne, which, since 2016, has been part of the wider and new administrative region *Grand Est*; and Leicester, accounting for 300,000 inhabitants, located in the English industrial region of the East Midlands, and part of an important economic cluster called the three cities subarea (comprising Leicester, Nottingham and Derby). The two cities share several economical and geographical commonalities. Both are located 89 miles away from their respective capital cities (Paris and London) and serve as important economic hubs for their respective localities. Furthermore, both cities undertook pioneering urban regeneration schemes in the 1980s to tackle the problems posed by deindustrialization in the form of unemployment and urban deprivation.

The study's primary mode of generating the investigated material is based on archival research, which constitutes a privileged form of inquiry within historical (urban) research (e.g., Faire, 2016). This is an appropriate tool with which to scrutinize Reims's and Leicester's urban development discourses in the 1980s and the two following decades, and the approach is in line

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with previous investigations of how cities manufacture strategic representations of themselves (Jensen, 2007; Rabbiosi and Giovanardi, 2017; Barbehön et al. 2016) during disrupting historical shifts. Equipped with a clear set of “historical questions”, appropriate “historical sources” were then identified by the researchers, in line with common practices of historical and archival research (Craggs, 2016, p. 111). Seven official reports and fourteen newspaper articles were gathered (for a total of twenty-one). Council reports, available at the Record Office of Leicestershire Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR) and at the *Archives Municipales Communautaires de Reims* (AMCR) in Reims, have been important sources of data on urban regeneration and planning schemes since the 1980s. Images included in both official reports and newspaper articles were also considered (see the Figures enclosed in the article); however, no specific video footage was included in the analysis. The cuttings files of the daily regional newspaper for Leicester and the county of Leicestershire called ‘*The Leicester Mercury*’, which are available at the David Wilson Library of the University of Leicester (DWL), were analyzed. The daily regional newspaper for Reims and the Champagne-Ardenne region called ‘*l’Union*’ as well as an economic and regional one called ‘*Matot Braine*’ and an official monthly publication of the Council called ‘*Ville de Reims Information*’ (VRI), which are available at the *Bibliothèque Carnégie de Reims* (BCR), were also examined. These were important sources that provided a daily record of each city’s views on urban development, shedding light on the distinct local political outlooks and both cities’ urban representation construction since the 1980s. Particularly for the Leicester case, the daily local newspaper acted as a crucial ‘mirror of urban discourses’ that the authors examined while conscious of the publication’s tendency toward commercial spectacularism emphasized by the previous research (Machin and Mayr, 2007).

The data analysis focused on language as a means by which political actors construct their positions, work out their relationships with each other and validate specific neoliberal identity projects. First, the authors identified certain crucial themes through which the neoliberal ethos of municipal governments was expressed such as urban planning, retail and tourism. Then, critical discourse analysis was employed to unveil the overall work of identity construction implied by the practices of municipal governments and to ascertain the discursive relationship between municipalities and the national governments’ ideologies, in line with preceding attempts to explore multiscalar place-branding accounts (Giovanardi, 2015). This approach is intended to follow a Foucauldian “strand of critical human geography” (Lees, 2004, p. 103), with a view toward challenging the assumed pre-given identities of political actors that arguably characterize Marxist-tradition discourse analyses. Consistently, the examination of the national ideologies of the United Kingdom and France served as the primary context in which to appreciate the municipalities’ policy statements, and thus obtain knowledge on municipal agency, as the next chapter will show in detail.

The authors are conscious that any method-related choice is characterized by various limitations and (often tacit) assumptions that depend on researchers’ positionalities. Thus, aware of authoritative assertions about the need for more reflexive perspectives when accepting the task of writing history (Jenkins, 1991), the authors employed strategies to mitigate the conventional “substantive register” of historical accounts with a more “reflexive” attitude (Thomas, 1999, p. 152). Consistently, the involvement of a second author ensured trustworthiness in refining the preliminary “interpretation” (see White, 1973) proposed by the first author, who is a native of Reims and who performed the archival research and the preliminary thematic analysis. Thus, the final exposition of the study’s findings is the result of an extensive dialogue in which the authors sought to achieve two goals: first, to acknowledge and rebalance the insider positionality of the first author in relation to the context of the French case study; and, second, to produce a critical account of how municipal governments navigate national ideologies, with the ultimate aim of facilitating the creation of novel theory. As a preliminary step in this direction, the next subsection illustrates the

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national ideologies of the United Kingdom and France, examining the convergences and divergences in the two approaches to neoliberalism.

## Overview of national contexts: United Kingdom and France

The economic recession that followed the two oil shocks of 1973 and 1979, the influence of more assertive neoliberal ideologies and the increased pace of globalization are the most significant factors to contextualize urban regeneration avenues in both France and the United Kingdom. In fact, by the 1980s, both countries were experiencing the turmoil of this economic restructuring, and their governments were compelled to respond to a multitude of challenges posed by the intensification of globalization such as adapting to a service-based economy while tackling growing unemployment rates, urban poverty and decline. The 1980s marked a new era in both French and British urban policy initiatives: with the encouragement of central governments, local authorities attempted to redefine the role of cities within a context of deindustrialization. Nevertheless, of the two countries featured in the study, the United Kingdom is certainly the one that embraced a more commercial and mercantilist ethos.

The election of Thatcher in 1979 paved the way for a neoliberal revolution in Britain, where faith in the welfare state had begun to decline. The Conservatives hugely influenced the redirection of urban planning in Britain through a form of capitalist thinking whereby the private sector was defined as the key for urban regeneration while weakening postwar bureaucratic forms of socialism (Atkinson and Moon, 1994). The aim was to encourage local authorities to become more independent from central government to solve problems of deindustrialization, unemployment, low economic rates, and poverty. Initiatives such as the “Urban Development Corporation” and “the Enterprise Zones” were adopted under the Planning and Land Act of 1980 to boost industrial activity and to encourage the creation of new enterprises and thereby secure urban regeneration. The 1990s clearly marked a redirection in urban policy. The introduction of the City Challenge Programme created in 1991 was a turning point in the Conservatives’ urban policy as they at least partially reinstated some level of decisional autonomy for local authorities. However, the post-Thatcher years maintained a strong market orientation that has remained at the heart of the British urban agenda (ibidem).

In comparison with Britain’s individualist political culture, urban initiatives in France were informed by a social responsibility to financially support citizens through the provision of welfare services, thus symbolizing French Republican concepts of fraternity and solidarity. While some neoliberal initiatives (e.g., privatization) under Mitterrand’s leftist government in 1981 and Chirac’s right-wing government in 1995 were nevertheless enforced, French neoliberalism adopted a particular mode of functioning whereby the welfare state remained the fulcrum of Republican unity. In France, the well anchored “republican tradition emphasize[d] the active role of the state for the well-being of its citizens” (Dikeç, 2006, p. 76). Indeed, France “has followed the political rationality of the republican tradition, and not that of neoliberalism, which seeks to extend and disseminate market values” (ibid, p. 59). This political culture based on solidarity was clearly noticeable in 1980s urban policy initiatives such as the Social Development of Neighborhoods (*Développement social des quartiers*) that aimed to enhance people’s living conditions in the most deprived areas through investments in public infrastructure. Rather than feeding urban economic competition, as Britain did, the French state was mainly addressing social well-being to prevent the development of communitarian ghettos. By the 1990s, French urban policy reflected the idea of a

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growing “Republican nationalism” based on the idea of moving citizens toward a common identity that embraced the values of the Republic under a rubric of equality (ibid, p. 61).

This overview of the divergent orientations toward neoliberalism in the two countries serves as a foundation upon which to discuss the situated accounts of urban identity management in those countries. The next section seeks to gauge the role of municipal governments in deploying neoliberal identities by reporting relevant findings from Leicester and Reims.

## Findings: Multi-scalar accounts of urban identities

One might assume that the chances are scarce that a declining English industrial town would resist or negotiate the vibrant neoliberal ethos predicated by its national government in a post-Fordist scenario. However, the narrative presented in the first empirical section on Leicester discloses some unexpected findings.

### Leicester: establishing market-led multiculturalism

In line with the national ideology of market-led policies, the Leicester City Council began to be proactive in the 1970s by presenting the city as a place for business. The Leicester Promotion Campaign was launched in 1976 by the City Council in partnership with business place stakeholders such as the Chamber of Commerce, local banks, hoteliers, retailers, estate agents and property developers. The aim was to promote the expansion of Leicester’s existing industry and commerce to present the place as a relevant alternative for business relocation. Not too dissimilarly from other British cities, Leicester was thus advertised as an “ideal place to start up” (Leicester Mercury, 1982) in an effort emphasize urban assets such as low office rents. The central position of Leicester in the United Kingdom was also promoted (Leicester Mercury, 1976; 1977) with a view to create an awareness of Leicester as the ideal destination for factory accommodation.

This envisioned business identity is framed in continuation with the traditional entrepreneurial ethos of the city. Sir Mark Henig, former Mayor of Leicester, argued that employers would be choosing a place where “traditionally businesses began, thrived and grew” (Leicester Mercury, 1977). To further substantiate this narrative, shopping and retail were particularly emphasized by local authorities from the mid-1980s on, as illustrated by the ambitious celebration of Leicester as “the best shopping area in the Midlands” (Leicester Mercury, 1986). The opinion of Lewis’s general manager that “shopping has to become less of a chore, more an exciting experience” (Leicester Mercury, 1978) seems to provide an *ante litteram* illustration of contemporary experiential perspectives on urban consumption (e.g., Miles, 2010). A prominent asset within this view is the city center, whose expected vibrancy constitutes a recurring motif in much of British urban planning and promotion practice (e.g., Page and Hardyman, 1996). The promotion of an attractive city center was considered important to transform the public image of Leicester as well as to maintain the advantage of a market city, such as the indoor Haymarket Centre, which opened in 1973 and was long considered the largest of its kind in Europe. Retail was thus presented in a particular light in the efforts made to generate a tourist-friendly image (Leicester City Council, 1986; Leicester Mercury, 1986). This trend remained unaltered across the following decades with

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the city center becoming a “fly-wheel” for private investments and a key resource catering to the city users of the region (Atkinson, 1995a; 1995b). This was in line with the selection of competitor cities by hospitality professionals who identified Birmingham, Coventry, Nottingham and other cities of the region as the most obvious benchmark cities for Leicester (Leicester City Council, 1990).

In spite of this faith in restoring Leicester’s commercial spirit in line with the national policy discourse of market-led urban regeneration, doubts began to arise related to the actual city-product’s tourism potential. The General Manager of The Post House Hotel argued, for example, that “honestly, what Leicester needs is a U-change. [...] Sadly, nothing is outstanding here and the city’s image conjured nothing” (Leicester City Council, 1990, p. 51). That thinking was echoed by The Grand Hotel’s General Manager’s statement that “Clearly Leicester is not a tourist destination” (ibid., p. 53). Notably, while the city and county council officers were nevertheless still convinced that “Leicester could be sitting on a tourism goldmine” in the late 1980s, local actors were unable to determine what the city’s unique selling point might be (Leicester Mercury, 1987). In this respect, it is worth noting the rather marginal role assigned by local stakeholders and private entrepreneurs to the potential of cultural heritage resources to be any different from that of other cities in Great Britain and Europe (Garcia, 2004).

Meanwhile, Leicester increasingly begun to enrich and complement its well-established commerce-based reputation by introducing a novel theme. Right after mentioning the “great engines of the Victorian production” and the “market town” character, *The City Guide* published in 1995 maintains that “Enterprise culture has always thrived here and the flourishing of thousands of *Asian-owned* businesses in the last twenty-five years is but the latest example” (Leicester Promotions, 1995, p. 2, emphasis added). Indeed, the interest in the economic potential of ethnic minorities appeared to gradually promote the multicultural atmosphere that has progressively shaped the image of Leicester until today. Figure 1 documents the multicultural business cooperation between autochthon business stakeholders with the Asian Business Association in 1992.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

This philosophy is in line with Britain’s positive approach toward multiculturalism based on the principle of “race relations” (Schain, 2010, p. 211) that embraces the diverse cultural and religious backgrounds of ethnic minorities for the purpose of social integration. While Leicester’s strategy resonates with Britain’s approach toward multiculturalism, the city extends it through the creation of a *sui generis* model in which people are encouraged to go beyond mere tolerance by comprehending internal differences through the experience of sharing each other’s cultural lives. Even though this policy has warranted criticism (Machin and Mayr, 2007), Leicester has continued to build a reputation of being a tolerant and welcoming city through the promotion of various ethnic festivals and public religious celebrations (see Figure 2), such as the Asian festival of Diwali and the Caribbean festival, which play a crucial role in bringing together people from different local communities (Leicester City Council, 2002a). This commitment became more explicit with the release of the Race Equality Scheme, which recognized that

“We are proud that Leicester is both a multi-cultural and a multi-faith city. With the joy of being a truly diverse city comes the responsibility and challenge to make sure everyone is treated equally and can play a full part in the City life” (Leicester City

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Council, 2002b, p. 3).

Consistent with this aim was the city's branding campaign, "One passion, one Leicester", which was made public in 2008 and conveyed the vision of an open and plural society based on the constructive attempt to cooperate with ethnic minorities (Hassen and Giovanardi, 2018). The campaign's pay-off also reflects the principle of tailoring facilities and public services according to the linguistic and cultural needs of each community and local authorities' incentive to remain a model for multicultural cooperation. Overall, although the Leicester City Council did not completely converge toward the central government's orientation to favor a neoliberal economic discourse rather than one that would safeguard social cohesion, the creation of a business reputation remained vital to the urban regeneration of the city. The shaping of a multicultural and tolerant identity can thus be understood as an innovative strategy of adding nuances to the dominant urban development discourse suggested by nonlocal actors by promoting a strong entrepreneurial mode of urban integration.

[insert Figure 2 about here]

### Reims: Republicanism and beyond?

Drastically more resourceful than Leicester appears Reims, which is definitely exposed to a less mercantilist national context. And yet, the narrative of its identity management practices might equally lead to unexpected conclusions. Although there is no doubt that Reims's economic prosperity also relied on important manufacturing centers such as the wool and glass industries, most such industries completely collapsed in the 1960s. The policy of industrial decentralization at the end of the Fourth Republic and the development of the Common Market in 1957 exposed Reims to foreign competition at an early period (Dorel-Ferre, 2005). Visual indicators of its industrial past were less visible by the end of the 1960s as industrial woolen buildings were demolished in favor of new residential buildings. In comparison to Leicester, no strong emotional attachment to an industrial past was evident in policy discourses, and less emphasis on commerce and retail can be observed. The city rather leveraged its historic role as the coronation site of the kings of France and the wine of Champagne to convey the distinctiveness of its *genius loci*. In the early 1990s, a local newspaper noted that "its prestigious past as the 'coronation city', the undisputed popularity of its sparkling wine and its geographical position enable Reims to be an important destination" (Matot Braine, 1992).

Notably, Reims managed to fine-tune with perseverance a reputation based on *l'agro-alimentaire* (agri-food resources), which remains one of France's strongest national selling points. It is easy to appreciate the roots of local development discourse based on agri-food by recalling that during the coronation of both Charles IX in 1561 and Louis XIII in 1610, only wine from Reims was allowed to be served on the royal tables (Matot Braine, 1992b). In the second half of the seventeenth century, thanks to the Benedictine monks, and most particularly Dom Perignon, who improved the making process of the Champagne wine, the reputation of the "sparkling wines" of Champagne became further established (Matot Braine, 1992b). The creation of the *Comité Interprofessionnel du Vin de Champagne* in 1941 aimed to protect its identity by establishing a

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place brand that was firmly anchored in specific territorial boundaries (Charters and Spielmann, 2014). In this sense, the reputation forged by Reims largely rests on “inescapable spatial associations” (Pike, 2009, p. 619) that offer a very strong linkage between *land* (together with the goods it offers) and (commercial) *identity*. This industry has also played an active role in the local community, as exemplified by Jean Taittinger, a member of the famous Champagne producing family, who was mayor of the city from 1959 to 1977. As a consequence of these reverse “place-of-origin effects” (see Andehn, 2013), Reims has been progressively associated with the luxurious image shaped by the corporate brand discourses of major Champagne producers.

Another relevant component of Reims’ fashionable reputation (see Figure 3) lay in its cultural heritage artifacts, such as the iconic Cathedral. The office for tourism promotion gained impetus and reinforced its marketing efforts in 1994, when UNESCO nominated the Cathedral, the Palais du Tau and the Abbey of Saint-Rémi as World Heritage Sites (Matot Braine, 1992a; Ville de Reims Information, 1992). Together, these resources facilitated the job of local authorities in sustaining the city’s tourist image in both national and international markets. For example, in 1991, 1.5 million visitors walked through the Cathedral and 350,000 people visited the Champagne caves (Matot Braine, 1992a). Overall, the emphasis on the combination of cultural heritage and agri-food assets distinguishes the prevalent development discourse in Reims by reproducing and amplifying some world-recognized *leitmotifs* of the French national reputation. Not only the specific themes portrayed in promotional campaigns but also the entire rationale underpinning those themes reflect French national ideology based on values such as *égalité* (equality) and *laïcité* (French secularism).

[insert Figure 3 about here]

In contrast to the British perspective on multiculturalism, the French Republican model “recognizes the legitimacy of collective identities only outside the public sphere” as a means of integrating the population within the common identity of the Republic (Schain, 2010, p. 207). This is meant to be in line with the French ideal of *égalité*, which mainly seeks to facilitate social integration by alluding to common historical references and an exclusive hegemony of Republican values. As a result, *assimilation* into a common historical references is considered a fundamental principle in creating “in particular the acceptance of a common public space that is separated from religious faith and expression” (ibidem). For example, a local newspaper suggests that the “[p]eople of Reims love the historical heritage of their city and they demonstrate it” (l’Union, 1997a). The local discourse seems to portray a vision that is the natural evolution of a common past, and *les journées du patrimoine* (heritage days) in Reims are an illustration of the abiding attachment of the local population to their city that stresses the commonalities between them (l’Union, 1997b).

Another notable difference in comparison with Leicester is that Reims’s management of diversity appeared to limit the manifestations of divergent faiths and religious rites, which were excluded from the public sphere and thus from the main promotional strategies of the city. In fact, only festivities that represented the history of France were admitted and celebrated to prevent any obstacles to social integration. This can be observed, for example, in one of the main urban festivals that has been celebrated in the city since 1983: *les fêtes Johanniques* (Joan of Arc festival, see Figure 4). Joan of Arc, also called the Maid of Orléans, represents one of the symbols of Reims as well as the nation for her devotion to the country during the English domination of the Hundred Years’ War (Testard-Vaillant, 2014). A parade reenacting this period of history, which travels from the Abbey of Saint-Rémi to the Cathedral, is intended to engage local people in the values of the

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Republican model. As a local newspaper noted during the 2005 festivities, “the coronation city has reconnected with its history” (l’Union, 2005).

[insert Figure 4 about here]

In the early 2000s, the *Office du Tourisme* announced its decision to further emphasize the historical aspect of Reims and the coronation of the kings of France by improving the physical environment from the Cathedral to the Abbey of Saint-Rémi. They also put forward a new brand proposition for the city: ‘*Reims Carrefour spiritual européen*’ (Reims, spiritual European crossroad). Here, an apparent discursive deviation from the national French prescriptions for secularism should be noted. It is difficult to deny that the cultural character of Reims is partly built on a Christian heritage and that a number of religious monuments have long been promoted such as the Cathedral and the Abbey of Saint-Rémi. The obvious but unemphasized religious connotation of these artifacts, festivals and assets seem to point to the emergence of an ambivalent heritage discourse that appears to rework aspects of the dominant national discourse at the local level. Contemporary principles of *laïcité* could be understood as a means of overcoming the difficulties of assimilating religious diversity according to the terms of a common heritage of the Republic “that leaves little room for plural identities” (Killian, 2007, p. 305).

This section has suggested that both Leicester and Reims constructed urban identities that draw from the prevalent ideological orientations operating within their respective countries. However, the shaping of entrepreneurial identities performed by Leicester and Reims seem to go beyond their respective national ‘scripts’. This is the specific focus of the theoretical reflections offered in the next section, which reframes the above findings in terms of locally *situated* understandings of different urban neoliberal programs (Theodore and Brenner, 2002).

## Discussion

Both Leicester and Reims can be seen as entrepreneurial cities that have responded to perceived mounting world-forces by strategically manufacturing specific reputations. In doing so, both purposefully draw from their national ideologies in order to shape their neoliberal programs of image-making. However, even if both cities’ discursive strategies exhibit signs of their respective national ideologies, this exhibition does not necessarily unfold in a linear or predictable manner as an appreciation of urban scale as size or hierarchy (see Howitt, 1998) might suggest. In other words, decision-makers at the local level have not simply acknowledged and reproduced the main orientation to neoliberal values predicated on the national level but have rather also engaged in some kind of negotiation or reworking of it. In this respect, Reims and Leicester can be understood as similar cases in differing contexts (France and England). However, closer consideration of their differences reveals the existence of two slightly divergent theoretical constructs (see Table 1).

The Leicester case appears to come closer to that of Windsor (Sutcliffe, 2011), where the neoliberal program deployed by the municipal government is meant to tailor or modify national policies to the advantage of the local community. In the case of Leicester, the construction of an entrepreneurial welcoming identity that points to a multicultural future constitutes an example of *active deflection*. Here, on the one hand, the national neoliberal discourse is explicitly embraced

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and, to some extent, also heightened. The vibrant base of commerce and retail envisioned by local authorities is presented as an inclusive development platform that can accommodate any ethnic difference and subsume these under a collaborative, but deliberately market-oriented, urban agenda. Echoing traditional critical voices on urban marketing schemes (Philo and Kearns, 1993), this form of tolerance promoted by Leicester can be criticized as one that is subtly engineered and mainly conducive to better economic performance rather than to ethical and peaceful community living.

On the other hand, the neoliberal ethos of Britain finds some nuance in this local policy of commerce because of the powerful message of inclusive sociality that is encouraged by the “Leicester Model” and its corollary of staged multiculturalism. This urban discourse thus reworks, perhaps opportunistically, some of the main aspects of the UK’s mercantilist spirit to create an urban reputation that adds a new dimension to the national discourse. This trajectory implies, in fact, that a neoliberal program of local development can result in the widening of opportunities for migrants and the provision of public services that pave the way for a tolerant and inclusive urban environment. For this reason, the active deflection enacted by Leicester can be explained as a tendency to decompress the nationally scripted identity, based on commercial and economic prosperity, by emphasizing certain leitmotifs while lessening others. The character of the agency enacted by Leicester comes close to a form of *transformative* agency, which emphasizes the effort to work towards the establishment of novel territorial development patterns (see Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). Furthermore, unlike the Windsor case (Sutcliffe, 2011), the type of deflection facilitated by the expression of local agency in Leicester can, in turn, end up having some impact on the national political context, as illustrated by the increasing influence exerted by the Leicester Model among London government representatives regarding the importance of community engagement and the provision of public services for minorities (London Home Office, 2001; Bonney and Le Goff, 2007).

In the case of Reims, conversely, the local identity trajectory is characterized by a different and less visible form of deflection that we might term *passive deflection*. To a great extent, in fact, the identity platform that scripted the local development discourse in Reims appears to rest on the given solid values of French Republicanism and firmly grounded in understandings of spatiality such as *terroir*. Thus, it follows that much of Reims’s reputation management program appears to be in tune and harmony with the discursive orientations promoted by the national *Weltanschauung* by limiting the mercantilist attitude that characterizes the aforementioned Leicester Model. The focus on the Republican principles of *égalité*, *laïcité* and common history clearly prevails, epitomizing the national discourse. Additionally, the logic of *terroir* suggests a future that is firmly grounded in a glorious past of agricultural creativity that people should continue to replicate and to which they should collectively conform. In this sense, the local agency manifested in this type of deflection appears to be slightly more limited as it reproduces the softened version of neoliberal principles underpinning the national agenda. However, “fissures” (Warnaby et al., 2010) in this mode of representation also emerge that express the difficulties and contradictions in providing *une identité commune* (a common identity) to all citizens under the principle of social equality. The particularistic and situated roots of that common identity, specifically, a white and Christian Catholic one, have gradually revealed themselves at the urban level over the last few decades in a way that contradicts the public anti-religiousness entailed by French secularism. This less direct form of deflection can be interpreted as a symptom of a (still nondeliberate or unintended) local reaction against a national ideology that might have become too inflexible and rigid to keep up with certain perceived augmented global challenges. Rather than a pro-active negotiation based on orchestrated policy intentions, the deflection happening in Reims appears to convey the constraints inherent in reducing the local particularities via the adoption of collectivistic narratives based on

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principles of cultural assimilation. The agency exhibited by Reims comes close to a form of agency that is more *reproductive* than transformative, because it is mainly focused on the maintenance of existing structures (see Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020).

By emphasizing the role of municipal agency, these theoretical reflections revamp Brenner and Theodore's (2002) argument that the economic and sociospatial restructuring brought about by the neoliberal agenda should be understood as "multiscalar" and "multidirectional" (p. 366) rather than "unilinear" (ibidem). The choice of investigating comparable medium-sized cities has allowed the authors to operationalize Brenner and Theodore's (2002) critical constructionist perspective with a specific focus on the "mechanism of neoliberal localization" that the authors identify as "re-representing the city" (p. 372). In this process, municipal governments are neither simply passive recipients of neoliberal policies nor idealized agents of resistance in defense of traditional local values, but, rather, they actively contribute to the complex "amalgamations of inherited and emergent institutional arrangements" (ibidem) and spatial identities. Thus, the concepts of active and passive deflection can be viewed as illustrations of the "multiscalar character of contemporary neoliberalization tendencies" (p. 367) and an attempt to extend and refine Sutcliffe's (2011) discussion of the function played by local agency within contemporary symbolic geographies of neoliberalism.

In appreciating urban neoliberalization as both place-specific and connected to other spatial levels (i.e., national ideologies), this paper intends to give nuance to the rigid roles often ascribed by the extant literature to political actors involved in the creation of urban identities such as municipal governments. This observed role-rigidity (see Goulart-Sztejnberg and Giovanardi, 2017) can in fact encourage a-priori and superficial assessments about whether an actor should necessarily embody a pro- or an anti-neoliberal stance. Superficial narratives can emerge from this perspective such as the naïve view of municipal governments as proud champions of authenticity and guardians of *genius loci* in opposition to external market-oriented tendencies that are straightforwardly imposed by supra-local institutions. Additional implications of the proposed approach are summarized in the concluding remarks.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that smaller municipalities are far from being passive "victims" of neoliberalism (Sutcliffe, 2011), instead being active designers of place-specific neoliberal identities that are shaped through a creative appropriation of national ideologies. This task has been performed by investigating the identity management strategies put forward by the medium-sized cities of Leicester and Reims in response to the pressure posed by globalization in Europe from the mid-1970s until the 2000s. The longitudinal perspective facilitated by historical research has allowed us to explore the trajectories whereby medium-sized cities (re)articulate their discursive strategies by appropriating the repertoires of their respective national ideologies with a varying degree of purposefulness and creativity. Previous studies had emphasized the "limits on the council's ability to exercise local agency within a neoliberal context" (Sutcliffe, 2011, p. 287), noting the prominence of nonlocal actors or forces in dictating neoliberal agendas. Integrating this perspective, the notions of active and passive deflection constitute a useful lens through which to better capture the entanglements between identity management at the municipal level and the role of national ideologies (see Cvitković and Kline, 2017), thus giving us an opportunity to interpret the policy decisions of the "neoliberal city" (Hackworth, 2007) more holistically and critically.

This approach also provides a means of rebalancing the selective attention attributed to certain

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forms of “global-urban imagination” (Madden, 2012, p. 772) whereby only a few iconic world-cities are presumed to reproduce the “distinctiveness of the world” and its uneven entanglements (ibid., p. 775). Ultimately, the deflections illustrated in this paper can be seen as discursive manifestations of the “relationality of globalization” (Quinn, 2007, p. 459) that is articulated in the form of a “multitude of glocalities” (Roudometof, 2016, p. 398) in which the global and the local intermingle in a mechanism of “refraction” (ibidem). The prism of medium-sized cities thus provides an alternative empirical entry point through which to explore these relationalities by recognizing the role of local agency in the negotiations happening at different scalar levels. This empirical lens reminds researchers that a multitude of simultaneous, context-based spatial politics are actually deployed by third-tier cities in which we may witness a strategic (re)use of national ideologies. Maintaining the usual empirical focus on global metropolises or national capitals will lead to neglect of the existence of diverse modes of confronting the pressure of international urban competition that may imply less spectacular but more mundane and widespread forms of place commodification. In this context, in addition to restating that a *genius loci* (e.g., spirit of commerce in Leicester, agricultural resources in Reims) is key to global recognition in an allegedly homogenizing context of globalization, the symbolic heritages of national states go beyond the usual functional role (specifically, that of regulatory power) ascribed to them by recent relational accounts on scale (see Amin, 2002). In fact, national ideologies remain a prominent source of reputational capital for cities as they can be appropriated for crafting locally embedded neoliberal identities (Theodore and Brenner, 2002).

The focus on how smaller cities exercise local agency under different circumstances could inspire other scholars to reassess the challenges encountered by local authorities in repositioning cities that lack the status and resources of mega- or capital-cities such as the “urban stars” usually featured in the literature (e.g., Sihlongonyane, 2015; Evans, 2003; Berg and Björner, 2014). Obviously, the present paper has several limitations that future studies might want to address. For example, the focus on the official programs of reputation management (embodied by the official reports analyzed) and the traditional urban stakeholders behind those reports may have marginalized alternative manifestations of local agency and, probably, alternative or competing understandings of scalarity. A deeper analysis, possibly based on interviews or ethnographic methods, of the views of disadvantaged groups under the prevalent ideological conditions would have a lot to offer to the scholarly accounts of globalization during a time when the collision between mounting sovereignist and advocates of the “right to the city” seem to be unavoidable.

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Figure 1



Figure 2

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Figure 3



Figure 4

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