

The Creative Economy in Local Territories: Alibaba and Amazon in Territorial Competition, but Ideological Synergy to Bypass Democratic Governance

Bruno Lefèvre
Sorbonne Paris Nord University

Louis Wiart
Free University of Brussels (ULB)

Alibaba and Amazon now dominate global e-commerce. Although their strategies partly differ, they are both territorializing their activities around sorting hubs and warehouses. This often creates tensions in local territories. In our research exploring the effects of these strategies, conducted in France and Belgium from 2019 to 2022, we hypothesized that the impacts of the digital industrialization of local and global trade go beyond sales and logistics; the concentration of these markets in the hands of two ultra-dominant actors reflects unequal power relations that are reconfiguring governance, public decision-making, and democracy, notably by obscuring the major challenges that territories face.

Keywords: digital and creative industries, digital platforms, political economy, local development, economic ecosystem

INTRODUCTION

Alibaba and Amazon now dominate the global e-commerce market. While the former developed from Asia, and the latter from the United States, in recent years, these transnational corporations have increased their investment in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Although their strategies partly differ, both localize their operations—including information technology (IT) and logistics—around hubs, sorting centers, and warehouse networks. The development of a site of one of these industrial actors often creates tensions in local territories. On the one hand, most institutions and public decision-makers are inclined to support these economic dynamics, which are seen as an asset for the socio-economic development and for attracting investors and economic actors. On the other hand, some civil society groups and elected officials refuse to support development strategies whose socioeconomic impact they consider disastrous in environmental, cultural, and social terms. They support the idea of the commons, and are advocating alternative models of local development. How do such different paradigms coexist in local territories, and are stakeholders able to come together to develop a balanced and dynamic form of governance?

This article presents research findings conducted in France and Belgium from 2019 to 2022. Our research question centered on characterizing how the strategies of these transnational actors affect or reinforce the tensions between different models of regional development, in particular by politicizing the

relationships between local issues and global dynamics. We collected more than 300 press articles in order to analyze the discourse of local stakeholders affected by projects involving the territorialization—by which we mean the implementation of a presence in local territories—of Amazon or Alibaba operations. The corpus was extracted from the EuroPress database, based on a search in the local and national press (France and Belgium) for the keywords “Amazon,” “Alibaba,” and “logistics.” Based on this corpus, we conducted a sociosemiotic analysis of the discourse of local and non-local actors on e-commerce industrial site projects. We then conducted interviews with around thirty of these actors to understand their relationships to the reconfigurations and interdependencies taking shape between local territories, states, continents, and the world.

We show that, beyond their competitive e-commerce and logistics activities and local territorialization, both Amazon and Alibaba seek more broadly to bring about a profound reconfiguration of international trade rules. This project is based on economic and customs corridors (including the “New Silk Roads”), but also on contracts with institutions (such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and World Trade Organization (WTO), states, and governments (for example with Alibaba’s eWTP, discussed below). Since these contracts are covered by trade secrecy, their contents elude open public debate. This excludes from any democratic process a set of decisions that have a considerable socioeconomic impact, including on evolution of the law and forms of work, a unique development model centered on the digital and creative economy, public-private partnerships, taxation, and environmental impacts. Here, the paradigm of a creative, digital-based economy and the concepts of “ecosystem,” “win-win,” and “commercial appeal” appears central. These value indicators correspond to those that define a creative economy, viewed as a dominant contemporary form of capitalism based on creating market value through digitizing all information transfer. Digital platforms play a central role in this economy, not only in technical terms, but above all in political and socioeconomic terms. The implementation of these ideas in local areas raises major questions about democracy and the way in which public decisions are made.

We therefore hypothesized that the impact of the digital industrialization of local and global trade goes beyond sales and logistics. The concentration of these markets in the hands of two ultra-dominant actors reflects unequal power relations, in both material and symbolic terms, that are reconfiguring modalities of governance, public decision-making, and management of democracy, notably by obscuring the major challenges that territories face at both the local and global level: the environment, growing socioeconomic inequality, and commoditization of data.

To demonstrate the political dimensions of what might appear to be simple economic decisions at first sight, we provide an overview of the historical and strategic territorialization of Alibaba in Liège in Belgium, and Amazon in eastern France. We focus on three main issues related to these events: what territories represent for local stakeholders, how economic local development is debated and managed by public authorities, and how civil society groups act to oppose projects in a bid to shift the balance of power and create the conditions for collaborative governance of the territory, which they consider to be a common good.

THE LOCAL ANCHORING OF GLOBAL E-COMMERCE INDUSTRIES

Along with other transnational e-commerce companies with online sales platforms, Amazon and Alibaba compete with one another to sell both goods and logistics services. Beyond this competition and its geopolitical issues, however, the two companies are pursuing specific strategies in a bid to alter the legal and technical rules of international trade to their advantage. In this sense, they are also “cooperating.” From their perspective, national and international legislation and rulings, which are numerous and specific because they result from local democratic decision-making processes and negotiations, are obstacles to harmonizing the way goods are traded globally and optimizing their financial profits and control over these markets. Based on case studies of Alibaba and Amazon site development projects, we contextualize the decisions and processes they are related to at several different levels.

Alibaba at Liège Airport: A Local Anchor of a Global Strategy for Reconfiguring e-Commerce

Alibaba was founded in 1999, and initially (over the period 2000-2010) grew by developing a set of digital services that now dominate the Chinese market. Online sales platforms are only one element of a diversified and integrated set of tools and services Alibaba offers businesses, which include strategic and marketing expertise, cloud and data management, financial and logistics services, applications and communication tools, and artificial intelligence (AI) (Tsai & Yuan, 2016; Zeng, 2018; Paquiénéguy & He, 2018). In 2010, the company launched the AliExpress platform for international markets, and since then has been pursuing a global expansion strategy to offer an “economic ecosystem for SMEs,” implemented in different ways depending on the countries and economies concerned (Lefèvre & Wiat, 2020). According to Sébastien Badault, managing director of Alibaba France, the group seeks to “redraw the boundaries of international trade,” “facilitate trade around the world and provide merchants, businesses, consumers and our partners with the added value and relevant services they need to succeed, compete, and enjoy a better shopping experience. Our internationalization and expansion strategy is built on this philosophy, as we prioritize the needs of our customers in every market” (Badault, 2019). This official discourse sets out the ideological dimension of the group’s industrial project, which consists of harmonizing the rules of global trade based on its own digital devices, and its focus on preserving the specificities of the different markets in which it operates. One of the key tools developed by the company to support these ambitions is its electronic World Trade Platform, or eWTP.¹

With the eWTP, which was developed in 2016 by Alibaba founder Jack Ma, the company offers governments a deal: it will provide them with digital operations and strategic support in exchange for their help in reshaping international trade, notably through the creation of a global network of digital hubs. The eWTP is formally a bipartite contract setting out the terms of an agreement in principle between Alibaba and the government concerned. As of 2024, Alibaba has established ten eWTP hubs in collaboration with local authorities: in Malaysia, Thailand, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Belgium, and Mexico, and in Hangzhou, Yiwu, Hainan, and Hong Kong in China. By “facilitating public-private dialogue,” the eWTP represents, according to the group’s official communications, an “incubator for new business rules, more integrated and inclusive policies, and an enabling business environment for e-commerce development, trade and the digital economy” (Alibaba Group, 2019). Divided into four “T”s (“trade,” “tourism,” “training,” and “technology”), the eWTP goes beyond the strict e-commerce market and is designed to revolutionize the conditions for the circulation of goods, people, knowledge and, more broadly, digital data.

Through these bilateral agreements, and by relying on the dazzling speed of its development in China, Alibaba offers to make its services and digital tools available, along with its expertise in fields as varied as logistics, economic cooperation, marketing, access to financial products, and management of customs procedures. In return, the signatory state agrees to “facilitate” the implementation of the project within its territory to harmonize the conditions of international e-commerce, the principle of which is promoted by the WTO, B20, and G20.

The decision, in 2018, to allow Alibaba, via its logistics subsidiary Cnianiao, to build a giant logistics hub at Liège Airport was part of the eWTP agreement signed between the group and the Federal Government of Belgium. While local business networks² had helped influence Alibaba in choosing Liège Airport as a location in Western Europe, the decision regarding the local territorialization of Alibaba in Liège-Wallonia was thus officially made at the national level.

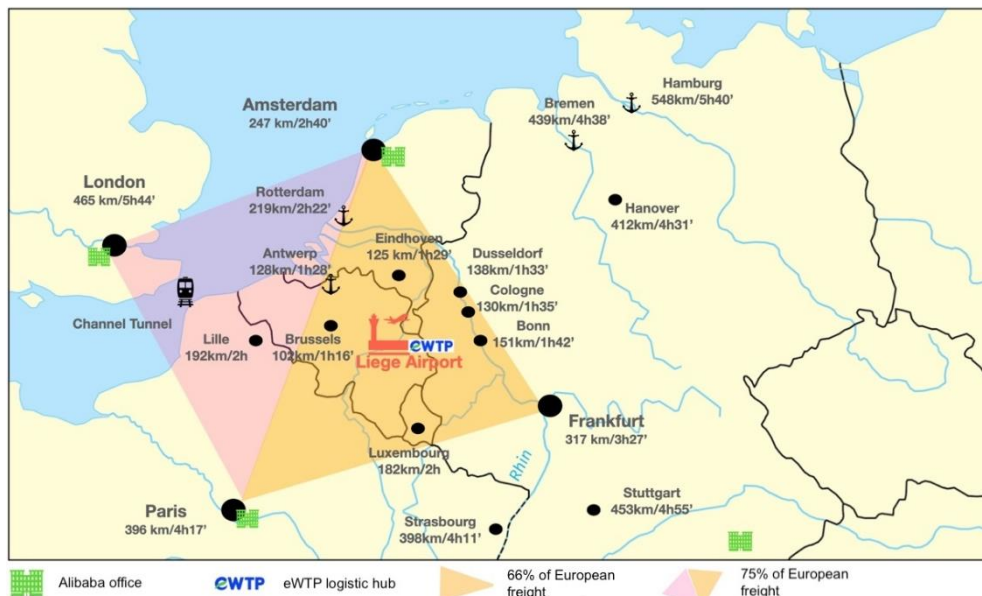
The eWTP agreement between Belgium and Alibaba remains secret under private and commercial law, even to most of the federal and regional public representatives we interviewed. It seems clear, however, that Alibaba’s decision to choose Liège Airport as its first Western European location was motivated not only by the central geographic position of the site (see Figure 1) and the fact that it operates 24/7, but also by the eWTP agreement. For Alibaba, Belgium represents a strategic operational logistics location and a partner for strengthening its influence over European countries. For it is at the European level that it seeks to adapt legislation and agreements about customs procedures and working conditions. The company is pursuing implementation of its strategy in Western Europe with warehouse projects in France (in the south-west and north of the country), along with partnerships with distributors (the AliPay platform has been

introduced in Parisian department stores with a high proportion of Asian customers) and distribution groups (including Auchan, which is expanding in Asia).

Considering the different levels at which decisions are made (the local, regional, national, and international) thus helps us to see that the specific example of the territorialization of Alibaba at Liège Airport is not only a response to logistic issues, but is also connected to a profound global change in the international regulation of flows of goods and people. It should be noted that the eWTP also involves promoting Belgium to Asian tourists, via Alibaba’s platforms and services.

FIGURE 1

LIÈGE AIRPORT, IN THE HEART OF THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE OF EUROPEAN FREIGHT



Amazon in Eastern-France: A Web of Infrastructure for the Domination of Territorial Flows of Goods

From the outset, Amazon has focused on long-term growth at the expense of short-term profitability, continuously investing in its distribution capacity to pre-empt the e-commerce market and establish itself as a leader. It began in 1994 as an online book retailer, but gradually began to sell electronic products and all kinds of manufactured goods via partnerships, on its platforms. In 2016, Amazon launched and promoted Amazon Web Services, which provides companies and governments with digital cloud services, including data storage. The same year, Amazon collaborated with Google, Facebook, IBM, and Microsoft on the “Partnership on Artificial Intelligence,” to “provide guidance on emerging issues related to the impact of AI on society” (Lyons, 2018, p.8) and “act as a trusted and expert point of contact” on AI for societies and their leaders (Lyons, 2018, p.5). In 2021, Amazon acquired the MGM film studio among many company takeovers, notably in the AI sector. Unlike Alibaba, Amazon has developed an extensive network of warehouses and logistic centers to reduce the shipping time between products and consumers.

In France, since it opened its first warehouse in 2000 in Boigny-sur-Bionne, Amazon has developed an ever-tighter logistics network to support the accelerated development of its online sales: as of 2024, it has a network of twenty-five logistics sites in the country, including eight distribution centers, and aims to build ten new sites each year, including a number of fulfilment centers, in order to get the widest possible range of products to customers more quickly. Amazon claims that through its logistics sites it has invested over €20 billion in France since 2010, and created a significant number of industrial jobs in the country, with around 20,000 people employed on permanent contracts as of 2024. More broadly, Amazon has developed a whole ecosystem of logistics and e-commerce companies (for example, haulage, delivery companies,

business services, and construction) representing tens of thousands of indirect jobs. Job creation is an argument with substantial influence on the conditions for hosting Amazon warehouses in a territory. A study of the territorialization of Amazon's logistics warehouses shows both the growth in the number of sites, the diversification of the types of warehouses, and their concentration near dense consumer areas, particularly cities (Blanquart et al., 2019). Finally, Amazon Marketplace provides commercial opportunities for around 10,000 small and medium French companies.

Amazon's territorialization strategy differs from Alibaba's. Alibaba relies on an international goods transportation network to strengthen the harmonization of trade-related procedures and legislation (this is the purpose of its eWTP) and to collect and manage numerous types of data related to these B2B and B2C exchanges (this is the purpose of its web services and financial products). It does not directly oversee the shipping of goods that are sold via its intermediation platforms to the customer, but focuses on their routing to distribution centres and their tracking, throughout their journey from the production site. On the other hand, Amazon has centered its objectives on managing and continuously optimizing the distribution of goods to customers, particularly in the "last mile." In a more recent second phase, the company has developed its range of web services in order to store and manage large volumes of data, via partnerships with companies or governments. Finally, Amazon produces multimedia content for its Amazon Prime streaming service. Amazon can thus be seen as a network operator and multimedia content manager, rather than a global operator for optimizing the exchange of goods and people between customers and small and medium enterprises.

While the two companies are pursuing different strategies, they have a shared desire to dominate the markets for the movement of goods and people, and for the management of big data, by winning power struggles with other companies and states, to offer services designed to harmonize and optimize the "availability" of physical and digital exchanges at the global level. Beyond the extreme industrial concentration that they imply, these objectives also have numerous political and socioeconomic implications, since both Amazon and Alibaba see regulations and legislative frameworks—which are the product of democratic processes and fall under the sovereignty of states and governments—as obstacles to, or curbs on, their project of harmonization, cost reduction, and administrative simplification. Both companies are localizing their activities via agreements with public institutions that are specific in terms of their contents and form, but always covered by trade secrecy and therefore not open to public debate.

LOCAL GEOPOLITICS BASED ON POWER STRUGGLES AND CONFLICTS OVER THE GOVERNANCE OF TERRITORIES

We have set out the strategic and action frameworks of these two dominant actors in the digital platform industry. In the context of these industrial strategies, the territory in which the company is based is seen as a resource, an object from which power relations are deployed for its domination or development. Physically, in legal terms, as a production site as well as a link in a bigger chain, the territory is the space in which power relations with varying degrees of equality are played out in order to secure for the company the optimal conditions for conducting its operations and implementing its own strategy. Observing the territory from this perspective comes under the approach of "local geopolitics" (Subra, 2016), which considers how at different levels, and in a dynamic manner over time, actors with partly overlapping and partly divergent interests use their strength and resources to dominate a territory.

These resources—from the financial and legal to the political, economic, and symbolic—are very varied. Here we propose to characterize the local geopolitical conflicts linked to the territorialization of the industrial actors Amazon and Alibaba in relation to three major dimensions: the paradigm of the "creative economy" as a framework for thinking about the development of territories, the socioeconomic impact of the anchoring of these international actors in territories, and the forms of opposition from civil society that their establishment triggers.

Local Territories as Resources for Global Industrial Projects

Hosting an industrial actor means that the territory becomes a resource, giving it a value in a competitive territorial market. The project of capitalism lies fundamentally in the privatization of goods and services, aiming to give them a market value (Rosa, 2020). From this point of view and in the context in question, the territory is developed, through secret public-private agreements, for the reception of activities, which we will describe as logistics- and technology-based, within the framework of the industrial strategies of actors whose main characteristics we have highlighted. From this perspective, the territory constitutes a resource intended for the market and financial leveraging of the activities of the industrial group concerned.

However, the territory in question cannot be considered exclusively as a market resource, for this same territory is also a lived space, by local inhabitants, skilled tradespeople, and entrepreneurs, a space perceived by these same local actors and their representatives as well as by more remote actors, and a space conceived, thought out, and imagined by planners, industrialists, and elected officials (Lefebvre, 1974/1992). Understanding the geopolitics of this territory, i.e., characterizing the power relations that shape the relationships between the actors concerned by this territory, therefore requires us to oppose the view of the territory-as-sales-resource conceived by the industrial companies with the diverse range of representations linked to this territory. These representations evolve and concern different spatial levels, from the local to the global.

Elected officials—the public representatives responsible for managing this territory—are therefore called upon, in theory, to arbitrate between these different representations and the issues associated with them, since they are responsible for deciding on the matter. To do this, i.e., to determine the modalities by which this decision will be made, there appear to be two key aspects: first, the elected official's frame of thought, their paradigm, their way of conceiving the world and envisaging their action on the world; and second, the mechanisms, or bodies within which these different representations are debated, that they implement and lead in order to reach a decision.

In the rhetoric reported in the media or expressed by our interviewees, the same arguments in favor of welcoming industrial companies are used to justify the choices made by these public decision-makers: the promise of job creation, which requires few qualifications, and the “positive dynamic” that will energize an employment area and give the territory “commercial appeal,” enabling it to “stand out” and give it a “modern image.” The digital-based nature of Amazon and Alibaba's operations constitutes an asset, a source of modernity seen as making up for the sense of being “left behind” experienced or felt by these local actors.

All of these arguments are consistent with the ideological framework proposed by the concept of the “creative economy” since the 1990s, and promoted in various forms by international institutions (Moeglin, 2019). Without going into detail here regarding the history of this concept, and its implications for local economic development strategies, we will highlight that it reinforces the centrality of employment, including precarious and low-skilled employment, in various economic sectors that draw on the territory to “enrich” the value of their activities and products (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2017). Public decision-makers argue, for example, that the presence of these industrial companies constitutes a “win-win” and that this is a rare opportunity that cannot be missed, especially since other neighbouring territories would gladly seize it. Some elected representatives, however, are attempting to challenge this development model by asking questions about employment guarantees, the indirect costs for the community, and the environmental impact. The debates held among bodies such as the councils of elected representatives of *communes* [municipalities] and *communautés de communes* [federations of local municipalities] rarely allow for in-depth discussion of the impact of this development paradigm, at either the local level or the national or international level.

This brings us to the second point in the characterization of decision-making: the bodies of debate, conflict management, or expression of heterogeneous representations of the territory identified by our research. This question relates to democracy, or rather the processes that tend to guarantee democratic forms of decision-making. As noted immediately above, the members of councils of elected representatives tend to agree with one another: “As the chair is generally the mayor of the largest *commune*, it is difficult for mayors of small communities to express themselves and to have any influence,” explained one elected

representative from the west of France. “There is also an unspoken rule that if I vote for your proposal, you will vote for mine later.” Suppose some elected representatives have questions about whether a project is appropriate, or consider it harmful to the development of the territory. In that case, there is little room for them to debate within these institutions. A second type of body is sometimes mobilized in the case of projects of general interest and with large budgets: the nationally regulated procedures of “public debate” and “public enquiry.” In principle, anyone can take part in these meetings, and in theory express their opinion, ask the project representative questions, highlight breaches of legal constraints, and influence the project. But here again, these public meetings consist mainly of an official presentation of the project and promoting it based on its state of progress and opportunities. Since projects are always developed in secret (between a handful of elected representatives and company representatives), or even above the local level (the eWTP agreement, for example, was signed at the level of the Belgian federal government), the project’s detractors have limited technical information on which to base their arguments.

Local territorial planning is therefore based on a more or less conscious ideological consensus according to which an innovative industrial group, whatever the nature of its operations and their socioenvironmental impact, constitutes an opportunity for economic development and, above all, for making the territory stand out. In addition to job creation, the creative societal paradigm (Moeglin, 2019) that dominates the thinking of public decision-makers therefore sees the establishment of Alibaba or Amazon as an asset in terms of innovation and technological competition, an opportunity to attract other socioeconomic actors, and to stand out from other regions. Implicitly, not welcoming these actors would make the territory weaker than other territories that choose to do so. This local development paradigm thus tends to “naturalize” the territorialization of these industrial actors, without any fundamental debate about the conditions and consequences of such decisions.

The Territory: Not Only the Site, but Also the Subject of Conflicts

The second dimension concerns the status of the territory, and, therefore the terms of its management. This status is legal and is based on the representation that the actors involved have of the territory. The law provides for three main types of status for a territory, based on two criteria: its rivalry (whether consumption of the good limits its access to others) and its excludability (whether its use is technically or financially limited): private, public, or common (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
THE STATUS OF GOODS BASED ON THEIR RIVALRY AND EXCLUDABILITY

	Rival good	Non-rival good
Excludable good	Private good	Club good
Non-excludable good	Common good	Public good

The objective of industrial actors such as Amazon or Alibaba, with the help of public decision-makers, is to have exclusive rights over the territory that they see as a resource for creating value. For these actors, a territory is a private good, rival and excludable, and the negotiations they engage in with public decision-makers focus on the conditions of access (price) and management (services and regulatory constraints) of the territory that will be granted to them. In some cases, such as the Liège Airport site, this coveted territory is privately owned, facilitating negotiations. In other cases, the land is public property, managed by local authorities that have the right, under certain conditions, to transfer it to a private actor and thus make it private property. This case appears more problematic, since private use of the territory effectively excludes any other use of it, and limits civil society’s ability to control how it is exploited.

For these reasons, the opponents of the installation projects we have studied attempt to impose a third type of status, that of common property. These opponents challenge both the exclusive privatization of the territory concerned, and the way it is managed by public decision-makers, who are prepared to hand over to private actors spaces that they would no longer be able to use. While this demand to give the territory

the status of a common good is rarely explicit or conscious among opposition groups, all of their arguments and actions are consistent with this idea. By refusing to consider the territory exclusively as a market resource, privatized due to the domination of the capitalist economic model, these opponents seek to generate a debate, which includes and makes public decision-makers responsible, about the territory's status best suited to enjoyment by all local actors.

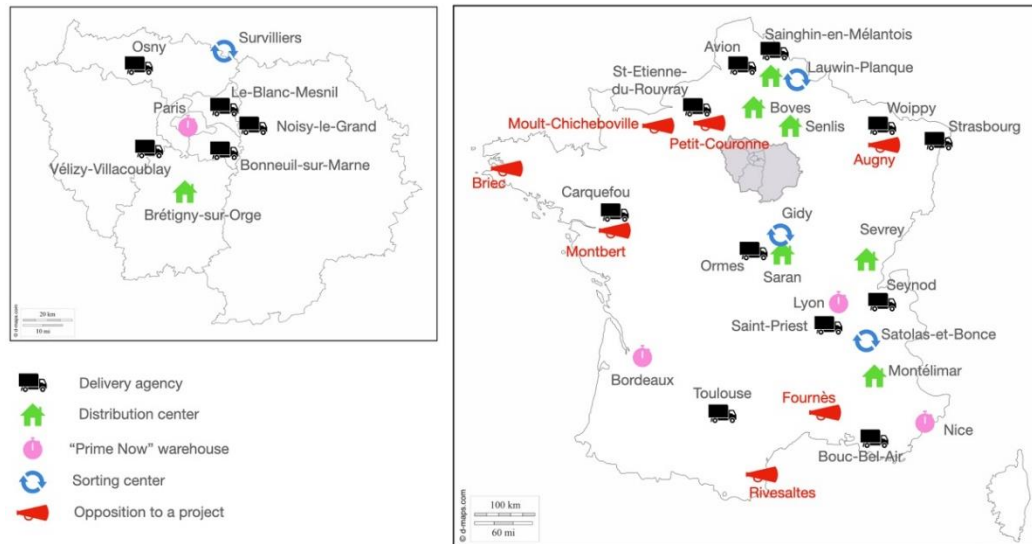
The territory in which these industrial projects are located is therefore the object of heterogeneous strategies implemented by the actors involved in a bid to ensure their domination. A "local geopolitics" (Subra, 2016) can therefore be observed, based on power relations and conflict management. Beyond the arguments and claims of each party, these conflicts concern the legal status of the territory, and in particular the possibility that these industrial actors may benefit from it exclusively, at the expense of any other activity, and any form of democratic control. Instead of the logic of the contract, these opponents are trying to impose a logic of consultation, public debate, and collective management of an asset they consider to be common. Their actions aim to develop individual and collective attachments to the territory, resulting in its heritagization and thus reinforcing its common status.

Civil Society Initiatives to Create New Public Spaces

Meanwhile, the acceleration in the construction of logistics sites has been accompanied by an increase in opposition in the areas where they are located. In several municipalities, including Chartres, Mondeville, and Tremblay-en-France, the majority in power has refused to allow Amazon warehouses to be built, while in other regions it has taken protest groups set up by citizens to at least challenge the appropriateness of these projects³ (see Figure 2). Most of the Amazon or Alibaba logistics site projects that we have studied have led to the formation of opposition groups. These collectives, named "Stop Amazon" or "Stop Alibaba," "Against Amazon and its World," or "Watching Alibaba" (see Figure 3), form as soon as the project is made public via the local press. Local elected officials noted that developers delay this step as much as possible: this is a strategy designed to limit the impact of these opposition movements, since the later the project is made public, the less likely opponents will be able to mobilize effectively. Information meetings are sometimes presented as consultation meetings to officially present the project. In addition to company representatives and local elected representatives, experts or consultants lead these meetings, the main purpose of which is to ensure the acceptability of the project and to promote its effects, such as job creation, increasing the appeal of the territory, and low public cost about the expected local benefits. However, many participants in these meetings feel that they are not listened to, especially when they counter these advantages with their concerns about the quality and precarity of the jobs created and the environmental impact of the increase in road and/or air traffic along with the exponential increase in international goods flows. In response to these concerns, local elected officials struggle to justify their choices, and take refuge behind a certain fatalism: they argue that meeting local job needs is the priority, and that the environmental effects are global and would only be slightly influenced by these local decisions.

On this basis, the opponents of these projects seek to politicize the status of the territory concerned and how it is managed. The location of the activities of international industrial actors thus fueled the formalization of a political counter-discourse that is anchored at the local level, but coordinated at the international level, thanks to the integration of extra-local activist networks. These groups of a few dozen members are made up of local residents who are concerned that these sites will have a direct impact on their living environment, but also of others who situate what is presented as an ordinary economic decision as part of a wider struggle against the development of the capitalist economy and the neoliberal, or even "high-modernist" ideology (Scott, 1999). Some of these residents have no experience of activism, while others are involved in environmental or socioeconomic movements. These collectives are also made up of local representatives of national or international networks (such as ATTAC, Youth for Climate, and Extinction Rebellion) that contribute to the professionalization of these local collectives and their networking at the supra-local level. They also provide legal expertise, which is used to delay or even stop projects.

FIGURE 2
AMAZON IN FRANCE: LOCATIONS AND AREAS OF CONTENTION



These interconnected local collectives pursue a wide variety of actions, specific to the local political and socioeconomic context, including holding their own information meetings as an alternative to official presentations, site visits, demonstrations, and communications in the press and on social media. These activities are gradually contributing to the emergence of counter-expertise of a technical (e.g. calculation of the increase in road traffic resulting from the project), environmental (e.g. inventory of the fauna and flora impacted), and legal (e.g. assessing compliance with public debate procedures or regulations) nature. In order to carry out their actions, these collectives rely both on the heritage-based nature of the territory (particularly in the environmental sector), on local attachments, and on the harmful effects of the activities envisaged by these industrial companies within the framework of private contracts negotiated with elected officials and public representatives, but without consulting citizens and civil society.

These mobilizations are bearing fruit. Plans to build a number of Amazon warehouses in eastern France (such as in Dambach-la-Ville and Einsisheim) have been abandoned, and others have been suspended due to legal action taken by these groups. And in all cases, these mobilizations have successfully publicized and made the political issues linked to these land-use planning choices visible to the public. However, Their impact on the industrial companies' strategy has been weak. There are two reasons for this: first, these global companies usually delegate prospecting and negotiations to subsidiaries or specialist partner companies; and second, they pass on the responsibility to local elected officials, taking refuge behind their strict economic development purpose.

FIGURE 3
POSTERS PUT UP BY THE “WATCHING ALIBABA” GROUP ON A BUILDING IN ONE OF THE MUNICIPALITIES NEAR THE LIÈGE AIRPORT



In various forms, these local collectives are therefore trying to gain recognition for issues other than employment or the commercial appeal of land, which are the arguments put forward by the project developers. By transforming each local industrial project into a political object, they are attempting to impose an alternative reading and representation of these sites of activity, in particular by drawing a link between the local decision and the major global challenges facing contemporary societies, which include socioeconomic inequality, environmental degradation and climate disruption, and indeed increased dependency on global industrial actors, at the expense of local or national actors. For example, opponents of Amazon’s warehouses point to the fact that one job created by the group’s activity leads to the loss of several local jobs, particularly in local businesses. Encouraging e-commerce increases inequality and human impact on the environment.

These phenomena of opposition, and counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2006), which are localized but interconnected at the international level, therefore consist of power relations with the advocates of the dominant paradigm of socioeconomic development. By holding a public debate about these projects and their impact and providing counter-expertise, these collectives contribute to creating or strengthening public spaces. These public spaces, which are materialized in the territory (through meetings, demonstrations, and occupations, including *zones à défendre*, or “Zones to Defend” at development sites), or active online (through websites, social media, and digital communication kits), are designed to create the conditions for a conflict of ideas, paradigms, and objectives between heterogeneous actors—a conflict of the kind integral to the democratic functioning of a society. These mobilizations must therefore be understood as part of a wider dynamic than “NIMBYism”—one that has been growing since the 2000s in opposition to the hegemonic domination of the neoliberal model in international institutions as well as in local representative public bodies.

THE CONFLICTUAL GOVERNANCE OF HETEROGENEOUS IDEOLOGIES FOR LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Situated in a complex set of local and international interactions and issues, analysis of the discourse of the local actors affected by the establishment of Alibaba or Amazon sites highlights two apparently incompatible paradigms of socioeconomic development. Power relations are established between the bearers of these two types of discourse, notably via the publicization and media coverage of signifiers and

values designed to construct the meaning of this industrial event, but also a dual international-local movement, with the dominant industrial companies pulling in one direction, and the collectives opposing their site development projects pulling in the other.

These ideal frameworks are opposed in terms of the aims of the socioeconomic development choices made by the public actors in the local territories, but are also based on radically different modes of governance. A logic based on silos (employment, customs procedures, exports, digital technology, innovation, and commercial appeal through standing out) is opposed to a demand for spaces in which heterogeneous, complex, holistic, and multi-scale issues can be contrasted and connected. These issues include the number, nature, and sustainability of jobs; the role of public investment in relation to markets; policies to support and structure local industrial innovation; and the compatibility of public decisions with environmental or climate protection commitments.

These two positions produce radically different methods of consultation, conflict, and decision-making: on the one hand, a culture of bipartite agreements, characterized by legitimized expertise and industrial secrecy; and on the other, a dynamic and complex process of collective construction of public spaces or “boundary objects” (Star & Griesemer, 1989), that is permanently activated and would allow the diverse range of local actors to express their conflicts and resolve them. The status of the territory concerned appears to be central, since it determines the legal and societal framework for its management: whether it is private, public, or common property, it appears to have decisive significance for the actors. In the absence of genuinely effective consultation spaces proposed by institutions, civil society has taken the initiative to raise and publicize a heterogeneous set of issues linked directly and indirectly to the establishment of these dominant industrial actors in the digital platform industry. Two creative logics are therefore opposed here, in this territory: creating market value, or creating collective attachments. Two different ways of managing this clash of perspectives can therefore be envisaged. The first consists of viewing this dichotomy as a defining one, and a source of innovation for the system—even though the imbalance of power (in media, legal, administrative, and even policing terms) between the actors represents a threat to the permanence of the local ecosystem. The second position consists of creating and leading new bodies to manage the debate and define public action. The public authorities could legitimately translate the ideal frameworks and construct a new, shared, and opposable meaning of a creative ecology specific to the territory. But we have seen no such initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The study of these specific examples shows the balance of power between public authorities focusing on the territory’s economic development and international recognition, and the domination of a digital industrial group that seeks to integrate this same territory into its own economic ecosystem. This balance of power takes shape within the framework of economic industrialization of territories: the primacy conferred by the public authorities on standing out, here embodied in particular by logistics clusters and the presence of a “digital giant,” and on commercial appeal, are seen as necessary conditions for attracting investors. Through the neoliberal prism, the economic vitality of the territory becomes a resource (Cabedoche, 2019) for the development of platform industries and international trade, particularly their dominant global actors. But policy-makers do have another option open to them: to view such projects as opportunities to build the commons (Ostrom, 2010). Seen as a process of “making in common” (Bollier, 2014), this commons would consist of processes for producing shared resources, managed by a system of rights and duties, and through collective governance.

ENDNOTES

1. A second key component of this strategy is the construction of “New Silk Roads,” which use “Special Economic Zones” to create highly efficient corridors for the international transportation of goods.
2. In particular the Wallonia Export Agency (AWEX), an organization reporting to the Regional Government of Wallonia dedicated to the international promotion of trade.

3. Notably in Briec near Quimper, Augny, and Ensisheim in the north-east of France, Fournès in the Gard region, Montbert on the outskirts of Nantes, Moul-Chicheboville to the south-east of Caen, and also near Rouen and Perpignan.

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