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The 'Titanic syndrome' of coastal cities. Putting an End to Resilience

Valérie Lavaud-Letilleul, November 2025

Summary (2,500 characters)

The Titanic Syndrome of Coastal Metropolises: Putting an End to Resilience, written by Valérie Lavaud-Letilleul, offers a critical discussion of the paradigm of attractiveness and resilience based on an analysis of major French coastal cities and their exposure to climate change. The central hypothesis of the text is that the future catastrophe is not merely aquatic (flooding, erosion), but is above all social, ecological and democratic, with the urgency stemming less from the climate than from 'the policies of metropolisation themselves'.

Metropolisation initially unfolded in a 'favourable' phase, when urban policies harnessed the sea as an amenity to redevelop port-side neighbourhoods into 'new urban centres'. Subsequently, the consequences of this productivist model led to the displacement of the working classes due to gentrification, with these projects serving as 'anchor points' for 'urban capitalism'. In a third phase, coastal metropolisation faced the threat posed by climate change. It was at this point that the notion of resilience came to the fore on the scientific and political agenda as a means of adapting the development of metropolitan areas to the crisis. The author criticises this paradigm, describing it as a 'false concept' and an 'urban fable'. Resilience, a notion

'insurance-based' rather than 'existential', is said to ensure the reproduction of urban-maritime capitalism rather than the survival of its inhabitants.

The author draws on three case studies of coastal cities worldwide to illustrate the unconsidered aspects of the model of attractiveness and resilience: the cities of Miami, Lagos and Venice. She proposes replacing the 'Sea, Sun and Sand' triad with that of 'Sea-level rise' to highlight the lack of adaptation and over-densification; 'Selection' to criticise the growth of socio-spatial inequalities; and 'Saturation', using the socio-ecological effects of overtourism in Venice as an example.

The book denounces the 'paradoxical metropolis', founded on the contradiction between economic hyper-attractiveness on the one hand and the hyper-threat of climate change on the other. To break the deadlock created by this model, the author advocates the solution of 'demetropolisation', which she bases on liveability, hyper-regulation, de-commodification and the rebuilding of urban democracy.

Abstract (long version)

This ^{fourth} Transversal POPSU issue on coastal metropolises presents a critical analysis of urban development in the face of climate threats. It uses the concept of the 'Titanic syndrome' to illustrate the paradox of large coastal cities, which, despite their appeal and the investment they attract, are on the front line when it comes to the risks of flooding and coastal erosion. The text examines strategies for urbanisation and urban resilience, particularly through waterfront regeneration projects, which often favour urban capitalism and exacerbate socio-spatial inequalities, as illustrated by the cases of Venice, Miami and Lagos. Finally, the author calls for a cultural and political transformation to prioritise liveability over attractiveness, by giving a voice to residents and non-human beings.

The author, Valérie Lavaud Letilleul, is a professor of geography at the University of Montpellier-Paul-Valéry and a researcher at the ART-Dev laboratory. Her research focuses on the link between socio-spatial dynamics, urban planning, conflict and democracy on the humanised coastlines of Northern countries, particularly port cities, tourist coastlines and major coastal cities. Rooted in the field of critical social geography, her work explores the disconnect between the territory as experienced by ordinary people (residents, community groups, professionals, etc.) and the institutional territory (as narrated and shaped by elected representatives and technical officials). The conflicts that arise around areas where liveability is a major issue provide a key starting point for her investigations.

The book opens with the observation that 'the early 21st century is taking on the air of a pre-urban catastrophe on the coast'. It examines the future of the metropolitan model in cities such as Dunkirk, Rouen, Le Havre, Brest, Nantes, Bordeaux, Montpellier, Marseille, Toulon and Nice. The 'Titanic syndrome' is used as a metaphor. Just as the Titanic was regarded as 'the jewel of the seas', 'the largest, most luxurious and safest', so too are metropolitan cities perceived as the 'jewels of the urban landscape', attractive to investors and the 'creative classes'. However, just as the sinking of the Titanic in 1912 shook faith in naval progress, major coastal cities have now become the urban harbingers of the impending catastrophe. The book's central thesis is that this catastrophe is not merely aquatic (submersion, erosion, rising sea levels), but is also, and above all, social, ecological and democratic. In other words, the author sets out to demonstrate that the urgency stems not so much (or only) from climate change as from the policies of metropolisation themselves.

The focus of the book is therefore less on French coastal cities than on the process of metropolisation that has unfolded along the coast, in France as elsewhere, since the 1990s. According to the author, large coastal cities act as laboratories for metropolisation, defined as a process of selective concentration of investment, businesses and residents with high purchasing power, underpinned by their ability to attract people and by inter-urban competition.

The starting point for the argument is to consider the intersection of two parallel processes: the urbanisation of coastlines and the 'coastalisation' of metropolitan areas. Whilst the coastal metropolis is today associated with a sought-after lifestyle—that of the 'resident-tourist'—the author points out that this 'desire for the coast' is a recent social and cultural construct, which only emerged from 1750 onwards.

Metropolisation by the sea unfolds in two cycles, beginning with one based on the myth of 'happy metropolisation' (which Valérie Lavaud-Letilleul describes as 'Act 1'). Water, the sea and the port act as catalysts for

metropolisation. Neighbourhoods surrounding the port are subject to development and regeneration schemes aimed at converting derelict port areas into new urban centres. These projects transform the image of the productive city into that of a high-end metropolis, utilising the amenities associated with the water and the maritime and port heritage. From Boston, Baltimore and San Francisco, this model crossed the Atlantic in the 1980s, reaching London and Liverpool, before landing in France, in Marseille (with the Euroméditerranée project) and Dunkirk (the Neptune project).

'Act 2' of this movement reveals the consequences of this development: the decline of former port districts and the displacement of the working classes as a result of gentrification. These projects are emblematic of urban capitalism insofar as coastal cities are the preferred sites serving as 'anchor points' for capital, generating profits through rising property values.

It is during 'Act 3' that the 'sea-aménité' becomes a threat. But whilst the sea rises, the process of metropolisation continues; it merely takes on a different guise, that of 'resilience'. The author examines the various stages of this process: the distancing of the threats (the 'metropolitan denial'), latency, inaction and public powerlessness; and finally, when the cost of inaction becomes higher than the cost of action, and the very security of urban investments is at stake, the tipping point occurs. Dominated by the insurance sector, the issue of habitability 'proves to be more a matter of insurance than of existential concern'. It is at this point that the 'resilient metropolis' emerges, suggesting that the threat can be brought under control and, building on this assumption, reorganising new inter-urban competitions around this frame of reference, *ultimately* enabling urban-maritime capitalism to generate new profits through the implementation of major resilient urban projects.

This new model of the 'resilient metropolis' is examined and critiqued on the basis of three global case studies, which serve as 'anti-benchmarks':

- Miami (Florida, USA) represents the belated, 'flamboyant' and costly shift towards resilience in the face of rising sea levels. The 'Miami Beach Rising Above' project, costing \$600 million, deploys a high-tech infrastructure arsenal (dams, pumping systems) financed by the over-densification of waterfront development. This has led to climate-driven gentrification away from the coast, with the wealthy moving into less exposed inland neighbourhoods, displacing working-class residents from the city centre.
- Lagos (Nigeria) reveals a contrast between official 'resilient' urban planning (the Eko Atlantic megaproject, a highly capital-intensive polder protected by the 'Great Lagos Wall') and the everyday urbanism of the shantytowns, where residents adapt their spaces with limited resources and struggle against displacement caused by the very same large-scale 'resilient' projects.
- Venice illustrates an extroverted and extractivist model based on overtourism, threatening the very existence of the city. Efforts to save Venice from rising sea levels include the colossal Mose project (underwater barriers whose €6 billion funding has already been the subject of a corruption scandal). The 'vicious circle of tourism' is driving residents out of the historic centre – a phenomenon known as the 'Venexodus' – which has seen the city's population fall from 175,000 in 1951 to 50,000 in 2020.

Following this 'anti-benchmark' overview, the author engages in a critical discussion of the classic model of coastal urbanisation – known as the 3S model, standing for 'Sea, Sand and Sun' – and proposes replacing it with his own 'unthoughts': '*Sea level rise, Selection and Saturation*'

- Sea-level rise: The overlooked aspect lies in the lack of adaptation due to a failure to anticipate the issue, coupled with unchecked urbanisation and maladaptation, which serves to exacerbate the causes of climate change. She also observes a 'transfer of adaptation', whereby the negative consequences are shifted onto other territories or social groups.
- Selection: Urbanisation operates a dual process of attraction and displacement, filtering residents (rich/poor, residents/tourists). This creates a build-up of socio-spatial inequalities, including inequalities in exposure to risks and inequalities in treatment under adaptation policies. Here, the resilient metropolis risks becoming a 'Noah's Ark' that saves only the most privileged.
- Saturation: The 'ever-more' model of metropolisation ignores irreversible thresholds (occupancy, visitor numbers). Coastal over-urbanisation (through densification or upscaling) results in a variety of models of climate-driven coastal gentrification (adaptation ex nihilo, adaptation by substitution), which leads to a proliferation of 'residential deserts' for the poorest and 'blue deserts' for non-humans.

The argument then reaches the heart of the book's thesis with a chapter entitled 'Putting an End to the Resilient Coastal Metropolis'. The author proposes resisting the model of metropolisation by refusing to bow to the reformist agenda embodied by the adjective. Whether described as 'sustainable' or 'resilient', the metropolis always conforms to the paradigms of the dominant urban ideology. Resilience is criticised because, according to the author, it is part of an 'urban fable' that ensures the resilience of the metropolitan model itself rather than that of its inhabitants. Borrowed from psychology and applied to the field of local public policy to denote the capacity to 'anticipate, react to and adapt to disruptions, whether gradual or sudden', resilience is regarded as a 'false concept' that fails to address the systemic causes of threats and does not transform unequal urban structures. The challenge, therefore, is to move beyond this urban model 'based on the inherent contradiction between attractiveness and threat'. This 'double bind' (or dual constraint) functions as a contradictory imperative and underpins the 'paradoxical metropolis', characterised by a growing disconnect between hyper-attractiveness and hyper-threat. This paradox is evident, for example, in the existence of a property market for flood-prone properties, the value of which runs into billions of euros. The resilient coastal metropolis represents, in this context, the latest manifestation of a 'paradoxical society' – that is, a situation in which demands are mutually incompatible and contradictory imperatives multiply to the point of becoming the norm.

What alternatives are possible at a time when the metropolitan 'TINA' (*there is no alternative*) seems to be taking hold? As an alternative to a 'business as usual' metropolitan approach – which, like the orchestra on the deck of the Titanic, plays out the cheerful apocalypse of hyper-metropolisation through technical adaptation – the author advocates a solution known as 'demetropolisation', which involves de-commodifying space and promoting coastal liveability, in contrast to the paradigm of attractiveness.

Demetropolisation should be accompanied by a re-founding of 'waterfront' urban democracy. This involves defending the framework of liveability and citizenship, and abandoning the 'attractiveness' paradigm. The former is based on a precautionary approach, where threats take precedence over attractiveness, and on instruments – including legal ones – of hyper-regulation, enabling use value to take precedence over market value, for example and first and foremost in the field of social housing; for without a guaranteed right to housing, no climate policy will be socially acceptable.

The final chapter proposes avenues for 'devising new policies for strategic locations that would be prime places for living rather than prime places for investment'

including ports and boats, industrial and port areas, beaches, the ocean, the sea, lagoons and wetlands – all of which are ‘places of contention’ in coastal cities that are also sites of conflict and dissent, upon which public policies should be able to build compromises.

The author does not wish to conclude on a doomsday note, which would be a sign of passivity. On the contrary, her book is a call for awareness and action in a context of climate emergency, scientific oversights and public powerlessness.

Debates and issues

The text raises the question of the nature of the impending catastrophe: is it merely aquatic (flooding, erosion, rising sea levels) or is it also social, ecological and democratic? The author clearly argues that the urgency stems not so much from climate change as from the policies of urbanisation themselves.

The public policy issues raised in this regard are numerous, starting with those relating to **the model of economic and spatial development**:

- The challenge to the ‘resilience’ paradigm. The text criticises the notion of the ‘resilient metropolis’, describing it as an ‘urban fable’ and a ‘false concept’ that fails to tackle the systemic causes of the threats, thereby ensuring the reproduction of the metropolitan model and metropolisation rather than the survival of its inhabitants.
- The shift from attractiveness to liveability: In line with the above, the argument highlights the dead ends of the attractiveness paradigm and proposes breaking with it in favour of that of liveability, which involves de-commodifying housing and living spaces, and prioritising use value over market value.
- Managing threats and planning ahead: the author highlights a general failure on the part of major coastal cities to adapt, characterised by their lack of foresight and the pursuit of unchecked urbanisation along the seafront, driven by the metropolisation agenda, which increases urban vulnerabilities. Coastal cities, despite being ‘outposts’ of climate change, paradoxically do not appear to be at the forefront of adaptation policies
- (Regulatory) control of urbanisation in the face of flood risk: Metropolisation continues to fuel a growth model despite the threat. A major challenge, according to the author, is to strengthen regulation of the property market in light of the existence of flood-prone properties (which are estimated to be worth between 2.2 and 19.5 billion euros by 2100). The text proposes changing the legal framework in favour of climate-resilient urban planning law, which could, for example, challenge the constitutional principle of coastal property rights (for instance, through the ‘public coastal domain’ or the gradual dismantling of property rights).
- Funding for protective measures: The book criticises the economic model of adaptation (and therefore of resilience), which relies on the over-densification of coastal urbanisation to fund protective structures (as exemplified by the grandiose, inefficient and unjust project in Miami).

Furthermore, the book raises debates on **issues of socio-spatial justice**, denouncing the inequalities inherent in the process of metropolisation.

- Inequality of access to housing and 'Housing First': The text emphasises that overheated property markets are making major coastal cities unliveable for low- and middle-income groups even before they suffer the effects of climate change. To address this challenge, the author proposes the development of a highly regulatory policy on social and affordable housing ('Housing First'). Without a guaranteed right to housing, she argues, no climate policy will be considered socially acceptable.
- Socio-spatial inequalities in risk exposure: From the perspective of socio-environmental justice, the resilient metropolis risks becoming a 'Noah's Ark' that comes to the rescue only of the wealthiest. Adaptation policies, due to their social selectivity, merely reinforce inequalities by targeting 'strategic' areas and neglecting the needs of the most disadvantaged.
- Climate gentrification: Excessive urbanisation or the relocation of populations in the face of climate change will lead to dynamics of retro-littoral climate gentrification, whereby the affluent classes settle in less exposed inland neighbourhoods, forcing out the working classes.
- The 'battle for the beaches' and access to the coastline: Another social justice issue concerns the democratisation of access to the coastline, which is often subject to elitist and commercial appropriation. Policies (relating to transport, parking and beach concessions) restrict access to the shoreline, which should form part of the public maritime domain.
- Overtourism and saturation: The issue of saturation (resulting from the combination of over-urbanisation and overcrowding) is highlighted through the example of Venice. The extractivist and outward-looking economic model of overtourism is driving residents out of historic centres to the point of threatening the city's ability to function.

Finally, the text raises debates concerning the **governance of coastal cities**, offering a direct critique of the current metropolitan model.

- The choice between hyper-metropolisation and de-metropolisation forms the central debate of the book. The hyper-metropolisation approach would involve continuing urbanisation and investment in these areas despite the threat posed by climate change. The second path entails a radical change of model, based on the view that metropolisation is part of the problem.
- Overcoming public sector powerlessness and conflicting demands. Local decision-makers face a 'double *bind*'. They are caught in a vice between two conflicting demands: on the one hand, the need to formulate attractive urban policies; on the other, the context of a climate 'hyper-threat'. This creates a 'paradoxical metropolis', leading to a state of public powerlessness at both national and local levels.
- Democratic renewal: The author calls for a renewal of urban democracy in coastal metropolises, which would involve opening up access to the coastline, de-commodifying urban planning, and ensuring genuine participation by citizens and residents in decision-making processes.
- Taking the 'voiceless' into account: This re-founded urban democracy should be mindful of non-human entities (natural environments, rivers, the sea) and future generations. On this point, the author proposes a series of legal and political experiments, such as granting legal personality to rivers or seas, or the creation of citizens' assemblies or assemblies for the future.

- Managing conflict: Rather than banking on an illusory consensus, given the radical nature of the proposed solutions, the text suggests fostering dissent and viewing conflict as a resource for comparing viewpoints and building socio-eco-territorial compromises in contested areas: ports, industrial-port zones and beaches, for example.

Social media (LinkedIn)

📖 [POPSU Notebooks] 'The Titanic Syndrome of Coastal Metropolises: Putting an End to Resilience', by Valérie Lavaud-Letilleul

📖 Discover the latest issue of Cahiers POPSU – the Platform for the Observation of Urban Projects and Strategies, published by Éditions Autrement. This series brings together the knowledge generated through the action research carried out as part of the POPSU Métropoles programme. This is the ^{fourth} cross-cutting issue which aims to foster dialogue between the action research projects conducted in metropolitan areas and to cross-reference their findings.

🔗📖 As the 21st century begins, with coastal areas taking on the air of impending urban disaster, what does the future hold for the metropolitan model in Dunkirk, Rouen, Le Havre, Brest, Nantes, Bordeaux, Montpellier, Marseille, Toulon and Nice?

- What form will the impending crisis take? Will it be aquatic, involving submersion, erosion and rising sea levels? Or will it also be social, ecological and democratic in nature?
- What if the urgency stemmed not from climate change but from the very policies of metropolitanisation themselves? If so, how should we respond?
- Is the concept of resilience a viable approach to tackling the challenges and consequences of climate change?
- Is it possible – and if so, under what conditions – to move beyond the paradigm of attractiveness and resilience?
- What if ensuring the liveability of our coastlines required a rethinking of urban democracy?

This book offers some avenues for thought by proposing that we move beyond the notion of resilience in order to rethink the conditions for the future liveability of cities and coastlines.

👉 You can find this Cahier via the following link: XXX

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