

Lecture by Olivier Coutard, 26. April 2006: Securing sustainable access to basic urban services - lessons from history and contemporary issues

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His research addresses the social and spatial issues associated with the regulation of, and reforms in, utility industries (water and energy supply, telecommunications) in Europe. He is also studying transport policies addressing mobility issues faced by low-income individuals and households.

Within Latts, he heads the research group on Networks, Institutions and Territories (Réseaux Institutions Territoires, RIT). He sits in the editorial boards of Flux, International Scientific Quarterly on Networks and Territories and of the Journal of Urban Technology, and is a referee for the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (2004).

Between 2000 and 2004, he was a member and the secretary of the French CNRS national committee for the assessment of CNRS researchers and research groups in geography and urban and architectural research.

Abstract

Over the last two decades, networked utility sectors are being subject to regulatory reforms combining the commodification of services (through, esp., the limitation of cross subsidies), the liberalisation of markets (i.e. the increased role of competitive mechanisms) and the privatization of public bodies in charge of supplying those services.

Academic and political debate on the effects of those regulatory reforms are highly polarized between supporters of and opponents to reforms. Supporters of reforms emphasize cost reductions, increased productivity and better adaptation of services to the diverse needs of customers, while opponents stress increased inequalities in access to yet essential services as well as the devastating social effects of reforms within utility companies and their sub-contractors.

In this presentation, I will try and go beyond the economic determinism which, I argue, underpins the arguments of both parties, by shifting the focus of the discussion onto the key factors that explain the universalization (or non universalization) of access to essential networked utility services, and on factors that sustain (or do not sustain) such universal access.