The Fantastical Accounts of Grand Paris[1]

Frédéric Léonhardt, translated by Eric Rosencrantz

After four years of ongoing debate, the French government's Grand Paris scheme has spawned a large-scale mass transit project called the Grand Paris Express. In response to Nicolas Buchoud's article on the subject, Frédéric Léonhardt sounds the financial alarm: the Grand Paris Express, as he sees it, is headed straight to the wall.

Four years after it was announced with great pomp and circumstance, the Grand Paris project remains precisely that: a much-hyped announcement, a grand pipe dream. On the ground, the problems have only gotten worse over the past few years – especially the housing crisis and mass transit conditions, the two major issues facing Greater Paris along with the social crisis in the city's deprived neighborhoods.

Four years of detours and delays, and for what?

With regard to housing, all the indicators are on red alert: market tension is too high, access to social housing and new housing starts are too low (only 40,000 in 2010 as against the SDRIF [regional and urban development master plan] target of 60,000 and the French president's proclaimed target of 70,000). Various organizations, spearheaded by the Fondation Abbé Pierre, point to the massively swelling ranks of the "ill-housed" in France. More and more households are devoting an increasingly large share of their budgets to homes that are smaller and smaller or further and further away from their place of work. As for transportation, the situation has gone from bad in 2007 to worse now, especially on the main suburban trains and inner-city subway lines. Travel conditions, reliability and rapidity are steadily declining. According to the current planning horizons for Grand Paris, we will have to wait a good ten years for the first sections of the new driverless subway lines to go on stream. Now that ought to reassure all those cramped commuters agonizing through the daily ordeal of an overloaded system!

Back in his day, Jules Ferry denounced the "fantastical accounts" of Haussmann's plan for the renovation of Paris, inveighing against the use of public monies for the benefit of big real-estate operators. Today, we can't help wondering whether the Grand Paris scheme does not amount to an equally alarming "bottomless pit".

First of all, it's a bottomless pit in view of all the money already spent without any real transparency or concrete results. To begin with, Christian Blanc's cabinet, who are deemed spendthrifts by National Assembly deputy Bertrand Derosières, draw higher salaries than the other ministry cabinets. Then there is the Grand Paris team itself: a 30-strong body of armchair planners

[1] Translator's note: the French title, *Les comptes fantastiques du Grand Paris*, is an allusion to *Les Comptes fantastiques de Haussmann* ("The Fantastical Accounts of Haussmann"), Jules Ferry's indictment of Baron Haussmann's massive use of public funds to change the face of Paris in the 1860s. The title of Ferry's article, in turn, is a punning twist on *Les Contes (fantastiques) d'Hoffmann* (i.e. *The Tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann*). Unfortunately, much of this is lost in translation.

with no clear-cut status who have been charting the roadmap since 2007. Lastly, the Société du Grand Paris (SGP), which has been active for a few months now, already has several dozen staff members and expects to grow its personnel to a hundred in due time. The SGP overlaps with the STIF (the public transport authority for Paris and the surrounding Île-de-France region), as well as with transit operators and the competent local authorities: for a government bent on simplifying the regional map, avoiding overlaps and streamlining decision-making processes, Grand Paris constitutes a giant stride backwards. Even though it benefits from supplementary tax revenue, there is tremendous concern about its ability to carry out projects that look more like Rube-Goldberg-machine partnerships than a bona fide regional development plan.

The Grand Paris Express: a financial Grand Canyon

But the worst is yet to come. If we focus on the primary, if not the only, object of the project, namely the transportation system, the agreement reached between the national and regional governments involves a €32 billion investment program combining the execution of a 150 km Grand Paris Express (GPE) network and improvements to existing systems, especially the RER suburban rail lines. The problem is that the solutions developed for the GPE amount to yet another bottomless pit. As matters stand, the large-scale underground project for the *première couronne* (the first ring of suburbs around Paris) comes to €150 million per kilometer, not including the cost of rolling stock and the sizeable additional cost of underground stations (not less than €50 million in the simplest cases).

Paris is the only big city in the world to plan such a budget-guzzler of a subway system: all other cities reserve this mode of transport for crossing old high-density areas, with elevated lines (over major thoroughfares and developable brownfield sites) or recycled overground infrastructures in lower-density suburban areas.

In a very detailed report published in 2010,[2] the Cour des Comptes (Court of Audit) pointed out that the operators have systematically far exceeded their investment cost forecasts: for the 25 CPER projects (*contrats de projets État–région*, investment projects co-financed by national and regional governments) from 2000 to 2006, the average cost overrun came to 92%. This tendency to underestimate the price tag remains a widespread practice that will probably plague these new projects as well. Given the numerous geological imponderables within the Île-de-France region, the cost of digging the 150 km of tunnels involved could easily end up exceeding the budget by 50%.

In addition, there is the cost of running the new system, for which only one real estimate has been made – in the report by National Assembly deputy Gilles Carrez (September 2009). For a €24 billion investment (Christian Blanc's version of the Grand Paris system combined with the regional transport action plan), the supplementary operational requirements for the 2010–2025 period total €19 billion, over and above the ongoing deficit for the running of the existing system, which in turn is assessed at €24 billion.[3]

The additional networks will add a heavy and enduring item to the STIF bill, which already comes to nearly €8 billion per year. Providing services to areas that are far less dense will generate diminishing returns: lower passenger traffic levels means a higher cost per passenger than on the existing RER and metro lines. This fact, combined with the initial cost plus the budget overruns, makes the financing and realization of the system in its entirety rather doubtful, if not impossible.

2 *Les transports ferroviaires régionaux en Île-de-France*. La Cour des Comptes, p. 81: http://www.ccomptes.fr/fr/CC/documents/RPT/Rapport_transports_ferroviaires_regionaux_ile_de_france_novembre_2010.pdf

3 *Rapport Carrez*, "*Grand Paris, financement du projet de transport*". September 30, 2009, pp. 12–13: http://lesrapports.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/BRP/094000480/0000.pdf

An untenable policy model

Financial issues aside, there are other drawbacks to this strategy of *tout neuf – tout beau* ("everything spanking new and beautiful"): the completion periods, averaging 10 years, are longer than those allowed for recycling existing stations or elevating tracks. What is more, an underground infrastructure gives off considerable carbon emissions: 1 kilometer of tunnel generates 40,000 metric tons of CO_2 – in other words, at the very minimum an additional 6 million metric tons for the whole network. These arguments are well known, but that has not scared off the decision-makers.

So why this hasty headlong rush? It bears a striking resemblance to certain national projects, such as the high-speed rail lines to Normandy and the French South-West for example, which have the remarkable double faculty of catapulting construction costs to astronomical levels while also galvanizing local elected officials. They see the state arriving with supersized projects guaranteed to generate no nuisance and no opposition from residents (because underground), promising undreamed-of economic dynamism. Behind the scenes of each of these big public works, the majors in the civil engineering industry are pushing to get new construction sites opened up – with hefty profit margins. Tunnel-building is one such lucrative activity, for it is exceedingly mechanized and requires limited manpower for the machinery that has drawn such heavy investment.

In a word, this strategy amounts to privatizing the immediate profits on construction projects by creating public deficits and swelling the national debt. The "RFF" (Réseau Ferré de France – French Rail Network) syndrome lies in wait for the Grand Paris Express project: RFF has amassed close to €30 billion in debts. We need to rethink the whole conception of public spending on big infrastructures. This outdated but enduring model, which dates from the *Trente Glorieuses*,[4] is encapsulated in the dictum "*Quand le bâtiment va, tout va*" ("All's well when construction's well"). The Keynesian economic equation of these large-scale works turns a blind eye to the contemporary socio-economic context, with the growth rate trend cut in half and a colossal debt amassed in a single generation, while demographic growth proves less dynamic.

The issue is not the amount of spending per se, but the fact that, under the guise of environmental and public transport policy, we are avoiding the whole question of getting good value for such huge investments. And yet inconsistent spending, even on a mass transit system, will only pave the way for unsustainable development.

Grand Paris Express: a factitious 21st-century consensus

Even before really being launched, the Grand Paris Express system already bears the hallmarks of an obsolete prototype: astronomical financial and ecological costs, a far-off and necessarily underestimated completion date, and a factitious consensus. It has all the ingredients of a public-sector industrial fiasco.

Furthermore, it is rather unnerving to see densification studies and projects already homing in on the sites of the future stations. With the GPE's completion slated for 2020 in the best-case scenario, this urban development strategy makes the city entirely dependent on the realization of the transit system. But that runs counter to the principles of economizing on resources and space, which involves making the most of urban consolidation and the specific virtues of mass transit. This strategy is particularly perilous, moreover, because it is fragile, irreversible and, as we have seen, extremely dicey.

So aside from sporadic commitments to up the quality of suburban rail services, the program disregards people's desire to see the whole situation improve in the years to come. Numerous objections to the proposed project have been raised by ecologists, associations, elected officials in the areas that are still left off the transit map – such as the outlying suburbs – and so on and so forth. Their protests have petered out for want of any follow-up and any alternative development model

4 Translator's note: post-war economic boom (1945–75) in France.

for public transportation in Île-de-France. But it is the alternatives that we should be considering with a view to providing better transportation services and passenger conditions at a lower cost for the whole region.

The situation is paradoxical, given the unrelenting day-to-day problems, but we should be almost glad that the current consensus rests on such shaky political ground. Its expiration date, April 2012, is contingent on the outcome of the presidential elections and how the economy shapes up in the sequel. In a nation already crippled by public debt, the whole plan may well fall apart. And if the subsequent scenario does make it possible to get a more efficient project up and running faster, it'd be a case of backing up a bit to make for a smoother ride.

Frédéric Léonhardt is an urban planner and former urban political project director. He now works for the ANRU (National Urban Renewal Agency), coordinating urban renewal projects in the Val-de-Marne *département* in the inner Paris suburbs. He participated in the deliberations on Grand Paris as a member of the Castro team (on housing, neighborhoods and mobility) and in the 4D association's public debates about Arc Express and Grand Paris. Frédéric Léonhardt has published various articles in the journals *Urbanisme*; *Ville, Rail et Transports*; and *Études Foncières*.

His published articles on public transportation include:

- "La bataille du rail", *Urbanisme*, November 2008;
- "Les transports, enfin pilotes de l'urbanisation ?", *Ville, Rail et Transports*, July 15, 2009;
- "Matrix City contre Métropole fédérée", *Urbanisme*, November 2009.

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