



Free public transport: from social experiment to political alternative?

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Reviewed : Giovannangeli, M. and Sagot-Duvauroux, J.-L. 2012. *Voyageurs sans ticket. Liberté, égalité, gratuité : une expérience sociale à Aubagne*, Vauvert: Au Diable Vauvert.

In a work combining storytelling and reflection, a local councillor and a philosopher analyse the policy of free public transport implemented since 2009 in Aubagne, near Marseille. A resounding success with residents, this experiment has opened the way to a stimulating debate on the feasibility of policies that offer an alternative to market-led solutions in urban areas.

Free public transport appears to be something of a taboo subject both in society at large and in the world of the social sciences.¹ And yet some 20 urban areas in France have bitten the bullet and gone down this controversial path in recent years. The scintillating work *Voyageurs sans ticket. Liberté, égalité, gratuité : une expérience sociale à Aubagne* (“Passengers without tickets. Liberty, equality, charge-free: a social experiment in Aubagne”) analyses one such experiment conducted in Aubagne, a medium-sized town to the east of Marseille, and shows that this apparent silence on the subject masks a certain timidity on the part of decision-makers, researchers and citizens, to a large extent linked to an inability to “think outside the box”. Its two authors – Magali Giovannangeli, a communist local councillor in Aubagne, and philosopher Jean-Louis Sagot-Duvauroux – offer a rigorous analysis of free public transport that ultimately becomes a work of political advocacy. In Aubagne, it would seem that free public transport has led to a greater involvement of residents in local politics, as well as a new sense of freedom, while at the same time offering a real alternative to market forces. This work combines carefully argued analysis with a clear stance on the public debate, and as such comes across as a successful collaboration between a researcher and an elected representative.

A social experiment in transforming “public space”

The analysis of the experiment is based first of all on figures, in response to the economic arguments of the many “hostile opponents” (p. 26) to such measures: the implementation of free public transport on the 11 bus routes² that serve the 100,000 inhabitants of the Aubagne urban area has resulted in a 142% increase in ridership across the network between 2009 and 2012, a 10%

¹ No scientific research has been conducted on this subject; we may, however, cite the study published by GART (Groupement des Autorités Responsables de Transport, the association of French transport authorities) (GART 2012) and the publication of a debate on free urban public transport in *Transflash*, the newsletter of CERTU (Centre d’Études sur les Réseaux, les Transports, l’Urbanisme et les Constructions Publiques – Centre for the Study of Urban Planning, Transport and Public Facilities), no. 352 (CERTU 2010). For this issue of *Transflash*, a number of researchers, elected representatives and professionals expressed their opinions on the matter.

² In 2014, the network will be complemented by a tram line. A second tram line is also planned for 2019.

reduction in car journeys over the same period, a service satisfaction rating of 99%, a drop in public expenditure per journey from €3.93 in 2008 to €2.04 in 2011 – and all without any increase in taxes for local residents. Presented like this, free public transport appears to be an effective response to the problems of passenger transport and pollution due to exhaust fumes.

But, above all, it is the analysis of the effects on the population that should convince the reader of the merits of this measure. The removal of social barriers, the soothing of tensions, greater recognition for the work of bus drivers, and the end of ticket inspections are all changes that have transformed users' relationship with transport. According to the authors, buses in Aubagne have – like footpaths and other places where access is free of charge – now become “public spaces” in the broadest sense of the term that have been appropriated by “new citizens of public transport” (p. 120). The hypothesis proposed, inspired by the thinking of philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville (1981), is that the charge-free provision of a service is a vector of freedom. In this regard, the second chapter of the book – which places this hypothesis in a historical context – is particularly enlightening: for example, schools, libraries and public spaces are all free, and each of these places provides individuals with a form of freedom.

Is social appropriation the key to the scheme's success? This hypothesis, put forward by the authors, can be discussed in the light of recent studies concerning innovative mobility policies. For instance, social appropriation was undoubtedly a factor in the success of France's first self-service bicycle-hire experiment, in La Rochelle in 1976 (Huré 2012). In Aubagne, think tanks were organised at the initiative of citizens or set up by the Communauté d'Agglomération du Pays d'Aubagne et de l'Étoile (the intermunicipal council covering the 12 towns and villages in the Aubagne urban area) to promote and complement new practices among users. In addition to reclaiming public space in this way, free public transport is also seen as a means of involving citizens in the political process, by helping them to “become aware” that transport policy is one of the major political issues of the 21st century (pp. 124–126). Finally, in the authors' view, free public transport is something that “goes against current trends and represents a clear alternative to the market-based approach” (p. 35).

Free transport as a political alternative

The alternative to the market proposed by the authors is first and foremost a political alternative. “Why does free public transport and, more generally, alternative proposals to liberalism occupy such a small space and have such poor visibility in left-wing manifestos?” (p. 208) asks communist councillor Magali Giovannangeli, who, in the course of this experiment, also begins to question her political identity. In particular, she condemns the ideological inflexibility of the traditional political parties, who prefer to regulate the price of public transport using concessionary fares rather than promote free public transport. In this introspective section of the book, both the councillor and the philosopher – who handed in his Communist Party card over 20 years ago – seem to effect an ideological shift and harness the ideas of the degrowth movement (Mouvement de la Décroissance; p. 142). Furthermore, the authors make no secret of the fact that the title of their book is borrowed from *Liberté, égalité, gratuité* by Paul Ariès (2011), a key intellectual figure in this movement.

These reflections allow us to question contemporary ideological shifts, at a time when current debates all seem to converge on the word “crisis”, particularly in the field of political thinking. Although not cited, Ivan Illich's theories on conviviality (Illich 1973a) and the counterproductivity of industrialised transport systems (Illich 1973b) – the very foundations of political ecology – are brought up to date here: if one's aim is to reduce the role of the car, it is necessary to put in place tools that incentivise rather than restrict, and which create spaces of freedom and conviviality (pp. 138–143). This book can therefore also be read as a work that advocates a transformation of the Left in France, and which promotes political alternatives rather than an alternation of political

parties.³ However, it is also clearly a means of diffusing knowledge about this experiment in France, as Aubagne wishes to play a leading role within the network of towns that have implemented free public transport, while awaiting the adoption of this measure by a European capital (Tallinn in 2013).

A true fight against market forces?

Does making public transport free of charge really weaken the influence of market forces? Although it attacks a fundamental value of capitalism – commercial exchanges – the experiment is still organised within the context of the market economy. As the authors concede, “a company that has the necessary equipment and know-how, and which provides an essential service to the population, cannot simply be replaced” (p. 69); and, indeed, Veolia is still the transport operator in Aubagne. Moreover, the public funding of free public transport is provided by an increase in the *versement transport* (transport contribution)⁴ levied on businesses, a move which is not possible in all urban areas, in particular those that have already reached their upper taxation limits. Finally, although ticketing costs have been eliminated, investments to improve clock-face scheduling have generated a 20% increase in overall costs. During negotiations, Veolia also succeeded in imposing a passenger-counting system, recovering €0.40 per passenger as an incentive bonus.

Is it therefore possible that free public transport could, on the contrary, reinforce the market by giving a new legitimacy and a positive image to urban-services firms? This also raises serious questions about the degree to which of public institutions can organise the market (Hall and Soskice 2001), particularly in terms of the service offer proposed. Accordingly, the authors believe that free public transport is a means of opposing the integrated fare policies⁵ of large urban areas. Aubagne, for instance, forms part of the Marseille urban area geographically,⁶ but has to date refused to join the city’s intermunicipal council, the Marseille Provence Métropole (MPM) urban community, instead preferring to create its own intermunicipal structure (the Communauté d’Agglomération du Pays d’Aubagne et de l’Étoile, CAPAE). With this in mind, the partnership with Veolia represents an additional, non-negligible resource in Aubagne’s efforts to remain independent from Marseille; indeed, MPM does not look upon Aubagne’s experiment kindly, as it prevents fare harmonisation across the metropolitan area, unless Marseille’s network were also to be made free of charge.

In addition, the agreement between the CAPAE and its public transport providers was attacked by the prefect of the Bouches-du-Rhône *département* (in which Marseille and Aubagne are located) on technical grounds relating to the compensation of transport companies in the context of a public-service delegation. According to the authors, this procedure was highly political in nature, representing the culmination of a clash between the French state, represented at the time by Nicolas Sarkozy, and a left-wing municipality (chapter 5: “Aubagne vs Sarko”, pp. 81–96). Nevertheless, this resistance to integrated fares may also be seen as part of a fight to prevent the growth of private monopolies across ever larger areas. In the Paris region, the implementation of a flat-rate fare system,⁷ managed by private operators, has preceded the creation of a Greater Paris authority. As a

³ It should be noted that the first town to implement free public transport was Compiègne, in 1975, led by a right-wing mayor at the time.

⁴ The *versement transport* (VT) is calculated on the basis of the payroll of companies with more than nine employees. The aim of this tax is to finance urban public transport. The rate at which it is set essentially depends on the size of the urban area and the infrastructures in question. In Aubagne, the VT has increased from 0.6% to 1.8%, in particular to fund the new tram line, which will be the first free light-rail service in the world.

⁵ The term “integrated fare system” refers to different fare and ticketing practices that enable users to travel across an entire (intermunicipal) urban transport network, on all available transport modes, using single or combined travel documents that can be purchased at preferential rates.

⁶ According to the French statistics office (Insee), Aubagne forms part of the *unité urbaine* (continuously built-up urban area) of Marseille–Aix-en-Provence.

⁷ It was planned that, from 2013, all holders of Navigo travel cards, regardless of place of residence or type of travel card, would be able to travel anywhere in the Paris region by bus, tram, metro or suburban rail (RER and Transilien)

result, certain authors have talked about “back-to-front intermunicipality” (Baraud-Serfaty 2011), as the construction of the market is taking place before the construction of political institutions.

It is clear, therefore, that the choice between free public transport and integrated fare systems has very real political implications. The difference between these two competing measures concerns the way local-government areas and powers are organised, in a context of ongoing discussion and debate on the role of city regions in France. As we have seen, this means that free public transport can become an instrument of resistance wielded by medium-sized towns in the face of attempts at political and territorial domination by larger urban areas. By implementing an integrated fare system, these big cities use economic stakeholders to organise their territories and political powers. Why couldn't Aubagne do the same with free public transport? In the field of the social sciences, “thinking alternative” means opening up new perspectives in order to understand the organisation of our contemporary societies,⁸ a stimulating account of which is proffered here in *Voyageurs sans ticket*.

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for the same price. At present, this policy applies only at weekends, when the network is “dezoned”.

⁸ This is the aim of the new “Altervilles” master's programme that has been offered since September 2012 by Sciences Po Lyon and the Université Jean Monnet in Saint-Étienne: <http://altervilles.universite-lyon.fr>.

Further reading:

GART. 2012. *Une décennie de tarification dans les réseaux de transport urbain* (in French): <http://www.gart.org/Les-dossiers/Tarification>.

CERTU. 2010. « Le débat : la gratuité des transports collectifs urbains ? », *Transflash*, n° 352, April, pp. 1–3 (in French).

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