

1. Research notes



Yellow vests and mobility crisis: what did the “True” and the “Great” Debates lead to?

Research notes

Begin: July 2020

End: July 2020

With the Yellow Vests movement that exploded in France during the winter of 2018/2019, the question of travel in people’s lifestyles and the need to better understand their mobility in order to design efficient public policies was unexpectedly brought to the fore in the public debate. With a commitment to pursuing research related to current events and the social reality of mobility, we wanted to conduct a series of exploratory research projects to report on these matters and ensure that we fully understand the lifestyles and systems that caused the discontent and desires exposed by these movements.

Research participants

- Mobile Lives Forum
- Antoine Lévêque
- Marc Antoine Messer
- David Moreau
- Christophe Parnet
- Stephan Utz
- Vincent Ventresque

The very existence of the Yellow Vests movement, which appeared in October 2018, is intrinsically linked to mobility issues. Indeed, it emerged and structured itself in opposition to a series of projected policies limiting the mobility of car users:

- Increasing the carbon tax
- Increasing in the price of diesel
- Lowering the speed limit to 80 km/h on all secondary roads.

With the Yellow Vests movement - which is characterised by people wearing yellow road safety vests and congregating on roundabouts - we witnessed a real crisis of mobility.

The arguments challenging these measures were essentially based on claims of fiscal and territorial justice. First of all, in areas that are highly car dependent, most people don't have much of a choice in terms of travelling to work, see a doctor, go shopping, etc. Moreover, and throughout the whole country, the implementation of these measures would have a considerable impact on the daily lives of many people whose job relies on travelling (who represent a quarter of working adults: delivery workers, home services, drivers, train and airplane crews...) and whose need to use a motor vehicle such as a car is often forgotten or neglected. The scrappage bonus for the purchase of a less polluting vehicle isn't an effective incentive for those with small incomes: it is up to 5,000 euros for the purchase of a new vehicle. Finally, people's misunderstanding of the proposed taxation of motor fuel was contrasted with the lack of taxation of kerosene: why tax motorists and not airline passengers? Indeed, even if air travel has been democratized with the rise of air traffic and low-cost airlines, it remains mainly a privilege for the more well-off – who are also globally the biggest polluters.

Following the emergence of this social movement and its demands, and alongside the organization of "grievance books," local debates and regional conferences, two online platforms were set up to collect citizens' opinions: one from the Yellow Vests movement itself, and another by the Government that saw it as a tool for ending the crisis.

- **Le Vrai Débat - The True Debate**

An online participatory platform was launched in November by a collective of Yellow Vests members on Reunion island. Shortly after, the website for the "True Debate" rose to the national scale: from January 30 to March 3, it collected all the citizens' demands, on the topics that mattered to them. Participants were able to make proposals and vote on them, but also document and debate arguments.

- **Le Grand Débat National - The Great National Debate**

"Upon the initiative of the President of the Republic, the Government is launching a Great National Debate for everyone to discuss the essential issues of the French people." In December 2018, the French Government announced the organization of a national "Great Debate." Its online platform to collect citizens' opinions and proposals opened on January 21, 2019, for a period of 2 months and it collected citizens' opinions on four topics: the ecological transition; taxation; democracy and citizenship; and the organization of the State and public services. Mobility issues weren't directly exposed in the major themes, despite them being the very reason why the Yellow Vests movement started.

Because no analysis had been made from the point of view of mobility, the Mobile Lives Forum commissioned two research teams to carry out exploratory analyses of the proposals that came out of the True Debate and of Great Debate on issues of mobility.

1. Three researchers from the Triangle laboratory of ENS Lyon - Antoine Lévêque, Christophe Parnet and Vincent Ventresque - for the True Debate

This project was launched in early May 2019, and the results were received at the end of May 2019.

It is very clear that the proposals and arguments of the participants in the True Debate, from the point of view of mobility, are in keeping with the demand for a massive reinforcement of transport infrastructure and equipment.

Several mobility-related demands run through all the themes:

- a massive demand for public service, with the observation of a deterioration in mobility conditions linked to a decrease in government support (public transport, motorways and small train lines);

- a set of demands about tax justice: rejection of fuel taxes, and a call for fairer tax distribution;
- environmental concerns: free public transport, road-rail transport, etc.
- the perception that different mobilities are selectively valued: whether it is in the treatment of tax measures, the loss of public services or the unequal location and availability of transport infrastructure, there is a strong perception of unequal mobility, encouraged differently according to which social categories are travelling or what goods are being transported.

2. Three researchers from the Mobil'homme social sciences office - Marc Antoine Messer, David Moreau and Stephan Utz - for citizen contributions to the Great Debate.

This project was launched in October 2019, and the results were received in December 2019.

The researchers found many elements that they grouped under 4 main lessons, all relating to the current state of mobility in France, how the country's organization generates mobility needs (including car dependency), the tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility in the context of climate change, and proposals made to improve the situation:

- the transport supply is degraded and there's a total dependence on cars;
- the organization of the State and its territory causes a high dependence on mobility;
- there is a strong tension between individual aspirations and collective choices about modes of transport in the context of climate change;
- to change the situation, we need to take action on the territory and on the transport supply.

Finally, despite the participants having a very different sociological profile (few people who were young, employed, or with a university degree), the Great Debate exposed similar issues to those revealed in the True Debate: the decline or weakness of transport services (rail, public transport,...), the fact that local services are run-down, thus creating new mobility needs, etc. And it also received similar proposals: road-rail transport, cycling as an alternative to cars, free public transport, limiting the desertification of rural areas, etc.

Download the full analysis (in French Only)

Mobility in the Great Debate

Mobility in the True Debate

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Cars / motorcycles
- Aspirations
- Inequalities
- Proximity
- Crises
- Work

Policies

- Civic Action
 - Cars
 - Reducing inequalities
 - Ecological transition
 - Public transport
 - Cycling & Walking
 - Cities & Territories
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