

1. Crossed Perspectives



Does free transport work?

Between Philippe Duron (Politician)
And Arnaud Passalacqua (historian)

13 April 2022

The idea of making public transport free is gaining ground. By the end of 2021, 36 towns and cities in France had adopted it. Its supporters defend its benefits in terms of equality and modal shift, while its detractors criticise the cost and question the benefits. But what do the results of the experiment tell us? What are the problems that emerge, and what are the solutions? Arnaud Passalacqua, member of the French Observatory of free transport, and Philippe Duron, president of TDIE, debate on the use of free transport as a response to contemporary mobility challenges.

01. The question of free public transport is not new. What are the political, social, economic or environmental arguments that justify us considering it today at the urban, or even regional or national scale?



Arnaud Passalacqua

First, we should not forget that many uses of public space and infrastructure are already free of charge. Tolls have become quite rare, whereas they used to be more commonplace. Today, although highways and some bridges or tunnels impose a charge, motorists largely enjoy the experience of free travel – although I am well aware of fuel tax issues. The history of free public transport is yet to be fully written, but it has evolved through various forms, with the current ones dating back to the 1970s. Over time, communities have implemented such measures for multiple reasons, but not always the same ones. Nowadays, they are mostly centered around ecology and social justice, but this was not necessarily the case in the past, such as Compiègne that aimed to attract students with free transport. The context has changed: for 50 years now, we have been developing policies to encourage a modal shift away from cars towards public transport or active modes. However, in medium-sized French cities, half of all trips are still made by car, 4 to 5 times more than those made by public transport. If we add the rise of environmental problems to social justice issues, in a society that seems to be at an ever-increasing risk of becoming divided, free public transport is one solution worth exploring. The main arguments in support of it, however, are more or less pertinent depending on the different local contexts. Do we want to make public transport more attractive? Support a modal shift? Avoid the non-use of social tariffs by an estimated 40% of the people who could claim them? While these arguments should be assessed according to the specifics of each territory, it seems to me that three more global contextual elements are pushing our society to consider free public transport. First of all, we can see that policies focusing on solutions embodied by a specific mode have their limits: tramways are insufficient to create a decisive modal shift, just as electric cars do not solve all the problems of urban mobility. Free transport opens up another way of looking at things: how to make better use of existing systems? It offers another way of conceiving a public mobility policy. Here it could be compared to policies on lowering speeds, for example, which also consist in reviewing the way in which public space can be adapted to our needs, without waiting for an unlikely innovation to happen and provide the magic solution. Secondly, while privatization and individualization have been powerful dynamics for a long time, our society is also in the process of reconsidering what should be part of public common services. Covid-19 has even led us to question what we deem essential. Free service would make public transport networks part of this sphere of common and essential services to a much greater extent than is the case today. In this sense, the discussion on the relevance of free public transport is therefore part of a broader discussion on our society's aspirations. Finally, the health crisis linked to Covid-19 has accelerated the already difficult financial situation of many public transport networks. Reviewing how these networks are financed is essential. This can pave the way to free public transport, even if that may initially seem paradoxical.



P. D

The claim is that free public transport would promote more inclusive mobility. This argument is worth reconsidering, insofar as it only concerns people who live within a perimeter that is served by urban public transport. However, recent events have highlighted how a significant part of the population lives beyond the reach of service networks, in the large peri-urban and rural areas. These populations are very often dependent on their own car for their daily travel; rising fuel prices often weigh heavily on their already limited budgets. Free public transport here would increase the divide between urban dwellers and the rest. Making mobility a true common good would mean making all travel free (train, cars...)! To increase the share of public transport, and lower that of cars, we must extend the public transport service to populations living in peri-urban and rural areas, and ensure better ways of connecting different modes of travel. Inclusive pricing, when it has been proposed, reduces the cost of transport for people with modest incomes (job seekers, students, etc.).



Philippe Duron

Free public transport has long been confined to small towns or urban areas where fare revenues remained marginal. Since the municipal elections of 2014 and 2020, larger cities have chosen to make public transport partially or completely free of charge: Niort, Dunkerque or Montpellier. This very French movement is made possible by a powerful and dynamic source of revenue, the Mobility Payment (Versement Mobilité) which covers 48% of the financing needs of public transport in cities with regular lines. Using it as a powerful campaign argument, the advocates of free public transport champion two goals: increasing the purchasing power of households and encouraging the modal shift from cars to public transport. While we can justify having free universal services such as healthcare or education, financed by a solidarity system of redistribution or through taxation, public transport does not follow the same rationale, as it concerns a smaller part of the population. If free public transport became generalized, it would then aggravate inequalities between urban dwellers who are well equipped in terms of public transport and those who are forced to resort to a more expensive means of individual transport, as the Yellow Vest movement showed.



A. P

I completely agree that there is a French nature to the models of fully free public transport, through the existence of the mobility payment. This local contribution also explains other French specificities, such as the development, between the 1990s and 2010s, of tramway projects that were of a high quality but rather expensive. The Observatory of Cities with Free Transport has also attracted interest from abroad because of this tax specificity. However, there are many cities around the world that offer partially free transport, regardless of whether such a resource exists or not. In addition, Philippe Duron is absolutely right to raise the issue of territorial equity with regards to free transport, but we can approach this issue differently: free transport can also be seen as a way of maintaining the attractiveness of city centers, in order to avoid urban dilution, which further encourages car use. This is, for instance, the policy that Montpellier wants to implement. On the other hand, one may wonder whether being more dependent on cars costs society more than financing free transport, even though I know that residential choice is a complex matter over which individuals do not have complete control.

02. Is free service a threat to the development of public transport or even to its sustainability?



Arnaud Passalacqua

This idea is repeatedly put forward in the public debate. It is based on several arguments. I will discuss two main ones here. First, free service would ruin the financial capacity of public transport. Secondly, it would damage the image of public transport both in the eyes of the public and of the elected officials in charge of managing it, because what is free of charge is often viewed as lacking value and therefore doomed to be neglected. On these two subjects, I believe the discussion is more complex than how it is regularly portrayed. From a financial standpoint, we should note that commercial revenues are never sufficient to finance the development of public transport, since they never cover operating expenses. Investments are always driven by other budgets, provided by local authorities or by the State. The financial threat posed by free service cannot therefore directly concern investments in the networks, even if indirect effects are possible, and, even with regards to operating costs, it should be remembered that in many cities, this rate of coverage by fare revenues is 10 to 20%. In other words, the networks are already part of a massive financing system outside fare revenues, except in a few cases such as in Île-de-France (42% coverage in 2016) or Lyon (more than 50% for several years, before the health crisis). This is the effect of the mobility payment that complements public funding. Thus, while making public transport free clearly incurs a loss of revenue, this can be compensated by political choices that do not necessarily harm public transport: the choice can be made to reallocate other budgets to this effect, in the context of political arbitrations, as we saw in Dunkirk. It is also possible to look for new sources of revenue, such as parking charges, as considered in Montpellier. Finally, if an increase in users is to be anticipated, in the case of networks with high-capacity reserves, free service can lead to the vehicles being used at full capacity, thereby reducing the cost of the traveller.km, without requiring heavy additional investments. Moreover, the image of public transport does not seem to suffer from being free of charge, especially because such measures could be accompanied by an upgrading of the networks. Free transport offers a different experience of one's relation to buses and trams, which become real extensions of the public road space, because of their increased porosity through this measure. The fact that free public transport has been sustainable in many cities despite political change suggests that when implemented, it becomes part of the city's identity. Finally, from a material point of view, there is no evidence that vehicles on free networks are more degraded than those on paid ones: it seems that the increase in users induces a social control that plays a part in maintaining their condition.



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Free public transport would not radically change an economic model that relies largely on employers (through the Mobility Payment) and taxpayers. In France, the ratio between revenue & expenses is indeed very low (27% in 2019). But when A. Passalacqua mentions "a few cases" as exceptions, he cites Île-de-France and Lyon; Île-de-France accounts for 75% of the country's daily trips while Lyon is the main AOM (Organising Authority for Mobilities) outside of Île-de-France. As I showed in a recent report, it is the power and dynamism of the mobility payment that led to a downward trend in passenger revenues (they amounted to 70% in 1975). Free travel may lead to strong resistance from employers

regarding the mobility payment, considering that they are not intended to finance non work-related travel.



Philippe Duron

Free public transport has a very high cost that can reach several hundred million euros per year in large cities. In Paris, according to Mr. Rappoport for IdF Mobilités, this figure has even been estimated at over €3 billion per year. Receiving a subsidy from the AOM (Organising Authority for Mobilities) in place of fare revenues would be difficult to bear. The Belgian city of Hasselt stopped providing free public transport after thirteen years, because the cost to the community increased fourfold. Initially, some French cities opted against other investments to be able to finance it, such as giving up on a BHLS (Bus with high level of service) in Niort, or on a sports arena in Dunkirk. But this is only a short-term saving. More likely, free public transport would lead to a decrease in the quality of service, whether in terms of the frequency, regularity or schedules of daily transport. This is what the inhabitants of Geneva understood when they voted against free public transport in 2008. In a context where the fight against climate change and carbon emissions calls for doubling the modal share of public transport, priority must be given to developing the service, renewing the vehicles, creating digital tools, etc. All these things will require significant investments. Organizing authorities will need to perform a (r)evolution of public transport if they are to achieve carbon neutrality in 2050, a target of the European Green Deal. Free service is fundamentally changing the economic model of urban public transport, which is threefold: fares, budgetary public subsidies, and tax contributions from employers with over 10 employees through the Mobility Payment (versement mobilité). The latter is regularly called into question, especially by employers, but this would be extremely detrimental to the maintenance, modernization and development of public transport networks.



A. P

I agree that the mobility payment is regularly criticized during election cycles. But, if it were to be reformed, surely it would make more sense to broaden it, by including, for instance, shops and other consumer locations, so that the financing better matches people's practices, which are obviously not limited to commuting from home to work? In addition, free transport must be assessed in light of local contexts. The fact that free public transport does not seem well suited to Île-de-France does not mean that it would not be a useful measure elsewhere. This may explain why many cities have stuck with free public transport for long periods of time, despite political changes. Because, ultimately, these are political choices: free public transport is necessarily financed at the expense of something else. But what? We can cut one policy or another. But we can also rethink the network. Or even think differently about its development. Should it become digital and include a transition to electric batteries? Could there also be fewer technical choices available, so as to reduce investment costs? I think it is worth remembering that transport solutions should not be seen as answers to their own problems, but as means of satisfying the needs of individuals, under the best environmental conditions possible. The challenge of our society is to do better ecologically, using less carbon and energy. Depending on the case, free public transport can help us to go in this direction.

03. What can be learned from the experiences to date in terms of number of users, modal shift, user profiles and accessibility?



Arnaud Passalacqua

While there are a number of studies on the effects of making a service free, it is more difficult to identify the effects of free public transport policies that are actually implemented, because they operate in combination with various other levers and are part of specific contexts where data is not always readily available for comparison. What is clear, however, is that these measures do not lead to a massive modal shift away from cars. As with many other measures tested to date, such as shared mobility solutions (self-service bicycles, car sharing, etc.), the results in this sense remain modest. The main direct and quantitative effect seems to me to be the inclusive nature of the measure: it is first of all a social measure that allows everyone to get on board, by defusing the issue of unclaimed social tariffs. Therefore, after such measures are implemented, we observe mass use, which translates into strong increases in user volume in the first months. The network in question then has to stabilize its occupancy rate at a higher threshold than before, when access came at a charge. More precisely, it is likely that new uses will emerge, such as increased use at weekends by families for whom pricing represented a psychological barrier (even though this barrier is not necessarily justified), but we know that the price signal plays a strong role in the world of transport. Among the effects that are rarely discussed, we can look at driving professions. A recent study by the Observatory of Cities with Free Transport for Ademe shows that free transport gives bus drivers in Dunkirk greater control of their vehicle, by freeing them from having to sell tickets and control the passengers getting on – tasks which were often the source of negative experiences and stress. Free service is therefore also a measure that transforms how transport operators experience their work. On the other hand, these effects are still small compared to the massive climate and energy challenges we face. By itself, free public transport remains a limited measure because it does not involve any constraints on motorists. But combined with other measures, simultaneously or cumulatively over time, it can play a part, by sparking a broader debate on mobilities as well as on what is common and important for the community. It can be a lever for other measures and open up another way of thinking about urban planning. It can be seen as a counterpart to policies aimed at curbing car use: pedestrianization, restrictions on car use, urban tolls, rationing... In this sense, it can therefore be part of an environmental process.



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The fight against climate change requires a powerful modal shift. The EU's "Fit for 55" plan sets the target of having a modal share of 30% for public transport, while Switzerland, which is always exemplary in terms of transport, aims for 40%. France is far from reaching these goals and will need to mobilize significant financing, from Europe, the State, the local authorities as well as commercial revenues.



Philippe Duron

There are only a few cities that have implemented free public transport. They are of varying sizes, and some have done so very recently, with different goals: to facilitate the mobility of lower-income populations and young people, to enhance the attractiveness of the city center, to restore purchasing power to the inhabitants, to promote a modal shift. It is therefore premature to make a definitive assessment. While the number of users of public transport undoubtedly increases, the modal shift seems to be coming more from active mobilities (walking, cycling) than from cars. Finally, in the largest cities, the increase in users is only possible with a very expensive increase in capacity; this is the whole point of Rapid Express Services (which are like the regional RER trains for metropolitan areas), which are hard to finance. The cost of transport takes up an increasing share of household budgets. In a context where wages were severely squeezed after the 2008 crisis, a need to support low-income individuals can legitimize inclusive pricing, or even free service for those who need it most, such as students. But is it really necessary to extend free travel to all users, especially the wealthiest, for whom the cost of fares has little impact on their finances? Is the equality championed by the defenders of free public transport fair? I do not believe so.



A. P

In Philippe Duron's answer he outlines the kind of city where free public transport does not work: large cities, with an already heavy network that requires expensive extensions to encourage modal shift away from cars. Cities where strong social inequalities are also at play, and where therefore the most well-off benefit from the free service when they could instead be financing it. I also believe that in this kind of city free public transport is not an appropriate tool. However, in smaller cities, with a more homogeneous social fabric (not like in Île-de-France with its high percentages of executive-level workers), I think free public transport is worth considering in the construction of an effective mobility policy. But if we want it to have tangible effects, it cannot be implemented alone, without strong limitations on cars too. And even then, such effects will need to be measured, which will not be easy.

Associated Thematics :

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Philippe Duron

Politician

Philippe Duron was President of the Regional Council of Basse-Normandie, Mayor of Caen, President of Caen-la-Mer and Deputy for Calvados. In 2021, he submitted a report on the economic model of public transport to the French Minister Delegate for Transport.



Arnaud Passalacqua

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Arnaud Passalacqua is a Professor at the Paris School of Urban Planning (Lab'URBA/LIED), he specializes in mobility issues, with a long-term approach and trans-disciplinary concepts (public space, innovation, energy, collective representations, transnational movements...). His work focuses on various transport systems (urban transport, high-speed rail, etc.) in Western urban contexts.

To cite this publication :

Philippe Duron et Arnaud Passalacqua (13 April 2022), « Does free transport work? », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 19 January 2025, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/crossed-questions/15548/does-free-transport-work>

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