Have metropolitan mobility policies been redefined by the Covid pandemic?

12 avril 2024

Jean Debrie, Juliette Maulat

The pandemic precipitated a sudden, short-term shift in mobility. The immediate repercussions of the lockdown are widely documented: a substantial decrease in travel, partially supplanted by telecommunications; significant alterations in modal practices (increased walking and cycling, and decreased use of public transport and private vehicles); and a surge in short-distance trips. Throughout the crisis, numerous media outlets speculated about a transition towards a "post-Covid world" characterised by a new mobility paradigm. Examination of people's behaviours, drawing on national and local statistics available in 2023, reveals a change that is more modest. This change is marked by an acceleration of pre-existing trends (such as the rise of active modes, significant growth in teleworking, and the expansion of home delivery services) and the emergence of new trends partly associated with the proliferation of telework (such as a decrease in the total number of journeys and an increase in the frequency of short trips). Although these shifts are challenging to quantify over such a brief timeframe, they raise questions about the trajectory of so-called sustainable mobility policies.

This article examines the evolution of mobility policies since the onset of the pandemic, drawing on an analysis of agendas, tools, and projects within various French cities (Paris, Strasbourg, Rennes, Clermont-Ferrand, Grenoble, and Rouen), and supported by a corpus of documents [1]. These cases were chosen to represent cities of diverse sizes with varying histories and policies favouring alternatives to cars. These cities share the common characteristic of being governed by left-wing administrations (with mayors affiliated with either Socialist or Green parties). Notably, three of these cities (Paris, Strasbourg, and Grenoble) are under political majorities distinct from those of their central city governance. After outlining the primary changes in post-Covid mobility policies, the article sheds light on several ongoing controversies.

A shift in urban mobility policies?

The evolution of mobility policies in France in response to sustainability frameworks, and more recently, to transition frameworks established over the past two decades, has been documented in academic literature (Gallez, 2015; Reignier, Brenac, 2021; Debrie, Maulat, Berroir, 2020). This progression relies on a common toolbox deployed across most metropolitan contexts (the development of public transport, initiatives to promote cycling and walking, selective restrictions on car usage, urban densification, etc.). Implementation of these measures varies between city centres and suburbs: "historic city centres and secondary centralities need to be protected from cars, while suburbs require efficient road infrastructure and major junctions" (Reignier et al., 2013).

In this context, what have been the consequences of successive lockdowns on the direction of mobility policies? The first is a bolstering of initiatives aimed at promoting cycling and walking, along with accelerated implementation through the use of new tools such as temporary urban planning (Morio and Raimbault, 2021; Ortar and Rérat, 2023). The temporary cycling facilities established after the initial lockdown, commonly referred to as "corona lanes," and the reconfiguration of public spaces (such as widened pavements and expanded pedestrian areas) to address both mobility and social distancing requirements, have been partially maintained (Chapelon et al., 2023). Their sustained implementation over the long term has been facilitated by investments from municipalities and local mobility organising authorities (including metropolitan and other intercommunal bodies), often with co-financing from Regions and support from the State (through regulatory simplifications enabling the establishment of temporary lanes, increased resources allocated to cycling and walking in conjunction with the LOM law, and annual calls for projects related to active mobility). However, the degree to which metropolitan policies supporting cycling (such as RER Vélo, cycle lanes, equipment grants, and parking policies) are enacted varies from one city to another, influenced by their political trajectories, available resources, and the influence of environmental and user associations. For instance, in cities like Paris, Strasbourg, and Grenoble, the pandemic served to reinforce pre-existing cycling policies, whereas in other cities (Rouen, Rennes, and Clermont), the pandemic acted as a catalyst for the implementation of emerging cycling policies.

In light of this notable focus on cycling policies, the attention given to walking appears to have been comparatively limited, with an emphasis primarily on pedestrianisation policies alongside the promotion of commercial centres (Strale, 2017) [2]. Walking is still perceived "as a mechanism for attracting individuals to serene, commercial, and tourist-oriented city centres" (Chastenet et al., 2023 [3]), and is seldom regarded as a mode of transport on a metropolitan scale. Nevertheless, certain temporary measures implemented during the pandemic have become permanent fixtures, such as the expansion of pavements or the establishment of café terraces, both facilitating social distancing and allowing businesses to reopen, particularly restaurants and bars. While walking continues to receive minimal attention within mobility policies, recent announcements indicate its gradual integration into the national agenda (such as the 2023 Cycling and Walking Plan, ADEME's call for projects on "Everyday Walking", etc.) [4], with several studies presenting new operational perspectives [5]. In Strasbourg, although the metropolitan cycling plan was reaffirmed in June 2021 (objectives included a 20% modal share by 2030, an additional 120 kilometres of cycle paths within 5 years, and a budget of €100m), the city has also adopted a new Pedestrian Plan aimed at prioritising walking as the primary mode of transport (2021-2030).

The second major consequence of the pandemic has been the weakening of the public transport system [6]. This primarily stems from financial challenges, including a decline in fare revenues compounded by a recent surge in energy costs. However, it also relates to shifts in the operating model itself, which was faced with changes in public transport usage during the pandemic, particularly the proliferation of teleworking. The Institut Paris Région has identified a phenomenon of "peak days" alongside "peak hours," indicating increased network usage in Île-de-France on Tuesdays and Thursdays, correlating with teleworking practices [7]. This temporary deterioration of the public transport system reinforces pre-existing tensions surrounding urban mobility financing. These challenges are not exclusive to Île-de-France Mobilité, as illustrated by discussions during the region's conference on transport financing (the "Assises du financement des transports franciliens") [8], but are also being encountered by other metropolitan mobility organising authorities [9]. Despite the financial context, none of the cities have re-evaluated the investments pledged prior to the pandemic to modernise or expand their networks [10]; instead, they have postponed their timelines. Furthermore, the post-Covid period has witnessed the revival of metropolitan RER (regional train) projects, as demonstrated by the December 2023 law on metropolitan regional express services, which were under examination before the crisis. Although the financial viability of their implementation remains uncertain, this legislative framework supports various ongoing studies in cities such as Rouen and Rennes aimed at enhancing multimodal public transport services between city centres and suburbs, as well as various projects that are already underway, as in Strasbourg, which inaugurated the first section of its express network at the end of 2022.

Strong tensions: new logistical practices and automotive controversies

The cases studied also shed light on two key challenges for current mobility policies. Firstly, there is a notable trend of new logistical practices overtaking public initiatives. The significant growth in home delivery services since the pandemic has presented fresh urban challenges, such as the proliferation of facilities where delivery products are prepared or stored (referred to as "dark kitchens" or "dark stores") and the associated logistical flows: "the dark city or the risk of a city without shop windows," to quote a headline from La Gazette in December 2021. Additionally, these challenges have a social dimension, evident in heightened job insecurity and income instability experienced by delivery workers employed by home delivery platforms [11]. In 2022, disputes between France Urbaine, representing various urban communities in France, and the government regarding the classification of these new sites (as warehouses or urban logistics areas) and legal battles between the City of Paris and major dark store chains exemplified the complexity of these issues. National regulatory developments have clarified this ambiguity by legally categorising them as warehouses, gradually providing municipalities with tools to regulate these practices. However, this regulation fails to address the environmental and social concerns associated with such practices, which have largely been driven by a "mad dash" facilitated by virtually unrestricted access and a significant reduction in delivery times [12]

The second challenge arises from the tension stemming from increased regulation within the automotive industry. There have been numerous cases of residents, motorists, and elected officials advocating for the abandonment of temporary cycling facilities [13]. Recent controversies surrounding low-emission zones (ZFEs, for zones à faibles émissions) in

Paris, Rouen, and Grenoble further underscore the debates over reducing the dominance of cars in metropolitan areas, both within city centres and on the outskirts. This last point seems essential because, although not exclusively linked to the pandemic, it indicates that the Covid crisis now seems far away in view of the current economic landscape, characterised by returning inflation and escalating energy prices, alongside the implementation of car regulation policies like ULEZ.

Ever more selective mobility policies?

Analysing post-Covid metropolitan agendas raises the question of the longer-term direction of urban mobility policies. While observing changes in the agendas of French cities, it becomes evident that pre-existing trends (such as active modes, public transport, automobile regulation, and logistical agendas) have been accentuated. However, corresponding shifts in the overarching conceptual framework are absent, which would imply a broader discussion - still largely non-existent – about reducing mobility itself. In this regard, the toolbox for addressing mobility challenges remains relatively conventional, derived from sustainability policies, albeit with greater emphasis on active mobility. Despite the recent introduction of the transition's reference framework within the context of the climate emergency, as reflected in the local inter-municipal plans of the cities studied, there is no apparent alteration in these tools. This standardised approach is applied to varying degrees depending on the specific context of each city, with differentiating factors warranting further exploration. Cities employ distinct strategies for regulating urban mobility. Some have longstanding agendas promoting alternatives to cars (e.g., Paris, Strasbourg), others (e.g., Grenoble, Rennes) have significantly strengthened their efforts to promote active mobilities like city-wide cycling in response to the pandemic, while others (e.g., Rouen, Clermont-Ferrand) have recently and swiftly prioritised this issue on their agendas within the context of transition policies. Furthermore, differences in political majorities between city centres and inter-municipalities can lead to contentious debates regarding the mobility agenda, as observed between the majorities of Grenoble and its Métropole, or between Paris and the Île-de-France region. Despite these differentiating factors, two developments contribute to a degree of standardisation in metropolitan action: first, the consolidation of the inter-municipal level as the authority responsible for organising mobility, and second, the alignment between the pandemic and the 2020 municipal elections, resulting in an increased number of green party officials elected to office in the cities studied. However, it is crucial to note the selective nature of urban mobility policies. The dualisation of public policies observed in recent years - between pacified urban centres that encourage active mobilities and which have accessible public transport, and car-dependent urban peripheries with limited alternatives - persists. Several major road projects remain underway on the outskirts of the cities studied (such as the Strasbourg and Rouen bypasses). Consequently, the question of the generalisation of mobility policies across all territories of the metropolitan area is particularly pertinent, especially considering that the increase in local travel since the pandemic has predominantly occurred in the suburbs.

Bibliography

Chapelon L., Depeau S., Feidel B., Lammoglia A., Lucas M., Ortar N., Poisson A., 2023 "Tactical cycling urbanism and the health crisis" ["Tactical cycling urban planning and the health crisis"], Mobile Lives Forum, 25 September 2023. URL: https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/project/15930/tactical-cycling-urbanism-and-health-crisis

Debrie J., Maulat J., Berroir S., 2020, "Les politiques urbaines face à l'automobile : objectifs, outils et controverses de l'action publique dans les métropoles de Bruxelles et Paris" ["Urban policies in the face of cars: goals, tools, and controversies of public action in the cities of Brussels and Paris"], Flux, n°119-120, pp. 102-120.

Gallez, 2015, La mobilité quotidienne en politique. Des manières de voir et d'agir [Everyday mobility in politics: ways of seeing and acting, HDR dissertation], HDR dissertation, url: https ://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01261303/document

Kaufmann V., 2020, "lockdown", Dictionary of terms on mobility, Mobile Lives Forum, https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/dictionary/13661/lockdown

Morio L. and Raimbault N., 2021, "Plus de place pour le vélo en ville? Covid-19, mise à l'agenda et mise en œuvre des politiques cyclables en France" ["More space for bicycles in cities? COVID-19, agenda setting, and implementation of cycling policies in France"], Droit et Ville, vol. 91, no. 1, 2021, pp. 179-200.

Ortar N. and Rérat P. eds, 2023, Cycling through the Pandemic, Springer, 254 p.

Reigner H., Thierry Brenac, 2021, Les faux semblants de la mobilité durable [The false appearances of sustainable mobility], éditions de la Sorbonne, 288 p.

Reigner H., Thierry Brenac, Frédérique Hernandez, 2013, Nouvelles idéologies urbaines. Dictionnaire critique de la ville mobile, verte et sûre [New urban ideologies: A critical dictionary of the mobile, green, and safe city], Presses Universitaires de Rennes. Strale M., 2017, "La piétonnisation contre les habitants" ["Pedestrianisation against the residents"], Lava Media. [Online] (accessed 30 March 2020), https://lavamedia.be/fr/la-pietonnisation-contre-les-habitants

Authors Jean Debrie Jean Debrie is a professor of urban planning and development at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and a member of the Géographie-Cités joint research unit. His research focuses on the relationship between transport and development, on metropolitan mobility policies and on urban planning in river and port cities (city-river-port interfaces) using a comparative approach (Europe and North America).

Juliette Maulat Juliette Maulat is a lecturer in urban planning and development at the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne and a member of the Géographie-Cités joint research unit. She studies mobility policies, the relationship between transport and development and urban production around infrastructure. Her current research focuses on the way in which various transport operators capture capital gains on land and property in European cities.

Notes

1 This study is part of the Monde d'Avant Monde d'Après (MAMA, 2021-2024) programme funded by the CNRS Institute of Human and Social Sciences. The case studies were the subject of work by the authors and by students (collective or individual) of the Master's degree in urban planning and development at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

2 On this subject, listen to the podcast (in French) "What is a walking policy after the lockdowns", with Jenny Leuba: https://forumviesmobiles.org/podcasts/15794/quest-ce-

quune-politique-de-la-marche-apres-les-confinements

3 https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/project/15744/making-walking-pillar-transition-greener-and-more-desirable-lifestyless

4 ADEME call for projects "Everyday Walking" to co-finance studies and experiments to promote walking. https://agirpourlatransition.ademe.fr/collectivites/aides-financieres/20230327/marche-quotidien

5 CEREMA, 2022, Pedestrian plans: towards more walkable towns and cities; ADEME, 2022, in action, putting pedestrians at the heart of public space creation; Institut Paris Région, 2022, Walking territories in Île-de-France

6 For more on this subject, listen to the podcast (in French) "Has Covid brought public transport to a standstill?", with Annelise Avril and David Henny: https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/podcasts/15423/did-covid-cause-public-transport-grind-halt

7 Institut Paris Region, 2021, "Des heures de pointe aux jours de pointe" [From rush hours to rush days], Short note n°923.

8 https://www.iledefrance-mobilites.fr/decouvrir/assises-financement-transports-franciliens-2024-2030

9 As concluded by two recent reports, one by the French Senate on the financing of mobility organising authorities (Rapport d'information sur les modes de financement des autorités organisatrices de la mobilité, July 2023) and one by the French National Assembly on transport funding methods in France (Rapport d'information sur les modalités de financement des transports en France, June 2023).

10 https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/podcasts/15423/did-covid-cause-public-transport-grind-halt

11 Forum Vies Mobiles, Being a bicycle delivery rider: passion or exploitation?, 2021 https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/project/13524/being-bicycle-delivery-rider-passion-or-exploitation

12 "Zéro frais, zéro délai, la course folle de la livraison" [« Zero fees, zero delay, the mad dash of delivery »], Alternatives Économiques, December 2021.

13 In Grenoble, for example, the city of Grenoble and the metropolitan authority have clashed over the removal of the temporary cycle path known as Tempovélo from the quays on the left bank of the Isère river. In Paris, the permanent installation of previously temporary cycle lanes on the Avenue de Saint-Ouen has also been the subject of debate, as in other towns in the Île-de-France region such as Noisy-le Grand, Drancy, Argenteuil and Puteaux.

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.

En savoir plus x

Active Mobility

Active mobility refers to all forms of travel that require human energy (i.e. non-motor) and the physical effort of the person moving. Active mobility occurs via modes themselves referred to as "active," namely walking and cycling.

En savoir plus x

Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people's freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people's lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

En savoir plus x

Teleworking

The remote performance of a salaried activity outside of the company's premises, at home or in a third place during normal working hours and requiring access to telecommunication tools.

En savoir plus x

Associated Thematics :

Policies

- Cars
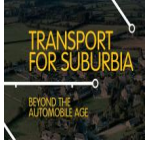- Paris and Île-de-France
- Public transport
- Cycling & Walking

Other publications

Saudi Arabia: How is Mobility Being Transformed in the Oil Kingdom?

Aniss Mouad Mezoued, Mobile Lives Forum

Transport for Suburbia: Beyond the Automobile Age, by Paul Mess

Javier Caletrío

Geopolitics and electric vehicles: the rise of climate protectionism

Xabier Gangoiti, Graham Parkhurst

Can universities learn to leave behind air travel?

Tamara Ben Ari, Parke Wilde

1 https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01261303/document