

# **POLITICISATION AS A STIMULUS FOR URBAN TRANSPORT POLICY. THE CASE OF LIGHT RAIL PROJECTS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The diffusion of light rail in France highlights a rather original phenomena that can be defined as a politicisation process. Indeed, what used to be a transport-rationale policy solution, the French Standard Tramway, has been attributed with a wider and wider range of qualities : it would trigger urban renewal in deprived areas or derelict city-centres, it would develop shopping and small businesses along its route, it would provide added value for housing, it would embellish historical areas and attract tourists, it would foster civic pride among citizens and competitiveness of the whole city, and even more. More generally, light rail seems to have gained a very privileged status in the global discourse on urban sustainability.

In this paper, this evolution is illustrated through many examples of local debates or controversies on light rail projects. It is also discussed in regard of its impact on the expert knowledge field and on current debates related to "communicative rationality" in transport planning.

*Keywords: Light Rail Transit, Tramway, Urban Transport Policy, Decision Process, Expertise, Arguments, Politicisation*

## INTRODUCTION

In European cities, public transport is a well-established policy sector with its institutional framework, its expertise tools and its specialised actors. It is also fraught with controversies on the respective relevance of the multiple technologies available: suburban rail, metro, light rail transit (LRT), bus rapid transit (BRT), conventional bus... Controversies dwell on the technology choice, but they also break out about the possible routes along which the new infrastructure could be implemented, and the level of segregation from the rest of the traffic – with the "classical" on-street/underground opposition. To illustrate this kind of controversies, one can quote the city of Quebec, where the local authorities have been dithering about the "best" mode to adopt for more than a decade. Another example is the debate on Paris' tramway route, between the "boulevards des Maréchaux" (Paris' inner ring road) and the "Petite Ceinture" (a former peripheral railway alignment) options. The two rival projects and their proponents – the debate occurred within every organisation involved<sup>1</sup> – were opposed during six years (Zittoun 2008).

However, light rail projects, on which this paper wants to dwell, are not always controversial. On the contrary, the example of France during the 2008 local elections campaign seems to attest that light rail has become a widely shared policy "recipe", or at least a frontrunner in political manifestos. Indeed, a light rail scheme was proposed at least by one candidate in 37 cities<sup>2</sup>. A reader of the French regional newspapers would have the same impression of quite a broad consensus. More widely, new projects seem to convince an ever larger number of cities throughout Europe<sup>3</sup>. Considering the source of conflict that public transport projects can easily turn to be, considering the fate of the former tramway networks in West-European cities, how this has been possible? Why has light rail gained such a force as a policy solution?

Such a questioning raises a wide range of issues and can be explored through many ways. In this paper, we want to focus the analysis on a peculiar aspect of what can be described as the light rail success. Our hypothesis is that *from project to project this policy solution has been to some extent politicised*. Politicisation here is not especially linked with conflict. It is a kind of policy-learning process according to which an ever wider set of arguments is linked to a policy solution, which is then promoted as an ingredient of "the common good" rather than

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<sup>1</sup> The main actors were the STIF ("Syndicat des transports d'Île-de-France": Paris region's transport authority), the City Council of Paris, the RATP ("Régie autonome des transports parisiens": the state-controlled company that operates Paris' underground and bus networks) and the SNCF ("Société nationale des chemins de fer français": the French national railway operator).

<sup>2</sup> Estimation from the article "Les promesses des nouveaux élus" ("The promises of the newly elected candidates") in *Ville et Transports Magazine*, n°44, 9 April 2008, pp.36-45. 52 This figure concerns cities where at least one candidate for mayor has explicitly mentioned the idea of implementing a first or a new tramway line (but the same idea can be defended by many competing lists). In 15 other cities, the candidates were suggesting to build a public transport scheme with a dedicated route, without any precision on the nature of the rolling stock (light rail, bus rapid transit, trolleybus...) or with a preference for another mode than light rail.

<sup>3</sup> Among the multiple examples, one can quote Athens (2004), Barcelona (2004), Dublin (2004), Edinburgh (2011), Florence (2009), Hamburg (project 2014), Luxemburg (project 2014), Tenerife (2007)...

as a rationale response to a precise divisible/tractable problem or social need. This evolution is strongly connected with the content of expert knowledge related to urban transport, in such a combination that it is not possible to ascribe a primary causality to politicisation over expertise design. To support this hypothesis, we will mobilise some accounts of three case-studies, three decision processes we have thoroughly analysed: the light rail projects of Grenoble, Marseille and Dublin. On each field, we have especially paid attention to the discussions about what can be expected from the solution, the arguments exchanged, and the dynamic it creates. For factual details about each project, we suggest a brief look at the figure annexed to this paper. We will also recall some historical elements of the re-introduction of light rail in 1970's France.

In a first part, we will show that the "tramway moderne" that has been re-invented at that time suffered from three main weaknesses. Promoted at the national level (Department of Transport) as a transport solution, it has not been very warmly received at the local level (I-1). Our three cases reflect the divisive dimension of light rail, a policy solution that convey contradictions one could argue they are inherent in urban space (I-2). In a second part, we will detail and illustrate the mechanisms of the politicisation process that can be highlighted from the middle of the 1990's in France (II-1). Drawing a lesson from controversies and politicisation, we will establish a typology of expert-knowledge concerning light rail projects and we will discuss it by the yardstick of ideas on participatory planning and communicative rationality (II-2 and conclusion).

## **LIGHT RAIL AS A CONTROVERSIAL TRANSPORT SOLUTION IN URBAN SPACE**

### **The re-invention of light rail as a transport solution**

As in many West-European countries, historical tramway networks have been removed from French cities soon after World War II – except in Paris where the decision was effective as soon as 1937. Consequently, when the Department of Transports starts to be interested in a "modern" version of the object, in the middle of the 1970's, tramway has disappeared almost everywhere<sup>4</sup>. At that time however, it ends up reaching the national political agenda thanks to a framing process that qualify it as an adapted response to the – then – perceived problems.

To explain this undertow, among many factors, it is important to recall the previous period. Indeed, between 1965 and 1975, while traffic is getting more and more intense in city centres, while public transport networks face a severe drop of their patronage as car-ownership is rising, as buses are often stuck in traffic jams, public authorities nurture intense expectations about a genuine technological breakthrough that would reverse the situation. From this perspective, many innovative modes are experimented: light automatic metro, monorail, overhead metro, "mini"-metro, personal rapid transit vehicles... One can find a link between this technological ambition and other famous R&D programs of the period such as

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<sup>4</sup> In Lille, Marseille and Saint-Étienne, one line has been maintained.

Concord or TGV. Innovations in urban transport are targeted on cities that are not considered big enough to get the standard metro as Paris, Lyon and Marseille<sup>5</sup>, that is to say cities with a population ranging from 300,000 to 1,000,000 inhabitants. The prototypes are generously financed by the Department of Transport and the General Directorate for Research and Technology<sup>6</sup>. However, all those innovations finally appear as costly, not operational in the short term and very difficult to implement. They are denounced as myths, idle fancies that are not without convenience to reduce the existing tensions on urban transport issues (Godard, Naessany 1974).

Precisely, it is in reaction to such a "technological deadlock" that in 1975, the Department of Transport, with Marcel Cavaillé<sup>7</sup> as undersecretary of State, decides to change its stance and to promote a rather well-trying solution. Does this evolution put the tramway back on tracks? Actually, at this stage, the Department chooses to use a cautiously crafted formula: "modern tramway". An official mail is thus sent to eight cities that could consider the "new" solution, in order to test their interest<sup>8</sup>. Soon after this mail, the Department issues a public tender directed towards transport manufacturers, asking them to design a new guided vehicle likely to equip the volunteer cities. This tender has become famous as the "concours Cavaillé". It is nowadays considered as the first step towards the "French Standard Tramway", the vehicle that will eventually be adopted by four cities, Nantes being the first in the list<sup>9</sup>. To explain the different stages that lead from the "concours Cavaillé" to the first delivery of the French Standard Tramway ten years after, would require much more than the few pages of this paper. However, about this light rail's agenda-setting process, there are three main points we want to insist on in order to understand the consecutive local "fate" of the solution.

The first point is that the Department of Transport's initiatives constitute a precise framing of the solution. Indeed, the guidelines insist on a crucial dimension: the new system has to enjoy a dedicated right of way and priority devices at crossroads in order to avoid traffic congestion. A dedicated infrastructure means that the system will be most of the time separated from the other modes of transport, but that it has to share the street-level with them, on the contrary of previous overhead or underground technologies. This principle is defended as "a condition for the success of a tramway solution"<sup>10</sup>. Otherwise, the system has

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<sup>5</sup> Metro projects emerge in these two last cities at the end of the sixties.

<sup>6</sup> DGRST is another Government's service at that time.

<sup>7</sup> Marcel Cavaillé, born in 1927, is a centre-right politician (politically close to the new President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing), at that time senator of Haute-Garonne (Toulouse). He stays Undersecretary of State for Transport from 1974 to 1978.

<sup>8</sup> The eight cities are Bordeaux, Grenoble, Nancy, Nice, Rouen, Strasbourg, Toulon and Toulouse. Nantes, where a metro project was less than more on the agenda, was not in the first list but asked almost immediately for being part of the initiative.

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in 1976, the Department of Transport selects *Alstom's* bid as the official supply for cities interested by "tramway moderne" – even if the prototype is then called "light metro" and not "tramway". This choice reveals what can be considered as a Government strategy at that time: to create a labelled standard system that could be subsequently exported as the successful product of the "national railway champion", *Alstom* (furthermore, *Alstom* will be nationalised between 1982 and 1987). Nantes is the first city to express some interest for the modern tramway. A first line comes into operation in 1985, a second one in 1989.

<sup>10</sup> *L'utilisation des véhicules légers sur rails (tramways modernes) pour la desserte urbaine* ("Using light rail vehicles – modern tramways – for urban transport"), Direction des Transports Terrestres et Institut de Recherche des Transports pour le Secrétariat d'État aux Transports, May 1975, 21 p.

to be electricity-propelled, and to ensure a certain level of travel need: from 5,000 to 10,000 passengers per hour. Considered together, proper on-street infrastructure, high passengers capacity (at least higher than bus) and electricity supply are three criteria that define a transport solution, explicitly designed to tackle transport problems in middle-size agglomerations. Thus, at its origins, light rail in France is framed as an economically and technically rationale solution, relevant for a certain transport need.

The second point is that the 1975's initiatives are not followed by a very dynamic strategy of promotion. Indeed, though one can identify some logic considering the previous "technological utopia" sequence, contingency seems to have prevailed in the re-emergence of light rail as a policy solution at the national level. A councillor of M. Cavaillé ("chef de cabinet") explains, for example, that the initial working group has been set up after an "ENA<sup>11</sup> alumni type" discussion he had with President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing on December 8<sup>th</sup> 1974<sup>12</sup>. At the beginning of its mandate, the President was keen on new initiatives, especially when they could help to substitute electricity to fuel and reduce the dependency of the country towards Middle-East oil resources<sup>13</sup>. However, light rail is a very peripheral issue for him, and after May 1976 he does not pay great attention to the marketing of the *Alsthom's* vehicle labelled by "his" Department of Transport. M. Cavaillé as well, though he seats in Toulouse's City Council, does not consider himself as a "militant" of the light rail's cause<sup>14</sup>. Above all, there is no specific budget that could urge local authorities to seize the new policy solution.

The third point is that in the context of France 1970's, the idea of "tramway moderne" suffers from three major weaknesses, which represent as many costs for the local actors potentially interested. As a matter of fact, "tramway" is a heavily connoted word. In French cities, it reminds something antiquated, slow, rattling and dangerous. Many of the mayors who need to be convinced have personally directed the removal of their city's historical network. Furthermore, the condition of dedicated ways seems controversial if not explosive at that time. Implementing light rail on a proper layout implies to be ready for conflict with local residents, retailers and car users. Finally, a "tramway moderne" project appears to be a heavy burden on the electoral field, especially if the election occurs during the highly disruptive construction phase. Such a fear is predominant from 1975 ; it is somehow substantiated by the defeat of Nantes' mayor in 1983, precisely while the first line is at works.

The feeble support and the weaknesses of the solution re-invented in 1975 explain certainly much of the difficulties faced by light rail in the following years. Indeed, apart from Nantes we have already quoted, very few projects become reality: two lines in Grenoble (1987 and

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<sup>11</sup> ENA is "École nationale d'administration" the graduate school that trains high civil servants , since 1945.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Raymond Guitard, born in 1922, "chef de cabinet" of the Undersecretary of State for Transport (1974-1975), chairman of the working group on "tramway moderne". Interview on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2009 in Toulouse. The date of the discussion is precise since it was the day of the "Fête des Lumières" in Lyons, also the day when the "Conseil d'État" gave its approval to the South-East TGV's route (Paris – Lyon).

<sup>13</sup> It has to be remembered that at that time, September 1973 oil crisis is omnipresent in the reasoning of public actors.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Marcel Cavaillé, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2009, Toulouse. In 1985, M. Cavaillé votes with the majority of Toulouse Transport Authority's executive council in favour of the VAL rather than light rail.

1990), one in Seine-Saint-Denis (Saint-Denis – Bobigny, Paris North-East suburbs, 1992) and two lines in Rouen (1994). Besides, in this last case, the project is christened as "metro", as if the local transport authority was shameful of its "simple" tramway. However, we argue that *the very framing of the solution was also a cause of its relative failure*. As a first set of elements supporting this idea, we now come to the content of the controversies surrounding light rail projects.

## **Conflicts on the solution and their implications**

Indeed, public disputes have an important property: they highlight the fact that a same object can be expected or dreaded according to a very diverse range of arguments. In the case of light rail, they show that the solution can be envisaged as much more than a transport solution. What kind of controversies can be observed? From the experience of our three cases, it is possible to distinguish two main categories of conflict. The first one concerns disputes on the relevance of light rail as an efficient transport solution, as the most adequate response to traffic congestion or alternative to car-use. The second category concerns disputes on light rail's side effects, or expectations else than the "transport people from A to B" function of the object.

In the first category we can find controversies such as the "Tram against VAL" that animates public debate in Bordeaux, Nice, Strasbourg, Rennes and Toulouse, all the 1980's long. VAL ("Véhicule Automatique Léger" or "Light Automatic Vehicle") is the light metro developed by *Matra Transportation*, subsidiary of the French arms manufacturer. During more than a decade, with various results<sup>15</sup>, local actors argue in favour of one solution or another. What is important for our general point is that in such controversies, these actors debate principally on transport-efficiency grounds. VAL is compared with tramway regarding its speed, capacity and likely costs (investment/operation). It is also promoted as an embodiment of modernity, while tramway would have nothing modern but the label the Department of Transports has hardly attempted to put forward. In this way, the debates in these five cities are quite similar with the discussions that lead to put light rail on the local political agenda in Marseille and Dublin. Indeed, in the Phocian city light rail becomes an option only when the metro dynamic (two lines built between 1974 and 1992) fades away because of its growing impact on the City Council's finances, while in the Irish capital it becomes "a serious runner"<sup>16</sup> in 1990, soon after the Government's decision to stop the extension of the DART system<sup>17</sup>. At this

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<sup>15</sup> Rennes and Toulouse end up to choose the VAL while Bordeaux and Strasbourg finally vote for the tramway after a dramatic reversal of situation. Nice will also prefer a LRT scheme, but a long time after (first line inaugurated in 2007).

<sup>16</sup> The expression is formulated by Professor Simon Perry, head of the Department of Civil Engineering in Trinity College, after a conference on light rail (June 1990). S. Perry, died in 2002, is one of the early promoters of light rail in Dublin. He is part of the "People First Initiative", a citizen's mobilisation against dual carriageway projects (especially a very controversial "Eastern By-pass") and in favour of public transport (1990-1995).

<sup>17</sup> DART means Dublin Area Rapid Transit. It is a heavy rail electrified system – rather equivalent of the French RER. A first line is built on "classical" railways and inaugurated in 1984. At that time, CIÉ (Córas Iompair Éireann), Ireland's national public transport operator (Irish Rail + Dublin Bus + Bus Éireann), is seeking the Government's approval and budget for a four lines DART-network with a central underground "hub" under Temple Bar, the central "cultural" district of Dublin. In 1987, the Government, then led by Fianna Fáil, decides to abandon any extension within a very severe and restrictive "budget package".

stage, in Marseille and Dublin, light rail appears relevant primarily because it costs less than heavier modes. On the same scale, light rail is sometimes compared with "lighter" and cheaper solutions, like in Nancy. In this city, a three-line trolleybus network with some dedicated corridors is inaugurated, in 1983. The local transport authority has established its choice on costs grounds, but also according to a topographical argument: the city-centre is surrounded by many hills, and the average slope of some streets would not allow the passage of a tramway-type vehicle. Finally, light rail is assessed according to its potential impact on roads and parking space. Controversies appear when some local actors consider that the solution is not only an alternative to car-use, but also an unacceptable limitation because of the space it removes from cars, goods vehicles or buses in city centre. The "Luas"<sup>18</sup> story in Dublin is a good illustration of such debate. Indeed, between 1996 and 1998, the relative consensus that has emerged from the Dublin Transportation Initiative (DTI, a four-year quite participatory planning process) is completely undermined. Some experts, business representatives, the Irish Automobile Association and a part of the governing coalition from June 1997<sup>19</sup> argue that an on-street light rail in the heart of the city would impede the general traffic and provoke a massive worsening of the congestion. It would especially completely disorganise the existing bus network. Finally, after very tough disputes in local media and political arenas, a compromise is found in May 1998. The light rail line is cut into two sections (the future Red and Green Lines) that do not meet in the city centre until an underground link or a new metro line is built. At any stage of the debate, the analysis of the arguments exchanged shows that as in 1970's France, light rail's impact on road space is rather considered as a cost (to compare with the underground option) than as a benefit.

Thus, in this first category of controversies, and whatever are some specific arguments, light rail is comparable to other modes of transport. A dominant representation in the systems of actors concerned is that there would be a best rationale solution for the transport needs that can be deduced from patronage analysis, demand modelling and technology assessment. On this aspect, in the 1970's, Grenoble is not that different from the other cities quoted. Actually, there is nevertheless an important difference: the size of the city and the geology of its location are an important constraint for an underground solution. This difference explains why light rail faces a less competitive arena for agenda-setting, and partly why the solution is finally adopted in 1981 – and validated by a local referendum in 1983. Anyway, at this stage, tramway is also debated from a transport-efficiency point of view. Indeed, a feasibility study by the agency for urbanism "unveils" that the system would reduce the operating costs of public transport thanks to greater passenger capacities and a lesser need for drivers than the existing bus network<sup>20</sup>. However, Grenoble is an interesting case because once adopted, the solution continues to be discussed, and is little by little shaped on noticeably renewed lines of arguments.

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<sup>18</sup> Luas means "speed" in Irish. It is the name of the LRT system from the end of 1996.

<sup>19</sup> The main political party engaged against an on-street light rail transit system in the city centre is the Progressive Democrats. This (economically and socially) liberal party is the minor partner of the centre-right coalition that governs from 1997 onwards (the coalition is lead by the Fianna Fáil, Ireland's main party).

<sup>20</sup> *Étude de faisabilité d'un tramway moderne* (Feasibility Study), Agence d'urbanisme pour le Syndicat mixte des transports en commun de la région grenobloise, 1980.

Here we come to our second category of controversies. In this category, conflicts usually break out *after* light rail has been selected as a generic solution, during the project phase. They can concern some issues related to transport, such as the accessibility to disabled persons. In 1982's Grenoble for instance, a group of local associations raises a strong mobilisation reclaiming a genuine accessibility to the future scheme. But conflicts can also fall on issues without any clear connections with transport needs. Indeed, discussing a light rail project raises almost inevitably questions on urban design, housing, the economy, and more generally on the global functioning of the city. To illustrate this kind of controversies, one can quote the case of Marseille, where the light rail's project that emerges from 1995<sup>21</sup> is criticized by some city centre residents and by left parties in the City Council. According to the opponents, the selected route, being redundant with the existing metro lines, would not answer Marseille's public transport needs. It would rather be devoted to a hidden agenda: forcing the poorer (and immigrant) part of population to leave the city's central neighbourhoods. On the contrary, the promoters of the route explain that it will foster urban renewal and attract richer people, a good point for social mixing. Another example is the debate that divides Grenoble's City Council about an extension of the second tramway line towards "Europole", an emerging business district. In 1990-1991, the promoters of this option argue that for a business district aspiring to world-class (well, at least to be the main executive centre for Grenoble) light rail is a necessity, an essential ingredient for the status that is ambioned. The opponents answer that no matter the competitiveness requirements, the patronage forecasts do not justify the investment – except if the Council decides to add some housing to the office blocks in the project. Last but not least, Grenoble's case offers a third example of "non-directly-related-to-transport" controversy. Between 1996 and 1998, a suburban municipality, Saint-Martin d'Hères (population 35,000), pleads in favour of a light rail route that would serve the centre of its territory. The city councillors' main argument is that their town needs a tramway line for a very ambitious urban project: to create a new centrality that could balance the development of the agglomeration. Once again, the problem is that before the 1,000 or so apartments are completed (with shops, offices and public equipments), the travel demand is bound to be very low, while some other routes would achieve immediately better performances (especially the route to the university campus).

All these examples are somehow classical, archetypical of the debates surrounding public transport. They illustrate the problems faced by any transport solution, but particularly the difficulties it faces when confronted with the complexity of urban spaces. Indeed, transport rationality is especially difficult to "import" within cities, where it meets an irreducible plurality of entrenched issues. Such a statement is not a revolutionary one, authors like Jean-Claude Thoenig had already noticed the resistance faced by "Ponts et Chaussées" engineers in 1970's France, when they tried to apply their technical-economical know-how to urban highways (Thoenig 1973). A more singular idea is that light rail transit, in our opinion, has managed to overcome most of the controversies it generates. In France at least, albeit it has been "invented" as a transport-rationale policy solution, it has become a global recipe that is in many cities strong and coherent enough to overwhelm oppositions and contenders. How

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<sup>21</sup> The project is not precisely designed and promoted until summer 2000, that is to say six months before the 2001 local elections. After 2001, the transport authority is not any more the City Council, but the new Urban Community ("Communauté urbaine") that gathers Marseille and 16 neighbouring Councils.



this has been possible? It is time to illustrate the process we have theoretically introduced: politicisation.

## **POLITICISATION AS A FORCE FOR THE SOLUTION AND ITS LINK WITH EXPERTISE**

### **Politicisation as the aggregation of new expectations to the solution**

The controversies we have quoted show the limits of light rail as a transport-rationale policy solution, and some of the obstacles it meets on local scenes. On the other hand, controversies have to be considered as empirical tests for the solution. We go further: they can contribute to change the solution. As a matter of fact, they can be the root of some policy learning phenomena, and nurture new types of discourse towards light rail.

An example of such impacts is the controversy on light rail's accessibility in Grenoble. Indeed, urged by the social movement we have already evoked, the local transport authority negotiates an adaptation of the French Standard Tramway with *Alstom*. Now, thanks to public subsidies<sup>22</sup>, the constructor accepts to pilot a R&D program that leads on to the invention of a partially low-floor vehicle, with access pallets to help wheeling chairs or elderly people to get in. From 1987, Grenoble is thus the first city in Europe to be equipped with a fully accessible LRT system. For the point we are trying to make, the sequence is significant. It shows that a controversy about what can be expected from light rail can end up with a shared objective that is henceforth closely linked with the object. The initial argument, *light rail has to be accessible*, has been transformed into a strong collective belief, *light rail is an accessible policy solution*. In this case, this collective belief is even "acknowledged" by a physical innovation, the low-floor and the pallets.

This sequence is typical of a policy learning process. It can be triggered by a controversy, but it can also start with a striking but unexpected phenomenon. Many episodes illustrate this second case. Among them, some deserve a special focus since they happened to convert the initial weaknesses of light rail into decisive advantages. Indeed, almost from the early days of the modern tramway idea, the Department of Transport, the industrials and the local authorities involved have tried to reverse the tramway's old-fashioned image. Their effort relies on an important investment on vehicles and stations' design, but also on a very intense rhetoric of modernity. Thereby, *Alstom* enlists the designer of the TGV, Jacques Cooper, to contrive the French Standard Tramway. The CETUR<sup>23</sup>, the State's main expertise centre on urban transport, is charged to make a movie in order to "emphasize the technological gap

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<sup>22</sup> The Department of Transport puts 50% of the whole budget on the table. *Alstom* accepts to finance 30% from its own resources. The rest (20%) is paid by Grenoble's local transport authority, but the agreement allows that the sum will be partially refunded by the three next local authorities that will acquire the French Standard Tramway (5% for Nantes, Rouen and RATP in the case of the Saint-Denis – Bobigny line).

<sup>23</sup> CETUR means "Centre d'études sur les transports urbains et l'urbanisme" (Centre for Studies on Urban Transport and Urbanism). In 1994, the CETUR becomes the CERTU, "Centre d'études sur les réseaux, les transports, l'urbanisme et les constructions publiques" (Centre for Studies on Networks, Transport, Urbanism and Public Works).

that separates the modern tramway with ancient tramcars (noise, comfort...) <sup>24</sup>. In Grenoble, the transport authority insists on the idea that the new light rail system introduces "vanguard equipment" <sup>25</sup>. Both other weaknesses are overcome after the inauguration of Strasbourg's light rail and its nationwide impact. Indeed, in 1989, the municipal election is won by Catherine Trautmann (socialist candidate) over the incumbent mayor, Marcel Rudloff (Christian-democrat). Yet, while M. Rudloff was defending a VAL project, C. Trautmann favours a light rail scheme coupled with a reorganisation of the city centre's traffic plan. In 1994, the first line is inaugurated and greeted by the whole national media sphere. For instance, one can quote an editorial of *Le Monde*: "It is metallic grey and green as moss. It has a sharp muzzle, immense tinted windows that offer the city's scenery to the eyes of the passengers, a name old like nostalgia but a forthcoming millennium's allure" <sup>26</sup>. The article is titled "a streetcar named Trautmann", as if the mayor was in position to personalise the change brought by the new infrastructure. Yet, six months later, the municipal election is a landslide for her. With such an outcome, Strasbourg is a significant stage in a long-term process: from 1994-1995, the costs of light rail as a policy solution have turned into opportunities. Concerning the impact on road space, Grenoble's third line project ("Tram 3") is even more impressive. Indeed, one can consider that the route on the city's boulevards has not been selected *despite its impact* but to a large extent *precisely because of the impact* on car traffic – or at least on the road's share of public realm.

Actually, the process is not limited to the initial weaknesses of the solution. In particular, it intertwines more and more tramway projects with urban issues. We call it "politicisation" because local politicians are increasingly in frontline of light rail's promotion, but above all because the registers of justification they mobilise are not mainly if not anymore connected to transport rationality. They rely on something much less precise that can be defined as the "common good" of the city. Consequently, light rail seems to be not anymore comparable to the metro or to the bus, as the director of "Mission Métro-Tramway" (technical service in charge of the light rail project) in Marseille explains:

Metro and light rail do not have the same use, at all. Metro does not take the city into account. On the contrary, light rail allows a kind of wandering through the city's landscape. The functions are totally different. Our choice has been to regenerate the city and its centre with strong and structuring actions. <sup>27</sup>

The "new" urban expectations are visible in the example of Marseille's tramway route through the "Canebière" and the "rue de la République" – contested as we have mentioned for its

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<sup>24</sup> Account of the 1<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Technical Committee for the French Standard Tramway, 18 October 1982.

<sup>25</sup> *Une ville et un tramway. Dossier d'information sur la réalisation du Tramway de l'Agglomération Grenobloise* (A City and a Tramway. Information file on the conception of a light rail system for Grenoble's agglomeration), SMTC, Grenoble, January 1988, 20 p.

<sup>26</sup> GEORGES Pierre, "Un tramway nommé Trautmann" (A streetcar named Trautmann) in *Le Monde*, 26<sup>th</sup> November 1994, p.24.

<sup>27</sup> Interview of Jean-Michel Kuntzer, director of the "Mission Métro-Tramway" (Urban Community of Marseille) in CACHOUT René, "Jean-Michel Kuntzer: «Le tramway de Marseille se construit avec la population»" (Marseille's light rail is getting built with the population's participation) in *L'Urbain*, n°27, 23 January 2004, p.3.

poor transport performance and its ambiguous effects on segregation. In this case, in spite of the controversy, one argument happens not to be challenged anymore: light rail would provide added value for housing. Urban expectations are also visible in Grenoble, with the choice of a route serving Saint-Martin d'Hères' planned centre<sup>28</sup>. This time, the central argument – light rail would provide centrality effects – is still disputed after the route's selection, but is to a certain extent validated by the course of events. Indeed, once the route is confirmed, the initial number of dwellings programmed in the soon-to-be city centre is almost doubled thanks to a renewed interest from private developers. The "centrality" argument is quite contingent, but once the controversy is solved, an idea remains, strengthened by the sequence: light rail can be the vehicle of a certain housing densification. In the following years, this idea starts to be positively mobilised in the local politicians discourse.

Another expectation has emerged through the Saint-Martin d'Hères controversy. Indeed, to convince its "partners" the municipality has asserted its demand with a kind of moral argument. According to her, the town would also deserve a tramway line because it is one of the poorest, and the one that has previously "paid" the greater price to the agglomeration's development – notably with social housing and a campus that does not bring any corporate tax in. As for the "centrality", this second argument is hardly separable from the context, but much of the underlying idea has remained: light rail could foster a kind of civic pride among citizens and change the social image of their neighbourhoods.

Once again in these examples, the initial expectations argued by some actors are transformed into a collective belief that is quite firmly linked with the policy solution. When this process becomes visible in the justification discourse, when actors defend light rail projects on more and more diverse grounds, one can speak, in our opinion, of a politicisation process. We believe that this process, albeit far from pure transport rationality, provides a considerable force to light rail. It makes the solution more convincing, it modifies the basis of the routes' appraisal ; it can also result in innovative elements. We have quoted the low-floor and the pallets, but we can also evoke, in the case of Grenoble, the new procedure adopted after the "Tram 3" project. Indeed, considering that light rail could induce and had to induce densification, the local transport authority has decided to impose a "scheme partnership" ("contrat d'axe") to local councils concerned by the future projects. This partnership implies that as a counterpart of the new service, each municipality is committed to implement new dwellings and businesses along the 400 m catchment. Such constraint has to be understood in a context where densification is a shared political objective at the agglomeration level but a very divisive issue when a precise area is at stake.

More generally, the long-drawn-out process we identify redefines the properties of what was previously a technical device well-established in its "transport people from A to B" role. In some projects, the urban dimension ends up to prevail against the transport objectives – that is at least what some actors pretend in Marseille. Recently, light rail's politicisation has reached a new level, with the recurrent use of the solution within a global discourse on urban

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<sup>28</sup> This decision is also the result of an intense political arm wrestling, we mention this fact since it gives us the opportunity to temper the power of arguments and "pure" conviction in public decision processes.

sustainability. This evolution is quite clear in Grenoble and Marseille, but it is far from automatic. The case of Dublin proves that light rail can remain a transport solution in the long-term if it is envisaged mainly through its ability to get people out of their cars. With such a framing, the "Luas" is still challenged by the metro on one side, BRT on the other side, in spite of the popularity of the two lines inaugurated in 2004<sup>29</sup>. What can explain the non-emergence of new justifications in Dublin? A prominent reason probably lies in the local institutional setting. Indeed, while in France light rail projects are promoted by local politicians eager to implement such flagship measure within their term of office – such a behaviour is by the way quite contradictory with "blame avoidance" governance theories (Weaver, 1986) – in Ireland urban transport lies in the hand of the Department of Transport, with a growing influence of the Department of Finance since 1997. In Grenoble, 27 municipalities are "members" of the local transport authority. After the success of the first line, most of them enter a courteous but fierce competition so as to enjoy the due to come. In Dublin, the Department of Transport decides to build or not to build new lines according to sectoral expectations and expertise, according to a nationwide perception of the "transport" problem(s). The political dimension of light rail is usually denied by the engineers and economists who dominate the local debate. Such framing of the solution is quite similar in Ireland and in the United Kingdom, where light rail has been marginalised after 2002 (Knowles, 2007). We argue that it is also in some way analogous to the French situation in the 1970's.

## **A mapping of expertise in politicised discussion scenes on urban transport**

### **Body text**

Indeed, the wider and wider range of arguments that are enounced in discussions regarding light rail rests on expert knowledge that can vary a lot in nature as in level of formalisation. The "classical" transport expertise, based on demand estimates, is certainly still the most coherent and clear in the respective relevancy of transport projects it reveals. Now, the politicisation processes we have looked into tend to mix this expertise with what we can define as an "urban and civic" expertise. In this second category, some tools have appeared, such as maps of urban projects within the 400 m catchment, isochronal maps (with the distance to the nearest public transport stop, or distance to the city-centre) or 3D simulation (light rail in situation, with a view on redeveloped urban spaces), but the expert discourse is rather made of explicit norms or sophisticated arguments on the interferences between light rail routes and the global functioning of the city. This lack of equivalence may be considered as an impediment for dialogue, actually the example of Grenoble's "agence d'urbanisme" (local expertise centre financed by local authorities) shows that an enriching mix is possible.

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<sup>29</sup> One can notice that the idea of light rail as an alternative to car-use has also direct implications on routes selection. Indeed, while in France some social or civic pride arguments defend routes towards deprived neighbourhoods or poorly served suburbs with high level of unemployment, in Dublin routes that serve affluent areas with greater car-ownership are privileged. This has been the case in 1994 when the Government favoured the Sandyford Line over the Ballymum Line on modal shift grounds – Ballymum's population being already very dependent on public transport.

On the other hand, one can distinguish a third category of expertise, that can be labelled "financial", is not always more easily compatible with standard transport engineering expertise. The distance between the two approaches and its impact on the ranking of transport projects have been theoretically well characterised (Bonnafous, Jensen 2005). Empirically, the record of Dublin's debate on public transport illustrates the potential disputes that can break out from a direct comparison of a light rail's route socio-economic appraisal and its narrow cost-benefit analysis. Indeed, in the capital of Ireland, the idea that public transport has to self-finance its costs is a very influential argument in transport projects' gestation. This argument tends to disqualify light rail outside the most profitable routes (Wickham 2006). It also tends to reinforce the argument that "premium" public transport (such as light rail transit) has to serve first and foremost areas where car-ownership is high and where wealthy potential customers are ready to pay (more) for a fast and reliable service (Ballymum vs Sandyford controversy in 1993-1995).

In the following table, we try to establish a synthesis of expertise tools and discourses that can be recorded in light rail projects' genesis. Such a presentation does not mean that all types of expertise and arguments are present in every local debate. However, our research tends to prove that when the politicisation process is at an advanced stage, the line of arguments mobilised are more hybridised, more explicitly discussed besides expertise "results". Actually, behind these three expertise types, one can recognize some elements of the "cités", the archetypal registers of justification identified by Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot in modern public debates (Boltanski, Thévenot 1991). The "transport engineering" expertise would correspond to the "Industrial City" with its emphasis on performance, maximisation of the "production". The "urban and civic" expertise would correspond to the "Civic City" with its legitimacy scale based on values like equity and citizenship. The "financial" expertise would correspond to the "Merchant City" with its value for money and efficiency logic. One can notice that there is no reference to an "environmental expertise". Indeed, if environmental arguments are very important for the adoption of light rail as a generic solution, if environmental expectations are high in our three cities, one cannot identify (yet?) an autonomous type of expertise that could interfere with the concrete routes' selection process.

Table I – A typology of expertise regarding light rail projects

|  | "Transport engineering" Expertise  | "Urban" and "Civic" Expertise  | "Financial" Expertise   |
|--|--|--|---|
| Underlying line of argument                | <p>Light rail is a response to transport needs on the most busy axes<br/>                     It relieves congestion in city-centres<br/>                     It is more effective than bus/trolley but less than underground (defensive line of argument)</p> <p>An public transport network has to maximise the number of passengers transported</p> | <p>Light rail restructures urban space (quality, commercial and residential renewal)<br/>                     It re-distributes public realm in favour of cycles and pedestrians (against cars)<br/>                     It enhances the status of the neighbourhoods it serves : effects of centrality, inclusion and attractiveness (→ estate valuation)</p> <p>A public transport network has to be accessible/affordable to everyone and to provide accessibility to every parts of the city :<br/>                     → places of competitiveness (airport, opera, business districts)<br/>                     → disadvantaged areas (social housing estates, deprived suburbs)</p> | <p>Light rail <i>has to be</i> an attractive <i>and</i> profitable alternative to car use<br/>                     It can be more or less cost-effective than bus rapid transit or underground (defensive line of argument)</p> <p>A public transport network has to be self-financed</p>   |
| Tools                                      | <p>Passengers data<br/>                     Travel Demand Modelling (prospective)<br/>                     Socio-economic impacts analysis (social and environmental impacts monetarization, net present value, socio-economic internal rate of return)</p>  | <p>Socio-economic data<br/>                     Map of urban projects within the 400 meters catchments<br/>                     Isochronal maps or accessibility maps (distance to the nearest public transport stop, time of travel to the city centre, number of jobs accessible in 30 minutes...)<br/>                     "3D" simulations</p>   | <p>Travel Demand Modelling (prospective)<br/>                     Modal shift<br/>                     Cost-benefit analysis (profitability of the project, internal rate of return)<br/>                     PPP / DBMO procedures<br/>                     Patronage optimisation through fares policy (i.e. yield management)</p>        |
| Type of alignments highlighted             | <p>Alignments via high-density areas and places that generate traffic<br/>                     Direct and radial types of alignment<br/>                     Medium to high level of segregation with the rest of the city traffic (possible underground sections)<br/>                     Medium to high average speed</p>                           | <p>Alignments <i>via</i> "strategic" areas or sites to be developed in the future<br/>                     Radial or "bypass" or "serpentine" types of alignment<br/>                     Medium to low level of segregation with the rest of the city traffic : on-street alignments, pedestrianization, reduction of road space<br/>                     Low to medium average speed</p>   | <p>Alignments <i>via</i> most densely populated and affluent neighbourhoods (with a high car-ownership)<br/>                     Direct and radial types of alignment<br/>                     High level of segregation with the rest of the city traffic (underground sections)<br/>                     Medium to high average speed</p> |
| "City" (register of justification) related | <p>Industrial City</p>   | <p>Civic City</p>  | <p>Merchant City</p>  |

## **CONCLUSION**

Our overview on the diffusion of light rail and the transformation of its initial framing as a transport (policy) solution sheds new light, in our opinion, on two types of current positions in the debates on urban transport policy.

The first position that can be discussed is the transport/economic-rationale one. From this position, some authors have recently called for the generalisation of BRT, instead of LRT schemes that would result from "blind commitment" (Hensher 2007). It would be then "very important that the investment in such systems is made in a rational way" but in the same time BRT would need a principal ingredient, "simply the political will to make it happen". One can be sceptical about such line of argument. First, "political will" is nothing but simple, in the case of light rail we have seen that it has emerged through a long-term process of preference-building and local appropriation of the initial transport solution. Moreover, there is always a kind of paradox in establishing one best-rationale solution and then calling for political will for its implementation. If political will overlaps exactly expert conclusions (or expert will...) then why are the subtle mechanisms of projects legitimisation and goals allocation necessary? On the contrary, we tend to believe, given the example of light rail, that political will in urban transport policy stems from the confrontation of expertise tools and arguments – and their potential aggregation towards wider justification discourses than the "transport people rationally" one.

On the same basis, one can question the authors that plead in favour of a "communicative rationality" in transport planning (Willson 2001, Lowry 2010). Such a thesis is notably based on the "deliberative democracy" model (i.e. Habermas 1984-1985) and its transposition to planning and local development through the idea of an "argumentative turn" (Fischer, Forrester 1993) or "communicative turn" (Healy 1996). Its promoters defend a paradigm, but also some concrete practises that can be implemented during the conception phase of a public transport project. Actually, "communicative rationality" should lead to some procedural innovations and to a sophisticated engineering of public debate that would guarantee the emergence of a patiently weighted/balanced collective decision. In this case, optimisation is rather procedural than substantial, though the authors bet that communicative rationality clarifies then minimises the contradictions/conflicts that surrounds any planning process in urban space. We can only praise the general purpose of such an approach, but what we have learned from the light rail's case encourages us to put a damper on it. Indeed, the politicisation process we have highlighted seems to establish that locally, public debates are not as fluid as the theory supposes they are. They are certainly dependent on the local context – especially in its institutional dimension – but they have also to be considered as ongoing sums of discussions. On such scenes, preferences that were controversial at instant  $t$  can be consensual at instant  $t+1$ , and even not any more discussed at instant  $t+2$ , therefore very difficult to undermine.

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**Annex : Grenoble's "Tram 3", Dublin's "Luas" and Marseille's "Le Tram" in a nutshell**

|  | <b>Grenoble</b>  | <b>Dublin</b>   | <b>Marseille</b>   |
|--|--|---|--|
| Agglomeration<br>Size and Population                           | Grenoble Alpes Métropole (La Métro)<br>Grenoble City and 25 municipalities<br>307 km <sup>2</sup> , 397 000 inhabitants<br>City itself : 157 500 h. (2004) | Dublin Region<br>Dublin City Council and 3 Counties<br>921 km <sup>2</sup> , 1 187 000 inhabitants<br>City itself : 506 000 h. (2006) | Marseille Provence Métropole<br>Marseille City and 17 municipalities<br>607 km <sup>2</sup> , 1 024 000 inhabitants<br>City itself : 839 000 hab. (2006)   |
| Authority in charge of public<br>transport organisation        | Syndicat Mixte des Transports en Commun<br>(SMTC)  | Department of Transport<br>Government of Ireland  | Marseille City Council before 2001, Marseille<br>Provence Métropole after 2001   |
| Companies in charge of the<br>network operation                | Société d'économie mixte SEMITAG<br>(shareholders : SMTC + Transdev Group)<br>Public service delegation  | Córas Iompair Éireann (CIÉ) :<br>Dublin Bus, Irish Rail and Bus Éireann<br>+ Veolia Transport only for the Luas                       | Régie des Transports Marseillais<br>(local authority control)<br>+ Veolia Transport for light rail (2007-2008)   |
| Last "historical" tram operating                               | 31 August 1952<br>(October 1955 for freight)   | 31 May 1959   | 24 January 1960 except for the line 68<br>Noailles – Saint-Pierre until 8 January 2004   |
| Initiation of the project                                      | First line debated at the end of the 1970's.<br>"Tram 3" project from 1995   | First CIÉ plans at the end of 1988.<br>Endorsed in the Dublin Transportation<br>Initiative in 1993                                    | Study of an extension of the line 68 towards<br>Les Caillols and La Valentine at the end of the<br>sixties, part of the City Transport Plan in 1974,<br>implementation voted <i>in theory</i> by the City<br>Council in May 1977 |
| Definitive decision on the<br>alignment                        | Early 1998, global approval of the feasibility<br>study's conclusions, then minor arrangements   | May 1998, decision of the Minister for<br>Transport (Government)  | May 2004, decision of the Urban Community<br>Council, <i>after</i> the public inquiry : 2 lines<br>remaining instead of 3  |
| Preparatory works  | April 2003   | August 1999   | February 2005  |
| Inauguration   | 20 March 2006 : extension of line B<br>20 May 2006 : ligne C<br>6 October 2007 : section of line D   | 30 June 2004 : "Green Line"<br>28 September 2004 : "Red Line"   | 3 July 2007 : official inauguration<br>17 November : Eugène Pierre – Blancarde<br>27 September 2008 : Noailles' Tunnel   |
| Number of lines  | 2 new lines and an extension<br>(2 previous lines since 1987 and 1990)   | 2 new lines   | 1 new line, 1 extension  |
| Length of the alignment  | 9,6 km (Line C) + 1,9 km (extension line B)<br>+ 2 km (Line D). Total : 13,5 km  | 9 km (Green Line) + 14 km (Red Line)<br>Total : 23 km   | 11,9 km for 2 lines (1 <sup>st</sup> phase)  |
| Average speed  | 19,2 km/h (Line C)   | 24,5 km/h (Green Line)<br>19,5 km/h (Red Line)  | 19,2 km/h (Noailles – Les Caillols)<br>15.2 km/h (Gantès – Blancarde)  |
| Rolling stock type   | 35 vehicles Alstom Citadis<br>(44 meters, 370 persons)   | 40 vehicles Alstom Citadis<br>(Red Line 30 meters, 235 persons,<br>Green Line 40 meters, 315 persons)                                 | 26 vehicle Bombardier "Flexity Outlook"<br>(33 meters, 200 persons))   |
| Theoretical capacity<br>(passengers per hour per<br>direction) | 4440 pass./h (Line C)<br>Frequency : 5 mn at peak hours (2006)   | 2820 pass./h on the Red Line<br>3780 pass./h on the Green Line<br>Frequency : 5 mn at peak hours (2007)                               | 3000 pass/h<br>Frequency : 4'30 mn at peak hours (2008)  |
| Final cost of the project                                      | Nearly €500 million (€2006)<br>Including a €23 million State grant   | Nearly €800 million (€2004)<br>Including a €67 millions EU grant  | €515,7 million (current € 2002-2009)<br>including a €40 million State grant  |