



**HAL**  
open science

# From the History of Transport in Paris to the History of Mobility in Greater Paris?

Arnaud Passalacqua

► **To cite this version:**

Arnaud Passalacqua. From the History of Transport in Paris to the History of Mobility in Greater Paris?. *Mobility in History*, 2016, 7 (1), 10.3167/mih.2016.070115 . halshs-02004368

**HAL Id: halshs-02004368**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02004368>**

Submitted on 7 Jul 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## **From the History of Transport in Paris to the History of Mobility in Greater Paris?**

Arnaud Passalacqua, Paris Diderot University (ICT-LIED)

Historians are scholars of their times. This sentence is well illustrated by recent work done by academics on the history of mobility in Paris. While current trends in transport planning and politics have been addressed by historians of mobility, this article will discuss whether historians have tackled all the most important developments around transport in the Paris area. It will first consider the latest focus of the research in this field in connection with recent evolutions of transport policies. Then the article will try to highlight the valuable topics not yet addressed by existing academic work.

The election of Mayor Bertrand Delanoë in 2001 marked the beginning of a shift in Parisian attitudes toward transport that have since unfurled during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Under Delanoë and his deputy mayor for transport, Denis Baupin, the role and legitimacy of every mobility system was publicly analyzed. These discussions led to a general reorganization of public space away from cars, in favor of public transport, bikes, and pedestrians. At the same time, historians were studying similar debates in the *longue durée*, considering especially the example of the automobile and conflicts between mobility systems. The relationships between Paris and the newly contested car became a historical theme illustrated by Mathieu Flonneau.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, the development of new transport systems in the street—dedicated bus lanes and tramways—induced a historical reflection by Arnaud Passalacqua on the cohabitation between systems in a constrained and common

space.<sup>2</sup> In 2006 a new tramline opened and marked the reemergence of that system in Paris, yet few scholars have embraced this specific mode or its historiography, which remains dominated by Jean Robert.<sup>3</sup> This new tram, an exclusively Parisian project, can be understood as the last milestone of a period of relative cold war between Paris and its suburbs around the subject of transport.

Since the end of the 2000s, both public policies and academic studies have increasingly converged on new configurations of actors and mobility. Both worlds have addressed new stakes, at a new level: the (old) difficulties of mobility and governance in the suburbs have become a new priority for politicians and academics alike. The unbalanced concentration of jobs in the western part of the agglomeration and housing in the eastern part

---

1

Mathieu Flonneau, *Paris et l'automobile: Un siècle de passions* (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2005); Mathieu Flonneau, "City Infrastructures and City Dwellers: Accommodating the Automobile in Twentieth-Century Paris," *The Journal of Transport History* 27, no. 1 (2006): 93–114.

<sup>2</sup> See Arnaud Passalacqua, *L'Autobus et Paris: Histoire de mobilités* (Paris: Economica, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The reference is old but useful: Jean Robert, *Les Tramways parisiens* (Neuilly-sur-Seine: Jean Robert, 1992). More recent works also exist: Peter Soppelsa, "Reworking Appropriation: The Language of Paris Railways, 1870–1914," *Transfers* 4, no. 2 (2014): 104–123; Arnaud Passalacqua, "Resident Alien: France's Ambivalent Relationship to the Tramway Before 1914," in *Mobility in History: Themes in Transport (T<sup>2</sup>M Yearbook 2011)*, ed. Georgine Clarsen et al. (Neuchâtel: Alphil, 2011), 71–86. On the new wave of tramways, in France and not only in Paris, I underline the importance and the success of the seminar "Réinventer le tramway? Quarante années de TCSP, tramways et transports guidés en France: controverses et réalisations," organized by Rails et histoire and the UMR AUSser (2013–15).

has created an unbearable situation. This divide is accentuated by the involvement of governments at all levels—from town councils to the state—who have made a variety of attempts to address the problem. The expected solutions to these main problems are based on the idea of a Greater Paris, a polysemous concept that is being outlined by a new circle train line. This expensive project intends to develop high-quality underground service in the suburbs by opening several sublines starting in 2020 and attempting to reduce the number of trips along currently congested radial lines.

The circle line and other political fixes are aimed at addressing the problems caused by Paris's poorly functioning mobility system, problems that are increasingly growing in importance within Parisian politics and in the local press. At the same time, however, historians, geographers, and town planners have been encouraging broader reflection on the dysfunctions of the city's transport systems since the early 2000s. Xavier Desjardins, Nicolas Douay, and Vincent Gagnière have written an interesting long-term analysis of the history of transport planning in the Paris area. Their work resonates importantly with the regional planning document that was published in 2013.<sup>4</sup> Cooperation between geographers and historians has also shed light on the relationships between rail and territory and on the cultural differences visible in how the British and French view these topics.<sup>5</sup> In the frame of mobility studies, researchers in urban and social geography, notably Lionel Rougé, have worked to better understand suburban areas, contributing to making them a focus of transport planning that can be addressed by public policies<sup>6</sup> On the topic of Greater Paris, scholars have published books for a general audience that have allowed them to join in the debate

alongside citizens and politicians.<sup>7</sup>

Historians have also broadened their point of view, investigating the whole agglomeration and not just inner Paris. This trend is not restricted to the historians of transport and mobility. Indeed, it is pervasive across disciplines. Greater Paris and its history, punctuated by two major moments of reform—the 1860s and the 1960s—has become its own field of research.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between Paris and its suburbs was first studied through an institutional point of view. Florence Bourillon, Annie Fourcaut, and Nathalie Montel have published new research on the expansion of the capital in 1860, which was the first step in the increasing tensions between Paris and the *communes* of the *département de la Seine*.<sup>9</sup> Increasingly, the suburban territory of the twentieth century has also been widely addressed by scholars. For instance, Pierre Chabard and Virginie Picon-Lefebvre edited a comprehensive dictionary on the iconic La Défense.<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Bellanger and Julia Moro

---

<sup>4</sup> Xavier Desjardins, Nicolas Douay, and Vincent Gagnière, “Évolution des schémas, permanence des tracés: La planification de la région parisienne au prisme des réseaux ferroviaires,” *Géocarrefour* 87 (2012): 69–84.

<sup>5</sup> See *Town Planning Review* 85, no. 2 (2014), special issue, “Linking Rail and Urban Development: French and British Experiences.”

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Claire Aragau, Martine Berger, and Lionel Rougé, “Vers une maturité des territoires périurbains?,” *EchoGéo* 27 (2014), <http://echogeo.revues.org/13683> [accessed June, 26 2015].

<sup>7</sup> The most discussed work is Jean-Pierre Orfeuil and Marc Wiel, *Grand Paris. Sortir des illusions, approfondir les ambitions* (Paris: Scrineo, 2012).

have recently proposed a historical perspective on a more common area, the Val-de-Marne *département*.<sup>11</sup> Along the same lines, the opening of archives from the 1970s has allowed new works to be written on the important moment of the Pompidou era, which for years had been hidden by the shadow of the de Gaulle/Delouvrier moment that preceded it.<sup>12</sup> Transport, given its variety, is crucial to understanding that the actors of that time already conceived the metropolis on a regional scale.

Today, as in earlier periods, the history of transport systems in the Paris area is still concerned more with projects and planning than the experience of traveling. And no amount of daily reports on the difficulties of transport produced by the press and discussed by politicians have changed that focus. The origin of this arrangement may be traced to the relationship between historians of transport and mobility of Paris and geographers, political scientists, architects, and engineers, who traditionally focused on technical, economic, and

<sup>8</sup> Among the different works on this theme, the annual conferences organized by historians Florence Bourillon and Emmanuel Bellanger must be mentioned, with colleagues from schools of architecture (the most recent one was “Inventer le Grand Paris,” in December 2014).

<sup>9</sup> See Florence Bourillon and Annie Fourcaut, eds., *Agrandir Paris: 1860–1970* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne/Comité d’histoire de la ville de Paris, 2012); Nathalie Montel, *Faire le Grand Paris: Avis des habitants consultés en 1859* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes/Comité d’histoire de la Ville de Paris, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Chabard and Virginie Picon-Lefebvre, eds., *La Défense, dictionnaire et atlas* (Marseille: Parenthèses, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Bellanger and Julia Moro, eds., *Le Val-de-Marne: Anthologie—1964–2014* (Ivry-sur-Seine: Éditions de l’atelier, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> Mathieu Flonneau et al., eds., *Le Grand Dessein parisien de Georges Pompidou: L’aménagement de la région capitale au cours des années 1960–1970* (Paris: Somogy, 2011).

political stakes, as the important book by Dominique Larroque, Michel Margairaz, and Pierre Zembri shows.<sup>13</sup> Many historians, however, remain wary of working with other social scientists, who are usually more open to discussing social and cultural factors in their research. For instance, works by Isaac Joseph<sup>14</sup> in sociology or Marc Augé<sup>15</sup> in anthropology have still not been fully incorporated into the work of historians.

But, beyond Paris, historians have not remained entirely exclusive. A decided turn toward social and cultural concerns has been made within the dynamic field of mobility studies at an international level. The T<sup>2</sup>M conference held in Paris in 2006 had an important role in that move. Along with the mobility turn, cultural approaches to mobility have been developed by many scholars. But most of the innovative work done on Paris is still conducted by international researchers, with academics in Greater Paris standing off to the side. Here railways are still dominating the field, including the books edited by Steven Spalding and Benjamin Fraser<sup>16</sup> and the interesting study on the words used surrounding the Métro project and the tramway by Peter Soppelsa.<sup>17</sup> But French and Parisian colleagues appear increasingly able to develop their own thematic approaches, which are still coming to the surface, such as the gender analysis of the Paris public transport systems by Arnaud Passalacqua<sup>18</sup> or the focus on expertise by Hadrien Commenges.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the recent publication of these stimulating works, it is still possible to identify missing topics. If one considers that urban transport was born with the industrial city, the history of the two centuries of the industrial era is poorly balanced. The nineteenth century, which provided lots of systems and invented the habits of daily travelers, is still

<sup>13</sup> Dominique Larroque, Michel Margairaz, and Pierre Zembri, *Paris et ses transports, XIXe–XXe siècles: Deux siècles de décisions pour la ville et sa région* (Paris: Éditions Recherches/AHICF, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Joseph, *Météor: Les Métamorphoses du métro* (Paris: Economica, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Marc Augé, *Le Métro revisité* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2008).

underexamined by scholars. The only systems taken into consideration are railways on which interesting works with new focuses have been published, such as a study of railway stations as social places by Stéphanie Sauget.<sup>20</sup> The transfers of ideas, images, and actors that have occurred between Paris and London since the beginning of the nineteenth century is another theme well addressed on the basis of subway projects by Carlos López Galviz.<sup>21</sup> But the figure of the horse, which is at the center of the transport system of this first industrial century, deserves new research to update the works done by Ghislaine Bouchet,<sup>22</sup> on the pattern of what has been published on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Daniel Roche.<sup>23</sup>

Historical works seem to have also underexamined the recent decades. No overview study on the last thirty years of the history of transport in the Paris area has been written. The last complete book, by Dominique Larroque, Michel Margairaz, and Pierre Zembri, does not go beyond the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> More precisely, the recently finished mayoralty of Delanoë, which was explicitly based on mobility (r)evolutions, could provide a very stimulating topic for a historical perspective. The older and probably more classic Réseau Express Régional (RER)

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Fraser and Steven D. Spalding, eds., *Trains, Literature and Culture: Reading and Writing the Rails* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012); Benjamin Fraser and Steven D. Spalding, eds., *Trains, Culture, and Mobility: Riding the Rails* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Soppelsa, “Reworking Appropriation.”

<sup>18</sup> Arnaud Passalacqua, “Genre et mobilité urbaine: Un itinéraire parisien, XIXe–XXe siècles,” in *Genre et techniques, XIXe–XXIe siècles*, ed. Fabien Knittel and Pascal Raggi (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013), 221–238.

<sup>19</sup> Hadrien Commenges, “L’invention de la mobilité quotidienne: Aspects performatifs des instruments de la socio-économie des transports” (Ph.D. diss., Paris Diderot University, 2013).

project (1960s–1970s) still awaits scholars who could write a history based on oral archives at the scale of the metropolis. Historians have not really addressed walking and cycling in Paris, mainly because of source problems. But here imaginative efforts on the part of scholars could help collect historical materials on these practices, such as pictures of streets, unstructured archives of associations, and more.

Whereas other technical networks (water, energy supply, etc.) have been studied, particularly by Emmanuel Bellanger, Sabine Barles, and Isabelle Backouche, the history of transport in the suburbs is still to be written.<sup>25</sup> Monographs on railway lines exist, often written by nonscholars, as well as academic works on the suburban territory, often without real consideration of the history of transport systems.<sup>26</sup> Here, one can only regret the lack of historical works on the history of suburban mobility, beyond the already written transport history of the inner Paris territory, inscribed in the *périphérique* motorway and equipped with the Métro network.

Because mobility and planning are also a matter of words, scholars could shed light on the history of how many came to see Paris as a world city because of transport networks.

<sup>20</sup> Stéphanie Sauget, *À la recherche des pas perdus: Une histoire des gares parisiennes au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Tallandier, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> Carlos López Galviz, “Metropolitan Railways: Urban Form and the Public Benefit in London and Paris c. 1850–1880,” *The London Journal* 38, no. 3 (2013): 184–202.

<sup>22</sup> Ghislaine Bouchet, *Le Cheval à Paris de 1850 à 1914* (Geneva and Paris: Librairie Droz, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Roche, *La Culture équestre de l’Occident, XVIe–XIXe siècle, L’ombre du cheval* (Paris: Fayard, vol. 1, 2008; vol. 2, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> Dominique Larroque, Michel Margairaz, and Pierre Zembri, *Paris et ses transports, XIXe–XXe siècles: Deux siècles de décisions pour la ville et sa région* (Paris: Éditions Recherches/AHICF, 2002).

For instance, the contemporary Greater Paris project focuses on Paris's main airport (Paris-Charles-de-Gaulle) as a key component of the city's international reputation and as a site in dire need of improved transportation connections. This trend hides local stakes, such as problems with unequal transportation provision across the metropolitan area because of unbalanced network configurations and high fares. Such local issues have yet to be fully investigated by historians. Another way to develop this question is to study the history of Paris not only as the urban (anti)model in the French frame, as developed by Bernard Marchand, but also as the mobile one.<sup>27</sup>

Convergences between mobility history and the now established field of environmental studies are also likely to happen. Whereas the history of freight is nearly nonexistent, studies based on the environmental impact of the functioning of a great metropolis such as Paris may open the way to a new interest in historical studies of freight

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, on electrical networks, Emmanuel Bellanger and François-Mathieu Poupeau, *Lumières sur la banlieue: Histoire du Syndicat intercommunal de la périphérie de Paris pour l'électricité et les réseaux de communication* (Paris: Éditions de l'atelier, 2013).

On water, see Sabine Barles, "The Seine and Parisian Metabolism: Growth of Capital Dependencies in the 19th and 20th Centuries," in *Urban Waters: Rivers, Cities and the Production of Space in Europe and North America*, ed. Stéphane Castonguay and Matthew D. Evenden (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2012), 94–112; Isabelle Backouche, *La Trace du fleuve, La Seine et Paris (1750–1850)* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2000).

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, the classic book by Annie Fourcaut, *La Banlieue en morceaux: La Crise des lotissements défectueux en France dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Grane: Créaphis, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> Bernard Marchand, *Les Ennemis de Paris: La haine de la grande ville des Lumières à nos jours* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

systems. But the quantitative approach of some environmental studies does not necessarily match well the paradigm of the mobility turn.<sup>28</sup> Continued methodological exchanges could open a useful dialogue between the fields. This could be built from the existing works of historians like Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud on pollution<sup>29</sup> or Jeffrey Jackson on the 1910 flood of Paris.<sup>30</sup>

As a last point, one can only regret the current state of Paris's mobility heritage. While the French capital was one of the most important birthplaces of the car and an industrial center of that sector during the twentieth century, the memory of the automobile in the city is poorly commemorated by Parisians. The agglomeration does not provide any historical museum worthy of the name on this transport system. The history of public transport is hardly treated better. Since the closing of the Museum of Saint-Mandé in 2001, attempts to build a new museum, first in Colombes, then Chelles, have been threatened by divergences between the AMTUIR—a public transport enthusiasts' association that owns a unique collection—and museum professionals, who have the know-how but no collection. The lack of physical monuments to mobility history is all the more damaging given the popular enthusiasm for historical perspectives on transport. A recent exhibition on the Métro<sup>31</sup> and the success of a nonscholarly book by Grégoire Thonnat on the history of the Métro ticket<sup>32</sup> have confirmed that a real interest in transport heritage exists. This enthusiasm

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, Sabine Barles et al., “Grain, Meat and Vegetables to Feed Paris: Where Did and Do They Come From? Localising Paris Food Supply Areas from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-First Century,” *Regional Environmental Change* 12, no. 2 (2012): 325–335.

<sup>29</sup> Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, “Pour une histoire environnementale de l'urbain,” *Histoire urbaine* 18 (2007): 5–21.

<sup>30</sup> Jeffrey Jackson, *Paris Under Water: How the City of Light Survived the Great Flood of 1910* (London: Palgrave, 2010).

should be the impetus for the development of the mobility history museum that Paris deserves. Here lies a tension: whereas historians of mobility of the Paris area follow the contemporary debates and focuses, they lack the necessary support from contemporary institutions to develop a richer relationship with a public audience.

**Arnaud Passalacqua** is an assistant professor of contemporary history at the Paris Diderot University. He works on the history of mobility in different European cities as well as on railways. He recently coedited *Les Transports de la démocratie: Approche historique des enjeux politiques de la mobilité* (Rennes: PUR, 2014).

## Notes

---

<sup>31</sup> *Métro . . . Ticket pour une expo*, exhibition, Musée des arts et métiers, 2011–12.

<sup>32</sup> Grégoire Thonnat, *Petite histoire du ticket de métro parisien* (Paris: Télémaque, 2010).