



Grand Huit, big gamble, big problem

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translated by Michael Stokes

The secretary of State for the development of Paris and its region, Christian Blanc, left office in July 2010. He leaves behind him a public transport project, known as the « Grand Huit » (literally the Big Eight, a project to build three metro lines looping around Paris) which costs between 21,4 and 23,5 billion Euros according to the initial estimate of the contracting authority. It remains to be seen how this project will be carried out.

Shock and outrage, such is the reaction of a research professor, who has studied mobility in *Île-de-France* (Paris and its region) for over 30 years, to the « public transport network for Greater Paris », the new name given to the « Grand Huit. » The shock of a citizen presented with a project, which makes a rule out of an exception. The outrage of a scientist only too aware that the difficulties experienced by public transport users and the fundamental problems that afflict the regional network continue to be ignored.

Shock of a citizen

The move to decentralize, begun in the 1970s, entrusted the organization of public transportation to metropolitan areas, the *départements* and the regions. *Île-*

de-France is one of the only metropolitan areas in the world to boast exclusive control of its public transportation system. After the presidential election of 2007 when it became apparent that “the coffers were empty”, government envisaged reducing compulsory deductions and public deficits to a level on a par with that of our neighbours, and progressively opening transport services to competition with a view to improving the quality of service and limiting their costs. None of this has in fact occurred.

The Grand Huit project, and the urban development schemes it involves, brings us back to the days of the omniscient State, which decided which urban development zones should be given top priority and where to build social housing. In the middle of a major public finance crisis, parliament passed a law endorsing the project along with exceptional means of realization? In this way, authority for the project has been attributed to an ad hoc public body, the *Société du Grand Paris*, which will shortly hire its workforce from the RATP and SNCF. The cost of the project, initially estimated at between 21 and 24 billion Euros, in a system in which commercial revenues stand at around 2,3 billion Euros, doesn't appear to be surprising. Nor does the funding of this project seem to pose a problem. After a campaign of disinformation which led us to expect a partnership between the public and private sectors and revenues from Real Estate developpements, which the “Carrez”¹ report forestalled, we are falling back on the State (4 billion Euros in subsidies) and bonds; in other words, future generations will carry the burden.

Assessment of the economic and social desirability of the project (in terms of customer volumes, its impact on economic growth and the reduction of car traffic) was extremely superficial and left no room for independent assessors. These latter might have sought to understand the yawning gap that has opened up between the regional job creation forecasts used as reference by the project (0,8 to 1,2 million extra jobs) and those published by official agencies (0,3 million)². They might have been astonished at the State's ability to single out some forty development zones, representing at best 2 to 3% of the region's surface area, for the lion's share of job

creations: 40,000 jobs outside high-employment hubs out of one million new jobs! They might also have been surprised to discover capacities for peak travel times set at 20,000 travellers per hour between *Saclay* and *La Défense*, while two-way traffic between these zones currently stands at around 20,000 travellers per day, all means of transportation (including cars) taken together. They might have tried to understand how a 160-km long rail network spread over an area five times less dense than that of central Paris can generate a traffic flow equivalent to half the traffic flow of the Paris metro (200 km of rail tracks and 300 stations). They might have tried to narrow down the estimate of between 2 and 3 million customers per day. The expected pattern of returns on this project were not even mentioned when the report was submitted for public debate, despite the crucial importance of such information in any “business plan” drawn up by a young entrepreneur. Finally, the silence concerning the finances required to run the network once it was built could have been broken.

Such astounding facts are bound to be unwelcome since they can only dampen enthusiasm for a glamorous new infrastructure much vaunted by the media in a context of hyped-up consulting with architects. The core message seems to be: “the Tough Guy” is running the country, “the Weak guy” is running the Region. This surely explains why we have never seen so many civil servants (government or local) professing to abide by the “rules of confidentiality”, long before the public review officially begun. One might feel less bitter if this project constituted an effective response to the problems encountered by the region’s inhabitants and those concerning their transport network. Unfortunately this is not the case.

Outrage of a scientist

The projected transport network for Greater Paris only concerns itself with existing lines when it needs to link up with them (commercial centres, stations) and fit in with their ticketing system. It doesn’t see any problem with them, even though the current network will probably continue to service a majority of public

transport users for a long time to come. The problems encountered by inhabitants of the region concern quality of service, saturation levels at certain times in certain places, and too few interconnections between suburban areas. Regarding the first two points, investments on the current network (particularly the automation of the 5 or 6 structuring metro lines) could bring considerable improvements for a cost of around one billion Euros. On the third point, the projected network does indeed offer a solution, but it is only a very partial one: it is not with a mere 160 km of railway lines spread over 10000 km² that we will achieve an adequate quality of service. Need one recall that of the 23 million mechanized journeys made every day in *Île-de-France*, half are for distances of under 5 km?

The first challenge for any authority responsible for the system, be it regional or national, left-wing or right-wing, is to reconcile the financing needs for development with the running costs of the current system, which today amount to 7,8 billion. These needs have increased annually by 160 million Euros (at a constant rate) since 2000 and only 2,3 billion Euros of this sum are recouped through ticket sales. The challenge is also to ensure that the new proposals really help improve conditions for travellers, and do not add new routes (which would lead to a huge increase in financial needs) or increased circulation in the segments which are already saturated. Nothing in the current system guards against these risks. The State, the “boss” of both the SNCF and the RATP whose presidents it appoints, has put off to 2024 (buses) and 2039 (rail network) the implementation of European directives designed to introduce competition and hence reduce costs for these operators - which, as is widely known, are from a quarter to a third higher than for other would-be service providers. Employers pay a transport tax which is not dependent on the type of service provided by the network: an employer in *La Défense*, which is remarkably well served by public transport, pays the same tax as an employer in *Clamart* for instance. All things considered, it is in the interest of employers to establish themselves in the areas best served by rail infrastructures, worsening saturation levels thereby, and accentuating regional disparities. In this way employees working in the areas with highest job densities - which are better

served by the busiest lines - have a longer commute (15,5 km to *La Défense*, as opposed to 9 km in the inner eastern suburb of Paris) and are more reliant on public transportation. *Île-de-France* inhabitants, whose taste regarding where to live are indeed diverse, can do a little arithmetic. A four-room, 80-90 m² flat will cost them more than 2000 Euros per month in rent in Paris, about 1500 in the inner suburb (with major disparities), and around 1000 Euros in the outer suburb, while the price difference between the 2-zone Navigo pass and the 6-zone Navigo pass is 31,6 Euros, after reimbursement by the employer. In return, as it were, the transportation authority will need to come up with about 1000 Euros per year for a 2-zone pass and 6000 Euros per year for a 6-zone pass, all the while facing accusations of unfairness for failing to propose a single fare! London, a city as cosmopolitan as Paris, has avoided this kind of problem, with the Oyster card³, a fare system cleverly directing travellers to the services, periods and places not subject to chronic congestion.

Institutional, fiscal and ticket pricing structures are the forms of governance responsible for the principal malfunctions within the current system, which is subjected as a result to ever greater stresses in a context of limited public resources. As we have seen, creating the “network of public transportation for Greater Paris” comes down to inventing superb applications for a computer whose operating system is riddled with flaws. The construction of this network in an unaltered “ecosystem” will only worsen the situation, with serious consequences both political (populists who will denounce a holy mess) and economic (a capital city and its region weakened by the cost of its infrastructures).

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¹ Gilles Carrez, Grand Paris. *Financement du projet de transports*, September 2009.

² See IAU, *Note rapide*, n°501, May 2010. This note is based on the studies of a work group involving the ex-Dreif, the INSEE, the Iau, and the Apur.

³ The Oystercard works like a pre-paid phone card, and is automatically rechargeable should one choose the option. The pricing system accounts for significant differences in fares between metro trains and buses, during peak and off-peak hours, and inside or outside the central zone. Fares are ‘capped’ with a maximum daily charge. It generally favours local travel, use in the suburbs and off-peak travel periods. It also offers discount entitlements for persons on low income.

See : www.tfl.gov.uk/assets/downloads/tickets/getting_around_with_oyster_may_2010.pdf