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ImagineTrains : *Imaginaire* and decision makers in contemporary France¹

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Supported by the Forum Vies mobiles, the ImagineTrains project intends to work on the *imaginaire*³ of decision makers and users in the world of railways, both in the US and in France. The main idea behind this project is the hypothesis that decisions in terms of railways are made on arguments that are not only clearly readable and visible but that also refer to other kinds of justifications. Because of many factors (historical development, territorial stakes, etc.), the sector of railway is probably more likely to be framed by such arguments than many others. Railway is linked to projection in space and in the future, is a technological field, more or less focused on innovation, and is a support of mobility that many people have experienced.

These aspects may be shared by other mobility systems. But railway presents specificities, which are probably different from a country to another. For the French frame, for instance, it has a strong relationship to two main concepts of the republican ideal: *service public* (approximately: public utility) and *aménagement du territoire* (approximately: land settlement). Combined with the central notion of sustainable development, these concepts are to be found behind the reasons for opening a new railway line or renovating rolling stock. But more classical topics, such as economic profitability of projects, are also involved in the political discourses.

How do these registers of justification combine behind a decision in the field of railway? The project tries to understand this articulation by focusing on decision makers as human beings, who have their own experience of railway, their own vision of a territory, the future, etc. These factors contribute to frame their *imaginaire*, which is also partially a result of a common representation supposed to be shared by a larger audience, for instance on a local, regional or national scale, but also

¹ This project has been funded and scientifically supervised by the Mobile Lives forum, a research and prospective institute created by SNCF to prepare for the mobility transition.

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³ The project has decided to keep the French word *imaginaire* in order to describe the key-concept of the research because of the difficulties linked to its translation in English. *Fantasy* or *imaginary* sounds not serious enough in order to describe the collective process of thought which is here in the centre of our reflections. Like any other transnational project, ImagineTrains is confronted to various issues due to translations of words from language to another, not only from French to English. In the other sense, we did not find translations good enough for words like *community* or *frontier*.

depending on the kind of relation to the technical system (user, operator...).

The paper will present the French development of the project, in connection to the American one. Because revealing *imaginaires* is a challenge, methodological stakes will be addressed. First results can not really be presented, because this work is in progress on different study cases particularly dealing with high-speed rail.

1) The *imaginaire* of train in France since the 19th century

We defend the idea that most of the French trains *imaginaire* is likely to be revealed by the railway system history since the 19th century. This history has many effects on contemporary decision *imaginaire*.

The railway imaginaire

What constitutes the railway *imaginaire* in France? Its foundations seem to be recognized and rooted in industrialization (speed, rationality and progress). The idea of prestige - which high speed brings to a nation or a subway system bring to a city that was previously lacking one - are also in this vein. In the specific railway *imaginaire* of the traveller, its unique physical characteristics seem to play an important role. The perception of the landscape, the movement and the sound environment all feed this *imaginaire*. Another element of this *imaginaire* is nostalgia. The train indeed gives rise to nostalgic discourse, as do many technical devices. Successive innovations fuel the regretful discourse of the previous technical generation, which nonetheless remains perceptible in many ways - from the vocabulary come down from the world of the horse-drawn carriage to railway crossing signs that still depict steam engines.

The *imaginaire* of the train therefore more generally touches the question of time - this same time that we are constantly trying to save (with ever-increasing speeds) and kill once aboard (with books and personal electronics). This crucible is not without its contradictions; this desire to reduce travel time goes hand in hand with a generally favourable view of trains.

The train *imaginaire* also has its place in a larger *imaginaire* (that of land, networking, regularity, public utility, etc.). The notion of public rail service likewise lends to the image of universal access to train networks and travel possible for anyone at anytime. The example of the 1995 Pasqua law⁴, which established a maximum distance from any point in the country to a highway or high-speed rail network, is emblematic of this

⁴ This general law addressed the land settlement with a specific focus on infrastructures such as railways and railroad. The right-wing Home minister Charles Pasqua based electoral promises on such a pattern.

imaginaire, in which technical systems succeed in erasing distances, regardless of the context.

The constitution of the railway network as the main image of the public utilities in France is an old process - at least linked to the creation of the national operator SNCF in 1937 - but the recent evolutions of the rail sector in France have shed light on a renewal of this image. With the opening of the successive railway markets in the European countries, after the 91-440 directive,⁵ the French organization of the sector has been widely revised. Since then, the status of the SNCF as a unique public operator of rail service on the French territory has been discussed. Moreover the banalisation of train services among a rich supply of mobility have probably been contributing to a general trend marked by a minor interest for the idea of public utility.

A trend which has already to see with the recent evolution of the collective representations of the special relationship the country has had with its train operator since 1937, even if France has not opened its regional and national services to new companies, despite the European legal context.

This quick look at railway history leads us to consider that *imaginaire* has strong relationship with the historical background of technical networks. But it does not mean that *imaginaires* are fixed. They are inscribed in their historical contexts and produced by contemporaries, particularly decision makers.

Imaginaire *and* decision

Because of the heavy investments needed to build them, railway involve a projection into the future. Whether rationalized in the form of figures (traffic, financial performance, etc.) or utopic imagery (the image of life in the future, etc.), it affects the imagination because it forces us think of a time that is not yet. Prospective documents are relevant here for better understanding this dimension.

But it is also because of its extremely practical nature - celebrated with inaugurations - that trains weigh heavily on territories and thus succeed in seducing policies before a decision is taken. Deciding to open an infrastructure - with the promise of technological innovation and service it brings - probably goes back to dimension of power between a decision-maker and an object that surpasses him in terms of cost, longevity and complexity, but that he or she nonetheless manages to control through his or her ability to design it via successive decisions.

⁵ This 1991 European text imposed the distinction between the railway operators and the owner of the tracks.

For instance, in the French context, the equipping of the country with high-speed train lines reflects not only the desire for power of politicians at different level, but also that of technical staff, as evidenced in particular by speed records. One can also consider the specific relationship high-speed rail has with the notion of democracy in a country where several factors limit a truly universal democratic way of functioning (i.e. centralism, the notion of common good, ease of expropriation, government acts, etc.).

2) A series of hypothesis

We base our study on different hypothesis. Among them, here are the most important.

The train as a tool to enter the modern world

We share the idea that, like it occurred during the 19th century, railway projects are synonymous with modernity. If speed and technology explain, in part, the modern representation of the process in the 19th century, these *imaginaires* have been revitalized with the development of the TGV, after a period of decline in the middle of the 20th century.

This vision of train as a modern artefact seems to be a way to justify a modern political posture able to anticipate problems, which is supposed to be one of the main tasks of decision-makers. In a context of competition between territories, this *imaginaire* refers to a boost to local economic development, often without real evidence, but with a strong and recurrent discourse.

The *imaginaire* of modernity must also be questioned in the light of the sustainable development imperative. To what extent the ecological paradigm has updated the *imaginaire* of modernity of railways? If so, the modern representation of the process can legitimately be correlated to economic and ecological imperatives for the territories.

The train, a vector of territorial economic development

In France, a railway decision is a political decision inscribed on a territory. In this sense, it is necessary to understand how policies represent the territory. It is likely that the global understanding of territory is primarily based on a political vision, precise and marked by the balance between parties... This peculiar vision of decision-makers is not that of many other actors of the world of railways, from travellers to operators (SNCF) or network managers (RFF).

Because of this gap, decisions-makers have to find narratives in order to justify the railway projects. Very often they use a historical discourse as a

base for this justification. The idea of a special relationship between a territory and the world of railway is recurrent and can justify decisions in its favour, whether to strengthen an existing link or repair what are considered historical errors. In the contemporary France, railway decisions are made in an area already heavily equipped for 150 years. In this way, policy maker discourses are based on the idea that “train is a natural part of the local landscape”, which however requires some modernization, evolution, etc... A discourse whose logic tries to be inscribed in a sense of history.

Imagine changes with the paradigm of ecology and sustainable development?

Almost since the 1990s, the development of mobility has been faced with environmental problems. In this context, railway is considered as a sustainable mobility because it emits less CO₂ than air transport and private car. Operators communicate on this aspect in order to gain market share, specially in France, because of the major part of nuclear power in the energetic mix.

However, this idea of the train conceived as an ecological emblem is challenged by associations of environmental protection when it comes to implementing new high-speed lines, which are heavy infrastructures deteriorating natural environments. Decision-makers are confronted with the contradiction between the infrastructure and the system of transport itself.

We will study the hypothesis that the ecological *imaginaire* of train can reintroduce or reinforce other *imaginaires*: the *imaginaire* of public utility, as a mobility which should be sustainable; the *imaginaire* of territorial development to enhance the attractiveness of territories and the *imaginaire* of modernity against that of the automobile.

In this perspective, the *imaginaire* of train among policy makers can be seen as a combination of *imaginaires* self organizing consistency in decision-making in the contemporary era. These *imaginaires* are based on contemporary issues, but also on a highly-visible historical discourse in relation to economic, social and policy of France.

3) The necessity of a strong methodology

The first months of the project have been mainly dedicated to the definition of our methodology. This is one of the most difficult points of the project for many reasons.

The international dimension of the research is first methodological problem in itself, more important than in many other projects because we

work on national representations linked to language, discourses, unconsciousness, etc. A set of factors which are particularly difficult to cross between different national cultures. After long discussions, we made the choice that our questionnaires should not be the same but should be equivalent. That is to say, they should address the same points and follow the same philosophy, despite the differences between languages, socio-political organizations of decisions, case studies, etc. We have decided to keep a common base for the main part of the questionnaires, but each team has the freedom to write it in its own words. A minor part will be specific to each team or event to each case study.

The choice to work on *imaginaire* is a second problem. This concept is hard to stabilize, even if different authors have produced research based on this idea. The French team has made the choice to follow the proposition made by Cornelius Castoriadis to define the *imaginaire* as the way we give sense to objects, decisions and other socio-cultural artefacts. This idea means that the *imaginaire* is a key-factor in the elaboration, comprehension and uses of every objects or discourses around us: a kind of seminal factor.

In this sense, how to build a questionnaire able to catch the *imaginaire* of the interviewees? Historians and political scientists are often accustomed to precise questions elaborated during their preliminary researches based on archives and bibliography. They ask for details on a process of decision, or, if they work on a more general topic, they ask direct questions on the opinion of interviewees on a subject or another. The way that we have defined in order to build our interview grid differs from this pattern, in the sense that we have written a rather little number of very general questions. For instance, interviewees are asked about their relationship to railway in a general sense, without any precision coming from the interviewers. By giving first elements of answer, the interviewees define the sense that they give to this world of railway: a technical approach based on speed, tracks and rolling stock, a vector of nostalgia support of remembrance of childhood or specific travels in train, a political stake intensively debated between many actors, etc. If necessary, interviewers can then had questions that are not conceived in order to make the interviewees come back on pre-supposed good tracks, but just to dig deeper in the direction given by the interviewee.

The last set of problems that we have encountered is linked to our panel of interviewees. We all know that decisions are collective process, in which decisive people or steps are often hard to identify. But our focus on *imaginaire* leads us to ask questions and wait for answers that are very personal, linked to the experience of each interviewees not only as people implied in a process of decision, but also as human beings. Hence, our difficulty has been to identify people who are decision-makers even if we know that their decisions are the results the combination of documents,

informations, discussions with their collaborators, opponents, etc. We must keep in mind that we do not work on the process of decision itself but on decision-makers themselves. This position is also a difficulty for presenting the research to the panel of interviewees. Decisions-makers are often accustomed to answer to journalists or even social scientists, with pre-formatted discourses, but they may be destabilized by questions that are simultaneously more general and more individual. Moreover, we have decided not to mention the key-concept of *imaginaire* because of the projections that it could generate, and we present the research on a very vague pattern.

4) The French case studies

Our project has choose to work on 4 case studies in order to test our hypothesis on different contexts.

Because France has been one of the first countries to develop high-speed railways and because of the huge consequences of this policy on the today national landscape of railways, we have decided to study two projects of high-speed lines (LGV).

The first one is the LGV Rhin-Rhône. A project strongly supported by local politicians with efficient links with the national level, mainly within the socialist and left-wing ecologist parties. A first phase of the project has been recently opened which supplies a now classical high-speed service between Paris and the industrialized area of Besançon-Belfort-Mulhouse, near to the Swiss border. Whereas the project was initially presented as a European project allowing a high-speed connection between Germany and Southern Europe on the Francfort/Lyons axis, the result is today very different from the initial propositions. The branches that would better fit the initial project would probably never be built. Here we think that there have been a huge work of *imaginaire* that can explain such a difference between images, decisions, financing and results.

The second high-speed line project is the LGV PACA, which intends to link Nice to Marseilles, with different stations according the different versions. TGV was born on the Paris-Lyons line, with a prolongation to Marseilles, which constitutes the main axis of high-speed train in the country in terms of traffic and profitability. The prolongation to Nice can be considered the natural project according to the general functioning of the French Riviera, as inscribed in the classical railway network and the highway network. But the realization of this LGV is complicated because of the weight of local right-wing politicians, mayors of big cities and actors on the national scene, and because of the specific landscape that would be transformed by the project. The necessity to reach high speeds, in order to obtain Paris-Nice services able to compete with planes, is challenged by the desires of intermediate cities and the protection of an

exceptional environmental context. Here, the different justifications of high-speed lines are confronted on a very international territory, because of the massive tourism that represents the major resource of the region and also because of the possible link with Italy.

The last two study cases deliberately address other forms of railway projects, despite the general interest of the French public for high-speed train, which very often hides other parts of the sector of railways. We have chosen to work on the future of the Parisian metropolis which has been heavily discussed for a few years. The project of a subway circle line around this urban areas has quickly become the main topic of the discussions around the future of Paris, as if building a new line could solve the different problems faced by the French capital. Many politicians have plaid a role in the discussions on this circle line, or have tried to get involved in these debates in order to get a railway station for their own territory. Various registers of justification have been used in order to base the necessity of such a project and, then to defend a detail or another. Simultaneously, discourses on the shape of the city and the image it should have on the international scene have been produced, so that this study case presents a rich pattern of imbrication between political *imaginaires* and a technical artefact, with historical echoes with the situations in the 1960s, when the dream of modernity was partially supported by a regional railway network, the RER, combined with airports, business districts and research centres.

Our last study case is focused on a peculiar French region, Alsace, near the German border. Here we do not focus on any project, even if the second phase of the high-speed line between Paris and Alsace will open very soon. We have noticed that Alsace has regularly been among the first regions to implement various railway projects or ideas (new tramways, tram-trains, regional trains, decentralization of railway management, etc.) Our inquiry tries to understand the reasons for such a situation of Alsace in the French landscape, with a specific focus on the *imaginaire* of decision-makers of this region, who are frequently implied on national level in the debate on railways, through reports, law projects, etc. Of course, the possible influence of Germany on these decision-makers is one of the main hypothesis. But, we can find some others, such as the linear configuration of a rich and industrialized territory, or the strong local identity which probably help to go beyond the political competition between left and right.

Conclusion

This project is a work in progress and we can not provide any conclusion at this step. We have begun to record interviews on different case studies but we are faced to difficulties in order to get scheduled meeting with

ministers and important mayors, who are our decision-makers. However, thanks to different contacts, we are going on and our campaign will probably be achieved by the end of 2014.

If we do not have results from our interviews yet, we can consider the work achieved with the American colleagues as a first satisfaction. The elaboration of a common problematic and of a common base for interview grids is a first result which is very important for the project and which has been time-consuming. We hope that this basis will be useful in order to open the project to other teams coming from other countries, such as South-Africa or India.

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⁶ The most important references also exist in an English translation.