

From Vélib' to Autolib': private corporations' involvement in urban mobility policy

Maxime Huré

In December 2011 – four years after the launch of Vélib' – Paris inaugurated Autolib', the largest system of self-service electric cars in the world. Leaving aside the debate on the economic and technical viability of Autolib', the development of self-service mobility services has brought with it the increased involvement of large private groups in the production of urban policy, contributing to the privatisation of public spaces and redefining the notion of public service.

With the inauguration of Autolib' on 5 December 2011, Paris became the capital of self-service mobility. Following the launch of Vélib' in 2007, the city was already home to the most ambitious self-service bike-hire system in the world, comprising 20,600 bicycles spread between 1,451 stations. Like Vélib', Autolib' – with its 3,000 electric vehicles spread between 1,200 stations,¹ to be complemented by some 6,000 recharge points – is intended to “revolutionise”² Parisians' mobility through the collective use of what has long been considered an individualised mode of transport. Behind the innovations of these two services lie a less well-publicised transformation: the emergence of new private-sector players in the shaping of the city. Mobility is now managed by major urban services groups listed on the stock exchange, such as JCDecaux and Bolloré, in partnership with local authorities. In this way, self-service mobility represents a new form of privatisation of the city, alongside older methods of managing urban services by large private groups (Baraud-Serfaty 2011): through the creation of new urban markets, those involved in self-service mobility take ownership of both knowledge and public spaces (Huré 2010). To what extent does these new players' influence on public policy transform the role of public bodies in urban management? Who are the winners and losers of these reorganisations?

Self-service mobility: mode of transport or model for public action?

Self-service mobility has a unifying effect. It brings together not only users with regard to new practices, but also modes of transport – bicycles and cars – that have developed in opposition to one other for over 40 years, particularly in Paris (Flonneau 2005). This opposition has resulted in a “battle of the road” in terms of the distribution of public space in the city (Passalacqua 2010). How have these two modes managed to follow the same trend towards self-service? The concept of self-service in the city has, in fact, gone through three major phases of innovation: it first appeared in the voluntary sector, before being appropriated and implemented by local authorities, and finally subjected to forms of privatisation.

¹ Figures to be achieved by June 2012. The system was launched with 250 cars spread between 75 stations.

² Term used on the official Autolib' website (retrieved 9 December 2011 ; URL: <http://www.autolib.eu/une-revolution-urbaine>).

In its first phase, involving associations, the concept of self-service mobility was the result of a somewhat unholy alliance between libertarian movements and consumer society. In Amsterdam, for example, self-service bicycles developed in 1965 among associations close to libertarian circles. A collective, Provo, then submitted plans to the city council proposing that the municipality finance a fleet of 20,000 public bikes; when the council refused, members of the association decided instead to repair abandoned bicycles in the streets of the city, then paint them white and make them freely available to citizens under the name *witte fietsen* (“white bikes”). Similarly, the concept of self-service cars was developed in the late 1990s in the voluntary sector, particularly in Switzerland and the Netherlands, but also in Rome, at the initiative of the environmental association Legambiente Lazio. Innovative associations such as these have developed real expertise in the field of mobility, allowing them to gradually legitimise their place in the production of the city.

Self-service mobility then became a service taken on by public authorities. It first began to be “institutionalised” in 1976 in La Rochelle with mayor Michel Crépeau’s³ introduction of 300 “municipal bikes”. From this point onwards, the basic concept would be definitively fixed, i.e. organising a bicycle rental system using fixed stations spread across a given territory. Although the sharing and free ownership aspects appear as new values, means of controlling usage are not absent and are based primarily on user committees (citizen surveillance) and identity checks (municipal surveillance). Public management – in-house – of self-service mobility also marks a second phase of development of the concept for cars. An experiment was conducted by Rome city council from 2005 in the form of the Roma Carsharing operation. In Lyon, the work of the association “La Voiture Autrement” led local authorities to develop the first system named Autolib’ in 2007; the name would later be the subject of an agreement with Paris city council regarding its use. This second phase of public innovation was marked by processes of co-production of urban action, with the participation of associations and recycling of their knowledge.

The third stage involved large private urban service firms taking ownership of the self-service concept and introducing their own innovations. In Lyon, in 2005, JCDecaux implemented Vélo’v, a self-service bicycle-hire system on a vast scale (prior to the launch of Vélib’ in Paris in 2007). The choice of location was no accident, as Lyon was the city where the company – the world leader on the street furniture market – introduced its first bus shelters in 1965. In a different context, Bolloré made a spectacular entrance into the world of urban services management with Autolib’ in Paris. These two companies have developed a common strategy: to make Paris a “world showcase” in order to export their products and their international image. Here, the innovation lies not only in the industrial and investment capacities of the groups concerned (€30 million for the electric battery of the Bluecar proposed by Bolloré), but also the incorporation of new information technologies and a fully automated system. Partly as a result of the emergence of private players, the system of co-production with regard to the city that was at the origin of self-service mobility – with public bodies and associations working together – has been broken down following the establishment of partnerships between the public and private sectors. This change has not only displaced the traditional associations from the decision-making process, but has also profoundly transformed the urban services economy.

From the privatisation of public spaces...

This reorganisation of players is not without consequences for the spatial organisation of the city: self-service mobility is characterised by an increasing occupation of public space by big firms.

In Paris, the stations for bicycles and cars, as well as the terminals to recharge Bluecars’ batteries, are all places now dedicated to promoting businesses. The presence of large groups in public spaces is particularly visible in the case of JCDecaux. Indeed, this visibility is a key part of the company’s economic model: Vélib’ and other services are funded by revenue from advertising on JCDecaux

³ French lawyer and politician who was mayor of La Rochelle (for the Mouvement des Radicaux de Gauche [Movement of Radicals of the Left] party) between 1971 and 1999.

street furniture. Furthermore, since the 1970s, the urban space in Paris has been transformed into a dense jungle of street furniture (Carmona 1985): bus shelters, billboards, road signs, benches, phone booths, street name plates, lighting, litter bins, toilets, municipal newspapers – and now the Vélib’ system. This abundance of street furniture reflects the influence of JCDecaux on the public space. In the same way, Paris city council has granted Bolloré the use of numerous on-street parking spaces. And, who knows, maybe we will soon see advertisements appearing on the side of Bluecars?

With this model, the occupation of public space leads to public authorities becoming highly dependent on businesses. Furthermore, any change of provider for this type of service represents a major political risk, as the removal of one company’s fixtures and fittings necessarily means “tearing the city up” – the example of Rennes in 1998 showed how difficult it is to change providers of street furniture.⁴ Consequently, the links between the public authority and the service provider chosen from the outset make opting for a self-service mobility system a long-term decision.

... to a new definition of public service?

Self-service mobility also contributes to the reconsideration of some traditional players in the management of urban services. Examples of legal action taken by vehicle rental professionals are becoming increasingly common, in particular for “unfair competition”, notably in Lyon in 2005 against Vélo’v, and in Paris in 2011 against Autolib’, where Ulpro (the Union of Professional Rental Firms) took action to denounce the “financial aid and 24 km [15 miles] of road space that have been privatised for Autolib’, which enjoys a preferential rate for parking its vehicles of €750 per year per car – a price 50% lower than the market rate”.⁵

But the emergence of private players in the field of self-service mobility has led, above all, to the very notion of public service being called into question. Previously, the debate concerning JCDecaux’s activities ended in 1978 with the decision that its services could not be qualified as “public services”.⁶ However, the debate has resurfaced with the development of self-service bike-hire systems. The term “individual public transport” used by politicians reflects hesitations over the vocabulary relating to public-private partnerships. Pending any judgements, the situation regarding Autolib’ is clearer, as Bolloré operates within the framework of a public service delegation contract; by offering 24/7 service availability, self-service mobility can complement public transport.

In this context, the role of local authorities has changed. Their action is now less focused on the running of services than the legal control of the contractual agreement and evaluating the performance of service providers: public bodies act as regulators of an urban space that is increasingly seen as a vast market. However, in parallel, there has been a reinforcement of public control of large private groups’ activities, in particular through ongoing negotiation processes, the development of the legalisation of public action (Duran 2009) and the production of (counter-)expertise. To implement this expertise, public authorities could join forces with user communities that are becoming better and better organised: in Brussels, the “Where’s My Villo?” user committee produces reports assessing the state of the fleet of self-service bicycles managed by JCDecaux.

⁴ In 1998, Rennes city council chose not to renew JCDecaux’s contract, instead favouring More Group France, a company subsequently bought by Clear Channel. The removal of JCDecaux’s equipment ended in the two companies fighting a long legal battle. For more information (in French), see: *Arrêt de la cour d’appel de Paris (1^{ère} chambre, section H) en date du 22 février 2005 relatif au recours formé par la société JCDecaux contre la décision n° 04-D-32 du Conseil de la concurrence en date du 8 juillet 2004 relative à la saisine de la société More Group France contre les pratiques du groupe Decaux.*

⁵ “Autolib’ fâche les loueurs de voiture et les taxis parisiens”, *Le Figaro*, 7 December 2011 (retrieved 9 December 2011; URL: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/2011/12/06/04016-20111206ARTFIG00688-autolib-fache-les-loueurs-de-voiture-et-les-taxis-parisiens.php>).

⁶ French interior ministry circular no. 78-207 of 18 May 1978.

Finally, local government policy is now focusing on two different groups: the consumers of individualised public services, and the large private groups that run them. In this regard, Paris has become a model of public action, which has spread rapidly to other major European cities. Large groups' investment in the French capital is largely due to its status as "world showcase"; this self-service mobility is therefore not accessible to all cities, as evidenced by the failure and subsequent termination of the V'hello service in Aix-en-Provence in 2011. The challenge now lies in other cities' ability to adapt mobility systems to meet their social needs and territorial realities. Failure to adapt would mean the triumph of the self-service city could become the triumph of the market and lead to the development of inequalities between cities in terms of the quality of service provision.

Bibliography

- Baraud-Serfaty, Isabelle. 2011. "La nouvelle privatisation des villes", *Esprit*, nos. 3–4, pp. 49–167.
- Carmona, Michel. 1985. *Le mobilier urbain*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Duran, Patrice. 2009. "Légitimité, droit et action publique", *L'Année Sociologique*, vol. 59, no. 2, pp. 303–344.
- Flonneau, Mathieu. 2005. *Paris et l'automobile. Un siècle de passions*, Paris: Hachette Littératures.
- Huré, Maxime. 2010. "Une privatisation des savoirs urbains ? Les grands groupes privés dans la production d'études des projets de vélos en libre-service à Lyon et Bruxelles", *Géocarrefour*, vol. 85, no. 4, pp. 265–273.
- Lorrain, Dominique. 2002. "Capitalismes urbains : des modèles européens en compétition", *L'Année de la Régulation*, no. 6, pp. 197–241.
- Passalacqua, Arnaud. 2010. *La bataille de la route*, Paris: Descartes & C^{ie}.

Maxime Huré is a temporary lecturer and research assistant at IEP Lyon (Lyon Institute of Political Studies). He is currently completing his doctorate thesis, entitled *La circulation des politiques de vélos en libre-service en Europe : sociologie historique d'une innovation* ("The circulation of self-service bicycle-hire policies in Europe: the historical sociology of an innovation"). His main areas of research are government knowledge, the circulation of public policies and large urban services companies.

His web page: <http://triangle.ens-lyon.fr/spip.php?article917>.

To quote this article:

Maxime Huré, translated by Oliver Waine, "From Vélib' to Autolib': private corporations' involvement in urban mobility policy", *Metropolitiques*, 25 April 2012. URL: <http://www.metropolitiques.eu/From-Velib-to-Autolib-private.html>.