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The Making(s) of an Alternative Urban Policy: What Happens When Free Fares Come to Town?

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Abstract: While many urban policies and practices claim to offer an “alternative” to the “mainstream” of urban entrepreneurialism, they remain under-theorised and prone to alignment with entrepreneurial agendas. In this paper I examine fare-free public transport (FFPT) as a salient example of an alternative urban policy. Looking at Aubagne (France) and Tallinn (Estonia), I explore what happens when an alternative policy “comes to town”. I detect how FFPT enters local urban regimes, and study the (non-) participation of public transport passengers and workers in the decision-making process about whether and how to abolish public transport fares. My analysis reveals that albeit alternative policies such as FFPT seem to oppose entrepreneurialism, they may hinge on urban regimes that span across institutions, leave the local configurations of power unchallenged, and strengthen local elites. The adaptability of alternatives to diverse political and intellectual positions explains their resilience. Consequently, their radical character cannot be taken for granted and remains an object of political struggle.

Résumé: Alors que de nombreuses politiques et pratiques urbaines prétendent offrir des « alternatives » à la « domination » de l’entrepreneuriat urbain, elles restent insuffisamment théorisées et s’alignent sans difficultés sur les politiques entrepreneuriales. Dans cet article, j’examine la gratuité des transports publics comme un exemple remarquable de politique urbaine alternative. À travers les cas d’Aubagne (France) et de Tallinn (Estonie), j’explore ce qui se passe quand la gratuité des transports publics « arrive en ville ». Je décèle la manière dont elle entre dans les régimes urbains locaux qui ont conçu cette politique, et j’étudie la (non-)participation des passagers/ères et des travailleurs/euses des transports publics à cette politique. Mon analyse révèle comment les politiques alternatives dépendent de régimes urbains de gratuité des transports publics qui recouvrent différentes institutions. Ainsi, ces politiques ne remettent pas en question les configurations locales du pouvoir et permettent aux élites locales de réaffirmer leur capacité à gouverner. La capacité des alternatives à s’adapter à des positions politiques diverses explique leur résilience et indique que leur caractère radical ne peut pas être considéré comme acquis: ce dernier reste un objet de lutte politique.

Keywords: urban regimes, alternatives, transport, mobility, participation, workers

Mots clés: Mots-clés, régimes urbains, alternatives, transport, mobilité, participation, travailleurs/euses

Introduction: Exploring Urban “Alternatives”

This paper emerges from the need to analyse urban policies and practices that allegedly challenge the capitalist mode of producing urban space and society.

While a plethora of contemporary urban practices claim to propose “alternative” ways of producing and living the city (Béal and Rousseau 2014; Bonfond 2017; Parker et al. 2007), they receive less attention than the hegemonic “mainstream” project of urban neoliberalism.

The “alternative” label is carried by heterogeneous policies, projects, and spaces, embracing diverse facets of urban life such as housing, food, economy, finance, planning and governance. What connects co-housing initiatives, community land trusts and squats (Bunce 2016; Martínez López 2013; Yardımcı 2020), food networks, farming cooperatives and community gardens (Eizenberg 2012; cf. Weiler et al. 2016), local currencies (North 2014), and participatory budgeting programmes (Sintomer et al. 2008)—to name but a few “alternative spaces” (North and Huber 2004) and “urban laboratories” (Chatterton et al. 2018)—is their head-on opposition to the capitalist logic of producing urban space and society. Many such practices implicitly challenge what David Harvey (1989) recognised over three decades ago as “urban entrepreneurialism”—a strategy that is essentially neoliberal in its focus on inter- and intra-urban competition. According to this rationale, urban authorities should create optimal conditions for attracting human and financial capital by prioritising supply-side interventions in select urban spaces, which can supposedly “trickle down” across urban territory and society. While urban scholars have long explored urban entrepreneurialism (Doucet 2013; Hall and Hubbard 1998; Jones and Ward 2002; MacLeod 2002; Peck and Tickell 2002; Quilley 1999), policy-makers and activists have referred to it less often. For instance, the nascent movement of transforming urban policy-making under the label of “new municipalism” (Thompson 2021) denounces the general logic of “capitalism”, its “elites” and “establishment”, the broad agendas of “urban austerity”, and specific policies such as privatisation of public services (Angel 2021; Popartan et al. 2020; Russell 2019). However, as urban entrepreneurialism keeps evolving (Peck 2017; Phelps and Miao 2020) and continues to inspire political agendas across diverse urban institutions (Byrne 2016; Moreno Zacarés 2020), I argue that its logic aptly captures the key aspects of the “mainstream” against which many alternatives are positioned.

Urban entrepreneurialism is particularly tangible in the field of transport and mobility. As my colleagues and I argued (Tuvikene et al. 2021), the provision of public transport (PT) infrastructure is often conceptualised as key for boosting territorial competitiveness. Many urban actors such as mayors, chambers of commerce, transport operators, and construction companies—converging in what Stephen Elkin (1985, 1987) and Clarence Stone (1989) identified as “urban regimes”—tend to argue for improving connectivity between strategic nodes, corridors and “premium network spaces” (Graham 2000) to attract external investment. Urban regimes approach PT infrastructure as a crucial asset in strategies geared towards capital accumulation, rent valorisation, and gentrification (Enright 2016; Lin and Chung 2017; Lung-Amam et al. 2019), which frequently involves forming high-risk public–private partnerships (Siemiatycki 2013). To justify or obfuscate this logic, local elites repeatedly frame the construction and maintenance of PT networks as a “largely ‘technical’ process of managing traffic flows through ‘rational’ solutions, rather than a question of governance over

essentially political choices regarding socio-spatial distribution of costs and benefits related to urban development” (Tuvikene et al. 2021:8).

A variety of mobility practices claim to offer a more progressive, inclusive, and just approach to how transport policy and infrastructure take shape. Many of them relate to the notions of urban “sustainability” and “liveability” (Low and Gleeson 2001; Reigner and Brenac 2019), which seem to herald a veritable “urban revolution” (Sadik-Khan and Solomonow 2016) by advocating for “cities for people” rather than for cars (Gehl 2010). These slogans have empowered a flurry of bottom-up movements (e.g. Mohl 2004; Sagaris 2014) to call for reportedly “radical” planning measures reducing car access to select urban spaces, for instance by applying stricter car parking regulations and delineating congestion charging zones (Banister 2003; Givoni 2012), effectively opening them to cyclists and pedestrians (Hass-Klau 1993) to generate a significant modal shift away from motorised vehicles.

However, analysing practices that propose an alternative to urban entrepreneurialism requires addressing at least two problems. First, the notion of urban alternatives has not been sufficiently theorised, nor systematically analysed (Béal and Rousseau 2014; Purcell 2008). Albeit many urban actors—from bottom-up social movements and academics to public officials and real estate developers—frequently claim to be producing alternative urbanities, the term lacks a clear definition (Kębłowski and Van Criekingen 2014). This dilemma does not prevent alternative urban policies from becoming mobile objects, as diverse stakeholders promote them to counter “fast policies” of the entrepreneurial kind with “fast activism” (Lauermaun and Vogelpohl 2019) practised within slowed-down counter-hegemonic circuits of knowledge (McCann 2011), notably represented by the network of “fearless cities” and the “new municipalist” movement (Angel 2021; Russell 2019; Thompson 2021).

Second, many urban actors claim to nurture alternatives to bring hope against the fatalism of urban entrepreneurialism, and the post-political condition it generates, emphasising “the political—understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement” (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Nevertheless, alternative practices and policies are not impervious to the forces of “alter-washing”, that is, attempts at institutionalising, hijacking, or aligning them to entrepreneurial agendas (Béal and Rousseau 2014). This trend is particularly evident in the field of urban transport and mobility. Across diverse urban contexts, investment in “sustainable” PT infrastructure such as tramway lines, bus rapid transit systems, and cable cars has formed part of place attractiveness strategies and portfolios of standardised policy “fixes” and “models”, which focus on territorial “rebranding”, central to competition-driven entrepreneurial urbanism (Álvarez Rivadulla and Bocarejo 2014; Beier 2020; Wood 2015). A handful of cities have become celebrated as “best practices” of limiting the presence of cars in urban cores (e.g. Barcelona, Oslo), promoting cycling (Amsterdam, Copenhagen), re-introducing tramways in urban centres (Bordeaux, Strasbourg), and offering PT services that contribute to urban sustainability (Vienna, Zurich) and social inclusion (Bogotá, Medellín). Critical urban scholars have exposed how urban regimes conceive these models of “sustainable” transport planning as tools of neoliberalism

urbanism, and how they reproduce uneven geographies, power relations, and elite interests (Addie 2015; Enright 2016; Farmer 2011; Henderson 2009; Wood 2015). Meanwhile, alternatives to this entrepreneurial pattern have received much less critical attention (e.g. Castañeda 2020; Gamble 2019). Consequently, little is known about how allegedly alternative urban policies are developed, what agendas they follow, and what interests they advance.

Below I address these two problems by enquiring into the policy of fare-free public transport (FFPT). Fully applied in no less than 250 localities worldwide, FFPT is advocated by many diverse urban movements and mayors worldwide, notably in Brazil, Canada, France, Poland, and Sweden (Enright 2019; Planka.nu 2016; Santini 2019). Its critics—usually among transport economists and engineers—deem it largely unsustainable, uneconomical, and even irrational (Cats et al. 2017; Fearnley 2013; Storchmann 2003). Its proponents—representing heterogenous academic fields, geographical locales, activist groups, and public institutions—claim that offering unconditional access to PT directly contributes to social and spatial justice, addresses climate change, and challenges the capitalist logic of urban development, well beyond the particular field of transport and mobility (Dellheim and Prince 2018; Robert 2015; Schein 2011). This perspective usually takes for granted that FFPT does not follow the entrepreneurial “mainstream” and helps to transfer significant power over the production of urban space directly to its inhabitants. However, this claim is yet to be proven, as existing work on FFPT tends to focus on the overall cost of fare abolition and its impact on mobility patterns (Cats et al. 2017; Fearnley 2013; Storchmann 2003), and little is known about how the decision to abolish fares is reached in the first place, whom it represents, what interests it articulates, and how it affects local power relations.

To unpack these questions, and to understand what happens when an alternative policy such as FFPT “comes to town”, I focus on two fare abolition programmes, developed in Aubagne (France) and Tallinn (Estonia). Although, as I explain below, important contextual differences separate these two cases, they are both guided by the idea that providing unconditional access to mobility contributes to a socially re-distributive transport policy, in explicit opposition to entrepreneurial agendas that promote large-scale yet socio-spatially selective infrastructural investment. To verify the alternative character of FFPT, I refer to urban regime theory (Elkin 1985, 1987; Stone 1989) as a way of exploring urban policies that claim to resist the entrepreneurial hegemony. It argues that participation in policy-making resides within coalitions of elites, whose power hinges on the ability to work towards building and securing a consensus around specific policy goals and solutions. Throughout the paper I analyse how an alternative policy such as FFPT enters local urban regimes that control who participates in local policy-making. I explore the agency of both PT passengers and workers, as the latter group remains generally overlooked by critical urban geography and transport studies (for exceptions, see Attoh 2019; Borowiak 2019; Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018). Consequently, I assess the capacity of FFPT to empower urban inhabitants and alter the local configurations of power.

The paper is structured as follows: having discussed Stone’s theory and its recent interpretations in the next section, I introduce the two cases and the

methodology used to dissect them in section three. In the paper's fourth section, I scrutinise the process of arriving to the decision to abolish fares; section five examines whether and how passengers participated in FFPT from below; and section six how it affected the position of PT workers.

Exploring and Contesting Urban Regimes in Transport

The concept of urban regime emerged from the "community power debate" that throughout the 1950s and 1960s engaged elitist and pluralist approaches in discussing the question of *who* governs the city (Dahl 1961; Hunter 1953). Path-breaking work by Elkin (1985, 1987) and Stone (1989, 1993) challenged this inquiry by shifting it towards the question of *how* power is created, assembled, and enacted. In his study of the city of Atlanta (United States), Stone argued that power is not simply obtained and controlled, for instance by winning an open election or holding a public office. Instead, power is relational, produced and sustained among a variety of governmental (elected) and non-governmental (unelected) urban actors, whose capacity to govern is something that is being constantly achieved and reaffirmed. This capacity constitutes the power *to* develop and execute policy rather than the power *over* particular institutions or territories. In turn, power can be detected by studying urban regimes, which Stone (1989:6) defines as "informal arrangements by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions".

Urban regime theory is as influential as it is controversial. Critiques have been raised with regard to its application outside the United States (Davies 2003; Ward 1996), its capacity to explain the process of regime formation (Mossberger and Stoker 2001), and its relevance to analyse contemporary globalised and post-industrial cities (Pierre 2014). Urban scholars have drawn the boundaries and core properties of the concept, discussed its typologies (Brown 1999; Dowding 2001; Kantor et al. 1997), and warned against applying it to describe just any relationship between public and private institutions (Mossberger and Stoker 2001). However, some have argued for a more flexible approach to urban regime theory, focusing on Stone's central observation of how power is produced through relations between governmental and non-governmental actors, which in the European context does not necessarily involve private businesses (Stone 2005; Ward 1996), and can embrace a specific sector of urban politics (Hankins and Martin 2006; While et al. 2004). This approach emphasises the plurality of processes of consolidating and reproducing power, involving a variety of actors. It also highlights how the alignment of private and public interests in policy-making engages stakeholders other than just elected officials, who often form relational and trans-national policy networks (Marsden et al. 2012; Wood 2015). Finally, it demonstrates that the power to make policy ultimately resides within coalitions of elites, which foregrounds the importance of exploring what interests urban policies represent and to what extent the process of their conception and development involves and represents non-elite and "non-expert" citizens. That last set of issues identified by urban regime theory is what I explore below.

I argue that the power configurations identified by urban regime theory commonly underpin transport policies in contemporary cities, and following them constitutes a valid framework for scrutinising diverse interests of actors involved in PT, including public and private PT operators, construction and engineering companies, international consultants and experts, (st)architects, urban planners and designers. While their inclusion in transport policy-making may give the impression of rendering PT governance more consensual and democratic, growing evidence shows that framing PT agendas and planning metropolitan networks hinges on coalitions forged among local elites (Enright 2016), in line with Elkin's and Stone's observations. As these processes are largely informed by techno-managerial circuits of knowledge (Healey 2013), transport may be depoliticised and ejected from the public debate, obfuscating the uneven geographies and power relations it (re)produces.

This phenomenon is particularly visible when exploring how PT users and workers are excluded from decisions about transport agendas. PT authorities occasionally enable "non-expert" citizens to participate in the process of making decisions over mobility projects, and transport studies generally praise such initiatives as useful for building legitimacy and acceptability of transport projects (Eprecht et al. 2014; Isaksson and Richardson 2009). However, as citizen participation usually centres upon specific proposals and seldom allows for discussing broad mobility agendas, it can help to forge consensus that excludes alternative policies, obfuscating social and spatial conflicts that underpin PT, and effectively sustaining rather than challenging the post-political order (Mouffe 2005). Therefore, as argued by critical inquiries into participation (de Vries 2016; Nash 2013), its processes should be scrutinised against their inclusivity and capacity to accommodate deliberation among top-down and bottom-up actors, to articulate both consensus and conflict, and to validate the expertise of passengers and workers (Enright 2019; Sosa López and Montero 2018).

Methodology and Context for Exploring Fare-Free Programmes in Aubagne and Tallinn

To detect how urban regimes frame alternative urban policies, I examine fare abolition programmes in Aubagne and Tallinn. Important contextual differences separate these two cases. In Aubagne, FFPT embraces the whole territory of the former Communauté d'agglomération du Pays d'Aubagne et de l'Etoile (Agglomeration Community of Pays d'Aubagne et de l'Etoile, CAPAE), which until 2014 functioned as an agglomeration of 12 municipalities, of which Aubagne was the largest one at the time (45,128 inhabitants; 104,018 in the whole CAPAE). The agglomeration is located in the eastern periphery of the adjacent city of Marseille, and in 2016 became part of the newly established Métropole d'Aix-Marseille-Provence (Metropolis of Aix-Marseille-Provence, MAMP). Despite rapid de-industrialisation and suburbanisation that began in the 1960s, CAPAE has retained a strong working-class identity. Unlike the traditionally right-wing neighbouring cities of Aix-en-Provence and Marseille, the majority of CAPAE municipalities have been governed by socialist and communist mayors. In Marseille, on the

other hand, ever since the 1990s the right-wing majority has advanced neoliberal agendas. Investment in PT infrastructure, notably the tramway network, is aligned with pro-gentrification real estate strategies, particularly evident in urban neighbourhoods located at the city's waterfront (Reigner and Hernandez 2014). This vision entails applying stronger policing and surveillance measures in PT and increasing fares, which contributes to socio-spatial exclusion, notably among the youth residing in the city's stigmatised *banlieues*. Aubagne officials have unambiguously opposed this approach. They have advanced socio-spatially redistributive policies and referred to the agglomeration as a "co-operative" of municipalities—a hub that wanted to "do things differently" (Claux 2014:243) and a bastion of radical municipalism *par excellence*. Until its dissolution in 2016, CAPAE held major responsibility for transport policy and planning, and had the power over developing and executing its own PT agenda, independently from the neighbouring Marseille. Nonetheless, despite advancing a vision of alternative urbanity, CAPAE's policies were strongly influenced by business representatives. The agglomeration constitutes an important business hub, strategically located in close to proximity to Marseille, and therefore local entrepreneurs held a privileged position in Aubagne's political landscape. As a member of municipal chamber of commerce reports: "we enjoyed an excellent relationship with local politicians: regardless of their political colour, they listen to us really carefully" (Interview AU-24).

Unlike Aubagne, Tallinn is a large economic and administrative centre of national importance, with the population of 443,932 (2020). Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the political identity of Estonia's capital city emerged in juxtaposition with that of the Estonian state, which from 1999 to 2016 was governed by right-wing parties committed to neoliberal agendas. In the field of transport, this approach is reflected by a series of policies abolishing national tax on car ownership, privatising inter-city bus services, and supporting digitalisation and flexibilisation of PT services (Lanamäki and Tuvikene 2021). Contrarily, since 2001 Tallinn's municipal institutions have been almost uninterruptedly dominated by the left-leaning Centre Party. Opposing neoliberal ideas advanced on the national level, the city's government developed a series of welfare programmes and institutions such as municipal bank offering low-rate loans, alleviation of land tax for homeowners, provision of financial bonus to retired citizens on the day of their birthday, and distribution of small amounts of free potatoes and firewood—a campaign dubbed "Tallinn helps" that attracted much publicity and mockery alike. The key decision-making power over PT belongs to the city's mayor, yet the policy-making field is open to diverse actors and interests. Similarly to other Estonian municipalities, Tallinn holds the right to collect 11.6% (2014) of each of its resident's personal income tax, guaranteeing relative economic and political autonomy from the national authorities. Therefore, as admitted by a municipal official, "one of the main factors that enabled [FFPT] in the first place was the fact that Tallinn ... does not receive a state subsidy for public transport from the national level" (Interview TA-2). As in Aubagne, various Tallinn officials imbued the idea of abolishing fares in the aura of alternative politics, narrating it as an exception to the surrounding entrepreneurial "mainstream".

The two FFPT programmes do not operate in the same way. In Aubagne, since 15 May 2009 riding on board of the local PT network is unconditionally free for all, and no tickets are issued. Tallinn's FFPT was made available on 1 January 2013, yet it is available only to officially registered residents, who are required to validate their "zero ticket" upon boarding PT vehicles. Furthermore, at the time of research Aubagne's network was relatively small, composed of 20 regular bus routes, 10 school routes, and a single tram line. Tallinn's PT system was significantly larger, consisting of 74 bus routes complemented by a compact network of four tramway and four trolleybus routes.

The choice of these particular two cities is guided, firstly, by Flyvbjerg's (2006) strategy for conducting research on a small number of cases. Accordingly, Tallinn and Aubagne are selected as important reference points in the global FFPT landscape, and "most likely" among FFPT localities to embody alternative urban politics and to resist "alter-washing" by urban entrepreneurialism. Secondly, both Aubagne and Tallinn remain at the periphery of debates in critical geography and urban studies, outside the small group of global "celebrity" cities. Therefore, they offer an opportunity to theorise alternative urban policies from two "ordinary cities" (Robinson 2002)—an approach that hopefully inspires readers in the global East and South.

Throughout the paper I rely on data gathered between February 2016 and January 2017 in 62 semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders (see Table 1). While I offered some early insights emerging from this dataset in my earlier work on both Aubagne and Tallinn (Kębłowski 2017, 2018; Kębłowski et al. 2019), below I analyse their FFPT programmes in much more depth. Among my informants are key local officials in two cities and their neighbouring municipalities, representatives of regional and national authorities, local PT operators and their workers (drivers and ticket controllers), trade union leaders, and local NGOs. In Aubagne, I additionally spoke with participants of workshops and debates organised around the fare abolition. The insights from interviews were supported by a scan of official records of political bodies that discussed FFPT, existing and forthcoming transport and mobility plans, and local media outlets.

Producing an Alternative From Above: "We can still do what we want to"

Both in Aubagne and Tallinn the idea of abolishing fares emerged unexpectedly, surrounded by an aura of radical change, and introduced by charismatic political figures. However, in line with Stone's (1989) observations of urban regimes, in both cities the arrival of FFPT hinged on careful construction of broad alliances of local stakeholders. In Aubagne, the first mention of FFPT dates back to the municipal election in March 2008, ahead of which the so-called "rainbow" coalition gathering local communists, socialists, greens, and representatives of civil society reached an electoral agreement. In the week separating two electoral rounds—held on 9 and 16 March 2008 respectively—Aubagne's mayor at the time, Daniel Fontaine, and the head of CAPAE council, Magali Giovannangeli, announced the idea of launching FFPT in explicit opposition to Marseille's entrepreneurial agenda.

Table 1: Stakeholders interviewed in Aubagne and Tallinn

Interview code	Aubagne	Interview code	Tallinn
Municipal policy-makers and officials			
AU-1	Members of the Council of	TA-1	Officials at Tallinn City Office
AU-2	CAPAE	TA-2	
AU-3		TA-3	
AU-4	Former member of the Council of	TA-4	Former official at the Tallinn City Office
AU-5	CAPAE		
AU-6	Officials of Aubagne municipality	TA-5	Members of the Tallinn City Council
AU-7		TA-6	
AU-8		TA-7	
AU-9	Former official of Aubagne municipality	TA-8	Officials of Rae municipality
AU-10	Official of Bouilladisse municipality	TA-9	
AU-11	Official of Roquevaire municipality	TA-10	Official of Saku municipality
AU-12	Opposition members of Aubagne city council	TA-11	Official of Viimsi municipality
AU-13		TA-12	Official of Kose municipality
AU-14		TA-13	Official of Radisiki municipality
Regional and national policy-makers and officials			
	n/a	TA-14	Official at Estonia's Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications
		TA-15	Officials at the Harju County Government
		TA-16	
		TA-17	Official at the Harju county public transport administration
Transport planners			
AU-15	Officials at CAPAE's Transport	TA-18	Officials at the at Tallinn's municipal
AU-16	Department	TA-19	transport department
		TA-20	Local transport and mobility researchers
		TA-21	
		TA-22	
Public transport officials and workers			
AU-17	Officials at CAPAE's public	TA-23	Official at Tallinn's public transport
AU-18	transport operator (TransDev)		operator (Tallinna Linnatranspordi)
AU-19	Bus drivers (TransDev)	TA-24	Bus drivers (Tallinna Linnatranspordi)
AU-20		TA-25	
AU-21		TA-26	
AU-22			
AU-23		TA-27	Tram driver (Tallinna Linnatranspordi)
Local NGOs and unions			
AU-24	Member of the local chamber of commerce	TA-28	Members of local NGOs
		TA-29	
		TA-30	
AU-25	Members of local trade unions		
AU-26			
AU-27	Members of local NGOs		
AU-28			
AU-29			
AU-30			
AU-31			
AU-32			

Aubagne was to embark on a “completely different urban project”, in tune with the municipality’s long-standing ideological commitment to developing “radical” and “original” policies of “powerful and symbolic dimension” (AU-4). Fare abolition was envisioned as an “alternative to the logics of the rule of the market” (AU-4), commoning transport and providing equal access to mobility across space and society. Albeit conceived behind closed doors and announced only before the second electoral round, FFPT immediately became “a battle call [that] made people dream” (AU-5), giving the left-wing coalition crucial electoral advantage by surprising and ultimately defeating the right-wing opposition.

In Tallinn, too, the proposal to abolish fares came as a great surprise, announced by the local mayor, Edgar Savisaar. The mayor first mentioned FFPT in January 2012 in a short commentary piece published in *Õhtuleht*, an Estonian daily newspaper, proposing to organise a referendum on abolishing fares just two months later (Savisaar 2012). Municipal transport planners were astonished by this decision: it “emerged ... out of the blue ... It’s the politicians that came up with it. Why? I don’t know! ... They didn’t ask us” (TA-18). FFPT had not been discussed by local mobility experts, nor by municipal officials and city councillors, nor the members of the Centre Party, which at that time was firmly led by the mayor and acted as a major force in Tallinn politics. Instead, it was the mayor’s office alone that conceptualised the rationale behind FFPT and its form. Fare abolition was framed as a social policy “providing mobility for all, especially the low- and middle-income groups and ... the unemployed [while] stimulating the economy [by] increasing labour mobility” (TA-3), and attracting tax-paying residents. Putting this alternative policy to a public vote—a referendum that took place from 19 to 25 May 2012—clearly allowed the Centre Party to gain competitive advantage over its political opponents.

Although FFPT was initiated by mayors, its articulation depended on broad coalitions of both public and private actors. In Aubagne, the local mayor quickly convinced his counterparts from the other 11 CAPAE municipalities that the shift to a fare-free system was financially feasible and beneficial to their communities. However, even more vital for forming a pro-FFPT coalition across institutions and ideological positions was the approval of local businesses. According to the French law, CAPAE municipalities could levy a transport tax (called *versement transport*), collected from companies of more than 11 employees. Fare abolition thus depended on local employers, represented by the local chamber of commerce. They agreed to fund free fares through a tax increase, expecting FFPT to act as an additional amenity benefiting their employees, making daily commuting more comfortable and cost-efficient. As one of the officials who led the negotiations with local CEOs recalls, “they were ready to contribute more to *versement transport* ... only because they [knew] that in return they would receive a service for their employees ... It was a kind of give-and-take agreement” (AU-11).

The “radical” move to abolish fares also had to be embraced by the local PT operator, a branch of the multi-national company Veolia. As another official recalls the negotiation between Veolia and the mayor:

Once we have gained certainty that things could be done, [the mayor] contacted the person in charge of Veolia on the national level, [and] received him in my office. [He] asked the question: We want [FFPT] in our city: are you in? ... I assure you, he thought about it for five, maybe ten seconds [even though] they had never done it ... From then on we developed [FFPT] together. [We made] a private company accept a totally innovative and complex policy ... and it is quite striking to see a private company working hand in hand with a left-wing municipality like ours. (AU-5)

Thus, despite Veolia's entrepreneurial focus on profitability of transport provision, and no prior experience in operating a fare-free network despite managing more than a hundred PT systems across France, the company came on board almost immediately. Paradoxically, a shift to a "radical" fare-free system secured their privileged position as local PT operator, maintaining a "remarkable relation with the local authorities" (AU-5).

In Tallinn, too, producing FFPT relied on constructing a broad consensus across institutions and interests. The referendum was crucial in this regard, as it generated an overwhelmingly supportive result (75.5% votes in favour, with 15% turnout), helping the mayor to bypass the public debate and transmit the decision to adopt fare abolition down the administrative hierarchy. Unlike in Aubagne, Tallinn's PT operator is operated by the municipality, yet it "had nothing to say about FFPT" (TA-19), and was merely informed about the new policy, without any prior consultations. Instead of being conceived by transport engineers, FFPT was authored and advanced by elected officials and approved through a referendum, thus placing the political dimension of transport over "politics—understood as technocratic mechanism and consensual procedures" (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). However, after the initial shock and disbelief among transport planners that fares may actually be zeroed, it became clear that FFPT was not at odds with ongoing transport projects: the extension of tramway network, renewal of PT vehicle stock, design of right-of-way bus lanes, and overall improvement of PT quality. As one high-rank municipal technician shares his relief: "we quickly realised that [FFPT] would cause no major disaster, make no major change ... and that we can still do what we want to" (TA-24).

Participating in Fare-Free Public Transport From Below: "We did not have the same power"

As producing FFPT hinged on a consensus across institutions and political positions, even though the policy carried the promise of advancing alternative and transformative urban politics, the process of deciding about it generally excluded local inhabitants.

In Tallinn, the debate about fare abolition began in the context of a relative lack of established traditions of citizen participation, fairly recent post-Soviet history of urban activism, and fundamentally weak position of urban social movements vis-à-vis the municipal authorities. As a local activist complains, "we do engage with municipal [officials], but when it comes to important decisions, people are not informed or involved ... If a project is not important to politicians,

they listen to us, [but] if it is important ... they don't listen to us" (TA-29). Citizen participation remains limited to rare and punctual moments, focused on singular and secondary issues, as exemplified by referendums on imposing a citywide road speed limit of 40 km/h (rejected by voters), and a ban on late night alcohol sales in local shops (accepted). In the case of FFPT, municipal officials assert that "no information campaign was needed. In fact, the job was done through the referendum" (TA-3). Albeit the direct vote arguably gave Tallinners an opportunity to express their views on the idea of zeroing fares, the local authorities did not organise any meetings with local inhabitants, neither before nor after the vote. The debate on fare abolition took place only in established political spaces, such as the municipal council and Estonia's national parliament. As a result, in line with observations of urban alternatives elsewhere (Enright 2019; Sosa López and Montero 2018), PT passengers and workers were unable to articulate their views and expertise, and their interaction was limited to answering a yes/no question on fare abolition.

Aubagne, on the other hand, boasted strong participatory system built around a complex set of institutions, practices, and spaces that included neighbourhood assemblies, a CAPAE-wide activist forum, a participatory budgeting programme, and a committee of PT users. As one of the local activists recounts:

Municipal and agglomeration authorities had developed a strong commitment to participation. They wanted to implement a participatory democracy in a whole variety of domains. I think this was known by the entire population, they were plenty of meetings and workshops organised all-year round. (AU-27)

However, instead of employing these instruments, and despite their alleged commitment to participatory democracy, the "rainbow coalition" decided to inter-nalise the debate about FFPT until the local election: "there was no participatory debate about the transport question, [nor] was there any discussion in the municipal council" (AU-9). The "rainbow" politicians argue that "the democratic debate took place within the framework of municipal elections" (AU-2), articulating FFPT as "a top-down project" that was "not meant to work ... with citizens" (AU-28), and therefore bypassed existing movements. Consequently, local activists bemoan that "the 'rainbow' politicians were ... very powerful in terms of their vision and political will, but much weaker in terms of participation" (AU-28).

Only once the decision to switch to FFPT has been approved and announced did a participative process begin. Open debates took place within neighbourhood assemblies, the committee of PT users, and on board of buses, dubbed "meeting places" ("*bus lieu d'échange*"). A symbolic "celebration of FFPT" ("*fête de la gratuité*") was held on 15 May 2008—the day on which fares disappeared—and would hereafter be repeated on the same date in following years. Additionally, two long-term participative workshops focused on mobility were launched. Many officials have enthusiastically praised these participatory activities, and one of the initiators of FFPT calls them "the greatest experience of [her] life" (AU-4). Indeed, unlike before the election, the plethora of participatory events and structures organised thereafter were profoundly inclusive. Each meeting and workshop was open to any participant, regardless of their official function or supposed expertise

in transport planning. Nonetheless, confirming observations of anti-entrepreneurial policies elsewhere, the inclusivity of participation was not necessarily accompanied by interaction and deliberation (de Vries 2016; Nash 2013). Rather, the local elites saw the meetings as an opportunity “to promote and legitimise ... the project” (AU-16), and “to explain how things work[ed]” (AU-5). As municipal councillors and technicians joined many of discussions to share their expertise, other participants did not feel empowered:

We had worked with technicians all the way ... We started with a blank page, [and] there was no pre-established agendas ... But, on the one side, you had technicians working on the project 35 hours a week, and councillors who worked on it from 10 to 15 hours per month. On the other side, there were us, citizens, ... [involved] three to four hours per month. Sure, we made a huge contribution, we influenced things but ... Well, us, citizens, we were not on the same level. We did not have the same power. (AU-31)

Working in Fare-Free Public Transport: “From being perceived as people to being perceived as numbers”

The analysis of how an alternative transport policy is embroiled with urban regimes would not be complete without looking how it embraced PT workers—a heterogenous group that is generally overlooked by critical urban geography and transport studies alike, despite some notable exceptions (Attoh 2019; Borowiak 2019; Rekhviashvili and Sgibnev 2018).

At first sight, the abolition of fares has led to a significant improvement of working conditions in PT networks in both Aubagne and Tallinn. Although working hours and salaries remained unchanged, PT drivers no longer have to sell and control tickets, nor handle cash throughout their working day. Unlike in payment-based networks, they experience “no more stress ... about fare-dodging, checking tickets, [and] can focus on driving and welcoming passengers” (AU-19). The disappearance of fares has considerably improved the relations between workers and passengers, for whom PT “became the question of pride, something that belongs to them, that they care for” (AU-19). Thus, FFPT has effectively “transformed the driver’s profession, who now has only one question in mind: ride their bus well” (AU-5).

However, these significant improvements to labour conditions have not prevented an ongoing erosion of PT workers’ bargaining power vis-à-vis the local regimes. The essentially top-down decision to put FFPT into practice was presented to them as a *fait accompli*. In Tallinn—where as many as 1,085 PT workers were employed at the time of research—drivers, ticket controllers, and social workers responsible for accompanying passengers and cleaning vehicles complain that “when the company announced [the fare abolition] we discussed it only among ourselves. Everything was done by the administration ... Nothing particular was organised for us, or with us” (TA-27). In Aubagne, too, the 106 drivers operating the local network “had to learn to adapt to the new situation on [their] own” (AU-20), as they were informed rather than consulted about

fare abolition. Since the workers “were not sure what would become of [them], [and] afraid that [FFPT] would bring huge crowds on board of buses” (AU-18), CAPAE authorities organised a visit to an existing fare-free network in Châteauroux (France) “to respond to their doubts and anxiety, ... to convince [them], and to bring a positive message back home” (AU-22). The PT operator also referred to the bus drivers as “the face of the [fare-free] project” (AU-17), and used their images in posters placed inside and around PT vehicles to advertise the policy.

The exclusion from the process of deciding about FFPT is mirrored by the workers’ limited possibility to engage in collective bargaining. In Tallinn, while they may join a company-based trade union, they risk having individual salary bonus suspended should they raise any objections to the company’s policy. The drivers are disillusioned by this approach, as “there is a fixed bonus every month ... If you drive on time, the bonus comes, but if you make a [complaint] then the bonus can be reduced or taken away” (TA-25). In Aubagne, FFPT was announced in the context of a parallel shift from a “family-like business” (AU-22) to a privatised network run by Veolia, a multi-national corporation specialised in management of transport services. A local trade unionist highlights this paradox:

After Veolia [entered CAPAE], the drivers realised that their working conditions had become worse ... The moment that the management realised that the drivers wanted to organise themselves the pressure against them became enormous. [This shows] a major contradiction between abolishing fares and letting a private company ... manage it ... (AU-25)

Although Veolia adhered and adjusted to FFPT, it simultaneously developed a series of measures oriented towards “rationalising” the PT network. Notably, each driver’s individual on-time record began to be tracked by a GPS system, while the collective responsibility over the company gradually diminished:

[A decade ago], it was a company that managed itself ... Whatever had to be regulated was mostly the responsibility of the drivers ... The company was managed among us, drivers ... And now ... it’s the [IT centre] that manages us ... We don’t have as much responsibility as before ... We have moved from being perceived as people to being perceived as numbers. And this has changed everything. (AU-29)

The board of the PT operator further insists that the drivers do not join the trade union of their choice—Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT; General Confederation of Labour), and instead are “forced to join CFDT [Confédération française démocratique du travail; French Democratic Confederation of Labour]—a trade union that was easier for the management to [accept] ... which is a trade union of compromise, not a trade union of struggle” (AU-25).

Ticket controllers witnessed even more profound changes in labour conditions. In Tallinn, as many as 70 out of 80 of them were simply made redundant, as they did not belong to a trade union, unlike the drivers. In Aubagne, instead being laid off, controllers became responsible for maintaining security on board of buses, as initially there were numerous concerns that fare abolition would result in vandalism. Since security issues were quickly understood to be a minor problem, the PT

company directed the controllers to supervise the drivers' attitude and performance, following the policy of network "rationalisation". Instead of controlling the passengers, they oversee other workers, as FFPT has become incorporated in a wider strategy geared towards disempowering transport labour.

Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on urban policies that claim to offer an "alternative" to the urban entrepreneurial "mainstream". I have examined fare-free public transport (FFPT) as an example of an alternative urban policy that increases access to mobility and frames it as a common good mediated by public institutions, rather than by the market. Looking at FFPT programmes in Aubagne and Tallinn, I have enquired into the effect that FFPT has on urban politics, scrutinising how it was developed, and what interests it advanced.

Exploring this case, I have revealed how allegedly alternative policies may well hinge on urban regimes, which span across ideological positions and act as a driving force behind conceiving and executing policies that supposedly question the entrepreneurial mainstream. In both Tallinn and Aubagne, the push towards alternative politics was organised almost entirely by pre-existing coalitions of local stakeholders, and no actor external to these coalitions played a significant role in deciding about and preparing the shift to a fare-free system. Potentially transformative tools such as participative workshops (in Aubagne) and a public referendum (in Tallinn) that accompanied or led to the emergence of an alternative urban agenda were designed to muster popular support against political opposition, to inform the local inhabitants, and to co-opt PT workers. Although Tallinn's referendum on fare abolition temporarily re-politicised the public debate about transport by taking it out of the usual technocratic strongholds of decision-making, it effectively impeded any deliberation about why, for whom, and how fares should be regulated.

These insights demonstrate the importance of verifying the alleged social and environmental objectives and achievements of alternative urban policies. Put simply, it is necessary to analyse how and by whom they are made, who participates in the process that leads to their emergence, and what effect they have on local power relations. The relevance of these issues is clearly visible in the case of fare abolition, which albeit narrated as an alternative and radical measure, enabled existing interests and power relations to endure and consolidate, leaving local urban regimes unchecked and unchallenged. This contradiction is particularly striking in Aubagne, where albeit FFPT was advocated by a far-left political force seeking to explicitly divert from the entrepreneurial logic and to "challenge capitalism on the urban level" (AU-25), it turned out to be palatable to key private actors, becoming "a progressive policy ... managed by a multi-national company [that] treats passengers like clients, rather than citizens" (AU-26).

The resilience and longevity of alternatives is another evidence of their significance for urban regimes. In both Aubagne and Tallinn, putting a "radical" urban vision to a public vote constituted an electoral gamble that paid off. Its initiators, established local politicians, gained significant advantage in the polls and temporarily disarmed political adversaries across the political spectrum.

Although in both Aubagne and Tallinn the alternative was conceived and put in place by left-wing officials, the conservatives began to claim to have been favourable to abolishing fares from the start. What is more, they admit that “re-installing fares would be impossible, if not suicidal” (AU-8), and so they “do not really see an exit strategy” (TA-20). In effect, even though fare abolition was initially controversial and mobilised strong opposition in both Aubagne and Tallinn, it has survived electoral changes, outliving the political actors that had conceived it in the first place.

These observations do not imply that urban actors interested in FFPT as potential alternative to urban entrepreneurialism—and a further sign of rising “new municipalism”—should abandon all hope. Rather, they must approach FFPT as essentially variegated and dependent on context. Unlike the policy models belonging to the entrepreneurial portfolio, seemingly straightforward ideas such as abolition of PT fares do not act as uniform blueprints for alternative urbanism. Even though universally and unconditionally free access to PT generates understandable excitement on the Left, the evidence from Aubagne and Tallinn reveals that zeroing fares can be embraced by heterogenous rationales, including of the entrepreneurial kind. FFPT has strong capacity to re-politicise the debate about urban transport by framing transport-related choices as inherently political and conflictual rather than purely technical and consensual. It can further emphasise the public character of public transport and might constitute an element of a socio-ecological transition, addressing the climate crisis and socio-spatial inequality on the urban scale. However, this capacity must not be taken for granted—the alternative dimension of FFPT is an object of political struggle that must engage public transport passengers and workers as political agents.

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