



**TOPIC 36**  
TRANSPORT  
PLANNING ISSUES

**THE HIGH SPEED TRAIN AND  
LAND PLANNING IN FRANCE:  
THE EXAMPLE OF THE "TGV MEDITERRANEE"**

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**Abstract**

The extension of the TGV network has substantially modified the terms of public debate about land use planning in France. Through the case of the "TGV Mediterranee", this paper examines the reaction of the line neighbours to this project and the adjustments done by its developers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The extension of the TGV network decided in 1989 by the government within the framework of the "High Speed Train Outline Plan", has substantially modified the terms of public debate about land use planning in France. It has introduced new actors into the public arena such as the environmental defence associations, and it has brought forward new formalised styles of concertation between elected representatives, professionals and citizens. These developments have been accompanied by an extensive reevaluation of values concerning land use policy espoused since the Sixties. This reevaluation has recently resulted in a new law concerning land use planning being passed by Parliament.

These changes were a result of a conflict, the extent of which had never before been seen in France in this field. This conflict was brought about by the construction of the TGV Med, a 300 kms line linking Lyon to Marseilles, with eventual extensions towards Spain and Italy. During almost six years, from 1989 to the end of 1994, this conflict, between people living close to the line and the SNCF, the French national railway company, saw the region of southeast France in commotion.

This paper, originating from a research work in process (Fourniau et al. 1994), attempts to place this project in its political context. By examining the reaction of people living close to the line to the implementation of a big infrastructure project and the adjustments done by its developers, it studies the process of "interactive learning" by which decision-makers (ie central government and SNCF) and those contesting the decisions can reach viable and productive accommodations.

## **THE ORIGINS OF A CONFLICT**

### **A new context for public decision at a national level**

At the origin of the conflict was a new conception of public action which had developed in France during the 1980s. Set in the increasingly liberal economic context gaining ground in numerous western countries, this new conception's aim was to better adapt the public services to the competitive standards of private firms. It should be pointed out that this type of logic ran counter to the traditions of centralized national state planning that have existed in France since the beginning of the century and before.

As a result, this new 'entrepreneurial' logic questioned a fundamental notion of governmental action in France, namely that of general interest. In 1989, when the preliminary outlines for the layout made by the SNCF for the extension of the southeast TGV from Lyon towards Marseilles, and then Spain and Italy, appeared, it was evident that the TGV was not to be considered, at least not in its immediate context, as a project for the "general interest". The aim of the SNCF was to build a profitable railway line and not to participate in the improvement of public transportation service as a whole, and even less to contribute to the land planning of a region. This new conception ran contrary to the traditional system of managing big planning projects and contrary to the types of political participation normally associated with such projects between the national administration and local representatives.

This new approach by-passed the regional political representatives. As a result different groups concerned with the layout were seen to occupy a more important place in direct negotiations with the SNCF. These groups were chiefly agricultural organizations (wine growers and market gardeners of the Rhone Valley) and environmental defence associations (particularly in the area of Marseilles where 70% of the TGV line crossed areas of ecological interest). In addition, the importance of these groups was enhanced by weaknesses among the traditional regional political actors.

### **A political vacuum at a regional level**

The increased involvement of these groups was, as stated above, at least partially explained by the relative absence of local political representatives when the debates on the selection of the TGV layout took place. Unlike the planning from the North TGV and the East TGV, a political vacuum existed in the southeast region at the time.

This political vacuum was by several factors. The first was the departure in 1987 of the former mayor of Marseilles Gaston Defferre, a man who had dominated the political life of the region since the end of the Second World War. His departure provoked a crisis in regional political leadership which has yet to be resolved (Donzel 1990). Another factor was the rivalry between the city of Marseilles and the other regional governmental administrations. Due to its superior budget, the city of Marseilles is perceived to be the dominant force of the region. This situation did not encourage cooperation between these different regional administrations. As well, the previous history of a nationally centralized land planning policy (as shown in the building of the new harbour of Fos-sur-Mer and in the planning of the course of the Rhone River), had not accustomed regional officials to show initiative in such matters.

Finally, the regional political leadership was not prepared to deal with a project such as the TGV. There existed the public perception that it was the airplane, and not the railway, which was the key to transportation renewal in the region. The region is home to the largest airports outside of Paris (Nice, Marseille) and to a large aeronautical industry (Eurocopter, Airbus, etc.). In addition, it should be remembered that this region is already heavily developed and is one of the main tourist destinations in Europe. This meant that it was already comparatively well endowed in transportation infrastructures. Unlike more isolated regions, the TGV was not considered by the people of the region as an urgent need.

## **THE CREATION OF A SOCIAL MOVEMENT**

The passivity of both the local representatives and public opinion permitted associations opposed to the new railway's layout to 'grab the limelight' in public discussions. In fact these associations developed all the components of a social movement as defined by the sociologist Alain Touraine.

Touraine defines three basic principles involved in the creation a social movement: an opposition principle, an identity principle and a totality principle. The opposition principle is fundamental in the creation of a pressure group. But for it to last and flourish, a social movement must include an identity principle which unites actual and potential adherents. Finally, the movement must include a totality principle; a discourse which allows it to surpass the particularities of its original local context (Touraine 1973).

### **The principle of identity**

Without a doubt, the utilization of the regional 'provençal' identity was an extremely strong factor in the mobilization of associations at the beginning of the conflict. The slogan "Cézanne, wake up, they are murdering 'la Provence'", made popular by an association in the area of Aix, is a revealing sign of this identity dimension. The protest was directly hinged on two traditional supports of the land defense in Provence: on the one hand a farming trade union deeply rooted in its native region, and, on the other hand, a system of territorial lobbying still very efficient in the rural areas used both for the rallying of the population and for putting of pressure on various regional and national units of the State. Despite this, the "rallying around the Provence" theme quickly reached its limits when in 1990, following the intervention of the President of the Republic in favour of the Côtes du Rhône winegrowers, some concessions were granted to the opponents of the proposed route.

However other motives for protest besides that of land defence crop up. The special feature in the anti-TGV movement is the mingling of traditional ways of mass protest, often characteristic of a rural society, with more modern aspirations typical of new social movements surfacing in the

1960s-1970s in a more urban contest, and whose outcome is not primarily local but global (Castells et al. 1974).

We must bear in mind that the TGV is an infrastructure whose function has an important say on the whole of society. It concerns the main values of modern life. This includes values such as: the quality of life (which is not part and parcel with the speed and the hyper-mobility of today's society), the benefits of the policy of large scale public works (often damaging the environment and not always relevant in matters of economic development considering the fact that they generate less and less employment), democracy (which should not be implemented only at the end of the decision process, but also at its beginning).

Thus the TGV does not only have an impact on local societies, but concerns, by its repercussions, society as a whole. The anti-TGV movement has therefore easily gone beyond the bounds as first established to treat amply these extra-territorial themes. This enlargement beyond protests against the layout, occurred through a double criticism of the project, both technical and political. The first trend came to the fore in the Vaucluse region around associations such as "TGV Environment" and "Credo Rail". These groups devoted their attention to a reconsideration of the technical and economical foundations of the SNCF project. The second one, more known in the Bouches-du-rhône region (surrounding Marseilles), through the CARDE (Coordination Associative Régionale de Défense de l'Environnement), devoted itself to the criticism of the means of consultation and of decisions in the administration, without a priori calling into question the project.

### **The totality principle**

The convergence of these two courses of opposition was not always evident. The environment themes which could have occupied a central place, have been, if little present, a lesser factor of mobilization in this debate. The schism of the ecologist parties as well as their weak local establishment undoubtedly illustrates this state of fact. But beyond simply the local and national conjecture, we must ask ourselves whether movements for environment protection are able to bear a problematic of general interest which could have united the different components of the protest. They seem in fact more at ease in the defence of menaced minorities rather than within a process of the construction of a majority social movement.

To a large extent it is the land use planning theme which has helped to unite the different components of the movement. This theme has allowed the movement to become one of proposition instead of only protest. The creation in 1994 of the Citizenship Foundation (Assises de la Citoyenneté) instigated by a member of the movement, has been the outcome of this. It is perhaps the most lasting innovation of the anti-TGV movement because it has a true ability to involve citizens in the process of decision-making in matters of regional land use planning.

## **A REFORM IN GOVERNMENT ACTION**

### **The confirmation of State responsibility**

This evolution went hand in hand with an extensive renewal of the ways and means of government action. As early as the summer of 1990, the Public Works Minister Michel Delebarre, seeing that the protest against the TGV was taking on new dimensions, entrusted a high official (Max Querrien) with the mission to reexamine the layout of the line and to renew contacts directly with the people concerned by the line and their representatives. Thus the drawing up of the project was to be done, no longer by the SNCF, but by the State, thereby readopting a more traditional way of directing important land planning projects, through the responsibility given to the prime contractor which in this case was the State.

This mission, besides giving once again the project initiative to the administration, made an effort to supply the need for more democratic decision-making expressed by the local representatives and the associations in the beginning of the conflict. It organized four "co-ordination" meetings in

the six departments affected by the line: the first one with the local political representatives, the second one with the environment defence associations, the third with the workers trade unions, and the fourth with the employers (Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Chambers of Agriculture, Employers Associations, etc.). This type of negotiation had a negative effect on association mobilization: it promoted negotiation on a departmental scale, and, as such, the rallying dynamics of the larger scale associations were slowed down. As a result it gave once again a leading role to the local political representatives at the expense of the anti-TGV associations.

Nevertheless big concessions were made to the opponents. The Fréjus branch across the French Riviera towards Italy was given up and the number of proposed route options was reduced (in the beginning the SNCF had proposed over 3000 kms of route options for only 300 kms of line). These two facts highly reduced protest. The new project took more into consideration certain land demands: the conservation of natural areas (as "la Crau" in the north of the Camargue), the respect of lands of high agricultural value (vineyards of the Côtes du Rhône), underground passage in urban areas, etc.

There at last begins to come to the fore a new emphasis on regional development. The TGV now became a means to improve the entire regional transportation system and not only a project to connect the large cities to Paris. Even if the withdrawal of the Frejus branch compromises the "Grand Sud" TGV project which would have enabled to improve the links between the regions of the "Mediterranean Arch", the place where the branching off is situated (around Avignon between Marseille and Montpellier, and not, as was first proposed in the north around Orange) helps nevertheless to safeguard the possibility of such a route in the future.

These adjustments helped local political representatives to fall into line. They leave however in suspense a good number of problems raised by the associations concerning the technico-economic rationality of the project. The Querrien Mission, far from stamping out protest, has rather indirectly reinforced it by freeing it from the supervision of politicians and from their limited local targets. Following this mission, the anti-TGV movement composed itself on a much more general basis than previously, thereby leading to a new type of negotiation between associations, the State and the SNCF, through the creation of a new means of mediation: the "Collège des Experts", a group of experts designated both by the government and the associations.

### **New means for citizens' participation**

The rise of associations with more global concerns is exemplified in the Bouches-du-Rhône region by FARE-Sud (Fédération associative régionale de défense de l'environnement), as well as in the Vaucluse region by the birth of UJRM (Union juridique Rhône-Méditerranée), regrouping different local associations. Both propose to influence land use planning projects, based however on different rationales.

FARE-Sud was born from the desire of some leaders of the Bouches-du-Rhône anti-TGV associations to bring forth a citizen movement, which would go beyond just the TGV opposition to deal with all the problems of regional land planning, thereby including not only transport issues, but economic development, social welfare, etc. According to its former president Gérard Perrier, "the aim of FARE-Sud is nothing less than the quest and the defence of general interest". In particular, it stresses the entire democratic process of decision-making as well as "the taking in hand by the people of their own environment" (Perrier 1994).

The aim of UJRM is less one of self-management. It developed a technical and legal strategy based on the consulting of experts such as lawyers, land experts, scientists, etc. It has in particular criticized the technical choices of the SNCF, fighting to make the TGV use the existing lines on the German and Italian model of the "pendular train".

These two associations asserted themselves as privileged interlocutors of the Ministry of Public works, when the latter decided to form a group of experts to assess the TGV Med project. This step is a landmark in the evolution of French administrative practice. For the first time citizens are able to give their opinion on land planning projects as soon as the first outlines of the project are

made. Traditionally, this has occurred through public 'open houses' after the project has been conceived.

In December 1992, this experiment was formalized by a circular of the Minister of Public Works known as "The Bianco Circular", on the citizens' participation in the drawing up of important land planning projects. More recently, on February 4th 1995, the law known as "The Orientation Law for Land Planning and Development", has reconfirmed the State's responsibility in land use planning. At the same time it gives a bigger right of control to citizens through such things as referendums of popular initiative (DATAR 1995).

## **CONCLUSION**

Administrative practices, however, are not only changed by decrees. The TGV Med conflict was solved through a mutual lesson both for the antagonists of the project, as well as for its protagonists. For the former this learning has brought about a better awareness of certain global environment constraints (better transport services between towns, economic development of Mediterranean areas, etc.). For the latter, it meant a better integration of local concerns into the project and, more specifically, by the improved linking of the TGV to the regional transport network.

The TGV Med conflict, beyond its consequences in matters of transport and land use planning, has perhaps ushered in a new epoch of government action in France: it has enhanced one of its fundamental references, namely the general interest. Until then, this concept wavered between two interpretations:

- the first one is the directive (dirigiste) and normative idea of general interest. This approach, considering the State as being its only legitimate source, was prominent in the land use planning policy in France up to quite recently.
- the second one, of more liberal inspiration, comes from a more pragmatic process, considering the general interest as a temporary compromise between groups of diverse interests. The danger of this conception is that a project which was initially coherent might disappear to the profit of the dominating interest.

The TGV Med conflict has shown the insufficiency of both conceptions. It has demanded a new approach towards the general interest; one which attempts to bring together beforehand the different representatives of the interests in question, and at the same time restrengthening the arbitration role of the State. It is at this price that it is conceivable in the near future that Mediterranean towns might be linked to the rest of France and Europe by TGV.

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