

## **Automobile Pollution: Agenda denial vs. agenda setting in early 20th century France and Greece**

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After the European debate of the eighties on acid rain, public opinion start becoming aware of the new urban plague: motor vehicles pollution. The problem is however far from being new. It was raised from the start of the commercialization of automobiles at the beginning of the 20th century, and has been the subject of debates and strict regulations. In order to find the origins of the motor vehicles' clean air policy one must identify the moment of the official recognition of the problem by the public authorities and its registration on the political agenda. This moment is accompanied by a more or less sustained parliamentary activity that appears more constant in Greece than in France (C.A. Vlassopoulou, 1999). In fact, the comparative analysis of the parliamentary records of both countries makes it possible to raise a paradox that we will try to explain in the following pages: the official recognition and efforts to affront this problem started much earlier in Greece. This happened despite the fact that the number of vehicles circulating in France has always been higher and that public health sensitivity is historically higher in this country than in Greece (J.P. Bardou and Al 1977).

Through the analysis of the parliamentary documents and debates, we will first try to identify the way in which motor vehicles are perceived as a new means of transportation, putting particular emphasis on how car pollution issues are raised in each of the two countries. In the Greek case pollution is recognised very quickly and put on the agenda like a serious problem requiring the intervention of the state. On the other hand, in the French case it takes the form of an agenda denial (R.W. Cobb and M.H. Ross, 1997) as French politicians refuse to recognise it officially like a public problem. (I). Furthermore, the comparison leads to note that more than the relative gravity of the problem in the two countries it is the socio-political and economic factors which make it possible to explain the very different ways of tackling it and regulating it (II).

## **I/ The perception of motor vehicles in the political discourse:**

While automobiles start to make their first appearance at the beginning of the XXth century, this new means of transportation is not welcomed everywhere in the same way. As a reflection of the political and social concerns of the time, parliamentary records make obvious two very different approaches: in Greece the car represents a problem that must be regulated while in France it is seen like a scientific achievement that must be supported.

### **a/ A problem to be combated**

Because of the slow commercialization of automobiles, the term "motor vehicle" appears in the Greek Official Journal only in 1911, that is eleven years after its appearance in the index of the French Official Journal. Since this moment the car will be perceived primarily as a danger to the public security and binding regulation will appear quickly to control its circulation.

At the time of the first parliamentary debate of 1911 motor vehicles are presented, practically as an enemy of the society: "the society must fight against these insolent means of transport", "all we say on the risk generated by the cars cannot reflect the true danger that these means of transport involve [...] cars are like trains that run off the railway [...] it is better that we go all on foot if people suffer". In the climate of panic diffused by this "dangerous machine", according to the expression of a deputy, the Parliament does not hesitate to denounce, from the beginning, the car as being the origin of four problems requiring the intervention of the public authorities: accidents, noise, roadway erosion and pollution: "the state of the roadway, dust, and odours constitute social damages caused by the car [...] cars are sources of noise and of harmful effects". This speech goes even further by accusing this means of transportation to be at the same time a factor of social discrimination and expensive for public finance: "it concerns a social class which rolls for its pleasure and by vanity and puts the life of all society in danger [...] caused social damage goes further if it is considered that we export money to buy these vehicles".

The near-unanimity of the Greek politicians in the condemnation of the car as a source of problems goes hand in hand with the adoption of rigorous regulation recognised as innovative in Europe. Thus, the law of 1911 on the civil and penal liability for the drivers is followed by a decree from the prefecture forbidding lorries to cross the centre of Athens. In 1930, the rule of the road condemns the driver whose vehicle

emits without restraint fumes in the air. While in France the problem of fumes emitted by diesel engines is hardly discussed still today, in Greece, a prescription of 1937 stipulates that: "all types of diesel vehicles which emit fumes and odours [...] will be penalised by a withdrawal of the car licence from two to ten days".

### **b/ An issue to be promoted**

Nothing similar in France where, from the first debate in 1901 on motor vehicle traffic, it appears that the official authorities have a real difficulty in assuming their role of regulators. An extract of a report of the minister of the interior in 1903 shows that the fumes produced by the cars are perceived as a problem but do not manage to become the subject of debate and regulation: "it is necessary to reduce as much as possible the noise, the fumes and the inconvenient odours about which the public complains frequently ". The first regulation of the motor emissions in France first appears in 1954 and a hesitant debate about car pollution does not start before 1980.

The few times where we find the motor vehicles mentioned in the parliamentary documents their benefits as a new means of transportation are exhorted: "prohibition is a vexatious measure which could harm development and the progress of an industry which deserves to be sustained"; "the desire not to stop by inappropriate measures... the progress of motor vehicles technology "; "it is not in our intention to decry motoring, this industry which works for the major profit of our country" As we will see thereafter, this perception of the car as a sign of economic and technological progress is connected in France to the presence of a powerful motor lobby which delays any strict regulation on the matter whether it is the speed limit, the driver's responsibility or pollution.

The obstacle that the existence of a motor industry represents to the development of a clean air policy in France is indirectly demonstrated by the discourse of a Greek deputy in 1911: "cars give birth to a very useful industry both for the economy and for the employment [...] in Greece unfortunately we do not have this type of industry and we even do not have hope of having one in the future [...] therefore is permitted in Greece to take particularly strict measures with regard to the motor vehicles". Indeed, the interest of the comparison between France and Greece arises from the fact that these two countries represent two opposite cases as regards their motor policy: in France, the first car manufacturer in Europe for a long time, the car is perceived as a development factor and public authorities care not to block its

promotion and technological progress. On the other hand, in Greece where the motor industry never existed, motor vehicles traffic is defined as a source of problems for the community. This situation reflects major differences in the configuration of policy actors with direct implications in agenda setting process.

## **II/ Definition of the pollution problem: strategies of power**

The simultaneous analysis of the French and Greek cases demonstrates the weak correlation between the objective gravity of the problem and the attention that the official authorities devote to it (D. Stone, 1997). Their intervention depends more on the presence and configuration of the different policy actors rather than the level of the pollution. The presence of a powerful motor lobby in France limits considerably the possibilities for public debate and action, while the Greek authorities enjoy a much greater liberty on this policy field.

### **a/ The power of industrial interests**

Since the first ministerial report of 1901 concerning motor vehicles traffic, it becomes apparent that the regulation of this new means of transportation is a strict administrative issue managed within a flexible and especially opaque decisional framework: "It seemed to us that simple ministerial decisions would adapt better to this situation" This choice opened the possibility for mutual adjustments on a case by case basis between the transport administration and the concerned interest groups.

The conclusion of a second ministerial report of 1903, shows that this policy field escaped even the parliament's control: "the interests in question are such, that the Government did not hesitate to declare that the care of discussing them had to be entrusted to an extra-parliamentary committee, composed in its majority of motor vehicle engineering experts, of engineers of all categories, namely, of members best designated by their high competence to examine from all the points of view the interesting and difficult problems that the automobile traffic raises". This committee, made up of engineers of the prestigious "*corps d'Etat*" of the "*Mines*" and "*Ponts et Chaussées*", of car manufacturers and of other industrialists connected with motor vehicle production, has since ensured that the question of pollution does not disturb the aura of progress and modernity of this new means of transportation. The close collaboration between the motor lobby and the ministry of transport prevent simultaneously the emergence of severe regulation.

## b/ The autonomy of Greek authorities

Contrary to the resignation of the French political community, the Greek politicians exhibit major activism on the matter. The absence of financial and industrial considerations is certainly one of the reasons which explains the large options of action available to the Greek government. But the absence of a motor lobby does not explain by itself the reasons which led politicians to deal with car traffic problems since 1911 while the number of vehicles was still very weak and concentrated in Athens. In order to arrive to an answer to that question it is necessary to place this policy in the political context of the time.

All the debates and the major transformations of car legislation coincide with the periods that the progressive party of Eleftherios Venizelos is in government. The political success of "venizelians" in 1909 marks a political turn and inaugurates a new manner of considering the role of the State within society. For the first time a broad planning of public interventions is drawn up with its principal objective "middle-class modernization" (G. Mavrogordatos et C. Hatziosif, 1988). Various social milieus identified with the "venizelian ideology" among which a new professional class made up of civil engineers and urban planners graduates of the new Polytechnic School of Athens. By occupying both the progressive party and public administration posts, they will conceive and manage Venizelos' project in which urban planning will become a major part (A. Karalimou-Gerolimpou et N. Papamihos, 1992). Thus transport and traffic issues will appear as principal means of carrying out the modernization policy and a major field of concern for these technocrats.

For reasons which will not be examined here, the broad legislative work undertaken by this technocratic elite was never implemented strictly. This however did not prevent the definition of the automobile as a source of harmful effects and the registration of vehicle pollution on the political agenda in Greece, a century ahead of France.

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