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The daily mobility of citizens put to the test by collective urban transport conditions: the case of the Oran agglomeration

التنقل اليومي للمواطنين على المحك بسبب ظروف النقل الحضري الجماعي: حالة تجمع وهران الحضري

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الملخص:

بهدف تقييم ظروف التنقل اليومي لساكنة التجمع الحضري لولاية وهران، يستطلع هذا المقال ويحلل حالة النقل الجماعي الحضري كعامل محدد لهذا التنقل، مع التركيز على تحديد مدى فعالية هذا النظام في تلبية احتياجات السكان وتحقيق تنقل حضري مستدام ومتوازن. ومن خلال اعتماد رؤية تدمج بين تحليل سياسات النقل العام، وسلوك المشغلين والمستخدمين، يسعى المقال إلى تشخيص الإشكالات الرئيسية التي تعيق تطوير نقل جماعي حضري عالي الجودة، واقتراح حلول عملية لتحسين فعاليته وكفاءته .

ويكشف التحليل عن ثلاث مشاكل أساسية تعرقل تطور النقل الجماعي الحضري في هذا الفضاء الحضري، وهي: ضعف السيطرة على مشغلي القطاع الخاص الذين يعانون من التشتت والفوضى، محدودية إعادة إدماج مؤسسة النقل الحضري العمومي الجماعي وضعف الاستثمار في البنية التحتية للنقل، وأخيرًا، التعقيدات المرتبطة باستغلال الترامواي داخل بيئة حضرية تفتقر إلى التنظيم والتخطيط الفعّال.

الكلمات المفتاحيّة:

التنقل اليومي، النقل الحضري الجماعي، ظروف النقل، وهران

Abstract:

With the aim of assessing the conditions of daily mobility of residents in Oran agglomeration, this article explores and analyses the state of urban collective transport as a determining factor of this mobility. By adopting a vision articulating public transport policies, the behavior of operators and users, the article stands on three problems which hamper the development of quality urban collective transport in this urban space. These problems are: the weak control over private sector operators who suffer from dispersion; the failure of the reintroduction of the public transport enterprise and poor investment in transport infrastructure investment and finally, the complexities of Tram exploitation in an anarchic urban environment.

Keywords:

daily mobility, collective urban transport, transport conditions, Oran.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Once approaching the problems of cities in Algeria, the issue of citizens' daily mobility arises acutely, particularly in the context of urban collective transport. This type of transport has become a necessity given the growing number of populations residing or using services in cities as well as the challenges linked to the creation of a healthy and inclusive urban environment, capable of ensuring fair and accessible circulation for its users (Baouni et al, 2013, Boubakour & Bouguella, 2012). In this context, it is widely recognized that the objective beyond developing a collective urban transport system is to reduce the use of private means of transport and consequently limit pollution, noise and congestion in the city (Gershon , 2005). In addition, the lower costs of this type of transport allow disadvantaged social categories to benefit from mobility at the lowest price, which contributes to achieving greater social justice in terms of mobility (Tirachini, Hensher, Rose, 2014). On the other hand, current town planning and territorial development policies emphasize the aesthetic dimension of territories and cities, including certain means of transport, such as the metro and the tramway, which can make the territory more attractive and more coherent with the architectural and aesthetic form of the territory (Baouni, 2009).

Given this importance, the current article attempts to explore and examine the state of collective urban transport, focusing on Oran agglomeration as a field of investigation. Although obsolete, the latest master plan for development and urbanism in 1998 defines this agglomeration by the four following municipalities: Oran, Bir El Djir, Senia and Sidi Chahmi. This agglomeration occupies an area of 190.8 km2 and counting 1,467,758 inhabitants in 2020 (ANIREF, 2024). Since the colonail era, it has experienced complex dynamics of urban growth then after independence, it witnessed urban extension due waves of internal immigration for reasons of security or access to services (health care, job search, education, etc.), state housing and rehousing policies and the attractiveness of this city as a center with great dynamics in economy, tourism and leisure (Kadri & Madani, 2015). Recently, the hosting of several international events in this city has led to an additional pressure on transport services, such as the hosting of the Mediterranean and Arab Games.

My approach to analysing the urban collective transport in this city is based on elements linked to the organisation of this transport sector and the policies implemented by public authorities, as well as the behavior of operators and beneficiaries. I consider that articulating perspectives from these three actors (public authories, operators and users) will allow us to have a better understanding of the functioning of this sector and its performance in terms of daily mobility (Bachiri & Triki, 2022, Boubakour & Bouguella, 2012). In doing so, my analysis uses qualitative data collected between 2018 and 2019 as part of a research project carried out by a research group at the research center in social and cultural anthropology (CRASC).

For three weeks, we observed the conditions of public transport in Oran agglomeration and the behavior of operators and users, through conducting journies in collective urban buses (private and public operators) and in tram. Although each member has investigated only three bus lines, we tried to diversify the itenereries so that they reflect points where there are high or low bus concentrations and their interconnections with different parts of the agglomeration. Using an observation grid, each member completed observations related to the state of the means of transport, its real functioning (e.g. accordance with official stops and timetables, respecting the itenerary and rules of safety, respecting the offical specifications sheet of transport exploitation, interactions with users,) and users' behavior (e.g. satisfaction, dispute with operators, respect of rules inside the bus).

The analysis and cross-referencing of the data collected from these observation grids with the evolution of urban public transport in this agglomeration and a reading of the legal texts organising this sector resulted in three mains conclusions. The first concerns the fragmentation of urban public transport, particularly after the urgent and the uncontrolled advent of the private operator in this sector. The second conclusion raises the complexities of the reintroduction of the public urban transport company and the affirmation of its regulatory role; while the last conclusion highlights the positive aspects of the establishment of the tramway and the difficulties it faces after ten years of implementation in the Oran. In what follows, I discuss these elements in more detail.

2. From shortage to the problem of managing the anarchy of the abundance of private operators

Like other Algerian cities, the organisation and financing of collective urban transport in Oran followed from independence to the early 1990s the same rules as the public sector companies. It was considered as a sector belonging to the State and was managed first time by the municipal transport authorities, then restructured in 1983 as part of the new territorial policy into regional public transport companies which was, in the case of Oran , the passenger transport company of Oran west and its surroundings (Said et al, 2017, Ramdini, 2016, Youcefi, 2004). This company offered urban, semi-urban, long-distance transportation services, transportation services for workers and students, as well as rental services. It operated in the context of national social policy based on the principles of national integrity, regional balances and the subsidy of social categories through social prices (Boubakour & Bouguella, 2012, Rebouha, 2010).

The country's entry into the economic crisis of the mid-1980s reduced the financing of public transport companies which were already suffering from bankruptcies and dysfunctions linked to several factors, which I can sumarize here as follow (Boubakour & Bencherif, 2013, Ramdini, 2016, Rebouha , 2010):

- Symbolic prices that did reflect the real costs of transport services and investments.
- The free service for certain categories of the population.
- Public service obligations, particularly in terms of operating unprofitable lines, or working on public holidays and periods of low population mobility,
- The increase in costs, especially between the years 1990-1995, following the decline in the value of the national currency due to economic liberalization and economic reform policies.
- The low level of professional qualifications of employees and their workforce exceeded the real needs of companies.
- Weak financial support following the economic crisis at the time, a natural consequence of the budgetary austerity policy.

As a consequence of this crisis, the insertion of the private sector appeared during this period as an urgent new policy to face the problems of financing and strengthening transport networks which would suffer from shortages and weaknesses in terms of supply. Following the implementation of Law No. 88-17 of May 10, 1988, the private sector has experienced notable expansion to the detriment of the public transport sector, particularly since 1994, the year of implementation of the readjustment economic program and the withdrawal of the State from this sector through the privatization of its public transport companies and the dissolution of municipal transport authorities.

This period, described as "the transition stage from public transport to the private sector", was caractarized by the emergence and dominance of family transport companies –also called "artisanal businesses"- in which the number of transport buses did not exceed just one vehicle per company (Rebouha, 2010). The private sector experienced another change in 1996, due to the adoption of public youth employment assistance program ENSEJ. The State supported the projects of many young people in the field of transport, which has had a positive impact on the urban transport sector, notably through the introduction of new types of buses vehicles and the rapid increase in the number of private companies (Youcefi, 2004). Today, and after almost twenty years of this policy, the private operator in Oran dominate the urban collective transport. According to statistics provided by the direction of transport in this region, it is present on 36 lines, with 782 active operators with 1194 urban buses and 884 private operators for the suburban, with 1174 buses (Bachiri & Triki, 2022: 844).

Even if this new policy led to a notable improvement in the supply side of collective urban transport compared to the 1980s and contributed to overcoming the shortage problem in the supply side, the uncontrolled increase in the number of private operators caused the dispersion of this sector and the emergence of numerous negative phenomena that can be grouped as follows according to our fieldwork we conducted in Oran agglomeration:

- The emergence of the phenomenon of oversupply on certain lines to the detriment of others that were considered isolated and unprofitable for private operators.
- The predominance of the artisanal logic of private operators had a positive impact on the increase in supply but prevented, but on the other hand, it

hampered grouping and development of this sector through forming dominant companies that can offer quality service and respecting safety standards.

- Lack of professionalism of employees of private transport companies, due to non-compliance with official specifications sheet, which negatively affected the comfort of users. This was particularly evident through numerous careless practices observed during the operation of the various operators, such as extended bus filling times, itinerary changes, violence against users, dangerous driving, maneuver, and race between operators to fill buses at the expense of passenger safety.
- Weak control by the authorities has led to the development of practices linked to unfair competition between private operators.
- Non-respect the principle of public service. It was observed that the private operator does not care about network coverage and provision of transport service during peak hours as well as holidays due to low profits during these periods.
- According to the same principle of "profitability", the low profitable lines and itineraries were abandoned and neglected by the private operator in favor of the lines most frequented by users such as lines connecting universities, city center.
- It is also necessary to renew the private transport fleet. We noticed that the date of which certain buses were put into service dates back to 2002 that means more than twenty years of operation. Beside the low comfort offered to citizens, some buses even threaten road safety, pollute the environment and cause noise during circulation. Also, and particularly in the private sector, minibuses must be replaced to another lines which become incapable of providing a quality transport service.

After the problem at the end of the 1980s was the management of the shortage in supply side of urban collective transport, the public authorities found themselves therefore confronted with the problem of managing the excess supply caused by the entry of the private sector into this field, as well as the various negative phenomena that resulted from it. To face this challenge, the public authorities have intervened with policies at several levels, the most important of which are the reintroduction of the public urban transport company which constitutes the following element in this article.

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3. The failed regulation

Since 2000, and in particular after the adoption of the law n° 01-13 of 2001 relating to the orientation and regulation of land transport, a new urban transport policy has put in place. The trend this time was based on the idea of regulation, through involving mechanisms for State intervention in the transport sector while preserving the progress realized by the advent of the private actor into this sector (Ramdini & Ahmed Zaid, 2022). In doing so, the public authorities created the Transport Regulatory Authority, whose primary mission was to regulate and develop transport, especially through the revision of transport plans and the carrying out of studies on population movements and the organization of transport lines and their needs, in addition to determining the standards price and coordinating between the different modes of transport as well as determining investment policies in the sector.

Most importantly, the new urban transport policy reintroduced the public transport operator after almost fifteen years of absence. The idea beyond this reversal to the public enterprise of urban transport would encourage private operators to better organize themselves and develop the quality of service offered to citizens (Bachiri & Triki, 2022). The public transport company was consequently entrusted with regulatory roles, through which public authorities found an effective means of control to regulate the anarchy and dysfunctions experienced after the arrival of private operators. Through the public company, the intervention of public authorities is designed to be more flexible and soft, depending on the problems envisaged, such as intervention on certain lines to put an end to the monopolization of private operators, thus creating organized competition on the transport system, which forces private operators to improve their quality of service. In addition, due to its public nature, it was easier to redirect certain public company buses towards lines that did not attract private operators, which ensured better regional coverage of the urban collective transport service (Ramdini & Ahmed Zaid, 2022).

In Oran, it is the company E.T.O, created by executive decree n°04-387 and put into operation from 2006, which had the mission of implementing this new transport policy and regulating the anarchy of collective urban transport. At the beginning, the buses of this company were distinguished by their spacious and clean character from buses belonging to the private sector. Its staff was more disciplined in terms of uniform, professionalism, respect for official stops and filling and waiting times (Rebouha, 2010). However, after seventeen years of activity, regressions have been recorded, making this transport incapable of considering the reality of transport and fulfilling its regulatory functions.

We can note that this company currently covers only 6 lines (23, 38, 53, G1, Z and K3), whereas initially, 23 lines were programmed. Thus, of the 64 buses that this company has, 23 are able to circulate and only 17 of them are operated. The rest (a total of 44 buses) are defective and unfit to be put into service (El Watan, 2023). The centralization of management of this company has complicated its problems, and the lack of funding has repeatedly led to strikes and operational paralysis due to the inability to pay its staff. Even resorting to bank loans to renew its assets and strengthen its investments did not solve its problems. This crisis recalls the situation of municipal authorities at the end of the 1980s. The weakening of the E.T.O company prevented the process of grouping together private operators which remains dominant on the ground and hamper the initiatives of the local authorities to intervene and regulate several lines.

In addition to the above-mentioned dysfunctions in the urban collective transport, there are also others problems that are not the result of the behavior of operators or users, but they are linked to low investment in transport infrastructures. With the exception of tramways, citizens' daily journeys face a lack of investment in technologies and communication settings that prevent users' adaptation to the transport network (Souiah, Nourine, Bakhti, 2022). For example, passenger waiting stations lack signs indicating bus departure and arrival times, leaving users constantly confused about regular bus arrival times. The official name of bus stations rarely appears, while bus employees tend to use popular or unofficial bus stop names that may not be known to all passengers, especially newcomers to the city. Added to this is the absence of line indications in stations, which leaves users without any information on the line, its directions and its interconnections. The only way users use here - according to our observation-is to ask people for the direction of the bus or wait to ask the bus driver to take the find out about their destination.

The low investment in transport infrastructures appears also at the level of the parking system that doesn't provide users with enough spaces to park their cars. These often find themselves forced either to enter the city center or make informal parking on roads' sides which causes traffic jams and anarchic parking. At the inter sectorial level, more coordination between local authorities and directions involved in city planning processes is required, particularly with regard to the increasing dynamic of rehousing programs and the creation of new residential sites. It was noted during our fieldwork that several residential sites lacked means of collective transport in the first months of the population's settlement, which favored the multiplication of illegal or clandestine transport lacking security conditions and respect for transport standards.

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4. The tram: an efficient means of transport confronting an anarchic urban environment

The tramway in Oran was put into service in 2013. Stretching over 18.7 km and connecting the four large municipalities (Oran, Bir El Djir, Senia and Sidi Chahmi), this means of transport is intended to be a solution for accessing a modern transportation and contributing to resolve problems of organisation and controlling the collective urban transport network (Fontaine, 2021). Indeed, the electric nature of this means of transport makes it more adequate to environmental protection requirements, more able to reduce the use of collective buses and private vehicles, as well as to achieve a better management of time and traffic on the streets (Boudjeriou & Kebiche, 2023, Rebouha, 2017). During our fieldwork, we noted that the organisation, the functioning and conditions of this means of transport allowed users to benefit from a quality transport service, particularly in terms of the following characteristics:

- A capacity to transport 365 passengers per train, or 90,000 passengers per day.
- A system for informing travelers by stopping and disseminating problems encountered during traffic.
- Respect of timetables and official stops,
- Air conditioning and heating according to the seasons,
- Security, the existence of surveillance cameras and uniformed security agents circulating on a regular basis.
- Unlike other means of public transport, which limit their circulation between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. (sometimes before) the tram schedules are longer (5 a.m. - 11 p.m.)
- A reasonable pricing system, with the possibility of subscription and special prices for students.

However, after ten years of experience, problems arise regarding the operation this mode of transport. It can be noted that the proper functioning of the Tram clashes with the behavior of users of other modes of transport. This means of transport often encounters disruptive parking lots on its itinerary. On several occasions, the tram driver finds himself stuck in a place where a motorist has not respected the space necessary for the Tram to pass, which affects the operation of the entire Tram system that is conditioned by a specific timetable. Likewise, car and bus drivers do not respect the priority of trams in certain places, which often leads to accidents. On the other hand, some users don't pay their tickets or use tricks of other users to avoid payment

(for example: we noted that some user hands their tickets to other users when they go down from the tram), which has had consequences on the profitability of this means of transport. We have also observed that many individuals use the tram to beg, which bother users of this means.

In the city center of Oran, the making of the tram has reduced many sidewalks and lanes, and its passage in these points require a reduction in speed and vigilance of the driver due to the large number of pedestrians, particularly during busy hours. This problem does not arise on the outskirts of the city, where two bridges and a tunnel were built at the Dar El Bayda roundabout, which facilitated traffic. The transformations of the city of Oran, particularly after the implementation of several population rehousing operations and new constructions, have disconnected the Tram from certain important points whose existence fulfilled essential mobility functions for the inhabitants. For example, the Tram was initially connected to the Senia university center which was then transferred to Oran Est (Belgaid). The Tram has not extended to Oran airport where the collective urban public transport network is almost absent. Likewise, the waves of rehousing of thousands of families from the city center to Oran-East have created more pressure on existing public transport infrastructure.

5. Conclusion:

This article attempted to assess daily mobility of citizens through examining urban collective transport condition in Oran agglomeration. Despite progress in the urban collective transport in this region, especially since 2006 (the year of introducing the ETO) and 2013 (the year of introducing the tramway), my study stand on certain problems that currently hamper its evolution, and which need urgent solutions to make it more efficient and capable of ensuring mobility that meets the standards of modern urban collective transport and consequently the requirements of inclusive and equitable city.

If the critical problem of urban public transport in Oran agglomeration are mostly concentrated among private operators due to its dominance over the collective public transport till today, my article considers that the problem of urban public transport results essentially from the accumulation and repercussions of "emergency policies" linked to the management of the transport crisis dating back to the 1980s and 1990s. There is still a structural problem linked to a clear political vision in this sector despite attempts to adopt what is called "regulatory transport policy based on targeted and limited state interventions.

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However, and as an urgent solution, there are some procedures that can ameliorate this transport at the moment. The process of grouping together private operators who dominate so far the collective urban transport is necessary to better control and manage their dispersion which concentrates on the most profitable lines and abandons other lines, leaving citizens to suffer from shortages. The successful consolidation of private operators will put an end to several unhealthy behaviors during competition between private operators such as maneuvering, overfilling, informal stops, long waiting times, etc. It will also make it possible to revise the tariff system to make it more equitable and fair. For example, the monthly or annual subscription system cannot function in the state of fragmentation of private collective urban transport. On the other hand, the experience of urban collective transport (bus and tramway) has made it possible to introduce some annual subscriptions and favors certain categories like students.

6. Figures and tables:

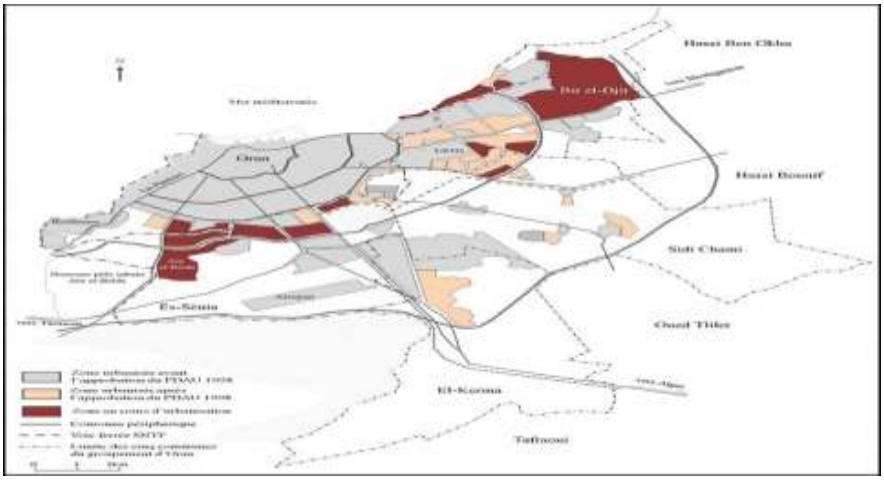


Figure 01 representing Oran agglomeration
Source: (Kadri & Madani, 2015)

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