



# Political and cultural events in the Parisian métro: manifestations of urban or mobile communities ?

Marion Tillous

## ► To cite this version:

Marion Tillous. Political and cultural events in the Parisian métro: manifestations of urban or mobile communities ?. Political and cultural events in the Parisian métro: manifestations of urban or mobile communities ?, Mar 2009, Las Vegas, United States. <halshs-00414679>

**HAL Id: halshs-00414679**

**<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00414679>**

Submitted on 9 Sep 2009

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

POLITICAL AND CULTURAL EVENTS IN THE PARISIAN MÉTRO:  
MANIFESTATIONS OF URBAN OR MOBILE COMMUNITIES?

Marion Tillous,  
Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

---

This paper is a part of my PhD project. I work on passengers travelling comfort and well-being within the parisian public transportation system and I try to understand wether the deal with a machinery more and more efficient or with a territory.

The method of this project : I conducted forty semi-structured interviews of regular passengers going through four transportation hubs.

---

In this presentation, I will focus on the expression of social groups inside the Parisian metro in so far as this has contributed to the transformation of what was first conceived as a technical artifact into a territory (as well as other urban areas). I intend to show that while cultural expression has found a place inside the network, any political dimension has remained undesirable. Yet, political expression is more and more frequent within the Parisian metro. And what is very interesting for us, as geographers, is that the majority of these political claims focus specifically on the system itself. This leads us to think that mobility spaces are subject to some kind of territorial appropriation or at least territorial claim.

1. To begin with, I will give you some of the background on the Parisian metro. It consists of sixteen lines which serve Paris's central district and inner suburbs. The last line opened in 1997: called "*Météor*" it's the first (in Paris) to be completely automatic, without any drivers. Everyday, 4,7 million people use this system. The Parisian central district is served by 297 stations, each 500 m apart. The system was designed at the end of the nineteenth century, following the same principles as other utility networks developed at the same time (like water, gas, electricity, mains drainage). The fluidity of passengers flows and regularity of trains were the main aims of the system, which explains spatial planning choices such as the separation of in and out flows, smooth and round corridors (like pipes) and so on.

Since the opening of the metro in 1900, its administrators have persisted in planning it as a utility network, as a technical artifact, rather than a place of daily life, inhabited by those that use it. But at the beginning of the seventies, a technological change transformed this way of planning the system. Indeed, the automation of control gates allowed all sorts of people to enter the system. Whereas ticket-punchers prevented unauthorized people from accessing the stations (only passengers were admitted),

the spread of automatic gates brought an end to this restriction. Various non-travelling people entered and settled in the subway spaces: for example, homeless people, street hawkers, music players, beggars. With them they brought new commercial and cultural practices that the Parisian transport authority first tried to dissuade but finally accepted and integrated into its own service. As a result, since the seventies the RATP (parisian transport authority) has been developing station shops in order to prevent its passengers from feeling alone and insecure now that the ticket-punchers don't watch over the spaces anymore. It also allows them to earn money from these spaces, that's why the commercial dimension has developed quicker than the cultural one. But the RATP eventually accepted underground music players by issuing them with permission cards. It even organized some live performances inside its spaces, like those of the famous artists Placebo in 2003, PJ Harvey and The Libertines in 2004, Supergrass in 2005. But Keziah Jones' performance in September 2008 is for me the most interesting because this artist began his career eighteen years before, right there, in the Parisian subway. His live performance proves that cultural events in the subway are the expression of a specific culture and not only of the urban culture. What's more, the RATP invited current underground music players to give live performances during the same week as Keziah Jones. Besides the musical events, many projects now attest to the RATP's new interest in culture: several stations were redesigned, like the Louvres-Rivoli station, which reproduces the works exhibited in the eponymous museum just above.

In general a large part of the cultural events, even the most recent ones like the flash subway parties, have been absorbed by the RATP within the framework of a process of "humanization" of its spaces.

2. But the automation of control gates also allowed other forms of social expression to spread inside the system, which could not be absorbed, precisely because they developed against it: by this I mean political expressions.

The work of the sociologist Michel Kokoreff shows that since the opening of Parisian subway spaces, a new kind of practice has appeared: the graffiti. As a new, wild and sharp way to communicate, it challenges the "smooth order" (in inverted commas as the words are from Kokoreff) of the metro. Graffiti can be seen as so many attempts to appropriate the system spaces. This is a characteristic shared by all the political events that mushroomed throughout the system: they're not related to national claims but specifically refer to the metro.

The most widespread political claim that metro has known perfectly illustrates this fact. Since the beginning of the nineties, collectives against advertising have bloomed, particularly around the key figure of Yvan Gradis. But it was only at the

beginning of the this century that the campaign picked up speed. On about fifteen occasions between 2001 and 2003, Yvan Gradis and some other militants smeared advertising posters with critical slogans. Their smears took a shape very close to graffiti. When they smeared the posters they didn't have any masks or anything covering on their faces; and journalists were present to record the action. That's why the movement immediately became known and grew quickly. Then the protest against advertising developed without a strong structure, by means of collectives known as "Stop-pub" (stop-advertisements). They organized actions with a wider and wider scope. Some of them gathered up to 400 (four hundred) people. It was also the time of the first police and justice repressions. Indeed, the RATP's response was to lodge a complaint against militants, while passengers seemed to judge them rather more favorably. It leads us to think that instead of repressive measures, a region-wide debate could have been chaired on the place of the ad in the subway, and, more generally, on public transport financing.

The second widespread political event in the metro deals with the same theme: it concerns the demand for free transport. This demand blossomed during the sixties for ecological reasons, and then recurred in the nineties for social reasons. It concerns urban transport as well as domestic lines. In Paris a new "RATP" collective emerged (RATP for "Réseau pour l'Abolition des Transports Payants" / literally: "Network for the Abolition of paying transport", which is obviously a pun on the name of the transport authority). Its militants organized the distribution of tracts and free tickets to passengers. They declared free transport weeks and organized a kind of open house (both literally and figuratively). On the other hand, they blocked parts of the sidewalk and forced pedestrians who wanted to walk across to pay for it. It was a way of drawing a parallel between spaces in and outside the system: they're both public spaces, so therefore they should be accessible as well. I personally see it as a way of appropriating the system spaces as could be done in other kinds of urban spaces: I mean in a territorial way. People can feel "at home" when they walk across the spaces of mobility and they don't understand why they should have to pay for it.

In the future, we can imagine that other kinds of demands for territoriality may grow. Take for example the women's demand for separate spaces on the train or even in the stations, such spaces already exist in Tokyo and Mexico. This example makes it clear that territorial appropriation also means the exclusion of the stranger, of the Other.

Cc: That's why it seems so urgent to me that the Parisian Transport authority take this demand into account. They are no longer a machinery but evidently a territory.