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Sustainable Mobility and the Institutional Lock-In: The Example of Rural France

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Abstract: Sustainable mobility issues in rural areas, compared with urban mobility issues, have so far been poorly covered in the French and European public debate. However, local mobility issues are determining factors in territorial inequalities, regional development and ecological transition. This paper is based on preliminary findings of qualitative socio-anthropological fieldwork carried out in two rural departments of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region: Drôme and Ardèche. Our objective is to highlight how the question of sustainable local mobility is linked to governance issues and multiple overlapping institutions. We argue that analyzing stakeholders' strategies and territorial governance is key to understanding the contemporary dynamics surrounding a transition towards a more sustainable mobility in rural areas. In order to do so, we show how the debates surrounding the adoption of a law allowing for the transfer of responsibility to local authorities for the organization of mobility services reveals the complexity of local mobility governance in rural areas and provides material for the analysis of the logics of stakeholder engagement, cooperation and conflict within the field of sustainable mobility. Through the case study of the organization of a local public transport service in a rural area, we shed light on the action of multiple stakeholders and their potentially antagonistic objectives.

Keywords: territorial governance; sustainable mobility; rural areas; transportation; bus; regional development; decentralization; LOM; mobility justice; France

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1. Introduction and State of the Art

Issues of sustainable mobility in rural areas have so far been hardly or poorly addressed in French and European public debate compared with the importance of the literature and policy on urban mobility, despite the fact that alack of accessibility and mobility are considered to be determining factors in rural inequality and regional development [1–3]. Moreover, there is near-total absence of specific policy for mobility in rural areas across the EU, and most countries do not have any policy at all on daily rural mobility, with the exception of school transport [4]. Thirty percent of France's population lives in rural areas [5], which are characterized by a low population density but also by a trend toward demographic recovery, something that has been observed particularly since the early 2000s [6]. However, those living in rural areas are facing the increasing scarcity and remoteness of everyday services and employment areas that stretch further than ever before [7,8]. They are also more likely to be in a situation of energy vulnerability [3] due to poor energy-efficient equipment and increasing energy costs [9]. Car-solo is the main travel mode, with nearly 80% of day-to-day trips made by car [10], but tends to exclude the more vulnerable population (young, elderly and disabled) [11,12]. Currently, about 30% of total emissions come from the transportation sector, making it the leading source of greenhouse gas emissions in France. More than half of this sector's emissions are produced by private vehicles [13].Improving both mobility and accessibility of services in rural areas

is a central response to the challenges that rural regions are facing in terms of both socialand environmental justice [14–16].

"Energy justice" is a normative framework for assessing the ways in which energy systems and transitions may inadvertently create or entrench unfairness or inequalities within society [17]. Although energy justice approaches are by no means new [18,19], more recent works have applied energy justice principles or concepts to the topic of low-carbon transitions. Academics have argued that although low-carbon transitions may well represent normative "goods" in the sense that they contribute to reducing CO_2 emissions, they may also generate new—or worsen preexisting—inequalities in society [20]. Research in this area typically focuses on injustices relating to the pre-existing (and fossil-fuel-intensive) energy system [21,22], but an emerging body of literature in this subfield has turned its attention to explicitly examining the justice dimensions of low-carbon transitions themselves. The concept of "mobility justice" is in line with this approach of "energy justice". Mobility justice is "multi-scaler" and goes from "micro-level embodied interpersonal relations, to meso-level issues of urban transportation justice and the 'right to the city,' to macro-level transnational relations of travel and borders, and ultimately global resource flows and energy circulation" [23] (p. 14).

Although rural mobility is not mentioned in this definition, both energy and mobility justice are useful concepts for understanding that successful low-carbon transitions must be based around shared beliefs, values, interests, resources, skills and relationships that are underpinned by democratically decided pathways toward sustainability [24–26]. Failure to facilitate the participation of all citizens may not only make for less responsive and representative policy choices; it may also create friction and resentment in society, increasing exclusion and inequality [27].

The emergence at the end of 2018 in periurban and rural areas of the gilets jaunes(yellow vests) social movement acted as a reminder of the relevance of this issue. Initially formed to protest against a fuel tax increase, the movement has spread fairly spontaneously and mobilized many inhabitants of rural and periurban areas, who gathered at roundabouts wearing yellow safety vests. It grew progressively in scale and came to raise a multitude of more general social and political demands. This movement has highlighted the impact of several decades of erosion of the welfare state in rural areas, particularly the disappearance of local public services [28]. These changes have come at a time when low-income households were juggling with several forms of cumulative economic stress, includingan increase in energy costs, having already had to make cutbacks in their energy bills and other expenses to fulfill their mobility needs [29,30]. The movement has also demonstrated the need to take into account the diversity of local situations when it comes to thinking about the low-carbon energy transition. It has provided a key reminder of how important it is to work on the issues of energy and mobility justice and to take into account the territorial dimension of transition policies [31], in order to address what has been labeled "the rural gap" [8].

Car dependency in rural areas is part of a historical spatial-planning trajectory that is based on individuality and velocity (the car), and which has not taken into consideration the low-carbon transition so far [32]. In fact, until recently, public policies on mobility in rural areas have focused primarily on the issues of economic development, the concept of periphery, and connection to urban areas [33,34]. As the choice to focus on car use to the detriment of other modes of transportation has generated significant social inequalities in terms of access to mobility, the search for alternatives was initially driven by social actors involved in the fight against isolation and social exclusion, for populations with difficulties in gaining access to a car, particularly the young, the unemployed and the elderly [35–39]. Indeed, the social challenges of daily mobility for people who do not have an easy access to a personal car has long been underlined by social scientists [40–44] because accessibility to basic services has deep consequences for social and territorial inequalities [7,8,45,46]. Additionally, the fuel-intensive mobility has appeared as one of the main vulnerabilities of rural areas regarding sustainability goals [3,33,47]. To answer those social and environmental challenges, recent research have particularly focused on the

benchmarking and evaluation of social or technical innovations such as electric vehicles and smart mobility, and the potential challenges linked with their implementation in low-density areas [4,48–52] and on the individual determinants of individual transportation practices [53,54].

The issue of local governance and the role of stakeholders have received far less attention [35,55], despite the fact that governance has appeared as a leading research angle for analyzing socio-ecological transitions in diverse sectors of sustainability, including, for example, water management [56,57], biodiversity preservation [58–60], agri-food systems [61,62] or adaptation to climate change [63]. More generally, governance issues have frequently been presented as a cornerstone of low-carbon transition and environmental justice [64–67].

However, the development of a low-carbon energy transition policy is a rather new and potentially controversial paradigm for public actors in rural areas [68]. The politicization of the issue of mobility observed during the gilets jaunesprotests has revealed the array of distinct representations, values and objectives that are associated with the low-carbon transition [69]. These are anything but consensual, thus reflecting the diversity of viewpoints of the actors involved in this area. The implementation of governance tools such as the Loi d'Orientation des Mobilités(LOM) also involves new imperatives for modes of action and decision-making, including increased participation of citizens and stakeholders [70], and the adoption of new powers and therefore new responsibilities for local politicians.

Since France made its commitments under the Paris Agreement on climate change, there has been a consensus on the need to find "low-carbon" solutions for local mobility. However, the objectives of sustainable mobility are often relegated to the background in national policies [71]. At the local level, achieving these objectives requires the promotion of alternative modes of operation and development to replace the dominance of the use of private cars, and the adoption of these models by policy makers. Although mobility has long been included in debates on sustainable cities [72], until now, local policy makers in rural areas have been deprived of truly effective tools, and the potential for deploying mobility policies has been limited to urban areas.

This article aims to question how to overcome the situation in which rural mobility finds itself "locked-in" and to explore the institutional dimension of energy path dependency in rural France [73,74]. Using a state- and society-centric approach [15], we argue that analyzing stakeholders' strategies and territorial governance is key to understanding the contemporary dynamics and challenges surrounding sustainable mobility in rural areas [35,75,76]. In order to do so, we analyze the stakeholders' agency revealed by the current debate following the adoption by the Parliament in 2019 of the Loi d'Orientation des Mobilités (LOM, Mobility Guidance Law). This law allows for the transfer of responsibility for the organization of local mobility services to local authorities that request them. While the law has been designed to make a "bottom-up" form of mobility management possible, enabling it to be better adapted to the geographical and socio-economic characteristics of different areas of France, several obstacles to this process have been identified. First, the technicality, cost and complexity of the issue of mobility restrict what small public authorities with limited finances can achieve. Second, the large number of stakeholders, the overlapping of levels of governance, and the different games of power and influence all hinder the emergence and up-scaling of alternatives to the personal car.

This article is based on an action research project conducted in two rural departments of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region: Drôme and Ardèche. This project was carried out in partnership with two local associations promoting the development of sustainable mobility in Drôme (Dromolib) and Ardèche (ALEC07),two national associations promoting sustainable energy transitions (Institut négaWatt and CLER –Energy Transition Network), as well as five "communautés de communes" (federation of municipalities, established by a 1992 law and hereafter referred to as "CCs". A federation of municipalities is an EPCI (Etablissement Public de CoopérationIntercommunale, public body of intermunicipal

cooperation) comprising a group of municipalities in a single geographical block and without enclaves, administered by a community council whose members are elected by the councils of the municipalities. The CC is the most widespread form of EPCI in rural areas, and enables municipalities to exercise a certain number of powers collectively, such as environmental policy).

It draws on the collaboration between these different partners to generate feedback and to identify shared levers for implementing cohesive mobility strategies at the local level.

To begin, we will present the specificities of the research field and our methodological approach. We will then move on to present the preliminary findings of this research project: after reviewing the challenges posed by the complexity of mobility governance in France, and providing a historical overview, we will demonstrate how the debates surrounding the adoption of mobility powers by public actors within the framework of the LOM shed new light on the role of actors involved in mobility in these areas. Using the case study of Tout'enbus, a public transportation syndicate in the Ardèche department, we will highlight the barriers to achieving mobility justice in rural areas.

2. Description of Fieldwork

2.1. Study Area

In the Drôme and Ardèche departments, the car is by far the most popular method of transport, not only in terms of transportation practices but also in terms of public policy choices and funding. Accordingly, the car is the preferred mode of travel for 80% of the inhabitants of these two departments [77], with commuting to and from work done mostly on small, unlabeled roads (86%). However, 47% of commuting trips take place within a radius of 5 km, and 33% of the working population works in the municipality in which they live [77]. Within the area studied, there is considerable variation. For example, the median distances traveled to work vary from 6.9 km in the Crest living area to 1.7 km in the Die living area, where more than half of the working population works and lives in the same municipality.

This rather large proportion of very short-distance journeys is an interesting lever for sustainable mobility, particularly cycling, which has been increasing in the living areas studied over the last two years, although remaining very marginal in the statistical data available (1% on average at the departmental level [78]). However, the official data on transportation choices has focused on home–work commuting trips, which are known to account for only 24% of journeys, and does not accurately measure recent trends or the potential diversity of local configurations [10].

If we look at the mobility experience in these areas, the studies conducted at the beginning of this research project show an appetite for change in the dynamics of mobility and the pace of life [79]. They seem to confirm that those living in rural areas are caught between aspirations (for a slower pace of life and more control over their time and mobility), demands (getting to places quickly on the one hand, limiting greenhouse gas emissions and energy consumption on the other) and area-specific constraints and habits that call for the use of cars [80].

The two areas in which we carried out our investigation, the Vallée de la Drômein Drôme, and Ardèche Méridionale in Ardèche, have low population density and are characterized by the absence of any conurbation. The Vallée de la Drôme is organized into three CCs, marked by a strongly structuring central corridor (the valley) and low overall population density (28 inhabitants per km^2). However, within it can be found a wide variety of demographic situations: in the west there is a more urbanized area, which is more densely populated (52 inhabitants per km^2) and has a large proportion of working-age people; while in the east there is a mountainous hinterland, very sparsely populated (nine inhabitants per km^2) with a more important share of aging population. In total, it has 56,800 inhabitants spread across 96 communes. Over the last few years, several citizen-led initiatives have focused on keeping local public services running, along with the railway line, which is a key structural element of the valley and runs alongside an increasingly busy

departmental road (the Valence–Gap corridor). This is the case, for example, of the fight to keep the maternity hospital in Die open, which was closed in 2019 despite protests, while the train station has been saved. The "Biovallée" (organic valley) brand—founded in 2005 by elected officials and economic actors from these three CCs as a result of a long-standing process of cooperation initiated in the end of the 1980s around the preservation of the Drôme river—marks the area's ambition to be a leading territory forsustainability. This effort is supported by an economic and association-based ecosystem that is particularly mobilized around the challenges of ecological transition. Although the brand is recognized at the national level for its action in promoting organic farming, it has not succeeded in establishing a model for sustainable mobility. Compared to other dimensions of ecological transition such as agriculture and biodiversity, sustainable transportation appears as a fairly recent matter of interest. However, in the recent years, there has been significant citizen mobilization on the issue of bicycle use, initiated in small towns through a lively activist ecosystem (bicycle promotion associations, "vélorutions", bicycle repair workshops) as well as commercial rental services dedicated to green tourism, especially structured around the recent opening of a green lane connecting the valley with national cycle routes.

Ardèche Méridionale comprises 10 CCs and nearly 130,000 inhabitants, with a density of 43 inhabitants per km^2 on average. There are long distances between service centers, and in the summer the high number of tourists visiting the area causes the roads to become congestedand requires local authorities to take into consideration the environmental, economic and social impact of tourism development in the region. Ardèche Méridionale also has apolitical culture strongly based around associations and activism, inherited from the "utopian migrations" of the late 1960s [81]. Indeed, even today, the areais stillhome to a neorural population that came in search for a way of life that fits with their environmental and anticapitalist views [81–85]. These actors showed their potential for mobilization in their fight against the development of the shale gas industry in the 2010s. Numerous citizen groups are still working to develop specific alternative forms of transition on various scales, particularly in the areas of public transportation and cycling, despite Ardèche being the only department in France that does not have any passenger rail lines.

In both departmental areas, numerous initiatives have been launched by residents and public actors—both municipalities and CCs—who want to address the issue of mobility and the challenges associated with it. For instance, some CCs have applied to national and regional calls for projects on innovative mobility schemes, including the introduction of a fleet of e-bikes for hire, the establishment of carpooling areas and car-sharing initiatives, the development of a safe hitchhiking network, and the implementation of cycling facilities, such as cycle lanes, bike shelters or public bike renting. They are involved in local ecological transition networks that have interest in sustainable mobility. In addition, numerous citizen-based local actors are acting as innovators and seeking to steer their area towards a more sustainable local mobility system, but the scale of these remains limited for the time being, and their impact on practices is small. Our action-research project aims to identifythe barriers that are found not at the level of individual practices but at the level of stakeholders in the mobility system [86] and their capacity to create a cohesive and consistent model that goes beyond isolated initiatives and experimentations. Figure 1 below represents the perimeter of the study area within the departments of Drôme and Ardèche, and situates both departments in France.



Figure 1. Study areas.

2.2. The Governance of Mobility in Rural France: The Complexity of an Institutional "Layer Cake"

To understand the governance system for mobility management in France, we need to look back at the history of the organization of subnational powers. From the end of the 1970s, the French state began a process of decentralizing its decision-making powers and related administrative powers, giving them to smaller-scale administrative divisions: municipalities (communes), departments (départements) and regions. This process, influenced by New Public Management, is based on the assumption that the functioning of the central state is marked by rigidity and bureaucratic red tape that undermines its efficiency and democratic dimension. Decisions taken at smaller scales of governance seem to be closer to the reality on the ground and to the citizens they affect.

In a context of rising public debt, decentralization was carried out alongside a policy of reforming the state with a view to make financial savings. This reform aimed to "introduce market principles into the management of [public] services and institutions" [87]. This new paradigm of public action questioned the legitimacy of administrative hierarchies and the centralizing monopoly of the state, and it encouraged the autonomy of administrative divisions to whom powers were contracted out [87]. This gave rise to a process of deconcentration, through the creation of contractual public agencies. These new actors (whether they were pre-existing public actors with strengthened powers or private actors) then became responsible to their financial backers (the state, Europe) and to their "users" (the citizens).

The proliferation of scales and actors involved in public policy managementsignaled the need for coordination and cohesive public policies at the local level. Transversal structures such as CCs, "pays"and syndicates were subsequently organized to promote intermunicipal cooperation [88]. Implemented in the 1990s, a "pays" is an administrative planning category used to designate an area that has a certain level of geographical, economic, cultural or social cohesion on the scale of a living or employment area. "Pays" are established on a voluntary basis (so they are not used everywhere in France) and may be represented by a syndicate, an association, a public interest group or some other institution. A syndicate is a voluntary association comprising several municipalities, formed to manage one or more activities of intermunicipal interest (such as waste treatment, water, transportation or tourism). Syndicates also allow for the formation of associations combining municipalities with departments, regions and public or private institutions.This overlapping and superimposition of actors with powers in the management of public services is often described as an institutional and administrative "layer cake," whose complexity is often criticized, particularly because the many institutional levels involved

in the management and development of public policies become a burden and a barrier to decision-making [89–92].

Mobility management is no exception to this overlapping of actors. In 1982, responsibility for transportation was divided between "urban transport" (the responsibility of municipalities or CCs) and "inter-urban and school transport" (the responsibility of departments), while the management of regional trains was given to the regions. Each of these administrative divisions has the status of "Autorité Organisatrice de Transport" (AOT, transportation organizing authority), meaning they are responsible for organizing regular public transportation within their respective division. Faced with the superimposition of different AOTs in urban areas, the government in 2000 passed a law on the creation of "Syndicats Mixtes de Transport" (SMT, mixed transportation syndicates), aimed at ensuring coordination between the offerings of the different AOTs. In 2014, "Autorités Organisatrices de la Mobilité" (AOM, mobility organizing authorities) were created, which include the organization of regular public transportation (AOT) but also other mobility services and even, under certain conditions, freight transportation within the "Périmètre de Transport Urbain" (PTU, urban transportation boundary). At the planning level, the organization of mobility takes the form of a "Plan de Déplacement Urbain" (PDU, urban travel plan), in existence since 1982.

Gathered indistinctly under the term "inter-urban areas", rural living areas have been totally absent from this gradual structuring of transportation authorities around cities. The creation of the AOMs in 2014 was part of the "Loi de Modernisation de l'Action Publique Territoriale et d'Affirmation des Métropoles" (MAPTAM, Law on the Modernization of Territorial Public Action and the Strengthening of Metropolises), which broadens the scope of mobility powers for conurbations and gives the status of metropolis to intermunicipal bodies comprising a central city within an urban area of at least 600,000 inhabitants. The law does not address the issue of extra-urban areas, in which, on the contrary, mobility powers are gradually moved further away from local authorities. Indeed, in 2015, the "Loi portant sur la Nouvelle Organization Territoriale de la République"(NOTRe, Law on the New Territorial Organization of the Republic) transferred the organization of school transportation to the regions, and then in 2017 powers over inter-urban transportation (coaches) were similarly transferred to the regions. The regions also retain powers over regional trains (known as TER, which stands for "transport express régional"), with the exception of the "Trains d'Équilibre du Territoire" (TET, territorial balance trains), also known as "intercité" (intercity) trains, which are managed by the central state. As many of the local elected officials we have interviewed argue, the transfer of coaches from the department to the region has been accompanied by a service degradation that is due not to poorer connections or equipment, but to the increased difficulties reported in the possibilities of expression of local needs. "We are a drop in the ocean for the region", said a CCs chairman.

Road management has experienced the same division of powers. In conurbations, this power is held by the municipality, the intermunicipality or the metropolis, over the whole of its territory, whatever the roads concerned. Outside conurbations, the department is responsible for the development and maintenance of so-called "departmental" roads, which make up 34% of the national road network. In Drôme and Ardèche, 16% of the roads are departmental, and less than 1% is made of national roads or freeways. The rest are unlabeled roads, which are the responsibility of the municipalities themselves.

It is through ecological transition laws that the issue of mobility planning is being introduced in rural areas. The 2015 "Loi relative à la Transition Énergétique pour la Croissance Verte" (TEPCV, Ecological Transition Law for Green Growth) provides for the establishment of rural mobility plans that are the equivalent of PDUs, deployed at the level of the intermunicipalities. The 2000 "Loi Solidarité et Renouvellement Urbain" (SRU, Solidarity and Urban Renewal Law) had already instituted "Schémas de Cohérence Territoriale" (SCOTs, territorial cohesion plans), which since then have included mobility planning and are deployed at the level of intermunicipalities, and "Plans Locaux d'Urbanisme" (PLUs,

local urban development plans), which define intra-municipal travel patterns along with road creation and use, and also exists at the intermunicipal level (PLUi)..

From this point of view, the current financing of mobility sheds light on the enduring logic behind mobility policy, whose financial dimension is made difficult to grasp due to the multitude of actors and levels involved. Roads receive the most money from public authorities [93]: the equivalent of €295 per inhabitant per year is allocated to the road network in the two departments, half of which is financed by the local authorities. In second place comes the rail network (€215), data for which is only available at the national level, which means that this expenditure is not necessarily distributed equally across France—particularly in Ardèche, which has no passenger lines. Half of the public funding dedicated to the road network is capital expenditure, used to build new roads or new road infrastructure (roundabouts, road widening, bypasses), whereas expenditure on the rail network and public transportation is mainly for maintenance. Walking and cycling take up €20 per year per inhabitant of public funding, non rail public transportation and school transportation €39, and carpooling €1.

3. Materials and Methods

Our research draws from the stakeholder analysis and advocacy coalition framework methods [86,94–98]. We use Weible's concept of "subsystem", defined as the dynamics in which "multiple actors who are motivated by their beliefs, structure their relationships into advocacy coalitions, and try to influence policy through utilizing multiple resources and venues" [86], p. 95, in order to define the "local mobility subsystem" as our research object. This "local mobility subsystem" is defined both spatially (through the lens of the administrative boundaries of the study area) and substantially through the concept of local sustainable mobility policymaking. Here we refer to Giorgi's definition of sustainable mobility being "everything that is at stake in the attempts being made of balancing costs and advantages in the transportation sector" [68], p. 201. Our analysis has focused on the shared (or opposed) systems of beliefs and action that are key to understanding public policymaking and the process of "selection and exclusion of stakeholders, characterizing the progressive creation of a system of action" [97], p. 199.

This approach has been used in transportation research to explain the profound changes that have affected transportation policy in the UK between 1987 and 2000 [99]. Those changes have not been caused by any technological or infrastructural determinism, Geoff Vigar argues, but rather by a change in policy orientation caused by contestation among various stakeholders and coalitions. Vigar thus recommends to focus on both "the 'hard infrastructure of policy-making' (the traditional political science focus on organizations, responsibilities, formal procedures and rules [...]), and the 'soft infrastructure' of policy-making (the routines, the practices and relational networks of policy stakeholders" [99], p. 4, in order to understand shifts in policy orientations. More recently, several empirical works have insisted on the importance of contestation and the emergence of new stakeholders reframing mobility justice [15,100]. However, so far and to our knowledge, this approach has been mainly used in national or urban contexts. The adoption of the LOM allows us to use this opportunity to observe the process of creation of a sustainable mobility system of action at the local level, and it allows us to try to understand what are the challenges for stakeholders in this debate.

We base our analysis on field studies in the departmental areas introduced above, with the aim of finding out about how the networks of stakeholders in these areas are structured, as well as understanding their interests, their action strategies and the accounts they give of their practices. We base our analysis on various materials acquired between September 2020 and January 2021. One part is made of ethnographic material extracted from our participation and observation of various events linked with debates surrounding the LOM. We have observed webinars and meetings organized by expert associations such as ALEC 07 and Dromolib (cf. supra) and national agencies on the issue of the LOM, organized for local elected officials and followed by debates. We have also observed a meeting between

local mobility stakeholders and the region, and a debate at the French Senate on the same topic. The other part of our materials is based on individual semi-directive interviews including questions on the perception of stakeholders' role, interest, motivations and projects on mobility. We have also investigated stakeholders' relationships, sources of conflicts and cooperation, and asked about the perceived challenges and opportunities of the LOM. We have met with elected officials (four CC vice-presidents on energy and mobility and one municipal deputy), 12 public officers in charge of mobility (9 at the CC level and three at the departmental level), association members (among our panel, we focus in this article on two associations that are particularly involved in the local advocacy for the LOM) and the director of a local transportation syndicate.

We will now present the findings of this work, which are centered on the local debates surrounding the possibility of opting for powers with which the LOM provides public actors and on a case study (the Tout'enbus transportation syndicate). All the interview excerpts quoted hereafter have been anonymized for the purpose of this article.

4. Preliminary Findings

4.1. The Challenge of Taking on Powersover Mobility at a Local Level: Local Public Actors Facing the Mobility Guidance Law (LOM)

Discussions about CCs taking on powers for the organization of mobility are taking place in the context of the decentralization of public services described above. The debates surrounding the LOM have represented an ethnographic opportunity to shed light on the challenges, opportunities and perceptions of the role of local authorities in providing solutions for sustainable transportation. It has appeared clearly during our observations that besides the very question of transportation, the issue at stake is rather the balance (or imbalance) of powers between various levels of public action, particularly from the financing point of view.

The aim of the LOM is to clarify the perimeter of jurisdiction and governance over mobility at a local level, allowing extra-urban intermunicipalities to become a mobility organizing authority (AOM) on their own territory. This law aims at providing extra-urban areas with tools of mobility management that were until now restricted to urban areas, and it allows for the implementation and running of local mobility services. Until now, those local services were run as experimentations by the CC's energy division through energy transition programs, or by the social division through inclusive mobility programs, while the urban planning measures (such as cycle paths) were often developed by tourism divisions. Indeed, most CCs do not have powers over infrastructures (roads) that remain municipal or departmental. At the intermunicipal level, the issue of mobility is torn apart between different services (typically Energy, Urbanism and Tourism). This law thus allows for the creation of a mobility jurisdiction of its own, opening the path for the creation of dedicated services and employees. The LOM also introduces the Plan de Mobilité Simplifié (PMS, simplified mobility plan) that is the rural counterpart of the PDU (that is also renamed Plan de Mobilité, mobility plan). The CCs have until March, 31st, 2021 to decide on whether they want to become a local AOM or not. If they do not, their jurisdiction will be automatically transferred to the region that will become their AOM. If they do, the CC itself can become AOM or it can be transferred to another local actor such as a pays, a syndicate or a local agency. This context of redefinition of jurisdictions and powers is particularly enlightening in distinguishing the different stakeholders involved in the governance of the organization of mobility in the rural areas of Drôme and Ardèche, their (sometimes divergent) interests and the scope of their actions.

While the promulgation of the LOM emanates from the central state, the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region president has called on local elected officials to refuse to take on powers over mobility, arguing of a risk of fragmentation of the mobility service offer in the region. The region has also insisted on the financial risks local authorities face when running a service at the local level. Indeed, although the law allows for diverse combinations of regionally and locally funded services, the region has been implying that local authorities choosing to take on those powers might lose the benefit of existing regional services. While

urban transportation is mainly funded by a tax on local businesses, most rural intermunicipalities have very few potential resources to fund their own regular transportation system because of the lack of sufficient tax base, thus remaining dependent on the regional funding schemes. On the other hand, the central state and its agencies are, on the contrary, encouraging CCs to become AOMs, considering this law as an answer to the problem of the lack of transportation alternatives in rural areas. Multiple funding instruments have been deployed in the past five years to encourage the experimentation of local services of mobility in rural areas. The CCs that refuse to take on powers on mobility are deemed to be excluded from those instruments, thus placing local representatives in a dilemma of being potentially excluded either from regional or from national funding opportunities.

The adoption of the LOM in the Drôme and Ardèche departments thus raises many questions for the representatives of the CCs, who must vote for or against the adoption of these new powers. The very understanding of the law and its consequences remain unclear for most representatives, especially because the region and the state have deployed a thorough technical debate with contradictory arguments on both sides. Many elected officials we have interviewed testify to their dismay at the lack of engineering capacity in their areas in terms of mobility, and the lack of human and financial resources for taking on these powers. Indeed, organizing mobility at the intermunicipal level without adequate funding would accentuate inequalities between areas (in terms of public transportation services, for example). In addition, there is a fear from certain elected officials that being responsible for mobility services will also make them accountable for the lack thereof in rural areas, despite the absence of any measure for reducing the funding gap between cities and rural areas on mobility. However, taking on this responsibility is also a lever in terms of autonomy and decision-making power. Indeed, the law stipulates that all CCs that decide to take on these powers have to be integrated in a consultative body comprising all the regional AOM within a "living area". Those CCs will have to be consulted by the region on all mobility issues that fall within its territory. Most of our interviewees thus consider that the issues of local day-to-day mobility will probably then be better taken into account by regional decision-makers, who will be forced to deal with local authorities' demands (for example, to decide on timetables, services, bus frequencies, etc.) and to create smaller scales of negotiation (though the actual size of living areas to be formed yet remains unknown and is a key element of the negotiation between the region and the CCs). Conversely, if the CCs decide not to adopt these powers, they will automatically pass to the region, without consultation. If they wish to develop a local mobility service, CCs will have to sign public service delegation agreements, thus negotiating on a case-by-case basis the contours of governance. For some technical officers from the CCs interviewed for this research, it is the CCs' entire legitimacy and capacity for action that is at stake in the adoption of the LOM. On the other hand, we see that regional authorities resist this decentralization of mobility-related powers, which would weaken their ability to control the organization of mobility and would break up its governance, thereby making regional coordination—which until now has been the sole responsibility of the region—multilateral.

Moreover, the adoption of the LOM in Drôme and Ardèche brings into play the central role of associations concerned with the development of sustainable mobility. These associations, which have been established locally for several years, have developed expertise on the issue of mobility management and have supported various projects that foster innovation (such as establishing organized hitchhiking networks, promoting carpooling, experimenting with local carsharing, promoting cycling and related infrastructures and so on) with local elected officials, national expert networks, funding agencies and local citizen-based initiatives. Over time, these expert associations have built up a network of mobility stakeholders, which, in a sense, prefigures the modes of governance that could be sought with the LOM. Over time, they also have gained experience and technical knowledge on the issue of sustainable rural mobility, while not being politically responsible also allows them more freedom to experiment. At a time when elected officials, newly arrived on the political scene (municipal elections were held in March and June 2020), have to make a

decision about the LOM, these associations are a crucial resource for public stakeholders, helping to clarify the issues at stake in this law and supporting local authorities in their assumption of new powers. If local authorities adopted the LOM, these association-based actors would be able to establish their position as experts within their area, as well as increase their capacity for action in supporting the mobility transition. This can be seen in the extract below, from an interview with an employee of the association ALEC07:

"For us, it's really important to make sure that elected officials are aware of the importance of this work on mobility. [...] If it's done at the level of the region, it may not go much further than what's currently being done. [...] The CCs could organize transportation on demand so that people of all ages can get to the market, a project for cycle training, hitchhiking, bikesharing, and so on. The region will not be able to respond to this kind of need, which is quite subtle and circumstantial. I don't think the region would organize this kind of thing at such a small level."

Indeed, those associations could accompany the creation of an independent AOM or could be potential future AOMs themselves, if the CCs decide to take on the mobility power and transfer it to a local agency.

4.2. An Example of a Local Transportation Syndicate in a Sparsely Populated Area: Tout'enbus

Used as a case study, the experience of the Tout'enbus syndicate makes it possible to assess in concrete terms the stakes involved in the adoption of the LOM by the CCs.

Tout'enbus is the only mixed syndicate for extra-urban public transportation in Ardèche. It provides an additional layer of service to the public transportation network managed by the region, and it has inspired the creation of two similar transportation networks, with different statuses, around the conurbations of Privas and Annonay. Tout'enbus was created in 2006 and now includes 11 municipalities in the Aubenas living area. These municipalities joined together on a voluntary basis, with the administrative status of the syndicate appearing as the most appropriate institutional structure to form under because it enabled the grouping and coordination of transportation in an area comprising several municipalities that were not part of the "CC du Pays d'Aubenas-Vals"when Tout'enbus was created.

Through a series of mergers, the "CC du Pays d'Aubenas-Vals" has grown to include 28 municipalities and has changed its name to be now called the "CC du bassin d'Aubenas" (CCBA). All the municipalities that were part of Tout'enbus were then, since this merger, part of the CCBA, but some CCBA municipalities were not part of Tout'enbus.

When the CCBA was extended, elected officials and technicians asked a research institute to investigate what the inhabitants' primary concerns were. The most frequently mentioned topic was the wish to see the development of a public transportation service in the area.

First developed as an experiment funded by the department for two years, Tout'enbus has managed to sustain thanks to a transportation tax levied on companies in the region due to a sufficient tax base (which finances approximately 80% of the service).Tout'enbus has been able to set up a public transportation network in the municipalities that are members of the SyndicatTout'enbus, which until then had been rudimentary (in terms of the number of bus stops and the frequency of bus journeys) and limited to a few major long-distance routes between the large cities of the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region and the Ardèchedepartment. The terms of this financing, however, meant that the Tout'enbus network had to develop in the area in which the companies who financed the syndicate were based, and this limits its potential scope.

"Putting a transportation route in a village where there are 100 people and no business...where there's no financial return, it's complicated. I agree that it's a matter of solidarity to offer transportation to these inhabitants, and maybe some of them even work in Aubenas, but to begin with, we made sure that we had the possibility of [financial] resources. [...] Sending a bus for two people a day isn't worth it", said the Tout'enbus manager.

Alongside this, as the pioneering work of the Tout'enbus syndicate has proved its worth, other surrounding communes have joined, and it has grown from 7 to 11 partner municipalities. Today, the CC and the syndicate no longer overlap, and the syndicate covers an area that is spatially noncontinuous, as Figure 2 below illustrates. The syndicate structure, which appeared to be an asset at the time when the project was launched, now works against the expansion of transportation over a larger area. Indeed, because decisions over whether or not to include new partner municipalities belong to elected officials sitting on the syndicate, political and interpersonal issues sometimes take precedence over technical ones.

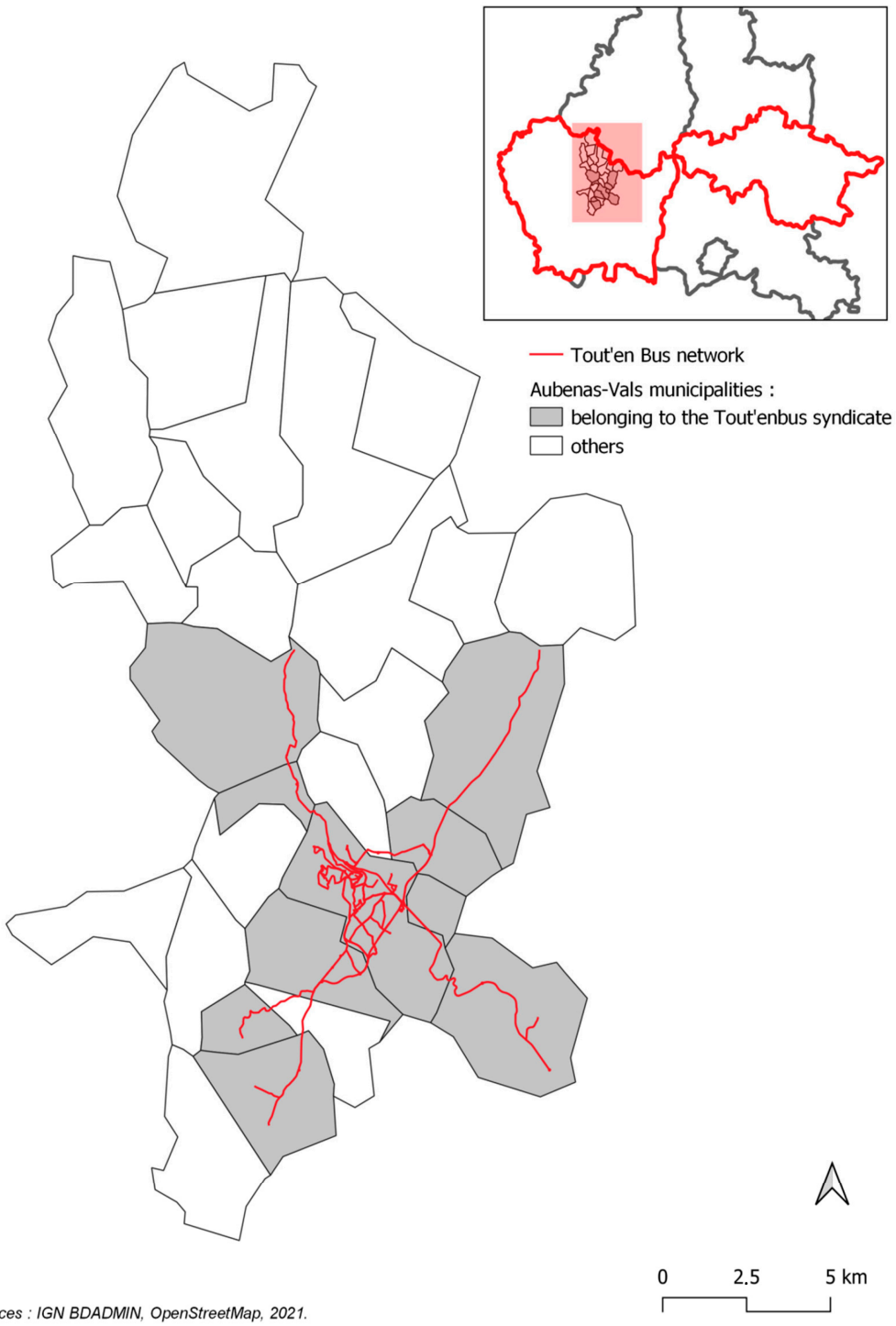

Figure 2. The perimeter of Tout'enbus syndicate in the Aubenas-Vals CC.

Indeed, the noncongruence between the perimeter of the syndicate, based on voluntary membership and for which all new members have to be coopted, and the political perimeter of the CC, generates inequalities between inhabitants of different municipalities, because some benefit from a local transport service, while others do not. This situation gives excessive powers to local representatives who can arbitrarily decide on the members of the syndicate and consequently on the perimeter covered by the public transport services. Indeed, some municipalities that belong to the CC have not been accepted by other in the syndicate, due to interpersonal rivalries.

In this context, taking on the new powers provided for by the LOM appears to be a solution that could streamline the local mobility offering. If the CCBA opts to take over the organization of mobility at its own level, the Tout'enbus syndicate would disappear or be deemed to absorb the entire perimeter of the CCBA. As such, applying the LOM would pave the way for greater intermunicipal cooperation, making it possible to foster solidarity on a larger scale.

However, the case of Tout'enbus is not only interesting for understanding the stakes involved in the adoption of the LOM. This syndicate is also a driving force in the experimentation of alternative models for mobility in the area. In 2014, for example, the syndicate purchased a fleet of 80 e-bikes that would be available for citizens to rent. This approach was met with great success (there is now a long waiting list for e-bike rental), and Tout'enbus is now being contacted by many other municipalities who wish to do the same and who are eager to draw inspiration from the syndicate's experience. Tout'enbus has also experimented with organizing hitchhiking networks, local carpooling platforms and initiatives for sharing electric vehicles purchased by communes. As illustrated in the interview excerpt below, it is interesting to note that mobility alternatives are being promoted as a solution to the financial obstacles to establishing public transportation networks in the more remote areas of Ardèche's countryside. As the interview progressed, however, the discussion of these alternative modes of mobility took on an additional dimension for our interviewee, that of creating social ties.

"This is where other solutions need to be developed: carsharing, carpooling, safe hitchhiking networks, bike rentals...there are plenty of possibilities, but it requires raising awareness. We're raising awareness so that people can organize themselves. The local authorities can give a push, but it must be the citizens who get involved, feel concerned, organize things. [...] They must also be the driving force; they mustn't wait for the authorities to do everything. [...] We can imagine an association or a citizen acting as a relay between citizens. I don't know, as every Saturday morning there's the market in Aubenas, a citizen can create a small questionnaire, organize a carpool...it's also a way of creating social ties."

The "individual responsibility" discussed by our interviewee above that initially rose as a solution to the financial inability to offer a transportation service throughout the whole of Ardèche then becomes a principle supporting a moral discourse on community sociability: sharing a car or carpooling is a means of combating social isolation and individualistic viewpoints. This observation should be viewed in the context of an analysis of new forms of territorial governance, especially with regard to the low-carbon transition. Indeed, one of the sectors in which the combined principle of citizen responsibility and shared power is extensively mobilized is that of environmental governance [91]. Participatory democracy mechanisms (urban policies, neighborhood councils, development councils, subsidized support for citizens' associations, etc.) are increasingly encouraged by public authorities. Indeed, the adoption of the LOM in Drôme and Ardèche also indirectly involves citizen participation. As we discussed earlier, this law is based on the principle that bringing decision-making bodies closer to the areas in question would guarantee that citizens would be better heard. However, citizens are also described as being the "resource level" that needs to be mobilized in order to work toward a mobility transition, while they are particularly absent from the debate on the adoption of local mobility powers in rural areas, considered as being primarily technical. During a discussion in the French Senate on

23 September 2020 on the issue of mobility in sparsely populated areas, repeated reference was made to private mobility innovations and local solidarity practices as being the most useful lever for bringing about a mobility transition in rural areas. Public and collective transportation services were described as too expensive for sparsely populated areas. The LOM itself has also been created to encourage local initiatives such as car-pooling associations, hitchhiking networks, etc., by not restricting the ability to become AOM to the operation of a public transportation service and by not providing additional funding for the operation of local transportation services. This choice to favor individual initiatives nevertheless raises questions about the role of the state as the guarantor of the equality of public services on the territory, particularly in view of inequalities between different areas in terms of car dependency. The ecological cost of car dependency should also be taken into consideration when compared to the cost of public transportation.

5. Discussion: Mobility Justice and Local Governance in Sparsely Populated Areas: Prospects for Future Research

In France, the adoption of the LOM has given rise to reflections and to games being played out between actors. These are of heuristic interest when it comes to analyzing access to mobility justice in sparsely populated areas, as our preliminary findings have suggested. Those are the prospects we wish to investigate further in our research project.

5.1. Focusing on Stakeholders' Agency to Understand the Institutional Lock-In Regarding Sustainable Mobility

The tensions and debates surrounding the assumption of new powers as provided for by the LOM reveal a wide variety of previously invisible actors who are involved in mobility issues. On the political scene, we are witnessing the emergence of professionalized experts and technicians from associations, who have a very good knowledge of the area in question and have suddenly come to play a central role as driving forces of sustainable mobility-related initiatives. These experts can be seen as resources that elected officials can rely upon to build a policy of mobility transition, but they also raise the question of equality between areas: not all rural areas have expert actors or citizen collectives who are organized around the issue of mobility, well-informed and able to influence the choices of local decision-makers. In the same way, the human resources and the availability and skill level of technical officers employed in the CCs for mobility issues can be a real driver for public policy. While so far mobility services as such do not exist in most rural CCs, experimentations developed in the last few years have mainly been developed by skilled and motivated technical officers that had personal interest in the issue of daily mobility and have managed to convince elected officials of the importance of this topic. On the contrary, when there are no human resources available, whether at the associative or technical level, elected officials tend to be discouraged by the technicality and complexity of mobility issues.

The wide variety of actors also leads to strategic and sometimes competing games being played out between actors. In this article, we have shown that the governance of mobility in France involves a complex institutional and administrative "layer cake". Multiple tensions can be seen between competing authorities: for regions, the objective is to keep control over the organization of mobility; for environmental agencies, the objective is to promote local experimentation. Local authorities are sometimes caught in a double-bind situation on a subject on which they lack knowledge and resources. However, the Tout'enbus case study has also revealed how actors are able to adapt to these different levels of powers and make use of them to serve fluctuating interests. When Tout'enbus was created, the choice of the mixed syndicate model for organizing a public transportation service made it possible to foster collaboration with municipalities that were not within the boundaries of the same CC. The form of this CC has now changed, and the syndicate has become a means of excluding certain municipalities. These disputes between elected officials and the games of influence that go beyond the inhabitants are becoming an obstacle to developing a transportation service that has been requested by these inhabitants. This

is not true, however, in all cases: in another case we investigated, the living area is split into two different CCs. Having one of them deploy a mobility service without the other would result in a lack of both efficiency and solidarity because one CC is concentrating most of the tax base, while the other is the one that most needs a transportation service. In this case, both CCs have decided to agree on a common position towards the LOM, but that might not be the case in all rural areas. The LOM thus highlights the crucial problem of the inconsistency between political governance scales and living areas for mobility management: while sometimes CCs appear to be the most relevant scale for mobility planning, it is not always true because the perimeter of CCs is not defined by objective criteria defining a living area, but by local political history.

As such, the overhaul of the governance of mobility powers that will be enabled by implementing the LOM makes it possible to restructure games of alliances. It therefore seems particularly appropriate to conduct an analysis focused on stakeholders in order to study the means by which mobility justice can be brought about in France's sparsely populated areas.

5.2. A New Look at the Decentralization of Public Policy

New public management and the decentralization of public policy management that it involves has been the subject of debate among political scientists and sociologists since the late 1990s. While for some it would make the state more "modest" in its scope [87,101,102] and would contribute to a greater horizontality and empowerment of citizens in controlling the actions carried out in their area [103], others believe that it would lead to a dissolution of the state's responsibility in social and environmental matters [91,104,105]. By handing responsibility for managing services and, in this case, environmental issues to a myriad of multilevel actors, the state would be relieved of the burden of responsibility for these eminently political issues.

It is interesting to note that this "balancing act" can be found in the discussions surrounding the adoption of mobility powers in Drôme and Ardèche. On the one hand, "expert" actors from associations see in the LOM the opportunity to bring decision-making bodies closer to citizens, to improve the democratic legitimacy of mobility governance, and to develop sustainable mobility initiatives that are more closely aligned with the needs of inhabitants and the specific characteristics of the area in question. On the other hand, elected representatives of CCs fear that they will have to take on responsibility and accountability for services that they will not be able to provide to their inhabitants (owing to a lack of funding or the necessary skills). The rules of the game, the priority of actions and the resources allocated to them are still, in fact, decided mainly upstream by the central state [89]. Furthermore, expanding the use of "project-based" contractualization may be a way of retaining decision-making power over the management of mobility and of circumventing the need for major financial investment. In her analysis of the principle of citizen consultations at the intermunicipal level, the jurist Patricia Demaye describes these initiatives in strong terms as a mere "illusion of democracy" [106] because the real importance of participatory democracy workshops is so devalued by the presence of the expertise (technical or political) of contractual, private or institutional actors [91,104,107,108]. It is therefore particularly interesting to put these critical theories of decentralization of public policy in France to the test in the field.

6. Conclusions

To conclude, the study of rural mobility governance has much to contribute to the issue of the sustainability in general. The description of the institutional "Layer Cake" of rural mobility reveals governance logics that go beyond the question of rural transportation and highlight the complexity of low-carbon transitions governance.

The study of rural mobility and energy transition also highlights the need to question more specifically the territorial dimension to bring out the specificities of rural mobility justice which has so far been mostly designed to meet urban complexity. The multidi-

mensionality of the concept of mobility justice is in this case useful to link microlevels of embodied interpersonal relations present in the associations and local policy makers to the difficulties encountered at the meso-levelin order to design services able to meet the rural transportation justice and the right of mobility. However, the French example illustrates the need for the social sciences to understand precisely how decisionmaking is organized at the smallest scales of power and how it meets bottom-up initiatives. Studying how the issue of transition is deployed in the discourse of stakeholders would allow the transition processes to be concretely understood, criticizedand improved in order to move towards more social justice and sustainability.

More broadly, attention should be drawn to how the "citizen empowerment" argument is used to mitigate the impossibility of offering a public service due to a lack of sufficient funding. While carpooling and car-sharing practices are interesting ways of diversifying modes of transportation in rural areas, making citizensshoulder the responsibility for mobility justice is also a way for the central government to divest itself of its responsibility of addressing the car-dependency problem of those areas.

Indeed, the principle of "citizen empowerment" is based on rhetoric of the individualization of social engagement, a discourse that fits well with a neoliberal perspective and excludes certain populations who are made invisible (including young people without driving licenses, the elderly and people with disabilities). Originally, this principle mainly concerned consumption and agricultural production in France, but our study shows that it also affects the organization of transportation.

Currently, many researchers agree that user participation mechanisms in the context of environmental policies serve rather to "disseminate behavioral norms in society (such as taking care of one's health, protecting the environment, getting around, and consuming differently) and to make individuals assume the individual and collective consequences of their actions" [91]. For Yannick Rumpala, these procedures ultimately have the effect of further establishing the moral image of the "good citizen" who is supposed to listen to the advice of experts and partners and to be part of a collective approach that goes beyond himself or herself [109]. In doing so, according to certain critiques, public debate is neutralized, subversive actors are channeled toward a discursive form of struggle and awareness-raising actions become more predictable and easier for the public authorities to apprehend [110]. The study of local mobility debates and controversies is thus a very interesting vantage point to interrogate the levers for the transition towards sustainable mobility in European rural areas, though given the exploratory nature of our research, the comparison with other case studies in Europe and with other types of materials, including quantitative data, would be particularly useful for future research.

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