



Low cost in high-speed train in France. Customer-king and the public service guillotine

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Abstract

Low cost air travel may be a longstanding and well-known phenomenon but up until now the same could not be said about rail travel, the topic of this article. This is changing, however, at least in France where low cost rail travel has started to spread in recent years. The present paper outlines different reasons why France's SNCF National Railways has embarked on a low cost trajectory over the past 15 years while discussing how this approach has affected work and employment at the company. The low cost paradigm has centred on a reduction in production costs, a restructuring of the commercial offer and a diminution in rail workers' social protections. The idea put forward here is that the SNCF's new commercial conditions hide a plan to undermine France's public service railway.

Keywords: Low cost, railways, railroads, High speed, SNCF, iDTGV ; OUIGO, IZIS, yield management.

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1. Introduction

In the railway business line, if the opening of freight and passenger transport markets is the rule in the European Union, low cost in passenger transport remains, as of Fall 2017, a French specificity¹.

Strategies imagined from one country to another are very diverse. After very clear injunctions from the European Commission, SNCF has distinguished itself from other European countries by putting an emphasis on low cost, a degraded vision of fast-train travel, as it has developed from 1981 to 2003, for more than 20 years. As of today, low cost only operates LGV (fast trains), even though Izy (launched in 2016) announces changes in Bruxelles-Paris lines in parallel with the fast-train line.

Let us formulate an hypothesis: in rail transport as in air transport, employers' creativity in the commercial field results from the incapacity in which they find themselves to fight and ultimately defeat labor - meaning the workers - to adapt according to their will the production tools, in the composition of which the organization of labor is essential. In railways, work authorizes different types of deliveries (fast trains, express regional lines, Intercités). And because of those difficulties in convincing trade unions to accept the flexibility deemed necessary, which ultimately means renouncing some social achievements, the State-employer has used bypass strategies. Unable to transform as it wishes what exists, it modifies it sideways, disarming - more or less - resistance from hostile or skeptical forces.

iDTGV	
Launched	Displayed objective
2004 (disappearing in 2017)	Competing against air transport through prices
Commercial modalities	
Trips around Paris covering less than 300 km. Objective of an at least 80% occupancy rate. Traveler's welcome on platform.	
Technical modalities	
iDTGV trains attached at the back of an ordinary TGV (so one conductor and one slot for two trains)	

¹ As we're writing these lines, LCR (Low Cost Rail), a freight society that also aims at transporting passengers, and apparently independant from existing operators, is launching its first convoys in Spain.

<http://www.vialibreffe.com/noticias.asp?not=21630&cs=oper>

OUIGO	
Launched	Displayed objective
2013	Competing against air transport through prices
Commercial modalities	
<p>Idem & important charges in case of booking cancellation (in order to avoid empty seats) one class only.</p> <p>The same trip (but not necessarily the same timeslot) can cost from 10 to 85 euros. Target clientele: “entry range”, young, poor, and not in a hurry, or wishing, at fixed costs, to multiply trips. No first class. Phone contacts at prohibitive prices (20 euros, sometimes more than the ticket price), obstacles to reservation changes (4h before departure, minimum).</p> <p>Alignment of OUIGO on Ryanair. « The corollary of simplification, slicing of the product, is the optionalization of all its secondary features (...). low cost is in fact the contrary of gratuity : everything has a price, and everything must be paid for » (Combe, 2011, p. 5). Added to a cabin luggage, billing of power outlet, on-board admission 30m before departure (controls on platform).</p>	
Technical modalities	
<p>a. constitution of filled trains over densification of occupancy on certain trains (bar disappears)²</p> <p>b. In order to reduce tolls in some cities, trains leave and arrive in far away stations (Tourcoing, Marne-la-Vallée, Lyon-Saint-Exupéry, etc.), which means more time and another ticket. SNCF wishes for those trains to leave from Paris stations (in 2019).</p> <p>Intensification of train utilization (sometimes 13h a day, compared to 6 or 7 for ordinary TGVs).</p>	

² According to sources a OUIGO hosts 634 places against 545 in an ordinary TGV duplex, which means + 14 % or 1 268 sièges against 1 000 in an ordinary TGV (+ 26 %).



IZY	
Launched	Displayed objective
2016	Competing against main brand Thalys, created 20 years ago, buses and car-sharing.
Commercial modalities	
<p>Compared to Thalys (launched 20 years ago), prices can be very low (for example 10€ if traveling standing). The sale is reserved for French and Belgian historical operators. Loyalty programs (even Thalyscard) are not valid. Loss in case of cancellation. Only works off-peak (after 9am and after 8pm), two daily lines (three on Sundays). Significant elongation of travel times (Paris Bruxelles in 2 hours and 8 to 26 minutes, meaning 46 to 64 minutes more than in Thalys, which takes 1 hour 24 for Paris-Bruxelles). Transformation in a relative low standard travel.</p> <p>Auto-competing against Thalys, Izy showcases the beginning of International Railway low cost by implementing low cost in Belgium.</p> <p>Amongst reasons for which SNCF (which owns 60% of Thalys) and its Belgian homologue SNCB (which owns 40%) have chosen the low cost option over reducing prices would be marketing strategy. Thalys would not like to see its prestigious in business circles brand depreciated. Thalys sometimes are half empty, but administrators not really caring about environmental issues deem beneficial to make “less branded” trains function more.</p>	
Technical modalities	
<p>« Slow speed » by using on the French side of the trip ordinary rails in order to reduce tolls.</p> <p>Over densification of occupancy on certain trains (bar disappears). No Wifi (contrary to what exists on Thalys).</p> <p>« SNCF-mobilitéé », the main shareholder, would like to optimize the utilization of its TGVs (by renting two trains to Thalys, which are in fact destined to Izy).</p>	

TGV POP	
Launched	Displayed objective
2016	Optimizing TGV occupancy
Commercial modalities	
<p>Only using the train if the number of passengers registered (15 to 4 days before departure) is enough (from 25 to 50 depending on destinations) . Maximal flexibility (incertitude for clients until three days before departure).</p>	

Eurostar Snap	
Launched	Displayed objective
2016	Idem for Eurostar
Commercial modalities	
Standard class exclusively. Reservations through Facebook only 7 days before departure, indicating whether morning or afternoon is preferred. The traveler receives confirmation and identification of the timeslot decided by Snap 48h before departure at the latest. Subject to availabilities of dates and trains. Return the same day sometimes is impossible.	

We could point out that the creation rhythm of those subsidiaries or new commercial modalities is increasing. Nine years separate OUIGO from iDTGV but IZY, TGVpop and « Eurostar Snap » have followed OUIGO in three years only, and those three last initiatives were born on the same year. We could also point out that over the years, commercial products are more and more “entry range”.

Those formulas impose the dematerialization of sales (suppression of counters which implies that the client works, and spends time and money) and use yield management (price modulation combining the rate of reservation and the departure date, a logic that many of our European neighbors, even great rail nations such as Germany, Belgium or Switzerland, ignore). More and more often, the price of cancelled tickets is lost or a change of trains is subject to prohibitive prices. Optionalization (billing of any additional delivery, in Izy the second luggage can cost more than the ticket price) is now the rule. In some cases, train occupancy is over-dense (by suppression of bar wagon). Finally, in all the last formulas, the traveler is attracted by low fares but is not certain to be able to travel at this price, and if he still wishes to take the train, he might have to pay a very high price. According to Cyrine Gardes : “client is king, but you’re not his queen”.

2. The heart of resistance is attacked through its periphery

In 2004, with iDTGV, the introduction of low cost in SNCF materialized an important restructuring for public service on French railways, accompanied some years later by the apparition of long-distance bus travels. This important management decision was not a provisory measure, in order to straighten budgets, but a durable orientation which, along with the breakup of SNCF in 2 EPIC (in 1997) then 3 (in 2015), aimed at the bypassing of resistances coming from workers to adaptations deemed necessary by the opening of the market. And, as could be expected, sooner or later the experimentations of production re-organization would touch all activity, coming back to the parent company SNCF. In the same way that “helped jobs” have degraded the norm for ordinary jobs, the introduction of low cost has helped sooner or later to undermine public service and the working, living and job conditions of its personnel. The heart of resistance is attacked through its periphery.



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3. The heart of resistance is attacked through its periphery

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Both the redefinition of clientele segmentation comprised in those different low cost initiatives and the progressive but continuous reconfiguration of organization and labor rules must be seen as going hand in hand.

3.1 Bipolarisation of clientele

SNCF aims at keeping its offer of ordinary TGVs (that it would like to christen InOui), even if that implies, for the moment, proposing lower prices (like Prem's) or making billing modulation thinner.

For the most part (but not exclusively), those lines have a specific clientele, called "business" or "Pro". In a hurry, this clientele catches the fastest trains, and travels on rush hour. Pampered, it is demanding regarding service (high frequency) and flexibility (possibility to change a reservation at the last moment or - until very recently - after the departure of the train), service "on site", comfort (subdued light in order to work or relax). Rather indifferent to costs, as it is generally taken up by the businesses, this clientele is very "elastic" (cost is not its first problem). Convenience is also taken into account (being able to leave from city centers). If we look at the case of the Paris-Bordeaux line, the finalization of the TGV railway that was operational in July 2017 meant 70 minutes less of travel, for 10 euros more on the ticket price (due to the financing of the public-private partnership by Vinci). On this line, iDTGV has at the same time disappeared in the same way as in 2012, when the Paris Lyon and Paris Strasbourg lines, occupied mostly by managers, have ceased to offer this option.

On the other side, where it changes the most, starting in the middle of the 2000's, SNCF now targets a clientele that is deprived of monetary means and /or for which ticket price is the main criterion (students, young independents, members of the working class, etc.). A significant percentage of low cost travelers does not belong to any of those groups, but the target clientele are the 25 to 59 years-old that travel privately. On total, compared to a client traveling with ordinary TGV and at equal distance, speed and comfort, the price would be 30 to 50% less, and sometimes even a lot less if one books early. This clientele sometimes travels intensely. Oftentimes at ease with the numeric world, it has very few time constraints, and is very fast in identifying the best prices, and some can be very competitive, for example 10 to 15 euros for traveling 700 kilometers on OUIGO if one anticipates his journeys months before and sometimes accepts departing from far-away stations, which for many travelers implies an elongation of travel times. In the last low cost formulas, on the same destinations, the mandatory travel times are significantly longer than those of an ordinary TGV (for example Paris-Bordeaux with OUIGO if one accepts to go to Massy or Marne-la-Vallée, or Bruxelles-Paris on Izy).

Most of this clientele - that is becoming more and more numerous - is sensitive to price. According to OUIGO's CEO on the Paris-Rennes rail, 45% of the clientele (for the most part comprised of children), wouldn't without this offer have used the railway. This segmentation policy redefines the frontiers between social categories that have a comfortable buying power and working class categories. And, logically, low cost offers always suppose more work from the consumer (Dujarier 2008), construction of the consumer (Grandclément



2011), in both senses of the word construction, as “putting the client at work” and his “commercial education” (Tiffon 2013). It is again essentially those same working class populations that are subject to additional costs. This clientele segment is what’s more victim from monetary penalization if it changes its train schedules postpones or simply cancels its journey.

3.2 Making not solvent clientele accept a downgrading

The trend is, in both train categories, that the traveler pays his ticket a higher price as the day and hour of the departure approaches but in both segments, the yield management cannot be reduced to this simple rule (Finez & Perennes, 2015). Tickets can be sold again at lower fares than those that existed the day before. Some imagine that this deliberate opacity policy allows commercials to blur lines and disarm the homo oeconomicus that would be too virtuoso or would like to turn marketing algorithms to his advantage. In a deliberate way, everything is made in order to blur lines, like consumer associations have had the occasion to deplore. “Almost nobody pays his TGV ticket at full fare”, was happy to note “SNCF mobilités” CEO, G. Pepy. It is because the swamp of fares gives the illusion of low prices that blur lines and the perception of the consumer. Nobody could say anymore what the “normal price” of a train ticket would be on a given destination. This is why at the end of the 2000’s, a parliamentary report advised communication to the consumer buying a train ticket of what was its median selling price.

Blurring lines, but to what avail? Even in the limits presupposed by the low cost offer, the aim is to - what a paradox - sell at the highest possible price, even if that means reintroducing a form of 3rd class, a category suppressed in 1956 and surreptitiously reintroduced under the form of full trains that offer lesser facilities than the contemporary standard (Kestel and Larue, 2016). In managerial medias, the general director of Voyage SNCF explained thus her commercial strategy: “we prefer (...) putting a client that pays less in a seat that costs half as much than in a TGV. We do not oppose the two offers but are constructing a global offer with both, a low cost offer, that is an industrial model and a contract with a different and constrained traveler, and a more qualitative TGV offer, with very high travel frequencies.” We could not describe best the segmentation of clientele and the confinement of the poor (to make it easier) in poorer trains. But of course things are not said this way. One of the main difficulties in analyzing the public railway service resides in the “lack of coherence between words and things” (Quessette 2016, p. 21).

3.3 Drain all the clientele that can be drained

For SNCF and “SNCF Mobilité”, on the commercial side, this clientele segmentation fundamentally amounts to draining all the clientele that can be drained (even on the intermodal way by launching an interurban coach company, car-renting between individuals or a car-sharing company). It is probably the reason why all trains will not become low cost. There would exist, what’s more, some sort of ceiling to the extension of low cost, just like in air travel where it would represent, according to some, 50% of the market ; because of social status, comfort or convenience of correspondence, some parts of the clientele do not wish to use flights or train that are low cost. Coming out of the Board of directors’ meeting of January 2016, SNCF Mobilité’s direction envisioned that classic TGV would tomorrow be “a little smaller than today, and OUIGO bigger”. SNCF would try to have 25% of its trains becoming low cost in 2020 (five times more than today).

Inversely, some parts of the low cost clientele that are not deprived from economic capital

estimate that one would have to be crazy to pay more than the minimum fare and they accept, for example for inhabitants of Ile-de-France, to depart from Marne-la-Vallée or Massy. Every little helps.

4. In the “side structure”, work and employment degraded

Other than economic and management reasons that we have just discussed, what motivated the birth of the low cost in rail transport is of the same nature than in air transport ; bypass resistances. Those goals are divided in two dimensions: a) fight the routine and relative facilities offered by “path dependency” in the firm’s management and the definition of its commercial strategy (North 190, Pierson 1994) and b) bypass the resistance of salaries that are turning against the weakening of their collective protections. If we should distinguish those two dimensions from an analytical point of view, the manager practical sense sees them both as intricate. We can consider by hypothesis that there is a functional relation between the productive act and the markets of both products and labor that, in a capitalist frame, makes them possible. This is what presumably meant a consultant, presented like one of the designers of the iDTGV model, when saying: “when we are trying to be innovative in a firm of this type (i.e. SNCF), we are blocked by the culture. The only way to act is to create a side structure” (told by Bouaziz 2012).

4.1 Making railway workers work differently

But the side structure isn’t destined to remain lateral and soon irradiates the parent company. “Should we get more inspiration from OUIGO, that has reduced its cost by 40% compared to ordinary TGV organization by making the railway workers work differently ?” asks Le Figaro with a false ingenuity?¹ On the same plan, the breakup of SNCF in two, then three EPIC (“network”, “mobilities” and “Head EPIC”), legacy from the railroad reform of July 2015, also obeys to the same logic, whatever be the circumstances that have favored its emergence.

Working in the railway low cost mainly supposes not to benefit from statutory protections of SNCF Railroad workers, except for train conductors, train controllers and maintenance in technical center, to the best of our knowledge. In this regard, firms or side low cost railway companies do not distinguish themselves from subcontractors (security, cleaning, welcome, etc.) whose primary vocation (but not exclusive) is to bypass the advantages often conquered by the workers of the main company, in this case the SNCF.

iDTGV is a great illustration of the weakening of closed labor markets (economists would say internal (Doeringer 1967; Doeringer & Piore 1971) of railroad workers by low cost initiatives. This entity functioned with very little directly employed personnel: 80 employees and 1200 providers (Bouaziz 2012). “The firm is using resources that are all located outside of its perimeter”. Thus, exterior providers are operating its booking system and its customer service. It was the same for ticket control, which was done before the train departure by a provider society. In 1992, less than half of iDTGV’s permanent employees came from SNCF (ibidem).

On board of iDTGV, “supervisors” and “barristas” (responsible for food and beverages) were not iDTGV employees (in fact, railway food and beverages have been subcontracted

¹ <http://premium.lefigaro.fr/societes/2016/01/22/20005-20160122ARTFIG00349-les-petits-prix-plombent-les-benefices-de-la-sncf.php>



for a very long time). Personnel characteristics are very telling. In iDTGV's headquarters, "beside direction functions, there is only one market cell that analyses live the prices of the competition (essentially air transport) so that the fares remain competitive".

In OUIGO branch, personnel are "SNCF agents that are sworn and certified by the Republic prosecutor to check for contraveners' identity." In order to save on workers' costs, workers affected to OUIGO come back home as often as possible, in order to spare the famous RHR (Rest out of Residence), also called "sleepovers", that make the employer give bonuses and pay for a collective house or a hotel room.

Controllers also have seen their mission evolve with rotations between long days on board and shorter ones, dedicated to "platform controls" of tickets before departure, and regular formations "integrated" to work planning, according to the Head of "SNCF Traveller"². A controller in OUIGO explained that he was wearing the uniform of this branch and not the one of its original employer SNCF, but that accepting to work for OUIGO opened the perspective of an accelerated career. "In principle, becoming controller on TGV is only possible after some experience as a controller on most classic lines (TER, Intercités). But by applying on OUIGO, we can become ASCT (Agents of commercial train service) (which means controller) on fast train lines without waiting for the end of our careers. And honestly, working on Transilien wasn't my thing. Working on OUIGO gives me more responsibility and more bonuses" (interview, May 15th 2017). One couldn't say better that the aim is to jostle traditional promotion rules based on experience, even though they remain - whether we like it or not - the most objective criterion for personnel evaluation. On the controller's side, they have seen additional tasks added, like "taking the train to cleaning" when their ordinary TGV colleagues have "jockeys" taking care of this function according to the CFDT general secretary for conductors (FGAAC CFDT). For the time, the most significant seems to be that low cost has effects on workers, technical centers, those that the client never sees. "Maintenance of OUIGO trains is faster, is only done by night and is centralized on the Gerland (Lyon) technical center and its 400 railroad workers" (some parts of the maintenance is also done in Tourcoing (Kestel and Larue 2016). The acceleration of train cleaning tends to multiply by two their monthly exploitation, from 40-45 kilometers by month to 80. Besides recruiting non-statutory personnel, employed by other firms than SNCF, one of the most salient questions is relative to the extension of night work on technical centers (but night bonuses make it less unacceptable). Tomorrow, night work could extend to workers in charge of maintenance of ordinary TGV. A management teacher speaks of the managerial logic that ends up in "proposing worse working conditions to their employees" even though they "work longer" (Zilberberg, sd).

"Once those new practices, notably for equipment maintenance, have been implemented, I don't see why the direction would not try to enlarge them" declared a leader of the Unsa union to Les Echos. And the financial press indicates "with its low cost offer, SNCF aims at taking back some market sections to the road. But it also surely tries to use those changes to jostle its labor organization."³ "All the TGVs will not turn into OUIGOs", declared the Head of "SNCF travelers", who nonetheless confessed that SNCF wished to "take into account some good ideas developed by OUIGO in order to generalize them on TGVs":

(<http://www.lavoixdunord.fr/economie/tgv-ouigo-une-organisation-du-travail-aux-couts-resserres-ia0b0n3284093>). All is said.

² http://lexpansion.lexpress.fr/actualites/1/actualites/tgv-ouigo-une-organisation-du-travail-aux-couts-resserres_1755834.html

³ https://www.lesechos.fr/05/06/2012/lesechos.fr/0202097879442_avec-son-tgv-low-cost--la-sncf-veut-aussi-tester-de-nouvelles-pistes-de-productivite.htm#Dud72A011Yq1cWyX.99

5. Conclusion

Commercial strategies of SNCF Mobilités and the answers brought back from the clientele, forced (or not) to escape from high prices if it wishes to travel, have amounted to those incontestable truths: a) little by little, low cost according to SNCF is getting more and more degraded. In its “Eurostar Snap” or “TGV pop” versions, the business model (according to marketers) rests on the idea that the train will only leave if enough people on the internet have declared themselves interested. Could we imagine less consideration for the clientele called “entry level”? b) The implementation of low cost is an experimentation field for some dispositions that are then extended to all transport products, whether they be rail or road, by the great public railway firm, something that Kestel and Larue (2016) show very well by studying OUIBUS in parallel with OUIGO.

The multimodal policy of SNCF aims at instilling the idea that competition is the source of price reduction in transports, when public investment and most notably a taking up of the debt by public authority would be a surer and preferable alternative in order to lessen the price of the kilometer traveled in train. According to a transport lawyer: “generalization of low cost translates and shows the emergence of a precarious lifestyle, and an existence that is subdued to the laws of marketing. The buying power gained by this service does not put the client-user at the heart of the public service, because of buying without power” (Quessette 2016, p. 23). And finally it is the idea of public service “à la française” (Brouté, 2016) itself that is mined by those commercial initiatives.

In a press conference, the President of SNCF gave his conception of the client. “I am sure that low cost will be a great success in railways.” “Our clients don’t care at all in what kind of transport they travel: they want price, price, price, simplicity and that it be fluid. After that, it’s better if it’s ecological. So we will never have air transport.”⁴ This evokes the simplistic vision that engineer Taylor had of worker Schmidt as only moved by money, indifferent to the organization of work, its working collectives and hierarchical situation. His only identity was the will to bring back, at whatever cost, more dollars home.

If the deregulation of commercial offer is not appealing for public service, we now have enough hindsight to see that it is not a good thing for railway workers. This offer wouldn’t have been possible without a weakening of union resistances and inversely the emergence of low cost, which as we have shown induces always more degraded performances, is an accelerator of this trend. Working conditions in the low cost are a model for the parent company. By paraphrasing M. Carolan (2015), we could say that on the social level, the cost of low cost is indeed very high!

We thus have sketched an outline that would have to be continued: under a commercial offer that seems at first sight to be inexpensive, is hidden a sound attack on the idea of equality supposed by French public service. Until the end of the 1960s, it relied - at least on traveler transportation - on the principle of fare equalization and the “obligation to transport”. Or, as explained by Quessette, “now it is the client that has to oblige SNCF in order to travel, and not the contrary.” For the lawyer specialized in transport, this bifurcation was made in 1971, when a decree allowed SNCF autonomy in management. From then on, the idea of “public service” had strongly lost its hold.

As for the client, the logic of immediate advantage in which low cost confines him isn’t without any risks: “public service liberates when low cost oppresses. Low cost symbolizes the fall of society and an important part of its population into precariousness.” (Quessette 2016, p. 25)

⁴ <https://investir.lesechos.fr/actions/actualites/france-la-sncf-anticipera-l-ouverture-a-la-concurrence-1561444.php#pTtOIyhabfSIwA3q.99>



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