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METROPOLIS

## How Paris Kicked Out the Cars

A city once remade for *voitures* has transformed itself into an unlikely utopia for cyclists and pedestrians. What can it teach us?

BY HENRY GRABAR

MARCH 30, 2023 • 5:45 AM

It is a humbling experience to try to learn any new skill as an adult. But there is a particular humiliation in learning to ride a bike. Not only because biking is something everyone already assumes you know how to do and the quintessential skill you never

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second-generation immigrants. All had to wait for months to enroll in the Bike School of the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, which is so oversubscribed that I was allowed to visit only on the condition I not write about it in French. Millan-Brun does not need the publicity. This is in part because she charges just 50 euros for a trimester's worth of Saturday morning lessons. But it is also because riding a bike has, rather suddenly, come to feel as Parisian as the Métro, and nearly as essential for getting around. To twist a French idiom, *vélo, boulot, dodo*—bike, work, sleep.

When Millan-Brun arrived in the '90s from Angoulême, in southwestern France, Paris had so few bicycle riders that they recognized one another. There were 3 miles of bike lanes; now there are more than 150. In October 2020, the number of daily bike trips likely surpassed 400,000—1 for every 5 inhabitants. And traffic in the city's busiest bike lanes has grown by more than 20 percent since. Each rush-hour light change at the intersection of Rue de Rivoli and Boulevard Sébastopol, in the center of the city, brings a bewildering, silent dance of scores of bicycles. Paris is learning to ride a bike.

It's part of a larger movement—spanning a half-century, two decades, or the mayoral tenure of the Socialist Anne Hidalgo, depending on whom you ask—to expel cars from the heart of the largest metropolitan area in the European Union. Car trips within Paris declined by almost 60 percent between 2001 and 2018, according to research from Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme, the city's planning arm; between the city and its suburbs, they have fallen by 35 percent. Car crashes have fallen by 30 percent; pollution has fallen too. A huge investment in bus corridors, tramways, and subways has caused mass transit ridership to jump by almost 40 percent in that time.

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ban on through traffic in the city center, including some pedestrianized areas. A reduction of street parking by half. A redesign of the ring road highway. A pedestrian-friendly renovation of the Champs-Élysées. Paris will become a cleaner, greener, cooler, quieter city, the proponents of these measures say. But detractors say it's on track to become a toy city—hostile to people who work with their cars, and increasingly inaccessible to residents beyond its walls.

Switching things up in France isn't always easy, as the past few months of pension-reform protests demonstrate. "It's not the street that decides," French President Emmanuel Macron has insisted, though that isn't always true. In 2018 Macron's proposed gas tax was met with the angry demonstrations of the Yellow Vests movement, as fed-up motorists cut the president down to size; he withdrew the proposal. Hidalgo's efforts in Paris, by contrast, have found surprisingly little opposition. Many people dislike her decisions, but there has been little organized protest—no one I spoke to could name a politician who incarnated the opposition.

For a city supposedly frozen in time, all this adds up to some undeniably dramatic changes, of which bicycles are only the most visible. A car-choked capital is transforming before our eyes, the dream of urbanites around the world who are eager to reassess the automobile's dominant role in the city. The question posed by these changes transcends the daily debate over bicycles and cars. It is nothing less than this: Who is the city for?

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In Paris, cars once represented a rising standard of living and industrial strength—the purring incarnation of the *Trente Glorieuses* after World War II. Spared damage during the war and growing rapidly afterward, French cities were particularly unprepared for rapid car ownership, but planners did everything they could. A postwar highway program wove a web of highways in the Paris region in the 1960s and '70s, including the highway on the banks of the Seine (completed in 1967, later the site of Princess Diana's fatal car crash) and the Périphérique ring road (completed in 1973), with arteries from the provinces converging on the city limits like spokes on a hub. The suburban highway network has continued to develop since.

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San Francisco. The French capital *still* has almost twice as many households with cars as Manhattan does.

But French planners got a later start than their American counterparts. Before Paris could be carved up by expressways, resistance mounted over the familiar objections that also characterized highway revolts in the United States: destruction, displacement, pollution, the oil crisis. These protests were nested in a trio of nascent trends: the rise of environmentalism, the historic preservation movement, and the early waves of gentrification.

By the 1990s, anti-car forces were playing offense. In 1996 came Paris Breathes, a series of periodic street closures on Sundays and holidays. In 1998 the city opened Métro Line 14—the first new subway in more than 60 years, and the first of a blitz of transit investments concentrated in and around the suburbs. In 2007 the city rolled out the bike-share program Vélib', which now offers 20,000 bicycles over 1,400 stations in and around the city. Car ownership in the region peaked in 1990 and has been declining since, even as the metro area population has grown by 10 percent.

Traffic around the Place de la République in 2014 (left) and 2023 (right). Google Maps and Henry Grabar

No one has taken credit, or blame, for this long evolution like Anne Hidalgo, the Socialist mayor now in her 9<sup>th</sup> year running the French capital. In 2017 she turned the city's central expressway into a permanent riverside pleasure path, and prevailed in a subsequent court battle over it. She has since picked up the pace with a kind of anti-car shock doctrine, taking advantage of a long transit strike at the end of 2019 and the COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020,

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been permanently closed to traffic in front of hundreds of schools. Beyond physical changes to the streets, Hidalgo has instituted a citywide speed limit of 30 kph (less than 20 mph), forced the city's ubiquitous motor scooters to pay for parking, and priced all-day street parking at 6 euros an hour in the city center.

But most of all, she and her deputies have explicitly embraced the controversial idea that the automobile's prominence in Paris is at the root of many of the city's problems—its frequent smog days, lack of green space, vulnerability to heat waves, noisy streets, geographic inequities. And thus fewer cars will allow the city to become a cleaner, quieter, cooler, fairer place. Hidalgo puts Sempé's whimsical bicycle cartoons on her greeting cards. She and her team are outspoken about cars in ways that, from the vantage point of a North American city, seem unadvisedly forthright. Speaking in a city meeting in April 2020, as Paris slumbered through its first COVID-19 lockdown, Hidalgo announced that the city would not be going back to the way it was before: "It is out of the question that we let ourselves get invaded by cars and pollution."

Hidalgo's Green Party deputy mayor for transportation, David Belliard, is even more strident: "The redistribution of public space is a policy of social redistribution," he told me in 2021. "Fifty percent of public space is occupied by private cars, which are used mostly by the richest, and mostly by men, because it's mostly men who drive, and so in total, the richest men are using half the public space. So if we give the space to walking, biking, and public transit, you give back public space to the categories of people who today are deprived."

A top official in New York or Chicago would never. But in Paris, this is how City Hall talks.

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**W**riters seeking to embellish their lamentation of a changing city often reach for a line by the 19<sup>th</sup> century poet Charles Baudelaire: "The old Paris is no more (the form of a city / Changes more quickly, alas, than a mortal's heart)."

But I found a different line on a mock street sign on the Rue Charles Baudelaire, in a middle-class neighborhood of the city's 12<sup>th</sup> arrondissement: "There, there's only order, beauty: abundant, calm, voluptuous." It feels like an auspicious quote to overlook one of the city's

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Along with the much-discussed “15-minute city,” one of Hidalgo’s big promises of her 2020 reelection campaign was to close streets to traffic outside the capital’s schools. She has done so in front of 168 schools since. All are blocked to cars by painted metal gates; some have been renovated with benches and planted with street trees.

Najdovski brought a prop, which he held up in front of us: a printout of photographs that showed the street as it was in the spring of 2020, when the moving lane was flanked with two rows of parked cars. For two blocks, a low fence ran the length of the sidewalk to stop kids from darting into traffic.

By the spring of 2021, the cars (and the fence) were gone. On both blocks, the pavement is now painted to suggest playground games. It was a wet winter day, and the street was playing its most basic role as a way to get from A to B. But Parisians were walking three abreast, wheeling strollers, bicycles, shopping carts, and suitcases, a rare thing in a city where many sidewalks are just a few feet wide. For residents with disabilities, he noted, it’s a clear improvement on the status quo. It seems to be a law of the car-free city that people, once given the opportunity, will immediately walk right down the middle of the street.

It’s also a nod to a past Paris, when streets functioned as raucous, multipurpose extensions to cramped and inadequate apartments: hubs for vendors, entertainment, and children’s play. This was true especially in the city’s poorer neighborhoods, despite the fact that they never got as much public infrastructure—fountains, benches, and toilets—as its richer ones.

Warnings about how dangerous the city’s traffic could be to pedestrians are almost as old. In 1823 the prefect of the Seine wrote that Paris “offers pedestrians nothing but an extremely arduous and even dangerous road network that seems to have been conceived exclusively for vehicles.” The solution at that time was to install sidewalks, which, according to the city’s chief civil engineer, might have benefits beyond safety: “Busy people, no longer having to focus their attention on which stones to walk on as they pick their way through the street, will devote all the more thought to their own interest, their work, and will enlarge their ideas accordingly.” Some ideas may have been enlarged, but the sidewalks were later pared down to make more room for cars in the streets.

Najdovski made two arguments for closing the streets in front of schools. The first was,

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Which leads to Najdovski's second argument for the school streets: planting trees. "Our cities are going to be harder and harder to live in with these repeat heat waves," he said, referring to the blistering summer of 2022, the hottest year in French history. "And if they're going to stay livable, you've got to be able to find refreshing green space near your house. If we want to plant trees in Paris, we don't have a lot of space. And if we want space, we're not taking it from the sidewalks. It has to be here, in the street, which was used before by cars. Do we want a city that feels like an oven, where we store private objects that weigh 1.5 tons and are immobile 95 percent of the time? Or do we open it up for everyone?" He gestured to a row of freshly planted hackberry trees in the old parking lane. They were scraggly, too small to shade the street. But they were a long-term investment.

I asked Najdovski how the city has managed to change the streets to new uses so quickly without arousing widespread opposition. "People voted for this!" he responded. "It was in our platform, it was a promise we made, and now we're following through on it."

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“Since about 10 years ago, we’ve noticed that we have fewer and fewer cars in our garages,” said Sébastien Fraisse, the head of Indigo France. “The traffic drops a few percentage points each year. Evidently, in the long term, it could have massive effects.” Even as the city has eliminated street parking and repriced meter rates to force commuters into garages, the trend toward fewer cars is overwhelming.

And yet his mood was buoyant. Fraisse and I were at a buzzy champagne reception organized by Indigo in the lobby of a climbing gym, below which lay one of the company’s garages. On this winter morning, it became the first underground garage in Paris to offer fast-charging stations for electric vehicles. With Europe set to ban new gas-powered vehicles in 2035, electrifying garages seems like a good bet—Indigo has also installed thousands of standard EV chargers in its French garages.

“There has been a slow erosion,” he continued, “and for us it’s been a few years now that we’ve been thinking about what else we could do with these spaces. Just the underground parking represents 14 Tour Montparnasse”—the city’s tallest building—“so you can imagine what’s available in terms of real estate. It’s enormous.” Last year, the company teamed up with the architect Dominique Perrault to launch an international architectural competition for the “car park of the future.”

Indigo was founded in 1964 to tackle a problem that was beginning to feel critical in cities from Washington to Tokyo: parked cars *everywhere*. In Paris, they marred the city’s famous public spaces, cluttering the Esplanade des Invalides, the Place Vendôme, the banks of the Seine, and the parvis in front of Notre Dame. The solution was underground garages, managed as a long-term concession by the new parking company.

Today Indigo operates 2,700 garages on three continents. But it’s here in Paris, where the company now manages more than a third of publicly accessible garage parking, that Indigo is beginning to develop a new underground commercial ecosystem. There are car repair shops, car rental offices, and click-and-collect lockers from Amazon. Larger-scale ventures the company is pioneering for lower levels include storage facilities and data centers. One private, non-Indigo garage has even been turned into a farm for mushrooms and endives.

Retrofitting parking is complicated, said Arnaud Viardin, Indigo’s director of partnerships.

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Indigo's underground real estate has few competitors. Hundreds of thousands of square feet are now dedicated to alternative uses across France, mostly in Paris. "Finding real estate under Place Vendôme, under Place Dauphine?" Fraisse put it to me, pointing to two of the capital's ritziest addresses. "We're capable of proposing square footage at prices that have nothing to do with what you'll find aboveground. Ten, 20, 50 times cheaper."

A few days later, I went out to Paris' western edge, in the shadow of the concrete soccer stadium where Kylian Mbappé and Lionel Messi play. Off-ramps from the ring road feed into a vast cobblestone traffic circle that rumbles under the passing tires.

Indigo's garage here contains about 600 parking spaces, but there used to be more. Down a level is the company's most ambitious adaptation to a city with fewer cars: a logistics hub for the grocery delivery company MonMarché. Mathieu Demond, MonMarché's head of development, met me where the rows of parked cars gave way to a cluster of electric cargo tricycles. These are not the jury-rigged e-bikes that deliver Chinese food in Manhattan. They are 9,000-euro (\$9,750) [Yoklers](#), made in Lyon. They have windshields and seats with backrests, and they can haul 200 pounds of merchandise in a rear storage compartment the size of a washing machine.

Demond pushed his way through a double-door air lock and into a series of chilly storerooms. Cooling fans hummed on the ceiling. Cardboard boxes stamped with QR codes sat on galvanized steel shelving in a kind of anti-market. There were no prices, no colorful labels, no deals. Demond, who has wild asparagus on his business card and knows when the last batch of Corsican clementines arrives for the year, pointed out a variety of things one doesn't usually see in a public parking garage—or a Stop and Shop, for that matter—tiny cockerels, boxes of oysters, pied de mouton mushrooms, kumquats, fresh tarragon, and, of course, a whole bank of cheeses. These had been cut and wrapped that morning at a MonMarché facility below the Invalides, inside Indigo's very first Parisian parking garage, adjacent to Napoleon's tomb.

For logistics clients, the value of Indigo's space is hard to beat. MonMarché is a spinoff of a larger French grocery chain, Grand Frais, whose stores are suburban big boxes with ample parking. "We had to find another solution for the Parisian market, which is the biggest," said Demond, slicing open the packing tape on a Styrofoam box of durian, the odoriferous East

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Paris in a casket hauled by a bike. There are a few explanations for this explosion, including subsidies for e-bikes, soul-sucking traffic, expansive bike infrastructure, and the fact that it is easier to hire (and insure) people who ride bikes than commercial drivers.

A representative from Stuart, one of Paris' heavyweight bicycle delivery companies, told me that bike trips shave five minutes off the average delivery time. Unaffected by the vagaries of traffic and parking, they are more dependable too. One [study of central London](#) concluded that electric cargo bikes make deliveries 60 percent faster than vans.

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“The biggest challenge is the perception of the service,” the company spokesperson wrote to me. “When Stuart first pitches to a client that his tour time can be reduced by 1.5 times due to route optimization and the ease of cycling, the client will often frown at first as he finds it hard to imagine that a vehicle that can carry 300 kg can be more efficient than a light commercial van which can carry 700 kg of goods.” Eventually though, they come

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A study from French researchers [projects](#) that 9 in 10 big-city deliveries could be accomplished by bicycle.

Back in the grocery warehouse garage, every few minutes a delivery worker took one whirring up the ramp of the garage at Porte de Saint-Cloud and out into the city's wealthy western neighborhoods, where grocery delivery is beginning to carve out market share from the traditional *petits commerces* and the bright-aisled supermarket. The service isn't profitable yet. But it is growing fast.

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In the park at Les Halles, I met Ibrahim Souaré next to his cargo tricycle. The 23-year-old delivers groceries for a third-party contractor that works with Monoprix, a kind of French Kmart. Like most delivery workers I spoke to, Souaré said he used and appreciated the city's bike infrastructure. Still, finishing the route isn't the whole job. Many clients, he's noticed, live on the high floors of buildings without elevators. Sometimes it feels as if his work is as much about carrying things up the stairs as getting them to people's front doors.

The good parts of the job include flexibility, independence, and being outside (except when it rains). On the other hand, Souaré makes a little over a thousand euros a month—well below the French minimum wage—and there is no hope of a raise. He lives with roommates in Bobigny, a suburb northeast of Paris and one of the poorest communities in France. It's hard work being on a bicycle seat all day. On his days off, he said, he rests up for the next shift. "When you're an immigrant," he said, "you've got to work. You want to eat? You don't want to sleep outside? It's obligatory."

His is a profile that's representative of the shift in bicycle delivery, which, until recently, was more or less thought of as a fun job for young people who liked riding bikes. Now it's a grueling, algorithm-driven trade practiced almost exclusively by recent immigrants, with routes that can lead all over town. The shift coincides with a broader rise in delivery, from e-commerce to restaurants to grocery, that was supercharged by the pandemic. Even in a city famous for its public life, delivery is now ubiquitous. Couriers with rented e-bikes and insulated bags from Picard (the frozen supermarket) zoom down the new bike lanes.

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business is slow. Their status is vulnerable to the whims of a restaurant or a customer, who can push their rating down with a click.

In a study of more than 800 Parisian delivery workers published last fall, researchers found that more than 9 in 10 are men. More than 8 in 10 were born abroad. Most are under 30. More than half ride bikes, with a third on mopeds and a few in cars. Most worry about the danger of traffic. In all these respects, Monoprix delivery worker Souaré—who arrived in France from Conakry, Guinea, three years ago—is typical. And in one more: 2 in 3 survey respondents told the researchers they had held the job for less than a year. Souaré is at eight months.

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**Y**ou don't have to go far to find someone who hates all of these developments. Everyone is fed up with the unending construction, roads that change direction overnight, the light-running of cyclists racing against delivery software. The more conservative western neighborhoods have done their best to resist bike lanes. Left Bank art galleries protested the city's plans for a no-through-traffic zone in the city center; now the proposed area may stop at the Seine. The national government won't help develop a traffic camera system, like the congestion pricing ring in London, to enforce the low-emissions zone, and the police are wary to let the city make more substantial changes to the big boulevards. After Hidalgo instituted parking fees in September, moped riders rode through the city in protest. Pedestrians routinely complain about the rudeness of bike and scooter riders. Bus riders complain that the city is leaving them behind, with just one clogged lane for taxis and mass transit on the Rue de Rivoli, versus the rest of the roadway for bicycles. Traffic declines every year, but (or perhaps relatedly) you will not find a driver in Paris who likes Anne Hidalgo.

At a brasserie near the southern edge of the city, I met Thierry Véron, the president of the Parisian small-business federation FACAP. After Hidalgo closed the Rue de Rivoli to private cars in 2020, Véron was one of 10 business group leaders to write to the city and express their concern with the mayor's decision-making, which they said would crowd mass transit, limit suburban access to the city, especially at night, and penalize older people and others with reduced mobility. "Don't forget that Paris must stay an attractive global capital. clean

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| [Rue de Rivoli in 2014 \(left\) and 2023 \(right\)](#). Google Maps and Henry Grabar

Three years and one coronavirus pandemic later, the results are mixed. Mass transit ridership is now about where it was in 2019. The city has made up its pandemic job loss and now has 90,000 more jobs than before the lockdowns. A French commercial real estate agent told me a joke: What month do merchants complain the least? February, because it has the fewest days. But, Véron said, businesses in car-free areas are hurting. In 2021 his group showed that while sales activity was basically even with 2019 levels nationally, it had declined by 20 percent in Paris. He conceded that it's difficult to blame the city's new mobility politics amid the coronavirus, the related drop in international tourism, and the rise of e-commerce. Still, his conversations with members make clear that they are suffering both with suppliers and with clients. The day we spoke, news broke that the beloved BHV department store, which sits on the newly car-free Rue de Rivoli, was being sold. Its numbers have suffered since the street was pedestrianized.

“We all want to lower the number of cars in Paris. But if our clients can't reach us, we're impacted. If our suppliers have to go to point B from point A”—Véron ran his index fingers frantically across a round-top table—“and you're obliged to do a whole circuit, a whole labyrinth, high and low, delivery men have big problems.” Delivery costs are rising in the city center, and he was not convinced by the potential of bicycles. “Do you know much freight gets delivered [in the region] every year? Twenty million tons. Imagine how many cargo bikes that is.”

Véron does not come across as a partisan so much as a problem-solver. His members—less bakers and butchers and more stores that sell clothing, furniture, musical instruments, and

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**H**istorian Mathieu Flonneau, the author of a dozen books on Paris and the automobile, is sympathetic to this point of view. “*Canceling* automobile culture in Paris”—he said the first word in English—“is not coherent with the history and the part the automobile has played in the capital.” Paris, he reminded me, was an auto manufacturing city. The rise of the car was intertwined with the social mobility of the tens of thousands of workers who toiled in auto plants—not an imposition on the city but a literal product of it. Deindustrialization has come for the plants. But it has not, in Flonneau’s view, severed the link between the automobile, workers, and the regional economy.

Flonneau does not see anything positive about the precarious, two-wheeled workforce that flits about the city on bicycles to cater takeout orders for millennial tech workers. Or in the chaotic interactions that have come to characterize the city’s hastily installed bike infrastructure. (Hidalgo has promised to unveil new “[rules of the road](#)” this summer to govern unruly cyclists, e-scooters, and other new forms of mobility.) He suggested that less traffic in Paris comes at the expense of more traffic in the suburbs. “Ninety-five percent of traffic in Paris isn’t people joyriding. It’s not people having fun getting into traffic jams. It’s people who need their vehicle, who work with it. People who need many steps in the day, with their kids in the morning, with errands, older people. They now find themselves excluded from this inclusive city. It’s an incredible paradox,” he said.

This specific critique, that Hidalgo is improving Paris for those lucky enough to live there car-free at the expense of the region’s car-dependent suburban majority, echoes other cities’ debates over undoing the urbanism of the automobile. The right-wing regional president, Valérie Pécresse, sued Hidalgo over the riverfront highway conversion. (She lost.) The administration does not deny that its policies might be decreasing suburbanites’ access to the city. “The city cannot be a place in which we say everyone can access at the same time coming from outside,” Najdovski said when I put the question to him. “We make choices weighing things and trying to give residents a good quality of life. And business—if it was bad for business, we wouldn’t do it.”

Hidalgo’s administration points to fewer vehicle trips between Paris and its suburbs as evidence its strategy is working, but this could also be understood as the hardening of that old barrier—physical, metaphysical—that divides the capital and the *banlieue*. There’s a lot less parking for suburban families driving in for shopping and a show. And it is extremely

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who founded the capital's Pedestrian Rights organization in the 1960s, once recounted his surprise at the group's troubled recruitment efforts: "We began by defending the humble people, those who didn't have a car. We thought we'd recruit from the most modest backgrounds. But it was exactly the opposite that happened. Our organization became 'aristocratic.' " The capital's poor may not have had cars, but they sure as hell wanted them.

Parisian elected officials deny that the city is some elite bastion; incomes may be higher here than in the suburbs, but so is the rate of poverty. Furthermore, many suburban communities are pursuing the exact same changes in their own neighborhoods. The Socialist president of Seine-Saint-Denis, the department that abuts Paris on the northeast and counts as the country's poorest (excluding France's overseas departments), is an ally of Hidalgo and a big proponent of bicycle infrastructure.

Above all, reducing the outsize role of Paris in the region has been the goal of metropolitan planners for decades. "We already have centralities outside of Paris," Paul Lecroart, an urbanist at the regional planning association, said recently. "You have to imagine a polycentric system, where each center plays its role in the setting of an orchestra." That's one reason the investment for next year's Olympic Games is centered in Paris' northern suburbs. Planners, expecting that athletes, spectators, and workers will use bikes, are building special lanes to connect Olympic sites.

What say do suburbanites deserve in core-city politics? Do Parisians need to make sacrifices for their neighbors in the suburbs? These are political questions that can't be solved with traffic counts or parking studies. Flonneau argues that residents of neighboring cities deserve a say in the fate of major infrastructure—like pedestrianizing the Seine highway or scrapping half the capital's parking spaces—and that Hidalgo should not rule alone. There is historical precedent for this: Paris didn't even have its own mayor until 1977. Even within Paris, the only plebiscite on Hidalgo's anti-car policies will be an April vote on the rather frivolous question of whether dockless scooters should be permitted. And her reelection in 2020? It was with the vote of 1 in 10 Parisians. Besides: "Paris," Flonneau said, "is too important to be left to a local election."

To some extent, the changes that Flonneau decries—the home-price run-up, the deindustrialization, the Uberization of work, the recent population decline—have happened

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population than in London, Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin, Hamburg, Milan, or Rome. Hidalgo's voters really can ride a bike to get where they need to go.

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It was on a beach vacation several years ago that Abi Tall finally had enough. A long summer day was winding down, and Tall's husband, daughters, and friends sat on the sand, waiting for the sun to sink into the sea. They had all brought bikes, except for Tall. She had to leave before sunset to catch the last bus back into town. "When we got back, I said, 'I swear I'm going to learn.'"

Her first attempt to ride a bike was in the Bois de Vincennes, the big park on the capital's eastern edge, with the help of her 15-year-old daughter, who had learned to ride a bike in school. Now it was mom's turn, and the teenager was frustrated. "I'm going to see on the internet if you can learn, because you are hopeless," she told her. A year later, Tall was spending her Saturday mornings with Anne-Lise Millan-Brun on that peculiar blend of fine gravel that makes Parisian parks perfect for *pétanque*—and for learning to ride a bike.

When I joined them recently, the trimester was coming to a close. There were about as many students as monitors—the volunteers, including some recent graduates, who help out. The students' numbers had dwindled as the quicker studies dropped out, and those who remained had been, like Tall, among the last to figure it out. Tall, who grew up in Senegal, said it was not part of her upbringing for little girls to learn to ride bikes. She didn't even know the French word for bike seat, *selle*, when she enrolled, and when she fell behind the rest of the class, she got so frustrated she burst into tears.

But then, one day, it clicked: She spun around the Parc Floral, screaming with delight. She cycled in the Bois de Vincennes with her daughter. "It was too cool," she said. "It was my *dream* to ride with my daughters." She bought a bike in a small town outside the city and hauled it back on the train. On her lunch break, she biked around the little park near her house.

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Today Millan-Brun was leading Tall, and the rest of the women, through the final frontier: onto the streets of Paris. Bicycle infrastructure is often criticized as an amenity for young men, and it's true that many early bike lanes are used by the very people who felt comfortable riding without them. A decade ago, this was the case in Paris as well. But the city has built so much bike infrastructure that it is possible to go nearly anywhere without sharing a busy street with cars. And Paris has encouraged the adoption of e-bikes, which has drawn in older people and parents, whose tyke-hauling cargo bikes are ubiquitous. Since 2010, Paris has offered to cover a third of the cost of a resident's e-bike purchase. In 2020 more than 20,000 people—1 in 100 Parisians—took advantage. Users of the city's Vélib' bike share program were 44 percent female in 2020, up from 37 percent in 2019.

That meant that Millan-Brun could lead her students on a 90-minute ramble that rarely put us in contact with fast-moving traffic. When we did face a busy street, she had the group pause. "I have a declaration to make. Seine-Saint-Denis"—the suburban department we had crossed into—"is the department of the victims of toxic masculinity. It's full of men who think their virility is under the gas pedal"

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the sidewalk. “We suffered today, girls—we struggled.” Someone asked if it was the last day. “No,” Tall said. “But it was our first real bike ride.” 📌

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