

# The difficulty of the agenda setting of industrial odours in Greater Lyon included (1960-2003)

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The year 2003 saw the problem of industrial odours included in the public agenda in Greater Lyon with the creation of a network of ‘noses’ throughout the agglomeration with the aim of monitoring the evolution of odours. From the existence of this system, we question the construction of the problem and its treatment since the 1960s, the era of the political institutionalisation of ‘the environment’. The main finding of research highlights a slow awareness of the problem of odours in the public agenda. If, like the 19<sup>th</sup> century texts on listed establishments, the 1961 “law concerning measures against atmospheric pollutions and odours” clearly shows odours as a public concern, it does not however pave the way to a policy of measures against odours, either in France or in Greater Lyon. The issues are dealt with individually by the Préfecture administration, the authority responsible for the problems of pollutions and the registered establishments, when complaints are received or specific incidents of bad smells occur.

Odours do not mobilize the population and mostly appear in individual and irregular complaints. It is thus difficult to put forward collective dynamics in the display of discomfort. Consensually considered by the players in charge of dealing with it as not representing a health ‘risk’, the problem does not have priority. Constantly played down as mere discomfort, odours thus appear as less justified than other problems such as ‘real’ pollution<sup>1</sup> which has to be tackled. To this can be added the complexity of producing a measure of odours in figures, questioning the conventional assertion that dealing with a problem involves measuring it. Without direct appeal, not dangerous and unmeasured, odours seemed to be doomed to silence. This situation is also aggravated by the assertion of the industrialist consensus for over a century which allows problems of pollution to be dealt with by the industrialists themselves<sup>2</sup>. However, despite these obstacles to recognition and treatment of the problem, it slowly moved towards being included in the local public agenda. We will try to show this evolution by highlighting three significant moments of public awareness in the period concerned.

The first wave of awareness in Greater Lyon is to be seen in the winter of 1970-1971. Mysterious, unaccustomed odours were present in whole areas for several months. A large number of complaints were made to the Mairie and the Préfecture. Unlike the ordinary complaints concerning the registered establishments, they concern a generalised smell, and do not belong to a specific industry. The administrators in the Préfecture offices and the inspectors of registered establishments found themselves in an unaccustomed situation for which no procedure existed. Controversy sprang up between the inhabitants and the authorities, publicized by the local press<sup>3</sup>. The Préfet found himself obliged to intervene faced with the public extent of the problem and decided to carry out a survey on all the city in order

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<sup>1</sup> In an article in the daily newspaper *Le Progrès* of 1 February 1971, the Préfet of the Rhône explains that “odours do not kill but they cause discomfort” and that “it is necessary to distinguish between real pollution and the other”.

<sup>2</sup> In the same strain, the Rhône Préfet wrote to the mayor of Vénissieux in a letter of 26 June 1994 that odours must remain “an area of freedom” for industrialists. Records of the Environmental department of the Vénissieux Mairie.

<sup>3</sup> In particular, the newspaper *Le Progrès*.

to identify the company or companies responsible. This process could have led to the problem of odours being durably included in the public agenda. However, once enthusiasm had died down again, odours no longer appeared as an issue worthy of interest<sup>4</sup>, or only periodically when there were incidents of smells. They were thus not “a problem”, but rather what John Kingdom calls “a condition”<sup>5</sup>, a state of affairs against which nothing can be done. Finally, the affair was silenced and forgotten once again. This can be called a form of “agenda denial”<sup>6</sup>.

During the 1980s and 1990s, several isolated initiatives revealed a growing preoccupation with odours for some actors. Firstly, the official agency monitoring the quality of air COPARLY made an inventory of the complaints about odours and then made a survey with the local Mairies on this subject. At the same time, a space of reflection was set up, including local authorities and members of Lyon industries, for exchanges of knowledge from experiments carried out in other regions or by industrialists with a view to listing and reducing odours. Finally, a local association of a neighbourhood particularly exposed to the industrial odours of Vénissieux (South-East of Lyon) took action and succeeded in alerting the municipal council. It was during this second period that the first idea of networks of noses appeared in Greater Lyon, without going any further at this stage. Compared with the previous stage, a step forward had been made in the process of recognition on the agenda. Those concerned then tried to enter the competition to define the “problem”. However these initiatives remained relatively isolated and the actors were not sufficiently skilled in coalition to be strong enough to impose the problem.

Finally the third period of action corresponds to the significant event of the odour of 16 May 2002, covering a large area and being strongly smelt by the inhabitants. Following the movement of anxiety of Lyon people and their repeated telephone calls, the Rhône Préfet commissioned the Secrétariat Permanent pour la Prévention des Pollutions Industrielles (SPPPI) to find a solution which would make it possible to identify odours and their sources in order to avoid things getting out of hand in the future. In this way, the RESPIRALYON system was born, based on a network of noses involving about 200 inhabitants of Greater Lyon, each situated in a geographical grid and evaluating the odours from their homes. Odours are then shown on maps of Greater Lyon which can be consulted on the system’s website. This systems allows the inhabitants access to a certain “measure” of the problem. However, once the source of an odour is identified, negotiations take place between the authorities members of the SPPPI and industrialists, via the service des mines de la Direction Régionale de l’Industrie de la Recherche et de l’Environnement (DRIRE).

In the end, it is truly the emergence of a system and apparently the successful inclusion of the problem on the agenda. However, odours still generate little action on the part of the inhabitants, the service is not always known and few repercussions of complaints can be seen. Under the cover of a public service, a priori open, the decisions in the form of negotiations continue to be carried out in an obscure way by the same actors as before : the engineers of the Mines (DRIRE) and the industrialists. Considering these characteristics, it would seem that Greater Lyon’s odour policy has reached a stage of what might be called “semi-institutionalization” or partial success in having it included in the public agenda.

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<sup>4</sup> Odours are never mentioned in events concerning the Environment such as the Quinzaine de l’Environnement in Lyon, and are not mentioned in the documents of ecology-oriented associations or policies.

<sup>5</sup> John W. KINGDON, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public policies*, second edition, Boston, Longman, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Roger W. COBB, Marc H. ROSS, *Cultural strategies of agenda denial. Avoidance, Attack, and Redefinition*, University press of Kansas, 1997.