

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Giving up control: Devaluation of railway work in Luxembourg's fare-free public transportation system?

Sonja Faaren Ruud 

Geneva Graduate Institute, Geneva, Switzerland

Correspondence

Sonja Faaren Ruud

Email: sonja.ruud@graduateinstitute.ch

Abstract

Luxembourg's implementation of a nationwide fare-free public transport (FFPT) policy in March 2020 transformed the everyday work and imaginaries of railway accompaniment personnel who had previously been responsible for fare control. It also sparked debate among both workers and the public about the value of their work. Dialoguing with discursive uses of *devaluation* as a shorthand for specific hopes and fears about the future of transit work, this article explores railway workers' experiences and perceptions of the transition and proposes a new framework for conceptualizing devaluation. Drawing from ethnographic research with the Luxembourgish national railway agency, Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Luxembourgeois (CFL), this article interrogates what it means for accompaniment personnel to give up the task of fare control by tracing the effects on their work rhythms, interactions with passengers, sense of authority, and visibility. In the absence of fare control, accompaniment personnel continue to produce value for a broader public and largely see their own work as valuable, yet there has been a rupture in the social validation of their labor, which produces feelings of devaluation.

KEYWORDS

devaluation, fare-free public transport, mobilities, value, work

INTRODUCTION

The announcement in November 2018 that Luxembourg would be the first country in the world to enact nationwide fare-free public transport (FFPT) garnered much media attention and provoked impassioned responses nationally and internationally (Karasz, 2018). Proponents expressed excitement about the social and environmental transformations it may bring as well as the image that it paints of Luxembourg as an innovative nation with a high standard of living. From the beginning, the government—which negotiated the policy for trains, buses, and trams providing public transit services, including those operated by private companies—emphasized that it was first and foremost a social measure, designed to make mobility more accessible and equitable. However, many residents and transport workers voiced concerns that fare abolition would increase dirtiness, vandalism, and crime in public transportation spaces.¹

Among employees of the national railway agency, Société Nationale des Chemins de fer Luxembourgeois (CFL), the uncertainty engendered by this announcement was particularly pronounced. They hadn't been consulted before the decision was made and were surprised to read about this job-altering change in the news at the same time as the general public, as I learned through interviews with transport sector administrators. The approximately 300 railway accompaniment personnel—referred to within the agency as *personnel d'accompagnement de train* (PATs)—who were responsible for fare control on the nation's six railway lines were particularly worried about their job security, a concern that was widely reported in local media. Railway work in Luxembourg, which typically confers the desirable status of civil servant, has long been associated with a great deal of job stability and social status and is a middle-class

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2023 The Authors. *Anthropology of Work Review* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Anthropological Association.

professional career (Moreau, 2022). CFL, in turn, is frequently ranked among the most attractive employers in the country (Hennebert, 2021). In this context, concerns about the future of PATs' work reflect fears that this stability and status may no longer be guaranteed.

Following the government's announcement, Luxembourg's two railway workers' unions released statements denouncing FFPT, contending that removing fares would lead to a "devaluation" of transportation services and work ("*Le Landesverband ne veut pas des transports gratuits*," 2018; Welsch, 2018). One union spokesperson cited a common Luxembourgish expression: "That which costs nothing is also worth nothing."² While never fully defined, the threat of devaluation is commonly invoked in the debate around transit work under FFPT in Luxembourg to stand in for a variety of concerns about workers' futures. Most often employed to signify fears about a lack of respect by the public without a fare to regulate entry, devaluation is also conjured by workers to describe a potential shift in occupational identity due to the loss of certain functions. Simultaneously, I find in my conversations with transport personnel that the term *devaluation* is sometimes used euphemistically as a proxy for the possibility of job loss, immediately or in the near to mid-range future. Given this range of discursive uses, this article foregrounds the notion of devaluation to unpack workers' concerns vis-à-vis their subsequent experiences of fare abolition and anthropological value theory and develop a novel analytical framework centered around the concept.

Responding to transport workers' concerns about the transition, Luxembourg's Minister for Mobility, François Bausch, held a press conference on January 21, 2019. In addition to announcing the implementation date for the policy (March 1, 2020) and cost (EUR 41 million per year), the minister issued a guarantee that no railway personnel would lose their jobs and that employees' roles would be "expanded" rather than reduced.³ "CFL agents have five missions: two of them will be dropped [selling and controlling tickets], yes, but not the most important ones," he contended. "Guaranteeing the quality of service, keeping order in the stations and onboard the trains, information services, all that will remain. And other missions will be added" (Wiessler and Brucker, 2019). Despite these reassurances, the moment of transition was met with uncertainty among railway employees, especially PATs. What would the loss of fare control mean for their everyday work rhythms, their relationships with passengers, and the future of their work? Would such changes provoke the devaluation predicted by unions or rather expand employees' roles, as Minister Bausch suggested?

In this article, I argue that the perceived rupture experienced by railway accompaniment personnel has little to do with removing the cost of using public transportation; rather it stems from the loss of functions, interactions, authority, and visibility that fare control entails. In centering a term that is frequently used in debates around FFPT, I do not take specific discursive uses of devaluation for granted, but rather take seriously workers' fears and feelings of being valued less and unpack diverse contributing factors. In this vein, I explore how railway workers experience and think about transformations in their work, focusing on what it means for them to give up the task of fare control. Exploring these transformations in turn contributes to expanding our framework for conceptualizing devaluation.

Before delving deeper into this analysis, it is useful to situate the case of FFPT in Luxembourg in relation to some of the social, political, and economic tensions which characterize life in the grand duchy. Around the world, Luxembourg is largely known as a very small, very rich country. With a national territory of just under 1000 square miles and a population of 645,397 in 2022 ("*La croissance de la population reboostée*," 2022), it was recently ranked the wealthiest country in the world in terms of gross domestic product (Ventura, 2022). In a little over one and a half centuries, Luxembourg transformed from an impoverished agricultural society to a steel-driven industrial economy and then to a global financial hub. Today, neoliberal policies aiming to increase national wealth coexist with extensive social services financed by high taxes. Beyond FFPT, the current government coalition—comprising the Green Party, Democratic Party, and Socialist Party—has enacted a range of progressive social policies (including same-sex marriage and steps toward the legalization of marijuana), despite the social and political conservatism of a significant portion of the voting population.

Though Luxembourg is often described in sociological and policy contexts as having a high level of "social cohesion"—a term used to measure integration of and consensus between a society's members on various levels—there is also great deal of social and spatial stratification along class, geographic, ethnic, and linguistic lines.⁴ With non-Luxembourgish nationals constituting nearly half of the total resident population and cross-border commuters accounting for almost half of the country's workforce, public transportation constitutes one of the few spaces where different sectors of the population coincide.⁵

It is in the context of these social dynamics and tensions that railway accompaniment personnel navigate fears and feelings of devaluation. To investigate devaluation, this article draws primarily from ethnographic research conducted in the context of a broader investigation of Luxembourg's transition to FFPT between 2018 and 2022, including interviews with railway accompaniment personnel and time spent shadowing them, which entailed accompanying them on the job and observing their daily routines, interactions, and practices. After some theoretical and methodological reflections, I explore how PATs' working rhythms have changed with the reduction in control responsibilities. Next, I consider the act of controlling fares as a structured form of social interaction, the loss of which changes workers' modes of relating to passengers. I then go on to examine how a loss of fare control is linked to perceptions of a loss of PATs' disciplinary role juxtaposed with a perceived reorientation toward customer service. Finally, I discuss the comparative visibility of fare control versus PATs' other functions.

Beyond Luxembourg, this case study sheds light on bigger questions pertaining to both public transportation and work. Not only is it relevant in the context of ongoing debates about FFPT around the world, which often exclude transit workers, but it also relates to other developments in the realm of mobility work that potentially devalue workers and their labor, including driverless vehicles (Bissell et al., 2020), the privatization of public transportation systems (Fleming, 2016), and the continued rise of ridesharing and the eponymous trend toward Uberization (del Nido, 2021). These phenomena correspond to broader issues in the anthropology of work, including the automation of tasks previously performed by humans (Collins, 2018) and the perpetuation of neoliberal labor management strategies (Taha, 2020). In this light, the concept of devaluation proposed here is designed to travel, to illuminate and articulate how workers experience undesired transformations in the nature and social recognition of their labor.

(DE)VALUATION

On the surface, concerns about the devaluation of transit labor resulting from fare removal seem to indicate a capitalist framework equating cost and value, whereas FFPT is often (re)presented as a refutation of such logics. At a conference in Luxembourg following the announcement of FFPT, political scientist Paul Ariès (2018) conceptualized the policy through the duality of “*gratuité*,” a French noun denoting the state of being cost-free, “versus capitalism.”⁶ Indeed, the removal of fares and fare control is arguably a significant step away from the capitalist valuation logics prevalent in many mobility systems (Sheller, 2018; Urry, 2000). In addition to reducing the capital-generating functions of workers, FFPT lowers the financial barrier of entry for users and eliminates the risk of fines and other disciplinary measures incurred by refusal or inability to pay (Ray, 2018).

Yet FFPT is not free from efforts to quantify value in capitalist terms. Even without fares, many researchers and practitioners in the transportation sector invoke the economic concept of the “value of time” (Small, 2012, 2). Quite unlike a labor theory of value, this framework posits an inverse relationship between value and the amount of time it takes to consume something. The labor of those who produce transportation systems and services is conspicuously absent from this calculation. Furthermore, some view FFPT in Luxembourg as potentially generating capital, factoring into a nation-branding campaign aimed at attracting tourists, finance professionals, and high-net-worth individuals (Barthelemy, 2015).

As boundaries between capitalism and alternatives to capitalism blur such that neither serves as an adequate label for Luxembourg's FFPT policy, I turn to David Graeber's anthropological theory of value. I flip Graeber's interpretation of value as “the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality” (2001, xii) to consider devaluation as the sudden or gradual loss of such actions, meaning, or incorporation into a broader social milieu. Values, as Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing illustrates, are not fixed but fluid (2015), and like the specter of anti-value identified by David Harvey as inherent in logics of value-as-capital (2018), the possibility of devaluation is already built in as a feature of value-in-action. Because value, in this latter sense, involves both creative action and social recognition, a rupture in either of these processes can result in feelings of devaluation.

In this vein, it is also critical to consider the structural inequalities in how societies value different types of actions, including the often gendered distinction between productive and reproductive labor (Weeks, 2011) and the frequent undervaluation of care labor (Sabelis, 2001). These hierarchies can exist not only between jobs, but within them, as I demonstrate with railway accompaniment personnel. Because care-related tasks are frequently valued less than other functions, an increased proportion of this type of work can produce an impression of devaluation even when the overall quantity of time and energy expended remains the same. Similarly, a sense of being devalued can arise without a concrete reduction in workers' job security, salary, or status.

Devaluation processes can take a wide variety of forms, but like valuation processes, they are deeply social and often highly affective—frequently marked by the feeling that one's actions are no longer valued by others to the same degree as they once were. In the case of the Luxembourgish railway, accompaniment personnel's work still creates value for others, yet the recognition of this value by others is ruptured, and this broken link in the chain produces feelings of devaluation. Though the fare-free system no longer requires the validation of train tickets, the social validation of railway personnel's work remains a crucial yet often overlooked part of the equation.

METHODS

Before researching the transition to FFPT, I used Luxembourg's railway system as a passenger on and off for nearly ten years, first as a tourist and later as a resident of the country. In this time, my interactions with accompaniment personnel were typically brief and transactional: I purchased or presented tickets for inspection and occasionally asked questions about timetables, stops, or maintenance work. Yet this contact was also a consistent part of my train experience and nearly always included the mutual exchange of hello's and thank you's with workers.

Following these experiences as a passenger and months of participant observation in public transportation spaces, conducting interviews with accompaniment personnel was my first opportunity to see the passenger–PAT relationship from the other side. Gaining access to workers was a complex bureaucratic procedure that entailed working closely with Thierry, a CFL administrator who oversees accompaniment personnel, and negotiating an official contract with the railway agency.⁷ This granted me extensive access to railway workers and spaces. I was even given a key, which I was allowed to bring home with me at night, to the building that houses the CFL personnel training room (where interviews were conducted).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 12 PATs, all of whom had volunteered in response to a call for participation transmitted by Thierry. Like the larger body of accompaniment personnel, these interlocutors represent a range of class and educational backgrounds. Some had joined the agency quite recently, whereas others had been there for decades; most expressed a desire to work for the railway until retirement. Several of these workers, like many Luxembourgish railway employees, have family members who also work or worked for CFL. Overall, I interviewed more men than women, mirroring the gender imbalance among workers in this profession.

Later, I shadowed four of these interlocutors, each on a different train line and always accompanied by a supervisor, called a “coach,” who offered explanations and answered my questions so that my presence would not hinder PATs’ abilities to do their jobs. In this way, I engaged in what Laura Watts and John Urry call “mobile ethnography”—a practice that, rather than moving between field sites, emphasizes “travelling *with* people and things, participating in their continual shift through time, place and relations with others” (2008, 867).⁸

As a researcher from the United States, affiliated with a Swiss university, living in Luxembourg, and (as of 2021) holding Luxembourgish nationality, I occupied a unique position vis-à-vis PATs who—owing to the requirement to speak fluent Luxembourgish, French, and German—are largely Luxembourgish nationals who grew up in the country. Formal interviews were primarily conducted in French, which none of us spoke as a first language, but in which we could communicate at a high level. Other conversations, including those had while shadowing PATs, took place in Luxembourgish, in which I can communicate but am not fluent. While these linguistic dynamics set me apart, they also built bridges. Given the high proportion of non-Luxembourgers and cross-border workers in the country, many Luxembourgers feel linguistically marginalized, and language acts as an important signifier and vector of belonging. Several interlocutors expressed appreciation for my efforts to speak Luxembourgish, and I found that they often spoke more openly and informally in their native tongue.

The process of interviewing and shadowing PATs during their work time presented several advantages. First, I was able to observe parts of their jobs that passengers typically do not see—including spaces reserved for personnel and the behind-the-scenes work of attending to machinery—and gained a richer understanding of how PATs navigate interactions with passengers in a variety of scenarios. I also frequently got the impression that PATs appreciated the break from their routine that my presence created, and some of them explicitly told me that they enjoyed talking about their work to an interested listener. This, combined with the fact that PATs were being compensated for the time that they spent with me, perhaps contributed to their willingness to openly share their time, experiences, and feelings.

These relationships, however, also bring responsibilities regarding representation. Some PATs expressed concerns about comments being traced back to them by supervisors while others expressed hope that my work would shed light (for both the railway administration and the general public) on components of their work experiences that they feel are largely unseen or disregarded. In translating my research into writing, I am mindful of both concerns and seek to do justice to the personnel who entrusted me with their stories.

RHYTHM CHANGES

As a first step in apprehending the effects of FFPT for railway workers, I set out to better understand PATs’ everyday work routines. Before and after the transition to FFPT, PATs juggle a variety of rhythms, navigating between the valuation logics of what Laura Bear calls “the abstract time-reckoning of capitalism” and “concrete experiences and social rhythms of time” (2014, 7). Pressures to contribute to the productivity and efficiency of the railway—not just by selling and controlling tickets but also by ensuring timeliness and minimizing disruptions—coexist alongside responsibilities to assure the physical and psychological wellbeing of passengers. This resembles a tension identified by Ida Sabelis between the rhythms imposed by “time management” logics versus those of care labor. Care-related tasks, she contends,

are considered time-consuming and “not fitting” in the system, because they are not plannable and sometimes have a variable order. It is impossible to subjugate them to the fixed temporal pattern (duration, varying sequences) that is needed in order to impose a temporal structure and to follow the time = money principle.

(Sabelis, 2001, 396)

Before the transition to FFPT, fare control was a consistent task around which PATs' work routines were largely organized. However, while fare abolition was implemented in one day, the bigger story of fare control is not one of instant transition from all to nothing. Although the policy was presented as a radical change, not everybody paid for tickets before its implementation. Many passengers—including both students and people under the age of twenty—already benefited from free transit passes from the state or their employers. Universal FFPT also did not mean a complete removal of fares. Trains (unlike other modes of public transportation in Luxembourg) maintain first-class compartments requiring tickets, which PATs control. Additionally, in most cases, users must still pay when leaving the country, even on trains operated by CFL.⁹

Despite these lingering moments of fare control, most of PATs' work consists of other activities. With most of the capital-generating/regulating portion of their jobs stripped away, they still have a lot to do. The continuation of these other functions is reminiscent of Graeber's insistence that striking transit workers in London in 2014 did not have “bullshit jobs” because rather than simply producing “value for capitalism” they performed a wide variety of tasks oriented toward ensuring the safety and wellbeing of passengers (2018, 235–36).

In Luxembourg, many PATs describe safety as their top priority, as they perform a variety of technical functions that are integral to the safe operation of trains, including checking brakes, opening and closing doors, monitoring signals and issuing departure permissions for the conductor at each stop, and attending to onboard maintenance issues. The reduction in control activities leaves more time for these tasks. As a result, many accompaniment personnel describe feeling less stressed now. David, a young PAT who began working at CFL shortly before the implementation of FFPT, relates that he found it particularly challenging to control all the tickets on a busy train while also getting out at each stop to give the departure permission for the conductor. “You have to think of a ton of things at the same time,” he tells me. Now, they “have more time for certain technical tasks, and... other things,” including the perpetual responsibilities of informing and assisting passengers.

In addition to the clear implications of reduced fare control for PATs' time, there is also a spatial dimension to this change. Before, the act of controlling tickets for every passenger imposed a relatively slow rhythm of moving through the train, meaning that personnel spent longer in each compartment, one at a time. As a passenger, I would often only see the PAT once during a journey, or sometimes not at all. Now, they move back and forth through the train more quickly and more frequently—which I experienced firsthand as I tried to keep up with them during shadowing. These walk-throughs, called security rounds, make it easier to respond to crises and conflicts, including health emergencies, drug use, thefts, harassment, and assaults.¹⁰

André, who has been a PAT for almost a decade, explains that although he's not completely satisfied with the changes in his job since FFPT, he recognizes certain advantages of the new rhythm:

Before, with fare control, we saw less. We needed five or six stops to be able to go through the whole train. Now, from the start we know who is on the train and we can already position ourselves... so that [passengers] see us; that way they don't do anything. Before, because of controls, it was impossible because we had to control everybody. So, while I was selling tickets, a young person could maybe be assaulted, or a woman harassed, or a man harassed, on the other side of the train.

This strategic positioning is not just about looking after passengers' physical wellbeing, but also caring for their emotional needs and making them feel safe. While shadowing PATs, I saw how they carefully position themselves, both in the train and on the platform, to be visible to passengers so that they can respond to questions and requests. Simultaneously, PATs constantly look around, ready to proactively offer assistance to passengers who may need help getting on or off the train (people with strollers or walkers, for example) or who appear to be lost, confused, or distressed.

Joana, a veteran PAT of nearly a decade, recounts a story of seeing two young women coming home on the train from their university in Belgium one night. One got off a few stops before the other, and Joana could see that her companion was not comfortable being alone, so she made a point of telling the young woman that if she were ever uncomfortable, she should say something and Joana would come sit with her. “You shouldn't have to be afraid in the train,” Joana says. “On the street, in a dark corner, maybe, but not here, not when we're here. Or at least not when I'm here.... My passengers should feel safe. Because I don't like it when my passengers, on my train, feel scared. No, that's not okay. Not at all.”

Another area in which care-oriented components of PATs' work have shifted is the increase of onboard announcements. While PATs previously made some announcements, particularly about delays or incidents, they are now required to make many more—for example, welcoming passengers and wishing them a pleasant day. This change is explicitly designed to compensate for the functions they lost with fare abolition. While some see it as a positive addition to their routine, bringing new responsibilities for them and enhancing services for passengers, others find it irritating or even demeaning. A few describe an oversaturation of announcements for passengers and argue that the frequency leads people to tune them out and miss urgent messages about deviations or incidents.

Today, fare control no longer constitutes the dominant rhythm in PATs' working routine, which some PATs experience as disorienting after several years of constructing this as their primary task. Without fares, however, PATs still navigate between the steady rhythms of the trains themselves—performing specific tasks at each stop and various places and

times along the way—and the more unpredictable, changeable rhythms of caring for passengers' needs. While the removal of fares has freed up more time for PATs to focus on other forms of labor, the care-oriented tasks that they perform are less easily quantifiable than ticket sales or controls and do not correspond to capitalist valuation logics. Though personnel themselves largely see their care labor as vital, they express a pervasive concern that external others—including the government, the railway administration, and society—may see this type of work as less valuable than fare control and that might result in a broader devaluation of railway work. In addition to affecting workers' job satisfaction, sense of occupational identity, and social status, this transformation contributes to concerns about the future stability of their careers.

FARE CONTROL AND SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

Although the ways workers experience and perceive rhythmic shifts following the implementation of FFPT are personal and diverse, they are also social. While interactions between personnel and passengers during control are often brief and transactional, they constitute a form of social interaction. By focusing on this aspect of PATs' jobs, we see the changes engendered by fare abolition from a different perspective. To an extent, how personnel navigate this transition socially depends on their own personalities and level of comfort interacting with strangers. Previously, fare control facilitated a structured way of making contact with passengers and a relatively codified mode of communication. Without it, PATs and passengers suddenly find themselves off-script, which can produce feelings of uncertainty.

While most of the PATs with whom I spoke cite contact with clients as one of the factors that attracted them to this work or one of their favorite things about their job, they nearly unanimously agree that such interactions are decreasing, in part because of FFPT. Indeed, I have observed, both while shadowing personnel and using the train as a passenger, that few passengers now respond to PATs' perpetual refrain of hello issued while walking throughout the train. I hear repeatedly from PATs that the exchange of greetings that accompanied ticket controls, however brief, held meaning in and of itself—a moment of human contact and mutual recognition—and served as an entry into conversation. Several PATs relate that many passengers do not “dare” approach them or ask questions without the icebreaker of fare control.

In some cases, this simple encounter served as the basis for exchanging banter, which constituted an enjoyable break from the more monotonous parts of their work. Mark, who has been a PAT for around six years, tells me:

It's not the same anymore with the clients. It's really just if they need something, they'll call on us, but otherwise it's just “*bonjour*” and we move on.... [Before], we talked, we laughed. Sometimes there were also conflicts, but that made it so that every day was different,... and often we'd even joke around with people.... I really miss that.

When I ask Mark if he attributes this change primarily to FFPT, he responds, “Yes, because before when we controlled tickets, we went up to people, and we asked them for something, whereas people practically never ask us anything now that it's free.”

This link between fare control and interaction is clearly visible on railway lines that still require fares to travel into a neighboring country. When crossing borders, the difference is instantaneous and striking. Suddenly, PATs go from walking quickly through the train to pausing briefly to interact with each passenger, frequently responding to questions about tickets, schedules, or deviations. Each PAT navigates these encounters in their own manner, relating differently based on their own identity and demeanor as well as those of passengers. While some of these interactions are conflictual, such as those involving discipline, others are quite friendly and sometimes lead to longer conversations about topics unrelated to the trains.

Looking more broadly at the ensemble of social exchanges that accompany fare control, we can ask: What do these interactions create or produce? On one hand, they (re)produce structures and systems on a variety of levels: a monetized framework for legitimating transit use, class-based hierarchies of users, capitalist logics conflating cost and value, disciplinary relationships between personnel and passengers, and so on. On the other hand, they constitute social interactions between workers and users and, as such, produce affect, affinities, antagonisms, and affections. Thus, PATs experience the elimination of fare control as a decrease in contact, and for PATs who appreciated or ascribed meaning to such encounters, this can be felt as a sharp loss. Far from facilitating a sense of incorporation into a larger social body (Graeber, 2001), the elimination fosters feelings of isolation and further disrupts the recognition of the value that accompaniment personnel produce through their work.

DISCIPLINE VERSUS SERVICE

If we shift our focus to another mode of interaction between accompaniment personnel and passengers, we find that the act of fare control is also linked to understandings of PATs' authority. Many see the removal of fares as part of a

broader shift in their work away from discipline and toward more customer service. Employees view this shift in different ways and often construct the importance of one over or against the other. The ways PATs talk about their roles of discipline and service are often chock-full of affect, as these are two of the primary modes in which they interact with passengers and are closely entangled with how they see themselves and their jobs.

While there is an abundance of anthropological literature and theory about how workers are disciplined in and through their jobs—phenomena that are undoubtedly experienced by PATs as well—I focus here on how railway personnel perceive their roles as disciplinarians. As employees of the country's only national railway, workers are invested with their authority by the state apparatus (Bear, 2007). Yet personnel are themselves also subject to the authority of the CFL administration and the Luxembourgish government, who dictate which management tools are at their disposal.

In this sense, some accompaniment personnel experienced the end of controls as a loss of authority. Thierry informs me that when FFPT was first announced, during the negotiation period, there were some people at CFL who advocated maintaining zero-cost tickets.¹¹ “Why this somewhat bizarre idea?” he asks rhetorically, before ascribing it to a “fear of losing authority.” Some PATs attached their sense of authority to the tickets they controlled, with the fare figuring as both symbol and instrument of power.

The abolition of most tickets, however, is not a purely symbolic loss of authority. The transition to FFPT brought the removal of one of PATs' primary disciplinary mechanisms: the ability to issue fines to passengers who do not have a valid ticket. Some personnel, according to Thierry, in turn “asked the state to define a system of sanctions” that they can impose upon passengers for other behavioral infractions instead of only in cases of fare disputes. Transporting people safely, he explains, involves a “responsibility” to intervene if one client is posing a danger to others. To do this, however, many accompaniment personnel feel that they “must be perceived as an authority.”

Several PATs echo these sentiments. As Mark tells me, “Before, with the tickets, we sometimes had fare disputes, but [passengers] knew that if they pushed us too far... then they might get a fine.” Now, however, if passengers are breaking behavioral rules, “We can only ask them to leave the train. But that's always complicated, too, punishing everyone on the train [by causing a delay] just because of two or three people.” In his view, the best way to address the growing problem of passengers' insubordination is to reinstate and expand fines. “I think that in order to be more respected in what we say, they need to give us more authority,” he argues, “so that... in the case of such or such, I can still give out fines. It's not just about punishing people but so that they have in their heads, ‘I could get a fine.’ Whereas on the other hand, they know that we can't do anything.”

Fares and fines notwithstanding, disciplining clients constitutes one of PATs' most delicate tasks. Responding to potentially belligerent clients requires careful yet rapid calculation to minimize risks of escalation. While shadowing PATs, I see how personnel observe passengers and tailor their modes of interaction accordingly. David tells me,

I always try to have a feeling for the client, so I see with which client I can say something, and with which client I have to try another tack.... It's important to see from a distance how you can act with each client, because there are different characters. There are some who take it really really poorly and act very quickly and others who say, “Oh, ok.”

This intangible “feeling” for how passengers may react is an important skill, undoubtedly a product of both experience in the job and social awareness or intuition.

On the other side, the shift away from control has been experienced by many PATs as a shift toward more customer service. Some, like David, find this transformation to be a positive development. David tells me, “Now that we don't have the stage of controlling tickets, we do more to welcome clients.” This “welcoming” primarily takes the form of the onboard announcements, discussed above, as well as taking more time to respond thoroughly to passengers' questions—about the trains but also more “touristic” matters—if and when they are asked. David says, “Since we don't have certain tasks anymore, we have received other ones.... Now we try to be there more for the client, to provide more customer service, more toward quality than heavily controlling tickets.” In this sense, David asserts that his work has not been “devalued” because CFL still offers “the same level of service, or even more.”

Other PATs, however, worry about taking the concept of customer service too far. Mark, for example, tells me that he likes being an authority figure in the train: “the one who decides what to do, how to behave, and all that.” In this vein, he says,

I wouldn't want it to become too much about serving clients to the point where, for example, we're distributing coffee to people onboard. That's something I wouldn't like because we used to be an authority figure... and that would be moving completely in the opposite direction. I wouldn't really like that.

In other words, he fears the service PATs perform may too easily slip into servility.

Again, these accounts reflect clear concerns among accompaniment personnel about how others view their work. Yet we also find changes in how PATs perceive the value of their own work, linked to the meaning they ascribed to it prior to

fare abolition. While some see the new functions they perform as a source of value, others—including those who enjoy being authority figures—feel them to be devaluing. This change also provokes concerns about the future of PATs' work; while some worry that losing fare control responsibilities may be part of a gradual erosion of functions and authority leading to the ultimate elimination of the position, others fear that their job could transform into something that they no longer find meaningful or enjoyable.

(IN)VISIBILITY

Alongside this friction between notions of discipline and service, we find another tension in the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of railway personnel's work. Frequently, the first answer I get from PATs when asking them about how they see their role at CFL is that they're the “image” or “face” of the agency. After hearing this response several times in a row, I began to suspect that this is something they are frequently told by training personnel, supervisors, or administrators—a suspicion that was later confirmed in my interview with André. “As they always tell us, we're the ‘ambassadors,’ we're the CFL agents that people see directly on the ground, that they see everywhere, in all the trains.” Indeed, accompaniment personnel are typically the first and most visible—or in some cases the only—CFL employees that passengers see on trains or platforms. As such, they're the primary point of contact for users. Whether or not there is direct interaction, PATs' physical presence is apparent to most clients through the distinctive uniforms they wear, their loud whistling each time the train departs, and their movement through the trains.

Awareness of this perpetual visibility functions, to some extent, as a form of self-control among workers (Salzinger, 2003). In my interactions with PATs, I find that their uniforms nearly always appear clean and unrumpled—even, miraculously, after an eight-hour night shift—and all are generally neatly groomed and coiffed. Equally, the responsibility to embody a positive image for CFL is often perceptible in PATs' demeanor via a calm professionalism they typically adopt in how they speak and carry themselves when they interact with passengers. André contends that it is “very important” for PATs “to stay polite and to give necessary information because we're selling the brand of the railway.” At the same time, however, by personifying this attractive persona of tidy and polite efficiency, PATs strive to accumulate value on a personal level by conforming to the image that is expected of them and modeling, through their visible respect for the work, the respect with which they wish to be treated.

Emilie, who has been a PAT for nearly a decade, contends that the representative role PATs perform has taken on even more importance since the transition to FFPT. “I represent CFL; I'm the image of CFL.” She laughs. “In fact, that's always how I see myself. Now, with free transportation... it's not the same thing as before, that's for sure.... Before, we also represented [CFL], but now it's *really* that.” Her implication, as I understand it, is that with most of their commercial and regulatory role stripped away, PATs' representative role looms larger, even becoming a mechanism for demonstrating or justifying the need for their continued presence aboard Luxembourgish trains. Despite the high visibility of PATs' jobs, many lament a lack of public recognition and understanding about the individual tasks that they perform outside of control. We find, in their accounts, a different configuration of the simultaneous visibility and invisibility that Kristin Monroe (2014) ascribes to Syrian delivery drivers in Beirut.

Part of the issue, Thierry suggests, is a misconception around the term “controllers,” often used—even now—to refer to accompaniment personnel. What is to be made of “a controller who doesn't control anymore?” he asks, ironically. “What more is there?” From passengers' perspectives, selling and controlling tickets were previously the two most visible activities performed by PATs. Thus, removing tickets, Thierry proposes, is less a question of removing value and more of removing “the value that clients see.”

Several PATs describe fielding questions from people outside of CFL—including their own family members and friends—about what they do now or why they're still there. Emilie tells me that “sometimes... people [say],... ‘What do you do now that it's free? You don't have anything to do anymore.’” The resultant pressure to defend, justify, or explain the continued existence of one's job can be frustrating and demoralizing for accompaniment personnel. Before fare abolition, PATs did not have to do this—not necessarily because passengers had a better understanding of what they did, but because they performed a function that passengers could easily see and identify. Several personnel recount to me that they feel invisible now that they no longer control fares. When they walk through the train, few passengers even look up from their phones, and this can provoke feelings of frustration and discouragement.

André emphasizes the highly unequal visibilities of different functions that accompaniment personnel perform. While controlling tickets was only a “small part” of his job before, he explains that it had an outsized visibility compared to other tasks.

In the beginning [of FFPT], people asked us what we were still doing there.... We had to explain to people... that we have a lot of other functions, that we have security functions, technical functions, safety functions. That we don't just have a commercial function. The commercial is certainly what people see the most, inside the trains, because as long as the train operates there is no problem.... [Passengers see] that we do

a round and then we stand by the door or we sit down, and [think] “he doesn't do anything.”... Now, we do our rounds, people don't look at us, because they don't even see us pass by.

From this angle, we see that the commercial side of PATs' jobs is frequently linked to public perceptions of value not only because of its capital-generating function but because it is the lens through which passengers see and apprehend their work. This in turn increases pressure for personnel to perform visibility and take on the totemic role of image-bearers. Yet such demonstrations of visibility for visibility's sake can produce a sense of hollowness. Making themselves and their work visible requires effort, but for most PATs this is not the part of their job from which they derive the most satisfaction, nor is it where they attribute the most utility.

Such distinctions between visible and invisible work—that which is seen versus that which is done behind the scenes—have been richly analyzed by feminist scholars, who reveal the unequal valuation and frequent delegitimization of less visible labor, including work performed in the private sphere or outside of publicly recognized employment apparatuses (Weeks, 2011). While PATs by and large still describe their work as essential to the safe and efficient functioning of the country's railway system, they share a sense of frustration that passengers cannot see, and therefore fail to appreciate, the less visible but more critical functions that they perform. In this vein, we see a clear link between visibility and social incorporation of value, including how a decline in visibility can disrupt the recognition of value produced.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, railway accompaniment personnel experience and perceive the transition away from fare control in a variety of ways, each of which sheds light on the bigger question of devaluation. While a shift away from commercial measures of value opens the door for a prioritization of work related to ensuring passengers' safety and wellbeing, such tasks are less easily quantifiable and, in the case of care work particularly, difficult to apprehend through a capitalist value framework. Here, feelings of devaluation arise from a sense of incompatibility between the type of value being produced and the economic logics imposed by the previous fare system.

A heightened emphasis on the relational and affective dynamics of accompaniment personnel's work, however, does not necessarily increase or improve social interactions with passengers. On the contrary, many experience the loss of fare control as a loss of contact. For many, this makes the job feel less meaningful or enjoyable and strips the sense of recognition they gained through these encounters. Simultaneously, while some describe a perceived trend toward a more customer service-oriented paradigm as a positive development, others feel it as a loss of status or authority vis-à-vis passengers. While the feelings of devaluation associated with these losses are personal and subjective, they are also highly social. In addition to emphasizing the critical role of human relations and interactions in valuation processes, this case reveals the fragility of such ties. Devaluation in this context can be understood not as a rupture in the production of value through work but rather a transformation of the social dynamics surrounding it.

Furthermore, changes in accompaniment personnel's tasks create a paradoxical position in terms of visibility. While they and their jobs are highly visible, the bulk of the activities they perform outside of controlling fares is frequently overlooked. Overall, the value personnel see in their work does not match the value they imagine passengers and the public see in it. In this case, we can read physical visibility as both a metaphor and an external manifestation of the social legitimation at the heart of how value is intersubjectively appraised. Devaluation, then, is tied to a perceived decline in the recognition or appreciation of railway personnel's work by society. It will take time to ascertain how PATs' work may be transformed in the longer term, and devaluation isn't an inevitable nor linear outcome. As a fluid social process, it can also be reversed, which is undoubtedly the goal of recent campaigns by CFL (especially on social media) to publicly recognize and make visible work performed by PATs outside fare control.

Looking beyond Luxembourg, this case sheds light on the importance of considering the experiences and perceptions of transport workers in transitions to FFPT and other transportation studies and illustrates the analytical utility of exploring these through the lens of value and devaluation. There is a strong tendency, among both practitioners and researchers of public transportation, to focus on passengers, policies, and infrastructures. While these perspectives are undeniably crucial, a lack of attention to transit workers risks further erasure of their labor, reifies their feelings of invisibility, and quite troublingly leaves room for efforts to dissociate the value of the service from those who produce it. I argue here for centering transport workers as value producers and as social beings whose thoughts and feelings about their own work are shaped by interactions and relations with others and closely entangled with how they perceive their work as seen from the outside.

Interrogating these social dynamics and paying close attention to points of rupture not only expand our perspective on value but also formulate a novel framework that considers devaluation as an analytical category in its own right. While anthropologists have developed a great depth and breadth of frameworks for thinking about how value is produced and accumulated, we have significantly fewer implements in our conceptual toolkit for apprehending how it can be lost or destroyed. In this vein, I propose devaluation as a critical concept for the anthropology of work more broadly

to help us understand how workers themselves experience and seek to make sense of transformations in both the nature of their work and the social dynamics which shape how it is recognized by others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Open access funding provided by Institut de Hautes Etudes Internationales et du Developpement.

ORCID

Sonja Faaren Ruud  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1336-9208>

ENDNOTES

¹In the months leading up to Luxembourg's implementation of FFPT, I frequently heard these arguments repeated in conversations with Luxembourg residents and regularly saw them debated on social media. I later found during interviews with transport sector workers and administrators that many of them also feel that fare abolition removes a substantive barrier against negative passenger behaviors.

²"*Wat näischt kascht, dat ass och näischt.*" All translations from French and Luxembourgish are my own, as are any potential errors.

³Unfortunately, this guarantee did not prove true for ticket window employees (Wiessler, 2019).

⁴For a discussion of social cohesion in relation to Luxembourg, see Klein (2013).

⁵Luxembourgish nationals constituted 52.9 percent of the country's population in 2022 ("La Croissance de La Population Reboostée," 2022). Additionally, according to data from the previous year, non-resident cross-border commuters from Belgium, France, and Germany accounted for about 46 percent of the country's workforce ("Panorama Sur Le Monde Du Travail Luxembourgeois à l'occasion Du 1er Mai," 2022).

⁶See Ariès's book by the same name (2018).

⁷All names used here are pseudonyms.

⁸"Travelling *with*" transportation workers has elicited rich ethnographic material in other studies of transit labor. See, for example, Bedi (2016) and Ference (2016).

⁹Exceptions include trains serving Athus, Belgium; Audun-le-Tiche, France; and Volmerange-les-Mines, France (Brucker, 2019).

¹⁰"Security" duties in public transportation in Luxembourg primarily concern interpersonal conflicts. Unlike other European countries, Luxembourg has not experienced large-scale terrorist attacks, and there is little public fear of this.

¹¹This common application of FFPT policy was adopted by Tallinn, Estonia, in 2013 (Kębłowski et al., 2019).

REFERENCES

- Ariès, Paul. 2018. *Gratuité vs Capitalisme: Des Propositions Concrètes Pour Une Nouvelle Économie de Bonheur*. Paris: Larousse.
- Barthelemy, Claire. 2015. "Luxembourg Goes in for an Image Makeover." *New York Times*, November 23, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/24/business/international/luxembourg-goes-in-for-an-image-makeover.html>.
- Bear, Laura. 2007. *Lines of the Nation: Indian Railway Workers, Bureaucracy, and the Intimate Historical Self*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bear, Laura. 2014. "Doubt, Conflict, Mediation: The Anthropology of Modern Time." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20 (S1): 3–30.
- Bedi, Tarini. 2016. "Taxi Drivers, Infrastructures, and Urban Change in Globalizing Mumbai." *City & Society* 28 (3): 387–410.
- Bissell, David, Thomas Birtchnell, Anthony Elliott, and Eric L. Hsu. 2020. "Autonomous Automobilities: The Social Impacts of Driverless Vehicles." *Current Sociology* 68 (1): 116–34.
- Brucker, Christelle. 2019. "Trains Gratuits Depuis Athus, Audun et Volmerange." *Luxemburger Wort*, March 14, 2019. <https://www.wort.lu/fr/luxembourg/trains-gratuits-depuis-athus-audun-et-volmerange-5c876694da2cc1784e33f965>.
- Collins, Samuel Gerald. 2018. "Working for the Robocracy: Critical Ethnography of Robot Futures." *Anthropology of Work Review* 39 (1): 5–9.
- del Nido, Juan M. 2021. "Production, Consumers' Convenience, and Cynical Economies: The Case of Uber in Buenos Aires." *Economic Anthropology* 8 (2): 326–36.
- Ference, Meghan. 2016. "'Together We Can': Redefining Work in Nairobi's Urban Transportation Sector." *Anthropology of Work Review* 37 (2): 101–12.
- Fleming, Mark D. 2016. "Mass Transit Workers and Neoliberal Time Discipline in San Francisco." *American Anthropologist* 118 (4): 784–95.
- Graeber, David. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Graeber, David. 2018. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. London: Allen Lane.
- Harvey, David. 2018. *Marx, Capital and the Madness of Economic Reason*. London: Profile Books.
- Hennebert, Jean-Michel. 2021. "Les CFL Demeurent l'employeur Le plus Attractif." *Luxemburger Wort*, June 9, 2021. <https://www.wort.lu/fr/economie/les-cfl-demeurent-l-employeur-le-plus-attractif-60c0ca64de135b92366a692c>.
- Karasz, Palko. 2018. "Luxembourg to Become the First Country to Offer Free Mass Transit for All." *New York Times*, December 6, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/06/world/europe/luxembourg-free-mass-transit.html>.
- Kębłowski, Wojciech, Tauri Tuvikene, Tarmo Pikner, and Jussi S. Jauhiainen. 2019. "Towards an Urban Political Geography of Transport: Unpacking the Political and Scalar Dynamics of Fare-Free Public Transport in Tallinn, Estonia." *Politics and Space* 37 (6): 967–84.
- Klein, Carlo. 2013. "Social Capital or Social Cohesion: What Matters for Subjective Well-Being?" *Social Indicators Research* 110 (3): 891–911.
- "La Croissance de La Population Reboostée." 2022. *Le Portail de Statistiques*. Luxembourg City: STATEC, Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques. <https://statistiques.public.lu/fr/actualites/population/population/2022/04/20220411.html>.
- "Le Landesverband Ne Veut Pas Des Transports Gratuits." 2018. *Luxemburger Wort*, November 26, 2018. <https://www.wort.lu/fr/luxembourg/le-landesverband-ne-veut-pas-des-transports-gratuits-5bfc029b182b657ad3b9a671>.
- Monroe, Kristin V. 2014. "Labor and the Urban Landscape: Mobility, Risk, and Possibility among Syrian Delivery Workers in Beirut." *Anthropology of Work Review* 35 (2): 84–94.

- Moreau, Sébastien. 2022. *Les CFL En Mouvement Depuis 75 Ans: Histoire Des Chemins de Fer Luxembourgeois*. Luxembourg City: CFL.
- "Panorama Sur Le Monde Du Travail Luxembourgeois à l'Occasion Du 1er Mai." 2022. *Le Portail des Statistiques*. Luxembourg City: STATEC, Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques. <https://statistiques.public.lu/fr/publications/series/regards/2023/regards-06-23.html>.
- Ray, Rosalie. 2018. "The US: Seeking Transit Justice from Seattle to NYC." In *Free Public Transit: And Why We Don't Pay to Ride Elevators*, edited by Jason Prince and Judith Dellheim, 137–150. Montreal: Black Rose Books.
- Sabelis, Ida. 2001. "Time Management: Paradoxes and Patterns." *Time & Society* 10 (2/3): 387–400.
- Salzinger, Leslie. 2003. *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sheller, Mimi. 2018. *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*. London: Verso.
- Small, Kenneth A. 2012. "Valuation of Travel Time." *Economics of Transportation* 1 (1): 2–14.
- Taha, Hebatalla. 2020. "Making Cheaper Labor: Domestic Outsourcing and Development in the Galilee." *Anthropology of Work Review* 41 (1): 24–35.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Urry, John. 2000. *Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge.
- Ventura, Luca. 2022. "Richest Countries in the World 2022." *Global Finance Magazine*, August 2, 2022. <https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/economic-data/richest-countries-in-the-world>.
- Watts, Laura, and John Urry. 2008. "Moving Methods, Travelling Times." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 26 (5): 860–74.
- Weeks, Kathi. 2011. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Welsch, Annette. 2018. "Syprolux Dit Non à La Gratuité des Transports Publics." *Luxemburger Wort*, November 25, 2018. <https://www.wort.lu/fr/luxembourg/syprolux-dit-non-a-la-gratuite-des-transports-publics-5bfbdcb182b657ad3b9a667>.
- Wiessler, Sophie. 2019. "Ettelbruck Refuse La Fermeture Du Guichet de Sa Gare." *Luxemburger Wort*, July 30, 2019. <https://www.wort.lu/fr/luxembourg/ettelbruck-refuse-la-fermeture-du-guichet-de-sa-gare-5d404523da2cc1784e348d80>.
- Wiessler, Sophie, and Christelle Brucker. 2019. "Transports Gratuits Au Luxembourg: Les Réponses Aux Questions." *Luxemburger Wort*, January 21, 2019. <https://www.wort.lu/fr/luxembourg/transports-gratuits-au-luxembourg-les-reponses-aux-questions-5c459cc3da2cc1784e33c0f8>.

How to cite this article: Ruud, Sonja Faaren. 2023. "Giving Up Control: Devaluation of Railway Work in Luxembourg's Fare-free Public Transportation System?" *Anthropology of Work Review* 44 (2): 94–104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/awr.12259>.