

Death of Cyclist in Paris Lays Bare Divide in Mayor's War Against Cars

Paul Varry was run over on a city street in what prosecutors suspect was a deliberate act of road rage, as bikers and drivers choose sides.



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It sent a shock through Paris, a city striving to transform itself into one of the great cycling metropolises in the world: a bicycle rider, crushed under the wheels of an SUV in a bike lane just a few yards from La Madeleine, the landmark neoclassical church, in what prosecutors suspect was a deliberate act of road rage.

A murder investigation has been opened, and last week, Mayor Anne Hidalgo led the Paris City Council in a minute of silence for the cyclist, Paul Varry, a 27-year-old who was also a cycling advocate. Ms. Hidalgo, a member of the Socialist Party, delivered an emotional speech in which she signaled she would continue to roll out her famously aggressive policies that aim to drastically reduce the role of the automobile in Parisian life.

“I am truly angry,” she said. “The future does not belong to cars.”

An outpouring of emotion over Mr. Varry's Oct. 15 death has put a spotlight on the dangers facing cyclists in a city that has seen an explosion in bikes and cycling lanes in recent years. But it has also underscored the frustrations that motorists

increasingly feel in a place that has chosen to limit the movement, speed and parking options of cars.

In recent weeks, as cycling organizations, spurred by the death of Mr. Varry, have demanded more protections from aggressive drivers, others have complained about Parisian bikers themselves, some of whom have earned a reputation as dangerous risk-takers.

Supporters gathered to pay tribute to Paul Varry, at Place de la Madeleine in October in Paris. Adnan Farzat/NurPhoto, via Getty Images

Ratcheting up tensions this month is a new policy banning motorists from driving through the four arrondissements, or districts, in the heart of the city, rekindling the argument that Ms. Hidalgo's anti-car stance is impractical, bad for business, and caters mostly to wealthy liberals who can afford to live in the city center.

“She is putting a garrote around Paris,” Patrick Aboukrat, a boutique owner in the fashionable Marais neighborhood, said this week, placing his hands on his neck for effect.

The debate in the French capital reflects the challenges facing policymakers around the world as they ask constituents to alter ingrained life habits in the fight against climate change. Ms. Hidalgo’s experiment — which has turned many Parisian streets into whooshing parades of pedaling commuters — is also unfolding in a city that has long harbored an innate tension between the big-city need for speed and the more languorous pleasures of “la belle vie.”

If the rest of France thinks of the stereotypical Parisian as eternally in a hurry, and perhaps a little rude along the way, it is also the place that gave rise to the 19th Century concept of the flâneur, the strolling, poetically minded observer of city life, who required time to adequately savor it. The German cultural critic Walter Benjamin even asserted, in what may be an urban myth, that some flâneurs slowed their roll by walking with a turtle on a leash.

Paul Varry in an undated photograph.
An outpouring of emotion over his death has put a spotlight on the dangers facing cyclists in Paris.

Ms. Hidalgo, in her fiery speech last week, effectively embraced the turtle. Going “very quickly from point A to point B,” she said, “is not living in a civilized way in a city. In a city, one stops, one takes one’s time. We respect others.”

But for some Parisians, especially pedestrians, it is cyclists streaking wantonly through intersections who have become the threat. A recent article in *Le Monde* described the rising trend of “bicycle bashing,” noting social media complaints about bikers bearing the hashtag #cyclopathe.

Ms. Hidalgo, who took office in 2014, announced this week that she would not seek a third term. She has made reducing car traffic a signature effort.

Her government has already turned roads on the banks of the Seine into walking and bike paths, created hundreds of miles of new bike lanes elsewhere, and reserved most of the Rue de Rivoli, a key east-west thoroughfare, for cyclists.

The city has reduced the speed limit on Paris’s ring road and plans to remove 60,000 parking spaces by 2030. It is currently enacting a soft rollout of the new traffic restrictions in the First, Second, Third and Fourth arrondissements, on the right bank of the Seine, an area that encompasses the Louvre museum, the Tuileries gardens and neighborhoods like the Marais. Buses and taxis are exempt from the prohibition, but regular drivers must have a specific destination inside of the zone in mind.

Paris' fashionable Marais neighborhood has new traffic restrictions, which some shop owners feel will harm their businesses. Andrea Mantovani for The New York Times

In an interview last week, Mr. Aboukrat, the head of a merchants' association called Comité Marais Paris, said his group is planning to take legal action to stop the ban, which he predicts will harm his business.

“People will look on Waze and see that it is a forbidden zone, and they won't come,” he said, referring to the navigation app.

Yves Carra, a spokesman for the group Mobilité Club France, until recently known as L'Automobile Club Association, said he is frustrated that the Paris government, which represents about 2 million people within the boundaries of the city, is making decisions that affect the 12 million-plus people who live in the metropolitan area.

The car, he said, was a valid technological response to Paris's suburban sprawl; Ms. Hidalgo's policies, he said, was detrimental to "the people who need these cars to be able to move around and live."

Mr. Aboukrat agreed. "It's stunning for a Socialist mayor to stop the banlieues from coming in, or to cut off their liberty to circulate," he said, referring to working-class suburbs.

Ms. Hidalgo, among other things, has argued that her policies have contributed to significant reductions in the amount of air pollution in the city.

A new sign reducing the speed limit to 50 kilometers, or about 31 miles, per hour, being installed on Paris's ring road. Thomas Samson/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Parisians' love for bicycles has a long history, including what has been described as a sort of "fever" for its precursor, the velocipede, in the 19th century. During World War II, the bicycle became the principal means of transport on Parisian streets, according to Clément Dusong, a scholar of urbanism, but it fell out of favor after the war and the city began adapting to the automobile.

Mr. Varry, the cyclist who was killed, hailed from a close-in suburb, Saint-Ouen-sur-Seine, where he had made the cause of cyclists "the commitment of his life," according to the City Council there.

According to the authorities, Mr. Varry was riding a bicycle in a cycling lane near La Madeleine on a Tuesday evening. The driver of the SUV, a 52-year-old man, began illegally driving in the lane as well, and at some point, ran over Mr. Varry's foot. Mr. Varry banged his fist on the hood. Shortly thereafter, prosecutors say, the driver, whose teenage daughter was in the SUV with him, ran Mr. Varry over.

The motorist, whose name was not disclosed by prosecutors, has been detained. A lawyer for the man described him as a father of four who worked as a sales representative. He said that his client was trying to turn right, and did not run Mr. Varry over deliberately.

The incident sparked more than 200 protests across France, including one on Oct. 19 that gathered roughly 1,000 people in Paris. It has also spurred cyclists to talk about road rage they have experienced from drivers; some have even likened it to the #MeToo movement.

A cyclist on the banks of the Seine in Paris, opposite the Île Saint-Louis. Roads along the river have been converted into walking and bike paths. James Hill for The New York Times

“What Paul’s death showed is that there are a lot of cyclists who experience dangerous things on a daily basis, but it has received very little media coverage,” said Antoine Breton-Godo, a cyclist in his 20s. “So it was a trigger.”

A recent poll in Le Parisien newspaper suggested that the effort to limit cars is supported by roughly half of residents, with 27 percent saying the Hidalgo government is doing a good job, and 23 percent saying that more should be done. Ms. Hidalgo is supporting a protégé and fellow Socialist, Rémi Féraud, in the 2026 mayoral election. Mr. Féraud said he plans to continue with Ms. Hidalgo’s transportation policies.

In direct response to Mr. Varry’s death, France’s transportation minister, François Durovray, created a new “mission against violence to protect all users of the road.” This month, a pro-cycling group that Mr. Varry belonged to, Paris en Selle, or Paris

in the Saddle, announced it had drawn up a list of 200 intersections and 25 major roads that they say are in urgent need of changes to make them safer.

Ms. Hidalgo said that she hoped that someplace in Paris would be named in Mr. Varry's honor, adding him to the list of martyrs and heroes whose names already adorn the city streets.

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