

1. Opinions



Sustainable motility

October 2015

Vivre à l'ère de la transition mobilitaire

As a researcher of the *Living in the Mobility Transition* project, I have been thinking about new ways of unpacking the so-called “mobility transitions”, over the past six months. Last month, both at the Royal Geographical Society and the Cosmobilities/T2M annual conferences, I came forward with some ideas, although these are still (very) preliminary and incipient.

By Andre Novoa

As a researcher of the *Living in the Mobility Transition* project, I have been thinking about new ways of unpacking the so-called “mobility transitions”, over the past six months. Last month, both at the Royal Geographical Society and the Cosmobilities/T2M annual conferences, I came forward with some ideas, although these are still (very) preliminary and incipient.

I introduced the notion of “sustainable motility”. According to my readings and findings, one of the aspects that stands out in this field of studies is a focus either on technology (services, infrastructures, etc.), efficiency (efficiency of services, of fuels, etc.) and/or on the actual movement of people. This theoretical and analytical bias has ruled out a more incisive focus on other dimensions, such as the social and cultural aspects of mobility transitions. I believe that a model based on the concept of sustainable motility can override this lack, borrowing a more multifaceted tool of analysis to this area of expertise. But, first, let us consider what I mean by sustainable motility.

Sustainable motility is a recast of Vincent Kaufman’s concept of motility, a central piece of his renowned work *Re-thinking mobility* (2002). Drawing upon his theory, sustainable motility could be defined as the capacity of a person to be sustainably mobile, or more precisely, as the way in which an individual appropriates what is possible in the domain of sustainable mobility and puts this potential to use for his or her activities. In other words, sustainable motility refers to the individual, and collective (when assessed together), array of possibilities for moving through sustainable forms of mobility. It is the consideration of being sustainably mobile even before mobility takes place, and to assert the consequences and ramifications of such consideration in what regards the adding (or subtracting) of quality of life to the individuals involved. So, how could this be important to the study of mobility transitions? Why should it be?

In the first place, I believe that sustainable motility could prove itself worth to grasp the distribution of potentials of sustainable mobility across a given context. Sustainable motility could be measured with a group of five variables (these variables should be perceived, at this stage, as preliminary and provisory: (a) the distance to one or more sustainable transport services, (b) the coverage, in terms of distance, of these services (especially, if they serve commuting and daily practices of mobility), (c) the time efficiency of such services in comparison to non-sustainable forms of dislocation, (d) the accessibility of these services, namely in what concerns affordability and (e) the amount of available active transportation infrastructures (this variable should pay attention to spatial planning and land-use). Each one of these variables should score from one to five, one being “very poor”, two “poor”, three “good”, four “very good” and five “excellent”. This means that each one of the variables suggested has to be broken down into tangible and concrete measures. Consider the following table.

| | Very Poor | Poor | Good | Very Good | Excellent |
|------------|------------------|----------------|-------------|------------------|------------------|
| (a) | > 2km | > 1km | > 500m | > 200m | < 200m |
| (b) | < 20% | 20% - 40% | 40% - 60% | 60% - 80% | > 80% |
| (c) | 2x slower | Slower | Same | Faster | 2x faster |
| (d) | Too expensive | More expensive | Same | Cheaper than | Free /td> |
| (e) | Nothing | Insufficient | Few | Some | Many |

Figure 1. Model for variables.

A result would then output. I believe that this measurement could be important to evaluate the distribution of potentials of sustainable mobility across a pre-determined geography. It could be a viable tool to assess the justice and equality of access of certain mobility services as it would allow for a visualisation of who has the highest potentials, of which parts within a city the sustainable services are concentrated in, where the potentials of movement are the lowest and to evaluate whether there are significant differences in and across districts. The model could be used, thus, with a multi-scalar perspective. (1) The first scale of analysis would be that of the individual. For instance, the model could be used to compare two individuals. These individuals may live close to each other or in opposite parts of the same city. (2) The second scale of analysis would be that of the district (or borough, or other such administrative divisions). By making an average of different sustainable motilities of two or more districts, possibly sampling the scores of circa ten individuals that live spread out across each one of them, comparisons between the potentials for sustainable mobility of these districts could be made, highlighting areas that should be prioritised and others that already have satisfactory results. (3) A third scale of analysis would be that of the city. The sustainable motility of a given city could be attained by making a weighted average of the city’s districts combined motility results. Comparisons between several cities could, then, be made.

But there is a second reason why I consider a model based on sustainable motility to be valuable. We now walk into a much more subjective realm. Such a reason is underpinned by the following question: what to do after the results? I believe that we should delve into understanding the social and cultural dimensions of mobility transitions. In fact, the question above unfolds into many others. Who is capitalising their potentials? Who is not? Why is a certain individual capitalising, or not capitalising, his or her sustainable motility? How is this being achieved? In answering these questions, the social and cultural dimensions of mobility transitions, and as a consequence of mobility regimes, need to be considered. It is a much more subjective realm, wherein dimensions of affection, cultural attachments, symbolic value of practices, representations, and so forth, come at stake.

Allow me to illustrate. Consider two women. The first is a middle-aged woman who works as a maid in a given middle to high-class suburbia. A new Bus Rapid Transit was built connecting her house to her job in less than 30 minutes. She could also take the train, but it would take much longer (walking distances are longer), even though it would be slightly cheaper. Her potential to sustainable mobility is quite significant and she does make use of it with the BRT service. She is, thus, capitalising her potential to move in terms of time efficiency (rather than money efficiency with the train system). Now, consider the woman for whom the maid works for. This woman, who works as an executive in a tech company, also has access to the BRT system and the train. Both would take longer than a car to take her to the company, although not significantly, and it would be much more affordable. Let us assume, then, that her sustainable motility would be comparable to that of the maid. However, this woman decides to maintain the practice of using the car to work, thus making very little use of her potential. This practice would probably be underpinned by the fact that the car is a source of symbolic value, whilst the BRT is seen as a service that is mainly used to transport low-class people. To this extent then, it is a cultural attribution of value that is hindering the second woman to putting her motility to use for her daily activities, namely the practice of commuting. Naturally, this is a very simplistic and caricatural example. It is just meant to provide an example of the types of analysis that could be drawn.

So, in the end, why use the concept of sustainable motility? For two major reasons, I suggest. In the first place, because it could force policy-makers and analysts to consider not the actual mobility of people, but rather the potential for mobility, centring the debate more on people and less on the numbers of targets and goals to be achieved. In a way, it opens the door for a less econometric perspective on mobility transitions. This could be of paramount importance to recast policy-making in this realm. Focusing attention not on individuals' mobility, but rather on bestowing individuals with the capacity to be sustainably mobile, regardless of whether they use it or not, could implicate new directions in policy-making, much more focused on people's expectations and behaviours, and less on the immediate impact of infrastructures and regulations. Furthermore, it would probably mean that dimensions of a cultural and social nature were to be reconsidered in policy-making, something that is frequently excluded from the equation.

The second reason has to do with putting themes of social justice and equality on the spotlight. Sustainable motility might offer a door into understanding who are the individuals who have the most potential for sustainable mobility and where these potentials are the most concentrated in. That is, an analysis based on sustainable motility could allow for the grasping of the distribution of capitals of mobility. How are these capitals being physically and geographically distributed? Who are the social classes where these are most visible? What social groups have the most potential? Examining the distribution of capitals could then lead to understand the processes of accumulation and capitalisation of such potentials, that is, understanding how a symbolic value is appropriate by some, but not others, and how individuals are capable to accumulating these potentials, regardless of whether they are using them or not. This special emphasis on justice is something often marginalised in "mobility transitions" debates. Sustainable motility, as a concept and a tool of analysis, might prove itself useful in this regard.

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

Motility

En savoir plus x

Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

Other publications



Did Covid cause public transport to grind to a halt?

Annelise Avril, David Henny



Demobility. Back to the roots

Bruno Marzloff



Time, leisure and mobility

Benjamin Pradel