

1. Videos

The injunction to mobility

By
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Christophe Mincke, who studied the emergence of mobility ideology in *La société sans répit* (2019, La Sorbonne), investigates the idea of mobility as a social injunction. In a society where mobility has become an end in itself, where being constantly in motion is the norm, what room is left for each individual's aspirations? And, finally, is the ultramobility of the 21st century a source of liberation or constraint?

The question of how we relate to mobility evolves over time. I focused on the transition, in the 1960s, between an industrial society and a post-modern or post-industrial society.

The modern industrial society is a society that is tremendously mobile and that places great importance on mobility. It is no surprise that this is the society that invented trains, planes and transatlantic liners... It is also the society that invented the 100m race, and that eventually created Concord. Clearly, there is an ever-present imaginary of speed and mobility.

The hypothesis I've developed is one of a society in which mobility has become an end in itself - it is no longer a means to achieve a goal. Mobility is a good in and of itself. Just look at the number of people nowadays who are digital nomads, look at how public discourse and advertising continuously sell the idea that being simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, constantly on the move, is a good lifestyle etc.

At that point, we're no longer in a system that says: "You were at point A, you're going to point B." We're in a system that says: "You have to constantly be on the move, because movement is life, it is good, it is vitality."

The relationship that we have to space and time evolves. We formalized the mobility ideal, which is this injunction to mobility, this promotion of mobility in and of itself. We thought about how to characterize it, in order to make this concept a useful one for the social sciences. We divided it into four imperatives: activity, activation, participation and adaptation.

Activity is the imperative to which we are almost all subjected, to be active at all times – in our private lives, in our professional lives, in the evening, in the morning. All the time. We have to be active. Even when we retire, we don't just rest and go fishing, we become active senior citizens. And when we're children, before ever entering an active life, we are already required to learn languages, to do sports, to perform a thousand extracurricular activities... It's like this in all aspects of life: it is an injunction which is really a prohibition of rest.

Second imperative: activation. Being active is not enough.

You have to get yourself moving and not wait on others or on an external command to become activated. This is a command that is often directed at those who receive government welfare, who are expected to be proactive. They are told: “You need to look for work, you have to get training, you have to build a professional project.”

What does projecting yourself mean? This is the third imperative, the imperative of participation. It's not enough to work on your own. You are expected to participate in collective projects. The form taken by the collectivization of activity is not a strict hierarchy, it is not the army, it is not discipline. It's become the collective project. It is a relatively horizontal system in which a group of people is recruited and is an important resource. These projects are obviously temporary projects. That is the very definition of a project.

You don't have a career. You have professional projects. And when one comes to an end, you're expected to find another one. People nowadays are ideally flexible and resilient, because they have to bounce from project to project. This is how life is presented. There are projects that come to an end, and the value of a person is demonstrated by his or her ability to bounce back from that finished project and to find a new project to initiate or join.

The fourth imperative: the contemporary individual needs to be able to adapt. This is the imperative of adaptation. We hear calls for flexibility, innovation, resilience, self-questioning... This is typically an imperative that weighs on individuals who manage many projects in parallel. The phone rings, it's my wife: I move from a professional attitude to a familial one. This was not something that happened at work before.

What we are seeing here is the need to constantly juggle a whole series of concurrent projects. The idea that life is a succession of projects implies that we have to adapt each time. Because in every project, we are met with new actors, we don't necessarily have the same function, or the same mission.

Capitalism is a system based on production. Logically, with a productivist mindset, you want the machine to never stop. That's why we invented night shifts and machines, because that way work never stops.

Capitalism comes with a kind of obsession with downtime and a desire to be constantly productive and active. That is what lean management is today: identify points of slow production and make it the workers' responsibility to eliminate these bottlenecks.

This way of prohibiting rest has spread outside of factories and schools, outside of places of discipline. Today, there is a general idea that rest is bad. We stigmatize unemployed people – the very same people of whom we have nothing to demand in terms of production.

When, for example, we fill up our children's schedules, we are spreading the idea that rest is harmful. That is why we now have psychologists claiming that being bored is important. Boredom is educational. But it's a problem because we don't have the framework for thinking about it today.

The geographical and social consequences of the injunction to mobility are countless. In terms of infrastructures: the reason there are cellphone towers everywhere is only because we really need to watch some video when we're on vacation in the middle of nowhere. We can't miss that funny cat video! This idea that all places must be equivalent, that I must be able to do everything in any place, has impacts in terms of spatial planning, collective equipment, etc.

There are very important social consequences, such as blurring the lines between the different spheres of our lives. Before, we had territories: we had a territory for work, a territory for home, etc. Nowadays, these territories overlap: teleworking, e-mails being available on mobile devices, private computers being used for work and vice versa.

There are also consequences in personal terms. What happens to a society that refuses rest and expects everyone to be proactive, to constantly take initiatives and adapt? Exhaustion. Today, burn-out awaits those who run through life without ever being able to pause and say: "I have arrived." Who now can say "I have arrived"? Collapse is always very close, or in any case very probable.

We shouldn't see our relationship to mobility as being necessarily a pathological one. If we initially wanted to break down borders, it was because they were harmful and constraining. For instance, on the positive side: the question of mobility includes the issue of the free movement of people. It was one of the great European dreams in the second half of the twentieth century. Look for instance today at free roaming throughout Europe. Families who were thousands of kilometers apart and who had great trouble communicating can now talk to each other every day, send photos by Facebook, give updates, whereas before you'd only call once a month to announce the death of an aunt or the acquisition of a house. So we shouldn't think that our relationship is necessarily negative. It is a new relationship, one we will have to learn to harness of course, but one which is also positive.

Obviously, the relationship to mobility can be greatly uneven. Let's take an example: today, people are required to be mobile. A housewife raising her children spends 1h or 1h30 in public transport or in her car. Technically, beyond 1h30 of daily travel, a person is considered highly mobile. Yet who gets praised as a highly mobile person for taxiing their children to their activities? No one.

So there we see that these social inequalities remain very powerful. They are powerful in the sense that those in some categories remain unrecognized for complying with the imperative to move, while conversely others cannot be forgiven for their immobility.

Let us take another example: unemployed people are stigmatized because they are supposedly immobile. But what about people who inherit wealth? No one criticizes them. They may live off inherited wealth, but they do nothing: there is perhaps nothing more immobile than the transmission of capital by inheritance. If there is something that plays no role in social mobility, that's it, and yet no one asks any questions there. Meanwhile, we call unemployed people to ask: "What time did you get up this morning?" Wealthy inheritors can get up at noon if they want. When you're in a normative context, it is not enough to say, "I live in accordance with the norm", you have to also convince others of it and make them see its merits and possibly ignore its downsides.

There are two kinds of resistance: reactionary resistance, that is, a nostalgia for the world as it was before, saying that "we have lost it", and then there are attempts to invent more comfortable or more satisfying ways to live with mobility. I believe that reactionary aspect is very well illustrated by the far right, which is almost a textbook case in resistance to mobility. It is clear that compared to 30 years ago, there has been great tension around the questions of opening the borders, of migration, of outsourcing work abroad. The far right has unquestionably been the champion – and it is not the only one – in refusing all this: rebuilding borders, erecting walls if necessary, even within the EU. There is an imaginary that resists, an imaginary that is very linked to the question of identity, because these mobilities are cultural contacts and interactions, mixed couples, stories of expatriations and migrations, etc. And clearly the question of identity bothers national communities who end up wondering: "Who are we? How to differentiate between us and them?"

Beside that, there are attempts to build a relationship to mobility which doesn't hark back to the past: "Mobility is good, it can be an asset, but it has to be handled with caution, like everything." For example, the movements to slow things down: slow-food, slow-science, etc. These are movements that are not at all for immobility, but that say "careful, being constantly on the move - why not - but allow yourself time to adapt, give yourself time to reflect and think about what you do." I think these are attempts to reinvent a particular relationship to mobility, and attempts to rethink mobility.

It is somewhat inevitable that our mobilities will have to be justified once again. Why? Because we are realizing that mobility has a cost, including a gigantic environmental cost. The climate issue is going to become so pressing that at some point it will be necessary to have very good reasons for emitting CO2.

This question, why do we move about? Or why do we make things come to us? Or why do we make information come to us? This question will have to be asked again, because at some point, we will realize that mobility cannot be infinite, and that we have a limited quota of sustainable mobility. We will need to choose between acceptable and non-acceptable mobilities, between those that are possible and impossible. And then we'll come back to the question of meaning: why do we travel, at the end of the day? Is it really worth it?

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

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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

Teleworking

The remote performance of a salaried activity outside of the company's premises, at home or in a third place during normal working hours and requiring access to telecommunication tools.

En savoir plus x



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