

1. Research notes



Dialogue on mobility between F. Dureau, P. Lannoy, J.-P. Orfeuill and T. Ramadier. 2 : A multidisciplinary perspective

Research notes

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In the second part of the round table held for the 16th edition of the MSFS symposium “Spatial Mobilities, Methodologies for Data Collection and Analysis,” Françoise Dureau, Pierre Lannoy, Jean-Pierre Orfeuill and Thierry Ramadier discussed, from the vantage point of their own specialty, how researchers from different scientific disciplines collaborate. What makes interdisciplinarity in mobilities research in France possible, and what are the obstacles?

Research participants

- Françoise Dureau
- Pierre Lannoy
- Jean-Pierre Orfeuill
- Thierry Ramadier

Discussions presented by Laurent Cailly and Nicolas Oppenchain

This round table was held as part of the research Ending automobile dependence (periurban and rural mobility). The first part is available: Dialogue on mobility between F. Dureau, P. Lannoy, J.-P. Orfeuill and T. Ramadier. 1 : The origins of a field.

Nicolas Oppenchain: We will be looking at the question of inter-disciplinary dynamics in the study of mobility. You have all collaborated with researchers from other disciplines and some of you have led cross-disciplinary research teams. Could you go back to the conditions for these disciplinary exchanges, the difficulties you may have encountered, and more generally what you think of the lack of a department dedicated to mobility studies or urban studies in France?

A disciplinary anchoring... but not real exchanges between disciplines

Françoise Dureau: For my part, I don't think we need an urban studies department to do urban research. I think it's an aberration to build disciplinary subfields like they do in the English-speaking world. If we look at what has happened in French urban research over the last forty years, we can clearly see how and why there have been places for debate, real exchanges, like the socio-economic network for habitat on the issue of housing¹. When it was created, it worked and it fostered a lot of exchanges between social sciences disciplines. On this point, we shouldn't forget that the work produced by researchers is often commissioned. It was the public commission on housing that enabled the creation of this network and the subsequent exchanges between sociology, anthropology, geography and demography. This is one of the positive effects of commissioned research: you end up in a room with people who don't come from your area of expertise and you exchange. As a matter of fact, if I were to name a few researchers who are part of this network, I don't think anyone would know precisely what discipline they belong to. With author like Jean-Pierre Lévy, half the time people are mistaken about his disciplinary affiliation – the same goes for Catherine Bonvalet. In the end, there may be ways of conducting research that promote exchanges, and others that hinder them. For example, today, with the policy of excellence, I believe that everything is designed to turn people against each other: you have to be better than your neighbor, than another team in your lab, than other research units, etc. Similarly, while there is a general call for more interdisciplinarity, in reality the avenues for publication are currently segmented by discipline. I think that this reemergence of disciplines in France is also linked to political positions: for example, the LRU law in 2008 (the law on the freedoms and responsibilities of universities) focused more on the university side than on the research institutes, thus lending more weight to academic disciplines. As a result, we are faced with a paradox: there is a discourse that would like us to have more interdisciplinarity, but the reality doesn't facilitate it.

Method transfers that are particularly fruitful

Nevertheless, during the last forty years there have been transfers between disciplines, especially at the methodological level, which have had very important effects on the production of knowledge, for instance on residential mobility. As such, it wasn't demography that invented the biographical approach to mobility, anthropologists had been using life histories for a very long time, but at some point demographers began undertaking biographical surveys on large samples, respecting the rules of the art of their discipline, in particular statistical representativeness, and developing adequate analytical tools to process the data. For me, this is a prime example of a transfer from one discipline to another, one that cannot be denied. And we may think that this approach would be beneficial to the study of other types of mobility. Seeing daily mobility over a whole life, with the acquisition or loss of skills and know-how, would probably be a somewhat novel way of analyzing daily mobility practices.

So I don't agree with the idea that "we are competent in all social sciences and as a geographer I could do sociology or anthropology properly." However, reading what anthropologists and sociologists have produced, and trying to make use of that in relation to geographical questions, yes, I fully agree. For example, what interests me in spatial mobilities is how they relate to spatial transformations, which is typically a question for geographers.

Exchanges that have epistemological conditions

Thierry Ramadier: I agree with Françoise Dureau on this point: to have interdisciplinarity you have to rely upon your own discipline, otherwise we lose the very idea of discipline. But it seems to me that the main point for exchanging between disciplines is the epistemological dimension: what epistemological link can there be between our disciplines? If we ignore this question, we will find it very difficult to discuss, to imagine methods, to analyze, to describe. I'll take an example: in the so-called "movement

period” (from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, see the first part of the round table), during which mobility was seen as being derived from an individual need, psychology invited itself and was invited into this research. But not all psychologists were invited: only those who imagined a rational psychology, whose epistemological foundations were compatible with those of econometricians. Psychology illustrated the idea of limited rationality, by showing how people’s mobility choices are based on subjective dimensions, such as distance distortion. Another example: on the question of modal change, the economists’ assumption was that individuals compare travel costs, but it was quickly realized that people who use cars don’t know the cost of public transport. In these different examples, economists can talk with psychologists because they share the same epistemology, that of limited rationality. On the other hand, articles such as those by Serge Moscovici ² (1959) or Françoise Askevis ³ (1985) were discarded because they were, at that moment in time, on another epistemological plane and they approached mobilities in a different way.

The second element that I think is important about interdisciplinary exchanges is the effort made by each researcher to get accustomed to the scientific challenges of the other disciplines. I am not talking about becoming versed and knowledgeable in all the practices of another discipline, but about understanding the fundamentals of the collaborating researcher’s thought-process. The point isn’t to become a sociologist when you are a geographer or psychologist, but to understand at a minimum the scientific issues of the other discipline, such as the process of interviewing in sociology. From that point onwards, I think that exchanges are possible and of course that there are multiple ways of doing interdisciplinarity.

Internal differences within disciplines

Pierre Lannoy: I would add something that goes in that direction, but which clarifies what is meant by interdisciplinarity. It seems to me that recent cross-disciplinary exchanges about mobility are related to the desire to open up a Pandora’s box in the understanding of mobility, in the sociological sense of understanding, that is to say, trying to uncover the reasons and mechanisms that underlie this activity. That’s the whole point of the mobility turn: to understand what motivates travel, of all kinds. The different disciplines open this Pandora’s box with their own tools, with their own histories, their own habits, but all researchers share an implicit principle: to understand the meaning of these mobilities.

However, researchers do not always share the same implicit principle. On this point, there are divisions not only between disciplines, but also within them. I don’t think disciplines are homogeneous, at least not in sociology. Based on what Thierry Ramadier just said, we see that there are internal differences within disciplines, that we can call epistemologies or ontological positions, that is, “how do we conceive of reality?” and “what is important to study?”. These positions influence the objects, scales and interests of research. For example, for some English-speaking ethnographers of mobility, their interest isn’t the transformation of space as it is for geographers, but rather the diversity of contemporary lifestyles. As a result, they’ll study the lives of people who spend their time on planes or in nightclubs, for instance, to see how their movements operate within these spaces. Yet these different epistemological positions, which don’t necessarily belong strictly to one discipline but can be common to several, mean that there may be some form of irreducibility in how different researchers dealing with mobility can work together.

Customizable interdisciplinarity

Jean-Pierre Orfeuil: I think that on the issue of interdisciplinarity there is also a question of rhythm. When we say “working together,” it doesn’t necessarily mean “working together every morning.” For example, in the field of daily mobility, I was part of the ATP (Programmed Technical Action) on “socio-economy transport,” along with psychologists, engineers, etc. We learned a lot from one another, but we only saw each other once or twice a year. It was the same idea with the finalized research programs of PUCA (Urban Planning Architecture Plan) and it didn’t work too badly. The important thing isn’t to say “we’re going to build cross-disciplinary teams,” but to ask “are we open to what others have to say?” That’s the first point. The second point that I think is very important is that we all work on the same

thing: people. And if you ask people whether their behavior belongs to sociology, ecology, ethology, ethnology, economics, or engineering, they will either tell you that they don't understand the question, or that it's all at once. And this makes sense, because their practices respond to a mixture of instrumental rationalities, other types of rationality, etc. A third key point is the goal of the research, that is, the question or problem that drives the research. This central question will also influence how open the research is to other disciplines. And finally, the last point, in my view, is that research has a huge responsibility in contemporary public debate. As I see it, the academic world is, at present, the last sphere where speech can be free and constructed. It is basically the last bastion of a form of constructed thought, which the press has virtually lost and political powers have somewhat neglected. In this context, researchers have a strong responsibility to produce work that is understandable to all. In that respect, I'm not entirely convinced when I see more and more so-called "scientific" articles where researchers are only speaking to other researchers.

Beyond disciplines: a common paradigmatic background...

Laurent Cailly: Let me pick up on two things that Pierre Lannoy said. First of all, the mobility turn: was that not a moment that saw the construction of a common paradigmatic foundation? I believe this construction was structured around three things: first, the comprehensive approach, linked in part to questions of agency, the recognition of forces and motives underlying an actor's actions; second, a systemic approach to mobility, with authors such as Vincent Kaufmann in sociology, or R my Knafou in geography, who question the relationship between residential mobility, daily mobility, migration, etc.; and third, it was also the moment when the idea of generalized mobility appeared in different social spheres, such as the sphere of work, as Chiapello and Boltanski aptly described in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. I wonder whether this moment didn't move the boundaries within disciplines by reinforcing intra-disciplinary heterogeneity. For example, in geography today, there are still very different ways of dealing with mobility. And for a geographer like me who works on mobility to understand the diversity of lifestyles and socio-spatial dynamics, I feel closer to Fran oise Dureau or some urban sociologists who work on this issue of living modes, than to certain very quantitative geographers who work on mobility as traffic systems. This should therefore lead us to wonder whether transactions between disciplines aren't becoming more important than forms of disciplinary unity and coherence.

... And common questions!

Pierre Lannoy: I'll answer in two stages. It seems to me, on the one hand, that the central idea of the mobility turn - i.e. interrogating how we understand the social, individual, symbolic and cultural underpinnings of mobility - leads necessarily to opening doors between different types of mobility, regardless of methods used. However, each discipline may not have the tools to go further than that, hence the need for cross-disciplinary collaborations. On the other hand, I think that the idea of a generalized mobility can be understood in two ways. The first meaning of generalized mobility is the fact that different forms of mobility, movement, circulation and instability affect all dimensions of social life. That is, everything changes: statuses change, institutions change, residential questions change, etc. Mobility then becomes a central ideology, the foundation of contemporary life. This is the basis for research done in line with John Urry's work. The other version of generalized mobility is the issue of inequality. Does everyone move the same way? Does everyone have the same resources to respond to this mobility injunction? This, of course, leads to long debates about individual levels of resources, whether or not people choose their mobility, their immobility, etc.

Acknowledging mobility as an interdisciplinary object

Fran oise Dureau: I don't think we should spend too much time debating whether or not we should have more interdisciplinarity: our objects are recognized as being interdisciplinary, we are in this room representing a variety of disciplines, and we are here to talk to each other. I'm not convinced we need to prolong the debate on the "why and how". Let's just do it! Let's acknowledge and enact the position we

had from the start, which is to say that spatial mobility or migration is a multidisciplinary object that we have every interest in sharing.

I would still like to recall the central point, mentioned by Jean-Pierre Orfeuil and which is the research question I ask myself, the one that drives me to study forms of spatial mobility. This question has many implications in terms of methodology: studying mobility to understand spatial dynamics requires things in terms of sample design, which have many methodological consequences. And I think that it's on these questions and issues, which aren't the result of a given disciplinary affiliation, that we should make progress a priority.

Interdisciplinarity: a renewal of questions and objects...

Thierry Ramadier: This issue of research questions is indeed central. It allows us to move beyond institutional dynamics, which remain very much linked to disciplines, since institutions were built around disciplines. But these common questions that we are going to ask ourselves, are they a starting point for an interdisciplinary approach? Aren't they also sometimes a point of arrival for interdisciplinarity, in the sense that such interdisciplinarity is a means of renewing the way in which we question mobility as an object of research? Françoise Dureau spoke, for example, about the issue of housing: how did the question of housing go, in the 1990s with the work of Catherine Bonvalet, from being a consumer good to an object that encapsulates a family history? We approach the subject matter of housing completely differently, and we are therefore able to talk to other researchers with whom we couldn't previously talk when we still saw housing as a consumer good. I believe that interdisciplinarity allows us to change the questions we raise about the object. This is important because it stops us from falling into routines with our questionings. I take the somewhat caricatural example of the work done on modal change: walking more, favoring soft modes, etc. If we compare the research done today with what was done in the 1970s on the levers of transition from cars to public transport, we find exactly the same reasons, exactly the same questions, except that on the one hand the problematization was structured around energy in the economic sense of the word, i.e. "to save energy," whereas nowadays it is done more from an ecological standpoint. But at the end of the day, the way we deal with these transitions or levers of change is exactly the same. Instead, I believe that interdisciplinarity could allow us to go further and offer renewed understanding of the transitions from one mode of transport to another.

Françoise Dureau: I am convinced that interdisciplinary practice allows research topics to evolve and that mobility, as a subject matter, lends itself well to interdisciplinarity. I also think that multidisciplinary research may lead to different research issues and questions. At some point, even if my ultimate goal is to understand urban dynamics, I need to be able to observe mobility practices correctly at different time scales, and for that I need people whose very focus is understanding these practices. However, I think that for sociologists, the main objective is to start from mobility to understand societal dynamics. What's important isn't that the research questions be diverse, but that they be explicit. That's why I was saying that what bothers me when people talk about mobility - while in fact referring in practice to something much narrower, i.e. one specific form of mobility - is that it is neither scientific nor rigorous (see the first part of the round table). We have to be explicit: the first thing is to say "why are we studying mobility?" and, from there, work together for parts of the journey. For example, I didn't know about environmental psychologists before I met Thierry Ramadier and Sandrine Depeau; then, at one point, I thought, "Oh yes, it's important to understand this and that." But it was primarily in relation to my own problem, and I do the same with anthropologists.

... and a promising adventure.

Jean-Pierre Orfeuil: The researchers who helped change and shape how we view mobility - in the sense of transport - were almost all people who moved from one discipline to another. They were half this, half that. And to promote exchanges, there are of course universities, but there are also institutions, and we can only hope there will be more of these. The organizers of the symposium managed to get

the support of the Mobile Lives Forum: that is typically the kind of institution that could now come to play the same part that PUCA (Plan Urbanisme Construction Architecture) played before slowly becoming less active for several reasons including financial. After all, if these segmentation problems are a little less common in other countries, it may also be because there are more foundations in place to allow different disciplines to mix and exchange. In conclusion, let me come back to the idea of careers: if you stay completely in your discipline and on paths already ploughed, this may not be where you will make a name for yourself. If, by your own curiosity, by your own approach within different fields, you manage to establish the general theory of the link between residential mobility and daily mobility, I guarantee you, that job is yours! I would even suggest, being a little opportunistic, that choosing to go down a path that has been less explored by others will ultimately bear more fruit. This is also the spirit of research: to be carried along by a spirit of curiosity, to move forward, to connect. Perhaps, after all, our institutions are holding us back. If I look at mobility, which I see as both an individual phenomenon and a collective phenomenon, I want to say to young researchers today: "Go into the fields that have been less explored and that you deem legitimate, and this may not be the worst way to find your place in the sun."

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Notes

1 The REHAL network (for "REcherche HABitat-Logement", or Habitiat-Housing Research) brings together French researchers (university lecturers and researchers, researchers from public scientific and technical institutions - CNRS - PhD students) working on habitat and housing. <https://blogs.univ-tlse2.fr/rehal/le-rehal/>

2 Moscovisci S., « La résistance à la mobilité géographique dans les expériences de reconversion », in Sociologie du travail, Seuil, n° 59, 24-36, 1959.

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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

Residential mobility

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

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

Associated Thematics :

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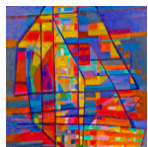
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