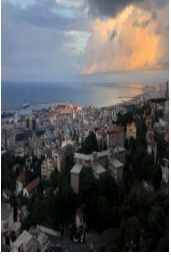


1. Southern Diaries



Urban mobility in Algiers: An overview of the sociological research

04 November 2020

Africa

Research on mobility issues emerged in Algeria with the creation of the Laboratory for Socio-Anthropological Analysis of Territorial Development (LASADET, Algiers 2). Its director, Professor Madani Safar Zitoun, reviews the work carried out within the laboratory, the evolution of mobility issues in Algeria and the specificities of social science research at the University of Algiers.

Research participants

- Madani Safar Zitoun

ALGÉRIE





Introduction, presentation of the laboratory

As part of the research framework provided by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, the LASADET lab (Laboratory for Socio-Anthropological Analysis of Territorial Development) has helped enhance social science research on issues relating mainly to urban sociology and anthropology since its inception in 2012. More specifically, research teams have examined urban mobilities as a dimension of social life linking different urban issues.

LASADET lab unites efforts of four interdisciplinary research teams working on different topics within the University of Algiers 2.

The first topic concerns the production of urban marginality as both a spatial and social fact. Mobility here is addressed firstly as a resource that is leveraged in the migration strategies of families when they settle in marginal neighborhoods of the capital, and secondly as a mechanism for how the term “poor” is used in the urban space to signal a “threat” to the established order in the context of rehousing policies.

The second research topic focuses on residential mobility as an explanatory principle for the new dynamics involved in the reconstruction of social ties in the old central districts or the newly inhabited peripheries of Algiers. The third topic addresses “The place and status of the religious in the city” with a focus on mobility in terms of relative proximity to mosques in the neighborhoods of Algiers. The aim was to show to what extent the location of these religious institutions, but also the nature of the religious discourses delivered every Friday by the imams, led people to make trips beyond the boundaries of urban neighborhoods.

The fourth topic is the circulation of public resources between the city and the countryside from the point of view of their social reception by local populations. It addresses how the connectedness or isolation of rural communities in several parts of the country affects how they benefit from the local development programs initiated by public authorities. This analysis tests the assumption that access to financial resources available through local development programs implemented by the government or by international donors is largely dependent on access to the means of mobility of goods and people.

The final topic deals with how traditional communities of Zaouïa followers (or religious brotherhoods) are renewed in their historical settlement regions (the highlands and medium-sized cities of the South-West). Through this project, the team questions how these brotherhoods, through processes of populating the country’s inland cities coupled with new forms of political rooting, have helped completely renew the forms of allegiance to traditional local notabilities. ¹

The laboratory has been run by Professor Madani Safar Zitoun since 2012 and includes sixteen university lecturers and researchers and eighteen PhD students, supported by five other teachers and researchers who are experienced thesis supervisors.

The evolution and current situation of residential mobilities

Interest in the sociological dimension of mobility predates the creation of the laboratory in 2012. Prior to that, Madani Safar Zitoun and the other founding members had already carried out a number of investigations on the subject. These include: the document "Urban Mobilities in Greater Algiers: Evolutions and Forecasts,"² which provided an overview of issues pertaining to residential and daily mobility in relation to the evolution of urban planning and urbanization in the city of Algiers; the 2005 study for the Ministry of Land Development and Environment on the Oued Smar landfill, showing that there existed models of "community"³ mobilities; as well as other works on the impact of mobility in the construction of social ties in the neighborhoods of Algiers.⁴

These works echo the analyses developed three years earlier by Nassima Driss⁵, who already described the city of Algiers as a city "of intense movement," but they are completely different to the numerous studies and publications on mobility in Algiers since the country's independence.

These latter papers don't deviate from the traditional methodologies and theories on mobility as described by Alain Bourdin who wrote that "in the sociological tradition, mobility exists in only two definitions: as a geographical migration, first applied to nomadic populations then to international migration; and as social mobility," based on a definition of society as "a set of positions between which people can move with more or less limitations."⁶ From this perspective, residential mobilities have been studied as effects of global factors, such as historical ones (the time of the country's independence, for instance, with the departure of European populations and their replacement by local populations), economic ones (internal migration, rural exodus) and other "holistic" factors.

In this vein, the sociological understanding of these phenomena was constrained by the limits described by Vincent Kaufmann in his 2007 essay, namely "1) considering different forms of mobility as independent from each other, 2) ignoring the interactions between these forms, 3) focusing the notion of mobility on the geography of movement and not on the mobile agent, 4) forgetting temporalities and finally 5) the neglect of the sociology of transport,"⁷ as well as more local limitations that stem mainly from an essentialist conception of urban integration.

In these holistic approaches to mobility, the social agents i.e. the urban dwellers, whether originally from the city or newly arrived from rural villages, were people who inhabited places filled with civilizing virtues (the old neighborhoods of Algiers). They didn't exist as "competent" agents, but as inheritors of a rural essence, of some stubborn rurality.⁸ Research had remained within the comfortable bounds of cultural approaches,⁹ denying other possible types of causality¹⁰ and more importantly ignoring agency.

It took a few more years, through the implementation of new international research programs by the laboratory's first team led by Professor Safar Zitoun, for the first research results to enhance our understanding of the relationship between processes of residential mobility - whether voluntary or involuntary - and processes by which local identities are constructed. Surveys conducted in 2008 under the PRUD program¹¹ as well as those carried out under the ANR project¹² led by Nora Semmoud enabled a greater understanding of the tenuous relationship between mobility strategies and the symbolic reconstruction processes of urban identities.

Impact of residential mobility on daily mobility

Sociological and urban-anthropological research on residential mobility has gradually moved from a holistic level to a more microsociological level more attentive to the processes of urban construction through mobility. These studies show how residential mobilities, whether forced or desired, lead to the production of new systems of daily mobility, because inhabitants must solve the problem of reaching often remote workplaces, as well as the city with its economic, social and symbolic centrality.

The impact of residential mobilities on daily mobilities can't simply be measured through the effects of uprooting, as some older studies¹³ may suggest. An issue that unquestionably deserves to be analyzed is the struggle to remain rooted to places and neighborhoods in the contemporary Algerian city and especially in Algiers. This city has constantly been reshaped by powerful movements of people coming to settle here from around the country and by great flows of residential displacement caused by the government's rehousing policies.

The relationship of the inhabitants of Algiers with their living space, based on an unprecedented and massive movement to reclaim the "European" city by the Algerian people during the country's independence in 1962, has since evolved in often contradictory and antagonistic directions. The frenzy of this initial recapture¹⁴, which drew the inhabitants of the so-called "Muslim"¹⁵ peripheral neighborhoods to the higher-quality, central districts abandoned by the *pieds-noirs* (French nationals born in North African colonies), gave way to a short phase of residential stability, which was then quickly replaced by a new frenzy of residential change following the legal liberation of all vacant property in 1981.¹⁶

Within a decade, this new real estate market paved the way for profound reclassification processes of the Algerian populations into locations that was governed by speculative market dynamics, reinforcing daily mobilities even more than before and increasing the distance between living spaces and workplaces¹⁷. So much so that by the early 2010s, Algiers had a completely fragmented and disintegrated social landscape, exacerbating the two contradictory trends observed in previous decades: on the one hand, the "villagization" or "communitarianization" of residential installations, and on the other, the breakdown of the urban fabric. This produced enclosed areas where communitarian groups reinforced dictatorships of neighborhood proximity and traditional conformism, as well as trends of individualistic retraction into private residences and apartments located in large collective housing complexes.

Recent statistics on population relocation since 2014 show large-scale centrifugal movements, away from central neighborhoods towards the peripheries. In the space of five years (from 2014 to 2018), more than 600,000 people (representing 155,000 families) were subject to involuntary displacement from precarious housing sites (slums and other fragile buildings) to new collective housing estates located in very peripheral locations. This made the mobility systems between housing and workplaces more complex and created new problems for the inhabitants, insofar as the choice of new residential settlements was made by the local authorities (the wilaya), not according to their accessibility but to the availability of land plots.

From a sociological point of view, a new and radical phenomenon has appeared since the government's implementation of large-scale rehousing operations that bring together, on the same site, whole communities from different slums who don't know each other. This situation brought into question the validity of the findings from studies conducted in the 2000s. How must we rethink the processes by which new forms of urban segregation appear in the context of new housing estates that are isolated and enclaved, as well as the causal relationship between strong communitarian groups living in close proximity and urban violence and insecurity?

In this context LASADET launched a new research project (currently being validated) aimed at documenting the extent of residential displacement by mapping the places of deportation and relocation, and revealing the complex responses of the inhabitants of these new neighborhoods to their exclusion from daily mobility through their inclusion in residential normality. The new PhDs being undertaken at the laboratory ¹⁸ will further develop methodological and conceptual frameworks to observe these changes in residential mobility processes: the research can thus study how these processes are driven by what Bourdieu calls ¹⁹ trends of fusion (strategies of family groups) and fission (laws of the market), and also question the resulting mobility strategies for the women of Algiers.

Place, state of play, specificities of mobility research in Algiers

What is specific about the mobility research performed at the LASADET lab, a research laboratory in urban sociology and anthropology, can be understood this way: we consider mobility as a "social phenomenon," in the words of Marcel Mauss. This is not a new idea, as Alain Bourdin wrote that "all urban sociology is built around mobility." It has, however, been picked apart and reduced to its simplest expression by competing approaches. A quick review of the country's research trends on mobility has shown that in recent years specialized expertise has developed in this field, thanks to the work of geographers, urban planners and economists working with various institutions, laboratories and universities around the country.

While being necessarily selective, we can identify the following major research themes:

- the evolution of urban transport systems and networks, particularly in the capital, by comparing the supply of networks and new means of public transport with social demand, expressed in demographic terms and other social indicators;
- the analysis and evaluation of public transport policies;
- the analysis of market deregulation and how people respond to deficits in the public transport supply by implementing alternative solutions (DIY transport, private companies, etc.);
- the analysis of how the mobility behaviors of city dwellers were reorganized by the introduction of new means of transport with exclusive rights of way (metro and tram), with special attention paid to "modal shifts";
- paying special attention to the problems of unequal consumption, especially gendered, of mobility resources by the users of transport systems.

This latter point - a promising and innovative research imperative - has largely guided the work stemming from new questions developed in Aline Delatte's study in the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa) on public transport users ²⁰, with the LASADET laboratory being an active partner in conducting focus group surveys in the city of Algiers.

It should be noted, however, that despite the current proliferation of academic work, including unpublished theses and dissertations constituting a fairly substantial stock of references and information, research on the issue of mobility remains trapped in departmental boundaries and university silos. Algerian researchers remain very disconnected and "specialized," not reading their respective papers or sharing their knowledge, and often expressing contempt for and rejection of multidisciplinary approaches. The fact that most of the grey literature (i.e. doctoral theses) is written in Arabic and that social science journals are mostly published in that language also helps explain why these works are poorly shared internally and scarcely disseminated internationally. In addition to the traditional disciplinary silos that are already extremely hard to break down, there are linguistic boundaries which are becoming increasingly insurmountable. Generations of bilingual "transmitters" between French and Arabic, these teacher-researchers are giving way to new generations, reinforcing the trend towards a decline in critical thinking involved in international scientific debates.

Algeria still has no specialized publication dedicated to mobility issues in their various manifestations and dimensions, and the few conferences or seminars held over the past decade were still very much constrained by the "State's doctrine," i.e. a very technical and pseudo-operational conception of scientific knowledge, and consequently of public policy.

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Notes

1 The researchers responsible for these projects are, respectively, Professors Madani Safar Zitoun, Larbi Icheboudene, Mohamed Raouf Kacimi, Brahim Benmoussa and Abdelaziz Rasmal.

- 2 Safar Zitoun M. and Tabti-Talamali A., 2009 : "Les mobilités urbaines dans l'agglomération d'Alger : évolutions et perspectives," World Bank, UNEP Blue Plan, Sophia-Antipolis, 110 pp.
- 3 See the (unpublished) report of this study by CREAD and MATE in 2011: "Étude plan de réinstallation des récupérateurs de la décharge de Oued Smar, Wilaya d'Alger" Volume 1: Results of the socio-economic study, Algiers, 61 pp. (under the direction of Madani Safar Zitoun); and Safar Zitoun Madani, 2015: "La reconversion économique des récupérateurs de la décharge d'Oued Smar (Alger) ou le dilemme communautaire in Sociétés urbaines et déchets," Éclairages internationaux, François Rabelais University Press, Tours, p. 101-121.
- 4 See Larbi Icheboudene's article, 1998: "L'intégration citadine. À propos de la difficulté d'être algérois," in La ville dans tous ses états, Revue Réflexions, Ed. Casbah, Algiers, p. 5-23.
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- 12 ANR URBAMARG Project (2013/2018) led by Nora Semmoud, EMAM, MSH of François Rabelais University, Tours.
- 13 See the classic book by Bourdieu P. and Sayad A., 1964, "Uprooting," Midnight Editions, Paris.
- 15 A term used by the colonial authorities to describe neighborhoods inhabited by the indigenous Muslim population.
- 16 This vacant property (called "Biens Vacants" in French) refers to the land and real estate that was abandoned by Europeans and that was nationalized at the country's independence in 1962 and then later ceded to their occupants in 1981.
- 17 See the study "Les mobilités urbaines dans l'agglomération d'Alger. Évolution et perspectives" by Madani Safar Zitoun and Amina Tabti-Talamali, 2009, World Bank Blue Plan, which provides an update on the decoupling of residential mobility with daily commuting mobility.
- 18 This is especially the case with the following theses: Khadija Boussaïd's "Les stratégies genrées de motilité des Algéroises" (The gendered motility strategies of women in Algiers), Samia Bentoudert's "La femme dans la cité et ses nouveaux comportements de mobilité" (Woman in the City and their new mobility behaviours), Maroua Kennouche's "L'impact des opérations de relogement sur la reconstruction du lien social dans les nouvelles cités d'habitat collectif " (The impact of rehousing operations on the reconstruction of the social link in the new collective housing estates), and Achour Abdeslam's "Les impacts du relogement sur les modes de déplacement des habitants d'un quartier de la ville de Laghouat" (The impacts of rehousing on the travel modes of the inhabitants of a neighborhood in the city of Laghoua.)
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- 20 See the two publications from this survey in the bibliography.

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.

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Motility

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Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

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