

1. Opinions



Demobility. Back to the roots

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Bruno Marzloff can be credited with a certain constancy in his determination to promote demobility and its promises. He is the author of the Demobility page in the GART's Dictionary of Mobility published in November 2021. The exercise is contrary to the values of a progress that endures. The word is often inaudible, even shocking for many. It persists, no doubt for very good reasons. This is also why we wanted to give him the floor.

We think of mobility as unlimited. But its excessive, unequal and structurally inflationary ¹ use in terms of carbon emissions, are now making it a rare commodity. This is where the concept of the commons comes in, in the respective interests of its protagonists. Mobility calls for regulations not in terms of what it allows – a freedom to come and go – but for what results from its abusive practice (congestion, pollution, artificial landscape change, etc.). Like any commons, mobility requires elaboration to define the resource, the licenses (for its production and uses) and the community. This is one of the goals pursued by La Fabrique des Mobilités, explained here by its co-founder. He outlines the paradox that better mobility means less motorization, more chosen mobilities and alternative accessibility. It is in the commons of transport (modes, shares, data, networks, hubs, etc.), in the concerted management of territories and their communities that we must look for solutions to the excesses of mobility. The Covid 19 pandemic shifted the parameters, inviting us to consider the end of an era, and go back to the roots of this commons to design what comes next: demobility.

Cars: too big to fail. Really?

The 2021 satirical film Don't Look Up, about two scientists struggling to convince people about the imminent end of the world, is a timely reminder of human carelessness. The field of mobility is also guilty of this collective irresponsibility. Cars are just like the asteroid, on an inevitable collision course with our planet, that will take only a bit more time than the six months in the movie. On the subject of climate change, cars are responsible. The automobile has devoured our daily lives, our landscapes, our cities, our lifestyles. We believed in peak oil (the depletion of oil resources), then peak car (the decline in car use) and now in "green" energies. Yet more highways are being built ², pipelines are

funneling more gas and oil than ever, motorized vehicle sales keep growing and the GHG index keeps rising.

Keep selling cars, strengthen their position, protect their invulnerability. This has been the mantra for a century and it only gets stronger as cars keep spreading. It is as if cars are too ubiquitous to disappear, too big to fail. Despite all the many, pressing and irrepressible reasons against their use, cars are overtaking the global economy by their sheer number and the infinite industries that rely on them: from advertising to insurance, from mass distribution to tourism, from public works to oil, from digital technologies to hydrogen, from rental services to the parking industry, from digital intelligence to delivery logistics. Should we shoot ourselves in the foot and forget about all that? When Tesla's market value killed the game, capitalizing more than all other industry competitors, when the delivery systems of Amazon or Alibaba generate huge amounts of carbon emissions around the world, we can measure how delusional, resilient and deleterious this sector-system is. But is it really invincible?

The mobility bullshit

Cars have helped dry up the countryside's resources and made its rural populations wholly reliant on their use. Cars have organized the spatial organization of work, each day separating homes and activities a little further, driving a disastrous urban sprawl and a peri-urban area that is diffuse and out-of-control. While there are proven alternatives, they struggle when faced with the limits imposed by cars. What is the point of drastically reducing car traffic in cities if only to clog up the peripheries, or to switch from supermarkets to online shopping, thus shifting the impact onto remote delivery services? Do we have to become Amish eco-warriors to give up our cars in the countryside? Is there no other way out?

In reality, most users³ wish for fewer unchosen mobilities³, in other words a demobility that will be possible if they can escape a state of overmobility that constrains and penalizes in many respects. We could call this mobility a bullshit mobility, like anthropologist David Graeber's bullshit jobs, i.e., a mobility presented as an unavoidable necessity in the name of employment and productivity, even championed as a guarantee of freedom of enterprise and progress. But this mobility is neither necessary, nor socially acceptable, nor ecologically sustainable. It is actually unbearable for many. The good news is that this criticism is now being voiced and heard. It is perhaps even the only topic where the concept of degrowth is explicitly accepted by the public. More specifically, surveys show just how fed-up people are with the obligations associated with cars. In France, 76% of drivers would like to be able to manage without a car, either for environmental reasons, budget or time wasted⁴. Another survey⁵ mentions that 53% of French people favor transport rationing. Organizing a shortage probably is not the solution but reducing car use must be part of the plan.

When the pandemic ignites demobility

The pandemic has given us unprecedented opportunities to imagine a radically different mobility. Covid-19 has completely disrupted global transport and weakened the hegemony of cars. At the end of 2021, new cars were down 25%, the same as in 2020 compared to 2019 (-26%)⁶. Cars are not the only victim: air travel is also collapsing, trains and public transport are struggling to pick up; meanwhile, the bicycle industry cannot keep up with demand and walking has reached levels not seen in decades. But the situation is more complicated, as cars remain important in terms of traffic. Yet one certainty did collapse in that moment: mobilities do not have to respond to a supply-driven system and do not have to be organized around cars. In the absence of alternatives, their use continues, but the car itself is losing its attractiveness and legitimacy, while new perspectives are emerging. As such, general interest can inform demand and its quest for demobility, understood as an invitation to comprehend and act in favor of less constrained mobilities. After all, 67% of French people support the concept of degrowth, as MEDEF⁷ reports (with a little surprise). In the same vein, the Citizens' Convention on Climate has

opened a path for citizen intervention. Despite many setbacks, some proposals were accepted⁸ but above all, citizens experienced the ability to make their views heard; cities and transport authorities have followed suit. A door is opening.

Teleworking, a first step towards the nearby

Covid-19 gave us the opportunity to decouple mobility from transport solutions, to focus on roots that are contained in the system of dwelling. Working and Dwelling are two sides of a triangle whose dialectic must be pierced to deconstruct the third, Traveling. With Fordism, work moved further away from home, and so mobility has since become locked in a spiral of increasing speed and distances, where transport serves as an adjustment variable for housing. In these continuously widening gaps, we saw the urbanization and the disadjustment of territorial strata. This is what caused the Yellow Vests' anger to explode. Yet telework shows us how to reverse this mechanism. Required by the circumstances of Covid-19, promoted to avoid the spread of the virus, remote work found its place and imposed itself. Other lifestyles started to organize themselves around this home-centered practice, resulting in less carbon-based travel and a more peaceful mobility; a counter-system ruled by restraint and solidarity. This is a first step in a dialectic of demobility, that can be continued with users themselves adopting or conceiving of new transport solutions.

With the pandemic, teleworking is proving to be malleable in space, time and within another geographical and social context. While this new state of delocalized work is not without its difficulties, it has two main assets: on the one hand, in terms of how workers experience it, and the public and gradually companies are getting on board; on the other, it provides a platform to imagine what comes after. The initial experiment in telework is now being administered continuously and is reactivated with each new variant, confirming the possibility of an effective choreography of remote and face-to-face operations, that is useful even beyond work (telehealth, tele-administration, social networks, etc.). There is now a robust foundation favoring a domestic polarity, encouraging a strong neighborhood fabric with short-distance, local mobility. This is a good start. But it is not enough. While proximity is a good thing, it is now hampered by the spatial fragmentation of our needs, caused by the scattering of facilities, shops and services that has been enabled by a century of mass car use.

Creating other mobilities

In the wake of the lockdown that imposed proximity and refocused us on the home, the structure of our lives is being reinvented and the architecture of our cities and territories is being redesigned. What underlying framework can be imagined between these layers of disjointed territories scattered between urban centers, to bring resources closer to households? What network hubs should be put in place to optimize transport resources? The answer to these questions is one of the conditions for creating other mobilities and another transport system. In this regard, geographers and urban planners argue for a doctrine that combines proximity, density and reliance⁹. We must open up the discussion to other fields of expertise from the social sciences, to reorganize local accessibilities and rebuild the transport system and its supports. Proximity modes (walking, cycling, e-bikes and micromobilities) are growing and received a major boost with the pandemic. They need to be supported to grow further, with retrofitting¹⁰ for instance. Collaborative and shared mobilities need the support of digital technologies to become more efficient. Here again, new commons are emerging¹¹ in response to the stranglehold of tech giants. Faced with the challenges of intermodality - i.e. the ability to combine modes of transport - the question of networks arises and brings about calls for new projects.

Decolonizing obsolete representations of mobilities to build a new narrative means changing the dominant framework, and this is necessarily a collective endeavor. It is therefore political. It is also an opportunity to ask ourselves questions about the possibility of different world, to mobilize those who invent, the users, and those who know, the experts; by convening, for instance, a Parliament for the uses of mobility¹², like the initiative called "Le fleuve qui voulait écrire. Les auditions du Parlement de

Loire” [The river that wanted to write. The hearing of the Loire Parliament]. Engaging in this dialectic is to "accept pooling divergent interests, to propose decision-making processes with multiple voices." This means a community – the Loire project established a Parliament to do this – and a common reference system, a set of indicators that translate and harmonize the assessments and their projections and give them a quantifiable basis. More and more initiatives are based on citizen mobilization. In the field of mobility, the Mobile Lives Forum stands out, by organizing a citizens' forum, in line with this process of user engagement ¹³.

Notes

1 Alternatives économiques, January 2022. Mathieu Chassignet comments on the data from INSEE's latest National Survey on the mobility of French people, 2008/2019.

2 At an average annual rate of +1.5%. 19,000 km of new roads were built between 2014 and 2019. Ministry of Ecological Transition, Key Transport Figures 2021.

3 Fabrique de la Cité/Ifop survey, January 2022.

4 Fabrique de la Cité/Ifop survey, January 2022.

5 Survey by Mobile Lives Forum/Obsoco, April 2020. Is the rationing of carbon-emitting travel a fair, effective and realistic solution? fr.forumviesmobiles.org, November 2021.

6 All indicators of the French automotive market in 2021. <https://pro.largus.fr/> January 2022.

7 In the light of an astonishing European study Le rapport au progrès [The relationship to progress] (09/2020), medef.com.

8 See Thierry Pech's Le Parlement des citoyens [The citizens' parliament] (Seuil, 2021) which provides an overview of this.

9 This term, introduced by Georges Amar (Homo mobilis. Le nouvel âge de la mobilité, éloge de la reliance [Homo mobilis. The New Age of Mobility, In Praise of Reliance], 2010) refers to the fruitful relationships to rebuild mobility.

10 Conversion of a combustion engine car to electric or of a normal bike to an e-bike.

11 See the many examples in the Fabmob wiki: <https://wiki.lafabriquedesmobilites.fr/wiki/Communs>

12 Camille de Toledo. Les liens qui libèrent, 09/2021 and at the citizen's convention Le Parlement des citoyens op.cit.

13 Tout travail mérite galère ? [All work deserves struggle?] Presentation of the proposals from the first Mobile Lives Citizen Forum. Tuesday February 8, 2022, from 12pm to 2pm at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie, in Paris

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

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

Lockdown

The lockdown measures implemented throughout 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, while varying from one country to the next, implied a major restriction on people's freedom of movement for a given period. Presented as a solution to the spread of the virus, the lockdown impacted local, interregional and international travel. By transforming the spatial and temporal dimensions of people's lifestyles, the lockdown accelerated a whole series of pre-existing trends, such as the rise of teleworking and teleshopping and the increase in walking and cycling, while also interrupting of long-distance mobility. The ambivalent experiences of the lockdown pave the way for a possible transformation of lifestyles in the future.

En savoir plus x

Mobilization

Mobilization is the action by which individuals are called upon to gather in the public space for a concerted effort, be it to express or defend a common cause or to participate in an event. In this respect, it is a social phenomenon appertaining to mobility. This article has been written by Sylvie Landriève, Dominic Villeneuve, Vincent Kaufmann and Christophe Gay.

En savoir plus x

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1 <https://anchor.fm/dixitnet/episodes/dixit-17--Gabriel-Plassat--La-piste-des-communs-e10k9pk>