

1. Tribunes



Covid-19: “The crisis allows us to radically reinvent our mobilities”

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Mobile Lives Forum

Due to Covid-19, mobility has come to a standstill almost everywhere in the world. This historic moment presents an opportunity to collectively reconsider how we move around: how do we want to travel in the future? How can we adapt our mobility system to face the social and environmental challenges ahead? For the Mobile Lives Forum, one thing is certain: we shouldn't just “go back to normal.”

In 2016, the English geographer Tim Cresswell claimed, with ominous foresight, that mobility was both “the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to destroy it.” ¹ It is now precisely at a time when mobility is hindered that we are becoming fully aware of the central place that it holds in our lifestyles, our territories and our economies. Mobility is presently at the heart of the Covid-19 health crisis: many radical political decisions aimed at stemming the spread of the epidemic - unprecedented in peacetime - are forcing us to contemplate a total upheaval of our systems and values associated with travel. This remarkable and unusual experiment, which everyone will have intimately endured while in lockdown, is a unique opportunity to think differently and collectively about the future.

Let's begin by acknowledging the fact that, from one end of the planet to the other, we have all been able to set aside this revered mobility of ours, enshrined in Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and fueled by the global economy, in order to save the lives of those most at risk.

As a vector of the rapid spread of the virus, our ability to travel at great speeds over great distances has also been mobilized in the effort to fight back, as evidenced by emergency transfers of equipment, medical teams or even patients, between countries and regions. The extraordinary rate at which knowledge - information, scientific advances and experiments - is shared and disseminated thanks to the global digital network also helps greatly in this effort. But all this cannot compensate for the dramatic health and

ecological impacts of mass international transport: it is clear that the current crisis has been made worse by the shortcomings of the international mobility system, which were already at the heart of the climate crisis. The unfettered explosion of air travel for tourism and business as well as the gigantic volume of merchandise shipped by sea are directly at play in this pandemic. In France especially, the struggle to supply essential goods is revealing the absurdities of the current international division of labor.

We are at present going through a complete upheaval of our habits and references. From the longest journeys to the most basic daily trips, people's movements have been the first target in measures taken to curb the spread of the contagion. People have been confined to drastically restricted spaces and their trips limited, with permits to ensure compliance: immobility is the new rule for populations that since the 1970s have been taught to embrace the values of mobility-freedom and stigmatize those who stay indoors. One welcome collateral effect is that, in big cities, noise and pollution are at their lowest level in decades. All of a sudden, people have suddenly become very aware of how much time and space - in our streets and schedules - travelling takes up in our daily lives (10 hours per week on average ²). Spaces that have been freed of traffic are now being reinvested in obviously limited but hopeful ways: people jogging safely in the middle of the road or enjoying their now peaceful balconies. But we have also been forced to abandon all those places where social life exists, our freedom to come and go and perform our chosen activities...

The crisis forces us to confront a new political debate, about what value and significance we want to give to travel. Before March 16, the richer and more educated you were, the more often, far and faster you travelled ³. The pandemic has disrupted this hierarchy with regards to movement. Now society has come to a standstill and the richest have been able to seclude themselves in second homes, most probably larger and closer to nature, while others have to keep risking their lives moving about: caregivers of course, but also all service workers (drivers, couriers, garbage collectors, food store employees, social workers, personal assistants...). We are witnessing a twofold division of the population with diametrically opposed living conditions: those under house arrest (teleworkers, unemployed people, students, children, the elderly) and those forced to travel for work.

This new hierarchy isn't without contradictions: how can we establish sanitary borders without threatening international trade? How can we limit personal contacts without shutting down all sectors of the economy? These questions are hard to tackle while still in the midst of the crisis - especially since these are transitional measures - but shouldn't this be treated as a dress rehearsal for overcoming the environmental, climate and social challenges ahead? This concrete and shared experience of the lockdown, which is shaking our whole society and the economic system upon which it is built, may be an opportunity to take more radical measures than thought possible to prepare for a desired and more sustainable future.

What mobilities and rhythms of life do we really want? These new circumstances are giving many workers a chance to experience working from home, freeing them from the constraints of daily commutes and related schedules, allowing them to profoundly rethink their relationship to work. This moment is also an opportunity to ask ourselves what living environments we wish to have, when at the beginning of the lockdown period more than a million Parisians decided to flee the dense city with its conviviality and narrow living spaces for more comfortable locations closer to nature. It's an opportunity to build territories that are both well connected and autonomous enough to be resilient in the event of a crisis.

This mobility crisis could even be the trigger to create a policy regulating fast long-distance travel, or even to think about rationing high-emission travel as an egalitarian tool to combat global warming. A few months ago, the yellow vests were already calling for higher taxation of air transport.

The Covid-19 crisis is giving us a chance to redefine - democratically this time - what kinds of movements we desire and believe are best suited to address the social and climate challenges ahead. What if the citizens of the Citizens' Convention for Climate seized this extraordinary moment to make radical proposals to get us out of the hypermobility system that is running out of breath?

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Notes

1 Ne pas dépasser la ligne !, Tim Cresswell, Mikaël Lemarchand, 2016, Mobile Lives Forum, Loco

2 2020 National Survey on Mobility and Lifestyles 2020, Mobile Lives Forum

3 2020 National Survey on Mobility and Lifestyles 2020, Mobile Lives Forum

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.

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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.

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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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Long-distance travel

Long-distance travel is variously defined, with reference to either distance, travel time, overnighing or being outside of a person's usual environment. When defined by distance (for example, over 100km), it typically accounts for the top 1-2% of trips.

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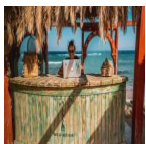
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Mobile Lives Forum



Rural mobility during the lockdown

Aurore Flipo, Nicolas Senil

1 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/publication/2016/01/19/ne-pas-depasser-ligne-3104>

2 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/project/2019/01/07/national-survey-mobility-and-lifestyles-12797>

3 <https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/project/2019/01/07/national-survey-mobility-and-lifestyles-12797>