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How the super-rich are changing our mobile world



Submitted by Forum Vies Mobiles on Thu, 12/12/2013 - 17:04

Mots clés

Transition

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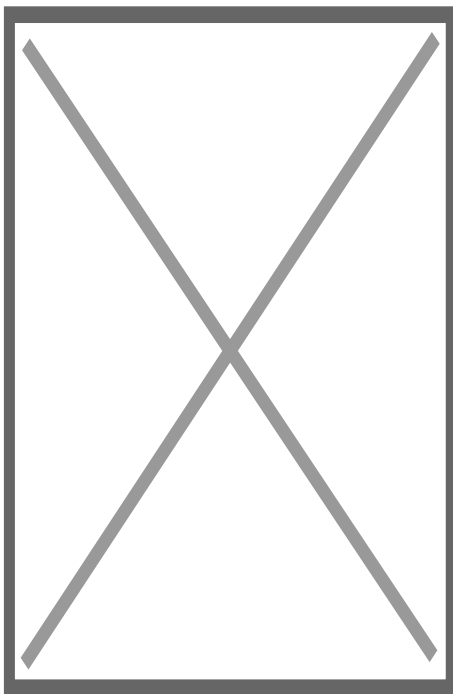
Sciences sociales

Mode de transport

Automobile

Avion

Visuel



Auteur

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Fichier vidéo

Transcription écrite

I'm going to talk today about a book entitled Elite Mobilities, which I have co-edited with my colleague Thomas Birtchnell, who is now at the Wollongong University in Australia.

A phenomenon that has been going on for three decades but which has only recently been noticed is the rise of the rich. We would miss the scale of this transformation if we were to confine our analysis - as we used to do only a decade ago - to the average gain of the top 10 per cent. To comprehend the dynamics at play here one needs to focus on the top 1 per cent, perhaps even the top 0.1 per cent.

Biggest changes in class structure at the top of the social ladder

The rise of the rich and the increase of wealth at the top of the social ladder began in the late 1970s and has been especially prominent since the mid 1990s as we can see in these figures.

During this period, sociology has had very little to say about the rich, and this is partly because studies of inequality were looking down, at the poor, while the most significant changes in class structure were taking place at the top of the social ladder. So what we propose to do in this book is to look up. In turning the focus upwards, this book is part of a small but growing number of texts that have appeared in the last few years calling for a revival of elite studies. In the book we recognize the value of these older debates, but we argue that research on elites demands a more diversified set of approaches.

The segregated mobility of the rich

In this book we identify mobilities as a useful optic for this task. And this is because mobility is central to how power is exercised and expressed in the world. We know that elites increasingly move along spaces segregated from the rest. Business aviation probably best illustrates this point. As our colleague Lucy Budd observes in the chapter that she has written for the book, between 2001 and 2011, the world's business aviation fleet increased 50 per cent from approximately 20, 000 to 31,000 units. This increase in the number of business jets has been accompanied by an expanding network of corporate terminals in commercial airports and specialized

business aviation airports such as Biggin Hill Airport in London and Le Bourget in Paris. Due to their smaller size, lower weight and minimal space requirements for landing and taking off, business jets can operate in far more airports than commercial airlines. In the United States, for example, business aviation serves ten times as many airports as all the commercial carriers combined.

This type of infrastructure constitutes one example of the fast-line corridors of globalization that facilitate comfort, convenience and smooth movement for those who can afford it. This type of infrastructure also confers status and a level of flexibility that other conventional forms of transport cannot offer. These fast-line corridors are then highly stratified and connect places which are also equally stratified. The list of these places of privilege regularly includes tax havens and financial centers in global cities, country clubs, mega-yachts, private islands, expensive mansions and luxury hotels.

Elite behaviours become the norm

So what we do in the book is we begin to examine the systems, the spaces, the practices and discourses that enable such smooth and segregated movements. But at the same time what we argue is that the idea that there is a powerful minority segregated from the rest is somehow misguided.

We suggest that elites are also part of the everyday world. Elite mobilities permeate everyday life in the sense that what becomes normal often owes its form to elites and their requirements or agendas of comfort, speed, status, productivity and flexibility. And this happens in multiple ways.

Most significantly, infrastructures are often designed, built and run first with the agendas of the few in view before the social considerations of the rest are addressed. Classic examples here include technologies and infrastructures that today symbolize democratized mobilities such as the aeroplane, the car and even the train but which in their beginnings developed as elite forms of transport.

Legitimizing high carbon lives

Elites are highly influential also in the setting of travel practices and aesthetics. This often happens through the media and the sense of taste and glamour conveyed through mobile lives. In his chapter written for this book, Anthony Elliott observes that 'the ultramobile way of living charted by globals remains a form of life conducted by only a minuscule elite (by percentage of global population). Nevertheless, it is the

mobile lifestyles of the globals that are held up as the normative ideal in popular culture and the media, and in turn mimicked by many other people.' So in influencing the design, the evolution and the location of infrastructures and the styles of travelling, the few set a certain tempo and style for the movement of the many through space. We argue that elites are powerful actors in advocating and legitimizing stratified, intensively global, high-carbon and expansionist mobilities. In making this statement we do not seek to advance a conspiracy theory arguing that the elites consciously shape or control the world. Rather the point is that elites thrive in a global economic system premised on growing circulation. Elites do show a preference for relationships that are mobile and global and in so doing they align themselves in the service of economic globalization. Therefore to question mobility-as-usual, that is, to question dominant patterns and styles of mobility – whether in relation to concerns about climate change or urban safety – is to question the affordances of the few whose capacity to lobby and influence policy is pervasive. We believe that this has significant implications for sustainability.

A powerful obstacle to the mobile transition

Elite mobilities are a powerful obstacle in the transition towards low-carbon mobilities. The rich help to perpetuate as normal patterns of high-carbon mobility that fuel their everyday lives and money-making activities. This is something that transitions theory, with its emphasis on bottom-up approaches to socio-technical innovation, has not sufficiently acknowledged. So to summarize, this increase of wealth at the top of the social ladder is being translated into power to bend rules and undermine democracy, create new spaces and infrastructures of privilege, and shape the taste and aspirations of the classes below.

What may happen in the years to come, no one knows really. But what we do know is that, despite the economic crisis, the super-rich continue to thrive, and their highly mobile lives are becoming an increasingly conspicuous feature of cities and privileged playgrounds all over the world.

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Elite's high-carbon hypermobility builds glamorous and enviable images which shape the aspirations of the world population.

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