

## 1. Crossed Perspectives



# why study super-rich mobility?

Between Javier Caletério (Sociologue)  
And Olivier Mongin (Philosophe)

17 December 2013

Shall we study the mobilities of the rich or those of the poor? How to understand the super-rich's virtual and material flows in relationship with those of the rest of the world population? Discussion between a Spanish sociologist and a French philosopher.

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## 01. Should we be more interested in the mobilities of the rich - or those of the poor?



Javier Caletrio

Private jets, luxury cars and mega-yachts are often regarded with a mixture of curiosity and indifference as expressions of the extravagant lifestyles of a sociologically irrelevant minority.

I would argue that this view of the super-rich and their mobilities is wrong. If, following scholars such as Vincent Kaufmann and others, we accept that physical mobility is not just an expression of wealth and status but also a valuable resource for their maintenance and reproduction, then we need to take those forms of mobility seriously, especially considering that the wider context in which new patterns of luxury travel are emerging is one of massive and unprecedented transfer of wealth towards the top of the social ladder.

In 2012 the top 1% of earners in the US took 22.5% of the country's total income, the highest level since records began a century ago. Figures are lower for European countries but the tendencies are the same. If we want to understand social inequality, these staggering trends need to be considered along with the situation of the poor.

The problem is that research on inequality has tended to focus on the poor while a veil of silence has shrouded the rich and their mobilities, contributing to their invisibility and impunity. Understanding the mobilities of the rich provides a context for understanding the situation of the poor.



O. M

Thinking about the mobility of the rich in this way highlights the specific drivers of contemporary globalisation; although the latter is often lauded as a way of reducing inequality (in terms of global poverty), it is more obviously a source of increasing inequalities, creating pockets of the greatest wealth and the most grinding poverty.

While it's legitimate to take into account hubs of wealth, the real question is about the relationship between that wealth, the poor and the middle class. Contrary to current opinion, there is no proof that a 'mediating' middle class is now emerging in developing countries.



Olivier Mongin

Today, understanding mobilities means also taking into account the virtual mobility that goes along with the IT revolution. However, this can also give rise to some powerful illusions – namely, that individuals

are mainly beneficiaries of this revolution and play an active role in it. However, in reality, these technological changes put pressure on people and force them to find a way adapting.

Contemporary mobilities are one of the most intangible aspects of the virtual world and, at the time, one of the most practical, hands-on aspects of the real world. But what is happening in the virtual world is also occurring in the real, physical world, where the decisive role of connections and imperative of accessibility come into play. Hence, the role of 'non-places' (by choice or obligation) and 'hyper-places', which are the specific places of all manner of connections through which one 'must go' in order to access mobilities.

As a result, the world of contemporary flows organises mobilities, which the individual - rich or poor - can appropriate, albeit more or less effectively, in both the real and the virtual world.



J. C

The relationship between physical and virtual mobilities is certainly a key issue in current processes of stratification and social mobility although an understanding of its complex dynamics is still lacking. And access is certainly a very important issue.

But, after years of promoting equality of opportunities in Europe, we may begin to realize that facilitating access is not enough, partly because mobility infrastructures are increasingly fragmented along different price bands and quality of service, and partly because those with greater economic capital are greatly advantaged in their capacity to transform this capital into cultural and social resources to benefit what are already faster and more convenient and exclusive elite mobilities.

We are reaching levels of inequality and social immobility that can only be reversed through extensive and bolder redistribution policies.

## 02. What do we learn from their mobilities?



Javier Caletrío

Globalization, with its intensifying flows of capital, goods and information across the world, has created the conditions for the emergence of a new type of elite.

Research is showing how wealth is increasingly in the hands of highly mobile mediators (especially financial mediators) whose job is to bridge multiple spheres of economic, cultural and political life (e.g. different economic sectors, institutional domains, educational, scientific and cultural arenas).

Key assets in this transnational playing field are sensitive information and privileged contacts as well as an ability to be at ease in different settings and with different people. Elites are disproportionately rich in information and contacts across diverse institutions and sectors. Research on the ultra-mobile lives of elites is still in its infancy but is set to provide an original angle on the transnational networking strategies of the wealthy and how status and privilege are currently being crafted in a global economy.

A focus on mobility is also set to provide insights on how, in an age of formal meritocracy, the rich gain legitimacy by engaging in forms of travel that convey glamour, and how they protect their wealth and privilege by erasing traces of their activities in different places and jurisdictions, often with the aim of escaping fiscal responsibility.

Mobility is a key element in a complex system that is concentrating vast wealth within a minority.



O. M

Whereas Urbanity (Simmel, Weber) encouraged links between singularities (urbanisation) and universal values (urbanity), contemporary wealth often goes hand in hand with a disjoint between the global and the local that is almost schizoid (the Emirates, Astana...).

In this, the contemporary market tends to accentuate the divide between a worldwide mobility and a large set of local identitarian closure. It's a trend that encourages the kind of successes that can prove to be merely provisional, and therefore fragile.



Olivier Mongin

Given how intertwined the two are, the mobilities of the rich and the poor help us understand that it is the mastery of the connections that determines their mobility within a world of flows that is increasingly controlled and secured.

Just as we might have spoken of a city as having several speeds – with globe-trotters who feel at home everywhere, others relegated to immobility in non-places and still others (such as the ones living in peri-urban areas in France) upon whom mobility is forced – we can also speak of globalised urbanisation at different speeds.

Which means understanding a couple of things. Firstly, the best speeds are not necessarily the fastest (see the role of maritime speed); success is actually about putting together a whole range of speeds (this is what multimodal mobility is), and being able to switch back and forth from one to the other.

To this we can add a second point – that today there is a disjuncture between the global and the local, which may serve as an indication of future mobilities trends— namely, that globalised mobilities can become cut off from local ones. This not without consequences: slogans such as “global, green, connected”, trumpeted by countries like Singapore and Dubai, overlook one word — “democracy.”



J. C

No doubt more attention should be placed on transnational mobilities and global inequalities. However, I would restrain from drawing a sharp line between what is and is not democratic. Democracies become dysfunctional when opportunities and wealth are not fairly distributed and we currently have a system that is clearly concentrating wealth in the hands of a minuscule, undeserving elite.

We should be aware of the democratic deficit being created by growing inequalities in Europe and the USA.

### 03. Does the mobility of the rich determine the more ordinary mobilities?



Javier Caletrío

I would not use the word "determine", but the rich certainly *influence* more ordinary mobilities.

Such influence is manifested, for example, in the unbundling from public networks of certain infrastructures providing higher quality and more reliable services for those who can afford them. This fracturing of the infrastructural landscape is accompanied by a shift in meanings – the more the mobilities of a few appear fast, smooth, flexible, convenient and normal, the stickier, more inconvenient, rigid and dysfunctional the (usually slower) mobilities of the rest appear. Related to this is the influence that the mobilities of the rich exert on the travel aspirations of ordinary people.

The desires to emulate elite styles of travelling, however, may gain expression in subtle and unconscious ways, for example through gradual shifts in the boundaries of what is regarded as normal, desirable and excessive. This poses serious challenges for sustainability considering that most people are reluctant to reduce their mobility on environmental grounds unless the burden is shouldered by all.

Research conducted in France showed that the richest five per cent are responsible for 50% of carbon emissions in travel. Added to this, in the US elites are opting out of commercial air travel systems and increasingly travelling in an expanding fleet of private jets. Yet the building of small airports for private jets is funded by public money and their use of the air control system is subsidized by taxes paid by travellers using commercial airlines.



O. M

Considering higher-level mobilities is all the more important for those who want to emerge from the lower-level and who are convinced by the images of success portrayed in the picture postcards of urban globalisation. Going from “the village to the town” (see *Saunders*) and trying to reach the pinnacle of success as quickly as possible are both an invitation to adopt the most extravagant models of consumption – as staged by the mobility of the rich.



There is a link between the mobilities of the rich and those of the poor which requires that we take into account the different types of governance, and thus the importance given to the informal sector.

The informal sector - which belongs neither to the market nor to the public sector - represents between 60% and 70% of the territory on a map of global urbanisation.

With regard to 'forms' of governance, three possible cases, among others, may be cited.

- The first is that of powerful states which exhibits contrasting faces: while democratic France ignores its urban fringes, its abandoned areas and its forgotten peripheries (as if they were "on the margins" of the state/city), undemocratic China controls and stigmatises its migrant populations from the inside by means of statuses introduced for this very purpose. The *hukou*, an urban residency card created in 1958, is pivotal in this.
- Along with this informal urbanisation - which is either controlled or deliberately ignored by the State - there are informal spaces (which is not to say they cohabit or coexist) near areas protected and secured by public power. A quasi-caricatural example is the juxtaposition of gated communities, condominiums and *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo.
- The third scenario is the one wherein informal areas attempt to enter the formal (legal) urban framework by becoming 'springboard districts', building on all manner of activities. An example of this are the *gecekondu* ("built overnight") districts of Istanbul.

Reflecting on these three scenarios, which underline the diverse nature of the links between the market, the State and the informal sector, gives way to two final thoughts. To begin, the suitable never goes without the unsuitable, as Michel de Certeau asserts in *L'invention du quotidien* (published in English as "The Practice of Everyday Life"). And being 'suitable' ("global, green, connected") is not enough to be democratic.

It may be nothing new, but one can conclude from all of this that the future of democracy requires that we maintain these links between the suitable and the unsuitable – as far as mobilities are concerned!



J. C

I agree that a focus on governance and informality is necessary to understanding the dynamics of inequality. It would be a mistake, however, to equate the informal with the practices and spaces of the poor and the formal with the spaces and practices of the relatively wealthier.

Elites routinely use or suspend the law to enable violation of planning controls to allow new developments, infrastructures and mobilities, and these are as informal as the favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

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Javier Caletrio

## Sociologue

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Olivier Mongin has followed a course combining philosophy, literature, anthropology and history. He is director of the Humanities review *Esprit*, and co-founded the discussion group *Les Métropolitaines*. He is likewise vice president of the think tank *La République des Idées*. A philosopher, he is author of numerous essays, including *La ville des flux*, published in 2013.

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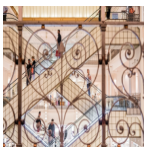


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