1.

Altermobilities

Used in 2005 by B. Marzloff, the neologism "altermobility" not only implies the idea of movement but also a new, more original relationship with time and space, one that could be defined as "a mobility that takes its time". It's an approach that was also put forward that same year in an article by E.Vergès (2005:128): "altermobility claims the right to contemplation and to a slower pace, to alternating rhythms, to the possibility of starting up and winding down."

Is travel time necessarily wasted time, something to be kept to a minimum? What if time and speed weren't always the determining factors in the choice of the mode of transport? Like the "slow food" movement, such questions represent the early stages of what could become the "slow move" movement: a different way of thinking about travel and mobility.

In subsequent years, the term altermobility was used in a different sense, one that reflected the rise of environmental concerns. Since then, without necessarily bringing into question this initial meaning of the term, altermobility – or rather altermobilities – were defined as being in opposition to the car-based society, or to put it another way, to the hegemonic and exclusive nature of the private car.

The hegemony of the private car

Today's car-based system has developed over time, driven by the democratisation of the private car. With a well-developed network and a wide range of services for users, many different types of centres (whether residential housing, employment, shopping or leisure) have grown up in areas that are solely accessible by car; described as "car-only environments" [Sheller &Urry, 2000:746]. This system also enabled travel to be individualised [Sheller &Urry, 2000]. K. Dennis and J. Urry (2009:2) describe this as a "mass system of individualised mobility".

Societies and modern urban areas, geographical and social spaces – along with different ways of life – have all been organised by and around the central role of the car. Beyond its position in this morphological evolution, the car is very deeply ingrained in people's way of life and also in the collective imagination – being seen as a symbol of autonomy, freedom and in some cases, of wealth [Kaufmann &alli., 2010]. But the car system – which excludes those who are unable to become members of this club, and which creates significant quantities of greenhouse gas emissions – is raising major social and environmental issues [Dupuy, 1999].

Developing alternative modes of transport that are complementary to car use

The response to these contemporary challenges, which involve transport in general and cars in particular, takes several forms; and four in particular: reducing the need for mobility, designing the modal choices in a different way, reducing distances by focusing on localised activities and finally, by drawing on technological innovation [Banister, 2008]. Thus, it's an issue that has a direct effect on politics, requiring new skills and approaches [Banister & Marshall, 2000].

To question altermobilities principally involves looking at the second of the four responses mentioned above, the modal choice. Can we live without cars today? Or rather, can we live with a reduced role for car travel? For what is essentially a societal question, altermobilities research offers a series of individual, micro-social responses. Who are the altermobilists? Are they born that way or do they become so? How? And why?

If the term is rarely seen today in relevant literature, similar challenges and research topics can be found in studies on "soft modes" and "non-motorised modes", or in "sustainable mobilities" or "alternative mobilities".

More specifically, any discussion of altermobilities involves looking beyond a purely binary choice between private cars and public transport. It's the reason why research on the subject is often focused on emerging modes of transport such as car-sharing, bicycles, bike-sharing or even scooters – along with the public transport options. These forms of transport are considered to be complementary, and part of a system that aims to be coherent and that doesn't completely exclude the use of the private car.

Further details

The recurring key question has to do with the motivating forces underlying the modal choice. The analyses and economic models, dominated as they are by the neo-classical paradigm, have long designated the economic rationale as the determining factor in the choice of a mode of transport [Kaufmann, 2000]. In this context, the analysis is based around the cost of travel, one that involves monetising the amount of time spent travelling.

Questioning speed as the only factor in the decision-making process

As previously mentioned, the early use of the word "altermobility" questioned the idea that speed and time should be the only factors in the modal choice. Indeed, other rationales and reasons for action can be put forward. The popular image associated with each mode of transport can also determine an individual's particular choice [Flamm, 2004]. At the same time, when opinions and actions are in a state of tension (or "cognitive dissonance" [Festinger, 1957]), social actors tend to adjust their beliefs afterwards – so as to harmonise them with their actual behaviours (which is the opposite of the usual situation of behaviours being based on convictions and ideals).Finally, the force of habit limits the chances of alternatives being considered on an equal footing with people's usual choices [Verplanken et alli., 1997].

All of these elements point to a perpetuation of the dominant form of transport, the private car. They are not irrational in themselves, but they are not part of the utilitarian view of a rational economic order. They do provide, however, a way of explaining in more detail the motivating forces underlying the modal choices and the inertia created over time.

Beyond these various, interlinked rationalities, social actors in a given place are also conditioned in their choices by contextual aspects of a geographical nature, and also by their potential for mobility. The first of these refers to the transport available and the range of possible activities that can be accessed within reach of someone's home. At the same time, the spaces being crossed during the journey will be more or less adapted to certain modes of transport [Amar, 1993]. The second one, the micro-social approach, concerns those aspects related to 'motility' [Kaufmann & alii., 2003]. Each social actor is characterised by their access to individual modes of transport (private car, scooter or motorbike, bicycle, etc), by their specific skills (such as the ability to map-read, to get directions, to know the public transport timetable and know where that transport is provided) and finally by their particular mobility plans.

Multimodal, intermodal altermobilities

Work carried out on modal choice and the modal move towards altermobilities shows the importance of all these elements in the changes witnessed in the behaviour of social actors [Kaufmann, 2000; Flamm, 2004]. Sudden changes (within a family or in employment, or by moving house) are also opportunities to effect changes in modal behaviours [Rocci, 2007; Vincent, 2008].

Altermobilities, as alternatives to the hegemony of the car, are designed to be plurimodal, i.e. multimodal (several different modes of transport used on a regular basis), or intermodal (several modes of transport used for the same journey) [Rocci, 2007; Vincent, 2008]. And it's through this ability to select from a range of modes, that it becomes possible to manage without a car [Allemand & alii., 2004]. Often, modes of transport are not in competition with each other, but are instead complementary. By extension, automobility and altermobilities shouldn't systematically be seen as being in opposition, they are not mutually exclusive. This is what we learn in particular from the disconnection observed in several urban centres between car ownership and car use [Héran & Ravalet, 2008; Vincent-Geslin, 2010].

The results of several different studies of altermobilities also show that a transition to altermobilities requires an expansion of the competences needed for travel [Allemand & alii., 2004; Flamm, 2004], Vincent-Geslin, 2008]. In societies such as ours, organised as they are around the car, doing without a car involves juggling several modes of transport according to the activity to be carried out, the timing, the places involved, etc.

Prospects for research

Today's research into altermobilities focuses mainly on modal choices. Even so – and here the first definition, with its reference to slowness, is particularly useful – it would be interesting if we could move on from just a study of alternative modes of transport to a study of altermobile ways of life, i.e. one that didn't just look at the choice of modes of transport but also looked at the rationales behind the residential location, the choice of activities, the relationship with space and time, etc.

The geography of altermobilities seems quite different from that of automobility [Bonnet & Desjeux, 2000; Dupuy, 2000] and yet it's a subject that is rarely discussed at the moment. Does being an altermobilist mean being restricted to the local area, for example? If being altermobile involves being mobile in a different way, what's the

connection with sedentariness? The most economical journey in terms of greenhouse gas emissions is actually the one that never gets taken….

Finally, it would appear useful to tackle head-on the question of the exact nature of these lifestyle and mobility mode choices – are they imposed, or are they freely chosen? Or, more precisely, to what extent are they imposed? People living in the provinces without cars are often forced by circumstances to do so [Bauvais & Espinasse, 2001], while in today's metropolitan areas, those who walk are often the underprivileged who live on the outskirts, rather than those who live in the very heart of the city and who walk because of their firmly-held beliefs about the environment.

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