

1. Dictionary

Sedentariness

By Vincent Kaufmann (Sociologue)

To be sedentary is to opt for stability and to put down roots, both social and spatial, whether by choice or not.

In contemporary western societies, sedentariness aims to avoid social and spatial change. It is the opposite of all forms of social mobility (such as a change of role , social position or job) and spatial mobility (such as daily mobility, leisure activities, moving house, travelling and emigration). Being sedentary is often something that is imposed, and leads to poverty. But it can also be a choice.

Therefore, in contemporary western societies, sedentariness is increasing, despite the fact that on average people travel further and faster in their daily lives, because the 'speed potentials' [Kaufmann 2011] provided by transport and communication systems are often used to avoid moving house, and therefore to remain socially and spatially rooted.

The result is that contemporary western societies are faced with a new paradox: we are moving around more yet becoming more sedentary. So we need to redefine what we mean by being sedentary, which no longer corresponds simply to a lack of movement.

Transport and communication methods are thus often used to cancel out the effects of travel on social life [Kaufmann 2011]. And the overwhelming attitude of those involved is very much to take advantage of that possibility. So the effect of using communication methods and motorised transport leads to a "reversibilisation" of mobility (see reversible mobilities).

It's been observed [Schneider et al, 2010] that the most irreversible kinds of movement (migration, moving house) have been substituted by more reversible kinds (daily mobility, travel). So, for example, the 'speed potentials' that transport brings allows people to live far from their place of work, and thus avoid the need to move house.

This substitution translates into a transformation of time-space temporalities from long-term to short-term. It changes the impact of movement on social relations. By travelling rather than migrating, and commuting rather than moving house, social roots and networks can more easily be maintained [Hofmeister, 2005].

Many studies have shown that the strength of social and spatial roots is accompanied by daily "hypertravel" [Schneider et al, 2002; Meissonnier, 2001]. The social network gains very few benefits from these travel experiences, however, and it remains very localised in the home town. Long-distance commuters, in particular, are like sedentary residents: people with highly localised social and spatial attachments who don't want to uproot from this stability. Long-distance commuters will take a job as long as it means they don't have to move house. Thus high-speed transport allows them to maintain their sedentary habits [Kaufmann, 2008].

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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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Sedentariness

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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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Reversible Mobilities

Reversible mobilities are forms of specific movement made possible by rapid transport network systems. They are made over long distances, with outward and return journeys that are undertaken closely together in time. They are also limited in terms of social mobility and their relationship with otherness.

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[Vincent Kaufmann](#)

Sociologue

Vincent Kaufmann, a Swiss sociologist, is one of the pioneers of mobility and inventor of the concept of motility. He is director of LaSUR at the EPFL, General Secretary of CEAT and professor of sociology and mobility analyses. He is the Mobile Lives Forum's scientific director.

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