Reversible Mobilities

By Emmanuel Ravalet (Socio-économiste)

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.

Reversible mobilities are a new category of mobility behaviours; a category that is part of the dynamics of globalisation and the development of the "modern" and "cosmopolitan" nature of our societies [Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2004; Bonss & Kesselring, 2004].

This kind of mobility has been made possible by the development of high-speed transport provided by motorway systems, high-speed train lines and the growth in the number of air connections. "Speed and communication networks have […] given mobility a reversible property that profoundly alters the uses to which it can be put" [Vincent-Geslin & Ortar, 2012:40]. The direct effect of these transport systems is not only to enable long-distance travel, but also to indirectly strengthen metropolitan integration in certain areas [Garmendia & alii., 2011].

Indeed, return journeys in rapid succession on a daily or weekly basis cancel out the distance travelled, and bring together areas that could not have been linked in the past [Vincent-Geslin & Kaufmann, 2012].

Long-distance, short-term and low social mobility

The three common denominators of all these so-called reversible mobilities are long distances, short time periods and low social mobility. Long-distance commuting is the most widespread form of reversible mobility (involving 4% to 11% of the workforce, depending on the European country being studied) [Schneider & Meil, 2008]. Other forms include dual residency for work reasons, job-related travel to distant destinations and tourists who cover long distances for short breaks.

It is different from so-called "irreversible" mobilities such as migration or moving house. The irreversibility in the latter case arises from the absence of a return journey, along with the definitive nature of that one-way trip– and the social dislocation that follows as a result. It also excludes short-distance commuting for a different reason: the spatial scale in which it operates. Even if the cyclical nature of short-distance commuting suggests a certain social reversibility, spatial reversibility doesn't really apply since those journeys are assumed to take place within a single space, and a single living area.

This reversible use of space and its networks can be the result of a trade-off: people accept longer journeys to get to work so as to avoid having to migrate or move house [Wiel, 1999]. "Commuting is often a way to avoid moving [author's note: relocating or

migrating] and to combine gainful employments of both partners and family life" [Limmer & Schneider, 2008:17].

Strengthened social roots

The paradox of reversible mobilities is that long journeys allow people to maintain very strong local roots, indeed these may be the reason behind it. Long-distance commuting can be a way for people to remain close to their families and friends. Taking on a second home during the week so as to be able to hold down a job far from the main home allows the worker's spouse and children to remain rooted. So the actual "change" associated with long-distance travelling can be seen as limited (the role and social status remain the same, while contact with otherness is at a low level). The idea is that there's an investment and an attachment that are both limited within the transport used and the distant destination; and that all of this is conducted within short timeframes.

This is reflected in the figure of the businessman who travels a great deal but who has few dealings with otherness, from within his hotel room or office [Montulet, 2009]. Thus the theory of reversible mobilities asserts that a long-distance journey does not necessarily involve any significant change for the individual. Spatial and social fluidity do not always go hand in hand [Kaufmann, 2005].

In these extreme conditions, the connections to otherness and to change probably cover a broader range, and could be the subject of complementary studies. For L. Belton Chevallier [2009] these situations assume the coexistence of social relationships, some of them established during travel time or in the distant area being visited on a regular basis. "Reversible or daily mobilities are the medium of ultramodern social links, more numerous, more selective, and more centred on the individual. In doing so, they demonstrate the fluidity of social links; not only in terms of their great capacity for unravelling, but also in their ability to be reconstructed at any time or place." [Belton Chevallier, 2009:112].

Further details and discussion

If these new kinds of spatial mobility are still marginal (13% of 25 to 54-year-olds in Switzerland, 18% in Germany and 15% in France [Schneider &Meil, 2008]), they seem to have increased markedly in recent years, which justifies examining and analysing the phenomenon.

This is true of short-term, long-distance leisure activities (city-break shopping, for example), which has not really been discuss ed in scientific papers. Same-day return trips are left out of the tourism-mobility category and its observation methods… [Lejoux, 2007]. More studies have been done on mobility in the field of work [Limmer, 2004; Limmer& Schneider, 2008; Bertaux-Wiame, 2006; Legrand C. & Ortar N., 2008; Vignal, 2011]. There are a number of lessons to be learned from the relevant literature. Yet mobilities linked to professional activities are not always reversible, and vice versa.

Reversible mobilities: from being constrained to being valued

Within the subject there is debate about the degree of constraint involved in people's choice of reversible mobility. Less than half of the Germans aged between 20 and 59 who were studied by N. Schneider, R. Limmer and K. Ruckdeschel [Limmer, 2004] became mobile on their own initiative (i.e. having a large degree of autonom y in the decision). For

the rest of them, mobility was shown to be an inevitable choice, or one taken in a situation of ambivalence between the free and forced-choice aspects. In this perspective, outside constraints linked to employment and the housing market are often the determining factors. Similarly, reversible mobility is often shown to be linked to unstable situations, whether social, professional or family-related [Belton Chevallier, 2009].

Reversible mobilities are often the result of trade-offs between work and private life. The hardness of the resulting commuting tends to be more tolerable for those who believe their mobility enables them to have a successful career [Vincent-Geslin& Kaufmann, 2012]. In these cases, even when reversible mobility is a constraint, it is generally appreciated by individuals and those around them.

A major mobility capital

These situations demand a major mobility capital for those involved, not only in terms of access but also in terms of skills and projects [Kaufmann, 2005]. The daily constraints that are involved (significant travel time budgets, long-distance separation from family members, or the financial restraints of the cost of transport or having two places to live) reveal the inequalities associated with reversible mobilities. There can be interpersonal differences and inequalities in the availability of effective, large-scale mobility, but also in the way it is experienced and conditioned by different lifestyles, particularly if children are involved, by income and by level of education [Schneider & Collet, 2010].

Research prospects

The rise of mobile lifestyles?

How sustainable are these large-scale mobilities? That's the question posed in the book Mobilité sans racine [Mobility without roots] in a dual form; "mobility as a stage, or a lifestyle?" [Vincent-Geslin & Kaufmann, 2012]. We don't have sufficient hindsight yet to answer with any certainty, but it would appear these practices are already going beyond the purely temporary, due to the rationales that caused them to emerge in the first place and the various forms they have assumed. The fact that they are taking shape, for largely macroeconomic and macrosocial reasons, the degree to which they are valued by the people who use them, the socialisation of mobility which they involve, and the fact that these practices have now become so routine clearly raise the question of whether we are seeing the rise of mobile lifestyles. On the other hand, some people with poor motility have a negative view of the situation and would like to change it. It remains to be seen if they can do so.

Methodological challenges

This still relatively unexplored subject offers considerable opportunities for research. The hybrid temporalities and complex spatialisation of reversible mobilities brings major methodological challenges, especially in understanding and assessing the size of the phenomenon: what are the sources? What scale is it on? At the same time, the degree of uncertainty that accompanies any prospective analysis of these behaviours means that it will have to be carried out over a sustained period of time. If young working people seem to be overrepresented in the reversible-mobile population, should we interpret that as being due to their position in the cycle of life or as a generational effect? What does the future hold for reversible mobilities?

At the same time, the way that people in this situation use their travel time and the way they establish themselves in a variety of different locations both merit further investigation.

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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.

En savoir plus x

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En savoir plus x

Long-distance travel

Long-distance travel is variously defined, with reference to either distance, travel time, overnighting 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.

En savoir plus x

Motility

Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles

Theories

- Concepts

Emmanuel Ravalet

Socio-économiste

Emmanuel Ravalet is an engineer and a doctor in Economics, and had PhD in Urban Studies. He works at the Institute of Geography and Sustainability of Lausanne University and at Mobil'Homme, where he is a founding partner. His research focuses on work-related mobility, energy consumption, new mobility services and local economic development.

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