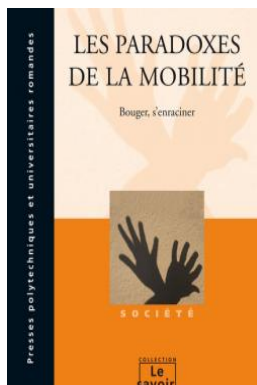


1. Essential Reading



Les paradoxes de la mobilité : bouger, s'enraciner - by Vincent Kaufmann

By Yann Dubois (Géographe)
11 December 2012

In *Les paradoxes de la mobilité: bouger, s'enraciner*, Vincent Kaufmann seeks to both highlight the ambivalence of mobility and to help define and conceptualize it in order to turn it into a tool for empirical research. To do so, the author provides an overview of mobility through several themes: travel, inequalities, urban transportation policies or the city – and ends with a series of hypotheses.

A more mobile world?

As a result of globalization, our societies are increasingly on the move and our economies increasingly interconnected. We move more, be it for work, leisure, vacation or to migrate. With the acceleration of the speed of modes of transportation and the development of telecommunications, it is not only humans that are traveling more, but goods, ideas and capital as well. As mobility, broadly speaking, touches every aspect of our society – from the shape of our cities to our daily lives – and the social sciences have until now only skimmed the surface by reducing mobility to the study of travel and transportation, certain researchers are calling for a paradigm shift towards “new mobilities” (Sheller and Urry, 2006). This “mobility turn” aims to address the multifaceted nature of mobility and understand the implications and effects.

What is mobility? Why do we move? These are the questions Vincent Kaufmann attempts to answer in this book. By way of an introduction, the author reflects on the increase in travel in recent decades and on how to do so. We travel more and more kilometers per year, with the proportion of car and plane travel on the rise. Since the 90s, we have spent more time traveling. And so on. The combination of the increase in travel and the potential offered by improved transportation and telecommunications networks has led to the emergence of new lifestyles, such as long-distance or weekly commuting. In fact, it is becoming increasingly common to work far from home. We thus try to avoid uprooting

ourselves, choosing instead to commute long distances every day or week, for a variety of reasons (local ties, attachment to a home, the plans of various family members, etc.). Speed potential is therefore used to maintain a sedentary lifestyle and minimize the effects of distance on social life, unlike moving or migration. These new practices, or “reversible mobilities,” as Kaufmann calls them, call us to rethink conventional mobility models.

Mobility: beyond movement

The author offers us a new perspective on mobility based on the works of Sorokin (1927) and sheds light on the practical and methodological implications of such a redefinition. For Kaufmann, mobility is not limited to movement in space or social change; mobility implies both a change in physical space and in social space. Therefore, according to him, it is possible to move without being mobile, if this movement does not involve a social change, a change in role, state or function, or an encounter with otherness. Moving without being mobile — one of the great paradoxes of mobility so characteristic of the modern life. According to Kaufmann, three dimensions should be considered when approaching mobility: the field of possibilities (transportation networks, job market, laws, etc.), the ability to move, or “motility” (physical capacities, skills, mobility plans, access to transportation, etc.), and movement itself (of people as well as of information or objects). In our society, mobility is now seen as a basic right, a symbol of freedom, but above all a necessity, a duty. Indeed, it is primordial to be willing and able to move for work as well as mobile in the sense of being able to adapt, rebound and change to meet the demands of today’s society. As such, we expect an unemployed person to accept a job on the other side of the country, or an executive to consent to going abroad for several months on a project. This societal requirement for mobility is not only geographic but social as well, as being mobile means being able to change. Motility - the ability to be mobile - has become an indispensable key for adapting to these demands—a resource that generates social inequalities in the same way as do income and education.

Mobility and the city

Mobility has a paradoxical effect on cities and regions. While on the one hand cities have a tendency to sprawl with the acceleration of speed (Weil, 1999) and in some ways are losing their “essence,” making it possible to live an urban lifestyle anywhere (certain authors aren’t afraid to talk about the “end of cities”) (Choay, 1994), core services, on the other hand, tend to cluster in certain cities, usually the largest. The city is not “dead”; according to Kaufmann, it remains especially conducive to mobility, as it allows people to change states or status quickly and to be constantly confronted with otherness. The city is also at the heart of public action aimed at managing mobility. In the last chapters of the book, Kaufmann discusses the inefficiency of some of the measures undertaken, especially those targeting an increase in modal share for public transportation. He notes that, through different studies, while speed has an undeniable impact on car use, the situation is not as clear regarding other modes of transportation. Thus, contrary to popular belief, even when taking public transportation is faster than driving, a large portion of the population continues to do the latter (more than 50% in Grenoble and Geneva). For a modal shift to take place, improvements in public transportation services (speed, capacity, quality) must be coupled with other measures, such as limiting access and parking in downtown areas, which public authorities rarely do. Similarly, for the author, public policies do not aptly consider actors’ motility. There is no sense promoting public transportation if it is not what city dwellers really want; you need to take into account their projects and help them develop them. Some cities, such as Basel, Zurich

and Bern, have managed to reduce traffic in their centers and limit urban sprawl by taking additional measures to improve public transportation (access and planning restrictions around well-serviced areas). These urban policies are not without their problems in so much as they encourage emigration of certain social classes, especially families and some of the more well-to-do, to the small towns around these three cities. Policies that aim to prevent certain lifestyles are inconsistent with the aspirations of many people, who themselves want the possibility of leading different lifestyles, pushing some of them to leave central areas to “escape” these limitations. The arrival of these new inhabitants in smaller towns outside of the city results in increased rents and the relegation of the more modest to areas that are underserved by public transportation services, and as such highlight the impact of the transportation policies of these cities on residential segregation, not on the urban scale but at the regionally.

Contribution to research on mobility

Vincent Kaufmann’s book captures the full extent of the ambivalence and complexity of mobility. While the author’s concept of mobility may disturb some who consider mobility as movement alone, he succeeds in convincing us that mobility is not limited to this. The book takes up one of Kaufmann’s key concepts, the notion of motility, an important contribution to the definition of mobility today, as attested to by its use above and beyond the ranks of French-speaking social sciences by authors like Kesselring (2006), Urry (2007) and Sheller (2011). With this work, Kaufmann offers us a rich panorama of mobility, its implications and the measures taken to manage it; at the same time, he helps us move beyond our preconceived notions on the matter. The hypotheses with which he closes the book open new perspectives on both mobility research and public policies. For the sake of brevity we will only mention three of them here. The first suggests that mobility is not so much synonymous with freedom as with stress - not just for the rich, who must move to further their careers, but also the poor, who are relegated to the outskirts of cities and are forced to travel long distance to get to work for lack of resources. The second point shows that individuals are not necessarily seeking to minimize their travel time, which becomes a support for various activities (reading, rest or work), revealing complex mobility practices and calling for measures to improve the quality and comfort of travel and not simply a reduction in travel time. Finally, the third thesis suggests that a “fair” transportation policy must take into account the pluralism of mobility projects; doing anything and everything to prevent the use of a given mode of transportation simply pushes those who have the means to find “loophole” strategies instead of creating a veritable modal shift.

About the author

Vincent Kaufmann is a professor of sociology at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. His research focuses mainly on mobility and urban lifestyles, as well as on transportation policies and land-use planning.

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

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.

[En savoir plus](#) x

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.

[En savoir plus](#) x

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.

[En savoir plus](#) x

Motility

[En savoir plus](#) x

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- [Living environments](#)
- [Diversity of lifestyles](#)
- [Inequalities](#)
- [Work](#)

Policies

- [Cities & Territories](#)

Theories

- [Concepts](#)
-
-



Yann Dubois

Géographe

Yann Dubois is a Doctor of Science from the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) and holds a Master's degree from the University of Neuchâtel in Geography and German studies. He wrote his doctoral thesis on mobility and borders at the Laboratory of Urban Sociology at EPFL, where he also worked as a scientific collaborator. After a two-year experience in the urban planning department of the City of La Chaux-de-Fonds (Switzerland), he now works for the Mobil'homme office and at the University of Lausanne as a scientific collaborator. His expertise and research are focused on various aspects of mobility, such as modal choice, high mobility, individual mobility potentials, urban planning & transport coordination, and more broadly urban and territorial issues.

The same author [See all publications](#)



Les sens du mouvement - by S.Allemand, F. Ascher and J. Lévy

Publication by Yann Dubois



La transition urbaine ou le passage de la ville pédestre à la ville motorisée - by Marc Wiel

Publication by Yann Dubois

To cite this publication :

Yann Dubois (11 December 2012), « Les paradoxes de la mobilité : bouger, s'enraciner - by Vincent Kaufmann », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 21 May 2025, URL:

Other publications



In the post-Covid world, have we forgotten about walking again?

Jean-Marc Offner



Geographical re-placement

Thierry Ramadier



"We need to boost public transport supply and limit car use in order to reduce our emissions by 60% within 10 years"

Jean Coldefy



Are homeless people "vagrants"?

Projet collectif SciencesPo/Architecture Bordeaux