

## 1. Essential reading



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

By Yann Dubois (Géographe)  
05 June 2013

“Les sens du mouvement”, the proceedings of a conference held in 2003, edited by Sylvain Allemand, François Ascher and Jacques Lévy, addresses the plurality of movement in general, and as it relates to urban mobilities in particular. As background, the question of the city – compact or diffuse - is discussed, along with its connections to society’s individuation and sustainable development.

---

## Dissecting Movement

Our world has always been in motion, but this movement has been accelerating over recent decades. Everything is in on the move—human beings as much as goods, capital and ideas. Mobility, defined very broadly in this work, questions and examines entire aspects of our society: our values, traditions and representations as well as our economies and our relationship to territory are all turned upside down by this increased movement. Echoing photographer Eadweard Muybridge - a pioneer of cinema who broke down the movement of a horse in motion - this work (the proceedings of a conference held in 2003) proposes to dissect mobility in all its forms. With this aim, the book is developed in four parts, each treating a specific theme: the world and society, the individual and social connection, the city and space, and transport and public policy. In this book review, we will look more specifically at François Ascher’s introduction and Jacques Lévy’s conclusion. We will also come back to the introductory section by Sylvain Allemand that sheds light on some of the debates that took place during the conference.

## Which right(s) to mobility?

In the introduction to *Les sens du mouvement: modernités et mobilités*, François Ascher contextualizes movement and the countless debates it raises. Being able to travel has become indispensable to daily life; goods, services and social relations are dispersed in space and very often require travel (or transport) over great distances. Mobility has become so essential and so “commonplace” that it is often considered a right. Ascher distinguishes two types of rights with regard to mobility: “*droit-liberté*” or “right-freedom” and “*droit-créance*” or “right-due”.

The first refers to the right to travel, which is guaranteed in Western societies. This right is an essential condition to meet the needs and expectations of individuals, whose activities stretch over vast areas. Not everyone can enjoy this right to the same extent, due to the lack of physical capacities, money or access to means of transport. These people risk isolation (in the sense of being hemmed-in) and social relegation (as *Le Breton [1]* notes in his chapter in the book), and are entitled to expect society to intervene to remedy this – this is what is meant by “right-due”. Implementing this right is complicated, since its limits need to be defined: to what extent is society willing to invest so that everyone can have the possibility to travel? Given the issues of urban sprawl and the growing demand for individuation, societies will have to find new ways of conceiving transport in order to respond to the demand for accessibility in the periphery.

## **The city and issues at stake for the transportation and storage of Goods, Information and People**

According to Ascher, cities only exist through movement; urbanization involves transporting and storing *goods*, *information* and *people*, which the author calls the GIP system. With the emergence of elevators, the Internet, private cars and even refrigerators, “new technologies” have helped modify this GIP system and, as such, influence the form of cities. The author cites three developments linked to the new GIP system: metropolization, the transformation of the accessibility system and the replacement of density by speed.

The first designates the concentration of human and material wealth in the largest cities, often at the expense of less dynamic territories, as *Veltz [2]* points out in his contribution. *Eade [3]* also addresses global cities, as does *Soja [4]*, for whom “post-metropolitan nodalities” no longer influence only their hinterlands but also have influence on a worldwide scale.

The second development, the transformation of the accessibility system, according to Ascher, reflects a paradoxical trend. For a long time, city centres were the most accessible areas, concentrating wealth, innovation and population. However, the development of the periphery - with regard to both function and demographics – is disrupting this logic; certain outlying areas are now more accessible than the city center. However, as telecommunication becomes commonplace, this lends a special value to real contact - physical co-presence – as much for leisure activities and travel as business, as *Urry [5]* emphasizes, re-endowing city centers with special meaning as good places for encounters and exchanges.

The third development, closely connected to the other two, refers to the complexification, multipolarization and diffusion of urban spaces, due, in particular, to the speed potential of the automobile. A new type of discontinuous urban space is thus emerging, interlinking the city and villages, which Ascher terms the “Metapolis”. The compact-city/diffuse-city debate, addressed by *Beaucire [6]* in his discussion, underlies these three developments. This is one of the common themes of the book; this urban sprawl inspires the dreams of those who aspire to a single-family house “in the country” and nightmares for local authorities, for who the spatial control and costs surpass their scope of action. It is also a nightmare for defenders of the environment. As Ascher points out, it is mainly climatic issues that will force us to question our urbanization models, given that we do not yet have the technological responses needed to resolve this thorny problem.

## **The need to take the spatio-temporal context into consideration**

In the conclusion, entitled *Essences du mouvement* (Essence of Movement), Jacques Lévy reminds us of the importance of comparing situations in space and time in order to understand movement. It is also crucial to take the specific contexts of movement into consideration, as can be seen in the examples from China (*Huapu [7]*) and Montreal (*Latouche [8]*) developed in the book. Lévy also demonstrates this by comparing the French and German rail systems, with the French system geared towards speed and the German one towards capacity. Instead of trying to eradicate differences in context, mentality and practices, it is more a question of using them to find suitable responses. *Smets' [9]* comment on

infrastructure is revelatory of these differences; he shows how context influences the perception of an infrastructure: a highway bridge in a city will generally be considered unsightly, while a similar structure can attract great admiration in a natural setting, as is the case for the Millau viaduct.

## **Different ways of being mobile**

*“The sense of movement is connected to the movement of sense, in other words with the change in our societies”* (p.300), whether this involves society’s individuation ( Bourdin [10]) or the relation to territory ( Haesbaert da Costa [11]). This individuation, this demand for autonomy, calls into question the foundations of our collective management of society and affects individuals’ mobility in very diverse manners. Thus, autonomy, the freedom of movement, does not necessarily solicit the automobile. According to Lévy, “strong” individuals are those who “waltz with the metrics [12]”, switching from walking to taking an airplane, in contrast with “weak” individuals, who are often obliged to use a limited number of transport means. In the same vein, individuals’ spatial capital is no longer to be conceived solely based on the distance traveled, but instead according to the way they travel. He uses the term “*métrise*”, a contraction of the words “*maîtrise*” (to master) and “*métrique*” (metrics) to express the ability to master to one’s advantage the different modes of transport, and whereby social inequalities are revealed. Mobility, therefore, is not synonymous with elite; on the contrary, as Cresswell [13] points out, without “kinetic proletarians” there are no “kinetic elites”, no businessmen without taxi drivers and cleaners.

## **Towards more sustainable mobility?**

According to Lévy, mobility is too serious and too complex for a single actor to be responsible for it, as demonstrated by the plurality of themes addressed in this book; it must be the object of cooperation between citizens, politicians and economic circles. Mobility goes beyond mere movement (all the contributions to this book appear to confirm this), and thus requires appropriate responses. However, these responses will likewise have to address the issues of pollution and the footprint that mobility is leaving on our planet. Lévy notes the emergence of ecological awareness, in particular amongst professionals — a return to the grace of density and concentration as well as a reorientation of mentalities towards more sustainable models. Massot and Orfeuill [14] speak of the “end of the automobile transition” in Western societies, giving way to a different and possibly more sustainable way of considering the city. Nevertheless, these new practices will have to take into account the question of reversibility to allow both ourselves and future generations to change our way of thinking and alter existing structures.

## **Contributing to research on mobilities**

The collective work *Les sens du mouvement* provides an account of the diversity of movements by addressing various classic mobility themes from metropolization to transport policies, including trade and freight transport. It also tackles some of the fundamental questions raised by our society in motion, such as individuation and the pollution created by and for our mobile lifestyles. On this last point, the message is clear – we need to act fast. Nevertheless, the authors’ opinions diverge on how to do this. Some suggest “making do” with and adapting peri-urban areas by making them more “sustainable” by using new technologies to lessen the negative consequences of urban sprawl. Other authors seek to combat the peri-urban by retaking possession of the city, restoring its urbanity while remaining aware of the difficulty of the task. Another debate that enlivened the conference was that of the notion of generalized mobility. Although the authors appear to agree on the fact that movement (of people, goods, etc.) has increased considerably over recent years, some of them point out that this movement needs to be seen in context, in comparison with the migrations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or international trade before 1914. Moreover, it would seem that proponents of the theory of generalized mobility do not take social and spatial inequalities sufficiently into account – not everyone is mobile, or at least not mobile in the same way. Furthermore, this conference also provided an opportunity to launch the debate on the *right to mobility*. This question provoked much discussion, and no consensus was reached by the

conference's participants. Almost ten years later, despite numerous initiatives in favour of the *right to mobility*, the inequalities and issues at stake with regard to mobility have continued to grow (Orfeuill, 2011). The debate on the *right to mobility* should not overshadow that of the *right to immobility*, as Lévy (2011) reminds us. According to him, the current climate is increasingly characterized by an injunction to mobility, where the choice to be mobile and/or how to be so is above all the preserve of the better off; in the future, the *right to immobility* should also be taken into consideration.

The aim of this conference was also to bring together scientists, policy-makers, artists and actors from the economic world on the subject of mobility. Similarly, it introduced scientists like John Urry and Tim Cresswell, until then relatively unknown in French-speaking research, as well as introducing the topic of "transport" into social sciences. By offering an overview of research on mobility, *Les sens du mouvement*, has become a work of reference. Unfortunately the format of a book review such as this does not allow for a full account of the wealth of all the contributions.

## The authors:

Sylvain Allemand is a scientific journalist. François Ascher, an urban theorist and sociologist, was a professor at the French Institute of Urbanism and President of the Scientific Board of the City on the Move Institute, and organized the colloquium on which this book is based. He died in 2009. Jacques Lévy is Professor of Geography at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. He is the author of, among other works, the *Dictionnaire de la géographie et de l'espace des sociétés* with Michel Lussault.

- 
- [1] Le Breton, E. "Mobilité, exclusion et marginalité", p.117-123
  - [2] Veltz, P. "L'économie de toutes les mobilités", p. 49-59
  - [3] Eade, J. "Vous avez dit villes globales ?", p. 198-206
  - [4] Soja, E. "Le temps des nodalités post-métropolitaines", p. 175-189
  - [5] Urry, J. "Petits mondes", p. 37-48
  - [6] Beaucire, F. "La "ville compacte" est-elle importable en France?", p. 170-174
  - [7] Huapu, L. "Politique des transports en Chine: quelles stratégies ?", p. 289-297
  - [8] Latouche, D. "La mobilité au secours de la compétitivité", p. 270-279
  - [9] Smets, M. "Le paysage contemporain des infrastructures. Le paradoxe de l'intégration", p. 249-256
  - [10] Bourdin, A. "L'individualisme à l'heure de la mobilité généralisée", p. 91-98
  - [11] Haesbaert da Costa, R. "De la déterritorialisation à la multiterritorialité", p. 69-79
  - [12] Metrics: "*means to measure and manage distance [...], metrics are a means of transport and all that goes with it*" (p.303).
  - [13] Cresswell, T. "Justice sociale et droit à la mobilité", p. 145- 153
  - [14] Massot, M.-H. and Orfeuill, J.-P. "Les mobilités urbaines dans 20 ans", p. 219-227

## 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

## 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

---

**Associated Thematics :**

**Lifestyles**

- Living environments
- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities

**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](#)



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

Publication by Yann Dubois



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

Publication by Yann Dubois

---

To cite this publication :

Yann Dubois (05 June 2013), « Les sens du mouvement - by S.Allemand, F. Ascher and J. Lévy », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 22 December 2024, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/essential-readings/846/les-sens-du-mouvement-sallemand-f-ascher-and-j-levy>