

Spatial mobility

Spatial mobility is an essential component of the way societies organise space. It has been defined in various ways, in reference to different registers of observation and conceptualisation. In its most frequent acceptation, mobility is movement or travel from one «place» to another. This movement can concern people, but also material and immaterial goods, and information. The unit of measurement naturally depends on what is travelling, and can for instance be in terms of numbers of passengers or tourists, numbers of vehicles, tonnage of commodities, volume of transactions (in dollars for instance, numbers of migrants, or baud rate per second on the Internet).

Mobility patterns of all sorts cross and mark out territories on all «scales». They cover four main complementary facets of our contemporary societies. Firstly, the mobility and leisure facet in our societies relates to long-distance commuting to work, general tourism, urban tourism or city trips, or international migrations. The information and knowledge facet of societies concerns the capture of sets of new practices in communication and research. Scientific partnerships that are set up between academic establishments or between individuals, and student and researcher mobility are good examples. The economic and financial facet of our societies shape the mobility patterns of a globalised tertiary society. This concerns, for instance, the internal flows generated by the large multinational companies between their head offices and their branches and outlets. Exchanges of goods are also good indicators of an economic society organised via a specialisation of its production system and the international division of labour. Energy is the last mobility facet in our societies, and its importance is constantly increasing, with the development of awareness about climate change and the exhaustion of energy resources. This for instance concerns gas pipeline networks and the transport of fuels such as oil.

Today the very rapid changes in our mobility patterns have led, over the last two decades, to a reappraisal of the way in which researchers frequently view mobility as actual travel across space, and of the representation and concepts that follow on from this in describing the relationships that populations entertain with their territories. In this reappraisal, sometimes referred to as the "mobility turn", the definition of mobility is thought to be too restrictive. Mobility is tending to become a whole that encompasses the movement itself, everything that precedes it, accompanies it and prolongs it (Kaufman 2002, Urry 2005, Kesselring 2006). Mobility in this perspective takes account of the strategies of the protagonists, and the virtuality of movement. It also changes the mobile person. The idea that both spaces and individuals change to become, themselves, mobile entities, pervades a large corpus of study (LÃ©vy 1999). Thus spatial mobility is more than a gap or a link between starting point and destination. It is a structuring dimension of life in society (Kaufman, Bergma, Joy 2004). This wide acceptation of mobility reflects a shift in meaning: mobility becomes a metaphor to refer to a quite different form of relationship with distance and space (Cattan 2009). In this context, near and far, here and there are no longer contrasted in a binary classification of space. In-between spaces take on meaning, immigrants and emigrants become mere migrants, starting points and destinations merge in circulatory spaces. Mobility is becoming a lifestyle that hybridises our spatial and social categories.

Numerous notions have emerged to reflect the scale of mobility phenomena. We commonly refer today to "nomad" societies (Knafou 1999), or networked societies (Castells 1996, Wittel 2001). The image of the archipelago is also used to represent these mobile spatial dynamics where line and tunnel effects are prominent. Notions such as "circulatory territories" (Tarrus 1994) also express effects that mobility patterns might have on territories and societies, and flow and fluidity are frequently used to describe the impact of mobility on our societies (Bauman 2000).

While it is widely recognised that spaces form «networks», little research has fully integrated the realities of exchanges and mobility patterns so as to understand the changes occurring. A change in perspective in our conceptions of territories and their development is required. Only a relational approach to territory can capture the real issues - an approach that considers territories not in terms of zone and distribution, but in terms of articulation and interdependence; an approach where territorial constructions are no longer envisaged as extents and boundaries based on proximity links woven across a continuous space, but envisaged in terms of relationships that link and connect places that are distant one from the other; an approach in which territories are reticulated, topological constructions. In this perspective, the image of the rhizome propounded by Gilles Deleuze (1980), representing an a-centric, non-hierarchic «system» with no organising memory, defined solely by a circulation of states, is enlightening.

Bibliographie

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