“Mobility as capital”
Sketching the arguments
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In the debate about economic and social integration, the possibilities and conditions related to geographical movement are becoming increasingly important. They are widely discussed, and people at home, at work, on holidays, etc must deal with their implementation. We hear it discussed on television, in political, economic and scientific debates, in museums, at school, and so on. In short, moving about now seems to be an important challenge in many aspects of our daily lives.

Introduction

In the debate about economic and social integration, the possibilities and conditions related to geographical movement are becoming increasingly important. They are widely discussed, and people at home, at work, on holidays, etc must deal with their implementation. We hear it discussed on television, in political, economic and scientific debates, in museums, at school, and so on. In short, moving about now seems to be an important challenge in many aspects of our daily lives.

But what is the scope of mobility? Is it about rapid travel? Long-distance? Movement on a regular basis? Cheaper travel? Is it about being able to change these “mobility parameters” as required? Being able to adapt modes of transport according to the place or the situation? Being able to change one’s way of getting around to facilitate one’s changing lifestyle? Is it a choice? In short, is it the achievement of movement and therefore the skills it requires that’s important, or is it an increasing number of ways to get around? Is it the ability to master spatio-temporal flexibility as a lifestyle that matters, or the possibility of being able to meet geographical demands that are beyond us? And as a last resort, who is concerned with all these facets of mobility? Is it researchers or engineers, hauliers, politicians or passengers, etc?
A vast research field

Social science has tried to respond to these questions by carrying out research about “mobility”. The research field is vast. It is also full of questions. The first one is about the nature of mobility and defining its outline: is it a resource or a potential? If so, can we envisage it in terms of “mobility capital”?

The following two texts do not look at mobility and the questions it raises in the same way. Their aim is to enable the reader to share in the academic debate on the subject. And finally, by clarifying their position on the idea of “mobility” and “mobility capital”, they present a controversial view of what seems the most obvious and established fact: geographical mobility.

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Simon Borja, a PhD student in political science at the Political Studies Institute (IEP), Strasbourg, is a member of the European Political Strategy Group (GSPE), Strasbour. Having spent several years working on time and space issues, he turned his attention to mobility as the new orthodoxy after collaborating initially with Christian de Montlibert, and then subsequently with Thierry Ramadier and Guillaume Courty.

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To start this discussion of "mobility capital", we would like to consider the status of mobility in western societies. Our position will be to show why "mobility" is not a mainspring of social success but rather is an effect produced by the different forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) that are possessed by an individual who moves in a geographic space. Seeing "mobility" as an "effect of capital" is to view it as a collective social construction whose consequences depend upon the initial conditions (of the context).

By viewing it as capital, we believe that researchers are being both dismissive and neglectful about one of the characteristics of mobility: it exists because it is produced by "spatial orders", which are becoming increasingly numerous and apparently "innocent". Yet as a result of this appearance being created (to want our mobility is to want what's best for us), the most efficient forms of domination we have today are further strengthened. By being mobile, individuals are not amassing any capital, they are simply submitting themselves to these orders and – paradoxically – most of them remain in the same social, economic and spatial situation they occupied before. To unravel the underlying rationales and to understand the place in our society of "mobility capital", it's important to start from the principle that "mobility" isn't just a phenomenon to be analysed. Or, more precisely, "mobility" has become more than just one phenomenon, and is now a triad: part concept, part collective belief and part component of the dominant ideology.
Why begin with this clarification? Because researchers who start work on what they believe to be only a single phenomenon soon need to realise that this precise phenomenon, i.e. mobility, is actually the result of a joint production involving several groups of people: researchers, artists, experts and political figures. All have been involved, and are still involved, in giving meaning to this word. Over the course of the past century, each of them has played a part in creating what we have today. Researchers have shown the extent of the phenomenon. The artists have portrayed it. The experts and the politicians have created its instruments, while at the same time frequently issuing different orders, encouraging people to "be mobile". All of them have done this – and are continuing to do this – according to their view of what society is and what it must (or should) be. So it's illusory to think that specialists get involved in such discussions "for free", i.e. without having been requested or commissioned by anyone, or without having any "good" reason for talking about such matters [\ldots]

The question is therefore a classic one in social science terms, though it enables a specific notion to be discussed here. Does "mobility capital" enable us to avoid the assumptions of the dominant ideology?

1. A capital of what?

In the research based on "mobility capital", everything happens as if individuals have "cultural attributes" that enable them to move in a geographic space. All that's necessary therefore is to "acquire" those attributes that can be used to improve their potential for mobility. At the heart of this reasoning, we find the notions of "mobility skills" or "capability", both of which condition the "potential for mobility" rather than the geographic movement itself. These characteristics refer to a body of "know-how"/"how to do" or "behaviours"/"how to be" that are distinct from other skills. The researcher can explore these latter aspects without paying too much attention to social position or to the conditions in which these skills are learned or the way they are actually used.

Such research takes an ever more detailed and descriptive approach to movement. "Mobility" is viewed as a factor of inequality, or even a "new" form of inequality because mobility is considered as a widely accepted "social value", with no doubts being harboured about the "benefits" it can provide.

This reasoning is implicitly based on the fact that mobility is viewed as an unavoidable feature of human activity. So, for example, since mobility has a direct correlation with the precariousness of someone's economic situation, the amount of "mobility" they possess would be a factor of social inequalities among others. To us, this way of seeing things too often ignores the balance of power, and the conditions that produce these social inequalities; inequalities which influence various aspects of movement. In other words, this research is too quick to start from the principle that what decides "mobility" for one
group, is equally valid for another. However, these analytical difficulties are precisely due to the fact that mobility for one group also differs socially from another. [...]  

1.1 Is it possible to trace history with "mobility capital"?

This is the first question we will discuss from our triad. "Mobility capital" already contains the expression "mobility." [...] Put this way, the concept already expresses the very subject to be explained. And since "mobility" is a term that has appeared recently, it poses an immediate problem – that of going back in time. Indeed, it does not allow us to discover the conditions in which individuals were previously mobile. To use such a concept means running the risk of projecting onto the past everything that we recognise about mobility today. In other words, there is the risk of creating a "retrospective illusion" (to view the past through the prism of the present) or an anachronism. For example, can mobility capital be used when considering the kinds of exodus witnessed during the Second World War? Or the rural exodus experienced by industrial societies? Or travel before the emergence of tourism and holidays? Further still, it strikes us as being very difficult to combine the notion of "mobility" with even relatively recent studies, like those carried out by France’s SERC during the 1960s, for example.  

What’s known today as “mobility” was previously known as "movement" or "transport", notably in the various public policies which have provided the travel infrastructure that is at our disposal nowadays. This replacement of one word by another brings with it a number of effects on practice. Certain populations or practices have thus gained an enhanced, more positive standing than others – who have been unable to accede to this desired status of “mobility” (are travellers mobile? Are people who return to their home regions during holidays actually travelling?). All these connotations bring with them a number of orders to which people struggle to respond in a rational way. [...]  

Finally, the arrival of “mobility” in industrial societies is one of these clever fictions that prevent people from openly discussing the economic challenges, considering them instead as merely a question of the “management” of flows and of people through the medium of “relocation”. Indeed, from the 1960s onwards, a view was developed that encouraged people to travel in order to find work and to see value in having several types of “professional experience” – or even having several jobs at the same time. Another idea that gained ground during this period was that of an upward “social mobility”, courtesy not only of a university degree but also through a lifelong process of training, one that was made possible by another form of mobility above all, in this case geographical. The challenges and the constraints linked to such movement are therefore no longer the same from one era to another. Finding out whether individuals have a “mobility capital” therefore completely ignores a fundamental aspect of their lives in a specific context: their history and, in particular, the question of “how” have they spent the past decades? Can such a personal history be thought of in terms of “skills” and therefore of “mobility capital.”
1.2. Do all individuals have a mobility capital?
The notion of “mobility capital” relies too much, in our opinion, on “good practices”, on those who “shuttle”, “commute” and travel ad nauseam. In short, there are several dimensions to be taken into consideration when analysing “mobility.”

First of all, there’s the dimension relating to movement (what’s considered fast, far, or simply different?); it’s a dimension that is also reflected at an individual level, in terms of a person’s freedom, autonomy, fulfilment and transition from one stage of life to another – even though that stage may not necessarily have been “chosen” even if it has been thought about for a long time.

These initial dimensions are linked with the economic one – where the individuals join (and rejoin) the world of economic activity through their various projects, their degrees of success, their merit and their career development. All these dimensions lead to an understanding of “mobility” as a principle of personal freedom and a society where the individual gains in “autonomy”. With “the mobility”, the encouragement to travel is something that both flatters and permanently reintroduces the principles of freedom and social advancement. Finally, “mobility capital” also highlights the “lack of ability” to be flexible (i.e. the “bad” practices). [...] In fact “mobility” is a term that’s used to avoid the real question, which is “the flexibility”. In 1997, French President Jacques Chirac publicly acknowledged that he preferred “mobility” to “flexibility”. “I don’t like this word much, especially as mobility is completely obvious.” That said, is a “flexibility capital” actually needed?

The term mobility is, in fact, so ideologically linked to flexibility that we wonder whether this conclusion is nothing more than a tautology: “in today’s world of work, where flexibility is valued, mobility capital or ‘motility’ is a key resource in a professional career that aspires to an ascendant mobility.”

2. Mobility: is it really capital?
To pose this question in another, more explicit, way we would like to discuss the role of knowledge produced around “mobility capital”, bearing in mind that the aim of scientific knowledge is not to be first in the “operational” sense, but to understand and to explain the world in such a way that “operators” (managers, decision-makers, engineers) can subsequently make use of it (or not) in their activities. In this way, when it comes to “mobility capital”, are we able to create a body of knowledge that does not simply maintain the dogma and orders we discussed in the first part of this article? We’re not so sure!

2.1 Mobility: does the political issue allow science a freedom of thought?
Since the start of the 1960s, the various élites have developed a rhetoric and language, and
have designed facilities that support and defend the following principle: that it is socially worthy, economically useful and good for all concerned “to be mobile”. At the heart of this construct, one way of looking at society and the people that make it up is clearly unavoidable: these are all flows, and these flows need to be managed. The notion of flow implies selecting and indicating those who move legitimately and those whose movements are against the norm. For example, while it’s true that the value of mobility is widely glorified, some of its forms – such as migrations – also involve some of the negative aspects of movement, notably in terms of safety. At this point in the argument, the tone changes and the practices of public institutions reveal that some people’s mobility is not equal to others.

As a result, faith in mobility sometimes only lasts for a period of time. Some don’t even get the chance to experience these moments of euphoria: going into exile, moving home or travelling by following others shows the extremes of what some can impose on others. As A.-C. Wagner underlines, the mobility experienced by the “elites” is not that of the less fortunate. Furthermore, the mobility of these elites involves a reworking of urban centres – which are becoming more homogenous in order to better suit the lifestyle needs of this section of society. […]

What we want to express is contained in the following question. Why don’t mobility studies ask the research questions related to what is implicit in a particular conceptual category, i.e. “mobility” that would actually lead a priori aspects of the research itself?

Let’s take the case of “daily mobility”, a term imported into France and used by social-science researchers that became widely used during the 1970s in ministerial invitations to tender – to which researchers duly responded, albeit with a few conflicts and challenges involving the engineering community over the use of the term “movement” in their simulations. At the same time, in other debates, urban planners began asking questions about “residential mobility”. Why? And a little later, when mobility was the word on everyone’s lips – around the start of the 2000s, a debate emerged on the relationship between daily mobility and residential mobility – even though their differentiation had already been expertly solved. Again, how could this have happened?

Our concern is also therefore about the way that questions are asked about this phenomenon. Mobility is immediately placed at the centre of a person’s existence, and yet, as we have already seen, it is also imposed from outside. It’s an order, a demand, even though it is not imposed on everyone with the same intensity. By taking the centrality of the phenomenon as a given, isn’t the researcher also imposing it in the way it’s presented, just as others who have a say in such things would like to impose it in the way they organise the lives of as many people as possible? And in this “new paradigm”, what of the classic variables of sociological research (such as social trajectories)?
2.2. “Mobility”: what capital?

To finish, let’s look at a sociology question: the difficulty involved in using the notion of capital, which is perhaps as difficult to understand as that of mobility. Given that this notion derives from a concept developed by Pierre Bourdieu, we are surprised not to find the sociological aspects that are linked to capital: i.e. what Bourdieu calls the habitus, the field and the illusio.

Put simply, the questions are the following: can research explain a phenomenon by drawing up a variable that only applies to this phenomenon? Clearly, “mobility capital” would be needed for “the” mobility, just as some might believe that economical capital is needed to examine the world of work – or that a “time capital” is needed to analyse people’s relationships with time. And there is yet another potential variable. Isn’t Marx’s famous warning that "capital goes to capital" useful here? Isn’t invoking a “mobility capital” simply making the immobility of the majority invisible? What should be made of this conclusion by Hugues Lagrange, for whom there has been “a reduction of mobility [which] is neither seen nor evaluated.” This reduction would affect mainly rural communities and disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. So, presumably this capital wouldn’t be going their way? […]

So although “mobility capital” wants to be seen as a concept in the style of Pierre Bourdieu, the necessary detail is lacking. For example, what is the relationship between this mobility capital with the three other classic types of capital: social capital (i.e. the personal connections, acquaintances, family ties etc that can all be mobilised when needed); economic capital (i.e. financial resources, property, possessions etc), and cultural capital (i.e. degrees and language codes)? We all know that these three types of capital vary according to social categories and that the different fields involved (the competitive spaces, with their relevant laws and organisations) all require both knowledge and power to mobilise the necessary resources (physical strength counts for little when it comes to forging a career in the university field!). We also know that any use of these resources is based on a pre-existing disposition (internalised ways of being and of doing things that define a person’s possibilities and which are also associated with a form of capital), without there being a conscious, rational strategy. […]

In social sciences, the concept of “capital” is a “dispositional” one. It provides an understanding as to why certain individuals are more likely to behave and think in particular ways, rather than attributing certain practices to a kind of determinism that considers people simply as “robots”. The example of cultural practices (reading) is frequently examined. Analyses show that the presence of books in a parental home predisposes children (as a tendency) to read (with books forming part of an array of other variables which, taken together, reinforce this predisposition to read). However, this doesn’t mean that children whose parents do not have books will rarely or never read, but
that the relationship with reading is less certain and is based on other rationales. [...] Here, therefore, is another of our suggestions, one that is much more than a question of ownership of the subject under discussion. It's above all, the notion that people have a propensity "to be disposed to be disposed" or "to be disposed to having a disposition towards something". To illustrate the point, which may appear complex, it means that learning to do something doesn't necessarily lead to this skill actually being taken on board. Everyone whose learning has come from conventional schooling will know that not all of the available knowledge is actually taken on board. The process of learning and really taking things in depends on the individual's prior, internalised dispositions (his or her possibilities). For example, someone who has played sport since childhood is more likely to find it easier to take up a new sport than someone who, at the same time, starts sport in general – as well as a particular new sport. One of them will be disposed to be disposed to a new sporting activity, while the other will have to equip him or herself with the necessary dispositions (respiration, physical condition, lateral movement, agility, coordination, etc) that are required by this new sport.

The various relationships with places and movements are based on the same principle. Everyone is more or less disposed to having a disposition towards a place (which is reflected, for example, in the comment "I don't have a very good feeling about this kind of place") and "is disposed to having a disposition towards" movement, and travel ("I was asked to go abroad but I'd rather stay here"). By always looking for "mobility capital" we would end up losing sight of the fact that places, in terms of their value and their "attraction", rely on a predisposition to exist in the eyes of those involved. What's more, we would lose sight of the fact that these perspectives of those involved are groups’ unconscious strategies, and are based on more global social rationales.

Drawing on the propositions made by Anne-Catherine Wagner, who argues that "to move is to move one's dispositions", we are making our own assertion that the kind of "mobility" in question reveals the type and specificities of the forms of capital (cultural, economic, social and symbolic) that are available to someone. This in turn leads us to consider movement as something that is actually "carried out" by the forms of capital that a person already has available. In other words, given that a capital is only efficient in certain contexts, mobility is simply one contextual dimension among others. And it's this context that needs to be explained, rather than a capital to be explored. [...] So "mobility" is no longer geared to the presence or absence of a specific "ability", but to the greater or lesser possibility of living within the imposed norm ("mobility"), such as having the power to consider one's movements. Moving therefore has something to do with the way someone views "what is to come" for him or her. This is not however unique or specific to a particular individual, but is built up according to a social position and trajectory, and as a result, is based on the challenges and socio-spatial contexts that we
have encountered. [

In the light of this point of view, it is therefore no longer so much a question of “mobility capital” but of considering “mobility” on one hand as an “effect of forms of capital”, and on the other as a new form of domination, one that is both spatial and social at the same time.

1 Putting forward a “pluridisciplinary” piece of work usually goes along with greater value to nominative means of recognition (by rank, by name). We would like to make clear that the alphabetical order of the authors simply indicates that these people have contributed to this article in equal measure, and in an equal capacity. Our intention is to underline the fact that collective research is the basis of scientific activities.

2 Studies Service for Roads and Road Traffic, within the Roads and Road Traffic Department (DRCR) of France’s Ministry for Public Works.


5 To make references without distancing oneself from the problems raised outside of the purely scientific field requires a demand for the operationality of knowledge – since there is no further production of knowledge as such!


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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.

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With the democratisation and gradual broadening of movement and mobility possibilities, moving has become a real skill. This change, in conjunction with a growing demand for flexibility in the working environment, underlines the importance of the ability to move as a resource for social integration.

This broadening of movement and mobility possibilities is taking the form of increased options for getting around and, more generally, for leading one’s life. Social and technical innovations are constantly changing the access and skills that enable people to be mobile. For example, when certain urban services move online, it changes the conditions of access and the skills needed to use them. This is true of postal and banking services but also for transport, such as for reserving train and plane tickets, or hiring a car.

A consequence of recent social transformation

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello denounce this transformation as a new ideology of domination in “The New Spirit of Capitalism”. They argue that it challenges statutory hierarchies and that, henceforth, social mobility is expressed in projects that are constantly being updated. The challenge of progressing in a professional career has changed: it’s no longer a case of conquering a social status in a hierarchical structure, but about being able to “bounce back”, to pass from one project to the next, to “surf” from one enviable job to another in a changing environment. So, “... in a connectionist world, mobility – the capacity to move autonomously, not only in geographical space but also between people...
or within mind spaces, between ideas – is the essential quality for ‘big’ people, so that ‘small’ people find themselves characterised first and foremost by their fixity (their rigidity)” [Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 445-446].

Actually, these writers reveal that immobile people are now exploited by the mobile, who can only safeguard their mobility thanks to the immobility of others. “That’s the reason why today it is local roots and stability, paradoxically, that have become features of insecurity…” [Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999: 449]. We expect an unemployed person who finds a job an hour and a half away from home to find a mobility solution to be able to take the job. In the same way a manager who is sent to Tokyo for three months to train a team on a new system is obliged to from his company’s point of view to meet this demand, regardless of his or her personal situation (a parent in a household where both adults work, for example). After a divorce that grants joint custody of the children, the former partners are expected to live in places that are compatible with this situation.

Building on Boltanski and Chiapello’s 1999 analysis, we would like to argue that recent societal transformations have resulted in the ability to move being a means of social integration, and that it even constitutes a form of capital that isn’t simply a combination of someone’s income, educational achievement and social networks.

Each person is characterised by their propensity for geographical, economic and social mobility. Altogether these abilities are termed “motility” [Kaufmann, 2002], which is defined as all the personal characteristics that enable someone to move. This includes their physical abilities, their income, their aspirations, the social conditions that allow them access to transport and telecommunications systems, their acquired skills, such as education, driving licence, mastery of international English for travelling, and so on.

So motility refers to social conditions of access (the conditions through which it’s possible to use the range of means on offer, in the broadest sense), to a person’s skills (required in order to use these means) and also to mobility plans (effective use of what’s on offer allows the person to realise these plans). So, for example, in matters of transport, motility is the ability of a person or group of people to take over the various kinds of transport on offer. Several recent studies have enabled motility to be measured [Kaufmann, Viry, Widmer, 2009; Canzier et al, 2008; Kesselring, 2005]. While they remain exploratory in that they have not yet come up with a recognised standard of measurement, they have revealed many kinds of aptitude for movement. These are differentiated in social and spatial terms, but seem to be dimly related to income and levels of education.

Hanja Maksim [Maksim, 2011] thus showed that people on low incomes develop highly specialised kinds of motility to compensate for this economic handicap, but that these kinds don’t conform with the dominant idea of the mobile person, one that is the recognised response to contemporary western societies’ demand for flexibility. So some
motilities are approved of as contributing to social success, while other forms are not.

**A value that carries its own differentiations**

As a paradoxical ideology, mobility is not new. Even in the 1950s, for example, analysing intergenerational social mobility data, wasn’t social reproduction all too often seen as an indicator of a society’s “blockage”, while social mobility used to imply its fluidity? [Cuin, 1983]. Since its beginnings, industrial society has valued social mobility because it builds a collective momentum towards development from the desire of individuals to improve their personal socio-economic circumstances. Everyone works hard at production in the hope of improving his or her condition and social standing on the basis of one’s merit.

This conception implies two principles: the first asserts that there is individual freedom in defining and achieving social status plan; the second calls for individual equality, so that a person’s origins should not obstruct their desired progress in society. So, paradoxically, it’s an egalitarian reasoning about competition for social status, which is inherently unequal. The paradox is generally removed by establishing procedures that try to ensure a level playing field for the different actors.

The value we now put on mobility is based on the same reasoning. When it is long-distance and rapid, it typifies the idea of freedom. By this means, individuals are free to establish their desired contacts, unencumbered by spatial or temporal obstacles. This argument implies that the people who are likely to achieve the desired social status are also those who are most willing to immerse themselves in the principle of flexibility without hindrance. Thus, the distinctive characteristic of current mobility ideology is to assume, in a shift of meaning, that mobility in space necessarily facilitates a fair dividing of people on the social scale. Therefore, we would only need to ensure access to promote a fair society.

The value we now put on mobility insists that responsibility to realise potential rests with the individual, whilst denying the fact that social structures are also involved in the behaviours of mobilities. It also denies that mobility is subject to social constraint and that the opportunity to change one’s socio-economic status, which the individual should respond to through physical mobility, are just as often willing decisions as decisions by default. In this respect, the idea of mobility as the essence of liberty /freedom becomes less consistent [Montulet, 1998].

Mobility is a value that carries its own differentiations. It can be used in accordance with dominant values to acquire social status. In contrast, to disregard it or to use it against prevailing values can lead to a loss of status. In a world in which flexibility has become an economic demand, where the future is therefore highly uncertain, individual actors tend to widen their potential mobility as much as possible to lessen any undesirable changes in
their socio-economic circumstances.

Just as money refers to economic capital, knowledge and its passing down into cultural capital (in the sense of “cultivated culture”, not in its anthropological sense), and networks of relationships to social capital, so our results suggest that mobility refers to motility, in the sense of individual actors’ potential for mobility. So, if spatial mobility is essential to constructing social status, as many studies have suggested, can it not be argued that motility constitutes a capital all on its own? Individuals can have a lot or a little of it, but more importantly, they can have it in different ways.

Motility seems to be a particularly indispensable resource for overcoming the many spatial and temporal frictions experienced by each of us. We can have a little or a lot of it, and mainly we can have it in different ways. The quality of the actor’s life and that person’s chances of improving his or her social status will often depend on us. The ingenuity of the solutions considered and applied in this matter are extremely important.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Disciplines : Humanities, Social sciences, Economy, law and management

Transport mode(s) : All modes of transport

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