**Mobility**

By **Vincent Kaufmann** (Social Scientist)  
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Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

The definition of mobility is even wider because the term has multiple meanings. When geographers use the term mobility, it is to signify the idea of movement through space; they are not talking about the same thing as traffic engineers or sociologists, who use it to refer to transportation flows or social change.

Far from being a richness of language, this diversity of meanings is an obstacle to knowledge. In other words, when someone talks about mobility, we don’t know exactly what is meant: it all depends what discipline they’re coming from.

**All kinds of mobility**

According to Vincent Kaufmann, mobility is a socio-spatial phenomenon with two aspects: social change and movement through space. It combines the intention with the action, and its expressions are interlinked according to specific temporalities: minutes, hours, days and weeks for the succession of activities and roles; weeks, months and years for journeys; years and lifetimes pathways for displacements along with professional mobility and identity for migration.

Different types of mobility have reciprocal effects on each other. The types that reflect the longest periods (lifetimes) have a systematic effect on the types with short time frames. After a house move, the arrival of a child or a change of job, one’s daily mobility is different because the activities and social roles held over the course of a day have changed necessarily. A move abroad results not only in a change in daily mobility but can also lead to travels (returning to see friends and family who have stayed at home) and even to specific residential mobility (first people might move into furnished accommodation, then later buy an apartment).
In this compound idea, mobility is about individual and collective actors who have intentionality – which excludes goods and ideas – and who are liable to move about. In the same way, most long-distance communications don’t belong to the same idea of mobility because they don’t entail a person physically moving through space.

**A new way of thinking about society**

Some writers engaged in the ‘mobility turn’ go further in broadening the idea of mobility. Sociologist John Urry, in particular, thinks of mobility as a social and spatial phenomenon, but he includes within it objects, communication and ideas. Urry believes that different forms of mobility reflect all social relationships, and that they are the main organiser of the social world. He goes as far as to say that mobility should replace society as the object of study for sociologists. One of the merits of this proposal is to ensure that space becomes part of sociology. For ultimately, Urry’s critique of society consists in saying that in sociology, society is a place that is ill-defined and badly thought out. The consequence of having such a broad approach to mobility is to make it into a generic idea, no longer having an exact meaning and therefore something heuristic, both for understanding the phenomena that it is supposed to describe and as a useful concept for empirical research.

Geographer Tim Cresswell is also part of the “mobility turn” thinking. He looks at mobility in a very general way, but essentially in its spatial sense. Mobility includes all movements in space – everything from lifting your hand to migrating, from dancing to catching a bus. All movements in space made by human beings are considered to be mobility; and all are considered as social constructions.

Cresswell perceives mobility through three dimensions: observable facts (mobility as an observable movement); representations (mobility as ideas and ideology); and experiences (mobility as a way of being in the world). This conception has the advantage of defining mobility in a very clear way as all movements of the human body, what they represent and how they are experienced, but it is very broad and above all it limits itself to a vision of mobility as a passing or a movement through space, without considering mobility as change.

**Historical developments/details**

The term mobility really entered the social sciences in the 1920s with the works of Sorokin and the Chicago School. Mobility was then defined both in terms of change and movement.

In 1927 Russian researcher Pitirim Sorokin, having emigrated to the United States, published a work entitled “Social Mobility”, in which he laid the foundations for what was
to become one of the classic research areas in sociology. He defined mobility as a change of profession and identified two types of movement:

Vertical mobility, which implies a change in position on the socio-professional ladder, upwards or downwards (for example an employee who becomes his own boss).

Horizontal mobility, which describes a change in status or category without change in relative position on the social ladder (for example changing one job for another with the same qualifications and salary).

In Sorokin’s thinking, mobility could mean movement in space, but a shift in geographical space was only significant if it implied or revealed a change in social status.

The separation of urban sociology and transportation science

The Chicago School’s work in the 1920s and 1930s placed the study of mobility in a dynamic analytical framework. While the Chicago School’s work focused on the interplay between the city, its morphology and social relationships, researchers concentrated chiefly on the social system, its functioning, organization and changes. Geographical mobility, either residential or daily, came to be considered an integral part of urban living. The originality of this approach lay in the fact that mobility was seen as a factor in disorganization and destabilization and thus as a vector for change.

At the same time in the United States "transportation science" was also being developed. This was the foundation of a new tradition in urban mobility analysis entirely dedicated to movement in geographical space, and which very quickly separated itself from the ideas of sociological mobility developed by Sorokin and the Chicago School. Pierre Lannoy (see bibliography at the end of the text) shows how the fields of mobility research divided mainly over the motorcar, which was the object of research and investment by transportation science but not really pursued by the Chicago School researchers.

The emergence of transportation science was concurrent with the rapid expansion of individual motorization that began in the 1910s and 1920s in the United States, and after the Second World War in Europe. It was made indispensable by the increase in traffic flows and the need to regulate them; it was the start of traffic flow simulation tools that are still used in transport economics today. So at the dawning of the Second World War the field of mobility is already divided between sociological research, which defined mobility first and foremost as a change of position, role or social status, and transportation science, which saw it as flows in space.

From transportation science to transport economics
From the 1950s social mobility analyses focused on career paths and the intergenerational transmission of professional categories. This subject crystallised essential questions about the construction of unequal societies, such as social reproduction and the potential to ascend or descend the professional ladder. It invigorated the field of sociology, to the point where it became one of the most dynamic research fields, which was to become autonomous with regard to work on the city and the urban. In this movement sociology swept up for itself the definition of mobility as a change of status, role or position, and it has been the only discipline to retain this definition until the present day.

The now autonomous field of transportation science developed in a similar way to sociological thought on social mobility, gradually focusing on fluid, dynamics-based models, and developing its own specialized definition of mobility as movement in physical space, and particularly as flows of particles, individuals, cars, motorcycles, etc., in the space we now call the street.

From the 1950s onwards, transportation science was to undergo major development to become transport economics. Econometric modeling of the demand for transport and traffic forecasts, and its applications in engineering, progressively came to dominate transport analysis.

**Geographical approaches to mobility**

After the Second World War, geographical approaches to mobility began to develop between these two fields. They were structured around four main forms of spatial mobility in societies of the time: daily mobility, travel, residential mobility and migration. These principal forms were differentiated according to their temporality (long or short) and the spaces in which they took place (inside or outside a population basin) – see the table below.

Each of these four forms became the subject of a large amount of literature, developing its own concepts, forums and reviews – in short building itself as a research field. Once again the study of mobility split apart.

### The four principal forms of spatial mobility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Short temporalities</th>
<th>Long temporalities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily mobility</td>
<td>Residential mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within a Population life basin</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Outside a Population life basin, Travel, Migration

The concept of mobility – moving from origin to destination – remained common to all four areas. This approach combined the idea of mobility as movement with mobility as change. In fact it offered a link between these two kinds of phenomena.

This division of research into four separate areas produced considerable scientific advances, but the autonomy of the research areas it produced meant that not all the aspects could be explored.

Over the last 20 years many researchers have observed a reversal in the influence of movement on social integration. Today, paradoxically, being rooted in an area and staying put can contribute to job insecurity. There is a requirement to be socially mobile in professional life, of course, but also as a couple, for leisure and for general self-fulfilment. This mobility imperative no longer means purely functional movement through a geographical space: to be mobile doesn’t necessarily imply moving about a lot but, rather, being capable of change.

This radical social change has gradually made obsolete some of the suppositions and premises on which mobility research was developed and then divided. It makes it indispensable for us to take a more united approach to the pieces of the mobility research puzzle that have been scattered by its history.

**Why do we move? The social and spatial arguments**

To talk about flows and mobility brings us to the fundamental question of why we move about. We travel to relax and sometimes to take part in different activities, and the transit between one activity and another brings a change of role, of country even of social status. We move to set up home with a partner, then again after a divorce. Sometimes we move just for sake of moving, for example when we go for a walk. But besides these motives, when do we move in order to be mobile? And when does moving make us mobile?

As the preceding discussion shows, to understand mobility requires a substantive approach that includes both its social and spatial aspects, allowing us to reassemble the pieces of the puzzle that research, over its history, has sometimes mislaid and often scattered.
In this, the works of Michel Bassand are essential. In Spatial Mobility (1980), Michel Bassand and Marie-Claude Brulhardt laid the foundations for this approach. They saw mobility as a “total social fact”, in the Marcel Mauss sense, defining it as “any movement implying a change of state in actors or in the system”.

This definition gives mobility a quality that is both spatial and social, which gives it back its richness.

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More

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.

More

Residential mobility

Broadly speaking, residential mobility refers to a household's change of residence within a life basin.

More
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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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