

# A Social Science Approach to the Study of Mobility: An Introduction

Matteo Colleoni

**Abstract** The chapter introduces the foremost theories put forward by social sciences on daily mobility, notably in urban societies. After a preliminary part aimed at defining spatial mobility from a sociological point of view, the paper puts forward an overview of explanations related to factors associated with daily mobility and its growth, particularly following the invention and diffusion of motorised means of transport from the second half of the nineteenth century. The relationship between mobile populations and new urban morphology is dealt with in the subsequent part of the chapter aimed at describing the history of city transformations as a reflection of the evolution of mobility. The coexistence of different populations, in urban areas characterised by the increasing scattering of settlements and by the difficulty to access goods and services, it is the basis for the last group of theories, outlined in the final part of the chapter related to the issue of the relationship between mobility, accessibility and risks of social exclusion.

**Keywords** Daily mobility • Urban mobility • Motorised means of transport • Mobility time • Urban morphology • Accessibility

## 1 Introduction

The study of mobility has become an object of interest for social sciences, particularly following the invention and diffusion of motorised means of transport, from the second half of the nineteenth century. Despite societies always having been mobile, suffice to think of migration, mechanical transport changed the way that the population moved and lived, generating hitherto unknown levels of mobility. The diffusion of private mechanical means of transport gave mobility an ordinary connotation lacking in eras when travel was associated with the extraordinary aspect of

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migration or the drama of exile. The car turned mobility into a private daily activity, expanding the range of places that could be reached quickly and enabling working, consuming, purchasing and social relations in increasingly more distant, diverse contexts from the habitual ones. The presence of private mechanical mobility in societies that came about at the turn of the twentieth century was so pervasive that it has become a habit, in social sciences, to call them automobile or *automobility* societies (Urry 2000). This expression refers not only to the fact that in these societies travel is mainly by car, but also to the consequences that this has had on relationships between people and organisation of space.

Recurrent use of private transport means, together with that of the new communication technologies, has been interpreted in various ways by social sciences, in some cases highlighting the positive aspects, with reference to the expansion of exchange, opportunities for interaction, accessibility to urban resources and social inclusion (Kwan 1999; Dijst et al. 2002; Le Breton 2005; Seu 2006; Preston and Rajé 2007; Colleoni et al. 2012). In other cases, a critical interpretation prevails of the consequences that the excess of vehicular mobility has on the poor quality of urban environment (Schäfer et al. 2009), on the loss of spatial proximity in interaction and spatial-temporal references of social formations (the so-called processes of de-territorialisation, Giddens 1985; Mela 2006) or on the risks of social alienation of subjects excluded from possession and use of the car (Kenyon et al. 2002; Lucas 2004). The following pages introduce the main theories put forward by social sciences on these issues, many of which will be analysed in the papers in this book.

## 2 Spatial Mobility in Social Sciences: Definitions and Foremost Explanations

It is opportune to start this introductory review by recalling that social sciences define spatial mobility as the subjective and objective inclination to be mobile via any method with the aim of reaching the places where social activities take place. This is a fairly broad definition that includes the different forms of mobility, deliberately excluding actions that do, however, not entail physical movement inherent to the activity. Action aside, reference to the inclination is justified by the interest in seeing mobility as a property of subjects rather than a characteristic of places. This perspective sees insertion of studies by Dijst on the concept of space of action (2002) and those by Kaufmann on the capital of mobility (Kaufmann et al. 2004). The space of action shifts attention from places and services that must be reached to the possibility of the person being able to do so, where reference to the concept of potentiality refers to the possession of different kinds of individual resources. Resources that are included, together with more traditional ones (gender, age, family condition, income...), in the definition of capital of mobility proposed by Kaufmann and which will be analysed, with reference to the theme of

reversibility, in Chapter “[Putting Territory to the Test of Reversibility](#)”. According to the latter, an individual’s mobility behaviour is to be considered as the combined result of the factors that represent his mobility capital (or motility), including competences.

It is known that, of social sciences, economic sciences includes in mobility only physical travel that enables places to be reached where activities occur that generate an indirect differential benefit (or usefulness) (Musso and Burlando 1999). However, some sociologists highlight the perception that the presence of an indirect benefit represents an important, yet not always necessary, motivation for travel. Mobility can have direct usefulness simply as a result of travel for pleasure, visiting environments other than habitual ones (Flamm 2005). Otherwise there would be no explanation for tourism, which represents one of the most important forms of mobility in contemporary society, in particular in its interpretation of mobility motivated by the pleasure of the travel experience (Cohen 1979).

Reference to travel for pleasure or tourism, reminds that there are different forms of mobility. The classifications of kinds of mobility proposed by social sciences include the particularly successful one proposed by Kaufmann in 2004. This sorts mobility depending on the length of the time of travel and exit or not from the life context. The combined use of the two variables allows the author to identify four kinds of mobility: everyday mobility and travel in short temporality, residential mobility and migration in long temporality.

The importance assumed by daily mobility has led social sciences, on the one hand to dedicated increasing attention to it and on the other to study the hybrids resulting from a combination of the different forms of mobility. Cases are known of daily mobility or tourism that turns into voluntary residential mobility; in the first case, to reduce home-work travel times and in the second, to benefit from a holiday home. Less frequently analysed, despite being more and more frequent, are those hybrid recursive forms of mobility which Beck calls polygamies of place (1997), evident for example in existential tourism and multi-localism. In the former, characterised by the adhesion to values of the hosting context, the tourist lives in separate worlds, that of ordinary life without meaningful values and the chosen one of tourist life (Cohen 1979). Whereas with multi-localism, the player lives in different places and homes, developing individual strategies to adapt to the environment and acquiring a multi-place personality in order to maintain social relations and cognitively combine the different places (Weichhart 2009). In this sense, he is different from the better-known cosmopolitan, the citizen who lives in various places in the world, while not actually belonging to any of them. He is different from this latter multi-place individual, also due to the longer period of time he spends in the places—such as some contemporary cities (Sassen 1994; Duclos 1999)—where gradual specialisation of production, financial and service functions calls for the presence of highly qualified works willing to work and live temporarily in various places without having a fixed abode in any of them. In addition to the paper by Kaufmann on the theme of reversible and irreversible mobility (Chapter “[Putting Territory to the Test of Reversibility](#)”), this matter is also covered by Nadler in his essay on multi-local life-words (see Chapter “[Plug&Play Places](#)”:

Subjective Standardization of Places in Multilocal Lifeworlds”) and by Vendemmia in his study on inhabiting simultaneous lives (see Chapter “[Inhabiting Simultaneous Lives: Analysing Process of Reversibilization of Mobility Practices in Italy](#)”). The fact that daily mobility accounts for almost all travel in contemporary cities has led social sciences, in the same way as urban sciences, to analyse the causes and formulate theories on relative consequences. Many factors have been studied to find the reasons for this increase in daily mobility, for which it is difficult to establish the direction of causality. Paper by Pasqui, in the Chapter “[Populations and Rhythms in Contemporary Cities](#)”, offers in-depth analysis of this aspect.

Separation of family life spaces from working spaces, marking the passage from the peasant society to that of urban industry, is the first historic reason considered to be at the base of the increase in daily mobility. A separation that for citizens translated into the practice, at first unusual, of having to travel to work and to purchase goods or access service. Moving into cities and subsequently between cities, was not just a necessity, it was also an opportunity that allowed players to multiply and differentiate contexts of life and respective social roles. For modern citizens, being able to choose where to go became a condition for deciding what to do and who to be, in those cases where moving, beyond being an activity, is the expression of a citizen’s right. Individuals who have also had positive collective effects, in particular that of having enabled movement of the labour force and scientific-technological competences, ensuring the success of cities and territories that received them and exploited them to its advantage in national and international competitions (Jones 1981).

Another important phenomenon that social studies associate with daily mobility is the insertion of women in the job market and relative consequences on mobility. The question is addressed in a growing number of international studies (Walsh 2007) and community and national policies (OECD—International Transport Forum; World Bank—Transport and Gender, Transport of London 2007). These studies agree in saying that in the past, female mobility was not absent but limited to the restricted spaces and hermetic times of home life and in the residual and, for a long time inaccessible to women, leisure time. Sources provide information about the presence of mobility profiles characterised by short times and distances, regular flexible rhythms and slow pace, which was suitable to the lifestyle of women in post-war societies. Short travel times and distances, to guarantee their presence, necessary to the running of the home; regular flexible rhythms to compensate for the rigid working hours of husbands and school hours of children; a slow pace, to meet the family’s requirements for attention and care. Characteristics that we still find in the daily mobility profiles for females, together however, with others that are increasingly similar to those for males and characterised by a reduction in time spent at home and by an increase in that spent on travel.

Reference to the question of times has allowed social sciences to address a third macro phenomenon associated with the increase in daily mobility, which consists of an increase in daily activity. The results of surveys into time use carried out in different countries over the past thirty years, provide scientific support for the experience common to growing numbers of people of being increasingly busier

with different activities and having to travel to reach places in order to do them (Gershuny 2000, 2011; Fisher and Robinson 2011).

For sociology and economic geography, the increase in daily mobility can also be traced back to the transformations that have occurred in the production sector of goods and services. Acceleration in the production cycle of modern post-Fordism enterprise has been enabled by the gradual automation of companies' in-house functions, but also by organisational changes for the management of production decentralisation and management of just-in-time warehouses (Harvey 1990). From a territorial point of view, this has translated into the spreading of production and trade functions, previously located in just a few industrial areas, thanks also to the parallel development of the two technological macro-systems of physical and immaterial communications. Diversification of territorial localisation of company divisions and desynchronisation and differentiation of production times has resulted, on the one hand, in an increase in the average level of integration of the overall system (Chiesi 1989; Colleoni 1994), and on the other, in an increase in the number of atypical work relations out of the total labour force. The greater functional interdependence of activities by the individual parts, primarily in the production system and then in the service system, has resulted in an increase in the average level of mobility of human resources and increasingly more delocalised materials.

This overview of explanations regarding the factors associated with daily mobility cannot draw to a conclusion without addressing the main cause for this increase in travel, the availability of the car. Its origins, as it is known, date back to the period after World War Two, when a greater disposable income of families and the still low price of cars and fuels considerably increased the demand for cars, frequently leading to automobile dependence. This issue essentially refers to two traditional studies; the first is by Newman and Kenworthy (1999), who during the 1980s and 1990s carried out a survey on approximately 50 cities around the world with a view to analysing the relationship between urban density, use of the car and energy consumption. Analysis by these authors is introduced by an interesting historic reconstruction of types of cities, starting with:

- *walking city*, which dominated until the mid-nineteenth century, characterised by a combination of small size, high density, mixed use of territory and narrow streets;
- *transit city*, established in industrialised countries from the second half of the nineteenth century, distinguished by the co-presence of more extended territorial size, average density, increase in the population and the presence of linking rail and tram ways;
- *automobile city*: historic evolution of the previous city, characterised by big size, decentralisation and scattering of settlements, low demographic density and territorial separation of urban functions (zoning).

Allowing home to be kept separate from the workplace, the car had the result of influencing the structure of settlements and services, with greater scattering of the latter than increasing use of the car, creating the conditions for automobile dependency. To justify this theory, the authors show that where there are low-density

levels, like in North American and Australian cities, consumption of energy for transport is very high, with the worst consequences on depletion of energy resources, on climate change and urban sustainability.

The theme of automobile dependency is also addressed by a second traditional theory from the English sociologist John Urry and his studies on *automobility* (2000, 2004, 2006). According to the author, social sciences have always undervalued the influence of the car on urban life and the causes should be looked for in the trend either to consider the car as a mere technological invention or to highlight only the negative consequences on the quality of life and urban spaces. To obviate this limit, he proposes the word *automobility* to describe the car as a kind of society based on its use and dependency that goes beyond a mere means of transport. “Complex amalgam of interlocking machinery, social practices and ways of dwelling which have reshaped citizenship and the public sphere via the mobilisation of modern civil societies” (Sheller and Urry 2000, p. 73, 2006). On the one hand, the word *automobility* refers to the ability of individuals to move autonomously and on the other, it indicates the ability for movement of objects and machinery (automatic) and finally, it refers to the possibility of self-directed movement free from the constrictions of transport on rails. *Automobility* therefore represents a self-fuelling system that constantly generates the conditions for its expansion through its effects on social organisation of space and time. The reference to space and time allows the author to highlight the main characteristic of *automobility*, which consists of being simultaneously flexible and coercive. Flexible, allowing multiple activities to be carried out at freely chosen times; coercive, because territorial organisation of activities founded on the car obliges use of the car for ever longer travel.

### 3 Daily Mobility and Urban Societies

Social science studies into factors traditionally associated with the increase in daily mobility have more than once reminded that this has come about and developed in urban societies. The urban connotation has, in fact, been since the beginning associated with mobility because it is in cities that people become accustomed to moving every day to connect the different sectors of life, starting with those in which they live and work. It has mainly been urban sociology, out of the social sciences, and urban planning, out of territorial sciences, that have studied the relationship between mobile populations and new urban morphology, as part of an approach that sees the history of city transformations as a reflection of evolution of the flows that run through them. From this perspective, Martinotti elaborated the theory of urban populations and development process of metropolises (1993, 1999), picked up and updated by many authors, including, in this book, Nuvolati (2007) and, of urbanologists, Pasqui (2005). The theory is very well known and represents the conceptual point of reference for a large number of contemporary urban studies.

Here, we limit ourselves to presentation of the contribution this offers studies into urban scattering and those into conflict and inequality associated with mobility.

The historical evolution from traditional city to new-gen metropolis (in other words from resident population city to that where the population lives alongside the ever more numerous temporary populations), comes from the theory by Martinotti summarised in the formation process of today's scattered (or borderless) cities. According to the author, the scattering of settlements has led to the formation of increasingly more extended urban areas in which the continuum of housings, businesses and services no longer allows the city to be distinguished from its surrounding area. Many words have been used to define the new urban realities—megapolises, scattered cities, urban regions and metropolitan areas—whose variability indicates the difficulty in identifying their distinctive traits. Over recent years, some authors have suggested calling them meta cities, cities that have gone beyond both the classic morphology of the metropolises that dominated the twentieth century and also traditional administrative control by local bodies in the area, and even the sociological reference to the resident population alone. However you want to call them, they are clearly visible in the immense urban areas where most of the world's population lives today. In Europe, they are recognisable in the urban continuum of the London area, that of Paris or in the Hanseatic megapolises in the Netherlands and Lombardy in Italy (see Chapters "[Mobility Practices in Peri-Urban Areas: Understanding Processes of Urban Regionalization in Milan Urban Region](#)" and "[Metropolitan Dynamics and Mobility Flows: A National Comparative Study \(1991–2011\)](#)"), but also along the axes that link coastal cities in the South of France and along the Spanish and Italian Mediterranean coasts. Their borders often do not coincide with those of the administrative units and they are similar to corridors in shape, places for residential, production and service settlements and increasingly spaces of flows (Castells 1996; Martinotti 2004). In the new urban areas, the scattering of settlements has brought with it that of mobility, with the consequent further increase in movement of temporary populations. That of commuters, drawn by the larger number of available jobs in the metropolises and also of city users, attracted by the concentration and better quality of goods and services in urban centres. A meeting of populations that has resulted in a change in the morphology and quality of life in the cities that house them and that, in many cases, as covered in the paper by Nuvolati (see Chapter "[Resident and Non-resident Populations: Types of Conflicts](#)"), may cause conflict and new forms of urban inequality. The reference to the newness of these conflicts depends on the fact that compared to the past, they do not involve just the social classes that live in the cities, but the populations that inhabit them, visit them and more in general use their places and services.

Coexistence of different populations, in urban areas characterised by the increasing scattering of settlements and often, by the difficulty to access goods and services, is the basis for the last group of theories by social sciences, which we introduce here, regarding the question of the relationship between mobility, accessibility and risks of social exclusion (Colleoni 2011). The argument is covered by a large number of authors belonging, and not only, to the dominion of social sciences, in this book in the paper by Mattioli and Colleoni, with reference to

sociology, and in the paper by Henckel and Thomaier, with attention to the new theme of efficiency and urban temporal justice. These studies share the assumption that the relationship between mobility and accessibility is complex and not unidirectional and that in a society constructed around the assumption of high mobility and the availability of a means of private transport, the insufficient or inadequate mobility of weaker subjects may compromise access to goods, services and social networks, compromise participation in economic, political and social life and as a consequence, cause their social exclusion (Kenyon et al. 2002). As will be explained in detail in the papers, the lack of accessibility (better known in international literature as transport disadvantage, Naess 2006; Currie and Delbosc 2011; Jones and Lucas 2012), is the result of the combination of four macro factors: the resources of the individuals and families, the characteristics of the context in which we live (land use, infrastructure, density and distance from services...), the supply and quality of the transport system and the social obligations of interaction that require players to be mobile (in literature summarised by the term compulsion to proximity, Cass et al. 2005). To these factors must be added those that come in the field of capital of mobility, or motility, mentioned by Kaufmann and which we have already introduced on the previous pages, which represents the mobility potential of subjects in terms of resources for access, competence and cognitive appropriation (Dijst and Vidakovic 1997; Kaufmann et al. 2004). Attention to the relationship between mobility, accessibility and social exclusion has over recent years extended to that with the theme of well-being and quality of life. Starting with a consideration of the differences between subjective, objective and psychological well-being (Vella-Brodrick 2011), many studies highlight the direct and indirect relationships that exist between inaccessibility, social exclusion and well-being (Vella-Brodrick and Delbosc 2011) while others emphasise its complex interrelations with the concept of social capital (Viry et al. 2009; Stanley et al. 2010).

## 4 Conclusions

From pioneer studies by the French and Chicago schools (McKenzie 1927), to those by Sorokin (1927) and of urban sociology in the seventies, social sciences have looked to spatial mobility with increasing interest. Studying the way in which people and populations move, they have given, on a macro social level, a better understanding of the morphology of societies and their transformations. But also on a micro level, the study of mobility has provided much information to social sciences, enabling a revision of the theories on which explanations for social and spatial interaction between people and the sentiment of social-territorial identity were based. A structural, and not only contextual, element of social interaction, mobility is studied to better understand how society has changed. As Urry says, it has a paradigmatic value that goes beyond the field of social sciences to meet the more general one of the sciences involved in knowing the forms assumed by societies in their distribution in space. Sciences that, as we will see in the papers,

consider the cities as the spatial formation where the flows of movement define their identity in a way that is increasingly more liberated from characteristics of centrality, compact morphology and behaviour style traditionally associated with urban life. As Simmel (1907/1986) had already observed at the turn of the last century (1907), mobility is a key to interpreting modernity and, we add, an important analytical tool for integrated, spatial and social interpretation of urban phenomena (Bassand and Brulhardt 1980; Bourdin 2005; Gallez and Kaufmann 2009). An integrated interpretation of social-spatial practices that lend shape to daily life in urban contexts that, as we will see, represents the element of continuity for the papers in this book.

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