

Vincent Kaufmann

## Mobility as a Tool for Sociology

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# Mobility as a Tool for Sociology

by Vincent Kaufmann

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## 1. Introduction

According to Marcel Mauss' definition, mobility is a "total" social phenomenon, in other words a lens through which may be read all of the social relationships of a given society. As early as the 1920s, Robert Park declared that "the man gifted with locomotion" is the subject of urban sociology. The idea is therefore not new but, rather, was long left fallow. Concretely, the central place of mobility in sociology was ignored until the 1970s, when it resurfaced first in urban sociology and then, more recently, in general sociology. However, this rediscovery is accompanied by a multitude of works on mobility whose scope is often very general and theoretical.

In this article, we would like to seriously consider the idea that mobility is a "total" social phenomenon and, therefore, that the analysis of mobility teaches us about the composition of and changes in a society. This implies seeing mobility as a tool that must be well defined and finely tuned to be able to "read" a society. As such, we will revisit and identify common conceptual limits of understanding mobility to address the urban phenomenon. Then, using theoretical works on mobility, we will diagnose the pitfalls that a re-conceptualization of mobility must avoid. Thirdly, we will develop a new conceptual proposition based on motility. Finally, from the research findings based on this conceptualization, we will attempt to highlight its contribution to knowledge.

## 2. The Urban and Mobility

Analysis of the urbanization process has put mobility on the sociology agenda. More specifically, it is the gradual shifting of the city-country dichotomy – the result of the reign of the urban and metropolitanization – that has made mobility central.

Among the many ingredients that comprise the essence of any space, there are three whose relationships have changed – a change that is the source of the transformation the city is currently undergoing. 1) Functional centrality: a city spreads into its hinterland, of which it is the functional centre; 2) Morphology of the built environment: a city is characterized by building density, forms and infrastructures; and 3) Lifestyles: inhabitants have specific social practices [Kaufmann 2011]. Just a few decades ago, centralities, morphology and lifestyles fit together like “Russian dolls,” in the words of Pierre Veltz [1996]; lifestyles were organized according to morphology, the city’s core functions were organized in a hierarchical way and municipal boundaries corresponded to functional ones. In other words, daily life was rooted in territories whose boundaries were multiple but nonetheless clear and relatively fixed. Cities spread into the countryside following modalities that were extensively modelled by geographers. But the Russian doll has burst. The relationship between what is nearby, what is connected and what is moving has changed, thus changing the very definition of “nearby,” “moving” and “connected” (or in relation with).

From a pedestrian standpoint, territories today are organized according to car metrics [Wiel 1999]. The speed potential afforded by the automobile was overwhelmingly appropriated by households in order to live further from the city, attracted by both individual homes and reasonably-priced real estate. This phenomenon, coupled with significant development of major urban road infrastructures (ring roads, freeways), would gradually lead to a change in metrics. As the car became more widely used, business localization strategies shifted towards the city outskirts, amplifying the urban phenomenon [Chalas and Paulhiac 2008].

Some cities are gradually acquiring global centrality that surpasses even the reputation of the countries in which they are located. The creation of jobs, added value, artistic creativity, and innovation in general are concentrated in these cities. The process is not entirely physical, although there are morphological implications (such as the development of financial districts, or strong urban growth often associated with urban sprawl). These cities – often large but not always – are often specialized and compete amongst themselves.

While several decades ago the city-country dichotomy was associated with specific cultures and lifestyles, this is no longer true today, though specificities do, of course, remain. Many analysts suggest that this phenomenon reflects freedom of spa-

tial proximity in cultural references, through the distribution of consumer goods throughout the territory and the development of mass media.

Upon closer examination, it seems that this situation attests to the disappearance of the unity of place that the city once constituted and challenges its theoretical approaches. Since its inception, urban research has been characterized by a plurality of theoretical bases, as the pioneers of sociology immediately recognized big cities as revelatory of social and societal dynamics. That is why Karl Marx considered the city the privileged arena of class struggle, why Emile Durkheim saw it as the privileged place of modernity - made of freedom and of risk of anomie, why Max Weber called it the privileged place of capitalism, and why Georg Simmel thought of it as the theatre of the objectification of cultures and the birthplace of the “urban personality” [Stébé and Marchal 2011].

Marx’s ideas are thus quite different from bourgeois economists, as they presuppose not the homogenization of spaces but rather their differentiated development. Harvey says that the geographical expansion and intensification of capital accumulation, in fact, are emblematic of Marx’s theory of imperialism. “In Marx’s own thought it appears that the crucial intermediate steps encompass a theory of location and an analysis of fixed and immobile investment; the necessary creation of a geographical landscape to facilitate accumulation through production and circulation” [Harvey 2001, 266].

All of these authors have had many descendants in urban sociology, be it the Marxist-inspired sociology of Manuel Castells and Francis Godard, the morphological analysis of Durkheimian obedience so dear to Maurice Halbwachs [Halbwachs 1970] and later Marcel Roncayolo, works on the emergence of global cities that utilize numerous Weberian concepts, the Simmelian urban ecology of the Chicago School, or Goffmanian interactionism.

With the gradual breakup of the unity of place due to the bursting of the Russian doll, the ability of these approaches to describe, comprehend and explain the urban phenomenon has weakened. Indeed, all are based on the implicit assumption of unity of place – that somehow, the city *is* society. And yet, urban dwellers now have the possibility of escaping from this framework by living outside of it in order to seek those qualities the city cannot offer, and continuing to frequent the city for work or relaxation.

Similarly, private actors and investors have a much wider range of choices in terms of location and relocation. With the increase in speed potential offered by transportation and communication systems, the possibilities in terms of travel – updated and democratized – have increased considerably.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many empirical studies took this to mean that the city was disappearing, or at the very least *dissolving*. More prosaically put, we now know that the compact city of the past – delimited and marked by the congruency between spatial contiguity and social proximity – is gradually changing based on the mobility of its inhabitants and actors [Ascher 1995]. This reality, however, is essential, obliging us to revisit the theories and tools of urban sociology. A close reading of the urban phenomenon indeed implies divesting ourselves of a number of ideas and static, territorialized frameworks that are no longer valid.

To address these questions, the need for concepts that help us understand how and why individual and collective actors move clearly arises. In other words, mobility is becoming an essential analytical tool. However, in the scientific literature of the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of mobility – as used in the fields of geography and economy – suffered several shortcomings [Gallez and Kaufmann 2009]:

- a) It is strictly spatial and therefore does not allow for social change to be thought of in conjunction with travel;
- b) It focuses on actual travel and rarely looks at the mobility potential of actors;
- c) It measures in a functional manner, using indicators relative to movement in space and time (spatial scope, travel time budget, speed, motive, etc.), and does not take into account the experience of mobility and its imaginaries;
- d) It only applies to individuals, not collective actors (businesses, etc.).

Much of mobility's richness (and interest) is, in fact, lost – be it in its social definition as change – its potential dimension as virtuality, its ideological aspect or its collective nature. We find here the ideas of Georg Simmel, though at an angle different from the one we just discussed regarding individual differentiation. In a Simmelian vein, mobility is one of the keys for understanding the experience of modernity, in particular with regard to its differentiation processes at the individual level [Simmel 1907]. As Alain Bourdin noted, one of the advantages of Simmel's sociology is that it links the dialectic of proximity and distance in social relationships with the potential to move [Bourdin 2005]. From this standpoint – which is also ours – the sociology of mobility is based on the observation that, in addition to individual differentiation, a process of mobility that measures not only objective material distances but also “a set of technical and cognitive skills to combine with relational distance and proximity” [Bourdin *Ibidem*, 12] is developing.

### 3. The Limits of Mobility Theory

As the preceding discussion illustrates, to advance in our knowledge of mobility, we need a comprehensive approach that incorporates its social and spatial dimensions. How do we describe and understand a contemporary world in which mobility is a complete social phenomenon (meaning a phenomenon in which the very foundations of society itself can be discerned) without concepts, methods, and methodologies that allow us to grasp its principles and challenges? The pioneering works of Michel Bassand are particularly enlightening in this endeavour.

In their work *Mobilité spatiale*, Michel Bassand and Marie-Claude Brulhardt [1980] lay the foundations for such an approach. They define mobility as *all movement involving a change in the state of the actor or system* in question. In this definition, mobility has both spatial and social qualities, as such restoring its wealth. This methodological approach also stresses the study of the interaction of different forms of mobility. These interactions may consist in the strengthening, substituting or modifying of the forms themselves. However, as stimulating as this may be, this approach nonetheless has two limitations.

The first is relative to the links between movement and mobility. Their conception comes from the Chicago School: movement in physical space becomes *mobility* when it also involves social change [Grafmeyer et Joseph 1979]. This is how Roderick McKenzie [1927] distinguished between *mobility* – which for him was event-based movement characterized by the fact that it marks the life history, identity or social position of the person in question (migration, the purchase of a home, etc.) – and *fluidity*, defined as movement with no particular impact on the individual's life (buying bread, taking a walk, etc.) – in other words, the routine activities of daily life.

However, we believe that this should be taken one step further. Movement in physical space and movement in social space are not the same and, more importantly, are not necessarily simultaneous. Therefore, physical travel alone is not enough to be mobile (if being mobile also means a change of state socially). More importantly, however, one can be mobile socially without any physical movement whatsoever.

The second limitation has to do with complexity. Approaching mobility as a system, like Bassand and Brulhardt, involves taking into account the effects of so many interactions that it stands to render this approach ineffective. The principle virtue of such a systemic approach is that it regards mobility as one phenomenon that is likely to manifest itself in different ways.

While the work of Bassand and Brülhardt has had few descendants, the need to think about mobility has given rise to a profusion of theoretical research on the

subject over the past fifteen years. Sometimes assembled under the umbrella term “the mobility turn,” they are actually extremely heterogeneous and sometimes fall into certain traps, including:

1) *Considering mobility as a broad, all-inclusive concept at the risk of diluting it.* That is how mobility becomes that of actors, as well as that of objects (sometimes considered actors themselves by extension), ideas, and capital. Similarly, it is often confused with telecommunications, and ends up being called virtual mobility. This is for example the case of John Urry, who considers mobility a social and spatial phenomenon, but includes objects, communication and ideas. If broadly defined, mobility becomes an umbrella term and, for our purposes, loses its ability to describe and grasp contemporary social and societal changes [Urry 2007].

2) *Associating mobility with the shift from a post-structuralist society, making the increase in travel flows a sign of the weakening of social structures and the unilateral rise to power of individualization.* In our opinion, there is a danger in associating mobility with a specific school of thought in the social sciences, because it is a multi-faceted phenomenon capable of dialoguing with a variety of literatures and epistemologies. Thus, John Urry considers that in the different forms of mobility we find all social relationships, and that these relationships are the organizing principle of the social world, to the point of abandoning the notion of society as the subject of sociology and replacing it with that of mobility. One of the great merits of this proposition is that it truly brings space into sociology. Because ultimately, Urry’s main critique is that, in sociology, society is a territory that is both poorly defined and poorly thought out [Urry 2000]. Improving modes of transportation helps overcome spatial distance, with credit providing the temporal stepping-stone for the “annihilation of space by time.” This “improvement,” however, leaves its physical mark in the landscape (through infrastructure). These same forms of fixed capital are also superseded and destroyed by capital’s need for endless expansion: “Capitalist development has to negotiate a knife-edge path between preserving the values of past capital investments in the built environment and destroying these investments in order to open up fresh room for accumulation” [Harvey 2001, 247].

3) *Measuring and prioritizing mobility based on the speed and spatial scope of travel, and considering those who move fast, far and frequently as “highly” mobile.* Mobility is becoming increasingly important in our modern societies. This does not mean, however, that it should be unequivocally considered a positive phenomenon or be quantified based solely on speed and spatial scope. Mobility is ambivalent; it is used differently by different ideologies. It is therefore important to consider it with objectivity and detachment. It is more accurate to speak of *injunctions* to mobility rather than a single *injunction* – injunctions that, moreover, are often contradictory

and therefore do not allow for a unilateral reading of the links between mobility phenomena and contemporary societies.

#### 4. Mobility as a Tool

To give substance to the notion of mobility in response to the various shortcomings highlighted (and being mindful of the three traps mentioned above), over the past decade or so we have developed a specific approach to mobility using the work of Sorokin [1927] and the Chicago School [McKenzie 1927]. This approach consists in defining mobility as “the intention and realization of an act of movement in physical space that involves social change.” The originality of this approach lies in shifting from this general definition to a focus on *intentions* relative to mobility and the actual act of moving, more than on the movement itself. Thus, in this approach, each person or group is characterized by a more or less marked inclination to move in physical, economic and social space. Together these form a set of skills that we have conceptualized by the notion of “motility” (in reference to the biological definition of this term).

Motility is defined as *all of the characteristics of a given actor that allow him/her/it to be mobile (i.e. physical skills, income, aspirations (to move or be sedentary), the social conditions of access to existing transportation and telecommunication systems, and acquired skills (job training, a driver’s license, international English for travel, etc.)* Motility therefore refers to the social conditions of access (the conditions required to *use* the offer in the broadest sense of the term), the knowledge and skills (those required to make use of the offer), and mobility projects (the actual use of the offer that makes it possible to realize them) [Kaufmann 2002].

Motility is inherently situated in and connected to space. Each territory offers a specific range of possibilities in terms of mobility, thus defining its potential receptiveness to mobility projects. While receptiveness that varies according to the project and territory is not a new idea, what is new is the opportunity for individual or collective actors to locate or relocate based on the many possibilities offered by both transportation and telecommunication systems, and urban spaces’ receptiveness to different projects [Kaufmann 2011]. What defines the scope and potential of this receptiveness has largely to do with the capacity of their material systems. All action takes place within a context; this action requires that the environment provide the necessary footholds [Gibson 1979].

While material artefacts are central to the receptiveness that territories can potentially offer projects, more fundamental still is recognizing how they act on the very



emergence and definition of these projects [Hommels 2005]. Acknowledging that the diverse characteristics of urban forms (their aesthetics, their ambiance, how they are inhabited, their price, etc.) all define a territory's potential receptiveness is obvious. Similarly, the potential access offered by transportation systems also contributes to defining its receptiveness to mobility projects and movement therein. Cultural, sports, and economic facilities also define a territory's ability to accommodate projects.

A territory's material artefacts likewise have an impact on the very presence and nature of projects [Kaufmann 2011]. The existence of industrial wastelands in the middle of the city, or derelict workshops, is likely to give rise to projects of reappropriation. The possibility of living without a car thanks to excellent public transport service renders this lifestyle desirable and provides incentive to adopt it. The existence of numerous performance venues lends to the birth of festival projects. Such examples are abundant, the point being, however, that a project cannot find footing just anywhere. Certain places are more receptive than others to certain projects, depending on their morphological characteristics, the laws that govern them, their accessibility, etc.

From this conception of mobility as change, whose expressions are organized in the form of temporal interlocking, we can conceptualize three dimensions of analysis:

*a) The field of possibilities.* Each context offers a specific field of possibilities with regard to mobility. This receptiveness is comprised of several ingredients, including: 1) the available networks and their development, performance, and conditions of access (road, highway and railroad networks, airport hubs, and regional telecommunication equipment); 2) space and all of its territorial configurations (urban layout, functional centralities, institutional territories, etc.); 3) the employment market (possibilities for training/employment and the unemployment rate); 4) the institutions and laws that, in different ways, govern human activity (family policies, property/housing assistance, immigration policies, etc.) – in short, all of the social relationships and models of success a society proposes and the trials to which it subjects its various actors in order to succeed.

*b) Aptitude for movement.* Each person and collective actor is characterized by its aptitude for movement in physical, economic and social space. This set of skills is called *motility*. Motility is comprised of all those factors that determine an actor's potential to move or be mobile (i.e. physical ability, income, aspirations (to move or be sedentary), technical systems (transportation and telecommunication) and their accessibility, and skills acquired through training (driver's license, international English for travel, etc.). Motility is therefore comprised of factors relative to access (the conditions by which it is possible to *use* the offer in the broadest sense of the term), skills (those needed to utilize the offer, and appropriation (using the offer to

realize personal projects). Thus, motility is the way a person or group appropriates and makes use of the field of possibilities (with regard to movement) and relates to aspirations and plans.

*c) Movement.* This refers to movement in space. This travel can either be planned (i.e. taking place between an origin and one or several destinations) or more akin to wandering, with no real origin or destination. Let us note that movement concerns not only individual and collective actors; goods, ideas and information in general all move as well.

These three dimensions form a system, but not mechanistically. A field of possibilities that offers highly-efficient networks and whose access is democratic is not automatically appropriated or used by the population. Similarly, a population with highly-developed motility can use this to anchor itself in a territory, rather than change status. Likewise, a population that moves a great deal does not necessarily have a field of possibilities particularly favourable to travel, and so on.

The advantage of such a model lies primarily in the fact that it allows us to work on the relationships that develop between the field of possibilities, motility and movement, all the while putting actors, their constraints, aspirations, and skills at the heart of the research process.

## 5. What Does Motility Say About Western Societies?

The concept of motility and conception of mobility that we have just briefly described have been extensively discussed and cited [Kesselring 2006; Söderström and Crot 2010; Jensen 2006; Nowicka 2006; Sheller 2011; Merriman 2012].

The use of this definition has gone beyond the frontiers of sociology to question anthropology [Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013], management [Sergot *et al.* 2012], human geography [Lévy 2004; Kellerman 2006; 2012], history [Guigueno 2008], and urban planning [Lord 2011; Chalas and Paulhiac 2008].

Following the publication of the book *Re-thinking Mobility* in 2002 [Kaufmann 2002], this approach was the object of theoretical [Kaufmann *et al.* 2004; Canzler *et al.* 2008; Ohnmacht *et al.* 2009] and methodological insights that would allow it to be applied to individual and collective actors [Kaufmann 2011]. We also sought to utilize motility for qualitative research on various specific topics, such as the appropriation of travel time [Vincent-Geslin and Kaufmann 2012], the use of time in subway stations [Tillous 2009], social inequalities [Maksim 2011], and family dynamics [Kaufmann and Widmer 2006]. Motility has also been used qualitatively, for instance as part of the *Job Mobilities and Family Lives in Europe research program* [Kaufmann,

Viry and Widmer 2010], which analyzed the links between travel practices and the spatialization of social networks [Viry 2011], and in an inquiry on the logics of action underlying modal practices in Santiago de Chile [Witter 2012]. While they remain exploratory – insofar as they have not led to the adoption of a validated method of measurement – they nonetheless highlight several types of skills for moving that are differentiated in both social and spatial terms, but that are also weakly associated with revenue and education level.

Meanwhile, researchers have appropriated the notion to conduct empirical research on a variety of topics, including the non-use of rights in social access policies [Féré 2011], social inequalities [Ureta 2008; Oliva 2010], the routines of daily life [Belton 2009; Buhler 2012], social innovation [Brand and Dávila 2011], the relationship with public space [Jirón 2010], transportation modal choice [Vincent 2008; Rocci 2007; Rivere 2009; Fouillé 2010; Kellerman 2012; De Witte *et al.* 2013], multiple residences and identity [Halfacree 2012], and business travel [Faulconbridge *et al.* 2009].

What have these works contributed to knowledge in regard to the changes taking place within contemporary societies? One aspect in particular stands out: with the gradual development of opportunities relative to travel and mobility, the ability to move is becoming increasingly important for social and economic inclusion. This change, coupled with a growing demand for flexibility, socially speaking, strengthens the importance of motility as a resource for social inclusion. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello denounce this change as a new ideology of domination in “The New Spirit of Capitalism,” arguing the fact that it challenges statutory hierarchies and that, as a result, social mobility is expressed in terms of constantly evolving projects. The challenge of progressing in a professional career has likewise changed: it is no longer a question of merely “climbing the ladder” within the hierarchical structure, but of being able to “rebound,” glide from one project to the next and “surf” from one enviable position to another in a changing environment [Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 445-446]. Building on Boltanski and Chiapello’s analysis, we would like to argue that many of these recent societal transformations have resulted in individuals’ ability to move (their *motility*) becoming a means of social integration, and even constituting a form of capital that is not simply a question of their income, education and social networks. Motility seems to be a particularly indispensable resource for overcoming the spatial and temporal friction we experience in our daily lives. Individuals can have little motility or a great deal of it, and, most importantly, can have it in different ways. The quality of our lives and chances of improving our social status often depend on it.

The question of the nature of this resource and its workings thus arises. Is it a new form of “capital,” as defined by Bourdieu? Or is it a resource that depends entirely on one’s income or the scope of one’s social network? Is it an essentially cognitive skill?

Hanja Maksim [2011] showed that low-income individuals develop highly specialized forms of motility to compensate for their economic handicap. However, these forms do not correspond to the dominant model of the “valued” mobile person, (i.e. responsive to the demand for flexibility) that characterizes contemporary Western societies. Thus there are “valued” motilities that contribute to social success, and others that do not.

Mobility as a paradoxical ideology is not new. In the 1950s, for instance, in the analysis of intergenerational social mobility tables, social reproduction was often seen as an indicator of a “block” in society, while mobility was considered a sign of social fluidity [Cuin 1983]. From the beginning, industrial society has valued social mobility because it helped to establish the collective dynamics of growth based on individuals’ desire to improve their own socio-economic status. Everyone invests in work in the hopes of improving his or her living conditions or social status on the basis of merit. This conception assumes two principles: the first affirms individual freedom in the defining and carrying out of a statutory project. The second, in principle, calls for equality of individuals so that the “status of origin” can no longer be an obstacle to social ascension. Paradoxically, in competition, it is a question of maintaining an egalitarian rhetoric for statuses that are *a priori* unequal. The paradox is generally raised by the implementing of procedures which seek to ensure a level playing field for the different actors.

Works on motility suggest that our modern-day valorisation of mobility is built on the same logic; when it is fast and far away, it embodies the idea of freedom. Through it, the individual will be free to make the contacts he or she wishes without spatial or temporal obstacles. This rhetoric suggests that those most likely to occupy the more enviable social statuses are also those ready to accept a logic of unfettered flexibility. Thus the particularity of the modern conception of mobility is to assume – through a shift in meaning – that the spatial dimension of mobility inevitably favours the fair distribution of individuals on the social ladder. Thus, starting now, we should facilitate *access* in order to favour an egalitarian social game. Yet it appears that those who travel the most – in general economically well-endowed – are often obliged to do so by their professional or social situation, juggling their activities in time and space in a complex manner. When they have a choice, it is not rare for them to choose a stroll in the city to an overseas flight.

The society that offers the greatest freedom of movement is not one that mandates the use of modes of rapid transport like the car or low cost flight, but rather one that allows for the development of a multitude of mobility projects (local rooting or cosmopolitanism, career or investment in leisure activities, a life with or without children, a home in the city or in the suburbs, social inclusion via proximity or via connectivity, etc.).

Contemporary valorisation of mobility in fact continues to make individuals bear the brunt of the responsibility for their future, negating the fact that social structures are also at work in travel behaviour.

Other research shows that mobility itself is the bearer of its own differentiations. Playing with these through the intermediary of motility (meaning in terms of dominant values) may permit the acquisition of social status. Conversely, neglecting it or using it in opposition to dominant values can lead to a loss of status. In a world where flexibility is an economic imperative and where the future is therefore uncertain, individual actors tend to broaden their mobility potential to the greatest extent possible in order to compensate for all of the undesired changes in their socio-economic conditions. Thus, today, people choose their living place *first* – not their place of work – even if it means having to travel far to get there [Vincent-Geslin and Kaufmann 2012]. Given the uncertainty as regards job insecurity and the obligation to be increasingly mobile, residential sedentariness attests to individuals' desire to maintain control over what little they can still control in their lives.

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## Mobility as a Tool for Sociology

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**Abstract:** Mobility is a broad, polysemic concept. However, despite its linguistic richness, its multitude of meanings can also present an obstacle to knowledge. In other words, when people talk about mobility, we do not always know exactly what they mean. In this paper I propose discussing the challenges posed by the concept of mobility for sociology, and offer an approach based on mobility potential, of which individual and collective actors are carriers. This work is based in particular on a critical review of theoretical literature on the concept of mobility.

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*Keywords:* Mobility, Motility, City, Social Theory, Action.

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**Vincent Kaufmann** is associate professor of urban sociology and mobility at Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). After a master degree in sociology (University of Geneva) he did his Ph.D. at EPFL on rationalities underlying transport modal practices. He has been invited lecturer at Lancaster University (2000) and Ecole Des Ponts et Chaussées (2001). His fields of research are: mobility and urban life styles, links between social and spatial mobility, public policies of land planning and transportation.