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Pioneering mobilities – Work in the Mobile Risk Society

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Mots clés

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Auteur

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Transcription écrite

In the late 1990s we started a project in Munich in the Research Centre on Reflexive Modernization (funded by the German Research Society) which had this fancy title – Mobility Pioneers – and what I'm trying to figure out in these few minutes is that I think there is a kind of development from these pioneering mobilities to new things and the opening up of different forms of mobilities into a sort of normalisation of that. In the 1990s, in some ways in business life something spectacular or extraordinary became something more and more something essential, normal part of our lives. When I was making interviews in the industry in the 1990s and early 2000s, people were talking about how they went to China and their colleagues said 'Wow, you went to China?' But today one (person) says he is going to China and the other one is telling a story about India and Australia. So I think a lot of these things have changed in business life. But it's not only on spatial mobility and travelling, it's also about virtual mobilities. When we started the project of the Mobility Pioneers in the late 1990s, we were harshly criticised for using that term 'virtual mobilities'. People said 'You're totally crazy, that doesn't make any sense'. Actually in the same way, a little bit different - but with the same message - when we started working on aeromobilities, a colleague said 'What's this about aeromobilities? When I go to an airport I check in, I fly out. So where is the research programme?' He argued this is kind of a minority of people. I'm not saying that everybody today is using the internet; not everybody is using mobile phones, not everybody is always accessible somewhere else than where he is and not everybody is using planes and airports. But nobody is living a life without depending upon the internet, airports, flight connections and so forth.

Organizing mobility imperative

So our life has changed in that way – in a very rapid, very fast way. This picture that I brought, we call it the Social Spatial Pattern of Virtual Mobility Management. The background of the Mobility Pioneers project has always been that we've been asking 'How do people actually organise, how do they manage what we call the mobility imperative?' – the need to be mobile or to present oneself as a mobile person. And that's the reason why we talk about mobility management. It's not management on the corporate level or on the institutional level, it's about how people organise and

manage their lives. And this picture I brought you is a pattern from a journalist, where we made interviews in the early 2000s with her, and I asked her 'What are the important places in your life? Please type in the important places in the centre of that picture – those places which are important but less important on the boundaries of the picture'. The first things that she wrote in was 'My email', 'My PC, 'My house' and 'My desk'. At this time - you need to consider it was in the early 2000s - we were really surprised what she kind of added as the important places in her life; an email program is not a place in our understanding, but in her understanding it was a place. The second things she added were three websites and then she wrote in the university, her birthplace and the residence where she is; but actually the residence and the birthplace don't play a very important role in that pattern. And this was an interview with a very successful journalist at this time. And it was pioneering in that understanding, of finding a pattern like this in the empirical research. But you might say 'that's quite normal, I know a lot of people like this' – but this is what I'm saying: this is the development from pioneering mobility into a normalisation of mobility. We've entered a time or a situation where we all live in some senses digital lifestyles and what I like is this quotation from Aharon Kellerman in 2006 where he says "New, sophisticated virtual mobilities permit us to be in touch without any regard to the location of the cities or countries from which communication comes nor with regard to the internal spatial structures of the cities from which we call".

A constellation of spaces

I think this is a sort of placelessness in some sense, but it indicates a cultural change in the sense that we are kind of layering different spaces – social spaces, virtual spaces, geographical spaces, technological spaces - into each other and each of us, every person, has a specific constellation of these different spaces. I'm reading quotations, but one of my favourite quotations on that is indicating that there is a significant cultural change – which is where we don't know yet how this is going to transform our life in this modern world. And it comes from John Tomlinson and he says: "Mechanical velocity is still with us in abundance, the night mail still runs distance and the physical effort to overcome it still stubbornly persists. But now we have something else. Now we have the phenomenon of immediacy which in its light, effortless, easy ubiquity has more or less displaced the cultural attachments of an earlier speed. And with this displacement comes a shift in cultural assumptions, expectations, attitudes and values."
What he describes there – mentioning cultural assumptions, expectations, attitudes

and values – is actually a new way of thinking about life: we have a mobile life, but also a new way of thinking about how interaction has come into the world. This is probably going to change our world and the big question today is 'Has this a kind of potential to develop, this sort of sustainable mobility, or is this a kind of a withering process?'

A world in motion

In their book, "Mobile Lives" from (Anthony) Elliott and (John) Urry, they describe the significance of what they call 'miniaturised mobility'. That means we are carrying all these technological devices with us, which enable us to be in contact and to be kind of stable in relation to other people and to other places – to colleagues, to business, to other websites and so forth while we are travelling somewhere. What they actually describe there is this process of constantly receiving and processing information, this process of constantly rescheduling meetings and contacts and so forth, this process of constantly reorganising our social networks and the socio-geographic shapes of these networks. That means in some ways, around us, we are in a world which is constantly in motion and the only stable thing or reliable thing probably for many people who are using these devices is the mobile phone or the internet virtual communication and virtual mobilities.
I brought you a video from a company, IBM, that actually ends up with the formulation 'What actually is going on?' asks one guy to another. And he says 'the usual'. For me, this video is very interesting – a kind of exemplification of what we think. It's a little bit overdoing the issue, but it's exactly this: that we are living in a world where a lot of things around us are constantly in motion. And we as individuals are those who have to handle the configuration, the constellation of these mobile things. So technologies are becoming more and more driving factors in the way that we organise and structure our lives and our social relations and places.

Three patterns of life management

Coming back to the Mobility Pioneers project we actually found three ideal types of how people organise and how they manage their lives. We call them the Centred Mobility Management. (The first) is the classical thing of the salesman, the sales person, who is travelling to customers and coming back in the evening or who is travelling for two days and coming back but with a very clear-cut and defined place of belonging and of social fixities. And the second pattern we call the Decentred Mobility Management, where people actually have different places where it's hard to figure

out which is the place of the most importance or is it a network of three or four different places which are on the same level of social importance for them. The third pattern that we figured out, or found in the empirical data, is what we called the Networked Mobility Management, which is what I described before: the different spaces are kind of layered/boxed into each other and people are organised in stable social relations by using the internet.

We had, for example, one interview partner he had a website with his calendar on the website so if people wanted to meet him they could immediately access the website and see 'ok, he's coming to Frankfurt or he's in New York – I'm in New York too we can schedule a meeting there. I'm not talking about an everyday pattern that everybody has – it's a pioneering pattern at this point. But it would definitely be interesting to have follow-up research on that to see what these patterns look like today.

Handling mobility expectations

What is part of my work today is that I'm working together with a research group in Munich on the question – how can we actually handle these mobility expectations and how can people in business life develop a sort of socially sustainable mobility without the negative impacts of that? Because today in business life, French sociologists (Luc) Boltanski and (Ève) Chiapello described it very, very precisely that everybody has to behave, has to set oneself on stage, as a mobile individual. So we are mobile subjects – we are able to handle all these things. But the research on that, if you ask people actually how this mobility regime they are living in works and what is let's say the consequence for the work-life balance, there are a lot of really complicated and threatening issues in that. And part of that work that is supported by the Hans Böckler Foundation in Germany is the work on what I call the Mobility Regimes – the corporate mobility regimes - there is not enough space to talk about that.

Learning to be mobile... and immobile

Apart from this normalisation I was describing, there are three more dimensions which are kind of frameworking the way that people are professionally mobile. One thing is that the individual has to take over much more responsibility for how mobility looks like, has more responsibility to make decisions about switching off the mobile phone, not taking flights, booking a flight which is more expensive but without a stopover somewhere else. So this kind of self-regulation aspect and taking care of oneself comes much more to the individual. People have to struggle and to handle

much more constraints from time-space compression. You can communicate from everywhere, it opens up a lot of new opportunities – but it also opens up a lot of pressure that enters into the organisational world. And the third dimension is that there is a lot of pressure from companies to rationalise mobility, to get cheaper flights, to spend less time abroad, less time travelling – and to make more meetings during that time and so forth.

The main message of that project or that work is actually also that if we all think that mobility is totally normal – it's actually not. It's something that we need to develop, it's something that we need to learn, it's something where we need to develop that competence to handle mobility and the potentials of mobility in a sustainable way. But it also comes to the fact that we all need to learn to be immobile – to make decisions against travelling, to slow down our mobility and to reduce the amount of mobility. And on a corporate level, I definitely don't want to make any kind of promotion for any companies but IKEA's concept of 'meet more, travel less' – using more virtual mobility instead of travelling – I think it's a very interesting case study; to understand actually how the normalisation enters companies, how it is organised and what policies can be developed to reduce the amount of travelling.

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German sociologist Professor Sven Kesselring discussed the notion of mobility pioneers - people who set the trends that others will follow in the future. Virtual mobility and sustainability will both have significant roles to play.

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