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Autor: Kaufmann, Vincent / Kesselring, Sven / Manderscheid, Katharina
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Mobility, Space and Inequalities

The social structure in Switzerland – as well as in the other advanced European and Western societies – has become more heterogeneous, more dynamic and more internationalized. But does that mean that it has become more egalitarian? One of the main challenges for social science today is to identify and model the processes that create, modify or weaken inequalities in a society characterised by considerable complexity and fluidity. Mobility is at the centre of the transformations currently occurring in contemporary Western societies. Spatial mobility of information, goods and people – a prized vector of economic growth, stimulated by the expansion of technological systems that offer considerable and democratised speed potentials – wreak havoc on the temporal realities of daily life, life course and even social mobility patterns. These two ponderous trends both question the issue of social and economic inequalities, and make us wonder whether they are not in fact generating new forms of inequality linked to mobility and space.

In terms of mobility, the increase in the volume of flows of goods, information and people, their speed and their spatial range is causing a great deal of speculation among social scientists. Does this growth equal an expansion of the universe of choices available to actors? Is it not instead becoming a new universe of (mobility) constraints? Does access to transport and communication systems become a central dimension of inequalities and does it interact or replace older dimensions such as class, gender or ethnicity?

Describing these flows in terms of origin and destination does not provide a complete answer to these questions. The flows of mobility do not in themselves reveal the motivations that give rise to them. Getting to the bottom of these questions requires a sociological approach focusing on the actors and the ways in which they build their potentials for mobility and their strategies to transform them into movement. From this point of view we ask: *How far is being mobile “wittingly” in time and in space a central aspect of professional and social integration? And does this make it an important factor for social differentiation, and a powerful generator for new forms of inequality?*

Until recently, most social theory and research neglected the dimension of space and mobility as integral to social processes. Under the perspective of mobility research and theory, its potential for a critical analysis of contemporary societies is revealed. Investigating mobilities can be a foray into the paradox nature of a second modernity under the conditions of globalization and increasing social liquidity.

In terms of space, do the different socio-spatial configurations – social and spatial segregations, housing markets, proximity of important amenities (hospitals, shops, etc.), type, quality and accessibility of infrastructure and transportation services, educational establishments (secondary schools, universities, specialized higher educational institutions) and the spatial concentration of economic activities and job

markets contribute to generate social inequalities? This question aims at identifying to what extent the life setting of an actor and his or her strategies of residential and daily mobility are aligned with the traditional configurations of economic and social segregation, or on the contrary if these practices form a new geography of inequalities where spatial morphology and access to amenities are central elements. It feeds the current debate surrounding the links between equality of access to urban infrastructure, types of urbanisation (compact city, suburbanisation, edge city) and transportation policies more generally (which either facilitate automobile usage or make it difficult).

To tackle these questions for sociology, this special issue opens with a paper by John Urry where he discusses the notions of access and network capital. He shows how mobility becomes a central dimension of stratification in contemporary western societies. After this general statement on mobility, space and inequalities, the following paper from Malene Freudendal-Pedersen introduces the tool of structural stories in order to analyse the interlinkages between mobility, motility and freedom. Paola Jiron M. then focusses on Santiago de Chile with an ethnographic analysis on how urban inequality generates differentiated experiences of urban daily mobility. Martin Abraham and Natascha Nisic, in their contribution, investigate the different effects of regional bonds for employees' chances on the labour market in Germany and Switzerland. Marie-Hélène Bacqué and Sylvie Fol bring in new insights regarding the normative claim of access to public transports as a means against social inequality. Lukas Zollinger, with his analysis of the supporters of the Swiss People's Party in a suburban municipality shifts the focus from questions of mobility to the question of how our residential situation together with the implied experience of inequality impacts on our political values. Finally, the special issue is rounded up by Claus J. Tully and Dirk Baier's study on youth and mobility.

Vincent Kaufmann, Sven Kesselring, Katharina Manderscheid, Fritz Sager