

# Introducing Rhythmology in Mobility Studies

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## 1. Introduction

After a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which profoundly transformed the rhythms of daily life, we are at an exciting moment in dealing with mobility, especially since the major social science research traditions on mobility still struggle to think of time and space together in a single non-deterministic and dynamic approach.

In this endeavor, the work of Michel Bassand is essential and pioneering. In the book entitled *Mobilité spatiale*, Michel Bassand and Marie-Claude Brulhardt [1] laid the foundations for such an approach twenty years before the work of John Urry. Bassand and Brulhardt consider mobility as a total social phenomenon in the same way as Marcel Mauss and define it as all movement involving an actor's change of state or system. With this definition, mobility has a dual spatial and social quality, which makes it richer than purely spatial or purely social approaches.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, many thoughts on mobility have developed under the banner of mobility turn. These approaches aim to develop an integrative definition of the phenomenon in order to create a real concept. These reflections concern our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon [2,3], the way in which mobilities are experienced [4], the role that mobilities play in the constitution of the contemporary individual [5], the way in which they have evolved over time, etc. These works deconstruct the spatio-temporal mobility scales and see this phenomenon as fully integrating migration. They insist that crossing geophysical space is generally a means to an end, not the end itself, and it is therefore essential to look at the nature of this end in order to understand the motives and motivations of mobility. This is how the mobility paradigm, which is a way of analyzing societies by paying attention to the role played by movement in the organization of social relations, was formed. Such an approach allows us to legitimize questions concerning the practical, discursive, technological, and organizational devices implemented by societies to manage distance as well as the methods necessary to study these devices.

The integrative approach to the notion of mobility, which stems from the work of Michel Bassand and mobility turn, makes it possible to consider mobility using a resolutely interdisciplinary multi-scale approach. In particular, it has the advantage of making it possible to approach mobility as (1) a socio-spatial phenomenon, (2) an analytical indicator, and (3) a social value. These three modalities of the notion of mobility are specific and complementary :

- Mobility as a socio-spatial phenomenon : The first modality is the observation that being mobile refers to a double faculty, that of moving and changing place, but also that of transforming oneself, by adapting to a new situation, by changing status, position, skills, etc. These two dimensions are strongly intertwined.
- Mobility as an analytical indicator : The second modality is that mobility can be considered as an analytical indicator of social reality. In this sense, measuring mobility can, for example, help us to understand the dynamics of family relationships. It can also, for example, make it possible to measure the rhythmic pressures to which working women with young children are subjected in terms of reconciling family life, social life, and professional life [6].
- Mobility as a social value : Previously, mobility was understood as a primary right [7] according to the definition of Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights relating to freedom of movement. However, the value of mobility is marked by fundamental ambivalence : when movements are rapid, distant, and frequent and therefore reversible, they have very positive connotations ; when, on the other hand, it is a question of migration, specifically of poor populations, it is therefore irreversible and has a negative connotation. In contemporary Western societies, reversible mobility has thus become a dominant social norm, which is constructed on the basis of an imaginary ideal that associates rapid and distant movement with positive experiences of self-enrichment through the experience of travel.

## **2. A Necessary Critique of the Uses of Mobility**

An approach to mobility organized by objects (everyday local mobility, residential mobility, migration, and even atypical mobility) runs the risk of segmenting analyses and contributing to the development of compartmentalized research and refers, on the one hand, to specific disciplines and, on the other hand, to specific objects and fields. Mobility turn, as proposed by John Urry, aims to go beyond this state of affairs by considering, in the tradition of Michel Bassand, that all forms of mobility form a system by mixing various objects and by including the different spatial and temporal mobility scales mentioned above.

However, more than twenty years after the publication of John Urry's manifesto [8], it is clear that research on mobility is still profoundly associated with disciplines and struggles to go beyond the traditional fields of everyday mobility, residential mobility, tourism, and migration. This is evidenced by the titles of conferences, scientific journals, international networks, or, more anecdotally, by the profiles of the positions advertised in international research. This persistence is certainly linked to the shaping of research on specific subjects. Whoever wants to have a career in the social sciences must specialize in a specific subject, and mobility as a system is certainly not one of them. In our book, the references cited by various authors often attest to this state of affairs, particularly with regard to empirical research.

It is obvious that research on mobility is not reaching its full potential and is very often confined to certain fields, struggling to integrate the spatial, temporal, and social dimensions of the

phenomenon in a broad and generous approach. This situation needs to be overcome, and three major challenges need to be addressed by research :

- Firstly, the concept of mobility should allow a holistic approach for the analysis of contemporary societies. It is important that this vision be translated into a conceptualization that is specific to this broad approach. Reversibility and motility clearly go in this direction, but approaches to mobility are often not very transversal.
- Secondly, the study of mobility should focus its interest on movement, regardless of whether it is social or spatial, thus implicitly putting aside the instituted, the fixed, and what remains and, more generally, what does not move. The challenge is to avoid making what is immobile invisible and to avoid producing new analytical blind spots.
- Thirdly, the research that has been carried out on mobility issues has not made it possible to highlight the levers of action that would make it possible to meet the major challenges facing contemporary societies in the areas of climate change, the globalization of trade, and growing inequalities. As a result, the impact of this work often remains limited.

In relation to these three challenges, it is crucial to adopt a reading grid that allows us to think about how the different forms of mobility are intertwined. Such a grid must allow us to move between the different fields of the social sciences and between their different terrains and issues. From this perspective, we hypothesize that the notion of rhythm has the necessary conceptual qualities to respond to the identified issues.

### **3. Mobilities [XE “Mobilités”] and Rhythms**

The various forms of mobility coexist in a constantly changing world [9]. This constant change suggests a complex entanglement of the different forms of mobility [10]. Thus, within the same space-time, different regimes of mobility cohabit with one another, motivated by a myriad of purposes, obligations, and projects, but also hopes. This configuration implies a differentiation of the regimes of commitment in the practice of mobility. These regimes may be driven by the promise of an upwardly mobile professional career, the possibility of a moment of relaxation, a simple stroll around the neighborhood, or the prospect of a better life in another part of the world.

From this perspective, the forms of mobility are composed according to an aesthetic order, but above all, they depend on the rhythm of movement. Here, rhythm is understood as a speed of crossing, but more, generally, as something that testifies to different regimes of mobility. Thus, through rhythmic forms, it is easy to distinguish the hurried worker, the tourist, the newcomer, or the stroller in public space. Rhythm thus gives meaning to movement, an unprecedented density that illuminates the different forms of mobility in a single shot. This exercise can be carried out on the forecourt of a train station, in the heart of a public space, or even in large tourist resorts. This approach gives pride of place to anthropology and more broadly to ethnographic methods. However, the rhythmology of mobility that we propose is also likely to draw on methods such as Big Data analysis and, more broadly, quantitative analyses of behavior.

Our rhythmanalytic proposal of mobility is based on a vast legacy of the study of the rhythms that we propose be outlined here. Already present in Plato's work, the concept of rhythm is marked by a long evolution in its use and in its conceptualization. In order to avoid a long digression that would take us away from a reflection on the forms of mobility and the way of thinking about them together, we will limit the presentation of the conceptualization of rhythm to the major authors in the social

sciences. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of rhythm has been present in various fields that have fueled a long genealogy of rhythmanalytic propositions [11]. In philosophy, rhythmanalysis first appeared with Gaston Bachelard in 1936 [12], then with Henri Maldiney [13], and saw a resurgence at the beginning of the 1990s [14] and then at the end of the 2000s with the publication of the journal *Rhuthmos*.

In parallel with philosophical approaches, the concept of rhythm has been present in sociology since the beginning of the 20th century. Georg Simmel highlights the progressive separation between the cyclical rhythms of nature (season, fluctuation of the quantity of food) and the rhythms of human activity [15] by putting into perspective the role in this separation of city life, of the commodification of time, and of the individualization of lifestyles through the division of labor. Georg Simmel observes that the rhythm of life, which he refers to the “sum of actions”, is more sustained among the inhabitants of large cities, describing an “intensification of nervous life” in particular. The sum of actions as an analytical prism of rhythm is also taken up by Hartmut Rosa, for whom rhythm corresponds to the number of episodes of actions and experiences per unit of time, thus putting the experiential dimension already described by Simmel into perspective [16]. In 1981, Henri Lefebvre proposed the notion of rhythmanalysis in the third volume of *Critique de la vie quotidienne* [17] and then developed it in his posthumous work, which was published in 1992 (*Éléments de rythmanalyse : introduction à la connaissance des rythmes*) [18]. The notion of rhythm is also present in *Production de l'espace* (Lefebvre 1973) as well as in a synthesis article published in 1974 [19].

Henri Lefebvre's proposes building a sociology of everyday life by jointly considering time and space in a rhythmology project that analyzes the arrangement of the social time and its modalities of deployment. These arrangements can thus be defined as rhythms in which we are likely to see forms of life in their spatial and temporal dimensions [20]. From this perspective, the proposal of rhythmology developed in Chapter 12 corresponds well to the study of the entanglement with other forms of mobility. Thus, putting different rhythms of mobility into perspective is likely to show different forms of life that cohabit within the same spaces and the same temporalities.

## **4. Conclusions and Discussion : From Mobility Research to a Rhythmology of Mobile Societies**

To respond to the three challenges facing research on mobility that were previously identified, the rhythmological analysis of contemporary societies [20] offers very stimulating avenues for reflection.

First of all, in the face of climate change, the rhythmology of mobility allows us to see the impact of mobility on the environment and fragile spaces. This impact is materialized through the intensity, extent, and frequency of practices as well as their consequences in terms of energy consumption. This approach paves the way to broader reflections on the regulation of mobility. Surprisingly, the regulation of mobility remains a hot and controversial topic. Under the argument hindering individual liberties, the regulation of mobility is nevertheless a major theme of sustainability policies. It also refers to reflections on the saturation of spaces by traffic and the congestion of public space during rush hours.

From this perspective, the rhythmology of mobile societies is likely, on the one hand, to provide tools for observing the spaces and forms of mobility that overload traffic, oppress natural environments, and congest public spaces. Rhythmology is also capable of providing political alternatives for

regulation by proposing a new choreography of the rhythms of mobility that limit the pressures on space-time by spreading out, recomposing, and reorienting flows. This political perspective of regulating mobility through rhythms makes it possible to avoid the pitfall of a brutal and homogeneous slowdown, which, as the economic crisis following the COVID-19 health crisis shows, involves considerable damage at both the economic and social levels.

Work on mobility logically tends to focus on movement, both social and spatial. Thus, contemporary societies are marked by all kinds of movement generated by daily mobility, long-distance or local tourism and, on the social level, the multiple changes in roles, jobs, and lifestyles. This way of interpreting the world gives pride of place to what is moving and can be considered dynamic on the individual, collective, and territorial levels. On the other hand, it does not emphasize the immobile, the fleeting, and the captive, and thus risks making vulnerable social phenomena and groups invisible. John Urry denounced the fact that above all, the social sciences insist on analyzing the solid, institutionalized world, leaving aside what comes under the heading of flows in the broad sense [8] ; with the idea of mobility turn that he proposed, the perspective is reversed, and with it, the opposite observation is made. Rhythmology allows us to respond to this limitation of the concept of mobility. By including the diversity of speed, it reduces the dichotomy between intense movement on the one hand and immobility on the other.

Rhythmology proposes integrating the analysis of the different nuances of movement. For example, its analytical focus proposes that the non-mobile, the captive, and the person with limited mobility be included. The rhythmology of contemporary societies makes bets on temporal and spatial inclusion by orienting the focus to be on more ordinary and even banal rhythms.

In the last twenty years, research on mobility has largely focused on the transformation of the relationship with time and, in particular, on the temporal pressures imposed by the injunction to activity. This perspective of the analysis of mobile societies has fed the currents of the critical analysis of neoliberalism considerably. It has also accompanied reflections on well-being and the search for slowing down as an aspiration in contemporary lifestyles. As Hartmut Rosa [16] suggests, alienation is a particularly salient symptom of the effects of time pressure and saturation on mobile individuals. In our proposal, rhythmology is perfectly adapted to the fight against the different forms of alienation associated with time pressure. Indeed, it allows for the forms of life that imply rhythmic pathologies related to the various forms of saturation to be put into perspective. It also allows us to contribute to the search for the rhythm that favors emancipation and the reappropriation of time. In short, rhythmology proposes we understand the diversity of the relationships to time in the different types of mobility and thus that we identify the pathological forms as well as the happy forms.

By focusing on time, the notion of rhythm allows us to go beyond the identified limits of research on mobility and allow us to provide a broader theoretical framework to the systemic conception of mobility that was dear to Michel Bassand.

Thus, permanence can be considered in rhythmic terms in the same way as flexibility, and an analysis of mobilities in the broader paradigm of rhythmology allows researchers to avoid focusing their attention on what translates into movement in geographical space at different scales. Moreover, the rhythmology of mobile societies allows for the introduction of an important political dimension to the analysis of mobilities [21]. It proposes the design of new choreographies of mobility to limit the pressure on living environments and that support the transition of lifestyles.

Rhythmology also proposes we fully welcome the plurality of rhythmic forms by transcending the categorization of mobilities according to their spatial and temporal scales and by thinking about the entanglement of diversity. Finally, the rhythmology of mobile societies aims to contribute to the debate about the search for the right rhythm that reconciles, on the one hand, the good life and the preservation of the non-human, and, on the other hand, personal emancipation and the culture of the link with others.

## **5. Goals of the Special Issue**

This Special Issue seeks to address the challenge of high mobility. Based on several contributions that integrate the concepts of high mobility and rhythm to analyze mobility behaviors in contemporary societies, the contributors consider different topics and case studies from perspectives that confirm the relevance of this Special Issue. In his paper, Marc-Edouard Schultheiss shows the imbalance between transport demand and supply. The author suggests that the current transport supply is defective in time and space for specific groups that present contrasted rhythms compared to usual rhythms, such as those of commuters. In their contribution, Philippe Gerber and colleagues focus on high-mobility behaviors from the perspective of cross-border commuters. This specific mobility pattern generates arrhythmias in daily life that can deteriorate life satisfaction. In this way, a public transport system that is able to respond to dissatisfaction by offering comfortable timeframes for resting and carrying out various activities is suggested. Guillaume Drevon, Philippe Gerber, and Vincent Kaufmann focus their contribution on an approach to daily rhythm related to motility. The paper aims to put the difficulties encountered by families caused daily life management and chronic time pressures into perspective. In this paper, the contributors propose a typology of temporal resources that enable families to cope with important rhythmic pressures. Thomas Skora, Heiko Rüger, and Nico Stawarz examine various mechanisms that might explain why commuting distances become shorter after childbirth. This paper shows how decisions are made regarding rhythm management in different spheres of life. From this perspective, the authors highlight the inequalities, gender inequalities in particular, that are generated by time pressures in relation to commuting and the management of family life. Finally, Christophe Mincke considers mobility from the perspective of the legitimization of prison in his original paper. In this paper, the contributor raises the idea of reshaping our vision of prison by considering its apparently paradoxical relation with mobility.

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