

1. Dictionary

Ascher François

By Vincent Kaufmann (Sociologue)
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François Ascher (1946-2009) was a French economist and sociologist who specialised in metropolitan phenomena and urban planning. He invented the concept of the “metapolis” and explored the idea of “hypermodernity”, giving a central place to mobility in both of these concepts.

A rather rare occurrence in France, François Ascher’s led a career that combined senior management positions in public administration (at the Ministry of Public Works, the French Delegation for Territorial Development and Regional Action (DATAR) and the Ministry of Research, between 2000 and 2003) with an academic career at the French Institute of Urban Planning (University of Paris-East). This special vantage point allowed him to be active in both the production of knowledge and in urban projects in the broader sense (representing the town planning authority in new cities, for example), which makes him a knowledge communicator. He was, for instance, a strong advocate of high-quality planning for city outskirts. Moreover, François Ascher often argued for strengthening the links between scientific research, expertise and planning proposals.

In detail

Mobility is central to François Ascher’s work, especially in the dynamics involved in the urban phenomenon - which he calls the metapolis - and in the hypermodernity he feels characterizes contemporary society.

The metapolis

François Ascher believed that cities – those great concentrations of human beings – have always been the main places of trade, but also the ideal places for unexpected, creative encounters with the unknown. They facilitate chance meetings like no other place can, which is why cities are conducive to innovation. Ascher shows cities are not undermined by long-distance communications and rapid transport systems: their capacity to generate chance encounters, or serendipity, is such that, even if we can overcome distance, the city remains at the heart of contemporary societies. As such, it is gradually changing and becoming a metapolis.

In his book *Metapolis, or the Future of Cities* (1995), Ascher shows that long-distance communications and rapid transport systems are fundamentally changing the territorial form taken by the urban phenomenon. It is to describe this new form that he uses the term “metapolis”. For Ascher, the metapolis is both compact and spread out, agglomerated and discontinuous, spreading ever further, absorbing increasingly remote areas - an eclectic combination of shapes and landscapes. It is defined by highly contrasting population densities, creating a network of “hubs and spokes” of small and large cities, rural towns and villages, each part of an indivisible whole.

The novelty of this idea is that it considers territory as a potential process as well as physical substance. Ascher’s works describe urban areas as a network whose reticular structure is made possible by transport and telecommunication systems. Thus the metapolis is defined as:

“ The collection of spaces in which all or some of the inhabitants, economic activities and territories are integrated in its daily (ordinary) workings. Generally, a metapolis forms a single employment, residential and business area. The spaces that make up a metapolis are highly mixed, though not necessarily contiguous. A metapolis has at least several hundred thousand inhabitants. It is moreover a city that is no longer just part of a national system, but, increasingly, is part of an international network” (Ascher, 1995, p. 34).

A metapolis differs from the concept of a network of towns in the hierarchical relationships that exist between the urban centres of which it is comprised. The *metapolis* also differs from a *metropolis* in its characteristic spatial discontinuity.

François Ascher’s proposal has the advantage of going beyond approaches that merely contrast the urban and rural, as well as works that argue the end of cities — an urban world in which territories are indistinguishable and cities are reduced to the role of bearing witness to past heritage. Through mobility, he emphasises the pivotal role of transport and telecommunications systems for the future of cities; it is the way actors use the potential they offer that makes a metapolis. According to Ascher, this usage is consistent with a search for rationalisation and speed. As such, the form of a metapolis is directly linked to the speed potential of its technical and regional networks. In this respect, a metapolis is the result of the convergence of an area’s potential *and* the way individual and collective actors appropriate it and adapt it to their own projects.

Hypermodernity

According to some philosophers and sociologists, this concept refers to the pursuit of modernity through a radicalisation of its basic elements — that is, individualisation, reflexivity, social differentiation and increasing socialisation, commoditisation and regulation (Ascher, 2007).

Based on this thinking, François Ascher developed the theory of “hypermodernity” by examining the modern individual, who, he feels, faces a widening range of identifications, values and rules, which are simultaneously present in different worlds and uses the urban space to find the means of satisfying them.

Throughout his studies, which he summarised in his book *The Hypermodern Society, or Let’s pretend we’re in charge of these events that are leaving us behind* (2005), he clarifies the individual’s relationship to urban space-time, specifically highlighting the links between the attributes of people, places, technical systems and values. Once again, mobility plays a central role in his thinking. Hypermodern society is defined by individuals’ hypermobility. More than just an exaggerated form of mobility, hypermobility is the ability to move in many different ways, both in person and remotely (Allemand et al. 2004, p. 81). It is also individuals’ ability to experiment with their mobility potential and, in this way, is similar to the “skills” aspect of the motility concept. Hypermobility seems to be a vital resource for modern individuals; it allows them to move between different social worlds, to be reflexive, and to “scrap build” a lifestyle and set of values.

Bibliography

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Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Motility

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Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Vincent Kaufmann

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Vincent Kaufmann, a Swiss sociologist, is one of the pioneers of mobility and inventor of the concept of motility. He is director of LaSUR at the EPFL, General Secretary of CEAT and professor of sociology and mobility analyses. He is the Mobile Lives Forum's scientific director.

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