

1. Dictionary

Bassand Michel

By Vincent Kaufmann (Sociologue)
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Born in 1938, Michel Bassand is a Swiss sociologist. He was successively a professor at the Université de Genève and at the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL). A specialist in urban issues, he was responsible for a highly-original theory of mobility as a completely social phenomenon, whose different expressions form a complete system.

The concept of spatial mobility he developed in the 1970s, along with his major empirical studies, is probably the best-known aspect of his work, and is also the most widely recognized at an international level. His concept of mobility led to a significant body of research within urban sociology, 30 years before Luc Boltanski, John Urry and Zygmunt Bauman – without necessarily being aware of it at the time – created a key notion in understanding social change.

Michel Bassand sought to understand how travel organizes and structures the surrounding space, and informs the decision-making for those journeys. Taking on board the concept put forward by Marcel Mauss, he conceptualized mobility as a "total social fact", as a result of which, both spaces and spatial forms – along with their intrinsic dynamics – are created. Michel Bassand therefore became the first to put forward a broad sociological definition of travel and mobility, an approach that includes both the social and the spatial aspects.

The foundations for this are set out in "Mobilité Spatiale" (1980), a book written by Michel Bassand and Marie-Claude Brülhardt that defines mobility as "all journeys that involve a change of state for the individual or the system under consideration." This definition gives mobility twin components – the spatial and social - and is a continuation of the work carried out by the Chicago School. Their proposition is based on five specific, methodological principles (Bassand and Brülhardt 1980, pp55-56) :

"1. The need to consider mobility as a total social fact, i.e. a category of phenomena which involves the whole society and its institutions, but also its secret and hidden components. 2. The need for an interdisciplinary approach to deal with mobility. 3. The recognition of two irreducible levels of analysis: micro and macro. 4. Taking flows into account, along with the determining factors for those flows and their consequences. 5. The importance of taking into consideration the context of the analysis of mobility. This approach is a response to the fragmentation of the notion of mobility. This fragmentation is problematic in that it focuses current knowledge on specific forms of journeys, when in fact one of the most interesting aspects of research on the phenomena of mobility is the study of the interactions between its different forms. These interactions can then modify, strengthen or become part of a game of substitution or modification of the forms themselves."

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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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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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