

Access to urban opportunities: Mending the urban-rural divide in metropolitan areas

Giovanni Vecchio

Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Politecnico di Milano, giovanni.vecchio@polimi.it

Introduction: Access to opportunities, in-between urban and human development

Contemporary urban settings can rely on inedited opportunities for everyday mobility. Paradoxically, thanks to infrastructure and digital technologies our territories are more and more connected, while our societies appear to be more divided than ever. The new, endless mobilities opportunities are not enough to facilitate the interactions between people and places; rather, the divide between the urban and the rural is once more relevant, showing opposite attitudes – rational or emotional – towards ongoing social changes (Tricarico, 2017). Everyday mobility provides in fact differentiated opportunities to participate in social life, according to varied urban populations.

The paper aims to investigate how to face urban mobility according to its impact on the opportunities available to individuals. The issue is crucial to address both human and urban development. Individuals in fact need to move, in order to access those urban opportunities they have reason to value, according to individual life aims and strategies (Cresswell, 2010; Kaufmann, 2002; Kronlid, 2008; Nordbakke, 2013; Nordbakke & Schwanen, 2014; Urry, 2007). A focus on access is relevant also for its contribution to the overall development of a country or a society, assuming that development can be identified with the possibility for everyone to flourish according to what she has reason to value (Nussbaum, 2000) and assuming thus individual freedom a social commitment (Sen, 1999). Access to opportunities is thus crucial both to improve personal well-being, both to provide those conditions that increase the attractiveness and the competitiveness of a territory (Camagni, 2002). In metropolitan areas, the issue acquires a specific relevance, given that their urban and rural parts show very different performances in terms of access to significant services and opportunities (Immonen & Sintonen, 2016; Smith, Hirsch, & Davis, 2012).

Access emerges thus as a relevant guiding principle when evaluating the urban mobility strategies of metropolitan areas, helping to consider which infrastructures and services contribute more to support individual opportunities. To explore this issue and its specific inflection in metropolitan areas, the paper investigates an emerging new urban-rural divide, as expressed by mobility and access to urban opportunities in metropolitan areas (section 2). Emerging practices highlight new forms of mobility as well as inedited ways of participating in urban life (section 3). Consequently, new evaluative and operational approaches for urban mobility planning and policy are required (section 4), especially to understand how everyday mobility can contribute to development in increasingly divided societies (section 5).

A new urban-rural divide?

Mobility is fundamental for each person: it allows to access the opportunities available in urban settings, allowing to pursue personal life objectives and to participate in the life of one's society. Mobility is a key tool for more cohesive societies, as established academic research and devoted social policy demonstrate (Lucas, 2012; Lucas, Mattioli, Verlinghieri, & Guzman, 2016; Preston & Rajé, 2007; Schwanen et al., 2015; Stanley & Vella-Brodrick, 2009). And the city cannot exist without the interactions allowed (also) by mobility, given that "it is interaction, not place, that is the essence of the city and of city life" (Webber, 1964, p. 147). Thanks to mobility, it is significant to focus on the urban rather than on the city: not a specific kind of settlement characterized by clear borders, but rather a specific way of life, with peculiar everyday activities and socio-economic dynamics (Brenner & Schmid, 2015).

The possibility to interact with the urban is not sufficient to take part in it. Urban and rural settings prove to have different opportunities, as well as diverse ways to define problems and desired solutions. The manifold, secret lives of urban societies (Mehta, 2016) do not necessarily interact with what remains outside of them. This is particularly true if the city is seen as a hub and the surrounding territories are simply areas that provide resources to be shared in the global markets (Khanna, 2016). A neo-medievalist scenario is emerging, made of nodes, networks and... huge voids in the middle. Mobility systems in fact can create privileged relationships and exclusionary mechanisms, contributing to a peculiar 'geography of power' (Raffestin, 1983) that guarantees the opportunities of mobility only to some subjects and territories.

Several significant mobility opportunities are currently available only to some urban settings and populations. This is the case for high scale infrastructures and the services they host, as in the case of the Italian high speed rail network: living near the few high speed nodes allows to access the rapid connections between the main Italian cities, at least from Piedmont to Campania; however, these fast territories connected to each other are counterbalanced by the slow territories crossed but not served by the network, so that in these territories the high-speed rail network is rather an extraneous

presence that responds only to some specific mobility exigencies, dividing some territories while connecting others (Vecchio, 2015). Technological innovations may seem to offer better mobility opportunities than those provided by infrastructures. However, even if individuals have increasingly access to mobile devices, innovative services still serve only the main cities. The few attempts to expand their service areas to the surrounding metropolitan regions often failed, as in the case of car sharing vehicles (De Vito, 2015). Even the innovations provided by community initiatives (Tricarico, Vecchio, & Testoni, 2016) require demand densities that cannot be found outside the main cities.

Emerging practices of mobility and participation in urban life

New mobility practices are emerging outside cities, showing how populations living in low-density areas are developing new relationships with the urban. However, their practices may be the result of voluntary residential choices as well as the consequence of locational constraints. The issue emerges considering some ongoing spatial phenomena, highlighted for example by recent research on the Milan metropolitan area (Pucci, 2016, 2017; Pucci, Manfredini, & Tagliolato, 2015).

A first phenomenon involves long-distance commuters. For work reasons, they engage in daily long-distance commutes (more than 150 km). The phenomenon is a consequence of both a contraction in the job market, both an improvement of the available mobility opportunities (for example, thanks to new public transport services offering medium-long distance connections). Despite involving a small number of people, the phenomenon has experienced a huge growth in the last years, both in Italy (Vendemmia, 2016) and in Europe (Viry & Kaufmann, 2015). Instead of moving to the city where they work, long-distance commuters choose to keep living far from their workplace and to reach it daily. While the phenomenon has already been the object of devoted research, it is not clear if these commuting practices are the result of voluntary choices made by people who prefer to keep living in non-urban settings; in fact, such practices may be an adaptive strategy (De Certeau, 1984), resulting from the impossibility of covering the costs required to inhabit the main cities and consequently participate in urban life.

A second phenomenon concerns the redistribution of the commuting trips that reach Milan every day. The influence area of Milan is growing, as well as the number of daily incoming commuters, while the importance of regional polarities is decreasing, questioning the polycentric model emerged in the previous decade. The economic evolution of the Milan metropolitan area has thus put new emphasis on the capital city, also due to the job market crisis. However, even outside working hours the city offers opportunities that are not available outside: as the telephone traffic data show (Pucci et al., 2015), commuters heading to the municipalities in the Southern Milan metropolitan areas move in later hours than the people directed to the highly urbanized areas north of Milan. Such difference seems to be the result of a diverse availability of services and activities, more easily found in the northern municipalities; instead, those who live in the southern municipalities choose to use activities or services after their working hours, staying in Milan for more time.

Both cases are just two examples of the new relationships between what is urban or not, as fostered (also) by mobility. These practices reflect not just specific forms of travel, but also new forms of participation in urban life: specific mobility practices allow to access urban opportunities and to overcome some limitations of the places of origin (such as the distance from the capital city, or their scarce service provision). However, these mobility practices are the reflection of more complex features – lifestyles, preferences, ideas – that influence individuals as well as the communities they belong to (Anable, 2005; Cairns et al., 2008; Cao & Mokhtarian, 2005; Kazhamiakin et al., 2015; Schwanen, 2015). And the territories they inhabit, of course, requiring to develop new conceptualizations – for example, the idea of postmetropolis (Balducci, Fedeli, & Curci, 2017; Soja, 2000).

Accessibility, the main aim of transport planning

New forms of mobility define manifold relationships between populations and territories and require mending the gap between connected and excluded territories. Specific technical and political approaches are required in order to face the new practices that aim to participate in urban life at inedited spatial scales, calling for devoted evaluative and operational approaches.

Suitable evaluations may focus on the instrumental use of mobility in order to access those opportunities and allow participation in those activities that each individual “has reason to value” (Sen, 1999, p. 285). Accessibility can thus be crucial to contrast social exclusion and consequently enhance quality of life. In fact, accessibility strongly relates to “the capabilities of performing activities at certain locations” (van Wee, 2011, p. 32): this view seems in line with approaches that highlight accessibility as one of the main aims of transport planning, referring to the instrumental use of mobility in order to access opportunities and allow activity participation (Martens, 2017). The wide range of perspectives concerned with the social dimensions of mobility confirms thus that accessibility may be a relevant evaluative tool also to express how transport systems may support or not individuals’ capabilities.

Operational approaches instead need to recognize the value on new spreading initiatives that address these emerging mobility needs but often operate outside the existing normative regulations. For example, low-cost bus lines (such as Flix Bus) allow to regularly move from the cities where people work and study to the provincial areas they come from. Or it is

the case of long-distance commuters, who use high speed rail services (like FrecciaRossa and FrecciaBianca) and asks for devoted transport passes. These are just two examples of new practices that show how new territorial dimensions are required to take part in urban life and take advantage of the opportunities it offers. Interestingly, both examples have recently animated harsh political debates at the regional and the national scale, because of the difficulties of recognizing the new exigencies these services address.

Even bottom-up initiatives provide interesting experiences that address mobility needs with new forms of engagement (Vecchio, 2016). Many communities in fact are active in initiatives that express specific demands and at the same time develop partial solutions, promoting forms of “social productions of public goods, that is to say obtain public goods by social practices rather than by policies” (Donolo, 2005, p. 47). Bottom-up practices develop innovative solutions that in many cases provide (more) effective solutions for mobility needs. Their consequences go beyond individuals, since “the innovation produced by each individual to build her own everyday life is constitutive of social innovation in general, and contributes thus to a social production that in turn will produce new innovation opportunities” (Bourdin, 2005, p. 19). Such changes also generate collective benefits, since “the effects of innovation are the reclassification and redistribution of opportunities” (Veca, 2010, p. 90).

Conclusions: Rethinking urban mobility in increasingly divided societies

New mobility practices require an interpretative effort to understand the opportunities to which they provide access, as well as to define the motivations, aims and lifestyles they reflect. In a society where the tendency to closure is increasing, as well as segregation dynamics, can urban mobility policy help to contrast such processes? It is thus relevant to define services and policies to break the isolation of what remains outside the cities - or, better, the urban: basic opportunities, such as schools, services and shops, can help to tackle such isolation, by providing enough occasions to participate in social life (Lucas, van Wee, & Maat, 2016). Top-down interventions and bottom-up initiatives can contribute to such basic access. The intention is as simple as important, since the patient work with those left behind is fundamental to guarantee the development of a society and its members (Cassano, 2011).

In conclusion, interpretative and operative efforts are required to define what society is desirable for our future. The future of mobility and, consequently, society was already central in the work by the sociologist John Urry (2008). Examining different forms of mobility for people, goods and information, Urry imagined two extreme scenarios: a Hobbesian war of everyone against everyone, due to conflicts for the use of scarce resources and the adaptation to climate changes, and an Orwellian digital panopticon, based on the extensive use of technology with surveillance purposes. None of these two scenarios appears as desirable. The challenge is thus to define a third way towards society to which anyone may wish to belong, also thanks to everyday mobility.

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