



HAL
open science

Urban time policies and mobility: on the road to Sustimability

Emmanuel Munch

► **To cite this version:**

Emmanuel Munch. Urban time policies and mobility: on the road to Sustimability. Local and regional time agenda T o p i c 2. Time Mobility and Sustainability, 2023. hal-04101468

HAL Id: hal-04101468

<https://hal.science/hal-04101468v1>

Submitted on 19 May 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

URBAN TIME POLICIES AND MOBILITY

On the road to “Sustimability”

Emmanuel Munch

*Research Officer for the French Ministry for Ecological Transition
Laboratoire Ville Mobilité Transport, Université Gustave Eiffel*

Mobility is the link allowing the spatial and temporal coordination of daily activities. Based on the precepts set out in the Italian Turco Law of 2000, **urban time policies seek to coordinate, reconcile and harmonise the operating hours of urban transport with all the other activities that make up urban life.** According to this philosophy, for instance, the arrival time of trains at the station should be coordinated with bus schedules, which in turn are coordinated with the hours of hospital nurses, children's day-care centres, public services and shops so that the various activities can be performed one after the other.

Since the early 2000s, fragmented social rhythms have been a phenomenon with a profound effect on the lifestyles of Western populations. From the point of view of social temporalities, devices, individuals, and institutions seem to function increasingly autonomously and according to an increasingly “personalised” rhythm.

We are witnessing a phenomenon of widespread desynchronisation of daily and weekly temporalities: shops open Sundays and nights, atypical working hours, shorter lunch breaks, longer daily travel time. The synchronisation of social rhythms which segmented daily life in the industrial era is now dislocated in favour of increasingly dispersed travel timing.

However, when we look at these situations from a territorial perspective, the findings are much more ambiguous than the average statistics and leading narratives would suggest.

For example, in many cities in France, Switzerland, and the United States, the increased proportion of employees able to choose their working hours –i.e. autonomy in working hours– comes alongside an increase in the synchronisation of arrivals at work during the morning rush hour.

So we are far from finished with the phenomenon of rush hour.

autonomy in working hours- comes alongside an increase in the synchronisation of arrivals at work during the morning rush hour.

So we are far from finished with the phenomenon of rush hour.

Transport and (re-)synchronised urban rhythms

Since their inception, urban time policies have addressed the ambivalent impacts of empowered travel rhythms. On the one hand, they have sought to adapt the mobility offer to temporally evolved and diversified lifestyles: night buses, on-demand and intermodal transport... Strasbourg's "Revolution of Mobility", which can be found in this publication, offers an example of such diversification.

On the other hand, faced with the persistence of peak times, time offices are designing policies to manage transport demand. These take the form, among other things, of local policies to relieve peak-time transport congestion by staggering working hours. **In Europe, time offices¹ were the first local authorities to successfully institute staggered working hours, mainly in universities.** To our knowledge, the first such initiative took place in Poitiers in 2001. But without a doubt, the most impactful and most documented is a University of Rennes-led initiative from 2014².

Beyond these issues relating to the re-synchronisation of travel rhythms, now well mastered by time policies, I would like to point out a new issue for the temporal planning of urban spaces. It is today a blind spot in urban time policies, especially when we are interested in mobility.

From “faster, cheaper” to “slower, closer”

Often, when an urban time office analyses the temporal dimension of mobilities, it is done, implicitly, with a view to 'saving time' and maximising opportunities for interactions and exchanges between individuals, goods, and capital. Time offices' work fits into the usual framework of local action geared towards acceleration and economic growth. In this sense, someti-

¹ Time offices are an institutional formulation for the Departments in charge of coordinating urban times. This designation can be found in Italy, where they first appear due to the "Turco Law" of the 2000s, and in France, since the "Aubry II" Act.

² Munch, E. (2014). "Could harmonised working times spell an end to the rush hour?". Métropolitiques.eu, 5. Available at: <https://metropolitiques.org/IMG/pdf/met-munch-en.pdf>

times in spite of themselves, time offices follow the precepts of the functional city. When I surveyed French, Spanish and Italian cities³, heads of time offices frequently depicted the same tendency: “the community's vocation is to absorb ever more flows”.

On the upside, by enabling individuals to carry out activities previously hindered by time constraints, accelerated travel flows make it possible to diversify lifestyles. In this way, acceleration could also be conducive to a broadening of life horizons.

The downside, however, is that the effects of accelerated, and particularly motorised, mobility can be questioned in terms of road deaths and urban sprawl. Observed since the first suburban motorway constructions in the 1960s, sprawl takes people away from centres of activity rather than bringing them closer, and ultimately requires them to consume ever more fossil fuels or electricity to get around. Moreover, it is now clear that transport acceleration has a direct and intense impact on the ecological crisis we face in the 21st century. Transport speed, distance travelled, GDP growth, and CO2 consumption are historically closely linked.

Is it not time to move gradually from a model of always “faster, cheaper” to “slower, closer” to live better? The interest of this line of thought in urban spaces appears validated by the aspirations of their populations.

In 2015, an international survey⁴ on city dwellers' aspirations regarding their future lifestyles revealed that, irrespective of respondents' origin, aspirations to slow down the pace of life and return to close relationships were systematically ranked highest. More recent surveys in France confirm this⁵, and awareness-raising drawing on the Covid-19 pandemic would surely reinforce it. What form might mobility take to match these desires? Living at a less frantic pace with close relationships necessarily requires us to rethink our relationship with speed, productivism, and territorial organisation.

These readjustments can already be seen in the practices of certain catego-

³ Munch, E., Leslie Belton C., Gwendal S. 2022. Politiques de Mobilité Durable et Décélération. Rapport de recherche. ADEME. Available at: <https://hal.science/hal-03911343/document>

⁴ Descarrega, B., Moati, P., 2016. « Modes de vie et mobilité. Une approche par les aspirations. Phase quantitative », *Rapport de recherche*, Forum Vies Mobiles, ObsoCo, Paris. Available at <https://forumviesmobiles.org/recherches/3240/aspirations-liees-la-mobilite-et-aux-modes-de-vie-enquete-internationale>

⁵ France Stratégie, 2021. Séminaire Soutenabilités, Cycle 2 : les politiques publiques au prisme des soutenabilités. Le temps, *Note de cadrage*.

ries of people, for whom, in 2023, shopping at local stores is likely more important than going to a distant shopping centre. In the same vein, others may now value going on holiday close to home, or a staycation. While we must be cautious about the reasons of this phenomenon, the latest national survey on household travel in France (2019) attests to this finding. It shows an increase in daily travel time, in parallel with a stagnation, or slight decrease, in distances travelled locally. For the first time in the history of national surveys, we are witnessing a slowdown in the average French person's travel speed.

In the field of mobility policies, it must be noted that local politicians have been involved, in some cases for many years, in organising mobility with a view to easing urban travel, particularly in town centres (switching to walking, cycling, boating, limiting car speeds, etc.).

Slow mobility for desired sustainability: the quest for conviviality

Nevertheless, we lack a global planning model that clearly places the emphasis on preserving forms of slowness in urban metropolises, where intense paces of life are sometimes too pervasive.

The invitation, then, is to collectively define the rhythmic thresholds beyond which temporally intense activities become counterproductive for quality of life and the environment, both for individuals and the community. We are reminded of the seminal work of Ivan Illich (1974)⁶, for whom any travel exceeding 25 km/h wastes time for the community as a whole and therefore for the individual on average.

Where are the rhythmic thresholds of technical progress and economic growth, beyond which “acceleration” becomes too harmful for society? How can we define and evaluate sustainable urban rhythms based on maximum travel speed and limited accessibility?

Because of their historical weight, urban time policies have an important role in creating a unified framework to regulate the mobility times in the city. Embracing sustainable objectives means putting quality before quantity and shifting priority from material to temporal prosperity. It requires transfor-

⁶ Illich, I. 1974. *Energy and Equity*. Harper and Row, New York.

ming our breathless functional cities into convivial ones, making clear room for a holistic vision of well-being and health in the city. This would necessarily put the spotlight on children, the elderly, and people with disabilities who are often sidelined in urban life because they are too slow to fit into the ever-accelerating course.

Finally, this new framework for urban time policies means reconciling the political with the individual. It means bringing together collective 'constraints' and individual aspirations by making slower urban mobilities a project for the common good, desirable for both the individual and the collective.



Emmanuel Munch is a chrono-urbanist and socio-economist of transport. His work focuses on the problem of rush hours, the acceleration of life rhythms and the socio-ecological bifurcation.