

Los Angeles and North-American approaches

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The presentation is divided into two times. In a first part I expose how I met the set of themes of displacements within the framework of my research tasks on the urban question. The second part presents the three relevant sets of themes on which the researchers in social sciences work specialized in transport in the United States.

I – Reconceptualizing the link between the networks industry and the real estate market

The question of mobility does not arise same manner in urban areas which are organized on the mode of the centrality (strong) and those which are thought on the polycentric mode or on the principle of the multicentrality or polynuclearity. Etudier Los Angeles from the comparative point of view with Paris makes it possible to give an account of the differences between these two 'ideal-type'.

The assumption that I developed in the years 1980 within the framework of my research tasks¹ can be summarized with the following sentence. **Contrary to the dominant thesis in urban studies (including different social sciences), the freeway no more than the car do not explain the sprawl of Los Angeles as well as its lack of distinction between the central city's urban fabric and its suburban areas.** The urban structure of a metropolitan region is in fact at the interface between the industry of the networks and the real estate market. Within the

¹ Part of this research task was published in two works, *Los Angeles, le mythe américain inachevé* (Los Angeles, the unfinished American myth), 1997 & 2002, CNRS editions and *La ville insoutenable* (The unsustainable city), Belin 2006 so as in reviews like *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* (Annals of urban research).

framework of the “these d’Etat”, it was shown that the representations related to live it can be regarded as the determining factor.

- Los Angeles was built on the principle of the single-family house as the ideal urban setting for everyone. Public and private decision-makers, along with the inhabitants, shared these representations during approximately one century (from the 1880s to the 1980s). The preeminence of this myth in the social representations results from:
 - 1) the ideological debate which prevailed in the first half of the XIX^E century parallel to the advent of industrialization and the urbanization and
 - 2) the specificity of the settlement of Los Angeles.
- Indeed contrary to the cities of the east coast and the Midwest like Chicago, Los Angeles accommodated (since it became an American city) migration flows made up of Americans in search of an ideal urban environment and not of immigrants coming from abroad. The developers in charge of the creation of large subdivisions were often in charge of the construction of a streetcar line. Once the lots were sold they would sell the line to another company.
- Los Angeles chose the principle of the municipalization of water and later of electricity; but **refused the municipalization of public transportation**. A large debate involving the media (Los Angeles Times) took place in the 1920s about the future of public transport in a city where the car was still mainly used for the leisure. At the end of this debate, the inhabitants voted in favor of the car like a means of transportation and refused to municipalize public transport. Indeed, the experts had shown that any operator of public transport (public or private) should also adopt a strategy of land acquisition in order to ensure the medium-term profitability of the operation. For any inhabitant of Los Angeles, this argument meant that in the long term, the operator would lobby the municipality in order to change the zoning plan and densify the urban fabric. Then the apartment building would slowly replace the single-family house.

II - Three relevant sets of themes of North-American research

For the last fifteen years, American researchers who are also specialists of transportation (within the social sciences) work mainly on the three following sets of themes:

- **Financing public transport and the freeway .**
The question of the financing arises around fifteen years approximately following an awakening of the limit of the public investments. Hence the need to find new methods of financing, in particular through local taxes and more precisely the “property” tax based on the value of the land in the market. Any investment in public transport requires a participation of the landowners who are taking advantage of the equipment, a situation which results in a rise of the value of their goods in the real estate market.
- **Fluidity in the freeway and the routes.**
The Federal state chose to finance the construction of the freeway network in 1956. The realization of this network was completed at the end of the years 1980. Circulation on this freeway, mainly in metropolitan areas, is increasingly difficult

and for the last 15 years, there is no question of expanding it. It follows then that in order to regulate the problem of “congestion” and bring back some back of fluidity, meant the number of cars should decrease. Decreasing the number of cars requires a change in the drivers’ behaviour.

- **The access of the people not-motorized to the job market.**

I worked on this set of themes within the framework from Predit 2 (in the early 2000) by carrying out interviews with local decision-makers (public, private actors and associations and non-profit corporations) in American cities. At the conclusion of the various exchanges, informal public transport was presented as a means for settling the mobility question of non-motorized people, especially as concerning access to the jobs. A certain number of American researchers think that informal transportation should be a serious theme of research in order to get a better understanding of the underground phenomenon and evaluate its capacity for meeting a social demand.

Perspective for a sustainable development strategy

The themes of mobility and its future is today linked to sustainable development perspective (reduction of the energy dependence and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, GHC), the conceptualization of the interface between the industry of the networks and the real estate market represents hence a fundamental stake for research in social sciences as well as for engineers.

Contrary to the ambient *doxa*, sustainable development is not limited to the only concept of environment; it also takes into account social dimension such as the conditions of life of non motorized people in deprived neighbourhoods. The category of non-motorized people includes people who do not have enough money to buy a car as well as elderly people. These two groups should have access to the job market and to public equipments and social services.