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Spatial categorization in life course: the case of residential mobility in Switzerland

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This paper explores the residential trajectories of inhabitants, through the ways in which they depict the places where they have lived. It aims at understanding how important are places of residence and especially categories of places in the ways individuals tell and imagine their life course. I argue that residents claim their personal identity by using geographical categories that give meaning to their life course and to the sequences of places inhabited. Our research explores how the individuals are capable of combining different facts they consider meaningful to create an identity, namely to present themselves as a subject. The method of biographical interviews is particularly relevant to reach this aim.

The first way to address migration and change of place of residence is to analyse cause-effect relationships. When asking people to talk about the places they inhabited, they will tend to justify what led them to live or to leave this place. In this regard, it is worth considering the residential trajectories under the strict terms of pull factors or push factors. Many scholars have studied in this sense what they call residential choices (Authier et al. 2010). The “classical” approach of migration consists of explaining migration by relations of causality. The motives for moving are related to a change of job or a change of familial status, among other factors. In wealthy western societies, the choices to migrate are very often motivated by a will to increase the quality of life (O’Reilly, Benson 2009). Sociology of life course (Elder, Giele 2009) is interested in understanding what are the objective factors (familial context, historical conditions, etc.) influencing the life of an individual. On the contrary, our research focuses on the subjective perceptions of the events affecting the life course. In the other hand, it is worth interesting in factors attracting people to a place: the environmental settings of this place are generally termed amenities (Green et al. 2005). In this perspective, places with high amenities are usually considered as “good” place to move in. These are the case of coastal areas or mountains regions. The motives for moving often overlap with tourism images and resources, i.e. the better climate, the leisure opportunities or the quality of landscape (O’Reilly, Benson 2009).

The second way to understand migration and residential trajectory is to claim that individuals are attached to places, even when they move. Social psychologists and geographers have shown that people are emotionally invested in particular places (Cf. Altman, Low 1992, Entrikin 1991, Hidalgo, Hernandez 2001, Tuan 1977). This body of work has highlighted the processes by which an individual (or a subject) can create emotional bonds to place over time and how these processes can impact the identity. It focuses on fixed and long history produced places that give an anchorage to individual. We develop a sense of belonging with familiar places, which come to be invested with memories across time. Nevertheless, the overwhelming impact of mobility in contemporary life has led scholars to pay attention to the construction and deconstruction of affective bonds with a plurality of places (Gustafson 2001).
These two premises are useful for understanding why people had moved or stayed somewhere. But our contribution adopts a slightly different point of view. On the one hand, in telling their trajectory, individuals hardly give a single reason for moving. On the contrary, they evoke a complex range of practices and decisions which leads to a movement (Cf. Mason 2004, p166). Accordingly, the model of cause-effect relationship needs to be more elaborated. Our contribution does not emphasize on the migration or the residential choice per se, but rather on the identity that individual constructs regarding their current, past and future places of residence. It aims at exploring life course not through objective patterns but through subjective events used by people to justify their trajectory (Cailly 2007).

On the other hand, from our perspective, attachment is not sufficient for apprehending the residential trajectory and the identity of an individual. Identity cannot be discounted as attachment to place. It is rather through conscious positioning that an individual constructs his identity. For that matter, the attachment to places is not that important for all the interviewees.

The corpus of the study comprises biographical interviews with recent newcomers or inhabitants in places significant in terms of migration in Switzerland (i.e. where immigration and emigration rates are particularly high). The municipalities chosen are all located in what is officially designed as mountain areas in Switzerland, insofar as the focus of our study is on the use of the category “mountain” in the biographical narrative of inhabitants. The first case is the commune de Bagnes, in the canton of Valais. Its economy is in a large extent dependent upon the tourism resort of Verbier. Very well known ski resort, particularly appreciated by Britons, Verbier is a useful example of lifestyle migration concerning affluent people. The second is the commune de Soucle, tiny village of 200 inhabitants situated in a remote valley in the canton of Jura. It belongs to what we call in Switzerland a peripheral region. The third is the commune de Saint-Cergue, lying in the Jura Mountain range. Close to the metropolis of Geneva, its inhabitants can commute easily. Partly for that reason, its population increased dramatically during the last decades. The interviews conducted in these three municipalities have allowed participants to mention the various places where they had inhabited, to qualify these places and explain what led them to settle or to leave there. They were also asked to relate these moves to personal, social and family events. The corpus of interviews was treated with the software ATLAS.ti. This analysis identified the main categories used by participants to account for their residential trajectory and for their choices to move. It enabled to give an insight into each of the selected environments and movements within the construction of biographical narratives.

This paper put forward two arguments.

The first argument is that both specific places and categories are evoked by individuals in their biographical narratives. These unceasingly hover between generality and specificity. It is argued that life course is narrated through a limited repertoire of spatial categories (mainly city, countryside and mountain). Each of these categories is defined by a range of recurrent attributes. These categories and attributes constitute a repertoire of resources upon which biographical narratives can draw. It appears indeed that these resources are shared and taken for granted in the culture to which individuals belong (Taylor 2006, p94).
In the perspective of sociology of knowledge and phenomenology (Berger, Luckmann 1966, Quéré 1994), categorization can be conceived as a way of ordering our environment, by using concepts relating a particular object to similar objects. It is a schematic representation assembling things considered to be similar (Fradin et al. 1994). Mountain is the category in which our research is the most interested. This category pertains to commonsense and is regarded as particularly attractive and relevant for some people. Nonetheless, the two others categories appear to be more often mentioned by the participants. Indeed, they readily oppose “city” and “countryside” generally in order to give negative meaning to the first category and positive to the second. The three main categories are defined recurrently by a range of attributes, both objective and subjective.

- The biophysical attributes are used to describe a place on the basis of its physical and morphological characteristics. A place is considered as “mountainous” (or not) according to its altitude, climate or relief.

- The functional attributes are related to activities of everyday life. The category is defined by the functions performed in the places. In mountain areas, it is easier to practice outdoors leisure, like skiing or hiking. On the contrary, the importance of cultural activities would characterize cities.

- The sensitive attributes are related to feelings, experiences or atmospheres. They cover a type of sociability associated more readily with a category. Acquaintanceship, close relations between the inhabitants, important social proximity would be the particularities of village and countryside, while the anonymity is often used to qualify the city.

- The axiological attributes relate to values that participants associate with the categories of places: the city would be synonymous with openness, for instance.

The second argument is that some individuals shape consciously their identity by telling their life course (as they do in the interview), and by giving meaning to the events and the places they have inhabited. The concept of narrative identity, inspired from the work of Paul Ricoeur (1990) and used by others (Somers 1994), refers to self-definition produced by the stories each of us tell of his life. In sociology, many scholars studying modernity contend that the individual “aspires to be the author of his or her own life” (Ulrich Beck quoted in Mason 2004). The individual is today endowed with reflexivity: the identity has become a reflexive project of the self, which is not constrained by predetermined norms (Giddens 1991). By choosing to way in which they present themselves, individuals attempt to give continuity and coherence to their life course. The role of narrative in this process is to connect past, present, future, self and other (Mason 2004, p165). The person is active in identity work, he makes choice. “Out of the millions things that occur in a life, only some will be selected as “events” with which construct a story” (Lawler 2008, p16). Places and categories of place are resources at disposal for constructing the identity.

But what are the narratives taken up by the persons? It appears that some narratives recur in the discourse of the interviews. I will take the example of three persons, who “story” their trajectory both in a different and similar way.

The first interviewee insists much on the significance of “living in mountain”, i.e. he states a powerful and emotional attraction towards mountainous environments. The trajectory of Robert resembles many of those immigrants in Verbier who come to practice intensively skiing in the early 1990s. He first lived only during the winter season, and then he ended up settle there permanently. He spent his childhood in a large Italian city, but he admits not to
have loved it. At the end of his studies in the University, he decided to spend a winter in a large French resort. He then left in a large English city to carry on work. “One year in XXX, and every day, I looked out the window, I said” Oh, the mountains …”. Robert is representative of those immigrants who express a strong attachment to mountain, which is often combined with a passion for skiing. He began practicing this activity as a teenager: “I loved [more] skiing than the mountain at that time. The mountain, I began to love … maybe in [big French resort], I began to love the mountain. Before, I loved skiing”. Robert arrived at Verbier because one of his friends lived there. He became a photographer. The account he gave of his trajectory is more based on categories than on specific places. “The things you love, you find in many places. I like the mountain, I’m in the mountains. After all, I can live anywhere in the mountains, it’s true, but I like being here because of my friends, actually. I am fortunate that now is here […] If I could take all my friends, we would move all together in another mountain village …”

The second example of interviewee demonstrates a will of some persons to highlight mobility across the world as self-definition. Jenny was born in a country of Southeast Asia, in a small village (“small place”, as she call it) and a wealthy family. She spent her childhood in England, where she studied at the University in a big city. There she met her husband, also wealthy, and started a family. She says her residential trajectory is dictated by the search collectively assumed, for environments with sports and nature. Thus, she decided with her husband to live in a Caribbean island for seven years. Once their children were of school age, they decided to settle near a large city in Switzerland, saying enjoy its accessibility, its international character, its ease of access to leisure and its good reputation in education. In the same time, they built a chalet in Verbier as a second home, since the husband of Jenny loves skiing. Aware that they are perfectly able to work remotely to conduct business without having to travel, they settled permanently in their chalet in Verbier. In her talk, Jenny develops a sophisticated discourse on the categories. She said she wanted to go either to the “ocean” or to the ”mountain”. Her talk is based on the contrast between a category valued, the village or the mountain, and a devalued category, the city. “Small communities” or “small places” seem fascinate her. To her, the city is where all the temptations of over-consumption and all the artificial activities are privileged, while the village (or mountain) allows the closeness to nature and where people maintain authentic relationships.

The final example concerns a person less eager to regard reflexively his life course: he imputes changes of places to coincidences or opportunities, rather than to a deliberate choice. However, he also invokes categories, namely the opposition city-countryside. Marc grew up in the suburb of a large Swiss city. As a teenager, he often changed places of residence, successively in suburbs and the centre of the city. He particularly enjoyed living in a big flat in the center. It was at that time he also married. The couple decided to move to a town near the French border. “We looked especially for things outside Geneva […] We wanted to find something in the countryside, outside […]. My wife couldn’t stand living in tge city”. They found a flat in Saint-Cergue. “It was really by chance, in the newspaper, there were ads for apartments”. Marc does not attempt necessarily to create continuity in his life course. But he uses categories and defines them by attributes both objective (the altitude of Saint-Cergue leads him to classify as a mountain village) and subjective (the inhabitants of Saint-Cergue are considered as more friendly than those of cities).
Bibliography:


