Political and Social Challenges to Walking in Town

Call for papers: special issue, *Espaces et sociétés* journal, deadline 15 July 2017

20th century urbanism, whether regulated by the State or the market, has granted to walking two functions applied in completely different ways in urban spaces. On the one hand, it has been envisioned as an auxiliary travel mode, preliminary to access individual or collective transportation, enabling the use of transport networks at urban or regional level. While creating distances that only rapid transport can cover, this system has also fostered social-spatial segregation. In addition, it has created major obstacles to transit (physical barriers, safety issues, other difficulties) which reduced the short-range effectiveness of pedestrian travel. Pedestrian accessibility thus became highly unequal in contemporary cities, depending on location (dense city centre, suburban areas organised by major transportation routes or ring roads, recently urbanised peripheries) and personal situations (persons with reduced mobility, car dependency, existence and affordability of collective transportation, etc.).

On the other hand, walking has been considered as a leisure activity for which specific sites were planned, in accordance with the envisioned public. As early as the Renaissance, the development of the “art of walking” (Solnit, 2001) meant opening parks and gardens, later incorporated as ‘green areas’ in functional urbanism. The development of tourism and of wandering, in major shopping streets, boulevards or Ramblas, supported the broadening of sidewalks for window-shopping, the creation of “passages”, the pedestrianisation of some streets in historical centres or the creation of pedestrian routes for the purpose of promoting heritage. The “come-back of walking in town” (Thomas 2004; Papon & de Solère 2010) appears in a literary and media corpus promoting strolls, personal development or urban exploration and would explain the “leisurisation” (Latouche & Lapерrière 2001, Monnet 2012) of already-central sites: so-called pedestrian, shared or “pacified” ways, reconfigured squares to reduce traffic or parking, pedestrian-only embankments, etc.

As such, walking is not only the most universal means of access to what a city has to offer, but as a practice it also reveals and perpetuates planning and representation, power balances, political visions, centrality and marginalisation, segregation and inequality. We would like you to reflect on these issues and answer to the following questions, among others.

I. Does the distinction between leisure-walking and transit-walking account for heterogeneous social behaviours? You can discuss the role of sites’ segregation and specialised planning in the disjunction of pedestrian practices and the existence of differentiated collective identifications allowing for the emergence of interest groups. Is it possible to empirically verify the assumption that utilitarian walking gives little support to a “logic of collective action” (Olson 1965) whereas leisure-walking does? What determines whether city dwellers see themselves as car drivers, bike or public transportation riders rather than pedestrians? How do these configurations evolve with the development of leisur-sport activities, pedestrian (visits, hiking, running, etc.) or not (cycling…), and of new means of individual transportation (scooters, skates, rollerblades …)?

II. Walkers’ strategies and tactics to deal with their environment and the inequalities they reveal or encourage are also of interest. What are the consequences of each and everyone’s personal characteristics and social status (upper or lower categories, elderly persons, children, women, foreign tourists or groups targeted by racism or police harassment, street workers, etc.)? To what extent do the fear to get lost, to end up in an ill-reputed neighbourhood, fear of assault or harassment or general orientation abilities matter? How are dependency or limited access to walking modified or backed by the emergence of new communication tools? It will be particularly relevant to question organisational patterns in urban spaces where walking is the only option: staircases, narrow streets, pedestrianised areas for heritage, touristic or commercial purposes, street-less and precarious self-built areas, enclosed spaces. Are there specific forms of mutual assistance or exclusion? What is the track record of several decades of street pedestrianisation across Europe and elsewhere? To what extent is community life revived by this policy?
III. What kind of knowledge is provided by empirical research on collective dimensions of pedestrian transit? Is the latter a sign of the (dis-)continuity of urban fabric? Can we refer to “pedestrian dependency” with regards to accessing public transportation and services? Who would the dependent pedestrians be? To which spaces are they restricted? Research can show that the presence or absence of pedestrians and the co-existence of different types of use (residence, work, transit, shopping, tourism, etc.) reveal (in-)formal rules for sharing streets or public spaces. Under what conditions are crowds (in train stations, markets, department stores, hot spots) attractive or repulsive for walking? In which urban spaces are walking quality indicators (walkscore, walkability index, etc.) relevant, what kind of actors elaborate them and with which political agenda(s)?

IV. What are the collective values related to walking in town, and how are they defined or limited? On what grounds and under what conditions does walking become a topic of collective mobilisation, activism a/o public action? Who are the actors starting or relaying such movements, what are their social, political or economic goals, what are the reflections of power balance and conflicts? Emergence of a public issue on walking and its recognition (Hassenteufel 2010; Honneth 2004) can thus be of interest, as well as the diverse motivations of those concerned: improving road safety and standing up for categories seen as vulnerable, promoting of alternative modes of transportation, safeguarding health a/o the environment, “right to the city” or mobility claims...How are walking and the pedestrian envisioned in regulations or by patented actors of urban production, and how do these visions evolve? Where does walking fit in urban planning and transport policies, particularly when fighting insecurity or exclusion? To what kind of negotiations do these objectives lead within urban or metropolitan communities?

To further supplement these questions, you are welcome to submit any proposal related with issues of walking in town, as well as its social and political impact, regardless of the disciplinary approach, the methodology or the site. The issue will follow the journal’s editorial policy strictly and will favour new research findings, clearly presented and accessible to international and multi-disciplinary readers.

References:


Latouche D. & H. Laperrière, 2001, Faire la fête ou faire la tête, Agora débats/jeunesses, n°24, p.95-104.


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Timeline:

- 15 July 2017: deadline for reception of finished papers
- 15 October 2017: contacting authors upon completion of the first reviews
- March or September 2019: final publication of the issue

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