

## MOBILITY

### *Mobilidade*

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**Abstract.** The concepts of migration and mobility clearly intersect, but they are not synonyms. While migration by definition entails mobility, migration studies has privileged studying other aspects of the migratory process. This article analyzes migratory (im)mobilities and methodologies to study them and it critically reflects on the usefulness of mobility studies as an analytical lens to study human migration. Lack of empirical data suggests that we need more systematic comparative studies of how migratory mobilities are generated in everyday life and facilitated as well as constrained by specific mobility circuits and institutions.

**Keywords:** mobility; immobility; migration; theory; methodology.

**Resumo.** Os conceitos de migração e mobilidade com certeza se cruzam, mas não são sinônimos. Enquanto a migração, por definição, implica mobilidade, estudos de migração têm privilegiado estudar outros aspectos do processo migratório. Este artigo analisa (i)mobilidades migratórias e metodologias para estudá-las e reflete criticamente sobre a utilidade dos estudos de mobilidade como uma lente analítica para o estudo da migração humana. A falta de dados empíricos sugere que precisamos de estudos comparativos mais sistemáticos sobre como as mobilidades migratórias são geradas e facilitadas na vida cotidiana, assim como reprimidas por circuitos e instituições específicas de mobilidade.

**Palavras-chave:** mobilidade; imobilidade; migração; teoria; metodologia.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines a migrant as “any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a State away from his/her habitual place of residence, regardless of (1) the person’s legal status; (2) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (3) what the causes for the movement are; or (4) what the length of the stay is”<sup>1</sup>. This rather broad definition highlights that human movement is at the core of what is commonly known as migration. After all, the migrant

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <<https://www.iom.int/who-is-a-migrant>>.

is a “figure least defined by its being and place and more by its becoming and displacement; by its movement” (Nail, 2015, p. 3).

The United Nations page on Migration confirms the importance of movement, stressing this is of all times and mentioning the widely varying motivations for moving<sup>2</sup>. The page also mentions mobility. In 2006, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan released the report *International Migration and Development*, in which a “new era of mobility” was identified, characterized by a “back-and-forth pattern” (General Assembly, 2006, p. 7). In that same year, the interdisciplinary journal *Mobilities* was launched (Hannam, Sheller, Urry, 2006) and the proponents of the “new mobilities paradigm” made their ideas public (Sheller, Urry, 2006). The latter incorporates new ways of theorizing how people, objects, and ideas move around by looking at social phenomena through the lens of movement<sup>3</sup>. The term “mobility turn” has been used to indicate a perceived transformation of the social sciences in response to the increasing societal importance of various forms of movement (Urry, 2007). This can be seen as a scholarly critique of both theories of sedentism and deterritorialization, trends in social science research that may confine both researchers as well as their object(s) of study.

The concepts of migration and mobility clearly intersect, but they are not really synonyms (even if some people use them as such). The way the term is being used, mobility entails, in its coinage, much more than mere physical motion (Marzloff, 2005). Rather, it can be understood as movement infused with both self-ascribed and attributed meanings (Frello, 2008). Human mobility entails a complex assemblage of movement, social imaginaries, and experience (Cresswell, 2006). As such, mobility is a key social process, “a relationship through which the world is lived and understood” (Adey, 2010, p. i). The temporary permanent character of mobilities has led to confusing terminological ambiguities (Salazar, Jayaram, 2016). Scholars have used a multitude of denominators, partially overlapping with one another, to denote various forms of mobility (Salazar, 2018). In this article, I reflect on mobilities related to migratory processes and on the usefulness of mobility studies as an analytical lens to study human migration.

### **No migration without mobility**

While migration by definition entails mobility, most research on migration has privileged studying the causes and impacts of migration on points of departure and (settlement) destinations, so before or after the

<sup>2</sup> Cf. <<http://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/migration/index.html>>.

<sup>3</sup> In general, mobility has become a widely used perspective that takes many forms. In other words, not every scholar studying mobility necessarily agrees with what has been termed the “mobility turn” or the “new mobilities paradigm”.

physical migratory movement (Hui, 2016). Anthropologist Andrew Dawson (2016) identifies three problematic characteristics of migration studies. First, the perspective of transnationalism, which rarely focuses on the concrete processes (e.g. homeland visits) underlying the formation of the imaginaries of transnational communities (Rapport and Dawson, 1998). The dominant transnational lens privileges forms of identification (i.e. ethnicity and nationality) that are fundamentally sedentary. Second, migration studies is subject to “migrant exceptionalism” (Hui, 2016) because it focuses almost exclusively on migrants, and categorizes rather rigidly a very limited range of mobile people as “migrants” (with a strong bias towards so-called lowly skilled migrants and saying little, for example, about the category commonly called as “expats”). Third, partially in reaction to the previous point, there is a proliferation of new and discrete migrant and migration types and subtypes (e.g. lifestyle migration). This ignores the fact that many people shift, not always willingly, between various migratory statuses, categories, and roles (cf. Schuster, 2005). According to Dawson, these three features of migration studies have “rendered the migrant subject discursively immobile, politically, definitionally and conceptually” (2016, p. 275).

Even if mainstream migration studies seem to pay little attention to mobility, there have always been exceptions to the rule. Economist Michael Piore (1979), for example, documented the migratory movements back and forth between Europe and the United States. Historically, a significant portion of European migrants to the United States became known as “birds of passage”, describing people who crossed the Atlantic more than once. Sometimes this was part of an intentional pattern of circular migration, but in other instances a migrant’s level of financial security determined how often he (most were male) would move. Many of these “birds of passage” dreamed of making their fortunes abroad and then returning to their home villages to purchase land or establish small businesses. As Piore (1979, p. 3) pointed out, “Migrants initially see themselves as temporary workers and plan to return home; however, many of them fail to realize their plans and either never return or come back repeatedly ... becoming more or less permanent members of the labor force”.

In the 1980s, geographers Mansell Prothero and Murray Chapman (1985) distinguished between “migration” as permanent displacement (geographic redistribution) and “circulation” as a reciprocal flow of people. Following this distinction, “circulation” (which implies either return to the point of departure or moving on to another destination) appears as one of the dominant forms of contemporary human mobility. Sociologist Natan Uriely (1994) identified a continuum of people on-the-move, from settlers (permanent migrants) to sojourners (temporary migrants), with “permanent sojourners” being a compromise between the two. The latter category are those “who maintain a

general wish to return to their homeland,” and “their orientation toward their new place of residence” represents a compromise between the sojourner and the settler (Uriely, 1994, p. 431). Of course, people’s “intentions often change after living for a time in a new location, so that what begins as a temporary sojourn becomes a permanent stay or what begins as a permanent move turns into a temporary one” (Hamilton, 1985, p. 405).

### Meaningful mobilities

Notwithstanding the many kinds of involuntary or forced movements (typically linked to situations of poverty, disaster, conflict, or persecution), most “back-and-forth” mobilities are positively valued. Mobility itself has become an important socially stratifying factor. Many people link “voluntary” geographical mobility automatically to some type of symbolic “climbing,” be it economically (in terms of resources), socially (in terms of status), or culturally (in terms of cosmopolitan disposition). In other words, mobility is used as an indicator of the variable access to and accumulation of various types of “symbolic capital” (Bourdieu, 1986). Important in this context is the concept of “motility” or the potential for mobility (i.e. resources and access) and people’s agency to be mobile and to choose whether to move or to stay put (Leivestad, 2016). Of course, there are many underlying assumptions regarding the supposed nexus between spatial and symbolic mobility, while the mechanisms producing mobility are poorly understood (Faist, 2013). It is therefore the task of critical scholarship to question whether mobility is, in actuality, “held up as a normative ideal in popular culture and the media, and in turn mimicked by many other people” (Elliott, Urry, 2010, p. 82).

Do work-related mobilities, for instance, increase or diminish opportunities for socio-economic mobility? The relationship between temporary work abroad and occupational mobility is unclear. Some researchers suggest that “the experience and money obtained does give people scope to get better jobs,” either at home or in the host country (Vertovec 2007, p. 6). Others argue there is no positive effect at all and, in the case of some groups, the effect can even be negative (Masso, Eamets, Mõtsmees, 2013). This may particularly be the case in “regulated circular migration systems, which see people returning year after year to the same job rather than trying to negotiate their way into better jobs and localities like unregulated circular migrants might do” (Vertovec, 2007, p. 6).

Sociologist Mark van Ostaijen’s (2017) study of European Union migration policies nicely illustrates the discursive and normative dimensions of human movement. In the practice of migration policies, the term mobility often becomes synonymous with temporary migration and the multiplication of modes of migration (Pellerin, 2011). Migration or mobility are thus much

more than objective empirical phenomena. There are always complex power dynamics at work, even if one would stick to one term (Salazar, Glick Schiller, 2014). For example, as geographers Russell King and Ronald Skeldon (2010) have pointed out, migration studies retain a division between internal and international migration and since the 1990s internal migration has been generally ignored.

### **No mobility without immobility**

The scholarly focus on processes of mobility almost automatically leads to an increased attention to immobility (Salazar, Smart, 2011). Moreover, “a systematic neglect of the causes and consequences of immobility hinders attempts to explain why, when, and how people migrate” (Schewel, 2019, p. 1). After all, most of the world’s population stays put, whether they voluntarily choose this option or are forced to.

Although the motivations to cross borders, be they international or internal, may vary widely (and are certainly not all positive), movement is generally perceived as a marker of “freedom”. It is a widespread idea that much of what is experienced as freedom lies in mobility (Sager, 2006). Mobility is a fundamental element of human freedom, as argued in the global *Human Development Report 2009, Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development* (UNDP, 2009). However, there is an inherent paradox in the contemporary idealization of freedom of movement: “‘freedom’ entails developing the infrastructure to defend the free movement and operation of some, and to strictly curtail the freedom of others” (James, 2005, p. 27). The mobility of some has consequences for or corresponds to the immobility of others. Even those who do not move are affected by movements of people in or out of their communities, and by the resulting changes.

Present-day news reports regularly remind us that restrictions on border crossing movements are commonplace. Indeed, the ability to move (freely) is spread very unevenly within countries and across the planet. As sociologist Mimi Sheller rightfully remarks, “sovereign freedom has often been exercised as a freedom of movement which immobilizes others; in fact the sense of freedom of movement often depends on the denial of others’ mobility. Hence it produces what we might refer to as mobility injustice” (2008, p. 28). Importantly, “freedom as mobility” is composed both of opportunities to move when and where one pleases and of the feasibility of the choice not to move at all (Sager, 2006, p. 465). Not everybody wants to be mobile (Jónsson, 2011). The problem of “involuntary immobility” is linked with “the increasing benefits of mobility to those who are able to migrate and sustain transnational social links” (Carling, 2002, p. 7).

A persistent misconception is the assumption that free movement across borders equals more migration (in the sense of permanent settlement) instead of mobility (movements back and forth). However, it may well be the other way around. Because restrictions on movement limit people's freedom to circulate, they may lead to a higher rate of permanent migration and discouraging seasonal workers, for example, from returning, temporarily or not, to their country of origin. While the migrant as a figure is discursively defined by mobility, in reality migrants nowadays "more often inhabit spaces of confinement: detention and deportation camps, modern incarnations of poor houses, international zones in airports" (Kotef, 2015, p. 11). The message from forced migrants to those that romanticize mobility may very well be one of caution: "there is as much un-freedom in mobility as there is in fixity" (Gill, Caletrio, Mason, 2013, p. 304). The hypermobility of enforcement stands in stark contrast to the relative immobility of asylum-seekers.

In sum, mobility is formidably difficult for many; sometimes more so than before. To understand mobility, we thus need to pay close attention also to immobility, to the structures (which, once again, shift and move in their own right) that facilitate certain movements and impede others (Salazar, Smart 2011). Paradoxically, focusing on boundaries requires border-crossing transdisciplinary approaches, often bringing together geographers, political scientists, sociologists, historians, literary scholars, legal experts, and anthropologists.

## Methodology

Mobility, as a concept-metaphor, captures the common impression that our lifeworld is in flux, with people, cultures, objects, capital, businesses, services, diseases, media, images, information and ideas circulating across (and even beyond) the planet. While analyzing mobile practices is not at all new, what emerges in the more recent scholarship on mobilities is a concern with mobility as an assemblage of phenomena of its own kind, requiring specific methodologies and conceptual frameworks. *How* mobilities should be studied remains a methodological and theoretical challenge. Geographer Peter Merriman has warned about some of the methodological pitfalls of mobility studies, questioning for example "the assumption that mobilities research is necessarily a branch of social science research, the production of over-animated mobile subjects and objects, the prioritising of certain kinds of research methods and practices, and the overreliance on certain kinds of technology" (2014, p. 167).

In his "anthropology of movement", Alain Tarris (2000) proposes a "methodological paradigm of mobility" articulated around the space-time-identity triad, along with four distinct levels of space-time relations, indicating

the circulatory process of migratory movements whereby spatial mobility is linked to other types of mobility (informational, cognitive, technological, and economic). What he describes as “circulatory territories” are new spaces of movement that “encompass the networks defined by the mobility of populations whose status derives from their circulation know-how” (Tarrius, 2000, p. 124). This notion reaffirms that geographical movement is always invested with social meaning. Discussing the concept of social navigation, anthropologist Henrik Vigh nicely illustrates the analytical advantages of mobility-related concept-metaphors. As both process and practice, social navigation “joins two separate social scientific perspectives on movement, that is, the movement and change of social formations and societies, and the movement and practice of agents within social formations” (Vigh, 2009, p. 426).

A fundamental methodological challenge that studies of mobility pose is one of scale. In the study of mobility, scale has often to do with the presence or absence, and relative efficacy, of overarching institutions, networks, and processes, rather than with merely geographic or demographic scope. Scale, in this sense, requires researchers to simultaneously focus on the macro-processes through which the world is becoming increasingly, albeit unevenly, interconnected, and on the way subjects mediate these processes. Anthropologist Xiang Biao and sociologist Mika Toyota (2013) have presented interesting methodological experiments that explore the interfaces between individual migratory experiences and institutional, structural and historical forces that are themselves constantly changing.

Recent research in this field has developed a range of innovative methodologies, including mobile technologies (Büscher, Urry, Witchger, p. 2011; Elliot, Norum, Salazar 2017, Fincham, McGuinness, Murray, 2010). A mobile perspective that follows migrants along their trajectories, for instance, offers “a fruitful methodological approach for grasping ongoing long-term and long-distance migratory journeys” (Schwarz, 2018, p. 21). “Following” has taken two main methodological forms. The first, perhaps more immediately intuitive, mode of engagement requires the researcher to travel alongside the moving subjects that are being studied. The second mode, or form, of methodological engagement, draws on the researcher’s observations, interviews, mapping and other techniques of tracing aimed to capture the complex mobilities of the subject. In the latter case, following requires imaginative mobilities and methodological and analytical attention as much as it does physical travel (Salazar, Elliot, Norum, p. 2017). Though this approach may miss out on some detail of the mobilities involved, for various practical reasons it can provide a solid option when being co-mobile is not possible or desirable. In other words, one can also study mobility by remaining in place.



Although the value of remaining “in place” when studying movement has received increasing recognition, the first mode of engagement with mobility, built on the idea of following one’s subject of study, often remains the most alluring methodological route. As anthropologist Matei Candea (2007) notes, it is useful to ask how much following is necessary, and whether too much of it detracts attention from the emplaced. Adding imaginaries and affect to the conceptual toolkit of migration research within mobility studies allows us “to probe into the ways in which marginal and dominant, and mobile and sedentary subjects are embroiled in the inextricability of desire and politics through complex processes of internalisation, incorporation and (dis)identification” (Fortier, 2013, p. 70).

## Conclusion

If mobilities research forces us to think about migration in relation to the ways in which ‘mobility’ has been variously established (institutionally, legally, technologically, materially, idealistically) as a universal condition if not a universal ‘right’, migration studies force a reconsideration of the fluidity, accessibility and desirability of the assumed mobile world, as well as the conditions under which people are ‘mobile’ (or not). (Fortier, 2013, p. 65)

Movement *per se*, including that involved in migration, but not exclusively, can be regarded as an essential characteristic of this day and age (Rapport, Dawson, 1998). Human mobilities – be they physical or imaginative – are molded by sociocultural knowledge and practices. Culturally rooted understandings of mobility, colored by media images as well as personal accounts, in interaction with physical movements, are important in attempts to explain migratory phenomena. Mobility is a contested ideological construct involving much more than mere movement but is socially embedded, manifested in metacultural discourses and imaginaries. We urgently need more systematic comparative studies of how migratory mobilities are generated in everyday life and facilitated as well as constrained by specific mobility circuits and institutions. An emerging area where the importance of a mobilities lens, stressing the subjective and relational nature of movement, is proving crucial is the nexus between migration and climate change (Boas *et alii*, p. 2018; Parsons, 2018).

Mobility studies does not refer to a new subject of scholarly investigation, much less a new discipline. Rather, it directs new questions towards traditional social science subjects (such as migration). People, objects, and ideas are moving all the time, but not all movements are equally meaningful and life-shaping – neither for those who move nor for those who stay put. Mobility gains meaning through its embeddedness within societies, culture, politics, and histories (which are themselves, to a certain extent, mobile)



(Salazar, 2010). Importantly, “mobilities research clearly extends far beyond the study of migration, just as the latter extends far beyond the conceptual and methodological concerns of ‘the new mobilities paradigm’” (Blunt, 2007, p. 685). Migration is not only about migrants; it is an integral part of the way the world is imagined, and as such it impacts on how individuals, communities, nations, or transnational formations, imagine themselves and their (co) inhabitants. Just as there are different types of societies, so there are many different types of migrants and different degrees of mobility.

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