



# Mobilities I: Catching up

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## Abstract

This first report on mobilities outlines some aspects of research on mobilities that differentiates it from and connects it to earlier, ongoing geographies of movement such as transport geography. In the context of a world on the move it seeks to bring us up to date with the mobilities turn and make a case for mobility research as a project which focuses on the universal but always particularly constructed fact of moving. Mobilities research is compared to and differentiated from work in transport geography, arguing that mobilities research takes a more holistic view that allows it to make some previously unlikely connections.

## Keywords

mobility, mobility turn, movement, new mobilities paradigm, transport geography

## I Earth on the move

The Earth seems to be moving. Quite literally. As I write, incomprehensible gallons of oil continue to spurt out through the Earth's crust which was ruptured by the ingenuity of the oil industry. The oil that is consumed by a world on the move is, itself, on the move and no one seems quite sure where it is going or when it will get there. The fishing industry of the Gulf of Mexico as well as the tourist industry that relies on clean beaches along its margins are braced for the worst. In April 2010, Eyjafjallajökull, a volcano in Iceland, erupted, stranding hundreds of thousands of air passengers on either side of the Atlantic ocean, including many geographers attending the annual conference of the Association of American Geographers in Washington, DC. Meteorologists and atmospheric scientists applied models of ash dispersal developed following the nuclear accident in Chernobyl. The level of uncertainty in these models proved to be quite high given the uncertainties surrounding our understanding of turbulence and the lack of empirical measurement of the ash cloud itself.

Cut flowers in Kenya could not be delivered to their markets in western Europe before they wilted and died. Stranded travellers suddenly discovered older, slower forms of transport booking rooms on the *Queen Mary* or on the container ships that carry 90% of the world's things around the world. Earlier, a devastating earthquake in Haiti provided a challenge for the logistical logic of aid agencies and the military who tried to organize relief efforts in a country without a recognizable infrastructure. People, things and ideas arrived from all corners of the world to help a people who were immobilized.

It is in this context that I write the first of three reports on the theme of 'mobilities'. While later reports will focus on particular aspects of mobilities research in geography and beyond, this report, by necessity, has some catching up to do. I need to explain how we arrived at the

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position where the editors of this journal felt it necessary to commission these reports. For this reason this first report will be somewhat more wide-ranging temporally, and in terms of discipline, than is conventional. The immediate reason for reports under the title ‘mobilities’ is fairly clear. A ‘new mobilities paradigm’ or ‘mobility turn’ has been declared or advocated (Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller and Urry, 2006). Facts in the world – increased levels of mobility, new forms of mobility where bodies combine with information and different patterns of mobility, for instance – combine with ways of thinking and theorizing that foreground mobility (of people, of ideas, of things) as a geographical fact that lies at the centre of constellations of power, the creation of identities and the micro-geographies of everyday life.

This turn has been prefigured for a while by a number of theorists across disciplines who have argued for a kind of thinking that takes mobility as the central fact of modern or postmodern life. A significant thrust of these arguments has been to question the perceived prioritization of more rooted and bounded notions of place as the locus of identity. Important precursors include Clifford’s work in anthropology where he asks his colleagues to move from an abiding fascination with the deep analysis of particular, and usually remote, places to an engagement with the ‘routes’ that connect sites. We might also consider Augé’s philosophical musings on the potentials for an anthropology of ‘non-places’, such as airport and motorways, marked by constant transition and temporality, and Castells’ outline of a network society where he suggests that a ‘space of places’ is being superimposed by and, in some senses, surpassed by a ‘space of flows’. These are tempered somewhat by the feminist analysis of Kaplan who asks necessary questions about the gendering of metaphors of travel in social and cultural theory but nonetheless lays the groundwork for a feminist embrace of mobility studies (Augé, 1995; Castells, 1996; Clifford, 1997; Kaplan, 1996). The ‘turn’

became more pronounced with the arrival of key works in sociology that argued for the centrality of mobilities in a complicated, globalized world marked by time-space compression, a variable politics of mobility and the (arguable) withering away of established notions of ‘societies’ and ‘nations’ (Kaufmann, 2002; Urry, 2000). Urry’s two monographs on the importance of mobility have been particularly important here as he has advocated a ‘sociology beyond societies’ that focuses on how sociality and identity are produced through networks of people, ideas and things moving rather than the inhabitation of a shared space such as a region or nation state. All of these works ask fundamental questions about ontology and epistemology, urging us not to start from a point of view that takes certain kinds of fixity and boundedness for granted and instead *starts* with the fact of mobility.

## II Why ‘mobilities’ is different?

So what is the logic of the mobilities turn and how is it differentiated from other approaches to forms of mobility such as migration or transport that have traditionally been important aspects of geographical research? One answer is that it focuses on, and holds centre stage, a fundamental geographical fact of life – moving. Mobility has a wide theoretical purchase because of its centrality to what it is to be in the world. This fact connects forms of movement across scales and within research fields that have often been held apart.

More precisely there are a number of other ways in which mobilities work is clearly different from other work on moving, journeying or travelling that have been a part of geographical research throughout the discipline’s history. First, work in the mobilities turn often links science and social science to the humanities. Merriman’s exemplary text *Driving Spaces*, for instance, is about a road – the M1 motorway – but it tells the story of the road with the help of Foucault and Latour in a way that would be

familiar to some historians. It is certainly very different from transport geography's accounts of roads but is also distinct from earlier North American accounts of road geographies from within traditional cultural geography (Merriman, 2007). While transport geographers may have provided accounts of the routing of the M1, its effects on traffic flow or its influence on travel times, Merriman considers the role of aesthetics in the design of bridges and the choice of plants to be grown along the verges. He also brings in the development of a highway code to regulate the new act of driving at high speed. Mobility here is as much about meaning as it is about mappable and calculable movement. It is an ethical and political issue as much as a utilitarian and practical one. Second, work on mobilities tends to link across different scales of moving. While long-standing subdisciplines such as migration research or transport geography tend to be quite focused on a particular form of moving, a mobilities approach considers all forms of movement from small-scale bodily movements, such as dance or walking, through infrastructural and transport aided movements to global flows of finance or labour. Understanding these things together adds up to more than the sum of the parts. Third, mobilities research thinks about a variety of things that move including humans, ideas and objects. It is particularly interested in how these things move in interconnected ways and how one may enable or hinder another. Particularly important here is the work that shows how mobile technologies feed into corporeal acts of moving and staying put (Berry and Hamilton, 2010; Larsen et al., 2006). This leads to the fourth point – that mobility is considered in relation to forms of place, stopping, stillness and relative immobility (Adey, 2006; Bissell and Fuller, 2010; Hannam et al., 2006) that are enabled by or enable mobilities. Fifth, there is a general feeling that a focus on empirical mobilities necessitates both mobile theorization and mobile methodologies in order to avoid seeing mobility from the point of view which privileges notions

of boundedness and the sedentary (Büscher and Urry, 2009; Büscher et al., 2010; Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007). Finally, there has been an increased focus on the differentiated politics of mobility whether at the scale of individuals lining up at an airport, men and women travelling to work on a daily basis or the global flows of the kinetic elite or refugees (Cresswell, 2010; Hanson, 2010; Silvey, 2005).

The purpose of *Progress in Human Geography* is to reflect on 'leading issues of formative influence in human geography'. The fact that 'mobilities' has been recognized as just such a 'leading issue' is evidence of success as a research agenda. A quick look at Web of Science statistics confirms the relentless rise of mobility as a concept in geography. Looking for 'mobility' as a topic in leading journals (*Environment and Planning A*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, *Progress in Human Geography*) over the past 40 years we find the following number of hits by decade. In the 1970s there were 24. In the 1980s there were 42. In the 1990s there were 102 and in the present decade there have been 156. While there have been an increasing number of journal issues over the decades these numbers remain striking. Compare them to equivalent totals for the term 'transport' which are (1970s) 33, (1980s) 56, (1990s) 89 and (2000s) 88. While the number of hits for transport has also risen, it has been rapidly overtaken by mobility.

Indeed geographers, along with their colleagues in related disciplines, have taken the mobilities agenda forward in a number of ways. Geographers have been instrumental in setting up the journal *Mobilities*. We have the first mobility-based textbook for our discipline (Adey, 2009). Adey's exemplary text (in the Routledge 'Key Ideas in Geography' series) reviews the nascent field in terms of its meanings, politics, practices and mediations. He thinks through mobility as a *relation* – 'an orientation to oneself, to others and to the world' (Adey, 2009: xvii). It is a book which takes the

mobility ‘out there’ in the world and mobility on the pages of books and the models of planners equally seriously. It is worth pausing to compare the contents of this text to the only other example of a disciplinary textbook which specifically focused on movement and mobility both as a fact on the world and a theoretical issue – Lowe and Moryadas’s *The Geography of Movement* (1975). Adey’s book considers, among other things, the practice of *Parkour* (free running), elite helicopter travel, the forced movement of refugees in Rwanda, the Parisian flâneur and the mobile gaze of the television watcher. Along the way we explore theoretical approaches ranging from spatial science to non-representational theory. The earlier text focused on mostly measurable and modelled forms of movement derived from demography, transport studies and the analysis of traded goods. Meaning and politics do not feature at all. This focus on the entanglement of movement with meaning and power can also be found in a series of monographs that have placed themselves in relation to the mobilities turn (Adey, 2010; Cresswell, 2006; Merriman, 2007).

Edited collections seem to appear almost monthly with mobility or mobilities in the title. Geographers are centrally involved in these collections but they are notably interdisciplinary with contributions from sociologists, anthropologists and others. Examples include collections on mobility and ethics (Bergmann and Sager, 2008), gendered mobilities (Uteng and Cresswell, 2008), tourism mobilities (Sheller and Urry, 2004), and mediated mobilities (Larsen et al., 2006). We now have a collection that focuses explicitly on the geographies of mobility (Cresswell and Merriman, 2010).

While travel by car and by plane have attracted particular attention (Cwerner et al., 2009; Dennis and Urry, 2009), it is gratifying to see increased attention being paid to less obvious forms of mobility. Vannini’s (2009) collection *The Cultures of Alternative Mobilities* is a wonderfully diverse set of papers on travelling

by ferry, canoeing, travelling by motorcycle and waiting in line (among other things) (Mitchell and Kubein, 2009; Vannini et al., 2009; Waskul, 2009). It stands in contrast to the prevalence of work on automobility, flight and the virtual mobilities of the internet. These essays serve to remind us of the multiple mobilities that are neither new nor necessarily part of a hypermobile urban and western world. Another collection that stands out is Edensor’s collection on the geographies of rhythm (Edensor, 2010). Inspired by Lefebvre’s unfinished project on ‘rhythmanalysis’ (Lefebvre, 2004) and the earlier works of humanistic geographers drawing on phenomenology (Mels, 2004; Seamon, 1979), Edensor’s book considers a wide variety of cases where rhythmic motion warrants closer scrutiny. While it predictably includes the rhythms of urban public space and walking in modern traffic (Hornsey, 2010; Wunderlich, 2010), it also includes the movements of the sea in its tidal rhythms and the rhythmic mobilities of horses and their riders (Evans and Franklin, 2010; Jones, 2010). Both of these collections reveal the full promise of the mobilities turn in that they range across scales of mobility making unlikely connections rather than falling into the trap of thinking of mobility as relentlessly ‘new’ and ‘hyper’.

The focus on the new is definitely a potential pitfall for a self-identified ‘new mobilities paradigm’ and there is a danger of an incessant focus on twenty-first-century high-tech hypermobility characterized by the car, the plane and mobile communications devices. There is also the danger of disconnecting new mobilities work from all the work on forms of mobility that geography has actually always been good at. Our traditions of transport geography, migration research and tourism studies, for instance, have all been vital parts of the longer history of the discipline that have informed and been informed by the recent turn to mobilities research. More recently the flowering of work on hybridity and diaspora and, specifically, studies of transnationalism and translocalism have necessarily involved serious

consideration of the role of mobility in the constitution of identities that transcend a particular place of nation (Jackson et al., 2004; Mitchell, 2002; Yeoh, 2005). Work on the mobility of things has also been important, particularly work which has sought to follow things (such as papaya or cotton) along commodity chains from production to consumption (Cook, 2004; Cook and Harrison, 2007; Dwyer, 2004; Freidberg, 2004; Moseley and Gray, 2008). No group has been more attentive to the variety of mobile experiences and the power dynamics afforded by mobility than feminist geographers. It was feminists who made the analysis of daily mobility patterns central to their concerns and the concerns of the wider discipline (Hanson, 2010; Hanson and Johnston, 1985; Law, 1999). Similarly, at the transnational scale, feminists have been central to critical work on the plight of asylum seekers, migrants, refugees and domestic workers as they attempt to move into or out of developed nations (Hyndeman, 1997; Mountz, 2010; Pratt, 1999). But perhaps the most immediate precursor to much of the work on mobilities has been the subdiscipline of transport geography.

### **III Transport and mobilities – building bridges**

Between 2007 and 2009 Keeling wrote three progress reports for this journal on the theme of ‘transportation geography’ (Keeling, 2007, 2008, 2009). As this is the first of three reports on mobilities it seems a bridge needs to be built. While the primary antecedents for work in the mobilities turn have been largely theoretical texts across a range of disciplines, transport geography is overwhelmingly the child of a positivist spatial science. Recent work, however, has sought to build a bridge between transport-oriented approaches and those advocated by those involved in mobilities research (Knowles et al., 2008; Shaw, 2010). Keeling’s reports make interesting reading. Work on mobilities

was certainly flowing during the years of Keeling’s reports but there is little recognition of this other than the increased use of the word mobility. A number of new ‘paradigms’ are introduced – particularly work on global cities, but not a mobilities paradigm. The reviews stay very close to moving machines and infrastructures with occasional references to historical or more qualitative work. More recently Shaw has argued that there is much to be gained from marrying transport geography’s concerns with the approaches of the mobilities turn (Shaw, 2010).

If a bridge is to be built between transport geography and mobilities research it seems best signposted by those working on the ways in which travel time is filled with significance. Transport geography has a lot to offer mobilities researchers when it comes to thinking about issues of infrastructure development and notions of accessibility, for instance, but less to say about the act of moving itself. Moving is about so much else besides, whether travelling in a car, on a bicycle or by foot (Jain and Lyons, 2008; Middleton, 2009; Spinney, 2006). Jain and Lyons’ work on travel time, Spinney’s work on cycling, Watts’ and Bissell’s work on train travel or Laurier et al.’s work on driving are all excellent and innovative examples of these crossovers (Bissell, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Jain and Lyons, 2008; Laurier et al., 2008; Spinney, 2006; Watts, 2008). While transport geography’s main concern might be summarized by the need to figure out how to efficiently get from A to B, the mobilities turn motto may well be ‘it’s about more than getting from A to B’. All of these works attempt to think about the experience of moving by filling time spent on the move with significance. Watts’ paper on ‘the art and craft’ of train travel, for instance, takes us on a narrative journey down the west coast of England paying close attention to the arrangement of things and people that form a temporary community within the carriage. Picking up on developments in actor-network-theory, she crafts a journey/story that asks ‘how do links between place get made and

broken whilst onboard a train carriage? What specific social and material relations and arrangements are involved?'. She tell us about 'the arrangement of train seats, timetables, windows, tickets, newspapers, rain clouds, mobile phones, rucksacks, railway cuttings, and all the social and technological flotsam of train travel' (Watts, 2008: 712). Watts' paper is indicative of this growing body of work that brings a range of social and cultural theory including actor-network theory, theories of affect and ethno-methodology to bear on the act of travelling. They all embrace qualitative methodologies and use them imaginatively. They are keen to link forms of movement across scales from the body (where all human mobility is immediately experienced and recognized) to the wider remit of regional, national and international travel. Work such as this is just as much 'transport geography' as it is mobilities research and there is clearly great potential in any bridge building that might occur between these two trajectories.

#### **IV Conclusion**

It is important that the mobilities turn does not become identified with a small group of mainly British writers and researchers. It is clearly the case that many people involved in research on mobility topics do not see themselves as part of a new paradigm or turn. Perhaps only half of the work touched on in this report would be self-consciously 'mobilities' research. But it is also the case that a preoccupation with mobility is spreading. There has been a flowering of work in Scandinavian countries (Bergmann and Sager, 2008; Jensen, 2009; Larsen et al., 2006; Uteng and Cresswell, 2008) and across northern Europe (Canzler et al., 2008). Workshops and symposia on mobility have been spreading like wildfire with recent events in Argentina, Germany, France, Ireland, Canada and the United States. These have been notably interdisciplinary in character. While much of the work has been focused on the worlds of the global

north and west, there are notable uses of mobilities approaches outside these contexts. Jiron's work on urban daily mobility practices on the public transport networks of Santiago, Chile, Sheller's analysis of the complex mobile networks of the Caribbean, and Tanzarn's work on gendered mobility patterns in urban Uganda are all good examples (Jirón, 2009, 2010; Sheller, 2009; Tanzarn, 2008).

Another danger lies in the potential valorization of newness in mobilities research. I mean by this both the newness of mobilities in the world and newness of ideas about mobility. There is a tendency to celebrate 'gee-whiz' technologies such as fancy airport hubs or GPS devices. Similarly there is a constant urge to claim newness for theories that emphasize or deal with mobility in a hypermobile world, a space of flows, or a world of non-places. I would urge mobilities scholars to remember all the work on mobility that already existed before any 'new mobilities paradigm' was proclaimed. Transport geography is a good example. I would also advocate a strong sense of historical consciousness. People and things have always moved and mobility did not start in the twenty-first century or even with the industrial revolution. We need to know how we arrived at this place. Ships are a good example of an age-old technology. They are relatively slow and essentially the same thing as they have always been, give or take a few modifications in power supply and navigation. Yet empires were formed aboard ships, military might has been projected through them and 90% of the world's goods still move around the world on them. It would be nice to see an edited collection on watery mobilities to sit alongside the collection on car and air travel.

Now let us return to this world on the move. The three events I started with (a volcano, an oil spill and an earthquake) bring together a bundle of mobility issues including logistics, the modelling of oil and ash on the move (and the logic behind these models), the mobility of ideas, such as those derived from Chernobyl, into new

contexts, oil dependency and its relation to fishing and tourism, the feeling of being 'stuck', the routing of air travel, the movement of flowers from Kenya to the west, the implication of infrastructural breakdown, the politics of mobility which distinguishes the western providers of aid from the Haitian recipients, the sudden visibility of older forms of mobility (particularly sea travel) in the face of cancelled air travel, notions of hospitality in a crisis situation, theorizations of turbulence – the list goes on. Mobilities research has linked the fact of movement across scales and in a way that links the humanities at one end to the sciences at the other. And at the centre of all of it is the universal experiential fact of moving. A mobilities perspective clearly has the potential to make a unique kind of sense of these disturbing events.

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