The New Mobilities Paradigm

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The Never Ending Journey

A sense of urgency.
An unwavering desire to move on.
But being trapped. Pure frustration.
“Ali missed his family and did not want to wait.”
(Innes, 2015, p. 504)

This is the story of Ali. Ali is from the Sudan. Due to harassment by local communities, he feared for the lives of his daughter and wife. They decided to leave the country and go to Paris. With their savings, however, they could only afford two sets of false travel documents—none for Ali. Hence, Ali had to go on a dangerous journey by boat. After finally reaching Europe, he got stopped in Greece and was classified as an illegal immigrant. Ali used his last money to pay a human trafficker—ending up in Belgium. In Belgium he was stopped and sent back to Greece. Since then Ali has been “trapped in Greece without immigration status” (Innes, 2015, p. 501). “Over time Ali continued to try to leave Greece and was frequently detained in the attempt” (Innes, 2015, p. 508). He was “kept in custody” (Innes, 2015, p. 508). He waited, waits and will be waiting with thousands of other immigrants. He is stuck in a “never-ending migrant journey” (Innes, 2015, p. 501).

“Human history is a history of human mobility” (De Genova, Mezzadra, & Pickl, 2014, p. 7). Migration flows are only one of many examples. Today, people travel even greater distances with greater speed than twenty years ago (Bissell & Fuller, 2011). 2010 counted about 1 billion international arrivals, whereas 1950 counted only 25 million (Urry, 2009). This extreme increase provides a fertile breeding ground for a new sociological concept, the so-called “new mobilities paradigm”.
Definition and Meanings

The new mobilities paradigm, also referred to as the mobilities turn, is an integrated approach to study the movement of people, things and ideas across all scales, i.e., social space and social time, as well as its implications on society (Cresswell, 2006; Bissell & Fuller, 2011; Conradson, 2011).

The term mobilities has its roots in the noun mobility. Mobility is defined as “the ability to move or be moved freely and easily” (Oxford Living Dictionary, 2016). In line with this definition, John Urry identified four meanings attributed to mobility within the context of sociology. It can refer to:

1. Properties of things, exemplified by mobile phones, the micro scale movements of bodies, and things enabling immobile people to become mobile again, e.g., parentheses. Especially “converging mobile technologies appear to be transforming many aspects of economic and social life” (Urry, 2009, p. 478).
2. “[A] mob, a rabble or an unruly crowd” (Urry, 2009, p. 480), which needs “to be tracked and socially regulated” (Urry, 2009, p. 480). The flash mob is the most prominent mob of our time. It is “seemingly random” and “typically organized” (Oxford Living Dictionary, 2016).
3. Vertical movements between social classes. This is the meaning mobility usually gets associated with in mainstream sociology.
4. Horizontal movement dealing with “physical movement, ranging from standing, lounging, walking, […], cars, trains”.

Tim Cresswell goes one step further than John Urry. He analytically distinguishes between the terms movement and mobility. He defines movement as the general fact of displacement before the type, strategies and social implications are considered, whereas mobility goes beyond the physical act of moving. (Cresswell, 2006)

As “movements of people (and things) all over the world and at all scales are […] full of meaning” (Cresswell, 2006, p. 4), he argues that it is crucial to take the interface between mobile physical bodies and the represented mobilities into account. For example, to get an holistic impression of Ali’s journey, we should not only analyze the physically manifested route he has taken, but also the fact that he is non-European, has black skin, tries to enter the EU during a refugee crisis as well as other contextual factors. Hence, Cresswell combines all the four meanings of mobility proposed by Urry to define forms of mobility under the new mobilities paradigm. (Cresswell, 2006)

Historical Context and Scope of Research

“Human history is the history of human mobility”
(De Genova, Mezzadra, & Pickl, 2014, p. 7)

The new mobilities paradigm “has surged to prominence across social sciences over the past decade” (Bissell & Fuller, 2011, p. 3). Globalization and the accompanied exponential growth in technology tremendously increased the distances and the speed with which people, things, and ideas travel the world (Bissell & Fuller, 2011; Urry, 2009), leading to an increased perceived importance of both historic and contemporary mobility (Cresswell, 2012).
In 2000, John Urry firstly used the terms new mobilities paradigm, mobilities turn or just mobilities in his book “Sociology beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century”. John Urry himself, however, labels Georg Simmel as the first scholar who attempted to create a mobilities paradigm. (Urry, 2009)

Prominent sociology researchers of the new mobilities paradigm are John Urry and Mimi Sheller with their paper “Mobilizing the new mobilities paradigm”, geographer Tim Cresswell with his three progress reports on mobilities, and David Bissell and Gillian Fuller with their collection “Stillness in a Mobile World”, a collection on immobilities (Cresswell, 2012). Focus of the research has been on the “movement of people and things and the relations between the two of them” (Cresswell, 2012, p. 651). The movement of ideas, in contrast, is the “least developed” (Cresswell, 2012, p. 651). The well-known TED conferences, however, are examples how ideas increasingly are shared around the globe.

Researchers from the disciplines of anthropology, cultural studies, geography, migration studies, science and technology studies, tourism and transport studies also made important contributions, including work of Ahmed, Amin and Thrift, Appadurai, Clifford, Coleman and Crang, Crouch and Lubbren, Degen and Hetherington, Ginsburg, Kaplan, Kaufmann, Mol and Law, Pascoe, Riles, Serres, Verstraete and Virilio, and others. (Sheller & Urry, 2006)

Cross-disciplinary topics range from tourism, migration, and mobilities in the context of security, identity and citizenship, over social networks and mobile media, to transportation and communication technologies. (Cresswell, 2012; Urry, 2009)

A focal point of cross disciplinary research is the contact point between transport geography and mobilities (Cresswell, 2012). It not only investigates physical travel, but also imaginative travel, virtual travel and communicative travel (Sheller, 2011). Reason for that is that globalization caused a significant change in the construct of the traveler. The figure of the self-directed human, the Flâneur, was replaced by the passenger. The Flâneur is a man who is “self-ambulatory and self-directed” (Bissell & Fuller, 2011, p. 8), whereas the passenger is a “figure carried away by the mobilization of mobility and stillness” (Bissell & Fuller, 2011, p. 8). Hence, the new mobilities paradigm aims at counteracting critique by feminist geographers that the “old” mobilities turn was highly based on a nomadic theory describing a world “grounded in masculine subjectivities, made assumptions about freedom of movement and ignored the gendered production of space” (Sheller, 2011, p. 3).

Despite the great intersection between the two research streams, Cresswell names several characteristics which delimits mobilities from previous approaches to study transport. First, previous studies on transport or migration tend to focus on the mere movement only (Cresswell, 2010), whereas the mobilities turn takes the type of mobility, strategies and social implications into account (Cresswell, 2006). Secondly, the new mobilities paradigm “suggests a set of questions, theories, and methodologies rather than a totalizing description of the contemporary world” (Sheller & Urry, 2006, p. 210). Furthermore, it considers mobility “in relation to forms of place, stopping, stillness and relative immobility” (Cresswell, 2010, p. 552) – “both voluntary and forced” (Sheller, 2011, p. 1), whereat Ali’s case is an example for the latter one.
Immobilities

“Stillness is everywhere”
(Cresswell, 2012, p. 648)

Bissell and Fuller compiled the most prominent collection “Stillness in a Mobile World” on the interplay between mobilities and immobilities describing it as follows: “It is easy […] to miss the fact that the intensity we experience from a journey arises at least in part from the fact that we are often immobile in relation to the moving bicycle, or plane […]“ (Bissell & Fuller, 2011, p. 25). Hence, they argue that forms of immobility are thoroughly incorporated into the practices of moving (Cresswell, 2012). One could say that they are each other’s Ying and Yang. Confucius already stated that “the interplay of opposite principles constitute the universe” (Confucius). As a consequence, one cannot exist without the other.

In contrast to forms of mobilities, stillness and immobilities are mostly “coded negatively” (Cresswell, 2012). To verify this hypothesis, I conducted a lecture as part of the development of this glossary entry. During the class I presented participants with photos showing different forms of immobilities and asked them to note down associated feelings and thoughts (cf. Appendix 1). As an introductory example, I made them familiar with the case of Ali (cf. The Never Ending Journey). Everyone was able to relate to why Ali felt frustrated, distressed and hopeless.

Negativity is, however, not only associated with devastating situations like Ali’s, but a general form of coding forms of immobilities. Because of that it surprised me that participants not only noted down negative feelings and thoughts. One participant, for example, was presented with a photo showing a snow-bounded house. In her interpretation she acknowledged that a change in speed and devices of movement happens as well as that humans have to adapt to the situation. This caused a discussion about the appropriateness of the words negative and positive in order to classify forms of mobility and immobility. Thus, the question is why even we, who do not live under comparable circumstances as Ali, still code stillness and forms of immobilities with the judgmental terms of “negative” and “positive”. Tarja Salmela of the University of Lapland tries to explain this phenomenon by looking at basic values, beliefs and attitudes implied by our current economic system, the capitalism. She states that “the omnipotence of the estimable materiality which has been assumed to make people happy has only led to a never ending strive for more and more – a strive in which the active and mobile subject plays the leading role” (Salmela, 2014). Hence, in the context of capitalism forms of mobility are associated with being productive and forms of immobility with being unproductive, whereat the active subject is positively perceived as being a good citizen.

Many movements in today’s world, however, call to slow down our lives and leverage stillness as a source of self-reflection. The Italian Slow Food Movement, for example, was founded in response to globalization. Members intend to slow down their lives starting with food (Leitch, 2003). Moreover, many people meditate to achieve “[a] sense of peace of mind, a sense of belonging to nature, a strengthened heart and soul” (Conradson, 2011, p. 82).

This summer I lived in New York. Under the week, I often went for a morning run between 5am and 6am. During this hour the city had a magical atmosphere - stuck in between the night owls and the early risers. Usually one cannot hear a single bird in New York. During this hour, however, I
could hear seagulls turning their rounds over the city. In his novel “If nobody speaks of remarkable things”, John McGregor labels this specific hour as the “miracle of silence”, “a rare and sacred dead time between the late sleepers and the early risers” (Conradson, 2011, p. 72).

In this example, silence is used as a synonym for stillness to describe it as a source of self-reflection. Reading academic papers it seemed to me that scholars not only randomly interchanged the terms stillness and silence, but also the terms stillness and immobilities. First, this often confused me while reading and secondly raised the critical question if it is necessary to use all those terms or if we could exclusively use one of them to fully understand the concept of immobilities.

Culture, Mobility and Space

The sociology of space is one of the concepts paving the way for the new mobilities paradigm (Urry, 2009). It as well is highly interrelated with the discipline of geography. Hence, in a research triangle of culture, mobility and space (cf. Figure 1), the new mobilities paradigm is located between mobility and space. Explanation for that is that mobility as a social product does not exist in an abstract world of absolute time and space. In contrast, it highly influences how people experience space (Cresswell, 2006).

Globalization and new modes of mobility such as the airplane and high speed trains blurred the lines between the distinctiveness of places (Cresswell, 2006). Hence, mobilities has transformed a space of specific local places into a space of global flows. “It is [a] fertile ground of deterritorialization, in which money, commodities and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world [...]” (Appadurai, 1990, p. 303). Consequently, “culture [...] no longer sits in places, but is hybrid, dynamic - more about routes than roots” (Cresswell, 2006, p. 1).
Ali’s case, however, demonstrates that even though mobilities accelerate the process of deterritorialization, traditional notions of culture bound to and within certain territories are strongly embedded in the world of the passenger and other types of travelers. Ali, as a non-European, is not allowed to enter the EU freely. He is required to seek asylum. Even though Ali has the right to be united with his wife and daughter in Paris to join their asylum request, authorities force him to seek it in Greece. (Innes, 2015)

Not only the fact that he is non-European impedes Ali’s journey, but also his gender and skin color. Discourse on the refugee crises in media and other scapes fuels among Europeans the fear for the unknown. This anxiety is rooted in the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization, with which a fear of cultural absorption and identity loss rises (Appadurai, 1990). As a consequence, Europeans put a mask on Ali’s face based on institutionalized Western knowledge rooted in cultural distinguishing factors such as skin, religion, nations and others. Therefore, imaginative geography manifests the static polarity of “we” vs. “them”. For Edwards Said, “there is no doubt imaginative geography [...] helps the mind to intensify its own senses of itself by dramatizing the distance and difference between what is close and what is far away (Said, 1978, p. 361)

Huntington already predicted in 1991 that “the conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations” (Huntington, 1993). Hence, it can be criticized that the new mobilities turn rather neglects the influence of traditional notions of culture on the concept of mobility. De Genova argues that the absence of the terms border and migration in prominent keyword collections on culture and society indicates that they have “not yet fully emerged as a problem-space for cultural studies” (De Genova, Mezzadra, & Pickl, 2014). Ali’s case and its context of the refugee crisis, however, demonstrate the importance of those two keywords. Hence, it would be desirable that critical mobilities research acknowledges that “[m]obility and control over mobility both reflect and reinforce power” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 49) rooted in the traditional notion of culture as territorially fixed.

Therefore, in the context of the European refugees’ crisis, interesting research question could be:

- How do imaginative geographies influence our stereotypes of refugees and migrants creating borders and boundaries in addition to national geographic fixed borders?
- How do forced mobility and forced deterritorialization influence the subjective self-identification of refugees with different notions of culture, for example, territorial fixed culture?
- Can forced deterritorialization cause a form of identity loss? Comparable to how consequences of colonization still impede ontology of many former colonized people today (cf. Fanon, 1986).

Research questions like this would move the concept of mobilities and immobilities paradigm closer to the center of the proposed research triangle of culture, mobility and space (cf. Figure 2). Hence, critical mobilities research “interrogates who and what is demobilized and remobilized across many different scales, and in what situations mobility or immobility might be desired options, coerced, or paradoxically interconnected” (Sheller, 2011, p. 2) and takes into account that “[m]obility is a resource to which not everyone has an equal relationship” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 49).
References


## Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Figure #</th>
<th>Picture</th>
<th>Thoughts and Feelings associated with picture by participant</th>
<th>Source</th>
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| Snowbound                | Figure 3 | ![Snowbound Image](http://static.boredpanda.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/winter-houses-21__880.jpg) | - enforced break  
- adaption to the situation  
- stillness/quietness of sound/noise  
- change of the speed/devices of movement | ![Source](http://static.boredpanda.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/winter-houses-21__880.jpg) |
| Casper David Friedrich’s “Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer” | Figure 4 | ![Casper David Friedrich Image](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg) | - masculine superiority  
- sacred moment of stillness  
- impressed by nature’s beauty  
- inspiration for paintings  
- being proud of the ability to climb the mountain | ![Source](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/b9/Caspar_David_Friedrich_-_Wanderer_above_the_sea_of_fog.jpg) |
| Supermarket Queue        | Figure 5 | ![Supermarket Queue Image](http://i.huffpost.com/gen/1650345/images/o-LINE-facebook.jpg) | I am here because I run out of toilet paper. I was working all day and my kids are at home, which is close to the supermarket. I am thinking: I love that sweater... and her hair it would be so much easier to have short hair, but I would look so bad. But she looks so beautiful | ![Source](http://i.huffpost.com/gen/1650345/images/o-LINE-facebook.jpg) |
| Broken Leg | Figure 6 | - I can be happy; I survived (happiness)  
- Pain  
- Bored  
- Impatience  
- When do I get out of here  
| Meditation | Figure 7 | - Empty  
| Flight got Cancelled | Figure 8 | - Nervous  
| Waiting before a job interview | Figure 9 | - “Waiting sucks!”  
- Nervous  
- Feels like not moving forward in his career | https://typeset-beta.imgix.net/rehost/2016/9/13/b3eddecc-11a3-47e3-a34e-3168f34d4aa3.jpg |