

Javier Caletrío, Giuliana Mandich

Introduction to Symposium "Moving Boundaries in Mobilities Research"

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Introduction to Symposium “Moving Boundaries in Mobilities Research”

by Javier Caletrío *and* Giuliana Mandich

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Theories of the social come and go, some transforming the field or legitimising extensive programmes of social change, others leaving barely noticed traces after moments of passing effervescence. When a “mobilities turn” was explicitly advocated almost fifteen years ago, it prompted enthusiastic interest and constructive criticism, as well as certain scepticism towards what looked to some like yet another provocative and ephemeral fad. Since then social, political, technological and environmental transformations all over the world have only sharpened the need for process-oriented, multi-scalar analytical lenses that account for social formations beyond taken for granted territorial units (i.e. city, region, nation state), that discusses notions of the self, identity, class, inequality or power in relation to socio-technical systems spanning the globe, and that are sensitive to the inter-relation and co-evolution of flows of people, money, goods, information, resources, waste and diseases that increasingly seem to order social life.

A wealth of research and publications inspired by the mobilities turn have appeared during this period, reflecting the growing interest in understanding lives under conditions of what Zygmunt Bauman [2000] has appropriately called “liquid modernity.” As the conference on *Moving Boundaries in Mobilities Research* in Cagliari in July 2012 showed, this line of research is evolving rapidly in conversation with emerging fields of study such as new media, computation and design as well as more traditional ones such as urban planning, archaeology, history, migration and area studies, also prompting reflections about the methodological innovations that such new ap-

proaches require [Büscher and Urry 2009; Büscher 2013]. Overviews of this growing literature have recently been written by, for example, Cresswell [2010; 2012; forth.], Sheller [2011], Vannini [2010] and, most comprehensively, Adey et al. [2014], and this is not the place to provide yet another review. Rather the aim is to showcase and bring to new publics research that illustrates some of the directions in which the field is evolving.

By way of introduction to the papers in this symposium, some clarifications about the origins and diversity of understandings of the mobilities turn will help to outline its dynamism and untapped potential. The mobilities turn has emerged in the fragmented space of academic knowledge as a *catalyst* facilitating the convergence and transformation of previously disparate areas of study around a shared concern for the empirical fact of mobility. What began decades ago as a discontinuous, almost imperceptible murmur of isolated voices, has developed since the early 2000s into a lively dialogue. The work of British sociologist John Urry is perhaps the best known and most influential in orchestrating efforts to give shape and direction to this unfolding conversation involving numerous, and often discrepant voices. Thus, while some authors may associate mobilities research with some defining features of the "mobilities paradigm" [Sheller and Urry 2006] such as a focus on "mobility systems," others hold differing views on what a mobilities-oriented social science should look like, its basic units of analysis, the main writers and research traditions that have inspired it, or its potential to transform the social sciences. For example, in this volume Kaufmann identifies the mobilities turn with a much narrower set of concerns around the relationship between physical and social mobility while at the same time brings to the fore a broader range of (predominantly French) works prefiguring this approach.

This diversity of understandings may still be rooted in recognizable disciplinary concerns but an increased sensitivity to interdisciplinarity is shifting these perspectives. While often highlighted as a defining feature of mobilities research, at the moment this emphasis on interdisciplinarity refers more to an *aspiration* and a potential than a fully developed characteristic of all research classed as "mobilities." A mobilities perspective is an *invitation* to consider a specific question or problem in relation to a much broader set of socio-technical processes and dynamics than that envisaged by more traditional and narrower disciplinary approaches. This involves following connections without *a priori* concerns about the limits of a relevant network so as to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the problems themselves. As such rather than understanding interdisciplinarity as an absolute feature of mobilities studies it is perhaps more accurate to observe that it is selectively performed. Although research questions and preliminary findings suggest the bodies of knowledge to engage with as research progresses, rather than any favoured theory or privileged methods, the

inexorable limitations of a researcher's background, as well as resource constraints and institutional contexts still bear upon the degree of interdisciplinarity in mobilities research.

This wider context in which mobilities research develops partly explains its uneven reception in different fields. Human geography is no doubt the field where the mobilities turn has been most enthusiastically embraced partly because of its contribution to the "spatial turn" and partly because the discipline has traditionally been receptive to interdisciplinarity. The mobilities turn has also re-energised certain fields such as strands of tourism and transport studies that were being pushed to the margins, becoming inward looking and out of touch with key societal and theoretical concerns, enabling them to keep pace with shifting sociospatial realities. Debates about social media, big data, networked infrastructures and technological mobilities have also opened a fertile ground for cooperation between mobilities researchers, designers and urbanists. These are fields where the role of mobilities in the spatial patterning of social relations is perhaps most evident and it is here where the mobilities research is being developed most rapidly. But the mobilities turn is also informing research in a much wider range of issues. Key mobilities texts are being cited in papers about social theory, social science methods, management, consumerism, sport, planning, landscape, development, architecture, security, risk, citizenship, surveillance, energy, gender, ageing, disability, social work, education, sustainability, criminal economy, complexity, climate change, to name but a few. As the number of disciplines and researchers concerned about mobilities expands, the mobilities turn acts as a liberating force legitimating forays into formerly forbidden lands, addressing new audiences, publishing in new journals, and engagement in new collaborations.

These moving and uneven boundaries of mobilities research are as much geographical as they are thematic. Mobilities research is still largely concentrated in a number of sociology, geography, media and transport departments and research centres in the northwest of Europe and a few locations elsewhere such as Santiago de Chile, São Paulo, Philadelphia, Montreal or Canberra, reflecting the intriguing and uneven ways in which theories travel. In this respect, the global outlook of *Sociologica* and its concern with facilitating access to academic debates make it an excellent platform to bring mobilities research to new audiences. The next fifteen years of the mobilities turn may hopefully be marked by a more geographically diverse research landscape that helps to understand macro as much as micro foundations and conditions of possibility of im/mobile lives worldwide. This is not just a matter of academic interest. Mobilities' untapped potential to develop a public sociology may apply to many areas of social life, as noted above, but is perhaps most significant in relation to social futures and sustainability and socio-technical transitions. As

diverse prospective studies have observed, accelerating environmental change and the likely end of cheap energy could bring current patterns of mobility to an abrupt end with destabilizing effects in many societies. Understanding possible long-term trends and imagining desired social worlds could facilitate adaptation to unknown futures in more democratic and equal ways. Although only some of the papers included in this symposium have been written with this specific concern in mind, they do illustrate analytical sensitivities that may be deployed to better understand the period of radical inequalities and uncertainties that may lie ahead. These involve a concern with how agency and identity are embedded in socio-technical systems (Pellegrino), how inhabiting these "material worlds" leaves traces of our movements in the form of digital data and the challenges of mobilizing this data in an increasingly crisis-prone planet (Büscher et al.), an understanding of how cities evolve within networks of cities through which best practices in social and environmental policies travel (McCann and Ward), how new mobility regimes (Kesselring) may redistribute affordances of physical mobility and its implications for social cohesion and social mobility (Kaufmann) and environmental justice (Freudendal-Pedersen), and finally, how mobilities are governed across borders and across different scales (Sheller), and how territories can be conceived of as mobile formations as a way to rethink care in times of resource scarcity (Mubi Brighenti).

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Keywords: Mobility, Immobility, Social Theory, Uncertainty, Transitions.

Javier Caletrió is a Research Fellow and member of the Advisory Committee of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University. He is also Scientific Advisor to the Mobile Lives Forum (Paris). His research interest lies broadly in the intersection of sustainability transitions, mobilities and inequality, especially in the Mediterranean and Latin America. He has co-edited *Elite Mobilities* (Routledge, 2014).

Giuliana Mandich is Professor of Sociology at the University of Cagliari. Her main research interests include: space, society and everyday life (domestication, cultures of motility, imagined mobilities), time and the future (capacity to aspire, imagination and narratives of young people). On mobilities she recently published “Connecting to the future: the role of spatial mobilities in young people’s imagined biographies” (with Simona Isabella), in *Connections and disconnections*, European Youth Partnership Series, 2014.