



## Mobility, migration, and its nexus to power

Oskar Christensson

### review of

Söderström, O., S. Randeria, D. Ruedin, G. D'Amato and F. Panese (eds.) (2013) *Critical mobilities*. London: Routledge. (PB, pp 234, € 44,50, ISBN 978-0415828161)

### Introduction

*Critical Mobilities* is a book edited by Ola Söderström, Shalini Randeria, Didier Ruedin, Gianni D'Amato and Francesco Panese. The editors and authors of the book are interested in a critical perspective on society, which they see as composed of mobile assemblages (including, e.g., different policies, urban forms, people, institutions, and technologies). They want to understand what these assemblages are made of, how they are maintained and what they imply for people and society in general. From this position the book 'focuses on diverse mobile entities considered (at least by some) as problematic' [vi]. By mobile entities the authors understand and refer to units of analysis as diverse as reproductive health technologies and medical mobilities in India, undocumented migrant laborers in the US and Europe, road interchanges and shopping malls in cities of the global South, and university branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates. In a broad sense the book analyzes the interplay of mobility and power in various forms and explores how this interplay shapes inequality, domination and constraint. Thereby the book addresses questions about how national identities are maintained and understood by different actors in a globalized world.

The editors describe their view on mobilities as being close to the 'mobile turn' in social sciences while they, at the same time, claim not to be 'firmly situated' [vii] in the new mobilities paradigm (e.g. Sheller and Urry, 2006). Instead, the book's authors draw upon diverse perspectives stemming from anthropology, cultural geography, migration and

urban studies. Among the fields addressed, migration studies receive the most attention [xii]. This is likely due to the editors' and the contributors' argument that the combination of mobilities studies and migration studies allows for a critical approach to mobility/ies. While not explained in detail, migration studies is thought to mainly 'de-romanticize' mobility by putting emphasis on forced forms of migration (Gill et al., 2011). Three central claims are made when presenting the book's perspective on mobilities research: a critique of a sedentarist and a-mobile view of society and social science is considered crucial; a new epistemology and an ontology addressing how the 'process of movement constitutes the entities in circulation' are seen as important [ix]; and finally, new methods are considered necessary to deal with the fleeting, ephemeral, multiple, and sensory aspects of contemporary society (Büscher and Urry, 2009).

With regard to migration studies, the book argues that, traditionally, migration was understood as a static occurrence, referring to citizens leaving one nation state to immigrate to a another nation state, to wit on a permanent basis (e.g. Park, 1928). The phenomenon of transnationalism has changed this understanding by questioning people's one-way and once and for all movement from one place to another. However, many authors of this edited collection claim that transnationalism still works within a nation-state framework relying on sending-receiving relationships between societies. They subsequently connect mobilities with migration studies as the former allow migration studies to break with the classical optic of fixity [xiv] and accept that movement, and not the belonging to a particular territory or nation-state, creates the relevant relationships that so-called receiving societies maintain with 'immigrants'. A critical mobilities perspective then re-thinks and explores the role of the nation-state in defining and controlling borders and classifying mobile people crossing borders (e.g. migrants, tourists, students, or business travelers) as wanted and unwanted. This book therewith takes up a central issue for critical mobilities and migration studies by questioning how the power of the nation-state is changing in an age of 'global economy', in particular for those who are located outside of the 'kinetic elite' (Cresswell, 2006).

The book is divided into three parts: part one is on mobility and place, part two is on global migration, and part three discusses medical mobilities in the geopolitical context of India. While part one and part three relate to critical mobilities, they do not explicitly discuss the notion of migration. At times, this leads to the impression that mobility and migration are identical phenomena. Hence the introduction's emphasis on migration does not come across equally in the three parts of the book. For me this results in a somewhat 'unbalanced' book with part two presenting its strongest part.

## **Mobility and place**

Chapter 1 [p. 1-28], written by Robinson, focuses on how policies of urban development in post-colonial cities (in this case Johannesburg) are 'arrived at'. In chapter 2 [p. 29-57], Söderström asks, on a related note, how physical structures (also called urban types and forms) of city mobility interact with local populations. He studies road interchanges in Burkina Faso and shopping malls in Vietnam to show how state and private actors

develop urban landscapes through built forms. These actors claim that urban forms have a proper and intended use, which requires ‘educating’ the population how to use such forms. But, as Söderström shows, built forms also provide people with new spaces to experiment with identities and learn how to be ‘modern’. Söderström writes in the tradition of complex ‘multiple modernities’ where the non-West is not merely a recipient of readymade Western ideas and moralities. The clash between the intended use of urban forms and people’s actual use thereof is a good illustration of this. Chapter 3 [p. 59-80], by Geddie and Panese, then looks into how political, geographical and individual mobilities interact and collide. This is exemplified through a Swiss university, establishing a branch campus in the United Arab Emirates.

## Migration and identity

Part two of the book focuses on transnational migration and addresses political aspects of migration in relation to different mobility entities: citizen and denizen (or non-citizen), the state, systems of security and surveillance, and information and communication technologies (ICT). Part two of the book sets the following scene: Today’s liberal democratic states want to retain their standard of living, keep citizens and ‘accepted’ migrants (e.g. tourists and skilled workers) safe and thus away from possible crime and terror attempts; they further want to maintain civil liberties, citizen freedom and the self-image of being open societies governed by law and transparency. This balancing act has, however, become increasingly difficult in a globalized world.

In chapter 4 [p. 81-100], Cresswell presents the nexus of citizens and mobility from a number of perspectives. The idea of the citizen is discussed with reference to categories such as space, time, and the city itself. Cresswell argues that from the polis of Greece to the modern city and the nation state the citizen is and was defined in relation to both the respective city and the time in which he or she live(d). According to the author, the modern city is less connected to the nation-state than it was in the past. Instead, it is connected to a global network of cosmopolitan cities where a group referred to as ‘kinetic elite’ finds belonging and citizenship. Related to this group is, however, the non-citizen – referred to as the *denizen* – who emerges and is created with the citizen as its other. Like the idea of the citizen changes over time and across space, the idea of the denizen shifts and is created differently, especially via the development of so-called urban spaces. As the flows in and out of a city change, its people change with it. Today, in the modern city, the citizen and the denizen are mobile subjects whereby it is only the citizen who has access to different mobilities. The denizen’s mobility is not immobility or the opposite of the citizen’s mobility; it is rather a different mobility characterized by less access, time, money and by more frictions at points of passage (Urry, 2007).

In chapter 5 [p. 101-123], De Genova writes about two mobility ideas of the ‘global North’ and discusses how they interpolate various individuals. The first understands mobility as a form of freedom and (almost) a right of individuals. The other idea refers to the increasing *securitization* of the world. Securitization is argued to be the result of an overall increase in mobility including that of people with homicidal tendencies such as

contingent terrorists, who have to be combated. However, De Genova reminds us that there are those people who fall in-between the two depicted mobility ideas; they are clearly not terrorists, yet they do not have the freedom to move the way people move who are 'desired' by the state and economy (e.g. citizens, tourists or skilled workers). Here De Genova speaks of undocumented migrants who are often treated like terrorists when being detained and summarily deported. In popular discourses these kind of (im)migrants are often called 'illegals'. However, De Genova goes on and argues that, at present, the economy cannot be sustained without the work being done by 'illegals'. The state thus tries to maintain an image that no longer corresponds to 'reality'. The phenomenon of migration suggests that some places – such as the US, the EU, or Australia – are better or preferred places to live compared to other places. Part of what is here seen as 'better' refers to the idea of an open society, which is what the US and EU want to be. At the same time, though, they wish to control the influx of people seeking a better place to live.

Lahav writes chapter 6 [p. 123-152], which addresses similar problematic relationships than chapter 5, but it does so from an explicit neo-institutional perspective. The terror attacks of 9/11 in the US, 2004 in Madrid and 2005 in London set in motion to what the author refers as the mobility 'trilemma' [124]. The chapter accounts for how this is done by exploring how states have reconciled rights, security, and economic perspectives of mobility. In short, Lahav argues that two forces have allowed the state reconciliation: One is the outsourcing of ideas and practices of security from the state to the private sector. This has led to the maintenance of an image of being a liberal state while or despite privatizing (national) security (see here also the discussion of the concept of securitization in chapter 5). The second force refers to how migration is framed as a threat to physical safety and security rather than, like in the past, a threat to economic interests and cultural values. According to Lahav this shift in public narrative has a cohesive rather than a divisive effect on internal politics. In other words, 'as immigration has shifted from a cultural to a physical threat, immigration issues have become increasingly salient (on the political agenda) but less politically (divisive)' [141].

Chapter 7 [p. 153- 175], written by Nedelcu, explores migration in the digital era from a cosmopolitan, trans-nationalist perspective (see also Beck, 2002). In effect, Nedelcu argues that ICTs (especially digital and satellite media, the internet and mobile phones) can make the borders of nations less relevant. Here migration is presented as a phenomenon that is widely accepted by the state, allowing migrants and their families to gain access to ICTs for communication purposes, among other things. In comparison to how migrants are discussed in the previous chapter by Lahav, Nedelcu portrays them as rather privileged people.

Traditionally, transnationals or people who spent time in two countries were seen as being torn between an 'old' and a 'new' nation state. Today, with the proliferation of ICTs, transnationals, however, seem to go beyond such distinctions. They in fact challenge such distinctions and therewith the political scope of the nation state and its homogenizing interests and endeavors. Thus, this chapter is not about migrants who are forced to move but about people working and living in one country yet maintaining, on

the basis of ICTs, relationships with friends and family members in other countries. On balance, similar to the other chapters ‘making up’ part two of the book, Nedelcu reflects upon current globalization tendencies and people’s diverse mobility practices by scrutinizing questions of capitalism, governance, resistance, identity, and their relation to mobility.

## Medical mobilities in the context of India

Following chapter 7 the book changes direction, in a somewhat abrupt manner. The two remaining chapters that form part three of the book are, hence, different from the previous ones. They focus on India and on medical mobilities, and it is thus a very specific geographic location and view of mobilities that comes to the fore. In part three the mobilities discussed are less about corporeal mobility, even though examples stem from medicine, health care, and thus center on the body. Instead, interest surrounds logistics of drugs, accessibility to medical procedures, and ideas of what constitutes good health for the individual as well as a nation. Further the relationship between social status and medical mobility and the role of public-private interests in the health market come into focus.

Chapter 8 [p. 177-212], written by Towghi and Randeria, directs attention to the mobility of reproductive health technologies (i.e., HPV-vaccines and contraceptives) and discusses how these come to India and are disseminated. In contrast to the previous chapters on migration, in this chapter people are considered more or less sedentary, whereas technology comes to them through new markets created by collaborations between the government, NGOs and pharmaceutical companies. The market-friendly regulations that these collaborative networks ‘enjoy’ are central to their existence – and the analysis of the chapter. Following the authors, we can at present observe both the content and conditions of medical mobilities flowing in and out of India. To further illustrate this: After having been tested in the bodies of women of the ‘global South’ drugs are, for instance, frequently shipped to the ‘North’. Likewise, personal health data is mined in the ‘global South’ and then sold to universities and companies in the ‘North’. The testing of drugs and the collection of medical data are possible by behavior deemed unethical and possibly illegal in ‘the North’. However, such behavior is not only allowed but appears standard practice in ‘the South’, widely promoted and sustained by the collaborations outlined above. The authors conclude with suggesting ‘that a reconfigured nexus of state-market relations increasingly shapes the governance of the poor in the global South’ [207] resulting, among other things, in the dissemination of new norms and regulations within healthcare and the control of population, more generally.

Chapter 9 [p. 213-234], finally, is written by Cohen and stands out, to me at least, as it seems less constrained as for the interpretation of what mobility is and can be. The chapter illustrates changes in the representation of medical clinics in Hindi films. Films here appear as an interesting medium allowing to reflect upon Indian society and its relationship to health, progress and movement, status and national identity. I appreciate the form and direction of this concluding chapter as it shows the potential of (critical)

mobilities studies to draw on fiction and imaginary forms of mobility (Urry, 2007). Therewith it also shows how representations of mobility in movies can challenge and problematize notions of social (im)mobilities seemingly prevalent in 'real life'.

## Concluding remarks

Ideas, practices and materials increasingly flow from the global 'North' to the 'South' and are, in the process, negotiated, evaluated and received by countries, citizens as well as companies. Bodies try to move 'North' – in the form of migrants, workers, or consumers – and encounter resistance depending on how desirable their particular body is to the respective state and economy. Questions arise, to the authors of this book at least, as to what the nation state is today and how it is maintained and augmented. Of particular interest to the authors of the book are thereby the states' changing relationships to private organizations and the market. Basically the authors argue that the state is certainly not *one* thing to everyone anymore, if it ever was – and this might be(come) a crucial challenge for those in power.

What keeps this edited volume together is the introductory chapter elaborating on the authors' interpretation and understanding of mobilities. The nexus of mobilities and migration studies – which was argued to enable a *critical* approach to mobilities – is however not equally emphasized throughout the different chapters. Critical mobility studies are, as stated in the introduction, about the interplay of mobility and power. Questions of inequality, domination and constraint are indeed raised throughout the book, but they are not necessarily discussed against the backdrop of migration studies, as the introduction tends to suggest. As mentioned previously, the chapters making up part two of the book most obviously draw inspiration from migration studies in their explorations of the mobility-power nexus. However, I am not sure if someone who is not familiar with the field will share this assessment. Yet there is no indication that the book is meant to be an introduction to the field of mobilities, or any other field the volume draws upon. But for which audience is this book then meant to be? Assuming that there are different ways to read the book I see two very general possibilities.

One way is to approach the book as a collection of rather loosely coupled texts; and this comes along with both strengths and weaknesses. While I find the conceptual, empirical and analytical breadth of the book compelling, the wide variety of empirical cases and contexts explored simultaneously makes the book difficult to grasp as a whole. Every chapter evokes other and new issues and concepts with which many readers are probably, at least in parts, unfamiliar. By tendency, the singular chapters thus assume that the readers have some prior conceptual knowledge of the respective fields and areas addressed. That said, the book also allows its readers to gain access to a variety of mobility-related concepts and empirical settings, thereby revealing the diversity of the field of critical mobilities studies. For scholars with a previous interest in and knowledge of mobilities and migration studies, looking for new and critical perspectives on mobility and mobility-related phenomena, the book appears to be of particular interest. For me, it has been eye-opening and an inspirational read. That the book is, besides, highly relevant

these days seems to be obvious recalling news covering stories of people who try to cross the Mediterranean to come to Europe on a non- or at the very least semi-‘legal’ path.

## references

- Beck, U. (2002) ‘The cosmopolitan society and its enemies’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19(1-2): 17-44.
- Büscher, M, and J. Urry (2009) ‘Mobile methods and the empirical’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12(1): 99-116.
- Cresswell, T. (2006) *On the move: Mobility in the modern western world*. New York: Taylor & Francis.
- Gill, N., J. Caletrio and V. Mason (2011) ‘Introduction: Mobilities and forced migration’, *Mobilities*, 6(3): 301-316.
- McCann, E. (2011) ‘Urban policy mobilities and global circuits of knowledge: Toward a research agenda’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 101(1): 107-130.
- Park, R.E. (1928) ‘Human migration and the marginal man’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 33(6): 881-893.
- Sheller M. and J. Urry (2006) ‘The new mobilities paradigm’, *Environment and Planning A*, 38(2): 207-226.
- Urry, J. (2007) *Mobilities*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

## the author

Oskar Christensson is a PhD student at Borås and Lund University in Sweden. His research project is on consumer perspectives on everyday transportation.  
Email: oskar.christensson@hb.se