

Mobilities and Transformation: Understanding Societies, Economies, and Environments on the Move

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Societies of late modernity are characterised by far-reaching social and cultural processes of change, which, through their interaction at the beginning of the twenty-first century, have triggered, accelerated, or fundamentally transformed a plethora of forms of movement. This conference will focus on dynamics among people, objects, practices, and signs; the social relationships that underlie and produce these dynamics; and reciprocal regional, national, and transnational processes of transformation. The mobility and circulation of resources, labour, money, capital, goods, wealth, information, knowledge, and perceptions are of central importance here. We consider their mutual forms of interdependence to be crucial to the intensification of cultural change. At the same time, these cultural changes also influence existing and future forms of movement carried out by people, objects, and signs. Moreover, to gain a comprehensive understanding of these contemporary processes, it is also necessary to view them from a historical perspective.

Twenty-first century societies are characterised by the enforced and intensified

circulation of people, goods, and symbolic communication (including, for example, credit systems and stocks). This has been considered to be the motor of modern notions of development since the eighteenth century. Such circulation has introduced a dynamic that has particular ramifications for the conditions under which we live.

The related processes of industrialisation and urbanisation are based on the widespread mobilisation and mobility of labour. The increasing international entanglement of the world economy after the Second World War is closely connected to the increasing mobility of labour, capital, and goods, as well as information, knowledge, and symbols. The surge in globalisation during the last four decades has intensified these trends, while clear countertrends have become apparent over this time (Dicken 2015). In reconfigured constellations, nation states seem to have regained their importance as the focal points of political action, as both the 2008 financial crisis and the recent circulation of reactionary nationalist rhetoric in the wake of the movement of refugees across Europe attest. Economic and institutional changes in the recent past have enhanced unequal regional development, which is reflected in forms of social inequality. The other side to the promises of modernity (upward social mobility, consumption, the acceleration of processes, the fostering of flexible contacts across time and space, and aspirations to individualisation) is thereby made clear: increasing inequality in terms of access to resources, the general conditions under which people live, and opportunities; ecological problems resulting from the exhaustion of resources and waste levels, as well as globalised relations of dependence (Urry 2010, 2011).

It must be acknowledged that the social problems created by movement have forerunners. The mobility of bodies, objects, and signs across space, considered from a global perspective, is part of a long tradition that dates right back to the premodern era (classical empires and trade contacts, modern colonial expansion and concomitant developments in trade, migration, and transfers of biotic species, etc.). It is mainly from the middle of the nineteenth century, however, that they have taken on broader and broader significance under catchall terms such as international labour, migration, urbanisation, trade, transport (rail, road, and air travel). In this regard, old - and allegedly static - systems, such as regional or national identities, are being broken apart. Moreover, commonplace assumptions about public and private life are being challenged too.

The mobilisation and mobility of **labour** have been intrinsic features of the capitalist society since its emergence (Harvey 2014). The migration of people from the country to the city and from the periphery to the centre are ongoing processes. Neither European industrialisation, the current industrial rise of China, deindustrialisation processes, the formation of global cities and megacities, nor the emergence of new regional centres of growth would have been possible without this movement of people. Various types of commute between home and the workplace - sometimes for hundreds of kilometres - have, in a diversity of forms, become a

routine for billions of people.

Processes of **migration** have been a common form of social mobility for centuries; they can appear in diverse forms and demand rigorous academic analysis. The current flight and movement of refugees is a situation of critical severity, which has forced European societies to confront fundamental challenges (Sassen 2005, 2014). Perceptions of foreignness, competition in work and housing markets, and fear of overburdening social-security systems are the subject of controversial negotiations within society.

Another form of mobility defined by its short duration, its round-trip format, and the availability of adequate finances is **tourism**. Currently, this sector in Europe alone has revenues of around 500 billion US dollars per year (UNWTO 2015). Here, too, the mobilities of people, objects, and signs appear in ever more complex structural relationships, which manifest themselves in regional transformation processes; in a continually increasing need for functionally differentiated infrastructure; and in globalised communication. These relationships are accompanied by a strained coexistence between notions of authenticity and otherness (Gisage et al. 2014).

Goods and **commodities** are both mobile and immobile. As they are traded, they circulate between diverse individuals who claim ownership of them, and by doing so they also simultaneously circulate spatially. Once taken out of circulation, however, they become fixed to a place. An exception to this are those goods that themselves induce the circulation of other goods, such as means of transport and money. Consequently, circulating capital transforms into goods or money in order to multiply itself.

Processes that create value are, at the same time, **metabolic processes** within nature (Fischer-Kowalski et al. 1997; Singh et al. 2013; Altvater 2010). The development and consumption of goods, through the deployment of work and with the aid of capital, should be considered alongside the ecological implications. These aspects should be conceptualised as the results of a metabolic exchange within nature and also as the movement and recombination of resources and materials (cf. Urry 2004). The movement of goods, from their development to their consumption (Ritzer 2007) and use, all the way up to their return to nature in the form of waste and CO₂ emissions, involves not only the movement of labour and its skills, of money and capital, but also the perpetual movement and transformation of biological, physical, and chemical materials and processes.

To create value, **capital** must shift from place to place. Work sets capital in motion; it has to be mobile and is also often rendered fixed. As such, capital is both a value, the purpose of which is to achieve its own multiplication, as well as a social relationship. It manifests as money, as goods, and as productive capital, as newly

produced commodities, and, finally, as money again (Harvey 2014).

The growing symbolic exchange of **signs** (in the form of pictures, writing, sounds, diagrams, films, and so on) has accompanied a collective feeling of acceleration and the experience of new temporal structures. As a result, habitual forms of perception have been altered and a profound cultural transformation of social relationships has arisen. This transformation has occurred through the merely loose links that exist between technologically disseminated symbols and primary experiences derived from face-to-face contact (Lash/Urry 1994).

Knowledge emerges through the continual recombination of existing forms of knowledge. Processes of innovation within and across companies and educational institutions are based on the interaction between mobility and knowledge. However, in places where codified information is easy to transfer, the knowledge borne out of social context remains bound up in regional contexts. This situation presents companies with continual challenges, if they want to organise their internal learning processes and systems of knowledge exchange with cooperating partners (Foray 2005; Ashem et al. 2011).

Aesthetic innovation also triggers processes in which knowledge circulates. This occurs through the advancement of artistic forms of expression and the specific forms of organisation that accompany them; it leads to an exchange with existing institutions under the premise that artistic creation follows its own logic.

Through the transformation of **socio-technical forms of infrastructure** in modern societies - in this case as special, new information and communication technologies - related systems of knowledge are also increasingly set in motion. This, in turn, is often accompanied by conflicts of interpretation between those who monopolise forms of capital and those who want to challenge the monopolists' position (Bourdieu 1993; Geels/Schot 2007).

[More information \(PDF\)](#)
