



Book review: Critical Mobilities

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Critical Mobilities, edited by Ola Söderström, Shalini Randeira, Didier Ruedin, Gianni D'Amato, Francesco Panese, Oxford, EPFL Press distributed by Routledge, 2013, 240 pp., £36.99 (discounted at £29.59), EUR 34.70 (Hardback) ISBN 9780415828161

Critical Mobilities offers a myriad of perspectives of mobilities and immobilities from a variety of disciplines including geography, sociology, public health and migration studies. The book positions society to be composed of mobile assemblages and offers critical accounts that address the interplay of mobility and power by questioning the inequalities of movement and constraint. The aim of the book is to offer insights into how the movement of people, policies, practices, materials, imaginations and technologies shape society. It focuses on the institutional framing of mobility rather than more popular experiences of mobility, and in doing so it attempts to overcome the limits of using mobility theory to capture social processes that happen in and across space and time. The book earns its title since many of the case studies present mobile entities as problematic, for example, the mobilisation of urban structures as a means to control from afar, or the global branching of university campuses that offers an affordable research strategy yet fails to utilise knowledge locally in the host countries.

The book attempts to bring together mobility and migration studies to better understand contemporary issues of forced migration and regulation of mobility. Mobility and assemblage theories are utilised to describe what mobilities are constituted by – for example, space, time, experience and regulation – and what mobilities are constitutive of, for example, materials, agents, and organisational structures. The editors hope that such assemblage analyses will enrich the research of migration, using it to “rethink the extent to which migration as a phenomenon should be defined in terms of, and derived from, the needs of the state to classify spatial

mobility in a particular way” (Editors: XIII). *Critical Mobilities* seeks to detangle and understand the mechanisms and logics that the state utilise to classify and manage various types of (im)mobile subjects, including those with very temporary movements, such as tourists and business types.

The first three chapters consider issues of mobilities of urban forms in postcolonial cities. In chapter one Jennifer Robinson explores how policy makers understand processes of engagement with “elsewhere”, finding overlaps between borrowing and inventing in local policies that arrive through a mixture of here and elsewhere to form distinctive local policies and urban form. In chapter two Söderström uses actor–network theory to examine not only how urban forms enact and convey pedagogies but also how they afford new possibilities of action, such as identity creation. Söderström argues that modern Asian urban policies do not just circulate in the direction of North–South, but are multi-polar and Asian influenced. In chapter three Geddie and Panese consider the connections of actors and objects to facilitate university branch campus mobility. It demonstrates the different objectives sought by universities and the conditions under which the transnational mobility of academic institutions takes place. Geddie and Panese find that the mobilities of branch campuses are limited, tentative and restricted by knowledge mostly flowing to the North, which reinforces unequal spatial relations between the home and branch campuses.

The next four chapters focus on human migration, and this is where the editors and authors attempt to bridge migration and mobilities studies. In chapter four Tim Creswell argues that mobilities are crucial to the reconfiguration of rights and identities of the citizen. The modern citizen, a figure central to the nation state, is connected to place, and their identity is established in relation to particular spatial formations; some places are more privileged than others. He concludes that contemporary state discourses which celebrate freedom of movement simultaneously condemn the mobility of alien

others. Chapter five draws on Hannah Arendt's work on freedom to examine how mobility and regulatory "securitarianism" can be understood as a web of tensions and torsions (De Genova: 115). Securitarianism, De Genova argues, is escalating to control migration in the name of antiterrorism. The ordered and state-regulated vision of "freedom of movement" comes into confrontation with a more elementary freedom of movement that is "the existential predicate for the autonomy and subjectivity" (De Genova: 116). Chapter six also examines increasing regulation of mobility in reaction to globalisation and security threats. Gallya Lahav considers competing demands of border security versus competitive interests of nations, for example, medical tourism and higher education. Lahav detangles the "trilemma" between human rights, markets and security interests. Chapter seven examines the use of information communication technologies (ICTs) as a lens through which to read transnational practices. It highlights a need to expand on current research to understand how ICTs change the meanings of time, space and proximity – for example, how ICTs impact identity construction in migratory situations and whether or not ICTs contribute to cosmopolitan behaviour or feelings of belonging.

The final two chapters address medical interventions from sociocultural perspectives and bring in assemblage analyses to examine the (im)mobilities of pharmaceuticals, technologies and surgical practices through a nexus of state and non-state actors. Chapter 8 explores the inequalities of the mobility of healthcare practices and pharmaceuticals. Within this nexus, the state governance of India is found to facilitate the spread of vaccinations and contraceptives amongst the poor through pathways of distribution and experimentation. This involves the domestication of international medical practices and the opening of new markets by the state and other actors rather than the regulation of the mobility of pharmaceuticals or implementing other methods of preventative healthcare, in this case, cervical screening.

For me, chapter 9 stood out as being an original and creative postmodern take on the failures of clinical technology and the urban/global landscape. It considers clichés of movement within Bollywood films that assign certain meanings to healthcare, which offer a historical narrative of a postcolonial, future-oriented era through the lens of surgical practice in popular Indian culture. Firstly, the chapter discusses how films create a binary of healthcare mobilities from the immobile slum dweller to the relative mobility of the middle-class urbanite, the latter with access to the hypermobility of European medical treatment; alas each class inevitably are faced with the immobility of death in the film *Anand*. The scene breaks down the power and hope of modern medicine, and the patient is separated from their otherwise mobile world as a middle-class citizen. The modern and foreign operating clinic is represented as a failure of the civil and is resistant to rural–urban mobilities, as well as modernity narratives and "blind faith in the future" (p. 222). The authors

then take us on a journey to see the representation of elite transnational mobilities of access to healthcare whereby the clinical operation is scaled up to Europe and conveys a sense of promise in a time of developmental promise and technological mobility. Here a binary is revealed of the immobility of the mass's access to healthcare versus the mobility of the elite's. Throughout, the author recognises the masculinised representation of mobility. The latest film in the analysis depicts the darker, violent side of mobility, which is trafficking, but it fails to represent the political movements this entails. Overall the author argues that a staging of Indian "clinical utopia" tends to immobilise the rural mass population and their access to healthcare and highlights inequalities staged within popular culture.

One of the main lines of thought that has arisen for me after considering this book as a whole and the array of case studies using a mobilities approach is to reflect on what this can lend to various disciplines. My thoughts are that, since the mobilities paradigm in its nature perhaps ought not to be tied down, it lends itself more as a theoretical position than a discipline in its own right. For example, the authors of chapter eight helpfully reflect on how a mobilities approach allows the authors to explore the discontinuities, as well as flows, in the trajectory of pharmaceutical mobilities and the constellation of actors that both enable and resist these movements. The authors argue that their research is more decentralised and less Eurocentric than classical studies since their mobilities approach does not seek to improve the efficiency of diffusing pharmaceuticals and authors do not assume health practices move in unidirectional flows from developed to under-developed nations. Instead the authors explore sites outside of the West and their role in creating and blocking pathways for circulation.

The book strives to broaden mobilities research, to unite it with other disciplines and to engage critically with the many and varied frameworks that work to create politics of flow. It is useful in exemplifying how a mobilities approach allows for more freedom and attention to varied directional movements of many different actors holding varying degrees of power within a nexus. It also allows for spatial and temporal understandings of these relationships of power that shape society and its movements. The book therefore is useful to a wide audience, showcasing diverse and recent research, and not limited to researchers, to practitioners of mobility, or to migration content. The depth of language and particularities of the case studies tend to limit the book to a mostly academic audience, however. Given that the book is aimed at such a diverse audience and with the case studies being so varied, the breadth of terminology and academic writing may be a little tedious and act as a barrier for some. I would have liked to have access to more empirical data, for example, quotes from interviews, where possible, to ground some of the theoretical analyses and to offer a link between empirical evidence and the academic voice.