

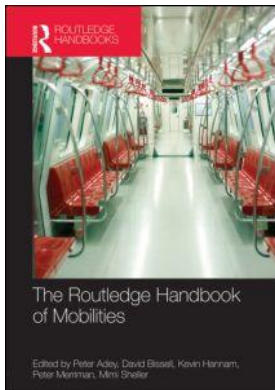
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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315857572.ch3>

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Published online on: 23 Dec 2013

How to cite :- Mimi Sheller. 23 Dec 2013, *Sociology After the Mobilities Turn from: The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* Routledge

Accessed on: 02 Dec 2021

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315857572.ch3>

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Sociology after the Mobilities Turn

Mimi Sheller

Reflecting back on a little over a decade of research that has gathered under the banner of the “new mobilities paradigm” and “critical mobilities research,” it is a good time to ask what impact it has had on traditional disciplines such as sociology. Although sociologist John Urry’s work has been fundamental to challenging the “sedentarism” of sociological thought, sociology itself has been especially resistant to the “mobilities turn” as compared to other disciplines such as geography, transport studies and communication (though even in these disciplines the inroads are only partial). Following his book *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000), Urry’s 2001 article “Mobile Sociology” in the *British Journal of Sociology* was re-printed in their special 60th anniversary edition (Urry 2010) as being one of the most agenda-setting articles of the decade. Yet there is scant evidence of that impact within the discipline of sociology itself: much of the impact has been on adjacent fields.

Although Urry’s approach has at times been equated with that of theorists of global fluidity or liquidity, it goes beyond a description of the contemporary world as more mobile than in the past. It also posits a relational basis for social theorizing that puts mobility at its center; a research agenda around the study of various complex systems, assemblages and practices of mobility; and it includes a normative move toward addressing the future of mobility in relation to ecological sustainability. While the epochal claims have been rejected by many sociologists or perceived as Eurocentric (see Sheller 2012), few of these latter trajectories have been seriously taken up within sociology.

Having co-founded the journal *Mobilities* in 2005, with the first edition published in 2006, the editors (Kevin Hannam, Mimi Sheller and John Urry) worked to establish a shift in thinking around mobilities that would influence a range of disciplines, including sociology. With full-text downloads from the journal growing from about 1500 in 2006 to 20,000 in 2011, the journal entered the Thomson Reuters Social Science Index with an impact factor of 1.238, ranking 28/65 in Geography and 12/23 in Transportation. Yet the journals with the largest number of citations of *Mobilities* articles are all within the discipline of geography. The presence of “mobility” as a strong theme in geography can be seen in the abstracts of papers presented at the recent annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers (2012), in which there were 95 papers with “mobility” listed as a keyword. In contrast, at the American Sociological Association conference mobility does not appear as a searchable topic

area, and the only sessions with mobility in their title are concerned with social mobility – with only a handful focusing on educational mobility, job mobility or geographic mobility. Within the discipline of sociology, especially in the United States, it seems clear that the influence of new ways of thinking about mobilities has barely made a dent.

In the sociological literature the term “mobility” is usually equated with the idea of “social mobility,” which refers both to individual movement up or down the scale of socio-economic classes and to the collective positional movement of social groups or classes. Dating back to the work of Alexis de Tocqueville and Emile Durkheim, sociology has been fundamentally concerned with the relation of social mobility to processes of social change and social stability. Elaborated by Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin in his 1927 book *Social Mobility*, this approach to structural sociology and stratification theory became especially influential in the United States. Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix, in their classic *Social Mobility and Industrial Society* (1959), for example, defined social mobility as

the process by which individuals move from one position to another in society – positions which by general consent have been given specific hierarchical values. When we study social mobility we analyze the movement of individuals from positions possessing a certain rank to positions either higher or lower in the social system.

(1991 [1959]: 1–2)

This positional understanding of mobility still predominates in sociology, and studies of geographical mobility are limited to specific sub-fields such as migration studies or labor studies, and use very traditional methodological approaches that treat mobility as the movement from A to B (see Cresswell 2006).

Such structural approaches still influence the way sociology is taught today and the commonplace assumptions about what the term mobility means. However, there are other sociological traditions that do place more emphasis on *spatial* mobility, or what is sometimes called geographical mobility, especially the Chicago School of urban sociology. Sociologists in the 1920s addressed geographical mobility in several respects, including the residential mobility of groups migrating into cities, the daily mobility of urban dwellers and commuters, and the heightened stimuli of fast-paced “urban metabolism.” American sociologists like Robert Park and Ernest Burgess were concerned with the potential negative effects of displacement and social destabilization linked to rapid urban expansion; but they nevertheless valued mobility as a vector for urban growth based on the fundamental capacity for human “locomotion.” German sociologist Georg Simmel also influenced ideas of “urban metabolism” and the importance of circulation and mobility as crucial aspects of modern urban life, including the mobility not only of people, but also of capital. Mobilities researchers today are returning to some of these early sociological theorists to begin to re-think the sociology of mobilities.

Yet, as Kaufmann (2011) suggests, the field of urban sociology was early on hived off from specialist sub-fields such as the study of transportation, migration or communication. Sociology largely dropped its interest in spatial mobility, while those disciplines interested in spatial mobility developed highly specialized quantitative techniques of measurement and mapping. Mobilities theory was left outside the purview of mainstream US sociology due to the marginalization of early critical theorists and the fragmentation of sociology into policy-oriented sub-fields. The new transdisciplinary field of mobilities research effectively re-unites the specialist sub-fields that had been evicted from sociological research, including: the spatial mobility of humans, non-humans and objects; the circulation of information, images

and capital, including critical theories of the affective and psycho-social implications of such mobility; as well as the study of the physical means for movement, such as infrastructures, vehicles, and software systems that enable travel and communication to take place. Thus it brings together some of the more purely “social” concerns of sociology (inequality, power, hierarchies) with the “spatial” concerns of geography (territory, borders, scale) and the “cultural” concerns of anthropology and media studies (discourses, representations, schemas), while inflecting each with a relational ontology of the co-constitution of subjects, spaces and meanings. Of course, it is precisely this anti-disciplinary hybridity that continues to situate the field as not-quite-sociology, even as it attracts students.

Despite the apparent obduracy of sociology in the US, the emergence of a new mobilities paradigm is nevertheless linked to a number of new academic institutions, networks and research initiatives that are attempting to re-position the sociology of mobilities. Amongst the leading institutions that include sociologists are the Centre for Mobilities Research (CeMoRe) at Lancaster University; the Center for Mobility and Urban Studies (C-MUS) at Aalborg University; the mobil.TUM Center at Technische Universität München; the Laboratory of Urban Sociology (LASUR) at Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne; and the Center for Mobilities Research and Policy (mCenter) at Drexel University. The main research networks, which sponsor conferences and research meetings, include the Cosmobilities Network and the Mediterranean Mobilities networks in Europe, and the Pan-American Mobilities Network, which is entering its fifth year of holding annual conferences in the USA and Canada, and includes members from Latin America. Key publications include the journal *Mobilities*, and the journal *Transfers: Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies*, as well as book series published by Routledge (Changing Mobilities) and by Ashgate. Out of this transnational, interdisciplinary nexus the field of mobilities research has gradually established a position that has a foot within sociology, but also reaches across many disciplinary boundaries.

Beyond the classical locus of urban sociology, and its important influence within human geography (Cresswell 2006; Adey 2009), mobilities research is also recognized as an important addition to the fields of transport research (Knowles *et al.* 2006), migration studies (Blunt 2007), tourism studies (Hannam and Knox 2010), and communication and media studies (De Souza e Silva and Gordon 2011). By focusing on the corporeal travel of people and the physical movement of objects, as well as dimensions such as imaginative travel, virtual travel and communicative travel (Urry 2007), it has stimulated transformative research agendas that reconvene the disparate fields of social science in a cross-cutting and dynamic configuration. Mobilities research holds the potential (and the threat) to reconfigure the boundaries, methodologies and theoretical lens of sociology. In what follows I aim to delineate in broad strokes some of the key areas in which mobilities research has perhaps been misunderstood by sociologists, and also where it can contribute to a renewed sociology. The first section is concerned with historicity, (im)mobility and power, arguing that mobilities research is not simply concerned with global flows or contemporary traveling elites, as it is sometimes misunderstood to be. The second section turns to some theoretical issues concerning micro and macro scales, and the relation between phenomenological and non-representational approaches within mobilities research and wider macro-approaches to structuration, systems and socio-technical change. The conclusion re-frames what mobilities research can offer contemporary sociology.

Historicity, (im)mobility and power

Although many theorists of postmodernity, late modernity and globalization began to describe a sense of societal motion, flow and liquidity in the 1990s (e.g. Bauman 2000), it is

important to establish that the claim to a “new mobilities paradigm” is not simply an assertion of the novelty of mobility in the world today. Mobilities have long been a central aspect of both historical and contemporary existence, of urban and of non-urban locales, of Western and non-Western experience. Patterns of mobility are always shifting to support different modes of trade, interaction, urbanization and communication. While some (though certainly not all) groups of people *may* live more “mobile lives” today than in the past (Elliott and Urry 2010), geographical mobility and infrastructures of human, technological and informational mobility were as crucial to the existence of ancient imperial cities and seafaring empires of early modernity as they were to the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century industrializing cities of Europe and America, and to the global trading ports, long-distance trade and pilgrimage routes, and modern global megacities of today.

To take one specific area of historical sociological research, a mobilities perspective can raise new questions around the emergence of the public sphere and its role in civil society – one of the classic problems of Habermasian-influenced sociology. Notions of public and private are fundamental to sociological analysis, yet are often oddly lacking a spatial perspective on how the mobilities of people and information shape the formation of publics and counterpublics, or how infrastructures and sorting systems might guide access to and movement between private and public spaces. New forms of mobility, new technologies of communication and novel convergences between travel, mobile communication and the infrastructures that support them have arguably reconfigured public and private life such that today there are new modes of public-in-private and private-in-public that disrupt commonly held spatial models of these as two separate ‘spheres’ (Sheller and Urry 2003). Publics are constituted not simply as abstract moments of communication, nor in the assumed form within sociological research as “public opinion” to be measured by surveys, but are part of deeply embedded social and machinic complexes involving the infrastructures that allow for the mobilities and coming together of people, objects, and information. Increasingly integrated modes of transportation, personal communication, and electronic work and entertainment have significant implications for the constitution of mobile publics, such as new forms of “net-locality” (De Souza e Silva and Sutko 2010).

Second, although the speed, intensity, and technical channeling of various mobile flows may be greater than ever before (for some people, in some places – though certainly not all), mobilities research emphasizes the relation of such mobilities to associated immobilities or moorings, and their ongoing reconfiguration in the past as well as in the present. The increase in cross-border transactions and of “capabilities for enormous geographical dispersal and mobility” go hand in hand with “pronounced territorial concentrations of resources necessary for the management and servicing of that dispersal and mobility” (Sassen 2002: 2). Such infrastructures and concentrations of mobile capital are linked to what David Harvey described as “spatial fixes” and later elaborated as “spatio-temporal fixes” (Jessop 2006). By bringing together studies of migration, transportation, infrastructure, transnationalism, mobile communications, imaginative travel and tourism, new approaches to mobility are especially able to highlight the relation between local and global “power-geometries” (Massey 1993). This brings into view the political projects inherent in the power relations informing processes of globalization (and associated claims to globality, fluidity or opening) that depend on various kinds of structured practices of mobilities and immobilities.

Third, with an emphasis on the relations between mobilities and immobilities, scapes and moorings, movement and stillness (Hannam *et al.* 2006: 3), the frictions and turbulence of differential mobilities are at the heart of recent mobilities research (Cresswell 2010). Thus it would be a great mistake to think that it is only concerned with the “hyper-mobile” elite of

global capitalism. Differential capacities and potentials for mobility are analyzed via the concept of “motility,” defined as “the manner in which an individual or group appropriates the field of possibilities relative to movement and uses them” (Kaufmann and Montulet 2008: 45). A person may have a high degree of motility without actually moving (for example, a well-connected professional who works from home), or they may be amongst the “mobility pioneers” who live highly spatially distributed lives yet seek sameness everywhere (Kesselring and Vogl 2008); while another may be involved in much physical displacement, but have low motility in terms of capacities, competencies and choices, especially if that movement is involuntary (for example, someone caught in the grips of a human trafficker). Issues of uneven motility and of mobility rights, ethics and justice have become crucial to the field of critical mobilities research (Cresswell 2006; Bergmann and Sager 2008; Uteng and Cresswell 2008), with attention to subaltern mobilities (and immobilities) as well as recognition of the importance of uprooting, dwelling, homing and grounding (Ahmed *et al.* 2003; Sheller 2003, 2004).

Here one can also begin to conceptualize “mobility capital” (Kaufmann *et al.* 2004) as the uneven distribution of these capacities and competencies, in relation to the surrounding physical, social and political affordances for movement (with the legal structures regulating who or what can and cannot move being crucial). Elliott and Urry (2010: 10–11) similarly describe “network capital” as a combination of capacities to be mobile, including appropriate documents, money and qualifications; access to networks at-a-distance; physical capacities for movement; location-free information and contact points; access to communication devices and secure meeting places; access to vehicles and infrastructures; and time and other resources for coordination. Uneven mobility capital is crucial to processes of globalization, effectively being created by particular forms of demobilizations and remobilizations (in the process of ongoing spatial fixes, temporal fixes and spatio-temporal fixes). Mobilities research is therefore highly engaged with debates over globalization, cosmopolitanism, postcolonialism, and emerging forms (and histories) of urbanism, surveillance and global governance of various kinds of differentiated or uneven mobility, all of which should be central concerns of contemporary sociology.

Theorizing mobilities at different scales

Mobilities theory departs from classic social theory in part because it builds on a wider range of philosophical perspectives to more radically re-think the relation between bodies, movement and space. In doing so, it treats scale in a different way than most sociology, because it is not limited by a micro vs. macro imagination of agency and structure. Through a relational approach to ontology, mobilities research enters as it were “between” scales, exploring connections across scales, and envisions a distributed agency that is both human and non-human and that circulates amongst people, objects, and environments. While in one sense this may alienate it from the more humanistic approaches of sociology, it also offers great opportunities for challenging the boundaries of “social” processes and where we locate action and social change (Sheller and Urry 2006a).

First, it draws on phenomenology to reconsider embodied practices and the production of being-in-motion as a relational affordance between the senses, objects, and kinaesthetic accomplishments. There are active corporeal engagements of human bodies with the sensed world, suggesting many different kinds of affordances between varied bodies, technologies (cars, phones, the internet, satellites), practices of movement (such as walking, biking, riding, driving or flying) and events of movement (such as commuting, migration, congestion,

waiting, touring or pilgrimage) (Hannam *et al.* 2006). Merriman notes that writings on mobility have begun to trace “the more-than-representational, performative, expressive improvisations of bodies-in-movement-in-spaces” by describing “the production of complex entwined performativities, materialities, mobilities and affects of *both* human embodied subjects *and* the spaces/places/landscapes/environments which are inhabited, traversed, and perceived” (Merriman 2011: 99). Some recent work, for example, focuses on the micro-mobilities of the body in forms of dance or the bodily rhythms and motion involved in activities such as bicycling, rock climbing or walking (Fincham *et al.* 2010).

New methodologies are being developed to study these more ephemeral, embodied and affective dimensions of interlocking mobility and immobility, including attention not simply to fluidity or speed, but to slowness, stillness, waiting and pauses, which are all part of a wider sensuous geography of movement, affect and dwelling (Adey 2009; Bissell 2007, 2009; Bissell and Fuller 2009). Innovative mobile methods of video ethnography, mobile participant observation, and being “mobile with” others are said to offer important insights into the accomplishment of various mobilities, and the affective economies surrounding movement and stillness. For example, Spinney’s recent work on cycling emphasizes “the sensory, emotional, kinaesthetic and symbolic aspects of cycling” (Spinney 2011: 164); understanding “those fleeting, ephemeral, and often embodied and sensory aspects of movement,” he argues, is vital for understanding how and why we move. Through these affective and atmospheric non-representational geographies of a wide range of embodied practices, we see a growing interest in cultures of “alternative mobility” (Vannini 2009) such as walking, biking, boating, climbing, riding ferries, etc. (Vannini 2011). We also gain an appreciation of the temporal pulse of transfer points and places of in-between-ness in which the circulation of people and objects are slowed or stopped, as well as facilitated and accelerated (Sheller and Urry 2006a; Hannam *et al.* 2006; Urry 2007).

Yet it is also crucial that we recognize that the field of mobilities research goes beyond a micro-sociology of practice. As the preceding section on histories of (im)mobilities suggested, it also draws on Foucauldian genealogies and governmentalities to address the meanings of (im)mobility, discourses and visual representations of speed and slowness, and the production of normalized mobile subjects. Mobilities research in its broadest sense concerns not only physical movement, but also potential movement, blocked movement, immobilization, and forms of dwelling and place-making (Büscher and Urry 2009), all of which are deeply enmeshed in relations of power and counter-power, disciplinary power and capillary power, strategies of control and tactics of resistance. Classic historical and comparative sociological questions of state formation, social movements and resistance can also be re-thought in terms of the state strategies for management of mobility, borders and the visibility of subjects within regimes of mobility, versus hidden mobility as a tactical escape from state power and anarchistic evasion of state governance (Scott 2009) that is still crucial to informal economies, piracy, and practices of offshoring.

Influenced by social studies of science and technology, in particular actor-network theory, mobilities theorists also pay close attention to the more-than-human infrastructures, technical objects, prostheses and practices that assist (or disable) mobility (Latour 1987, 1993; Büscher *et al.* 2010). This suggests “that contemporary landscapes are shot through with technological elements which enroll people, space, and the elements connecting people and spaces, into socio-technical assemblages – especially transportational technologies, such as roads, rail, subways and airports, but also the informational technologies such as signs, schedules, surveillance systems, radio signals, and mobile telephony” (Sheller and Urry 2006a: 9). In this sense, the classical emphasis of sociology on agency and structure, and on the

individual and society, is displaced in favor of a more distributed, rhizomatic and post-humanist sense of what Deleuze called “agencement,” translated as “assemblage.” But the “agencement” of the world is not simply at the bodily level of personal interactions with spatial affordances, it is also very much concerned with larger scales of spatial production, urban form and infrastructural systems.

Having broken out of the straightjacket of society imagined as a national container with fixed boundaries at its borders, macro-level mobilities theory also draws on critical postcolonial theory and theories of political economy to re-think the performative politics of racial difference, secured borders and the governance of migration, sea-space and air-space. Crucial here are the in-between and liminal places at which movement is paused, slowed or stopped: borders, airports, toll roads, hotels, motels, detention centers, refugee camps, etc. (Mountz 2010). The study of mobilities at this scale too is also very much about waiting, stillness and non-movement. It is also very concerned with emotional geographies, and the ways in which affect circulates amongst that which moves and does not move, suffusing the speeds and stillnesses of (im)mobility with negative and positive polarities. Thus it offers a far more nuanced view of migration, border-crossing and various other kinds of travel, including tourism, and has been recognized in all of these sub-disciplines as an important contribution to how we might think about our field of study. Rather than assuming pre-constituted subjects who cross pre-existing borders, there is a move towards examining the co-constitution of mobile border-subjects or places-in-motion (Sheller and Urry 2004).

Through a kinaesthetic sense of bodily motion we apprehend time and space, orient ourselves toward the world, and create place through the frictions and rhythms of our movement. Movements have different rhythms, and those rhythms of movement flow through bodies, cities and landscapes, shaping their feel, sculpting their textures, and making places. Picking up on Henri Lefebvre’s (2004) concept of rhythmanalysis, geographer Tim Edensor argues that “rhythmanalysis elucidates how places possess no essence but are ceaselessly (re)constituted out of their connections . . . Places are thus continually (re)produced through the mobile flows which course through and around them, bringing together ephemeral, contingent and relatively stable arrangements of people, energy and matter” (Edensor 2011: 190). Accordingly, he argues, the “organised braiding of multiple mobile rhythms produces distinct forms of spatio-temporal order, maintained through the orchestration of traffic management systems, the conventions of travel practice, the affordances of transport forms and the characteristics of the space moved through” (ibid.: 190). And this certainly echoes the feel of the work of Simmel on the stimulus of urban life and the rhythms of urban metabolism, yet places it into a contemporary framework that is relevant to understanding global urbanism today.

Conclusion

By revisiting a diverse range of historical and contemporary sociological issues, mobilities research re-casts some of the classical concerns of social stratification theory and urban ecology, expanding the notion of social mobility to wide-ranging spatio-temporal contexts and multiple scales. The journal *Transfers*, for example, in its first issue claims interests that “will range from analyses of the past and present experiences of vehicle drivers, passengers, pedestrians, migrants, and refugees, to accounts of the arrival and transformation of mobility in different nations and locales, to investigations of the kinetic processes of global capital, technology, chemical and biological substances, images, narratives, sounds, and ideas” (Mom *et al.* 2011). It would be a significant contribution to sociology were mobilities

research recognized for its ability to bridge separate geographical and historical domains, to re-position the empirical content of sociology to be more inclusive, and to cross scales in analyzing the dynamics of structure and agency.

Mobilities research combines social and spatial theory in new ways, and in so doing bridges micro-interactional research on the phenomenology of embodiment, the cultural turn and hermeneutics, post-colonial and critical theory, macro-structural approaches to the state and political-economy, and elements of science and technology studies (STS) and new media studies. Büscher, Urry and Witchger argue that “Through investigations of movement, blocked movement, potential movement and immobility, dwelling and place-making, social scientists are showing how various kinds of ‘moves’ make social and material realities” (Büscher *et al.* 2010: 2). These moves, it must be noted, are not simply individual moves, but may be moves of infrastructure and spatio-temporal fixes, moves of meaning and representation, or moves of distributed power and evasive tactics. The mobilities turn, they continue, thus “open[s] up different ways of understanding the relationship between theory, observation and engagement. It engenders new kinds of researchable entities, a new or rediscovered realm of the empirical and new avenues for critique” (Büscher *et al.* 2010: 2).

The question is, where might this lead contemporary sociology? And are sociologists willing to make the moves that would be required to follow these new avenues and new forms of engagement with the empirical? Would such moves require the dissolution of sociology as we know it, and is the move towards what Urry called a “sociology beyond societies” too threatening to sociology as a discipline which has been built around an object called “society”? In some respects the field of mobilities research has already left sociology far behind, and constituted its own disciplinary matrix of highly productive research collaborations and conversations that span many other disciplines. If anything, it may be that this move, beyond sociology, is already part of the transition toward a new paradigm (implicit in the initial claims for the field), in which academic research will be more transformative, more innovative, and more mobile.

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