



THE MOBILE CONSTITUTION OF SOCIETY: RETHINKING THE MOBILITY- SOCIETY NEXUS

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Abstract

Concepts and metaphors referring to the idea of mobility have become pervasive in contemporary social theory. The aim of this article is to discuss what is implied by considering contemporary society as constituted by mobility – or rather *mobilities*¹, to use the lexicon of scholars in this field. To do so, we start by reviewing some of the most influential contemporary social theories, and provide an account of the ways in which they handle and operationalize the concept of mobility. In the second part, we critically reflect on the ‘new mobilities paradigm’ by seeking to identify its contributions to social theory, as well as its weaknesses and areas for development. We argue, first, that in order to be constructed as a full-fledged theory, mobility studies need to engage in an ontological discussion regarding the similarities and differences between various mobilities; second, that a more substantial conceptual reflection needs to be led with regard to the mutual constitution of mobility and society. We conclude by proposing an analytical framework intended to overcome these limitations, which we then illustrate through an empirical example regarding the mobility of institutions of higher education.

Keywords:

Mobility studies, global flows, social theory

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1. MOBILITY IN SOCIAL THEORY

The deep transformations associated with the current phase of globalization have prompted scholars to search for new conceptual, theoretical and methodological approaches to make sense of contemporary social (re)configurations. Of the critical accounts proposed by these works, subsumed here under the heading of contemporary social theory, most are founded on the idea that present times are epitomized by increasing mobility (Maurer, 2002). Under current conditions of globalization, 'mobility has become a most suitable trope for our time, an era accelerating at what seems to be ever faster rates of speed' (Tiessen, 2008: 112). Consequently, mobility provides the backdrop of many recent analytical approaches. The recently proclaimed 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007) constitutes the most eloquent instance of this phenomenon, but several influent approaches in contemporary social theory are built on more or less explicit assumptions about rising and diversifying types of mobility and their role in shaping society. In particular, there has been a spectacular inflation of metaphors aimed at describing society as people, things, relations and institutions 'in movement'. Terms such as 'fluidity', 'flows' and 'mobility' have become pervasive and part of a by now well established trope in contemporary social theory. To retrace the archaeology of this trope is beyond the scope of this paper.ⁱⁱ However, before we follow it through a series of theories, let us briefly ponder on the metaphors.

Metaphors can be considered as ways of thinking which work as an often unthematized background for scientific thought and categories (Blumenberg, 1996). The metaphors mobilized in philosophy and social theory are however not pure products of the mind. When thought-provoking and productive, they are distillations of the ethos of a particular historical period (as is perhaps best shown by the work of art historian Erwin Panofsky (1951, 1956)). Therefore, if mobility appears as a powerful metaphor that is today extending well beyond social theory, it is not because it corresponds to a buzzword in academia but because it adequately encapsulates a vast array of phenomena in different realms: daily life, economy, biology, philosophy, the social science etc.

Gilles Deleuze, who conceived of philosophy as a fabric of heuristically powerful concepts, arguably is with Félix Guattari the first contemporary radical thinker of fluidity and mobility. Their common work (1983, 1987) invites the social sciences to re-read the social as constituted by flows of energy and desire repressed by social structures and institutions. In his recent work, Peter Sloterdijk (2004) suggests considering the world as made of complex intersecting spheres, a sort of foam. Rejecting the concept of the network as key to understanding the contemporary worldⁱⁱⁱ, Sloterdijk sees in the foam an adequate image for describing the result of global interconnectedness: the addition of microspheres, a series of complexly related and communicating worlds (Morin, 2009). This image conveys the fragility, ephemeral character and separatedness of the structures organizing the mobile world in which we live.

Deleuze and Sloterdijk's philosophies both distillate the ethos of our times in terms of fluidity and movement. They are also resonant, as we will see below, with different forms of post-structuralist social theory engaged in the theorization of a mobile society. Authors in contemporary social theory do not necessarily place the concept of mobility at the heart of their reflection. However, most of them emphasize, in one way or another, the significance of

mobility-related issues such as the increase in material and digital flows, the deterritorialization of borders, and the un-bounding of identities, communities and places. The theories that we have chosen to briefly discuss in the next section are: anthropological theories of globalization, actor-network theory, the theory of cosmopolitanization, and assemblage theory.

For the sake of feasibility and clarity, our analysis deals with central texts written by emblematic figures of each theory: Appadurai and Hannerz for the first, Latour for the second, Beck for the third, and Ong and Collier for the fourth. Our purpose is not to summarize those theories, but to analyze how mobility is theorized in each case, with the help of three questions: how central is mobility? How does it constitute society (if it does so at all)? Which forms of mobility are taken into consideration?

1.1 Anthropological theories of globalization

The approaches discussed here are not theories of mobility. Yet their construction certainly hinges on the *fact of mobility*. This fact is represented through an imagery of 'fluidity' which is seen as a fitting metaphor to grasp the nature of our 'world in motion' (Inda and Rosaldo, 2002). Authors working within this perspective are calling upon us to discard our structuralist approach to 'social facts' as sets of regularities, norms and patterns, and conceive of social space as a fluid (Bauman 2000, 2005). Central to this imagery is the notion of 'flows', a term indicating 'a way of referring to things not staying in their places, to mobility and expansion of many kinds, to globalization along many dimensions' (Hannerz, 1997: 4). Mobility, therefore, constitutes a fundamental element of the theoretical accounts stemming from this approach.

The work of Arjun Appadurai (1990, 1996) counts as one of the most influential elaborations revolving around the 'flow' metaphor. He posits that global flows of people, images, technologies, capital, narratives and ideologies are permeating and shaping contemporary life. As a result, the contours of notions of culture, community and identity are shifting in complex and sometimes even contradictory ways. The notion of mobility – both physical and virtual – thus lies at the heart of Appadurai's analytical approach which conceives of mobility as crafting contemporary societies in fundamental ways. Appadurai considers that the various flows crisscrossing national boundaries are disrupting notions of cultural, national and community identity that were previously seemingly stable (Aas, 2007), as the imaginary resources that these global flows create allow people to construct a range of different cultural identities (Savage et al, 2005). In his words (1996: 33-4):

The landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. This is not to say that there are not relatively stable communities and networks... But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move.

Another emblematic treatment of the fluidity metaphor is that proposed by Ulf Hannerz. His approach to mobility takes shape through an analysis of human and cultural flows which form what he terms the 'global ecumene' (1992, 1996), an imagined 'global cultural flow chart' (1997:

5). He envisions the global ecumene as a space of interaction and creolization between once-separate and autonomous cultures that are now dialoguing and mingling through complex and multifaceted flows. Whereas he considers that these cultural flows are primarily flowing geographically from powerful centers to more vulnerable peripheries (Tsing, 2001), he recognizes that the global ecumene may nonetheless contribute to strengthening peripheral cultures as *creolization* 'creates a greater affinity between the cultures of the centre and the periphery, and as the latter increasingly uses the same organizational forms and the same technology as the centre' (1992: 265-6).

While neither author attempts to theorize the concept of mobility itself^{iv}, both examine with great force and detail the implications that the fact of mobility has for society. Human mobility is essential to their theoretical constructions, but their works make a distinctive contribution to an enlarged conception of mobility as they intertwine the mobility of people with that of knowledge, culture and ideas (Hannerz, 1990, 2004; Appadurai, 2006).^v We thus find in their writings a strong connection between human mobility and the generation and circulation of ideas. A fine illustration is Appadurai's focus (1990) on the relationship between the left-behind cultural worlds of those who have moved or are on the move, and their imaginatively shaped new ones. Appadurai's and Hannerz's theoretical endeavors converge towards a vision of mobility as 'liquidating' social life and social relations. In emphasizing the flowing nature of contemporary social relations, they are echoing in the social sciences the invitation of the 'philosophers of fluidity' mentioned previously. They give particular attention to the ways in which different manifestations of mobility shape the contemporary world. In so doing, they focus on dimensions that are usually overlooked by mobility scholars as will be argued in the section on the 'new mobilities paradigm'. However, despite the centrality of the fact of movement in their theoretical endeavors, mobility as such is taken as a given and remains under-theorized; for their focus is not on how entities move, under which circumstances, at what rhythm and with which purpose – important considerations for scholars working explicitly from a mobility perspective.

1.2 Actor-network theory

Latour rejects the agency-structure dichotomy by continuously looking at entities that are in-between, at connections, associations, actor-networks, instead of analyzing either actors or networks. As a result, his theory occupies a middle ground along our axis. Latour's Actor-Network Theory (ANT) has extended from being a theory of the relations between science and society (1987), to being a theory of law (2002b) and religion (2002a), to becoming conceived as a theory of almost everything (2005). In all cases, mobility is absolutely central. At the heart of the workings of science and the constitution of the social are a series of transformations, traces and inscriptions of phenomena. Science and society are made of movements, reinterpretations, displacements. ANT is therefore articulated around a series of concepts and principles evoking the movement of knowledge, people and things. Since the 1980's, the concept of *translation* (how knowledge about the world takes different verbal and non-verbal forms and thereby connects human and non-human entities) has been used to theorize these movements (Callon, 1986). The concept of *immutable mobile* – referring to knowledge devices, such as the map, which stabilize knowledge and allow it to circulate – is one of the most powerful examples of

procedures of translation in ANT. It shows the importance of both the material infrastructures of science and their capacity to circulate: a map of a piece of land drawn on paper by means of modern cartographic techniques is much more powerful socially and politically than a sketch of the same area drawn on the beach and erased by the tide (Latour, 1987). Such a conception of science and society has methodological consequences. The injunction to ‘follow scientists (or simply actors) around’ implies the use of mobile methods and encourages researchers to investigate how different social fields, often conceived as separate (e.g. science and politics), are related and woven together.

To better understand how mobility is theorized by ANT, let us look more closely at Latour’s most recent and comprehensive contribution to social theory: *Reassembling the Social* (2005). The central argument is that the social is not a constituted entity endowed with the power to cause and explain a series of external phenomena: religion, science, etc., but the result of a series of associations. It is not a specific domain of reality ‘but refers to movement, displacement, transformation, translation, enrolment’ (2005: 93). Methodologically, the idea of *network* is the basic tool enabling to follow the traces of those associations and translations. Describing net-making – the composition of the social – is for Latour what social science is about. In the same vein, the social cannot be divided into two distinct levels: the local and the global. What the social sciences have to do is to describe how sites endowed with a more or less global reach are connected. ‘Movements and displacements’, Latour argues, ‘are first, forms and sites come second’ (2005: 300).

In other words, mobility in ANT constitutes society in all its dimensions. Like in anthropological theories of globalization, mobility is nonetheless considered as socially shaping much more than socially shaped. The question of the differential capacity to translate, associate, create networks of different lengths is not really addressed by Latour. Mobility is therefore not clearly distinguished from movement (Cresswell, 2006). The *form* of mobility studied by ANT is quite specific as well. If some work in ANT really follows actors around and develops mobile methods (Hine, 2007), most studies remain rather static and look at how observations and knowledge become traces, inscriptions or artifacts, mostly in scientific milieus. What ANT has to offer in particular to a mobile theory of society is therefore a series of tools to analyze the mobility of knowledge and technologies.

1.3 Cosmopolitanization

Ulrich Beck’s theory of cosmopolitanization (2002, 2006) represents another influential contemporary social theory in which mobility plays a crucial role. It is however less a theory of mobility than a theorization of its consequences for politics and the methodologies of the social sciences. Like Latour’s recent version of an ‘association theory’, Beck’s cosmopolitanization theory is a generalization of more specialized previous work.

Beck became first known outside Germany for his analysis of risk society (Beck and Ritter, 1992; Beck 2000). One of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary risks (related to ecological disasters or technological threats such as Chernobyl) is their spatial scale: they concern much larger areas than former types of risks and disregard national borders. They are inherently mobile and transnational. In his more recent and profuse work on cosmopolitanism,

mobility *in general* is the prime cause of social transformation. Cosmopolitanization, the central process of our age according to Beck (2005), refers to the internal transformations of humans and societies resulting from the growing interconnectedness of the world (whereas globalization refers to external factors of change). Cosmopolitanism, the correlative worldview, refers to the 'taste for the absence of borders' (Beck, 2006: 82). These phenomena shape society anew: they transform the political sphere (leading to the emergence of post-national polities), social relations (which stretch increasingly across the globe), and cultural identities (liberated from the prison-house of national borders and increasingly governed by a *both/and* instead of an *either/or* logic). These transformations also create a series of tensions: between global financial capital and national labor forces; between the demand for transnational politics and the national or international architectures of political institutions; or between the global human rights regime and national moral norms. The consequences for the social sciences are as radical: having been forged within the framework of the nation states of the 19th and 20th centuries, they must move from methodological nationalism to methodological cosmopolitanism. This implies reforming their theories, conceptual apparatuses, methods and data (Beck, 2006; Beck and Sznaider, 2006). In other words, Beck argues that mobility reconfigures the world and that it is time for academics to reconfigure the means of its scientific interpretation.

The forms of mobility taken into consideration by the theory of cosmopolitanization are numerous: they range from the mobility of information through electronic networks to transmigrants, political ideals or natural hazards. Beck's research program (2006: 161-2) is however more restricted. It clearly focuses on the *consequences* of those mobilities according to a series of possible focalizations: *local* (e.g. looking at the struggles against poverty in Delhi), *national* (e.g. analyzing transnational communication in a specific country like China), *translocal* or *transnational* (e.g. multi-sited studies of transnational forms of lives of migrants) or *global* (e.g. how do cosmopolitan cultures develop differentially in different countries throughout the globe?).^{vi}

The theory of cosmopolitanization therefore focuses, like ANT and anthropological theories of globalization, on the constitutive power of mobility and much less on its social production. Unlike ANT, it has little to say on mobility itself both in terms of conceptual and methodological tools and research results. What it brings to a mobile theory of society is, in our opinion, an insistence on the necessity to refabricate our research tools.

1.4 Assemblage theory

In recent versions of assemblage theory, authors seek to transcend the imagery of liquidity by contending that 'we need to build on this inchoate image of flows to conceptualize the structures, barriers, and regulatory mechanisms within which things move' (Featherstone, 2006: 389). This is not a call to fall back into a structuralist view of society, but to identify how once-stable structures and borders are shifting and becoming more elusive, and how the new configurations obtained through these shifts are combining into particular 'assemblages'.

The notion of assemblage, initially popularized in the social sciences by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), is well-suited to the study of global mobility as it refers to different combinations of 'discrete flows of an essentially limitless range of phenomena such as people,

signs, chemicals, knowledge and institutions' (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000: 608). An assemblage theory in the social sciences, as proposed by de Landa (2006), supposes a flat ontology where, instead of different ontological categories – for instance, the division between animals, plants, and lifeless objects – we would have only one category containing 'nothing but differently scaled individual singularities' (2006: 28). While flows pre-exist any assemblage, they are spatially fixed by and in that assemblage, though only temporarily as 'the time-space in which an assemblage is imagined is inherently unstable and infused with movement and change' (Marcus and Saka, 2006: 102). This theoretical perspective permits to reconcile the heterogeneous, evanescent and unbounded features of the global era while not giving up on the long-established endeavor of social theory to account for the structured aspects of social life.

The most representative and fruitful operationalization of the approach, from a mobility perspective, is probably that proposed by contributors to Collier and Ong's edited book 'Global Assemblages' (2005). A global assemblage is a tool for the production of 'knowledge about global forms (...) that strives to replace space, culture, and society-bound categories that have dominated the social sciences throughout their history' (Collier, 2006: 400). Mobility is central to the formation of global assemblages as it presides over the global relations involved in such formation. For instance, through her analysis of the mobility of transplant organs, Scheper-Hughes (2005) assembles constellations of global relations generated by and through the travels of organs: the networks of organ brokers and dealers, sellers and buyers, donors and recipients, all working at the same time within and through various economic and ethical contexts, as well as through a range of technical and political regulations.

Interestingly, global assemblages combine mobility and fixity. On the one hand, as Collier explains, research into global assemblages is about investigating the 'abstractability, mobility and power of global forms' (2006: 400). On the other hand, assemblages are defined as 'territorialized global forms' (Collier and Ong, 2006: 4).^{vii} With its focus on the combination of different flows (of norms, people, objects, etc.) and its interest in the territorialization of global forms in specific sites, assemblage theory does not play mobilities against structures. Instead, it invites us to look at mobile entities as parts of the elements constituting the temporary order.

In this section, we have reviewed the ways in which mobility has been handled by a selection of influential authors in order to shed light on its significance and different declensions within contemporary social theory. We have pointed at the ways in which these authors help thinking about and analyzing the mobile constitution of society. At the same time, this review has revealed that it is the *fact* rather than the *concept* of mobility which is central to the major social theories examined in the preceding pages; mobility is never questioned or scrutinized as a concept worthy of analytical interest in its own right. It is telling that the notion of flows is used interchangeably with movement and mobility. To find real attempts at dissecting and conceptualizing mobility, one has to turn to the recently emerging field of mobility studies, most notably the body of works flagging the emergence of a 'new mobilities paradigm'. In the next section, we provide a critical overview of this new school of thought and discuss its most significant contributions to contemporary social theory as well as its areas for progress and development.

2. THE NEW MOBILITIES PARADIGM

We have seen in the previous section that whereas the *fact* of mobility is central to some of the most influential macro-theories of contemporary society, the *concept* of mobility has been rarely if ever taken as a particular object of focus and enquiry. Awareness of this lack of conceptualization underpins the emergence of a new and growing body of research pertaining to the 'new mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry, 2006).

The new mobilities paradigm departs from the realization that mobility has been under-theorized for most of the history of the social sciences. Scholars supportive of this approach observe that, in spite of a longstanding interest for 'how life moves' (Cresswell, 2006; Valier, 2003), the question of the conceptual and theoretical content of mobility has remained at the periphery of social science for much of the 20th century. While the question of mobility has not been entirely excluded from research, its scope and meaning have long been restricted to, and equated with, the movements of people and goods in migration and transportation studies. However, with the rapid rise and intensification of travel – whether in its physical (people, goods, materials), imaginative (knowledge, ideas, images), or virtual (money, information, practices, emails) manifestations – the fact of movement, its meanings and implications can no longer be trivialized (Urry, 2007; Watts and Urry, 2008; Cresswell and Merriman, 2008).

The aims of the new mobilities research agenda are threefold. First, the 'sedentarist' (Cresswell, 2002) and 'a-mobile' (Urry, 2007) premises on which social science has been traditionally hinging are to be replaced by new epistemological foundations. In a seminal introduction to a special issue on 'materialities and mobilities', Sheller and Urry (2006: 208) write that

(...) a 'mobility turn' is spreading into and transforming the social sciences, transcending the dichotomy between transport research and social research, putting social relations into travel and connecting different forms of transport with complex patterns of social experience conducted through communications at-a-distance. It seems that a new paradigm is being formed within the social sciences, the 'new mobilities' paradigm.

Second, the novelty of the approach does not only call for an epistemological twist but also requires a different ontological understanding of mobility. The baseline of a 'mobile sociology' is movement, not fixity. Mobility constitutes an ontological absolute for a 'sociology of the 21st century' (Urry, 2000). In addition, as Tiessen observes, 'mobilities come in all shapes and sizes' (2008: 112). The new mobilities paradigm thus instructs to move beyond narrow conceptions of human and material travel so as to consider a vast array of crisscrossing mobilities, thereby shedding light on the complex interconnections between different networks and spaces. Such 'new mobilities' include as varied phenomena as 'the mobilities of money laundering, the drug trade, sewage and waste, infections, urban crime, asylum seeking, arms trading, people smuggling, slave trading, and urban terrorism' (Sheller and Urry, 2006: 220).

Third, proponents of this research agenda believe that new epistemological objectives and ontological conceptualizations require appropriate research methods (Sheller and Urry, 2006; Watts and Urry, 2008). Watts and Urry consider that 'the analysis of mobilities as a wide-ranging category of connection, distance, and motion transforms social science and its research methods' (2008: 862). The direct observation of different types of movements and travel

situations thus requires that the researchers themselves participate in various patterns of movement and performances of travel. 'Mobile ethnography', also called 'itinerant ethnography', recognizes the deterritorialized character of mobile subjects (Schein, 2002). It may involve engaging with people's worldview by travelling with them, or closely following the itineraries of material, virtual and imaginative entities (Spitulnik, 2002; Molz, 2006).

Among the critiques leveled against the new mobilities paradigm, a major reservation rests with the idea that if everything is mobile, then mobility as a concept loses its analytical power (Adey, 2006). It would be misguided, though, to imagine that new mobilities scholars are unaware of this risk, or that they truly suggest that the pervasiveness of movement rules out all physical, material and institutional fixities. Rather, they seek to identify and analyze the contingent relations between various movements, and the ways in which these relations are channeled, facilitated or constrained by place-bound, immobile 'moorings' (Urry, 2007). Mobilities and moorings are thus engaged in a dialectical relationship in which they are dependent upon one another (Adey, 2006). Sheller & Urry (2006: 210) insist that

The new paradigm emphasizes how all mobilities entail specific often highly embedded and immobile infrastructures. (...) The complex character of such systems stems from the multiple fixities or moorings often on a substantial physical scale that enable the fluidities of liquid modernity. Thus 'mobile machines', mobile phones, cars, aircraft, trains, and computer connections, all presume overlapping and varied time space immobilities.

Whereas the new mobilities paradigm offers a rather loose framework for scholars seeking to engage with mobility research, there have been recent attempts at greater theorization. Tim Cresswell's work (2010) possibly represents the most sophisticated theoretical endeavor. Cresswell posits that mobility has three interconnected dimensions – movement, meaning and practice –, which combine into different 'constellations of mobility' and shape the 'politics of mobility'. First of all, mobilities are about *movement*. Movement is closely related to place, as mobility happens in places and through places. Movement is itself made of different dimensions which Cresswell identifies as purpose, velocity, rhythm, route, and spatial scale. Second, mobilities are meaningful, that is, they do not take place in a vacuum but in socially and culturally constructed systems of *meaning*. Mobilities mean different things to different people in different societal, cultural and historical contexts. For instance, the same journey between two specific locations acquires very different meanings in different contexts such as tourism and immigration. In other words, mobilities are a relational phenomenon. Third, mobilities are *practiced*. This means that the experience of movement may be extremely different depending on a number of factors. Under diverse circumstances, the practice of moving may range from being an exhilarating experience to being a boring routine or a life-threatening adventure. Mobilities are an experiential phenomenon.

French-speaking scholarship has also offered significant contributions to reinforce these emerging attempts at theorizing contemporary mobilities. The esteemed work of Alain Tarris, for instance, has highlighted the essential relationship between the spatial and temporal dimensions of mobility (1989, 2000). His notion of 'circulatory territories', most notably, exposes how new social spaces get constituted through a dynamics of periodic mobility between multiple moorings. Another, more recent endeavor is Dureau & Hily's edited volume 'The worlds of mobility' (2009). Bordering to some extent on the project advocated in the present paper, the

editors explain in their introduction that ‘to interrogate mobility is also to consider the social transformations it produces and the new forms of socialization it establishes’ (2009: 13). The authors underscore the merit of approaches – such as that of John Urry – which, in breaking from the traditional focus on vertical (social) mobility, enable to build a different conceptual arsenal for understanding the relationship between mobile practices, their motives, and their impact on social organization.

This is not to suggest that approaches associated with the vertical dimensions of mobility have lost their appeal in French academia. A number of authors have indeed emphasized the connection between social and spatial mobility by insisting on the unequal access to mobility as a source of persistent social discrimination and injustice (Ascher, 1997, 2005; Ascher and Godard, 1999). Building on the work of Swiss sociologists Michel Bassand (1980) and French geographer Jacques Lévy (2000), Kaufmann has thus crafted and operationalized the concept of ‘motility’ (Kaufmann, 2002; Flamm and Kaufmann, 2006), defined as ‘the way in which entities access and appropriate the capacity for socio-spatial mobility according to their circumstances’ (Kaufmann et al, 2004: 750).

Still, it must be noted that French scholarship appears to retain, with the exception of Kaufmann, a more cautious stance on the role that social science should assign to mobility than the one observed among proponents of the new mobilities paradigm. Bourdin summarizes this reluctance when writing that, whereas there is a need for a ‘radicalized’ study of mobility because this may be theoretically productive, ‘one should certainly not develop a ‘specialized’ sociology of mobilities’ (2005: 20).

We thus reckon that the new mobilities paradigm probably represents the most radical approach to the study of mobilities existing so far. However, for all the advances made, scholarly research in this emergent field is still at an incipient stage. Further improvements are needed, especially regarding the ways in which the society/mobility nexus is conceptualized and theorized. The following section suggests three areas where we believe that a more consistent reflection needs to be led.

3. AVENUES FOR MORE THEORY WITHIN MOBILITY THEORY

A fundamental claim of mobility theorists is that we should not separate different types of mobilities but instead study them simultaneously and dissect their interdependencies. The obvious skeptic reply raised by that claim is: But are mobilities really comparable? Is the fact of movement not too ubiquitous and vague to justify the creation of a new field of inquiry? In other words, mobility studies raise ontological questions: are the different mobile entities addressed by mobility theory ontologically equivalent? If so, what are the theoretical underpinnings of such equivalence? To these different questions, mobility theory offers few replies so far. We argue that answering these questions requires three different moves: the development of a real ontological discussion within mobility theory; a discussion of the distinctive features of different types of mobility; and a more dialectical understanding of mobility-society relations. To fully develop these points is beyond the scope of this paper but let us shortly identify a series of possible avenues for future reflection.

First, we think that, in order to become a full-fledged theory, mobility theory should engage in an ontological discussion and situate itself with regard to the present 'ontological turn' in social theory (Escobar, 2007). Escobar describes this turn as the exploration of 'flat alternatives' (2007: 106), that is, the dissolving of traditional social ontologies in terms of more or less organic wholes such as: the nation state, the market, autonomous 'Bourdieuian' social fields, territorial scales etc. These alternative ontologies are formulated in different ways by different contemporary social theories, such as ANT or assemblage theory. The most elaborate attempt is probably de Landa's proposed new philosophy of the social sciences (2006) mentioned in the previous section. On the basis of a flat ontology, he suggests that we can start analyzing the constitution of assemblages and identify their emergent properties without pre-ordering the social within traditional and often obsolete categorical boxes.^{viii} Situating mobility theory within such a reconstruction of the categories of the social sciences is necessary to explain why the mobilities of persons, goods, capital and information should be treated together in mobility theory.

However, to argue that different mobilities may be seen as ontologically equivalent in certain philosophies is not sufficient. It does not provide enough ground to respond to skeptics for whom seizing together migrations, capital flows and, say, a television program adds more confusion and incoherence than heuristic value. This takes us to our second point. What is needed if we want to understand the constitutive power of mobilities is to flesh out the distinctions between different mobilities, *even though* these differences are not seen as ontological within such a still-to-be-built mobility theory. For instance, distinguishing between different degrees of predictability – some patterns of movement may indeed follow a well-defined course at regular time intervals, whereas others may behave in unpredictable ways by suddenly changing the course or pace of their journey – or different degrees of speed – such as the speed of the mobility of information in comparison to that of people or goods – is important for the construction of a mobility theory. As we have seen in the previous section, Cresswell's criteria (2010) take us some way down that track, but they still have to be systematically applied to different forms of mobility.

Thirdly, and more fundamentally: how do mobility and society relate? Mobilities are of course internal and not external to society. They are constitutive elements of society, at least if we consider the latter as a complex set of associated entities constantly in the making. Now, mobility studies have been very effective in showing how mobilities, that integral part of society, are socially constituted, and how, for instance, differences in economic or social capital define the spatial mobility of persons. Mobility studies however very rarely discuss the co-construction of society and mobility and in particular how mobilities are socially *constitutive*. 'What precisely is it that mobility does to society?' remains, in other words, an unanswered question, and we argue that this results from the lack of theoretical grounding mentioned earlier. We do not suggest that mobility theory should be subsumed under another more encompassing social theory such as ANT, new institutional theory and the like. Rather, we think that mobility studies would benefit from engaging more thoroughly with the type of theories that we have discussed in the first part of this paper. Developing a theoretical conversation with assemblage theory, in particular, could help to see mobilities as one of the entities combining with a series of others (political institutions, networks, Bourdieusian capitals) to give emergent properties to specific

assemblages: a city, a building, an organization, etc. In this perspective, mobilities can be seen as a crucial mechanism in the creation of assemblages. They are the elements engendering those external connections between existing entities (people, cities, social groups), giving new capacities to those entities and creating new forms of assemblages (de Landa, 2006). For example, our own research has shown that the mobility of urban policies between the cities of Lyon and Ouagadougou has contributed to the emergence of a new translocal assemblage and has given, among other things, new capacities to the mayor of Ouagadougou on the one hand and to the Institut d'urbanisme de Lyon on the other (Söderström et al, 2011).

Rethinking the mobility-society nexus thus means, from our perspective, crafting more theoretical reflections along the three avenues which have been described in this section. In order to move forward along these lines, we propose in our conclusion an 'analytics of mobility'. We then try to operationalize it through a concrete example.

3.1 By way of conclusion: an analytics of mobility

The proposition put forward in this section rests on the recognition that the concomitant transmigration of people, objects, ideas, knowledge, practices and capital across multiple borders and spatial scales (local, national and international) are reshaping the relationship between social interactions and their regulation. We refer to this process of transformation as the 'mobile constitution of society'. The key question therefore asks how various forms and configurations of mobilities are influencing such transformations. What we propose is not a new 'Grand Social Theory'. It is rather meant as a working model for investigating one aspect of the dynamics of contemporary societies which is their mobile constitution. In other words, we see it as a helpful tool to try to grasp the common mechanisms through which mobile entities shape different aspects of society.

To investigate the mobile constitution of society, we need analytical categories that allow us to interrogate the relationship between mobility and society. We are outlining here a conceptual framework which addresses both components of the equation by examining (A) the specific aspects which are constitutive of various mobilities, and (B) the components of society potentially shaped by these mobilities. We refer to this framework as the 'analytics of mobility'.

(A) To examine the constitutive aspects of various types of mobilities, we largely build on Cresswell's and Kaufmann's formulations presented in the previous section. We see mobility as defined by two sets of factors. First, as already stated, the characteristic and most distinctive feature of mobility is movement. Movement is not an invariant but has changing properties. While different types of mobilities are all made of movement, all movements are not identical. The first question to be asked is of course 'what is moving'? Second, each movement may be distinguished and defined according to its route (where is this movement taking place?), velocity and rhythm (at what speed and frequency does this movement occur?) and spatial scale (at what scale is this movement happening?). Third, mobility is more than just movement – if it were to designate the same phenomenon, there would be no need for a different word. Mobility is *socially constructed movement*. It ensues that mobility as a social construct is endowed with particular purposes (what is the purpose of this movement?), meanings (what meaning does it

have?) experiences (how is it experienced?) and competences (to what types of movement does one have access?).

Each type of mobility under consideration therefore needs to be considered in light of these two sets of elements – mobility as movement defined by its route, velocity, rhythm and spatial scale, and mobility as social construct defined by its meanings, experiences and competences. We believe that dissecting these various facets of mobility shall allow for identifying and analyzing the extent and effects of different physical, symbolic and virtual mobilities; for exploring how material and immaterial networks spread within and across national borders; and for explaining the internal changes that state and society have to assume in order to regulate mobilities and their consequences.

(B) The added value of this analytical framework is the recognition that mobilities are not only socially shaped but also socially shaping. To identify the specific social changes engendered by these mobilities, we first need to distinguish between the various components of society.^{ix} At a first level of abstraction, society is composed of bodies, subjectivities, material forms (or materialities), and various combinations of relationships among and between them (that can for instance be seen as socio-technical networks). These combinations are however not constituted in a vacuum but forged by power relations. At a second level of abstraction, society can therefore be considered as an assemblage constituted by the above mentioned basic building blocks and a series of resources and constraints acting as 'rules of composition': economic resources (and their unequal distribution), social positions (and the hierarchies between them), institutionalized rules (such as legal regulations, moral norms and cultural traditions), and organizational structures (state authorities, industry lobbies, NGOs, and so forth).

Analyzing the mobile constitution of society within this framework means studying systematically constitutive relations between elements in (A) and (B). How, to give a rather classic example, do highly qualified immigrant ICT workers with specific career projects change social positions and institutionalized rules in a given place? The proposed analytics of mobility also opens up the analysis to questions related to other mobilities more rarely addressed in mobility studies such as the mobility of ideas and their capacity to change the material constitution of society. For instance, we may consider the mobility of a model of urban planning. Such mobility is shaped by a series of factors and actors (economic opportunities, transfer agents, exchanges of experience in planning conferences, etc.)^x and, at the same time, has the capacity to shape the places where the model gets imported by transforming urban landscapes (materialities), local planning policies (institutional rules) and power relations between local planning experts (social positions).

Finally, studying the mobile constitution of society requires a fruitful conversation with existing social theories. We saw in section one that different contemporary social theories offer different useful resources: anthropological theories of globalization show the importance of translocal connections and consequent creolizations; actor-network theory examines how procedures of translation move knowledge across space; the theory of cosmopolitanization investigates how concepts, methods and data should be rethought to escape methodological nationalism and embrace mobile phenomena; and global assemblage theory studies how mobile entities combine with other entities to produce temporary social order.

In the next section, we draw to a close by illustrating the ways in which the proposed analytics of mobility might concretely contribute to a better grasp of the mobility-society nexus.

3.2 An illustrative case study: the mobility of higher education institutions

Among the various avenues for research on different types of mobilities, one has particular resonance for the world of academia: the mobility of institutions of higher education.

The past decade has witnessed the advent of a new phenomenon in the field of international higher education. As stated in the title of a book recently published by the Institute of International Education, in recent years, the field of higher education has been 'on the move' (Bhandari and Laughlin, 2009). While the internationalization strategies of academic institutions had hitherto involved movements of students, scholars and knowledge across borders, numerous high-ranking universities are now taking further steps by transnationalizing entire parts of their institutional hardware through the establishment of 'branch campuses' in overseas locations (Knight, 2003; Naidoo, 2006).

The transnationalization of educational institutions is particularly interesting from our perspective. Given that education represents one of the most potent means of acting on societies, it appears inevitable that the mobility of institutions of higher education, as well as that of the educational systems travelling with them, shall have deep reciprocal implications for both sending and receiving societies. As Olds reckons, 'in venturing abroad, these universities are generating a series of impacts, both in destination territories, and within their own institutions and home bases' (2008: 7). Let us try to consider how an 'analytics of mobility' may account for these impacts.

First of all, the transnationalization of higher education entails a wide range of different and intersecting movements: the mobility of universities' organizational structures and hierarchies, of educational practices and regulations, of scientific knowledge, of academic staff, of exchange students travelling to and from home and branch campuses, and of commercial companies establishing new operations in the vicinity of branch campuses so as to benefit from knowledge externalities. Each of these patterns of movement may be analyzed through its specific routes, velocity, rhythm and spatial scales. In the case of the movement of educational institutions, it involves analyzing the specific modalities of each particular case: the networks of actors presiding over the off-shoring process and the negotiations between them (routes); the 'travelling' patterns of the academic institution and the organizational arrangements governing that process (velocity and rhythm); and the choice of the location(s) of countries of destination, as academic institutions may open branch campuses in one or many more or less distant regions of the world (spatial scales).

These movements may also be examined according to their particular purposes and meanings, the ways in which they are practiced and interpreted by those experiencing them, and the differential mobility competences that they sustain. For instance, an educational 'off-shoring' agreement may underlie an attempt to bridge cultural or political divergences between two countries, or it may express a university's need to find additional resources to sustain its research activities (purpose/meanings). At the same time, it may be experienced very differently by students benefitting from the opportunity to study at branch campuses and by academic staff

required to leave their home base for certain periods of time to teach at branch campuses (experiences). Finally, it may shed light on different mobility endowments, as illustrated by the case of Middle Eastern students who, since September 11, are denied visas to spend time at the US campus of their institution, whereas their American counterparts are allowed to spend extended periods at branch campuses in the Middle East.

Second, these mobilities may significantly impinge upon both home and host environments, not in mechanistic and unchallenged ways, but through a process of intense reshaping and renegotiation. We may consider the ways in which the mobility of institutions of higher education is constitutive of transnational networks of experts whereby scholars, students and decision-makers share and exchange knowledge, ideas and practices across borders. We may also analyze the constitution of new social positions and hierarchies among host citizenries through the creation of highly educated local elites, or the emergence of new educational systems and practices in home and host locations. Also, the travelling process itself contributes to reshaping mobile academic institutions: the institution which lands on foreign soil is never exactly the same as the one that initially embarked on the journey.

Of course, the ways in which the transnational delivery of higher education impinges on host countries is highly context-dependant (Verbik and Jokivirta, 2005). In spite of strict state supervision and patronage, however, there are plenty of ways in which the creation of transnational campuses influences and shapes host societies. For instance, through their educational mission as well as all the non-academic aspects of campus life, western institutions are seen as exerting 'soft power' by projecting foreign values, cultures and agendas onto local societies (Hartmann, 2008; Olds, 2009). At the same time, however, local actors and institutions resist and remodel these foreign influences in ways that render them more compatible to their own background. Tellingly, a survey regarding the risks associated with the transnationalization of higher education showed that the primary risk identified by Middle East respondents was a 'loss of cultural identity' (Knight, 2006).

If we agree that education is one of the most potent engines of social change (Halsey et al, 1997), we may then assume that the mutually-influencing dialogue between transnational universities and host societies does not stop at the gates of branch campuses, but is carried into the larger society by students and local university staff when they leave the campus' premises. An area that may be affected is, for instance, the employment market. In Gulf countries – which are major recipients of branch campuses, employment markets are known to be catering mostly to foreigners, as a result of inefficient national education systems. Whereas it is expected that the access of local populations to the high-quality education supplied by foreign-led branch campuses will help to reverse that situation, it must also be acknowledged that this new type of education is not available to everyone. Educational imbalances are therefore likely to arise, hence generating new social hierarchies.

This dialectical process of mutual influence and transformation has significant implications for the home bases of travelling universities. For instance, as branch campuses are often located within or close to technology parks and industrial clusters, travelling universities may forge linkages with pioneering companies and collaborate in state-of-the-art research and development. They may also increase their visibility in regions that are culturally-challenging for their home-based academic staff and students, thereby creating improved prospects for

conducting innovative scientific activities and creating new networks of research and expertise. On a less positive note, the mobility of academic institutions may also pose a threat to their academic freedom and ethical reputation when they travel to overseas locations where human rights and civic freedoms are weakly respected (Hansen, 1998; Sidhu, 2009). It may also be difficult to ensure that standards of academic quality at the branch campus are identical to the ones maintained at home (Knight, 2009). This may prove particularly difficult in countries where the sophistication of both college and pre-college education is low. It appears that, in such cases, reforms of host countries' national education systems are a fundamental precondition if foreign universities are to retain the academic excellence that made their reputation in the first place. As a result, host educational systems and regulations may be transformed by the mobility of academic institutions before such mobility even takes place.

These questions still constitute a largely uncharted territory. For such reason, it is worth to conclude by reiterating the two major arguments put forward in this paper. First, the study of any one type of mobility ought not to be done in isolation, but with a close examination of and dialogue with the work conducted on other forms of mobilities; second, mobility research will greatly benefit from an approach which does not treat mobilities as the products of social contingencies but also as being themselves actively producing and shaping those contingencies. We are taking up this agenda in our own ongoing research. We hope that other scholars will join and accompany us along the road.

NOTES

ⁱ The use of the plural emphasizes the idea that the study of mobility must reach beyond the focus on physical entities so as to encompass other types of mobility such as that of knowledge, information, practices, etc. 'Mobilities' are to be distinguished from 'movements' in that they are infused with meanings and power relations.

ⁱⁱ Mobility is an important dimension in the 'sensitive' theory of modernity developed by Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin (Füzessery and Simay, 2008), as it was for the Chicago School and the work of Pitrim Sorokin in the 1920s. For a detailed and useful discussion of the historical trajectory of the concept in the social sciences, see Kaufmann (2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ Unlike Latour's actor-network theory. See below.

^{iv} It is striking that they both rarely distinguish between fluidity and mobility, despite the early efforts made by the Chicago School to distinguish between routine movements having no particular effect on the individual (fluidity), and movements affecting the biography or social position of an individual (mobility). See Kaufmann (2009).

^v In particular in Hannerz's work on transnational connections (Hannerz, 1996), and Appadurai's well known 'scape theory' where he reflects on the convergence and disjuncture between different types of flows (Appadurai, 1990).

^{vi} It is interesting to note that, despite his call for a thorough methodological reform in the social sciences, Beck clings to a scalar division of scientific labor, while many in geography and science studies suggest that we abandon scale altogether (Marston et al, 2005; Latour, 2005).

^{vii} Such assemblages are what Sassen strives to grasp at a more general level in her ambitious book *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Sassen, 2006). While Sassen does not explicitly address questions of mobility, she shares with mobility scholars some issues of common interest such as the alteration and permeability of borders, the relationship between flows and places, and the role of the state in the new global paradigm.

^{viii} However, like Beck, de Landa maintains a very classical Russian doll conception of the organization of society, as if scales were its ultimate architecture.

^{ix} Society is not, we believe, an organic totality – therefore, if it were not too heavy, we should constantly talk of ‘the social’ instead of ‘society’. Our conception of society is instead an ‘assemblist’ one, as will be seen below.

^x For a proposed systematic analytical framework on the mobility of urban policies, see McCann (2010).

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