Mobility

By Gisela Welz
Translated By Courtney Johnson

Mobility is understood as overcoming geographic distances with movement. When national borders are crossed, one refers to transnational mobility. Some kinds of mobility are freely chosen, such as tourism or study abroad; others are reactions to force and hardship, such as forced migration and poverty-driven migration. The term 'mobility' suggests an occupation with new phenomena that differ from previous forms of migration, such as labor migration from southern Europe to Germany and other northern European countries which started in the 1950s. While the so-called guest worker migration was governed by bilateral accords between states and entailed mobility by workers from their societies of origin to the admitting society and back again, by contrast, today there are many-poled, discontinuous, and disseminated movements. This also means that migrants from the same country can differ significantly from one another in terms of their mobile careers and decisions about mobility. [1] The basic precondition for migration is an increasingly improved transportation infrastructure, particularly air travel as a "new global technology."[2] Additionally, low-threshold and inexpensive communications technologies like e-mail, Skype, and cell phones allow close contact with one's region of origin and family, so that people can be tele-present and take part in the daily life of several places—sometimes on two continents.

Social scientists speak of the emergence of boundary-transcending environments. In theory, mobility is often pluralized ("mobilities") so as to do justice to the diversity of forms of mobility. In practice, these forms do not delineate themselves strictly from one another. This goes in hand with a closer examination of foundational presuppositions that are thought to be spatially bound and clearly demarcated by the social formation "society." So, too, can members of a population living scattered across different continents ("diaspora") be conceived of as the social formation that resembles a society. The coining of the phrase "mobility turn" attests to the social sciences having adjusted their observation perspective.[3]

The direction and intensity of mobility practices was dynamised by the persistent and deepening social inequality between affluent societies on the one hand and emerging nations and poor regions on the other, as well as through unequal access to job markets, educational qualifications, and rights of residence and citizenship, which nation states or international communities of states like the European Union regulate and grant to individual groups while refusing them to others.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, mobility also begins to encompass populations in prosperous western societies, which research had long viewed as having a rather settled way of living. Economic restructuring and new biographical options lead to more and more people commuting daily and weekly within and

[1] Sabine Hess, *Globalisierte Hausarbeit. Au-pair als Migrationsstrategie von Frauen aus Osteuropa* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005).
[2] Jürgen Osterhammel, "Wann fing die Globalisierung an?", in *Globalisierung 2.0,* ed. Helmut Gold, Gundula Bavendamm and Benedikt Burkard, 18–26 (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 2007).
[3] Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," in *Environment and Planning* 38 (2006): 207–26.

© by the University of California, Berkeley. ISSN 1551-9627. http://german.berkeley.edu/transit/

beyond their residential areas, households, and families. The ethnological mobility researcher Johanna Rolshoven affirms that in most European countries in recent years, internal mobility (relocations within the country), professional mobility (daily commuting to work or weekly circulation), leisure mobility (especially tourism), and multilocality (the use of second homes and additional residences) increased along with this trend.[4] Communications media and mobility give rise to the impression that far-flung places are moving closer together while distances are becoming instantly tangible though travel-based mobility. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, adolescence and young adulthood give rise to special lifestyles and consumption practices which operate with expansive spatial experiences of untethered mobility. The travel practice of the *Backpacker* seems to live out the promise of "being able to develop the world completely into a space of presence."[5] For highly qualified professionals who are deployed to various countries for short intervals, mobility also becomes a central element of their self- and world-understanding as the beneficiaries of globalization. Package tourism, commuters, study abroad, shopping excursions, foreign military deployment, vacation homes, seasonal work, backpacking, and many other occupations that entail mobility—from flight attendants to holiday resort hosts—represent actors and practices that are interesting for mobility research today.

In migration research, the term 'mobility' is increasingly replacing the term 'migration.' Boat people in Lampedusa, Eastern European caregivers illegally entering Germany on tourist visas, the grandchildren of Sicilian guest workers who have German citizenship, and stateless Palestinians in Berlin-Neukölln are all conceptualized by researchers not just as migrants, but also as mobile actors. In contrast to the migration paradigm, the mobility paradigm holds national origin and ethnic affiliation less central than the questions of which opportunities for movement these people have and to which restrictions on mobility they are subject. This is not intended to trivialize the political powerlessness, unequal economic treatment, and social marginalization of migrants and refugees, but rather to disclose that it is nation states and supranational institutions that monitor the mobility of all social actors, handle them selectively, and process them into channels. This becomes particularly clear in studies of the European Union's border regime, which show that it not only controls the mobility of migrant workers, refugees, exchange students, and tourists but also that its governing technology generates these very categories of migrant workers, refugees, and tourists. Studies in cultural anthropology expose that these categories are often arbitrary in the sense of the word and primarily serve the interests of states that treat mobile social actors unequally and process them according to economic concerns.[6]

But scientific distinctions between individual forms of mobility—for instance between tourism and migration—can no longer be maintained if social actors develop new practices that are categorically irresolute and react to flexible economic options and legal parameters, such that, for example, a tourist visa is used for entry and then, if necessary, facilitates gainful employment. The fluid blending between tourist trips and second-residence migration is also typical, as is the relocation of migrants from northern to southern Europe as they look for retirement homes. At the same time,

---

[4] Johanna Rolshoven, "Mobile Culture Studies – Kulturwissenschaftliche Mobilitätsforschung als Beitrag zu einer bewegungsorientierten Ethnographie der Gegenwart," in *Kultur – Forschung. Zum Profil einer volkskundlichen Kulturwissenschaft*, ed. Sonja Windmüller, Beate Binder und Thomas Hengartner, 91–101 (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2009).

[5] Jana Binder, *Globality. Eine Ethnographie über Backpacker* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005), 219.

[6] Hess, *Globalisierte Hausarbeit*.

tourist destinations are attracting labor migration so that different types of mobility coalesce and overlap in areas such as the Alps or the Mediterranean region.[7] Research about mobile actors, too, is adapting to this new situation: researchers are themselves becoming mobile and travel with the people they are investigating.[8]

---

[7] Ramona Lenz, *Mobilitäten in Europa. Migration und Tourismus auf Kreta und Zypern im Kontext des europäischen Grenzregimes* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010).
[8] Binder, *Globality.*