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Intersecting Mobilities

Beyond the Autonomy of Movement and Power of Place

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Abstract

It is widely understood that we live in a world where people, goods, species, and things of all sorts are on the move, and that the politics around mobility and its regulation and meaning are critical to contemporary political and social life. Human migration has been globally intensive for well over a century; industrial economic production, consumption, and trade move goods around the world; transportation infrastructure moves all sorts of cargo around, human and nonhuman; regular and irregular ecological processes and changes are creating new patterns of nonhuman movement; variants of viruses race around the world; even geological elements are far from static. This special issue tackles the challenge of thinking about mobility, not only in its individual instances where it is treated in self-enclosed containers, and not only in its usual contrast to place, ground, sedentarism, and static forms of being; but rather, in the terms of the generative forces created when multiple mobilities come together and cross paths, for better and for ill—in short, intersecting mobilities.

Keywords: borders, mobility, animals, migration, refugees

Introduction

It is widely understood that we live in a world where people, goods, species, and things of all sorts are on the move, and that the politics around mobility and its regulation and meaning are critical to contemporary political and social life. Human migration has been globally intensive for well over a century; industrial economic production, consumption, and trade move goods around the world; transportation infrastructure moves all sorts of cargo around, human and nonhuman; regular and irregular ecological processes and changes are creating new patterns of nonhuman movement; variants of viruses race around the world; even geological elements are far from static. Forms of immobility, too, are central to political life, whether in the ways national communities are imagined to be grounded in place, or in state efforts to detain and hold people and things on the move at national borders. While mobility is arguably a feature of nearly every element of life on earth, much of our thinking about mobility remains tethered to concepts and practices of non-movement. This special issue tackles the challenge of thinking about mobility, not only in its individual instances where it is treated in self-enclosed containers, and not only in its usual contrast to place, ground, sedentarism, and static forms of being; but rather, in the terms of the generative forces created when multiple mobilities come together and cross paths, for better and for ill—in short, intersecting mobilities.

To introduce the articles in this special issue, we first consider two ways that mobility has been considered in extant literature—first as a kind of political autonomy in relation to migration, where mobility is understood both as a foundational aspect of being human and itself potentially generative of political

subjectivities; and second, in relation to a place-based politics and geography where immobility grounds political care for the environment and is a condition of both vibrant cultures and environmental justice. We suggest that although both have significant merits that we draw from, neither of these frames is ultimately compelling, and that part of the reason lies in an insufficient rendering of mobility as a political, ontological, and metaphorical concept. We then outline what some have called “the new mobilities paradigm” in addition to some of the ways that mobility literature has generated criticism and use that to show the ways that an approach that puts intersecting mobilities front and center offers different kinds of insights into political and social life, opening up a more imaginative and varied political landscape. Lastly, we suggest that intersecting mobilities require intersecting disciplinary approaches, and we introduce the multi-disciplinary contributions to this special issue.

Mobility as political autonomy

Much of the academic and popular literature on migration gets stuck in what Anne McNevin (2019) has called the discourses of progressive time and international space, taking sovereign nation-states for granted as the spatial basis of political life, with their linear imperatives of economic growth, and state security formed around a territorialized nation. In this perspective, migration is seen as a linear movement from one nation-state to another, in order to settle, to “integrate” or submit to dominant social norms, and finally, to gain citizenship. Liberal immigrant rights organizations fight for these rights, while protecting state sovereignty, often against migrant-phobic nationalist movements who presume too to be protecting both nation and sovereignty. The concept of mobility offers an alternative to this normative discourse, and a different set of grammars: often using the activist-inspired nomenclature “people-on-the move,” it takes into account that people do not travel in straight lines, but often travel from one place to another many times over, staying in one place for several months or years before moving on to the next place. People may stay in place because of family, community or because they have a job, or because they are put in a detention center; they may leave because of these same reasons, because they are in search of new possibilities, or because they are deported. People-on-the move often move in erratic or

circular ways, staying in a few regular places, before returning to their homes and then leaving again. There is no one formula for how people move or how long they stay—in this sense, mobility disrupts the scripted language of migration, while more accurately capturing how and why people move.

The language of mobility also opens the way to consider what “freedom of movement” means in a broader sense. To be sure, there was a romanticization of movement and mobility in the 1990s around globalization; people spoke of borderless worlds, but this was ultimately a naïve rendering that rationalized neoliberalism, opening borders for capital and privileged elites while closing them for many others. “Flows” were seen as good to maximize profit and minimize regulation. But since then, there have been two key arguments in the literature about mobility, and, in particular, about freedom of movement, both of which bear on our discussion here.

First, there is the literature on the autonomy of migration (AoM). This critical field of study comes largely from the European context, and was initiated in the late 1990s by activist-scholars who insisted on seeing migrants as a constituent and often transgressive political force in and of themselves, instead of always understanding their movements in relation to states and capital, or in relation to economic, political and social push and pull factors (Moulier-Boutang 1998; Mezzadra 2004; Papadapolous, Stephenson & Tsianos 2008; De Genova 2010;). Associated with autonomous Marxism, which claimed the primacy of workers’ struggles in shaping the changing logics and workings of capital, the AoM perspective starts with and centers migrants, rather than borders. Mobility is taken as an ontological fact of the human condition (De Genova 2018, see McNevin 2019, p.10), a defining feature of what it means to be human. Indeed, as De Genova and others have argued, “freedom of movement is an elemental and constitutive force”—one that can transform the socio-political world (De Genova, Garrelli & Tazzioli 2018). Movement itself is what forces the state to generate regulatory responses and what feeds political and social movements—the struggle for movement has its own autonomous logics.

The second and overlapping set of approaches that pushes mobility as an ontological condition, does so in the name of “no borders.” The work on no borders is largely activist inspired and engaged in by scholar-activists in the

name of transnational solidarity with migrants. Unlike open-borders approaches, which assume continued state sovereignty over borders but seek to reform it through a rights-based, liberal approach, no-borders work refuses state sovereignty. As Heller, Pezzani and Stierl (2019) argue in their comparison of the two, open-borders is future-oriented, and would require major policy changes; in contrast, no-borders approaches work with what is already happening on the ground, and the reality of freedom of movement now. It is practical in orientation, rather than utopic, but it is radical insofar as it challenges the current political and economic order from the ground (Anderson et al 2009). No borders approaches have often proposed the commons as an alternative political formation, something that is already being enacted by people on the move—whether a “mobile commons” (Papadopolous & Tsianos 2013) which refers to the shared knowledge, affective cooperation and mutual support between people-on-the-move when they are on the road or arrive somewhere—or a more expansive idea of the commons as a struggle against enclosures, the privatization of spaces of freedom and, perhaps most importantly, private property (Anderson et al 2009; Sheller 2018; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Dardot and Laval, 2019; Federici, 2019; Ticktin 2021).

Both of these approaches to mobility take the role of power seriously in shaping and constraining movement. They do not assume freedom of movement in a liberal sense—De Genova, Garelli & Tazzioli (2018) suggest for example that freedom of movement is always located in relation to violence and hierarchies of domination, as well as to governing regimes of mobility. Indeed, Tazzioli writes about the ways in which mobility itself is used as a technology to govern unruly migrant mobility—for instance, by keeping migrants on the move, forcing them to constantly reroute their journeys or take convoluted paths (Tazzioli 2020). Scholars discuss the ways in which freedom of movement stands in tension with labor and capital, and must include the right to immobility or, stated otherwise, the right to place. It is also thought about in relation to other hierarchies and distinctions, or what some call social boundaries: primarily gender, race and class.

However, an approach which centers people on the move can risk taking the concept of mobility itself for granted—how people move, against what, with what, and how mobility actually shapes subjectivity and being in the world,

remain open questions. What are the materialities that structure movement? To be sure, in “Viapolitics” (2015), William Walters brings an original approach to migration politics by way of infrastructures of mobility, including vehicles, roads and routes. But there are also other less obvious aspects that inform how people move, and how they come into being as subjects through movement: people change and move in relation to ideologies, pathogens, viruses, water, and other non-human things. This scholarship does not always leave room in the frame for people who are not considered mobile or migrants at all, but whose struggles nevertheless intersect with people on the move—for instance, in terms of expanded or abolitionist sanctuary (Paik 2020, McNevin 2019), #BLM or even indigenous struggles for sovereignty. Even though the autonomy of migration literature writes against understanding the migrant as an autonomous liberal subject, there is no acknowledgment of subjects as multiply constructed—as part of larger ecologies or shaped in and by encounters with other movements, people, or things.

Place and mobility

Place is often understood to be something that stands in contrast to mobility—the set of thick social meanings generated over time, attached to a physical location, and one that it takes time to make (Tuan 1974). It often implies a localized kind of space that is bounded and physically accessible, though it can also imply a bigger, more imagined geography of place, such as sovereign nation (Anderson 1983; Stilz 2019); homeland (Tuan 1974); or territory (Elden 2013). As such, place can be something that is seen as antithetical to frequent mobility, and with a negative connotation. Thus, as Lisa Maalki noted (1992), refugees, exiles, and migrants are often seen as lacking because of their geographical distance from homeland place. This ‘sedentary metaphysics’ (Cresswell 2006, p. 26) privileges a fixed, rooted conception of culture that also ends up buttressing a political imagination of the world as cut up by bounded political communities.

Yet these thick attachments to place are still understood as grounds for positive connections for care, community, and stable institutionalization of law, grounded in knowledge acquired over time. This thicker attachment to place, for example, is invoked as a basis for a strong politics of environmental care.

Though place involves a location, place is, as Peter Cannavo notes, first and foremost a practice, involving elements of both founding and preservation, allowing sense-making, identity-formation, and the embodied practices through which we connect to and care for the spaces we inhabit— or some ‘enclosing fabric’ (Cannavo 2007, p. 44). As a practice, place can thus also be ‘debased’ or fall out of use— detachment from physical surroundings, whether through hyper-mobility or shifting scales of attention, can lead to a crisis of place, rather than to care. Similarly, arguments by scholars about the ways we take care of the earth are often rooted in the connection of indigenous peoples to particular lands and places, in registers both secular and sacred (Lerma 2017; Winter 2021), and in defense of indigenous sovereignty (Simpson 2014). The politics of mounting a response to the negative effects of national and global flows of capital, resource-extraction, and exploited labor, then, might well depend on the counter-force of place and the richly developed web of connections that particular people have there, whether through mobilizing collective personhood in rights of nature (Youatt 2017; Tanasescu 2022), or in motivating direct and indirect struggles against resource extraction (Cadena 2010).

Yet mobility and place may not be so antithetical. For one, as Tuan (1974: 184) notes, often it is the intensity of an experience that generates a thick attachment to a place, as much as it is an extensive experience with it. Thus as an experience, an attachment to a place can come through a brief encounter from someone moving through, even if much of what a place means remains unavailable so quickly. Additionally, as Doreen Massey (2005) has argued, space should not be treated purely in objective Cartesian terms. Rather, place as a thicker kind of space is, and should always, be understood as involving more complex vectors, from near and afar, and through wormholes in bent global fabrics. Mobility, too, might allow transnational connections between places, ones sharing similar conditions. Most recently, Covid19 makes us rethink the politics of place even further—if place was already constituted from afar beforehand, it is now much clearer. In short, mobility and place are not necessarily opposed, but rather, might be better understood as mutually constitutive.

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All of this suggests that while mobility sometimes problematically tends to presume a kind universal space in which mobility takes place, so too does place sometimes think of mobility as antithetical, rather than constitutive, of its fabric of meaning. On one hand, an insistence on the deep qualities of landscapes, places, and sites are critical resources in standing against the homogenizing effects and thin visions of modern extractive industries, both in ecological and political terms. On the other hand, localist accounts of place misses the 'afarness' of place—all places—and our capacities to make place through mobile practices, and to generate grounded imaginaries by way of movement and distance. Place, then, following Massey, might be better conceived of as the intersection of mobilities, at different rhythms, scales, and intensities. All of this makes some commitments to place worth rethinking in terms of mobility, at different scales and in intersection.

Mobility and its critics

In light of these questions, there has been a turn to what some have called “a new mobilities paradigm” (Sheller & Urry 2006, Cresswell 2006). In this approach, movement is understood as a foundational condition of being, space, subjects, and power (Sheller 2018, p.9). Rather than starting with sedentarist, bounded entities like nation-states, this perspective starts from the assumption that everything is in movement, and every move is contingent upon other moves. For instance, instead of starting with capital as an object and then following how this object moves, the relational ontology of mobility studies understands capital as coming into being in movement and in relation to other things, such as bodies, natural resources, and information technologies. To be sure, mobility is understood in relation to “friction, viscosity, stoppages and power relations”—there is nothing simple or “free” about it, and it can often mean coercion. This approach was equally informed by new understandings of space, or the spatial turn, which see the production of space as interrelational and always under construction (Massey 1994; 2005)—that is, rather than acting as a container, space is itself a set of relations between entities (Urry 2000). In this sense, it worked to undermine the sedentarist theories we discussed above. The new mobilities paradigm covers all kinds of movement, from migrants to technologies, materials, information, money,

media, forms of taste, automobility and so on; and it proposes mobile social sciences and methods (Sheller & Urry 2006). More recently, Sheller proposed the idea of “mobility justice,” which identifies climate change, migration and urbanization as intersecting problems of uneven and unequal mobility (Sheller 2018). This is an incredibly useful, multi-scalar approach; while we build upon it, we also try to avoid the tendency for the concept of mobility to mean and encompass everything, vacating it of its analytical power.

For many, though, mobility ultimately remains useful in relation to migration, borders, and citizenship—as a way to reconceptualize this historical cluster of practices, or as a way to investigate it and its political worlds differently. While powerful, such approaches tend to inscribe a kind of what we could call ‘methodological migrationism’ (to transpose an over-used phrase from Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002) onto mobility. Mobility heralds a wide variety of practices (Cresswell 2016), many of which do not relate to this cluster around migration directly or at all. By contrast, then, for us in this special issue, the strategy is a fuller decoupling of mobility from migration, and an effort to think about it both in relation to thicker social and political practices of many kinds, and as a deep condition, parallel in some ways to space and time as ‘unavoidable social production’ (Cresswell 2016, p. 22).

So how does one move beyond a primary focus on migration, while still taking the movement of people seriously? Achille Mbembe (2018) offers an interesting alternative, from an African and postcolonial perspective: while he too believes that circulation is fundamental, he proposes we turn back to pre-colonial ideas of movement in space as an archive that can inform the present. He argues that the biggest challenge faced by colonial states in Africa was to stop people from moving around: to capture them, as it were and make them stay in place, in this new social order. Liberal regimes balance the tension between an ideal of freedom of movement, and movement as a threat to order, particularly by certain populations (Kotef 2015)—this is seen as “excess” movement. But in Africa, Mbembe suggests that mobility is and was key to any form of transformation: social, political, economic, and it was and still is the key to survival. He argues that mobility is about networks and crossroads—flows of people and flows of nature, because “you cannot think of people without thinking of nonhumans.” What matters, he suggests, is the distribution of

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movement between places, and the way movement produces space. This is a different kind of geometry, where flows intersect with other flows, and where lines, points and cardinal references are not primary. Rather than make ontological claims about the human condition, he demonstrates how freedom of movement has been historically important—against slavery and colonialism, forced migrations and containment. A decolonial politics, then, must enable a freedom of movement; but this unchained movement must be coupled with “the right of abode”—something he takes from the Ghanaian constitution. This is, as he says, a cornerstone for any reimagination of Africa as a borderless space—that is, it joins the freedom of self-determination with the aspiration to move freely—two positions that are often juxtaposed, as we have seen, rather than conjoined.

Intersecting mobilities

We find Mbembe’s approach to the intersecting flows of human and non-human movement crucial in understanding the world today, and we follow the idea of freedom of movement as a historical notion, one that has the idea of place embedded in it. What can we see in the interstices of different types and kinds of movement, in the intersections, encounters, pauses, or processes of multiple movements together? We are indebted to the theories of intersectionality proposed by Black feminists insofar as they have made us attentive to the way power works in relation to intersecting identities and experiences, never simply one (Crenshaw 1995). But building on these, intersections here are less a series of pre-formed subjects, objects, or events coming together or meeting, and more a space of contact, or a contact zone (Pratt 1991). These contact zones manifest new political possibilities or a process by which new political subjects are formed, as well as offering evidence of different modes of sustaining political inequalities and distributing power.

This intersecting space of encounter or contact is what interests us, and the special issue makes three interventions in relation to it. First, we propose that this contact zone is an important place for political imagination; it opens up space for creative possibility and forms of speculative theory and thinking. While all zones of contact or spaces of partial commensurability may open place for thinking or acting differently, we propose that intersecting mobilities

in particular generate new creative visions and possibilities, insofar as mobility always involves some form of change, and difference. In this sense, when framed or lived in intersection, the gaps become apparent—material, territorial, intellectual, or political. As Hattam’s contribution to this special issue suggests, new political imaginaries and possibilities are created in the slippages and misalignments between different types of mobility. Take for example the different mobilities of commodity parts for a car, crossing back and forth across the US-Mexico border in the process of production—attending to the multiple and intersecting mobilities of those parts troubles the definition of “domestic” politics or a domestic product; and ultimately, it undermines the fantasy of coherence about capitalism.

In Mah and Rivers’ piece, too, imaginative possibilities are opened, as the authors demonstrate the slippages between borders created for people in Southern Africa, and animals like the rhino or viruses like rinderpest, because border fences are not scaled for these others. They illustrate the seepage between intersecting mobilities—the excess, the run-off, the unimaginable—with watercolors, showing it as a different substance, with new texture, hue and depth. Watercolors—which we might think of as a method or epistemology of mobility insofar as the paint always escapes its confines—illustrate new political possibilities; watercolors evoke the idea of politics without clear boundaries, or absolutes.

Gilbert shows us the space of thinking otherwise, what he calls discovering—as opposed to the settler mindset of discovery—in the gap between two ways of walking: following the Cartesian grids of settler colonialism in the American West that attempt to direct and contain all movement, and his own embodied walking art practice which leaves room for chance. For him, to walk is to walk in relation to the land and the stars, to “dis-integrate” space; not in relation to an abstract, disembodied grid or a map. These two intersecting walking practices produce new ways of being in the world, more appropriate for grappling with climate change.

Finally, by taking an intersecting mobilities approach, Ticktin works to evoke imagination as the foundation of many types of politics, including border regimes, thereby denaturalizing ideas like “invasion.” By thinking through the

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intersections of the mobility of people, architectures, technologies, pathogens (Covid19) and non-humans, she attempts to open the way to an “alter politics” sustained by a different political imaginary about borders, based on xenophilia, rather than xenophobia.

The second intervention of the issue has to do with the idea that mobility is, on one hand, an indispensable concept given its ubiquity, but on the other, also an inadequate concept to rest the full weight of a normative argument or political analysis on by itself (a point also made persuasively in McNevin 2019). That is, mobility’s practical and conceptual power comes in the fact that it works only when it comes into contact with the specificities of rhythm, vibration, friction, time, or space, or more political concepts such as sovereignty, borders, migration, extinction, or settler-colonialism. Mobility, as we approach it, is a mid-level concept that necessarily works in alliance and relation, tension and interaction, bridging philosophical abstraction with empirical particularity. It seems therefore particularly well-suited to the current political and ecological moment, which demand precisely that kind of bridging.

As one example of this approach, Weitzel’s analysis takes on the intersection of mobility with time. Her exploration of the various temporal dynamics of mobility in the West Bank city of Hebron, or what she calls “temporal mobility regimes” offers a new and subtle understanding of the regime of power that governs political life and maintains Israeli domination, from checkpoints to the prohibition or regulation of bodily movements in prayer. In this case, intersecting mobilities are necessarily also about intersecting temporalities; together these produce political life in the West Bank.

Youatt’s piece similarly also asks us to think about mobility in relation to different temporal registers, in relation to the human and nonhuman life forms being driven to move to new habitats by anthropogenic climate change. It suggests that climate change is something we might better understand by thinking about the intersecting mobilities of geological, natural, and living elements, which occur at very different time scales, yet converge in recurring ways in immediate moments. The piece considers deep time of geological movements; the slow yet also persistently immediate mobility of both glacial formation and melt, and recurrent patterns of wildfire; and the ways that human

and nonhuman life are now on the move. The intersections of the mobile earth, increasingly, are the ground for ethics and politics, and not just environmental issues.

Subramaniam's piece on the footprint engages mobility in relation to scale; indeed, her exploration of mobility enables us to perceive many scales at once: individuals, political communities, ancestors, and species. By tracing footprints in their physical, metaphoric, and symbolic sense, she brings these different scales of life and being into the same frame, to show us how a particular kind of individual footprint can lead to a particular kind of carbon footprint. To understand carbon footprints, then, we cannot ignore practices of mobility and immobility—or the heaviness with which one moves in the world.

For Hunold and Britton, the intersecting concepts are culture and ecology. They bring together different forms of non-human mobility—wild horses and climate change in the American West. But they show that the mobility of wild horses is alternately framed through the lens of culture or ecology, and the intersection of these differently framed mobility regimes is what produces the contentious politics in response to climate change. Stated differently, we cannot address the politics of climate change without also understanding how the mobility of certain non-humans is formulated: as invasive or native; culturally significant or not.

Finally, the third intervention of this issue—across all the pieces and within them as well—is to suggest that a study of mobility requires an interdisciplinary set of practices and approaches. The pieces in this issue come from different disciplinary spaces and use interdisciplinary approaches, and a final word is in order about this heterogeneity. While bringing together approaches from different disciplinary starting points can have drawbacks, in not sharing common conventions of method, research fields, or writing style, the pieces gathered here do show some of the synergistic possibilities of such an approach. For example, following the mobility of things (Hattam), human and nonhuman creatures (Mah/Rivers), and people (Weitzel) across national borders all reveal the power but also the complexity of borders as they engage movement, in security, economy, and ecology.

Intersecting mobilities might also be taken as a metaphorical suggestion for making explicit a kind of reading practice that many readers may already undertake, if we think about the ideas from one piece moving from one piece into another (whether with or against the pieces themselves). Footprint in its multimodality (Subramaniam) shows up also in the hoofprints of the horses and of carbon-driven climate; political imaginaries of mobility (Ticktin) makes its way into deep planetary time (Youatt). This is one element of a mobile method or reading practice—to read across, non-linearly, in parallel.

Last, examining intersecting mobilities, arguably, benefits from such an interdisciplinary treatment, given that the sorts of mobility under examination are often themselves heterogeneous in nature—not confined to political, or aesthetic, or economic, or ecological domains. This collection starts, and continues the work, of multidisciplinary approaches to particular topics (see e.g., Choy et al 2009). The contributions here all take on these issues in different forms, offering us analytic tools like transposition, transection and alterpolitics, and methods like photography, watercolors, and soundscapes, to draw attention to an underexamined, yet critical aspect of political life.

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