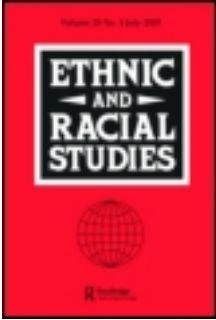


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Debate Article

The mobility turn: a new paradigm for the social sciences?

Thomas Faist

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Abstract

A new paradigmatic turn has reached migration studies, the mobility turn. Following on from many turns in the recent past, such as the linguistic turn, the cultural turn and the spatial turn, the mobility turn seems to be the newest effort in diagnostic descriptions of modern society. Like other turns, the mobility turn generalizes one aspect of contemporary society to the detriment of other features. While such a turn may usefully highlight various forms of spatial mobility, it cannot be fruitfully employed unless the scholars working with this paradigm critically reflect underlying political assumptions about the nexus between spatial and social mobility. Moreover, any analysis of spatial and social mobilities needs to go beyond descriptions and start accounting for the mechanisms underlying the production of social inequalities.

Keywords: mobility; migration; welfare state; transnationality; social inequality; sedentarism.

Introduction

Taking a broad view, the concept of mobility as such is certainly not new in the social sciences. In sociology, one of the main elements of research on social inequalities has been social mobility – vertical social mobility, connoting the movement from one class or strata of society to another, and horizontal mobility, referring to, for example, the movement from one occupational position to another roughly equal one in the social stratification system. In connection with social mobility, spatial mobility – not only but also across borders – has been

seen as a way to achieve upward mobility, or at least to deal with social risks, as in the livelihood approach or the new economics of labour migration (NELM). Other options include redistribution of resources through state intervention (welfare state) or direct collective action, for example via unions and social movements. The following analysis looks at the issue of mobility from the point of view of social inequalities, and takes the specific vantage point of how movement across the borders of national states comes to be defined as mobility. This is to answer the broader question of whether and how mobility constitutes a new paradigm in and for the social sciences.

What characterizes a conventional approach to social mobility is its assumption that changing social positions across hierarchies is a characteristic of modern societies. Traditional societies such as feudal societies, by contrast, are held to be quite static. In these societies, physical movement is also held to occur at very low rates, a claim that has been proved factually incorrect by systematic historical research (Hoerder 2002). We also find this juxtaposition of traditional vs modern with respect to spatial and social mobility in disciplines adjacent to sociology, such as demography and geography. There are, for example, spatio-temporal approaches, as in the model of the mobility transition (Zelinsky 1971). It holds that spatial mobility is low or basically non-existent in so-called traditional societies but increases with the 'vital transition', that is the demographic transition from an agricultural to an industrial society and economic growth more generally. The model distinguishes various stages with distinct characteristics in the relationship between spatial and social mobility. It is essentially a stage model that juxtaposes traditional and modern society and ascribes high degrees of spatial mobility to modern societies only. In sum, the concern with mobility in disciplines such as geography and sociology has a long history.

The concern with mobility is not new; what is new is what has been called the 'mobility turn', a 'mobilities' perspective (Urry 2000) or it could be termed 'the mobility paradigm'. The trend towards a reconsideration of spatial mobility, its patterns and manifestations, has been visible for a while. Two literatures reflect this change – in migration studies it is the transnational approach and, more generally, in sociology it is the concept of the 'network society'. A transnational approach to migration not only deals with the causes and consequences of migration, focusing on settled migrants (in immigration countries) but also considers short-term movers and circulation generally. Such concerns tie in with policy discussions, for example the call for 'circular mobility', which was issued by the Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM 2005). Circulation seems to be one of the synonyms for mobility, as in – to paraphrase Nathan Glazer in his rendition of multiculturalism – 'we are all diasporists now' (cf. Glazer 1997). One of

the conceptual underpinnings of the transnational approach in migration studies has been a concern with social space. Space is considered as socially constituted and may involve asymmetries and power, as reflected in social fields. The transnational literature has coined terms such as 'transnational social spaces' and 'transnational social fields', which – though with distinct concerns – are largely complementary. In the literature on transnational social spaces the network concept has become important in order to capture flows across boundaries such as administrative borders and to capture structurally the formations that criss-cross national state borders.

The concern with networks has moved one step beyond empirical analysis to connote the characteristic of modern society more generally in what has been called 'network society' (Castells 1996). It is one of the efforts to define contemporary sociality by one concept, akin to 'risk society' (Beck 1999) or 'knowledge society' (cf. Stehr 1994). Certainly, the concept of network society has an elective affinity to mobility, and at that, not only mobility of persons but of capital, goods, information and so on. This move has been quite in tune with developments in other disciplines like economics, which identified other principles of organizations beyond hierarchy (state) and markets and found utility in the network concept. The concept of network society, however, hypostasizes and exaggerates one, albeit important trend in modern sociality, and declares it to be the decisive one.

In line with such network society thinking, a spate of recent scholarship in globalization studies has made far-reaching claims regarding the importance of cross-border interactions for social positioning and social inequalities. In the words of Ulrich Beck (2008, p. 21, my translation), 'the most important factor determining position in the hierarchies of inequality of the global age . . . is opportunities for cross-border interaction and mobility.' In many cases, the global is even juxtaposed with the national and/or the local – and often, the latter two are used interchangeably. The concept of 'local' then denotes an unfavourable position in a system of inequalities in that 'local in a globalized world is a sign of social deprivation and degradation' (Bauman 1998, pp. 2–3). The global/local binary is thus used by these authors to attribute life chances and social positions on different scales, connected to the claim that this is a relatively new development brought about in the course of globalization over the past few decades.

How far the claims put forward by Beck, Bauman and Sklair actually reach in accounting for issues such as cross-border inequalities, is a broad question that cannot be addressed here fully.¹ Nonetheless, their conceptual validity can be checked. What is asserted by these authors is that the mobility turn has far-reaching implications for social mobility and social inequalities. The implication is that spatial mobility, and by extension, transnationality, are important

preconditions for successful navigation of social life, whereas immobility connotes stasis, decline and disadvantage. In this way, these social scientific considerations may reflect semantic or discursive shifts in thinking about mobility and social inequalities. They have become part of the public debate. This state of affairs calls for a closer analysis of how the term ‘mobility’ is actually used in these debates. This focus on debates (or discourses, more broadly) is one piece of the puzzle in unearthing the mechanisms underlying the (re)production of inequalities involved in cross-border mobilities. Needless to say, another piece of the puzzle consists of understanding the social mechanisms outside public or academic debates, that is going beyond (cheap) talk and looking at action. Instead of affirmatively following a mobility turn – akin to the mind-boggling number of turns proclaimed in recent years – the ‘linguistic turn’, the ‘cultural turn’, the ‘spatial turn’ – it is more fruitful to analyse how the term ‘mobility’ is used and what kind of boundary work it is actually doing. In a Wittgensteinian fashion the goal here is not to define mobility, for example as opposed to migration, but to explore its actual usage in a concrete example. This will be undertaken in two steps. In the following, I will first place the issue of mobility in a historical structural context, namely the development of the social question of the nineteenth century to the welfare-competition state of the twenty-first century. Second, I look at how such movement across state borders is normatively evaluated in public debates and public policy. I will explore one example of how in the welfare-competition state the movement of persons is dichotomized in public debate into mobility and migration, with mobility connoting euphemistic expectations of gain for individuals and states, and migration calling for social integration, control and the maintenance of national identity.

From the social question to the welfare-competition state

Movement of people across borders is usually considered – along with climate change or development – as an issue signifying the interdependence of the contemporary world. It connects vastly unequal parts of the world, unequal with respect to political power, socio-economic resources and cultural hegemony. Movement signifies action instead of mere talk. Movement across borders is a crucial mode for addressing inequalities. To give an example, open borders, if we had them, would contribute more to income equalization around the globe than free trade (Rodrik 1997). Even if this claim were exaggerated, movers across borders practise an understanding of equality that is now the benchmark by which social inequalities are perceived in both public debates and many academic analyses across the globe – namely the understanding of equality as equality of opportunity. In the EU those citizens

who live and work in other member states are hailed to contribute to ‘Europeanization from below’ (cf. Recchi and Triandafyllidou 2010).

Against this background it is instructive to compare the so-called social question of the nineteenth century with contemporary social inequalities and what I have called the transnational social question (Faist 2009). The old social question eventually came to mean contention and mobilization mainly around the dichotomy of class – proletariat vs bourgeoisie. Significantly, the social question as it arose in the nineteenth century involved a perception of ‘dangerous classes’ (i.e. the working class), among them also ‘vagabonds’. According to Abram de Swaan (1988), vagabonds constituted a formidable threat to the ruling elites, generating the incentive to constitute welfare state arrangements, as, for example, in the classical Bismarckian solution. Do elites nowadays feel threatened again, this time by transnational vagabonds, namely international movers? Today we have a constellation of factors that differs from the nineteenth century in at least three respects. First, national welfare states have already been established in Europe, North America and Australia, albeit in various incarnations, which have been labelled liberal, social-democratic, conservative or wage-earner. Effective migration control is part of welfare states. Movement of people across borders was not reined in as much in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as it was later. The protection of these welfare states is one of the main rationalizations for immigration control and restrictions – for example, the regulation of labour markets (Freeman 1986). Second, although there is nowadays no focused mobilization around class, as there was in nineteenth-century Europe, there are multiple and manifest heterogeneities around which the perception of global social inequalities and mobilization crystallizes on a cross-border scale, such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion and so on. Some of these heterogeneities have flourished also as a result of cross-border migration. Third, the welfare state must now also be seen in close connection with national economic competitiveness. Indeed, the ‘embedded liberalism’ of the post-Second World War era (Ruggie 1993) can be seen as an instrument to ensure competitiveness, incorporating the working classes in a welfare state compromise. In its current manifestation, the welfare state needs to be connected to the ‘competition state’ (Cerny 1997) and the push for enhanced flexibility and spatial mobility of workers. Key terms in public debates are flexibility, re-regulation and constituting markets. At the surface it seems that sedentarism, at least pertaining to movement across state borders, is a hallmark of the old welfare state engaged in migration control and that positively connoted mobility (nomadism) characterizes the new welfare-competition state.

The reproduction of (discursive) social inequalities

Viewed against the background of the transnational social question, we can ask how the movement of people across state borders is normatively evaluated in current public debates and public policies – and how the consequences may thus contribute to the (re)production of cross-border social inequalities. Here, I briefly refer to the social mechanism of hierarchization, which juxtaposes two categories of cross-border people, namely, on the one hand, those often called labour migrants, including those with regular and irregular legal status, and, on the other hand, the so-called highly skilled, which includes both those coming from abroad and citizens – professionals and so on. – who venture abroad. The discursive contrasts between labour migrants and the highly skilled are visible and evident in public debates as well as in academic research, at least in Germany, over the past two decades (Faist and Ulbricht forthcoming). In a way, category one – labour migrants – is ‘wanted but not welcome’ (Zolberg 1987), whereas category two – highly skilled – is ‘wanted and welcome’. It appears that labour migrants are rather negatively connoted whereas more positive connotations are connected to those considered mobile.

Labour migrants are understood as immigrants, whereas the highly skilled often are not. This means that labour migrants are always connected to social integration, and the dangers of dis-integration or non-integration are the topic of constant public debate, as evidenced in conflicts over naturalization or the demands placed upon migrants in the form of civics and language requirements. While, in this view, the maintenance of the transnational ties that attach them to their ‘old homes’ may allow labour migrants to allocate some resources through their networks and exchanges, help to confront daily needs, and provide economic niches and jobs at the place of immigration, their transnationality will eventually lead into a social mobility trap. For this group, transnationality is likely to contribute further to a marginalized status in the immigration country (Esser 2003; see also Wiley 1967). Thus, for these migrants, cross-border contacts – their transnationality – is considered to be bad because it hinders successful social integration.

By contrast, with respect to the highly skilled mobiles, spatial movement is considered economically efficient and thus desirable. Allegedly, no issues of integration arise. It is as if a win-win-win situation applied: all concerned profit, for example countries of origin, destination and the highly skilled. In this perspective, national economic competitiveness in global markets leads to a ‘global hunt for talent’ (Kapur and McHale 2005). Functional necessities are often mentioned, such as the need of the knowledge society for ‘brains’; one has only to mention the recent spate of studies with respect to the mobility of international students and the highly skilled (see e.g.

Mahroum 2012). There is also a great deal of public policy concern suggesting that mobility is the key to improved living standards in the countries of origin. A case in point is the debate on migration and development since the early 2000s, instigated by the World Bank and taken up by other international organizations, nation-state governments, the European Commission and various civil society organizations (Glick Schiller and Faist 2009). In a nutshell, the perception is that highly educated and professionally successful people move across borders easily and possess the relevant competencies for cross-border communication and exchange. Their transnational education and career paths secure them a social position at the upper end of the social ladder.

The discursive juxtaposition of category one vs category two in itself is an outcome of upholding and reproducing social inequalities on a national and global scale, in this case the social mechanism of hierarchization of migrants and highly skilled mobiles. First, in public debates it seems as if mobility is a phenomenon of the market, which is regulated by Adam Smith's 'invisible hand', that is, social order is emerging spontaneously out of aggregated individually rational acts. However, it appears that international migration needs to be controlled tightly by national states, mainly because the politics of migration control has not been globalized to the same extent as markets. Yet such a view overlooks the well-known fact that it is states, first and foremost, that are implicated in the constitution of what we call markets: states authoritatively constitute the rules that regulate markets (see Polanyi 1957 [1944]). Second, mobility supposedly reflects the necessities of global economic competition and suggests how spatial and social mobility act in tandem to the best of all involved, whereas migration is connoted with problematic outcomes with respect to the social integration of immigrants into national policies and national welfare states. In all of this it is important to remember that movement across international borders is a specific case of boundary. There are also boundaries built around, among others, around markers of heterogeneity such as gender, age, religion.

Conclusion: mobility as a new norm?

A reflection on the mobility turn offers the opportunity to bring in issues of transnational social inequalities. One of the tasks of research in (political) sociology is, first, to look at the social mechanisms by which movement is legitimated or de-legitimated. In addition to the mechanism of hierarchization, which has been mentioned briefly here, there are others, such as exploitation, social closure or opportunity hoarding (see Diewald and Faist 2011). Second, future research will

have to look at other binaries beyond labour migrants vs highly skilled mobiles, such as the distinction between mobility and immobility. It looks as if one positively loaded pole, sedentarism, is increasingly being replaced by its opposite, nomadism. This shift towards a positive evaluation of movement is deeply problematic because it usually does not reflect underlying trends that aim to build a flexible, docile and politically abstinent global workforce – processes sometimes discussed under the label ‘neoliberalism’. Also, it does not engage in questions of how locally based political equality and liberty, that is democracy, is compatible with high degrees of spatial mobility.

The analysis of the juxtaposition of labour migration vs mobility raises concerns with respect to the legitimation of social inequalities, which become so visible in the movement of people across borders. The question of the legitimacy of social inequalities is inextricably linked to standards of equality that can be found in proclamations of social norms with a global reach – equality of opportunity in particular. The way in which the movement of people across borders is conceptualized – for example, as migration juxtaposed to mobility – is one of the crucial strategic research sites for understanding today’s transnational social question. It is not only the categorization of people along nationality/citizenship and thus the accident of birth-place, but also their distinctions with respect to economic utility and social adaptation that make a difference to the life chances of many individuals. Nonetheless, one of the most important meta-mechanisms ensuring the social closure of rich vs poor around the globe is legal citizenship, usually called nationality. The accident of birth into a particular country and the position of that country in the global inequality scale decide life chances to a great extent (Shachar 2009).

Overall, to the extent that social scientists reinforce this discursive divide and hierarchy in the analytical distinctions made and the questions asked, they are part of the reproductive cycle of reinforcing the semantics of social inequalities across borders. This is why social scientists need to engage, to a greater extent, in self-reflection on mobility and immobility.

For future consideration, the question arises whether mobility is a new norm, that is, whether nomadism is replacing sedentarism as one of the dominant principles of social order. Is mobility really a human universal, as anthropologists tell us? And from a sociological point of view, is it true that spatial mobility is a marker of success in navigating the global world? Is immobility then a hallmark of disadvantage and exclusion? What is this new norm normalizing? In the end, it is people who decide whether mobility is simply an outflow of a neoliberal agenda or a way to enhance the opportunity structure to move – or to stay.

Note

1. For empirical analyses, see SFB 882 Project C1 (<http://www.sfb882.uni-bielefeld.de/en/projects/c1>) and Project C3 (<http://www.sfb882.uni-bielefeld.de/en/projects/c3>).

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