

## 1. Videos

# Mobility between movement, meaning and practice

By  
Tim Cresswell (Géographe)  
13 September 2013

Why do we make journeys from one place to another? What modes of transport do we use? And how exactly do we use them? Mobility is not just about travelling from point A to point B. It has a number of different dimensions... and all of them are experienced in different ways by individuals.

---

It's about more than getting from A to B, this to me is the central idea of mobility research. And this is true of all kinds of ways of moving, whether you're walking, driving, flying, taking a train, all of them can be imagined as a line on the map, one place at one end, one place to another, your destination. But mobility's research is about figuring out what fills that line, what makes it significant, what makes it socially important rather than just something you can measure. One way of thinking about that is like the relationship between a location and for instance where we are now in Paris; you could get the coordinates, longitude and latitude to somebody, that would be a location and a place. Once you know its Paris, then you know all kinds of other things about it. You know that it's a city of light. You know that it's associated with romance; you know it's associated with the French Revolution and its history. So location that is simply a point or dot on a map if you like becomes a rich meaningful set of ideas as well as a location and the architecture and landscape that Paris is. Now, we can do the same thing with movements. So if you imagine movements as a line on a map, just like a location as a point on the map, then our task as mobility scholars is to figure out what makes that line more interesting than just the line or does it relationship to meaning mobility, travel, exploration, commuting, all of these forms of movement can be mapped and they can be quantified, we can do statistics about them but they also come with histories, they come with rich sense of different ways in which they've been practiced that political in all kinds of ways. And they fit into narratives and stories in interesting kinds of ways. So I think mobility's research is about this more than, it's more than getting from A to B what is the more than and that's what I'm interested in.

## Three aspects to make the line richer

How do you make alignment on that into something rich, socially significant and interesting? So, I want to talk about three aspects of this line that make it richer. The first of these is the simple factor movement, the second is meaning, and the third is practice, how is this line active, how do we do it, how do we move or its experience of it. I just want to take you to these in turn.

### First aspect: movement

So, the first aspect of mobility is movement and by movement I mean this simple geographical displacement, going one place and then you're in another. Now that can be a simple line going from

one place to another, it could be a circle, it could be someone moving right in circles, it could be any kind of pattern you can think of. But the important thing here is that something that you could theoretically at least draw a map of, you calculate the distance and the speed at which it's traversed, you could do all kinds of statistical analysis on it. This is often the way mobility is dealt with by planners, by some kinds of social scientists are more interested in the statistical and quantitative aspects of mobility. It's the way government often deals with mobility issues, how are people moving, where are they moving to, why they are moving there and not here, how many people are moving that way and how fast are they moving.

### **The second aspect: meaning**

The second is meaning. Now meaning is important and it's often not dealt with well by government, by planners, by more technocratic ways of thinking. And it's more often dealt with by people in the arts of the humanities. And the question here is, what does this movement, mean both to the people who are doing it and to people around them who are thinking about it. So, walking for instance, what does walking mean, it's an interesting question. Well, it meant a particular set of things to for instance romantic poets who suddenly in the middle – at the end of the 18th Century and into the 19th Century started to think of walking as something that a solitary person could do, usually a man. And it could be way of getting in touch with nature; it became something that was morally valuable. Whereas before that period, walking to most people was always a drudgery, work, something you wanted to avoid doing, if you're walking it meant that you would somehow had to get to somewhere you maybe didn't want to go or it was hard work to get there. So it had these two meanings. And then walking continue to mean different things to different people, so walking in Paris, where the situation is artists would involve walking across Paris to disturb the way that Paris was arranged specially to walk through places, they weren't supposed to walk through, they're trying to think about the ways in which they might free walking starts a question, the plans of the powerful. So, walking started to get this rebellious set of meanings associated with it. And of course walking also means different things depending on where you are – if you're walking now through Paris on a sunny day then that's one thing. If you're walking – if you were living in Mali and you have to leave your village to walk five miles to get water then that means something entirely different. Meanings become all entangled into movements at this point, and we start to get ideologies, narratives, stories, all kinds of ways in which moving is about more than getting from A to B. Finally, you can think about a larger scale form of movement like immigration. Immigration is something very contentious – constantly contentious, mobility is at the heart of it, we can have our lines on the map, we can draw things, we can count things, we can do our statistical analysis that we all know that immigration comes with any number of meanings and narratives associated with it. And the United Kingdom has a long history of people talking about immigration as “swamping” or “flooding” and these words that seem simple and innocent are actually metaphors that carry with them a whole set of assumptions about what that might mean for the places where immigrants are surviving. On the other hand people – activists trying to stop racism and xenophobia might argue that immigration is something that “feeds” the country and these are the idea of nutrition, it is something that brings “new blood” into society that makes society more dynamic and interesting and cosmopolitan. And therefore it's something that we should favour. So, again meaning becomes important.

### **Third aspect: practice**

So the third aspect of mobility I'm interested in is practice, it refers to how we move. How we experience movement. And sometimes the way that we move and the way experience it can conform to the narratives and the meanings, so when we walk, we may experience it as freedom, we may experience as toiled or travailed in some way. When we drive a car we may experience it as a moment of individualism, as a private space as something that increases our sex appeal even, if the advertisers to be believed. Or we can experience it as nerve wrecking as something that – something we realized that we are in a metal box travelling at 60 miles an hour with other people around us. Or we can experience it as guilty if we've taken our messages from environmental politics seriously which indeed we should. So, these things interact, our practice interacts with the narrative, the way that we experience mobility is

informed by the narratives and meanings that are around it but doesn't always fit exactly together with it, sometimes there is a difference between them. And many philosophers and thinkers and artists have used these experiences to make mobility into different things, kick a garden walk-around thinking in a particular way made walking into a kind of experience of philosophy, walking and thinking becoming the same thing. So, all of these aspects of mobility - movement meaning and practice - are combined in any particular moment of mobility. And they're also political and it is very important all wound and wrapped up in power which is something I want to talk about next.

## **Mobility and politics**

So, understanding mobility holistically means, understanding it in relation to politics, in relation to power, mobility is wrapped up in power in so many ways. It's like a resource that is differently distributed, some people have it, some people don't, some people have different kinds than other people. So, one person's speed might be completely related to another person's slowness, or one person may be able to move because another one is immobilized.

## **The meaning of movement wrapped up in politics**

So one example at the moment that has made headlines recently particularly in the U.K. and in the U.S. is the school run. The school run is the name that's been given to the moments when people go either to school to drop their children off or to pick their children up and usually we're talking about elementary school or primary school. And what happens is stereotypically is people, often mothers, arrive in large cars, in the U.S. and in the U.K. and we have a number of cases in which children have been injured by these large cars so it has become this panic around the school run, and women are blamed all the time, because it's seen as women who are driving these big cars, they don't need to be driving. And more children should be walking so then become obese, and all of these get involved in a very complicated story with complicated politics and morality involved, a morality of obesity, morality about who can drive and who should drive, whether they should drive big SUVs in London, whereas are necessary, and all of these issues are wrapped up. Pedestrians are threatened by the fact that other people are driving the large cars. And yet – the cars make it easy for mothers who otherwise have very complicated lives to juggle time and space in ways that previously were unavailable to them. So there is not an easy story to tell but it is a political story. It's a story about power, it's a story about movement, it's a story about the meanings wrapped up in movement. And these, these practice relationship of power in mobility is – goes back to the three ideas I discussed previously so movement, meaning and practice are all political. Movement is political because who moves, who moves where, how fast do they move, how often do they move? These seemingly simple quantitative scientific even questions have politics to them. And often we see maps appearing in our papers, newspapers showing some kind of mobility and a scare story attached to it. Meaning is political, who constructs the narratives about mobility, who decides if mobility means freedom, progress, modernity, citizenship, on who decides the mobility suddenly means transgression, threat, disease, flooding, this is a political story, who is in control of the meaning that movement gets is a political point.

## **The practice of movement wrapped up in politics**

And then there is the politics of practice, who gets to practice mobility in the ways that they do, the perfect model for this might be an airport and an aeroplane, all right. So you go into an airport, you can go through the fast lane, you can be stuck at customs, you can be stuck at immigration, you can be stuck even before you get on the plane, if you've failed some set of norms that the people behind the desk have decided constitute good mobility as opposed to bad mobility. Then you get on the aeroplane and of course it's divided into first class and business class and economy class. One of the few times in your life where you're sort of told what class you are where you should sit, and the people in the front get more oxygen, better food, more toilets, people in the back have headaches because there is not enough oxygen, less toilets to use, less legroom, less everything. So there is a very clear sense in which the experience, the practice in mobility is differentiated. And we can also think about many other

examples of this, I mean, people getting stopped regularly, post 9/11 in Western cities, people or the Middle Eastern are frequently stopped for one reason or another as there is a phrase used in North America, in American cities, it's been written about by a number of people called "driving wild black", the idea being that if you're a black person driving particularly a car that looks like it's reasonably expensive, you're 10 times more likely to get stopped than if you're white, the assumption being that you've stolen it or the money that you've used to buy it is from illegal means. So, movement meaning and practice are all parts of the politics of mobility, all wound up in power, all wound up in relationships of domination, oppression and resistance because people are able to use mobility to resist these forms of power as well.

## **Constellations of mobility**

The last thing I really want to talk about here is the idea that these form what I call "constellations of mobility". So, constellation of mobility is a more or less enduring structure – more or less structured sense of the ways in which movements, meanings and practices are related to each other. And my argument would be that these vary over history and geography, but if I think by Europe, in feudal times we have this idea that mobility was really – in terms of long distance mobility – the privilege of a few people.

### **Feudal constellation of mobility**

So, if you were to map feudal mobility's, the vast majority of them would be within a sort of 7-mile radius of where someone lives. There were exceptions, there were always exceptions outside the order, there were musicians, crusaders, monks, and vagrants gradually began to emerge who would upset the sense of a feudal mobility. And the people that were in-charge of mobility were essentially the king and the lords because of the way the authority was structured within European cultures at the time. So, the people with the monopoly on the power to control and to regulate mobility was a very small number of people and the vast majority of people were regulated, carefully controlled and weren't able to move great distances.

### **Early modern constellation of mobility**

What happens as we moved in through from the 14th Century to the 16th Century particularly was a gradual moving away from this idea as agriculture changed as laws changed, and there was an emerging class of people who became known as vagabonds or vagrants who weren't attached to the land, who had been removed from the bounds of serf – it became possible to go to a city in what is now Germany for instance and stay there for a year and a day and then you'd become free of your obligations as a serf or as peasant. And this was where the expression "the city makes men free" comes from, ideally you become free. So mobility was very much attached to that. When you started to get 10, 20 maybe even 100 people turning up and say the end of the 14th Century or the 15th Century in a small town, there was suddenly a new sense of how it had to be dealt with which became dealt with within the nation, state, and the local community. You started to get the people being getting passes of one kind to another. So the passport as it's originated in this period, not in the way we know as a modern national passport, but as a kind of more local passport. In Berlin, Switzerland for instance people were given passes if they lived there in the 15th Century to show that they properly belonged there. And if you didn't have a pass then you could be run out of town as a vagrant or vagabonds. And if you came back, and will court again, then you could be branded with a star on your forehead. Almost like an early form of biometrics so like to think, it's sort of a sense of your body can be, locate your identity and mobility could be controlled.

### **Modern constellation of mobility**

As you moved into the modern period then, the nation state began to be the group of – the organization, the scale at which mobility was organized. And the passport became an important thing to cross over

borders, police forces began to control mobility as a national issue rather than a local issue. And population movements became – began to appear on a much bigger scale in terms of number of people and faster. Certainly as the industrial revolution happened, you started to get the infrastructure of the train system, you started to get labour, my good labour is moving seasonally, so in the South of France, so it would be people coming from all over Europe to pick grapes at a certain time and then leaving and you start to dig out a bigger sense of strangers inside the nation. And you started to also get the emergence of new ideas in science about – we no longer think we are the centre of the universe. The earth is now moving around the sun, it gives you a different sense of who you are. Theories in physics started to develop, laws started to develop, we define the citizen as a figure, somebody who could move within a nation state and could move across borders, between one nation state and another – someone who belongs and then someone who wasn't a citizen, was no longer the vagabond but was the alien, was the foreigner.

If you get back to the 14th Century, a foreigner was simply someone from 10 miles away. When the nation state by the 19th Century become sediment, you saw get this idea of a foreigner, someone from a different nation state and you started to get panics and moral panics about them. So, you can look at broadly speaking feudal constellation of mobility and then an early modern constellation of mobility into a modern constellation of mobility where mobility becomes quite a bit progress with freedom, with technological advance that the train, that the excitement of the Italian futurists of the possibility of speed and machinery and all of these things wrapped up in each other.

## **Nowadays constellation of mobility**

So, the question I suppose really is what constellation of mobility are we now and where is it going. What are the meanings, practices and movements that are being entangled in the 21st Century? We don't know the answer to that yet, we do know that more and more it's beyond the nation state's ability to control so we have supranational organizations, United Nations, the Schengen Area core deal, European Union, various bodies of the United Nations, all trying to regulate and talk about refugee mobility's and other mobility in new ways. We also have increasing clamp-downs, increasing panics, threats, mobility seems to be both the very sort of light blood of the world we live in, at the same time a virus, where it's portrayed as a virus, that threatens to undo it all the time, whether it's through immigration, whether it's through epidemics like salts and bird flu, swine flu, as soon as these diseases happen we suddenly get lockdowns at airports, we get maps in newspapers, we get a panic spreading across the world and it's mobility related. Where is it coming from? It's a question were the real world is asked.

## **Mobility**

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

## **Movement**

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

En savoir plus x

---

Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Representations

Theories

- Concepts
- 



Tim Cresswell

Géographe

The same author [See all publications](#)



**Mobility: the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to undo it**

Tim Cresswell



**Transitioning toward low-carbon mobility: a holistic approach to transition policy**

Video by Tim Cresswell



**Ne pas dépasser la ligne !**

Publication by Tim Cresswell, Mikaël Lemarchand, Géraldine Lay

---

To cite this publication :

Tim Cresswell (13 September 2013), « Mobility between movement, meaning and practice », Préparer la transition mobile. Consulté le 25 August 2024, URL:

<https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/videos/1163/mobility-between-movement-meaning-and-practice>

---

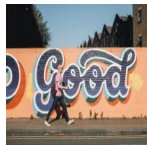
 Licence Creative Commons

Videos by Forum Vies Mobiles are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 France License.

Permissions beyond the scope of this license may be available at contact.

---

Other publications



In the post-Covid world, have we forgotten about walking again?

Jean-Marc Offner



History of the concept of mobility

Vincent Kaufmann



"We need to boost public transport supply and limit car use in order to reduce our emissions by 60% within 10 years"

Jean Coldefy



Are homeless people "vagrants"?

Projet collectif SciencesPo/Architecture Bordeaux

1 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/fr/>

2 <http://forumviesmobiles.org>

3 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/fr/>

4 [http://fr.fvm.localhost/modal\\_forms/nojs/contact](http://fr.fvm.localhost/modal_forms/nojs/contact)