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Natural disasters, mobility and inequalities

By
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27 September 2013

Mobility – and the lack of it – can be a way for established powers to keep control of their populations, especially after a catastrophe, argues Mimi Sheller.

Sustainable mobility is connected to mobility justice and I want to talk about what I mean about mobility justice by thinking about disasters, and what happens when mobility systems fail because it's one of the ways in which we become most aware of the inequality of mobility. When we think of sustainability it's often described as having three pillars, or three legs: one is ecological, and the environmental sustainability; the second is economic, whether we can economically sustain something; and the third has to do with social sustainability which concerns democracy and equity and fairness. So when we talk about sustainability and sustainable mobility, we need to think about all of those environmental, economic and social justice as part of what makes something sustainable.

Mobility justice as the self-determination of movement

I use the term mobility justice as a way to think about all of the things that go into making equitable and fair capacity for mobility, and on the one hand it begins with self-determination of movement. For me, because I have studied the history of slavery and emancipation, slavery is the extreme example of non-self-determination of mobility where you are trapped by someone else. Think of being in chains or in prison; that's a situation where you have no self-determination of movement.

Mobility justice as potential for mobility

Secondly is motility as the sort of potential for mobility. That's a different kind of thing than just physical capacities, but also it's of cultural skills, know-how and forms of potential access which you do not have to necessarily use but to be able to decide when and how you will be mobile – this is the power that we call motility.

Mobility justice as mobility capability

Finally I also refer to the idea of mobility capability, drawing on the capabilities approach, which is that we have not just a right to mobility but we need to ensure people's capabilities for mobility. All those three things together, self-determination of movement, motility, and mobility capability, make what I call mobility justice.

The failure of mobility justice during crises

In certain disasters we see a complete failure of mobility justice and I'm going to talk about two examples; one was Hurricane Katrina when it hit New Orleans, and also to think more recently about Hurricane Sandy and its effects on the East Coast of North America. The second example I'll turn to is the earthquake in Haiti in January of 2010. Learning from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina we saw a city that was completely flooded.

More recently in Hurricane Sandy we saw Lower Manhattan completely flooded and parts of the outer boroughs of Manhattan being hit by just so much water, in a way that has been predicted and expected, and yet nobody's really prepared for it when it happens. When a transportation system gets completely shut down we can see that natural disasters, yes, they affect everybody, but they affect the poor and the marginalised areas more than the centre, the places of power and the people who have higher mobility potential. So in New Orleans we saw the levees overflow, especially into the poorer neighbourhoods, we saw roadways knocked out and that the people who were able to evacuate were those who had access to cars and could get out quickly. The people who did not have cars, who maybe did not even have a bus fare or a place to go to, they were the ones who were left behind.

Victims without network capital

This relates to the idea of Elliot and Urry, of what they call network capital. Network capital means all these things that go into the capacities to be mobile and that includes money, documents, qualifications, access to networks, location-free information and contact points, the physical capacity for movement, but also the communicational capacity – to be able to use phones and other communication devices, to secure meeting places and to have access to vehicles, infrastructure, time and other resources for coordination. Those are all the forms of network capital that are missing for the people who are left behind in a disaster like Hurricane Katrina. As it was reported on at the time, for example the New York Times wrote: "The victims were largely black and poor, those who toiled in the background of the tourist havens, living in tumbledown neighbourhoods that were long known to be vulnerable to disaster if the levees failed. Without so much as a car or bus fare to escape ahead of time they found themselves left behind, by a failure to plan for their rescue should the dreaded day ever arrive?" There has been a lot of research within transportation studies on what some call transportation apartheid, or the question of the right to the city. Who is able to be mobile and to come and go in a city and who cannot?

Turning, then, to the January 2010 earthquake in Haiti, we have an even more extreme example of the kinds of inequalities that come to light in mobility capabilities after a disaster. I was working in Haiti with a NSF-funded research team; we were working on issues of local participation in rebuilding water and sanitation systems. The earthquake occurred in January 2010 and I was there in May and June, and then in July and August that year, and I could really see the examples of the vast inequality in mobility. Immediately after the earthquake the US military came in right away and took over the airport in Port-au-Prince and they controlled it before they were even invited. That right there laid bare the fact that air systems, and access to air, basically is something we are allowed to do because a military power lets civilian aircraft fly. In a disaster, civilian aircraft can immediately be grounded and really it's the military who controls the airspace. So you see right away military control of airspace and then you see that the foreigners were able to come into Haiti to help, but people in Haiti were not able to leave. In fact, some refugees started to leave in small boats in the months after the earthquake but they were intercepted by the US Coast Guard and they were returned to Haiti.

Failed mobility systems unveil the dynamics of power behind them

So you see that in a disaster you see a flow of responders, of humanitarian aid, people and equipment coming into the country, but very few people are able to actually leave the disaster zone. Especially the poorest, so there were about 30,000 Haitians who were able to leave the country right after the earthquake but they were generally US passport holders or they already had a passport and a visa, and they could fly out maybe through Santa Domingo and the Dominican Republic. Those were the few who were able to leave while the vast majority were stuck in what were called IDP camps, or camps of internally displaced people. So I contrast the view from the airplane window as I'm flying in to Haiti and I have this power to have a passport, to have vaccinations, the money to pay for a ticket, to be able to bring a smart phone which allows me access not only to the internet but to maps, really good Google Earth maps of the entire geography of Haiti. No local people had access to any of those forms of mobility or network capital. To contrast with that you could think of what kind of mobility did Haitians have access to. They have their buses, which are these beautiful colourful buses called tap-taps, and one of the classic images you see on the decorations of the tap-tap buses is a painted airplane running along the top of it.

People are sitting up on top of the bus with their luggage, and that is as close as most of those people will ever get to air travel or flight because they are the people without passports, the people without visas, so they end up sitting on top of a hot, dusty bus on a mock airplane, in contrast to the rescuers who are coming to help them. So we have this kind of militarisation of airspace and this access of the foreigners with network capital, and you can contrast that with those who don't have access to those things. It's also important to think about how that relates to wider power relations in the Caribbean. In a disaster it's an extreme situation, but we can think about tourism also and the ways in which tourism is a form of access by those with mobility capability to go to a place, to enjoy a place, to leave and go home when they need to, whereas the people who work in the tourist areas often do not have that kind of ability to move around in the same way. So I think for me thinking about failed mobility systems, is a way to sort of unveil the power dynamics that are behind all of our mobility systems all of the time, but we mostly tend to ignore those inequalities.

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

Motility

En savoir plus x

Lifestyles

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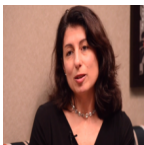
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To cite this publication :

Mimi Sheller (27 September 2013), « Natural disasters, mobility and inequalities », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 27 July 2024, URL:

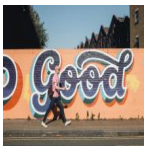
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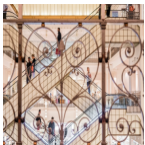
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