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From the street to the planet: can mobility justice unite our diverse struggles?

By
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What is mobility justice? This is the question that Mimi Sheller addresses, from the observation that if the right to mobility is a freedom to conquer, its limits are also the root of many inequalities, whether at the level of the street or on a global scale. The urban crisis, with its inequalities in terms of access to the city's transport and amenities, the migrant crisis with its population movements and the walls that contain them, the environmental crisis with the exploitation by rich countries of the raw materials of poor countries: all these issues find a common denominator in this continuous struggle for mobility. Why not conceive of mobility as a shared resource to be managed democratically?

"I wrote the book *Mobility Justice* because I was concerned that we talk a lot about a sustainability transition but it's not happening quickly enough and it seems like a lot of the policies for a low-carbon, post-automobile world were stuck - we still have a car culture, we still have high energy use - and it didn't seem like it's changing very quickly.

So the idea of mobility justice is to think about a triple crisis happening across different scales. We can't just address the sustainability crisis at the urban scale. We have an urban crisis, it's true around mobility and transportation, and the challenge is trying to make a greener, more sustainable transport system. But we also have the climate crisis which is about CO₂, and global warming and also the risks and natural disasters that are coming with that and the idea that cities and countries have to get ready for recovery from those disasters and also to adapt and to bring down carbon levels.

And thirdly there's also a migration crisis, which is related to the first two crises. There's a feeling that the world is under pressure right now and people are starting to move, and the countries in the richest parts of the world are nervous and are all starting to turn to these very racist and ethno-centric right-wing movements that are building walls, and closing borders, and keeping out refugees and moving away from the humanitarian policies that came in the 20th century that said that we all have a right to move and to live and to escape from persecution. I believe we also should have a right to escape from a changing climate, a climate that's unsustainable and unliveable.

So it's that combination of crises which I think are all crises of mobility - mobility of everyday life, and getting around in the city, mobility of resources around the world which affects the climate, and mobility of people across borders and nations.

So, I think we had divided up our approaches to mobility in different ways.

There's the people who work on transportation and deal with the transition to sustainable transportation. Then there are people who work on migration and borders and movement of people

around the world. And then there are people working on climate solutions at a larger scale. These people are not always coming together and thinking holistically. So in that sense we have movements for climate justice movements, movements for migrant justice, movements for transport justice and racial justice, etc.. But mobility justice actually spans all of those areas, and it helps us understand how they're connected : these are transversal and intersectional and relational and multi-scalar solutions that will, I think, mobilize enough people to take action if they see that these issues are interconnected.

I talk about a mobility justice perspective because in the past there has been an interest in theorizing justice in different ways. The first way is through what's called distributive justice: if we all have access to the same goods we'll have greater equality and greater justice. And so the approach to transportation justice has been a distributive one, that we need to make our transportation systems accessible to all people. But the limit on that has been around who is included in transportation planning and decision making, and it's a fact that many people involved in planning, building and running transportation systems are men and not women and are often from the dominant ethnic group in any country, and they don't always include minorities, and they also often don't include people with disabilities or other challenges.

So, distributive justice within transportation has been limited and therefore, as a response to this, there is the notion of deliberative justice which asks 'Okay who's included? Who's part of the decision-making? Who's doing the planning? Who's designing our systems of transportation and other kinds of urban infrastructure? So deliberative justice was a way to help think about expanding the table (i.e. making the deliberation process more diverse). But there are also limits to that because not all people can participate equally. Some people's embodiment and voices have more power, have more influence than others, and some people don't even feel comfortable being part of that kind of process.

So procedural justice is the next level of thinking about how we can make a fairer process for people to be part of the deliberation and help us get towards more distributive justice. But that too has limits because not all forms of expressing oneself and articulating one's needs are equally valued, and that led to the idea of epistemic justice which is the idea that some people have a different, whole world view and cultural system that might not fit into the current way of thinking and doing transportation planning. So for example, indigenous people's worldviews might not make the separation between humans and nature in the same way that we might in a Western context. So it becomes difficult to articulate the need to protect the world spiritually or for future generations if you're in a framework that has divided humans from nature already.

So, all those different levels of justice are part of thinking about mobility justice as a form of justice that in itself is mobile - it has to move across these different domains and terrains in order to bring a more holistic and inclusive view of justice and that means that different groups will have a say in what is happening, through a critique of the existing systems of power around mobility planning, urban design and border control, and all the different facets of it.

The book is organized in chapters that address different scales. I found this focus on scales to be a nice way to organize the thinking, even though I understand the scales as always interconnected, always simultaneous. So what we are dealing with is a complex set of relations between the different scales. I begin with the body and then look at the street and the transportation structure, then I look at the city and the whole infrastructure of cities and urbanism, and then the nation and the idea of national border and the national scale and its relation to migration but also tourism. And finally, the level of the planet as a whole; I'm thinking through the climate issue in terms of circulations of energy and resources.

The Local Scale : the body, the street and the city

So regarding the scale of the body, we can think about how gender and race and sexuality and class influence how people move through the world and their freedom of movement. That is intersectional in the sense that differently embodied abilities and environments disable us in different ways and have an effect on our mobility. A disabling environment could be physically disabling but it could also disable us

because of the lack of rights for racial or gender or sexual minorities to move in space and the violence that's often imposed on people as a result of this. So violence against women, violence against transgendered people violence against racial minorities prohibits their movement in physical space. So first mobility justice has to deal with the question of the personal, human, embodied experience and the right to move without being coerced by others or limited by segregation or by forms of built environment that don't allow access to them, so these are accessibility issues.

A number of social movements have emerged around the rights to mobility of different groups of people. So the early feminist movement had the 'take back the night' marches that were meant to address sexual violence against women. Critical disability scholars have also engaged with lots of social movements around the lack of accessibility to metros and public transportation. They've done wheel-ins and sort of sit-ins where they occupied public spaces. And then the Black Lives Matter movement has mobilized against the police harassment of minorities in the United States for offenses called manner of walking, or stop and frisk. Another issue is the stopping of drivers of vehicles which is very racially unequal in the United States.

So those movements have addressed mobility justice already and begin to move up to what I call the scale of the street and transportation systems and who is able to access them, who is able to use them and also the way in which they're designed to privilege different groups and different neighbourhoods in various ways. How can we also have mobility justice around the planning, design and implementation of urban transit systems.

The National Scale : the migrant and the border

When we get to the national scale, we get into a whole different set of related issues which have to do with citizenship, migration, and who has the right of entry, who has the right to remain, to stay to become a resident and a citizen. This has increasingly been limited and policed through ethno-racial lines of division, especially in the United States. It's very problematic because the United States is a country of immigration. It's a country that also has a colonial history which took the land of native Americans and now excludes native and indigenous people from Central America who are coming through Mexico and trying to get to the United States. And then it has a history of slavery and the racial history of Jim Crow and segregation. Our whole built environment was built on all these racial exclusions and white supremacy which is now being articulated through our immigration and border policies. The social movements against that are large and many and varied, so there have been protests against each of the changes that have been made in U.S. national policy and there are court decisions that are being contested right now to try to stop the Trump administration from imposing these policies which are directly leading to people's deaths - people are dying at the border, people are dying in the deserts, people are dying at sea. The same is true in a different way in Europe with the migration crisis and the deaths of people in boats crossing the Mediterranean, but with a different historical context behind it.

The Global Scale : climate and overconsumption

Finally, in the book, I have a chapter which looks at what I call the planetary scale. What I mean by that is that our current system is one of planetary urbanization. This means that cities in the global north, cities in the prosperous parts of the world, are built using resources that have come from all around the world. So oil drilling, mining for metals and energy, hydro-energy, and all the food in the agricultural crops, the plantations, all those things are flowing into the wealthy regions of the world while other places are suffering from the climate change that has been caused by the same wealthy regions' patterns of consumption or what I call overconsumption. So that means that when we think of mobility justice we must consider the global planetary scale because there's a circulation of flows of energy, a kind of metabolism of natural resources. The problem is that if we just made the European Union or North American societies green and sustainable, that might mean that we were still trying to bring in agricultural produce from other parts of the world, we were still building with metals that were mined in

other parts of the world, we were still using lithium in our electric car batteries. And that would not lead to a sustainable world. That would mean that we might be sustainable within our bubble but we would be externalizing all the costs and all the harms of climate change, and climate instability would still be affecting other places, and pollution and waste would still be affecting other places.

So for me, the final key to mobility justice is that we need to begin by rethinking how we live here in ways that are local, urban, national and globally connected. Because all of us are citizens of the world, we have one planet and we need to find ways to share it.”

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

- Inequalities
- Crises

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- Civic Action
- Ecological transition

Theories

- Concepts
-
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Mimi Sheller is a key theorist in mobilities studies. She is Professor of Sociology and founding Director of the New Mobilities Research and Policy Center at Drexel University in Philadelphia. She was co-founder with John Urry of the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster.

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