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

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Turbulence and disruptions at the heart of mobility systems

"Mobilities are frequently disrupted. Any mobility has the potential to do something unexpected – to go wrong. A helpful concept here is turbulence. Turbulence, or disordered mobility, happens when a form of movement encounters friction of some kind. This friction can occur when a form of mobility encounters something immobile. Alternatively it can happen when different forms of mobility collide with each other. Turbulence is inevitably and largely unpredictable. We know it will happen but not where, when and to what extent. Once you produce mobility then you will produce turbulence – a form of mobility that lies beyond calculation and prediction. A good deal of work (particularly by transport planners) has gone into making mobility smooth and predictable. Much of the way the world works in advanced neo-liberal capitalism is based on the logic of logistics – the logic of things always moving in predictable ways (and, incidentally, not stopping for

too long). This logic often remains invisible as long as it is working properly. Events of turbulence make it suddenly visible. These events include accidents such as the cutting of undersea cables that route the internet by a ship's anchor (making most of India go off line), or the sinking of a container ship and the sudden visibility of athletic shoes or rubber ducks floating around the world, or, perhaps, the intentional turbulence caused by terrorists and pirates who seek to feed off of global flows to make their mark.

Turbulence can be both accidental or deliberate – a moment of breakdown and/or a moment of creativity. While terrorists and pirates clearly see the utility in disrupting the smooth space of flows so to do political activists and creative artists who want to jolt us out of our everyday worlds to draw attention to the way the world is being made around us. The everyday world of mobility – the everyday coalescence of movement, meaning and practice [2] – is increasingly a world of order, security and surveillence within which social differences are produced and maintained. So, turbulence – the disruption of this ordering – is not necessarily a bad thing but a positive and creative moment that can occur when that which is mostly taken-for-granted becomes suddenly visible. Turbulence plays a role in the politics of mobility and can arise in relation to any of the facets of mobility – speed, rhythm, route etc. Turbulence is not so much a product of an error in systems of mobility as it is integral to those systems. Systems of mobility such as the distribution of commodities around the world in container ships of the distribution of people around the world in aircraft have turbulence built into them. Turbulence is not a product of the system going wrong but of the system working. Volcanoes erupt, diseases enter countries through airports, pirates in Somalia take over ships, oil leaks from the hulls of ships, hackers break into the computer systems of banks – all of this because of the systems of mobility that produce the modern world. Mobility is both the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to undo it."

Here I used "virus" as a metaphor for turbulence and disruption within the established and largely taken for granted mobilities of everyday life. Here, "virus" can be either a destructive threat or a creative moment in the creation of a better future. As we are seeing with the coronavirus that causes the disease covid-19, there are occasions when the virus is both figurative and literal. It is a terrible thing that will kill many before their time. As is often the case with turbulence, it also reveals much that is wrong with the ways we move. The following are some reflections on various aspects of our mobile lives that covid-19 has revealed.

When I speak of turbulence I am thinking of the unknowable products of small changes in mobility systems. These mobility systems include various kinds of mappable and quantifiable movement (largely the domain of epidemiologists and their models at the moment), meanings and narratives attached to these movements, and particular embodied practices of movement. Sometimes these coalesce into more or less coherent constellations [3] of mobility, and sometimes, such as now, these constellations are revealed through disruption and turbulence. The emergence of covid-19 is just such a small change. Without the global mobilities we have become used to, covid-19 would not be the global issue it is today. The movement of goods, people, and capital is made smooth by global and local mobilities and the infrastructures, logistics, and regulations that undergird them. These mobilities also make a pandemic not just possible but probable.

Calamities always come from elsewhere

As far as we know, the virus had its origins in Wuhan, China and has been associated with a particular "wet market" where traders sell meat and seafood as well as live animals. They are crowded urban ecosystems where the mobilities of people intersect with animals both live and dead. They are places where a zoonotic disease can move between animals and humans. [4]

Along with the fact of movement come stories. In this case all of the stories that have historically accumulated in the West around "China" and "Asia". There is a long history of naming epidemics and pandemics after their supposed place of origin. If we look at Pandemics of the 20th and 21st Centuries we can see this pattern. The flu of 1918 was called the Spanish Flu. In 1957 it was the Asian flu and in 1968 the Hong Kong Flu. This reflects a deeper history of naming diseases after somewhere beyond home. Syphilis in 15th Century Italy was called the French disease. In France it was called the Italian disease, in Russia, the Polish disease and in Turkey, the Christian disease. The British called it the Bordeaux disease. Diseases are mapped on to others, from elsewhere, usually people with other alleged negative characteristics in xenophobic discourse. Alongside such specific stories of "origins" comes a more diffuse distrust of mobility in general and the disease and its name become part of a conversation about the need for protected and clearly bounded spaces. We know the disease caused by the new corona virus as covid-19 thanks to a deliberate act of naming by the World Health Organization that sought to avoid the use of specific geographical indicators (such as "Wuhan" or "China") in order to reduce scapegoating and xenophobic reactions to Chinese people. Despite these efforts, there are stories of east Asian people being harassed [5] and Chinese restaurants in London being empty. [6] Perhaps unsurprisingly, on the 17th March 2020, President Trump referred to the virus as the "Chinese virus". [7]

The solution to problems associated with turbulent mobilities is often to stop or curtail them. In the last few months we have become accustomed to the use of the word "quarantine". Most spectacularly this was associated with cruise ships and particularly the Diamond Princess which was quarantined in Japan's Yokohama harbour on February 4th after a passenger who disembarked in Hong Kong on February 1st tested positive for Covid-19. Most of the passengers remained on the ship had to stay on it. The final group only left the ship on March 1st and many faced additional quarantine on dry land. In the period spent on board over 700 passengers and crew caught the disease. [8] The process of quarantine originated in Venice as it sought to protect itself from the Plague in the 14th Century. Ships arriving at the port were required to sit at anchor for 40 days (a period that leads to the word quarantine - from the Italian quaranta giorno (forty days)). Venice, at the time, was at the center of early mercantile capitalism based on emerging global trade by sea. [9] In its very origins, quarantine was a response to disease mobilities that piggy-backed on the mobilities of trade. The Diamond Princess was the latest in a history of ships in limbo.

Differentiated experiences of turbulence

Covid-19 turbulence has revealed some stark differences in the mobile practices between people. One notable group has been the rich. A Guardian article from 11 March, 2020 reported on the super wealthy chartering private jets and retreating to specially prepared bunkers and isolated second or third homes in countries with limited exposure to the virus. Many were attempting to escape compulsory quarantine orders they expected down the line. [10] The effects of quarantine on the mobilities of the poor are quite different. Gig workers and those on hourly contracts need to keep working in order to

have an income. Requests to self-isolate, or to stay away from public space, are simply impossible for those who rely on insecure incomes - including the delivery drivers that many who can afford to stay at home are relying on. [11] The homeless are another group of people who cannot easily conform to requests to self-isolate. Similar issues arise as universities move very quickly to on-line learning and ask students to go home. Not all students can simply go home at a moment's notice and even for those who can, they may not access to the high-speed internet that is necessary for many forms of online learning.

Covid-19: turbulence that exposes the evidence of global mobility

As planes stop flying, people stop making unnecessary journeys, and streets are freed of cars, mobilities that are most often invisible (because taken-for-granted) become starkly apparent. One of the more spectacular visualizations of the first months of 2020 was a comparison of air pollution (nitrogen dioxide) around Wuhan before and after the strict quarantine measures were introduced. [12] Nitrogen Dioxide is a product of the combustion of fuel. Some estimate that more lives were saved due to the reduction in air pollution than the numbers who have died from the virus - perhaps as much as 20 times as many. [13] We rightly take emergency action to combat covid-19 but not to combat air pollution caused by automobility, or even climate change. Turbulence has made certain aspects of our normal, taken-for-granted and never questioned mobile worlds visible. As I wrote earlier, "Turbulence is not a product of the system going wrong but of the system working."

Notes

1 Tim Cresswell, *One the Move: Mobility in the Modern World* , Routledge, 2006.

3 "Considering movement, meaning and practice collectively allows us to think in terms of historical senses of movement we might call constellations of mobility. At any time and place certain forms of movement, meanings of mobility and practices of mobility coalesce to form a constellation." Tim Cresswell, Mikaël Lemarchand, Géraldine Lay, Ne pas dépasser la ligne !, Paris, Forum Vies Mobiles, 2016.

4   https://medium.com/@WCS/emerging-zoonoses-and-the-risk-posed-by-wildlife-markets-5689b7ba7ee2

5   https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singaporean-student-in-london-seeks-eyewitnesses-after-coronavirus-related-taunt-and

6   https://london.eater.com/2020/3/10/21172916/coronavirus-uk-latest-covid-19-london-restaurants-chinatown-closures

7   https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/trump-tweets-about-coronavirus-using-term-chinese-virus-n1161161

8   https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/13/from-paradise-to-coronavirus-the-grand-princess-and-the-cruise-from-hell

9   https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/short-history-of-quarantine/

10 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/disease-dodging-worried-wealthy-jet-off-to-disaster-bunkers

11 https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/covid-19-highlights-lack-of-social-protections-for-gig-economy-workers

12 https://www.theverge.com/2020/3/2/21161324/coronavirus-quarantine-china-maps-air-pollution

13 https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffmcmahon/2020/03/16/coronavirus-lockdown-may-have-saved-77000-lives-in-china-just-from-pollution-reduction/#31554bba34fe

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

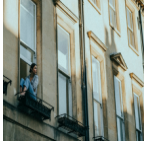- Inequalities
- Rhythms of everyday life
- Crises

Theories

- Concepts
- History

Other publications

Rural mobility during the lockdown

Aurore Flipo, Nicolas Senil

The lockdown is revealing the limits of our lifestyles, pace of life and environments

Mobile Lives Forum

On global counter-productivity. The critique of mobility and the coronavirus crisis

Alexandre Rigal