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



Submitted by [Forum Vies Mobiles](#) on Wed, 03/18/2020 - 18:25

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Chapô

In my 2006 book, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*, I wrote that mobility was the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to undo it. The idea was further developed in reflections on the concept of turbulence in the text that follows, also written a few years ago, without knowing that it would resonate particularly today with the unprecedented situation that has arisen since the appearance of the coronavirus.

Présentation longue

In my 2006 book, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*^[1], I wrote that mobility was the lifeblood of modernity and the virus that threatens to undo it. The idea was further developed in reflections on the concept of turbulence in the text that follows, also written a few years ago, without knowing that it would resonate particularly today with the unprecedented situation that has arisen since the appearance of the coronavirus.

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 surveillance 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 or 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

<div class="logo logo-mobile"> [^3]</sup> 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

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^[^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

<div class="logo logo-mobile"> [^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>

Date de publication

18 March 2020

Visuel



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mobilité globale

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Concepts

History

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