

1. Videos

The Politics of Mobility

By
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Tim Cresswell is a professor of Human Geography at the University of London. His research considers the role of geographical ways of thinking the constitution of social and cultural life. He has identified six main ideas to look at mobility differently.

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.

When thinking about the mobility as a whole, it's impossible not to think about the politics of mobility. I think we live in an age where – when, how, and where we move are as important as where we live in terms of differentiating one person from another. Indeed we can think about mobility in terms of a hierarchy with, kinetic class at the top, who can move from place to place with relative ease, you travel quite frequently, you generally travel comfortably over great distances and are welcomed wherever they arrive. And under the hands of kinetic underclass who are sometimes forced to move when they don't want to and other times prevented from moving when they do want to. And their travel can be uncomfortable, highly regulated and less – a matter of choice than it is if they are member of the kinetically. So, what I want to do is differentiate this hierarchy, this politics mobility using six ideas, six things which are central to uneven of movement. I'm not suggesting these are the only ones but they are certainly six important ones.

1. The reason why we travel

The first of these is the – why things or why people start moving, what is the motive force. If we think of physics, then for something to start moving there has to be a force of some kind applied to it. With humans, that force can be external, so I'm making us move – something making us move or it can be internal, it's a decision, something that we do. And I think that it's very important to think about the realm, the degree to which any human movements is based on desire, will-power, intension and/or on the other hand is about compulsion, something that is forced, something that is has to happen or there will be negative consequences. And these I think make mobility very different, they differentiate them in interesting ways. I think it will be easy to suggest that kinetically always choose and the kinetic underclass don't choose, they don't want to say that, I think even the wealthiest business traveller must sometimes despair as they check into their first-class seat on a plane to fly from Paris to Singapore, even though to us, that might seem too luxury, to them if they have to do it all the time and it's part of their job, they may feel obligated. So, I'm not suggesting an easy distinction but I do think nevertheless there are important differences between the person who maybe tired and may not want to fly to Singapore and the person who for instance feels like they have to climb into the wheel-well of an airplane in Africa in order to get to London and ends up falling out frozen dead somewhere outside

Heathrow, which happens regularly around the world, people trying to get from one country to another by hiding in the wheel-wells of aircrafts.

2. The speed of travel

The second facet of mobility that has a politics is velocity, speed. In some ways this is obvious, if you can get somewhere quicker, usually that's because you've paid more money or because you have access in a way that someone else doesn't have, we can think of the fast lane in some kinds of road systems now where people pay extra in order to be in the fast lane and not the slow lane. We can think of in airports where although since the age of concord you can't really fly anywhere quicker than anyone else, all classes fly at the same speeds. The bits are the beginning and end, how quickly it takes you to get through the airport are speeded up for those high-up, even if you do have to stop, then you can stop in a business line rather than in McDonalds. So, there is a key difference there in terms of speed. But it isn't just a matter of going fast, another aspect of the politics of velocity is slowness, so we know there is a slow food movement, the movement out of Italy teach us slow, which is the slow city movement, there is a slow culture movement. And these are also Bonshaw right, the slow – the slow food movement doesn't come out of the working classes, the slow food movement is only from those who are able to think about slowness as something good, right, who are able to make the choice to be slow. So we can see how speed and choice interact here in interesting ways. One of the most extreme forms in ways we can think about velocity is the idea of immediacy, of something happening at exactly the same time as something else. And it is something that the philosopher Paul Virilio has written a lot about, Paul Virilio has argued to one of the big transformations that's happening in history is that we're moving into an age of the immediate that things happen at the press of a button. And it has not to do with transport technology, this has to do with communications and to do with the ways in which we were wired in, in various ways.

3. Mobility rhythm

Third aspect of politics in mobility is rhythm. Now rhythm refers to either intervals of mobility where one kind of mobility happens in particular sets of time repeatedly over and over again, or it can refer to relationship between mobility and immobility where stopping and starting happens, sort of with a particular measure like in music, at a particular kind of interval. Rhythm is something that has been considered in a number of different aspects. So, one of the ways we can think about that is in the 19th Century in the origins of train travel where the rhythm of life was transformed by the fact that time-tables have to be adhered to. Before that, usually people could wait but the train isn't going to wait because you're late, the train is going to depart or at least theoretically a train will depart on time, and if you miss it, you miss it. So if the rhythm of people's lives started to get connected into, the train and into the timeframe of the time structure with train travel necessitated, so the way that we talk about time now, watch time we have on our watches is the time that – it's origins are in trains and the way that they had to construct time-tables so the trains wouldn't crash into each other. And so with the rhythm of life was completely changed by that dual invention of the railway and railway time, well the time that we know now. There are other kinds of rhythms that we can think about, the French urban theorist Henri Lefebvre, talked about two kinds of rhythm, one he called organic, which is a rhythm of the body, something that is close to you – he romanticizes slightly with the idea of this kind of rhythm – it is the rhythm imposed. It's a technological rhythm, it's the rhythm imposed by things like the railway and new forms of time. So one way you can think about rhythm is a conflict that emerged in this period between the rhythm of the body, the natural rhythm and the rhythm that's being imposed by capital, by capitalism, by technology, by industrialization and urbanization, all of them happening through the 19th Century at a massive pace. So, Henri Lefebvre particularly liked this, rhythm appears as regulated time governed by rational laws but in contact with what is least rational in the human being, that lived the carnal of the body. So the body has a rhythm, the rationality has a rhythm and they come into contact and in that contact is a kind of politics. We can see, we can see this as well as in trains, we can see in a number of different aspects of life. So one of the things that happened in the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century was the way in which factories became regulated in terms of clocking in, clocking out

having lunch breaks at particular times. We can see more recent aspects of rhythm in terms of what was called Gait analysis which is Gait, which means like walking. So now it's possible, I understand to recognize somebody, to identify them by the pattern of their walking. So, that from a distance with a camera, you can see someone's walk and recognize who they are and these are being used in airports and other places to recognize people from a distance, no, you don't need to have a fingerprint and the contact. You can see just by their movements, their rhythms whether they are suspicious or whether they're trusted. So there are suspicious kinds of rhythms, trusted kinds of rhythms. On larger scale you can also see that in airports, people looked, wonder where people travel and when do they travel, are they travelling on one-way tickets, are they travelling to strange places and these become part of what's put into programs to recognise passengers so that when you get to check-in, they know whether you can be trusted or not trusted. And that also is part of rhythm.

4. The routes mobility takes

The fourth aspect of the politics in mobility is the route the mobility takes. Mobility doesn't happen evenly like water spilled across the table with no friction. Mobility happens by being channelled, right, like a stream, like hydraulics, channelled in a particular way. And then, a lot of the politics mobility comes through the way in which now mobility is stopped or started but just where it's allowed to go and where it's not allowed to go. It produces currents, it produces the correct designs flows of mobility. This obviously happens in transport planning, roads that are designed or train lines are designed in order to move people in particular ways and not in other ways. Increasingly this is political because this channelling can occur in ways that to privilege certain kinds of movement or over others, so particularly the movement between say an airport in downtown in a major city like Paris or London, you usually get a fast route that takes you from airport into the middle of the city, ignoring everything around it, usually that's not even – it doesn't even – the train doesn't even stop you can get the Heathrow Express, the train just takes 15 minutes, it doesn't stop anywhere. Stephen Graham, the urban theorist called this the tunnelling effect and this happens in all kinds of ways, whenever people pay for the privilege to move – it often means that they can move faster and more directly from one point to another, and when you're not paying it becomes more convoluted. One of the examples I came across working in Los Angeles was they were trying to design a light rail system to go from the suburbs into centre of Los Angeles, various organizations protested against this, saying, all this was doing was benefiting disproportionately white population working – lived in the suburbs of Los Angeles and coming into their jobs, whereas the people will clean their houses often Latino or Korean, often female had to roll over in the busses, which often would have four or five connections to make – in order to get from in the opposite direction from a different place in a city where they lived to the houses in the suburbs of these people who had moved downtown for their jobs. So the houses could be cleaned while they were working. So, one mobility is made easy, the others made difficult through the routing and the connections have to be made. So we can see how conduit or channels or tunnels are also a political issues that's – that breaks through a kind of old idea of topography, the shape of space, the shape of the landscape and produces a new kind of politics based on what we could call topology which is not about whether one thing is next to something else but whether it's connected to it, all right.

5. The experience of travel

The fifth aspect of the politics in mobility I'd like to talk about is how it feels. This doesn't seem quite the same because you couldn't think about as in a physical sense but as long as this human's we're talking about or possibly animals we're talking about – how experiences are important – we already touched upon aeroplane travel, how it feels to be travelling first class as to how it feels travelling economy class or what I sometimes called cattle class is very different. I mean, you're not being massaged, you're not going to find the food made by a well-known written chef somewhere in the world or designed by them and again you get, you lie down 180 degrees, you can – all of these experiences – well, if you're at the back of the plane it's a very different issue. We also could consider walking the opposite, extremely from the plane travel. Many of us might consider it's a pleasure, something we'll do after dinner, go for a nice walk, go for maybe a walking holiday in the country side, in which case walking is this is a

privileged activity, whereas whole, and is experienced as that whereas if you are walking because you have to it's a very different experience. One thing I came across recently was a looking for houses in the United States you come across a little thing called the Walk-score. So you can look at a house and it tells you is it walkable, can you get to the local urban amenities, can you get to a library, can you get to shops, do you have to get in your cars or don't you. And the idea of this walk score is this a good thing, now if you've got a walk-score of 80% then it's a good house. And I recall looking at chat reading about these – about houses buying house in Boston and one person said, where is a good place in Boston for walking, I want to get good walk-ability in my neighbourhood. And someone else replied, and I thought that was a totally brilliant said, if you want a neighbourhood where lots of people walk, just live where poor people live, because where poor people live they have to walk. That the provision of infrastructure isn't as good, they are less lucky to have a car, they're just used to it.

6. Friction in mobility

The sixth aspect of the politics in mobility is when and why does it stop. We can think about this as friction, mobility it never occurs in a frictionless world, there is no such thing as perpetual motion machine, there is always encounters something that makes it stop. The question is why and how and clearly friction is unevenly distributed. And for some people there is more friction in their lives than for other people. So, we can think about the various forms of security that exists in urban environment, CCTV cameras, gated communities, the various kinds of spaces you can access or not access, even a shopping mall. You can go into a shopping mall and if you are a respectable looking person, you fit somebody's expectations and what a shopper looks like, you would never know that there was anyone watching you, you would never know that it was possible to be stopped. But if you don't fit into that it's quite possible you could enter this space and security would appear, security is invisible to those people who don't need to be concerned with it, they have to other people, maybe young people with skateboards, wearing hoodies, maybe people who aren't looking affluent will be stopped, friction will occur. This happens also in airports of course, the people that are stopped most frequently are people who don't fit the category of a trusted traveller whereas and it does fit a trusted traveller in Europe that would be middle-aged white male, a business person, for instance that travels frequently and recognize patterns flows easily through this whereas you are stopped frequently if for various reasons, you don't fit that model. Geographers used to talk about something called the friction of distance which is simply there something away from you was – the more likely it was that you wouldn't interact with it, in other words, the closer something was the more likely you would interact with it. This in a globalized world is seized to be always is true, often not true, Indian populations in South Hall and London are much more in touch with India for instance and they might be with say West Whales, even West Whales is obviously a lot closer because of the way communications work on the way telecommunications work in particular. But we are entering a time when borders and boundaries, the things that stopped motion aren't really distance but much more about the particular kinds of spaces we're moving through and who we are. And the distribution of friction is something is very political, while who stopped how often and again we can talk about people being stopped while they're driving, he's stopped while they're driving why, walking through the city, he's stopped and why and who can just move easily and not be stopped and only stop when they choose to stop. These are also important questions for the politics of mobility. Pour les dernières photos à trouver, ce n'est pas grave s'il n'y en a pas autant que prévu, l'idée principale est de montrer au moins quelques-unes de ces situations.

7. Mobility wrapped up in power

So, I've talked about six facets of the politics of mobility, six things that need to be considered when considering the way in which mobility is wrapped up in power. The starting point that is wide movement starts, speed, how fast or slow do we choose or not choose travel, rhythm, what intervals do we travel in, how are we using, following a rhythm we want to follow or rhythm is being posed upon us, routes, how do we get from A to B, is it an easy route or a difficult route, experience how does it feel to travel, how hampered are we or how uncomfortable is it for other people and how we stop when friction is encountered and how that friction is distributed amongst different groups of population of different

individuals. Each of them is important in the creation of mobile world we live in and each of them is contested and each of them are relevant to any form of mobility we choose to look out from walking to driving, to flying. There may be others, I'm sure there are others, but these six I think are things that need to be considered.

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

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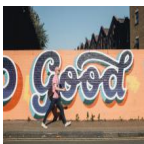
Tim Cresswell (09 October 2013), « The Politics of Mobility », Préparer la transition mobilière. Consulté le 21 July 2024, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/videos/1359/politics-mobility>

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