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Racial segregation and Mobility

By
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Slaves and their African American successors were denied basic mobility rights, but mobility segregation persists in the 21st century.

At the recent Differential Mobilities Conference, which was hosted at Concordia University in Montreal, there was a special session organized by Judith A. Nicholson on “Race and the Mobilities Paradigm”. She raised some very important questions about the absence of attention to race in the field of mobilities research. So what I want to talk about today is to begin to think about where race comes into play, and especially about the idea of the production of racial space and racial projects through mobilities and through the governance of mobilities.

So, where is race in the mobilities paradigm? For me, my entry point into the field actually came out of a background in studying slavery and emancipation, and histories of the Caribbean. I want to take us back to that history to think about where we begin to think about mobilities in terms of race. And really, you can think of the institution of slavery as being defined by the exercise of control over mobility, and the immobility of an entire labor force of individual bodies. There was of course resistance to slavery and one of the key ways of doing that was through running away, and running away is of course a form of mobility. Escaping, running away, exiting the system, is one way of thinking about race and mobility in that period.

Emancipation through the creation of network capital

But also you can think of how systems get overturned by the illicit mobilities not only of people but also of goods, how things get smuggled, how they bypass the impositions of the plantation system. I got interested in thinking about this long process of emancipation from slavery as very much related to different forms of mobilities and differential mobilities. Really you could think of it in terms of the creation of network capital. That might sound surprising, but if we look at Elliott and Urry’s definition of network capital, it’s: “A combination of capacities to be mobile, including appropriate documents, money and qualifications; access to networks at-a-distance; physical capacities for movement; location-free information and contact points; access to communication devices and secure meeting places; access to vehicles, infrastructures; and time and other resources for coordination.” When I imagine the forms of resistance to slavery, I can think about network capital as being really crucial to those. Almost all of these elements of network capital, ever since the founding of plantation regimes across the Americas, are more concentrated in white hands, and were denied to enslaved people and later to freed African Americans. Yet we don’t have a systematic theoretical framework for approaching racial projects as a spatial relation and a bodily relation that’s predicated upon differential mobilities.

The production of space through the racial segregation of dwelling-places and neighborhoods, private and public spaces that are racially distinguished, of transit corridors and vehicles that have segregated use of them – all of these areas which became really central in US politics and governance of mobility – are arenas of racial domination, racial privilege and demands for racial justice.

Political contestation over the right to be mobile/immobile

So if we look back at the history of civil rights movements, desegregation of transit was crucial, beginning with the famous Plessy vs. Ferguson case of 1896 up to the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the famous actions by Rosa Parks, in 1955, and more recent mobility justice movements such as the LA Bus Riders' Union. Various writers have studied this, like Tim Cresswell's work; Cotton Seiler, who has written histories of automobility and transit in the United States; Paul Gilroy's work on cultural performances of automobility. There has been this long political contestation over the right to be mobile, as well as the right to remain in place. So all of these are issues about mobility and moorings, that is, how to move and how to settle, who is able to move and who is forced to move, and who must move very very carefully, not only during slavery or desegregation but also in more recent cases such as the beating of Rodney King or the recent killing of Trayvon Martin.

Racialized mobility regimes: from emancipation movements to 20th racialized urbanisation

How do different events of moving, slowing, staying, passing, pausing, or rushing inform the meaning and experience of mobility as a racialized experience? We can trace these racialized mobility systems in the United States out of the abolition of slavery into the Reconstruction era, the rise of the Jim Crow segregation systems, and then the Great Migration out of the South and into the Northern Cities in the 1920s and 30s, and then the civil rights movement. But limitations on spatial mobility remain today as a key aspect of the managing of racialized space. Racial and class distinctions in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, are a crucial axis for the differentiation of network capital, arising out of the long history in the United States of racial and class discrimination in mobility rights and freedoms, and that's carried over into the age of automobility.

We can furthermore read these racialized mobility regimes in the patterns of US urbanization and suburbanization. First, the unequal investment in highway and automobile infrastructure at the expense of public transit, which has privileged automobility over other forms of mobility; secondly the 1950s Federal Housing Authority subsidies for suburban home owners that contributed to "white flight" from the de-industrializing cities of the post-World War II era; and finally the urban renewal policies of the 1960s and 70s that created ghettos of public housing projects with limited means of mobility, in contrast to the white suburbs mainly accessible by car. So all of these aspects of mobility that we can trace back to slavery and emancipation have carried through right across the 20th century into the forms of urbanization and automobility that we see today.

Privatized corridors of white privileged mobility

I just want to point to one other thing, if we switch our perspective to looking at elite mobilities and the infrastructures that perpetuate extreme wealth. While much early interest in mobilities has focused on that which moves, there is also a growing concern with the infrastructures that enable mobility. Mobilities have been supported by a wide range of systems and infrastructures that create particular kinds of mobility space, and I would argue that aerial space and aerial life, as Peter Adey describes it, is the production of a white space, a space represented by whiteness and populated by white bodies.

Although the global circulation of elites through privatized corridors of privileged mobility (including the protection of wealth in offshore tax havens), is not necessarily a racial process, given the racialized distribution of wealth in the world today, the main beneficiaries of such spaces of privileged mobility tend to be white. Indeed, one could argue that a key feature in the production of white privilege is access to speed, privacy and ease in physical movement through a kind of cocooning of the body and of the means of mobility. The creation of airline privilege programs, global trusted traveler programs, first class cabins and private jet services reinforce aerial space as a space for white passage. Aerial space is a white space, a space represented by whiteness and populated by white bodies.

Intersecting environmental justice movement and racial justice movement

So ultimately, when we look at both sides of this argument about the production of racial space in the US and the current production of elite spaces of mobility, we could think about how forms of racialized labor, racial embodiment and state racial projects are closely tied to economic structures that rely on cheap energy and that produce racially segregated urbanism, suburbanization and the heavy carbon footprints of jet travel for elite mobilities. So I would argue ultimately that the environmental justice movement has to look at both the histories of environmental impacts of different forms of mobility but also at the production of racialized space and the question of racial justice movements as a crucial part of a transition towards a more sustainable mobility system.

Mobilities paradigm

The mobilities paradigm is a way of seeing the world that is sensitive to the role of movement in ordering social relations. It serves to legitimize questions about the practical, discursive, technological, and organizational ways in which societies deal with distance and the appropriate methods for their study.

En savoir plus x

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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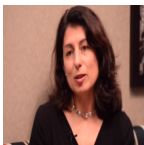
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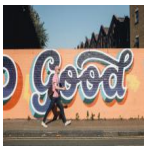
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