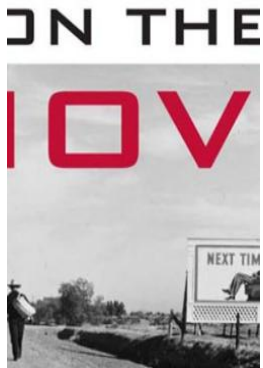


1. Essential reading



On the Move. Mobility in the Western World - by Tim Cresswell

By Javier Caletrío (Sociologue)
11 December 2012

On the Move examines how modes of imagining place, space, and mobility imbue everyday life with ideology. In so doing it provides a way of thinking mobilities in relation to each other and within broader historical contexts.

Knowledge and ideology

Movement is a fact of life. Knowledge about flow and movement in all its rich and diverse forms, from the circulation of blood through our veins, to dance, car traffic, tourism and global commodity trade, is currently being produced in a wide range of disconnected fields and subfields of study from medicine, law and dance to photography, logistics and urban planning. While such division of knowledge is decades and even centuries old, the result of this specialization has been a dramatic increase in certain bodies of knowledge but a disarming inability to make connections between now seemingly independent areas of social, economic, political and environmental life. As a result, what is absent in many fields of study is not only a view of the systemic nature of all forms of life and an awareness of the multiple spatial and temporal scales at which any phenomena or process gains expression or manifests itself. The lack of dialogue between disciplines, especially between the so called 'hard sciences', and the social sciences, arts and humanities is also preventing a deeper understanding of how knowledge is being produced and the implicit assumptions, values and ideological commitments unconsciously being made by scientists, engineers, planners, technocrats and people in all sorts of professional realms in the development and application of seemingly objective practices of scientific research.

Aim of the book

On the Move is a fine example of the multidimensional thinking of mobilities research and the possibilities it opens for describing and understanding questions of travel, transport and movement in all its rich complexity. The book provides 'a way of thinking that traces some of the processes that run through the different accounts of human mobility at different scales and ties them into a single logic without negating the very important differences between them' (p. 7). It does so by examining how ways

of imagining place, space and movement inform habits of action and thought in ideological ways. Such geographical imagination often constitutes an unconscious background shaping the construction of knowledge in a wide array of professional and disciplinary contexts, creating silent, unexpected links between seemingly differentiated realms of natural, social and political life. The examples used to illustrate this include the aforementioned fields of anatomy, medicine, law, dance, literature, photography, urban planning, philosophy and geography.

Movement and mobility

The book is structured in nine chapters. The first two outline the conceptual framework while the rest form a series of detailed case studies that vividly illustrate and further expand the theoretical discussions. Cresswell begins his conceptual approach with a basic description of movement as a displacement from point A to point B, as the line that links point A and point B (i.e. $A \rightarrow B$). He then asks how it is that spatial and social sciences have assumed the line linking point A and point B as being an unspecified, blank space. For example, that line may encompass the frustrated London mother stuck in the traffic jam on the morning school run, the terrorized Somali refugee crossing the straits of Bab el Mandeb in a crowded tiny fishing vessel on her way to Yemen, the diligent Argentinian paramedic rushing to a road accident in the outskirts of Valparaíso, or the Swedish CEO feeling at ease in the first class lounge of Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport. Why has the line linking point A with point B been seen as neutral when all over the world the movement of people is full of meaning?

A key aim of critical mobilities research, Cresswell argues, is to make sure that that line is not emptied of meaning, that its content is adequately examined. In explaining how motion is made meaningful, he proposes an analytical distinction between 'movement' and 'mobility'. He explains this difference by reference to a well-known distinction between 'location' and 'place'. Location, he observes, is abstracted space emptied of history and ideology, an unspecified dot in a map. By contrast, place is a meaningful portion of space, location instilled with meaning and ideology. Drawing on this distinction, Cresswell proposes that movement is the dynamic equivalent of location while mobility is the dynamic equivalent of place. Movement is then mobility abstracted from practical contexts of meaning and power. Mobility, by contrast, is movement loaded with social and cultural significance. When considering mobility we are then paying attention not simply to the material fact of movement, but also to the ideas attached to that movement (e.g. freedom, transgression), and the embodied social practices with which a physical displacement is always indissolubly intertwined (e.g. commuting, taking kids to school, doing business, holidaymaking, doing exercise, escaping). Mobility as socially produced motion is an amalgam of those three elements (the brute fact of physical movement, ideas of mobility and embodied practices).

Connecting mobilities

Spatial and social sciences have tended to focus on movement rather than mobility, assuming places to be the foundation of human experience and the basic unit of social research. Mobility, when it was considered, appeared subordinated to place, such as in migration theories assuming migrants as being 'pulled to' or 'pushed from' specific places. Cresswell argues that such absence of meaning in spatial analysis, such neglect of mobility as movement imbued with meaning and power, should be a cause of concern because it precludes seeing the existing connections between different mobilities at different scales, and between different approaches to studying human mobility. An example of how meanings travel and jump scales is the influence that seventeenth-century discoveries of the circulation of blood through the body had on developments in economics, Hobbesian political philosophy and urban planning. In the specific realm of urban planning, for example, the city was envisioned as a body whose health depended on the correct circulation of air, water and waste. A good, healthy city came to be considered that which enabled smooth flow. Obstructions to flow were believed to cause malaise for the urban body.

The power of geographical imaginations

Just as in this example a particular idea of mobility as health emerging in one field has informed thought and action in other restricted fields, sometimes specific forms of imagining mobility become widespread, constituting a tacit symbolic matrix shared by whole populations and cultures. These imaginaries confer legitimacy to common practices and pursuits and embed them in a normative scheme. Cresswell identifies two such geographical imaginations that have been particularly influential in the modern western world, each one revolving around specific, yet distinct understandings of place, spatial ordering, and mobility, and each one implying a specific moral order. One privileges fixity and stasis and presumes an ethical life and an authentic existence to be rooted in place. Mobility is then regarded as morally suspect. The migrant and the nomad are seen as a disorder in the system and despised as incapable of commitment. Another positively sanctions the fleeting, the ephemeral and the temporary, associating mobility with freedom, progress and positive change, and seeing belonging and attachment to place as reactionary.

The power of these imaginaries to shape action and thought across different fields is shown in a number of fascinating case studies: nineteenth-century photographic techniques to make movement intelligible, factory-based motion-studies to produce new, more efficient workers, the normalization of ballroom dancing in Britain, mobility as a right of citizenship, the role of mobility in feminist activism, and the airport as a site for the production of mobilities. This last case study successfully weaves earlier analyses of photographic techniques, migration and citizenship in discussing the regulation of human mobilities at Amsterdam Schiphol airport. Each of these studies shows how a desired or legitimate mobility is always embedded in a normative field that presupposes other mobilities which are negatively sanctioned as inappropriate, excessive or corrupt. These studies show a tension that has been constitutive of modern western societies: movement as a source of order and transgression, as the very principle of modern life, and movement as the threat to suppress or regulate.

Contribution to the mobilities literature

This book is a major contribution to the mobilities literature by an academic who has consistently argued for a mobilities turn in the social sciences. Its style is clear and engaging, making it enjoyable reading and showing that serious scholarship can be written in a way that is accessible to wider publics. The richly illustrated case studies are full of unexpected connections between practices and events in the nineteenth century with contemporary aspects of everyday life. This serves as a reminder that mobilities research, at the moment excessively focused on the present, should cultivate a historical sensitivity that helps discern the continuities and changes in current practices and ideas of mobility. Those interested in a further elaboration of the issues developed in this book may want to look at Cresswell's recent paper 'Towards a Politics of Mobility'.

On the Move has been particularly influential in British human geography, one of the fields where the mobilities turn has resonated most deeply and which is producing some of the best research. A reflection of the growing significance of mobilities in geography, and the recognition granted to Cresswell, is the invitation he received recently to write a report for the journal *Progress in Human Geography* about mobility as a leading issue in the discipline (see Cresswell 2010, 2012).

About the author

Tim Cresswell is Professor of Human Geography at Northeastern University, in Boston. Since the mid 1980s he has been writing about mobility, space and power.

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

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

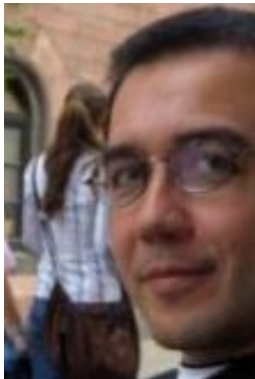
Associated Thematics :

Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Inequalities

Theories

- Concepts
- History



Javier Caletrió

Sociologue

Javier Caletrió is the scientific advisor of the Mobile Lives Forum for the English-speaking world (BA Economics, Valencia; MA, PhD Sociology, Lancaster) . He is a researcher with a background in the humanities and social sciences. In addition, he also has a strong interest in the natural sciences, especially ecology and ornithology. His research lies broadly in the areas of environmental change and sustainability transitions, especially in relation to mobility and inequality. Javier was based at the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University from 1998 to 2017.

The same author [See all publications](#)



Harnessing social tipping dynamics for the ecological transition: the case of the electric car

Javier Caletrío



Ecotourism: Is my flying saving the planet?

Javier Caletrío



Mobility and disability

Javier Caletrío

To cite this publication :

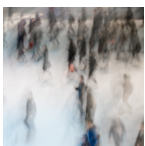
Javier Caletrío (11 December 2012), « On the Move. Mobility in the Western World - by Tim Cresswell », Préparer la transition mobilitaire. Consulté le 22 July 2024, URL: <https://forumviesmobiles.org/en/essential-readings/516/move-mobility-western-world-tim-cresswell>

Other publications



Geographical re-placement

Thierry Ramadier



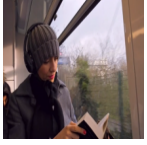
History of the concept of mobility

Vincent Kaufmann



The weight of daily life: women facing mobility

Anne Jarrigeon



The mobility of women: a constrained freedom

Anne Jarrigeon