FORUM VIES MOBILES

POINTS DE VUE

# Mobile Urbanisms

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Since 1960 the world's population has increased from 3 to 7 billion. Of this, half lives in cities, a figure which is expected to rise to 6,3 billion by 2050, posing still more complex sustainability challenges, especially for developing countries where 82% of the world's population currently lives and where most megacities (cities with a population of more than 10 million) are expected to emerge in the coming decades. As cities evolve in an unevenly interconnected world, the realities of social exclusion, traffic congestion, 'natural' disasters and security risks, economic crises and development, infrastructural stress and failure are being experienced and addressed in myriad ways, some of them inspired by experiences and policies tested elsewhere, in other cities.

The mobilities turn in the social sciences is helping to further an understanding of these challenges and is providing socially and policy relevant knowledge generated within Europe, North America and, increasingly, elsewhere. In this expanding field, British human geography has since the early 2000s made important contributions as evinced by the diversity of mobilities papers and sessions at the annual conferences of the Institute of British Geographers (IBG). The Mobile Urbanisms conference organized by the IBG's Urban Geography Research Group has been in line with such a promising trend, reflecting the diverse ways in which mobilities and cities are being studied and pointing at emerging areas of research.

The conference call for papers invited a wide range of submissions relating mobilities with, among others, urban infrastructure, public space, citizenship, gender, age, inequalities, disability, gentrification, and political mobilitizations. The conference title, borrowed from Eugene McCann's and Kevin Ward's recent book on policy mobilities (2011), was, however, indicative of the focus of many of the papers and discussions that took place in all sessions. Policy mobilities is a new strand of research arguing that urban development cannot be understood by looking at what happens within the narrow geographical

confines of the city or the country of which they are part. Instead, cities need to be understood as assemblages of policies, ideas and practices which are territorially defined but also influenced by experiences and policies in other cities. Through this territorial *and* relational approach cities are then to be seen as forming part of a wider transnational urban network through which ideas and experiences travel, are translated and mutate. Such circuits of urban mobilities are highly selective and a concern is to identify which policies travel and which fail to do so, and the infrastructures, architectures, ideologies, regulations, professions, identities and individuals facilitating or hindering such mobilities.

At the Mobile Urbanisms conference presentations about policy mobilities included historical research on the genealogy of the idea of 'model cities' showing continuities and discontinuities of such a notion in the twentieth century, the role of 'negative models' in the planning strategy of London 2012 Olympics, the methodologies and methods to study how policies travel and the relation between policy mobilities, social learning and policy change. The conference also included papers on how the 'sustainable masterplans' behind the proliferation of 'eco-cities' have become a planning 'model' and the way it circulates internationally. One of the most interesting papers looked at Bogotá as a 'model city' for its 'successful' experiences in transport, education, security, and public space. Drawing on archival and ethnographic research on the bus system, the paper examined the emergence of risk as a paradigm of urban planning and the way in which risk informs the envisioning of urban futures. The paper discussed how cities like Bogotá in the global south are now inventing original solutions to their problems or borrowing solutions from other cities in the global south, signaling a break in modernist mode of knowledge transfer from the metropolis to the peripheries. Another fascinating paper examined the policy transfer process behind the expansion of the 'bus rapid transit' concept in South Africa. Seeking to understand the reasons why some policies successfully travel while others are ignored or rejected, the paper examined the role of the local urban landscape in providing a fertile ground for the implementation of certain transport policies.

The rest of the papers were not explicitly concerned with policy mobilities but many of them discussed specific case studies and provided insights which fostered a lively discussion about similarities, differences and borrowings between different cities. This was particularly the case for papers focused on traffic and public transport policies in nineteenth-century London, post-civil war Beirut, and contemporary Limmerick. In their own different ways these papers examined how specific ideas of mobility in the city wrestle with and are shaped by local politics and offer an original perspective to analyze wider social and political processes. There was also a 'pecha kucha' session. This new format of presenting research consisting on short five-minute presentations is still new to many and is sometimes received with scepticism, but in this conference it worked well and provided

fresh, clear and stimulating insights into a variety of projects on psychogeography, infrastructural megaprojects, nomadology, gated communities and the mobility of ideas of colonial planning.

The explicit emphasis on policy mobilities did not preclude, however, due attention to other seminal issues in the research agenda on cities and mobilities. In fact, none of the keynote sessions was actually on such a topic, which testifies to the willingness of the organizers to make the event as wide ranging and inclusive as possible. Alison Blunt, the first keynote speaker, talked about an ongoing research programme on diaspora cities, a project that seeks to think cities through diasporas and diasporas through cities. Her research on Jewish, Anglo-Indian, Bhramo and Chinese communities in Calcutta shows how, contrary to certain strands of diaspora research, cities rather than nations become places of belonging for diasporic communities and how visits to places of origin revolve around the re-enactment of memories and the experience of street life which serve to nurture a sense of belonging. By conducting research on both cities of origin and resettlement, Blunt's work shows how ideas of cities travel through diasporas. Such an emphasis on materiality, memory and transnational networks is providing a productive way to establish dialogue between migration and mobilities studies, an issue that only recently has begun to be addressed.

If the first keynote session was the presentation of years of ongoing research, the second keynote session, entitled 'Evacuate: governing mobility in emergency', was the presentation of a new project by Peter Adey. The paper focused on the ambiguous ways in which evacuation produces new forms of vulnerability. It did so in various ways. I outline here three of them which I found most interesting: first, by attending to the fluid status of the evacuee, a subject whose identity, rights and needs shift at different moments of the evacuation process; second, by examining the tacit social and cultural commitments assumed by evacuation plans, especially regarding the behavior and agency of evacuees; and finally by examining the imaginaries of evacuation informing official evacuation procedures as well as in art, aesthetics and design. A few lines in this brief summary can hardly do justice to the richness of the argument and one hopes this research project will soon materialize in a monograph as inspiring as his previous work on Aerial Life (2010). This is a fascinating topic which is set to become increasingly significant in urban governance as climate, energy, infrastructural and security challenges increase with the growing urbanization of the world's population.

The last keynote was by historian Richard Dennis from University College London. His paper 'More haste, less speed: On the nature of mobility in nineteenth and early twentieth-century London' examined shifting modes of experiencing time and space at that specific period of profound technological transformations in western societies. The acceleration of

everyday life and the promises of social and economic progress it evoked, Dennis argued, were accompanied by feelings of frustration at the increasing frequency of congestion, a feeling partly caused by lowering tolerance towards the slowing down of circulation. While such transformations expressed in what E.M Forster called 'the architecture of hurry' (Howard's End, 1910) have been broadly examined by scholars looking at the social and cultural dimensions of modernity (see Schivelbush 1977, Thrift 1996), an original aspect of Dennis research is not just the detail he goes into but his eclectic combination of quantitative and qualitative sources of information. These included quantitative data on residential patterns and the speed and frequency of travel in London along with qualitative analyses of visual and literary works such as subway posters and paintings (e.g. Ginner's 'Picadilly Circus' 1912, Cyril Power's 'The Escalator' 1929) and novels by Forster (i.e Howard's End) and Gissing (i.e. The Whirlpool). This talk on 'old mobilities', as Dennis described it, was, I think, an excellent way to end the conference, not just as a reminder of the valuable contribution that historians are silently making in the mobilities field, but also as an illustration of the potential benefits of employing an eclectic range of data in the study of mobilities. At the beginning of his talk, Dennis explicitly declared himself not a 'mobilities' researcher, but being nonetheless open to emerging trends in geography which can illuminate the way we look at the past. I think this is illustrative of the subtle ways in which mobilities is informing research beyond the fields, programmes and networks explicitly identified with the mobilities turn in the social sciences.

Overall this was an enjoyable event with high quality papers. Out of 25 presentations, including the keynotes and the pecha kucha session, there was only one dull paper, and some of the most inspiring came from younger researchers. Attended by fifty scholars from different disciplines, the conference provided a diverse setting for discussing an emerging theme in mobilities and urban studies –policy mobilities– while at the same time its scope was broad enough to appeal people like me with a wider interest on mobilities and cities. Taking place at the very centre of London, the event was attended largely by researchers from the many London universities but there were also scholars from other UK and European institutions. For a conference with a strong emphasis on urban policies it was disappointing, however, to see a lack of both speakers and members of the audience from the public sector (although one paper did involve academics working in a trilateral partnership with the private and public sectors). On the other hand, an aspect to be praised is the diversity of case studies from different parts of the world. This diversity will again characterize the forthcoming Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society – Institute of British Geographers to take place in London on the 27-30 August. With at least 20 sessions (out of a total of 120) on mobilities and many other sessions on globalization, energy, cities, resilience and infrastructure, it certainly is an event to pencil in the agenda. Check this website for further information about the mobilities sessions in this

Check this website for further information about the mobilities sessions in this forthcoming conference.

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