

# Introduction: Studying (Im)mobility through a Politics of Proximity

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From John Urry's seminal book *Sociology beyond Societies. Mobilities for the 21st Century* (Urry 2000) onwards, this last decade has been marked by a novel interest towards mobility, mobilities, movement and motion as the hallmark of both social dynamics and their sociological (but not only sociological) understanding.

It is not by chance that the International Sociological Association (ISA) decided to entitle its 2010 World Congress 'Sociology on the Move'; neither by chance has the body of literature having mobility/mobilities as keywords and topic been increasing (Cresswell 2006, Sheller and Urry 2006a, Urry 2007, Canzler, Kaufman and Kesselring 2008, Dennis and Urry 2009, Verstraete 2009, Adey 2010, Cwerner, Kesslerling and Urry 2009, Schönfelder and Axhausen 2010 amongst many others).

Is mobility a new phenomenon in history and society? Migrations, diasporas, urbanization processes show how big physical movements of people constituted turning points for creating new social, cultural, economic and political conditions. What changes, indeed, when looking at contemporary society by highlighting the continuous and interrelated movement of multiple elements (not only people, but also objects, information, representations, risks, cultures and communication) is the epistemological primacy so far attributed to sedentariness, physical proximity and stability (cf. Engelbrekt in this book).

The Simmelian matrix of such a perspective relies not only in the primacy of the sense of the eye for corporeal travel (cf. Urry 2000, 2007), but also in the relevance of relations and relationality, more than their provisional outcomes. In a certain sense, it could be said no sociology of change can exist, since sociology (as well as society) *is* change, movement and motion. Simmel also contributes greatly to an analysis of travel, body in motion, patterns of mobility in the city (Urry 2007).

Given this scenario where multiple forms of mobility are intertwined to the extent of producing complex patterns of real and virtual co-presence, what is the contribution that this book aims to provide in the context of the (over)crowded, ever changing landscape of mobility as academic discourse?

Indeed, mobility and related concepts (flow, flux, networks, -scapes, cf. Hannerz 1992, 2002, Castells 1996, Appadurai 1996) has constituted a consolidated discourse unifying some social sciences, from sociology to anthropology and cultural geography, over the last decade. In this sense, mobility is a powerful keyword used to assemble interpretive resources in order to understand the global changes occurring in contemporary society (cf. Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006, Pellegrino 2007).

The title of the book summarizes its ‘philosophy’, based on a relational approach to the phenomena addressed, as multiple as the chapters and contributions herein collected: from theoretical analyses of space, mobility and proximity, within and beyond the so-called ‘Mobility Turn’ (Marchetti, Engelbrekt, Buscema); to issues of textual (im)mobilities linked to car transport system (Noy) and a return to physical proximity after segregation (Gerharz); from the city as landscape enabling and constraining mobility, immobility and inequalities (Colleoni, Jirón); to the global phenomenon of multinational travelling workforces (Gherardi).

What ties together so many different subjects, topics and focuses?

In the beginning, many of the chapters of this book came out of a call for papers for a session held at the IIS Congress of Sociology in Budapest (2008), starting from the evidence that intersections, overlaps and relations between globality and locality can be framed through the encompassing concept of mobility, which fosters both a powerful discourse in multiple settings and a renewed perspective in looking at socio-political transformations in the twenty-first century.

After that and through the complex process of peer reviewing and adaptation which allows for ideas to circulate in the form of what is known as an ‘edited book’, some key words and statements emerged as follows, constituting the (hidden) infrastructure of the book:

- the inescapably political character of proximity and, complementarily, mobility. ‘Political’ means here that more or less freely chosen (or constrained) elements are mobilized together when people, objects, information are on the move. In this respect, *politics* can be re-framed as the ‘art’, the power, and the possibility to set up strategies in order to enable, constrain or even enforce conditions of physical and virtual proximity between people, objects and information, or, in other terms, sociotechnical assemblies, networks of human and non human elements (Latour 1989);
- the need to put *proximity* at the centre of the stage, in order to understand how the feeling of being close to each other is accomplished through circulating objects, practices and discourses, ever more crucial in our social being and social life. Proximity itself is on the move and constitutive of mobility;
- the relational, ever changing, dialectic constitution of mobility (cf. Urry 2007, Adey 2006, 2009) which is addressed in this book through the conceptual couple *Mobility/Immobility*: neither a dualism nor an opposition, rather a relational *continuum*;

- the *sociotechnical constitution* of our everyday life as invisible, tacit *fil rouge* of all the contributions. None of them addresses explicitly the issue of technological innovation (Buscema being a partial exception); notwithstanding this apparent marginality of technology, it is in the backstage of many of the essays. This introduction will provide an overall view of the elements of the current technological scenario and its relevance for proximity, mobility and immobility;
- *practice* as the situated and material *locus* where proximity, mobility and immobility are put forward, challenged and realized, throughout myriad contexts, cases, situations and conditions where different assemblies of (im)mobility and types of proximity are practised and constructed.

The remainder of this introduction will provide a focused analysis of the categories listed above, in order to propose a general frame, through which to enter the book contents.

## Politics

Politics is about choices and decisions, selection and norms. Politics is about rhetoric and persuasion: outcomes of decisions are not natural, but social; neither taken for granted, nor irreversible, as they are politically relevant and inspired by political moves and motives.

Since politics is about positioning oneself, situating selves and things ‘somewhere’ (Haraway 1991, Suchman 2002), as well as articulating the engineering of the heterogeneous which mingles together people, artefacts and words (Law 1997), it is involved in proximity and, consequently, in mobility.

In fact, ‘... Mobility provides a space for a politics and renders our ability to be *political* by shaping one’s capacity to contest, deliberate and oppose’ (Adey 2010: 84, original emphasis).

Furthermore, ‘Mobilities are underscored by political decision making and ideological meanings that arrange mobility and the possibility of mobility – motility – in particular ways to relations of society and power’ (Adey 2010: 131).

Giving proximity a political meaning aims to render the chosen, not natural, socially constructed and articulated character of the feelings of togetherness, vicinity and distance. The common association of mobility to freedom, equality and justice is the ideological veil which endows such a construction, the shortcomings of which can be more than severe, opening gates not just to a heaven of ‘elected mobility’, but also to the hell of injustice, inequalities and multiple divides (Adey 2010, Urry 2007). In this sense, proximity politics brings to the stage those issues linked with the forced relational closeness due to globalization processes, ‘both “structurally” via the complex institutional interconnections of globalization, and “phenomenologically” via the sort of *experienced* proximity that is provided

in time-space bridging technologies – particularly communications and media technologies’ (Tomlison 2000: 403, original emphasis).

There are negotiations and conflicts, alliances and rivalries involved in this character of proximity. Proximity can be enforced or prohibited (cf. Būscema’s and Gerharz’s chapters in this book); it is based on communicational and metacommunicational skills, which can be acquired depending on social, cultural and mobility capital (cf. Part III of the book). Such a composite capital is the result of politics (and connected policies) which enable or constrain individuals and groups’ ability to build up resources for accomplishing strategies of proximity and mobility towards each other.

Eventually, politics means selective decision making processes, and orientation towards future outcomes of present actions which are likely to happen (cf. Luhmann 1982). Such an orientation involves a proactive attitude, taking into consideration how the combination of multiple mobility systems generates potential for future mobilities, so shaping and changing patterns of (intermittent) proximity.

## **Proximity**

The crucial character of proximity – and distance as its complementary dimension – is evident across the history of sociological thought and the media. The primacy of face-to-face, body-to-body relationships is maintained for the existence of both the individual and the community (cf. Gerharz in this book). Therefore, it can be said that:

Social science presumes a ‘metaphysics of presence’, that it is the immediate presence with others that is the basis of social existence ... And yet ... all social life ... presumes relationships of intermittent presence and modes of absence depending in part upon the multiple technologies of travel and communications that move objects, people, ideas, images across varying distances. (Urry 2007: 47)

Phenomenology approaches such a metaphysics and condenses it when stating that:

The place which my body occupies within the world, my actual Here, is the starting point from which I take my bearing in space. It is, so to speak, the center 0 of my system of coordinates ... And in a similar way my actual Now is the origin of all the time perspectives under which I organize the events within the world. (Schutz 1945: 545)

The immediacy and relevance of the ‘Here and Now’, or world of the ‘actual reach’ according to Schutz, presumes the possibility to derive from such a world all the other forms of communication and social interaction (cf. Berger and

Luckmann 1967). To some extent, the intervention of technical means aimed at extending spatial and temporal accessibility of symbolic contents, and producing what has been called ‘mediated interaction’ and ‘mediated quasi-interaction’ (Thompson 1995) represent surrogated forms of the original co-present, spatio-temporal simultaneity of face-to-face interaction. Yet, it is questionable if body-to-body communication must be considered as the only possible and univocal model for understanding mediated interaction (Fortunati 2005). Indeed, alternative models should consider that all types of interaction at a distance, intermittently and discontinuously performed, deserve the same attention and interest for social life as face-to-face communication based in physical co-presence (Urry 2002). At the same time, notwithstanding the issue of disruption of social ties linked to extensive networked communication being a prominent argument (cf. Adey 2010), compulsion to proximity in physical co-presence is not excluded, but rather enhanced, by imaginative, virtual and communicative travel of information (Urry 2002, 2007, Boden and Molotch 1994, Engelbrekt in this book).

Indeed, proximity, closeness and togetherness increasingly depend on how mobility is articulated through the ever-present influence of infrastructures: ‘What constitutes social life is fundamentally heterogeneous and part of that heterogeneity ... are various material objects ... that directly or indirectly move or block the movement of objects, people and information’ (Urry 2007: 50). This raises some important questions, variously addressed in the book’s chapters:

- Is mobility a resource or a boundary (cf. Marchetti, Gherardi)?
- How is ‘being on the move’ accomplished (cf. Buscema, Noy)? How is the sense of time, space, global and local shaped through mobile practices (cf. Part I and II)?
- How is the sense of proximity constructed through multiple informational and communicational infrastructures (cf. Part II and III)?
- How are practices of mobility/immobility supported and fostered in the global arena (cf. Part III)?
- What is the relationship between proximity and contextualization (cf. Part I)?

### **(Im)mobility**

Mobility cannot be conceived of without its opposite, that means immobility. Like Janus, the God of all beginnings, passages and movements, mobility has a double status and a relational constitution: ‘... mobilities are positioned in relation to something or somebody ... mobility and immobility are understood as an effect or an outcome of a relation’ (Adey 2010: 17–18). The category of difference becomes relevant here, with its political implications in terms of power and positioning into power relations (Butler 1990, Adey 2010; cf. Buscema and Part II of this book).

Difference makes it possible to overcome the idea of ‘mobility’ as single, rigid category, since it requires multiple moorings and relative immobilities for mobility to be maintained and performed over time and space in a fluid way (Urry 2003, 2007, Adey 2006, 2010).

The dialectic relationship between mobility and immobility, therefore, opens up their plurality and multiplicity: mobility is multiple, constituted by mobilities of various types (cf. Urry 2007), depending on the combination and action of different ‘carriers’ of movement (bodies, objects, goods, information, representations and so on). Furthermore, mobility and immobility rely on mediations and connections of such carriers in broader sets, or textures; what Urry, again, names as mobility-systems ‘... that distribute people, activities and objects in and through time-space and are key in the metabolic relationship of human societies with nature’ (Urry 2007: 51).

Again, these systems have a political relevance and significance, by means of ‘... the effect of producing substantial inequalities between places and between people in terms of their location and access to these mobility-systems’ (Urry 2007: 51). In this sense, ‘... unforced movement is power ... [It means] to be able to move (or to be able voluntarily to stay still) is for individuals and groups a major source of advantage’ (Urry 2007: 51–2; cf. Gerharz and Gherardi in this book).

These systems are based on expert knowledge, therefore (im)mobility is deeply embedded and rooted in what I term as sociotechnical mediation, which accounts for the different and diverse meanings mobilities have in the twenty-first century society: ‘... while it is true that all societies have involved multiple mobilities ... the twenty-first century places *digitized* systems of mobility at its very core’ (Urry 2007: 15, my emphasis). These systems and their qualification as ‘digitized’ constitute the novel, emergent and crucial character of contemporary mobilities. In the next section, a sociotechnical, non deterministic approach to qualities of these digitized systems will be proposed.

### **Sociotechnical mediation of (im)mobility**

Far from being something external impacting unilaterally on our daily lives, technology is the result of conflict and negotiation among key social groups, which construct it (Bijker 1995). In particular, technology is deeply involved in the way people, objects and information are more and more ‘on the move’. Mobility depends on sociotechnical processes which make artefacts increasingly convergent, multi-functional and pocketable. Technological mediation of mobility is both based on specific artefacts, e.g. mobile phones, laptops, PDAs; and embedded in complex infrastructures based on sociotechnical networks, e.g. electricity, the Internet, broadband networks, wireless networks. Such infrastructures are the invisible and embedded texture (‘moorings’, Urry 2003) which make it possible for people, objects and information to be mobile. They represent the pre-requisite of interconnections which allow communication

while being on the move, as well as the portability and transferability of data and information across large networks.

Technologies of/for mobility can be situated at the crossroads of complementary phenomena which characterize contemporary sociotechnical mediation, namely convergence, or the trend towards uniformity of technological platforms and systems; saturation; hybridity; ubiquity: saturation as the web of interoperability on which infrastructures are built up and linked to each other; hybridity as the constant interlinkage of human and non human components; ubiquity as aspiration towards omnipresence through simultaneity and instantaneity (cf. Pellegrino 2010a).

### *Convergence in technologies for mobility*

Different types of convergence can be identified in technologies for mobility. Generally speaking, technologies tend to converge at the level of markets, functions and infrastructural architectures. Furthermore, there is a material profile of this convergence, which has to do with miniaturization and portability of multiple, multifunctional mobile technological artefacts. They concentrate in themselves a high diversity of tasks, functions and channels of communication. Multimedia is part of the emergence of convergence as a long-lasting trend in media and information history. Such a convergence is particularly linked with the body and redefines materiality and visibility of technology. The increasing convergence of functions and infrastructures for corporeal and communication travel (e.g. the smart car and the development of the mobile Internet) is also part of the sociotechnical framework of convergence.

### *Saturation of mediated environments*

The texture of saturation is, like that of infrastructures, integrated and based on the concept of interoperability (Bowker and Star 2000). As such, it is invisible, transparent, therefore difficult to grasp in its patterns. It happens with all complex infrastructures that we become aware of their existence when they stop working, when any kind of breakdown, interruption and misuse occurs. This phenomenon can be referred to the mobile phone as ubiquitous technology accessible everywhere/everytime, the saturation of which increases expectations of continuous availability of participants to the communication process (Katz and Aakhus 2002). More generally, the concept of saturation describes well the way our bodies and environments are intertwined into inextricable chains of socio-technical relationships, like in the 'everyware' texture of ubiquitous computing, imagined as a technology able to colonize surfaces and settings of everyday life (Greenfield 2006).

### *Hybrid bodies and artificial natures*

Objects ready to hand which provide affordances to mobile practices (Urry 2007) are differently integrated, mingled and portable within the body and the surrounding environment. Interoperability and saturation make technological devices, networks and media closer to each other. In this respect, as they become closer, differences and boundaries between them and between technology and ourselves go in the background. Indeed, proliferation of hybrids and the erection of the boundary between nature and culture are part of the modernization process (Latour 1993). Everyday, we delegate our actions and perform activities through some sociotechnical device, so that it becomes an integral part of our sociality and inextricably assembled with our agency. What appears to be 'natural' is highly artificial and artificially naturalized through rhetorical strategies. All of us are hybrid and hybridized: the body is increasingly empowered through technology; communication cannot be conceived of without mixtures of media and assemblies of sociotechnical devices.

### *Ubiquity and extension of co-presence*

Ubiquity can be defined as the tension towards 'being anywhere anytime' as opposed to the *hic et nunc* constraints of face-to-face interaction. The mobile phone is *par excellence* an example of such a ubiquity because of the constant availability it makes possible. The tension towards reaching a virtual, potential omnipresence is supported by convergent artefacts, which make ubiquity more at hand than before. Mobility itself is a ubiquitous phenomenon, and globalization can be interpreted as a process of extensive mobilities (Adey 2010).

Ubiquity as aspiration to omnipresence is embedded into discourses, information and artefacts supposed to be accessible anywhere anytime (at least in principle). The myth of ubiquitous computing as invisible, unobtrusive infrastructure embedded into material surfaces is exemplary of a trend to imagine and design contexts of interaction, both public and private, where materiality of technology and transparency of infrastructure are redefined, so mobilizing resources to build up future social settings (cf. Pellegrino 2010b).

### **Practice**

Practice is usually contrasted with theory, since it privileges the situated *locus* of action as the focus of interest in understanding social life and relations. Drawing on phenomenological accounts (Merleau-Ponty 1962, Schutz 1945, Berger and Luckmann 1967), especially Organization Studies (Gherardi 2001, 2006, Orlikowski 2000) as well as Science and Technology Studies (Suchman 1987, Laŵ 1997, Suchman et al. 1999) have pointed out how practice is the foundation for an alternative understanding of organizations and technologies, and in general

for human cognition and activity (cf. Engeström and Middleton 1996). Such an alternative understanding, or the ‘added value’ of a practice perspective, relies on the fact that:

it enables analysis of the social connections among individuals, collectives, organizations, institutions, the situated contexts in which these connections take specific form, and all the intermediaries utilized by them (...) dynamically as the constant becoming of a form which self-reproduces but is never identical with itself in that practices are incomplete and indeterminate until they are situatedly performed. (Gherardi 2006: XVIII)

Such a definition of practice as ‘connection in action’ or ‘texture of practice’ elaborated by Silvia Gherardi (Gherardi 2006) seems particularly adequate to study (im)mobility. Not least because it contains a Simmelian echo of the struggle between form and life, object and process, subjective and objective spirit. On other hand, it is coherent with the attention the ‘Mobilities Paradigm’ has devoted to complexity theory (Urry 2003, 2007), looking at patterns of self production and maintenance of mobility systems and their fluidity. Therefore, it can be said that practice shapes (im)mobility as well as proximity through multiple, situated *loci* of temporary stabilization and fluidity, where a tentative trajectory for assemblages of intermediaries is established and accomplished.

Practice is one of the key-words of this book, not only in the senses listed above, but also because of the attention reserved for seeing mobility and moving empirically (six of the eight chapters are based on empirical research). Doing mobility and enacting immobility, in other words looking at the situated contexts where mobility, immobility and proximity are displayed, accomplished and realized, is one of the objectives of this book. Unfolding representations and discourses of (mediated) (im)mobility is possible through a practice-based approach, which involves the awareness that ‘humans are sensuous, corporeal, technologically extended and *mobile* beings’ (Urry 2007: 51, original emphasis) as well as the necessity to look at the body (and not only it) *in action*, as indivisible from the mind, and embedded in the surrounding environment (cf. Merleau-Ponty 1962, Adey 2010). Following the actors, or better the hybrid, heterogeneous actants in their networks of alliances, enrolment and fabrication (Latour 1989, 1996) as *in fieri* processes, means to avoid the risk of reifying the object. This is even more important when dealing with mobility, which is by definition a changing category.

Last but not least, a practice based perspective recognizes the impossibility of telling and saying everything, the necessity of ‘doing’ the experience of moving on, and the incommensurability between formal and informal settings, explicit and tacit knowledge (Brown and Duguid 1998, Orr 1996, Polanyi 1966).

Practice goes back to situating things, people, connections in action: it complements the deep political meaning of proximity and (im)mobility, as well

as the attempt to understand them while making their constitutive, complex multiplicity as accountable as possible.

### **The book's contribution – an outline**

Given the scenario depicted above, this book aims to focus on specific dimensions of the 'multiple mobilities paradigm' (Sheller and Urry 2006b, Urry 2007), putting forward the following hypotheses to understand contemporary mobility:

- the 'political' dimension as constitutive in establishing patterns of proximity in real and virtual co-presence (cf. Urry 2000). As a consequence, (the sense of) proximity is seen as the result of choices, negotiations and practices carried out in different settings, specified and presented along the various chapters;
- the irreducibly relational character of mobility (Adey 2006) which can be understood only and always in function of its oppositional constituency (that means, immobility). For objects, people and representations being mobile, others must be immobile, anchored, embedded. Such a relational quality is particularly important in shaping mobility and the sense of proximity itself;
- the central concept of 'practice' in shaping and situating relationships between proximity, mobility, and immobility.

The main scope of the book is, therefore, to analyse patterns of mobility in relation with new possibilities to organize space, time and proximity to others.

The main features of the book are the following:

- wide range of methodologies, approaches and case studies through eight chapters;
- equal attention to the theoretical, empirical and methodological dimension of mobility/proximity;
- different phenomena analysed as creating different types of proximity through mobility and immobility (from automobility to diaspora, from urban mobility to mobile work).

The objective is to offer a cross culture (case studies cover a wide range of countries) framing of issues linked to mobility, through the link with immobility and proximity.

This introductory chapter has focused on the points above to specify the contribution the book aims to give to the current debate in the field of the so-called 'Mobility Turn' in sociology and to the vast sociological debate about modes of co-presence and their technological mediations.

Consistent with this analysis, the book is structured according to three conceptual axes, each constituting a different part of the whole work.

Part I (*Categories of Proximity/Mobility*) is conceived of as the most theoretically grounded part, aimed at framing:

- the categories of space, time and place in the vast sociological debate (Marchetti's contribution);
- a critical phenomenological perspective as an attempt to enrich Urry's 'Mobilities Paradigm' (Engelbrekt's chapter);
- the notion of proximity/mobility in the framework of a critique to capitalist society, and its impact on the organization of work (Buscema's work).

In the second part of the book (*Discourse/Identity in Proximity and Mobility*), two notions are central: 'discourse', as in the semiotic, discursive analysis of two cases in the automobility system (Noy's chapter on discursive automobilities in Israel); and 'identity' as emerging from enforced proximity or isolation (Gerharz's analysis of Jaffna re-migration patterns).

Part III (*Global Firms/Urban Landscapes as Scenery for Proximity and Mobility*) proposes two different contexts to analyse current scenarios of proximity and mobility, emphasizing the danger of inequalities, asymmetries and human costs in accessing mobility as a resource. The multinational company is the setting of Gherardi's study of a peculiar mobile group (international managers). Urban landscapes (four European cities, in Colleoni's chapter; Santiago de Chile in Jirón's qualitative study) constitute another relevant arena where proximity and mobility are performed, resulting in different outcomes in terms of inequalities, borders and accessibility to (im)mobility resources.

## Concluding remarks

The introductory chapter of this book argues that proximity, and social relationships stemming from it, embody political meanings, which are performed through extensive sociotechnical systems of mobility and immobility. These systems can both enable and constrain the movement of people, objects, information and representations across distance, at the same time allowing for the understanding the specificity and peculiarity of their trajectories of motion and resilience in situated contexts.

The eight chapters of the book, divided into three parts, represent an articulation of this general thesis, focusing on theoretical aspects of the relationship between mobility, immobility and proximity (Part I); on discursive practices and identity shortcomings of proximity through forced mobility (Part II); on the local-global nexus of mobility and immobility (Part III).

(Im)mobility is, first and foremost, a relation to the world which shapes our sense of closeness and distance to people, objects, ideas and information, allowing

us to feel and perceive ourselves through both permanence and instability in space, time and society. The peculiar forms this relation can take place in across cultures, contexts, and practices, are the voices which compose this book. The list is, as usual, very tentative, as things (and beings) always *move on*.

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