

## THE MOBILITY TURN IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCE

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this article is to present the latest upsurge in the interest in different forms of mobility in the contemporary world. The newfound popularity of interdisciplinary research on mobility is sometimes identified as the mobility turn in the social science. Many scholars argue that a new paradigm has emerged at the intersection of social science and transport studies. It focuses on the gradual increase at the turn of the century in the movement of people, goods, services, capital as well as ideas and mental imaginaries; and its far-reaching social consequences. The main proponents of this turn are associated with a group of British researchers publishing in the journal *Mobilities*. This journal, which provides a platform of communication between the researchers in this field, explores the issues like: mobile spatiality and temporality, immobilities and social exclusions, tourism and travel mobilities, transportation and communication technologies, migration and diasporas.

In the article it is argued that the theoretical background of the mobility turn consists mainly of the different variants of theories of globalization. The vast globalization literature provided a crucial analytical underpinnings of the contemporary research on the different forms of mobility. The article examines some of the most influential, both in the international and Polish social science, definitions of globalization, paying special attention to the ways in which mobility was analyzed. This examination proves that mobility was thought to have been one of the key social determinants of globalization processes after the fall of the

Berlin Wall and dissolution of the Soviet Union. Then, the main sources of the mobility turn and the crucial arguments in favor of introducing “mobilities” as a separate field of research are presented. In addition to that, article indicates the most important critical remarks concerning the mobility turn. Attempts to constitute a separate field of research on the mobility are discussed in the broader context of recent developments in the field of social science. Finally, conclusions are presented.

It should be noted that the examination of different theories of globalization, especially the dimension of the supposed unprecedented spatio-temporal compression in the contemporary world, was inspired by Justin Rosenberg’s article *Globalization Theory: A Post Mortem* (2005: 2–74). The description of the recent developments in the field of social science refers to the Immanuel Wallerstein’s claim about the “microscopization of social science”.

### **Mobility in Theories of Globalization**

The concept of globalization became one of the most powerful ideas at the turn of the century. International Relations scholar Justin Rosenberg argued that globalization was “the *Zeitgeist*” of the 1990s (Rosenberg 2005). In that period this word seemed to many people to have captured the essence of what was going on in the world after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. It is argued that the dissolution of the Soviet Union created a form of a vacuum in the international order. A bipolar structure, as a form of a balance of power in the international relations, in the opinion of many realists in the IR (International Relations) was thought to have been the best form of organizing the world order (Waltz 2010). What’s more, a bipolar structure, as given in the Cold War, was also probably the most influential idea of the second half of the twentieth century, as far as the world order and state of international relations were concerned. It is no surprise though that the end of the Cold War put into question the so far ruling intellectual concept. The dissolution of the Soviet Union created a specific lacuna in the sphere of mental imaginaries of the reality and brought about the need for a new conceptualization of the emerging situation. This lacuna is often identified as a source of an astounding popularity of the notions like Francis Fukuyama’s the End of History or the belief in the global convergence

of capitalism, which shaped the intellectual atmosphere of the 1990s. To the greatest extent, however, this vacuum was filled by the varying theories of globalization. The focus on mobility, as we shall see, was an important part of some of the most influential theories in the field.

Sociologist Anthony Giddens, in one of the most cited definitions of the phenomenon, described globalization as “the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa” (Giddens 1990). Similar observation was made by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman when he stated that “initiatives are as before local, but their consequences are now global, staying stubbornly beyond the predicting/planning/steering powers of the initiative’s birthplace, or any other place for that matter” (Bauman 2012: 245). In the definition presented by economist Grzegorz W. Kołodko globalization is a “historical process of liberalization and integration of previously solitary functioning markets of goods, capital, information and labor into a single, interdependent global market” (Kołodko 2003: 433). According to Kołodko globalization is defined by a specific triad: liberalization – integration – interdependence, as a result of which the planetary economy emerges. Economist Nouriel Roubini characterized globalization by indicating the internationalization of trade in goods and services, labor migration and universality of information (Roubini, Mihm 2011). Roubini claims that globalization goes hand in hand with technological innovation. Therefore, “today’s much faster flow of financial capital in the world should be owed to the universality of information technology” (Roubini Mihm, 2011: 333). The interdependent global economy composed of capitalist states in an arena of contemporary globalization. As noted by Jürgen Habermas, the state is capitalist as long as its primary function is to provide regular meetings between capital and labor (Habermas 1975). The capital must be able to purchase labor and the labor must be transferable, that is attractive to the capital. Globalization widens the scope of these meeting and internationalizes them.

What all these above mentioned definitions have in common, is the focus on movement, overcoming distance, fading barriers, subordination of various localities to one global dimension; mobility in brief. The fact of stressing mobility in the different theories of globalization can be identified not only by looking at the diverse definitions formulated by distinguished scholars but also by capturing only the very terms which

denoted these various concepts. Manuel Castells's *The Space of Flows*, Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Modernity* or Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society* (Thomas L. Friedman's *Flat World* might be another example, if we were to include also non-scholarly writings), although very different in meaning which they tried to convey, were based on an acceptance of the notion that globalization processes have significantly changed the social reality and basic conditions of human existence. What was intrinsic to all these concepts was the claim about growing scope and increasing dynamism of material and social mobility. According to Castells, constant flows are one of the key determinants of the new social order. Globalization became to a large extent almost synonymous with all-embracing mobility of goods, services, capital, people, ideas and time-space compression in general.

### Sources of the Mobility Turn

The astounding popularity of the idea of globalization in the 1990s gave birth to the new research fields like global public policy, patterns of global governance, the nexus between globalization and glocalization, new world economic order or global covenant of cosmopolitan social democracy. It initiated also the upsurge in the interest in different forms of mobility in the contemporary world. The increase in the research on diverse forms of mobility of people, goods, services, capital and ideas is often called "mobilities" paradigm or the mobility turn. The main assumption behind the mobility turn is that there is a great need for the insertion of the "social" into analyzing travel and transport (Urry, Grieco 2011). Representatives of this approach claim that mobility research as an intellectual and scientific project focuses on the universal but always particularly constructed fact of moving (Cresswell 2010: 550). The project is stimulated by the mode of thinking which takes mobility as the central fact of modern or postmodern life. This observation is a direct result of a rapid increase in various forms of mobility in the contemporary world. John Urry and Margaret Grieco identified five interdependent "mobilities" that are producing modern social life organized across multiple distances:

- 1) the corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape, organized in terms of contrasting time-space patterns ranging from daily commuting to once-in-a-lifetime exile;

- 2) the physical movement of objects which include food and water to producers, consumers and retailers; as well as sending and receiving of presents and souvenirs;
- 3) the imaginative travel effected through the images of places and peoples appearing on and moving across multiple print and visual media and which then construct and reconstruct visions of place, travel and consumption;
- 4) virtual travel often in real time transcending geographical and social distance and forming and reforming multiple communities at-a-distance;
- 5) communicative travel through person-to-person messages via personal messages, postcards, texts, letters, telegraph, telephone, fax and mobile (Urry, Grieco 2011: 4–5).

They claim that current growth in mobility stems from following interdependent processes:

- 1) the growth of automobility throughout the world increasingly in the world's two most populous societies of China and India;
- 2) the rapid growth of cheap air travel based on new budget business models;
- 3) a significant resurgence of rail transport especially of high speed trains across Europe and Japan;
- 4) new kinds of globally significant themed leisure environments that have to be visited from afar;
- 5) increased 'miles' both flown and travelling on the world's 90,000 ships by manufactured goods, components and foodstuffs;
- 6) much greater distances travelled by work colleagues, members of leisure organizations, families and friends in order to sustain patterns of everyday life that are 'at-a-distance';
- 7) carbon use within transport, which accounts for 24 per cent of total greenhouse emissions – second fastest growing source of such emissions and expected to double by 2050 (Urry, Grieco, 2011: 5).

Urry and Grieco noted that ubiquitous, at the turn of the century, urge to be mobile, corresponds to the neo-liberal ideology prevailing in the contemporary world. It is also deeply rooted in the energy system based on coal, as the twentieth century was the century of oil (Urry, Grieco 2011: 16). According to them, changing the main sources of energy in the twenty-first century and the forthcoming of "post-carbon era" can also change the forms of mobility. The economic collapse of formerly

prosperous city of Detroit may signal the upcoming changes. In the opinion of the enthusiasts of the mobility turn, the potential changes in the forms of mobility and energy sources in the years to come are just another reason why mobilities as a research field will carry more weight than ever before.

### **Critical Approaches to the Mobility Turn**

Like many turns in the recent past, such as the linguistic turn or the cultural turn, also the mobility turn was subjected to a strong criticism. Serious doubts concerned the very basis claim about the need for the insertion of the “social” into analyzing travel and transport. It was argued that precisely this insertion has been already made at the intersection of social science and transport studies. Even some proponents of the mobility turn questioned the ostensible newness of the very idea and admitted that “people and things have always moved and mobility did not start in the twenty-first century or even with the industrial revolution” (Cresswell 2010: 555). It might be worth mentioning that the birth of American welfare state and the Great Compression, which started since early 1940s in the US, are commonly illustrated in the literature, among others, by the emergence of a car as a most popular mode of transport (Krugman 2009). Historian Tony Judt observed that “the car, at the height of its hegemony, stood for individualism, liberty, privacy, separation, and selfishness in their most socially dysfunctional, although insidiously seductive, form (Judt 2011b: 48). Cresswell noted that perhaps less than half of the work on the issue of mobility would be self-consciously “mobilities” research. In his opinion many people involved in research on mobility topics do not see themselves as a part of a new paradigm or turn.

It was argued that mobility as a social phenomenon has always been an important element of the social world and, as such, has been studied by the social science. As noted by Justin Rosenberg, space and time themselves are the foundational parameters of social explanation. “There is no question that the relational form of any given society is inseparable from particular orderings (practical and imaginative) of space and time” (Rosenberg 2005: 13). Mobility, different ways and instruments of being mobile, has been the subject of research in the social science in the most classical texts. The first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto* is

a perfect example of a description of anything other than the movement and transformation of the existing social feudal structures. The famous phrase “All that is solid melts into air; all that is holy is profaned” describes, above all, the transformation resulting from the movement of previously static and natural social forms. That’s why many scholars have identified in the first chapter of *The Communist Manifesto* kind of proto-theory of globalization (Rosenberg 2005). Likewise, the opening paragraphs of John Maynard Keynes’s *Economic Consequences of the Peace* provide an insight into the “hubristic illusions of a world on the edge of catastrophe” (Judt 2008: 20); illusions resulting from the belief that a rapid increase in mobility at the dawn of the twentieth century was substantially changing the very nature of international order and the conditions of human existence. The recurring illusion, that a rapid increase in mobility is radically transforming the social life and world order, seems to be something perennial in the modern history of mankind rather than something very new.

Therefore many critical arguments concerning the latest mobility turn bear some resemblance with the critical arguments related to the different theories of globalization. Justin Rosenberg argued that “the undeniably dramatic spatio-temporal phenomena of the 1990s were overwhelmingly produced by a process of social change – and not vice versa”. Therefore, there are the social changes which created contemporary mobility that should be brought into focus and analyzed, not mobility itself as a merely spatio-temporal result of these changes.

Attempts to constitute a separate field of study or even a separate perspective, which might be called mobility approach, were discussed also in the broader context of recent developments in the field of social science. Such attempts are symptomatic for a broader tendency to select one particular social characteristic, social condition or social dimension, and to create a separate discipline or research perspective on this basis. In this mode, safety, which is a social condition of being “safe” and feeling protected against any harm, recently became the basis for the emergence of the safety science. Immanuel Wallerstein called the above mentioned process of separation between different fields of study the “microscopization of social science” (Wallerstein 1999). According to him, this process can be attributed more to the gradual growth in a number of researchers or the logic of an academic career rather than to the more substantial grounds. It is worth remembering that in many cases

the creation of new disciplines and fields of research does indeed seem to be a logical and reasonable consequence of civilization development, social changes and increase in the scientific knowledge. In many others, however, it is difficult to see such a justification. In the opinion of opponents of the latest mobility turn, the dynamic increase in mobility in the contemporary world may not be a self-evident reason for the creation of a new research field.

### **Potential Benefits of the Mobility Turn**

Although one can be cautious about the sufficiency of the grounds and premises to constitute a separate field of study; there should be no doubt that the ongoing increase in research on mobility may bring some significant benefits. First of all, it can change the perspective by altering the central object of an analysis, which can result in better comprehension of the subject matter. Such a change can be already seen in the International Relations. In many recent works of distinguished scholars in the field, the sovereign nation state is relegated to the secondary position; while “the things between” like movements, flows, interferences and interdependencies came into the foreground. Focusing on the movement and interactions of populations shed the light at the role of these processes in shaping the ideas, mental imaginaries and living conditions of different societies.

Secondly, the mobility turn should draw the attention to the barriers and contemporary exclusions from various forms of mobility. Urry and Grieco argue that “the social exclusion/inclusion agenda places the focus on transport in relation to very uneven levels of societal participation across various domains” (Urry, Grieco 2011: 1). It is worth remembering that mobility infrastructure in contemporary world becomes just another arena of expansion of the omnipresent market regulator and the neoliberal logic. Political philosopher Michael Sandel wrote about the fast-track lexis lanes of motorways in the United States, where commuters can buy their way out of bumper-traffic and take the paid express lanes. For fees of up to \$10 during rush hour, solo drivers can buy the right to use paid express lanes in, among others, San Diego, Minneapolis, Houston, Denver, Miami, Seattle and San Francisco (Sandel 2012). In his opinion this is just one more proof that in the era of market triumphalism, citi-

zens of the Western liberal democracies, without quite realizing it and without ever deciding to do so, “drifted from having a market economy to being a market society” (Sandel 2012: 10). Subjugating the mobility infrastructure to the market logic has immense social consequences. The mobility turn should inspire wide public debate about the public transportation, the role of markets in the support of mobility instruments and, more generally, a proper balance between the public and private in the social world. As it was argued by historian Tony Judt, “arguments from efficiency, conventionally invoked to justify private enterprise over public service, do not apply in the case of public transportation. The paradox of public transport is quite simply that the better it does its job, the less efficient it may be” (Judt 2011a: 182).

What’s more, the growing popularity of mobility research corresponds to the latest upsurge in the interest in the city as a political space par excellence. Cities are increasingly seen as a sphere of real politics, an arena of international cooperation and effective public policies, in contrast to more and more dysfunctional nations. Sociologist Saskia Sassen observes that increase in mobility of people, goods, services and capital, resulting from contemporary economic globalization, denationalizes to date national territories (Saasen 2007: 10). This process is the most visible in the global cities like New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Zurich, Amsterdam, Sydney or Hong Kong. Historically, cities have been synonymous with the sphere of mobility, the space of continuous motion and movement (Barber 2014). It is estimated that more than half of all people in the world already lives in cities and the percentage is growing. One hundred global cities account for thirty percent of the world’s economy and almost all its innovation (Khanna 2010). The shape of the urban infrastructure is increasingly becoming the subject of conflicts between different social groups living in the cities. This is often generational conflict, when men and women of middle age as well as the elderly demand expansion of the existing street network whereas young people fight for a better public transport. The general dilemma “Who owns the city?” takes a form of various local struggles about the right to decide about the shape and forms of urban infrastructure and the instruments of mobility. According to the enthusiasts of mobility approach, much wider participation in the design and determination of levels and patterns of mobility will be more possible thanks to, among others, the new information communication technologies.

## Conclusions

The article describes the latest upsurge in the interest in different forms of mobility in the contemporary world. This process results from a rapid increase in mobility of people, goods, services, capital, ideas and mental imaginaries at the turn of the century. The mobility turn, in the opinion of its enthusiasts, provides an answer to the growing need for the insertion of the “social” into analyzing travel and transport. It is argued that different theories of globalization created an analytical foundation and intellectual framework for the emergence of “mobilities”. The article examines some of the most influential definitions of globalization, paying special attention to the emphasis on mobility. This examination proves that a common denominator among varying definitions consists of the notion that rapid increase in mobility in the contemporary world radically changes the very basic conditions of human existence in the world.

The most important doubts concerning the mobility turn were pointed out. Main critical arguments voiced by opponents of the turn consist of: questioning the ostensible newness of the insertion of the “social” into analyzing travel and transport; indicating that mobility as a social phenomenon has always been an important part of the social world and, as such, has been studied by the social science; claiming that the growth in mobility and overall undeniably dramatic spatio-temporal compression in the 1990s were produced by the processes of social change; not the other way around; therefore the social change should be analyzed, not its spatio-temporal results.

Finally, the potential benefits of the mobility turn were presented. It was indicated that mobility turn can: alter the central object of an analysis in many disciplines which ultimately may result in a better comprehension of the subject matter; draw the attention to the barriers and exclusions from the mobility and inspire a public debate about public provision of certain goods like mobility infrastructure. It was also noted that the newfound popularity of research on mobility corresponds to the growing interest in the cities as a political space par excellence.

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